“We Can Draw!”: Toronto Improvisation, Abstract Expressionism, and the Artists’ Jazz Band

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The improvised performance practice that came to be known as “free jazz” burst into prominence around 1960, and soon proved itself a genre extremely permeable to influences from other artistic disciplines. It was, as John Szwed writes, “. . . played by musicians who often seemed to have completely escaped the jazz recruitment process. They were classically trained virtuosos and musical illiterates, intellectuals and street rebels, and highbrows disguised as primitives” (Szwed 236). Ted Gioia calls the first free jazz musicians “. . . almost all outsiders . . . an outgrowth of the bohemians and ‘angry young men’ of the 1950s” (Gioia 311). To make the members of this new movement even harder to pigeonhole, George E. Lewis points out that the new music’s emergence “was a multiregional, multigenre, multiracial, and international affair” (Lewis 40). If there was any consistency among these varied practitioners, it lay in their identification—imposed either by themselves or by their circumstances—as, in Gioia’s terminology, “outsiders,” and in their adoption of the music, what Lewis describes as “a symbolic challenge to traditional authority” (40).

Over the previous two decades, abstract expressionist art had been evolving a similar language of resistance, positioning itself as a symbolic challenge to authority. It also polarized opinions in the visual art world just as free improvisation would do in the jazz world. Serge Guilbaut, for instance, writes that Jackson Pollock’s work was seen as “. . . ‘unpredictable, undisciplined, explosive’ . . . The breaking of the rules offered proof that the artist was free and that his works were frank and authentic” (Guilbaut 86). The posture of resistance that gave social context to the work of abstract expressionists was to do the same for improvised music. In fact, Canada’s first improvising ensemble, the Artists’ Jazz Band (AJB), which declared itself to the world (after several years of private playing) in 1962, was composed primarily of professional abstract expressionist artists. In examining the AJB as a Canadian phenomenon, and arguing that it could only have happened in its particular place and time, we should bear in mind the extent to which cultural activity in this country is both inspired and overshadowed (often co-opted) by our enormously more populous and powerful neighbour to the south. In economies of scale alone, few Canadian cultural entities can approach the size and the influence of their U.S. counterparts, so whether they publish magazines or make music or produce movies, Canadian cultural workers have always had to fight fierce American competition to reach audiences in their own country.¹ The power discrepancy is as keenly felt in the arts as anywhere else. Avrom Isaacs (1926–2016), the art dealer who helped launch the AJB, said that when he founded his first gallery in 1955: “I started off showing Canadian artists . . . then continued showing only Canadian artists . . . because of the cultural monster to the south of us. I felt that unless we kept stressing our own we were going to be overwhelmed” (Wigmore 9).

As artists, the members of the AJB developed their styles and built their careers within this complex power relationship, constantly looking south (specifically in both jazz and the visual arts, to New York City) to see how they might measure up to the American stars of the North American art world, but also critiquing their own individual practices, and each other’s, to ensure that their artistic premises, their critical language, and the artworks they made were discreet entities and were as original as they wanted, and needed, them to be.

The Origins of the Artists’ Jazz Band

Referring to the Akira Kurosawa film in which a crime in the forest is recalled very differently by four participants, painter Robert Markle (1936–1990) called the AJB “the *Rashomon* of jazz bands” (*Artists’* left foldout, col. 4). By 1957 Gordon Rayner (1935–2010) was playing drums. Markle began taking tenor saxophone lessons in 1959 (Wainwright 76–7). Graham Coughtry (1931–1999) played trombone, Richard Gorman (1935–2010) double bass, and Dennis Burton (1933–2013) and Nobuo Kubota (1932–) alto saxophone. Rayner, in reference to the AJB, made the claim, “I invented it completely”; indeed, the AJB first got together at Rayner’s studio, then located on Yonge Street (77). By 1960, the sessions had moved to Avrom Isaacs’ new Isaacs Gallery at 832 Yonge, a short walk north from the central Bloor-Yonge intersection.

Poster for a performance at the Bohemian Embassy, Toronto, early 1960s.

In 1962 this group of close friends first played in public as the Artists' Jazz Band. Shortly after this performance, pianist/trumpeter Michael Snow (1929–), who worked professionally in Dixieland bands, began to play with them occasionally, as did architect/violinist Harvey Cowan (1935–), artist/guitarist Gerry McAdam (1941–), and professional musicians, saxophonist Wimp Henstridge and his brother, bassist Ian Henstridge. Electric bassist Jim Jones became a regular member, and double bassist Terry Forster and saxophonist Kenny Baldwin were also frequent contributors.

Veteran Toronto music journalist Peter Goddard describes the AJB as “. . . the last cohesive—well, to a degree—coterie of Art Stars, with theatricalized practices as great painters, adept multimedia manipulators and energizing teachers” (Goddard 80). In the visual arts their credentials were impeccable: conventionally trained as students, professionally tested as commercial draughtsmen, and critically praised as Canadian originals. As musicians, they were largely self-taught. Free improvisation pioneers such as New York residents Charles Mingus and John Coltrane, Vancouver's Al Neil, London's Joe Harriott, and Amsterdam's Misha Mengelberg had all mastered the complexities of bebop before turning to free improvisation. No one in the AJB had a comparable musical background. But through a set of circumstances peculiar to Toronto in the 1950s and '60s, having established their virtuosity in the visual arts, they felt empowered to expand their artistic identities into music by *enacting* jazz virtuosity in their performances—in effect insisting that their talent, erudition, and social daring could transfer into any setting. In their hands, music was another device to bring their own brand of “sheer bravura” (Goddard also calls it “the Toronto Swagger”) to the city's burgeoning art scene (80).

Art openings now doubled as concerts, and throughout the 1960s and '70s, the AJB's blend of music, art and sheerchutzpah helped its members gain, for Canadian artists, unprecedented attention. Coughtry, Rayner and Markle posed for a cover of a 1965 *Canadian Art* that parodied their roles as jazz-playing renegade artists (Goddard 81). Both Coughtry and Markle wrote articles for *Maclean's*, English Canada's national news magazine, and in 1965

Markle made headlines when a gallery showing his work was charged with exposing obscene pictures to public view (Wainwright 63-7).

**Canadian Art, January/February 1965. Left to right: Graham Coughtry, Gordon Rayner, Robert Markle.
Photograph by John Reeves.
Courtesy of The Robert McLaughlin Archives.**

Moreover, during the sixties the AJB played at a reception for Andy Warhol in an artist's studio, at an Art Gallery of Ontario opening "in a side room where two thousand people left the big court band and came to hear the AJB," and in venues as diverse as the Ottawa club Le Hibou, and Sarah Lawrence College in New York state (78). Into the 1970s they performed at universities, art galleries, and international venues such as the Kitchen in New York and the Canadian Embassy in Paris.

Surprisingly, during those years, no indignant players sallied forth from the ranks of the Toronto jazz scene to challenge the AJB's credibility as free jazz players.² Certainly the band's lack of formal musical credentials would have made them easy targets for such criticism. Alto saxophonist Nobuo Kubota wrote: "we couldn't have read a note of music if our lives depended on it. Nor did we know the difference between a chromatic scale and a tetra chord" (Wigmore 76). Everywhere else in the world, experienced jazz musicians were setting aside the chord changes and essaying free improvisation, but by and large Toronto's jazz community remained indifferent not only to experimental musical processes in general, but to the countercultural movement, with its insistence on a radical shift in sensibility, of which free jazz was an active part. In 1978 Michael Snow pointed out that Canadian jazz musicians "are professional musicians first . . . A certain conformity is essential within the many worlds of the music business and Canadian modern jazz musicians seem for the most part stuck in the 'modal' stage of the music as it was and is played in the United States" (*Collected Writings* 189).

In 1982, Mark Miller suggested a number of reasons why the Canadian jazz scene, most blandly typified in Toronto, has been historically so conservative. Chief among them was the way that an American-dominated music industry tended to filter out alternative voices through disparities in broadcasting and distribution. The music's most popular forms were the first, and sometimes the only, forms of jazz to reach Canadian ears. Miller noted the music of the Canadian jazz musician is created "*functionally*, in the context of the pop world [and] approaches an art form only according to the musician's virtuosity," that both musicians and listeners lacked ". . . access to the most important artistic movements and performers in jazz . . ." and that the Canadian jazz audience "has had its tastes shaped by the most commercial of standards" (Miller 6). As a result, Miller concluded (perhaps presciently, since from the viewpoint of 2016 the situation is not much changed): "In Canada, the leading jazzmen of today are playing music of the 1950s and 1960s" (6). In this context, the Artists' Jazz Band specifically employed improvised performance to situate

themselves within the resistant relationship that jazz, especially free jazz, had created for itself in relation to North American culture. Few Toronto jazz musicians identified themselves in this way. Because of the constraints Miller describes, the Toronto jazz community reacted to free jazz in the way any endangered trade would react to an outside threat, by closing ranks against the musical devices, as well as the kinds of resistant, political, and countercultural discourses that arose around the music.

The discourse that remained was one of loss, of omission—a discourse of absence. The music was often described, both by detractors and by supporters, as jazz from which something had been subtracted. As recently as 1994, an entry in the *New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* asserts:

The music is probably best defined by its negative features, though a performance need not be characterized by all these qualities: the absence of tonality and predetermined chord sequences; the abandonment of the jazz chorus structure and its replacement by loose designs in which collective improvisation takes place around predefined signals; an avoidance of “cool” instrumental timbres in favor of more “voice-like” sounds; and the suspension of standard timekeeping patterns for a free rubato. (Robinson 405)

In order to be interpreted as “jazz”—there seemed to be nothing else at hand to compare it to—free improvisation had to be interpreted as “jazz *minus*”—jazz *minus* the song form; jazz *minus* chord changes; jazz *minus* consistent tonal centres, danceable rhythms, and so on. It was a discourse that gave Toronto jazz musicians further reasons to shun free improvisation, since association with this music implied shortcomings in all the areas where, professionally, they needed the greatest strengths. Just as the name “jazz” itself had been more or less imposed on this African-American-based musical practice by the early twentieth century music industry, a similar hegemonic pressure came to bear on “free jazz,” deploying this discourse of absence to impute a lack of competence and/or laziness, and a homogenized, characterless “free” style. This constructed a punitive discursive barrier around an improvised music that, in reality, demanded much from its creators and had the potential to take on many different forms.

The Wild Ones: Modernism Comes to Canada

If free improvisation, with its discourse of absence, was not feasible for Toronto jazz musicians, it was highly feasible—even inevitable—for the Artists’ Jazz Band because of a unique set of historico-cultural circumstances that had been set in motion a decade before the band was formed. A preceding artistic generation in Toronto laid a type of visual arts groundwork that eventually equipped and empowered their immediate successors to undertake modernist art forays such as improvised music. In the early 1950s, for instance, the first wave of Toronto abstract expressionist painters founded the collective Painters Eleven. If this motley assortment (the major book on Painters Eleven is subtitled *The Wild Ones of Canadian Art*) of ground-breaking postwar abstract expressionists had anything in common, it was an interest in jazz and a tendency to see their work as a visual counterpart to musical improvisation. Throughout the 1950s, the decade of their greatest prominence, the collective, either directly in their mentoring of Rayner, Coughtry, Kubota, Markle, Gorman, Burton, and Snow as students and apprentices, or indirectly in contributing to the creation of a downtown bohemian art world, made the AJB and its music possible, even though none of its members were musicians themselves.

Painters Eleven’s second major contribution to the AJB (and this may be most immediately comprehensible to Canadian readers) was *confidence*. As the Toronto studio culture they founded spread and attracted new artists, gallery-goers, and audiences, it also fostered a discourse that foregrounded its own importance. For the first time, Toronto artists encouraged each other to perceive their local art world not as a marginalized subset of the US (New York) art world, but as an equal peer, even a competitor, just as capable of stylistic originality and affective power. Such confidence, which eventually swelled into the “Toronto Swagger” identified by Goddard, was instilled in Painters Eleven in the mid-1950s when vital legitimization, from the New York art world itself, was bestowed upon them by the leading New York art critic Clement Greenberg.

Abstract Expressionism and Improvisation

Serge Guilbaut has described the ways in which, as a result of the clash of political ideologies in Depression-era New York, abstract expressionism “provided a way for avant-garde artists to preserve their sense of ‘social commitment’ . . . while eschewing the art of propaganda and illustration. It was, in a sense, a political apoliticism” (Guilbaut 2). Through the 1930s, into the 1940s, a number of factors contributed to the rise of abstract expressionism, including massive subsidization by members of the wealthy Guggenheim family. In 1939, Solomon R. Guggenheim’s eponymous foundation opened The Museum of Non-Objective Painting in New York, and in 1941, Solomon’s niece

Peggy Guggenheim returned to New York married to the visual artist Max Ernst and began to encourage American abstract expressionists, including Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, and Jackson Pollock (Nowell *Painters* 59).

Unbefriended by millionaires, Canadian abstract expressionists preserved a closer relationship with antiestablishment politics, and, as a result, their careers progressed much more slowly and painstakingly. Throughout the 1940s, the young painters who came to be known as the Automatistes became increasingly prominent in Quebec art circles, and in 1948 they “created a storm of controversy” with the publication of Paul-Émile Borduas’ manifesto, *Refus global* [*Total Refusal*] (59-60). The *refus* boldly stated that the modern artist had a “duty”

to break definitively with all conventions of society and its utilitarian spirit! We refuse to live knowingly at less than our spiritual and physical potential; refuse to close our eyes to the vices and confidence tricks perpetuated in the guise of learning, favour, or gratitude; refuse to be ghettoed in an ivory tower, well-fortified but too easy to ignore; refuse to remain silent . . . (Borduas 120-1)

The automatistes faced not only the resistance encountered by any avant-garde artists, but the uniquely Québécois problem of essaying modernism in a province where the government was closely tied with a patriarchal, authoritarian Catholic church. The *refus* was the ultimate modernist *cri de coeur*—the cry to be independent of one’s society, of one’s government, of one’s religion, even independent of one’s own past. When the *refus* appeared in print, it caused such a scandal that Borduas was fired from his teaching post at Montreal’s École du Meuble. “Indeed,” as Douglas Fetherling writes, “it has been called the opening salvo of the Quiet Revolution” (Fetherling 113)—the revolution that twenty years later fired the formation of the Quatuor du Jazz Libre du Québec (Miller and Ménard 784). The *refus* also made clear that artists were embracing abstraction for ideological as well as aesthetic reasons, insisting that essential to artistic practice was the dissolution of any mediation—technical, social, political, or religious—between the artist’s hand and his or her unconscious. Through improvisation’s greater spontaneity, a truly authentic expression could be attained. As such the authors of the *refus*, with their insistence on the importance of modern art practice, became important influences on the art that was to blossom in Toronto in the decade to come.

By 1944, future Painters Eleven members Alexandra Luke and Jock Macdonald were student and teacher, as Luke was coached by her fellow Toronto painter in automatic drawing, “an art style derived from Automatism, an approach to writing that had its origins in the Surrealist movement” (Nowell *Painters* 104). In 1947 the Ontario Society of Artists, a major gatekeeper in the Toronto art world, began to invite younger artists to show their work, including a few “semi-abstract” drawings and paintings. Later, in 1952, Luke organized the first major showing of abstract expressionist work in Ontario, the *Canadian Abstract Exhibition* touring show (Murray *Painters* 6). The following year, she invited the other artists from *Canadian Abstract* to form a collective to promote and display their work: along with Luke herself, Jack Bush, Oscar Cahén, Hortense Gordon, Tom Hodgson, Ray Mead, Kazuo Nakamura, Jock Macdonald, William Ronald, Harold Town, and Walter Yarwood declared themselves as Painters Eleven (Nowell *Painters* 60).

Nine members of Painters Eleven, 1957. Left to right: Tom Hodgson, Alexandra Luke, Harold Town, Kazuo Nakamura, Jock Macdonald, Walter Yarwood, Hortense Gordon, Jack Bush, Ray Mead. There are no known photographs of the entire Eleven, and missing here are William Ronald, and Oscar Cahén (d. 1956), who is represented by two of his canvases.

Photograph by Peter Croydon, courtesy of The Robert McLaughlin Archives.

The collective's members had been "impressed" by a Toronto show of *automatiste* work (Murray *Painters* 16), and the pure process of automatism—creation without intention—appealed to a generation who were trying to look past the boundaries of their formal art training. Automatism influenced one of William Ronald's early successes, a spontaneous watercolour made during a 1952 residency in Manhattan (Belton 20-1) where, living near the Village Vanguard, the 26-year-old Ronald heard modern jazz and "developed a taste for improvisation, contributing substantially to the pictorial techniques and professional tactics of his later development—not to mention to his increasingly countercultural self-image" (18). Ronald also encountered the work of Jackson Pollock and befriended abstract expressionists Mark Rothko, Franz Kline, Helen Frankenthaler, Willem de Kooning, and Larry Rivers. In her text *Painters*, Joan Murray adds: "He also met . . . writers like Kerouac and Ferlinghetti, jazz musicians like Miles Davis, and the Modern Jazz Quartet . . ." (15). Hence, *Painters Eleven* honed their taste for improvisation not only through automatism and abstract expressionism, but also through music. Thelonious Monk, "due to Monk's abstractness," was a favourite of Harold Town (Nowell *Breakfast* 130). Jack Bush "was a great jazz fan also" (Murray *Rayner* 19), and in the early 1950s Oscar Cahén, Walter Yarwood, and Town would regularly end their nights out by listening to jazz at the Colonial or the Town Tavern, "where for the price of a drink you could listen the whole night long to all-time-great jazz legends—Billie Holiday, Lester Young, Stan Getz, Miles Davis, Oscar Peterson and more" (Nowell *Painters* 141).

Cover, exhibition catalogue: *Painters Eleven. At the Roberts Gallery. Feb. 11 to 26, 1955*. The text reads, "There is no manifesto here for the times. There is no jury but time. By now there is little harmony in the noticeable disagreement. But there is a profound regard for the consequences of our complete freedom." Toronto: The Roberts Gallery, 1955 (Nowell, *Painters* 131). Courtesy of The Robert McLaughlin Archives.

Improvisation, then, was implicit not only within the modernist influence, especially surrealism and automatism, that had birthed Abstract Expressionism itself, but also within the music that the members of this tiny but fervent art world listened to on records and in clubs. *Painters Eleven* were the first Toronto artists to embrace what Daniel Belgrad calls the "aesthetic of spontaneity" of the mid-twentieth century (15). In the same way an artist such as Jackson Pollock allowed that besides his own painting jazz music was "the only other really creative thing happening in this country" (ibid. 195), *Painters Eleven* adopted a jazz paradigm as central to their own artistic processes, an aural counterpart to improvised visual art practice.³

Clement Greenberg

Clement Greenberg had made his name in US art circles with a 1939 article in *Partisan Review*. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" put forward Greenberg's view of the grand purpose of artistic avant-gardes: ". . . to keep culture moving in the

midst of ideological confusion and violence" (5). His next major essay, "Towards a Newer Laocoön" championed abstraction in all disciplines as a way of creating an art that truly responded to its time, although abstract expressionism interested Greenberg less for its improvisation than for the way that it allowed artists to eschew representation and work directly with the basic elements of painting (Belgrad 104-5). Throughout the 1940s Greenberg carefully honed his arguments in order to connect the visual arts to larger cultural and political issues. In 1942, as art critic at the *Nation*, he began proselytizing for art's importance to the American nation, and by 1946 he openly "entertained the idea that New York, not Paris, might be the postwar art capital" (Rubinfeld 98). In 1948 he wrote, "... with the emergence of new talents so full of energy and content as Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, David Smith ... the main premises of Western art have at last migrated to the United States, along with the center of gravity of industrial production and political power" (qtd. in Guilbaut 172).

Greenberg's prestige made him an important voice in an art world that, in turn, was connected to a growing mass media empire of unprecedented influence that, in the face of the growing Cold War, was only too eager for yet another example of American triumphalism. In this particular historic moment, even if a mass audience found abstract expressionism difficult to understand, they were primed for an art that claimed to represent all-American "freedom." Within a few years the mass-market magazines *Saturday Review*, *Time*, and *Life* published feature articles echoing Greenberg's opinion that abstract expressionism was the art of the modern age, and furthermore, that its most important proponent was Jackson Pollock ("Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?" asked the *Life* headline) (Rubinfeld 110). Many found his "action" paintings outrageous, but Pollock had an important credential for mass media acceptance, which the 1949 *Life* article accentuated in its photo of "the brooding artist, dressed in jeans and cowboy boots, a cigarette dangling from the side of his mouth" (110). He was a country boy; moreover, he was from the American West.

Europe treated its artists as demigods. It had an old and respected fine-arts tradition. In the United States, resourcefulness and independence of mind, symbolized by Daniel Boone and his coonskin cap, had always been valued over a poetic soul. "Effete Eastern snobs" was the category to which most Americans assigned artists. But Pollock defied the image. He hailed from Cody, Wyoming, and looked the part of the lonesome cowboy. (110)

This essential (and essentialist) authenticity—that the artist did not come from the urban, Europeanized, educated elite, but sprang organically and un-self-consciously from the rustic American working class—drew upon what would become a major cultural trope of the 1950s.

Within a few years of the *Life* article, denim-clad "lonesome cowboys" were everywhere: in the popular media through the rise of film stars such as Marlon Brando and James Dean, in the rolled shirtsleeves of the singers of the American folk music revival, in the rise to prominence of Jack Kerouac (whose roots in fact were Canadian, working-class Québécois) as an important new American writer, and even in helping to legitimize free jazz through a popular depiction of Ornette Coleman as "a walking myth, the image of a small bearded man striding out of the woods of Texas and into New York's usually closed jazz scene" (Spellman 79). This success may have sharpened Greenberg's eye for further non-Manhattanite authenticity. In 1957, after praising William Ronald's paintings at the Kootz Gallery in New York (Nowell *Painters* 31), he was persuaded to come to Toronto specifically to critique the work of Painters Eleven. In a string of studio visits, he singled out Harold Town for praise (32) and made criticisms of Jack Bush that eventually guided Bush toward the bold colour-field painting for which he later became famous (33).

Before Greenberg left Toronto he told his hosts, "You don't need to know anything more about painting—just get rid of looking over your shoulder at yourselves and New York or London. Just paint—no tricks" (33). Jock Macdonald wrote, "Greenberg gave me such a boost of confidence that I cannot remember ever knowing such a sudden development" (212). Painters Eleven members gained American exposure and sales from this new relationship. Acutely aware of their marginal status, as Canadians in the Western art world, it was enormously important to have the leading New York art critic tell them that what they were doing was original, important, and cutting-edge. In consecrating Painters Eleven, Greenberg confirmed their importance not only to the art world at large, but to themselves.

By the end of the 1950s, by establishing that Canadian abstraction could be recognized by the bigger art world beyond Canada's borders, engaging both highbrow critics and high-profile galleries, Painters Eleven had laid the foundation for other forms of experimental practice in the Toronto art world. These artists opened up a modernist discourse in which art works were allowed, even expected, to deliberately call attention to the circumstances of their creation. Painters Eleven created a Toronto art culture that made it possible for up-and-coming painters such as Coughtry, Rayner, Markle, Burton, Kubota, and Gorman to extend their studio practices into a music that also called attention to the spontaneity of its creation—a music that unapologetically celebrated the fact of being improvised.

The Post-Painters Eleven Generation

In 1950, at the age of fifteen, Gordon Rayner became an apprentice in Jack Bush's graphic arts business, and was introduced to Toronto's tiny community of nascent abstract expressionists.

I would occasionally be asked to work late in order to serve drinks to a strange and gregarious group of people who congregated in Jack Bush's office. They loved to yell and scream at each other. I actually saw one of them, Harold Town, I think, rolling around on the floor with Oscar Cahén indulging in fake fisticuffs. I think they must have been having fun. *Pugilistic possums*. They were the Painters Eleven. Little did I know the historical significance of these formative gatherings. During this period, Jack was changing from naturalistic art to abstract art, which of course had an enormous effect on me. (Murray Rayner 19)

Despite his youth, Rayner used his artistic skills to forge a birth certificate so he could get into bars and hear jazz (Nowell *Painters* 141n*): "I started to . . . broaden my scope with music as I was broadening my scope with the experience of the world of art" (Murray Rayner 19). A younger generation was being shaped by the Painters Eleven milieu and its attendant discourse of bohemianism and spontaneity. Rayner's friends Graham Coughtry, Dennis Burton, and Richard Gorman, like Alexandra Morton a decade earlier, were students of Jock Macdonald (Nowell *Painters* 213). "Jock didn't like his classes to be too serious," Burton wrote, "so I brought in a portable record player . . . to play bebop and modern jazz . . . He encouraged me to do free abstractions" (Burton 11). As they learned the basics of art making, these student painters were also imbuing themselves with a broader sense of their work's importance and with "the myth of the twentieth century artist as hero" (Murray Rayner 9).

Some of these young artists were initially skeptical of abstract expressionism. Their youthful sense of mission drew them to social realist artists such as Mexico's José Orozco, or the USA's Ben Shahn (Hale 8) but, being alert to new developments, which were introduced by foreign newspapers and art magazines as well as by their Painters Eleven mentors, they simultaneously broadened their horizons, and closed ranks to form a supportive community of their own. Meanwhile, their love of jazz—as a music resistant of conventions—and their tight-knit social milieu, drew them increasingly toward working in sound. Rayner wrote:

. . . we would talk all night long and longer. We'd have jam sessions. I was playing drum brushes on the back of beer cases, [sculptor Gerry] Gladstone was playing flute, Coughtry was singing the blues and Mike Snow was already playing brilliant piano. This music has been more of a social tie than our private art. We always had that in common, the fun, the gatherings; not when we were alone struggling in studios, but when we got together at those great parties: people pounding garbage cans (they were metal in those days), and singing the blues. (Murray Rayner 22)

By 1962 these cocky, self-consciously iconoclastic young painters were announcing themselves and their work to the world of Canadian art. They became the first generation to take the ethos of modernism, the ethos of jazz, and the ethos of abstract expressionist art fully to heart, and by enacting this ethos in music, they became the Artists' Jazz Band.

The AJB and the Present Writer

To an extent this essay is deeply rooted in my personal experience. From 1975 until 1988 I was an active part of the Toronto improvised music scene: editing, publishing, and writing (on the staff of the jazz magazine *Coda* 1975-1983, then with my own small publishing house), as well as playing bass and cello in various ensembles. In the early 1980s I often played with the Artists' Jazz Band, mostly in the Spadina Avenue loft of drummer/painter Gordon Rayner. By the time I played with the band, the core group had defaulted to three of its founders: Rayner, trombonist Graham Coughtry, and less reliably, tenor saxophonist/pianist Robert Markle. For a couple of years we floated a semi-regular sextet with Rayner, Coughtry, Bill Smith on saxophone, David Prentice on violin, and myself on double bass—or more likely cello if I knew that Jim Jones or Terry Forster was going to be there.

Every group I played with offered a slightly different approach to improvisation. With the AJB, it was about everyday life as performance, a performance they had by that time been rehearsing for a couple of decades. The private musical sessions were rife with drugs and alcohol (more the latter, as the core of the band entered their late forties and fifties), passion and argument, shouting and forgiveness. For a polite young guy from a small town in BC, it was an education to be welcomed into a circle of elders whose ethic was to be argumentative—one had to be ready to be berated and yelled at, and to learn how to keep one's head up and push back without defensiveness. These were lessons you had to learn, or you wouldn't be asked back. Even founding member Markle wrote of the AJB in 1973:

"I've been fired myself about five times" (*Artists'* left foldout, col. 4). The improvisatory aesthetics that arose from these personal dynamics cannot be underestimated in terms of how they influenced the distinctive music produced by the band—a key element that is instrumental to the arguments I have been making concerning this scene's uniqueness and culturally specific contexts.

Cowboy and Indian

Don Owen's 1972 film *Cowboy and Indian* focuses on two founders of the Artists' Jazz Band: Gordon Rayner, the son of a successful Toronto commercial artist of white British heritage, and Robert Markle, of Mohawk heritage, hailing from a working-class family in the nearby steel town of Hamilton. Filmed in the winter of 1970-71, the film is a deceptively casual portrait of these two men, their friends, and their art. About two-thirds of the way through *Cowboy and Indian* we hear several significant musical facets of the Artists' Jazz Band, lasting just a few minutes.⁴ For instance, at the 28:25 mark, a New Orleans-styled jazz group is heard, its sound superimposed over a montage of Toronto's College and Spadina streetscape near the live-in studios of Nobuo Kubota and Gordon Rayner. Soon we see the music's source: Kid Bastien and the Camelia Jazz Band in Grossman's Tavern, just down the street from both studios. Rayner is sitting in on drums, playing a competent shuffle, complete with fills and rolls. The film cuts to the sound of a high E-flat played by solo alto saxophone, soon joined by a trombone ruminating in B down to A. The musicians are Coughtry and Kubota, in the latter's studio across the street from Rayner's. They play a highly reactive duet, each instrument dodging and feinting, hanging onto a note, then changing as the other approaches, chasing each other's tonalities, heightening the action into a duel of riffs and counter-riffs. Their duet in F brings to mind Stuart Broomer's observation, "soundwise Markle and Coughtry could always produce these certain kinds of sounds on their horns, this vaguely Ellingtonian feel" (Broomer 2016). Finally, Kubota negotiates the octave with a recognizable blues lick and as the duet ends, we are transported to Robert and Marlene Markle's farmhouse near Durham, Ontario, to hear a living-room ensemble of Coughtry on trombone, Kubota on alto saxophone, Jim Jones on electric bass, and a concealed drummer (probably Rayner, although elsewhere in this sequence the drummer is Michael Sarrazin, a Hollywood actor who was a close friend of Markle's). Markle, on electric piano, gravitates to a Gm-Dm vamp that the band picks up and develops—sloppily, but with all of the AJB's signature gusto.

In a few brief minutes of film we hear a mix of styles that conveys an accurate sense of the Artists' Jazz Band: completely free improvisation between two horns, fragments of blues, and a jam session that sounds more like psychedelic rock than jazz. Moreover, Owen presents all of these styles as facets of an eminently social impulse as the sequence begins in a crowded bar and ends in a crowded farmhouse. Even the sequence where Rayner sits in with Kid Bastien is a revealing snapshot of its time and place: in 1970s Toronto, Grossman's Tavern—with its cheap draft beer, live music, and lack of cover charge—was an important meeting place for the city's downtown art community.

On the AJB's 1973 LP *The Artists' Jazz Band*, the music ranges from vigorous and chaotic to sparse and highly considered, and some of the pieces use compositional devices that counter the band's reputation for being resolutely improvised. The most consistent element is humour, reflected in titles that play off the band members' names—"Looks Like Snow," "Markle-O-Slow"—and mock the artistic lifestyle itself. "Is It Addicting? (a love song)," begins with a chant:

*Is it addicting? Is it addicting?
When you stick that needle right in your arm!
Is it addicting? Is it addicting?
Well, you're addicting too.*

The band recites and plays off of the sung rhythms of the three words of the title, while the piece includes a unique and delicate trio passage for trombone, bowed bass, and whistling.⁵ Side three of this two-LP set features "Raynershine," described by Rayner: "While listening to a previously recorded tape of themselves playing percussion instruments, the artists play blocks of chords according to a set of signals that in the loosest sense could be considered conducting" (*Artists' Jazz Band* foldout 2, col. 1). More than just a jam band, the AJB, over its long history, tried a little bit of everything. In fact Stuart Broomer, who occasionally played with the group in the 1960s, writes, "the AJB sounded less like free jazz to me than a parody of older jazz. I was always slightly shocked that they didn't seem to listen to free jazz or know it well" (Broomer 2016).

The band's most famous member, Michael Snow, was not one of its founders. He moved to New York with his wife Joyce Wieland to pursue a career as artist and filmmaker. He bought a piano from a neighbour (another former Dixieland player, trombonist Roswell Rudd) and, lending his loft out for rehearsals, became acquainted with Archie Shepp, Paul and Carla Bley, Steve Lacy, and other members of the Jazz Composers' Guild. On visits to Toronto,

Snow would play with the Artists' Jazz Band—at first, for purely social reasons: “I’d been making a living playing jazz, and the AJB seemed pretty silly. But I gradually started to hear what was going on and appreciate it” (Wainwright 77). Snow noted that in New York the free jazz musicians “played fixed lines, tunes, and then they improvised ... I thought that was stupid” (*Music/Sound* 65). He continued:

I sometimes felt that these musicians weren’t necessarily developing what seemed to be the most amazing implications of their music. They often composed tunes that would, by and large, be played first, followed by solos and repeated to close ... but they only occasionally trusted in collective improvisation in which the thematic material is generated then and there by the player-composers. (*Collected* 188)

Snow’s attitude toward the AJB began to change. He realized they were not necessarily as primitive as he’d first thought, conceding, “You have to learn how to improvise in that free way” (Snow, *Music/Sound* 64-5). In fact, a milestone of Snow’s years in New York was his 1965 film *New York Eye and Ear Control*, famous for its soundtrack by Albert Ayler, Don Cherry, John Tchicai, Roswell Rudd, Gary Peacock, and Sunny Murray. “When I chose the band to make the sound track,” Snow writes, “I specifically asked them not to play compositions, just to play free” (65). Toronto saxophonist and multimedia artist John Oswald brings an intriguing perspective to the resulting session:

The musicians that were involved in the *New York Eye and Ear Control* sessions—Albert Ayler, et cetera, were all surprised when Mike [Snow] said no head, just play ... he said it just seemed kind of like a novel idea, but a doable idea, to them. So I think the seeds for that idea of, total free jazz let’s call it, were perhaps planted by a Canadian influence. (Martinez 2014)

Artists' Jazz Band: Artsake, Toronto, 1980. (l to r) Gordon Rayner, Robert Markle, Terry Forster, Bill Smith, Graham Coughtry, David Lee, David Prentice. Photograph by John Oslansky.

Conclusion: The Artists' Jazz Band and the Discourse of Absence

Throughout the 1960s, practicing Toronto jazz musicians seemed immune to the modernist impulse that galvanized musicians around the world to pursue free improvisation. The influence of abstract expressionism gave these artists the license, the confidence, and the motivation not only to play freely improvised music, but to foreground it as an essential part of their identities as artists.

They were empowered to do so by a tradition of experimentation, introduced by influences from Europe, Québec, and New York City that had been established by the formation of Painters Eleven in Toronto's visual art world in the years after the Second World War. Over the years, artists, curators, and critics exercised their combined efforts to establish abstract expressionism as a legitimate genre. Their success gave the AJB permission to pursue its analogy in music—to depart from steady rhythms and chords and the song form. They were committed to building art from the ground up when they painted—it was a logical step to do the same thing when they played music.

Like other free music of the time, the music of the AJB inevitably became part of the jazz discourse around free improvisation, which I have referred to as a “discourse of absence.” This was a discourse of loss, lack, shortcomings, and omission, whereas—as everyone knows who plays the music or discusses it critically—in reality, free improvisation is a way of conceiving music-making from the ground up, giving its composers/players licence to work with basic elements, such as tones, textures, melodies, beats and rhythms, in any way they choose. The music can incorporate all sorts of compositional elements, but it has no constraints to refer to those jazz signifiers that have been reified as tradition.

Such a discourse may have discouraged experimentation among Toronto's jazz musicians, but as abstract expressionists, the AJB and their immediate artistic forebears, Painters Eleven, had already weathered and become inured to such criticisms. Instead of the jazz “discourse of absence,” they applied a discourse that they had tried and proved on canvas, the abstract expressionist discourse of building art from the ground up, of going back to the medium's most basic elements and configuring them openly and spontaneously, sometimes bringing all of their education and erudition to bear, sometimes just as carefully deploying a deliberate naïveté.

For all of that, the persistent jazz “discourse of absence” hung in the background ready to point an accusing finger. It was a potential threat to the brashness that kept the Artists' Jazz Band aloft, and a ‘would-be damper’ of the goodwill that helped to build and expand a downtown art community—a community that loved the band even when they hated the music. But the members of the band had devised a catchphrase that, once pronounced, would dispel this curse. In the many private sessions I enjoyed with the AJB, mostly in Rayner's studio on Spadina Avenue, there were times when the improvisations would cluster around a recognizable tonal centre, or when we would enter collectively into a blues-like groove or start to play a rhythm with walking bass that actually sounded like conventional jazz. At these times, a thrill would go through the band, we would end with a flourish, and the founders of the AJB would raise their fists triumphantly and proclaim, “WE CAN DRAW!”

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Notes

¹ For the purposes of this essay, I am really talking about English Canada. Quebec, an officially francophone province, has evolved a distinctive culture with its own unique and complex relationships to its surrounding anglophone hegemonies, both Canadian and American.

² Starting in 1966, multi-instrumentalist Stuart Broomer (1947-) began playing free improvisation in Toronto, but his first collaborators from the jazz community were saxophonist Jim Falconbridge and drummer Ron Sullivan, whose background was not modern music, but traditional New Orleans jazz (Broomer 2016). Broomer's seminal work in Toronto music, which includes collaborations with Michael Snow, Graham Coughtry, and Bill Smith, merits an essay in itself.

³ Occasionally, they would come right out and say it. In the 1980s, as a member of Toronto's improvised music scene, I lived in an apartment on Queen Street West next to former Painters Eleven member Tom Hodgson, who in the 1960s had hosted the studio party for Andy Warhol where the AJB played. Tom used to say that he felt he was doing in art what we were doing in music; he came to many of our performances, and we played at an opening of his paintings at the Baux-Xi Gallery on Dundas Street in the early 1980s (the group was Larry Potter, David Prentice, Bill Smith, and myself).

⁴ This particular clip can be found on YouTube. Entitled *Coughtry Jones Kubota Markle Rayner c 1970*, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OBxdw6VnZDc>.

⁵ Is It Addicting? (excerpt). This audio clip, illustrated by photos and texts from the Isaac Gallery's 1973 limited-edition LP, can be viewed at <https://youtu.be/a-LG7zoSgGo>. The clip features Robert Markle and Nobuo Kubota, saxophones; Graham Coughtry, trombone; Harvey Cowan, electric violin; Gerald McAdam, guitar; Michael Snow, piano and whistling; Jim Jones, electric bass; Terry Forster, upright bass; and Gordon Rayner, drums.

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