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Success, Failure, and Improvisation:
Tactics of the Los Angeles Experimental Jazz Community

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Music

by

Aaron Kaplan

June 2013

Thesis Committee:
Dr. Deborah Wong, Chair
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Dr. Jonathan Ritter

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The Thesis of Aaron Kaplan is approved:

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Committee Chair

University of California, Riverside

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Success, Failure, and Improvisation:
Tactics of the Los Angeles Experimental Jazz Community

by

Aaron Kaplan

Master of Arts, Graduate Program in Music
University of California, Riverside, June 2013
Dr. Deborah Wong, Chair

This study of avant-garde jazz and free improvisation in the greater Los Angeles region investigates the musical and social role of experimentation. A major aim of this study is to reassess the criteria for the sustainability of an experimental music scene. Whereas economics are often invoked in the arts to assert the longevity of musical production, the LA experimental jazz scene offers alternative benchmarks for success.

This study also contributes to the knowledge of communal and cultural arts organizations in LA. I show how LA has sustained small and specific spaces in which experimental jazz flourishes in this region. It is imperative to understand this music in a local context to assess the current economic, political, and ideological fit of experimental jazz within the larger arts culture in LA today.

My ethnographic research is focused on two major organizations that promote experimental jazz in the region, Angel City Arts and the Blue Whale, and includes interviews with eight musicians and concert promoters, including Jeff Gauthier, Rocco Somazzi, Nicole Mitchell, and Matt Zebley. A goal of this study, largely stemming from these interviews, is to show how musical improvisations embody alternative worldviews

that challenge the status quo and demand constant innovation and change. These improvisatory ideologies inform the strategies enacted by Angel City Arts and the Blue Whale. They offer two different alternative sustainability models that are largely community-based, and use experimental tactics not as a means to an end, but as concrete strategies to achieve practical goals. However, the community faces severe economic hardship and thus improvements are necessary to ensure the scene's prosperity. I argue the need for the scene to engender forums unique to a public discussion of their challenges, and to embrace an explicitly activist culture that boasts experimental values. I hope the overview of and insight into the nature of the development of experimental music scenes I provide will inspire future strategies to help the community overcome the inherent challenges to sustain and keep their music exploratory.

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INTRODUCTION

Experimental jazz in Los Angeles today is spread across an unusual terrain, and I have joined audiences in radically different venues across the greater LA region. I have sat with audiences at a symposium listening to stories about the history of jazz in LA at the corporate funded REDCAT Theater at Walt Disney Hall, and at the legendary John Anson Ford Amphitheater, listening to jazz legend Archie Shepp sing about the enslavement of his grandmother. Only twenty miles further west (but often an hour drive due to the infamous LA traffic) I have sat in UCLA's Royce Hall and listened to avant-garde guitarist Bill Frisell in a film-music collaboration about the 1927 Mississippi River Flood. Such events are only a few of what LA jazz fans experienced in the 2012 Angel City Jazz Festival on two back-to-back weekends. During the last few years, avid fans of experimental jazz often go downtown to the Blue Whale in Little Tokyo, nestled in the corner of the third floor of the Japanese Village Plaza, to listen to anything ranging from highly dissonant free improvisation, to straight-ahead jazz, a jazz-inspired DJ, a big band or a jazz-rock-soul-R&B fusion group. Other fans will never even spot this innovative jazz club from the street when visiting any of the great Asian restaurants filling this plaza, but must trust that amazing music takes place there seven nights a week. I also found experimental jazz in larger performance venues with large stages, at the Kirk Douglas Theater or the Musician's institute, trying to catch one of the shows of the Jazz Bakery's "moveable feast," while the legendary venue struggles to build a new home in Culver City. Dozens more diverse and often-unusual settings feature experimental jazz in this

vast city that Mike Davis refers to as an "urban galaxy," the "fastest growing metropolis in the advanced industrial world" (1990:6).[1]

My research focused mostly on the experimental jazz community and its associated improvisatory music scenes in Los Angeles from the summer of 2012 to the summer of 2013. I also frequented venues hosting more traditional straight-ahead performances and jam sessions. In this thesis, I present my ethnographic findings and analyze them in relation to historical, social, cultural, political, economic, and ideological contexts. The major perspectives presented in this project are from musicians in the LA area. Although I also talked to many fans and followed the Internet trail of blogging, social networking sites, and press releases relevant to the LA experimental jazz community, the most passionate and erudite responses I received were from performers. Importantly, many of the musicians I interviewed are also active fans and attend shows regularly as audience members. This study does not attempt to form a comprehensive understanding of audience reception of the LA experimental jazz scene, though I think it is needed.

My aim is to offer a critical analysis of the scene and to further a much-needed conversation about its sustainability, something I argue requires urgent attention. As performing and producing this music involves economic hardship and leads to individual

[1] Mike Davis (1990) provides an immensely useful history of the development of Los Angeles since the early 20th century, looking specifically into the cultural evolution of the city alongside various waves of immigration. I draw on Davis' work extensively in the following section to illustrate the dynamic between the development of jazz in the area and the larger socio-economic and political development of LA as a whole.

struggle, there is little time for public discussions about how to improve upon performance opportunities and open up more channels of production. I will demonstrate why a serious dialogue about these issues that is closely knit to performance itself will help the experimental jazz community think through and implement strategies to overcome their inherent challenges. The role of experimentation in both the music itself and the channels through which it is produced is imperative to understanding the alternative sustainability models needed for the scene to prosper. I will focus on two of these models implemented by the organizations Angel City Arts and the Blue Whale. Angel City Arts represents a community-level responsive non-profit model focused on music/community experiments, while the Blue Whale offers a for-profit jazz venue model dedicated to cultivating a performance space conducive to innovation, experimentation, and improvisation. I will demonstrate how these models correlate to, and emanate from, the improvisatory ideologies upheld by both the musicians and producers. The critical values built into experimental jazz can be mobilized in ways that are suggested by Angel City Arts and the Blue Whale, but are not yet explicit enough. Thus, in my final assessment of these organizations, I offer some suggestions for how they can better achieve their goals.

I aim to demonstrate how the musicians and organizations promoting improvisatory music manage to develop and sustain communal formations that remain perpetually experimental and contribute to alternative economies and social values. I first offer a historical overview of how jazz developed in Los Angeles as a whole, and how and why the avant-garde or experimental jazz scene emerged from it. It is necessary to

understand how specific sociocultural moments in Los Angeles jazz culture inspired and allowed avant-garde ideologies to develop, for this history has an abiding influence on today's LA experimental jazz performances. Next, I discuss the various sub-scenes in LA today, including the straight-ahead jazz, experimental jazz, and free improvisation scenes, which are often lumped together as the LA jazz scene; I focus on geographic and economic challenges. I then present my two case studies of Angel City Arts and the Blue Whale to explore critical issues in the experimental music scene, including the influence of black avant-garde ideologies on present day performances, the role of non-profit organizations, the sustainability of for-profit experimental jazz venues, jazz innovation versus jazz tradition, and the merging of the music's social and ideological contexts with performance practice. I hope the conclusions I arrive at in this paper will prove useful to all people involved with experimental jazz in Los Angeles and help inspire new social and musical perspectives necessary for the scene's future.

CHAPTER 1

Jazz in Los Angeles: History and Scholarship

A chaotic LA jazz scene has perhaps been the norm since the early 1900s. Bobby Bradford says jazz in LA has always had an oppositional aesthetic (Bradford 2012). After jazz developed in New Orleans and musicians traveled north, establishing important centers in New York and Chicago, LA provided an alternative experience of jazz. At the beginning of the twentieth century, LA was still regarded as a region of wonder and fantasy, regarded as an untapped land of opportunity imbued with a spirit of individualism. The grandiose, undeveloped landscape of the area and the many days of sunshine only enhanced this vision of Los Angeles—a place conducive to experimentation and innovation, a nascent urbanity as opposed to the long-established major cities on the East Coast. African Americans in the United States flocked to Los Angeles and the black population doubled between 1910 and 1920 (Bryant et. al. 1998:7).[2] During this time, segregation policies were not strictly enforced and blacks could become bandleaders or even own their own businesses, unlike in many East Coast cities (ibid.:6). As early as 1907, jazz bands were touring the area, and by 1914 Los Angeles based bands such as the "Original Creole Band" and the "Black and Tan

[2] Bryant and the other editors of *Central Avenue Sounds* provide a much-needed in-depth look at the Central Avenue jazz scene and reasons for its demise. I am indebted to this book for the historic detail and panoply of perspectives from various musicians it provides. More historical explorations of the Los Angeles jazz scene are much needed: writing on the subject is both scarce and often skewed.

Orchestra," and female singers such as Ada "Bricktop" Smith were touring the U.S. and had an established presence in LA (ibid.:5-6). But jazz musicians and fans had to share this West Coast utopia with others, and as more people moved to the area, a complex migrant culture developed resulting in fraught social, political, and economic formations. In the 1920s people of various ethnicities moved to LA largely due to oil speculation and the emergence of Hollywood, (ibid.:8) where so-called "boosters" (Davis 1990:26) flocked to work in the "culture industry" (ibid.:17). Hollywood continues to be a strong political and economic force in the greater LA area today.

Important jazz venues such as the Alabam, the Downbeat, and the Last Word arose in the 1920s mainly in the black neighborhoods along Central Avenue, and celebrities and other new residents often visited this area for entertainment, fueling the early jazz scene (Gioia 1992:5). Gioia (1992) and Bryant (et. al 1998) write extensively about the scene during this auspicious time, the beginnings of what would emerge as the largest center for jazz in Los Angeles history. The Dunbar hotel developed a reputation for housing celebrities and musicians visiting the area, and today is a historical landmark (ibid.). Central Avenue was a place where blacks could find employment, working either as musicians or as staff at various venues, and the jazz scene grew rapidly with music played regularly at even small chicken restaurants and after-hour clubs (ibid.:6). The Watts district, still a rural area at the time, became home to another jazz scene, known for its late-night music, for the area did not have to follow the midnight curfews enforced in urban areas (Bryant et. al. 1998:92). However, the simultaneous growth of jazz and the black population within a relatively dense area, mainly along Central Avenue between

11th and 42nd Streets, would soon prove dangerous to black jazz musicians and business owners. (Gioia 1992:4).

Although the Great Depression challenged the jazz infrastructure in Los Angeles, many of the famous clubs were able to survive the economic downturn: it even encouraged black business in the area, as whites were more willing at this time to sell their businesses to black owners (Bryant et. al 1998:17). However, the depression forced the larger economy of the area into an unusual position, for the "boosters" who moved into the region formed a middle class, but "without the concomitant development of a large manufacturing base" (Davis 1990:35), resulting in severe economic pitfalls (ibid.:37). The World War II economy helped ameliorate some of these economic problems and further supported the rapid growth of the Los Angeles jazz scene. The mid-1940s through the early 1950s was arguably the most active period for the Central Avenue jazz scene in LA. Jazz musicians flocked there to both settle and perform and fans could go easily between different clubs on any given night and hear great music. Coleman Hawkins, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, and many other stars came to play in the area for extended periods of time, as West Coast innovators and the sounds of East Coast bebop could be heard on the avenue. Scholar/improviser Jason Robinson (2005) argues that Central Avenue needs to be examined more closely because many future jazz legends and "influential musicians grew up or spent formative years on the Avenue and in Watts" (2005:125). Gioia describes Central Avenue at this time as a "blossoming culture," a "panoply of businesses, residences, social clubs, eateries, and nightclubs," and "a city within a city" (1992:4). Importantly, a nascent avant-garde

movement in Los Angeles emerged in the late 1940s, as Ornette Coleman and Eric Dolphy played frequently on Central (Davis 1990:64). Also during this time, Los Angeles developed a large aerospace industry attracting many new migrants (ibid.:18). These large-scale immigrations to the area have resulted in an unusual scenario in which the Los Angeles work force is mostly entrenched in large capital projects, as "almost everyone is either on a corporate payroll or waiting hopefully at the studio gate" (ibid.).

However, just when jazz in Los Angeles seemed well established, the end of the wartime economy and escalating racial tensions nearly destroyed the vibrant scene enjoyed by so many musicians and fans. In the early 1950s the Los Angeles police force headed by William H. Parker started a brutal harassment program of black business owners and musicians in the area, forcing many out of business and encouraging whites to stay out of these dangerous clubs (Bryant et. al. 1998:177). Mina Yang offers an in-depth analysis of the Parker regime and argues "that the time period in which the LAPD's status rose also saw the decline of Central Avenue is hardly coincidental" (2002:218). Yang attests Parker redesigned the overall operation of the LAPD as a form of "social control" with a "barely veiled white supremacist rhetoric" (ibid.:220) towards the large immigrant populations constantly flocking to the area. To secure the prosperity of the white population, Parker increased the police presence in immigrant neighborhoods (ibid.:226), specifically targeting areas such as Central Avenue where rich whites would spend much money in black businesses. By discouraging interracial socializing, the police channeled money away from Central Avenue and into the economy of white neighborhoods (ibid.:231). These corrupt policies prompted more crime and drug abuse

in poorer immigrant communities, as neighborhood economies were squeezed (ibid.). Yang illuminates how Parker's police force essentially created impoverished areas, increased racial tensions, and put blacks in Central Avenue into a desperate economic cycle, stimulating criminality.

The Central Avenue scene has been a ghost town since the 1960s. Police brutality intensified and the economic situation of blacks became more and more desperate as the densely populated impoverished neighborhoods in South Central LA offered little opportunity for escape. Although black musicians gained more legal rights (e.g., were included in some musicians' unions in Los Angeles for the first time), this resulted in a stronger police presence on Central, which in turn debilitated them further (Tapscott 1998:299). Today the once booming jazz neighborhood of Central Avenue is regarded as dangerous and rundown. Yang describes the clubs there today as "defunct and graffiti-ridden storefronts and sweatshops" (2002:236), while Gioia asserts "there was no uniform gathering place for West Coast jazz players after the decline of Central Avenue" (1992:361).

Severe conditions for blacks in Los Angeles during the 1950s and 60s spurred new types of jazz ensembles dedicated to promoting an "alternative value system" of Afrocentric ideals, fusing black social progress with art instead of the pains of "capitalist America" (Isoardi 2006:3). Although LA avant-garde jazz started with Ornette Coleman's influence, experimental approaches to jazz burgeoned within small community movements. Isoardi's scholarship focuses on Horace Tapscott and highlights

the significance of the grass-roots Black Arts movement. Hoping to restore African American history, Tapscott founded the Union of God's Musicians and Artists Ascension as well as the Pan Afrikan People's Arkestra, and he led them for decades, helping hundreds of black jazz musicians to perform, raise their spirits, and to improve their economic situation. However, the fight continued, as these organizations did not offer the black community economic advancement on a grand scale, and even when segregation policies were repealed, problematically the "integration of blacks…lead to the disappearance of black culture," as education was criticized for teaching a white perspective on history, literature, science, and the arts, while ignoring black achievements (Isoardi 2006:3). Chief Parker's totalitarian policies led to the Watts Riots in August of 1965 in which many were left dead. However, this failed to change the police department's policies, as police/community violence worsened in the 1970s; by the 1980s, mass killings from gang violence were rampant (ibid.:224-25).

By the 1960s, the absence of an organic arts economy in Los Angeles is one of the distinctive features of the region. As corporate or Hollywood funding was not readily available to most arts organizations, and especially to "inner-city cultural institutions" that were harassed by the LAPD, many failed (ibid.). Cultural arts in Los Angeles continued to struggle, and for the most part only community grassroots movements like Tapscott's continued to make an impact. Mike Davis asserts that "no 'broadly convincing local aesthetic' emerged, only a 'gruesome' celebration of trivialized made-in-Los Angeles productions" (1990:69).

Charles Sharp's cogent dissertation (2008) addresses the experimental music scenes in Los Angeles and shows how many major LA jazz musicians were involved with avant-garde free improvisatory music from the 1960s on. Tapscott's projects in the 1960s led to the development of similar groups, the most significant being the collaboration between Bobby Bradford and John Carter that began in the Watts district in 1966 (Sharp 2008:92). They developed a quartet known as the New Art Jazz Ensemble that "focused more on melodic improvisation than chord changes" (ibid.:93), and emphasized experimentation through communication, as "their music focused on each individual's ability to listen to each other" (ibid.:94). The group performed throughout the 1970s, but, as Sharp argues, "the mainstream jazz world of Los Angeles remained predominantly unreceptive to experimental jazz music and the group consequently found it hard to play regular paying gigs" (ibid.:98). Although most mainstream jazz clubs closed during the demise of Central Avenue, some new ones emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s when independent groups like Tapscott's and Bradford's were looking into their own channels of production—"alternative and community based performance opportunities," often in people's homes or small coffee shops and other businesses which supported this experimental music (ibid.:99). However, the mainstream jazz venues established during this time did not last long, as the popularity of jazz was diminishing in the United States overall, and thus neither mainstream nor community-based approaches to the production of this music prospered in the Los Angeles economy.

As performance opportunities were scarce during the 1970s and 80s, radio stations in Los Angeles assumed a large role in getting jazz music out to the public. Some

radio shows, such as Greg Kufahamu's on KUSC even "featured music and poetry associated with the black power movement including poetry, jazz, and other styles of black music" (ibid.:108). Jazz education was further institutionalized during the 1980s in LA, with a proliferation of jazz college programs, even those dedicated to more avant-garde approaches, such as California Institute of the Arts' jazz program, established in 1982 (ibid.:352). Jazz festivals sprouted up in Los Angeles during this time as well, but according to Sharp, they "were a very small part of the scene" (ibid.:358). Jazz musicians' struggle to develop an audience during this time was further challenged by the proliferation of corporate culture in Los Angeles during the 1980s that, Mike Davis argues, belittled the arts of "inner-city communities" (Davis 1990.:70). The corporate merging of "design professionals, fine arts institutions, and elite university departments" (ibid.:71) constructed a "wealthy institutional matrix" (ibid.:22), that mostly supported fine arts institutions like museums, which are characteristic of the current art scene in Los Angeles today. Such projects are seen as "cultural investments," and have created a "cultural superstructure" that is intertwined with the politics of helping Los Angeles gain the reputation as an important global "world city" (ibid.:71). As most of the arts money in Los Angeles was tied up in such grandiose million dollar projects, many other important historical artistic practices, including jazz, were left to fend for themselves.

The struggle continued into the 1990s, but individuals and their small projects continued to fuel the scene. William Roper emerged as a leader of many improvisatory ensembles, whose "music uses a complex system of notation and is rooted in the

experiments of the AACM" (Sharp 2008:389).[3] The World Stage (still active today) opened in Leimert Park in 1989 as a center of African American music, hosting jazz performances and jam sessions dedicated to both preserving and pioneering new African American musical aesthetics (ibid.:391). Further, important individuals such as Nels Cline, Alex Cline, and Vinny Golia started their own experimental improvisatory projects, bringing fans together and creating small communities surrounding their music (ibid.:398-99).

Rocco Somazzi emerged as an important figure in the production of jazz in LA, producing shows at various restaurants and bars, starting his own restaurant/jazz club in Bel Air in 1998 and another, Café Metropol in 2005 (ibid.:434-35). Somazzi is well known and loved within the Los Angeles experimental jazz community, as he attempts to promote musicians with new, interesting, innovative approaches to jazz. I talked with him extensively during my research, and his passion for this music was quite evident. He always seemed to be thinking ahead, making friends with fans, and sacrificing his own time and money to keep the scene going. Jeff Gauthier, an improvising LA born violinist and current executive director of the Jazz Bakery also started many independent projects

[3] The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) is an organization that formed in Chicago in 1965 and still exists today. This organization is arguably the most successful community-based organization in the history of black avant-garde improvisatory music in the United State in terms of the number of great musicians they have associated with them, the impact they have had on the economic prosperity of this music, and the model they have established for organizations working towards black social equality through musical endeavors. George Lewis' extensive social, cultural, and musical history of the AACM (2008) provides a much needed intensive view of the organization and its success in empowering African Americans, providing political and economic freedom through jazz and improvised musicking—demonstrating the successful creation of a "new, utopian kind of sociopolitical system" (2008:xii).

to support improvisatory music in the area during the 1990s. Gauthier was another of my main research consultants, and like Rocco, he is a beloved figure who jazz fans and musicians enjoy bumping into, for it assures them that someone is working hard to produce this music in LA. His Cryptogramophone record label, founded in 1998, is dedicated to recording improvisatory music; he also created an online music store, indiejazz.com, and a concert series named Inner Ear in 1999 to promote this type of music, although it did not last long (ibid.:436-37). As Jason Robinson attests, "the combination of performance venues and artist-run record labels serve as the 'public sphere' of the music community" (2005:159). Such individual or small collaborative projects are typical of the jazz and improvisatory music scene in LA today. The larger clubs continue to exist, but often go out of business quickly, as out of the fifty-eight jazz clubs that jazz writer and critic Leonard Feather counted in Los Angeles in 1987, "only two are still open: Catalina's and The Baked Potato" (Sharp 2008:346). A divide certainly exists between these larger clubs and the smaller projects that dominate the experimental jazz scene. Large names, many from out of town, come and go from the larger current-day clubs such as Catalinas, Vitellos, or Steamers, and while they create memorable musical experiences, the smaller movements have done far more to develop a cohesive jazz community in Los Angeles. These small projects engage more dedicated individuals, build a small communal infrastructure of support for fans and musicians, and thus are arguably more significant in sustaining a dynamic culture of jazz in Los Angeles today, one genuinely dedicated to the local development of the music rather than financial profit. Further, experimental jazz approaches flourish within these smaller

movements, which build closely-knit community formations of people with similar dedication and interests.

Thus the LA jazz community, and especially its experimental subcultures, occupies a unique space due to its struggle to fit in with the corporate-dominated arts mentality in the city. However, this is just one of the problems. Gioia argues there has always been the "lack of an influential, indigenous critical establishment" for jazz music in California, which "plagued the whole development of the music" (1992:365). There were no West Coast jazz periodicals and if a jazz musician's name appears in a newspaper article, this has little impact (ibid.:366). Jazz critics are generally based on the East Coast and are not directly engaged or invested in the Southern California scene, and they often offer distorted views of the music when they write about it (ibid.:367). Gioia argues there is a lack of confidence in West Coast jazz today as musicians "no longer feel that the West Coast experience is conducive to great art" and Californians "do little to hide their inferiority complex in the arts" (ibid.:369). Contemporary LA experimental jazz musicians thus must become experts at navigating the labyrinth of the corporate-funded, institutional arts scene, or create alternative scenes, to which I now turn.

CHAPTER 2

The Jazz and Free Improvisation Scenes in Los Angeles Today

Paul Berliner's extensive ethnography of jazz performance practice in the United States (1994) focuses on individual jazz musicians' experiences. He argues that although jazz changes continually, "it retains the continuity of certain underlying practices and values associated with improvisation, learning, and transmission of a musical system" (Berliner 1994:14). In contrast, Ken Prouty (2012) emphasizes the importance of understanding the constant evolution of an entire jazz community—including musicians, audiences, fans, critics, concert promoters, venue owners, journalists, online forums, bloggers, Facebook users, etc.—and critiques Berliner for his narrow focus on the musicians themselves (ibid.:144). In my research, I attempted to trace the behaviors of a broad jazz community in the way that Prouty encourages, as I believe it necessary to form a comprehensive understanding of the Los Angeles jazz scene and its surrounding culture, but I also spent considerable time, like Berliner, talking with individual musicians. Robinson has looked at specific traits of improvised music communities and argues in improvised music scenes, "the symbolic construction of community evidenced in venues, websites, discussion groups, record labels, and festivals amounts to a technology of identity, an apparatus rooted in specific nodes of collaborative social work" (2005:230). Improvised music specifically relies on communal support due to the disinterest of powerful institutions.

The current discussion of jazz in LA is a direct result of the music's overall struggle since the height of Central Avenue, and its strange place in the cultural arts infrastructure of the city. Jazz musicians and fans of all kinds profess concern for the overall jazz culture in the region. People I have talked to are quick to highlight the various problems with jazz in the area. A sense of crisis and pessimism was often apparent in my interviews with musicians and fans I have talked with, although the community demonstrates a deep passion for this music whether playing or supporting jazz. Jazz in Los Angeles faces utterly unique challenges, but experimental jazz faces even greater challenges because it is always on the far edge of economic support. However, it is necessary to understand that musicians' sense of crisis is embedded in the ideology of the avant-garde these musicians invoke. They constantly strive for musical innovation over stability, and thus inevitably face economic challenges inherently involved in performing improvisatory musics that have difficulty attracting financial backing because investors often view them as risky musical experiments that do not attract large audiences. Thus the economic challenges and musical ideologies of experimental jazz are deeply intertwined. The experimental jazz community in LA is extremely dedicated and for the most part seems willing to live with the scene's difficulties. Some fans told me that the scene was stronger in the early 2000s, while others highlighted the value of recent performances. Of course each community member's understanding of the scene varied according to the venues they chose to visit, the audience they were part of at certain shows, their knowledge of Los Angeles jazz history, the relationships they have or have not formed with other members of the

community, and also their own personal histories, their race, class, gender, and ethnicities.

Active participants in the LA jazz community refer to the scene in a range of ways. One of my informants, Dr. Matt Zebley was extremely articulate about the general state of jazz in the area. Zebley, a middle-aged Caucasian, is an accomplished saxophonist and woodwinds player who received his doctorate in jazz studies at USC. At the time of my research, he was the director of bands at UC Riverside, was teaching private lessons, and performed frequently in the LA jazz scene, where he has been active since the early 1990s. He is very knowledgeable about jazz programs in the area and talked about the difficult transition between finishing college and trying to make it on the scene; he believes things have not changed much since he started out in the early 1990s (2013). Trying to describe the Southern California jazz community, Zebley said, "I think that it's a good community. I think it's large. I think it's broad. I think it's diverse. I think it's deep. Yea, I would say it's pretty healthy and strong here" (ibid.). He posits,

> There are a lot of different ages represented by the jazz community here in LA. There's a lot of students getting pumped out of these really great schools like Long Beach, USC, CalArts, Northridge, and they just filter into the scene. Some move on, some go to other places, New York, San Fran, but a lot of them end up on the streets in the clubs. I constantly see a lot of new people coming up, making bands, releasing new projects, making music, and to me that's exciting (ibid.).

Similarly, Jeff Gauthier believes Los Angeles hosts one of the most diverse jazz scenes in terms of musicians who play here from a panoply of different generations (2013). Saxophonist and newcomer Jeremy Lappitt told me, "Many people may not feel that there is a community, but I certainly do. Having lived here just short of a year, I had to

make the community myself in order to have friends, acquaintances, etc." (2013). On the other hand, the Executive Director of Angel City Arts, Rob Woodworth points to the fragmentation of the scene as a reason for why he is not sure if a real jazz community exists in LA (2013). I have only seen jazz fans vibrantly discussing the state of the jazz community in Los Angeles at a few shows—usually annual festivals or monthly concert series. However, when asking people directly about these issues, they often have a lot to say. The community has no active forums where the scene's needs and challenges can be discussed. Keeping the scene going takes so much time and energy that looking for ways to strategically improve things is a secondary concern.

Fans and musicians alike often mention the geographic difficulties plaguing jazz in Los Angeles. Matt Zebley attests to the "fragmentation" of jazz in Los Angeles and posits the existence of "separate scenes"—"an OC scene, a downtown LA scene, and a San Fernando Valley scene" (2013). Writing about improvisatory music scenes in Los Angeles, Charles Sharp explains, "Experiences of distinctly different scenes… characterize my musical life in Los Angeles. I am constantly moving between scenes that seem somehow related, yet have remained separate" (2008:2). The vast geographic area that Los Angeles encompasses directly inhibits communication throughout the jazz community. Zebley says,

> All those cats from Northridge, those young students….there's coffee shops, and there's all these players playing up there and you would never see them at the Blue Whale. They're playing three nights a week in the valley, but they don't come to LA. Same thing in Orange county…You hear about them, you see them once in a while... So to me that's interesting, its part of the broadness of the scene, but its difficult, its too bad (2013).

Zebley sees a proliferation of musical ideas in different LA scenes, but few connections between them (ibid.). He says, "Within those scenes there is growth and new players coming in, but I think as an entire entity, they are not really fitting together" (ibid.). Nicole Mitchell, an African American flutist and improviser who tours internationally and recently moved to LA when she became a faculty member at UC Irvine, is still learning how the LA jazz scene functions. Mitchell was active with the AACM in Chicago for many years and still has many recording projects with its members but hopes to collaborate with more Los Angeles based musicians (2013). She posits Los Angeles is a "very vital scene" and there is "a lot more going on here than people think," but argues there needs to be "improvement in terms of people knowing what's going on" (ibid.). She wants to "form more of a network of all of the different organizations and musicians so that there can be better communication and more connections between all these different people who are all have similar goals and visions but are all isolated from each other" (ibid.). Angel City Arts' Rob Woodworth speaks of how he often hears people complaining about traveling throughout the Los Angeles area for gigs, and believes it deeply impacts the cohesiveness of the jazz scene and the number of performances that occur (Woodworth 2013).

Alex Sadnik, another one of my research consultants, is highly cognizant of the geographic challenges to the LA scene and has started a project to improve the situation. Sadnik is a Caucasian Orange County native in his late twenties who studied music at Cal State Long Beach; he is a performing saxophonist in the area and teaches private lessons in Long Beach and Irvine. Sadnik attests that "unless you cultivate a community within

where you live or you get a big PR machine behind you, it is hard to get people to come out to your gigs just because of how far the distances are in this scene" (Sadnik 2013). Sadnik argues for the importance of cultivating small scenes (ibid.). He started a community-based concert series in Long Beach in which the goal was "to make Long Beach a place where we could live and we could gig and perform so that we didn't have to go all the way to downtown LA or other places to be heard or to have venues to play" (ibid.). The concert series proved unsustainable, but the idea developed into a podcast named *Break the Mold,* in which Sadnik interviews people involved with jazz in Los Angeles on a weekly basis. This "oral history project" is meant to "recreate conversations in lessons and gigs" that people have about the LA scene but are not heard publicly (ibid.). Sadnik hopes to document the scene and to "create a comfort level" for people involved in it (ibid.). Sadnik says that there are generally about two to three hundred downloads per episode (ibid.), so he has an audience. I argue Sadnik's project is doing a great deal to start up much needed conversations about how to improve upon the LA jazz scene and should serve as a model for others who wish to work through these challenges together.

Besides geography, musicians and even experienced fans often bring up the difficult economics of the jazz scene. Robinson attests to how "within musical communities, artists are, in fact, continually confronted with economic challenges that require calculated decisions about time management, economic viability of projects, and the relationship between labor, art, and the cost of living in their local environments" (2005:168). Matt Zebley refers to the economics of jazz in LA as "sad, "dire, and

unsustainable" (2013). Jazz musicians understand the difficulties of playing this type of music for a living and have had to supplement it with playing other types of gigs, having other day jobs, or teaching. At the weekly Sunday jazz jam session at the Mint,[4] three different players complained to me on the same night that there is no money to be made on jazz in LA, although this is the music they would like to play fulltime. One guitarist mentioned that jazz gigs generally pay only fifty dollars a night, while most others will pay at least one hundred. The leaders and organizers of that jam session are Jeremy Lappitt (saxophone) and Mike Rocha (trumpet), both Caucasian males in their twenties who are trained musicians with degrees from top jazz programs. Both play at Disneyland to support themselves, while other musical endeavors are delegated to their spare time. Rocha explains, "Musicians stay afloat in this economy by working hard!" (2013) Many exceedingly capable jazz performers rarely have the opportunity to be heard live: as LA trombonist George McMullen attested, many of these musicians get locked into day jobs in the Hollywood studios and the live "potential for unbelievably beautiful art" is not realized (McMullen 2013). Musicians will sometimes publicly talk about their financial difficulties during performances, illustrated by saxophonist and improviser Phillip Greenlief, who announced from the stage after his recent performance at Alex Cline's monthly free improvisation series at the Eagle Rock Arts Center, "Thanks for being here and keeping this going. It is very hard, even in a culture where it is supposed to be valued" (2013). Greenlief is an accomplished improvisor and saxophonist who has made dozens of recordings, founded his own independent record label, and actively promotes

[4] Established in 1937, the Mint is a landmark nightclub in LA that hosts a combination of less- and well-known jazz and rock musicians.

free improvisatory music in both Los Angeles and San Francisco. Looking at the scene overall, Matt Zebley argues players coming out of school are "young and hungry" and "try to make a living playing only jazz for about three to five years…before they decide to make a life change" (2013).

The dire economic situation of jazz in Los Angeles not only impacts what performances can occur, but also how both musicians and fans form an understanding of the music, the connections they draw to it, and the identities they choose to present to the public. When asking Jeff Gauthier about how musicians manage to earn a living playing jazz in the area, he responded, "well, they either do or they don't" (2013). He noted that exciting things and clubs pop up and last about three to five years before they often suddenly vanish (ibid.). Gauthier mentioned how the bass player for his band suddenly had to leave and is now driving a truck and not playing music at all, which used to be his primary source of income (ibid.). Mike Rocha explains how because it is so hard for private music clubs to survive in Los Angeles, especially those hosting a lot of jazz,

> club owners and promoters…pay as little money as possible to maximize their own profits. This creates a market where there are more and more musicians who are lacking in experience and looking for anywhere that will let them play— and they'll do it for little to no money" while more experienced musicians are left without much work (Rocha 2013).

Although people are quick to acknowledge the problems plaguing their scene, many still embrace the feeling of being part of a jazz community in Los Angeles. Although it is hard, fans and musicians do their best to cope with the problems and create something special. I have seen some of the most famous LA jazz musicians, e.g., Bobby Bradford and Vinny Golia, perform in front of only fifteen people for very little money,

and I talked to musicians who sat in traffic for hours before a gig but believed it was worth it. The passion many have for the music seems to keep the scene going despite the ongoing financial challenges. Talking about older musicians who have families and for whom the economic difficulties are more pressing, Zebley says, "they all gripe about how the work is worse and they are not making any money, but they are still here. They haven't packed up and split" (2013). There is a certain awareness of struggle that pervades the way people talk about jazz in Los Angeles, but many try to create a place for themselves, as they know there is potential in this area and tons of great jazz musicians living here. To further extend the discussion of current experimental jazz in Los Angeles, I will now present two case studies of organizations that are deeply committed to presenting and sustaining this music in the area: Angel City Arts and the Blue Whale. My case studies are based on ethnographic research I conducted at the 2012 Angel City Jazz Festival and at many performances at the Blue Whale throughout 2013.

CHAPTER 3

Angel City Arts

Angel City Arts (ACA) is a small non-profit organization co-founded in 2008 by Rocco Somazzi and Jeff Gauthier. It is "dedicated to presenting, commissioning, recording, and teaching the performing arts in Los Angeles" (Angel City Arts 2012). This volunteer-based organization consists of a board of directors who are mainly local LA jazz fans, volunteers for various festivals and events, and a staff of three—the two co-founders and executive director Rob Woodworth. Each supports themselves with other jobs. Somazzi is involved with other private business endeavors and is currently involved with a new restaurant/jazz club named Duende in Oakland, CA, Gauthier is a performing violinist in the Los Angeles area and is still involved in many of the projects discussed above, and Rob Woodworth works for other concert promotion companies. However, they are all very dedicated to the mission of ACA—"cultivating and revitalizing jazz culture in Los Angeles" by presenting "regular live concerts by established and emerging music innovators who have achieved exceptionally high levels of musicianship and brought forward a significant contribution to the evolution of jazz and improvised music" (Facebook, Angel City Arts, 2013).

The infrastructure of this organization and its resources appear relatively sparse, yet they have managed to produce excellent events. Their main annual event is the fall jazz festival, though the organization also promotes occasional shows throughout the

year. In 2013, they have only produced one show to date, featuring Nicole Mitchell at the Blue Whale on January 14th. Although her performance was magnificent, there were only fifteen to twenty audience members. Woodworth explains that the organization rarely makes money on shows, even though they often present virtuosic musicians at the height of their careers that are relatively well known within certain sub-sects of jazz (2013). Though the organization presents profitable big-name performers in mainstream jazz, it also hosts many lesser-known musicians in order to give LA fans a chance to hear performers who offer new approaches and push musical boundaries. ACA also aims to record music and enhance their education program, which includes "workshops and master classes at all educational levels with an emphasis on presenting creative music in the public schools" (Angel City Arts 2012). The organization hosts a yearly Young Artists Competition "for musicians ages seventeen through twenty-one" in which four finalists perform at the Blue Whale and the winner performs at the Angel City Jazz Festival and receives a cash prize. This competition is meant to inspire young performers and give them the opportunity and experience of performing on the LA jazz scene at a young age (Somazzi 2012). The 2012 winner was the talented Anthony Lucca Quintet including some members photographed below. This photo appeared in the program for the 2012 Angel City Jazz Festival and was featured both as promotion for these young artists and as an advertisement for the ACA competition. ACA is actively promoting their Young Artists Competition through their main production vehicle —their annual festival.

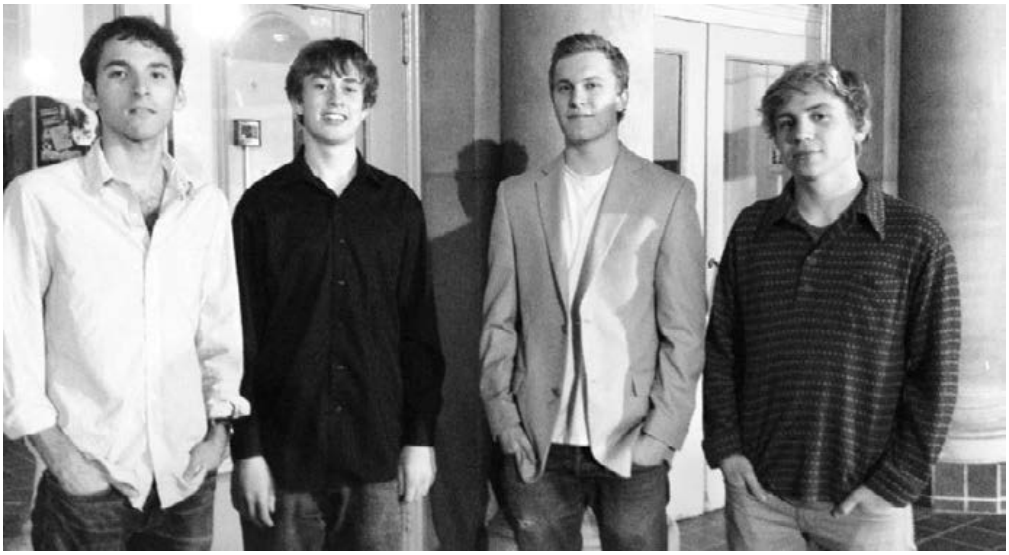

Figure 1. The Anthony Lucca Quintet, Winners of the ACA Young Artist's Competition 2012. Photo courtesy of Angel City Arts.

The organization's largest event is their yearly Angel City Jazz Festival—"LA's only non-commercial jazz and new music festival," which is "known for its eclectic line up of live performances by critically-acclaimed artists devoted to exploring jazz in creative, cutting-edge ways" (Facebook, Angel City Arts, 2013). This festival is unique due to the famed performers it attracts for a non-profit festival and the diverse jazz styles it presents. Somazzi describes the festival as "the main vehicle" for achieving ACA's goals (Somazzi 2012). Each year the organizers tie the various performances of the festival together with a unique theme. The organizers are very intent on shaping their festival beyond mere entertainment, using festival themes to illustrate their larger aims: "Rethinking Jazz" (2008), "Global Jam" (2011), and "Artists and Legends" (2012). ACA attempts to stay current and present the broad range of jazz as a genre, favoring neither more experienced players over new ones or vice-versa. In the 2012 festival, ACA presented both jazz legends, notably Archie Shepp, and up and coming jazz musicians,

such as Ambrose Akinmusire, who played together in one piece during the headlining performance of the festival.

Angel City Jazz Festival 2012

When I volunteered to help out at the 2012 Angel City Jazz Festival, I did not know what to expect. I had seen some video footage of the previous year's "Global Jam" festival featuring jazz artists and hybrid-jazz musics from around the world that were highly improvisatory, but 2012's theme "Artists and Legends" was sure to be different. It was indeed *a festival*, a celebration of jazz for Los Angeles, but not one that occurred in the open city streets or a park where people could casually walk around from show to show and hang out. This festival was hidden away in established venues, including the REDCAT Theater at Walt Disney Hall, The Ford Amphitheater, and UCLA's Royce Hall. Each venue shaped how the audience experienced the music, understood it, and found meaning within it. For the most part, the festival was not an ongoing event for multiple hours, but consisted of one or two shows each night, with most attendees arriving immediately prior to the show just like any other concert. ACA's festival did not offer mainstream jazz but instead attempted to produce an eclectic array of performances, most of which pushed the boundaries of what is familiarly heard as jazz into the realm of the unique and unexpected through free improvisation. The entire schedule for the 2012 festival in October is shown below, offering a sense for the stylist range covered in the various performances.

Figure 2. Schedule for the 2012 Angel City Jazz Festival. Picture courtesy of Angel City Arts.

Festival Night Two: October 6, 2012.

A one-hour symposium titled "Honoring and Breaking with Lineage" occurred early on in the festival at the REDCAT theater, prior to a performance by Anthony Wilson, Larry Goldings, and Jim Keltner. The panel featured a number of people very knowledgeable about jazz in Los Angeles, including Greg Burk, a longtime Los Angeles jazz journalist; Ruth Price, the founder of the Jazz Bakery; Bobby Bradford, a legendary LA jazz musician, mentor, and educator; Steve Isoardi, a Los Angeles jazz historian; and Ambrose Akinmusire, a thirty-year-old up-and-coming jazz trumpeter in LA. The discussion focused on the culture and history of jazz in LA. Although the symposium was free, only about forty people attended, while the show only an hour later in the 250-seat REDCAT theater was almost full. There were very few questions from the audience, who seemed to look upon the symposium as a fun, interesting activity rather than anything serious. I began to think that these conversations about jazz in Los Angeles need to happen more openly; my research subsequently showed that members of the jazz community have little opportunity to publicly discuss the issues that most directly address them. A fan and jazz MC told me later that night he had missed the symposium and asked what it was about. I responded they mostly discussed Central Avenue and the history of jazz in Los Angeles and his response was "so they didn't talk about all the problems with jazz in LA today?" I responded no and then he just walked off, displeased yet unsurprised.

The audience for that night's performance was predominantly middle-aged white men and women. I was surprised to see so few young adults at the show. Volunteering for ACA by helping out with their table in the REDCAT lobby until most of the fans left, I noticed that people stuck around for about an hour or so after the show, talking with acquaintances they had not seen in a while, discussing the performance and talking about jazz in general.

After experiencing my first night of the festival I was left with many questions. First, can one classify the audience of this show as a jazz community, or even a community? I was curious about what the audience members hoped to get out of these shows and whether they were concerned about the state of jazz in Los Angeles. Did this night feel special or like any other Saturday night musical performance in LA? Do these fans attend other jazz shows in the greater LA area, and did they plan to return for the other performances of the festival? Were they searching for a deeper meaning in improvisatory music, or did they view the show merely as leisure entertainment?

From the people I talked to that night and observations before, during, and after the performance, the music itself was the most communal experience of the night—not the pre-performance discussion. I could see that people were moved by the performance and could sense that sharing the same soundscape with others was a meaningful and inspiring experience. The musicians interacting with each other and with the audience simultaneously through the music and improvisations created a space for something special. However, how much of an impact did these improvisations have after the show

was over? Free improvisation is profoundly located in the moment, even though it emanates from the histories of the individual performers and their communities. Is the experimental jazz community as fleeting as the improvisations themselves?

The ACA festival certainly promotes an innovative, experimental approach to jazz in Los Angeles, which leads me to ponder the character of any experimental jazz scene. Jazz record sales have been plummeting for decades, and I question how an experimental jazz scene can stay afloat and sustain a dedicated audience. Although musicians aim for performances on a large scale, Nicole Mitchell says, "Live music is the fringe, and jazz is the fringe of the fringe," but "it is not something to complain about," and she says she likes that it is "not embraced by corporate culture" as she believes that is partly what happened to hip-hop, where corporate interests deeply affected musicians' artistry and indeed their message (Mitchell 2013). Saxophonist Jeremy Lappitt similarly believes that jazz musicians are not "of the system" and "don't wake up at 6am everyday to get ready for [their] job that will be, no matter what, from 8am to 5pm, Monday through Friday" (Lappitt 2013). He argues that it is this very lifestyle, a lifestyle some might consider experimental as well, which places improvisers and jazz musicians "already on their own link to social freedom," and "living the lifestyle of a jazz and improvised musician does inspire…change and a sense of individualism" (ibid.). I would argue that these struggles attract and inspire musicians in other ways. Just as improvised music embraces difference and spontaneity, improvising musicians often live their life according to these values, not only through a strong attachment to the music, but also by connecting their musical expression to their personal lifestyle choices and ideals. Robison

explains, “In order to achieve authenticity, musicians (black musicians in particular) are often expected to reproduce…stories of economic hardship and artistic servitude. Experimental jazz practices have especially produced such expectations” (2005:268). Realistically, this creates a very difficult balancing act between perpetuating and producing improvised music in relation to the complex musical values, spontaneity, and freedom this music inspires.

However, the liberatory values of jazz and improvised music have historically created some remarkably sustained and stable communal formations. The Sun Ra Arkestra existed for decades, and the AACM of Chicago still exists today, through which thousands of fans and hundreds of musicians were able to come together and experience this music on a constant basis and in a very communal fashion. The missions of these black avant-garde movements originating in the 1960s were very practical and deeply tied to the economic advancement of African American musicians, and served as vehicles for social justice. Angel City Arts does not explicitly promote social equality, but it could be considered an ethical organization dedicated to alternative lifestyles and opportunities. The very music it promotes, its operating structure, and the audience it attracts all embody an alternative ideology of music performance, production, and reception compared to the usual for-profit channels of popular music in the United States. Is there a place for such an organization in Los Angeles today? As I suggested above, the state of the current Los Angeles jazz scene is a product of the history of the city of Los Angeles itself. Gioia argues that since the demise of Central Avenue in the early 1950s, jazz on the West Coast “was a musical equivalent of a grass-roots campaign” (1992:366), and

organizations like Tapscott's Pan Afrikan People's Arkestra have had the largest sustained impact, having little connection to the official arts institutions of the city. Judging the success of jazz in LA by the size of its audience, or the economic sustainability of the music, may offer a limited and incomplete view: different criteria are needed to fully understand the critical and cultural impact of the scene. ACA is a non-profit organization, and according to Rob Woodworth, any profits generated go back into the production of the festival (Woodworth 2013). Their vision of jazz promotes an alternative economy, the very existence of which perhaps may be considered a successful end in itself. This community-based alternative economy operates through the creation of its own channels, opposing the capitalist economic system, and is essential to sustaining experimental musical values.

Main Festival Event: October 7, 2012.

I now focus in on the main festival event to explore some deeper connections between the operations of ACA and their role in sustaining a successful experimental jazz scene in Los Angeles. I will examine how they promote alternative value systems through a non-profit framework and contribute to the sustainability of the avant-garde jazz tradition.

The main day of the festival at the John Anson Ford Amphitheater in East Hollywood was when most fans came together to enjoy an all day event of experimental jazz. This day had a festive atmosphere and included an array of different groups, each showcasing their unique interpretations of jazz. The age range of the audience was

diverse, from young children to older adults, but the primary groups would again be middle aged white men and women. I saw a large number of young adults as well as college-age music students. The layout of the beautiful venue facilitated the festivities and success of the event. The main performances occurred inside the amphitheater itself, but a number of groups performed in the large outside lobby area when first entering the venue, including Matt Zebley and his Oversize Quartet. I volunteered at the Angel City booth selling CDs and t-shirts for much of the day. The Los Angeles Jazz Collective (LAJC) also had a booth selling some albums and posters and answering questions. As their promotional material states, the LAJC is "a group of musicians working together to build a stronger jazz community within Los Angeles. Through cooperative effort and education, [they] seek to promote [their] work and generate greater public appreciation for improvised music" (Los Angeles Jazz Collective 2008). The atmosphere was very casual and people were eager to talk and ask questions. It felt like a community-based event and people roamed around the outdoor venue and socialized. Inside the amphitheater, the staff handed out audience surveys all day, with questions such as "is this the first time you have seen this performance style or culture," and "how much did you feel a connection to others in the audience?"

The Peter Erskine Trio featuring Vardan Ovespian and Damian Erskine kicked off the show with a laid back mix of straight-ahead and often very bluesy jazz standards and original compositions. The trio used little if any group improvisation and most of the songs were relatively short and to the point. Next, the Mark Dresser Quintet with special guest Bobby Bradford performed a highly improvisatory set led by the aggressive and

thunderous Dresser, who pushed the improvisations along by interacting intensely with all the soloists. By this time, the audience was much larger. The Dresser performance included collective free improvisation and also improvisations only between certain members of the group, offering different dynamics throughout the performance. Their songs interwove innovative compositions with improvisations and kept the audience on its toes throughout with constant energy and enthusiasm. The much-awaited Ambrose Akinmusire Quintet performed next, showcasing a group of talented younger musicians who demonstrated a high level of improvisatory communication, with great group energy and individual virtuosity very much on display. At the end of the night, I overheard fans exclaiming that Akinmusire's was their favorite performance of the night.

Figure 3. Archie Shepp. Photo courtesy of Angel City Arts.

The Archie Shepp Quartet played last. Since they were the headline performance for the night, the venue had become much more crowded by then—people had come

specifically to see the renowned jazz star. Shepp served as the principal jazz "legend" on display, actualizing the "Artists and Legends" theme; he was joined by Ambrose Akinmusire for one number. The following picture is the cover to the program of the festival, clearly legendizing Shepp as he is the largest figure and all the other performers fit into the shape of his head and hat.

Figure 4. Program cover for the 2012 Angel City Jazz Festival. Picture courtesy of Angel City Arts.

Shepp gained fame in the 1960s as a major advocator for the Black Arts Movement, and he is well known for how he politicizes music. He rejects the term "jazz" as pejorative

against African Americans and instead thinks of his music as African American music (Ho 2006:152). Shepp is also a poet and educator and during performances often speaks about the black struggle for social equality and against American imperialism and capitalism (ibid.:144). As Fred Ho attests, remembering his encounters with Shepp in the 1970s, "What fascinated me about Shepp was the combination of his outspoken militant political views, fused with Marxist influences,…and his soulful and incendiary tenor saxophone playing" (ibid.:152). Shepp's performances are often provocative and are explicitly about much more than the music itself. Shepp is a stunningly virtuosic player. He connects his music to the African American struggle and views the stage as a way to publicly teach others about this struggle, fusing the experience with highly emotional and expressive music. Shepp has done this for decades and he sees the African American message as relevant to the music he plays today, as he said in an interview a few days before the festival, "There's been a lot of changes since I was a young man, including a black president. But fundamentally, I think America remains the same; we've still got a long way to go" (Shepp 2012). Shepp was the only performance that day to refer at all to the role of race in jazz history.

The audience seemed oddly ambivalent towards seventy-five year old Archie Shepp and his performance. Some fans seemed outright surprised when he played his song "Mama Rose," in which he sang about the oppression of African Americans, slavery, and specifically his grandmother. He has performed this song at jazz festivals for decades. "Mama Rose" was written in the early 1960s, a poem that Ho describes as "a searing indictment of colonialism" that "evokes the Baptist preacher, the work hollers of

the sharecropper, blues man, and militant orator" (ibid.:161). Before starting the song, Shepp's drummer Steve McCraven demonstrated a "patten-juba" slave dance on stage, slapping his legs and cheeks to produce a rhythm. Shepp sang the poem in its entirety while the rest of the band played powerful, repetitive, ritualistic phrases in the background, similar to the vamps used on Coltrane's "A Love Supreme":

> They say that Malcolm is dead
> and every flower is still
> but I want to tell you Mama Rose
> that we are the victims . . .
> I want to take this ex-cannibal's kiss
> and turn it into a revolution . . .
> your corpse turned up to the sky like a
> putrefying Congolese after the Americans
> have come to help . . .
> your vagina split asymmetrically between
> the east and the west . . . (Ho 2006:161).

Shepp sang over and over a gain "it's time for a change," and then shouted "revolution," followed by a very expressive and soulful yet anguished soprano saxophone solo. Combining spoken poetry with music is a powerful emotional amalgamation, as it was clear Shepp enhanced and amplified his message through these media. However, by the end of the performance many fans were leaving or awaiting the show's end by standing in the aisles,. It seemed that the racialized politics of Shepp's performance failed to captivate much of the audience. Although I am sure most knew about the deep connections between jazz and African American social equality movements, they did not seem willing to delve into these issues through Shepp. Most of the fans were middle-aged white men and woman, and thus perhaps these demographics had something to do with their clear lack of interest in Shepp's song about African American oppression. However,

we must not discount the value of this performance at this point in Los Angeles jazz history. Although Angel City Arts is not dedicated to promoting black social equality *per se,* their festival serves as a vehicle through which these concerns are heard. Further, because ACA certainly promotes experimental and/or avant-garde jazz, it is useful to look into the history of such experimentalism to understand the dynamic between the Shepp performance and the mission of ACA.

The concept of the jazz avant-garde developed in the late 1950s and early 60s, propelled by Ornette Coleman and his famous albums *The Shape of Jazz to Come* (1959) and *Free Jazz* (1960). On these records, Coleman demonstrated a new approach to improvisation, in which the goal was to play outside of the chord changes and open up room for more experimentation, often resulting in a focus on other aspects of the music, such as timbre or rhythm. He attempted to liberate jazz improvisations from any type of formal structure, keeping it perpetually "free." Many other jazz musicians interested in this new approach were also African American, and the style became quickly associated with African American values. During this crucial time for African American civil rights, many of the most experimental jazz musicians—including Charles Mingus, John Coltrane, Pharaoh Sanders, Cecil Taylor, Sun Ra, and of course, Archie Shepp—explicitly tied their music to the liberation of blacks in American society. At the same time in the 1960s, a European avant-garde style of jazz emerged along with new approaches to improvisation. This movement was not tied to African American values and was viewed as a white aesthetic by many African American communities. George Lewis has written extensively about the differences between the black and white musical

avant-gardes, arguing "Eurological" improvisatory practices, with their ideal of absolute spontaneity, excludes the "history" and "memory" of African American roots—"a way of excluding jazz" (Lewis 1996:108). Lewis argues that discrimination was built into the very musical practices of the white European avant-garde. Ho similarly states,

> Unlike the avant-garde of a colonialist Western Europe or white North American culture, which isn't necessarily politically progressive or transgressive and may, indeed, reinforce privilege, promote solipsism and self indulgence, oppose social responsibility and consciousness, and elevate art for art's sake, the avant-garde of oppressed peoples' cultures generally tends to fuel liberation, challenge cultural dominance and hegemony (usually of the oppressor, colonial traditions and forms), and promote rebellion, struggle, dissidence, disturbance, militancy, and opposition to the mainstream and status quo. The African American avant-garde of the 1960s and early 1970s was such a force. The new music, new poetry, and new theater were part of a cultural and social movement for a new society. In a broad sense, the artists sought to deconstruct and support the destruction of the old society of white supremacist, Eurocentric, and patriarchal capitalism for a new society based on full equality, social justice, and 'power to the people (Ho 2006:175).

Most of the avant-garde jazz performances I have witnessed in Los Angeles, including both white and black musicians, have not been explicitly tied to the values of the African American avant-garde. With the exception of The World Stage in Leimert Park (an organization and venue that is explicitly dedicated to an African American music but is not frequented much by many of the people I interviewed on the LA jazz scene), the current experimental jazz scene in Los Angeles does not seek to forge deep connections to racial politics. However, the existence of non-profits dedicated to this music, such as Angel City Arts, I see as a result of, and something of an extension of the type of black avant-garde music organizations dedicated to the progress of their local community that started emerging in the 1960s. Within the Los Angeles corporate-dominated arts infrastructure today, non-profits serve as a continuation of organizations

such as Tapscott's Pan Afrikan People's Arkestra, whether or not focused on socially liberating values. Thus it is somewhat fitting for ACA to put Archie Shepp's concerns at the forefront of their festival, for their organization is only made possible by people like Shepp who have advocated for a meaningful avant-garde and a change in American values since the 1960s. The compelling porosity of these values is illustrated by Ho, who demonstrates how some Asian American musicians have adopted the ideologies of the African American avant-garde and used them for their own endeavors. Wong has also written about the connections between the African American and Asian American jazz avant-garde, pointing to an "interethnic political coalition" (2004:275) that links Asian American and African American values, and the resulting importance of improvisatory performance (ibid.:291). Her model of "interethnic" musical ethnography and argument that "crossing musical color lines is always closely situated in time and place," and forces us to think not about the "politics of music," but "music as politics" (ibid.:296), offers a framework for thinking about the production and reception of Shepp's performance within a white-dominated Los Angeles experimental jazz scene. Sharp has shown how values of the black avant-garde have influenced the white avant-garde within Los Angeles itself:

> The ideas radicalized by Ornette Coleman were an influence on the concept of avant-garde or free jazz, including the music of Horace Tapscott, John Carter and Bobby Bradford. This work then inspired the community that included Nels and Alex Cline, Lee Kaplan, and Vinny Golia, who created a scene around the concert series at the Century City Playhouse. From that series, connections were made that would branch out into a number of different communities and scenes including contemporary concert music eventually even punk. (Sharp 2008:439). […] As musicians' understanding and interest in the music increases and deepens, they find and become members and participants in different communities, which not surprisingly often challenge and transgress socially informed racial barriers.

> These transgressions are prefigured by the shared history and aesthetics that inform the music of both communities (ibid.:442).

Robinson attests to how non-African American experimental jazz musicians like "saxophonist Marco Eneidi, percussionist Alex Cline, and reed player Vinny Golia all describe their music as 'black American music.' These strategies of naming undermine essentialist views about racial belonging and historical narratives" (2005:28). My goal here is to show how delineating improvisatory music to white or black avant-garde traditions in any tidy way obscures the history and current ideologies behind many musicians' music. Further, these musicians and communities are brought together by sharing many of the same challenges plaguing the production of improvised music in general in Los Angeles, and many people I have talked to, although aware of these issues, do not see the point in stringently separating them into two camps. Robinson argues one must understand both the black and white avant-garde to comprehend the development of improvised music in Los Angeles, for they are both "important points of reference" (ibid.:110).

Angel City Arts, functioning through a small non-profit framework, operates in an avant-garde fashion, on the fringes of capitalism. Just as successful organizations like the AACM created their own paths towards social, economic, and political advancement, ACA participates in a similar alternative economy, which success is not based on monetary profit but rather the integration of experimental jazz and its related values into the culture of Los Angeles' communities. Just as black civil rights were pushed to the outskirts of the city in the 1960s, infinitely reinforced by the structures put in place by the American capitalist economic system (and one could say are still this way today), the

current avant-garde jazz scene of Los Angeles cannot operate effectively within this capitalist structure either. ACA represents an alternative model for success. Perhaps emphasizing quality over quantity when producing performances is a necessary prescription for this experimental music scene. I question whether the music would remain innovative and experimental if there is a constant stream of shows in large corporate-backed venues, and if musicians could easily become rich from this music. In today's American neoliberal, capitalist-driven society, the very existence of organizations such as ACA is a form of opposition in itself and perhaps "being on the fringe" is the optimal way for them to operate and fulfill their goals. There is a good reason why such organizations are a great fit for experimental improvisatory music production and why the music and the organizations are often equally ephemeral.

One could say that ACA is free from the burden of flourishing in the U.S economy, as the organization consists of people who have come together for no reason other than a strong dedication to promoting its mission. Of course a great deal of money is needed to put on their yearly festival. The amount of time volunteers and staff for smaller non-profits have to spend on fulfilling their mission is often minimal. This is a direct result of the neglect of jazz by commodity capitalism and the value placed on profit over cultural or artistic experiences. Larger non-profits that manage significant resources often become more hierarchical and have more formal operating structures, which may not be optimal for an experimental improvisation scene.

Economist Ann Markusen attributes different criteria for success for smaller non-profits. Firstly, she argues that smaller budgets "may reflect adaptability and innovation

rather than dysfunction" (2011:13), and a small size may be "optimal for their mission and work style" (ibid.:14). Educational impact is another criteria that may he hard to judge by numerical analysis (ibid.:21). Further, Markusen argues that "smaller organizations are organizationally more diverse than larger ones" (ibid.:6), and often work "across disciplines," opening up more roads for opportunity (ibid.:12). Lastly, cultural non-profits, whether small or big, play a role in promoting arts in locations that helps local businesses in the area, and thus indirectly helps others (ibid.:43).

Markusen's research also suggests that non-profit organizations have far-reaching effects and influence. She notes that, as a whole, "California's nonprofits have a much larger footprint than formal budgets convey, because at all budget sizes, they engage the services of substantial numbers of volunteers and receive in-kind contributions of time and materials uncommon in public and for-profit sectors" (ibid.:2). Markusen also asserts that non-profits should not be judged by their economic stability or impact alone, for these are simply not their goals. Even the length of the life of a non-profit is an unworthy criteria for success, as organizations can make a lasting impact in a relatively short period of time, and thus "longevity, size, and growth are not synonymous with success" (ibid.:13). Markusen argues they valuably "create beautiful and meaningful arts and cultural experiences and make them available to the general public" (ibid.:5). Further, "they provide food for thought, underscore meanings and interpretations of past and present" and "are often the originators of ideas and forms that result in creative industry products and services that generate many more jobs and incomes than those generated directly by their operations" (ibid.:7). Their ultimate success should be judged on a local

level, and by how well organizations adapt to the needs of the communities in which they operate, i.e., their "roles in stabilizing their immediate neighborhoods: improving safety, aesthetics, and infrastructure, and providing a sense of community for people more generally" (ibid.:43). Markusen offers the radical argument that non-profit organizations' success correlates most profoundly to the engagement of their surrounding community, which when accomplished on a certain level, the "distinction between creator and participant is fuzzier" (ibid.:13). This may be viewed as the ultimate goal of such non-profits, where community collaboration and participation is so deeply incorporated that their mission is fulfilled through the everyday social behaviors of the community.

Angel City Arts is successful for many of the reasons Markusen suggests. Although not very often, they engage the Los Angeles jazz community through major events and give them a place to socialize and experience innovative jazz together. They create experiences for people that the larger American economy neglects and thus creates new spaces for thinking and innovation. Improvisatory music has recently been tied to a liberatory discourse that is often viewed as inherently ethical because of the very oppositional, and out-of-the-ordinary experiences it creates (Heble 2000; Fischlin and Heble, eds. 2004; Solis and Nettl, eds. 2009). Due to the economics of the situation, ACA may never have a large impact in terms of the number of people they reach, but their value lies in the constant potential for change they infuse into society, and how they hopefully prompt others to think about alternative value systems and change. They even offer an alternative model to other jazz non-profit organizations, such as Wynton Marsalis' Jazz at Lincoln Center (JALC), which is (not coincidentally) the largest jazz

non-profit in the country and a promoter of jazz that disregards avant-garde achievements in favor of promoting jazz as "America's classical music." Sharp argues that JALC's

> vision of the tradition of jazz redefined the field of cultural production surrounding it to allow their particular kind of jazz to be more respected and better represented in public, but it excluded more people than it included and it led to an understanding of jazz that was exclusive and no longer experimental or innovative, at least not in the same sense as it had been (2008:444).

Marsalis' aim is to sustain and promote "jazz traditioning" (Ake 2002:146), a jazz canon of the elites, which like Western classical music, strategically finds a great deal of conservative institutional support. Angel City Arts is by definition oppositional and will continue to be so until the larger framework of things change. There will always be a need for such organizations—to challenge the status quo and to diffuse alternative values throughout society.

CHAPTER 4

The Blue Whale

The Blue Whale is an approximately one hundred person capacity jazz club located in Little Tokyo, founded in late 2009 by Korean immigrant Joon Lee. The club is hidden away in the corner of the third floor of Weller Court, a multilevel outdoor mall full of Japanese restaurants, and was previously a karaoke bar (Rodriguez 2013). Lee promotes the Blue Whale as "live jazz + art space" (The Blue Whale 2013) that is dedicated to housing innovative improvisatory music. There is no stage in this club, but only a space in the back where musicians perform, described by Lee as "a little playground for musicians and artists" that facilitates improvisatory music and the "sharing" of "energy" between musicians and the audience (Joon Lee, quoted in Rodriguez 2013). The club is one large open room, with a bar area, a seating area in the middle, and the performance area in the back. The seating consists of moveable cube-shaped chairs that enhance the openness of the space and provide an unfixed seating arrangement and indeed an unfixed means to experience the music. The following photographs portray a visit to the Blue Whale. I first show the location inside Weller Court and the entrance to the club. Next, you see the bar area and artwork drawn with chalk on the wall. Lastly, walking further into the club, you see the performance space and the seating area with its moveable cubes.

Figure 5. View of Weller Court from the third floor, outside of the Blue Whale. Photo taken by Aaron Kaplan on Jan. 14, 2013, Los Angeles.

Figure 6. Sign outside of the entrance to the Blue Whale. Photo taken by Aaron Kaplan on Jan. 14, 2013, Los Angeles.

Figure 7. Entrance to the Blue Whale. Photo taken by Aaron Kaplan on Jan. 18. 2013, Los Angeles.

Figure 8. Lobby and Bar area of the Blue Whale. Photo taken by Aaron Kaplan on Jan. 18, 2013, Los Angeles.

Figure 9. Artwork drawn in chalk on wall to the left of the bar. Photo taken by Aaron Kaplan on Jan. 17, 2013, Los Angeles.

Figure 10. Seating area: The moveable green cubes. Photo taken by Aaron Kaplan on Jan. 14, 2013, Los Angeles.

Figure 11. Performance space of the Blue Whale. Photo taken by Aaron Kaplan on Jan. 18, 2013, Los Angeles.

The shows at the club are diverse, featuring out of town and local acts, established jazz musicians and new ones, and both concerts and open jam sessions. The atmosphere is casual, welcoming, and respectful; the staff always makes an announcement to stay quiet during the performance (i.e., despite the presence of the bar, the music is the point). Although this club is known for hosting very free improvisatory music, it also hosts straight ahead jazz and jam sessions, soul and r&b jazz fusion, jazz-funk fusion, traditional big bands, electronic musicians and DJs, and collaborative acts of music, dance, and painting. I have seen solo performances as well as ensembles with as many as twenty perform there, and almost any number in between. Fans who frequent the Blue

Whale on a regular basis are exposed to wide array of approaches to jazz and improvised music.

Lee says in an interview that opening a jazz club in LA in 2009 at the beginning of a recession was a "really dangerous" and "not very profitable" endeavor (Lee, quoted in Sadnik 2012). His description of his business plan sounds like a non-profit approach, in which he put the presentation of "great music" ahead of profits (ibid.). Lee says, "You just pay half the price and get the same quality of music you listen to at Walt Disney Hall" (ibid.). He also mentions, "When I built this place I felt some things were unfair in this city," referring to his experience hearing how Los Angeles is not known as a city for "creative music," in opposition to the East Coast; he learned that the many great young players in the area had very few places to present their music in the way they would like, and were forced to play at restaurants where their main focus is "to control their volume," to provide background music (ibid.). He describes the Blue Whale as a collaborative effort between himself and the musicians who choose to come there, for they often come for "ten buks a night" when "they are worth much more" (ibid.). He thus helps expose younger musicians to wider audiences for little money (ibid.). Alex Sadnik applauds Lee for his approach and enjoys playing at the Blue Whale for he "knows its being curated by someone who knows what [he's] been through" and understands "the challenges [he] faces as a musician" (Sadnik 2012). Lee believes Los Angeles needs many more kinds of jazz clubs but says, when people call him and say they want to open a jazz club in LA, he responds, "Don't do it," thinking of the economic realities of the business endeavor (Lee, quoted in Sadnik 2012). Jeff Gauthier sees the Blue Whale as a place where excitement is

"bubbling up," but says "the Blue Whale will go out of business one day too," like other exciting clubs have vanished in the past (Gauthier 2013).

The Blue Whale attracts a diverse audience of various ages and ethnicities. Many musicians frequent the club, but Lee is proud that he has established a venue where many people come without knowing much if anything about the musicians performing but trust they will enjoy the show. From my experience, performers who come to the club on tour from elsewhere in the U.S attract the largest and most diverse audiences, while local acts often attract an audience of LA jazz musicians and students in the area. On Friday or Saturday nights, I often meet people who say they do not go there regularly but decided to check out the club as a fun weekend activity. The most dedicated jazz fans generally visit the club during the week. Overall, audiences are generally extremely attentive during performances and very focused on the music. Few people remain in the bar area while music is being played and those that do will often whisper during the performance. Jam sessions attract many students from CSU Northridge, CSU Long Beach, CalArts, and UCLA. Experienced professional LA musicians also attend these jam session and play with younger musicians. Ambrose Akinmusire played with Archie Shepp at the 2012 Angel City Jazz Festival but also casually sat in on the standard "All The Things You Are" at a Blue Whale jam session.

Whenever I mentioned Joon Lee and the Blue Whale during interviews, everyone—fans, musicians, and others in the music business—talked about him and the club with excitement and great respect. A common response was "Joon's the Man" or "I

love Joon" or "I love playing at that place." Somazzi says the Blue Whale is "the greatest venue for modern jazz," hosting "national and local acts" and "a large range of styles" (Somazzi 2012). I talked with a fan at Nicole Mitchell's show who said "I feel something is happening at this place. I always see very exciting music here and I think others feel the same way." The Blue Whale is a unique venue that has made a real impact in its short four years of existence. Still, the club's sustainability is questionable. Matt Zebley attests to Lee's hard work, saying,

> If you go to the Blue Whale, he'll be there, but he's like washing dishes…I'll see him in the wings, he'll watch half of one tune, and then he'll be back in the kitchen, I don't know if he cooks, but I've seen him serve booze, wash glasses, clean plates, so yea, that guy is working there. He wouldn't be able to make any money if he wasn't there. I don't even know how he makes money (2013).

Joon Lee's work at the Blue Whale is a perfect example of Matt Zebley's description of how the jazz scene in Los Angeles survives at all. As Zebley said, "What happens is the people that get bit by this bug, the people who are passionate about the music find a way, you know the spirit finds a way to express itself" (ibid.).

The Michael Feinberg Group at the Blue Whale, January 18, 2013

Michael Feinberg is a twenty-five year old bass player living in New York City. His show at the Blue Whale on Friday, January 18th attracted a strikingly diverse crowd for the club. There were about forty people in the audience at the height of the show, with a wide age range of both men and women from their early twenties to older adults, and people of many ethnicities; the usual white middle-aged crowd did not dominate the audience that night. Feinberg's entire group was young and consisted of a drummer,

pianist, trumpet player and a guest guitarist, saxophonist, and a singer who each joined for at least one song. The atmosphere was very casual and many people I talked to that night were checking out the Blue Whale for the first time or had never heard of Michael Feinberg before. The audience was less attentive to the music than usual and seemed more interested in hanging out than listening intently to the music—the opposite of what I have witnessed at most Blue Whale shows.

The band played an imaginative array of songs and styles. They kicked off the performance with the funky "Black Widow Blues" by Branford Marsalis, incorporating trumpet and piano solos and an extended improvisatory section with just bass and drums, leading into a collective jam section at the end of the piece. The remainder of the first set continued in a similar fashion, with the music always having a distinct beat for the audience to groove to and feel. Most of the attention was on individual soloists—especially the trumpet player—rather than collective improvisation. The band played original Feinberg compositions as well as many covers, including covers of a song from the movie *Babel* and a Björk song. I argue that this band took a very experimental approach to jazz despite little free improvisation, lots of covers and compositions, and mostly standard meters: this show demonstrated how the Blue Whale showcases groups with non-standard jazz interpretations. The jazz avant-garde is often thought of in terms of stylistic musical characteristics that are outside jazz conventions and thus gets stereotyped as "atonal" or "noise," but the Michael Feinberg group suggests a more complex range of experimental practices. The following photographs are from the performance that night. The first few photos portray the guest artists and the band

interacting in the open performance space, showing how conducive it is to group communication. The audience's interpretation of the performance, and the connections they draw from it, are shaped by the openness and the absence of an elevated stage, closing the gap between performers and the audience. The last photo shows the audience hanging out during the set break, illustrating how the cubes facilitate connections between audience members, inspiring a social atmosphere and encouraging group conversation.

Figure 12. Michael Feinberg on electric bass (2nd from right) and his group. Photo taken by Aaron Kaplan on Jan. 18, 2013, Los Angeles.

Figure 13. Michael Feinberg Group and guest guitarist. Photo taken by Aaron Kaplan on Jan. 18, 2013, Los Angeles.

Figure 14. Michael Feinberg Group and guest guitarist, saxophonist, and vocalist performing a cover of a Björk song. Photo taken by Aaron Kaplan on Jan. 18, 2013, Los Angeles.

Figure 15. Audience socializing during set break. Photo taken by Aaron Kaplan on Jan. 18, 2013, Los Angeles.

Categorizing jazz into sub-genres, although useful as a marketing tool and for understanding the historical development of the music, can channel audience expectations in overly determined ways. The Feinberg group's performance at the Blue Whale fell between traditional jazz and the avant-garde, as it incorporated elements from both, but also drew from popular music, soul, and funk. The audience that night did not seem to include a large number of die-hard jazz fans (either straight-ahead or avant-garde), and although there was a good turnout that night, the audience consisted of an unusual amalgamation of people. Performances that represent, for lack of a better term, the in-between of jazz thrive at the Blue Whale but often struggle elsewhere. Within just a few years, the Blue Whale has established itself as a club that supports an experimental jazz scene beyond superficial stylistic categories. Lee's approach as a club owner/concert

promoter also offers a curatorial relationship with the performers on a more personal level. Lee specifically looks for musicians who add something new to jazz in their own special way, bolstering a performance space beyond jazz's cursory divisions.

Lee's approach parallels what jazz scholars have debated in recent years in jazz education and jazz history as a whole. Some scholars argue for "the new jazz studies," or new critical approaches to researching and understanding jazz, which Porter describes as those scholars who "have charted the histories of musicians and musical styles and situated them in their broader social contexts" (Porter 2012:13). Sherrie Tucker refers to this approach as "deconstructing the jazz tradition" (2012: 264). She deploys new pedagogical strategies to redirect jazz history, which is often taught as "a logical march from one style to the next, forged by a procession of great men," when in reality it is much more complex (ibid.). Jazz has always been marked by innovation, and players, although encouraged to master a certain skill set, more importantly strive to develop their own voice, often through improvisational approaches. I agree with Ake, Garrett, and Goldmark's argument that jazz is "an open-ended, multifaceted, ever-changing idea or set of discourses rather than a prescribed and proscribed set of specific musical devices, names, places, or styles" (2012:6). A small community of performers and fans knows that the Blue Whale embraces this understanding of jazz, but perhaps Lee's model needs to be given more attention for it is a manifestation of the many issues that the 'new' jazz scholars have drawn forward—the fact that jazz today is in an "identity crisis" (ibid.:2) and "the lines some people draw between 'jazz' and 'not jazz' can be at once both fiercely guarded and very difficult to discern" (ibid.:1). Lee extends this pedagogic model

into the production and curation of the music itself—precisely the aspects that musicians and educators often have little control over in today's narrow jazz economy. Many young jazz musicians know that no matter how virtuosic or innovative they may become as a player, there is no guarantee they will be able to perform their music publicly in any sustained way. Generally, there is little conversation between jazz venues and the historical, cultural and performance practices being taught in schools. Lee, although struggling to keep his beloved venue afloat, is helping to bridge this gap and doing precisely what Porter argues will "help us to expand the parameters of jazz history and to rethink its ontology" (2012:15), encouraging more communication that is mutually enriching for jazz businesses, performers, educators, and fans.

The many out-of-town musicians who decide to perform at the Blue Whale while on tour are already familiar with Lee's efforts. Many of them live in New York (e.g., Michael Feinberg, Tim Berne, and Uri Caine), but they choose to come to the Blue Whale and often attest to how much they enjoy playing there, saying how they view it as a great place to showcase their experimental music. The Blue Whale is both unstructured and postmodern: musical experiences there are not heavily guided by the spatial proxemics of the club or indeed by the jazz fans who come to the shows. The audience often does not know what to expect, though they know the Blue Whale is a place to come and see something out of the ordinary. Thus the Blue Whale is a very fertile ground for experimentation, for both performing musicians and listeners. The club is not weighted down by history: the Blue Whale is certainly not reaching into the past to establish itself as a jazz club that attempts to carry forward a great tradition of jazz in Los Angeles, but

instead looks toward the future by asserting that a change is needed for jazz in LA. This idea is solidified by every performance at the Blue Whale and all the experiences people have there, but there is very little open discussion about it. Thus the interactive relationships between jazz fans, musicians, educators, scholars, venue owners, concert promoters, writers, and critics represented by the ideology of the Blue Whale is in important ways only metaphoric. To be actualized more deeply and extensively, the Blue Whale will need to be actively cultivated and publicized as a business that is doing far more than just presenting music.

The Anthony Shadduck Double Quartet at the Blue Whale, January 22, 2013.

Just a few nights after the Michael Feinberg Group performance, Anthony Shadduck assembled his Double Quartet for only the third time ever to fill the Blue Whale with "free collective improvisations that span the traditions of avant-garde free jazz, world music, and western classical based free improvisations" (Bluewhale 2013). Shadduck, an upright bass player, assembled two drummers, another upright bassist, a guitarist, trumpeter, alto saxophonist, bass clarinet and clarinet player, and special guest Vinny Golia on assorted woodwinds. Artist Norton Wisdom also joined the group and painted during the performance on a large canvas behind the band. The Blue Whale advertised that this would "be a night of success, failure, contrast, harmony, dissonance, and the unknown" (ibid.). It is notable that this group does not come together often, as the musicians in it are all involved with other projects, but choose to perform their free improvisatory music at the Blue Whale.

This extraordinary Tuesday night performance attracted fewer than twenty audience members. The musicians seemed neither disappointed nor surprised and still seemed to put forward their best effort. The performers simply seemed to expect the audience to understand their *raison d'etre* as an improvising group and "go with them" for the performance. The few audience members listened very attentively; few seemed surprised with what they heard, and all applauded loudly after each piece or even during pieces. The group actively and energetically communicated with the audience, taking them along on the improvisatory journey. The format of the performance was kept very open: to start a piece, Shadduck would often simply say to another musician, "You want to start this one?" The freeness of the music did not guide the audience's interpretation of the piece; instead, it cleared a space for them to inject their own thoughts into the music and to search for something new, just as the musicians were doing.

Each improvisation was fifteen to twenty minutes in length and generally started off slowly and sparsely, gradually building into a dense soundscape. The drummers constantly searched through their collection of multiple percussion instruments for the right sound to use at the right moment. They spun tops on their drums, dragged large metal chains over the drumheads, and even bounced balls on top of them. Many of the horn players focused on adding to the overall sound through unusual timbres rather than by trying to push the improvisation in different directions from what it had evolved into. However, when the time seemed right, various members of the group burst into solo improvisations—dramatic expressions of the moment. The group seemed to want to keep the improvisations open enough so that new ideas kept entering, but not necessarily by

pushing the entire improvisation in any distinct direction. The musicians did not seem to have established endings for any of the songs but instead simply came to an end when the energy had wound down, almost fading into silence. The following photographs are from the performance that night, illustrating how the group is positioned to allow greater communication during the improvisations. The musicians not using amplification are up front but placed in between the two contrabass players, the guitarist, and the drummers. The musicians form a loose circle during the performance to enhance the potential for deep listening as well as to facilitate visual communication. The last two pictures show artist Norton Wisdom painting during the performance, and then one of the finished paintings. He would leave the final painted product on the easel for only a few minutes and would then erase it and start anew with the next improvisation. This multimedia improvisatory display enhanced the experimental atmosphere and offered visual ideas for the musicians to respond to while improvising. The audience was able to follow the painter's visual interpretation of the improvisations, while interpreting the performance themselves.[5]

[5] I have seen other multimedia performances at other venues in LA, incorporating improvisatory dance and more.

Figure 16. The Anthony Shadduck Double Quartet performing at the Blue Whale. Photo taken by Aaron Kaplan on Jan. 22, 2013, Los Angeles.

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Figure 17. Anthony Shadduck on double bass (center) and Alex Sadnik on alto saxophone (right). Photo taken by Aaron Kaplan on Jan. 22, 2013, Los Angeles.

Figure 18. The Anthony Shadduck double quartet and artist Norton Wisdom painting behind them. Photo taken by Aaron Kaplan on Jan. 22, 2013, Los Angeles.

Figure 19. Final work by Norton Wisdom painted along to one of the many musical improvisations. Photo taken by Aaron Kaplan on Jan. 22, 2013, Los Angeles.

Listening to free improvisations requires a deep engagement and audience understanding. The music itself may seem extremely dissonant, chaotic, and even uncomfortable. The few people who attended the show seemed to understand the meaning and dynamic of the performance, but I question whether the larger Los Angeles jazz community is as knowledgeable about collective free improvisatory music, and I wonder how they would think about the importance of this music. To me, this performance was representative of what the Blue Whale strives to offer as a jazz club: a place where people hear something new and special every time they go. But if the Blue Whale booked collective free improvisatory performances on most nights, they would never attract a large audience.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusions and Takeaways

Within the small experimental Los Angeles jazz scene, highly avant-garde, free improvisation performances occupy the edge rather than the center. For me, though, these dynamic, in-the-moment group improvisational performances are one of the most generative spaces for cooperative experimentation in jazz. The Anthony Shadduck Double Quartet show illustrates the small size of the community of people who seek out this type of experience. Mike Rocha believes,

> People are attracted to seeing improvised music because they know of the perils that are involved with the spontaneity of the performance. Things can easily come crashing down in the tightrope walk that is improvisation. But, through this, some of the greatest moments in music can happen (Rocha 2013).

Thus fans must be willing to understand and take this risk. In these types of performances, music-as-entertainment is withheld for a more cerebral and embodied critical meaning. Problematically, many jazz fans are not methodically exposed to the ideology behind this music and although perhaps they might find free improvisation interesting, they cannot connect with the music on a certain level. Jeremy Lappitt similarly believes free improvisation attracts fans looking for something beyond the music itself. He explains, "Fans are attracted to 'hearing' improvised music because they can see inside of someone by listening to their voice through the music. Improvisation becomes a very personal experience, especially when the audience can see the performers while they're improvising" (2013). One is unlikely to understand such music the first few

times, or even many times, for it requires deep thought and concentration. Jeff Gauthier refers to the people that attend highly improvisatory performances as a "captive audience" (2013). He explains,

> Sometimes people are not willing to explore feelings that are a little more difficult and sometimes when you are improvising it gets to a space where it is disturbing to people and they are just not willing to go there. Whereas if they were able to be open to that they might discover some beauty within that or the fact that it's the process that's leading to something else or some kind of organic structure that you don't notice when your focusing on something that is disturbing for one second (ibid.:2013).

I suggest the Blue Whale and the Los Angeles jazz community would deepen, solidify, and expand the experimental music community and its audiences by offering more sustained and strategic public discussion of the ideals associated with free improvisatory music. Although this postmodern jazz club in Los Angeles is inviting, intriguing, and inspiring, perhaps it needs to be more proactive in promoting its performances and placing them within a certain critical context. The Blue Whale is certainly doing more than promoting "art for art's sake," but unless this is more publicly acknowledged, then perhaps the community-based venue Joon Lee hopes the Blue Whale to be, will forever be betwixt and between. Perhaps the Blue Whale needs to be more explicit about its mission and goals. Free improvisatory musicians often think deeply about—and know—what they want to accomplish, but in attempting to keep their music free, they forego a certain level of communication and public discussion about their music itself.

Understandably, serious and in-depth conversations about jazz ideologies, performance practice, sociocultural impacts, etc., are rarely directly connected to musical performance. Students must learn about these extra-musical aspects on their own;

inspiring interconnected social and musical development is difficult. Whether fans choose to pursue an understanding of these issues is their own choice. Alex Sadnik believes it is hard enough to get fans to come out and listen to experimental jazz, and thus asking them to understand the music on a cultural and ideological level is an even greater challenge (2013). Ethnomusicologists and other scholars work relentlessly to show that musical performances are far from isolated sonic events, but always intertwined with and imbedded in complex ideologies, sociocultural histories, local and global political developments, and much more. The importance and acknowledgment of critical potential is veiled by the difficult practical work of producing musical performances in the United States, especially an experimental jazz show in Los Angeles.

Ajay Heble has created and sustained a model that fuses performance with community-based conversations through his annual Guelph Jazz Festival Colloquium. The festival includes a conference that is free and open to the public, and it routinely features a broad range of presenters and attendees, from journalists involved with jazz to performers to educators. The jazz festival features group improvisational learning activities, local performances, large international acts, and more. Heble also heads the ICASP Project (Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice), which grew out of the Guelph jazz festival. ICASP

> explores musical improvisation as a model for social change. The project plays a leading role in defining a new field of interdisciplinary research to shape political, cultural, and ethical dialogue and action (ICASP website).

In *Landing on the Wrong Note,* Heble links the performance of music to its history, culture, and ideology and extends this into an ethical argument about "the social function

of art" (2000:6), and "the imperfect fit between the academy and the public sphere" (ibid.:3). He argues "music needs to be understood in relation to the cultural and institutional practices that promote both action and reflection in the public arena" (ibid.:230). Heble's endeavors have only been made possible by a large amount of local community and international support. His accomplishments prove it is possible to form a large network of people dedicated to jazz performance and its related discourses—and in a relatively small Canadian college town at that.

The Blue Whale is far from developing into a community-based project like Heble's, and it differs due to Lee's for-profit framework, but the Blue Whale's principles and goals are actually quite similar to those of Heble's Jazz Festival in Guelph. Experimental and improvisatory music thrives through community-based projects. Sharp argues,

> Given that the nature of experimentation in this music puts so much emphasis on the musician's obligation and commitment to make fitting choices while improvising, it is no wonder than it inspires and flourishes within communities…The music encourages a sense of recognition even at the level of its performance since musicians must recognize and respect each other while improvising together. This sense of recognition informs the political ideas that are attested to in the appreciation of these improvisatory musics (Sharp 2008:440).

Many of my research consultants are challenged by how to put these ideas into practice but were adamant about the inherent links between experimental, improvised music and the formation of community. Nicole Mitchell noted that jazz and improvised musics are inherently connected on a musical level. She explains,

> The music is open and embraces other forms of music so it really invites everybody to be able to make a contribution to it because of the way it is

> designed. Whatever your background or your experience it is a vehicle that you can express yourself and find your voice and make a contribution to the legacy (Mitchell 2013).

In much the same way, Mike Rocha argued,

> Improvised music helps the community because it brings people together and helps them deal with their issues. Whether an audience member, a performer, or both, improvisation provides a means to washing away the dust of everyday life and dealing with the issues of humanity, right there, right now. Hearing a performer succeed in their musical convictions is just as energizing as succeeding yourself. It is these moments that bring people to the places where improvised music takes place (Rocha 2013).

Similarly, Jeff Gauthier reflected that the constant spontaneity in improvised music allows for different experiences than those allowed by non-improvisatory musics. He said, "sometimes you get together with people you've never played with before and its magic, there's no explaining it" (Gauthier 2013). I believe a main attraction to being part of the improvised music community, whether for musicians or fans, is the potential they find in improvised music and the powerful communal experiences that may result from this. In his extensive study of improvised music scenes in California, Jason Robinson posits that "improvised music is woven into local communal formations" (2005:5) and "real-time socially-rooted decision-making musical processes—show myriad ways that artists engage with social, cultural, and economic landscapes and demonstrate future-oriented modes of cultural production" (ibid.:6).

ACA and the Blue Whale each serve as important and much needed production centers for experimental jazz in LA. Both organizations were established relatively recently, ACA in 2008 and the Blue Whale in 2009, and thus have dealt with similar issues related to Los Angeles' economic and political environment. Each organization has

similar goals but uses different strategies and models to achieve them. ACA focuses most of their time and energy on their annual festival and works in a non-profit framework, while the Blue Whale, working for-profit, presents music (astonishingly enough) twenty to thirty days every month. ACA's festival provides a celebratory space for experimental jazz in Los Angeles, providing a major event for the city and its fans. Such large events are important due the attention they attract in presses, their heightened ability to invoke memorable experiences, and the ways they bring together large numbers of people. The venues used during the festival are all much greater capacity than the Blue Whale. On the other hand, the Blue Whale presents music on a much more consistent basis and thus is necessary for cultivating a dedicated experimental jazz audience and providing a space for musicians to perform regularly. From time to time, they promote large names that usually pack the house, and thus serve as a larger gathering space for local fans.

The Blue Whale is more grounded in place than ACA. ACA's festival and musical productions take place at multiple venues throughout the city, while the Blue Whale cultivates their music in a single space. The Blue Whale relies on the traditional model of a jazz club, albeit an innovative one. The Blue Whale generally offer a more diverse range of jazz sub-genres, while ACA focuses more on the experimental, although the boundaries of these categorizations can easily become ambiguous. Both organizations promote local and out-of-town musicians, as well as big stars and up and coming players.

They both also work to engage younger jazz musicians. The Blue Whale offers a monthly jam session often led by students from schools throughout the area, and ACA

offers their annual Young Artist's Competition. The Blue Whale's monthly jam session is an important platform for musicians wanting to enter ACA's Young Artist's Competition to practice and gain experience playing at a live jazz venue. Lastly, there are many interpersonal connections between these organizations in terms of founders, staff, musicians, and audiences. Most of the shows that ACA produces outside of their festival are staged at the Blue Whale.

Both ACA and the Blue Whale provide experimental jazz fans in the Los Angeles area with multifarious social and musical experiences. Fans can go to the Blue Whale to catch amazing performances most nights of the week and then celebrate the experimental jazz scene as a tradition at the yearly Angel City Jazz Festival. Thus, the efforts and framework for this experimental music scene exist, but the vibrancy of the scene is at question. Fans and musicians do not visit the Blue Whale in large numbers many nights per month. Keeping the scene experimental also requires keeping the production of the music experimental, and thus both organizations struggle with how to sustain an audience by non-traditional means. They are not looking for the most profitable names to in-turn produce profit and thus long-term financial stability.

The experimental jazz scene in Los Angeles, as I illustrate through the work of Angel City Arts and the Blue Whale, faces real challenges. Many of these challenges cohere with the ideology of experimentation, such as taking risks in supporting new and innovative musicians and musical techniques, and establishing non-hierarchical modes of production. The scene will perpetually face these challenges in continuing to foster such

musical and social experiments. Thus the ultimate challenge is for the experimental jazz scene to accept and work through this long-term difficulty and think through alternative criteria for success. Improvised music and its surrounding communal formations are always changing. However, Robinson argues this constant state of flux, "rather than being some kind of telltale signs of the 'demise' of improvised music,…signals the continually transforming local manifestations of music and makes visible the 'alternative future'[6] that is always present and possible," (2005:313) for "it is in this continually shifting social context that improvisation makes most sense" (ibid.:315).

Indeed, improvisers/scholars Jason Robinson, David Borgo, and Charles Sharp offer important critical handles for the future of experimental jazz in the U.S. and Southern California. These figures not only efficaciously research and write about the larger sociocultural context of jazz in the region, but are avid improvisers themselves and thus deeply engage with these questions on both social and musical levels. Perhaps the community would benefit by pondering the work of Borgo, who uses the framework of chaos theory—"the science of surprise" (2005:4), to highlight the functions of various improvisational "musical networks," comprised of musical, social, and economic connections (ibid.:11), pointing to the "the inherent problems of a slow-moving traditional hierarchy, providing an effective way to handle unstructured problems, to

[6] The concept of "alternative future" is from the start of the prologue of Mike Davis' *City of Quartz:* "The best way to view Los Angeles of the next millennium is from the ruins of its alternative future" (1990:3). This idea represents the alternative lifestyle upon which the culture of Los Angeles has developed since the early 1900s. As the concept of improvisation inherently embodies innovation and alternatives, Robinson sees Davis' "alternative future" as fitting to an understanding of improvised music (Robinson 2005:311).

share knowledge outside of traditional structures, and to inject local knowledge into the system" (ibid.:194). Borgo argues, "Improvising music…ensures that the cognitive models and metaphors we live by remain flexible" (ibid.). The democratic character he attributes to improvised music, what he describes as "a healthy reverence for uncertainty" (ibid.), embodies a vast potential for the LA experimental jazz scene to understand and work through the challenging production and reception of their music. Charles Sharp argues for the importance of a certain kind of "cultural capital" as opposed to economic capital, which plays a role in building communal support so that artists can successfully remain independent, free from the control of large corporate record labels or concert promotion agencies (2008:446). I would argue that, rather than blame their difficulties on socioeconomic structures, experimental artists could embrace it as a reality that must be worked through in compelling and innovative ways. Albeit small, the Los Angeles experimental jazz community is already developing an infrastructure via the models put forth by Angel City Arts and the Blue Whale to tackle these issues. Perhaps what the scene needs is to develop an openly and explicitly culture of advocacy, and to articulate it not as a struggling scene operating on the economic periphery, but one that proudly and successfully manages its experimental reality. The potential of the scene to flourish certainly exists, as these Los Angeles experimental jazz musicians and fans have demonstrated their ability to exert an extraordinary amount of time, energy, and concentration into their beloved music.

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