

Jeff Schwartz
June 19, 2020

The Soundwaves New Music Series as Local Action

My name is Jeff Schwartz. For the last 20 years I have been a reference librarian at the Santa Monica Public Library. I was born in Culver City which, like Santa Monica, is an independent city surrounded by Los Angeles, and I grew up hearing great LA musicians from Zubin Mehta to Ray Brown to Charle Haden to Horace Tapscott to Mike Watt. When I moved back here for my library job, I began working increasingly seriously as a bassist, primarily in jazz and improvised music, but also in the standard orchestra repertoire, new music, rock, Arabic music, musical theater, and other genres.

I kept my creative and professional work separate until late 2015, when I successfully convinced Santa Monica to become the first public library to subscribe to the Database of Recorded American Music (DRAM). This responded to two trends. First, libraries felt challenged by the rise of streaming services. How relevant were our CD collections in the age of Spotify? It is not possible to buy a Spotify or AppleMusic subscription for the entire city, and none of the online music products for libraries offered reasonable pop music coverage. Second, the combination of poor space planning in the new Main Library, which opened in 2006, and increased reliance on circulation statistics for collection management, was prompting us to discard less popular items, leading towards a selection that looked more like a basic chain store than a well-staffed indie. DRAM, a streaming service for independent and musician-run art music labels ("art music" is their term), based around the New World and CRI catalogs, offered a way to add thousands of titles to the collection with no space requirements and very low cost. As a nonprofit archive, DRAM's annual fee is less than the sales tax on many of our other electronic subscriptions and, divided by the number of streams, it turns out the cost per play for Harry Partch and Cecil Taylor on DRAM is far less than for the pop music included on the Hoopla service (which we got primarily for audiobooks).

Once we had DRAM, my department head suggested I start a concert series. I was also contacted by

local composer Daniel Rothman, who had booked music series at UCLA's Fowler Museum, the Beyond Baroque literary center, and other venues. Daniel's persistence and enthusiasm convinced me.

I was also motivated by my disgust with the library's then-new Strategic Plan. While one of the elements of the plan was "Community and Cultural Connector," that section included nothing about culture as creativity or identity, but used that heading for technology and vocational training. This was in the midst of the app-driven tech bubble, when the startups of the so-called "creative economy" were fueling gentrification that priced artists and venues out of west LA neighborhoods. I realized the library could partially replace these venues and keep creative music visible on the westside.

Another way to describe it is that I saw crises in creative music and librarianship and tried to use one to ameliorate the other. Public libraries seemed unsure about our role after Google, Wikipedia, and Amazon, and musicians needed a stage on my side of town. I am proud of the work I've done in the last five years, and I will try to draw some lessons from it in the next few minutes.

Between January 2016, when Soundwaves launched with an evening co-sponsored by the Venice-based Cold Blue Music label, featuring piano music by Michael Jon Fink, Peter Garland, Michael Byron, Daniel Lentz, and Jim Fox, to this February, when Thomas Kotcheff played and discussed excerpts from Frederic Rzewski's "Songs of Insurrection," I presented 70 free shows. The series began monthly, with Daniel and I booking artists through our personal connections, his primarily in the world of composition and mine improvisation. As we got a little exposure, artists began approaching us directly. Starting in 2018 we joined with the PianoSpheres series to present partial previews a few days before their ticketed shows at the Colburn School, and in 2019 we started a similar relationship with the Jacaranda Music series. There have been additional collaborations with MicroFest, the Dog Star Orchestra Festival, the City of Santa Monica's Office of Cultural Affairs, and UCLA's Center for Music Innovation. Also, for the last two years, we've hosted the Angel City Jazz Festival Young Artists Competition. These partnerships steadily increased the number of shows to almost two every month.

As that list of partners shows, I tried to draw on multiple scenes. Most LA music series have a focus,

whether post-Steve Coleman math-jazz or post-Wandelweiser near-silence, and these musical schools have some overlap with actual schools: CalArts, USC, etc.

My original criterion for the series was that some of the composers or performers on every show had to appear on DRAM, but this gradually loosened since there were many outstanding and appropriate artists who simply had not recorded for DRAM labels. I hoped that, by booking performers from multiple scenes, I would cross-pollinate their audiences, that people who came to hear Dana Reason play free jazz in August 2016 would come back the next month to hear Just Strings play Lou Harrison and John Luther Adams. This happened to a degree, but what happened more was that a group of regulars formed, including some older bohemians with eclectic taste, but it was mostly people who had no idea what any of this music was and trusted the Library to take them on an adventure for an hour. They didn't know they weren't supposed to like it. There were a few dozen people who came to anything the Library presented. Some were just looking for a comfortable chair in a dark auditorium instead of a hard chair in a bright reading room: I had to eject one patron for snoring loudly during a Ferneyhough solo clarinet piece, of all things, but most were people with real curiosity who would have never heard about shows at the REDCAT or the Blue Whale, much less schlepped to Downtown LA or paid \$20+ for a ticket. I am really proud of making this music more accessible.

Accessibility also came from intimacy. The Library auditorium seats around 140. I only had overflow crowds twice, both times for ensembles featuring octogenarians Bobby Bradford (cornet, associated with Ornette Coleman, David Murray, etc), and Don Preston (piano, Carla Bley, Frank Zappa, etc). I'm sure this was mostly due to Preston's Zappa connection, judging from the tie-dyes, goatees, and tie-dyed goatees on hand. Average attendance for all the shows was around 45, a decent crowd for this music in this town. I encouraged artists to introduce pieces and to take questions, although I did print and distribute programs if they wished. The configuration of the space, with no curtain or dressing room, helped draw people to the stage after a performance. Often musicians' friends would come to greet them and others would join the conversations, asking to examine scores and gear.

Those present at the May 2017 and November 2019 shows by the Partch Ensemble even got to play the Diamond Marimba and the Marimba Eroica. I love being able to show people that composers and musicians aren't magical creatures who lock themselves in a room and somehow come out a month later with a score or an album, but that we're real humans who work hard and have lives.

I also led two participatory programs, open to anyone who showed up. In December 2016 I had an hour rehearsal with 18 volunteers ranging from professional freelancers to children to my friend Michael Intrerie from the band Fat and Fucked Up, then we performed Terry Riley's "In C." The next December I organized a graphic scores extravaganza, where I gave a short lecture, Scott Worthington played James Tenney's "Beast," the Cal State Fullerton New Music Ensemble played Christian Wolff's "For 1, 2, or 3 People," Ellen Burr and Sarah Belle Reid each led the community volunteer ensemble in their own work, and I directed them in Earle Brown and Christian Marclay pieces.

Our current Library Director's catch phrase is "removing barriers." Removing barriers to what? She uses it to justify public libraries turning from cultural work to social services. I have an alternate reading. Almost every creative musician's origin story includes finding a transformative LP at their public library, whether John Coltrane, Terry Riley, the Nonesuch Explorer series, etc. By continuing to offer live and recorded noncommercial music, academic and small press books, etc, public libraries can remove the cultural barriers erected by the near-elimination of arts coverage in newspapers, of newspapers themselves, and of alternative papers, as well as the replacement of record and book stores with Amazon, Spotify, Twitter, and YouTube algorithms, all of which hide all but a handful of artists from public consciousness. I have no desire to tell people to listen to experimental music instead of pop - I like to rock too - but just to promote awareness of new music, its histories, and its local practitioners.

I need to acknowledge two ethical issues I faced booking this series. First, as a presenter and performer I directly booked bands I was in twice: Andrea Centazzo's trio in February 2017, and my own group The Present Quartet, who were scheduled to play Anthony Braxton's music on his 75th

birthday June 4, a show which did not take place. Both of these ensembles play music of appropriate style and quality for the series. I am confident I didn't bend the rules or lower the standards to boost myself. I also booked several artists I'd previously played with; some asked me to join them on their Soundwaves shows, some didn't. Some musicians I met when I presented them on Soundwaves subsequently called me for gigs, I hope because they liked me as a musician and person and not because they thought they owed me. I have endeavored to be as scrupulous as possible, but there are lots of grey areas.

Second, I could have done better on equity, diversity, and inclusion. My programming was at least as diverse as the population of Santa Monica and the various LA new music scenes, but defining the scope of the series in terms of DRAM, which is a collection of older recordings, and relying on the professional and social networks of Daniel and myself, both middle-aged Jewish men, risked reifying old limitations. Female composers and performers appeared on over half of the programs, without special outreach, but we could have done much more to seek out LGBTQ artists and performers and composers of color. As other speakers this week have said, you can't book people who don't exist, but we could have looked harder.

Like everyone else, I cancelled all my March, April, May, and June shows. Normally I would be finishing booking my 2020-21 season right now, but of course no one knows when it will be safe for people to gather for concerts again. Additionally, the City of Santa Monica has been hit very hard by the coronavirus-related economic crash. Santa Monica depends heavily on tourism, which has been essentially shut down for over three months and is unlikely to resume this year. Around a third of my colleagues have been laid off and, when the public health situation is stable, the library will still be open fewer hours. Closing at 8 instead of 9 will make it hard to present evening concerts. It is possible that the virus will be brought under control, the economic recovery will be quick, and our resources restored, but I doubt it. It is more likely that the combination of public health threats and budget cuts means the end of the series. I'm gradually accepting that. I never got the recognition I hoped for from

Mark Swed, Alex Ross, or Steve Smith, but I did get a small grant this year from the Amphion Foundation, my first outside money. Five years, seventy shows, thousands of audience members. I'm pretty proud of this work and lucky to have gotten away with it.

Experience presenting new music will serve us well in the post-coronavirus world. Organizations like the Society for Private Musical Performance and the Jazz Composers Guild are our history. We know how to create and present work on a zero budget.

The bad news is that everyone else is going to be down there with us. Before the shutdown, there were two bars with bands in Santa Monica: The Trip had neo-hippie jam bands and Harvelle's had blues, R&B, and whatever else went with hipster burlesque. There was also the world-famous McCabe's Guitar Shop, presenting singer-songwriters, roots rock, and other acoustic guitar-based music. All the other performances I knew about in town happened at churches, schools, and my library: places that didn't need to pay rent. This included two symphonies, two chamber orchestras, school music programs from elementary to community college, Jacaranda, the events my colleagues and I organized, Jazz on the Lawn at City Hall, world music on the Pier, the 18th St. Arts Center's annual jazz artist in residence program, and the Jazz Bakery's presentations of a-list touring artists at the New Roads private school auditorium. The current economic collapse is unlikely to restore sanity to urban residential or commercial rents, and artists and venues will continue to be displaced.

Over the last few years I have participated in events organized by UCLA's Center for Music Innovation, a joint project of their business school and music department, as an audience member, panelist, and co-host. I was surprised to hear rock and dance music presenters at these events complain about their cultural, financial, and legal marginality. They sounded like experimental music scene veterans, and this was before the coronavirus. For-profit organizations were already borrowing survival strategies from non-profits and non-profits from DIY.

When I wrote about Soundwaves for the 2017 California Library Association, I described it as a possible example of cultural sustainability, using public resources to replace venues (and other creative

spaces like book and record stores) lost to gentrification and tech monopolies. I hope similar projects will be possible as part of the post-coronavirus recovery.