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Thursday Night at Miller's: John D'earth Teaches the Creative Process

An Interview by Brian Jones

At seventy-three years old, jazz trumpeter, composer, bandleader, and educator John D'earth remains a vortex of energy: constantly gigging, ceaselessly composing, and tirelessly teaching. An iconic musician with a world-class reputation, D'earth is a gifted post-bop trumpeter with a muscular tone, a dense knowledge of harmony, and a virtuosic sense of rhythm; the type of player that would command attention in any major metropolitan jazz scene, but within the small confines of the Charlottesville, Virginia jazz community, a pillar of influence. In addition to his skills as a performer, D'earth is a revered teacher and mentor; as the Director of Jazz Performance at the University of Virginia (UVA), D'earth has helped hundreds of promising young musicians navigate the vicissitudes of institutional learning. But it is D'earth's work as a teacher outside the academy that will ultimately cement his legacy: D'earth has been leading a weekly Thursday night gig at Miller's, a beloved tavern in downtown Charlottesville, for over thirty years. Miller's on Thursdays is a laboratory—a musical workshop, an improviser's classroom—where D'earth holds court with both students and colleagues. On the Miller's bandstand, D'earth puts professionals next to amateurs, beginners alongside experts. Everyone solos. All players add to the collective musical interplay, and each musician has a voice within the group.

This essay engages D'earth in a series of interviews exploring his holistic approach to jazz pedagogy and improvisation. Beyond interrogating D'earth's specific teaching systems, I will inquire into his views about both the pitfalls and advantages of jazz in the academy, how improvisation can build social, political, and economic alliances, and the ways in which music can act as both a form of resistance and a strategy for survival in neoliberal times. Part of my agenda is to address how the jazz ecology of Charlottesville was affected by the events of August 12, 2017, when a wrongheaded and reprehensible "Unite the Right" rally ended in the tragic death of paralegal and anti-racism campaigner Heather Heyer and injuring nineteen others, bringing political upheaval and racial turmoil to the city of Charlottesville. Finally, I will explain how Miller's has operated as both a performance environment and important pedagogical space

for such a remarkably long time, yielding a wealth of creativity and access to musical insight.

Full disclosure: I have performed on drum set at Miller's on Thursday nights with D'earth and company around a dozen times since the mid-nineties, always as a "sub" for the regular drummer. Whenever I have played there, I have marveled at the spirit of the space inside Miller's, the "vibe" of the gig, and the looseness that both band members and audience appear to crave. This is not a concert hall situation, with the audience politely listening while the overly prepared ensemble presents its music. That is not to say the patrons of Miller's are not listening. They all seem intimately involved, hyper-listening. They all know D'earth and the regular performers, or so it seems. Thursday Night at Miller's is a late-night hang. The band typically plays two sets between 11:00pm and 2:00am, 2:00am being closing time for bars in Charlottesville. Miller's attracts a community of night owls, musicians and music lovers who know what to expect when they walk through the doors. The community demands music on the edge. Sometimes the music on the bandstand spills over the edge, but that's fine. The point is not to be safe. The goal is to improvise in the moment and create something new, even if only on a song like "Stella by Starlight" (which the band plays almost every week). While innovation can be controversial within certain circles of the jazz intelligentsia,[1] it remains, for my money, the lifeblood of the jazz continuum. And D'earth is certainly an example of a musician who welcomes change and experimentation, arguably the chief domains for creativity. How else do you inspire audiences and musicians to keep showing up for thirty-eight years? How else do you explain D'earth's drive to devise an interactive, adaptable, flexible—what I will later refer to as "synergistic"—practice methodology for his many students, in his early-seventies?

I conducted three interviews with D'earth during the summer of 2019, hoping to find answers that explained the phenomenon of Miller's, while simultaneously exploring D'earth's role as a jazz educator.[2] These interviews reveal D'earth's frustration with the normative practices of jazz pedagogy. His teaching career was a search for new ways to explain the inner workings of the music. At the center of D'earth's educational ethos is a flexible approach to improvisation. The Miller's gig is D'earth's attempt to find an alternative space where practice met theory: just as every Thursday night performance was different, every student

[1] For a fascinating polemic on the place of innovation in jazz, see Stanley Crouch, *Considering Genius: Writings on Jazz* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2006), 209-211.

[2] The three interviews with D'earth were conducted on the following dates/times: July 31, 2019 (in person, Richmond, Virginia, 12:00pm EST); August 21, 2019 (via phone, 2:59pm EST); and August 22, 2019 (via phone, 3:43pm EST). These interviews were lightly edited for clarity and readability.

was unique and improvising a fresh approach to teaching each pupil was de rigueur.

The final interview I conducted with D'earth concerned the aftermath of the "Unite the Right" rally. This interview found D'earth wrestling with the nuances of self-representation and the ways in which jazz culture was intertwined with the Black Lives Matter movement. Charlottesville in August of 2017 was a place of turmoil, a watershed moment when white Americans were forced to reckon with their status as citizens of privilege. This was a critical juncture when a musician of D'earth's stature—a community leader confronted with the fact that he was a white musician whose life's work was spent interpreting and reimagining African American music—felt it necessary to try and explain jazz as a Black art form to a largely uninformed public with honesty, respect, and compassion. Even as an ally to the Black community, this style of cross-cultural commentary is tricky business, freighted with problematics that, I argue, D'earth was still trying to come to terms with at the time of the interview.

During the interviews, I found D'earth to be an endlessly curious and imaginative musician whose expressive production involved a deep commitment to teaching the creative process, a process that requires searching for the edge and being willing to jump off. But to find the edge, let us begin with a brief history of the space at the center of this project: Miller's Downtown at 109 W. Main Street in Charlottesville, Virginia.

I. MILLER'S: THE ANATOMY OF A GIG

Jones: Every time I play Miller's, I look at [bassist] Pete [Spaar] and ask him, "How many years have you been doing this gig?"[3]

D'earth: Nobody knows. Nobody can remember.[4]

Jones: Was the [Thursday night weekly gig] always at Miller's?

D'earth: Yeah, it was Thursday night at Miller's and what happened was before that it was Miller's whenever we wanted to play Miller's or they wanted us to play and we played there a lot.

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[3] Spaar has been performing at Miller's for approximately twenty-eight years. He is not sure about the exact date, but estimates he started playing on Thursdays in 1991. Besides D'earth, who by best estimate has been playing at Miller's on Thursday nights for thirty-eight years (1981), Spaar has the longest tenure as a Thursday at Miller's musical participant.

[4] Though D'earth began playing at Miller's in 1981, the exact date is unknown.

Jones: And when you say "us," who are you talking about?

D'earth: Well, it's like a cohort. It's like a family of people and that basically starts with myself and my late wife [vocalist/songwriter Dawn Thompson] and Robert Jospé, the drummer.[5] We came down here [to Charlottesville] together in 1981. And you know, honestly, I think it may have had a big effect on the music scene around here because we met [drummer] Carter Beauford and [saxophonist] LeRoi Moore and we just all started playing together a lot and they were very excited about the sort of "New York" energy that [we brought to Charlottesville].[6] We had been living in New York for over ten years playing gigs up there all through the seventies. So, we had this band called Cosmology.[7] We moved down here and started playing at Miller's. After a while that band—and I think it really probably wasn't with Dawn at first—but soon enough she started playing and we changed [the name] from Cosmology to the Thompson/D'earth Band. That's when Jospé started Inner Rhythm and went his own way.[8] We had a communal band for many, many years—Dawn and Jospé and I—in Cosmology. We came down here in 1981 to get out of the city for the summer and then we met wealthy patrons who wanted to start a record company with us and put out our music and do all that stuff. It was a great gig. We had a gig doing our *own* music. So, we stayed here.

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[5] Dawn Thompson (1946-2017) was a key figure in the Charlottesville music scene as a vocalist/songwriter/poet since the early 1980s. She was a vocal instructor at UVA for many years. Robert Jospé has been active as a drummer/percussionist/composer since he moved to Charlottesville with D'earth and Thompson in 1981. He has been on the music faculty of UVA since 1989.

[6] After years performing jazz and various styles of music throughout the central Virginia area, Beauford and Moore went on to become founding members of the Dave Matthews Band.

[7] In 1977, Cosmology released the self-titled *Cosmology* for the Vanguard record label. *Cosmology* features D'earth, Thompson, and Jospé, as well as Dave Glenn-trombone, Rick Kilburn-acoustic and electric bass, Armen Donelian-keyboards, and special guests Collin Walcott-sitar/congas/percussion and Reed Wasson-tambura. Cosmology's aesthetic is a kaleidoscopic mix of post-bop riffs, singer-songwriter poetics, and the sonics of prog-rock. Imagine a Laurel Canyon-esque sound-field comingling with a soul jazz working band with serious improvisational chops. This is the jazz-fusion of the counterculture.

[8] Jospé formed the Latin jazz ensemble Inner Rhythm in 1990. They have played music on stages all over the world. Jospé continues to perform and record with Inner Rhythm to this day.

II. GETTING PEOPLE INTO MUSIC: INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING MEETS THE "OSCAR WILDE" SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

Jones: How did teaching jazz at Virginia Commonwealth University [VCU] and University of Virginia differ? Also, how has your teaching philosophy changed through the years?

D'earth: Right now, I'm coming up with something that is a very different way to think about how to teach somebody how to play an instrument or work on improvisation and it sort of has to do with taking the idea of jazz, which to me the idea is: the musician owns the music and the instrument, and the musician tries to find themselves or be themselves. So, the jazz thing is like Oscar Wilde: "Be yourself; everyone else is [already] taken."[9] But the way I'm thinking about it right now is [that] all instrumentalists could learn how to use musical language in the practice room to do exactly what I just said. Even if they never play a lick of jazz and even if they hate jazz. So, that's my sort of basic approach to teaching at this point, and the changes that have happened to my teaching all happened [as I] headed towards this idea, and mostly I've learned everything through teaching because I wouldn't have figured out most of the stuff that I feel like I now know, and want to present in a slightly different way, if I hadn't been teaching or having to teach. That was a big part of it. When I first moved down to Charlottesville, I was teaching at five schools: UVA, VCU, James Madison University, Tandem Friends School, and St. Anne's-Belfield School. At all those places—but particularly at VCU and UVA—I felt like I could totally be myself. But in two different ways. At VCU, hanging out with Doug Richards and Howard [Curtis] and Skip [Gailes], I felt like I was back in New York.[10] I was with people who really knew what was going on and really could play. [Pianist] Bob Hallahan. [Bassist] Clarence Seay. And later [drummer] Clarence Penn. At VCU, I felt like I could be myself in the sense that I had found some people with which I could keep growing as a player: playing with Howard and knowing Doug and the students. I think what happened to me at both schools— though UVA was a different kind of thing—[VCU] was like I was [giving] a constant

[9] There is no real evidence that Oscar Wilde is the actual author of this statement, though it is often attributed to him.

[10] Doug Richards is an arranger/composer/educator who created the Virginia Commonwealth Jazz Studies program beginning in 1980. Drummer Howard Curtis and saxophonist Skip Gailes were Virginia-based musicians on VCU's adjunct faculty. All three are highly regarded as teachers and musicians, active in the central Virginia jazz scene throughout the eighties and nineties, and into the 2000s and beyond. Richards and Gailes are now retired. Curtis, also now retired, went on to be a tenured Full Professor of Music at the University of Music and Performing Arts, Graz, Austria. Curtis continues to perform regularly, mainly in Europe.

masterclass. I could share what it was like to be somebody who knew how to play [jazz] and was trying to aspire to play. And I could show what that was like.

[At UVA], there weren't a lot of people playing at a high level. The students were very much amateurs or very beginner. And that changed over the years and got to a better and better level at UVA in terms of the caliber of player. But basically, the schools had two different goals. VCU's goal was a professional music school for people to be trained professionally. The UVA goal for me was to keep these people who were interested in the liberal arts playing music and creating in music for the rest of their lives with the feeling or the understanding that to [play] music is a positive good in the world because it's good for you. Science is now proving the obvious—with neurology being the hottest science—finding out all kinds of stuff about the efficacy of musical activities for the brain, for brain health and brain growth, but also for community. Anybody who's playing music and really digging the music is going to be communal because music is a social art. So, you're likely to be from a family involved [in music]. And I would always think if a [UVA student becomes] a diplomat in South America wouldn't it be hip if they knew how to play the blues. That could help. That was the whole goal [at UVA].

But the other thing that happened over the years for me as a teacher was that I became friendly with scholars at UVA and I never knew what that was. I quit school.[11] [At University of Virginia] most of the people I was dealing with had been through rigorous schooling and I never had. I was way too flighty for that. So, everything I learned I sort of had to learn on my own. That's how I've always learned, by teaching in that way. What happened to me by learning about these scholars taught me was learning about how deeply people can go into a subject and how they can create an argument. And I started realizing that I had a big argument because I do. Because I've been having an argument with the world since I was born—as many musicians do—because we rail against this unmusical, uptight world. I went further and further into just coming up with ideas that I thought would help students.

And then… I don't know what happened. I think I just kind of voted myself out of [VCU] at a certain point. I didn't really have a lot of interest in coming back or teaching [there] because I don't really feel like that's my best use, to teach people who are on the professional track. There are plenty of people to do that way better than me. In fact, I'm thinking about myself lately in these little aphoristic ways like: I'm a white man playing Black music. I'm probably also the worst trumpet player that ever sounded good. So, I don't know what the fuck to

[11] D'earth attended Harvard University during the 1969 school year. He quit after one year, moving to New York City to begin his career as a professional musician in 1970.

tell these students really, but I know how to teach *getting into music* and my theory on music is [that] everybody's musical. But it gets triaged out because music is the most conservative art and the gatekeepers—teachers and composers and the maestros—are gatekeepers that shut kids down. There are no bad guys, they don't mean to do it, but what happens is kids have a big dream of music at [ages] two, three, four, five, six. They're musical. The parents say, "Do you want a music lesson?" They send them to the music lesson. The kid likes music and then the teacher says put your finger here. No, not there. Here. And then the kid is like, "What?" And then "Oh no, practice this?" But I am convinced every little kid should be encouraged to play free music and everybody should play free music, and everybody should know what that means.[12] That's one of the great gifts of Black American music. That we can play free music. You know Cecil Taylor showed us how to do that. Ornette Coleman showed us how to do that. Trane showed us how to do that. Just do it, just do it. It doesn't take any more than that. I found that by doing that with little kids it un-intimidates them. Music isn't intimidating anymore: "I can do that." But then if you want to get more specialized, [then] "OK, I do." Or I don't. Just like sports. Everybody says, "Come on let's do sports." But they don't say, "Oh come on lets everybody do music. Let's just frolic around here." No, no! Music. Oh God. Because the fucking teachers are so uptight about hearing a sound they don't like. And everybody is so geared up to make sure that the instrumental excellence of the band program is [at a high level]. That's all beautiful. But I'm saying something else is needed along the way to help ameliorate the militaristic aspects of that.

The lesson is [that] you master the language yourself. It's a mastered language. Any jazz artist that we listen to and revere has mastered musical language. Western [classical music]: Forget about it. Great musicians. Or they don't master it and they deal with it from a side-door like Ornette [Coleman]. And that's also beautiful. And those are two good examples. [Those are] the strands of Western music anyway: tonality and atonality; common practice music and aleatoric music. You know, it's the same. So, you take the lesson of that which is also to create yourself and instead of going to the jazz literature to learn how to play jazz—which I totally understand transcription and everything for upper levels—but what I'm talking about is at the basic level of just practicing the instrument. Positing a different way to practice [other] than always practicing out of method books, finding the method, getting the method. But to understand the method and then apply your own exploratory mind to musical language which will teach itself to you. A musical language that is composed of

[12] I interpret D'earth's concept of "free music," to mean *freely improvised music*: music improvised with very little theoretical preconceptions.

three vocabulary sets for Western people. Intervals, chords, and scales. Which is to say intervals, intervals, intervals. So, then I found that you could teach this very concretely because it's not a huge set of information. It doesn't even begin to compare with a course in organic chemistry or a course in tax law. It's a very limited lexicon of things. Know your intervals and how they behave. But one of the big flaws in music education is they do not teach what intervals actually do. They just teach you the intervals. They never point out that there are two kinds of intervals: twelve-tone intervals and less than twelve-tone intervals. And you have these atonal patterns built into the intervals. Once you know that you can explore that at will and it's infinite what you start to see. And right away then, you go from intervals to chords and scales and now you're into tonality. So, you have these two strands: this aleatory or atonal interval work and then this tonal work with chords and scales and then you have three levels of [comprehending] this. You go through the level of construction where you learn to construct these things in all keys. Then you go through the level of relation when you learn to start to practice ways [in which] these things relate to each other like chords within scales or the way you can screw around with the intervals of a chord by changing the inversion. And then you go to the third level which is function and that's how these vocabularies function in actual music. Common practice music gives us the answer in the diatonic seventh chords—we chose seven—and if you pattern them out in fourths twice, you get a song that I like to call "Every Tune." It's an A section and a B section and it's I/VII/III/VI/II/V/I. B Section: "Ahh, the IV chord," and it's IV/VII/III/VI/II/V/I/I. And that's the tune. And that's "Autumn Leaves," "All the Things You Are." Every damn tune is "Every Tune" or not "Every Tune." [There are] some departures. So that's function[:] once you understand just what I said on how a dominant [chord] functions, you know how the chords and the scales relate to each other and what happens when you get to the five chord and why the root interval fourth is so important, you have basically got it. That is all it is, but people go through life totally mystified and intimidated by these things. They never have entrée to it and then cannot use it themselves in the practice room.

III. "PINE TREE BY THE LAKE": BINARY PRACTICING

Jones: What is the most recent addition to your study of improvisation and your relationship with the trumpet?

D'earth: The most recent thing that I figured out for myself, and I'm practicing it all the time and I got inspired to figure this out by a student I have, Will Evans, who is going to the Manhattan School [of Music]. [Evans] wanted [me

to create] "synergistic" exercises that would make him practice more than one thing at the same time. OK! Thanks a lot for asking me to do that when you're thirteen years old! I came up with something so amazing to me. It's like an epiphany. I call it binary practicing or contrapuntal practicing and it's exemplified by two exercises. One I call a "spider formation" for scales and the other I call "pine tree by the lake," which evokes the image of a reflection of a tree in a lake. But the idea is that you never practice an item of musical language in one direction; only between two points up and down. You always go up from a point and down from that point and then you relate the pairs of notes that occur when you start to look at the first note up, the first note down. The second note up, the second note down. The third note up, the third note down. Back and forth, in and out. It becomes like a huge 3D look at a chord. It has all kinds of applications to chords. You start to see all these melodic patterns when you use three note chords or four note chords or five note chords. This binary [or] contrapuntal practicing has become the cornerstone of my trumpet practicing or a cornerstone of it. And it's been a huge growth thing for creative thinking when you're improvising. Having more access to more options of ways to develop melody or ways of developing things, but it also suggests very specific ways that you can organize this into exercises that actually teach a person how to improvise. They're actually truly improvisation exercises. [It's not], "Learn these licks, now play with a Jamie [Aebersold] record"—which I don't put [down] at all. I think that's awesome, but this is in addition to and prior to, I think.

IV. THE SOUND OF BLACK LIVES MATTER: THE UNITE THE RIGHT TRAGEDY AND THE MILLER'S MANIFESTO

Jones: How did the Unite the Right rally change your approach to teaching and performing, especially at the University of Virginia and more generally, in the Charlottesville, Virginia area? Furthermore, did it affect your weekly gig at Miller's?

D'earth: Because of the fact that [the Unite the Right rally] happened right before the school started that year, and people were really harmed in that [event], it was very traumatic for [the students] that came back. It was important—it seemed important to certain people, and I was one of them—that the kids coming back be given a forum to talk about how they felt coming back into this situation, especially anybody who was feeling marginalized in some way by this white supremacist situation. So, we talked about it a lot and it became much more a part of what was going on [as a professor at UVA], to be talking about this. So that was one thing that it changed. And in the process of that I changed

in one very strong and fundamental way, which was I had never really tried to push the love of jazz or the appreciation of jazz on my students. They come to me; they say they want to play jazz. I tell them, you want to play jazz? You have got to listen to the music. And they either do or they don't. But if they don't, I'm not going to take the attitude that they should, OK? Because it seems to me elitist to do that. If what they really want to do is honk out the blues scale on some rock 'n' roll or something and are satisfied with that, [then] they don't really [need jazz]. Jazz music, it has to hurt you in a way if you are going to play it. You have to want to [play it] so badly. You've got to listen so hard to it and you can't help it. So how do you put that on another person? You can't put that on another person. So, I always thought: don't do that. Just teach music. Teach music and help people find their path in music. If they [sincerely] want to play jazz [then] show them how to do it and what to listen to.

After the rally I started thinking about it differently. Basically, it was the fact that *jazz music is Black music*. It's the music of Black America. Jazz doesn't sound like a lot of the other music that's African-based. Wherever slaves went in the New World they created new music out of their collision with the local music. And they created all that. Latin [American] music. So, all that music sounds [more] like African music. You can hear the connection much more with the even eighth-note, 6/8 thing [that is prevalent in Latin American music].[13] With jazz it's much more difficult to hear the connection between that music and actual African music. And that's because in America [the slave owning plantocracy] took the instruments away and didn't let them do anything with music. So, it had to be invented through the church and through work, so you get gospel music and the blues basically out of this. And out of that you get jazz. And because of recordings this music really was an innovation in the world. It's a huge innovation. This is Black music from America, right? It was recorded went around the world. Music is neurological. It's a different thing. They asked Louis Armstrong: what is this thing? What is this swing? He said something like: if I have to explain it, you'll never understand anyway. But it's a feeling, in other words, which means its neurology. So, the music on [jazz] recordings is Black music. Jazz music played by anybody you know it's still the same music" it's Black music. This music on recordings went around the world and affected certain people who were susceptible to it neurologically. You have master jazz musicians in every corner of the globe and they're *playing* "Black Lives Matter" because the notes they play wouldn't exist without Black lives. That's the keynote of it. So instead of thinking this is appropriation of some kind you're saying this

[13] An example of a tune utilizing an Afro-Cuban 6/8 rhythmic structure is "Sarah's Bracelet" from the John D'earth Quintet's 2023 release *Coin of the Realm*."

was a gift that was given to the world that people were changed by it. Almost like a magical gift except now science proves the obvious that these changes happen in people. There's a huge neurological shift [that happens] when you start improvising [and] start playing jazz, the studies show.[14]

I had an episode at Miller's. Two guys, who had been marching in a [white supremacist] tiki [torch] march—not the big one, but a different one around those statues—were identified by two [Miller's patrons] as "Unite the Right"-type people and [anti-racist activists] shut down that section [of the downtown mall near] Miller's. [The anti-racist activists] assembled a flash-mob of about ten people chanting, "Nazis go home." [The anti-racist activists] didn't want these people to be able to eat at Miller's and [so] I had [a controversial situation,] because I thought the [anti-racist activists] were a drag. [They] were all white. And I thought if these had been Black kids out there saying these things, the cops would have shut it down in ten minutes, but they were out there for hours screwing up the business of Miller's. You know just virtue signaling that they're woke and now these "Nazis" aren't going to get any quarter. But to me that's just like doing exactly what the other side does.

So, I expressed my displeasure with that and got into some controversy with some of the guys in the band. One in particular asked me, "you would play for white supremacists?" And I said, "I'll play for anybody." I mean, I won't be in their employment, but if they come in [to Miller's] this music is for everybody. So, we wrote a little manifesto and put it on the sign for a while. It said [that] what we play is Black music, so that we would make it clear that if anybody was coming in there hearing us that what they were *hearing* was Black music [no matter] whatever they were *seeing* on the bandstand. What I realized from all of that was that, if people understood this music more, [then their understanding of jazz could change] the whole inability of people to discuss anything or hear each other. That was the big change for me: I started to realize that people should hear more about jazz music. So, I just am talking about it a lot more. I give these classes called "Hearing as Jazz Musicians Hear," mostly to older white people who don't understand what happened in jazz after Tommy Dorsey.[15] I just started to feel that [talking about jazz] was much more important. Talking about the way [the music] moves me when I listen to Billie Holiday. I thought that if everybody felt that way, we'd have much less of a [polarized political] situation.

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[14] For more information on this subject, see: Andrew T. Landau and Charles J. Limb, "The Neuroscience of Improvisation," *Music Educators Journal* 103, no. 3 (2017): 27-33, https://doi.org/10.1177/0027432116687373.

[15] D'earth teaches this course at UVA during the Summer Session.

The handwritten "Miller's Manifesto," composed by D'earth and entitled "Message from The Music," reads as follows:

> *This is a message from tonight's band, Thursday Night at Miller's with John D'earth. We play our version of the music called jazz. Jazz is Black music, created by African Americans out of the horror, pain, and love of their experience here in the United States of America. One hundred years ago this music began to be recorded. It gave music a whole new meaning for listeners worldwide! African American music has become one of the greatest gifts any group of people has ever bequeathed to this world. All praise to Black music! We love this music and play it gratefully for all listeners. Jazz music teaches honesty, truth, beauty, and love so we are vigilant! We protest any disrespect for the values of this music which, by its nature, is inclusive. In the spirit of Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, Bird, Diz, Trane, Miles, Monk, Sonny, Duke, Wayne, et al., and in honor of the monumental beauty and elegance of their creation, we ask that hate and ugliness be met with beauty and elegance of form and content. 'So how does it end?' a dear friend asked. We resonate with this sacred utterance: 'Hatred will by hatred never cease, but by love, alone, is healed: This is the ancient and eternal law!'"*[16]

V. POSTLUDE: FIELDWORK ON CHARLOTTESVILLE'S DOWNTOWN MALL

On August 1, 2019, I drove to Miller's from Richmond, Virginia with J.C. Kuhl, currently the regular tenor saxophonist in the Thursday at Miller's band.[17] I had not been to the Thursday gig in a while, and I wanted to get reacquainted with the unique Miller's vibe. Even though a major thunderstorm was raging outside, Miller's was packed and loud. Creedence Clearwater Revival's version of "I Heard Through the Grapevine" blared through the stereo speakers. A bearded fifty-something hipster in a cowboy hat drank canned Budweiser and regaled all of those close enough to hear about his days partying and playing music during the 1990s in Nashville, Tennessee. A jazz bass player who had recently studied at VCU stood at the back of the bar, anticipating the night's music. Tables of UVA students drank, talked, and seemed to be having a blast. A typical college bar in a typical college town. Around 10:45pm most of the musicians started to arrive and begin to set up. Spaar, as always on bass, Mike Rosensky, on electric guitar (subbing the regular keyboardist Ayinde Williams), and Kuhl on tenor saxophone. Drummer Devonne Harris rolled in at 11:00pm, having just returned from a tour of the western United States with his band Butcher Brown.

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[16] This quotation is paraphrased from Jack Kornfield's *The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness, and Peace* (New York: Random House, 2010).

[17] Kuhl has been regularly performing with D'earth on Thursdays at Miller's since 2003.

D'earth arrived right before Harris, all handshakes and hugs, flashing white hair and incandescent smiles. One of his students, a middle-schooler, sat at the front table with her parents. Two other students, trumpeters Owen Brown and Will Evans (the Will Evans who inspired "pine tree by the lake"), hung by the side of the stage, nervously oiling their horns. The band kicked things off around 11:15pm, with a D'earth original entitled "Frog Gnosis." Spaar's spidery bassline, with its rubber band logic, set the tone, as polyrhythms spilled from the stage, Spaar and Harris locked down a ferocious groove.

All night, D'earth piloted the band with a calm, confident presence that encouraged interplay and musical connectivity. Though the atmosphere was loose and casual, D'earth's strong presence was unmistakable. His body language and hand gestures directed the band, clueing the audience into who was in charge. Yet, he happily yielded the spotlight to the other musicians. He was generous and open to their ideas, spontaneously riffing and creating backgrounds with Kuhl on the spot. The night unfolded in classic Miller's fashion: his students sat in, local musicians of all genres stopped by to check out the music, the band sight-read a brand new D'earth composition ("There's Always Hope"), and played classic jazz tunes like Ornette Coleman's "Turnaround" and Joe Henderson's "Recorda Me." I sat in on the last tune of the night—which comprised the entire second set. It was just another Thursday night at Miller's: a master musician fully engaged in the process of discovery, teaching a band of fellow travelers how to be willing to explore the possibilities of collective performance. I cannot say we went to the edge and jumped off, but at times we got pretty close.

Yet, even as the positivity of the musical community that D'earth has cultivated in Charlottesville flourishes, there is darkness present. In 2019, the aforementioned "edge" —at once a metaphor for musical freedom—is also a precipice. Miller's sits at the center of Charlottesville's tense political dynamics, with D'earth's progressive aesthetic practice living in tension with the sobering reality of the city's fragile racial climate. For D'earth, attempts to curtail the city's far right presence grate against his investment in jazz's expressive freedom. Still, as witnessed in the "Miller's Manifesto," D'earth is steadfast in his belief that understanding and respect for the music will lead to greater tolerance and inclusivity: "we ask that hate and ugliness be met with beauty and elegance of form and content."

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