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MORE THAN A RECORD STORE: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE CATALYTIC SOUND CREATIVE MUSIC COOPERATIVE

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More Than a Record Store:

An Ethnography of the Catalytic Sound Creative Music Cooperative

Brock Stuessi

Abstract

Catalytic Sound is a collective of thirty creative improvising musicians working toward creating economic sustainability for themselves through cooperative means. In this thesis, I investigate the ways Catalytic Sound developed to this point from its beginnings as an online musician-owned record store. I write a short history of Catalytic Sound from 2011 to 2021 through ethnographic observation and interviews, archival research and my own personal experiences as manager of the cooperative from June 2018 to July 2019. Beyond a description of this history, I develop an understanding of Catalytic Sound and its evolution through modeling and analyzing the network of musicians and other actors who have shaped the cooperative. Additionally, I draw historical connections to the Jazz Composers Guild, the New Music Distribution Service and the AACM to historically situate Catalytic Sound within a broader history of political and economic organizing on the part of improvising musicians in the United States and Europe.

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Introduction

In this thesis, I investigate the ways Catalytic Sound developed from a musician-owned record store to a digital cooperative of musicians and listeners. I document the short history of Catalytic Sound from 2011 to 2021 through ethnographic observation and interviews, archival research and my own personal experiences as manager of the cooperative from June 2018 to July 2019. Beyond description, I develop an understanding of Catalytic Sound and its evolution through modeling and analyzing the network of musicians and other actors who have shaped the cooperative. Additionally, I draw historical connections to the Jazz Composers Guild, the New Music Distribution Service and the AACM to historically situate Catalytic Sound within a broader history of political and economic organizing on the part of improvising musicians in the United States and Europe.

Drawing inspiration from George Lewis's writing on the AACM, I am interested in how Catalytic Sound provides an example of collective organizing in the current era of economic challenges brought on by the digital distribution of recorded music via streaming services and the Covid-19 pandemic. In foregrounding the cooperative in this musical study, I call attention to the many activities that make being a musician in the twenty-first century both uniquely challenging and possible. Rather than view music in a vacuum of performed and recorded sounds, I also examine the economic and political organizing that is a backbone of creative improvised music in 2021. Lastly, I see this thesis as part of the ongoing mission of Catalytic Sound to serve as a model for the implementation of collective self-

determination in a variety of contexts. The last two years of graduate studies have offered me both the space and time to research and contemplate such collective projects, and I hope this document will be useful not only to scholars, but also to the musicians of Catalytic Sound and any artists attempting to create cooperative structures.

Methodology

My methodological approach to studying Catalytic Sound involves both digital archival work as well as different ethnographic approaches—digital, traditional and auto-ethnographic. My engagements with Catalytic Sound preceded my interest in it as an academic project. As mentioned above, Ken Vandermark hired me as the manager of the cooperative in June 2018. In this thesis, I combine the experiences of my time as manager of the cooperative with interviews, musical experiences, and close readings of digital material on the web platform. Additionally, I access a variety of archival sources from both the informal collections of Catalytic Sound and the internet archive of writing about and documentations of the collective. In doing so, I seek to write a short history of Catalytic Sound from its conception in 2011 to its current state in 2021.

This history is necessarily ethnographic, as the line between archives and that which is eye witnessed is blurred by my ethnographic presence, which spans three years. Moreover, my time as an employee constitutes an informal autoethnographic phase that preceded my formal research phase. My understanding of autoethnography

has been informed by Martha Gonzalez's book *Chican@ Artivistas* and the personal history and narrative she uses to structure the text. While Catalytic Sound is not nearly as tied to my personhood as Gonzalez's topic, I have come to realize that my time and the decisions I made as manager have had a significant impact on what the collective is now and is working toward for the future. Because of this and the profound impact working for Catalytic Sound has had on me, I find it necessary to map my approach to Catalytic Sound and the ways the collective has informed what I "know" as a method of understanding what the project is.[1] At the same time, Catalytic Sound was many things before my time there and has continued to develop in ways I never could have envisioned after I left. With this distance from the project, I also inhabit an ethnographic position that places the subject more squarely on my informants and the history of the collective. Much of my research has consisted of uncovering the story of its past, paying attention to the ways Catalytic Sound has been functioning since I left and examining the involvements of various participants within the collective. Lastly, because of the ways Catalytic Sound exists primarily in digital space, I use a variety of digital ethnographic and interpretive techniques throughout the thesis. My notions of digital ethnography draw on Alejandro Madrid's conception of "cyber-fieldwork" as an ethnographic practice that "recognizes the Internet as much more than a tool for communication or a space for the storage and retrieval of information; it acknowledges [the internet's] importance as a virtual space

[1] Martha Gonzalez, *Chican@ Artivistas: Music, Community, and Transborder Tactics in East Los Angeles* (University of Texas Press, 2020).

where relationships are established, knowledge is produced, and cultural meaning is negotiated."[2]

My choice to use both autoethnographic and more conventional ethnographic research methods is a reflection of my relationship to Catalytic Sound. This relationship is on the one hand, intensely close, intertwining with my own personal musical history, and on the other, now-distanced as my life has moved on from Catalytic Sound and my positioning toward the collective shifted to that of researcher. I had initially understood this positioning as native ethnography. This understanding was informed by the ways my time spent working for Catalytic Sound and in the Chicago experimental improvised music community provided me with certain insider knowledge and experiences. However, I now hesitate to claim native-insider status in this community given the brevity of time I spent in this scene and my lack of sustained connection to it since leaving Chicago. Invoking a methodology that utilizes autoethnography and more distanced ethnographic methods has helped me to realize how I have directly influenced the trajectory of Catalytic Sound and the ways I am and continue to be an outsider to the musical community represented by the collective.

In addition to my direct dealings with Catalytic Sound, I also draw on my experiences as an enthusiast, performer and occasional presenter in the Chicago improvised music scene. These experiences constitute a variety of positions I

[2] Alejandro L. Madrid, *Nor-Tec Rifa! : Electronic Dance Music from Tijuana to the World.*, Currents in Iberian and Latin American Music (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2008),11.

continuously pull from throughout this thesis. My ventures into the community of experimental improvised music began with my time as a jazz DJ at WNUR-FM, the student-run radio station at Northwestern University. I first encountered the music of Ken Vandermark and many of the other Catalytic Sound musicians in the station's deep CD archive during my weekly program. I worked as a producer at the not-for-profit performance space, Elastic Arts, from 2018 to 2019. In this role I gained a more behind-the-scenes understanding of how improvised musicians in the Chicago scene navigate the network of performance spaces and auxiliary money-making opportunities. In addition to the concerts where I programmed and worked the door, I attended many improvised music concerts at a variety of venues on the North and West sides of Chicago. Aside from my experiences as an enthusiast, I am a practitioner and student of the music represented by Catalytic Sound. I first attended Northwestern University as a Jazz bass performance major. Motivated by my musical encounters at WNUR, I dropped out of the jazz program, as I considered it to be too rigid, to pursue the more experimental improvisational forms I was riding the train into the city to see. During my time as manager, I participated in the improvised music scene as a performer, playing bass in the trio Boomerang for a year. I mention these experiences to illustrate my sustained interactions with not only Catalytic Sound, but with the creative improvised music scene more broadly.

Methodologically, I build on the experiences and knowledge I gained as an enthusiast and practitioner of experimental improvised music to offer insight into the ways the organizational model of Catalytic Sound is a reflection of the music it represents.

My previous responsibilities as manager of Catalytic Sound also provided me access to internal aspects of the business: These data include financial data, communications, sales information and knowledge of how Catalytic Sound, as an assemblage of different websites and services, operates. These materials amount to what I conceive of as an uncollected business archive that straddles both my personal materials from my time as manager and materials created since I left. With permission from the current manager of the project, Sam Clapp, I have continued to access many of these resources over the course of my research. While I maintain this continued access, however, my role within the organization has moved from participant-observer to observer.

In addition to drawing from my experiences and the variety of materials pertaining to the operations of Catalytic Sound I can access, I also interviewed many of the people involved with Catalytic Sound. My primary informant over my period of research into the collective has been Ken Vandermark. Vandermark is one of the founding members of Catalytic Sound and since the beginning has dedicated more time and energy to the project than any other involved musician. Examples of this commitment include: the storing of records for the collective in the basement of his house in Chicago; hiring the non-musicians who work on the collective; and overseeing the business aspects of the project.

Along with Vandermark, I have also spoken with the current manager who was hired during the end of my tenure in 2019, Sam Clapp, the graphic designer and social media manager, Federico Peñalva, and the manager who preceded me at the

cooperative, Steve Marquette. In addition to these core members who tend to the day-to-day functioning of Catalytic Sound I have also communicated by video call or email with a number of other musicians in the collective. These musicians include Ab Baars, Ben Hall, Bonnie Jones, Brandon Lopez, Claire Rousay, Dave Rempis, Joe Morris, Luke Stewart, Nate Wooley, and Tim Daisy. While I feel these musicians offer to my study a diversity of age, gender, aesthetic approach, race, and time spent in the collective, I do acknowledge that the list of musicians I was able to speak with exhibit a bias towards the US-based musicians in the collective. While I attempted to reach out to all of the twenty-four musicians involved during my period of field work, those who appear in this thesis are simply the ones who were responsive to my requests.

I view this document as a kind of recording of Catalytic Sound – a recording analogous to the many recordings the involved musicians make of their musical processes and developments. By invoking the analogy between recording and ethnography, I mean to reference the ways ethnography, especially in the case of Catalytic Sound, is a perpetual encounter with the ephemeral. While many of the actions and music I am writing about are improvisatory, my documenting and analysis of them is not. Much like the structured work that goes into the recording and producing of a recorded improvisation, work that occurs in the time and space between the musician and listener, my documenting includes mixing, editing, and transfer. In the same way microphones exhibit biases for certain frequencies and producers leave their fingerprints on the records they help to make, my

documentation of Catalytic Sound is necessarily shaped by my experiences with the collective, identity and personal beliefs.

Interventions and Contributions

Related to the musical context of Catalytic Sound, this thesis enters into conversation with a specific history and scholarly discourse surrounding creative improvised music. Catalytic Sound is part of a long history of efforts by creative improvising musicians to organize themselves in collective and cooperative ways. This history includes African American led collectives like the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), Union of God's Musicians and Artists Ascension, or Underground Musicians Association (UGMAA/UGMA), and the Jazz Composer's Guild and European collective of improvisors like the Dutch Instant Composer's Pool (ICP) and the London Musicians Collective. George Lewis's history of the AACM, *A Power Stronger Than Itself,* provides a model for a "close reading of a particular, highly diversified, and widely influential musical network/movement, rather than an overview of a received genre, or of the life and work of an individual."[3] I draw on this model in my efforts to describe and draw meaning out of the activities of Catalytic Sound over the last ten years.

Detailing the history of creative and experimental improvised music is beyond the scope of this project and has already been covered elsewhere. A large part of this

[3] George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), xv.

history of creative improvised music has to do with the collectives these musicians have formed. Ben Piekut's work on New York experimentalism in the 1960s includes an in-depth exploration of the short-lived Jazz Composers Guild led by Bill Dixon.[4] Steven L. Isoardi's book *The Dark Tree: Jazz and the Community Arts in Los Angeles* is an oral history of the Union of God's Musicians and Artists Ascension, or Underground Musicians Association (UGMAA/UGMA) led, in part, by Horace Tapscott.[5] Tamar Barzel has explored radical Jewish music and the downtown New York scene surrounding improvisor and composer John Zorn in her book *New York Noise*.[6] Ajay Heble and Daniel Fischlin have each written and co-edited a number of publications, books and collections that concern creative improvisation and community formation.[7] Floris Schuiling has written about participatory art practice

[4] See Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise - The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits* (University of California Press, 2011); Benjamin Piekut, "Indeterminacy, Free Improvisation, and the Mixed Avant-Garde:. Experimental Music in London, 1965–1975," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 67, no. 3 (2014): 771–826, https://doi.org/10.1525/jams.2014.67.3.771; Benjamin D. Piekut, "Testing, Testing…: New York Experimentalism 1964," *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses* (Ph.D., Ann Arbor, Columbia University, 2008), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses A&I (304620659), https://search.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/testing-new-york-experimentalism-1964/docview/304620659/se-2?accountid=14523.

[5] See Steven Louis Isoardi, *The Dark Tree : Jazz and the Community Arts in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

[6] See Tamar Barzel, *New York Noise : Radical Jewish Music and the Downtown Scene*, Ethnomusicology Multimedia (Bloomington ; Indiana University Press, 2015).

[7] See Daniel Fischlin, *Rebel Musics : Human Rights, Resistant Sounds, and the Politics of Music Making*, Human Rights, Resistant Sounds, and the Politics of Music Making (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 2003); Daniel. Fischlin and Ajay Heble, *The Other Side of Nowhere : Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*, First edition., Music Culture (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2004); Mark Laver, Ajay Heble, and Tina Piper, "Ethics and the Improvising Business," *Critical Studies in Improvisation - Etudes Critiques En Improvisation* 9, no. 1 (2013): np, https://doi.org/10.21083/csieci.v9i1.2946; Ajay Heble, *Landing on the Wrong Note : Jazz, Dissonance, and Critical Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2000). Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz, *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Cocreation* (Duke University Press, 2013), https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822378358.

and relational aesthetics in the Amsterdam-based Instant Composers Pool.[8] George Lipsitz has written extensively on the politics of improvised music and a variety of specific musician networks including St. Louis's Black Artists Group (BAG).[9] David Borgo has applied a number of theoretical lenses including Actor-Network Theory, cultural theory and cybernetics to his various published studies of improvised music.[10] Other recent studies of this music and collective formations have appeared in the Web-based journal *Critical Studies in Improvisation,* the *Black Music Research Journal,* and *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies.* Many of these studies are significant for the ways they not only document histories of the musician collectives but also understand the organizing efforts of musicians as essential to the continued existence of creative improvised music in the United States and Europe. They speak to the possibility of community organizing around experimental art practice as a potent force for combating the alienating effects of capitalism.

In addition to the above writing, Vandermark has described a "do it yourself, together" ethos as central to Catalytic Sound. The backgrounds of many of the involved musicians have distinct relationships to DIY aesthetics and approaches of the American underground rock movement of the 1980s and 1990s. Evidence of this

[8] See F.J. Schuiling, "The Instant Composers Pool: Music Notation and the Mediation of Improvising Agency," Cadernos de Arte e Antropología/Journal of Art and Anthropology 5, no. 1 (2016): 39.
[9] See George Lipsitz, "Like a Weed in a Vacant Lot:," in *Decomposition*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case, Philip Brett, and Susan Leigh Foster, Post-Disciplinary Performance (Indiana University Press, 2000), 50–61, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2005s5j.7.
[10] See David Borgo, "Negotiating Freedom: Values and Practices in Contemporary Improvised Music," *Black Music Research Journal* 22, no. 2 (2002): 165–88, https://doi.org/10.2307/1519955; David Borgo, "The Play of Meaning and the Meaning of Play in Jazz," 2004; David Borgo, "Free Jazz in the Classroom: An Ecological Approach to Music Education," *Jazz Perspectives* 1, no. 1 (2007): 61–88, https://doi.org/10.1080/17494060601061030; David. Borgo, *Sync or Swarm : Improvising Music in a Complex Age* (New York: Continuum, 2005).

influence is present not only in Vandermark's personal history of playing improvised music in rock venues and with rock musicians in Chicago, but also the involvement of Terrie Hessels and Andy Moor, two members of the band, The Ex and Ex Records in the collective. While writing on these topics is much broader and multidisciplinary than the more condensed field of creative improvisation studies I have described above, I also engage with a variety of scholars who have written on the collective politics of the 1980s punk rock movement. These include Dawson Barrett, Michael Azzerad, Greil Marcus, Karl Seibengartner, Kevin Dunn, Alan O'Connor and P Guerra.[11] These writings on the underground rock DIY document both economic ideals like the Minutemen's *econojam* concept and the political meanings of collectivity in the American rock context. The vast majority of these writings on collectivity in both punk DIY and creative improvised music historical settings employ a blend of ethnographic and historical methodologies and show a clear connection between collective economics, creative sustainability and political organizing. Inspired by the above work, I am interested in documenting the history of

[11] See Michael Azerrad, *Our Band Could Be Your Life : Scenes from the American Indie Underground, 1981-1991*, First edition. (Boston: Little, Brown, n.d.); Dawson Barrett, "DIY Democracy: The Direct Action Politics of U.S. Punk Collectives," *American Studies* 52, no. 2 (2013): 23–42; Karl Siebengartner, "Contradictory Self-Definition and Organisation:," in *Ripped, Torn and Cut*, ed. The Subcultures Network, Pop, Politics and Punk Fanzines from 1976 (Manchester University Press, 2018), 281–94, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv18b5q46.24; Kevin Dunn, "'If It Ain't Cheap, It Ain't Punk': Walter Benjamin's Progressive Cultural Production and DIY Punk Record Labels," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24, no. 2 (2012): 217–37, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-1598.2012.01326.x; Alan. O'Connor, *Punk Record Labels and the Struggle for Autonomy : The Emergence of DIY.*, Critical Media Studies (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008); P Guerra, "Raw Power: Punk, DIY and Underground Cultures as Spaces of Resistance in Contemporary Portugal," *Cultural Sociology* 12, no. 2 (2018): 241–59, https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975518770353; Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces : A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989).

Catalytic Sound. Where this thesis differs from other writings on musician collectives is its historical position as a contemporary project in the digital age. Where studies of specific musician collectives like Lewis's, Piekut's, Isoardi's and Barzel's cover the general time period of 1960-2000, Catalytic Sound started ten years ago and has only really achieved its current form within the last three years. Thus, where many of the writings above, with the exception of those on the AACM, deal with collectives that are no longer operative, I am writing about an organization that is still in existence and in a dynamic state. I am also writing about a collective in the digital age. This context means the ways Catalytic Sound engages with music production, reception, communication and community are essentially different than those of the twentieth-century collectives mentioned above. Where the AACM, UGMAA, ICP and others represented specific geographically bound collectives of improvisors, Catalytic Sound exists primarily in digital space and represents a selection of an international creative improvised music scene. Because of this, a variety of my methodologies and ethnographic approaches emphasize the digital in a way the writings mentioned above do not.

Overview of Chapters

I have structured this thesis into six short chapters. Each chapter centers on one project or moment in the ten-year history of Catalytic Sound and seeks to make a focused descriptive and/or interpretive claim around and through this moment. In Chapter One, I describe the historical and aesthetic context of Catalytic Sound's

founding and initial years. I identify certain characteristics of the broad range of music Catalytic Sound represents and make sense of the cooperative's early development in relation to this musical style. I also situate the cooperative in the economic struggles of the five musicians involved in 2011 and investigate the initial form of Catalytic Sound as an online record store. These early days of the collective give context for what Catalytic Sound would become and show how the cooperative had very different goals and structures of organization in its beginning. In Chapter Two, I describe the first major expansion of the musician collective. Through an analysis of networks of musicians in the collective, I make the claim that the six musicians who joined the Catalytic Sound collective in 2017 radically altered the meaning and potential for the collective. I investigate how this expansion created a kind of existential question that resulted in the mission statement I helped Ken Vandermark write in 2018. I use the statement and the writing process surrounding it to show the incongruity between the ideas expressed in the statement and the actual processes and politics of Catalytic Sound at that time. In doing so, I investigate the role of words in making meaning and initiating change in the cooperative.

In Chapter Three, I describe the membership service started in October 2018 as a partial manifestation of ideas Vandermark and I articulated in the mission statement. I use the membership service to discuss the concept of sustainability as understood and acted out by the cooperative. In doing this, I explore the ways sustainability in terms of Catalytic Sound relates to a kind of capitalist failure. I also draw connections between Catalytic Sound and the New Music Distribution Service

Carla Bley and Mike Mantler created in the 1970s. Lastly, I investigate how the membership program was another moment that expanded the network of Catalytic Sound to include patrons from all over the world. In doing so, I articulate the significance of the transition from customer to patron and the implications of this patronage to the political economic structure of the cooperative. In Chapter Four, I chronicle how the Covid-19 pandemic and a compilation to benefit social justice initiatives enacted radical change in the ways the collective of musicians thought about and interfaced with Catalytic Sound. I describe how expansions of the musician collective in 2018 and 2020 again altered the meaning and potential of Catalytic Sound through visualizing and analyzing the musician network model of Catalytic Sound. Additionally, I draw an analogy of Catalytic Sound's work as a collective to activism and political organizing to show how building its cooperative was--and is--political work.

In Chapter Five, I discuss the 2020 Catalytic Sound Festival as a public manifestation of the organization's ideals. I show how the unexpected circumstances caused by COVID-19 led to an online event that better represented the cooperative aspirations of Catalytic Sound than an in-person festival might have. Using the historical parallel of the Jazz Composers Guild's 1964 *October Revolution in Jazz* I investigate the ways both festivals were important spaces for conversation about the specific issues each collective addressed. In addition, I show how the festival opened an important channel of communication with the public that elevated those who support the cooperative from patron to participant and reconstituted the meaning of

cooperative. Lastly, in Chapter Six, I describe the Catalytic Soundstream, a streaming service for the musicians of the collective. I explore how the Catalytic Soundstream differs from dominant music streaming platforms, specifically Spotify. I show how these differences address economic and aesthetic aspects of Spotify that inhibit Catalytic Sound artists from having success on the platform. In doing so, I aim to show how the structure and design of the Soundstream reflects the broader mission of Catalytic Sound and, as a case study, illustrates the *Do It Yourself, together* ethos Vandermark first named in 2018. Throughout all of these chapters, I demonstrate Catalytic Sound as a constantly changing and fluid entity. In doing so, I investigate why and how Catalytic Sound has aspired to be *more than a record store* in the last five years, and the significance of that pursuit within the broader current and historical landscape.

Chapter 1: Beginnings

In this chapter I describe the historical and aesthetic context for Catalytic Sound. I begin by situating the initial impetus for the Catalytic Sound project as driven by a sense of economic urgency on the part of Ken Vandermark and other improvising musicians. I then discuss the style of music represented by Catalytic Sound and how the particularities of both performance and recordings shaped the early formations of the project as a cooperative record store. In the second half of this chapter, I investigate the early days of Catalytic Sound to establish a point of departure for the rest of this thesis. As the title of this thesis suggests, Catalytic Sound has become much more than a record store in the ten years since it first began in 2011. In order to convey the significance of that transformation, I begin with a description of Catalytic Sound in its most simple, early state.

In April 2018, improvising saxophonist Ken Vandermark (b. 1964) wrote an essay titled "Catalytic Sound, DIY and the Challenge of 21st Century Sustainability." In it, he described the increasing economic pressures he and other creative improvising musicians confront in the era of music streaming. As the essay reached its apex, he wrote:

> For musicians to continue to create new work, they are going to have to have the time and resources to do so- whether that music is improvised and experimental, or if it's populist in nature. If every musician's time is taken up with one or more day jobs to pay their bills, there is going to be less and less opportunity and energy to devote to creating music- whatever kind.[1]

[1] Ken Vandermark, "Catalytic Sound, DIY and the Challenges of 21st Century Sustainability," *Catalytic Quarterly*, April 2018, https://catalyticsound.com/quarterly/1/index.html.

Other early members of Catalytic Sound communicated similar challenges of being a working musician. Saxophonist Dave Rempis described a "constant grind" that rarely yields long-term creative and financial sustainability.[2] A third musician, Ben Hall, explained the dilemma to me as, "the more successful you are in your job, the less successful you can be on the road as a musician. So, the job has to somehow, you know, take second banana to the music, but if you do that, then you're jeopardizing your job…that's a difficult trade-off to negotiate."[3]

These struggles and trade-offs are the environment in which Catalytic Sound developed, grew and changed. The three musicians quoted above, and many of the other musicians I talked to in the course of my research, described similar tradeoffs as they constantly negotiated their efforts to produce music in twenty-first century United States and Europe. Though the challenge of being an artist in a profit-driven economy is common, there are specific challenges faced by creative improvising musicians, given that their musical form is neither popular in a market sense, nor a traditionally patronized or institutionally supported arts music. These struggles are part of the history of most musician collectives in the United States and Europe. As AACM member Lester Bowie said in an interview about the early days of the Art Ensemble of Chicago: "the thing we were trying to figure out was how we were going to survive playing this music which was so different from anything else."[4] In his book, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz,* historian Eric Porter centers the question and

[2] Dave Rempis, interview with the author, November 3, 2020.
[3] Ben Hall, interview with the author, February 26, 2021.
[4] Lincoln T. Beauchamp Jr., ed., *Art Ensemble of Chicago: Great Black Music; Ancient to the Future* (Chicago: Art Ensemble of Chicago, 1998), 45.

difficulty of "making a living," similarly within the cultural discourses of avant-garde African-American musicians who developed the creative improvised music idiom in the 1960s. While the context and struggles of the specific musicians of the Catalytic Sound collective is very different, a struggle to balance and integrate musical and financial work remains.

Detailing the history of creative and experimental improvised music is beyond the scope of this project and has already been covered elsewhere. What makes writing the history of the music of Catalytic Sound interesting and difficult is its heterogeneous make up. While a collective suggests unity, the collection of thirty musicians that make up Catalytic Sound do not represent a unified genre. In similar fashion to the ways Derek Bailey has described free improvised music, when attempting to define the music of Catalytic Sound "diversity is its most consistent characteristic." While there are musicians, like Ken Vandermark, who draw artistically from a clear lineage to creative improvised music, free jazz, and bebop, there are others like Terrie Hessels and Andy Moor, whose musical roots lie more in punk rock and hardcore, and others still, like Ikue Mori, who is a computer musician that developed artistically in the New York No Wave scene. Given this breadth of style and approach, it is interesting to note the ways Catalytic Sound as a creative music cooperative is a marker of the current diversity of the creative music landscape. Catalytic Sound is a marker of the ways *creative music* has grown from its historical usage by the AACM to include a diverse range of musical approaches and musicians.

Regardless of these historical and stylistic differences, there are certain meta-musical characteristics which cohere the musical approaches of those in the collective. The most prominent shared musical approach between the thirty musicians involved is improvisation. Under the broad umbrella of creative improvised music, improvisational practice manifests as a mix of both directed and free approaches. While there are certainly musicians in the collective who identify most strongly as either performers or composers, the lines are often blurry between the two. Those who do identify as composers do not necessarily do so in a European art music sense of composing music for other ensembles. Instead, those whose improvisational practice includes notation, write music solely for ensembles they are a part of and, accordingly, for specific individuals. As the improviser Leo Smith explains in his book *Notes (8 Pieces) Source a New World Music: Creative Music,* "although an improviser may create and notate certain types of symbols and forms in which to retain creative music this process is not composition, for any elements of improvisation that are notated are but mere forms to be exploited by creative improvisors."[5] This approach to composition connects to the history of African American experimentalism of which Leo Smith is a part of, though it also finds commonalities with composition in the rock context. Many of the musicians perform and record in a variety of contexts and orientations. This elasticity creates diverse

[5] Wadada Leo Smith, *Notes (8 Pieces) Source a New World Music: Creative Music* (Chicago, IL: Corbett vs. Dempsey, 2015).

catalogs containing solo and group recordings with both longstanding and one-off formations.

Philosophically, the music represented by Catalytic Sound emphasizes individuality in both sound and representation. Much has been written about the political implications of the ways individuals situate themselves in collective musical formation by both scholars and practitioners.[6] These critical discourses surrounding the music emphasize individual voices within group contexts and map artistic careers by the development of an individual *sound* in conjunction with musical associations. Musicians appear and are identified in performance and on releases with their birth names and group names are often abbreviations or collections of the musicians' surnames. In these ways, the creative improvised music scene is similar to the ways jazz music has traditionally been organized around individual musicians' sounds along with the collective musical action that develops from their interactions. George Lewis describes this unique relationship between individual and collective in the *Afrological* tradition of improvisation in his essay, "Improvised Music After 1950:"

> Working as an improviser in the field of improvised music emphasizes not only form and technique but individual life choices as well as cultural, ethnic, and personal location. In performances of improvised music, the possibility of internalizing alternative value systems is implicit from the start. The focus of musical discourse suddenly shifts from the individual, autonomous creator to the collective – the individual as a part of global humanity. [7]

[6] See George E. Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives," *Black Music Research Journal* 22, no. 1 (2002). David Borgo, "Negotiating Freedom: Values and Practices in Contemporary Improvised Music," *Black Music Research Journal* 22, no. 2 (2002): 165–88, https://doi.org/10.2307/1519955; Leo Smith, *Notes (8 Pieces) Source a New World Music*; Derek Bailey, *Improvisation : Its Nature and Practice in Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993).
[7] Lewis, "Improvisation Since 1950," 110.

In the remainder of the essay, Lewis illustrates how this mode of music making and relationship between the individual and collective rises out of an *Afrological* tradition that opposes an aesthetically similar tradition in European art music of *indeterminacy* that seeks to erase or obscure the unique, individual performer. In this thesis, I argue that Catalytic Sound is similarly dedicated, both musically and organizationally, to the kind of individual-collective relationship Lewis outlines above.

A New Kind of Record Store

Part of the way I understand and contextualize the relationship between the individual and the collective in the context of Catalytic Sound is through Actor Network Theory.[8] Situating Catalytic Sound as a network allows me to think about the ways the individual and, at times, autonomous contributions of the musicians construct a collective whole. This collective whole, much like the collective creations of improvised musicians is never fixed but is instead in a constant state of reassembly carried out by the involved actors in response to their needs and changing situations. With this in mind, we can examine how the mission of Catalytic Sound changed from its original impetus to be an online record store with its original four members to becoming something more than a record store as it gained more members. The original impetus for 'Catalytic-Sound,' as it was called in 2011, was for the original

[8] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Clarendon Lectures in Management Studies (Oxford ; Oxford University Press, 2005).

musicians to address demand for records while performing live music on the road. As Ken Vandermark elaborates:

> [being] on the road a lot; releasing lots of records; people asking for a record at shows that came out three years ago and you couldn't fit in your suitcase; working with smaller labels with limited distribution...everybody was really working on small scale, but in highly artistically motivated, musician directed kinds of cooperation. And it started by asking the question, okay, why don't we create an online record store that we can direct fans toward to get our music?[9]

In 2011, the *we* Vandermark refers to above included himself, Swedish, Austria-based saxophonist Mats Gustafsson (b. 1964), German reedist Peter Brötzmann (b. 1941), and Norwegian drummer, Paal Nilssen-Love (b. 1974). Three years later, in 2014, these musicians would invite New York-based saxophonist and trumpet player, Joe McPhee (b. 1939) to join the collective. From the beginning, Vandermark took on a leadership role in the project because as he told me, he was "tired of complaining about it."[10] Having known and worked with Vandermark now for some time, I understand the ways he became the pseudo-leader of the collective as not just arising from frustration, but also a distinctly solution and community-oriented way of thinking that runs throughout all of his work. The manager who preceded me, Steve Marquette (also a musician collaborator with Vandermark in the band Marker), confirmed this to me when he said:

> Inherent in [Vandermark's] musical constructions, and all these other aspects of his work is this community element…and I think this is

[9] Ken Vandermark, interview with the author, July 22, 2020.
[10] Ibid.

> connected directly to the fact that he got the MacArthur when he was super young. Like, the responsibility of 'what are you going to do with this privilege that you were given?' And he pretty much answered that by funneling resources back into the community of musicians in Chicago and the international scene. So, I think that's always been a through line to his work, his natural interests in these kind of bigger picture issues and questions. Coupled with like, a real sense of duty, to the music, the community, the history, to really do something with that stuff.[11]

Vandermark's importance to the project is difficult to overstate. Marquette sums up various parts of Vandermark's personal history and approach well and I continually add to this description throughout this thesis.

As Vandermark described it above, Catalytic Sound intervened into the means of distribution for the musical output of the four musicians involved. While it might seem somewhat obvious now, it is clear from talking to Vandermark that, in an era before the current ease of small-scale e-commerce for musicians powered by sites like Bandcamp, the idea of pooling resources in a central online location was somewhat of a revelation. The broad ecology of small scale labels that make up the creative improvised music scene, while crucial to the music making process, contribute to these issues of decentralization and often only have the resources to pay musicians in the form of artist copies.[12] These artist copies, if unsold on the initial tour promoting the record, would pile up in the basements of Vandermark, Nilssen-Love, Brötzmann, and Gustafsson, not because there was no demand for them, but simply because as

[11] Steve Marquette, interview with the author, April 8, 2021.
[12] Ken Vandermark, Sam Clapp, Andrew Clinkman, conversation with the author, October 10, 2020.

Vandermark alludes to, you simply cannot haul your fifty CD back catalog on tour with you.

In the beginning, Catalytic Sound intervened into the logics and means of distribution for the back catalogs of the five involved artists as a relatively simple online record store. Accessing an archived version of the website from 2014 using the Internet Archive's Way Back Machine, one sees a fairly simple online store with the five involved musicians listed at the top. Underneath the logo at the top of the site, a tagline reads, "ONE SITE FIVE MUSICIANS HUNDREDS OF CDs/LPs/DOWNLOADS."[13] (See Figure 1.1)

[13] "Catalytic Sound Website ca. 2011," n.d., https://web.archive.org/web/20110724043428/http://www.catalytic-sound.com/home.php.

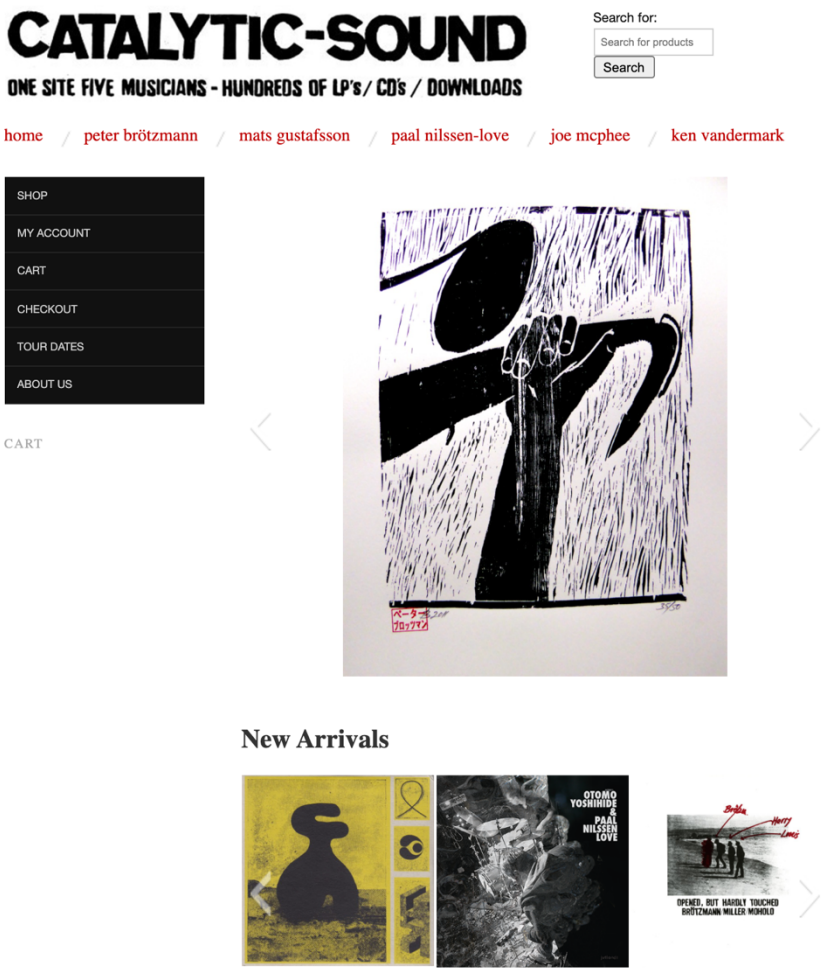

Figure 1.1: Catalytic Sound website from 2014

As seen in the screen capture above, the site structured the catalogs of each musician through separate pages linked on the home screen. The only additional information the site hosted, as seen in the menu bar to the left, was tour dates for each musician. Inspecting the page source, the underlying HTML of the website, I can ascertain that the site is built on Wordpress, a popular content management system and the store operates on an early version of WooCommerce, a popular commerce plugin for Wordpress. This detail of the website's structure is important because it explains

catalyticsound.com's starting point of existence as a digital entity that served a singular purpose : to distribute the music of the collective through an online store. To provide some foreshadowing about where Catalytic Sound and this thesis goes, we can compare it to the current site (Figure 1.2).

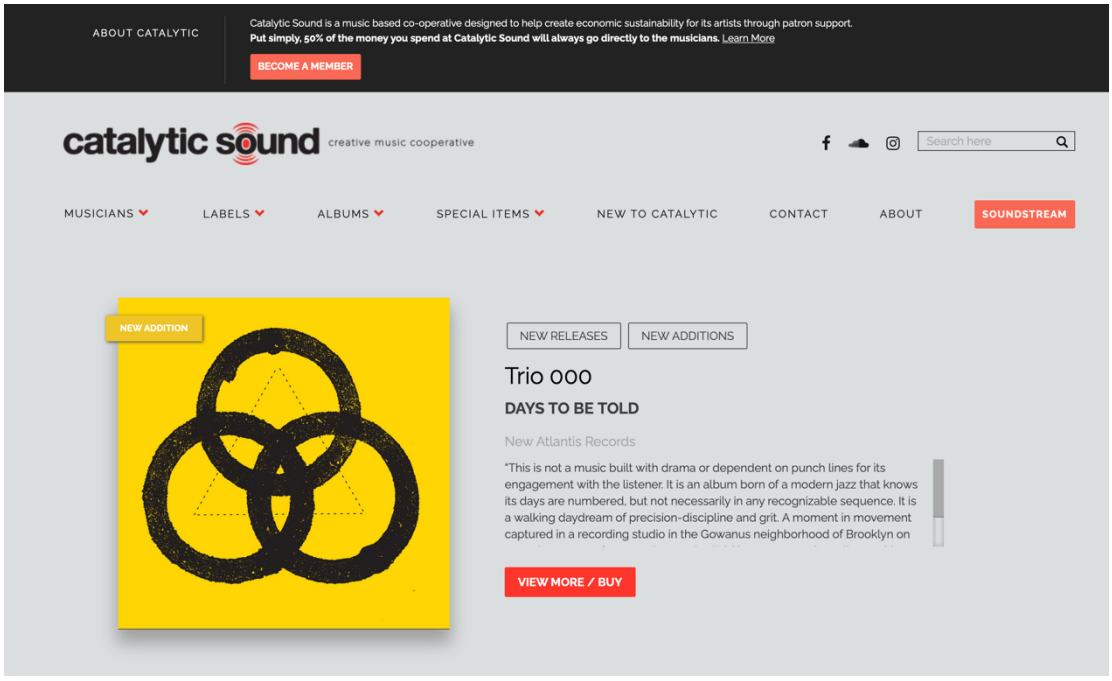

Figure 1.2: Catalytic Sound website in 2021.

This website, which is a derivation of what Joel Villafañe built from the ground up in 2017, provided an elastic design concept for the expanding mission and meaning of Catalytic Sound. While it contains the basic store design of the original, it also directs users to a membership service in the top-bar, the "stream" to the right and connects to the social media network of Catalytic Sound next to the search bar. These are all projects and important facets of Catalytic Sound I discuss in subsequent chapters of this thesis and signify a shift from Catalytic Sound as a singular digital entity in the form of a webstore to an ecosystem of various platforms and websites.

Catalytic Sound as a Cooperative

Since the beginning, Catalytic Sound has been called a cooperative thought the term was admittedly aspirational. By Vandermark's assessment, "calling [the project] a co-op from the beginning in a sense is a misnomer because Paal, Peter, Joe and Mats were involved, but they were mostly involved in just getting the materials to Chicago. Me and Steve Marquette, who was the manager at the time, were doing all of the work to disseminate them."[14] Thus, in the beginning, the ownership of Catalytic Sound was not distributed across either workers or consumers as one would expect from a cooperative. When I asked Vandermark why they used this terminology from the beginning even if it was in some ways inaccurate, he replied "I think because that was what I hoped it would be."[15] While Vandermark acknowledges that Catalytic Sound was different from what one would traditionally associate with a workers cooperative in its beginnings and gestures towards an imagined future for the project as a more traditional cooperative, the fact still remains that Catalytic Sound is and has always been called a cooperative.

In the early stages of my fieldwork, this naming was something I wrestled with. When I had worked at Catalytic Sound, I believed wholeheartedly in the idea that Catalytic Sound was a cooperative, but as I learned more about cooperative structures and watched as Catalytic Sound developed further, I became confused by the

[14] Ken Vandermark, interview with the author, October 10, 2020.
[15] Ibid.

slipperiness of the word. As trumpeter and later musician member Nate Wooley notes, "cooperative is one of those great terms that you can use when you need to leave something wide open...it gives you latitude to move."[16] Having the latitude to move, as Wooley calls it, has been important to the continued evolution of Catalytic Sound. In the beginning, Catalytic Sound functioned as a worker's cooperative economically, but governed itself hierarchically: while the collective of musicians shared the profits equally, Vandermark and Marquette, acting as managers, made most of the decisions without input from the other musicians (though input was sought). This organization of power had less to do with maintaining control on the part of Vandermark and more about a general lack of institutional protocol (documented bylaws) and a seemingly absent interest for shared governance on the part of other musicians in the collective. In the beginning and through my time as manager, regardless of wanting to include the other musicians in decisions, it was difficult to actually get feedback from them. Many of the musicians I have talked with about this express their trust in Vandermark as a main reason for joining the cooperative and deferring leadership to him. However, Vandermark, as evidenced in the quote above, has never viewed this concentration of power as ideal. Over time, and from unexpected events of change, Catalytic Sound has become much more politically cooperative and has aligned with Vandermark's original vision. While I discuss these shifts in later chapters, I establish here the ways Catalytic Sound, in its beginnings, operated hierarchically with Vandermark and the manager at the top.

[16] Nate Wooley, interview with the author, September 16, 2020.

At the same time, there is another way the elastic term *cooperative* described the activities of the five initial musicians of Catalytic Sound. As Vandermark described (quoted above) the scene at that time, he used the phrase "musician directed kinds of cooperation" to describe the interface between labels, touring, and playing going on.[17] Cooperation in this sense draws a connection between the social modalities of making creative improvised music and the ways Catalytic Sound was organized. Stepping out of Catalytic Sound for a moment to observe the general musical context of the project, it is clear that the style of creative improvised music Catalytic Sound represents is itself a cooperative music practice. Thus in 2014, when McPhee joined the project, Catalytic Sound was something Vandermark described as arising "organically" from the musical activities of and connections between those five musicians.

This connection between musical cooperation and the coordination of Catalytic Sound is not simply an analogy. Rather, it speaks to the underlying social structure of the project at the time. Mapping the musical connections between the first five musicians of the collective reveals a tight web, a cluster of associations without any definite center. This is easy to visualize through a network graph I made of the 2104 collective using D3.js (Figure 1.3):

[17] Ken Vandermark, interview with the author, July 22, 2020

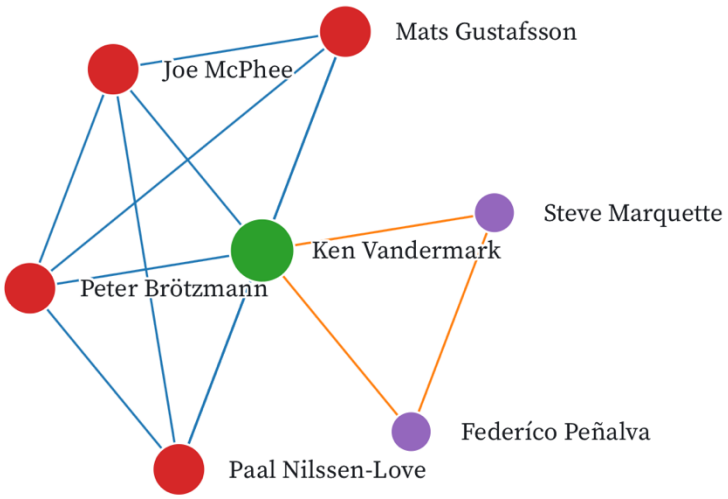

Figure 1.3: Network graph of Catalytic Sound in 2014

In the graphic above, blue lines indicate musical connections, defined as recordings made together. Orange lines indicate staff relationships and the kind of planning committee I outlined in the section above. The colors and size of the nodes reflect the number of connections each musician has. While there has never been an official musical grouping of the quintet of Vandermark, McPhee, Nilssen-Love, Brötzmann, and Gustafsson, one can perhaps think of the social structure of Catalytic Sound from 2011 to 2017 as directly connected to and rising out of their various musical relationships. As the figure above shows, looking solely at musical relationships, there is no real center to the collective in 2014 aside from Vandermark's association

with both the musicians and staff. Each musician is connected to everyone else in the collective. This understanding of the social dynamics at play also helps to explain the kind of cooperation Vandermark often references when he talks about this period. Additionally, and this data remains outside of the network graph, the five musicians involved in 2014 were operating in very similar contexts. This context was one of international recognition and establishment within the field of creative improvised music: they each had relationships and have released music with many labels, or were running their own successful imprint, and were earning their livings solely through playing music. Thus, both musically and contextually, the similarities between this initial group of musicians explains the singular mission of Catalytic Sound at the time to sell records.

Returning to an idea of economic cooperativity, the payout structure Catalytic Sound has modeled since the beginning has been one that shares and distributes profits among those involved relatively evenly. While there are historical precedents for this kind of profit-sharing, there is a clear connection between the ways Vandermark thinks about the economics of music making and those of Catalytic Sound. Vandermark has "always subscribed to the idea that everyone gets paid the same once the expenses for making the music have been paid for."[18] Speaking specifically about one of his actual groups, the Vandermark 5, he says "even though it was 'my band,' my name is on it, I always felt I couldn't do anything with that band without those particular people. They are devoting a lot of time and energy to work

[18] Ken Vandermark, interview with the author, July 22, 2020.

with my name on the front of it so they should get paid the same. The idea of a leader's fee was always totally abhorrent to me."[19] This model in the context of Catalytic Sound has manifested through the basic principle of paying out 50% (or greater) of all profits generated by the business to the artists. In the initial formation of Catalytic Sound as primarily a record store, payouts varied with how many records a given musician sold. Thus, not everyone was paid the same amount each quarter; each musician was paid an equal portion of their relative sales. This included and has continued to include Vandermark, who in addition to receiving the same cut as other musicians, has also invested labor and, at times, money into the project to sustain it.[20] The 50% cut that Catalytic Sound retained pays for the upkeep of the site and for the labor of the manager who in addition to organizing various aspects of the business has also historically handled shipping all of the orders from Chicago. In my experience as manager, this 50% often provided the bare minimum of sustenance for the project to continue moving forward and for everyone to receive their pay. When it was not enough, Vandermark would forfeit a portion of his quarterly profits to make sure everyone else was paid. These economics and the centrality of Vandermark to the continued operation of the project is something I continue to discuss throughout this thesis.

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[19] Ibid.

[20] While 50% may still seem like a fairly large margin for Catalytic Sound to take from record sales, in the larger context of record shops and online marketplaces artist profit margins of 50% are unheard of. Based on my experiences selling wholesale records to stores as manager of Catalytic Sound, these stores often buy merchandise directly from the labels at a reduced wholesale price. The labels then pay a small portion of that wholesale price to musicians (if the musician and label have agreed to even receive a cut of these sales beyond their artist copies). In real world terms, this would mean for a CD that sells for fifteen dollars at a record store, an artists might receive three dollars.

In this chapter, I have attempted to describe the context for the creation of Catalytic Sound and the music it represents. In particular, I have tried to connect the distinct musical approach of the musicians of Catalytic Sound to the project's beginnings and its potential for change. Particularly, I investigate the specific relationship between the individual and collective understood within creative improvised music and use this as a justification for understanding Catalytic Sound as a network that constantly and collectively reassembles the cooperative. Additionally, I have described Catalytic Sound in its earliest formations. While the remainder of my thesis focuses on the time period between 2018 and 2021, it is important to remember that for the majority of its existence, Catalytic Sound was, for the most part, a musician-run record store. As I examine the remarkable ways Catalytic Sound has become more than a record store in the past three years, this history becomes critical to understanding the radical ways the project has enacted change and transformation.

Chapter 2: Writing a Mission Statement

In this chapter, I describe the first major expansion of the musician collective. Through continuing to analyze networks of musicians in the collective, I make the claim that the six musicians who joined the Catalytic Sound collective in 2017 radically altered the meaning and potential for the collective. Drawing on Actor Network Theory referred to in the previous chapter, I argue that their mere inclusion as actors initiated a kind of existential question within Catalytic Sound that led directly to writing a mission statement in 2018. Additionally, I use the network to analyze the structure of Catalytic Sound and show how the cooperative moved from a group of musicians that shared many stylistic and economic characteristics without a clear center in 2014 to a diverse group of musicians clustered musically around Vandermark in 2017. In the second half of the chapter, I discuss my first impressions of the cooperative when I was hired as manager in June 2018. In examining my earliest impressions through materials I personally archived, I view myself as another actor entering the Catalytic Sound network. Lastly, I interpret the mission statement Vandermark and I wrote in the first two months of my tenure as manager. I identify incongruities between the aspirational language of the document and the realities of Catalytic Sound at the time. In doing so, I draw on J.L. Austin's theory of speech acts to examine the ways the Catalytic Sound mission statement represented a doing that enacted future activities of the collective.

The context for expanding the collective in 2017 was a financial crisis. Earlier that year, Vandermark and Marquette had to take out a six-thousand-dollar loan to

cover losses around a mistaken wholesale record order. By the Fall of 2017, it was clear that the loan was accruing interest faster than the sales of Vandermark, Nilssen-Love, Gustafsson, Brötzmann, and McPhee could keep up with. Additionally, as Marquette notes, "the only people that were generating sizeable income on a regular basis were Paal Nilssen-Love and [Vandermark]."[1] Marquette continued by specifying that these differences in sales had nothing to do with the demand for the musicians' work: "when Gustafsson, Brötzmann or McPhee would send something, it would fly off the shelves, but they just weren't consistent with keeping our stock up to date."[2] Beyond the issues of getting records to Catalytic Sound, Vandermark and Marquette decided this asymmetry was tied to the fact that he and Nilssen-Love were unique among the other members of the collective for running their own record labels that produced the bulk of their released music. This not only allowed them to sell more copies than whatever they received from labels as artist copies through the site, but also meant they controlled the distribution and could sell more exclusively through Catalytic Sound than someone who works with multiple labels like Mats Gustafsson. Thus, it was clear to Vandermark and Marquette from a business perspective that in order to turn more profit, the organization would need to add more musicians who could more easily get their records to Catalytic Sound. Because Vandermark and Nilssen-Love both managed their own record labels, and they were bringing in the most revenue for the project, the management duo of Vandermark and

[1] Steve Marquette, interview with the author, April 8, 2021.
[2] Ibid.

Marquette focused on trying to add musicians who similarly controlled their distribution.

It is helpful to understand the evolving significance of Catalytic Sound in part through the associations and connections of the individual musicians that have expanded the collective over its ten-year history. The network graph below (Figure 2.2) shows a radically expanded group of actors and associations within Catalytic Sound as compared to the cooperative in 2014 (Figure 2.1):

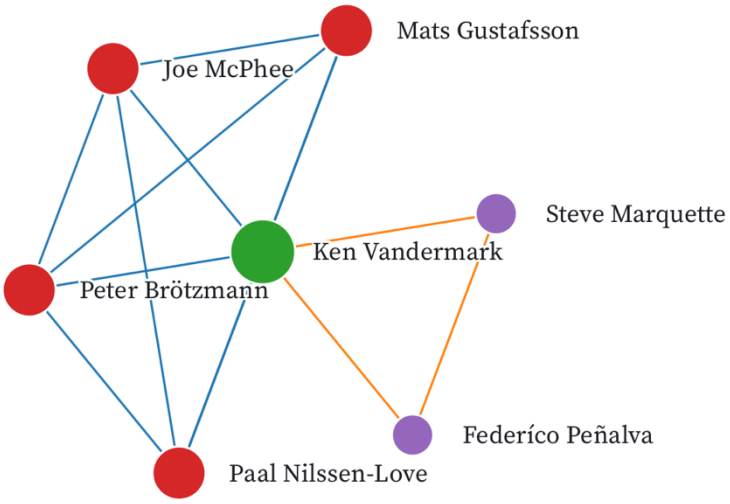

Figure 2.1: Network graph of Catalytic Sound in 2014

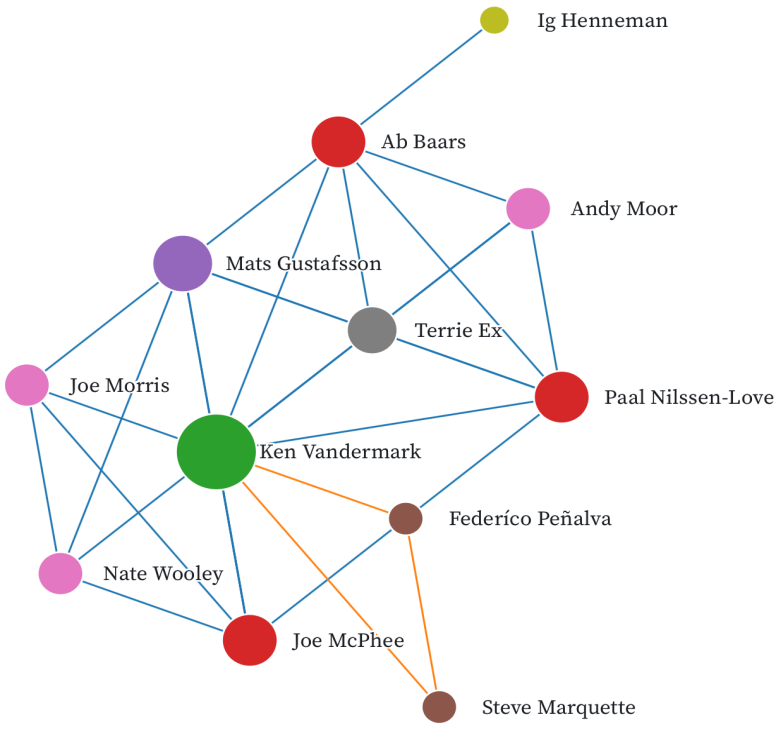

Figure 2.2: Network graph of Catalytic Sound in 2017

Looking at this visualization, it is clear that Vandermark has the most musical connections and has therefore drifted to the center of the network. Where the network of associations from 2014 (Figure 2.1) was evenly distributed, the new network in 2017 more clearly centers Vandermark as the *leader* of the group. This makes sense given the ways Vandermark and Marquette made the decision to expand and decided who to ask fairly independently from the rest of the group. Also notable in the graphic above is the lack of Peter Brötzmann. As I have gathered from my interviews,

Brötzmann's decision to leave was a marker of dissent within the cooperative toward Vandermark's choice to invite others onboard. It is important to note this resistance to the early leadership of Vandermark, however it is clear Brötzmann's departure came on the heels of the dissolution of the Brötzmann Tentet and also had to do with degrading interpersonal relationships of the time.

Moving from the general to the particular musicians who joined in 2017, I will elaborate upon and add context to the associational lines above. Ab Baars (b. 1955) and Ig Henneman (b. 1945) are Dutch musicians based in Amsterdam. They are both improvisors, though Henneman is also known as a composer in the more classical sense of the word. The two have recorded many records together and operate the record label and organization WIG where they release the majority of their music. Baars has played in varying capacities with Vandermark, Gustafsson, Nilssen-Love, Moor and Ex, making him one of the better-connected members of the group. Henneman on the other hand only has an association, based on recording history, with Baars. Remaining in the Netherlands, two other Dutch musicians, guitarists Andy Moor (b. 1962) and Terrie Ex (ca. 1965) represented a new musical direction in the collective toward punk rock through their associations with the band The Ex. In addition to bringing the Ex's catalog to Catalytic Sound, the farthest afield from the prior homogeneity of improvised music, the two also brought with them their respective record labels Unsounds and Terp Records. Unsounds presents experimental improvised music and New Music while Terp releases various forms of improvised music from the African continent. These two labels are different from the

others included in the collective as they are not simply imprints for Moor and Ex's respective work, thus they brought in yet another layer of musicians through their labels. The clearest musical connection of these two musicians to the rest of the collective is through the band Lean Left that features Moor and Ex on guitars with Nilssen-Love playing drums and Vandermark playing saxophone. In addition, Vandermark has a personal history with The Ex having appeared on two of their records from the 2000s. New York City-based trumpeter Nate Wooley (b. 1974) is from the same generation as Nilssen-Love, they were the two youngest musicians when Wooley was added in 2017. His longest lasting association is with Vandermark; the two have multiple duo records and working bands together. In addition to his label Pleasure of the Text, Wooley is also the editor-in-chief of the Sound American music publication and the curator of the Database of Recorded American music. Lastly, Joe Morris (b. 1955) is a New England based guitarist of the generation of Gustafsson. Morris runs the Glacial Erratic record label and stylistically draws from the history of free jazz and creative improvised music I have mentioned above. In addition to his playing Morris is also a well-known concert presenter and has been on faculty at the New England Conservatory since 2000.

These descriptions of biographical information and associations provide essential information for understanding the ways Catalytic Sound would change in the four years from 2017 to 2021. Inspired by Bruno Latour's ideas of the social as an "assemblage" of actors and associations that actively and passively construct networks of meaning, I focus on the actors themselves in an effort to know what "the

collective existence has become in their hands."[3] When speaking to this group of musicians directly it is clear that many of them still conceive of Catalytic Sound as a musician-owned record store. Joe Morris described it as:

> a clearing house for a specific community of musicians...There is an implicit understanding in our shared sense of purpose. It's there in each of us, in all of our work alone and together and it is always driven and supported by a lot of self-directed production and organization. The collective makes all of that stronger.[4]

Reedist Ab Baars described the project as similar to collective distribution efforts going on in Amsterdam in the early 1990s: "a center from where the music is distributed and that would also be in touch with the latest developments in music distribution."[5] In considering these responses, my first inclination was to assume that these six musicians could not have possibly changed the direction of Catalytic Sound given the ways they maintained an ideological status quo from the first six years of Catalytic Sound. However, Nate Wooley problematized this idea when he told me that in 2017 "[he] was a little unsure of what Catalytic was at that point because Catalytic Sound was a little unsure."[6] This comment led me to think more about Catalytic Sound as an organizational entity existing as something autonomous from the particular ideologies of the musicians, even Ken Vandermark. It is a social network in a perpetual dynamic state of what Latour calls the "not yet," continually reassembled by its actors.[7] Where I find Latour's Actor-Network Theory especially

[3] Latour, *Reassembling the Social,* 12.
[4] Joe Morris, email correspondence with the author, September 10, 2020.
[5] Ab Baars, interview with the author, February 25, 2021.
[6] Nate Wooley, interview with the author, September 16, 2020.
[7] Latour, *Reassembling the Social,* 12.

useful in describing Catalytic Sound in 2017 is the way it illuminates how actors shape the social collective through both intentional and unintentional ways.

This framework allows for an understanding of Catalytic Sound that does not simply rely on what the musicians of Catalytic Sound say but takes into account who they are and asks how their inclusion shapes the collective. While Baars and Morris are from the same general generation and status level as internationally recognized musicians as the five original members, Wooley is slightly younger and interfaced with the project in a different way than the original five musicians of the collective. Specifically, his Pleasure of the Text label was less connected to the distribution networks of improvised music as the initial five members. Ex and Moor, by bringing the Ex catalog and Terp records to the cooperative, questioned the stylistic glue of the group and began a process of decoupling from the specific interconnected scene of the initial musicians. Henneman, the least connected of the musicians, suddenly had a point of connection to a group of musicians she was otherwise on the periphery of. Given his positionality, it is perhaps no surprise that Wooley articulated a very different vision of Catalytic Sound in 2020 than Baars and Morris:

> I see it existing at a midway point between two things that musicians are used to: a highly organized, but very exclusive situation of selling your music, i.e. being on a record label that takes real control over your work, but is very successful at getting your work out there; and 'loosey goosey' organizations that are built roughly on a slight-misunderstanding of anarchism or mutual aid, outlined on a bar napkin, and then kind of thrown together in which everybody has a really equal say, but nothing gets done because no one's thought about the interface between that kind of idealism and the reality of selling things in the capitalist marketplace.[8]

[8] Nate Wooley, interview with the author, September 16, 2020.

Many of the changes Catalytic Sound would go through over the next year trace directly back to the new needs and elements these six musicians brought to the project. These changes include the development of a membership service to provide more stable streams of income for those musicians with less records to sell, providing additional outlets of creative activity through publishing a journal and the development of a collaborative creative network out of Catalytic Sound.

While I have mapped the musical connections above, it is important to note the ways Catalytic Sound itself has formed connections between the involved musicians. I believe this is a significant aspect of how musicians of a variety of backgrounds and generations benefit in the collective structure of Catalytic Sound. For example, while Nate Wooley has never recorded with Paal Nilssen-Love, he has come into association with Nilssen-Love and his fans through the network of Catalytic Sound. Morris acknowledged this fact when he told me "Catalytic Sound draws the often-disparate audience for each of us closer together and helps to draw attention to the other members."[9] Thinking about Catalytic Sound as a network of musical activity that more than doubled in size in 2017 explains some of the ways Catalytic Sound began to change organizationally and materially around the same time. In response to the confusion caused by the expansion that Wooley describes above, Vandermark and others in the collective were forced to contend with the existential question of "what is Catalytic Sound?" in a way they had not since the

[9] Joe Morris, email correspondence with the author, September 10, 2021.

beginnings of the project. When Vandermark hired me as manager in 2018, we decided one of our first projects would be to articulate a mission statement.

Articulating a Mission

When I started working as manager of Catalytic Sound in 2018, I shared Wooley's partial confusion about what the project was. This feeling was fueled in part by the lack of public explanation surfacing from Catalytic Sound as an organization at that time. Looking back at the website from 2018, while the design had changed greatly from the simple Wordpress look of 2014 to accommodate the increased musician roster, there was little description of *what* Catalytic Sound was aside from the "creative music cooperative" banner across the website header. One of the first projects I proposed when I started as manager was to articulate a clear mission for Catalytic Sound to share on the website. Looking back at initial communication between Vandermark and myself surrounding my hiring process, I describe Catalytic Sound as a kind of "fair-trade" music store.[10] Embedded in this articulation is a certain understanding of *conscious* or *ethical* capitalism in which a product is marketed for the ways it supports *fair* payment of producers or for its supposed sustainability. Thus, my initial understanding of Catalytic Sound was also firmly rooted in viewing Catalytic Sound as a business primarily concerned with selling as many records as possible. This vision is in line with the ideas of both Joe Morris and Ab Baars above for the ways they understand Catalytic Sound as a kind of

[10] Ken Vandermark, email correspondence with author, May 24, 2018.

musician-centered clearing house or distribution service. Where this vision perhaps varies from the somewhat monolithic idea of Catalytic Sound pre-2017 by the majority of those involved as "just another record store" is how the project had begun to take on not only an economic importance but also a political one in the ways the musicians had begun to see themselves as part of a collective organizing force within Catalytic Sound.[11]

The initial correspondence from Vandermark to the rest of the musicians in the collective in late June introducing the mission statement outlines this political shift clearly. Writing about ongoing changes, he said, "one of the important things that needs to take place is to help customers and fans of the music understand what we're trying to tackle at Catalytic Sound, why it's significant, and why it's more than an online 'record store.'"[12] Elaborating on this shift in consciousness, Vandermark continued "I have become more and more concerned about the shrinking economic resources that exist for musicians in general, and for the people I know and collaborate with in particular."[13] Here, it is clear that the expanded network of Catalytic Sound had an effect on Vandermark's idea of the issues the cooperative could respond to. As "the people" expanded so did the potential meaning of Catalytic Sound. This email to the musicians in the collective is the first time I have found the phrase *more than a record store* appear in any official cooperative correspondences. While Catalytic Sound would truly become more than a record store in its

[11] Steve Marquette, interview with the author, April 11, 2021.
[12] Ken Vandermark, email to Catalytic Sound, June 30 2018.
[13] Ibid.

organizational structure and activities over the next three years, it is interesting to note the ways the project was still mostly functioning as a record store. Importantly though, Vandermark did not write "could be," he invoked "is" to make a claim to the present of Catalytic Sound. The tension between Catalytic Sound's structural state and the aspirational, political view of the cooperative exists not only in Vandermark's correspondence, but throughout the entire mission statement. However, before investigating this further, it is important to note the process of writing the mission statement.

Vandermark and I collaborated to write the statement by sending drafts back and forth through the project management platform Basecamp. In order to understand the political organization of Catalytic Sound at that time, it is important to note the way Vandermark and I unquestionably assumed the role of dictating the mission to the rest of the musicians in the collective. This position explains the sort of hierarchical structure which was in place when I came on as the manager of the collective. Returning to Vandermark's correspondence to the rest of group, it is clear he was not looking for feedback from the musicians and merely relaying an "update" on the newly articulated direction and meaning of Catalytic Sound. Accordingly, there were no email responses from the musicians I am aware of or was included on. Fast forwarding to the present moment, the collective is currently (Spring 2021) in the process of rewriting their mission statement. As has been relayed to me, this process is very different than the one in 2018. An initial committee of seven musicians and thinkers from both within Catalytic Sound and from the broader orbit of people

involved with or curious about the project have worked on a first draft of the new statement. Vandermark and the current manager, Sam Clapp are part of the discussion, but play an equal role with the other people involved. Currently, the initial ideas from this committee's email and video meeting discussions are making their way through a second committee of seven artists from the Catalytic Sound collective roster. This is, of course, a huge shift. Where certain ideas from the first mission statement are directly traceable to aspects of Vandermark and my thinking about the co-op, the current activities involve a kind of collective agency and decision-making that one would more conventionally think of as cooperative. Thus, the process of writing the statement itself was somewhat incongruous with the political ideas of cooperativity expressed in the mission statement. However, at the time, it was very difficult to get any feedback from the musicians and part of our goal with the mission statement was to inspire a more collaborative politics within the collective.

Turning to the actual text of the mission statement written in 2018, one can read a similar narrative arc as has been discussed. The statement begins with an articulation of what Catalytic Sound had been: "Catalytic Sound began in 2015 [sic] by putting a collective of creative musicians in more control of the dissemination and sale of their available discographies."[14] It then moved to articulating "the continuing goal of Catalytic Sound as 'sustainability.'"[15] The statement continues in expressing that the mission of Catalytic Sound is "to do more than sell 'great' records — it

[14] catalyticsound.com, accessed, April 11, 2021.
[15] Ibid.

strives to help generate economic resources for musicians while documenting and making available artistic evolutions in contemporary improvised and experimental music."[16] It is the "doing more than selling records" here that is critical to understanding how Catalytic Sound has evolved since the time of writing the mission statement in 2018. The document went on to transparently explain the fifty-percent payment model that had been central to the project, but not publicly acknowledged, from the beginnings in 2011. In the closing paragraph, Vandermark and I wrote:

> [Catalytic Sound] is a cooperative, in the truest sense, between artists and patrons. The musicians involved provide the diversity and depth of their individual discographies and record labels. Fans of the music, acting as the 'members' of the co-op, gain access to the huge range of these materials from one source. In this way, purchasing records at Catalytic, in whatever format a person chooses, has a parallel to belonging to a food co-op: money spent sustains a creative ecosystem by directly supporting its producers, helping to maintain their survival through firsthand sponsorship.[17]

If one was able to understand the use of "cooperative" throughout the early days of Catalytic Sound as signifying the cooperation between the five artists involved in making the project happen, the use of "cooperative" in the 2018 mission statement connotes something different. This new idea of cooperative is one that, more than anything, signified a changed conception of patronage around the collective. Where Catalytic Sound had presented itself and functioned as something most resembling a worker cooperative previously, the mission statement invoked an ideological shift to thinking about the project as a consumer cooperative. This idea

[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.

most popularly connects to the food co-op which appeared in the writing as the descriptive model for the vision we tried to articulate. The radical shift in thinking here was again, not one necessarily of collective ownership, but one that ideologically repositioned people who buy records at Catalytic Sound from customers to patrons and stakeholders in some sense. This shift makes explicit the role of vital support these consumers play in the lives of the musicians involved in Catalytic Sound and sought to elevate their importance to a higher level.

The fact remains that for all the rhetoric of Vandermark's statement to the collective, the mission statement did not align with the truth of what Catalytic Sound was at the time. Here, I believe it is useful to turn to J.L. Austin's speech theory, specifically the collection of lectures *How to do things with Words.* In these lectures, Austin spoke on the idea of a performative utterance as a form of speech that contrasts with a constitutive speech act, in that a performative sentence is not merely descriptive of some fact but contains a doing. As Austin says of performative speech "the uttering of the words is, indeed, usually a, or even *the*, leading incident in the performance of the act, the performance of which is also the object of the utterance, but it is far from being usually, even if it is ever, the sole thing necessary if the act is to be deemed to have been performed."[18] One cannot evaluate a performative speech act by the same metrics of truth a constitutive act might be able to.

[18] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words.*, William James Lectures,1955 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001395947, 8.

With this in mind, I have come to think of the mission statement Vandermark and I wrote as performative. It did not reflect the current reality of Catalytic Sound, but following Austin's line of thinking, this falsity was part of the act. The statement instead gestured toward an imagined "creative ecosystem" of mutual economic and creative support and in that gesture, attempted to call the things it claimed into existence. It served as the first action toward structural changes that would take place within Catalytic Sound over the next three years. The same logic applies to Vandermark and the other three musicians calling Catalytic Sound a cooperative in 2011. Interestingly, we were not necessarily aware of the performative aspect of this language in 2018. When I wrote parts of the mission statement, I believed on some level that I was writing a truthful representation of reality. Thus, part of the performance was unintentional and unplanned. Combining Austin's speech act theory and Latour's ANT analysis, one can consider the ways the mission statement itself was a non-human actor in the network of Catalytic Sound. Though Vandermark and I penned the statement, only on reflection have I realized the way those words helped to enact the many projects and developments at Catalytic Sound during my tenure.

In this chapter I have mapped the network of associations of the expanded Catalytic Sound collective in 2017. I have tried to show the ways this network, regardless of the actions of the musicians, expanded the meaning and potential of the organization by the sheer diversity of the new musicians. In addition, much like the musicians who joined the collective in 2017, I have claimed the mission statement radically altered the make-up and meaning of Catalytic Sound in ways those

embedded in the organization at that time could not have possibly realized. By invoking Austin's theory of performative speech acts, I have understood the mission statement as an actor in its own right that radically reoriented the priorities and possibilities of the collective. Much of the remainder of this thesis deals with the activities and shifts that began with these two expansions in 2017 and 2018 and deal with an increasingly complex network of musicians and other actors.

Chapter 3: The Membership Service

As I argued in the previous chapter, the mission statement Vandermark and I wrote in 2018 was a performative speech act that precipitated organizational changes at Catalytic Sound. The first of these, which connects directly to ideas articulated in the mission statement was the Catalytic Sound membership program started in the Fall of 2018. In this chapter, I use the membership program to discuss the concept of sustainability as understood and acted out by the cooperative. In doing this, I explore the ways sustainability for Catalytic Sound is something only achieved through a kind of capitalist failure. In an effort to better situate the cooperative historically and understand this mode of existence, I draw connections between Catalytic Sound and the New Music Distribution Service Carla Bley and Mike Mantler created in the 1970s. Lastly, I investigate how the membership program was another moment that expanded the network of Catalytic Sound to include patrons from all over the world. In doing so, I articulate the significance of the transition from customer to patron and the implications of this patronage to the political economic structure of the cooperative.

One exception to the idea that the mission statement did not align with the actual activities of Catalytic Sound was the Catalytic Quarterly publication. At the time of its founding, the Quarterly was broadly conceived of as "a new periodical that [would] focus on the creative pursuits of the Catalytic Sound co-op members, associated with music and their other interests."[1] The first issue, printed in April

[1] Vandermark, "Catalytic Sound."

2018, featured a love letter to the vinyl medium by Mats Gustafsson, travel photography by Andy Moor and Ig Henneman, and poetry by Joe McPhee and Ab Baars. An article by Ken Vandermark titled, "Catalytic Sound, DIY and the Challenge of 21st Century Sustainability," the same I began Chapter One with, led the collection and like the mission statement, was a harbinger of both the conceptual and material changes that would unfold over the next few years. Most importantly, the Catalytic Quarterly was one the first Catalytic Sound projects that did not have to do explicitly with selling records. Rather, the cooperative distributed the document freely with every record or CD sold. Thus, the Quarterly was less about generating profit as it was about bringing the artists of the collective closer together and signifying to the public that there was something more than selling records happening at Catalytic Sound. As Vandermark describes the moment: "When the quarterly started, I really began asking the question: What does this really mean? What are we really trying to do here? Because when we began to look at the numbers, selling records is not helping enough."[2] This kind of active reflection came shortly after the expansion in 2017. As I have argued in the previous chapter, in addition to the economics of the business, these searching questions also had to do with the diverse set of musicians and artists then involved in the project.

Vandermark's quarterly article dealt with the variety of challenges musicians faced in financially supporting their artistic practices in 2018. The article reads as an alarm, not only for articulating the ways paths toward economic sustainability were

[2] Ken Vandermark, interview with the author, October 10, 2020.

shrinking for experimental improvising musicians, but also for the shrinking streams of revenue for musicians writ large. Vandermark linked these problems directly to the rise of music streaming in the early and mid 2010s. Vandermark wrote:

> A major factor causing this change in the financial situation for musicians in the 21st century is the loss of income from record sales at shows, but the problem also includes record sales in general. These issues were the essential reason behind the formation of Catalytic Sound, it's a collective established to try to organize a better way to generate income for its members. To help do so, organizing, consolidating, and centralizing the available discography for the musicians, for fans of the music, and for the labels involved, only made sense.[3]

Vandermark goes on to paint a picture of a music infrastructure in the United States and Europe that has made sustainability, defined in the instance by Vandermark as "having the time and energy to devote to making art," increasingly difficult to find.[4] It is a passage that relates to the contextual set up I provided in Chapter One and the historical notion of survival in the field of improvised music.

The New Music Distribution Service

As I have mentioned thus far, Catalytic Sound is part of a history of musician-led businesses, collectives and cooperatives that have sought to create sustainability for their artistic communities. Related to the ideas Vandermark expressed in the first issue of the Catalytic Quarterly, I want to call attention to a specific historical parallel with the activities of Carla Bley and Mike Mantler in the mid-1970s and their New

[3] Vandermark, "Catalytic Sound," 3.
[4] Ibid.

Music Distribution Service (NMDS). Much like Catalytic Sound, it is difficult to pin down what exactly the NMDS was. As Amy Beal writes in her book *Carla Bley,* the NMDS "continually emphasized it was a service, not a business," the organization connected "the strands of an underground and independent international musical network," and was also a "creative outlet."[5] It is shocking how well these fragments describe Catalytic Sound, they could have easily been part of the 2018 mission statement. In short, the NMDS was a service dedicated to distributing emerging forms of contemporary, non-commercial music without editorial discernment. Beal discusses the ways the NMDS, like Catalytic Sound, published a newsletter that served as a platform for creative expression and information sharing. Unlike other collective efforts like the AACM and the Jazz Composer's Guild, of which Bley and Mantler were members, the NMDS was an intervention into the distribution systems of recorded music that serves as a direct historical precedent for Catalytic Sound in 2018. With a similar sense of purpose Bley described the service in 1978 as such:

> We believe in the distribution of independent records, and we operate as a non-profit service; we can't depend on getting government or subsidy money, so we run the office as a small business trying to break even to survive. We distribute over 200 labels— without any exclusive agreements— and when there's too much work for us, we cut it off…There's a machine that serves commercial music very well, but new music or art music not at all, and a machine must be concocted to serve that. This is not your typical capitalist office. We believe in art and expression. Business is an art form I'm trying to learn.[6]

[5] Amy C. Beal, *Carla Bley*, American Composers (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 54.
[6] Carla Bley in Beal, *Carla Bley,* 56.

Where the NMDS most differed from Catalytic Sound is how they worked with as many artists and labels as they possibly could. As Bley describes above this was two-hundred labels in 1978 – a much larger operation than Catalytic Sound has ever been. This non-exclusivity was a critical part of the NMDS's mission and was one of the main reasons Bley and Mantler started the project. This inclusion of two-hundred labels reveals the ways Catalytic Sound has from the beginning functioned in an exclusive way, only working with artists who have been personally invited into the cooperative. In Chapter Five I will discuss the moment those at Catalytic Sound became aware of this potential gatekeeping and how they have responded to it. Another parallel between NMDS and Catalytic Sound is how the two organizations have dealt with the duality between non-profit and business. As I discuss later in this chapter, Catalytic Sound has similarly operated in ways that elude the conventional classifications of money-making activities related to artistic and community sustainability in a capitalist system. I have offered this example to again call attention to the ways Catalytic Sound does not exist in a vacuum but is rather part of a historical network of creative interventions on the part of musicians to improve their conditions of artistic survival. As I show later in this thesis, Catalytic Sound is an assemblage of these various histories connecting, unintentionally, to multiple activities and movements of the past.

Returning to Vandermark's earlier statement, in the face of a financial crisis for the cooperative and attached to the broader context of supporting oneself as an artist in 2018, Catalytic Sound began a concerted effort towards creating

sustainability. When I began as manager in 2018, it was clear Catalytic Sound not only needed to help create sustainability for the artists involved, but also for itself as a cooperative business model. Part of the challenge I remember grappling with in my first few months as manager was to understand the unique position of Catalytic Sound as existing somewhere between a business and a not-for-profit in the same vein as Bley describes above. This confusion centers on both services' relationships to profit. Where a business operating by a capitalist logic strives to amass profit through the extraction of wealth via labor and resources, Catalytic Sound distributes its profits among the artists it works with and those on staff. Thus, from its beginnings, Catalytic Sound has always been a somewhat anti-capitalist endeavor in the ways it has prioritized paying artists as much, or often *more* than, the business ought to be able to support. I can vividly remember the fear I felt when our business account dropped to double digits after the first quarterly payout I oversaw in July of 2018. Beyond not making profit, the cooperative was in the red. Catalytic Sound was unable to pay Vandermark his quarterly share in July of 2018; he instead opted to treat his unpaid portion of record sales, which were the largest of the group, as a no interest loan to be paid back over time.

I have come to understand some of the components of Catalytic Sound and those of Bley and others with NMDS as operations in a kind of capitalist failure. They are by all capitalist metrics, failed businesses for not accumulating capital in an efficient manner. Additionally, because of the ways they deal with business, as Bley said, "concoct machines" akin to the ones that serve commercial music, they are not

admitted to the legal standing of being official not-for-profits that hold tax-exemption. Thus, one can understand Catalytic Sound and the NMDS as existing in a constant state of in-between. This in-between is no luxury, I know from my experience the kind of stress this positionality forces upon those who are trying to make Catalytic Sound work. Part of this thesis is a documentation of the incredible ways these unlikely businesses create and determine success for themselves within a system that seems to leave no space for their kinds of activities and values.

Importantly, Vandermark and Bley are embedded within the communities their respective projects aim to help. Because of this, it is clear that the investments Vandermark makes into the Catalytic Sound project are very different than the kind one expects to see in more conventional spaces of market capitalism or even the United States non-profit sphere.[7] Because of the structure of Catalytic Sound, the return on Vandermark's investment will likely not be the kind of profit most entrepreneurs seek. Rather, the return Vandermark hopes to make is the success of Catalytic Sound in creating sustainability for the artistic community he is a part of. This sustainability is of a kind that cooperative member and saxophonist Dave Rempis equates with a notion of stability. Speaking candidly on the matter, Rempis states:

> It's just a constant hustle, there's not a lot of sustainability to making the kind of music I make. The people who are able to have some sense of stability are people who end up teaching at a university or something where they have some kind of underlying salary. I've always had another job in production that more or less underwrites my music habit. In the last few years, that's really overlapped with the

[7] Ken Vandermark, interview with the author, October, 10, 2020.

> growth of my label for example and so that's become a means of stability to some degree, at least in the COVID crisis where I've been focusing like most of my efforts this year on selling stuff and putting out new recordings and filling orders because sales just went off the charts. Whether that's sustainable in the future, I don't really know—I hope it might be. But I don't know, as far as sustainability, it's a constant hustle as a musician trying to find work and trying to find concert opportunities for all the different groups I work with...there's nothing too sustainable about it.[8]

The situation Rempis describes is rather bleak, nonetheless, he outlines the specific challenges of being an experimental improvising musician in 2020 well. One can understand the "constant hustle" Rempis emphasizes as one endemic to the constantly changing, precarious position of the non-commercial, aesthetically marginal artist. The economics of making this music necessitates a DIY ethic that many of the musicians I interviewed talk about whether in the context of running their own labels or learning skills to piece together a means of living. In the end, as Rempis describes, all of these actions aspire toward a kind of fleeting stability that he may never fully realize. Catalytic Sound ideologically refutes the idea that sustainability and stability are unachievable. The future Catalytic Sound hopes to call into being is one where musicians are able to have the stability necessary to focus sufficient energy toward music making. Thus, for Catalytic Sound in late 2018, sustainability and success hinged on the interdependent and mutually beneficial relationship between the artists and the business. As I scrawled in my notebook in October of 2018: "Success for Catalytic Sound means <u>EVERYONE GETS PAID.</u>"[9]

[8] Dave Rempis, interview with the author, November 3, 2020.
[9] Stuessi, Catalytic Sound meeting notes, October 2018.

The Membership Service

It was with this notion of sustainability in mind that Vandermark, designer and social media manager, Federico Peñalva, and I began to build the Catalytic Sound subscription platform in 2018. The alignment of these values was clear from the initial communications about the project on social media. An Instagram post announcing the membership from October 10, 2018 reads:

> Since the beginning, Catalytic Sound has operated as a co-operative [sic] between patrons and artists, though without a clear way to support artists apart from buying their music. That changes today with the Catalytic Sound membership. We are happy to give you as listeners a new way to support the artists of Catalytic Sound while also gaining access to exclusive releases, merchandise, and offers. As part of our evolving mission, the membership represents Catalytic Sound's commitment to developing creative and innovative economic models for our artists. Please consider joining us in this cause.[10]

While this statement seeks to write a smooth history of Catalytic Sound through connecting the membership service to the earliest instantiations of the cooperative, the membership service marks a definite departure from the history I have documented in this thesis. It was a new model to address the economic ups and downs of release cycles and income at the cooperative. In doing so, it established a structure for consumer cooperativism at Catalytic Sound and introduced the concept of the patron to the network. In its initial invention, for twenty-five dollars a month a member would receive an exclusive digital release from a Catalytic artist (with a CD

[10] Catalytic Sound Instagram post, October 10, 2018.

compilation of these recordings each quarter), two digital downloads a month, an exclusive Catalytic Sound tote bag, access to a monthly sale code, and the Catalytic Quarterly mailed to them independent of a purchase. Economically, in line with the profit-sharing model of the record store:

> Artists would be paid as usual for any standard digital downloads that a member selects each month. The payout would go like this: for one subscriber paying $25/month, $8 would be divided between all musicians, $8 would go to Catalytic, and the remaining $8 would go toward the artists' whose two albums are selected for download by that subscriber. The only extra labor required on your part to make this new subscription platform possible would be the contribution of an exclusive recording once a year or so.[11]

As this last statement to the Catalytic Sound artists makes clear, part of our thinking in designing the membership had to do with minimizing the amount of additional labor required of musicians and leveraging materials that already existed.[12] Additionally, while we wanted the focus of the membership to be toward supporting musicians, we designed the incentives with the particular community of Catalytic Sound customers in mind. Thus, much of what the Catalytic Sound membership initially offered from musicians to members, makes clear specific values of the music commodity in the context of Catalytic Sound. Many Catalytic Sound customers are best described as collectors who seek to hear every recorded instance of the particular improvisers they follow. Offering exclusive recordings served the dual purpose of engaging these collectors and offering an avenue for Catalytic artist partners, as we

[11] Email from Ken Vandermark to Catalytic Sound musician partners, August 4, 2018.
[12] This thinking was in part fueled by the approach of installation artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude, who funded their large scale environmental works by selling various materials of the planning process. Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Christo and Jeanne-Claude." Encyclopedia Britannica, May 31, 2020.

came to call them after the membership began, to distribute and receive financial compensation for unreleased material. The ability to pay around three hundred dollars to a musician each month for this recording was not only a small boon to that musician's sustenance but a partial realization of Catalytic Sound's mission.

Returning to the idea of patronage, one way of thinking about the membership service is through the new associations and networks of support it created. It established a meaning of cooperative that not only encompassed the organization of Catalytic Sound as a collective of musicians and workers but expanded the ecology of the project to include patrons. We decided to refer to these patrons as members and the artists as partners to serve as a reminder for the ways these supporters were equally a part of realizing Catalytic Sound's mission. Where a relationship between customers and the cooperative certainly existed pre-2018, the concept of patronage surrounding the membership service articulated a more meaningful association of support than had previously been considered with the customer base. Thus, returning to the network concepts I offered in the previous chapter, one way to think about the membership service is that it expanded the network of Catalytic Sound.

Initially, these members spanned a geographical range even wider than the musicians and often resided outside of the urban centers of Chicago, Detroit, New York City, Baltimore, and other smaller scenes of the Midwest and Eastern seaboard of the United States and Central and Western Europe where creative improvised musicians and performance infrastructures exist with the most density. This initial list of subscribers included people from Selby, North Yorkshire; Athlone, Ireland;

Calgary, Alberta; Seattle, Washington; Kamnick, Slovenia; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Zagreb, Hungary; and Bethany, Oklahoma. This small sampling offers insight into the international and dispersed community of listeners Catalytic Sound brings together. This kind of community is one Catalytic Sound as a *digital* and *international* cooperative of musicians is uniquely positioned to foment. Where historical parallels to Catalytic Sound like the AACM, Horace Tapscott's UGMA, the Instant Composers Pool and others helped to create cooperation among their respective immediate geographical musical communities, Catalytic Sound brings together a community of musicians *and* listeners that are geographically dispersed and international. The expansion of the cooperative in this sense offers another historical parallel to the NMDS in that they both interacted with national and international networks of supporters of the music they distributed. Where Catalytic Sound has gone farther than NMDS is in fomenting the concept of patronage and membership out of this network. In doing so, Catalytic Sound became a unique hybrid between a worker and consumer cooperative drawing on aspects of both. This is not only apparent in the economics, but also a burgeoning shift toward more collective politics around the time of the membership service's founding.

In contrast with the process of writing the mission statement I outlined in Chapter Two, early communications between Vandermark and the other musicians of the collective show a movement toward a more inclusive and transparent process of change at Catalytic Sound. In the same email quoted above explaining the payout breakdown, Vandermark writes, "Catalytic Sound being a collective, Brock and I

would like to hear your thoughts and opinions on these two new ideas before moving any further. These changes will require your support, and we only want to make them with everybody on board and excited to move forward."[13] In talking to Vandermark, this kind of open communication was an essential part of his shift in understanding Catalytic Sound as a more cooperative endeavor. On the heels of the fallout with Peter Brötzmann about the expansion of the collective, which was more or less an executive decision by Vandermark and Marquette, Vandermark realized "if Catalytic Sound is going to be a co-op, I have to communicate with the people involved. We are cooperating on creating what Catalytic Sound is."[14] Furthermore, where the communications about the mission statement elucidated zero response from the musicians, Ig Henneman, Nate Wooley, Mats Gustafsson and Ab Baars replied-all to the email about the subscription platform with helpful and constructive responses.[15] These responses signaled a shift in the active engagement of the musicians and the beginnings of more collective and cooperative actions on the part of Catalytic Sound.

It is difficult to overstate the impact the membership program has had on Catalytic Sound since its instantiation in October 2018. In Vandermark's words:

> There are all of these factors and challenges that go into each component of what Catalytic is trying to do to generate money. And one of the keys to getting us to even survival level was the membership service that Brock was the one to initiate and to put into practice. Without the stability of having 100 people or so, who pay on a monthly basis, Catalytic would not be where it is today. That core foundation of income makes it possible to weather the ups and downs of release schedules, because when those cycles dipped, suddenly

[13] Email from Ken Vandermark to Catalytic Sound musician partners, August 4, 2018.
[14] Ken Vandermark, interview with the author July 22, 2020.

> Catalytic didn't have any money coming in, and we still had to pay the manager, Federico for his social media and designing work, and theoretically pay me my monthly wage for my work, and that would kill us. So, Brock's idea about really getting the subscription platform going was key, not only financially, but also key to rethinking what Catalytic was all about.[16]

As Vandermark describes, the membership service offered and has continued to offer the kinds of stability and sustainability Catalytic Sound set out to create since its beginnings. Much of Catalytic Sound's activities since the start of the membership service in 2018 have revolved and expanded upon the understanding of cooperative embedded within the membership service.

In this chapter, I have described the Catalytic Sound membership service as the first major innovation toward realizing the vision the mission statement articulated and set in motion. In an effort to understand these activities within a broader history of musician-led innovation and organizing, I have drawn historical parallels to Carla Bley and Mike Mantler's New Music Distribution Service. These comparisons are helpful in understanding the unique positions and significance of the two alternative institutions and the kinds of sustainability Catalytic Sound aspires to create. From here I discussed the formation of the Catalytic Sound membership and the ways the initiative expanded the network and meaning of the cooperative. Importantly, the decision-making process was far more collective and transparent than any other before and established a new precedent of communication. Lastly, the service reframed those who were previously customers to patrons and in that

[16] Ken Vandermark, interview with the author, October 10, 2020.

transition redefined the meaning of cooperative. In the chapters that follow, I map how these inklings of change grew between 2019 and 2021 to bring radical change to Catalytic Sound.

Chapter 4: The Juneteenth Fundraiser

In the forward to her book *Hope in the Dark,* writer, historian, and activist Rebecca Solnit uses mushrooms as a metaphor to describe the ways revolutions manifest in unexpected ways from organizing and activism. She writes:

> Mushroomed: after a rain mushrooms appears on the surface of the earth as if from nowhere. Many do so from a sometimes vast underground fungus that remains invisible and largely unknown. What we call mushrooms, mycologists call the fruiting body of the larger less visible fungus. Uprisings and revolutions are often considered to be spontaneous, but less visible long-term organizing and groundwork—or underground work—often laid the foundation…It seems insignificant or peripheral until very different outcomes emerge from transformed assumptions about who and what matters…[1]

My research into Catalytic Sound has revealed to me the various ways my work as manager, the continued work of Sam Clapp, the manager since July 2019, Ken Vandermark, Federico Peñalva and the musicians of Catalytic Sound was and is political work. Many of the activities I have written about thus far have to do with organizing people, articulating an ideology, and inventing structures of sustainability. Often times, trying to organize and communicate with the musicians when I was manager felt like trying to push a boulder up a steep hill. For much of the year I spent managing Catalytic Sound, getting a twenty-five percent response rate on a group email to the musicians as I described in the last section was a major accomplishment. Vandermark, Peñalva and I saw the vision of what Catalytic Sound *could* be if we had a full commitment from the musicians, but actually realizing that with a group of

[1] Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (Haymarket Books, 2019), xvii.

busy and independent musicians, regardless of their musical collaborations, was continually challenging.

In this chapter, I describe the sudden change that took place in 2020 amid the COVID-19 crisis, a time Vandermark has described to me as "the worst time to be a musician in my lifetime."[2] Through making connections with the work of Rebecca Solnit, I describe the ways the work of Catalytic Sound is essentially political for those involved. From the last section focusing on activities in 2018, I fast forward to 2020, because the staggering amount of radical change that has taken place in the last year of the cooperative requires the remainder of this thesis to fully investigate. Having witnessed these changes over the last year, I now understand the work I, Steve Marquette, Vandermark and all the other people who have worked to realize the vision of Catalytic Sound have done as underground work of the kind Solnit describes above necessary to create change. These activities put Catalytic Sound in what Vandermark called "a fortunate position in an unfortunate time" during the pandemic to provide assistance to the musicians involved.[3] In addition to this, I describe expansions of the cooperative that took place in 2018 and 2020 to bring the total number of musicians involved to twenty-four. I return to the network theory and model I developed in Chapter Two to interpret both the center and periphery of the Catalytic Sound network. In doing this, I address both Vandermark's central role to the cooperative and the ways the network model illustrates gendered inequities in the

[2] Ken Vandermark, interview with the author, July 22, 2020.
[3] Ibid.

music. Through this kind of network analysis, I also problematize a notion that a few actors created change through intentional efforts and look to the holistic state of the network in 2020 to better understand the change that took place in 2020.

The shift I am referring to has to do with the ways the musicians of Catalytic Sound rallied together in support of a compilation assembled and sold to raise funds for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund titled *Juneteenth.* They released the compilation on June 19, 2020, at a time Vandermark describes as a "multilayered point of crisis that included not only COVID, but a social crisis and the movement for Black lives."[4] Prior to the release of the compilation Catalytic Sound had quickly pivoted at the start of the pandemic to better support the artists who were out of work in the co-op. As the current manager Sam Clapp described:

> When COVID hit, it just unleashed this complete change in the circumstances of the organization. All gigs were cancelled for everyone, and Ken [Vandermark] suddenly had nothing to do except Catalytic. The first Bandcamp Friday, where they were giving a one-hundred percent share of sales to the artists happened right at the end of March. It was this massive boom, and we were suddenly able to pay everyone out. Around the same time, we created an Artist Relief Fund tier in Patreon and opened a PayPal Donate button on the site, because some people want to give lump sums. So, we were able to help artists out that way. And we shifted to a every month pay out model instead of the usual quarterly one all during those crazy early days of the pandemic in mid-March.[5]

As Clapp describes it, one of the remarkable things about Catalytic Sound and the artists involved has been their ability to quickly adapt to changing circumstances. In

[4] Ken Vandermark, interview with the author, October 10, 2020.
[5] Sam Clapp, interview with the author, July 14, 2020.

addition to the various streams of income Clapp and Vandermark set up for musicians within Catalytic Sound, the collective as a whole decided to use their platform and resources to raise awareness and funds for social causes beginning with the compilation this chapter revolves around. The compilation, of which 100% of proceeds would go to the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, featured unreleased material from twenty-one of the twenty-four musicians in the collective as of June 2020.

More Musicians

Stepping back from this for a moment, it is necessary to again describe the makeup of Catalytic Sound in June 2020 given that, since 2018 the collective of musicians had again doubled. I believe these twelve musicians added in 2018 and 2020 had similar effects on the network and potential meaning of the collective as those I detailed in Chapter Two. However, because of the generational and gender diversity of these twelve musicians, I believe their impact on the network has been more dramatic and makes the kind of coming together that happened in June of 2020 ever more necessary for the continued existence of Catalytic Sound. The first of these expansions took place concurrent with the unveiling of the membership service in fall of 2018 I described in the previous chapter. Vandermark and I, with input from Nate Wooley, Ig Henneman and Mats Gustafsson focused less on the economic aspects than in the 2017 group of new musicians and more on bringing people who would offer different perspectives to the collective.[6] As Vandermark recalls:

[6] Email correspondence within Catalytic Sound collective, August 2018.

> We brought in more women, because we really wanted to make sure we were working toward having better representation within the group. We were also in the process of thinking more holistically about the cooperative's mission and so that brought Luke Stewart and Ben Hall into the conversation. They do amazing music, but they also bring unique perspectives on what creative process and principles and practice are in relation to the broader musical organizing they do.[7]

In line with this sentiment, we asked New York-based pianist Sylvie Courvousier (b. 1968) who is a collaborator with Ken Vandermark and Nate Wooley and teaches at the New School; Ikue Mori (b. 1953) who has been a fixture of the New York Downtown scene since playing drums in the group DNA and was the first computer improvisor to join the group; and Austrian pianist Eisabeth Harnik (b. 1970) who has connections with many of the European improvisors in the collective. Additionally, as Vandermark mentioned, we invited Washington D.C-based bassist, Luke Stewart and Detroit-based percussionist Ben Hall (b. 1977) for both their playing and their holistic engagements with a broad variety of activities in the music industry. For Stewart this included presenting shows in the Washington D.C. community, his work with the Arts for Art organization in New York City and helping to run the publication, Capitol Bop. We believed Hall's work as a community food activist, presenter, record label owner and multidisciplinary artist would bring a range of different perspectives to Catalytic Sound. Hall and Stewart also joined Joe McPhee as African American artist partners of the cooperative. Chicago-based percussionist Tim Daisy (b. 1976) who also runs Relay Recordings and Chicago-based saxophonist Dave Rempis (b. 1975) who also runs Aerophonic Records joined as long-time collaborators of

[7] Ken Vandermark, interview with the author, July 22, 2020.

Vandermark's having played in his band The Vandermark 5 and as important members of the contemporary Chicago scene. Lastly, we invited the Norweigan bass player Ingebrigt Håker Flaten (b. 1971) who is a longtime collaborator of original Catalytic Sound members, Nilssen-Love and Gustafsson in the band The Thing. As I did for the musicians who joined Catalytic Sound in 2017, I created a network graph of the expanded group of musicians in the collective in 2018 in Figure 4.1:

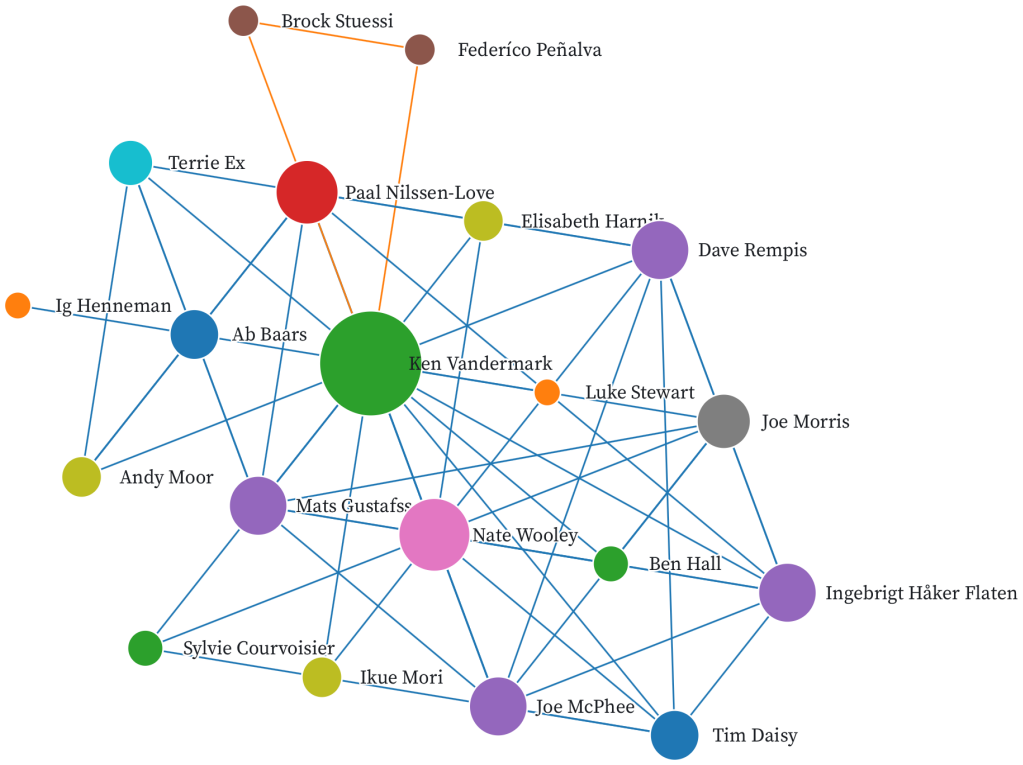

Figure 4.1: Network graph of Catalytic Sound in 2018

Like the network graph from 2017, this visualization underlines the ways Vandermark is the central actor in the Catalytic Sound collective of musicians. In many cases, he is the common musician between those from different scenes and geographic locales. His musical activity and ensembles between Europe and the United States reflect directly in the musicians involved, an effect of his role in making decisions for the cooperative in 2018. For this reason, perhaps the best way to describe the network of musicians involved with Catalytic Sound is that they are the musical constellation of Ken Vandermark. Vandermark's musical practice has consistently been tied to community-building practices in the improvised music scene. A prime example of this attitude and approach is how Vandermark used the $265,000 fellowship awarded to him through the MacArthur Foundation in 1999. As he told Bill Meyer in an interview in 2000, "I can't imagine anything better to do with the money than put it back into the music."[8] He invested the funds in recording sessions and tours for both his own projects and those of others like the Peter Brötzmann Tentet, which was a large-scale coming together of players from the United States and Europe. However, in underwriting some of the Tentet's activities, Vandermark "never set himself up as anything other than one guy in the band" – an observation that speaks to the egalitarian values Vandermark brings to his projects and positionality.[9] Given this context, it is clear that Catalytic Sound, especially as it expanded in 2017 and 2018 became another space of community building for

[8] Bill Meyer, "OkkaDisk: Ken Vandermark: Interview," accessed May 24, 2021, http://okkadisk.com/articles/magnet111200.html.
[9] Fred Longberg-Holm in Meyer, "OkkaDisk."

Vandermark, not so dissimilar from the Brötzmann Tenet. While the collective may center on Vandermark's musical associations and he may own the business, it is clear that since the expansion in 2017, Vandermark has made a concerted effort to bring more musicians into the decision-making process at Catalytic Sound. Part of what I investigate in this chapter is how, in addition to the political structure of the cooperative, the dynamics of association, which mostly consisted of musical ties between individuals who communicated very little with each other as members of Catalytic Sound in 2018, developed into a more coherent and interconnected collective in 2020. Thus, what I describe is a kind of shift in network dynamics from one where communication flowed mostly to and from Vandermark and the manager, to one where communication and associations formed between musicians of the collective.

In the midst of the COVID-19 crisis and the Movement for Black Lives as I have described above the musicians decided to expand again. The main motivating factor of this expansion was to help provide economic relief to more people in the scene. Chicago/Poughkeepsie-based cellist Fred Longberg-Holm (b. 1962) and Danish sound artist/vocalist Jaap Blonk, (b. 1953) had each previously expressed interest in joining the group out of their long-time musical associations with various Catalytic artists and were the first musicians who asked to join the cooperative. Baltimore's electronics artist Bonnie Jones (b. 1977) brought holistic associations to the group much like Hall and Stewart through her work as a presenter and the TECHNE organization in Baltimore. At the same time, Jones had not recorded with

any members of the collective, making her somewhat of an outsider. The New-England percussionist Chris Corsano (b. 1975) was a natural fit because of his longtime musical associations with artists in the collective. Lastly, the expansion in 2020 brought the two youngest musicians of the collective thus far: San Antonio-based percussionist and sound artist, claire rousay and New York-based bassist Brandon Lopez (b. 1988). Rousay, like Jones, is an island in the network visualization below and represented a different experimental aesthetic, based heavily in field recordings and improvised percussion with everyday objects, than many of the acoustic instrumental improvisors in the collective. Lopez, on the other hand, despite his age, has recording projects with multiple members of the collective and plays acoustic improvised music. These six musicians again represented a diverse group of identity, age, musical association, and approach that, when combined with the six musicians added in 2018, shifted the cooperative in an entirely new direction. As you can see from the visualization below in Figure 4.2, the network in 2020 had become quite complex, especially compared to what the collective had been four years prior:

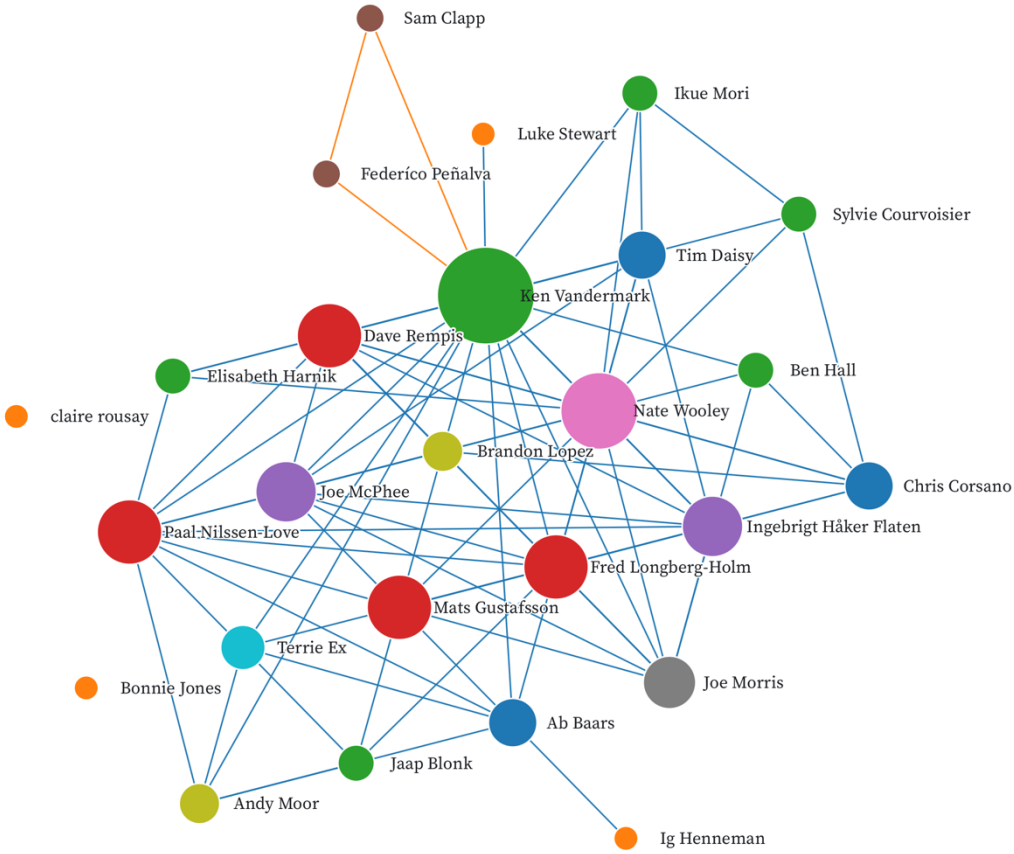

Figure 4.2: Network graph of Catalytic Sound in June 2020

While this sort of network modeling has illuminated the centrality of Vandermark to the collective of musicians of Catalytic Sound I describe in the section above, the periphery it shows is equally important. Looking around the outside of the graph and to those musicians with the smallest circles, one sees Bonnie Jones, claire rousay, Ig Henneman, Jaap Blonk, Sylvie Courvoisier, Ikue Mori, Elisabeth Harnik, Luke Stewart and Ben Hall with four or fewer musical connections to the group. This list notably includes all six women in the collective and thus illustrates a gender dynamic I had not recognized before mapping these musical connections. The fact

that the women have the fewest musical connections in the collective speaks to the ways their representation in the cooperative does not necessarily equate to the same sorts of representation in recordings or performance. This is part of a larger history of male-dominated music making in the space of creative improvised music that extends from the beginnings of the tradition in both the United States and Europe to now. Beyond under representation, there are examples of blatant misogyny from respected musicians in the scene like former Catalytic Sound member Peter Brötzmann who called the all-woman Feminist Improvising Group, active in London in the early 1970s "all these English chickens" in an interview with The Wire magazine in 2012.[10]

Rather than use the gendered imbalances illustrated through the network model to critique Catalytic Sound, I interpret them as evidence of the active role Vandermark and others have taken to include women, regardless of their musical associations, in the group. In doing this, Catalytic Sound creates new networks of association and potential for collaboration that may not have been as likely to happen prior. Since the expansion in 2018, these connections have already led a duo album between Tim Daisy and Ikue Mori. When I asked Daisy whether this recording would have happened without Catalytic Sound, he answered "although I have wanted to collaborate again with Ikue since our live performance at the Hungry Brain back in 2013, being in the same co-op with her had certainly been a motivating factor in following through with the recording project."[11] As Daisy described, there are many

[10] David Keenan, "Last Man Still Standing: An Interview with Peter Brötzmann," *The Wire*, December 2012, 34.
[11] Tim Daisy, email correspondence with the author, February 19, 2021.

more musical associations through performance my network graph does not fully capture. However, the importance of the Catalytic Sound network to initiating the next step from performance to recording and the ways recordings create legacy and legitimacy for individual musicians cannot be understated. These observations speak to the ways Catalytic Sound, because of its visibility in the scene and the associations it creates, can be a tool for addressing gendered imbalances of representation and respect historically present in the field of creative improvised music while at the same time reflecting trends within its network as a microcosm of the scene writ large.

Continuing the network theory I have developed throughout this thesis, one way to think about the COVID-19 crisis is as another agent in the network, something which, like the addition of new musicians, necessitated a change. As I discussed in Chapter Two, these moments where new, powerful actors enter the network show the ways Catalytic Sound remains in a state of constant reassembly, never quite static or fixed. Understood in this way, the actors have continually dictated the meaning of the organization: in the beginning that was simply selling records; in 2018 those focuses shifted toward creating streams of stable income to accommodate for musicians in the collective with more diverse needs; in 2020 the needs of musicians ballooned and so did the efforts and urgency of Catalytic Sound. In this way, I believe there is also connection between the music Catalytic Sound represents and the organization itself. They are both constantly in process, never pre-composed but always approaching some ideal. There is failure, of course, but also moments of alignment and success only possible because of those so-called failures. Where larger and more one-

dimensional institutions were faltering in mid-March amid the structural changes caused by Covid-19, Catalytic Sound quickly engaged the mutable structures it had already put in place to achieve its goals.[12]

In contrast with the ways those musicians added in 2017 still largely viewed the cooperative as a musician owned record store or clearing house, many of the musicians who joined in 2018 and 2020 had a very different perspective when they described the project to me. I believe this has to do with the ways the membership program I detailed in the previous chapter caused a radical conceptual change in what Catalytic Sound was to both the musicians involved and those witnessing the activity from the outside. Luke Stewart described the collective as something that gives context to and elevates the work of each person involved: "It's impressive, it's prestigious…and more than anything Catalytic is just a really good idea…it works in still like a very low stakes way, but in a similar way to the underground music situation turning the DIY warehouse into Carnegie Hall for the night…Catalytic is our Blue Note records."[13] Brandon Lopez described to me the ways he is "more interested in actually building something and being a part of Catalytic as far as administration goes than making and selling my records."[14] Bonnie Jones was candid about the ways her "CDs are not flying off the rack like Joe McPhee's," but

[12] The same can be said for other organizations in the orbit of Catalytic Sound, most notably the Chicago non-profit Experimental Sound Studio, who started the Quarantine Concert livestream in mid-March out of experiences livestreaming concerts before the pandemic. As Steve Marquette told me, part of the job of playing this kind of music is "finding solutions" because there always have and always will be difficulties inherent to making aesthetically marginal art.
[13] Luke Stewart, interview with the author, October 28, 2020.
[14] Brandon Lopez, interview with the author, April 6, 2021.

responded to that self-assessment with the questions of "what can I contribute? How can I be a useful member of the family?"[15] Lastly, claire rousay described to me how she "was feeling a little burned out before joining. The positivity and drive that seems to be constantly spewing out of Catalytic has really altered [her] mental/emotional state for the better."[16]

The *Juneteenth* Controversy

I have described these new members and the various ways they related to the collective because I believe these new ideas, people, and sense of community--or as Bonnie Jones said, *family*--were essential to the way the cooperative responded to an attack on social media surrounding the *Juneteenth* compilation. This attack came from one of Catalytic Sound's followers on social media who questioned "2 black artists out of 21 people on your free jazz compilation you've titled *Juneteenth*?" on Catalytic Sound's Instagram post and later called out the compilation on their own social media page.[17] As Buenos Aires-based designer and social media manager Federico Peñalva described the situation to me of that Saturday after he published the post, "everything went from just a comment to something really off the charts. There was a whole Facebook situation that was gaining traction and Sam Clapp and I were talking in real time through all that Saturday. I was really worried that it was going to

[15] Bonnie Jones, interview with the author, April 7, 2021.
[16] claire rousay, email correspondence with the author, October 28, 2020.
[17] Catalytic Sound. 2020. "Out now! Juneteenth Compilation." Instagram photo, June 18, 2020. https://www.instagram.com/p/CBoC3bVAeBq/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

be like the end of Catalytic."[18] The Facebook situation Peñalva described was a shared post that was building steam through comments and likes with many calling out and criticizing Catalytic Sound and Vandermark directly. Sam Clapp, the manager, described thinking "oh my god, is Catalytic getting cancelled right now? And that compounded with this feeling of disorientation because we had also just raised over two-thousand dollars for the NAACP."[19] Instead of attempting to respond directly, Clapp and Vandermark decided to write an email to the rest of the musicians to decide how to move forward collectively. As Vandermark described "*every single member* of the collective responded, and the feedback was: *we are doing the right thing here.*"[20]

The first time I read through the various email threads responding to the query from Clapp and Vandermark, I was in awe of the engagement from almost every member of the collective. As I have referenced previously, in my time as manager, I never witnessed a conversation, digital or otherwise, between all members of the collective. In the nearly thirty messages sent over the weekend of June 20th, there was not only an implied sense of collectivity, but also an explicitly stated one. In his initial email to the group, Vandermark recognized a "default position" where he had occupied an outsized decision-making position in the group. As he wrote, "this *default position* can no longer continue if Catalytic Sound is going to truly function as the cooperative it can be."[21] As the conversation developed, consensus formed around

[18] Federico Peñalva, interview with the author, July 29, 2020.
[19] Sam Clapp, interview with the author, July 14, 2020.
[20] Ken Vandermark, interview with the author, October 10, 2020, (emphasis added).
[21] Email from Ken Vandermark to Catalytic Sound musicians, June 19, 2020

the idea of the *transparent hierarchy* I have previously discussed. Many of the musicians, especially early partners Mats Gustafsson and Ig Henneman, were adamant that committee decision-making was impractical and that "trust is key" for the collective to function.[22] At the same time, the idea sprouted that having more open and frequent channels of communication between various members of the collective would be important for its continued development. Luke Stewart put it best when he wrote:

> The model of Catalytic is beautiful because we are allowed to be our best selves in our individual spheres, which adds to the greater potency of the group. Here we are all connected, and I'm sure we all have questions and insights that can be explored with love and positivity. In the least, having mutual respect as musicians, we can use this opportunity to talk amongst ourselves sharing thoughts, ideas, and perspectives on the Music, and the systems that we all have to navigate. This is a powerful moment in the world, and we can use our connectivity for greater understanding. If that be continued email threads, zoom meetings, columns in the quarterly, open dialogue with Catalytic members, however it can happen in the easiest, most organic way. [23]

Stewart's message to the group is important because he recognizes the *power* of Catalytic Sound's collectivity. Many of the other musicians recognized the importance of this kind of solidarity and communication while also expressing deep gratitude and humility for being part of the group.

Regarding the actual issue of the name *Juneteenth* and optics of representation surrounding the compilation, Vandermark, Tim Daisy, Brandon Lopez, and Andy Moor all saw the ways the compilation title could be problematic and saw value in

[22] Email from Ig Henneman to Catalytic Sound email list, June 20, 2020.
[23] Email from Luke Stewart to Catalytic Sound, June 21, 2020.

changing the name. The conversation began to shift towards keeping the name when Ben Hall, who is "mixed," as he identified himself to me, responded to the original poster on Instagram:

> Do you speak for the black people on this recording? In this collective? Do they require your agency? Your alliedship? Have you been voted proxy by these other speculative communities you 'feel' would find issue? None of the black folks on this comp has a problem with the title. You definitely don't speak for me. I'm proud of the title. Proud that we're not sheepish about who we are and also our aspirational possibilities. We are a collective. Inter-generational, all the genders, all the races even though race is a social construct. You ask no questions. You occupy a power position that acts as though these black voices involved can't speak for themselves, as if we don't have agency. As if we are not sure what's at play or what's at stake. Maybe ask why we made that title choice as a collective that is dedicated to the transformational power of black music and its inventors rather than assume it's tone deaf because you don't understand the goals of our org. This is a moment in time that's supposed to be about listening after all. This is a process, it has no zero, it's not a vacuum. At present we are roughly 15% black as is America. We are shaping a future, an economic, creative, and social future, one where black people have participatory power. If that's somehow not black enough for you then please address some other group/form/construct to critique because this future we are creating will make a significantly more open, anti-racist, pro-black, creative future. Feel free to cede your power and space to that future or add to its generativity but understand that we won't slow down.[24]

I quote Hall's response in full here for the ways he so strongly articulated what Catalytic Sound is, why it is important and the problems with the assumptions underlying the original comment. As Hall identifies, where that person faltered was in their assumption that the decision to put together and name the compilation was the work and decision of one person, Ken Vandermark. What they did not realize was

[24] Ben Hall, Instagram comment, June 21, 2020.

that Catalytic Sound *is* a collective, that all the musicians had agreed on the title even if Clapp had been the one to name it. Fueled by Hall's words the group slowly decided that they would keep the original name. Joe McPhee, the eldest and a deeply respected musician of the group weighed in by saying, "May we keep our eyes on the prize, keep putting one foot before the other, testing to see if the way is secure, and move on. Ken and everyone at Catalytic KEEP GOING! Music is indeed THE HEALING FORCE OF THE UNIVERSE. Let us play on!"[25]

Keep going, which was also the title of McPhee contribution to the compilation, became a rallying cry that others in the group echoed and amplified. In his brief message, McPhee also draws a connection between Catalytic Sounds and the history of the music by invoking the title of Albert Ayler's last studio album released in 1969, *Music is the Healing Force in the Universe*. In this connection and in Hall's articulation I understand the ways Catalytic Sound is not only dedicated to "the transformational power of Black music" in function, but also form.[26] When McPhee says "play on," I believe he means both the playing of music and the kind of back and forth of *playing* at the center of the ways Catalytic Sound operates as an organization.[27] By this I mean to suggest that there is a radical politics found in the ways the musicians organize themselves in both the music they play and in the processes of Catalytic Sound.

[25] Email from Joe McPhee to Catalytic Sound cooperative, June, 21 2020.
[26] Ben Hall, Instagram comment, June 21, 2020.

From the beginning, I believe there were always those who saw the transformational potential of Catalytic Sound. Though communication was always a struggle when I was manager, I always had the sense that Vandermark and I were not alone in feeling that the collective could be something more than a record store. During those pre-pandemic times, many of the musicians were likely too busy and engulfed in the "constant hustle" Dave Rempis described earlier of making experimental music in a societal system that allows very little space for it. However, when the pandemic struck and the collective came under attack out of a misunderstanding of its collectivity, what I and others had worked so hard to lay the groundwork for, a true sense of collectivity, appeared from the earth like a mushroom. In the end the negativity of the social media attack was far less important than the unexpected positivity that it prompted. In closing, I want to emphasize the ways Catalytic Sound reached this version of deep togetherness and collectivity only through the difficult work of consciously building strong and deep foundations. I return to Solnit and her ideas of political change through the words of Vandermark:

> It's so weird that for so many years, including the time you were here, we tried so hard to get people behind what we were doing. Saying "we want to help raise money for you, help us do it." to where we are at now, where because of all this stuff that's been faced, and how we are trying to work together as a group of twenty-four to solve those problems together, and suddenly we have created that collective spirit after trying for so long, and that's kind of fascinating. You can have the idea. And you can develop the idea organically. You can try to communicate it as best you can. You can be transparent. You can do all the things that we were doing when you were here, which were total game changers, all of them: the way we approached communication, the subscription idea, the mission statement ideas, thinking of members as part of the co-op. All those ideas totally

> transformed it. And still, even with all those changes, it was very hard to get the feedback from members or partners.
>
> And then this crisis happened, and it changed the group. And man, it was very heavy, because as you know, social media is the worst place to try to articulate any kind of complex communication. The feedback from every single member of the collective was like we're doing the right thing here. And maybe it wasn't articulated in the best way we can work on that part of it. But that moment brought everybody together to say: "We believe in this. We don't want to change it; we won't back down from it."[28]

In this chapter, I have described the ways the Catalytic Sound network expanded to twenty-four musicians in 2018 and 2020. By using visual models of the network, I have investigated both the center and the periphery to examine the ways Catalytic Sound is an extension of Vandermark's community-centered music practice and represents a potential tool for correcting the under representation of non-cis-male improvisors in the creative music scene. I have also contended that COVID-19 has been another actor in the network of Catalytic Sound that precipitated a dramatic unification of the collective in June 2020. Overarchingly, I have used the metaphor of political activism Rebecca Solnit articulates to understand the ways the work of realizing a collective ideology of what Catalytic Sound is, is essentially political work. Much like the process of reassembly I have detailed previously, Catalytic Sound continues to manifest politically in a processual fashion from the work of many people over the ten years of the cooperative's existence.

[28] Ken Vandermark, interview with the author, October 10, 2020.

Chapter 5: The Catalytic Sound Festival

In this chapter, I examine the ways the 2020 Catalytic Sound Festival continued the formative process I described in the previous chapter within the collective and initiated another shift in the changing position of the public toward the cooperative. Using the historical parallel of the Jazz Composers Guild's 1964 *October Revolution in Jazz* I investigate the ways both festivals were important spaces for conversation about the specific issues each collective addressed. Turning to the Catalytic Sound Festival itself, I draw from my observations as a festival attendee and interviews after the fact to assess the ways the digital medium of the festival reflected and created space for the community surrounding Catalytic Sound.

If the communication around the *Juneteenth* compilation marked a moment of collective recognition of the significance of Catalytic Sound for the involved musicians, the online festival that took place a few weeks later was an outward expression of this newfound meaning. Like many musical events that took place during 2020, the Catalytic Sound Festival had been originally planned to take place in person. At the start of 2020, Clapp, Peñalva, and Vandermark had secured dates in a variety of Chicago venues and were making arrangements for a number of musicians to travel to the city for three evenings of music. When in-person music events shut down in mid-March, the Catalytic Sound team began rethinking the festival to be a streamed, digital event. Around the same time, Chicago non-profit music presenter and recording studio Experimental Sound Studio (ESS) launched their Quarantine Concerts series and live streaming channel on the Twitch platform. ESS was critical

in creating the infrastructure that would not only become the digital site of the Catalytic Sound Festival, but also helped to host events presented by similar organizations around the country.[1]

In this chapter, I situate the 2020 Catalytic Sound Festival in a historical conversation with the Jazz Composer Guild's 1964 *October Revolution in Jazz.* Historian and scholar Ben Piekut has identified the four night concert series, which took place at The Cellar in Manhattan, as the declarative beginning of the Jazz Composers Guild (JCG) collective/organization.[2] The JCG, which included Bill Dixon, Cecil Taylor, Carla and Paul Bley, Archie Shepp and Sun Ra, attempted to combat problems of representation and diminishing performance opportunities in the New York scene for what they called "new improvised music."[3] At the center of the organization's stated goals was the commitment to "protect the musicians and composers from the existing forces of exploitation and commerciality."[4] As part of this mission, the *October Revolution in Jazz* organized by Bill Dixon featured many then unknown names such as Roswell Rudd, John Tchicai, Lewis Worrell, Milford Graves, Joe Maneri, Alan Silva, Burton Greene, and Don Pullen. These musicians would become well-known proponents of free jazz and contemporary improvised

[1] The link between ESS and Catalytic Sound runs mostly through Vandermark who is a longtime collaborator with the organization on the Option concert series and often records there. ESS is also one of the main organizational players in the Chicago improvised music scene. As context, I was hired as manager through an internship I did at Experimental Sound Studio and would frequent the space, which was only a couple streets over from Vandermark's house.
[2] Benjamin D. Piekut, "Testing, Testing…: New York Experimentalism 1964," ProQuest Dissertations and Theses (Ph.D., Columbia University, 2008), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses A&I (304620659), https://search.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/testing-new-york-experimentalism-1964/docview/304620659/se-2?accountid=14523.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid, 208.

music in the next decade. While the Guild dissolved six months later due to constant disputes and disagreements between the musicians involved, the problems the JCG collectivized to address continue to this day. In Chapter Three, I brought Carla Bley and Mike Mantler's New Music Distribution Service into the conversation, which formed in the fallout of the JCG. In many ways, one can see Catalytic Sound as a contemporary continuation of these efforts existing somewhere between the business-like mechanics of the NMDS and the collective political ideology of the JCG. As a particular moment of historical overlap, I use the *October Revolution in Jazz* as a historical foil to the Catalytic Sound Festival. Through these comparisons I show the ways Catalytic Sound both aligns with and departs from a history of collective organizing by improvising musicians.

The festival idea had been floating around since the time I was manager at Catalytic Sound. In early 2019, we were already thinking of the festival as a way to make a public statement about the cooperative and collective being more than a record store. Though the mission statement and the membership service I have already written about were attempts to create this change in the minds of the musicians and supporters of the cooperative, it was clear when I left my position in June 2019 that many of those who were supporting were doing so as customers, expecting a product in return for their support as members or from shopping the online store. While the idea had been planted, there simply was not the time nor the resources to make a festival happen in 2019. One of the valuable skills Sam Clapp brought to the project when he was hired as manager in June 2019 was experience

with grant writing. The Catalytic Sound Festival in 2020 was funded in part by a grant from the Chicago Department of Culture and Special Events (DCASE).[5] In its entire ten-year history, this instance is the only time Catalytic Sound's activities have been funded by means other than record sales or subscriptions. Meditating on this fact for a moment, it is interesting to again consider the ways Catalytic Sound operates somewhere between a non-profit organization and a for-profit business. When speaking with Ken Vandermark, he often iterates the dictum that Catalytic Sound is a "for-profit" institution: "Catalytic has to profit because if we don't make money, no one gets paid. And the goal is to pay the musicians, right?"[6] At the same time, Catalytic Sound has rarely turned a profit. This moment, where Catalytic Sound began to operate more similarly to a non-profit by securing public arts money, caused questions from within the organization about whether Catalytic Sound should investigate becoming a legally recognized 501c3 organization. While gaining that title proved quickly to be impossible given the nature or Catalytic Sound's business of selling records, the exploration and question is significant for again showing the blurriness between businesses and non-profits in practice.

Returning to the planning process of the festival itself, one major shift that occurred when Clapp, Vandermark and Peñalva committed to doing an online festival was that they could invite all of the musicians to contribute, regardless of their geographic location. As Vandermark explains, this new digital reality of the festival

[5] Sam Clapp, interview with the author, July 14, 2020.
[6] Ken Vandermark, interview with the author, October 10, 2020.

helped to further strengthen and consolidate the collective energies that had formed in response to the *Juneteenth* crisis:

> Because of COVID, we couldn't do the in-person festival in Chicago, like we had planned. That was all in place and we had invited Terrie [Hessels] and Paal [Nilssen-Love] from Europe, but we couldn't present all the members. The irony was that in doing the online festival, we could represent everybody, including the new people who had just joined, to the public. So, in a sense, that further consolidated the sense of the group, everybody played, everybody's work was presented, and that further consolidated the conception of the group. Since then, that consolidation has accelerated, because with the communication about all the things going on, it truly feels like a cooperative.[7]

While holding the festival in Chicago would have been logical given the centrality of Vandermark's home to the cooperative's operations, it would not have been representative of the collective in the same way Dixon's *October Revolution in Jazz* was. Where the JCG festival, and events organized by other historical improvisor collectives such as the Association for the Advancement of Creative Music (Chicago), the Underground Musicians Association (Los Angeles), and the Instant Composer's Pool (Amsterdam), all represented their immediate geographic surroundings and the communities they were born out of, Catalytic Sound has no real geographic center. Catalyticsound.com and the social media around the site are the digital center of a collective that has, from its beginning, reflected an international creative improvised music scene. Understood in this way, the online, streamed festival that took place in July 2020 was actually much more representative of the community of Catalytic Sound than a festival in Chicago would have been.

[7] Ibid.

The tenth edition Catalytic Quarterly was a printed program of the online festival. A few lines of text on the front cover read: "Three days of performance, discussion, and new work from the Catalytic co-op and their collaborators."[8] Thumbing through the document, one finds biographies of forty-one musicians, artists, organizers and web developers who were a part of making the festival happen. Along with the twenty-four musicians of the Catalytic Sound collective performances and discussions also featured non-Catalytic musicians Frode Gjerstad, Macie Stewart, Andrew Clinkman, Phil Sudderberg, Steve Marquette, Susan Alcorn, Håkon Kornstad; writer and curator John Corbett; Olivia Junell, the director of outreach and development at Experimental Sound Studio; Nate Cross of Astral Spirits Records; and visual artists Kim Alpert, Patrick Cain, and Federico Peñalva. The inclusion of these musicians, organizers, and artists illustrates the broader network of people who interact with Catalytic Sound either through musical association or by supporting other similar organizational projects. The festival program also took time to highlight the work of manager Sam Clapp, visual artist Dan Grzeca (who made the festival poster), and web developers Santiago Quintana and Max Oppenheimer, who built a page for viewing the festival within the Catalytic Sound website. In this way, the festival performed a more expansive kind of networking that perforated the borders of the collective between the included musicians and non-musicians who were otherwise unacknowledged on the Catalytic Sound website and store. In this way, the festival

[8] Catalytic Sound, "Catalytic Quarterly #10" (Catalytic Sound, July 2020).

situated Catalytic Sound within an even broader community of musicians, organizations and record labels.

With regard to programming, each day of the festival featured performances from eight musicians or groups and one panel discussion between three panelists and a moderator. The majority of the performances were prerecorded in an effort to present higher quality audio and video. However, there were a number of musicians and groups who opted to experiment with live performances via Zoom or some other video conferencing software. Each panel discussion focused on a specific topic: "Art/Music" moderated by John Corbett, "DIY/Funding" moderated by Olivia Junell, and "What's Next" moderated by Ken Vandermark. These discussions have an interesting historical precedent and parallel in the *October Revolution in Jazz.* As Piekut details, Dixon's festival also included panel discussions each day on the topics of "Jim Crow and Crow Jim," "The Economics of Jazz," "The Rise of Folk Music and the Decline of Jazz," and "Jazz Composition."[9] With the exception of the specific focus on and classification of Jazz, there are many similarities between the two collections of panels. Both included discussions of economics and aesthetics of the music, while also giving space for discussing the future. Notably one of the other main differences between the two panel discussions is the attention paid to race in the JCG's festival. While 1964 was certainly a very different moment of racial segregation than 2020, it is worth noting that the Catalytic Sound Festival took place during the continued Black Lives Matter movement surrounding the police killing of

[9] Piekut, "Testing, Testing…", 194.

George Floyd in Minneapolis that summer. In this climate and especially following the *Juneteenth* compilation as has been previously discussed, the musicians of Catalytic Sound were certainly thinking about and discussing race and representation internally. However, these conversations never materialized publicly aside from the response to the Instagram comment.

The historical context of the JCG and its relationship to African American political ideologies of the time is a complex and multilayered one that Piekut details in his chapter on the group.[10] Where Catalytic Sound perhaps intersects with the history of the JCG is the ways Catalytic Sound represents a multiracial collective of musicians, with the music, not race acting as the central tenant. However, given the history of this music and the historical shift one witnesses from majority-Black collectives of the 1960s and 1970s to the majority-White collective of Catalytic Sound of the 2010s, there is certainly a conversation to be had about race and representation in the creative improvised music scene. As Ben Hall told me: "I will be on tour and show up to the gig and it's like ninety-four white people and they're all men. And it doesn't seem very open, and generous in a way. When I walk into those rooms, I often feel like an outsider. If I bring a girlfriend, she feels like outsider, because she might be one of two or three women out of fifty. And then if that woman happens to be brown, it's just like another outsider thing."[11] The scene Hall describes is one that neither reflects the history of creative improvised music in the United

[10] Ibid, 200-286.
[11] Ben Hall, interview with the author, February 26, 2021.

States nor the diversity of players who currently play it. While a thorough investigation of these observations is beyond the scope of my current project, I do think it is important to acknowledge and recognize the ways Catalytic Sound *is* about race merely through its representation of a scene that has deep historical ties to African American music making and experimentalism.

Returning to the Catalytic Sound Festival's capacity to represent the full roster of involved musicians through the online festival, the event was also able to reach the international community of fans who support the cooperative. As I have written about previously, since Vandermark and I penned the mission statement in 2018, the cooperative has been engaged with shifting the role of the customer. Later in 2018, the membership program opened up the potential for the patron role in the ecosystem of Catalytic Sound. This patron role expanded in 2020 during the COVID-19 crisis. One of the initiatives Catalytic Sound started, the Artist Relief Fund, was novel for the ways it connected fans and artists in a strict mode of financial support without the exchange of goods. In 2020, the cooperative was able to raise over ten-thousand dollars for artists through these donations.[12] While this show of support was certainly a shift in the nature of interaction, it was still a unidirectional interaction between artists and fans. By this I mean, it was an interaction that hinged on giving and receiving money, it opened up no new channels of association or communication. The festival was the first occasion in the ten-year history of Catalytic Sound where fans were not only able to communicate directly with the artists they support *en masse*, but

[12] Catalytic Sound accounting documents, 2020.

also, more importantly, with each other. These public conversations, enabled by the Twitch streaming platform chat, were one of the most interesting and important by-products of the online festival.

As an attendee of the festival, it quickly became clear to me that people were tuning into the event from around the world. Viewership for all three days was consistently between one-hundred fifty and two-hundred people – far more than could have fit in any of the Chicago venues of the original planning. There were names in the chat I recognized from my time in the Chicago scene and many that I recognized as recurring Catalytic Sound customers from my days taping postage to CD packages as manager. Early starts to the festival, 1:00 p.m. Central time, accommodated the many viewers and musicians tuning in from Europe. In my notes on the festival, I mentioned people identifying from places as far afield as Brooklyn, Milwaukee, Rio de Janiero, England, Ireland, Poland, Buenos Aires, and Belgium. In one particularly interesting comment a viewer identified themselves as being from "Redneck TrumpTown in Florida" and followed up by noting, "where I live there's never a show like this so I'm not complaining."[13] This comment stood out to me for the way it perhaps typifies the significance of Catalytic Sound as a digital and international collective. As mentioned during Chapter Three, I was shocked by the many addresses I frequently shipped records to that were off the beaten path, away from both geographic centers of creative improvised music and the normal touring stops of

[13] Screen capture, Catalytic Sound Festival, Day 3.

musicians like Ken Vandermark.[14] While it is difficult to know how many of these customers became fans of the music, Catalytic Sound, even from its beginnings as a record store, has offered these geographically distanced fans a way to listen to and support the musicians of the collective. The festival was a unique opportunity for these many fans of the music who live in places where they lack both opportunities to see these musicians perform live *and* be a part of the communities that surround these performances to commune in this space.

With these many conversations happening, both on the stream in the form of fruitful public panel discussion and in the chat on the right side of the screen, I had the feeling of a sudden broad realization of *what* Catalytic Sound is in the minds of everyone involved. In the journal entry I took after Day Two of the festival I wrote:

> I am not the first to say this, but live streaming does not offer a substitute for the live performance, it did not before Covid and it will not after Covid. However, in the time of Covid, the Catalytic Sound Festival offers what Ben Hall called in the discussion yesterday a kind of *restorative moment* for the many improvising musicians whose ways of life have been so impacted by the current moment. It is truly staggering to look at the list of names of those performing—a list made even more broad by the virtual nature of the festival. Virtual or not, the festival seems to be a stake in the ground, if only for the performers and audience of what Catalytic Sound is, why Catalytic Sound matters and what the potentials of collective energy can create. In reality, Catalytic Sound is a virtual cooperative — it is a digital marketplace that establishes a community of listeners and players across locales and scenes.[15]

Responding to this journal entry now, I return to the idea of the restorative moment the festival provided. As I understand it now, the idea of restoration not only implies

[14] Catalytic Sound shipping data, 2019.
[15] Author's personal journal.

a certain relationship or return to an imagined past, as in restoring to an original condition, but also implies a relationship to the present in which one is reenergized and realigned to move forward. While the festival provided an obvious platform of artistic exchange and collaboration stolen from the creative lives of improvising musicians whose practice centers on the corporality of exchanging sounds, it also energized and brought together a new idea of Catalytic Sound's significance to the collective of people in attendance.

Understanding restoration as a forward-looking process, as I think Hall does, one can decipher countless comments in the chat of the Catalytic Sound Festival as significant to reaching the collective understanding of the cooperative that for so many years had been imagined in the minds of a few. While there were many comments over the weekend that clearly expressed gratitude for the festival, a sense of belonging with fellow viewers and musicians, and a belief in the artistic and social significance of the music, the chats during the panel discussions provided the richest evidence of cooperative understanding and ownership. During all three of the moderated discussions, interesting and worthwhile conversations about what Catalytic Sound is and how it can function better happened between viewers. In allowing for these synchronous and separate conversations, the Catalytic Sound Festival stream effectively brought community members and people into the active process of assemblage going on at Catalytic Sound. This sort of engagement was a radical step toward the kinds of cooperative structures Catalytic Sound has long been trying to build. Much like the *Juneteenth* compilation, it took an unexpected crisis of

the COVID-19 pandemic and an online festival to effectively bring the dispersed constituents of the cooperative to the table.

Beyond simply gesture, many of the ideas generated by the community in the chat over the course of the weekend have had a real impact on how Vandermark and the other musicians of the cooperative think about the project. In one instance, Vandermark spoke with me about a question in the chat about the "Eurocentric" make-up of Catalytic Sound.[16] These questions caused a self-reflection for Vandermark on the ways the cooperative formed around his own musical community. In a similar vein, Vandermark referenced a friend who posted in the chat during the festival about the potential of Catalytic Sound becoming a gatekeeper through dictating an inside and outside of the collective.[17] This question has greatly influenced the entire conception of Catalytic Sound moving forward as what Vandermark now describes as "a model to be used by others to generate collectives all over the place. And the hope would be that the collectives, as an ongoing larger entity, could also work together and share resources, for the same reasons that the improvising mentality works within the Catalytic situation. Because we're not competing with each other, we're contributing to each other."[18] As part of this effort, Catalytic Sound is currently working on producing a document that describes how the cooperative has formed and functions with the specific intention of inspiring others to do the same. Similarly, the Catalytic Soundstream, a streaming services specifically

[16] Ken Vandermark, interview with the author, July 22, 2020.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ken Vandermark, interview with the author, October 10, 2020.

for the musicians of Catalytic Sound unveiled in 2021, is entirely open source and designed to "eventually integrate with other collectives so their content gets synced to our system as it gets published automatically."[19] Thus, the conversations generated during the festival not only contributed to a collective, public understanding of the significance of the collective, but have also affected the decision-making process and future of the cooperative.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge the festival as a moment of meaning making and joy for Catalytic Sound. As Vandermark described to me:

> After calling ourselves a cooperative and trying to articulate that to the public for years. The festival changed everything. People suddenly saw this group of twenty-four musicians and visual artists and other musicians all talking to each other, either through the panel discussions, through the chat, or through the performances themselves. And suddenly there was this collective feeling of, oh wait, this is actually a thing… you could feel like something happening. We hoped it would be good, we hoped we would do a good job with, but this went way beyond what I expected. There was like this galvanization, and it started with the music and performances being so amazing and creative…All I could think was *Wow* and I haven't felt like that since the last gig I had…I finally had this feeling like "this is why I make music" because it was so engaged. Socially and creatively engaged toward a level that made me fall in music in the first place.[20]

What Vandermark touches on here so poignantly is the real meaning of music for him that came through during the festival. This meaning is one derived directly from the social functions of the music whether that is being and playing with other musicians or the broader community context that supports and surrounds the music. In a time where this being together was made impossible through the COVID pandemic,

[19] Email from web designer, Santiago Quintana, April 8, 2021
[20] Ken Vandermark, interview with the author, July 22, 2020.

Catalytic Sound has proven its worth as a site of collectivity for the dispersed and isolated communities of both musicians and fans who constitute the organization. Through the galvanizing effect of the festival, one can begin to understand Catalytic Sound's meaning and value as not only a cooperative, but also a supportive *community* of people who have helped each other throughout one of the most difficult times for those who derive joy and meaning from making and listening to improvised music. Beyond conveying the ideology and meaning of Catalytic Sound to the public, the festival illustrated the potential for the cooperative to be a digital community center for the dispersed group of musicians and fans it represents.

In this chapter I have described the Catalytic Sound Festival as a virtual site of community formation and restoration during the Covid-19 global pandemic. I have called attention to the ways the circumstances of the pandemic, forced the festival into digital space and in doing so, perhaps better represented the network of Catalytic Sound. Through a historical comparison with the Jazz Composers Guild and the *October Revolution in Jazz* I have attempted to show the ways the festival related to a history of collective organizing to stage both music and conversation. Lastly, I have investigated the ways the festival actively engaged with and widened the network of actors who have influenced the direction of Catalytic Sound through the Twitch streaming platform medium. Looking to the future, it will be interesting to witness if and how Catalytic Sound continues to engage the community of fans who support and are a vital part of the cooperative.

Chapter 6: The Catalytic Soundstream

On January 2, 2021, Catalytic Sound unveiled the Catalytic Soundstream on Facebook and Instagram as "an artist-owned streaming service that pays musicians fairly."[1] Ideas about creating a streaming service for Catalytic Sound artists had been around since before I took over as manager of the cooperative in 2018. As referenced in my previous chapter on the creation of the membership service, Vandermark wrote an article in the first edition of the *Catalytic Quarterly* journal on "Catalytic Sound, DIY, and the Challenge of 21st Century Sustainability." In the article, Vandermark identified one of the major challenges as "the loss of income from record sales at shows…[and] record sales in general."[2] He went on to detail the financial differences of touring in the United States in the 1990s and 2010s and eventually focused on streaming services—Spotify in particular—as a primary reason for these negative differences. Rather than calling for an end to streaming music, Vandermark acknowledges that "Pandora's Box is wide open on the internet."[3] By this, Vandermark referred to the ways he believed streaming and the music file-sharing that preceded it, are situations musicians will need to adapt to rather than attempt to dismantle or ignore. In the article, he called for fans to actively support artist-run initiatives like Catalytic Sound and solutions that enact an ethic he describes as "Do It Yourself, together."[4] Writing now in 2021, Vandermark's words in 2018 clearly have

[1] Catalytic Sound (@catalytic_sound), "Announcing the Catalytic Soundstream," Instagram photo, January 2, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CJjYOyTgaVn/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.
[2] Ken Vandermark, "Catalytic Sound, DIY and the Challenges of 21st Century Sustainability," Catalytic Quarterly, April 2018, https://catalyticsound.com/quarterly/1/index.html.
[3] Ibid, pg. 3.
[4] Ibid. pg. 4.

proven to be prophetic. While change took root slowly and manifested in the ways I have described throughout this thesis, there is a clear, traceable line of thinking and activity one can draw between the unveiling of the Catalytic Soundstream in 2021 and Vandermark's critique of Spotify in 2018.

In the last few months, I have again become involved in Catalytic Sound as a volunteer web developer. In doing so, I have come full circle from my involvement in the early sketchbook ideas for a streaming site to now working on a fully operating partial manifestation of these ideas. In this role I have worked with the developers who built the Soundstream website to learn the structure and mechanics of the application. I volunteered to help the collective in this way not as a researcher, but out of my continued interest in helping the cooperative. However, in that time, my research and web development work have intertwined in unexpected ways. In this chapter, I explore how the Catalytic Soundstream differs from the dominant music streaming platforms, specifically Spotify. I will show how these differences address economic and aesthetic aspects of Spotify that inhibit Catalytic Sound artists from having success on the platform. In doing so, I hope to show how the structure and design of the Soundstream reflects the broader mission of Catalytic Sound and, as a case study, illustrates the *Do It Yourself, together* ethos Vandermark first named in 2018.

When I talked to Vandermark during the development phase of the streaming service, he was candid in noting: "I don't stream music, I am just not interested in that. But I am not ignorant enough to believe that other people don't use it and that it

isn't important to like a whole stratum of the listening audience."[5] Given the heavy focus on physical objects within the collector-centric world of creative improvised music I have already detailed elsewhere, Vandermark's opinion is likely one shared by many fans of the music. When I was manager, friends and family would often be surprised when I told them the number of CDs we were selling on a weekly basis. This commitment to the CD and skepticism towards streaming not only relates to the desire to collect physical artifacts, but also the audiophilic attitude I detailed in Chapter One. When the Catalytic Sound released the Soundstream, one of the top comments on the announcing Patreon post was "What's the bitrate? Regular Soundcloud is only 128, is that right?"[6] These attitudes speak to a desire to experience something as close as possible to the live music event through superior listening environments and sound quality. Given these opinions, why should Catalytic Sound focus energy toward developing a streaming service or the digital music object in general?

I pondered this question when I first started as manager of Catalytic Sound. In looking into cash flows and sales in a more detailed way than had ever been done, I found that, to both my and Vandermark's surprise, nearly forty percent of Catalytic sales on Bandcamp in 2018 were digital records.[7] Thus, despite the attitudes I have presented above, a fair amount of those who bought music from Catalytic Sound were interested in the digital albums for offer. Accordingly, more than merely an

[5] Ken Vandermark, interview with the author, July 22, 2021.
[6] "Catalytic Sound Is Creating Sustainable Income for Experimental Musicians," Patreon, accessed April 24, 2021, https://www.patreon.com/catalyticsound.
[7] Catalytic Sound financial data, 2018.

ideological statement, the idea of creating a streaming service for Catalytic Sound actually had relevancy to generating revenue for the project. I believe part of my ability to notice this trend, stemmed from the relationship I have had throughout my life with digital music relative to the older members of the cooperative. As I gain distance from my time as manager, I see this latter fact—my age—as increasingly significant to my impact on the cooperative. While Vandermark and many of those I referenced who may have no desire to use music streaming platforms are of a certain older generation, every one of my friends, regardless of their music preferences, streams music. I used Spotify from when it first hit the major market in 2012 to when I cancelled my subscription last year. Without Spotify, I still mostly stream music I buy on Bandcamp and use internet radio when I listen to music. I believe these perspectives and Vandermark's own research and abhorrence of Spotify combined to give urgency to the Catalytic streaming service idea.

Though we were talking about the idea with the web developer who built catalyticsound.com when I left the manager position in 2019, it would take until winter of 2020 and a team of two new developers, Santiago Quintana and Max Oppenheimer, to really start work on the project. Acknowledging these three developers' significance to the project as a whole, and their less visible, digital labor is important for expanding the cooperative network to include not only those doing musical labor but also the non-musical labor necessary to the ongoing functioning of the project. Importantly, Quintana and Oppenheimer agreed to do their work for far less money than they would typically charge. As manager Sam Clapp told me, "If

they had been charging the $60 or $75 an hour that web developers usually charge, it would have totally been impossible. It would have cost five times as much."[8] These sorts of sacrifices, made by those other than the musicians, are essential to the continued operation of Catalytic Sound. They speak to an underlying, anti-capitalist, cooperative economics in which there are, as Vandermark says, "many ways to be paid."[9] As Vandermark continues about the web designers who built the Catalytic Soundstream:

> They get paid way less than they would be paid normally for their work. And they're doing that because they believe in what we're doing at Catalytic, they're excited by it, and they want to be involved. We told them, we can pay you this much, does that work for you? And they said yes. And they said yes, not because what we're paying them is enough based on their corporate rate, but because they're getting paid in part through being involved in a project that's bigger than a corporate project that has a bigger and more meaning for them.[10]

This phenomenon is not specific to Catalytic Sound but occurs throughout most of the organizations and small businesses that makes the creative improvised music scene run. Nate Cross, the owner and operator of Astral Spirits records told me "my partner and I both have great day jobs, we own our home, we have a comfortable life in general and so I don't need the money from the label when that money can go toward artists or go toward future projects that could help in other ways."[11] When I volunteered and worked at both the Elastic Arts Foundation and Experimental Sound Studio, two organizations that support the Chicago improvised music scene, I was one

[8] Sam Clapp, interview with the author, July 27, 2020.
[9] Ken Vandermark, interview with the author, July, 22 2020.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Nate Cross, email correspondence with the author, August 4, 2020.

of many formal and informal volunteers who offered our labor for the continued advancement of the organization and the music. At the same time, there is a double edge to this logic of receiving payment other than money that musicians, especially those making marginal music, find levied at them. When talking about this with the drummer Ben Hall, who supports himself financially as a restaurant owner and teacher, he was candid about the tiring nature of the financial trade-off improvising musicians are constantly asked to make for their labor. Speaking about being offered an opening gig at a DIY venue in his own hometown, Hall said:

> I'm getting too old for this. And it's not like I don't want to play it and I don't value that energy exchange. But how am I going to go into that situation and what am I going to actually get out of it? If I'm not going to get paid, am I going to get something out of it? And secondarily, on the energy exchange level, do I even have something to offer? Is this a place where the offering is meaningful? I think that it's a little bit like we're at a casino. And we keep playing at the $50 table, but we've got to play at the $500 table, just because of time management.[12]

These are the kinds of mental calculations the musicians of Catalytic Sound are often forced to make when the question of payment comes up for their musical labor. One of the problems Hall gestures towards is that playing creative improvised music demands both a high amount of time and energy for it to be a worthwhile experience. It is a rigorous musical form that often requires great instrumental dexterity and a dedication to developing one's unique language and voice – it is not something one can simply phone in. For these reasons it is both incredibly rewarding as an art form (the non-monetary payment Vandermark references) and has the potential to be

[12] Ben Hall, interview with the author, February 26, 2021.

draining when one confronts the realities of a capitalist society in which, as Vandermark says, "you have to have health insurance, you have to pay rent, you have bills, you have to buy food and everything else."[13] This is the exact problem Catalytic Sound attempts to intervene in and aims toward creating a supportive network of economic resources that find a better balance between effort, time, fulfillment and financial sustenance than is currently possible.

The Spotify Problem

One of the main problems with music streaming as it currently exists, is how it handles and has rewritten the kind of musical value I have outlined above. Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and its accompanying economic crisis for musicians in the United States and Europe, many journalists and musicians have pressured Spotify and other music streaming services to pay artists more. The most visible of these efforts in the United States has been the Union of Musicians and Allied Workers and the Musician Workers Alliance who have organized rallies, policy proposals, and social media campaigns to call for more equitable streaming payment structures from Spotify.[14] The critiques these efforts are based in have been a part of the discourse around music streaming since Spotify first gained international prominence and use in the early 2010s. Briefly outlining this issue we can turn to

[13] Ken Vandermark, interview with the author, July 22, 2021.
[14] Ben Sisario, "Musicians Say Streaming Doesn't Pay. Can the Industry Change?," *The New York Times*, May 7, 2021, sec. Arts, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/07/arts/music/streaming-music-payments.html.

Spotify's own description of their payment model. In a two-minute, fifty second video detailing the way artist payouts work at the company, the makers quickly gloss over that royalty revenues are calculated not specific to individual plays, but as a proportion of an artist's plays to the whole of plays per month.[15] This model is called a pro-rata plan, and means that the users of Spotify do not exercise a one-to-one, play-to-pay dynamic for the artists they listen to. In effect, all the revenue Spotify generates either from subscriptions or advertising goes into one pot. The company then divides and pays out portions of this pot based on the ratio of listens each artist has received that month against the total listens on the platform. To put this in more concrete terms, if I only listened to one album over the course of a month, my ten dollars subscription will not directly reach the creator of that album. It will instead feed the larger pie and will mostly pay out to artists I did not listen to. This is the main economic problem with streaming for aesthetically marginal music like creative improvised music. While I have shown how this music attracts dedicated fans who would stream repeatedly, though in smaller numbers, these streams are miniscule in comparison to the stream counts of the largest pop artists. The pro-rata structure also means that the more songs streamed and the more users Spotify gains, the more diluted payout for one play becomes as measured by the top earners. In 2018, this dollar amount was reported at $0.00134 per stream, which is lowest rate of any streaming platform aside from YouTube.[16] To put this number in perspective, an artist

[15] *How Spotify Pays Artists*, accessed March 19, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZ6BE-NLJYY&feature=emb_logo.
[16] Chris Castle, "@realrobcopeland: WSJ Reports Google Reveals YouTube Revenues of $15 Billion of Value Gap, CEO Wants More–Where's Ours?," *Artist Rights Watch--News for the Artist Rights*

would need to accrue nearly *nine million* streams a year to break the U.S. poverty threshold of $11,770 a year, hardly a number most non-commercial, independent, let alone experimental, musicians can feasibly reach.[17]

While this is obviously an important aspect of why Spotify does not work for the musicians of Catalytic Sound, I see a deeper, ideological problem with the ways Spotify creates and assesses value for music on the platform. Spotify makes money primarily through user subscriptions, data gathering and selling, and advertiser revenue on the free version of the service.[18] All of these factors lead to a system where music is only valuable to Spotify in so much that people listen to it in large numbers drawing them to the platform where auxiliary data can be harvested and resold. Thus, it makes sense that the value Spotify assigns to music commodities has to do with their playability. Furthermore, within its platform, Spotify has created a micro neoliberal economy in which the musicians must compete with each other for these plays and their according value to find success. These valuations also have aesthetic implications as they promote a kind of music suitable for what media scholar Annahid Kassabian has called "ubiquitous listening."[19] He writes, "whereas we are accustomed to thinking of most musics, and most cultural products, in terms of

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Advocacy Community (blog), February 4, 2020, https://artistrightswatch.com/2020/02/04/realrobcopeland-wsj-reports-google-reveals-youtube-revenues-of-15-billion-of-value-gap-ceo-wants-more-wheres-ours/.

[17] This calculation also fails to account for the amount of money it takes to produce a song or album that could potentially attract millions of streams.

[18] Maria Eriksson, *Spotify Teardown : Inside the Black Box of Streaming Music*, *Spotify Teardown : Inside the Black Box of Streaming Music* (Cambridge: MIT Press, n.d.).

[19] Anahid Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention, and Distributed Subjectivity*, Fletcher Jones Foundation Humanities Imprint (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

authorship and location, this music comes from the plants and the walls and, potentially, our clothes. It comes from everywhere and nowhere. Its projection looks to erase its production as much as possible, posing instead as a quality of the environment."[20]

Liz Pelly, a journalist who has written about Spotify over the last few years identified this aesthetic of music made for ubiquity as a kind of contemporary Muzak. As she writes, the wildly popular playlists "Chill Tracks," "chill.out.brain" and "Focus Mix" all work toward Spotify's bottom-line by attracting "an audience of distracted, perhaps overworked, or anxious listeners whose stress-filled clicks now generate anesthetized, algorithmically designed playlists."[21] However, many musicians, like those of Catalytic Sound, are not interested in making music that easily fits the Spotify agenda. Much of the music on the Catalytic Sound platform offers something expressly different from the kind of easy, background listening I and others have identified as part of the Spotify paradigm. As John Corbett pokes fun at in his book, *A Listener's Guide to Free Improvisation:*

> Six things improvised music records are not good for:
> 1. Fun at a dance party.
> 2. A backdrop for nookie.
> 3. Studying.
> 4. Dinner music.
> 5. Reliving a favorite concert.
> 6. Experiencing the open-endedness of improvisation.[22]

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[20] Ibid, 39.
[21] Liz Pelly, "The Problem with Muzak," *The Baffler*, December 4, 2017, https://thebaffler.com/salvos/the-problem-with-muzak-pelly.
[22] John Corbett, *A Listener's Guide to Free Improvisation,* 99.

While there is obviously some humor to this list, it is quite clear that the first four of the list are pretty much exactly what music designed for maximum profitability on Spotify and Apple Music and the playlist categories that dominate the respective services is good for. The music of Catalytic Sound can be challenging. In my experience as a listener, it demands my full attention and is not something I would put on as the background to nearly anything. For this reason, when I buy a record of improvised music, I do so knowing I will likely listen to it fewer times than the other pop records in my collection, however, if anything, I assign these records a higher value for the attention they demand of me. Thus, regardless of how much Spotify pays artists per stream, the entire platform has always promoted a style of music listening antithetical to the kind of listening the music of Catalytic Sound requires.

The Catalytic Soundstream

With these incongruities between the values of creative improvised music and the values of music to Spotify in mind, one can begin to consider how the Catalytic Soundstream offers a viable alternative through a *DIY, together* ethos. As I have already detailed, the Soundstream is owned by the musicians of Catalytic Sound and was created through a system of cooperative labor-sharing in which the ethical value and meaning of the project took precedence over money for the developers. Technologically speaking, the site is extremely small scale compared to Spotify. It uses Soundcloud as a work-around for hosting and playing the music, only features one-hundred albums for streaming at a time and represents the digital catalogs of the

thirty artists involved and a handful of associated labels. Outside of Google analytics that measure site traffic, it does not collect user listening data and does not offer an individualized listening experience through recommendation algorithms. Given these differences in scale, I believe it is important to view the Catalytic Soundstream as a solution to the problems created by Spotify rather than a competitor to the tech giant. In fact, much of the Soundstream solution has to do with the small scale it deals in. To better illustrate these differences, I have included screenshots below in Figures 6.1 and 6.2 of the two services:

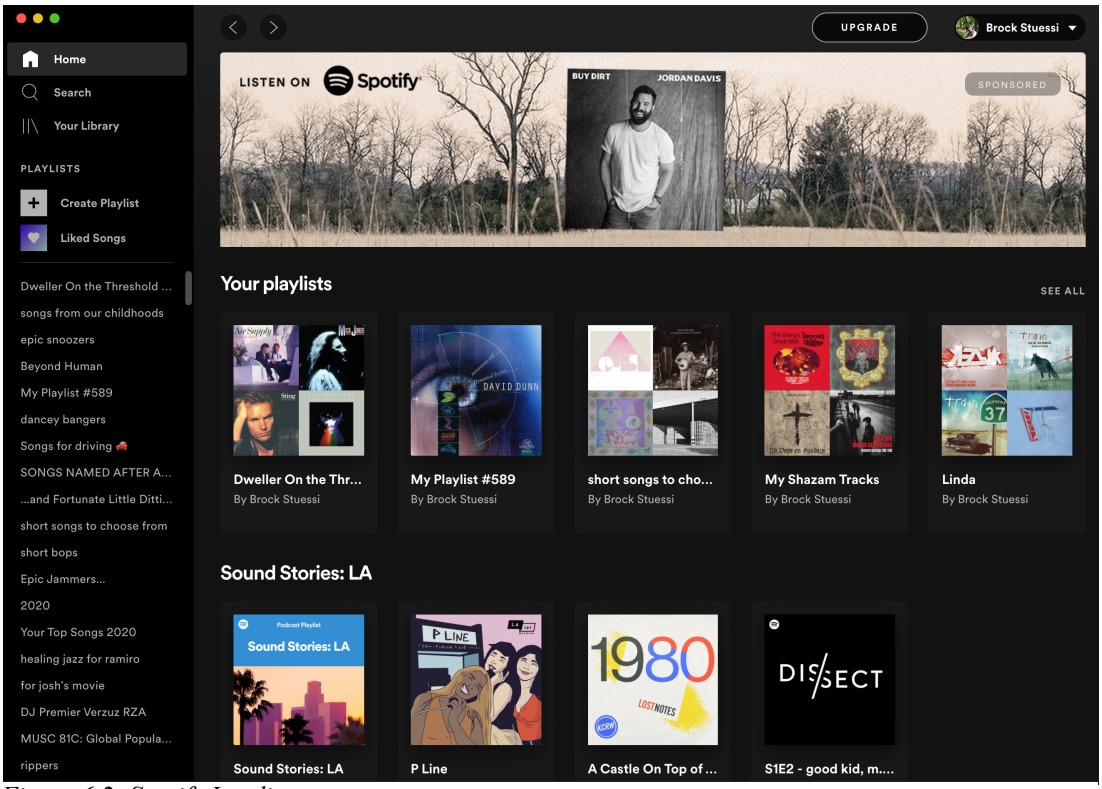

Figure 6.2: Spotify Landing screen

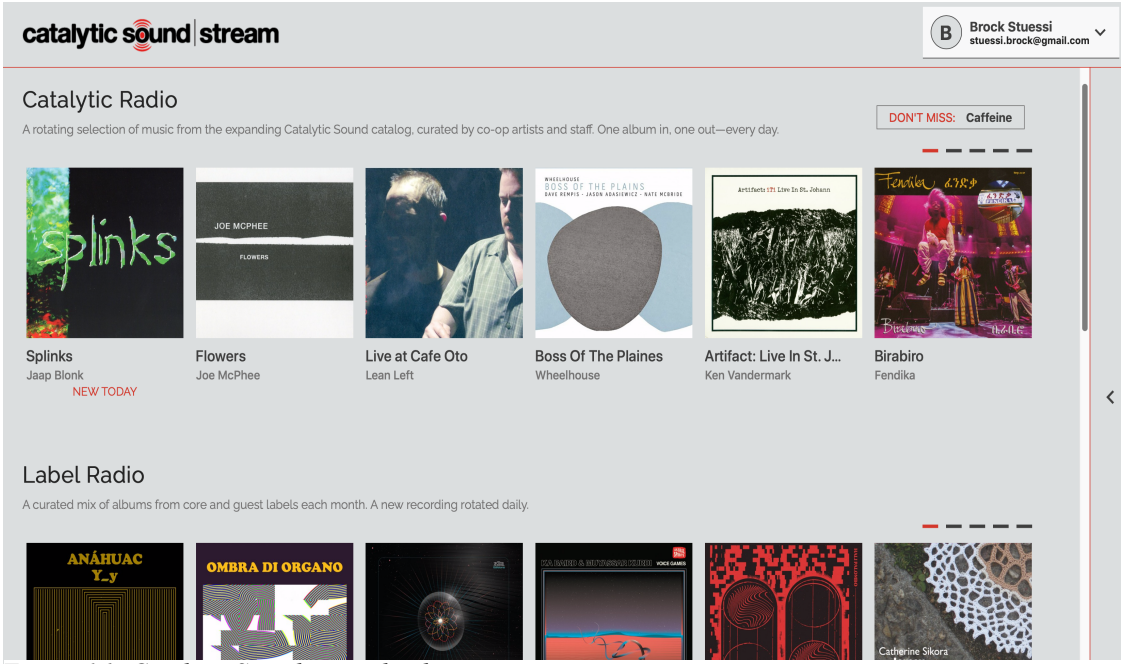

Figure 6.1: Catalytic Soundstream landing page

On first impression, there are some obvious similarities in design between the two platforms. They both utilize horizontally scrolling sets of squares as major parts of their interface. However, where these squares and the navigation on the left side of the screen represent playlists, user created and algorithmically created, the Catalytic Soundstream centers on albums. Under the "Catalytic Radio" heading, one reads "a rotating selection of music from the expanding Catalytic Sound catalog, curated by co-op artists and staff. One album in, one out—every day." Thus, where Spotify represents a seemingly endless sea of music accessed through playlists and a search bar, the Catalytic Soundstream presents a rotating, finite selection of music, curated for the listener. These design choices emphasize albums and a highly refined collection curated by the musicians themselves. In doing so, Catalytic Sound's streaming service emulates something many of the cooperative's patrons could easily recognize – the brick-and-mortar record store. Taking this model one step farther, when I listen to an album on the Soundstream, I see a note from the curator on why they selected that album and have an opportunity to view and buy the album from Catalytic Sound on Bandcamp (Figure 6.3):

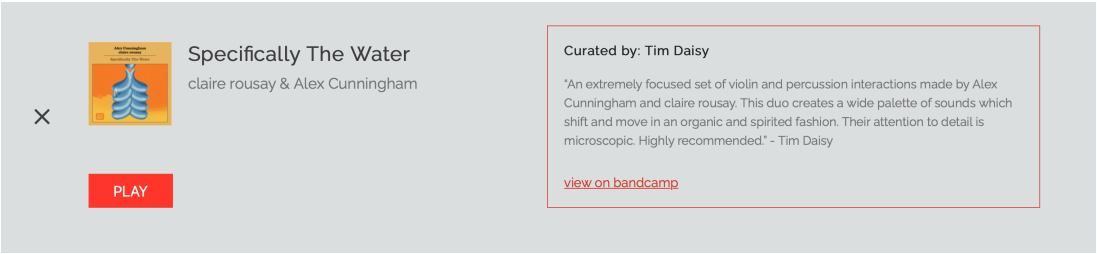

Figure 6.3 Screenshot of curation on the Catalytic Soundstream

Where Spotify is a closed system with very few hyperlinks on the platform that will take you elsewhere, the Catalytic Soundstream connects to entire digital ecology of Catalytic Sound and provides opportunities for those streaming the music to buy physical or higher quality digital versions of the music they are listening to. Economically, Catalytic Sound does not correlate the number of streams to the payout musicians receive. Instead, the platform pays musicians an equal share of the ten-dollar-a-month memberships each month. In doing so, the platform eliminates competition between the involved musicians and promotes a collaborative environment. All of these design choices address specific design flaws of Spotify that make the platform incompatible with creative improvised music in the ways I have outlined above. Instead of emulating Spotify, the Soundstream creates its own context both economically and aesthetically for the community of Catalytic Sound and the enthusiasts of the music.

In an interview about the Soundstream published on The Free Jazz Blog, Paul Acquaro asked Ken Vandermark "did you ever think you would become an internet entrepreneur?" Vandermark replied:

> Ha, ha, ha- no! But the way Catalytic has always worked was to be musician-forward, and to look at how we can be an added income driver for the musicians in the collective. This leads to asking questions about what steps to take next, to look at the problems musicians are facing now, and to try and solve those problems. It's an organic process, and we're fortunate to have some of the most creative minds in the world working with us to help create solutions.[23]

[23] Paul Acquaro, "Catalytic Sound Stream: Q&A with Ken Vandermark and Sam Clapp," The Free Jazz Collective (blog), accessed May 26, 2021, https://www.freejazzblog.org/2021/01/catalytic-sound-stream-q-with-ken.html.

Returning to the idea of DIY Vandermark brings up in his article about music streaming and sustainability, he expresses a kind of DIY ideology attached to underground rock in the 1980s. As Vandermark describes, "when I started doing stuff in the mid 90s, the get in the van model, the DIY indie rock model, that's what I subscribed to, and it worked. You threw the records in the back of the van, and you went out, you played shows."[24] While there is a playful aspect of Acquero's question to Vandermark, I understand his answer as an acknowledgement of the ways the DIY of 2021 can no longer be or look like the DIY of the 1990s. Making your own records and jumping in the van simply does not cut it in a world where most of the challenges musicians face have to do with digital forms of distribution. This is where the Soundstream intervenes as a DIY solution to the problem of music streaming for a group of thirty musicians.

With this in mind, one can begin to assess the material success of the Soundstream. With current membership, each musician partner of Catalytic Sound receives about thirty-four dollars a month for the Soundstream.[25] This is just a portion of the larger payout they receive from income generated by the membership service in general. While it may not seem like much, considering the pennies many of the musicians were making from Spotify each month, thirty-four dollars is significant. As drummer Tim Daisy told me: "I have made more money via streaming with Catalytic in one month than I have *ever* made on Spotify. Nobody is getting rich, but the

[24] Ken Vandermark, interview with the author, October, 10, 2020.
[25] Calculation by author based on most recent membership data.

Catalytic model is way, way fairer."[26] In some ways, Daisy's experience sums up Catalytic Sound in general. If some *one* was getting rich, Catalytic Sound would be a cooperative failure. Where Spotify is organized to create the greatest amount of wealth possible for a small group of owners and investors, Catalytic Sound aims to generate as much wealth as possible for everyone involved. Furthermore, rather than seeking to be *the* platform for creative improvised music in the way Spotify seeks to be the *the* platform for audio in general, Vandermark and others at Catalytic Sound have most recently described the ideal form of Catalytic Sound as a "model" for use in a variety of contexts.[27] For this reason, the code base of the Catalytic Soundstream is open source on GitHub and the developers built it to easily adapt to usage by other collectives. In thinking and designing this way, Catalytic Sound extends its ideas of cooperation and collectivity beyond the organization itself. Vandermark centers these ideas of collectivity in the practice of improvised music when he says "the collectives as an ongoing entity, could also work together and share resources, for the same reasons that the improvising mentality works within the coop situation. Because we're not competing with each other, we're contributing to each other."[28]

In this chapter, I have used the Catalytic Soundstream as a case study in examining how the *do it yourself, together* ethos of Catalytic Sound manifested in building the digital service. While it is small scale, I have shown how the

[26] Tim Daisy, email correspondence with the author, February 18, 2021
[27] Ben Sisario and Michael J. de la Merced, "Spotify. It's Not Just for Music Anymore.," *The New York Times*, February 6, 2019, sec. Business, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/06/business/dealbook/spotify-gimlet-anchor-podcasts.html.
[28] Ken Vandermark, interview with the author, July 22, 2021.

Soundstream intervenes as a viable solution for the musicians of Catalytic Sound for the problems music streaming platforms present. In an analysis of Spotify, I have shown how these problems are not exclusively economic but also include the aesthetic values Spotify incentivizes and promotes on the platform. The design choices of the Soundstream create a context that far better serves the medium of creative improvised music and in doing so, the service creates an effective alternative to Spotify. Lastly, the choices the Soundstream developers have made to make the project adaptable and open-source gesture toward a future in which many communities of musicians, through a *do it yourself, together* approach, might similarly create viable alternatives to music streaming giants.

Conclusion

I began this research with the simple question: "What is Catalytic Sound?" This question led me into the ten-year history of Catalytic Sound, the many musicians who make up the collective, and my own personal history as manager. The answer to this question shifted under my feet as I researched and wrote concurrent to developments like the Soundstream and further expansions of the collective. In the pages above I have tried my best to document both the history of the project and all that I witnessed as an observer and researcher over the past year and a half. These observations have led me to think about the ways Catalytic Sound is and has always been a network of musicians and other actors. This network, as Bruno Latour has said, is in a constant state of reassembly, never quite fixed, expanding, contracting, *moving.* In some ways then, the question of "what is Catalytic Sound" is not so different from someone happening upon a free improvisation performance and exclaiming "what is *this*?" By this comparison I mean to make a connection between the ways both Catalytic Sound and the music it represents exist partially outside of the conventional, the static, and the expected. Furthermore, they are both constantly in process and through their respective emphases on collectivity, arise from the networks of association that constitute them.

In this thesis I have shown how Catalytic Sound developed from its beginnings as an online record store owned by five musicians to an international collective of twenty-four musicians creating structures of sustainability for themselves through initiatives like the membership service, creative endeavors like

the festival, and the Soundstream. These actions are part of and extend the historical initiatives of creative improvising musicians in both the United States and Europe to determine success for themselves in the contemporary moment. While much has been written about these historical collectives, I was partly motivated to research Catalytic Sound because many of the involved musicians, despite their significance within the contemporary scene, have been acknowledged very little in scholarly discourse. It is my hope this thesis will be a resource for those interested in both the music and organizing efforts of the musicians of Catalytic Sound to further my research. Moving beyond description, I have offered a theory based in network modeling and analysis to make sense of the ways the individual musicians of Catalytic Sound have continually negotiated their relationship to the collective in the ten-year history of the project. These active and ongoing negotiations have greatly informed the meaning, significance and structure of Catalytic Sound throughout its history.

Taking this analysis one step further, I recognize the ways I reentered the network of Catalytic Sound as a researcher and thus contributed to organizational change as well. I know that some of the ideas I shared from my research process including my conception of the relationship between the music and organizational structure of the cooperative have made an impression on Vandermark and others in the collective. While it is too early to discern how these interactions may change Catalytic Sound, it is impossible to deny my research has shaped its subject in some way. In this way, the network model I have developed over the course of this thesis is not only helpful in understanding Catalytic Sound, but also in understanding my own

relationship with the project both past and present. In the future, I conceive of a network analysis that is more detailed to include the non-musician actors I have discussed in my writing, but never mapped.

In closing, I believe writing about Catalytic Sound and other initiatives like it is important for developing an understanding of the ways musician-created institutions play an important role in supporting music making in the United States and Europe. Catalytic Sound is a solution to the *problem* creative improvised music has seemingly presented to structures of both institutional and commercial support over the last seventy years. In the space created by this lack, the cooperative has been a solution by continually asking what does it mean to be more than a record store? The answer has manifested in a number of unexpected and revolutionary ways. They construct the history of Catalytic Sound as I have presented it here and will no doubt dictate the future of the organization for years to come.

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