

FRAGMENTED MEMORIES AND ACTIVIST ARCHIVES

Archives do not simply reconnect us with what we have lost. Instead, they remind us . . . of what we have never possessed in the first place. If that is a paradox, it is perhaps the paradox of modernism itself.

—SVEN SPIEKER

The date was November 19, 1975. We know this because the document is dated. It is the first page of a letter addressed to the Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts, a non-profit group providing free legal services to artists and organizations. The remainder of the letter has not been found. Though the signature is absent, it appears to be written by bassist and percussionist Juma Sultan, director of the New York Musicians Organization (NYMO) and concert organizer at a small, lower Manhattan loft called Studio We. The page provides a general introduction to the goals and current activities of NYMO. We can speculate that subsequent pages outlined the reasons why Sultan was contacting the Volunteer Lawyers—reasons that, in 2009, Sultan could not recall.¹ It begins with a basic mission statement:

The New York Musicians Organization (N.Y.M.O.) is a non-profit corporation established in 1972, to provide New York and elsewhere in the United States:

- (1) A jazz complex housing auditoriums, concert halls, seminar rooms, archives and other facilities enabling the fullest communication of the jazz medium to the public.
- (2) Employment for the jazz musicians for whom there are insufficient professional engagements, because of the restrictions in the commercial market.
- (3) To improve the quality of jazz and the public knowledge thereof.
- (4) To preserve the cultural heritage of all forms of jazz music, which will disappear unless the traditions of the music are passed along from one generation to another through sheet music, recording and other mechanical devices, training and listening.²

It is a mission that is striking in both ambition and range, combining aspects of commercial production, cultural promotion, job creation, historic preservation,

and artistic training. Jazz fans will recognize, however, that NYMO was hardly the first musician-run organization to pursue such goals amid the heightened social and political consciousness of the 1960s–70s. Collectives like Chicago’s Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM),³ St. Louis’s Black Artists Group (BAG),⁴ and Los Angeles’s Union of God’s Musicians and Artists Ascension (UGMAA)⁵ all used similar language to advance their own grassroots efforts. Closer to home in New York, NYMO emerged within a crucible of small-scale organizing activity that spread throughout lower Manhattan beginning in the 1960s. In warehouses and tenements, in parks and on street corners, in churches and community centers, New York artists were developing a broad array of alternative spaces and strategies to promote their work. But their activities eventually became most closely associated with the abandoned factory spaces that littered the neighborhood and provided frequent settings for concerts. In time, the movement would be known throughout the world as the “loft scene.”

If NYMO’s primary mission centered upon empowerment, it is striking how the creation of a historical archive figures prominently in items (1) and (4) of these early goals. Alongside plans to produce, promote, and educate, the impetus to preserve a yet unwritten legacy and to facilitate the writing of history is much more than an afterthought. The archive is not merely a thin residue of the past to be combed over by future historians—it is positioned as a central, active agent within the group’s vision of musical and social change. If this seems like overstatement, it is worth noting that, forty years later, the archive is the last remnant of the NYMO enterprise, and it is still maintained by its original organizer. Through the physical materials of the archive, the goal of re/constructing a new musical history, marked by particular ideals of beauty, progress, and development, becomes possible. In fact, it is only through the archive that this early document—fragile, fragmented, and forgotten—reaches us in the first place.

But perhaps I’m getting ahead of the story. After all, many readers have never even heard of the New York loft scene, much less NYMO’s short-lived role within it. A more conventional approach would start by relating the background of the organization itself, using strategically positioned documents to sketch out a noble musical legacy. But the key to an archival project like NYMO’s goes beyond merely corroborating dates and details—it provides more than just documentary proof that “we were here.” Rather, to place the archive at the center of a broader campaign for musical and social empowerment is to recognize its *generative* force in the construction of narratives. It constitutes a vital facet of the artists’ efforts to reclaim control over their work, their finances, their legacy. It appears not as a scrap from the past that falls to us in the present, but the vision of a possible future conceived at/as the group’s inception.

LOFTS, JAZZ, LOFT JAZZ, JAZZ LOFTS

The goal of this book is to examine histories and discourses surrounding New York's so-called "loft jazz era," one of the least-understood periods in jazz history. Spanning from the mid-1960s until about 1980, the jazz lofts were a dense network of musician-run performance venues established (mostly) in and around the former industrial buildings of lower Manhattan.⁶ The majority of these spaces were also musicians' homes, a factor that allowed them to operate with minimal overhead costs (though also with some sacrifice of privacy). In various contexts, lofts acted as rehearsal halls, classrooms, art galleries, living quarters, and meeting spaces. Their most visible role, however, was as public performance venues, especially for younger members of the jazz avant garde. At a time when few commercial nightclubs were interested in experimental styles, the lofts became a bustling base of operations for a growing community of young improvisers. When musicians couldn't find gigs in the city's shrinking club scene, they could often arrange a performance at a loft—though performance conditions were sometimes less than ideal.

The loft years were nothing if not divisive. To those who remember them fondly, the scene was vibrant and fertile, effervescing with musical and social activity. For players and listeners alike, lofts provided no shortage of sounds to hear, places to play, people to meet, and things to do. The settings were generally casual—sometimes literally inside of living rooms—and young musicians had endless opportunities to interact with veteran players. The proceedings overflowed from day into night, from night into day: jam sessions, rehearsals, performances, workshops, conversations, gatherings. With few commercial restrictions, artists were free to explore their most adventurous visions. Free-blowing affairs could last for hours, as players grappled with extended techniques, extreme volumes, group interaction, and long-form improvisation. And when one marathon session finally ended, the close proximity of the spaces meant that another was always waiting a few blocks away.

But the period was not without its detractors. By the end of the 1970s many musicians voiced pointed critiques of the lofts. The spaces were often small, had shoddy acoustics, and were sometimes poorly managed. Most gigs only paid musicians from the meager ticket sales earned at the door, rather than offering a guaranteed fee. Since loft spaces generally had little to no budget for advertising and promotion, audiences were often scanty, further limiting the potential to earn a livable wage. Loft performances could be sloppily planned and sloppily executed. In an atmosphere of complete freedom, some players lacked discipline, leading to endless blowing with little evident musical direction. Perhaps the most infuriating development came when some writers began to use the term "loft jazz" to denote

a particular musical style, one that seemed to pejoratively imply that experimental improvisation was best suited to meager circumstances.⁷ In short, critics argued that on every level (economics, acoustics, respectability) the lofts failed to do justice to the seriousness of the music.

There is, of course, truth in both perspectives. At various points the loft scene could be both vibrant and messy. Unfettered and undisciplined. Filled with promise and devoid of direction. It soared toward unexplored heights and crashed headlong into glass ceilings of its own creation. To understand such an environment requires grappling with a range of complex and conflicting stories, memories, and perspectives on a deeply fragmented musical moment. It is such an effort that this book attempts to undertake.

RE / CONSTRUCTING JAZZ NARRATIVES OF THE 1970S

Since the mid-1990s, scholars of the “new jazz studies” have increasingly worked to problematize canonical narratives of jazz history. Instead of presenting the music as a linear progression of influence from one legendary figure to the next, musical practices have been reimagined in terms of the elaborate interactions among aesthetic, social, and historical discourses. This perspective has reconceived the function of music as a living entity that emerges not merely at historic moments or through “great works,” but as a tradition residing in the everyday lives of artists, listeners, and the culture at large. It has been especially productive for considering the music through a variety of interpretive lenses, including critical race and gender theory, twentieth-century political history, and postmodernism.⁸

A particularly fruitful approach is the crafting of studies that focus on jazz communities rather than on individual artists or recordings. Community-based approaches allow scholars to examine a broad swath of musical meanings that spill over into other spheres. They challenge us to traverse paths of musical circulation other than solely commercial recordings, which tended to dominate much earlier scholarship in the field. As Jed Rasula has argued, jazz records—though a seductive starting point—fail to account for the more ephemeral movements, exchanges and social networks that generate music’s changing meanings over time.⁹ By shifting attention away from the musical product (records) and toward the musicking practices that emerge among social groups, it becomes possible to construct histories that use the essential information found on recordings without overstating their role within the broader context of musical culture.¹⁰

Perhaps no period has benefited more from this methodological shift than the 1970s, an era of jazz that has never fit easily into linear narratives. Where earlier decades are commonly—though reductively—linked to the rise of particular sub-genres (swing in the ’30s, bebop in the ’40s, hard bop and cool jazz in the ’50s, free jazz in the ’60s), the surfeit of styles in circulation by the 1970s makes any such

characterization insufficient and problematic.¹¹ At the same time that fusion artists experimented with rock rhythms and electric instruments, bebop and mainstream styles underwent a revival that rejuvenated the careers of many older musicians.¹² The nascent jazz repertory movement also gained steam through groups like the New York Jazz Repertory Company and the adoption of jazz curricula at several universities. Meanwhile, avant gardists continued to develop the language of free jazz in new directions, often supporting their work through European touring and collective organizing.

This diversity—some might call it fractioning—of the jazz scene makes it difficult to fit the decade into the types of evolutionary frameworks that remain common in survey texts. Authors have attempted innumerable ways of getting around this, each of which is fraught with issues. Some concentrate exclusively on just one subgenre in order to preserve the narrative structure, the most common candidate being fusion.¹³ Others depict a battle pitched between advocates of old and new styles, a discursive echo of the 1940s conflicts between modernists and “moldy figs.”¹⁴ Still others gloss over the new stylistic developments completely, focusing instead on the ongoing careers of earlier legends as they navigated a rapidly changing musical landscape.¹⁵

More nuanced approaches avoid lumping the decade into a particular category, instead choosing to acknowledge the decade’s deep fragmentation. A refreshingly confessional example can be seen in a chapter introduction written by Joachim-Ernst Berendt and Günther Huesmann:

Up to this point, we have been able to match each decade with a particular style—certainly at the cost of some fine distinctions, but with greater clarity as a result. With the beginning of the seventies, we have to drop this principle. This decade showed at least seven distinct tendencies:

1. Fusion or jazz-rock . . .
2. A trend toward European romanticist chamber music . . .
3. The music of the new free jazz generation . . .
4. An astonishing comeback for swing . . .
5. An even more amazing and widespread comeback for bebop . . .
6. European jazz found itself . . .
7. The gradual development of a new kind of musician who moved between jazz and world music.¹⁶

As the authors imply, fragmentation did not originate in the 1970s and can be noted in earlier periods as well.¹⁷ Still, the decade’s explosion of stylistic diversity creates narrative complications that historians are forced to confront.

The movement toward community-based approaches has been a powerful tool in addressing this challenge, and has led to some of the most nuanced work on the period. Especially impressive are several excellent studies of musician-run collectives

that sprang up in cities throughout the United States, including George Lewis's seminal research on Chicago's AACM, Benjamin Looker's examination of St. Louis's BAG, and Steven Isoard's chronicling of Los Angeles's UGMAA.¹⁸ In all three examples, a transition away from individual biography and toward a communal and/or organizational emphasis has allowed these authors to articulate more precise questions, and to employ a wider variety of source materials. Furthermore, by concentrating on particular cities, these studies are capable of addressing national discourses of music and politics while retaining a sharp focus on the way musicians work within and/or confront their own unique local environments.¹⁹

If a standard tendency among survey texts is to portray the 1970s as a time of dissent and contentiousness, community-based studies act as a corrective by foregrounding solidarity, organization-building, self-sufficiency, collaboration, and friendship. This is no small point, as it implicitly argues for the musical/cultural relevance of the decade by acknowledging that it was more than a series of petty squabbles. Such studies are far more effective than discographical or magazine-centric accounts at conveying the perspectives of musicians who worked in these communities and found meaning within them. I argue that such work therefore constitutes a *reconstructive* project aimed at unearthing layers of musical significance as remembered and cherished by musicians, despite being overlooked in other secondary sources. The approach does not dispute the role of fragmentation—indeed, it relies on it—but adds clarity by demonstrating how the music continued developing within various types of (often hidden) sociomusical networks.

While the lofts shared a great deal with these previously mentioned jazz collectives, they differed starkly in that they were not governed by any centralized organization. Instead, a downturn in the lower Manhattan real estate market (discussed in chapter 2) allowed hundreds of artists to obtain and develop their own spaces, mutually independent from one another. Such independence led to a more diffuse set of activities than manifested elsewhere—further fragmentation in an already fragmented time.²⁰ Loft organizers pursued a diverse range of artistic and social priorities that were not always evident to the listening public. Some spaces featured mostly straight-ahead styles, others spotlighted free jazz, and still others interfaced with contemporary European music. Some participants envisioned themselves as champions of black solidarity, while others employed language emphasizing racial universality and multiculturalism. Some attempted to position themselves within national and global discourses, while others saw their work as primarily connected to neighborhood concerns. Contradictory impulses could even manifest within a single venue, with attitudes and strategies shifting set-by-set and night-by-night. Although these varied activities were, and often still are, referred to as a cohesive “loft movement,” “loft era,” or “loft scene,” their disjointed nature presents endless complications for scholars and enthusiasts approaching the period as a whole.

Despite such challenges, despite the fragmentation and self-contradictions and shortcomings of the lofts, I nevertheless conceive of reconstruction as a central motivation for this book. It operates on several levels. First, I claim reconstruction as a historiographic approach to problematizing and revising narratives that would frame the lofts as governed only by dissent and stagnation. Following the work of the scholars above, my emphasis is instead on generative ideals of institution-building that informed musical practices, even when those institutions were unsuccessful in achieving their goals. Second, reconstruction provides a framework for reflecting upon the ways that musician-organizers aspired to re/build communities and foster self-empowerment as a strategy for confronting hardship. In this sense, the term carries echoes of the Reconstruction Era in the postbellum United States, especially through musicians' efforts to reformulate issues of race in terms of economics and cultural ownership. Third, the text will attempt to reconstruct not only historical details, but also look at central, unsettled discursive debates that animated the loft movement. In this sense the term calls attention to the historian's delicate task of re/constructing nuanced narratives out of a web of archival fragments and personal recollections. Fourth, later chapters (especially chapter 7) will engage deeply with musician-curated archives that document loft activities. Such projects have served as meaningful rendezvous points for former loft artists, some of whom had not corresponded in decades. In this way, historical projects not only generate accounts for posterity, but work to rebuild personal relationships among living figures, reconstructing bonds that were dispersed across time and space.

In all of these ways, I employ reconstruction not in opposition to deconstructive approaches to historical writing, but as a corollary to them.²¹ This is intended to reflect the goals of musician-organized movements more broadly. Though such groups always tacitly imply a deconstructive analysis of the jazz industry, I have found that musicians are rarely content to merely revel in a landscape of unmoored postmodern pastiche. Instead, deconstruction is comprehended as a prelude to new forms of growth and institution-building, to re/construct a position of strength through self-ownership. This book makes no attempt to rebuild grand narratives, nor do I seek to insert an alternative group of "major figures" into an extant canonical model. Rather, by excavating specific threads of musical and social significance, I hope to provide the groundwork for considering the lofts as an attempt, however flawed, at generating a productive, empowered, and independent sphere for musical exploration.

JUMA SULTAN AND THE ACTIVIST ARCHIVE

If the fragmentation of the loft scene creates one type of challenge, a second arises from a noticeable gap in source material. This lack is especially apparent in regard

to commercial recordings. Due to an economic recession and a downturn in the jazz industry during the 1970s, musicians in the lofts made significantly fewer records than earlier artists, leaving a dearth of widely accessible material. Echoing Rasula, it is clear that a history based only on commercial records would drastically underrepresent the overall richness of the period. It becomes imperative to look elsewhere for source material.

Luckily, what is missing from the public sphere is more than adequately compensated in the substantial private collections of musicians. Throughout the 1960s and '70s, the increasing affordability of amateur tape equipment allowed many artists to record their own work. Several such collections have come to light in recent years, though these materials vary widely in scope and audio fidelity. Ephemera such as flyers, programs, photos, and business documents also abound, scattered in the files, drawers, and closets of dozens of individuals. Our challenge, therefore, is not that research materials don't exist, but that they survive as singular, unpublished, hidden artifacts that remain in private hands. Since these sources are not generally accessible in record stores, and have not yet been catalogued in libraries or posted online, a deep engagement with private archives is necessary in order to reconstruct the loft period.

Much of the source material for this study comes from one such archive, compiled by the aforementioned Juma Sultan of the New York Musicians Organization (NYMO). Sultan is one of those fascinating figures of the 1960s and '70s who seemed to float effortlessly through a string of groundbreaking movements. Originally from Monrovia, California, he spent much of the early 1960s in San Francisco, enjoying the height of counterculture activity near Haight-Ashbury and playing drums at events staged by the Black Panthers. He moved east in 1966, splitting time between New York's Lower East Side and communal living spaces in the vicinity of Woodstock. It was at the latter that he met rock legend Jimi Hendrix, and Sultan soon became a staple in the guitarist's final bands (he even played in Hendrix's legendary set at the 1969 Woodstock festival).²² After moving to New York full-time in the early 1970s, Sultan became active in the lower Manhattan free jazz scene, playing bass and hand percussion at jam sessions, coffee shops, and clubs. In 1972, he was instrumental in organizing the New York Musicians' Jazz Festival, an episode that proved to be a germinal moment for the loft scene. Through the remainder of the decade, Sultan continued organizing concerts, festivals, and workshops, working primarily out of an Eldridge Street loft called Studio We (Fig. 1).

Sultan was an avid recordist, and often brought reel-to-reel equipment to rehearsals, performances, and events that he attended. With help from multi-instrumentalist Ali Abuwi, he built a recording studio in Studio We that musicians could rent to record rehearsals, demos, or even commercial records.²³ Over the course of about ten years, Sultan accumulated over 400 tapes. Many of these

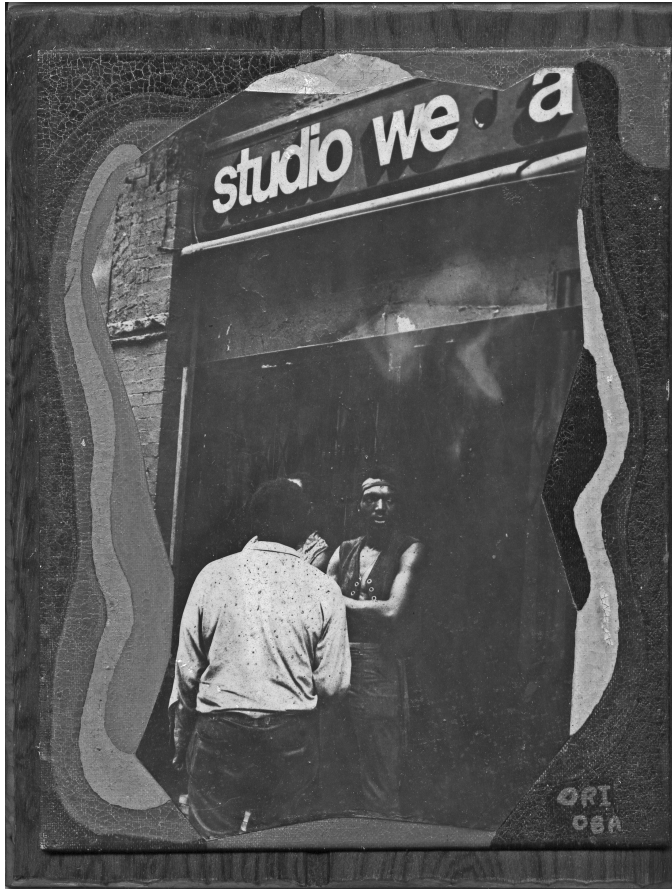


FIGURE 1. Juma Sultan outside of Studio We. Photo mounted on painted wood with design by Ori Oba. Image courtesy of the Juma Sultan Archive (Print 001).

included artists who are scarcely documented in commercial sources. In addition, he saved over 10,000 pages of documents related to his work, including contracts, budgets, photos, flyers, and other materials relating to his business operations. After leaving the city in the early 1980s, Sultan transferred this collection to his new home in upstate New York, where it remained largely untouched for almost twenty-five years. In 2005, he launched the Juma's Archive Project, which seeks to preserve these materials and make them available to scholars and listeners. To date, the project has received support from the National Endowment for the Arts, Clarkson University, and Columbia University. Since 2011, the project has begun

issuing selected items on CD and LP, including a three-disc boxed set titled *Father of Origin* and the compilation *Whispers from the Archive*.²⁴

Sultan's collection is hardly unique among musicians who performed in the lofts, though it is currently among the largest to be made available to researchers. Smaller collections were compiled by dozens of individuals, most of which remain with their original owners. By chronicling individual experiences within a larger social-economic-aesthetic context, such archives put pressure on the assumed boundaries between public history and private lives, a topic that will emerge repeatedly throughout this book. In many ways, this destabilization of conventional historiographic channels seems somehow fitting in relation to the lofts, a movement which saw factories transforming into homes, homes into studios, and studios into stages.

The Juma Sultan Archive rests firmly within this conceptual break, blurring the boundaries between personal collection, corporate archive, and historical repository. It is far from a representative sample of the total swath of loft activities and vastly overrepresents Sultan's own career as an organizer and performer. Rather than conceding this as a shortcoming, this book will attempt to use the private nature of the Sultan collection as an entry point for a decidedly nonhagiographic history. Instead of identifying dominant narratives, I aim to expand outward from the private sphere, examining the movement from the most local level. My guiding questions are less about pinning down "What happened during the loft era?" and more about asking, "How did a series of shifting discursive landscapes affect the lives of musicians on an everyday level and how, in turn, did these individuals react and feed back into these broader discourses?"

BLUEPRINT FOR RE / CONSTRUCTION

The primary research for this book took place during a five-month period of fieldwork at the Sultan archive in the fall of 2009. My work was not limited to studying the collection, but also entailed assisting Sultan in various administrative tasks. Over the course of my time there, I helped create a full catalog of his holdings, and oversaw the digitization of 143 tapes, 203 photos, and several thousand documents. I assisted in drafting grant applications for further preservation efforts, and facilitated requests from musicians who wished to obtain copies of materials. I also conducted a series of interviews with Sultan, both to provide annotations for particular items and to record his memories, perspectives, and present goals. By living, working, and studying alongside Sultan, I sought to intertwine the research modalities of written documentation, recorded sound, and living memory. Sultan's ongoing contributions as collaborator, fact-checker, archivist, guide, primary source, generous host, and friend have contributed immensely to the interpretation and analysis presented in these pages.

I supplemented my work at the Sultan archive by conducting interviews with other musicians, organizers, and listeners who were active in the lofts. My interview choices were guided in part by the archive itself; I purposely sought out figures who appeared frequently in the collection. Certain names may be unfamiliar—even to dedicated fans and discographers—but their footprint in the archive speaks to the ways that music circulates outside of the most familiar channels. Their contributions were essential in grappling with the everyday significance of the period. These archival and interview sources are juxtaposed against a wealth of periodical and secondary accounts to provide further historical context.

Though the chapters that follow draw from a variety of inspirations, I am especially indebted to two scholarly models. The first is Ingrid Monson's 2008 study *Freedom Sounds*, which analyzes the role of jazz in the civil rights era by considering three analytical levels: discourse, structure, and practice. Monson uses these levels to break down the complex interconnections between musical and social movements, arguing that simpler models²⁵ fail to account for the myriad forms of tension that arise between rhetoric (discourse), context (structure), and action (practice).²⁶ Applying this framework to the lofts creates enormous potential for reading diverse sources against one another in fruitful ways. Even the term "loft jazz" itself seems to rest precariously between these three modalities, as it refers to the discursive moniker coined to name the movement, the various structures (physical, economic, social) that underlay it, and the artistic practices developed by artists to navigate a complex urban ecology.

Beyond Monson's approach, I am additionally concerned with issues relating to memory, artifact, and contested technologies of historicization. Following the example of Gabriel Solis, I conceive of history as an ongoing process of negotiation, subject to influence by musicians, writers, and material objects.²⁷ Through the interplay of personal memories with physical and/or sonic materials, musicians act as decisive—though under-acknowledged—agents in developing a historical discourse. Examining the fluid processes of histori(ographi)cal *transcription* across modalities (performances, memories, interviews, texts, artifacts, narratives), rather than simply a process of historical *inscription* (from event to account), is a key critical goal. Musicians' present-day memories are placed in dialogue with archival materials, exploring how past and present can speak to one another in manifold ways. This effort is not made to favor one modality over another, but rather to demonstrate how, to quote David Scott, "Memory and tradition are inextricably intertwined."²⁸

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With these objectives in mind, this book is not organized as a purely historical chronicle, but as a mosaic of overlapping themes that arose repeatedly throughout my research. By weaving through a range of (sometimes conflicting) accounts,

I intend for the text to reflect the messy vibrancy of the scene itself. It is not a tale with a single message or protagonist, but a dense web of meanings, memories, and experiences.

Chapters 2 and 3 are the most straightforwardly historical, and together provide a detailed sketch of the period. The story begins with an overview of the lofts' primary influences and contextual backgrounds in chapter 2. Details about its organizational forebears (including earlier jazz collectives) and descriptions of the unusual urban ecology of early 1970s New York serve to situate the movement's beginnings. An account of the scene's emergence follows in chapter 3, starting with an in-depth look at the 1972 New York Musicians' Jazz Festival. The movement is traced through its peak around mid-decade, and into its subsequent decline amidst a string of new financial and structural challenges. These final years also saw a growing number of critiques leveled by musicians who disputed the efficacy of the lofts. Whereas the movement had begun as a campaign against industry exploitation, its failure to develop viable alternatives ultimately made it vulnerable to the criticism that lofts merely repackaged the inadequate conditions of nightclub performance.

The remaining chapters each follow a single discursive trajectory, each of which offers a different perspective on the loft period. Drawing from Robin Kelley's scholarship examining the "freedom dreams" of African American activist movements, in chapter 4 I consider the multifaceted ways that loft artists envisioned freedom as an inspiration for their work. Rather than hewing to a single definition, however, artists employed the term to connote a wide variety of different meanings. The chapter examines several in succession, including definitions that foreground: (1) collectivist or communalist practices, rooted in civil rights and 1960s counterculture movements; (2) self-creation and identity politics; (3) off-the-grid living strategies; (4) transgression and transcendence, and (5) "energy music" aesthetics that feature minimal pre-composed elements. In the end, the term "freedom" emerges as powerfully overdetermined, as it is used to reference a number of interrelated goals and values.

Chapter 5 examines discourses of community (as well as contradictory discourses of isolation) that arose within the lofts. While references to community involvement were quite common, the symbolic boundaries that defined and demarcated loft community/ies were often described in highly divergent ways. I begin with a survey of several scholarly models for conceptualizing collectivity before proceeding to outline four boundary discourses that were referenced most frequently by loft artists (discourses of pay, play, place, and race). Although conceiving of the lofts as a community provides certain benefits, the discussion concludes by attempting to reframe the period in terms of network- and scene-based theoretical approaches, arguing that each model offers potential insights.

The physical spaces of the lofts are considered in chapter 6, which asks how the surrounding environment afforded certain types of performer and listener experi-

ence. In contrast to architectural accounts of loft conversions for high-end housing—which often romanticize the industrial history of old factories—musicians’ accounts tended to be largely devoid of nostalgia for a bygone era. Instead, descriptions of loft jazz venues generally focused on the creative possibilities enabled by the presence of large, raw spaces. By emphasizing the liberatory potential of blank space, rather than the nostalgic echoes of industrial place, organizers stressed underlying values of reclamation and community-building. The second half of the chapter goes on to discuss descriptions that referenced markers of domesticity in loft venues, a factor that carried additional resonances in regard to gender politics. All of these factors worked to differentiate lofts from other types of music venues (especially nightclubs) by constructing new types of relationships between artists and audiences.

The topic of private archives returns in chapter 7, which looks at the various challenges (both conceptual and methodological) that such collections pose to historical research. This observation is no mere esoteric exercise; many musician-archivists explicitly situate their work as an intervention into historiographical processes—an intervention that mirrors the musician-run ethos of the lofts themselves. These topics are explored through an ethnographic account of my own involvement in the Juma Sultan Archive. I divide the discussion into three sections that correspond to different storage media in the collection: audio tape, paper, and human memory. Each of these media carries particular affordances and limitations, and they converse with each other in interesting ways. Drawing from literature of the recent “archival turn” in the humanities, I argue that engaging with these affordances is essential to understanding the role of the archive as a generative force (and not merely a passive repository) in the writing of history. By including this reflexive account at the end of the study, I also aim to situate my work within a larger histori(ographi)cal process of inscription in which my role as a scholar necessarily makes me implicit.

A final chapter concludes the study by considering multiple musical legacies that emerged in the aftermath of the loft era. By tracing the most prominent narratives and historical initiatives to emerge since the 1980s, the conclusion grapples with the ongoing resonance of the loft era, which continues to influence musician-organized activities in New York to the present day.

. . .

Several caveats should be noted from the outset. First, this work makes no attempt at providing a comprehensive treatment of the loft era. Considering the deeply multivalent nature of the loft scene and its countless participants, such a goal would lie well beyond the scope of a single monograph. Instead, I have sought to collect, consolidate, and analyze the materials and recollections provided to me by a subset of several dozen consultants, situating them within the context provided by secondary source material. Due to its size, the Sultan Archive is my primary

point of entry, though even it—as noted above—is starkly incomplete. Following the example of Antoinette Burton, it is my goal to take this incompleteness not as a weakness, but as a strength.²⁹ The archive provides an opportunity to explore the private, lived experiences of a handful of individuals as they navigated an intricate network of discourses and structures. There are scores of other artists who I might have chosen to interview, and whose stories remain to be told. My choice of trajectories is also necessarily selective. Substantial issues like the politics of gender, the development of specific musical techniques, the commercial discographies of loft artists, and the scene's connections with other experimentalist communities in lower Manhattan (from minimalism to punk rock) are only touched on briefly. Conversely, certain topics reappear in several places in connection with different threads. It is my hope that this book will provide a productive starting point, and that future work will push further in many additional directions.

Second, although I present much of my analysis as a historiographic intervention away from hagiography, it is less certain whether the musicians I spoke with would share this goal. Some would likely be more content to carve out their own place within extant canonical discourses. In some of my interviews, it seemed more like my correspondents would have preferred me to simply write them into the canon as the next “great figure.” Though I do hope that my work brings recognition to these individuals, my broader aim is to look at the lofts through the lens of rapidly changing contexts and discourses, rather than appealing to notions of artistic genius and / or timelessness. Following the work of Monson, Solis, and others, I find this to be a more productive way to convey the full scope of an era's musical and social significance.

Third, although I often frame the discussions that follow in terms of artist agency, it is clear that I, as the author of this book, am complicit in the ongoing historicization of the period. Unlike a scholar like George Lewis, I can make no claim for this work as an insider account or “autobiography of a collective,”³⁰ despite my close collaborative relationships with many of the musicians cited herein. Instead, I conceive of this study through the practice of ethnography, especially through its emphasis on living alongside a community in order to study its patterns and values. My status as a participant-observer at the Sultan archive offered a unique perspective on musicians' goals in dictating their own histories. This text acts as an extension of that collaboration. I gladly acknowledge my role in advancing the history presented here (including my role in building the Sultan Archive), while also maintaining that it is Sultan's initiative as musician-archivist that constitutes the more radical move. Were it not for the discursive complex of sounds, words, objects, and memories that he and others have created, researchers like myself would lack the most basic groundwork for engagement.

Lastly, although I strive to present a multiplicity of viewpoints, undoubtedly some participants will disagree with certain parts of my account. To an extent,

such disagreement is unavoidable when constructing an account of a phenomenon that included so many diverse goals and activities. Even the choice of what to call the period remains a constant struggle. Some musicians like Ahmed Abdullah insisted on referring to it as the “loft movement,” a phrasing that highlights the progressive politics of self-determination.³¹ Others, like Cooper-Moore, expressly disputed the idea of the lofts constituting a movement, arguing that the absence of coordination among organizers would seem to contradict the term’s association with unified struggle.³² “Community” is another possibility, but as I discuss in chapter 5, the word came to mean different things for different individuals. While the phrase came up often, it was rarely used in the construction “loft community.”

Perhaps no moniker is more contentious than the very term “loft jazz,” which I ultimately chose (not without certain reservations) to use as the title for this book. Some musicians have protested that the phrase misleadingly suggests itself as a discrete musical genre, like swing or hard bop. The period’s wide range of musical styles would support this objection; there may have been “jazz lofts,” but there was certainly never a thing called “loft jazz.” Even more pointedly, others contend that such phrasing might imply that progressive black art is best confined to meager, low-budget venues. Some musicians even object to the very mention of the lofts in the first place, arguing that talking about a type of building may detract from the importance of the actual music being produced. And on top of all of this, some of the artists involved didn’t consider their work jazz at all, and many performances did not take place in literal lofts (at least defined by architectural standards).

I have no intention of ignoring or sidestepping these criticisms. In the context of a culture that has long marginalized African American artistic work, it remains imperative to respond to reductive commentaries when and where they appear. In using the title “Loft Jazz,” then, I make no attempt to defend it as a discrete category. To the contrary, I hope to engage with the layers of discourse evoked by both terms—loft and jazz—as well as with their juxtaposition at a particular moment in time. These include issues related to race, class, land use, gentrification, urban repurposing, musician-organized initiatives, industrial romance, and inequities surrounding the reception of African American art music of the late twentieth century. I even briefly considered titling the book “Loft / Jazz” to reinforce the tenuousness of the connections between them. Though the designation is not without its problems, the fact that such a diverse set of associations came to be perceived as linked suggests a revealing moment in New York’s musical history. It remains worthy of study, even as we subject it to ongoing critical pressure.

But loft performance wasn’t exclusively seen as a straitjacket, either. Despite occasional claims that the spaces were universally deplored,³³ my discussions with numerous musicians told a very different story. For many, the lofts represented a fertile opportunity to come together and create new visions of artistic practice and social mobility. Lofts were not a prison meant to confine the music, but a gathering

place to come together in a spirit of exploration and joy. As the late violinist Billy Bang told me when I asked for his reaction to the phrase “loft jazz”:

I just know [loft jazz] defines a period and it defines a happening. It's not just a coincidence because everybody used their lofts . . . to have music. I love the fact that they all agreed—individually and collectively—let's have some music! So they called it loft jazz, but I don't think of it as a sound of jazz. I think of it as some different guys coming together. But the guys that came together under this umbrella are the guys that I like a lot . . . If it means that, then great!³⁴

Rather than focusing purely on restrictive definitions ascribed from the outside, it is the lofts' empowering, revolutionary potentials—for community, for creativity, for resistance—that this book seeks to explore.