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Fields of Production and Streams of Consciousness:
Negotiating the Musical and Social Practices of Improvised Music

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in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

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.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	iv
Acknowledgments	vi
Introduction	1
Constructing Connections	6
Situating The Sounds	15
Searching for the Script	43
Chapter Summary	59
Chapter One – Surveying the Improvised Music Field	62
Converting Capital	65
Fields and Fences	71
Transforming the Territory	80
Chapter Two – Chin Music: Talking and Playing with Improvisers	86
Finding the Field	92
Voicing the Discord	106
Rhetoric and Representation	128
Chapter Three – Playing the Field: Improvisation as Social Practice	134
Improvising Autonomy	142
Imagining the Improviser	152
Composing the Musical Margins	163
Chapter Four – Improvised Music and the Modernist Work Ethic	176
Improvising Modernism	177
Autonomy and Negation	182
Sphere of Influence	195
The Improv Ethic	201
The Anxiety of Genre	211
Chapter Five – The London School of Improvised Economics	222
Structuring the Spontaneous	229
Courting Conventions and Spatial Dimensions	247
Identifying the Improviser	260

Chapter Six – Reducing the Improvised Music Field 277

Last Past the Post 280
Another Other 296

Conclusion – Improvising Tradition 308

References 319

Sound References 325

Appendix A: Research Participants 328

Introduction

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

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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.

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 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

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

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 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

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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*.

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 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 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

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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.

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

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.

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 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.

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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.

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 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.

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

[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.

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.

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]

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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.

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 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.

Chapter One – Surveying the Improvised Music Field

During my stay in London in 2006/2007 I pursued a research program that involved a combination of participant observation through attending performances and playing with other musicians, and ethnographic interviews with participants in the London improvised music field. Other than regularly attending Eddie Prévost's workshop on Friday evenings, my schedule was largely improvisatory as I selected which performances to attend on a day-to-day basis, and arranged interviews as I got to know the improvisers in the field. As a primarily English-speaking city with considerable cultural and historical connections to my home city of Toronto, the research field was a relatively slight transformation of my home environment; my research thus did not involve a radical shift or accommodation of cultural difference, as I did not encounter significant political, linguistic, or cultural barriers. But despite the cultural similarities between my research field and my home, I still had to engage with the inherent political, ethical, and methodological issues relating to fieldwork and ethnography as I followed my practice-based research plan. In addition to the spatial and cultural shift that characterizes academic work in the field, my experience in London involved a fundamental shift in identity, as I went from my familiar home scene, where I function primarily as a musician, to a much bigger scene where I presented myself as a writer/academic. Chapters One and Two will present a detailed description of my research process: this chapter will describe the basic theoretical framework I used to conduct and interpret my fieldwork, and Chapter Two will contextualize my fieldwork by describing how, when,

and with whom I conducted the ethnographic interviews that are the foundation of this dissertation.

This research project began with my desire to learn more about how the improvising musicians in London generated their performances, in hopes that their insights might help me to become a better improvising bassist. As I became familiar with the musicians in the London improvised music field, my initial interest in the sonic materials they were working with expanded into a curiosity about how we might account for the different sub-scenes, sound-worlds and performance practices that revolve around the basic idea of free improvisation. It quickly became clear after my arrival in London that that there are long-standing divisions in the field, as improvisers work with some players rather than others, venues and record labels support particular musical aesthetics, and some musicians have more and better performance opportunities than others. We expect these kinds of divisions in other music scenes, but this situation causes some low-level dissonance in our understanding of improvised music, as the dominant rhetoric around free improvisation positions it as an egalitarian, socially inclusive, personally expressive, and politically transgressive mode of music making. In other words, free improvisation is often framed by the improvisers in my study and in the literature as being different from conventional musics, a kind of socially conscious response to the authoritarianism of mainstream culture (See Heble and Fischlin 2004, and Attali 1985). Yet the struggles I observed in the improvised music field in London—which were similar to those in my home scene of Toronto, only on a much larger scale—suggest that the traits around community building and personal/political transformation that are

frequently attributed to improvisation are an idealized conception of the potential of the music, rather than a representation of how the musicians who claim to be improvisers organize their lives and music. This is not to say that the practice of free improvisation does not enable personal and political transformation, only that its potential to do so is necessarily embedded in, and mediated by, the discourses and structures that determine how music in general is produced and consumed in contemporary Western culture. London improv is clearly aesthetically different from other musics, but it shares with other cultural forms an over-determination by the "nineteenth-century industrialization of culture" and the related conception of "music as a commodity" (Frith 1996, 95).

The divisions, conflicts, and shifting relationships that I observed in the London improvised music field simply means that it works like any other musical domain, which should have been no surprise; my home community of Toronto functions in the same way, only on a smaller scale. Although a self-sustaining community of interest has formed around the particular sonic symbols and social practices associated with free improvisation, the reality of the socio-economic system within which improvising musicians work means that participants in the improvised music field are frequently in competition with each other for the resources that allow them to pursue their aesthetic priorities. My perception of the conflicts within macro-level social relations aligns with my experience as a player, as I have often felt that in successful improvised performances there is usually more conflict than agreement between the musicians on the stage. In a discussion about the metaphor of conversation which pervades writings about jazz, pianist Paul Bley offered this description of improvised ensemble performance: "... it is

important to pick up on the ideas of one of the other players, but not to the extent that you mask what he or she is doing. The continuity expresses itself in the conflict among the conversationalists—if we all agree, the conversation is over". With this basic framework in mind, I was drawn to investigate the domain of improvised music as a site of conflict and struggle, at both the micro-level of performance relations, and the macro-level of musicians as social agents who are in constant negotiation with each other for performance opportunities, audience recognition, and ultimately the economic resources that allow them to make a living. The observations I made in the London scene, in conjunction with my introduction to the work of Pierre Bourdieu, caused me to shift my research priorities from looking at how improvisation might embody certain social ideals and radical politics, to looking at how musicians use the practice of improvisation to generate creative action, build identities, and interact with other musical subjects who share similar aesthetic priorities.

I – Converting Capital

Pierre Bourdieu wrote extensively on the arts in France, and over the course of his writings developed a methodology and set of terms for analyzing artworks as manifestations of social practice rather than as aesthetic objects. On the idea of aesthetic beauty, Bourdieu wrote: "The pure disposition is so universally recognized as legitimate that no voice is heard pointing out that the definition of art, and through it the art of living, is an object of struggle among the classes" (1984, 48). From this we can surmise that Bourdieu wished, through his substantial writings on the arts, to be the voice that

points out how aesthetics are socially constructed. To this end, his writings on art explore how the production, perception, and reception of art arises out of the class conditions generated by the dominant socio-economic structures of Western society. The following paragraphs will introduce the basic ideas and terminology Bourdieu developed, and will suggest how they might relate to the study of London improv. My intention throughout this dissertation is to put Bourdieu's ideas in conversation with the ethnographic data I gathered in the field, to test his framework to see if it can offer us any new insights into the practice of free improvisation. In this I am following a suggestion made by Harker, Mahar and Wilkes, who wrote:

> Bourdieu's is a theoretical model that derives its dynamic through a dialectical relationship with data gathered in specific research enterprises. Such data provide the content for the various conceptual entities that he uses, and hence it is inappropriate to try to evaluate his work without putting it to work. (Bourdieu et al. 1990, ix-x)

Bourdieu's ideas about art and culture are based on his conception that the products and practices we associate with art are not the result of a universal aesthetic impulse, but are determined by the dominant socio-economic framework he refers to as the "field of power" (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993, 163). In Western culture the field of power is shaped by the structures, practices, and ideologies that arise from the free market economy. To work with Bourdieu's concepts means situating the ethnographic data I collected in the London improvised music field within the context of capitalism. Bourdieu defines capital as: "...a social relation, i.e., an energy which only exists and only produces its effects in the field in which it is produced and reproduced..." (Bourdieu 1984, 113). In his writings on art and culture Bourdieu stretches the conventional

understanding of capital as economic potential to describe less obvious movements of power through the dominant field out into the specific sub-fields of cultural production. Using the laws and constraints of free market capitalism as the foundational metaphor for his cultural analysis, Bourdieu developed alternative meanings of capital to signify the sets of values and relations that govern particular areas of social life. These values are embedded in specific skills, credentials, social networks, and competencies that allow us to function within the various environments and positions that we inhabit in our daily lives. As the goal of this dissertation is to build a sociological description of free improvisation, I will construct my analysis using the particular terminology and concepts Bourdieu developed to theorize about cultural production and the arts in general. These are particularly useful ideas in the context of art forms that subsist on the margins of the dominant field of power, as they allow for an analysis of what is at stake in relations between participants in art scenes where there is little economic capital in play.

The two terms in Bourdieu's analysis of art that are most relevant to my project are *symbolic capital* and *cultural capital*. Symbolic capital refers to "a degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity, consecration or honour and is founded on a dialectic of knowledge and recognition" (Johnson, in Bourdieu 1993, 7). This metaphor is central to Bourdieu's conception of art as a struggle over the art of living, as it leads us to investigate the socio-economic structures that determine cultural production. Symbolic capital is accrued or transformed as artists work to increase their status, public profile, and work opportunities, either through pursuing formal education, seeking favourable publicity, developing relationships to established artists in the field, performing at

prominent venues, or anything else which might be summed up by the phrase, "making a name for yourself." This "name" becomes the currency that artists can convert into the resources that allow them to pursue their creative practices. Symbolic capital may be transformed into economic capital, should the skills, credentials, and artistic productions become valued in the marketplace, but this transformation is not always possible, or even desirable. Bourdieu contends that the arts scene "is the economic world reversed; that is, the fundamental law of this specific universe… establishes a negative correlation between temporal (notably financial) success and properly artistic value, is in the inverse of the law of economic exchange" (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993, 164). Based on this reading, for Bourdieu symbolic capital is generated and maintained through "distaining immediate economic reward or a large market by adopting the marginal, prophetic role associated with youth, iconoclasm, and asceticism" (Born 1995, 141). Popular culture has little symbolic capital in this formulation, as its ability to potentially generate income for its producers means that it is embedded within the systems of standardization and repression that stem from capitalist ideology. As I described the musical practices that are my concern in the introduction, the improvisers in my study consciously avoid the materials of conventional Western musics, so the discursive framework of free improvisation remains dominated by the conception of improvisation as a form of resistance to the standardization, inequality, and exploitation associated with commercial music. Whether individual agents are able to transform symbolic capital into money or not, for Bourdieu the discursive power of symbolic capital in avant-garde, experimental,

or otherwise transgressive art rests in its ability to obscure the economic foundations and power structures that he contends determine cultural production:

> Symbolic capital, a transformed and thereby *disguised* form of physical 'economic' capital, produces its proper effect inasmuch, and only inasmuch, as it conceals the fact that it originates in 'material' forms of capital which are also, in the last analysis, the source of its effects. (1977, 183)

The lack of economic capital at play in the improvised music field is thus tied to the accumulation of symbolic capital, as the assumed transformative potential of avant-garde art is dependent on its autonomy from the dominant field of power.

Cultural capital is a transformed version of symbolic capital. Bourdieu uses this term to signify the collection of skills and competencies gained through life experiences that enable us to participate in the creation, interpretation, and consumption of art. In *Distinction,* his broad study of the social construction of taste, Bourdieu wrote:

> In a sense, one can say that the capacity to see (*voir*) is a function of the knowledge (*savoir*), or concepts, that is, the code, into which it is encoded. The conscious or unconscious implementation of explicit or implicit schemes of perception and appreciation which constitutes pictorial or musical culture is the hidden condition for recognizing the styles characteristic of a given period, a school or an author, and, more generally, for the familiarity with the internal logic of works that aesthetic enjoyment presupposes. A beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and lines, without rhyme or reason. (1984, 2)

Bourdieu's formulation refers specifically to an audience member's ability to decode an artwork, which in the present context relates to familiarity with recordings, exposure to the prominent players on the scene, and the opportunity to gain knowledge of the history of Western art music. In my analysis I will use similar ideas to explore the knowledge possessed by musical producers that allows them to engage with, and move through, the improvised music field, and eventually to accumulate the symbolic capital that might

result in increased opportunities to perform and pursue their creative work. Examples of the forms of cultural capital that are important for the musicians in my study are: knowledge of the basic skills/sounds required to play with other musicians; a particular sound/technique that makes one recognizable; and an awareness of how to negotiate with other participants to secure performances and recordings. There are many more skills that improvising musicians deploy in the production of their music, and much of the rest of this dissertation will be spent interpreting the words of improvisers in order to uncover the kinds of social relations, ideologies, and musical practices that determine the sound of London improv.

It should be noted that it is necessary to situate Bourdieu's analyses of art in the context of France in the second half of the twentieth century; it is therefore problematic to transpose his concepts and ideas onto descriptions of art production in different historical and social contexts. For example, the white bourgeois literary scene in Paris is a very different socio-economic context than the south side of Chicago in the late fifties, where black experimental musicians came together to form the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) to support the production of original and boundary-pushing music, and different again from the vibrant and diverse London music scene in the 1960s. Yet Bourdieu's basic interest in connecting artistic practices to larger institutional structures is fruitful for a practice-based analysis of free improvisation, as the musicians in my study pursue their aesthetic priorities within a complex network of social relations. So Bourdieu's terms, including symbolic and cultural capital, will have to be contextualized by, and tested against, the ethnographic data I collected in the

London improvised music field. My analysis will develop the idea of symbolic capital especially to explore how the movement of power, practices, and perceptions between musicians determines the creation of improvised music in London.

II – Fields and Fences

As I have described it so far, Bourdieu's conception of capital as a "social relation" allows the term to be transferred onto any number of things that represent value within specific contexts (1984, 113). Our ability to distinguish different social formations and roles is determined by what is considered to be of value between those participating in these social relationships. Bourdieu developed the term *artistic field* to describe the social domains within which specific aesthetic practices take place. In Bourdieu's writings there are many different sub-fields that function within the dominant field of power, such as the economic field, the political field, or the education field; my analysis will situate London improv within the overarching cultural field. As Bourdieu wrote little about music, I will unpack the field concept through excerpts from his substantial writings on literature, in which he used the term "literary field" (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993, 163-164):

> [A field is] an independent universe with its own laws of functioning, its specific relations of force, its dominants and its dominated, and so forth... [The literary] field is neither a vague social background nor even a *milieu artistique* like a universe of personal relations between artists and writers… It is a veritable social universe where, in accordance with its own particular laws, there accumulates a particular form of capital and where relations of force of a particular type are exerted. This universe is the place of entirely specific struggles, notably concerning the question of knowing who is part of the universe, who is a real writer and who is not. (1993, 163-164)

Bourdieu's ideas about the literary field can be easily transplanted onto a discussion of music, even though the creative processes are substantially different. Writing is generally a solitary process, and London improv is oriented towards the public exploration of sound, but they both depend on a larger system of social relations in order to be read/heard by the intended audience—e.g., publishing houses/record companies, newspapers/radio, bookstores/record shops, and literary agents/concert promoters. The differences in production between literature, music, and other art forms are mediated by the related systems of education that allow for the interpretation of works, and the similar methods of distribution that allow for the consumption of the respective art forms.

The above passage from Bourdieu contains the key theoretical ideas that I will connect to the ethnographic data I collected from improvisers in London. My aim in the following paragraphs is to develop a theoretical framework for what I have already been calling the London improvised music field, and to use this concept to explore improvisation as a space of specific struggles between agents who claim the identity of improviser. The London improvised music field is a specific version of the general improvised music field, which has developed in a various locations in Europe and North America over the last fifty years as a growing number of musicians have begun to orient their musical activities around the concept of free improvisation. To construct the improvised music field, and trace the origins of the position of improviser, I will work from the understanding that a field is a relatively autonomous area of social/economic activity with its own governing rules, value systems, and identity formations that are related to, yet distinct from, other social formations. An artistic field is formed when a

critical mass of people engage in struggle over a distinct set of values and objects. While the exact boundaries around a field are impossible to draw, there remains a general awareness amongst those inside and outside the field (if those outside are even aware of a particular field) that a certain collection of agents, social structures, institutions, and common practices interact to generate cultural products of a specific type.

Despite the distinctions that characterize different musical formations, Bourdieu suggests that the different social relations we might wish to explore as conceptual entities—such as the literary field in Paris, the New York jazz field as developed by David Lee, or the London improvised music field I am proposing—are transformed versions of each other, rather than autonomous formations. The boundaries between fields are fluid rather than solid, and they share some basic characteristics, so Bourdieu warns of the danger of:

> … inventing as many explanatory systems are there are fields, instead of seeing each of them as a transformed form of all the others, or worse, the error of setting up a particular combination of factors active in a particular field of practices as a universal explanatory principle. (1984, 113)

With this cautionary in mind, my intention in working with the concept of a London improvised music field is to position the practices of the particular improvisers in my study within a specific social context, by highlighting connections to other forms of music making.

Although London improv has different sonic characteristics than the popular musics with which it coexists, Bourdieu maintains that the two are related to each other through shared struggles around ideological, material, and economic imperatives. In order to resist aesthetic or essentializing analyses of art, Bourdieu insists that we attend to

the socio-economic context of the cultural products we wish to study. His concept of fields is thus based on connecting art to three basic levels of social reality: (1) the position of the improvised music field within the field of power; (2) the structure and particular struggles that characterize social relations within the improvised music field; and (3) the determining factors and dispositions that generate the practices of participants in the field (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993, 14). This analytical model offers several points of entry for exploring the ways "social and musical practices weave interconnections between the more disembodied domains of discourse and structure" (Monson 2009, 23). The field concept thus allows for an investigation into the discursive framework of free improvisation, as it grounds the ephemeral concept of improvisation within a broad context of art as social practice, while recognizing the differences in details (symbolic capital) that shape relations between improvisers and society at large.

It is necessary to take a few steps backwards to properly situate the proposed conceptual entity of an improvised music field. Bourdieu's concept of fields makes possible an examination of the "independent universes" of particular fields by tracing a path from the general to the specific (1993, 163). In this case, building the framework for an improvised music field must start with an understanding of the dominant field of power, followed by an exploration of the details of the cultural field, as the improvised music field exists as part of a matrix of other artistic and musical formations within the general field of cultural production. My analysis of the London improv builds from Jason Toynbee's assertion that "...music-making is located both in its own particular domain and in large social relations at one and the same time" (2000, 36). The "large social

relations" in question are determined by the market-based economy, and the "particular domain" that the improvised music in question works within is the cultural field. Randal Johnson summarized Bourdieu's conception of the relationship between culture and the field of power in his introduction to *The Field of Cultural Production*:

> The cultural (literary, artistic, etc.) field exists in a subordinate or dominated position within the field of power, whose principle of legitimacy is based on possession of economic or political capital. It is situated *within* the field of power because of its possession of a high degree of symbolic forms of capital (e.g. academic capital, cultural capital), but in a dominated position because of its relatively low degree of economic capital (when compared with the dominant fractions of the dominant classes). (1993, 15)

Within the already dominated cultural field, the improvised music field is even further marginalized through its intentional negative relation to the materials and forms of popular music and its corresponding lack of economic capital. Bourdieu characterizes this distinction between popular culture and art as a binary based on economic imperatives and the struggle between what he calls "cultural orthodoxy and heresy":

> The structure of the field of cultural production is based on two fundamental and quite different oppositions... between the sub-field of restricted production and the sub-field of large-scale production, i.e. between two economies, two time-scales, two audiences, which endlessly produces and reproduces the negative existence of the sub-field of restricted production and its basic opposition to the bourgeois economic order... (1993, 53)

The improvised music I experienced in London clearly fits within the category of restricted production, as it manifests primarily at a local level through the efforts of individual musicians, promoters, and writers, rather than through the actions of corporations and governments, and the audience that attends to this music is smaller than that which attends to popular musics.

The field of cultural production is further defined by its focus on aesthetic rather than functional objects. According to Bourdieu, cultural production not only generates novels, paintings, and musical performances, but also creates a of set values, skills, and social positions necessary to interpret and appreciate these objects:

> Cultural production distinguishes itself from the production of the most common objects in that it must produce not only the object in its materiality, but also the value of this object, that is, the recognition of artistic legitimacy. This is inseparable from the production of the artist or the writer as artist or writer, in other words, as a creator of value. (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993, 164)

Again in this quote, and many others like it throughout *The Fields Of Cultural Production*, one can substitute musician for writer (or music for literature) and arrive at a similar analysis of the field of music. The process of developing an understanding audience through establishing and working with a value system that people can relate to occurs in conjunction with the development of the position of "writer," or in this case, improviser. The improvised music field thus involves not only the creation of music as an aesthetic and social experience, but the creation of a social position or identity formation of improviser, which I will argue in Chapter Three is a relatively recent addition to the general category of "musician." The London improvised music field is constituted by various discrete social positions in addition to "those who make the sounds we call 'music'," such as "the many intermediaries in the music business that connect" the creators to the audience (Lee 2006, 38), but as my focus is on the musical practices that signify free improvisation I have privileged the "musician-creator (individual or collective) [who] stands at the centre of a radius of creativity" (Toynbee 2000, xxi) over the audience and supportive positions.

The position of improviser is both aesthetically and socially constructed, as the use of particular sonic materials and relationships positions those who choose it as an identity in a specific corner of the dominant field of power. There will be more in Chapter Three about the aesthetic/political construction of the role of improviser. In the present context I am concerned with interrogating the role of improviser as a social position, as the factors that contribute to this position influenced which musicians I came into contact within the field, and who I eventually interviewed for my research. Participation in the improvised music field, in terms of who gets to do what with the available resources, is determined by the movement of various forms of capital between interested parties. Bourdieu theorized about the relationship between subjects and the wider field of power:

> [The] invention of the writer, in the modern sense of the term, is inseparable from the progressive invention of a particular social game, which I term the *literary field* and which is constituted as it establishes its autonomy, that is to say, its specific laws of functioning, within the field of power. (1993, 163)

Conflicts within the field, which manifest as a kind of "social game," are related to determining who is a member of the field or not, as participants negotiate with each other over the use and distribution of resources; for example, performances, recordings, financial rewards, and publicity. These negotiations continually shape and reshape the field, with the rules of the game shifting as new participants bring in fresh value sets and resources. What is at stake then, in a restricted field of cultural production is "the power to impose the dominant definition of the writer and therefore to delimit the population of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define the writer" (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993, 42).

Musicians are constantly negotiating with each other and with larger institutional structures for the resources to continue their creative work, so the trajectory of most improvisers is towards trying to increase their performance opportunities, and potentially to gain financial remuneration for their work, by expanding their public profile and acquiring cultural competencies within the field. An improviser's symbolic capital changes as they learn the musical standards and conventions of the field, perform with established members of the field, release recordings, or maybe start to travel to play with musicians in other locales. In addition to refining basic musical skills, other competencies that allow improvisers to move through the field might be learning how to write grants, developing interpersonal skills related to acquiring performance opportunities at well-known festivals, or the ability to generate positive coverage in relevant media. So the improvised music field is constantly changing at the micro-level, as the relationships between musicians and the field of power shifts to accommodate the movement of symbolic and/or economic capital. Bourdieu wrote of these shifts:

> [The] structure of the field, i.e. of the space of positions, is nothing other than the structure of the distribution of the capital of specific properties which govern success in the field and the winning of the external or specific profit (such as literary prestige) which are at stake in the field. (1993, 30)

For this research, my focus is on the particular musical skills that improvisers develop which allow them to continue their creative work, as there are particular aesthetic ideals at play in the improvised music field that both mediate the identity of improviser and isolate these musicians from the flow of economic capital that supports the popular music field.

Shifting my vantage point to the dominating rather than the dominated position, certain public institutions, music festivals, venues, record labels and publications have the power to grant both symbolic and economic capital to musicians, as they offer prestige and acknowledgement by association, which may in turn be converted into revenue-generating opportunities. In this situation, as well as within the government arts funding system, musicians are placed in competition with each other for this capital. The reality of this situation continually counters the rhetoric of collectivism and community building that has become part of the discursive framework of improvisation. Jason Toynbee's interpretation of Bourdieu's concept of artistic fields reflects the material concerns of artists who must work within a market-based economy:

> For Bourdieu then, the field of cultural production has a strong individualistic and self-serving aspect. Artists strive to increase their own credit, and those who achieve success may then repudiate the very movements through which they built their careers. This emphasis on the self-interested nature of culture-making is important I think. It provides a useful counter to naïve or ideological beliefs in the purity of art. (2000, 37)

Although he is speaking to the more vicious field of popular music, Toynbee's critique has particular relevance to my investigation of London improv, as performance opportunities, recordings, and financial rewards are increasingly rare for musicians of all styles, and improvisers in particular. As a result, improvisers are constantly struggling for performance opportunities and the means to pursue their practice, which often puts them in competition with each other. This situation runs counter to the focus on collaboration and communitarianism that characterizes the personal and musical relationships between musicians. The constraints of the dominant field of power thus continually infringe upon the political and musical ideals of improvisers, so that it becomes necessary to think

about the improvised music field as a diverse constellation of members and institutions that "at any given moment is determined by the relations between positions agents occupy in the field" (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993, 6).

III – Transforming the Territory

Given my intention to explore and document specific musical practices that are claimed and positioned as free improvisation, the primary task in my early fieldwork became determining who identified as an improviser, and then interpreting how the practices of these individuals contribute to the overall distinctive character of the London improvised music field. Bourdieu gives a simple answer to the question, "Who is an artist?" that slightly obscures the set of complicated negotiations and conflicts I described in the previous paragraph: "There is no other criteria of membership of a field than the objective fact of producing effects within it" (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993, 42). Although it is difficult to argue for how we might objectively measure the effects participants produce in a field, I think that Bourdieu's meaning is clear: if one has the means to produce a work that is acceptable within a field, and this work and its maker are granted access to the venues, media, discussions and personal networks of the field at even a minor level, then one can be said to be a member of the field. In the context of my study, the musicians I interviewed in the UK and Europe I either knew before I went (which suggests a particular elevated status in the improvised music field) or came to know through my attendance at improvised music performances in London. The usual trajectory, as I argued above, is for an artist to ascend through a range of possible

positions to achieve some kind of recognition, symbolic or economic, from the other field members, or from the more general population. The field concept makes it possible to follow this trajectory, as musicians gain particular kinds of capital (skills and prestige) that allows them access to the support structures (venues, record labels, government arts funding, etc.) that have developed around the practice of free improvisation. Despite their musical, social, and political differences, the musicians in my ethnographic study share a measurable presence in the field as improvisers, since I encountered them through the performances, recordings, and pedagogical initiatives which are the primary indicators of field membership.

Membership within a field is constantly changing, as new producers and consumers enter the field and older ones fade away. The new members force a re-evaluation of the positions occupied by established improvisers, as when "a new literary or artistic group makes its presence felt in the field of literary or artistic production… the previously dominant productions may, for example, be pushed into the status either of outmoded or of classic works" (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993, 32). David Lee's (2006) writing on Ornette Coleman and the New York jazz field calls attention to the shifting values within the jazz field in the late 1950s, as the attention granted to Coleman's distinctive musical approach by the jazz media forced other musicians to declare themselves in relation to his music. Lee suggests Coleman's appearance in New York precipitated a further fracturing of the jazz world, as Coleman's new ideas about improvisation were introduced into the field at a moment when bebop, the original jazz avant-garde, had become the mainstream musical practice. As Coleman's music began to

generated debate in the field, Lee argues that the negative reactions from major jazz figures, such as Miles Davis and Max Roach, arose out of a general concern amongst established musicians that the shift towards less structured approaches to improvisation contained in Coleman's music would result in lost employment opportunities.[12] Free jazz did not entirely replace bebop as the jazz mainstream, yet many established musicians, such as Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, and Jimmy Giuffre did end up adapting aspects of Coleman's approach into their own music. This shift in the jazz field contributed to the genesis of a distinct improvised music field, as new musical techniques and players came to prominence that did not fit with the prevailing jazz-related structures of the time. As an example of this kind of generational shift in the London scene, percussionist Steve Noble told me how some of the early free improvisers made a significant break with the jazz mainstream that eventually led to the formation of a distinct improvised music field:

> It's almost like [Derek Bailey and Tony Oxley] were the first generation of art musicians, because before that whole break in the late 1960s, what was there? Well, you had classical players who would experiment with doing avant-garde pieces, but there wasn't a scene like there is now. It wasn't like, 'Hey I've got to go, because it's 8 o'clock and there's three laptops being played,' or whatever.

In Chapter Three I will explore in more detail how the improvised music field emerged in the late 1960s out of the jazz and experimental music fields of the 1950s, as the notion of a radical break that Noble evokes in the above quote continues to influence the discursive framework of London improv.

The overarching modernist ethos of the improvised music field means that these kinds of changes and re-evaluations occurred with regular frequently in the formative

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[12] For examples of the debate around Ornette Coleman's music as it played out in the jazz press, see the liner notes to Ornette Coleman (1993) *Beauty Is A Rare Thing: The Complete Atlantic Recordings*.

years of improvised music, as new techniques, instruments and players entered the field from other musical domains. As the discursive framework of London improv is based on an ethic of experimentation based on the negation of established musical materials, and as there is little economic capital at stake, there hasn't been an upheaval in the field comparable to Coleman's effect on the jazz field that Lee chronicled. However, as an example of the dynamic nature of the improvised music field, the rapid pace of technological development in recent years has resulted in the establishment of new kinds of musicianship, as sound generation and manipulation on computers has become more effective and accessible. This has resulted in a significant change within the field, as acoustic musicians now have access to (or are in competition with) a new set of electronics-orientated practitioners who have an entirely different range of sounds available to them. As an example of this process of continual re-evaluation and renewal, the concluding chapter of this dissertation will address the rise of a style of music in Europe known variously as "reductionism," "lower case music," or "the new silence." This music was a frequent topic of conversation amongst the improvisers in my study, as it was generally viewed as a competing form that impinges upon the resources available to them. Although the rhetoric of free improvisation revolves around ideas of inclusion and communitarianism, the emergence of a new group of musicians with a different set of aesthetics than the improvisers reveals certain boundaries, assumptions, and conventions that had been previously obscured by ideas such as free or "non-idiomatic improvisation" (see Bailey 1991). Bourdieu's concept of fields allows for an analysis of the constant negotiations between the established and the new, and in my conversations with London

improvisers it was revealed that the London improv scene is divided along lines that reflect generational distinctions about what it means to improvise.

The practices of the improvisers I interviewed are mediated by the limited economic resources available for them to produce musical culture, as improvised music fares poorly in the free market. In London this struggle was particularly obvious, as the cost of living is extremely high and there is very little government-sponsored support for artists. According to the musicians I spoke with, the government arts funding system that is in place in England doesn't adequately address their needs, as it prioritizes more institutionalized high art forms. Many of my interview subjects wishfully contrasted their situation with that of their colleagues in continental Europe, who they positioned as having better access to government subsidies and state-sponsored performance venues. The London-based improvisers thus considered themselves to be on their own, doing whatever they had to in order to make their music in the free market economy. The economic realities I observed first hand in the London improvised music field, in conjunction with the stories recounted to me by my interview participants, will provide the basic framework for interpreting the social context within which the musical practices I am concerned with take place. The particular economics of the London scene will be covered in more detail in Chapter Five.

This investigation of Pierre Bourdieu's terminology is intended to provide a conceptual framework for describing the dynamic relationships between subjects, practices, and institutional structures that mediate the practice of London improv. The musicians in my study have all found different ways of dealing with the political and

economic realities of life in a market-based society, and their life decisions have generated a history of practices and objects that persist despite the lack of economic reward for their efforts. To conclude, the relevance of Bourdieu's ideas to the study of free improvisation stems from how his framing of art as an object of struggle over the art of living is mirrored in performances of improvised music; improvisers on stage are in constant negotiation with the other musicians, the audience, and the sonic materials that signify free improvisation to other participants in the field. As modernist ideas around pushing against musical boundaries and questioning cultural orthodoxy are central to the discursive framework of London improv, the improvised music field, like other avant-garde/experimental art forms, is a site of continuous struggle. Yet free improvisation is grounded in certain conventions, structures, and historical contexts that allow it to manifest to, and be understood by, particular audiences. Bourdieu's concepts provide an analytical framework for addressing the relationship between the ideologies and aesthetic ideals expressed by improvisers in describing their musical practices, and the social structures that determine how music is produced in contemporary society.

Chapter Two – Chin Music: Talking and Playing with Improvisers

My research process in the London improvised music field was guided by my intention, following a suggestion by Ajay Heble, to develop an analysis of London improv that balances "the teachings of critical theory" with the "insider perspectives" gained from interviewing improvisers in the field (2000, 91). In order to conduct a practice-based discursive analysis of London improv I needed to find ways of knitting together the "conventions of participant-observation" derived from the social sciences, the abstract readings of music from critical theorists, the "artistic explanations" I acquired from the improvisers, and ideas generated through my experience as an improviser (Rae 2003, 5). The basic theoretical framework described in the previous chapter provided the foundation for how I interpreted my ethnographic research; this chapter will describe how, where, and from whom I gathered the "insider perspectives" that form the core of my analysis. I have only recently taken up the position of writer/researcher, so I will begin this section with a description of my position in the research process, and move from there into an investigation of the general politics of ethnography. Following this, I will describe the places, people, and practices that constitute the ethnographic data that provides the content for the theoretical constructs I have developed thus far.

The experience of conducting this study and assembling my data into a narrative structure forced me to consider various aspects of my own identity—both internally, as in how I think about myself, and externally, as in how the participants in my study read me. Erving Goffman developed the notion of the "frame" to describe the flexibility and situational specificity of identity, and proposed the term as a way of thinking about the

interpretive schemes we devise to make sense of our daily experiences (Monson 1996, 17). Goffman suggests that a specific frame "allows its user to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its terms" (Goffman 1986, 21). Particular frames allow us to position the people we interact with, and the situations we find ourselves in, within a network of associations and expectations. I will use the term to refer to specific identity formations I might take on and project (consciously or unconsciously) as a researcher, and those that my research participants might read onto me. The two most relevant frames in my research are those of musician/practitioner and writer/researcher. The conflicts, intersections, and connections between these two frames mediated how I conducted my research and the narrative form my work has ultimately taken.

Perhaps the most determining influence on my research practice is my position as an active participant in the Toronto improvised music field. My thinking about improvisation and the way I spoke to other improvisers was fundamentally informed by how I have spent much more time playing the bass than reading critical theory. This influenced my research in obvious ways, such as the disproportionate number of bass players I interviewed, and in more subtle ways that will likely reveal themselves over the course of this writing. The disconnect between my experience as an improviser and the expectations of the discipline within which I am working became obvious upon my arrival in London, as I had to shift my presentation of self from that of a musician, a frame I am very familiar with, to a researcher, which was new territory for me. The unforeseen difficulty in making this transition was that I had to work to maintain the

frame of the researcher while doing many of the same things that I do in my life as a musician. Specifically, I was going out to hear live music, meeting and talking with musicians about what they do, and making music with some of them. My time in London therefore involved a constant negotiation between the two positions of improviser and researcher, as I struggled to stay focused on the intentions behind the interactions I was orchestrating, and my plans for what to do with these experiences afterwards. In other words, I was not trying to build personal networks in order to join these improvisers in the field (as I would do if I were planning on moving to London to pursue a career as a musician), but to produce a scholarly document that describes their lives and music. But this is perhaps too simple a reduction, as the thoughts and ideas my interview subjects shared with me have informed my music making practice, and there is no doubt that my approach to improvisation and working in the improvised music field has been substantially changed by the experience of conducting this fieldwork. Despite my intention to present myself as a researcher in the London improvised music field, it was not possible, or necessarily desirable, to fully bracket off my identity as a musician by assuming the scholar frame. In reflecting on my fieldwork experience it is clear that the two positions of improviser and researcher became less distinct as the project went on; the process of transplanting myself to a new locale, adopting an unfamiliar position, and applying theoretical constructs to the ethnographic data I collected had the unexpected effect of demonstrating how the teachings of critical theory might be productively applied to my own day-to-day practice as an improviser.

This tension between contrasting roles and identities can be interpreted as a transformed version of the larger conflict between theory and practice that has mediated recent studies of music. My experience of these tensions while working in the field is far from unique in the history of ethnomusicology, but issues around documenting and theorizing about creative practice are becoming increasingly salient as more artists enter the academic field. Nicholas Cook called attention to divisions in the discipline of musicology when he suggests that what is needed in the discipline is "... a performative approach to performance" which stresses the "inseparability of intellectual and bodily knowledge... [and] the ways in which one informs the other" (Cook and Everist 1999, 248). In recognition of this need to work productively with the binary of theory and practice, Phillip Clarke proposes the term "practitioner-theorist" as a frame for understanding the liminal position occupied by artistic practitioners working in the academic field. This term highlights the productive tension between subjectivity and objectivity (or practice and theory) demanded by the practical and the academic fields, respectively. Clarke's summation of the issues faced by artistic practitioners in the academic field is worth quoting at length:

> The practitioner-theorist's role oscillates regularly between an internal, somatic experience and an external perspective, between the ground and a place at the top of the theoretical tower. At the same time, the practitioner-theorist remembers the appropriate practical knowledges, embodied in the time and space of performance. They are unable to disentangle themselves from the practitioners' intertwining behaviours in order to place themselves at a distance from which to speculate. (2004, 15)

In this quote Clarke underscores the inseparability of the researcher's ground-level experience from the objectivity that is conventionally expected of scholarly analysis.

The position of practitioner-theorist is clearly not a new position, for artists have always written and talked about their practices. Relevant examples of writings from Western music history include: pedagogical guides such as *On Playing The Flute* by Johann Joachim Quantz (first published in 1752), *Structural Functions of Harmony* by Arnold Schoenberg (1969), and *New Musical Resources* by Henry Cowell (1996); historical studies such as *The Swing Era* by composer and conductor Gunther Schuller (1989) and *Hungarian Folk Music* by Béla Bartók (1979); and philosophical works such as *Silence* by John Cage (1961) and *Tri-Axium Writings* by Anthony Braxton (1985). These examples are obviously in addition to the many practitioner-theorists I have referenced so far in this dissertation, such as Derek Bailey, Eddie Prévost, George Lewis, Ajay Heble, Ingrid Monson, David Borgo, and Georgina Born. So I am not proposing practitioner-theorist as a new position, or that my adoption the frame privileges my analysis, but suggest that it is useful in how it reveals a particular trend towards separating practice and theory within the institutional framework of the academy. University music education in particular is compartmentalized in ways that separate pedagogy into performance, theory, history, and composition units for example, and the demands of teaching and research can limit the amount of time available for participating in the music field as a practitioner, even for those who make it a priority to do so. In using this term I wish to highlight the growing migration of practitioners into higher levels of education, a trend that is obvious in my home field of Toronto, where many of my colleagues in the improvised music field have begun to pursue graduate degrees. This situation will lead to an increase in writings from scholars, such as myself, who identify

primarily as practitioners, for they/we have invested considerable time learning the skills and techniques to work in the music field before taking up the position of writer. The frame of practitioner-theorist is thus useful for positioning the work of subjects trained in the informal and community-based system of the improvised music field within the context of the more regulated academic field.

The challenge in my particular research project has been in finding productive ways to put my experiential knowledge as an improviser in dialogue with the external interpretation and description of the musical practices of other improvisers, towards the goal of developing a nuanced description of the improvised music field. For the production of this written documentation of my experience in the London improvised music field I have attempted to "reconcile the typological differences between writerly praxis and performance practice," by recognizing that my written work is undertaken from "the position of an agent who produces both practice and theory …" (Clarke 2004, 14). In other words, I have tried, through writing, to find connections between the experiences related to the positions of improviser and researcher. These points of intersection, whether experienced as friction or concurrence, can provide insight into the workings of the improvised music field. Practitioner-theorist is thus a useful identity framing for conceptualizing my research methods in the field, and its implications have remained with me through the process of organizing my research into a narrative form. Although the practitioner-theorist frame is central to my research methodology, it is largely an internal formation, as in the field I presented myself primarily as a student and writer. When introducing myself to the improvisers in my study I always said that I was a

musician myself, but my interactions with most of them did not involve instruments, and I made it clear to them that I would be recording the thoughts they shared with me for the purpose of interpreting them in a lengthy research document. So although I am primarily known in my home scene as a practitioner, in the field it is most likely that the improvisers I met in London situated me within the researcher frame. The dynamic nature of my project means that I emphasized different facets of the practitioner-theorist frame at different points in the process of conducting and documenting my research.

I – Finding The Field

The three main research activities I undertook in London were recorded interviews, participant observation at performances, and direct musical interaction at workshops and rehearsals. Of these, the ethnographic interview is the most obvious source of the material in this document, as the ways in which the improvisers I spoke with described their practices generated the particular interpretations I made about the discursive framework of free improvisation. I undertook the process of interviewing musicians with an awareness of the problems of ethnography, yet it seemed to me to the most effective way to learn more about the improvised music field. This feeling arose from a combination of a sense that I needed to make space for my own experience as a musician, a desire to address the fact that most writing about improvisation privileges either theoretical or ethnographic interpretations of the activity, and an awareness of the conventions of the discipline of ethnomusicology. These thoughts developed in conjunction with a general awareness that the kind of music I am interested in is under-

documented. My interest in researching the musical aesthetic that motivates improvisers in the London scene stems from its incompatibility with the many analytical models that have been developed for describing improvisation in jazz. As London improv has even less relevance to the tonal, rhythmic, and timbral conventions of Western art and popular music than jazz, and as many of the musicians are motivated by an ideological opposition to these conventions, the ethnographic interview became a necessary tool for uncovering and analyzing the discursive framework around which the improvised music field is built.

This research project began by arranging for an extended period of fieldwork in London, making a list of the improvisers in London and Europe who I wanted to interview, and refocusing my priorities onto my recording device as my primary instrument. I did take an electric bass to London, which I used primarily at Eddie Prévost's workshop rather than in public performance, so my instrument played a much more limited role in my research than it does in my life in my home scene. As I stated in the introduction, my initial intention was to learn more about the sonic materials of London improv, in hopes of developing a model for describing how musicians generate their performances. But as I spent time talking with musicians in London I became more interested in the overall ideological, structural, aesthetic and discursive framework of free improvisation, and in how these factors mediate the ways musicians use improvisation to construct their individual identities and social lives.

I can trace this shift in my research priorities to a conversation with percussionist and author Eddie Prévost, who I came to know through attending his weekly improvisation workshop in London. Prévost has devoted himself almost exclusively to

improvised performance for more than forty years, and has very strong views on the social and political importance of improvisation. In his extensive writings he frequently refers to the "meaning" of improvisation. When I asked him to clarify what he meant by this he said:

> What I mean by 'meaning' is what it takes to make this music, what informs it, and all the assumptions that are made about the relationships of musicians to materials, other people, and culture in general. That's what the music means. It comes back to the politics.

This description of the meaning of improvisation connects to Bourdieu's ideas about art and culture being determined by social relations, and suggests that the materials of the music are regulated in a very self-conscious way by the value sets and assumptions that motivate the musicians to make the kind of music they do. In terms of the materials of his practice, Prévost seldom references specific sonic domains or performance traditions, instead characterizing his practice as "searching for sounds, and for the responses that attach to them, rather than thinking them up, preparing them, and producing them." At the workshop he never spoke about what to play, only about the kinds of relationships between participants and materials that he felt were worth pursuing, and those he felt needed questioning. His example suggested to me that it would be productive to explore the value systems, external structures, and social relations that mediate the production of London improv. Jacques Attali made a similar claim about the importance of establishing a social context for interpreting sonic materials:

> Although the value of a sound, like that of a phoneme, is determined by its relations with other sounds, it is more than that, a relation embedded in a specific culture; the 'meaning' of the musical message is expressed in a global fashion, in its operationality, and not in the juxtaposed signification of each sound element. (1985, 25)

By following the lead of Prévost and Attali into an investigation of the meaning of improvised music, my questions became about how musicians operationalize the concept of improvisation: What does it accomplish for those who use it? What kinds of structures does it generate and support? How does it function within society at large, and who gets to claim it as a practice and identity? This kind of analysis is especially germane given that the sonic materials of London improv, although they have formed into their own conventions and orthodoxies, are irreducible to Western notation or its related analytical models.

A description of London improv requires a different approach than a formalist analysis in order to communicate anything of meaning about the music and musicians. Yet the sonic materials are clearly part of this meaning, as their difference from the sounds of popular music positions London improv at the margins of the cultural field of cultural production. There is a material history to these sounds that needs to be mapped out in order to resist essentialist ideas about free improvisation as unimpeded personal expression, as representing radical politics, and as a perpetual avant-garde. But the meaning of the music cannot be reduced entirely to these sounds, as they are nested within a complex web of assumptions, relationships, and institutional structures. Georgina Born (1995) writes in her text *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-garde*:

> The core of music as culture is organized and meaningful sound. Its character can best be grasped by contrast with other media and their forms of signification. Musical sound is alogogenic, unrelated to language, non-artefact, having no physical existence, and non-representational. It is self-referential, aural abstraction. This bare core must be the start of any socio-cultural understanding of

> music, since only then can one build up an analysis of its social and cultural mediation. (1995, 19)

The idea of "meaningful sound" again connects to Bourdieu's formulations around the systems of power that regulate how we develop the cultural competencies that allow us to interpret and produce certain art works. Born references Bourdieu throughout *Rationalizing Culture*, as she works to situate the aesthetic ideals of modernism within a wider framework of social practice and economic structures. Free improvisation, with its variable sonic materials and persistent association with freedom, radical politics, and musical innovation, demands the kind of socio-cultural analysis suggested by Georgina Born. Although it attends to the vastly different circumstance of a state funded institution in France, her book offers many suggestions for ways of analyzing the improvised music field, especially as the practices I pursued in London share with the music generated at IRCAM (Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique) an over-determination by a modernist ethos.

The following chapters will employ the narrative model presented in Born's text, which combines ethnographic research with various theoretical constructs to generate an analysis of the social context of London improv. The improvised music field is maintained and continually reproduced in the ways that improvisers retain a specific set of social values, musical practices, and aesthetic ideals. In other words, the music is dependent on a discursive framework for its continued existence as a meaningful cultural form. Peter Martin suggests that ethnography is the best way to get at the discursive framework of a musical formation:

> [The] 'meanings' of music must be understood as embedded in more general configurations of social activity, [so] methodologically… ethnographic research, rather than the production of decontextualized 'readings' is more likely to elucidate these meanings. (2006, 8)

This basic idea, in conjunction with the model offered by Georgina Born, led me to the ethnographic project I undertook, which involved interviewing twenty people to elucidate details about the improvised music field. This collection of people breaks down as follows: fifteen London-based musicians, two Amsterdam-based musicians, one American musician living in France, one London-based record label owner, one improvised music fan who records several concerts a week on his own recording machine, and one critic and author.[13]

Although it remains the most common research methodology in anthropological and sociological studies, ethnography is often criticised as being a problematic method of research. As my study relies heavily on ethnographic data collected in the London improvised music field, it is necessary to address the concerns about ethnography raised in post-colonial studies, cultural studies, gender studies, and other related disciplines. Although I don't wish to imply in my work that ethnography is the only way to elucidate the meaning of a musical form for those who engage with it, I do think that it is a useful way of exploring how musicians operationalize the concept of free improvisation. My hope is that when the voices of my interview subjects are put in conversation with theoretical concepts, the resulting story will tell us something that neither method alone could. The value or problems with this ethnographic research will be determined by how it is contextualized, and with how my actions as a researcher influence the lives of my

[13] See Sound References for examples of relevant recordings from each of the improvisers I interviewed.

interview subjects. So the challenge of the research model I am presenting here is to treat the words of the participants as equitably as possible, while at the same time analysing them with the lens of critical theory to see what kinds of power dynamics and discursive structures motivate their musical practices.

To contextualize my research process I will address in turn the key points raised by Deborah Wong in comments she made about the general politics of ethnography in ethnomusicological studies:

> The problems with ethnography aren't new and haven't changed: they include the false binary of the insider/outsider, colonial baggage, and the empiricism still lurking behind a solidly humanistic anthropology and ethnomusicology... Ethnomusicologists still need (1) to make sure that we are consistently engaged in the practice of critical ethnography and (2) to focus explicitly on creating performative ethnographies while acknowledging the place of auto-ethnography in our methodologies. (2008, 77)

I already alluded already to the insider/outsider binary in the opening of this chapter with my description of the basic similarities between Toronto and London, and in my description of how I identify primarily as a practitioner rather than a theorist. This identity claim implies that I shared more similarities than differences with the improvisers in my study, as I have spent more time playing music, pursuing performance opportunities, and trying to make a living as a musician than I have as a researcher. Although I do share many experiences and cultural reference points with the improvisers I spoke with, I was presenting myself to them as a writer, with a different agenda for our conversations than they might have had, and a different set of resources behind me. On reflection, it became clear that during the research process I moved in and out of the insider/outsider role at various times, emphasizing one or the other depending on the

circumstance. The simple fact that I was visiting London for a fixed amount of time positioned me as a cultural outsider, but outside of this basic reality there was flexibility and vagary within the binary. As an observer of the London scene, rather than a struggling musician, I was separated from the improvisers in a way that I am not in my home field. I cultivated this "scholarly distantiation" at times to aid in developing a critical understanding of the improvised music field (Rice 1997, 116). At other times I highlighted my insiders status, as I found that emphasizing my connection to the experiences of the other improvisers helped to establish a frame of reference that enlivened our discussions. As an example, when talking to musicians I found it helpful to assure them that I was a fellow traveller in a way, a bass player who was interested in making music in the same ways that they were. This seemed to help set a casual tone for our discussions, as we were each experienced in talking to other musicians about music. Yet I also had my recorder on, and we both knew I would be taking this conversation home with me to analyze, interpret, and edit. So it was never really just a friendly chat between musicians, but I hope that I was not being deceitful either, as I am also an improviser who experiences the same struggles. The insider/outsider frame proved to be more of a continuum than a binary, as I could shift the frame to push things in a certain direction. However, there was no way that I could control the identity frames applied to me by my participants, so they surely read me in ways that made sense to them. The boundaries between insider and outsider were thus fluid and dynamic, as the participants and I worked with the sets of expectations inherent in both sides of the insider/outsider (or practitioner/theorist) binary to frame, interpret, and guide our interactions.

Ethnography has taken substantial criticism from many academic disciplines (most notably post-colonial studies) over the inequalities inherent in the relationship between researchers and those who live in the marginalized communities that are being studied. The basic structural inequalities that need to be taken into account when a researcher from Toronto moves to a small village on Baffin Island, for example, were not as acute in my study, as I left Toronto to study the music being made in one of the world's largest and most diverse cities. Yet this is too simple a reduction, as there are obvious inequalities in my research that I have tried to address as fairly as possible. The basic inequality in my fieldwork process stems from my coming to London with a research grant to study a community of struggling artists. My intention in recording their words was to generate a document that would be shared with the academic community. Taking this analysis further, I would be transforming their knowledge/symbolic capital into my own symbolic capital (a PhD), which might then be used to generate economic capital for myself, should I get a job based on this work. Most of these artists accepted me graciously, yet the subtext of our meetings was clear. Some musicians I'm sure read me as a journalist, an experience that Ingrid Monson mentions in her book *Saying Something* (1996, 17-18). The journalist frame allowed for the possibility that my work could result in some publicity for the improvisers in my study, which might then translate into paying work. One of the musicians I spoke with said quite bluntly that he viewed our conversation as an advertisement for the music in general, and for himself in particular. I appreciated his honesty in this. At the moment of this writing there is little I can do to address these inequalities, other than remaining aware of this power imbalance in my

writing, and presenting the thoughts of my interview subjects as honestly as possible. But the process of conducting this research has made me aware of the need to give back to these musicians in particular, and the improvised music field in general, in more concrete ways should I be in a position to do so in the future. This might include, for example, something as simple as using my research to generate favourable publicity for my participants, or the slightly more complex task of arranging playing opportunities for them. It is my intention to stretch this research project beyond its official completion, as I have taken it as a responsibility to those who lent me their voices to be watchful for ways that I can contribute productively to the improvised music field.

Another problem with my ethnographic research is the positioning of the improvisers in my study as the voices of authority, the sources of the 'real' information about London improv because they are working on the ground level of the field. I have gathered together voices from different corners of the London improvised music field, and their descriptions of their practices reflect the diversity of free improvisation, yet the formal structure in which I place their words risks fetishizing the voices of those who get to speak through this document. The thoughts of the musicians must be read not as ultimately authoritative, but as part of a matrix of descriptive strategies defined effectively by performance theorist Paul Rae:

> On one side, there are the social scientists, teasingly dangling their conventions of participant-observation just out of my conceptual reach. On the other, the artists with their artistic explanations, which in this context are no explanations at all, but rather strategic evasions. These tend to mystify the creative process. (2003)

What Rae somewhat negatively calls "strategic evasions" are, I argue, merely representative of an alternative descriptive strategy to the ones conventionally acceptable

in academic research. Critical theory, which involves analyzing the historical and social context of art, offers a potential method for translating these artistic explanations so that they can shed some light on the discursive framework of free improvisation as it is practiced in London. The ethnographic information is thus not intended to represent the truth of the matter, but one interpretation based on the lived experience of the improvisers in my study. Neither is the detached position of the theorist able to elucidate the full meaning of the music. My intention throughout this dissertation is to strike a balance between theory and practice, to bring musicians' voices into current theoretical debates about improvisation, and to bring theory to the interpretation of improvisers' descriptions of their practice. Ultimately I want to have a variety of tools in play for analyzing the London improvised music field. This dissertation is intentionally structured as a dialog between the ethnographic data and critical theory, extending the metaphor of conversation that is often applied to descriptions of improvised musical performances. Each of these analytical frames is intended to inform the other, as Bourdieu's theoretical model in particular "derives its dynamic through a dialectical relationship with data gathered in specific research enterprises" (Bourdieu et al. 1990, ix). With this dialogic structure I hope to avoid privileging or doing an injustice to any of the voices in my text, while at the same time recognizing that I have edited and selected the comments that appear in this work so that they support my larger arguments. Thus how improvisers' words are framed and interpreted is the responsibility of the author, and I have attempted to be both respectful and critical in my efforts to gain some insight into the London improvised music field.

The problem of authority is further compounded by my reliance on some voices at the expense of others; there will always be voices left out that should have been in a document that makes the kind of claims I am putting forth. I chose to talk to the improvisers I did based on my interest in their musical practices, but I do not wish to position them as members of a unified mass of people, with the same aesthetic interests, goals, and political convictions. Bourdieu warns against imagining artistic fields as unified communities of interest, as the avant-garde arts in particular bring people from different racial, class, and religious backgrounds together under a common purpose. He suggests that these groups are fragile, as a shift in the economic fortunes of some members can upset the balance of the field:

> [Whereas] the occupants of the dominant positions, especially in economic terms, such as bourgeois theatre, are strongly homogeneous, the avant-garde positions, which are defined mainly negatively, by their opposition to the dominant positions, bring together for a certain time writers and artists from very different origins, whose interests will sooner or later diverge. These dominated groups, whose unity is essentially oppositional, tend to fly apart when they achieve recognition, the symbolic profits of which often go to a small number, or even to only one of them, and then the external cohesive forces weaken. (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993, 66)

My ethnographic research was situated within a general socio-economic context of wealth and privilege, yet the improvisers themselves pursue their artistic practice with very little economic support. With this socio-economic context in mind, the shared interest in improvisation as an aesthetic priority—which manifests as "effects" within the cultural field—allows me to connect people from diverse circumstances in the conceptual space of the improvised music field (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993, 42). Bourdieu's concepts of fields in general, and the idea of an improvised music field specifically, allow

for thinking of the participants as part of a larger network of social life; improvised music is certainly an important part of the lives of the musicians in my study, but they are not defined exclusively through their interest in this music. The thoughts of the subjects represented in my study thus need to be read as individual components of the multifaceted musical domain of London improv. By focusing my analysis on the musical practices of particular individuals from the London improvised music field, I hope to demonstrate the diversity contained within the unifying frame of "improviser."

The study of musical culture, in the discipline of ethnomusicology at least, has traditionally entailed immersing oneself in the practices of a different culture, which includes learning to play the music and instruments of the culture in question. John Baily stressed the importance of learning to perform in ethnomusicological research:

> The importance of [learning to perform] as a research technique, for direct investigation of the music itself, must be emphasized. One understands the music from the 'inside', so to speak. This means that the structure of the music comes to be apprehended operationally, in terms of what you do, and, by implication, of what you have to know. (2001, 95)

Learning to perform is a standard component of research projects in my discipline, which means that there are many models for the research I conducted while living in London. Paul Berliner's (1994) *Thinking in Jazz* and Ingrid Monson's (1996) *Saying Something* are two relevant models, as they are studies of the practice of improvisation. Both of these narratives involve the researcher moving into a community (New York, in both cases) to study a relatively unfamiliar instrument as a means of exploring the larger cultural context and social implications of jazz music. For his study of the harmonic, melodic, and social structures of small group jazz improvisation Berliner returned to the

trumpet, which he played before focusing primarily on the mbira in his academic research and performing. Monson, who is a jazz trumpet player by training, took up the drums for her investigation into the workings of the jazz rhythm section. In my research I did not set out to learn a new instrument or musical form. I did move to a different location in order to immerse myself in the field, but I took my regular instrument (or at least the portable version of my regular instrument), as the specific musical practices I wanted to investigate involved the notion of exploring the sonic potential of one's instrument as deeply as possible, rather than learning specific instrumental roles and melodic/harmonic/rhythmic conventions. So the particular instrument I brought to the London improvised music field was not as important as internalizing the general experimental approach that the improvisers I spoke with bring to their instruments. My intentions with bringing my bass to London were similar to Berliner and Monson's—to get to know the music better and to facilitate entry into the improvised music field—but the musical practices I went to study did not require learning to perform on an alternate instrument. While in London my instrument did not play a major part in my research; I did play in Eddie Prévost's workshop, but I didn't go to other sessions, pursue performance opportunities, or take regular lessons with experienced improvising musicians I got to know. That said, my performance practice on the bass was profoundly changed by the music I heard while in London, and I came home with new sounds in my ears and a desire to find out how to make them on the double bass myself.

II – Voicing The Discord

With the above theoretical concepts in place, I will now describe the details of my fieldwork in London. As I stated in the introduction to this chapter, my research process was largely improvisatory, based on following practices and sounds as I encountered them in the field. I left home with a few particular musicians in mind who I wanted to speak with, and knowledge of one or two venues where I might go to hear the music. Once I arrived in London this list expanded as I became familiar with other players, venues, and paths of inquiry I might follow. So I can characterize my process as a circle that expanded outwards from the well-known musicians and venues to take in parts of the improvised music field that I had not known about before immersing myself in the London scene. I made contact with the participants in my study in two ways: introducing myself to them at performances (or workshops) and over email. Performance venues were the most common spaces where I met improvisers. After the initial connection I exchanged contact information with willing participants and we set up times to meet. The improvisers I spoke with who don't live in London I emailed first, and then arranged to travel to meet them. All of the interviews were conducted in person, either at improvisers' homes, at venues before or after performances, or at their local pub. The majority of socializing in England takes place in neighbourhood pubs, so pubs were a natural setting for the formal conversations I arranged with improvisers. The following section will describe the paths I followed and the places I went to hear the music, meet the musicians, and collect the ethnographic data that is the foundation of my analysis.

I began my fieldwork in London with an idea about what I was looking for and how I wanted to uncover it, but the reality of the place shaped my process in ways I did not anticipate. Specifically, the London improvised music field is more diverse and segmented than I thought it was before I went there, as the fault lines from the formative years of the field in the 1960s still exert an influence on the social relationships between those who claim the identity of improviser. Like any art scene in a large urban centre, local politics mediate the enactment of particular artistic practices, leaving us with smaller scenes that co-exist within the overarching artistic fields. The boundaries around small scenes within the London improvised music field are fluid, and have become less obvious amongst succeeding generations of improvisers, but as I said in my introduction, the improvisers I spoke with still refer to the distinctions between SME and AMM as a way to situate themselves and others within the improvised music field. I have thus divided my interview subjects into three loosely defined groups, for the purposes of describing their positions in the London improvised music field. It is perhaps more useful to conceive of these groupings as orbit patterns— the participants in my study generally revolve around particular aesthetics ideals, venues, and leading figures, yet they intersect at different times in the complex ecology of the improvised music field. The first two groups in my study are distinguished by their connections to SME and AMM, respectively; the third group is connected simply by the fact that they do not live in London, and thus have a different relationship to the London improvised music field than the first two groups. This group includes the musicians I interviewed in Oxford, France, the Netherlands, and the United States.

As I explained in my introduction, SME and AMM were crucially important ensembles in the formative stages of the improvised music field in London, and they remain the touchstones by which improvisers in London define themselves and their practices. By dividing my interview participants in relation to these two ensembles I am not intending to enforce or reproduce what are at best arbitrary aesthetic boundaries, but to provide a simple system for organizing my research that reflects the social context within which I met the improvisers I spoke with. The divisions in the London scene revealed themselves to me in the process investigating the well-known improvisers, who were mostly members of the 1960s generation, and working my way through to the local players. Specifically, tracing the paths of former SME members Kenny Wheeler and Evan Parker led me to a particular set of players and places; tracing the orbit of AMM co-founder Eddie Prévost led me to other corners of the scene. These three musicians are part of the formative generation of improvising musicians in London, and they are still active participants in the field. Their work is well documented on recordings, which is how I came to be aware of them in Canada, and why they were the starting points for my research. SME and AMM provide a conceptual foundation for constructing a map of who played where and with whom on the London scene. There is, and was, considerable cross-pollination going on in the London improvised music field, but the frequency with which improvisers on the scene spoke to me about their relationships to SME and AMM suggests that there is still some meaning in the distinctions participants in the field make between these two formative ensembles.

I'll begin with describing the participants and places in my study that I came to think of as part of the SME orbit. The SME was the blanket name for projects instigated by percussionist John Stevens, who died in 1994. Stevens emerged in the 1960s as a kind of free improvisation activist, pursuing performance and recording opportunities for himself and other improvisers. Obviously I was not able to speak with him, yet his importance to the London scene is clear from how frequently his name was mentioned by other improvisers. His voice lurks silently in the background of this project, as he was an important motivating force in the early days of the improvised music field in London. At different stages in its twenty-five year history the SME had a more or less permanent membership, but in the mid-late 1960s performances were mostly ad hoc, with the ensemble forces determined by whoever happened to show up for the particular performance or recording. The main venue for the musical explorations of the SME was the Little Theatre Club in London, where Stevens began organizing performances in 1966. The use of club spaces in the day-to-day practice of free improvisation continues to determine the musicians and practices that I position within the SME orbit; the AMM orbit, by contrast is characterized by the use of alternative spaces for presenting the music, such as art galleries, churches, and universities. This is a generalization of course, as improvisers associated with either orbit play in a variety of spaces, but in my experience of the London field, improvisers' ideas about the suitability of particular spaces for the performance of their music determined their practices in significant ways.

At the time I lived in London the SME branch of the field centred around two club spaces that operated on different models: the Red Rose and the Vortex. I first heard

and met many of the musicians in my study at these two places. The Red Rose is a pub in London's Finsbury Park neighbourhood that rented out its back room on a nightly basis at an affordable rate for improvising musicians. It was an important venue for improvised music performances for over twenty years, but it stopped hosting music in early 2008 when the management converted the back room into a snooker hall. From what I've heard the improvisers have moved into other spaces, but I've not been back to see how the closure of this long-standing venue has affected the scene. The Vortex, in contrast, is a dedicated music venue, with a wide range of programming that fits loosely under the label of jazz. Operating in a fashion closer to that of a conventional commercial venue, the Vortex books and promotes performances, and features music seven nights a week. Yet even this space is not entirely self-sufficient, as it is financed through a combination of revenue from performances (tickets and alcohol sales) and donations from audience members. The Vortex had only recently moved into a new building when I arrived in London, having been housed in a variety of locations in the Hackney neighbourhood for over twenty years previous. It has more of a formal jazz club feel than the back room of the Red Rose, and features less ad hoc and informal music making than the many other performances I attended in other spaces.

I knew about the Red Rose and the Vortex before arriving in London, so these were the venues I first went to in order to hear the music and introduce myself to the improvisers, beginning with Kenny Wheeler and Evan Parker. My initial motivation to move to London was based on a desire to explore Canadian trumpet player and composer Kenny Wheeler's contribution to the improvised music field there. As I have said, this

interest expanded outwards as my fieldwork progressed, but as a past member of the SME Wheeler is central to the development of the London improvised music field, and I conducted three extensive interviews with him over the course of my stay. Following my first night out to hear and meet Kenny Wheeler, I went to the Vortex to hear Evan Parker, another former SME member and one of the most well-known of the early generation of London improvisers. On this occasion I heard Parker playing with bassist John Edwards, who I had not heard of before. It quickly became clear that Edwards was the busiest bassist on the improvised music scene—he seemed to play almost every night with a wide range of improvisers from different corners of the field. I enjoyed his playing very much, and made it a point to hear him as often as I could. By virtue of his instrument, Edwards was a regular member of many different ensembles, so through following him I got to hear and meet many other musicians who I eventually interviewed, including drummer Steve Noble and pianist/analog-electronics improviser Steve Beresford.

A final musician in my study from the SME orbit is pianist Howard Riley. I did not have a chance to see Riley perform, but I knew of his name from recordings released on Emanem records with English bassist and SME alumnus Barry Guy (who now lives in Switzerland and was not available for an interview). Riley teaches at Goldsmiths College, which was the school I attended while in London, so I was able to meet with him there. He had interesting insights about playing the piano in the London improv scene, a situation made difficult by the lack of functional pianos in venues. Riley's participation in SME, and in the improvised music field in general, was thus determined by the availability of an instrument on which to perform. Pianist Steve Beresford dealt with this

by adding other instruments to his performance practice, including small objects amplified through contact microphones and various portable analog electronic devices. This gives Beresford access to more venues and performance opportunities, and as a result I saw him perform many times. I missed getting to hear Howard Riley in person, as he performs in Europe more often than in England.

The remaining individuals in this group are not improvisers, but supporters of the musicians-creators who are my primary focus. By regularly attending performances of London improv I came to recognize and get to know other audience members who travelled in the same orbit. Of particular importance to my study is Martin Davidson, who I mentioned in the introduction. Davidson owns and operates an independent record label called Emanem, which he started in 1974 to document the improvised music being made in London. He attended many of the early SME performances at the Little Theatre Club in London in the mid-late 1960s, often with his reel-to-reel two-track tape machine on hand to record the proceedings. He has a significant recorded archive of the early days of the London improvised music field, and has been steadily releasing them on CD: see Spontaneous Music Ensemble's *Challenge, Frameworks*, and *Quintessence,* all recorded between 1966 and 1974. Davidson also co-operates a label with Evan Parker, psi records, which releases a combination of new and archival recordings. Another frequent audience member I encountered was Tim Fletcher. Fletcher is well known to the improvisers on the scene, as he attends three or four shows a week and records them all onto a portable digital recorder. As a result of this dedication to documentation, Fletcher has a staggering archive of the last 15 years of the London scene. Some of these recordings have been

formally released on Emanem and other labels. He recorded quite a few shows that I attended which I would like to hear again. The only other non-improviser in my study is London-based writer and critic Ben Watson, who wrote a substantial book on Derek Bailey that I read before moving there. I got in touch with him through e-mail, and he agreed to an interview. These three non-performing participants in the improvised music field have a substantial knowledge of the players, history, and aesthetic ideals that shape the London improvised music field. The positions they fill, as audience members, documenters, and generators of written discourse are central to the operation of the field. The comments I collected from these people are included to provide deeper context for the thoughts gathered from improvisers.

The second branch of the London improv stream I followed flowed from AMM. AMM is still active, and although different musicians have been involved at various points in their forty-five year history, they have for the most part maintained a more consistant membership than SME. AMM has ranged on recordings from a duo to a quintet, but the one constant member is percussionist Eddie Prévost. Their current configuration is a duo of Prévost and pianist John Tilbury. Prévost has documented the sonic history of AMM on his record label Matchless, and has written extensively about the politics and aesthetics of AMM's music in two books, many liner notes, and multiple articles. I was introduced to this orbit through Prévost's weekly improvisation workshop, which has become an important institution for the communication and extension of the musical and social principles that Prévost has been exploring since the inception of AMM. The workshop takes place every Friday night, and is open to anyone. It has moved

around a few times since Prévost first convened it in 1999; when I lived in London it was held in the basement of the Welsh Chapel in South London. I first met Prévost there, and got to know some of the other regular participants over the six months I regularly attended. There is a small and relatively self-contained corner of the London scene that is comprised primarily of regular workshop participants and alumni. Participants in this branch of the London scene tend to organize gigs for themselves in non-conventional (non-club) spaces, and there is little connection between this group of improvisers and those who play at the Red Rose and The Vortex. I rarely saw anyone from the workshop orbit, save Prévost himself, playing in either of these formal venues. The activities of this group of musicians are well documented on Eddie Prévost's label: see Chant-Lambert-Lexer-Milton/Coleman-Wastell-Wright/AMM: *That Mysterious Forest Beneath London Bridge* (2008), 9!: *none(-t)* (2003), and Yann Charaoui, John Lely, Seymour Wright: *396* (2000).

I met saxophonist Seymour Wright, whose comments figure prominently in my study, at Prévost's workshop. Wright has been attending the workshop since its inception, so he had much to say about this corner of the London improvised music field. Like many of the musicians in my study, Wright also organizes his own concerts and releases his own recordings. He put me in touch with trumpet player and writer Tom Perchard, a workshop alumnus who now focuses primarily on academic work rather than performing. Perchard had much to offer about the history of the London scene, particularly around the relationship between London improv and jazz. The final workshop alumnus who appears in this document is pianist Tania Chen, who studied with AMM pianist John Tilbury.

Chen attended many of the same concerts I did, and Steve Beresford formally introduced me to her at the Vortex one evening. Like many of the younger musicians in my study, Chen works in a variety of fields in addition to improvised music, including contemporary classical music and popular music. This flexible relationship to other fields is one of the main distinctions between the first generation of improvisers, who were more likely to restrict themselves to free improvisation, and subsequent generations, who have not maintained the ideological attachment to improvisation to quite the same degree.

The final musician in my study from this orbit is saxophonist Alan Wilkinson. At the time I was living in London Prévost was regularly working in duo and trio with Wilkinson; I introduced myself to him at one of their trio performances. Wilkinson inhabits several different corners of the scene, performing with other improvisers who are more closely aligned to either of the two orbits I've been describing than he is himself. In addition to this flexibility between scenes in London, Wilkinson developed his musical practices while living in Leeds, so he had interesting insights into the local politics of the London scene from the standpoint of someone who arrived in the city later in life.

The distinctions between the SME and AMM branches of the London scene are shifting all the time, through younger musicians crossing between them, and the influence of distinct scenes that have formed around contrasting aesthetics (reductionist music, for example, which I will describe in Chapter Six). Yet based on the comments of my participants, and the circumstances of my meeting them, it is clear that the historic social and aesthetic distinctions between the two groups continue to influence the field. In addition to the different venues and spaces where the various sub-scenes present their

music, the divisions in the field are maintained through the two record labels I mentioned above. Emanem and Matchless each document different groups of improvisers, in terms of new recordings and the release of archival recordings of SME and AMM, respectively. There are of course other labels and other scenes operating in London, but my research is focused on these two orbits because of their influence and historical importance to the London improvised music field.

The third group of participants in my study are not directly connected to either of these scenes, or even to London itself. Cellist Mark Wastell is a member of an entirely different scene in London that I will argue in later chapters defines itself against the two streams mentioned above. I met Wastell at Sound 323, a record shop specializing in improvised and experimental music recordings that he owns and operates. From 2000 to 2008 Wastell's shop was an important centre in the improvised music field, since in addition to a large selection of books, magazines, DVDs, and CDs it also had a performance space in the basement. Wastell has released recordings of performances from this space on his label Confront Recordings. Shortly after I left London the store closed its physical doors; as of this writing the online store is still functioning. Although Wastell is an active musician on the scene our discussion primarily revolved around his role as a storeowner, and he shared many insights into the business side of London improv.

The last group of English musicians in my study are based in Oxford. The three improvisers I spoke with—bassist Dominic Lash, pianist Alexander Hawkins, and guitarist David Stent—are members of a collective called The Oxford Improvisers,

formed in 2001. This group organizes performances in Oxford, and sponsors an informal playing session on Monday nights. Lash, Hawkins, and Stent are the youngest improvisers in my study, and are just beginning to establish themselves on the English scene. They travel to London often to play with the London-based improvisers, and I first heard them at the Red Rose. I travelled to Oxford to meet with them, and they treated me to a lively and wide-ranging group discussion. It was very clear that I had stepped into the middle of a debate that they had been having for some time.

The other three improvisers in my study do not live in England. This sub-group is divided into Dutch and American improvisers, and I included them in my study to provide historical and geographic context for my interpretation of the London improvised music field. Many of the English improvisers I spoke with defined their practices against those that have historically been associated with Dutch improvised music, and when speaking to Dutch improvisers they did the reverse. As an example, John Edwards's description of his practices from my introduction is worth repeating in the present context:

> The Dutch thing is 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 hear each other, then making this kind of music.

From the other side, Dutch violist Ig Henneman described a performance of English improvised music in the following way:

> It was all about only sounds and colours. Not one little pulse, not for half a second. It's really strict, what they could do. I think the English improvisers were much more concerned about the rules, which is the big difference with the Dutch scene—we are more open and flexible, and use whatever sounds we want to.

Based on these comments, and many others I recorded on a similar theme, it appears that the improvisers in my study view these two scenes as an oppositional binary. Therefore I felt it would be productive to speak with a few members of the Dutch scene in order to provide wider context for the predominantly English voices in my analysis. The history of the Dutch improvised music scene itself has been thoroughly documented by Kevin Whitehead (1998) in his book *New Dutch Swing*, so my intention was to ask improvisers to speak to the idea of free improvisation generally, and their feelings about the English approach to free improvisation specifically. Whitehead's text led me to speak with bassist Wilbert de Joode and violist Ig Henneman, as they have been part of many of the important improvising groups that originated in Amsterdam. Both made very astute comments that positioned their approach as a contrast to the practices and aesthetics that characterize the London scene.

The last participant in my study is American bassist Barre Phillips, whom I was interested in based on his association with Texas-born composer and reed player Jimmy Giuffre (1921-2008). Giuffre was significant a contributor to the ruptures in the jazz field in the early 1960s that led to the formation of the improvised music field as a distinct domain of musical practice. Phillips played with Giuffre and pianist Don Friedman for two years in the mid-1960s, but the trio never made a commercial recording. I visited Barre Phillips at his home in the South of France in June of 2007 to address the absence of documentation on this period of Giuffre's career, but as I researched Phillips's work more closely it became clear that he would be a bigger part of the story than I had originally anticipated. Phillips left the US for Europe in the late 1960s, and lived in

London for a short period before relocating permanently to France in the early 1970s. While living in London he played with Evan Parker, Derek Bailey, and other members of the first generation of improvisers, recorded the first album of solo bass improvisations (*Journal Violone,* 1968), and formed an influential group with English saxophonist John Surman called The Trio. My conversation with Phillips revealed that he is an important link between the experimental/avant-garde developments in American jazz and the establishment of a distinct European approach to improvisation, and provided some context for a larger discussion about the development of the improvised music field as a transformed, and marginalized, version of the jazz art world.

Keeping in mind the social context for the improvisers with whom I spoke, it is also important to position them in time, as they frequently mentioned the existence of different generations of musicians on the London scene. These distinctions are not precise, but their continued use by those interested in this music means that they are meaningful in the field. I have already referred to certain members of SME and AMM as representative of the first generation of London improvisers. In a more general sense, the first generation label is usually applied to those musicians who in the mid-late 1960s started framing their musical practices as distinct from the free jazz that was emanating from the US at the time. Many of the first generation of London improvisers started out playing jazz—including Eddie Prévost, John Stevens, and guitarist Derek Bailey—but made a conscious break with jazz performance practices, venues, and conventions in their desire to pursue other musical directions. The first generation continues to be defined by this forceful break with jazz and other commercial musics, as abandoning the structures

of the jazz art world meant that these musicians had to find new spaces to perform their music, build new infrastructures to document their work, and foster an audience to support their efforts. In other words, the first generation of improvisers helped to establish the improvised music field as a domain of practice that is distinct from other musical formations. Percussionist Steve Noble described this process, and how it affected younger musicians such as him:

> If you go back to the 1960s when the Dutch and the Germans and the Brits were all coming out playing jazz and trying to discover European improvised music, those guys knocked a wall down. They were in situations where no one had heard this music before, because in those days people didn't know what free music was. Now that's a challenge. But you have to remember that when people like Derek and [Tony] Oxley became improvisers and chose to cut off their commercial work, they were at the top of that commercial work. I've come along as a cymbal scrapper, a squeaky bonk player or whatever you want to say. So the younger musicians haven't had to make the same break. We're coming along in the wake of that generation; we've chosen to play a specialized avant-garde improvised music.

The break with jazz, which led to the formation of the improvised music field and the position of improviser, will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Three, but this introduction should make it clear that there are different things at stake for the improvisers in my study based on their positions in the field. The older musicians, most notably Derek Bailey and English percussionist Tony Oxley, decided to abandon their lives as financially successful jazz and commercial musicians to devote their time entirely to free improvisation, essentially sailing into uncharted waters. This process of building new identities involved rejecting the repertoire, performance conventions, and sound-world of jazz; the ripples created by this negative relationship to jazz continue to shape the discursive framework of London improv, even though the younger musicians in my

study seemed less conflicted about their relationship to jazz and popular music. In any case, the first generation of improvisers, many of whom are still active, provided models and infrastructure for those who have followed, as Steve Noble described in his comments above. The musicians in my study who are associated with the first generation of London improvisers are: Evan Parker, Kenny Wheeler, Eddie Prévost, Barre Phillips, Trevor Watts and Howard Riley. I was not able to interview Derek Bailey (he passed away in 2006) or Tony Oxley, but their work and ideas are well documented in Bailey's (1980) book and Ben Watson's (2004) book *Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation.* Their names came up frequently in my conversations with other improvisers, so their voices will inhabit this document, albeit transformed and translated by other participants in the improvised music field.

Subsequent generations of improvisers can be defined both chronologically and by their relationship to the structures and practices established by the first generation. As Noble says above, younger musicians have not had to make the same kind of dramatic break as the older ones did, and they have been able to step into a world where improvised music exists. Post-break generations of improvisers can be also characterized by a new set of acknowledged influences, including rock and other forms of popular musics. John Edwards, whom I have categorized as a second generation London improviser, spoke about the musical influences on himself and his colleagues:

> Where I am I have quite a strong feeling and relationship to the jazz thing. That's how I got into playing and what I listen to and all that. But there are lots of people today who are a few years younger than me and have got nothing to do with jazz. Almost every improviser I've spoken with has listened to all sorts of different things—traditional folk musics, contemporary classical things, jazz, improvised music, music from all over the world, and on it goes. If they're less than fifty

> years old they probably grew up listening to pop music and rock, soul, punk, reggae, whatever. If you talk to them as improvising musicians later in life, you'll find that they got turned on by all kinds of different things. This diversity is a common thread with all the improvised community.

Although the older musicians would surely have been aware of popular music, the discursive framework around free improvisation that has been passed down from the musicians who made the initial break with other forms is tied to a negation of the materials of popular music. The practices I investigated are determined in general by the conception that the resulting music exists outside of the constraints of genre, is free from reference to other musics, and that it functions differently than other musical formations. This problematic framework will be explored in more detail in Chapter Four, but it was clear in my discussions with musicians younger than Parker, Wheeler, and Prévost that there was less of a concern with defining themselves against a particular dominant structure; jazz being the main other for improvisers. But perhaps the simplest division between generations is that the second generation, and onwards, started out working in a world where improvised music existed, both as an aesthetic formation and in the pragmatic sense of there being performance venues, record labels, and an audience already in place. As Steve Noble says, the first generation "knocked a wall down," and "we're just walking on the rubble." So the younger generation is informed by its coming of age in a world where the improvised music field exists as a separate and staple domain of practice. This is not to say that it is easier for younger improvisers to get gigs, sell recordings, and make a living, but that there are more support structures in place than those that what was available to the first generation. As an example, it was difficult for the first generation of musicians to make and distribute recordings, but now there is a

network of labels, shops, and fans of the music. So the second generation of improvisers onwards are making music within a particular structural framework, and with an awareness of a growing recorded tradition of the music. The chronology of this group ranges from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, and is represented in my study by: John Edwards, Steve Noble, Steve Beresford, Alan Wilkinson, Wilbert de Joode, and Ig Henneman.

The final generation of improvisers represented in my study are those who started working in the field in the mid-1990s. This third group includes: Seymour Wright, Mark Wastell, Dominic Lash, Alexander Hawkins, Tom Perchard, and Tania Chen. These musicians are still in the process of establishing themselves, yet most defined themselves against the first and second generations. Aside from having access to and an awareness of recordings made by the older musicians, the practices of these younger players are informed by rapid changes in technology, including laptops, digital electronics, and computer technology in general. Although I restricted my research to improvisers who work primarily on acoustic instruments, many of these players work with electronic musicians. The younger generation also seems to have less of an ideological opposition to working in popular music fields than the older improvisers; some play commercial music because they need the money, others out of a genuine appreciation for, and connection to, popular music. These younger players are also defined by how they are working in a long and well-documented tradition of improvised music in London. Seymour Wright described his relationship to the city and the dominant trends in improvised music that shape the field:

> There's definitely a tradition in London, and I think it's important to be aware of it because you are in the tradition if you're here doing it. But be careful not to become a traditionalist. As soon as people buy an SME record, or an AMM record, they say, 'Great, this is the music I want to make, and we're going to make music just like this.' To me that's quite problematic, and I don't understand it. But to listen to that music and ask, 'What are these people doing, and why are they doing it? What's it got to do with me? If I were them, what would I be doing? And I'm not them, I'm me, so what am I doing?' That's the kind of engagement I want with the tradition, because it involves an understanding of what's happened and a lot of critical thought about what one is doing.

This later generation is clearly living and working in a post-improvised music world, as the major breaks from jazz, classical, and popular music are well in the past, and the dominant aesthetics/practices have already been established. These improvisers are therefore faced with the challenge of being aware of the tradition and being critical of it at the same time, as the experimental ethos of London improv pushes improvisers to find new sounds and approaches, which might put them at odds with the structures established by the first generation.

These chronological generalizations are included here to provide historical context for the improvisers in my study. It is important to keep in mind that these generational distinctions are flexible in terms of aesthetics and practices, as improvisers from different age groups frequently play with each other, and older players often add to their practices as new approaches press against the conventions of the field. This dynamic is reflective of the relatively recent formation of the field—the scene I'm dealing with dates back only to the 1960s, so many of the original generation are still active. Some musicians in my study make a conscious effort to connect to players of different generations, others do not. Eddie Prévost is a compelling example of an older improviser who cultivates connections between generations, as his workshop draws many young

players who are just discovering free improvisation. In addition to the connections across age and experience, the different aesthetics and practices that I have used so far to characterize the generations all function concurrently in London; it isn't quite right to say that the music of the younger musicians is dominant, or that the younger musicians feel pressured and inhibited by the established music of their predecessors. There is space in the London scene for a variety of practices and scenes to operate alongside each other.

Like the various orbits I outlined above, the conceptual framework of multiple generations continues to have some descriptive power in the experiences of improvisers, as many of the participants in my study defined themselves against other generations. For example, Steve Noble compared his pattern of work to the more strict practices of older improvisers Derek Bailey and Tony Oxley:

> [It's] awkward talking about generations but there is a clear difference between the Bailey/Oxley generation and John Edwards and myself. Bailey and Oxley came from a background of being professional musicians, where they were told what to play—i.e., there's the music, and you've got to play it right. So yeah, they wanted to leave that behind. But for us, John does a wide variety of things, and I do a wide variety of things. You have to. Also, I think we enjoy it. It's not a case of shitting on the people who are offering you work that isn't improvised.

These kinds of distinctions between generations or sub-scenes arise out of shifts in the socio-economic context, and out of the ways younger musicians construct their identities in relation to the unfolding tradition of a musical formation. The first generation, according to Noble's description, defined themselves by abandoning other musics and their roles as professional musicians, leaving Noble and Edwards to deal with the tensions around making a living as a "pure artistic musician" (Noble, pers. comm.). Noble's comments are just one example of how the participants in my study declared

their relationships to other improvisers or generations as a way of claiming a distinct identity for themselves.

Pierre Bourdieu theorized extensively about the politics of generational divisions in the art field, and his ideas can provide further context for the improvisers in my study. The older improvisers who are still working possess a high level of symbolic capital, as they were part of the initial forming of the improvised music field. The continued importance of the veteran players is reflected in my research process, as I started investigating musicians such as Paul Bley, Evan Parker, and Kenny Wheeler before branching out to include more local, and generally younger, improvisers. The symbolic capital of the older players manifests in their ability to consecrate, or elevate, younger players, either through direct offers to play and tour with them, or more abstract forms of approval or support, such as mentioning younger players in media interviews. An example of this kind of transference of symbolic capital is Evan Parker's practice of releasing CDs by emerging young musicians on his psi label: see Peter Evans, *More is More* (2006), and Adam Linson, *Cut And Continuum*, (2006). This kind of generally positive support is mirrored by a negative reaction to the aesthetics and practices of the older improvisers on the part of some younger ones. The older generation can represent an established orthodoxy, so rather than looking to them for support, some younger practitioners (particularly those involved in reductionism) might reject them in order to establish their own identities and positions in the field.

Bourdieu described this process as a struggle for resources between the established artists and those wishing to gain recognition:

> [To] occupy a distinct, distinctive position, [younger artists] must assert their difference, get it known and recognized, get themselves known and recognized ('make a name for themselves'), by endeavouring to impose new modes of thought and expression, out of key with the prevailing modes of thought and with the doxa, and therefore bound to disconcert the orthodox by their 'obscurity' and 'pointlessness'. The fact remains that every new position, in asserting itself as such, determines displacement of the whole structure and that, by the logic of action and reaction, it leads to all sorts of changes in the position-takings of the occupants of other positions. (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993, 58)

These kinds of struggle are particularly obvious in the improvised music field, as the discourse of London improv is determined by two dominant themes: an ethic of experimentation and innovation amongst improvisers, and the "fundamental notion of sonic personality" that stems from jazz practice (Lewis 2008, 250). These two factors insure that younger musicians are constantly pushing against whatever they might conceive of as conventional practice, so their actions will exert pressure on those who have helped establish the "prevailing modes of thought" against which younger generations measure themselves. As an example of this process from the improvised music field, Wilbert de Joode expressed some frustration with the younger generation of improvisers in Amsterdam:

> There's a group of young improvisers in town that are more into the minimalistic way of playing—not the ever-changing texture. They really decided to not get involved with the older generation, which I think is crazy. If that separation is needed, that's ok, but it has never been like that in improvised music.

Comments such as de Joode's were common in my research, in particular in relation to the reductionist music scene in London, which I briefly mentioned earlier. I will treat reductionist music in more detail later on, but for now it will suffice to say that tracing the trajectory of a younger generation that consciously sets itself off from the established scene can tells us things about how the improvised music field functions. Specifically, in

my research the limits to the social and material inclusivity of free improvisation became clear when the improvisers who work within the field were confronted with a separate, yet related, other music that was competing for the same audience and resources.

III – Rhetoric and Representation

The improvisers I interviewed for this project are predominantly white and male, and are therefore not a representative sample of the London improvised music field. They are however representative of the particular musical practices that I gravitated towards, based on my initial attraction to the internationally known members of the first generation of London improvisers. A survey of the early recordings from these London improvisers reveals few women represented in the sessions documenting the formative years of the field. Despite an increase in the number of women involved in London improv since the 1960s, and the notable contributions of improvisers such as Maggie Nichols, Lindsay Cooper, and Julie Tippett in the 1960s and 1970s, based on my observations at many different performance venues the gender ratio is still far from an even split, in terms of both improvisers and audience members. So there are clearly some systemic problems that deter more women from being involved in the London improvised music field, or at least that limit their visibility in terms of performance and recordings. The particular conceptual threads and sounds I followed led me mostly to performances by male improvisers, but my focus on these particular improvisers is not intended to obscure the participation or contributions of women improvisers in London. For a more detailed analysis of the gender politics of the London improvised music field, see Julie Dawn

Smith 2001 and 2004. As a supplement to Smith's specific analysis of the musical practices that are the focus of my research, Sherrie Tucker and Nicole Ruston's (2008) anthology *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies* offers a collection of articles that investigate the importance of gender to the discursive frameworks of a variety of musical practices, each of which centre around the concept of improvisation. These texts provide further political context for my interpretation of the thoughts and practices of the particular improvisers I interviewed.

The gender uniformity of my interview subjects is mirrored in the racial constitution of my list, but the number of white improvisers I spoke with is a more accurate representation of the London improvised music field. With a few notable exceptions—including pianist Pat Thomas, vibraphonist Orphy Robinson, trumpeter Harry Beckett, and percussionist Louis Moholo-Moholo (who moved back to South Africa in 2005 after forty years in London)—the majority of London improvisers are white. This situation persists despite the racial diversity of the city of London.

Most of the theorizing about race in improvised music has arisen out of the charged racial climate of the United States, but England, and Europe in general, is a different social context than the United States. The jazz field in England in the 1950s, from which most of the members of the first generation of improvisers in my study arose, was dominated by white, local musicians, which reflected the dominant racial makeup of the country at the time. English jazz musicians in the 1950s, according to pianist Howard Riley, learned about improvisation by "listening to American jazz records and trying to copy them;" in other words, they were studying the music of a different culture and

bringing it into their own situations. Some of these white musicians, including Riley, Derek Bailey, and Eddie Prévost came to question their relationship to jazz in the mid-1960s, which eventually led to the formation of the improvised music field as a distinct domain of musical practice. Echoing Howard Riley, Eddie Prévost described AMM's practice as motivated by a desire to "move away from what we perceived as being the jazz models, which we grew up with and liked, but didn't feel entirely comfortable with because they didn't arise out of our experience." This shift towards free improvisation hinges on a negation and rejection of the basic materials of jazz, which, as George Lewis (2004) argues, complicates the political implications of London improv by obscuring the contribution of African-Americans to the practice of free improvisation.

Lewis's analysis is founded on his observations that white experimental musicians have considerable mobility within the cultural field, while black experimental musicians are constrained by the label of "jazz." There is an extensive amount of writing on race and improvisation that attempts to reconcile, understand, and address the inequalities generated when the "first generation of musicians… confronted issues of European musical identity in jazz," for even though many of the improvisers in my study, especially the older ones, expressed a respect for and appreciation of the jazz tradition, their privileged position allowed them to construct a new field that Lewis argues excluded musicians associated with jazz (2008, 249).[14] Lewis's (2004) argument about the racialized power imbalance between "Afrological" and "Eurological" approaches to improvisation makes sense within a context of global cultural exchange, but in the

[14] Examples of relevant readings that will provide further social and political context for my analysis of London improv include: Lewis 2004 and 2008, Radano 1993, Lipsitz 1994, and Monson 2009.

specific music field I researched the fracturing of jazz into a mainstream and an experimental/avant-garde occurred almost exclusively between white musicians, because jazz in England was predominately a white domain to begin with. So in the particular context in which I was conducting my ethnographic research I mostly heard and spoke with white musicians, as they represented the main source of the practices and discourse that I am concerned with.

The preceding paragraphs reduce the racial context to black and white musicians, but of course London is a very multicultural city, with musicians from all over the world continually immigrating to the city. Although the most well-known improvisers on the scene, both globally and locally, are white, the field is beginning to reflect London's racial and ethnic diversity. As a public event that is open to all who might be interested, Eddie Prévost's workshop offers an entry point into the scene for musicians who are newly arrived in the city, or who have just discovered improvised music and wish to become more involved in the practice. London-based Asian-English pianist Tania Chen, who trained as a classical musician, told me that the workshop helped her to become involved in the improvised music field:

> I think it takes years to learn to improvise. For a long time I didn't really understand what it was about, that it was a group experience and you would listen and interact and support other people. I thought it was just about sitting down and making loads of noise. Then after a while I started to go to lots of improvising concerts, such as AMM and others on the scene, and to go to [Eddie Prévost's] workshop, and I started to listen and understand more about it.

Chen had stopped attending the workshop by the time I arrived in London, but during the time I attended many other non-white and/or non-English improvisers came to the workshop to play. Two such individuals I came to know were Lebanese bass clarinettist

Bechir Saade, and Anglo-Chilean pianist Philip Somervell. Saade attended the workshop regularly in 2006 and 2007, and has since re-located to Lebanon where he leads an experimental music ensemble; Somervell still lives in London and performs with other members of the workshop, yet maintains connections with the jazz and improvised music scenes in Chile. There were other non-white workshop participants that I did not get to know because they either attended infrequently, or maybe only once, but it was clear that the workshop attracted a diverse range of people from a variety of musical and ethnic backgrounds. So it seems perhaps a matter of time before the racial makeup of the London improvised music field shifts to be more reflective of the changing population demographics of the city.

This shift in London is also driven by the expansion of the improvised music field into other locations. There is a thriving scene in Tokyo in particular, and many of the musicians in my study—including Barre Phillips and Derek Bailey—travel(ed) to Tokyo frequently to collaborate with Japanese musicians. Much recent scholarship has situated improvised music as a site of trans-cultural communication (see Wong 2004 and Stanyek 2004), but as my interest was in analyzing specific practices and ideological approaches to free improvisation, I restricted my research to a local population of improvisers who were part of an ethnic majority. This assertion is not intended to deny the larger systemic issues that continue to generate inequalities in the music field, but to situate my analysis of free improvisation within a particular demographic context. Therefore, the insights into the practice and discourse of free improvisation from the mainly white musicians I interviewed are intended to illuminate particular aspects of the larger social issues that

inform cultural production, and to supplement, rather than replace, the narratives and practices generated by improvisers from other social and political contexts.

The preceding two chapters are intended to establish the basic theoretical and social framework around which the rest of this document will be based. In the subsequent chapters I will operationalize the two frames of critical theory and insider perspectives that I have developed up to this point to generate a description of the improvised music field as a dynamic space, inhabited by subjects whose artworks and social practices are determined by the dominant socio-economic structures of Western society.

Chapter Three – Playing The Field: Improvisation as Social Practice

Free improvisation occupies a complicated position within the field of cultural production. It is at once representative of basic human music making relationships and a site of intricate negotiations between subjects living within a complex socio-economic system. At the structural level, improvised music shares much with other musical formations, including performance conventions (public concerts, set lengths, a seated and listening audience), documentation (recordings, magazines, books), and infrastructure (performance venues, record labels, festivals, record shops), yet it is discursively constructed as a kind of alternate reality, a music that resists social, political, and musical orthodoxies and proposes positive alternatives. Similar strategies of decontextualization are applied at the subjective level, as discussions about improvisation often proceed from the assumption that making music without pre-determined structures allows for unmediated self-expression. David Lee alludes to this discursive manoeuvre in his description of Ornette Coleman's impact on the New York jazz field:

> [Coleman's music] was taken by thousands of musicians, all over the world, as permission to explore music through improvisation. Suddenly playing jazz need have nothing to do with the song form—in fact, if improvisation was, as many insisted, the essence of jazz, then it logically followed that to retain the song form—or in some cases, any kind of prearranged structure—could only be an impediment to self-expression. (2006, 35)

This framing of improvisation as, first, autonomous from the basic materials of a genre, and second, a way for individual subjects to transcend place and self, breaks down under an examination of the social divisions and sonic materials that mediate the improvised music field. Such an analysis reveals that there are specific rules and structures in place that determine what sounds and relationships are open for manipulation when

improvisers interact with each other, who gets to claim the identity of improviser, and where improvised performances can take place. The process of asking how different improvisers use the concept of free improvisation to build their social and musical practices led me to share sociologist Peter Martin's conclusion that improvisation is "collaborative and collectively organised, a social as much as a psychological matter, in which the impulses and aspirations of individuals must somehow be reconciled with the configuration of normative conventions which confronts them" (2006, 140). The next three chapters will focus on the inconsistencies between what we might think about (or expect from) free improvisation, and the existing social conventions, material artefacts, and ideologies that mediate its manifestation in Western Europe and North America.

The ethnographic research I conducted in London was structured to explore the dissonances that arise when we allow "philosophical speculation about the potential significations [of improvisation] for hypothetical 'subjects'" to drift too far from an understanding of how we "use music in real situations" (Martin 2006, 5). The disconnect between the political potential ascribed to improvisation and the social reality experienced by improvisers is obscured by the way improvisation is continually positioned as a special, rarefied activity that possesses critical powers denied to other artistic forms. In other words, recent analyses of improvised music depart from the assumption that improvisation is an inherent form of resistance to the presumed prioritization of scripted/repetitive behaviours in Western culture. This facet of the discursive framework of improvisation informs Ajay Heble and Daniel Fischlin's assessment of improvised music as a valuable object of research:

> [Improvisation is] a complex and non-reductive activity that has something important to teach about the ways in which extreme forms of human creative expression (and the experimentation with its multiple alternatives and potentialities) are profoundly tied to much broader social fields in which the forms of production in fact reflect on (and theorize toward) alternative social arrangements activated by the experimental forms of musical production. (2004, 20)

Heble and Fischlin's interpretation of improvisation as an "extreme" form of expression underscores the discursive framing of improvisation as inherently innovative and transgressive, and positions improvisers as outsiders, or trickster figures, who can comment upon social conventions from a vantage point denied to musicians in other fields. This conception of improvisation as a force for generating transgressive music is a reaction against the privileging of composed music—and the related elevation of the composer figure—in the cultural field of Western Europe and North America. The domination of notated music in Western culture, in terms of state-sponsored institutions (symphony orchestras, opera companies), academic authority (university teaching curricula), and class politics (classical music as a signifier for upper class identity) relegated performance-centred music to the margins of mainstream musical consciousness for much of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Improvisation re-emerged in Western musical life during the 20th century through jazz, which for the first half of the century was coded by bourgeois society as popular/commercial music. The ongoing association of improvisation with jazz music in the West means that improvisation continues to be coded as an "epistemological other" to the institutionally entrenched traditions of Western art music, which are determined by notation (Lewis 2004, 147). Improvisation continues to be positioned by musicians and

commentators as a practice that is essentially avant-garde or experimental; to put things more bluntly, Derek Bailey suggests that promoters and mass audiences have come to associate improvisation with music that is unable "to hold the attention of large groups of casual listeners" (1993, 83). As I suggested in the introduction, the ongoing marginalization of London improv stems from a shared ethos among improvisers around the negation of the basic materials and performance conventions of mainstream music. I will return to the dialectical relationship between improvised music and popular (tonal) music in Chapter Four. For the present chapter, my focus is on how the practice of free improvisation is determined by the fundamental assumptions that improvisation generates an alternative to normal society, that it is essentially different from other musics, and that it is inherently innovative.

My experience working in the improvised music field in Toronto, in conjunction with my fieldwork in London, has led me to think that improvised music is different from conventional jazz, popular, and classical musics in certain fundamental ways, yet a close investigation of the London scene revealed that improvised music shares its position on the margins of the dominant socio-economic field with a wide range of other musics and art forms, improvised or not. As an example of these connections, in her writings about the institutionalization of the musical avant-garde in France, Georgina Born uses similar terms to Heble and Fischlin in reference to the discursive framework that mediates hyper-composed serialist and electro-acoustic music:

> [On] the one hand [we have] the omnipotence of the modernist avant-garde, which perceives itself as the subject of history with a messianic role of (aesthetic) salvation; on the other, the sense of persecution when it is felt that contemporary

> composition bears the weight of survival of western art music under the threat of its annihilation (by popular culture). (1995, 38)

Taken together, these two quotations situate free improvisation and tightly composed serialist music in similar positions in the cultural field, in terms of their political potential/imperative for instigating social change, and their opposition to the dominating other of popular music. To put this analysis in Bourdieu's terms, freely improvised music functions as a transformed version of other avant-garde/experimental artistic practices and forms, sharing certain fundamental characteristics and infrastructures beneath the surface distinctions that mark it as a discrete domain of social and musical practice.

The discrepancies between the discursive construction of improvised music and the structural realities faced by London improvisers, when read in the context of the similar social positions of London improv and modernist classical music, point towards the need to develop an analysis that shifts between the global level of fields and the local level of practice. By collecting ethnographic data in the London improvised music field I hope to reveal the assumptions, ideologies, and meanings that motivate the practice of free improvisation, and to uncover the points where these discursive constructions conflict with how improvisers use music in "real situations" (Martin 2006, 5).

There is a distinct danger in this kind of analysis of improvisation of essentializing the activity. Improvisation is an ephemeral concept that resists easy definition, so it is frequently used in ways that obscure the structural details of the contexts in which we might claim it to be present. Therefore it is necessary to specify the context of my research, which is first of all improvisation in music; from there, I have narrowed my focus to music making without pre-determined structures, and finally to the

London improvised music field in particular. My interpretation of the ethnographic data I collected in the field is based on my interest in developing a sociological analysis of the discourse of free improvisation, rather than an aesthetic description of the music itself. Georgina Born offered a starting point for the kind of analysis I have been pursuing:

> [It] is axiomatic to the theoretical framework I am proposing that the 'music itself' is never outside discourse but is just one of the many simultaneous mediations, or forms of existence, of music as culture as it is produced in discourse. (1995, 22)

By describing London improv as a social practice that arises out of particular historic contexts and material traditions, I am prioritizing the specificity of the concept, rather than proposing a general theory of improvisation based on my research among subjects who identify as improvisers. Arguments around what improvisation is, and how we then might apply it to (or find it within) contexts outside of music and the arts, are increasingly common in discussions on the subject, so it is necessary to contextualize descriptions of improvisation through addressing the materials, conventions, and social structures which improvisers work with on a day-to-day basis. Improvisation, free or otherwise, manifests through a particular relation between the subjects and materials that are interacting at any given time, and these subjects and materials are necessarily part of a larger cultural framework. Despite the London improvisers' interests in questioning the restrictions of conventional musical materials and social arrangements, their musical practices remain embedded in the social and historical context in which they manifest.

Improviser and scholar George Lewis echoes Born's comments about removing the "music itself" from discourse in an argument about the importance of grounding discussions of improvisation in material, social, and historic contexts:

> The composer and theorist Larry Solomon… has defined the 'fundamental ideal' of improvisation as 'the discovery and invention of original music spontaneously, while performing it, without preconceived formulation, scoring, or content' (Solomon 1986, 226). Buried within this… definition of improvisation is a notion of spontaneity that excludes history or memory. (Lewis 2004, 147)

Lewis's (2004) critique of what he calls the "Eurological" conception of improvisation points to the problem of decontextualizing the activity through claims about the essential spontaneity, innovation, and originality of improvisation. His analysis positions these discursive constructions within a racial context, specifically attributing the marginalization and misunderstanding of improvisation to the inequitable power relationships between black and white improvisers and commentators. Lewis argues that not everyone is able, or indeed willing, to erase history and identity through their musical practice. Lewis and Born connect two vastly different musical practices through a conception of music making as a social relation that arises out of specific historical and material contexts, rather than as a set of practices for transcending the aesthetic and social limitations imposed on musical subjects.

My conversations with improvisers demonstrated the importance of contextualizing the idea of free improvisation at the local level, as improvisation is a flexible concept even within the individual practices of my research subjects. Percussionist Steve Noble spoke to the subjective mobility of improvisation when he described the different sub-scenes in London, and how he shifts his practice relative to the other people he is playing with:

> The way I think about improvisation is that it's about the individual. There are obviously different areas of improvising—like the John Russell [guitarist] people for example, who make very quiet squeaky bonk stuff. It is a very small area to work in, but I enjoy playing that way and there can be some magnificent music in

> there. On the other hand there's John Edwards [bassist], whom I have done an awful lot of work with in the last three or four years, in free jazz groups like the one with Lol Coxhill [saxophonist], and the one with Alex Ward on guitar that is more loud and rocky. I can work with John in different ways - we can be a rhythm section, jazz-style, or funk. But I can't expect Dominic Lash [bassist] to be like John, and he never will be. There's only one John, only one Dominic, and only one Simon Fell [bassist]. And that's the joy for me, working with the fact that improvisation means different things to different people.

Noble's conception of the situational specificity of free improvisation was echoed by many of the improvisers I spoke with, as one aspect of the work ethic that characterizes the London improvised music field is an interest in engaging with different, and perhaps unfamiliar, improvisers and performance situations. Ad hoc performances are a distinguishing feature of the improvised music field, and the complexity of the concept of free improvisation is revealed in how musicians choose to deal both sonically and socially with different musical approaches. The particular assumptions, materials, and individual aspirations of the participants involved thus determine the resulting sound of an improvised performance, as history and memory mediate the relationships between improvisers, even as they attempt to generate music without reference to a score, song form, or the direction of a composer figure.

The comments above, delivered from a variety of vantage points, share a conception of improvisation as an aesthetic practice that arises out of the social/political/economic context, material traditions, and personal relationships of musical subjects living in a shared social circumstance. This conception is the foundation upon which I will build my analysis of the London improvised music field, by addressing both the specific historical formation and the well-documented set of aesthetic practices. The following three chapters will divide my research findings into three separate, yet

interdependent, areas of inquiry—the present chapter will explore the possibility of theorizing improvisation as a social practice, and will include: an analysis of the development of improvisation as an autonomous conceptual construct, an investigation into the related establishment of the social position of improviser, and a description of the historical context that determines the discursive framework of London improv.

I – Improvising Autonomy

The most fundamental influence on the discursive framework of free improvisation is the relatively recent construction of improvisation as an autonomous practice, distinct from the particular musical traditions and structures in which we might claim to find it. This conceptual shift is marked by how we might once have spoken about playing jazz, playing bluegrass, or extemporizing on a fugue subject, and how now it is possible to talk about improvisation as an external force we can bring to bear on the materials of particular musical traditions. Put another way, the label of improviser has come to signify a mobile musical subject who relates to accepted sonic conventions in a particularly manipulative way. Derek Bailey's (1993) book *Improvisation* is an extended example of the conceptual separation of improvisation from the materials that characterize particular musical traditions. For this text Bailey collected ideas from musicians working in six different musical idioms under the theme of improvisation, and then theorized about how the improvisatory practices he and his colleagues developed in England are fundamentally distinct from the practices of musicians working in more traditional musical areas. The separation of improvisation from a material and historical context allows for the positioning of free improvisation as a distinct practice, as the formative

premise behind the activities of the first generation of improvisers was that musicians could generate performances without the structures or sonic codes of the musics they might have played previously. The improvisatory practices that are my focus thus hinge upon a negation of previous and familiar forms, so the improvised music field that emerged through the second half of the twentieth century is built on an assumed dialectical relationship between improvisation and established material traditions. As I have argued so far, this shift towards conceptualizing improvisation as an autonomous practice needs to be understood in terms of how improvised music relates to existing musical structures, rather than how improvisation represents a potential and perpetual rupture in the cultural fabric. The following section will explore how the idea of improvisation as an autonomous practice resulted in the establishment of the improvised music field and the position of improviser.

For the participants in my study, the discursive manoeuvre of decontextualizing improvisation, and the subsequent development of the improvised music field, came about through a combination of the innovations of free jazz in the late 1950s, and the concurrent questioning of traditional models of artistic authority taking place in experimental art music in Europe and the United States. Alan Durant, writing in 1989, suggested that the improvising musicians who have emerged over the last sixty years have elevated improvisation "from its role of being merely one dimension of music which is for the most part composed and notated, to become a specific form in itself: improvised music, 'free collective improvisation,' 'free jazz'" (1989, 252). In this article Durant refers specifically to the London improvised music field, contextualizing it within

the history of American jazz and European art music. The notion that focusing on this one dimension of music making can create non-referential, expressive, and innovative performances—or generate some kind of pure manifestation of the concept of improvisation itself—is a fundamental element in the discursive framework of London improv. The construction of improvisation as an autonomous entity enables George Lewis to define improvised music as a social formation, rather than an aesthetic one:

> Improvised music may be usefully characterized as a socio-musical location inhabited by a considerable number of present-day musicians, from diverse cultural backgrounds and musical practices, who have chosen to make improvisation a central part of their musical discourse. (2000, 78)

In Lewis's formulation then, membership in the improvised music field is determined by choosing to define oneself in a particular way in relation to other musical traditions, rather than by the specific sonic materials that one is working with. Yet it is clear that the improvisers I spoke with have very clear aesthetic ideas (articulated through their words and music) around what kind of materials are acceptable in their practices. In Chapter Four I will connect these materials to a basic modernist ideology, as the character of London improv hinges on the notions of the need to push against existing boundaries and to consciously reject the conventions to popular culture. For the present context, I am working with the assumption that improvisation, following the formative work of the American free jazz musicians of the late 1950s and the first generation of European improvisers in the 1960s, has become conceptualized by a certain group of musicians as a force that is separate from the inherited conventions of older musical forms.

The participants in the London improvised music field have made important contributions to this reframing of improvisation as an autonomous practice, and their

activities have led to the formation of the socio-musical domain I have been calling the improvised music field. Derek Bailey, whose controversial idea of non-idiomatic improvisation is a clear manifestation of the framing of improvised music as an autonomous form, revealed his personal musical imperatives through a description of flamenco music: "No idiomatic improviser is concerned with improvisation as some sort of separate isolated activity. What they are absolutely concerned about is the idiom: for them improvisation serves the idiom and is the expression of that idiom" (1993, 18). Throughout his book, Bailey negatively defines his practice against other traditions in order to clarify his focus on improvisation as a "separate isolated activity." The structure of his text and the force of his convictions—as demonstrated in his performances and recordings—are representative of this discursive framing of improvisation as an autonomous activity, and of the desire to imagine London improv as an undefined anti-genre.

The notion of improvisation as an autonomous practice is problematic, for as Lewis (2004) suggests it is not possible, or desirable, for all musicians to claim that they can step outside of history to create music without any "preconceived formulation, scoring, or content" (Solomon 1986, 226). Yet the improvisers in my study are motivated by the intention to explore improvisation separately from the structures and rules of particular musical traditions, and they continually define their practices against so-called "idiomatic" performances. Kenny Wheeler's description of an experience he had in the early days of the SME illustrates the trajectory towards the separation of improvisation from the conventional materials of a form:

> We never really talked about things at the Little Theatre Club. I remember once though John Stevens said, 'Let's play a blues.' So we played a blues, and while we were playing I was counting and thinking, 'This doesn't sound like a twelve bar blues to me.' I spoke to him about it afterwards, and he said, 'No, I meant just play the feeling of the blues.' That was one of the few times we talked about what we were going to play.

In this situation Stevens was asking the other improvisers in the group to play with whatever they imagined was left when you removed the harmonic, rhythmic, and melodic framework of an idiom—the underlying assumption being that there would be *something* left to work with. By evoking the blues as a common reference for the participants, Stevens created a situation that was not quite a free improvisation, yet the musicians had considerable flexibility in what they might choose to play. The SME frequently worked with such loose structural ideas to explore the potentials of ensemble improvisation, and John Stevens eventually collated his ideas into a pedagogical text called *Search and Reflect* (1985). Wheeler's anecdote, drawn from the formative years of this ensemble, demonstrates how these musicians were beginning to separate improvisation from the details of conventional forms, a process built on the assumption that improvisation can be treated as an autonomous activity.

Based on Wheeler's description of the early days of the London improvised music field, and on archival recordings from the Little Theatre Club (see Spontaneous Music Ensemble: *Frameworks*), it appears that from the early days of the scene AMM was focused more on abandoning pre-determined structures than SME. Eddie Prévost still maintains a radical line on the autonomy of improvisation, disassociating it completely from any established forms or subservient role to composition:

> I hate the idea of improvisation being used as a way of refreshing another tired, musical form. It can be that, but it's more than that. It's used therapeutically, sometimes in music schools, as a way of encouraging creativity, but then it's left, because it's not considered very important on its own. I think it has a right to exist on its own, that it has its own aesthetic and is not a means to composition. That's what I'm wedded to, that's what I want to foster.

Prévost's creative practice embodies the ethic he describes above, as he only rarely performs with any kind of compositional structures. He also conducts his weekly improvisation workshop without using any pieces, structures, or suggestions as pedagogical aids to the participants; in contrast, John Stevens's book *Search and Reflect* offers a series of progressive exercises designed to train participants familiar with other musics to make music without pre-determined structures. Prévost explained his particular improv ethic by contrasting his practice with the methods developed by Stevens and SME:

> You can't bring in a John Stevens piece to the workshop, because someone might say, 'I don't want to do that.' And they would be quite right. It would be infringing on someone's freedom to introduce such regulation. You have to push other authorities aside, and make a new authority arising from the components we have in the moment of doing it. That's what I think happens.

In terms of the early generation of London improvisers, Prévost and AMM took an extreme view on the autonomy of improvisation by positioning composition and idiom as authorities that repress the creative freedom of the individuals participating in the music making.

The ways in which Bailey, Stevens, and the other SME participants deconstructed traditional forms suggests an attachment to the idea of improvisation as an autonomous practice that is equally strong to that of AMM. Although SME worked occasionally with pre-conceived suggests and compositions, the underlying assumption was that one could

strip away the structural details of a form to reveal a "new authority" that arose primarily from the participants themselves. As Stevens, Prévost, and other musicians took the concept of improvisation to the logical conclusion of removing all external references, they established a sense of improvised music as a specific form, and positioned themselves as improvisers, rather than blues musicians, for example. I do not suggest that the early generation of London improvisers were the first to work with these concepts and assumptions, or that one of the approaches mentioned above is more aesthetically pure and politically responsible than the other. Rather, each approach contains a shared assumption about improvisation as a discrete force that can be distilled from the fixed materials of specific musical traditions, and that the participants in my study chose to focus on this force instead of the conventions and rules that are tied to older idioms. Whether or not such a separation between improvisation and the materials is actually possible is a larger issue that runs in the background of this writing, but in the foreground of this analysis I am concerned with how this basic premise informs the day-to-day practices of improvisers. The practices and aesthetics outlined above have had a wide and ongoing influence on the discursive, aesthetic, and social framework of the London improvised music field especially, and the global improvised music field in general.

The improvisers in my study continually re-inscribe the notion of improvisation as its own aesthetic through their avoidance of the sound-worlds conventionally associated with jazz, popular, and classical music, yet this perpetual negation also defines free improvisation by emphasizing its dialectical relationship with these other forms. Put another way, the self-conscious aversion to tonality, regular pulse, metre, and

conventional instrumental timbres over-determines the shape of the improvised music field by continually calling attention to their absence. This dialectic connects the practices developed by the London improvisers to the continuing modernist project I alluded to in the introduction to this chapter, for if improvised music is to fulfil its assumed role as "cutting edge" culture it must sound different than conventional musical forms (Hegarty 2007, 50). Eddie Prévost articulated this aspect of the improvising ethic on the first day I went to his workshop; he began the evening by saying that it was not the goal of the workshop to arrive at familiar musical forms through improvised means. In other words, improvisation for Prévost is not about the removal of pre-determined structures to be replaced by collectively determined emergent structures that mimic known musical styles, but it is about a total re-evaluation of the basic materials on hand. The workshop imperative—which is an extension of Prévost's personal practice as he has pursued it in AMM—places responsibility on the participants to attempt to develop new relationships and sonic materials, which means that the conventions and forms of popular music are to be avoided. In her analysis of the post-serialist electro-acoustic music that was being made at IRCAM in the mid-1980s, Georgina Born suggests that the avoidance of popular materials and forms is a key component of the modernist ethos, and Prévost's comments above suggest that similar terms can be applied to an understanding of London improv: "Given that tonal harmony is also one of the aesthetic bases of the history of commercial popular music, the absence of tonal reference is a key marker of the way that [modernist music] asserts aesthetic difference from popular musics" (Born 1995, 48). So the improvisers in my study assert their difference from popular music, and by extension

declare their opposition to the dominant field of power, by a self-conscious avoidance of tonal references. This kind of aesthetic exclusion results in the separation of the fields within a shared social space—improvised music and popular music co-exist in place and time, but there is little interaction between them.

The basic modernist ideology that informs the production of London improv places particular constraints upon the concept of improvisation as it is articulated by the London improvisers, for the sounds they deem open to manipulation are determined by the imperative to negate other musics. But the improvisers in my study usually framed their music in positive terms, as a search for sounds that can represent their own social realities and creative potentials, rather than as a simple reaction against a dominating system of power. As an example, Eddie Prévost told me about his motivation for pursuing improvisation outside of the conventions of jazz, which is where he first encountered the idea of improvisation in music:

> The idea was to move away from what we perceived as being the jazz models of improvisation, which we grew up with and liked, but at the same time didn't feel entirely comfortable with because they didn't arise out of our experience. They were emulative of things. You heard what someone had done in the 1950s in Chicago or New York, and initially you tried to come up with a version of that, which often was not very successful. Amongst us [AMM] we still admired and certainly had a strong affection for jazz, but we were interested in the possibility of making our own musical world outside of that. That was the objective, as simple as that.

Prévost and AMM thus prioritized the search for new sonic materials and relationships to reflect the experience of growing up in post-war England, a process that was based on the avoidance of the materials they had inherited from African-American musicians. Yet built into this conscious search for identity is a self-conscious sense of rupture and

negation, as improvisers must take into account not only what they might want to do, but also what they want to avoid on a moment-to-moment basis in performance. Such constraints both limit the possibilities of improvised performance and provide a framework within which communication and interaction can take place. Pianist Alexander Hawkins compared the approaches of the first generation of English improvisers with that of the contemporary American experimental music organization the Association For The Advancement of Creative Musicians, as an example of contrasting approaches to improvisation:

> [In] the first generation [of English improvisers] there's much more of a sense of a self-imposed restriction, that we will only play improvised and atonal music, like the early Derek Bailey thing of never striking an open string. Whereas in the AACM the concept of freedom was built not on the idea of restriction, or freedom from tonal materials, but on the freedom to include materials from diverse sources. So you could chose to play what you like.

This framing of the basic sonic materials as "freedom from" versus "freedom to" is a recurring theme in discussions about the London improvised music field, as the older improvisers from the London field in particular are perceived by members of other scenes as being fairly strict in their approach to music. But this restriction appears to come out of a desire to search for, establish, and maintain a distinct identity, based upon an overarching assumption that improvisation allows for the exploration of new materials and relationships.

Out of these material constraints, aesthetic ideals, and assumptions about improvisation as an autonomous musical form, an identifiable artistic field emerged in Europe in the 1960s that was distinct from jazz, popular, and classic music. Although the improvisers in my study do not necessarily share the same generative processes, aesthetic

ideals, or political ethics around improvisation, they do all claim improvisation as their aesthetic priority. Their activities, when taken together, constitute the improvised music field as a distinct domain of musical practice; this musical formation is founded on the idea that improvisation is an autonomous practice that is at once separate from the restrictions that determine other musics, and embedded within the dominant socio-economic structures that regulate the day-to-day activities of improvisers. Therefore the improvised music field continues to be determined by a dialectical relationship between the conventions and materials of: 1) the formative influences on the particular musicians (usually jazz and classical music), and 2) the economically and socially dominant musics with which London improv coexists.

II – Imagining the Improviser

The London improvised music field arose out of the local conflicts between improvisers and the regulatory figures of the existing fields; the improvised music field now has its own set of participants, listeners, venues, record labels, festivals, and all the other infrastructures that construct and maintain a genre. The most crucial element of this formative process was the establishment of the identity of improviser, as distinct from jazz musician, contemporary music specialist, or other related formations. George Lewis characterized this development in the following way: "[We] can now identify 'improviser' as a functional musical activity role in world-musical society, along with such roles as 'composer', 'performer', 'interpreter', 'psychoacoustician', and various flavours of 'theorist'" (2004, 152). In the present context I argue that the position of

improviser in London has developed around the practices and aesthetics of the first generation of London improvisers, as they sought to establish a distinct place for themselves within the cultural field. The position of improviser, as I have described it so far, implies a subject who creates music without pre-determined structures. But the position also suggests a particular relationship between the improviser and the materials from other music forms—the improviser is interested in the manipulation and transformation of these materials, either pre-determined or not. From this basic aesthetic formulation, the position of improviser extends outwards into the social domain, as claiming to be an improviser situates musicians within a particular marginalized space in the cultural field. The following section will address issues around the social and aesthetic role of improviser, as it is positioned in relation to the larger domain of musical practice.

George Lewis offers a starting point for this discussion, as he ties the identity of improviser to both musical practices and patterns of work: "Working as an improviser in the field of improvised music emphasizes not only form and technique but individual life choices as well as cultural, ethnic, and personal location" (Lewis 2004, 149). When read in conjunction with his earlier comments, it appears that Lewis is suggesting that the identity of improviser is not open to everybody in the same way, nor is it necessarily a desirable identification for all of the participants in the improvised music field. In the context of the London improvised music field, the development of the improviser is determined by a negative relation to the identity formation of jazz musician. There is a direct connection to jazz for many members of the first generation of London

improvisers—including Derek Bailey, Kenny Wheeler, Eddie Prévost, and John Stevens—as these improvisers came of age studying and playing jazz. But perhaps more fundamental to the relation between the identity of improviser and that of jazz musician is that "the exploration of improvisation in both Europe and America" continues to be discursively connected to jazz (Lewis 2004, 131). As described above, the process of constructing the improvised music field—and by extension the identity of improviser—involved the negation of pre-existing conventions, materials, and structures, so because many of the first generation of London improvisers share a background in jazz, jazz is continually positioned as the other to London improv. Such a distinction has racial undertones, as described in Chapter Two. Historically, black musicians have been denied the mobility of white musicians when it comes to claiming identities outside of the already established frameworks (Monson 2009), and, as Lewis (2004) suggested earlier, the aesthetic removal of memory, history, and social context from the concept of improvisation is problematic for many black musicians. In proposing and developing the new identity of improviser, the activities of the London musicians highlight larger structural problems around how the movements of certain subjects in the cultural field are regulated. In discussing London improv then, we must attend to it as a transformation of not only the sonic materials of jazz, but of the role of the jazz musician in the cultural field.

London improv, and the improvised music field in general, both constitute, and are constituted by, the participants in the field. The improvisers themselves stand at the centre of a "radius of creativity" which includes many other subjects filling other roles in

the field (Toynbee 2000, xxi). We can learn things about the practice of free improvisation by asking how the identity position of improviser was developed in London, how it is maintained, and who has access to it. Pierre Bourdieu addressed the issue of identity directly, as his concept of fields revolves around an analysis of the subjects whose activities generate the practices, structures, and ideologies that we might associate with a distinct art form. Bourdieu contends that to understand the workings of a cultural practice we need to look beyond the paths of individual subjects, and analyze the larger structural and systemic trends that allow for the position of artist to exist in the first place: "[We must ask] not how a writer comes to be what he is, in a sort of genetic psycho-sociology, but rather how the position or 'post' he occupies—that of a writer of a particular type—became constituted " (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993, 162). The position of improviser became constituted through a process of negation of the preceding musical forms and a rejection of the role of entertainer that characterizes popular musicians, in favour of the idea of a "pure artistic musician" (Steve Noble). Such a shift towards the "re-evaluation of the possibilities of improvisation" came about through the "anointing since the 1950s of various forms of jazz" as art music, and the consequent re-positioning of jazz musicians as artists (Lewis 2004, 131). This shift was precipitated in jazz in the 1940s, when the musicians associated with bebop moved from generating music for dancing to art music for listening. According to Paul Hegarty, "...bebop had driven not only avant-garde jazz, but the *idea* of a jazz avant-garde, of jazz as avant-garde" (2007, 45). The shift towards coding jazz as art music informed the development of free jazz in the late 1950s, and led directly to the music generated by the London improvisers. So the

position of improviser became constituted first through a general re-evaluation of jazz as art music, and secondly through a process of abandoning the sonic codes, performance conventions, and infrastructure of the jazz field, a division that was initiated by English musicians in an attempt to "make their own musical world..." (Prévost). The improvised music field thus hinges on a general conception of an artist as self-realized individual who has creative ideas that are not well served by the existing socio-economic structures that govern other parts of social life, as opposed to the professional/entertainer model that characterizes the position of the popular musician.

The existence of an artistic field (and the position of artist) depends on particular social support systems that allow subjects to get involved in a musical form that generates little economic capital. Howard Becker described the general social requirements for an artistic field to develop: "Before people can organize themselves as a world explicitly justified by making objects or events defined as art, they need sufficient political and economic freedom to do that, and not all societies provide it" (1982, 39). I briefly mentioned this idea in the introduction, as it provides context for the particular field I am looking at; specifically, the improvised music field in question arose out of the relative economic security of Western Europe. This is not to say that the improvisers in my study were/are well off financially—many came from working class backgrounds, and the African-American free jazz musicians who preceded and influenced the London scene were clearly under-privileged. Yet there is a basic context of institutional wealth—including social support networks, public education systems, accessible health care, and the possibility of employment within a diversified industrial economy—that enabled

some members of Western society to devote enough of their time to making art music, which led to the development of the London improvised music field.

The positioning of jazz as the dominant other against which improvisers define themselves highlights how the identity formation of improviser, and the improvised music field in general, is a site of struggle between participants. This relationship offers a compelling example of how free improvisation, despite being positioned by practitioners as an inclusive and democratic form of music making, is still determined by the larger constraints of the socio-economic system within which improvisers live and work. It is worth going into the racial politics of the improvised music field in a little more detail to provide some context for the interview subjects in my study, who are mostly white and living in a relatively privileged society (which is a mediating factor on their activities, whether or not they have direct access to the economic capital that enables a society to be privileged). George Lewis has done a substantial amount of work towards theorizing how the identity of improviser, as a representation of experimental/avant-garde music practices, is constrained by systemic inequalities. Lewis's argument around the racist implications of certain definitions of improvisation hinges around the mobility of white musicians within the cultural field:

> Who is 'really' a jazz musician at a time when so many artists in the world of white American experimentalism, for example, are able to describe themselves as 'former' jazz musicians? The example highlights how what I whimsically call the 'one-drop rule of jazz' is effectively applied only to black musicians... [Musicians] of other ethnicities have historically been free to migrate conceptually and artistically without suffering charges of rejecting their culture and history. (2008, xli)

Lewis's observations connect to how many of the London improvisers employ strategies of negation against the inherited materials of jazz in order to construct a new music that is presumed to be more reflective of their experiences. Although such a manoeuvre was undertaken in good faith by the first generation of improvisers—as they respected jazz as an African-American form and wanted to create an equivalent music that reflected their own experiences—the politics of exclusion was based on a particular flexibility of identity that has, according to Lewis, historically been denied to black musicians. My intention in pointing out these specific circumstances is to highlight how membership in the improvised music field, and specifically the position of improviser, is regulated by more than just the particular materials and performance conventions one might learn and appropriate. It is a field of practice that is open to different people in different ways, despite the general ethos of inclusion and egalitarianism that motivates many of the field members. Ingrid Monson, paraphrasing theorist Paul Gilbert, underscores this tension between the intentions of the participants and the constraints of the socio-economic system:

> [There] are structural limits to aesthetic agency and practice. Even though individuals in the jazz world can reach beyond their sociologically defined categories through practical acts of imagination, emulation, and creativity, their social relationship to styles not of their home social categories is frustratingly shaped by the continuing race, class and gender hierarchies in American and global society. (Monson 2009, 34)

These real constraints on participation in the improvised music field thus extend beyond the actions of those immediately involved in the field, reflecting larger constraints on identities in culture at large. As improvisers continue to define their practice against jazz,

they perhaps unwittingly enforce a boundary around their music that those with an actual, assumed, or imposed connection to jazz have difficulty penetrating.

Defining the emerging position of improviser against the established position of jazz musician was a common move in my interviews. Although the majority of the improvisers in my study are white, I certainly do not suggest that their comments are directly racist—the systems of exclusion that limit who gets access to certain privileges and identities extends far beyond the practices of individual subjects. Rather, I include their comments here as a way of demonstrating the larger systemic flexibility which allows them to assert and maintain certain identities, and that this process allows certain subjects to establish themselves in the field in particular ways. The comments made by my interview subjects about their respective identities merely illuminate one side of Lewis's specific argument about white mobility, and my general argument about the identity of improviser as emerging through a process of both self-affirmation and negation of the other. Similar strategies of negation were taken up by the African-American musicians in Lewis's recent book *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (2008), for some of the musicians in his study asserted a strong Afro-centric identity through their musical choices as an act of resistance to white imperialist tendencies. Before proceeding much further, it should also be said that jazz is not the only other that mediates the production of improvised music—there is a pervasive system of power around composition and the institutionalization of Western art music that was perhaps an even stronger negative influence on the early improvisers. There will be more on these factors later on in this chapter, but for now I

will continue my focus on the influence of jazz on how the musicians in my study adopt, articulate, and maintain the identity of improviser.

The frequent references in my interviews to the break with the London jazz field initiated by Derek Bailey, Tony Oxley, and others reveals that the general idea of rupture is essential to the character of the London improvised music field. These musicians were both at the top of the commercial field of jazz: Oxley was the house drummer at Ronnie Scott's jazz club in London, playing with such major figures as Sonny Rollins and Bill Evans, and Derek Bailey was a busy session guitarist who played with Lee Konitz and Shirley Bassey, among others. Both of these musicians made significant lifestyle changes at a certain point, leaving their positions in the jazz and commercial fields to focus their time on improvised music. George Lewis has commented on this break the white European musicians made with jazz, suggesting that the racial undertones of this shift were less severe than the outright dismissal of jazz by John Cage and other experimental music composers—this quotation from the my introduction is worth repeating in the present context (2004, 151): "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 these comments, Lewis seems to accept the basic argument from the first generation of improvisers about how they wanted to find their own music and to develop structures that allows them to pursue their own creative impulses, yet he still maintains the longer view that there are systemic restrictions that

inhibit black musicians from abandoning the frame of jazz musician as Bailey and Oxley were able to.

As a specific example of the shift away from jazz that characterizes the activities of the early generation of improvisers, bassist Barre Phillips described his process of identity formation, in terms of the kind of professional work he chose to take on:

> I guess sometime around 1975 I had a real choice. I could have chosen to make myself a place in the European jazz scene, either as a freelance guy or a bandleader. But my interest was in the improvising thing, so I decided to stay with the more avant-garde stuff. As the years go by, all that past stuff disappears, at least in terms of what the audience knows. So most people, young musicians and audiences, know me as an improviser. They don't know that I used to play 4/4 in B flat.

Phillips is a liminal figure in the European improvised music field, as he has a closer connection to jazz than the European-born musicians in my study by virtue of being American, and having spent his formative years in the early 1960s studying and working in New York. Before relocating to Europe in the late 1960s, Phillips played with many of the major figures in the American jazz avant-garde of the early-mid 1960s, including Jimmy Giuffre, Archie Shepp, and George Russell. Although he first came to Europe as a jazz musician, Phillips has been able to shift his identity, in terms of public perception, to that of an improviser; now he rarely plays composed music or music with pre-determined structures. Phillips's assessment of his career trajectory suggests a particular level of mobility that was not restricted by the kinds of materials he was working with.

English bassist John Edwards presents a slightly different take on the distinction between the identities of jazz musician and improviser, as he is a member of a later generation of improvisers, and makes his living working as a musician on the London

music scene. Edwards has less of an antagonistic relationship with jazz than the older players, as the improvised music field, and the related identity of improviser, were well established by the time he started working on the scene. As Steve Noble suggested earlier, members of his generation did not have to fight the same battles as the older musicians, as they inherited a set of structures and an audience based on the pioneering work of Bailey, Parker, Prévost, Phillips, and others. Yet this does not mean that it is easier for the younger musicians to support themselves as improvisers, only that there are more opportunities for performances than the older musicians had. Edwards grew up listening to jazz, in addition to many other kinds of musics, and he has maintained his connection to commercial musics, at least in an economic sense. His comments on his pattern of work make it clear that he identifies primarily as an improviser, although he works playing jazz music when given the opportunity: "I love playing jazz - sticking within the rules of the game and doing my thing as the bass player. But I have never called myself a jazz musician." Edwards's position as a bass player gives him a lot of mobility in the music scene in general, and he told me that he plays many different kinds of music in addition to improvised music. His ability to get work playing jazz music, yet not take on the identity and position of jazz musician, speaks to a certain level of social mobility. Like Barre Phillips, Edwards maintained that free improvisation was his main aesthetic priority, and indicated that he made particular sacrifices in life to enable him to pursue improvised music as much as possible. Unlike the first generation of improvisers, Edwards's identification as an improviser does not involve restricting himself to improvised music at the exclusion of other forms, but it does require him to focus

primarily on improvised music at the expense of the opportunity to make more substantial money playing other musics.

Percussionist Steve Noble, Edwards's frequent collaborator, made similar comments about his relationship to commercial music, but was more direct about his identification as an improviser:

> If someone phones up and asks me to do a session, I'll say, 'Yeah, OK.' And I'll go do the best I can as a session player, not as an improviser. Last time I went I ended up hitting the wood block, and a tom every now and again and that was it. And I get paid two hundred quid. So for me it's about kind of balancing, because it is difficult to earn your living by just being a pure artistic musician.

These comments illuminate the different ways in which musicians articulate the identity of improviser, usually framing it in a negative relation to the materials and "socio-economic circuit" of other musics (Born 1995, 21). The above descriptions of patterns of work underscore the modernist ethos that mediates London improv, as the identity of improviser is based on the assumption that certain aesthetic priorities position musical subjects outside of the sonic and economic orbit of popular music. As Steve Noble says: "You always get the feeling that if you want to play this music you're going to struggle." These examples demonstrate some of the ways that musicians build their identities, both personally and publicly, around and against existing structures and musical frameworks.

III – Composing the Musical Margins

London improv is vastly determined by its historic connections to jazz, yet the conflicted relationship with jazz is not the only influence on the improvised music field. Improvising musicians have a more overtly negative and reactionary stance to the

institutions, structures, and practices of the art music establishment in Europe. This establishment is built around the concept of composition, and the related position of the composer as the voice of artistic authority. The following section will unpack the social, rather than aesthetic, differences between improvisation and composition. The aesthetic differences between these creative activities are difficult to quantify; the structures that are in place to support the practice and artefacts of composition are easier to trace, as these have a very real impact on the day-to-day lives of improvisers.

For most of the improvisers in my study jazz is a respected field of practice, and the inequities between the fields viewed as an unfortunate microcosm of larger social injustices. But many London improvisers position composition as a real enemy, as the discrepancy of available resources between classical music, both historical and contemporary experimental forms, and improvised music reflects an institutionalized bias towards certain kinds of artistic practice. Many of the improvisers in my study keenly feel this discrepancy, as they perceive their work to be art, with as little connection to the marketplace as the music being made by academic (or dead) composers, but without the attendant access to the same mechanisms of financial support. The inequitable distribution of symbolic capital between composed and improvised art musics in Western culture, and the related economic imbalances, is the fundamental distinction between my study and Georgina Born's study of IRCAM. Born's research investigated the inner workings of a state-sponsored centre for the creation of modernist music—a place where public money was used to fund artists who were writing music that supposedly advanced scientific knowledge and critiqued the cultural status quo. My study is of musical subjects

who struggle day-to-day for performance opportunities, recordings, and enough economic capital to pursue their creative imperatives.

Avant-garde composed music and improvised music share many sonic materials, and a similar oppositional political stance around resisting the presumed artistic standardization that is rewarded by the dominant socio-economic system. But the music that is clearly aligned with a tradition of composition, either in terms of notation or electronic reproduction, receives state recognition as official culture, while the improvisers fend for themselves in the back rooms of pubs. Bourdieu proposed a model for interpreting these kinds of distinctions, relating different artistic practices and products back to the institutional structures that nurtured them. In the present circumstance, avant-garde composition is associated with music schools (conservatories, universities), and is made by composers who usually possess certain academic credentials (symbolic capital). Improvised music has no such pedigree, being a music studied and created informally, outside of a system of regulated training. Bourdieu refers to these two kinds of artistic practice as "legitimate" and "illegitimate" culture, mirroring the vernacular terms jazz musicians use to mark the distinction between what they do and what classically trained musicians do:

> Illegitimate extra-curricular culture, whether it be the knowledge accumulated by the self-taught or the 'experience' acquired in and through practice, outside the control of the institution specifically mandated to inculcate it and officially sanction its acquisition, like the art of cooking or herbal medicine, craftsman's skills or the stand-in's irreplaceable knowledge, is only valorised to the strict extent of its technical efficiency, without any social value-added, and is exposed to legal sanctions (like the illegal practice of medicine) whenever it emerges from the domestic universe to compete with authorized competences. (1984, 25)

Free improvisation is certainly not subjected to any particular legal sanctions, but the improvisers in my study suggest that they have been passed over for government grants and admission to new music festivals because they can't produce the artefact of a composition to support their performances. Steve Beresford described an experience he had that illustrates the social tension between improvisation and composition:

> [At the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival] people didn't want to hear the improvised stuff. It's scary to them I guess. For them, if you can justify a piece of music, however irrational it sounds, by saying it's all written down on paper, then those people feel reassured that it has some logic to it. If you can't say that, they seem to hate it instinctively. It's all to do with authoritarianism, and the authority of the score. I love Schoenberg, but not the obsession with decoding scores that came out of his twelve-tone music. I think people got wedded to this idea, and they decided that that is how you understand music. And if the score is not there, then you can't understand the music.

Beresford's objections I think arise out of the similarity of experiences, sonically speaking, that one might have listening to improvised music and contemporary experimental composed music—the difference in how the sounds were generated might be imperceptible to the audience in light of the shared approach to dissonance and aversion to the materials of popular music. His comments speak to the different value systems that continue to marginalize improvised music in terms of the distribution of funding for the arts.

Improvisation continues to be discursively constructed as an epistemological other to composition, and the first generation of improvisers purposefully defined their activities against the concept of composition. This negative relation between the two generative processes manifests as substantial economic inequality. Many of the improvisers in my study were quick to point out how opera companies, symphony

orchestras, university music programs, and music festivals could not survive in the capitalist system without government support, yet as improvisers they get only minimal support for the cultural work they claim to be doing. There will be much more about the economic structure of the improvised music field in Chapter Five, so at this point I wish only to call attention to how some of the improvisers in my study claim that their practices are regulated by systemic inequalities that are perpetuated through a valuing of one approach to music making over another.

Different improvisers relate to the concept and structures of composition in different ways, and I am dealing here specifically with improvisers who for the most part reject the use of compositional frameworks. Aesthetically speaking, there are many grey areas in between, as not all improvisers are averse to playing compositions; as I demonstrated with the examples of John Edwards and Steve Noble, the younger generations of improvisers will engage with composed forms for economic reasons. Of those who restrict their activities entirely to free improvisation we might ask: what kind of work does the practice of improvisation do that composition does not? The negative relationship to composition allows improvisers to assert a certain autonomous identity from the dominant power structures, yet also positions them on the margins of these structures, which forces them to deal with a lack of resources. But for the participants in my study improvisation is about more than just the creative freedom of developing new sounds free from the constraints of the market; there is a strong political component as well, as many of the improvisers in my study express a strong, leftist political orientation. Eddie Prévost has made very clear statements about the connection he perceives between

composition and the inequities of monopoly capitalism; he sees the relationship between improvisation and composition as a question of autonomy, freedom, and social justice. In his view, any kind of composition impinges on the creative potential of the musicians in the moment of performance:

> [A] composed sound commands a different social priority. The musician is being requested to do something by another. Such an instruction may be considered restrictive and (if only in an abstract sense?) as oppressive. A collective improvisation is a freely interactive discourse. A composed work—by contrast—is an authoritarian one. (2004, 20)

As a member of the early generation of improvisers in London, Prévost's comments demonstrate the importance he places on making a complete break with the existing power structures in order to propose the shaping of a new music, and by extension an alternative social arrangement. Prévost continually articulates his political intentions through his practice and the environment he fosters at the workshop. Composition, in these terms, not only represents the economic rewarding of legitimate culture over informal culture, but a way of controlling the activities of musicians at the moment of performance.

In the first generation of improvisers, the break with composed forms was a way of asserting an alternative identity, and for these improvisers to imagine their activities as making new culture. This conception of improvisation as antithetical to composition has reverberated out from the original break of the 1960s, and continues to dominate the way improvised music is produced and socially positioned. Improvisation was thus not only conceived as a way to make music that sounded cutting edge, but a way to make music that reflected the self-conscious rejection of the capitalist system. The first generation of

improvisers worked with the assumption that the structures of the music they were making could indeed point towards alternative social arrangements, as illustrated in Frederic Rzewski's comments about the formative years of the field:

> In the 1960s, in radical circles of the 'free music' movement, freedom was an ethical and political, as well as an aesthetic, concept. Free music was not merely a fashion of the times, and not merely a form of entertainment. It was also felt to be connected with the many political movements that at that time set out to change the world... Free improvisation was viewed as the possible basis for a new form of universal communication, through the spontaneous and wordless interaction of improvising musicians of different traditions. (Cox and Warner 2004, 268)

So the identity of improviser is determined by the negation of composition, and by equating composition with political systems of repression that impinge on the basic freedoms of individual musicians. Whether or not these musicians were successful in changing the world, the basic ethos of the improviser, as established by the first generation of European improvisers, revolves around resisting and transgressing existing power structures. This conception continues to shape the London improvised music field, positioning those musicians who do work with compositions in a different part of the field than those who are more restrictive in their practice.

A compelling example of the continuing conflict around the social relationship between improvisation and composition occurred at an encounter between European improvisers and African-American members of the AACM at the 1969 Baden-Baden Free Jazz Treffen in Germany. This event has been thoroughly documented by George Lewis (2008, 251-254), so I will not go into detail here, other than to say that the American musicians brought compositional frameworks with them, and the European musicians were mostly interested in improvising their performance. Lewis suggests that

these contrasting ideas about composition signify the continuing racial tensions in improvised music; he contends that composition represented an assertion of identity for the AACM members, a way of structuring their music to express what they felt needed expressing, while the European musicians treated composition as an impediment to their expression. This methodological distinction around the use of composition continues to inform the contrasting definitions of the improvised music field and the jazz field, and the emphasis on entirely improvised performances is a distinguishing characteristic of the London improvised music field. Other scenes are more inclusive of composition, yet the rhetoric of many of the first generation of London improvisers positions composition as a dominating other that they continually define themselves against. This dialectical relationship is fundamental to understanding the work of the first generation of improvisers, as they chose to assert their identity by rejecting the dominant music making model, which put them in conflict with the structures that regulate European composed music.

The younger musicians in my study have developed a different relationship to the discursively constructed binary of composition and improvisation, and seem less concerned about restricting their activities to one sphere of music making. Whether this represents a failure of political will on their part (admitting defeat against the presumed pressures of standardization and repression that are generated by the dominant socio-economic field), or whether this trend represents the development of a workable alternative that allows improvised music to continue to exist in a hostile economic climate is difficult to say, but it is clear through my ethnographic research that the

complex relationship between different generations of improvisers is similar to other political movements. The first generation of improvisers made significant advancements towards establishing structures, identities, and audiences that did not previously exist; subsequent generations have grown up without having to fight these same battles, so their identities are not as tied to an oppositional politic as those who had to fight for recognition. Writer and improviser Tom Perchard, an alumnus of Eddie Prévost's workshop, spoke extensively about the distinctions between generations, and his comments are worth quoting at some length:

> I think there's less concern with the difference between improvisation and composition with the younger generation, whereas it was quite taboo among some older improvisers. Eddie [Prévost] has a very troubled relationship towards the idea of composition—he doesn't like the idea of being pushed in certain directions. Young improvisers don't tend to be that bothered about it. They say, 'Ok, it's just another sort of material to work with.' I think the tension comes out of a negative a reaction towards certain institutions. The first generation of improvisers, Eddie's generation, came out of nowhere. That music didn't exist at all—they were all either lapsed classical musicians, jazz musicians, or both. They were doing something that was in opposition to the normal styles of the time. So jazz fans hated it, and classical musicians thought it was silly. It was very oppositional, very new, and a lot of them felt left out of their respective music making worlds. That may well be why a lot of them have this antagonistic attitude towards composition.

Tania Chen delivered a similar interpretation of the political shift in the field:

> The scene is more political with musicians who are well over forty, because they were doing all this stuff in the 1960s and 70. I really don't think that half the people who I know as improvisers, who are a similar age to me, actually bother about the politics at all, because we're of a completely different generation. There is a whole load of students who came out of Goldsmiths College, especially when John Tilbury was there, and none of them are political. I think we're more interested in free improvisation from a historical aspect.

In interpreting these and other comments about the various generations of improvisers in London it is important to bear in mind that this is all relatively recent history—many of

the first generation of improvisers are still actively working in the field, so there is frequent interaction between improvisers who came of age at different times. The improvised music field is approximately five decades old, and the London scene younger still, meaning that developments and shifts in the field are debated and critiqued by subjects with varying levels of experience and diverse political stances.

As the above comments from second generation improvisers Noble and Edwards reveal, the role of improviser is the foundation of their creative identities, but it is possible for them to take up other positions as economic imperatives demand—jazz musician and studio session player, for example. Younger musicians still, as will be explored in Chapter Six, are now able to make improvisation just part of what they do, a component of a larger identity through which they interact with the cultural field. This stratification between generations is common in political movements; the stakes in the improvised music field are much lower than those which inform the relationship between second and third wave feminisms, for example, but there is a similarity in the complex relationship between those who made a substantial initial break with the dominant power structures and those who follow this break with privileges and opportunities not available to the older generation. In the improvised music field the younger players now have a choice to devote themselves to being "purely artistic musicians," as Noble would say, or to balance their creative music with commercial music to pay the bills. But all of these decisions take place within the context of the relatively stable field of improvised music, which musicians such as Prévost, Bailey, Parker, and Phillips helped to establish through a long process of activism, and economic and personal sacrifice.

The three dominating influences that press against, and ultimately form, the London improvised music field are jazz, the materials and positions of popular music, and the concept of composition, which manifests socially as the official culture of Western art music. As a result of these forces, the identity of improviser emerges out of the way subjects negotiate with each of these material traditions and their related social structures. So the improvised music field operates in parallel with these historical influences, and functions as a transformed version of these other distinct fields. There is continued interaction between them all, as they all operate within the same socio-economic system, and the subjects who engage in the respective fields are struggling for the same resources to enable them to continue to create music. The improvised music field is founded on the assumption that the participating subjects are generally free from basic restrictions on their rights and freedoms, and have the opportunity to think about something other than basic sustenance. As an example, Eddie Prévost positions his musical stance within a wider social framework, acknowledging that the notion that improvised music can create positive social change is a luxury born out of privilege (2004, 57):

> [Having] a conscience, and being angry about the brutality and inequalities of the current world order, are luxuries that most of the world's population cannot afford. Survival for them is the overriding priority. Political anger can, in such circumstances, be analogous to railing at inclement weather. (2004, 57)

All of the above issues related to identity, aesthetics, and political potential need to be read within this social context, even though the improvisers in my study come from a variety of class backgrounds. The general assumption that improvisation offers a commentary on, and an alternative model for, contemporary society is determined by the

socio-economic reality in which the improvisers live. London is a big, expensive city that, like most cities, attracts many different artists from all over the world. The improvised music field in London is a separate universe, with its own aesthetic ideals, social structures, and relationship to the others against which it defines itself, yet the participants in the field are subject to the same freedoms and constraints that work upon everyone else that lives in a similar industrialized Western city. So the potentials for personal autonomy, expressive freedom, and political transformation through improvised musical practices need to be explored in relation to the forces that determine social life in contemporary Western society.

The preceding analysis of the improvised music field as a distinct domain of practice, the improviser as a position within that field, and the position of the improvised music field within the larger frame of culture is intended to provide a framework for interpreting the discursive framework that works upon the social and musical practices of the participants in my study. The next chapter will deal specifically with the sonic materials of London improv, to provide context for understanding how improvised music performances are generated. In the same way that the improvised music field is determined by a variety of factors related to the dominant economic system of capitalism, the sound of the music itself is determined by the overarching ideology of modernism, and by a negative relation to the patterns and conventions of popular music. The following description of the aesthetic and material influences on London improv will work in conjunction with the preceding social description of the improvised music field

towards contextualizing the practice of free improvisation as it is pursued by London improvisers.

Chapter Four – Improvised Music and the Modernist Work Ethic

In the preceding chapters I worked towards framing improvisation as a social practice by interrogating the discursive framework that mediates how free improvisation manifests in contemporary Western society. This chapter will address the aesthetic foundation of the particular musical practices I followed in London, and will contextualize the theoretical ideas developed thus far through an analysis of the sonic materials improvisers typically employ in their performances. The sonic archaeology I am proposing is intended to provide some nuance and musical context to supplement abstract theoretical notions about how musical subjects use improvisation to negotiate their positions within the cultural field. I will argue in the following paragraphs, based on comments I collected from improvisers in the field, that improvised music fits within a material and discursive framework of modernism. Therefore, the descriptive strategies and analytical models which have been developed to address modernist European notated music offer a means to situate the performance practices of the improvisers in my study within a well-documented tradition of social, aesthetic, and sonic dissonance/dissidence. My analysis will attend mostly to the aesthetic ideals, ethics, and musical practices developed by the first generation of London improvisers, as their formative work provided the foundation upon which the improvisers who followed constructed the improvised music field.

Although the generative process of London improv is substantially different from that associated with modernist classical music, the use of similar sonic materials, and a shared interest in resisting the dominant musical structures of popular culture, means that these two musical practices are socially positioned in similar areas in the cultural field.

Despite the structural differences between the musics we are addressing, Georgina Born's (1995) study of IRCAM offers compelling ideas about musical modernism that can be productively applied to the London improvised music field. I will work with these ideas to explore how the lens of modernism can inform our understanding of free improvisation; specifically, I will make connections between the modernist ideals of negation, musical autonomy, innovation, and social rupture, and the artistic explanations about improvisatory praxis that I collected from improvisers in the field. Following this theoretical investigation, I will explore the specific material influences of jazz, modernist classical music (particularly the work of composers Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern), and the European and American experimental music tradition on the improvisers in my study. This chapter will conclude with some thoughts about how the discursive framing of improvised music as avant-garde and cutting edge relates to: the growing historical distance from the original break with other musics that initially coded free improvisation as radical; how the accumulating musical conventions and codes that improvisers work with manifest as an anxiety around genre; and how the social boundaries around the improvised music field increasingly regulate its ability to "advance the future of music" and promise "greater things to come" (Born 1995, 4).

I – Improvising Modernism

I will begin this analysis with a comment from bassist John Edwards, in which he articulates many of the assumptions that mediate the creation of improvised music:

> In jazz you can't suddenly break everything up. In our music we have that freedom, as we're not playing with harmonic and rhythmic structures. We take it

> from scratch, and we all share an approach to finding things and improvising with what we've got. So with improvised music, what have you got? If you're with other people you've got each other, you've got the room and you've got the situation as it is. You put yourself in a really open situation, and you see what happens. Improvisation allows you to completely respond to or interact with the people present.

The language Edwards uses in this description is typical of the ways other improvisers I spoke with explained their creative practices, and his comments offer several productive entry points for my investigation into the materials and performance practices of London improv. In using Edwards's words as a point of departure for my analysis I am not suggesting that there is anything flawed or missing in his conception of free improvisation, only that he offers a practice-level lens through which to view the theoretical ideas that I have been working with thus far.

Edwards's comments connect to Martin Davidson's in my introduction, and two key interconnected themes that I will explore throughout this chapter. The first is the discursive positioning of London improv in a negative relation to other musics; in this case Edwards situates the practices and identities of London improv in opposition to jazz. The narrative of exclusion that pervades the rhetoric of London improv, particularly around jazz materials, manifests as the dominant conceptualization of improvised music as a non- or anti-genre, a musical universe that is not bound by the rules and structures that mediate other musical forms. Secondly, Edwards's formulation that improvisers "take it from scratch" is a common manoeuvre in discussions of free improvisation, one which equates the obfuscation of pre-determined materials with the possibility of pursuing a "pure alternative" to established musical conventions (Durant 1989, 273). The practice of performing without pre-determined structures implies an openness to

alternative sonic materials, yet it was clear from watching John Edwards (and the other improvisers in my study) perform that there are mediating factors acting on his music that give it an identifiable character, rather than the feeling of an "anything goes type of anarchy" (Borgo 2005, xvii). The practice of performing without the structures that determine other improvisatory musics—such as tunes, scales, and rhythmic patterns—perhaps generates a subjective feeling in the moment of performance of "taking it from scratch," yet such a reduction obscures the aesthetic/material framework that has arisen around the practice of free improvisation as it has developed in London. The rest of my conversation with John Edwards revolved around discussions of his influences, his approach to the instrument, his relationship to the different players he works with, and many other threads that lend nuance to the blank slate, or anti-genre conception of improvised music. With these themes running in the background, the rest of my analysis will investigate the gaps between the political ideals attributed to free improvisation and the material traditions and conventions that allow improvisers and listeners to produce, and find meaning in, the sounds we associate with London improv.

The dissonant, noisy, non-tonal sounds that have come to signify free improvisation in the cultural field are part of a much longer tradition of dissonance and dissent in Western musical culture. London improv inherited certain aesthetic ideals from particular formative influences (which I will explore later in this chapter), but the practice overall is over-determined by modernist discourse, which revealed itself in the ways the improvisers in my study contrasted their practices to the dominant musical forms of the society in which they live, and in how they spoke of their music as being experimental.

Edwards's comments above offer a succinct summation of the basic assumption that improvised music is at once representative of the now ("Improvisation allows you to completely respond to or interact with the people present"), and orientated towards the future (freedom is possible through avoiding the "harmonic and rhythmic structures" of older musics). This description is a specific example that connects with the general definition of artistic modernism offered by Max Paddison:

> Art cannot be defined in terms of what it once was, as it is also a process of *becoming*, proceeding by way of *negation* of its own previously existing concept. Although it is dependent upon tradition and derived from it, it proceeds through critique and negation of prevailing historical and social norms within its own material. In this, it is involved in a process of constant redefinition and expansion of its own reified concept at any particular historical period. (2004, 57)

This definition fits well with many of the comments from improvisers presented in earlier chapters, specifically around the idea of forging new identities out of existing frames, and the connections between London improv and established musical forms (even in the negative sense of improvisers defining themselves against the older musical practices of jazz, for example).

Paddison's abstract formulation of modernism and Edwards's practice-based assessment of his approach to improvisation can be further contextualized through Derek Bailey's account of his development as an improviser, in which he refers to the assumption that improvisation can lead to innovative music making through a re-evaluation of, and reaction against, specific prevailing musical norms:

> [Much] of the impetus toward free improvisation came from the questioning of musical language. Or more correctly, the questioning of the 'rules' governing musical language. Firstly from the effect this has had on jazz, which was the most widely practiced improvised music at the time of the rise of free improvisation, and secondly from the results of the much earlier developments in musical

> language in European straight music, whose conventions had, until this time, exerted quite a remarkable influence over many types of music, including most forms of improvisation to be found in the West. (1993, 84)

Modernism in music is thus characterized by the dialectical relationship between experimental/avant-garde musics and the other forms that function within the same cultural orbit. The improvisers in my study frequently reference other musics that they define their practices against, and in general the discourse of free improvisation features more rhetoric around what the music is not than about what is essential to its production. The aesthetic choices of the improvisers in my study are thus mediated by the presumed need for "constant redefinition and expansion" of the concept of free improvisation, in relation to both the accumulating sonic conventions of the improvised music field and the influence of the other dominant musical forms in Western society (Paddison 2004, 57).

Georgina Born adds to this basic conception of modernism by suggesting that negation is not just about declaring difference from social and musical norms, but about actively pursuing "progress, constant innovation, and change;" she goes on to say that the avant-garde composers in her study "saw their role as leading this process through a radical intervention in art and culture" (1995, 43). The comments from Eddie Prévost I have presented so far fit into this framework, as does the interpretation of improvised music from Heble and Fischlin (2004), who theorize that improvisation is about building communities and modelling alternative social arrangements. These ideas of progress, change, and radical intervention form the basic ethical framework that many improvisers work with as they develop their music.

The concept of modernism offers a compelling frame for thinking about free improvisation as a manipulation of specific sonic codes developed over time, and as a social relation between historically situated subjects working within a shared cultural context. Such a framing is important for redressing romantic notions of improvisers as decontextualized expressive subjects who create cutting edge, transcendent music with each performance. Rather, the contemporary improvised music field, as it has developed over the last sixty years, is built around "the collective accumulation and stockpiling of code" (Attali 1985, 30). Improvisers work with an awareness of their relationship to the musical culture in which they live, and make their aesthetic choices based on a self-conscious "transgression and transformation of existing codes" (Durant 1989, 273). Improvisers use these codes to produce music and interact with each other, and listeners use them to interpret the music they are hearing. In the rest of this chapter I will use the discursive frame of modernism—particularly the themes of negation and innovation—to look more closely at the specific codes, conventions, and assumptions that signify free improvisation in London.

II – Autonomy and Negation

The fundamental distinction between London improv and the majority of other Western musics is in how improvisers reflexively structure their practice around avoiding the grand structures that have determined Western music for most of modern history; specifically, the tonal system that originated in Europe in the seventeenth century, the use of cyclical rhythmic/metric patterns, narrative structures based on the notion of tension

and release, fixed compositional forms, and the centrality of a composer figure to the music making event. The exclusion of the melodic/harmonic/rhythmic/timbral conventions of Western music from the musics generated by the improvisers in my study is based on the aesthetic ideal that such a manoeuvre allows for the discovery of new and non-referential sounds. Derek Bailey frames this deconstructive tendency among improvisers as an impulse to pursue "unpredictability and discontinuity" through "perpetual variation and renewal" (1993, 107). Yet a step back from the micro-level of practice—by which I mean the subjective experience of newness and discovery for individual improvisers—reveals that the overall sound-world that has come to signify free improvisation in Western culture is over-determined by this negative relation to the sonic and narrative conventions of the dominant tonal system.

The discourse of music in Western culture is shaped by the modernist conception that tonality has followed an evolutionary trajectory from the simple to the complex, from the modal system through to atonality and serialism. But tonality is not just a way of organizing sounds: its continued dominance in Western popular and folk culture means that it functions as a system of social organization through its central role within the shared experience of subjects living in Western society. As Adorno suggests, the very idea of music in Western culture is determined by the tonal system:

> All music from the beginning of the age of figured bass until today forms a coherent 'idiom' that is largely given by tonality, and that still exerts a persistent power even in the present-day negation of tonality. What is called 'musical' in everyday parlance refers precisely to this idiomatic character, to a relationship to music in which the material, by virtue of its reification, has become second nature to the musical subject. (Adorno, Leppert and Gillespie 2002, 145)

As second nature, the ways in which music, as part of the cultural field, is structured and interpreted by musicians and listeners is based on familiarity with the basic laws of tonality; musics built using other materials will necessarily sound "out" in relation to the sounds musical subjects in Western culture have been socialized to interpret. Adorno's formulation shares a surface connection to Bailey's concept of non-idiomatic improvisation through Bailey's (and other improvisers) negation of the "coherent idiom" of tonality, yet this reduction fails to account for the accumulation of codes and techniques that sound and function socially as an idiom, once they are recognizable by a critical mass of other musical subjects. And as Adorno also notes, the self-conscious negation of tonality reveals its "persistent power" through our heightened awareness of its absence in London improv.

The standard historical narrative of Western music is constructed around the gradual deconstruction of the tonal system, culminating with the work of Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These composers are central to Georgina Born's analysis of IRCAM, and her description of their musical innovations connects with the general themes I have been exploring in the rhetoric around free improvisation:

> Musical modernism emerged out of the expansion of tonality in late romanticism and the break into atonality in the early decades of the twentieth century. It took a number of forms. One of the most historically powerful was the serialism or twelve-tone technique of composers Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg—the Second Viennese School. Schoenberg conceived serialism as a new compositional technique based on the structural negation of the pitch hierarchies and forms associated with tonality... Given that tonality and modality are the aesthetic bases of many popular musics, serialist principles prescribe an aesthetic that is completely antithetical to these other musics. (Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000, 12)

Many of the improvisers in my study expressed a specific interest in the composers that Born mentions, and I will explore this direct connection in more detail later in this chapter. For the present analysis I wish to highlight the shared ethos between the Second Viennese School and the improvisers I interviewed around deconstructing tonality. Schoenberg's atonal compositions and eventual codification of twelve-tone composition were particularly important to the development of London improv, as his concepts allowed for the generation of a music that was fundamentally different from than that of popular music. As a specific example of why these compositional techniques appealed to improvisers, Derek Bailey wrote that Schoenberg's student Anton Webern's ideas allowed for an "escape from the lack of tension endemic in tonal or modal pitch constructions" (1993, 87). The similarity of sonic materials between atonal composed music and London improv is clear, even when the generative processes of the musics are entirely different—Webern and his artistic descendents (Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Milton Babbitt) represent a high point of compositional control over performers, and the first generation of improvisers reacted specifically against this trend by abolishing the score, the composer, and the rigorous systems that characterize mid-20th century avant-garde art music.

Steve Noble's interpretation of Derek Bailey's shift from being a professional musician to focusing exclusively on improvised music reflects this fundamental difference between modernist notated music and improvised music: " ...if you come from a background where you've been told what to play—i.e., there's the music, and you've got to play it right—then yeah, you want to leave that behind." Yet like Schoenberg and

Webern, the improvisers in my study emphasize sounds that are coded as dissonant in relation to the dominant conventions of tonality: large intervallic leaps, non-triadic chord clusters, rhythmically disjointed gestures, non-narrative chord progressions and structures, unpitched timbres, and a general prioritization on tension without progressing towards resolution. Although some improvisers I spoke with have specifically studied the compositional techniques of Schoenberg and Webern—bassist Steve Swallow told me about improvising with tone rows he took out of a text by Austrian composer Ernst Krenek (1940), and Derek Bailey composed music for solo guitar modelled on Webern's solo piano music (see *Pieces for Guitar*, 2002)—the historical importance of the Second Viennese School to the improvised music field is more as a general influence around ideas of dissonance, timbral manipulation, and the fundamental negation of tonal forms. In other words, the London improv ethic, like the serialist principles that preceded it, "prescribes an aesthetic that is completely antithetical" to "tonal idioms" (Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000, 12). The music of the Webern still sounds dissonant in relation to most other musics in the West, so the innovations of the Second Viennese School did not bring about a large-scale re-evaluation of the basic principles of music making. Rather, like London improv, atonal and serial composition function in parallel with more conventional forms, and have taken up a well-defined position in the cultural field in opposition to the "persistent power" of tonality (Adorno, Leppert and Gillespie 2002, 145).

Born's interrogation of the discursive framework of musical modernism extends beyond analysing the negative relation to the materials and forms of the tonal system. She

provides further nuance to the music in her study by suggesting that through a process of excluding references to other musics, modernist/avant-garde composers were attempting to develop an autonomous musical language. Schoenberg's twelve-tone technique, and the subsequent development of serialism, is an identifiable manifestation of this interest in autonomy, as these systems of composition were developed as alternatives to the hierarchical and narrative structures that characterize tonality. Born is careful to situate Schoenberg's contributions within a larger cultural framework by describing musical developments that were taking place concurrently, yet she ultimately contends that through a process of institutionalization the particular modernist ethic embodied in Schoenberg's work became dominant in the art music field:

> Post-war high modernist composition powerfully asserted musical autonomy, refusing the representation of ethnic or popular musics in the name of formal innovation and rigor; and the modernisms of Bartok and Stravinsky, which engaged with folk and ethnic musics, failed to achieve hegemony in the face of the systematic serialisms of Boulez, Stockhausen, and Babbitt. The lineage that became institutionally and ideologically dominant in musical modernism—serialism and its aftermath—and which is defined as an absolute and autonomous aesthetic development, won out over the eclecticism of early modernist experiments, including the various forms of aesthetic reference to other musics. (Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000, 15)

I should add a similar caveat by asserting that the music I am investigating is just one area of the improvised music field—other approaches to improvising, including those more closely aligned with jazz, continue to be practised in the musical field. Yet to paraphrase Born I am suggesting that the lineage of European improvised music that has become "ideologically dominant" is based on the negation and exclusion of "known" styles of music (Bailey 1993, 142). Bailey's formulation of "non-idiomatic" improvisation mirrors Schoenberg's interest in autonomy rather than pluralism and

eclecticism; in contrast, George Lewis's (2004) sustained critique of notions of musical autonomy calls attention to the social inequalities generated and enforced through this politics of exclusion.

Georgina Born underscores the social implications of the exclusion implied by the concept of non-idiomatic improvisation by positioning popular music as the sonic representation of cultural norms in Western society: "Given that tonal harmony is also one of the aesthetic bases of the history of commercial popular music, the absence of tonal reference is a key marker of the way that musical modernism asserts aesthetic difference from popular musics" (1995, 48). The assertion of aesthetic difference through avoiding the materials of popular music translates into the social realm as an imagining of the position of improviser as an alternative identity to the average musical subject, who is regulated by the constraints and restrictions imposed by the dominant field of power. Born elaborates on this point by questioning the motivation behind the pursuit of autonomy from popular forms:

> [As] with serialism and other high-modernist tendencies [there is an attempt] to construct a 'relation' of absolute difference, nonrecognition, and nonreference. With the coexistence of modernism and commercial, folk, and non-Western musics in mind, it becomes apparent that a defining discursive and aesthetic characteristic of the dominant high modernist tradition has been its assertion, under the guise of a self-referential, formal autonomy, of its absolute difference to popular musics. This has the character of a defensive manoeuvre against the vitality of those popular forms, as though out of fear of aesthetic and social contagion. (Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000, 16)

This interpretation of the high-modernist ethic connects back to Edwards's comments about the fundamental differences between his music and jazz. Yet Born adds a further layer to the discussion by asking why the composers in her study were so resistant to

popular music. Such a question is clearly relevant to the study of London improv, as there is so much similarity around notions of autonomy in the rhetoric of free improvisation and the modernist electro-acoustic music that concerns Born. Potential answers to this question can arise out of an analysis of the different political contexts and generative processes of these two musics; as I suggested earlier, London improv differs fundamentally from the music in Born's study through the emphasis on emergent musical structures produced through collaborative group interaction, rather than the production of a fixed text generated through a pre-determined compositional system, created by an individual working in a state or institutionally supported artistic field. The improvisers in my study thus occupy a different social, political, and economic space than the composers in Born's research, and many of them use the practice of free improvisation as a means to resist the presumed homogenization and standardization—and the related restrictions on individual creative production—that popular music is discursively positioned to represent.

Eddie Prévost's writings and musical practices offer a compelling example of the self-conscious assertion of aesthetic and social difference from popular music that characterizes the improvised music field. Although he doesn't use as clear a terminology to describe his practice as Derek Bailey, Prévost articulates similar ideas around the relation of "absolute difference, nonrecognition, and nonreference" between his music and the dominant musical system of Western society, and goes further than most other improvisers in connecting the use of conventional musical materials to larger structural systems of social inequality (Born 2000, 16):

> [The improviser] must be prepared to jettison all sound-source material which bourgeois dominated culture refers to as musical, if attachment to these systems of music and their attendant philosophies is to be severed. Particular scales and pitch values will have to be abandoned. New systems and styles will emerge, bound to the needs of the moment, propelled by human ingenuity. Freedom is a performance that must be renewed at every occasion that it is practiced. (1995, 119)

He added specificity to this abstract formulation in our discussions about his weekly workshop:

> [It's] just about impossible to bring some kind of pre-existing formulation to the workshop—jazz, flamenco, or fiddle music, for example. It wouldn't work. You have to relinquish all your anticipations about what music is in order to participate with people who may be coming from a different place. It does require that you leave certain things aside. If I insisted on playing a 4/4 beat at the workshop, you would see. There's just no place for it. But I wouldn't say to a drummer, 'Never do that in any circumstance, ever.' That would be nonsense. But if you're going to improvise with people from diverse backgrounds, then you're going to have to leave those kinds of expectations behind, focus on the absolute fundamentals—that is, your relationship to the materials you're dealing with, your sound sources. And asking what it is you can do with these elements in a collective situation without having a pre-formed notion for a piece. It doesn't eliminate or replace other musics, it just is somewhere where something different happens.

Prévost's idea of avoiding the materials that "bourgeois dominated culture refers to as musical" recalls Adorno's assertion that subjects socialized in Western culture equate tonality with the musical, and therefore offers some clue as to what kinds of sounds and relationships Prévost imagines are useful to improvisers. The processes of exclusion and negation in improvised performance are undertaken with the assumption that the "sound-source materials" of the dominant culture impinge on the agency of musical subjects, so Prévost's comments about what is acceptable at the workshop he convenes highlight the larger discursive manoeuvre of imagining improvisation as a liberating, collectively

articulated, and socially conscious response to the restrictive norms enforced through "pre-existing formulations."

Prévost's description of what is admittedly a rarefied pedagogical situation nevertheless exemplifies the basic performance practice of many London improvisers. As an example of an alternative approach to improvising, many of the London improvisers I spoke with defined their practices in opposition to the music made by Dutch musicians, who were imagined to be more open to the inclusion and manipulation of conventional materials. John Edwards's comments on the distinction between these two scenes are typical of the kind of rhetoric I heard from other London improvisers, and worth repeating in the present context: "The Dutch thing is more about them living in a socialist country and playing jazz with lots of humour. The British thing is about reducing it all down so we can hear each other, then making this kind of music." The Dutch musicians I spoke with echoed this conception of the fundamental differences between the scenes, as demonstrated in the following comments from Amsterdam-based violist Ig Henneman:

> I think that many of the English improvisers [in the 1960s], as far as I know, played without composition. They seemed much more strict in the rules, which is why there were quarrels among musicians. And it started the same way here, totally without scores - the ICP was totally free music, energy music. Until certain people got bored with that, because it didn't develop into something else. I think that's the big difference with the Dutch scene—we are more open and flexible, and use whatever we want to. I think of Misha Mengelberg and Willem Breuker as being the real tastemakers for that. They gave a path by using our own little waltzes, marches or contemporary music - things that we know—with all the free jazz. That made it much more open I think. I remember I was in Austria at a festival in 1998, and I heard [a group of well-known English improvisers]. And it was all about only sounds and colours. Not one little pulse, not for half a second. It was really strict, what they could do, and seemed that having a pulse was forbidden. For me, that made the music much less interesting. I loved all the colours they developed from their instruments, but when you play for 45 minutes,

> it's hard to keep the audience's attention without having a structural path. I don't think there were any Dutch groups that were so strict.

Henneman's comments speak to an entirely different approach to improvisation than the one I have been developing thus far, one where conventional materials are juxtaposed with each other and manipulated in particular ways, rather than excluded outright. The ways Edwards and Henneman define themselves and their scenes against each other serves to highlight the fundamental assumptions that determine the discursive framework of their respective musical domains. These general distinctions constructed around the use of pre-determined materials are still used by musicians from either scene to describe the other, even though practices have shifted considerably in recent years. London improvisers make similar comparisons between their music and the music made by the American musicians associated with the AACM, who base their performances on compositional frameworks. As I am attending primarily to the London scene in this writing, I will continue to explore the ethics of negation, exclusion and reduction that inform the music making practices of the majority of the improvisers in my study.

The emphasis on exclusion and reduction leads to questions around the viability of sustaining a music based on a fundamental negation of other forms. To bring this question down to the level of practice, we might ask to what degree it is possible for improvisers to exclude the materials of other music forms, and how listeners might interpret improvised music in relation to the other musics they hear every day. As I will continue to argue throughout this discussion of the modernist ethos of London improv, the exclusion of the materials of popular music heightens our awareness of their absence, in a sense bringing them to mind as the unmarked other of a performance event. The

autonomy of improvised music, or the desire for "absolute difference, nonrecognition, and nonreference" in the music, is therefore somewhat undone through acts of negation, as neither improvisers nor listeners can claim to be unfamiliar with the dominant musical forms in Western culture (Born 1995, 16). Ingrid Monson (2009) proposes the term "intermusicality" to address the complex relationship between the modernist ethos and the internalized musical assumptions established through the dominant musical system within which subjects are socialized. Monson suggests that "people hear music over time as well as in time; that is, they listen in relationship to all the musics they have heard before, recognizing in particular performances similarities, differences, quotations, allusions and surprises that contextualize their hearing in the moment" (2009, 26). I would add to this frame Adorno's assertion that "no consciousness can assume a greater innocence than it actually possesses" (1998, 276). This definition of intermusicality offers a compelling framework for theorizing how musical subjects interact with the different musical forms they come into contact with in daily social life.

In the present context, the improvisers in my study necessarily create their music with an awareness of the ever-accumulating history of London improv, their relationship to their particular influences, and the "commercial, folk, and non-Western" musics that co-exist in Western society with improvised music (Born 1995, 16). In other words, improvisers' creative practices, and the interpretative strategies of listeners, are contingent on their knowledge of the music that they have heard up to the moment of an improvised musical performance. The modernist ethos of London improv thus functions in a dialectical relationship with a certain pre-determined level of shared understanding

between participants, as meaning is contingent on "familiarity with the internal logic of works" and the capacity to implement the "implicit schemes of perception and appreciation which constitutes… musical culture" (Bourdieu 1984, 2). The improvised music field is distinguished from other fields by the acceptance and expectation of a high degree of mutability in the music, yet there are certain codes and signifiers which define the improvised music field as a distinct domain of musical practice, and that provide a discursive framework for the interpretation and creation of improvised music. The interpretive schemes that enable listeners to find meaning in music, and for improvisers to make music, are dependent on the recognition of "sonic interrelationships… created through music-making and listening practices that are part of the web of larger social and cultural meaning" (Monson 2009, 26). The practice of reflexively avoiding the conventional tonal, rhythmic, formal, and timbral materials that characterizes the work of many improvisers in the London improvised music field thus is mediated by the context and history within which improvised music is created and interpreted.

This basic concept of excluding certain materials in order to allow equitable communication between improvisers who might not be familiar with each other has become a defining element of the practice of free improvisation in London. The character of this exclusion, as articulated by Prévost and other improvisers in my study, is not a defensive move against the aesthetic contagion of popular music, but an attempt to articulate and maintain particular social ideals through acting as producers, rather than consumers of culture. By making such a claim I am not intending to obscure the aesthetic ideals embraced by improvisers, which clearly tend towards relative ideas of dissonance

and difference from popular music, but to underscore the different mode of production of London improv from the music made by the composers Georgina Born spoke with. Specifically, as I will explain in more detail in Chapter Five, improvisers are forced to work on the margins of the cultural field, with very little economic support for their activities. The music survives through a collective and individual do-it-yourself approach to cultural production, as the dominant economic system is ambivalent, if not hostile, towards the music made by the improvisers I interviewed. Unlike the music in Born's study, improvised music does not need to "legitimize its present position of official subsidy in the absence of a large audience," as it has neither of these things; rather, their position on the fringes of the free market allows for improvisers to frame their activities as a critique of the "dominant order" through the practice of music that sounds dissonant and noisy to the average musical subject in Western society (Born 1995, 4). The improvised music field is thus defined through a general politics of social resistance to the mainstream of consumer culture, and an imagining of the improviser as a self-actualized subject who can disrupt the "hierarchical musical division of labour between composer as creative authority, performer as constrained interpreter, and passive audience" (Born 1995, 58).

III – Sphere of Influence

The idea that improvisers are attempting to generate an autonomous musical practice through avoiding pre-existing formulations means that we might conceive of London improv as consisting entirely of sounds leftover following the conscious exclusion of

materials that would be familiar to the average listener in Western society. Yet as Eddie Prévost suggests, free improvisation doesn't replace other musics, nor, as I have maintained throughout, does it arise fully formed out of the musical ether. Rather, the aesthetic choices of improvisers are determined by the prescription to avoid—or perhaps more accurately, deconstruct and manipulate—the narrative forms, relationships of consonance and dissonance, and harmonic progressions of popular music. The accumulation of these choices, as reiterated in live performance and documented on recordings, has resulted in the creation of a set of limitations, conventions, and materials that have come to signify free improvisation for musical subjects socialized within the dominant tonal system. But this negative definition of improvised music doesn't take into account how the sonic codes that we now associate with the practice of London improv arose out of a particular material history; specifically, the sound of London improv is a product of the various musics that influenced the early generations of free improvisers. Based on my ethnographic research, in which I spoke with improvisers about how they began making music in this way, I have come to think of improvised music as arising out of a nexus of jazz, classical music, and popular music. Jazz is the most formative influence on the improvised music field—at least in terms of the first generation of London improvisers, most of who worked as jazz musicians. But there is an almost equally strong connection to the concepts of experimental and avant-garde European classical music, and improvisers declare themselves in a myriad of ways in relation to other high art musics. Popular music plays a smaller role in terms of the borrowing of specific sonic and conceptual materials, but as I suggested in the preceding section it is

perhaps the most determining influence on the sound of London improv through improvisers' fundamental negative relationship to the tonal system and the socio-economic structures that mediate mainstream musical culture. By exploring how the musicians in my study work with these formative influences it becomes possible to establish a material context for the more abstract aesthetic and political ideals that motivate the activities of individual improvisers. The following section will provide context for the "taking it from scratch" ideal through developing a detailed history of the sonic materials that characterize London improv.

I will start this portion of my analysis by returning to comments from American bassist Barre Phillips, who worked in the jazz and contemporary music scenes in New York City in the late 1950s and early 1960s, before relocating permanently to Europe in the late 1960s. Phillips spent some time playing with the foundational figures of the London improv in the late 1960s, then moved to France in the early 1970s and stopped working in conventional jazz formats altogether. He told me how he got free improvisation, and his comments introduce the key material influences on the aesthetic formation of London improv:

> My first experience with free improvising was in 1960 in California, with three other friends—piano, saxophone and percussion. It was in direct reaction and stimulation from hearing Ornette Coleman's music on record and a brief run-in with Ornette. We started playing, and it was just experimental. It didn't become a band or anything, we were just interested in experimenting with things. We didn't know what to do at all, so we made some graphic charts. Ian [Underwood, saxophone] was a composition student, so he was into contemporary music, and we were all familiar with Harry Partch and things that were happening around him. So those were the first experiments.

The connections Phillips makes between free jazz and experimental classical music were echoed by many other participants in my study, although Phillips, by virtue of geographic location, had a more direct connection to the formative American free jazz scene than the European improvisers.

In his book *Improvisation* Derek Bailey (1993) offered a similar musical genealogy to Phillips. Bailey worked as a professional jazz musician in London during roughly the same time Phillips was working in New York, and connected his inspiration to extend his musical activities to the European composers of the Second Viennese school:

> Beyond the immediate influence of the musicians I was playing with, the basis of my improvising language came from an interest in the music of Schoenberg's pre-serial, 'free' atonal period, the later music of Webern and also certain early electronic music composers… [The] very clearly differentiated changes of timbre which characterised some early electronic music was the sort of thing which could assist in assembling a language that would be literally disjointed, whose constituents would be unconnected in any casual or grammatical way and so would be more open to manipulation. A language based on malleable, not pre-fabricated material. Generally I was looking, I think, to utilise those elements which stem from the concepts of unpredictability and discontinuity, of perpetual variation and renewal first introduced into European composition at the beginning of the 20th century. (1993, 107)

Bailey is very clear here about defining the roots of his musical aesthetic, many of which he shares with the composers in Georgina Born's (1995) study. As I described in the previous section, the difference between London improv and the music in Born's study is in how these dissonant and disjointed materials are treated—Schoenberg and Webern fixed their materials in notation; Bailey and Phillips were interested in manipulating similar sounds in the course of performance. Yet the point remains that Bailey, whose aesthetic ideals and instrumental techniques continue to be a significant influence on the

London improvised music field, developed his personal creative practice through an active engagement with the theories and compositions of an earlier generation of European modernist composers. Bailey's claiming of influence by specific European composers is echoed in Steve Beresford's description of the history of the London improvised music field, in which he underscores the diverse creative paths of his contemporaries:

> Of course, we certainly listened to Albert Ayler and John Coltrane and all that stuff. But we were trying to incorporate Western composed music ideas as well. We particularly liked *Sinfonia* by Berio. But we also listened to any other free jazz coming out of America, as well as anything out of Holland, Germany or England as well… If you look at the roots of all the free improvisers—Phillip Wachsmann (violinist) studied with Nadia Boulanger for instance, and Dave Tucker (guitarist) played in The Fall—there's an incredibly diverse set of influences there.

This assessment of influence aligns with Phillips's and Bailey's statements around jazz and classical music, yet adds to our understanding of the material tradition of improvised music by situating the work of the London musicians within a wider context of European music. As a member of the second generation of London improvisers, Beresford began working in the improvised music scene in the mid-1970s, by which point there was a significant amount of recorded documentation of improvised music from various parts of the world. So his comments recall the moment when improvised music began to develop its own musical conventions and social structures, at which point influence could come from within the improvised music field as well as through relations with other musics. I will examine this process in more detail in Chapter Six. For the present investigation I wish mainly to call attention to the specific influences, as stated by improvisers themselves, that mediate their musical practices.

My intention in introducing these statements of influence is to situate the improvised music produced in London within a more or less defined material tradition of modernist and experimental music. Although the generative process of the musicians involved in the formative years of the improvised music field were based on the aesthetic idea of performing without pre-determined structures (and without reference to the materials of popular music), the sounds they were working with were not the unknown leftovers following a conscious process of exclusion. They were instead transformed versions of the basic materials derived from a particular set of influences, of which jazz and avant-garde/experimental art music were the most frequently mentioned. This situation demonstrates what Georgina Born refers to as the antimony of modernism—although improvisers might pursue the aesthetic ideal of an autonomous, non-referential music making practice, it is not possible to create music that exists outside of the historic and social context within which the improvisers live. In a sustained critique of interpretations that decontextualized improvised music, Alan Durant wrote:

> [As] regards developing a politics of improvised music on the grounds of 'novelty' and the possibility of escaping strictures on conventional sound associations, what seems clear is that novelty exists only in situationally specific relationships of transgression and transformation of existing codes, rather than as some 'pure' alternative to them: there is no new musical realm to discover that isn't at the same time a restructuring or reconstruction of the old. (1989, 273)

Despite Durant's well-reasoned arguments, the discursive framework of improvisation continues to emphasize modernist ideals of rupture, transgression and innovation at the expense of recognizing the history of the sonic materials at play in the improvised music field. The above comments from three different improvisers serve to confirm Durant's assessment that there is "no new musical realm to discover that isn't at the same time a

restructuring or reconstruction of the old," as even as staunch an improviser as Derek Bailey, whose concept of non-idiomatic improvisation has served to reify the notion of improvisation as an autonomous activity, situates his personal practice within a specific European musical tradition. Bailey's use of terms such as "manipulation" and "variation" in describing his relationship to the influences he claims reveals the importance of the specific social and musical context to the particular sound of a free improvisation.

IV – The London Improv Ethic

With the preceding material context in mind, I will turn now to an exploration of the more abstract forces that work on the "taking it from scratch" ideal. Improvised music performances are mediated by the idea that by excluding pre-formulated structures certain sounds will emerge that perhaps could not have been planned in advance, and cannot be repeated in the future. So in this sense improvisers are taking it from scratch, as they do not have specific forms and patterns to work with. But there are conventions, acceptable sounds, and a larger performance practice that provides both a starting point for communication between the players (and the audience), and a general outline for how a performance will sound. The notion I explored in the preceding paragraphs around how improvisation is tied to the deconstruction and manipulation of known or existing materials is a fundamental part of the London improv ethic.

Frederic Rzewski's comments on his experience with free improvisation in the 1960s illustrate some of the assumptions that inform the improv ethic:

> In improvised music, we can't edit out the unwanted things that happen, so we just have to accept them. We have to find a way to make use of them and, if

> possible, to make it seem as if we actually wanted them in the first place. And in a way, we actually *did* want them, because if we didn't want these unwanted things to happen, we wouldn't improvise in the first place. (in Cox and Warner 2004, 269)

This particular conception of improvised music emphasizes the importance of contingency, or the idea that improvisers are wilfully opening themselves to the possibility of making musical mistakes. Although this kind of passive acceptance of the consequences of performing without pre-determined structures is one aspect of the improv ethic, I contend that the dominant ideology in the improvised music field involves a more active pursuit of the modernist ideals of innovation, experimentation and difference from popular forms. Eddie Prévost has generated a substantial amount of writing on the ethos that motivates his practice, and his thoughts reveal a rigorous, modernist approach to improvisation:

> Finding a new sound, mastering its production, and then projecting it: this is the work of a meta-musician. It is commitment to this investigative ethos which sets him apart from the technocratic ideal: he is not concerned with the production of perfect examples of a given form. Certainty comes only in the constant search for a sound to meet the need of the meta-musical context. Sensing, evaluating and acting, in creative dialogue, are the medium of the meta-musician. (1995, 3)

Prévost follows this manifesto with a shorter summation of his musical imperative: "Music ever afresh is needed to renew creative life-forces and reaffirm the inexhaustible potential of human existence" (1995, 41). The imperative to renew life-forces through sound was revealed, albeit in a more subtle fashion, in the ways that other improvisers in my study spoke about their desires to explore techniques that deconstructed the rules and structures of the musics they were trained in. Kenny Wheeler's account of his early experiences with SME exemplifies the experimental ethic that motivates improvisers:

> I was a bit frustrated because I wasn't really getting many jazz gigs, and I wasn't too good at strict bebop. Then I heard about the Little Theatre Club, where these young guys were playing this new kind of thing. So I went there a couple of nights, but I didn't like the sound of it very much. Eventually they asked if I would like to sit in, and I said, 'Why not?' So I did sit in, and think I just went berserk on the trumpet for ten minutes. I suppose I went back because I realized that you could actually play anything you wanted with these players.

The improvised music field is fundamentally informed both by an inter-subjective attachment to experimentation and rupture that connects free improvisation to the larger tradition of musical modernism I explored earlier in this chapter, and by improvisers' subjective attraction to exploring new sounds on their instruments.

The basic "investigative ethos" that Prévost refers to manifests in the ways that some of the improvisers I interviewed evaluated their performances in terms of how many new sounds and relationships they were able to develop out of their familiar materials. Pianist Howard Riley described his performances in these terms:

> The reality is that with most people who improvise around 80% of what they play is something they've played before, but if they're good there will always be 20% of something that is new. That's the reality of it. I know there's a great myth that everybody's coming up with fresh things all the time, but this isn't true. It's just edging forward very slowly, and that 20% difference pushes you forward.

Other improvisers give different odds for an ideal performance—Barre Phillips puts his ratio at 95% materials he has played before versus 5% new sounds discovered in the moment of performance. Rather than questioning the statistical accuracy of these kinds of measurements, I instead want to point out the basic assumption underlying these calculations: improvisers are aiming to find and project new sounds through pushing against the boundaries of their current repertoire. In terms of the wider improvised music field such developments are entirely subjective, as Riley and Phillips did not claim that

they were finding things that had never been played by anyone—only sounds, techniques, and relationships that they had not played before. The basic imperative to attempt to develop new materials, in conjunction with the overarching modernist ideal that new sounds be distinct from the familiar conventions of popular music, determines the overall sonic properties of an improvised performance as much as the basic premise of starting without structures.

From the listeners' perspective, it might be difficult to tell if an improviser is discovering new materials or not, especially if we are not familiar with a particular player. But the audience goes to improvised music performances expecting that the musicians will manipulate and vary their chosen materials, rather than reproduce pre-composed works. So the improvisers and the audience share certain expectations around what will happen in improvised performances, a situation that is reflected in Derek Bailey's description of the improv ethic:

> A feeling of freshness is essential and the best way to get that is for some of the material to be fresh. In a sense it is change for the sake of change. Change for the sake of the benefits that change can bring. (1993, 108)

The ideal of 'change for the sake of change' dominates the discourse of London improv, manifesting in the kinds of language applied to improvisatory practices—"transgressive, critical, [and] radical" are three such words that are frequently linked to the improvised music field in recent literature on the subject (Fischlin and Heble 2004, 13). Improvised music might represent these traits in relation to the dominant popular musics, but at the level of practice the shifts in materials and relationships between participants in the field take place on a smaller scale than the standard rhetoric around free improvisation implies.

The percentages of new material that Howard Riley and Barre Phillips mentioned are difficult to discern in an improvised performance, because improvisers make micro-level changes to their techniques, attitudes, and creative imperatives on a day-to-day basis, rather than sweeping re-evaluations of their materials with each performance. Using terms that relate to Howard Becker's (1982) ideas about artists as workers, Barre Phillips described the ongoing process of gradual development that characterizes the position of improviser:

> Evan [Parker] and I have been doing this music for a long time. Evan has got the arpeggiated things that he does, and I imagine at some point in every gig he's going to get back to that and carry on his work in that way. And I am very happy that he does that, because it's completely organic, real and representative. He's not just playing the same thing over and over and over again because that's what you want to hear from Evan Parker. He's working on this stuff that is not the same every day, if you can hear that well. It's the same with me.

This interpretation of one of the most well-known and experienced improvisers in the field recalls Alan Durant's more abstract analysis of the basic dialectical relationship between the past and the future in modernist music, in which he wrote: "… there is no new musical realm to discover that isn't at the same time a restructuring or reconstruction of the old" (1989, 273). In some sense, we do want to go hear Evan Parker play the same thing over and over, as these basic techniques are what distinguish Parker from other saxophonists; if we like what he does, we want to hear him do it in performance. Yet as an improviser we expect that Parker is going to shift the details within the sound-world we as listeners associate with the name Evan Parker. Based on Phillips's description, participants in the improvised music field are distinguished from those in other musical fields by their mutual interest in looking for and cultivating these subtle variations. The

feeling of freshness that Bailey, Phillips and Parker seek to cultivate in their music is thus not generated out of radical transgressions and reinventions, but rather through subtle manipulations of materials within the particular parameters that improvisers set for themselves.

Phillips's description of Evan Parker's practice alludes to the economic imperatives that work in conjunction with the aesthetic ideals around the development of new sounds. Many of the improvisers in my study spoke about the importance of developing an individual and recognizable voice, an ethic that led George Lewis to theorize that the "ongoing investment… in fundamental notions of sonic personality" is a clear indicator of the formative influence of jazz on improvised music (2008, 250). I will not delve too deeply into the aesthetic importance of "voice" in improvised music, but in terms of the social position of improviser it is clear that having an individual voice, or being known for a certain kind of technique, is an essential source of symbolic capital for participants in the field. A recognizable sound becomes a kind of currency that can be transformed into economic capital if a critical mass of people wants to hear it—if we like the "arpeggiated things" that Parker does, we might pay to hear him make those sounds.

This process of developing an identifiable sonic personality through so-called extended techniques quickly expands outwards from the individual improviser to the inter-subjective domain of the improvised music field. Put another way, these sounds, once played, become part of the general code of improvised music that improvisers must be aware of to work in the field. As an example, as Barre Phillips mentioned Evan Parker is known for his circular breathing and extended over-blowing of arpeggiated figures on

the saxophone. Parker's relative success as an improviser has meant that these techniques have entered the common lexicon of the improvised music field, and many saxophonists have since made circular breathing part of their instrumental repertoire. This is just one example of how radical innovations enter into the common pool of techniques available to other players—Barre Phillips's many and varied bowing techniques are another, as are Derek Bailey's techniques for voicing harmonics on the guitar. The improvised music code is constructed and maintained through the ways in which the small-scale innovations of a group of individual players are taken up and transmitted over time by improvisers in other locales. Once a technique has been documented on recording, or gets repeated in performance, it becomes available to other participants in the field who might wish to use it for aesthetic enrichment and economic gain. The ideal of developing a recognizable voice as an improviser thus serves multiple functions within the improvised music field.

The ever-expanding stockpile of techniques and sounds available to individual improvisers is just one aspect of the skills required to participate in the improvised music field. For an improviser to get to apply these sounds within a performance setting they must be aware of, and negotiate with, the overarching rules, conventions and structures that regulate the improvised music field as a social domain. At the most fundamental social level, if one does not have a certain level of symbolic capital it is unlikely that one would be invited to perform with experienced improvisers such as John Edwards or Eddie Prévost, as like any other field there is a system of organization that one most work through in order to play with the established figures. Edwards told me that he worked for

many years in the London scene before he felt that he could ask to play with Evan Parker—now he is a regular member of Parker's working group. At the aesthetic level, one needs to know certain things about the materials, approaches, and relationships improvisers such as Edwards and Prévost favour in order to generate a meaningful ensemble performance. I addressed how participants in the improvised music field might develop these competencies in Chapter One, so I will not go into further detail here beyond suggesting that the economic realities of the improvised music field continually work upon both the equalitarian social ideal and the modernist ethos that informs the practice of free improvisation. In other words, mastery of particular techniques and the ability to generate performances without the use of harmonic and rhythmic structures are not enough for participation in the improvised music field. Subjects who wish to work in the London improvised music field must necessarily do so with an awareness of the "particular institutions," "specific laws," and "relations of force" that regulate the improvised music field as an "independent social universe" (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993, 163-164).

To return to the material context of improvised music, even as improvisers push against the conventions and patterns of past musics (and their own techniques) to attempt to create new and innovative music, their practices are regulated by the impossibility of stepping outside of discourse and context. In other words, improvisers are necessarily building on a foundation of shared meaning for themselves and the audience. I attended to this tension between the ideals of freedom and innovation and the "strictures on conventional sound associations" at the macro-level in the preceding section about

specific historical influences on the improvisers I interviewed, and will suggest in the following section that similar constraints on the aesthetic ideals of the improv ethic apply at the micro-level of subjective experience (Durant 1989, 273). As Howard Riley and Barre Phillips suggest above, despite the overarching prioritization of innovation, experimentation and rupture that pervades the discourse of free improvisation, the reality of day-to-day performance as an improviser is characterized by very small scale change, with diminishing returns as one becomes more familiar with the materials at hand and the practices of other participants in the field. In the approximately fifty-year history of improvised music, the overarching practice of excluding materials from more conventional musics has meant that the sounds available to improvisers have become increasingly fixed and limited. Eddie Prévost recognizes this complex relationship between the intention to invent and the possibility of actually disrupting musical norms, and is able to speak to the essential paradox in improvised music from a position of considerable experience:

> When people come to improvisation initially, this whole new world opens up to them, and there just seems to be a hell of a lot of potential places to go. Obviously this narrows down as you do it more and more. When you've been doing it for 40-odd years, you begin to wonder if there is anything new you can do or find. Things become more nuanced, I think. There is less and less area for exploration. This must be the case.

Cellist Mark Wastell made similar observations about the limits of invention at the level of individual practice—his comments here are taken from a larger argument about the viability of the idea of improvisation:

> I'm sure Evan [Parker] quite proudly calls himself an improviser, but his materials are instantly recognizable. Why is it recognizable? Because it's built on foundations. It does have clear distinctions. A musician can't re-invent himself

> every time he picks up the instrument. You can't invent and improvise from scratch—it's an impossibility. Your fingers fall into patterns, they fall into the same place. And the structure of the instrument determines things.

This narrowing of possibilities over time is certainly not unique to improvised music, yet the discursive framework of improvised music prioritizes the initial moments of potential and possibility that characterize the early days of a developing field or an individual's practice. The experiences of the first generation of London improvisers reveal the inherent tensions in the modernist ethos, as the force of the initial break with formative fields and known systems of organization diminishes over time, to be replaced by conventions and codes that signify free improvisation. My highlighting of these limitations is not intended to devalue the practice of free improvisation, but to demonstrate the disconnect between the social, political and musical ideals attributed to improvised music and the day-to-day practices of those who claim the identity of improviser.

Taken altogether, the thoughts from practicing improvisers reproduced above suggest that London improv is determined by what Georgina Born refers to as the "discursive 'laws' of avant-garde culture," as improvisers are "aiming to maximize cultural capital, orientated to the future, and unconcerned with stimulating present demand" (1995, 29). By self-consciously avoiding the harmonic and rhythmic structures of conventional music in order to address a presumed need for "music ever afresh," improvisers position themselves within a long tradition of modernism in art (Prévost 1995, 41). This particular framing of improvised music is useful in that it allows us to connect the practices related to London improv to a tradition of sonic/musical materials,

and to argue that there are considerable historic factors that determine the manifestation of the aesthetic ideals of "taking it from scratch," self expression, and resistance to orthodoxy that inform the discourse of London improv.

V – The Anxiety of Genre

The modernist ethos of London improv—particularly notions around pursuing musical autonomy through excluding references to other musics—has led to an overarching conception of improvised music as existing outside of genre and idiom. As I suggested earlier in this chapter, Derek Bailey's concept of non-idiomatic improvisation has become the dominant conceptual frame that mediates discussions of free improvisation. Although Bailey himself made it clear in his writings that he was aware of the context and history of the music he was making, the dominant discourse of improvised music continues to rely on Bailey's term to prioritize a conception of free improvisation as a kind of universal language that exists outside of the material conventions, assumptions, and listener expectations that regulate other musics. But the resistance to genre classification that pervades the improvised music field comes into conflict with the basic realities of the systems of musical production and consumption in Western society. The tension between the modernist pursuit of autonomy and "the normative pull of idiom"—which has been a theme throughout this chapter—manifests in the discourse of improvised music as an anxiety of genre (Toynbee 2000, 110). As a practice that defines itself negatively against the other musics that surround it, free improvisation is constantly on the defensive in order to preserve its status as a transgressive, radical and critical

music. Yet despite a focus on change, fluidity, and innovation, the practices established by London improvisers over the last fifty years have hardened into a kind of orthodoxy, which, as Howard Becker (1982) convincingly argues, is an inevitable process given the strength of the aesthetic ideals that inform the working methods of creative artists. The following paragraphs will explore this anxiety of genre, with the aim of situating improvised music within the larger social field of cultural production.

The resistance to genre categorization in London improv begins at the position of improviser. As I argued in Chapter Three, the improviser tends to be imagined as a creative artist who relates to sound in a playfully deconstructive way—they are assumed to have the ability to enter into almost any musical situation and manipulate the basic materials of an idiom into something new and unexpected. Claiming the position of improviser (at least in terms of the basic improv ethic I have been describing) therefore implies access to a particular mobility across idioms, which by extension means that improvisers are not defined by the restrictions of any given genre. The aesthetic ideals of improvisers are usually characterized within the discourse as a desire to pursue increased musical freedom in order to allow for maximum personal expression, which in turn is positioned as a protest against the social and economic inequalities that repress the particular community of which the improviser is a member. In other words, the discursive construction of the improviser mirrors the trope of the romantic genius as a subject who has access to deeper emotions and more compelling political ideas than the average citizen in Western society. Although I do not wish to argue against the assumption that improvisers are creative and intelligent individuals, or to dispute the important social and

political work of many improvisers (particularly in the African-American community), the position of improviser in general has been discursively constructed in a way that obscures the process of socialization that allows a subject to produce and interpret particular aesthetic formations. Put another way, the romantic genius trope hides the work that goes into developing the skills to generate improvised performances, the influence of wider musical trends on the decisions of an individual improviser, and the ways in which material and performance conventions mediate how improvisers produce their music.

Jason Toynbee offers a sustained critique of decontextualized notions of expression and creativity in popular music, and his framing is easily transferable to improvised music:

> [To] produce popular music is not at all an intuitive act of expression, but rather something which depends on planning, research and the constant monitoring of the outcome of decisions. It is difficult to find a suitable name for this. Most terms used to describe art and music-making are tarnished by romanticism... (2000, 35)

The idea that the improviser is capable of "intuitive acts of expression," and is thus not restricted by the rules of genre, obscures the cultural competencies that subjects must acquire in order to participate in the improvised music field. As I argued in the previous section, the improvised music field is constructed through the stockpiling of sonic codes and instrumental techniques that allow for participants in the field to work with each other and to communicate with an audience. Most of the improvisers I spoke with talked about their specific musical influences and how they worked their way through the improvised music field to take up the various positions that they currently occupy. Although the basic conventions of London improv can't be acquired in the same way that the scales, song forms, rhythmic patterns or tonal framework of popular musics can—

which is a distinction between my study and Toynbee's—there are certain agreed upon musical aesthetics and social practices that must be in place in order for a meaningful performance to take place. Even a player as resistant to the presumed restrictions of genre as Derek Bailey appeared to favour some level of aesthetic agreement, as evidenced by the following story:

> [English writer] Peter Riley related an anecdote to me: "Probably about 1980 or so I remember one person, I don't know who it was, came who played the vibes and wanted to play with Derek because he played free, like he thought. But Derek couldn't play with him. I mean they did, but Derek didn't enjoy it, and one time stopped and said 'Do you think you could groove a bit less?'" (Lash 2006, 4)

This anecdote reveals that although improvisers might have the skill to fill up musical time without referring to formal structures, their interactions with other subjects who claim the identity of improviser are not necessarily meaningful or pleasurable for the players or the audience. Bailey's reaction to engaging with another improviser who didn't share his approach to free playing underscores the tension between the aesthetic ideals attributed to improvised music and the social realities of performance in the improvised music field.

Toynbee provides a productive critique that illuminates the subtext of the anecdote above:

> Certainly the form's aesthetic *goal* is an unhinged affirmation of the body, the spirit or the particular player's persona. The claim being made here is for a break through into a space beyond the normative confines of the code. Yet the *practice* of free music cannot be exempted from what I now want to call the inevitability of genre. (2000, 108)

The analytical model Toynbee proposes continually measures the aesthetic ideals of music making against the determining influence of the social structures and systems of

meaning that arise around musical practices. So although I do not wish to argue that radically transgressive self-expression and political critique are impossible through free improvisation, there is a specific set of cultural competencies learned through engagement with the conventions of the improvised music field that mediate the activities of those who claim the identity of improviser.

The anxiety of genre that pervades the discourse of improvised music is primarily an aesthetic debate, perpetuated around the discursive construction of free improvisation as perpetually contemporary. Yet it is clear that improvised music functions socially as a genre, much like any of the other forms which improvisers define themselves against. Bourdieu's conceptualizing of art as social practice can provide some insight into this fundamental disconnect that haunts the larger discourse of free improvisation: "… the effort to recognize culminates in classification into a genre, or, which amounts to the same thing, in the attribution of a social use, the different genres being defined in terms of their use and their users" (1984, 42). As Toynbee rightly notes, Derek Bailey and other free improvisers count on a certain level of shared understanding between participants in an improvisation as a point of departure for creative action; this understanding comes out of the "effort to recognize" the sonic materials improvisers are working with. As a critical mass of subjects recognize these sounds as music, they begin to use these sounds to articulate particular identities, and build structures to foster the production of improvised music—or perhaps more accurately, transform existing structures to accommodate the new sounds. Improvisers, despite their focus on innovation and the cultivation of individual voices, remain grounded in the specific structures that enable music to

manifest in the social world, both in terms of audience interpretation and the basic infrastructure that supports day-to-day performance of the music—venues, record labels, media such as *The Wire* magazine, music festivals, and educational institutions, for example. The improvised music field—as a blanket term that signifies the infrastructure, aesthetic ideals, and sets of assumptions around improvised music—is defined through both its identifiable social structures and the more abstract ways it is invoked through discourse. In other words, we can identify it as a distinct field in the ways that subjects from both inside and outside the field refer to it, and through how participants in the field structure their lives around the production and consumption of free improvisation.

For Toynbee, the question becomes not whether or not improvised music is a genre, but how we can interpret the ways improvisers use the inevitable accumulation of convention and social structures that emerge around musical practice:

> The implication for the genre called free music is that *most* of what is played will be highly conventional. [Despite] problems in defining particular cases it is impossible to do without a concept of genre at the level of the text. Even a music maker like Derek Bailey who is strongly opposed to the normative pull of idiom will concede that, as well as being constrictive, genre provides a necessary point of departure for creative action. But whether treated as burden or as opportunity the assumption has been that genre is part of the production environment, that it is something for the musician-creator to negotiate. (Toynbee 2000, 110)

Toynbee's analysis brings the concept of negation back to the level of the individual practitioner, as he contends that some level of shared understanding—both of the conventions of a field and the intermusical relationship between free improvisation and other musical formations in society—is necessary for meaningful communication to take place between musicians and audience. In this formulation it is up to the improviser to negotiate their subjective relationships to the social reality of genre. The subtext of this

analysis is that genres are not just about the particulars of sonic materials: they are social formations as well. Musical subjects in Western society make choices around what musics to attend to using interpretative strategies developed through a prolonged process of socialization. Like the improvisers themselves, listeners need to acquire a level of familiarity with the codes of free improvisation to allow them to find meaning within it. Such a process takes place through an engagement with the social infrastructures of media, record shops and educational institutions, in addition to attending live performances. Genre conventions are thus not only a point of departure for the creators of the music, they also function as markers that allow participants in the field to negotiate their relationship with other subjects and the wider field of cultural production.

The aesthetic debates in the improvised music field around musical autonomy, the ethic of innovation, and the prescription to resist musical orthodoxies that manifest as genre are typical of the kinds of discussions that take place in other modern art forms. Like the European avant-garde composers of the early 20th century, the London improvisers who began documenting their music in the mid-1960s proposed a radical re-evaluation of how we make and perceive music. The discourse around both these musics involves the creation of new systems of organization that can address the aesthetic shortcomings and social inequities that are imagined to be contained within older musical forms. Yet as we have seen these musics have entered into larger systems of social organization to become part of the continually expanding cultural field, rather than precipitating a large-scale re-evaluation of the dominant systems of musical and social organization. Derek Bailey dates this absorption of freely improvised music into the

dominant musical culture to 1974, by which time he claims that free improvisation "had run its course and would probably continue to exist, if at all, only as some kind of generalised influence" (1993, 125). The innovations of Schoenberg, Webern, Prévost and Bailey are still noisy and dissonant within Western musical culture, but these sounds have become known in a way that allows them to be regulated within the cultural field. In other words, the atonal music of the past century has still not been incorporated into mainstream Western culture as anything other than a "generalised influence" that can be dropped into more conventional musics to signify the far out, experimental, or modern.

I recently encountered an example of Bailey's prediction about the fate of improvised music in a review of Toronto guitarist Don Scott's CD *Out Of Line*, where the reviewer writes: "Scott's music has much free improv in it, although there is also a feel for innate structure, harmonic foundations, and even jumpy post-bop" (Chapman 2008, 35-36). In this instance, one can imagine that the reviewer hears moments on Scott's CD that lack a discernable structure, do not groove, have large leaps between notes, and feature some scratchy, unpitched noises from the various instruments. This reading of Scott's music as a composite of various improvisatory traditions is a contrast to the kinds of rhetoric I encountered from many of the improvisers I interviewed, who described their music making practice more as a unified generative process that hinges on the creation of emergent structures. It makes sense that the conventions I described above have since been incorporated into other musics to signify experimentation and an avant-garde aesthetic, as once the sounds and techniques are documented on recording and reproduced in performance they become open to appropriation. But the example of this

particular CD review reveals the distinguishing feature of London improv, at least as it is practiced by most of the musicians in my study, which is the prioritization of unstructured sounds that function without harmonic and metrical foundations.

There is no way to avoid this gathering of conventions and codes which signify free improvisation, as the ways in which improvisers have focused their work on materials and processes that exclude the dominant conventions of popular music have resulted in a music with a clear sonic and social identity. Prévost spoke to the difficulty of resisting fixity in improvised music in his description of his 40 years experience as an improviser, yet he also insists that his workshop is not intended as a place to bring in codes from other musics—such as "jumpy post-bop"—to be manipulated in an improvisatory way. His interests are in working with the materials that arise through the application of the improv ethic I described above. But Prévost's deep engagement with the aesthetic ideals of free improvisation highlights the subtext of the CD review above, which is that London improv has been around long enough that the surface details of the practice have become a code and a signifier that can be learned and manipulated by musicians who don't necessarily share the improv ethic that Prévost advocates. Even for those who do share Prévost's investment in free improvisation, the "inevitability of genre" makes it increasingly difficult to create radical, transgressive and surprising music (Toynbee 2000, 108).

Ig Henneman spoke to these issues around the historical position of improvised music in a description of a performance by several well-known free improvisers:

> There are journalists already who talk about 'improv standards', because there are groups of mostly younger players who know about the medium, the balance and

> colours of contemporary improvised music. There is by now an improv language that people learn as young people. But when it's not really your own language, does it mean anything? I heard a concert of very good players in Vancouver - all four of them were strong players but it was such a boring concert. It sounded like everybody knew how to do the improv standards. They didn't have any need to play, just like how jazz standards can be beautiful but can be awful when they don't have any intensity. For me it was one of the first times I heard strong musicians play, but I didn't like it at all. I don't know that these players always do that, but in that situation it happened. I don't know why.

This account is highly subjective, and it is entirely possible that these musicians were merely having a bad night; part of the improv ethic from the audience perspective is that one must be prepared for unsatisfactory experiences when a performance is entirely improvised. Yet Henneman is speaking to a wider issue in contemporary improvised music, which is how improvisers can continue generating new materials once a critical mass of conventions has accumulated. Paul Hegarty asks a similar question when he writes:

> Once the vista opens up of playing any notes, incorporating any sound, taking any musical approach, then this infinite expanse itself becomes a limit, a pre-prepared instruction to 'explore' this musical universe, that can lead to the ossification of this exploration as simple style. (2007, 53)

As I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this chapter, free improvisation as practiced by many of the London improvisers I spoke with is not about incorporating any sound or musical approach; it is rather about excluding certain materials and working with the remainder. Therefore, the risk of developing "improv standards" is all the greater, as the imperative to explore an ever-shrinking universe of possible sounds and combinations—at both the subjective level of individual practitioners and the global level of the field itself—has led to the establishment of a known and shared body of conventions, assumptions, and materials.

To conclude, this situation of diminishing returns means that despite the grand modernist narrative of innovation, experimentation, and rupture that pervades the discourse of improvised music, the day-to-day reality of the improvised music field is characterized by small-scale change and local, subjective transformations for improvisers and listeners. This is not to say that the improvised music currently being made, or the other musics that incorporate the signifying materials of improvisation, are being made in bad faith in terms of the basic modernist ethos that inform their creation, only that in our current moment improvisers wishing to innovate, transgress the norm, or establish alternative identities have a considerable weight of conventions working against these intentions. The critical faculties of the improvisers themselves are no less than they have always been, and I am not suggesting that further innovation in the field is not possible. Rather, analyses of improvised music need to take into account the social structures and musical traditions that mediate the practices of improvisers if we are going to continue to suggest that improvisation can "advance the future of music" (Born 1995, 4) and propose "alternative social arrangements" to those that have already formed around the production and consumption of the more dominant musics (Fischlin and Heble 2004, 20). The following chapter will attend to these particular social and economic structures that determine how free improvisation is produced and consumed by subjects in London.

Chapter Five – The London School of Improvised Economics

Modernism offers a productive conceptual framework for unpacking the aesthetic ideals and discursive constructions that determine the sound of improvised music, at least as it is practised by a specific group of London-based musicians. The aesthetic assumptions that motivate and regulate the activities of individual improvisers manifest socially as a distinct artistic field, with its own infrastructure, audience, and "relations of force" that generate "specific struggles" between participants (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993, 163-164). This chapter will describe the various structures and performance conventions that arose around the concept of free improvisation in London, and which determine how improvised music is produced and consumed.

The following investigation of the London improvised music field owes much to the basic analytical model Howard Becker (1982) developed in his book *Art Worlds* to investigate artistic production. As I mention in the introduction, Becker's methodology treats "art as the work some people do," and "artists as not so very different from other kinds of workers" (Becker 1982, ix-x). *Art Worlds* is a general analysis of various art forms, but Becker's ideas are easily transferable onto the specific context of the London improvised music field. For example, Barre Phillips used similar language to Becker to describe his role in an improvising ensemble:

> The thing about improvisation is that if you're playing with two or three people, you're in a situation where you're going to hear sound. How do you hear yourself in this sound? Your job as a worker is to make what you are hearing in your ear and what is coming out of the instrument the same thing. That's quite a job, even if you're playing notated music.

In framing improvisers as workers I do not mean to devalue their aesthetic motivations and political intentions, but to use this frame as a metaphor to interpret how the participants in my study articulate and sustain the practice of free improvisation within a generally disinterested economic system. I was drawn to Becker's model when I noticed a recurring theme in my interviews around discussing the economic constraints that regulate creative work. Those who I spoke with who only play improvised music either had day jobs, a supportive spouse, or lived in a state of perpetual financial distress. The improvisers who worked within the professional musician model—by which I mean they played other musical styles in addition to improvised music—endure the insecure financial situation of freelance cultural work for the privilege of playing music full time. In either situation, the London improvisers do not count on support from the government or the state-run cultural institutions, so their creative work is determined by the kinds of lifestyle decisions they must make in order to live in one of the most expensive cities in the world. The identity of improviser is thus not solely an aesthetic formation, based on a particular subjective relationship to sonic materials, but a social position that is articulated through an engagement with the structures and systems that regulate both creative and every-day activities in the locations where improvisers choose to live. Those who claim the identity of improviser in London do a variety of work to enable the continued production of improvised music, and an analysis of these patterns of work can tell us something about how the improvised music field functions.

London shares a similar mythology in the improvised music field as New York City does in the jazz field: they both continue to draw musicians from other locales based

on their association with radically innovative musical communities of the past. In speaking with veteran improvisers from both cities, including Barre Phillips and Evan Parker, the kinds of musical experimentation that took place in New York and London in the 1950s and 60s was made possible by affordable living conditions; a low cost of living meant that musicians could spend a greater portion of their time focusing on their creative practices. When I asked Barre Phillips about his experience playing with Jimmy Giuffre in New York in the period directly after Giuffre lost all of his recording contracts and high-profile performing engagements, Phillips said:

> During that time in New York [the early 1960s] we were playing all the time. I got together with Jimmy [Giuffre] a few times a week for about two years, but it wasn't like were keeping the band oiled up and going or anything, because there just wasn't much work. We were playing for the sheer pleasure of playing, but life was so cheap that you didn't have to work all that much anyway. It wasn't like it is today.

Evan Parker's description of London during the same period reveals a similar situation for the first generation of improvisers:

> You could live on almost nothing if you had no material ambitions. Just surviving, paying rent and eating was very easy back then. Now, it's the opposite. So we were very lucky to meet one another, get to know one another and make connections to each other back then, because now I see that it's harder for people to meet or get a chance to play.

In the intervening years these two cities have maintained their status as important creative centres, and as a result contain a large population of immigrant musicians. Yet the cost of living in both cities has risen so dramatically that the social support systems that allowed for the initial burst of creative activity are no longer available for those wishing to work as full time improvisers in the way that Parker and Phillips have been able to do.

This anecdotal analysis perhaps betrays a too-rosy nostalgia for an era that is already excessively romanticized, but Phillips's and Parker's comments do align with the general economic trends I will describe in more detail later in this chapter. I can also relate to these anecdotes on a personal level, as my own brief experience of the cost of living in London made me long for my return to the most expensive city in Canada. But like New York City, the critical mass of creative practitioners (and potential audience members) in London means that improvisers are willing to deal with the day-to-day challenges of a high cost of living in order to cultivate opportunities to pursue their musical imperatives. In evoking the notion of an easier time for artists I do not intend to idealize the past, or to position improvisers as powerless victims of capitalism; rather, I wish to highlight the resilience of improvised music as a form of cultural expression through exploring how improvisers work to maintain their status as cultural producers, despite economic obstacles.

My focus on London-based improvisers is not meant to elevate their contributions over those of improvisers from other scenes, but to provide context for an analysis of the practice of free improvisation. I also want to clarify that I am not proposing that the participants in my study, or the historic figures mentioned throughout, are entirely responsible for the development of the improvised music field as a domain of practice, as the construction and maintenance of a field is shared across a network of interested subjects from many different geographic locations. The formation of a distinct field also took place over an extended period of time, starting with the innovations in the jazz field of Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, and Jimmy Giuffre in the late 1950s, through to the

break with the jazz field Derek Bailey, Barre Phillips, Eddie Prévost and others initiated in the late 1960s, and finally to the establishment of the improvised music field as an identifiable and autonomous social universe in the 1970s. This process reflects Steven Johnson's description of what he calls emergence, or bottom-up social organization, where the actions of independent individual subjects combine to establish new structures:

> [Plug] more minds into the system and give their work a longer, more durable trial—by publishing their ideas in best-selling books, or founding research centres to explore those ideas—and before long the system arrives at a phase transition: isolated hunches and private obsessions coalesce into a new way of looking at the world, shared by thousands of individuals. (2001, 64)

The formation of the improvised music field did not involve the proliferation of best-selling books, or state-funded research centres set up to test the basic ideas; it occurred through the combined day-to-day musical activities of a group of players who worked out particular musical approaches in their home scenes, documented their efforts on recordings, and travelled to play with musicians in other centres.

Based on this interpretation of phase transitions, improvised music established itself as a distinct domain of musical practice in much the same way as jazz music did decades earlier. Both musics are products of advancements in recording and transportation technology, and therefore took shape in a historical moment when musical subjects were gaining access to, and awareness of, a wider range of musics than had been possible previously. In aesthetic terms, the transformation of existing musical structures ("phase transition," in Johnson's terms) has resulted in the establishment of a series of sonic codes that have come to signify free improvisation to those within and outside of the field. This accumulation of recognizable codes has allowed for the establishment of

improvised music scenes beyond the urban centres of North America and Europe. Improvised music has developed in such a way that despite London's historical importance as a centre for the practice of free improvisation, many of the London-based improvisers I spoke with make a larger percentage of their living performing in the international network of festivals and venues than they do playing in London. That said, my analysis in this chapter focuses on the structures and conventions that mediate the London scene, with the awareness that I am attending to only one part of the larger socio-economic system that has formed around the practice of free improvisation. But the continued vitality of the London improvised music field, despite the adverse conditions of free market capitalism, makes it a compelling example of how the continuing dedication of "thousands of individuals" globally who embraced the "new way of looking at the world" offered by the first generation of London improvisers, resulted in the formation of a new musical domain (Johnson 2001, 64).

The following analysis of the social context of London improv will be based on the assumption that live public performance is the primary location for the practice of free improvisation. Performances function both as occasions for the aesthetic exploration of sonic materials, as I described in Chapter Four, and as situations where improvisers might potentially earn the economic capital required to support their continued creative work. In my observations of the London scene I noted that improvisers organized their social and professional lives around attending, pursuing, or participating in live performances, both public and private (rehearsals, casual sessions), so therefore the infrastructure that enables performances is a determining element in the way improvised

music is produced and consumed. As an example of the importance of performance in the improvised music field, Cornelius Cardew's description of the improv ethic both emphasizes the imperative of aesthetic experimentation, and insists that these experiments take place in the medium of performance:

> We are *searching* for sounds and for the responses that attach to them, rather than thinking them up, preparing them and producing them. The search is conducted in the medium of sound and the musician himself is at the heart of the experiment. (Cardew, Prévost and Barrett 2006, 127)

Cardew wrote these lines in relation to his experiences playing in AMM, and Eddie Prévost continues to reference them as a concise description of his own practice. Prévost expanded on this basic aesthetic ideal by suggesting that it is also important that there be something at stake in the performance of improvised music in order to maintain the critical edge that he contends is essential to the practice:

> The effect of an audience's presence upon AMMmusic gives this situation a sharp focus. The musicians are aware of a further refinement in their perception of the materials and situation in which they must work. It feels a bit like a player playing with someone looking over his shoulder and enquiring of his every move. Yet ultimately he knows that he must get beyond this very personal response if he is to do justice to the work at hand. (Prévost 1995, 27)

Both of these descriptions position improvised music as a social activity, based on an ongoing open relationship between the improvisers, their materials, and the audience. However, the medium of public performance is largely determined by economics, as improvisers require spaces in which to play, media in which to advertise performances, and a certain amount of financial stability to continue functioning as artists in the cultural field. These constraints have a direct effect on the musical practices of improvisers, as they regulate the opportunities for public experimentation. In this chapter I will build my

analysis around an investigation of public performances as the primary location for the articulation of aesthetic ideals, personal and collective identities, and patterns of work.

I – Structuring the Spontaneous

My description of the improvised music field so far has drawn extensively from Pierre Bourdieu's writings on culture, which are based on an interrogation of the relationship between aesthetic practices and the dominant economic structures that regulate subjective action within society. In the preceding chapters I addressed many of Bourdieu's theoretical concepts in the abstract, in order to transplant them onto the particular context I am researching. The following section will give some specificity to the theoretical framework I have been developing through a description of the specific economic context that the London improvisers work within, and an analysis of how these constraints shape their music. Eddie Prévost has written extensively on the relationship between improvised music and capitalism, so an excerpt from his writings offers a constructive starting point for the following discussion—again, this quotation is repeated from my introduction, but is relevant to this new context:

> 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)

The musicians in my study deal with the constraints of the market economy on a daily basis, as their practice of making music that self-consciously avoids popular music conventions means that they exclude themselves, in terms of their creative productions,

from the dominant socio-economic system that mediates Western culture. In London there are few major record labels with an interest in recording or distributing improvised music, and none of the music festivals I attended were sponsored by tobacco, car, or alcohol companies. In terms of the non-market-based systems of support for the arts, the improvisers in my study claimed that there is little government support for their activities, and that free improvisation has only a marginal presence in the academic system. As a result, there is very little economic capital at stake in the improvised music field, so participants in the field must make challenging lifestyle decisions in order to realize their aesthetic priorities. The participants in the London improvised music field thus pursue a distinct do-it-yourself approach to cultural production, an ethic that manifests structurally as musician-run record labels, self-organized performances, and grass-roots organizational initiatives such as Eddie Prévost's workshop and the non-profit advocacy group the London Musicians Collective.

The economic imperatives that regulate the improvised music field have resulted in a shift away from the professional musician model that characterizes the jazz field. Although it may be a romanticized fiction to think that anyone was ever able to make a living playing jazz, the position of jazz musician carries with it certain expectations around the acquisition of musical skills that can be transferred into other, more lucrative fields (popular music, commercial sessions, dance bands, etc.), and the assumption that one is entitled to payment for the use of these skills in performances. The position of improviser is more reflective, economically and socially, of the folk musician model, in which the expectation of payment for making music is significantly reduced and the

required skills more specific. I will explore this dichotomy in more detail later in this chapter, but for the present argument I suggest that although day-to-day public performances are the main locations for the production of improvised music in London, these occasions are not expected to generate a reliable income for improvisers.

The majority of the performances I witnessed in London offered no financial guarantee for the improvisers, which suggests that they pursue performance opportunities in response to other imperatives. Most of the performances I attended were what the improvisers I spoke with referred to as "door gigs"—in this circumstance an individual, or group of interested people, books a venue, does their own advertising, sets a price for admission (which usually was divided into regular and unwaged rates), collects the money at the door, pays for their expenses (rental, promotion, and other incidentals) out of the money taken in on the night, and divides the remainder between the musicians. To add to this challenge, most of the performances I attended took place in relatively small rooms, with little budget for promotion. As a result, audiences in London were usually small (typically between ten and forty people, depending on the venue and performers), even for internationally known local improvisers such as Evan Parker. This is not to say that musicians don't make any money from door gigs, as they might do reasonably well depending on attendance. However, the willingness of improvisers to take on door gigs underscores certain fundamental differences between the position of improviser and the professional musician model I alluded to above. Specifically, there is reduced expectation around getting paid to perform, and an acceptance that the potential for financial remuneration is contingent on how many people come to hear the music. The door gig

has become the dominant model for performances in London, and also for my home field of Toronto.

There are rare occasions where improvisers can expect to be paid for performances, but these are usually connected to multi-artist festivals that function through government, corporate, or private sponsorship. As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the internationally known musicians who make their living from improvised music, such as Evan Parker and Barre Phillips, rely on these festivals for the bulk of their income. Such a situation leads to competition between participants in the field for the few opportunities to be financially compensated for their efforts. Yet these opportunities are rare, and my observations in the London improvised music field correspond with Derek Bailey's assessment of the importance of day-to-day music making (versus formal festival concerts) to the continuation of the free improvisation as a musical practice:

> The bulk of freely improvised music, certainly its essential part, happens in either unpublicised or, at best, under-publicised circumstances: musician-organised concerts, ad hoc meetings and private performances. In other words, simply in response to music making imperatives. And it's easy to see that the more conducive the setting is to freely improvised music, the less compatible it is likely to be with the kind of presentation typical of the music business. (1993, 141)

Door gigs continue to be the most common situation for the public performance of improvised music in London, so they will function as the foundation for my analysis of the economics of the improvised music field.

Within the door gig paradigm, a common model of performance organization in London involves improvisers organizing performances for themselves and their friends, or booking an ongoing series at a particular venue. As an example, during the time I was

living in London saxophonist Alan Wilkinson booked a regular series of improvised music performances he called Flim Flam, at a pub call Ryan's Bar. Wilkinson described his motivation for organizing performances:

> The money situation is so ridiculous in this country. It's very difficult to do regular gigs with decent money. So to keep themselves playing musicians traditionally organize their own gigs. That's how the scene keeps going—musician run gigs that are door money gigs. That's why I don't like to pay for the room, because all the money I get I like to divide amongst the musicians and that's it. Which kind of works, because unlike the rock scene you don't tend to have overheads like sound engineers and that sort of thing.

This subjective account of the economic situation improvisers work with reveals the most determining element of the improv ethic, at least in terms of social relations: the improvisers I heard and spoke with clearly find enough value in their activities to continue searching for playing opportunities, despite the lack of economic return on their investment of time and energy. Wilkinson is just one example of many other musicians who embody this aspect of the improv ethic by proactively organizing their own performances. Derek Bailey's Company Week—an annual performance series he convened from 1977 to 1995, in which he brought together performers from diverse musical fields to improvise together—is a well-known example of this practice, as is guitarist John Russell's Mopomoso series, which is a monthly event that features three sets of ad hoc performances, usually including a set by Russell himself. This trend of musician-organised performances does not exclude or replace the contributions of non-musicians, as I met several dedicated non-musician volunteers who organized performances in pubs and other spaces—Martin Davidson, who co-organizes the annual Freedom of the City Festival in London is one example; another is Sybil Madrigal, who

organizes Boat-Ting, a bi-weekly performance series that claims to bring you "the cutting edge of experimental music and poetry (www.boat-ting.co.uk). Most of the improvisers I spoke with who organized their own performances would rather somebody else do this work, but as Wilkinson notes, improvisers take on these jobs out of necessity, to keep themselves playing.

The many nights I spent at The Red Rose Club revealed it to be a compelling example of how the aesthetic formation of improvised music is maintained by a network of unpaid participants working with a bottom-up organizational system. Based on my observations of performances at this venue, the London improvised music field, like other economically marginalized art forms, is sustained by the assumption that improvised music is a meaningful and worthwhile pursuit, so the economic realities of the cultural field means that creating the conditions that keep improvisers playing requires considerable personal initiative from participants in the field. To the best of my knowledge, The Red Rose itself operated from a relatively neutral aesthetic position—the owners rented the back room for various cultural events, and provided the minimal infrastructure of space, heating, reasonably clean washrooms, and beer for sale in the front room. Apart from these basic amenities, most of the labour related to hosting a performance was performed by a small community of volunteers—sometimes musicians, sometimes not—who set up the chairs, took money at the door, and cleaned the room afterwards. In other words, like any other artistic field in which public performance is a key component, improvised music performances depend on people to do "whatever the artist, defined as the person who performs the core activity without which the work

would not be art, does not do" (Becker 1982, 24). Yet the economic situation in the improvised music field is such that there is little motivation for professional promoters, venue owners, sound engineers, etc. to get involved in the music, so the improvisers themselves take on jobs not traditionally associated with the position of artist. The improvised music field as a social domain thus arises out of the complex relationships between the artists, the interested non-artists who attend, organize, and generally support the music, and the neutral forces that provide necessary infrastructure that the more active participants cannot—e.g., the owners of venues who provide performance spaces, and the media outlets that print free events listings.

This brief analysis of the ways improvised music performances are organized in spite of the absence of sustained economic support underscores how the field depends on the efforts of individuals and small groups for its day-to-day existence. Cellist Mark Wastell—who owns a small record shop in London in addition to being an active performer in the field—described the grassroots, do-it-yourself ethic that enables improvised music to survive in a hostile economic climate:

> In my experience, whether it be staging concerts, running retail outlets, small labels or whatever, it's down to individuals really. They're not company led, there's no board of directors. It's always down to individuals who decide to do something. So that's how this endeavour continues, right across the globe. It's no different in Tokyo, it's no different in New York, it's no different in Berlin. It's exactly the same everywhere you go—individuals who have made a mark, who have run concerts, festivals and labels to little reward outside of the immediate scene.

Wastell builds his description of the scene through a contrast with the larger economy of popular music, which is assumed to operate with a corporate structure. His breakdown of locations and roles within the global improvised music field recalls Bourdieu's assertion

that although they are somewhat autonomous, discrete fields are transformed versions of each other, and they all function based on a model of production and consumption. The roles I have mentioned up to this point are similar to those that other music fields require, so Wastell's description points to how, despite the modernist work ethic of many improvisers, the field is regulated by the same economic laws and patterns of work that determine other musics. But as I suggested in the previous paragraph, the improvised music field is distinct from more mainstream fields in the variability of roles that those who are marked as artists must take up. Wastell and Wilkinson are examples of this flexibility, as they took on the jobs of shopkeeper and promoter respectively, both to finance their own creative endeavours and to contribute to the continuation of their local improvised music field. The organizational structure of the improvised music field is thus comprised of participants from a variety of positions in the field, who contribute a myriad of skills and perform labour ranging from promotion, custodial duties at the venues, managing record labels, and playing the saxophone.

My ethnographic research focused primarily on the improvisers themselves, as the people who perform the core activity around which the other participants in the field coordinate their activities. So I will not go much further into the details of the supportive roles filled by non-musicians in the field, beyond echoing Howard Becker's (1982) general argument that aesthetic formations, such as London improv, exist through patterns of cooperation between those who create the art and those who are part of the systems of support and distribution that allow the art form to enter the public domain. Yet as I mentioned in Chapter Two I did get to know Martin Davidson and Tim Fletcher, two

non-musicians who contribute in a substantial way to the documentation and dissemination of the music being made by the London improvisers. So following Wastell's comments I arranged to speak with them formally in order to broaden my understanding of how the field functions. It is also worth noting that it is through these people, and others like them in different cities, that I was introduced to the London scene, so their particular contributions to the scene have had an impact beyond the boundaries of London itself. Davidson's description of his motivations for documenting improvised music reveals the do-it-yourself approach that typifies the improv ethic:

> There was so much incredible music being made, and none of it was being documented. I wanted to have a go at documenting and broadcasting it. Not many people knew about it—there were odd things on the radio, a few hours a year, and very few records available. I just wanted to increase that, and get people abroad to hear about it as well. Plus, being a record collector, it was a long-term ambition to have my own label. At the time when I started I didn't succeed very well, but I did do something. I was always running into financial problems, which were very restrictive on what I could put out. The process of making records I find very enjoyable, though it's a pain to try to sell the stuff.

This documentation project started in 1974, and continues despite the harsh economic realities of being a small-scale record producer. To save on costs, Davidson designs all the packaging, often mixes and masters the recordings himself (particularly the archival amateur recordings from the formative years of the scene), stores the stock in his house, and ships the discs himself to distributors, stores, and individual customers. Emanem is a very small operation, and depends solely on Davidson's efforts for its existence, but his dedication to improvised music has made the label's extensive catalogue an invaluable aural history of London improv. Emanem has also allowed the practices and sounds developed by musicians such as Derek Bailey, Evan Parker, Barry Guy, Paul Rutherford,

and Kenny Wheeler, among others, to travel the world, helping to establish the improvised music field as a global domain of practice. The economic rewards are few for Davidson, but it clear from his comments above—and from how Emanem has consistently put out records since 1974—that he takes enough pleasure in this work to devote a significant amount of time to the endeavour.

Like Martin Davidson, Tim Fletcher's interests tend towards the improvisers associated with the SME orbit. Fletcher was at most of the performances I went to, so I eventually introduced myself to him and he agreed to an interview. My conversation with Fletcher was formative for how I came to think about improvised music, as his activities as a documentarian are founded on an astute interpretation of certain fundamental aspects of the improv ethic. Fletcher has been recording performances since the mid-1990s, and as a result he has a significant private archive of the London scene; his field recordings made in various venues far outweigh his collection of commercially released recordings. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine that he would have time to listen to all of the recordings he makes himself, let alone to attend to formally released recordings. Martin Davidson told me that he stopped taking recording equipment to gigs many years ago, but now if he hears a performance that he wants to release he can ask Fletcher for a copy. Many of the improvisers on the scene know Fletcher, and they permit him to record their performances in exchange for copies should they ask him for them; they also seem to have a verbal agreement that the improvisers will retain the rights to the recordings if they are deemed worthy of commercial release. Some of his recordings have been released commercially on Emanem and other labels, but most of them he simply keeps

for posterity in his private collection. In our conversation Fletcher described his motivations for doing this work in a way that offered a compelling frame for the kind of analysis I have been undertaking:

> I feel that it is important to record the small gigs in the back rooms of pubs—the day-to-day sense of the music. Because it is a day-to-day sort of music. For a lot of these people it's their life. Roger Smith [guitar] said an interesting thing in an interview recently—he said he didn't see himself as an artist, but as an artisan. He saw being a musician as an ongoing job. It is not about creating specific works, which I think is the interesting thing about recording it week by week. It's not about the great work, the final version. You can never have the perfect recording, because it contradicts what the whole thing is going on about.

Fletcher's conception of London improv as "a day-to-day sort of music," and improvisers as workers engaged in an ongoing creative process, is a concise reduction of the arguments I have been making throughout this dissertation about the disconnect between the discursive framework of improvised music and the social practices of improvisers. His practice of recording small gigs mirrors Derek Bailey's comments about how "the bulk of freely improvised music, certainly its essential part, happens in either unpublicised or, at best, under-publicised circumstances" (1993, 141). The improv ethic revolves around the practice of pursuing opportunities to play, either publicly or privately, for the purposes of both subjective enjoyment and musical experimentation. In much the same way that improvised music is characterized by the constantly shifting moment-to-moment interactions between musicians, Fletcher's practice is built on a basic conception that the improvised music field, as a social domain, is constructed through the day-to-day activities of improvisers, as they negotiate with each other and the other participants in the field to maximize their opportunities to make music. By attending and recording casual gigs, Fletcher is attempting to capture the way these negotiations play

out over long stretches of time. Fletcher's framing of improvised music became the model for this chapter specifically, but also for my general investigation into the relationship between the social formations and aesthetic ideals that mediate the ways the London improvised music field functions.

Between these two dedicated fans of London improv, the SME orbit is thoroughly documented on recordings that are widely available. So although there are other strong aesthetic movements in play in London—the AMM approach to improvising, for example, is entirely distinct from the practices developed by musicians from the SME orbit—the frenetic, rapidly changing, dissonant and noisy music of the SME tradition of improvised music has come to signify British free improv to many listeners outside of London. Martin Davidson's efforts with Emanem are just one example of a self-contained independent recording operation; in addition to organizing their own performances, many improvisers run their own record labels to document their activities and potentially generate extra income. An early example of this kind of initiative is Incus Records, which was formed by Evan Parker, Derek Bailey and Tony Oxley in 1970. Incus, according to the label website, is usually referred to as "the first independent, musician run record company in Britain." The site goes on to state: "Overlooking one or two short-lived predecessors in the 1950's, that's probably true. Motivated partly by the ideology of self determination and partly by an absence of an acceptable alternative, the policy is centered on improvisation" (Incus records website: www.incusrecords.force9.co.uk). Parker and Oxley parted ways with Incus in the mid-1980s, and now Karen Brookman-Bailey, Derek Bailey's widow, oversees the operation.

Eddie Prévost also runs a label and publishing imprint, Matchless Records, to document his musical work and writings and those of his colleagues. When I asked Prévost about the paradox between his anti-commodification stance and operating a record company, his reply was something to the effect that this contradiction is a necessity for improvisers within the dominant economic system—he cannot make a living entirely on performing, so the sale of recordings helps to generate capital to support his ongoing creative work. Recordings are a way for musicians to build a following outside of their local territory, and to develop symbolic capital through media reviews and play on relevant radio stations. In the current climate of digital copying and piracy, recordings are becoming more of a way for improvisers to generate interest in their live performances than a direct source of revenue. Musician-run record labels might not generate substantial economic capital for improvisers, as they are catering to a small community of interest, but the combined aesthetic and symbolic value for improvisers means that many are still willing to invest their time and energy in documenting and distributing their music.[15]

According to most of the participants in my study, these independent record labels, and the network of performance venues in London, are almost entirely self-supporting, as improvisers claim to have had little luck in securing economic aid from public arts funding bodies. The older improvisers in particular frequently referenced the imbalance between state sponsorship of opera, symphonies, and ballets, for example, and the amount of money that is allotted to improvised music. The negation of the basic materials of popular music has served to code improvised music as high art, but it is left

[15] Other examples of improviser-run labels include Confront (Mark Wastell), Ping Pong Productions (Steve Noble), Psi (Evan Parker), and Stichting Wig (Ig Henneman).

to the free market in ways that some improvisers argue the art forms of the 19th century, and the composers of contemporary notated music, are not. The London-based improvisers frequently compared their situation to that of their colleagues in other European countries, particularly the Netherlands, which they perceived as having better state funding for the kind of activities they were engaged in. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter many of the musicians in my study—including Evan *Parker*, Kenny Wheeler, and the members of AMM—make most of their money, in terms of their musical work, performing in Europe. Kenny Wheeler only rarely performs in London, but during our interviews he mentioned upcoming recordings in Italy and tours of Germany; he also has a manager to handle his engagements in Europe, but books performances in England himself. But the Dutch musicians I spoke with told me independently that their situations have changed for the worse since the formation of the European Union, and that it has become more difficult for them to make a living in their home country. So it seems, based on anecdotal evidence at least, that we are in a moment where the previously lucrative touring circuit in Europe, which supports many musicians in both England and North America, is changing in ways that might adversely affect the global improvised music field.

The absence of equitable support for the arts was a common theme in my discussions with London improvisers, as London improv occupies a liminal space between art music (through the aversion to the sonic materials of popular music), commercial music (through a presumed relationship to jazz), and folk music (in terms of the lack of notated compositions and the "illegitimate" modes of acquiring the skills to

improvise) (Bourdieu 1984, 25). In my interviews it was clear that most felt under-valued in the cultural field, yet there were a variety of opinions on how to negotiate the inequitable distribution of arts funding. Writer and trumpet player Tom Perchard's comments on the issue of government funding for improvised music illuminate the contrasting levels of political engagement that characterize the different generations of London improvisers:

> You're not likely to hear a younger generation musician complain about the lack of funding, or that the arts council won't give them money to do this or that; whereas if you talk to Eddie [Prévost] or Evan [Parker] you'll hear a lot of that, because they're into politics. They've all been members of one sort of political organization or other at one point in their lives. They've been on the ground. To some extent it seems like a worthwhile process for them to engage with political bartering, and that's born of the times. But this is not a politicized generation—we're not involved in political groups, and not interested in politicking. Seymour [Wright] is always applying for funding, and sometimes he gets it. But he doesn't take a kind of 'us against the system' attitude; he tries to fill in the forms really well. If he doesn't get it he puts his things on anyway, and works around the obstacles. That's really the way it's always been—there wouldn't be any free improvising if it wasn't. I don't want to say it's an entrepreneurial approach, but there's a very pragmatic angle to it. People take satisfaction in setting up their own label or gigs.

These thoughts from a member of the younger generation of improvisers—Perchard is in his early thirties—reiterate issues I have been exploring throughout this analysis of the economics of the improvised music field, specifically around how the field persists through a pragmatic approach to cultural production and social organization that is built on assumptions of the value of free improvisation as a musical practice. As Perchard says, first generation improvisers Eddie Prévost and Evan Parker were involved at different times in government committees that dealt with arts funding, and both fought to secure better support for improvisers—Prévost was on the board of the Jazz Centre

Society in the early 1980s (which was the forerunner to Jazz Services, a jazz advocacy body based in London that organizes tours, concerts, and educational initiatives throughout the UK), and Parker was on the jazz sub-committee of the Arts Council England in the early 1970s. They are both no longer involved at this level, but continue to lobby these and other bodies for representation and balanced funding. My experience with younger improvisers reflects Perchard's description of his contemporaries, who seem less inclined to work with the "change from within the system" model, and put on their performances whether or not their applications for funding are successful—if they bother to apply at all. Therefore the musician-run independent record labels and door gigs constitute an alternative network of organization that runs parallel to, yet mostly outside of, the "legitimate" systems of cultural production that government arts-funding bodies attend to.

Alan Wilkinson's approach to organizing public performances is an example of the pragmatic attitude that informs the improv ethic, and like many other improvisers I spoke to he positioned his efforts as an oppositional act against the public arts funding system. Unlike other improvisers however, Wilkinson frames ethic of "getting on with it" in a positive way, a sign of the vitality and importance of improvised music:

> I think one of the strengths of the British art scenes in general, like any area of left field art that is poorly financed by the government, is that it happens in spite of everything. Which means that artists are quite strong as a result, because you have to be quite determined to carry on, as no one on high appreciates you at all.

In Wilkinson's assessment, the harsh climate improvisers work in generates a strength of purpose that results in compelling art, for if one is not particularly dedicated to the aesthetic and subjective values of the music, then one will not last very long in the

improvised music field. Regular Wilkinson collaborator Steve Noble added to this "strength through adversity" notion by suggesting that the kind of subjective satisfaction Perchard alluded to is a necessary foundation for working in the field:

> In England you're kind of own your own, as there's not a good feeling from the people who you would assume would help support this area of music, like the arts bodies. You have to find a way of surviving. Part of that is enjoyment—if you're not enjoying doing the gig, what are you doing this music for?

Martin Davidson and Tim Fletcher clearly fit within Noble's paradigm of enjoyment and individual satisfaction, as they continue to produce recordings that document the scene despite structural and economic limitations. Wilkinson and Noble themselves have been active on the London scene for over two decades, so clearly both find enough meaning and enjoyment in the music to continue to perform for door money. But there is a political component to the decision to make improvised music as well, which supplements the basic enjoyment derived from acts of creation and social interaction with like-minded individuals. Barre Phillips explained his motivation to focus his activities on improvised music in politicized terms: "When I made a choice to play improvised music it was for social reasons, to take a stance. In the overall scene, it's important that there is the improvised music experience, next to the commercial use of music." The musical imperative of "getting on with it," of assuming the importance of free improvisation as a form of expression within the wider cultural field, is a defining characteristic of the improv ethic that mediates the London improvised music field. This imperative is articulated through the kinds of decisions participants make to pursue (or attend) performance situations that might not be economically lucrative, but that allow them the creative freedom to make the music that they want.

Since the improvised music field continues to function as an identifiable musical domain, despite the dearth of economic capital, it is clear that the concept of free improvisation does something important for participants in the field which can't be reduced to simple economic terms. Sociologist Peter Martin has written extensively on the issue of meaning in music, and his thoughts offer a compelling framework for theorizing about why participants in the improvised music field devote so much time and effort to this music:

> Why should music matter so much in contemporary culture? I have suggested that this may well have something to do with the effectiveness of music, not in stupefying the masses (as Adorno thought), not in either representing or challenging conventional morality (though it can contribute to these things), but quite simply in its ability to give people a sense of secure identity—whatever they wish that to be—and a sense of belonging at a time when the accelerated pace of economic and technological change is making it increasingly difficult to achieve continuity and stability in social life... From this perspective, music appears not as the manipulator of passive victims, but as a means through which individuals can actively construct a sense of self and proclaim a distinct identity. (2006, 65)

As my overarching concerns in the present analysis are with how particular aesthetic ideals and economic constraints determine the sound of London improv, how and where this music gets made, and the position of the improvised music field within the cultural field in general, the kinds of subjective questions Martin raises must be left to run in the background. My analysis of the London scene will continue to work backwards from the basic assumption that the existence of the improvised music field is evidence that the concept of free improvisation does something of value for musical subjects, and that this shared, inter-subjective meaning leads them to sacrifice time and energy for "little reward outside of the immediate scene" (Mark Wastell, pers. comm.). The next section will

address the details of the performance conventions that became established within the basic economic context I have described thus far.

II – Courting Conventions and Spatial Dimensions

The above description of the basic economic structures of the improvised music field, and the related work ethic of improvisers, is intended to provide context for theorizing about how London improv is produced and consumed. From this foundation it is possible to move into an analysis of the specific performance practices of London improv, which is necessitated by the ways in which free improvisation is discursively constructed as somehow essentially different from other musics. The following investigation will loosely follow performance theorist Richard Schechner's analytical model for describing cultural events, which involves five key points: "1) a special ordering of time; 2) a special value attached to objects; 3) non-productivity in terms of goods; 4) rules. Often special places—non-ordinary places—are set aside or constructed to perform these activities in" (2003, 8). A musical performance obviously attaches special value to instruments, and in the preceding chapters I addressed some of the rules that determine the sound of improvised music performances. So in this section I will attend to some of the more mundane aspects of improvised music performance, including the kinds of spaces the music is made in, the ensemble organizations that typify the practice, and the basic assumptions about the music that are enacted through the medium of public performance. This level of analysis is based on Schechner's (2003) basic argument that the

fundamental assumptions, conventions, and locations of performances are no less important than the aesthetic and political ideals that motivate the participants.

London improv continues to be determined by a modernist/avant-garde conception born out of the originary break with its formative influences, so the rhetoric around the music reveals an uneasy relationship to notions of performance conventions and genre fixity. To address this issue, I will begin this section with some thoughts from Howard Becker, who offers a useful framework for thinking about how even radical artistic shifts depend on standard performance conventions:

> As with political revolutions, no matter how much changes, much stays the same. Composers may use new sounds and notations; musicians may play their instruments in unfamiliar ways and use new kinds of equipment. But composers still produce scores which, however unconventional, function as parts that the performers read and use to guide their performance; performers play in public events called concerts or recitals, lasting a conventional two hours or so; audiences attend at a specific time and sit quietly while the performers play, frequently having bought tickets to the event as a result of learning about it through publicity and newspaper stories. So composers, performers, audiences, ticket sellers, renters of halls, and publicity people still cooperate to produce these events, even though the nature of the event has changed. (Becker 1982, 307)

Despite the radical political rhetoric, dissonant sonic materials, and unorthodox instrumental techniques that characterize London improv, improvised music performances are structured in much the same way as other musics, sharing many qualities with jazz performances in particular. Improvised music performances usually take place in a space with some sort of separation between audience and musicians, the evening is usually divided into sets, each set is approximately forty-five minutes to one hour long, the audience sits quietly, listens, claps between pieces, and has usually paid to be there. In addition to these performance conventions, the commodification of the music

in recorded form is also similar to other musics, with the compact disc as the main medium of documentation, the same methods of distribution (record shops, mail order, digital downloads), and similar conventions around recording either live or in the studio. These basic similarities between London improv and other musics, as enacted through performance (both live and recorded), align with Bourdieu's conception of fields as at once discrete entities and transformed versions of each other. So although the rhetoric around improvised music retains a character we might associate with discussions of political revolutions, in practice the music manifests through long-established conventions relating to spaces, media systems, and patterns of work that are fundamental to the way music in general is produced and consumed in Western society.

In previous chapters I introduced some basic thoughts about the venues for London improv, and how different participants in the scene favour different locations—some like to work in clubs, others prefer to work in environments where the focus is more clearly on the music than on the business of selling food and drink. While in London I attended performances of improvised music in a wide variety of spaces—from concert halls, university auditoriums, a vault under London Bridge, church basements, and on a boat floating on the Thames River. But clubs and pubs are still the most common setting for the day-to-day practice of improvised music; performances in other spaces are marked differently, by which I mean they occur less frequently, are booked well in advance, and tend to be coded as special events.

Pubs, as the main venue for public socializing in London, are obvious settings for the performance of improvised music. Aside from their ubiquitous presence in English

culture, many pubs have the structural advantage of a back room or upstairs space that is separated from the main bar area. The existence of such spaces was essential to the initial development of the improvised music scene in London, for they provided a location for experimental music making that was accessible to the public, yet isolated from the distractions and noises of other public spaces. The Red Rose Club, as I described it in the previous section, was a good example of this performing situation. The revenue generated by selling alcohol in the front of the pub meant that the musicians were more or less left alone to do what they wished in the back room, so there was no need to make music to please a general audience. The Little Theatre Club, where the SME conducted their formative musical experiments, is another example of such a place, as the owners of that space allowed John Stevens to use their stage after the theatre show was finished. But the reconfiguring of the back room of the Red Rose Club into a snooker hall perhaps signals a shift in the ways that pub owners are using their resources; the leftover spaces in London that once were an affordable venue for improvised music are now being transformed into more reliable revenue generating units.

Although many pubs in London have the advantage of ready-made infrastructure for music events, the non-commercial character of improvised music means that the organizers of door gigs cannot guarantee an audience or a profit for those who own the spaces. The example of The Red Rose Club withdrawing its welcome for music events is a reminder that pubs are private businesses. As a result, pubs are only part of the ever-shifting network of venues in London—many performances take place in less conventional spaces, and improvisers have had to be resourceful in finding new locations

in which to play. John Stevens was particularly known for his ability to convince art gallery curators, church administrators, warehouse owners, and anyone else with a suitable room to allow improvised music to be performed in their spaces. Improvised music shares this problem with finding venues for non-commercial (or at least non-mainstream) art with other performance-based art forms. Richard Schechner described a similar situation in the theatre field:

> Environmental theatres—built in cheap hit-and-run spaces, often in out-of-the-way neighbourhoods—exemplify a resistance and alternative to the conglomerates. But environmental theatres exist only in the creases of contemporary society, living off the leavings, like cockroaches. (2003, 183)

Improvised music generally requires less equipment and space than theatre, so the alternative spaces in which I heard improvised music were not quite as colourful as those Schechner describes, but many of them did lack the basic comforts we might associate with dedicated music clubs.

The equivalent venues to Schechner's "environmental theatres" in the London improvised music field are rooms not originally intended for music, so there may not be a stage, a piano, a sound system, or any of the other materials one might expect to find in a proper music venue. Steve Noble, who has worked in many different performance environments, offered a fairly comprehensive description of the two basic venue models in the London scene:

> There has always been a very strong working class line through the improvised music scene—sort of 'no nonsense', or no pretension. And pubs sort of provide that. On the other hand, when the LMC [London Musicians Collective] had its place with the filmmakers' co-op in Gloucester near Camden, in an old rail building, they had a little office space with nothing in it. The performance space had chairs and little heaters, but no bar and no toilet. So it was very functional, and a great place to play. But it didn't have anything to offer apart from the

> music. If you wanted to get a beer, you had to cross the road. Drink has always been a big part of it, so pubs provide that when you play in one.

The performance space offered by the London Musicians Collective clearly had few luxuries. It ran on a volunteer basis and had no income other than donations and contributions at the door. These sorts of alternative venues have had a direct influence on the kind of music that the improvisers make. For example, the scarcity of pianos in alternative venues has meant that piano players such as Steve Beresford have had to diversify their performance practices. Beresford often performs on analog electronic instruments, amplified found objects, and toy instruments he finds in dollar stores; he has made a virtue of this necessity, and developed a highly individual and creative musical language on tiny sound-generating objects that he can carry to the gig in a backpack. In a similar move, Steve Noble has had to pare his drum kit down to a bare minimum of parts for ease of transportation and to maximize room on stage. These improvisers are willing to make these kinds of concessions in exchange for the creative freedom that non-commercial spaces provide.

The loft scene in New York City in the 1970s is another well-documented example of the trend towards musician-organized performances in found spaces. George Lewis, who was a prominent participant in the New York loft scene, described it in a way that translates easily onto the present description of the situation in London:

> The loft network developed as part of the general move among experimental musicians to develop performance environments that eschewed the codes and genre policing of conventional jazz and classical performance… These newer art worlds needed alternative spaces in order to get their experimental work before the public, expanding the set of positions available for the music. (2008, 349)

The loft scene in New York City seems somewhat equivalent to the pub scene in London, as these were pre-existing public/private spaces where improvisers could arrange performances of experimental music. According to Lewis such spaces have been in the decline since the 1980s, because, like the pubs in London, 'blank' urban spaces are increasingly being converted for maximum revenue generation. The imperative to maximize creative freedom means that improvisers are continually searching for new spaces that will allow them to pursue their aesthetic priorities, which results in a constantly shifting network of venues that generate their money in other ways, and spaces where the music is the focus but the environment is less comfortable.

Once a performance has been arranged in any of the settings mentioned thus far, improvisers usually structure their ensembles in one of two ways—the dominant models are ad hoc meetings between musicians who either don't know each other at all or who play together only rarely, as championed by Derek Bailey, and long-term ensembles who perform together regularly, such as AMM. Eddie Prévost described these two distinct models that continue to determine the London improvised music field:

> [Derek Bailey] enjoys mismatch and confrontation: his mutuality seems to exist only at the point of agreeing to perform. Such a philosophy inevitably pushes its advocate into a corner, and perhaps generates in consequence some 'un-thought of' response. Bailey's aesthetic departs before commonality can congeal into a convention... In contrast to Bailey's interest in voicing before common language and understanding develop, AMM implicitly accepted the difficulty in appreciating meaning and sought therefore to develop a diversity of communication. This of course brought its own crop of contradictions, amongst which looms the question whether common understanding can indeed be achieved, and whether it matters. (1995, 13-14)

Derek Bailey's aesthetic ideals are well documented on recordings and in his book, and his term non-idiomatic improvisation, which is an expression of his particular aesthetic

prescription, has had considerable traction amongst other improvisers. This situation has led to the ad hoc being discursively constructed by many improvisers and commentators as the most pure form of improvisation, even though longer term associations between improvisers are much more common in the London improvised music field. As Prévost explains, AMM has followed the opposite path from Bailey, and over the past forty-five years has taken on the challenge of pursuing the modernist ethic of innovation in the context of regular performances with the same people.

These two examples are at the extreme ends of common practice; many of the other musicians in my study fall somewhere in the middle, as their patterns of work involve both ad hoc groupings and long associations. The working pattern of improvisers typically involves semi-permanent groups that play together for a time before disbanding due to the migrations of people, or a general shift in the priorities of the musicians involved. As an example, Barre Phillips had a band with saxophonist John Surman and drummer Stu Martin called The Trio, which toured Europe and recorded two LPs in the early 1970s before disbanding over musical differences. A more recent example is that during the time I was living in London, John Edwards and Steve Noble played together frequently in a trio format with various other improvisers, including Alan Wilkinson, saxophonist Lol Coxhill, and guitarist Alex Ward. Each of these trios was ongoing, playing shows and recording at sporadic intervals. To borrow a phrase that recalls descriptions of the jazz field, Edwards and Noble were the top rhythm section team on the improvised music scene. In terms of day-to-day music making then, the majority of the improvisers in my study work within a specific network of musicians who share

similar aesthetic concerns, rather than prioritizing the search for new people to play with as Derek Bailey did. These networks gradually shift as new participants enter into the improvised music field, established ones leave, and creative priorities shift. By looking at the patterns of work of the improvisers it becomes possible to conceptualize improvised music as social practice, rather than reducing it to a prescribed aesthetic that manifests primarily through ad hoc performance.

The ad hoc ideal is perhaps a holdover from the early days of the SME at the Little Theatre Club, where the band on a given night was comprised of whoever happened to show up. Kenny Wheeler described the situation: "It was a small scene in the beginning, with only eight or nine players—John Stevens, Derek Bailey, Evan Parker, people like that. They were great players, and we all just did what we wanted to do." According to Wheeler, the audience at the Little Theatre Club was minimal at best, so it seems like this regular gathering functioned as much as a workshop as a formal performance. The SME's most famous album *Karyobin* (1968), which includes Wheeler, offers a recorded example of Stevens' organizational ethic, as according to Wheeler the line up of himself, John Stevens, Evan Parker, Derek Bailey, and Dave Holland had not played together in that combination before, nor did this configuration play together afterwards. Yet since the formative years of the improvised music field there has been a shift away from this type of community music making, as fixed ensembles have become the most common model for improvised music performance. Wheeler connects this shift to a decline in what he calls "casual gigs":

> You could always sit in on the free jazz scene. People didn't mind that. They didn't have a set routine of numbers they were going to play, so if you were all

> right you could just join in. One of the problems now is that there are no more casual gigs. Nobody will ring and ask, 'Can you do so and so on Wednesday?' Now they have to know three months ahead, even for gigs that don't pay very much. There are no gigs for next week now.

The scarcity of performance opportunities, and the related economic demands on subjects living in an expensive city like London, means that improvisers must book their ensembles in advance. Again the pragmatism of improvisers has led them to respond to this disappearance of casual gigs by increasing their level of preparation and organization for what gigs there are. These performances might still feature ad hoc groups of musicians who do not play together regularly, but the participants are planned in advance, and advertised as such, so it is not expected that other improvisers will sit in. Eddie Prévost's workshop, and a similar weekly event in London called The Gathering, continue to offer ad hoc-style situations that are determined by whoever happens to show up, but these are not presented as public performances—if you go, you are expected to participate. In this way, London improv has become more event-based, even though the basic improv ethic, as Cardew described it, involves the exploration of new sounds on a day-to-day basis, rather than preparing them in advance and presenting them at a show. Yet this ethic is tempered by how the cultural field is currently organized around formal performances, where improvisers book a venue, do some promotion, and hope that an audience shows up to at least cover the expenses. Thus the basic creative imperatives of communitarian experimental music making conflicts with the market-based structures that regulate the public presentation of music.

This tension is highlighted in performances that do feature ad hoc ensembles, as in my experience the ad hoc model is most prevalent in contrived situations such as

festivals and recording sessions arranged by label managers—in either case an external party organizes the event because they wish to hear certain players together. An example of this trend is the ECM album *Time Will Tell* (1995), which features an improvised collaboration between Paul Bley, Barre Phillips, and Evan Parker. ECM producer Steve Lake put these improvisers together in homage to the Jimmy Giuffre 3—Bley played in the original trio, Phillips was the replacement for original bassist Steve Swallow, and Evan Parker frequently mentions the 1962 Jimmy Giuffre 3 album *Free Fall* as an important touchstone for the first generation of London improvisers. This trio did a short tour of Europe and recorded a second CD, but is not a working group that persists through internal motivation from the players. Rather, ECM, based on the assumption that ad hoc meetings between experienced improvisers will generate great music, financed the project, and when they were no longer willing to do so the group went on indefinite hiatus. This is not to say that the players did not enjoy working together, or that the music they made was not worthwhile, but the life cycle of the group illustrates current realities in the improvised music field, and how the discursive framing of the ad hoc as the most productive working model (following Bailey's example) does not reflect the day-to-day practices of the majority of improvisers.

The predominant working model in the improvised music field, at least at the local level, is closer to Seymour Wright's description of his practice:

> I've had the opportunity to play with big musical figures that I grew up listening to, and always wanted to play with. But it can be a very strange and odd activity, because although you know their music very well you don't know the person. Whereas the people I have played with for a long time who are my friends, they're the people who I want to play with. The groups I have now, I'm very

> happy for them to continue. As far as I'm concerned, once they exist, they exist until we're dead.

This statement reflects Tim Fletcher's notion that the great majority of improvised music performances take place at small venues within a local scene, between a relatively fixed community of players who share a basic approach to music making. Given this context, it is not possible, or even desirable for the improvisers I spoke with, to work with new and unfamiliar people all the time. The social bonds that form around a shared interest in the aesthetic qualities of improvised music are thus reflected within the extended relationships between improvisers that Wright refers to. Although not all groups have the staying power of AMM—and even they have had several membership shifts—the day-to-day manifestation of London improv emerges out of a small group of musician who share an aesthetic ideal and a basic work ethic.

The above interpretation of the character and shape of the improvised music field is a general reduction, based on my observations of the London scene and my experiences as a musician in Toronto. Clearly there are specific events in the improvised music field that differ from the more informal performances that are the foundation of local scenes—CD release parties, improvisers visiting from other locales, and festivals are examples of these kinds of special performances. But the bulk of London improv performances, as Derek Bailey and Tim Fletcher argue, are based on the assumption that regular public performances are a productive environment in which to explore the particular aesthetic ideals that concern improvisers. The creative imperatives of such an ethic are magnified by the lack of financial reward for these performances, although it can be argued that the more performances one does, the more chance there is of making

some money and gaining symbolic capital. However, the practice of performing frequently will of course lead musicians to play in a variety of different situations, and not all improvisers find this favourable to their creative work. As I mentioned in a previous description of the distinctions between AMM and SME, some improvisers do not share this ideal of frequent performance, choosing to focus on more ideal performance situations rather than adopting the professional musician model that has been the subtext of my analysis thus far. The position of professional musician is contingent upon a subject's ability to make enough money playing music to live and function within contemporary Western society, which leads to the pursuit of performance opportunities as a way of making a living. This imperative was clearly a motivating factor for some of the improvisers in my study, but the difficulties in achieving the goal of living solely off of their music, and an unwillingness to make the kind of aesthetic and political compromises that such a lifestyle requires, means that many of the other improvisers in the London scene choose—or are compelled—to make their livings doing other things. This situation is common in other music fields, yet has particular significance in the improvised music field, in terms of identity politics. The following section will explore how the economic context described above informs the ways that participants in my study articulate the identity position of improviser, and the kinds of lifestyle decisions they make that enable them to participate in the improvised music field.

III – Identifying the Improviser

My analysis of the London improvised music field in this chapter has been constructed primarily in economic terms, which in conjunction with Becker's frame of the artist as worker has privileged the notion of the professional musician. The ideal of the full-time artist is dominate in discussions of culture in Western society, as most of us would rather be paid to create art than do the kinds of work that pays for the other necessities and privileges of life. But, as is clear by this point, improvised music is not popular art, so, to repeat Eddie Prévost's assertion from the beginning of this chapter, improvisers must "tread a difficult and often painfully compromising path through the market economy in order to secure a living" (1995, 89). Based on my discussions with other improvisers, Prévost's comment is slightly problematic (or perhaps just unrealistic), as it presupposes that it is an ethical compromise for improvisers to play other musics, and that taking on non-musical work is difficult and painful. Not all of the improvisers I spoke with shared Prévost's stance on playing other musics, and many of those who worked other jobs took personal satisfaction both in the work itself, and in knowing that this work generated the necessary capital to enable them a high degree of creative freedom. In our conversation Prévost framed his argument slightly differently than he does in his book, and his comments reveal the conceptual binary within the cultural field between the full-time artist and the casual worker:

> People who have gone to music college get this obsession about making a career out of it. It's understandable. But you're almost certainly going to hate music in the end, unless you're very, very lucky. Keep your music special. Do something else that can earn you a living if you really are passionate about music. It's the passion that you need to keep, and you will lose it if you insist on it being the main focus of your living, because you're going to be driven to do things on your

> instrument that you don't want to do. And you'll end up hating music and yourself, and probably give up.

So the aesthetic and ethical ideals that inform the position of improviser in London are tempered by a high degree of pragmatism, as those who are interested in making this music take a variety of paths to get to the moments of improvised performance. The following paragraphs will present a series of specific examples to illustrate the complex relationship between aesthetic priorities and social realities that manifests through the day-to-day performance of London improv.

The two basic models of improviser I have been working with so far might be characterized as the professional and the amateur, but such a reduction is inaccurate at best, and pejorative at worst. This binary presupposes the existence of an economic system where skills are exchanged for money. Such a system usually involves an institutional framework to regulate and accredit the essential techniques of a field, and a multi-layered structure to position subjects according to their proficiency in the desired skill. Bourdieu (1984) refers to this model as "legitimate" culture. I used Bourdieu's framing of "illegitimate" culture in Chapter Three to describe the position of London improv within the cultural field, and it is equally useful here for deconstructing the professional/amateur binary. The preceding analysis of the economic structure of the improvised music field should have made it clear that it differs substantially from other musical fields that have a more clear division of labour. There are London improvisers who make more money performing than others, and the venue systems are stratified to some degree, but the social and economic divide between the well-known improvisers and the local players is substantially less than between the concert master of a major

symphony orchestra and the first violinist in a community orchestra operating in the same city. The low economic stakes, the system of underground venues, the informal training process, and the grass-roots organizational structure of the improvised music field more closely resembles a folk music paradigm than the professional/trade model represented in the classical music field, for example There is a clear hierarchy within the improvised music field in terms of symbolic capital, but on the day-to-day level, at least in my experience in London, even the well-known musicians play door gigs in their local communities.

Other trends in the field align improvised music with the folk music paradigm. For example, Eddie Prévost's workshop bears a notable similarity to Irish music sessions I have witnessed at pubs in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where the participants set up in a separate room from the main bar, and anyone who knows the repertoire is welcome to join in. I have also noted a recent trend towards house concerts in both folk and improvised music, where interested listeners (or musicians themselves) bypass the venue system and organize performances in their homes. These structural similarities reflect an organizational system that does not always equate skill with fame or economic gain/potential, or measure commitment and creativity through either official accreditation or sheer number of performances. The improvisers I spoke with who might in another field be classified as amateurs because they work a day job, may be in fact the most fiercely committed to the improv ethic, as they are uninterested in making other music. Therefore, in analyzing patterns of work and positing various models to account for the social practices of improvisers, it becomes necessary to shift the standard paradigm away

from the value judgements contained in the notion of professional and amateur, towards a continuum of practices based on a shared ideal of creative music making.

The full-time improviser is an increasingly rare find, and in my research group it is mostly the older, first generation improvisers who have been able to maintain a career playing improvised music exclusively; most of the younger improvisers in my study either play other musics, teach privately or in schools, or have jobs that had nothing to do with music. The full-time improvisers need to travel frequently, taking gigs as they are offered and being "on" for the audiences when they get there. Evan Parker was a common reference point for other improvisers when they spoke about the few players who make their living playing improvised music. Barre Phillips fits in this category as well, and his comments about Parker illustrate the kinds of demands placed on working improvisers: "It's great that Evan [Parker] can do all that travelling. It's the name of the game. If you're not into the travelling, when you have a particular thing and are a soloist like he is, then you're going to have trouble getting enough work." As an example of how the improvised music field currently functions, Evan Parker came to Toronto in the winter of 2009 to play with some local improvisers at an art space dedicated to improvised music, and far more people came to hear him than ever attend a performance by local players. I was able to contrast this situation with my experiences attending Evan Parker's performances in his home city of London, where, in a striking parallel, his audiences were comparatively smaller than those that came to see visiting American improvisers. This situation illustrates that in the improvised music field, like other music fields, visiting performers draw more of an audience than local players, which means that

for even the most well-known improvisers a life dedicated to making improvised music requires foregoing a secure financial situation and taking on the difficult work of touring.

Barre Phillips has followed a similar pattern of work to Evan Parker, and has managed to work exclusively as an improviser for almost forty years. Phillips's decision to work as an improviser arose out of a particular ethical/political view of the cultural field, and his ability to focus exclusively on projects that he considered to be creatively fulfilling is based on his willingness to forgo certain life comforts:

> I guess sometime around 1975 I had a real choice. I could have chosen to make myself a place in the European jazz scene as a jazz musician, either as a freelance guy or a bandleader. I saw how the scene worked, and could have slogged through it. But I felt that it was more important to play this music, which meant finding a way to afford to do it. So we developed a very low budget living situation, where we lived for ten years without a telephone or electricity.

Phillips's "low budget living situation" is a medieval chapel in a rural area of southern France he has been renovating since the early 1970s, which means that in addition to living without basic amenities, the vast majority of his work involves travelling. The ideal of making a living off of creative cultural work still motivates many improvisers, but current economic realities mean that younger improvisers must devote more of their time to the necessities of living and less to music. Phillips has a particularly informed perspective on this trend, as his son is an improvising bass player who lives in New York City:

> There's no question of asking how one can make a living off of this music, because it's impossible. The young musicians aren't even dreaming about that. They do it because they love to play together and the music sounds good. For them it's about getting an education, getting the teaching job, getting the material thing organized, and if there's still time to play some music, then doing it. More and more I think that's how it's going to have to be.

This assessment of the field again recalls the folk music paradigm, where participants create the music that is meaningful to them without expectation of their labours being transferable into economic capital. The idea of folk music clearly conflicts with the high art aspirations and dissonant sonic materials of London improv, so the connection I am making is at the socio-economic level, rather than the aesthetic. Phillips's description of the differences between his and his son's practices marks a generational shift away from the model represented by the professional touring jazz musician, towards the skilled amateur who uses their work in other areas to support their musical activities.

My intention with these anecdotal accounts is to underscore that even at the top of the improvised music field, improvisers' activities are regulated by fairly serious economic constraints, and they must make substantial sacrifices to pursue their musical imperatives. The example of Phillips and Parker reminds us that we are in a moment when many of the originary figures of London improv are still working in the field. Many of the first generation improvisers have accumulated a significant amount of symbolic capital as representatives of the formative era of the music, so they are well positioned to receive the small amount of economic capital that circulates in the improvised music field, although they clearly still have to work quite hard to get it. In a description of Derek Bailey's position in the field, David Borgo underscores how the improvised music field, despite its discursive framing as a communitarian form of artistic expression, is subject to the same kinds of organizational rules that regulate conventional musical fields:

> While the improvised music world seems insulated from the rapid fads and fashions of the music industry on whole—in both desirable and undesirable

> ways—even here the logic of networks can be hard to dispute. Derek Bailey often adamantly denounces his title as one of the 'grandfathers' of free improvisation, but his career and creative work is still shaped in dramatic ways by the network that has bequeathed him this 'dubious' honor. (2005, 165)

Bailey, Parker, and Phillips's respective positions as formative figures in the music, and that they established themselves at a time when it was possible to live for much less than it costs now to live in an urban centre, means that they occupy a rarefied position in the improvised music field. These first generation improvisers continue to offer a model for other improvisers who would like to focus more of their energies on their musical practices, but the particular elevated positions they represent in the field are becoming less and less available to younger musicians (in terms of the possibility of pursuing a career as an improviser), as the networks that regulate musical production in Western society continue to privilege those who came to prominence in the formative years of the field.

Given this situation, younger participants in the improvised music field have had to develop alternative models of living that enable them to produce the kinds of music that interest them. Bassist Dominic Lash, a young musician who is just beginning to make a name for himself in the London improvised music field, provided a framework for thinking about the patterns of work that currently characterize the position of improviser:

> People make decisions to play this music. The choice becomes, certainly for the younger musicians, to either get another job or play music that is not freely improvised. The Evan Parkers and Derek Baileys of the world have made a living playing improvised music, but there are probably only about fifty people worldwide who can do it.

Second generation improvisers such as Steve Noble and John Edwards negotiate this situation by being less restrictive about the music they play than Parker, Bailey, Phillips, Prévost, and other first generation improvisers. As I mentioned in Chapter Three, they play commercial musics to make money, yet primarily identify as improvisers even as they are engaged in playing functional jazz or popular music. These practices situate Edwards and Noble within the professional musician model, as they have taken the time to develop the necessary skills to make themselves employable within most musical areas that require bass and drums. Yet in terms of their self-directed creative projects, both of these players primarily pursue opportunities to make improvised music; their work in the popular music and jazz fields is in the role of side players. But even the presumed ethical compromise around playing other musics implied by Lash and Prévost does not necessarily result in financial stability, as Edwards's and Noble's continued devotion to improvised music means that they prioritize projects that are creatively, rather than economically, rewarding. These aesthetic priorities, in conjunction with the decline in the kind of commercial work that Derek Bailey and Tony Oxley were in a position to actively reject, means that these individuals still struggle to make a living wage from musical work.

The difficulties of making a living as a musician, no matter what the field, led many of the improvisers in my study to take on other jobs. Some are involved in teaching music, both privately and in the formal education system, but others I spoke with work in areas that have nothing to do with music, from teaching English as a second language to working as an accountant for the London municipal government. For some improvisers

these kinds of decisions are based on aesthetics priorities as well as a basic sense of pragmatism—they are not at all interested in making any other kind of music, or in developing the kinds of musicianship skills required to work as a professional musician. The pragmatic aspect of taking on other work derives from an acceptance that Western society is not structured to allow large numbers of subjects to devote all of their time to the production of experimental art. My regular attendance at Eddie Prévost's workshop introduced me to a community of musicians who work within what might be called the amateur musician frame, but which I have been arguing is more accurately interpreted within a folk music paradigm. Dominic Lash described one specific example that typifies the way improvisers in this corner of the London scene structure their musical activities: "Think of Eddie's [Prévost] workshop, and Nat Catchpole [saxophone]. He was an accomplished young jazzer and made the decision to work at day jobs to pay his bills, so the only music he would do would be the improvised stuff." This exclusive focus on improvised music closely follows the AMM model that I described earlier in this chapter, which involves taking a clear aesthetic stance and working on these ideals with a small pool of improvisers in particular performance situations. By choosing to focus their music making activities on free improvisation, the improvisers who take on other jobs are not necessarily demonstrating a lack of commitment to their music, but asserting a creative freedom that they believe is more difficult to maintain for those who try to work as full-time musicians.

Saxophonist Seymour Wright is a compelling example of an improviser who rejects the professional/amateur binary. Wright works as an English teacher, and in our conversation he described his personal relationship to these labels:

> I think you can be a profoundly committed musician without being a professional, and that you can be a fantastic musician without being a professional. AMM are not professional musicians—well, they are now, but they weren't then. And they're still not making any money at it. You can certainly be a freer musician if you're not a professional.

He went on to explain what he imagined to be unique about the group of musicians who attend Eddie Prévost's workshop, and his description reveals a particularly rigorous approach to improvised music:

> The defining thing about the workshop school is that we've all got other things that are our jobs, so we're not beholden to producing or projecting anything. It doesn't matter if we do concerts and it doesn't matter if we make records, because we don't need to. It's completely different from trying to be a professional musician, and allows us to make different music than professional musicians. I've often thought that if I was trying to be a professional musician, I would be beholden to the consumers who were asking me to play. For example, if someone bought *Hornbill*, that solo recording I did, and asked me to go play in Toronto, if I went and didn't play like that they might be disappointed. I'm not interested in that at all. I think I'm much more concerned with procedure than with product.

Wright's conception of his pattern of work revolves around the idea that it is possible to make more creative music if the musician does not depend on the support of the free market. These comments align with Tom Perchard's description of the government funding system from earlier in this chapter, in which he mentions Wright's practice of applying for government funding, and then putting on his projects whether or not he gets the funding. Such a situation means that Wright and his colleagues are willing to invest their own economic capital (derived from their non-musical work) into their creative projects.

Wright has to work hard to generate performance opportunities, often booking, promoting, and setting up chairs at the venue himself, occasionally taking a loss if attendance is not what he had hoped. But this extra work is clearly worth it to him for the freedom to make the kind of improvised music he and his colleagues want to make. The most memorable performance I attended that Wright organized did not take place in a conventional venue like the Red Rose or the Vortex, but in the vaults beneath London Bridge. The use of different spaces than those more specifically connected to the day-to-day performances of improvised music is typical of this particular alternative model of organization; Wright still works with the basic framework of performance as the main location for improvised music, yet through a self-conscious engagement with the larger field of power he and other musicians have made a space for themselves outside of the micro-economy of the improvised music field, based on their willingness to use their personal resources to produce and present just the music they want to be involved with. Making improvised music is an important part of the lives of the people I met at Prévost's workshop—Seymour Wright has missed only a handful of Prévost's Friday night workshops since it started in 1999—and they have found ways to work within the dominant system that allows them the creative freedom that is an essential part of the improv ethic. Their activities require a conceptual shift away from the over-determining professional musician frame that has been the basis of my economic analysis of the London improvised music field, towards a more inclusive paradigm that reflects the creative ways that subjects structure their lives around the ideal of identifying as cultural producers.

The preceding analysis is intended to provide social and economic context for the interpretation of the practice of free improvisation as the participants in my study enact it. As I proposed in Chapter Four, improvised music—as it is practiced by most of the musicians I chose to attend to—is defined against the conventions and materials of popular music, so pursuing an interest in creating improvised music automatically positions one outside of the dominant economic structures that regulate and reward the creation of commercially-orientated music. Improvised music shares this position on the margins with any number of other experimental art fields, including literature, theatre, and visual art. Also like any other art field, the positions of subjects within the improvised music field are stratified according to "its own laws of functioning," as participants have to deal with the external constraints of the free market economy, and the internal "specific struggles" around the particular types of symbolic capital that are deemed valuable within the field (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993, 163-164). The majority of those who currently claim the identity of improviser operate with the assumption that playing improvised music is not a reliable means of generating economic capital, and that they will have to find a balance between music making and some kind of other work that allows them to maintain a satisfactory engagement with the field.

But the current position of the improvised music field within the dominant cultural field is substantially different from the conditions experienced by the first generation of improvisers, even though the economics related to the practice have never been overly favourable. At various points in this dissertation I have described how the first generation was faced with the task of building an audience, creating new structures

to support improvised music, and defining an identity against the formative traditions that led them to the concept of free improvisation. Earlier in this chapter I used the words of Barre Phillips and Evan Parker to suggest that the first generation was able to accomplish the construction of a new field because of affordable living conditions in the urban centres where a critical mass of artists chose to pursue their creative work. The work the first generation of improvisers accomplished in late 1960s led to the establishment not only of the infrastructure for the practice of improvised music that I described throughout this chapter, but to the identity of improviser that the participants in my study continually claim, negotiate, and re-evaluate. Contemporary London improvisers, including those from the first generation who are still working in the field, now operate in a system where improvised music is a known commodity, by those both inside the field and outside of it. Improvised music has a place in the world, and musical subjects can choose to go to the venues or buy the records in the same way that they make choices about any other way they might spend their time and money. In my conversation with Mark Wastell he referenced a radio interview he heard with John Stevens (conducted shortly before Stevens's death), as an example of the relative stability and self-sustaining character of the improvised music scene since the early 1970s:

> The interviewer asked Stevens if the playing situation has improved or not in the thirty years he had been playing. He said with exception it's more or less exactly the same. This music has a place, it doesn't seem to get above its station, and it never really seems to drop below. It just continues, and I think it's exactly the same for us. The sound of the music might be different, and the technologies used to produce it might be different, but the opportunities to play it live and present it to an audience are maybe exactly the same.

This anecdote aligns with my research findings from the interviews I conducted with London-based improvisers from various positions in the field. The professional musicians I spoke with, and those who work in other jobs, make their decisions based on the assumption that there is an audience for improvised music, even if it is a small one, and that they will come to performances with a certain level of expectation for what they will hear. In other words, following the formative work of the first generation of improvisers, there is a now a group of musical subjects with the cultural competence to find meaning within improvised music, who will seek out the small venues where it takes place and generate discourse about it through conversation with others, writing about it, or even making the music themselves. This does not mean that it is less work for contemporary improvisers to play their music and present it to an audience (based on my experience of the venue and recording situation in London it remains a constant struggle), but that the context of the music has shifted as it has solidified into a relatively stable domain of practice, with its own laws of functioning.

The trend towards fixity represented by the development of the improvised music field into a relatively self-sustaining entity is mirrored in the ways that the basic sound-world has become available to anyone who might wish to incorporate the codes into other contexts, or even to anyone who might want to work in the improvised music field in the same way that an improviser like John Edwards can claim to work in the jazz field. London improv continues to be discursively constructed around the notions of rupture, transgression, and social transformation that motivated the first generation of improvisers, but these ideals are becoming increasingly difficult to maintain as

improvised music takes on the social structures of a conventional genre, and as the sonic materials become known and available to an increasing number of musicians. Eddie Prévost addressed many of these concerns about the future of improvised music in our conversation—not in a particularly nostalgic way, but certainly with an awareness that the hegemony of capitalism continually works to undo the political ideals that he brings to his music making:

> We think of it as still being marginal, but it's a big margin now compared to what it was when we started playing in the 1960s. It's changed now beyond all recognition in terms of its acceptability at festivals and in the media. And people can cross over —I know young trained musicians now who do a bit of contemporary music, a bit of session work, a bit of free improvisation... Now it's become one of the strings you can add to your bow. That's not the way most of the people who began it saw it. They didn't come into it for those reasons. Therefore it's somewhat alarming, unless you've benefited from these so-called improvements in opportunities. So what's happened to it? It's now become commodified, and it's become part of the leisure industry, albeit the more obscure part.

Prévost's comments speak to his continued political commitment to free improvisation, and to how the shifts in the cultural field generated by the first generation of improvisers at once created a space for the practice of improvised music, and opened it up to the forces of commodification that regulate all forms of cultural production. Subsequent generations of improvisers have taken up the aesthetic ideals of Prévost and his contemporaries, and have had to make self-conscious life-style decisions around how best to continue the tradition of improvised music. These have involved either playing other musics or taking on non-musical other work, but in either case improvisers have shown considerable agency in ensuring that improvised music continues to exist. Some have benefited from the improvements in opportunities Prévost refers to, but, to return to

Derek Bailey and Tim Fletcher's foundational point, the bulk of London improv performances still take place in small venues, and improvisers still struggle for an audience with little hope of financial reward for their efforts. The basic commitment to function as active producers of alternative culture still motivates improvisers in the same way that it did the first generation, and the variety of choices contemporary improvisers make to pursue this commitment demonstrates the continued importance of music for constructing a sense of self within an economic system that prioritizes consumption.

My analysis over the past three chapters is a reversal of the scientific method described by Steven Johnson, who suggests that we can't tell how a system of behaviour and interaction is going to look "by looking at the original instruction set. You have to make it *live* before you can understand how it works" (2001, 165). I started my investigation with the assumption that the improvised music field lives, and spoke with individual subjects in order to build an understanding of how their actions at the subjective level contribute to the overall functionality of the field. In Johnson's terms, my intention with these last three chapters on identity, modernism, and social structure has been to reconstruct the original instruction set of the improvised music field, which I have attempted to do through interrogating the relationship between the discursive framework of improvisation as it has developed over the last five decades, and the social practices of subjects who must work within the dominating system of free market capitalism. This analysis has been necessarily backward looking, a process of deconstructing a long-running and self-organizing system in order to see how it continues to operate. The concluding chapter will build from the various claims I have made

throughout this writing to explore how we need to shift our interpretation of the practice of improvised music to accommodate the accruing distance from the originary ruptures made by the first generation of improvisers. This analysis will include a description of recent challenges to the London improvisers, and offer some concluding thoughts about the future of free improvisation in London.

Chapter Six – Reducing the Improvised Music Field

In this final chapter I will provide some historical context for my analysis of the improvised music field by exploring the frame of a "post-improvised music" world, by which I mean—following Derek Bailey's assertions about 1974 as the end of free improvisation as he knew it—investigating how the practice and discourse of free improvisation has changed since it has become a code that can be manipulated by other musicians, developed a relatively stable infrastructure that supports its production, and become a subject of study in the formal education system. I began to think in the terms implied by this frame following my conversation with Steve Noble, who characterized the activities of his generation of improvisers as "walking over the rubble" left by the first generation of European improvisers. As I have argued throughout this writing, the discursive framework of free improvisation has retained the rhetoric of revolution and transgression that is typical of marginalized art forms, yet as the energy released by the originary break in the late 1960s dissipates over time, the practice of free improvisation and the position of improvised music within the cultural field has become increasingly fixed. In other words, London improv is discursively positioned as perpetually contemporary, even as it accumulates its own conventions. Our understanding of the practice of free improvisation needs to take into account the political, social and ethical changes of the past five decades, especially as the improvised music field has become increasingly defined and autonomous from other fields. This separation of the field has had the positive result of providing a space within Western capitalist society for the day-to-day practice of improvised music, but the trend towards self-containment has meant

that the more autonomous the scene becomes, the less able it is to follow through with the modernist ideals of social transformation and transgressive political critique.

To address these issues related to the social aging of an avant-garde art form I will draw again on Howard Becker's writings on art; in this context I will explore how Becker's theories about the life cycle of art worlds apply to London improv:

> As the years pass, [art] worlds settle down and begin to experience their own segmentations, differentiations, and splits. An already developed world commonly defined by insiders and outsiders alike as an art world, complete with appropriate ideologies, aesthetics, and forms of social organization, often (in another characteristic sequence) changes in the opposite direction. The originally expressive art works and styles become increasingly more organized, constrained, and ritualized; organizational forms subordinate the artist increasingly to partially or entirely extraneous sources of control; and the world and its activities begin to resemble conventional craft worlds. In this sense, an art turns into a craft. (Becker 1982, 288)

This assessment of the transformation of art into craft mirrors Tim Fletcher's comments in the previous chapter, in which Fletcher suggested that—based on their day-to-day work ethic—it is productive to position the improvisers he records within the artisan frame, rather than applying the romanticized label of artist. Becker's formulation above clearly resists the romantic interpretation of the avant-garde, as he focuses his attention on what happens after the initial break with a dominant art form, when the aesthetic practices become social practices, and subjects begin to define their identities around the ideologies and social organizations of particular artistic productions.

The increasing organization and definition of the improvised music field is further underscored by the emergence in the past two decades of reductionist music, an occurrence that recalls Becker's (1982) ideas about the "segmentation" and "differentiation" that takes place once an art world begins to settle. Improvised music

continues to be discursively constructed as an inclusive and experimental musical domain, yet many of the improvisers I spoke with framed reductionism as an "other" that has caused social problems for them. This emerging music introduced a new community of people into the cultural field who increased the demands on the scant resources that are available to improvisers. The tension I observed between musicians with different aesthetic priorities working in a very similar socio-economic position within the cultural field demonstrated how political and aesthetic ideals are perpetually mediated by economic imperatives. As a distinct musical form that is defined through a negation of the sound-world that signifies London improv, reductionism functions as a kind of "post-improv" music, and the force it exerts on the improvisers I interviewed reveals the problems with imagining free improvisation as a perpetual avant-garde.

I will begin this chapter by exploring how the notion of a post-improvised music era might offer a productive analytical model for connecting the aesthetic and political ideals of improvised music to the social changes the field has undergone over the last five decades. Following this I will analyze the problematic relationship between improvisers and those working in the related, yet independent area of reductionist music, and will theorize about what this specific conflict tells us about the discursive framework of London improv. The questions I will explore in this chapter will bring together the various ideas I have been exploring throughout this dissertation, with the aim of providing some concluding thoughts on how we might think about the future of free improvisation.

I – Last Past The Post

It is necessary at this point in my interrogation of the discursive framework of London improv to situate the assumptions I have addressed thus far within a historical context. The major break between London improv and the dominant musical conventions and structures that regulated the creative lives of the first generation of improvisers took place over forty years ago, yet the notion of a radical shift away from a dominating norm still determines the practices of London improvisers. In making this assertion I am not arguing that improvised music has become entirely codified in the intervening years, or that improvisers have become complacent in their creative work, but that the developments in improvised music now take place within a more contained social space than they did when improvisers were still connected to the structures of the jazz, popular, and classical music fields. The development of the improvised music field—as a domain of practice that is distinct from the fields from which the improvisers in my study drew their initial inspirations—marked improvised music as a known commodity within the cultural field. In other words, the establishment of an infrastructure of venues, record labels, and media means that both participants within the field and musical subjects from outside make their decisions about this music from a basic awareness of what the music sounds like, how to find (or avoid) where it is being performed, and where it fits within the hierarchy of musical culture in general.

The formation of the improvised music field has been positive, in that we now have the infrastructure and a supportive community for improvisers to follow their creative imperatives, and negative in the way that it brackets off this group of people into

a sub-culture, whose political influence is diffused through a process of ghettoization, passive ignorance, and outright dismissal. According to Howard Becker's (1982) model, this trajectory from radical innovation to establishment art form is a typical pattern for experimental art practices, as it is not possible for an art form to sustain negation and rupture over an extended period of time. Yet as I have argued throughout, aesthetic analyses of free improvisation attend primarily to the substantial differences between this music and jazz, popular, and classical music, and tend to neglect the processes of standardization, organization, and accumulation that take place within the improvised music field itself. The complex relationship between discourse and practice is contained within the notion of the post-improvised music era. Like other experimental artistic movements, the initial decade of London improv was a period of uncertainty and rupture, characterized by rapid creative growth and a restructuring of the musical field. But since that time improvisers and listeners have been working with the established "ideologies, aesthetics, and forms of social organization" that inevitably accumulate around forms of artistic expression as more people take them up (Becker 1982, 288). This claim is not intended to dismiss the vitality and value of the music for those who participate in the field, as there continues to be a community of people, myself included, who engage with this music despite the challenges, but to position improvised music within a broad social/historical context in order to understand how assumptions about the music relate to the cultural field at large.

The discourse of improvised music continues to be shaped by the forces set in motion by the break with the jazz field that took place in the late 1950s in the United

States with the work of, among others, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, and Jimmy Giuffre, and in the mid-1960s in England with the shift by Derek Bailey, Eddie Prévost and others away from their commercial work towards an exclusive engagement with free improvisation. Although the importance of Coleman's and Taylor's work to the eventual formation of the improvised music field cannot be overstated, my focus remains on the London improvised music field, so I will attend to the implications of the self-conscious break undertaken by the first generation of London improvisers. Steve Noble's interpretation of this break is worth repeating to provide context for interpreting the initial formation of the improvised music field and for the resulting analytical frame of the post-improvised music era:

> If you go back to the 1960s when the Dutch and the Germans and the Brits were all coming out playing jazz and trying to discover European improvised music, you can see that those guys had to knock a wall down. They were in situations where no one had heard this music before. Derek Bailey told me a story about a gig in France in 1969 or 1970, and on the bill was Louis Armstrong, and on before him was [Peter] Brötzmann, Fred Van Hove and Han Bennink. I mean, what a bill, because in those days people didn't know what free music was. That's a challenge. We're coming along in the wake of that - we're just walking over the rubble. But there can still be some fine music.

Over the course of my fieldwork I heard other, similar stories from members of the first generation of improvisers about moments of collective uncertainty, where new ways of making music co-existed with other musics before alternative structures were established to support improvised music. Another relevant example came from Eddie Prévost, who told me that AMM appeared on several bills with English rock band Pink Floyd in the mid-1960s, and on one occasion Paul McCartney was in attendance. In this situation, AMM would have had more of an aesthetic connection to the psychedelic sound-world of

Pink Floyd than Peter Brötzmann and Han Bennink would have had to the traditional jazz of Louis Armstrong, yet both these interactions seem beyond the realm of possibility when compared to the compartmentalization of the improvised music field today. Both anecdotes reveal that in the formative years of the improvised music field musicians were more likely to be in the position to shock, surprise, or reach out to an audience who might not have known what to expect. The discourse of free improvisation continues to be informed by the radical potential inherent in these kinds of situations, even though the interactions between improvisers and unfamiliar audiences are becoming increasingly rare. Noble's metaphor about younger improvisers "walking over the rubble" of these initial breaks is thus particularly apt, as the first generation of improvisers left Noble and his colleagues a world that includes the infrastructure and audience for the performance of improvised music, but these performances now occupy a restricted position within the cultural field.

The notion of a break with the dominant structures and conventions of existing fields suggests the implementation of some radical strategies and sudden manoeuvres by the early London improvisers. London improv as we might identify it today was rather the result of a gradual process of development across multiple places by a diverse collection of artists, most of whom were not musical outsiders, but were involved professionally in the dominant musical fields of the time. Many of the participants in my study from the first generation framed the development of the improvised music field as a long-term shift away from other musical formations that took place between approximately 1965 and 1974; the notion of a radical break primarily came from younger

participants in the field. Howard Becker's thoughts on how new fields and practices arise out of an antagonistic relationship between groups of artists offers a frame for theorizing how the improvised music field was initially created and sustained, and for interpreting how its relationship to revolutionary political ideals has shifted over time:

> Revolutionary innovations, involving deliberate changes in the conventional language of the art, inevitably change who can act together to do what... [Revolutions] differ from the gradual shifts in interest, attention, and convention... They attack, ideologically and organizationally, the standard activities of that art world at that time. The ideological attack takes the form of manifestos, critical essays, aesthetic and philosophical reformulations and a revisionist history of the medium, denouncing old idols and exemplars and celebrating new work as the embodiment of universal aesthetic values. The organizational attack aims to take over the sources of support, audiences, and distribution facilities. (1982, 304)

The specific musical practices developed by the musicians involved with AMM and SME were a significant and deliberate departure from the materials and conventions of the dominant idioms, but the process of segmentation and differentiation took some time to unfold, during which public interactions between the established and the emergent musical forms took place. So it might be overstating the case to suggest that London free improv was revolutionary, according to Becker's use of the term. London improv did involve deliberate changes in the conventional language of jazz and classical music practices, and required a realignment of the existing organizations and systems of support for the participants in this shift, so based on my ethnographic research the formation of the improvised music field falls somewhere between the "revolutionary innovations" and "gradual shifts in interests" that Becker suggests characterize artistic movements.

The descriptions of the London improvised music field that I collected from improvisers suggest that the process of establishing the improvised music field followed a

trajectory that is reflective of Pierre Bourdieu's theories about the transformation of existing power structures, rather than Becker's formulation of an "organizational attack" aimed at taking over "sources of support, audiences, and distribution facilities" (1982, 304). To be clear, Becker is writing here about the rhetoric that forms around experimental artistic movements, rather than suggesting that such violent actions against the establishment actually take place, but his reduction is an apt description of the dominant discursive construction of London improv. From our present vantage point, it is clear that the revolutionary musical innovations proposed by the free improvisers did not destroy or displace other musical forms, as the fields from which the early improvisers emerged have continued to exist and develop on their own terms. The early generation of improvisers started out working in the jazz and classical music fields, so they drew on the existing structures and audiences of these fields to support their activities before eventually developing an independent infrastructure of venues, publications, record labels, shops, and audiences that functions in parallel to those of other musics. The revolutionary potential of a new art form is mediated by the existing structures and methods of distribution, so at the structural level improvised music continues to share much with the musical forms that the originary practitioners sought to distance themselves from. But the trend towards autonomy in the London improvised music field, and the subsequent diminishing of the kinds of organic cross-cultural communication between different musics and audiences (or between different generations of musicians) that Noble and Prévost described, means that London improv has become increasingly self-referential and more narrowly defined by those both inside and outside the field.

The energy expended by the first generation of improvisers accomplished the particular goal of establishing an alternative organizational system that allowed for improvised musical performances, but at this point in the history of the field the revolutionary ideals that initially motivated the split from the established forms are in conflict with the reality of these fixed structures. Contemporary improvisers are still walking on the rubble left over from the historical moment when only a few people knew what improvised music was, but as the music has persisted it has become more difficult to sustain the assumption that the musical practices employed within the field can cause the same level of rupture that was possible before the establishment of a distinct improvised music field.

Derek Bailey's book *Improvisation*, first published in 1980, offers a compelling and specific example of the abstract theories Becker and Bourdieu developed around the formation of new artistic fields, as Bailey claims that he first felt the motivation to write such a book in 1974 because of "a suspicion that freely improvised music as an identifiable separate music was finished" (1993, 125). This kind of statement of purpose, in the context of a book that argues for the idea of non-idiomatic improvisation, reveals not only Bailey's tendencies as a musical agitator, but that the conception of a post-improvised music world has been in the air for over thirty years. Perhaps more important than these abstract ideas however is that Bailey's book is an example of a wider practice amongst improvisers of producing written discourse on their activities, a trend Becker identifies in his description of revolutionary art forms: " The ideological attack takes the form of manifestos, critical essays, aesthetic and philosophical reformulations..." (1982,

304). Other examples of active improvisers who have written about their musical practices include Evan Parker and Steve Beresford, who have written liner notes, magazine articles, and commentaries on their work; George Lewis, who has written numerous articles that focus on the relationship between improvisation and racial politics, as well as a substantial book on the AACM; Dominic Lash, who has contributed several articles to the Oxford Improvisers website; and Martin Davidson, who has enriched his documentation of the London scene through the liner notes he has written for his Emanem releases. Of particular importance to my research project are the writings of Eddie Prévost, whose two books, numerous articles, and extensive liner notes for Matchless Recordings releases have ensured that his particular ethos has been documented and disseminated widely throughout the field. I have frequently referenced Prévost's writings throughout this dissertation, as his descriptions of the improv ethic of AMM provide a political and aesthetic counterweight to the more widely known writings and recordings of Derek Bailey and the other SME-related improvisers. Eddie Prévost's books have not had as wide an impact as Bailey's; they address the ideological rather than the material aspects of improvised music, and function as a serious political critique of the dominant power structures, in contrast to Bailey's rigorous, yet playful survey of the concept of improvisation. Prévost and Bailey represent a strong trend amongst improvisers to use both the written word and recordings of their music to question and propose alternatives to the "standard activities of the art world" (Becker 1982, 304). My focus on Bailey's writing in the following section is intended to demonstrate how he

articulates the analytical frame of a post-improvised music era, and is not meant as a prioritization of the value of this book over the other written accounts mentioned above.

Improvisation has served as an entry point for many musicians into the concept of free improvisation in general, and to the music of the London scene in particular. Given the book's longevity it is interesting to note that it was written, according to the author, in response to a feeling that free improvisation had ceased to be a vital and progressive art form. In the present context, a closer analysis of Bailey's book can shed some light on the themes I've been exploring so far in this chapter, as Bailey's writing signified the solidification of an aesthetic of free improvisation to the point where it could be labelled and positioned as an alternative to the conceptions of improvisation that were dominant at the time the book was first published. By basing his descriptions of other musics on the overarching idea of improvisation, Bailey at once posits improvisation as an autonomous force that is applied to specific musical materials, and highlights the distinctions between his musical practices and those of musicians working in conventional idioms. Although in this manifesto Bailey does not directly "denounce old idols" or suggest that the new music is the "embodiment of universal aesthetic values," he does position his own practice, which he developed in conjunction with other improvisers in the London scene, as a new and distinct approach to music-making that rejects the musical rules that regulate other forms (Becker 1982, 304). However, despite the overall tone of advocacy for the new musical form that pervades Bailey's writing, his statement that free music was finished in 1974 suggests a crisis in the music that I argue stems not from the disappearance of the traits that marked it as an "identifiable and separate music," but

from the social separation of the music into a self-contained field (Bailey 1993, 125). By 1974 a significant amount of recordings of freely improvised music had accumulated, and the improvisers had been excluded from the performances and venues that catered to other musics. In other words, the major breaks with the formative traditions of jazz and classical music were finished by the early 1970s, and improvised music had begun to function as a distinct field unto itself.

Bailey's description of the solidification of free jazz into a defined area in the cultural field both recalls Becker's generic description of the life cycle of art worlds, and perhaps offers Bailey's prediction for the future of freely improvised music:

> The revolution that was free jazz is long over and a process variously described as maturing, re-trenchment, rationalisation, consolidation—all the usual euphemisms for a period of stagnation and reaction—has turned much of free jazz into a music as formal, as ritualised and as un-free as any of the music against which it rebelled. Like the rest of jazz it now seems to have very little existence outside the perennial festivals at which it presents its stars demonstrating whatever it was that made them stars. But in these situations free jazz seems to fulfil a somewhat peripheral role, and has never managed to integrate in any way with the main body of jazz which, after first greeting the free development with scorn and vituperation, has ever since contrived to ignore it. (1993, 56)

This admittedly subjective account of the trajectory of free jazz aligns with the way I positioned improvised music in the preceding three chapters. As I described in Chapter Five, the full-time improvisers depend on the circuit of festival gigs for the majority of their income from music, the performance conventions of freely improvised music have more or less solidified, and the structures connected to the formative traditions of jazz and experimental classical music (festivals, academic institutions, media, etc.) rarely incorporate improvised music into their programming. In addition, as I argued in Chapter Four, the sound-world of improvised music has come to function at the level of code, as a

signifier for innovation and experimentation that can be inserted into an otherwise mainstream musical context. Based on Bailey's comments, it is possible to project that by 1974 it appeared to him that the stock-piling of conventions and recordings had already caused the music to become excessively self-referential, which meant that it had lost the critical potential it might have possessed through the negation of, and reaction against, the dominate other musics that the early improvisers were familiar with. Once the improvisers were excluded from interacting with musicians from other fields (and an unsuspecting public), and it became possible to refer back to a tradition of sonic materials, the possibility of improvising new sounds became increasingly difficult. I suspect that this is why Bailey pursued ad hoc performances with players he didn't know, as this unfamiliarity with the overall ensemble context allowed him to reach towards the feelings of uncertainty that had characterized the formative period of the field.

The above analysis is just one possible interpretation of Bailey's malleable and varied text. According to the improvisers I spoke with who knew Bailey, he was more interested in stirring the pot than giving straight answers, so in framing his writing as an obituary for freely improvised music, and proposing the frame of non-idiomatic improvisation, he was perhaps presenting a challenge to those who read the book to keep the experimental ethic of improvised music sharp through a continued engagement with musicians from outside of the improvised music field. Bailey may have imagined London improv to be stagnant by 1974, but his book became a formative text for the worldwide growth of the improvised music field, and helped to discursively position the improviser as a musician who can bring a deconstructive force to bear on discrete material traditions.

The notion of a post-improv era that Bailey implies in his text connects directly to the increasing fixity of aesthetic practices and performance conventions that occurs while an artistic field is transforming into a distinct domain of practice. As Becker suggests, the trajectory from critical practice to establishment art form is typical of experimental artistic movements, and he goes on to propose that these movements have a quantifiable life cycle that reflects their ability to sustain support from interested subjects and institutions:

> Art world growth eventually levels off, with a maximum of the resources which can be gathered and a maximum of the people interested in participating. Some art worlds reach this peak and remain there a long time. In the short run, they seem permanent, as the world of the novel or the film or the classical ballet seems to us now. But nothing, and that includes art worlds, lasts forever. Many change gradually, in ways we have already discussed. Many decline to the point where we might want to say that they have died, although few disappear completely. (1982, 347)

This assessment of a mature art field recalls the interview with John Stevens that Mark Wastell described in Chapter Five, in which Stevens said that improvised music has its station in the cultural field, and that for the last three decades it has carried on at more or less the same level despite the difficulties improvisers face. Stevens was known for his ability to agitate for performances in places that did not ordinarily host improvised music events, and the kind of work ethic he displayed throughout his career is still a requirement for improvisers if they wish to ensure the continuation of the field. Wastell's retelling of Stevens's story fits with the examples of diminishing growth from Noble and Prévost presented earlier in this chapter, in which they mark the shift when jazz festivals no longer saw fit to put players like Peter Brötzmann and Derek Bailey on the same bill as the living legends of jazz, and when rock clubs stopped offering performance spots to

experimental improvising groups. This is not to say that such combinations never happen, as they occasionally do in certain rock contexts, but these events are exceptions rather than common practice, as the social and aesthetic boundaries between the improvised music field and other fields have become increasingly defined. London improvisers have responded to this shift by finding their own performance spaces outside of the corporate structures of other fields, and this network of alternative venues has persisted through the efforts of dedicated individuals, despite the minimum amount of resources available. But the trend towards levelling off and boundary fixity reveals a conceptual dissonance within the improvised music field, as the concept of improvisation itself is discursively constructed as inherently radical, and improvised music positioned as a perpetually dangerous avant-garde, long after the musical community has been pushed to the periphery of the cultural field and reached the maximum amount of people interested in participating.

The eventual exclusion of improvised music from more popular musical domains is not surprising, given the interest in avoiding the materials of popular music that underscores the practice of London improvisers. So there is little question as to why the improvised music field, as a social entity, has had to develop alternative structures for its continued existence, as the music has become limited to those who have developed the rather rarefied cultural competency to decipher and find meaning within the sonic codes employed by improvisers. This is not to say that a listener who is unfamiliar with improvised music cannot have a meaningful experience upon hearing it for the first time, as such experiences surely do happen. But the improvised music field is sufficiently

marginalized from mainstream musics that it is becoming increasingly unlikely that one would arrive at an improvised music show by accident, and without knowing what to expect. The moments of uncertainty that characterized the formative years of the improvised music field did contain considerable power, as audiences at jazz and rock performances were being presented with something that they probably had not heard before. The potential energy contained within such moments of transgression still determines the discourse of improvised music, but on the larger social level these moments of uncertainty between the musicians and the audience are becoming more rare, as improvisers have fewer opportunities to present their music to a wide public. At the subjective level, at least as I interpret the rhetoric I heard in my interviews, improvisers still try to reach for those moments of uncertainty in their performances, and attempt to get to places where they and the audience are not sure what is going to happen. But as Eddie Prévost explained it in Chapter Four, the imperative to explore new sounds within an ensemble and on one's instrument is a process of diminishing returns, and the more experience an improviser has, the more improvised performances become about nuance than transgression. In addition to this subjective experience for the improvisers, as listeners become more familiar with certain players, and with the conventions of the field in general, the moments of possible uncertainty occur on an increasingly smaller scale.

The fundamental restructuring of the improvised music field away from the formative infrastructures of the jazz and classical music fields took place over four decades ago, meaning that the force, scale, and pace of transgression has been reduced since the first generation of improvisers presented their music to an unsuspecting, or at

least uninformed public. Instead, London improvisers have developed their own structures and scenes, and continue to make their music with the support of a small group of listeners. This gradual structural change in the performance situations for improvised music manifests in the conception of improvised music as a day-to-day music, and the assumption that the fundamental work improvisation does for those interested in the music takes place on a small scale, rather than at festivals, on recordings, or in the grand moments of transgression represented by the interactions between disparate musicians and audiences. The dissonance between the political ideals connected to free improvisation and the way the music has seemed to reach its peak in terms of social influence requires a re-evaluation of the discursive framework of improvisation, in order to account for the shifting relationship between the improvised music field and the cultural field in general.

If we are to imagine that improvised music maintains a radical edge that can disrupt normative orthodoxies and propose alternative social models, then we need to contexualize this assumption in relation to the social shifts that have taken place since the formative years of the field. The power projected through the initial break of the 1960s dissipated considerably as improvised music became a known commodity within the cultural field—it has now become one of many musics coded as avant-garde and experimental which musical subjects in Western society can choose to pursue or ignore. This process of commodification has meant that the foundational concept of improvisation itself has lost much of the disruptive power it was imagined to possess as an act of rebellion against a dominating other, as represented by composition. Put another

way, now that the sounds generated through the process of improvisation have become familiar to listeners and other musicians, they can be listened to or dismissed based on the tastes of the musical subject who comes into contact with them, with little regard for the way in which the sounds are produced. My ethnographic research in the field demonstrated to me that there are still innovations happening within the improvised music field, as improvisers follow Eddie Prévost's imperative to "never stop looking" for new sonic places, but the grand moments of discovery and radical transformations of existing materials that signalled a "phase transition" and the emergence of a "new way of looking at the world" are in the past (Johnson 2001, 64).

At this point in the history of the field, the experience of an improvised music performance, at least for those who are familiar with the music, is little different than other musics, where we might appreciate the skill of individuals, the level of communication between the participants, and how they play with our expectations in the generation of their performances. Our worldview might be confirmed or productively critiqued during this experience, but it is difficult to imagine at this point that it would be dramatically shifted, as the accumulating history of improvised music has resulted in the establishment of performance conventions, audience expectations, and a self-referential sonic tradition that has sustained itself for over four decades. Rather, improvised music has settled into a particular corner of the cultural field, where the priorities of the small community of people involved are first of all to maintain the field's current position in the midst of adverse economic conditions, and then, if there is any energy left, to expand the field through an engagement with the structures of other artistic fields. Yet the

persistence of the improvised music field means that there are still ways for subjects to discover the practice of free improvisation and some of those who do experience the music find value within it at the local level; in other words, freely improvised music continues to offer identity, community, and fellowship to those in a position to engage with it. So whether or not it is possible now to remain true to the aesthetic ideals and political intentions that motivated the first generation of improvisers, the concept of free improvisation has retained enough utility in the wake of the formative break that it supports a vital community of interest. The following section will explore the impact of reductionist music on the improvised music field, as an example of how—despite being socially and economically marginalized, and more flexible than other music fields—improvised music has come to function as an established art form.

II – Another Other

In arguing that the improvised music field has become a self-sustaining and autonomous entity I am not suggesting that it has been creatively static since 1974, only that it has come to function as a domain of musical production that is identifiably distinct from the other musical formations at play in the cultural field. Nor is improvised music a uniform practice, as there are a variety of aesthetic ideals that coexist within the general borders of the field; the fundamental distinctions between AMM and SME are one relevant example from my ethnographic research, and the differences between the London, Amsterdam, and Berlin scenes are another. There have been changes within the field since the formative period of the late 1960s, yet these changes are also self-contained in a sense,

influencing those already within the field rather than disrupting the musical field as a whole. The following paragraphs will problematize the notion of free improvisation as perpetually contemporary through a description of the relationship between improvisers and reductionist music, which over the last twenty years has emerged as an other that defines itself against improvised music in much the same way that the early improvisers defined themselves against jazz.

Reductionist music, as it was described by many of the improvisers I spoke with, is characterised by long stretches of silence, very quiet sounds, extended drones, and a notable absence of the kinds of continuous movement and obvious ensemble interaction that characterizes both jazz improvisation and the music we might associate with SME.[16] There is a strong scene for this music in London, and my interview subjects also positioned Germany as an important historical centre for the development of the reductionist ethic. I did not conduct interviews with the prominent members of the reductionist movement—save for cellist Mark Wastell, who is part of that scene—as my interest was in how this new influence affected the practices of the improvisers I interviewed. Therefore, rather than applying the kinds of analytical models to reductionism that I used to investigate improvised music, I will describe reductionism as a force that acts upon my research subjects, and use the ways improvisers evoked this music to broaden my interpretation of the London improvised music field.

The sonic influences that inform London improv have shifted considerably in the last forty years, as the basic aesthetic ideals have been taken up by musicians in different

[16] As an example, see The Sealed Knot (2006): *Live At The Red Hedgehog*. Confront Records.

locales, from a variety of musical backgrounds. Since the formative work of the first generation of improvisers, new participants in the field have introduced sounds and instruments from electronic music, rock, folk, and various world musics to supplement the previously dominant influences of jazz and modern classical music. Jazz in particular has receded as an influence on younger improvisers, as its presence in popular culture in general has diminished considerably in comparison to its cultural position when the first generation of improvisers were developing their aesthetic priorities. There are now multiple generations of improvisers who have learned about free improvisation through the recordings of the early improvisers, and thus don't share the same relationship to, or awareness of, the dominant influences and conventions against which the first generation of improvisers defined themselves.

The shifts in the aesthetics of London improv—which have accelerated considerably with the recent adoption of laptop computers as performing instruments—were substantiated in my interviews with young improvisers, who seem less invested in the strict ideological and political agendas that defined the first generation of musicians. Tom Perchard spoke to the trend towards plurality amongst younger improvisers, and evokes reductionism (which he refers to by its alternate label of lower case music) as a distinct other to improvised music:

> Younger improvisers are less concerned about crossing borders between idiomatic and non-idiomatic forms. They are probably less concerned with a rigorous intellectual, prescriptive approach. So some people will probably do lower case improv, and then do some time-no-changes free jazz, in addition to the kind of music they make at Eddie's [Prévost] workshop. Radu Malfatti [trombonist and prominent participant in the reductionist scene] will turn his nose up at that kind of thing, because he's from an all or nothing generation.

With these comments Perchard recalls Eddie Prévost's concerns about improvisation becoming just part of a skill set for subsequent generations of musicians, which for Prévost means that improvisation loses the critical edge that he and his colleagues applied to their music. But the trend towards taking up sonic materials from a variety of sources, and performing in multiple musical scenes, is increasingly common amongst younger improvisers, as they work with the basic ideas and materials of the first generation to create music that fits with their world, in the same way that the older musicians developed their practices in relation to the jazz, classical, and popular music that they were familiar with. This is not to say that Prévost's concerns about stylistic plurality representing a political and ethical compromise are unfounded, but as the ideological shift Perchard refers to continually modifies the sound of London improv, it is necessary to attend to the affect these changes in practice are having on the improvised music field.

Reductionist music has a historical foundation in London improv, specifically in the practices of AMM, which involve a conscious use of silence, layering sounds that may not relate to each other in obvious ways, and the incorporation of randomly generated electronic sounds. As it has developed into a distinct aesthetic formation however, reductionist music has come to feature even less movement and change than the music of AMM. Tim Fletcher's description of reductionist music points to the basic aesthetic and generational differences between the forms, and indirectly illustrates how free improvisation is discursively constructed as pure improvisation:

> Younger musicians want to tackle different elements of music, so I think the quiet music is really interesting on that score. I think a lot of it is more composed, in the sense that there's an idea that, 'Ok, you're going to play like this in this context.' But then the reductionists would argue

> that it's the same in improvised music, where you're not likely to get long passages of very, very quiet music. The classic sort of improvised music is quite busy, loud and energetic. It has a lot of dynamics in it, but it does cancel out different styles of playing.

There is some overlap between musicians who work in improvised music and reductionism (the borders between the two can be vague), but in a trajectory that reflects the emergence of the identity position of improviser there are those who restrict themselves entirely to reductionist music, and who specifically define themselves against the sounds, practices, and identities associated with free improvisation.

The affects reductionist music has had on the improvised music field were a frequent topic of discussion in the interviews I conducted. Reductionism was usually evoked as a somewhat threatening other, as representing a practice and musical community that conflicted with the activities of improvisers, and that made claims on the limited resources that are available in the London improvised music field. The participants in reductionist music were usually portrayed as a younger generation who choose not to interact with the older musicians, a discursive manoeuvre that recalls how the first generation of improvisers distanced themselves from the jazz players of the 1960s. Martin Davidson's comments on reductionist music are a typical example of the particular tone improvisers used in discussions of this other music:

> Well there's this whole area called various things, like reductionist or lower case music. For me this is very much déjà vu, because certain people like [John] Stevens, Trevor Watts and [Paul] Rutherford were doing that sort of thing years ago. But they would go into it and just come out when they had had enough of it. What's new about it in the last twenty years is that people seem to make a whole career out of playing very little. I enjoy it at times, but don't find it very interesting when it's all that people do.

In this description Davidson not only positions reductionism as an other to London improv, but also situates it within a general modernist concept of history by suggesting that the techniques of reductionism have their roots within the practices of the free improvisers. Davidson's interpretation of the relationship between these two musics suggests that the reductionist musicians have asserted an alternative identity by excluding certain sonic materials from their music, in much the same way that improvisers removed many of the materials and conventions of jazz from their performance practice. This specific assessment of a shift in the improvised music field connects to Pierre Bourdieu's general description of the life cycle of artistic fields:

> The social ageing of authors, schools and works results from the struggle between those who have made their mark (by producing a new position in the field) and who are fighting to persist (to become classics), and those who cannot make their own mark without pushing into the past those who have an interest in eternalizing the present state of affairs and in stopping the course of history. (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993, 187)

Reductionist music thus represents a continuation of the process of distanciation and identity formation undertaken by the first generation of improvisers, as a younger group of creative practitioners have recently attempted to make their mark within the cultural field by "pushing into the past" those who are already established in the field.

There are many examples in my interviews of established improvisers discussing reductionist music in terms that mirror Bourdieu's theoretical framework. I will repeat two of them here to provide some context for my interpretation of the aging of the improvised music field. Bassist Barre Phillips, who has been part of the improvised music field since the formative era, spoke about reductionist music from the position of an improviser who has witnessed many shifts in the field:

> Well, in terms of what's happening on the scene now, there's the reductionist movement that's going on, if you can call it a movement. It will be interesting to see that evolution. At least the European guys I know who sway in that way are coming to it from a lot of playing experience. So it's not just new people arriving on the scene. There is that too, but players like John Butcher [saxophone],[17] who are strongly involved in playing in this new minimalism, are not just young guys taking a mouthpiece off an instrument and showing up to proclaim that they're playing the new music.

This description of the new music contains equal parts tolerance and disinterest, as Phillips seems both willing to watch how the aesthetic conflict between these two musics will resolve, and invested in conventional notions of instrumental virtuosity that are more connected to the improvised music field than to the basic principles of reductionism. Although he continues to be adventurous in his music making and choice of collaborators, Phillips has already had a lengthy career as an improviser, so he is able to view the shifts in the field from a particularly elevated position.

In contrast, Dutch bassist Wilbert de Joode is in the middle of his career, so reductionist music represents not only an aesthetic shift, but also the potential for a real change in his patterns of work. He described how this new scene has affected his perception of his role in the improvised music field in Amsterdam (a shorter version of these comments appeared in Chapter Two, but they are elaborated here to suit the present context):

> There's a group of young improvisers in town that are more into the minimalistic way of playing—not the ever-changing texture. I have only started to feel older because of them. They really decided to not get involved with the older generation, which I think is crazy. If that is needed, that's ok, but it has never been like that in improvised music. I've seen it everywhere—improvised music cuts across race, where you come from, anything, it doesn't matter. So it feels a bit awkward for me to experience this group of young people who need to set

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[17] I tried to arrange an interview with John Butcher, but he declined.

> themselves off. It's interesting, but unusual, and I'm not so sure that it's good. We'll see.

Aside from the unsavoury experience of feeling old while working in a musical domain that is imagined to be "ever afresh," de Joode's exclusion from new developments in the field means that he may face the very real situation of a reduction in the performance opportunities from which he makes his living (Prévost 1995, 41). Many of the comments from other improvisers in my study reflect de Joode's sentiments to varying degrees—I encountered everything from outright dismissal of the music, to grim acceptance, to sadness for how the divisions in the scene represent a failure to work collaboratively amongst artists in the same social position in the cultural field. Evan Parker's thoughts on the subject are a particularly pragmatic assessment of the relationship between improvised music and reductionism, and offer a concise summation of the current state of the "social game" that is playing out in the improvised music field (Bourdieu 1993, 163):

> If the more instrumental approach, the more expressive approach is gradually succeeded by the Power Book players and the very quiet players, you'd have to say it [free improvisation] has evolved into something else or it simply died out, depending on the way those successors choose to represent their activities. (Borgo 2005, 155)

The aesthetic differences between improvised music and reductionism that Fletcher, Davidson, Phillips, and de Joode refer to underscores the trajectory of improvised music towards becoming an establishment art form, a perception that has inevitably generated a reactionary response from an emergent musical community that wishes to make its mark. The aesthetic and ideological attack represented by reductionism has caused a re-evaluation of the social positions of the participants who are already established in the cultural field. Like the break between jazz and improvised

music, this new conflict has resulted in the formation of new identity positions in the music field, as some younger musicians are seeking to distance themselves from the conventions of London improv by claiming alternative identities. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the only member of the reductionist scene in my study is cellist Mark Wastell. In our conversation Wastell was careful to declare his distance from the practices and identity formations of improvised music, in a way that mirrors John Edwards's distancing of his practices from jazz in Chapter Three:

> I consider myself a musician first and foremost. I don't really call myself an improviser. It's about music, more than it is about being an improviser. I have a bit of a struggle with what improvisation means—a composer sits at an empty sheet of paper, he's improvising. An electronic composer computer-based guy is improvising the moment he sits down and switches on his machine. Likewise, real time musicians do the same. It's all part and parcel of the same thing, so I wouldn't define myself as an improviser.

By calling himself a musician rather than an improviser, Wastell is reaching towards an even more mobile and general identity formation than that signified by the label of improviser. He went on to define his terms in more detail, through a description of how his practice has shifted away from those activities he identifies with improvisers:

> Everything I do now is conceptual, including choosing collaborators. I think clearly about who I want to work with and why. Whereas when I started playing as an improviser it was all about ad hoc groupings, and chance meetings. These kinds of free improv interactions were very exciting, and were the main stimulus. Now I don't play with anybody in those ways. I need to know what somebody is about, to feel comfortable with what they're doing and why. Aesthetically, there has to be a perceived connection between what I'm doing and what my collaborators are doing. Which has resulted in my pool of collaborators shrinking a lot. Before, year in year out I was playing with hundreds of different musicians. Now, meetings with new people need to be thought out.

Wastell's comments about the shift in his creative work reflect the notion of the post-improvised music world—in his intention to forge a separate identity he clearly positions

himself as a post-improviser. Yet his choice of "musician" as an identity signifier is an interesting one, as although it suggests more flexibility than the label of improviser might allow, Wastell's description of his practice can easily be read as more restricting than liberating. But his choice of terms does accomplish what is likely the primary goal of distancing himself (for the moment) from the expectations and conventions that have attached themselves to the positions of jazz musician and improviser, and the flexibility of musician reveals a clear desire to avoid restrictions on his future activities. Wastell was the only person I interviewed to use the frame of musician to describe themselves, so I cannot say for sure if it is common currency within the reductionist scene, but his use of the term does function as a concise reduction of the kinds of manoeuvres artistic subjects make to declare their differences from the dominant or conventional practices and structures within the cultural field.

The ways that the improvisers in my study discussed reductionism demonstrates how even an art form as flexible and mobile as improvised music eventually settles into its own orthodoxy, following the moment when it separates from the surrounding musical context, and after a critical mass of subjects crack the code for making and interpreting the music. The increased documentation of improvised music on record, the establishment of venues and an audience, and the rise of a hierarchy of improvisers have all led to the formation of a field with more or less defined boundaries. With these structures in place it makes sense that a new group of musicians, working with the same modernist ethic that motivates improvisers, would develop ways of playing that challenge the hierarchies of a particular field through the negation of the sonic materials that

constitute the older form. In this specific case, the musicians who established reductionism rejected the rapidly changing textures, call and response ensemble relationships, and virtuosic instrumental techniques that characterize a dominant stream of London improv. But in the same way that the jazz field has continued on its own trajectory following the separation with players like Derek Bailey, Barre Phillips, and Eddie Prévost, the influence of reductionist music on the improvised music field has not been overly disruptive to the older form. Improvised music continues to be made in London, and the practices established by the first generation of improvisers remain far more common than those advanced by the reductionist musicians. In addition, the distinctions between improvised music and reductionism are breaking down, as this musical intervention is itself nearly twenty years old. Although reductionist music has not supplanted improvised music on the margins, it has caused a redistribution of resources and precipitated a re-evaluation of the discursive framing of improvisation as perpetually contemporary.

The present writing is by necessity a backwards look at a musical formation that is based on the idea of looking towards the future, to establishing new relationships and disrupting the cultural status quo. Yet the basic modernist ethos that motivates improvisers is problematized by the continual accumulation of conventions, patterns of behaviours, and social structures; if improvisers wish to follow through with the ideals of rupture, subversion, and experimentation, they must work all the harder the farther we move from the conditions that precipitated the original break from the formative musical fields. The shift in the public profile of London improv since the original break has to do

with the sounds and practices that characterize the music becoming a known commodity to those both inside and outside the field. It now has its adherents and detractors, and can be followed or dismissed based on the particular "schemes of perception and appreciation" that musical subjects have internalized (Bourdieu 1984, 2). So improvised music is at once mediated by a perpetual ethos of experimentation and a determining connection to past events and social conditions that no longer exist. Therefore, interpretive models for the practice of free improvisation need to take into account the relationship between the assumptions about improvisation that were generated when London improvisers were defining themselves against other fields, and the current reality of an accumulated tradition and distinct identity formation which has become increasingly self-referential and isolated from other music fields.

Conclusion – Improvising Tradition

To conclude this investigation of the practice of free improvisation in London I will offer some final thoughts on how we might think about improvised music as a material tradition that is at once determined by an overarching ethic of modernism and situated within a specific historic context. Much recent writing on jazz features debates around the implications of imagining a jazz tradition, as writers and musicians attempt to measure the pulse of jazz at a moment when the classicization of jazz is prevailing over the ideals of experimentation and personal expression that are attached to the concept of improvisation. Stuart Nicholson's 2005 text *Is Jazz Dead?: (Or has it Moved to a New Address)* is one provocatively titled example of this trend, in which the author investigates the possibility that the current culture in the United States is not conducive to the kind of creative activity that has been historically associated with jazz. The swing towards conservatism in jazz, as represented in the rhetoric and music of Stanley Crouch and Wynton Marsalis, involves drawing lines around what is and what is not jazz, in an attempt to preserve certain essential characteristics of the music in the face of increased social exclusion from popular culture. This situation recalls an essential element of Bourdieu's concept of fields, in which he states that an artistic field is a "place of entirely specific struggles, notably concerning the question of knowing who is part of the universe, who is a real writer and who is not" (1993, 163-164). The improvisers I interviewed are generally less concerned with staking out and defending a tradition, as their practices tend to be founded on an ethic of rupture and experimentation. Yet this ethic also has its limits, as similar to the concerns around the death of jazz at the hands of

the popular music industry, the way the improvised music field operates has, in Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh's words, "the character of a defensive manoeuvre against the vitality of… popular forms, as though out of fear of aesthetic and social contagion" (2000, 16). Barre Phillips spoke about his motivations for pursing improvised music in terms that reflect Born and Hesmondhalgh's assessment: "…it's important that there is the improvised music experience, next to the commercial use of music." So despite the discursive framing of improvised music as an anti-tradition, or an anti-genre, there is clearly a particular kind of social relation at stake in the improvised music field, even though the overarching modernist ethic makes it difficult to define the sound-world, at least in comparison to the way the jazz tradition has been codified. I have attempted throughout this dissertation to provide musical and historical context for interpreting the practice of free improvisation, so in this concluding chapter I will explore how the frame of tradition—by which I mean a set of ideals and conventions that motivate and regulate collective action over time—can tell us something about how free improvisation has persisted as a form of cultural expression.

The central theme throughout my investigation has been the dissonance between the avant-garde ideal of social, political, and musical rupture, and the realities of working as a cultural producer in contemporary Western society. Although improvised music continues to be coded and treated as a "radical intervention in art and culture," in practice the music has solidified to the extent that there are those whose lives and identities are intricately connected to a certain sound-world, either as fans of the music or as workers in the improvised music field (Born 1995, 43). Martin Davidson, who has been watching the

London scene since its beginnings in the 1960s, offers a description of the trajectory of the scene that aligns with Howard Becker's (1982) contention that even radical interventions settle down to become their own traditions:

> I am in a way a bit concerned. My main interest before free improvisation was jazz. There you can see a steady progression from the 1920s up to the 1960s—new styles and so on. After the initial ten years there haven't been so many new developments in free improvisation. Individuals have obviously become more experienced, more responsive. In a sense I find that a bit of a worry, but I still find the music very enjoyable, generally. Like any other music there's a lot of dull people around. And everyone has their off nights.

This assessment articulates the basic ideal of stylistic progression and innovation that underscores the dominant discourse of music in Western culture, which also informed the discussion of tonality in Chapter Four. Davidson's expectations for improvised music are based on his conception of progression in jazz, yet even though his expectations have not been met, his ongoing activities as a chronicler of the scene demonstrate that he still hears much to value in London improv.

In taking Davidson's words at face value I am not suggesting that there have been no new developments in free improvisation (as my analysis of reductionist music in Chapter Six revealed that there has), rather that his comments reveal the basic ideal of progress that underscores London improv. Davidson's description of the field also reveals the limits of the restrictions the first generation of free improvisers placed on their music, as the imperative to create music without predetermined structures, while also avoiding reference to popular musics, presents the improvisers with a considerable challenge as they continue their work through time. These comments from a listener's perspective echo Eddie Prévost's assertion in Chapter Four that after a certain point free

improvisation becomes about exploring nuances, rather than generating grand ruptures in the sonic fabric. The relatively extreme aesthetic prescription of improvised music means that although its initial departure from the formative musical fields sounded radical, the limitations the London improvisers placed on their materials resulted in a pace of development that levelled off after approximately a decade. The London improvised music field has changed gradually as younger players bring new sounds into the field, yet once the basic sound-world was established, and a critical mass of people began to manipulate the codes that signify free improvisation, the investment in structures and identities connected to free improvisation makes it increasingly difficult to pursue the kind of quantifiable progress associated with the avant-garde.

The discursive positioning of improvised music as an anti-tradition—as represented in the common constructions non-idiomatic and free improvisation—implies a conception of this musical practice as somehow separate and autonomous from other musics. In a related manoeuvre, improvisation itself is often framed as an inherently positive force that can disrupt the repressive social inequalities embodied within conventional sonic materials and musical relationships (See Attali 1985, Heble and Fischlin 2004, and Prévost 1995). This trend in both the literature and the rhetoric around free improvisation recalls Howard Becker's general description of experimental art movements, in which he suggests that emerging artists differentiate their work from the already established artists by positioning their new practices as the "embodiment of universal aesthetic values" (1982, 304). In the improvised music field this manifests as the notion that free improvisation is a universal musical language, by virtue of the

exclusion of overt references to other musics, and the imperative of experimentation, which allows for a wider range of sounds and instrumental techniques than are permissible in other forms. But as George Lewis (2004) suggests throughout his writings on experimental music, this paradigm of musical freedom underscores the origins of improvised music in the unmarked and de-historicized culture of Western Europe, as it is based on particular assumptions about the mobility of subjects within the cultural field. Lewis reminds us that participation in the practices and social events related to improvised music are not open to everyone in the same way, as not all subjects are in a position to attempt to erase their identity and history towards the abstract goal of musical freedom. Free improvisation thus needs to be understood as not just an aesthetic ideal, or a prescription for creative action, but, as Ingrid Monson (2009) suggests of jazz, as an artistic practice that is regulated by the same structural limitations that generate race, class and gender hierarchies in Western and global society.

The racial analysis that Lewis brings to bear on the discursive framework of the avant-garde music field reveals a contradiction within the dominant paradigm of improvised music that extends beyond problematic assumptions about the universality of free improvisation. In his book *A Power Stronger than Itself*, Lewis's (2008) analysis of the musical practices of the AACM reveals that composition, rather than free improvisation, was considered the means through which musicians could assert their personal identities, build their communities, and resist the homogenizing effects of the dominant culture. In this context, improvisation becomes just part of the overall project of self-determination and political resistance, as opposed to the primary prescription for

freedom of expression and the articulation of alternative social models. This role reversal reveals the situational specificity of artistic practices, as although the American musicians in Lewis's study and the European musicians I have focused on expressed similar political intentions around their creative work, they have developed a substantially different process for pursuing these goals. I am admittedly comparing two very different contexts here—an under-privileged and disenfranchised black population in the United States, and a predominately white working to middle class community in Western Europe—but I think this example serves to problematize the discursive construction of improvisation as an inherently oppositional, expressive, and creative practice. It can be these things, but the context in which it is evoked determines the actual potential of a musical practice to generate social change beyond the immediate surroundings of the musicians involved. Improvisation thus functions as a mutable concept that can be shaped to meet the political, ethical, and creative imperatives of those who claim it as their working practice, rather than the embodiment of universal values of personal and collective freedom.

As I described in Chapters Five and Six, assumptions about London improv as an anti-genre break down when viewed in the context of the social structures that have formed around the music. The work being done by London improvisers has resulted in the formation of a distinct community of players and listeners, who, as I explained in the discussion about reductionist music, have a clear interest in maintaining the aesthetic ideals around which they have formed their identities and built their livelihoods. This trend toward fixity in the improvised music field aligns with Howard Becker's (1982)

general argument that artistic fields follow a trajectory from revolutionary innovation to craft; in this specific context, certain sonic materials, instrumental techniques, and listener expectations have solidified around the basic concept of free improvisation. If an individual wants to work in the improvised music field, then there are now certain skills one must learn in order to do so, in addition to preparing oneself to negotiate the financial hardships that accompany the production of improvised music. In a related way, listeners must gain a certain degree of cultural competence to find meaning in improvised music, and also be willing to be flexible in their expectations when they attend an improvised performance. Free improvisation continues to be discursively constructed as an oppositional art practice, and the musical practices developed by the first generation of improvisers as inherently cutting edge, but as we move farther away from the originary break it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the revolutionary ideals that mediate the discourse and practice of improvised music in London. The London improvised music field is far more flexible than the commercial music field in terms of the number and quality of sounds we are likely to hear in a given performance, yet it is still mediated by the considerable tension around the basic avant-garde aesthetic and the need to maintain some sense of continuity for improvisers and their audience.

Despite the difficulties in sustaining the ideals of innovation, experimentation, and rupture that pervade the rhetoric of free improvisation, the improvised music field persists as a functional musical domain within global society. A relatively stable community of participants in London continues to produce the music, or to fill any of the other roles needed to support the day-to-day performance of improvised music. Although

in my analysis I have attended primarily to the shifts that have taken place since the formative years of the field, my perception of the contemporary London scene was of a creative community that is still making vital and important music. Even though the improvised music scene in London is small in comparison to the popular music field, there were more performances happening on a daily basis than I could have hoped to attend. I went to as many as I could, but still missed performances I wish I could have heard. So based on my experience, the vitality of the London scene is in little doubt, despite the difficulties in maintaining the infrastructure and the constraints upon its growth.

Eddie Prévost's Friday night workshop is a fitting example of the health of the improvised music field. Since 1999 the workshop has offered an important opportunity for new participants to enter the field. My time in London was limited, and Prévost's workshop enabled me to get involved in the field immediately by introducing me to an active community of young, creative improvisers who were willing to share their music and thoughts. Workshop veteran Tom Perchard described the important role Prévost's pedagogical efforts have come to play on the London scene, and his comments reflect my experience as a workshop participant:

> There was a kind of generational gap when I started [free improvising]. I stopped very quickly, but lots of people I started with are still playing. At the time Eddie started the workshop you had all your old school first generation improvisers who were very distant superstars, like Evan [Parker] and Eddie himself. And then there were people from the second generation, such as Steve Beresford and John Butcher, who were knocking around. This was before there were a lot of laptops, so there was quite a homogenous approach to the music at the time. It hadn't really moved on very much in many years—a lot of musicians got better at doing it, but it was recognizably the practice you hear on the AMM or SME records, just later on. But there weren't many people our age doing it at all. So the workshop

> was a sort of nursery—and I think Eddie saw it as such—that would rejuvenate the improvised music scene.

The workshop is a compelling case study, and will be addressed in more detail in my future research. For the present analysis, the continuation of the workshop as a volunteer-run performance space, and the influence of its participants on the London field, is a testament to the strength and vitality of the improvised music tradition in London. Towards the end of our conversation Eddie Prévost made a remark about the workshop that in many ways sums up the themes I explored in the preceding pages:

> It's very cheering to know that there are people who continue to want to do this. There's no economic underpinning, so people are not doing it, generally speaking, as a way to make money. Although some people have been very clever and are using it in that way. But most people are not. There's a whole generation coming along that finds something important in it. I don't have any illusions of it needing my presence at all, but I'm happy that they let me be there still.

Despite the humility with which Prévost describes his role in the workshop, it was his individual initiative that opened up the field to a new generation of improvisers, who previously did not have access to it. Prévost's presence at the workshop (he tries to attend each week) represents a direct connection to the formative years of the field, so the occasion is an opportunity for participants to: learn from an established figure; try out new ideas in a sympathetic context; and observe the effects of musical exchange between different generations of improvisers. But perhaps more than these specific examples of musical practice, Prévost's workshop, like many of the other improvised music events I attended in London, was a chance to explore the possibility of constructing an identity as a producer of culture, rather than the more easily accessible role of consumer.

The improv ethic and the position of improviser, as I have described them thus far, present musical subjects with an ideal that is at once vague and rigorous—they offer enough of a prescription to provide people with, in Peter Martin's words, a "secure sense of identity," yet are flexible enough to allow this identity to be coded as an alternative to the dominant norms of society (2006, 65). Based on my experience in London, by declaring an interest in the concept of free improvisation, musical subjects in Western society can connect themselves to a well-established musical sub-culture, in which they can adopt a variety of positions and identities in relation to their particular competencies and inclinations. The improvised music field endures because the concept of free improvisation still does something important for the participants in the scene, however they might choose to work with the sonic materials and identities implied by the term. The persistence of the workshop attendees, and of the other improvisers and audience members I met in London, suggests that the concept of free improvisation offers a meaningful foundation upon which subjects can "actively construct a sense of self and proclaim a distinct identity" (Martin 2006, 65).

To conclude, my interpretation of the inherent problems related to sustaining the revolutionary ideals of an artistic form in the context of the free market has parallels to Theodor Adorno's work, as Adorno made similar pessimistic claims about the avant-garde classical music that was of interest to him. But according to Paul Hegarty, Adorno left a small opening to allow for the possibility of agency within the dominating structures of contemporary society. Hegarty writes:

> While I do not think genre, style, or category can be suspended except very fleetingly, the attempt is still worthwhile, and if, as Adorno suggests, the attempt

> is all we can have, then the attempt is the highest form of freedom to be aspired to, and must be maintained as an aim. (2007, 51)

The impossibility of removing improvised music from discourse, or positioning it outside of the marketplace, does not mean that it has lost all critical potential, or that it cannot offer transcendent experiences for participants in the field. It may not be possible to achieve the aesthetic ideal of taking it from scratch—which would entail relinquishing all expectations of what music is and resisting the normative pull towards idiom—but the distinguishing feature of the improv ethic is the intention to do so, despite the social, material, and economic restrictions that work against improvisers. With this, I return to the problematic discursive framework of improvisation I started with. Despite all of the constraints, restrictions, and conventions I have explored that mediate the manifestation of improvised music in Western society, the assumption that free improvisation is a meaningful way of accessing the promise of greater things to come continues to motivate musical subjects to make the difficult life choices required to produce unpopular music.

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Appendix A: Research Participants

London

Steve Beresford – piano, analog electronics, found instruments

Tania Chen – piano

Martin Davidson – owner of Emanem Records

John Edwards – bass

Tim Fletcher – amateur recording engineer and music archivist

Steve Noble – percussion

Evan Parker – saxophone, owner of Psi Records

Tom Perchard – writer and musicologist

Eddie Prévost – percussion, co-founder of AMM, owner of Matchless Recordings

Howard Riley – piano

Mark Wastell – cello, bass, owner of Sound 323 (record shop) and Confront Records

Ben Watson – author, critic

Kenny Wheeler – trumpet

Alan Wilkinson – saxophone

Seymour Wright – saxophone

Oxford

Dominic Lash – bass

Alexander Hawkins – piano

France

Barre Phillips – bass

Netherlands

Wilbert de Joode – bass

Ig Henneman – viola and composition

Germany

Steve Lake – Producer, ECM Records

United States

Paul Bley – Piano

Steve Swallow – Bass