You're tuned into a kind of harmony. Here, we're looking to transcend the physical limitations of daily life. And each episode we speak with a different practitioner who uses sound as a tool or method for connection, transcendence and healing. Were your hosts, Julia E. Dyck and Amanda Harvey.

In this episode, we spoke with James Goddard, also known as skin tone. skin tone is a solo performance practice is saxophone voice Embera and electronics is an exploration of possible futures, is a space for reflection is an echo of free jazz, both spiritual and harsh, is black. We were curious to speak with James about his practice as a performer. In this interview, we discuss jazz music, improvisation, and their potential social implications.

James
My name well, my given name is James Nicholas Dumile Goddard and I'm an artist of Ndebele and settler Canadian white Canadian descent. My practice revolves largely around the saxophone. I guess I do a lot of other stuff though, too. And I perform solo as skintone. Often saxophone is the focal point or the basis, but I incorporate electronic elements either made with my computer or running processing, saxophone or in gira, through pedal chains, and also often spoken word content, almost always spoken word content, this themes that my work of bridges are often related to blackness and sort of Afro futurism is kind of an umbrella that some of it falls on there, although often I also look backwards. So it's maybe a flattening of time, like an afro futurist conception of time, where the past in the future in the present are co determined, kind of making a quantum sense or whatever. Yeah, that's, that's my practice, I guess.

Julia
Super. So I wonder if you could talk a little bit more about your relationship with the saxophone, maybe how that started, as well as the other instruments you employ. You mentioned electronics and spoken word.

James
Yeah, so I started playing the saxophone. When I was about 11, or 12. When I was in Australia, in Australia, as opposed to Canada, they have a much more sophisticated school band program, they take it very seriously there. So through taking saxophone at school actually got like private instruction, as well as music class with other people as well as band practice in the mornings. So I had like a lot of instruction. And so I kept up taking sort of formally instructed saxophone through high school. When I came back to Canada, I found that the program wasn't so strong. So I was just taking lessons outside of school. And then when I left high school, I basically stopped playing completely for almost five years. And then I sort of rediscovered the saxophone when I was living in Kingston, and I was starting a noise project sort of agence Gronk project called Pop talk with my friend Nevin. And I wanted something that could make noises. And so the saxophone was still around. My relationship to the saxophone has changed. And I would say that it's kind of like riding a bicycle, I guess, in the sense that like, I didn't forget

everything, but I forgot a lot. And so there's elements of my playing, I think, that are very self taught, and elements that are more reflective of how people conventionally play the instrument. I was definitely drawn to the saxophone because growing up I existed in mostly white spaces, I would say and one of the things that I associated with blackness and so had a fascination for it and in a personal identification with was jazz music because it was something that was presented often as black when I was white. doing like TV or whatever it also is why I wanted to tap dance because I saw black people doing it on TV. And then I was like, I want to do that too. That's what black people do. So that like influenced why I was interested in the instrument for sure. Lately, I've been working on incorporating more and more mbira. And mbira is a Shona instrument that was developed over 1000s of years as a traditional Shona instrument. I also do not play that in the traditional style. That's something that I definitely need to work on more in my life, I was able to through my uncle who lives in Toronto contact a friend of his who brings mbiras over and teaches people how to use them. And he's shown as an mbira player from a tradition of mbira players. And so that instruments like very special to me, and often is mistaken for the colomba. And I like that because it always gives me the opportunity to explain to people that the colomba was stolen from the mbira in the sense that this ethnomusicologist went up to the Shona people in Zimbabwe saw them playing this Inbhir and was like, Cool. I'm going to return that to the Western scale, create a company and start exporting these things. The poet chi cow said, when I told him this story, he's like, Oh, the colomba, the Babylon version of the mbira. Those are like my two main instruments. And then as far as electronics, it's mostly weird guitar pedals I've picked up and then just like strange patches and sampling that I've cobbled together through my background in radio, and I feel like you can't really be an artist in any discipline if you don't do something digital at this point in the game. Thematically, adding in bleeps and bloops helps to create a futurist environment.

Julia
Perfect. And what about your voice? Hmm,

James
I mean, I guess that again, maybe this tracks back a bit to pop doc, Nevin Locky. And I, our concept for that project was to create an inversion of a band, where he scripted dialogue, and improvised the sort of Sonic elements. I'm not a singer. But I do like storytelling. And definitely my musical practice is heavily influenced by my decade long relationship with community radio. So sound art, music, radio, all sort of blends together. And I guess I just don't necessarily feel like a piece is complete unless it has some sort of semantic content. I mean, that's not true of all of the projects. I plan, like Egyptian cotton orchestra is largely instrumental. So whatever story is being told, is being told in the interplay of the players, but I don't know I like telling stories. I like talking. So it seems natural to put it on top.

Julia
Can you speak to any traditions that you feel your practice is a part of?

James
Definitely, when I started playing out, as opposed to kind of like playing school music, I was definitely, again, we were trying for this anti band thing. And I guess a lot with skin tone to I'm like, not looking to necessarily create music in a sense. That is, that's a hard one, right? Because everything can be music, you know, we've gone through the minimalist, like John Cage, and Alvin, Lucy, a and all of that. So anything can be music, but at the same time, there are things that we think of as like song structure in song form, that are like more identifiably musical, whereas other kinds of Sonic explorations are more linked to sound art and noise. And I think I've always been interested in noise, and sort of abrasive Sonics for their ability to be cathartic. Following that thread, and again, following the thread from my youth being interested in jazz, and then introduced to the Avalon jazz kind of scene. I'm curious at the sort of ecstatic musics were almost the the music break song form, and even melodic structure, but why is it doing that? And what's it pursuing to do that? So I definitely feel in lineage with the world of free jazz. And I definitely think that there's a lot of richness there in how people played, but also how people thought about playing and thought about organizing. I'm also an arts administrator. And I found that a lot of those conversations, just reading on how people organized for example, there was Archie Shepp Bill Dixon quartet that went over to play a communist Music Festival in Finland. And then there was the CIA also put on a music festival in Finland at the same time because that's what they did back then. And a lot of the composers from both sides of that divide. When they came back, they set up together almost like a Creative Collective, they set up their own company to own and manage their own publishing, which was a way to like keep the money that their music was generating to make themselves more economically stable, but also to keep the money in their community. And even part of why they went to the communist Music Festival was in protest to sort of Jim Crow and the ways that black people were limited even under the suppose it freedom of America, I definitely read up on the lineages of like noise and free jazz and experimental music. And I feel myself informed by their history. And I often find, as I delve deeper, that I'm more informed, even by accident that I am necessarily aware.

Julia
And you talked a little bit about kind of noise as catharsis and also the political origins of jazz music and organizing, musicians organizing, I wonder how you relate to music making as a healing or laboratory practice and your own experience?

James
There's lots of ways to take that question. And I find that really interesting because we can heal on different levels, right, you can heal a community, you can heal an individual, you can heal a relationship between people, or you can heal on all sorts of different scales. And I definitely find that one way that music is healing. And this can be in a group setting or in another setting is through the actual act of releasing, you know, to take an instrument or even your voice, if you don't have an instrument or whatever you have at hand. One of the big things about free jazz is they're generally, free jazz musicians are unconcerned about what counts as an instrument or not. So you'll have things like, you know, you'll have a lot of Cecil Taylor recordings where he's not playing a single, readily recognizable instrument, and you have a bunch of collectives that

have used non instruments as instruments. And part of that is to break down the barriers of mastery, to make music seem more accessible, seem more possible so that people can feel comfortable sharing through it, and sharing through it just means participating in it and getting that release. So I definitely think that there's on a very brute level, when I like, go really hard on the saxophone, just like squonking way out, that's a good way, if I have a lot of pent up stress or anger or energies, that's a great way to release that. On the other hand, on a similar sort of level, still the personal level, I find that also maybe if I'm feeling scattered, and like too much frenetic energy, sitting and creating a drone, and just sitting in it, and playing in that space, the much more calmer music space is also a way of allowing things to flow through me and release. So I think that there's a very strong personal level at which music can be healing simply as a practice. And I mean, I guess some people might get the same kind of release out of exercise, or whatever, or different kinds of artistic practice. But I think there's something very, I don't want to say more fundamental, but like, vibrating the air allows you to externalize your emotions in a way that's perceptible to others in a way that perhaps other art forms are less direct or other practices of release or less direct. So there's that sense in which I think music can totally be healing. There's been a lot of discussions, especially in the Canadian music industry, if not the sort of independent music industry across North America and the world around the sustainability of music as a career choice, or being a musician as sustainable lifestyle or whatever. As a sort of arts administrator, I follow these conversations, and I'm curious around. But more and more, I've moved away, especially I think that this is going to be come even more necessary as streaming becomes like streaming is not going away, streaming is just going to become more and more how people engage with music, or how the vast majority of lots of people engage with music. And I think that there's another level of thinking about music that steps away from it as a commodity form, you know, stops thinking of music as the product and more around the social practice. So the value of the music is not in how many streams it has. It's around the people who come together to gather around it, whether that be audience members or people who put on shows or people who open their space. setup to host musicians, or there's an entire community level practice that so many people just engage in, whether they really think about it or not, there's an entire ecosystem of people who are doing stuff around music, without necessarily focusing on, you know how much money it's making, or this that or the other thing, although, you know, obviously, it's important for everyone to be remunerated for their labor insofar as that's possible. And so I guess I think also of music as healing in the sense that it does create these communities. And it allows these communities to flourish and interact with each other, and allows people to flourish and interact with each other and make connections. And so there's this social practice of music, as community building or as a shared experience that I think is very valuable, and also can be very healing, it can be divisive to, but it can create an opportunity for bringing together for a lot of people going out just alone to like a bar or even like a restaurant or something can be very intimidating and say you move to a new place, whereas going to a show feels like a space that's more easily inhabitable alone. And that can lead to connection, and that can lead to growth. So I think that there's that on a more macro level. Yeah, there's What does music do politically to heal the wounds of the polity are engaged with the problems of the polity. And obviously, musicians as other artists have long been involved in various struggles. Certainly, during the Civil Rights era, a lot of the music that was

created, especially the jazz music, was directly engaging those problems. And you see that echoed again, in apartheid era, South Africa and the South African jazz movement of that time period.

James
I used to play in a project called public transit, we would, we would have the titles for the songs that imply a certain kind of politics, but obviously it was wordless instrumental music, like abstract instrumental music. And so somebody came up after one of our shows, and was like, oh, like experimental music. abstract music, like this is always just kind of fake political, because really, you could give it a different title. You could like say, Yay, fascism is great. But you could apply Fascism is great, or fascism sucks to the same music. In the instance of public transit. I thought that was a little off, because one of the things we were doing at the time in particular, was using a live stream audio from drone strikes in Palestine. So like, I guess you could do that, and then say, Zionism is great. But I think clearly, the intent built into that is a critique of those military practices. So often, there's this idea that there's a fakeness, to the politics of free jazz or of experimental music, because there's no direct semantic content. And I don't necessarily believe that, and I think that the way musicians can engage in political problems, and create something like strange fruits is a clear example of a way in which musicians can create an emotional resonance around something that might not otherwise reach people. If you look at free jazz, certainly, sonically, I guess, you could argue, although there's a lot, there is more free jazz than people think of that actually has semantic content or lyrics. But you can't really divorce the means of production from the production itself. So you also have these situations where if you look like at the sun, Ra Arkestra, or there was the black artists grew up in St. Louis, or there was the ACM again, in Chicago, you have these, these groups of musicians all coming together and working collectively, like the black artists group famously involved, poets and dancers and costume makers, and they would put on these elaborate productions and they would offer community music lessons to neighborhood kids, and the music making was one thing, but then there was this broader sort of community practice. And there was clearly a thoroughgoing concern with a kind of communitarianism, a kind of black anarchism that influenced the sound as well as influenced how they decided to make those sounds. So I think that despite what this person said at this show, like nine years ago, I don't think that all experimental musics are actually empty of politics just because they don't have words that say exactly what the politics are. And I think that that's an important healing element to music because I think it allows addressing social problems is a way of moving towards healing.

Julia
Definitely, I wanted to ask you about the potential for music and music making as a model for a social organization. And you definitely already touched on it here. So I, if you just have anything kind of more to add about the means of production, the production itself, how this can be a model for a social organization, or could potentially teach us something about how to organize socially.

James
I'm reading a book right now called the fierce urgency of now by Daniel fishlin, AJ Hubley and George Lipsitz. And it's called improvisation rights and the ethics of co creation. It's sort of taking a rights based lens, which I don't know that I love a rights based lens. But I think that their thesis is kind of interesting improvisation as a practice involves navigating power dynamics on a micro scale between different performers and different needs and attempts to create space. And when you improvise well with others, you'll find that the same person isn't always in the lead, that there's a given take that space is shared, that different stuff is going on, these relationships are constantly navigated wordlessly and creatively, it's in an innovative practice, because you have to come up with the ideas on the fly. And so they argue rights in a society are sort of similarly derived in that as we figure out what people are allowed to do and what is right and what is wrong. In a society. we're improvising, we're co creating that meaning because obviously, as evidenced by I guess, like January 6, there stuff like that. We can say symbolically or point, you know, what we have here in Ontario right now with Rob Ford, trying to use the notwithstanding clause to get rid of the workers right to strike. You know, it's one thing to say that there's a right, but that's constantly being negotiated by different stakeholders, different participants in society. And how we engage with that is constantly evolving. So I think that definitely, there's a way in which free jazz and improvisation can help individuals sort of experience and get comfortable in the kind of nebulous liminal space where maybe we don't have rules from on high, and we have to make the rules up together. And as a sort of communitarian art, anarchist, or whatever, that really appeals to me. And I like things built collectively, with as little hierarchy as possible, and with as much sharing as possible. And I think that one of the places we see that in the world is for sure, in improvised music, definitely, some groups take it further than others, but it's always there if you're trying to build something together.

Julia
Super, and then could you expand further a bit on how you see playing music, the way that you play music, the way you improvise as a means of interaction, and how this potentially can challenge western classical constructions about the way that music is made, and, and heard.

James
So this goes back to sort of the thinking about the means of production. There's like a time dilation effect when you're playing music, right time either sort of seems to stop, and the music takes over, and then you're out of it, you're like, Whoa, 20 minutes went by, like you lose your perception of time a little bit when you're performing music. And so I think that there's an interesting, just on a very basic level, I think, within capitalist society, or whatever. There's a sense that like, coming together to play music with others, creates this space outside of, especially if you're playing experimental music, like this is not the economic engine that the Minister of Culture is talking about when they say, oh, you know, the arts put $1.76 back into the economy for every dollar we spend or whatever the number is, at that exact time. You know, making experimental music is not the thing that adds the 76 cents. I've always found that often like going to practice whether alone or with other people creates a sort of again, this I guess,

goes back to the healer therapeutics base, but it also creates a space that operates out inside of capitalist time logic, where you know, the value of the product is not even necessarily repeatable outside of that ephemeral moment. And on top of that you're doing this weird thing, maybe even in a closed environment. So I think in one sense, that's a way that music making can challenge sort of Western conventions, because it literally changes your perception of time. And in that time, what you're doing can be sort of outside of what is normally considered valuable, productive activity. And it can have this common therapeutic effect. Something that my uncle said that echoes very closely, something that's in Jaques Attali's book "noise". And that's that Western music is all about death, in the sense that there's a certain Ego Death demanded of the listener to bear witness. So this goes back. My uncle didn't say all this my uncle was like, Why do you always make music about death in Africa? Music is all about life. You're supposed to eat and party and people are supposed to stand up and dance and hoot and holler. And why does everyone have to shut up when they're listening to music, because the only time you shut up is when you're asleep or you're dead. But Jaques Attali sort of elaborates that there's this western tradition of, of music making that comes from an ecclesiastical tradition, a church tradition. And that tradition was about imposing power. The organ wasn't created just because they were like, This sounds dope. The organ was created because they were like, we want people to come into this room. And like, see how powerful we are. We want them to be ensconced in our power. And we also want them to quiet themselves in face of God, in face of the sermon and face of God. So Western music is drawn out of this tradition, where very literally, it asks an ego death. I think that there's a sense that also the energy that can be generated around improvisational music and the way in which it can incorporate sounds outside of itself into itself. For listeners away, there was a DIY music space called Love plant. And it was right on the train tracks here in Montreal. And so it was always a crapshoot, whether there was going to be like a 30 car freight train rolling through the middle of your set. And for some more precious musics. You could see the musicians getting frustrated. But obviously, the improv musicians are like, oh, yeah, we got a train. Yeah, they start jamming with the train because it has this rhythmic element to it, you know, it's shaking the building, it's making all this noise. So I think also, there's a sense in which the inclusivity I guess of, you know, there's a bringing in of extraneous stuff can be a way in which it challenges ideas of authorship and composition, and who, who has power in a situation. So I think that those are some of the ways that the music making I engage with a lot challenge sort of Western assumptions about what is music and where does it come from? And how is it created?

Julia
That is fascinating. So I wonder if you think, or have any ideas about how these practices of improvisation of experimental music, of free jazz, any of these Yeah, of your practices, how they could potentially be cultivated. To help us in this current moment of crisis. You mentioned the train coming by at the plant. And I think it's like, seems like there's always a train coming through right now, and shaking the building up. So it's kind of a big one. But if you think there's any way we can apply these skills, these models in practice.

James
I mean, one thing I've been thinking a lot about lately is actually a piece we made together as platitudes, where we talk about how no one is free until everyone is free, or we don't believe in an exceptional class of musician. And ultimately, the kinds of supports that we should look for and demand from the state for musicians should actually be applied broadly to everyone. I guess a lot of what I see going on that is a large part of people's crisis right now is the hollowing out of the middle class. Today is November 10. 2022 for anyone listening, there was a suppose a homeless encampment being cleared out in downtown Montreal. And, you know, you see these kinds of things happening. And I think that touching on those topics and bringing up those ideas as much as possible is for sure one way musicians and artists in general can contribute to talking about solutions. And positing not just the problem, but potential paths out that are more hopeful is, I think, one way in which artists are clearly essential for finding solutions to problems. On another hand, I'm also perhaps a little pessimistic, I don't know, if free jazz can scrub carbon from the air. I mean, I'm pretty sure it can't. And I don't know if noise music is going to stop the pipeline through British Columbia, like I just don't know if that's a real thing. Certainly, there's ways in which those practices can contribute, like I've played noise, fundraisers for wet sweat and, and I'm supportive of those kinds of practices. But I don't know if there's like a magic bullet within the experimental music, for example, for the current crisis, I think a lot of the skills perhaps people learn through co creating, and through participating in musical communities in general, like, especially DIY as one's kind of outside the industrial scale of music production, everyone coming together, sharing profits equally insofar as possible, being transparent and open about what's going on. Like all the stuff you learn about collective organizing, when you participate in a musical community. And you do like, even if you're playing like, straightforward indie rock music, if you're operating in the DIY scale, you're not doing it yourself, you're doing it together with other people, and you're co creating spaces, and you're learning how to navigate conflict. And you're learning how to be transparent about finances, and you're learning about how to share resources. And you're so you are learning a lot of practices that are close to, if not map on, directly to the same practices that are needed for building community and other ways are around other issues, and sharing space equitably in other organizing spaces. So I think there's definitely a sense there in which, again, if we step away from music as a product and back to music as a social practice, that there's lessons to be learned from the social practice of music, as it exists in the independent context today, around other organizing. The music itself is fine and can be useful for messaging. But I again, I'm pretty sure when I play the saxophone, it's probably like, if not carbon neutral, a little bit on the creating more carbons.

Julia
Yeah, of course, the music doesn't happen without all of the organizing and this social interaction. So I think if you see it as built in to the practice, then those skills seven really do become important. Okay, my last question is a bit of an abstract one. So through sound, what would you say is hidden? And what would you say can be revealed?

Julia
I mean, from a physics perspective, what is revealed is the shape of a space. And so like, you'll

get bass swells in certain parts of a room and different sounds. So I mean, that's, that's cheating, perhaps. So there's a book called the race of sound. And I'm blanking on the author's name right now, it was a while ago that I read it. And it's mostly focused on vocal practice and how we racially categorize vocal practices, also gender vocal practices, and how that's a sort of feedback loop in which we kind of create ideas about what a racialized sound sounds like. And then people who want to identify with that sound, pursue that sound. That's kind of what it's exploring. And ultimately, it wants to say that there both is and isn't a racialized sound, but I think is in the sense that there is a socially constructed sound that we identify as racialized, and isn't in the sense that that's not an essentialist, or biological category of sound or natural category of sound. I think that one of the things that is hidden in music is actually social relations. Often sounds are talked about or listened to, in a way that suggests that they're empty of social context that there sort of sounds from nowhere. I found that in music spaces, especially academic music spaces, there's a lot of reticence to engage with this sort of diversity, inclusion equity conversations that are happening and in other art forms, because the thinking is that music and sound are abstract in the sense. Again, this goes back to this idea that when you're absent semantic content, you're not actually saying anything political, which is not true. If you consider the modes of production as part of the politics. So you have the sense that there's still resistance in the sound world in the audio world, to engaging with these issues, because they're like, obviously, it's important in literature, because white people have different stories to tell them black people, but in sound, you know, the scale is the scale, we all make the same sounds, you know, for 40 is for 40, for everyone. So I think that there's a sense in which sound is still considered like an abstraction. And I do think that that does paper over and thus conceal certain elements of its social creation, and its social practice and its habits. And then on the other hand, what is revealed beyond my snarky answer about the shape of a room, maybe what I would say is, it depends on the context what's being revealed. I think sound can be very revelatory. But I also find that the revelation one can access through sound is often very personal. So it can depend on say, from the perspective of the listener, it can depend on what, okay, this is going to sound very new agey, or Turbo or whatever. But like the question the individual needs answered at that time, the answer can come to them in the way that sound can kind of clear one's head, it can help people come to Revelations around problems, whether that be metal or experimental music or modern classical like, you know, that could happen in there's no particular context. But I think that sound in the way that it allows us to like let go in a sense and be consumed because it's all encompassing, can allow for a sort of personal revelation. And I think that that's probably one of the most important things that sound reveals even if perhaps some of the individuals come to horrific revelations through it but.

Amanda
James's piece is entitled reflections on a genre by skin tone, electronics, saxophone voice chimes words by Philip Carl's and John Louis Komali Archie ship and Roscoe Mitchell

Amanda
This kind of harmony is hosted and produced by Julia E Dyck, Nick and Amanda Harvey, with the generous support from the Canada Council for the Arts. This episode was edited by our

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