

COMMENTARY

How Does Music Free Us? “Jazz” as Resistance to Commodification and the Embrace of the Eco-Logic Aesthetic*

Fred Ho

In my opinion, the predominant suppression of discourse around music and the arts is not so much its social context, which aspects of “critical theory” and “ethnomusicology” and other “ologies” engage, but the actual political role music and music creators can play in challenging—and even daring to overthrow and replace—capitalist-imperialist hegemony.¹ That is the question: HOW DOES MUSIC FREE US?

But before I proceed, let me not make the assumption that the readership of this essay may share such an interest or intention. So for the sake of civil intellectual discourse, let me argue why we should even be concerned about this matter as intrinsic to perhaps what I may assume to be our common interests and values, such as artistic integrity, aesthetic development, creativity, originality, inclusivity and “racial/gender/economic” equity in terms of compensation, career recognition and rewards, valorization of transgressive and “avant garde” or innovative formal considerations, etc. Even if one subscribes and espouses “art for art’s sake” and “standards of creative excellence/artistic quality as the sole and determinant criteria,” I will argue that destroying capitalist imperialism is the way to go for anyone who feels, believes, and sees that commodification and desertification of creative resources is the ever present danger.² The onslaught of cultural and ecological degradation, and the exponentially growing subordination to imperialist aggression (whether it be military conquest or socio-economic, the double effect of McPentagon and McWorld) is the imminent danger to both human society and to the planet.

First let me define what I mean by the capitalist-imperialist system. No one but the most dishonest or ideologically blinded would disagree that the hegemonic world-system of capitalism is running amok over the entire planet. Imperialism refers to this global, monopolistic stage of capitalist economic and social development, which seeks to impose its relations of production everywhere and hence is totalizing and globalizing. Imperialism is not merely a policy of nastiness and bullying practiced by mighty nation-states over weaker ones. Even these policies and acts of bullying and domination are driven by competition to hoard and control resources, to exploit cheaper labor, and to expand markets in order to

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¹ Most institutions of musical pedagogy in the Western world tend to divorce the “practicum” fields of performance from those of “theory” (the “ologies,” e.g., ethnomusicology, cultural anthropology, etc.). Furthermore, virtually all of the citadels of Western art, from the concert hall to the gallery, propagate the “art for art’s sake” ideology that opposes “art” and “artistry” to the social and political, and celebrates the individual genius as a Superman whose abilities are alien to the terrestrial structures of the socio-economic, whose origins are independent of the terrestrial, and whose duty or responsibilities are to the non-terrestrial aspects of politics and economics.

² The MacArthur Genius Award recipient and Director of Jazz Studies at Columbia University, George Lewis, who is black, expresses such in his book, *A Power Stronger than Itself* (2008, 359-377).

stimulate and saturate them with consumer goods and parasitic services. So my use of “imperialism” refers to this totalizing, world dominating process and effect of capitalism, through both its state institutions (governments, military, world bank, trade cartels) and its monopolistic multi- and trans-national corporations.

Let me address the symptoms and characteristics of imperialism upon music.

Imperialism and Ecological and Cultural Desertification

The capitalist system of mass commodity production and exchange inevitably replaces and defeats individual production (from the family farm, to the individual or cooperative craftsmen guilds, to mom-and-pop businesses) by simply producing things more cheaply and faster. The inevitable effects and consequences of mass production are mass consumption/consumerism. Circulation of commodities (including music via recordings or packaged tours, digital downloading thru the purchase of more toys like iPods, etc.) is accelerated and intensified. What might appear to be more “choices” in actuality is the homogenization of products, as volume and per unit sales trumps quality and individuality. Even so-called “niche” markets cannot survive if sales don’t produce sufficient profits to stave off competitors who are always looking to capture and control greater market share. We live, in sum, under a regime of so much information, so little knowledge; of so many channels, so few choices; of so many toys, so little satisfaction and pleasure.

The advancing desert is a powerful metaphor. Ecologically, soil erosion, increased land salinity, deforestation, monocrop horticulture and agriculture have led to a devastating desertification. So, too, has cultural desertification been a product of the homogeneity of commercial music (Pop music with a “capital/capitalist P” and not the popular music, small “p,” of indigenous creativity).

Musical malnourishment, with increasing mono-diets and over-consumption of processed, chemically treated/created culture, entails an over-reliance upon intake from manufactured commodities such as loudspeakers, machines, and computers. Thus greater passivity is generated whereby people no longer look to themselves to make music, but simply purchase it via a concert ticket or through a new electronic home entertainment toy. With declining participation in creative activity comes the musical and artistic deskilling of the populace along with its monopolization by “experts” or marketers (often, with the complicity of academia and corporations, these are one and the same).

So we get a listening population which, like the general population, is obese, out-of-shape, unhealthy, and addicted to all the wrong stuff. What is organic becomes a “specialty” niche market perhaps packaged as “world music,” etc. People become hooked onto the saccharine-saturated; they believe the hype, and worse, consume it as if it is good for them. Thus the cycle of consumption/accumulation spirals out of control: more diet fad books, to the latest pills, to the latest exercise toys or gurus. In terms of music, consumers consume the latest glossy music junk journalism, buy the latest world music guide books or illustrated coffee table books about “jazz” or watch the Probably Bullshit and boring Stuff (*PBS*) documentaries called “Jazz” made by a well-financed darling who not only is a novice about

the subject matter, but relies upon the most reactionary and backward “advisors” in the field.³

Technology has not only mediated and shaped how and what kinds of music we hear, but it has in a growing number of cases under the control of capitalist interests, become the actual music. Sound and recording engineers are as—or in the most commercially aggressive cases, more—important to the finished product of music we buy and listen to than the actual musicians themselves! And as we all know, the most influential and determinant link in the process from recording studio to the marketplace has nothing to do with music production, but its marketing, from visual packaging design, to advertising, to the hype of so-called music journalism, to simply conforming to current lifestyle and fashion trends.

I go to my food market, and “regular” foods are everywhere, while “organic” foods are in special sections. A “regular” apple I buy has been subjected to petro-chemical fertilizers and insecticides, artificial environmental treatment, probably genetically modified to enhance its size and color attraction. The “organic” apple has to be labeled with its certification and of course, costs a whole lot more (because expensive human labor power was much more directly employed rather than automation).

What Is To Be Done, How Can Music Free Us?

By recognizing and combating the ideological “givens” and values and assumptions of bourgeois culture/society—and by constructing their negation so we can live and make music in total opposition, as revolutionaries who seek to rid the world of all of its bullshit effects and toxins—we can become organically whole and self-producing, creative, imaginative and socially conscious human beings building socialist sustainability. Specifically, this requires that we:

Reject domination of the cerebral over the physical. Some black artists, in reaction to being stereotyped or “essentialized” as “physical” and “emotive,” have argued for and justify access, legitimacy, credibility, and recognition for the more “serious” valorization of European high-art musical values. In academia, this becomes apparent when music theory and analysis are valorized over performance or “playing.” Music as emphasized in bourgeois academia is more about knowing than doing (with the false assumption that one could ever really know something without being able to be engaged in doing). Performer-players are relegated to junior and adjunct positions. The stars are those who can throw together the most fashionable big-worded jargon masquerading as theory. When one scrutinizes what they can actually do, either as musical leaders or as performers, they come up shallow and superficial.

De-Europeanize the world (Kalamu ya Salaam 2002). With the ascendancy of the Western bourgeoisie, music became increasingly removed from its communal soil and sold

³ I am, of course, referring to Ken Burns’ documentary “Jazz,” for which critiques abound. Burns has admitted that prior to his being hired by *PBS* to produce said documentary, he had only owned four “jazz” CDs. For more detailed criticism of Burns’ “Jazz,” see Ho 2009b, 121-128.

on the market as the product of the individual heroic genius. Removed from its profound attachment to communal life, music became subjected to an elite paradigm produced for (and soon, by) the leisure classes, with concomitant values of notation-primacy, equal temperament, technical perfection, fixed “classics,” “canon” construction, rigid hierarchal pedagogy, and the correlated ensemble of social relations. These became established, and as capitalism took root everywhere, became the “standards” for “art.” I am not advocating the total discarding of the bourgeois European art music traditions (though personally I have little interest or use for them). I reject, however, their canonization as anything superior or more profoundly musical than other traditions. Indeed, I find those of Asia and Africa to be far more evocative, especially in regard to shamanism and the spiritualizing totality of music. In those traditions, music IS an affective force upon (wo)man and Nature.

I personally would rather converse in “non”-European tongues, eat the food of local families in Third World villages, wear Afro-Asian clothing, and build movements of musical and political solidarity with the national liberation struggles of Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Oceania. But that’s me.

Reject technological supremacy, embrace Ludditism,⁴ learn from and have a low impact upon nature. I’d rather have sex with many womyn openly and freely without the repression of bourgeois monogamy, marriage, and the nuclear family than, failing to attain these “family values,” stay in front of the TV or on the Internet trying to find a date or masturbate to commercial porn. I’d rather be playing with George Lewis, without having a gig bring us together, enjoying the natural acoustics of my local church (I’m not religious, just rent the space to practice) to simply enjoy his musicality and personality.

Prioritize acoustic live performance over electricity-dependent situations. Live performance is a social act in which all people participate and interact and have mutual influence. It wasn’t the recordings of Sun Ra, Rahsaan Roland Kirk or many other artists that had the most important and profound impact upon me (indeed, some artists’ recorded works are substantially inferior to the experience of hearing and being there live with them, which ironically, “live” recordings fail to capture/convey). It was hearing them live, being in the aura and experience. I have visited the home of Amiri Baraka many times and have been most profoundly struck, that given his output of writings and involvement with “the music,” how few actual recordings he had, how little “stuff,” except paintings and other artwork, was in his home—especially the low number of techno-types of toys. I realized that Baraka’s great knowledge of music and of black culture in general came from participation and involvement, not from accumulation of things and objects (again, with the exception of visual art). I also noted how freely he gave away books he had (not just of the books he’s had published). It was like barter. He gives me a book, I give him a CD, he perhaps gives that CD away and someone gives him something else to check out. This recycling is another form of circulation, but outside of mainstream commodity exchange for cash.

⁴ For an elaborated explanation of revolutionary ludditism, c.f., “FUTURE’S END: COMMUNISM AND ECOLOGY. REVOLUTION IS THE ONLY SOLUTION AND IT MUST BE LUDDITE!” by Sarah and John Connor with Fred Ho (2010), unpublished. To obtain a copy, email: bigredmedia@hotmail.com.

Computer-generated music, like computer-generated art/animation, can infinitely explore all the permutations and probabilities of responses to any and all data. They are the ultimate in technical perfection. But I would submit that it is in the imperfections where the imagination inhabits, and which is truly the stuff of great, soulful human expression.

Reject city domination over countryside. Mao and the revolution in China especially had to struggle with this contradiction/dichotomy. My life is lived in two environmental extremes, from which Suburbia is completely removed and indeed non-existent. Suburbia is the analogy for homogeneity and social engineering. I spend part of my time living and working in one of the world's great cosmopolitan cities: Brooklyn (secondarily New York City which most presume is Manhattan!). I spend the rest of my time in Third World rainforests completely nude, usually living with an extended family from whom I get meals and a place to sleep. My music is most characteristically "urban," but my soul is "tropical rain forest." While I think my music can communicate with humans, I am still learning to figure out how I can communicate with bears, coyotes, whales, dolphins, jaguars, mountain lions, cougars, bob cats, wild horses, etc. Raul Salinas, the great Native American-Xicano poet-revolutionary socialist, said in a poem that Native Americans liked Rahsaan Roland Kirk a lot ("Song for Roland Kirk") because:

...you were close to something, man...
native brothers and sisters from the north
dug you, too
you talk to trees, bees and birds and things like that...
the gray world judged you nuts,
so what else is new?...

I haven't learned how to make my own musical instruments like the elderly musician I met on a beach in southern Turkey who made a flute from the marsh reeds by the beach, and played one of the most spectacular solos I've ever heard; and who, when finished, simply gave me the flute he made and had played (without my asking for it).

Why "Jazz" is an Eco-Centric Revolutionary Music and How it Can Further Ludditism and Human Liberation

In other essays (2006, 2009a), I discuss why the music called "Jazz" has been the revolutionary music for the 20th century, not only for the U.S.A., but for the entire world as it has expressed revolutionary aesthetics and transformed both the process and character of music itself for the planet.

I needn't reiterate here my arguments as to the features, characteristics and processes that make "Jazz" a revolutionary musical force, both artistically and socio-politically. Rather, here I will argue for why the music furthers eco-centric values and prefigures a revolutionary ludditism.

Some of what I suggest below is not unique only to "Jazz" but is shared by all music that has not been reified into a commercialized commodity (especially the Pop genres) or ossified as a classical artifact (institutionalized into high art canons and thereby "frozen" as something of the past). I mentioned earlier, the shamanistic music from peoples around the

world of pre-industrial cultural origination. In such cultures, music exceeds its paramount modern role as entertainment (recreational) and aesthetic (the enjoyment of beauty). Rather, it confers spiritual and evocative power, regarded and practiced as a healing force. In many ways, the “avant garde Jazz” of the 1960s, especially as practiced by saxophonists Albert Ayler and John Coltrane, fulfilled this function. They explicitly philosophized and asserted that their music was a “healing force” and evoked musical cultures that practiced shamanism. Indeed, more than one observer has remarked upon the uncanny similarities of Korean *shinani* (a pre-modern improvisatory shaman possessional-inducing music) to “free jazz.”

“Avant garde jazz,” more than any current of the “Jazz” tradition, rebukes commercialism and canon constriction. As a result, it has been maligned by all of the institutional mechanisms of valorization in the “Jazz” industry, from the mainstream media to hegemonic institutions such as Jazz at Lincoln Center, for being too “outside” and unassimilable for mainstream commercial or institutional consumption and propagation. It is “outside” and too unruly and feral, like the wilderness, precisely because it relies upon the intuitive and is therefore incapable of being tamed, enclosed, and confined to preconception or predetermination, even in the musical process. While it evokes spontaneous, in-the-moment form, it neither comes with nor begins from set form. Its aesthetic is the conjuring of the moment, and not the well-rehearsed performance or the pre-determined architecture of the composer’s score.

Collective improvisation, as the form has been termed, I argue, is the purest form of human communication. It is free from preconception or pre-arrangement. It is the unity of performance and composition, as musicians spontaneously create and perform interactively with one another. The pleasure and gratification for both musicians and listeners, the degree of artistic success if one insists upon such criteria and goals, is the experience of that interaction and the spontaneous marvels that can result. This relies upon individual creativity and artistry, but its success or failure is contingent upon the communality or collectivity of all performers. It stands in the most direct opposition to individualized authorship and is the most realized “free association of independent producers” music can make possible. There are no inadmissible sounds, notes, rhythms, emotions, ideas; nor are there inclusive criteria of any kind except the agreement by the performers to be there and to play. It is genuine play, with the motivation and intent to seek pleasure, enlightenment, inspiration, revelation and discovery, constantly and collectively. It relies upon no score, no industry, nor audience expectations other than to be “real,” “fresh,” and “from the heart.” Collective improvisation at its supreme evocation has no expectation of virtuosity, formal architecture, or any considerations of artistry save the power to evoke freshly and indeterminately.

The ethos of “free jazz,” as it took shape in the 1960s, has been to be a medium in which all experiences, musical and non-musical, could find community and interaction, without the incessant expectations and demands placed upon the artist to gratify audiences. The “search” and “exploration,” the perpetual endeavor to experiment, and to have audiences share and experience this as such, is both process and goal.

Most “free jazz” performances are acoustic, optimally experienced live and in the moment as opposed to reproduced and disseminated via electronic recording. They work best in down-scale venues such as former factory lofts, recycled and converted for purposes of presenting music, and are best performed in intimate settings and surroundings and

therefore not reliant upon technological sound reinforcement; thus “free jazz” valorizes in-the-moment expressivity over technical skill or training. Its “freedom” stems from both the musical democracy upon which it insists, and its elusiveness to being captured by forms of commodification. However, its influence is clearly felt in genres and forms that have been both popularized and captured by the Pop culture industry, including grunge, heavy metal, punk, etc. There are veritably no examples of crossover “free jazz” artists, except for those who abandoned it all together, and those examples are very few.⁵

Developing the musical empathy and deep listening abilities needed for effective free collective improvisation perhaps may lead to innovative capabilities for telepathy and, as noted earlier, in the case of the titanic blind musician, Rahsaan Roland Kirk, inter-species musical communication. These are not necessarily products of proficient technical mastery, such as playing faster or expanding the range of instrumental performance. They emerge rather from a deeper and more profound philosophical and spiritual engagement for which goals of professionalism, careers, recording and ticket sales—in other words, measurements of the exchange-value placed upon music in a capitalist social order—are immaterial and a curtailment upon artistic transcendence.

The capitalist music industry, like all industries, exists today and exercises dominance and hegemony upon all facets of music production and consumption. I have outlined the causes and effects of this domination and its consequences to artistry and to individual and social liberation. While theorists such as Jacques Attali, Theodor Adorno, and others have debated the hegemonic or liberatory, counter-hegemonic qualities to “Jazz” (and in Attali’s case, specifically “free jazz” for its social import and role), I have argued that it is in its revolutionary alteration of the agency and reception of music itself from which its greatest and most profound prefigurative contributions are evoked.

The collective nature of collective improvisation, the dissolution of demarcations as cited above, offers a precursory process of creative cultural production that should be the template for any socio-political activity that can transcend capitalist-dominated values and its inexorably imposed logic. The contribution of “free music” is precisely that it insists upon being “free” both from aesthetic predetermination and constricting socio-economic relations.⁶ In asserting “free music,” venues no longer were confined to the commercially exploitative night clubs or to the art establishment concert halls. Abandoned loft spaces, in particular, were reconstituted as performance outlets. Indeed, popular urban wisdom has deemed the “loft artists” as the vanguard of urban restoration, unfortunately paving the way for gentrification designs by real estate developers to parasitically intervene once declining industrial areas have been reinvigorated by pioneering artist communities.

Future tasks for “free music” or collective improvisation performance sites include further extraction from the grant dependency of art funders (both state- and corporate-sponsored), to modes of self-reliance supported directly by the community of artists and

⁵ We may note here the fact that Stanley Crouch, a former “free jazz” drummer, gave up playing music altogether when he became a right-wing commentator and professional pundit (Crouch 2006). As for the few artists who sought “greener” commercial pastures, they became purveyors of retro-“mainstream/straight ahead jazz” or commercial artists (e.g., Gato Barbieri, Norman Connors, possibly Pharoah Sanders...).

⁶ Originally, during the 1960s, this also meant “free” from white supremacist music industry-imposed relations.

audiences. Venues have always been mixed-use and serve multi-purpose functions as rehearsal-work space, performance venue, and residential occupancy. During the early 1970s in the pre-gentrified Soho of lower Manhattan, what were then loft-residential spaces such as Studio Rivbea, Ladies' Fort, and Ali's Alley were founded by woodwindist Sam Rivers, singer Joe Lee Wilson, and drummer Rashied Ali, respectively. Self-reliant activity could mean forming food gardens, schools, restaurants, and other projects based upon revolutionary Luddite principles of organizing upon local-produced goods and services, sustained from collectivized, shared labor, skills, and management. Such an experimental project is presently underway in Harlem, New York, with the Scientific Soul Sessions (see <http://www.scientificsoulsessions.com>) activities. These include a socialist garden project for self-reliant food production, a concert and political discussion series, study groups, etc.

The “perpetual avant garde”⁷ nature of organizing and sustaining “free music” is an embryonic effort at revolutionary prefiguration, of furthering values of trust, cooperation, self-reliance and collectivity both via musical practice and the organization of musical production and dissemination. It is an experimental musical project built upon revolutionary precedents that emerged during the 1960s, ignited by the self-determination efforts of the Black Arts and Power Movements (what Robin D.G. Kelley has termed, The Great Black Proletarian Cultural Revolution), and continues forward as a committed alternative to the denaturing and depoliticizing of commercialized and canonized (veritably colonized or captured musics) music embedded in capitalist domination and control over culture.

We need to restore what some call community, others call collectivity, but what I would assert is communism: the social nature of production must finally and ultimately mean the social control and ownership and benefit of production over individual profiteering (transmogrified today into imperialism, the monopolization of power by a very few ruling over the very very many). Many would say: Fred, let's focus on what's possible. . . . or, Fred, your ideological and political predilection seems to preclude propensities for the here-and-now possible reforms. But I will only quote Sun Ra in response: “Everything possible has been tried and nothing has changed. What we need is the Impossible.” The music we make must embrace the Impossible in the arduous journey to make music a true force for social revolution. Everything musically possible has been done. The world hasn't changed. What we need is some Impossible music along with some Impossible thinking and activity.

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⁷ The concept of the “perpetual” vs. the “permanent” avant garde was developed and asserted by Dr. Salim Washington to demarcate two contradictory practices in “free jazz” (S. Washington 2004). The former asserts the revolutionary nature of this music style, while the latter signals reification, and ossification of style and musical tropes.

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