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The Noise Indoors
Improvisation, Community, and #StayHome

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Improvisation, Musical Communities, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Article abstract

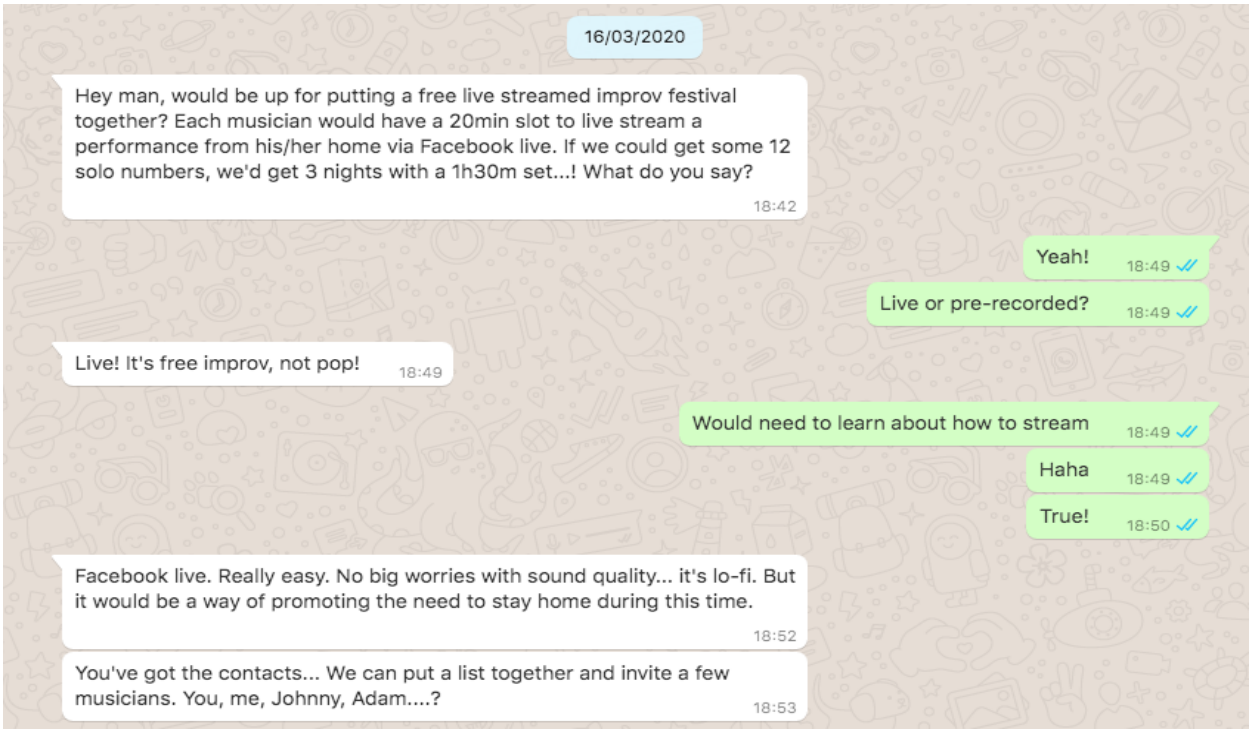
This article is a reflection of a collaboration between musicians Anton Hunter and José Dias who, in April 2020, organised a free, biweekly improvisation streaming festival, which ran for three weeks, entitled The Noise Indoors (TNI). Devised as a way of encouraging musicians and fans to stay home by providing the chance to continue experiencing and celebrating improvised music during confinement, TNI gathered twenty-eight artists based in seventeen cities across Europe who filmed solo or duet performances in their homes. As TNI progressed, this festival became a platform for sharing each artist's intimate music-making, as well as an opportunity for networking and community building. Using an eclectic mix of critical and dialogic writing styles (including field notes and text messages), they reflect on their experiences as researchers, musicians, and curators who organised and participated in TNI, and consider its wider implications.

The Noise Indoors: Improvisation, Community and #StayHome

José Dias & Anton Hunter

In April 2020, with COVID-19 lockdowns in effect across Europe, Manchester-based improv collective The Noise Upstairs (TNU) organised a free, biweekly improvisation streaming festival, The Noise Indoors (TNI), which ran for three weeks. Devised as a way of encouraging musicians and fans to stay home by providing the chance to continue experiencing and celebrating improvised music during confinement, TNI gathered twenty-eight artists based in seventeen cities across Europe who filmed solo or duet performances in their homes. As TNI progressed, this festival became a platform for sharing each artist's intimate music-making, as well as an opportunity for networking and community building.

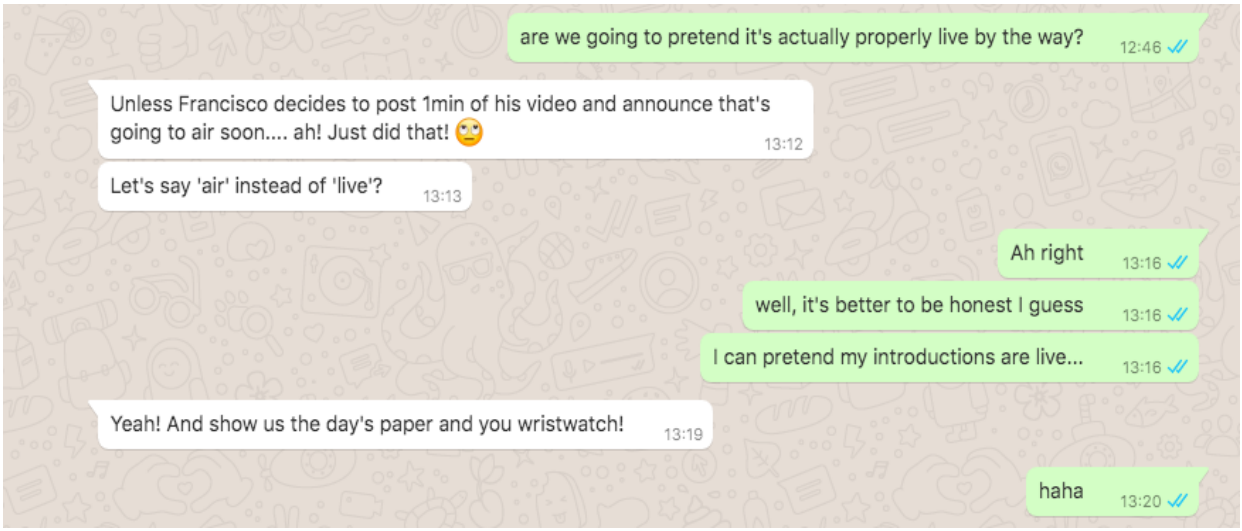
In this article, using an eclectic mix of critical and dialogic writing styles (including field notes and text messages), we reflect on our own experiences as researchers, musicians, and curators who organised and participated in TNI; on the ways in which the notion of improvisation as a typically collective practice in front of a small audience can be challenged when set in the context of streamed solo performances for a larger global and anonymous audience; and on the roles of both formality and informality in the transition of a live improvised music ecology and musicians' practices into a virtual context.



WhatsApp exchange between José Dias (white) and Anton Hunter (green), March 16, 2020.

On March 16, 2020, the UK Prime Minister advised the public to "avoid pubs, clubs, theatres and other such venues" (Johnson, qtd. in Merrick) without mandating this by law, drawing criticism from business owners, who added their voices to scientists', many of whom were "expecting there to be something a bit more rigorous" (Hunter, qtd. in Sample et al.) in response to COVID-19. In the face of hesitancy from government, some sectors took action themselves and José suggested the two of us do something, initially as a way to highlight the need to stay

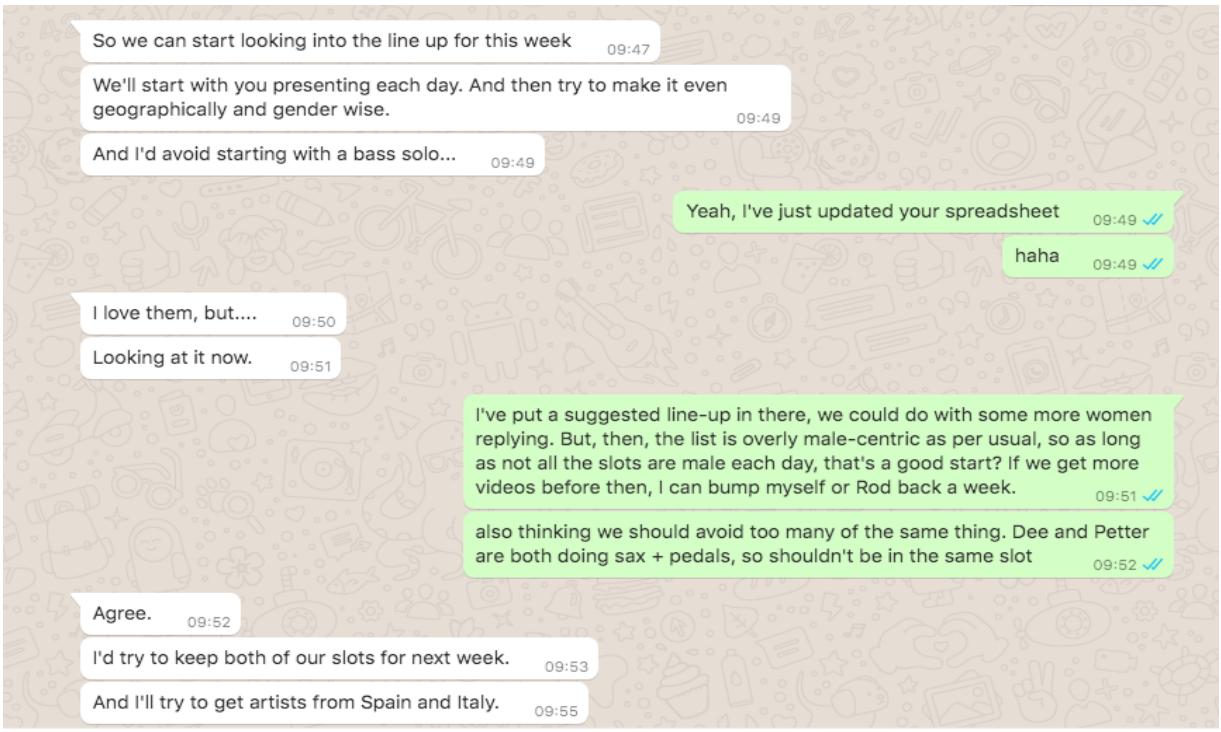
at home: our own “improvised, DIY direct action in the face of disaster and state incompetence and neglect” (Fischlin and Porter 5). Our stance—stated in our initial exchange as “Live! It’s free improv, not pop!”—quickly met the barrier of our own technological inabilities, and pre-recorded performances became the preferred method. We were curious as to how musicians and audiences might respond to this approach.



WhatsApp exchange between José Dias (white) and Anton Hunter (green), March 28, 2020.

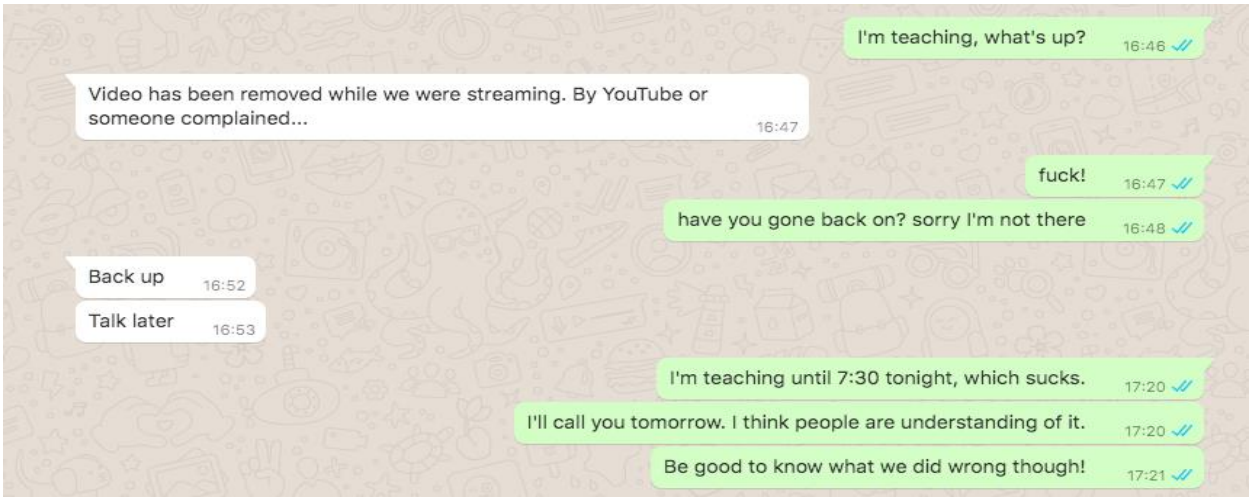
We realised early on that streamed and live performances are different experiences and are informed by particular social, behavioural, and communicational codes. At a time when DIY strategies have become increasingly commonplace for independent jazz artists as a way to use digital production and dissemination to their benefit (Medbøe and Dias), our call for artists to self-record their performances in the privacy of their homes was received by the vast majority as an accepted practice. None questioned the fact that these would not be streamed live but rather broadcasted at a later date as pre-recorded performances. We were also aware that the streamed performance experience tends to be quite niche, with relatively small audiences, and, crucially, that the “multisensory experience of presence in the time and place of performance” is lost when in a virtual context (Holt, “Is Music Becoming More Visual?” 55). Yet, to our surprise, the first session reached over 400 playbacks and 30 live views. The number of live views remained consistent across all three weeks of TNI, above the regular attendance at TNU. This might be explained by the particular context of the COVID-19 pandemic: both fans and artists were certainly more exposed to social media during lockdown and potentially more predisposed to engage in virtual interaction. Rather than merely replacing the normal programming of TNU, TNI became an event. The “eventization” of streamed pre-recorded improvised music during the pandemic seems to confirm Arnt Maasø’s theory that “outside events and happenings influence streaming patterns” (165) and that these “might bring both centrifugal and centripetal forces to bear on music culture” (170). While some artists and fans of improvised music might perceive this as a non-authentic live experience, our live chat record suggests a dynamic and engaged community.

TNU ordinarily has minimal curatorial input; the primary focus has always been on the participatory element where improvising trios are created by pulling names out of a hat, alongside a short guest set which is usually booked following an e-mail inquiry from a touring or local group. TNI, on the other hand, necessitated curatorship.

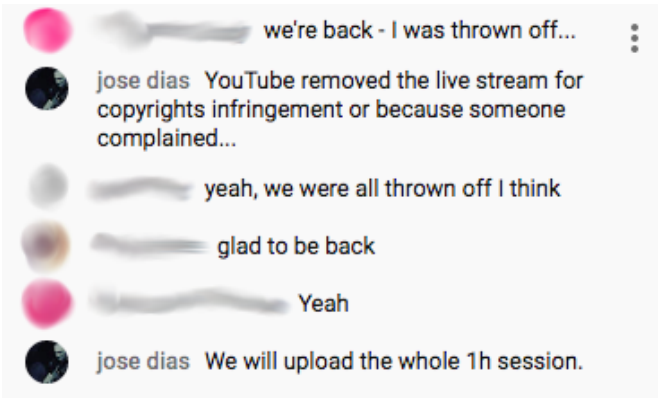


WhatsApp exchange between José Dias (white) and Anton Hunter (green), March 28, 2020.

We saw this as an opportunity to curate a series for a virtual community, with a more balanced representation in some areas that we saw as essential: aiming for gender parity and featuring collaborations from across Europe at a time when Brexit negotiations seemed to only increase the UK's isolationist determination. In many respects, curating a virtual improv series did allow us to imagine a pan-European improv scene beyond national borders, where both men and women had equal opportunities. Although, in the end, this was not fully achieved, we did manage to meet our own target to not present an all-male, all-UK line-up in any session.

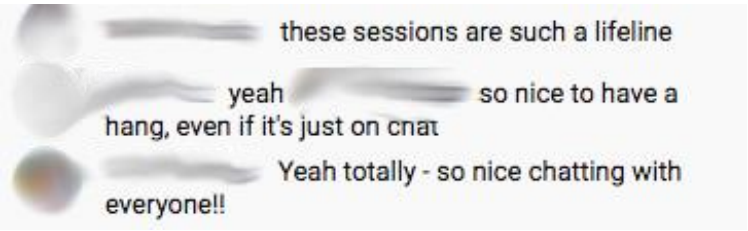


WhatsApp exchange between José Dias (white) and Anton Hunter (green), April 7, 2020.



The Noise Indoors, YouTube live chat, April 7, 2020.

On May 7, the stream was suddenly cut off. The only information displayed on our YouTube channel was that the contents had been removed for copyright infringement or due to a complaint. Although a debate on copyright infringement in improvised music would be as entertaining as imagining who could possibly complain (and on what grounds) about these performances, we assumed that this was the result of the over-zealous YouTube algorithm. Less than five minutes later we were back on, as were our live viewers. But this slight external disruption in our streaming experience and interaction revealed to us the importance of these sessions: they were a ritual around which was mobilised an informal music network "connecting individuals who are essentially assumed as equal, and as equivalent contributors to the system" (Dias 8). In this case, fans and musicians experiencing a virtual event of streamed improvised music simultaneously. We had to ask ourselves: what sort of community did we create?

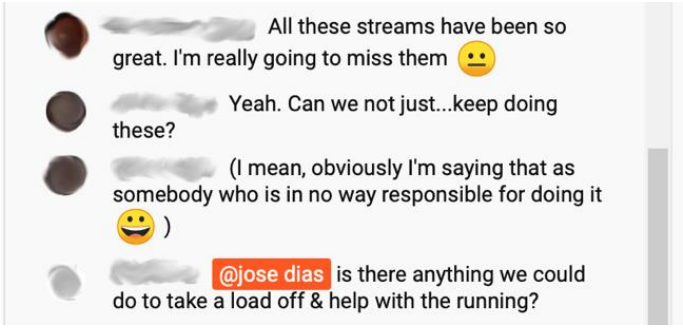


The Noise Indoors, YouTube Live chat, April 2, 2020.

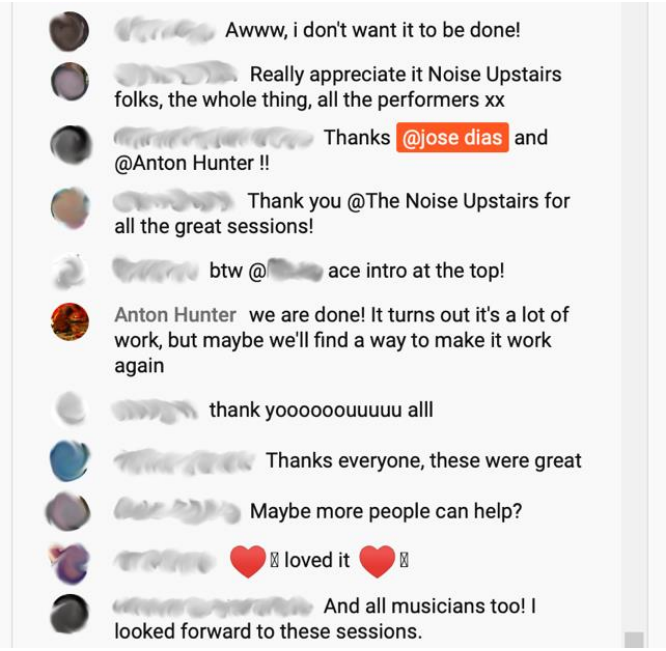
Heller recognises "communities of place" (105) when referring to the loft jazz scene in New York in the 1970s. In a similar way, TNU has been shaped by the physical space we inhabit. For as long as TNU has existed, our regular venue has been the Fuel Café Bar in the Manchester suburb of Withington, a vegetarian café with an upstairs room that also functions as a thoroughfare to the toilets, and hosts various community group meetings as well as a wide range of DIY musical happenings. The attendees at TNU are a mixture of musicians who already know about the event and those who stumble across it, bringing together "a mobile and varying intergenerational group of amateur and professional musicians" (Bright and Hunter 126).

Recreating TNU online, in the virtual space of YouTube, we were surprised by the strength of sentiment expressed by audience members, some of whom went so far as to describe the sessions as a "lifeline." This community is an embodiment of Born's second plane of music's social mediation, where "music has powers to animate imagined communities, aggregating its listeners into … virtual collectivities" (Born 43). It is a virtual community that bridges international borders, with musicians from different countries hearing each other and interacting for the first time.

However, this new format also reinforced certain existing divisions. For instance, those engaging in the live chat were mostly professional musicians. We were not able to recreate the participatory nature of the monthly in-person TNU sessions and very few regular TNU attendees participated in the online sessions. How this kind of mixing of amateur and professional can continue in a post-COVID-19 world is something that needs to be explored.



The Noise Indoors, YouTube live chat, April 14, 2020.



The Noise Indoors, YouTube live chat, April 16, 2020.

TNI was an improvised reaction to a specific set of circumstances. We are now taking the time to pause and reflect on its impact and discuss potential avenues for the future. By embracing online performance, we unfortunately ended up reinforcing a performer-audience hierarchy that TNU otherwise subverts. One potential solution to this issue could be shared curatorship in the future, creating space for different agendas, concerns, tastes, and aesthetic values. While the comments above show how valuable this endeavour was to musicians, giving it away for free (as we have been doing) runs the risk of devaluing the art form at a time when incomes are increasingly unstable.

For now, this experience leaves us with more questions than answers. How could improvised music exploit the fact that fans and musicians may use “social media and mobile technology in an effort to contest and reshape the boundaries of live music concerts” (Bennett 545)? How

could improvised music benefit from the current context where “free music streaming affects positively live music attendance” (Nguyen et al. 315)? What is the role of streamed and broadcasted concerts in a “hybrid media economy” (Holt, “The Economy” 246), and how might we test new dissemination and promotion models for improvised music in that economy?

The TNU collective has a long pedigree in improvised music. It is essentially a communal initiative and a shared experience. While livestreaming or broadcasting pre-recorded performances will never replace the live experience, reflecting on the successes of TNU has led us to feel that those strategies could play a decisive role in expanding the experience of making and enjoying live improvised music beyond the conventional limits of time and place.

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