

UC SANTA BARBARA

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UCSB Scholar Examines Musical Improvisation as a Model for Social Change

Musical improvisation as a model for political, cultural, and ethical dialogue and action is the focus of an international research project involving scholars at 18 universities across the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. George Lipsitz, a professor of Black studies and sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, is leading the section on transcultural understanding and improvisation.

"We are interested in the history of how cultural understanding has been defined differently in different times and spaces, as cross-cultural, inter-cultural, and transcultural," said Lipsitz. We're interested in how cultures come to be seen as belonging to particular times and spaces when they also migrate across them."

The project, titled "Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice," is based at the University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada, under the direction of Ajay Heble, a professor of English and theatre studies. It is supported by a \$2.5 million Major Collaborative Research Initiatives (MCRI) grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

In addition to financial support from SSHRC, the project received funding from the University of Guelph, McGill University, the University of British Columbia, and

Université de Montréal as well as from private donors.

"Improvisation is arguably the most widespread musical practice in the world and the least understood," said Heble. "Musicians collaborate to make real-time creative decisions so that the creative process is very much in the foreground."

Added Lipsitz: "Everywhere there are people creating new forms, speaking new languages, and crossing new barriers. We're using music as an understandable example of what democracy can be. It's the same way people work together in science labs and other institutions."

In addition to transcultural understanding, the research will focus on six areas related to improvisation: law and justice, pedagogy, social policy, gender and body, text and media, and social aesthetics. Also, working closely with community partners, researchers will create outreach projects to bring world-class improvising musicians together with youth and disadvantaged groups.

The first of several colloquia will take place next summer at the University of Guelph. According to Lipsitz, it will have two focal points. First, it will compare and contrast Montreal, New Orleans, and Toronto as sites of improvisation and transnational culture. Second, it will explore the expression of Brazilian culture worldwide.

"People learn about Brazil in Nigeria because they listen to samba music," Lipsitz said. "That's a great example of transnational culture."

The project will result in five books based on research findings, all of which will be published by Wesleyan University Press as a sub-set of its distinguished Music/Culture series.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.