

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Max Roach and M'Boom: Diasporic Soundings in American Percussion Music

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in

Contemporary Music Performance

by

Sean Leah Bowden

Committee in charge:

Professor Steven Schick, Chair
Professor Amy Cimini
Professor Anthony Davis
Professor Stephanie Richards
Professor Emily Roxworthy

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The Dissertation of Sean Leah Bowden is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California San Diego

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VITA

2006-2010 Percussionist, William Winant Percussion Group

2010 Bachelor of Music, University of California Santa Cruz
Jazz Studies Minor

2010-2012 Research Assistant, University of California San Diego

2010-2017 Percussionist, red fish blue fish

2012 Master of Arts, University of California San Diego

2012-2017 Teaching Assistant/ Lecturer, University of California San Diego

2018 Board Chair, Voices of Our City Choir

2018 Doctor of Musical Arts, University of California, San Diego

PUBLICATIONS

“Grooves for Our City: Music and Mutual Aid on the Streets of San Diego,” *Tom Tom Magazine* 31, (Summer 2017): 57-59.

“Conversations in an Amsterdam Coffee Shop: With Rhythm Turner of Black Market III,” *Tom Tom Magazine* 28, (Winter 2016): 32-33.

“The Allure of Collective Effort: From Drumline to Hollywood,” *Tom Tom Magazine* 23, (Fall 2015): 43-45.

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Music

Studies in Percussion
Professor Steven Schick

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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by

Sean Leah Bowden

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Professor Steven Schick, Chair

Max Roach founded M'Boom as a New York City based musical collective in 1970 with an open-ended idea to explore the full range of sound offered by percussion instruments. Additionally, like many of Roach's musical projects, the ensemble was also

conceived as a social and political project. This dissertation explores the aesthetics, politics and broader theoretical and historical contexts surrounding and leading to the percussion ensemble M'Boom.

In 2015 I began compiling source materials on M'Boom, including press releases, record reviews, audio recordings and other documents. I conducted interviews with surviving members of the ensemble including Joe Chambers, Warren Smith, and Eli Fountain. I also helped coordinate the archiving of previously uncirculated M'Boom percussion scores at UC San Diego's Geisel Library, and led a performance of selected compositions with an 8-piece ensemble. In this dissertation I draw from these materials, as well as from a number of more generally relevant scholarly sources.

INTRODUCTION

Max Roach (1924-2007) was one of the most important drummers in the history of American music. His early contributions to bebop opened up rhythmic and creative possibilities for the drum set, paving the way for many styles of music to come. Always seeking new ideas and fresh sounds, he was active as a percussionist, composer and bandleader throughout six decades of cultural and musical change.

Max also framed music-as-politics from early in his career. Through his substantial contributions to bebop in the 1940s, and hard bop in the 1950s, he inspired drummers to think beyond what he saw as frustratingly subservient musical roles left over from the swing era.¹ Roach developed a polyrhythmic, contrapuntal drumming style through which he could “[engage] his fellow musicians in an open-ended conversation while maintaining a rock-solid pulse.”² Roach was also concerned with the relationship between music, musicians and business, and in 1952 he helped Charles Mingus and Celia Zaentz to establish *Debut*, one of the first musician-operated record companies.³ In 1960 Max Roach, Abbey Lincoln and others released *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite*, foreshadowing a proliferation of jazz albums that would directly address racial and political issues through the music. *We Insist!* was immediately hailed by the NAACP as a deeply relevant political work, and it would later be seen as a landmark of the early Civil Rights Movement.

Many people consider the 1960s to be Max Roach’s most political period. In 1961 (just months after the first sit-ins had taken place in the South) Roach declared, “I will never

¹ Scott K. Fish, “Innovators of the Jazz Drum Set: Part II,” *Percussive Notes*, December 1994, 24.

² Peter Keepnews, “Max Roach, Master of Modern Jazz, Dies at 83,” *The New York Times*, August 17, 2007, Sec. A.

³ *Ibid.*

again play anything that does not have social significance. We American jazz musicians of African descent have proved beyond all doubt that we are master musicians of our instruments. Now what we have to do is employ our skill to tell the dramatic story of our people and what we've been through."⁴ Max's comments suggest that even as jazz was becoming accepted as high art, the perspectives and interests of the people who generated it were dropping from view. Musical innovation was showing itself to be not enough on its own—Roach called for, and had just delivered, music with a clear message to bring these histories and subjectivities to the foreground.

In the broader context of Roach's career, though, we see that there are many ways to be political. In his music he was equally invested in a coded politics of representation and signification, with an understanding that instrumentalists inscribe social messages into their sound. His studio album *Drums Unlimited* (a 1966 release) represented a new phase in Max's efforts to increase the cultural value of jazz drumming. Three of the album's six tracks, roughly half of the content, are solo performances—it's just Max and his drums. This was unusual in jazz recordings at the time, especially when the drum solo formed its own track. Critics praised the album for Roach's melodic inventiveness, noting that he demonstrated the sophisticated degree to which the drums can tell a story. Max would eventually work to validate as high art everything from the drum set to the full range of percussion instruments to the entirety of the "jazz" continuum.⁵ As part of this process of validation he would employ language more commonly associated with Euro-American conceptions of high art, even describing the solo tracks on *Drums Unlimited* as "the creation of organized sound."⁶

⁴ "Interview with Max Roach," *DownBeat*, Summer 1961.

⁵ Steve Dollar, "Percussion Discussion: Jazzman Wields One Diverse Pair of Sticks," *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, n.d., sec. Living; Section D.

⁶ Tony Bravos, "Drum Set Forum: An Interview with Max Roach," *Percussive Notes*, June 1982, 40.

By the end of the 1960s Roach had begun frequenting percussionist Warren Smith's Studio WIS loft in Harlem, where Smith maintained a complete setup of orchestral percussion instruments and countless idiophones and membranophones from throughout the world. Many prominent "jazz" drummers of the time had received "classical" percussion training at universities in the United States, and Roach was no exception.⁷ Max had the idea to develop those skills toward the creation of a percussion ensemble "centered in the concept of African-American Classical Music (commonly called 'Jazz')." ⁸ Roach would need his own ensemble, so he recruited five of his junior colleagues including Smith, Roy Brooks, Joe Chambers, Omar Clay, and Freddie Waits.

Meanwhile, as the 1960s came to a close, small ensemble jazz was no longer soliciting the same kinds of record deals that it had in the preceding decades.⁹ In an industry that already prioritized profitability over cultural value, the increasing financial constraints of the period had a direct impact on artists' creative output. Industry executives were suggesting that musicians fuse pop and jazz styles as a way to increase revenue.¹⁰ Roach, who would maintain decades later that there was no difference between jazz and hip hop,¹¹ was by no means a cultural conservative. However he felt that the industry's demands for "fusion" represented a level of commodification of music that was unacceptable to him.

⁷ Roach held a bachelor's degree from the Manhattan School of Music.

⁸ Leah Bowden, "Interviews with Warren Smith," phone and email, February 2016-May 2018.

⁹ Richard Harrington, "Max Roach's Drum Roles," *The Washington Post*, June 8, 1985, G1.

¹⁰ W.A. Brower, "An Interview with Legendary Jazz Musician Max Roach," *Howard University Jazz Oral History Project*, Washington, D.C., video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qwUt1aROu4>, 14:15.

¹¹ James T. Jones, "Roach's 'To the Max' Drums up His Creativity," *USA TODAY*, October 16, 1991, Final edition, sec. Life.

Although Roach's initial response to the market shift had been to record an album of jazz spirituals (presenting that as "fusion" was in itself a political statement), he would ultimately circumvent the demands of the commercial recording industry by accepting a teaching job at the University of Massachusetts in 1972.¹² This arrangement afforded him the financial stability and institutional support to develop his ideas through whatever projects he desired.

More broadly, the constraints and decline of the jazz industry did not put an end to the creative efforts of the musicians. The timing of M'Boom—a highly ambitious endeavor—was in fact prescient. 1970s New York in retrospect can be seen as the mainstage for a dramatic inflection point in global and U.S. economic and cultural power. The myriad economic and political changes and crises reached tipping points that also left openings, both physical and abstract. Abandoned buildings and neglected neighborhoods were colonized by the various "loft scenes," and served as hidden hotbeds of artistic, social and political experimentation.

Much like the musicians from the preceding decade, the loft jazz scene, as well as the broader African American avant-garde movements, were engaged with and critical participants within the rapidly changing and emergent aesthetic praxis of this period. However, while the period has frequently been cited as part of a "postmodern turn," the discourses and praxis of many African American artists complicates such narratives. Although the work of M'Boom and its individual members might suggest the developing eclecticism, pastiche, and vernacular interests of postmodern musical forms, it can also be understood as a continuation of the large scale and universalizing projects of modernism. Political and economic changes in the 70s and beyond directly intervene and limit, and later

¹² Harrington, "Drum Roles."

even reframe the musical works under discussion. In this paper I am less concerned with deconstructing or arguing against either postmodernism or postmodernist tendencies and readings of M'Boom and related subjects. Instead, I wish to explore and highlight the ways in which M'Boom, and its members more generally, were deeply invested in modernist and universalizing desires to represent and embody a better (working, overcoming, transcending) world in the broadest sense through a critical musical praxis, and as such is well situated within what Paul Gilroy refers to generally as “the stubborn modernity of these black musical forms.”¹³

M'Boom served as an important space for a new generation of percussionists, in which to incubate ideas and more fully develop musicianship. Although founded by Max Roach, the ensemble featured widely distributed authorship and performance roles and considered itself to be a musical collective. Together, M'Boom's members produced a unique and cohesive library of percussion music integrating elements from African and world music, avant-garde classical music and jazz. Instead of writing lyrics, the percussionists set out to encode a politics of diversity and radical inclusiveness into the sound itself. The musicians of M'Boom dreamed of using music to build bridges of solidarity across the African diaspora. More specifically, they were thinking about the challenges of integration in the United States, decolonization on the African continent and resistance to Apartheid in South Africa. Their interpretation of “world music,” which had not yet become a commercial genre, sought to appeal to people of all cultures, although it was rooted in an African American sensibility and a diasporic African identity. Fittingly, the word “M'Boom” is both an onomatopoeic term

¹³ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Harvard University Press, 2002), 74.

referencing percussive sounds and the name of a secret order of drummers in Northern Senegal.¹⁴

Max Roach directed M'Boom for approximately 25 years. During this period, they made two European tours (1978 and 1995) and traveled to venues and festivals across the United States with hundreds of instruments in tow. Their U.S. appearances included a concert at the Cathedral of St. John (1981), the Capital City Jazz Festival (1985), a residency at Blue Note in 1987, and the 1994 Monterey Jazz Festival among many other events. They released several studio albums including *Re: Percussion* (1973), *Max Roach's M'Boom* (1979), *Collage* (1984), and *Live at S.O.B.'s – New York* (1992).

In order to understand M'Boom we need to look closely at the settings that produced it. These contexts include Max Roach's mindset at the beginning of the 1960s, when his political ideas were most clearly and potently reflected in the music, and the New York loft scene of the 1970s, where the physical spaces and informal communities made complex and long-term collaborations possible. The following sections cover these topics respectively, and the third chapter looks directly at M'Boom through its music and the words of Max Roach, Warren Smith, Joe Chambers and Eli Fountain. Finally, an index includes the full text interviews, comments on a recent concert and a glossary of terms.

¹⁴ "M'Boom," Joe Chambers – Composer, accessed May 27, 2018, http://www.josephachambers.com/?page_id=222.

JAZZ DRUMMING: POSSIBILITIES, LIMITATIONS

The drum set is an American Innovation. It's the only percussion instrument that I know of in the world where you have to play it with all four limbs. It also exemplifies, in some way, the sociological and racial makeup of this country. The cymbals come from the Middle East, the side drums that we call tom-toms simulate the sounds that came of drums from Africa as well as the American Indian, the bass drum and snare drum are decidedly European, and somehow they got all together and had us play with both feet and both hands.

—Max Roach¹⁵

Throughout his life Max Roach thought penetratingly about the drum set and the role of drumming within jazz. Roach's views on the topic pivot between a celebration of possibilities and a critique of limitations. On the one hand, Roach viewed the drum set as a unique multiracial and multicultural assemblage, powered by the creative freedom and ingenuity of African Americans. On the other hand, Max struggled with the racialized and racializing role that drums and rhythm played within jazz and the music industry. The racist primitive/ modern discourses and tensions that surrounded much of jazz and African American art forms were particularly concentrated upon the role of the drummer and the music's rhythmic elements.

Early recording technology limitations, economic inequalities in the recording industry and racial stereotypes imposed severe limitations upon jazz musicians, and particularly drummers. The modern, angular, loud and virtuosic bebop drumming style pioneered by drummers like Max threw down the gauntlet and directly exposed and challenged cultural

¹⁵ Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, "A Masterclass with Max Roach," filmed in 1991, North Carolina Public Television, video <https://monkinstitute.org/video/a-master-class-with-max-roach-1991/>.

and technological limitations. Yet for Max, (somewhat tongue in cheek), “the horns were [still] the front line and the drummer was like the n****r of the band.”¹⁶

The 1950s and early 1960s were marked by a revolution in commercial recording methods, giving rise to “high fidelity” sound and stereo recording. These recording technologies afforded and reaped profit from an infatuation with the dynamic and rich timbral world of percussion. However, while these technological developments opened up new sonic space, all too frequently the end product served to capture and amplify percussion and rhythm within a stereotypical and reified framework of race and gender symbolism (Les Baxter’s representative 1957 exotica album *Skins! Bongo Party with Les Baxter*, leaves little to unpack in that regard).

Max’s own 1959 album with Buddy Rich, *Rich versus Roach*, is illuminative of the challenges and limitations facing jazz drummers within the confines of the recording industry and larger American cultural discourse. Although *Rich versus Roach* was made possible by the new recording technologies and featured a talented pool of musicians, the interests of the music industry in promoting essentialist notions of drums and rhythm results in a novelty album that consists of virtuosic and macho battles between two drummers (one White, one Black) and simply inverts the jazz band hierarchy, with their respective bands relegated to the background (and once again, White versus Black).

For African American jazz musicians the political, technological and economic dictates were inseparably linked with the formal sonic constraints imposed on their creativity. Max Roach grasped this crucial link both generally but also specifically regarding the role of drums and percussion. For Max this was not merely a point of self-interest, but rather also a

¹⁶ Scott K. Fish, “Max Roach,” *Modern Drummer*, Accessed January 1, 2018, <https://www.moderndrummer.com/article/june-1982-max-roach/>.

point of contention with dominant Eurocentric narratives of musical innovation. For 20th century music “the reason that there is a change is *rhythmic things*. It has nothing to do with the horns! They’re still going from C to F, or just doing an A minor mode or whatever it is! This is where they are basically. So, the *rhythm* changed!”¹⁷

Polemics aside, Max Roach had by the end of the 50s developed an intriguing group of ideas that raised many questions about the importance and role of percussion and rhythm to 20th century American music. The following decade would see many more musicians rigorously exploring subjects and challenging conventions that Roach was preoccupied with.

Spatial Eruptions in the Space Age

...it matters a great deal whether modern racial slavery is identified as a repository in which the consciousness of traditional culture could be secreted and condensed into ever more potent forms or seen alternatively as the site of premodern tradition’s most comprehensive erasure. Similarly, it matters whether modern rationality sanctions or subverts the unfreedoms of the slave system it helped to sanction. These problems are even more pronounced because arguments over where the line between past and present can be drawn continue to be a source of fundamental and valuable tensions inside black cultures. The idea of diaspora might itself be understood as a response to these promptings—a utopian eruption of space into the linear temporal order of modern black politics which enforces the obligation that space and time must be considered relationally in their interarticulation with racialised being.¹⁸

The distillation of the meanings of slavery as a marker of absence and erasure is frequently cited by both Paul Gilroy and Max Roach¹⁹ as a particularly “potent form” of Black

¹⁷ Fish, “Max Roach.”

¹⁸ Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 197-198.

¹⁹ Jomo Cheatham, “Max Roach Part-2,” Filmed May 30, 1993, in Chicago, IL, video, 1:18, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6MHFPYLTG8>.

consciousness, and a driver of experimentation and discourses of freedom in Black modern art forms. Similar to how the Frankfurt school's reflections upon the Jewish experience in Europe challenges accepted narratives of European enlightenment, rationality and progress, Black modernist thinkers challenge America's enlightenment narratives.

More specifically, Black modernity and modernism inverts and recontextualizes a number of crucial theses. First, it turns the European narrative of the proper modern subject on its head, arguing that slavery and colonialism lay the foundation for the properly modern subject. This re-centers discourse around African American, and Black Atlantic subjectivity. Whereas European modernism is primarily concerned (if not content) with appealing to a highly educated and "refined" audience, Black forms of modernism on the other hand were more tightly bound to the collective experiences of erasure and absence that formed the Black, modern subject. This structural linkage to the racialized masses would dovetail with Marxist objectives for a mass appeal to class (as well as concomitant critiques of European "high modernism").

Secondly, in contrast to European and White American modernisms, Black modernism does not treat the past as the dead weight of outmoded tradition to be tossed aside in search of the new. In as much as ideals of *tabula rasa* and realities of violent erasure coexist, Black modernity works in temporally ambivalent and seemingly contradictory ways. Absent the conservatism of nostalgia, the past can function much like the future—a hidden frontier for exploration—a repository of creative ideas and experimental methods.

Third, as Gilroy observes, "the power and significance of music within the Black Atlantic [has] grown in inverse proportion to the limited expressive power of language."²⁰ Max

²⁰ Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 74.

Roach also frequently draws attention to the importance of musical forms of expression in relation to slavery's repression and erasure of the African languages and cultures of African Americans.²¹ The hegemony and rationality of language and semiotics to modern systems of communication is turned on its head by the universalizing power and effectiveness of Black musical forms of communication.

Lastly, Black modernity's diasporic networks challenge the view of modernity as a temporally dominated spatio-temporal construct. If the goal in (capitalist driven) modernity is the annihilation of space through time, the paradox is that "spatial barriers can be reduced only through the production of particular spaces (railways, highways, airports, teleports, etc.). Furthermore, a spatial rationalization of production, circulation, and consumption at one point in time may not be suited to the further accumulation of capital at a later point in time."²² Harvey's spatial doubling of capitalism's temporal drive points to the way diasporas double, and come to challenge, the linear, geographically fixed narratives of capital-driven modernity.

From early in the work of Max Roach this distinctly spatial analysis of modernity is already present. Recall that the modern drum set struck Max as a meeting point of distinct cultures and geographies, as much as a technology of (more efficient) time keeping. The 1960s would see Max and many other musicians directly challenge the spatial-temporal power constructs of Europe and White America with a counter-modernism informed by the Black Atlantic and, more broadly, aligned with the left-wing anti-colonial movements sweeping across the global South.

²¹ Cheatham, "Part-2."

²² David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1990): 232.

Released the year following Ornette Coleman's 1959 ultra modernist revolution (*The Shape of Jazz to Come*), Randy Weston's *Uhuru Afrika* and Roach's *We Insist* began 1960s jazz with precisely the sort of unsettling spatio-temporal eruptions Gilroy draws attention to. Both albums were highly ambitious, conceptual works that helped orient the musical and political work of artists in the coming decades by re-centering universalist modernist discourses of freedom, change and progress through the diasporic networks of the Black Atlantic.

Uhuru Afrika, on which Max Roach also played, was innovative in how it explored, connected and incorporated pan-African themes into Jazz. Most obvious was the inclusion and collaboration with Babatunde Olatunji, a Nigerian academic, activist and percussionist, as well as the Tanzanian Tuntemeke Sanga as narrator. While influences and collaborations with Afro-Caribbean musicians were commonplace and well established by this time, collaborations between Jazz musicians and African musicians were decidedly novel.

The intro and the first movement lay down a bold, Afrocentric call for freedom, alternating between Swahili and English and driven by 12/8 West African rhythms. The second movement, *African Lady*, was dedicated to African American women and inspired by Weston's mother, who supported him and their family through long hours of low paid, menial labor.²³ The music and lyrics refocus the themes of freedom and liberation onto a feminine imaginary, valorizing and incorporating a Black female ideal into a forward-looking, utopian celebration of "African dawn." The third movement features an extended percussion break, blending the American drum set with Afro-Cuban congas, and African instruments including the gankogui, mbira, and jawbone. The fourth movement is fittingly an ambitious, re-

²³ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Africa Speaks, America Answers: Modern Jazz in Revolutionary Times* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 59.

purposed blues. As Max Roach does in *We Insist!*, and for Black modernists more generally, the blues asserts itself less as an essentializing pre-modern marker of Black authenticity, and more as an anti-modern²⁴ tool and signifier of the power of (Black) musical form. The functionality and suitability of the blues form serves both as a reminder of the “changing same” of modernity as well as a universal and utilitarian form for experimentation and narration; its continual relevance asserts a form of Black consciousness that is at once universalizing and diasporic.

The orchestration throughout *Uhuru Afrika* is innovative, complex and ambitious, featuring a six-piece percussion section, two basses and a total of 24 musicians. Arranger Melba Liston explores registral and timbral extremes, densely layered, interlocking call and responses between horns and percussion, and later in the album, rich, Ellington-inspired harmonic textures. As Robin Kelley observes:

In Liston, Weston found not only a brilliant arranger who understood his vision of combining jazz, blues, and folk idioms, but one who shared his passion for music of Africa and the diaspora. Weston recalled how they would get together and listen to tapes of Congolese traditional music that, to their ears, sounded like “hillbilly music, the blues, modern music” combined.²⁵

Melba’s inclusion and role in the project was materially central. It also raises uncomfortable questions about the overlooked roles that both women and conceptions of femininity played in avant-garde and modernist music.²⁶ Likewise, *We Insist!* was marked by a similarly intense collaboration between Max Roach and vocalist Abbey Lincoln.

²⁴ See glossary for definition.

²⁵ Kelley, *Africa Speaks, America Answers*, 54.

²⁶ For example, what role does gender integration (or lack thereof) play in music that addresses race and class issues? How did misogynist connotations of Black masculinity and Black resistance/ liberation politics limit the participation of women in political jazz?

Considered side by side, Max Roach's *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite* forms a satisfying dialogue with *Uhuru Afrika*. This dialogue would prove both internally important to liberation struggles in America and abroad, as well as challenging and discomfiting for White audiences. As Weston commented on his album, "they [Whites] would hear it once and they wouldn't want to hear it anymore."²⁷

Difficult as Weston's music and message may have been for White audiences, *We Insist!*'s decidedly militant tone would generate even more of a backlash. Initially a collaboration with civil rights activist and lyricist Oscar Brown, Roach's political views, which aligned more with Malcolm X, led to a split between the two shortly before the album was recorded. In addition to its militant and at times bitter tone, Max resisted Brown's preference for a temporal arc beginning with a pre-modern Africa. Instead, Roach insisted that the suite begin with slavery, progressing geographically and temporally from the struggles of Black America, towards a pan-African and diasporic vision of Black struggle.²⁸

Both Weston and Roach's diasporic modernities challenge and complicate the spatio-temporal grid of White modernity. Weston does this in part by positioning Africa as a utopian *future*. Max accomplishes this with a similar approach, but he further re-centers the discourse of modernity in two interrelated ways: first, by explicitly highlighting America's dystopian history of racial oppression and ending with a haunting dedication to the ongoing, contemporary freedom struggle in South Africa. And second, by incorporating this modernist narrative of Black freedom struggles directly and in multiple ways into the formal, sonic developments of avant-garde music.

²⁷ Kelley, *Africa Speaks*, 54.

²⁸ Ingrid Monson, *Revisited! The Freedom Now Suite*, *Jazz Times*, September 1, 2001, <https://jazztimes.com/features/revisited-the-freedom-now-suite/>.

Attempts at fusing radical political narratives with formal innovations had long confounded politically-minded European modernisms.²⁹ In the context of Roach's views on Black versus European musical forms this difficulty seems rather predictable, and the appropriateness of "jazz"³⁰ to the task rather undeniable. Roach saw classical music as fundamentally backwards; imperialist in its social relations (he referred to orchestral musicians as "serfs") and unavoidably conservative. Roach would instead stress the democratic structures of jazz and improvisation and the necessarily experimental nature of African American culture as the underlying conditions for realizing his musical vision.³¹ So convinced, after releasing the album, Roach famously stated that he would never play music again unless it had a political significance.³²

The best known (and most controversial) example from the album of integrating sound and narrative is the vocal screaming from the "protest" section of *Tryptich*. The middle section of *Tryptich* involves Roach on drums accompanying Abbey Lincoln alone as she screams, uncannily crossing back and forth between musically contoured cries and more literal sounding screams. As Roach stated, the goal was "to take outside sounds like screams and hollers and create some kind of musical texture with it and that is what we were after with the whole piece."³³

At the same time that Max Roach was incorporating these outside sounds, he was also radically stripping away harmonic, melodic and rhythmic conventions, leading Coltrane

²⁹ An oft-cited example being the debates surrounding serialism and whether it effectively encodes a message of equality into the sound.

³⁰ As later discussed, Roach famously hated the term jazz.

³¹ Jomo Cheatham, "Max Roach-Part-4-Jazz and European Classical Music," May 30, 1993, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWiqHTIHxd8>.

³² Keepnews, "Master of Modern Jazz."

³³ Brower, "Legendary Max Roach," 19:20.

to tell Max that the piece validated his belief that “you can just deal with the sound itself.”³⁴ In this way Abbey Lincoln’s screaming is also an important link between the artistry of Ornette’s noisy saxophone “screams” on *The Shape of Jazz to Come*, and the coming era of “Free Jazz” that radically moved away from harmonic, melodic and rhythmic conventions and increasingly incorporated abrasive and noisy elements. On the one hand, Abbey was making a literal (non-abstract), and explicitly extra-musical statement. And on the other hand, simultaneously and paradoxically, as a musical gesture the screaming was a formative contribution in the abstracting musical innovations of Free Jazz.

Like Ornette Coleman’s *The Shape of Jazz to Come*, Max’s decision to eliminate piano³⁵ from the ensemble was significant in that it freed the musicians from restrictive harmonic language, the instrument’s middle-ground role, mediating between rhythm section and soloist. The freed middle ground heightened attention to details and interplay between band members, opening up space to experiment and intensifying the sense of drama and dialogue between individual and group.

The suite opens with Abbey Lincoln accompanying herself alone on tambourine in free time. Her abrasive, aggressive vocal delivery is then answered by dissonant horns and the rhythm section, which enter playing a methodical blues in 5/4 time signature. Following on the heels of Brubeck’s time signature experiments on the 1959 album *Time Out*, the use of 5/4 by Roach for three out of the six tracks is an intriguing feature of the album. The uses of 5/4 on the first and third tracks are distinctly different from Brubeck’s experiments however. More than acting as an abstract expansion and development of a musical language, Max’s rhythmic innovations again serve a double function in making his narrative

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Arguably the most symbolically European instrument.

diegetically audible, suggesting, like with Abbey's screaming, a unity between sound and message.

The opening track *Driva Man* is a compound meter of 1 plus 4, where the downbeat integrates itself into the musical form, violently punctuating and interrupting a brutally repetitive 4/4 swing ride cymbal pattern. This effect suggests the sound of a slave owner's whip punctuating repetitious toil and labor. Like Nat Adderly's rhythmically iconic motif in *Work Song*, also released the same year, the innovations re-articulate and signify on the sonic embeddedness and encoding into Black music of the experience of slavery.³⁶

Likewise in *Triptych: Prayer, Protest, Peace*, Roach makes formally audible a subversive notion of peace with a limping 2 plus 3 compound meter played with military squareness on the snare and paired with Abbey Lincoln's breathy vocalizations. Roach derives this concept of peace from Black spirituals (like the blues, a persistent anti-modernist presence); it is meant to evoke the feeling of exhaustion after a period of total struggle.³⁷

Among the particular discursive links between race and rhythm explored, the connections between Africa and rhythm are signified on to facilitate Roach's own experimentation and creative compositional structure on the penultimate track, *All Africa*. Like with Weston's *Uhuru Afrika*, Olatunji's 12/8 West African rhythms and instruments are selectively featured as part of a musical dialogue, but crucially resistant to any racially essentializing theme. Olatunji enters in an ambiguous manner—out of time and with an uneven, hesitating call and response between hand drums and voice. For the second time in the suite Max makes use of the seemingly innocuous phrase, "they say." Both times the

³⁶ Patrick Jarenwattananon, "A Work Song for Labor Day," *A Blog Supreme (NPR Jazz)*, September 30, 2012, <https://www.npr.org/sections/ablogsupreme/2012/09/03/160411466/a-work-song-for-labor-day>.

³⁷ Brower, "Legendary Max Roach."

phrase is used to highlight the multivalent link between sound and rumor. The first time the phrase explicitly calls into question emancipation (*who* says Blacks are free?). This second time, the phrase allows Roach to signify on the idea of Africa and pre/ modernity: “*they say*” highlights tensions between imagining the drumbeat as distillation of a pre-modern, historically immutable Africa, and the drumbeat as a change driven, modern and diasporic call to rebellion.

Following Abbey Lincoln’s delivery of the lyrics “they say it began with a chant and a hum... [*pause*]... and a Black hand laid on a native drum,” with dramatic effect Olatunji establishes the 12/8 groove and the ensemble enters, with Abbey Lincoln calling out the names of African tribes and Olatunji responding in Yoruba. Following a break, the ensemble transitions into an all-percussion section with featured solos. Most illuminating is Max’s own entrance and solo, which occurs midway through the extended percussion jam. Roach enters abruptly, doubling the percussion section’s 7-beat bell pattern on the bell of his ride cymbal. He then fades out, gradually re-exposing the African bell timbre, and transitions to skins. Roach disengages the strainer on his snare to better integrate his sound as he builds on a series of melodic cross-rhythms. His drum set eventually becomes so well blended with the percussion ensemble that it is difficult to discern from the timbre and rhythmic patterns the end of his solo and the beginning of Olatunji’s.

On the last track of the album, *Tears for Johannesburg*, Roach unleashes a virtuosic 5/4 pattern that can be heard as a parting shot at the White establishment’s investment in the “college jazz” experiments of Brubeck. Max Roach’s interests in percussion and rhythm innovations signify on and seek creative license from multiple narratives of race and rhythm. As Ingrid Monson notes “it would not be the first time that Roach had showed an interest in interracial one-upmanship. He had, after all, recorded Rich Versus Roach with Buddy Rich in

early 1959. Indeed, a sense of interracial competition through music is an important subsidiary dynamic motivating many of the colossal achievements in jazz of this period.”³⁸

This intensely competitive dynamic further contributes to the album’s narratives of modernity and racial struggle.

As in *Uhuru Afrika*, the narrative and temporal arc do not reduce to a stylistic pastiche of eclectic sounds and styles. Instead, the challenging narrative structure and political message of *We Insist!* is driven by Roach’s understanding and synthesis of the formal musical structures developing in avant-garde jazz at the time, in dialogue with the historical significance, structural utility, and encoded modernism of Black music. This concern for and successful unifying of form and content in the compositional process explicitly points to *We Insist!* as an important achievement of politically conscious modernism.

³⁸ Monson, *Revisited! The Freedom Now Suite*.

FREEDOM FROM/ FREEDOM TO: THE MULTIPLE AVANT-GARDES OF 1970s JAZZ

Stanley Crouch—I don't agree with much he says—but he said the real avant-garde was what we were doing on those Blue Note dates [late 60s]. We were very grounded. We could play anything. You can hear the blues, the time changes. Them cats [Free Jazz musicians] couldn't do that; they could only do what they were doing. We were thorough, but we were also stretching out. We were the real avant-garde. But that Blue Note movement was cut off at the pass.

—Joe Chambers³⁹

Many grand narratives of contemporary history include 1970s New York, where deindustrialization, economic downturn, and political paralysis set the stage for a new world order led by an organized financier class that was able to bring the city to its knees.⁴⁰ Likewise, as noted in the introduction, the period is often marked as a cultural turning point from modernism to postmodernism. While the first narrative is broadly substantiated by the economic and social circumstances particular to New York's jazz scene, the question of what exactly constitutes postmodernism praxis and whether the musical forms under discussion can be categorized as developing along such a trajectory is more complex.

The statement by founding M'Boom member Joe Chambers highlights and comments on these two common narratives. First it is sympathetic to a general understanding among jazz musicians that the underlying economic structures in the music industry could no longer well sustain the development of modern jazz (they were "cut off at the pass"). This echoes the grand narrative of the economic downturn and restructuring of the 70s. Secondly, a discussion and point of contention within the avant-garde of the late 60s is raised; the avant-

³⁹ Andy Beta, "Percussion Bitter Sweet: Joe Chambers," *Stop Smiling Magazine*, Issue 34: Jazz, http://www.stopsmilingonline.com/story_detail.php?id=990.

⁴⁰ Adam Curtis, "HyperNormalisation," filmed 2016, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fh2cDKyFdyU>.

garde modernism of Jazz was not simply abandoned but rather internally contested by contrasting approaches and beliefs.

As previously argued, part of the strength of Black forms of modernism lies in the ability to synthesize diverse, critical and seemingly contradictory ideas, a flexibility and utility that Gilroy, borrowing from DuBois, links to a very particular inside/ outside double consciousness. This sets it apart from much of European modernism, but also implicitly challenges postmodernism, which draws its discursive strength by way of contrasting its plurality with that of a monolithic and totalizing modernism. An important component of Black musical forms in the 70s is the very stubborn modernity that continues to drive the work of many jazz musicians, despite the period's widening aesthetic diversity and complexity and the mounting cynicism fueled by large-scale political setbacks and failures. In fact, as Joe Chambers alludes to, the interest and fluency in a wide variety of musical styles and practices, incorporated into diasporic and pan-African identification, fits well within the avant-garde counter-modernity and critical anti-modernity suggested by artists like Max Roach. The conscious linking together of 20th century and so-called world musical styles suggests an interest in unity as much as difference—an encoded universalism searched for across a diasporic spatio-temporal musical terrain.

All of which is to say that instead of pointing to a natural evolution towards postmodernism, one can alternatively ask how these musical styles—from fusion to so-called free jazz to spiritual and world jazz and everything in between—continued to develop in relation to one another and to synthesize large-scale ideals within a framework of the musical form that, to paraphrase Roach, is loosely referred to as “jazz.” In this sense, the proliferation of and complication of styles broadly speaking further substantiated Roach's critical position

with respect to the term “jazz,” and its usefulness (or lack thereof) with respect to the artists under discussion.

As Michael Heller argues in his study of the Loft Jazz scene, much of the large-scale debates within the avant-garde circles of the jazz community can be interpreted as less about asserting a specific musical style and more about questions of freedom—freedom *from* and freedom *to*.⁴¹ George Lewis, in his groundbreaking article *Improvised Music After 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives*, observes this divide between avant-garde European Jazz and American Jazz. European improvisers, in part weighted down by the conservatism of their own musical culture, were generally concerned more with ideas of freedom *from*. However, within the African American avant-garde a strong emphasis in both directions, *to* and *from*, was present.⁴²

Although it's easy enough within this framework to get a sense for where Joe Chamber's positions himself aesthetically, more generally his polemic points to an understanding of modernist discourses and representations of freedom in jazz as a dialectic between contradictory ideas of freedom. This provides a useful framework for understanding the evolution of Max Roach's aesthetics and the work of M'Boom, as well as more generally the artistic and aesthetic turmoil within 1970s Jazz. Max Roach's concern for and disdain of the term Jazz offered a particularly dialectic window into the complexities of the debate:

Duke Ellington to me is one of America's greatest composers and inventors of instrumental music. Charlie Parker exemplifies the kinds of virtuosity that the world has never heard of on that instrument before. Art Blakey—these are not people who I say are jazz musicians. They are inventors, they are architects and they set the pace and everyone else kind of comes behind and they just

⁴¹ Michael Heller, *Loft Jazz: Improvising New York in the 1970s* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

⁴² George Lewis, “Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives,” *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 91-122.

take a little bit of what all these people are doing, and make something out of it and make money out of it—I'm talking about folks of the other persuasion. So jazz doesn't exist... and if it does exist, it's played by Gerry Mulligan and Benny Goodman.⁴³

Both Chamber's and Roach's polemical positions can of course be taken with a grain of salt. Roach is of course partly articulating a fairly common argument—the creativity of “great” musicians engenders a music free from external labels of “style.” What links these “great” musicians is less their shared stylistic traits and fluencies, and more how they fit into a larger, conceptual narrative of creative freedom. If we understand Roach's statement in the context of his original struggles as a musician to carve out the necessary freedom and musical space to allow for creativity, we can see that there is a dialectical relationship between freedom *from* and freedom *to*. This asserts a circular logic, in which it's not quite possible to determine what is of primary concern to “great” artistic creations—freedom *from* or freedom *to*.

There is an implied directional trajectory that echoes common narratives of Black freedom struggles (i.e. first freedom *from* slavery and colonialism) and then freedom *to* (become architects, inventors).⁴⁴ If the ideal is both freedom *from* and freedom *to* coexisting in equilibrium at the same place and time, then the lived, practical reality tends to present situations of imbalance and division that artists, just like everyone else, must negotiate. In fact, when asked later in the interview if he wasn't a musician what he would want to be, Roach responds that actually he would prefer not to be a musician in the first place as there are already enough great Black artists. Instead, he'd rather be an architect as these

⁴³ Jomo Cheatham, “Max Roach-Part-3 ‘Public Schools, Rap Music and Black Americans’ Creativity,” 8:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aVG2bQ4hq9w>.

⁴⁴ On the other hand, Booker T. Washington's strategy of incubating an African American professional and business class as a means to eventually achieve enfranchisement reverses the narrative, and illustrates the dialectical nature of the subject of freedom.

powerful, resource-intensive opportunities to create physical infrastructure are precisely what is systematically denied to African Americans. In this case, freedom *from* and freedom *to* are not presented as *musically* reconcilable.⁴⁵

By introducing a completely different dimension into the discourse of freedom—i.e. the freedom not even to be a musician and instead rather to become an architect - Roach draws attention to the multiple levels that freedom discourses operate on. The 1970s presented an intensified discourse on the meaning of freedom among artists that were both struggling with the failures and fallout, as well as building on the success and promise, of 1960s political and countercultural movements. The attendant fault lines, contradictions and complexities offered artists a rich and varied conceptual terrain, and New York City provided the physical spaces in which these ideas could be explored. Contrary to the polemics above, as Heller states:

What is more surprising, however, is how frequently individuals shifted between these two ideals [freedom *from/ to*], and how friendships and collaborations developed across conceptual lines. The diffuse structure of the loft landscape allowed them to coexist in a tenuous duality, making music together in an ongoing dialogue over the very freedom of “free jazz.”⁴⁶

Heller is, however, reticent to make any large scale political or ideological claims on behalf of the musicians (or the time period). This reticence is understandable, especially given the propaganda purposes jazz had served during the cold war period, and the later post-racial glossing that continues to exploit and commodify the “multi-cultural” legacy of Black music. However, by highlighting the ways in which loft musicians carved out free spaces (freedom *from*) in order to better come together and cooperatively create (freedom

⁴⁵ Jomo Cheatham, “Max Roach Part-6,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qmVJFZNVdAg>.

⁴⁶ Heller, *Loft Jazz*, 93.

to) *despite* and *across* differences and fragmentation, Heller implicitly validates the enduring freedom ideas and ideals of the musicians themselves. Given this framework, it is useful to examine how David Harvey and Paul Gilroy's more spatially conscious understandings of modernism were enacted within the aesthetic praxis of the loft jazz period.

One of the musicians that well encapsulates the spirit of the period is founding M'Boom member Warren Smith. Born in Chicago, Smith attended the Manhattan School of Music in the 50s, and was later able to secure an affordable loft space, *Studio WIS*. The loft served as meeting point, rehearsal space, venue, and even temporary housing⁴⁷ for the artist community during the 70s and through the 80s. Warren, along with a great many jazz musicians at the time, identified as a Black nationalist. In contrast to the easy multicultural gloss that characterizes much of the later romanticization of world music, the collaborations Smith participated in and facilitated occurred within a delimited space of Black artists, drawing from a diasporic network of culture and knowledge. These Afrocentric *boundaries* provided a strong framework and orientation within which artists were free to pursue diverse and ambitious musical projects, again underlying the complexity of freedom discourses.

Strata East, a Black artist-run recording label that Warren was a member of, is illustrative of the way in which Afrocentric and diasporic identification afforded musicians the intellectual and creative space to pursue diverse and ambitious opportunities for collaboration despite the economic downturn and an increasingly conservative commercial recording industry. The label released over 50 albums during the 70s that reflected and showcased many of the musico-political ideas, ambitions, and concerns of the period. In addition to the ambitiousness of many of the projects, Strata East recorded a generally reflective, spiritual, inward turn that many Black artists identified with. Increasingly the

⁴⁷ Ibid, 104.

universalist ideas of freedom and equality underpinning the musico-political praxis of the jazz avant-garde were on the surface paradoxically best able to find expression within the racial boundaries of Black nationalism and Afrocentrism.

Stylistically, the label was a broad church, releasing albums featuring a range of artists, across generational boundaries, and in unusual groupings. This certainly reflected the lack of opportunities to commercially record, with the wide breadth of styles incorporated on Strata East represented by artists ranging from John Lewis to Don Cherry, Babatunde, Jayne Cortez and Gil Scott-Heron. The awareness and engagement with questions of proximity, distance and space, again a defining feature of the loft jazz scene, extended from an engagement with diasporic musical forms (*A Message from Mozambique*) and spiritual messaging (*Alkebu-Lan: Land of the Blacks*), through to experimental compositional structures employing unusual and extreme effects (*Sound Awareness*) and unusual combinations of instruments (*The Piano Choir, The New York Bass Violins Choir, M'Boom*).

M'boom's first two appearances likewise were on Strata East. The first was on French hornist/ flutist Brother Ah's *Sound Awareness*. The album, divided into two contrasting sections, first features a small ensemble including Ah's horn and flute playing, cello, (operatic) voice, synth, and percussion. *Beyond Yourself (The Midnight Confession)* is structured around the image of the emergent self-awareness of a drug addict. The minimalist, largely out-of-time improvising is augmented and at times saturated by a pervasive use of reverb and extreme echo effects, evoking a foreboding sense of loss and searching.

The contrast between this first piece and the second, arranged by Max Roach and featuring M'Boom, is striking. *Love Piece* opens with the jingling of a string of bells which quickly dissipates. Unaccompanied, Brother Ah proceeds to carve out space with a series of

legato flute lines. A full two minutes into his calls, the bells offer a gentle answer, guiding the flute as it approaches a long tone in its lower register. After a short silence, the bells ring out once more. The flute creeps back in, bending and twisting, recalling the dark and moody meanderings of the previous track. Howard Johnson enters abruptly, his vivacious tuba phrases punctuated by a sharp opera gong attack. A single male voice enters with a melismatic “Ahhh,” and more percussion sounds are gradually added. The bells continue to speak softly as reverberant timpani and marimba notes surface, and a toy whistle joins the polyphony. By now Brother Ah has switched to horn. His sound barely distinguishable from the tuba, their phases wildly cross one another and eventually come to rest.

After a moment's pause an explosive 12/8 groove begins on a wide array of percussion instruments. The core rhythms are laid out on rims and pitch-bent skins, embellished by vibraphone, timpani, a delicate ride cymbal, raucous opera gongs and metals. Once the pulse is well established, Max Roach begins a boisterous spoken word performance, riffing on the meaning and supreme, world-unifying importance of love. This evolves into a call and response between Roach and a 90-person chorus(!). As the roar of the chorus grows increasingly ecstatic, the percussion players produce waves of heightened densities and attacks. In the penultimate section the chorus hypnotically bellows “Lo-ah-ah-ove” over and over again, before unleashing short cries of “Love!!!.... Love!!!” over a thunderous free jazz duet between timpani and drum set with an array of splashing metals.

As if leading his troops into battle, Max Roach's exhortations and the ensemble's infectious groove exemplify a more ecstatic version of the encoded politics of his earlier work. The transition from a discourse of freedom to one on love is instructive of the inwardly directed politics of the period (and a fitting complement to the likewise individually and inwardly focused explorations of drug addiction on the preceding track). But at the same

time, Max Roach is also appropriating and subverting a changing discursive landscape as a means to continue to develop his political work. If *Love Piece* is a love song, it's certainly no bourgeois love song, nor a love song in any traditional western sense of surrender and gender. In fact, the piece couldn't be more explicitly uninterested in such notions of love. Roach continuously exhorts the chorus to use the power of love to overcome the limitations of a cold, alienated and capitalist-driven society of exchange value. Rather than a retreat to the nostalgic safety of bourgeois love, Max calls for an abstracting, universalizing and militant love, calling out, "You are deceiving yourself... cuz what you have is love on credit. What you have is, 'I love you if you love me,' and that's no class love and no class love is no love at all." It may be a love piece, but as composer and improviser Anthony Davis is fond of pointing out, "if it's Max Roach, it's got to be modern!"⁴⁸

The direct relationship between explicit words and encoded sounds enacted on this track transform the different percussion instruments into a metaphor for diaspora. At once universal and firmly centered on Black subjectivity, "Love" is expressed by the whole percussion (i.e. human) family, over the pulsings of a pitch-bent tom-tom.⁴⁹

One can ascribe a certain overdetermination to Strata East's catalogue and more broadly the loft jazz scene, where simultaneously the economic enclosures that broader society was experiencing intensified and channeled artists into the open spaces of the lofts, artist-run labels, and music collectives. The words of Gil Scott-Heron on his Strata East recording *Winter in America* (1974) are instructive of the developing mood, "Now more than

⁴⁸ Davis, Personal Communications.

⁴⁹ The pitch-bent tom-tom mimics the talking drum of West Africa. Similarly, the use of Chinese opera gong, and its disruptive role within the arrangement, heightens the non-western orientation.

ever, the family must come together...You my lawyer. You my doctor. Yeah, but somehow you forgot about me. And now, now when I see you, all I can say is, 'peace.' Peace go with you, brother." The strategic Black Nationalism ("now the family must come together") and anti-modernism (are there professions more modern than lawyer and doctor?) espoused by artists was informed by a reflection of the reality as described by Heron that "the middle-class people who were just in the movement for the adventure of the moment have gone on to do whatever it is that middle-class people do".⁵⁰ The factionalism and political retreat of the 70s is here seen largely as the result of a retreat of White modern and middle class society, a "white flight" that unintentionally opened up the loft spaces to Black artists.

The metaphor of winter, like the blues, is a poignant and cyclical anti-modern reminder that considers time and space relationally. We can imagine the lofts (and the universities, the collectively run labels, even the European festivals, etc.) as wintering spaces where artists could come together inside (and call others in) to reflect on themselves and to weather the storm while continuing to hold belief in, and maintain and develop an ambitious and far-reaching musical consciousness. The recorded documents are testament to the creativity and drive of the musicians to bring instruments, sounds, ideas, cultures, and people together for a greater purpose and good. But also, in line with Max Roach's African American centered modernism, this creativity and synthesis was critical and conflicted about society at large and responsive to the hard economic and racial systems of oppression that not so much *offered* creative and innovative responses, as *required* such adaptation and ingenuity.

Neither running from the period's challenges and aesthetic chaos (i.e. neo-conservatism) nor commodifying "differences" (i.e. postmodernism), Black artists associated with jazz during the 70s continued to synthesize centered musical spaces out of the period's

⁵⁰ Veron Gibbs, "Gil Scott-Heron Is Not Bob Dylan," *Playboy*, July 1976.

aesthetic diversity and fragmentation. Over time, from *inside* these spaces, the artists' calls would receive little in the way of outside response, let alone support. The "benign neglect" and disinvestment characteristic of the period, a strategic and cynically conscious freedom *from*, was followed by the celebrated "law and order" return of the White middle and upper class (freedom *to*), and attendant displacement of the loft jazz community (among many others). As many of the period's so-called jazz musicians were all too aware, freedom (and "rumors flyin," in the words from *We Insist!*), is by definition not free, but rather emergent out of intersecting internal and external struggles and conflicts.

SEARCHING FOR THE SOUND OF DIASPORA

And now everybody get ready for M'Boom! And when you're getting ready for M'Boom, you're getting ready for one of the most exciting musical trips imaginable. Get ready for six percussionist composers who have created a percussion ensemble and workshop to advance the knowledge and beauty of percussion to the world!

—Ellis Hazlip⁵¹

In 1985, The Washington Post observed that “M'Boom [had] extended Roach's melodic and textural ideas on a grand scale.”⁵² Roach was concerned with larger narratives of African American music, which he characterized as “a purely democratic music” that embraced a “collective creativity where somebody introduces something and we all get a chance to say something about it.”⁵³ He presented an idea and created space for M'Boom, but the project required collective effort to be realized. While the music of M'Boom reflected a maturation of Max Roach's artistic trajectory, it also contained a set of overlapping desires and general concerns that resonated with its members who were working at the intersection of jazz, contemporary percussion and world music. The percussionists set out to expand the expressive range and artistic value of US-based percussion playing, while using the medium as a tool for metaphorically addressing questions of identity, solidarity, authorship and belonging at a politically tumultuous time. The musicians maintained that their positions as Americans, jazz musicians and percussionists licensed them to repurpose instruments, sounds and rhythms from other cultures to suit their needs. And in showcasing the African and Caribbean elements of jazz and the global qualities of percussion music, they were

⁵¹ Ukvibeorg, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4eV1vrmSC5k>. This clip aired in 1972 on the TV show “Soul.”

⁵² Mike Joyce, “Capital City Jazz Festival: Max Roach,” The Washington Post, June 10, 1985, Final edition, sec. Style; B7.

⁵³ Harrington, “Drum Roles.”

building bridges across the African diaspora and beyond. As Eli Fountain (who joined M'Boom in the 80s) would later say, "Everybody everywhere should hear a little bit of themselves in the music."⁵⁴

M'Boom devoted a full year to developing their sound and composing the early pieces in their repertoire. Regular Saturday rehearsals at Warren Smith's studio became a laboratory for experimentation and study. To maximize democratic participation and performative fluidity among members, they educated one another on different instruments, playing techniques and rhythms. Since most of the players specialized in drum set, those with other skill sets such as orchestral timpani, keyboard percussion and hand drumming trained the others. When it became apparent that the original lineup lacked expertise in "the African element" of drumming and "the rhythms of this hemisphere,"⁵⁵ Roach recruited Ray Mantilla and, later on, Steve Barrios to fill the gap. These players added Afro-Caribbean hand drumming technique and Cuban and Puerto Rican rhythms to M'Boom's collective skill set, or as Smith would call it, "the brain trust."⁵⁶

M'Boom shared authorship and performance roles as equally as possible among the members. The percussionists would eventually produce a substantial collection of original music with coherent intentions and consistent style despite widely distributed authorship. And in performance the players would switch not only solos but would also collectively improvise and rotate instruments on stage in a more complete display of egalitarianism. Several of the arrangements, including Warren Smith's *Elements of a Storm*, were built around instrumentally fluid, collective improvisation.

⁵⁴ Leah Bowden, "Interview with Eli Fountain," phone, April 26, 2016.

⁵⁵ These are phrases that Warren Smith and Joe Chambers (respectively) used in our conversations to broadly describe the rhythmic palette of the Black Atlantic.

⁵⁶ Bowden, "Warren Smith Interviews," phone and email, 2016-2018.

The groups' collective structure and its message of solidarity and Black identification resonated deeply with its members. Yet these things were relatively non-confrontational compared to Roach's collaborations with Abbey Lincoln a decade earlier. As Joe Chambers explains, "We tried to avoid [explicit politics] because you paid a price for doing that kind of stuff... well maybe it was implied, there's always something there, but nobody was saying 'Alright. Freedom now...we insist,' nothing like that, no." From his position as a laborer in the music industry, Chambers observes that radicalism costs musicians work. However, that didn't stop him or his colleagues from articulating a subtler politics, one that was "maybe" implied. Warren Smith's comments help explain how diasporic Black liberation struggles framed M'Boom's sound and message:

Well, some of it was [political], and some of it was just playing music, but there was enough of an impetus... well, first of all the concept was in support of a free Africa without colonization, you know, so that was a reflection of it... I don't think any of us had actually been to Africa by that time but in '69 of course the civil rights protests were probably at the height... this political element was certainly very active and a lot of the things that we did were representative of our protests of racism and our stance against Apartheid and colonialism in general, you know, so that was certainly an element within most of the compositions that we did.⁵⁷

Eli Fountain offers additional perspective on the political nature of M'Boom, pointing out that:

The fact that we exist is the statement [*laughs*]. The fact that this group exists is a statement. You're trying to do a group of color, and you've got this technically unwieldy group with all these instruments and so forth, so the idea of even trying to do this, and it's not electronic, there are so many fronts that are political. You're always trying to convince promoters that this is something that people want to hear, but they [only] have an idea of what a *drum* ensemble is. You're telling them "Look, it's a *Percussion Orchestra*." All of that in the mix. The fact that it exists is a statement in itself.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Bowden, "Warren Smith Interviews."

⁵⁸ Bowden, "Eli Fountain Interview."

According to Fountain, M'Boom's ability to maintain artistic integrity and "unwieldy" ambition should be read as a direct confrontation with both the music industry generally and public perceptions about Black artists. The fact that the artists were able to realize such an ambitious and unusual project under existing market conditions greatly contributed to its strength as a socio-political entity.

A Uniquely American World Music

M'Boom is accepted because it's got the whole percussion family in it— from bells and glockenspiel to bass marimbas and timpani, as well as some instruments of undetermined pitch — it's really an orchestra. Europe, Africa, and the Far East have always had percussion groups. Here in the states, the trap drummer was caught in a bind of sorts. I've tried to break out of that mold, and M'Boom has always tried to do something that is, you know, uniquely American.

—Max Roach⁵⁹

In the 1970s, North American Universities began to separate "musicology" (i.e. the study of practices descending from European traditions) from "ethnomusicology" (everything else). This decision was intended to make music departments more diverse, but in practice it also widened the ideological gap between the two spheres. In the following decades, world music would become "an umbrella category under which various types of traditional and non-Western music are produced for Western consumption."⁶⁰ But the term can also be used on a more basic level to describe music as an encounter between cultures in a time of

⁵⁹ Jim Macnie, "Jazz Blue Notes," *Billboard*, June 24, 1995, Vol. 107: 25.

⁶⁰ Bob W. White, *Music and Globalization: Critical Encounters*, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2012.

globalization. The commercial category was not widely used until 1987 however,⁶¹ and the percussionists of M'Boom used it in the latter sense.

Warren Smith explains that he thinks of M'Boom as “world music,” and defines the genre as “music that you can enjoy across cultural lines and across geographic lines.” He connects this to their efforts to appeal to a very “demographically wide” audience. But the sound is complex enough to engage and challenge listeners. “People are not accustomed to hearing rhythm in that kind of nuance,” he says, and “we wanted to open everybody’s ears. That’s how you draw a younger audience to you. They can feel the vibrations and they can dance to it, but they can’t actually reproduce it themselves.”⁶² In this sense the term “world music” also describes the encounters taking place in and through the listener. Fountain also describes M'Boom’s sound as radically accessible:

I think [M'Boom is] accessible, you take all of these complex ideas and you make them accessible. People are supposed to be able to sit back and listen and tap their feet, even with all these different things [going on]. There were collaborations with all kinds of people. We were trying to be the people’s music. Trying to compose music with all the things we learn about other genres that could also be considered “people’s music.” ...It doesn’t mean anything if the audience is not reacting to it physically and spiritually.⁶³

By drawing connections between complexity and accessibility, and in referencing Ellington, Smith and Fountain affirm the ways that M'Boom was seeking to build on the particular music-as-politics of Max Roach, crafting an encoded “music to think by”⁶⁴ for the masses. These percussionists were building on a history of Black musicians exploring the intersections of folk art, high art, and revolutionary politics as music intended for the

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Bowden, “Warren Smith Interviews.”

⁶³ Bowden, “Eli Fountain Interview.”

⁶⁴ Brower, “Legendary Max Roach.”

masses.⁶⁵ The scale and breadth of the project also was a part of its revolutionary politics (as Fountain pointed out earlier). They filtered the diasporic, pan-cultural imaginary through their experience as American jazz musicians. As Smith points out, “African American music itself is an amalgam of anything that influences our fancy.”⁶⁶ Fountain explains that M’Boom intended “to use all the instruments in the diaspora and apply it to a world music kind of a vision...the way Americans take things and use them... It’s never been like an ‘ethnic’ band per say.” Here, and in other statements, the percussionists’ use of the terms “African American” and “American” more or less interchangeably further re-centers the American experience onto a universalizing Black Atlantic subject.

M’Boom repurposed and blended rhythms and timbres liberally. Rather than seeking to affirm notions of “authenticity,” the music spoke to the fluidity of Black Atlantic identity. For example, *Jamaican Sun* by Roy Brooks is built on a deliberately *inauthentic* use of cultural referents. It starts with a 2-3 clave pattern, that suggests Cuba rather than Jamaica. And after just a few iterations this clave gets abstracted by the addition of a second player articulating the opposite clave, 3-2. By layering these two traditionally oppositional orienting patterns, Brooks creates a powerfully disorienting effect. A few moments later, the steel pan enters, but of course no one is playing Calypso.

This deliberate experimenting with and blending of cultural lines was also extended to dress. As Warren Smith recalls, “we dressed, a lot of us, in what was then our concept of traditional African clothing like dashikis, but there were other times where we would also put on business suits and shirts and ties... then you might see another photo of us where

⁶⁵ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Africa Speaks, America Answers*.

⁶⁶ Bowden, “Warren Smith Interviews.”

everybody is, some of us, you know I had my hair braided sometimes, and various other elements of our expression of our own culture.”⁶⁷

Joe Chambers recalls that the players enriched one another’s understandings of what composing for percussion could mean. Compositional strategies would vary from one tune to the next, ranging from “jazz” derived methods to more timbre-based writing. As Joe explains:

My approach to M’Boom and percussion was to treat it as a small jazz band. You can have the bassline played by the timpani, and bass marimba, you have some chords that could be played by the vibraphone, marimba, and you have melody playing instruments like vibes, xylophone, and stuff like that. And we set up tunes, I set up songs that had AABA type forms and then a place for improv-- just like they do in the jazz bands. Now, Warren’s approach was different; he approached it in terms of textures... And then I later, the rest of us found out that’s the way you can go. You can approach it like woods, woods on woods, metals, you know metallic sounds, and you’ve got idiophonics... and just different, throwing different texture combinations together.⁶⁸

Building a robust vocabulary of world rhythms was also integral to the process of establishing a collective voice. I asked if there were any particular rhythms or cultures that were more relevant than others in their practice. Joe’s answer illuminates how the contemporary percussion medium calls for a compositional palette of exceptional breadth:

[Percussion is] really a world music culture. I would say [M’Boom] would be a broad-based interpretation because you’re dealing with, and first of all we all learn, and I learned this, the percussion family has the broadest range of textures and sounds of any family in the orchestra. That’s including woodwinds and brass, anything, it has the widest range of textures. Think about it [*laughs*], it does! And you’re talking about hundreds and hundreds of instruments in your percussion family. So, you have a very broad base to look at. You have the jazz tradition we’re coming out of, we have the compositional tradition of the modern so-called “classical” composers, then you’ve got the so-called “third world,” you can deal with African, Asian, we examined the balafon tradition... we certainly are close to that. Then you’ve got, of course, you’ve got Afro-Cuban and Brazil, so we had to familiarize ourselves with all of

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ Bowden, “Interview with Joe Chambers,” phone, March 19, 2016.

the rhythms, the Bembes and the Batucadas and all of that. So, it's a world music situation with percussion. That's the fact of the matter.⁶⁹

We Weren't Gonna Do Anything Like That

The percussionists of M'Boom negotiated tensions between integration and multiculturalism, and maintained the Afrocentric elements of their music in part by distancing themselves from European performance practices. Although they were trained at the University level and had been exposed to the Western canon of solo and ensemble percussion music, this was not a lineage that they considered to be "people's music." In our conversations, both Fountain and Chambers distanced themselves from the Western percussion cannon by framing their uses of the repertoire as exclusively pedagogical. Fountain affectively limits the value of the Western contemporary percussion cannon to technical and historical "study purposes." "There's stuff that I did, Poulenc—I have played from the percussion solos," he says:

Elliott Carter, some Vic Firth solos, all of that stuff is part of your normal study. But to the extent that it actually influenced a lot of things, not really. Not musically per se. You learn how to make setups and you learn how to operate out of a station... it's useful on Broadway and other things like that where you have to play several instruments at once...

[Contemporary classical music] is more for study purposes... I mean, when's the last time you went out to listen to Iannis Xenakis? [*Laughs*]. If you have a party in your house and you want people to have a nice time and you're sitting around drinking, are you listening to Marvin Gaye? Or are you listening to Vic Firth? No! I mean, the function is different. Music has a function; a lot of music has a function.

...The music [of past eras] was functional, you had Gavots, you had Waltzes, all kinds of dances; the music was functional. People forget that the music was functional. You know what I mean, and even with Bach, *that* music was functional because it was in church so there were certain things that they needed to have. So the idea of function, has been the narrative that goes

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

across all lines. Function. What is this music *for*? What do you *do* with this music? *When* do you listen to this music? That goes across *all* the lines.⁷⁰

At the intersection of jazz and contemporary Western Art Music, there seems to have been a shared interest in percussion as a musical medium in the mid-to-late twentieth century; European and Euro-American composers were also rethinking the role of percussion music. In New York City in the 1970s, there was dialogue between these circles; Warren Smith worked and recorded with John Cage and Harry Partch, for example. Joe Chambers discusses M'Boom's vision in the context of these musical exchanges:

We listened to it. I listened to it. In fact, Warren listened to a lot of it and Max was familiar with it and I became very familiar with it through teaching and stuff. Michael Colgrass and, oh I got a whole bunch of, I got a lot of the material. I listened to it and then these guys out of New York-- Philip Glass and a couple other dudes... Steve Reich... And I listened to a lot of it, and I've got music and scores and stuff, but we were determined not to do that. We weren't gonna do anything like that. In other words, our approach to it was to approach it in the tradition of the jazz, in the jazz instrumental tradition of the Duke Ellingtons and you know, bebop and everything. How that is put together, with the improvisation as being [central].⁷¹

Chambers' identification with the pre-integration music of Duke Ellington, as opposed to more contemporary jazz musicians, is notable. In the late 1920s and 30s, Ellington mobilized elements of New Negro intellectual discourse to frame his musical vision. Ellington argued that such a music could speak to the present and the future in ways that so-called classical composers of the past could not, although (like Chambers) he cited the musical influence of these composers.⁷² By combining musical elements from multiple sources, Ellington crafted a popular art music that could have universal reach while staying rooted in

⁷⁰ Bowden, "Eli Fountain Interview."

⁷¹ Bowden, "Joe Chambers Interview."

⁷² Eric Porter, *What is this thing called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics and Activists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 36-37.

the Black American experience and its history—these are concerns that M’Boom was specifically interested in.

Percussion at the Intersection of Race and...?

As mentioned above, M’Boom’s original lineup included Max Roach, Warren Smith, Omar Clay, Joe Chambers, Freddie Waits and Roy Brooks. Over the years the personnel would fluctuate between six and eleven of Max Roach’s junior colleagues. The players were without exception African American and Latino men best known for their contributions to musics of the “jazz” continuum. Much of the political discourse surrounding jazz in the 1970s and 80s centered around the interrelated issues of race, ethnicity and class. This resonated with M’Boom and their efforts to construct a radically inclusive music. But their goals for inclusiveness were complicated by the fact that there were no women in an eleven-piece band.

Max Roach, for his part, actually did speak out about gender issues in music (after a little prompting from his mother). “You’re making records with all these people,” Cressie Roach pointed out, “When are you going to make a record with your daughter?” Although his daughter Maxine was a professional violinist, Max had not thought to collaborate with her. But he would take Cressie’s suggestion a step further, saying, “I talked to Maxine and told her to put together a string quartet... but I wanted women. There weren’t enough women on the scene instrumentally in jazz.” That was the start of the Uptown String Quartet.⁷³ This moment gives us a window into how musicians were thinking (or not thinking) about gender at the time. It required Cressie’s subjectivity to make gender visible because even Max

⁷³ Jones, “Roach’s ‘To the Max’ Drums up His Creativity.”

Roach, who epitomized music-as-politics, did not yet politicize the participation of women. Also, there was already a long history of all-women groups, such as the swing era orchestras that rose to prominence during World War II. There was significantly less precedent for gender-integrated bands. When the string quartet collaborated with M'Boom, their section was similarly all-female.

Referencing a young Charlie Parker and his famous woodshed, Nichole T. Rustin has argued that narratives about genius and authenticity in jazz have traditionally centered on Black masculinity as a marker of difference from White masculinity. "Jazz has created blackness, or race," she writes, "as a metalanguage through which gender, specifically the feminine, drops out of view."⁷⁴ I asked Eli Fountain how they remember thinking about gender at the time, and whether or not people talked about it. "No, not at all, never... no," He replied, "Nobody ever thinks about that, you get your guys together and then you hit. You go, you contact your boys and then you hit!" Fountain's use of the phrases "your guys" and "your boys" implied that gender uniformity may have even been a signifier for the group's identity. His framing of gender as unspoken, or at best an "afterthought,"⁷⁵ supports Rustin's argument that jazz discourse has traditionally excluded the feminine as well.

Warren Smith explained that M'Boom's all-male lineup was a reflection of larger gender imbalances in multiple music scenes:

Max selected 6 "Jazz" Drummers who were familiar with that tradition, and who had experience with the whole spectrum of Percussion instruments. Eventually, he added two voices who were familiar with African Hand Drums and Percussion. There were Women performing on these Instruments during the time, but none within Max's professional circle. He selected people he was

⁷⁴ Nichole T. Rustin, "Mary Lou Williams Plays Like a Man!" Gender, Genius and Difference in Black Music Discourse," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 104: 3, Summer 2005.

⁷⁵ Bowden, "Eli Fountain Interview."

personally familiar with. Many of us had worked with him on other projects. We were within 15 years of age apart, that is to say of the same generation.⁷⁶

Max Roach set out to work at the intersection of several genres that already had overlapping sets of gender problems—Western classical music, Afro-Caribbean hand drumming, jazz and “world” percussion. Warren mentioned the importance of being in generational proximity to Roach, who was 45 at the time, implying that that was likely a factor in the lineup being exclusively male. To clarify, in keeping current Roach recruited his junior colleagues; they were close in age to one another and about 15 years younger than Max. Warren later emailed me to offer further comment on the issue:

It has become more obvious in recent years that many Women are now prominent in all areas of Percussion Performance. In 1969, when "M'Boom" was formed, there were prominent Women in "Jazz" and Classical Percussion, as well as commercial music. Elaine Jones was a Timpanist in New York (New York City Opera and Ballet orchestras). She later joined the San Francisco Opera, along with a [female] Japanese Bassoonist (I think). Both left within two years, partially due to reluctance of other orchestra personnel to accept them as equals. I think things have improved somewhat since then. But there is still a lack of, and room for, many more female performers in the field. I'm pleased to see many more female students now than there were then... We perhaps could have done more than we did.⁷⁷

Things have certainly changed in terms of how much people pay attention to gender and talk about it. From Smith's vantage point in 2016, he could see that M'Boom's music-as-politics “could have done more” to disturb gender imbalances and discrimination which saturated the music scene. But there certainly wasn't anything exceptional about being an all-male band in the 70s.

⁷⁶ Bowden, “Warren Smith Interviews.”

⁷⁷ Bowden, “Warren Smith Interviews.”

At the same time, the presence or absence of women in a performing group is not the only way to evaluate how gender operates socially or musically. In *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, bell hooks frames her discussions within the ways that White, capitalist patriarchal society exacts a devastating toll on Black men in particular. For hooks, music is seen as historically a means to challenge the limitations and stereotypes imposed upon Black men.

When black males have not been able to achieve in the world of sports, they have looked to the world of music as a site of possibility, a location where alternative masculinity could be expressed. Certainly the musical culture of blues and jazz had its roots in the black male quest for a vocation that would require creativity and lend meaning to one's labor.⁷⁸

On the other hand, hooks notes a disturbing trend beginning in the 70s that marked a shift in gender discourses that connects deeply with the period's emergent economic and racial realities. She writes:

Once money, and not the realization of a work ethic based on integrity and ethical values, becomes the sole measure of man, more black men could enter the game. As long as the stakes were respectable jobs, work that would lead into the mainstream, black men did not stand a chance at beating the odds. When money became the goal, black men had a chance. In black communities hustling for money, even if that meant lying and cheating, became more acceptable if it brought home the bacon. A shift in class values occurs in black life when integration comes and with it the idea that money is the primary marker of individual success, not how one acquires money.⁷⁹

From the perspective of musicians, and Black musicians in particular, this encroaching financialization on the heels of the Civil Rights and Women's Liberation movements offered new opportunities to celebrate, commodify and exploit racial and sexual differences. Compounded by the collapse of the economic infrastructure supporting jazz

⁷⁸ bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Man and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 22.

⁷⁹ hooks, 18.

musicians, this devalued the work and cultural capital of artists who were unwilling, uninterested or unable to perform (or sell out) to those expectations. And in the same way that Eli Fountain points out that M'Boom's existence itself was a statement on race, it was also a statement on Black masculinity. M'Boom's universe was a striking departure from the machismo which helped fuel *Rich VS. Roach*, and other similarly themed drum-centric works. Part of the percussionist's work to "open [people's] minds to the possibility of sound"⁸⁰ included an engagement with the complete gamut of timbral and rhythmic possibilities that they felt only percussion instruments could offer. This is sometimes contained within a single track; *Elements of a Storm* builds from light rain showers, to a bombastic depiction of a hurricane, back to rain showers, then gentle bird calls as a rainbow emerges into springtime. Other tracks imply a more complete liberation from aggression and machismo. *Twinkle Toes* (another Smith composition, which was dedicated to Joe Chambers) features a delicate (dare I say dainty!) 32nd note sextuplet glockenspiel theme which is passed across the various mallet instruments before returning to solo glockenspiel. The entire track shimmers and shines.

M'Boom's male camaraderie also helped them deal with common struggles and meet their emotional needs in constructive ways. As Warren pointed out, "Men, if you will pardon the term, can be just as 'bitchy' as everyone else," to which I responded, "Everyone has emotional needs!" He continued:

Oh absolutely. What happens is everyone wants to be the alpha male and if it hadn't been for Max Roach being the Alpha Male of the group and the rest of us being around the same age, we'd probably have had fur flying all over the place. But everybody admired him so much that we just subsided ourselves to whatever his decisions were. And he knew... he had gone through a lot of rough situations before he became a leader as well. He instilled in us the ability to be good leaders in our own right, and passed around the leadership

⁸⁰ Bowden, "Interview with Eli Fountain."

depending upon who presented a musical composition that we had to learn and had to play and then that person had to be the big boss. I grant his tutorship with helping me to develop that kind of a personality later on in life. To see somebody just command that kind of respect from everybody else is just something that you kind of try to get to.⁸¹

According to Smith, Max Roach “knew.” He had an insider’s perspective on behaviors and attitudes that the others may have learned growing up male and then becoming drummers and band leaders. Roach created a situation where the percussionists had to reimagine their relationships to one other and embrace the give-and-take of shared leadership. The freedom to rethink masculinity was both conceptually and practically necessary for the group’s success. Starting from within the ensemble’s internal dynamics, M’Boom moved toward an alternative masculinity based on mutual support, individual maturity and respect. In M’Boom’s 1983 interview with *Modern Drummer Magazine*, Freddie Waits likewise affirms the value of these community exchanges, stating, “We’ve learned so much about just being *men* around each other, and about how to accept each other.”⁸²

An Enduring Vision

I think musicians become composers either out of inspiration or frustration... in my own sense the frustration came from not being able to play the kinds of music that I wanted to play.

-Warren Smith⁸³

⁸¹ Bowden, “Interview with Warren Smith.”

⁸² Scott K. Fish and Rick Mattingly, “M’Boom,” *Modern Drummer*, published September 1983, accessed May 1, 2018, <https://www.moderndrummer.com/article/september-1983-mboom/>.

⁸³ umaxxi, “Warren Smith: Percussionist & Archivist,” Internet, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YXdTvlaoOM>.

Because of his continued evolution as an artist from the 40s through the 90s, music critics would come to view Max Roach as the quintessential modernist. This reputation was projected onto all of his projects, the percussion ensemble included.⁸⁴ At first a theme and variation on Max Roach's career, M'Boom proceeded to hit, shake and scrape out its own legacy. M'Boom developed a timbral range new to "jazz" and a style that was outside the range of other percussion ensembles before and since. Their collectivist mode of musical production, which was rare in Jazz, produced a library of works inspired by themes of solidarity, diaspora and inclusiveness. As Joe Chambers puts it, "For my [taste], there is too much individualism in jazz. They need more collectivisms; they need more group approaches." Max Roach and M'Boom recognized this—they worked hard to strike a balance between the star-power needed for promotion in the jazz industry, and the sense of democracy that they felt the music required and should therefore reflect. Fittingly, the idea of continuing beyond the life and legacy of individuals was very much a part of the collective vision. Everyone wanted the group to stand on its own as an independent entity, even without Max's name or physical presence. After the deaths of four founding members (Roach, Clay, Waits and Brooks), the surviving founders (Chambers, Smith and Mantilla) vowed to keep the vision alive, and M'Boom continues to perform to this day.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Jones, "Roach's 'To the Max' Drums up his Creativity."

⁸⁵ Leah Bowden, "Joe Chambers Interview."

INTERVIEWS WITH WARREN SMITH

[The following conversation took place on February 9, 2016, by phone. This interview, and those that follow, have been edited for clarity and length]

Leah Bowden: What was the vision originally planned for M'Boom?

Warren Smith: Max Roach was rehearsing my studio here in 1969. That's when I think we had our first rehearsals. Some people say it might have been 1970 but my memory says 1969. Max came up with the idea. A lot of us had experienced, I guess you would call it classical percussion ensembles. I did all the repertoire in college, at the University of Illinois, which was one of the first University programs that had a percussion ensemble. And, most of the people who were involved did also. Max Roach was rehearsing at my studio and he had been exposed to that too so he came up with the idea of doing it within the tradition of African American classical music, which a lot of people call "jazz." So he recruited me along with Omar Clay, Joe Chambers, Freddie Waits and Roy Brooks. There were originally just six of us. And we got together at my studio in the Chelsea section of Manhattan and started coming together and rehearsing. We didn't have any specific music, so we sat down and composed for this group. And it kind of grew organically but Max Roach was the one who originated the concept and got us together.

LB: By that time Max Roach had released some groundbreaking political music and had declared that he would never again make music without social meaning. But most of M'Boom's output was instrumental, so was it political? And if it was, how did you encode your message into the sound?

WS: Well, some of it was, and some of it was just playing music, but there was enough of an impetus... well, first of all the concept was a concept in support of a free Africa without colonization, you know, so that was a reflection of it. The very name M'Boom comes from I think the Congo I should say. Belgium was the colonial power that invaded, but I discovered that mask with that title "M'Boom" and Max probably saw it, as I did, at a museum in Paris. I don't think any of us had actually been to Africa by that time but in '69 of course the civil rights protests were probably at the height. Very early during that time, there was a music festival in Nigeria that a lot of people went to. I can't remember the name of it now... that might have even been in 1979 but all of this political element was certainly very active and a lot of the things that we did were representative of our protests of racism and our stance against Apartheid and colonialism in general, you know, so that was certainly an element within most of the compositions that we did. I will say also that we dressed, a lot of us, in what was then our concept of traditional African clothing like dashikis, but there were other times where we would also put on business suits and shirts and ties as well.

LB: How did you decide between dashikis and suits?

WS: It depended, I would say we did more of that [wearing dashikis] probably in the United States... there is a set of formal photographs of us in Paris and we're all standing in front of the cathedral in Notre Dame, with shirts and ties, you know, and more or less business attire I would say, but then you might see another photo of us where everybody is, some of us, you know I had my hair braided sometimes, and various other elements of our expression of our own culture.

LB: Which specific percussion traditions were most relevant to the players and how did multicultural sensibilities enter into the music?

WS: Well, like I said when we first got together there were six of us and all six of us were “drummers,” you know what I mean. Max Roach was famous for being a bebop drummer, and he knew those of us that he selected well enough to know that we were also branching out into various other experiments within our music. We weren’t all just playing bebop; I had done a lot of Broadway shows... a lot of us were doing a lot of other things, you know some of us had experience in, as I said before, percussion ensembles at the University level and some of us, you know I think Roy Brooks had gone over to Africa and brought back certain instruments which we did incorporate. But our instruments were, primarily, two drum sets, a set of four timpani, kettle drums which supplied most of the bass, and then the melody was performed on two marimbas, a vibraphone, a xylophone, orchestral bells and tubular chimes. So now these are all European classical instruments in their generation, except for the drum set which was conceived and invented in the United States of America. And gradually, we found ourselves needing the actual element of African hand drums. So we brought in Ray Mantilla and a few years after that Steve Barrios. And, so then these two people gave us not only the African concept in hand drumming but also the Cuban and Puerto Rican concept in hand drumming, and this enabled us to kind of enlarge the whole pallet that the ensemble was able to use in our compositions.

LB: And were there certain African traditions that were more appealing than others, that you were trying to use, or would you call it more of a pan-African concept?

WS: I would definitely say it was pan-African because we also, Roy Brooks played the steel piano which was generated in Jamaica, the West Indies, and for instance Joe Chambers is an excellent piano player as well. There were a lot of keyboard elements, and I had played timpani symphonically, and we just started using all of these instruments in ways that employed more improvisation and they weren’t as, how should I say, well they were more sophisticated rhythmically, you know, implying a lot of African rhythms and syncopation and things of that sort. And improvisation, of course.

LB: So you developed your unique voice through this Pan-African style, and also were trying to validate a more diasporic kind of African American identity.

WS: I think that’s a more accurate description of what we were trying to do. You know we by no means considered ourselves an African ensemble because none of us were as thoroughly experienced in the tribal and cultural concepts of Africa to do that, you know. And, for instance there were periods when Ray Mantilla and Steve Barrios could do Bata drumming, but the rest of us were assigned to just small parts that accompanied that if we employed that. So a lot of things were open to us but then there were things that we didn’t feel that we could or wanted to do as well as other groups might do them within their own traditions.

LB: How did this all connect conceptually to your position as Americans?

WS: African American music itself is an amalgam of anything that influences our fancy, you know, we employ instruments that are in the symphonic orchestra, we use violins and cellos sometimes, performing, but the concept of the innovation of improvisation [in American music] is primarily by African Americans.

LB: Are there any such percussion ensembles [similar to M’Boom] now?

WS: There are some, you know, some of them are using electronics, most of them I would say are much more scripted [than we were]. I don't think they employ improvisation to the extent that our group did. I won't say all of them because I haven't heard everybody, but a lot of the music is thoroughly composed and really doesn't depart for the structure that is set. With us we would expand our pieces like a jazz musician would do and each performance would be different within the context of the solos.

LB: I know about many of the better-known percussion ensembles out there, and I've played with a lot of them, and I noticed that although some of the players have also played in jazz groups, they're not really coming at the percussion music from the same angle, do you agree?

WS: I would say that's absolutely true. And when Max Roach passed along, and Roy Brooks, Omar Clay... there were no people conceptually to replace them. It's like saying, who plays like Charlie Parker now? And when he left there was nobody with that mindset to explore further, you know. A lot of people consider the fact that, I wonder what he would have sounded like if he was still alive, etc. What we are doing as an ensemble, is still minus those specific voices, but we have others that have replaced them. So even the performances that M'Boom does concurrently would not be quite the same.

LB: Many of the players had University level education in music, right?

WS: Literally all of us.

LB: Would you say that African American percussionists today as interested pursuing music at universities as they were at that time?

WS: Oh yeah, absolutely, but you see, we came along before the whole digitalization of the whole process. So it was more a lot more centered, in our day, on absolute live performance within the instruments. And since that time there's been the intersection of the digitalized instruments themselves, of electricity as a source of amplification and things of that source. With M'Boom, we still perform acoustically and let the people in whatever theater we would perform in, put microphones, but nobody uses amplifiers.

LB: Was it important to preserve the specific identities of the instruments themselves?

WS: No, that was not important because we used everything we could bang on. Sometimes we employed found objects, somebody might come in with pipes and pieces of wood and we would use that for a specific performance. But we did have a specific thing because once M'Boom began touring it was impossible to bring all of our own equipment with us anyways, so you had to rent what you could. So very small things you could bring like a kalimba, thumb piano, or a set of claves or shakers or something, that kind of thing we could bring in our suitcases with us. You know everywhere you go the manufacturing companies would supply the other equipment, or the producers would get it for us.

LB: And the instruments available to rent would have been the symphonic instruments.

WS: Oh, always. And we don't alter the instruments themselves, we just employ them in our own stylistic manner.

LB: And it's important to notice the ways that touring influences which instruments you can use, and that changes the sound...

WS: Yes, for instance, I'll tell you this. We did a tour, oh maybe three years ago, with the World Saxophone Quartet, and there is a type of tympani that they use in Germany and we specifically asked them not to use that but when we got to the concert, those instruments were what we had to use. And the way we employed them, a couple of us wound up kind of straining our ankles and feet just for the extra effort we needed to use that instrument, that specific kind of instrument.

LB: Yeah, because most of the time, the timpani player isn't used to changing notes two times every eighth note!

WS: Yeah I would say, more like never [laughs]! And I had never heard anyone improvise on the timpani other than myself and I would have to, you know, wait until everyone had left the music room in school to even attempt to do that. You know, being a jazz musician at the outset anyway, that led me into that practice.

LB: The timpani playing is definitely one of my favorite elements of the recordings. When I play it for people and they usually say, "Wow, I've never heard anything like that!"

WS: Yeah [laughs], well that was definitely one of the ideas. But it got extended when we started rehearsing. I wasn't writing out soloistic parts or anything like that but some of the other people were watching what each other was doing, and if you saw somebody doing something that hadn't been done before... Joe Chambers wrote an arrangement of a Thelonious Monk tune and assigned the melody to the timpani, you know the kettle drums. And it was difficult to learn it, but I did. And you know I played Ricard Strauss parts where there are a lot of difficult changes, but you only do it once or twice. I realized that you could do it over and over again if you wanted to, so that's the way it developed.

LB: The earlier recordings contained some longer collective improvisations...

WS: There are some people who have maybe isolated copies of those, but what happened was, our first recording didn't survive because Max Roach wasn't satisfied with the quality of it. And we had done it independently and he didn't like the way it turned out, so he actually trashed the shipment we had of recordings and a few of us in M'Boom managed to... I was actually storing them in my studio and I managed to put aside a box so that each of the members would have a few copies of their own but it's just that rare, there are very few of them out on the street.

LB: Someone uploaded it to YouTube though. I also saw a live performance online at some jazz festival and it's about 40 minutes long and it appears to be a structured improvisation.

WS: It probably is

LB: There is body percussion, there are mallets at the end, there is a big giant crescendo... And then a quiet part.

WS: I'll tell you exactly what that is. It's called *The Elements of a Storm*. That was my composition. What happened was, when I was in the Cub Scouts, even before the Boy Scouts, the scout master showed us at a meeting how to pat our hands on our thighs and make the sound of rain. That's the way it started, and then it rose to a crescendo where we were playing brushes on drum heads and somebody introduced thunder and lightning and big severe, you know like hurricane and it all came back down again to a patter of rain and a rainbow that was pictured by a triangle.

This piece would sometimes sustain itself for quite a long time. I remember we were rehearsing it one time and another band was coming onto the campus where this jazz festival was, and they heard it and they all started putting up their umbrellas, but you know, the sun was shining [laughs]. They actually thought it was a storm, so it seemed like it was a pretty affective piece.

LB: The body percussion thing, could it be directly connected to certain African traditions?

WS: Well, I guess it could but I actually learned it in the Cub Scouts. Now our Cub Scout master probably learned it from some ancestors that he had encountered, you know, so I don't know how far that has been passed down, you understand. This is something that I passed on to people who were younger than me and you know I'm sure somebody else will re-institute the idea too over a period of time...

LB: In our conversation about this piece, Anthony Davis pointed out that body percussion has a long history within African American culture. Can you comment on this?

WS: Oh yes, that's true. Even more so in folk music; as children we had rhythms we would play you know slapping between our thighs and our stomachs. There was one we called the "ham bone" that had a pattern, and a whole poem that went with it that everybody learned in school. The girls had a pattern where they would clap their hands together and then clap each other's hands, but you know it was a rhythmic sequence that was made up spontaneously in our free time outside of school mostly.

LB: That recording at times reminds me of some of the things Sun Ra, or Art Ensemble of Chicago were doing. Would you relate the music of M'Boom to those groups?

WS: Absolutely chronologically because I came from Chicago, and while those groups were developing I was in New York experimenting with musicians that I met there. And I would interact with them when I'd come back and forth because a lot of my childhood friends were engaged in those AACM experiences, you know. So I know them all; I played with Muhal [Richard Abrams] often in New York. The fact that we all grew up in that same environment might have placed us in a collective development like you might say with the French Five composers or, you know, any other group of people who are in close proximity and produce some music that was remembered.

LB: Like a school of thought or something.

WS: Yeah, and it wasn't like a formal thing. We associated socially, of course, and we were often in organizations where we tried to, we had an organization called the Collective Black Artists, where we would meet weekly and try to figure out a situation where we could, you know, get better compensation for our efforts and attract a better crowd, you know audience development, in general, to produce ourselves because it seemed like the rock and roll artists had long surpassed us in their exposure to the public. So we did that, and a couple of years we put on a New York Musician's Jazz Festival; this was 1972 and 1973 in opposition to the Newport Festival in New York, and we were able to do very nicely and attract a lot of people but it kind of got co-opted when a few of the artists in the following years were invited into the Newport Jazz Festival and that kind of took the steam out of the independent initiative. I'm sure Anthony Davis would remember having participated in some of those events as well...

And none of us who have actually studied our music are satisfied with the term “jazz.” It’s just too informal and it relates to a period in New Orleans when there was abstract prostitution and stuff. So we feel that that is an undignified title to give to a music that has reached its prominence. We prefer to call it African American music.

LB: Did you listen to all the percussion stuff by European and Euro-American composers in the 60s and 70s?

WS: Yes, and in fact I was involved in a lot of it. I recorded with Harry Partch, I recorded with John Cage and performed a lot of their music... all of this was through my connections at the University of Illinois and the Manhattan School of Music when I first came to New York. I was involved in a lot of music with those composers.

LB: Do you think there is more of a separation now between Black and White musicians and composers, or between players brought up playing African American forms, verses more Eurocentric music, than there was at that time?

WS: Well, no because we’ve got a much better means of communication between groups now. Particularly with social media and streaming and what not. During the 60s and 70s and 80s there was a lot of travel. A lot of European groups went back and forth and a lot of us went over there in those years. It’s happening now at a less frequent level but there are still bigger exchanges happening. Like that music festival that you saw on YouTube. There are a lot of those things happening. But now they are incorporating less so-called “jazz” and more so-called “pop music.”

LB: Yeah, I noticed there is kind of a cross-legitimization trend going on between European classical music and pop or rock styles.

WS: Yes, yes, yes, and I would say that even more than an influence upon the Euro-Americans of American jazz are the more basic forms of the blues, or rhythm and blues, because even the Beatles and the Rolling Stones claimed Muddy Waters as an influence, and that is very basic African American music from the Mississippi delta. So we are all streaming from the same source; I think the difference is that musicians like myself who grew up in the city have always been familiar with this music and are familiar with every nuance that has continued to become more popular *and* the other stuff has been left behind, you know, and you only acquire that from experience. The younger people just don’t get the chance to do that until they’ve lived through it.

LB: Would you say that some of the players of contemporary classical music are averse to improvisation?

WS: No, I don’t really think so. I think that what happens is a lot of people don’t realize that improvisation itself is a studied art and it has to be experienced and performed before you can acquire a way of presenting it professionally. A lot of people think, oh, I’ll just pick up whatever and squawk and that’s my original sound but the people who really are influential in improvisation have taken a lifetime to study and develop the original styles that you hear. I know a lot of people, particularly symphonic musicians who can literally play a fly speck if they see it on a page of music but if you ask them to play something without the music they are at a loss of what to do because they are used to being told what to play every time. Now the improviser has always been making up songs and playing them and developing things over and over again and within that you get just as skilled as a person who’s reading music every day. And then you get people like myself who are doing both reading music and improvising so that puts you in another category entirely.

LB: Is M'Boom rhythm-based music? Does the music develop out of rhythmic ideas?

WS: No—I would tend to disagree with that. I remember reading a review where the critic was amazed at how melodic the group was. You see, because all of the mallet instruments as we call them, the marimba, the xylophone, the vibraphone, have an octave range sometimes in excess of what a violin does. You know, three and a half octaves. And it's a matter of how they are used, but yes, we did quite a few things where the melody was quite distinct and people could walk out of the concert whistling.

LB: I guess I didn't mean to say that it wasn't melodic, because I do hear it as melodic, but I think that the work you did in terms of groove and rhythmic relationships was complex and also central to both the compositional structure and the cultivation of a sound.

WS: Yes, yes and even then, it wasn't a matter of writing it down and it happens, you know what I mean, because the music is so nuanced that it comes out of our repetitive rehearsing of this music over a long period of time until... Well, actually we rehearsed the music to the extent that we never brought our music onstage. We felt that music stands would get in the way because we felt that each of the musicians was moving around to different instruments and stuff, and also the music stands conceal or barricade you from the audience at certain times. We wanted to have that open communication.

But what happens is you play rhythms over a period of time, now the rhythms are very repetitive, but then there are certain elements like surges and falls and dynamic swells and diminishes that happen as a result of the expression, you know the one rhythm that you hear might take a half an hour to actually develop and complete itself. But, people are not accustomed to hearing music in that kind of intensity and that kind of nuance because the music that you grew up listening to doesn't have any rhythm sometimes, everything is just four-part harmony or whatever they're using symphonically and it never gets any more complicated than that rhythmically.

LB: So the music challenges people ears because it contains things that people aren't used to hearing.

WS: Absolutely. We constantly do that. That's what brings a younger audience to you. They want to find out what you're doing and see if they can get involved in it. They can feel the vibrations and they can dance to it, but they can't actually reproduce it themselves.

LB: Who was the intended audience for M'Boom and what did you do to cultivate that?

WS: That is a very difficult thing to do personally. Max Roach was an exceptional person, but even he had to rely upon other people to make contacts and do publicity and press releases and these kinds of things way out in front of any time we were going to perform. I personally failed miserably at developing an audience even for myself... it takes a press agent to do that.

LB: In terms of what you envisioned, how you imagined your audience to be, did you have specific demographics in mind? Were you trying to attract people who would normally attend jazz concerts, or people who went to go see percussion ensembles, the symphony, rock?

WS: You see, we can employ any of those elements in our music. We haven't yet, well actually we have done some things with vocals, but the vocals were more within a

religious Yoruba tradition of Africa where we were making chants and calls and stuff like that, but it could be anything, some of our music was playful, some of it was intended for children, with nice little simple melodies that everybody could kind of shake their head to and what not, but to get a whole concert together of two 45-minute sets or three, you have to have a lot of these elements intertwined with each other to keep an audience interested for that period of time.

LB: So you were trying to appeal to a very wide audience.

WS: Oh yes, absolutely. Yeah, I mean, we feel like we are doing world music, you know what I mean and... we hope to open up everybody's ears to it.

LB: What is world music?

WS: World music is music that you can enjoy across cultural lines and across geographical lines, where you can go to some other place and celebrate their expression of culture, and enjoy it.

LB: Do you have thoughts on the commercial genre of world music?

WS: Well that, how should I say, is a blessing and a curse because we all need to be able to live, you know, in a decent fashion, but in pursuit of that sometimes your general perspective gets altered over the consciousness that you might not make as much money following your heart, and that is a real life problem for many of us. Some of us just go ahead and do it whatever will make the most money but some of us can't do that, I taught school for 40 years to compensate, and that works too.

LB: Where did you teach?

WS: I taught in the New York City public school system from 1958 until about 1968, then from 1969 through 1970 I taught at Adelphi University in Long Island New York and then for the next 26 years I was at the State University of New York in Old Westbury Long Island. I taught there with McConda Kin Macintire, we developed the whole program there, and I stayed until my retirement. I still go out and do guest lectures and educational clinics at Universities and all kinds of institutions.

LB: Can you speak to the value of cooperation and community in the arts, based on your experiences with M'Boom?

WS: First of all, the very idea of prominent musicians coming together as an ensemble, that was one of our first lessons because all of us were band leaders as well as drummers, and percussionists and drummers are used to setting the pace and the rhythm of a musical entity and so right away you would have a tremendous clash of egos unless you had a superior leader with the experience to deal with that, and that was where Max Roach became our inspirational father. We were able to get by all of those things and work together in an unselfish manner because we had the guidance that allowed us to do that. There was no competition about whose piece was gonna be first or whatever, we just kind of let it organically sort itself out that way. Not everybody is wise enough to gather a group of individuals who can work like that together, and that again sometimes takes a different kind of leadership to even sort the elements of it and it was our good fortune that Max Roach was that person and was able to guide us in that direction. So, the individuals were talented enough to be able to present some ideas that were interesting enough and allow others to help develop them. The whole things just, it was really a community, an inter-community

action. Max refused to take over the leadership himself, he said it should be a cooperative and that's what it wound up being.

LB: So you had this balance, and you also had strong leadership, and this reinforced the strength of the cooperative rather than having everyone try to lead all at once.

WS: See, that was another thing, all of us were well into our 30s and over a lot of the problems that young people might have that have never been exposed to travel or experienced the outside world without supervision before. So, we were mature people. You know, and, it was just fortunate... Now, this would be a lot more difficult now because the attitudes of people are different. Even the fact that we had places that were affordable where we could rehearse every day if we wanted to. These elements are no longer available because of the real estate markets; the gentrification of all those places where we were has put them out of our reach. A lot of things that we were able to take advantage of, probably coming out of the depression, you know, just aren't available to us anymore.

LB: Have you heard any other groups performing M'Boom's music, and what did you think?

WS: There was one group in Japan that I heard, and they didn't do the music of M'Boom but just the idea that another group had spawned from that far away was very interesting. And I have heard some college/ university groups, I've even worked with some who would have me come in and do a residency with their ensembles. So it's possible for it to be done, but at the same time there are other elements of it, creatively, that you know, just will never be reproduced. But people can certainly do it their own way and probably do it very well.

LB: There's also a lot that's not notated going on in the performances, isn't there?

WS: Everything was notated. As I said before, we actually did compose every bit of our performance. But what we did was we had the time, and we took the patience to rehearse so that in performance everybody had everything memorized. It was like, I don't know if you've ever had experience with a Broadway type show. When people get on stage they don't have time to walk around with their scripts. And the orchestra gets to the point where, even the music that we play in the pit, is fully memorized. The reason why the great symphonies sound so well, they're not reading the music—they've got that music memorized. They're reading the nuances of the conductor. Some of us are great sight readers and that comes from doing it all the time, but I think the most accomplished performances are not dependent on written notation at all. But it is there. That's how we taught it to each other.

LB: And you also have to play enough where you have a specific sound that everyone in the group hears on another level. And you can't just do that by having a score that you rehearse a couple times.

WS: No, no, that's not gonna happen. You have a period where an organization has to, what they call, "gel." The individuals have to work with another enough so that they trust each other and know each other's tendencies. To give you an example, when you're working in a rhythm section with other drummers, or even a bass player and a piano player... if they do something eclectic and you think it's off the beat and you try to make an adjustment, that's because you don't understand what they're doing and you don't trust them enough to assume that they're right. So you have to work with them enough, whoever they are so that you understand each other, and understand each other's tendencies so that any eclectic

influence won't throw you off of what you're supposed to do. Machines don't have that problem because they're locked in, but we have a lot more ways that we can do things as human beings. Our stuff is much more organic and much more complicated than that.

LB: How long did it take you, working with a University group and kind of coaching the music, how long did it take you to get to a point where you were happy with the sound?

WS: Never *[laughs]*. Never, never ever. Nothing has ever worked out absolutely perfectly. I mean, you can accomplish that in a recording studio sometimes, but that's because you go over and alter and correct things but not because any one performance is going to come out perfect. There is always something that could be improved upon.

LB: Are you saying that you didn't like the sound at all or...?

WS: Oh no, no, no, no, no, I'm not saying that, but I have never been absolutely satisfied with it. I am happy sometimes that I can do something, and it affects people in the way that I intended it to affect them, you know, or they can see a vision that I've tried to describe musically and they can come back and tell you that they saw it in some way you know, so that's what I strive for and I'm very happy with that you know. But in terms of, "could it have been better if I had a chance to rehearse the musicians for five hours, for three or four days, and then go right on the stage and do it?" then it might have been *[better]*. Or it might have incurred a disappointment, but we don't have those resources so we're still fortunate with the success that we have.

LB: Would you like to see the music of M'Boom in circulation for performance by future musicians?

WS: Yes, absolutely, I would. Because, you know, a lot of us have the compositions out there and the more they are performed then the more attention and perhaps future royalties we can receive from that.

[Warren explains that he is working with a percussion grad student intern at the New School to help organize his archives]

[What follows is a collection of email and phone correspondences between May 2016 and May 2018]

LB: Much of the political discourse in the music at that time (1970s) focused on issues of race, ethnicity and class. M'Boom was an all-male group. Did you think at the time about gender? How did people talk about it then?

WS: When "M'BOOM" was organized, we did not consider Gender Issues. Max Roach came up with the idea of forming a Percussion Ensemble that was centered in the concept of "African-American Classical Music" (commonly called "Jazz"). There were already Percussion Ensembles in African Culture of course, and many famous Composers were writing compositions for Percussion Ensembles in Western Cultures as well. Max selected 6 "Jazz" Drummers who were familiar with that tradition, and had experience with the whole spectrum of Percussion instruments. Eventually, he added two voices who were familiar with African Hand Drums and Percussion. There were Women performing on these Instruments during the time, but none within Max's professional circle. He selected people he was personally familiar with. Many of us had worked with him on other projects. We were within 15 years of age apart, that is to say of the same generation. He was familiar with our musical

styles both as Composers and Performers. It has become more obvious in recent years that many Women are now prominent in all areas of Percussion Performance. In 1969, when "M'BOOM" was formed, there were prominent Women in "Jazz" and Classical Percussion, as well as commercial music. Elaine Jones was a Tympanist in New York, (New York City Opera and Ballet orchestras) She later joined the San Francisco Opera, along with Japanese Bassoonist, (I think). Both left within two years, partially due to reluctance of other orchestra personal to accept them as equals. I think things have improved somewhat since then. But there is still a lack of and room for many more female performers in the field. I'm pleased to see many more female students now than there were then. I don't think there is any shortage of Female performers at present. Just as in Professional Athletics, the presence of Female percussionists is no longer unusual in the music scene. We perhaps could have done more than we did. There were women then that were respected in "Jazz". It was just as difficult and probably more exclusive in Classical music and Broadway Shows. That resistance lasted far longer than in "Jazz" and Popular Music. The struggle (however) continues.

LB: When/ how did you start studio WIS?

WS: In 1959 (approximately) I took over a loft space on 59th street near 10th Avenue. It was on the 5th floor of a 6 story walk-up, with a shared bathroom in the hallway. The Kitchen sink doubled as a bathtub. We used the space as a rehearsal space which we shared with other groups. One of them was called "The Mug Wumps." They soon changed their name to "The Mamas and the Pappas." In 1967 I took over another Loft from Peter Berry, another Percussionist friend, in a brownstone, at 151 west 21st street. This became "Studio WIS". We stayed at this location until the end of 1999, when all the brownstones in the block were torn down.

LB: When did Max Roach start showing an interest in the space? How did that space and your conversations with Max shape the beginnings of the percussion project?

WS: Max Roach began using the space to rehearse his groups, because we had a Piano, Drum Set and Amps. In time people would come across the fire escape to listen to the rehearsals. So eventually we began producing concerts in the evenings with various groups. Many of the other lofts were beginning to do the same thing, which created the "Loft Jazz Movement" if you could call it that. At one point ,we organized a Festival to compete with the "Newport Jazz Festival." We attracted a lot of international fans as well as local people. Max Roach brought us the idea of organizing a Percussion Ensemble based upon the concepts of African-American Classical Music" (usually called Jazz). He selected 5 other Percussionists, Freddie Waits, Omar Clay, Roy Brooks, Joe Chambers and myself. Since my studio had a full complement of Percussion Instruments, we began rehearsing weekly, for almost a year, and then began performing and touring all over the world.

LB: How did collaborations with other musicians in and around the NYC loft scene help shape M'Boom's sound in the earlier years?

WS: This is a difficult question to answer precisely. One idea that did seem to catch on was the evolution of several same instrument ensembles that developed in "Studio WIS" and other loft spaces, such as; Tuba, Bass Violin, Baritone Sax, Trumpet, Piano, Trombone, as well as Brass, Woodwind, String and Chamber Ensembles, performing composed and improvised music.

LB: Freddie Waits, in an interview about M'Boom, states that part of the formative experience for him was a group of men coming together. Was there any sense of specifically male camaraderie? Not simply in a sexist or misogynist way, but also in relation to common struggles, emotional needs, etc.?

WS: Oh absolutely. Men, if you will pardon the term, can be just at "bitchy" as everyone else.

LB: Everyone has emotional needs!

WS: Oh absolutely. What happens is everyone wants to be the alpha male and if it hadn't been for Max Roach being the Alpha Male of the group and the rest of us being around the same age, we'd probably have had fur flying all over the place. But everybody admired him so much that we just subsided ourselves to whatever his decisions were. And he knew as a leader himself, because he had gone through a lot of rough situation before he became a leader as well. He instilled in us the ability to be good leaders in our own right, and passed around the leadership depending upon who presented a musical composition that we had to learn and had to play and then that person had to be the big boss. I grant his tutorship with helping me to develop that kind of a personality later on in life. To see somebody just command that kind of respect from everybody else is just something that you kind of try to get to.

INTERVIEW WITH ELI FOUNTAIN

[The following conversation took place on April 26, 2016, by phone]

Leah Bowden: What was the vision that was originally planned for M'Boom and does it live on today?

Eli Fountain: Yeah, the vision still lives on. The vision is to use all the instruments in the diaspora and apply it to a world music kind of a vision, you know, the way Americans take things and use them. We're not, and we've never been like an "ethnic" band per se but we use all the different musics to arrive at a sound. To explore the world of sound.

LB: What were the building blocks that you used to do that?

EF: The building blocks are all the experiences that all the people have in the group, in rhythm and melody and so forth. You get together and you kind of forge some sort of, you get a bond out of all the things that people have. Everybody brings something to the table and you kind of look at what you got, a kind of "stew" thing. You take all the different ingredients and you come out with something that's nice.

LB: As far as different rhythms and sounds that you used that were from traditions other than your own, were there specific traditions that were more relevant than others?

EF: The only tradition is the American tradition, and that tradition is taking stuff, all the different things that make us who we are. We take stuff from the Caribbean, the Americans, we've got influences from Africa, Native Americans, everything. We've got jazz, everybody, so we bring all that to the table and come out with different cookie cutter type, you get all the different shapes and colors.

LB: Did you supply original compositions for the group?

EF: I did something called "That's It." I think that's on Live at S.O.B.'s. But I also have my own percussion ensemble now, Eli Fountain's Percussion Discussion. You can find it on iTunes, Amazon, CDBaby.com...

LB: What material does Percussion Discussion perform?

EF: All the material is my material. There are two particular pieces, though, one is by Max, "It's Time," that I rearranged. We've got a couple recordings of that. And we do something called "No Fear," which is "Fear Not" by Tony Williams, which was performed in Europe. We did it in Europe with M'Boom with Tony Williams but we never got a chance to record that because he died the week that we were supposed to record it, so I recorded it with my percussion ensemble.

LB: And your percussion ensemble is based in New York City?

EF: Yes it is, and Warren Smith who is a founding member of M'Boom is on that recording.

LB: Do you guys publish the sheet music or is it just for the group?

EF: It's just for the group, I haven't published any of the sheet music. Some of the music for M'Boom is published in a book that Joe Chambers and Warren did. Some of them are, in some form. There are a couple of ensembles do my music, like a couple colleges and I sent them the music, so it is available in that form. People get in touch with me and I send it to them.

LB: Were you influenced by percussion ensembles from the Western Classical percussion tradition as well?

EF: Well of course I studied percussion in college. I went to Cincinnati Conservatory and a very famous high school, Cass technical high school in Detroit which turned out many, many musicians. So I did that there, but as a kid I studied classical music, I played in the Detroit Youth Symphony and when I went to college I was a sub for the Cincinnati Symphony, Cincinnati Ballet, Cincinnati Opera Orchestras, and in New York I did Brooklyn Philharmonic.

LB: Did you play solo percussion, or the ensemble pieces by Reich, Cage, Xenakis, those people?

EF: Well, yeah, there's stuff that I did, Poulenc, I have played from the percussion solos.. Elliott Carter, some Vic Firth solos, all of that stuff is part of your normal study. But to the extent that it actually influenced a lot of things, not really. Not musically per se. You learn how to make setups and you learn how to operate out of a station, you know, where you have to devise a setup. I mean, it's useful on Broadway and other things like that where you have to play several instruments and then you have a station. So to that extent, but musically, it's still all of the things you listen to, if you listen to Balinese music, whatever it is you listen to, and you're able to put it in some context that it makes sense for other people to listen to [it].

[Contemporary Classical Music] is more for study purposes... I mean, when's the last time you went out to listen to Iannis Xenakis? *[laughs]*

LB: Sometimes I have to but I don't particularly want to.

EF: You know what I mean? If you have a party in your house and you want people to have a nice time and you're sitting around drinking, are you listening to Marvin Gaye? Or are you listening to Vic Firth? No! I mean, the function is different. Music has a function, a lot of music has a function.

LB: What about the ways that some of those composers were dealing with Notation? Joe Chambers says he used pretty much standard notation for M'Boom and thought of it like a jazz ensemble.

EF: You're trying to get people to play the music so you've got to give them a road map. The more ways you have of marking out the trails of what you're trying to do the better. There's graphic notation you can do that, there's standard Western notation, you can do that. So to the extent that you're trying to get it played and you want those ideas realized, yeah, you use traditional notation.

LB: But there was crossover as well, with experimental notation techniques being used, not only by academic composers but also by musicians such as Wadada Leo Smith for example...

EF: He came right to mind, yes.

LB: But you guys weren't doing that so much with M'Boom then.

EF: Not so much. The idea is to be able to play it on the stage without using music so we can pay more attention to the performance. So, whereas you might bring it in, we'd have to memorize it because Max was NOT about us having music on the stage. It's very much the same concept I had when I was music director for Savion Glover for many years. We'd memorize the music. The dancers remember choreography, they don't bring anything on stage they remember the steps so that's what the idea is. You can pay more attention to the music if you're not tied to the page. Now, the rare occasion for that is a piece that Tony [Williams] wrote that we did and it was necessary for us to read it so we did. But most times, nah, we didn't do that. And even for the Tony Williams piece, we did that because that's what the nature of the beast was.

LB: Do you think part of the memorization was not wanting to come across as too "Western"?

EF: Well, that's part of it, but the idea is that you're paying attention to the music. There's an aural tradition AND oral tradition that we adhere to. So, to the extent that it's necessary, yeah, but other time's we're not trying to do that. We're trying to keep things in a certain context. We're trying to keep it to a minimum. Anything that can't be memorized, at least in my ensemble we're going to read, but we're trying not to do that you know so that we can actually get to the performance.

LB: You guys were developing a whole new sound, learning new instruments and rhythms and synthesizing these studies in to the sound. To what degree was M'Boom accessible to listeners?

EF: I think it's accessible to listeners, that's the thing, you take all of these complex ideas and then you make them accessible. So, yeah, the idea is that people are supposed to be able to sit back and listen and tap their feet and do different things. We're trying NOT to make it not accessible. It needs to be accessible. You want kids to listen to it, you want people to hear it, all over the world that hear a little bit of themselves in it.

LB: Were you reacting against certain traditions that weren't accessible, that were actually difficult to listen to?

EF: Not really, Max did all kinds of collaborations with Kodo drummers and all kinds of people. In 92 we did Spain, World's Fair with Enrique Morente with the Flamenco, because that's the "people's music" so we are trying to get in there and at the same time, show that we can compose music with all the different things that we learn about Stretto, and all the things we learn about Fugue and all that other stuff and try to make it happen, you know what I mean?

LB: So you were drawing from genres that you specifically identified as people's music?

EF: Yeah, and there is an intellectual affect to everything so of course the composers want to compose. But it doesn't mean anything if that audience is sitting there and they're not tapping their feet and they're not reacting to it physically and spiritually. Everybody can write some stuff and say, look at me and look what I did but it doesn't do anything and it doesn't translate if people don't react to it.

LB: Were you trying to cultivate a specific audience or were you trying to appeal to as broad of an audience as possible?

EF: As broad of an audience as possible.

LB: M'Boom still performs today, do you still play with them?

EF: Yes, with Joe and Warren and Ray Mantilla.

LB: And who else has joined up in recent years?

EF: In recent years Bobby Sanabria has been with us. But the last concert we did was with strings down in Atlanta. And in the past couple of years we did a collaboration with the World Saxophone Quartet, but we can only do that every once in a while because everybody is spread out.

LB: Much of the political discourse at the time that M'Boom developed was focused on race, ethnicity and class, did you guys ever talk about gender? Have you ever had female percussionists in the group?

EF: No, not at all, never.

LB: Is that something that is intentional, keeping it an all-male group?

EF: Well, that's not something that anybody thinks about. You get your guys together and you hit [*laughs*]. That's not the way it works, you know. Yeah, you get your guys together then you hit!

LB: [*laughs*] Okay...

EF: Now in Percussion Discussion I've had a couple [women performing]. But, I mean, that's never a consideration; you go, you call your boys, and then you hit!

LB: So it's also in context of the environment, who you know and want to work with.

EF: Well that's an afterthought. No one said, "Let's get the boys together," You say "let's call Bobby..." You call your peeps and then you hit.

LB: What did Western music mean in the 70s and how did that change?

EF: I don't know what that is when you say Western music. I'm a fourth generation musician, my father played with Marvin Gaye, he's on *What's Going On*, so I don't know what that is, it's just music. Western music, I mean, what *is* that? I don't even think of it like that. I mean, when I was a kid I listened to Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, Ravi Shankar, I had albums by them as a kid. So, yeah, you listen to music! And lots of it!

LB: The only reason that question came up in my mind, was because when M'Boom was developing the early pieces in its repertoire there was a lot of modernist stuff going on that had entered in to the jazz world, bebop had happened already, and so it feels like M'Boom's sound was kind of anti-modern and I'm wondering if it is reacting to the idea of "Western music," and where it was going in that moment.

EF: Well you have to think about World Music, you've got to think about things that everybody has in common. World beat or whatever it is, is still highly functional and it's gotten more complex. I mean you're saying Western music, how about *Prince*? That's western music [*Laughs*]. That's straight up... those overly broad titles and stuff, that bugs

me. It bugs me to a certain degree because there is plenty of intellect in it, and it *is* growing in different ways. There's stuff that you can do now that you couldn't do before because they've got instruments that can do more things than they used to be able to do.

LB: Right, well I guess I'm thinking about how European Classical music has this teleological *narrative* to it.

EF: A lot of the time what's happening is, they're trying to show off composition skills. The music before was functional, you had gavots, you had waltzes, all kinds of dances; the music was functional. People forget that the music was functional. You know what I mean, and even with Bach, that music was functional because it was in church so there were certain things that they needed to have. So the idea of function, has been the narrative that goes across all lines. Function-- what is this music for? What do you do with this music? When do you listen to this music? That goes across *all* the lines.

LB: Was M'Boom a collective?

EF: Yeah.

LB: What did you learn about cooperation and community based on working with top drummers who were all used to being leaders...

EF: Top *Percussionists*.

LB: Oh okay, thank you. What were the internal dynamics of the group, for getting the work done, what did you learn?

EF: Well, how should I count the ways? How should I measure the... the background, the geography of where everybody came from has a lot to do with it. Freddie Waits was from Mississippi and he knew all the marching band concepts. We could have him come up with marching, and [he played] in pop groups, funk groups. Then Max coming up through the bebop period through the first generation of beboppers with Bird and all that so there's the whole element of that and then him playing timpani, studying and recording timpani, there's that aspect, so all of that comes into the brain trust. Roy Brooks coming from Detroit, which has a whole style of playing drums and so forth, much less playing the saw and the pans like he did, so there's a whole aspect coming from *that*, and Warren Smith coming from Chicago. His dad played in the Noble Sissie band and his mother was a harpist, so he was trained classically. And so, all of those different things add up to little tidbits that you get and it doesn't even occur to you until later, what it is. There's a thing that comes from everybody.

LB: Was it humbling as already-accomplished musicians to go into this kind of educational setting together?

EF: Well it's always humbling to play with fine musicians no matter what it is. I guess the whole idea of Max bringing me to New York to play with his ensemble was the most extraordinary thing but once you get there, you have to hit! There's no time for thinking about *Wow, wow, wow!* We just came in, and it was trial by fire.

LB: Have you heard the music of M'Boom performed by other groups?

EF: No, except for the ensembles that I've coached that have played some M'Boom music. Normally I coach my music but I have coached a couple of M'Boom tunes. Again, with my ensemble. I've never heard of some other entity doing M'Boom music, no.

LB: What were some of your favorite arrangements to play on?

EF: Well, *It's Time* is always fun. The recording that we did, Max Roach didn't play the drums, he played the bass drum. We tried to convince him to play the drums, but no!

LB: Why was that?

EF: Well, he just on that particular day he's like, *I'm tired of playing the drums. I'm not going to play the drums today!* We all attempted to play something on the song, and none of us liked what we did so we did it without the drums, and he played the bass drum! He said, "I'm a percussionist, I don't feel like playing the drums" Okay fine, you know, so we came up with a whole other ethereal groove on it!

We all tried to play something, Freddie Waits played the drums on it, Omar Clay played the drums on it, and none of us liked any of it, we kept going, "man, it's a Max Roach beat" [*laughs*] you know, he's gotta play it so we ended up doing it without the drum set, but on my CD I put it back in and I change the drums and how we do it.

LB: Which album is that on?

EF: That version might be on *Collage*... that might be the one... you'll have to check.

I also have fun, I also like "Giselle". That's by Joe..

They're are neat tunes, they all have a function. They all have a purpose in our grand scheme of things. When I did "That's it," that's like an ending tune, we didn't have one that we could go out on, and he asked, what do you want to call it? And I said, "'That's it.' You know... the concert's over!"

LB: The function of the music is to get people moving, and to get everyone feeling it?

EF: And to open their minds to the possibility of SOUND. 'Cuz it's not about bass, drums and piano like that, the different openness of using percussion instruments, there's a sound that we can get without bass players and pianos blocking everything up.

LB: Did Max Roach change your understanding of what it meant to be a drummer or a percussionist?

EF: Not really because I grew up in Detroit so I've always known great percussionists. Roy Brooks was around when I was growing up. But it was understanding how he approached the idea that helped open up and encouraged my train of thought, because I knew that it could be done but he was doing it.

LB: And how would you describe his approach?

EF: His approach was a universal approach and Joe always said that, if you can play the drums with the right touch, there's not reason that you can't play the timpani... with the right touch. There's no reason you can't apply that to the marimba or the xylophone, which is basically a bunch of little drums. They're all little drums, they've all got names on them, each note has a name, but they're all basically little drums.

LB: That has to do with Max calling his drum set a multiple percussion instrument.

EF: Yeah. It's about sound.

LB: Were political messages encoded into the work of M'Boom?

EF: Well, it's not encoded. The fact that we exist is the statement [*laughs*]. The fact that this group exists is a statement. You're trying to do a group of color, and you've got this technically unwieldy group with all these instruments and so forth, so the idea of even trying to do this, and it's not electronic, there are so many fronts that are political. You're always trying to convince promoters that this is something that people want to hear, but they have an idea of what a DRUM ensemble is. You're telling them "Look, it's a Percussion Orchestra." All of that in the mix. The fact that it exists is a statement in itself.

LB: Warren mentioned to me that the group was thinking about Black liberation, with the decolonization of Africa going on, integration and everything else... and that the content spoke to that... were you trying to build bridges?

EF: Building bridges is part of the idea of using all of the musics of the diaspora in our concerts. Everybody everywhere should hear a little bit of themselves in it. You know, a little something of them in it. There's not anywhere you can go in the world where [people] don't hear a little bit of something, you know, that's in the music, you know what I mean?

LB: But it's the African diaspora and its offshoots that you're working with primarily.

EF: Well the offshoots are from everywhere, whether it's Brazil or whatever, even if it's just the instrument, you know, we use pans even though we're not playing Calypso!

LB: Yes. And what does diaspora mean to you?

EF: It's the family of humanity, the 'all of us humans' out here. Everywhere we go, people come out with tunes behind that. We may not use them all, but Warren is notorious for taking his staff paper, and I would too! On the road, when we hear something we write it out. It's easier now, kids walk around with their telephones and if they hear something they tape it. Wherever you are, if I'm in Japan and I hear something great, or something simple, I'll try to remember it or put it down in some kind of way... if I'm in India, or wherever. It's all fair game.

LB: New York City in the early 1970s was a pretty crazy place to be. How did that environment influence the music?

EF: Well, I got there in '81. But it was still an insane time [*laughs*]. It was crazy, but so many of the masters were still alive. Philly Joe Jones, Papa Joe Jones, Danni Richmond, I mean these guys were all still around, you know, Art Taylor, Art Blakey, Elvin Jones, so [*laughs*], so if you didn't... I mean, it was a fascinating time to be in the city. And there was still a large element of freedom and lawlessness that was going on, because you had all the free music, and I mean the Butch Morris'es and all the people doing things, the Sunny Murray's, so you know, if you were gonna do something, that was the time to get it done! It's gotten more conservative since then, but then, everything was fair game. Everything was fair game. People doing stuff, people weren't afraid to do things, and people were accepting and they were looking for new things to be doing. Like I said it's gotten far more conservative now than it was then, and all those great masters were still around and you could see them... up close!

LB: What did you guys think about the early MC's and the beginnings of hip hop which was also developing in the 70s and 80s New York?

EF: For me hip hop was nothing new, if you listen to the Last Poets, who've been around forever so that was nothing new, but it was good because I liked the idea that these guys were doing their stuff underground without support from the regular media. They were packing the garden in different places just by doing their thing on foot. They weren't getting any radio play. And that, I loved. I don't care what they were doing, as long as it's outside the regular mainstream and as it turns out now they were right because it's a hip-hop world now! [Laughs].

The hip hop and rap at that time was mostly positive. KRS-One and... you didn't get to the misogyny until later! The thing about music is, there's always something to hate. If you hated your parents' music, and that level of love or hate may be different now, you know I just don't listen to it, but I always told people, if you don't like this, you might not like what comes *after* this. When they didn't like disco and they tried to almost burn down Wrigley Field, well, if you didn't like disco then you're gonna hate rap. You didn't like rap, well okay, then you're gonna hate gangsta rap! There's always something to hate.

And I'm thinking you know, Prince just passed. The stuff that I like, well I'm a Prince fan, I first saw him in like '79. My favorite tunes are the things you can't say on TV, like Sexy Mother Fucker... that's one of my favorite tunes! And Irresistible Bitch [laughs], those are great tunes you know! But there it is, you know. There it is, there's always something that you're not gonna like but if you get rid of that, there's something else that you REALLY won't like! [Pauses] But then there's stuff that you really might like.

INTERVIEW WITH JOE CHAMBERS

[The following conversation took place on March 19th 2016, by phone]

Leah Bowden: What was the vision originally planned for M'Boom and how does it live on today?

Joe Chambers: Well it was actually the brainchild of the late Max Roach. You know, the visionary Max Roach, and actually it grew out of something I guess they used to call it "Rise and Fly." Now what that is, is, years ago, now and you know what I'm getting ready to explain to you might have been occurring way back in the history of jazz, particularly jazz drumming. As far as I know about it, in New York, at Birdland, the original Birdland they used to have what they call "Gretch Drum Night" and what that was, is they would get four or five of the top drummers, and what I saw and what I'm saying is, it probably happened years ago too I imagine, but this is as far as what I know. When I arrived on the scene in '61 [or] '62, they used to have Gretch Drum Night, Gretch was the drum company, and they would get people like Art Blakey, Max Roach, Philly Joe sometimes, Elvin Jones, Roy Haynes, they would gather these drummers and they would have four or five drum sets on the stage and they would have a band, like a house band that played for all of them. Then each one of those particular drummers, would take their turn with the band and then play long solos, and in the climax they would have all the drummers together. Now, this was an ongoing scenario; they would have it periodically in the club, you know, and it was really a big night, really big crowds and everything. So, and they used to tour with that concept, they used to go on tours, worldwide, Europe, Japan, with that same concept. Max, Philly, Shelly Manne, he was a part of it... different settings of the leading guys. So, when Max Roach called me and subsequently the original members of the organization, he threw out the format and I thought that that was what it was gonna be, but he said "No that's now what we gonna do; we're gonna deal with percussion. We're gonna deal with the percussion family of instruments." And that's a whole other things. So, we had to learn how to play those various percussions. The original people was myself, Roy Brooks--the late, he's gone, he's dead, Omar Clay--he's gone, Freddie Waits, he's gone too, and myself and Warren Smith. And, we would meet every Saturday just to practice, no jobs or anything 'cuz we essentially had to learn, in other words, everybody played the drum set but we had to learn to play the mallets, that's when I started to get into the mallets (the mallets being, vibraphone, marimba. Xylophone); we had to learn to play the timpani properly. Now, Warren Smith he already could do--he already was learned in all of his stuff. You know, learned through school. We had to learn how to play the timpani, we had to learn how to play the hand drums, the congas and stuff and African drums and various, and then the small stuff the idiophonic instruments we all, there's certain techniques--maracas, shekeres, all that stuff. This is what we did in 1970. Yeah, 1970 the summer of 1970 Max Roach assembled us all and we rehearsed every Saturday at Warren Smith's studio just learning how to get a sound, just learning how to play the instruments, and getting a sound. And that, we did that for a whole year. That's how it developed.

LB: You didn't go to music school?

JC: Well, yeah, we all went to music school. But I didn't go to music school to learn how to play vibraphone, marimba, no I didn't go to music school to study percussion. I went to music school to learn how to compose, and stuff like that. Warren Smith, he was a

percussion major way back in the 50s. He was the only one who essentially went to study academically, the percussion in our system. We were not percussionists in that sense, not even Max, so it was like that so... I was a piano player, I had studied and played piano a long time, you know when I was young and everything so I had keyboard knowledge so it wasn't really, to me, playing the mallets was not, I mean even to day you say this around mallet players and they get mad but it was easy to transform from the drums to the mallets for me 'cuz I needed a keyboard. I just had to get the sticking.

LB: So before M'Boom you didn't play mallets at all?

JC: No, I didn't play mallets at all. I was around mallets a lot 'cuz I worked with Bobby Hutcherson, we made a lot of records, I worked with Milt Jackson, I was around the mallets but I had no inkling, even back there when I was playing with Bobby and all that but I didn't have the sense of mallets being a percussion instrument. I didn't have a sense of it, you know, it's funny and a lot of people today today, I mean, nonmusicians and people, they don't understand the concept of vibraphone being percussive. They don't; they think it's something else. I think you know what I'm talking about, you're a musician you should know what I'm talking about. But I'm saying, people, I'm telling you, even like producers and stuff... people who know, but a lot of people don't have the understanding that the vibraphone is a percussion instrument; it's a thing that you *strike*.

LB: Right.

JC: You strike it. You have to hit it! Sometimes you've got to hit it hard like you hit a drum. And people don't, they don't understand that.

LB: So you guys needed your own repertoire for this instrumentation...

JC: Yeah, we were not gonna play the uh, you know the Western, we were not gonna read, you know, music. To this day we don't take music on the stand, that's something we learned from Max Roach. You know we wrote songs and arranged and I wrote a lot but we didn't, we don't take music on the stand and we were not gonna play... We all became familiar, especially Warren, he was familiar with the litany of the body of work of percussion composers, you know there's a whole lot of that material, you should know that.

LB: Yes.

JC: But we were not gonna do like that, we weren't gonna do that.

LB: So did you listen to, speaking of those composers, any of the European...

JC: Yeah, we listened to it. I listened to it, in fact, Warren listened to a lot of it and Max was familiar with it and I became very familiar with it through teaching and stuff. Michael Colgrass and, oh I got a whole bunch of, I got a lot of the material. I listened to it and then these guys out of New York-- Philip Glass and a couple other dudes.

LB: Steve Reich...

JC: Yeah, yes Steve Reich. And I listened to a lot of it, and I've got music and scores and stuff, but we were determined not to to that. We weren't gonna do anything like that. In other words, our approach to it was to approach it in the tradition of the jazz, in the jazz instrumental tradition of the Duke Ellingtons and you know, bebop and everything. How that is put together, with the improvisation as being... setting up songs, you know so I wrote a lot of stuff, my approach to it, and everybody in fact had different approaches. My approach to

the M'Boom and percussion was to treat it as a small jazz band. You can have the bassline played by the timpani, and bass marimba, you have some chords that could be played by the vibraphone, marimba, and you have melody playing instruments like vibes, xylophone, and stuff like that. And we set up tunes, I set up songs that had AABA type forms and then a place for improv-- just like they do in the jazz bands. Now, Warren's approach was different; he approached it in terms of textures. He had a piece called *Elements of a Storm*, which was basically, his approach was in terms of textures. And then I later, and rest of us found out that's the way you can go. You can approach it like woods, woods on woods, metals, you know metallic sounds, and you've got idiophonics, you know the idiophonics, and just different, throwing different texture combinations together. And so, that was his approach to it.

LB: Were there some compositions that combined the two approaches as well?

JC: Well yeah, I was bringing in those type tunes, Max had some tunes, Max was bringing in stuff kinda like the way like the jazz tradition, you know with melody and chords, with a bassline, the timpani, a good timpani player can play a bassline. You can do, play a lot of ostinato stuff, you know ostinato patterns, vamps and stuff. Then you know we have to deal, the other thing is learning the rhythms. Which um, what I mean by the rhythms is the rhythms of this hemisphere, like the latin claves, that's a whole, we had to learn how, so we got Mantilla in there and Steve Barrios to bring the Afro -Cuban idiom: the guaguancos and rhumbas and bembes and stuff like that.

LB: So which cultures were you most interested in?

JC: Well in terms of knowing percussion, it's really a world music, really it's really a world music culture. So, that's the, I would say it would be a broad-based interpretation because you're dealing with, and first of all we all learn, and I learned this, the percussion family has the broadest range of textures and sounds than any family in the orchestra. That's including woodwinds and brass, anything, it has the widest range of textures. Think about it [*laughs*], it does! And you're talking about hundreds and hundreds of instruments in your percussion family. So, you have a very broad base to look at. You have the jazz tradition we're coming out of, we have the compositional tradition of the modern co-called "classical" composers, the so-called "third world," you can deal with African, Asian, we examined the balafon tradition, we certainly are close to that... Then you've got, of course, you've got Afro-Cuban and Brazil, so we had to familiarize ourselves with all of the rhythms, the Bembes and the Batucadas and all of that. So, it's a world music situation with percussion. That's the fact of the matter.

LB: So you were trying to be as comprehensive as possible...

JC: Right. Yeah. Using our jazz base as a point of departure, of course we were all like jazz people so that's your point where you start from.

LB: In musical discourse there is often a tension between, on the one hand, the idea of music as a pancultural space of articulating imagined relationships, and on the other hands the idea of music that's rooted in particular cultures, speaking to ideas about authenticity and cultural specificity. How to M'Boom negotiate this terrain?

JC: When Max Roach was alive, he was like the center, you know, and everything was centered around him in a sense, and he got, any major jobs we got, were gotten by him so that automatically puts us in the "jazz" sphere, which is fine. So, M'Boom, then and now presented and presents major problems. Major cartage problems, logistics, where are you

gonna do it? How are you gonna get, nah let me tell you.. Let me tell you M'Boom was so major, and it was so major I'll tell you and I'll get to that but, Max had a deal with Ludwig somehow I don't know the particulars but they gave him a whole line of percussion instruments, I mean a complete line, timpani and all that, and we used that, and but it's a cartage nightmare. See because if you go to Europe, we used to take those instruments. You can vie for renting stuff but you're taking a big gamble when you want to rent something in Europe. You're taking a tremendous gamble. So we used to take the whole line of percussion and I'm telling you, the fees were astronomical, just getting the stuff there, getting it there.

LB: You took the instruments from here to Europe?

JC: Yes, yes. Nah, we didn't rent.

LB: Wow.

JC: Nah, we didn't rent. Uh.... we did do a tour where we rented, that is we had the promoters and people, and it was a nightmare you know, it was really like, you know they, you even have to pay for that. If you go to Italy or something, or even France, if you don't go to Paris, the instruments they come up with can be very, very antiquated, it can be very strange. So, that is a problem in itself, and then you have to have a place to do it. You have to have a big place to present this stuff. You have to have a big stage you gotta be outside or you have to have a big amphitheater a big place. M'Boom was uh.. *[laughs]* M'Boom was a headache, I'll tell you that and I just did something, just giving you an idea, I promoted something in the summer of 2014, couple years ago, and shit I went into a hole. I'm still in the hole, I lost 20-something thousand dollars, and I can't afford it, I lost that money trying to produce something. M'Boom is something, and then you have, whatever we did, any major stuff as I said was by way of Max Roach and he paid us very well, individually we were paid ampilly, you know, so I tried to maintain that standard so I went into a hole in 2014 in Atlanta and I still haven't recovered. So, M'Boom is a headache, man, in that sense.

Just generally speaking now, I produced, just tried to produce this show in Atlanta in 2014, put out the money, like I said lost that money, and I thought we could get a record out of it, and recording percussion is a nightmare also. So, I thoughts that I could, we had a live recording, and I didn't think it out right and it wasn't recorded properly. When you record, everything has to be mic'd. Everything, everything. And percussion brings that, really right to the front, so then I thought I could get the record out, and it's just wasn't sounding, and I thought, we had this agent that was gonna try to book something for us in Europe, but Europe is not like, Europe is hurting, in terms of the music business I mean they still have people tour but nobody is putting out that kind of money now. So, we didn't get to tour and it's just, nobody's willing to put up that money, to put up the money it takes for something like that, for something like M'Boom. What I tried to do I tried to have strings and percussion. I hired a string group, in Atlanta, so we had strings and percussion but nobody's putting out that kind of money.

LB: Did you play at universities?

JC: Well yeah, we've done somethings, went to Dartmouth and in the beginning we did, we went to, oh where was it, a place in Jersey... Most of the work that we did with M'Boom were tours to Europe and the jazz festivals that was the litany of the work that we did. And, we did a thing in Austria at Graz University. It's a big time University, and they feature percussion. We did something over there.

LB: How did working with M'Boom intersect with and inform your own priorities as a musician?

JC: Well, [*laughs*] that just speaks for itself. The fact of the matter is, after I lost all that money two years ago, and I have various size bands, quintets and stuff like that. The less is better, really, and now I have a quartet. So after I did that recording and we did that show two years ago and there was supposed to be a recording out of it and it didn't come out right and all the money I lost, the company I was trying to put that project, M'Boom with strings to the company Savant, and they were there, and they weren't helping with the money cuz it was all out of my pocket and so they wouldn't take it because it wasn't right, it didn't sound right and so now (I'm just explaining), my latest recording I just did it, and it's out, just myself with a trio and I'm overdubbing, I overdub vibes. A basic drums, piano and bass with me overdubbing. And it works out fine.

LB: So in your own music do you have more of a focus on percussion in the arrangements now?

JC: Well yeah, percussion is always a focus, it's always there and the fact of the matter is, like I said you know I consider myself a mallet player now, and a drummer you know everybody knows me, but I play, in other words that's why I did it I can play, I lay down the tracks and I play the vibes over it. I've played enough vibes I can solo and everything else, so...

LB: Alright well, let's talk a little bit about when the economics of the group worked a little bit better... when you guys were writing the music were you aiming to have the sound be accessible to listeners or challenging or both?

JC: Well you know the thing is, in terms of that, you know it's just like the term commercial. You know, everything is commercial. Everything is commercial in the sense that everything is produced for an audience. For an audience. It's just a matter of getting it to the audience.

LB: Yeah.

JC: The lack of appeal, or no appeal, it's all around marketing and promo, it's how are you getting it out there that's the key to all of this, in that sense. So, in terms of getting to an audience and if you're thinking about getting to an audience, you know, that really, that doesn't work as far as I'm concerned. In other words, you can think about... I'll just give you this analogy. You've heard of the jukebox industry? The jukebox if years ago, in the 50s and 60s is when jazz had a very great presence and appeal and a part of it was because of the jukebox industry. Now the jukeboxes, on the jukeboxes which were all over the place in restaurants, bars, everywhere when I was coming up as a teen. Oh those jukeboxes you had most of the latest rhythm and blues but a lot of jazz. You had tremendous jazz on the jukebox and the reason why, I believe, and nobody said this but, you see the mob controlled the jukebox and see they liked jazz and they made sure that the jazz was in the jukebox. So, consequently, you could get a hit, you could get an instrumental hit. Are you old enough to remember a song called Poinciana by Ahmad Jamal?

LB: I'm not old enough to remember but I do know the song.

JC: Poinciana was a huge hit in 1959/ 1960. It was such a hit that teenagers used to walk around with the 45 in their hand, this is 1959/ 1960. It was that big of a hit. Now you know the jukebox industry is no more, there is no more jukebox industry. My point being, is

that in those day's, we're talking the 50s and 60s jazz per se had tremendous presence, it had much more presence than it has today. Even with the advent of rock and roll-- rock and roll was really like just being nurtured back in those days, but jazz, jazz used to be on TV, and the jukebox industry was very paramount, and certain musicians took advantage of that and were successful. Consequently it made other musicians think, 'well I think I'm gonna try and get a hit,' and people were trying to play certain things to see if they could get a hit and it was not successful. It wasn't successful. Some of them were, most of them were not. See, so that's my point in terms of directing something to try to get, of course the jukebox industry is gone, people still try to play music, watered down like smooth jazz and stuff, to create a broader audience so to speak, but I've found, what it is, you have to do what's best, you have to do what you do best so it will come off. Cuz if you try to do, like, years ago, when these jazz cats was trying to get these hits, it was fake, you could hear it, the fake in the playing. I don't know if you know, you could hear it that it was not real. It was fake, fake jazz cats trying to be funky, you know, and you could hear it, so, and still some guys try to do that, but you gotta do what you do best that's what I found.

Behind the project of M'Boom was, when you think about it, there are lots of things that you could attempt to do, as a matter of fact, we did some commercials, Max Roach had got some of what we did on a TV commercial, promoting, what was the product? I don't even remember but he got some of the music on a TV commercial, probably from his contacts. When you think about so-called commerciality, percussion lends itself right to it. It's right in there, as percussive as all this stuff is, you could put something together that, you know you can do it but it's really in your connections, promo and all this in terms of commerciality. No matter what you're doing, it's all marketing, who you know, who can get your stuff there or get your stuff over here. Percussion can lend itself to a lot of commercial ideas, more accessible ideas I'll put it that way.

LB: Were you trying to cultivate an audience as you were developing your sound?

JC: When you think of the percussion, and when I say percussion, even so-called Western percussion, which I guess you could dub that's what we do because we're here in the West so we're dealing with timpanis, the drum set, marimbas, etc. blah blah blah, we did dealing with the tonal system, but you can branch off into all kinda other things, we got Brazilian percussion, we bring that in, Batucada instruments, all of that stuff. You can bring it into it. But in terms of what we did, what we actually got to present, it was more or less determined by Max Roach's presence. He was the biggest name and I guess I was the next biggest name in terms of jazz drummers. So he got the gigs and they were all related to jazz; they were jazz festivals and he had the biggest name; I had the next biggest name, jazz-wise. So what we were doing is jazz, it was related and associated with jazz and whatever the jazz was going on at the time. 'Course we were different, it was a different situation but we still had the jazz names.

LB: So you were basically trying to build on the audience that you already had.

JC: Right, right, yeah.

LB: Was M'Boom a collective?

JC: Our approach was collective. It was a collective idea, yeah, conceptually. We had some corporate papers, we had a corporate name, we had bank accounts. But as we learned, and see the other thing is, as we moved on we started to add, in other words we did something in the 80s with this World Saxophone Quartet, and we very recently tried to do

that, we did a tour in 2010 with the current M'Boom and World Saxophone Quartet. That's why I said, well M'Boom actually needs to branch off, that's why I got the strings, percussion and strings with a bass player and a saxophone player and strings so it becomes almost like an orchestra almost. So, that was my idea, it was time for M'Boom to stretch out, branch out to other things.

LB: But it was all approached with a collective mindset?

JC: We had corporate papers but see, even with that in mind Max Roach was still the forefront because he was the one that was getting all the work. And his name was the one, it was bigger, he had the big name and everything was centered around him. So you may think corporate but it's still coming out that way. It's coming out like the autocratic.

LB: So you guys were developing a whole new sound, you were learning unfamiliar instruments, you were drawing from the music of other cultures and synthesizing it into your music in new ways, what did that teach you about cooperation and community through that process?

JC: Everything was fine, we got along fine, but you see none of us could depend on M'Boom to make a living, we weren't working that enough. We didn't get that much work to depend on it. So we were all down with it, of course, yeah, it's just that none of us were able to devote our entire mode of operation around M'Boom, it was just not bringing in enough, but the cooperation was good, we got along with it, everybody was fine. It was fine, you know. We never got to the point where, Max Roach was trying to get M'Boom to be an entity in itself, that is, to be able to stand off on its own as an entity, even without his name. We never got to that point. We are at that point now because he's gone, but we never got to that point. Mainly because it just didn't work, for example you've heard of the modern jazz quartet? In the jazz world, specifically the modern jazz era, that would be from bebop on, there were approaches to cooperative and collective but it's mostly individuals, autocratic. Miles Davis band, Sonny Rollins band, you know like that. Dave Brubeck and his quartet, it's individuals, it's autocratic. There were approaches, Modern Jazz Quartet, they tried to do a collective; I think they did do a collective to a point, they did, but it wasn't a thing, I think individually they were more successful on their own, do you get my point?

I think that had a lot to do with the nature of the music industry, or the jazz business, industry, in other words you see more collectivism in the Rock world, now they have individuals too but you see more collectivism in the Rock world than in Jazz.

LB: That's interesting.

JC: Yeah, think about it. And for my, the fact is there too much individualism in jazz. They need more collectivisms. They need more group approaches.

LB: Have you heard the music of M'Boom performed by other groups before?

JC: No.

LB: Would you like to?

JC: Well, yes. Of course. Yes I would, yeah, I dropped some of M'Boom music to the group in the University of North Carolina, the percussion group up there, and I've got some of my music there, and some of Warren Smith's music is out there but as far as know it's not a widespread situation.

LB: Where are the rest of the charts now?

JC: Well the charts are basically divided between myself and Warren, really, the last of it. I have most of the charts, most of the music and charts that we have. Do you have an outlet for this?

LB: Yeah, I have a percussion ensemble in San Diego.

JC: Well maybe we can talk about getting some of the music out there.

LB: Definitely, I would love that. OK well let me ask a couple more questions and I'll be back in touch about that. What were some of your favorite M'Boom arrangements to play on?

JC: Well, my favorite M'Boom arrangements were mine [*laughs*]. One called *Gazelle Suite*, and one called *Circles*. I have a book, there is a book of M'Boom compositions that I compiled... and Omar Clay had one called *Onomatopoeia*.

LB: So how did the different members of the ensemble approach composition and notation for percussion?

JC: Well, we all approached it pretty much the way I described the way I approached it. We all laid it out like a melody, bassline, melody, etc., except for Warren's textural thing. We all laid it out like that, you know, where you put a melody where a melody can be played, chords, bassline etc. Like you're writing for a five, six-piece band or something.

LB: Yeah. So no, like, experimental stuff?

JC: None of that stuff that I think you're alluding to. I think I know what you're talking about, no, we never did nothing like that.

LB: By the time Max started M'Boom he had released groundbreaking music dealing explicitly with the early Civil Rights Movement, and declared that he would never again release music that wasn't political, so did you feel like there were political messages encoded into the percussion music?

JC: Well the thing of it is, there always, when you say political, well, explicitly political, no, when I think about it, no. Nobody... None of us, in fact I think he tried to avoid... You pay a price for doing that kind of stuff. There was no, political, well maybe it was implied, there's always something there, but nobody was saying "Alright, Freedom now, we want freedom now, we insist" nothing like that, no.

LB: But the tone of a lot of African American music at that time referenced Africa, you can find a lot of compositions, titles... I guess these imagined bridges with decolonization and representations of solidarity, these ideas are still aesthetically still in the work, no?

JC: Yeah, right, yeah.

EL OTRO LADO (THE OTHER SIDE)

As mentioned in the introduction, I assisted Joe Chambers and Music Subject Specialist Peter Mueller to archive 16 original percussion scores and parts by various members of M'Boom at the UC San Diego Geisel Library. We are in the process of adding more material to that collection at present. Hopefully the availability of sheet music will encourage future study and performance use.

In 2017 I arranged some of the charts for a new project, reimagining M'Boom's vision for solidarity and inclusiveness in a different setting—the Southern California/ Northern Mexico border region. The city of Tijuana is located just 28 miles from the UC campus. I enlisted musicians who were working as performers and educators on both sides of the border including Charlie Chavez, Ruben Hernandez, Dominico Hueso, Philip Bowden and myself, and several colleagues from UC San Diego's resident percussion ensemble red fish blue fish. These percussionists included Fiona Digney, Sean Dowgray, and Ben Rempel. We named the group *El Otro Lado*, meaning "The Other Side," which is a phrase I have often heard residents of Tijuana use to refer to the United States.

At a time in which fear and hostility were being projected onto our border spaces, our project called for a reinvigoration of a politics of solidarity, joy and friendship. Continuing and expanding upon M'Boom's musical and social concerns, we showcased musical exchanges taking place across social, political and geographic lines. In celebration of diversity and in resistance to bigotry, we wanted to affirm the power of music to strengthen human connections. In addition to strengthening lines of communication between San Diego and Tijuana, we presented new interpretations of these historically relevant works to the public. The program included *Circles*, *Jihad Es Mort (Landscapes)* and *Gazelle Suite* by Joe Chambers, *Elements of a Storm* by Warren Smith, *Onomatopoeia* by Omar Clay and *Jamaican Sun* by Roy Brooks. A recording of this concert is archived at UC San Diego.

GLOSSARY

Note: This dissertation makes use of a number of keywords and concepts. Some of the meanings can be a bit slippery - varying across a wide variety of discourses. To help the reader navigate I've attempted to define my understanding and use of some of these more "slippery" terms below.

Anti-modernism: Somewhat loosely paired with the term counter-modernity. Large-scale ideas and practices that exist both in relation to/ as part of and are outside of and critical of modernity and modernism. Ideas such as Marxism, ecology and Afrocentrism that seek to resolve the contradictions and are critical of the spatio-temporal alignment of capitalist-driven modernity. Temporally, anti-modernism often looks to the pre-modern past to help imagine and develop universalist ideals and future social relations. In the example of the Black Atlantic universalist ideals are inverted and displaced. Displaced in the sense that such universalist ideals form a rhizomatic network within a (displacing) diaspora. This diasporic understanding contrasts with and challenges the "placed", centered discourse of the modern nation state. Inverted in the sense that the universalist ideals develop from a point of resistance to oppression that is perpetuated in the name of Enlightenment ideals (slavery, colonialism, etc.). Specifically here in the formal sense that, as Paul Gilroy asserts, musical forms serve as repository of (encoded) universal ideals that come to challenge the West's recorded historical and legal documents (both in terms of form and content).

Black Atlantic: Refers to a global diaspora beginning with the slave trade and colonialism that circulates from Africa to the Americas, and back. This global circulation of people, culture, and ideas forms the basis for a wide-reaching counter-modernity—a set of common conditions and experiences that both cohabits and extends beyond European modernity.

Freedom *from*: Freedom that comes through the removal of barriers and constraints (i.e. rules, traditions, conventions, coercive or limiting structures, institutions).

Freedom *to*: make positive forms, to establish one's own rules, traditions, conventions, institutions, etc...

Jazz (music loosely referred to as): Although the term is derided by so many of the musicians under discussion, it's also important to recognize that the individual artists discussed share much in common. Later in life, Max Roach was a bit more pragmatic with regards to the term, preferring to refer to the music he played as "loosely referred to as jazz." I would extend this to discussions of avant-garde jazz as musicians "loosely referred to as avant-garde." Jazz in particular with regards to this dissertation serves as an important container for a particular form of musical modernism. From modernity to modernism, Jazz develops as a distinctly modern musical style that, emerging out of the commercial swing era, increasingly comes to define itself (via the Black Atlantic) in self-conscious, modernist, and universalizing terms. Often manifested in the adversarial, competitive relationship jazz musicians cultivated vis a vis similarly aspiring European classical music, part of the theoretical foundation of this dissertation is to take seriously a universalizing definition of the music 'loosely referred to as jazz'. A common progressive model for understanding jazz derived from dominant aesthetic categories is as follows: modern/ modernity (i.e. swing), modernism (i.e., bebop), avant-garde/ high modernist (i.e. free jazz), postmodern (i.e. jazz fusion). While I don't generally speaking adhere to this model, it's important to be aware of as it frames much of the scholarly and historical work on music that is loosely referred to as jazz.

Modernism: An aesthetic praxis that reflects and reflects upon modernity. Seeking to heighten awareness and perceptions of modernity (whether positive, negative or neutral).

High Modernism/ Avant-Garde: Extension of modernism that advocates a complete/ revolutionary break with the past and seeks to incite and lead change. Eurocentric high modernism and African American avant-garde practices differ substantially, but share radical societal and formal objectives/ concerns, and an interest in unifying these objectives/ concerns.

Modernity: Refers to a set of interrelated conditions that form a set of shared, common individual life experiences. In particular, this dissertation is concerned with a definition of modernity that arises from the cross fertilization of European Enlightenment ideas and values with capitalist driven change and development. Common themes of modernity include technological change, alienation, dislocation, speed and intensification.

Neoliberalism: A stealth revolution beginning in the 70s that would develop into a hegemonic global economic and political system in the following decades. Characterized by a return to laissez-faire economics and a consolidation of political power by finance capital. Neoliberalism underlies much of the discussions of modernism/ post-modernism and freedom to/ freedom from. A general homology can be observed between freedom *from* discourses and neo-liberalism's laissez-faire arguments.

Postmodernism: Borrowing from the work of marxist scholars including David Harvey, postmodernism is broadly conceived of as an aesthetic practice that is emergent from neo-liberal economic and productive patterns. Emerging out of the contradictions arising from the individual experience of fragmentation and instability under capitalist driven modernity (in which meaning seems transient, relative, temporary) and the simultaneous collective integration of economic globalization (meaning is constructed out of a maze of increasingly totalizing and obscure spatio-temporal networks).

Praxis: Practice that is intentionally informed by/ integrated with theory.

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