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Dissertation abstract for "Fields of Production and Streams of Consciousness: Negotiating the Musical and Social Practices of Improvised Music," York University (2010)

The concept of free improvisation emerged as an influence on Western musical practice in the mid-twentieth century, and has come to signify a domain of musical production that is discursively constructed by many musicians and commentators as experimental, boundary pushing, and perpetually contemporary. This dissertation is a practice-based ethnographic exploration of the rigorous approaches to free improvisation that arose in London, England in the mid-1960s. Through observing, interviewing, and playing with active practitioners on the London improvised music field, I construct an analysis of how a specific group of musical subjects operationalize the concept of free improvisation to produce musical culture and articulate the distinct identity of "improviser." The discursive construction of this identity position is analyzed in relation to the performance practices and sonic materials that these improvisers employ in their creative work, and then contextualized by an investigation into the social and economic structures that regulate the production of contemporary improvised music in London.

I begin my analysis by applying Pierre Bourdieu's ideas of artistic fields and cultural production to the London improvised music scene, to build a conception of free improvisation as a practice that manifests within a specific universe of social relations. Following the establishment of this theoretical foundation, I use the ethnographic information I collected in London to explore how the idea of free improvisation is mobilized by the particular subjects in my study to enable creative action, generate

meaning and identity, and mediate cultural production. The noisy, dissonant, and non-narrative sound-world that characterizes the music created by the London-based improvisers in my study is contextualized by connecting the sonic codes these improvisers employ to a history of musical modernism that defines itself through the negation of the basic tonal structures, harmonic cycles, rhythmic materials, and conventions of instrumental timbre that typify Western classical, folk, and popular music. I conclude with a structural analysis of the improvised music field, drawing on my experience living in London to describe how the existence of the non-commercially focused practice of free improvisation is dependent on a self-organizing network of venues, record labels, cultural institutions, and non-artist participants. My analysis addresses the structural factors that determine how improvised music is produced and interpreted by those who claim free improvisation as their aesthetic priority.

Peter Johnston
Introduction to "Fields of Production and Streams of Consciousness: Negotiating the
Musical and Social Practices of Improvised Music"
Dissertation submitted to York University in January 2010

<u>Introduction</u>

The concept of improvisation emerged in the twentieth century as a determining influence on

musical and cultural production in Europe and North America. Improvised musical forms

persisted in European folk music alongside the production of notated sacred and art music

compositions in the 18th and 19th centuries, but the practice of improvising performances, as

described in contemporary accounts of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven, was abandoned by

subsequent generations of European composers and performers. As the ability to improvise

cadenzas, fugues, and other forms became less important to European musicians, the aesthetic

distinctions between composition and improvisation, and the related social divisions between the

positions of composer and performer, became increasingly reified. Improvisation reappeared in

Western musical discourse in the early twentieth century with the production of recordings of

African-American musics. The distribution of these and other recordings of non-European music

led some European and American musicians to an active re-engagement with the concept of

improvisation. This shift resulted in the emergence of a group of musicians in the 1960s who

self-identified as improvisers, and the establishment of musical practices that prioritized

spontaneous invention over the use of pre-determined musical structures, such as notated or

internalized compositions, traditional song forms, harmonic schemes, scales, or rhythmic cycles.

This dissertation is a practice-based, discursive analysis of the concept of improvisation

as it is operationalized by a group of musicians who claim "improvisation as the aesthetic

priority of their creative lives" (Prévost 2004, 20). The music that is the focus of my research is

variously known as free improvisation, creative music, improv, and non-idiomatic improvisation (among many other names), and is primarily defined by its practitioner's resistance to the use of compositional frameworks in the generation of their performances. I have chosen the community of improvisers in London, England as the focus for this investigation into the practice and discourse of free improvisation. London, along with Amsterdam and Berlin, has been an important centre for the development of a European conception of improvisation since the 1960s, and continues to support an active and innovative improvised music scene. The majority of the ethnographic research that forms the foundation of this dissertation was conducted in London from September 2006 to July 2007, during which time I had the good fortune to live in downtown London. My research consisted primarily of attending performances of improvised music, participating in percussionist Eddie Prévost's weekly improvisation workshop, and interviewing improvisers about their musical practices and creative priorities. I will refer to the particular musical practices in question as "London improv," and use the term "free improvisation" to describe the general activity of making music without the compositional structures mentioned above. The other labels mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph are commonly used in descriptions of the music made by the improvisers I interviewed, but for the sake of clarity I will use a shorthand identifier that clearly situates the practices I am concerned with within a specific social and geographical context. The term London improv is not my invention—the improvisers I spoke with referred to the "London improv scene" when describing their musical activities, and when I moved to the city I found out about upcoming concerts through the website www.londonimpov.com (which unfortunately was taken down soon after I arrived). In using this label I am both addressing the music in terms used by the subjects of my

research, and hopefully avoiding generalizations about free improvisation by underscoring the specificity of my analysis.

The establishment of free improvisation as a "functional musical activity" over the last five decades has led to the formation of a distinct musical domain that is mediated by the idea of improvisation (Lewis 2004, 152).[1] This musical domain, which includes the related infrastructures involved in the production of music in Western society (venues, media, festivals, educational institutions, record shops and labels, and recording studios), is currently comprised of an "eclectic group of artists [and listeners], with diverse backgrounds in modern jazz and classical music—and increasingly in electronic, popular, and world music traditions" (Borgo 2005, 3).[2] Even though there are many conflicting ideas between musicians and audiences around what materials and relationships are acceptable/desirable in improvised performances, the diversity of this group is contained within a unity generated by a shared attachment to improvisation as a creative process. I will refer to this network of people and structures as the "London improvised music field," which is a term derived from the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002). Bourdieu's concepts and how they are useful for an analysis of improvised music will be examined in more detail in Chapter One; as a brief introduction to this theoretical framework, I use the term "field" to represent the dynamic socio-economic

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[1] The basic time-frame for my analysis of free improvisation starts with Lennie Tristano's 1949 recordings of "Intuition" and "Digression," which are widely considered to be the first recorded examples of non-structured ensemble improvisation. But this is an isolated example of this kind of activity, and was not followed further by the musicians involved. So my primary reference point for the formation of a distinct practice of free improvisation is the late 1950s and early 1960s. During this time a number of American jazz musicians, beginning with Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, and Jimmy Giuffre began to deconstruct the conventional compositional frameworks of jazz; these practices were taken up by English musicians in the mid-1960s, leading to the development of a musical domain that is oriented around free improvisation as an aesthetic ideal.

[2] In this context, "Western society" refers to the countries of Western Europe, the United States of America, and Canada.

relationships and institutional infrastructures that revolve around particular artistic practices. For this research project the mode of artistic production is improvisation in music and the people and structures I am concerned with are based in London. While living in London I engaged directly with the "musical subjects" who participate in the field that has arisen around the practice of free improvisation (Adorno, Leppert and Gillespie 2002, 145).

Building on my experiences as an improviser in Canada, this dissertation provides a descriptive account of how a particular sample of subjects from one of the formative scenes use the idea of free improvisation to structure their musical and social practices. I will use the term "improv ethic" to describe how the improvisers I spoke with articulate their aesthetic and political ideals through musical practice; this term is derived from an essay by Cornelius Cardew called "Towards an Ethic of Improvisation," and was used by several participants in my research to describe their particular approaches to free improvisation (2006, 125). The responses I received from the improvisers I interviewed are put in dialogue with relevant theoretical paradigms to address the basic research question: How does the concept of free improvisation enable creative action, generate meaning and identity, and mediate cultural production for musical subjects living within contemporary Western society? Through speaking with these individuals about their musical practices and personal philosophies about free improvisation I have attempted to uncover specific facets of the "discursive framework" of free improvisation, by which I mean the schema of internalized assumptions, expectations, and performance conventions around the creation of improvised music that are evoked in speaking or writing about the subject (Born 1995). This discursive framework affects the way improvised music is

made and heard in London, and manifests through the "social conventions and material artefacts" that are associated with the practice of free improvisation (Borgo 2005, 135).

Despite the centrality of the concept of improvisation to my work, I will not theorize about its essential nature herein, in favour of describing and interpreting the practices of a specific group of musical subjects who use improvisation as a descriptor for their musical activities. In other words, I am not proposing that my analysis of the musical practices of the improvisers in my study represents a theory or philosophy of improvisation, but that the particular insights and ideas expressed by my interview subjects represent specific examples of a fluid and ever-shifting artistic practice. I undertake this analysis of practice and discourse with an awareness of Derek Bailey's pointed dismissal of music scholars:

> [There] is no general or widely held theory of improvisation and I would have thought it self evident that improvisation has no existence outside of its practice. Among improvising musicians there is endless speculation about its nature but only an academic would have the temerity to mount a theory of improvisation. (1993, x)

With this warning in mind, my ethnographic research was directed towards uncovering—through interviews with active participants in the improvised music field—the discursive framework that continually shapes this "endless speculation" about the practice of free improvisation.

I – Constructing Connections

I undertook this project out of a desire to explore the history and social context of the sonic materials that I use in my ongoing practice as an improvising bassist. My musical background is in jazz and Western popular music, and I have worked professionally in a wide variety of musical contexts for the past fifteen years. But my creative priority for the past decade has been making music that is primarily improvised, in both regular groups and ad hoc

encounters with other improvisers. Thus my original intention for this research was practical in nature: I wanted to understand the sonic materials used in London improv in order to improve and expand my own playing. During my fieldwork in the London improvised music field, however, my focus expanded to include a sociological component, as it became clear that an analysis of the contested assumptions, aesthetics ideals, and social conventions that determine the production of improvised music is a necessary corollary to understanding the sonic content of London improv. This broadening of my research priorities was guided in fundamental ways by my own practice as an improviser, for rather than attempting to develop a comprehensive analysis of London improv I followed sounds and ideas that resonated with my experiences playing and listening to improvised music. My interpretations of the practice and discourse of free improvisation are thus largely subjective, but I argue that this subjectivity can reveal something useful about how certain ideas and musical practices have travelled from a specific social and historical context to become part of a larger code that signifies free improvisation.

My interest in London improv grew out of hearing the music of Ornette Coleman, which was my first introduction to music that was not organized according to harmonic progressions, cyclical forms, and repetitive rhythmic patterns. Coleman's music has been the entry point into free improvisation for several generations of improvisers, and he was a common reference point in my interviews with improvisers in London. To give one brief example from my research of Coleman's importance in the history of improvised music, here is American bassist Barre Phillips's response to my asking how he became interested in free improvisation:

My first experience with free improvising was in 1960 in California, with three other friends—piano, saxophone and percussion… and it was in direct reaction and stimulation from hearing Ornette's music on record and a brief run-in with Ornette.[3]

In pursuing this initial exposure to the idea of free improvisation I discovered Derek Bailey's (1993) book *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice and Music*, where I was introduced to his controversial concept of "non-idiomatic improvisation," and to the London improvised music field in general. Subsequent experiences hearing Kenny Wheeler's (1990) recording *Music for Large and Small Ensembles* (which features an interesting mix of improvisers from the London jazz and free improv scenes) and a concert by English bassist Barry Guy led to a curiosity about the developments that had taken place between Coleman's paradigm-shifting work in the American jazz field, and the noisy and dissonant sounds I was hearing, playing, and reading about that seemed to be emanating from Europe. These encounters with London-based musicians were the beginnings of the present project, as I became interested in investigating how the idea of non-idiomatic improvisation and the abstract, pointillistic music of musicians such as Bailey, Guy, and saxophonist Evan Parker (who is featured on the Kenny Wheeler recording) have become such a central part of the code that I use in creating music without pre-determined structures.

The final connection that led me to this ethnographic study of London improvisers occurred while I was researching the formative, yet under documented improvising ensemble the Jimmy Giuffre 3. Woodwind player and composer Jimmy Giuffre led many different ensembles under this name from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, but the one of interest to me was active in the early 1960s and featured Giuffre on clarinet, Paul Bley on piano, and Steve Swallow on

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[3] Unless otherwise indicated, all non-cited quotations are personal communications from fieldwork conducted between September 2006 and June 2007.

bass.[4] This trio of experienced jazz musicians pursued the musical innovations of Coleman,

Lennie Tristano, and pianist Cecil Taylor, and over the course of approximately two years of

rehearsal and three studio albums developed an ensemble style that deconstructed the

instrumental roles and compositional structures associated with jazz.[5] I became interested in this

group based on how they integrated composition and improvisation in their performances, and

how they anticipated later developments in improvised music making. Despite (or perhaps

because of) their innovative approach to the standard jazz conventions of the era they were

working in, their records did not sell well—according to Steve Swallow, Verve and Columbia

Records allowed them to go out of print immediately following their release, and they were not

reissued until the 1990s. Performance opportunities for this trio were rare as well; Bley recalled

that upon returning to New York from a brief tour of Europe in 1961, "Jimmy found himself

musically triumphant, but out of work" (Bley and Lee 1999, 79). The trio disbanded in 1962

following the release of their most adventurous record *Free Fall* (1962), and, according to Steve

Swallow in his liner notes for the 1998 re-release of *Free Fall*, a pass-the-hat gig in a New York

City coffee shop that yielded thirty-five cents each.

My interest in the Jimmy Giuffre 3 led me to form a trio of saxophone, piano, and bass to

explore the approaches to improvisation that this group introduced, and to research their role in

jazz history in more detail. This ongoing project included interviewing Bley and Swallow in

2006, and reviewing the limited amount of writing about the group. During this process I also

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[4] I interviewed Jimmy Giuffre 3 members Paul Bley and Steve Swallow as part of another research project in the winter of 2006. Giuffre at the time was not able to speak due to Parkinson's disease; he died in April 2008.

[5] See Sound References for discographical details. To clarify this information, the Jimmy Giuffre 3's first two CDs, *Fusion* and *Thesis*, were re-released as a double CD on ECM Records titled *1961*.

interviewed Steve Lake, who in 1991 produced the reissue of *Fusion* and *Thesis* for ECM

Records. Lake's comments about how he first heard the trio solidified my interest in the musical

aesthetic pursued by the London improvisers:

> Working as a music journalist in London in the early 70s, I was in close contact with many
> of the players on the British free scene. John Stevens [percussionist and band leader] and
> Evan Parker [saxophonist] in particular talked about the significance of the Giuffre trio,
> which had somehow been marginalized in the history. I believe I first heard *Free Fall* at
> Evan's house. At the quiet end of the jazz upheavals of its era, the louder voices somehow
> shouted it down. The fact that all 3 LPs were deleted, meant that there weren't enough
> reminders about how special Giuffre's concept was. (pers. comm, 2006)

I asked Evan Parker about the Jimmy Giuffre 3 when I had the opportunity to interview him in

2007, and his response echoes Lake's recollection: "*Free Fall* is a masterpiece. It's still relevant,

and still shows possibilities. It's an amazing record." Barre Phillips, who replaced Steve Swallow

in a version of the Jimmy Giuffre 3 that unfortunately never recorded, described Giuffre's music

in a way that demonstrates a clear aesthetic connection to the practices of Stevens, Parker, and

the other London improvisers who began to document their music in the late 1960s: "… there

was no meter and no pulse given, the music only had implied rhythm with the pulse changing all

the time, and I improvised the harmony following the natural tendencies of my ear." Although

the Jimmy Giuffre 3 had little influence on the American jazz scene during the initial lifespan of

the group, *Free Fall* became an important recording based on how the formative generation of

London improvisers took up the musical directions suggested by Giuffre, Bley, and Swallow.[6]

This connection between the jazz avant-garde in America and the rigorous approaches to

free improvisation represented on recordings of European musicians from the late 1960s pointed

me towards conducting a practice-based analysis of improvisation in the London improvised

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[6] Giuffre, Swallow, and Bley reunited in the early 1990s, following the success of the re-release of their original
albums. They went on a short tour and recorded four studio albums before ill health forced Giuffre to retire.

music field.[7] When I arrived in London I initially sought out the older, internationally known

members of the improvised music field, as these were the names I was familiar with from

recordings. My initial list included players such as Trevor Watts, Evan Parker, Kenny Wheeler,

and Barre Phillips—players who George E. Lewis says "were part of the critically important first

generation of musicians who confronted issues of European musical identity in jazz" (2008,

249). Speaking with these and other older London-based musicians, such as Eddie Prévost and

Howard Riley, was vitally important to my study. As I became more familiar with the field

however my list of potential interview subjects expanded as I got to know other players who do

not have the same international profiles as those improvisers mentioned above. In the end my

sample of improvisers consists of a mix of young, mid-career and veteran practitioners, some

who are internationally famous and others who are primarily known in their local scene. My

interest in a diversity of responses reflects a larger trend in social research that David Borgo

references in his study of free improvisation:

> Historiographic research is consequently focusing on situating the icons, as well as lesser-
> known individuals more fully in a historical and cultural context. The motivation is not to
> dethrone any individuals from canonical status as much as it is to make us fully aware of
> the rich context that affected the lives and work of all musicians, both those remembered
> and those forgotten. (2005, 169)

Ultimately, my choice of improvisers to speak with was largely subjective, as I based my

decisions on following threads of sounds, techniques, and musical approaches that connected in

some way to the musical practices I had been pursuing in my home field under the rubric of free

improvisation. As a result, the improvisers in my study represent a wide range of aesthetic ideals

and positions in the field, which generated an interesting array of responses to my questions.

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[7] See Sound References for examples of relevant recordings.

London was famous for its music scene in the 1960s, and it continues to be a hub of artistic activity. Cities allow for a critical mass of musicians and interested (or potential) audience members to find each other and support the public activity of improvised music making. In a specific reference to the jazz scene in New York City, David Lee addressed the importance of cities to artistic production in terms that are easily transferable to London:

> An artistic field is an economic as well as a social and artistic entity… Depending so much on the abilities of their fellow group members for the success of each night's performance, musicians, even more so than other artists, gravitate to centres where the best players, and in a pinch their substitutes, are immediately available. (2006, 84)

Many musicians migrate to London every year, and spend variable amounts of time in the improvised music field. I stayed for nine months; American bassist Barre Phillips lived in London for a year in the late 1960s, eventually settling in France; Kenny Wheeler arrived from St. Catharines, Ontario in 1952 and never left. The constant influx of new musicians and the influences they bring ensures the continued development of the improvised music scene in London. Likewise, this ongoing migration has allowed the practices developed by improvisers in London to spread to other locales. Most of the participants in my research are from England, though not usually from London itself; they gravitated to London from other parts of the country, as the big city offered the opportunity to engage with a larger community of interest. Although the majority of my interview material was collected from English musicians, there are comments from members of the improvised music fields in the Netherlands and France interspersed throughout. The few interviews I conducted outside of England generated valuable commentary on London improv, as the outsider's perspectives provided a deeper context for my interpretation of the ethnographic data I collected in my primary research area.

My analysis of London improv is not intended as a comprehensive history of this community of musicians, nor am I proposing a grand theory of free improvisation that can account for the practices of all musicians who claim the identity of improviser. The goal of this project is to generate a conceptual framework for thinking about the complicated, multi-faceted domain of improvised music by asking questions about how a particular group of individual improvisers mobilizes the concept of free improvisation to generate musical culture. Improvised music in London is far from a monolithic aesthetic formation, as there are many distinct and different sub-scenes aligned around the concept of free improvisation. In other words, there is not a clearly defined "London sound" that characterizes improvised music made in that city, and even within the small sample of improvisers I spoke with there are radically different musical approaches and aesthetics. For the purposes of this study, I focused on a shared prioritization of the idea of free improvisation as the unifying relation between the performances I attended and the potential interview subjects I approached.

It is worth noting that my analysis of London improv is undertaken from the position of a subject who was born into a world where free improvisation is an established musical practice. Despite the relative stability the practice of free improvisation has achieved, much of the discursive framework that continues to inform this practice is derived from the historical context of the 1960s, when, in the words of percussionist Steve Noble, " people didn't know what free music was." The position of free improvisation in world musical culture has shifted considerably since the 1960s, as musicians living in different social and geographical contexts have taken up the sounds and ideas associated with the early London improvisers. My musical practices as an improviser are thus part of a tradition that has accrued a significant history of sounds and

techniques. By tracing these improvisatory practices back to the formative London improvised music field I have attempted to uncover how the innovations of a particular historical moment and geographic location shape, both consciously and unconsciously, the ways in which the concept of free improvisation is mobilized to generate creative action today. To this end, my analysis of the ethnographic data I collected is structured as a survey of the influential ideas and practices of the first generation of London improvisers, which allows for a more nuanced understanding of how free improvisation functions as an art practice in contemporary society.

The results of my ethnographic research represent a genealogy of sorts of the practices and materials that I have inherited and use in the creation of improvised music rather than a systematic documentation of the London improvised music community. In interpreting the ideas improvisers shared with me I have tried to illuminate the assumptions, ideologies, and aesthetic ideals that underscore the practice of free improvisation, with the intention of connecting the "disembodied domains of discourse and structure" to the lived experiences of musical subjects who struggle to produce musical culture (Monson 2009, 23). This approach aligns with Michel Foucault's (1977) description of some of his writings as a "history of the present," as the interpretative strategies I use for the specific ethnographic data I collected in the London improvised music field reflect Foucault's general goal of uncovering the origins of the rules, practices, and institutions that presently regulate social action. My analysis of the sounds and practices associated with free improvisation inevitably became a history of the present, as the subjects in my study connect the identity position of improviser to the ideal of creating music that is "ever afresh," even as they are working within an increasingly defined area of cultural production (Prévost 1995, 41).

My aim in this dissertation is to develop an analysis of the improvisatory practices of a specific group of musicians, tenuously united through the aesthetic priority they place on improvisation as a working practice, who function in the shared social, economic, and historical context of contemporary London, England. Although they live in a centre of historical importance to the development of improvised music, and many of them are well-known globally, the musicians in my study are not intended to stand in as ideal representatives of the position of improviser, but rather as local proponents of a particular cultural practice that has migrated to many parts of the world, including my home city of Toronto. In researching the origins and legacy of the improvised music practices in London I hope to shed some light on how free improvisation continues to functions in society, even as the context that motivated the initial practitioners has been transformed by the passage of time and the migration of the sonic materials beyond the borders of this formative field.

II – Situating the Sounds

Although the London improv scene lacks an overarching system of sonic organization that unifies the activities of those who claim the identity of improviser, free improvisation can be loosely characterized as noisy, dissonant, and otherwise unorthodox in relation to the dominant musics in Western society. This difference from the musical mainstream is underscored by how, since the formative years of the improvised music field in the 1960s, improvisation has been discursively connected to music that "[sees] itself as cutting edge" (Hegarty 2007, 50). Before I provide a description of the sound of London improv, it is necessary to situate this music in

relation to the other musics that improvisers define their work against, and to contextualize the practice of free improvisation within the larger field of European and North American music.

As I stated at the beginning of this introduction, the improvisers I spoke with contrast their practices with conventional Western music. Tania Chen, who is one of the few improvisers I spoke with who works in both the improvised and popular music fields, described the London improvised music field in terms that reflect this binary conception: "The improvised music scene in London is very small. It's never been commercial, and hasn't switched anywhere near the mainstream. Pop and improvising are two completely opposite things." This broad category of "conventional Western music," which includes the pop music Chen refers to, needs some qualification to contextualize the relationship between London improv and the primary "musical other" that was evoked in my interviews. Based on my interpretation of the comments from London improvisers, conventional music means those forms that are built on sonic materials and relationships that are familiar to a majority of listeners in Western society. Examples of these elements include: the twelve note tonal system, narrative and cyclical forms, the presence of a steady temporal pulse, repetitive rhythmic patterns, recurring chord progressions based on triadic harmony, and a relatively narrow range of timbres from individual instruments. There is considerable variation within these basic parameters—including Beethoven's symphonies, Irish reels, lullabies, electric blues-rock, polka, and mariachi music, among many others—but these diverse forms are unified by the larger narrative of tonality and the sound of a regular rhythmic pulse; the elements that signify "music" to the majority of people born into Western society. I will explore the idea of musical socialization in more detail in Chapter Four. The following

description of the sonic content of London improv is contingent on how improvisers relate to and resist these basic parameters of sonic organization.

The discourse and practice of London improv are determined by how it is socially positioned by its practitioners and audience as art music. The improvisers I interviewed tended to describe their practice as existing in a negative relation to the dominant bourgeois culture, which they suggested manifests as the sound-world and economic structures of popular/commercial music. This notion of London improv as art music manifests as an explicit orientation towards particular aesthetic and social ideals, rather than towards the production of commodities that may potentially generate economic capital when sold on the free market. Eddie Prévost provides a concise summation of the "art for arts sake" ethic that characterizes the discourse of London improv, and his comments reveal how this intentional avoidance of the materials of conventional Western music affects the economic prospects of improvisers:

> Collective improvisation in western society runs counter to the commodity ethos, even though its most dedicated musicians, who give their lives to its creation and continued development, have to tread a difficult and often painfully compromising path through the market economy in order to secure a living. (1995, 89)

Prévost's description generates a bit of dissonance in light of the continuing production and sale of recordings of improvised music, a process of commodification that resembles that in most other Western musics. But it is clear from speaking with the improvisers in my study that the systems of organization that cater to the very small community of interest for London improv operate on a different scale than the labels, shops, and media that distribute recordings of popular music. Many of the improvisers I spoke with, including Prévost, run their own labels and produce their own recordings, but the sales of these recordings generate very little direct income for improvisers.

I will provide a more detailed analysis of the economic structure of the London improvised music field in Chapter Five. For now my concern is with the more general position of London improv in relation to the binary of art and popular culture, or to put it in Prévost's terms, the distinction between "collective improvisation" and the "commodity ethos." Georgina Born argues that the distribution of economic capital within the cultural field is the most important factor in assessing the social position of a music: "[Whatever] the sound, the point is that overall, the music as culture remains defined by its primary socio-economic circuit. Avant-garde rock remains rock; pop-influenced art music remains art music" (1995, 21). Popular music, in relation to London improv, is thus understood as music that inhabits a different socio-economic circuit based on the production of commodities that contain the possibility of mass appeal. In contrast, the primary socio-economic circuit of London improv involves very low financial stakes, for the improvisers I spoke with make no attempt to cater to a wide audience, preferring to pursue their aesthetic priorities with the support of a small community of interest. As I will explain in the following section, the discursive framework of the musical practices I explored in London is based on "questioning [of] the 'rules' governing musical language" (Bailey 1993, 84). The ways in which this ethos is operationalized by the improvisers in my study has resulted in music that sounds nothing like the popular music that it has developed alongside over the last fifty years, which has restricted the audience in ways that position London improv on the margins of the dominant economic field. Based on Born's model, this economic situation situates London improv within the frame of art music.

This brief analysis of the social position of London improv is intended to provide some context for the following description of the sound and aesthetic ideals of the musical practices I

researched in London, which emerged in the mid-1960s when a small collection of musicians began to organize their activities around the basic concept of free improvisation. This group of early London improvisers—an abbreviated list of which includes percussionist John Stevens, guitarist Derek Bailey, saxophonist Evan Parker, percussionist Eddie Prévost, guitarist Keith Rowe, and cellist/pianist/composer Cornelius Cardew—pursued a particularly disciplined approach to the practice of free improvisation, and this historical foundation of ideological rigour around the idea of improvisation continues to inform the practices of those currently working in the London improvised music field. The particular improvisers I spoke with in London located the roots of their musical practices within a nexus of influences that includes: Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, Albert Ayler, Jimmy Giuffre, and other American musicians from the late 1950s and early 1960s associated with the label free jazz; the American experimental tradition associated with John Cage, Christian Wolff, Earle Brown, and Morton Feldman; and the European avant-garde as represented in the work of Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Webern, and Karlheinz Stockhausen, who contributed to the systematic deconstruction of the Western tonal system. The specific sonic materials and performance practices that the musicians I interviewed derived from these and other influences they claimed are ultimately subsumed under the conceptual framework of improvisation, as each of my interview subjects claimed improvisation as their aesthetic ideal and dominating generative process.

Over the last four decades the number of musicians in London who align their practice around the concept of free improvisation has grown considerably, and what began as a hybrid musical form has fragmented even further. Any study of a specific artistic practice is complicated by how the art form changes all the time; improvised music in London is far from a stable

formation, as new musicians bring in unorthodox instrumental techniques, different sound

sources, and alternative ideas about what it means to freely improvise. But the basic concept of

free improvisation has remained a relatively constant organizational principle amongst a small,

yet consistent group of London musicians. This unity around the idea of improvisation connects

performance practices that might result in vastly different sounding musics, so it is the

implications of this shared prioritization of improvisation as a generative process that is the

subject of my analysis, rather than the specific sets of sonic materials and performance

conventions that improvisers might use. However, there are certain modes of working and ways

of thinking about improvisation that were shared by the improvisers I spoke with, so I will

provide a general introduction to the music in question by describing the basic ideological

foundation and organizational principles of the music I studied in London.

The historical time-frame for my research begins with the establishment of regular

performances by two distinct, but equally important music collectives: Spontaneous Music

Ensemble (SME) and AMM (the members of AMM have never publicly explained the meaning

of the acronym).[8] SME and AMM will be described in more detail in Chapter Two, but for the

present context the early performances of the musicians who organized themselves under these

names provide a starting point for my analysis of the London improvised music field. There were

instances of free improvisation in England before these ensembles began performing—Joe

Harriot's (1960/61) groups and recordings were the most frequently cited by the improvisers I

spoke with—but the musicians involved in SME and AMM marked the establishment of the

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[8] For a sample of AMM from their album *Generative Themes* (1983), go to: http://www.youtube.com/watch?
v=6iDLmFLQI-I. Excerpts from the Spontaneous Music Ensemble album *Karyobin* (1968), can be found at: http://
www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYbf5poRCdI.

London improvised music field as a distinct entity by how they clearly and deliberately

positioned their music as a new form, which was distinct from the jazz tradition of improvisation

(See Bailey 1993 and Prévost 1995).

Early in my research bassist John Edwards provided me with some historical context for

the practices I was researching; his account illustrates both the long history of jazz in England,

and how London improvisers distinguish themselves from that tradition:

> There is a tradition here. Jazz didn't suddenly arrive here in 1955. Ellington came over in
> the early 1930s, and people have been doing it over here in a very English way ever
> since. By the 1950s there were really good bands and good musicians. Of course with
> improvised music, it started very early on with AMM. [Vocalist] Phil Minton was telling
> me about a year ago that he remembers going to see AMM in 1964 or 1965, and they
> were improvising. They weren't playing free jazz, in other words. They were playing
> stuff that would relate more to the chamber and classical world.

In addition to the historical precursors to the particular musical practices I am concerned with,

there were other groups of improvisers in London that were more or less contemporaneous with

SME and AMM, yet who worked in entirely different ways—most notably the Scratch Orchestra

and the People Band.[9] Although these other two distinct ensembles constitute an important and

under-documented tradition of improvisation in London, the particular improvisers I spoke with

most frequently referenced SME and AMM in descriptions of their music and personal histories,

so I chose to attend primarily to the lineage of improvisation that descends from them.

Although SME and AMM are crucial to the analysis I conduct in this dissertation, I did

not pursue a systematic program of speaking with past and present members of these groups, so

the following description of their particular influences on the London scene is not intended as a

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[9] See Sound References for discographical details about Scratch Orchestra and People Band

comprehensive case study of the early London improvisers.[10] I did speak with several

improvisers who were directly involved with these ensembles—Evan Parker (SME), Kenny

Wheeler (SME), and Eddie Prévost (AMM)—but they were chosen primarily for their general

contributions to the practice, discourse, and history of free improvisation in London, rather than

for their specific connection to SME and AMM. My primary interest throughout this dissertation

is in how these two ensembles are evoked in discussions about improvised music in London, for

the ways in which other improvisers position themselves in relation to these formative ensembles

can tell us something about how the practice of free improvisation has developed since the

1960s.

    SME and AMM started performing regularly at roughly the same time, although

according to AMM founder and percussionist Eddie Prévost (2005) they were "to a (surprisingly)

large extent unaware" of each other. SME began a nightly residency at the Little Theatre Club in

London's West End in 1966, and AMM started playing weekly at the Royal College of Art in

1965. Both ensembles released their first recordings in 1966: *Challenge* (Eyemark EMPL 1002,

re-released as Emanem 4053) by SME, and *AMMmusic* (ReR/Matchless) by AMM. Apart from

these obvious chronological connections, SME and AMM pursued radically different approaches

to improvisation, and they continue to be discursively positioned by the improvisers I

interviewed as the opposing poles of the London improvised music field. In the following

paragraphs I will provide some details about the particular musical practices that I am concerned

with in this dissertation, using the ways SME and AMM were described to me by the participants

in my study to generate ideological and sonic context for my analysis.

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[10] SME ended with John Stevens's death in 1994. AMM is an ongoing project that is currently a duo of Eddie
Prévost and pianist John Tilbury.

The musical practices that developed in London in the 1960s were an extension of the fragmentation of jazz that began in the United States in the 1950s, and was taken up in Europe by a diverse group of musicians who may or may not have had any training in jazz improvisation. The three major centres for improvised music in Europe were Berlin, Amsterdam, and London; the historical distinctions between these scenes continue to inform the discourse of improvised music in London, even as these distinctions have blurred as technology has allowed sounds and ideas to travel much further and faster than they did when the London improvised music field was first established. Martin Davidson, the founder and proprietor of Emanem Records, summarized the history of the London improvised music field in a way that introduced three of the key themes I encountered in my other interviews: 1) jazz is positioned as an "epistemological other" to the improvised music made in England (Lewis 2004, 147), 2) the music made in England is contrasted with the improvised music in Germany and the Netherlands, and 3) AMM and SME are positioned as opposing, yet equally formative ensembles, distinguished by their fundamentally contrasting approaches to ensemble organization. Davidson's comments on the London improvisers—made from the position of one who has been listening to and documenting them since the formative years of the field—also give some sense of the sound of the music I am concerned with in this dissertation:

> In the initial stages [the early 1960s] there was a difference between what was happening in England, the rest of Europe and the United States. In the US there was virtually no free improvisation that I knew of—there were small examples of it, going back to the 1940s with [Lennie] Tristano, but most of the music tended to be free jazz. German musicians tended to play free jazz without the tunes, and in Holland it was similar, with a lot of humour thrown in. What happened in London in the mid-1960s was two movements that began to reorganize improvised music away from free jazz—one from AMM and one from SME. The AMM approach is kind of layered, where you place sounds one on top of the other. Evan [Parker] calls it 'laminal.' The SME approach is this conversational thing, where typically people are playing all the time. Evan, who was of course a member of the

SME for a time, called this music 'atomistic.' You don't get one musician being featured very often. And you don't get the distinction between the rhythm section and the soloist. Everyone is on the same footing in spite of their instruments. That's a gross over-simplification of what was happening, of course.

The specific examples, rhetorical manoeuvres, and themes introduced here form the foundation of my description of London improv, as they mirror the comments and ideas I heard from the improvisers I interviewed.

As exemplified by Martin Davidson's quote, descriptions of free improvisation tend to gravitate towards situating the music in relation to what it is not, rather than addressing the essential characteristics that might define what it is. The musical practices I followed in London are largely defined by this discourse of negation, as the musicians I spoke with, and the literature I read on the subject, focus in large part on the musical materials and performance practices they exclude or avoid in the pursuit of the aesthetic ideal of free improvisation. Such a work ethic is implied in Derek Bailey's formulation of "non-idiomatic improvisation," which he posits as a way of differentiating the music he makes from the music of the other improvisers he interviewed in his book, who self-identified as jazz, flamenco, Indian, baroque, rock, or church musicians. English Bassist John Edwards employed a similar rhetorical manoeuvre in a comparison of the music made in England and that made by the Dutch improvisers:

The Dutch thing seems to be more about them living in a socialist country and playing jazz with lots of humour thrown in. The British thing is about reducing it all down so we can really hear each other, then making this kind of music.

This framing of improvisation as a process of reducing music down to a basic level of equitable ensemble interaction, through the exclusion of "known" musical materials, was a dominant theme in the conversations I had with improvisers in London (Bailey 1993, 142). I will address this rhetoric of negation and anxiety of genre in more detail in Chapter Four, but these two

examples from Davidson and Edwards establish the basic ideological framework for the musical

practices I followed in London, which improvisers reduce down to, in Eddie Prévost's words, the

desire to "make our own musical world that arises out of our experience."

The relationship between the American jazz tradition and London improv is a complex

mixture of respect and resistance. Most of the improvisers I spoke with expressed a deep

knowledge of and affection for jazz; the older improvisers on the London scene in particular,

such as Derek Bailey and Eddie Prévost, were working jazz musicians before they shifted

towards performing improvised music exclusively. The example of the Jimmy Giuffre 3 from the

previous section demonstrates how the first generation of London improvisers drew on American

jazz models for the formation of their own musical aesthetics. Yet following the initial shift

towards free improvisation the discourse of the London improvisers took on an increasing tone

of independence, as evidenced in Bailey's (1993) and Prévost's (1994) accounts of the formative

years of the scene. In my conversations with improvisers in 2006/07, jazz was the most common

reference point that the improvisers I spoke with defined their musical practices against. In

describing his relationship to jazz, pianist Howard Riley illustrated the larger political tensions

between London improv and American jazz that inform the discourse of free improvisation:

> Looking at in a sort of broad sense, I would say that the problem always for European
> musicians, certainly for my generation, is what to do with the fact that we're not
> American. I realized early on that there's no use in just imitating Americans – I call that
> 'dialect jazz.' It was great to play American-style jazz, but of course, after you've been
> playing a while you ask yourself, 'Well, is this it? Where do I come into it?' This is the
> tricky bit —developing your own feeling, and your own language, yet still retaining the
> best aspects of the point you start off from.

The issue of European identity that Riley introduces here recalls George Lewis's assertion that

jazz is the musical "constellation most commonly associated with the exploration of

improvisation in both Europe and America (the geographical "West")" (2000, 80). Such a situation necessarily makes jazz the dominant other to negotiate for those wishing to craft alternative improvisatory practices. I will deal with this relationship in more detail in Chapter Three. For the present description of the sonic content of the improvised music I experienced in London I wish to introduce the idea that the sound of this music is determined in large part by both the direct influence of the American avant-garde jazz of the 1950s and 60s, and by a continual assertion of difference from jazz.

George Lewis (2004) has provided a thorough critique of the problematic racial politics contained in what he refers to as "Eurological" definitions of improvisation. I will address this important critique in later chapters, but wish to introduce some nuance to this description of the sonic character of London improv by suggesting that despite the positioning of jazz as an epistemological other in the discourse of European improvised music (which manifests sonically as an avoidance of the sonic materials and ensemble relationships associated with jazz), the music made by the improvisers I spoke with is not simply reactionary. Based on my ethnographic research, the improvisers I spoke with conceive of their music as an expression of a marginalized community of artists working within a generally hostile economic and political environment. As Eddie Prévost suggested in the preceding section, free improvisation became a way of asserting a particular identity and making music that reflected the specific social and cultural context of the musicians.

This way of thinking about music as a force for social change has much in common with the rhetoric of African-American nationalism and self-determination that Lewis (2008) connects to the music of black American experimental musicians in the 1960s, although clearly the vastly

different political context of an under-privileged racial minority and a mostly white population living in one of the world's economic capitals makes the connection a complicated one. But it is worth noting that although the majority of London improvisers I spoke with did position jazz as an "epistemological other" in relation to the sound of their music, they did not critique jazz as a music that can't be "spontaneous or original" (Lewis 2004, 147). Instead, they identified with the overall political project of black American jazz musicians, such as those involved in the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, and expressed the will to adopt a similar ethic of individual and collective self-determination. Saxophonist Seymour Wright convincingly articulated how this particular identification with American jazz manifests in his improvised performances:

> I think what I'm trying to do is play an essentially jazz-based music. I think I play in the tradition of Charlie Parker and Jackie Maclean—I don't think what I do is that different. Obviously I can't play anything like that at all, but I think that's the kind of music that I play, on a fundamental level. So [what I do] is not a reaction against the history at all, but a quite respectful following of a spirit of activity. I think you can listen to people's playing and be driven by it to play music that has the same kind of invention, say, but the materials must be different. What you take from people is not their music, but their kind of drive and invention. I'm not saying that I've adopted that successfully in any kind of way, but if I can be anywhere near that kind of music it's not through trying to play the saxophone like them, it's through trying to invent and create at the same level.

This example is not intended as a rebuttal to Lewis's racial critique, as there is clearly a very real social and economic disparity between the white European musicians in my study and the African-American musicians Lewis writes about, but to demonstrate that at the subjective level many of the improvisers in my study see connections between their artistic practices and those of experimental jazz musicians. Despite his sustained critique of the systemic inequality contained within European notions of improvisation, Lewis does allow room for individual musicians to step outside of the racialized narrative when he writes:

Bailey's critique of jazz, therefore, far from adopting the premises of Cage in critiquing its improvisers, is actually a critique of the art world surrounding jazz, with its tendency toward canonization and toward what is perceived by many as its capitulation to the influence of corporate power in the form of a rather limp neoclassicism. (2004, 151)

Based on the interviews I conducted, the dominant trend amongst London improvisers is not towards devaluing jazz or the skills of jazz musicians, but towards following the examples of jazz musicians of the past in attempting to preserve a space in society for music making that resists standardization and the regulation of creative action.

The basic practice of excluding certain sonic materials does not result in a music that is unrecognizable, unknowable, or re-invented in each performance. A body of performance conventions, instrumental techniques, and sonic codes has emerged that at once defines a sound-world associated with London improv, and provides a construct that other musicians can define themselves against—Chapter Six will deal with a group of musicians who have come to question the utility of the idea of improvisation, and developed a distinct musical practice in the process. As I have stated at various points, I do not think it is possible to reduce improvised music to specific recurring structural frameworks, but there are certain sonic characteristics and performance practices that do recur in the work of the improvisers I listened to and spoke with. I will address three main points to provide some sonic context for my analysis of the discursive framework of London improv, as a local manifestation of the larger idea of free improvisation: 1) the re-evaluation of instrumental roles within an ensemble, 2) the elevation of timbre as a primary parameter for manipulation through the use of extended techniques, and 3) the avoidance of materials that imply harmonic progressions, tonal resolutions, and repetitive rhythms. Each of these points will be addressed in turn, and I will use the words of the improvisers I spoke with as verbal illustrations of musical practices.

The most defining characteristic of the improvised music that emerged in London in the 1960s is the re-organization of the ensemble roles that were typical of mainstream jazz and popular music of the time. Historically there have been two dominant approaches to ensemble improvisation in the London scene: the interactive, rapidly shifting, call-and-response style of SME, and the layered, sustained, and droning sound of AMM. The SME approach is more clearly connected to the jazz tradition of ensemble interaction and dialogue, and AMM is more aligned with the textural, gestural, and static experimental music of John Cage and Morton Feldman. The boundaries between the atomistic style of SME and the laminal music of AMM have shifted considerably over the last four decades, even within the performances of these two formative ensembles, but they serve as useful stylistic markers because they are still evoked by the London improvisers I spoke with to describe their contemporary practices. So the ways in which the improvisers who have followed them distinguish SME and AMM from each other are meaningful in the ways in which they reveal how contemporary improvisers understand the historical foundations of the London scene. Although SME and AMM were radically different in their approaches to improvised performances, they were united through an interest in revising the ensemble roles associated with jazz improvisation. I will provide a brief analysis of the deconstructing of ensemble roles in the jazz tradition, and then connect this trend to the formative London ensembles.

The dominant ensemble model in jazz is that of soloist plus harmonic and rhythmic accompaniment, with the rhythm section role usually filled by piano, guitar, bass, and drums. This model of ensemble organization was established in the 1920s in the work of horn soloists such as Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet, and solidified in the 1940s in the small group

performances of Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, and other musicians associated with bebop. Lennie Tristano's freely improvised recordings in the late 1940s mark the beginning of the process of deconstructing the time-keeping duties of the bass, drums, and piano, and this trend reached the jazz mainstream in the late 1950s recordings of Bill Evans, Jimmy Giuffre, and Cecil Taylor. The elevation of the bass and drums to more foreground roles in ensemble performances became a defining characteristic of the music of the early 1960s that came to be known as "free jazz," and this ideal of a more equitable distribution of ensemble roles became a formative element in European improvised music.

As I mentioned earlier, Jimmy Giuffre's trio with Paul Bley and Steve Swallow from 1960-62 was an important touchstone for many of the early London improvisers, particularly Evan Parker and percussionist John Stevens, who was the founder and leader of Spontaneous Music Ensemble. According to Bley, Giuffre wanted this trio to be "equal voiced," with clarinet, piano, and bass exchanging melody, harmony, and rhythmic roles. Bley elaborated on this theme of instrumental equality, employing the metaphor of conversation that has become common in discussions of jazz ensemble performance practice:

> Giuffre's idea was that the trio was equal voiced, that everybody has exactly one third of the responsibility. So any device that one of the players was doing—if one of the players was playing an ostinato, if one of the players is leading the piece at that point and the other players are doing a sub-relation—it's supposed to divide into one third, one third, and one third. Roles were there to be reversed… There's no comping—that word became obsolete. You're playing with somebody or you're not playing with somebody. So everybody has everybody's job at certain times, like a good conversation. For instance, this conversation would not be a good Giuffre piece because I'm doing all the leading. If this were the Giuffre trio, I would be resting as much as I am talking. My participation would be exactly equal to yours.

This description of the Giuffre 3's performance practice echoes Martin Davidson's comments about SME above, when he says that in SME "you don't get the distinction between the rhythm

section and the soloist," and, "… everyone is on the same footing in spite of their instruments."

English pianist Howard Riley, who played with SME in the early years at the Little Theatre Club, described his approach to free improvisation in terms that clearly follow Bley's comments about ensemble hierarchy:

> I found with conventional jazz, much as I loved it and still love it, that unless you are very careful, every instrument gets a very specific function, and they just stick to it. The bass player is there to provide the crotchets and the chord notes, the drums are there to provide the time with rhythmic accents, the pianist is there to provide the chords. And those are sort of rigid formal functions in the group. So for me free improvisation has a lot to do with attitude—you have to be prepared to loosen things, prepared to let things happen, to drop out, to come back in, to put something in you've never thought of before.

This basic premise of freeing instruments from any kind of prescribed role is the foundation of the musical practices I studied in London, which led me to solo concerts by bassists and drummers, performances where saxophonists never played a melodic line (or indeed ever fully assembled their instruments), and sets of un-amplified duets between acoustic guitar and drum set.

The dialectical relationship with standard jazz practice that informs the above comments from Bley, Davidson, and Riley reflect a wider trend in discussions about the SME, as this group of musicians was clearly invested in the jazz tradition of improvisation. This connection is obvious in the instrumentation of SME as represented on *Karyobin* (1968), the ensemble's most famous recording. *Karyobin* features a standard jazz quintet orchestration of saxophone, trumpet, guitar, bass and drums, but the music does not sound like conventional, or even free jazz, as there is no steady pulse, no harmonic progressions, no recurring or recognizable melodic themes, and no clear soloist and accompaniment divisions between the players. There is instead rapid melodic, rhythmic, and timbral interplay between all of the musicians, and a continual movement

of instruments between the foreground, background, and middle-ground of the ensemble texture.

When I asked pianist Steve Beresford to explain what he thought Evan Parker (who was the

saxophonist on *Karyobin*) meant when he referred to the music of SME as "atomistic", Beresford

responded with the following description of the performance practice associated with SME:

> In the SME model of free improvisation we're talking about very small gestures, which
> could spin the music off very quickly into other directions. One tiny sound could kick the
> music into a different area very quickly. Webern was a massive influence on that music.
> The ideas of interlocking things, non-metrical hocketing, and melodic lines being passed
> from instrument to instrument—like Klangfarben melody—were all part of the SME
> approach.

This model of playing has become a dominant reference point for free improvisation in other

centres; Dutch bassist Wilbert de Joode described his music as featuring "ever-changing

textures," and most of the improvised music I make in my home scene in Toronto features an

emphasis on continuous motion, and a general "bouncing backwards and forwards" between the

instruments in an ensemble (Prévost). So a defining characteristic of the practices I pursued in

London is this non-hierarchical approach to ensemble playing, where instruments move freely

throughout the overall ensemble texture, with the players paying attention to the counterpoint

created between the voices. This approach is not unique to the London improvisers, as American

ensembles such as the Art Ensemble of Chicago pursued similar approaches to increasing the

flexibility of instrumental roles. But the music I heard in London differs in the strict avoidance of

musical references that imply certain instrumental roles, where the music of the Art Ensemble of

Chicago for example is characterized by shifts between conventional instrumental role-playing

and less-structured ensemble interplay.

AMM pursued an approach to ensemble organization that has little connection to the

ideas of interplay and dialogue that inform both jazz practice and the SME model of free

improvisation. Although the ever-changing texture and rapid interaction that characterizes the

SME approach has become the dominant code for improvised music performances, the quieter,

more static soundscapes of AMM have proven to be influential for younger generations of

musicians who may not have any connection to jazz. The musicians associated with

"reductionism" in particular reference AMM rather than SME as their primary touchstone; I will

address reductionism in more detail in Chapter Six.[11] AMM founder Eddie Prévost explains his

performance practice using Evan Parker's term "laminal," and like the other London improvisers

I have quoted thus far anchors his description around a contrast with jazz:

> SME was always more wedded to the jazz tradition than AMM was. Amongst us we still
> admired [jazz] and certainly had affection for it all, but we were interested in the
> possibility of making our own musical world outside of that. There was always a residual
> jazz feel to John Stevens' stuff, whereas when AMM got into its stride, with those kind of
> long drone-y things, there was no way you could connect that with anything out of jazz.
> To use Evan Parker's kind of characterizations, SME were more atomistic, and AMM
> was more laminal. We made long stretches of stuff, and the connections between things
> were less obvious. The bouncing backwards and forwards and interplay between the
> musicians in SME and like groups was a different kind of approach.

As Prévost describes it, the AMM sound is characterized by long, slow stretches of sounds that

do not obviously relate to each other; the term laminal refers to the way that the musicians in

AMM layer their sounds on top of each other, as opposed to the fast-paced call-and-response

relationship between sounds that is typical of the SME approach. There is much use of silence

and generally low volume in AMM's music, and a notion of collage that allows sonic

relationships to unfold over extended lengths of time. In his book *No Sound is Innocent*, Prévost

(1995) provides some thoughts on how he thinks about his music that give some clue as to how it

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[11] Reductionist music is characterized by extended stretches of silence, very quiet sounds, and the absence of the
kinds of instrumental virtuosity and dialogic ensemble relationships associated with the SME and related
improvising groups.

might sound, and how it is different from other approaches to improvisation: "Sounds are placed: placed in contrast to, in parallel to, in imitation of, in respect of, without regards to, other sounds" (4).

AMM is also distinguished from SME by their use of electronic sounds, including radios broadcasts, guitar feedback, and various electrical vibrating objects on strings and cymbals. From their first recordings their performance practice makes it difficult to tell what instrument is making what sound, and it can be difficult to distinguish individual instruments at all. This approach differs once again from the notions of instrumental virtuosity that inform SME, where, despite the use of extended techniques, it is generally possible to follow the contributions of each player once one is familiar with their individual sounds on their instruments. The issue of developing a recognizable "sonic personality" (Lewis 2008, 250) that is such an important part of jazz discourse is antithetical to the ethos of AMM, who prioritize—according to Prévost at least—the expression of the collective over the voice of the individual:

> There is a tacit acknowledgment that AMM's strength comes from each member allowing other voices to impinge upon individual aspirations and sensibilities. No one is subdued or subordinated unless they allow themselves to be. Fundamental to this experience is the maintenance and development of a sense of 'self' that can bear, even enjoy, sublimation – but does not fear annihilation. (Prévost 1995, 25-26)

This brief description is a reduction and simplification of AMM's performance practice, but it does reveal a desire on the part of these musicians to address the instrumental roles and ensemble hierarchies that characterize other musics. The particular solutions that Eddie Prévost and his colleagues arrived at have become part of the discourse and practice of improvised music in London, and continue to be an influence on musicians entering the improvised music field.

Although I have addressed SME and AMM separately in the preceding description of the sonic content of the improvised music I studied while in London, the particular sonic innovations, ensemble relationships, and conceptual frameworks attributed to these two groups have become part of the larger practice of improvised music in London. So the divisions I have reproduced here are not as clear-cut as I have described them, especially as new improvisers have entered the field and taken up practices derived from a variety of sources. My primary reason for describing the distinctions between SME and AMM is that although they are positioned as opposing sides of the London improvised music field, they represent a shared area of musical inquiry based on the questioning of instrumental roles within jazz music in particular, and popular music in general. This questioning of ensemble roles remains a foundational principle of London improv.

The second key characteristic of London improv that I observed in the field is the prioritization of exploring and expanding the sonic potential of individual instruments, and the elevation of timbre as a parameter for improvisation to the level of pitch and rhythm. Timbre is obviously a parameter for manipulation in all forms of music, but the London improvisers I studied have made it a priority to treat their instruments not as representations of particular idiomatic ideals, but as sound generating objects that are capable of an unlimited variety of sounds. In David Borgo's words, the practice of free improvisation "tends to devalue the two dimensions that have traditionally dominated music representation—quantized pitch and metered durations—in favour of the microsubtleties of timbral and temporal modifications…" (2005, 3). This experimental ethos is related to the deconstruction of ensemble roles, but manifests at the individual rather than the collective level. Jazz discourse has always stressed the importance of

developing a "sonic personality," but the improvisers I interviewed extend this ideal by pushing against the physical boundaries associated with their instruments, in order to develop an extensive range of sounds to use in their performances (Lewis 2008, 250).

Different improvisers approach the traditions associated with their instruments in different ways. Barre Phillips for example claimed that when he began studying the bass he focused "fifty percent on the history of the bass and the standard techniques, and fifty percent on following my own ear to find out what the bass can do. That was a good, balanced way of doing it – learning to play the instrument normally is not a bad thing to do." In contrast, Seymour Wright told me:

> For me, part of the point of improvised music is for things to happen at the time they happen and in the way that they happen—discovering techniques in the moment of playing with other people, then exploring these instances and ways of playing. I don't think you can practice that. The only thing that I would like to have more of is physical stamina, and the ability to consistently breathe for as long as I want to be able to. But apart from that, I wouldn't want to practice.

These two comments illustrate separate points on the continuum of instrumental technique and tradition, but they are united through a shared focus on the discovery of new sounds (at least at the subjective level of the individual—no one I spoke with claimed to be creating sounds that had never been played before).

The prioritization of exploring the sonic potentials of instruments has resulted in the development of extended techniques on particular instruments that have become part of the language of free improvisation. Examples of these include: Evan Parker's manipulation of overtones through circular breathing on the saxophone; Eddie Prévost's use of string instrument bows and battery operated fans on his cymbals to generate drones; and Barre Phillips's use of the wooden parts of the bow for playing non-pitched percussive sounds on the bass. These

developments arose out of a particularly inclusive way of thinking about the available materials

for constructing musical performances. Eddie Prévost provided a summation of the ideas

expressed by many of the participants in my study in a description of his approach to playing

drums in AMM; his comments also reveal a direct connection between the re-evaluation of

ensemble roles and the development of new instrumental techniques:

> There were specific problems that each of us had to negotiate. Myself as a drummer, I had to get away from the idea of laying down the beat. That was an obvious thing. Secondly, the sounds the drums produce tend to die very quickly—there is a sharp attack and a quick fade. So the problem became finding ways to create long sounds. But I was always stimulated by the materials that I had. I had the tam-tam, the drums… I was looking at these things and thinking, 'How can I find something new in this material that I haven't seen before?' You're forging a relationship between yourself and the stuff, an ongoing relationship within the improvising ethic. And you never give up, you never stop looking. You can push and push and it will open up new relationships that will lead you to new materials.

Bassist John Edwards echoed Prévost's sentiment in describing the timbral possibilities of the

bass, which he also connects to the exploration of ensemble roles:

> When I started playing the double bass, I felt like this is a fantastic sound source. It's got an incredible range from about as high as I can imagine down to really low. You've got percussion, you've got the wood, you've got strings, and the hair on the bow—what an incredibly deep, resonant and beautiful instrument. And in freely improvised music, you don't even have to think of it as a bass. Think of it as a trumpet, by which I mean it doesn't have to play the role of the bass.

This basic ethos of experimentation was shared by many of the improvisers in my study, and as a

result the music they make is characterized by the use of a wide variety of sounds that are not

conventionally associated with their respective instruments. These sounds might be noisy or

dissonant in relation to the dominant traditions that inform standard instrumental practices, but

when integrated with the overarching concept of improvisation they become part of an extensive

store of materials that the improvisers I spoke with draw from to generate their performances.

The final point to discuss in this description of the sound of the particular musical practices I am concerned with is the self-conscious avoidance of the tonal progressions, rhythmic patterns, and formal structures that characterize the majority of music made in Europe and North America. Although I have suggested so far that the London improvised music that I experienced is inclusive in terms of instrumental techniques, timbres, and alternative ensemble relationship, it is equally defined by what it excludes. In speaking with improvisers in London it appeared that many of them share a specific ideological attachment to the notion of using improvisation to construct a new and different music. This ideal of creating a music that resists the pull of cultural orthodoxy and addresses the particular cultural context the improvisers are working within is the foundation of the ensemble and instrumental innovations I described in the previous paragraphs. Derek Bailey's term "non-idiomatic improvisation" is a concise summation of this ethos. As I mentioned earlier, this concept has been thoroughly critiqued by many commentators and improvisers, and I will address it in some detail in Chapter Four. For now, I argue that regardless of the efficacy of this term as a genre label, it does encapsulate the general ideology of improvisation that I encountered while living in London, as it represents an ideal that improvisers seem to strive for. Specifically, the improvisers I interviewed tended to conceive of their work as: fundamentally different in approach and materials from other improvisatory musical traditions; experimental in the pursuit of new sounds and ensemble relationship; and an act of resistance against the repressive tendencies of capitalism, as they manifest through mainstream popular culture. This way of thinking about improvisation results in performances that feature few instances of recognizable rhythmic patterns, tonal centres, or repeated melodic phrases; when these do occur it is only briefly, as references or allusions rather than attempts to

create within the boundaries of a defined idiomatic context. This distinct lack of the basic structures that constitute the majority of other Western musics distinguishes the improvisatory practices I researched from those that are more inclusive of references to other musics.

Taking these three points together, the overall sound-world that results from the musical practices I explore in this dissertation is characterized by unorthodox timbres, instrumental techniques, and ensemble relationships, and by the absence of the recognizable materials and forms that constitute the majority of other Western musics. It is important to note as well that a crucial aspect of the particular musical practices I explore in this dissertation is the avoidance of any kind of pre-composed framework in the generation of performances. The identity of improviser, as the people I interviewed described it to me, hinges on the ability and desire to create music with only the particular materials available at the moment of performance. These materials include the instruments and the other participants in the performance, but most significantly the improvisers' accumulated sounds, skills, and experience in creating music without pre-determined structures. Underlying all of this is the importance of a shared ethos of music-making between the musicians and, ideally, the audience. My research attends to a group of musicians who, although they may disagree on the details of musical practice, share the idea of free improvisation as their aesthetic ideal.

The above description of the sound of the music made by my interview subjects is necessarily vague, for there is considerable variety of musical approaches amongst this particular sample of London improvisers. But this sketch should give some idea of the formative ideas and sonic materials in play in the London improvised music field. For further listening, refer to the recordings listed at the end of this dissertation. The following internet links also contain audio

and video examples of the improvisers I have been referring to, and many others I haven't

mentioned who are active in the field: European Free Improvisation Pages—http://

www.efi.group.shef.ac.uk/ (under the link MP3 Clips), and Helen Petts's YouTube channel,

which features an extensive archive of beautifully shot videos filmed in various free

improvisation venues in London—http://www.youtube.com/helentonic.

The focus of my research is the practice of making music without "pre-existent prepared

material," yet my intention throughout this writing is to disrupt the idea that the practices

developed in the London improvised music field represent improvisation in a pure and essential

form (Durant 1989, 269). Although such an idea was never directly articulated in my interviews,

the rhetoric around excluding the sonic materials from other musical forms suggests that the

practice of free improvisation is contingent on reducing the music down to some kind of

essential form. This assumption is problematic, as the diversity of musics I heard in London that

were claimed to be improvised reveals that free improvisation is a social and historically situated

concept, rather than an agreed upon aesthetic ideal. In his compelling critique of notions of

universality in improvised music, Alan Durant questions the implication that free improvisation

is the resulting residue when musical restrictions and conventions are boiled away:

> [What] is perhaps most striking in looking at relevant musical history and ethnography is
> that improvisation plays very different roles in different periods, cultures, and types of
> music. Far from suggesting any underlying common denominator, these differences
> indicate a social and historical specificity of musical practice which challenges the
> essentialism of conceiving of improvisation as the musical root of the human or the self.
> So it would seem more useful to concentrate on specific social relations of improvisation
> rather than on any power of the activity to strip off the social and reach an underlying
> human commonality. (1989, 259)

My research in London confirmed the specificity of improvised musical practices that Durant

calls our attention to, as there are vastly different interpretations of the concept of improvisation

between improvisers living in the same city, in the same time period. The differences between improvised performances from the various sub-scenes in London demonstrated that, rather than a process of removing assumed musical restrictions to reach towards some kind of common human experience, the sound of improvised music is determined by a collaborative agreement between the specific participants upon the particular materials, performance conventions, and relationships that are open to manipulation.

Echoing Durant's call for specificity in discussing free improvisation, George E. Lewis writes:

> In the musical domain, improvisation is neither a style of music nor a body of musical techniques. Structure, meaning, and context in musical improvisation arise from the domain-specific analysis, generation, manipulation, and transformation of sonic symbols. (2004, 134)

Both of these writers contend that it is not possible, nor desirable, to develop a grand theory of improvisation that separates it from its social and historical context, but that it is possible to learn something about social relations through looking at the specific sonic symbols which are attended to by improvisers working in particular domains. My intention with focusing on the London improvised music field is to explore how the particular sounds and musical practices of a group of improvisers living within a specific social and historical context is mediated by the larger discursive framework of free improvisation.

III – Searching for the Script

My research on the practices and discursive framework of free improvisation takes place at a time when academic interest in improvisation is increasing dramatically, a trend that is most obvious in the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada's awarding in 2007 of

a seven-year interdisciplinary Major Collaborative Research Initiative to a project called *Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice* (ICASP). This project is centred at the University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada, and brings together many of the leading scholars on improvisation from a variety of disciplines to investigate the hypothesis "that the innovative working models of improvisation developed by creative practitioners have helped to promote a dynamic exchange of cultural forms and to encourage new, socially responsive forms of community building across national, cultural, and artistic boundaries" (from the *Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice* website: www.improvcommunity.ca). ICASP reflects—and in many ways has fostered—the emergence of the field of Improvisation Studies, an interdisciplinary area of inquiry inhabited by a diverse collection of practitioners, writers, researchers and theorists who take the concept of improvisation as their subject, and apply a wide variety of research methodologies, analytical models, documentary strategies, and theoretical frameworks to interpret the role of improvisation in contemporary society. Improvisation Studies emerged out of the study of jazz, but there was a paradigm shift that led to the establishment of a new field when improvisation began to be conceptualized as autonomous from the particular musical contexts in which it was claimed to be a generative process, and then started to be used as a conceptual frame through which to view and interpret other social phenomena. I will explore this shift in more detail in Chapter Three.

The work conducted so far under the auspices of ICASP has looked at improvisation as it relates to diverse areas of social life, including gender issues, the legal system, and public policy (see http://www.improvcommunity.ca/research/areas). My work, however, fits with the current majority of writings that might be positioned under the broad label of Improvisation Studies, as

my interest is specifically in improvisation in music. The trend towards broadening the definition of improvisation beyond how it functions in jazz, and towards applying the term to a variety of activities outside of the performing arts in general, reflects the larger fragmentation of the discipline of musicology which has taken place as writers have applied theories and analytical frameworks from philosophy, sociology, anthropology, literature studies, cultural studies, and other academic disciplines to the study of music in/as culture. This interdisciplinary approach to the study of improvisation has generated a wide variety of literature on the subject, written from a diverse range of perspectives and featuring a myriad of theoretical approaches and research methodologies.

The growing interest in the study of improvisation is also the result of an increasing number of practitioners entering the academic field, as the concept of interdisciplinarity has led to institutional shifts around the kinds of knowledges and areas of inquiry that are acceptable in academic work. This shift has been apparent for many years within popular music studies, which brought musicians trained in rock and popular music into the academy, and in jazz studies, where an increasing number of musicians are pursuing graduate degrees as jazz education has become more standard in university music departments. A more pragmatic explanation for this migration of practitioners into the academic field might be that the economic prospects for musicians have been deteriorating for many years, and the accreditation and employment opportunities offered by academic institutions allows artists the potential for a degree of financial stability that is increasingly difficult to attain as a cultural worker. I count myself as part of this long and ongoing migration, as I have attempted to maintain my practice as an improviser while writing this dissertation. Like the many musicians who have walked this path before me, including many

whose works I cite in the following pages, it has been difficult for me to find a satisfactory

balance between my musical and academic work, but I have had the good fortune that my

practice as an improviser has been enriched by the opportunity to hear and speak with the

improvisers who are represented in this dissertation.

The subject and context of my research necessarily positions this dissertation within the

emerging disciplinary framework of Improvisation Studies, and in relation to the expanding body

of literature on improvisation. My work draws from a range of narrative archetypes and

theoretical models that have previously been applied to the study of improvisation in music, yet

this project aims to address certain gaps I have perceived in recent literature on the subject.

Specifically, I have structured this narrative to attend to the persistent disconnect between

theories about the political potential of free improvisation and the day-to-day social and musical

practices of those who claim the identity of improviser. My ethnographic research was

undertaken with the intention of building connections between discourse and practice, through

asking questions about the individual cultural activities of a particular group of musical subjects

who align their creative priorities around the concept of free improvisation. By focusing on a

small selection of musical subjects from London who maintain a rigorous attachment to the idea

of free improvisation, I have been able to construct a commentary on how the historical origins

of this concept inform the contemporary musical practices that I work with as an improviser in

an entirely different social, historical, and geographical context.

This dissertation brings together an analysis of the musical materials, historical context,

and aesthetic ideals that inform the practice of free improvisation with an investigation into the

social identity position of improviser as it is enacted by a specific group of musical subjects. The

methodology, structure, and content of this writing is informed by several key texts from the extensive literature on improvisation; these texts provided narrative models and analytical frameworks which I transferred onto the specific context of the London improvised music field. As previously mentioned, I was introduced to the London improv scene in large part through Derek Bailey's (1993) influential book *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*, which is arguably the most widely read book on the subject of free improvisation. Bailey's book is important for how he interprets the activities and ideas of musicians working in six different musical idioms through the wide lens of improvisation, and for what this analysis reveals about the musical ideals that motivated the early generation of London improvisers. It is also notable for the introduction of the term "non-idiomatic improvisation" to a wide audience, a term that— in my interpretation of his text—Bailey intended as specific descriptor for the music that he wanted to make, but which has become a much-debated catchphrase that is applied to improvised music in general. As is clear by now, I do not use this term to describe the particular music under investigation in this dissertation, as I believe it to be too firmly tied to Bailey's particular mode of working, which is not shared by most of the participants in my study. However, the ongoing debates around "non-idiomatic improvisation" provided the initial impetus for the discursive analysis I pursue in this dissertation, as the persistence of Bailey's ideas—particularly his ideal of resisting the use of identifiable musical materials from other musical styles, and his prioritization of ad hoc performances—has made this term the dominant frame for thinking about the music of London improvisers. The ways in which the improvisers I interviewed align or distance themselves from Bailey's ideas and musical practices thus reveal the complex sets of

creative priorities, aesthetic ideals, and patterns of work that constitute the improvised music field.

Bailey had been exploring the concept of free improvisation for over a decade before he conducted the interviews that form the foundation of his book, so this formative text is an influential example of a wider trend in the improvised music field of practitioners writing about their musical work. A short list of the many improvisers who have written about their musical practices in books, articles, liner notes, and other forms includes: Eddie Prévost (1995, 2004), Paul Bley (1998), George E. Lewis (2000), Cornelius Cardew (2006), Ingrid Monson (1996) and Pauline Oliveros (1998). These texts offer practice-based accounts of improvisation, and provided models for the challenge of writing from the position of a practitioner. Of these texts, the books by Bailey and Prévost are the most relevant to my research, as they are focused on the London music scene in which I conducted my ethnographic research. Unlike Bailey and Prévost I have written little about my own practices or ideas about making music; instead, I have positioned my experiences as a practitioner as a starting point for a wider analysis of the idea of free improvisation, as my concern is with how many of the concepts and musical techniques that Bailey, Prévost, and other older London-based improvisers introduced on their recordings have come to signify free improvisation. The ethnographic research I conducted in London is the result of following sonic materials and conceptual threads that connected and resonated with my own musical practice.

Following the basic form of the practitioner narrative, the most formative model for my analysis of London improv is Georgina Born's (1995) book *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde. Rationalizing Culture* is an

ethnographic study of the Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique (IRCAM) in Paris, a state-run research institution charged with creating cutting-edge modern music. Although this ethnographic context differs radically from my investigation into an under-funded, community-based musical form, Born's study offers a compelling model for an analysis of artistic practice. Born's point of departure for her social and musical analysis of IRCAM is an interrogation of the concept of modernism itself, as she argues that the sonic content of the music she is concerned with is over-determined by the discursive framework of modernism. Her stated aim to "consider the avant-garde discourse as itself an object of study" in order to "question its models of artistic innovation and history" is relevant to the study of improvised music, as many of the improvisers I spoke with aligned their practices around ideas of musical innovation, transgression of norms, and resistance to the dominating influences of contemporary commodity culture (1995, 33). I argue throughout this dissertation that much of the improvised music I heard in London fits within Born's conception of a musical avant-garde, but the primary analytical method I borrow from her work is the idea of considering the discourse of free improvisation itself as the object of study. This discursive framework, at least as it shapes the particular practices of the improvisers in my study, will be revealed through the words and music of subjects who position themselves within the tradition of improvised music in London.

My attraction to Born's analysis of the music made at IRCAM in the 1980s stems from how her framework allows for a way of talking about free improvisation that avoids theorizing about its essential nature (what it is), by asking questions about how the subjects in my study use the concept to generate their musical practices (what it does). Like Born's deconstruction of the discursive framework of modernism through the ethnographic data she collected, I am seeking to

uncover the foundational aspects of free improvisation that the particular improvisers in my study evoke to describe their practices, in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of how free improvisation functions in the production of musical culture. There are significant differences between our projects however, aside from the basic social differences between the official culture of IRCAM and the grass-roots folk paradigm that characterizes the London improvised music field. The primary aesthetic distinction is that Born's analysis deals with composers and the creation of composed musical works, and the musical subjects in my study define themselves specifically against the idea of the fixed musical work and the notions of authorial control that the practice of composition implies. But despite the ideological differences between the two groups, the basic framework of a discursive analysis, which is the foundation of Born's methodology, can be productively applied to the music made by the improvisers I interviewed. My analysis of London improv will make connections between the words and music of the improvisers in my study and the relevant, yet more abstract theoretical constructs that circulate in the literature of musicology, sociology, and cultural studies.

This dissertation shares more than just an analytical framework with *Rationalizing Culture*; like Born's book it is an ethnographic account of a particular group of musical subjects, conducted at a particular time and within a specific geographical location. Such a narrative and methodological model is common within ethnomusicology in general, and in recent writings on jazz and improvisation in particular. Other examples that are especially relevant to my research include: *Thinking In Jazz* by Paul Berliner (1994), a study of jazz pedagogy in New York City; *Saying Something* by Ingrid Monson (1996), a practice-based ethnography of New York jazz rhythm sections; *New Dutch Swing* by Kevin Whitehead (1998)*,* a history of the jazz scene in the

Netherlands; *Derek Bailey and The Story of Free Improvisation*, Ben Watson's (2004) description of Derek Bailey's contribution to the practice of free improvisation; and *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music*, George E. Lewis's (2008) comprehensive account of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. By choosing to restrict my ethnographic research to a particular place and music field I am engaging with the documentary tradition represented by these works, especially with those by London-based writers and practitioners such as Watson, Prévost, and Bailey himself.

The practice-based methodology of this dissertation positions it closer to the texts by Monson and Berliner than to the other historic and ethnographic accounts mentioned above, as I am not attempting to generate a comprehensive historical account of the London improvised music field. My goal is rather to engage with the basic idea of free improvisation as it is articulated by a small group of musical subjects, with the recognition that knowledge of this particular musical ideal is situated within specific social, historical, and geographical contexts. A certain historical picture of the London scene emerges through the comments of my interview subjects, especially as I describe their relative positions in the scene. But their voices are not intended to be representative of the entire scene, nor am I using their words to propose an authoritative account of the story of free improvisation. Through the ideas and recollections reproduced in this dissertation we can discern parts of the discursive framework that characterize improvised music in London, both historically and in its contemporary context, but the whole is far more complex than can be addressed by words alone. Yet by focusing on a small sample of improvisers who share a work ethic based on the idea of free improvisation, it is possible to reveal fragments of the story that might be obscured by attempts at a comprehensive account of a

music scene that is constituted by a diverse and "unruly group of people who love what they're doing and agree on some things, but not on a lot of other things" (Wong 2008, 77).

The primary theoretical framework I use for interpreting the ethnographic data I collected in London is derived from the work of Pierre Bourdieu. I first encountered Bourdieu's theories of art and culture in David Lee's (2006) book *Battle Of The Five Spot: Ornette Coleman and The New York Jazz Field*. Georgina Born also draws on Bourdieu's theories in *Rationalizing Culture*, where she incorporates the specific terminology Bourdieu developed to describe the structures and relationships that mediate cultural production into her analysis of the avant-garde discourse. Lee's and Born's books deal specifically with music, but Bourdieu himself wrote very little about music; his writings on art are concerned mostly with literature, although he suggests that his theories about the social structure of the literature field are translatable onto other art forms (see Bourdieu 1993). For this research project I attend primarily to Bourdieu's most influential books on art and culture: *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984) and *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art And Literature* (1993). Taken together, these primary and secondary texts present a range of concepts and frameworks for thinking about how art in general, and improvised music in particular, is produced and consumed in Western culture. I will go into more detail about how Bourdieu's work informs my theoretical framework in Chapter One, but will introduce here, through highlighting connections with David Lee's book, the basic analytical model I apply to my study of the London improvised music field.

In *Battle of the Five Spot* David Lee uses Bourdieu's concepts to analyze Ornette Coleman's extended engagement at the Five Spot Café in 1959, which he positions as a pivotal moment in the fragmentation of the jazz field into a mainstream and an avant-garde. The London

improvised music field that I am concerned with emerged from the paradigm shift around the idea of free improvisation that Lee chronicles in his account of Coleman's early career. Using Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus, cultural capital,* and *artistic fields* as his analytical framework, Lee conducts a structural analysis of the New York jazz scene by broadening his focus beyond the musicians themselves to include the system of venues, record companies, media, and professional relationships which mediate how jazz was produced and consumed in New York in the late 1950s. Lee writes that his subjects include, "creators, consumers and mediators: those who make the sounds we call 'music', their audience, and the many intermediaries in the music business that connect them" (2006, 38). The subject of my research is less specific than Lee's, as I am concerned with free improvisation as a basic idea and general music making practice rather than with a specific player and series of historic events, but his analysis offered a compelling model for expanding my analytical frame to include the various structures, institutions, social relations, and material conventions that constitute the musical domain that revolves around the idea of free improvisation.

The kind of structural analysis that Lee builds from his interpretation of Bourdieu's writings has much in common with American sociologist Howard Becker's theories on art. In his book *Art Worlds,* Becker (1982) addresses art as a social, rather than aesthetic phenomenon, and structures his analysis of art around examining the "network of cooperating people" and institutions that enable the production and consumption of the artefacts we associate with art (24). He also treats what I have been calling "artistic practice" as "the work some people do," and "artists as not so very different from other kinds of workers" (Becker 1982, ix-x). Becker is a musician himself, so there are a few musical examples in *Art Worlds,* but this work is primarily

about art in general, as Becker draws on a variety of art forms to illustrate his argument for the reframing of art and aesthetics as social constructs. Taken in conjunction with Bourdieu's Marxist interpretation of artists as subjects working within the constraints of the free market economy, Becker's approach of deconstructing the structures and assumptions that have formed around the idea of art enables a detailed view of the various factors that mediate the practices of those who claim the identity of artist. Such an analysis expands the idea of practice—which previous to reading these authors I had restricted to musical techniques and sonic materials—to include all of the other activities involved in the production of music.

This expansion of priorities allows for the possibility of developing connections between the abstract ideals that improvisers and commentators attribute to the concept of free improvisation, and the specific social context that grounds the musical practices of the improvisers in my study. Based on Lee's and Georgina Born's examples, I have taken the general ideas about art and culture from Becker and Bourdieu and applied them to a specific social context and art practice. To this end I devote a significant portion of this dissertation to an examination of the day-to-day functioning of the London improvised music field as a site of culture work, which includes asking questions about how the institutional structures that constitute the field shape, and are shaped by, the practices of the improvisers I interviewed.

Much recent writing on free improvisation has focused on its potential to bring about or signify change in the social fabric in which it is enmeshed. The political aspects of the discursive framework of free improvisation are articulated in literature that connects the practice of improvisation to: the struggle for Civil Rights and racial equality in the United States (Radano 1993, Lewis 2004 and 2008, Monson 1995 and 2009); creative forms of resistance to the

repressive tendencies of capitalism (Prévost 1995 and 2004, Attali 1985); the possibility of transgressing social and political orthodoxies through artistic practice (Heble 2000, Heble and Fischlin 2004, Hegarty 2007); productive models for social organization and a re-invigoration of music education (Borgo 2005, Lewis 2000, Sawyer 2000); and the disruption of patriarchal ideas of cultural production (Tucker 2001, Smith 2004, Rustin and Tucker 2008). The particular categories I have divided these works into are fluid, and there are many more examples of literature that deal with improvised music as a force for political change than I can list here. These few studies I've highlighted relate specifically to the musical practices and political issues that concern the particular improvisers I met in London.

The assumption that free improvisation and artistic practice in general can offer an effective response to social and political inequalities has been productively critiqued by Alan Durant (1989), Jason Toynbee (2000), and Peter Martin (2006), yet the equation of improvisation with oppositional culture persists in the literature on the subject and in my conversations with improvisers. As my intention in the present project is to consider the discourse of improvisation itself as an object of study, I am interested in how—as the examples above illustrate—improvised music is continually positioned by musicians and commentators as an alternative to "normal" musical and social practices, and how free improvisation is used as a force to disrupt orthodoxies that practitioners might consider to be repressive or inequitable. By investigating how a particular group of subjects use music to articulate their political priorities, enact their aesthetic ideals, and negotiate the social and economic implications of claiming the identity of improviser, I hope to reveal something of the origins of the discursive framework of the London

improvised music field, and to provide insight into how the narrative of freedom and resistance to orthodoxy informs the contemporary practice of free improvisation.

The analysis I conduct in this dissertation contributes to the emerging field of Improvisation Studies in how I have proposed practice as an entry point for asking questions about the ways in which the more abstract domains of discourse and social structures mediate the artistic activities of subjects who claim the identity of improviser. My motivation for such an analysis is a curiosity about how the musical practices and sounds that I have grown to associate with free improvisation are coded as perpetually contemporary and radical, even as the original break with other musics (jazz, classical, and popular music) took place over four decades ago and a relatively stable support system of venues, festivals, and record labels for this music has emerged in the intervening years. This is not to say that improvised music is a safe and settled musical domain; improvisers are always working against considerable economic constraints, and the support for the public performance of their music is almost entirely dependant on the continued interest of a small (yet dedicated) audience. But the complicated relationship between the discursive framework of free improvisation and the musical practices of subjects working within particular social and material contexts is too often obscured by romantic notions about the role of artists in society in general, and the transgressive power of improvisation as an art practice specifically. By speaking with improvisers who live and work in one of the formative scenes for the practice of free improvisation, it becomes possible to explore the relationship between the aesthetic and political ideals that form the foundation for the concept of free improvisation, and the social implications for those who orient their artistic practices around the generative process of improvisation.

I chose to speak with the particular improvisers in this study because I felt that they could address the questions I had about my own practice as an improviser, which would in turn provide some insight into the larger discourse of free improvisation that is the foundation of what is now a recognizable domain of musical practice in many parts of the world. As I have said, London improv is not a stable nor uniform musical formation, but the basic concept of improvisation, and by extension the idea of free improvisation, has remained the foundational framework around which a growing number of musicians orient their musical activities. By asking individual improvisers about their musical practices I think it is possible to expand our understanding about what this concept does for those who claim it as their aesthetic priority, and to theorize about how it has remained such a vital force in our contemporary musical landscape. With this goal in mind I will follow Ajay Heble's model for writing about jazz, and apply it to the music made by the improvisers in my study:

> [The] best writing on jazz has to involve a rather tricky balancing act, a complex set of negotiations between on the one hand the teachings of critical theory—especially its dismantling of socially produced assumptions about meaning, identity, and knowledge— and, on the other, a recognition of the value and importance of documenting insider perspectives. (2000, 91)

Throughout this dissertation I will strive for this balance between theoretical concepts derived from the literature on free improvisation and the practice-based data collected through ethnographic research, while maintaining the awareness that all of these ideas will be filtered through my personal experience as an improvising musician. Ultimately, any document such as this must coexist with the sonic manifestation of the music, so it is hoped that the thoughts contained herein will inform listeners' experience of the music in a constructive way.

Chapter Summary

This dissertation will consist of six chapters, each designed to explore a particular aspect of the discursive and practice of free improvisation. When read together, a coherent description of the London improvised music field should emerge, through the combination of the comments of my research participants and my interpretation of theories derived from relevant literature. Chapter One will provide a theoretical framework for the interpretation of the ethnographic data I collected in the field and the ideas I have derived from the literature on improvisation. Of particular importance are the concepts of *field* and *capital* developed by Pierre Bourdieu. In this chapter I will relate these general ideas to the specific music scene I am researching, and will propose a general sociological framing for the study of free improvisation. Chapter Two will describe my research methodology, providing details on how, where, and with whom I conducted my fieldwork, and what I hoped to accomplish through the process of recording personal interviews. Chapter Three will elaborate on issues related to the interpretation of improvisation as a social practice rather than an aesthetic ideal. Employing ideas from Bourdieu introduced in Chapter One, I will construct a practice-based analysis of improvisation as an autonomous musical activity, and the improviser as a social position. In Chapter Four I will position London improv within the discursive framework of modernism, in both an abstract sense relating to rupture, negation, and progress, and in a material sense through an investigation into the influences that informed the practices of the early free improvisers. Chapter Five will be an analysis of the specific economic, social, and musical structures that have arisen around performances of improvised music in London. This chapter will explore general ideas about how the field functions on a day-to-day basis. Chapter Six will conclude the dissertation with an analysis of reductionist music, a musical form that has arisen over the last twenty years that is

positioned as an alternative to London improv. Many of the improvisers in my study cited this music as an other against which they defined themselves, so an analysis of this relationship will bring further clarity to the identity formation of improviser, and will provide historical context for interpreting how improvised music is frequently evoked as a perpetual avant-garde. The emergence of reductionist music in Europe over the last decade, and the resulting expansion of the pool of participants in the improvised music field, put pressure on the scant resources available to subjects working in similar areas in the field of cultural production. This tension between separate but related marginalized musics highlights how free improvisation is a transformed version of other musical forms rather than an entirely autonomous socio-musical domain. It is hoped that these distinct chapters will contribute to a broader understanding of how specific aesthetics, ideologies, socio-economic structures, and sonic materials interact with the concept of improvisation to manifest as the particular musical practices of the improvisers I interviewed in London.