

ASEM 2724: Jammin': Technoculture and Improvisation

Winter 2014 | Tues & Thur, 12:00-1:50pm | Sturm Hall 434

Professor: Trace Reddell, Emergent Digital Practices

Office Hours: Thursday 2:00-2:50pm and by appt. | Office: Sturm 216B

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This course introduces students to the recent history of musical and cultural forms devoted to improvisation, including jazz, free music, contemporary classical music, psychedelic and progressive rock, funk, jam bands, and electronic dance music. Particular attention will be paid to the ways in which subcultures of artists, producers, concert organizers, and listeners have formed around these types of musical expression. The act of improvisation will be examined as a response to emerging technological forms (new musical instruments, recording technologies, concert presentation, and distribution, particularly those enabled by networking technologies) by which musicians and listeners embody new personal as well as collective identities.

The class will ask you to listen closely to recorded materials both inside and outside of class, as well as read from multiple sources. Academic scholars, professional writers for the popular music press, and all sorts of fans of improvised music will provide us with many different ways to approach improvisation as both a concept and a practice. And we will want to make sure to address the various technological and cultural events that shape and inform the kinds of sounds that improvising musicians make. Therefore, rather than a music theory class, we will approach improvisation from several different perspectives, including cultural studies, philosophy, history, media studies, sound studies, and critical theory.

Required Recordings

Grateful Dead, *Aoxomoxoa* (1969)

John Coltrane, *Meditations* (1965)

Miles Davis, *In A Silent Way* (1969)

Predators, *Radio Telescope* (2011)

Sound Tribe Sector 9, *Artifact* (2005)

Supersilent, *6* (2003)

Required Texts

Graham St. John, *Technomad: Global Raving Countercultures* (Equinox Publishing, 2009)

Undercurrents: The Hidden Wiring of Modern Music, ed. Rob Young (Continuum 2002)

Class Schedule

Please see the class website: <http://mysite.du.edu/~reddell/courses-asem>

All listening and reading assignments must be completed before the class session on which they are listed.

Final (March 13, 2014): final album due by 2pm

Course Objectives

This class asks you to explore the ways in which “jamming” can help you become a more nimble critical thinker, a more creative communicator, and a better writer. The concept of the “jam” will therefore extend into the class’s writing exercises. Inspired by Beat writer Jack Kerouac’s notion of “spontaneous get-with-it” as well as his use of jazz music as a productive prompt, several class sessions will provide you with musical cues for you to use as you improvise your own written response. Small groups of you will also be asked to share collective writing spaces, such as a Google document, in which you will be asked to write together. Improvisational practices such as “riffing,” “soloing,” and “call and response” will be explored in search of writerly counterparts.

Finally, you will explore different aspects of documenting improvisation as another way of modeling the writing scholar’s practice. The act of recording, editing and releasing improvised music has proven problematic, even controversial, but essential for such music to reach a wide audience. Improvised music has exemplary producers like Teo Marcero, who faced the daunting task of editing the free jazz sessions of trumpeter Miles Davis into LP format, or the Grateful Dead members Jerry Garcia and Phil Lesh, who first transformed their band’s meandering and prolific output into condensed songs. These producers suggest methods for editing raw material into formats for widespread documentation and distribution. You will therefore be asked to explore the creative task of editing both your own and other students’ works.

Learning Outcomes

1. Describe and assess sound recordings in terms of improvised, technological and cultural elements.
2. Distinguish different forms and modes of improvisational techniques, strategies and technologies.
3. Understand the conceptual significance of specific modes of writing about music (informal fan-based; album review; concert review; professional music journalism; academic/scholarly writing).
4. Identify and apply multiple critical approaches to the study of improvisation-based musical cultures.

Assignments

Writing in class will be a big part of our practice this quarter – individually, collectively and collaboratively – and some part of just about every class session will involve writing. You will be asked to read your work aloud. You will be asked to comment on, discuss, remix, and edit each other’s work. You will write together in shared documents, both in real-time and in asynchronous post-production. And you will be expected to listen, read, and write regularly outside of class, both in ways that extend exercises begun in the classroom, as well as those that work from recordings and artists of your own selection and which craft your documents for different kinds of audiences and publication venues.

Assignments and Evaluation Weight

Writing Jams

- 3 1-page solo writing jams (10%): Three times over the course of the quarter, you will be asked to submit a 1 page example of your individually written word “jams” created in class to musical and conceptual prompts.
- 3 1-page group writing jams (10%): Likewise, three times during the quarter, you will be asked to submit a 1 page example of your collaboratively written word “jams” created in class to musical and conceptual prompts.

Ethnography

- 1 5-page ethnography (15%): The first formal writing assignment will ask you to articulate an ethnographic question to pose to other classmates. You will have a chance to track some of your own history as a listener, fan, collector, concertgoer, or musician. You will turn in a 3-page draft describing, discussing and analyzing your ethnographic data. After a class workshop, you will turn in an expanded 5-page piece.

Reviews

- 1 2-page review (10%): We’ll consider different formats of the formal music-related review. Reviews will be read and discussed in class. You will revise and then post your review on the class blog.
- 1 2-page meta-document on review (10%): This short piece relates your review assignment to class readings and discussions.

Final Album (this collection of revised and new writings has two phases, a pitch or proposal, and the final album itself)

2-page pitch for the final album (10%): Your proposal should indicate:

- a. what material you plan to work with, edit and incorporate into your album.
- b. your album’s genre(s) and organizational approach (“greatest hits”; collection of singles; concept album).
- c. concepts and critical ideas from material we have listened to this quarter. You should pick at least two albums/groups from our required listenings and do any relevant reading into that album or group that you can find in print or online (reviews, interviews, essays, artist websites, fansites).
- d. concepts and critical ideas from our discussions, ethnographies and readings that you would like to discuss. You should pick at least two things that we have read this quarter that can inform your album’s liner notes.

8-page final album (20%): Your final album should fulfill your proposal and meet the four learning outcomes listed above, as well as respond to any revision plans agreed on by the instructor.

5-6 pages of material that you have written in the class, excluding the (auto)ethnography. Half of this can come from group writing sessions (be sure to identify group-written material in your liner notes). At least 1 page should be new material that you write according to your own “rules” and “prompts.” You can organize this album into

“tracks,” giving each track a clear title and word count (instead of time length). You should assemble and edit your album in ways that explore your writing style as a type (or types) of music.

2-3 pages of liner notes that discuss the album contents and your approach to assembling the album. You should also reflect on how your writing style(s) indicates certain types of musical expression, form, style, or genre. Full points will be given to students who incorporate at least two ideas drawn from writers we have studied this quarter. Please attribute to the writer’s name and source material by title, date, and page number.

Participation (15%): I expect you to be ready to write and willing to discuss reading material assigned before class. You will also be asked to do a good amount of listening in class as a prompt for writing and discussion. We will have regular discussions of each other’s work, and I expect you to be attentive, creative and constructive in your work with each other as reader, commenter and editor.

General Policies

Peripheral Devices

I prefer to keep the seminar free from distractions, so please do not use your cell phones, instant messaging, or laptops in the class except when instructed to do so. Exceptions to this are jam sessions and workshops, as long as you are working with documents assigned for that class, and electronic texts. You should keep a notebook or journal for class notes.

Disabilities / Medical Accommodation

If you qualify for academic accommodations because of a disability or medical issue please submit a Faculty Letter to me from **Disability Services Program** (DSP) in a timely manner so that your needs may be addressed. Disability Services determines accommodations based on documented disabilities/medical issues. DSP is located on the 4th floor of Ruffatto Hall, 1999 E. Evans Ave.; 303.871. 2372/ 2278 / 7432. Information is also available on line at <http://www.du.edu/disability/dsp>; see the *Handbook for Students with Disabilities*.

Email Policy

1. If you cannot see me during my office hours, please email me to set up an appointment. I try to accommodate appointments within 48 hours, but it might be up to a week before we can meet.
2. I read and reply to email once a day and usually do not read or reply to email after 5 PM or weekends.
3. Your questions about assignments should be addressed in class or during office hours. Please do not expect “zero-hour” clarification of assignments via email. I typically will not reply to emails regarding course matters (assignment requirements or due dates, readings, etc.) that are the result of your unexcused absences or lack of attention to course instruction.

Attendance and Participation

Attendance and participation in all class sessions are expected. I also expect you to listen attentively to presentations, discussions and audio material. Falling asleep in class constitutes an absence. After two absences (excused for documented illness or school-related travel), each additional unexcused absence will result in a 10% reduction of your final grade in the class. Missing 5 classes will result in an F; documentation for major illness or other extenuating circumstances may allow accommodation if you request a late withdrawal or incomplete if you choose to take the class again. Failure to have work ready by its due date constitutes an absence and may result in failure of the project.

Grade Scale

A = 95-100%; A- = 90-94% = generally, this grade is reserved for those works that surpass expectations. The grade recognizes:

- sophisticated critical writing and editing skills;
- incorporation of multiple, different concepts and techniques with excellent results;
- outstanding use of source materials, research analysis, and synthesis of own content;
- written work contributes greatly to understanding of primary works from various cultural and theoretical perspectives;
- consistently original and substantial contributions to class discussions and workshops.

B+ (85-89%); B (80-84%); B- (75-79%) = meets and in some areas exceeds expectations and criteria. The grade recognizes:

- very effective critical writing and editing skills;
- incorporation of multiple, different concepts and techniques, usually with very good outcomes;
- original use of source materials, research analysis, and synthesis of own content;
- written work contributes to deep listening and understanding of primary works from various cultural and theoretical perspectives;
- frequent original or substantial contributions to class discussions and workshops.

C+ (70-74%); C (65-69%); C- (60-64%) = fulfills all requirements. The grade recognizes:

- satisfactory critical writing and editing skills;
- a tendency to stick to a one or two familiar concepts and techniques;
- a reliance on untreated source materials, lack of research analysis, and little synthesis of own content;
- written work states the obvious and does little to contribute to understanding of primary works from various cultural and theoretical perspectives;
- infrequent or rushed and unpolished contributions to class discussions and workshops.

D+ (55-59%); D (51-54%) = fails to fulfill some requirements. The grade recognizes:

- less than satisfactory critical writing and editing skills;
- sticks to one key concept or production technique;
- a reliance on untreated source materials, lack of research analysis, and no synthesis of own content;
- written work is insubstantial and fails to contribute to understanding of primary works from various cultural and theoretical perspectives;
- rushed and unpolished contributions to class discussions and workshops, and some inability to keep up with the schedule.

F (0-50%) = fails all requirements. The grade recognizes:

- an inability to master anything more than basic critical writing and editing skills;
- an inability to incorporate multiple concepts and techniques;
- an over-reliance on source materials;
- written work is incomplete and poorly developed in terms of its contribution to understanding of primary works from various cultural and theoretical perspectives;
- lack of contributions to class discussions and workshops, and failure to keep up with schedule.

Plagiarism

I expect all assignments to represent the outcomes of your own critical thinking and creative efforts. A student found to have plagiarized another's work – that is, represented someone else's written word as your own – will receive an F for the course, and I will report the matter to the AHSS Dean's office and the Office of Community and Citizenship Standards.