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## Intents and Purposes: Philosophy and the Aesthetics of Improvisation by Eric Lewis

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[See table of contents](#)

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## Book Review

### ***Intents and Purposes: Philosophy and the Aesthetics of Improvisation***

Eric Lewis  
University of Michigan Press, 2019  
ISBN 9780472131303  
280 pages

#### **Reviewed by Jeff Schwartz**

Named for a Bill Dixon album it does not discuss, *Intents and Purposes: Philosophy and the Aesthetics of Improvisation* explores some key issues in the philosophy of music, posing five multi-part questions:

1. What is a musical work? Where does originality in musical works lie?
2. What is a musical agent or performer? How does agency function in the production and reception of music?
3. What aesthetically relevant properties do musical works have, and why?
4. What is a musical genre? How do genre categories operate and enter into evaluative discourses? What is their function?
5. What is a performance, what is its relationship to musical works? What is an improvisation? (x)

Lewis rejects the common practice of using hypothetical examples to test abstract answers to these sorts of questions. Instead, he draws his examples from avant-garde jazz. Developing and testing concepts from an improvisation-based perspective rather than a composition perspective challenges the traditional European score-based assumptions and biases of the philosophy of music. Lewis embraces George Lewis's (no relation) concept of Afrological music to describe a wide range of work based in the African diaspora emphasizing improvisation and the performers' individual histories and personalities. The examples chosen are themselves experimental; they thematize the philosophical questions at hand, so Lewis's work is explication as much as application.

The first chapter addresses the first question, on the identity and authorship of works, through flutist James Newton's lawsuit against the Beastie Boys for their use of a sample from his solo recording "Choir" on their song "Pass the Mic." Newton's label ECM had licensed the Beasties' use of the recording, but Newton argued that the sample violated his right as composer. The notation for the introduction to "Choir" consists of this particular flute multiphonic and instructions for the performer to explore the interactions of the sung and fingered pitches. Newton argued that the sample in question represented his unique compositional decisions and thus required permission from him as composer as well as from the owners of the copyright on the specific recording, but the court ruled in favor of the Beasties on the basis that that it was simply a combination of notes and couldn't be a composition any more than any other single chord voicing or instrumental technique. This example provides a provocative means of approaching distinctions between composition, performance, score, and recording; questioning traditional holistic concepts of the musical work in which meaning and identity depend on the complete structure; and highlighting some of the economic, legal, and racial complexity of the music business.

The second chapter addresses the question of subjectivity using the Voyager software created by George Lewis as an example. Voyager selects and produces sounds in relation to audio input. It can interact in real time with human improvisers and has passed a version of the Turing test, convincing expert listeners they were hearing a recording of two people rather than a person and a computer. Is Voyager a musical subject? Can it be an Afrological one? The argument proceeds through several theories of the self and of expression in music.

Chapter three uses John Coltrane's multiple versions of the Rogers and Hammerstein song "My Favorite Things" to discuss the identity of musical works. Coltrane's popular 1960 recording all but eliminated the chord changes of the original and replaced the original waltz feel with a driving 6/8, and his later versions increasingly left the meter and tonal center entirely. Are they all performances of "My Favorite Things"? For Lewis, the identity of works containing improvisation is continually being produced through performers' intentions and listeners' understandings.

The penultimate chapter considers genre using three albums recorded in Paris during a flurry of activity in August 1969, when a corps of touring and expatriate African American artists created the bulk of the BYG-Actuel Records catalog: The Art Ensemble of Chicago's *Message to Our Folks*, Archie Shepp's *Blasé* (featuring Jeanne Lee), and *Silence* by Anthony Braxton, Leo Smith, and Leroy Jenkins. Lewis argues genre is essential for establishing interpretative and evaluative criteria, briefly comparing Taylor Swift's fans, who expect her to always perform a song in close to its recorded form, to those of the Grateful Dead, who expect loose extended improvisational reinterpretations.

The Art Ensemble and Shepp/Lee albums overtly play with genres. The Art Ensemble's unorthodox version of Charlie Parker's "Dexterity" is followed by the parodic "Rock Out," asking the listener to think differently about bebop, rock and, reflexively, the Art Ensemble's own music in light of these works, while Lee's commanding performances of a blues, a gospel song, a Duke Ellington ballad, and the titular free jazz original critique the gender politics typical of those genres and their settings. The title piece of the Braxton/Smith/Jenkins LP, composed by Smith, is read as a claim by these three young Black men from Chicago to be considered as peers of John Cage (composer of the notorious "silent" piece 4'33" and whose first book was entitled *Silence*), as well as both a critique of and an intervention in the European-American experimental lineage he represents (the "Eurological" contra the "Afrological"). Lewis briefly contrasts these signifyin(g) performances to John Zorn's use of pastiche in pieces like "Spillane," in which references only represent the act of reference.

Finally, Lewis returns to Coltrane's "My Favorite Things" to discuss when and how a performance is a representation of a work, and how improvisations can be works if they are not instances of an already existing composition.

The philosophy of music is a very specific niche. Readers with a general philosophy background will not find many familiar names here, but Lewis ably and accessibly handles this complex literature. The musical texts considered are well-matched to the concepts they are used to explain, test, and refine. However, Lewis is clear that this is not a musicological work. When he discusses the Art Ensemble of Chicago, he specifically directs the reader to Paul Steinbeck's *Message to Our Folks* for history, biography, and music analysis. The philosophical work is primary and, while Lewis grounds it in Afrological music, discussions of the music are secondary. The music is there to provide examples, not to serve as the focus. I found this somewhat frustrating because, apart from Coltrane, relatively little is written about these artists. Journalism aside, there is barely a handful of texts on James Newton, Archie Shepp, Jeanne

Lee, the Art Ensemble, Wadada Leo Smith, or George Lewis. While jazz studies includes a long history of uncritical and undertheorized biographies, discographies, and formal analyses which current scholars are justly attempting to problematize and move past, Jeanne Lee has passed away, as have three of the five core members of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, and the basic work of gathering oral histories, archives, etc. from artists who began working in the 1960s is becoming urgent. It seems odd for these artists to appear as philosophical case studies before their lives and music have received much scholarly attention. Lewis himself has published an article on Lee, with a book forthcoming, and credit is due to projects such as the Oral History of American Music, UCLA's Beyond Central, and the Smithsonian Jazz Oral History Program for generating primary sources (see E. Lewis, "This Ain't a Hate Thing").

The categories of the Afrological and Eurological, presented by George Lewis in several much-anthologized and cited essays, have become commonplace without stimulating as much discussion as they deserve (G. Lewis, "Gittin' to Know Y'all"; "Improvised Music After 1950"). George Lewis is adamant that they are not essentialist or binary, but in some hands they can be a vehicle to reintroduce simplistic oppositions of Black/white, USA/Europe, improvisation/composition, and so on. This is ironic since George Lewis's own music—and that of many of his regular collaborators, including every artist discussed by Eric Lewis (except John Coltrane and the Beastie Boys), plus Muhal Richard Abrams, Anthony Davis, Derek Bailey, Steve Lacy, Musica Elettronica Viva, and the Instant Composers Pool—complicates all these divisions. In *Intents and Purposes*, the examples from both experimental/improvisational and popular music offer opportunities to trouble our notions of the Afrological/Eurological. Eric Lewis notes that the jazz community largely backed James Newton's suit against the Beastie Boys, seeing him as a creative Black artist taken advantage of by a group of white musicians who were getting rich by performing in a Black genre, part of a long history of such exploitation by the white music industry, while popular music fans and scholars saw it as one in a series of sampling lawsuits which threatened common practices in rap production. Are DJ-ing and sampling also Afrological? Do they become less so when done by the Beastie Boys' white producers Rick Rubin and the Dust Brothers? The current system of intellectual property law, focused on scores as the essential form of composition, melody as the key element of music, and recordings as work for hire, does not accommodate structured improvisation, sample-based work, or many other varieties of Afrological or Eurological experimentalism (G. Lewis, "Improvised Music," 220). Ironically, since the suit, Newton's career has moved away from performance towards more conventionally scored music, created and released in the traditional European classical paradigm, away from either experimental stream.

The primary criterion of the Afrological in *Intents and Purposes* is the centrality of the personal narrative and intent of the artist. However, for readers coming from a literary theory background, appeals to authorial intent are problematic, evoking the "intentional fallacy" from New Criticism or the structuralist "death of the author." While texts are not autonomous, it is risky to expect specific extratextual knowledge from the listener. A listener finding Coltrane recordings of "My Favorite Things" online will not even have the original liner notes, much less any other particular material on what happened to Coltrane, jazz, and the world between 1960 and 1966. While Lewis is concerned with ontology rather than semiotics, he regularly introduces questions of the meaning of texts, not only their being.

Lewis's discussion of the Beastie Boys suggests several further unexplored routes. First, while the works selected from the Black avant-garde clearly illustrate the issues at hand and often seem to explicitly thematize them, such as the Art Ensemble and Shepp/Lee albums' genre play, one could find equally provocative examples from smooth jazz. Commercialism is also a form of limit-work. Is XL's 4/4 rendition of "Take Five" still "Take Five"? Does a performance of a pop

ballad, which uses the identical arrangement but replaces the vocal melody with soprano sax, then become jazz? How much pitch correction and rhythmic quantization can be applied to a human performance before it is no longer a human performance? While many of us in jazz studies are drawn to the avant-garde as scholars, listeners, and performers, the discipline can also support a “poptimist” wing, looking at jazz as popular culture and as a commercial product (see “Beyond Genre Program”; Rosen; Porter).

Second, while Newton did not mention the Beastie Boys’ lyrics in his suit, he complained about them in interviews, and about the use of “Pass the Mic” in a *Beavis and Butthead* episode, citing his religious beliefs (Sheridan). While the words to “Pass the Mic” are completely benign, it was the lead single from their third LP, and the first two albums had contained plenty of lyrical tales of excess. Relationships between words and music are an area of the philosophy of music which Lewis does not engage, although the majority of his examples are either performances with vocals or instrumental versions of songs best known as vocal performances (e.g., “My Favorite Things”). It is much easier to talk about intent and meaning in words than sound, but interpretation of works is ultimately tangential to Lewis’s project, although the works chosen and his interesting use of them are what will draw most jazz studies readers to this book and keep us engaged.

Returning to the Newton case could have also been productive in the discussion of genre and pastiche. Some uses of sampling are meant to create dialogue with the source, much as the Coltrane, Shepp/Lee, Art Ensemble, and Braxton/Smith/Jenkins works Lewis discusses signify upon texts from John Cage to Rogers and Hammerstein. For example, the Beastie Boys’ use of drum loops from Beatles and Led Zeppelin records on *Paul’s Boutique* arguably thematizes their own whiteness and the boundaries of hip-hop. Some samples, such as the “Apache” and “Impeach the President” beats, are so ubiquitous that their referents are not the original artists but rather the canon of records which have sampled them. In contrast, the Newton sample surely originally eluded recognition by all but a handful of listeners and now, if recognized, likely evokes his lawsuit rather than his original recording.

Finally, the discussion of intellectual property law in the first chapter could have been more fully developed as a through-line. It is in this legal field that the abstractions of the philosophy of music become material and consequential. If I published a transcription of Rashied Ali’s drumming on John Coltrane’s 1966 *Live in Japan* rendition of “My Favorite Things” or released a recording of a performance of this transcription by a contemporary drummer, the composer credit and accompanying royalties would go to Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein III, not Ali or Coltrane, even though Rogers did not compose a single note Ali played and Hammerstein’s lyrics were not sung. Judges, not philosophers, would decide who received the minuscule proceeds from my ill-advised project.

*Intents and Purposes* is a provocative intervention in both jazz studies and the philosophy of music, challenging jazz scholars to engage philosophical questions and philosophers to take improvisation and African-American creative music seriously.

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