Book Review

Loft Jazz: Improvising New York in the 1970s

Michael C. Heller
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The jazz canon, in historical literature, gets a bit hazy in the 1970s. If New York City was then still the capital of the jazz world, it would be impossible to overlook the relationship between a fractured city and the music produced within it. “By the early 1970s,” writes historian Kim Phillips-Fein, “this confident and prosperous city seemed frayed beyond all recognition”:

New York’s once-beautiful parks were dirty and deteriorating. Its glorious research library was deep in the red. The public hospitals were dilapidated, their emergency rooms overcrowded and their equipment out of date. The city university was struggling to meet demand. Fires had started to tear through the once stable neighborhoods of the South Bronx. The economy that had supported the expansive social sector of the postwar years was falling apart (21).

It is no surprise then that a trope of fragmentation emerges in how the music of the decade, especially that developed and performed in the lofts of Lower Manhattan, is written about in contemporary histories. Gary Giddens and Scott DeVeaux, in the nuanced 2009 survey *Jazz*, describe Loft Era musicians as taking the term “free jazz” to task by playing whatever they liked, combining the old and the new—ragtime, marches, swing, funk, and free rhythms—in a way that acknowledged tradition without staking any claim in any sort of stylistic fidelity (585). Theirs was a “boundless eclecticism,” informed by music history and wholly devoted to experimentation (580). Benjamin Bierman, in *Listening To Jazz* of 2016, also a college survey, frames the jazz of the decade as consisting of “many movements,” where musicians of an electric, globally-informed “fusion” (John McLaughlin, Chick Corea, Pat Metheny, Weather Report) are linked to the experimentalists of a more insular New York “downtown scene” of the 1970s in their eschewing of fealty to a monolithic jazz aesthetic regime. What he says about the latter group resonates with his descriptions of the former, in that they all “are well versed in jazz styles yet do not necessarily think of themselves as jazz players. They are also often interested in moving past traditional expectations of the jazz scene, even though much of their music is rooted in mainstream or avant-garde jazz. Their music frequently has connections to numerous popular music styles . . . The scene tends to emphasize an intense eclecticism, or openness to numerous influences, which can be expressed through a pastiche compositional style—moving through a variety of styles in one piece—or through involvement in a variety of projects that each may be in a different style” (325).

As alluded to in these surveys, the New York City loft scene of the 1970s was an era and locale that fundamentally disrupted the aesthetic teleology and stylistic cohesion that was so much a part of a now faded monolithic Jazz Tradition promulgated first by jazz writers of the 1950s, but most amplified and supported (by the state and private investors) in the 1980s-90s with the founding of Jazz at Lincoln Center. The same neighborhoods that harbored New York’s jazz avant-garde of the 1960s—received initially by the jazz press as the paragon of jazz

modernism—crumbled in the 1970s, as too did discourses of jazz's modernist tradition. The remaining husks and debris were repurposed by a generation of resourceful and creative thinkers. Phillips-Fein writes: "In downtown lofts that had once housed small manufacturers, artists decorated makeshift theaters with old furniture, abandoned commercial signs, tossed-out tinsel, crutches, and children's toys to perform works that were half confession, half provocation" (54). These were America's Nixon years, and New York City's Mayor Beame years: an era of industrial decline, neoliberalist deregulation, white flight, urban divestment, and the most entrenched racial segregation and disenfranchisement since Reconstruction (Marable 146-181). Artists were among the many that were forced to find order, stability, and potential in and among the detritus.

Musicians' efforts to survive and thrive under these circumstances are the focus of Michael Heller's *Loft Jazz: Improvising New York in the 1970s*. Rather than spend time on how loft jazz relates (or does not relate) to the Tradition, he focuses on how the constellation of venues (performance spaces) and musicians (individual actors and their networks) effected a vibrant and multifaceted cultural realm bound by the city's topology and political machinations. Heller's attention to the role of inventiveness and resourcefulness in musicians' collective action, despite circumstantial dire straits, bears a metonymic relationship to their inventive and boundless musical creation during the decade. Heller departs from the historical survey's task of summarizing what was by foreshadowing the multiple ways in which the era and music *meant* for the musicians involved; as such, he accounts for their creative multiplicity in a manner unburdened by even a symbolic gesture towards a central Tradition. With the concession that the genre designation "loft jazz" was not embraced by many musicians on the scene, the music and social connections created in the lofts are to be understood, according to Heller, as a polyvalent music practice that was part of a way of living and coexisting, engendered by special and ultimately ephemeral spaces in Lower Manhattan. These were spaces for bandmates, friends, lovers, children, neighbors, community members and organizers which, in totality, map out the city's cultural topography as much as the pavement, concrete, brick, and mortar. And this map, sketched out in Heller's text, is incomplete because the archive consulted for his study is—as are all archives—also incomplete: "A private archive is more than the sum of its artifacts, it is also the thrust of its intention—a tool in a process of self-affirmation that has animated musician activism for half a century. The archive is a storehouse, but it is also a mechanism. A mine, but also a pickaxe" (178). More on the archive later.

Borrowing from ethnomusicologist Ingrid Monson, Heller unpacks the multiple meanings and perspectives of "loft jazz" on the part of musicians active on the scene via three analytical levels: discourse (interviews, archival media), structure (social, political, and economic contexts), and practice (action). The goal in this three-pronged approach is to collapse the tendency for historical narratives to erect boundaries in between "public history and private lives," and this epistemological strategy successfully ensures, in Heller's book, that the artist-as-subject retains, at every point, ownership for the creative and professional decisions they made. Missing are analyses of important commercial recordings, like those in the surveys, as representative examples of artistic practice; rather, the artifacts brought to surface are ephemera, both material (posters, letters, meeting minutes, rehearsal recordings) and immaterial (memories, drawn from the author's interviews). Most importantly, as a scholarly study, Heller pulls back from the historian's Romantic efforts at crafting an apodictic, cohesive narrative, choosing instead for the text to make legible the musicians' numerous, coexistent, and at times conflicting views and recollections of their actions, beliefs, and goals (10).

The impetus for this approach is, surprisingly, made clearest in the penultimate chapter of the book, "Archive," where Heller invites the reader into his long, at times challenging, and deeply

rewarding experience organizing the documents and magnetic tapes of Juma Sultan, the bassist and percussionist whose devout auto-archivism yielded a full, if necessarily incomplete, picture of a vibrant cultural moment. Opportunity brought Sultan from San Francisco to New York State in 1966, shortly after which he became a core member of Jimi Hendrix's final bands, an integral part of the experimental jazz scenes of lower Manhattan, a member of the New York Musicians Organization collective, and an organizer of the New York Musicians' Jazz Festival. Heller's history of New York City's loft scene, then, grows from Sultan's rich archive of materials from his career, and as such is a text of aliquots: fragments stitched together by theoretical and historiographically-informed context, all in the service of providing the reader with penetrating and efferent glimpses into the loft scene's past.

The central concerns of Heller's book are summarized on p. 188, and these points connect the New York jazz avant-garde collectives of the 1970s with subsequent jazz-related experimentalism in the 1980s up to the present:

- 1) an ongoing concern with ideals of freedom, both as a musical value and a political program for self-determination; 2) a community-oriented focus, aimed at bringing together artists and listeners; 3) efforts to build and/or repurpose spaces for cultivating artistic practices; and 4) relying on a combination of cooperative DIY practices and funding through grants and city arts programs.

This emphasis on artistic and indeed creative agency, on the part of musicians most centrally but other collaborators as well (venue and community organizers, spouses, and family members, for instance) is aimed at focusing on an "ethics of collaboration" in service of "moving forward" (Heller 190). Importantly, this is to be distinguished from the teleological "progress" of jazz historiography. This forward motion, as Heller dutifully captures, was and is sustained by the nurturing community bonds that serve, *a priori*, as the generative pretext for creative ideas, action, and collaboration—the grassroots setting for cultural engagement and exchange, between artists and their audiences. Attuned to more ideal worlds "different from the one we currently inhabit," one goal in the collaborative experimental projects of loft jazz musicians was precisely to incant sounds and ideas that were hitherto unimaginable, thus driving the collective—musicians, audience, and the broader community—towards a more ideal and just reality than that which exists currently.

There are moments of vivid description in Heller's text that, in either capturing the interior vibe of performance spaces, mapping the terrain around and in between venues, or capturing the varied perspectives of the artists, organizers, and community-members on the scene, are indispensable. Chapter three, "The Jazz Loft Era," stands out in this regard; in it, Heller traces the genealogy and operational rhythms of perhaps the most recognizable lofts of the decade—Ornette Coleman's Artist House, Rashied Ali's Alley, Burton Greene and James DuBoise's Studio We, Stanley Crouch and David Murray's Studio Infinity, and Sam and Bea Rivers' eponymous (and deeply influential) Studio Rivbea. Heller also recounts the tension surrounding the Newport Jazz Festival's temporary relocation to New York City in 1972, a move that was met with criticism, ire, and resistance on the part of musicians active in New York that were never included in—or saw their work as antithetical to—the presentation of the festival. The ways that black musicians like Sultan and saxophonist Archie Shepp publicly challenged Newport founder George Wein because of the festival's lack of engagement with the city's black communities, and the omission of black input and representation on the managerial staff, demonstrates continuity with efforts by artists in the decade prior to challenge power hierarchies and engage in self-advocacy. A highlight in these resistance efforts was the New York

Musicians' Jazz Festival (NYMJF), organized in response to Newport, which led to the founding of the New York Musicians Organization (NYMO) in 1972. Most importantly, in recollecting these significant cooperative efforts between musicians, Heller makes clear that even acts of solidarity involved disagreements and unresolved tensions revolving around musicians' racial identity, access to resources, group membership and inclusion, economic returns, and which goals should receive priority over others. The chapter ends on a somewhat somber note: the dynamics of cooperative agency so vibrant during the loft era begin to wane in 1978 amidst a rise in Lower Manhattan's rent prices (due to city rezoning earlier in the decade and the start of Ed Koch's first mayoral term), necessitating highly creative, at times desperate, and sometimes unsuccessful responses on the part of musicians to these structural changes. If the loft scene championed collectivism, its decline was marked by heightened competition between musicians and a renewed focus on independent ventures (60).

Improvisation figures into Heller's account of the loft scene on two levels. The first, as a given, is in music creation and performance; Heller's account of the music activity in the private lofts-cum-public performance venues of 1970s lower-Manhattan is summarized in chapter four—"Freedom"—where it, in practice, is realized by intersecting aesthetic and extra-musical (social and political) objectives:

Musicians used "freedom" as a sort of discursive bridge, capable of mapping musical practices onto social values in multiple directions. Though there was a near universal agreement on its attractiveness, musicians deployed the term for a wide array of descriptive and aesthetic purposes (67).

There are a few caveats here. For one, Heller acknowledges that the term "freedom" was, in the 1960s and 70s, overdetermined; while metaphorically succinct, it consisted of a panoply of conceptual, technical, and performative approaches that are underserved by a reductive—if otherwise unifying—ethos. In stagings of small-group avant-garde music, which occurred in musicians' residences and theater spaces in the neighborhood, understood as "loft" performances by audiences and the music press, the instrumentation, which otherwise reflected a conventional jazz format, varied. Depending on the ensemble's membership (which might be contingent) and on whether the performance was understood as being open to walk-in participation, freedom is, in this context, the intent and ability to make meaningful music regardless of situational variables. "Freedom dreams," a term borrowed from Robin D.G. Kelley, is Heller's way of accounting for the multiple ideals of freedom realized through musicians' initiatives that varied from person to person and changed across time. He parses these into three subsections: 1) musicians forming new politically-informed identities (a self-reinvention marked, for instance, by the adoption of non-Western names) and seeking control over performances and economics, individually and collectively; 2) acts of transgression and/or transcendence (political activism, third world solidarity, social transgression, and the expansion of one's consciousness via education, spirituality, communal or off-the-grid living, and drug experimentation); and 3) an investment in an approach to musical improvisation that eschewed many if not all predetermined elements, grounding one's playing instead on the raw and fertile possibilities of the immediate present—"energy music" (69).

The second level in which improvisation figures into Heller's narrative of the loft jazz moment is in musicians' navigation of the impermanent and at times demoralizingly difficult circumstances of a city in crisis. Here, improvisation is understood as a broad, quotidian, and ubiquitous problem-solving operation in a manner explored in detail by George E. Lewis, Jeff Pressing, and Vijay Iyer. For Heller, this operation accounts for the many ways in which musicians survived

and thrived in the face of uncertainty, disappointment, and change (26-33). Heller invests in this notion in two ways: first, he emphasizes that lofts served as “spaces” (defined as open, abstract points along a topological grid where utility and meaning are not derived by their being a physical “place” constituted by objects—i.e. walls, a roof, doors, chairs, and a stage – but an “unfilled medium” with an immaterial potential for people to convene, communicate, dream, and do) where social and professional networks could form and prosper (133). Secondly, improvisation was a necessity in a heterogeneous city, where communities—as formal neighborhoods, but also dynamic social groups—were not necessarily cohesive entities:

[C]ity residents group themselves into countless smaller collectivities that may be based on any number of criteria (work, religion, hobbies, etc.). These collectivities are rarely discrete; a single person may consider him/herself to be a member of several different communities. Such insights have given rise to numerous models to account for porous boundaries and/or degrees of fragmentation within social groups (Heller 97).

In this regard, Heller disambiguates between community and collectivity, the latter being more intentional and strategic than the former because of members’ self-selection in service of professional and aesthetic goals, especially in the face of economic instability and internal fragmentation. In a particularly illuminating subheading of chapter five titled “Community In The Lofts: Pay, Play, Place, Race,” Heller explores how membership and communal action in loft collectives were determined by discourses related to those four keywords, where economic strategies and critiques of industry (“pay”), musical practices (“play”), community embeddedness and engagement (“place”), and the concerns of black musicians and city residents, especially vis-à-vis white people (“race”) determined how and why collectives were formed and dismantled (100-120). That collectives themselves were ever-changing and impermanent underscores the fundamental role of improvisation in the very survival of musicians within the loft scene.

As stated earlier, Heller’s text is one that is historiographically self-aware, and, notably, he does not spend much time locating his work within a scholarly field by critiquing contemporary jazz literature with the intent of getting at a truer narrative of loft jazz. His attention is on what the archive can and cannot tell us, and he acknowledges, in chapters one and seven especially, that it is a record of gaps and omissions as much as it is extant artifacts from which a narrative can be fabricated. The perhaps disappointing payoff of this acknowledgement is that the story of what happened can never be “complete.” Admissions of this sort are to thwart any expectations on the part of the reader of a history of loft jazz located within the streamlined modernist teleological model still in place within universities, conservatories, and jazz curricula across the globe. As Heller remarks in the last chapter, “Aftermaths and Legacies,” the decline of the loft scene in the 1980s was not due to jazz’s neoclassical stylistic turn (which reactionarily construed the experimentalism of the 1970s as a collective act of dissent),¹ but rather due to the vicissitudes of an ever-changing city: changes of venue (where the downtown “underground” migrated into more commercial nightclubs and more formal concert spaces), changes in the lives of the musicians (including their disdain of and subsequent pushback against being labeled “loft jazz musicians”), grant funding and institutional support, and new festivals.

To revisit the trope of *fragmentation*, it applies not only to the stylistic variance of the era, nor to the philosophical disjunctures and structural challenges that the musicians faced, but also the archive. Indeed, Juma Sultan’s archive is central to Heller’s book because it unlocks the possibility for a community-based study of an era rich with significance as varied as the individuals themselves. Through the personal archive of Juma Sultan, Heller has sought to

present a “reconstructive history,” one faithful to the “layers of musical significance as remembered and cherished by musicians, despite being overlooked in other secondary sources” (6). This is his addendum to jazz studies’ scholarly expansion in the last twenty years; Heller shows, successfully, how a private archive can wield the same import and authority as the conventional resources sought after by researchers: commercial recordings, discography, historical newspapers and journals, music theory and analysis, social theory, and ethnography. These are all their own types of archives, and Heller’s point is that musicians’ private archives, if accessible, should be added to this list of resources, thus leaving the unenviable task of engaging with and synthesizing these artifactual fragments in a manner informed not just by the researcher’s training and disciplinary discourses, but also the organization and contour of the musicians’ documents and memories. What stands out is the respect that Heller shows towards Sultan’s archive; this deeply personal collection of objects and memories facilitated by said objects are, Heller rightly notes, not ensconced like a research library’s special collection. Rather, they “circulate,” possessing great meaning to the musician in question, serving as a testament to their life’s work, and may be accessed and repurposed for creative or documentary work while the musician is still alive. For these reasons, the researcher must exercise great care by seeing an archive as a vestigial extension of human life itself.

The most curious part of Heller’s study was, for me, the rare glimpses of self-reflection as he is invited into Sultan’s personal space; while illuminating, they felt incomplete. He was welcomed into the home of Juma and his wife Mariyah, who was initially skeptical of his intentions, and brought into the highly intimate space of the archive—conceivably an intimacy not unlike that maintained in the lofts themselves decades prior. Starting on p. 170, Heller recounts his “terms of engagement,” i.e., the many informed ways in which he sought to understand and engage Sultan’s archive, exploring the myriad pertinent connotations of archival reserves for past theorists: as the “exteriorized memory” of the private individual which can ultimately destroy and replace their memory (Jacques Derrida); as an “exteriorized” document out of the hands of its originator and in a distant, publicly accessible institution (Sven Spieker); as a subaltern “history” that can contest institutional, state-sanctioned narratives on behalf of the disenfranchised (Antoinette Burton); and the archive as insurrectionary “counter-memory” harboring subaltern truths that exist outside of state-sanctioned institutions and retain currency within a specific community (David Scott) (Heller 171-172). It is clear that Heller intends not to replicate the power asymmetries of the researcher vis-à-vis the artists of jazz history’s past, but what of Heller’s own positionality vis-à-vis Sultan? The reader understands something of Sultan’s biography as being germane to the archive, but is there no corresponding link between the researcher’s life and his or her work, or interest in the archive? If identity was so central to how musicians on the loft scene related to each other and built or broke solidarity, is not the identity of the researcher in relation to his or her living subject and archive also relevant? While these open questions do not point to a deficiency on the part of Heller’s deep and balanced study, as a musicologist and musician myself, I can only but wonder.

Notes

¹ Giddens and DeVeaux 585–6, 588–9.

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