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Statement of Research and Artistic Interests

I am not always comfortable finding common ground between my research and artistic practice. They feel totally different. As a researcher I try to make factual statements and argue in a manner that is logical and interesting. As a musician, I freely associate, make jokes, improvise and explore.

But the two things do come from the same person (me) and must share certain features, if only on the most basic level. To figure out what they share, then, demands a pretty deep kind of self-examination. But if I really do that examination, jazz is one of the things I see. I have always been a jazz musician first and foremost, but as I have branched out into other activities like composition and musicology, I have come to see that the jazz identity is not solely, or even primarily, musical. Jazz is a subculture, a sense of humor, a way of doing things. It describes a whole intellectual approach. In this regard it defines my scholarship, teaching and composition just as much as my piano playing.

I grew up as a devoted jazz pianist, and spent most of my early career dedicated to performance. I attended the Dave Brubeck Institute, where I studied with some of the greatest musicians in the world. Although I continue to perform regularly today, at a certain point in my twenties I realized that performance alone was not what I wanted. I had also always taken academic scholarship seriously, and was getting more and more satisfaction from composing. It was my dual interests as a musician and academic that led me to UCSD, where I was able to pursue a doctoral degree doing both.

During my time at UCSD, I made a lot of music. I released two piano trio albums, a set of solo piano pieces, composed five symphonic works, and many chamber compositions. I also appeared on a release for New World recordings and a huge pop-jazz album in China. Many of these are firmly in the jazz idiom, but even the ones that present as “contemporary music” are rooted in my upbringing as a jazz pianist. My voice as a composer will always derive basically from my jazz identity, just as my playing has evolved thanks to my work as a composer.

I also published a lot of research: besides my dissertation, I wrote three peer-reviewed articles, two review essays, and various blog posts and criticism. Many of these have been in the Jazz Studies area, but not all of them. I have also written about Spotify, Hip Hop and visual art.

My research covers a broad range of subjects, but it is always conducted in the same way: a question occurs to me to which I really want to know the answer, and the research documents the process of trying to answer it. For each of the three academic articles mentioned above, I can point to a simple motivating question that got me started. I will conclude this statement by reviewing them.

The first, “The Blues Scale: Historical and Epistemological Considerations,” was published in *Jazz Perspectives*. This article came about as a result of a class discussion from my course “Blues: An Oral Tradition.” While I was lecturing on an example of a piece of music that contained an unambiguous example of the blues scale, a student raised her hand and asked a great question: “where does the blues scale come from?” This simple question expressed a nagging suspicion I had had all my life, and I decided to pursue it as a research project. The question is at once historical, philosophical and ethical, and my article approaches the subject in all three ways. After narrating the scale’s history (which had never been done before), I situate that history in a philosophical framework that helps to explain some of the tension around the scale that is common in the jazz community today.

The second article, “What does Music Mean to Spotify? An Essay on Musical Significance in the Era of Digital Curation,” was published in *INSAM: The Journal of Contemporary Art, Music and Technology*. This article is based on my dissertation research, which came about after I saw a talk by a leading researcher in the field of music information retrieval (MIR). What I learned from that talk was just how ubiquitous automated recommendation is, and just how reductive its musical vocabulary can be. How, I wondered, are these recommendations actually made? And what will be their consequences for 21st century music listening habits? In this article, I argue that, although the true content of Spotify’s recommendation engine is a carefully guarded trade secret, it is nevertheless possible to discern some of its general contours. I do this by comparing the behavior of its user interface with the doctoral dissertation of one of Spotify’s principal scientists. This makes it possible to glean an implicit “theory of musical” meaning, which I then compare with the history of humanistic thinking on that complex subject.

The third article, “Reflections on Teaching Music 17: Hip Hop,” is forthcoming in *Current Musicology*. Here, I am trying to ask a simple question that I constantly asked myself while teaching Music 17: “what business do I have teaching this course?” In this article, I discuss the ways in which the various movements to decenter Western Art Music in college curricula have had the perhaps unintended consequence of occasionally putting Hip Hop under the institutional care of people like me: white people, that is, who stand at a considerable remove from living Hip Hop culture. Teaching Hip Hop was rewarding and valuable for me and, I believe, my students as well. Still, my role as teacher is ethically complicated. In the end, I argue that while my enjoyment of the course was perfectly sincere, that does not change the fact that teaching it was basically an expression of racial privilege.

Clearly, the Blues Scale piece is an example of academic scholarship that derives from my education as a jazz musician. But the commonality really occurs at a deeper level. My whole personality and intellectual style is shaped by jazz. It is a music that demands commitment and clarity about what kind of statement you are trying to make. It is also a music where you are forgiven for making mistakes, which is why beginners are often told not to hide their mistakes but to make them loudly. Above all, it requires honesty. These are values that I carry into everything I do, including equally my work as a musician and scholar.