Jam Sessions: Improvising Across Disciplines

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I began to think, that is to say, to listen harder.
—Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*

In this collaborative essay, we work together to make one key point: what improvisation affords as a mode of music-making is also what it offers as a mode of interdisciplinary cultural study. What it offers, that is, is a layered alternative to single-authored, “work-centered,” mono-disciplinary writing.

In the pages that follow, we not only work to explain this concept, but also to model it in two different ways. First, at the level of process, we opt to present ideas that we generated collaboratively and improvisationally, over two years of after-hours conversations about our experiences as drummers and interdisciplinary scholars. Second, at the level of form, we present these ideas in a way that captures the shape of our conversations, opting for analogical, associative connections over streamlined, linear arguments.

The result is essentially a record of our improvisations—a trace of live jam sessions. In the four sections that follow, woven together from written correspondence and recorded conversations, we offer a lived example of our thesis, molding our dialogues about disciplinarity, improvisation, and musical thinking into a winding exploration. By the end, after having covered a wide range of texts, we return to our opening gesture: the central homology between musical improvisation and academic interdisciplinarity.

Before we begin our discussion in earnest, we think it’s pertinent—perhaps in a slight departure from some academic norms (yet in accordance with our topic here)—to provide a little personal context. The two of us first met in graduate school, as students who had matriculated into the same interdisciplinary Ph.D. program after having walked relatively similar life-paths in Texas and Wisconsin. By the time we met, we had each had transformative life experiences as improvisation-driven drummers and percussionists. In the varying spaces in which we had performed, our improvising had alternated between explicit and implicit modes—overt in places like jazz gigs, hardcore shows, and drumline rehearsals, and more subdued in settings like wind ensembles, school orchestras, and classical auditions. In those different musical spaces, we came to learn (alongside our peers and mentors) a few of the many meanings improvisation can have in different musical environments. And while we each found these lessons to be important and generative within each of those musical environments, we soon realized, as students of culture and eventually as local colleagues, that there was more to the story. By talking through our shared experiences, we became aware of the ways that an improvisatory sensibility could blur the boundaries between things like disciplines, stages, and seminar rooms.

In this paper, then, we consider that insight. As interdisciplinary researchers working across humanistic fields and disciplines, we consider what musical improvisation can teach us about scholarly analytics, methods, and lineages. As we do so, we keep in mind the central lesson of

our first meeting: that our experiences, while certainly our own, are not necessarily unique, and that many other writers and listeners have shared similar concerns. With this sense of relation, connection, and community in mind, we ask, in our own way: what new ideas can emerge when we approach interdisciplinary research like musical improvisation?

Vamp: Improvisation as Low Theory

One starting point might be the concept of tektology, a practice of improvisatory and multi-modal crossings imagined by the Soviet writer Alexander Bogdanov and further theorized by Mackenzie Wark. Bogdanov—a philosopher, scientist, and science-fiction author who was both a contemporary and rival of Lenin’s—dreamed of an intellectual practice in which different fields of knowledge could revise one another through the movement of concepts, techniques, methods, etc., from one arena to another. As Wark explains:

[T]ektology is a practice which generalizes the act of substitution by which one thing is understood metaphorically via another. It is a practice of making worldviews . . . [T]he wager of tektology is that it might be possible to construct a kind of low theory whose purpose is to experimentally apply understandings of one process to other quite different processes to see if they can be grasped as analogous. It is a kind of *détournement* that works ‘sideways,’ from field to field, rather than from past to present. (87)

Rather than an ideology, tektology is an activity, an experimental method, a kind of thinking-in-doing defined primarily by the forms of conjunction and substitution that Wark describes. Whereas things like dialectical materialism are systematic, orderly, and legislative, Wark, via Bogdanov, sees tektology as necessarily contingent, improvisatory, and open-ended. It privileges the specific, local, and practical over the systematic and theoretical. Tektologists are necessarily inter- or multi-disciplinarians and improvisers, adapting themselves (and their thinking and playing) into new or unfamiliar situations by borrowing tools and ideas from other spheres. The credo of tektologists is simple: *if it worked there, perhaps it will also work here*.

Wark’s notion of tektology rhymes neatly with what the theorist of language Roman Jakobson called “intersemiotic translation”: the movement of concepts from one semiotic system to another. Musically speaking, reading Jakobson’s work on understanding translation as “transmutation” clarified something we had known but never articulated: that ideas could first take root as sonorities (i.e. unresolved seventh chords, rhythmic modulations, pedal point bass ostinatos), then evolve into metaphors through language and/or literary form, and finally find new life as useful academic concepts and affective artistic statements.

Both Wark and Jakobson’s terms can be seen as cousins of what the ethnomusicologist Ingrid Monson (in drawing on Mantle Hood’s notion of “bi-musicality” [Hood 55-59]) once described as “polymusicality,” or the ability of musicians with at least one strong stylistic affiliation to navigate a wide variety of musical genres and settings. For Monson, this movement between musical planes “should not be seen as a liquidation of cultural identity but rather as an important component of the cultural identity of a cosmopolitan group” (131). In other words, the jazz musician’s familiarity with Carnatic rhythmic systems, A Tribe Called Quest’s sampling practices

or Esteban Jordan's use of the Echoplex, as well as their abilities to transfer and translate musical ideas across sonic domains, is not musical rootlessness or chameleonic evasion, but rather a kind of experiential honesty and an index of cultural exchange.

The proximity of these three terms—tektology, intersemiotic translation, and polymusicality—captures a fundamental component of our experiences as both musicians and graduate students, moving from anthropology to musicology seminars, literary theory courses to jazz combo rehearsals, and engineering talks to our own jam sessions. Indeed, when thinking through the lessons of these terms, and when thinking about the relationship between musical practice and scholarly work, one can't help but wonder about these and other concepts' deeper entanglements—about the methodological resonances they share and the departmental distances they mark.

Thus, we arrive at our first stop: seeing the practice of music-making as a form of theorizing, a way of not only grappling with and coming to understand the world around us, but also as a domain in which such an understanding can be expressed. As the British writer Kodwo Eshun put it: "Far from needing theory's help, music today is already more conceptual than at any point this century, pregnant with thoughtprobes waiting to be activated, switched on, misused" (-003).

And while it's not necessarily novel to hear music as theory, what might be new is a focus on the ways that musical improvisers and academic interdisciplinarians work across contexts and boundaries. For to link, on a fundamental level, is to connect ideas, gestures, and materials across seen and unseen divides—and when people practice such things for long enough, they eventually cultivate a connective sensibility and a way of perceiving the gaps between social, aesthetic, and academic discourses. And, from within them, creating.

Verse: How to Listen Closely

There is no doubt that in order to be a good drummer, one needs to develop a set of baseline musical skills and attitudes that enable ensembles to thrive. To be a good improviser in interdisciplinary contexts, one needs to do much of the same: opening oneself to newness, and in the process, testing and relinquishing ego. One of the most important skills and attitudes in both domains is (no surprise) a practicable ethic of close and careful listening.

So, what might such an ethic entail? We can still hear a profound example in the work of composer, improviser, and writer Pauline Oliveros:

. . . *Deep Listening* for me is learning to expand the perception of sounds to include the whole space/time continuum of sound—encountering the vastness and complexities as much as possible. Simultaneously one ought to be able to target a sound or sequence of sounds as a focus within the space-time continuum and to perceive the detail or trajectory of the sound or sequence of sounds. Such focus should always return to, or be within the whole of the space/time continuum (context). Such expansion means that one is connected to the whole of the environment and beyond. (xxiii)

For Oliveros, the simple, yet committed, practice of listening is a way of both sharpening and widening one's perception of sound and environment—an attempt both to take in the entirety of the aural world and to attend to the particulars of individual sonic phenomena. An ethic of close listening requires patience, humility, receptivity, precision, and diligence, by prioritizing clarity over speed, breadth over volume, and intentionality over showmanship.

For anthropologist Steven Feld, this kind of listening is as much a product as it is a practice: a mode of sound-thought that he describes as “acoustemology”:

Acoustemology conjoins ‘acoustics’ and ‘epistemology’ to theorize sound as a way of knowing. In doing so, it inquires into what is knowable, and how it becomes known, through sounding and listening. Acoustemology begins with acoustics to ask how the dynamism of sound's physical energy indexes its social immediacy. It asks how the physicality of sound is so instantly and forcefully present to experience and experiencers, to interpreters and interpretations. . . . acoustemology engages acoustics at the plane of the audible—*akoustos*—to inquire into sounding as simultaneously social and material, an experiential nexus of sonic sensation. (Feld 12)

Acoustemology; deep listening. Just as Oliveros and Feld open themselves up to the richness of aural thinking, they also model the activity of scholarly improvisation: the work of attending to dynamic social, cultural, and scholastic relationships as well as the fruitful instabilities of cultural texts. With Oliveros and Feld in mind, we might also say that listening as an improvising scholar means much of the same thing as it does for a jazz drummer: lowering the shields of certainty, attending to colleagues and objects in disparate fields and periods, and cultivating the capacity to share work with others in ways that enhance the intellectual community. We might say that listening means not only charting the terrain of a dialogue and offering contributions when most beneficial to the collective—not only knowing when and how to phrase, transpose, and modify concepts to fit the groove of the conversation, but also, by extension, how to most fruitfully and creatively participate in that conversation.

When we listen as musicians in a group of improvisers, we aim to hear ourselves in, against, and through the ensemble, attending carefully to our own place within the push and pull of musical interactions, but also reaching towards something slower, deeper, a flowing, intuitive sense of the ensemble as a whole—what Ralph Ellison might have called “the lower frequencies” (581). And while this listening is undoubtedly conditioned and particularized by the music and musicians we listen to, it's also generally guided by an attentive flexibility and the willingness to change directions on a dime.

In his work on jazz and pragmatism, writer Walton Muyumba traces how this plays out at the level of the individual solo:

The improvised composition presents both the musician's and culture's fluctuations; improvisation is a way of articulating the agon among the individual artist, the musical setting, the composition itself, and the larger social matrix that shapes the aesthetic. Improvisation, however, is also about revising or *othering* all those parts of aesthetic

statement. The construction of an improvised solo is designed to articulate the music's openness to renewal and revision while also enabling the public expression of the self as performative—both are othered in the play. When musicians improvise, they are detailing some elements of their individual and/or ensemble musical educations and jazz performances, as well as creating spontaneous, new compositions. (19-20)

These ideas about musical improvisation, as much as they inform our own thoughts on literal jazz practice, also instruct when read as allegory; the “improvised solo” that articulates “the agon among the individual artist, the musical setting, the composition itself, and the larger social matrix that shapes the aesthetic” can be cast as a comment in a workshop, an essay in a collection, a book-length project in a field. Heard in this way, the practices and products of improvisation can thus be thought to encapsulate an interdisciplinary thinking in, with, and through art that at once traces the social matrices of contemporary knowledge production; demands confrontations with the histories of academic institutions; and underscores the potential of re-combining discrete educations. And concerning the affordances of sound and music for critical inquiry, this improvisatory interdisciplinarity thrives on alternative epistemologies—those afforded by de- and post-colonial critique, as well as those still-to-be-named, enabled by acoustemological life.

We can also extend this idea a bit further. Take the writings of philosopher Walter Benjamin, for instance. Just as with Feld's acoustemology, Benjamin's writings focus on the phenomenal realm of aesthetic spectation as a form of knowledge. In particular, his writings on the imaginative stuff of childhood stand as a monument to the power of imagination—a faith not only inspirational, but also vital, in today's world of increasingly siloed curiosities. Writing about children's books, Benjamin observes that:

. . . For children, a whole new world opens up in their black and white woodcuts. . . The colored picture immerses the child's imagination in a dream state within itself. The black-and-white woodcut, the plain, prosaic illustration, leads him out of himself. The compelling invitation to describe, which is implicit in such pictures, arouses the child's desire to express himself in words. And describing these pictures in words, he also describes them by enactment. The child inhabits them. . . Children fill them with a poetry of their own. (Benjamin, “Old Forgotten Children's Books” 411)

And later:

The objects do not come to meet the picturing child from the pages of the book; instead, the gazing child enters into those pages, becoming suffused, like a cloud, with the riotous colors of the world of pictures. (Benjamin, “A Glimpse” 435)

For Benjamin, the children's book works like a trap door for the imagination, a malleable space of wonder in which the world itself can be not only explored but also expressed and possibly transformed. Such a practice of spectation straddles the boundary between the informed and naive—a genuine curiosity informed by the idiosyncrasies of experience. Benjamin's late correspondence with Theodor Adorno illustrates one of the principle difficulties of dealing with

such slippery, ephemeral topics—namely, the danger of being misunderstood (or even worse), simply dismissed as unserious or “insufficiently dialectical” (Feldman 336–362). Thus, what is miraculous in Benjamin’s writings, and in his life, is his absolute insistence that sensuous modes of spectation are not only real, but of central importance to modern life—not simply diversions or entertainments but real, vital conduits of understanding which, if one could appropriately open oneself to them, would illuminate some of the fundamental questions of human life.

And while this practice of critical listening—to one’s objects of study, intellectual ancestors, academic peers, and of course, one’s self—is indispensable for anyone doing academic work, it is the lifeblood of interdisciplinary scholars. To listen as an avowedly interdisciplinary scholar is to stretch across conceptual boundaries. Like the turntablist, it’s to hear the fruitful possibilities of re-contextualization, the generative powers of suggestive juxtaposition. It’s to practice embracing the risk and uncertainty of improvisatory and re-combinatory activity, as scholar-musicians like George Lewis and Vijay Iyer; writers like Ralph Ellison and Cherríe Moraga; border intellectuals like Gloria Anzaldúa and Rafa Saavedra; and electronic artists like Flying Lotus and J Dilla have all exemplified. It’s to sit with one’s world and to render it strange.

Now, with all that said: it’s important for us to note that not all instances of interdisciplinarity and improvisation are rosy. As Dale Chapman and Mark Laver have documented, for instance, jazz-inspired practices of improvisation have been readily and enthusiastically adopted by neoliberal financial capitalism.¹ Appeals to “interdisciplinarity” have been presented in some university settings as justifications for undermining faculty power. At times, even the critical discourse of improvisation itself can take on triumphalist overtones. Amid such practices, it’s crucial to remember the basics: healthy improvisation, just like generative interdisciplinarity, places community at its center. Its weight isn’t on consumerist logics or lucrative possibilities, but instead on group-oriented experiences of creative flexibility.

Keeping this in mind as graduate students, from a nuts-and-bolts perspective, has meant being patient, and learning to hold conflicting registers of thought and expression together at once. It has meant learning to read well: to take in writings on their own merits, to know the contexts of their publication, to recover their histories of reception, to map their explicit and implicit interlocutors, and to understand the settings in which they’ve already been read or used. It has meant learning to analyze and synthesize: to communicate observations that account for any number of social, political, historical, and theoretical concerns while simultaneously being sufficiently original and worth sustained attention. It has meant learning to listen actively within the domains of academic disciplines, to learn the watershed cuts, controversies, debates, and lacunae of many different fields of inquiry and then to find ways to layer or draw connections between them. Which is all to say: it’s meant taking many of the deeper theoretical lessons of our improvisatory musical experiences and re-localizing them in academic space, all with a sense of community in mind.

Refrain: Practice and Study, Study and Practice

Again, through our conversations, we’ve come to agree that this homology between improvisation and interdisciplinary work has special relevance for scholars invested in the study

of culture. Consider, again, Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's interest in the cheap, the extraneous, the forgotten, and the liminal speaks to a marginality that resonates not only with the interdisciplinarian's improvised position within the disciplinary academy, but also with the study of culture as a super-field itself composed of the marginal and the liminal (Benjamin 470). And as can be seen in the work of the theorists mentioned in this essay alone, it is not surprising that many of the most prominent voices in cultural studies have, in their own ways, been improvisers: writers and musicians, performers and visual artists, samplers and wanderers.

That intellectuals have also long turned to music as a key social practice and organizing metaphor for studying culture is also significant. Scholars like Michael Kramer have turned to the multi-track mixing board to think through often incongruent layers—narratives, ideologies, and events—that are always occurring in real time and, occasionally, aligning (Kramer 220-225). Thinkers like Edward Said have turned to counterpoint to metaphorize multi-perspectival cultural criticism, tracing the contours of clashing ideologies, attuned to the variety of sonorous, modulating, and dissonant chords such conflicts produce (Said 51). From W.E.B. Du Bois's wordless sorrow songs to the University of Warwick's Cybernetic Culture Research Unit, scholars have seen popular music as a privileged entrance into contemporary culture—a window into how musicians and audiences understand and navigate the world around them.

Like so many others, both of us have found our experiences reflected in these scholars' writings. So too have we found inspiration in writers like Fred Moten, Nathaniel Mackey, Vijay Iyer, Greg Tate—all accustomed to testing the affordances of writing and sounding, all coming to the former only after investing serious hours in the latter. Consider, again, Ralph Ellison:

. . . [W]hen it was suggested to me that I try my hand at writing, [that boyish ideal] was still with me; thus I went about writing rashly unaware that my ambitions as a composer had been fatally diverted.

Once involved, however, I soon became consciously concerned with craft, with technique. And through my discipline of consciousness acquired from the study of music theory I was gradually led, often reluctantly, to become consciously concerned with the nature of the culture and the society out of which American fiction is fabricated. (Ellison 55)

Taking Ellison's lead, perhaps we might all try and imagine together what a craft of interdisciplinarity looks like in our moment. Perhaps that's what improvising across disciplines is all about—craft, care, rigor, *inter-discipline*.

Coda: Back to the Top

A refrain: what we've affirmed for each other in our practice rooms, text threads, and seminar conversations is that improvisation is at once an in-the-moment activity and an experience-informed mentality. It is an approach to merger, juxtaposition, and translation motivated by the twin rewards of interpersonal connection and shareable discovery. Improvising across disciplines, then, means fostering such an ethic in oneself and one's communities. It means cultivating that special discipline so often ascribed to the craftsman and the artist—a deep love

for the honest phrase, the earnest groove. It means continuously exerting pressure on institutions that seem too ingrained to be innovative.

Together, as improvisers, what we've articulated for each other is this: that to write for a specific, disciplinary audience is to play to a room—to gauge, with open ears, how and when to accompany and interject, lay back or lean forward. To listen responsibly is to *actually* listen—a feat in the often unfortunately tense spaces of seminar and conference rooms. Just as jazz musicians accompany or “comp” for their peers’ expressions, an ethic of listening requires that one actively support others in real time—to communicate to a peer, through earnest questions and subtle ghost notes, in order to hear them on their own terms. To solo is to braid histories—some more firmly implanted in academic institutions than others—into utterances that, like language itself, are only ever partially one’s own. To drum across boundaries is to cultivate a love for overlapping processes, to cherish layers and simultaneities, and to dismantle the stage—as the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians did with those “little instruments”—is to step from the presentational to the participatory, to practice democratization rather than tout it as a cure-all, and to recognize the messy, political potential of improvisation as musical, social, and scholarly practice.²

Articulating these things for each other collaboratively, as graduate students from two very different parts of the United States, helped us experience something we sincerely hope many students have the chance to during their studies: a feeling that we were not improvising alone. Building on that feeling over these last few years has meant finding new theoretical gestures and creative processes; it has meant keeping our academic and musical practices collaborative and entwined; it has meant actively seeking out those many other scholars around the world who have formed similar relationships and engaged in related discussions. In our case—and undoubtedly in others—improvising across disciplines has not only meant cultural theory and experiential difference, but also friendship, and joy.

So, with that in mind, for those out there in similar circumstances who listen to make sense of it all—and for those out there just arriving at the table, curious and eager to learn—what we offer you here is a route through open questions, and a record of our shared efforts. Or, in a phrase: a jam session.

Endnotes

¹ See Chapman, *The Jazz Bubble: Neoclassical Jazz in Neoliberal Culture* and Laver, *Jazz Sells: Music, Marketing, and Meaning*.

² For more information, see Lewis, George.

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