

Analysing Improvised Music Through a Comedic Lens

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Abstract:

Improvisation in modern Western performance can most commonly be found in the mediums of music and comedy. These practices have been an integral part of art performance throughout its documented history, yet there is an underrepresentation of improvisation in academia. Music and comedy academic discussion respectively privilege score-based and written media over the extemporised, and no theories have been proposed in any field to explain the effect of improvisation. However, there are three accepted theories of comedy that can be used to explain the humorous effects of improvisation in theatrical performance. These are referred to as the theories of incongruity, relief, and superiority.

Viewing improv comedy through the lens of these theories demonstrates that the idiosyncratic elements inherent in the improvised nature of its performance conform with the conventions established by the aforementioned theories. As these elements are not displayed in written comedy, which the theories primarily address, the argument can be presented that improvisation as a creative approach, regardless of its medium, displays elements of humour. This argument is supported by using these theories to analyse jazz music and in recognising their relationship to jazz and their relationship to improvised comedy is very similar. This connection between improvisation in comedy and jazz goes beyond theories of comedy, and these additional similarities will be examined, before each of the primary theories is analysed in turn

Within this thesis, I propose that the world of commonality between improvised music, specifically common-practice jazz, and improvised comedy, including their relationship to comedy theory, transcends the established worlds of composed music and written comedy respectively. Therefore, I will conclude that improvisation should be viewed as its own unique genre of interdisciplinary performance.

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I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Analysing Improvised Music Through a Comedic Lens

Improvisation: 'The creation of a musical work, or the final form of a musical work, as it is being performed...'¹ – Grove Music Online

'immediate communication of "felt" experience'² – Robert Leach

'any attempt to describe improvisation must be, in some respects, a misrepresentation'³ – Derek Bailey

Improvisation is a fascinating art form that can exist in any medium or genre of art and performance. The fact that it is conceived and articulated simultaneously causes difficulty when defining and extrapolating exactly what it means to improvise a performance. Conventionally, improvisation is not categorised as an independent genre, though some professional performance niches will market a specific aesthetic of contemporary improvisation. Nevertheless, in general theory and practice, the art form encompasses multiple styles and disciplines, meaning that it is understood as 'a way to communicate, not the medium in which you communicate,'⁴ and is generally recognised as holding great 'potential for interdisciplinary activity'.⁵ While also extending to forms such as poetry or the visual arts, improvisation is most commonly practiced in music, theatre, and comedy. The latter is often overlooked by writers and critics in preference to the more academically-reputable dramatic theatre, despite the two art forms sharing very similar skill sets and approaches.

All areas of improvisation are aided by a vast knowledge of their medium, and an extensive knowledge of theory and years of experience can be very beneficial. However, this is not necessary to improvise expressively and effectively, and improvisation is favoured by many performers due to its inclusivity. An ability for quick thinking and an openness to close collaboration are also useful

¹ Grove Music Online, s.v. "Improvisation," Bruno Nettl et al., updated Sep 3, 2014, accessed Jan 31, 2019, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000013738>

² Robert Leach, *Makers of Modern Theatre: An Introduction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 24.

³ Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: its nature and practice in music* 2nd ed. (London: The British Library National Sound Archive, 1992), ix.

⁴ Mick Napier, "Talking to Improvisers" in Tom Salinsky and Deborah Frances-White, *The Improv Handbook: The Ultimate Guide to Improvising in Comedy, Theatre, and Beyond* 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017), 387.

⁵ Simon Rose, *The Lived Experience of Improvisation: In Music, Learning and Life* (Bristol: Intellect, 2017), 75.

skills for an improviser. John Hodgson and Ernest Richards, in the context of improvised theatre, state that 'besides working as an individual with other individuals, the student needs to learn to respond to the group and within the group'.⁶ Another key reason for its popularity is its unique immediacy with other improvisers and with the audience. Leach conveys this clearly when discussing Konstantin Stanislavski's use of improvisation, arguing that the art depends upon the 'immediate communication of "felt" experience'.⁷ Meanwhile, Tom Salinsky and Deborah Frances-White describe successful improvisation as 'the most revealing art form'.⁸ Other enticing aspects of improvisation across all disciplines include the resultant pleasure of tension and release, and of expectation and subversion, its unique states of group consciousness, trance or flow, and the personal, political and social freedoms it allows.

Approaches to improvisation at a beginner level tend to exist within a framework.⁹ In music, this can exist in the form of a jazz standard, or even something as simple as quiet to loud, while improvised comedy – regularly abbreviated to improv – features various set foundations for scenes or games. However, these art forms can also be approached in a freer manner, with comedy and theatre allowing for many long-form performances with varying degrees of established platforms. The most famous structure of improvised comedy is the Harold, a type of long-form improv that was pioneered primarily by Del Close and Charna Halpern in 1970s Chicago. Within a performance of a Harold, several thematically and sometimes narratively related scenes are performed from a single audience suggestion – the form will be discussed in more detail later in this thesis. Free improvisation in music meanwhile is more commonly claimed to be created from a blank canvas, though extemporisation of any kind can also be inspired by an emotion or theme decided either by the performers or from audience suggestions.

Despite all these similarities and the cross-disciplinary practices of some improvisers, there is some tension when regarding the issue of reputation between its genres. Improvised music, be it in jazz or more contemporary free improvisation, is often viewed as a very serious practice. Indeed, it could be argued that this is to its detriment, especially considering improvisation's history of entertainment and play, with journalist and performer Leonard Feather saying that jazz criticism 'often takes itself so seriously that the reader may be disconcerted, even turned off by its

⁶ John Hodgson and Ernest Richards, *Improvisation* (New York City: Grove Press, 1974), 90.

⁷ Leach, *Makers of Modern Theatre*, 24.

⁸ Salinsky and Frances-White, *The Improv Handbook*, 337.

⁹ Tony Wigram, *Improvisation: Methods and Techniques for Music Therapy Clinicians, Educators, and Students* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishing, 2004), 41.

pretentiousness'.¹⁰ Conversely, improv comedy is rarely even acknowledged within academic discussions surrounding improvisation despite the influence, versatility, and critical acclaim of many of its contributors.

Many jazz musicians have compared their art to comedy and vice versa, most explicitly with cornetist Bix Beiderbecke stating that 'jazz is musical humor'.¹¹ Various stand-ups from the 1950s and '60s who incorporated improvisation into their acts were also regarded as 'jazz comedian[s]'¹², with improvising musician Derek Bailey claiming that legendary comedian Lenny Bruce 'often compared his working methods to those of the jazzman'.¹³ However, these comparisons are primarily made to spontaneous stand-up comics of this golden era, rather than what we regard today as improv comedy.

Texts on improvised comedy acknowledge these links, but there tends to be vagueness or generalisation as if music is an unrelated and misunderstood art form. Rick Overton opens his foreword to Michael Pollock's book *Musical Direction in Improv and Sketch Comedy* with the bold statement 'Improv is theatrical jazz'¹⁴. Similarly, Dan O'Connor specifically compares the Harold to jazz, and there are many reasons why this comparison is valid. The formation of a jazz standard is dependent on the contributions of various players, and the performance as a whole can be viewed as being comprised of individual musical offerings in the form of solos. These solos are usually related to the original head but will diverge from it and explore new material. The same can be said of a Harold where the same theme is explored, but each section of the performance could consist of different characters, locations, or time periods. Unfortunately, the explanation given by O'Connor is limited as he simply argues that 'when you put all those scenes together, they're one song. But they're all short little pieces.'¹⁵ While the essence of his argument comes across, the comparison is not explored or developed in a satisfying way.

¹⁰ Leonard Feather, *Laughter from the Hip: The Lighter Side of Jazz* (New York: Horizon, 1963), quoted in Charles Hiroshi Garrett, "The Humor of Jazz," in *Jazz/Not Jazz: The Music and Its Boundaries*, ed. David Ake, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and Daniel Goldmark (California: University of California Press, 2012), 52.

¹¹ "'Jazz Is Musical Humor,' Says Davenport Composer and Cornetist of Whiteman's Band," *Davenport Sunday Democrat*, Feb 10, 1929, quoted in Garrett, "The Humor of Jazz," 49.

¹² Bruce Klauber, "George Carlin: Last Jazz Comic Standing," *Jazz Legends*, June 29, 2008, accessed Jan 31, 2019, <http://www.jazzlegends.com/george-carlin-last-jazz-comic-standing/>

¹³ Bailey, *Improvisation*, 49.

¹⁴ Rick Overton, "Foreword," in Michael Pollock, *Musical Direction for Improv and Sketch Comedy* (Los Angeles: Mastereyear Publishing, 2004), 13.

¹⁵ Dan O'Connor, "Talking to Improvisers" in Salinsky and Frances-White, *The Improv Handbook*, 391.

Charles Hiroshi Garrett's essay "The Humor of Jazz" is one of very few works that directly and effectively compares jazz music and its performers to comedy. Garrett also discusses the primary theories of comedy,¹⁶ which shall be addressed in far more detail in the main body of this thesis. Numerous theories of comedy have been cultivated over millennia and have their roots in Ancient Greek philosophy. There have been various interpretations, developments, and combinations of these theories throughout history, but it is generally accepted that these can all be synthesised into three main schools of understanding humour: incongruity, relief, and superiority. However, Garrett only goes as far as to consider the art of jazz in reference to these theories as they were initially formulated, as methods of understanding humour in written works and scripted performances, with some further comparisons to stand-up comedy. In order to fully understand the relationship between these comedy theories and jazz, an improvised genre of music, one must first understand the relationship of these theories, and of jazz, to improvised comedy.

Considering the wealth of improvised music practiced in a range of cultures and settings around the world, it lies beyond the constraints of this thesis to represent all forms of improvised music equally and give them the attention they deserve. This thesis will focus on jazz, specifically the subgenre of post-bebop 'common-practice jazz'¹⁷. Common-practice jazz is a well-known form of improvised music in the Western world, particularly in countries where improv comedy is most commonly practiced. Furthermore, the prolific amount of common-practice jazz recordings with identifiable titles from a canon of artists, and the range of texts in recent decades analysing these recordings and the subgenre itself, allows for clear referencing for the duration of the thesis. Therefore, it is the most appropriate subgenre to focus on to make this comparison. The term 'jazz' will be used throughout, mainly in reference to this subgenre, to allow for more concise phrasing. The term 'improvised music' will be used sparingly to acknowledge the fact that not all forms of improvised music are being discussed in this thesis. However, in cases where jazz is being directly compared to either non-improvised music or to improvised comedy, and the fact that jazz uses improvisation is especially relevant to the comparison, the term 'improvised music' will be used to reinforce this.

Through analysing the role of improvisation in music and comedy, and by highlighting their commonalities while openly addressing any issues with this comparison, I hope to make the case that the two art forms are more interdependent and mutually beneficial than may be initially

¹⁶ Garrett, "The Humor of Jazz," 53.

¹⁷ Michael Schachter, "'Autumn Leaves': Intricacies of Style in Keith Jarrett's Approach to the Jazz Standard," *Indiana Theory Review*, Vol. 31, No. 1-2 (2013), 128, para. 2, accessed Jun 10, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.2979/inditheorevi.31.1-2.0115.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A22f57dcb707e174f72ad46d239489592>.

assumed. The essay will then move on to a critical analysis of improvisation through the lenses of the three main theories of comedy in cross-curricular academia. While these theories were indeed initially formulated to address the effectiveness of written or devised comedy, there are several presently unaddressed reasons why their extension to improvised comedy is just as relevant. Beyond this, these theories allow for a deeper and more nuanced comprehension of improvised music. By discussing improvised comedy and jazz with relation to these theories, this thesis not only endeavours to bring theoretically-overlooked art forms to the forefront of academic debate, but to provide well-supported arguments as to why improvisation should be viewed as a wholly separate and unique genre of performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

I. EXPRESSION AND CONNECTION

Many improvisers view their craft as an extension of the innately performative rituals of everyday life and, in keeping with this view, as an essential factor for authentic expression in performance. Improv comedy pioneers Halpern, Close and Johnson have assessed the interconnectedness of the human experience by stating that 'life is a slow Harold',¹⁸ while Stephen Nachmanovitch has posited that 'every conversation is a form of jazz. The activity of instantaneous creation is as ordinary to us as breathing'.¹⁹ Hodgson and Richards have also written on this topic, suggesting that 'improvisation in drama aims to utilize the two elements from everyday life improvisation: the spontaneous response to the unfolding of an unexpected situation, and the ingenuity called on to deal with the situation'.²⁰ The idea that improvisation is prevalent in ordinary life explains why theatre practitioners such as Stanislavski and Meyerhold held it in such high regard in their quests for realism. This belief that the incorporation of improvisation into plays allows a more convincing and effective depiction of the unplanned nature of unscripted life challenges the convention of strictly-scripted theatre. Similarly, improvisation's connection to the real allows performers a controlled space to process, train, and communicate emotions, some of which they may neglect and repress in modern society. One could argue that improvisation, in whatever medium or genre, offers an even more authentic emotional experience than everyday life.²¹

Artistic expression is often cited as one of the main appeals of improvisation, be this for the authenticity, directness, or the freedom of expression available. Keith Johnstone, in the sequel to *Impro* (his seminal text on improvised comedy), clearly states that 'self-revelation should be at the heart of improvising'.²² Meanwhile, Nachmanovitch describes it as 'a remarkable and often moving experience in direct communication'.²³ The important link between improvisation and expression is also dominant in the world of music – for example, Derek Bailey has said that 'instrumental

¹⁸ Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim "Howard" Johnson, *Truth in Comedy: The Manual of Improvisation* (Colorado Springs: Meriwether Publishing Ltd., 1994), 146.

¹⁹ Stephen Nachmanovitch, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* (New York: Jeremy P Tarcher/Putnam, 1990), 17.

²⁰ Hodgson and Richards, *Improvisation*, 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

²² Keith Johnstone, *Impro for Storytellers* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 27.

²³ Nachmanovitch, *Free Play*, 4.

improvisation can achieve the highest levels of musical expression'.²⁴ Furthermore, there is a widely-held belief across artistic fields that Stephen Blum articulates succinctly in stating that 'improvisation opens up possibilities that are not available in the process of composing'.²⁵ This argument can easily be applied to theatre with regard to script writing, as in both there is a complete construction of a performance before it reaches the stage, limiting the direct communication between creator and viewer. David Borgo also shares this view, saying that group improvisation 'can inspire individuals to play things that they would not have been able to play alone, or would not have explored without the inspiration of the group'.²⁶ The desirable quality that improvisation brings to content creation is a direct result of its unique energy which is primarily attained through conscious or subconscious group interaction. This collaboration has the potential to be with either other performers or with the audience witnessing and directly creating the improvised content.

Improvisation not only 'secures the total involvement of the performer... [and] provides the possibility for the player to completely identify with the music'²⁷, but its 'responsiveness to its environment puts the performance in a position to be directly influenced by the audience'.²⁸ Jihad Racy describes this connection between the performer/s and the audience as an 'active feedback process [that] inspires the improviser and ultimately shapes the content of his improvisation'.²⁹ The act of creating in the here and now, combined with the ability to gauge the audience's reaction to what is being created in the moment of creation, allows the spectator-consensus (or at least a performer's interpretation of this) a voice in what is successful and unsuccessful. This can be extended further by handing the audience the power to decide what direction an improvisation should go in. How closely a performer responds to this is to their discretion. A connection between performers and everyone else in the room can be highly desirable, especially from the latter's perspective, and Bailey praises improvisation for allowing the audience 'a degree of intimacy with the music that is not achieved in any other situation'.³⁰ Similarly, Salinsky and Frances-White acknowledge that 'the point of improvisation is that it's fun and engaging for an audience to share in an artist's moment of inspiration',³¹ and Steve Day describes this engagement by stating that

²⁴ Bailey, *Improvisation*, 48.

²⁵ Stephen Blum, "Representations of Music Making" in *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society*, ed. Gabriel Solis and Bruno Nettl (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 242.

²⁶ David Borgo, *Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music in a Complex Age* (London: Continuum, 2005), 184.

²⁷ Bailey, *Improvisation*, 17.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁹ Jihad Racy, "Why Do They Improvise? Reflections on Meaning and Experience," *Musical Improvisation* ed. Solis and Nettl, 318.

³⁰ Bailey, *Improvisation*, 44.

³¹ Salinsky and Frances-White, *The Improv Handbook*, 27.

improvisation 'asks the listener to continue the creative process of interaction... The listener too must improvise'.³² A sense of involvement with and a partial responsibility for the artistic creation one is witnessing is one of the most exciting ways to consume media and elevates audience members from the role of a spectator to a psychological level closer to that of the performers. For performers too, immediate validation from an engaged crowd can increase confidence and comfort, allowing one to relax into the flow of spontaneous creation and generate artistic material that may seem inaccessible in a situation with less positive energy and inspiration.

Some improvisers, however, have noted the dangers of responding too explicitly to instantaneous audience feedback. Alain Danelou has warned that 'when the musicians note a positive reaction from the public, they are tempted to reproduce the effect which provoked this reaction and consequently one can understand how the rapid deterioration of the music performed could occur'.³³ Halpern, Close, and Johnson similarly caution against taking a positive response from an audience as an indicator to continue with more of the same, as routines focusing purely on audience satisfaction over scene construction can lose their way very quickly.³⁴ An improviser must distinguish between what the audience positively responds to (for example, in improvised comedy, a well-executed joke) and what they really want (an entertaining and funny scene, rather than a string of jokes with no momentum or cohesion). They must also balance this against what appeals to them as a performer and what will satisfy whoever else they are performing with, with the primary objective generally being to 'focus on making the other person [or people] look good'.³⁵

It is commonly accepted that improvisation is dependent on collaboration. Hodgson and Richards have stated that improvised theatre, like life, is 'a combination of the individual and the group approach',³⁶ and musicologist David Toop has posited that 'improvisation is fundamentally cooperative'.³⁷ The most commonly-referenced aspects of this mutual creation are the sharing of responsibility between performers, and the necessity of compromise for the benefit of the group. Anthony Braxton suggests that 'the "responsibility ratio" of extended creative music demands the

³² Steve Day, *Two Full Ears: Listening to Improvising Music* (Chelmsford: Soundworld, 1998), 143, quoted in Borgo, *Sync or Swarm*, 26.

³³ Alain Danelou, in Bailey, *Improvisation*, 44.

³⁴ Halpern, Close, and Johnson, *Truth in Comedy*, 83.

³⁵ Chad Elliot, *Improv Manifesto: 7 Easy Steps to Confidence, Creativity and Charisma – Even If You're Shy!* (Seattle: Creative Conference LLC, 2017), Kindle Mobile edition, 15.

³⁶ Hodgson and Richards, *Improvisation*, 17.

³⁷ David Toop, *Into the Maelstrom: Music, Improvisation and the Dream of Freedom* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 19.

complete involvement of every participating musician,³⁸ and Simon Rose observes that ‘improvisers share responsibility for the creation of music in performance’.³⁹ The specific wording here reveals slightly distinct viewpoints. Braxton’s theory of a Responsibility Ratio *demanding* the musician’s involvement is interestingly phrased, as it suggests that the social contract of group improvisation has implied levels of accountability from before the creative act, and it is this agreement that ‘demands the [performer’s] complete involvement’⁴⁰ rather than the music itself. Furthermore, his specification of creative music implies that he views performance from a score as belonging to a different category, where the performer and creator are separate. There would still be a Responsibility Ratio present in a scored ensemble performance, but the weightings of that ratio would be different than in improvisation where everyone has a role in creating. Rose’s point conveys this more simply as he specifies that the responsibility for musical creation in improvisation is shared, whereas Braxton states that the involvement of all musicians should be equal, but not necessarily their role in the creation of the music. This discrepancy relates to a common concern in group improvisation of knowing when to play and when not to play, and how not playing can factor into collaborative creation. Most collaborative improvisers share the viewpoint that assisting one’s fellow players is more important to group creation than focusing primarily on oneself, though it can be argued that this is only the case ‘when everyone is out to help everyone else, which simply means mutual justification’.⁴¹ Rose’s comment seems to argue that the Responsibility Ratio is only balanced when the sharing of musical creation is equal, whereas Braxton’s comment suggests that it is simply the *complete involvement* of the performers that is necessary, be this directly with an equal amount of playing or on a spiritual level of interconnectedness.

In many forms of jazz music, primarily bebop and similar subgenres with a small ensemble, it is not uncommon for a single performer to take a leading role within the ensemble. As such, many prestigious jazz performances are credited to a lead performer’s eponymous group, for example the Miles Davis Quintet. Whilst Davis is not the only member of the Quintet to perform solos, he artistically directed the group and is rarely declined a solo on their recordings. While all the musicians in an ensemble continuously support one another and aid each other’s musical creation, the Responsibility Ratio may not be completely equal. Yet this is not at the detriment of the music or

³⁸ Anthony Braxton, Liner notes for *Performance 9/1/79*, by Braxton, Hat Hut Records, 1981, LP, quoted in Graham Lock, *Forces in Motion: The Music and Thoughts of Anthony Braxton* (London: Quartet Books Limited, 1988), 147.

³⁹ Rose, *The Lived Experience of Improvisation*, 65.

⁴⁰ Braxton, Liner notes for *Performance 9/1/79*, in Lock, *Forces in Motion*, 147.

⁴¹ Pollock, *Musical Direction for Improv and Sketch Comedy*, 20.

the improvisation process. Some improvisers may be more comfortable in a supporting role, whether this is due to their level of experience, their view of their ability compared to others in the ensemble, or simply the nature of their instrument. Laura Hall, in her discussion of her experience as a pianist on hit improv comedy television show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, addresses the dynamism and interchangeability of roles in improvised performance: 'Sometimes you are following and supporting the actors; other times they are following your lead and reacting to the sonic changes you create'.⁴² Due to the inherent uncertainty of improvisation, a performer cannot generally predict the necessary extent of their role. Therefore, an improviser must be completely involved in the process of performance, even if they are taking a supporting role and not necessarily creating an equal amount of music to their contemporaries. However, this debate becomes even more complex when one considers the notion, as phrased here by Wigram, that 'music needs to be understood as a combination of sounds and silence'.⁴³ By applying this logic, a performer in even the smallest of supporting roles is still contributing as much as a Coltrane-esque soloist, and their collaborative involvement and musical creation are equal to each other, as well as to those of their fellow performers. This view is shared in improvised comedy, with Halpern, Close, and Johnson claiming that 'an actor has more responsibility in improvisation than any other theatre form'⁴⁴, and continuing to suggest that this responsibility is shared equally by all performers, not just the lead performer.

II. TRANCE AND FLOW

After an improvised performance by Braxton and his ensemble, Lock observed that 'all the players are simultaneously independent and connected'.⁴⁵ While retaining a personal voice in improvisation is very important as it allows for the liberation of many performers, the connection with other performers can sometimes extend beyond collaboration to transcendence from the self. This distancing from a single identity is a consequence of the formation of a group consciousness which allows seamless collaboration. Many texts on improvisation refer to these trance states, sometimes called flow or groove in a musical context, and with various names in texts with a more spiritual or global focus. Nachmanovitch, for example, references concepts of *chi*, *élan vital*, and others from

⁴² Laura Hall and Bob Baker, *The Improv Comedy Musician: The Ultimate Guide to Playing Music with an Improv Group* (Valley Village: Sister Trudy's Music Box, 2016), Kindle Mobile edition, section 1.

⁴³ Wigram, *Improvisation*, 177.

⁴⁴ Halpern, Close, and Johnson, *Truth in Comedy*, 117.

⁴⁵ Lock, *Forces in Motion*, 144.

around the world.⁴⁶ Ronnie Scott describes this sensation by saying ‘it becomes as if something else has taken over and you’re just an intermediary between whatever else and the instrument’.⁴⁷ Both Racy and Thomas Turino discuss the concept of flow in an edited book on musical improvisation, with the latter crediting this term to psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and describing its effect as ‘liberating and sometimes transcendental’.⁴⁸ Racy, meanwhile, suggests that ‘the creation of music while it is being performed may have a profound transformative effect upon the improviser, as well as upon the listener’,⁴⁹ and that flow ‘appears to open the gate to extraordinary musical ideas that may be totally unpremeditated’.⁵⁰ Johnstone dedicates a lengthy chapter of *Impro* to trance, interchangeably referred to as *samadhi*, which means ‘a state of intense concentration achieved through meditation...’.⁵¹ *Samadhi* has been a concept in Buddhist meditation for centuries, and Johnstone is recognised as being responsible for introducing it to Western performance,⁵² praising these subconscious states as a way of accessing inner emotion and enhancing spontaneity. He claims that ‘in many trance states people are more in touch, more observant’,⁵³ and later encourages improvisers to attune to their ‘automatic processes’.⁵⁴

The idea of one’s conscious self not being in complete control is intimidating to some and is one of the reasons people can be apprehensive about improvisation, alongside more obvious issues of confidence and so forth. However, it is a common appeal of the art form to those who find excitement in releasing their inhibitions and embracing the sometimes-chaotic nature of free creation, and of achieving temporary mental synchronicity with their fellow performers. Borgo highlights that ‘group flow can inspire individuals to play things that they would not have been able to play alone, or would not have explored without the inspiration of the group’.⁵⁵ This view of the connection between improvisers is very similar to the aforementioned view of the connection

⁴⁶ Nachmanovitch, *Free Play*, 32-3. [These are different names that have been applied to incredibly similar concepts, rather than a group of completely distinct concepts around a similar theme. For this thesis, I will generally refer to ‘trance’ or ‘flow’ unless quoting another writer. I will use these two terms interchangeably].

⁴⁷ Ronnie Scott in Bailey, *Improvisation*, 52.

⁴⁸ Thomas Turino, “Formulas and Improvisation in Participatory Music,” in *Musical Improvisation*, ed. Solis and Nettle, 108.

⁴⁹ Racy, “Why Do They Improvise?”, 320.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 321.

⁵¹ *Oxford Living Dictionaries*, s.v. “samadhi,” accessed Apr 2nd, 2019, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/samadhi>.

⁵² Nachmanovitch, *Free Play*, 53 – 5.

⁵³ Johnstone, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 149.

⁵⁴ Johnstone, *Impro for Storytellers*, 64.

⁵⁵ Borgo, *Sync or Swarm*, 184.

between the artist and the listener, furthering the claim that the audience are directly involved in the performance and are improvising themselves.

While this experience is a highlight of improvisation for many, it is not found in all instances. Like many states of meditation, trance can be hard to achieve when one is actively searching for it. Instead, it arises from moments of intense concentration and selfless co-operation, both of which are beneficial to group improvisation even if the trance state is not ultimately reached. This selflessness often alludes to a flexibility, with many improvisers recognising that performances must be approached in different ways depending on the nature of the ensemble. Yves Robert puts this bluntly, claiming it is 'obvious [that] you have to adapt your way of playing depending on who you are working with,⁵⁶' and Johnstone shares this view by suggesting that 'unless you are willing to be changed you might as well be working alone'.⁵⁷ Halpern, Close, and Johnson also encourage this kind of selflessness, stating that 'no one improviser is more important than the group or the game'.⁵⁸ One of the most interesting aspects of improvisation is how it balances its capacity of allowing for such supportive collaboration, with many of its leading theorists and writers encouraging improvisers to serve the needs of the group over self-satisfaction, with its reputation as the most liberating form of self-expression. Free jazz pioneer Cecil Taylor describes improvised performance as 'the most heightened perception of one's self, but one's self in relation to other forms of life,⁵⁹' embracing the personally reflective and expressive experience of improvisation as well as its capacity for interconnectedness.

Bailey acknowledges that group improvisation 'demands the sacrifice of individual preferences. It calls for musical generosity, curiosity and sensitivity'.⁶⁰ The wording of this rightly frames what could be viewed as a negative revelation in a positive light. The sacrifice he refers to is of individual 'preferences', but not of inspiration or personality, and the grouping of generosity, curiosity and sensitivity introduces different ways to think about this embracing of another's musical ideas over one's own as something other than a diminishing of the self.

The view of collaboration as generosity is common, with Salinsky and Frances-White saying improvisers should 'focus on being good to work with'⁶¹ rather than pushing their own agenda. This

⁵⁶ Yves Robert in Bailey, *Improvisation*, 139.

⁵⁷ Johnstone, *Impro for Storytellers*, 57.

⁵⁸ Halpern, Close and Johnson, *Truth in Comedy*, 120.

⁵⁹ Cecil Taylor, Liner notes for *Live in the Black Forest*, by Cecil Taylor, MPS, 1979, LP, quoted in Lock, *Forces in Motion*, 316

⁶⁰ Bailey, *Improvisation*, 136.

⁶¹ Salinsky and Frances-White, *The Improv Handbook*, 50.

seems to be good practice for performers to recognise that within the improvising collective their roles may adapt and vary to best suit the scene. ‘Sensitivity’ relates to the same kinds of considerations, as well as implying an understanding and acceptance of the personalities and mindsets of others. The inclusion of curiosity however, while equally valid, is not discussed as often, or at least as explicitly. Much like any gathering of people with different lifestyles, especially in a performance environment where one’s idiosyncratic personality (shaped by one’s cultural background as well as one’s artistic influences and experiences) can shine through, improvisation can provide a platform for distinct voices to express themselves while working together. It encourages unfamiliar performers to find common ground and introduce each other to new ideas or ways of looking at and thinking about their art, and to take on the ideas presented by fellow performers. Borgo praises improvisation’s capacity to allow for a wide range of voices to be expressed, describing intense, connected improv as a ‘swarm-like [art form] in which individual parts may be moving in very different directions and yet the musical whole develops with a collective purpose’.⁶² Similarly, Rose points out that ‘allowing for others’ music as well as your own... makes it possible to create something new together,’⁶³ specifying that mutual creation is aided by listening and then responding generously, curiously, and sensitively. Being open to other improvisers and taking influence and direction from them, learning from their approaches and adapting your own personal style to accommodate theirs, does not diminish your individual voice: rather, the individual voice is enhanced as the internal repertoire of experience and available content is expanded. In this way, collaborative improvisation not only complements individual expression but assists it.

III. CO-OPERATION AND SPONTANEITY

The curiosity to hear and learn from others in improvisation requires listening to the offers given by fellow performers and responding to and building on these offers to create as a group. In improvised comedy, this process is commonly called “Yes And...” and is informally regarded as the first rule of improv.⁶⁴ The premise behind this is simple: a performer will make an offer within the scene (for example “We’re going to the beach!”) and their partner will respond positively while adding information (“Yes, and I’ve prepared a picnic!”). Disagreeing with the continuation would negate the information that has been introduced and undermine the scene’s integrity; this is

⁶² Borgo, *Sync or Swarm*, 9.

⁶³ Rose, *The Lived Experience of Improvisation*, 41 – 2.

⁶⁴ From my personal experience of learning improv, “Yes And...” was the second ‘rule’ behind the more imperative “Don’t be a dick”

referred to as blocking. Not only does blocking hinder a scene's progression and begin to challenge the world-building that improvised comedy depends on, it also suggests a lack of respect between performers. Alternatively, agreeing without expanding on the offer ("We're going to the beach!" "Yes, we are") would pressure the first improviser in this scenario to expand upon their own offer without anything else to react to or build upon. This indicates that the latter improviser has failed to fulfil their responsibility of progressing the scene. Whilst the dialogue does not need to be as explicitly prescriptive as following the "Yes, and..." formula, by agreeing and adding information related to the first offer a logical platform for the scene can be built with minimal struggle. This concept can be and has been easily applied to musical improvisation as well, as Borgo specifically credits Johnstone for the terming of "Yes And...". He continues to say that performers 'must listen intently and acknowledge the gestures of others as a form of musical "offer"'.⁶⁵ Ideas can spark other ideas, and a lot of the most effective and affecting improvisation comes from performers picking up on and developing a motif, providing a contrast to a riff, or being changed by a revelation offered by their partner. In the words of Chad Elliot, 'you can't have a great idea in a vacuum.'⁶⁶ Improvisation at its peak often features witty repartees, be the dialogue musical or literal, and a piece or scene can often reach its climax with a tight group on the same wavelength reincorporating earlier material.

Another skill that the "Yes And..." rule is intended to develop is that of obviousness, which Johnstone especially encourages. Spontaneity is a highly sought-after trait by improvisers, though this is often confused with the ability to constantly conjure up the perfect idea in an attempt to seem interesting. Various writers have addressed this skill in ways that may at first seem to disagree with each other but, when viewed together, can be seen as multiple steps of the same process. Johnstone encourages the reader to 'trust your mind. Take the first idea it gives you'⁶⁷, while Nachmanovitch explains that 'the first thoughts are the ones that, by definition, are the most inspired ones'.⁶⁸ Rose, however, warns that 'collaboratively improvising with someone whose goal is to be constantly spontaneous can quickly negate the creative process'⁶⁹. While this appears to portray spontaneity as potentially counterproductive, it can also be interpreted as an encouragement of trusting one's instincts of the obvious rather than trying to be clever, as this attempt at cleverness is inherently not truly spontaneous. Following the obvious requires complete

⁶⁵ Borgo, *Sync or Swarm*, 186.

⁶⁶ Elliot, *Improv Manifesto*, 14.

⁶⁷ Johnstone, *Impro*, 82.

⁶⁸ Nachmanovitch, *Free Play*, 179.

⁶⁹ Rose, *The Lived Experience of Improvisation*, 144.

spontaneity and is less forced than what Rose seems to be referring to. Instead he addresses taking ideas that are given by one's collaborators and naturally building on them rather than clamouring to share one's own ideas to prove how inventive one can be without regard for the cohesion of the creative work. This latter approach can be harmful to the construction of an improvised performance. It can be directly evidenced by musicians trying to play incredibly complex passages that feel out of place from the established groove of the piece, or by comedians who try to introduce random and discordant ideas into scenes they don't cohere to simply from a desire to be seen as original.

Johnstone continues to be rather damning about this rejection of obviousness, saying that 'striving after originality takes you far away from your true self, and makes your work mediocre'.⁷⁰ The specification of this yearning to be original taking one 'far away from [their] true self'⁷¹ reinforces the capacity for expression in improvisation, implying that purely spontaneous acts display our true selves in a way that is unattainable by performance or creation that has been prepared in even the most immediate of ways. Nachmanovitch shares this belief, saying that 'spontaneous creation comes from our deepest being and is immaculately and originally ourselves'.⁷²

While spontaneity is an invaluable skill in improvisation, one must ensure that it does not overshadow the established structure of a performance. By surrendering to our instincts, we can achieve instantaneous and self-expressive creation, but in a performance environment this is generally expected to remain inside the narrative structure of a scene or the harmonic and tonal limitations of a jazz standard, for example. Borgo addresses the balance between spontaneity and restraint, saying that 'the goal of improvisation is not to play something new at every moment, rather it is to play something that is entirely appropriate to the moment'.⁷³ Spontaneity is a tremendous skill for uninhibited content creation, but an actively engaged consciousness is required to structure this content in a way that a climax and conclusion can eventually be reached.

⁷⁰ Johnstone, *Impro*, 88.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Nachmanovitch, *Free Play*, 10.

⁷³ Borgo, *Sync or Swarm*, 191.

IV. STRUCTURE

Structuring an instance of improvisation does not diminish the freedom or spontaneity of the form. While some types of improvisation have a clearer and stricter structure than others (for example, a jazz standard or a short-form improv comedy game like World's Worst), it is very rare that an improvisation is entirely "free". Whether established beforehand or identified and exemplified during the piece, even performances which present themselves as free improvisation will often make use of frameworks, patterns or game rules such as a theme or a recurring motif, or something as simple as 'soft to loud'.⁷⁴ Frameworks such as this not only help to guide the performers, but an audience who can identify these conventional patterns and structures will have a better understanding of the format of the improvised piece unfolding before them. Rather than limiting the artistic options available, pre-arranged structure can establish a context for approaching the otherwise empty canvas of improvisational possibility. Viola Spolin, a theorist and practitioner of improvised theatre whose ideas have been credited by many as the foundation of improv comedy, acknowledges that 'a blank space can be scary, but it can be filled in any number of interesting ways'.⁷⁵ Many improvisers apply these kinds of game rules to guide their artistic creation, providing a starting point from which to trigger further ideas. Braxton discusses how even the most minor of structural preparations can help to 'define the nature of the thoughts which will take place in the music',⁷⁶ while Nachmanovitch sloganizes 'structure ignites spontaneity'.⁷⁷

There is no set way to discuss structure in improvisation, and different performers go about approaching structure in their own idiosyncratic ways. Some writers have suggested categories to apply to improvised performance and while these are medium-specific, they can be used to look at other kinds of improvisation. Martha Pline uses a quite basic continuum to look at the level of structure within an improvisation, ranging from highly-structured "tighties" with minimal flexibility to "loosies" with no identifiable structure.⁷⁸ Borgo has described a slightly more detailed approach that was introduced to him by Graham Collier at a panel discussion, in which improvised musical structure is divided into soloing, textural improvisation, and structural improvisation.⁷⁹ Soloing

⁷⁴ Wigram, *Improvisation*, 41.

⁷⁵ Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theatre: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques* (London: Pitman, 1974), 28.

⁷⁶ Braxton in Lock, *Forces in Motion*, 238.

⁷⁷ Nachmanovitch, *Free Play*, 83.

⁷⁸ Patricia Shehan Campbell, "Learning to Improvise Music, Improvising to Learn Music," in *Musical Improvisation*, ed. Solis and Nettle, 125.

⁷⁹ Graham Collier, "The Shape of Jazz to Come?" (panel discussion, *International Association of Jazz Educators*, New Orleans, Jan 2000,) discussed in Borgo, *Sync or Swarm*, 182.

relates to a standard improvised solo within a jazz standard, with set sections to improvise over and chord sequences to follow, regardless of whether the soloist closely plays the changes or strays into more dissonant territory. The second category of textural improvisation describes music with an arranged structure to adhere to, but less strict rules regarding who should improvise when or, in some cases, the harmony or tonality of the piece. Collier's final category of structural improvisation is quite self-explanatory, with the structure of the piece itself being improvised along with the other elements of the music. Leonard Feather has also separated musical improvisation into three distinct categories – however, these are specifically referred to as types of melodic improvisation and, while his conditions for the distinctions are similar to Collier's, they are less relatable to improvisation in other media. Feather identifies brief variations on the melody (soloing); additions to the melody while keeping it recognisable (a broader interpretation that could relate to both soloing and textural improvisation); and what he regards as 'full improvisation.'⁸⁰

Dan O'Connor has also suggested three categories for improv comedy, which can be more closely compared to Collier's categories for musical improvisation. O'Connor says that he 'would define Theatresports⁸¹ games as short-form, plays as long-form, and the Harold as free-form'.⁸² Short-form improv has the most explicit similarities to soloing, though the focus will be on all those active on stage rather than emphasising a specific performer. These short-form games will typically have the most strictly defined structures. Each game has specific and relevant rules which are fundamental to the construction of the scene - for example, in the game "ABC", two performers will act out a scene with their sentences starting with consecutive letters of the alphabet.⁸³ The ensemble will often explain to the audience beforehand to ensure that there is a universal understanding of the task which encourages audiences to appreciate the added difficulty of the performers' lexical confinements rather than viewing it as an ordinary performance. Not only do explanations like this create camaraderie and allow the audience to understand and appreciate any internal logistics of the game, these moments of direct conversation also create future opportunities for entertaining tension and release if the performers show any sign of struggling with the limitations of these rules, assuming they then recover and resume the scene. In "ABC" this could be caused by an overlap in dialogue causing confusion as to where in the alphabet the performers are,

⁸⁰ Feather, *The Book of Jazz: A Guide to the Entire Field* (London: Arthur Barker Ltd., 1959), 214.

⁸¹ Theatresports is a form of 'competitive' improvised comedy, where teams of improvisers will perform short games and either a panel of judges or the audience will decide who is the most entertaining.

⁸² Dan O'Connor, "Talking to Improvisers," in Salinsky and Frances-White, *The Improv Handbook*, 391.

⁸³ e.g. "All we seem to do is talk through the alphabet" "Bloody strange how that keeps happening" "Can't understand why" etc.

or simply the panic of approaching difficult letters. Just like each game has its own set of rules, they also have their own specific challenges. Some of these may be unavoidable, but others can be overcome by familiarity. One could compare this to certain standards or chord sequences where familiarity and experience will allow a performer an understanding of which scales would be the most appropriate to improvise over. A jazz musician can have a bank of stock phrases for tricky tunes and difficult scales, just as an experienced improv comedian may have a few X and Z words to hand that they could customise to apply to any scene.

As these short-form games have the clearest rules and are more confined, anything that detracts from immediate progression of the scene or pushes its confines in any way is noticeable. Improvisation is a style in which anything can happen, but by clarifying these self-imposed rules there is a necessity to stay within them. The challenge of this is exciting, but any hesitation or rule breaking can be viewed by an audience – who expect a performer to comply to their chosen limitations – as an error.⁸⁴ This approach to improvisation continues the similarity with soloing throughout a jazz standard. Standards have distinct chord sequences, and soloists are expected to play the changes within the boundaries of this harmony. Some dissonance can add excitement to a solo, just like toying with the logistics of an improv game can entertain the audience, only if the pre-established confines are returned to before too long to retain the integrity of these choices. While experiments into dissonance, atonality, and more free improvisation can be incredibly high-quality and certainly have an audience, performing in this manner to listeners expecting a more conventional jazz performance may result in them feeling cheated.

In textural improvisation, the limits of harmony and turn-taking are less prevalent, and either dissonance is more regularly expected or there is simply not a chord sequence to stick to. Wigram describes these freer musical exchanges as ‘continuous, “free-flowing” dialogues.’⁸⁵ The second of Collier’s identified forms of jazz improv is most directly relatable to the third of O’Connor’s: The Harold. The Harold usually begins with a monologue, though it can also start with a short group game, and this is often based on an audience suggestion. The purpose of this opener is to generate lots of content in around a minute, with the performers then taking three ideas inspired by the monologue as the overarching scenes in the Harold (for the purpose of clarity, these shall be referred to as X, Y, and Z). The performers will then start with the first part of scene X, then onto scenes Y and Z, generally as two-person scenes of less than five minutes. The three scenes will

⁸⁴ The concept of what can be viewed as an error in an improvised context, and what the consequences of mistakes are, will be addressed in more detail within the main body as the topic of incongruity is discussed.

⁸⁵ Wigram, *Improvisation*, 98.

feature different performers and will begin unrelated to each other, sharing only the commonality of their inspiration from the opening monologue or game. After this, the improvisers will perform the second part of each scene, either picking up from where they left off or allowing for some time to have passed between what I will refer to as X and X2. At this second stage, details or motifs from the other two scenes can begin to appear. The third stage is usually the final stage as each scene sees a conclusion, sometimes tying multiple scenes together if possible. There are many variations to the Harold structure, with some groups performing short, unrelated group games between each iteration of the scenes, but the bare structure⁸⁶ generally remains the same.

While O'Connor describes these as 'free-form', the performers will have to be incredibly familiar with and strictly adhere to the structure for the scene to work. However, as the Harold is comprised of various shorter scenes around a larger theme, the narrative and chronology of the overall scene is indeed free-form, justifying this description. The structure is also rarely explained to the audience, and there are usually no specific game mechanics to adhere to within each scene, allowing for great variation between Harolds and a certain freeness of improvisation. Much like textural improvisation in jazz, the structure is clear to the performers and it demands to be followed, but there are far more possibilities within this structure than in a short-form scene.

The final type of structure mentioned by Collier is structural improvisation, which has the closest resemblance to what is commonly viewed as free improvisation. While there may be some sense of structure to a piece, it will not be as strict as other kinds of improvisation and will often be improvised itself. The structures that do feature in free improvisation are not what one would generally view as structure in the terms of notated music, such as ABA, but ways to organise things such as 'when, how, or how many people might play together'.⁸⁷ Structure of the more traditional form will commonly be completely improvised, unless the performers are attempting to improvise a parody of a specific musical style where structure is a defining genre-specific element. As Ng Hoon Hong states, 'improvisers tend to allow their music to dictate its own form as they subconsciously try to create a unique form or to struggle to free the form'.⁸⁸ The final point of this quote is specifically relevant to structural improvisation, though the overall idea can be applied to any type of improvisation. Though frameworks may be in place to assist some direction to the creation, the overall structure is often an afterthought as, once the opening notes have been played, the music

⁸⁶ X, Y, Z, X2, Y2, Z2, X3, Y3, Z3, or simply ending at X3 if enough details from the Y and Z narratives have been incorporated and resolved as part of this smaller scene.

⁸⁷ Borgo, *Sync or Swarm*, 7-8.

⁸⁸ Ng Hoon Hong, "Free Improvisation; Life Expression," *International Journal of Education & the Arts* (2011), vol 12 no. 14, accessed May 7, 2019, <http://www.ijea.org/v12n14/>

can shape its own creation – this idea is further exemplified by Ng’s focus on spontaneity and improvising without forethought.

Comparing again to O’Connor’s categorisations of improv comedy, structural improvisation holds many similarities to a long-form improvised play, as it will allow for significantly more narrative development than a Harold, and more varied pacing than a short-form scene. There can be a theme such as an improvised murder mystery or an improvised Shakespearean drama, and the performers may have established frameworks that they loosely follow but are far less rigid than those of a Harold and will not be revealed to the audience. The improvisers will have to adhere to the chosen theme but will have more flexibility than in a short-form game, not just in the length of their scene but also by the relinquishing of the “gimmick”,⁸⁹ and the more lax approach to structure.

Braxton suggests that different structures call for different ways of improvising, saying that his ensemble ‘work with various structures – material, thematic, repetitive structures – so the kind of improvisation depends on the context’.⁹⁰ Similar belief systems are also used by improv comedians, as most performers approach short-form as high energy games with regular jokes and an urge to reach an effective and entertaining climax, often ending the scene at this high point. Long-form improvised comedy, meanwhile, has a closer focus on narrative and character development to hold the audience’s attention even when the jokes stop flying, with slower pacing and more regular stretches of quiet, and allows for an appropriate resolution and denouement after the climactic peak. Johnstone has said that slowness can be more interesting than speed.⁹¹ Perhaps the primary aim for long-form improvisation is to be interesting, whereas for short-form improvisation the emphasis commonly falls upon the performance’s ability to be funny.

V. FREEDOM

Both music and comedy are regarded as conduits for liberation. This is most obviously connected to their capacity for self-expression, but there are other forces at play associating the art forms with freedom on various levels. Jazz music is accepted as having its origins in the blues. Therefore, the foundations of jazz are rooted within a musical genre stemming from slavery and the African-American struggle. Toop associates this origin of captivity with musical freedom, saying that ‘it is

⁸⁹ While I disagree with the negative connotations of this term, it is the easiest way to describe short-form game rules

⁹⁰ Braxton in Lock, *Forces in Motion*, 158.

⁹¹ Johnstone, *Improv for Storytellers*, 37.

entirely understandable that a people who were silenced by slavery would develop a music, jazz, in which everyone would have their say'.⁹² This builds upon the notion expressed by Eric Nisenson that the people 'who have been the least free in our society have had the greatest understanding of what freedom is'.⁹³ It is less well known that improvised comedy also originates from a time of persecution, with many of the genre's early pioneers being American Jews in the 1950s suffering from widespread anti-Semitism thinly veiled as anti-Communism. This persecution, according to Jeffrey Sweet, resulted in an 'explosion of satiric humour'.⁹⁴ Forming from environments of incredible prejudice, improvisation allows a voice for the oppressed by creating and performing their own art and expressing their own personal experience. George E. Lewis has talked about the necessity of creative expression and argued that the insistence by people of colour that 'music has to be "saying something" becomes part of a long history of resistance to the silencing of the black voice'.⁹⁵ To express oneself against a state of oppression is a political act, reinforcing existing ideas that the political is embedded in art, and the improvisation of art allows for a performer's complete control over what their art is saying.

The choice to improvise can also be viewed as an act of rebellion from a simply practical perspective. Bruno Nettl states that 'in musical cultures that distinguish between improvised and precomposed music, the improviser – or group of improvisers – is inevitably making a statement'.⁹⁶ Meanwhile Daniel Fischlin and his collaborators described this as 'an act of critique, courage, resistance, and liberation'.⁹⁷ Historically this will not have been a conscious choice in every situation, as improvisation in the styles that developed into jazz was a necessity due to the lack of formal music education, and other more essential rights and freedoms, available to its originators. Even in modern society the possibility to access scores or records from which to learn composed music, let alone to be taught how to read music and play instruments, is not available to everyone. Indeed, Fischlin and co. suggest that it was natural for improvisation to develop artistically in underprivileged backgrounds as these communities were used to making do and creating with whatever was available.⁹⁸ Nevertheless for performers who are privileged enough to have received a musical

⁹² Toop, *Into the Maelstrom*, 27.

⁹³ Eric Nisenson, *Blue: The Murder of Jazz* (Boston: Da Capo Publishing, 1997), 269.

⁹⁴ Jeffrey Sweet, "Talking to Improvisers" in Salinsky and Frances-White, *The Improv Handbook*, 413.

⁹⁵ George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 41.

⁹⁶ Nettl, "Preface" in *Musical Improvisation*, ed. Solis and Nettl, xii.

⁹⁷ Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz, *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Cocreation* (London: Duke University Press, 2013), 24.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 49 – 50.

or theatrical education yet opt to improvise over engaging in or attempting to add to the existing canon of art works, a conscious choice will have been made to engage in this counter-cultural form of creation. By opting to follow and share their inner voice, improvisers are choosing to stray from a historic Western tradition of performing pre-composed music in favour of their own spontaneous creation. Whether or not this choice was made with political reasons in mind, the choice itself is a political one.

The Fierce Urgency of Now opens with two quotes offering contradictory views on improvisation as freedom, specifically the freedom of humans to improvise. Muhal Richards Abrams, co-founder of the influential Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians,⁹⁹ is quoted first saying that ‘improvisation is a human right’.¹⁰⁰ This is paired with a quote from fusion pioneer John McLaughlin who instead suggests that improvisation ‘is neither a right nor a necessity; it is our natural state of being’.¹⁰¹ The choice of these two contradictory quotes is obviously intentional, with the book’s three writers instantly presenting a range of views on the subject of improvisation and rights. McLaughlin’s view certainly complements the spiritual view of improvisation, and the role of the mind and soul in creation, but this stance can seem narrow when addressing rights debates. Even if one believes improvised creation is our natural state of being, this does not mean it is therefore not a human right. It is worth acknowledging that Abrams was African American and, as co-founder of the AACM in 1960s America, experienced the oppression of creative opportunity simultaneously with the oppression of various human rights. This difference of phrasing draws attention to the fact that, in all contexts, improvisation can mean very different things to different people, and it makes sense that improvisers on contrary sides of a racial divide will have varying views on the human rights discourse embedded in the art form.

When regarding freedom in improvisation, it is essential to consider the balance between personal freedom and the freedom of the entire group, as these are not always synonymous. Spolin specifically describes spontaneous creation as ‘a moment of personal freedom’,¹⁰² though she later clarifies that the goal of improvised performance is ‘individual freedom while respecting community responsibility’.¹⁰³ Many other writers on improvisation discuss freedom as a balance between

⁹⁹ From here on, the Association will be referred to by the acronym AACM

¹⁰⁰ Muhal Richards Abrams, quoted in Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz, *The Fierce Urgency of Now*, ix.

¹⁰¹ John McLaughlin, interviewed by Fischlin, “‘See clearly ... feel deeply’: Improvisation and Transformation: John McLaughlin Interviewed by Daniel Fischlin”, *Critical Studies in Improvisation*, Dec 1, 2010, quoted in Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz, *The Fierce Urgency of Now*, x.

¹⁰² Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theatre*, 4.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 44.

personal liberation and respecting the needs of the ensemble. In the liner notes of his first LP, Braxton is adamant that the group's emphasis is on 'the complete freedom of individuals in tune with each other, complementing each other'.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, John Stevens says that a successful improvisation workshop is one where the performers experience 'a feeling of freedom about playing music... [and] the feeling of wanting other people to have that same freedom'.¹⁰⁵ While there may be some personal limitations in place for a group improvisation, these are often necessary to allow the entire group an equal level of freedom and ensure that none of the performers are made to feel uncomfortable or lesser than their fellow improvisers. Braxton has more to say on this balance between individual expression and supporting the ensemble, arguing that for everyone to experience personal freedom, there must be 'a kind of social contract, a dialogue of give and take'.¹⁰⁶ As has been made apparent, cooperating with and respecting fellow performers are vital for group improvisation to be successful. Much like one's individual preferences must be put aside in favour of generosity, sensitivity and curiosity, one must sacrifice part of their complete freedom for the entire ensemble to experience this freedom, and to feel free in synchronisation with and in respect to each other. It is only through this unanimous experience of personal freedom, and allowance of freedom to others, that the grander experiences of social and political liberation through artistic expression and the infinite possibility of improvisation can be communally felt.

It is worth noting that while the majority agree that all kinds of art can achieve social and political freedom, this is not unanimous. Northrop Frye has written about the revolutionary potential of comedy but argues that this only allows personal moral victories rather than widespread socio-political change.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, literary critic and novelist Umberto Eco has stated that festivity of any kind is incapable of causing global liberation.¹⁰⁸ This is purposefully in direct contrast to a famous theory by philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin which, to use Jan Hokenson's concise summary, describes comedy as a 'festive liberation from social constraints'.¹⁰⁹ Eco's argument against this theory, or at least his more contemporary response to it, is that festivity has become commercialised to an extent where it cannot be liberating due to its ingrained nature in the

¹⁰⁴ Braxton, Liner notes for *Three Compositions of New Jazz*, by Braxton, Delmark DS 415, 1968, LP, quoted in Lock, *Forces in Motion*, 147.

¹⁰⁵ John Stevens in Bailey, *Improvisation*, 121.

¹⁰⁶ Braxton in Lock, *Forces in Motion*, 245.

¹⁰⁷ T. G. A Nelson, *Comedy: The Theory of Comedy in Literature, Drama, and Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 174.

¹⁰⁸ Umberto Eco, "The Frames of Comic 'Freedom'" in *Carnival!*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 1984), quoted in Nelson, *Comedy*, 178.

¹⁰⁹ Jan Hokenson, *The Idea of Comedy* (Madison, New Jersey: Fairleigh University Press, 2006), 62.

oppressive system of capitalism. While his criticism is specifically addressing comedy, in performance and literature, it can easily be applied to the music industry (arguably even more so today than at Eco's time of writing). This damning view of the entertainment industry is unfortunately a legitimate concern. It is understandable that one can believe entertainment cannot grant freedom for this reason, and by extension that using comedy or music as a medium for social change is hypocritical. However, even if one feels that this criticism is just, it would surely only apply to the established canon. As discussed earlier, improvisation is a rejection of the canon, and therefore a rebellion against the conventions of the performance industry itself. Music, comedy, and theatre existed before their respective industries, and improvisation is a return to the origins of these art forms. Therefore, it is isolated from any problematic associations with capitalist appropriations of art. By improvising, performers are taking back control of these art forms, and using art to express themselves and strive for whatever personal, social or political freedoms they desire in a way in which their canonised counterparts are no longer fully capable of.

Despite improvisation's capacity and desire for inclusion, one can easily observe the internalised discrimination that can be found within the art form. While this is arguably a criticism of art or society in general rather than specifically improvisation, it would be deceitful to praise the inclusion of the improv community while ignoring its history of racial tensions and gender bias. It is no secret that white jazz bands often saw more commercial success than their black contemporaries despite generally being viewed as musically inferior. Collier discusses how many black artists were initially hesitant to record out of fear that their musical ideas would be stolen by white artists, and he draws attention to the fact that the first commercially available jazz recording was by the all-white Original Dixieland Jazz Band in 1916. He continues to cite this as 'the first of a distressingly long series of examples of white musicians exploiting the superficialities of jazz while more creative Negro musicians starved'.¹¹⁰ Other examples of exploitation in jazz can be found in performances by some black artists, such as Louis Armstrong in his later career. Armstrong would exaggerate and make jokes about stereotypes of African Americans to entertain his predominantly white audiences, engaging in what has been described as "'Uncle Tom" behavior'.¹¹¹ The populist approach of Cab Calloway is similarly controversial. The bandleader is perhaps best remembered for his immortalisation in cartoons of the time, which have received modern criticism for the racist exaggeration of certain physical features. Garrett argues it is unfair that Calloway is now only really viewed critically as a caricature on the fringes of the jazz canon, when the success of his humour at

¹¹⁰ Collier, *Jazz: A Student's and Teacher's Guide* (Tinling: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 7.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

the time was its ability to be 'interpreted as a type of risqué playfulness or as a strategy for upending social norms'.¹¹² The racist attitudes in these performances have perhaps unfoundedly become synonymous with the priority of humour over a more serious approach to jazz, as the role of jazz musician as entertainer has itself become entwined with stereotypes. Contemporary critics have essentially disowned this unconscientious style of populist pandering, but it seems unfair to focus more on chastising the artists performing these stereotypes than the industry and society that perpetuated them. While racial tensions in improvisation have generally relaxed, with many canonical jazz recordings featuring unsegregated line-ups of musicians, and with many black jazz icons now receiving the acclaim they deserve, it is impossible to erase the degree of racial appropriation during its mainstream advent.

Additionally, a vastly disproportionate majority of performers and bandleaders regarded as canonical jazz greats are male, as is the case with Western Art Music composers. A recent online list of fifty 'essential' jazz albums features only one with an eponymous female performer: the singer Sarah Vaughan's record with male trumpet player Clifford Brown.¹¹³ Many jazz fans would presumably be more inclusive of female jazz singers than this list suggests, with Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday among others rightfully regarded as icons of the genre, but male instrumentalists and bandleaders are noticeably under-represented. This is by no means due to a lack of talented female artists but instead due to a lack of opportunities presented to them, and it has been observed that 'female musicians often discover that the world of improvisation is as resistant to their inclusion as any other'.¹¹⁴ In a male-dominated industry within a male-dominated society, it is perhaps no surprise that, despite its capacity for equality through collaboration and non-discriminatory self-expression, the world of improvised music can often be a hostile environment for its female contributors. The relative exclusion of female improvisers can lead to what Dana Reason Myers has called 'the myth of absence'¹¹⁵ – an assumption of the false narrative that because women are underrepresented in writings on improvised music, they are therefore uninterested in improvised music. Myers' work applies to a range of improvised music styles, including but not limited to jazz.

¹¹² Garrett, "The Humor of Jazz," 60.

¹¹³ Sam Armstrong, "Best Jazz Albums: 50 Essentials You Need To Hear," *UDiscoverMusic*, Apr 5, 2019, accessed May 19, 2019, <https://www.udiscovermusic.com/stories/50-greatest-jazz-albums-ever/>.

¹¹⁴ Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz, *The Fierce Urgency of Now*, xxiv.

¹¹⁵ Dana Reason Myers, "The Myth of Absence: Representation, Reception, and the Music of Experimental Women Improvisors" (doctoral thesis, University of California, San Diego, 2002), xi, accessed Jul 20, 2019 at Jazz Studies Online, <https://jazzstudiesonline.org/resource/myth-absence-representation-reception-and-music-experimental-women-improvisors>.

This is an assumption that Frances-White has observed in improvised comedy circles. In *The Improv Handbook* she reported that some members of all-male improv companies have gone out of their way to tell her ‘that women don’t want to improvise, are not funny or are simply not good enough to be cast’.¹¹⁶ This attitude can unfortunately be found in all forms of comedy. A recent study of female representation in comedy panel shows found that just one of over 4700 examined episodes featured an all-female line-up, whereas 1488 featured all-male line-ups.¹¹⁷ While there is no comprehensive data for gender ratios in improvised comedy, the famous improv TV show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* can be examined. In the UK run of the show, the only female improviser who could realistically be viewed as a regular was Josie Lawrence, who appeared in 53 of 136 episodes – the most regularly featured male comedian, excluding host Clive Anderson and musician Richard Vranich, was Ryan Stiles who appeared in 92 episodes. Behind Lawrence, the next most regularly featured female improviser was Sandi Toksvig, who only appeared in 15 episodes. The US version of the show arguably had an even bigger issue with gender diversity, mainly due to Ryan Stiles, Colin Mochrie and Wayne Brady appearing as regulars (the former two starring in all 220 episodes of the show, with Brady in 212) alongside the US host Drew Carey. With four men, three of whom are white, on almost every episode and only one slot remaining for another comedian, the show was already very white-male-dominated. The most commonly featured female comedian, Kathy Greenwood, was in 34 episodes. Despite this obvious gender misbalance and the issues caused by this, it would be unfair to refer to the US run of the show as all-male due to the contributions of improvising musician Laura Hall to 215 episodes. Linda Taylor also performed as a musician in 116 episodes of the show, with various other musicians across the show’s ten-year run, maintaining the presence of an all-female band counteracting the predominantly male comedians.

The consequences of this mainstream representation of improvisation and comedy as a male art form extend beyond simply not seeing women in these roles. The myth of absence has the potential of creating a feedback loop of misinformed exclusion, with the absence of women in improvisation perpetuating claims that women are not interested in the art form, and these untrue claims then diminishing opportunities for women who are interested, experienced, and talented in improvisation. This is a very harmful and fundamentally untrue perspective to be held, and rather ironic in reference to improvised comedy when one considers the pivotal role of women in the

¹¹⁶ Frances-White, “Intermission: Women in Improv,” in Salinsky and Frances-White, *The Improv Handbook*, 354.

¹¹⁷ Esther Addley, “Study of UK comedy panel shows finds just one all-female episode,” *The Guardian*, Dec 23, 2016, accessed Jul 20, 2019 via <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/dec/23/study-uk-comedy-panel-shows-finds-just-one-all-female-episode>

shaping of the art form. Spolin is regarded as the practitioner who developed improvised theatre into a more comedy-centric form of entertainment and is heralded by influential improvisers on both sides of the short-form/long-form debate as the originator of the ideas and theories they have continued. Halpern is another central figure in the development of improvised comedy, having worked very closely with Close on the Harold and other methods of long-form improv, and continuing work in their style after his passing.

Frances-White has noted that representation of and attitudes towards women have thankfully improved in the last few years, to the extent that her essay regarding Women in Improv has been significantly condensed in the 2017 edition of *The Improv Handbook* as she feels 'it's dated'¹¹⁸ – the first edition was only released in 2008. She does however warn of the still pervasive whiteness of improv comedy and argues that 'if we are to reflect [our cosmopolitan] society in any meaningful comedic way, we need to reflect the views and values of that society'.¹¹⁹ The same can surely be said for improvised music. For an art form that prides itself on its capacity for self-expression and collaboration, the most interesting and enlightening results should be expected from the personal expression of a variety of voices with different life experiences and different things to say. Archie Shepp, discussing the use of improvisation to express and to strive for freedom, has said that 'music doesn't change things, but in my own small way, it makes a statement'.¹²⁰ Similarly, Frances-White concludes her chapter by musing that people talking about the necessity for the world of improvisation to become more diverse 'won't make it so, but it's a start'.¹²¹

VI. REPUTATION

Improvisation has historically struggled with its reputation as it breaks from the canonical traditions of Western Art Music academia. This has been specifically noticeable from the Romantic Period onwards, when composers became idolised to a level of infallibility and any diversions from specific notation in a performance was frowned upon, and when jazz arose as a popular form of primarily improvised music. Therefore, jazz's inherent distinction from the Western common practice of performance from notated music by notable master composers, and its lack of adherence to any

¹¹⁸ Frances-White, "Intermission: Women in Improv," 353.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 356.

¹²⁰ Archie Shepp, "What Inspires You to Compose/Perform Music That Has Political Overtones?", *Newmusicbox*, Nov 1 2003, accessed Sep 26 2019, <https://nmbx.newmusicusa.org/what-inspires-you-to-compose-perform-music-that-has-political-overtones-archie-shepp/>

¹²¹ Frances-White, "Intermission: Women in Improv," 356.

kind of detailed score, has been viewed negatively by various academics and critics throughout the 20th century. Nettl cites a 1942 edition of the Grove dictionary's definition of improvisation, which describes it as 'the primitive art of music making'.¹²² Slang terminology to describe improvising appeared throughout the jazz heyday that, while being accepted in the idiolect of the musicians themselves, can be viewed as derogatory language. Gushee has discussed the evolution of language in improvisation and explained the use of such terms, the most enduring of which is 'to fake'.¹²³ This term distinguishes improvised music from notated music, implying that improv is inferior to, or less musical than, this "real" music due to its unprepared nature. Fischlin, Heble and Lipsitz also identify the use of "noise" as a common dismissive and discriminatory term against jazz music, with the musical establishment overlooking the subtleties and creativity of improvised music (especially of African-American origin). However the jazz community of the time were able to 'reappropriat[e this] demeaning stereotype... in constructive ways that subvert historical misunderstanding and racist ignorance'.¹²⁴ Further examples of discriminatory attitudes towards jazz and its musicians are given in Peter Blecha's book on music censorship *Taboo Tunes*, in which some of the phrases historically used to describe jazz include 'musical impurity', 'syncopated savagery' and a 'return to the primitive'.¹²⁵ These attitudes are generally rooted in racial discrimination and are projected onto the music, ultimately resulting in an internalised social rejection of improvisation regardless of the performers.

The reputation of jazz suffered due to even more blatant and malicious racism as the genre was outlawed throughout Germany in the 1930s as part of the Ordinance Against Negro Culture, and jazz and its associated dances were banned from public performances in various venues in America after pushes for censorship by Christian and right-wing groups.¹²⁶ Decades later, Lock has argued that the predominantly African-American AACM was commercially under-represented because of their race. He also discusses how the group were misrepresented by European and Euro-American critics, who inappropriately imposed qualitative criteria for Western Art Music onto artistic displays of African-American culture.¹²⁷ Ingrid Monson similarly warns of 'evaluat[ing] the musical production of jazz musicians by [Western Art Music's] standards without asking whether these are indeed the

¹²² Nettl, "Preface", x.

¹²³ Lawrence Gushee, "Improvisation and Related Terms in Middle-Period Jazz," in *Musical Improvisation*, ed. Solis and Nettl, 265.

¹²⁴ Fischlin, Heble and Lipsitz, *The Fierce Urgency of Now*, 27.

¹²⁵ Peter Blecha, *Taboo Tunes: A History of Banned Bands & Censored Songs* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2004), 17.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 23-4.

¹²⁷ Lock, *Forces in Motion*, 37.

sole – or even the most important – criteria to musicians and their audiences'.¹²⁸ She does however argue that there can be positives in comparing the jazz aesthetic to those of Western Art Music, though this comes across as a way of complying to a flawed society rather than artistic preference.

While it should not be necessary to do so, by indulging in and reinforcing these comparisons one can make a strong case for taking the music of various jazz musicians seriously in academia within its existing criteria. It is now true that in modern academia, there exists a canon of jazz greats such as Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Miles Davis and so on. This canonisation extends to specific recordings of these artists being viewed in the same way as scored musical works. This has obvious positive effects on the prestige of jazz music but also risks the singular details of these recorded performances becoming the definitive version of the musical work. This view contradicts the improvisatory nature that allowed for these works to exist and be so effective, and it can be argued that a group attempting to recreate their favourite jazz pieces as they sound on record are missing the point of the music.

It is also observable that jazz academics and critics take the music incredibly seriously, possibly by necessity to make the music approachable from the domineering Western Art Music perspective and therefore “worthy” of critical analysis. While some jazz musicians include comedy in their acts, adopting the role of entertainer over serious artiste, many have felt the need to defend these choices and retain their reputation. Jaki Byard has said that his ‘music is serious. I might do it with humour but it's still serious because I mean what I'm doing’,¹²⁹ and Billy Taylor is similarly quoted as saying ‘though it is often fun to play, jazz is very serious music’.¹³⁰ Many jazz artists who prioritised entertainment were criticised for an overtly populist approach which was viewed as disrespectful of the genre and its origins. Other jazz musicians, a notable example being Charles Mingus, have used satire as a way of injecting some form of comedy into their performances as it is a more serious and therefore critically accepted form of humour, and ties directly to the political nature of jazz as an art form.¹³¹ The balance between being entertaining and being respected can be difficult to maintain, and it seems many performers view comedy as the antithesis of seriousness, which they interpret as an indicator of quality. This is despite the critical acclaim of non-serious comedy in various forms, from various Shakespeare plays to the works of “Weird Al” Yankovic and

¹²⁸ Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997) 136.

¹²⁹ Jaki Byard in Richard Brown, “Jaki Byard: Romping, Stomping, and Waiting for the Break,” *Down Beat* 45, 1979, 16.

¹³⁰ Billy Taylor in Garrett, “The Humor of Jazz,” 49.

¹³¹ Garrett, “The Humor of Jazz,” 62.

beyond. Collier proposes that ‘in other arts there is not the dichotomy between entertainment and art that has grown up in jazz’.¹³² This is a statement I do not agree with in all contexts but believe is appropriate when regarding popular arts, and jazz is commonly viewed as a genre of popular music rather than belonging to the realm of Western Art Music, though this is not to say it is any less artistic. As Garrett argues, the relevance of the debate as to whether jazz should be categorised as art or entertainment entirely depends on ‘whether we believe musical humor is a valid artistic strategy, whether humor and art can coexist’.¹³³

Whether the canonisation of jazz is a progressive step forward or a sacrifice of the ephemeral and playful nature of improvisation is a complex debate, and not one that has its place in this thesis. What is relevant is that in the last few decades, music academia and criticism has gradually become more accepting of improvisation, to the extent that Solis has stated that ‘it is now hard to claim that improvisation is neglected in scholarship’.¹³⁴ Whether one agrees with this claim or not, the same can definitely not be said about the view of comedy within academia on improvisation and vice versa.

Texts on improvisation very rarely discuss comedy despite the art form’s prominence since at least the 1950s, and its mainstream breakthrough in the eighties to early nineties with the success of *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* Academic texts on comedy are equally dismissive or ignorant of modern improv, addressing scripted plays primarily with some recent texts including discussion of comedy films. Some texts acknowledge commedia dell’arte as an origin of comedy performance and address its improvised nature, but give little recognition of modern improvised comedy despite its relevance in theatrical development. Many improv acts have warranted critical acclaim, such as *Austentatious* and the Olivier-winning *Showstopper!: The Improvised Musical*, but this acclaim does not continue to academia. Admittedly these collectives have only been in operation for a few years so their absence from academia is understandable, but pioneering improv groups such as The Second City and Loose Moose are also not featured in academic texts on improvisation or comedy. Some more recent texts on improvisation acknowledge Johnstone’s work, with Nachmanovitch and Borgo both naming him and discussing his ideas, but both do so while referring exclusively to improvised theatre despite his and his work’s vital relationship with comedy. Maybe this can be traced to Johnstone’s own terminology: while he regularly discusses improv comedy within his texts, the subtitle of *Impro* is ‘Improvisation and the Theatre’ as, at the time of its release, improv comedy was nowhere near as

¹³² Collier, *Jazz*, 13.

¹³³ Garrett, “The Humor of Jazz,” 60.

¹³⁴ Solis, “Introduction,” *Musical Improvisation*, ed. Solis and Nettl, 8.

widely recognised as it is today. It would be a massive oversight and disservice to the art of comedy to attempt to argue that it does not qualify as theatre, and therefore that improvised comedy cannot be included in the blanket term of improvised theatre. Yet, to address Johnstone's work today as purely theatre seems dismissive of the idiosyncratic nature of improv comedy.

Some comedians would argue that improv comedy should not be discussed academically, and some musicians feel the same way about jazz. Due to the in-the-moment nature of the art form and, with regards to the former, the subjective nature of comedy itself, it is difficult to translate the effect of improv comedy to the written word. One must also consider the issue of the documentation of improvisation never being able to capture the eccentricities of the live performance, the substantial change in the role from present and connected audience member to passive listener, and the issue of canonising one specific interpretation of the intentionally evanescent. However, there is certainly still merit in learning the history of and the theory behind improvisation, and it must be possible to discuss improv in an academic context without diminishing its spontaneous joy. As Matthew Bevis succinctly states, 'we can take comedy seriously without taking it solemnly',¹³⁵ and the same view should be applicable to improvised music. After all, music and comedy both originate from games, and 'all creative acts are forms of play'.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Matthew Bevis, *Comedy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

¹³⁶ Nachmanovitch, *Free Play*, 42.

THEORIES OF COMEDY, AND THEIR RELATION TO IMPROVISATION

There are three predominant theories of comedy in criticism and academia. While the theories themselves have been introduced and developed by a variety of respected writers throughout Western history, from Socrates and Aristotle to Nietzsche and Freud, the identification of these three being the primary theories of comedy and the standardisation of terms concerning them has only emerged in the last few decades. Before this, the additions and reworkings of other writers' ideas were often intended to usurp these existing theories as an ultimate theory of humour. Nowadays, the three main theories are generally viewed as three fundamental, and sometimes overlapping, elements of a comprehensive understanding of comedy. While they are most commonly addressed in writings on philosophy and in literary criticism, they are accepted and referenced in works across a wide range of fields, including music academia. To briefly summarise, the Incongruity Theory was introduced thousands of years ago, and refined by various writers in the 18th century, and addresses humoured responses to the presentation of two seemingly incongruous ideas or images. The Relief Theory is the most modern of the three and was not really introduced until the 18th century, with most writings coming from the early 20th century, and this concerns the idea of psychological tension and release as a feature of humour. Finally, the Superiority Theory originates from Ancient Greek philosophers, with further notable contributions from the 17th century onwards, and suggests that we can find humour in feeling superior to others.

A concise example of these theories is displayed by Mel Brooks in his interpretation of comedy as distinguished from tragedy. 'Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall down an open sewer and die'.¹³⁷ The correlation between falling down a sewer and dying is incongruous, as one would not expect such an occasion to be fatal. The Relief Theory is exemplified here by the build in tension between falling down the sewer and hitting the floor, with the release and relief in this case being that of death. Finally, Superiority Theory is displayed when comparing the specificity of pronouns between the two definitions. Brooks suggests that a painful incident that happens to oneself is tragic whereas an incident in which another person is the victim, especially when elevated to a level of incongruity, becomes comic.

All three of these comedy theories were developed as a response to humour in comedic literature and in everyday life. Despite the origins of these philosophical theories, they can also be used to understand improvised comedy and, as I shall argue, improvised music (again, with a specific focus on common-practice jazz). By applying these theories to jazz, I am not attempting to argue

¹³⁷ Mel Brooks, quoted in Andrew Stott, *Comedy* (London: Routledge, 2005) 1.

that jazz is inherently funny, though it certainly has the potential to be. Instead the argument is simply that jazz possesses traits that have defined our perception of comedy and, therefore, a level of humour and wit is an integral factor of improvising music. This is a view shared by Garrett, who compared jazz musicians to stand-up comedians of the mid-century. I however do not feel this is the most appropriate comparison when discussing jazz and humour. As well as the properties of these theories and the nature of their application to the content, jazz shares various other traits with specifically improvised comedy, as discussed in the literature review. Therefore, a strong argument can be made that it is the improvised nature of this music that causes its closest relations to comedy rather than its more conventionally musical properties i.e. its idiosyncratic rhythms and specific harmonic language. The reasoning behind this connection is more than a mere observation that the two forms are improvised. There are elements of these theories that are exaggerated or reframed by their presentation in an improvised context and bear even closer relations to their appearance in jazz than to the traditional understanding of the theories for scripted comedy. I will refer to this reframing as a metacontext, regarding such phenomena as the enactment of comedy theories in the audience's engagement with a performer, as opposed to their engagement with a character.

Brooks' example succinctly demonstrates the three theories in one situation and, while clearer cases will be examined in later subsections from which one or more theories can be derived, it only seems appropriate to offer a musical extract from which one can interpret enactments of all three main theories of comedy. The title track of John Coltrane's *Giant Steps* is an iconic jazz recording primarily due to its complex harmonic progression, utilising regular modulations and substitutions in a pattern now commonly known as the Coltrane changes, and its blisteringly quick tempo. It is well known amongst Coltrane aficionados that he had been studying variations of these changes for years, having worked out some melodic patterns that complemented them prior to the recording sessions, and the composition is regarded as the culmination of his theories in this area. Thomas Owens has stated that Coltrane 'worked out his solutions to the various segments of each chord structure, and relied heavily on those worked-out patterns in performance,'¹³⁸ while Ekkehard Jost has described Coltrane's solos over the progressions as 'masterfully presented, well-planned etude[s].'¹³⁹ The changes are notoriously difficult to play over, especially at the time when its approach to harmony and tonality was truly ground-breaking, and the tune is viewed and used as a challenge even today. Ethan Hein actually criticises modern performers' idolisation of the composition, arguing that 'you won't be taken seriously as a jazz musician unless you can play "Giant

¹³⁸ Thomas Owens, *Bebop: The Music and Its Players* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 97-8.

¹³⁹ Ekkehard Jost, *Free Jazz* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 25.

Steps" at speed',¹⁴⁰ and compares its presence at jazz nights to a video game in which improvisers 'compete to beat each other's scores.'¹⁴¹ Indeed, its difficulty is apparent on the recording.¹⁴² Unlike Coltrane, the pianist Tommy Flanagan had not studied the sheet music before the day of recording, and he believed the song was a ballad until Coltrane counted in the nearly-300bpm fast swing time. Flanagan has since reported that Coltrane showed him the chord progression just once before the recording session, and that he 'didn't know [he would] have to play on it and what tempo [Coltrane] was talking about'.¹⁴³ Therefore, it is understandable and no detriment to his skill as a musician, yet ultimately very noticeable and the topic of decades of conversation, that he famously struggles with his piano solo.

While some issues with solos on difficult tunes may be expected at live concerts, the preservation of this noticeable imperfection on a major studio recording, especially one as historically revered as 'Giant Steps', is intrinsically incongruous. Coltrane's solo immediately after the head is incredibly confident and effortlessly dances across the advanced harmonic and tonal changes, whereas Flanagan's solo is much more fragmented as he tries to keep up. Furthermore, the chord sequence itself is unexpected (or, at least, it was at the track's time of release), as the circle of fifths had not been applied in such a way in a musical composition before. As well as being incongruous, the uncertainty of Flanagan's playing creates a sense of tension to the listener as the composition risks falling apart as he loses his way from the chord sequence. However, just as the piano improvisation really begins to lose its way, Coltrane bursts back onto the track with another deftly played tenor solo and swiftly dissolves this tension, thus allowing an interpretation of Relief Theory.

One can also view Coltrane's return on the recording as a boast of his musical prowess, especially considering that he clearly interrupts Flanagan's melodic phrase to do so. Estelle Caswell observes that 'it really becomes apparent how much [Flanagan] struggled when you hear Coltrane take off at lightning speed the second Flanagan stops.'¹⁴⁴ Even if one perceives Coltrane's interruption to begin his second solo as a move of sympathy rather than braggadocio, he is still presented as the superior soloist on this take, and it is very interesting that this first take was the

¹⁴⁰ Ethan Hein, "Giant Steps," *The Ethan Hein Blog*, Nov 28, 2018, accessed Sep 27, 2019, <https://www.ethanhein.com/wp/2018/giant-steps/>

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² John Coltrane, "Giant Steps," *Giant Steps*, Atlantic 81227 3610-2, 2002, CD.

¹⁴³ Tommy Flanagan, in Lewis Porter, *John Coltrane: His Life and Music* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 155.

¹⁴⁴ Vox, "The most feared song in jazz, explained," YouTube video, 2:12, posted by "Vox," Nov 12, 2018, accessed Sep 27, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=62tlvfP9A2w&t=166s>.

one Coltrane chose to include on the recording. Additionally, the chord changes and the speed of the track can be viewed as displays of superiority, not of Coltrane to his fellow performers on the session, but to his contemporaries and predecessors whose more basic harmonic work and slower tempos are instrumentally lambasted.

Coltrane's dominance on the track is unrivalled, at times appearing superior at Flanagan's expense, yet the intruding impact of his second saxophone solo also provides relief to the incongruity of the pianist's uncertain performance. I would argue that there is humour to be found in both the purely musical aspects of Flanagan's solo and in Coltrane's incredibly contrasting interruption, and in the real-life miscommunication that created this moment. Braxton Cook suggests that Flanagan's surprise at understanding exactly what he had to play 'was probably so funny,'¹⁴⁵ and one can easily posit that, at least on reflection, the musical realisation of his fear just minutes later was equally so.

Throughout the main body, I will explain each of the three main comedy theories in more detail; analyse their applications to improvised comedy and improvised music; and suggest further musical examples that demonstrate similar appearances of aspects of incongruity, relief, and superiority throughout the history of recorded jazz.

I. INCONGRUITY THEORY

The first theory of humour this thesis shall address in detail is what has become known as Incongruity Theory. Ideas for a theory of incongruity have been present for millennia, with Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero observing that 'the most common kind of joke is that in which we expect one thing and another is said; here our own disappointed expectation makes us laugh'.¹⁴⁶ However this theory was not developed further until the writings of Francis Hutcheson in 1750 in which he posited that laughter is caused by 'the bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas'.¹⁴⁷ He continues to give the humour of burlesque as an example by suggesting there is an incongruous nature in its presentations of grandeur and profanity. Just decades later, James

¹⁴⁵ Vox, 9:39.

¹⁴⁶ Cicero, *On the Orator, Book II c.63*, in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. John Morreall (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 18.

¹⁴⁷ Francis Hutcheson, *Reflections Upon Laughter*, in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. Morreall, 32.

Beattie addressed the theory again by observing that ‘laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances.’¹⁴⁸

The theory of incongruity was then developed by many philosophers over the next century, with Arthur Schopenhauer arguing that ‘the cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it’¹⁴⁹. Meanwhile William Hazlitt distinguishes the humorous from the serious by saying that ‘the essence of the laughable... is the incongruous, the disconnecting one idea from another, or the jostling of one feeling against another’.¹⁵⁰ Incongruity can be found in surrealist and absurdist humour, where unrelated images are presented simultaneously; in puns, where an expected phrase is subverted, creating a new and unexpected meaning; and in any combination of seemingly contrasting or opposite ideas. Robert Leach, while discussing the work of 20th century theatre pioneer Vsevolod Meyerhold, states that ‘in genuine art the high and the low, the bitter and the funny, the light and the dark always stand side by side’.¹⁵¹ It is worth mentioning that Meyerhold famously used improvisation to develop his students’ theatrical performances.

While these writers each present distinct approaches to the theory, each one attempting to update and build upon the ideas of their predecessors, the basic idea that is common to all examples of Incongruity Theory is that we find humour in that which surprises us. Some writers attribute this to the physiological similarities between laughter and gasping in shock, while some believe there is a more complex psychological reason, but the theory itself is rarely questioned. Even those who do challenge Incongruity Theory generally criticise the specifics of philosophers’ approaches to the theory, such as George Santayana’s insistence that ‘the shock which [an incongruous event can] bring may sometimes be the occasion of a subsequent pleasure... but the incongruity [will] always remain unpleasant’.¹⁵² Other writers have also challenged claims that incongruity can be a universal theory to explain all comedy without challenging the validity of the individual theory itself.

¹⁴⁸ James Beattie, “On Laughter, and Ludicrous Composition” in *Essays: on poetry and music, as they affect the mind: on laughter, and ludicrous composition; on the usefulness of classical learning* 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: E. and C. Dilly; and W Creech, 1779), 320, accessed Jun 8, 2019, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101067567584>

¹⁴⁹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. Morreall, 52.

¹⁵⁰ William Hazlitt, “On Wit and Humor” in *Lectures on the English Comic Writers* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1845), 4, accessed May 30, 2019, via <https://www.questia.com/read/102708988/lectures-on-the-english-comic-writers>

¹⁵¹ Leach, *Makers of Modern Theatre*, 71.

¹⁵² George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty: Being the Outlines of Aesthetic Theory* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1955), 152 – 3.

Incongruity Theory and Improvised Comedy

The provocation of laughter due to Incongruity Theory in everyday life and in scripted comedy can be easily observed. Its application to improvised comedy however is dependent on the performers maintaining an effective balance of the obvious and the surprising. As Johnstone and his contemporaries have presented, obviousness is a prime way of generating material and progressing the narrative of a scene in a logical way. Breaking from the obvious too soon for something entirely unrelated through a desire for the incongruous may result in laughter, but the scene will often lose direction and momentum from an unnecessary extreme shift such as this, and fellow performers may simply be stunned. In a concise paraphrasing of a rather intractable quote by anthropologist Mary Douglas, comedy critic Andrew Stott posits that 'a joke cannot simply jump from nowhere, but derives from a sense of reality that pre-exists it, and which it seeks to distort'.¹⁵³ This idea is evident in the balance of obviousness and incongruity in improvised comedy.

Once a solid platform for a scene has been created however, one can introduce the unexpected with fewer repercussions. In improvised comedy this is often known as breaking routine, though performers from a more dramatic background may use the term 'tilt', as conceived by Stanislavski. This break of routine is often used to inject conflict into a scene, though it is also a perfect opportunity for a first big laugh in a scene. If a mundane platform has been built through obviousness and Yes And...ing, the introduction of an absurd or fantastical conflict will reframe the existing scene and this incongruity can result in laughter. Assuming the original scene had been sufficiently established before this and that the conflict is in some way related to or inspired by what has been introduced, despite being out of the ordinary enough to be unexpected, this break of routine can surprise and amuse the audience while still allowing the performers a solid enough platform to continue the scene. The second appendix to Johnstone's *Impro for Storytellers* contains numerous examples of tilts categorised by a theme of the established scene. This list is obviously not conclusive and should not be memorised as a quick solution for adding tension to scenes, but it demonstrates the wide range of possibilities available. Simply choosing the first entry in the list as an example, Johnstone suggests tilting a scene involving a babysitter by having that character find photos of murdered babysitters.¹⁵⁴ This ridiculous scenario would seem far too outlandish to begin a scene with and would leave nowhere for the scene to escalate. However, if the groundwork had been put in to establish the babysitter character, their relationship with the parents or the child, and

¹⁵³ Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), para. in Stott, *Comedy*, 9.

¹⁵⁴ Johnstone, *Impro for Storytellers*, 354.

hints towards an uneasy atmosphere then the discovery would be a satisfying way to make the scene suddenly more intense and exciting. The revelation would still be shocking, and incongruous enough to entertain the audience and potentially provoke laughter, with enough context having been built beforehand to subvert the audience's expectations without entirely disregarding them.

In a potentially controversial quote, Halpern, Close, and Johnson have claimed that 'improvisers should resist trying to fulfil the audience's expectations.'¹⁵⁵ While this seems to reject Johnstone's approach of embracing obviousness, it complements the Incongruity Theory's role in comedy. This also furthers the writers' warnings of not being swayed by an audience's laughter into repeating the same jokes, therefore cancelling their effect by removing any element of incongruity they contained. The importance of the Incongruity Theory in comic history and the acclaim of Johnstone's method of prioritising obviousness highlight a requirement for a balance of these two seemingly oxymoronic processes in improvised comedy.

For an exciting event to seem truly incongruous, there must be a relatively mundane base to contrast it to. Expectations can only be subverted once there is an indication of what to expect, and the audience is given something familiar to relate to before things veer into insanity. To make a comparison to jazz, one could view the framework of a scene like the head in a jazz standard. It is something identifiable and establishes the 'normal' before the tilt happens, or the solos start. This is arguably a loose comparison as the head could just as easily contain a high proportion of dissonant to consonant notes as a solo, but its placement within a standard will make the head easy to recognise even if the listener is unfamiliar with the specific tune. Traditions of melody treatment and repetition of the head will make the section clear and separate from the melodically improvised sections and, considering most jazz standards also conclude with a repetition of the head, this will create an atmosphere of returning home. Similarly, the normality of an improvised comedy scene's framework establishment will often be returned to as the scene resolves, especially in a longer scene where a conventional narrative structure is more clearly adhered to, returning from a period of heightened incongruity and (hopefully) hilarity to comfort and reconciliation. The incongruity of the scene provides the humour, and the denouement of the return to banality provides catharsis.

Another example of incongruity to consider is that of mistakes, with 19th century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard claiming that it is specifically the incongruity of errors that makes them comical.¹⁵⁶ These can be more obvious in scripted comedy as there is a set script that the

¹⁵⁵ Halpern, Close, and Johnson, *Truth in Comedy*, 72.

¹⁵⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* ed. Morreall, 86.

performers are expected to follow, but in this case it would be deemed a serious offence as the illusion of theatre is shattered by a break from the immersive scripted norm. Meanwhile, mistakes in improv are generally far more forgivable as there are no set expectations, and anything identifiable as a mistake can even become an inside joke in its own right. In improv, a mistake can only be qualified if it denies an idea that was introduced earlier in the scene in a way that cannot be explained away (for example a lie told by an untrustworthy character) and its severity is entirely dependent on the reactions of the performers. Nachmanovitch compares mistakes across the improvised arts to homeostasis and describes improvisation as 'a continuous dance of self-correcting play',¹⁵⁷ addressing the necessity of mistakes but also the performers' ability to correct them. Halpern and co. argue that, in improvisation, 'there are no mistakes. Everything is justified'.¹⁵⁸ I would argue however that this is only the case if the performers are able to justify them. An unintentional or unexpected addition to a scene has the potential to derail it entirely if an inconsistency fails to be addressed, though there is also the potential that the scene will be redirected and lead to something completely different and even more satisfying. One of the most exciting aspects of watching improvised comedy is when a mistake or a leftfield line leaves a scene teetering on the brink of collapse, and the performers are put under pressure to collaboratively solve the problems this has caused: this experience ties into the Relief Theory, which shall be examined later.

Incongruity Theory and Improvised Music

Incongruous techniques have regularly been used in music for intentional comedic effect. Dr Simon Keegan-Phipps has proposed that there are three types of incongruous musical humour: textual, contextual, and procedural incongruity.¹⁵⁹ Textual incongruity concerns the juxtaposition of lyrics with their musical setting, a Classical example being Mozart's infamously smutty canon "Leck mich im Arsch". The clash of the formal connotations of high art surrounding Classical music and the base sexuality of the lyrical content is humorous, and this was clearly the composer's intention. Keegan-Phipps also includes melodic quotations as an example of textual incongruity as he classifies a text as 'any discrete creative material'.¹⁶⁰ This kind of musical referencing stands out as an idiosyncratic

¹⁵⁷ Nachmanovitch, *Free Play*, 129.

¹⁵⁸ Halpern, Close, and Johnson, *Truth in Comedy*, 43.

¹⁵⁹ Simon Keegan-Phipps, "Humour, Incongruity and the Postmodern Jukebox," *Music and Comedy*, Mar 21, 2015, accessed Sep 5, 2019, <https://simonkeeganphipps.wordpress.com/2015/03/21/humour-incongruity-and-the-postmodern-jukebox/>.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

feature of jazz as a genre. Some artists will recontextualise standards, showtunes, or other well-known melodies by presenting them in a completely different style. Consider John Coltrane's jazz waltz version of Rodgers and Hammerstein's classic 'My Favorite Things',¹⁶¹ or Robert Glasper's neo-soul reinterpretation of Mongo Santamaría's 'Afro Blue',¹⁶² which Coltrane has also previously performed as a jazz waltz. An exaggerated example of this is The Swingles' *Jazz Sebastian Bach* recordings which transcended the general notions of a cover version. These recordings, while undoubtedly impressive and enjoyable in their own right, are innately humorous parodies due to the incongruity of Bach's music appearing in the jazz a cappella style.

Musical referencing in jazz can also refer to the quoting of a melodic line during the solo passage of a different tune, sometimes for intentional comic effect. This would not apply to a piece specifically invented to pay tribute to an artist or piece of music but would instead concern an original piece or an improvisation over an existing standard during which a performer decides to make a musical connection. For example, in 'Ego vs Spirit' by Marquis Hill,¹⁶³ the first solo references the melody of the jazz classic 'Caravan'. It is unclear whether this quotation was intended to be humorous, but I certainly laughed upon first hearing the recognisable melody in an unexpected setting. The effect of this kind of intermusicality is entirely dependent on the audience's familiarity with the jazz canon. A quotation of this kind could either be a way of parodying the original tune or a respectful homage to the existing music. Feather argues that melodic quotations of this kind are only acceptable if 'used occasionally, and with discretion and humor.'¹⁶⁴ However, as Monson notes, 'homage and respect are not incompatible with humor, and listeners may respond to the recognition of homage with laughter'.¹⁶⁵ While perhaps holding different perspectives on the use of this technique, both critics identify the importance of humour in this situation.

In Feather's argument, this necessity for humour and discretion even applies to unintended references of another artist's work. Incongruous features in a piece of music can certainly be perceived by an audience as comedic despite this not being the aim of its performers. By applying this logic, both scenarios (intentional parody and homage) are examples of incongruity theory in jazz evoking a comic reaction. An artist will often reference an existing tune upon realising that the chord sequence of the tune they are already playing would complement a famous melody, or if they simply

¹⁶¹ Coltrane, 'My Favorite Things,' *My Favorite Things*, Atlantic 8122765882, 2004, CD.

¹⁶² Robert Glasper Experiment, 'Afro Blue,' *Black Radio*, Blue Note Records 509995 5901420, 2012, CD.

¹⁶³ Marquis Hill, 'Ego vs. Spirit,' *Modern Flows vol. 2*, Black Universal Music Group, 2018, <https://marquishill.bandcamp.com/track/ego-vs-spirit>.

¹⁶⁴ Feather, *Pleasures of Jazz*, 215.

¹⁶⁵ Monson, *Saying Something*, 124.

want to appropriate a melody they enjoy in a contrasting style. In either case this action is whimsical, and whether the intention is to be humorous or not it has the capacity to entertain anyone who identifies the unexpected reference. In identifying the connection between pieces and by drawing the audience's attention to it, the musician is demonstrating their knowledge of the canon, and their wit and skill in restyling their musical inspirations. This action can also be related to the Superiority Theory. The incongruity of a quoted melody appearing in this context, and of the performer's choice to draw a musical connection over the expected unrecognizability of improvised material, combined with an appreciation of the performer's wit, is objectively humorous in accordance with at least one comedy theory, and can result in laughter.

Contextual incongruity concerns the presence of a musical feature that seems out of place in its musical location such as its genre, or simply a situation where the appearance of music is unexpected. Examples of this would be the use of certain chords and time signatures in genres that they would seem out of place in, or a sudden change of time signature or style in the middle of a song. An extreme example of this could be the changes in rhythm and time signature at the end of *One Percent* by Gogo Penguin,¹⁶⁶ which replicates the sound of a CD skipping. Furthermore, many jazz covers of simple ballads or showtunes will alter the chords of the original piece in interesting and unexpected ways, and there are numerous jazz standards that will switch feels between a compound Latin groove and a common time swing. A similarly incongruous occurrence, and one that is often present in jazz improvisation, is the use of notes being played in key signatures and chord sequences that they would not usually be heard in.

Jazz toys with the expectations of a listener and subverts them, and the improvisatory approach of the genre tends towards unpredictable events over anticipated cues and responses. This distinguishes it from other forms of popular and classical music which utilise a composition-centric approach. The pioneers of jazz made lots of discoveries through improvisation and changed how the world viewed music by reinventing harmony, experimenting with timbre, and embracing the new and the free. Sun Ra has been quoted as saying that 'the possible has been tried and failed; I want to try the impossible'.¹⁶⁷ The unknown and undiscovered is incongruous by nature and experiencing this can be liberating and extremely pleasurable. Borgo has observed that musical pleasure 'arrives not from exact matching of expectation with reality, but rather from slight readjustments to our

¹⁶⁶ Gogo Penguin, 'One Percent,' *V 2.0 (Deluxe Edition)*, Gondwana Records, 2018, <https://gogopenguin.bandcamp.com/track/one-percent-2>.

¹⁶⁷ Sun Ra, quoted in John Szwed, *Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra*, London: Canongate Books, 2000).

future anticipations following surprise'.¹⁶⁸ While he does not specifically reference Incongruity Theory, his observation shows an awareness of the effect of incongruity in music and how it evokes a positive reaction from observers. It would be insincere to cite this as hard proof that incongruity in jazz is seen as humorous, but the highlighting of a positive reaction from a writer who has shown no distinct awareness of comedy theory is worthwhile. Borgo continues with this idea, this time focusing more on the performer's role in infusing jazz with incongruity by noting that contemporary improvisation 'engenders an emotional and aesthetic response by playing with familiarity and expectation'.¹⁶⁹ The idea of creating an expectation only to subvert it is a direct enactment of Incongruity Theory as discussed by writers on comedy, and practically a definition of Stanislavski's tilts.

Procedural incongruity concerns music that is made in an unusual way. Keegan-Phipps cites Canadian comedian Michel Lauzière as an expert of this kind of musical comedy,¹⁷⁰ and similar instrumental eccentricities can be found in performances by Bill Bailey and the bizarre song "Konis Hupen" by Hoch Tirol. The creation of music from objects that one would usually not identify as a musical instrument is incongruous and, in all these cases, can be found by listeners as very funny. One could also view the creation of unexpected timbres from a familiar or unknown musical instrument as a form of procedural incongruity, with extended techniques having the potential to confuse, intrigue, and entertain an audience who are not used to these sounds. Jazz musicians and contemporary improvisers regularly use extended techniques to expand the sonic range of their instruments, allowing themselves a wider variety of timbres to explore. The performers will not necessarily be utilising these techniques with the intention to amuse, but the surprise of being introduced to these sounds for the first time or from hearing them being used within a piece with otherwise conventional timbres can be amusing.

Onstage activity while performing can also be viewed as a form of procedural incongruity. I once saw a fantastic piece of improvised music which featured a host of performers on spinning office chairs with the caveat that they could only play their instrument while their chair was in motion.¹⁷¹ The performers may have been adhering to other game rules, but this was the only one clearly identifiable from my audience perspective. The co-operation between the performers was

¹⁶⁸ Borgo, *Sync or Swarm*, 69.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁷⁰ Keegan-Phipps, "Humour, Incongruity and the Postmodern Jukebox".

¹⁷¹ *Untitled*, conceived and performed by Ish, Sir Jack Lyons Concert Hall, York, May 31, 2017.

admirable, the music they were creating sounded amazing, and it was really funny.¹⁷² Amidst a programme of serious contemporary music, the quality of which was consistently high, it was an unexpected and amusing change of pace to see ten to fifteen exemplary musicians whizzing around the floor of the concert hall like hyperactive children. The humorous element did not detract from the quality of the performance – if anything it did the opposite. The incongruous motion structured the entire piece of music, as well as making it a memorable feature of the concert. While this specific example was not a jazz piece, there are numerous contemporary jazz artists who explore similarly unorthodox performance procedures, and one can easily imagine that these could be perceived as humorous.

A final source of incongruity found in jazz is one that is specifically applicable to improvisation. Much like the idea of mistakes and their importance in improv comedy, many writers on improvised music have also addressed the value of error to inspire creation. Monson has said that “‘mistakes’ in jazz improvisation not infrequently have as their consequence extraordinarily positive, spontaneous musical events’.¹⁷³ Racy even implies that mistakes are synonymous with discovery, suggesting that a performance without them is not reaching the full potential of improvisation. He argues that ‘musical improvisers must find the right balance between correctness and precision on the one hand, and creativity and adventure on the other.’¹⁷⁴ Braxton holds a similar view to this, arguing that if an improvised ‘performance is too correct, it means you’ve made a mistake’.¹⁷⁵ He stresses the importance of experimenting and pushing oneself over technically accurate playing - there are plenty of opportunities for this kind of performance in the canon of notated music. These views highlight the vital role of this unintentional incongruity in jazz and imply that an improvised performance without incongruity in the form of mistakes is inherently lacking in creativity and value. Incongruity clearly has a large role in jazz and in improvisation in general and, considering the correlation between incongruity and humour as supported by centuries of philosophical theory, improvised music can indeed be perceived as a humorous activity.

¹⁷² ...though I believe I was the only audience member laughing: the hyper-serious reputation of contemporary music, despite the delightful playfulness and silliness of many of its works, remains a baffling anomaly.

¹⁷³ Monson, *Saying Something*, 154.

¹⁷⁴ Racy, “Why Do They Improvise?”, 316.

¹⁷⁵ Braxton, in Lock, *Forces in Motion*, 248.

The Incongruity of Incongruity

The issue of a dependence on incongruity in jazz has been addressed, raising the question of how any genre of art can be inherently incongruous. Racy has commented that an improviser is 'expected to bring out the unexpected',¹⁷⁶ while critic Charles Fox is quoted as saying that, in jazz, 'the unexpected suddenly becomes transformed into the inevitable'.¹⁷⁷ Garrett argues that the expectation of the unexpected when listening to or involving oneself in jazz results in a higher chance of identifying incongruity, to an extent that one is constantly prepared for something to break from the norm - this means that intentionally humorous incongruity can be harder to identify.¹⁷⁸ This can result in ideas intended to be humorous being missed, or accidental references, dissonances and so on being misread as a comical addition. Similarly, in improvised comedy, a performer can deliver a joke they are proud of to no reception, and alternatively make a Freudian slip or similar unintentional gag that receives uproarious laughter. A further level of incongruity can be reached on this occasion, where the response received by unintentional humour compared to conscious jokes is itself incongruous, and this phenomenon can amuse the performer, or an audience member who has correctly interpreted the situation.

An improvised comedian's personal story throughout a show is incredibly important, and their onstage manner when out of character can entirely change an audience's view of them and the performance in general. This idea translates to musical performance as well and resembles modern theories of musical personae discussed by musicologists such as Philip Auslander and Nicholas Cook. I aim to relate these ideas to the three main theories of comedy, viewing the effects of these comedy theories relating to improvisers in the meta-context of performers as performers, external from the in-scene context of performers as characters and the comic effects relating to these events.

Salinsky and Frances-White have discussed the personal story of improvisers, emphasising the struggle and the glory that comes from this, and saying that the balance between their story and the story of the scene is open to change at any time.¹⁷⁹ They reiterate this later in the book, advising that improvisers always keep in mind the two stories that are being told (in the moment, and across the show), and which of these is most important at any given time.¹⁸⁰ Improvised comedy differs from most theatre in that breaking character is not necessarily negative, or indicative of an unskilled

¹⁷⁶ Racy, "Why Do They Improvise?", 318.

¹⁷⁷ Charles Fox, quoted in Collier, *Jazz*, 87.

¹⁷⁸ Garrett, "The Humor of Jazz," 54.

¹⁷⁹ Salinsky and Frances-White, *The Improv Handbook*, 26.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 287.

performer. A great comedian will know when to break character and joke with the audience as themselves before returning to the role of the scene and, as mentioned earlier, this is often most effective in times of struggle or glory. A scene that unexpectedly descends into chaos can warrant a disbelieving look to the audience; moments of difficulty and hesitation in a short-form game which requires a performer to guess an audience-chosen prompt are often improved by cries of desperation; the execution of a ridiculous context-specific pun may prompt a swift moment of celebration, just as a groan-worthy pun may similarly prompt a knowing sigh. Like all exercises in comedy, actions such as these are entirely dependent on a strong awareness of the fickle beast of comic timing and should be used sparingly to avoid their predictability and allow some audience investment in characters that are created. Despite this, an experienced improviser can afford to consciously communicate with the audience as themselves in this way, and the incongruity of this removal of the facade of character has the capacity of being just as humorous as the in-scene content.

Furthermore, in cases where this communication of self is unconscious, most commonly a genuine expression of emotion, the incongruity that comes with a performer's lack of control over what they communicate may also prompt laughter. A performer who is pushed to break from character by being moved to speechless pathos or visible disgust, for example, from a fellow improviser will often encourage laughter from the audience.¹⁸¹ This would remain part of the meta-context, as it is a communication between performer and audience external from the story of the scene, and can be viewed similarly to mistakes within an improvised performance but with an added level of expression. Improvised performance depends upon moments like these, direct communication and an expression of self. Whether these moments can be viewed as a successful part of a performance is irrelevant: they are a real part of performance, in a form which strives for the closest representation of the real as can be achieved. Meta-contextual communication may not have its place in scripted performance, as the close representation of a documented and inflexible art work is the priority, but improvisation allows a space for it and creates an environment where it is seen as a positive aspect of a live performance as opposed to the clinical sensibility of a sitcom with post-production and reshoots and laugh tracks. These genuine breaks of character and bursts of genuine personal emotion are humorous because they are incongruous to the inherently fabricated world of performance.

¹⁸¹ An observation of this reaction is on the assumption that this break of character is a rare enough occurrence to not be distracting or seem arrogant, and that the performers can regain their composure quickly enough to continue with the scene.

II. RELIEF THEORY

The most recently defined of these theories is the Relief Theory. The ideas of this were first briefly introduced by David Hartley in 1749, and later by Immanuel Kant in 1790. Relief Theory can be summarised as the building of tension as a joke is being told, or as a humorous scene is unfolding, that culminates 'in hearing the punchline, [at which point] the tension disappears and we experience comic relief'.¹⁸² This seems simple enough, especially with comic relief now being an idiomatic concept, but the path to formulating a comprehensive theory to complement this concept was long and staggering, primarily due to its initial entanglement with the (at the time) more pervasive Incongruity Theory. Relief Theory itself was not fully expanded upon until the early 20th century by writers including Sigmund Freud and Henri Bergson, both of whom explained the theory in relation to their idiosyncratic bodies of work.

To better understand the 20th century expansions of Relief Theory, one must be familiar with the earlier contributions to its written history. Initially, Hartley acknowledged that children do not laugh for their first months, and the emotion that eventually sparks their laughter is that of surprise. While this primary claim can be viewed as an example of Incongruity Theory, a continuation of this idea hints at something more. Hartley wrote that the surprise 'brings on a momentary Fear first, and then a momentary Joy in consequence of the Removal of that Fear, agreeably to what may be observed of the Pleasures that follow the Removal of Pain'.¹⁸³ A later observance that one can 'repeat the Surprize [sic]'¹⁸⁴ to prolong the child's enjoyment and laughter firmly distinguishes this scenario from an enactment of incongruity, as the repeated action will now be expected and thus can no longer be viewed as incongruous. The idea that remains is that of experiencing pleasure from a removal of pain or discomfort. To express this in a way that can be more appropriately applied to music in future paragraphs, it is a release from a build-up of tension. This phrasing is resembled in Kant's writings on the topic, who observed that sometimes we laugh because 'our expectation was strained [for a time] and then was suddenly dissipated into nothing'.¹⁸⁵ Rather than expectations being subverted, the Relief Theory explains the humoured reactions to instances where these expectations continue to build in a potentially discomfoting manner, like an elastic band stretched

¹⁸² Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 5-6.

¹⁸³ David Hartley, "Of the Pleasures and Pains of Imagination", *Observations on Man, His Duty, His Frame, and His Expectations* (Hildesheim, George Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1967), 437. [The capitalisation of these quotations is not my own.]

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 437.

¹⁸⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. John H. Bernard (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 133.

to its limit, and the pleasure and laughter caused by their eventual release; the removal of pain or fear.

Freud's writings on jokes and humour are heavily linked to his work on dreams and on sexuality, with the unconscious mind connecting these themes. By continuing his idea of parapraxes (the accidental exposure of repressed subconscious thoughts from which the term Freudian Slip has been derived) and his hydraulic theory of psychic energy, Freud developed the Relief Theory into something far more complex than it originally was. While discussing Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Richard Keller Simon goes as far as to say that 'No other theoretical work on the comic has this textual complexity and few others make such demands on the reader.'¹⁸⁶ Freud also posited that there are different kinds of jokes which can provoke laughter for different reasons, though all are related to Relief Theory. Eagleton has summarised Freud's views on different types of jokes by saying that 'in the more innocuous kind of joke... the humour springs from the release of the repressed impulse, while in obscene or abusive joking it stems from the relaxation of the repression itself.'¹⁸⁷

The idea of abusive joking draws from the long-existing superiority theory, but it is still explained here in terms of relief. Jokes with the intention of degrading their target will be covered in more detail later in the thesis but jokes on a potentially inappropriate topic with other aims are indeed enactments of relief theory. It can be argued that by making an offensive joke - whether this uses discriminatory language, exploits stereotypes or is simply sexual or taboo in its content - the comic is making light of an existing tension which others may have been aware of, thusly dispelling this tension. The effect of this is incredibly context-dependent, as jokes of this kind always carry the risk of greatly offending their audience and creating even more tension. Furthermore, Freud observes that, as we constantly censor ourselves in daily life to be respected in polite society, jokes are the one area where we can expel natural obtrusive thoughts in a controlled, acceptable, and entertaining way. To use the terms of Freudian psychology, the impish id is allowed to slip through our moral defences, 'relieving the pain caused by repressing forbidden desires'.¹⁸⁸ By making jokes like this, one is not just using humour to relieve the tensions of others through laughter, but relieving tensions of the self by engaging in the taboo in an environment often free from consequence.

¹⁸⁶ Richard Keller Simon, *The Labyrinth of the Comic: Theory and Practice from Fielding to Freud* (Tallahassee: University of Florida Press, 1985), 223.

¹⁸⁷ Terry Eagleton, *Humour* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 12.

¹⁸⁸ Bevis, *Comedy*, 95.

Another of Freud's categories of jokes is one which comforts the joker from the dangers of the world, either through light amusement or in making light of a difficult situation. Whereas his earlier category is manifested by the mischievous operations of the id, this realm of joke is the work of the nurturing super-ego which 'strives to comfort the ego through humour, and to protect it from suffering'.¹⁸⁹ The relief in this case is often experienced by oneself though a present audience can also be subject to this feeling, especially if they are living the same unfortunate reality prompting the necessity for levity. The idea of dealing with hardships through humour has been regularly discussed, perhaps most quotably by Nietzsche who, in pondering why man is the only animal to laugh, concludes that 'he alone suffers so deeply that he had to invent laughter'.¹⁹⁰

Freud's suggestions that humour can be used both to humiliate and to comfort are clear from everyday life. One can easily see how, in both these instances, the joke operates as a form of providing relief, either by acknowledging and impishly engaging in taboo matters or by drolly laughing at the state of the world and showing that things aren't all that bad.

Relief Theory and Improvised Comedy

Relief Theory is regularly found in improvisation and is arguably the comedic principle most commonly experienced, or at least most directly observed. Improvised comedian Neil Mullarkey has specifically referred to Freud's ideas about the theory, stating 'Freud said that pleasure is the relief of pain. And improvisation is a sort of exquisite pain'.¹⁹¹ This extremity of self-degradation is a popular comic trope, but also acknowledges the reality of tension in the creation of improvised comedy, rather than just in the narratives it presents. Again, there is an example of a meta-context as the comedic theories are observable in the personal stories presented by the improvisers as themselves, externally to their characters' stories.

The idea of tension and release in improvised comedy, other than its standard use in joke construction and delivery, is most obviously seen when crafting the narrative of a scene. Spolin refers to the concept when discussing the addition of conflict, arguing that conflict should only be introduced once a scene's platform has been appropriately established.¹⁹² This mirrors the idea that

¹⁸⁹ Sigmund Freud, "Humour (1927)," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXI (1927-1931): The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents, and Other Works*, ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1961), quoted in Bevis, *Comedy*, 95.

¹⁹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, quoted in Bevis, *Comedy*, 94.

¹⁹¹ Neil Mullarkey, "Talking to Improvisers," in Salinsky and Frances-White, *The Improv Handbook*, 369.

¹⁹² Spolin, *Improvisation in the Theatre*, 248-9.

a platform needs to be created before tilting it for Incongruity Theory to have a stronger effect on the audience, but is probably even more obvious in this case. The introduction of conflict is a clear cause of tension, and the longer this is allowed to build, the more effective and satisfying the release of it will be. In order to build tension, a solid groundwork needs to be laid down. The setting and characters need to be distinguished; their motivations identifiable; the stakes and consequences of the incoming conflict clear. For the audience to find the resolution of the conflict pleasurable, they must know where the conflict has come from and what its possible outcomes could be. While any resolution would be satisfying if justified appropriately within the scene, Johnstone has argued that it is the most obvious resolution that will garner the warmest reception, as this is what the audience have already decided they want to see.¹⁹³ While tilts and incongruity can make the progression of a scene more interesting by provoking unexpected developments, the tension built throughout must ultimately release in an understandable and satisfying way in order to entertain the audience and cause laughter and applause. Attempting to subvert the audience's expectation at the conclusion of a scene would risk confusing and alienating them.

Another example of tension and release that Spolin identifies in improvisation is that of competition. Forcing competition, she warns, will generally provide negative outcomes as performers will be actively working against each other, but natural competition revealing itself through a quest for collaboration is 'an urgent part of every group activity'.¹⁹⁴ It is impossible to always have the same ideas as one's fellow performers, and the give and take necessary to reach a mutually pleasing conclusion can cause tensions. The resolution of these at the conclusion of a scene would then provide a release of nervous energy. Obvious moments of heavy compromise can also be entertaining for an audience. If one improviser suggested a tilt that their scene partner was unprepared for, the latter performer may be noticeably taken aback, and the temporary struggle for both performers to get back on the same page can be humorous. In this case, the tension is demonstrated by the obvious contrast of ideas between the improvisers and, providing the surprising addition to the scene is not dismissed, there will be a moment when they settle back in sync. This moment of resyncing should then result in everyone in the room becoming comfortable once again with the direction the scene is going in. The performers' confidence in their scene partners is restored, as is the audience's confidence in the performers, and the relief of this return to the norm is often expressed in laughter. Improvisation is never perfect, and it is the possibilities of

¹⁹³ Johnstone, *Impro for Storytellers*, 79-80.

¹⁹⁴ Spolin, *Improvisation and the Theatre*, 11.

imperfection that make it such an exciting art form. To quote Nachmanovitch, 'perfect harmony can be an ecstasy or an utter bore. It is the push and pull that makes it exciting'.¹⁹⁵

While introduced earlier to demonstrate Incongruity Theory, personal stories can also communicate Relief Theory with an audience. Comedians can share and even amplify their agitation and apprehension when a scene has developed unexpectedly or become overwhelming, and audiences enjoy seeing this kind of struggle. An experienced improviser could stretch out this struggle for minutes, with the scene reaching its peak and resulting in a wave of relief on which to end that routine.

Any exciting scene will feature a character having to overcome some kind of obstacle or suffering, and it will always be satisfying to see this result in success.¹⁹⁶ By exaggerating their desperation and heightening their exquisite brand of suffering for comic effect, a performer can create their own meta-context in which we can see an enactment of Relief Theory. The presentation of this meta-context of personal struggle can be interpreted as the performer viewing the scene itself as their obstacle to overcome, with the scene's unhindered progression and the performers' positive contributions to it as measures of its success. A performer who is genuinely struggling within a scene will experience an uncontrollable increase in tension which will only dissipate by them regaining confidence in the direction of the scene and their contribution to it. This release of tension may be gradual rather than the snapping release of tension necessary to prompt laughter, but will be a pleasurable release nevertheless.

Alternatively, the performer may exaggerate or even feign discomfort purely to unsettle the audience before continuing to operate comfortably within the scene. Many audience members will be amused by a performer heightening their uneasiness to the verge of ridiculousness, as explained by the principles of the Incongruity and Superiority Theories. If this continues for too long or is not resolved then the tension will be overwhelming, which can potentially be destructive to the audience's connection with and trust in the performer. However, if this meta-context is used sparingly and resolves through a demonstration that the performer was in control all along (regardless of how truly the performer felt this was the case), the audience would experience this breaking of tension in a humorous wave of relief.

¹⁹⁵ Nachmanovitch, *Free Play*, 100.

¹⁹⁶ This is not the only satisfying way to resolve a scene, however: some sacrifices must be made to make the successes matter more.

Relief Theory and Improvised Music

The effect of tension and release in music is best described by Relief Theory pioneer David Hartley, in the pages shortly before his writing on humour. Here, Hartley argues that ‘Discords are originally unpleasant, and therefore... may be made use of to heighten our Pleasures, by being properly and sparingly introduced, so as to make a strong Contrast’.¹⁹⁷ This observation of the use of discords to provide a sense of the unpleasant, which can easily be assessed as musical tension, and the pleasure caused by their resolution to concordant passages is clearly correlated to the Relief Theory in humour that he continues to introduce. While Hartley does not draw clear parallels between these two observations, the fact that they both discuss the pleasure caused by a removal of unpleasantness or pain, and are contained within just a few pages of each other, implies that he viewed the philosophical interpretations of music and humour to hold some commonality.

When applying these observations to improvised music, the main consideration is the regularity of discords. Discords can be found more commonly in jazz music, especially bebop and onwards where jazz harmony became more experimental, than composed music of Hartley’s 18th century norm. In jazz, even chords within the key signature will generally have extensions or variations, with unusual chord voicings to make the harmony more interesting and exciting to play, with either more varied or more intentionally challenging options for how to improvise over chord sequences. Furthermore, the improvisations around these chords will allow even more possibility for discords, and less certainty of when these will resolve, allowing the musical tension to continually build and release beyond the anticipated harmonic structure. As the release will not always come at an expected part of the chord sequence, a pattern which could become boring if too predictable, the uncertainty of this tension allows for an even more enthralling musical experience. When the resolution does eventually come, with the backing players and the soloist synchronising in their return to a chord within the established sequence (most effectively when reinforcing a cadence), this release can have a much stronger effect than that of a familiar piece of music, and will often result in excitement and pleasure. There are many instances of jazz performances where an especially daring solo has returned to the chords within the changes, sometimes only when the other lead players enter with the head, to rapturous applause from the audience. While the latter scenario may be interpreted as a polite show of appreciation at the completion of a solo, the former can only be explained by a communal experience of this relief of tension and the pleasure this causes; a pleasure so strongly felt that the audience want to share their appreciation of this moment.

¹⁹⁷ Hartley, “Of the Pleasures and Pains of Imagination,” 426.

Borgo has suggested that there is a natural tension in improvised music because of the unknown content being offered by one's fellow musicians (and, to a lesser extent, oneself). While improvised performance can be a conduit through which to express other tensions, an obvious source of tension in improvisation is the nature of the act itself. Ideally, musical improvisation will 'offer a consequence-free space in which to explore the complex dynamics created by a continual tension between stabilization through communication and instability through fluctuations and surprise'.¹⁹⁸ This interpretation combines ideas of relief with incongruity, highlighting the unexpected nature of other performers' actions as a cause of tension in musical improvisation. This tension experienced by the performer can easily be compared to personal stories concerning Relief Theory in improvised comedy.

A musical improviser would generally not exaggerate their struggle to continue a performance in the same way as some improvised comedians, though they may heighten the visible signs of their physical exertion by blowing out their cheeks or making excessive movements. However, a personal feeling of lacking synchronisation with the other performers may well pervade. If this is especially strong, it may be identified by an audience or fellow performers but, as it would not be intentionally communicated to anyone else, we shall look solely at the impact of this feeling on the performer. A musician can feel out of sync with their contemporaries for many reasons, ranging from inexperience with improvising music in general or just with the specific ensemble, to perceiving one's own musical or communicative qualities as inadequate.

Alternatively, this feeling could simply be caused by another performer (let's say Musician A) playing something unexpected, potentially by playing outside of the chord sequence, or by altering the rhythmic feel of the piece. This unexpected change by A will prompt an alert musician (B) to alter their own playing to respond to this change, by following their fellow performer to the musical terrain they have indicated their entrance to. This is not always instantly achievable, as B may misinterpret A's offer – for example, A may have intended to introduce a cross-rhythm which B was not expecting, resulting in an uneasy rhythmic feel. This confusion would then prompt the two musicians to attempt to follow each other and reach some stable ground, communicating only through their playing where they feel the piece should progress to after this misinterpretation. This whole exchange would result in a build of tension, not just from the rhythm uncertainty, but from the uncertainty of the players themselves. By clearly communicating, the musicians will hopefully

¹⁹⁸ Borgo, *Sync or Swarm*, 133.

find their way back to each other and continue progressing the piece. As soon as the improvisers are noticeably back in sync with each other, they and the audience will undoubtedly feel relieved.

While this situation is an exaggeration for clarity, smaller discrepancies between improvising musicians are far more common, and can often be resolved between the players without the audience even noticing. Even if there is a lengthy battle for a common ground, once a performer has been pushed out of their comfort zone and is creating and experiencing the unknown, any positive or enjoyable reaction to these discoveries is in some way a feeling of relief from the tension that the uncertainty of improvisation has created. Many improvisers view these uncertainties as the moments that make improvisation most exciting, as these moments of surprise and collaboration through trial and error can lead to musical output that would otherwise not be possible, and the relief caused by the break in tension from experiencing these phenomena cannot be experienced in any other form of music.

III. SUPERIORITY THEORY

Superiority Theory was the first of the three main theories of comedy to be written on. Naturally, its specifics have been questioned and revised by many writers at different stages of human history and understanding in the 2500 years since its earliest documented origins, but all interpretations ultimately concern themselves with the correlation of pleasure and pain. As opposed to the much later developments of the Relief Theory, which describes the feeling of pleasure caused by the removal of the pain of tension, Superiority Theory concerns the pleasure gained from mocking someone's pain or even causing it. Indeed, Plato has recorded Socrates' observation of 'the curious mixture of pleasure and pain that lies in the malice of amusement,'¹⁹⁹ and Aristotle has referred to jokes as 'a kind of abuse.'²⁰⁰ Thomas Hobbes continued highlighting the malicious side of humour in the 17th century, and has been heralded as one of the founders of Superiority Theory alongside the Ancient Greek philosophers, despite his work taking place some two millennia later. He wrote about the 'grimaces called laughter [which are] caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleases them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.'²⁰¹ In later philosophy, Freud has also observed that 'our

¹⁹⁹ Socrates, in Plato, *Philebus*, 48 – 50, in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* ed. Morreall, 12.

²⁰⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 79.

²⁰¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan or the Matter, Forme, & Power of a Common-wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill* (n.p.: McMaster University Archive of the History of Economic Thought, 1998), 36.

laughter expresses a pleasurable sense of superiority which we feel in relation to [the comic],²⁰² and Superiority Theory was used as the basis of one of his interpretations of Relief Theory.

The sheer volume of writing on Superiority Theory, as well as easily observable instances of people laughing at others in some form pain or distress, makes it difficult to invalidate. However, some writers, especially in the last few decades, have attempted to argue against the theory. Some of these are rejections of Superiority as a comprehensive theory of comedy – Eagleton, for example, posits that 'as an account of humour as a whole, the superiority theory is vastly implausible.'²⁰³ While he rejects the theory's objectivity, he does not dismiss the Superiority Theory's placement alongside two other non-comprehensive theories. Morreall also does not dismiss the theory outright, but suggests that, compared to Incongruity Theory and Relief Theory, it is the least relevant in contemporary psychology due to the apparently 'sloppy theorising that created and sustained Superiority Theory,'²⁰⁴ and the fact it remained unchallenged for millennia. This criticism is somewhat more valid, though the enduring ideas of the Ancient Greek philosophers in other fields remain similarly unchallenged to limited controversy, and the commentary on Superiority Theory by writers such as Hobbes and Freud demonstrate that, even if it is unchallenged, the theory is not exactly untouched. Other rejectors disagree with Superiority Theory by arguing that human nature and humour are not as cruel and victimising as the theory suggests, though the popularity of offensive and crass humour, and the prevalence of discriminatory attitudes and actions shown by various groups around the world would imply otherwise.

While modern tastes in comedy held by more socially aware audiences may be starting to reject degrading humour that is regarded as punching down, it is difficult to deny the prevalence of that cruelty throughout comedy history. Most writers who disregard the theory for these reasons seem to argue from a perhaps naïve disbelief that the delights of humour can stem from such sadistic cruelty. Charles R Gruner has suggested that this view is due to the contrast between 'the social pressure on us humans to be kind, understanding, and charitable [and] the negative terms of superiority, aggression, hostility, ridicule, or degradation.'²⁰⁵ The issue of contrast, then, is primarily due to the theory's correlation of these unpleasant terms to the positive feelings caused by humour. I posit that the paradox lies beyond even this and is most heightened when one considers the fact

²⁰² Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: WW Norton & Co., 1990), 195.

²⁰³ Eagleton, *Humour*, 39.

²⁰⁴ Morreall, "Introduction," in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* ed. Morreall, 4.

²⁰⁵ Charles R. Gruner, *The Game of Humor: A Comprehensive Theory of Why We Laugh* (Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2017), 1.

that a sense of humour is viewed as a significant merit in contemporary society amongst the other niceties Gruner mentions. Yet, as the Superiority Theory suggests (and as millennia of documented comedies and jokes have shown), humour can be rooted in abuse and derision that directly clashes with, and makes a point of ridiculing, these societal values. This paradox is no longer present when one takes the admittedly cynical view that society rarely reflects the values it purports to uphold.

Alternatively, it can be argued that, while mocking humour can come from a place of cruelty, it can also exist in more innocent forms. Santayana has claimed that 'we do not enjoy the expression of evil, but only the pleasant excitement that comes with it,'²⁰⁶ and while this view is far more subjective than his phrasing suggests, there is certainly some truth in it. Humanity and humour are broad and not everyone will express humour in the same way. Superiority Theory explains the history of abusive joking, and there are cases where this should never be excused, but this is not to say that all jokes that play with status dynamics are inherently abusive. These dynamics are still present in the advent of a more woke comedic mainstream; it is simply executed in different ways.

Firstly, the presentation of figures in power as incompetent, weak, absurdly corrupt, and generally flawed allows an audience to feel superior to them. This is Superiority Theory in its most basic form, just with targets who have historically not been victims of prejudice outside of the effectively harmless world of satire. Stott explains that 'human beings are moved to laugh when presented with a person or situation they feel themselves to be intellectually, morally, or physically above.'²⁰⁷ This is just as applicable, and arguably more effective, when highlighting and ridiculing the shortcomings of the social elite as opposed to a historically-oppressed community.

Superiority Theory can also be found in self-deprecating humour, as this not only allows the audience to feel superior to the character or performer who makes themselves the butt of the joke, but it allows the audience to feel superior to another aspect of themselves. In the words of George Orwell, 'the aim of a joke is not to degrade the human being, but to remind him that he is already degraded.'²⁰⁸ Freud's convoluted ideas on this experience are condensed by Simon Critchley, who articulates that 'the super-ego observes the ego from an inflated position [which means that] humour is essentially self-mocking ridicule'.²⁰⁹ Similarly, an audience member who relates to the

²⁰⁶ Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty*, 156.

²⁰⁷ Stott, *Comedy*, 125.

²⁰⁸ George Orwell, "Funny, but not Vulgar," *The Leader*, July 28, 1945, accessed Dec 15, 2019, orwell.ru/library/articles/funny/english/e_funny.

²⁰⁹ Critchley, *On Humour*, 94.

mocked character can have fragments of the same psychological experience as them, and is allowed an opportunity to laugh at themselves through the misfortunes or mistakes of the character.

For example, in the Key and Peele sketch “A Capella”,²¹⁰ a black student (played by Key) tries to join an a capella group who already have a black member (Peele). This leads to intense conflict between the two students, resulting in Peele’s character seeking revenge by infiltrating an improv comedy group which Key is a member of. The sketch addresses the systemic whiteness of a lot of a capella and improv groups as well as the idea of predominantly white social groups having a token black member, and comically exaggerates the tension between two black students vying for what is presented as the sole token position. None of the characters in the sketch are presented as being superior to others, but its humour can still be explained by interpreting Superiority Theory. Firstly, the white members of the two groups are shown as being superficial and exploitative. In the improv scene, they laugh uncontrollably when both Key and Peele make jokes about black stereotypes (their laughter in this case can be viewed as a result of Superiority or Relief Theory, but this is beside the point). The hysterical reactions of the white members in the scene highlight an issue that can be caused by having a lack of racial diversity in an improv group, with non-white members feeling pressured to resort to exploiting stereotypes of themselves, allowing the white comedians to laugh at these stereotypes without feeling racist. As a white improviser, I feel a sense of superiority to the white students in the sketch and their exploitative actions but am also reminded of the issue of diversity in improvised comedy. This allows a second reading of superiority, where I am presented with my own experience in predominantly white improv groups like the characters in the sketch and allowed to laugh at my own possible shortcomings in addressing this issue. Similarly, people of colour viewing the same sketch could potentially see themselves represented in Key and Peele’s characters, empathising with and thusly laughing at ways they exploit their racial stereotypes, or at how they argue with each other despite the true antagonist being the lack of diversity.

The shortcomings of characters in the sketch remind us of our own shortcomings, allowing us to laugh at our situation from an elevated level of superiority over our past selves. We have lived and learned, and comic characters who make mistakes we have made, and find themselves in exaggerated versions of situations we can relate to, make us laugh. Sometimes this is by feeling superior to them, but it is more often by feeling superior to ourselves. To clarify this difference, one can easily speculate that the results of this specific sketch would be very different and far less funny

²¹⁰ Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele, “Key and Peele – A Capella – Uncensored,” YouTube video, 4:30, posted by Comedy Central, 24 Jul 2015, accessed Oct 12, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2EtalOOS-eM>.

if it were helmed by white writers, especially the observations and jokes that are, ultimately, at the expense of people of colour. However, because the sketch was written by people of colour about experiences that they may have lived through or at least can relate to themselves, the objects of mockery are not the characters themselves. Instead, the mockery is directed towards the recognisable and relatable, though exaggerated, situation the characters find themselves in.

Superiority Theory can be applied just as easily to modern comedy as any other era of comedy in documented history. Just because some comedians have been more careful with the targets of their jokes in the last few years so as not to offend has not changed this at all, and this attitude has certainly not ruined the genre of comedy, despite various comments to the contrary.²¹¹ While the Superiority Theory explains the appeal of humour that seeks to offend, it also reveals many other forms that humour can take that are arguably more valuable and certainly more pleasant. One must consider humour's capacity for exclusion and denigration before heralding it as universally desirable and dismissing a theory that addresses humour's potential for causing harm. Similarly, one must consider teasing between friends, self-deprecating jokes, and the use of derogatory humour as a means of retaliating against oppressors before dismissing its varied effects as harmful, and before suggesting that humour can only exist in a harmful state.

Superiority Theory and Improvised Comedy

Superiority Theory can certainly be applied to improvised comedy in the same way as it can to any form of comedy, with characters and their narrative situations presenting regular opportunities for an audience to laugh at eccentricities and comic misfortune. One of Johnstone's most famous improv exercises, commonly known as Master/Servant, is built around a relationship that specifically exploits superiority as a comedic trope.²¹² A fundamental activity to practice performing status, the basic premise is self-explanatory, with the Master possessing a far higher status than their archetypally pathetic Servant. However, variations of the exercise introduce a range of status dynamics. The Servant can play a higher-status character; two more Servants of decreasing status can be added to the exercise; the performer playing the Master can be made to provide dialogue for both Master and Servant. This third variation introduces a status dynamic between the performers

²¹¹ Kate Erbland, "Todd Phillips Left Comedy to Make 'Joker' Because 'Woke Culture' Ruined the Genre," *IndieWire*, Oct 1, 2019, accessed Oct 3, 2019, <https://www.indiewire.com/2019/10/todd-phillips-left-comedy-joker-woke-culture-1202177886/>.

²¹² Johnstone, *Impro*, 62.

as well as their characters, which can then be subverted when the Servant mimes an action that is challenging for the speaker to justify. These all demonstrate the many ways Superiority Theory can be exemplified in short scenes and, by focusing so heavily on Status, Johnstone identifies the complexities and transience of superiority as a way of not only causing laughter but making more interesting and varied scenes.

However, unlike its meta-contextual relationship with the other two theories, improv rarely lends itself to an interpretation where the elements of comedy performance which are idiosyncratic to its improvised form accentuate its presentation of superiority for humorous effect in a way unachievable by its scripted alternatives. The exercise explained above is useful for considering status in a scene but the fact it is improvised adds little to the audience's perception of it, other than potentially the final example of one performer challenging the other. This technique of forcing one's fellow improviser into a situation that is difficult to justify or follow through on is commonly, albeit controversially,²¹³ known as pinging.²¹⁴

In the example of the third variation, the audience would presumably laugh at the wit of the performer playing the Servant, and at how they are reclaiming their superiority over the speaking performer. Yet at no time in this interaction are the audience themselves encouraged to feel superior to either performer. While it can be fun to put another performer on the spot or to call out a small mistake in a tongue in cheek manner, doing so to such an extent that the audience views this performer as inferior would be disastrous to the scene in two ways. Firstly, if it appeared that a performer was significantly weaker than the rest of the group, or if the whole group were viewed negatively, then the audience's faith and therefore their interest in them and any scene they tried to create would be completely lost. Alternatively, if it appeared that a performer was being unfairly treated and made to feel inferior by their fellow improvisers, destroying the co-operative and mutually beneficial spirit of improvisation, an audience would similarly disengage. Performers can only effectively play with the status of themselves and their collaborators if their goal is to present the entire group in a positive light.

Improv relies more than most forms of performance on a feeling of equality between performers and audience. There is a lot of direct communication with the audience, from explaining the mechanics and quirks of certain games to asking the audience for suggestions and, at times,

²¹³ Katy Schutte, "How Yes And changed with #MeToo (...and why Pinging has had it's time)," *The Improviser's Way* (blog), May 10, 2018, accessed Oct 3, 2019, <http://www.katyschutte.co.uk/improblog/how-yes-and-changed-with-metoo-and-why-pinging-has-had-its-time>.

²¹⁴ Salinsky and Frances-White, *The Improv Handbook*, 485.

inviting volunteers to the stage. For the audience to feel comfortable and remain forthcoming and receptive throughout the show, there could be no imbalance in superiority between those on and off stage. An audience member made to feel inferior to the performers would be far less likely to contribute, whereas an audience member feeling superior to a performer would be less interested in their act and more likely to heckle or disengage. This latter situation is less of a problem in stand-up, where the comedians can be self-deprecating and allow the audience to feel morally superior to them, for example, but still command their attention by being the sole speaker with a microphone. In a case of heckling, they could quickly riposte the heckler thus displaying their superiority to them, and could do so in their comic persona. This would then encourage the rest of the audience to laugh at one specific member they no longer feel connected to and suddenly feel above. In a comedy play, the audience can feel superior over the characters, and their relation to the performers is irrelevant as the character is the primary persona being displayed. Improv, however, displays the dual personae of characters and the performer, the latter in constant personal engagement with the audience. The fate of both the character and the performer are in the hands of the audience as the scenarios are enacted from their suggestions, and the development of narratives and deployment of jokes are dependent on the energy in the room. As discussed earlier, improvisation is reliant on a group consciousness with mutual collaboration and creation from performers and spectators alike. For this mutuality to remain constant, there can be no imbalances of status, and therefore no meta-context is created onto which Superiority Theory can be applied.

To summarise, improvised comedy can create situations which display traits mentioned by all three main theories of comedy. Meta-contexts specific to the improvised nature of this style of comedy can also be created, where the subtle relationships between performers and their audience exaggerate existing and create new demonstrations of the Incongruity and Relief Theories. Superiority Theory, meanwhile, is not demonstrated in a similar improvisation-specific way. This slight omission, however, only strengthens the argument that improvised comedy and jazz are closely related due to their relationship with the three main theories of comedy, for reasons that shall become immediately clear.

Superiority Theory and Improvised Music

Improvised music rarely concerns itself with superiority. Improvisers will often try to challenge each other and will indulge in virtuosic solo passages or complex rhythmic accompaniments to add variation and interest to a piece, but this is almost exclusively with the aim of improving the piece as

a whole and to push their fellow performers into producing something they would maybe struggle to achieve without such pressure. “Giant Steps” only stands out as a notable example of one soloist humiliating the other because of how significantly it deviates from the norm. Master players like Coltrane have historically searched for the best ensemble players possible to make their records fantastic in every regard. As discussed earlier, “Giant Steps” only saw such a mismatch of solo quality because of Coltrane’s existing intimate knowledge with his own tune contrasting with Flanagan’s unfamiliarity with its various difficulties. If one improviser plays an incredible solo, the next soloist may feel the pressure to match the quality and show they can hang with the ensemble, but rarely to outdo the former performer. Like with improvised comedians in a scene together, there is generally a respect between musicians who regularly play with each other that would prevent them from pettily squabbling to flex their supposed superiority over their band members.

Another rare example of this not being the case is on Miles Davis’ recording of ‘Bag’s Groove’.²¹⁵ At the time of this recording session, Davis famously did not get on with pianist Thelonious Monk to the extent where he forbade Monk from playing underneath his trumpet solos. Monk was insulted by this but obliged, timidly entering during the vibraphone solo but then playing his own solo with confident rhythmic complexity, potentially as an act of rebellion to Davis, though he respectfully lays out again when the trumpeter takes his second solo.²¹⁶ It is difficult to say who comes out on top in this clash of musical icons, as Monk’s choice to drop back out for Davis’ second solo could be viewed as an admission of defeat, or a morally superior act of humility. It is also interesting to note that, in this case, the conflict for status is present not in flashy solos cutting into each other’s performance space, but in the absence of this. Again, it is uncommon to see superiority displayed in jazz recordings but, when it does appear, it is often in the form of performers attempting to prove their dominant musical ability over others.

Some performers historically took advantage of the unexpected nature of jazz by isolating others from participating. Musical battles on the bandstand amongst jazz elites in what were known as cutting contests have been well documented, as uninitiated musicians would be invited on stage to attempt to play through notoriously difficult tunes from memory, and would be booed off and shunned if they struggled to keep up. The pioneers of bebop built upon this combative display, developing their own musical language by reworking standards with complex chord substitutions as an additional way of excluding both inexperienced beginners and more traditional swing players.

²¹⁵ Miles Davis and the Modern Jazz Giants, ‘Bag’s Groove (Take 1),’ *Bag’s Groove*, Prestige P-7109, 1986, LP.

²¹⁶ Ira Gitler, Liner notes for *Bag’s Groove*, by Miles Davis and the Modern Jazz Giants, <https://d16klsh1z1xre7.cloudfront.net/dorp/liner/0/5b93/b162/1002143330-liner.pdf>.

David H. Rosenthal has commented on how the emerging genre's "weird" chord changes and keys were designed to hustle incompetent musicians off the stand,²¹⁷ and has described bebop tunes as intentionally 'labyrinthine, full of surprising twists and turns.'²¹⁸ Another aspect of this competitive jazz playing was the sheer speed of the young and ambitious generation. These boppers would regularly blitz through up-tempo tunes to leave the swingsters of an outgoing era, and any unexperienced contemporaries, with no chance of keeping up. This potentially demeaning practice helped several of the most impressive performers in jazz hone their skills under high pressure conditions. However, what some strong-willed artists saw as extreme motivation could easily have been discouraging to others, and the cutting sessions are difficult to justify as a feature of the supposedly communal art of improvisation.

It can be argued, though, that it is the uncertain balance of these attitudes that makes the jazz genre so vital. The passive Yin harbouring sensibilities of community and equality of expression against the passionate, sometimes aggressive Yang of aspiration and self-improvement through competition. The conjunction of the inclusive nature of improvisation and the combative atmosphere of cutting sessions seems to have been pivotal in the development of jazz music, with many pioneers of the genre owing their success to the dichotomous challenges and pressures, humiliation and all, of the ever-evolving jazz community. The constant striving for development is one of the most exciting and revolutionary aspects of the genre, and it is the reason jazz has encompassed such a varied range of subgenres throughout its history, with artists constantly pushing themselves and each other to release the most forward-thinking, captivating and technically-impressive music possible. The uneasy equilibrium between inclusion and competition is the source of jazz's excitement and, while the cutting sessions may not have been entirely compatible with its spirit of respectful collaboration, the quest for superiority that inspired these sessions pushed the genre to otherwise unachievable heights.

A similar activity can be found in modern communities of hip-hop artists, the genre being indebted in many ways to jazz music. Many up-and-coming rappers will have honed their skills in rap battles, a competitive challenge of improvisatory skill and wit. This practice is more than just freestyling, with two rappers drawing on their knowledge and opinions of each other to spontaneously craft and trade lyrical insults until a victor is chosen. These battles can be brutal and viciously personal, but the high-pressure environment can encourage very interesting techniques of

²¹⁷ David H. Rosenthal, *Hard Bop: Jazz and Black Music 1955-1965* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 10.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

lyric-crafting and delivery, as anything deemed lazy would be discouraged by the forthcoming audience.

Rap battles were a key inspiration to the activity of roast battles in the comedy circuit, in which comedians will exchange insults about their competitor.²¹⁹ They are also derived from the traditional comedy roast format in which a host of celebrities make jokes at each other's expense before focusing their attentions on a special guest. These jokes are written ahead of the evening and delivered one comedian at a time, like a regular stand-up night. The conventional roast targets are allowed to specify personal topics that should be avoided (for example, in the 2011 Roast of Donald Trump, he forbade comedians from claiming that he exaggerated his wealth)²²⁰ and the special guest is often treated as a figure of prestige, with the onslaught of mockery being counterbalanced with confessions of admiration. This sanitised format is less present in the more raucous roast battles where the exchange of roasts is more rapid, allowing for improvised rebuttals especially if the battle reaches a sudden-death round. Both rap battles and roast battles contain an underlying appreciation for one's competitors, as the bop players surely appreciated the cultural impact of the swing masters who preceded them, but personal desires to be heard can result in a competitive approach to improvisation, with these contests sometimes resulting in altercations and one-upmanship with an intent to humiliate.

Superiority has also been displayed in jazz culture in the onstage patter of some artists. The comedy that populist performers incorporated into their sets was regularly rooted in stereotyping, and Garrett has lamented that 'jazz humor is not necessarily innocent or timeless'.²²¹ By presenting themselves and their race as caricatures as a form of light musical entertainment, players like Armstrong and Calloway used discriminatory comedy to mock the black community. Furthermore, they attempted to present themselves as superior to their black acquaintances, and closer in social status to the white audiences they performed to. The racist humour used by some jazz entertainers has been rightfully criticised by modern writers, albeit perhaps in a misguided way, and is an example of the most despicable traits of Superiority Theory.

²¹⁹ Julie Seabaugh, "Roasts + Rap Battles = Roast Battle, the Hottest Thing in L.A.'s Comedy Scene," *LA Weekly*, Sep 10, 2014, accessed Sep 12, 2019, <https://www.laweekly.com/roasts-rap-battles-roast-battle-the-hottest-thing-in-l-a-s-comedy-scene/>

²²⁰ John Lynch, "Here's the one joke Donald Trump banned from his Comedy Central Roast," *Business Insider*, Aug 3, 2016, accessed Sep 12, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/donald-trump-roast-on-comedy-central-what-he-banned-2016-8?r=US&IR=T>

²²¹ Garrett, "The Humor of Jazz," 59.

It is apparent that the jazz community's clearest demonstrations of Superiority Theory are closely related to comedy, whether this be the inclusion of comedy routines in the acts of jazz entertainers or a competitive musical contest that has been repurposed by insult comics. However, while these activities and behaviours are rooted in displays of superiority, the music itself is not representative of this. The jazz community can be analysed with Superiority Theory, but jazz music cannot. Dissonance can be musically incongruous, and a return to the head or the home key can provide relief after a period of harmonic tension, but superiority does not present itself in a musical sense in the same way as the other two comedy theories. As posited above, improvised comedy also struggles to closely demonstrate a deeper level of Superiority Theory. Therefore, it can be argued that, when analysed through a lens of comedy theory, improvised comedy has an even closer relationship to improvised music than it does to other forms of comedy.

The nature of improvisation exaggerates interpretations of incongruity and relief, as surprise is inevitable and the build and release of tension is impossible to predict, therefore amplifying the effect of two main theories of comedy. The third theory, however, is not amplified in the same way, and this is true to both the mediums of improvisation that have been discussed in detail. Improv comedy can be analysed by using historical theories of comedy in a way that is independent from other comedic art forms such as theatre and novels, and improvisation in jazz can be successfully analysed in the same idiosyncratic way. Improv distinguishes itself from the comedic canon and establishes a canon of improvisation that also contains music, which can be explored with comedy theory. This analysis is dependent on certain limitations which both improv comedy and jazz have in common. Considering the additional connections between the two mediums that were explored in the literature review asserts that current understanding of both improv and jazz are restricted by academic expectations and conventions of their respective fields. In order to have an appropriately nuanced appreciation of these performance-centric art forms, it is essential to consider them collaborators within the specific interdisciplinary genre of improvisation.

CONCLUSION

As demonstrated throughout this thesis, jazz music has more in common with improv comedy than the fact that both are types of improvised performance. The commonalities are also more expansive and varied than the interpretations of comedy theory which satisfy both improvised music and comedy in similarly idiosyncratic ways. The two art forms share similar roots – both improvised music and improvised comedy have existed and been developed throughout human history but, especially throughout the Romantic period, fell out of fashion in Western culture as writers and composers began to be viewed as ineffable masters of their field. The modern revival of these improvised art forms originated amongst oppressed communities, from slaves to Semites, though they were soon appropriated and commercially (if not culturally) dominated by white men.

Both art forms are inherently expressive as the dual identity of creator and performer allows for intimate connection to the material,²²² and the combined moment of creation and performance allows an immediate connection with the ensemble and the audience.²²³ This heightened frame of being can result in trancelike performative states, where the material seems to be creating itself with the artist acting as a conduit.²²⁴ Other performers can similarly lock into this unique energy, making collaborative creation seem effortless.²²⁵ While it may seem like second nature at the time, the reality of this effect is dependent on practice at selfless, mutually beneficial co-operation and spontaneity. These two traits are closely related, as spontaneity is most impressive and effective as a response to another player's verbal, physical or musical offer.²²⁶

It also relies on some kind of clear structure,²²⁷ whether this be an overall structure of the entire piece or simply a smaller framework within it, so that the performance does not devolve into unrelated bursts of spontaneous thought and instead feels like a cohesive and coherent work. This can be a series of smaller pieces with clear individual structures, or more expansive and exploratory pieces. The identifiability of such a structure by an audience is not important, but its existence to shape the formulation of ideas is often seen as incredibly helpful, if not an absolute necessity.

Freedom and liberation are intrinsically linked with improvisation in all its forms,²²⁸ and the freedom of expression allowed by improvisation is often complemented by messages of political and

²²² Nachmanovitch, *Free Play*, 4.

²²³ Salinsky and Frances-White, *The Improv Handbook*, 27.

²²⁴ Racy, "Why Do They Improvise?", 321.

²²⁵ Borgo, *Sync or Swarm*, 184.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 186.

²²⁷ Nachmanovitch, *Free Play*, 83.

²²⁸ Nettle, "Preface," xii

social freedom, either in the content of the art itself or simply in the processes of creating the art. This is especially true of jazz which has a storied relationship with the civil rights movement, whereas improv comedy deals more closely with personal freedoms such as increasing self-confidence. The history of improvisation has an unfortunate relationship with discrimination, primarily racism and sexism, in a way that is no less extreme than external society but perhaps more obvious due to the principles of freedom and equality that improvisation preaches, and how these principles contradict with behaviours found especially in the commercial side of these art forms.²²⁹

Finally, there is a disparity between the social and cultural importance of improvisation and its academic reputation. The reception of jazz was divisive upon the genre's introduction to the mainstream music world. This was partly because of its complex, often dissonant approach to harmony that challenged the conventions of popular music at the time, prompting many critics to disregard it as noise, but was primarily due to racist attitudes towards its pioneering artists.²³⁰ There has been an ongoing critical reappraisal of jazz and the genre is rightfully recognised as one of the most important developments in modern music,²³¹ though it is still distinctly under-represented, or at least inappropriately represented, in musical academia when compared to the composer-centric Western Art Music canon.²³² Improvised comedy is also under-represented in academia, as most academic writing about comedy instead focuses on plays, novels, and sometimes films. The overlooking of improvisation by music and comedy academics ultimately results to the favouring, or simply the conveniently enduring documentation, of infallible writers and their canonical works over the ever-changing, unpredictable possibilities of extemporisation. Meanwhile the lack of acknowledgement received by comedy in texts that solely address improvisation is potentially due to the misguided view that comedy is a low art form and therefore less valid, and that art and humour cannot co-exist.²³³ The correlations between improvised music and improvised comedy become even more relevant when one considers philosophical theories of comedy, and how these can be applied to jazz. Rather than simply comparing the two art forms, this critical appraisal demonstrates that common-practice jazz can satisfy the quotients that have historically been used to identify humour, and suggest that all forms of improvised music have the potential of doing the same.

²²⁹ See "Interval" above for an in-depth analysis of this topic.

²³⁰ Blecha, *Taboo Tunes*, 17.

²³¹ Solis, "Introduction," 8.

²³² Monson, *Saying Something*, 136.

²³³ Garrett, "The Humor of Jazz," 60.

The Incongruity Theory concerns subverting expectations for humorous effect, and Michael Clark has credited it as 'probably the most plausible of the traditional theories.'²³⁴ In improvised comedy, the incongruous occurs most often when the performers veer away from a framework grounded in reality to produce excitement. It is also present in the phenomenon of mistakes, and the way that comedians react to these in the moment, incorporating them into the established world of their improvisation. Mistakes are similarly an idiosyncratic source of incongruity in jazz, alongside the more reliable traits such as dissonance. Other musical elements like rhythm, metre and timbre are also often pushed to ground-breaking extremes in the jazz genre, and this innovation is itself a type of incongruity. Jazz can appear incongruous to a listener unfamiliar with the genre, or a moment in a jazz piece may only be identifiable as incongruous because of a deep familiarity with the genre, in instances such as an unexpected melodic reference. Jazz artists have immense capacity to invent and to surprise, and the improvised nature of the music allows for far more instances of incongruity than a strictly composed work. It can be argued that, as an audience member familiar with improvisation would expect some element of uncertainty and surprise and would be better adjusted to the dissonances that characterise jazz, it is therefore more difficult for the genre to be truly incongruous (the same can be argued to an extent for improv comedy).²³⁵ However, in this case the interpersonal relationships between performers would become the focus. A performer could display something they believe is innovative to no acclaim or convey something unintentionally that the audience applaud as an inspired artistic addition. The incongruity then arises between the performer's intention and its reception, either by the audience or their fellow performers, and this misinterpretation of intent and how they react to it can be humorous to an astute viewer.

Relief Theory, by far the most recent of the three main theories of comedy, concerns the natural patterns of tension and release in any situation where something is at stake. In comedy, this can be the fates of the characters; in improvisation, the fates of the performers. Their cohesion with each other's playing; the fluency of their own; in jazz, their endeavours outside of established harmonic structures. All these features and more can hang in the balance during an improvised performance, and tension can build incrementally through careful and skilful playing or appear suddenly and unexpectedly. Regardless of the above, it is then in the hands of the performer to negotiate their way out of whatever trap has been set and to provide the listener with the feeling of returning to home. This release of tension can be comforting and may increase one's admiration for

²³⁴ Michael Clark, "Humour and Incongruity," *Philosophy* 45, no. 171 (1970): 20, accessed Oct 25, 2019, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3749521>.

²³⁵ Garrett, "The Humor of Jazz," 54.

a performer. It can also provoke laughter – a spontaneous reaction triggered by humorous events, possibly exaggerated by the self-aware realisation that one was made to feel tense by something as ultimately inconsequential as listening to music or watching a comedy show. However, it is easy to invest in a performer, especially in a form as expressive and personal as improvisation.²³⁶ We are driven to feel what the performer feels, and every discord; every moment of conflict; every flirtation with failure is experienced deeply and, consequently, every resolution can bring great relief, often in the form of humour.

Superiority Theory, the most enduring of these theories, is also the most controversial as it concerns persistent truths of human nature we often wish to repress. Ranging from friendly mockery to persecution, we find humour in the pain of others.²³⁷ Similarly, we can find humour in the defeats and failures of those who have caused us pain, and in our own. Superiority Theory is often synonymised with cruelty, with Aristotle referring to humour as a form of abuse,²³⁸ but further interpretations of the theory demonstrate its complexity and show that not all humour must be sadistic for feelings of superiority to be present.²³⁹ Improvised comedy and jazz can both display elements of superiority, but the theory only explains each form to a certain extent. With improv comedy, status is integral to its content and superiority is regularly displayed within scenes, but the meta-context for which both previous theories have provided a further level of truth does not profit the same results. On the contrary, pivotal breakthroughs in jazz culture are often indebted to battles of superiority, and the comedy favoured by jazz performers who are retrospectively viewed more as entertainers than musicians was often rife with taboo and offensive humour, but the content of the music itself, for the most part, cannot be explained with the Superiority Theory. That both improv comedy and jazz music satisfy the Incongruity and Relief theories and are both not wholly compatible with Superiority Theory suggests a connection between the two art forms that can only be explained by their mutually improvised natures. With relation to the three main comedy theories, improvised comedy bears more relation to improvised music than it does to other forms of comedy, and therefore improvisation can be seen as an art form that transcends the categories of comedy and music to exist as its own theoretically individual medium. Jazz is not comedy, just as improv comedy is not comedy, strictly. Instead, these two forms of improvisation are philosophically related to comedy while sharing a common distinction.

²³⁶ Bailey, *Improvisation*, 44.

²³⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 36.

²³⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 79.

²³⁹ Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty*, 156.

Before asserting this too boldly, one must consider the consequences of such an interpretation, as it implies that any comedic work must satisfy all three main theories of comedy at once to be considered valid. Surely, one may argue, if any of the three theories are satisfied, the examined material could be considered comedy? Or would it simply be categorised as a comedic moment rather than a complete example of comedy itself? A borrowing or re-appropriation of comedic tropes either as a fleeting instant or, in the case of improvisation, within a separate genre. A joke may only satisfy one of the three comedy theories and, while certainly comic, it is not strictly a work of comedy. A series of jokes, as in a jokebook or a stand-up set, would be valid, just as a comic novel or play would be viewed as a work of comedy while a line out of context would not be. Furthermore, there may be comedic lines within works of other genres. A horror film with a funny line of dialogue would not be classified as a comedic work, though a film like *Shaun of the Dead* which comically satirises tropes of the horror genre and ultimately follows a loose comedic structure, specifically one that ends on a positive note, would definitely be viewed as a comedy. It can be argued, then, that improvised music such as jazz belongs to a separate genre; not one of comedy but one that contains distinct comic moments and depends on some level of humour and wit to be effective. Improvised comedy, meanwhile, is a more identifiably comedic work, though some historic conventions of comedy as a genre, such as the aforementioned structure and numerous other tropes, would not be guaranteed as nothing in improvisation can be guaranteed.

The question then remains as to whether improv comedy can successfully be categorised as a form of comedy, or any genre historically defined by conventions of written works. The possibilities of improvisation mean that other genres can be explored, other tropes deployed either satirically or earnestly and, while in most cases an improv group will rely on comedic tropes and expectations to entertain their audience in a certain expected way, they may also perform in a way that cannot be defined as one genre. While groups like *Austentatious* and *Showstopper!* are regarded as improvised comedy performers, and they generally are incredibly funny, their shows also heavily involve tropes of period dramas and musicals respectively, and there is no guarantee that any one performance will explore comedic conventions more than those of their thematic genre. Other improv comedy groups, especially those who perform long form, can explore other genres throughout a show, and the unpredictability of improvisation can result in performances that are far less comedic than others, while being just as entertaining and captivating. As the meta-contexts discussed earlier will be present regardless, there are still elements of humour present in any improvised performance; it just may not always be the primary focus, even in the form classified as improv comedy. This constant possibility of variety and interdisciplinary exploration provides another reason why it can

be more appropriate to regard improv as an often-comedic form of improvisation, rather than an improvised form of comedy.

Having discussed and reflected on the three main comedy theories, this is an ideal time to direct one's attention to the contemporary ideas of a comprehensive theory of comedy. The two main writers who have suggested such a theory are Morreall in 1989 and, much more recently, Eagleton in 2019, with the latter simply stating that such a theory should be formulated rather than offering his own. Morreall acknowledges the merits of the three existing concepts, arguing that while 'none of them is adequate as a general theory, they each have features which belong in a general theory'.²⁴⁰ The hypothesis he presents is most directly a reinterpretation of the Relief Theory, though the other two main theories can be appropriately applied to it, and he condenses these ideas to the notion that 'laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift'.²⁴¹ The application of this theory to instances of laughter caused by the incongruous is clearer when paired with Eagleton's observation that while Incongruity Theory 'tells us what we laugh at [it does not tell us] why we do so'.²⁴² He continues to say 'what is needed, then, is to splice the incongruity theory with the release theory, which is indeed an explanatory move'.²⁴³ Morreall's theory succeeds in this, albeit not explicitly though this is a predictable sacrifice in favour of succinctness. An understanding of Incongruity Theory is necessary in order to fully appreciate how Morreall's theory applies to a wider range of humorous instances, but it is certainly possible to view the humour created by incongruity as a pleasant psychological shift. An audience member will begin viewing a performance with a set expectation in their mind, and an amusing break of routine can shift their psychological perception of the scene, resulting in a satisfying feeling. Similarly, the shift from tension to experiencing relief will generally be pleasurable, as will a shift resulting in the audience member feeling superior to a character or performer.

Eagleton has detailed a range of instances in which audience members can perceive and delight in humour, terming these as pleasures of wit. He observes that

We delight simultaneously in the artistry of the form, the dexterity of the performance, the labour-saving economy of the succinct language, the free play of mind, the inversions, subversions, surprises and dislocations of the content, the intellectual satisfaction of "getting" it and the display of personality it involves, while

²⁴⁰ Morreall, *A New Theory of Laughter* in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* ed. Morreall, 129.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 133.

²⁴² Eagleton, *Humour*, 89.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

the malice, insolence or disdain which may lurk behind a witticism allows us a certain vicarious release.²⁴⁴

While most of these examples can be interpreted with the main theories of comedy, some of them require lateral thinking to envelop them in these three categories, no matter how broad and persistent they may be. An appreciation of the artistry of the comedic form, for example, could potentially be viewed from a Superiority Theory angle. One could feel superior to other audience members by understanding a complex joke, or due to a longstanding familiarity with the performer's material that could provide an added level of comprehension and amusement for certain jokes: clearly, a lot of speculation would be necessary to suggest this would always be the case. An existing or even a newly-found appreciation of a comedian's style or personality can make their performance seem more humorous, and it is difficult to explain this in the same way with the longstanding theories of comedy. However, this latter experience can be easily viewed as a pleasant psychological shift, and the same can be said for all the examples given by Eagleton (many of which can also be more clearly viewed as a case of the classic comedy theories).

The same can be said for someone actively listening to jazz. The harmonic twists and turns; expressive and dissonant solo phrases; rhythmic playfulness: all these features and more can be explained with the theories of incongruity and relief. Other elements of jazz, however, do not fit these categories. Spiritual jazz in the vein of Coltrane's *Ascension* is difficult to comprehend as a source of incongruity, relief or superiority, but its grandiosity and pure emotional impact can definitely be viewed as psychologically pleasant. While the existing comedy theories do provide explanations for the humorous effects of improvised comedy and music in most cases, there are some instances in both fields of improvisation for which Morreall's less specific theory offers a more suitable understanding.

This is not to say that Morreall's contribution is an objectively successful comprehensive theory of comedy. Firstly, its vagueness can be just as destructive as it is useful. While some features of jazz can be correlated to Morreall's theory more directly than the three historic theories of comedy, these are not necessarily the features that employ wit and humour. I would argue that the skill necessary to create such an overwhelming mood of praise as that in *Ascension*, without using lyrics or conventionally evangelical musical features such as grand strings and repeated plagal cadences, may well require a level of wit and creativity but are not necessarily humorous.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

Morreall's specification of a *pleasant* psychological shift can also be problematic as it does not extend to some cases of Superiority Theory, such as defensively abusive or self-deprecating comedy. There are certainly humorous elements on display, but the resulting psychological shift is not necessarily pleasant. Moreover, one must consider the ideas of theorists like Santayana who claim that incongruous humour is inherently unpleasant, and the various writers such as Voltaire, Franz Kafka and Joseph Heller whose work presents the darkly and notably unpleasant comedy of the grotesque.²⁴⁵ Morreall's theory may provide some enlightenment on a few specific situations in both comedy and jazz that the existing comedy theories struggle to appropriately explain but, in achieving this, other notable humorous styles and movements are overlooked entirely. Another main flaw with Morreall's theory is that it may be satisfactory as a succinct explanation of why we are amused, but it is a theory of laughter more than a theory of comedy itself. The vagueness of the theory may endow it with the ability to extend to a movement such as spiritual jazz, but the phrasing of the theory's predilection with laughter over the more relatable features of humour are not entirely appropriate.

One must consider that laughter and humour are separate concepts: one is a physiological reaction, and one is a philosophical construct which at times causes such a reaction. Morreall even addresses the distinction between laughter and humour himself, criticising some early formulations of Incongruity Theory for presenting themselves as 'theories of laughter generally, when at most they could hope to serve as theories of humor'²⁴⁶ This is an astute observation that makes the fact that his comprehensive theory of humour specifically references laughter rather baffling. Holding this viewpoint provides us with an alternative reading to Eagleton's claim that Incongruity Theory 'tells us what we laugh at but not why we do so'.²⁴⁷ As a theory of laughter, this would indeed be inadequate, and combining it with an explanatory theory such as Relief would enhance our understanding. However, as a theory of comedy, it perfectly suffices. An understanding of comedy cannot be reduced to an understanding of what makes us laugh, as plenty of valid comedic texts may not evoke that reaction. One would not argue that a comedy from centuries ago that a modern reader no longer relates to enough to laugh is therefore void of humour. Neither would one argue that a comedy play is only humorous when an audience responds to it with laughter, and that the same content is inherently not comedy in a rehearsal.

²⁴⁵ Frances K. Barasch, "The Grotesque as a Comic Genre," *Modern Language Studies* 15, no. 1 (1985): 3-11, accessed Dec 23, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3194413>.

²⁴⁶ Morreall, "Introduction," 5.

²⁴⁷ Eagleton, *Humour*, 89.

Furthermore, everybody has a different subjective appreciation of what they find to be funny, and what drives them to laughter. However, the existence of humour is more objective, and humorous devices can be used and identified. While something can be explained in relation to a comedy theory, this does not mean everyone will find it funny, or even that anyone will find it funny. Clark has argued that

all we are saying is that nothing can (logically) amuse someone *unless* he sees it as incongruous, that seeing it as incongruous is a *necessary* condition of his finding it humorous. We are not saying that it is a sufficient condition for his finding it amusing, we are not saying that if he sees it as incongruous he is bound to be amused by it.²⁴⁸

The essay this has been quoted from specifically concerns Incongruity Theory, hence Clark's focus on the incongruous in the extract. Therefore, I would personally disagree with the first part of the quote. Seeing something as incongruous is *not* a necessary condition of finding it humorous but seeing something displaying traits of any of the three main theories of comedy *is*. Despite his exclusion of the other two main theories, Clark's specification of contrast is a valid one, and one that can be easily overlooked. I would therefore incorporate this idea into a more inclusive view of the conditions of humour. Seeing something as either incongruous, a relief from tension, a display of superiority, or any combination of these three principles is a necessary condition in finding something humorous but, just because something is seen as bearing any of these traits, it is not necessarily bound to cause amusement. This viewpoint can be especially relevant when viewing something that is not intentionally funny, such as jazz, through the lens of these comedy theories. Whether the incongruous or relieving characteristics of the music produce laughter is beside the point: these characteristics represent the principle theories of humour.

Improvisation has the capacity to be funny, especially improv comedy where the performers prioritise this reaction more than jazz musicians realistically would, but it does not have to be; it is inherently humorous, as in it satisfies conditions set by the theories of humour. Improvised music and improv comedy are both incredibly versatile mediums of performance, and to categorise them as simply one genre seems counterintuitive to the worlds of possibility on display. While improv and jazz are both forms of comedy and music respectively, and these improvised forms should certainly be discussed and explored more in comedy and music academia, they are both limited by the conventions of their current genres' distinct, written alternatives. It is therefore more appropriate to

²⁴⁸ Clark, "Humour and Incongruity," 28.

view both art forms as mediums within the interdisciplinary genre of improvisation. Finally, to discredit comedy and improvisation as lower or less valid art forms is to ignorantly overlook the presence and importance of both humour and improvisation in the history of music, theatre, and art performance in general, and to discredit jazz as not humorous is to disregard millennia of oft-revised yet ultimately prevailing philosophical, psychological, and literary theory.

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