

John Zorn: Autonomy and the Avant-Garde

(excerpt)¹

Ted Gordon

University of Chicago, USA

Art International Radio

Abstract:

This essay is an excerpt for a larger paper exploring the concept of autonomy as it emerges in the life and work of the composer, performer, record label executive and club-owner John Zorn. Zorn's activities over his wide-ranging career span from performing at jazz lofts in the 1970s to winning the MacArthur "genius" grant in 2008, while maintaining his status as a prolific composer and producer of avant-garde music. In interviews, documentaries, and in his music, Zorn often comments on his status as an avant-garde producer, specifically within the context of the record industry and within New York City's so-called "Downtown" scene. Economics take the forefront in determining artistic attitudes towards both production of music and the music itself, as Zorn has, seemingly, been forced by the "mainstream market" to create a parallel, vertically-integrated economic system to support the livelihood of himself and his collaborators. This excerpt, from the first third of the essay, unpacks Zorn's relationship with Downtown scene, his conception of the avant-garde, and his attitude towards artists who have set precedents for Zorn's version of autonomous cultural production. It also notes the idiosyncratic way that both Zorn and his critics have placed Zorn's music both within and without two distinct traditions: Avant-Garde composition and free Jazz.

Keywords: *John Zorn, New York, Downtown, Avant-Garde, Autonomy.*

¹ This version prepared by the Author for the AVANT journal. Long version of this essay from 2008 accessible at www.tedgordon.net.

I just wish I could remember it all. Being in the middle of the desert completely parched. There was a scene flying in the air and seeing the moon really close. It was a wild dream(...).²

(John Zorn)

Downtown and the Field of Improvisation

John Zorn lives and works primarily in New York, specifically on the Lower East Side of the island of Manhattan. This geographic location is crucial to understanding his position as a composer, a performer, and a figure operating within a well-defined artistic community. It would be an understatement to say that New York has, over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries, served as a capital of artistic and cultural production; the sheer volume of artists, critics, galleries, performance spaces, concert halls, and other sites of cultural production are testament to New York's enduring artistic spirit. For Zorn in particular, the amount of music that was self-described as "avant-garde" when he entered the scene in the mid-1970s served as a base for a musical self-discovery, self-identity, and self-segregation.

According to many critics, musicians, and even academics, there existed, and still exists, emergent boundaries within New York's musical scene, roughly delineated by geography: "Uptown," "Midtown," and "Downtown." According to the crudest schematic possible, these locations are widely held to correspond to "Academic," "Repertory," and "Avant-Garde" musical practices, respectively. Kyle Gann, a music critic for *The Village Voice* who championed a certain kind of grassroots, community-oriented "Downtown" music, defined "Uptown" music as academic, elitist, extreme, and in direct opposition to the project of "Downtown music," which was focused on community, accessibility, anti-elitism, and communal response to unfavorable economic and social conditions.³ This demarcation is heavily informed by Gann's position as a critic and composer, though explorations of these boundaries in academia are often no better: the sociologist Samuel Gilmore was one of the first scholars to attempt to study these divisions academically, publishing a paper that effectively lumped musicians and performers together based on the organizational properties of institutions—locating academics at Columbia University, repertory performers at Lincoln Center, and the avant-garde anywhere below 14th street.

² Source: Strickland 1991: 140.

³ See Gann's introduction to: Kyle Gann. 2006. *Music Downtown: Writings from the Village Voice*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press: 2-5.

Such divisions are obviously flawed. As Marcel Cobussen points out, massing every artist who lived below 14th street into “the avant-garde” makes no sense, especially when one compares someone like Zorn, who in the late 70s was playing in loft spaces, to Philip Glass, who at the same time was having works such as *Einstein on the Beach* performed at the Metropolitan Opera. (Cobussen 2001: P. I) Despite the musico-political and economic commonalities between musicians of the Downtown scene as struggling artists, there are also severe differences in aesthetics across the spectrum of artists who inhabited, and still inhabit, the scene. Borders in the early scene were defined by economics and a common mentality of organic composition, and according to Gann, against the elitism of the Uptown academics.

Composers, painters, sculptors, and others in mixed media who have been labeled Downtown are extremely varied: the same label has been placed on John Cage, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Terry Riley, Meredith Monk, Jack Smith, Henry Flynt, and of course John Zorn.

It is dangerously easy to conceive of a narrative history of experimental music in New York that is ultimately teleological and exclusionary, one that sews up the messy seams of modernism and postmodernism into linearity and favors certain groups of artists over others. The first wave of Downtown composers (developing what most people refer to as Minimalism) could easily be described, through reduction, as a reactionary movement against John Cage, a grand forefather of American experimentalism, therefore making it the inheritor of Cage’s experimental spirit through dialecticism; the next big generation of experimentalists who found their home downtown (often inclusive of Zorn and his circle, composers embracing poly-stylism, “totalism,” and postmodernism) could be seen as reacting against minimalism through another dialectical interpretation, and so on down the line.

This narrative of expanding and contracting the aesthetics of music is a temptation, and indeed has been sub-textually included in the theses of several books, including Michael Nyman’s “Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond,” published in 1973, and William Duckworth’s 1993 collection of interviews, “Talking Music.”⁴

⁴ The idea of a linear narrative of experimental music, influenced primarily by John Cage and Harry Partch, is also insinuated in the introductions that Walter Zimmermann (1973), Edward Strickland (1991), and Cole Gagne (1993) have all written for their collections of interviews with “American Composers.” This may be a result of the authors’ requirement to somehow neatly summarize their books for casual readers, but Gagne spells it out explicitly: “Even young composers such as Glenn Branca and John Zorn, who have felt the need to rebel in their own ways against Cage’s example, have created indeterminate scores that owe their existence to the doors opened by Cage’s music.” (Gagne 1993: vii)

It is also contained within the popular terms used to pool diverse artists together into cohesive movements: terms like “minimalism” and “maximalism” tend to beat one over the head with the idea that culture is a continuum of static, legible movements, each on the same trajectory, each with the same roots and the same goal, however distant and unclear. Zorn obviously wants to do away with history and crystallization when he claims that all genres “are used to commodify and commercialize an artist’s complex personal vision” (Zorn 2000: v) yet in his desire to escape the mass market he also implicitly states his desire to be part of the antithesis of the mass-market, what he calls the “avant-garde,” a genre with its own history, its own crystallizations, its own trajectories.

Outsider Circles: Zorn and Avant-Garde Composition

In interviews, Zorn often defines his history of the “avant-garde” as the history of composers: often, when asked to name influences, he cites the American composers Harry Partch, Charles Ives, and John Cage, and European composers Schönberg, Stravinsky, Stockhausen, Kagel, Xenakis, Cardew, and MEV, among others. This was the music that first turned him on to the avant-garde; in an interview on “The South Bank Show” in 1989, Zorn pulls out a record from his collection of over 13,000 LPs:

Here we are: Kagel, “Improvisation Ajoutée.” I bought this when I was about 15. Still marked: got it at Sam Goody in September, for 98 cents. And it’s a really crazy piece, with the guys screaming and hooting, something that attracted me. I was over at my friend’s house, and he really liked the rolling stones. And I just got this record, and I put it on and he looked at me like... ‘who the hell are you?’ Are you out of your ‘mind’? And his mother was there, and she was like [puts palm on cheek] my God, take this off... and right then and there, I decided: ‘this was the music’.⁵

Kagel, along with other European composers whom Zorn cites, becomes a representative for autonomous composers of concert music who have historically been considered experimental, boundary-breaking, difficult, and obscure, despite his involvement with the Darmstadt school and his status as a well-respected, almost canonical, composer of experimental works. Viewing Kagel, as Zorn does, as merely the music he created, moves the concept of “music” into a vacuum of aesthetics, devoid of the aspects of musical production that Zorn cares about the most—preserving individual artistic vision through the tight control of music in the marketplace. Kagel’s involvement with Darmstadt is ignored completely, the composer reduced to the subjective experience his music brings.

⁵ The South Bank Show: “Put Blood in the Music” (1989. United Kingdom: ITV).

Thus “Avant-garde” is a contradictory genre, one Zorn defines as both critiquing “mainstream” music, but simultaneously adding to another canon built on the same economic structures as mainstream music—commodification, economics, and consumption.

A particularly telling example of Zorn’s relationship to canonical avant-garde composers is his interview with William Duckworth, himself a composer who lived in New York at the same time as Zorn. Duckworth’s book is one of several collections of interviews with late-20th century experimental composers written by musicologists and composers. Many of the composers in these books are those whom Zorn cites directly as influences, and several of these volumes also contain interviews with Zorn. Already we can see how Zorn’s agenda is mitigated by the crystallization that textual interviews gives; perhaps that is why he has shied away from any interviews since the late 1990s.

The most strongly codified and legible period of the canon of so-called experimental composers must be the 1960s, a critical point in the development of avant-garde musical practices throughout the world. Though Duckworth’s project started out as an exploration of “not so much *what* happened in the sixties, which had already been documented, but *how* and *why*,” (Duckworth 1995: xi) he ended up collecting interviews with experimental musicians to develop “a freewheeling exploration of twentieth-century American experimental music—five generations’ worth—as described to me by the composers themselves.” (Duckworth 1995: xi). The result of several governmental grants and over 50 interviews with musicians, “Talking Music” extrapolates the concept of “experimentation” from an *Ursprung* of creativity—the 1960s—and projects it onto *all* experimental music composed in the twentieth-century.

It is not Duckworth’s fault, but for him, the most interesting subjects to interview about experimental music not only all lived in New York, but also apparently happened to mostly belong to the same race and gender; this is symptomatic of many musical genres that developed in the 20th century.⁶ It is significant, however, that in a collection of interviews that started off as an exploration of a musical “scene” delineated by time (the sixties) and geography (New York, particularly “Downtown”), the end result is a volume of interviews with “all individualists” who “work alone.” Of these composers, Duckworth writes, “What groups them is a spirit, a compelling personal goal, and a loner’s sense of adventure.” (Duckworth 1995: xii)

⁶ Of the 16 interviews he included in the volume, only 3 are with female artists.

That experimental music can be produced *only* by individualists may seem logical, but the idea of a “maverick spirit” is contradicted by the histories of some of the subjects he chooses to interview. Certainly some of his subjects are extreme individualists, such as Conlon Nancarrow or La Monte Young, but others—notably Milton Babbitt, Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, and especially John Zorn—all are widely regarded as constituents of certain communities of composition: Babbitt at Princeton, Glass in film scores, and Anderson and Zorn in the “Downtown scene,” to speak generally. Moreover, despite any individual composer’s “pioneer spirit” or impetus to be aesthetically independent and original, every composer is a musician operating within a specific field of cultural production, both aesthetic and economic. Though probably not Duckworth’s intention, his book still propagates the *mythos* of the strong individualist composer operating totally independently, like a “desert plant,” to borrow the phrase from Walter Zimmermann.⁷

It is important, then, to analyze the interview that Duckworth conducts with John Zorn in the frame of “American experimentalism” to see to what extent Zorn actually comes across as an individualist with little or no creative ties outside of himself. Duckworth groups Zorn with Glenn Branca and “Blue” Gene Tyranny as “The Post-Moderns,” a category to which Zorn is often assigned for his early game pieces and mid-career bands, *Naked City* and *Painkiller*. By grouping Zorn with Branca and Tyranny, and placing the “Post-Modern” section at the end of a volume starting with interviews with John Cage and Milton Babbitt, Duckworth implies that Zorn has come belatedly to the field of experimental composition and therefore must be some kind of re-assembler, looking upon the past and interpreting it into his own musical praxis, rather than a musician involved with an entirely personal, idiosyncratic or “genius” mode of composition.

Duckworth opens his interview by complimenting Zorn on his status of having the “biggest record collection in the East Village.” Zorn answers, “Well, see, it’s not really true. There are only about 13,000 pieces.” (Duckworth 1995: 446) From the beginning, Zorn emphasizes his humble attitude towards “paying tribute” to composers he fell in love with during his teenage years, running the gamut of canonical European composers: Stravinsky, Bartók, Berg, Stockhausen, Ligeti, and Kagel. (Duckworth 1995: 446-448)

⁷ Zimmermann’s 1973 collection of interviews with American experimentalists, “Desert Plants,” is an obvious ancestor of Duckworth’s volume (and Duckworth even acknowledges it in his introduction), yet the musicians Zimmermann interviewed were much more varied in geographical location than Duckworth’s subjects. Zimmermann also approached American experimentalists as an outsider, having no prior connections to his subjects; Duckworth, however, is a composer who had lived and worked in New York for many years before he started the “Talking Music” project.

As I have mentioned before, in other interviews this list also includes American composers such as Ives, Partch and Cage. The diversity of this list is striking; these composers are often considered part of serious movements, especially Stockhausen, Ligeti and Kagel at Darmstadt and Cage with the “New York School.” Through his encyclopedic knowledge of concert music regarded by many as modern, experimental, and avant-garde, all of which at once questions the field of canonical “serious music” and also reifies it through its status as part of the tradition, Zorn brings a similar attitude of “tribute” to experimental music when he discovered an entirely separate musical tradition: jazz.

Outsider Circles Outside Outsider Circles: Zorn and Avant-Garde Jazz

Zorn draws a very clear line between what he considers his foundation (diverse European and American experimental musics) and another, separate musical tradition that offered something else:

“In high school, I was into all of that shit [avant-garde composition]; I was soaking in as much information as I could. Maybe it was a dissatisfaction in my own ability to perform that music. Or maybe it was not the music itself as the situation that the music was being played in.

I went to the rug concerts of Boulez, and I saw the premieres of Stockhausen pieces. It was exciting, but at the same time, it was, like, very dry. No one was standing up going “Yeah!” An emotional quality was missing, somehow.” (Duckworth 1995: 452)

The “emotional quality” that Zorn appreciated came from a completely different tradition of music, one that had its own history, its own crystallizations, and, according to some (such as Amiri Baraka, then LeRoi Jones), its own trajectory. This tradition was jazz. Zorn’s influence came particularly from the Association for Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) in Chicago, and specifically from Anthony Braxton.

“I remember buying ‘For Alto’ by Anthony Braxton and just getting blown away, in that it had the kind of energy that I was looking for. I was tired of the kind of overly intellectual, very dry approach that a lot of contemporary classical music was moving towards. I wanted like a real kick butt kind of thing [...] I wanted someone who was up there, you know, blowing his guts out, but I also wanted the structural complexity that contemporary classical music had reached.” (Duckworth 1995: 452)

As Tamar Barzel points out, Zorn inadvertently positions Braxton's music, with more roots in Jazz, into a jazz/classical binary; he "appears to be endorsing the notion that jazz improvisation ('blowing') is emotional but lacking in the "structural complexity" of classical music." (Barzel 2004)

Braxton's *For Alto* is a 73-minute solo saxophone recording, broken into segments dedicated to various artists (including John Cage and Cecil Taylor), was released in 1969 as a double-LP put out by Delmark Records. Zorn tells the story of how he found it: "I went into a record store in St. Louis and asked, 'What's weird? What's really out there?' The guy at the counter said, 'You gotta get *For Alto*. We've got 20 boxes of it downstairs, *nobody* wants to buy it.' I said, '*That's* the record I want.'"⁸ This anecdote is strikingly similar to Zorn's explanation of his early infatuation with Kagel and European experimental composers: he finds a recording that is "weird," that doesn't sell, that alienates people, and admires it not only for its musical content, but also because of its transgressive act against mainstream culture. For Zorn, the shared weirdness of Kagel and Braxton's music is what brings them together—no matter who they were, where they came from, or what economy of music they were operating in, their records were still records.

Zorn repeats this story of being totally infatuated with experimental European "classical" music but discovering the "emotional" qualities of free Jazz in several interviews he gave throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, and also in television documentaries filmed at the time. In every instance, he emphasizes his interest in both "structural complexity" and "emotional chutzpah," which he considered opposites in all previous music to his own: "I still wanted all those horrible noises, but I wanted an emotional basis for them, not just a stopwatch."⁹

Without the fact that the implications of both the "jazz" and "classical" traditions had (and still have) acute and very real ramifications in New York's music scene, a theoretical discussion of Zorn's position between the two might seem pedantic and alien to the music itself. This is certainly Zorn's opinion: we have already seen his aversion to categorization.

⁸ "Hear and Now: John Zorn" Parts I & II. 2000.

⁹ Cole Gagne, *Soundpieces 2: Interviews With American Composers* (1993. Metuchen. NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc.). This quote also brings to light other classic binaries that Zorn imbues to the classical/jazz opposition—namely the Apollonian/Dionysian paradigm, metonymically represented by opposing a stopwatch (knowledge, mathematics, logic, etc.) to an "emotional basis."

Not only does he condemn categorization as an exploitative tool, he also condemns “listening with your eyes instead of your ears” (Zorn 2000: v; Heuermann 2000) a rhetorical device Zorn has invented to draw one’s attention to an abstract, free-floating musical experience, as opposed to any actual social or economic factors that music actually contains—factors on which Zorn has based his career as a curator, record producer, promoter, and venue operator.

George E. Lewis (2002) suggests that Zorn’s successful championing of diverse musical influences came not only because of his position as an improviser within the “Downtown” scene, but also because he was not seen by his contemporaries as belonging to the jazz tradition. “[Zorn], who [was] never subjected to the discourses of transgression and ‘roots’ that were being used to police the world of black experimental musicians, [was] able to take full advantage of [his] relative freedom from cultural arbitration.” (Lewis 2002: 145) As an example, Lewis points to several reviews in the *New York Times* that praise Zorn for “transcend[ing] categories”¹⁰ and condemn Anthony Braxton, whose experimental praxis mirrored Zorn’s in many ways: “However much he may resist categories, Mr. Braxton’s background is in jazz, which means an improvisatory tradition.”¹¹

Instead of discussing these ramifications, Zorn appeals to a kind of rootless, polymorphous musical literacy based on the very commercial genre system that he disavows: “The ultimate answer is, you can’t put what I’m doing or what Elliot [Sharp] does or what any of these guys [the “Downtown scene,” *TG*] into any kind of box like that. Inherently it’s music that resists categorization because of all the influences we’ve had.” (Gagne 1993: 524) Zorn implies that both the “complexity” and the “emotion” of his music are merely two equal influences, culled from the same source—recordings acquired at a young age. Zorn argues, it seems, that the incongruous nature of that combination—and the combination of other musics with this “classical”/“jazz” binary, such as film music, hardcore, world music, etc.—make the music both everything and nothing at the same time. By culling influence from such a wide variety of genres, Zorn wants to get rid of them all, to create only “avant-garde” music. Yet the musics he claims dominion over are not the same. These records, and the people who made them, are vastly different in terms of economics, politics, aesthetics, and race; the lowest common denominator of sounding music cannot erase these differences.

¹⁰ Rockwell, J. As Important As Anyone in His Generation. *New York Times* (February 21, 1988): sec. 2: 27. In: Lewis 2002:145.

¹¹ Rockwell, J. Jazz: Two Braxton Programs. *New York Times* (April 23, 1982): C23. In: Lewis 2002: 145.

Jazz music is as crucial an influence on Zorn's music as the experimental music of the Western canon. The compositional paradigms of collaboration, free improvisation, and "blowing," all of which Zorn has used in his compositional work, all stem from the influence of experimental jazz musicians, especially Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor, both of whom Zorn mentions by name in several interviews. Most important for Zorn's early music was the integration of "emotionally charged blowing sessions" into "more of a compositional atmosphere than an improvised one." (Duckworth 1995: 453) The synthesis of collaborative, freely-improvised music and of through-composed music intended for a concert setting set up Zorn to straddle the paradigms of "Downtown experimental music," with contemporaries rooted in the classical tradition and venues like The Kitchen and Roulette, and "Downtown improvised music," with contemporaries involved with Jazz and venues such as Studio Henry and other downtown lofts.

These musical paradigms were not mutually exclusive, as composers and performers played their work wherever they could; they were, however, deeply entrenched with different traditions that held important boundaries determined by race and perceived historical importance. More than a philosophical or theoretical importance, these entrenchments also held an economic value: funding from grant organizations and performances in venues traditionally devoted to one tradition or the other.

Though performances of music from these two traditions took place in all sorts of venues in the 1970s, and found increasing support in the 1980s, Lewis points out that there was a severe difference in public funding between the two perceived genres. The National Endowment for the Arts split music funding into discrete categories, forcing musicians to choose sides between "jazz-folk-ethnic" and "composer-librettist;" in 1973, \$225,000 from the NEA was split between 165 "jazz-folk-ethnic" artists (with no award over \$2,000), while in 1974 over \$400,000 was given to "composer-librettists," with many individual grants totaling over \$5,000. (Lewis 2002: 117)

Composition and Difference: Theorizing "Blocks of Sound"

This early segregation had little effect on Zorn's own practice, but it does show how theoretical lines drawn gained particularly real significance in the case of working musicians. Especially for Zorn, who would attempt to establish his own systems of financial and artistic support outside of the mass market, a discussion of genre classification would seem irrelevant, pedantic, and useful only to critics and the record industry who would attempt to capitalize, and exploit, some kind of true avant-garde zeitgeist of individuality.

For Zorn, music is simply music, either composed or improvised—and his compositional philosophy treats genre simply as a variable among others, something indexical, finite, and able to be organized into blocks. Zorn lays it out clearly in Derek Bailey’s “On the Edge” documentary, aired on the BBC in 1992: “I think in blocks—in changing blocks of sound. And in that sense, one possible block is a genre of music.”¹²

Despite Zorn’s insistence on the singularity and simplicity of his music, the paradox of his compositional praxis remains: by leveling the musical playing field and treating all musics as equal, Zorn completely ignores the political, social, and economic histories attached to musical traditions. How does one claim heritage from both Stockhausen and the AACM? The answer, for Zorn, is that he was exposed to both musics through recordings, not through direct instruction. “This is the first generation of composers that was brought up on a range of music as wide as this—available to us because of the recording boom,” (Gagne 1993: 524) Zorn comments; “We were the generation that benefited from [the recording explosion]. And we looked for like-minded individuals to work with.” (Cox & Warner: 2006 198) This reduction of music to recordings informs Zorn’s paradigm of “blocks of sound,” as a recording is quite literally that: a static representation of a musical performance, crystallized into its status as a record—a cultural product with a genre, album art, and liner notes.

Zorn corroborates this with his own anecdotal history—he was exposed to both “classical” and “jazz” music through recordings.¹³

Zorn, in his record-stuffed apartment in the late 1970s and 80s, seems to have been operating from a degree-zero of composition: if every genre of music was available to him as a composer, then he was free from the burdens of any specific compositional heritage. However, as he has said and as his music has communicated, his early works (and his compositions throughout the 1980s and 90s) owe a striking amount to the precedents set by musicians and composers falling into two different, often racialized, camps. Both of these groups were major influences not only to Zorn but also to his contemporaries, the community Zorn speaks for in his introduction to *Arcana*.

¹² On the Edge: Improvisation in Music - Episode 1: “Passing It On”. 1992. Dir. Bailey, Derek. London: BBC4. <http://www.ubu.com/film/bailey.html>.

¹³ Zorn’s obsession with the record as an artistic product brought him to dispute with Nonesuch, his record label during the late 1980s, for artistic differences regarding album art. Since founding Tzadik, he controls every aspect of his albums, including art; this has earned him some notoriety, as he often puts graphically violent photographs on album covers. (See Gagne 1993: 531-534).

By establishing himself as a serious composer who merely incorporated the “emotional chutzpah” of experimental jazz musicians into the more complex more serious paradigm of “composition,” Zorn, perhaps inadvertently, widened the gap between experimental jazz and “experimental music,” finally giving primacy—through his refusal to acknowledge the political ramifications of genre—to the concept of a general “avant-garde.”

This generalized avant-garde is at once all musics and no musics, incorporating influence with disregard to anything outside of the sounding music itself. Such an appeal to the primacy of sounding music is, as we have discussed, a strategy that excludes economics, extra-musical aesthetics, and political considerations.

Zorn writes,

Is it [‘Torture Garden’, an album of short-form compositions influenced by hardcore music] hardcore? No. There’s a certain set of rules which you have to obey. ‘And with most scenes, the most important rules are the least important to me: attitude; stance; posture; the clothes you wear; where you play’. All the trappings of the music. I’m not a skinhead with tattoos on my arm, who goes and slam-dances at CB’s. I’m interested in the music those people are making. The same thing with the jazz scene: Their trappings are not my trappings. The classical scene too: I don’t obey those rules. ‘I’m interested in music, and not the bullshit trappings that surround so many of the scenes, and which people are convinced are the tradition of the scene’. [Emphasis added, TG] (Gagne 1993: 524)

Zorn’s stance is a clear delineation of borders, and a clear statement of allowance and personal liberty. Zorn is obviously interested in “trappings” that surround the music: he has acted as a curator for most of his career at several prominent music venues; as an executive producer for every single record produced on his own record label; as a community leader and venue manager at The Stone since 2005; and, generally, as a charismatic figure in a large group of downtown improvisers and composers. As for the “bullshit” trappings, he is, contrary to his disdain for the hardcore, jazz, and classical scenes, very concerned with his appearance (camouflage pants with *tzitzit*), attitude¹⁴, and the venues in which his music is played.

¹⁴ “I’m a down-to-earth person like you, who’s going to tell it like it is. If someone’s jiving me, I’ll say, “Fuck you, you’re jiving me.” And people are threatened by that. And then they think you’re some obnoxious asshole, when you’re just someone who is very straight about shit.” Michael Goldberg. “John Zorn”. BOMB Magazine Summer 2002.

One such example is the infamous 1989 New Music America festival, for which Zorn wrote a scathing diatribe in the concert pamphlet to accompany a performance by the Brooklyn Philharmonic of a piece they had commissioned for him, “For Your Eyes Only,” which claimed:

Less than an actual music festival, New Music America is a one-sided overview that’s more about politics, marketing, and sales than about the music it pretends to support... it’s no more than a convention for people in the music business who try to “out-hip” each other in the manipulation of artists. This postmodern yuppie tendency of business people dictating creative policy to artists is a very real danger that I intend to avoid at all costs.¹⁵

Many critics, such as Kyle Gann, dismiss Zorn’s comments as hypocritical, citing the “\$10,000 orchestral commission” he supposedly received for it (Gann 2006: 233); in reality, the Brooklyn Philharmonic had commissioned that piece from Zorn two years prior, and played it at the festival without his involvement. (Gagne 1993: 527-528) Zorn’s decision to not be involved with New Music America highlights the unintentional presuppositions that come with a desire to consider music “without the trappings”, namely that a specific set of “trappings” are required to present music in such a way that will render it “pure” and unadulterated. Zorn’s statement about “trappings” should be amended, however: rather than remove himself from everything outside the music, he instead has chosen to create those factors himself by making his own scene, his own home. “Artists stand on the outside of society. I think that’s an important point: I see the artist as someone who stands on the outside, they create their own rules in a lot of ways and shouldn’t try to be socially responsible; being irresponsible is the very point of existence.” (Gagne 1993: 530)

Works Cited:

- Adorno, T. W. 2002. *Essays on Music*. Ed. Leppert, R. Trans. Susan H. Gillespie. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press.
- Auner, J. H. 2003. *Schoenberg Reader: Documents of a Life*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Barthes, R. 1977. *Image, Music, Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Barzel, T. 2004. *Radical Jewish Culture: Composers/Improvisers on New York City’s 1990s Downtown Scene*. Doctor of Philosophy: Ethnomusicology University of Michigan.
- Benjamin, W. *On the Concept of History*. <http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/ThesesonHistory.html>. 3/23/2008.

¹⁵ Reprinted in Gann 2006: 232.

- Bey, H.T.A.Z. 1985, 1991. *The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia.
- Bourdieu, P. 1993. *The Field of Cultural Production*. Ed. Randal Johnson. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Browbeat* - Issue Numero Uno - John Zorn. <http://www.browbeat.com/browbeat01/zorn.htm>. 3/16/2008.
- Cobussen, M. 2001. *Deconstruction in Music*. Erasmus University Rotterdam. Source: <http://www.cobussen.com>.
- Cox, C. and Warner, D. eds. 2006. *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*. New York, London: Continuum.
- Davis, F. 1991. Zorn' for 'Anger. *The Atlantic Monthly* January.
- Duckworth, W. 1995. *Talking Music: Conversations with John Cage, Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, and Five Generations of American Experimental Composers*. New York: Schirmer Books.
- Fitzell, S.P. 2005. The Stone: John Zorn's Latest Downtown Venture. *All About Jazz* April 7
- Gagne, C. 1993. *Soundpieces 2: Interviews with American Composers*. Metuchen.. NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc.
- Gann, K. 2006. *Music Downtown: Writings from the Village Voice*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press.
- Goldberg, M. 2002. John Zorn. *BOMB Magazine*: Summer.
- Gottschalk, K. *The Zorn Non-Interview: Ah, John, We Hardly Knew Ye*. 8/20/2003, 3/12/2008 <http://www.squidsear.com/cgi-bin/news/newsView.cgi?newsID=241>.
- Hear and Now: John Zorn* . 2000. Parts I & II. Produced by BBC Radio 3.
- Heuermann, C, Dir. 2002. *A Bookshelf on Top of the Sky: 12 Stories about John Zorn*. Prod. Zorn John. DVD. Tzadik.
- Lewis, G.E. 2002. Experimental Music in Black and White: The AACM in New York, 1970-1985. *Current Musicology*.nos: 71-73.
- Milkowski, B. 2000. One Future, Two Views: Interview with John Zorn. *JazzTimes* March: 28-35: 118-121.
- Names of 2006 Fellows - MacArthur Foundation. http://www.macfound.org/site/c.lkLXJ8MQKrH/b.2070789/apps/nl/content2.asp?content_id={4A099024-6AC9-4CAE-AAD3-B5A64B241DD1}. 3/24/2008.
- On the Edge: Improvisation in Music - Episode 1: "Passing it on". Dir. Bailey, Derek. Television Series. BBC4, 1992.

Strickland, E. 1991. *American Composers: Dialogues on Contemporary Music*. Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

The South Bank show. 1989. *Put Blood in the Music*. Anonymous Perf. Sonic Youth, and John Zorn. Television. ITV.

The Stone. <http://www.thestonenyc.com/>. 3/24/2008.

Tzaddik — The Baal Teshuvah - Letters of Light. http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/137090/jewish/Tzaddik-The-Baal-Teshuvah.htm. 3/23/2008.

Weber, H. 1984. *Schönbergs Verein Für Musikalische Privataufführungen*. München.

Zorn, J. 2000. *Arcana: Musicians on Music*. New York: Hips Road and Granary Books.

Zorn, J. 2006. Radical Jewish Culture. http://www.tzadik.com/rjc_info.html. 3/18/2008.

Zorn, J. 2007. *Arcana II: Musicians on Music*. New York: Hips Road.

* * *

Ted Gordon – a doctoral student of musicology at the University of Chicago, holds a BA from Yale University. He is a performer, experimentalist, and radio host on Art International Radio. Link to full activities: www.tedgordon.net