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## Asian Americans and Creative Music Legacies

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### Introduction

Throughout the twentieth century, African American improvisers not only created innovative musical practices, but also—often despite staggering odds—helped shape the ideas and the economic infrastructures which surrounded their own artistic productions. Recent studies such as Eric Porter's *What is this Thing Called Jazz?* have begun to document these musicians' struggles to articulate their aesthetic philosophies, to support and educate their communities, to create new audiences, and to establish economic and cultural capital. Through studying these histories, we see new dimensions of these artists' creativity and resourcefulness, and we also gain a richer understanding of the music. Both their larger goals and the forces working against them—most notably the powerful legacies of systemic racism—all come into sharper focus.

As Porter's book makes clear, African American musicians were active on these multiple fronts throughout the entire century. Yet during the 1960s, bolstered by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, Black musicians articulated these challenges in unprecedented ways. Often frustrated with how the jazz industry limited their options for contextualizing and presenting their music, they worked to create alternatives. Although there had been important initiatives earlier in the century such as the Black Swan record label, the 1950s and 1960s saw a drastic increase in this kind of activity as Black musicians established their own record labels, publishing companies and musicians' collectives in order to gain economic and aesthetic control over their artistic production. At the same time, through interviews, publications and new strategies of self-representation, they challenged prevailing conceptions of high and low culture, and established new ways of understanding their work.

"Creative music" was one of the many terms that emerged in this process. Used by composer-improvisers since the 1960s, this phrase invokes many interrelated methodological, ethical, cultural and political references. The term "creative music" was closely associated with the musicians' collectives founded in the midwest, northeast and California during the 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Many of those collectives were created by working class African American improvisers who sought in part to develop new infrastructures of support for their work that did not depend on the white-dominated jazz industry. The collectives also embodied a larger social vision that included deepening artists' symbiotic relationships with their host communities. Political scientist Sarita Gregory has termed the surge of musicians' collectives in the 1960s and early 1970s as a "Creative Music Movement," a label that highlights musicians' self-determination as well as this confluence of artistic and socio-political struggles.

Yet while the idea of creative music has strong roots in African American musicians' collectives, it quickly generated broader resonances. For example, the Creative Music Studio (CMS) of Woodstock, New York, was an educational center founded by German vibraphonist Karl Berger and vocalist Ingrid Sertso with help from Ornette Coleman. In this nexus for composer-improvisers from a wide range of backgrounds and traditions, "creative music"—rather than "jazz"—situated Black traditions at the center of a broader dialogue around musical experimentalism that also included European experimental and non-Western traditions.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, in their self-published writings, AACM members Wadada Leo Smith and Anthony Braxton ground their idea of creative music in Black traditions, but are also careful to articulate the more "universal" or "global" aspirations and meanings bound up in the term, and to frame Black subjectivity in fundamentally transcultural terms.<sup>3</sup> Overall, then, the term "creative music" was part of the vocabulary that composer-improvisers of the 1960s used to navigate the imperatives articulated in the Black Power and Black Arts movements, while also leaving open the full range of possibilities for engagement with other traditions—including European ones—that had been articulated by influential artists such as Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, or Charles Mingus. Operating from a post-1960 aesthetic and political perspective, the composer-improvisers who associated themselves with the idea of creative music asserted the rich histories of Black experimentation, while simultaneously avoiding any insular conceptions that would limit their scope and relevance.

The diverse meanings the term "creative music" has accumulated over time make it a slippery topic for historical narrative. Yet we should work to better understand the important questions raised by composer-

improvisers working to link artistic and social innovation during the 1960s. The musicians who associated themselves with terms like "creative music" during this period did not simply use conventional musical practices as vehicles for espousing oppositional politics, but instead saw artistic experimentation as a way to interrogate changing social realities in their full complexity. These musicians developed technically complex, collective and profoundly transcultural methodologies that were innovative yet also deeply grounded in African American histories of improvised music. During the following decades, their explorations resonated with other subcultures which were also committed to improvised music and alternative institution building, resulting in numerous grassroots experimental music scenes which often had little connection to the increasingly conservative jazz industry.

In what follows, I focus on one of these later chapters in the development of creative music, one that participants have called the Asian American Creative Music Movement.<sup>4</sup> During the 1970s and 1980s, numerous Asian American improvisers began to experiment with jazz traditions, and worked to make sense of African American creative music traditions from an Asian American perspective. The San Francisco Bay Area was a key site for much of this activity. This essay focuses on the histories of alternative institution building that took place there and on the choices that Bay Area-based artists made as they later developed more individualized careers. Rather than merely summarize those histories,<sup>5</sup> I want to provoke discussion about the broader questions these artists raise, as both musicians and institution-builders, about the intercultural legacies of African American improvised and creative music traditions.

### **"A Bandung Thing"**

The notions of "multiculturalism" and "identity politics" that emerged during the 1990s in the United States often obscure the trans-racial dimension of political struggle, particularly the histories of coalition building among people of color during the twentieth century. The Asian American political movement, for example, was inspired by and connected to the struggles of African Americans, particularly the civil rights and Black nationalist movements.<sup>6</sup> The historic Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955, which led to the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement, is an even earlier example of the collaborations among marginalized and racialized groups that white supremacy fostered.<sup>7</sup>

This Afro-Asian ethos evident in Bandung was also prominent in San Francisco Bay Area music worlds during the 1970s. The Bay Area, with its strong Asian American communities, was a key site in Asian American political struggles,<sup>8</sup> and it was also a fertile ground for collaboration among African American and Asian American musicians working in jazz traditions. As pianist Jon Jang has pointed out, this music scene during the 1970s was shaped by collaborations between "Japanese American musicians who grew up in the Bay Area and transplanted African American musicians originally from the Midwest" (Telephone Interview). The Japanese American musicians Jang refers to include bassist Mark Izu, saxophonist Russel Hisashi Baba, clarinetist Paul Yamazaki and saxophonist Gerald Oshita. Their African American collaborators include saxophonist Lewis Jordan, trumpeter George Sams, saxophonist Ray Collins and drummer Eddie Moore. Other musicians who became active in these networks in the early 1980s included Jang himself and saxophonists Fred Ho and Francis Wong, who are all Chinese Americans, as well as percussionist Anthony Brown, who is of mixed Native American, African American and Japanese heritage.

Few women musicians were involved with these networks at that time, with exceptions such as taiko and drum set artist Jeanne Mercer, along with poets, storytellers or dramatists, including Genny Lim, Janice Mirikitani and Brenda Wong Aoki, who developed important collaborative relationships with many of these male musicians.<sup>9</sup> Overall, though, the musicians active in these networks during the 1970s and early 1980s were men and, with the exception of Fred Ho whose work often attacked patriarchy and sexism, their liner notes, titles, and writings centered more on questions of race, nationality and ethnicity than on those of gender.<sup>10</sup>

Although most of the more organized activities associated with Asian American Creative Music began in the 1980s, various Afro-Asian ensembles of the 1970s were an important foundation. Saxophonist Francis Wong, who would later become a key organizer within Asian American improviser networks in the following decade, described how in his view, "there has never been an Asian American exclusive form." Stressing the importance of collective groups, Wong pointed out that "the prototype ensembles" were groups such as Mark Izu and Lewis Jordan's large ensemble Marron,<sup>11</sup> Lewis Jordan's Liberation at Large Orchestra, Eddie Moore and Russell Baba's Space Shuttle Omnibus, and, best known of the early Afro-Asian groups, the quartet United Front,<sup>12</sup> which included Izu, Jordan, George Sams and Anthony Brown. These groups were comprised of both African American and Asian American musicians and drew on Black improvised music

traditions while also incorporating musical ideas and instruments from Asian cultures, which many of the Asian American musicians had studied.<sup>13</sup> Wong pointed out that the early 1970s Afro-Asian creative music scene in the Bay Area "wasn't really like this Asian American identity thing. It is more of an internationalist perspective, kind of like a Bandung thing" (Telephone Interview).

The highly improvisatory and open structures of contemporary Black improvisational music, in part the result of a long history of jazz artists consciously integrating Asian and other non-Western musical processes into their own practice,<sup>14</sup> is an important part of the convergence of Asian American and African American improvisers. The sense that these musical methods were grounded in shared social, spiritual and political struggles strengthened these resonances even more, and increasingly gave shape to a new community of Asian American musicians as younger colleagues were inspired by these groups and brought into the fold. Wong, for example, recalled a formative experience hearing a 1978 concert that featured saxophonist Russel Baba solo, followed by the ensemble Marron. The performance ended with Baba joining with Marron for an interpretation of Charles Mingus's "Haitian Fight Song," a song which, like the name "Marron," (maroon, in English, a term used to refer to runaway slaves) references a strong political message of solidarity among oppressed groups (Wong, Telephone Interview).

### Growing with the Movement

During the early and mid-1980s, Asian American creative musicians in the Bay Area and elsewhere became more active presenting their work to the public and linking it more explicitly to the Asian American movement. The yearly Asian American Jazz Festival began in 1981. The early festivals were produced by writer George Leong and clarinetist Paul Yamazaki who were both part of the Kearny Street Workshop, an artists' collective organized in 1972 and associated with the organizing events around the I-Hotel in San Francisco's Chinatown/Manilatown. During the following few years, others who helped produce the festival included Randall Kline of the San Francisco Jazz Festival, and most importantly, bassist Mark Izu, who soon became the festival's main producer and artistic director (Jang, email). While providing an opportunity for artists to present their work to the larger San Francisco area community, the yearly festival also served as an important focal point around which musicians developed their own social and professional networks.<sup>15</sup> Though not as long-lasting, Asian American jazz festivals also took place in New York, between 1984 and 1986, organized by Fred Ho, violinist Jason Hwang and drummer Akira Tana, along with Cobi Narita, an important Japanese American organizer with the Universal Jazz Coalition in New York.<sup>16</sup>

By the mid-1980s, improvisers including Ho (who was active in New York as well as the Bay Area) and Jang had become more prominent as leaders of ensembles and began producing their own albums. Ho founded ensembles in New York,<sup>17</sup> and in 1985, following Izu's precedent, began incorporating traditional Asian instruments such as the Chinese *sona* (a double reed instrument) and *erhu* (a stringed instrument), alongside Western instruments, and began writing multimedia works as well as an opera.<sup>18</sup> Jang, who performed as a sideman in Ho's ensembles, also became active as a leader in the Bay Area during the early 1980s, producing a recording on the RPM label founded by members of United Front.

Jang's emergence as a leader of his own groups in the Bay Area exemplifies the ways that these artists' early professional work was in close dialogue with the Asian American movement, especially during this period of the mid-1980s. The Asian American movement, particularly in the Bay Area, was very strong and visible during the 1980s. It was energized by numerous events and causes including the Redress and Reparations movement for Japanese Americans placed in internment camps during the second World War, the response to the Vincent Chin murders, the fight to defeat the Simpson-Mazzoli immigration reform bill, and the Jesse Jackson presidential campaign (Paget-Clarke, "A Conversation"). Jang's second album, *Are you Chinese or Charlie Chan?* (1984), was dedicated to Vincent Chin, a Chinese American who was brutally beaten to death by two white men in 1982.<sup>19</sup>

In the liner notes to the album, Jang discusses the Chin case, tells us that the musicians on this album include Asian Americans, and then explains that the music on this recording "developed out of performances for Asian American events held at the Japanese Presbyterian Church on Sutter Street in San Francisco Japantown. *East Wind*, a nationwide progressive Asian American magazine, also organized an event in San Francisco Japantown which raised \$2000 to help support the recording costs." He stresses that this was music "about Asian Americans, by Asian Americans, for Asian Americans, and created from the Asian American communities" (emphasis in original). On the day the record was released, Jang and the ensemble performed at an Asian Pacific Student Union conference, where he recalls selling about sixty records and receiving "a tremendous response" (Paget-Clarke, "A Conversation").

This mutual support was in many ways a natural outgrowth of the political activism that Jang and many other musicians in these networks had been doing for years. Some of the earlier generation of Asian American improvisers in the Bay Area had been involved with struggles that defined the Asian American movement, such as the Third World strikes at San Francisco State University in the late 1960s. Some musicians were also active in underground Marxist-Leninist (ML) organizations that, while secretive at the time, have now been documented in publications.<sup>20</sup> Prominent ML groups included I Wor Kuen, The Red Guard Party, the Workers Viewpoint Organization, and perhaps most importantly, the League of Revolutionary Struggle (LRS), a larger group which resulted from mergers among various groups including I Wor Kuen and other ML organizations formed by Chicanos and African Americans.<sup>21</sup>

Yet as strong as these connections to the movement were, Asian American improvisers often found themselves at odds with the views of their radical political colleagues who would have preferred that musicians compose simpler songs with straightforward lyrics emphasizing the party line. Ho, for example, writes that during the 1980s, "with the advancement of both my professional artistic career and my personal understanding of the complex relationship between ideology, the arts and struggle would come frustrating and conflictual struggle with the LRS political leadership around these issues, including the validity of 'Asian American jazz'" ("Beyond Asian American Jazz").<sup>22</sup>

A related challenge these musicians faced as the 1980s continued was how to position their work in relation to both the Asian American community and, at the same time, establish professional careers in the music world. This balancing act paralleled much of what was happening in the political sphere of the Asian American movement during the late 1980s. The revolutionary ML organizations were gradually dividing into factions over the question of how much to engage in the electoral political system, in part due to the optimism surrounding Jesse Jackson's second presidential campaign in 1988. By the end of the decade neither the movement nor these improvisers' relationships to it were as stable and clear as before. In Wong's view, "the Asian movement of the '80s really carried us forward, but by 1988 there was a wane in activity and that pushed us to figure out what was our own initiative and vision" (Telephone Interview).

## Stepping Out

For Bay Area artists, one response to that challenge was Asian Improv aRts (AIR). This organization began in 1987 as simply a record label, Asian Improv Records, through which Jon Jang could release recordings. However, over the coming years the organization grew and came to be a focal point for an increasingly professionalized and visible Asian American creative music scene in the Bay Area and beyond.

AIR expanded quickly over the next few years. In 1988 and 1989, Asian Improv Records began to release recordings by artists other than Jang himself (who had released the first two) with three albums by Glenn Horiuchi (*Next Step*, *Issei Spirit*, and *Manzanar Voices*), and one by Fred Ho (*Song for Manong*) which brought together his Asian American Arts Ensemble with the Bay Area-based Kulintang Arts ensemble. AIR at this early stage was primarily a vehicle for recording, and not yet oriented towards community projects. However, at this same time Jang and Wong were also beginning to work within a community organization in San Francisco's Chinatown called the Chinese Progressive Association (CPA). Their period of what Wong described as a kind of artists "residency" at the CPA was one of the important influences on what AIR would later become, and also exemplifies the ways in which the careers of these musicians were shaped by the Chinese and Japanese American communities in San Francisco.

As Wong explained it, the relationship they developed with CPA started in 1988 because Jang had a piano but nowhere to put it. Since they lived near the storefront where CPA was based, Jang worked out an arrangement through which he could keep his piano there and use the space for practice, rehearsals and even concerts, while in return teaching citizenship classes. Wong became involved with CPA as an administrator and fundraiser for youth leadership programs and eventually became the director of the CPA itself. Thus, while taking advantage of CPA as a performance space, Jang and Wong also developed relationships with more Chinatown community members and learned organizing skills, all of which would later inform the work of AIR when it became a more established organization in the 1990s (Wong, Telephone Interview).

Another important context in understanding AIR's development was the musicians' collectives of the 1960s, notably the AACM. During the late 1980s, with no internet resources and even less published about the

AACM and other collectives than is available today, interpersonal networks were the most important source of information through which Asian American musicians were informed about and inspired by musicians' collectives. Glenn Horiuchi, based in Southern California, had been leading a band which included bassist Mchaka Uba, one the earlier generation of AACM members who was living in Tijuana at the time. Francis Wong explained that Uba, through Horiuchi, passed on information to Wong, Jang and others about "how the AACM was structured and what kinds of activities they did" (Wong, Telephone Interview). This information about the AACM was also important to the later development of Asian Improv aRts.

AIR's growth in the late 1980s and early 1990s was not without its costs. For one, Fred Ho, who had released one of the early albums on AIR during its emergence, parted ways with AIR after 1989 for reasons he describes as political and other AIR members describe as personal. As Ho put it, he "disassociated [himself] with the rest of 'Asian American jazz.'" <sup>23</sup> He eventually founded his own production company, Big Red Media, based in New York. Nonetheless, AIR continued to expand and attract new artists during the late 1980s and early 1990s, particularly due to the leadership of Francis Wong. During 1992 and 1993, with Wong as Creative Director, AIR released a string of important new releases by Mark Izu (*Circle of Fire*), saxophonist Hafez Modirzadeh (*In Chromodal Discourse*), Wong himself (*Great Wall*), and kotoist Miya Masaoka (*Compositions-Improvisations*), the first woman instrumentalist to record for AIR.

By 1993, these releases, along with the expansion of the organization into Asian Improv aRts and the continuation of the Asian American Jazz Festival, had established a broader professionalized and organized presence for these Bay Area-based improvisers. More generally, Asian American creative musicians were quickly moving into more individualized and international careers. While some Asian American improvisers had already begun to receive some degree of international exposure during the 1980s (notably Fred Ho, who released two albums on Soul Note, a division of the Italian label Black Saint, in 1985 and 1988), this trend increased even more during the early 1990s. Ho and other East Coast artists such as Jason Hwang (and his group the Far East Side Band) continued to premiere new works and gain critical attention, and both Jang and Glenn Horiuchi also released albums on Soul Note, making the label a major supporter of Asian American creative musicians in Los Angeles (Horiuchi), San Francisco (Jang) and New York (Ho).

These developments should not be seen in opposition to the community links that these artists had been fostering during the 1980s. The increasing international and professional exposure for these musicians was often grounded in profoundly local forms of support and in the relationships they had established with their host community. For example, Francis Wong explained that Jon Jang's recording of "Tiananmen," a piece he composed for his large ensemble, the Pan Asian Arkestra, was ultimately picked up by a record label due to the financial support they were able to develop at the grassroots level: "At that time we were still not being recognized in the funding world but Asian Improv was able to pool community resources to mount major performances of [*Tiananmen!*]... The success of those concerts led to Jon [Jang] successfully signing on with Soul Note" (Paget-Clarke, "A Conversation").

Still, these networks of Asian American musicians and their relationships to the community were steadily changing, as artists faced new challenges in presenting their work to a broader audience. The earlier years of the late 1980s and early 1990s had been, in Miya Masaoka's words, "an exciting time for the Asian American music scene. It was small, fragile, underground, and we had a mission and our bonds were strong" ("Columbia Panel"). In contrast, by the end of the 1990s, those networks were not small, fragile, or underground. Instead, they were supported institutionally by more established organizations like AIR, and had also expanded to include a new generation of artists both in the Bay Area and beyond. At the same time, the artists who had once been united by those strong bonds had begun to explore increasingly individual musical directions as their careers matured.

New artists involved in these Bay Area networks (and recording for AIR) during the mid-1990s, such as Iranian American saxophonist Hafez Modirzadeh and Indian American pianist Vijay Iyer (who soon moved to New York), complicated the very meaning of "Asian American" beyond what had previously been a narrower range of Chinese and Japanese American artists. Other Asian American improvisers who emerged during the 1990s with at least some degree of connection to these networks included cellist Jeff Song (Boston), saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa (New York), and bassist Tatsu Aoki in Chicago, which would become a site for another yearly Asian American Jazz Festival beginning in 1996 under Aoki's leadership. At the same time, we should remember that many Asian American improvisers have operated all along with little or no connection to these histories and networks I have been describing, including important figures in the jazz industry such as composer Toshiko Akiochi, drummer Akira Tana, and pianist Kei Akagi, along with

numerous younger improvisers emerging during the 1990s such as drummers Susie Ibarra and Ravish Momin, and violinist Eyvind Kang, among many others.

Today, AIR, under Francis Wong's ongoing leadership, and the Asian American Jazz Festivals both continue their work, but the context has changed. In contrast to the period when AIR formed during the 1980s, there is no longer as strong an Asian American political movement to ground their work together. And on a musical level, individual artists from the Bay Area networks have developed increasingly distinct sound worlds and approaches to composition and improvisation. Yet it would be misleading to suggest that as they moved into more professional music careers, these improvisers simply abandoned the "shared mission" that Masaoka referred to above. I think it is more accurate to say that the relationship between experimental music making and social practice which they began developing in the 1980s—like any relationship—necessarily became more complex as it grew and encountered new challenges. The breadth of musical and activist pathways these artists have explored as their careers developed during the 1990s complicates any simple notion of Asian American Jazz or of music's relationship to ethnic identities or political struggles. Rather, their choices represent multifaceted engagements with the artistic and social imperatives of African American creative music traditions. A brief discussion of a few of these artists will help bring into focus the larger stakes of this discussion.

### **"Never a Simple Story"**

Baritone saxophonist Fred Ho has been leading instrumental ensembles for over two decades, and he has also composed numerous multimedia works involving opera, dance, martial arts, and video, including tours of the United States for large-scale productions. He has incorporated Asian instruments and musical practices into African and African American based forms, which follows the lead of bassist Mark Izu, one of the earliest musicians to explore that idea. Ho has also been equally prolific as a writer, producing articles about his own work and that of other Asian American improvisers, and co-editing an anthology on music and political struggle (*Sounding Off!*) as well as another landmark anthology detailing the history of the Asian American movement from a revolutionary perspective (*Legacies of Liberation*).

In both his writings and the "extra-musical" content surrounding his music, Ho continually foregrounds radical revolutionary politics. His music is often accompanied by stories or images of struggle for social justice, either through metaphors within epic historical narratives (as in the "martial arts ballet" *Voice of the Dragon*), or through more contemporary topics (as in the video that accompanies *Black Panther Suite*). His writings contain scathing indictments of the music industry and bourgeois culture, and like much of his artistic work, continually portray stark choices between being part of the solution or part of the problem, in no uncertain terms.

This aspect of Ho's work has at times alienated critics, musicians, and other music world insiders who correctly understand that they are included among his political targets. For example, *Village Voice* critic Kyle Gann, writing about Ho's *Black Panther Suite*, a work involving ballet as well as video by Paul Chan, chastizes Ho for making him feel "intimidated" rather than "included." Yet Gann also complicates the picture—correctly, I think—by praising the artistry and imagination that Ho and his ensembles often demonstrate, as in his compositions for his *Monkey* orchestra, a large chamber group featuring both Chinese and Western instruments. The intense energy, the celebratory spectacle, and the innovative merging of Chinese and Western traditions of Fred Ho's productions have not been lost on critics or audiences. Although some works such as the *Black Panther Suite* may be more controversial, Ho has not only received positive reviews and numerous grants, but he has also sold out major venues (such as fine arts centers) with large, staged productions such as *Voice of the Dragon*.<sup>24</sup>

Ho describes himself as a guerrilla artist, and he runs his own for-profit production organization. He insists that he makes no compromises in his politics to receive funding or support, and I see no evidence to the contrary. At the same time, in order to produce and support his work, he has depended in part upon university fine arts centers, major grant organizations, academic teaching visits, and other such infrastructures of what he calls the "elitist arts establishment." Despite his emphasis on his own artistic and political freedom, then, Ho is still engaging in some kind of dialogue with what he refers to as the institutions of "white patronage."

Ho's insistence on his own political and artistic self-determination must be understood in relation to the cultural nationalist movements that emerged in the 1960s and early 1970s. With a profound respect for the Black nationalist idea of empowering communities at the grassroots level, Ho is quick to criticize intellectuals

and artists who, in his view, turned their backs on “the movement” once they reached a certain level of comfort within the academic and arts world systems, and have failed to “give back” to the communities from which they emerged. In contrast, he cites his own work to link his music to schools and grassroots community organizations, so that it is not exclusively presented within “bourgeois elitist art world” venues (Personal Interview).

I take seriously Ho’s insistence that the creative music movements of the 1960s were part of a larger struggle to truly transform societal power relations, and that helping artists develop their individual professional careers was not so much a goal in itself as it was a facet of this larger social vision. Yet I also worry that accusations of betrayal can easily reduce the distinction between social struggle and individual careers to unrealistically clear cut terms, and oversimplify the political dimensions of artistic experimentation. Ho’s commitments to making such clear distinctions and to bringing people together in collective struggle are perhaps part of what infuses his musical productions with such joyous energy, and his body of creative and intellectual work is an important and often under-appreciated intervention in the field of new music. At the same time, Ho’s exuberant output should not block our ears to the innovations of other Asian American improvisers who often have similar political perspectives, but work from very different aesthetic and personal sensibilities.

Consider the work of kotoist and composer-improviser Miya Masaoka. She has collaborated with insects and plants, worked as an improviser and experimental instrument builder, composed large scale works for chorus or for groups of improvisers, and studiously reworked and interpreted Thelonious Monk compositions for the koto. Masaoka arrived on the Bay Area Asian American creative music scene shortly after Ho had left those networks behind, but she was also an activist and musician who shared many of those same political convictions. Yet whereas Ho foregrounds the cultural nationalist dimensions of creative music traditions and enthusiastically calls upon us to join in the good fight, Masaoka’s musical works tend to unsettle, to expose the cracks in our assumptions, and to ground the political in precisely this act of opening up new questions about human experience rather than confidently answering existing ones.

Ethnomusicologist Deborah Wong has provided detailed reflections on one of Masaoka’s performance pieces (*Ritual*) which deals with the Asian American body, and also on her collaborations as an improviser with trombonist George Lewis. Masaoka has also worked with both plants and bees, exploring the ways in which both respond to sound. Likewise, she has long been an avid experimenter with new technology, approaching computers and instrument building with a focus on real time performance techniques, using interactive computer programs rather than simply playing back samples, and extending an “ancient” instrument like the koto by using computer and laser technology. (See her own essay about her work in John Zorn’s anthology, *Arcana*.)

This same emphasis on interactive models informs even those works of Masaoka’s that do have explicitly political dimensions, in which cases the audience is required to create their own dialogues with the work, rather than simply receive clearly defined narratives or messages. Consider one of her early large-ensemble pieces, *What is the Difference between Stripping and Playing the Violin?* This piece was developed in response to the murders of sex workers of color in the neighborhood where she was living, and was performed in a public space on Market Street in San Francisco accompanied by panels of sex workers speaking about racialization in the sex industry, specifically their lack of mobility across the roles assigned to them given their race and gender. Masaoka set these discussions alongside a performance by a multi-racial ensemble consisting of a wide range of improvisers from different Bay Area networks, including not only AIR related musicians but also other improvisers involved with rock, electronic, jazz and free improvised music scenes. She directed the ensemble through their scores by using conduction movements informed by the work of African American artists (notably Lawrence “Butch” Morris) and also by T’ai Chi movements. Led (quite literally) by an Asian American woman’s body, this open air public performance created a provocative context in which to consider the many questions about performance, power, gender, and race that lurk in her title and in the accounts of the erotic dancers who were panelists at the event.

More recent work includes her Transliteration Trio, which brings together rhythmic languages from the koto and the tabla in an effort to create a new musical vocabulary. As with her reworking of Monk compositions, the significant technical challenges of this project embody conceptual ones, such as how to create a dialogue between distinct cultural and musical sensibilities without collapsing their differences.

In choosing to stop performing on piano in favor of koto, Masaoka not only placed a Japanese instrument and its histories at the center of her practice, but also highlighted a more oblique relationship to traditions of



instrumental virtuosity which Eric Porter has described as part of a "masculinist ethos" within the jazz community (29). Masaoka herself has described how the gender dynamics of both the jazz world and Asian American culture impacted her career choices. Pointing out that even though she still feels "a great appreciation and a strong sense of kinship with my fellow Asian improvisers," she still recognizes that "it's a male dominated scene [that] didn't leave me much room, and ultimately for me to develop individually I had to seek my own road" (Columbia Panel). She was the first and is still the only woman instrumentalist to record as a leader for AIR, yet soon after that debut she began to explore a wide range of other musical networks, including collaborations with many Bay Area white improvisers as well as with prominent African American musicians.

Masaoka's breadth of compositional approaches, along with her instrument, makes it rare for her to be framed as a "jazz" artist. In contrast, pianist Jon Jang has more often faced the problem of being cast as a "jazz composer," despite his efforts to represent his work in different terms. In addition to his recordings mentioned above and his collaborative projects with improvisers such as James Newton, David Murray and Max Roach, Jang has also worked as a composer in fully notated forms. His compositions include a commission (*Island: The Immigrant Suite No. 2*) for the Kronos quartet, one of the premiere new music ensembles in the classical music world, in collaboration with the Cantonese opera singer, Eva Tam. (For a detailed discussion of this piece and others, see Wong, *Speak it Louder* 39-51.) Nonetheless, in a 2002 telephone interview, Jang claimed that the classical world "hasn't really accepted me," in part because his music has "references to jazz." He pointed out that he is referred to as a "jazz composer" rather than simply a composer, and he also suggested that "the white classical press is more comfortable with composers from China than they are with American-born composers in this country."

It should be clear by now that many of these Asian American composer-improvisers, like the many other musicians who are influenced by African American creative music traditions, have worked to construct professional identities that are not based solely (and sometimes not at all) on the idea of "jazz." Yet one important result of their early work together was broader public and critical recognition of this elusive category called "Asian American Jazz," a label that gained recognition within the national and international jazz press during the 1990s along with the increasing visibility of the Asian American Jazz Festivals, Asian Improv Records, and individual artists' careers. By the end of the 1990s, one of the most prominent symbols of critical recognition of these Asian American improvisers within the mainstream jazz industry was the Grammy nomination (for best large jazz ensemble performance) of Anthony Brown's Asian American Orchestra's (AAO) adaptation of Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn's *Far East Suite* in 2000.

As pianist and composer Vijay Iyer has pointed out, the AAO's performed this piece "largely verbatim, with small but crucial differences" (Iyer, "Performative Strategies"). The differences were the use of Asian instruments, particularly Chinese and Persian flutes and double reeds and Chinese mouth organ, to perform some of Ellington's passages and in some instances to perform improvised interludes. Iyer stresses the collective history that informed the project by pointing out that the use of these instruments depended upon Brown's "personal connections" with AAO members Mark Izu, Hafez Modirzadeh, and Chinese immigrant and multi-instrumentalist Liu Qi Chao. Particularly in the case of Izu and Modirzadeh, this grounds the work in the collective histories these Bay Area artists share, since Brown's "openness to these two artists' improvised contributions is best understood in the context of the AIR collective, for they were frequent collaborators with many of the artists in this scene, and were accustomed to an environment where multi-instrumental musical improvisation functioned as a technique of critical inquiry" (Iyer, "Performative Strategies").

Iyer notes that Ellington, on the original liner notes to the *Far East Suite*, stated his caution about becoming "influenced" by the music he heard on his Asian tour, since—in Ellington's words—"there was a great sameness about it, beginning in the Arabic countries and going through India all the way to Ceylon." For Iyer, the AAO's "re-presentation" of Ellington's work—specifically the contributions of the improvisers—involved a subtle, "warmly intentioned," but nonetheless "ever-so-slightly critical" stance towards such statements. Yet such critique was lost on most critics, and I agree with Iyer that for most critics and audiences, the recording

seemed to subscribe to a more facile notion of syncretism. The music had a multicultural aura, so a critic might feel morally obliged to extol its virtues, but one didn't need to go out on a limb to do so, since the rendition could be received unproblematically as an Orientalist ornamentation of one of the "Great Works" in the internationalist jazz repertoire. Created by a man who is himself of mixed African and Asian lineage, this recording seemed to fill in all the blanks for jazz critics,

enacting the convenient master narrative of internationalism while never essentially challenging the listener or the primary source material. Here we see a strange confluence of the AIR collective's politicized Asian American origins with a blander symptom of globalization, the homogenizing force of the jazz culture industry. It is a clear reminder that contexts change; in the environment of global post-modernity, the counterhegemonic status of the collective's early work had given way, through no fault of their own, to a simplistic incorporation of difference into the jazz mainstream. ("Performative Strategies")

Iyer thus outlines a dialectic which has surely faced other Asian American creative musicians seeking to bring their work to a wider public. On the one hand, the recording's success certainly helps to build more space for Asian American improvisers, broadening the dialogues which constitute the jazz field. At the same time, to the extent that the critical reception of the AAO's work depends upon the idea of Asian American jazz as "ornamentation" upon a narrowly conceived jazz tradition, this same success can simultaneously reinforce existing, racialized taxonomies of musical identity.

How can artists resolve this dialectic and avoid the pitfalls of this "simplistic incorporation of difference into the jazz mainstream"? For Fred Ho, the criteria for aesthetic and political evaluation are clear:

Well, what's their motivation? You have to ask. Is their motivation to offer penetrating clarity or forceful conviction, or is it a reflection of confusion or uncertainty, unwillingness to take a stand, take a side, be partisan? [. . .] Most people want to hide their motivation, because the art world can't accept politics, especially explicit politics. They seem to feel the two are a contradiction. And I feel that you can have great art and strong politics. (Telephone Interview)

Yet even as I am inspired by Ho's convictions, I also think that part of the challenge we inherit from creative music traditions is how to use artistic work not merely to take sides within political struggles, but also to unsettle the fixed notions of collective identity that those struggles can so easily reinforce. The forms of cultural nationalism that emerged in the 1960s were tremendously important as both theoretical and practical tools for addressing social injustices—injustices that continue today. But one of their unfortunate legacies—whether due to their deployment by their supporters or by their opponents—is how they have often ended up being appropriated in the service of essentialized racial and cultural identities that reinforce the "facile notion of syncretism" Iyer identifies above.

I do not want to suggest that there is one musical path to challenging those ways of thinking, but I do think that within African American creative music traditions, the real time, collective, and transcultural dimensions of music making are important sites for articulating alternatives. Consider Iyer's comments about his duo project with fellow Indian American and saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa. As someone who came up in the 1990s being mentored not only by AIR artists but also by numerous African American composer-improvisers, Iyer speaks here to both musical decisions and to the larger questions that surround them:

There's always a cloud of slightly conflicting and problematic meanings embedded in the discourse around what we do... You have to allow for that. It's part of the total fact. I don't even want to just pin it on the industry. These tendencies speak through people in the industry, but they extend far beyond the industry; some of them even speak through us, because of our postcolonial entanglements, so I can't dismiss them all wholesale. We strive to subvert or challenge any possible exoticist or orientalist readings of what we do. One may hear South Asian elements in our music, but they're always filtered through our hybrid worldviews, and always approached with a spirit of inquiry. We're not trying to "represent" South Asian cultures, the act of representation being akin to domination or ownership, but rather to articulate our complex, shifting individual relationships to them. That's never a simple story. (Telephone Interview)

Both technical and conceptual virtuosity are called for by this philosophical stance towards music making. Iyer portrays composer-improvisers as active and innovative participants within the dialogues around culture, identity, and power that shape our contemporary landscape. "Creative music" may always resist being told as a "simple story," but this multifaceted sense of musicians' agency that Iyer eloquently describes is surely one of its most important legacies.

## Coda

To explore this topic fully would demand more attention to musical works, to artists other than those discussed here, and to the political economy of creative and experimental music worlds. Still, this brief discussion exposes some important ways in which Asian American improvisers have drawn on and extended creative music traditions. Despite their many differences, they all use highly improvisatory and collaborative musical approaches to negotiate Asian and African American traditions, each responding to the imperative to develop a musical practice that is grounded in one's own unique experience. They work to establish new contexts for their work, whether through alternative institution building, self-publishing, or seeking diverse ways of linking their music to social struggles. And they have all operated in close collaboration with numerous African American improvisers, many of whom were connected to the musicians' collectives of the 1960s or the larger traditions surrounding them.

Today, it no longer seems possible to speak of creative music as a "movement." In the social and political contexts of the 1960s, the heterogeneous, innovative sounds and the collective institutions created by predominantly working class African American improvisers were powerful assertions of cultural mobility and self-determination. Over the following decades, many of those musicians entered into dialogue with other experimental music communities in the United States and elsewhere,<sup>25</sup> and increasingly became participants in many different decentralized, overlapping musical subcultures. It is true that some musicians who emerged in the 1960s and early 1970s may still be operating in the same musical networks as they did decades ago, and some collective organizations (notably the AACM) are alive and well today. Yet an equally important legacy of the creative music movements of the 1960s is their influence on numerous composer-improvisers from different backgrounds to help shape the complex terrain of experimental and improvised music today.

Today, the more professionalized and even academicized nature of experimental improvised music as a field (witness this journal itself), and the absence of a broadly powerful, countercultural political movement, suggest a very different set of challenges for improvisers who associate with creative music histories. Yet, at the same time, the struggles that shaped the work of creative musicians in the 1960s are in many ways as relevant today as ever. Contemporary experimental music worlds, like our societies themselves, continue to be shaped in powerful ways by the ongoing legacies of racism, sexism and class struggle. And although many improvisers in experimental fields have by this point severed their connection to the jazz industry due to the increasingly narrow aesthetic terms by which it is defined, we must still recognize what is at stake in such discussions. As corporate and educational institutions established a new notion of the jazz "mainstream" in the public imagination over the past two decades, they essentially colonized histories of African American improvised music traditions to control their meanings. The increasingly narrow conception of jazz that has come to dominate arts institutions, academia and popular culture today allows such institutions to celebrate African American traditions without fully confronting the ways in which post-1960 (or even earlier) improvisers linked musical innovation to a broader social and philosophical project.

To change this, we need to develop histories of African American improvised music traditions that foreground the conceptual, critical, and transcultural dimensions of musicians' work. Above all, we must understand these musicians as having—and struggling to cultivate—a kind of agency as intellectuals and activists, and we must not only be attentive to the important practices up to mid-century which have been codified and institutionalized as jazz, but also to the numerous other repercussions that continued to evolve into new dialogues after 1960.

To grasp the full scope of musicians' contributions to those dialogues, as Deborah Wong suggests, we must understand them as "public intellectuals."<sup>26</sup> As with traditional intellectuals—or perhaps even more so, given the scarcity of information on these histories—there is much work to be done documenting these artists' music and their ideas. Yet we also need to work to make sense of the larger, collective project evidenced here, in which improvising musicians aspire to link their sonic explorations to the broader act of interrogating and transforming our ways of relating to one another. To grasp those deeper implications of African American creative music legacies, music criticism must take up the challenge of locating conventional "musical" concerns alongside the conceptual, transcultural and activist dimensions of these artists' work. Exploring histories such as those above and the diverse musical expressions they have left in their wake is a small but important step in that direction.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The phrase itself is referenced in the name one of the most prominent and long-lasting collectives, the Chicago-founded Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), as well as others such as the Creative Arts Collective of Detroit. Other collectives included Black Artists Group of St. Louis, Horace Tapscott's UGMAA, based in Los Angeles, and Collective Black Artists, in New York.

<sup>2</sup> For more on CMS, see Robert Sweet's book *Music Universe, Music Mind*. Sweet's detailed accounts portray the kind of cultural and aesthetic diversity of CMS faculty and the wide range of experimental music worlds from which they were drawn. While frequently featuring African American experimental musicians (including Anthony Braxton and many others from the AACM), CMS also involved many of their white counterparts, including Frederic Rzewski, Garrett List, Alvin Curran, Richard Teitelbaum, Steve Reich, John Cage and Pauline Oliveros. CMS also attracted faculty from a wide range of countries, particularly in its later years, moving away from a black/white binary.

<sup>3</sup> See Porter's discussion of these writings and those by Yusef Lateef and Marion Brown, as well as other aspects of "creative music."

<sup>4</sup> I have not used the term Asian Pacific American (APA) here because the term Asian American is what is generally used in referring to these music worlds as they existed during the 1970s through the early 1990s. Both terms are examples of what Yen Le Espiritu calls "panethnic" groups, which are made up of culturally diverse subgroups and are not so much the result of "cultural bonds," but rather "products of political and social processes," most notably the shared experiences of and responses to racism.

<sup>5</sup> Although there are few if any attempts at a comprehensive history of the Asian American creative music scene in the Bay Area or elsewhere, musicians, journalists and scholars have already produced a fair amount of writing about this topic, including Fred Ho's essay "Beyond Asian American Jazz," Ho and Jang's contributions to Amy Ling's anthology *Yellow Light*, sections of Deborah Wong's *Speak it Louder*, Paget-Clarke's interview with Jang and Wong, and the AIR website.

<sup>6</sup> This influence is described in virtually all historical writing on the Asian American movement, whether more mainstream accounts like William Wei's *The Asian American Movement* or more radical ones such as Fred Ho's *Legacy to Liberation*.

<sup>7</sup> For more on Bandung and Afro-Asian activism generally, see Vijay Prashad's *Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting*.

<sup>8</sup> San Francisco and the surrounding region was home to many struggles of the 1960s and 1970s which helped inspire and define the Asian American movement, such as the Third World student strikes (at San Francisco State University and the University of California, Berkeley, 1968-1969), the organizing around the I-Hotel in San Francisco's Chinatown/Manilatown in the 1970s, and the founding of the Black Panther party in Oakland in 1966.

<sup>9</sup> Among these, one of the most regular collaborators with musicians is storyteller Aoki, who would later pursue many collaborations with Izu and others, and who began working with Lewis Jordan in the late 1970s (Jordan).

<sup>10</sup> For Ho's own discussion of his commitment to anti-sexism and relevant works, see his essay "Beyond Asian American Jazz."

<sup>11</sup> Founded in 1977, Marron included Mark Izu (bass), Lewis Jordan (saxophone), Ray Collins (saxophone), Gordie Watanabe (guitar), Paul Yamazaki (clarinet), Kenny Endo (drums) and Duke Santos (congas).

<sup>12</sup> United Front, which performed together until 1986, released two albums on their own label, RPM records, as well as one for a German label (FMP), and did various European tours. The group was also the subject of a documentary film entitled *Outside in Sight*.

<sup>13</sup> Some of these early Asian American improvisers met through the *gagaku* (Japanese court music) ensemble which was organized through the Institute of Buddhist Studies in San Francisco. Izu, for example, studied the *sho* (mouth organ) there and, through the *gagaku* ensemble, met other Japanese American musicians who were also informed by Black traditions and working to make sense of their connection to Asian musics. Izu remarked that "for the first time, I felt like I belonged someplace" (Asai 274).

<sup>14</sup> For example, Ingrid Monson has argued that African American "improvisors" developed the more open structures of "modal jazz" by self-consciously drawing on South Asian and other non-Western musical practices, and on ideas about unity and spirituality bound up in them ("Oh Freedom").

<sup>15</sup> Francis Wong, for example, recalled that he met the members of United Front at the first festival (Telephone Interview). Similarly, Jon Jang, who had left music to work in union organizing since graduating from Oberlin Conservatory, described how he felt "liberated and inspired" by the seeing African and Asian American improvisers collaborating at the festival, and suggests that this helped him start developing a musical practice that addressed his own experiences (Cheng and Jang).

<sup>16</sup> Hwang had begun collaborating with African American improvisers such as William Parker through the Basement Workshop, an Asian American artists' collective in New York which was also in contact with the Kearny St. Workshop of the Bay Area. The New York festivals, in contrast to those in the Bay Area, focused on both Asian American and Asian musicians, and they also engaged artists from other disciplines. The 1986 festival featured not only jazz artists, but also a film presentation, a short play, "Japanese traditional songs," "a slide show, a calligraphy demonstration, and a poetry reading" by Basement Workshop poets (Shepard). For more on Cobi Narita and the Universal Jazz Coalition, see Scott.

<sup>17</sup> Specifically, the Asian American Art Ensemble in 1982, the Monkey Orchestra in 1980, and the Afro Asian Music Ensemble in 1981.

<sup>18</sup> Ho writes that his opera, "A Chinaman's Chance," which "used both Cantonese and Beijing opera melodic styles" as well as African American influences, sought to "be an extension of the traditional Chinese opera in America that was once so active in the Chinatown communities before World War Two" (Ho and Sakolsky 140).

<sup>19</sup> Murdered in Detroit, Chin had been mistaken for Japanese and became a scapegoat for the men's frustration with Japanese domination of the auto industry. As horrifying as the Chin murder was, even more shocking was the fact that the men were eventually released on three years of probation with a mere \$3,000 fine, after pleading guilty to manslaughter. This turn of events made the Chin murder into even more of a rallying point for the Asian American movement. Another powerful aspect of the Chin case was that, because Chin had been mistaken as Japanese, many Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, Korean Americans and other groups became increasingly aware that however distinctly they perceived their own ethnic positions, they were all, in the eyes of the dominant white culture, a singular "minority race" (Yip).

<sup>20</sup> These Marxist-Leninist organizations sought to infiltrate factories in the major industries of the nation such as the steel and auto industries, in order to eventually unionize the proletariat and transform the nation's government and social structure. By the end of the 1980s, most of these groups had dissolved due to a combination of internal divisions, a shifting cultural terrain, the globalization of labor, and decades of destabilization efforts directed at radical organizations through covert United States government operations

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such as the counterintelligence programs (COINTELPRO) of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Among the most detailed histories of these secretive organizations is *Legacy to Liberation*, an anthology edited by musician and activist Fred Ho. This book chronicles the work of many such organizations in different regions of the United States, and their complex interrelationships.

<sup>21</sup> See *Legacy to Liberation* for a full accounting of the history of these and other ML organizations.

<sup>22</sup> A story recounted in an online interview with Brenda Wong Aoki reveals these tensions going back to the 1970s; see interview with Chang.

<sup>23</sup> In recounting to me his version of the emergence of AIR, Ho stressed the collective nature of the label's formation as well as his own role in its expansion, which included his release on AIR during its early stages (*Song for Manong*). However, most existing accounts of AIR neglect to mention Ho, in part because he left the collective early in its history, shortly after his 1989 release.

<sup>24</sup> For example, according to Ho, *Voice of the Dragon* sold out two consecutive nights at a California venue which seated 1,600 people (Telephone Interview).

<sup>25</sup> See for example George Lewis's essay, "Gittin' to know y'all."

<sup>26</sup> See for example Wong's discussion of San Francisco based Asian American improvisers confronting the San Francisco Jazz Festival.

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