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Very Urgent
Music of Desperation and Purpose in the Oakland of 2020

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See table of contents

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Cite this document

Article abstract

Guitarist/composer Karl Evangelista writes of the quarantine projects that he carried out from his home in Oakland, California: two album releases—one with South African drummer-activist Louis Moholo-Moholo and one with art rock/experimental project Grex—and the curation of two online "Lockdown Festivals."

Very Urgent: Music of Desperation and Purpose in the Oakland of 2020

Karl Evangelista

July 21, 2020

As I write this, friends and peers are mourning the passing of Eddie Gale, a San Jose-based, Brooklyn native trumpeter and Bay Area jazz fixture. Eddie, perhaps best known for masterminding two deeply surreal free jazz-cum-commune culture LPs on the Blue Note record label, exhibited a lifelong devotion to collaboration. He made those in his orbit want to follow him in a way that made participation feel both meaningful and imperative.

Much of what I learned in preparation for, and much of what I have subsequently applied to my endeavors over the course of the COVID-19 lockdown, I owe to my experiences in Eddie's band—which is to say that I have been able to negotiate my own place in social devastation by surrendering my energies to community engagement and political imagination. The three projects that have occupied my time in quarantine—(a) *Apura!*, an attempt to collaborate with South African drummer-activist Louis Moholo-Moholo; (b) Grex, an ongoing art rock/experimental project that has its foundations in fringe culture; and (c) my curation of a series of livestream format "Lockdown" festivals—give voice to the notion that some of the most meaningful art that can be made at a time of exceptional strife is that which argues for the usefulness, and indeed, the necessity, of confrontation.

Confrontation as I mean it is slightly more complex than the practice of weighing one's beliefs or identity against another's. Recent experience suggests to me that the magnitude of damage that lockdown procedures have visited upon improvised music communities worldwide is cataclysmic and not just disruptive. In much the same way that our current moment in worldwide protest means to envision a better reality, confronting the ugliness of lockdown entails inventing new practices that undermine seemingly unsolvable problems.

Perhaps my most liberating moment in this midst of effective house arrest was when I recognized that the very firmaments of the music that I had lately been investing my energies in, much of it free or experimental music, had coded into its genetics a solution to the issue of dramatically diminished opportunities. The aforementioned Grex survived for over a decade of continuous activity by virtue of its ability to both interface with and generate alternative performance infrastructure. *Apura!*, on the other hand, was centered on the participation of Moholo-Moholo, an artist who famously braved exile from South Africa in order to continue working in contexts that the Apartheid government deemed illegal.

Apura! (stream): https://apura.bandcamp.com

In Tagalog, "Apura!" roughly translates to "Very Urgent," also the name of Louis's first record in exile from Apartheid's racially oppressive strictures. Appropriately, this project—which involved not only Louis but also UK pianist Alexander Hawkins and free improv innovator Trevor Watts— was first envisioned as a way of activating the energies of the 1970s, of drawing a straight line between the incendiary, politically charged music of Louis and Trevor's heyday and certain socially conscious improvised musics of the present day. The need for music of this nature is vital at a time when both the United States and social movements worldwide wish to examine their relationships to fascistic politics, to the brutality of authority, and to embedded racial and

cultural prejudices. Naturally, this project had its genesis in the aftermath of Donald Trump's 2016 Presidential Election, and it was recorded in the UK in the midst of Brexit negotiations.

By the time that *Apura!* was slated for release, lockdown in America was well underway. To my surprise, the critical and experiential value of this music was enhanced by social stasis, the nature of which encouraged dialogue about the music's indictment of rearguard policies. Unable to bring overseas musicians stateside, the release plan for this music shifted from a focus on live performance to engagement with leftist periodicals like Morning Star (UK) and East Wind Zine (Bay Area). Paradoxically, this release may have garnered more attention over the course of lockdown than it might have otherwise as, like the rest of Louis's music, it has become as much about the sustained, inviolable relevance of its social messaging as it is about the people who made it. To put it simply: the message of this music was of social use, regardless of the circumstances under which it was presented.

Similarly, Grex conceived of its forthcoming album, *Everything You Said Was Wrong,* as an overt response to political and cultural phenomena that had begun an ineluctable creep into our musical lives. The basic thematic content of this album involves both open condemnation of authoritative overreach, like that which prevails in my second home country of the Philippines, and the celebration of survival in forbidding environments, not unlike Manila or Oakland. As was the case with *Apura!*, the conceptual underpinnings of historical free jazz provide a unifying thread; early on in the development of *Everything*, we discovered a Bill Dixon quote that speaks quite elegantly to anti-authoritarian creativity: "Someone is always trying to get you away from the thing that you do."

Video for "Blood" on YouTube: https://youtu.be/EzYj_xP7LrY

Dixon's adage can be found in the opening seconds to Grex's video for "Blood," a piece from *Everything* that we wrote in reference to drummer Milford Graves' problems interfacing with record label A&R in the 1960s. Out of necessity, this video was filmed in isolation. We utilized as coloristic imagery the backdrop of Oakland, the city to which we are so closely intertwined by virtue of civic engagement. This imagery took on secondary importance after the news of George Floyd's murder began to spread; the neighborhoods and overpasses depicted in our video would soon become the backdrop for protests.

For fear of both undermining this protest movement and confounding the intentions behind our own music, Grex utilized the release of this video as a way to amplify our advocacy on behalf of disenfranchised groups. All proceeds from the sale of this single, which debuted in coordination with the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, were directed to Movement for Black Lives, the Equal Justice Initiative, and the Alameda County Food Bank. In an odd way, the admittedly ersatz release format of this music has brought it closer to both its own intentions as well as those of the free jazz to which it is so deeply indebted.

Lockdown Festival I Playlist on YouTube: https://youtu.be/l9Xu6Syoo-Q

Lockdown Festival I Facebook Event: https://www.facebook.com/events/275032363670668

Lockdown Festival II Facebook Event: https://www.facebook.com/events/568385740469289

These two projects, then, were conceived as albums and re-configured as methods of fostering social engagement. In much the same way, the two Lockdown Festivals that Grex hosted in March and April of this year were staged to not only simulate social interactions but also to

exploit social media as a tool for generating otherwise impossible performance contexts. Lockdown Festivals I (April 4, 2020) and II (May 2, 2020) were guerrilla affairs—large-scale music gatherings that were made possible by collating a series of YouTube Live links on Facebook "Master Event" pages.

What I discovered over the course of planning these two festivals was invaluable. First, the operating procedures of improvised music—already deeply reliant on underground arts spaces, solo and duo performance contexts, and alternative payment structures—lends itself to novel forms of presentation. Once the plan was set into motion to create a virtual space that would allow for something resembling a traditional audience component, the logistics of assembly were startlingly simple. Absolutely no money was spent on promotion or infrastructure beyond the use of social media platforms.

Second, the value of this virtual space in a period of unshakable isolation was more significant than I envisioned. Without a proper mechanism for ensuring proceeds, the festivals solicited donations for lockdown aid institutions that targeted improvisers and sound artists, including the Safety Net Fund and the New Music Solidarity Fund. In addition, we advocated on behalf of several local performance spaces—including the Uptown Nightclub (Oakland), the Make-Out Room (San Francisco), Temescal Arts Center (Oakland), and the Center for New Music (San Francisco)—that were incapable of collecting revenue in the midst of shelter-in-place. These grassroots fundraising efforts would have been impossible had it not been for the calculated appropriation of a delivery format that so efficiently unified people.

In much the same manner in which Eddie Gale once constructed carefully curated bands that were endowed with a kind of intrinsic, if self-given, value, the projects that I've had the good fortune to stake over the course of the past year have found meaning that exceeds themselves. This meaning is, in turn, embedded in the generation of practices, contexts, and strategies that are both tied to a broader history of activism and deeply specific to our era in music. If there's any lesson to be divined from this ugly interval in human history, it is that justly celebrated histories in creative survival are invariably preceded by inconceivable desperation—or, to put it a different way: desperation is itself just an opportunity that has not yet been realized.

Addendum

Unable to tour or perform live in support of *Everything You Said Was Wrong*, Grex repurposed its album release date (September 5, 2020) for Lockdown Festival 3, a five-hour livestream fundraiser for the ACLU and ailing percussionist Milford Graves. All proceeds from this new recording, and all donations collected at Lockdown 3, will be directed to the aforementioned causes. Grex sees this event as a way to address a rising call for creative musicians to both support imperiled communities and preserve the legacies of artists of color, like Professor Graves, whose sacrifices have been incalculable in magnitude.

Lockdown III Facebook Event: https://www.facebook.com/events/645326159422827