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From Mainstream to Downstream: Jimmy Giuffre and the Deconstruction of the Jazz Art World

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This paper is a case study of the career of American saxophonist, composer and improviser Jimmy Giuffre, who was born in 1921 and passed away in April 2008. Giuffre's musical and professional trajectory reflects the fracturing of jazz into a mainstream and a marginalized sociomusical domain I will refer to as the improvised music field. The particular shift I will be discussing here mirrors the conflicts in jazz around the emergence of bebop in the 1940s, but differs in that bebop practices eventually became part of the standard conventions of jazz, while improvised music became its own distinct entity. What I refer to here as mainstream jazz is characterized by the use of steady rhythmic patterns, cyclical harmonic progressions, a soloist plus rhythm section ensemble arrangement, and a repertoire that revolves around a cannon of standard compositions. Although there is significant variety within this basic formulation, the dominant conventions that continue to signify jazz have been in place since the early 1950s. Beginning in the late 1950s - with the work of Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor, among others - an experimental stream of jazz emerged that became increasingly independent from the structures and conventions of the jazz field. This division was more or less complete by the early 1970s, when a discrete area of musical activity based on the idea of free improvisation - and the related infrastructure to support its performance - became identifiable in North America and Europe. The

following analysis will provide context for interpreting the socially and economically marginalized contemporary improvised music field through a re-evaluation of Jimmy Giuffre's role as a connecting figure between mainstream and experimental jazz practices.

My focus here is on the music Giuffre recorded with bassist Steve Swallow and Canadian pianist Paul Bley between the years 1960-62. When he founded this trio Giuffre was, in Paul Bley's words, "... equally famous to anybody else in jazz", based on his association with Woody Herman in the mid 1940s, for whom he wrote the swing era hit "Four Brothers", and a trio with guitarist Jim Hall in the late 1950s, which had a minor jazz hit in 1957 with a piece called "The Train and The River". Giuffre followed these commercial successes with the adventurous trio with Bley and Swallow. Here is a sample of Giuffre's work to illustrate his basic musical trajectory, starting with "Four Brothers" and "The Train and the River", which will be followed by two excerpts from the trio in question: "Jesus Maria", from the trio's first album recorded in 1961, and "Spasmodic", from their last album, recorded in 1962.

Play Sample

My analysis of Giuffre's position is based on sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of fields, a term he developed to describe the dynamic socioeconomic relationships and institutional infrastructure that revolve around particular modes of artistic production. Bourdieu wrote: "[A field is] an independent universe with its own laws of functioning, its specific relations of force, its dominants and its dominated, and so forth... [An artistic field] is neither a vague social background nor even a *milieu*

artistique, but a place of entirely specific struggles, notably concerning the question of knowing who is part of the universe, who is a real artist and who is not.” This general description of artistic fields translates easily into an interpretation of how music manifests in Western society. In Bourdieu’s terms, we can understand music as a sociocultural domain with a common set of structures – by which I mean venues, record labels, media publications, educational institutions – that are divided along aesthetic lines we label as genres. The mobility of subjects within the music field is determined by the power relationships that play out between participants in these specific genres. Although the exact boundaries around a field are impossible to draw, a field is loosely defined through a kind of general awareness amongst those inside and outside the field that a certain collection of agents, social structures, institutions, and common practices interact to generate musical products of a specific type. In the jazz field, like other music fields, the specific struggles Bourdieu refers to occur over performance and recording opportunities, or, more generally, over the pursuit of situations where one can “make a name for oneself”, and maybe a few dollars besides. A short survey of Giuffre’s early recordings reveals that he had a recognizable name in mainstream jazz - his early music is documented on iconic jazz labels such as Verve and Atlantic, and his records feature well-known jazz musicians such as Lee Konitz, Jim Hall, and Ray Brown.

It is clear from our present vantage point that by the early 1960s the performance conventions in the jazz field had become ossified, at least in terms of what one might reasonably expect to get paid to produce as a professional jazz musician. Giuffre’s re-evaluation of the harmonic, rhythmic, timbral, and formal conventions of jazz, in

conjunction with the work of Ornette Coleman and others, caused his status in the jazz field to shift, and his opportunities to record and perform diminished considerably after the debut of this trio. But Giuffre was unwilling to change his music to make it more commercially viable, and continued to work in a similar area for the rest of his career. Younger musicians took up the practices of Giuffre and Coleman, which eventually led to the formation of a discrete sociomusical domain that is related to, yet distinct from, the mainstream musical formation of jazz. I call this the improvised music field, and it has come to exist as a relatively self-sustaining system of small-scale organizational structures and musical practices that runs in parallel to the ongoing activities of the mainstream jazz field. The improvised music field, as an identifiable entity, is contingent upon the negation of the sonic materials and ensemble relationships of jazz, and is based on an aesthetic ideal of improvisation as being autonomous from particular musical traditions. Alan Durant theorized that this conceptual shift arose out of the practices of early free jazz musicians, who elevated improvisation “from its role of being merely one dimension of music which is for the most part composed and notated, to become a specific form in itself”. Bassist Steve Swallow provides a practice-level example of Durant’s formulation in a description of the Giuffre trio’s working methods:

We set about to subject all the unconscious, given assumptions in the music we played to stern scrutiny and reevaluation... We developed in rehearsal methods of improvising together that honored the particular piece we were playing and were specific to that piece. For example, there was a lot of talk about register. For a while we would very consciously play in the same register, all of us clustered around middle C. As an exercise we would play for ten or fifteen minutes with that as the only given. Then we would stop and do the opposite. Paul would play as far above Jimmy as he could and I would play as far below Jimmy as I could,

and we would observe the effect of the three voices being separated by as much air as possible.

Such practices contributed to the discursive shift in contemporary conceptions of music-making from “playing jazz” to “improvising”. Although I am reasonably certain that the members of this trio continued to identify as jazz musicians following the trio’s disbanding, their practices were taken up by a subsequent generation of musicians who had little or no connection to jazz, and who identify themselves as improvisers rather than jazz musicians. George Lewis suggests this discursive shift has resulted in a recognizable new identity in the music field: “[We] can now identify ‘improviser’ as a functional musical activity role in world-musical society, along with such roles as ‘composer’, ‘performer’, ‘interpreter’, ‘psychoacoustician’, and various flavours of ‘theorist’”.

The assertion of difference and independence through the avoidance of the sonic materials associated with jazz has had certain ethical and political consequences for improvised music, due to the continuing racial stratification of the jazz field. Improvisation in Western culture continues to be associated with jazz, so jazz has become, in George Lewis’s terms, the “epistemological other” against which Western musicians who claim improvisation as their aesthetic priority define themselves. Using Lewis’s interpretive model, as white musicians the Giuffre trio would have had a certain kind of mobility that enabled them to claim a distance from jazz that black musicians, such as Ornette Coleman and Anthony Braxton, cannot do. He refers to this situation as the “one drop rule of jazz”, which is a metaphor he uses to argue that black improvisers are perpetually coded as jazz musicians, while white musicians are freer to

establish and work with alternative identities. This is obviously a very complex issue, yet I mention it briefly here as the improvised music field is discursively constructed as an inclusive space that is open to experimentation, yet through its opposition to the materials of jazz it continues to function in Europe and North America as a mainly white preserve. This is not to say that there was anything inherently racist about the Giuffre trio's intentions – they acted in good faith, out of a love for the jazz tradition, yet their claim to be looking for musical approaches outside of jazz, and the resulting establishment of a field and identity position founded on the negation of jazz, underscores certain institutionalized inequalities that continue to mediate the improvised music field.

Given this social/political context, the trio's questioning of jazz conventions put them at odds with those in power in the jazz field. Yet based on Giuffre's past accomplishments they did get to record three records. The success of "The Train and the River" led to a contract with Verve Records, which at the time was one of the largest commercial jazz labels. Verve reluctantly released two records by the trio, but let them go out of print immediately and cancelled Giuffre's contract as soon as they could - this abstract, atonal, non-swinging music was not what they were looking for. After this setback, Giuffre signed a deal with the more adventurous Columbia records based on a recommendation from producer Teo Macero, who had had considerable success with Miles Davis. The trio recorded *Free Fall* in 1962, which contains some of the most outside improvising of the era. *Free Fall* became an inspiration for many European musicians who were looking to develop their own identities outside of the frame of

American jazz. English saxophonist Evan Parker told me: “*Free Fall* is a masterpiece. It’s still relevant, and still shows possibilities.” Yet like Verve, Columbia dropped the band immediately following the record’s release, and Giuffre never again recorded for a major label. According to Steve Swallow, the band broke up in 1962 after a performance at a coffee house in New York City yielded thirty-five cents each.

After the trio disbanded, Giuffre’s performing work dried up, as it seems that his stylistic shift and subsequent commercial failure resulted in the dominant forces in the jazz field determining that he was no longer a jazz musician, or at least not a marketable one. He continued writing music, but his subsequent efforts went largely undocumented. The musical practices the Giuffre trio initiated were taken up by a younger generation of musicians, particularly in London, who in the mid-1960s began to establish an audience and set of social structures to support the practice of improvised music. Musicians such as Derek Bailey, Evan Parker, John Stevens and Eddie Prévost worked individually and collectively to establish an infrastructure for improvised music, which now includes independent musician-run record labels, a network of venues where one plays for the door, dedicated media publications such as *The Wire*, a festival circuit in Europe, and a small yet steady audience for the music. It is, however, very difficult to make a living as an improviser. Bassist Barre Phillips, who replaced Steve Swallow in the 1964 version of the Jimmy Giuffre 3, described the current situation: “Young musicians aren’t dreaming about making a living as an improvising musician. They’re thinking about getting a formal education, getting the teaching job, getting the material thing organized, and if there’s still time to play some

music, then doing it." The contemporary position of improviser is thus characterized by this shift away from the notion of the professional musician and the corporate structure of venues and labels with which Giuffre had to work, towards a more grass-roots, do-it-yourself ethic where musicians accept that they must find ways to make a living outside of their creative practice. For the Jimmy Giuffre 3, this shift towards independent labels, musicians cooperatives and a small-scale economy came too late, and the intentions of the group members to support themselves through music meant that they had to disband when the trio lost the support of those in positions of power in the jazz field.

My own experience as an improviser in Toronto provides further context for understanding the fracture in the jazz field that I have been discussing thus far. I play in an improvising trio, and we have a reasonable amount of performing opportunities - all of them for the door, which is sometimes less than thirty-five cents. And because of developments in computer technology we have been able to record and release two CDs without outside financial support. Neither of these discs has made any money, yet they didn't cost very much to produce, and we feel it's important to document our work and make it available to the few who might be interested. The independent, micro-economy of the improvised music field is contained within the same basic structures of venues, labels, media outlets, and performance conventions as the mainstream jazz field, yet the two fields have historically functioned on different economic scales, with different expectations on the part of participants. This oppositional binary between jazz and improvised music is becoming increasingly hazy however. The position of improviser is still dependent on the discursive manoeuvre of

imaging jazz as a market-driven and dominating other. But the days of the professional jazz musician have long since passed, if they ever really existed. As jazz continues to recede from the public consciousness, and even the most mainstream of players cannot expect regular performing and recording opportunities, jazz musicians are being pushed to the same economic margins that the improvisers currently occupy. The two main dedicated jazz venues in Toronto closed in 2006, mere months apart; the musicians who worked in these places now find themselves isolated from the audience that might want to hear them and buy their recordings. So in my experience the younger musicians who want to play the standard jazz repertoire - as perpetuated through formal jazz education - are now competing for the same door money gigs that those of us making more outside music have long been accustomed to. The corporate structure that wouldn't accommodate Jimmy Giuffre's music, and against which the first generation of European improvisers defined themselves, has now shifted out of the popular domain and into direct competition for scant resources available to less-accessible musical forms. So we are in an interesting moment where two fields which claim their difference from popular and classical music through an emphasis on improvisation, and which define themselves against each other, are forced into the same socioeconomic position. We will have to watch how this might play out. To return in conclusion to the formative years of the improvised music field, Jimmy Giuffre was certainly not the only influence on the fracture in the jazz scene in the 1960s, but he is an important touchstone for many musicians who claim the identity of improviser, and

who we now consider to be representative of a distinct scene of independent and creative music-making.