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Noise and Meaning: A Cognitive Ethnography of San Diego Musicians

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Arts

in

Music

by

Clinton Ross Davis

Committee in charge:

Professor David Borgo, Chair
Professor Anthony Davis
Professor Tara Knight

2011

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2011

DEDICATION

To anyone who has ever gotten away with something.

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I would like to thank all of the musicians, noise-icians,
and experimentalists who shared with me their time and
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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Noise and Meaning: A Cognitive Ethnography of San Diego Musicians

by

Clinton Ross Davis

Master of Arts in Music

University of California, San Diego, 2011

Professor David Borgo, Chair

A genre label of ‘Noise Music’ or ‘Noise’ has emerged over the last two decades and become an increasingly common descriptor for artists working at the fringes of various forms of rock and popular music. Yet in theorizing noise (in the theoretical sense) and Noise (a genre and culture), discourse has often been limited to those artists with strong ties to the Western Avant-Garde and its institutions, or at the very least, those who profess creative indebtedness to that tradition. Though this is true of many prominent Noise musicians, this framing can exclude or marginalize many of the rich details that constitute the aesthetic and personal identities of Noise culture.

This paper will address the gap between existing academic Noise discourse and the experiences of musicians living in San Diego whose music, at times, may be considered Noise. Through interviews and observations of performances, I will provide an ethnographic account of these musicians, their work, and their communities as a means of grounding discussion in lived experience. After locating these musicians and their work within various cultural and aesthetic topographies, I will use observations about their creative practices and their descriptions thereof to theorize the significance of physical materials in meaning-making processes.

INTRODUCTION

Noise has emerged as a theoretical object of interest in various humanities discourses in past decades. It has been approached as a concept for metaphysical contemplation, a metaphor for historical narratives, and an object with its own history, among other things. Within this discourse, a prototypical ‘canon’ of artists has emerged - artists whose work has been used to ground the theorization of noise in any the senses listed above. This canon, I believe, often demonstrates a kind of academic ethnocentrism that limits our understanding of noise in any theoretical sense as well as our understandings of the musical cultures that celebrate noise or noisiness as of value in shaping aesthetic, personal, and cultural identities.

In the past two decades, ‘Noise Music’ or ‘Noise’ has become an increasingly common genre/aesthetic descriptor for artists working at the fringes of various forms of rock and popular music. Yet in theorizing noise (in the abstract, ‘objective’ sense) and Noise (as a culturally specific descriptor), discourse has tended to limit itself to those artists with strong ties to the Western Avant-Garde and its institutions, or at the very least, those who profess creative indebtedness to that tradition.

The claim that “Noise advertises its relation to the history of modern art as if to grease its cultural acceptance and pre-empt charges of vapid meaninglessness” (Smith, 51) is often true. For examples we can look to artists such as Christian Marclay or Marcus Popp (known for his work with/as Oval) who are cited frequently in discourses on noise, technological subversion, and failure. In most of these instances, their work is

introduced or framed in relation to musical or visual arts avant-gardists, or their contemporaries in philosophical discourse (Marclay, 341; Stuart, 47).

Noise music, however, has largely emerged from and taken root in cultural locations distanced from those of the Avant-Garde. Regardless of whether such ‘underground’ Noise musicians are aware of or enjoy ‘modern art’ or the Avant-Garde, one need not look or listen hard to realize that they might advertise their relation to numerous other histories which have not been considered in the discourses surrounding noise. Consider this quote from self-described ‘Noise-ician’ Sam Lopez, a performer in San Diego:

“I’m more impressed by Greg Ginn [singer and guitarist for the hardcore band Black Flag] than John Cage. It’s just where they’re coming from. I can appreciate something more when its coming from a dark place... John Cage was always wearing suits and stuff rather than a t-shirt with an upside down cross or something. That’s something I could relate to. John Cage was more of a ‘Leave it to Beaver’ kind of thing” (Lopez, 26 Feb. 2011).

The first objective of this paper will be to address the discursive gap between existing Noise discourse and the experience of musicians (and noise-icians) like Sam and others. I will approach the issue ethnographically. Rather than approaching discussions of this music from the discursive constructs of the Avant-Garde, this paper will begin with the words of local artists. Relying on numerous interviews, I will attempt to represent how these performers understand their own work and how they position their work within various social communities and aesthetic histories. These words will then be supplemented by my own descriptive accounts of their performances to further assist the reader in understanding this musical community and its practices.

The second portion of this paper will use these descriptions as resources for theorizing about the construction of meaning in musical practice. This paper seeks to explore how these performers transform their subjective experiences of noise into the aesthetic or metaphorical structures they designate aesthetically as Noise (if they even want to call it that)? Specifically, I will use informants' descriptions of their creative processes to argue for the role of embodied interaction with physical materials in the constitution of meaningful, performative action. This paper will turn to recent literature from cognitive science and sociological discourses which have engaged the subject of meaning-making while championing the value of ethnographic methods in such pursuits.

I. A GENERAL OVERVIEW OF NOISE AND EXPERIMENTAL MUSICIANS IN SAN DIEGO

Group Identities and Boundaries

In December of 2010 I began ethnographic research with two San Diego musicians, Sam Lopez and Frank Melendez, who describe some of their work as Noise. Research began with attendance at their performances and interviews about their respective creative practices. Over the next five months, this work expanded to include a network of local artists with whom these two performed frequently. During this time, I also participated in this network of artists as a performer at a show organized by Sam.

It can be difficult to identify uniform criteria that bound this group of musicians, or to identify any single label for a bounded 'scene'. When asked to describe their work or that of others in their musical community, two descriptors consistently appeared in dialogue with informants - 'Noise' and 'Experimental' - though not everyone agreed on when, where, and to whom these labels should be applied. Bobby Bray, local guitarist and student of the University of California, San Diego's Interdisciplinary Computing and the Arts program described his perspective on these terms:

"...It gets really tricky with these terms, right? Noise in particular - I think is fair to say in 2011, there is in fact a Noise genre of music, or sound, I guess. Is it represented in San Diego? Yes... There's this other term 'Experimental' right? I would say there is an Experimental scene in San Diego. I think 'Noise' may be under the 'Experimental' umbrella. I think Experimental can have more than one thing...I think experimental would be a better general term for these things..." (Bray, 06 April 2011).

Beyond any internal negotiations of self-descriptors, many informants

provided similar descriptions of a location of their work, or that of their peers, within a larger cultural landscape. Some described the local Noise scene as comprised of two main groups, or circles of activity with a notable sense of distinction. The first circle was the Trummerflora Collective, a semi-organized group of musicians demonstrating interests in electro-acoustic improvisation and Avant-Garde practices (including score-based practices). Most Trummerflorans emerged from UCSD's music department during the late 1990's but had no official recognition by the institution. Their performances often took place in the limited venues around San Diego supportive of their music. The second group was known as SxDx Noise (pronounced S-D Noise). Most of my informants considered themselves participants of the latter group.

In my experience, it was difficult to observe a separation of activities between these two groups. The longer I observed the area's music scene and talked with other musicians, the more it seemed that the Trummerflora Collective's level of activity had been waning in recent years as its members had moved out of town or else advanced their professional careers. Any notion of group separation was further confused by the fact that Sam Lopez, who has been a prominent organizer of SxDx shows, had become a member of the Collective a few years prior to the beginning of this study. As an organizer of shows, Sam now has the option of advertising his shows as presented by either Trummerflora or the SxDx Noise.

Although these claims of separation didn't seem to be observable during the time of this study, the history of these two groups still lingers in many musicians' memories. This lingering can reveal some of the issues relevant to their personal and creative identities. For example, many SxDx Noise informants described a sense of

appreciation and excitement about Trummerflora activities while, at the same time, conveying a sense that creative participation in that scene was not appropriate or even possible:

“I always used to read about Trummerflora: ‘experimental music’, ‘improvisational’, ‘*UCSD?!*’, [and thought] ‘Oh, I’ll never have a chance [to work with them]’” (Lopez, 28 Jan. 2011).

We can note that in Sam’s quote above, it seems the group’s association with UCSD is precisely what made creative interaction seem unlikely. Any description of the Trummerflora scene by those not directly affiliated with them would at some point comment on the considerable formal training possessed by most members. These non-Trummerflorans would often offer up their own inability to read musical notation as further evidence of a social and aesthetic distance. Thus, though many informants felt they could identify with the more transgressive or unconventional aspects of Trummerflora’s music, the recognition of conventionally framed skill/virtuosity and attribution of that ability to culturally privileged institutions seemed to inhibit social and creative interaction.

In addition to observations of technique and cultural location were aesthetic judgements of difference. As one might expect, music from the ‘high’ academy was often described in relatively benign terms like ‘cerebral’ and ‘intellectual’, or else slightly more pejorative terms like ‘rigid’. Meanwhile, the aesthetic of the ‘low’ SxDx Noise - ‘street-noise’ as some call it - was described using more visceral language (e.g. ‘music that punches you in the face’).

By practically all accounts, these observations manifested themselves in the

social patterns of performance around town. Informants who ‘originated’ in either group describe a period in the past when Trummerflora musicians did not perform with SxDx Noise musicians. Some describe this as a benign effect of Trummerflora performers not knowing about the SxDx Noise scene, while some believe it to be a more intentional effort made by Trumerflora to maintain a sense of internal identity through distance from other Noise/Experimental artists in the area.

Again, there was not a level of activity during this research period for me to observe directly such claims, but nonetheless, we can gather from these memories some of the means by which these musicians identify themselves - most notably, a tight correlation between perceptions of ‘skill,’ cultural location, and aesthetics - and how those identities have effected social and creative interaction in the past.

Boundaries by genre: Metal

Another informant, Esteban Flores, describes his own practices in relation to a different musical culture: Metal. In discussing his history of involvement with area Metal scenes, Esteban was able to give insight into other aesthetic and social codes that help define San Diego’s Noise and Experimental scenes as a particular cultural space. Specifically, he describes a sense of frustration with the social politics of that scene:

“The thing about the Metal scene that sort of drove me away... is [Metalheads] hate on *everything*, man.... For some reason... a lot of Metalheads love to argue about what is ‘True Metal’. I’m still not sure what that is, what that means... For my experience [the scene has] been a big fashion contest... I was doing black metal. There were people that were like ‘Well you gotta get some spikes [clothing with metal spikes] - you gotta get a bullet belt, you gotta look right too. You gotta make sure you write the right Satanic lyrics” (Flores, 12 Mar. 2011).

It should be stated that Esteban, it seems, has no problem with aesthetic boundaries of the Metal community necessarily, but rather the rigid ways in which social behavior is restricted by such aesthetic boundaries. It would seem that Esteban still possesses some abstract ideal of 'Metal' that guides his creative actions. In discussing a creative period in his past, Esteban described abandoning Noise practices to focus on "purely Metal music" (ibid).

Esteban went on to describe how the this rigid correlation of abstract aesthetics and more concrete social practices created an environment incompatible with his own musical interests. Along with Sam Lopez and Sam's wife Mandy, Esteban performs in the band Monochromacy, playing guitar and sometimes singing. Esteban describes the style of his work with Monochromacy as a hybrid - "Noisy Metal" - that, as such, is largely rejected by local and more distributed metal communities who value some inconsistent or ambiguous notion of what 'True Metal' is. Locally, Esteban says Monochromacy is not invited to perform in Metal shows. Though he has performed in the Metal community in the past, most Monochromacy performances come from shows which he organizes himself, and they are rarely attended by area Metalheads. As an example of rejection from the larger Metal community, Esteban described an experience with a website widely known amongst the Metal culture, Encyclopedia Metallum. The site attempts to document and categorize the activities of various Metal sub-cultures on an international scale, but with a selective process that resembles Esteban's earlier observation about Metal culture's concern for aesthetic 'truth' or 'purity'. When Esteban submitted the self-described Noise-Metal hybrid of Monochromacy to the site,

it was rejected by the website's administration as 'not metal enough'.

A Social Function of Noise and Experimental Labels

Like Esteban, Sam feels frustrated when aesthetic codes restrict social and creative interaction. It seems that, though 'Noise' is a useful and meaningful term for Sam, his desire for a musical community is one in which no single aesthetic code would rigidly prescribe social and creative interaction. Whereas the Metal scene, as described by Esteban, seems to have a primary mission to defend some ideal notion of musical practice (e.g. 'True Metal'), Sam's criteria for inclusion or involvement in the community seems much broader.

“[‘Noise music’ could refer to] Ligeti. Some of his stuff could be considered Noise - maybe not from his standpoint or from that perspective. But some of his stuff is pretty noisy. That banner [‘Noise’ as a genre] is pretty huge. I guess you just have to ask [the performer], “is it Noise?” Some people are like ‘Noise? Oh please, that’s not Noise.’ Or they’ll be like, ‘Hell yeah, its noise!’... There’s a weird black and white thing going on there where some people don’t like that term - and its stupid! For them to really go out of their way to say, ‘No, this is not Noise,’ that’s just disheartening. Accept it! Accept the Noise under whatever guise it may be, then let’s play a show.” (Lopez, 26 Feb. 2011)

It seems then, that while Sam recognizes 'Noise' as a genre with some aesthetic boundaries, he also recognizes 'noise' as a subjective experience that is not confined to any particular genre or history:

“[It’s] kind of going back to the age of man, when... whoever it was... first heard a sound and [thought] “What was that?”... I think [this] is along the same lines. for me, when I hear noise... there’s something that happens where you just get pumped up” (ibid).

So then, it is this experience, of going beyond what is known or understood, which Sam seeks to build communities of musical interaction, rather than any single

image of ‘Noise’ aesthetics and practice. Though Sam describes a level of social restriction being enforced by some who cite aesthetic ideals of Noise, Esteban describes being attracted to the local Noise scene by its seeming lack of such codes:

“That’s what appealed to me first, because no, it didn’t have any [restrictions]. You could just come in and just do, seriously, whatever you wanted, and then take your stuff and just walk away... There was just so much freedom and everyone there was really supportive about what you do... You can play anything. It doesn’t even have to be Noise, and people in the Noise scene will still find something good about it...”
(Flores, 12 Mar. 2011).

I witnessed this inclusive and encouraging attitude when I first met Sam. Knowing only that I was interested in noise music and taking my word that I made some myself, he offered to provide an opportunity to perform should I want one. Two months later, he did in fact provide a spot on a show he organized. Michael Stevens, another member of the scene described an almost identical first meeting with Sam as well.

As Sam and Esteban described with ‘Noise’, Bobby Bray does not feel the need to rigidly define a rubric of ‘Experimental’ but is comfortable with the meaning of this label remaining vague so as to encourage interaction between various existing musical communities. As an example, Bobby described his own hopes for a monthly series of shows called Makeout Weird which he organizes with his girlfriend at a local bar:

“The idea is [the series] can be experimental in that there’s bands that are experimental that play, or its kind of an experimental night in and of itself... We curate a new [visual] artist that put up stuff on the walls... Then there’s dance DJ music or experimental DJs, and then also a band or two... Normally [other bar shows are advertised as] ‘This is a *dance* night, come to the *dance* night’ - ‘This is a *metal* show, come to the *metal* show’ - ‘This is a whatever show’, then its always separate. Our

idea is to pull all of these together. So we're taking the experimental methodology and applying it to setting up a night." (Bray, 06 April 2011).

Much like 'Noise' for Sam, 'Experimental,' for Bobby does not necessarily describe an aesthetic ideal, but is a strategically vague label that, as such, allows him to construct new communities and networks of interaction extending beyond those supported by any single aesthetic or social code.

MERGING SxDx NOISE AND TRUMMERFLORA

Sam's more recent membership with the Trummerflora Collective¹ provides an example of action carried out in service of these ideas concerning the relationship between aesthetic and social codes described above.

"I always read about [the Trummerflora Collective] and dreamed for the longest time...that one day the Trummerflora Collective would merge with the SxDx Noise Collective... I felt so bad that they didn't know about each other, [and thought] it's a tragedy that we can't come together and do stuff. Now it's like, who's who? And what difference does it make? I still think there are some lines we need to cross to get everyone together...I think it would be cool to see more collaboration" (Lopez, 28 Jan. 2011).

The Second Annual Experimental Guitar Show (described in detail later) provides a good example of the collaborative interaction Sam seeks to promote. Advertised as a Trummerflora Collective event, the show was comprised of several short sets from area musicians with unconventional approaches to guitar performance. Many of my informants performed on this night and described themselves as 'originating' in either the Trummerflora or SxDx Noise scenes as well as describing a

¹ joining approximately two years before I met him - 'recent' in terms of many of the informants' experiences with the group

past time in San Diego where a show like this was not possible due to their social distance from one another.

Problem Solving

With such complex intersections and interpretations of various musical and cultural histories, it can become difficult to find a common conceptual thread that unifies these musicians, particularly in terms of abstract style. However, I believe if we observe their musical activities as a form of problem solving we might be able to better define or understand this musical community, its performative actions, and the narrative content ascribed to those actions.

This approach I take from cognitive anthropologist Edwin Hutchins, who describes culture as “an adaptive process that accumulates partial solutions to frequently encountered problems” (Hutchins, *Cognition* 364). Such a description provides a useful and relevant framing for this musical scene. Though informants don’t necessarily agree on a stable identifier for their music or their group that is based on aesthetic considerations, or even feel such a label is necessarily needed, many have discussed their creative practices in terms of problems and solutions.

Looking across various informants’ descriptions of their own techniques and styles, we find common descriptions of creative frustration. This frustration mainly concerns the respective individual’s understanding of conventional aesthetic modes and/or the embodied skill necessary to achieve them. Consider this statement by Michael Stevens: “I’m a very mediocre guitar player. I can’t just figure out how to play something that sounds interesting [on a normal guitar]. I’d have to prepare the guitar, like how John Cage prepared a piano.” (Stevens, 05 Mar. 2011). Though Michael

values the complexity or unusual character of music such as that of Captain Beefheart and Ornette Coleman, for instance, he feels he lacks the technical skill to reproduce that complexity using conventional techniques. Esteban Flores described a similar explanation for his appreciation of Noise music, though his reasoning lay more within an aesthetic rather than technical realm:

“I felt like I had expressed myself more...when I was playing Noise than whenever I tried writing a song... When I played noise I felt like I was fully putting myself into it without having to write a song, to write a ‘catchy tune’ or something like that” (Flores, 12 Mar. 2011).

Finally, there is Randy Chiurrazi, whose musical background seems different from Esteban and Michael. Randy has had access to the formal education and training that Michael perhaps feels he lacks. In his college years, Randy briefly studied guitar and then composition at Carnegie-Mellon before accepting an apprenticeship with King Crimson guitarist Robert Fripp. As a member of Fripp’s ensemble, the League of Crafty Guitarists, Randy performed and toured across Europe for several years. Randy also seems very comfortable engaging with conventional forms, having produced several albums of children’s songs and singer-songwriter material.

Though Randy continues to write in these more conventional realms - and as such continues to have use for his technical skills and conventional aesthetic sensibilities - he also describes an appetite for unfamiliar sounds. In pursuit of such sounds, he feels his conventional skills act as a kind of obstacle. To solve this problem, Randy sought a way of reconfiguring the performative relationship between his body with the guitar. He designed a ‘guitar-suit’ consisting of a mechanic’s coverall to which he affixed variously textured objects including sandpaper, wire mesh, pennies, and a

metal pipe. In performance he wears the suit and grinds the strings of an amplified acoustic guitar against these various objects. The amplified sound is then treated by a number of effects pedals. In our discussion, he described his guitar suit as a means of exploring creative possibilities apart from the technical training and conceptual systems (i.e. music theory, aesthetic modes) he was so familiar with:

“That’s when the suit hit me... I could use the guitar with [the suit] and I didn’t have to feel so conventional this way [assumes a traditional guitar playing pose]. I was like, I bet if I [tried the suit], then I would never play with my hands conventionally the same way again. I would hear things and do things and then re-inspire myself to play traditionally in a whole new way” (Chiurazzi, 14 Mar. 2011).

With all of these individuals, there is a ‘frequently encountered problem’ that concerns their relationship to cultural conventions of abstract style and/or embodied technique. For some, like Michael, frustration comes from a perceived lack of ability; For Randy it comes from possessing certain abilities and consequently, feeling his creative imagination constricted by them. In either case, there is a desire for unusual and/or complex sounds as a means towards creative satisfaction. Thus the ‘frequently encountered problem’ of this group might be stated as a question: How does one move beyond conventional models of musical action, thought, and organization?

The ‘partial solutions’ to such a question are as unique as the player, but I believe they share a common interest in exploration of the physical materials of performance. This could refer to the instrument itself (guitar in almost all cases for this study), or any means of effecting their sound electronically. In many cases, the ‘solution’ to the problem of achieving ‘unconventionality’ has involved recruiting the complexities inherent within physical, technological materials.

At almost every performance I attended, I observed this material exploration manifested in some mixture of three basic strategies:

1) *Performers physically interfacing with conventional instruments in unconventional ways.* Randy's guitar suit is a good example of this.

2) *Performers experimenting with the configuration of conventional equipment.* The most common example of this would be the extensive use of effects pedals by guitarists. As effect units can typically be connected in a linear chain, the sequencing of particular pedals can produce possibilities unique to that ordering.

3) *Performers creating their own instruments or else subverting the designs of existing tools.* Perhaps the most 'materially involved' strategy, this would involve custom instruments created through a variety of techniques requiring varied skills (e.g. carpentry, computer programming) at levels ranging from amateur to specialist.

A simple example of this last point of subversion would be the engagement with effects pedals in real-time as a performative tool. There are of course, many expression-pedal-based guitar effects designed for 'real-time' use such as the wah-wah and volume pedals. What I am describing here, however, is real-time engagement with effect units not designed for such use. I am referring to the more common design of an effect pedal which anticipates a user 'dialing in' a particular sound and controlling only its 'on' or 'off' state during performance via footswitch. Rather than this conventional use, performers sometimes placed their pedals on tables or stands such that controls could be tweaked on-the-fly - not only for timbral subtlety, but in some cases to produce gestures with strong rhythmic or pitch qualities. Indeed, a performer would sometimes attend exclusively to his guitar pedals as a means of directing the form of the performance.

None of these general strategies are themselves unique to this community, or any particular musical genre. The fascination or fetishization of 'gear' is arguably a

defining feature of modern guitar culture. In any issue of popular guitar magazines, one will likely find countless stories and myths of obsessive guitarists who have experimented with the physical configuration of their pedal-boards and signal chains, or perhaps gone even further, becoming involved at the level of electrical components (e.g. replacing resistors in a stomp box). In such stories, however, these engagements with material technology are often made in pursuit of some ideal timbre ('tone') while any discussion of a resulting effect on performance practice or compositional form remains peripheral.

Material Assertion

I will argue what is unique about this community's practice, (and perhaps that of Noise culture generally) is that these strategies often create performative situations in which material design can significantly shape the form of compositions and performance - that is, in a way that exceeds the expectation or understanding of the performer. One finds that the various combinations and mixtures of the strategies defined above often produce a human/instrument interface which can be highly unpredictable and unstable. For some in such a situation, the performative musical experience is described as a struggle to constrain the behavior of equipment that is somehow beyond their total control. Consider these excerpts from informants' discussions:

"I want to make sound clusters that are just beyond my control, or in my control too. I want to experiment with being out of control. [In my mind] I could hear something, an amorphous sound, something billowing, clouds. And then I realized I would be in control of containing it once I

released it...that's when the suit hit me, I could use it [for these purposes]" (Chiurrazi, 14 Mar. 2011).

"So now, when I play - when I try to create music - I try to... take the emotion of [all of my favorite music]...And it's impossible to do it with your instrument, but when you try to do it with your instrument, it might do something interesting... It won't be what's in your head, but it might be interesting anyway. Or it might be just bunch of crap too." (Stevens, 05 Mar. 2011).

"The cool thing about [using effects pedals with feedback signals] is, the slightest movement will change the whole dynamic of [the sound]. Especially, one of these boxes I have, its like a beast, it just does what it wants. There's no way of turning it off, it's just on. Just the slightest twist [of a knob] and its a total different game." (Lopez 28 Jan. 2011).

In all of these excerpts, individuals are describing performance as an engagement with physical materials that somehow resist acting as a transparent medium for their own intentionality. Performers feel these materials contribute sonic activity that significantly informs the resulting character or quality of the performance while existing apart or removed from their performative intention. Michael Stevens' comments perhaps most strongly supports the notion that performance does not necessarily concern the transmission of a pre-determined utterance, but can be an engagement or struggle with the immediate context or configuration.

This notion of struggle between musician and instrument is, of course, common to many musical cultures and contexts. What seems worth mentioning is that this specific sense of 'struggle' is not necessarily understood as an obstacle towards creative fulfillment or performative expression. It is not understood as a lack of virtuosity, but as essential to the constitution of expressive content. Individual performers may desire 'mastery' to reproduce particular sounds, but they also describe valuable creative

experiences in which the behavior of their equipment surpassed their control. Though these performers almost always make specific plans for their performances (e.g. a unifying structure, the use of specific sounds and gestures), their sense of the performative act necessarily involves improvised responses to situations that are somewhat unpredictable.

In a conversation about his use of guitar pedals, Sam Lopez described a desire for control over his equipment:

“...Sometimes I feel like I’m cheating myself by letting the pedals talk instead of the actual music...I used to let [my equipment] get so out of control that the only way to really stop the performance would be just like, to unplug your amp. To me... that’s kinda like, cheating because your just throwing things out but you’re not really taking responsibility for your sound... So now I did it so I can control everything...and be able to stop without turning the amp off” (Lopez, 28 Jan. 2011).

Shortly afterwards, however, Sam went on to suggest that personal control and intention cannot completely account for that which finds valuable in performance:

“Sometimes... you gotta let the music speak for itself too... which is what I’m finding...is where the magic lies - when the music takes you, but then you kinda grab it by the neck so it doesn’t get away... The magic is when it’s leading you but you kinda, you know, lead it back to its...cell. That’s the magic - especially with feedback” (ibid).

Material technology is configured in ways such that complex behaviors - like Sam’s feedback - can emerge apart from intentional action and position itself as central to the musical situation as defined by the performer. These unintended sounds are often understood as contributed by a technological actor - the gear in its particular configuration - and possible resources to confront in the performative, meaning-making act. Given this degree of unpredictability as well as the importance performers like Sam

attribute to it in the act of creating a meaningful performance, it would seem arbitrary to bound an inquiry about musical meaning in such a context to only the human subject and his/her/their intentionality. Performers allow the complexity of their material situation to assert itself during performance in ways that may significantly shape the performance. Furthermore, this material influence may result in a musical act that surpasses their understanding. In a later ethnographic account one of Sam's performances, we can actually observe a material assertion such as this arising from incidental arrangements of gear and see his negotiation of that assertion in performance.

In the case of Frank Melendez, however, these material assertions are more strategically invoked. At most performances, Frank will construct a complex signal chain through his pedals in a manner unplanned such that he must partially (re)discover an interface with his equipment in performance. For him, then, a performance is not necessarily a display of mastery over equipment, but a designed process of real-time sense-making of causal relations between his actions on the pedal and his sound.

Content

Just as Sam finds creative satisfaction in the struggle to control his materials, he also describes similar enjoyment and struggle when approaching his noisy sounds as vessels of symbolic content. Remembering his comment about listening in the 'age of man,' there can be excitement in the initial moments of 'noise' encounters in which one is unsure of what one is, in fact, listening to. As with his description of material interactions, this symbolic resistance to control (i.e. the inscription of meaning) is not

pleasurable or valuable itself, but is valued for the opportunity it affords one to actively engage with the phenomena imaginatively:

“I think when someone [in the audience] hears the feedback, they go ‘Oh that’s [just] feedback’...well... *it is*. Now *use* that! You’ve gotta really use your imagination. If you don’t have an imagination, I don’t see you playing this type of music at all. There’s no way, cause you’ll think to yourself, “It’s feedback, it’s too loud, there’s no way to control’ - that type of thing. But if you just let your imagination take reigns, you’ll really hear some beautiful stuff” (Lopez, 26 Feb. 2011).

In the same way that performers describe their literal engagement with physical materials as a kind of struggle, when asked about more abstract meanings, narratives, or content ascribed to their music, metaphors of violence and conflict are common. We can return to comments made by each of the same three individuals quoted about that matter earlier:

“[Performing is] like a fight... almost non-objective. It’s almost like abstract. You’re not really fighting *anything*, but you’re fighting. I guess that’s where this pleasant surprise [when something interesting happens] is when you land a punch.” (Stevens, 05 Mar. 2011).

“This piece is called ‘Corporate Malfeasance’...The suit represents corporate greed. The guitar represents the culture without unbridled corporate greed. This piece is an interpretation of what happens when the two collide” (Chiurazzi, 22 Jan. 2011).

“I’m gonna do an old blues song. Blind ‘Alligator’ Allen from...1932. It’s called ‘The Blood of My Tears’. I guess the guy, well, a few years after he wrote the song, he died in a knife fight. So I’d like to dedicate... and I think it happened like today, or this day in history. So, anyways, this is ‘Blood of My Tears’” (Lopez, 18 Jan. 2011).

With this observation, we arrive at a critical observation of this study: there is a striking correlation between the language used by performers to describe their experiences of performance and that used to describe the abstract content which they

ascribe to their performances. This idea will be explored more thoroughly later in the paper in the hopes of theorizing processes by which individuals conceptualize music. To aid these theoretical efforts, I believe it is necessary to first provide more specific observational detail about these musician's, their material techniques, and their social interactions. It is hoped that this will aid the reader in grounding later theoretical discussion. What follows are two observational accounts. The first is of a solo performance by Sam Lopez, and the second is of a show organized by Sam that includes performances by all of this study's informants.

II. TWO PERFORMANCES

1) Sam Lopez Performs at the Soda Bar

The following is a description of a solo performance given by Sam Lopez at San Diego's Soda Bar in late January of 2011. I had learned of the show weeks earlier after contacting Sam via e-mail asking about opportunities to see Noise performances around town. From this initial contact, I learned of this evening's concert as well as the Second Annual Experimental Guitar Fest which was to take place three days later at the Soda Bar. This show will be described in a later section of this chapter.

This evening's show was our first meeting. Sam had organized this show in part to create a performance opportunity for friends touring through town, members of the Australian punk band Occult Blood and a hip-hop artist billed as Ivens. These two performed earlier in the evening along with a local four-piece improv group called hING (which included Frank Melendez, another informant for this study who performs as Noise act Riververb). Audience for the show was very small, with bar patrons barely outnumbering performers.

Sam performed at the end of the night. He performed solo on electric guitar, and his setup included four guitar pedals elevated on a fold-up table to his right: a distortion unit, an echo unit, an uncommon envelope shaper, and a harmonizer unit which analyzes the frequencies of an input signal and output two additional tones algorithmically determined to be "harmonic". His guitar is a standard stratocaster model strung with baritone guitar strings. As such, strings are tuned a perfect 5th below standard guitar tuning (this is normal tuning for true baritone guitars, but again, Sam's

guitar is a standard model). With his guitar strapped on, he approaches a microphone, acknowledges the audience, and provides some introductory remarks for his performance:

“I’m gonna do an old blues song. Blind ‘Alligator’ Allen from nineteen-thirty...six? [Looking across the room to a friend] Esteban, it was ‘32 or ‘36? ...OK, ‘32, its called ‘The Blood of My Tears’. I guess the guy, well, a few years after he wrote the song, he um died in a knife fight. So I’d like to dedicate... and I think it happened like today, or this day in history. So, anyways, this is ‘Blood of My Tears’” (Lopez, 22 Jan. 2011).

With the end of the last sentence, Sam begins playing without hesitation. He begins with a slightly distorted electric guitar sound that makes no use of his tabled effects units. Sam’s guitar playing was, at this opening moment, certainly among the most conventional I’ve since observed in the scene, though he still employed unusual techniques. This opening was comprised almost entirely of a single gesture: open-string harmonics plucked lightly, arpeggiated at a steady, relaxed pace in an upward direction in groups of four notes. At the end of this gesture, all four notes would sustain and Lopez would, with his left hand, reach up to his guitar’s tuning pegs and ‘de-tune’ one of the higher sustaining note, creating an audible glissando. On a few occasions, rather than adjusting the tuning peg, he created a temporary bending of pitch or vibrato effect by pressing on the string behind the nut of the neck. Occasionally, the repetition of this arpeggio gesture was interrupted by the plucking of a chord of harmonics. In these instances, the chord would ring and Lopez would again change the tuning of one sustaining note.

After slightly more than two minutes of this, Sam grabs a tuning fork from his table with his right hand and positions it over the guitar’s pickups such that the fork’s

tines straddle the guitar strings. In a swift motion, Sam then pushes the fork towards the nut of the neck, and in doing so, the fork becomes tightly wedged between the strings and the neck of the guitar. This tension keeps the tuning fork in place such that it functions as a bridge, shortening the length of the vibrating string and thus controlling pitch. This also frees his right hand to pick up a metal rod which he then uses to strike the strings.

At roughly the same pacing of repetition in his opening, Sam strikes his strings with the metal rod and lets a resulting low chord ring. Rather than adjusting tuning pegs during the intervals of sustain, Sam now uses those moments to shift the tuning fork and/or adjust settings on a distortion pedal. Adjustments to the tuning fork create parallel chordal motion oscillating between half-steps. Adjustments to the distortion pedal increasingly obscure this chordal motion such that it becomes increasingly 'noisy' (i.e. one hears a lower or higher chord, but it is perhaps more difficult to hear these in terms of pitch).

At one moment, Sam reaches with his left hand to adjust the tuning fork and uses his right hand to stabilize the body of the guitar as he has been doing throughout the performance. For a brief moment, there is a high feedback squeal that masks the low rumbling of his guitar. The rumbling returns immediately and Sam continues with the patterned gesture of oscillating chords. A few moments later he simultaneously mutes his strings with his right hand and with his left pulls the tuning fork to a higher fret. The motion immediately generates the same feedback squeal as heard before, but this time, it rings for a longer duration.

I later reviewed a video of this performance with Sam and asked him about these two moments of feedback. He revealed these to be an instance in which his equipment surprised him:

“The microphonic feedback was the part that I didn’t expect. For some reason, in the studio [where Sam rehearses], I didn’t get that. But on stage, I got it... that was another element [I used spontaneously]. The first one was a mistake... but then all these subsequent ones, you know, I used it” (Lopez 26 Feb. 2011).

After further chordal oscillations, Sam removes the tuning fork. Striking the strings once more with the metal rod, his guitar begins to feedback and he directs his attention to his guitar pedals, using both hands to make adjustments. Using an Electro-Harmonix Flanger Hoax, an envelope is applied to the feedback signal such that it is molded into a fast pulsating sound. Sam then activates the harmonizing pedal. Sam’s hand drifts away slowly, attending neither to the pedal nor his guitar, but the pedal proceeds to output a variety of notes. It would seem that the complexity of the feedback signal surpassed the unit’s analytic capability, thus producing behavior in which it ‘struggles’ to compute the ‘correct’ pitch according to its programmed algorithms. These output pitches sound distinctly unlike a guitar and more like a simple oscillator synthesizer. These synth-like sounds do not seem to be distorted in the same way his guitar signal had been before. As such, the section provides a clear distinction from the previous tuning-fork section in its relative ‘cleanness.’

The feedback at this moment is less intense, more extended, and much more in the ‘background’ of Sam’s sound. With neither hand attending to his guitar, it swings slightly with his body motion. These slight changes in the guitar’s position relative to

the amplifier then stimulate changes in intensity and timbre of the feedback, which in turn effects the analysis and output of the harmonizer.

Again, this feedback was not anticipated by Sam, and he describes the performative moment as one in which his control of the sound was partially re-negotiated on-the-fly: “When I move, the whole color changes. I was just kind of seeing what’s gonna happen next. If I move any certain way, the whole thing’s gonna change...” (ibid). After a few moments of this, Sam adjusts a ‘master’ pitch knob such that the harmonized pitches perform a deep glissando resulting in a non-pitched rumble. Sam strikes the strings of his guitar and then activates his echo pedal. It is a marked distinction from the relatively clean harmonizer sounds, and, initially, seems a kind of return to the sound of the tuning fork section. However, the now active echo pedal causes all of Sam’s sonic activity to accrue into a dense mass of distorted sound. After making adjustments to other pedals, he reaches behind his back and retrieves two large machetes which have been tucked into the back of his pants out of sight of the audience. With one in each hand, he makes one last adjustment to his pedals, turning down the volume of the echoed signals and leaving only a live signal.

Sam then begins aggressively striking the guitar with his machetes, dropping the one in his left hand (i.e. the ‘fretting’ hand) almost immediately by accident. Whereas his bodily presence on stage has previously been muted and conveyed a state of concentration, his motions are now much more violent and cathartic. This sudden change in the nature of the performance draws a few loud cheers from the audience which has until now remained quiet.

This gesture created both a sensation of great excitement as well as a sense of danger and worry for both performer and audience. It seemed likely that Sam could fall onto his knife or that he could lose his grip and accidentally send it into the audience. At one moment he does fall backwards on to a drumset left on stage left from Occult Blood's set, but this allows him to catch himself and pick himself back up.

To finish the performance, Sam drops the knife in his right hand and quickly deactivates his distortion pedal to create an abrupt cut-off, leaving only the hiss of his amplifier. At this, the audience response was the strongest of the night, with many people - performers and other bar patrons - approaching Sam on stage to congratulate him and express their enthusiasm for the performance.

Analysis

The overall shape of Sam's performance can be described as one of escalation or expansion occurring within and across material and symbolic/narrative domains. As described before, Sam began on stage by dedicating his performance to the blues singer Blind 'Alligator' Allen, who had died in a knife fight. When I asked Sam about this story, he confessed with a smirk on his face that "Allen" and the accompanying narrative were an invention of his own. Regardless, the decision to 'frame' his performance with evocations of blues mythology and specific narrative imagery reveals important resources which Sam recruited in his attempt to inscribe content in his unconventional sounds (i.e. to make a creatively satisfying performance).

When I asked Sam about his taste for the blues, his response was tempered and critical of the genre, yet revealed an appeal for certain recurring narratives of that genre's mythology.

“I was anti-blues for a while, but now I have an appreciation for it...I think it's the structure that it's turned into that I have a problem with. What the blues represents to some people is a guy playing a stratocaster [playing swing 8ths]. That's just horrible to me. But the real dirty blues, the 'break the bottle and fight somebody' type blues, that's cool. That legend is good; I like that” (Lopez 1 Jan. 2011).

Shortly after Sam's performance, I became familiar with the work of Keije Haino, a Japanese guitarist celebrated within Noise communities, whose recorded output has included abstract covers of traditional American blues songs. Sam confirmed that he was aware of Haino and his 'blues' work but described a personal interpretation of the genre's cultural mythology as of greater significance to his own performance:

“I think something as preposterous as what I did - playing guitar with knives -[works] more with the blues than if I were to say it was a classical piece or an old jazz standard. Cause the blues is... mostly very violent type stories that deal with murder and that type of thing. So I think, I probably didn't look at Kaije Haino for inspiration, but to attribute it to a blues type scenario probably fit, just because of how the blues is” (ibid).

To be sure, there is much non-violent subject matter to be found in blues traditions. However, narratives of murder and violence are of general interest to Sam, who, as quoted before, is interested in subject matter that “[comes] from a dark place” (Lopez, 26 Feb. 2011). As such, the recognition of violence in some blues music allows Sam to engage with that tradition and recruit it as a resource for the construction of a meaningful performance.

Sam described how a more detailed narrative of the fictitious “Allen” served as an anchor for his creative decision-making. At the time, Sam had been cultivating different sounds and techniques in preparation for the recording of a new CD. For this performance, he selected and combined different fragments in a manner that he felt could represent some kind of archetypical narrative associated with blues music. As Sam described it, the clean, harmonic playing at the opening was an initial meeting between Allen and a woman who would be a future love interest. Noisier moments were depictions of their increasingly complex relationship which leads to a violent confrontation and the death of Allen - the knife fight. Combining what I understood as a listener at that moment with Sam’s later descriptions, one can describe a more general narrative in which Sam progresses from more abstract, ‘musical’, symbolic representations of narrative imagery, to theatrical simulation and spectacle.

Another way of describing this narrative would involve Sam’s bodily presence as a performer. Throughout the performance, Sam appears more as a technical facilitator of sounds, a bodily presence necessary for the transmission of content through abstract sounds. By the end of the piece though, his cathartic motions and the aura of danger created by the knives fully asserts the presence of Sam-the-embodied-performer as a story-telling resource. In these final moments it is as if he is no longer transmitting representations of “Allen” but is in embodying the narrative, assuming the identity of Allen or perhaps his antagonist.

This escalation of sonic complexity is afforded by an expansion of the instrument/performer's total configuration (i.e. the permutations of active effects pedals and their parameters within the signal chain). What I find particularly interesting about this performance is the extent to which the expressive potential of each section can be understood as significantly informed by the physical configuration of the 'instrument' at that moment. Sam has described the closeness between his materials and his practice.

"I used to have a shitload of pedals, and then I whittled them down to, like, four really, cause that's what I'm comfortable with now. I guess that's my sound. but that could change with the next [gig or idea]. Like, there may be something else that comes up and then basically, you base your sound around particular that effect. My sound is just these four pedals." (Lopez, 2011.01.28 - 25:57)

As such, it seems appropriate to base an analysis of the piece in terms of Sam's negotiation of configurations throughout the piece. A structural outline of the performance in these terms could be described as follows:

- 1) an unconventional exploitation of the conventional instrument (the use of tuning pegs)
- 2) a physical alteration of the instrument/interface (the use of the tuning fork and rod)
- 3) a physical/electrical alteration of signal (introduction of effects pedals)
- 4) an expansion and negotiation of expressive interface ('playing' the pedals)
- 5) theatrical transgression upon the instrument (using machetes with the guitar)

As with the narrative, Sam's material configuration demonstrates escalation or expansion throughout the piece. Because of this, we might understand the piece

as a process of negotiating what, exactly, his instrument *is*.

2) The Second Annual Experimental Guitar Show

The second show brought to my attention by initial contacts with Sam was the 2nd Annual Experimental Guitar Show, which was took place at the Soda Bar only a few days after I saw Sam perform there. He had organized this show as well as the previous year's show.

I had been surprised that Sam's previous show had started at the promoted time and made sure to arrive shortly before this event's promoted time. I searched for a good spot to set up my video camera, which proved a much more difficult task than at Sam's previous show here. Perhaps because of the intense promotional activities by Sam and his friends, the large number of musicians on the bill, and a Saturday evening date, the Soda Bar was well populated even before music began. Nearing the stage, I found two other individuals with video cameras prepared, further complicating my task. Given these cameras and the range of casual and semi-professional photographers that can be found in practically any urban bar crowd, it seemed the show would be well documented. After finding a corner near the stage with a suitable camera angle, I took a quick head-count estimate which suggested at least 100 people were in attendance when the first performer took the stage. By the end of the evening this number nearly doubled.

The evening was structured as six 20-minute sets, all of them for solo performances except the final set by a four-piece calling themselves The League of Assholes. In between sets, Sam would assume the stage as MC of the evening to

introduce the remaining artists, remind audience members of t-shirts and artist merchandise for sale in the back, and encourage the curious to sign up for an internet mailing list to learn of future noise and experimental shows. The mailing list was named SxDx Noise though this particular show was promoted as a Trummerflora event. What follows are descriptions of the sets of a majority of the musicians involved in the show.

Randy Chiurazzi

Randy Chiurazzi originally became involved with San Diego's experimental scene through the Trummerflora Collective before meeting Sam a few months prior to this show. For this performance, Randy created a special suit that allowed him to experiment with new ways of generating sound on the guitar. Randy attached materials of various textures to a mechanic's coverall and scraped an amplified acoustic guitar against them. These materials included sandpaper, coins, metal mesh, and a pipe. The objects were attached using velcro such that Randy could reconfigure the suit as needed for individual pieces or performances.

His guitar signal was routed through a digital multi-effects floor unit which can emulate a wide range of standard effects. Multi-effects units such as Randy's also allow him to save the effect combinations and their parameters in a memory bank of effect settings. Prior to the performance, Randy had developed a unique effects setting for each of his pieces.

Before his first guitar-suit piece, Randy delivered a prepared statement describing the 'program' or narrative of his work:

“This piece is called 'Corporate Malfeasance'...The suit represents corporate greed. The guitar represents the culture without unbridled corporate greed. This piece is an interpretation of what happens when the two collide” (Chiurrazi, 22 Jan. 2011).

Though Randy’s statement about current economic affairs involving Federal Government bail-outs of Wall Street seemed sincere and concerned, he introduced his next piece using a nearly identically formed statement in a more playful manner:

“This second piece...is called ‘Everyone is a Gooney Desert for Something in the Universe’. The suit represents the universe. The guitar is our species. The composition is an interpretation of what happens when *they* collide” (ibid).

The more amusing and playful tone of this statement complicated the matter of interpreting his previous, ‘serious’ statement. In a latter discussion, Randy acknowledged a seemingly thin line between sincerity and playfulness in his work, and embraces this quality.

Bobby Bray

Bobby Bray has lived and performed as a guitarist in San Diego’s hardcore scene for well over a decade. Perhaps his most widely known work was with the Hardcore/Grindcore band The Locust. That band has received acclaim in the Southern California music community and temporarily secured a record deal with Anti-Records (which has served artists such as Tom Waits in the past). Bobby’s work with The Locust has halted temporarily as he pursues an undergraduate degree in the University of California San Diego’s Interdisciplinary Computing in the Arts (ICAM) program.

For the Experimental Guitar Show, Bobby demonstrated the work he has been developing in that program.

Working with another student, Bobby is developing new effect units using the software language of Pure Data as well as developing a floor unit that interfaces with this computer-based software. This floor-unit interface contained many of physical mechanisms typical of effects pedals including knobs, push-buttons, and foot-pedals (more generally known as expression pedals, they control sonic parameters across a spectrum rather than the on/off function of push-buttons). This floor unit was rather unusual, even for multi-effects units, in that included four expression pedals.

This floor unit connected to Bobby's laptop via USB cable, where it interfaced with his custom software. Such a setup affords Bobby a great deal of control in mapping the components of his physical interface to sonic parameters. For example, his computer may recognize that his expression pedal is depressed by 30%, or recognize that a certain button is 'on' or 'off'. But, Bobby can take such information and assign it to any number of audible parameters based on the software he has written.

Much like Randy with his multi-effects unit, Bobby had created a unique program or setting for each piece he performed. Before playing, Bray went into an extensive and eloquent explanation of his work, describing both the mechanical apparatus, as well as the ideological values that directed his work. Most of these values could fall under some rubric of "do-it-yourself" or "DIY" ethos: Bray stressed that all of the software that he used was open-source and available free of charge and that, as such, they were "un-capitalistic and good for the collective unconscious" (Bray, 22 Jan. 2011).

The finale of Bray's set was an interpretation of Jimi Hendrix's Star-Spangled Banner. For this performance, Bray's effect system emulated common sounds of 'glitch' electronic music. Whenever Bobby forcefully struck a note, his computer would record a short moment of the live signal and then play this in a loop, mimicking the sound of a CD skipping. As a part of this effect program, one expression pedal controlled the duration of the playback loop, while a second expression pedal controlled the rate at which that sample was looped. As such, the latter pedal could control the rhythmic speed of the loop as well as its pitch in playback.

Though these 'glitchy' evocations of technological malfunction were prevalent throughout the performance, Bobby would control the extent to which those effects would subvert the familiar melody. At a moment in which the glitchy 'malfunctioning' sounds completely subsumed the melody, Bray let his hands to his side and controlled changes in his sound by standing on two expression pedals.

Frank Melendez

Frank Melendez performs most often in San Diego as Riververb, either solo or with any combination of a number of friends. As those performances do not often feature Frank playing the guitar, he chose to perform under his own name, solo, at this show. Like Sam often does, Frank performed with his pedals on a table so that he could tweak them during performance.

Frank's setup also included a home-made instrument comprised of a small metal trash can which acts as a resonator, a wooden beam which acts as a neck, and two piano wire stretched across the beam, tightened at one end with bass guitar tuners. An electric

pickup was housed under the strings so the instrument could be amplified. The instrument sat on the ground where Frank would play it by using a kick drum pedal to strike the strings. The strings were tuned extremely low, such that they were experienced more as a low rumble than as any discernable pitch.

The set, consisting of one uninterrupted piece, began with firecrackers that were thrown into the trash can drum, a favorite performance gesture of Frank's. Frank will occasionally incorporate this into his sets as he enjoys the sense of danger that is evoked by the sounds and residual smokiness that can make it difficult to see in a venue (Melendez 26 Jan. 2011). This performance also demonstrated some common markers of Frank's style as Riververb or otherwise. The performance was heavily drone based, with a low, pulsing, distorted guitar tone anchoring much of the set. Above the drone, Frank improvised melodies using conventional 'fret-and-pick' playing and created gestures through manipulation of his pedals.

For this and most other performances, Frank tries to configure his effects pedals in an unfamiliar manner such that he must partially re-discover an interface or causality between his actions and his sound. It is difficult to describe just how much variability could exist in these re-configurations and what sort of consequences this variability could pose for Frank's performance, whether they could lead to the kinds of 'autonomous' behavior observed in Sam's performances.

Henry Barnes

Henry Barnes is well-known and respected by many in the music community being studied. In the early 1990's, Barnes played as guitarist for the punk band Man is

the Bastard, based in the southern California town of Claremont. The band became popular in the nearby Los Angeles punk scene, where they became avatars of a subgenre of hardcore punk called Powerviolence. The name Powerviolence was in fact taken from one of their songs and was applied as a label for many other southern California punk bands at the same time.

Barnes contributed to that ensemble as guitarist and also with homemade electronics not unlike those he used at this show. In later discussions with area noise musicians about the Experimental Guitar Show, anyone I asked about Henry Barnes was already aware of his older work and newer projects. In fact, Bobby Bray's first recorded release with The Locust was a split EP shared with Man is the Bastard (Locust, 1995).

Compared to most other guitarists that evening, Barnes' setup was deceptively simple-looking as no effects pedals were used. However, his amplifier was a conspicuously custom-made piece of equipment. Though the amplifier electronics were housed in a hard casing, front and back panels were missing, leaving vacuum tubes, wires, and circuitry visible behind a few knobs.

The amplifier contained unconventional circuitry seemingly for the purpose of contributing electrical noise to the signal, though of a different kind and quality than that of typical amplifier distortion. For long portions of the performance short bursts of static would persistently 'interrupt' his playing such that it sounded as if the signal chain between his guitar and amp was somehow compromised. This sound/behavior could be controlled and 'dailed up' such that it dominated the signal. In fact, at one point, Barnes switched electric guitars while his amp was still on and producing sound.

These static sounds persisted and there was practically no perceivable difference in sound as he unplugged one guitar and plugged in the next. It is doubtful that I would have known Barnes switched guitars were my eyes closed or if I were at the back of the very crowded room.

For a majority of Barnes' performance, he kneeled near his amp such that he could switch between conventional 'fretting-and-picking' playing of the guitar and manipulating his amp's 'noise' circuits. As others observed in the scene would do with their effects pedals, Barnes' would sometimes attend to the amplifier exclusively, using both hands to make adjustments and producing extended gestures. In other words, he would 'play' the amp.

At the end of his performance, Sam returned to the stage as MC for the evening and shared his appreciation for Barnes:

"You know, without that gentleman, Henry Barnes, there would be no experimental guitar, so let's give him a fuckin' hand cause that was awesome...That guy's the inspiration for everything that I've ever dreamed about doing, so thank you" (Lopez, 22 January, 2011).

The League of Assholes

'The League of Assholes' is a name for an ensemble of musicians that was originally assembled for the first Experimental Guitar Show in 2010 and revived for 2011, though no individuals appeared in the ensemble both years. For this show, the ensemble consisted of four individuals who had each performed at last year's event under different monikers or with different projects: Michael Stevens, Esteban Flores, Marcelo Radulovich, and Peter Graves.

A feature of the League's performance was a 100-string guitar which had been advertised on the Show's website and mentioned throughout the evening as Sam MC'd. Sam revised his description half-way through the show, saying there were, in fact only 99 strings on the guitar. The guitar was a creation of Michael Stevens, and consisted of a standard acoustic guitar to which additional strings had been attached. Other metal objects were attached such as a cymbal over the sound-hole.

The performance could be described as a series of overlapping drones, with each performer providing a droning timbre or cluster of sound which slowly changed at its own pace. With his unique instrument (all other performer played conventional guitars), Michael was foregrounded in performance, and as such, he employed some of the more unusual techniques. Like Randy, Michael would take various objects (gardening tools, for example) and grind them against the strings.

Much later into their set, Michael slowly reached into his pocket and retrieved a guitar string still in its packaging which he had labeled "String #100". He held the package up and showed it around the stage to the audience, before unpacking the string and using it as a 'bow'. Running the string between other objects on the guitar, he created friction sounds by 'flossing' the instrument.

Analysis

Throughout the evening, the notion of 'experimental' most often manifested itself as an exploration of the physical materials of performance. The description of sets provided above should provide ample evidence of this material curiosity. In the course

of the evening, the guitar was played using the stem of a wine glass, power tools, garden implements, and an unattached guitar string which was used to ‘bow’ or ‘floss’ the attached strings. Guitars themselves were physically altered, with cymbals being bolted over one acoustic guitar’s sound-hole. For many performers, these sounds were heavily treated by effects units used in a real-time manner comparable to that of Sam’s performance analyzed earlier.

This emphasis on material technology was further emphasized by Sam’s decision to include a guest speaker from a boutique effects pedal company based in northern San Diego County. On multiple occasions, the company representative would take the stage to describe the work of his boutique and answer questions from Sam. Sam’s interests usually concerned the extreme possibilities of their products: “What’s the most fucked up pedal that you have?” (Lopez 22 Jan. 2011).

Finally, there were somewhat comical remarks from the audience about these matters. In the middle of his set, Randy Chiurazzi made the remark, “I’m gonna go without the effects [for this piece] ‘cause [the previous performer] can do amazing things with a clean sound, and so I will too” (Chiurazzi, 22 Jan. 2011). To this, an audience member responded, “But we’re here for the effects, man!” Though obviously a joke, the comment nonetheless touched on this interest in material technologies that permeated the evening.

Hendrix

This kind of celebration of materials found a powerful image in the show’s graphic (figure 1), which was used on all promotional material leading up to the show

and appeared on t-shirts sold at the event. The graphic featured an illustration of Jimi Hendrix with his iconic, ecstatic countenance, performing a guitar with a neck that morphed into a serpent-like creature. Most interesting for this discussion, however is Hendrix's left arm, which is clearly robotic in nature. Thus it is a cyborg-Hendrix.



Figure 1: Promotional flyer for the Second Annual Experimental Guitar Show

The graphic was designed by an out-of-town firm to which Sam provided only the idea of a guitar that turned into some sort of serpent creature. Though the cyborg-Hendrix did not emerge from within the San Diego scene, the graphic resonated with the collective imagination of those within the scene in very powerful ways. This image was circulated around town for several weeks leading up to the show as well as on a web-site blog created for the event. Of the performers involved with this show and this study, two described this image as inspiring their creative decision-making in preparation for the show.

Bobby Bray's decision to perform the Star-Spangled was of course a very explicit reference of to this graphic and the Hendrix mythology.

"The flier was being promoted everywhere, and it had Jimi Hendrix on it... I thought it would be kind of funny to perform the Star-Spangled Banner like Jimi Hendrix did it at Woodstock. It's a very reference-able performance, especially in terms of guitar/noise history, you know? He was making atomic bomb sounds [with his guitar]... My idea was to utilize the imagery of that flier and updating the guitar-noise genre with my own little addition" (Bray 06 Apr. 2011).

A less obvious form of inspiration came to Randy Chiurazzi, who in designing his suit, made important decisions about the materials he would use based on his reaction to the graphic. On his website/blog in the days before the festival, Randy described his suit and wrote, "The suit is configured at this time for the SD experimental show crowd, so I want the compositions to be mechanistic sounding. That seems to be the spirit of the flyer for the show" (Chiurazzi, Creating). When I asked him about this, he went into more detail:

"The [flyer] definitely inspired me to go to... as far as I could, as far as I wanted to go...My friend once got some bootlegs of Hendrix doing these sound sculptures on tour...sometimes on those tours he would do these

absolute sheets of sound, just experimenting with that feedback....just long massive things - big, big sound... [the image] definitely reminded me of that. [I thought] I could do that as well, I could create sheets of sound. It was just exciting for me to know they were using that image, and that [my work] could be part of that tradition 'cause I was thinking in terms of large clusters, large walls of sound that I could work with" (Chiurazzi, 14 Mar. 2011).

Though none of the informants specifically addressed the cyborg aspect of this Hendrix image, it nonetheless provides a striking metaphor for much of the activity taking place in this scene. This cyborg integration of the body-bound human agent and material technology for the sake creative expression seems to resonate with the language many of these musicians use to describe their creative practices as shown earlier.

III. MAKING MEANING WITH PHYSICAL MATERIALS

It seems entirely appropriate that the more literary or metaphorical narratives these musicians ascribe to their music should so closely resemble their narratives of their embodied experience during performance. What I would like to argue now is that this is not merely an appropriate coincidence, but it is indicative of fundamental processes by which meaning is constructed in musical and social situations.

Engaging the subject of meaning, meaning-making processes, and the actions enabled by them, sociological discourses and those of cognitive science as well have relied increasingly on ethnographic methods. With this, there has been a methodological commitment to analyzing informants' words and statements 'on their own terms'. That is to say, these disciplines have begun abandoning notions of autonomous or objective methodologies themselves rooted in the notion of a meta-language of science' as most suitable for the description of social reality.

Painting a broad and general picture of conventional sociology, Bruno Latour (2005) describes a traditional methodology that attempts to locate similarities across individuals' experiences as a way of indicating or revealing the presence of metaphysical constructs believed to explain individual and group action. These constructs are then believed to somehow have existence in the world apart from those very individuals, and to have informed their actions in a manner that they themselves are blind to. These constructs include the very notion of a 'thing' in the world that *is* essentially 'social', or a place that *is* social: the 'social domain', 'dimension' or 'contexts'. This language, Latour argues, misleads us to an image of an external world

possessing invisible forces that exist apart from our constitution of them. Furthermore, these invisible forces exert pressure upon us according to some logic that is their own, determined apart from the actions of those involved. Latour at one point seems to compare this notion to that of the mysterious ‘Ether’, which physicists before Einstein believed a fundamental unifying matter of the universe.

In place of this methodology which takes similarity as indicative of universals, Latour believes it more useful, accurate, and clarifying to look for controversies, or differences between individuals as a means of revealing constructs which they themselves have created to guide their actions and decision making.

Where it has been conventional to think about knowledge, information, meaning, or the possibility of ‘truth’ as a binarism of Universality or Nihilism, Latour argues for a recognition of social, cultural, and technological systems which inform activity on a more localized level. Neither universal nor radically individual, cultural patterns are powerful resources to aid a “science of the living together” as Latour calls it (Latour, 2).

Given this conviction for localized meaning systems, the Sociologist’s (or, in this case, the Ethno-musicologist’s) task is not one of translation into a meta-language, but one of enculturation. Rather than translating informants’ accounts of their experience into prevailing discursive constructs of the Sociologist’s ‘native context’ (i.e. ‘power,’ ‘social forces,’ ‘hegemony’), Latour suggests a density of material must be gathered from a range of informants such that their network of interaction achieves a complex ecology of interaction that reveals its own meanings. This is not to say that informants are in total control of these constructs and actions, but rather that we must

approach these constructs in an ecological fashion to discern meaning.

Metaphor and Cognition

In discourses of cognitive science, we find a similar interest in examining the language of the everyday ‘on its own terms,’ particularly when broaching the subject of metaphor (Turner, 1996; Fauconnier, 1997). It has been perhaps a longstanding, conventional view that metaphor is an ornamental, convenient expressions of more basic and fundamental cognitive structures or processes. However, more recent work suggests that rather than ornamentation, metaphor is constitutive of cognitive processes themselves. In other words, metaphor is not just a way of sharing our thoughts; It is, rather, a way in which we think and make ‘sense’ or ‘meaning’. In this way, metaphor provides at the same time the medium and content of communication, and perhaps suggests that that binary distinction be not quite useful.

Conceptual Blending

Fauconnier theorizes a process of cognition, which he calls conceptual blending, approximating what we might call metaphor in more common language. Conceptual blending involves the combination or superposing of distinct cognitive structures or concepts to make sense of or inscribe meaning upon the objects of our experience.

As an example of conceptual blending appearing, we could cite ancient arts of memory, in which orators would aid their memory of long narratives by mentally projecting narrative content along an imagined linear path through a familiar space. Within this practice, orators would blend their mental representations of a familiar

architectural structure with narrative structure, or map these structures upon one another. In doing so, it was thought one could improve one's memory or cognitive ability. With this result, it is understood that blended spaces afford possibilities that perhaps did not exist or were not as likely within either input space originally. In such a case, the cognitive problems of recalling a long a perhaps complex narrative are mediated by mentally blending the structures of that narrative with structures from a second domain (Fauconnier).

Music as Blended Space

We could now describe the experience of music as an experience of a blended space in which a range of internal structures and concepts are blended with structures perceived in sound through time. For example, the various notes emanating from the violin become a 'sad melody' that somehow evokes or reveals to us some meaning of our personal experiences through demonstrating some kind of structural similarity or engaging the musical sensibilities we inherit as members of a culture.

These musical, or blended experiences may emerge from a variety of bodily and cultural experiences. The larger cultural history from which we 'inherit' sounds (rituals, traditions, aesthetics, social descriptors and identities such as masculine and feminine) certainly constrain our understandings of sounds as representative. This cultural history would also include conceptual theories such as the Western theoretical systems used to divide frequencies into systems of discrete pitch. Also, embodied knowledge seems to frame much of our understanding as suggested by our reliance upon metaphors based in

other sensory modalities.

Structures such as these serve as potential input spaces to the blended experience of music. Just as the blend of narrative structure and architectural structure afforded unique abilities to ancient orators, basic projections of structures of sound affords a music-maker or listener unique possibilities of thought. We might describe these possibilities in terms of style or aesthetic – conventions of gesture and organization as well as their conventional representational associations.

Of course, musical symbols/representations are incredibly polysemic and retain a strong sense of ambiguity. Still, within any given cultural time and place, semi-stable constellations of sound-semantic or gesture-semantic pairings can be found, anchored by socio-cultural patterns of music-makers and listeners. Whether they are representations of death in the context of English Baroque opera music, or metaphors of social roles and interaction in traditional Zimbabwean Mbira music, or representations of violence in Norwegian death metal, patterning and grouping of sound can be found with shared - if nebulous - meanings attributed to them in a manner stable enough to form stable social communities.

Lawrence Zbikowski applied theories conceptual blending to processes of meaning-making in *Conceptualizing Music*. However, his thinking about the cognitive processes by which we arrive at meaning in music are often too narrowly grounded in the musical practices of a Western Classical tradition. While this does not diminish the value of the ideas he puts forth, it is important to understand the limitations of such a grounding.

Zbikowski bases the conceptualization of music on a listener's ability to first categorize it - to parse a temporal experience based on some criteria. In most examples provided by Zbikowski, we find a listening subject who appears disembodied (i.e. he/she is not physically participating in the production of sound), and the criteria for categorization usually concerns musical abstractions firmly established in the Western Classical Tradition, its notational systems, and its predominant modes of listening:

“While a collection of assorted motive forms is a good example of a musical category, categories can be much more various and structured around whatever set of musical relationships seems best to account for what is salient about a particular repertoire. The relevant units [of categorization] may be harmonic (as in a chaconne), involve a repeated bass pattern (as in a passacaglia), or combine the two...One could also envision musical categories informed by the text being set... or the affect that is to be summoned” (Zbikowski, 59).

The ethnographic material of this study can help broaden such models of conceptualization to include embodied action in addition to the abstract and culturally constituted categories like harmony or various affects. For the musicians of this study, conceptualization is not just a matter of identifying “whatever *musical* relationships [seem] to best to account for what is salient about a particular *repertoire*.” In addition to this, conceptualization can be a matter of identifying a *physical* or *causal* relationship to account for what is salient about a particular *performance* or *action*.

Material Anchors

Though Fauconnier's theory of conceptual blending and Zbikowski's application to music seem most effective in the example of comparatively disembodied

musical acts (i.e. listening as opposed to performing/producing), work in cognitive sciences by Edwin Hutchins can help us understand the role of a performer's body and his/her physical materials in conceptualizing music.

Hutchins extends Fauconnier's theory of blending to include material objects in the world. Calling such objects 'material anchors', Hutchins argues that individuals recruit external, material structures as resources to be blended with more abstract, internal representations. In this way, material objects provide structures that come to constrain our cognitive processes when we interact with them. We could update the previous example of an orator who blends mental representations of both a narrative and an architectural structure, such that the orator no longer needs to recall a *memory* of an architectural structure, but instead actually inhabits and progresses through it. In this way, the physical, architectural structure becomes a resource in cognitive actions of the orator.

The use of any object can both lessen internal cognitive demands for action and problem solving as well as privilege certain forms of thought. As one example, Hutchins describes a method of computing calendar dates taught in many Japanese schools. For this practice, students mentally project a calendar structure onto the anatomical structure of the first three fingers of the left hand as separated by the knuckles. The structure of the fingers can then be imagined as units of days or months. With the thumb, students then 'navigate' through the calendar to perform their computations. Though it would perhaps be more difficult to manipulate a system of information like the calendar with all of its irregularities completely mentally, the student's hand serves as a 'material anchor' for this task by providing an in-the-world

structure as a computational, cognitive resource. In these instances, the structure inherently visible in the hand serves not only to lighten the computational load required of the brain, but that structure actually privileges certain forms of computation. For example, as Hutchins describes it, this system is better suited for computations involving days or months as a base unit, rather than weeks.

To make this point more clearly, we could return to the abstract realm of mathematics to compare processes across numeric systems. Perhaps we can appreciate how the structure of a base-ten Arabic numeral system facilitates certain arithmetic procedures more so than a Roman numeral system might. In the former system, the actual value of a composite numeral is determined by two features: the symbol(s) used, and the visual placement of those symbols in relation to an absolute point (i.e. if a symbol is in the 'tens' position or the 'hundreds' position).

This system of visual placement provides a stable, absolute structure which we exploit for various arithmetic purposes. For example, in problems of subtraction, the absolute positioning of Arabic systems allows us to 'carry' values from one position to another. In comparison, the Roman Numeral codifies the same information through a series of more complicated syntactical rules. As such, we might find it difficult to use the system's visual features to assist us in certain computations as we use the visual features of the Arabic system.

Though each system is used to describe a similar domain, one of abstract quantification, each system possesses unique structural features which afford equally unique problem-solving strategies. We could say that a person performing any computation with either system has intentionally recruited that system, but that the

system possesses qualities which pressure us in choosing *how* it will be used. It may be misleading to say such qualities are inherent to the system (e.g. that the system itself possesses preference). At the same time, we could hardly claim that the differences in computational power afforded by either numeric system belongs to any *individual* performing a computation. Much like Latour's argument for the localization of meaning-making, we must recognize that much of our thinking is guided by culturally refined structures or processes as well as the availability of particular physical materials as limited by a given place.

Material Anchors in Musical Practice

With these theories, we can begin to recruit a vocabulary to describe and understand the connections between these musicians' performative strategies and the narrative content they ascribe to them. Generally, we can describe these musicians as creating material environments or interfaces for music-making in which a sense of performer-cause and instrument-effect is unclear, and perhaps a foregrounded aspect of the performative experience. This could include Randy's guitar suit, Frank or Sam's use of guitar pedals and feedback, or Michael's guitar of 100 strings, for instance. The experience of bodily interaction with these technological environments constitutes a structure, a 'sense', or an input space, to use Fauconnier's term, which shares similarities with other narrative structures which performers already identify with or find meaningful. Randy's words concerning his own creative thought process are particularly noteworthy.

I described earlier that Randy's interest in creating a guitar suit lay partly in his desire to transcend his conventional training as well as an appetite for unusual, unfamiliar sounds. Once he built the suit and began working with it, he describes discovering a structure in his interaction which he was later able to associate with other narratives in his life:

“I could push the guitar [into my body] and feel the strings...I realized the relationship between the [sounds with effect pedals] and the tension of the strings was a relationship, a physical relationship I wanted to *feel*” (Chiurazzi, 14 Mar. 2011).

“The [Federal bailout of Wall Street] was happening at the time...I asked myself, ‘Is there anything I could do with this [guitar suit] to express how pissed of I am?’ ... I talked about this problem with my friends about the corporations, and they're out of control, and they're against us, there's a dichotomy, there's two things going on... Well, I have two things [the suit and the guitar]. And it just hit me all at once. Wow, one of them is scraping against the other, friction against the other, smashing into it. That's how it is. Its like you're smashing - the corporate entity has collided with the cultural. There was no doubt, that was *it*. It was one of those moments when its all coming together” (Chiurazzi, 14 Mar. 2011).

In these two excerpts, Randy provides an account of his creative process which seems to agree with the conceptual blending models described above to an encouraging degree. In the first excerpt, Randy describes the formation of a kind of structure, a cause and effect relationship that he constructs from his immediate, embodied interaction with his instrument. At the beginning of the second excerpt, he describes his own conceptualization of larger social narratives of the time: Federal bailouts. With these, we might say that Randy has identified two input spaces.

He then goes on in the second excerpt to describe his own recognition of structural similarities between these two input spaces as a means by which he could understand his work as having content or meaning. We could summarize these similarities as one of conflict between two entities. In his description, we can even see how he begins ‘blending’ by transposing aspects of his embodied experience (friction, collision) into his description of the larger social narrative. Ethnographic information such as this expands upon Zbikowski’s theories by demonstrating the role of embodied experience in the conceptualization of music. Randy, in order to achieve creative satisfaction as he understands it, must first engage with an audible world of complexity that is beyond his understanding, or at the very least, not informed by the types of conventional training he has previously received. Like the Japanese student faced with a complex, abstract calendar computations, Randy anchors his thoughts and actions in the structure of an external, material object: his guitar/suit in this instance. Through this material anchoring of thought and action, Randy is able to assemble a meaningful structure through attention to the most salient feature of performing: the correlation of bodily sensation and sound quality. Perhaps even more interesting in Randy’s case is the idea that he’s actually using materials to *create* the abstract musical system in which his actions have meaning, as opposed to merely engaging with some existing system. It is as if the date-calculating student is using the physical structure of his/her to construct a new calendar system.

Emergence Through Interaction

Though we can argue that musicians like Randy are using material objects to anchor their construction of new musical structures, it should be stressed that these materials do not determine the content or narratives that get assigned to those structures. It is not as if musicians like Randy surrender their agency or intentionality to these materials in the pursuit of meaningful action. Rather, the complexity of their materials - the aspects which surpass transparent, intentional control in performance - is recruited as a condition to which the musician must react and construct new strategies for meaningful action.

To make this point more clearly, we could examine the configuration of individual and technology in Sam's performance practice. When we do so, we might arrive at the understanding that each part of this network possesses a partial structure. Whether we are talking about individuals, communities, or technology, these entities demonstrate qualities of experience that are negotiable (i.e. interpretable) and those that are not. When put into motion with one another (i.e. when they interact), we find these 'fixed,' partial structures co-constraining one another such that meaningful actions emerge.

For example, it is possible to describe Sam's interaction with his effects pedals in this way. In previous quotes, Sam has been willing to attribute agency to his pedals (if only metaphorically), and he has equated his aesthetic identity with his pedals: "You base your sound around that particular effect. My sound is

just these four pedals” (Lopez, 28 Jan. 2011). And, of course, there is partial truth to this. The actual functions of a pedal, and the physical design that produces it, are difficult to negotiate. Still, when these more fixed, material structures ‘collide’ with Sam, the intentional performer, new techniques and functions emerge which are largely not anticipated by pedal designers: Sam places his pedals on a table such that he can manipulate them on-the-fly, creating gestures of equal, if not greater, significance to the sounds that are contributed by the guitar alone.

In the same way, we cannot claim that the meaningful content of this music originated wholly within Sam and was then merely mediated by his equipment. It has already been said that Sam and many others in this group only feel they partly control their gear. We can remember that Michael Stevens even went so far as to seriously question the possibility of material transparency (i.e. that his instrument could represent his internal condition with an adequate fidelity to be considered ‘utterance’).

Just as with an effects pedal, we could say that Sam, or any musician, possesses qualities that vary in their malleability or negotiability. In the course of his life, Sam has accumulated ideas, concepts, or conceptual structures that form an identity that informs and predisposes his actions in musical or other realms. Sam can consistently bring this intentionality - interests in general subject matter or particular musical traditions - to whatever he is working on. These interests guide him in his selection of sounds, development of techniques, and ascription of content. And yet they cannot completely determine the end

result as he relies on objects with their own structures and predispositions. So then, rather than seeking for an origin point for meaning we might look for the emergence of meaning across a network of interactions. Physical materials (i.e. pedals) used by Sam provide sounds and structures demonstrating complexity that he might never have arrived at through controlled, conventional use of a familiar instrument. At the same time, the techniques that produce these sounds emerge from Sam's unique interests and personality which, in this case, were not anticipated by any pedal designer. It seems we cannot account for meaning within any notion of inherent property or structure belonging to the performer or the instrument. Rather, when these components are put into performance - when the performer is forced to negotiate the limits of control with his/her materials - the unique and partial structures of each component of this performance network combine or co-constrain each other, contributing to a larger system from which meaning emerges through interaction.

Assembled Meaning and Transformation

As other work using Latour's theories has argued, this sort of networked interaction between heterogeneous materials - individuals, communities, technologies, objects - involves inevitable transformations of any and all individual components (Winance, 2006). When we examine networks involved in performance - performers, equipment, audiences, social patterns - we can observe transformations of individual human understanding, group identities,

and even material design and production - all occurring at varied rates.

Though any material may be assembled with a clearly defined purpose within a broader context, as we have seen with these musicians, any *thing* possesses some qualities that cannot be controlled or accounted for, and yet inform the emergent phenomena of that context in substantial ways. When Frank assembles his pedals in a new way, or Michael attaches 100 strings to his guitar, they construct objects of such complexity that they at times cannot fully account for the most salient features of the sound they produces. Because of these unexpected and uncontrollable qualities, any intentional agent who has assembled such a network has the opportunity to be surprised by that which he/she has assembled. There is always the potential for the assembled materials to challenge or subvert the intention(s) under which they were assembled. In those moments, one's understandings of the materials and of self are negotiated and transformed.

We can find strong evidence of such transformations happening across networks that are localized around performances and other that are far-reaching, occurring across time-scales both immediate and protracted. It is perhaps easy for us to see how a performative act can catalyze change and discovery for individuals. Sam describes ways in which performance allows him to perform actions or simulate attitudes which he feels are perhaps less permissible or common in other domains of life:

“When I’m up there on stage it’s about not wasting time. No dilly dally, just say a little bit, git to the gist, and then you’re done. Which I probably don’t do in real life. If I’ve got a problem with someone I may hold it in,

brood about it. But on stage, I release it, I tell you what's on my chest right off the bat, and then I'm done... There's something physical about it which... is gonna help me in the long run, live a little longer." (Lopez, 11 Feb. 2011)

Thus, with performance, Sam feels he is able to beneficially transform himself through the assembled experience of 'performance'.

This transformation can also involve social interactions and constructs of experience. As their music often challenges audience members' notions of what is 'musical', many of these performers have described exciting moments in which it seemed that their work transformed a listener, if only in a small way:

"Sometimes it's the dudes that come to [a bar to] see a regular band, and then they see someone play [Noise] and they say 'Yeah dude, that was fuckin' great!'... You're opening up that dude's mind a little bit, and they're *allowing* you... They see it and are curious and actually listen to it and come away with a new thought, or a new way of listening to music." (Lopez, 26 February 2011).

We can also observe how the work of such musicians informs transformation across more extended realms, and consequently at a much slower pace. Consider the common use of effects pedals in real-time by many of these musicians. As has been said before, these techniques are unconventional and exceed the conventional paradigm of how this equipment is used. However, through persistent and widespread (though perhaps still 'underground') use of equipment in this way, evidence of their influence has begun to emerge in realms of more distributed, economic domains of material design and production. For example, we can examine the marketing efforts of the famous effects pedal design company Electro-Harmonix.

Sam owns a pedal made by Electro-Harmonix called the Flanger Hoax, and it offers a wide range of controls for amplitude and frequency modulation or enveloping effects. It was used by Sam during his performance of ‘The Blood of My Tears.’ Though many of the Flanger Hoax’s individual capabilities and features are common in the effect-pedal market (i.e. it can easily emulate common ‘flanger,’ ‘phaser,’ or tremelo-like effects), the Flanger Hoax integrates controls over an unusually wide range of sonic parameters, and as such offers more unusual options for affecting a signal.

In order to demonstrate the broad capabilities of the Flanger Hoax, the company produced an internet marketing video containing an improvised duet in which an electric guitarist runs his signal through the pedal and plays while a second man adjusts the pedal’s controls. Though this is obviously done to quickly demonstrate the pedal’s abilities, this use of the pedal is still framed by the producers as a musical, expressive use of the equipment. Furthermore, this marketed technique for using the Flanger Hoax is practically identical to that used by Sam in his performance at the Soda Bar described in the previous chapter.

CONCLUSION

Through interviews and observation, this paper has sought to provide an ethnographic account of a unique musical community and its practices. Of particular interest has been the descriptions provided by these musicians of their relationship to their instruments or other physical, performative materials. In order to achieve qualities of sonic complexity adequate to their tastes, many of these musicians construct unique instruments or re-configure existing ones such that their sense of control during performance is diminished.

Using theories from recent cognitive science literature I have tried to make a connection between these material, creative strategies, and the abstract narratives that these musicians use them to express. I have argued that by acknowledging the limits of their control and understanding of their instruments as an important resource in pursuit of new and meaningful sound, these performers materially anchor their creative thought and performative action in a way that allows them to form new systems of meaning. These meanings and actions have transformative potential in domains of personal identity, social interaction, and more broadly distributed domains of material design and production.

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