

# THE WILLIAMSBURG AVANT- GARDE

EXPERIMENTAL  
MUSIC AND  
SOUND ON THE  
BROOKLYN  
WATERFRONT

Cisco Bradley

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# EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC AND SOUND ON THE BROOKLYN WATERFRONT

Cisco Bradley

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*To Juliette,  
Who was with me on this journey,  
and  
to all of the people who made the  
Williamsburg scene happen*

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I began the earliest work on this book in 2012. Like any in-depth research project, it took many twists and turns before it found its way to stable ground. The core of the research involved conducting about 250 interviews with musicians, curators, club owners, and label owners about the Brooklyn music scene over the span of nine years, many of which have been published on the website Jazz Right Now (<https://www.jazzrightnow.com>), which I founded in 2013. Of these, 182 pertained specifically to Williamsburg, which became the focus of this volume. I wish to thank everyone who spoke with me about their work and trusted me to convey their perspectives about the music of which they were a part. It was an absolute honor to spend these years deeply engaged with some of the United States' most visionary artists.

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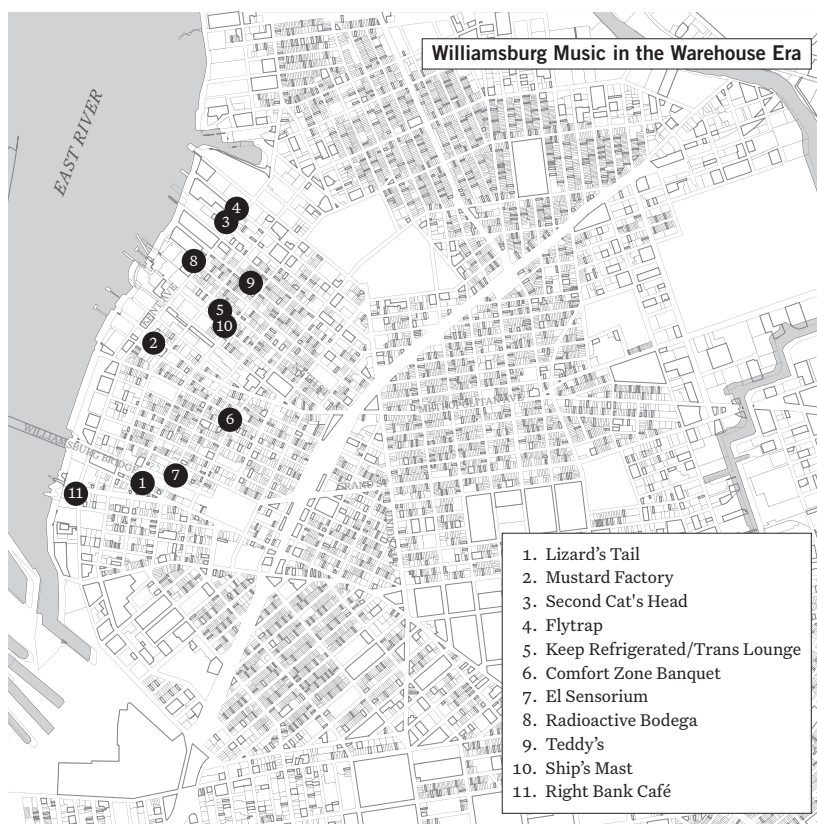
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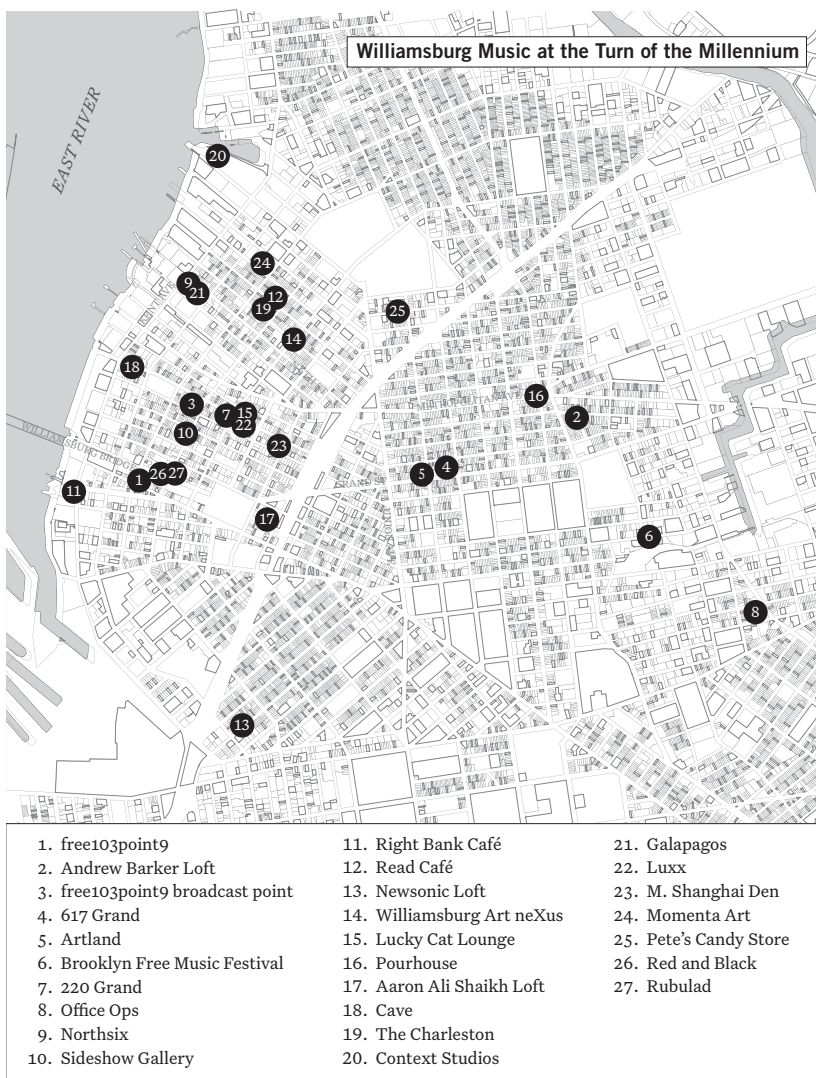


Map 1 Venues of Williamsburg in the warehouse era, early 1990s (*designed by Korin Tangtrakul*)

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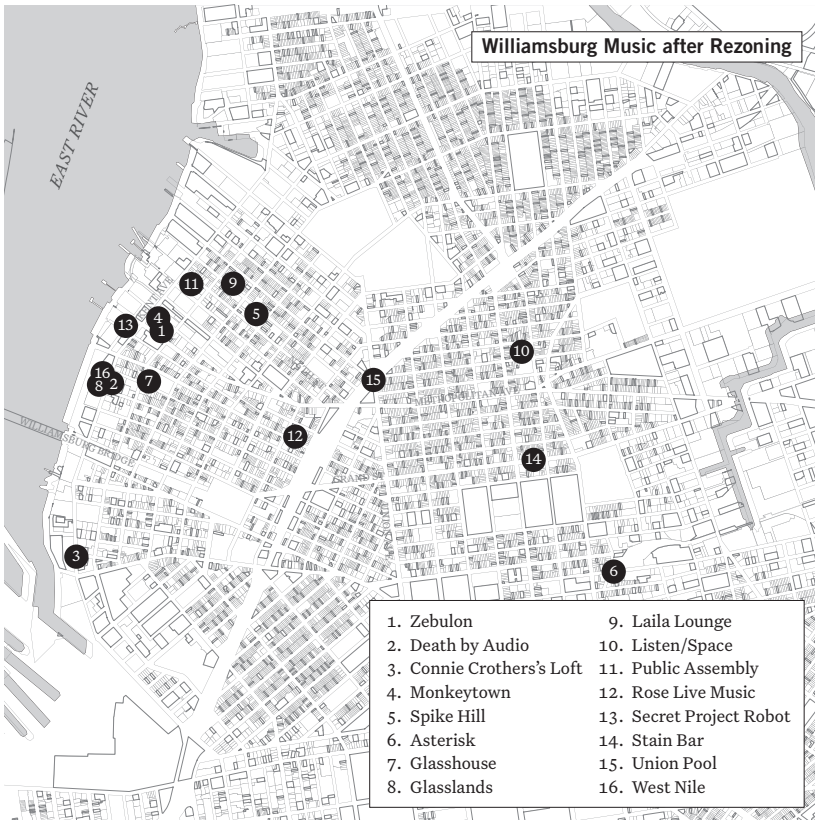




Map 2 Venues of Williamsburg at the turn of the millennium (*designed by Korin Tangtrakul*)

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Map 3 Venues of Williamsburg after rezoning in 2005 (*designed by Korin Tangtrakul*)

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## Introduction

### Locating the Williamsburg Avant-Garde

As I finished writing this book in 2020–21 during the COVID-19 pandemic, it could not have been a more unsettling time to be writing about the history of live music in New York City. With most live music canceled or broadcast remotely, communities like those described in this book were brought to a standstill in terms of live performances in formal venues. For some musicians, this was a moment of reckoning, compelling them to temporarily or permanently leave the city. Many bided their time, practicing, composing, and recording as they waited for live performances to be possible again. Others turned to performing outside in parks, in parking lots, and on rooftops because these were among the few safe places to gather as a community. This inventiveness in how music and communities relate to performance space has a long history in New York, inspired by the urban geography of a city that always seems caught in the throes of change.

From the late 1980s into the 2000s, one of the largest and most dynamic art scenes in the United States coalesced in Brooklyn. People from around the country and the globe found its inexpensive rents, ample space, and close proximity to Manhattan desirable as a launching point to take part in the

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arts cultures of the city. Fast-forward to the early 2020s, and Brooklyn has quickly become far too expensive for most artists to inhabit, its former arts hubs have been transformed into condominiums for the wealthy, and the arts community is being pushed further and further out from the center. Over the course of three decades, Brooklyn has witnessed a tremendous output of art across disciplines, despite mounting challenges that threaten its vitality.

Within this art scene, experimental music has been fantastically prolific and eclectic in Brooklyn since the 1990s. Nowhere was this more concentrated than in the north Brooklyn neighborhood of Williamsburg in the period 1988 to 2014. The Williamsburg avant-garde included a wide array of music, new and innovative in a variety of ways, and was situated in the most densely concentrated artist community in the borough. Improvisation was at the heart of many of these performances, and it is the single most unifying thread. Creative composition, aimed at creating unusual sounds or giving life to unusual ensembles, also was central to much of the activity. The use of new technology to create sounds, especially in the 1990s and early 2000s, spurred much of the noisier, electronic avant-garde. Experimentalists defied disciplinary and genre boundaries in these times and drew from an eclectic, global array of sources for their inspiration. At times, the avant-garde was a social experiment in bringing together people who might not otherwise gather or interact. And experimentation itself, in which the outcome was uncertain and the aim was to create something new, was at the heart of these performances.

The informal or do-it-yourself (DIY) nature of the community and of the spaces that musicians came to inhabit nurtured the creation of music that has been noncommercial, and the sounds themselves often seem to reflect back on the forgotten edges and broken seams of the city that fostered them. The DIY could take many forms but generally involved nonpublic, noncommercial venues, operated by artists or their collaborators, without public or private funding, and out of necessity often in direct violation of building codes and public safety standards. Thus, the vast majority of the musical performances discussed in this book occurred illegally. In postindustrial and abandoned residential pockets, the music community formed and blossomed, while still dealing with the harsh conditions, political opposition, and destructive moneyed interests that worked to displace them.

Occasionally, DIY art spaces went legit, but they catered to the same community of artists and generally did not have an apparatus for advertising their concerts widely. Even in licensed venues, police were still a regular threat to the survival of the scene owing to encroaching noise complaints. The struggle for access to and control of art space, having played out con-

stantly since the inception of the Brooklyn art wave, has become its defining feature. This book examines the social and cultural tensions surrounding the making of the musical avant-garde, the spaces it has inhabited, the communities that have formed within and around it, and the forces that have sought to undermine, co-opt, or destroy it.

Over these twenty-five years, Williamsburg's primary role was as the workshop—a very necessary one—for the New York avant-garde and for world stages around the globe. Williamsburg was where experimentalists presented their ideas, sometimes without much of an audience and often in raw form, as they worked toward an objective of sound bold and new, confrontational and daring, eclectic and defiant of definition. Oftentimes, the Williamsburg DIY afforded artists places where they could *fail*. In an art form where experiment is at the center of striving for something new, having the freedom and space to try things, not all of which might succeed, was necessary and played a central role in the emergence of new sounds and ideas that have pushed the music forward into new territory. Things can happen on small, out-of-the-way stages that cannot happen in the limelight, or at least not right away. This book charts many of those experiments, some of which were never attempted again, while others were refined, altered, restarted, or evolved into works that were later presented on stages in grand concert halls in New York and across the world. Only in recent years, primarily in gentrified areas, has Brooklyn possessed well-funded stages for experimental performances. The genesis of the Williamsburg avant-garde generally occurred at times and in places when most people were not paying attention.

The critical importance of the Williamsburg avant-garde, as one of the foremost expressions of the broader American avant-garde, was that it extended the musical and sonic culture of the United States further into unexplored realms. Put more simply, the avant-garde of various kinds is where experiment happens. It is the sonic space where old rules are broken and new ones are made. It is where previously existing concepts and sounds that existed separately are brought together for the first time to stew together in a kind of sonic alchemy. The avant-garde has a fearlessness aimed at peeling back the layers of the unknown, step by step. Sometimes the experiments themselves are critical. Sometimes the experiments lead to something more conventional that could not have been arrived at without the experiment and the breaking of conventions in the first place. The avant-garde is new sound, new aural senses, new audiences and communities.

In the 1980s and 1990s, there remained a semblance of commercial venues for experimental artists in Manhattan, but by the 2000s these had receded into

memory or became that elusive ideal that people chased but rarely found. That struggle stands in contrast to the immense artistic value that the music itself possesses. In fact, the struggle for the definition of value has plagued the avant-garde through its history. On the one hand, the avant-garde has broken into many new areas and explored concepts and trajectories never before pursued, but these new discoveries and innovations have rarely become any kind of commodity that could be packaged and sold. No dollar value may be placed on the utterance of a new sound, even a profound one, but at the same time musicians need to survive, pay rent, and eat. Pressure on musicians has mounted and continues to increase, as they seek to find a means to support their work in a world with limited grants, performance opportunities, commissions, and teaching positions. The aesthetic value of noncommercial music has regularly faced the accusation that it does not serve the capitalist machine.

This book is a social and cultural history of the Williamsburg avant-garde. While artist communities existed in numerous parts of Brooklyn, they were often more connected to Manhattan than to each other. Because of the structural layout of mass transit in the city via the subways, artists in central and southern Brooklyn often had more of a foothold in Manhattan than they did in North Brooklyn. The strongest affiliate was the South Brooklyn scene, which existed in the Park Slope, Kensington, and Ditmas Park neighborhoods during the same period, which I intend to write about in a subsequent study. The South Brooklyn community, although it shared a number of musical influences and interests, largely possessed its own character, more strongly informed by the early and mid-twentieth-century European avant-garde and some of the creative compositional practices that emerged out of it. Williamsburg's defining spatial characteristic was the postindustrial environment, which impacted on every level how the arts community was formulated and spatialized, and how artists presented their work to audiences.

This study traces the formation and dissolution of artist communities in Williamsburg over a span of twenty-five years. A distinct community possessing specific aesthetic influences and spatial orientations emerged in the neighborhood and evolved over time, with artists arriving in and departing from the social milieu throughout the period. My approach is to examine two related phenomena: art spaces and the communities that inhabit them. To accomplish this, I illustrate a series of sites around which scenes formed across a diverse array of art spaces, ranging from the back rooms of bars to artist lofts, galleries, rooftops, basements, warehouses, living rooms, stairways, backyards, wharves, street corners, subway platforms, balconies, and



boats. Virtually every type of space, public or private, was a stage for performance during the two and a half decades I study here, but these spaces also impacted what was possible within them.

By examining the development of the music within the context of the physical transformations of the city, we are able to see how and why particular scenes emerged or disintegrated. Laws passed under the Rudy Giuliani and Michael Bloomberg administrations had catastrophic effects on the artist communities and led directly to their displacement. Certain neighborhoods in particular times became social centers for the communities of artists, lasting as long as financial and logistical conditions remained viable. But when one center collapsed, another soon sprang up, allowing us to see how scenes were reconstituted in new locations from the remnants of earlier dissolution or dislocation.

Gentrification has been the specter of artist communities, following like a shadow. Whereas it took developers more than a decade to respond to the emergence of an artist community in Williamsburg, at present developers are anticipating the transformation of Brooklyn neighborhoods before artists even arrive. The perceived hipness of musicians and other artists has been ringing the bell on the cash registers of developers, with no benefit for most artists. This process of displacement has affected many people outside of the artist community proper, and thus I examine the communities outside of the music scene, which sometimes formed relationships with artists, and the ways both groups have been displaced and dispossessed in this process. The story of the Brooklyn avant-garde is one of struggle and survival in the face of a development-oriented city government that has often offered little more than lip service to artists, despite New York's storied legacy as a city of art and music.

Hundreds of bands and thousands of performances resulted from the Williamsburg music wave. To have a scene, at its most basic level, one needs only two groups of people: performers and listeners. But in most cases music scenes involve vast networks of people who all play a role in their sustenance. To understand the communities that form around and inhabit art spaces—including musicians primarily but also curators, venue owners, critics, videographers, and audience members—I examine the social networks that maintain the scene. The manner in which artists formed social networks changed dramatically from 1988 to 2014, so I examine at each juncture how these relationships evolved, grew, and discarded old forms and took on new ones. Where possible, this book illustrates the series of human relationships that kept the vital heartbeat of musical creation going in Williamsburg.

## The Evolution of Williamsburg

Williamsburg's memories are embedded brilliantly in its physical landscape. It has witnessed incredible change since the dawn of the twentieth century, with waves of immigrants from eastern Europe, the Caribbean, Latin America, and other parts of the world. Williamsburg has also experienced periods of incredible economic change, from the early twentieth century, when it was home to a broad range of chemical and industrial manufacturers, to the post-World War II era, when it contained munitions plants and other businesses. But like the rest of New York City, Williamsburg's economy collapsed in the 1960s and 1970s when deindustrialization swept through the area, leaving much of Brooklyn with crumbling buildings and a dwindling population. White flight to the suburbs left many urban neighborhoods like Williamsburg with few jobs, decaying infrastructure, and underfunded education.

To exacerbate an already difficult situation, the crack epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s tore through entire sections of Brooklyn, leaving thousands of inhabitants dead, communities fragmented and disintegrated, and property values destroyed. As economic rebirth has occurred since the 1990s, there has been gross inequality in its distribution, leading to extreme gentrification of neighborhoods and the displacement of many communities. Artists often dwelled and worked in the areas that were the hardest hit by gentrification, if even they were unwitting harbingers and ultimately victims of that transformation. The history of the musical avant-garde in Brooklyn is one of class and racial tension and of acute financial struggle placing working-class Brooklynites, artists of various means, and real estate developers into a contest that has resulted in profound transformation of the borough and the mass displacement of many residents, artists and otherwise, by economic forces far out of their control.

Today Brooklyn as a whole is New York's most populous borough; if it separated from New York City, Brooklyn would be the sixth-largest city in the United States and increasingly one of the youngest. This book examines how the flash points of Williamsburg's evolution from postindustrial landscape to hip trendsetter-created spaces of artistic experimentation. Or, in other words, I look at the people and the places where new ideas were born before they were distorted, diluted, stolen, or commodified by other social forces. Beginning in the late 1980s, Williamsburg became the site for the development of a whole range of innovative musical and sonic vocabularies in a shifting patchwork of communities.



Musical ideas never form in isolation, and they are never informed solely by other musical ideas. Much of the process is rather accretive, communally informed, and interdisciplinary. This book thus examines the social and intellectual context of musicians working in the avant-garde throughout the period. When possible, I zoom in and examine the specific locations of creation and presentation to see how these framed the music produced in such environments. I also see how the formation or dissolution of creative communities made its mark on the musical output of the participants.

A number of key cultural, aesthetic, social, and political elements contributed to the unique formation of the Williamsburg scene. In fact, the scene was constantly redefining itself. There was no single defining idiom but rather a diversity of communities and aesthetic influences, which shaped it over the twenty-five years covered in this book. The lack of unifying terminology is evidence enough of a scene that had no definitive center, though still connected through an array of influences, venues, community links, and a spirit of experimentation. Different elements, sometimes at war with one another, have worked to shape the music and the community of artists. Major streams of music coming from free jazz, noise, and postpunk bore the greatest influence on the Williamsburg avant-garde.

## Free Jazz

Free jazz has been a monumental influence and has had a presence in the city since saxophonist Ornette Coleman (1930–2015) began recording with Atlantic Records in 1959 and released *The Shape of Jazz to Come*. Coleman did not adhere to the standard rules of twelve- or sixteen-bar blues, and he had a particularly spontaneous approach to playing. As one writer noted, Coleman’s music was “described as raw, shrill, beautiful, repulsive, provocative, but rarely boring and always extremely personal.”<sup>1</sup> His following two-and-a-half-month residency at the Five Spot club solidified his presence as an iconoclastic innovator. The work of Cecil Taylor (1929–2018), John Coltrane (1926–67), Don Cherry (1936–95), Albert Ayler (1936–70), Archie Shepp (b. 1937), and many others created a tidal wave of free jazz in the 1960s.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, the controversy that grew up around the music was something it would never shake. It would continue to be seen as outside the jazz mainstream despite generations of premier performers contributing to its legacy. Even the word *out* would come to describe the method of free

improvisation or avant-garde sounds that challenged the listener to consider new musical possibilities, orienting listeners to view it as nonstandard or outside of the “jazz tradition.”

The outsider characterization of free jazz, however, enabled it to be the repository for Black American political consciousness in the late 1960s and 1970s during the era of Black Power and the Black Arts Movement. Many of the key Black intellectuals who were articulating and defining Black consciousness at the time saw the music as central to the transformation of Black America. Amiri Baraka, then Leroi Jones, wrote that the “New Black Music,” as it was then called, would be the “summoner of Black Spirit, the evolved music of the then evolved people.”<sup>3</sup> Or, as saxophonist Charles Gayle characterized it:

In the 1960s in the United States, there was a Black revolutionary spirit of breaking away from the mainstream of society for 30 million or so Black people. With the advent of Malcolm X we had the re-justification of the principles of Marcus Garvey and Harriet Tubman, and other people even in the times of slavery tried to help us gain our independence in thinking and in spirit, if not physically, from this particular land; and with other religions appearing, such as Islam and other African religions, the 1960s was an overwhelming period and it transferred itself to the music. It was a cry out and many people made music about revolution and independence and controlling our own destiny.<sup>4</sup>

A whole generation of musicians, just then coming of age, would give birth to an organic underground free jazz movement, though commercial constraints would eventually slow its growth. When commercial opportunities were not available, free jazz would be self-organized and self-produced in downtown lofts throughout the East Village, the Lower East Side, and SoHo.<sup>5</sup>

By the 1980s the free jazz wave began receding in terms of its public persona, but a circle of dedicated musicians kept the scene alive in New York. Pianist Cecil Taylor was at the center of that movement; he had drawn a number of musicians around him on returning to the city in 1973 and the following year presented his big band at Carnegie Hall, which showcased young and established talent. Taylor persisted through the 1980s by touring regularly in Europe, where he could get paid well at festivals, and cultivating new and innovative projects back in New York with dancers such as Dianne McIntyre (b. 1946) and his regular unit, which involved figures such as bassist William Parker (b. 1952), saxophonist Jimmy Lyons (1931–86), and drummer Rashid Bakr (originally Charles Downs, b. 1943). Institutional forces rallied

against free jazz in the 1980s, taking root in the music criticism of Stanley Crouch and later in the formation of jazz at Lincoln Center under the direction of Wynton Marsalis, which favored a fundamentalist turn toward the earlier bebop roots of the music. Documentaries such as Ken Burns's *Jazz* (2001) and many conservatories ignored or excluded free jazz in their work to build a jazz canon that was increasingly archaic.

From 1975 onward, the downtown loft the Kitchen became a space for experimental music in New York, but it was during George Lewis's tenure as music director there, 1980–82, that he shifted “the debate around border crossing to a stage where whiteness-based constructions of American experimentalism were being fundamentally problematized.”<sup>6</sup> The scene struggled to survive through the early part of that decade, with outlets at the Public Theatre; loft or DIY spaces such as the Kitchen, Soundscape, and Judson Memorial Church; and a few jazz clubs like Lush Life that sometimes booked the more well-known figures.<sup>7</sup> White participation in free jazz also began to increase more visibly in the 1980s through the period of challenging economics, a trend that would continue to build momentum in the decades after.

The scene found a new home at the Knitting Factory by the late 1980s and eventually migrated to the club Tonic by the turn of the millennium.<sup>8</sup> Bassist William Parker, saxophonists Charles Gayle (b. 1939) and David S. Ware (1949–2012), pianist Matthew Shipp (b. 1960), guitarist Joe Morris (b. 1955), multi-instrumentalists Daniel Carter (b. 1945) and Cooper-Moore (b. 1946), and their associates carried on the free jazz scene into the 1990s and beyond. The annual Vision Festival, organized by dancer Patricia Nicholson each year since 1996, became the focal point of the New York free jazz scene, dedicated to featuring members of the community that had spent so many years maintaining it against financial, commercial, and social pressures. Saxophonist John Zorn's DIY club, the Stone, became another vital space from 2005 to 2018 and continues at the New School in recent years. The 2010s witnessed a resurgence of the Black free jazz tradition within a younger generation.

## Noise and Postpunk

It is difficult to identify when exactly noise came into being and when it became a component in sound art and music. One theorist has argued that “in the nineteenth century, with the invention of machines, Noise was born.”<sup>9</sup> In the twentieth century, cities and living spaces became louder, filled with

noise of many varieties, and these sounds eventually came to inform the aesthetic of musicians in a wide variety of genres. To the present, much of the palette of noise music has retained identifiable industrial, metallic, or mechanical qualities. In 1954 John Cage's well-known investigation into sound, noise, and silence, *4'33"*, alerted listeners to all of the other sounds in the concert hall, including those from outside the room, blowing open the infinite possibilities of the musicality of the world in which we live. Cage later concluded, "Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise."<sup>10</sup>

The 1960s cast open the possibilities of noise in the musical palette, first in the form of free jazz and the avant-garde, as well as in the rock music wave that swept into popular music.<sup>11</sup> Lou Reed's *Metal Machine Music* (1975), though widely criticized at the time of its release, became a forerunner for noise as it developed over the following decades.<sup>12</sup> Punk rock would further explore many of the questions posed by the growth of noise and rock from the 1970s onward.<sup>13</sup> Punk featured stripped-down, fast-paced songs; hard-edged melodies; and often antiestablishment lyrics. Its full embrace of the DIY ethic became a defining feature and, like the contemporaneous lofts and self-run record labels of free jazz, would serve as an example for future experimentalists of how to create opportunities and interface with the general public. In New York the punk scene centered on CBGBs and Max's Kansas City, with a strong presence soon after in the East Village, where it continued to evolve in various forms until it began migrating across the river to Williamsburg in the late 1980s.

The conscious production of noise as part of a sonic experience in the pursuit of a broadly defined vocabulary began in earnest in the late 1970s.<sup>14</sup> In this context, one theorist described the phenomenon: "Noise is a negativity (it can never be positively, definitively, and timelessly located), a resistance, but also defined by what society resists."<sup>15</sup> That is, noise is culturally specific, defined by individual contexts; the cultures that create noise infuse it with meaning and value. What came to be known as industrial music emerged simultaneously with the decline of industry in manufacturing centers from London to New York. As one theorist characterized it, "Industrial music is music for the end of industry, the end of dreams of liberal softening of the capitalist machine."<sup>16</sup> Though the first industrial bands emerged in the United Kingdom, such as Throbbing Gristle, Wax Trax Records brought wider attention to the Chicago scene and bands from other parts of the United States in the early 1980s.<sup>17</sup>

Of importance to the development of noise, especially in New York, was the emergence of the No Wave movement in the late 1970s, which grew out

of and in response to punk and postpunk. The venue Artists Space, located at 155 Wooster Street in Tribeca, was the inception point for a scene that included an eclectic array of artists such as the Contortions, DNA, Mars, Rhys Chatham, and Teenage Jesus and the Jerks (fronted by Lydia Lunch), among many others.<sup>18</sup> As one writer observed, “The music was spare but precipitously jagged and dissonant, with little regard for conventions of any sort; the basic idea seemed to be to make music that could never be co-opted.”<sup>19</sup> Another writer argued that “No Wave groups defined radicalism not as a return to roots but as a deracination. They were united less by a common sound than by this shared determination to sever all connections with the past.”<sup>20</sup>

As one scholar observed, “Many [No Wave] bands still used the instruments of rock—guitar, bass, drums, the occasional horn or keyboards—but forced sounds from them that were deliberately or obviously intended as confrontational acts. This was not music meant to offer people escapism or entertainment. In their various forms, one was offered disharmony, irregular tunings, static, sparseness, unmelodic and/or atonal vocals as well as repetitive single-beat rhythms and single-note chords that were distorted into thudding white noise and drones.”<sup>21</sup> The music bore a nihilistic worldview that was manifest in the apocalyptic, decaying, postindustrial New York of the late 1970s. No Wave crafted its sound in the live setting. As one writer noted, “It was in small clubs at overwhelming volume that No Wave was most effective.”<sup>22</sup> The influence of No Wave was deeply felt in Williamsburg.

From the 1980s onward, a major movement in noise emerged in Japan. The roots of this movement date back to 1960, but it had gained momentum by the 1980s.<sup>23</sup> *Japanese noise* and *Japanoise* are both contested terms, since not all artists involved in the movement approve of the classification.<sup>24</sup> However, we can reasonably identify a number of key innovations among musicians from Japan through the 1980s that formally gave birth to noise as a genre of music. Paul Hegarty argues, “Japanese noise music is a loose, pleasingly futile and facile genre, grouping together musicians with enormously varying styles. With the vast growth of Japanese noise, noise music becomes a genre, a genre that is not one. It is not a genre, but is also a genre that is multiple, and characterized by this very multiplicity.”<sup>25</sup> Placed in context, Japanese noise was “a resistance to conformity, a sort of extreme and messy combination of 1960s ideas and the more aggressive outlook of late 1970s and early 1980s music.”<sup>26</sup> Figures such as Keiji Haino, Merzbow, and Hijokaidan pioneered these sounds, and many later bands expanded the possibilities of the music. As David Novak argues, “Over the last two decades

of the twentieth century, Noise became a musical discourse of sounds, recordings, performances, social ideologies, and intercultural affinities. It connected a spatially and culturally diverse network of musicians and was embodied through the affective experiences of listeners. It was exchanged as an object of transnational musical circulation that touched down in particular places and eventually came to be imagined as a global music scene.”<sup>27</sup>

Shonen Knife, an all-woman band from Osaka, was one of the first noise bands to become popular in the United States in the late 1980s.<sup>28</sup> By the early 1990s, a wave of other noise units also gained in popularity, such as Hijokaidan, Incapacitants, Masonna, and the Boredoms, which received broad distribution and exposure through independent record stores and college radio stations, while appearing on a number of labels, including New York’s Shimmy Disc and Tzadik.<sup>29</sup> Noise was to have an immense influence on the Williamsburg avant-garde by the late 1990s and early 2000s and has continued to be felt in the music community in various parts of the city up to the present.

### **The Demise of New York City’s Downtown Scene**

The New York downtown scene was a watershed moment for music in the city, a moment when many things came together between the mid-1970s and 1990s.<sup>30</sup> There seemed to be a shared interest in noise, distortion, high volumes, and dissonance, often presented as or within the context of a “breach of convention.”<sup>31</sup> As one scholar theorized, “In disrupting common practice, *outré* musical language amounted to a kind of defamiliarizing syntactical noise. Artists downtown tended to manifest this interest by juxtaposing idioms that ostensibly did not belong together, tweaking the hierarchies of taste and disrupting the semiotics of style that often underlay judgments of artistic quality.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, artists sought to undermine or destroy the method by which they were being judged in the first place and often to instill new senses of quality, taste, or value in their place.

Manhattan had long been home to the New York avant-garde. Brooklyn inherited key elements of Manhattan’s music scene only as the city, and especially the Lower East Side, no longer was a haven for artists. The period from the mid-1970s to the 1990s was the heyday of New York City’s downtown music scene, with cutting-edge, forward-looking music finding its home at the Knitting Factory and other venues. With four stages and an eclectic mix of performers and audience members, “the Knit” was at once a cosmopolitan community center, a cultural vanguard, and a global epicenter for

adventurous music. Situated on East Houston Street, the venue featured a variety of rooms with an array of different performers. The Alterknit was a closed black box theater, where musicians would often unveil new projects. The Tap Bar often had regular weekly performances featuring the most accessible music. Then there was the Old Office, which hosted innovative jazz-oriented and left-of-jazz types of music. And, of course, there was the main stage, which could accommodate bigger bands and the largest crowds. Innumerable performers played at the Knitting Factory, which managed to retain high standards while still making itself accessible to musicians who were new to the scene. Through the years it provided a stage for musicians ranging from free jazz players such as Cecil Taylor and David S. Ware to Steve Coleman and the M-Base scene to grunge rock stars like Vernon Reid, new and veteran proponents of No Wave, and unclassifiable figures like John Zorn. Music sometimes went as late as four in the morning on weekends.

The Knitting Factory scene has remained in the consciousness of all who experienced it. Its demise marked the end of the era when musicians playing new and experimental music could play with regularity at one hub. In addition to being able to offer well-attended gigs to musicians, the Knitting Factory also ran its own label and arranged tours for its artists. As trumpeter Russ Johnson noted, “If you were on their label, that meant you could instantly get gigs in Europe, and touring became easy. You could tour in Europe and make enough money there to support yourself for most of the rest of the year.”<sup>33</sup> The cash flow allowed bandleaders to pay their musicians well and to envision ambitious projects with large groups or draw performers from beyond New York City.

One musician who arrived in 1994 said, “I started playing a lot of gigs that paid \$50. If I did five gigs a week at different clubs, which was totally possible then, I could make \$250 a week and more than \$1,000 a month. Some months were better than others, but it worked because I was only paying \$275 per month in rent. I wasn’t making a lot of money, but I could at least survive.” Then he reflected, “Today, if you had a gig every day of the year that paid \$50, you couldn’t even come close to paying rent.”<sup>34</sup> Another artist recalled that up until 2001 there was “a spirit of artistic freedom that could exist because of cheap rent. An artist could survive on gig money or temp a couple days a week. The flexibility allowed artists to go on tour when the opportunity arose.”<sup>35</sup>

The downtown scene was not to last forever. Already by the late 1980s, the structure of the scene was cracking. Rising rents for businesses and tenants were making the Lower East Side no longer as accessible as it had



been a decade earlier. Many clubs in the area saw their rent go from \$5,000 per month to \$15,000 to \$30,000 within the span of only five or ten years through the 1990s.<sup>36</sup> With such a massive increase in overhead costs, venues could no longer make enough money just from drawing crowds to hear music. With the landlords, venue owners, and musicians as the three groups of participants in this contest, we can see how the power dynamics resulted in musicians being the first to be disenfranchised through the process. Without labor laws that protected them adequately, compensation for their services either flatlined while the cost of living skyrocketed, or their income rapidly decreased altogether. Still, in the early 1990s, almost every venue paid musicians a cut from their bar till on top of a door fee. By the turn of the millennium, most venues stopped paying anything beyond the door fee. And in the early 2000s, it became increasingly common for venues to claim part of the door fee as well. The economics of live music was eroding at an alarming rate.

Then 9/11 happened. Thousands lost their lives. Lower Manhattan was cast under the shadow of industrial dust and the fear of another attack. The environment suddenly became unpleasant for both musicians and audiences. As one musician recalled, “A band that used to draw thirty to fifty people suddenly might only have four people in the audience. The whole energy downtown changed.”<sup>37</sup> Another musician added, “A lot of musicians didn’t want to perform there anymore. Everything south of Canal Street felt like a police state.”<sup>38</sup> In the wake of 9/11, many people temporarily stopped going to hear live music.<sup>39</sup> The clubs could not survive without their patrons. In the span of a couple years, a huge wave of live music venues that had sustained the music scene for many years went bust, to the point that one artist referred to it as a moment of “oblivion.”<sup>40</sup> One of the most cohesive and sustained music scenes ever to exist in the city quickly disintegrated. Though other Manhattan venues such as Tonic, the Stone, and Cornelia Street Café became important centers for music, a new but related scene emerged in Williamsburg, which increasingly became the place where musicians lived, created, and presented their work to whatever audience they could muster. As one musician described the shift, “It was a matter of survival.”<sup>41</sup> Brooklyn was the workshop of the New York avant-garde, even as its participants fought an increasingly difficult battle to maintain art spaces and performance opportunities.

The years after 9/11 in Brooklyn were transformative. Many artists found opportunities, space, and community on an unprecedented scale. As



one Pratt Institute art student recalled of the time, “In the wake of 9–11 we were free to do whatever the hell we wanted. The paranoia and overreaching authority hadn’t settled in yet. Everyone sort of walked around like a celebrated survivor, like the little things didn’t really matter because at any moment a true and massive tragedy could occur. Those first years after 9–11 really felt like we could do anything.”<sup>42</sup>

## The Internet Age

The internet made all kinds of musical connections possible. Certain facets of the internet would also lead to the destruction of the music industry, and all of this would happen over less than a decade. Up until the early 2000s, most events were advertised by word of mouth, in the *Village Voice* or other local newspapers, or via flyers and posters in areas where community members lived. In other words, physical media predominated in how the community managed its internal communication and how it related to the general public.

Changes to how music was consumed happened fast. iTunes was launched in January 2001, which made music more accessible to audiences, in theory, but began to sever the public’s relationship with record stores. It was either an opportunity or an obstacle for musicians, depending on how they managed to relate to these changes; not all music was treated equally by these new platforms. The introduction of the iPod in November 2001 had a deeper impact on music consumption as it changed how the public related to each other—music became a more personal, less collective experience, and this also altered how the public related to live performances. The digitization of music has also completely alienated musicians from the fruits of their labor and creativity as it can be so easily replicated, which has deflated the value that musicians are able to get from recordings.<sup>43</sup> As one theorist described the process, “Once musical performances have been digitized they are in principle capable of being copied and disseminated in an infinite number at no extra production cost. It is at this stage of the whole process that it appears, in the consumer’s perspective, that digital products are effortlessly and immediately duplicated and distributed.”<sup>44</sup> This process of alienation has been taken to such an extreme that in many cases musicians now lose money producing records or choose to use physical media that cannot be so easily replicated. But as theorist Adolfo Sánchez Vásquez stated, “Under capitalism the artist tries to escape alienation, for alienated art is the very

negation of art.”<sup>45</sup> Musicians have been on the losing side of this struggle for two decades now, and if left unchecked, it will continue to undermine the well-being of music communities.

## Method

This book relies on a combination of extensive ethnographic interviews, private archival collections, formal and informal music recordings, videos, photos, and other ephemera. I began preliminary research for this book in 2012, conducting extensive interviews with musicians who had worked the Williamsburg scene or had chosen to live there. I also attended hundreds of concerts in a variety of Brooklyn venues over the course of the 2010s.

In 2015, drawing from newspapers, websites, posters, flyers, recordings, and correspondence, much of which was located in private or informal participant-managed archives, I reconstructed a Brooklyn sessionography. The Word file was over nine hundred pages long and documented the live concerts that had occurred in the borough since the 1990s. Working from that resource, I shifted my interviews toward location-specific questioning, often with the curators of particular music series, to get a sense of the culture and social milieu of different art spaces and the communities that inhabited them. Over the course of this research, I have conducted over 250 interviews with musicians, curators, critics, venue owners, audience members, and others who have been active in Brooklyn since the late 1980s.

In 2013 I founded the website *Jazz Right Now*, which concentrates on “improvised and experimental music on the New York Scene” with a focus on Brooklyn-based bands and artists. The website has since accumulated the largest archive on that music scene ever assembled, including reviews, interviews, and artist features. The website has also built a repository of over a hundred artist profiles, as well as many hundreds of band profiles, discographies, concert listings, and press links.

I became directly involved in the DIY elements of the scene in 2014 when I began running my own loft shows in my home in the neighborhood of Bushwick, which I called *New Revolution Arts*, just as what remained of the scene that had once inhabited Williamsburg had fully shifted to the area. I drew direct inspiration from my research into the Williamsburg scene when curating bills and planning events. It should be noted, for the sake of understanding the challenges faced by artists, that none of the concerts that I produced there was officially licensed, and I sold beer and other alcohol off the books,

turning over all of the proceeds to the artists themselves. Still, oftentimes this resulted in only a meager amount of money for the performers, though, on occasion, larger audiences crammed into the space such that I was able to pay bands better. From this experience I learned about the logistical and funding challenges that make the economics of the avant-garde difficult to maintain. It also gave me firsthand experience of how communities form around particular venues, as well as the inclusions and exclusions that arise through the curatorial process.

## Chapter Outline

In Part I, the book examines the rise and proliferation of music venues in Williamsburg from the late 1980s through the early 2000s. Each of these interconnected experimental scenes had its own unique qualities and bore a unique mix of influences, including free jazz, rock, metal, punk, classical, noise, and various international musics. In each chapter the book situates the music in the physical landscape of the city and examines why these locations were initially conducive to attracting a community of artists, what communities took root in those environments, what cultural influences people exhibited, and how each of these had an impact on the music they produced. The book notes key venues and performers in each of the scenes and the influence they had on the music. Maps detail the proliferation of music venues and the way their emergence was facilitated by the existing urban landscape.

Chapter 1 examines how, with the shift to Williamsburg, music began appearing in settings ranging from warehouses and lofts to squats and neighborhood bars. These spaces had been home to a punk and noise rock scene since the 1980s, which bore considerable influence on this phase of experimental music as it began to germinate. The art spaces of the early Williamsburg waterfront scene, almost all of them unlicensed, were no longer tenable from the mid-1990s onward as some were forced to close and the community began to be pushed inland and away from the largest spaces.

Chapter 2 examines how the Williamsburg music scene shifted from waterfront warehouses to inland lofts, cafés, clubs, rooftops, and house concerts. The catalyst for much of this was the pirate radio station free103point9 and the community it fostered via microbroadcasts in 1997–2004. In this rebellious atmosphere, experimental music thrived. The organization Jump Arts also worked to bridge the musician communities of Williamsburg and the East Village together through a dozen festival events. Toward the end

of the period, large festivals situated in East Williamsburg marked the shift of the community further east and south into other parts of postindustrial Brooklyn in future years.

The music also began to take root in cafés and bars as the community of artists grew. Chapter 3 examines the work of a wave of students who arrived in Brooklyn having previously studied with Anthony Braxton at Wesleyan University. They came with an eclectic training in composition and improvisation and an avid interest in the DIY possibilities of Brooklyn in 2001–6. Most established series in bars and cafés, while the community's most vibrant social center was at Newsonic Loft. The continued intermingling of such music with rock, noise, and electronic music, as well as visual art and film, made these spaces particularly vibrant for music aimed at exploring new sound.

Part II examines the period after the dissolution of most of the artist lofts, although some unlicensed DIY venues managed to persist. A few licensed venues came to cater to the scene, though they retained much of their DIY feel. The number of spaces that featured experimental live music in Williamsburg began to decline after 2005. However, some former loft spaces acquired legal certifications and became dynamic spaces for the music. Zebulon, more than any other space, became the new home for the scene in Williamsburg as other spaces closed. Chapters 4 and 5 look at the experimental music that occurred at Zebulon in two phases. From 2004 to 2006, Zebulon drew elements of the downtown scene to its stage. During its later years, up to its closing in 2012, Zebulon also issued a new generation of younger performers who made the scene their home.

Chapter 6 examines how the final DIY venues and a few licensed places persisted in Williamsburg up until 2014. Death by Audio was the last great venue of Williamsburg and was a key piece in a nationwide scene that followed experiments along the improvised music–rock–punk–metal–noise continuum. The chapter also discusses late artist lofts such as the one run by pianist Connie Crothers, as the scene itself became more and more fractured. Ultimately, neighboring Bushwick inherited much of the scene as musicians migrated inland and southeast to its cheaper rents. And during the later stages of the writing of this book, parts of the Bushwick scene have subsequently relocated eastward into Ridgewood, Queens. The voracious appetite of developers to further gentrify North Brooklyn has been stalled in recent times only by a global pandemic.

## Notes

### Introduction

- 1 Rout, "Reflections on the Evolution," 158.
- 2 Jost, *Free Jazz*.
- 3 L. Jones, "Changing Same," 126.
- 4 Charles Gayle, in *Rising Tones Cross*, directed by Ebba Jahn (1985).
- 5 Heller, *Loft Jazz*, 34–61.
- 6 Lewis, "Experimental Music in Black and White," 80.
- 7 Tom Johnson, "The Kitchen Improvises," *Village Voice*, September 24, 1980, 72.
- 8 Tonic also drew inspiration from Alt Coffee, a small café on Avenue A, which was run by the same owners. Accordionist Ted Reichman curated both venues in the early years of their existence. Ted Reichman, interview by author, digital recording, June 24, 2019.
- 9 Russolo, *Art of Noises*, 23.
- 10 Cage, *Silence*, 3.
- 11 Whiteley, "'Kick Out the Jams,'" 13.
- 12 Spelman, "Recasting Noise," 24.
- 13 Mallinder, "Sounds Incorporated," 81.

- 14 Tham, "Noise as Music," 268.
- 15 Hegarty, *Noise/Music*, ix.
- 16 Hegarty, *Noise/Music*, 105.
- 17 Cogan, "'Do They Owe Us a Living?,'" 84–86.
- 18 The music of the initial festival was recorded and released: Various, *No New York* (Antilles, 1978); see M. Taylor, *Downtown Book*, 57; Court, *New York Noise*, 54–55; and Lawrence, "Pluralism, Minor Deviations, and Radical Change," 68–69.
- 19 Azerrad, *Our Band Could Be Your Life*, 231.
- 20 Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, 140.
- 21 Traber, "Recentering the Listener in Deconstructive Music," 169. Simon Reynolds argued that No Wave bands found it most effective to "stag[e] their revolt against rock tradition using the standard rock instrumentation." Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, 140.
- 22 Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*, 141.
- 23 Mereweather, *Art, Anti-art, Non-art*, 13, 16.
- 24 Hegarty, *Noise/Music*, 133–35; and Novak, *Japanoise*, 13–14.
- 25 Hegarty, *Noise/Music*, 133.
- 26 Hegarty, *Noise/Music*, 133.
- 27 Novak, *Japanoise*, 5.
- 28 Novak, *Japanoise*, 11.
- 29 Novak, *Japanoise*, 12.
- 30 Hermes, *Love Goes to Buildings on Fire*.
- 31 Attali, *Bruits*; and Barzel, "Praxis of Composition-Improvisation," 176.
- 32 Barzel, "Praxis of Composition-Improvisation," 176.
- 33 Russ Johnson, interview by author, digital recording, July 15, 2013.
- 34 Matt Pavolka, interview by author, digital recording, February 11, 2014.
- 35 Charles Waters, interview by author, digital recording, October 19, 2015.
- 36 Pavolka, interview.
- 37 Johnson, interview.
- 38 Mike Pride, interview by author, digital recording, August 31, 2013.
- 39 Waters, interview.
- 40 Waters, interview.
- 41 Angelica Sanchez, interview by author, digital recording, June 20, 2019.
- 42 Andy P. Smith, "Ten Years of Music in Williamsburg 2002–2012: An Oral History," *Medium*, March 4, 2015, <https://medium.com/barns-kitchens-hotels-bodegas-and-stadiums/ten-years-of-music-in-williamsburg-2002-2012-an-oral-history-7fa2ac083470>.
- 43 Stallabrass, *Internet Art*, 104; Rigi, "Foundations of a Marxist Theory"; Prey and Rigi, "Value, Rent," 398; and Beech, *Art and Postcapitalism*, 99.
- 44 Beech, *Art and Postcapitalism*, 100.
- 45 Sánchez Vásquez, *Art and Society*, 85.