

ASEM 2724: Jammin': Technoculture and Improvisation

Spring 2015 | Tues & Thur, 10:00-11:50pm | Sturm Hall 434

Professor: Trace Reddell, Emergent Digital Practices

Office Hours: Tues/Thur 12:15-1:45pm 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.

Primary Recordings

Ornette Coleman, *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation* (1960)

John Coltrane, *Meditations* (1965)

Miles Davis, *In A Silent Way* (1969) & *Bitches Brew* (1970)

Grateful Dead, *Aoxomoxoa* (1969)

Sound Tribe Sector 9, *Artifact* (2005), *Artifact: Perspectives* (2005)

Supersilent, *6* (2003)

Required Texts (Available in the DU Bookstore)

1) *How To Write About Music*, edited by Marc Woodworth & Ally-Jane Grossan (Bloomsbury 2015)

2) *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Cocreation*, edited by Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, & George Lipsitz (Duke University Press 2013)

* Links to additional required readings and other media will be posted on the class website on an on-going basis throughout the quarter.

Backordered / cancelled

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

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

Course Structure and Goals

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.

By the end of the quarter, students will be responsible for working together to produce two distinct outcomes:

- 1) A mini-conference developed around the themes of your collective choosing.
- 2) An album of your best writings.

Course Objectives

Jam-Writing

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 responses. 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 music practices will be explored in search of their writerly counterparts.

Writing About Music

You will survey different styles of writing about music in the industry. Our primary text book, *How To Write About Music*, is an excellent sampler of professional practices, and we will read, discuss, and work from this book’s writing prompts.

Assignments and Evaluation

Assignment details will be posted on an on-going basis.

Writing Jams (20%)

- 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.

Writing Prompts (60%)

“Spontaneous Get-With-It” (Kerouac) (10 points)

“Sound Observations” (Oliveros) (10 points)

“The Blind Review” (10 points)

“Make It Better” (10 points)

“Track-By-Track” (15 points)

“The Annotated Mix Tape” (15 points)

“The Personal Essay” / “Other Voices” (15 points)

“The Blog Piece” (15 points)

Finals (25%)

Artist Profile

Music Scenes

Cultural Criticism

33 1/3rd Pitch

Course Participation (15%)

Participation

Your participation in this course is essential to its success. Being prepared for and present during class sessions, ready to interact in a focused and engaged way with the material and each other, is your main responsibility.

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.

Groups are an important part of this class, and you will be responsible for working with your group both during class sessions and outside of class. The majority of this outside collaborative work will take place online.

- **Phase 1: 5 groups of 3**
The first half of class will have you in very small teams for collaborative exercises, research, critique, and discussion.
- **Phase 2: 3 groups of 5**
The second half of class will switch to fewer big groups. Each of these three

groups will be responsible for organizing a final panel presentation and discussion.

Student Responsibilities

You need to read, watch, or listen to the required material before the class on which it is assigned. And for every thing we read, watch, or listen to, you need to be prepared with some things you'd like to talk about. These may take the shape of questions you want to pose, interpretations or applications of key ideas, sections of assigned material that you might want us to consider more closely. For each text, I will provide you with prompts and exercises.

You will be expected to write quite a bit for this class, which builds toward a final short paper and panel presentation. But you will also be asked to write regularly as part of your process of absorbing and working with new source materials. You will be asked to keep an ongoing journal in which you will track your interactions with the class content, as well as set and track goals for your work. I will interact with you through this journal.

Students need to have an active Google Docs account. It is your responsibility to maintain folders for the projects and course work. You will have individual work and collaborative work on Google. For a naming convention, please always include your last name at the start of any folder or document. For example, my files would have titles like "Reddell_EDPx2200-syllabus.doc," "Reddell_chappie-meme.gif," and "Reddell_chillwave_remix.mp3," all included in a folder, "Reddell_EDPx2200".

Communication with the professor, including tracking of attendance and grades, will be administered through the Canvas site accessible through DU's PioneerWeb.

Class Schedule

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

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

Week one

- 1) Course introduction
- 2) Spontaneous get-with-it

Week two

- 1) Sound Observations: Writing as listening
- 2) The Album Review

Week three

- 1) The Blind Review
- 2) Make It Better

Week four

- 1) Track-By-Track
- 2) The Annotated Mix Tape

Week five

- 1) Jam and Remix
- 2) New Improvisation

Week six

- 1) The Personal Essay / Other Voices
- 2) The Blog Piece

Week seven

- 1) Artist Profile
- 2) Music Scenes

Week eight

- 1) Cultural Criticism
- 2) 33 1/3rd Pitch

Week nine

- 1) refining the themes
- 2) refining the themes

Week ten

- 1) academic mini-conferences 1-2
- 2) academic mini-conferences 3-4

Final: final album releases

General Policies

Laptops and Peripheral Devices

Laptops are permitted as long as you are staying on task. Please do not use your cell phones or instant messaging device or service in the class. Recording class sessions is not permitted unless you are told otherwise on a case-by-case basis.

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 two school days.
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 such as 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 of all class sessions is mandatory and expected. Each unexcused absence will result in a 10% reduction of your final grade in the class. Missing 5 classes will result in a failed grade for the course. I allow for 2 absences excused for documented illness or school-related travel. If attendance becomes a problem beyond those 2, we need to discuss your continued enrollment. In such cases, documentation of 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, will count against you as such, and may result in failure of the assignment.

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.



Jammin' (Technoculture & Improvisation)

16 students

- **Phase 1: 4 groups of 4**
- **Phase 2: 4 groups of 4**

Daily Class sessions

10am-10:10am 1) Track or clip of the day / warm-up writing exercise

10:10-10:30am 2) Focus Content / Goals of the session + Q&A

10:30-11:05am 3) Solo student and/or small group work

11:05-11:30am 4) Discussion & Sharing

11:30-11:40am 5) Assignments for next session, homework

11:40-11:50am 6) Q&A

