

# AMERICAN MUSIC REVIEW

The H. Wiley Hitchcock Institute for Studies in American Music

*Conservatory of Music, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York*

Volume XLIII, Number 1

Fall 2013

## **New York Improviser-Composers and the Politics of Multiplicity**

Amanda L. Scherbenske, Wesleyan University

Lower Manhattan and more recently Brooklyn have hosted manifold artistic movements.<sup>1</sup> They have served as a stage for the literary Bohemians of the late nineteenth century; the Tin Pan Alley musicians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the Dada artists of the 1910s and 1920s; the Abstract Expressionists of the 1940s; the Beat writers and beboppers of the post-war period; the free jazz musicians, Fluxus artists and neo-Dadaists of the 1960s; the new wave, punk, “Downtown,” and hip hop scenes of the 1970s and 1980s; and the Radical Jewish Culture movement of the 1990s. A younger generation of improviser-composers began their careers in Lower East Side venues including Tonic and the Knitting Factory around the early 2000s; nowadays, they perform throughout New York, its surrounding areas, and beyond. It is this generation of improviser-composers with whom I am primarily concerned here.

Contextualizing these young musicians and their music requires reflecting on artistic movements that unfolded inside and outside of New York half a century ago. Starting in the late 1950s African-American collectives and individuals active in experimental musics regularly contested musical essentialism according to race. Midwestern and Western collectives such as the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), Union of God’s Musicians and Artists Ascension (UGMAA) and Black Artists Group (BAG), along with individuals including Sun Ra, Wadada Leo Smith, and Anthony Braxton, sought to move beyond genre circumscription and challenge racial stereotypes. They did so, in part, by favoring an egalitarian aesthetic that made use of varied musical resources. Many members of these collectives and individuals eventually found their way to New York. Over the next several decades musicians active in the M-Base collective, the “Downtown” scene, the Vision Festival, and the Radical Jewish Culture movement, invested in similar ideals of musical inclusion.<sup>2</sup>

The generation of improviser-composers active in New York since the early 2000s has taken up ranks in this tradition of boundary erosion, with varying relationships to its original political motivations. They regularly traverse myriad art and cultural scenes and to engage complex entanglements of sounds in their musical practices.<sup>3</sup> Mark Slobin suggests the term “musical multiplicity” to cope with, “the overwhelming interest in . . . multiple-source, multiple-leveled music-making.”<sup>4</sup> He observes that while today’s situation resembles that of the past, “the action is more ramified, multidimensional, and volatile than ever.”<sup>5</sup> In the case studies that follow, I use multiplicity to encompass the musical, personal, and political investments of this generation of improviser-composers.

Throughout her life Judith Berkson has engaged musical multiplicity. At an early age, her father taught her the intricacies of Jewish prayers and blessings, and she studied Western classical piano and music theory. Later, her teacher Joe Maneri at the New England Conservatory of Music (NEC) encouraged her to pursue all musics



Judith Berkson  
*Courtesy of Judith Berkson*

## New York Improviser-Composers (cont.)

that piqued her interest, including jazz: “[Maneri] just said [that] you could do it all. I mean why can’t you be well versed in a variety of musics, if you wanted to; you should.”<sup>6</sup> The principles she learned from Maneri guided her formative years in New York. She developed an eclectic solo show at her neighborhood Brooklyn haunt, Barbès. These performances culminated in the 2010 ECM release, *Oylam*.

*Oylam* gives expression to Berkson’s meticulous study of Jewish music, German Lieder, Second Viennese School atonality, and jazz. She insists that while the album contents are eclectic, they are unified by a personal sensibility: “It’s not just like a variety show... [it has] a certain avant-garde edge to it ... [it’s an] economy of playing in kind of space and mood.”<sup>7</sup> She illustrates her aesthetic in the way she introduces and arranges material: she precedes the Yiddish song with a brief microtonal improvisation and adapts Schubert’s classical standard “Der Leiermann” to an instrumentation more common to jazz or rhythm and blues.

Berkson’s compositions “Ahavas Oylam” and “Inside Good Times” give voice to a range of techniques, styles and contexts. Whereas “Ahavas Oylam” is largely tonal and sung in Hebrew, “Inside Good Times” is largely pantonal and sung in English. They differ in performance practice, too: Berkson performs “Ahavas Oylam” with lots of vibrato and ornamentation, while she sings “Inside Good Times” without vibrato. She sings with melisma and largely moves stepwise in “Ahavas Oylam”; in contrast, she frequently employs great leaps in pitch in “Inside Good Times.” Her rare combination of skills and blend of esoteric materials make her one-of-a-kind even within the vast expanse of New York art worlds.

If we assess multiplicity based on the performance of eclectic styles, we may say facetiously that Berkson performs Jewish music, Western classical music, and jazz. If, however, we resituate the discussion vis-à-vis her relationship to those styles, the conversation conjures personal and political implications. Berkson relayed to me that upon moving to New York she did not tell people that she performed Jewish music because she did not want to be relegated exclusively to it.<sup>8</sup> Her desire to be understood on her own terms resembles the political ambitions of the AACM, UGMAA and BAG, among others. The motivations espoused by elder African American improviser-composers, however, differ considerably from that of a white Jewish woman from Boston.

On one hand, Berkson’s experience mirrors the AACM’s desire to, “move beyond ethnic particularism toward the recognition of a multicultural, multi-ethnic base, with a variety of perspectives, histories, traditions, and methods.”<sup>9</sup> On the other, she seems motivated more by her upbringing and leadership experience than by greater social and political currents. Music was a compulsory part of her formative years:

[Music] was just something that I did ... I could never quit piano: that conversation would never exist. I couldn’t quit my family band: that doesn’t exist. I can’t not sing in the temple: that choice doesn’t exist. It was just something that we did.<sup>10</sup>

Berkson talks about music in general terms, but the reality of her early experience was that she performed exclusively Jewish-identified and Western classical music. Her studies at NEC marked the first time in her life that she explored music on her own terms, a direction she would continue to pursue in New York.

Berkson initially began to develop a solo show in part because she struggled to run her own band. Shortly after moving to New York she formed a quartet to perform her compositions. She later dissolved the ensemble because, “I think I was trying to reconcile this idea of being a jazz musician, and wanting to be that, but really not being that.”<sup>11</sup> Although she had training in jazz at NEC, she had more practice-based experience in Western classical and Jewish music. Slobin proposes that belonging is a “complex act” dependent upon degree of commitment to a particular expressive cultural affiliation and, “a choice to follow up an affinity.”<sup>12</sup> Berkson’s pursuit of her solo project *Oylam* was initially motivated by a sense of disbelonging among jazz communities. I

## New York Improviser-Composers (cont.)

speak of *dis*belonging because although Berkson made inroads into the jazz community, she ultimately felt that she did not fit in with her jazz peers.

It is out of just such a discussion of belonging, and disbelonging, that I turn to the practices of drummer-composer Tyshawn Sorey. Sorey was born and raised in Newark, New Jersey. As a toddler he and his father fashioned toy drum sets out of pots, pans and discarded boxes. When he was around four years old he plunked out church hymns on a keyboard in four-part harmony by ear. He learned trombone, and later, drum set through his public school music program. As a high school student Sorey delved into recordings of Charles Mingus, Cecil Taylor, Anthony Braxton, and Wayne Shorter and soon began to write music in the style of these composers. He studied classical trombone and jazz drum performance at William Paterson University from 1999 to 2004. While a college student he started a professional career as a drummer, performing throughout New York and Europe. He immersed himself in compositions by Anton Webern, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Christian Wolff, and Milton Babbitt. At Anthony Braxton's encouragement he began to write music inclusive of all his interests.

Sorey currently works across art worlds and performs multiple idioms, particularly when viewed diachronically. As a teenager he played organ jazz nearly every Tuesday at the Peppermint Lounge near his hometown of Newark. Throughout his twenties he toured the European jazz festival circuit with Steve Coleman, Dave Douglas, Butch Morris, and Michele Rosewoman. He has recently added klezmer to his performance palette. He plays the traditional klezmer drumming iterations he learned from canonical recordings and from improvising extended percussive passages with Frank London's Shekhinah Big Band. Sorey has never performed at any of the Jazz at Lincoln Center events, but his association with the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE) as an ICElab "collaborator" has led him to the stage of this midtown concert bastion. In the summer of 2013 he performed his composition, *New York/Copenhagen*, with ICE for Lincoln Center's Mostly Mozart Festival.

Sorey brings together a host of interests and ideas in *New York/Copenhagen*.<sup>13</sup> He repeatedly listened to recordings of the Ethiopian saxophonist Gétatchèw Mèkurya and cantors Josef (Yossele) Rosenblatt (1882–1933) and Leib Glantz (1898–1964) as compositional preparation, taking harmonic inspiration from the Ethiopian mode *anchihoy* and the Jewish modes *mi sheberakh* and *freygish*, and rhythmic inspiration from the performers' distinctive styles.<sup>14</sup> J.S. Bach's Violin Sonatas and Partitas (BWV 1001–1006) are brought to bear in the violin bowings and phrasing. Finally, Sorey demonstrates his longtime fascination with rhythmic perception. He loosely bases the meter of the third movement on a *terkish* (a klezmer genre in duple meter), reconceiving it as 15/16 (realized as 7 + 8/16). This gives the feeling of a duple meter with a slight hiccup effect. By emphasizing beat eight of each measure he produces a modified back beat (common to jazz and related styles) over every two measures. In addition, he provides an alternate way to feel the time—in this case as triple meter—by activating a high hat jingle every five beats.



Tyshawn Sorey  
Courtesy of Amanda Scherbenske

*New York/Copenhagen* embraces multiplicity. Yet for Sorey, an African American man, the "putative jazz label" lingers.<sup>15</sup> From 2009–2011 he attended graduate school in composition at Wesleyan University. He subse-

## New York Improviser-Composers (cont.)

quently applied to doctoral programs in composition at two prestigious American universities. He was accepted and matriculated to Columbia University; the other school rejected him. A tenured professor at the latter institution wrote in a personal email to Sorey that he had expected him to submit more “jazz” compositions, and that had he done so he would have been a stronger candidate. The pieces that Sorey submitted, however, were ones he had written for the ensembles Fieldwork, Paradoxical Frog, Sorey-Neufeld-Morgan and ICE; all but ICE have had greater visibility within the jazz worlds than classical or new music ones. The works he selected all demonstrated his diverse, boundary-crossing musical interests that include improvisation as well as concepts of time that explore rhythmic cognition, tuplets, layered cycles, and rhythmic synchronicity.<sup>16</sup>

Today Sorey faces obstacles similar to those encountered by the founders of AACM forty-eight years ago. Although he crosses genres and traverses new music and jazz art worlds, he was quite literally rejected by one of America’s preeminent institutions of higher education for not meeting racially essentialist expectations. I am reminded here of Appadurai’s “certain fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture and politics.”<sup>17</sup> A discussion of boundary erosion and multiplicity is not about artistic and cultural flows for Sorey; it is, rather, about artistic and cultural networks disjointed by personal prejudice at the micro level, and, disciplined structures of inequality at the macro level.

Multiplicity, then, is expressed through diversity of musical materials, as well as undergirded by individual histories, markers of identity, and expressions of belonging. In spite of Berkson’s ostensible Jewish lineage, heritage alone explains neither musical expression nor motivation. Instead, multiplicity evolves over a lifetime’s worth of experiences and aesthetics. Affinity groups, too, do not fully speak to multiplicity; among improviser-composers’ networks, genre is more significant for its residual presence within institutional structures than in ground-level music-making and creative exploration. Sorey’s performance of jazz, new music, and klezmer, and his appearance at venues connected to both jazz and new music, however, do not erase broader distinctions upheld by America’s bifurcated and, ultimately, racialized depiction of its musics and musicians.

Still, Slobin’s work provides a starting point for the sort of willed affiliations present among improviser-composers’ networks. His recognition that “[a] choice to follow up an affinity leads to belonging,” involves a “complex act” dependent upon the level of commitment to a particular expressive cultural affiliation.<sup>18</sup> This generation of improviser-composers forges unique relationships to an African American musical history that embraces musical inclusion. Their performance of multiplicity is ultimately shaped by their relationship and sense of connectedness to the music cultures and histories from which their varied resources stem. Multiplicity among New York improviser-composers, then, forces us to reevaluate any proffers that it is, in fact, benign. Rather, when we speak of multiplicity, we must really speak of a politics of multiplicity that takes into account America’s racialized and gendered history of musics and musicians.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> For my purposes Lower Manhattan is defined as below 28th Street. The majority of improviser-composers with whom I have worked live in Brooklyn, which now represents an important site for the performance of experimental musics.

<sup>2</sup> This version of the “Downtown” scene largely centered on the Knitting Factory’s 47 East Houston Street and 74 Leonard Street locations. See Michael Dessen, “Decolonizing Art Music: Scenes from the Late Twentieth Century United States.” (PhD dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 2003) and George Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), for a critique of “Downtown.”

<sup>3</sup> See my forthcoming “Multiplicity and Belonging among New York City Improviser-Composers, 2000-2011” (Ph.D. dissertation,

## New York Improviser-Composers (cont.)

Wesleyan University, 2014) for a thorough discussion of this generation of improviser-composers.

<sup>4</sup>Mark Slobin, "Musical Multiplicity: Emerging Thoughts," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 39 (2007): 108.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 113.

<sup>6</sup>Judith Berkson, interview with author, 14 December 2012.

<sup>7</sup>Judith Berkson, interview with author, 7 November 2009.

<sup>8</sup>Field notes, 29 March 2009.

<sup>9</sup>George Lewis, "Experimental Music in Black and White: The AACM in New York, 1970-1985," in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, edited by Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (Columbia University Press, 2004), 52.

<sup>10</sup>Berkson, interview, 7 November 2009.

<sup>11</sup>Berkson, interview, 14 December 2012.

<sup>12</sup>Mark Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West* (Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 56.

<sup>13</sup> See <http://iceorg.org/digitice/detail/tyshawn-sorey-new-york-copenhagen-2013#.Um2bY7S9VUQ>

<sup>14</sup>Tyshawn Sorey, personal communication with author, 28 October 2013.

<sup>15</sup>Lewis, "Experimental Music in Black and White," 67.

<sup>16</sup>Tyshawn Sorey, personal communication with author, 23 September 2013.

<sup>17</sup>Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 221.

<sup>18</sup>Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds*, 56.