Improvisation in Rock Music: Revealing the Extent to Which Capturing Spontaneity is Fundamental to Recorded Rock Music

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Abstract

This practice-led thesis explores the presence of improvisation in recorded Rock music through creative practice in studio composition and engagement with multi-disciplinary discourses. It is comprised of two interrelated components which are intended to carry equal weight: a written submission and selected recorded outputs from the researcher's creative practice.

The research builds on and interrogates existing studies into the construction and nature of Rock and improvisation. It argues that, whilst studio recording has been recognised as a defining characteristic of Rock and a fundamental site of Rock's innovation and creativity, studies have failed to fully address improvisation's presence there.

A multi-methodological approach comprises case studies which incorporate autoethnographic and phenomenological examination together and analysis of ideas and concepts drawn from musicology, cultural theory and aesthetics, and addresses the work of selected practitioners and culminates in a close examination of the researcher's own practice.

The thesis argues that improvisation has always been a presence in Rock, its nature moulded by technologies which separate performers and processes with implications for the realisation of the creativity of musicians. Attention is drawn to the artistic intentions and agency of performers, revealing how recording technologies situate and influence the character of improvised musical material.

The thesis - supported by creative practice - explains how improvisation contributes to studio composition and how interaction with technology and other performers facilitates and shapes the music. It investigates tensions created when improvised performance intersects with production, and how this dynamic operates in the composition process. Album tracks and videos from the researcher's practice are submitted as illustrative examples which act dialogically with the written thesis to address the research aims and objectives.

The purpose of this research is to provide a greater understanding of improvisation's role as a compositional tool in Rock music, and the insights provided should contribute to the elucidation of popular music and studio recording practice generally.

Acknowledgements

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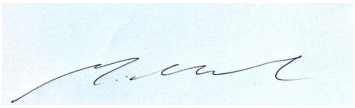
Declaration of Authorship

The work contained in this thesis is that of Michael Alan Cook and has not previously been submitted for any other academic degree or professional qualification. To the best of my knowledge and belief, no material previously published or written by another person has been included except where due reference is made.

Signature: 

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1. 1 Research Context and Overview

Little has been written about improvisation in Rock. When the subject is addressed, discussion tends to focus on its presence in the practice of a relatively few, historically circumscribed artists, and in the context of concert performance rather than the recording studio.[1] Examining the practice of certain practitioners from the late 1960s and early 1970s, several narratives have located improvisation in the contrast between *fixed* recorded tracks and *flexibl*e opportunities taken for extemporisation during live performance.[2]

In addition to observing a binary of fixed track and flexible performance, commentators have identified a focus on *studio practice* as a defining characteristic of Rock: its main site of innovation and creation being the construction of (album) tracks.[3] Could it be that improvisation is also a significant presence there too? If so, existing narratives do not reflect this, and a hypothesis of this research is that not only does improvisation occur within the recording studio, but its nature is often more distinct and varied in a recorded setting than in concert environments: not just *despite* its location in the studio, but *because* of it.

My research focusses primarily, but not exclusively, on improvisation in recorded music as opposed to live performance – giving attention to its most underexplored aspect and the area that reflects and connects with my own creative practice over the research period. Some attention will, however, be given to live improvisation - not least because any strict divide between the live performance and the recorded is impossible: there is a degree of

[1] For example, Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (Moorland: Incus Records, 1980); Allan F. Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text - Developing a Musicology of Rock* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993); David Malvinni, *Grateful Dead and the Art of Rock Improvisation* (Lanham: Little Brown, 2013).
[2] Ibid.
[3] For example, Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text* and Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (London: Duke University Press, 1996).

interdependence between the two, and the practice of some influential artists has helped to further blur any clear division.

This research does not attempt to be an exhaustive survey of Rock improvisation - I argue that the practice is too common a presence to allow for that. But it examines examples, including my own work,[4] selected to illustrate contrasting and influential methods and outputs – ones which, partially because of their studio location, remain Rock in nature; and, rather than just identifying variations of extended electric blues, illuminate music more diverse than often reflected in prevalent narrow conceptions of Rock. These examples are contextualised historically and discussed in relation to key themes that have emerged or solidified during the working out of my creative practice. These themes will be contextualised from a *macro* philosophical perspective, and philosophy/cultural theory will provide conceptual frameworks by which *micro* practices of musicians' practice, including my own, can be examined and explained.[5]

I argue that my history and experience as a working musician and creative practitioner affords me privileged insights, and autobiographical reflections are used to provide context and a deeper understanding of the background to and influences on my creative practice.

1.2 Research Aims, Questions and Contribution to Knowledge

The overarching aim of this thesis is to further elucidate the nature of improvisation in Rock music and demonstrate how it has, and can be, used in the process of composition. Following on from this, narrower questions have emerged during the research process which seek to understand more specifically how improvisation is located and used to create music in the studio. These questions are:

- To what extent can Rock improvisation be said to be distinct from that of other musical traditions?

[4] Specifically the albums by Ouseburn Collective: *Y.I.D.I.Y.* (Bandcamp, 2021), *Vent* (Bandcamp, 2022) and *April* (Bandcamp, 2022), all accessible at https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com Also, selected videos from *The Lockdown Sessions* (2020) accessible at https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnn5KaqJuaoUQojkqTSewDA

[5] Including selected ideas and concepts of Jacques Attali, Karl Marx, Jean- Paul Sartre, and Theodor Adorno.

- Is there a contradiction between improvised performance and the use of recording technology?
- What implications do recording processes have for the agency and autonomy of performers, and how is this reflected in the use of improvisation and nature of recorded outputs?
- How can spontaneously generated musical material be used to construct or contribute to studio composition?
- Why choose improvisation as a means of composition?
- To what extent is studio-located improvisation dependent upon dialogue and communication?

To address these questions, the thesis develops an original multi-methodological and multi-disciplinary approach. Drawing from musicology, cultural theory and aesthetics and using a strategy incorporating creative practice, autoethnography and case studies, it seeks to fill gaps in knowledge and provide a greater understanding of the phenomena addressed.

Existing research into musical performance has tended to focus on the Western Art music tradition,[6] and recent attention to creativity within the field of popular music has often focussed on the practice of songwriters.[7] Although improvisation has received attention in recent years, this has been predominantly from the perspective of Free Improvisation and Jazz.[8] Rock has remained comparatively under-explored, especially in relation to the examination of studio-based improvisation. It is hoped that this research will contribute to the body of knowledge by addressing these gaps and providing insights which contribute to a greater understanding and clarification of where improvisation is located and how it operates, and a more comprehensive picture of how it is experienced and considered by artists, including myself, working within the Rock field.

[6] Mine Doğantan-Dack, 'The art of research in live music performance', *Music Performance Research,* Royal Northern College of Music, 5, (2012), 34-48.
[7] Phillip McIntyre, 'Paul McCartney and the creation of 'Yesterday': the systems model in operation', *Popular Music,* 25(2), (2006) 201-219; Joe Bennett, 'Collaborative song writing – the ontology of negotiated creativity in popular music studio practice', *Journal on the Art of Record Production*, Issue 5, (2011).
[8] Monson, *Saying Something*; Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*; David Borgo, *Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music in a Complex Age* (New York: Continuum, 2006); David Toop, *Into the Maelstrom: Music, Improvisation and the Dream before 1970* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

The importance of this research lies, in part, from the contributing to the understanding improvisation from experiential, phenomenological and autoethnographic methods which enable the voices of practitioners, including my own, to be heard. In this respect, it builds on recent practice-related studies into creativity within popular music which place value on subjective experience.[9] The research has emerged from my own history as a Rock musician which has inculcated the desire to gain a better understanding of how creative processes work and how they are manifested in improvisation. It is hoped that the thesis will advance knowledge of these processes and how they operate in the recording studio to generate music.

Being Practice-led, the thesis examines examples from of my creative practice via autoethnography intended to provide new insights in relation to the use of improvisation within the studio. The recordings submitted as part of this thesis work dialogically with the text to provide a fuller, more complete understanding, but they should also be considered as original outputs. The resulting thesis is comprised, then, of two main components: the written submission and selected recorded outputs which are interrelated and intended to carry equal weight. Together they address the research's aims and objectives.

1.3 My Creative Practice: Ouseburn Collective

The creative practice component of the thesis constitutes 3 albums by Ouseburn Collective (*Y.I.D.I.Y.*, *VENT* and *April*) recorded during the research period, together with selections from videos presented as *The Lockdown Sessions*.[10] Ouseburn Collective is a moniker I use for my own solo and collaborative musical work, based on studio composition which incorporates varying degrees of improvisation.

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[9] Gareth Dylan Smith, 'Embodied Experience of Rock Drumming', *Music and Practice*, Volume 3, 2017, accessible at https://www.musicandpractice.org/volume-3/embodied-experience-rock-drumming; William Bruford, *Making it Work: Creative music performance and the Western kit drummer*, PhD thesis, University of Surrey, 2015); Craig Pollard, *Interjecting into inherited narratives: the politics of contemporary music making and creative practice*, PhD Thesis, (Newcastle University, 2018); Phil Begg, *Mediating Materiality: Exploring the Artistic Agency of the Composer-Producer Through Practice*, PhD thesis, (Newcastle University, 2020).

[10] Ouseburn Collective: *Y.I.D.I.Y.* (Bandcamp, 2021), *Vent* (Bandcamp, 2022) and *April* (Bandcamp, 2022), all accessible at https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com and *The Lockdown Sessions* (2020) accessible at https://www.youtube.com/user/dorsetyachts

The albums and videos are presented as collections of completed compositions featuring my musical performances (including guitar, bass, keyboards, and vocals) together with collaborations with other instrumentalists, predominantly drummers. The *Lockdown Session* videos are more consistently focussed on my solo electric guitar performances. The recordings also involve the related roles of engineer and producer: I mix, edit and master each album track.

The creative practice, both textual accompaniment and recorded outputs, are submitted as a central part of the overall thesis, constituting *practice as research*. The aspects of the textual component which relates most directly to the processes of studio composition work dialogically with the recorded outputs and with the rest of the thesis (which focusses on related themes and the work of other artists' practice) to address the above-mentioned research questions, but from different, complimentary, perspectives.

1.4 Outline of Contents

Chapter 2 discusses the most relevant literature from discourses on improvisation and Rock, identifying gaps in research and knowledge and themes and concerns that will be addressed throughout the remainder of the thesis. The chapter also provides an (incomplete) review of improvisational practice as it has been observed in Rock music. It argues that the phenomenon remains relatively underexplored, but that there are signposts within this knowledge and observed practice which suggest improvisation's more common presence in the construction of studio recordings.

Chapter 3 outlines and justified features of my philosophical stance and methodological approach, explaining how I adopt a multi-methodological strategy using qualitative, interpretivist methods which include creative practice, case studies and autoethnography. I explain how the resulting, custom-made approach strengthens the validation of the research by providing breadth and depth through viewing phenomena from differing but complimentary perspectives.

Chapter 4 presents a case study in essay form which focusses on 2 albums that incorporate improvisation using distinct and unusual methods: Talk Talk's *Spirit of Eden* (1988) and

Captain Beefheart's *Trout Mask Replica* (1969)[11] These recordings are used to bookend the period of Rock's hegemony, and my discussion widens to address recordings of other artists made over an approximate 25-year period, identifying parallels with, and influences on, my own creative practice. It includes consideration of divisions of labour in production processes, Alienation and Existentialism, and their relation to the nature of the music generated.

Chapter 5 is a case study, again in the form of an essay, which centres on the use of improvisation within the contrasting methods of Steely Dan and Can, discussing tensions and themes such as perfectionism and *imperfectionism*. It introduces examples from my practice-based work practice including 'Twitter Machines' (2022) and 'Counting the Days' (2021) together with selected videos from the *Lockdown Sessions* (2020),[12] and begins to address my own processes and intentions when constructing these tracks. The discussion further examines tensions (identified in the preceding chapters) thrown up by the situating of improvisation within recording and the differences produced when using improvisation to generate musical material - as a *solo* artist, and when working collaboratively.

Chapter 6 more closely, and at greater length, addresses aspects of my creative practice, most specifically the process of recording tracks from Ouseburn Collective's *Y.I.D.I.Y* (2021) and *April* (2022).[13] I also discuss aspects of my work as a professional musician which sit outside this creative practice (in particular recording with SPI and The Lou Ross Band) which throws light on improvisation as it occurs in other Rock contexts, and starts to address Bailey's 'Improvising Principle', together with notions of fixity and unfixity, and the theme of dialogue in the context of solo and collaborative working.

Each case study incorporates autobiographic reflections which help contextualise my history as Rock musician and consumer, allowing me to explain the background to and influences on my (*improvisatory*) creative practice.

[11] Captain Beefheart and the Magic Band, *Trout Mask Replica* (Straight/Reprise, 1969); Talk Talk, *Spirit of Eden* (EMI, 1988).
[12] 'Twitter Machines' from Ouseburn Collective's *VENT* (Bandcamp, 2022); 'Counting the days from Ouseburn Collective's *Y.I.D.I.Y* (Bandcamp, 2021); *The Lockdown Sessions* (YouTube, 2020).
[13] Ouseburn Collective: *Y.I.D.I.Y.* (Bandcamp, 2021) and *April* (Bandcamp, 2022).

Chapter 7 offers some conclusions in relation to the research aims, objectives and findings, suggesting potential uses of the research findings and identifies the thesis' contribution to knowledge.

CHAPTER 2

The Literature

2.1 Improvisation and Recording

> Improvised music has always had an uncomfortable relationship with the recording process; an ephemeral activity, improvisation inherently resists and contradicts attempts to record and preserve it.[1]

> What I consider to be the most important element of Can, the spontaneous creation of things…we call it instant composition.[2]

The above quotes reflect apparent contradictions that arise when considering improvisation in the context of commercially recorded music. Narratives often throw up a binary that juxtaposes the phenomena of recording and performance, implying that they are contradictory, possibly mutually exclusive. In this light, Rock, often considered focussed and reliant on studio recording practices, might be particularly opposed to the facilitation of improvisation: a process which relies on the performative agency of musicians.

Long before Rock existed, Walter Benjamin argued that our perception of original artworks was altered by mechanical reproduction.[3] For Adorno, such reproduction had only negative effects, but Benjamin believed that this was not necessarily so, reflecting his opinion that reproduction changed the very nature of the work.[4] But production of music within the recording studio, like film making, goes further than *reproduction* and has often been described as part of the composition process – the idea of *studio as instrument*.[5] If the recording process can be seen as part of the compositional (even performative) process, then where might this leave musicians' agency and improvisational practice?

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[1] Matthew Lovett, 'The Canonisation of Recorded Improvisations and its Impact on Performance Practice', *Dutch Journal of Music Theory*, Volume 13, no 1 (2008), 1.
[2] Michael Karoli quoted in 'Can you Dig It?', *Lollipop Magazine*, Issue 38, Sept 1, 1997.
[3] Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Illuminations, ed and trans Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).
[4] Theodor Adorno, 'On Popular Music', *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science,* IX,17 – 48.
[5] Evan Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel: Music, Records and Culture from Aristotle to Zappa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

Recent discourses surrounding improvisation tend to relate to *purer* forms that seek to sit outside of popular music's recording industry, such as Free Improvisation and Jazz.[6] They often contain philosophical and political underpinnings that echo Adorno's rejection of a political economy which facilitates mass produced music: improvisation is sometimes seen as a means to avoid and resist, through live spontaneous performance, the commodification and standardisation that Adorno so disapproved of.[7] Such positions reinforce a performance/recording division and often imply that recording is a process which divorces live performance from its *natural* context.

Such writings often share Adorno's pessimistic conclusions about recording, but closer examination of actual practice might challenge such oppositions, and examples from Rock might uncover approaches that, by openly acknowledging and embracing the relationship and creative possibilities of improvised performance and recording, (as opposed to dismissing or circumnavigating them) destabilise any contradiction between recording and improvisation.

Attali

> A music of revolt is transformed into a repetitive commodity...artificial music took centre stage…mass music for an anesthetized market…Jimi Hendrix was replaced by Steve Howe, Eric Clapton by Keith Emerson.[8]

Writing at the height of Rock's dominance as a popular music form, economist and philosopher Jacques Attali saw the possibility of a future epoch within certain types of musical practice, in particular Free Jazz which evidenced traces of a *Composing* age which would replace the epoch of *Repeating*: the latter representing a present where Adorno's 'standardisation' and 'repetition' prevails – resulting from developments in recording technology and mass production – the very milieu within which Rock operates. For Attali, the transition this music predicted would see the development of alternative, non - alienated

[6] For example, Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Paul Berliner *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Borgo, *Sync and Swarm* and Toop, *Into the Maelstrom*.
[7] Writing on jazz often ignores the presence of recording, implying that improvised performance survives untarnished and unchanged. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz* and Monson, *Saying Something*.
[8] Attali, *Noise*, 103 – 109.

human relations within music and wider society, the end of the division of labour between producer, consumer and composer: conditions in which improvisation could exist.[9]

Attali dismisses what Rock had become (colonized and sanitized), but recognises that, at its inception, it had worth and vitality. In this he echoes Christopher Small's initial optimism concerning Rock's potential, glimpsed at its *birth* in the mid to late 1960s.[10] Both writers advocate the liberating possibilities of improvisational *performance*, with its potential freedom from organising control, commodification and standardisation. Their identification of improvisation's presence in the DNA of Rock opens possibilities that the closed pessimism of Adorno could never allow within popular music.[11] Rejecting the necessity for composed score or external direction, Rock, like Jazz, challenges the modern classical division between work of art and performance (which Adorno seems attached to), and allows for the potential agency of performers as composers - exemplified in the practice of improvisation. Recognising these possibilities, this research asks – to what extent, and in what forms, can such *improvised performance* be said to have continued to operate in Rock?

Attali's wide sweep does not allow for closer, more nuanced attention to the music and creative practice of artists, and we can only speculate as to what he would have made of developments within Rock post 1977. Examinations of practice might reveal the presence of recording and improvisation successfully working in tandem, well beyond the *Golden Age* of Jimi Hendrix. Would such negativity towards Rock be tempered by a recognition that, to address Attali's quote, Hendrix was not *only* 'replaced' by Keith Emerson – but also by Frank Zappa, *And* Henry Cow *And* Sonic Youth *And* Throbbing Gristle *And* Radioactive Sparrow *And* Ouseburn Collective? etc.

Free Improvisation, Jazz, *Rock*

Important to this research, then, is an interrogation of the idea that there is any inherent contradiction between improvised performance and recording. Matthew Lovett suggests that

[9] Attali is not anti - technology but critical of contemporary forms used by the *Culture Industry* to produce *Repetition*. He implies that developments of new instruments will be part of technological advancements that might usher in the *Composing* age. Ibid., 144.
[10] Christopher Small, *Education*, *Society, Education* (London: Calder,1977).
[11] Attali chooses artists such as Clapton and Hendrix, whose performance practice relied heavily on improvisation, to illustrate Rock's initial worth.

the two are not separate musical artefacts, but rather inherently connected, interdependent, and, therefore, neither more genuine or authentic.[12] But he, like other commentators, doesn't address how improvisational performance exists *within* the recording studio - instead highlighting a connectedness between live concert performance and recordings.

Any juxtaposition of live performance and the recorded makes less sense if we consider that recording is, for Rock at least, comparatively rare in a strictly documentary role. As Eisenberg explains, studio recordings more typically *create*, through technological means (including manipulations, multi – tracking) something new and distinct.[13] Further, in Rock, rather than being *authentic*, real time spontaneous events, live performances often translate into close replicas of *original* recordings, arguably less authentic and lacking the 'aura' of the original studio recording. As Attali observed, 'concerts of popular music… are now all too often nothing more than copies of the records.'[14] Such recognition echoes Lovett's observation of the interdependence of recorded and live music which appears to have been a motivating factor for Bailey and others in their reservations about Jazz and Rock[15] - musical forms which could not escape the controlling effects the recording industry has on live, (improvised?) performance. However, some Rock musicians seem to have faced these challenges head on.

Lovett brings together narratives from Free Improvisation that imply improvisation cannot exist properly once recorded.[16] It is noticeable how sharply such perspectives contrast with those from a *Jazz Musicology* which, while similarly affirming the centrality and importance of performance, suggest that, for Jazz to be Jazz, *performance* has to (and does) remain central, somehow unchanged – whether or not situated in the recording studio.[17] These narratives, therefore, tend to bracket off any effects of the recording process by avoiding or ignoring them. Whilst there is writing about Jazz which addresses the impact recording

[12] Matthew Lovett, 'The Canonisation of Recorded Improvisations and its Impact on Performance Practice', *Journal of the Dutch Flemish Society for Music Theory*, (2007), 86.
[13] Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel*, 89.
[14] Attali, *Noise*, 118.
[15] Bailey, *Improvisation*: *Its Nature and Practice* (De Capo Press, 1980).
[16] Derek Bailey, *Improvisation*, 104; Cornelius Cardew, 'Towards an Ethic of Improvisation'*, Treatise Handbook* (Peters Edition, 1971).
[17] For example, Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*; Monson, *Saying Something* and Andrew Kania 'Making Tracks: The Ontology of Rock Music,' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, (Fall, 2006), 401 – 414.

techniques have on the music[18], it would be fair to say that neither Jazz nor Free Improvisation embrace recording as enthusiastically as Rock.

Seen from the point of view of these narratives, commercially produced improvised music, self - consciously constructed in the studio, might seem like an impossibility, even a contradiction. But the work of 20th century thinkers whose writings straddled the development of recording technology, and the development of Rock, might be useful in helping us navigate between these phenomena. Taking a lead from Benjamin's recognition that the nature of mechanically reproduced artwork is altered and recognising that studio processes play a role in music making/composition, we might assume that it is within this context that Rock improvisation, if it exists, sits and within which it is shaped.

The change that Benjamin saw in mechanically reproduced and temporally constructed artworks could reflect what Baudrillard called 'Simulation,' something 'no longer of a territory…the generation of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal'[19], or a 'Simulacrum': an altered state. Other transformations that occur through recording technologies such as those used in Rock involve a kind of recontextualisation, via the process of what Deleuze and Guattari identified as 'reterritorialization.'[20] These concepts refer to the construction of something that is not a copy of an original: a substantive change or difference has taken place. If, as many narratives suggest, the art-work *is* the recording [21] then there is no copying of original performance: it could be considered as *without original*.

If improvisation has existed in distinct ways within the recording studio, and survives within the subsequent recorded artefacts, this does not mean that the tensions and apparent

[18] Several popular texts address Jazz's most iconic recordings, detailing the recording processes and their influence on the music produced. For example, Ashley Kahn, *A Love Supreme: The Story of John Coltrane's Signature Album* (New York: Viking Books, 2002); Ian Carr, *Miles Davis: The Definitive Biography,* (London: Harper Collins, 1999); Ashley Kahn, *Kind of Blue: The Making of the Miles Davis Masterpiece* (Boston: De Capo Press, 2000).
[19] J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by S.F. Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).
[20] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004); Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004). An example of reterritorialization is Frank Zappa's use of Xenochrony, often used to resituate improvised performance.
[21] Several texts are discussed later: Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (London: Duke University Press, 1996). Allan F. Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text - Developing a Musicology of Rock* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2001) and, Bill Martin, *Avant Rock: Experimental music from the Beatles to Bjork* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 2002).

contradictions discussed in the narratives above have disappeared – just that they might be (re) located somewhere other than the live concert hall – and are interwoven with, not separate from, the production of Rock music.[22]

2.2 Derek Bailey and the Grateful Dead

Published in 1980 and revised in 1992, Derek Bailey provided a long overdue overview of contrasting types of improvisation, observing its presence in all musical traditions.
In doing so, he makes the not uncontroversial distinction between the 'idiomatic' and 'non – idiomatic', [23] the latter, often described as Free Improvisation, presented as distinct due to its independence from any necessary stylistic identity. Bailey argues that, compared to more fixed forms such as Jazz and Rock, Free Improvisation has the flexibility, an 'open endedness' to 'renew and change'.[24]

Bailey devotes several chapters to 'idiomatic forms' with Rock being addressed by way of interviews with guitarists Jerry Garcia and Steve Howe. This approach presumes value in musicians' subjective accounts of their experience of performance practice and contextualises and reveals intentionality and method behind their improvisations. Although not from a Rock background, Bailey was an electric guitarist who regularly collaborated with performers of various idioms, including those from a Rock tradition.[25] In this respect, Bailey's study could be considered an early exercise in practice - led research and inspiration for my own methodological approach. Arguably, his experience as a musician gave him privileged insight and vantage point to participate in, observe, question and consider the issues surrounding improvised performance.

The practice discussed in Bailey's Rock chapter initially centres on live performance. But his conversation with Howe quickly turns away from the concert halls of the late 1960s towards the guitarist's compositional method which incorporate recorded improvisation, and then

[22] Albin J. Zak suggests something similar when examining the role played by recording technologies in the construction of Rock - how artists, producers and others contribute to the production of the finished work. *The Poetics of Rock, Cutting Tracks, Making Records* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
[23] Bailey, *Improvisation*, xii.
[24] Ibid., 142.
[25] Examples include collaborations with Japanese art-of-noise rock band the Ruins: Derek and the Ruins, *Saisoro* (1995), and Company 91 a collaborative improvisational project from 1994 involving Metal guitarist Buckethead.

addresses how Howe approached improvised performance during the recording of the Yes album, *Tales From Topographic Oceans*.[26]

By way of contrast, Bailey's conversation with Garcia deals with concert performance: the phenomena Bailey associates with 'the rock improvisation tradition' of the late 1960s and early 1970s and, according to Bailey, one which was overtaken and made obsolete by changes in technology. By accepting the Grateful Dead's self-identification as the 'only Rock band whose performances are based on the idea of improvisation', the 'sole' preserver of this tradition, Bailey implies that improvisation was no longer a significant force in Rock, and little attention is given to how it might continue to play a role.[27] Bailey's generalisations echo Attali's negative conclusions about contemporary rock, but he does identify a *lighter* improvisational presence within rock's DNA: a 'flexibility' or 'improvising principle' – one enjoyed by the performer/producer and resulting from the absence of any prescriptive, pre - existing score.

My listening, performing, reading and recording experience leads me to suspect that Bailey, by not giving attention to other and more recent strands of Rock, and by failing to address the impact of studio recording's impact on and interaction with improvisation (despite Howe's lead here), understates how real-time music making has been a driver behind the generation of music in the studio. And, paradoxically, by not focusing on the centrality of recording, Bailey might overestimate the music's innate flexibility by failing to address recording's capacity to fix - especially in a live performance context.[28]

Although Bailey doesn't spell this out, he allows Howe and Garcia to identify the two contexts where rock improvisation has been found: the studio and concert performance. Despite the lack of any audience present in the recording studio, Howe speaks of them both as 'performance' and a concern of this research is to highlight how performance plays a role

[26] Yes, *Tales From Topographic Oceans*, (Atlantic, 1973). Bailey, *Improvisation*, 41. Howe reveals that several takes were necessary to provide satisfactory material for a particular track; that, when improvising, he thought in terms of a trajectory and structure, whilst being mindful of how his real - time performance related to the pre-recorded parts and harmonies already laid down.

[27] At the time of Bailey's writing contemporary artists such as Henry Cow, Frank Zappa, PiL and Throbbing Gristle were all using, or had recently used, improvisation to generate music in the studio. Since the publication of Bailey's book, improvisation has continued to exist - including within the Jam Band movement which emerged in the early 1990s which was heavily influenced by the Grateful Dead's approach to concert performance.

[28] Elsewhere, Bailey does address the effect of recording on music, but not within the context of Rock.

in studio creation – attempting to redress the fact that narratives often conflate performance with concert performance, with implications in respect of where improvisation can be located, at the same time echoing inappropriate 'classical' models of what constitutes works of art.

In addition to *limiting* the field of Rock improvisation by associating it with a bygone era, Bailey goes further by claiming that 'the derivation of almost all improvisation in Rock is the blues. What influence there is outside of this influence is usually of an experimental nature'. [29] Whilst there is no doubt that there is/has been much Blues-Rock improvisation, I would take issue with any implication that blues derived Rock cannot also be a site of experimentation. Further, his words suggest that experimentation is rare or marginal. This research seeks evidence that instances of the experimental (varying types and degrees) are more common, and often worked out by way of improvisational practice.[30]

Bailey's claim about the lack of writing on improvisation generally ('there is almost a total absence') no longer holds, but the statement remains fairly accurate when applied to improvisation in Rock. When Bailey was writing Rock still enjoyed dominance as the leading form of western popular music and I wonder if its failure to subsequently 'renew and change' in the face of new and changing popular music paradigms lessened its relevance and critical attention.

The Grateful Dead

Few have followed Bailey's lead and examined improvisation's role in the production of Rock. That (the) one area of expansion in this field relates to the Grateful Dead might suggest that a) the Dead were, as Bailey implies, singular in their approach, and b) there is no significant improvisational tradition remaining, or perhaps c) any improvisational practice that has existed is not worthy of examination. This research hopes to address such hypotheses.

[29] Bailey, *Improvisation*, 40.

[30] Garcia and Howe's styles are eclectic, influenced by Country, Jazz and eastern modal approaches and not solely based on strict blues structures or harmony. This hybridity reflects more open forms of Rock and might constitute *mild experimentalism*. And all types of improvisation could be considered experimental to the extent that a performer does not know in advance what the (exact) outcome of the performance will be.

Since the demise of the Dead, several articles and essays have appeared that focus on the band as sociological phenomenon,[31] but the first volume to address their improvisational practice was published in 2010.[32] Many of these essays analyse *deadhead culture* and fans' reception of the music - as opposed to my own focus on the nature of music and its construction. Some, like Graeme Boone, do examine the *music itself*, but use traditional methods which say little about performance practice and instead detail its results by way of notation and harmonic analysis which seem to have little relevance to how Rock musicians tend to approach music making.[33] But Boone's methodology does identify improvisation's presence in the contrasting material of various live versions of 'Dark Star'.[34] However, his approach is not well equipped to address the music's more 'outside' aspects: the 'feedback' sections of *Live/Dead*, for example, and other occasions when the band reach beyond standard forms and structures.

One compelling essay provides a Deleuzian reading of the Dead's improvisational practice influenced by the discussion of rhythm and improvisation in *A Thousand Plateaus*.[35] Contrasting fixed studio recordings with the open possibilities of the concert hall, Tuedio describes how the Dead used opportunities of live performance (rather than reproducing 'studio originals') to create *assemblages* through improvised performance which constituted an amalgam of diverse musical influences drawn from Blues, Country, Folk, Jazz, Eastern modality and the Classical Avant-Garde. Like other scholars, Tuedio looks only at the band's live legacy and does not address their studio practice, but a discussion of *assemblages* could fruitfully be applied to the band's most experimental album: *Anthem of the Sun* which, in addition to the use of eclectic musical influence, combined live and studio performance and improvisation and collage production techniques – a more multi-layered and complex assemblage.[36]

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[31] Elizabeth Carroll 'The Answer to the Atom Bomb: Rhetoric, Identification, and the Grateful Dead', *The Journal of American Popular Culture,* 6.1 (2007).
[32] *The Grateful Dead in Concert: Essays on Live Improvisation* by James Allen Tuedio and Stan Spector (eds.) (Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2010).
[33] Jerry Garcia's quote in David Malvinni, *Grateful Dead and the Art of Rock Improvisation* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press 2013). 189.
[34] Grateful Dead, *Live/Dead* (Warner Bros, 1970),
[35] James Tuedio, 'Pouring its Light into Ashes: Exploring the Multiplicity of Becoming in Grateful Dead Improvisation' in *The Grateful Dead in Concert: Essays on Live Improvisation* by James Tuedio and Stan Spector (eds.) (Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2010).
[36] The Grateful Dead, *Anthem of the Sun* (Warner Brothers, 1968).

The first full-length text to offer a musical assessment of the Grateful Dead was published in 2013, with a tantalising moniker boldly identifying Rock improvisation as a distinct musical practice, and at the same time suggesting that, outside of the of the band, it is a rare beast.[37] Malvinni claims that the Dead were *the* leading pioneers of Rock improvisation – audacious and hyperbolic, at least in the context of the mid to late 1960s.[38] Like other commentators on the Dead[39], his focus is on live concert performance rather than recording and, like Tiodios, Malvinni integrates ideas from continental philosophers and cultural theorists to situate the Dead's approach.

2.3 The Wider Popular Musicology

Beyond Derek Bailey and the Grateful Dead, a search of musicological texts reveals little significant evidence of a Rock tradition of improvisation, though traces of the practice emerge. A developing popular musicology from the 1990s onwards occasionally acknowledges improvisation's significance but either fails to adequately examine the phenomenon or denies its importance. Much writing focusses on the cultural and sociological significance of the music and aesthetic reception of listeners, often circumnavigating the processes and intentions behind its generation or discussion of the nature of the music itself.[40] When there is a musical focus, writers have often resorted to *formalist* approaches borrowed from Western Art Music which reveal little about how Rock musicians approach the production of musical material through performance.[41] I look at two influential works first published in the mid 1990s which address the *music itself* from different angles; both recognise Rock improvisation as a phenomenon, but downplay its significance. One is primarily concerned with the process of constructing 'tracks' in the studio, the other with

[37] David Malvinni, *Grateful Dead and the Art of Rock Improvisation* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press 2013).
[38] The Butterfield Blues Band, Jimi Hendrix Experience, Cream, Soft Machine, Zappa, Can, Jefferson Airplane, Velvet Underground, Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin etc.
[39] For example, Bailey, *Improvisation* and Malvinni, *Grateful Dead*.
[40] Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock* (London: Constable, 1983), *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990).
[41] John Covach and Graeme M. Boone, *Understanding Rock: Essays in Musical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

examining recorded musical outputs, the 'sounds themselves'. [42] Other texts will be referred to during the discussion.

Allan F. Moore

Moore accepts that improvisation has played a role in Rock and gives it attention, but, echoing Bailey's generalisation about the origins and typical nature of Rock improvisation, much of the discussion is confined to the work of a few prominent blues influenced groups who emerged in the 1960s.[43] In common with other commentators, his examples imply that improvisation is something that happens *live*, and he is not alone in citing Cream's extended concert improvisations as innovative and exemplar.[44] Whereas other assessments of this *Cream type* soloing tend to be negative,[45] Moore is ambivalent, giving Clapton particular credit as an originator in the signposting of 'what a guitar solo might mean', but then underplaying the importance and significance of improvisation in Clapton's playing and in Rock generally. However, intriguingly, Moore does claim insight into the intention behind artists' use of improvisation:

> The purpose of improvisation is not…the exploration of musical material or of an individual consciousness. Most improvised solos serve a dual role. For the listener, they extend the moment of experience (the individual song), while for the performer they offer an opportunity for virtuoso display.[46]

He states that there is no 'structural reason' for improvised solos: they could happily be transposed from one performance to another if the music shares the same key and tempo. Improvisation is, then, of secondary importance: subservient to song structure. The implication is that improvisation offers audiences nothing distinct or additional to what can be found in more typical pre-composed solos. But I wonder whether the improvisations of Eric Clapton or Jimmy

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[42] Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (London: Duke University Press, 1996). Allan F. Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text: Developing a Musicology of Rock* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2001), 1.

[43] Moore, *Rock*, 76 – 88.

[44] Moore compares the live version of 'Spoonful' from Cream's *Wheels of Fire* (1968) with the studio recording from *Fresh Cream* (1966) observing that the 'song' becomes a pretext for 'extended improvisation'. Moore, *Rock*, 76 -78. Cream's approach attracts attention from Frith, *Performing Rites*, 21 and 83, and the example of 'Spoonful' is referred to by Hegarty as 'pretext' for 'pointless' 'non – exploratory' extemporisations. Hegarty, *Noise/Music: A History* (London: Continuum, 2008), 61. For a more positive evaluation of Cream's *virtuosic* approach: Sheila Whiteley, *The Space Between the Note: Rock and the Counter-culture* (London: Routledge, 1992), 10-15.

[45] Hegarty, *Noise,* 61.

[46] Moore, *Rock*, 87.

Page (to use Moore's own examples) exist *only*, or even primarily, to extend songs and display virtuosity, though they undoubtably serve these functions. In the light of such practice, and the practice of many musicians that Moore fails to mention, this claim seems too reductive.[47]

Briefly referring to 'drum fills', Moore acknowledges that improvisation is not restricted to 'conventional solos' but elsewhere comes close to conflating the two. A lack of attention to key musicians operating within his own narrow historical window (such as Can, Pink Floyd, Frank Zappa and Jimi Hendrix) ignores those who were as innovative in breaking down standard structures and subverting concepts of solos, song forms and instrumental roles. And, importantly for this research, many of these artists used improvisation in the recording studio to do so.[48] While Cream might have been at the forefront of the *invention* of Rock improvisation in a concert setting, they were not alone, and something equally remarkable appears to have already been occurring in the construction of albums produced by (less cited) musicians such as Frank Zappa and The Butterfield Blues Band.[49]

Moore's focus on improvisation as object (noun) rather than process (verb) tells us little about improvisation as a *distinct means* of generating music. Everything he says about the use of chords, guitar boxes, melodies, scales, the intention to extend songs and displays of virtuosity etc could equally be said about the *more common* pre-planned/composed solos found in live and studio performance.[50]

The near conflation of improvisation and solo makes some sense when considering that Moore's discussion sits within a chapter identifying 'typical musical styles' as opposed to artistic processes: here 'blues inspired bands' whose 'solo punctuations' were defining characteristics of

[47] Clapton's self-depreciating quote, selected by Moore to downplay improvisation's significance, contains a suggestion that the song itself was of secondary importance, a pretext: he was reaching for something distinct than that achievable from the pre – composed: 'I use a song as a launch pad for going off on a groove'. Moore, *Rock*, 87.

[48] Can, *Monster Movie* (United Artists, 1969), Frank Zappa, *Hot Rats* (Bizarre, 1969), Jimi Hendrix Experience: *Electric Ladyland* (Reprise, 1968).

[49] The Butterfield Blues Band's *East West* (Elektra, 1966) was recorded and released prior to Cream's first tour and debut album. Lasting 18 minutes, the title track displays blues, modal Jazz and Indian influences. The same summer the Mothers of Invention's 'Help I'm a Rock' from *Freak Out* (Verve, 1966) contained improvised singing and lyrics. Previous rock releases contain *micro guitar improvisations*: the Beatles' 'I Feel Fine', the Who's 'Anytime, Any Place Anywhere', and 'Shape of Things' by the Yardbirds.

[50] Guitarists' approaches to constructing improvisations are summarized by Moore as 'either plucking individual strings of underlying chord shapes', or 'extemporisations on a melody, or on specific box positions used by all guitar tutor texts for improvisations.' Moore, *Rock*, 85.

their music. But is there any reason why Clapton and Page (Hendrix, Zappa and many others) chose the method of improvisation to generate their solos? Is there a distinct aesthetic/ reason underlying this practice? As a result of using improvisation, are these solos characteristically different than those that are pre-planned?

Referring to instrumental 'solos' makes little sense in respect of songs that are merely pretexts for extended group improvisations such as Cream's 'Spoonful' (1966 and 1968), and less appropriate when discussing music where songs and/or related pre-composed structures are removed altogether, making way for significant spontaneous collective contributions such as 'East West' (1966).[51]

Theodore Gracyk

Bailey, Malvinni and Moore all put the musician centre stage as creative and performative agent. But much musicological attention is on Pop and Rock's mediated nature, and, by emphasising the collaborative and technological aspects of record construction, sometimes allow little space for the consideration of musical performance: a necessary precondition of improvisational practice.

In the most detailed discussion of rock as distinct artistic medium, philosopher Theodore Gracyk proposes that *recording* is the main aesthetic aim of Rock.

> Rock's most distinctive characteristic within popular music may lie in the realm of ontology, in what a musical work is… as opposed to what it is, for instance, in jazz or country or folk. Rock is a tradition of popular music whose creation and dissemination centres on recording technology. [52]

He convincingly argues that Rock is distinct from other popular musical traditions in that it originated in and developed through the medium of recording technology rather than live performance and that, for Rock, the overarching aim of studio practice is to produce 'the recorded track for playback' which constitutes the finalised art work.[53]

Gracyk claims that the studio rather than live performance is the main location of creativity

[51] See also: Amon Duul, *Psychedelic Underground* (Metronome, 1969); Frank Zappa, *Shut Up and Play Yer Guitar* (Barking Pumpkin, 1981); Can: *Tago Mago* (United Artists, 1971); *Ege Bamyasi* (United Artists, 1972); *Future Days* (1973); Henry Cow: *Legend* (Virgin, 1973), *In Praise of Learning* (Virgin, 1974); PiL, *Metal Box* (Virgin, 1979).
[52] Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise*, 1.
[53] Ibid., 37.

and innovation for artists and producers. If he is correct, it might seem odd that Bailey and Moore, who seem to consider that the main creative agents in Rock are the artists themselves, fail to address the role and impact of studio recording adequately or significantly in their discussions of improvisation. And, if we accept Bailey's identification of Rock's inherent 'improvisational flexibility', why have so few addressed such approaches in the recording studio?

As Gracyk proceeds to answer the general overarching ontological question, 'what constitutes a work of art in Rock?', his arguments are compellingly grounded on concrete examples of record production. His conclusions, like those of Moore, depend on giving weight to tendencies drawn from the *typical*, the *standard*, and practices that are considered outside these norms are dismissed as being less worthy of weight.[54] With this in mind, along with 'experimental' aspects of Rock, Gracyk comes close to precluding consideration of improvisation: -

> Rock is not a complete stranger to improvisation…but it is not the norm for rock. Solos are often brief and largely planned out in advance.[55]

Elsewhere he touches on improvisation's presence when contrasting Rock with Jazz's performance focus and Classical Music's ideal of score as artwork,

> Rather than… an opportunity for improvisation or a faithful manifestation of an independent musical work, rock interpretation stakes out a middle ground which fuses a song and available performance means (including engineering) into a distinctive produce of mass production…usually involving a balance between the autonomy and cooperation of its performers and technical personnel. [56]

Echoing comments of Bailey and Moore, this *middle ground* suggests an improvisational flexibility, but the implications of this on the practice of musicians are not explored further, and the performance side of Gracyk's own equation is given little attention. Nor is there

[54] These untypical strands might reveal what Delueze refers to as *Difference*, containing the possibility of change, new and future musical forms and approaches which contrast with more stratified music and approaches to music making.
[55] Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise*, 170. Again, this conflates *improvisation* with *solo*, therefore not addressing other approaches, nor Bailey's 'improvising principle'.
[56] Ibid., 171.

significant consideration as to how artists themselves might be involved in the technical aspects of studio creation.

Unlike Jazz, for Rock performance is listed as only one factor among many, and subservient to the needs of the completed track.[57] This deprioritising (at best, '*some* degree of freedom in individual performance is essential') reflects the content of many texts which have sought to challenge Rock's exaggerated, bogus and romanticised claims of authenticity, the cumulative effect of which makes Gracyk's observation: [58] 'It is fashionable to praise Rock as a manifestation of the aesthetics of romanticism…originality, emotion, spontaneity, and invention as the measure of aesthetic success', surprising. By the time of Gracyk's publication Rock had already experienced a *corrective bad press*, at least within musicology.[59] And part of my own motivation behind this research is a fear that such bad press could obscure the practice, and music and *genuine* motivations of certain artists operating within the Rock field.

Gracyk's challenging of Rock's 'romantic authenticity' through a critique of Camille Paglia's ahistorical, ultra-romanticised writings, creates a straw woman: did any serious commentators agree with Paglia that it was pre-1966 Rock, as exemplified by 50s Rock and Roll and the early Rolling Stones, that *best* characterised rock as authentic, spontaneous, artistic expression? [60] Gracyk's justification is that Paglia's views most clearly represent the 'prevailing story of rock music', but since this story, and the *bogus* authenticity they reflect, have already been comprehensively critiqued, why not focus instead on other narratives which might provide a more nuanced view? Perhaps because they might not be so easily destroyed to support Gracyk's thesis: that performance is not, and never has been, the central

[57] Andrew Kania, 'All Play and No Work: An Ontology of Jazz', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 69 (4) (2011), 391 – 403.
[58] Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise*, 176.
[59] For example, Simon Frith: 'Art vs Technology', Media, *Culture and Society*, 8 (1986), 263 – 79 and 'The Industrialisation of Popular Music', *Essays in the Sociology of Rock* (New York: Routledge, 1989). These look at the role of technology in manufacturing expressivity and spontaneity. Also, Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text*; and debates on authenticity include Peter Kivy, *Philosophical Reflections on Musical Performance* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995), Richard Taruskin, et al 'The Limits of Authenticity: A Discussion', *Early Music* 12, 1984.
[60] Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992). *Sex, Art and American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992). Paglia contrasts this 'authenticity' and 'spontaneity' with increased commodification and lack of opportunity for spontaneous communication due to reliance on studio recordings and large stadium performances from around 1966. As Gracyk points out, significant improvisational live performance was only made possible *after* 1966 due to the development of superior sound systems. Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise*, 193.

concern of Rock music. My concern is that in building such an argument, he effectively throws the improvisation baby out with the performance bath water.[61]

Because Gracyk is careful to address the untypical (in order that he can discount it), his text provides a useful tool to focus on occasions where improvised performance has been used creatively by Rock musicians.[62] And these might demonstrate that not all proclamations of producing original, expressive and innovative music are bogus, and are a reminder that, despite recent debunking of authenticity and romanticism, there is clear evidence of artist driven strands of practice: a characteristic that initially helped separate Rock from *mere pop*. [63] And it appears that much improvisational practice appears within these *untypical* recorded outputs and approaches – often beyond amplified electric blues.[64]

For Gracyk,'the experimental' constitutes artists 'using sound or noise as elements of musical composition' including, more specifically, the use of feedback. But such a definition could incorporate aspects of the more visible work of Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton and many who followed in their footpaths,[65] and not just confined to the *sound sculpturing* of those he identifies as unrepresentative and commercially unsuccessful outliers: 'Suicide and Throbbing Gristle may bear their influence, but their music is unknown to most rock fans…Lennon's other work attracted few buyers'. One reason for Gracyk's bracketing off these experimental practices is their lack of commercial success. While this might be one way of assessing the value of music, it does not follow that records that don't sell are *less Rock*; commercially disseminated music must have winners and losers. And some of the least commercially successful are the most influential on other artists' practice and, often

[61] See: Allan F. Moore, 'U2 and the Myth of Rock Authenticity in Rock', *Popular Musicology*, 3.6 (1998) 5 – 33; Deena Weinsteen, Art Versus Commerce: Deconstructing a (useful) Illusion' Kelly and McDonnell (eds.), *Stars Don't Stand Still in the Sky*, *Music and Myth* (London: Routledge, 1999), 57 – 69. Adam Behr addresses such 'exposing' narratives and argues that they 'overlooked the extent to which it (the Romantic Rock ideology) incorporated the collective creativity of bands' *Rock Music Studies*, 2015, vol 2, No 1, 1 – 21.
[62] Gracyk delineates a boundary between 'standard rock' and 'experiments', which are identified then discarded as having significant influence over his conclusions: that the recorded track, rather than performance or song, is what constitutes the work of art in Rock.
[63] Keir Keightley, 'Reconsidering Rock' in Simon Frith (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 109-142.
[64] Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise*, 99-100. Gracyk's examples of the experimental smell strongly of improvisation: Grateful Dead's *Live Dead*; John Lennon's collaborations with Yoko Ono, the music of Sonic Youth and Throbbing Gristle.
[65] Arguably, Eric Clapton's major innovation was, rather than *inventing* extended blues soloing was using volume and amplification to change the sound of the electric guitar in a way that facilitated different ways of sculpting sound.

retrospectively, critically acclaimed.[66]

Gracyk could have identified many more *experiments,* but they would not have supported his argument, and the way he separates the 'typical' from the 'experimental' seems rather crude, not acknowledging that innovation and experimentation are often incorporated into music - sometimes providing tensions or subverting, with creative results, standard approaches. This might be because there is, no matter how weak or powerful, a pull towards originality and away from standardisation within Rock, one that is often situated in or identified with improvisation.

I wouldn't argue that (against Gracyk) the work of art in Rock is not or never can be the recorded track for playback, merely that such an ontological conclusion might obscure other significant strands of practice. A more inclusive view of what Rock might be can be found within the *pluralist* ontology of Dan Burkett who argues that artworks could be considered track, song or performance. But, like other commentators, Burkett is talking about live concert performance: not that situated within the studio.[67]

Gracyk's paradigm examples include Elvis Presley's early Sun recordings, Phil Spector's wall of sound aesthetic, and Bruce Springsteen's album *Born to Run*.[68] Each purport to illustrate how important the production of overall sound (resulting as much from the practice of technicians and producers as musical performers) is in characterising the final recorded artefact.[69] But these examples could as easily be said to represent an untypical emphasis of *produced sound*. In the context of mid 1970s Rock production, for example, *Born to Run's* Spector influenced sonic statement could be seen as an outlier, contrasting starkly with many standardised and therefore more *neutral* and *invisible* approaches to production, which, arguably, left more room for performers to stamp their sonic imprints on the music.[70]

Gracyk's characterisation of the 'ontologically thick' recorded track which, now fixed, limits the practical possibilities of variation for future performers echoes Attali's pessimism about live creativity in the concert context. He contrasts this with the fluid 'trial and error' of studio

[66] Obvious examples: Velvet Underground, Can, Captain Beefheart.
[67] Dan Burkett, 'One Song, Many Works: A Pluralist Ontology of Rock' *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Volume 13, (2015).
[68] Bruce Springsteen, *Born to Run* (Columbia, 1975).
[69] Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise*, 21. This prioritisation of production techniques seems to take agency away from musicians and epitomise careful, considered perfectionism: the *opposite* of an improvisatory aesthetic.
[70] Why draw ontological conclusions from outliers? And *Born to Run* harks back to the pre-rock age of Phil Spector's wall of sound which epitomised the performer/producer division that Rock sought to free itself from.

production and in doing so might be seen to reverse the dominant juxtaposition of improvisation/flexible live and fixed recording. What Gracyk doesn't allow much room for is, however, is a recognition that the performer/artist might be a key driver in these creative processes.

Bill Martin

If Gracyk's approach effectively brackets off and discounts the 'experimental' and 'untypical', and with them significant examples of improvisational practice, Bill Martin's *Avant Rock* embraces such approaches, identifying them as key strands within the *Rock project*.[71] Though less central to the canon of popular musicology and targeted more towards the general reader, his book is a rare example of a full-length text which identifies improvisation as a central driver in a significant strand of recorded rock music. Martin locates this within the practice of several influential artists of contrasting styles and (sub) genres, spanning more than 40 years of recorded music.[72]

Whereas Moore and Gracyk are representative of a musicology which has, correctly, challenged and checked Rock's myths and absurd claims,[73] in doing so they might also help obscure or marginalise artists whose approaches contain significant elements of originality and creative/performative agency: always part of rock's DNA. Able to ignore academic debates about authenticity and commodification, Martin looks (naively or perhaps phenomenologically) at examples of the innovative and experimental and, when necessary, supports his arguments and observations with use of artists' ethnography.

Martin identifies the work of artists whose musical experimentation 'plays itself out in the tension between composition and improvisation'[74] and, whilst his writing contains evaluation and brief references to techniques utilised, the ambitious scope and reach of the book (addressing the work of more than 50 artists throughout more than 40 years of recorded history, linking them to wider philosophical discourses) means that it provides only a sketch

[71] Bill Martin, *Avant Rock: Experimental music from the Beatles to Bjork* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 2002).
[72] Martin discusses the work of artists as varied as the Velvet Underground, Yoko Ono, King Crimson, Sonic Youth and Merzbrow.
[73] See respective chapters on Authenticity (Moore) and Romanticism (Gracyk).
[74] Bill Martin, *Avant Rock,* 5.

like outline of a potential in-depth study.

In addition, Martin provides a template for approaching rock music from a philosophical standpoint, stressing the hybridity and openness in 'rock at its best', addressing artists who look to musical and artistic practices and ideas from outside to inform their work, and he illustrates such approaches with reference to Cultural Theory: I was struck by his use of the Deleuzian term 'Rhizomatic' to describe Rock generally, and experimental Rock specifically, highlighting its eclectic, hybrid, and fluid connectedness which contains the possibility for distinct artistic and creativity growth and innovative possibilities. Again, due to the wide scope of the book, he does not develop this analysis further, merely introducing possibilities.

Martin's enthusiasm for his subject matter and admitted biases of taste influence his selection of artists. This, together with the fact that the book cannot be an exhaustive overview of experimental rock, significant gaps are present - some surprising.[75] Although his experience as a musician provides insight into the music he discusses, a lack of ethnography and consideration of the experiences of musicians themselves means that his perspective is rather one dimensional and mainly limited to his subjective personal and philosophical reflections and assumptions regarding artists' meanings and intentions.

Brackett and Jorgensen: Improvisation in Rock

More recently, research has emerged which addresses the use of improvisation in the recording studio by Rock artists other than the Grateful Dead or those who followed blues-rock models situated in the late 1960s/early 1970s.[76] David Brackett's article sheds light on the use of improvisation as Rock emerged as a distinct musical form in the mid 1960s. He argues that the incorporation of improvisational practice previously associated with Jazz, Blues and Eastern music played a part in providing Rock prestige, adding to the perception that it was an autonomous artform and separate, from other forms of popular music.

> By January 1967, participants in the field of popular music could find… greater formal complexity, with a large range of improvisatory techniques, more experimentation with electronics and new techniques of sound recording… the increasing use of modes and drones, pitch ornamentation associated with Indian

[75] Surprising omissions of *experimental* artists include Faust, Can and Frank Zappa: the latter two particularly relevant, in my opinion, to any discussion of improvisation.
[76] Darren Jorgensen, 'Improvised Rock and Independent Labels: The Dead C, Dunedin and the 1999s', *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, Volume 28, Issue 3, (2016), 315 -333 and David Brackett, 'Improvisation and Value in Rock, 1966', *Journal of the Society for American Music*, Volume 14, Number 2 (2020), 197-232.

> music and music of the "East" more generally, and greater diversity of instrumentation. [77]

Using the examples of the Byrds' 'Eight Miles High' and 'East West' by the Butterfield Blues Band (both 1966), Brackett identifies improvisation which is indebted to musical forms from outside previous popular music or Blues and Jazz traditions which does not rely on the fixed recorded/flexible live division I have previously observed.

Brackett goes even further back in Rock's (pre-Rock?) history to discuss an album which reveals that improvisation was already imbedded in the music's DNA: the extended improvisations and 'rave ups' present in selected tracks from the Yardbird's *Five Live Yardbirds* (1964).[78] The record is early evidence of Western popular musicians performing live who, through collective and solo improvisation, show that they are not (completely) constrained by pre-fixed tracks or structures.

> Consisting of almost entirely 12-bar blues or blues-based songs…several of the tracks exceed the then-almost-unassailable 3:30-time barrier by featuring extended improvisations…one of the most innovative features…was what came to be called the rave up… the rave-up featured rhythmic intensification in all the instruments, often moving to a double-time effect, resulting in a build-up that was then resolved by returning to the original tempo. [79]

These innovations, though heavily indebted to African American blues musicians,[80] can be considered prototypes for subsequent live improvisational models employed by artists such as Cream, Hendrix, Grateful Dead and Led Zeppelin who fused additional elements including increased volume, the influence of other musical genres (outside of the electric blues) and the incorporation of self-composed material from which to depart from.

Brackett is (yet) another author who addresses the practice of the Grateful Dead, but intriguingly (and rarely) in the context of studio improvisation rather than in concert - the track 'Viola Lee' recorded in 1966 and featured on the band's debut album the following year.[81] This is compared with Velvet Underground's 'European Son' (1967), also recorded in 1966, and Beckett contrasts the 'increasing complexity' of the Dead with the 'rejection of conventional virtuosity' and minimalism of the Velvet Underground.[82] He identifies an indebtedness to

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[77] Brackett*, Improvisation and Value*, 198.
[78] Brackett, *Improvisation and Value*, 209-210. The Yardbirds, *Five Live Yardbirds* (Columbia, 1964).
[79] Brackett, *Improvisation and Value*, 210.
[80] See, Roberta Freund Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues: The Transmission and Reception of American Blues Style in the United Kingdom* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2007).
[81] Grateful Dead 'Viola Lee' from *The Grateful Dead* (Warner Bros, 1967).
[82] Velvet Underground 'European Son' from *The Velvet Underground* (Verve, 1967). Brackett, *Improvisation and Value*, 212.

Western art music and its avant-garde in both recordings, influences already apparent in the work of prominent Rock artists such as Frank Zappa and the Beatles,[83] but here manifested within improvisational compositional practice.

Darren Jorgensen's article looks three decades ahead to the recordings of the post-rock band The Dead C whose albums were often comprised of excerpts from improvisations, either played live or in the studio. He explains that, in contrast with many of their Post-Rock contemporaries, the group's sound was influenced by the 'intentional amateurism' of punk as they followed a low-fi and do-it-yourself approach to recording and releasing.[84]

Both Brackett's and Jorgensen's work, then, reveal evidence of a distinct model of improvisation connected to an anti-virtuosic strand of Rock, a strand which is addressed further in this thesis as I examine the work of other artists, some of them highly influential and commercially successful, others working outside or in the fringes of the mainstream recording industry.

Jorgensen also examines how The Dead C (and associated local artists working for the same independent record label) attempted to avoid or deconstruct an 'alienation' produced by recorded processes and the music industry, including what they refer to as 'masculine hierarchy'.[85] The theme of alienation and how this might be reflected, facilitated, or avoided through improvisational practice is another theme I pick up on and develop further in this thesis.

In addition, Jorgensen's article is an influence, and partial model, for my general approach. When locating improvisation's presence within the recording studio, he relies heavily on first-hand accounts of participants' experience, rather than formalist analysis of the products of artists processes. Further, Jorgensen identifies effects that production techniques (in and outside of the mainstream industry) have on the *music itself* and touches on improvisation's role in shaping this music, relating this to possibilities for artists to employ independent means of recording and distribution. This thesis picks up on these insights and themes, arguing that examples of these kinds of creativity within Rock are more common and more variegated than narratives have so far implied.

2.4 Posts: Punk, Industrial and Rock

[83] For example, 'Tomorrow Never Knows' from *Revolver* (Parlophone, 1966) and Freak Out (Verve, 1966).
[84] Jorgensen, *Improvised Rock and Independent Labels*, 316 – 326.
[85] Ibid., 325.

> It was in the mid -1970s that New Wave burst on the scene in England, with precisely the motivation suggested by Attali…garage bands formed by people *not* educated as musicians.[86]

Susan McClary identifies traces of Attali's 'Composing' in the 1970s UK punk scene, a time when groups 're-appropriated the means to produce art themselves to escape the infinite regress of Repetition*'*. But the defining characteristics of punk *music* seem far removed from the improvisatory practice that Attali identifies with (proto) 'Composing' - Free Jazz.[87] Although both proclaimed the desirability of autonomy from the recording industry by valiantly attempting to organise DIY micro economies, Attali's admiration for Free Jazz's forward looking 'spontaneous music of immediate enjoyment' seems as much a recognition of the possibilities of a democratic *means* of music making as support for how it was disseminated.[88] By way of contrast, detached from its inherent critique of what contemporary Rock had become, Punk's conservative appropriation of early Rock forms and sounds avoided progression or innovation and *repetition* (rather than Attali's 'Composing') seems a more appropriate description; Attali's assessment of the Rolling Stones' significance could also apply to music that emerged some 12 years later: 'signalling the liquidation of the old…not the new mode of musical production'.[89]

What McClary does touch on is an approach to music making that deprioritises, questions or rejects the value of training and (established) technique. But, as Bill Martin articulates, this had always existed within Rock - it merely surfaced most obviously with Punk. And whereas Punk's rejection of training and technical expertise seemed purely negative, artists working prior to, contemporaneously with and subsequently to Punk utilised such approaches in more creative and original ways, often played out through improvisation.[90]

Post-Punk/Industrial

Journalist Simon Reynolds' history of Post-Punk uses Punk's nihilistic conservatism as a starting point to examine more eclectic, creative and open forms of music that followed in its

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[86] Susan McClary, Afterword to Attali, *Noise*, 156 – 157.
[87] Attali, *Noise.* My definition of punk here is the same as McClary's: the music of certain UK artists produced between 1976 and 1978, including The Sex Pistols, The Clash, The Damned, The Buzzcocks, X Rays Spex etc.
[88] Ibid., 138 – 140. Why did punk seek autonomy? To do what? And many of the leading Punk bands seemed happy to record for major labels.
[89] Ibid., 137.
[90] Velvet Underground, *White Light White Heat* (Verve, 1969), Amon Duul, *Psychedelic Underground* (Metronome, 1969), The Stooges, *The Stooges* (Elektra, 1969), Captain Beefheart, *Trout Mask Replica* (Reprise, 1969), Can, *Tago Mago* (United Artist, 1971). Although these artists emerged in the immediate wake of Jimi Hendrix, they *seemed* to avoid his virtuosic influence.

wake. He details histories of groups and their recordings whose rejection of 'conventional rock clichés', which included extended guitar solos and obvious displays of virtuosity, allowed space for musical experimentation and innovation.[91] Reynolds' ambition to address so many artists means that it is occasionally short on detail, but has proven a useful resource, a starting point to research selected artists further.

Although Reynolds' book is predicated on the idea that the years 1978 - 1984 represented a definable *moment of creativity*, his own timeline reveals no clear, linear progression or development of aesthetics and practice from pre-punk to Punk, and Punk to Post-Punk; there is no evidence of an abrupt schism separating these periods. The subgenres he identifies are disparate and overlapping, including New York's 'No Wave' (which pre-dated 1978's post-punk beginnings) 'Industrial' (named after the record label founded by Throbbing Gristle in 1975) and 'New Pop', whose pop electronica was heavily influenced by mid 70s Kraftwerk and Bowie, seems far removed from the guitar rock of post – punk's initial flourish. Although each might have been informed by a contemporary spirit that questioned, rejected and/or subverted dominant rock norms, they were still connected to previous moments and aesthetics.

Often at the expense of details of chart positions, release dates etc, a lack of attention to the approaches to music generation means that it is often unclear to what extent spontaneous composition was deployed and what effect such methods might have had on the nature of musical outputs, but sufficient insights are provided to illustrate that improvisation did not end with punk. Whilst punks prioritised brevity, simplicity and an artlessness which seemed to preclude many prominent forms of improvisation, spontaneous music making continued during and beyond punk's apparent 'break', though its nature might have been developed because of connecting with the questioning of technique and virtuosity that Punk raised.[92]

Reynolds provides useful introductions to the 'conceptualisation and sonic research' of Throbbing Gristle and, through interviews, documents their connection with late 1960s psychedelic improvisational practice and, in particular, P-Orridge's involvement with Coum

[91] Simon Reynolds, *Rip it up and start Again: Post Punk, 1978-1984* (Faber: London, 2006). 'Radical content demands radical form', ibid xix. The abandoning of solos and blues forms meant that *standard* improvisation became less common, but not a total abandonment of spontaneous composition.

[92] Artists' use of improvisation developed during the 1970s, sometimes in response to and informed by Punk, sometimes apparently oblivious. Consider the contemporary work of Henry Cow and Frank Zappa and PiL and The Pop Group.

Transmissions.[93] Some attention is also given to descriptions of the real time compositional/jamming techniques utilised by PiL during the making of Metal Box.[94] These improvisers had common influences informing their practice that stretched back beyond punk yet chimed with punk's dismissal of technique. Rather than being interested in post-Hendrix displays of virtuosity (still the most visible model for rock improvisation) they took a lead from the Velvet Underground's untrained long form studio improvisations and Can's instant studio compositions. PiL shared Can's combination of improvised performance with studied post-production techniques. Whilst Throbbing Gristle championed experimenting through 'no – technique' subversion of Rock's instrumentation, PiL's more traditional line up combined a more standard jamming on dub basslines and a gentler subversion of Rock guitar sounds and tonality.

England's Hidden Reverse discusses, via copius interviews with musicians, collaborators and witnesses, the work of 3 underground *Post-Industrial* bands who emerged in the wake of Punk, and the influence of Throbbing Gristle.[95] The book helps reveal how improvisation continued to be a presence in the outer fringes of Rock following Punk's *year zero*: a marker which seemed to signal and help contribute to the decline of the late 1960s electric blues improvisational' tradition.

Of relevance and interest are insights provided by interviews with Nurse with Wound's Steven Stapleton and other early band members who describe their approach to spontaneous creativity in the studio and discuss their eclectic influences in terms of processes and genre styles which reach back beyond the *Punk divide* to earlier experimental Rock artists and those from other disciplines. Although the recorded outputs could not be more dissimilar to mainstream Rock, many of their influences, instrumentation (and an intriguing antithapy to electronic music) and studio location can place them within the boundaries of the term.[96] As the interviews reveal, the band's lack of learned technique placed them along-side contemporaries more affiliated (by Reynolds at least) to Post Punks such as the Raincoats,

[93] Reynolds, *Rip it up*, 224 – 231.
[94] Ibid., 267 – 270.
[95] David Keenan, *England's Hidden Reverse: A Secret History of the Esoteric Underground* (London: SAF Publishing, 2003).
[96] Nurse with Wound's first album could be seen to juxtapose Pre-Punk *rockist* with a Post-Punk *anti-rockist* aesthetic in its contrasting use of improvisation. Incongruously, producer Nicky Rogers' Blues-Rock guitar soloing was overdubbed on top of Noise and Krautrock influenced collective improvisations. The band's unlearned *naïve* music making is at the same time contrasted with Rogers' *technique*. *Chance Meeting on a Dissecting Table of a Sewing Machine and an Umbrella* (United Dairies, 1979).

The Slits and the Pop Group in their *naïve* experimentation and spontaneity.[97] But, instead of imploding like those other bands, Stapleton has carved out a fascinating and singular career which illustrates a DIY aesthetic firmly married with creative control.[98]

2.5 Bailey revisited, Benson and Peters: Texts on Improvisation

Whilst inadequately addressing improvisation in Rock and sometimes helping to obscure its presence or value, some texts provide insights, approaches and concepts that can be adapted and applied to this research. Of particular importance will be Bailey's recognition of Rock's flexibility or 'improvising principle' which dovetails with the 'trial and error' Gracyk observes in the studio. And these improvisational approaches, as Lewis and Small attest, inherited from Afro-American models, can flourish when there is no separation between performer and composer.

As a performing musician who learnt to play *through Rock*, I was struck when reading Bailey's description of the improvising principle and have often felt a disconnect when playing alongside (and discussing music with) musicians from a classical tradition, sensing real differences in our contrasting approaches and understandings. And it's taken some years to begin to appreciate how different music might be perceived by those whose training has instilled in them that *the music* has, to all intents and purposes, already come into existence prior to (their) performance.

At first glance, Bruce Benson shares a similar motivation to Bailey: to illuminate how improvisation has existed in all types of music. But, for Benson, even tightly scored music of the Western Art tradition comes into existence through an 'improvisational dialogue' between composer and performer - only complete when subject to the 'improvisational' practice of the latter.[99]

> The process by which a work comes into existence is *best* described as improvisatory

[97] The relative prominence of female artists during the Post-Punk period reminds us how male dominated Rock had been. Many female artists during this period consciously subverted male models of Rock performance. See also Lydia Lunch from New York's No Wave *movement*. For more detailed discussion on the gendered nature of Rock see Mary Celeste Kearney, *Gender and Rock*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); S.Cohen 'Men Making a Scene: Rock Music and the Production of Gender' in Whiteley, S. (ed.) *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender* (Oxford: Routledge, 1997), 17–36.

[98] Nurse with Wound soon morphed into Stapleton's solo project, but despite being ostensibly and auteur he has managed to keep improvisation at the heart of his studio practice.

[99] Bruce Ellis Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue: A Phenomenology of Music* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

> at its very core…I think the activities that we call 'composing' and 'performing' are essentially improvisatory in nature. [100]

Benson's argument ignores what I consider to be a qualitative divide between kinds of music which is composed and dictated by score and consequently reliant upon the division of labour between composer and performer, and types of music which are free from such divisions. This distinction has significant implications for the agency and creativity of the performer.[101]

> Improvisation is one of the few universals of music which all cultures share. Each musical tradition necessarily develops its own approach and definition…one way we might define improvisation is by measuring the degree to which the performer is creatively involved. [102]

Like ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl, Benson sees evidence of improvisation everywhere: in all aspects of musical creation. For Nettl, there is a continuum of improvisation (the more creatively involved the performer, the more improvisational the practice) and some traditions exhibit a greater presence than others. For Benson, however, different improvisational models seem equally important in music creation, but this approach, rather than highlighting improvisation's importance, could just as easily make discussion of the subject irrelevant. Further, it might not do justice to performers whose practice is infused with a flexibility and commitment to creative agency, nor recognise that a highly developed ability of certain musicians to accurately realise/recreate composed scores might depend upon a highly specialised training which often leaves them incapable of what might reasonably be called improvisation.

However unsatisfactory, then, for us to speak meaningfully of improvisation and see how it does or does not operate in practice, it makes sense to create a dividing line between more and less fixed types of activity, with only the latter usefully identified as improvisation. And this line does not only exist within the confines of late 19th and 20th Century classical music as Bailey suggests: recording's capacity to fix, and the divisions of classical music have echoes in Rock too. But the flexibility, the improvisational DNA that Bailey identifies does provide possibilities, an improvisational potential that, I think, is lost to many classically

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[100] Ibid., 37

[101] Paradoxically, the pessimism of Adorno, Attali, and Small regarding the improvisational freedom of Rock is also borne out by my own experience of, and research into, Rock practice: the power of recording practices to fix can be as absolute as that of the notated score, but, as Bailey recognised the *potential* of creative freedom of the performer has continued to exist and is evidenced in the practice of many rock practitioners throughout the decades.

[102] Bruno Nettl, *Thoughts on Improvisation: A Comparative Approach* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).

trained performing musicians.

Continuum: within and without (forms)

Rock is particularly eclectic with hybrid roots so it might not be a great surprise to discover several *kinds* or *degrees* of improvisation within it and its many subgenres. Different artists, even within the similar style or genre, could display very different degrees of creative agency in their performance live or within the studio. Benson's discussion of improvisation, however broad ranging, is heavily weighted towards the composer/performer divisions peculiar to Western Art Music, and he seems to superimpose these when talking about other musics. His *analysis* of Jazz is sketchy (and Rock, together with other types of popular music, non-existent) with almost no attention to performers' perceptions/views on what they are doing when improvising. I wonder how many performers would agree with this when reflecting on their experiences,

> Performance in the WAM tradition and, say, jazz is then not nearly so different as it is often made out to be since both involve the *re*presentation of musical experience, whether it is as specific as a song or as broad as a genre such as free improvisation… whereas in jazz a musician improvises freely and openly, in classical music the requirement of fidelity has meant that the improvisational element has, to a great extent, been suppressed—or else has operated covertly. [103]

For the purposes of addressing Rock, Nettl and Benson's recognition of a *continuum of improvisation* is useful but needs to be adapted to the music's peculiarity. It seems that the Rock performer's freedom from score allows tantalising possibilities that, say, the second violinist of an orchestra could only dream of (or fear), even when performing Rossini. But Bailey's brutal division between idiomatic and non-idiomatic forms and *mere* 'improvisational principle' (rather than *improvisation proper*) directs us to expect less from Rock.

A Continuum for Rock: fixed, semi-fixed, and unfixed

A continuum that recognises forms of musical performance being more and less fixed in respect of improvisational content could encompass the eclectic nature of rock, and Gary

[103] Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue*, 146-147. In contrast with other writers who focus on the dialogical nature of collective improvisation such as Bailey, Berliner, Monson and Lewis, Benson provides little evidence of how performers themselves might identify assess their improvisational practice.

Peters' focus of how fixity relates to different forms might help us produce a workable model for identifying and discussing improvised performance. To recognise the nuances within and between genres, Peters takes Bailey's blunt division of 'idiomatic' and 'non-idiomatic' and expands these types to a total of six (fixed idiomatic, semi-fixed idiomatic, unfixed idiomatic, unfixed cross-idiomatic, fixed non-idiomatic, unfixed non-idiomatic) - the first 5 of which would have been dismissed as *merely* idiomatic under Bailey's categorisation. But I'm not convinced about the benefits of Bailey's idiomatic/non-idiomatic division, seeing Free Improvisation's valiant attempts to bypass stylistic constraints as a useful approach or ideal, but not grounded in what is possible or necessarily desirable. However, recognising that a looser coupling to idiom *can* facilitate difference and a kind of freedom, I continue to address the idiomatic/non-idiomatic divide (which I consider less absolute, more a matter of degree) in the context of another related and intersecting continuum: that spanning fixed and less fixed forms of performance and improvisation - remembering that, as many No Wave artists illustrated so well, despite appearance, the less idiomatically fixed can be at the same time less improvisational and pre-prepared.[104]

In addition to providing a framework for discussing improvisational practice in Rock, Peters identifies other themes which have proved useful to this research: dialogical notions of improvisation, solitude and habits.[105] The first of these (at which Peters rather obsessively rails against) reflects Benson's arguments and dominant narratives surrounding Jazz [106] and Free Improvisation. Lewis uses Georgina Born to 'present the circumstantial case' in respect of the importance of 'dialogical improvisation' pioneered not only by Jazz, but also Rock musicians in the 1960s.

> Some of the main elements of experimental practice - improvisation, live group work…were pioneered in the jazz and rock of the 1950s and 1960s. Moreover, the politics of experimental music are similar to those of the advanced black jazz of the '60s. Its musical collectivism, for example, was pre-figured by the Chicago black

[104] I have found Bailey's description of what non-idiomatic improvisation is trying to do particularly useful in my performance practice, helping to challenge and reach beyond strictures of idiom and genre, but share George Lewis' and others concerns about how such a division might devalue and obscure idiomatic forms (and experience) which contain challenges to what Lewis terms 'Eurocentrism'. George E. Lewis, 'Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives', *Black Music Research Journal 16,* no.1, (1996): 91-122.
[105] Peters, *Improvising Improvisation*, 5. Peters claims that the most powerful improvisation is conducted in solitude rather than through dialogue. In relation to *habit*, Peters discusses how (in particular non-idiomatic improvisers) attempt to 'outwit their habitual selves' and discusses Deleuze's concept of 'passive creativity' which seems particularly directed at non-idiomatic forms.
[106] George E. Lewis, *Improvised Music*, 91-122. Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1996; Bailey, *Improvisation* and Borgo, *Sync or Swarm*.

musicians' cooperative (AACM).[107]

[107] Lewis, *Improvised Music*, 101, and Georgina Born, *Rationalising Culture: IRCAM, Boulez and the Institutionalisation of the Musical Avant-Garde* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1995), 359. Despite roots in Afro-American music, Rock remained a predominantly white phenomenon. Key Afro-American improvisors included Jimi Hendrix, Funkadelic (especially in their early incarnation featuring guitarist Eddie Hazel), Bad Brains, Living Colour and the Black Rock Coalition. For further discussion see Jack Hamilton, *Just Around Midnight: Rock and Roll and the Racial Imagination* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2016) and Maureen Mahon, *Right to Rock and the Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

CHAPTER 3
Methodology

3.1 Introduction: A Multi-Methodological Approach

In this chapter I outline and justify features of my philosophical stance and methodological approach. I explain how I adopt qualitative, interpretivist methods including autoethnography and case studies, the latter relying upon analysis of secondary research findings and primary investigations. Practice-led, the research integrates my studio-based compositional practice which is addressed by autoethnographic reflections, and recorded and documented through sound and video recordings, recording diaries, and visual DAW screenshots.

I explain why these approaches were chosen, how they were designed to address the aims and objectives of this research and I explain how the resulting, custom-made, multi-methodological approach strengthens the validation of the research by providing breadth and depth through viewing phenomena from differing but complimentary perspectives.

The philosophical position which supports this thesis can be summarised as interpretive and phenomenological: stances which attempt to understand and explain the social world from the perspective of the actors directly involved in social processes.[1] In contrast with objectivist or positivist positions, mine is subjectivist, assuming that knowledge is neither objective nor absolute. It is, therefore, aligned with, and follows from a practice-led framework, itself inherently interpretive in its focus on the importance of subjective experience: my belief is that experience of a phenomena first-hand leads to a greater understanding, and examination of my own creative processes.

The resulting thesis is comprised of two main components: the written submission and selected recorded outputs from my creative practice.[2] These components are interrelated and

[1] Gibson Burrell and Gareth Morgan, *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis*, (London: Routledge, 1979), 1-37.
[2] Ouseburn Collective, *Y.I.D.I.Y.* (Bandcamp, 2021), Ouseburn Collective, *Vent* (Bandcamp, 2022), Ouseburn Collective, *April* (Bandcamp, 2022), *Lockdown Sessions* (YouTube, 2020).

dialogical and are intended to carry equal weight. Together they address the research's aims and objectives as set out in the introductory chapter.

3.2 Practice-led and Inductive: Creative Practice as Methodology

> 'Practice-led researchers construct experiential starting points from which practice follows. They tend to 'dive in', to commence practising to see what emerges.'[3]

My methodology includes, and is driven by, my creative practice. For many years this has centred on studio-based composition and performance which has involved, to varying degrees, improvisation as a primary means to generate musical material. To a large extent, I see my research reflecting Carole Gray's definition of practice-led research: 'that which is initiated in practice, where questions, problems, challenges are identified and formed by the needs of the practice and practitioners; and secondly that the research is carried out through the practice.' [4] But, in addition to influencing the other methodological approaches, my practice has developed in parallel, in conversation with, and in response to the other methodologies I discuss in this chapter.

In contrast with 'practice-based research' as defined by Candy, I don't consider the recorded outputs of my practice as constituting *the* research, *the* container of new knowledge;[5] I don't claim that the originality of my findings lies wholly or mainly within the content of the music submitted, although this does inevitably contain uniqueness, and the tracks should be considered as original works. Instead, the way I comprehend my practice in relation to its role of providing a contribution to knowledge corresponds with Hazel Smith and Roger Dean's conception of practice-led research: 'we… are referring to both the work of art as a form of research and to the creation of the work as generating research insights, which might then be documented, theorised and generalised.'[6]

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[3] Brad Haseman and Daniel Mafe, Acquiring Know-How: Research Training for Practice-Led Researchers in Practice-led Research, in Hazel Smith and Roger T Dean (eds.), *Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 4.

[4] Carole Gray, 'Inquiry Through Practice: Developing Appropriate Research Strategies : No Guru, No Method?' *Discussions on Art and Design Research,* University of Art & Design, UIAH, Helsinki, Finland, 82.

[5] Linda Candy, Practice-based Research: A Guide, *Creativity and Cognition Studios Report 2006*, V1.0, Sydney: Creativity and Cognition Studios, University of Technology. Available at https://www.creativityandcognition.com

[6] *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*, Hazel Smith and Roger T Dean (eds.), (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 7.

My practice leads the research to the extent that specific concerns of the investigation are dictated by issues arising from *inside* my practice. These then reach *outside* to other more traditional disciplines and research methods. My overarching aim, for example, which is reflected the thesis title, can be seen to precede and determine the direction the research travels. And creative practice, especially perhaps that which involves improvisation, is a phenomenon which is inherently indeterminant: when the creative process begins, I cannot know exactly how it will *work out*, how it will end, what it will sound like, what my interpretation or reflections on the process and finale artefact will look like or reveal. As my practice progressed during the research period alongside my parallel autoethnographic reflections, concerns such as the tensions arising from the interrelation of improvisational performance and recording processes, and the contrasting results of solo and collaborative practice, became increasingly acute; once identified and articulated, these contributed to more fully formed research questions, and, in turn, lead the direction that other forms of research would take.

Throughout the project, the research *type* used can be best described as inductive, or exploratory. Rather than beginning with a rigid hypothesis, the information collected through secondary research, the examination of my own practice, interviews and supporting methods, provided *clues* that have helped provide a more complete picture of *what has been going on* in relation to improvisation in Rock, and, hopefully, create new or more complete perspectives. And this type of exploration necessarily flows from a practice-led framework which, as Haseman and Mafe explain, is both 'emergent' and 'complex',

> From the outset practice-led research is multidisciplinary…built, at times uneasily, from contrasting registers of professional activity, creative practice and academic research…the creative work is one research output but creative research itself is something that works with the creative component to establish something other, some critical finding for example. So, while there are emergent outcomes within creative practice, it is when…this is co-joined with research creative practice-led research becomes truly emergent in its outcomes.[7]

These different types of investigation don't proceed in a clear, linear manner *from practice to research* but sometimes work in parallel, less obviously connected ways, and at times

[7] Haseman, *Acquiring Know-How,* 219 -220.

feedback upon themselves in a complex manner. This feedback loop is manifested in the way my creative practice has also been led by other, more traditional forms of research. Practitioners do not work in isolation from culture, politics, and societal discourses which exist outside their immediate musical parameters. So, for example, investigations into techniques and methods used by other musicians by way of interviews, conversations and other secondary research was not only motivated by questions thrown up by my creative practice but, in turn, also influenced how my own creative practice developed.

This two-way interaction and feedback loop reflects the presence of what Smith and Dean call 'Research-led Practice', evidencing that the 'academic research can lead to creative practice.'[8] A better way of putting it in relation to my own research might be: more *traditional* types of academic research can influence or determine the nature of the creative practice. This is because I recognise that practice itself should be considered a kind of research,[9] and because my general approach as a creative practitioner was existent prior to the research period.[10] In any event, Smith and Dean recognise, as do I, that practice-led research and research-led practice are 'not separate processes but interwoven in an iterative cyclical web.'[11]

In a recent example of musicological research, Michael Bridgewater explains how he used 'creative practice as a musicological method' when exploring 'how styles of hip hop beats have evolved and proliferated'[12] and, drawing on Wayne Marshall's concept of 'techno-musicality', he argues that 'by becoming practitioners… through adopting its technologies and compositional sensibilities, musicologists can learn from and esteem a culture genuinely while contributing to its fabric as opposed to observing it from a distance and othering it.'[13] Like Bridgewater, I include creative practice as an important methodology. However,

[8] Smith, *Practice-Led Research*, 7.
[9] In theory, I accept that a *pure* practice-as-research model which manifests types of non-verbal knowledge within its sonic outputs is possible, but not practicable for a PhD thesis which requires textual output.
[10] It is important to stress that my creative practice would have continued irrespective of whether this PhD was undertaken, although, as discussed, its precise nature was influenced and directed by concerns thrown up by other aspects of this research.
[11] Ibid., 7.
[12] Michael Bridgewater, *Probing the Evolutions and Proliferations of Beatmaking Styles in Hip Hop Music*, PhD Thesis, (Newcastle University, 2017), 59 - 60.
[13] Bridgewater, *Probing the Evolutions*, 60. Wayne Marshall, 'Musically Expressed Ideas about Music: Techniques and Technologies for Performing Ethnomusicology in the Digital Age', wayne&wax, 2006, http://wayneandwax.blogspot.co.uk/2006/04/musically-expressed-ideas-about-music.html (5th September 2022).

Bridgewater implies that at the start of his investigations he was an outsider in relation to the field under examination and, therefore, needed to *become a practitioner* to adequately address a pre-set research problem, which involved gaining 'inside knowledge of hands-on creative experimentation using a variety of technologies.'[14] Although perhaps not quite as obviously as Hip-hop production, the construction of Rock music, depending as it does on instrumental expertise and recording processes, requires knowledge and experience of specific and specialised technologies, and, therefore, a (deeper) understanding can be gained from such immersion. But, unlike Bridgewater, I don't see myself as a researcher (ethnomusicologist?) looking at Rock from the outside and seeking a means to *get closer*. Rather, my existing situation as practitioner within the cultural field of Rock already privileges me with knowledge in the form of experience of creative experimentation and relevant technology, resources, and history - all of which have helped facilitate the provision of insights which relate directly to my research aims and objectives.

3.3 Autoethnography

Practice-led research and autoethnographic methodologies are both based on epistemological and ontological foundations which are subjectivist and phenomenological and, therefore, philosophically aligned. And in practice it is rare if not impossible for practice-led research to appear without some form of autoethnographic accompaniment. The investigation of my own creative processes which constitute large sections of chapters 5 and 6 is a form of autoethnography, flowing directly and logically from experience, and reference is made repeatedly to the processes and outputs they refer to and draw from. Because of the types of insights and knowledge this research seeks, my practice needed not only to be recorded and heard, but verbalised too, so that it could be contextualised, interpreted, and analysed through text, the text itself to considered as a creative output. The musical sounds themselves, although perhaps containing different manifestations of knowledge, cannot speak entirely for themselves.

The textual, interpretive analysis of my own practice is presented, then, by way of autoethnography: 'a highly personalised form of qualitative research in which researchers tell stories based on their own lived experiences and interactions with others within social

[14] Bridgewater, *Probing the Evolutions*, 60.

contexts, relating the personal to the cultural in the process and product'.[15] In accordance with Allen-Collinson's identified conditions for effective autoethnography, I seek to provide nuanced insights into my experience, situating these within a wider cultural context, to expand the knowledge of the processes, experiences and intentions that relate to the phenomenon of improvisation in recorded Rock music.[16] I agree with Allen-Collinson that the 'insider' perspective of autoethnography potentially privileges the researcher (me!) with access to nuanced meaning, in-depth knowledge concerning the phenomena addressed, and lived experience within the field of Rock. As Allen-Collinson explains, the insider perspective also provides access to a wider range of resources, not normally available to 'outsider' researchers. As discussed above, much of the knowledge and resources are technical in nature and my autoethnographic writing, connecting directly to my creative practice as musical method, allows access to and draws insights from this immersed experience.[17]

The submitted recordings, albums and videos are not just products of creative processes. They are inseparable (at least in the context of this thesis) from the textual autoethnography which accompanies them. Their sounds help illuminate the written thesis' autoethnographic components, containing, for example, aural *evidence* that my compositional intentions were realised, or otherwise; that my processes were successful, or otherwise, in relation to what I had set out to do.

When defending the idea that composition can be properly considered research, Ian Pace suggests that compositional processes necessarily 'grapple with difficult questions, exploring solutions… producing creative work which embodies these solutions and from which others can draw much of value'.[18] [19] I can at times detect the embodiment of these explorations and

[15] Brett Smith, Narrative Inquiry and Autoethnography in M. Silk, D. Andrews & H. Thorpe (eds), *Handbook of Physical Cultural Studies*, (London: Routledge, 2017), 505-514.
[16] Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson, Autoethnography: Situating Personal Sporting Narratives in Socio-cultural Contexts, in K Young and M Atkinson (eds.), *Qualitative Research on Sport and Physical Culture*, (Bingley: Emerald, 2012), 191-212.
[17] Ibid., 199.
[18] Ian Pace, 'Composition and Performance Can Be, and Often Have Been, Research', *Tempo*, 70/275 (December 2015), 60-70.
[19] Several commentators have considered the problems arising from practice-related research in the creative arts, some arguing that such these strategies don't fit traditional academic research paradigms. For example, the debate sparked by John Croft in 'Composition is Not Research', *Tempo*, 69/272 (April 2015), 6-11. And then debated by Camden Reeves in 'Composition, Research and Pseudo-Science: a Response to John Croft', *Tempo*,

solutions within the recorded outputs submitted, and it is hoped that the listener might too. But I believe this can only be (more) adequately revealed when accompanied and verbalised through reflective text, just as the textual output (at least that which relates directly to the submitted recordings) requires the recorded sound to be better understood in relation to the intentions, processes and contexts discussed.

Brett Smith highlights the danger of producing 'self-indulgent research' when relying on autoethnography as a research strategy, arguing that if this is to be avoided there needs to be 'high levels of critical awareness, self-discipline and reflexivity'.[20] In attempting to counter this pitfall, I ensure that my writing openly acknowledges my role in the research and explains how selected prior experience, beliefs and assumptions have influenced the research process, and how they have directed my interests and expertise.

Although my autobiographical reflections sometimes stretch outside of the immediate concerns of the creative outputs submitted as part of this thesis, I have tried to ensure that they are always related in some way to the overarching research aims. And, in an attempt to maintain a disciplined focus, I have tried to *reign these in* to address the thesis' more specific objectives/research questions. Self-discipline is also demonstrated in the continuous logging of recording diary entries throughout the research period. These were made at the time (or as soon after as practically possible) of each recording session, detailing dates, location, equipment used, personnel, and any immediate thoughts and responses. These then provided valuable aid memoires and stimuli for the subsequent analytical reflections.

But it was important to have some temporal distance between studio performances/recordings and the more fully realised, retrospective reflections to allow some separation between the different kind of mindsets required by performer/producer and researcher. When creating music, especially when improvising, it is important to be *in flow,* to be so focused and immersed in the process that intrusive thoughts such as *how will this piece of music be used to illustrate x or y* can be avoided.[21] The mindset required to subsequently describe, interpret, and analyse these processes needs a wider perspective, one able to more systematically look

70/275 (December 2015), 50-59, and David Pocknee, 'Composition is Not a Jaffa Cake, Research is Not a Biscuit: A Riposte to John Croft', David Pocknee*,* 2015.

[20] Smith, *Narrative Inquiries*, 509-510.

[21] In Chapter 4 I discuss in more detail Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of 'Flow'. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).

for connections, patterns with the benefit of a more detached hindsight, and the benefit too of having heard and processed the resultant sonic outputs. This *researcher mindset* is necessarily slower, more considered and, unlike improvised performance, enjoys the possibility of constant repeated iteration.

In addition to providing a disciplined and reflexive research position, I have tried to direct my textual reflections outwards to others' experience and related themes, in the hope that, in the words of Chang, a window might be provided 'through which the self and others can be examined and understood'.[22] Still, autoethnography is inevitably most interested in subjective self-experience and, therefore, narrowly situated. It tends to provide depth as opposed to breadth which might be problematic when examining such a wide field as improvisation in Rock.

To the extent that it relates directly to the creative outputs submitted, my autoethnography relies upon methods of data collection including recordings of performances captured on the computer DAW software, Logic and GarageBand. These are supplemented with photographs of recording sessions, visual screenshots of these DAW recordings, videos. I also kept a contemporaneous recording diary which was completed throughout the research period detailing summaries of the location, equipment, personnel involved, and any initial thoughts, and this data worked as valuable aid memoires and stimuli – useful when writing the subsequent analytical reflections.

When examining my practice (and that of others), my writing contains analysis. For example, it tries to explain why and how certain compositional processes were chosen and contextualises these historically, explaining their significance in the context of Rock improvisation. In this respect, the overall research position sits towards the Heideggerian, subjectivist end of a phenomenological spectrum, one that, rather than acknowledging the possibility of 'bracketing off' social or cultural contexts, accepts the presence of the researcher and embraces retrospective interpretations and explanations.[23] Such a phenomenology emphasises meaning through 'manifestations' as opposed to objective

[22] Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as Method*, (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2008), 13.
[23] Maura Dowling, 'From Husserl to Van Manen: A review of Different Phenomenological Approaches', *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 44, (2007), 131-142.

essences, and these manifestations are emergent and in a constant state of interpretations.[24] As I document, describe, and analyse my experience as performer, composer and producer I do so in the belief that the resulting textual output will contain nuance and insights into how improvisation is used in the construction of recorded Rock music. This examination is incorporated case studies which also examine other practitioners' use of recorded improvisation; the focus on the content of interviews within these studies (secondary and primary data) acknowledges that accounts of *their* experience of the phenomena is important when attempting to provide insights into a practice (improvisation) which is necessarily reliant upon the agency of the subjective individual.

Another term for interpretive phenomenology is Hermeneutics, the aim of which is to describe, understand and interpret participants' experiences. In contrast with the descriptive phenomenology established by Husserl, a hermeneutic approach acknowledges that the researcher is part of the research and, therefore, acknowledgement and examination of the researcher's previous understanding, experience and knowledge facilitates interpretive insights.[25] This kind of phenomenology recognises that the lived experience which is examined is also connected to and influenced by social, political, and cultural contexts.[26]

As explained earlier, my autoethnography also contains autobiographic content which, although related, sits apart from the immediate concerns of the creative practice and outputs submitted. Reflections on previous experience as a musician, learning my craft within a popular music setting and working in wider, often less improvisational contexts, are included to provide a greater understanding of my current situation within the field of popular music and how my history relates the development and practice of Rock music over several decades. It provides insights into how improvisation situates itself and is facilitated or constrained in a wider musical setting and enhances awareness of factors that have influenced my more improvisational practice. The source of this kind of autobiographical data is memory, one which stretches back beyond the research period and sideways, outside to the edge of the immediate parameters of the phenomena addressed, but it provides important context and are chosen at times to highlight *epiphanies* which themselves relate to the

[24] Mark D. Vagle, *Crafting Phenomenological Research*, (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2014).
[25] Tracy McConnell, Ysanne Chapman and Karen Francis, 'Husserl and Heidegger: Exploring the Disparity', *International Journal of Nursing Practice*, 15, I, (2009), 7-15.
[26] Anne Flood, 'Understanding Phenomenology', *Nurse Researcher*, 17, 2, (2010), 7-1.

research questions and themes under discussion. Of course, these reflections are especially unreliable and subjective, but deliberately chosen to reveal or support other truths more obviously connected to the overall aim and objectives of the research. This type of autobiographical content also reminds the reader that my experiences are not merely lived so that they can be used to complete this PhD thesis. They would have happened in any event.[27]

3.4 Case Studies

Practice-led research, even when combined with autoethnography, remains a particularly subjective, narrow research strategy, especially when the phenomenon under consideration is as wide as improvisation in Rock. A main motivation for the introduction of case studies into my research was to expand the scope of the study, and, therefore, increase the width of insights and new knowledge, and to adequately address the research questions which were emerging or had emerged. Case studies seemed an ideal method by which, in the words of Emily Hornum, 'the complex layers of creative practice, subjective experiences and theoretical discourses… intersect and enrich the outcomes' of my research.[28] My intention was to use these studies as umbrellas which could incorporate the other main methodologies of creative-led practice, autoethnography, together with supporting methods and tools such as secondary research, thematic analysis, interviews and recording diaries.

A case study is a long-established research method used to investigate an individual, a group, or a phenomenon, and Sharan Merriam summarises its three defining characteristics: particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. Being particularistic, the study should focus on a particular phenomenon to provide depth rather than breadth when addressing specific, confined examples to reveal insights and knowledge about a phenomenon and what it might represent.[29] In this respect, the inclusion of case studies is well aligned with my

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[27] Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams and Arthur Bochner, 'Autoethnography: An Overview', *Forum Qualitative Social Research*, Volume 12, No. 1, January 2011. They describe how researchers uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to 'do' and 'write' autoethnography: it is both process and product. They explain how 'epiphanies' are used to reveal how intense situations are negotiated, and how they describe effects that continue recollections and feelings long after the incidents described.

[28] Emily Hornum, 'Practice, Process, and Product: A Self-reflexive Inquiry of Practice-led Research in Progress' in *Networking Knowledge*, no.9, (2016), 3. Accessible at https://ojs.meccsa.org.uk/index.php/netknow/issue/archive

[29] Sharan Merriam, *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2009).

autoethnographic approach as previously described; a primary focus of the studies presented in Chapters 4 and 5 is the work of carefully selected artists who use improvisation in the studio in distinct ways, with the aim of contextualising their approaches with what is already *more known* about Rock improvisation, together with the particular concerns of my own practice.

Merriam's second characteristic of case studies is 'rich, thick description of the phenomenon'. [30] This interpretative approach sits well with my autoethnographic reflections as I move, within each case study, from consideration of my own practice to that of others and vice versa, and also to the consideration of commentators on the phenomena I address.[31] The in-depth consideration of artists' practice draws heavily from extracts of interviews (primary and secondary) together with the consideration of the writings of commentators which address themes outlined in the Introduction and Literature Review.

The incorporation of reflective autobiography and autoethnography within these studies is a deliberate attempt to situate myself, my own practice and experience, within the research and at the same time blur or collapse any clear or absolute distinction between my practice, the practice of others and other related political and cultural concerns. The studies, which are presented as extended essays, then, cut across, make links, and address themes and questions that connect these phenomena, showing how they can all connect to the central concerns of the thesis.

The final defining characteristic of a case study, as identified by Merriam, is also shared with autoethnography: their heuristic quality. Case studies are used to explain the reasons for the problem, the context, what happened and why. They 'can bring about the discovery of new meanings, extend the reader's experience, or confirm what is known.'[32]

According to Creswell, a case study is deemed an appropriate methodological strategy when 'the inquirer has clearly identifiable cases with boundaries and seeks to provide an in-depth

[30] Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 43.
[31] For example, in Chapter 4 I discuss tensions and divisions created by recording processes as they manifest themselves in the work of Talk Talk, Captain Beefheart and myself (Ouseburn Collective).
[32] Ibid., 44.

understanding of the cases or a comparison of several cases.'[33] My Literature Review identified artists, practices and historical periods which had been more adequately examined in relation to the use of improvisation, and my selection of artists to focus on was, to a large extent, guided by gaps this review revealed; guided too by the conclusion that certain artists/approaches had been less acknowledged or framed as examples of *Rock improvisation*. I wanted to, then, examine less explored areas – ones situated in the recording studio and distinct from the *Cream Model* of electric blues-rock, oft-mentioned by commentators. This, in turn, ensured that the studies would keep focussed on the research questions which had emerged as the research progressed.

It was my intention that the case studies would be opportunities to compare and examine contrasting and underexplored approaches and at the same time address themes which had refined themselves into research questions.[34] Due to the complex contexts of the practices involved, submerged as they are within recording processes, often temporally and bodily separated, the nature of these practices was not obviously discernible from the resultant recorded artefacts. And, as Yin argues, case studies are particularly appropriate when boundaries between phenomenon and context are less evident.[35] By carefully choosing examples of recorded improvisation from different eras and sub-genres of Rock and using primary secondary data including artists' sonic outputs and ethnography, I have sought to gain an in-depth, if ultimately partial, understanding of the phenomena as it manifests itself in specific circumstances.

Following the lead of authors such as Bailey, Monson, and Berliner,[36] and mindful of how the case studies might sit alongside the reflections on my own practice, I wanted a particular focus on the experiential aspects of improvisational practice, the subjective intentions and perspectives of the individuals who were involved, and so the content of interviews was especially important. This was also the motivation behind incorporating primary research in the form of semi-structured interviews with members of the Scottish Polis Inspectors, and

[33] John W. Cresswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, (Thousand Oakes: Sage Publications, 2007), 74.
[34] For example, the examination of how dependent studio-improvisation was dependent on dialogue.
[35] Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods,* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2009), 19. And Merriam (2009) believed that 'The case study offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon', 50.
[36] Bailey, *Improvisation*; Monson, *Saying Something*; Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*.

conversations with Gustav Thomas, to introduce insights from other actors in the field, and to connect these to my own practice, that of others, and history and development of Rock music.

3.5 The Resulting Multi-Methodological Approach

The wider sweep required by a phenomenological approach to examining improvisation in Rock, which extends further than just my own practice, can be seen as a driver towards the inclusion of other supporting methodological strategies to help address the overall aim and research questions.[37] And, related to my previous discussion of potential self-indulgence, there are obvious limitations when autoethnography is used as a stand-alone research strategy, not least its inherent subjectivity. So, I have been careful to include other forms of qualitative research which look *outwards.* The Literature Review, for example, in addition to contextualising Rock improvisation historically and philosophically, surveys writings which address the work of artists who have extensively and/or distinctively used improvised performance to generate musical material. In addition, and by way of support, case studies are presented that attempt to expand this knowledge by focussing on the use of other distinct approaches by historically situated artists. These studies also address themes which relate directly to the research questions set out in my introduction and deliberately incorporate autobiographical and autoethnographic reflections to stress the connection between my own experience, my practice and those of others in the field.

Several commentators have argued that many forms of art are inherently interdisciplinary and, therefore, in a privileged position to generate research findings and new knowledge. And different types of practice necessarily involve combining different subject matter and methods.[38] Combining approaches might, therefore, be inevitable. But for practice-led research involving autoethnography, supplementary approaches might also be *desirable* to, a) address the overarching aim of the research and individual research questions, and b) to help ensure that the narrow subjectivity inherent in autoethnography is validated, and c) to reach

[38] Paul Carter, *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2004); Graeme Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2005); Mike Hannula, Juha Suoranta, and Tere Vadén, *Artistic Research: Theories, Methods and Practices*, (Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, 2005).

outside so that my own experience can be connected to that of others and wider cultural and political concerns.

Even subjectivist approaches are necessarily connected to outside cultural and political worlds and related artistic fields. And this research could be considered situated somewhere within a Popular Musicology which developed in the wake of a New Musicology that, as Kieran Rafferty explains, 'provided alternative approaches when exploring what the musical object, practice or experience stands in relation to', a discipline which 'has established that it would be an error to suppose that values or art-works could be adequately studied without reference to the particular society within which they were expressed'.[39] Combining the examination of texts by cultural theorists, musicologists, practitioners, and commentators who contextualise and help explain on a macro-level with the micro-subjectivist concerns of an autoethnography and artistic practice is not, then, novel. But, for this research it seemed necessary to dissolve any clear distinction between subjectivist concerns and the wider artistic and cultural field to adequately address specific research questions.[40]

Partly to counter the problems of self-indulgence, ultra-subjectivity, and narrowness of focus, it was always my intention to examine improvisation in Rock from other, wider perspectives. The multi-methodological approach that developed was a means by which the validity of the research could be strengthened through added breadth: in addition to the *thick description* contained in the analysis of my creative practice, insights and knowledge was sought by way of case studies, themselves appropriately aligned relying as they did on data from (secondary and primary sources) which themselves put value on the experiential, the phenomenological and value of subjective experience. In *post-positivist* forms of qualitative research more suited to the requirements of social sciences, the means used to enhance validation is often referred to as Triangulation. Merriam and Tisdell explain how triangulation is applied and introduce the related but newer concept of 'crystallization', a framework more aligned to my own interpretive, and subjectivist philosophical starting point: 'crystallization depends upon

[39] Kieran Rafferty, *Home Again: Propriety and Standardisation in Early-Twentieth-Century American Popular Song*, PhD thesis, (Newcastle University, 2016), 10. Musicology is now effectively multi-disciplinary, and it is now common for cultural studies, history, sociology, and philosophy to be incorporated into individual studies.
[40] For example, in addition to primary research (interviews and creative practice) the identification of distinct forms of improvisation within Rock was approached from other angles including consideration of secondary research which helped reveal (but not fully declared) forms of *hidden* improvisation.

including, interweaving, blending, or otherwise drawing upon more than one genre of expressing data'.[41]

Laura Ellingson develops the concept of crystallization further to provide a more realised framework for conducting qualitative research, describing it as a 'post-modern approach' to research that features in-depth multiple genre descriptions to integrate themes and patterns of subjective experience. It is, she argues, manifested itself through 'complex interpretations' 'thick descriptions' which should incorporate two or more genres that are 'interwoven, blended, and thickened' to triangulate the research findings.[42] I see crystallization manifested in my own methodological strategies, existing as a sub-methodology which allows the blending of more *traditional* forms of analysis, such as those contained within the Literature Review and examination of secondary ethnographic research findings, with more creative representations of findings such as my autobiographic and autoethnographic reflections.

The advantage of providing a multi-methodological approach is also articulated by Hannula, Suoranta, and Vadén who remind us that 'artistic experience is hermeneutical through and through' and that hermeneutics, which acknowledges that we always access the world through a particular and inevitably narrow frame of reference, so that new knowledge will always, in a circular fashion, be of and determined by that frame of reference. In the case of artistic experience, the artist-researcher can *only* use their experience to reflect upon their artistic experience.[43] Mixing research methods, therefore, helps to alleviate the kind of circularity that inevitably results through the examination of one's own creative practice.

In the above-described ways, my multi-methodological approach provides additional, appropriately aligned layers that can check the problems of circularity, narrowness, and self-indulgence. It is hoped that they combine a 'democracy of experience' with 'methodological abundance' by promoting a variety 'of methods and viewpoints, on the understanding that the many can counter excessive subjectivity' by intersecting with and checking one another.[44]

3. 6 Rejection of Alternative Approaches

[41] Merriam and Tisdell in, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, (2016) 244-246.
[42] Laura Ellingson, *Engaging Crystallization in Qualitative Research: An Introduction,* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2009),10.
[43] Hannula et al, *Artistic Research*, 44.
[44] Ibid., 38 - 44.

As previously discussed, practice-led research seems inevitably wed to an autoethnographic component and to the incorporation of practice-as-research. And in this research case attention is given to both creative processes and outputs. As the research progressed, so did the adoption and development of case studies which were intended to contextualise, add to, and more clearly frame knowledge of improvisation in Rock music: it is this custom-made combination which necessitated a multi-methodological strategy.

Because autoethnography and the analysis of other practitioners' practice contain hermeneutic and phenomenological components, including detailed and contextualised accounts of experience, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)[45] was considered as an appropriate and holistic methodological approach but rejected precisely because the thesis became more methodologically variegated. The adoption of a case study approach to support and connect with my creative practice and autoethnography favoured a more flexible design, incorporating the tool of thematic analysis to cut across these perspectives when addressing the overall research aim and related objectives. For example, the tensions between recording and improvisation are examined through philosophical, musicological, autoethnographic and other experiential perspectives. In this way, and in common with much post-New Musicological research, it allows the research to be informed by ideas and concepts from outside the more immediate concerns of individual practitioners and the restrictions of a narrow scope of a design such as IPA.

The interpretive, subjectivist stance which underlies my methodological approach can be contrasted with objectivist or positivist understandings which hold that meaning resides in things themselves, independently of consciousness and experience.[46] In the Literature Review I discuss *formalist* approaches to Rock inherited from Western Art music. These, I argue, fail to provide insights into the intentions, processes and meaning of artists because their focus remains on analysis of resulting forms, taking little or no account of the subjective experiences of the human agents involved. Instead, I favour an interpretive position which presumes that, to quote Pamela Burnard, 'musicians' perceptions and reflections… arise from

[45] For further discussion of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: Abayomi Alase, 'The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA): A Guide to a Good Qualitative Research Approach', *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, Vol 5, no2, (2017).
[46] Michael Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspectives in the Research Process,* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1998).

inside creative practice rather than outside'.[47] The analysis of notated transcripts of recordings that the above-mentioned studies contain is particularly inappropriate when looking at music generated by improvisation and studio construction - processes which are not, especially in a popular musical setting where practitioners are not generally schooled in harmonic theory or sight reading, and which attaches to different compositional paradigms and traditions.[48]

3.7 Additional Methodological Limitations

When examining the contents of interviews and reflecting on my own practice, there was always the danger that, whether intentionally or not, inaccurate information was obtained, or that data was misrepresented. There was the possibility that accounts (and this relates to the examination of secondary and primary research findings) focus mainly on positive aspects of experience in order that the individuals, practice, and artworks would be presented in the most favourable light.[49] With this in mind, at least in respect of others' experience, I have tried whenever possible to obtain accounts from several sources to, if not exactly cross validate, provide different perspectives.

In relation to the examination of my own practice, I have attempted to be self-critical and self-reflexive, trying to focus on the unsuccessful as well as the successful choices and processes, particularly during the discussion of compositional processes. The selection of the final recordings, the tracks I chose to appear on the Ouseburn Collective albums and the You Tube videos, might be more problematic in this regard – there are many more compositions and performances which, deemed by me to be unsuccessful, were discarded and therefore not discussed. But this is in the very nature of my creative process which involves editing and rejection, so I need to accept that, in this sense, those creative decisions are an attempt to present, as best I can, the most favourable (successful) aspects of my creative outputs.

[47] Pamela Burnard, *Musical Creatives in Practice,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 263.
[48] For example, Malvinni, *Grateful Dead*, Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text,* and Covach and Boone*, Understanding Rock.*
[49] In her ethnomusicological study of jazz musicians, Ingrid Monson found that musicians avoided discussing negative experience: Monson, *Saying Something*, 20.

Another concern relates to the fact that the work of artists discussed (including myself) are presented primarily as musicians, rather than talkers, writers, or thinkers. Although we are, of course, all these things. What I'm trying to say is that because the text, the verbalisation, is deemed necessary for the success of this research project, because I don't just let the music speak for itself, attention might be skewed towards the examination of artists who have been willing and competent articulators of their practice. Or, perhaps, have been *championed* by the most articulate and connected commentators. These dangers further highlight the necessity of examining examples of Rock improvisation from a wide historical and stylistic range, and of obtaining data from several commentators/participants, whenever possible, in the hope that these different perspectives allow for more effective crystallization.

CHAPTER 4

Spirit of Eden and Trout Mask Replica

4.1 Introduction

> There were two main ethics with this album, one...the approach to construction…, the other thing was that the most important aspect of this record should be its attitude. And you know, music at its best I think is music when it first emerges …when it is at its most spontaneous.[1]
>
> It's certainly a reaction to the music that is around at the moment.[2]

This chapter focusses on 2 albums from different eras which incorporate improvisation into their construction using distinct methods, the peculiarity of which produce contrasting recorded outputs. My discussion widens to address recordings of other artists made over an approximate 25-year period and identifies parallels with, and influences on, my own creative practice. It includes consideration of divisions of labour in production processes, Alienation and Existentialism, and their relation to the nature of the music generated. It incorporates autobiographic reflections from my history and background as Rock musician and consumer, to help provide context in relation to my own creative practice. The content of interviews and conversations with practitioners who work outside the mainstream recording industry are included to provide insight into how improvisation has operated, often worked out through naïve and/or anti-virtuosic techniques and methods, in more *hidden* spheres.

I wondered what Mark Hollis was referring to when he named Talk Talk's 1988 album *Spirit of Eden*.[3] The above quotes suggest a looking back from an unsatisfactory present, and a desire to capture a creative spark, attitude or sensibility from a Utopian past. In an interview with Richard Skinner from October 1988 Hollis explained that the title referenced 'what is created and then what has been destroyed…it is the thing of two opposite things co –

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[1] Mark Hollis, 'Interview with Mark Hollis', *Sunday Times*, 25th January 1998, posted in Pop Matters, https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/mark-hollis-composing-himself 12 May 2015 (15 March 2018).

[2] Mark Hollis, 'Interview with Mark Hollis', *Q Magazine*, https://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/talk-talk-come-on-imarketi-me October 1988 (4 March 2018).

[3] Talk Talk, *Spirit of Eden* (Parlophone,1988). Captain Beefheart and his Magic Band, *Trout Mask Replica* (Reprise, 1969).

existing'.[4] The presence of oppositions, dialectics or tensions can be identified in the unusual and contrasting processes of production involved in the making of *Spirit of Eden* and *Trout Mask Replica*, and they are embedded in the sounds and structures of the final recordings. These albums represent, in the context of Rock at least, rather unusual examples of artists realising their agency to prioritise innovation and creative freedom in a context of commercial production which often, as some narratives have suggested, facilitates against or refuses such possibility.[5] Along with these possibilities, the processes reveal a danger that runs parallel to and resultant from the drive to realise individual creative freedom – that of destroying and preventing the creative possibilities of others: collateral damage, if you like, resulting from tensions and divisions that these processes generate.

Narratives addressing improvisation, drawn largely from the practices of Jazz, Free Improvisation and Western Art Music, tend to presume some single, often collective, performative moment when music is generated or realised.[6] They do not, therefore, tend to address the difference produced when performances are separated in time and body in the context of the recording studio. Those narratives that recognise the creative possibilities of recorded Rock, however, in identifying the artwork as the recording itself tend to underplay the role and experience of the human performer within record construction.[7] But many artists have both demonstrated creativity in the recording studio and the centrality of *compositional performance* via improvisation – sometimes using it as a primary generator of musical material.

The recorded music discussed in this chapter was produced by artists who were free enough to actively exert control over creative and intersecting productive processes with the intention of (and/or with the result of) inscribing the spontaneous, the improvisational, into the music generation and, therefore, the recorded artefact: the Rock album.

> When you improvise, and you play something for the first time, you kind of play it at its peak. And if you kind of like play something and then you think "oh I like that" and then you replay it, you never quite get it. It's like the thing of demoing, you know

[4] Mark Hollis quoted in https://dervswerve.wordpress.com/2015/05/12/richard-skinner-interview-with-mark-hollis-on-spirit-of-eden-october-1988-full-transcript/ October 1988 (2 June 2021).
[5] Attali, *Noise*; Bailey, Improvisation and Andy Hamilton, 'The Art of Improvisation and the Aesthetics of Imperfection', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 40, Vol 1 (2000), 168 – 185.
[6] Such as, Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*; Monson, *Saying Something*; Borgo, *Sync or Swarm*.
[7] For example, Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise* and Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text*.

> if you demo a track, no matter how badly you try to demo it, there will always be a quality within it that you subsequently would try to recreate, which you shouldn't do.[8]

Hollis articulates what I think is a distinctive approach to the use of improvisation, one situated firmly within the studio. And he comes close to identifying some approaches and intentions reflected in my own creative practice: for example, a recognition that music which emerges through spontaneous performance has a different (better?) character, and a belief that it is possible to capture that character through recording. Certainly, a common denominator within my approach (my ethic of construction or attitude) is the intended integration, to greater and lesser degrees, of real-time performance into my composition. A general arc which can be traced from recordings completed earlier in the research period to the more recent is a kind of loosening, an unfixing from pre-planned forms allowing more spontaneous material to inhabit the music, and I hope this can be detected within the recorded outputs.[9]

Through focussed and time-consuming listening, I have been constantly reminded how much *failure* there is in improvised performance, how *imperfect* or uninspired (not the same thing at all) real-time composition of musical material can be, but also that careful and intentional construction methods can, however paradoxically, be used to frame and help organise spontaneously produced material.

4.2 Art and the Divisions of Reproductive Technology

The power of modern reproductive technology to change the nature of art was recognised as far back as 1936 by Walter Benjamin in his famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* which describes, in the context of visual arts, how mechanical reproduction destroys the 'aura' of an original artwork, displacing it from 'its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place it happens to be'.[10]

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[8] Mark Hollis, *Sunday Times*, 25th January 1998.
[9] Contrast, for example, the Ouseburn Collective tracks 'Shmorgust' recorded in 2017, *Vent*, (Bandcamp, 2022), accessible at https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com/track/shmorgust 'Baby Steps' recorded April 2021, *April* (Bandcamp, 2022), accessible at https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com/track/baby-steps-2
[10] Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art,* 220.

But Rock, born after the initial development of recording technology, quickly embraced rapid technological developments to reproduce and create. Such a subversion did not rely upon a pre-existing authentic model of live performance and therefore did not have a *pure* form that could be corrupted – no 'aura' to destroy. In this respect, the aesthetic of Rock can be distinguished from Jazz, whose early forms,

> Existed only during the instant of its performance characterized by Spontaneity and Improvisation…once it was technically reproduced the music was even more profoundly alienated from its aura of originality.[11]

Coultard argues that Jazz, having emerged prior to the widespread use of recording technology but maturing subsequently, is caught somewhere in the middle of Benjamin's two categories of artwork: the first, including traditional visual arts, were designed for an age before mechanical reproduction; the second includes works created specifically for re-production. Like movies, I see Rock albums to be in the second category designed as they are for subsequent playback, but these artefacts are also constructed using reproductive technology. Within these processes are contained artists' performances that often take place sequentially and are layered and collaged over time. There is no single live performative moment, but there is performance.

Unlike Jazz, which valorises the authenticity of the spontaneous moment of performance and creation, Rock displays a lack of concern for such purity, less inclined to articulate improvisation or measure any performance against any ideal yardstick of *spontaneity*. Because of a formative hybridity realised within the *collage* of the recording studio, Rock has one eye focused on the completed recording and can employ various (even aesthetically opposed) methods to get there. Performance, whether improvisational or not, is often central in these methods. Frank Zappa frequently used improvisational performance within the construction of albums, often alongside more structured *perfectionist* approaches. He explained,

[11] Karl Coultard, 'Looking for the Band: Walter Benjamin and the Mechanical Reproduction of Jazz', *Critical Studies in Improvisation* Volume 3, No 1, (2007).

> I mean, basically, what you're looking for is a musical result that works, you know, so…there's nothing 'pure' about me, and the tools that I use. I mean, I'm the guy that sticks 'Louie Louie' in every fifteen minutes.[12] [13]

Bailey's observations about the inherent flexibility of Rock, seemingly connected to working with conventional song structures, might be less applicable to nonstandard methods of production and forms. As discussed later in this chapter, Beefheart's compositions emerged from no scripted template or external direction. But, at a later stage of production, became almost entirely fixed: notated and scripted for musicians to perform, and Zappa's role as producer, overseen by Beefheart, returned to reflect a more traditional ontology: that of *recording realist* who seeks to *neutrally* capture Beefheart's prefixed compositions. By way of contrast, *Spirit of Eden* is comprised of many musical parts spontaneously created and performed at the point of recording; the musicians have so much freedom from script that to talk about their performance (as it occurs) as being never entirely fixed would be nonsensical. Rather than seeing some middle way, both cases reveal opposing approaches existing in parallel or in sequence.

Andy Hamilton contrasts the 'perfectionism' of the work concept with the 'imperfectionism' of improvising musicians when discussing Western Art Music and Jazz.[14]

> Live performance is privileged, and recording has at best a documentary status - when one aspires to the illusion of spontaneous creation, there is a risk of failure and minor imperfection, and so, imperfectionists believe, improvisation and interpretation are not well served by recording.[15]

Talk Talk and Captain Beefheart shared an overriding concern for the production of the recorded artefact, the artwork, but this doesn't preclude or interfere with a commitment to *imperfectionist* improvisation-these processes may be separated but they are then connected to work in tandem towards an overarching goal.

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[12] Frank Zappa quoted in D. Simms, 'He's a Human Being, He Has Emotions Just Like Us Part 2', *Society Pages*, No 7, September 1991, 19 – 20.

[13] Can's Holger Czukay incorporated *opposing* approaches of fixity and spontaneity during album construction. 'That is the thing that makes us different from jazz musicians …they improvise…they 'say that was it, goodbye'. Rock musicians think different, they say, 'can I do better?' and 'was that really better necessary what I have done…is it not better to hide something?' Quoted in Phil England, '*Holger Czukay Interview*', EST Web, 1994, 1.

[14] Andy Hamilton, 'The Art of Improvisation and the Aesthetics of Imperfection'*, The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 40, Vol 1 (2000), 168 – 185.

[15] Andy Hamilton, 'The Art of Recording and the Aesthetics of Perfection', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 43, Vol 4, (2003), 347.

Reflecting the concerns of a studio-based performer/composer, it might be inevitable that my primary focus is *production* rather than *consumption*: the latter the main concern of a Popular Musicology influenced by post-modernist discourses that have comparatively little to say about the former. My attention turns to a concern for the relations of production too: circumstances under which musicians choose and/or are obliged to operate, what they do *as* workers that shapes the character of recorded artworks which might not be necessarily artistically compromised or destructive as some narratives suggest.

Performance as Artistic and Productive Labour.

> Capitalist production is hostile to certain branches of spiritual production, for example, art and poetry.[16]
>
> The Rock model of creative self-sufficiency stands at almost the opposite end of the spectrum to the command and control associated with orchestras.[17]

Marx was probably not talking about popular music when singling out 'certain branches' of art as being 'opposed' to capitalist production. And *traditional* Marxists, Modernists, and Postmodernists might agree that commercial music and capitalism, rather than being mutually hostile, work well together. But different historical eras throw up different art forms and with them nuances within the relations of production. Ironically perhaps, and in contrast with High Art, Rock has allowed some actors more creative freedom to operate allowing (or requiring) agency and a rearrangement of the relations that might challenge the *destructive* aspects of 'capitalist production' from within.

Walter Benjamin's famous essay examines the consumption of technologically (re) produced artworks. But, as Born reminds us, in addition to the 'distracted reception and transformation of consumption' in mass consumer society (often a focus of post-structuralist and post-modern discourses), he was also concerned with the relations of production: in particular that

[16] Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2000), 251.
[17] Jason Toynbee, 'The Labour that Dares Not Speak its Name' in *Distributed Creativity: Collaboration and Improvisation in Contemporary Music,* Eric F. Clarke and Mark Doffman (eds.) (Oxford Scholarship Online: Oxford, 2017).

of workers in the film industry and the effect new technology had upon them.[18] Like the movies, Rock production has relied upon the labour of workers within a commercial industry, but, unlike film, they are not *ideally* given scripts or strict direction – they seek to realise artistic autonomy; to be *not-alienated* from the results of their creative labour.

As Toynbee explains, looking at the 'work' of musicians in terms of 'labour' reminds us that these activities are situated in social relations within a commercial economy, subject to its pressures and influences. It reminds us too that these are not mysterious generative processes only explainable in terms of *inspiration* or *genius* or necessarily separate from non – creative work.[19] Despite being 'labour', Toynbee recognises that popular music making enjoys, especially when contrasted with the 'command and control' models of the Classical Orchestra, an unusual degree of autonomy in respect of composition and performance. Toynbee describes this autonomy as 'ceded' by the culture industries as a result of, first, the complex nature of the creative processes involved, and second the industry's 'uncertainty of demand'. Rock's ideology valorises this autonomy, but many narratives have echoed Adorno's pessimism about the possibilities of authentic artistic expression within the culture industry, emphasising the gap between ideological claim and actuality that has undermined the concept of rock authenticity.[20] My concern is that this focus on bogus or exaggerated claims of artists, journalists and other actors within the culture Industries might obscure real creative, innovative acts of rock musicians who choose to use any autonomy available to them.

The recordings discussed in this chapter represent moments when artists appear to have negotiated (or were 'ceded') high levels of control - because and despite of the industry's complexity and what Toynbee calls the 'uncertainty of demand'. Production processes are

[18] Georgia Born, 'Modern Music: on Shock Pop and Synthesis', *New Formations*, No.2, (Summer, 1987), 51-77. Benjamin discusses the effect that working without an audience has on actors as well as of their productive labour. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (New York: Schoken,1968).
[19] Toynbee, *The Labour that Dares,* 2017.
[20] Deena Weinstein, 'Art Versus Commerce: Deconstructing a (Useful) Romantic Illusion.' *Stars Don't Stand Still in the Sky: Music and Myth*, Karen Kelly and Evelyn McDonnell (eds.) (London: Routledge, 1999), 57–69; Keir Keightley, 'Reconsidering Rock' in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock* in Simon Frith and Will Straw (eds.), (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001). 109–42; Johan Fornas, 'The Future of Rock: Discourses That Struggle to Define a Genre,' in Simon Frith (ed.) *Popular Music: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, *Vol. 2,* (London: Routledge, 2004), 393–411.

used to facilitate artistic aims relatively free from external influence, and it's no accident that these examples illustrate the use of improvisational practice, autonomy being a precondition for forms of spontaneous composition. This evidence of creative freedom is apparent in autobiographical accounts, inscribed too in the quality of the resultant sound worlds.

4.3 Post-Rock and the Spirit of Eden

1969 and 1988, the respective release dates of the two albums mentioned at the top of this chapter, provide useful bookends for Rock's hegemony as the most commercially successful and dominant form of Western Popular music. By 1969 Rock was *fully formed* having emerged to challenge *mere pop* by celebrating an aesthetic of authenticity whose ideal model was the *serious* creative performer – producer, free from external control, from reliance on Tin Pan Alley structures and related divisions of labour that separated performer from composer, free to make significant artistic statements transmitted through the long-playing album, rather than disposable, mass produced pop singles. By the late 1980s, this Rock Project seemed to have been exhausted, and urgent creative practices and opportunities for self-expression were more obviously located in other, more vibrant, still-developing, youth centred music such as Electronic Dance and Hip Hop.[21]

In parallel, developments in technology such as increased use of digital recording and sampling, often meant that musicians working in Rock encountered increasing divisions between the external specialist Producer and Artist.[22] Whereas Rock initially played a role in blurring this divide,[23] by the mid 1980s specialisations meant artists were increasingly being directed by producers, their traditional creative roles encroached upon by the changing demands of producing commercial records.[24]

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[21] These forms represent teleogical shifts in how popular music was constructed. These artists often retained (or re-established) connection to the *products of their labour*, allowing relative freedom and control as they proactively embraced the possibilities of developing technology. For further discussion, see Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994) and Simon Reynolds, *A Journey Through Rave Music and Dance Culture* (London: Picador, 1998).

[22] Paul Theberge's Any Sound You Can Imagine: Music Making/Consuming Technology (Music/Culture) (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1997).

[23] Contrast the Beatles' debut with the band's increased involvement in production (together with *more* production) during the making of recordings including *Revolver* (Parlophone, 1966) and the *White Album* (Apple, 1968).

[24] For example, the *less than transparent* production of Trevor Horn for Yes and Robert John "Mutt" Lange for Def Leppard. *90125*, (Atco, 1983); *Hysteria*, (Phonogram, 1997). These developments could be seen as a *turning back* to pop.

Post-Rock

> We set up sort of a makeshift string and sticky-tape kind of studio under the church where we rehearsed… we didn't have a track when we started, so we just set ourselves ten days to do a 12-inch and that's what came out... It's probably the most spontaneous record we've put out.[25]

> We wanted to capture real acoustics rather than have everything computer simulated… There was no part except for a few rough ideas…that's how we'd written the past few years, just jamming as a band underneath the church. 99.999% of it, you wouldn't use… but the vibe was really good at the time, so we decided why not just record a jam sort of thing… we tend to try and make life very difficult for ourselves for some reason…ninety per cent of it was recorded live and then there was a few things…vocals, some piano, some ambient guitar, a few different samples and stuff. [26]

The term 'Post-Rock' reflects a rejection of established rock conventions, a recognition that Rock's dominance within popular had been challenged and displaced, and the idea/realisation that traditional rock had exhausted its possibilities. Simon Reynolds summarised some key influences of this *movement* which stretch back to the late 60s: artists who suggested 'unrealised possibilities.'[27] It's interesting to note that many were pioneers of Rock improvisation; interesting too that the (retrospectively appointed) *leaders* of the genre, though enjoying disparate genealogies, placed spontaneity at the heart of their compositional practice.[28]

Whereas Bark Psychosis' approach involved recording improvised performance as it happened, Slint's use of jamming as compositional method (when constructing their influential album *Spiderland*,1994) was largely confined to the pre-recording stage, where they would *work up* and develop riffs, structures and through-composed forms, and this

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[25] 'Interview with Graham Sutton,' *Audrie's Diary Fanzine*, 1994. Bark Psychosis' vocalist and multi-instrumentalist discusses the band's approach to making their single 'Scum' (3rd Stone, 1992).

[26] Ibid. Sutton explains the Bark Psychosis' approach to making their album *Hex* (Caroline, 1994).

[27] 'The key lineage runs from the Velvet Underground, through Germany's kosmic rock…and the guitar-loop mosaics of Eno and Fripp, to late-1980s neopsychedelics as Jesus & Mary Chain, Spacemen 3, and A.R. Kane. The Velvets melded folkadelic songcraft with a wall-of-noise aesthetic that was half Phil Spector, half La Monte Young—and thereby invented dronology, a term that loosely describes 50 per cent of today's Post-Rock activity,' Christoph Cox, Daniel Warner Simon Reynolds (Eds.), *Audio Culture, Readings in Modern Music* (Continuum International: London, 2004), 359.

[28] Each came to this Post-Rock position via different routes. Bark Psychosis' influenced by post-No Wave noise rock bands Sonic Youth and Swans; Slint, from a hard-core punk tradition; Talk Talk evolving from 80s pop whilst looking back to older blues and jazz-inflected styles and sounds.

collective, time-consuming, iterative process was combined with discreet, song-writing duties.[29] The extreme use of dynamics and irregular forms were not, therefore, generated in real-time even though improvisation *was* present in the recorded performances.[30] *Spiderland'*s spontaneous energy seems to come in part from the unrehearsed nature of the McMahan's vocals together with conditions in which it was recorded, facilitated by the transparent *live* approach of producer Brian Paulson which reflected the band band's desire to capture, 'the music as we wrote it and as we heard it. That's what Brian gave us.'[31] Although it took years to compose, the recordings were completed in one or two takes, with very little overdubs or obvious processing in post-production. Paradoxically perhaps, the interplay between instrumentalists seems communicative, human, and flexible in contrast with many post-rock bands they inspired, who taking Slint's cue of complex time signatures and through composed structures, often eradicated any sense of the spontaneous from their recordings.[32]

As Reynolds acknowledges, some of the groundwork for Post-Rock seems to have been completed by Talk Talk by the early 1990s, at least in terms of *bringing back* a naturalism in sound, the contrasting use of dynamics and irregular structures. But compared with the Hard-Core inspired instrumentation of Slint, the sonic textures most Post-Rock artists generated tended to vary, and this reminds us of the eclectic, and non-linear nature of Rock-progression.[33] What these bands did share was a common rejection of solo-based Blues-Rock, as discussed later in this chapter.

Whilst a reaction, *Sprit of Eden* was also a logical, if quantum, progression. Talk Talk's first 2 albums utilised standardised production processes and common sounds of the era, incorporating state of the art synthesisers, sequencers and drum programming: *none-Rock*

[29] Discussing 'Nosferatu Man,' David Pajo recalled, 'that's a Britt song, he wrote most of the guitar parts on it. I think I wrote my guitar parts, but he came up with the main riffs, and wrote the lyrics.' Quoted by Michael Wojtas, 'Track-By-Track: Slint on *Spiderland*. Slint's David Pajo Takes Us Inside the Mysterious Classic', *Under the Radar*, https://www.undertheradarmag.com/interviews/track-by-track_slint_on_spiderland 15 October 2014 (12 February 2021).

[30] Ibid., 'Right before the "I miss you" part, some of the spoken word stuff where he's saying "I'm sorry" and "I'll make it up to you"…that was all improvised.' David Pajo talking about the recording of 'Good Morning, Captain.' Ibid.

[31] Brian McMahan, Quoted in *Breadcrumb Trail* documentary directed by Lance Bangs, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GsRpS6XGiOs 18 September 2017 (14 March 2020).

[32] See also sub-genres such as Math-Rock. Post-Rock groups continued to incorporate improvisation into their otherwise tightly scripted music, such as Battles and Mogwai.

[33] The primary influences on Hollis for the recording of *Spirit of Eden*: 'I would say… that late 50's early 60s Jazz scene, the early 50's Blues scene and then the turn of the century Impressionist stuff'. Quoted in *Richard Skinner*, 1988.

sounds and textures which rejected the established electric blues line up of guitar, bass and drums.[34] The band's progression has a backwards-and-forwards dynamic, running counter to prevailing pop music aesthetic. As 1980s standard sounds became ubiquitous, Talk Talk's records became gradually more organic, mixing acoustic and electric textures, and at the same time introducing looser, more groove-based structures. By the time of their third album, *The Colour of Spring* (1986), their approach had loosened sufficiently to allow for the incorporation of improvisation: highly unusual in pop records of the era. This trajectory could be seen as a working backwards to a 1960s progressivism or a reworking of the dynamic of pop to rock that occurred during the years 1965 to 1969, and a rediscovery of a creative potential and agency of the group unit.

For the construction of *Spirit of Eden* and its follow up *Laughing Stock* (1991), studio musicians were provided with no written or memorised parts. Instead, they were presented with loose musical fragments, often a few repeating minimal guitar parts together with a drum groove. They were asked to improvise in response to these fragments but otherwise given no direction. In this way sounds were built up in isolation from each other, not through real-time collective interplay. It was a slow process that took over a year, by the end of which they had around 800 fragmented, improvised performances. These were then sewn together by the band as producers to create the finished artefact.[35] This new approach involved a more complete return to the organic sound pallet of the 1960s, using instrumentation that could have been found in Jazz, Blues and Rock recordings of that time, returning, if you like, to the beginning of the Rock era, that of *Trout Mask Replica*. Hollis explained that this reflected a desire to capture natural and timeless qualities of acoustic and electric instruments, avoiding modern processing techniques which would date them.[36] But, far from being musical Luddites looking back to some Golden Age, the album's construction was also facilitated by a keen engagement with state-of-the-art developments in technology: multi-tracking and newly available digital copy and paste sampling techniques influenced by contemporary Hip

[34] Talk Talk, *The Party's Over* (EMI, 1982), *It's My Life* (EMI, 1984), *The Colour of Spring* (EMI, 1986). Sequencing and MIDI technology led to changes in how many recordings were constructed: from multi - tracked performances mixed into coherent tracks to the pre-programming of parts, often created and fixed independently of artists themselves.

[35] Mark Hollis, *Interview with Richard Skinner*, October 1988 Radio 1. Transcript: https://dervswerve.wordpress.com/2015/05/12/richard-skinner-interview-with-mark-hollis-on-spirit-of-eden-october-1988-full-transcript/ (8 April 2021); Mark Hollis, 'Interview with Mark Hollis', *Sunday Times*, October 1998, posted in Pop Matters 12th May 2015; Mark Hollis, 'Interview with Mark Hollis', *Q Magazine*, October 1988.

[36] Ibid.

Hop. And this approach was directed by the group in collaboration with a producer who was effectively a band member.

4.4 Spirit of Eden: Ethics, Attitude and Architecture

> The first thing that I ever learned was that if you made a demo it would be inevitably better than the final recording…just trying to catch these moments from people as they first emerge, rather than them being dictated parts.[37]
>
> There are already a great number of prescriptions that are prescribed in our memory and in our culture…one can't say whatever one wants, one is obliged more or less to reproduce the stereotypical discourse. And so, I believe in improvisation and I fight for improvisation. But always with the belief that it's impossible.[38]

Writing about Music: Dancing About Architecture

I've never fully understood *resistance* to writing about music. Of course, music cannot be reduced to or fully explained by language, but language upon a window to the complex reality surrounding the creation of *music itself*. And, like improvisation, utopia and creation, reaching for something, however unattainable, might be part of what makes us human.

Unlike commentators, creators of music are not just listeners; they are also human agents. What they produce can be considered objects, musical works to be listened to and discussed. But, as Christopher Small has articulated, music is also process, a performance, a verb: the act of 'Musicking'.[39] Such performance, vital for music to exist, can involve complex social activities, and behind these lie artists' intentionality, motivations and actions not necessarily obvious to those outside their immediate experience. Arguably then, the performer/creator's unique experience leaves them in a privileged position over and above the writer and pub commentator, having insight and knowledge of their own 'musicking'. However, as discourses surrounding authenticity have revealed,[40] when it comes to commercially

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[37] Mark Hollis, *Interview with Richard Skinner*, October 1988 Radio 1. Transcript: https://dervswerve.wordpress.com/2015/05/12/richard-skinner-interview-with-mark-hollis-on-spirit-of-eden-october-1988-full-transcript/ (8 August 2021)

[38] Jacques Derrida, Unpublished Interview, *Fear of Writing*, 1982, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qoKnzsiR6Ss 23 August 2006 (12 May 2021).

[39] Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (New York: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

[40] For example: Frith, *Performing Rights;* Allen Moore, 'Authenticity as Authentication' Popular Music 21.2 (2002); Weinstein, *Art Versus Commerce;* Keightley, *Reconsidering Rock*.

produced music, the utterances of artists themselves are especially *ideological,* often reflecting a different kind of *performance*, and what Keightley calls the 'illusion of control'. Keighley elaborates on this *ideal* Rock group:

> …self-sufficient and self-contained unit encourages a sense of freedom from mediation, a feeling of autonomy. This 'self – direction' of the ideal rock band signifies an independence from external interference and control, and, therefore, a greater authenticity.[41]

Hollis reflects on the processes involved in, and intentions behind, the construction of *Spirit of Eden* and *Laughing Stock*, and his words seem so earnest, so *authentic.*[42] It's impossible to know how *real* he's being but reading his words and listening to the music might provide clues.

Ethics of Construction

> …what… distinguishes the most incompetent architect from the best of bees, is that the architect has built a cell in his head before he constructs it in wax…we are not here concerned…with those primitive and instinctive forms of labour which we share with other animals…[43]

We could read into Marx's quote an implied contradiction between what architecture and improvisation represent: the former resting on man's capacity to imaginatively construct a blueprint for actions to be subsequently performed (presumably by others), the latter resting on actions that combine this design and performance in time and body. But this opposition only works if we equate improvisation with 'instinctive' action and focus on the temporal division between blueprint and construction. Even in improvisation, there is a (slight) delay between design (or decision) and action, and Marx's point seems to be that what is significant about humanity is that its activity can be directed by purposeful intent combined with a focussed engagement.

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[41] Keir Keightley, 'Reconsidering Rock', in Simon Frith and Will Straw (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Pop* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 135.
[42] Mark Hollis, Interview with Richard Skinner; Mark Hollis, 'Some Important Lessons on Music', Interview for Danish TV, 22nd February 1998, transcript: https://dervswerve.wordpress.com/2015/03/08/mark-hollis-on-music-1998-a-transcript/ (2 June 2021).
[43] Karl Marx, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 283-4.

Hollis' use of the term 'construction' speaks of the multi-layered and collective reality of Rock production and an intentionality that could be equated with architecture. For me, he is also talking about the process of designing something that will become a fixed structure, but never a template for exact reproduction, and like the most valuable and durable architecture, it must draw on what has been, but in some way be unique. Talk Talk's process is collaborative and fluid, and the materials used are musical fragments, generated in real-time. The *faith* in the *quality* [44] of these improvised materials together with his collaborators' *buy in* to the creative act is the *spirit* and *attitude* of which he speaks. When recording began there was no draft blueprint of the final structure in form of demo, score or remembered parts.

It's *ethical* to the extent that Hollis provides his musicians with the 'absolute freedom in terms of what they play…in a way that is completely natural to themselves*'.* It is axiomatic that for musicians to improvise they need this autonomy and, for Hollis, as a collective, each member needs to share this 'attitude' and 'trust' in each other, which is prioritised over any instrumental capability or dexterity. He talks of 'honesty' in respect of the way the sounds are both produced and presented, a means by which the music might be able to stand outside of its own time. This attitude reflects a humanistic attention to the potential of agency for himself and *his* musicians, and a recognition that his collaborators must share their own responsibility to actively create, having been ceded the opportunity. According to Hollis, Talk Talk do not direct instrumentalists: how and what they play is up to them and attention is given to preserving the *quality* of their output.[45]

Due to a recognition that my creativity almost always benefits from collaboration with others, an attention to allowing my collaborators to speak in their own voice undirected and to *preserving* what is of most value in their contributions (together with the dialogue this creates) is something I've strived for throughout, although this might not always be achieved. In the collaborative tracks recorded for the albums *Vent* and *April* [46] I try to present the drum parts as accurately as I can in terms of what I consider the essence of the performance, and select recordings that best represent, the ones that I was most taken with at the time and on

[44] I mean the nature, the character.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ouseburn Collective, *Vent* (Bandcamp, 2022); Ouseburn Collective, *April* (Bandcamp, 2022). Accessible at https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com.

subsequent listening (almost always the same thing) and try to frame these musical conversations with equal billing. I recognise that this non-direction is not completely selfless. Although it does in part come from an empathy borne from my own desire (partly a reaction to the extent my musical practice outside of my creative practice is so directed by others) not to be directed myself, it's also a reflection of an understanding that the resultant music will be more multi-dimensional, richer (*better*) if it draws on a wider pool of experience and inspiration. But I recognise that I am also an external producer who might select, edit, reconfigure, and process others' contributions according to my vision of what I deem appropriate for the finalised track. My intention has been to limit the editing as far as practically possible, and I consult and provide credit and an option of veto prior to the release of any recording.

This *attitude*, one which has driven my creative practice, is partly a reaction to the limited possibilities afforded to me to satisfactorily create within commercial and non-commercial contexts. Because the input of others is (usually) so important in respect of realising my own creativity, my collaborators' freedom to create is indivisible from my own.

4.5 Utopian Music Making: The Active Subject and Post-Punk

> Marx's aim was that of the spiritual emancipation of man… of restituting him in his human wholeness…aimed at the full realisation of individualism…In as much as man is not productive, in as much as he is receptive and passive, he is nothing. In this productive process, man realises his own essence, he returns to his own essence.[47]

Humanist strands of philosophy became part of a disparate radical ideology that influenced and reflected the countercultural radicalism of the 1960s.[48] This included an attention to Marx's early writings which highlighted an existential human misery: Alienation, characterised by a lack of control which left individuals separated from the products they

[47] Eric Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man* (New York: Frederick Unger Publishing, 1961), 1.

[48] Writing from a humanistic perspective himself, American academic Theordore Roszak examines the influence of several humanistic strands of thought, including the early writings of Marx, and the ideas of Freud, Herbert Marcuse, Alan Ginsberg, and Paul Goodman. *The Making of a Counterculture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and its Youthful Opposition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

produce and from their fellow humans.[49] According to Marx, alienation was the product of a division of labour inherent in the Capitalist system of production, a division that left individuals powerless to recognise their true potential. Equally influential in the 1960s, Existentialism also prioritised the agency and freedom of the individual, a *philosophy of action* which recognised the active subject in distinction with deterministic and *scientific* political theories such as the 'orthodox' Soviet Marxism or the emerging Post-Structuralism.[50] [51] Sartre attempted to fuse Marx's (and Humanism's) collectivism with Existentialism's stress on individualism, but it's arguable that both early and late Marx recognised the presence and importance of human agency.[52]

These radical spirits seem to have influenced or reflected demands of some popular musicians whose practice was predicated on agency and freedom, [53] an attitude Jacques Attali recognised as authentic when it emerged, echoing a desire for unalienated social relations. But, recognising Rock's commodification, he looked around for less compromised forms to evidence such freedoms. For Attali, a future utopian state (epoch) of 'Composing' was illustrated in the social relations of the Free Jazz scenes of the 1960s. By way of contrast, 'Repeating' (the current historical period) is characterised by a Political Economy within which musical performance is silenced through recording processes by which music loses its meaning by 'the stockpiling of the simulacrum of usage'.[54] Like Adorno, he believed that popular recorded music displays a lack of meaning produced through predictability of form, content and commercialisation in recording processes. Attali's pessimism about the

[49] Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, (London: Wilder Publications, 2001). Robert Tucker argued that the 1960s was a time to *rediscover* Marxism to help address human uniformity in modern industrial society. Tucker's emphasis was on the moralistic and ethical implications of Marx as opposed to the political and economic - though these aspects were connected. Robert C. Tucker, *The Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).

[50] 'Althussarian' Marxism, by identifying an epistemological break in Marx's work, attempted to erase the human actor and subsequent, post-structuralist theories have tended to reduce the centrality and possibility of human agency. A similar observation relating to popular music and the 'post-modern sensibility' is made by Simon Reynolds in *Retro-mania: pop culture's addiction to its own past* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001).

[51] Sartre argued that a realisation of one's own individuality requires recognition that humans are social-beings, and that consideration of others' freedom is inseparable from the consideration of one's own. Existentialism was, therefore, necessarily egalitarian and pointed towards a society with non – alienated social relations. Sartre attempted to fuse Marxism, Humanism and Existentialism - reconciling the apparent tensions between individualism and collectivism. Thomas C. Anderson, *Sartre's Two Ethics*, (New York, Open Court, 1993), chapter 5.

[52] '…it is men who change circumstances… the educator must himself be educated' Marx, from Theses on Feuerbach, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishing, 2016), 15.

[53] Eric Fromm's humanist, Marxist philosophy was based upon his interpretation of Adam and Eve's exile from the Garden of Eden.

[54] Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, 134

possibility of authentic artistic expression within the current epoch is akin to Adorno's *closed* view.

> There is no communication possible between men any longer, now that the codes have been destroyed, including even the code of exchange in repetition. We are all condemned to silence – unless we create our own relation with the world and try to tie other people into the meaning we thus create. This is what composing is. [55]

Attali asserts that a primary objective and function of the recording industry is to reproduce the original recording as 'perfectly as possible'. Whilst there is ample evidence to support this pessimism (indeed, a recognition of this tendency is one motivation for the reactivating of my interest in improvisation), not least the lack of freedom that popular musicians usually *enjoy* in a concert setting, this research tries to shine a light on numerous instances where individuals and collectives are not 'condemned to silence'.

Post-Punk: Piz to the Biz

A hypothesis made at the beginning of my research was that improvisation's presence is more widespread in Rock than dominant discourses suggest,[56] and as I have investigated musicians' outputs, methods and intentions, evidence has emerged which supports this. But these discourses also reflect a truth that the presence or visibility of improvisation has been historically uneven. There have been certain *moments* when it was greater, or more visible. And this is, of course, linked to material, intersecting factors such as concurrent technological developments, political and historical backdrops, the distribution of economic resources, and how the industry and its gatekeepers have chosen to disseminate and valorise certain artists. When reflecting as a musician (and as a human) these *objective* conditions are further complicated by subjective ones which are, paradoxically, common to everyone: experience and perceptions that occur at a young, impressionable age, when constructing your identity, when the reality of existentialist invention seems so tangible. So, I appreciate that choosing to focus here on Post-Punk as a particular moment is partly a reflection of my age at the time: 12 when I got my first guitar in 1976, 14 when I formed by first school band in 1978, and 18 when our last school band folded.

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[55] Ibid., 134

[56] The focus on improvisation in Rock during the live practice of certain artists in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For example: Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text*; Malvinni, *Grateful Dead*, and Bailey, *Improvisation*.

An avid reader of the music press (certainly from 1978 onwards) and listener of an older brother's and older school friends' records, I was aware of what papers such as Sounds and NME deemed important and was receptive to their (laudable) political stance and enthusiasm for new, urgent music. But being so young, I'm not sure I was initially fully *on-message*, or completely understood the political implications of what I was *supposed* to be listening to. I clearly remember, as a direct result of reading reviews and articles, being excited about the prospect of recordings by The Jam, Joy Division, Elvis Costello and the Fall, and I wasn't disappointed when I managed to access these. But I also recall being annoyed by dismissive reviews of some bands I had already discovered and liked, like Rush, Yes and Pink Floyd - it was almost as if the journalists hadn't bothered to listen or tried to seriously engage with what the artists were trying to do.

What I'm trying to say is that my perception was that, as Rock musicians, (even then I was optimistic enough to think of myself as one), we were all somehow engaged in the same project, trying to create something, maybe ourselves. And this seems tied into what I was doing at home with my guitar, what Silas 2 were actually achieving in Bruce's Sinclair's bedroom when performing a 15-minute collective improvisation on the Who's 'Relay'[57] I certainly didn't see any *real* qualitative division between Post-Punk, New Wave, Prog and Metal. So, when I look back at *Post-Punk*, I'm remembering a specific time, with multiple, intersecting or clashing/repulsing genres. It was a time where creativity seemed very possible, and I increasingly see creativity in terms of its exemplar: improvisation. To me, in this moment it all seemed like ours. Our Folk Music.

In the years following Attali's witnessing of Rock's *closing down*, many musicians were ceded a kind of autonomy within the culture industries. For example, Talk Talk and PiL through the goodwill of major record companies still flush with proceeds of previous successful releases; Henry Cow through the initial idealism of Virgin records, then by being subsidised by the success of one of their fellow label mates; [58] Post-Punks such as the Pop Group, the Fall, the Raincoats and Swell Maps by burgeoning independent labels in the wake

[57] The Who, 'Relay' (Track, 1972). A track I hadn't heard but somehow came across the sheet music for.
[58] Virgin's backing for *progressives* prior to 1977 seems to result from of a mixture of idealism and growing commercial expediency. It's interesting to note how different their roster was after the realisation that New Wave acts were selling better than the likes of Gong, Henry Cow and Tangerine Dream. Honourable exception: Mike Oldfield.

of Punk. And it's interesting to note that contained within these bands' creative methods is evidence of varying degrees of improvisation.

Ideally, independent labels provided greater creative control for artists and, if punks had *demanded* freedom from external restrictions (reacting against a pre-77 record industry which seemed to have increasingly established 'certainty of demand'), but had failed to actually *do* anything with it, certain artists emerging in Punk's wake questioned established forms, dominant processes and the means by which it was disseminated. And the DIY aesthetic that flourished in the late 1970s was not confined to newly established independent record labels.

> Though there is little sign today it ever existed, there was a thriving underground cottage industry issuing cassette tapes in the post-punk era. The late 70s and early 80s saw an explosion in UK indie labels issuing cassettes, bypassing the traditional record label business model and really doing it for the kids.[59]

This parallel *industry* was important for me as music consumer and aspiring musician: interrelated roles. In the late 1970s, my musical tastes were eclectic, but my musical practice centred on rehearsing and performing with a proto-NWOBHM, school band. Like many, we recorded rehearsals and gigs with primitive equipment onto cassette, but very few tapes remain, and little effort was made to distribute the results.[60] Our contemporaries, the Scottish Polis Inspectors, were more dedicated to the production of albums, and a string of releases between 1978 to 1981 evidence how productivity and innovation were possible when completely decoupled from mainstream industry support and control.[61]

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, music (or rather music *you* wanted to listen to) was still a rare and expensive thing. Recordings had to be actively sought out, purchased, or borrowed. And this effort ensured a kind of attentive and dedicated listening which, I think, is now less common. For good or bad, it means that I have clear memories of albums such as *Relayer*, *Unknown Pleasures* and *Gerald Eats Tomatoes*, even though they then remained un-listened

[59] Tim Naylor, 'Home Taping is Thrilling Us', *Record Collector,* January 2017, issue 462.
[60] *Hipgnosis*, (C60, 1979), *Kashmir* (C90, 1980).
[61] Scottish Polis Inspectors, *Raymond Baxter's Gardener* (RG1, 1979) *Gerald Eats Tomatoes* (RG2, 1980), *Free Frizbees at the Co-op* (RG3, 1980). There were at least another 3 more releases, but these are the ones I owned or had access to.

to for decades.[62] Questions which intrigued me then (and continue to) were: what compositional and production processes were involved in the construction of such unusual music? How did these methods effect what was heard?

Of the three LPs listed above, the greatest lasting value to me as musician and composer was the cheapest to make and acquire: *Gerald Eats Tomatoes*.[63] What initially sparked my interest was an apparent radical political engagement, a certain radicalism of form (I doubt I would have expressed it like that then, but a recognition that this music sounded very different to what I was listening to and was obviously made differently) and a sense of humour.[64] Unlike Yes and Joy Division, who seemed impossibly distant, otherworldly and inaccessible, the Scottish Polis Inspectors provided a local and tangible model of creativity.

On the 11th of August 2021 I interviewed SPI members Andrew Perks and Richard Collier to discuss their memories of recording these albums. Our chat focussed on recently unearthed tracks they'd sent to me a few days earlier which I hadn't heard for 40 years. They explained how the band's music reflected the conscious influence of contemporary post-punk in respect of sound and approach, and that they were immersed in the likes of The Fall, PiL, and the Gang of Four. According to Andrew, these influences were sometimes briefly discussed prior to recording, perhaps in the context of 'doing something like…or in the style of' but rarely attempted to replicate or *pastiche* any band or song, and it's interesting that this assimilation and blending was often done in real-time collective performance.

Andrew remembered how Richard and Geoff would independently present the outline of a song or musical idea shortly before a recording session, and they would spend a few minutes playing through, 'rehearsing', but rarely would parts or structures be discussed or agreed; neither *songwriter* would direct the others in terms of what was *required*. For the most part, the music was collectively improvised. Richard explained how he would often provide a chord sequence, play it to the others before recording, but this would rarely take more than 10 minutes preparation.

[62] Yes, *Relayer* (Atlantic, 1974), bought second hand from older brother's friend. Joy Division, *Unknown Pleasures* (Factory, 1979), taped from friend's older brother, *Gerald Eats Tomatoes*, (RG2, 1980), tape provided by band direct.
[63] Production costs of *Gerald Eats Tomatoes*: nothing. Purchase cost: value of used C60 cassette in 1980.
[64] The lyrics to 'Piz to the Biz and 'Tax Exiles' damn capitalist production more directly and succinctly than, say, Henry Cow's 'Living in the Heart of the Beast' (Virgin, 1975).

Richard described Geoff's even less-structured method of composition - he'd often provide a rough bass line or riff and a germ of an idea for a lyric, but rarely any chords or finalised words. This seems in part to account for the contrasting character of SPI's material: some songs were, at the point of recording, less tied down to *standard* development, and when freed from these fixed forms took on a strange contrapuntal nature which, in the absence of pre-performance discussion, rehearsal, or any apparent knowledge of any harmonic theory, relied more on a collective listening and collaborative negotiation to create form.[65]

Andrew confirmed that, however fixed or unfixed the structure of a song was when presented to the group, the rehearsals did not attempt to *perfect* it; they would 'often use a first, second or third take of a recording…whichever one sounded best…each one would, of course, be different.' They agreed that, at the point of recorded performance, the music would be relatively unfixed, but a *fixing* then occurred due subsequent live performance: the band would refer back to their recordings to learn their own material so that it could be reproduced.[66]

I suggested that their music sounded confident, deliberate, strident and that these might be unusual characteristics for a band with a limited (*traditional)* technical ability or, at least, tutored, formal technique.[67] I contrasted this to what I heard as the more tentative, unstable (yet relatively complex in terms of structure) early recordings of the Raincoats or Swell Maps: contemporary self-taught artists. Richard and Andrew concurred that this had something to do with a confidence borne of 'not knowing what you don't know' at the age of 17/18. They both mentioned how, looking back, there was a general sense that 'anything was possible'.

Richard recalled the specific influence of 'Dragnet era Fall' (1979), and the Gang of Four's Andy Gill in terms of influence, guitar sound and style (angular, trebly, harsh percussive,

[65] The final minutes of 'Gerald Eats Tomatoes', a similar but changing bass riff anchors the song, providing a platform for more free-form, collective interplay including atonality, dissonance, even traces of what sound like *obscure* Eastern modes. More structured songs would incorporate improvised guitar and drums parts which were never memorised or reproduced.
[66] There remained opportunities for *real-time composition,* particularly in the guitar parts and lyrics.
[67] The singular, idiosyncratic nature of guitar parts here would be difficult for someone (including Richard and Geoff?) to reproduce. I have tried. And why would you want to?

staccato), whilst Andrew referenced early Cure, Joy Division, and the Fall and how the prominent role the bass played.

> Is there anybody out there? (silence) [68]
> Is there anybody there…Yeah! [69]

In stark contrast to *Relayer* and *Unknown Pleasures*, the lack of any semblance of *production* on an album like *Dragnet* suggests just how realistic and achievable in terms of sound and accessibility of resources the goal of making an album (or 5 or 6!) might have been in 1979. The fact that *Dragnet* sounds as if it had been recorded on a cassette recorder [70] coupled with instrumental textures which could possibly have been produced by Woolworths guitars and amps might be construed as a calling to those without privileged access to the music industry's backing and resources: that it's possible to create your own music, that you are free and capable *enough*.

The repetitive, unison rhythms, chords and slightly irregular forms of *Dragnet* suggest more pre-planning than SPI's improvisational approach, though there appears room for spontaneity in the tentative, meandering guitar solos; spontaneity too in the impression that these tracks have not been over-rehearsed. For me, 'Spectre v. Rector' has most similarity with the Tomatoes era Inspectors - I'm thinking of the prominent bass, the contrapuntal rather than chord-based forms, the atonality and dissonance of the guitars, the *extreme cassette-quality* of the opening section, and the collaborative nature of the composition. Like SPI, parts clash but the Fall's dissonance is more repetitive, more relentless, more intentionally *worked up*. To my ears, tracks such as 'Gerald Eats Tomatoes' and 'Peas' are less claustrophobic and there's a restlessness, a looseness, a *searching* as instruments collide then separate to discover their own independent keys and rhythms, only to gel again, perhaps guided by attentive listening and collective real-time negotiation. But there is an instability within *Spector* which seems to reflect a less thorough or less expert pre-planning, the structures are pre-composed with parts intersecting repetitively, but little precision or accuracy.[71]

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[68] Roger Waters, *The Wall*, released 30th November 1979.
[69] Mark E Smith and the Fall, 'Psykick Dancehall', *Dragnet*, released 26th October 1979.
[70] It's likely some of it was. See *Dragnet* liner notes.
[71] More could be written about Smith's lyrics from this era of the Fall: spanning gothic horror to a different kind of alienation to that of Waters, a Northern England with 'no wage packet jobs for us…married couples

Scottish Polis Inspectors recorded each of their albums on the same portable equipment: a 70s Grundig cassette recorder with built in stereo condenser microphones.[72] This allowed recordings at several locations including Richard's parents' kitchen and Andrew's parents' upstairs landing. In addition to capturing the unique reverberations of these spaces, the Grundig would inadvertently record the human and non-human sounds and interruptions of their immediate locality. In terms of engineering, Richard recalled 'pointing the recorder at the band and trying not to get the instruments too close' and Andrew explained how practicalities often dictated where the recorder would sit in relation to the sound sources - Where would the drums fit? What could you place the amps on? And these practicalities (rather than aesthetic or artistic decisions) were responsible for the strange *mix* on tracks like 'Peas' which presents a monstrously loud *in-yer-face bass*, almost out of earshot from the distant drum kit.[73]

The availability of technology and limitations/possibility this creates frames and effects the music we hear and reminds us that it is situated in place and history. Making us aware of this mediation during performance can cause a kind of disruption, an alienation which, as in the case of Brechtian theatre, can direct listeners into a more critical mind set. And this might be what the Fall were doing when *inexpertly* splicing and joining the two halves of 'Spectre v Rector'. Equally intentional, using EMI's sophisticated recording facilities Pink Floyd created the appearance of a similar splicing on the track 'Wish You Were Here' - the first part pretending to capture *imperfect* playing and lo-fi technology in a live setting, the second the *perfect* iteration of the Floyd, a resolution created by Abbey Road's 24 track multi-tracking and processing. Floyd's juxtaposition of old (imperfect) and contemporary (perfect) echoes the band's transformation from a group who's early career centred on live, collective interplay but who's studio recordings became increasingly fixed, multi-tracked and less improvisational. As this stratification sped up with *Dark Side of the Moon* and culminated in

discuss the poverties of their self-built traps…we spit in their plate and wait for the ice to melt …' 'Before the Moon Falls'.

[72] Andrew, Richard and mate Gary ('s parents) all had similar cassette recorders.

[73] This accidental deconstruction accompanied a *deliberate i*nvention or extension of non-standard technique: (also *make do* improvisation of using guitar as bass) - the detuning/ retuning of strings and resultant microtones and shifting in and out of key. A reason for this sounding so like a bass (the Woolworths guitar is trying to emulate one by playing only on the lower strings) here is probably due to its unintentional closeness to the microphone.

The Wall, Waters' lyrics focussed increasingly on a kind of alienation and related critique of the music industry.

Water's alienation as evidenced in the lyrics to *The Wall* seems more individual than collective, more centred on *his* anxiety and the negative result of the behaviour of a few specific individuals (School Master, Mother, ignorant and uncaring Record Company Executive) as opposed to the effect of structures or any lack of communication between humans generally. But, wisely ceded autonomy by EMI/Columbia, Waters had a high level of control over his creative output so was free enough to not only articulate and bemoan his alienation but also to ingeniously and successfully commodify it through the release of what became one of the biggest selling LPs of 1979 and 1980. Collateral damage from this approach (of all this freedom) included the alienation of other members of Pink Floyd: their lack of autonomy seemingly down to Waters' almost total control; they had no (or no significant) opportunity to contribute creatively, assigned to merely reproducing Waters' songs (at times not even that when replaced by session musicians), and there was little sense of any interaction between musicians on stage.[74]

I'm not sure how effective Waters was at contributing to an undermining or changing of an industry he claims to have been hostile to, and it seems a curious response to your own alienation to accentuate and increase that of others by creating a bigger wall between band and audience, between band members, and detaching your former musical collaborators from the possibility of creative control and of creativity itself.

The summer of 1980 now seems like a significant *micro-moment* for me - the unsatisfactory Floyd concert, the approximate date of my last *metal gig* with school band Kashmir, and final disengagement with *that kind of Rock* (as a result of an increased connection with Post-Punk and other genres such as Blues and Jazz) as provider of aesthetic pleasure or template for my own musical practice. Of course, *The Wall* was an incredible Spectacle, but not spectacular enough to disguise the dull, life-lessness of much of music which I had been struggling with since buying the album less than a year earlier. So, I didn't need the Brechtian disruption created by the revelation towards the end of the opening song that the band I was watching were not actually Pink Floyd to break into a critical mindset. The sheer triumph of Water's

[74] My recollection of seeing the Floyd at Earls Court in the summer of 1980.

will (perhaps in conjunction with his band members' lack), and record company backing, ensured there was little connection between what I saw and heard and the improvisers who had helped signal the possibilities of Utopian, improvisational music making in the mid to late 1960s. They weren't even a band.

Another "Pink Floyd Story" can be found within Gustav Thomas' 'Who Makes the Tories' which has parallels with what I'm saying here, and Thomas more systematically examines the contradictions between Water's progressive political utterances and the content of his work.[75] He also compares Waters practice with that of The Fall: a tension which was very real to me in 1979/1980 when listening to *The Wall* between the SPI and my brother's strange records.

The singular case of Radioactive Sparrow

Not all *DIY Rock* emerging in the late 70s was so obviously influenced by Punk, its associated *anti-virtuosity* or the dismantling of Rock convention. Several New Wave of British Heavy Metal bands released singles on independent labels and, to this extent, shared Punk's DIY aesthetic. Neat Records was formed to promote Metal in the North East, and I bought a copy of Tygers of Pan Tang's debut direct from the band following their gig at Whitley Bay High School, and purchased Def Leppard's 'Get Yer Rocks Off' from the Rock City music shop in Newcastle the same year.[76] Like Punk, the energy and simplicity of these records signalled that almost anyone with limited musical ability could form a band, record and distribute recordings among friends and fans, and this was key to the initial growth of NWOBHM, which was amplified by enthusiastic journalists from Sounds including Geoff Barton. Whereas forbears Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath and Deep Purple incorporated various degrees of improvisation into live and studio performances, much of the Metal that followed

[75] Gustav Thomas, 'Who Makes the Tories', *Claws and Tongues*, Wordpress.com, 23rd May, 2020. Thomas also addresses an example of The Fall's own real-time composition in the studio. https://clawsandtongues.wordpress.com/2020/05/23/who-makes-the-tories-some-thoughts-on-the-lefts-blindspot-for-the-conservatism-of-popular-music-a-reaction-to-yanis-varoufakiss-lockdown-chat-with-roger-waters/ 23 May 2020 (15 June 2021).

[76] Tygers of Pan Tang, 'Don't Touch Me There' (Neat, 1979), Def Leppard, 'Get Yer Rocks Off' (Bludgeon Riffola, 1979). See also, Diamond Head 'Shoot Out the Lights' (Happy Face, 1979), Saxon 'Stallions of the Highway' (Carrera, 1979).

was more tightly constructed, perhaps coincidentally in parallel with major label involvement became more baroque, layered, and *produced*. [77]

Like the Scottish Polis Inspectors, Radioactive Sparrow's early albums were self-released on cassette and distributed by hand to receptive school acquaintances, but their music was grounded in contemporary 70s Metal and Hard Rock. Under the understandable misapprehension that Rock bands simply made up their songs in real-time, they improvised each of their tracks and used a production technique not dissimilar to that of SPI: playing 'towards' the external twin condenser microphones attached to a National Panasonic Stereo Music Centre. Guitarist, vocalist and engineer Bill Bargefoot explained how within one week in May 1980 the group recorded three albums of material, originally issued on cassette as the LPs, *Memories of Roman Times*, *Machines*, and *Magnetic Cow*.[78]

Real time blending of influence can be heard throughout *Farewell to Fresians*, but the only track which seems to precisely replicate is 'My favourite Thing' which begins by quoting Judas Priest's seminal pop-metal riff from 'Living after Midnight' (1980),[79] then becomes less exact, deviating via hesitant modulations and bold rhythmic variation. Perhaps echoing Coltrane's early 60s dissatisfaction with continuing to work within pre-composed harmonic structures, Sparrow appear to be already looking forward to a more openly improvisational approach.

Whereas Scottish Polis Inspectors' music morphed into indie-pop, utilising the more tightly pre-planned and standard song structures this demanded, Radioactive Sparrow remained faithful to their accidental aesthetic of 'Total Improvisation', recording more than 50 albums to date. As liner notes author Gustav Thomas observes, the group developed, 'an advanced capacity for production that sidestepped the conventions of the established recording industry… remaining firmly gripped by the overriding anti-professionalist principles that had long defined their nous…not out of any high-minded reverence for some artistic principle but because getting bogged down by any hint of professionalism or industrial orthodoxy strained

[77] It's noticeable how stripped down and 'punk' these early NWOBHM records are - especially compared to what Def Leppard and Iron Maiden soon became. There is more similarity to the simplicity and urgency of Motorhead, ACDC or the Zeppelin of 'Communication Breakdown' (Atlantic, 1969).
[78] Bargefoot explained that many of tracks from these early albums were lost, but a compilation retrospective *Farewell To Fresians* contains those that survived. Conversation with Bill Bargefoot, 4th August, 2021.
[79] Judas Priest, 'Living After Midnight' (Columbia, 1980).

the joy out of the process'.[80] Which brings us back to something I observed and experienced when listening to and watching SPI all those years ago, and when learning to play guitar with fellow aspiring musicians.

Fast Forward: Post-Rock era and agency in the studio

In the mid 90s an *originals* rock band I was in recorded a couple of ep's worth of material in a studio in Nottingham, and the contrast between my last *proper* recording studio experience (1983) could not have been starker. By this point, many professional studios were equipped with digital technology and sampling equipment, and even self-funding, independent artists like us were expected (strongly suggested) to incorporate these *labour-saving devices* into the production. I recall that our drummer declined their offer of sampling short segments of his drums parts to be pasted throughout the length of the track.[81] Another parallel development was the increased use of programmed drums, part of a *borrowing* of technology used more innovatively in other popular music forms.[82]

Talk Talk were peculiar amongst Rock artists signed to major labels in their wilful co-option of technological possibilities to create rather than passively reproduce imitate or simply save time and money. Rather than replacing musicians' agency with technology in a manner that would make improvisation impossible, they chose to use it to facilitate real-time music making. However, to allow improvisational freedom other divisions were required: a clear separation between the *recording/performance* and *postproduction* stages, which would work in tandem in the construction of finalised tracks.

Core band members and producer (Tim Friese-Greene) were involved in both stages, but the second stage didn't allow the input of other performing musicians. So, even though not alienated at the time of their performance, the products of their creativity, their spontaneous musical performances, were subsequently separated from them. They had no control over

[80] Liner notes to *Rockin' on the Portoman* (1989) https://kakutopia.wordpress.com/2012/05/15/radioactive-sparrow-rockin-on-the-portoman-1989/ 15 May 2012 (16 August 2021).
[81] As it happened our material was too *irregular* for this to have been feasible.
[82] Manic Street Preachers' *Generation Terrorists* used the, now iconic, Alesis SR-16, resulting in the album is forever locked in the reverb-laden sound world of the late 1980s. *Generation Terrorists* (Columbia, 1992). For further discussion of these technological developments and how they affected musicians' performance and creativity in the studio, see Paul Theberge's *Any Sound You Can Imagine: Music Making/Consuming Technology* (Music/Culture) (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1997).

how their musical material was used, reconfigured and ultimately shaped into the final product during postproduction. Although core band members/producer used the improvised materials to shape the final tracks, this usage and subsequent commodification does not seem to *reach back* to alter the nature and freedom of their initial performances.[83]

The nature of relations required by commercial recording processes (and the wider culture industries) are complex. As the previous examination of Talk Talk's practice illustrates, their configuration impacts on (and reflects) the freedom and agency of artists and the *quality* of the artwork produced, and the integration of improvisation into the recording process can require a change in the relations of production. For Hollis and Friese-Greene at least, control meant low levels of alienation, for the other musicians the picture is more mixed. That these changed relations were possible reflects a *micro moment* of what Toynbee calls 'uncertainty of demand'[84] within EMI because of Talk Talk's previous commercial success, unusual in the late 1980s but more common in the late 1960s,

> Because we had sold so many records, we had a very large recording budget, which we decided to use to give us freedom to experiment. [85]
>
> One thing that did happen in the 60s was some music of an unusual and experimental nature did get recorded…the executives of the day…looked at the product and said 'I don't know. Who knows what this is? Record it, stick it out. If it sells, alright!' [86]

4.6 Trout Mask Replica: Blues, Dialogue and Freezing Spontaneity

> The derivation of almost all improvisation in rock is the blues. What influence there is outside of the blues is usually of an experimental nature.[87]

Although Bailey acknowledges Rock's innate flexibility, its 'improvising principle', he presents the above generalisation which, whilst highlighting a truth about Rock's beginnings

[83] Gary Peters sees the crucial relationship in improvisation as being between individual improviser and improvisation, rather than between human beings. Gary Peters, *The Philosophy of Improvisation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).
[84] Toynbee,
[85] Mark Hollis, 'Interview', Sunday Times, 25th January 1998.
[86] Frank Zappa, quoted in 1987 interview, YouTube.
[87] Derek Bailey*, Improvisation,* 39.

and subsequent conservatism, along with other less sympathetic narratives, helps obscure evidence of Rock *meeting* its declared commitment to originality and creative expression.

By the late 1960s, electric amplification, the sound and textural changes produced by using increased volume and the consequent possibilities for altering and manipulating electrified sound had allowed Rock to *transform* the blues. In the hands of some this was accompanied by a looking outward towards other musical forms such as Jazz and Eastern music, absorbing other modal influences, and literally extending the blues temporally through improvisation: particularly in live settings but also when exploring and adapting recording technology and possibilities of the LP format.[88] The Butterfield Blues Band, for example, were inspired by Eastern modes when recording the title track of their 1966 album *East West*: an 18 minute collectively improvised instrumental which abandoned popular song structures altogether.[89] A similar rejection of familiar forms and abandonment of the standard electric blues instrumental line up can be heard in the music of Soft Machine's jazz influenced studio improvisations which incorporated unusual time signatures, spontaneous vocals and modal keyboard and bass solos which, through the utilisation of fuzz effects, helped introduced unique sounds into recorded music.[90]

Hendrix's experimentalism helped transform the blues through improvisation. Taking inspiration from the implications of elements of Clapton and Beck's practice, [91] he assimilated his understanding of the language and style of delta and electric blues with the influence of Soul, Country, Jazz and Eastern Music, and did so in the context of both studio and live settings.[92] It's arguable, then, that Hendrix's improvisations were *within and without*

[88] Cream and Hendrix explored the possibility of blues-based extended improvisation in live settings and, the latter in the context of the recording studio too.
[89] Butterfield Blues Band, *East - West* (Electra, 1966).
[90] The development between their first and second albums illustrates the loosening and abandonment of song structures in favour of experimentation, longer instrumental tracks, and a concomitant increase in improvised performance. *The Soft Machine* (Probe, 1968), *Soft Machine Two* (Probe, 1969). Their use of fuzz box to distort the bass guitar and organ extended the possibilities of real-time sound manipulation, previously a preserve of guitarists.
[91] Clapton's contribution to the *development* of sound through excessive volume in the studio was the result of overdriven valve amplifies producing increased sustain and compression. These tonalities influenced how guitarists interacted with their instruments and manipulated sound in real- time. John Mayall, *Bluesbreakers with Eric Clapton* (Decca, 1966). Jeff Beck had recorded solos incorporating *non-musical* sounds and timbres and extended techniques such as muted rhythms played off the fretboards on the Yardbirds 'I'm a Man' (Decca, 1965), and controlled feedback and extreme distortion on 'Shape of Things' (Decca, 1966).
[92] For example, the modal jazz and Eastern influenced 'One Rainy Wish' used static drones, a Coltrane influenced rhythmic freedom together with gospel-like counterpoint. The implications of real-time variation in

the blues, or that he transformed the blues into something different through a real-time blending of these influences, facilitated by modern amplification and technologies.

One impressive element of Hendrix's practice was virtuosity, and, as Paul Hegarty argues, a 'drive to virtuosity' (a lasting legacy of Hendrix, Beck, Clapton et al) became a central narrative of rock, being displaced years later by authenticity.[93] As far as it was linked with heavily amplified, extended blues, virtuosity was often demonstrated through a *post-Cream* model (usually ignoring Hendrix's more experimental leanings), and this legacy can be seen in countless 1970s rock bands, the careers of Clapton, Walter Trout, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Joe Bonamassa and others.[94]

I think that it's important to remember that a critique of this drive to virtuosity came concurrently from within Rock itself, and not just through self-legitimising narratives of journalists and gatekeepers, or when challenged by punk in the mid-1970s. It came in part from artists who were using different models of improvisation and [95] it's arguable that *Trout Mask Replica* evidences this immanent critique, whilst, paradoxically, containing a kind of *hidden* virtuosity.[96]

As my discussion of *post-Cream type* Rock attests, Rock improvisation cannot just be reduced to extended electric blues, and improvisation identifiable as distinctively Rock is discernible in the work of artists who 'go beyond.'

By 1969 a new standard modern rock sound had been established and within this context the Magic Band sounds *reactionary*, relying on raw delta blues timbres evident in the *primitive*, *naked* sounds of electric guitars, bass and drums – a harshness highlighted by the absence of excessive polish applied to the finished album. The clean, trebly, staccato parts were the

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tone were extended by Hendrix's use of wah-wah and tremolo arm. 'Voodoo Child (Slight Return)'*Electric Ladyland* (Track, 1968).

[93] Paul Hegarty, *Noise/Music A History* (Continuum: New York, 2010), 60 - 61.

[94] See also numerous articles in popular magazines such as, *Guitarist, Guitar Techniques, Guitar World, Guitar Player.* Progressive Rock bands' tight structures didn't lend themselves to improvisation; honourable exceptions: Henry Cow, Yes, King Crimson.

[95] The US garage band *movement*, The Velvet Underground, The Stooges, MC5 and others. Some artists continued to *experiment* within Blues-Rock: see Funkadelic's *Maggot Brain* and aspects of Frank Zappa's guitar improvisation. There is an obvious Blues influence in Talk Talk's later albums but could not be described as a standard Blues-Rock model.

[96] *Trout Mask Replica* became an important influence on generations of artists who seemed to reject Rock's drive to virtuosity, including No Wave and Post-Punk.

antithesis of post-66 Clapton, providing little opportunity for the kind of manipulation of sustained, saturated notes and/or feedback and/or rapid legato. It's noticeable too that there is little use of [97] guitar effects or contemporary studio processing techniques.[98]

Comprised of 28 short songs, *Trout Mask Replica* was also *anti- progressive* in its refusal to extend time. Such extensions, influenced by Free Jazz and Indian music, had been central to the incorporation of improvisation into the album, allowing artists to expand opportunities for spontaneous expression and development. But by the time Beefheart's material was recorded there was no need for real-time development as the musical parts had already been fully generated, fully fixed. The element that best connects *Trout Mask Replica* with the Magic Band's earlier, more standard blues-rock, is Beefheart's vocals: a blues-steeped repetition of lines, stylisation and approximation of structure and tonality. But there often appears little connection or dialogue between these vocals and the bands' polytonal/atonal parts and complex rhythms.[99]

Trout Mask Replica's Ethic of Construction

The lack of repetition, unpredictability and chaotic dissonance suggests an untutored kind of collective improvisation, perhaps a naïve version of Free Jazz. Shortly after the album's release, journalist Lester Bangs was quick to recognise this influence, contrasting the album with contemporary 'carefully crafted jazz rock bullshit', claiming it captured Free Jazz's 'essence', but 'getting there with a minimum of strain'.[100] As a result, perhaps, of a sensibility shaped as critic and journalist, his assessment focused on the sonic outputs and less on an attempted discernment of the creative processes involved. Certainly, subsequent revelations suggest that his assessment is problematic, but perhaps not wholly off the mark. Qualities of spontaneity do appear in the final artefact, improvisation's essence inscribed within the sounds. But the making of the album was far from instant. Like *Spirit of Eden*,

[97] Many of the sonic characteristics of *Trout Mask Replica* and *Spirit of Eden* are dissimilar. The latter is comprised of 6 lengthy tracks which could be characterised as *sparse*, *moody*, *minimalist*, driven by repeated regular rhythms and improvised textural and melodic parts that use notes sparingly, with a seemingly intentional care that might suggests the considered, 'craft like' attributes of composition.

[98] Although these timbres are present in the previous album, *Strictly Personal*, in context of more recognisable structures, stylised blues playing and 60s production including, flanging and stereo panning.

[99] For example, the vocals of 'Dachau Blues' and 'Frownland.' As Mike Barnes explains, this lack of connection was partially a result of Beefheart's deliberate refusal to allow himself to hear the band when overdubbing his vocals.

[100] Lester Bangs, 'Trout Mask Replica Review', *Rolling Stone* (July 26, 1969).

from conception to release its construction was a long, laborious process broken down into discrete stages, with composition and rehearsal stages preceding the actual recording.[101]

The apparent lack of communication and interplay between instrumental parts and vocal provide clues as to how the album was constructed, though this could have been evidence of performers playing in real-time but refusing to listen to (or be *guided* by) each other. More telling, perhaps, are the nature of contrapuntal guitar parts. Although dissonant and jarring, (evidence of untutored improvisation?) it seems inexplicable, especially in the absence of modern digital technology and click tracks, how the guitar duet of 'Dali's Car' could have been composed through free improvisation; how could the guitarists begin and end each *section* in sync, alternating from chordal to single line melodies?[102]

By 1969 the production stages of the Rock album were becoming standardised too, incorporating multitracking to layer individual and collective performances. Overdubs often augmented an initial rhythm section *base*, with each instrument confined to clearly defined roles. *Post-production*, the processing and mixing of the parts, constituted another discrete stage but could, in the hands of more experimental artists and producers, be a determinant of the character of the final product. However, the main purpose of production remained largely representational: to accurately record, or at least represent, a live studio performance of the artist. Construction of a record could, then, be seen in terms of three separate stages: the composition, the studio performance/recording, and post-production.

Reflecting Rock's valorisation of creative agency and authentic self-expression, artists would typically be responsible for the first and second stages. This re-connection of composer and performer provided improvisational possibilities, and when these opportunities were taken within the context of studio-practice they subverted the *standardised* recording process outlined above. Counter-intuitively for the listeners who identify many characteristics of

[101] Mike Barnes, *Captain Beefheart: The Biography* (Omnibus Press: 2009).
[102] Mike Barnes discusses the production process of *Trout Mask Replica* in greater detail, using first-hand accounts from Magic Band members. Mike Barnes, *Captain Beefheart: The Biography* and Samuel Andreyev and Susan Rogers elucidate how the guitar parts of 'Frownland' are in different, non-standard, time signatures: 'Why this awful sounding album is a masterpiece,' *Vox Earworm*, YouTube, 28th October 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58nPEe-TU-w 28 October 2017 (12 April 2019).

improvisation within *Trout Mask Replica*, the possibilities for improvised performance during the recording stage were not explored to any great degree by the Magic Band.[103]

Hollis' decision to incorporate improvisation into the making of *Spirit of Eden* was intentionally aesthetic and ethical: to capture the quality of spontaneous sound and to share in the collective 'attitude' and process of music making. But it was through practical necessity born out of a lack of technical and theoretical knowledge that led to Beefheart's use *total improvisation* to create most of the musical parts for *Trout Mask Replica.* Real-time composition was located at this composition stage and, in contrast with Free Jazz and much of contemporary Rock improvisation, this composition involved no real-time dialogue with other musicians.

Like Hollis, Beefheart's intention was to capture and fix the spontaneous emergence of music, *unfiltered*. But he could never remember his instant compositions and had not learned how to read or write notation. His solution was to task drummer and bandmate John French to transcribe what he played on piano or made by vocal utterance and once notated, these individual parts would be painstakingly arranged then communicated to each band member who would learn and practice each one prior to recording.[104] In *Trout Mask Replica*, then, we see a more complete and complex separation of actors and processes than the divisions found in Western Art Music.

French sees Beefheart's lack of knowledge as a disadvantage, and implies that his achievements would have been greater, 'had he been able to score music in the conventional manner, there is no telling what this man might have accomplished musically.' [105] But it's arguable that it was easier for Beefheart to look beyond the directive restrictions of conventional form and harmonic rules precisely *because* of this lack of knowledge, taking him more directly past these limitations to what he wanted to create or say. And this takes me back to the naïve approach of the likes of SPI and the Raincoats which I think has parallels

[103] At least in respect of most of the instrumental parts.
[104] Mike Barnes**,** *Captain Beefheart***.** The strange deconstruction of instrumental roles was also, in part, the result of Beefheart's not understanding that a bass or a guitar did not have the same range of notes as an 88-key piano, *Vox Earworm*, YouTube, 28th October 2017.
[105] French quoted in *Courier*, 10. Phil Begg addresses French's 'question'. Although choosing not to answer it, he seems to recognise implications it could have for real-time music making. 'Mediating Materiality: Exploring the Artistic Agency of the Composer-Producer Through Practice'*, PhD*, Newcastle, 2020, 92.

with the aims of Free Improvisation in that there is a shared ability or desire to bypass (and this could take the form of unlearning, adapting, not having learned, or mislearning) formal training (which involves a more *accurate* assimilation) or technique to *get* to new invention. Both routes seem viable, but both have dangers. An advantage of keeping a connection with idiom (however, deconstructed, adapted, filtered) is that it is more realistic and understands the impossibility and perhaps undesirability of completely decoupling from what we have experienced and assimilated. For me, Beefheart's music is stronger because of its connection to the Blues and Free Jazz. Why would anyone want to completely erase or avoid their history, their past, what has made them, er, them?

It appears that The Magic Band blended a Naïve Art with what might be considered a *hidden version* of its opposites: formal training and virtuosity. The group's virtuosity is hidden because it seems to require some understanding of the processes involved before it can be fully recognised, and, for the listener, this might transform what is heard from a lazy "just making it up" (echoing a misinterpretation of improvisation that Bailey and others have tried to correct) to something more considered and committed. This virtuosity is not about self-expression or displays of impressive technique associated with the kind of Rock-improvisation identified by Alan F. Moore[106]; it is functional and generous. As Begg concludes, 'Van Vliet was extremely fortunate to find himself surrounded by musicians who were not only receptive towards his vision, but as skilled, knowledgeable and patient enough an interpreter as John French.'

That *Trout Mask Replica* was completed at all was a collective achievement and its singularity at least in part a result of collaboration. Arguably, French's contribution was so significant it should be seen as compositional as much as interpretive, but not improvisational or intuitive. So, I'm not sure that if Beefheart had been a competent arranger this would have added to the work's greatness - even if this additional skillset hadn't precluded or negatively affected his ability to improvise. Like much worthwhile invention, it benefited from or required the input or influence of others, and I wonder if Beefheart's disinterest in acquiring formal knowledge reflected a particular creative mindset that necessarily focussed on intuitive creation.

[106] Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text,* 1993.

4. 7 Contrasting Ethics of Construction

In contrast with *Replica*, Talk Talk's peculiar division and methods of construction are deliberately dispersed more democratically amongst the musicians who contribute to *Sprit of Eden*. But the relatively coherent structure (another aspect of composition) we hear in the recording was arranged post-performance through painstaking editing and mixing. However solitary when improvising, like Talk Talk, Beefheart worked within a network of relations which didn't negatively impact on his freedom, agency and vision for what would become the recorded artwork.[107] [108] Beefheart was not alienated from the work he produced; he was in control of his *creative production*, connected with its products.[109] The extent to which this can be said of his band-mates might depend on how willingly they contributed to the recording, and the extent to which they *authentically* recognised the nature the role they were *playing*.[110]

That Beefheart's vision was achieved could also be considered to result from the embracing of an Existentialist artistic attitude: the recognition that an individual might realise their potential through becoming themselves by way of creative action. To do this within the confines of the commercial recording industry can be seen as a truly existentialist achievement – despite and, perhaps, in opposition to the powerful forces of mass consumer society. And such an achievement also questions closed outlooks on the commercial recording in particular, and, perhaps, culture within capitalist society in general.

[107] He was in the unusual positions of having more directive control than his producer and unprecedented time allocated, together with a willingness of a band to submit to this. Zappa had set up his own record label under the auspices of Warner Bros, with relative autonomy.
[108] Things become more complicated in the context of a commercial economy where artistic creation produces commodities to be sold. Some readings of Marx might even suggest that this commodification necessarily 'reaches' back and destroys even the possibility of 'true' art, which might be considered 'non-alienated' art.
[109] Central to Marx's definition of alienated labour was whether it remained under the control and direction of the producer. The important relation is that of the worker to the production, and 'alienation' is within that production process, the extent they are in control of the production and connected with its products. When we focus on this strand of a musician's ability and decision to act, to generate new music by way of performance, it might provide us with a simpler, clearer view of what improvisation is.
[110] Gary Peters talks of improvisation being primarily about the relationship between individual improviser and improvisation, as opposed to relations between people. Gary Peters, *The Philosophy of Improvisation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).

Rock and Lack of Purity

Rather than seeing composition and improvisation as being separate or opposed, some commentators have argued that improvisation exists within forms of composition, the extent of its presence determined by the degree to which the performer is involved in the compositional/creative process.[111] At one end of this a continuum might be located the orchestral serialism of Arnold Schoenberg (no or little creative input), and at the other Free Improvisation (total creative input). Many forms of Rock might sit somewhere in the middle, the degree of flexibility which Bailey identifies varying in nature and extent depending on the freedom and intention/will of the artists involved. But where would *Trout Mask Replica* and *Spirit of Eden* sit? From the methods of construction outlined above it seems that the extent of improvisation involved are at times greater and at others lesser than Bailey's 'improvising principle'.

By identifying improvisation's 'hidden' presence, Benson seeks to challenge a long-held notion of fixed artwork - fixed due to performers' required fidelity to the composer's score. This idea derives from an apparent (mis) interpretation of the dominant Western Art Music model that had developed by the mid 19th Century. Benson argues that improvisation always exists in some degree. However, Rock's focus on the recorded artefact intentionally prioritises the fixed: the record we hear is, ideally, what its creators want it to be, so perhaps more complete than the classical score or song sheet, no longer subject to significant variation. But constructing these works can be complex, multi - layered process and often performative in nature, and, to the extent they involve real-time creative decisions, improvisational. The processes in the examples discussed here are separated temporally, but there's no automatically fixed divisions between composer and performer: these might vary between artists or be fluid within the practice of a single artists.

In the *Trout Mask Replica* and *Spirit of Eden* the early stages of music generation constitute only improvised performance, undirected at the moment of emergence. So, in Benson's conception of performance, there is no departure from or addition to any fixed script. And these parts are not (yet) filtered or edited by subsequent iterations as would be the case in Benson's 'composition containing improvisation'. These unfiltered performances are separate from, but then subjected to, subsequent *perfectionist* processes including editing and mixing

[111] Bruno Nettl, *Thoughts on Improvisation: A Comparative Approach* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).

and, in the case of *Trout Mask Replica*, an additional layer of performance. For the Magic Band, like Classical music, this required a highly precise and directed reproduction of parts. What we are left with are methods of construction acting together towards the completion of recorded artefacts, separated in time and body but containing, at different moments, contrasting aesthetics which might be divided between the (counter to Benson's thesis) *improvisational* and *non – improvisational*.

If there is an overarching *ethic* at work within these albums (and Rock?) it could be a lack of concern for purity. Although Hollis' seems to imply, through his talk of Eden, some innocent, unfallen state, there is nothing sacred or untouchable about the real-time music generated, but he wants to do it justice, to allow and represent the contributions of others honestly, to capture sounds that are not overworked recognising that as they become more *perfect* through repetition, their idiosyncratic and individual nature tends to reduce. This is not, I think, to suggest that musical improvisation represents some essential state, but rather to recognise that creativity has always been part of what it means to be human and that the material and practical ways in which we intentionally organise and construct effects the nature of what we produce.[112]

Bad Faith and Authenticity

Considering the creative possibilities evidenced in the work of Beefheart and Talk Talk, and contrasting these with an apparent lack of similar opportunities for many contemporary popular musicians, I'm reminded of Sartre's phrase 'bad faith': a kind of self-deception that can obscure a lack of agency and allow individuals to assume more passive positions; and this could be applied to those who *choose* not to create: orchestral instrumentalists or Rock performers who endlessly reproduce the pre-composed.[113] As a relatively recent, mature undergraduate Popular Music student, I was surprised at the extent to which performance

[112] Bennett Hogg compares Stockhausen's 'Intuitive Music' with how spontaneity was 'represented in popular culture… couched in terms of a spiritual or mystical phenomenon, a "cosmic consciousness." 'Culture, Consciousness, and the Body: The Notion of Embodied Consciousness as a Site of Cultural Mediation in Thinking About Musical Free Improvisation' *Institute of Musical Research,* (2009), 3.

[113] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, tr. Hazel E. Barnes, (New York: Philosophical Library,1943); *Notebook for an Ethics*, tr. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,1983). An important thing that popular music is and does (exemplified by Rock's ideology): the allowing of participants to actively create. This is not *really* the case in the Classical tradition, where this question of authenticity might not be so prescient. But I have also witnessed in Classical performers a disconnect between what they describe themselves doing ('crotchet factory') with discourses which have created an expectation or perception of what they seem or should be doing ('self-expression, creativity etc').

modules were seen (almost) exclusively as opportunities for students to accurately recreate the songs and instrumental parts of an established Rock/Popular Music canon. This extended to directions from teaching staff to recreate famous solos, irrespective of whether these were originally improvised. What I found most disheartening was students' willingness to be so directed, and, when given the rare opportunity to perform or create their own material usually failed to take it. This *attitude* often seemed to be accompanied by a kind of conflation of what they were doing (perhaps reproducing Larry Carlton's elaborate solo from 'Kid Charlemagne' or performing Genesis' tricky 'Turn It On Again'[114]) and with what the artists they so admired had done - many appeared to see themselves as enacting a similar kind of creativity and self-expression.[115]

Of course, it's not possible to know how *authentic to themselves* people are being, and there is obviously *no problem* if they choose, recognise and accept the kind of role they play. I like to think I know what I'm doing when I perform in a covers band or pit-orchestra: I see myself as a kind of craftsman, re-producing other people's music because, for the most part, I kind of enjoy it, it keeps me connected to my instrument, and, crucially, I get paid. But, although I know I'm not doing what those people (the creators) did, I have experienced anxiety from the recognition that I'm spending too such time and effort doing *this* - at times far more than on the kind of thing that inspired me to create and perform music in the first place.[116]

A productive approach might be to see the music that inspires us as freedom enacted and illustrated through creation, through a *Spirit of Eden*. And to act more consistently, more directly in response to this. For Sartre, the artwork (the album, the track?) contained evidence of communication between freedoms without 'alienation' or 'objectification', and a 'gift appeal from artist to public. In trying to reconcile existentialist individualism with a humanist collectivism, Sartre's later writings speak of a 'positive reciprocity and generosity' required when realising freedom. Sartre's *Notebooks for an Ethics* and *Critique of Dialectic Reason* discuss this in more detail, explaining that artistic creation (Sartre's example, writing)

[114] Steely Dan, 'Kid Charlemagne' (ABC, 1976). 'Genesis Turn It On Again' (Charisma, 1980).
[115] A parallel, voluntary, non-assessed module offered students the (often sole) opportunity to improvise - in the context of standard Jazz formats - mainly ii-v-i and song structures. This was clearly delineated from the assessed pop syllabus. Students tended to struggle with even this relative freedom afforded.
[116] A tension within Sartre's existentialism: a recognition of both the limitations imposed by our *Situation* (perhaps the requirement to earn a living, the structures of a Political Economy, family commitments…) AND the extent to which we have freedom to choose within this.

can be seen as 'a generous act, an invitation from one freedom to another…suggesting…the move from objectifying and alienating relationships (series) to the *positive reciprocity* of the group members.'[117]

[117] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness; Critique of Dialectical Reason*, vol. 2, *The Intelligibility of History*, tr. Quintin Hoare, (London: Verso, Reprinted 2006); Thomas C. Anderson, *Sartre's Two Ethics: From Authenticity to Integral Humanity* (Chicago: Open Court, 1993).

CHAPTER 5

Steely Dan, Can and Ouseburn Collective

5.1 Introduction

This Chapter incorporates a slightly revised version of an essay written in September 2017 and introduces example of tracks from my creative practice, including collaborative compositions from the Ouseburn Collective albums *Vent* and *Y.I.D.I.Y.*, most specifically 'Twitter Machines' and 'Counting the Days' which were both recorded in the Autumn of 2019.[1] I also discuss selected solo recordings from the *Lockdown Sessions*: videos of improvised performances posted daily on Facebook during the first Coronavirus Lockdown between March and June 2020.[2] The studio compositions integrate improvised performance with multi-tracking and other processes; The *Lockdown Sessions* are unedited [3] events which attempt to bear witness to spontaneous composition as it occurs. Consideration is given to the different approaches taken and results achieved when working in collaborative and solo contexts.

My discussion refers to literature and themes previously introduced, the practice of artists who have influenced or echo my own practice and explores processes, intentions and aesthetic considerations. In particular, I examine tensions and the creative interplay which arise when improvised performance and recording technology are used in tandem to generate, develop and frame musical material and complete recorded composition.

In Chapter 4 I used *Trout Mask Replica* and *Spirit of Eden* to illustrate two distinct Rock approaches to improvisation and to represent bookends of Rock's hegemony within popular music. The stories of Can and Steely Dan illustrate another two contrasting and relatively unconnected approaches developed in the period immediately following *Trout Mask Replica* and leading up to the *Post-Punk moment* also discussed in Chapter 4.

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[1] *Vent* (Bandcamp, 2022) and *Y.I.D.I.Y.* (Bandcamp, 2021). Individual tracks accessible at https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com/track/twitter-machines and https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com/track/counting-the-days

[2] See, *The Lockdown Sessions* accessible at https://www.youtube.com/user/dorsetyachts

[3] The only after-performance video editing takes place on a couple of recording which have been shortened slightly by the removal of a short sections from the middle.

Despite an increased attention given to improvisation by academia over the last 20 years, there remains no agreed definition of the term, and it's likely that its meaning will remain nebulous, though identifiable when examining practices of specific artists. I will try to articulate what improvisation means within the context of my own practice, and, to highlight what I am to some extent reacting against: one motivation for my approach. I'll briefly explain what has, for me, *not* constituted improvisation.

A typical model for studio performance could be summarised as *learning and memorising parts by ear, then playing them as accurately as possible.* For me, there have been increasingly few opportunities to incorporate significant amounts of real-time generated music whether live or in the studio.[4] Which is to say increasingly few opportunities to actually *create* music through performance.[5] By contrast, my general approach throughout this research period has been to enter the studio (or plug into my computer DAW at home) without precomposed material, and, when I record I am not (for the most part) intentionally recreating the preprepared.

Commentaries often reflect my experience of past studio practice, speaking of how Rock tracks are based on pre-composed, standardised song formats that incorporate brief instrumental interludes, often presented as guitar *solos.* In addition to marking time, these provide opportunity or gestures of virtuosity and self-expression,[6] and other evidence suggests that these solos are typically pre-planned.[7] Reproducing structures and parts as exactly as possible, often to click tracks, seems an inflexible and uncreative activity; and, once recorded, these performances are fixed and extend this fixity when becoming templates for future concert performance. These generalisations reflect a truth, especially about the most visible and commercially successful Rock artists, but consideration of the practice of many influential and less publicised artists suggests that it is not the whole picture.

[4] The methodology utilised in the recording of my 2013 album *West by North East*: multi-tracking of numerous parts, each one meticulously learned then reproduced. This approach was also adopted during numerous other recording sessions over the last 25 years.
[5] This opens an ontological can of worms: what actually constitutes music? Does it come into existence only through performance? Being free of score and chart, the rock musician, as opposed to the classical performer, is at least enjoy the possibility of creativity through performance.
[6] Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text*, 76 – 88.
[7] Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise*, 170.

In contrast to the typical methods referred to in my recent professional experience, certain artists have used improvisation in the studio to generate significant musical material that is not just the reproduction of the pre-composed.[8] When generating musical material for both 'Twitter Machines' and 'Counting the Days'[9], for example, I employed approaches that were informed by and mirror some of these artists. How *purely* improvised each final piece of music remains was not my primary concern which was - how can spontaneously generated musical material be used to form, or help form, *satisfactory* recorded compositions?

5. 2 Can and Steely Dan: Essay September 2017

September 2017 was a bad month. Two of my musical heroes who created their best-known work in the 1970s passed away. Holger Czukay and Walter Becker were both leading members of Rock groups that, in contrasting ways, used improvisation in the production of their music. The original nucleus of Can and Steely Dan was the established Rock line up of guitar, bass, drums and keyboards, their chosen mediums the recording studio, and the then dominant long-playing album. Reflecting different influences and aesthetics, their contrasting creative processes account for the extreme difference in the two bands' respective sonic outputs – recorded legacies that remain influential and often cited touchstones for excellence, high water marks in two different strands of the 'Rock Project'.

Central to Can's practice was the idea of creating *instant music* through collective improvisation. Their early albums were constructed through the recording of hours of jamming which would then be edited, largely by Czukay, into more concise, album friendly tracks. While this improvisational approach drew from Jazz - the Free and Avant-Garde strains of the 1960s - these influences were tempered by backgrounds in classical, electronic and experimental music.[10] Compared with Steely Dan, Can's harmonic language was largely static and eschewed the extended harmony of post war Jazz and the Western Art Music tradition.

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[8] Artists as stylistically diverse and influential as Velvet Underground, Can, Jimi Hendrix, Frank Zappa, Led Zeppelin, Steely Dan, Henry Cow, Brian Eno, Public Image Ltd, Throbbing Gristle, Nurse with Wound, Talk Talk and Radioactive Sparrow have produced their own music in the recording studio using real-time methods.

[9] Ouseburn Collective, *Vent* (Bandcamp, 2021); Ouseburn Collective, Y.I.D.I.Y (Bandcamp, 2021). Accessible at https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com

[10] Jaki Liebezeit's background was as a Free Jazz drummer. Holger Czukay and Irmin Schmidt were classically trained and had both studied briefly under Karlheinz Stockhausen.

If the Afro-American tradition of collective improvisation was Jazz's primary influence on Can, Becker and Fagen inherited the comparatively complex structures and craftsmanship of white Tin Pan Alley American songwriters only to then invigorate them with the extended harmonies of a form of music almost synonymous with improvisation: Bebop. Such an approach turned Jazz's aesthetic on its head – whereas Charlie Parker and his contemporaries used the Great American Songbook as *hangers* and departure points for their experiments in improvisation, Becker and Fagan used the resulting musical language as the basis for tightly structured composition.

Steely Dan's carefully crafted, impeccably produced recordings might be the last place you'd expect to encounter spontaneous creation - albums such as *Aja* (1977) *a*nd *Gaucho* (1980) took 1970s perfectionism to new heights as they allied the styles and materials of Jazz with Rock's propulsive grooves and backbeats to carefully construct melodic pop songs, then drew on the most accomplished session musicians in America to help execute them.[11] And, by the mid - 1970s, any sense that Steely Dan were a *real* band with a definable membership or image had been abandoned. As the Beatles had done before them, they stopped performing live, recognizing that their complex studio productions could not be adequately recreated in concert, and that for them the real site of creativity had to be the studio.

Dan became a *virtual group* consisting of whoever Becker and Fagen decided could best execute their compositions. For these carefully selected musicians, little freedom to create was allowed; precise song charts were provided to be rehearsed until perfected. Becker and Fagen became composer-producer-arranger-performers, often demanding *endless* takes from musicians to perfect and realise their compositions.[12] Their use of multi-tracking to layer performances combined with extreme isolation to create clean separation between instruments could not have been more different from Can whose early recordings relied upon primitive 2-track recorders to capture music as it unfolded in real time.

But Becker and Fagen's songs, however melodic and commercial sounding, differed in another way from *standard* Pop and Rock. Not only was their harmonic language unusual,

[11] Their later albums followed this model: *The Royal Scam* (CBS, 1976), *Aja (*CBS, 1977) and *Gaucho* (CBS, 1980).
[12] Brian Sweet, *Steely Dan: Reelin' in the Years,* (London: Omnibus Press, 1994).

their incorporation of instrumental solos within tight structures re-instated the importance of improvisation in mainstream rock.[13] Many songs showcased instrumental passages that went far beyond the standard marking time with verse length solos, even challenging the importance of the vocal/ song narrative itself – high in the mix, they would often be elaborate, sometimes bookending song structures as well as appearing in unexpected places.[14] Their sheer melodic force and coherence meant that many of these improvisations would later be viewed as mini-compositions, or perhaps integrated parts of the whole.

These solos were distinct and the standard particularly high due to Becker and Fagen's careful choosing of instrumentalist and because of the time and care they took selecting the *best* of numerous takes from each soloist: a laborious post-production process that was, like Czukay's editing, reliant on close and focused listening. An additional factor was the careful placement of each of the solos within compositions – the right space at the right time in the overall structure, the careful planning of when to allow the soloist to perform.

The integration of these solos within the compositions created moments of what John Cage would call 'indeterminacy': moments left to the choice of the performer, when the external composer relinquished control.[15] At the point of recording, these spaces for instrumental breaks were the only unforeseeable aspects of the compositions. Unlike Cage's use of indeterminacy, however, once the recording was complete, the composition was fixed, and when played back could no longer re-appear in unforeseen ways.[16]

Whereas Steely Dan are often considered part of the 70s Rock mainstream, narratives surrounding Can often identify how they challenged the already established conventions of

[13] Instrumental breaks would typically be pre-composed. Progressive Rock of the period was usually built on tight, elaborate structures that wouldn't allow for significant improvisation in the studio. From the album *Katy Lied* onwards, many of Steely Dan's solos were improvised by guest musicians. If elements of these were pre–composed, their content was rarely directed by Becker and Fagen, left instead to individual performers. Sweet, *Reelin*', 1994.

[14] Larry Carlton's extended guitar solos bookending 'Kid Charlemagne' from *The Royal Scam*: lengthy, elaborate and harmonically sophisticated, weaving its way into the heart and structure of the song. See also Phil Wood's saxophone solo in 'Dr Wu' and Steve Gadd's drumming on 'Aja' from *Katy Lied* (CBS, 1975) and *Aja* (CBS, 1977), respectively.

[15] James Pritchett, *The Music of John Cage,* (Cambridge: University Press, 1993).

[16] Unless further improvisations were inserted during subsequent live performances. Some would become fixed composition themselves: solos being reproduced exactly during performance modules of Popular Music Degree courses and YouTube instruction videos.

Rock.[17] As performers, bassist Czukay and drummer Liebeziet were central to the production of repetitive, precise grooves that displaced the usual foregrounding of vocals, song structures and solo instrumentalist. This meant that Can presented as a more democratic and collective model of Rock ensemble, and, contrary to many post-Hendrix Rock Groups including Steely Dan, displayed no interest in obvious shows of virtuosity. Rather than *progressing* by taking the instrumental solo within song structures to extremes of quality or length, they abolished song structure completely and, perhaps taking a cue from John Cage's rejection of expressivity and intentionality, avoided any great sense of individual personal narrative.[18]

Although Czukay was central in creating the propulsive yet harmonically static *base* of many of their improvisations, his role was also that of post-production editor, carving out completed compositions from extensive recorded jams. He used the studio as a tool for musical design, pushing the relatively limited 2 track recording machines to their limits - an engineer and artist skillfully balancing the roles of perfectionist producer and spontaneous improvising performer within the context of the same band.[19]

By situating improvisational practice within the studio, Can and Steely Dan challenge narratives found in the Jazz, Free-Improvisation and the Western Art tradition that hold that improvisation is necessarily opposed to, even killed by, recording. Each of these processes illustrate how the sophisticated technology of the day could be used to subvert the often-held binary of improvisation (spontaneity) and recording (perfectionism). By using the technology available to them, blurring the role of performer and producer and by combining aesthetics that are often considered as opposing Becker and Czukay raised questions about how we might define composition and improvisation as creative processes.

In the Rock world of the 1970s albums where albums reigned supreme as medium for artists' self-expression, the use of multi-tracking technology seemed to facilitate against improvisation. But Steely Dan managed to inject elements of the spontaneous in two ways: first, by using improvised performance (albeit tightly circumscribed) and second by *over*

[17] Rob Young and Irmin Schmidt, *All Gates Open*: *The Story of Can,* (London: Faber and Faber, 2018).
[18] Like *Trout Mask Replica* (see Chapter 2) this approach could be seen as *hidden virtuosity*. Virtuosic yet repetitive grooves of Jaki Liebezeit were not obvious or egotistical.
[19] For example, 'Paperhouse' and 'Hallelujah' from *Tago Mago* (United Artists, 1971).

rehearsal and a perfectionist insistence on the *right take* from highly accomplished musicians – the music was so well performed that the recordings sound effortless and relaxed. They created an appearance of collective spontaneity when, in reality, their music presented carefully layered, sometimes isolated individual performances.

From the perspective of the instrumentalists who provided the solos, they had freedom to play whatever they wanted, but, as Sartre might say, within the constraints of a pre-arranged and directed 'Situation'. To my ears, the enthusiasm and joy of playing in the moment, *in flow*, is captured in many of these performances. Certainly, accounts suggest that these musicians respected Steely Dan so much that they were eager to appear on these records and not just out of commercial expediency. For me, many of these solos concisely capture moments of what non-alienated music making might sound like.[20]

Can achieved the quality of spontaneity by *actually* capturing collectively improvised studio performances. But their approach also relied on meticulous pre-preparation: not in the pre-composition of musical material, but by creating an environment that allowed for capture of composition as it enfolded in real time.[21] Czukay's post-production saw the studio being used as an extension of the compositional process rather than, as in the case of Steely Dan, a means by which pre-composition could be realised through meticulous use of studio techniques. As well as mercilessly editing large sections of recorded material, Czukay would integrate electro-acoustic elements, this combination combined to produce remarkably singular finished products. But, like Talk Talk's *Spirit of Eden,* the recorded artefacts would not be used as strict templates for future fixing in live performance.

For Czukay, the introduction of a perfectionist, producer's approach to editing improvised material allowed him to focus through keen listening and technical expertise on the *essence* of what was created through collective improvisation. This approach, like Becker and Fagen who cared little about the authenticity of Steely Dan as *real* band, reflected a lack of purity that might be a defining feature of Rock approaches to music making.

[20] And a sharing of this *joy* seems to be part of what inspired Becker and Fagen to reach out to instrumentalists to contribute, exemplified in the anecdote when they pretended to have failed to record Phil Woods' sax solos on 'Doctor Wu' to provide an excuse to ask him to play another one, just so they could hear him play again. Sweet, *Steely Dan*.
[21] Rob Young, *All Gates Open*, 2018.

Both groups' methods tested the limits of combining apparently conflicting aesthetics, reflected, perhaps, in their later recordings. Czukay felt that, from the mid 1970s onwards, Can lost their focus partly as a result of the availability and use of extensive multi-tracking which allowed them to bypass live collective performance in the studio therefore disrupting the balance between the spontaneous (collective performance) and perfectionist (studio production) aspects of their work. For Steely Dan, whose 1977 album *Aja* can be seen as a high-water mark of successfully combing tight song structures and extended instrumental performance by way of studio technology, 1980's *Gaucho* proved more problematic - arguably producing diminishing artistic returns despite (or because of) the number of musicians used, the multi tracking available to them and the studio time spent.[22]

5. 3 Ouseburn Collective and Twitter Machines [23]

> 29th October 2019. Finished first mix and edit of 'Twitter Machines', from recording with JA. Pleased with result. Seems like breakthrough.[24]
>
> Nothing was ever written actually, maybe some sketches of words maybe, but the music was never pre-planned, it was all made in the studio like a laboratory where you could create.[25]

Most of my creative practice during this research period has been in the context of the recordings of the *virtual band* Ouseburn Collective which has allowed me to complete collaborative projects including the albums *Vent* (with drummers John Allen and Bruce Sinclair) and *April* with drummer Marlene Everling. The album *Y.I.D.I.Y.* is comprised *largely* of solo recordings but does contain some virtual collaboration. I am featured performer (guitar, bass, and keyboards) and producer of each of these albums.[26] The combined roles of performer and producer throw up tensions and conflicts within myself - in particular, the challenge of not allowing the perfectionist pull of editing, mixing and

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[22] Steely Dan, *Gaucho* (CBS, 1980.), 42 different musicians were used and over a year was spent in the studio.
[23] Track from the Ouseburn Collectives album *Vent* (Bandcamp, 2022). Accessible at, https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com/track/twitter-machines
[24] Recording Diary, appendix 1.
[25] Jaki Liebezeit quoted in 'Can You Dig It', *Lollipop Magazine*, issue 38, September 1997, 2.
[26] Ouseburn Collective: *Vent* (Bandcamp, 2022); *April* (Bandcamp, 2022); *Y.I.D.I.Y.* (Bandcamp, 2021).

processing destroy or fail to successfully catch what is distinct and valuable in the (largely) improvised performance.

Fig. 5.1 Recording with John Allen at ICMuS Music Studios Basement October 2019

'Twitter Machines': Stage 1: initial improvised performance

The method for recording drums and guitar (the *base*, to which editing, overdubbing and processing would be later applied), for the track which would become 'Twitter Machines',[27] reflected a general approach John Allan and I had developed and adopted during several similar sessions over the previous year: I booked a 2-hour slot at ICMuS Studio Basement and we recorded 3 separate tracks of material, each one averaging between 15 and 25 minutes in length, though the exact length would never be predetermined. I set up my basic 4-track recording equipment incorporating 3 mics (3 on the drums, one on guitar) and we *jammed* three separate sections of music.

[27] Ouseburn Collective, *Vent* (Bandcamp, 2021). Track accessible at https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com/track/twitter-machines

Over the previous year we had built up an understanding of how we would operate. At the beginning of our sessions, back in 2018, we briefly discussed how we would try to incorporate *more-free*, conversational material with groove-based performance, although we didn't agree how this would be contained within or between individual tracks.[28] Other than this, nothing was discussed prior to recording; there was no pre-composed material-either in written or memorised form. It was important to me, from the outset, that neither of us would direct the other and that the improvisations would remain open, undetermined in respect of length, how the recordings would be used, or whether they would constitute complete tracks or bases for further editing), or how it developed stylistically.

Stage 2: Attentive Listening and initial Editing

As with the previous sessions, attentive listening was applied as soon as possible after recording to all the material captured in these long takes (typically, an hour or so from each session) to decide which were the best performances to use. I was always open to the possibility that a track might work "As is" without the necessity for editing or addition and there was always a hope was that as much of the initial performance of each track could be used or kept. Despite this openness, 'Twitter Machines', like most of the complete tracks which developed from the recording sessions that took place between 2018 and 2019,[29] the initial improvised performance was edited down to a more manageable length, keeping what I considered to be, following attentive listening, the most successful sections.

The recording sessions leading up to the recording of 'Twitter Machines', had, to my ears, yielded decidedly mixed results. But the first playbacks of this one indicated that something had clicked. In turn, this positive response made subsequent overdubs and editing quicker, less frustrating and, perhaps crucially, *less.* It helped provide momentum and encouragement, spurring us on to further recording sessions over the following weeks.[30] I'd kept a recording diary to document brief details of dates and participants, with occasional elaborations - necessary when something *felt* significant either at the recording session, or immediately

[28] John Allen and I spoke about this at the beginning of our working relationship. John called the freer sections *conversations*: those where are playing was not guided by a shared groove but rather immediate interplay regardless of rhythmic consistency.

[29] See also, 'Rolo Cake', 'Exotic Spresm' (both recorded 2018), 'Vent' and 'Test Event' (both recorded 2019 during the same session immediately following 'Twitter Machines'), both included on the album *Vent* (Bandcamp, 2021).

[30] Which produced the tracks 'Vent' and 'The Test Event'.

afterwards.[31] During the year leading up to October 2019 these additional notes were increasingly rare, but this particular session resulted in increased written reflections which stimulated and help form the basis of these reflections.

For 'Twitter Machines', a 10-minute continuous section from the second of the session's performances was selected which I had assessed as having *worked*: it seemed to contain identifiable, coherent structure and creative interplay between drum and guitar parts and displayed some integration of the idiomatic and less idiomatic - in this instance material which is relatively free from groove and/or standardised song/harmonic structures. Through this selection, the possibilities of what the composition could be were closing down, its temporality and structure becoming more fixed. But these processes also opened up opportunities for further music generation, a starting point, inspiration and kinetic connection for further performance - some freely improvised, some less so.

As Eisenberg and others have considered, recording and production have long been concerned with more than just the accurate reproduction of performance events, but unlike commentators such as Bailey and Provost, who seem to value something inherent within improvisation which cannot survive contact with such processes, I have been concerned to see it as a practical method of generating music, which could be used in conjunction with a *studio as instrument* approach, or might possibly stand by itself, *As Is*.[32]

Stage 3: Overdubbing/Processing

In accordance with this established way of working, the next stage involved the addition of new layers of largely improvised performance. The piano and bass parts were added a week after the initial recording, again at the ICMuS recording studio, as I played back and listened to the ten-minute *base*. To keep a level of spontaneity and freshness, I limited the takes to three for both instruments, the final tracks that can be heard being composites of these. Again, this process involved attentive listening back through headphones between clusters of takes, quick decisions as to which part of each take to keep and cutting and pasting.

[31] I have religiously listened to the recorded results on the day of recording, guided by a recent memory of what we thought had best worked that day. A kind of triage.

[32] Evan Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel: Music, Records and Culture from Aristotle to Zappa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 89.

At least as much of the time in the studio involved engineering and production activities that were additional to or separate from improvised musical performance, but necessary to facilitate further real-time musical generation, and which had a direct impact on the sonic characteristics of the final recorded output. These activities took place immediately before and between musical takes and trying not to interrupt my creative flow, I kept them as simple as possible, using my recording equipment of laptop and my recording interface connected to Sure SM57 and Rhode M3 microphones. Consideration of mic placement was necessary, and adjustments were required following quick test-takes. Some experimentation with the bass amplifier was required to get an acceptable sound, and a rough mixing of the balance between the layered tracks as the recording progressed was necessary in order that I could hear the expanding base track when performing additional parts.

These engineering/production activities each contained within them creative decisions which, although not unique processes, had nuances peculiar to themselves in their real-time moments: *that* particular placement of the microphone because it lessens the bass frequencies, *this* decision to choose *that* 8 bars of piano because it created an interesting or unexpected with the guitar part. It is the combination of all these processes that help to produce the final work, but these aspects, although not improvisational musical performance, contain improvisation.

As each additional part was added, the gradually expanding *base* inevitably became more fixed, more structured. Firstly, during overdubbing playbacks they were repeatedly listened to inevitably making them more familiar, necessarily altering my performative responses to them. For example, I could anticipate, to varying degrees, what was about to happen, then choose the way I responded – still in real-time but in a manner more informed and aware as to what the likely outcome of a response might be.

Another kind of stratification took place as a result of deciding to add additional takes of bass and keyboards to deliberately emphasise repetitions, grooves and micro-structures that had initially been generated during the original performance drums and guitar performance - often the most time consuming and least spontaneous, most perfectionist type of performance that contributed to the final track - involving careful listening and sometimes editing and

moving the recorded performance so that it would sync more precisely with the improvised base track.[33]

The remaining 10-minute stereo track was edited to cut out approximately 3 and a half minutes which had included a gradual transition from *free-form* improvisation (John and I interacting without regard for regular rhythm or even pulse), to a more regular groove. Although it was interesting for me to listen to this development, I didn't think that that this sometimes awkward and prolonged negotiation was a satisfying enough aesthetic experience for me or anyone else. Once this middle section had been removed, 'Twitter Machines', now comprised of two contrasting *halves* connected by quite a brutal edit. The groove based second half (the more idiomatically fixed) now appears as 'Twitter Machines Radio Edit'.

Once the final stereo edit had been mixed, I decided that it could still benefit from the additions of vocals. I had already written some lyrics reflecting my frustration with communication through social media, and I thought that they would fit the track. Although the lyrics themselves were pre-composed, how they were incorporated into the music, how they used rhythm and pitch and so forth was left up until the recorded performances that took place in November 2019. These were the final overdubs.

5.4 Counting the Days [34]

> We are no longer ourselves. Each will know his own. We have been aided, inspired, multiplied.[35]

The origins of this track can be traced to late September 2019 when I ran into drummer Marlene Everling at the ICMuS studios as she was mixing a cover of PJ Harvey's 'Dress'. Listening to the playback, I was struck by the power and energy of her performance and asked if I could use her drum parts as the basis of a studio composition, and she agreed. A few weeks earlier I had been approached by photographer Dave Hall to write some music to accompany a selection of his Tyneside images which he had collated into a short film. I had already been trying to direct some of my recordings to this end, and I thought Marlene's

[33] For 'Twitter Machines' this non-improvisation was kept to a minimum.
[34] From Ouseburn Collective's album *Y.I.D.I.Y.* (Bandcamp, 2021). Accessible at https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com/track/counting-the-days
[35] Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 3.

drums could provide a starting point for this project. I looked at Dave's images repeatedly during the subsequent recording processes.

Stage One: Pre-Performance: selecting and re-arranging

I often struggle initiating musical projects but find I respond well creatively to other peoples' input either in real time or in response to the pre-recorded. As I write now in April 2020, I'm isolated due to the Coronavirus Lockdown and out of necessity I'm working almost exclusively on my own, and the kinetic energy of drums is one of the things I miss most - vital in the construction of this composition.

I didn't want to alter the drums too much, didn't want to destroy the development and arc of the original performance. Apart from a slight rearranging of the order of the sections, I left the parts as they were. Initially at least. My intention was to *reframe* the drums, keeping most of the performance intact so it could form the base of a new track around which additional musical material could be built. I see this as a distinct approach from a typical sampling practice where short sections of material are ripped from recordings, looped and repeated over the length of tracks. My method here might be more akin to Frank Zappa's *xenochrony* where longer sections of performance are reterritorialized by being placed it in a different context helping to form a new studio composition.[36]

Stage Two: Multi-tracked, improvised performance

In common with 'Twitter Machines' and most of my collaborative studio compositions, 'Counting the Days' incorporates improvised performance overdubbed on top of an initial base track. Three separate bass guitar parts (two played high in the instrument's register through a fuzz box to emulate, but not quite reproduce, the sound of distorted 'standard'

[36] 'How Could I Be Such a Fool' was inserted into the end of 'Lonely Little Girl' on *Freak Out*. More typically Xenochrony was applied to improvised performance: for example, 'Rubber Shirt,' 'was the musical result of two musicians, who were never in the same room at the same time, playing at two different rates in two different moods for two different purposes, when blended together, yielding a third result which is musical and synchronizes in a strange way', Frank Zappa Interview with Bob Marshall, https://wiki.killuglyradio.com/wiki/Interview_by_Bob_Marshall 22 October 1987 (12 August 2021).
'Counting the Days' can be seen as an assemblage whose authorship can be traced to and connected with Marlene's drums, Dave's images and the no longer audible presence of musicians who recorded with Marlene, PJ Harvey etc.

electric guitar [37]), and one acoustic piano. All parts were recorded at a single recording session in November 2020 at the ICMuS studios using my own basic recording equipment.

Like 'Twitter Machines', I recorded two or three takes of each instrument, and the final tracks are composites of these. Following the drums' lead, the track is groove based until two separate breakdowns. Possibly because of years of playing in Rock bands, without the connection of groove I sometimes feel lost, a fish out of water. The kind of consistent drive of repeated, propulsive rhythm here is one factor that helps separate improvisation in rock from freer forms such as that found in non-idiomatic improvisation and Free Jazz, but some Rock musicians have explored both.[38]

In Marlene's original arrangement of 'Dress', there is a break in the track before the introduction of a middle section in a different time signature. I decided to keep this break but added material to divide the piece up into separate sections. In the dividing lines between the sections the drums patterns cease, and for the final overdubs I decided to add sampled electro acoustic sounds and electric keyboards which I think emphasises my hesitancy.

Apart from the breakdowns between sections, there is little musical material free of regular pulse and rhythm. Much of the improvised *lead* bass tries to closely follow and respond to the repetitive patterns and intensity of the drums, but during the middle section the bass takes on a more of a conventional guitar solo role.[39]

By the time the piano part was added significant stratification had occurred. Again, the piano performances were initially real-time responses to the rhythms established by the drums and composite bass parts. However, with each listening the expanding track had become more familiar, more memorised, and the nature of my real-time interaction inevitably changed as I

[37] Experiencing problems achieving a *strong* guitar sound using my electric through a Metal Muff distortion, I tried using my bass instead and found I could get a thicker sound. I also liked the way it changed my normal playing style – using reduced (power) chords (two notes only) and the difficulty bending strings as I attempted to play in the 'guitar style': this can clearly be heard in the solo between sections: the pain and discomfort is palpable and, I think it adds to the intensity of this section.

[38] Early examples of alternations between these two approaches are the guitar playing of John Lennon *Unfinished Music no. 2, Life with the Lions* (Apple, 1969) and *Yoko Ono Plastic Ono Band* (Apple, 1970) and King Crimson, 'Moonchild' from Court of the Crimson King (Polydor, 1969). See also Terry Kath's 'Free Form Guitar' on *Chicago Transport Authority*, Chicago (Columbia, 1969).

[39] Listening back, I can hear my struggle trying to bend thick bass strings as if it were a regular 6 string guitar. I think this adds to the sense of intensity here.

anticipated what was about to happen. This added to the track's fixity which was further intensified when, in common with 'Twitter Machines', I decided to use the piano to emphasise and further fix structures that had emerged – this took some rehearsing and perfecting to slot into segments - examples of the non-improvised within the final track.

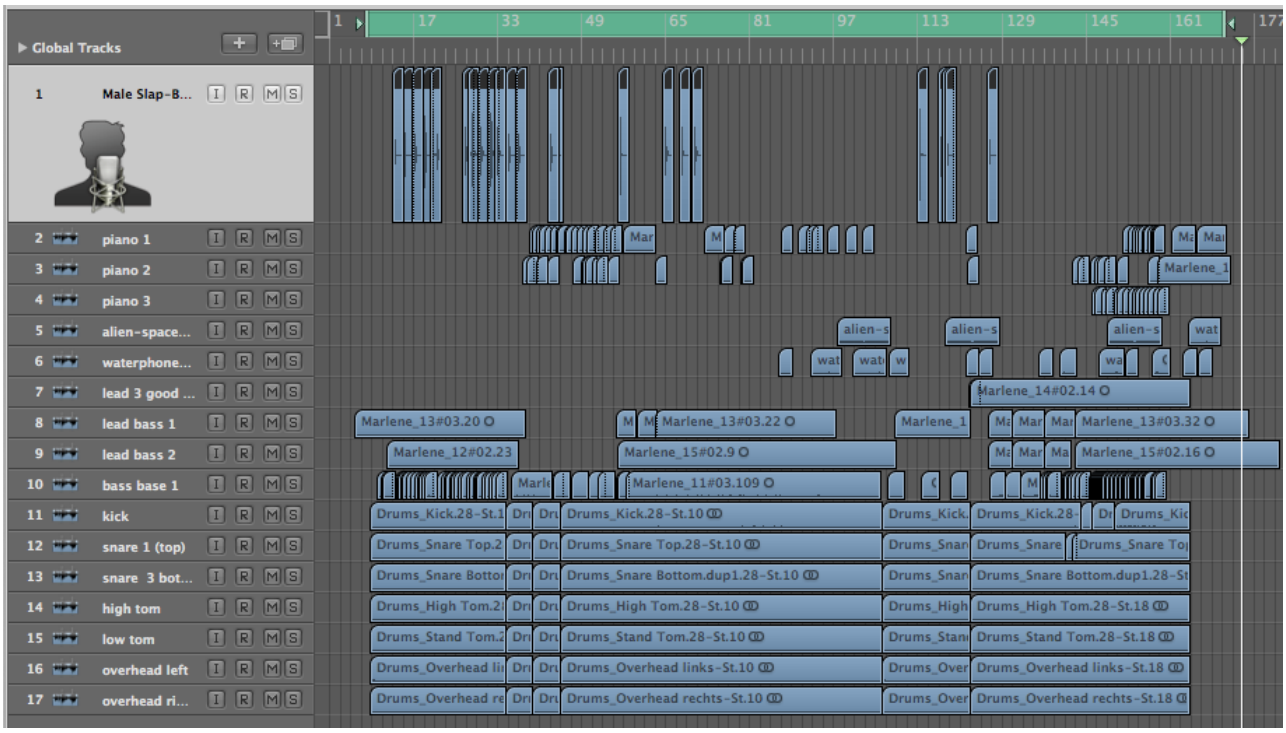
Stage Three: mixing, processing and post-virus editing

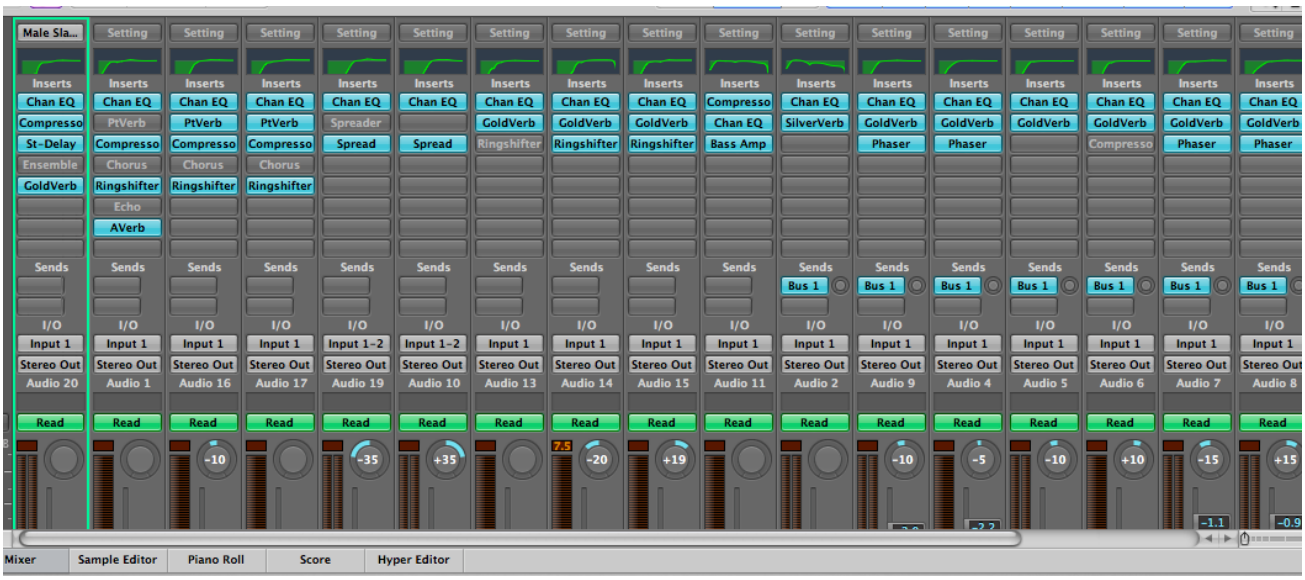
As with 'Twitter Machines', this stage involved additional listening to take stock of what I had and deliberate on how I felt I needed to alter and improve. The processes of mixing, processing and editing could be seen as the antithesis of improvisation, but if they can be seen as real-time actions, as perhaps all creative acts are, then they might be at the *slowest* end of any continuum. In any event, I'd hoped that the producer role does not necessarily destroy or invalidate the very real improvisational processes that are the heart of the piece. I hoped that instead they could emphasise and reinforce the power of what had been produced that way.

Although the final structure and performed parts were in place after the overdubs, the track sounded a little empty. I wanted something to frame, punctuate the separate the sections that had emerged, and I've always been drawn to the way some artists use sparse vocals for these ends without letting the voice or lyrics become the central focus, especially in any literal sense. To this end, I overdubbed sections of a sampled spoken vocals – a voice calling out numbers from one to ten, and carefully selected where these would best lie in each section of music. I thought it would add another layer of aural interest and *meaning* to be interpreted however a listener might wish. Initially I thought the numbers could relate to the different sections of the music and how I evaluated each one (1 for weak, 10 for strong etc. The first title for the piece was 'Rate my Music'). But by the time the final track was mixed and edited to sync better with Dave Hall's images, it became apparent that the numbers related to the way myself (and others?) were reacting to time's progression during lockdown. Hence the title: 'Counting the Days' which appeared to relate to Dave Hall's visual content: images that conjured up memories of a (now lost) world of social interaction, and urban centres almost devoid of people.[40]

[40] Interestingly, the images of empty, abandoned spaces were taken in 2019 – well before lockdown. They seem strangely prescient.

Fig. 5.2 Screenshots showing the completed Logic tracks for 'Counting the Days'





5. 5 The Lockdown Sessions: March to June 2020

> Improvisation is a metaphor for doing what you can while you can, for not waiting, for making use of what you've got at a given time…[41]

In March 2020, the focus of my creative practice changed due to the Coronavirus Lockdown. Whereas most of my recording had previously taken place at the ICMuS studios, it had to relocate to my house with the limited space and equipment this afforded. Eager to keep creating music daily, I set myself the challenge of posting daily videos of short solo performances on Facebook. The initial idea was to self-enforce a discipline and focus which would keep me in touch with creative and performative processes, but it quickly became apparent that the recordings could also serve as complete outputs.

Unlike the collaboration which created 'Twitter Machines', these would remain unedited. The posts would bear witness to new composition as it was born through real-time performance. In contrast with previous recordings where long sections of collaboratively improvised material, edited down to form *manageable* tracks, [42] I decided that these performances would be as short as possible to provide a more urgent challenge to spontaneously create pieces, or perhaps the capturing of brief *idea germs* as they arose, to be used later.

Between 23rd March and the 13th of June, I made 40 video recordings, posting them on my Facebook Timeline. A selection of these can be found on the Ouseburn Collective YouTube page, and I refer to specific examples here.[43] My aim was to post whatever I came up with that day, good or bad. The music and accompanying text would also provide a kind of diary and means of communication with anyone who cared to listen for the first weeks of this extraordinary time.

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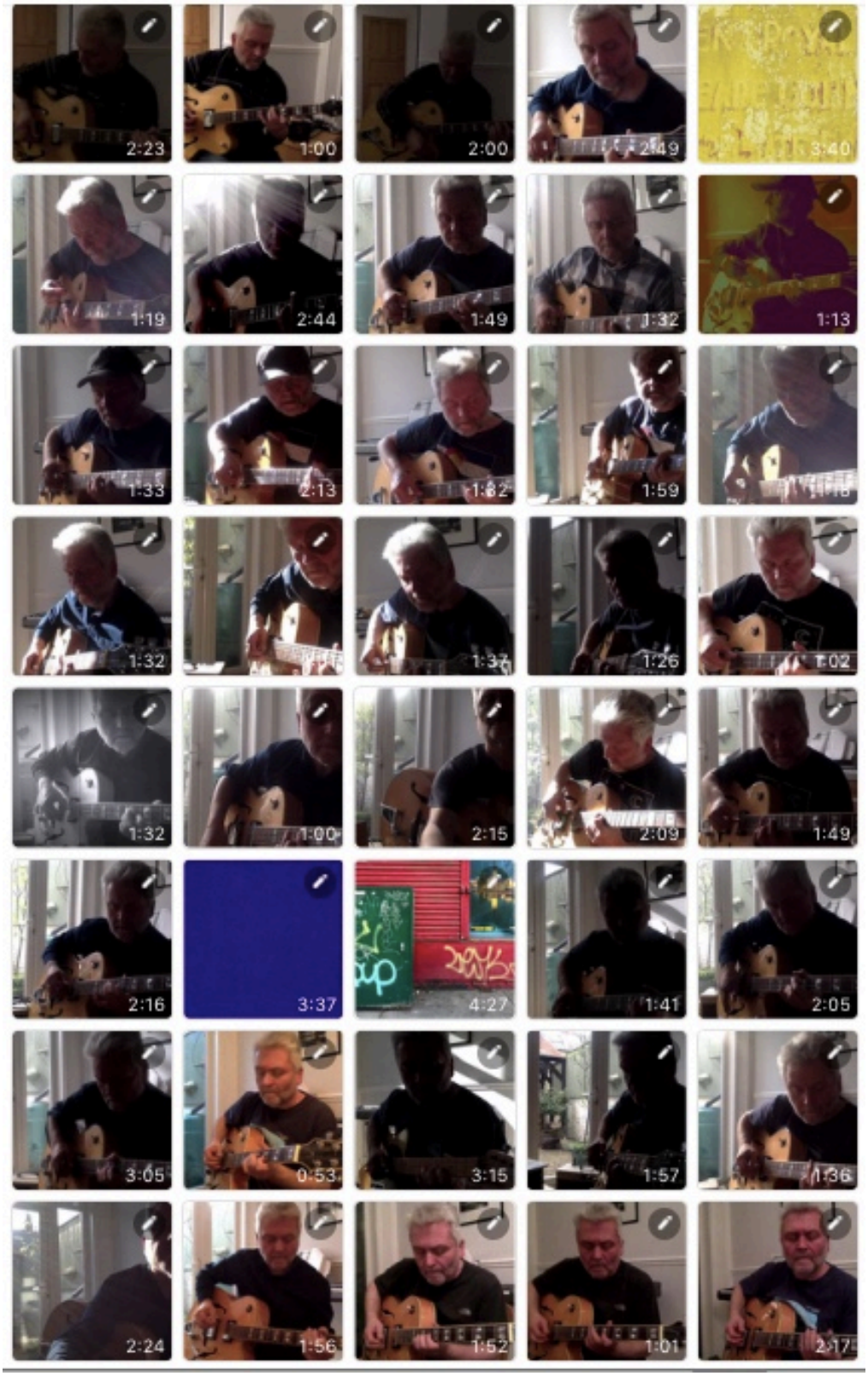
[41] Ratliff, *Every Song Ever*, 149

[42] Akin to Can's approach in the late 1960 and early 1970s.

[43] https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnn5KaqJuaoUQojkqTSewDA

Fig. 5.3 Screenshots of Lockdown Session Videos from Facebook March to June 2020



Improvisation no.1[44]

This was recorded on the evening the government announced that pubs and other public venues should be closed down. Over the preceding days access to recording studios had ended and all my upcoming professional performances cancelled. I remember feeling strangely enthusiastic about seeking other opportunities and audiences, but very aware of the limited scope for recording in the house. That afternoon I bought a cheap USB microphone from Argos (at Sainsbury's) in preparation. The least prepared of the sessions, this simply involved me picking up my acoustic guitar and playing without much thought or regard for the sound quality or approach I was taking. Listening back, it sounds spontaneous but contains familiar scalic patterns, chromatic runs and chord shapes – but each, at least unconsciously, configured in ways that I have no recollection of playing before. At the time, it felt very free and easy to do, not concerned with keeping strict time or being directed by other performers or backing track. This feeling of ease and freedom is, I think, reflected in the quality of the finished recording, and might stem in part from an uncertainty at the time of the recording whether it would be posted – if it proved disastrous it could be deleted and another one recorded. As the recordings progressed, I felt more pressure to follow through with each post having made a promise to myself and audience.

Improvisation 5 [45]

This could be considered more *Standard Rock*, using my (hollow bodied) electric guitar and incorporating some distortion by way of amplifier gain together with the use of a delay pedal. Unlike no 1, I recorded several takes of *this kind of thing*, mainly to get used to the delay, to develop some facility with the chosen settings; the *echoes* created providing an extra voice to respond to and energy to interact with in the absence of other musical actors. Each take was dissimilar in content. I turned my amp up as far as I thought possible given the fact that I live in a terraced house; this extra volume and slightly overdriven sound effects the way the guitar is played, more sustain is produced and the guitar becomes *alive*, more responsive to the possibility of *extended rock techniques* such as the scraping the plectrum down the strings and the more accentuated use of the whammy bar to manipulate chords, notes and harmonics in real-time. In turn, how I used these techniques seemed directed by the regular repetition of the delay tail, intentionally allowing regular layers to build up and this repetition more about

[44] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0JVTyowsjE8
[45] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oE9jTG-qiYQ

the interacting of rhythm and timbre than melody and harmony - although the piece was clearly situated in a familiar mode and incorporated what sounds like borrowed fragments of well-worn riffs.

Improvisation 6 [46]

Not having used the delay pedal much, deploying it for interesting effect took some time and I think that 'Improvisation 6' demonstrates more expertise, incorporating a longer delay time to create layers of performance in real-time. This required some adjustment of the pedal's settings before recording began, but once those had been made only one take was necessary. But, still dealing with unfamiliar technology, I decided to keep this particularly slow and simple, using only a few familiar and easy chords, remaining in clearly defined diatonic keys, but with a little chromatic tension, and using major and minor and pentatonic scales. Despite the regularity of this approach, I was surprised during (and after) the performance at how effective the simple melodic ideas intertwined with the arpeggiated chord patterns, creating what sounded like pre-arranged parts. I recall feeling very *in flow* and relaxed during this performance.

Improvisation 7: virtual collaboration [47]

As the posts continued, I found it difficult to generate what I felt were new and interesting ideas, and I quickly sought external stimulus. The advantages of posting videos on a social media site like Facebook during lockdown included the granting of a relatively captive audience, feedback received quickly and offers to provide musical input from musicians who, like me, had suddenly lost access to live audiences/performance opportunities. Just how quickly peoples' practice was adapting is evidenced by the way John Allen's offer to provide drum parts on the 27th of March was speedily translated (via some quick development of his knowledge of electronic drum kit and sending of subsequent mp3s) into the first of several collaborative lockdown outputs. These developments were also a reminder that improvisation is not just a musical activity, it's also a way of adapting and surviving as events develop around us, and, when necessary, using and adapting the technology available.

[46] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FiJ9Nd7fx5M
[47] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZE-5Am8Xxso

John's drum part invited a familiar return to set groove and a kind of call and response interaction with the drums which echoes regular song structures. In respect of improvisation 7, the drum fills appearing at regular intervals provided *expected* breaks in my chords and melodies, ready-made structures to wrap my new musical material around. The propulsive nature of the patterns and busier fills took pressure of me to fill in space, seemingly directing me to play less, and choose notes more carefully – enabling me to dig into the repeated and expected rhythms, making my melodic invention more rhythm orientated than, say, improvisation 6.

An obvious idiomatic signifier and pointer was the laying down of a 4/4 Rock-pattern. The practice and expectation of a regular beat and/or groove can be seen as something fixed, a default repetition imposing a closing down of possibility and difference. But repetition and resulting groove can provide a platform for other subversions and deconstructions (however minor) of stratified forms. A divide which I see present in the content of these improvisations, and my wider practice, can be seen as those dependent on groove and those that resist or reject it.[48]

Improvisation 12: Freer Forms

Another collaboration with J A.[49] He forwarded me an mp3 of what he described as *improvised* drumming which, in unedited form, became the backing for my guitar performance. Due to lack of obvious regular rhythmic pattern, my own real-time response was inevitably very different to that of, for example, improvisation 7. But a kind of *Rock energy* remained present in the drums, and I recall being immediately connected to his performance, experiencing an immediate sense of freedom, not having to be so confined to what might be expected or worry about trying to keep in time.

To provide a mood and vague tonality to work with (and possibly against) I added to John's drums a recording of an Eastern sounding drone which, I think, is responsible for the modal melodicism of my subsequent improvisation. Whist playing, I was conscious of how my instant melody was sounding against the static backdrop of the drone, using my ears to guide

[48] And those that find some middle ground between the two
[49] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Xp2bC928rU

a negotiation of this and JA's drum patterns. Although no doubt also guided by my muscle memory of scale shapes, I tried not to exactly reproduce these or at least reconfigure them.

The melodic ideas themselves have a familiarity and point towards idiom, but comparing it with my other performances I think the improvisation is more open: less reliant on reconfiguring pre-learned patterns, repetition of melody and negotiation of chord changes or sometimes any precisely fixed tonality. The relative freedom from these forms and rhythms, provides for more of a focus on timbre and rhythmic variation. I seem to have more time to experiment with note bends, exaggerated vibrato, pinch harmonics etc – and the natural sound of the guitar I remember made a difference to how I reacted to the sounds produced. Interestingly, immediately after the event, both JA and I expressed satisfaction about the way no 12 had turned out – reflecting I think both of our sense that we had realised our creative agency in both of our improvised performances.[50]

Improvisation 24: collaboration through Xenochrony [51]

'Improvisation 24' xenocronously connects the *Lockdown Sessions* with my previous studio practice by incorporating an edited version of Bruce Sinclair's drum track which was originally recorded more than 18 months previously and became part of a complete but unused composition 'September 25th' which centred on an improvised bass and drum duet. To wax Deleuzian for a moment, this deterritorialisation of performance illustrates how inappropriate a neat delineation between the *fixity of the recorded* from the *flexible spontaneity of the live performance event* can be when working with complex studio practices. Recording technology was used to fix the performed drum part in situ, but then served to free it, providing a line of flight and a plugging into new creation, a new assemblage with which my real-time guitar performance interacted. This complex web is also a reminder of how difficult it is to identify and apportion authorship: even if 'Improvisation 24' appears to be a *live* event (or two separate live events brought together) Bruce's

[50] Free from the directing influence of another musician, Improvisation no. 18 saw me return to solo performance. Using a standard delay/reverb setting instead of long tail delay/looper and no backing tracks, the external stimulus came instead from the use of a 'percussion egg' applied to the strings instead of a plectrum providing difference in sound, the different angles of egg to strings applied to create more variations than plectrum with *infinite* possibilities apparent through exploration of this new technique. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5GtdR2Z6E2g&t=24s

[51] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VLECs7cDU0w

drumming was itself improvised, but the interplay between him and the bass playing which helped generate it is no longer present, though its sonic echoes are.

5.6 Reflections: Creative Flow and Technologies

I was working on the final mix of 'Counting the Days'[52] amid recording the *Lockdown Sessions,* and they represent two extremes of my practice: the former a highwater mark of multitracking, layering, and mixing, the latter attempts to bypass *all this*. Although 'Counting the Days' is partially comprised of improvised performance, so much time was spent on post-production, in particular mixing and editing the 17 separate instrumental tracks, that, despite being relatively happy with the final recording, I think I lost a satisfactory balance between craft and intuitive performance, between perfectionism and imperfectionism. This was felt during the relatively painstaking construction process but also, I think, can be detected in the final recording. A desire not to pursue this direction further is reflected in the relatively spontaneous, less time-consuming approaches taken when constructing of *The Lockdown Sessions* and album *April*, recorded the following year.[53]

Creative Flow

One important element lost in the construction of 'Counting the Days' and central to my fascination with improvisation as process is what Csíkszentmihályi defines as "flow".

> …the sense of being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost. [54]

Csíkszentmihályi argues that people are happiest and most creative when they are in a state of flow. My memory of the rehearsals and recording sessions of school bands Silas 2, Hipgnosis and Kashmir is that we (at least me) were completely engaged, caught up in what we were doing, perhaps in a similar way to our contemporaries SPI, perhaps partially resultant from

[52] Ouseburn Collective, *Y.I.D.I.Y.* (Bandcamp, 2021) accessible at https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com/album/y-i-d-i-y

[53] A more satisfactory balance can be found in 'Twitter Machines' accessible at https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com/track/twitter-machines

[54] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 'Go With the Flow', *Wired,* Vol. 4.09, 1996. See also, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).

our lack of knowledge of what exactly we were doing. However inaccurate my memories, the experience left a palpable impression, creating a strong desire to return, to recapture: a motivation reignited years later when encountering Free Improvisation during my Masters course at Newcastle University. To some extent, then, this research is an exploration and continuation of this search for this improvisational flow, but also an attempt to use the process and experience to create tangible, lasting outputs. Immersion in activity can, in my experience, particularly when it is linked to collective creation, produce a sense of 'Joy' - I use this word as it best reflects my state of mind when I feel I am in Creative Flow, and it's a word used by members of SPI and Radioactive Sparrow when reflecting on their own improvisational recording practice.

Certainly, my experience of flow seems directly related to the extent I feel I am exploring or creating in a manner not dependent on laborious checking, iterations or corrections. It can extend to such perfectionist processes as mixing but rarely, as in the case of sections of 'Counting the Days', when spending extensive time slotting sections of material precisely and painstakingly into others. For me, flow is never achieved when being directed by another person to play a part or how to play a part and rarely achieved when re-producing my (or others') pre-composed parts.[55] It seems most likely to arise when forgetting or successfully bracketing off any specific overarching (future) purpose of the recording - the making of the LP or video *product*, for example. And, therefore, it seems important to keep open the uses for which a specific recording might be used - it might be a self-contained track, or a base for future additions etc.

It is not obvious to me that flow is more easily attained through freer, less idiomatic forms of improvisation. Arguably, like a tennis or football player, internalised, memorised technique to be drawn on *automatically* can allow a more instinctive rather than overly meditated response to a situation or dialogue and this would account for the sense of freedom and ease I feel when in a blues, conventional Jazz or jamming scenario. Conversely, I have often felt debilitated during Free Improvisation sessions because of an apparent expectation *not* to draw on what I know, what I'm familiar with. At the same time, however, what is absent from the *casual jamming scenario* is often the sense of purpose, challenge and commitment to significant creation. There is less at stake. My creative practice attempts to resolve these

[55] But could be achieved, paradoxically, by over-rehearsal.

tensions, to utilise my experience and technique (or perhaps evolve it or develop new) in a way that doesn't automatically prevent the appearance of something fresh, something spontaneous - a kind of flow which is open enough to capture the quality of the music as it emerges.

The realisation of this *Creative Flow*, through a combination of drawing on experience and somehow reaching beyond it, facilitated by the input of and dialogue with external voices, seems to be what was reached and successfully captured by Can in their collective jamming and many of the solos found in Steely Dan recordings. As a result of the relative lack of external direction and bracketing off (temporarily at least) the concerns of perfectionist production, what is detectable, I think, is a kind of non-alienated music making. (see Chapter 2).

Technologies and Hybrid Forms of Improvisation

One way of bypassing the dangers of fixed production processes and duties which interfere with Creative Flow could be to use *lighter* technologies to help facilitate and capture spontaneous music as it occurs. Simply recording onto video using a computer could be considered a lesser mediation with no obvious processing or multi-tracking. And the visuality provides a kind of transparency; there are no multi-tracking/editing *tricks* being played, such transparent technology a clearer window into creative processes and outputs of others as well as my own.

And contemporary social media technologies, in particular YouTube, Facebook and Bandcamp, have also allowed me to look sideways to discover the work of contemporary artists who seem to share parallel concerns, processes and priorities.

> *Made Out of Sound* was in fact recorded in different rooms on different coasts at different times and stitched together by Orcutt on his desktop. Corsano recorded the drums in Ithaca, NY, and (as Orcutt states), "I didn't edit them at all. I overdubbed two guitar tracks, panned left/right. I'd listen to the drums a couple times, pick a tuning, then improvise a part… I was watching the waveforms as I was recording, so I could see when a crescendo was coming or when to bring it down."[56]

[56] Liner notes and quote of Bill Orcutt from *Made Out of Sound,* Chris Corsano and Bill Orcutt (Bandcamp, 2021).

A clear parallel with the approach taken when recording several tracks for the *Lockdown Sessions,* can be found within the construction of *Made Out of Sound* by Bill Orcutt and Chris Corsano which was also recorded during the pandemic and which, through necessity, incorporated separate drum and guitar performances. Just as John Allen had forwarded me an improvised part to work with for 'Improvisation no. 12', Corsano recorded his drumming then sent them to Orcutt, who improvised his guitar over them. Like Orcutt, I was, at the point of performance, partially familiar with the nature of JA's part because I had played it a couple of times pre-recording; Orcutt's familiarity came from looking at the visuals in his DAW screen. This *hybrid* form of improvisation was also utilised in some of the overdubs that can be found within my DAW recordings exemplified by 'Twitter Machines' - the piano which extends throughout the track and connects the less idiomatic with the more idiomatic halves was improvised over the now static base of collectively improvised drums and guitar.

I don't see this hybrid approach as necessarily less improvisational. After all, my piano part and JA's drums were themselves real-time creations. Arguably, the drums were freer in the sense that when performed they were not constrained by negotiation or dialogue with another voice. But, at the point of my subsequent improvisations, there is a fixity of dialogue not usually found in collective improvisation: only I can respond in real-time to what JA plays. But the drums are now stratified, they cannot respond to me. And the partial familiarity I have obtained through prior listening reduces, but doesn't completely remove, the uncertainty which is often a feature of more open types of improvisation.

A more *total* improvisational approach seems evident in Corsano and Orcutt's pre-lockdown collaboration *Brace Up* [57] which displays an almost relentless *live* energy which was in fact the product of a highly focussed two-day studio recording session. The resulting spontaneity is the kind of quality I was reaching for with my solo and collaborative studio recordings, and partially achieved in the less multi-tracked duets recorded for the album *April* where an absence of or lighter post-production combined with a studio clarity allows a close-up view of the duo's real-time performances unfolding.

[57] Chris Corsano and Bill Orcutt, *Brace Up* (Bandcamp, 2019).

The kind of conversational dialogue and formal characteristics have echoes of some of the tracks from *April* and *Vent* too.[58] Corsano and Orcutt's naturalism has the *in-yer-faceness* of 60s Blues-Rock, but a track like 'Clapton's Complaint' provides a more compressed and collaborative exploration of improvisation within its 35 seconds, with Orcutt delivering a *head* in the form of a repeated riff which bookends a different kind of virtuosity, replacing the sequential soloing of a Clapton or Baker with a constant high energy and dialogical duet, before returning, like a condensed 'Toad' or 'Moby Dick'[59], to Orcutt's original riff. Rather than a Cream-like extension of Blues-Rock form, Corsano and Orcutt compress it through an intense focus, managing to edit out any *wasted* material in real-time rather than through post-production cutting or selection as Can (or perhaps Ouseburn Collective) might have done. I wonder whether calling the track 'Clapton's Complaint' was a reference to Eric's own recognition of the relative emptiness of the kind of extended improvisations Cream had initiated: 'Everyone got into too much of a heavy ego-trip. Virtuosity and all that kind of rubbish.'[60]

Whatever the precise or particular methods of album construction, working within a duo format seems to allow for an increased level of dialogical interplay between instrumentalists, even though the number of musicians involved is reduced from that of a traditional band line-up. Most people who have participated in collective improvisation find it difficult to focus on and create meaningful interplay with more than a couple of voices at once; when confined to just two instrumentalists this attention can be particularly acute and productive. As Corsano reflects,

> If it's a duo or a trio, maybe I react differently…there's a lot of space to fill up, or there's a lot of space to play with. I like this because I can dig into every note that Bill is playing, for instance; I can hear it as long as I'm not too loud. I can really concentrate on the music we're making together.[61]

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[59] 'Toad' from Cream's *Fresh Cream* (Polydor, 1966), and 'Moby Dick' from *Led Zeppelin 11* (Atlantic, 1969).
[60] Eric Clapton quoted in Hegarty, *Noise*, 61. I find the brevity *Brace Up*'s tracks particularly impressive. For the album *April* Marlene and I intentionally tried to limit the length of several recordings, timing them to end within 1, 2 or three minutes; the results were mixed - not only do I find it difficult to *get into* improvisation from a standing start, but it is also far easier to recognise shorter successful sections within longer recordings (which might be edited down). Of course, it is impossible to know whether the short tracks on *Brace Up* have been edited from longer sections; most sound complete in themselves, though a few ('Bargain Sounds' for example) sound like they could be endings to larger pieces for cut from others. Though the interview suggests most intentionally short.
[61] Chris Corsano quoted by Clifford Allen in 'Chris Corsano & Bill Orcutt: the veteran musicians talk their studio debut, short songs, and the best music ever made,' Tiny Mixtapes,

If an aim is to increase the amount of improvisation or *spontaneous quality* (which, to an extent, lies behind much of my practice) then it might not be necessary or desirable to increase the numbers involved in the collective improvisational process - diminishing returns can result. And recognising this is a factor which has led to a relatively consistent focus and satisfaction with (as well as the sheer challenge of arranging larger group recording sessions) the duo format throughout this research period.

Aspects of Orcutt's solo work has parallels with my own in its occasional use of overdubs to layer improvisations which, again, due to reduced uncertainty could be said to be *more compositional*, whilst still maintaining the spontaneous. Such techniques, together with a lyrical melodicism (found especially on the album, *Odds Against Tomorrow*[62]) further delineate his work from that of Free Improvisation being more connected to the idiomatic and, particularly considering his (and Corsano's) geneology, with Rock genres. And the album's title track echoes my own methods when constructing 'Seasons Delayed' and 'Acoustica'[63] - both comprised of two main improvised guitar parts; the second parts performed with a partial knowledge and memory of what is to come. As in Orcutt's track, my parts fall into more fixed idiomatic roles of lead and rhythm guitar, but I get the sense that Orcutt's repetitive, chordal *backing track* was pre-prepared whereas mine were allowed more spontaneous development, and open (at the time of recording) to other possibility: they could have been complete in themselves, and there is some flexibility and overlapping of roles.

https://www.tinymixtapes.com/features/interview-chris-corsano-bill-orcutt-and-best-music-ever-made 29 November 2018 (25 August 2021).

[62] Bill Orcutt, *Odds Against Sorrow* (Bandcamp, 2019).

[63] Accessible at https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com/track/seasons-delayed and https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com/track/acoustica

CHAPTER 6

The Solitary Laptop Musician and Collaboration

6.1 Introduction

> The most powerful improvisation is conducted in solitude.[1]
>
> The author does not precede the works, he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition…' [2]

This chapter further addresses aspects of my creative practice, most specifically the recording of tracks from Ouseburn Collective's albums *Y.I.D.I.Y.* and *April*.[3] I also discuss aspects of my performing and recording practice which sit outside of this *improvisational* practice-based work and consider how Bailey's 'Improvising Principle' together with notions of fixity and unfixity, communication and dialogue might help us understand how improvisation operates in the context of solo and collaborative studio performance.

6.2 The Solitary Laptop Musician

It's hard to disagree with Tracy Thorn's observation that modern popular music making is often a lonely business now that the democratisation of recording technology has made it affordable and practical to record and produce music alone, without necessary recourse to others.[4] A move from the collective to individual seems to be reflected in the way the singles charts have been dominated by solitary pop artists rather than groups - those collective

[1] Gary Peters, *Improvising Improvisation: From out of Philosophy, Music, Dance and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 5.
[2] Paul Rabinow, (ed.), *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought* (London: Penguin, 1991), 118-9.
[3] Ouseburn Collective: *Y.I.D.I.Y.* (Bandcamp, 2021) and *April* (Bandcamp, 2022).
[4] Tracey Thorn, *Bedsit Disco Queen: How I grew up and tried to be a pop star* (London: Little Brown Book Group, 2007).

vehicles that helped define Rock who now reside mainly in the album charts.[5] But a global pandemic might highlight how important certain means of connection, dialogue and communication were open to us as performing and recording musicians, and teach us through necessity how to adapt certain channels and locate and explore fresh ones.

Since the mid 20th Century, the romantic idea of individual artists creating alone has been questioned by post-structuralist thinkers, and, when reflecting on experience and observations on improvisation, the likes of Borgo, Sawyer and Lewis have emphasised the importance of collective creativity.[6] In popular music, and in Western art general, the individual creation myth has often dominated, but it doesn't take much digging to unearth the collective reality of authorship and production processes. As Dorian Lynskey points out, the sometimes absurdly long list of credits in many modern pop songs don't just reflect the risk averse nature of the music industry, but also serves to illuminate a genuine collaborative reality behind creative processes.[7]

If the apparent Rock (serious album) Pop (commercial single) divide that emerged in the mid 60s still has some resonance, it might make sense to compare *singles Pop artists* to more album focused *alternative* Rock groups like the Mountain Goats, whose Song Exploder podcast sheds light on creative and production techniques which reflect long-established rock methods, albeit ones not necessarily representative of how many modern popular musicians now operate. In fact, the trajectory of how the group have approached music making and production over the last 15 years could be seen as a reversal of how many (most) creative artists have adapted to the new economic and technologies of the music industry.[8]

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[5] Dorian Lynskey, '*Why Are Bands Disappearing, The Guardian*, 19th March 2021. Lynskey talks about bands 'in the limelight', his research is inconclusive as to whether this represents the actual number of artists working in groups or just the commercially successful. Paul Smith of Maximo Park suggests it might reflect decreased numbers overall, "I can get things done a lot quicker as a solo artist…I can choose the artwork, decide the track-listing: little things that take us weeks because we have an egalitarian mindset. You can make a bit more money.'

[6] David Borgo*, Sync or Swarm*; Keith Sawyer, *Improvised Dialogues: Emergence and Creativity in Conversation*, (Westport: Greenwood, 2002); George Lewis, 'Improvised music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives', *Black Research Journal*, Volume 16, (Spring 1996), 91-122. Paul Rabinow, (ed.), *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought* (London: Penguin, 1991),118-9.

[7] https://songexploder.net/the-mountain-goats 15 May 2019 (15 June 2021).

[8] Since 2002, the Mountain Goats have adopted a more polished approach, often recording studio albums with a full band, while still maintaining organically emotional lyrical motifs.

Ostensibly an auteur, John Darnielle is still at pains to dispel any notion of solo individual creator, emphasising the collective role of his group and producer, praising the skills and roles of *his* session musicians. But listening to the Song Exploder interview one might conclude that the production methods are peculiar to an increasingly rare strand of artist: those who have the economic resources to access expensive (Nashville) Studios and hire the 'finest' session musicians and orchestral arrangers. Listening to Darnielle's *original* guitar and vocal parts laid down prior to the multi-tracked recordings doesn't, to my ears at least, evidence that the final product is better - rather it confirms how different the recorded output might have been divorced from the economic and technical resources channelled into the production by his record company, including the input of session musicians.

Now, often divorced from the machinery of the traditional recording industry, the products of Rock musicians are rarely the cash cows for record companies they once were, and significant investment in artists is rarely *worthwhile*. Whilst the loss of financial backing creates limitations on the avenues open to artists, it also provides a freedom and necessity to explore other working methods with possibilities of control and realised agency within more localised and independent practice.

Creativity in Lockdown

For me, in creative practice as in life in general, adaptation to lockdown conditions proved inspiring at first, then, for stretches of at time, debilitating. The involuntary isolation imposed back in March 2000 was disruptive and unsettling - cancelled gigs, closed rehearsal rooms and recording studios, loss of in person contact with fellow musicians. But initially, strangely liberating too: unforeseen restrictions were imposed such as working and recording from home with limited technology and equipment which in turn forced improvised responses when trying to adapt-the zoom meetings, the daily Facebook posts and recordings, and on-line guitar lessons.

Looking back from the vantage point of lockdown no. 3, the initial *novelty event* of March 2000 seemed romantically historic; it was easy then to connect to a sense of urgent, collective endeavour which was for a time as stimulating. But as the pandemic progressed and the lockdown was extended then re-imposed, the one-off event made way for mundane, predictable routines with less chance of unforeseen experiences that might stimulate. After a

year of *this*, and despite the constant babble of Zoom and internet, there seemed less to talk or 'write' about, to have conversations or connections with.[9]

Improvisation and Communication between Musicians

Can musical improvisation, along with other collaborative artistic practice, even survive when we become *solitary laptop musicians*? Many narratives surrounding improvisation stress its communicative and dialogical essence. For example, for Jazz and Free Improvisation spontaneity of performance is often viewed as a defining characteristic, and it's this dialogical essence that Gary Peters rails against, his rejection accompanying a belief that not only *can* improvisation be solitary, it's often better for it. The restrictions of lockdown have provided opportunities to explore this claim.

Peters provides a fascinating case study centred on the practice of a 'very poor band' called The Jimi Hendrix Experience.[10] Drummer Mitch Michell and bassist Noel Reading stand accused of being substandard musicians, poor improvisers, incapable of listening to each other and *guilty* of filling rather than creating space. These judgements open up questions in respect of what good musicianship and improvisational practice are (especially in relation to different and emerging genres) and whether creating space is always desirable. For Peters, these band members, rather than facilitating Hendrix's creative practice, provide irrelevance in the form of 'surface trivia' and 'insubstantial ornamentation', and, worse, help to close down Hendrix's own improvisations. 'The singularity…and essential solitude of Hendrix's improvisation at its best has absolutely no need for such a contribution from his hapless rhythm section or anyone else.'[11] For the author, Hendrix's *genius,* and Peters comes close to claiming that Hendrix was one (albeit one who often tread an idle path that involved collaborations which could *never* accommodate or stimulate his potential), is limited to tiny fragments of performance where he escapes the confines of his fellow musicians and allows

[9] I'm looking now at the lyrics I wrote for 'Breakout Man', written quickly during a solo recording session in mid-March 2021. The inspiration was extremely local, as is the case of the lyrics to 'Days Like These' written and recorded a month later during the initial easing of lockdown no.3. Ouseburn Collective, *Y.I.D.I.Y*. (Bandcamp, 2021). Ouseburn Collective, *April* (Bandcamp, 2022).

[10] Peters, *Improvising Improvisation*, 178. I'm not sure if Peters is being ironic. But judging a musician as 'plain wrong' in the context of a Rock group which went some way in inventing what a Rock band *is* might be problematic. Contemporaneous with the Experience, the music of groups such as the Velvet Underground and the Stooges were questioning the desirability of virtuosity, *traditional instrument roles* and exploring the possibilities of repetition within the context of improvised performance.

[11] Peters, *Improvising Improvisation*, 179.

his guitar to speak 'in a strange tongue…outside of aesthetics and aestheticism', marking him out to be a 'unique and unequalled guitarist'.

It seems that Peters, in addressing Hendrix's *rare genius,* is in danger of entering into the kind of hyperbolic discourse which has often surrounded the Rock industry, whilst at the same time trying to debunk similar narratives by attacking the Experience's reputation. And if THIS band is so pedestrian (including their leader's 'automatic noodling' 'programme music' 'cliches') then what can be said about Rock music in general?

A more prosaic reality doesn't seem to be enough for Peters who "wants" to see in Hendrix's playing evidence of Hegel's 'Spirit at Work'.[12] I'm sure he is right when concluding 'even his best, most inventive solos are still only solos, individualised vehicles for expression, within a collective, shared situation'.[13] To me, as one valid approach to improvised practice this seems OK and was enough to contain some of the most singular and remarkable Rock music recorded in the late 1960s.[14] Although variable in quality (isn't everything?), Hendrix's recorded solos are sometimes compelling musical explorations, examples of *good* improvisation, framed by his backing band. Whether the band themselves are good improvisers or of Hendrix's stature is not necessarily the point; many musicians working within the Rock field, not always self-identifying as *improvisers*, incorporate varying degrees of real-time music generation and do so in collaboration with other musicians who operate within varying levels of fixity and unfixity. The improvised and less improvised often work in parallel or in dialogue, and such contrasting approaches don't necessarily invalidate or constrain one another.

Automatic Noodling and Failure

Like most improvised performance, not all Hendrix's solos are inspired or particularly explorational, and, similar to many Jazz instrumentalists, often contain sections of what Peters calls 'automatic noodling'. I assume he's taking about the use of unfocussed,

[12] Peters, Improvising Improvisation, 178.
[13] Ibid.
[14] For example, Hendrix's stylistically eclectic four-part solo in 'All Along the Watchtower'(1968) stretched the idea of what a *solo* could be, taking equal billing to the *song itself*, demonstrating a flexibility which questions Theodore Gracyk's identification of the 'ontological thinness' of the rock song and 'ontological thickness' of recorded rock track. See Chapter 2. Hendrix's approach appears to have influenced Dylan (the song's composer), as evidenced in Dylan and The Band's performances on the live recording *Before the Flood* (1974).

internalised repeated patterns (often based around pentatonic scales) that have as much to do with allowing muscle memory to dictate the nature of sonic output as any intentionally focussed and committed creation of *original* melodic, rhythmic, or textural material, or the entering into some flexible and changing dialogue with fellow musicians. Avoiding too much of this noodling is a challenge for many of us who choose to be, through improvisation, both performers and composers, especially, perhaps, for us *non-geniuses*. In my own practice, one useful indicator of whether an improvisation is *unsuccessful* is the extent to which a performance contains large amounts of 'automatic noodling'. Listening back to recorded improvisation allows me to make a judgement and the opportunity to discard less successful passages or whole performances. Live improvised performance, however, offers no such opportunity for real-time selective editing. But the *choice* to use a live (or live in the studio studio) performance (or part of one) for a recorded release, or to discard it, often exists. Looking now at the current contents of my Apple Mac Bin reminds me that whatever is heard in a finalised track, my *failures* or *less successful* musical outputs happened, they exist(ed).[15] Unlike live or recorded improvisation, *composition* (I'm thinking about *slow* composition, that which separates creator and performer bodily and/or temporally) necessarily hides the *unsatisfactory* through considered iterations which incorporate repeated discarding and rewording. But just like with improvisation these *failures* occur. They exist(ed), but we will not hear them.[16]

Automatic Noodling and the instrumentalist

I think the 'automatic noodling' of which Peters speaks (and I do hope I'm not misinterpreting him, easy to do when addressing a text containing *so* much irony) is the kind of thing, albeit in a peculiarly rock context, that Pierre Boulez has in mind when objecting to the use of improvised material or *indeterminate techniques* which allow the performer significant decisions.

[15] The hours of discarded material I've deleted or still storing (but will never use) on my hard disc; the hours of recording that Hendrix chose not to release but was released after his death; the material discovered but still not *used* for Can's *Lost Tapes*; Zappa's live solos he performed and recorded live, archived but didn't use. For both, this appears to have been in part directed by quality control (*failure/outtakes*) but also lack of space or opportunity. Can, *The Lost Tapes* (Spoon, 2012).

[16] Inevitably, there is often a high *noodle to focus ratio*, but arguably less than found in most subsequent Rock of the 1970s. Hendrix's studio albums included less *noodling* but less extended improvised performance too - I think the risk of this kind of *failure* in improvisation is necessary to allow for *success*. But there are times, most clearly evidenced on *Electric Ladyland,* when a combination of consistent inspiration, editing and selection provides. *Woodstock: Music from the Original Soundtrack* (Cotillion, 1970); *Band of Gypsys* (Capitol, 1970), *Electric Ladyland*, (Track, 1968).

> If the player were an inventor of primary forms or material, he would be a composer…if you do not provide him with sufficient information to perform a work, what can he do? He can only turn to information he has been given on some earlier occasion, in fact to what he has already played.[17]

I can think of few quotes which identify more clearly the contrasting assumptions, methodologies, and aesthetics of Western Art music viz musical genres that rely on Afro-American compositional methodology such as Rock and Jazz. Surely, a main *advantage* of ditching the composer-performer divide is that, as performer, I'm not dependent on another person providing me with musical material before I can act as a musician. And, without this ditching, improvisation is all but impossible.[18]

I'm assuming that Boulez doesn't believe there is some innate difference between *player* and *composer*, but I wonder why he considers that his adopted label somehow renders him capable of looking outside and beyond 'information he has been given' to invent 'primary forms' during his own *slow improvisations*.[19] I suspect that what makes him more capable of invention than *his* musicians is a certain kind of training and associated mindset which emerged with historically and geographically circumscribed musical forms.[20] In my opinion, what he correctly identifies is the general inability (and/or lack of confidence or desire) often inculcated in musicians who are trained in this Classical tradition: musicians who have discovered that, in Bailey's words, 'learning how to create music is a separate study totally divorced from playing an instrument'.[21] Rather, their training in instrumental skills are consistently directed at the transmission and interpretation of the composer's pre-written work, so it would be surprising if such training could prepare a performer to see their

[17] Pierre Boulez, *Orientations*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 461.
[18] Such a conclusion is contingent on the definition of improvisation you adhere to. For example, what I would class as *interpretation* is for Benson and Busoni a kind of *improvisation* by performers necessary to actualise a pre-composed score. Bruce Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue: A Phenomenology of Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
[19] Classical composers do not work from a blank slate; part of their process will use (to quote Boulez' remarks about improvisation) 'information previously given on earlier occasions', their task to creatively produce something new and distinct. They have the luxury of taking their time to work on, edit, reconfigure, rearrange this material. Boulez, *Orientations*, 461.
[20] Prior to the Western historical period which witnessed this division of labour, musicians would have been performers of their own work.
[21] Bailey, *Improvisation*, 98.

instrument as 'a source of material'.[22] No wonder then that when asked to improvise such a performer often rehashes scales and approximate passages that they have already performed or repeatedly rehearsed.[23]

I see this 'instrumental impulse' as being central to my own improvisational practice which situates itself mainly, but not exclusively, in my electric guitar playing. Like many Rock guitarists, my background and training varied - initially self-taught, then later incorporating more *traditional,* training, theory and techniques which bridged Classical, Jazz, and Popular pedagogy. Rock's attachment to the ideal of individual expression and creation using one's instrument can be seen to have been inherited from Jazz, but in the hands of Rock guitarists, with their utilisation and exploration and of electric instruments, volume and amplification (a kind of extension of the instrumental impulse) and hand-in-hand with the combining of acoustically and electronically manipulated sound, it necessarily developed in a distinct direction.[24]

Nevertheless, often when I pick up the guitar to improvise my *failure* to do so *successfully* reminds me of a truth contained within Boulez' quote: that the sonic material produced is often *too* attached to what I have previously played to be considered as a new or unique creation. The elimination of the composer-performer model together with an embracing of the 'instrumental impulse' won't entirely remove the risk of such *failure*, but I think they are a good starting point from which to explore. Without their presence spontaneous instrumental creation is rarely possible.

Improvisation: A Traditional Rock Model

[22] Bailey, *Improvisation*, 90 - 92. Bailey claims that for the improvising musician the instrument is not just a means to transmit the composed but, a 'source of material, and technique for the improviser is often an exploitation of the natural resources of that instrument'.

[23] Performing in pit orchestras for musical theatre productions provides opportunities for musicians from different backgrounds to mix. Because of the nature my own training, I'm often uncomfortable reading from charts and scores. But not as uncomfortable as many classically trained musicians I have come across when faced with rare instructions to 'improvise', such as during the crucifixion scene of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, 1971.

[24] These differences in the playing out of the 'instrumental impulse' in rock improvisation are not dealt with in Bailey's *Rock chapter.*

In summarising the Experience's approach to music making, Peters does provide a succinct account of a model of 'solo based, collective improvisation' that would become prominent in Rock.[25]

> Hendrix's improvisations…are also musical explorations that…are predominately staged as guitar solos within the parameters of a three-piece band, a given composition, and the finite, if flexible, time constraints of pop and rock music.[26]

At the same time this Hendrix/Cream approach to highly amplified, blues-based improvisation was as significant in its signalling of possibilities outside of pop song structures, instrumental roles and restricted temporality - songs as pretexts for improvisation.

6.3 The Improvising Principle

Rock has often been based on closed structures such as 12 or 32 bar song cycles and/or *static* repetition of chord sequences. These structures, inherited from various traditions including the Blues, Jazz, Popular Song, Folk and Gospel music, provide a certain predictability, but, unlike Western Art Music or earlier forms of popular music such as the *Tin Pan Alley Model*, Rock also championed the agency of the artist in the composition and performance. This lack of separation allowed for creative and improvisational possibilities.

From Rock's early days, song-based recordings, typically in the guise of album tracks, provided templates from which a group could choose to deviate from or reproduce as accurately as possible. How *fixed* the structures laid down in the studio would subsequently prove to be was, theoretically, a decision for the artists.[27] During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the exercising of choice to deviate and extemporise in live situations was embraced by the likes of Cream, The Butterfield Blues Band, The Jimi Hendrix Experience, Pink Floyd, The Grateful Dead, The Soft Machine, Velvet Underground, Led Zeppelin, Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention. Supporting many of these groups' performances was an aesthetic which reflects Bailey's 'improvising principle', which embraced a lack of attachment to the externally pre-composed, allowing the possibility to extend song length and add and adapt additional material spontaneously.

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[25] Peters, *Improvising Improvisation*, 178.
[26] Ibid.
[27] In reality, of course, the artist works within the considerable constraints of the music industry and audience expectations.

But, just as developments in recording technology quickly played a role in fixing studio performances, improvisation has also been facilitated by studio processes and developments - sometimes creating, intersecting with, modifying, and disrupting structures during the studio process. Perhaps as a partial reaction to the *over-production* techniques that were emerging in the mid 1960s and inspired by contemporary [28] *intuitive/first take best* take ethos, and techniques influenced by the Classical Avant-Garde, flexible and experimental studio practices were embraced by some leading rock artists.[29]

The Improvising Principle in the Studio and Bob Dylan

> Many rock instrumentalists and singers have very little concern for the skills of instrumental improvisation nevertheless employ what could be called an improvising principle. Their material, although it might change very little, has to be at least flexible and capable of adjustment…there is no abstract ideal, no scripted external yardstick, which stands above the performance and against which any performance has to be measured.[30]

For me the 'improvising principle' reflects an overarching flexibility present in my studio practice which allows a potential freedom from any fixed pre-precomposed material (by me or anyone else) at the point of entering the studio. The extent to which the material is or becomes *free* as it is constructed and performed during the recording process varies but this flexibility, inherited from Afro-American traditions, I think, separates this form of popular music from other traditions which cannot allow this extent of agency for the performer.

In 1966 Bob Dylan relocated to Nashville to gain access to Columbia's studios and local session musicians for the recording of *Blonde on Blonde*.[31] His approach to production and recording and his working relationship with studio musicians was far removed from the Tin

[28] In a rare interview, Bob Dylan stated that he considers songs as fixed entities which shouldn't be altered during performance, which seems incredible bearing in mind the free manner he has interpreted his work in concert over the years, not to mention his own use of spontaneity in the recording studio. 'You can set different guitar or piano patterns upon the structural lines and go from there, but that's not improvisation. Improvisation leaves you open to good or bad performances, and the idea is to stay consistent. You basically play the same thing time after time in the most perfect way you can.' Quoted in 'Has Bob Dylan Lost his Mind', *New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/arts/music/bob-dylan-rough-and-rowdy-ways.html 12 June 2020 (14 March 2021).
[29] Such as Zappa's use of xenochrony, meltdowns and Cagean inspired indeterminacy.
[30] Bailey, *Improvisation*, 39.
[31] Bod Dylan, *Blonde on Blonde,* (*Columbia,* 1966).

Pan Alley Model that had dominated the popular music industry; no charts or pre-written arrangements were used, and aspects of the music and lyrics remained unformed, unfixed prior to the studio sessions.[32] Like the Mountain Goats, through record company finance Dylan enjoyed privileged access to studio time and resources, and musicians - resources that were then untypical even for major artists. In 1966 few (the Beatles come to mind) could afford to use six hours of studio time to finish composing a song, [33] but tapping into contemporary aesthetics that valorised intuition and spontaneity, Dylan and producer Bob Johnson ensured that comparatively little time was spent recording the tracks. This aesthetic was typified in the recording of the 11-minute 'Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands'. Although lyrics and chords had been pre-composed prior to the recording, no instructions were provided to the musicians by Dylan prior to the first take (the first of three and the one that ended up on the album).[34]

Despite using the framework of a pre-composed song, at the point the recording commenced the lack of charts or definite instructions provided the musicians a kind of flexibility in performance that could not be enjoyed by orchestral musicians following a score and might be more akin to the loose arrangements found in certain strands of jazz. As drummer Kenny Buttrey recalled, 'We'll do a verse and a chorus, then I'll play my harmonica thing. Then we'll do another verse and chorus and I'll play some more harmonica, and we'll see how it goes from there.'[35]

This loose approach to studio practice represents a baseline of unfixity which, in my opinion, does not necessarily amount to improvisation but allows the possibility of spontaneous creation. And, during my own studio practice, when engaging in less (*idiomatically) fixed improvisation* this baseline is still present: it is what allows greater unfixity to operate - to the extent the performer is willing and/or able. As Bailey does not address how this approach operates in the studio, he appears to have overlooked the extent improvisation can exist during the recording processes whilst at the same time overestimated the extent that *the principle* remained ever present in Rock as developments in recording advanced and audiences and the industry increasingly demanded fixity in the form of exact replication.

[32] www.soundonsound.com/people/bob-dylan-sad-eyed-lady-lowlands-classic-tracks
[33] Ibid. Of course, many contemporary artists (including myself) no longer *need* studio time at all.
[34] Producer Bob Johnson and drummer Kenny Buttrey quoted in Clinton Heylin's 2000 biography, *Dylan: Behind the Shades*, (Penguin: London, 1992).
[35] Ibid.

Intersection of Improvising Principle and the Ontological Thin/Thick

Theodore Gracyk contrasts the 'ontologically thin' rock song, as exemplified here by Dylan's 'Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands', with 'ontologically thick*'* Rock recordings.[36] The former is fluid and capable of adjustment, the latter necessarily more fixed and, for Gracyk, more defining of what Rock *is*.[37] This thickness has often determined and constrained what was possible in live performance, questioning commonly held assumptions that underpin a live (flexible) studio (fixed) dichotomy. To use a Marxist analogy, if we recognise that the main site of creativity is often the studio rather than the concert stage, then we can think of the recording as the base and the contents of subsequent live performance of the recorded track a (secondary) superstructure determined largely by the prior recording. This analogy seems more appropriate when songs are only partly formed prior to recording processes or not formed at all as is the case with most of my own creative practice - at least that which divorced from a commercial imperative.[38]

Fixity and Improvisation within 3 stages of practice

Different levels of fixity can work in parallel within and between different stages of creative practice and can be a measure of the degree of improvisation possible and present. The 'Improvising Principle' present in my practice allows musicians to be composers, performers and producers, a flexibility that allows the possibility, in theory anyway, of any degree spontaneous creation. In this respect I think of it as representing a *freedom to* but made possible by a *freedom from* the 'external yardstick*'* of score or pre-composition. Another kind of freedom exists within improvisational practice itself, more aligned with *freedom from*: performance that attempts to separate itself, to varying degrees, from the idiomatic forms, conventions and sounds of a specific idiom.

In practice, fixity is present at the *pre-recording stage*. For example, the choice of instruments, DAW and recording set up and use of pre-composed materials provide

[36] Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise*, 1-198.

[37] Ibid. Other examples of prominent artists working 'spontaneously' in the studio to craft their music include David Bowie and Jimi Hendrix, *Electric Ladyland*, (Track, 1968); *Young Americans*, (RCA, 1975).

[38] But it would take a reductionist Marxist not to recognise that base and superstructure influence each other and produce feedback loops. Nevertheless, it's interesting to think of the "industrial" recording processes and outputs as sites of a more unfettered creativity than live concert performance.

constraints and boundaries as to the amount of spontaneity possible during subsequent performance. During the *recording performance* stage, the degree of improvisation will often depend on whether pre-composed materials are used, or elements incorporated. And real-time decisions as to what to play and how to play it will determine (along with the negotiation and interplay with any co-performers) how *free* the musical material is from the stylistic and sonic conventions of any idiom or, more specifically, how attached to any pre-composed material. Finally, fixity, and in particular the process of fixing, is present in the *production/post-production stage*. The very fact that material is recorded sets up, for some, a destruction of what is value about improvisation, and the carefully considered and iterative nature of (some of) the production processes seem to speak more of (slow) composition.

Within my creative practice, a concern has been to increase the amount of spontaneity within the middle stage (*recorded performance*) by reducing or eliminating pre-composed material and by trying to loosen the attachment to strict idiomatic forms during performance. Although fixity in the production stages is inevitable, my intention is not to provide templates for future fixed performance. To provide context and background to this approach, it might be worth looking at a previous and parallel practices which have been central to my life as rock musician, but which are not directly concerned with the processes involved in the production of the practice-based work submitted as part of this thesis.

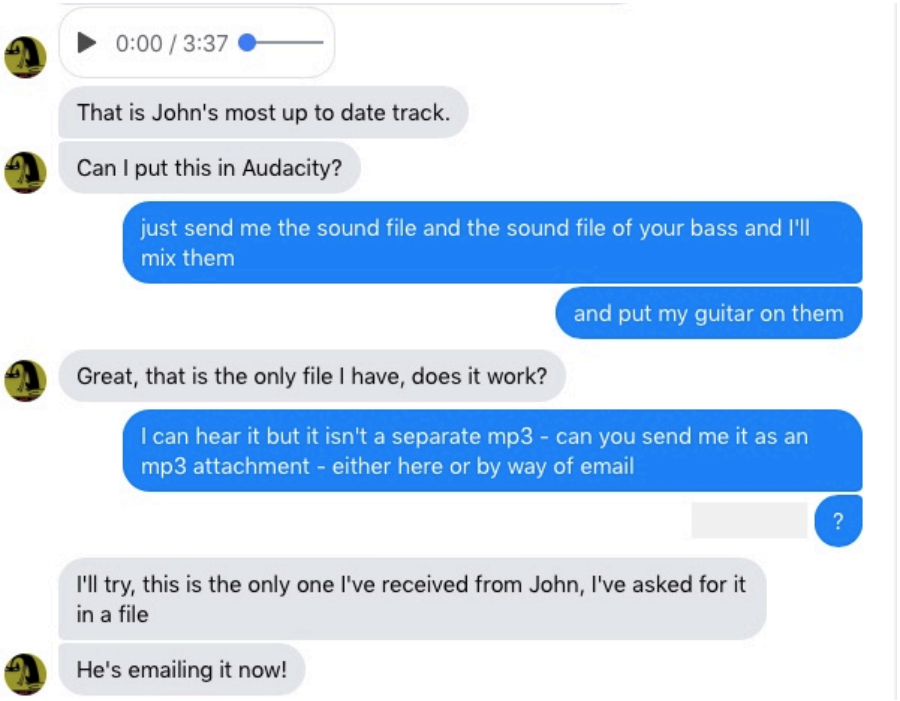
Improvising Principle in Practice: the Lou Ross Band and SPI

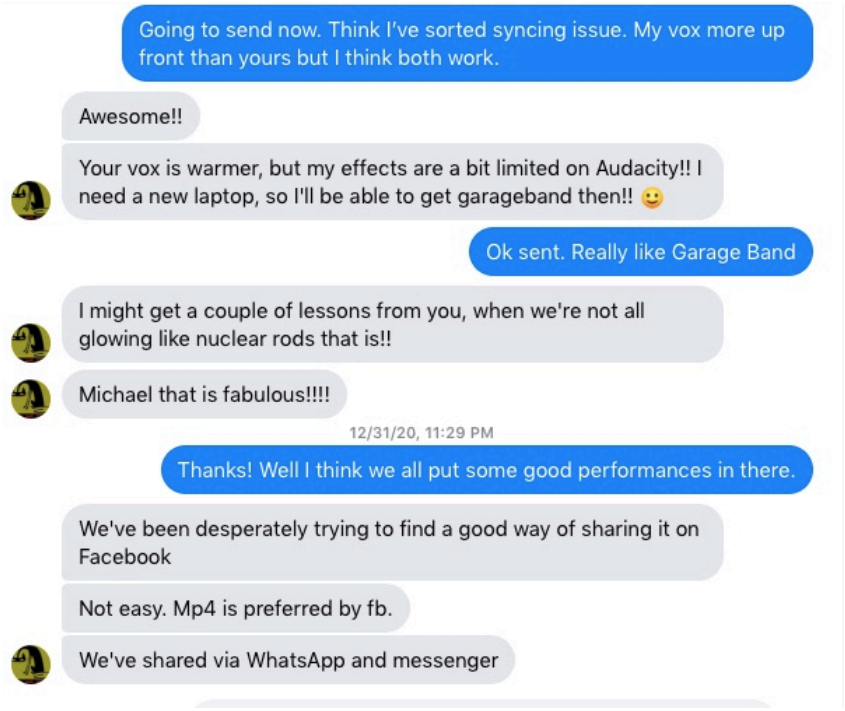
During the years before lockdown, much of my live performance experience had been in the context of playing in covers bands, pit-orchestras, and indie-pop groups. In contrast with much of the improvised material I have recorded during this research period, these activities involved working with written score or memorised parts in relation to fixed structures. As such, even where I had been part of the creative, compositional process,[39] there was little room in studio or concert to alter or shape the musical material in real-time - the recordings or score had *solidified* the parts, establishing firm expectations for fellow musicians and audience. Whether playing an established *classic* at a function or laying down a guitar or bass part in the studio, the performer's room to manoeuvre is heavily circumscribed and it is this frustrating limitation which has in part been an inspiration to my increasing interest in and involvement with 'improvisation' .

[39] For example, Scottish Polis Inspectors, 'Man on the Moon' (Bandcamp, 2021).

Although live performances have temporarily ceased, recordings have continued during lockdown. A diary entry from 31st December 2020 captures how my studio practice at times overlap with parallel outputs of commercially and non-commercial music. I would normally play a New Year Eve gig in North Shields with the Lou Ross band, but, due to restrictions, we recorded tracks to be live streamed for a virtual audience. These last-minute arrangements demonstrate ad-hoc working methods, a band improvising to address changed circumstances and using modern virtual communication and recording technology to produce quick outputs at minimal expense. Restriction meant we couldn't meet or rehearse so we agreed to record parts separately in the *standard* Rock multi-tracking procedure: drums first, then bass, then guitar and finally vocals. I was my job to perform two guitar tracks and mix the completed parts once they had been separately recorded.

Fig. 6.1 Screenshots of band communication relating to virtual recording of 'Don't Stop' 31/12/2000





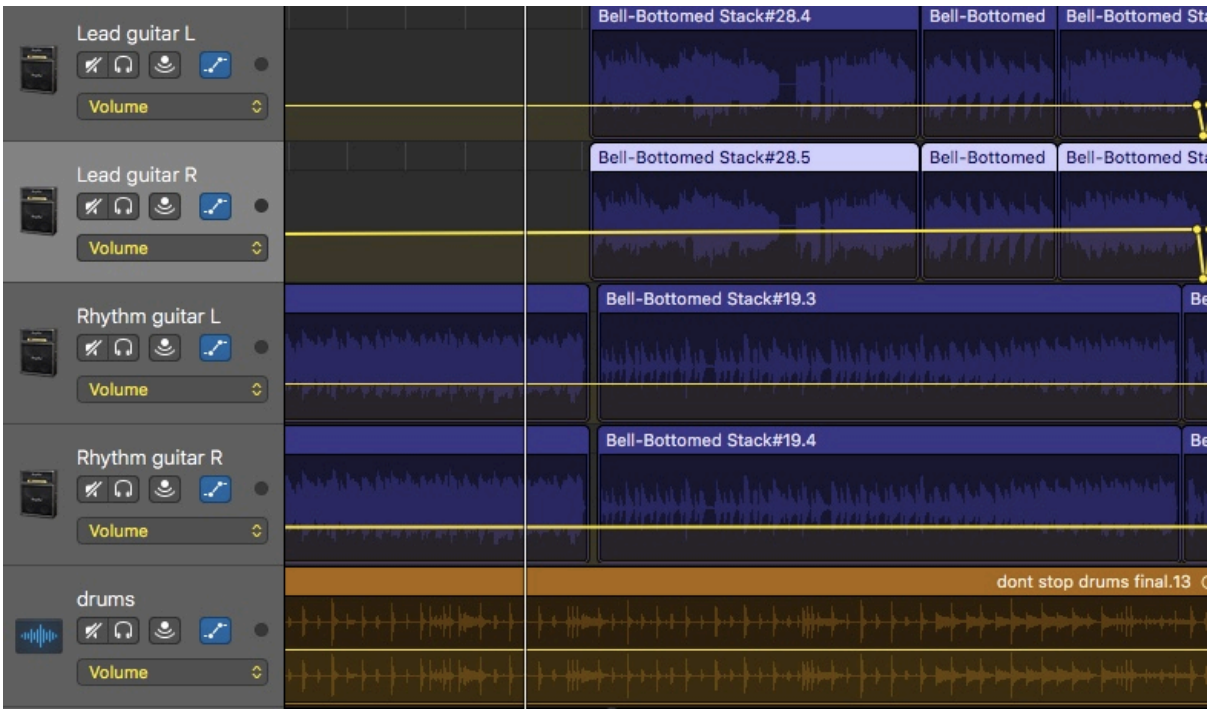
'Don't Stop' is a soft-rock standard, chosen for its simplicity and because we all knew the structure well. The template for our recorded performance was the Fleetwood Mac original recording - or rather our memories of it as consolidated and fixed through repeated performances.[40] It is also a song our audience knows, and there is an implicit agreement or understanding between us and them that nothing too different, too unpredicted will be presented. Within these constraints (determined by the *ontologically thick* original track) which, like a written score *stands behind our performance*, there remains some room for manoeuvre, some space for variation. Limited *Creation* even. And, for me, this is focussed on variations of dynamics the rhythm part, and a greater freedom to create new melodic content in the lead part.

'Don't Stop' is based on regular chord structure which is repeated with slight variation. Although the tempos might vary between performances, the structure doesn't. What does change is the precise way I play the same chords in the rhythm guitar track - altering the voicing, the dynamics and using, for example, different amounts of palm muting and arpeggiation from performance to performance and between verse and chorus and verse to

[40] 'Don't Stop', Fleetwood Mac, *Rumours* (Warner Bros, 1977).

verse.[41] For the purposes of this thesis, and to distinguish what I see as my *old less improvisatory practice,* I class this kind of real-time extemporisation as *interpretation* rather than improvisation - it does not contribute sufficiently or at all to the overall structure and form of the final product and is a product of constraints imposed by the composer/performer separation. I don't recognise any real equivalence of creative input between me (when playing 'Don't Stop') and Christine McVie, or between Rossini and a second violinist in the LSO.[42]

Fig. 6.2 Screen shot of GarageBand recording showing (doubled) rhythm and lead guitar parts.



In respect of the guitar solo, this is (like all the solos I perform in function bands) not a conscious reproduction of the original. Rather, it approximates that *kind of thing,* using the

[41] Fig. 6.2 illustrates the difference in dynamics and volume in the rhythm guitar part as the song moves from chorus to solo section. The reduction in volume and change of tonal emphasis required to make sonic space for the guitar solo, and drum part changes as John selects to use a ride cymbal. These *Rock conventions* reflect a common, unspoken knowledge that exists amongst musicians which allow variation and difference within relatively tight structures. The use of ride cymbal during instrumental passages, for example, provides a looser feel which can facilitate more improvisatory practice, but these conventions can also become overused clichés and enemies of difference and spontaneity. Because so many of these instrumental conventions have built up over the years, possibilities to subvert and dismantle them are plenty - and such processes can be seen as allowing an unfixing of the idiomatic.

[42] In contrast to Benson's definition of improvisation, I see this as being on the *non-improvising* side of a dividing line but encompassed within Bailey's 'Improvisation Principle': practice which, although demonstrating flexibility, is *not quite* improvisation.

same pentatonic scales and similar melodic contour of what I remember of the Fleetwood Mac recording. I have performed similar solos during the song on many live occasions and each time I play something similar, but slightly different. I see each attempt as a combination of *automatic noodling*, almost unconsciously incorporating finger movements made hundreds of times before, and a more directed focus on trying to create something slightly distinct and melodically coherent in real time. I know exactly where the solo will appear and its duration, but I don't know in advance exactly how it will play out or how *successful* it will be.[43] When performing live there is a certain amount of real-time rhythmic interplay that is possible between myself and the drummer (in this and during other solos) but recording in my DAW this is more limited.

Using a computer-based DAW to produce original music affords creative possibilities, but it's up to you to choose the extent you use or allow the computer software to shape the musical material. When working with predictable and standardised forms, software such as Logic and GarageBand offer templates that provide off-the-peg, time saving *solutions* when inserting and organised pre-composed sonic material. When recording a cover which intentionally complies with pre-formed, regular structure this can be a real benefit, but when composing original material, even that which complies with general song-writing conventions, it is easy to be channelled down paths that steer you away from creative and original paths.

Scottish Polis Inspectors Revisited

Since the late 1980s I have intermittently been a member of the Indie-Pop (formerly post-Punk band discussed in Chapter 2) group Scottish Polis Inspectors.[44] Their recordings can be seen to operate within flexible but identifiable conventions of a Rock related, albeit *anti-rockist*, genre. Since my involvement, most of the band's songs, like Dylan's example, first emerged as rough, pre-written chord structures, melodies and half-finished lyrics composed by one of the band members. Then, through rehearsal, instrumental and vocal parts would take shape during repeated performances; a gradual experimentation and iterative process that might be, in a collective context, what Schoenberg recognised as *useful* improvisation: the

[43] Even this amount of limited freedom and flexibility is often prevented by the decisions of musicians who choose to repeat as precisely as possible guitar solos (and other parts) learned from original recordings.
[44] See the discussion of the band's late 70s and early 80s Post-Punk iteration can be found in Chapter 4.

process of 'working up' into a final, fully formed composition.[45] Over several rehearsals this process would produce a strict fixity of parts before any recording took place.[46] Although improvisation is present here, the temporal divide between this stratification and the recorded performance means that, like the cover of 'Don't Stop', there is little real-time creation in the performance(s) we finally hear. This fixity is compounded when recordings occur virtually (as they have been during lockdown) and individually - there is no opportunity for the kind of real-time interaction as when laying down bass, drums and rhythm guitar tracks 'live' in the studio, but this is counterbalanced by a kind of freedom afforded when organisation your own time, further developing you own parts independently, without consultation or negotiation.

Post lock-down, after the band belatedly and out of necessity adopted the use of virtual DAW recording, this developed into a distinct approach, one that incorporated far less collectively generated musical material.[47] Most of the parts that I virtually performed and recorded were, although worked out during the recording process, effectively consolidations, and harmonisations of melodies, riffs and structures already composed and laid down by Richard. Sometimes several takes of an individual part would be needed to ensure that it was accurately aligned.

Within SPI, opportunities for solos are almost non-existent due to the brevity of the songs and an unspoken *anti-rockist* aesthetic.[48] Some improvisation was possible, however, when working on my own compositions, as this allowed me to generate the initial recording before sending over the GarageBand file to fellow band member Richard Collier. In the case of 'Man in the Moon' this freedom allowed for the inclusion of an improvised guitar solo, though I was careful to position this at the very end of the track so as not to attract too much attention.[49]

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[45] Quoted in H. H. Stuckenschmidt, *Arnold Schoenberg: His Life, World and Work* (London: John Calder, 1977), 226, 227.

[46] For example, as used for the composition and recording of the album *Gina McKee*, Scottish Polis Inspectors, (Spotify, 2006).

[47] A general approach which evolved during lockdown would be that Richard, the main songwriter, would record a basic track including rhythm guitar, vocal, keyboards and programmed drums. He would then send over the GarageBand files, and I would overdub any parts needed: usually bass, guitar and backing vocals. It would often be up to me to then mix and edit the final track.

[48] Reflected in *anti-virtuosity*, but also less experimental and less improvisatory than the early version of the band which emerged from the post-punk scene of the late 1970s.

[49] 'Man in The Moon', Scottish Polis Inspectors (Bandcamp, 2021).

Unlike the solo in 'Don't Stop', there is no fixed, recorded blueprint to adhere or pay lip service to. In contrast with the laborious process of remembering then reproducing (in time with programmed drum parts) the base instrumental and vocal tracks, this was the most creatively satisfying aspect of the whole recording process, reflecting my enthusiasm to produce and capture spontaneous musical material. In contrast with the hours it took to lay down the other parts, this uninterrupted 4 minutes of recorded improvised material seemed especially spontaneous, *in flow*, and I was happier with the results of this section than the rest of the track.[50] I think 'Man in The Moon' provides an example of how difficult it can be to incorporate the *improvised* within music firmly located within a popular music genre, but also a reminder of ever-present possibilities afforded to those who (can) control their creative output and allow the improvising principle space to operate within their studio practice.

Fixity: parallel levels

In these examples, different levels of fixity can be seen to be operating at once - from the nuances of performing standard chords, to the spontaneous melodic creation of the solo, whilst still operating within idiomatically rigid structures. Individual artists and groups (SPI, Ouseburn Collective and The Jimi Hendrix Experience, for example), can incorporate different levels of spontaneous performance (themselves operating within different levels of a continuum) with relatively fixed and pre-worked out material. And, for Rock, recording technology can play a big part in mixing contradictory aesthetics.

This *parallel mixing*, witnessed early in rock's history with the Jimi Hendrix Experience, is apparent in *classic rock* groups such as ACDC, where the rhythm section's performance and song structures are tightly fixed, but the idiomatic improvisations of Angus Young are a constant presence, and Led Zeppelin, whose fixed riffs and song-structures provided springboards for a flexible *looseness* and collective interaction in performance, their iconic recorded tracks directing but never completely constraining an ability and desire to change and adapt material in real-time.[51]

[50] The 4-minute solo was edited down to less than 30 seconds due to the space constraints of an E.P.

[51] ACDC, *Let There be Rock*, (Atlantic, 1977) and *If You Want Blood*, (Atlantic, 1978); Led Zeppelin: 'No Quarter', *Houses of the Holy*, (Swan Song, 1973). *The Song Remains the Same*, (Swan Song, 1976). See also the various contrasting versions of 'No Quarter' captured in bootleg recordings between 1973 and 1977 and now available on YouTube. I credit the *Song Remains version* as inspiring a fascination with instant composition, and, contributing to a misunderstanding of what many (most?) Rock guitarists *actually* do when soloing. Led Zeppelin, especially in their live performance represented a *step forward* from the Jimi Hendrix Experience in respect of democratically distributed improvised performance across the instrumental voices and real-time

The extent to which improvisation is incorporated both individually and collectively represents contrasting artistic values, but such values can also be detected in the extent to which each performer is *allowed* a creative voice. The rejection of guitar solos in UK Punk and Post-Punk and the associated indie Rock/Pop that followed reflects an anti-virtuosic and potentially pro-collective aesthetic. But instrumentalists, rather than being *liberated* to explore, create and express were often represented in passive, conservative voices, still subservient to the lead singer and traditional song structures which echoed older forms of Rock.

A more thorough and *successful* deconstruction of classic Rock conventions, and one contemporaneous with the UK punk scene, was evidenced in New York's No Wave movement. The chaotic and apparently unstructured music of Mars, DNA and others were not completely alien to Rock but rarely were they central to artists' aesthetics .[52]

Unlike the above mentioned established and comparatively rigid roles, the individual *voices* of No Wave groups enjoyed more equal prominence. Each voice was not, as with ACDC, the Jimi Hendrix Experience and SPI, subservient to a lead vocal or lead guitar, and the apparent interaction between the instrumental voices went further than the flexibility of groups like Led Zeppelin. The rejection of *solos* echoed Free Jazz's collectivist approach to music generation and the often harsh, chaotic, dissonant, and atonal music reflected Free Improvisation's search for sounds outside of idiom. What grounded these artists in Rock and allowed them to subvert the wider rock genre as it existed in the 1970s was their choice of instrumentation and propulsive beats. Despite being stylistically disparate, No Wave artists shared a common approach of abandoning traditional song structures, instrumental and singing techniques, and deliberately dismantling and/or rearranging the now accepted hierarchy of instrumental roles which led to a more *democratic* division of labour in

interaction between performers. Interestingly, most of the bands which were subsequently influenced by both groups moved in the opposite direction - a focus on virtuosic guitar playing (which largely ignored the creative possibilities of other instrumental voices) led to increased fixity of roles and less improvisatory possibilities.

[52] I'm thinking of commercially successful artists who incorporated elements of atonality, dissonance and chaos into their compositions. For example, 'The Solid Time of Change' by Yes, *Close to the Edge*, (Atlantic, 1972); Deep Purple, 'Speed King', *Deep Purple in Rock* (Harvest, 1970).

performance, and one which, according to Ben Watson, reflected Ornette Coleman's 'Harmolodics'.[53]

Coleman's collaborative practice from the early 1970s onwards seems to illustrate a working out of this theory and shares, although withing a Jazz setting as opposed to Rock, a similar kind of deconstruction and subversion using conventional *instrumentation* helping to ground it idiomatically. But 'Harmolodics' was a compositional method and theory, one designed to guide the creative *process* of performers rather than simply describe aural characteristics of any musical output. Although unclearly defined, one central component of this approach (gleaned from vague and conflicting content of interviews from Coleman and ex-band members) is that, however mediated by considerations of music theory, improvisational real-time performance was central. By way of contrast, the improvised sound of No Wave was more often carefully and painstakingly constructed through collective reiteration and rehearsal. Equally non-improvised at the point of recording and a [54] precursor to No Wave, *Trout Mask Replica* [55] shares with it and Coleman's approach this apparent democratic output but is compositionally considerably less equal: the musicians who played on the recording were closely directed to perform *exact* reproductions of pre-composed materials.

Despite (or because of) the truth contained in Bailey's assertion that improvisation is not a type of music but rather a means of music making, the way we construct music affects the resultant output; the process impacts the product. And we can hear the former in the latter, although in ways that might be unexpected. And this is one reason why many musicians choose improvisation as a method of composition. It is for me. Alternatively, if you want a rigid fixity and repeatable coherence, then it might make sense to pre-compose in accordance

[53] Ben Watson, 'Philosophizing Post-Punk', *Radical Philosophy* issue 132, July/August 2005. Interviews Coleman and his collaborators provided clues to how Harmolodics informed his approach. 'The use of the physical and one's own logic made into an expression of sound to bring about the musical sensation of unison executed by a single person or with a group… harmony, melody, speed, rhythm, time and phrases all have equal position in the results that come from the placing and spacing of ideas' Coleman, Ornette, 'Prime Time for Harmolodics'. *Down Beat*, July 1983, 54–55. See also, Don Cherry, in 'Reflections of Don Cherry', *Reflections in Rhythm, WordPress,* November 2009 (21 August 2021).

[54] We can compare the interplay of guitar parts in *Trout Mask Replica* with similarly contrapuntal voices in Coleman's recordings. The former carefully transcribed and reproduced but more chaotic than Coleman's which were guided by knowledge and application of music theory but not constrained by any written melodic or harmonic material. Coleman's approach involved players soloing at once using different keys, dependent on real time listening decision making. The first specified application of this theory in practice was *Skies of America* (Columbia, 1972).

[55] I mean in the sense that I define improvisation for the purposes of this thesis. The musical parts, at the point of recorded performance, were pre-written or memorised.

with familiar templates and with the assistance of DAW pre-sets. If coherent, integrated parts are desired which allow individual members of a group to share in a creation, then gradual and collective composition might work (*Gina McKee*, Scottish Polis Inspectors, 2006).

Although the above can incorporate, facilitated by the 'Improvisation Principle', elements of improvisation, more consistent spontaneity is possible by discarding pre-written structures. And unpredictability and spontaneity (or sense of) is sometimes, as No Wave and *Trout Mask Replica* illustrate, more apparent if the artist is still attached to idiomatic conventions.[56]

6.4 Solo Multi-tracking and Y.I.D.I.Y.

Most of the performances which comprise the YouTube videos (*The Lockdown Sessions*) discussed earlier are solo guitar improvisations. As such, they can be considered as *monologues* as opposed to *dialogues*, detached from the voices of other speakers. But, echoing Boulez's concerns about improvisation,[57] in my experience it is impossible (and not necessarily desirable) to detach oneself from memory, experience or knowledge. In any event, there appears to be present during improvised performance real-time dialogue with this *history* as you filter, adapt and possibly reject or react.[58]

Despite this dialogue, the combination of being so attached to baggage and repertoire together with technical limitations and drilled muscle memory, can constrain and direct solo improvised performance to such an extent that it becomes too inward looking and, therefore, less compelling to take part in or listen to. During lockdown, in the increased absence of collaborators, *solo creation* became more central to my creative practice. Most of the material that comprises the album *Y.I.D.I.Y.* reflects a return to, but also development of, an approach I have long taken: layering my own multi-tracked improvised (guitar) performances to

[56] Free Improvisation's attempts at cutting loose from idiom can sometimes result in predictable results: the inevitable hesitation before playing, the sudden latching onto a crescendo, the mimicking of a rhythms etc.
[57] Pierre Boulez, *Conversations with Celestin Deliege* (London: Eulenburg Books, 1976).
[58] For improviser and amateur runner Gustav Thomas, solo improvisation constitutes 'a combination of meditative internal thinking – music *is* thought, and thus solo improv is a kind of thinking aloud. But the 'dialogue' as such is with the depth of cultural association (baggage? Reference? Repertoire?) that a performer resonates with every sound, note, gesture'. From email conversation with myself and Gustav Thomas 17 May 2021.

produce complete tracks.[59] Part of the motivation for multi-tracking (as opposed to presenting solo recorded performances) is a hope and expectation that in creating multiple instrumental voices and, therefore, additional material to react to within a single composition more layers of difference will present themselves and this combination will produce a whole that has character unforeseeable from the perspective of laying down solo tracks.

Spontaneous Melody, Guitar, and Y.I.D.I.Y.

> It's never quite as magical. But then again it turns into a piece of music, a tune. It's now a melody. It changes from the idea of being an improvisation to playing a melody.[60]
>
> I'm more interested in melodic things. I think the biggest challenge when you go to play a solo is trying to invent a melody on the spot.[61]

Frank Zappa improvised guitar solos in the studio and on stage. He found the latter more creatively productive, one reason why his live improvisations were often incorporated into studio recordings. The presence of a concert audience helped, as did an absence of any parallel distraction from production and engineering duties which pre-occupied Zappa's studio practice; in concert he was free from the sometimes-debilitating tensions that arise when combining creative performance and production.[62]

Although the modern laptop musician enjoys *freedom from* the standardisation of procedures and directions of external producers/engineers, her agency is circumscribed by the intentionally fixing nature of the modern DAW which seems designed to maximise predictability. Default settings in GarageBand and Logic, for example, provide standardised pre-sets,[63] the most common time signatures, precise quantization, [64] and processing that apes *industry standards* often derived from *classic techniques* of engineers and producers

[59] A similar approach was central to the making of *Escapology*, Ouseburn Collective (Bandcamp, 2015). My more recent compositional approach, reflected in the contents of *Y.I.D.I.Y.* involves less editing of material, less cutting and pasting of melodies, which hopefully allows more flow in performance and sense of spontaneity in the recorded outputs.
[60] Steve Howe quoted in Bailey, *Improvisation*, 41.
[61] Frank Zappa quoted in Kostelanetz, *The Frank Zappa Companion*, 98.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Standard song structures immediately present themselves when creating a new track.
[64] Intriguingly, Apple seem to be trying to address some of this *off the peg predictability* with the 'Drummer Function' now available in GarageBand and Logic which *plays along with* pre-recorded tracks, *interacting* with their rhythmic output. Irony? Predictability re algorithm and Zappa's use of re *Dance Me This.*

developed in the 1960s and 70s. Of course, control can be wrestled back, but it can take time and effort to bypass or modify default settings, and such activities echoes older, established performer/producer tensions of established studio practice. Part of the challenge is to navigate these structures to produce music that is not entirely predictable.

I was struck when first coming across Frank Zappa's quote about creating instant melodies and I still find the possibility and actuality of creating melodic content in real time exciting: a practice I encountered soon after first picking up guitar.[65] But over the years opportunities to do so evaporated, until a relatively recent encounter with Free Improvisation immediately preceding this research helped to create further space.[66]

Howe's observation that reproducing melodic material generated through improvisation is 'never quite as magical' reflects my own satisfaction at a sense of discovery, creativity, and spontaneous expression. And a recognition that, as Mark Hollis described (see Chapter 2), that a quality in the musical generated can't be exactly replicated through performance of pre-composed parts. I suspect that these complimentary factors (one personally experiential, the other more objective), are also a motivation for many improvisors.

It's interesting too that Howe juxtaposes melody with improvisation as if they were opposites, somehow mutually exclusive - the implication being that improvisation is somehow no longer improvisation when it becomes a melody. I'm unconvinced, but I think I know what he's getting at: a kind of fixing that can occur after recognising melodic content that *works*, so wants to be frozen, preserved to be repeated via transcribing or memorising for future performance. Or, perhaps, through modern copy and pasting in a DAW, but this preservation could also take place more directly through the recording of the improvisation as it happens, and any repetition of the melodic content, with variation if required, could take place in in real-time performance thus preserving the *magic* of any *improvised quality*.[67]

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[65] Although Bailey's discussion of 'Instrumental Impulse' is in the context of Free Improvisation, it speaks to how I think about my own guitar playing. When left to my own devices, when playing outside of commercial contexts, I seek to create *through* the instrument, not to replicate, and I think this is (was?) true for many self-taught musicians from the *rock tradition* whether creation is through composition or improvisation. The nuances possible when working with the electric guitar are incalculable and, despite an obvious stratification that occurred in terms of how the instrument was used, some rock musicians have continued to explore these possibilities.

[66] To a large extent, what motivates me to continue playing and what drives this current research.

[67] I'm thinking here of more hip-hop derived methods involving shorter melodic fragments sometimes incorporated in my own practice. See also, 'Shmorgust' from *Vent*, Ouseburn Collective (Bandcamp, 2022) and

Howe is talking about constructing melodies whilst playing/ improvising on guitar, and this *becoming melody* seems to a have a life of its own; it *wants* to become part of recorded/memorised/written structure that might also *call* be reproduced live during concert performance. But, despite dominant practice and trends, Howe together with other electric guitarists continue to improvise, producing real-time melodic playing, whether one wants to use the noun *melody* to describe it.[68]

But counter to this, I'm reminded of an apparent increased focus within Popular and Rock music (inside and outside of Academia)[69] on the necessity for exact repetition of the pre-existing which seems to replicate, in my opinion inappropriately, the Western Art Model of performance and composition. As I discussed in Chapter 2, this was obvious when being taught and encouraged during my comparatively recent experience as a Popular Music Undergraduate - this included expectation to reproduce melodic solos as well as entire tracks from the *Canon*. As exercises in ear training (there were other opportunities for this) or even as *one* approach (Popular Music has always included the necessity for performative reproduction) this seems reasonable, but this replication was so central to the performance module and taught as a means in itself rather than in the context of learning about how to compose or improvise: the very things these artists were doing when they created the solos; they were not reliant on any previously recorded template to copy.[70] As a guitar teacher too, I am often witness to how technology is often used (particularly through YouTube tutorials) towards the aim of exactly replicating songs, tracks and solos and, whilst these technologies can be useful as teaching aids (not least as a means to demystify instrumental technique and

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the real-time melodic fragments used in the construction Talk Talk's albums *Spirit of Eden* (EMI, 1988) and *Laughing Stock* (EMI, 1991). I wonder what it would be like to hear the individual parts of *Trout Mask Replica* as they were first performed.

[68] Including electric guitarists Eva Mendoza, Nels Cline, Mary Halverson and Bill Orcutt. Each embrace the idiomatic but mix genre and technique. This *semi-unfixed* practice contrasts starkly with more traditional melodic players such as Eric Clapton and Joe Bonamassa who continue to work within a strict framework of amplified blues which was already established in the mid to late 1960s. In 'Days Like These', it's the real-time *discovery* of a simple melodic fragment, a riff, which led to the decision to repeat then vary it over a course of a couple minutes improvised performance, the riff itself intersecting with repeated and varied patterns co-collectively composed.

[69] My own experience of working in both covers and 'original' bands, and comparatively recent experience of completing a taught Popular Music degree.

[70] Popular examples were those from Steely Dan album tracks including 'Haitian Divorce', 'Kid Charlemagne' (both 1976) and 'Do it Again' (1972), examples of melodic solos which were improvised, the musicians having no intention of replicating them in concert. I think this reflects a truth in Bailey's concern that the fixity and separation found in Western Art Music has 'infected' and inappropriately colonising forms of vernacular music, and in doing so *closing down* improvisational and creative possibility. Bailey*, Improvisation*, 66-67.

knowledge), I now see a large part of my role as guitar teacher to use, contextualise and negotiate these and other learning resources in a manner which identifies what might be considered as a more *Rock approach* to instrumental and musical practice: instilling a recognition that creativity is a worthwhile and central aim of popular music practice and that improvisation is and can be a central driver of this creativity.

The presence of single line melody, especially when derived from scales and modes regularly used within specific genres, signifies the idiomatically fixed. It is one element which characterises much of Rock improvisation, often distinguishing it from free (er) forms.[71] No Wave and Noise artists often abandoned this kind of melodic content altogether and in doing so can be seen to operate outside or at the very fringes of rock genres. Interestingly, Pop and Rock avant-gardists Radioactive Sparrow and Yeah You!, self-avowed *Total Improvisors*, seem willing to embrace idiomatic content including melody, even cliché, whilst producing music which is as unfixed at the moment of performance as that of more traditional Free Improvisers, a reminder that the unfixed nature of improvisation does not necessarily involve an unfixing from idiom, but can in another sense be *absolutely free*.

A goal of my improvisational practice is to *unfix* elements of my performance from strict idiomatic style and convention and allow for a less abrupt movement across and between structures composed in real-time and idioms. At times, especially within my solo work, I feel I fail spectacularly in this respect, often reproducing, without too much variation, what I know, what I have played. But I think there are glimpses of *success* in more recent recordings.

Y.I.D.I.Y, 'Seasons Delayed' and *'Acoustica'*

All the guitar parts for 'Seasons Delayed' were recorded during the same 2-hour recording session on the 6th March 2021, some three months into the 3rd UK lockdown.[72] The starting point was typical of many of my solo recordings during these months: opening a new project in GarageBand then searching for a workable electric guitar sound, one responsive to my playing; providing the *right* balance of percussive attack, clarity and sustain, invariably

[71] Artists such as Zappa, Beefheart and Henry Cow, together with the contemporary artists I name check above, show how melodic material can be used to stretch genre and be mixed with more abstract, rhythmically based non-idiomatic approaches and material.

[72] 'Seasons Delayed' from *Y.I.D.I.Y.* by Ouseburn Collective (Bandcamp, 2021), track accessible at https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com/track/seasons-delayed

necessitating trawling through various amp models, modulation, reverb and delay effects, then adjusting them whilst carefully listening back. This preparation was time consuming but vital before any workable part could be recorded - over the years countless tracks have been abandoned due to unsatisfactory sound - and, for me, it was particularly important that *the* sound was established before performance largely because of how my own playing responds in real time to the sound that is heard during performance.[73]

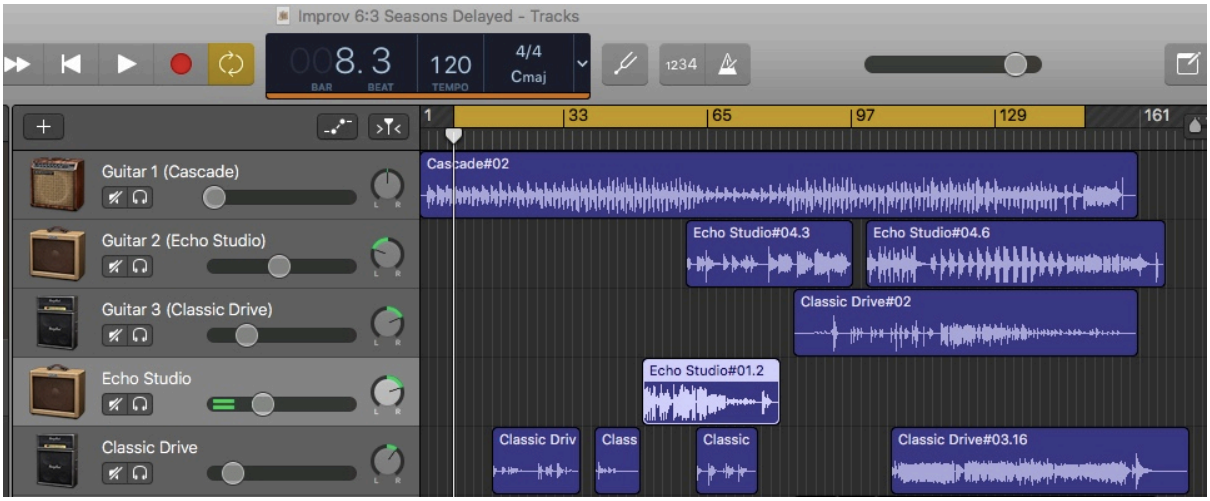
One fixed element was the tempo, the selection of which was the starting point for the track and chosen by opening the click track function in GarageBand and listening to what was presented, then adjusting. My intention was to then, as on so many previous occasions, record a first, initial guitar track over the click. Whereas earlier tracks, reflecting a standard practice employed by Rock groups such as the Mountain Goats, began by laying down a drum and guitar *groove* with the specific intention of using it as a *base* for future, more elaborate overdubs, from the outset my intention here was look only as far forward as *this* performance, *this* recording - keeping in mind a possibility that this track, this improvisation could be complete in itself and stand alone as a composition, not part of some future assemblage. This meant that the initial guitar performance needed to include both rhythmic and melodic content, perhaps in equal measure. My intention here was to capture in the first guitar performance/recording a complete, uninterrupted, long-form take with identifiable form and developmental, shape and length.

Tired of recording numerous guitar parts to be edited, copied and pasted, and, unhappy with many of the results, I was determined to perform a totally improvised guitar part in one take over at least a few minutes. There was no pre-planning or editing on this guitar part, I was free to play what I wanted but chose to play slight variations on a repeated rhythm, static harmony and my playing was guided by the delay pedal I was playing through. Once recorded, it was fixed of course. The repetition in my playing was emphasised by the repetition of the delay pedal and inspired by the predictability of lives lived under strict lockdown conditions.

[73] For the purpose of this research, these pre-recording and pre-performance preparations will be bracketed off from the musical performance/improvisations. But, to what extent could aspects of these processes be thought of as improvisation?

Like some of the *Lockdown Sessions* discussed in Chapter 2, the first guitar part (first recorded and the first we hear) of 'Seasons Delayed' effectively adds another layer of sound via the relatively long delay setting used, another voice to kinetically respond to (in the absence of people) and have dialogue with. The overdubbing of the second part effectively makes the first a *base* (not necessarily the intention at the outset) and, the single note emphasis of this second part suggests traditional rhythm/lead division but this separation is not clear, remains fluid in a way that strict, more typical roles normally prevent. The second (and subsequent) guitar parts are melodic in content, relying heavily on modes, pentatonic, diatonic scales together with some chromaticism, but interest might equally be found within the intentionally contrasting sounds (from processing and physical interaction with instrument) and sound combinations presented by the interacting voices throughout the track.

Fig. 6.3 Screenshot of from GarageBand recording of 'Seasons Delayed' displaying separate, multitracked guitar parts, panning and levels



Whereas 'Seasons Delayed' was constructed by building up several layers of parts over an initial chordal base upon which more melodic single lined parts were superimposed, 'Acoustica' was an attempt to create a duet - a dialogue between two acoustic guitars that didn't happen in real time but might convincingly sound like it did.[74] The first guitar part was laid down very quickly and attracted no editing. It was rhythmic, chordal and modal in character. No click track was used to keep time, so it was rhythmically fluid and slightly unstable, but during the performance there was an attempt to create and keep to some

[74] 'Acoustica' from Ouseburn Collective *Y.I.D.I.Y.* (Bandcamp, 2021), track accessible at https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com/track/acoustica

approximate regular tempo or tempos. This allowed for the complete bypassing of standardised timings and bars as dictated by Logic. On hearing the first track playback, I was happy with the results.[75]

The real challenge came when performing and recording guitar part 2 which would change the piece from solo to duet. It's a very different experience - improvising over a recorded part in real time without the benefit of a click track or drum part and when the *backing* is semi-unpredictable, feeling only partially known. Of course, I had knowledge of the sound and shape of the initial guitar part having performed it and played it back, but during overdubbing only an approximate memory of how the partially completed form was going to play out, with no precise map to navigate the changing of chords, tempo and dynamics. So, as well as trying to create real-time melodic and rhythmic material I felt partially *blindfolded* when negotiating a constantly changing sonic terrain.

6.5 Studio Recording: *April*

On the 10th of April 2021, after a year-long absence from playing live with other musicians, [76] I reconvened recordings with drummer Marlene Everling at ICMuS Music Studios. This would be the first of four, two-hour recording sessions that month which would provide the raw material for the Ouseburn Collective album release *April.*[77]

Establishing a template for Recording: First Recording Session

Our general, agreed approach was to record completely improvised material; we had no pre-written or memorised parts, the idea was *just to play* and see what happened.[78] In order to avoid excessive preparation time, I used a simple recording set up incorporating my lap-top, a four-track interface and three mics on the drums and one on the guitar amp.[79] On the first recording session, we recorded 3 tracks of approximately 15 minutes in length, the precise length of which were dictated by our real-time negotiation of when it should end. We then recorded a few shorter tracks before a final longer, undetermined one. Due to a mutual

[75] Screen Shot guitar part 1. 'Acoustica', Ouseburn Collective, *Y.I.D.I.Y.* (Bandcamp, 2021).
[76] Discounting one live gig in August 2000 and the virtual collaborations discussed in Chapter 5.
[77] Ouseburn Collective, *April (*Bandcamp, 2022). Accessible at https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com
[78] This approach would be slightly modified as the sessions proceeded.
[79] See figs 6.4, 6.5 and 6. 6.

feeling of success after the first recording session, this approach, with some minor modifications, was adopted during the following three.[80]

Fig. 6.4 Recording session for 14th April 2021 showing DAW set up, mic placement for guitar amp and percussion egg used in 'Taking Back Control'

[80] For each subsequent session, I made sure to include something different in my approach which might create difference along-side the repeated standardised procedures. For example, the second session involved the use of a percussion egg to strike the strings, the third a wah-wah pedal, the fourth a different guitar and effects unit.

Fig. 6.5 Recording session 14th April 2021 showing kick drum mic placement

Fig. 6.6 Recording session 14th April 2021 showing overhead mics placement

Realising that we would quickly accumulate a lot of material, I adopted the practice of immediately making notes following each session to remind me which takes I (we) had thought the best to help me focus my listening. For example, we both thought the first 15-minute recording was shaky and inconsistent, perhaps reflecting that we were both rusty having not played with other musicians for some time. This was exacerbated by the fact the recording levels had to be constantly adjusted. The second track recorded would become the basis for 'Days Like These' - a mid-tempo straight Rock groove: fun, but I felt at the time rather *standard* with its repeated riff and drum patterns but seemed to serve the purpose of getting back into playing collaboratively again. I made a note at the time that it might, with editing and overdubs, form the basis of a complete track.

Listening back to the tapes the following day, it seemed that the third improvisation was the most consistently strong. I felt at the time that I was coming up with ideas and aspects of my playing were more accurate/precise - my hands were more consistently doing what my brain was suggesting. I felt that there was a more organic mix of approaches which, more blended synthesis of freedom and structure, the idiomatic and non-idiomatic. The opening section (actually about a minute into the original recording) is reminiscent of Free Improvisation in

its atonal free from pulse, timbre focus and dialogical nature - the call and response, and hesitation. I liked the way it then gradually moved into a more familiar area of propulsive groove, with an energy and collectively negotiated climax. I remember being pleased at the time, and Marlene commented on the strong ending.[81]

6. 6 Days Like These: Fixed Idiomatic and Jamming

'Days Like These' was constructed from the second, *long* improvisation we recorded on the 10th of April.[82] The guitar and drums track were performed in the studio without any pre-planning or discussion. The unfixed nature of the track was apparent at the point the performance began; exactly how the piece would develop or how long it will last was underdetermined. I started playing a made-up riff and Marlene 'came in.' [83] (I subsequently edited out my introduction, so it sounds as though she starts with a drum pattern, then I follow). Despite this spontaneous start and lack of the pre-composed material, the resulting track sounds very familiar and derived due to its *standard* groove and use of pentatonic and blues scales.

The pre-agreed, pre-memorised structures of much of Pop and Rock usually require pre-performance verbal or written dialogue between musicians to establish the rules, the structure, the plan. Despite this lack of planning, a different kind of unspoken dialogue and mutual understanding is revealed by listening to this *jam*. The generic riff I play quickly establishes and communicates the kind of groove/rhythm *required*, and, listening to me, ME is quick to pick this up. Through familiarity with the *genre rules*, we have a connection and understanding of where this might go, but the exact working out, the exact order and dynamics of notes used, the variations of the drum patterns throughout only become known in the real-time performance and/or playback.

Jamming

The use of jamming to produce musical material often results in unfocused and lazy repetition of Rock cliches, arguably exemplified by my playing here.[84] But even at its worst I

[81] First track completed but not used in final album, effectively replaced by 'Baby Steps'.
[82] 'Days Like These' accessible at https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com/track/days-like-these
[83] It's still unclear to me to what extent I'm unintentionally reproducing a pre-exiting riff(s).
[84] But I don't try to replicate any part I've played or heard. It's an attempt, however unsuccessful, to instantly come up with a melodic idea. The initial recording shares an approach explained to me by Radioactive

think jamming is an avenue of communication and learning through participating in a shared language which incorporates spontaneity and at least the possibility of real invention,[85] so I don't think this kind of musicking should be dismissed completely; I have played with and talked to enough *trained* musicians to know that the ability to share in this practice is not enjoyed (whether valued or not) by all or even most. Jamming is, in addition to a useful starting point to collectively build collective composition, a glimpse into possibility, a reminder of what can be achieved collectively in real-time.

In my experience, jamming, in addition to being a means by which fixed material is collectively generated and honed, often presents itself as the warm-up to rehearsing more *seriously fixed* work in band practices, often the most potentially creative and free section of band rehearsals which just highlights how uncreative performing in commercial settings can be. To a large extent, I learned to play guitar and interact with other musicians through a kind of jamming; most of my school bands' practices were taken up this way, usually extending the middle sections of songs to ludicrous degrees for no other reason than we enjoyed it.[86] But, rather than being a fun distraction from the main event, my memory is that a kind of focussed and committed jamming was usually (unless *the* rehearsal immediately before gig) our raison d'etre. With extremely limited technique and musical knowledge, we would often play to the limits of our ability which itself required thought and concentration and learning to play an instrument and music outside of formal direction always involves experimentation, improvisation.

The *Jam Band Scene* which emerged in the US during the 1990s was a rare example of a movement within Rock premised on the *very idea of improvisation* and can be seen to have extended the loose and flexible approach to performance I describe above whilst consciously

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Sparrow's Bill Bargefoot. Sparrow spontaneously create their own distinct version of the Rock that inspired them, but not reproduction. I can certainly hear the influence of *Trout Mask Replica*, Status Quo and others in the guitar parts, sounds and rhythms of their seminal 1989 release *Rockin' on The Portoman* (Bandcamp), which also contains the haunting 'Empty Pockets' - at least as moving as the *obligatory* ballads which inhabited many Rock albums of the 1970s and 80s: Precis of a conversation with Bill Bargefoot 7th July 2021. Despite this improvisational purity they weren't averse to experiment with limited overdubbing to layer these improvisations, at least from the late 1980s onwards.

[85] Examples of jamming which seems to transcend the derogative sense of the term might include the studio generated material of Can and Pil. The long-form live instrumentals of Frank Zappa's *Shut Up 'n Play Yer Guitar* (1982), approaches which were often harmonically static and based on repetition of previously used harmonic forms but highly focussed and managing to create, to these ears, interesting nuance and difference, through complex dialogical interaction, sound nuance and rhythmic complexity.

[86] *Kashmir*, (C90, 1979).

grounding it firmly within established idiomatic forms. Although many Jam Bands demonstrated a hybrid approach to genre styles and conventions inspired by late 1960s groups such as the Grateful Dead and the Allman Brothers Band, this tendency was often conservative, looking back to but rarely developing the eclectic sources that were used to *construct* rock back in the mid to late 60s.[87] Like their predecessors, these bands mixed genres but there was little attempt to stretch, disrupt, subvert or transcend idiom. The focus on these artists' practice was the live concert and live album which, inherited from the Grateful Dead, was heavily reliant on an accepting fan culture which *bought into* the acceptance of lengthy, improvised performance.

Jamming, Just Playing and Open Improvisation

Counter-intuitively perhaps, there seems to be a connection between this type of Rock improvisation and the Free or non-idiomatic: the possibility of being able *just to play* without pre-planning or direction.[88] This is important for this thesis because it is my comparatively recent involvement with and research into Free Improvisation that has (re-) inspired my interest in incorporating less fixed forms of music generation into my practice.[89] It seems that *Rock jamming* (or shall we say *groove-based collective real-time performance*?) at its best can use memories and internalised patterns and techniques and allow the ability to *just play*. By way of contrast, dominant narratives from Free Improvisation reflect an intentional rejection of bypassing or lack of reliance on these stylistic conventions and techniques that facilitates this freedom, but at the same time invite us to reach further. These two intersecting approaches to spontaneous performance seem to be an ever-present tension within my creative process.

Both approaches constitute forms of improvisation which, unlike strictly delimited forms of Blues-Rock, are potentially *open* and *uncertain*. When describing the highly eclectic music of Henry Cow (and other experimental vernacular music) Piekut defines 'Open Improvisation'

[87] Jazz, Blues, Country, Folk, Funk, Bluegrass etc. Examples of prominent Jam Bands included Phish, Govt. Mule and Blues Traveler. A more in-depth examination of the Jam Band phenomena can be found in Dean Budnick's exhaustive texts *Jam Bands: North America's Hottest Live Groups* (ECW Press: 1998); *Jam Bands: A Complete Guide to the Players, Music & Scene* (ECW Press: 2004). See also Nicholas Clark Reeder, PhD, 2014, Brown University, *The Co-Evolution of Improvised Rock and Live Sound: The Grateful Dead, Phish, and Jambands.*

[88] I'm contrasting this with the type of unfixed studio practices of such used at times by Dylan or Bowie, or even the conventional use of 'head' arrangements by jazz musicians.

[89] This research includes my involvement with a post-graduate module which incorporated group improvisation sessions and a wider reading of texts related to Free Improvisation.

as that being 'without a plan or necessary telos…open improvisation appears as a kind of concerted movement toward a future that remains underspecified, and thus uncertain.'[90] Piekut wants to move away from the paradoxically limiting and directive (for me, with its unhelpful association with free *from*) use of the word 'Free' when describing these kinds of real-time practices, which seems helpful, not to mention more realistic.

6.7 Towards Less Fixed

The standard familiarity of 'Days Like These' locates itself at the fixed end of any fixed-unfixed continuum. But aspects of the approach adopted - the lack of planning, a mutual understanding to *just play*, and the variations introduced to patterns and material in real-time - introduce uncertainty and difference.

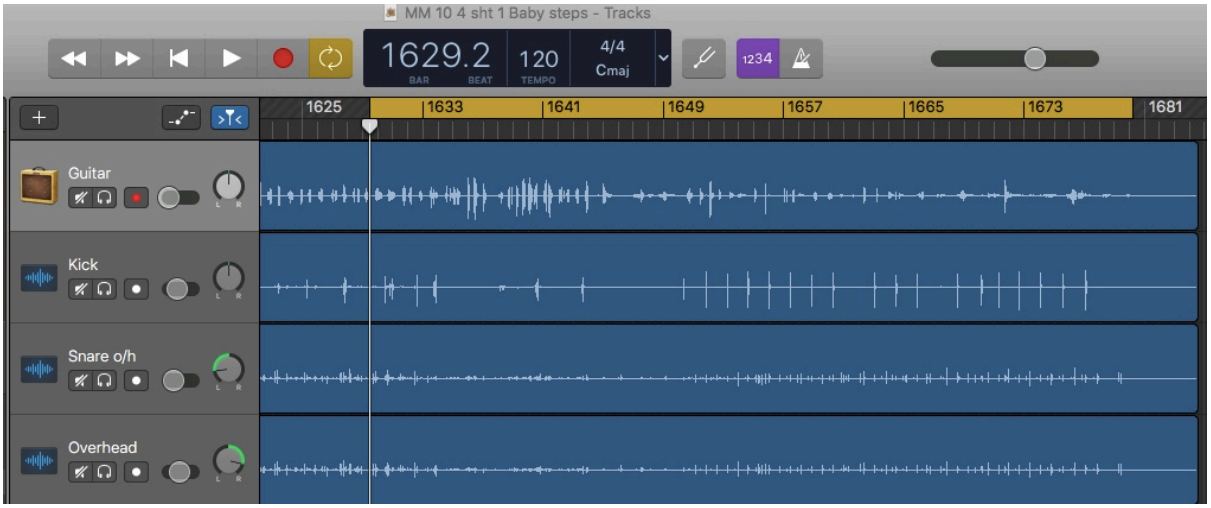
Without such reliance on pre-digested materials, or the reworking of familiar patterns, other tracks from *April* can at times sound more hesitant, more considered, less confident and less fixed. As far as I can recollect, my thoughts at the time reflect this mindset: without a certain familiarity my playing seems less automatic, less intuitive. At the moment of performance, I'm more often aware of my thinking process, how I should approach things, thoughts about what decisions I should make. All this reflects an increased uncertainty about how things might develop and a concurrent decrease in performance flow.[91]

a) 'Baby Steps' and 'Taking Back Control' Unedited short tracks

I see these tracks as companion pieces. Both are deliberate attempts to produce concise, focussed and *complete* tracks, and the fact that they don't *attract* any overdubs, that they exist as simple, real-time 'totally improvised' duets (and the fact they exist at all [92]) is testament to my positive assessment.[93]

[90] Benjamin Piekut, *The World is a Problem* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 36-37.
[91] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*.
[92] From the four hours of recorded material which was edited down to produce *April*, there were many deliberately short improvisations which did not make the album cut.
[93] Tracks accessible at https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com/track/baby-steps-2 and https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com/track/taking-back-control-2

Fig 6.7 Screenshot of GarageBand Recording of 'Baby Steps' showing continuous unedited performance



Listening back to the recording and recalling as best I can the experience of performing 'Baby Steps', I am surprised at how *successful* [94] the performance was at combining in a relatively interrupted flow elements of less fixed and melodically idiomatic material within one spontaneous composition. To my ears, there is an unforced combination of these elements, and movement from one to another is facilitated by relatively consistent and sympathetic dialogue between instruments. I'm thinking here of the movement from mimetic, rhythm free-time call and response of the opening and how this seems to effortlessly develop into more melodic, but still abstract in the sense of not obviously fixed material over a regular(ish) time. The melodic content of the guitar part still sounds in dialogue with the slightly unpredictable drum part, and detached from any harmonic backdrop, is able to unfix itself from strict key or modal centres. Although I hear a cautious, uncertainty in 'Baby Steps' emanating from both musical parts, I see this in positive sense - it's as if we are both carefully negotiating our respective voices, and in this respect reflects the fact that this was still our first recording session.

'Taking Back Control' might be considered an example of *Quasi-total Improvisation* in that we agreed (in a deliberate attempt to be more concise, less rambling) its approximate length

[94] It's important to remember that the tracks that made it onto *April* are comprised of what I deemed to be more successful. There were hours of performance that I rejected, often because of what I saw as a failure to of fluid, consistent dialogue and too much hesitancy in this respect.

before-hand.[95] In common with several short recordings from the sessions (see also 'Snare Frequency'), Marlene did not begin playing until someway in, leaving me to begin to form the character of the piece. The track could be seen to have a two-part structure, beginning with a solo guitar section. Without the direction or distraction of regular beat, groove or external noise, I choose to *look inwards* and explore the sound of my guitar as it emerges through *this* amplifier, in *this* room. I'm sitting unusually close to the amp so that I can, if required, adjust the settings as I play, and I decide, after a rather uncommitted, and meandering start (thankfully disrupted by the unwanted and unexpected appearance of feedback), to use a percussion egg as *alternative plectrum* to provide percussive hits, added harmonics and, lastly, a violin effect. Although the availability of the egg at this recording session attests to pre-planning, it is uncertain as to when and how I will use it.[96] Because I have less control, I play in a more crude, percussive manner, necessarily experimenting with a less formed technique which inevitably produces difference and contrast. Unwanted feedback appears towards the beginning of my improvisation, but I choose to embrace and manipulate this by moving still closer to the amp, and by operating the guitar's bigsby tremolo arm which enhances the sustain and adds and vibrato which, to my ears, offers a satisfying contrast to the preceding and following percussive approach.

The transition to *Part two* occurs as Marlene interrupts my free(er) playing by introducing a tentative pulse with her ride cymbal, which I respond to with repeated *violin* hits. This period of transition appears to give us space to think about our next moves, and Marlene takes the lead by playing a drum fill which I take as a signal to introduce a steady groove. My response it to ditch the percussion egg, pick up my real plectrum and perform more conventional arpeggios and melodic lines. During this *groove section* we appear to be listening intently as breaks in the beat and melody lines are negotiated in a call and response which doesn't disrupt the flow. The second part ends with a recapitulation of the sustained feedback from *Part 1*, this time with rhythmic accompaniment.

I see both 'Baby Steps' and 'Taking Back Control' as less fixed in that they contain high levels of spontaneous content and are less obviously grounded in idiom than, say, 'Days Like These'. These two measures are related but not quite the same and intersect. Whilst the

[95] On other occasions we agreed to perform long or short tracks before playing but were less precise about the time limit. Some, like 'Chord of Destiny' ended up shorter because we negotiated endings in real-time.
[96] Turns out that the initial catalyst for its introduction is Marlene's decision not to play.

instrumentation, use of groove and melodic content point to Rock, Pop and Jazz styles, the suspension and disruption of these elements together with the less regular use of structures and extended techniques move away from the standard stylistic conventions and forms. I think they might represent small steps towards a kind of looser and open Rock that uses a greater degree of improvisation to unfix and blend the idiomatic with the non-idiomatic more consistently and organically.

When first coming across Bailey's term 'non-idiomatic' to characterise free improvisation I found it helpful to focus my attention away from pre-digested, pre-learned materials and patterns which, in theory at least, prevent coming up with genuinely *original*. However, in practice, such a blunt division between idiomatic and non-idiomatic seems false, failing to recognise a more nuanced actuality of improvised performance and the fact that if such a clear division exists free improvisation itself contains stylistic traits and conventions.[97] What I find more compelling and inspirational are artists who have managed to incorporate aspects of this freedom into their own blend of already stylistically fused music to produce something distinct.[98]

During the *April* sessions we recorded 12 short improvisations, but most of them not deemed successful enough to include on the album. But through this *different* approach (up until this point, my improvised collaborations would almost invariably be open ended, extended improvisations to be edited down), I came to recognise the higher levels of concentration, and focussed decision making necessary to successfully execute these *condensed improvisatory dialogues.* It seems that a more concentrated discipline is required when there is more immediately at stake, more immanent prospect of failure. And this might be what differentiates a more attentively improvised approach from loose jamming approach, no-matter what the length of the recording.

[97] The term non-idiomatic improvisation takes its name from what it is against, impliedly denigrating the predictable and formulaic *idiomatic*.

[98] The second section of 'Moonchild' from King Crimson's *Court of the Crimson King* (Polydor, 1969) is an early Rock example of an extended track which includes both highly structured and highly improvised sections. The latter is not only totally improvised in the studio but reminiscent of what was becoming known as Free-Improvisation,' though grounded in rock by its instrumentation and studio production which includes state-of-the-art stereo panning. It illustrates how open some rock artists were in the late 60s to musical movements outside of their own genre, but also reflects common stylistic traits already present in Free Improvisation which clearly separate it from the more consistent (blended) aesthetic of the rest of the album. I think King Crimson's improvisations were more successful when incorporated and fused with their own more unique approach to composition and production.

b) 'Snare Frequency' and 'Catching Throws'

These tracks contain additional layers of unpredictability: 'Snare Frequency' when exploiting and responding to a kind of *failure* of recording technology and 'Catching Throws' when incorporating and reacting to undeveloped performative technique.[99] They are examples of absence of beat and groove, without which I'm aware of a different kind of challenge from a reconsideration of my role as Rock guitarist. How do I respond, for example, when a drummer decides not to drum? [100]

In these kinds of free (er) (less fixed to idiomatic convention) improvisations, there seems to be a different kind of conversation going on. Whereas the establishing of a standard groove allows space and time to think about possible decisions (often whether work with or against the groove), its absence seems to present more possibilities - especially when beginning, aware that the other person is waiting - the space is more open and undetermined. But, as discussed below, this openness can produce uncertainty which at times is debilitating. I'm thinking here of my choice to (and how to) begin improvisations such as that which became the finalised track 'Catching Throws'. Because of my musical background this (still) feels like an important *choice not* to play a groove type of riff with regular rhythms.

When confronted with more *irregular* material from another musician, a quicker, more intuitive (and sometimes more obvious) mimetic response to the rhythms and pitches provided seems required. I can hear this kind of conversation being established at the beginning of 'Catching Throws'. My cautious, tentative *throwing out there* of some conventional chords to establish a mood and tonality to see what response might be forthcoming from ME.

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[99] Tracks accessible at https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com/track/snare-frequency and https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com/track/catching-throws

[100] Bruce Sinclair*, Improvisation*, https://brucesinclairwriter.wordpress.com/blog/. 3 October 2016 (2 June 2020). From a drummer's perspective, this micro-essay expresses trepidation in the expectation for *him* to begin, perhaps to introduce a tempo and groove or make the initial *active* decision for the improvisation to avoid these conventions. This sense of uncertainty and doubt reflects feelings I often have prior to commencing a *solo* improvisation, when there seems there nothing to respond to, only blank space and thoughts. Listening back to early recordings from this research period I see how *reactive* own my playing was, reliant on the drums (or another voice) to instigate an idea for me to respond or add to. Bruce's decision to begin, to open the improvisation and create the initial mood and base is reflected in the completed recordings of 'Shmorgust' and 'Shieldfield Wormhole' which were recorded shortly after Bruce's blog entry. Ouseburn Collective, *Vent*, (Bandcamp, 2021).

Unfortunately, the original version of 'Snare Frequency' was not recorded at the time of performance as I failed to press the record button. But it is represented by a brand-new recording.[101] During the original, unrecorded performance ME decided not to play. Instead, and unbeknownst to me, (I was seated very close to my amp, several yards away from the drum kit, my attention focussed on creating an *instant solo composition*), she had listened closely to how the snare on her drum vibrated, producing what would normally be unwanted noise, created in response to certain frequencies of the guitar.[102] After the recording, ME expressed her enthusiasm for how the *duet* (captured snare noise plus me) had worked out and suggested we play back the track (something we rarely did) to see what was captured: due to my error, nothing. So, we agreed to record another performance to try to capture similar snare frequencies.

This recording involved a different approach to the rest of the album: before we record, we know what our shared focus is going to be - to recapture how the guitar *sets off* the snare drum. Another level of fixity was added when agreeing that this would (only need to) be a short track. This pre-planning allowed a more direct path to what we were trying to achieve. Before we began, Marlene picked up the snare, moved it closer to the microphone and aimed it to capture the relatively feint sound of the snare more clearly.[103] For my part, I was immediately searching and listening for (high) frequencies in my guitar playing which would trigger and emphasise the snare and this, rather than rhythmic and melodic invention, was my primary intention. I was now completely aware of a dialogue which was, for me, not present in the original unrecorded performance. This, in turn, affected how I proceeded to play - on hearing a good snare *response,* I would repeat the chords or notes and/or increase the volume. My recollection is that my first performance (the unrecorded solo) was by far the superior, and I remember the disappointment as I felt that I had succeeded in that rare thing: a totally improvised solo performance that seemed complete.[104] Discovering that it had been a *duet*

[101] 'Snare Frequency', *April*, Ouseburn Collective (Bandcamp: 2022). Accessible at https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com/track/snare-frequency

[102] The fact that Marlene had heard a very different performance to myself, a reminder that there is no objective, single performative event. Neither the live performance event in the studio nor my mediated recording are singularly *authentic*.

[103] Actual dialogue directed at improvisation and (captured unintentionally) as ME tells me that my guitar is triggering the vibrations well.

[104] I recall being completely immersed in what I was doing, the rare enjoyment of the possibilities of not being confined by a groove or other instrumental voice.

after all made the impossibility of hearing more upsetting and a motivation for the recreation that followed.

The above descriptions reveal the extent to which our *free* approach to *just playing* was tempered and modified in practice by unforeseen and unwanted events which became catalysts for additional decisions, directions and dialogue - once Marlene had indicated that the snare was echoing and responding to the guitar's frequencies, my response was then to search actively for notes and chords which would trigger the snare more consistently and severely.

Since the early 1980s, most of the musicians I have worked with have spent years developing a certain amount of technique. One way of approaching a performance is to use and display the limits of one's technical ability - this might mean showing a fluidity, a speed, a dexterity, an accuracy. But, unlike Alan Moore, I consider it reductionist to conclude that this *display* is necessarily there to signify virtuosity, although there are plenty examples within rock which would support such a conclusion.[105] An improvisor might require an advanced technique necessary to realise rhythmic or melodic ideas that form in the head and *need* to be translated into sound. It is a different kind of decision, then, to introduce unfamiliar tools such as percussive eggs and guitar tuners to replace plectrums and fingers (see 'Taking Back Control') or, like Marlene in 'Catching Throws', choosing to throw drumsticks from a distance at her kit. Employing such a new, unpractised technique inevitably introduces lack of control and unpredictability. And a kind of experimentation. How can she control with any accuracy how long it takes for the sound to be produced; how can she/we know the nature of the sound that will result? Variables such as velocity, trajectory, angle, will operate unpredictably if there is *insufficient technique* applied. And how will I (prepare to) respond with this less idea of the kind of sonic material I will be faced with?

[105] Moore, *Rock: The Primary Text*. Moore argues that improvised solos serve little purpose other than to demonstrate or signify virtuosity. Hendrix's 'automatic noodling' might reflect this, but we shouldn't forget that we listen to Hendrix through the prism of countless musicians who chose his *virtuosity* as a main template. A *better* example of 'automatic noodling' might be my own playing in 'Test Event' from the album *Vent* (2022) accessible at https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com/track/the-test-event This contains passages of almost *constant soloing*, but I'm not sure I'm deliberately showing off my virtuosity here - to my ears it displays my extremely limited technique masked partially masked by the use a delay pedal. My recollection is that my motivation was to compliment John Allen's drum patterns as best I could and provide a kind of wall of sound through single notes that might fill up the sonic field in the absence of other instrumentation?

Chord of Destiny: Quasi-Total Improvisation

Feeling that my guitar sound was in danger of becoming one-dimensional, I decided to use a different set up for the recording session scheduled for the 24th of April. Using a guitar with higher output pickups and a distortion unit gave my playing an obviously different sound. In turn, the distortion and sustain produced affected the way I responded, manipulated and sculpted the sound in real-time, and the nature of material generated.[106] I'm thinking here about the ringing, sustained notes of the repeated chords that linger effortlessly and create saturated harmonics, and the hint of feedback which emerges only to be cut short by the next strike of the plectrum.

This improvisation involved playing a single, arpeggiated chord repeatedly for over 2 minutes.[107] The strings are not muted, and the resultant sustain and repetition allowed for a real-time appreciation of and attention to the difference in timbre and harmonics produced by each (slightly different) repetition as the ringing strings verge on the edge of feedback. I was curious to see how these nuances would play out and was conscious of how they were affected by how hard I struck the strings. This repetition is emphasised by the incessant and hypnotic groove ME provides, and it quickly becomes apparent that we are locked together in stasis. Any development is not provided by harmonic movement or melodic interest but rather in these *micro nuances*, and in the trance like state induced (for me anyway) as the track moves and increases in volume, displaced by variation by 'micro-fills' sporadically punctuating the drum parts.

6. 8 Production and Post-Production: fixing the fixed, semi-fixed and unfixed

Listening and Selection Decisions

At the point of performance and capture, the tracks discussed in this chapter incorporate elements of fixed and unfixed, but each seems to slot *best* into different points of a continuum. For example, the familiar use of cliché and grooves of 'Days Like These' places it firmly at the left side despite its fully improvised genesis. In one sense the very act of

[106] A Les Paul Junior through an Electro-Harmonix Metal Muff distortion unit. The resulting sound is a signifier of post-Clapton/post-Hendrix guitar rock; a distinct contrast to the cleaner twang of many of the other tracks in *April.* In theory, using guitar effects in conjunction with amplifier and guitar types provides a myriad of possibilities, but there is a constant pressure (partly through magazines, you tube tutorials) to reproduce exact classic sounds of the 60s and 70s, often which were improvised via response to technologies available.
[107] Chord of Destiny, accessible at https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com/track/chord-of-destiny

recording makes all the material discussed as fixed as any *Classical* score - once the recordings are complete, mixed and released, it's not possible to alter them without access to the original stem tracks; they remain the same when played back. But they also remain unfixed to the extent that the recordings are not, as far as I'm concerned, strict templates for future live performance and reproduction - they do not seek to constrain any variation in future performances by me or anyone else.

A trust in the recording process and a certain lack of concern as to whether it contaminates, prevents or dilutes any *pure creative aesthetic* has been common to many artists working in the Rock field - including those whose practice incorporates extensive improvisation, and in this respect contrasts with many narratives surrounding Free Improvisation and Jazz. Certainly, for me, the centrality and importance of the original captured performance remains despite or even because of the recording process.[108]

Working alone with a modern computer DAW to record, mix, edit and overdub parts raises the issue of tensions between performer and producer.[109] And in my practice often locates them schizophrenically within the same person. Notions of a clear divide between *pure, undiluted performance* and *neutral capturing of performance* has long been challenged, exemplified in many standard rock studio practices from the mid 1960s onwards, and the degree to which my own editing processes significantly shape the structure and form of each track varies - there was a conscious attempt on my part when recording and producing *April* not to disrupt the *arc* of the original improvised performances.[110]

Just because it is impossible and often undesirable for recording to serve a transparent, documentary role and to objectively capture performance doesn't mean that it can't be used to catch [111] and preserve important (if subjectively experienced) sonic aspects of the event which would otherwise be lost; and doesn't mean that recording can't (and doesn't necessarily) serve other creative purposes. To the extent that production processes are used to

[108] See discussion of Talk Talk's *Spirit of Eden* in Chapter 2.
[109] This relates to the tensions discussed by Andy Hamilton in 'The Art of Recording and the Aesthetics of Perfection': 'perfectionism' v 'imperfectionism'.
[110] Contrast, for example, 'Taking Back Control' with 'Shmorgust'. The latter uses a couple of short *looped* drum and bass 'samples' from an improvised performance as a *base,* over which further improvised performances are overdubbed. In 'Shmorgust' the original improvised form in lost.
[111] The title 'Catching Throws' can be seen to have a double meaning: stressing not only my reactive, real-time response to ME's drum parts, but also the process of capture.

make better and improve the original improvisations, a potential conflict between the spontaneous essence of improvisation and the *perfecting processes* of recording technology.[112]

Recognising these tensions, made clearer by the temporal space between the initial recording of performance and processing procedures, my practice seeks to combine a kind of subjective, documentary capture, together with some *improvement* or *expansion*. This combination intersects with another kind of attempted fusion: between more and less (idiomatically) fixed forms of improvised performance. My hope as (co-) performer, recordist and producer to *faithfully* capture and preserve parts and aspects of improvised performance and, if possible, not destroy essential qualities of the performance in the production processes.[113]

In order to decide which of the performances recorded during April 2021 to work on and use for the album, I listened back to several hours of material, then quickly made editing decisions: selecting those sections which to my ears *worked* as performances, self-contained instant compositions, or possible bases of a piece to be completed later.[114] Experience of editing over the last few years has repeatedly confirmed to me that if the initial studio performance doesn't work, then neither will the final production. Those sections which didn't work on these terms would be deleted.

It takes close attentive listening to make quick editing decisions based on aesthetic judgments. This solitary listening is a kind of communication with performance and performers, and the real-time decisions they allow are another kind of improvisational/ compositional act. But, especially in the case of *April* where there was little editing *within* the sections of audio that are initially selected, and I see this selection and discarding as a kind of

[112] For a more detailed discussion of these contrasting aesthetics, see Andy Hamilton, *Aesthetics and Music* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2007) and 'The Aesthetics of Imperfection Reconceived: Improvisations, Compositions, and Mistakes', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 2000.

[113] Whereas narratives have often contrasted fixed recordings with concert improvised performance, if a similar divide appears in my creative practice, then it is situated between my roles of *studio* performer and *studio* producer.

[114] The extent to which track had already been fixed was often determined, perhaps paradoxically, by the extent to which I considered any improvisation had been successful, or complete.

secondary compositional tool - although it might carve out and frame the *best* of the performance, no editing would be possible without the base of the initially recorded track.[115] Like improvisation itself, these decisions to edit and discard are often irreversible, involving the deletion of stem tracks due to the limits of hard disc capacity, time constraints, and the understanding that only by narrowing down the material and options available can allow for the completion of any project. And, like improvisation, these decisions can be considered as part of a quick compositional process as opposed to slow composition which might allow for re-working and fine adjustments.

In general terms, the use of editing in the production of *April* marks an increased movement away from basing finalised tracks on smaller *sampled* sections of improvised material which reflected a more *post-hip hop aesthetic.* Overall, longer, uninterrupted sections of improvisation were used so more of the real-time development and instantly created forms can be heard in the finalised tracks - a combination of unfixed and fixed practices. [116] Some of the shorter tracks such as 'Baby Steps' and 'Taking Back Control' are almost presented *As Is*, whereas longer pieces including 'Days Like These' and 'Delay and Repeat', even though sections have been carved out of the beginning and middle and include overdubbed performances, still contain large section of unedited collaboration in the guitar and drum parts: always the foundation of each track.[117]

Tensions within Divisions: protecting the performance

Tensions between the practices and aims of artists and producers are common and when dealing with improvised performance this is heightened if we think of the production and post-production processes as ones of improvement and perfecting.[118] The lack of detachment inherent in mixing and editing one's own performance can produce a kind of schizophrenia,

[115] Over four hours of improvised material was collated. I spent several hours listening, making notes, then listening again to the *promising* sections. The decision to edit/cut and save then took seconds, but there were many of them.

[116] For example, 'Counting Throws' and 'Taking Back Control'.

[117] 'As is' refers to a kind of attempt at *accurate record of the improvised performance* which is, of course, impossible. These tracks too are mediated through selection, further editing, panning and E.Q processes. But my decision to spend less time and less process reflects an acknowledgement that they are more complete, there is enough *there* in what I can hear in terms of interest, compelling performance, variety and development to keep me, as listener, interested - perhaps others too.

[118] Consider the approach taken when making earlier Ouseburn Collective recordings such as 'Sound Ghost' from Ouseburn Collective, *Escapology* (Bandcamp, 2015). Is the *improvisational quality* hidden or killed through excessive editing?

and this is a challenge that I've long faced during my creative practice. Part of my dissatisfaction from the results of previous recordings lies in the feeling that the essence of the improvised performance has been destroyed by the editing and processing - but not because of any necessary contradiction between the two processes - but because I've failed to preserve or serve the inherent quality of the improvised performance.[119]

When listening for the sections improvised performance to use, I'm trying to identify the most *successful* which might mean most unusual, distinctive performances that contain their own unique sonic quality, dialogical interaction and/or developmental story or structure. My aim as producer, editor and mixer of this selected material is, above all, not to destroy what is successful or unique but rather to work out how they may be best preserved, emphasised and highlighted or expanded.

Overdubs and 'Jazz Dance Interlude'

Since the widespread use of multi-track recording began, overdubbing has been central to the methodology of Rock production, one aligned with slow and considered track formation, the *perfecting* process and, therefore, perhaps antithetical to the aesthetics of improvisation and even authentic notions of "live" performance. [120] But artists such as Hendrix, Can and Frank Zappa saw no contradiction in combining recorded, improvised performance with overdubbed material - sometimes themselves improvised parts.[121] For the album *April*, and in contrast with previously recorded material such as that found in *Vent* and *Y.I.D.I.Y*, overdubs were kept to a minimum; the extent to which they were used dictated to a large extent by how *successful* or *complete* the initial improvised recordings were considered to be.[122]

The final material of *solo* tracks such as 'Seasons Delayed' and 'Acoustica' are divided approximately equally between original *base* tracks and subsequent overdubs. This democratic split reflects quick assessments that, although the guitar takes were both

[119] Improvisers and experimental artists, seeing the live experience as central to their aesthetics have often been hostile or ambivalent to recording. See Eddie Provost, *No Sound is Innocent*; Bailey, *Improvisation*, 1992 and David Grubbs, *Records Ruin the Landscape: John Cage, the Sixties, and Sound Recording* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

[120] 1970s Rock live albums often incorporated overdubbed parts to *improve* the recorded performances and were often criticised for doing so, as if the additional material destroyed the authenticity of the enterprise or hid the artists' lack of expertise.

[121] Interestingly, Zappa often superimposed improvised material from concert performance over previously fixed studio recordings.

[122] See Chapter 3 and relationship between *Creative Flow* and its relationship to solo YouTube videos.

temporarily complete, they were far from finished in terms composition prior to the additional parts being added. Although these tracks cannot be neatly divided between initial chordal base and subsequent melodic overdubbed solo, this might serve as a general description. Overdubs are lengthy, only slightly edited improvised performances and, in my judgment, work better aligned with the other, previously recorded material. The overdubbed improvisations contained in 'Delay and Repeat' and 'Days Like These' are shorter, more self-contained and less structurally significant - operating more obviously as traditional solos, filling space created within the context of larger structures already formed by the initial improvised drum and bass parts. Although the superimposed synthesizer solo that appears in 'Delay and Repeat' reflects a truth outlined in Moore's generalisation that improvised solos serve no 'structural purpose', and a reminder that the character of a (single take, intuitive) improvised passage is often different in character from that produced by slower, more considered and reiterative forms of composition.[123] [124]

By way of contrast, most of the superimposed parts found in *April* are short and focussed on specific moments within the *base* improvised performance - an exception being the bass guitar part heard on 'Jazz Dance Interlude'.[125] This is a more complete performance, more substantial and intentionally significant in shaping the final composition - at least in the opening minutes where the bass shares at least equal billing to the guitar before receding into a less confident and less adept supporting role. My improvised, overdubbed performance creates, as if in real time, a duet with the guitar then falls back into a more traditional supporting role as part of a trio.

The bass guitar heard is the second of two complete and uninterrupted takes. During performance I am not thinking consciously of any specific, pre-remembered harmonic movement; my attention is focussed on the sound of the guitar as I manage to follow its progressions during the *introductory duet*. As the track proceeds, however, my attempts at second guessing where the chords and melodies are going are less on point, producing

[123] Central to the motivation behind this research is the idea that a certain quality or character can only be achieved through real-time, improvised performance. The apparently chaotic output of certain artists such as Captain Beefheart and No Wave groups might undermine such a proposition, but these might be peculiar exceptions. Certainly, I have found that, within my own practice at least, the character of the outputs differ, depending on the compositional method (slow or fast) used.
[124] 'Delay and Repeat' accessible at https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com/track/delay-and-repeat
[125] 'Jazz Dance Interlude' accessible at https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com/track/jazz-dance-interlude

discords and miss steps until I land more confidently in sync with the final more obvious chord progression.[126] My amusement at the outcome led me to search for a light-hearted way to frame the drum performance which, to my ears, are just *right* throughout.[127]

Overdubbed Performance and Improvised Structure

Very little of the sonic material heard on the album *April* is pre-fixed or non-improvised-worked out in detail before recording, memorised then recreated as accurately as possible during the recording process. The overdubbed parts are, however, constrained to the extent that they are responses too and dialogues with the now fixed improvisations. Further, when performing the superimposed improvisations, I am aware in general terms of the structures I am plugging into; I have memory of the initial performance(s) and, when recording multiple takes, increasingly aware of how the now pre-recorded structures are about to play out. Nevertheless, for the most part, I have not planned the parts that I intend to superimpose.

But there are short sections of overdubbed material used to deliberately re-enforce the repetition of the initially recorded improvised parts by carefully, and sometimes time consumingly, orchestrating or reinforcing powerful melodic or rhythmic material. For example, the bass part in the first couple of minutes of 'Days Like These' which periodically locks into, in traditional rock style, the kick drum pattern. These unison rhythms would have been almost impossible to create via improvised performance - the drum track, particularly the kick, subtly but constantly changing.[128]

'Rediffusion Cult Mystery' is less idiomatically fixed.[129] Although it begins with a slightly irregular circular drum pattern with accompanying guitar melody, this quickly breaks down into a more abstract and chaotic dialogue between the two instruments. Within this call and response there are moments when the drum part seems to speak with a particularly clear and purposeful intent which I thought would be best emphasised with reinforcement by way of overdubbed bass. At one point it sounds like we are negotiating, via a cautious build up, a climax, a crescendo attacked with synchronous power. For me, like the call of a melody that needs repeating, it warranted bolstering with the addition of a bass part provided in unison -

[126] There was some editing (re-positioning) of a couple of bass notes to try to align them with the kick.
[127] See earlier notes - flanger?
[128] Again, refer to Trout Mask Replica. ME's bass drum and variation throughout this section.
[129] 'Rediffusion Cult Mystery' is accessible at https://ouseburncollective.bandcamp.com/track/rediffusion-cult-mystery

the 3 instruments playing together, something, at least in the context of this way of working, only achievable by way of non-improvisation. Then, the bass is carefully inserted to play in unison with the sustained guitar chord which itself was in sync (in its real-time performance) with the drum and cymbal crash.

Reflection on Repetition and Difference

The vast majority of all the repetitive sections of music *April* (parts of 'Chord of Destiny' and 'Days Like These' for example) are negotiated by myself and ME in real time, and this means that within this repetition there is difference, sometimes subtle, because we are human and, related to this, deficiencies in technique or an intentionality to provide micro-development. The only significant looping (copy and pasting) occurs towards the end of 'Rediffusion Cult Mystery.' I particularly liked the power of the crescendo we had mutually discovered and wanted it to continue, so copied and pasted our performance so it repeated a couple of times, then reinforced it with a bass guitar overdub. On previous tracks, such as 'Shmorugst' and 'Shieldfield Wormhole' from *Vent* which were recorded at the beginning or the research period, reflecting more ubiquitous Hip Hop/EDM inspired production methods, I tended to use smaller fragments of collectively improvised performance to loop, then use as a base for future overdubs. I think this development of approach reflects some *success* in the sense that I more satisfactorily capture more spontaneity, more real-time collective performance and balance between the *imperfect* and *perfect*.

6.9 Reflections: Improvisation, Technologies and Why Improvisation?

Earlier on in this chapter I referred to Benjamin Piekut's use of the word 'Open' to refer to more experimental and uncertain forms of improvisatory, vernacular music. And, as we have seen, technology (or more precisely technolog*ies*) can be used to fix, making improvisation, performance, music, less open and less uncertain. Artists can use technologies to *freeze* improvisation, to capture and get closer to original ideas that emerge in their heads, or the sound or quality they first played: *Trout Mask Replica* illustrates this approach, and once fixed it became a template for future reproduction, no longer *open*. Frank Zappa's use of the synclavier (an early digital synthesiser and sampler), which, in the mid 1980s replaced his guitar as main *instrument*, could also be seen to facilitate against such openness, such uncertainty. As Gail Zappa articulated in the recent biographical documentary *Zappa*, she

saw her husband's motivation for using the synclavier as being to more accurately capture his compositions as they were initially constructed, as he envisaged them.[130] Such a motivation has parallels with what Talk Talk (*Spirit of Eden* and *Laughing Stock*) and Beefheart (*Trout Mask Replica*) were trying to achieve - but for them this *getting closer* was sought via the use of improvised performance in the studio; Zappa's use of synclavier, however, relying on the careful inputting and arrangement and fixing of notated score and subsequent (mechanical) automatic reproduction, seems opposed to improvisation - previously, a continuous element of Zappa's creative approach. For me, this *getting closer* represents only part of my motivation to use improvisation within my studio practice. As the discussion of my studio performances illustrate, improvisation also allows chance, mistakes and the constraints and dialogue of other, external voices to *direct* and create music which mediates any idea of the *pure* to be accurately captured.

Recording technologies can also be used to unfix, sometimes within the practice of the same artist. In a sense, everything that Zappa recorded was open: he frequently referred to a 'Conceptual Continuity' which ran through his albums, often providing rhizomic links to other recorded works which transcended genre boundaries.[131] But even within one of his more apparently stratified works, *Jazz From Hell*, there is improvisation present: most obviously within 'St Etienne' which incorporates a guitar solo recorded during a live performance of the track 'Ship Arriving Too Late to Save a Drowning Witch.' And, hidden within the synclavier notated and performed 'While you Were Art 2', there is a reterritorializing of improvised performance too: that of the solo from 'While You Were

[130] 'Zappa' directed by Alex Winter, Magnolia Pictures, 2020. And, in the process, Zappa bypassed the need for (unsatisfactory, imperfect?) external performers. If this was his intention, it's interesting because by removing this *Classical* division of labour (that Zappa was familiar and disillusioned with following his experiences with the LSO), the external performer and external human agent, later albums such as *Jazz From Hell* and *Civilization Phaze 111* seem more fixed, less improvisational. Gail's assessment of Zappa's motivation seems only partially accurate. It also allowed him to organise his compositions more quickly and efficiently than notebook and manuscript, and communicate them efficiently and instantly to other musicians, allowing *perfect* renditions of highly elaborate and parts of such difficulty that it would be almost impossible to find performers with enough developed technique to play them. 'Jazz From Hell, Frank Zappa' by Paul Gilby, *Sound on Sound* http://www.muzines.co.uk/articles/jazz-from-hell/1511 February 1987 (23 August 2021).

[131] 'Well, the conceptual continuity is this: everything, even this interview, is part of what I do for, let's call it, my entertainment work. And there's a big difference between sitting here and talking about this kind of stuff, and writing a song like Titties and Beer. But as far as I'm concerned, it's all part of the same continuity. It's all one piece,' Frank Zappa in 'Frank Zappa Interview with Bob Marshall', https://wiki.killuglyradio.com/wiki/Interview_by_Bob_Marshall 22 October 1987 (12 August 2021).

Out,' transcribed by guitarist Steve Vai from *Shut Up 'n Play Yer Guitar* and programmed into the machine. [132]

This complex assemblage owes its very existence to Zappa's original improvisation which was itself created through dialogical interaction with other performers. It became fixed with the completion of Zappa's live album, then given new life through other technologically facilitated Lines of Flight. And who is to say that, had Zappa lived, it would not have been recontextualised again. [133]

[132] Frank Zappa and Peter Occhiogrosso, *The Real Frank Zappa Book* (London: Picador, 1990).
[133] Further discussion of how Zappa applied this *conceptual continuity*, together with discussion of Zappa's concept of *project/object* which delineated and connected completed works with ongoing processes and states of flux, can be found in Paul Carr's essay 'Zappa and Technology: His Incorporation of Time, Space and Place in Performing, Composing, Arranging Music' in Paul Carr (ed.), *Frank Zappa and the And* (London: Routledge, 2016), 133-148.

CHAPTER 7
Conclusions

7. 1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the completed work and the extent to which the research has achieved its aims and objectives. It will discuss key findings in relation to the research questions and discuss their value and contribution. It will also review the limitations of the study and propose opportunities for possible future research.

Information was obtained from a range of research methods, both primary and secondary, the obtaining of which was designed to address the overarching aims of the thesis: the elucidation of the nature of improvisation in Rock music, and the determination of how central improvisation is, or can be, in the construction of Rock.

I adopted a qualitive, interpretivist approach which is reflected in a multi-methodological strategy that includes an analytical literature review, my creative practice, autoethnography and case studies. My practice, working hand in hand with autoethnographic reflections, generated material in the form of musical recordings and videos, together with textual outputs. Further data (obtained through interviews with practitioners and autobiographical reflections) was incorporated into the case studies which were presented as essays, and this information was discussed, interpreted, and analysed thematically.

An overriding objective of the research was to better illuminate aspects of improvisational practice as it occurred in the recording studio, as it negotiated and was affected by studio technologies and other determinants such as collaboration and working solo. It is hoped that these insights might also correct any misunderstandings of the experience of creativity among a particular field of artists within popular music. It is intended to contribute to the growing knowledge of improvisation and creative performance in popular music and contribute more specifically to the understanding of improvisation’s role in Rock - still a relatively underexplored area.

7.2 Work and Findings

Chapter 2 presented a Literature Review which discussed and analysed relevant texts relating to improvisation and Rock. It identified gaps in research and knowledge, and introduced themes connected directly to the research questions detailed in the introductory chapter. The Literature Review can be considered to *double* as a summary or (incomplete) review of improvisational practice as it has been observed over an approximate 60-year period. It revealed that, whilst commentators have identified improvisation's presence in Rock, the phenomenon remains relatively underexplored. Narratives have tended to situate improvisation within a confined historical period, within the work of comparatively few artists and subgenres, and mainly in the context of the live concert stage, rather than the recording studio. However, I argued that there are signposts within the literature and practice discussed which suggest improvisation's more common presence in the construction of studio recordings.

In Chapter 3 I outlined and justified features of my philosophical stance and methodological approach and explained how I adopted qualitative, interpretivist methods and a research strategy which included autoethnography and case studies. Practice-led, this research integrated my studio-based compositional practice, which was addressed by the submission of recorded outputs, autoethnographic reflections, and recorded and documented through sound and video software, recording diaries, and visual DAW screenshots.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 were presented as case studies in the form of essays. They acted as umbrellas to incorporate description and analysis of how improvisation had operated within Rock in specified studio-based situations within contrasting genres and time periods. They allowed the consideration of discourses from musicology, cultural theory and aesthetics to intersect with examination of the practice of improvising performers, including myself. Each study also address themes relating to the research questions identified in the introductory chapter including: tensions arising from the situation of improvisation within recording processes; how improvised performance in the studio is connected to the realisation of agency and autonomy of musicians; the examination of ways Rock approaches to improvisation might be distinct from other traditions; consideration of why musicians choose improvisation to generate musical material, and improvisation as dialogue or communication within the recording studio.

The studies helped reveal how the development and use of recording processes created divisions of labour and roles, separating aspects of performance and other methods of construction into discreet stages. Examples of improvisation operating withing these discreet stages illuminated how recording processes facilitated, shaped and/or restrict improvisational performance.

Each case study incorporated autobiographic reflections which contextualised my history as Rock musician and consumer, helping to explain the background to and influences on my (*improvisatory*) creative practice. These reflections, including my role in the SPI and the Lou Ross Band, helped illustrate the use of more fixed (less improvisatory) Rock performance, which sat outside the practice-based submissions, but had connections contained a flexibility which at times worked in parallel with unfixed and extremely fixed performance practice.

Chapters 4 and 5 focussed on examples of albums by artists who incorporated improvisation in their construction: Talk Talk, Captain Beefheart, Can and Steely Dan. They showed how improvisational practice was embedded within recording processes and situated at different moments throughout Rock's history - practices which were in some way distinct from the electric blues-rock models often referred to in previous narratives, and, as a result of their studio location, in some ways distinct from improvisation in other musical genres.

Chapter 4 gave particular attention to how musicians' agency and autonomy were evidenced through the presence of improvised performance. Consideration was given to how Rock musicians can be seen as workers who are, at different times, *alienated* or *non-alienated* in accordance to the extent to which they enjoy control over the creative opportunities afforded them, and over the character of the final recorded artefact: the products of their labour. It was suggested that if we focus on musicians' ability and decision to act, to generate new music by way of performance, it might provide us with a simpler, clearer view of what improvisation is. I used examples of studio practice to show improvisational possibilities (seen as exemplar of creativity itself) being constricted due to divisions created in recording processes which, paradoxically, also worked in parallel to facilitate creativity for others.

The case studies brought into focus contrasting methods of album construction which acted together to complete recorded artefacts, often separated in time and body but containing, at

different moments, variegated practice and aesthetics which could be divided in the binary: *improvisational* and *non - improvisational*.

After examining the contrasting uses of improvisation during the 1970s by Can and Steely Dan, Chapter 5 began to examine examples of my own contemporary practice in the guise of tracks 'Twitter Machines' and 'Counting the Days', together with selected video recordings from the *Lockdown* Sessions: 40 improvised recordings released daily on Facebook. This allowed further examination of tensions thrown up by the situating of improvisation within recording processes, explaining how these sometimes-conflicting phenomena were negotiated when attempting to use improvisation to generate musical material for the Ouseburn Collective albums: *Y.I.D.I.Y.*, *VENT* and *April*.[1] The consideration of these recordings also facilitated discussion of the effects that solitary and/or collaborative working had on studio-compositional processes and recorded outputs.

I observed how my practice demonstrated an intentional trajectory towards the successful capturing of larger *chunks* of spontaneous performance, relying less (as the research period progressed) on short excerpts of performance which were then heavily edited, copy and pasted to form longer tracks. Related to the above, Chapter 5 also introduced discussion of the concept of *flow* in relation to my own improvisational performances, and how it operated in idiomatic musical forms such as Rock which draw on convention, memory and stylistic traits.

The studies illustrated how contemporary studio settings often comprise a combination of (extreme) solitary and collaborative activity, and I discussed the impact that these, sometimes enforced, contrasting situations had on the use and nature of improvised material.
Both Chapter 5 and 6 considered how *successful* improvisational performance (and composition) can be facilitated by dialogue with other voices, a kind of communication which, in the absence of other human performers, might take the form of real-time interaction with pre-recorded (sometimes improvised) material when overdubbing, or real-time interaction with delay trails.

[1] Ouseburn Collective: *Y.I.D.I.Y.* (Bandcamp, 2021), *VENT* (Bandcamp, 2022) and *April* (Bandcamp, 2022).

Chapter 6 provided closer and more consistent attention to my own creative practice by way an analysis of the construction of tracks from two albums submitted as part of the thesis: Ouseburn Collective's *Y.I.D.I.Y* and *April*. This afforded a microscopic, subjective examination of improvisational and contemporary studio processes which added to, and further contextualised, the insights and knowledge gleaned in the preceding literature review and case studies. These reflections provided the reader with further immersion in my practice and, hopefully, closer insights into the use of specific technologies, the making of creative decisions which helped facilitate (and constituted) improvisation for specific compositional ends. I applied Bailey's 'Improvising Principle' to these studio performances and posited that the flexibility this principle implied was always present as a *potential* or creative possibility in Rock *because* of the absence of divisions of labour between performer and composer. However, in practice this flexibility was often restricted due to the situation of performance in the studio. I observed that, paradoxically, a greater flexibility was sometimes present precisely *because* of improvisation's presence within recording technology, associated processes and industries.

I proposed that the application of two intersecting continuums (fixed, semi-fixed and unfixed and idiomatic to less idiomatic) could be applied when looking at Rock improvisation, arguing that this would recognise the hybrid and multi-genre reality of Rock styles and compositional processes, the latter owing, to varying degrees, recording technologies and performance.

I identified and discussed *anti-virtuositic* strands of Rock music which have existed parallel to, and sometimes in dialogue with, parallel strands of *virtuosity*, the later often associated with the electric blues-rock model of improvisation, and I used examples of practice to illustrate how Rock improvisation had manifested itself through this distinct *anti-virtuositic* approach. The contents of interviews with practitioners helped reveal the workings of this *naïve* improvisation and I argued that Rock production methods had, in certain circumstances, allowed this to operate within and alongside other more complex strategies such as that evidenced by the construction of Captain Beefheart's *Trout Mask Replica*: a record whose sounds appeared *naïve* and improvised but disguised more virtuosic, less improvised practice which worked in parallel with spontaneous performances located at a different stage of production.

Each case study incorporated autobiographic reflections which contextualised my history as Rock musician and consumer, helping to explain the background to and influences on my (*improvisatory*) creative practice: and assisted in illustrating the use of fixed (non or less improvisatory) practice which sits outside the practice-based recordings completed during the research period and submitted as part of this thesis.

7.3 Summary and Contribution to Knowledge

My findings revealed that improvisation in Rock can be said to be distinct from other improvisational forms such as Jazz or Free Improvisation *because* of Rock's situation within the recording studio. Spontaneous performance often manifested itself within other mediating, often fixing, processes which might constrict or facilitate improvisational creativity. Free or Semi-fixed forms of improvisation can exist in parallel with other kinds of performance (often extremely fixed and non-improvisational) and all these can work together towards the production of completed tracks. This hybridity is a defining characteristic of Rock, a musical form which does not value aesthetic purity. Although Rock musicians are less inclined to self-define as *improvisors,* improvisation has often been, and continues to be, an important aspect of many performers' practices. One way of measuring a performer's agency, her ability to act freely to create musical material beyond what has already been fixed, can be measured in the extent to which her performance generates new (improvised) material.

This thesis emerged from my own practice as a Rock musician and improviser which had inculcated a desire to understand better how important improvisation has been in the construction of Rock music. It is hoped that the research will contribute functionally to popular music practice and illuminate creative processes in music and, perhaps, other artistic pursuits.

This research has contributed to the body of knowledge by filling gaps in existing research, providing insights which contribute to a greater understanding and clarification of how improvisation operates in recorded Rock music, and a more comprehensive picture of how improvisation is experienced and considered by artists, including myself, working within the Rock field.

The originality of this research stems in part from the phenomenological and autoethnographic methods which enabled the voices of practitioners to be heard and analysed, together with submission of original artworks, which work in dialogue with the text.

Although I don't claim originality when interpreting and drawing upon the works of others (including cultural theorists, musicologists, and practitioners), the bringing together and adapting elements, including analytical concepts, also constitutes new knowledge which can contribute to the understanding of popular music practice and improvisation.

7.4 Limitations and Implications for Further Research

The means by which Western art music and popular music (which owe a significant debt to Afro-American improvisational forms) generate music are sufficiently distinct to require separate kinds of investigation. And the extent to which *untrained* practitioners (particularly instrumentalists as opposed to vocalists and songwriters) in popular music, immersed as they are in contemporary technology, generate music remains comparatively underexplored. A strength of this research, a certain *depth* resulting from a focus on selected artists' processes and creative outputs is also a limitation. Although this study has pointed to evidence which indicates that improvisation is, and has been, more widely present in Rock than previous narratives had suggested, further detailed research would be required to provide a wider, more complete picture. Such research might draw from a similar practice-led framework to examine other examples of practice in Rock, including contemporary artists.

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King Crimson, *Red* (Island, 1974).

Led Zeppelin, *Led Zeppelin 1* (Atlantic, 1969)

Led Zeppelin, *Led Zeppelin 2* (Atlantic 1969)

Led Zeppelin, *Led Zeppelin 3* (Atlantic, 1970)

Led Zeppelin, *Led Zeppelin 4* (Atlantic, 1972)

Led Zeppelin, *Houses of the Holy* (Atlantic, 1973).

Led Zeppelin, *Physical Graffiti* (Swan Song, 1975).

Led Zeppelin, *Presence* (Swan Song, 1976).

Led Zeppelin, *The Song Remains the Same* (Swan Song, 1976).

John Lennon and Yoko Ono, *Unfinished Music no 1: Two Virgins* (Zapple, 1968).

John Lennon and Yoko Ono, *Unfinished Music no 2: Life with the Lions* (Zapple, 1969).

Living Colour, *Vivid* (Epic, 1988).

Living Colour, *Time's Up* (Epic, 1990).

Living Colour, *Stain* (Epic, 1993).

John Mayall*, Bluesbreakers with Eric Clapton* (Decca, 1966).

The Mekons, *The Quality of Mercy is not Strnen* (Virgin, 1979).

Eva Mendoza's Unnatural Ways, *The Paranoia Party* (Bandcamp, 2019).

Mogwai, *Young Team* (Chemikal Underground, 1997).

Mogwai, *Mr Beast* (Matador, 2006).

Mogwai, *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* (Wall of Sound, 2006).

Mogwai, *Special Moves* (2010).

The Mountain Goats

Neu! *Neu!* (Brain, 1972).

Neu! *Neu! 2* (Brain, 1973).

The Nice, *Nice* (Immediate, 1969).

No New York, Various Artists (Antilles,1978).

Nurse with Wound, *Chance Meeting* (United Dairies, 1979).

Nurse with Wound, *From the Quiet Men to the Tiny Girl* (United Dairies, 1980)

Nurse with Wound, *Merzbild Schwet* (United Dairies, 1980).

Nurse with Wound, *Homotopy to Marie* (United Dairies, 1982).

Nurse with Wound, *Soliloquy for Lilith* (United Dairies, 1988).

Yoko Ono, *Plastic Ono Band* (Apple, 1970).

Yoko One, *Fly* (Apple, 1970).

Bill Orcutt, *Odds Against Tomorrow* (Bandcamp, 2019).

Ouseburn Collective, *Escapology* (Bandcamp, 2015).

Ouseburn Collective, *Vent* (Bandcamp, 2022).

Ouseburn Collective, *April* (Bandcamp, 2022).

Ouseburn Collective, *Y. I. D. I. Y.* (Bandcamp, 2021).

Phish, *Junta* (Elektra, 1989)

Phish, *Lawn Boy* (Absolute A Go Go, 1990).

Pink Floyd, *Piper at the Gates of Dawn* (EMI/Columbia, 1967).

Pink Floyd, *Meddle* (Harvest, 1971).

Pink Floyd, *Obscured by Clouds* (Harvest, 1972)

Pink Floyd, *Ummagumma* (Harvest, 1969).

Pink Floyd, *Dark Side of the Moon* (Harvest, 1973).

Pink Floyd, *Wish You Were Here* (Harvest, 1975).

Pink Floyd, *The Wall* (EMI/Columbia, 1979).

The Police, *Outlandos d'Amour* (A&M, 1978).

The Police, *Reggatta de Blanc* (A&M, 1979).

The Pop Group, *Y* (Radar, 1979).

The Pop Group, *For How Much Longer Do We Tolerate Mass Murder?* (Rough Trade, 1980).

Praxis, *Transmutation (Mutatis Mutandis)* (Axiom, 1992).

Praxis, *A Taste of Mutation* (Axiom, 1992).

Public Image Limited, *Public Image Limited* (Virgin, 1978).

Public Image Limited, *Metal Box* (Virgin, 1979).

The Raincoats, *The Raincoats* (Rough Trade, 1979).

The Raincoats, *Odyshape* (Rough Trade, 1981).

Radioactive Sparrow, *Farewell to Fresians* (1980).

Radioactive Sparrow, *Rocking on the Portoman* (Bandcamp, 1989).

Lou Reid, *Metal Machine Music* (RCA, 1975).

Rip Rig and Panic, *God* (Virgin, 1981).

Rip Rig and Panic, *I Am Cold* (Virgin, 1982)

Scottish Polis Inspectors, *Raymond Baxter's Gardener* (RG1, 1979).

Scottish Polis Inspectors, *Gerald Eats Tomatoes* (RG2, 1980).

Scottish Polis Inspectors, *Free Frisbees at the Co-op* (RG3, 1980).

Slint, *Spiderland* (Touch and Go, 1991).

The Slits, *Cut* (Island, 1979).

The Slits, *Return of the Giant Slits* (CBS, 1981).

75 Dollar Bill, *Wood/Metal/Plastic/Pattern/Rhythm/Rock* (Bandcamp, 2016).

75 Dollar Bill, *I Was Real* (Bandcamp, 2019).

Soft Machine, *The Soft Machine* (Probe, 1968).

Soft Machine, *Soft Machine Two* (Probe, 1969).

Soft Machine, *Third* (CBS, 1970).

Sonic Youth, *Confusion is Sex* (Neutral, 1983).

Sonic Youth, *Evol* (SST, 1986).

Sonic Youth, *Sister* (SST, 1987).

Sonic Youth, *Daydream Nation* (Enigma, 1988).

Steely Dan, *Katy Lied* (ABC, 1975).

Steely Dan, *The Royal Scam* (ABC, 1976).

Steely Dan, *Aja* (ABC, 1977).

Steely Dan, *Goucho* (MCA, 1980).

Swell Maps, *A Trip to Marineville* (Rough Trade, 1979).

Swell Maps, *Jane from Occupied Europe* (Rough Trade, 1980).

Talk Talk, *Colour of Spring* (EMI, 1986).

Talk Talk, *Spirit of Eden* (EMI, 1988).

Talk Talk, *Laughing Stock* (EMI, 1991).

Throbbing Gristle, *Second Annual Report* (Industrial, 1977).

Throbbing Gristle, D.o.A: *The Third and Final Report of Throbbing Gristle* (Industrial, 1978).

Throbbing Gristle, *Jazz Funk Greats* (Industrial, 1979).

Unnatural Ways, *Unnatural Ways* (Atlantis, 2015).

Velvet Underground, *The Velvet Underground and Nico* (Verve, 1967).

Velvet Underground, *White Light White Heat* (Verve, 1968).

The Who, *Anywhere Anyhow Anyway* (Brunswick, 1965).

The Who, *My Generation* (Brunswick, 1965).

The Who, *Live at Leeds* (Track, 1970).

The Who, *Who's Next?* (Track, 1971).

Wilco, *Kicking Television: Live in Chicago* (Nonsuch, 2005).

Wilco, *Sky Blue Sky* (Nonsuch, 2007).

The Yardbirds, *Five Live Yardbirds* (Columbia, 1964).

The Yardbirds, *Shape of Things*, (Columbia, 1966).

Yeah You! *Krutch* (Slip, 2017).

Yeah You! *Id Vendor* (Slip, 2016).

Yes, *Close to the Edge* (Atlantic, 1972).

Yes, *Tales from Topographic Oceans* (Atlantic, 1973).

Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention, *Freak Out* (Verve, 1966).

Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention, *We're Only in it for the Money* (Verve, 1968*).*

Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention, *Uncle Meat* (Bizarre, 1969).

Frank Zappa, *Hot Rats* (Bizarre, 1969).

Frank Zappa*, Waka/Jawaka (Bizarre, 1972).*

Frank Zappa*, Zoot Allures* (Warner Bros, 1976).

Frank Zappa, *Sheik Yerbouti* (CBS, 1979).

Frank Zappa, *Joe's Garage* (Zappa, 1979).

Frank Zappa, *Sleep Dirt* (DiscReet,1979).

Frank Zappa, *Shut Up 'n' Play Yer Guitar* (Barking Pumpkin,1981)

Frank Zappa, *Jazz From Hell* (EMI Records,1986).

Frank Zappa, *Civilization Phaze 111* (Barking Pumpkin, 1994).

Frank Zappa, *Dance Me This* (Zappa Records, 2005)

Appendices

Appendix 1: Statement in relation to Ethical Considerations

I do not consider that there are significant ethical considerations that need to be considered in respect of the research undertaken. However, many of the recordings submitted as part of this thesis involved the performances of other musical collaborators. With this in mind, I can confirm that each participant was fully informed that the recordings were to be used as part of this research process, and the nature of the research was fully explained, and their consent was provided. They were made aware that at any point their contribution could be withdrawn. Their musical contributions to the recorded outputs have been fully acknowledged throughout the thesis.

Appendix 2: Recording Diaries 2017 to 2021

12th Feb 2017
ICMuS Studio 1
Bruce Sinclair drums and MC guitar. Logic 2 track recording using condensers. 2 hours, 3 x tracks. Sound poor, balance poor. Nothing to keep.

3rd April 2017
ICMuS Basement
BS and MC, drums and guitar. Logic 2 track recording. Condensers. 2 hours, 4 x tracks.
Work on track 3. Complete track? Poor sound, but good performance.

16th April 2017
Home Recording
Add bass guitar D.I. via Logic. Not kept. Mixing track 3 'Ouseburn Strut' improvised duet minimal editing.

4th August 2017
ICMus Basement, BS and MC
Drums and bass guitar. Logic 4 track recording, 3 mics drums, one bass.
1.5 hour recording. 4 tracks recorded.
Work on/keep track 3 'Shmorgust' – good sound, clear bass and drums, good separation.
Work on track 4: 'Shmorgust part 2', use as base? Parts good. Drum sound excellent.

12 August 2017
Home Studio Recording 2 hours. Logic.
Editing and mixing Shmorgust and and Shmorgust part 2.
Kept 5 minutes of original performance, then cut up, use best parts for tracks.
O/D electric guitar and keys for Shmorg 2; electric piano for Shmorg 1.

30th August 2017
Home Studio, 2 hours.
Mixing, Editing and Mastering Shmorgust and Shmorgust pt 2 (Shieldfield Wormhole) in Logic. Finished tracks.

4thh September 2017
ICMus Basement, BS and MC
Drums and guitar. Logic 4 track recording, 3 mics drums, one bass.
2 hour recording. 5 tracks recorded.
Good performances, potential keep all.
But sound very poor, balance bad, drum sound particularly unusable.

6th May 2018
ICMuS Basement
John Allen Drums, MC guitar, 3 hours, Logic. Good performances, poor recordings.

19th August 2018
ICMuS Basement
John Allen Drums, MC guitar.
Logic: drums tracks 1, 2, 3. Guitar track 4. 2 x sm57 2 x Rhode condencers. 2 hours.
5 tracks recorded.
Keep to work on: 2st and 3rd
Pleased with 2 and 3rd of recordings, good sound. Others discarded

29th August 2018 Home Studio, Logic, 2 hours
Work on last 2 tracks MC and JA, edit down to 5 minute tracks,
Overdub bass guitar, saxophone and keys, basis for 2 album tracks.

26 September 2018, ICMuS Basement
MC guitar, Adam Soper guitar, Michael Mather on drums
Logic 3 track recording – single condenser on drums, two sm57 guitars.
1.5 hr recording. 3 tracks.
First track worked well, second two to discard. Long track to edit.

4th October 2018 Home Recording
Solo studio 'Power of Three' – overdubs on 1st track above. Electric piano, samples, and keys, and bass guitar. Sound really good. Track more than 10 mins, might need editing down.

6th October 2018 ICMuS Basement
John Allen Drums, MC guitar.
Logic: drums tracks 1, 2, 3. Guitar track 4. 2 x sm57 2 x Rhode condencers. 2 hours.
5 tracks recorded. Keep to work on: 2st and 3rd
Pleased with 2 and 3rd of recordings, good sound. Others discarded. 3rd particularly pleased with improvised performance over 10 mins, capture full dialogue, should make complete track.

9th November 2018
ICMuS Studio 1
Solo overdubs bass and keys on tracks 2 and 3 – 'Exotic Spresm' and 'Rolo Cake'
Bass guitar through D.I.
Studio acoustic piano with Rhodes condenser and Casio keys D.I.
Sax with Rhodes condenser: Rolo Cake

17th November 2018
Home Recording, 3 hours.
Mixing 'Exotic Spresm' and 'Rolo Cake'
Studio acoustic piano with Rhodes condencser and Casio keys D.I.

18 November Home Studio Logic, 2 hours
Final processing, mixing mastering of 'Exotic Spresm' and 'Rolo Cake' longer tracks.

24th November 2018
ICMuS Basement
John Allen Drums, MC guitar.
Logic: drums tracks 1, 2, 3. Guitar track 4. 2 x sm57 2 x Rhode condensers. 2 hours
4 tracks recorded.

Keep track 3.
Sound variable but pleased with track 3 performances – keep long track to edit

17th February 2019
ICMuS Basement
John Allen drums, MC guitar.
Logic – 3 tracks of drums, one guitar. 2 hours.
4 tracks recorded.
Nothing kept, poor sound and technical difficulties

17th March 2019
ICMuS Studio 1. 3 hours. Using Pro-Tools Uni Set up.
MC bass, JA drums, 6 mics on drums, one on guitar
4 tracks recorded, good results, 2nd track definite keeper. On play back, very boxy sound, resolve via e.q.?

21st April 2019
Home editing and Mixing transfer last recordings Pro-Tools to Logic. 3 hours.
Chopped material down to 4 smaller, 3 – 4 minute tracks, might use for future album. Need to overdub bass, keys (possible vocals?)

13th October 2019
ICMuS Basement
John Allen Drums, MC guitar. 2 hours, Logic.
Drums tracks 1, 2, 3. Guitar track 4. 2 x sm57 2 x Rhode condensers.
3 tracks recorded between 15 and 25 mins. Best yet 10 - minute continuous section can be used. Seems to have coherent structure, with separate parts and moods, mixture of free and more standard rock grooves. Good sound, both pleased with results of final track, long track to edit

15th October 2019 Home Mixing/Editing
3 hours on Logic
Finished first mix and edit of 'Twitter Machines' – most successful track from last recording session with JA. Pleased with result. Seems like breakthrough. Track down to 6 mins, cut in middle – free to more groove- based sections.

21st October 2019, ICMuS Studio 1
4 hours working on longer track
Logic. Solo overdubs bass and keys on tracks 3 – 'Twitter Machines'
Bass guitar through Ampeg and sm57, both 3 x takes and took best from each. Used composite tracks

4th November
Home studio
Logic. Further keys on 'Twitter Machines' – casio
Vocals on 'Twitter Machines' through sm58. Good results, happy with initial takes (x2)
Needs compression and e.q. on vox. Casio parts as is.

15th November
Home studio Mastering and Final mixing of 'Twitter Machines'

21st November ICMuS Basement
John Allen Drums, MC guitar.
Logic: drums tracks 1, 2, 3. Guitar track 4. 2 x sm57 2 x Rhode condencers. 2 hours
4 tracks recorded. Tracks 3 and 4 keepers, very pleased, long form. Good sound

22nd November Home Mixing
Mixing ME drum parts from recording of 'Dress' in Logic, 3 hours
Cut up individual tracks, and reversed some, left basic sound of drums in tact.

30th November 2019 ICMuS Studio 1
3 hours Logic, solo recordings, 'Dress'
Overdubs three separate bass guitar parts (two played high in the instrument's register) through a fuzz box and Ampeg Amp into SM57, 3 x takes and use composit
Overdub one acoustic piano parts, 3 takes and use composit.

15th December 2019, home studio, 2 hours
'Dress' overdub Piano, keys, D.I. through Logic/Casio.
Recorded sampled sound effects.

15th April 2020
Home mixing 'Dress',
Overdubbed sampled vocals 'Counting the Days' new title to reflect
Mix and edit Counting the Days video and recording
Final mixes and video, adding samples vocals

20th July 2020
Home studio, writing and recording base for 'Breakout Man', lyrics almost done. Keys, synth from GarageBand, initial 6 tracks recorded with guide vox, 3 hours.

21st July 2020
Home studio recording, GarageBand 4 hours.
overdubbed vox Breakout Man (4 takes, composit) and electric guitar straight into GarageBand, with distortion and flange, edit drum machine, really unhappy with sound. Overdub real drums or percussion? Almost entirely fixed – only improvised performance electric guitar solo – 3 takes and composite final. Unhappy with guitar sound - re record?

1st August 2020
ICMuS solo recording Studio 2
4 hours, GarageBand
Studio 2. 4 separate tracks of acoustic guitar, Rhode cond. Logic. Overdub/duets. Good sound, keep all tracks. 1st and 2nd takes keepers – effective duet – both improvised.

5th August 2020
Home Studio
2.5 hours. Record electric guitar tracks x 5

Kept best two tracks – heavily processed, delays, chorus, eq. added

21st August 2020
Home Studio, 2 hours.
Mixing and Editing track from last session – Seasons Delayed.
Complete for recording.

6th October 2020 Home studio
3 hours, Recording GarageBand

5th September 2020
Home Studio
Mixing and Editing acoustic guitar tracks in Logic. 3 hours.

15th September 2020
3 hours
Mixing and editing final tracks, one to be kept - Acoustica. Others scrapped, eq and reverb, little processing needed, good sound

17th November
Home Studio
Recording 2 hours
Edit and Master Acoustica

12th January 2021
Home Recording, 3 hours, GarageBand, Edit mixing, mastering

24th January 2021
Home Mixing, 3 hours Logic, mixing, vocal overdubs, Mastering

15th February 2021
Home Mixing, keys overdubs GarageBand, 2 hrs.

10th April 2021
ICMuS Basement 2 hours. Marlene Everling Drums, MC guitar. GarageBand recordings. 3 mics on drums (cond plus SM57) one SM58 on guitar.
3 x long tracks, 4 x short, timed tracks. Good sound, good feel, Some material to be kept.
2nd track long take, rock groove, could keep as whole track.

14th April 2021
ICMuS Basement 2 hours. Marlene Everling Drums, MC guitar. GarageBand. Exact set up as last time. .
4 x long tracks, 3 x timed tracks. Better strike rate, more consistent. Some changes of equipment – percussion egg on 2 tracks recorded. 3rd track seemed strong.

20th April 2021
ICMuS – as above

Shorter time, 1 and half hours, same set up. Added wha wha pedal for interest and some good results. Good short tracks especially (x4)

24th April 2021
ICMuS Basement 2 hours. Same personnel and set up as last recording.
3 x longer tracks, 5 x short. Added effects unit for contrast – delay settings, distortion and chorus etc.
Most consistent yet, very strong and longer ones more productive. Variation re distortion unit on guitar.

Home Studio 10th May 2021
Mixing and editing material ME and MC via GarageBand. Arranged into initial 4 longer tracks and 5 shorter. Discard several hours of material.

Home Studio 24th May 2021
GarageBand, Overdub bass and keys (Casio) via GarageBand to 3 tracks from ME/MC material
3 hours
Chord of Destiny – fixed bass repeated, Jazz Dance Interlude, improvised bass, Delay and Repeat, fixed bass, improvised keys (Casio).

Home Studio 31st May 2021
GarageBand 2 hours, Overdub Keys and record vocals (previously written) to long track from ME/MC material, song title 'Days Like These', from 8 mins down to 4 mins plus.

Home Studio 14th June 2021
GarageBand 2.5 hours, overdub Keys, samples and bass to 2 tracks from ME/MC material

Home Studios 29th June 2021
3 hours.
GarageBand 3 hours, Mixing, Editing and Mastering 4 tracks from proposed *April* album
Taking Back Control, Jazz Dance Interlude, Snare Frequency, Delay and Repeat

Home Studios 5th July 2021
2 hours
GarageBand 2 hours, Editing and Mastering 4 tracks for *April*
I Didn't Get it, Baby Steps, Catching Throws, Days Like These