

Columbia University
English
Spring 2005

SEMINAR: THE ART OF THE IMPROVISERS

INSTRUCTOR: Professor Robert O'Meally

This is a new seminar focusing on improvisation as a set of artistic modes and strategies, and as a set of perspectives on the world in which we live. Having a decidedly literary bias, our explorations will involve the close study of certain masters of improvisation--in American literature, music, painting, and dance. (In the case of dance, we will consider flamenco, a *Spanish* form and set of aesthetic values.) Our search for theories of improvisation also will involve reading certain philosophers and artists—again primarily Americans--reflecting on the meaning of their practice as improvisers. We also will consider the work of scientists who study some of the processes of improvisation in the human body and in nature. What do race, nation, and gender have to do with these inquiries?

In a sense this course itself is an improvisation: a search for a way to talk about this most mysterious aspect of creating art, one that involves spontaneity, open-endedness, contingency, and, alas, great discipline.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Attendance is strictly required.

During the term, each seminar member presents two short (2-3 page) essays to the group. Each essay should include a brief bibliographical note: a very preliminary list of sources. Please plan to read and distribute 16 copies of your papers to the seminar, and to entertain questions and comments about them. Consider these papers workshop experiments (improvisations) in which you test an idea and marshal evidence as you find it. You are not asked to “cover” “everything” in your weeks’ readings, but rather to choose issues that intrigue or disturb you. Of course you are welcome to discuss with me your ideas for these mini-papers, in advance of the class meeting (or anytime).

The final project consists of a 15-page essay, due May 4th in the English Department office. This critical essay might consist of an extension or offshoot of the short pieces; or it may take up another issue altogether. Please do consult with me on your choice of topic for this longer essay. Late papers not accepted.

Grading:

Class Participation: 50%
Final Project: 50%

REQUIRED READING

Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*
Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*
Ralph Ellison, *Living With Music*
Gary Giddins, *Satchmo*
Jack Kerouac, *The Subterraneans*
Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues*
Robert O'Meally, ed. *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*

WEEKLY TOPICS

Week 1: Getting Started

Week 2: Focus on New Orleans & Jelly Roll Morton

Readings in the packet; listen to Jelly Roll Morton on line; students are urged to attend the conference on "[New Orleans: Rebuilding the Musical City](#)," Jan. 26-27

Week 3: Ralph Ellison on Improvisation, Music and Literature

Read *Living With Music*: pp. 3-14, 34-42, 50-76; 179-195; "Brave Words.." (in the packet)

Week 4: Ralph Ellison on Improvisation, Music and Literature (con't)

Read *Invisible Man*, introduction, prologue, and chapters 1-13.

Week 5: Ralph Ellison on Improvisation, Music and Literature (con't)

Invisible Man, chapters 14-epilogue; in the packet, read James Weldon Johnson, Gide

Week 6: Improvisation and the Beats

Read *The Subterraneans* and the Kerouac readings in the packet; recommended are the readings by Baraka, in the packet

Week 7: Improvisation and the Beats (con't)

Packet, *Bedouin Hornbook*, pp. 1-84;

Week 8: Where is the Visual? Bearden, Davis, and Pollock as Improvisers

In the packet, read Schwartzman, Murray, and Ellison on Bearden; *Jazz Cadence*, Thomkins; see Beardens on line

Week 9: Improvisation and Philosophy

In the packet, read Dewey and the sections from *Origin of Species*, in the packet; other readings tba Also read *Living With Music*, pp. 43-49,101-132; *Jazz Cadence*, pp. 111-113; Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues (intro. And first 4 chapters)*:

Week 10: Improvising Jazz

Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz* (Chapters 1-3); *Jazz Cadence*, Snead, Evans, read Schuller and Baraka on Sarah Vaughan; read *Satchmo*, chapters 1-4.

Week 11: Improvising With and Against the Computer: The Case of George Lewis, Composer

Read Lewis's "Too Many Notes: Computers, Complexity and Culture in Voyager" (to be handed out); listen to his *Endless Shout* on CD

Week 12: The Dancing Improviser

In the packet, read essays on flamenco by Mackey, Lorca, Ellison; read Goler on Dianne McIntyre

Week 13: Wrapping Up