

Sound Experts – Episode 2

TRANSCRIPT

SPEAKERS

Will Robin, Loren Kajikawa

Loren Kajikawa 00:00

I wanted a form of transcription and musical notation that explained the musical and artistic priorities of the practitioners, right, of the DJs at the time, and a DJ like Grandmaster Flash wasn't sitting there with staff notation in front of him writing out what he wanted, what sounds he wanted to come out of the speakers when he was at his turntables, *his* materials, his compositional materials, were pre recorded records, right, commercially released records, and he would put them on his turntables and manipulate them.

00:40 [MUSIC]

Will Robin 01:00

So a couple years ago, Kendrick Lamar's *Damn* won the Pulitzer Prize. And people on the internet went pretty crazy. It's fairly understandable. Lamar was not only the first hip hop musician to be awarded the Pulitzer in music, but it was also the first time that the award went to an artist outside of classical music and experimental jazz; the first time in a really, really long time that the music Pulitzer went to an actual household name. I don't want to "re-litigate" any of the more obnoxious commentary online. Perhaps you saw some of the worst of it. These kind of hoity toity complaints about how rap wasn't actually music because blah, blah, blah. Someone called the album "incoherent nasal yacking." One Facebook post I saw simply stated, "This year's music Pulitzer, how insulting." But there was one line of thinking that stood out to me because it was, in theory, in *defense* of Kendrick Lamar and his music; it went something like this. What makes *Damn* great is that its technical underpinnings are actually quite similar to those of the masterworks of "classical" music. A couple commentators even made a convoluted comparison between Lamar's rapping and Arnold Schoenberg's obscure modernist technique of "Sprechstimme". They were arguing in essence that hip hop *did* deserve the Pulitzer because it can be evaluated with the very same criteria with which we evaluate classical music. That's not entirely wrong. But this line of thinking also kind of misses the point. What makes any exemplar for any art form good, what makes it Pulitzer-worthy, is not whether it lives up to the standards of another genre, but whether it succeeds by the criteria of its own practitioners. The makers of hip hop do not necessarily seek to imitate the makers of symphonies. They work with different techniques and in different languages. Now, I say all of this to say that in the interview you're about to listen to, we actually don't talk about Kendrick Lamar or the Pulitzer Prize at all, but also we kind of do. And I should say, Hello again. I'm Will Robin, and this is my podcast, Sound Expertise. My guest for this week's episode is the musicologist Loren Kajikawa, an Associate Professor at George Washington University. He's thought a lot about hip hop's role in American cultural life as a genre that is immensely popular, but also still deeply misunderstood and not fully recognized by many musicians, in part because it's

held to a false set of standards. Last year, he wrote a fascinating and provocative essay titled, "The Possessive Investment in Classical Music: Confronting Legacies of White Supremacy in US Schools and Departments of Music," which has really helped shape my thinking on the Pulitzer stuff, it addresses what kind of music has belonged and should belong in our most elite artistic institutions. Because here's the thing: if you go to a major American University and sign up for a basic music 101 class called something like The Fundamentals of Music, there is something they don't tell you about, something missing from the course's title. The concepts that you learn -- rhythm, melody, harmony, form -- they're present in all musical genres, but the way that you learn those techniques -- reading Western notation, learning to label chords, understanding binary and Sonata forms -- is deeply linked to the genre of classical music. The course should probably be called "The Fundamentals of Western European Classical Music." After all, you're not going to learn about how to make hip hop beats or write pop songs or Indian ragas. But it's not. It's simply called fundamentals of music. A single genre comes to stand in for all genres. And we can push this idea a bit further too, which is what Loren does in his essay, that this isn't just an issue of musical genre, but it's also about how genre is intertwined with race and racism. Our music schools were founded as elite institutions designed to exclude non-classical music in an era in which elite American institutions were designed to exclude non-White people. And if we want to unwind or begin to think about unwinding that deeply ingrained connection, we have to start talking and thinking about how we got here and how we can teach music differently. And so that's what I'm going to be doing today, right now with Loren Kajikawa on Sound Expertise.

04:50 [Music]

Will Robin 05:03

You use this phrase "possessive investment" in the title of the article, can you talk a little bit about like what that means, outside of classical music, what it means within the kind of argument you're making?

Loren Kajikawa 05:12

Absolutely. So I base my title, "The Possessive Investment in Classical Music," is a riff on George Lipsitz's classic book, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, in which he explores the ways in which White people benefit from identity politics. So in all these ways that Whiteness is not named, but yet operates in US society historically, and one of his main case studies is the housing market. And so he looks at the way FHA loan practices and especially the GI Bill and other basically socialist, redistributive practices to help the middle class in the United States expand in the post war period, the ways in which those lending practices benefited White people, and the way that racial segregation allowed for the accumulation of wealth, for property values, to go up in all-White or majority-White neighborhoods, and therefore... and that people of color, especially African-Americans, were excluded from these large economic gains. So that ... Yeah, and so his... he, Lipsitz himself, is also borrowing from Cheryl Harris, who's a legal scholar who writes about Whiteness as a form of property, so that... So anyway, I wanted to think about how those ideas could be then applied to the institutions, the kinds of institutions that I and our colleagues are working in, that have a history of what I see as sort of ... processes of accumulating capital, accumulating a kind of investment in a particular repertoire, right, because for since ... you know, for the last hundred years or so, since modern schools and departments of music have existed in university campuses, for the, you know, first 70 or more years of that history, classical music was the only kind of music deemed legitimate and worthy of teaching. And

so departments acquired instruments, they acquired faculty members who specialized in certain... those particular kinds of music, and a whole set of research and curriculum cohere around that project, in ways that are racially exclusive. And so then ... today, when we look at Universities and say, well, you have a school of music, but what you really mean is you have a school of this particular narrow type of music, and the reason why it's difficult to undo those inequalities is because there is an investment, right? There's a possessive investment in a particular kind of music, a particular repertoire, a particular way of making and understanding music that is tied to a racially exclusive legacy. And yet, it's often not seen that way or those facts, the sort of power relations and the history of exclusion has been so baked into the institutions, they've ... that history's so repressed that in our daily operations, we often forget that those inequalities are there and that that's the legacy.

Will Robin 08:38

So that's the color blindness thing. Which I want to come back to, but, I didn't actually think about the word investment. And maybe you pointed out in the essay, and I missed it, but like investment almost you're thinking kind of like investment, like money investment in a way, right? It's like 100 years ago, schools invested in -- I don't know -- instruments or Beethoven scores and parts for their orchestra library, or like a bunch of biographies of Mozart? And that when they accrued those resources in the same way that something like the GI Bill or the housing market or the New Deal, right, like those are racially exclusive things designed to build wealth for the American middle class, but they're actually designed to build wealth for the White middle class. And this is a kind of analog within class classical music, within these schools?

Loren Kajikawa 09:27

I would say so, yeah. And it's self perpetuating. I think that's the other dynamic, and in ways that don't always call attention to the racial exclusivity in the history of unequal power relations and discrimination. So for example, when decisions are made in the present, about, you know, where are resources in a school going to go, and, you know, even ... I think one of the examples that I use in the chapter is the incorporation of new forms of music that are taught. So just like... I teach a class on the history of hip hop, jazz departments have certainly grown and done well in some institutions. But there's a whole new crop of courses that have been taught in the last couple of decades, from the history of rock and roll, history of hip hop, history of the blues, a variety of world music classes. Those classes are popular with students, they fill up, and they bring in tuition dollars to departments of music. But the decisions then that are made administratively don't redirect that money to the teaching of hip hop or the teaching of rock and roll.

Will Robin 10:40

They're kind of their extracurricular clubs.

Loren Kajikawa 10:42

Yeah, they're seen as sort of the ... as general education, as not central to the mission of the university. And so I think that investment is renewed, you know, in the same ... in the self perpetuating, in a way that's similar, I think to people who say, "Well, I just want to live in a good neighborhood, with good schools..."

Will Robin 11:02

We were just talking about that.

Loren Kajikawa 11:03

Yeah - So I want to live in a good neighborhood, good schools... people don't ... most people don't say "I want to live in an all white neighborhood, or a predominantly white neighborhood." It's just where are the good houses, where are the good schools.

Will Robin 11:14

So it's this unmarked category, I mean that's the color blindness idea. So like, when you say, "good neighborhood," you're bracketing what you *don't* say, which is a neighborhood that is populated by members of the upper middle class who are often white.

Loren Kajikawa 11:29

Yeah, and the neighborhood ... and it exists in that form because of a history of exclusion.

Will Robin 11:35

And so, your... not just your Juilliard, but your university of, I don't know, UCLAs and your Midwest music schools. These all have a kind of unmarked racial category around ... and what is -- and this gets back to maybe the historical component of the essay, like, what is the relationship between classical music and Whiteness, historically, in the United States. I mean, why do you need to mark it, because... Like how did it be... How was it unmarked? And how can you draw out the kind of clear markedness of the whiteness and the exclusion? It's a big kind of ... a multi part thing.

Loren Kajikawa 12:15

It is, it is. I mean, the best work ... I draw ... in the chapter I draw on Laurence Levine's classic _Highbrow/ Lowbrow_, and, you know, where he traces the, I think, traces back the founding of a lot of contemporary music and art institutions that we still live with today to the late 19th and early 20th century. So these are relatively recent institutions, given that the age of the United States... it's really only the last hundred or more, hundred or so years that the institutions that we live with today were really founded and continue to exist. And so that's a period of mass immigration from Eastern Europe, from Asia, and a lot of anxiety that Levine notes amongst the upper class, who were feeling like the America that they knew, the culture that they knew was slipping, was in danger of slipping away from them. And that founding these Institutes of high art, whether they were art museums, parks, or concert halls, the control over those spaces and what was celebrated as high culture, a Culture with a capital C in those contexts, was a part of a kind of exclusionary impulse to sort of say, this is what ... to control and to discipline the unwashed masses of the time. And so I think in that way, that's the origins, really, of our institutions are founded in a kind of exclusionary impulse, to say "this is what..." ... to legitimate some forms of culture, and exclude others. And so, I mean, I think that's the history... you can go all the way back to the founding of these institutions, and find sort of these deeply problematic impulses and legacies that we're still living with today. The institutions that we work in today are different in many respects, but some of the institutional inertia, like the reasons why we're slow to change, are often, I think, tied to those original impulses in a variety of ways.

Will Robin 14:36

Sure. So like, I mean, to go back to the investment, the idea of resources. Most music schools operate and you know, we can talk too, and I think it's worth talking about that we have, on the one hand, kind of like conservatories like Juilliard; music schools within larger universities, like my own school, University of Maryland; and then liberal arts departments of music, each of those have their own issues, but like most of them have an orchestra as a kind of like operating unit. That probably goes back... If it doesn't go back 100 years, it probably goes back to when these schools started amassing these various kinds of resources. And that has a certain orientation. You're articulating an argument about genre, too, right? That seems like, fundamental, right, that it's not ... it's not just about a classical music conversation anyway, it's actually about, like, other forms of music-making are not deserving of universal greatness, which is maybe the concept you want to get rid of entirely, but like, I mean, you bring up this point, which is one that I hadn't really clicked in my head, which is like, we have these classes called "musicianship", which is kind of like music theory 101. And that is an unmarked category, which is basically learning how to do classical music, right, like learning... It's not just learning about rhythm or harmony or melody, which are the tools that transcend genre, but it's about learning about them through like, eventually learning how to read notation. And we don't necessarily think about the fact that actually musicianship can mean, learning how to make hip hop beats, which is I mean, as you know, because this is your -- and this gets to your research, right, you are a scholar of rap and hip hop, I literally have your book sitting right here, in case we need to refer to it: *_Sounding Race in Rap Songs_*, by Loren Kajikawa. So genre, right, so this idea that there are other ways of making music... like, how does that relate to this concept?

Loren Kajikawa 16:30

Oh, well, I think you actually raised a couple of really important points, and thanks for reading the chapter so carefully. I think that what you said was absolutely right, that we have courses that are unmarked, in terms of race and genre. Yet, they really do teach a set of skills that are most relevant, and sometimes only relevant, for understanding particular bodies of music; right, so what is taught in a lot of, you know, I think the vast majority of musicianship and music theory courses, tends to be the tools that you need to get you to the place where you can then look at a, you know, look at a sonata movement, and understand what's happening. And those are powerful tools for being able to understand like harmonic progressions, and, you know, development and recapitulation and all of the great things we can talk about in sort of, you know, the common practice period, but they're not necessarily what musicianship would mean to a, like you said, a hip hop producer, or even, you know, go outside the US, you know, a gamelan composer from Bali or Java. And I think that there's a way in which, yeah, our curriculum pretends to be... It has these sort of universal sounding names yet very... but in practice are actually very particular in their focus. And so I think a really, if we wanted to think about what it would mean for us to live up to our names as schools of music or departments of music, to really live up to that title, I think, we need to start thinking more broadly about what things like musicianship mean to different populations, and give our students a chance to really see the world of creativity in a broader sense, you know, and I think that would free them. I think it would free us to be able to not only appreciate other forms of music, and support other forms of music, but I think it would lead to a lot of, you know, creative, you know, kind of reinvigorate, I think, creative practices and lead to things that we can't necessarily hear, you know, at this moment, but that I think are being restricted in some ways by the narrower conception of music that we that we live with. Yeah.

Will Robin 19:00

I was really struck ... since I was reading, I've been reading, and I'm only still about a third of the way through your book. Like, that it seems like a good example of how you're thinking about this where you in the ... maybe throughout the book, but certainly in opening chapters, you transcribe the sound of early hip hop songs by Sugar, no... Sugar Hill Gang? Yeah... compare the Sugar Hill Gang's Rapper's Delight and live recorded DJ routine by Grandmaster Flash and his four... at the time, the four MCs, before they were the Furious Five, and you're you're quite emphatic when you do these transcriptions that you say most transcriptions of hip hop songs, rap songs, have used Western notation to convey the musical meaning in a text - when I say transcriptions, I mean, you know, basically like a written down version of what the music sounds like. And you basically invent your own... I guess you invent your own method to do it, right? So like, why did you need to create a different method to evaluate the musical content of these songs?

Loren Kajikawa 20:06

Because I wanted a form of transcription and musical notation that explained the musical and artistic priorities of the practitioners, right, of the DJs at the time. And a DJ like Grandmaster Flash wasn't sitting there with staff notation in front of him writing out what he wanted, what sounds he wanted to come out of the speakers when he was at his turntables, his materials, his compositional materials, were pre-recorded records, right, commercially released records, and he would put them on his turntables and manipulate them so that the ... and look for particular parts of those records, you know, that he called the breaks or break beats, as they've come to be known, and he'd find those sections of the records that he liked -- that he thought dancers would want to hear, that would be good for his MCs to rap over, that would basically sound good to his audience. And he'd isolate them and use two copies of the same record on turntables to loop those sections that he wanted to isolate and repeat. And so I developed a way of transcribing that practice that took those break beats, those sections of the records that he was working with, as the fundamental, like, musical unit, and so I think it actually... and I've had ... I've been ... it's been really nice to hear from a couple of practicing DJs who have read my book that the transcription really makes sense to them

Will Robin 21:37

That's really interesting!

Loren Kajikawa 21:38

Yeah, that it really captures how... you know, what they're doing in real time as they're performing.

Will Robin 21:44

So this is... when we talk about this category of musicianship, right, this is what you're taught. This is another form of thinking about the concept of musicianship, right? If we transcribe early hip hop songs in a manner that doesn't actually reflect the practices of these working musicians and how they conceive of their music, and also how they like evaluate their music, presumably, right? I don't think any hip hop musicians will get all these detailed transcriptions to evaluate which piece is better ... I mean, piece, right? I'm using the wrong word. Which song is better than another song? Or which performance

is better than other performance? That's value... Those are values that are kind of intrinsic to a different genre, which is classical music and has its own kind of parameter for evaluation, too right?

Loren Kajikawa 22:25

I think so. I think so. And, you know, it's not that ... I don't think that I've invented some like, comprehensive system, or it's not the last... it's not sort of, it's not perfect, and it's not going to work for every purpose that someone might use when they want to analyze how hip hop's put together, but it allowed ... I think, just like any form of transcription analysis, it served the purpose that I needed it to serve at the time, right? You find ... you have to find the right... in my opinion, you really have to find the right tool for the job.

Will Robin 22:57

And that's kind of like an ethnomusicology, almost, way of thinking, like, you develop a system that is ... makes sense for a culture and is specific to it.

Loren Kajikawa 23:05

Oh, absolutely, very much so.

Will Robin 23:07

Do you... like going back a bit, did you start knowing you wanted to study hip hop, like in back way back? Or like, are you? I mean, there's like, I can imagine one trajectory. I didn't do enough research to figure out which one you mapped up to. And we might have talked about like, one trajectory is maybe like you were like an oboist who like, fell off the path and became like, a musicologist. And then got jaded and then became a hip hop scholar. And then like, there's the other path, which is kind of like maybe that was always your interest. And you studied cultural studies in college. And then, like, how does your research kind of map onto your trajectory? Because I also -- like when I was reading the possessive investment essay, I was also thinking like, this seems like it probably comes from someone who has been in these places for a long time, maybe?

Loren Kajikawa 23:56

No, good question. I'll try to give you the Reader's Digest version. So, no, my background is not as an oboist or another classical music, you know, another, like, conventional instrument that I rejected and went down the other path for. Actually I was an ethnic studies major. So like my concern has always been with questions of race, politics and power. And I ended up doing as an undergraduate this pretty big undergraduate research project I was lucky enough to be part of, I was at UC Berkeley, and they have this great undergraduate research program called the Haas Scholars Program where they take juniors and seniors who want to do research at the undergraduate level and pair them with faculty mentors, and get them started on ... give them money and support so that they can actually conduct research. And so I got a grant to be able to fly to visit musicians in New York, in the Boston area, Los Angeles and of course in the Bay Area to interview Asian American jazz musicians about their experiences.

Will Robin 25:09

How did you make the pivot to hip hop?

Loren Kajikawa 25:11

So that was just because that's the music I grew up listening.

Will Robin 25:15

So this is a lifetime...

Loren Kajikawa 25:16

It is a lifetime thing. It's just ... it's the music that I probably just know best in terms of ... and I had, you know, I went to grad school at UCLA, which especially at that moment, when I joined in 2001, was my first year in graduate school, they were super well known as being you know, one of the top and one of the one of the only but but also one of the top graduate programs in the country for people who wanted to take a musicological approach to popular music studies. So I was really interested in that, but I thought, Yeah, I thought maybe the Asian American jazz thing was going to get expanded into a dissertation. But then I was in a seminar, one of Robert Walser's seminars on popular music studies, and I said, I'm gonna write about hip hop. I mean, I had grown up in ... kind of ... I was born in 1975; so it's just like, the whole history of hip hop is basically like the soundtrack to my, you know, to my coming of age. And so yeah, I ... just to make a long story short, I just took the opportunity to write seminar papers that then ... that I think were successful enough and that were interesting to me enough that like, oh, maybe I'm ... this is something I can contribute to musicology. This is a perspective that hasn't really been represented before and I can help do that.

Will Robin 26:31

The perspective it seems like one of the ... and you shared with me some recent stuff that you've been working on too, like the book is called Sounding Race in Rap Songs. And the the word "sounding" seems particularly important in terms of -- you are making a strong case for -- and this goes back to the transcription thing we were talking about, and also it really goes back I think to this, like, musicianship as a category, maybe. Sound was a neglected category within hip hop studies or something, that wasn't treated as strongly as lyrical content or maybe other parts of the culture. Can you say more about that?

Loren Kajikawa 27:05

Yeah, I mean, I think that's where I was at a ... again, part of my graduate training was in a department whose motto practically at the time, I mean, it wasn't inscribed in the wall or anything, but I think it was sort of, you know, all about the tunes, right? This was a program that was very much about what can sound itself -- what can sort of the music itself, to use that phrase, tell us, you know, if we were to treat it as historical evidence, what is it telling us. And I think hip hop and rap music, especially because it came of age in a time where, you know, the music video starts to become invented and ... or become a really important medium for getting the music out there, that a lot of attention was paid to visual elements and of course to lyrics, because MCs are the stars of the genre, and not as much attention to what the work of the producers what ... you know, how they're putting the beats together, and how those beats contribute to the image and the ideas that artists are trying to present, you know, in their music. And so really the genesis of the book was driving in LA, which is a very common practice, being in the car, and listening to music, and hearing Eminem's "My name is", which came out in 1999, but

there were still playing it on the radio in you know, 2001-2002 -- and just having this epiphany that there was something about this beat that was different, and that I thought was really important and significant to Eminem's success, breaking through as like, you know, the first White artist since Vanilla Ice, right, to sell a bunch of records and really be successful commercially, and also get respect in the genre. And so I... And I thought a lot of that had to do with not just his music video, which was also a part of it, or his lyrical skills, but also the beat that Dr. Dre had produced for that single, and so that was kind of the origin for like -- there's something going on here, there's a way in which this beat is playing on his racial identity that I need to understand, I need to work out. And then from ... And that ends up being the last chapter of *_Sounding Race_*. And so I ended up working backwards from Eminem, like the moment that hip hop beats can sound Whiteness, well to sound Whiteness, it's, you know, Whiteness is always defined in relationship to what it's not. And so I sort of like... so by 1999 to around 2000 you know, Eminem and Dr. Dre come up with a way to sound White racial identity through hip hop music, and I wanted to work back from there to understand, well, then how did it ... How did hip hop come to sound Blackness in particular ways? So there's a chapter on Public Enemy via Run DMC, and then Dr. Dre, and and then also of course, like the original, the origins of hip hop as a genre of recorded music with the Sugar Hill Gang and "Rapper's Delight."

Will Robin 30:14

So how are you ... How have you been figuring out how to kind of put the theories into practice in terms of how you teach and also like in terms of how you conceptualize, like, pedagogy, big p Pedagogy?

Loren Kajikawa 30:28

Great question. I can talk about a couple of things. Some of them are at my older institution, at the University of Oregon, where I was for eight years before moving to GW. And I think in both that prior position and my current position, I've been really fortunate to have been given free rein, at least for some of the classes that I teach, to teach whatever I want to teach. So I think anything that I say, any ideas I come up with, and talk to you about, I think it's important to note that I'm in a lucky position, unlike a lot of our colleagues who are tasked with teaching courses that are on the books, and they don't really have the freedom to invent a new course or add a course to the curriculum. And so I think part of it comes from being in departments that have at least valued what I can bring to the table and have had, you know, had ... have given me that opportunity. So, since the beginning of my teaching career, I've taught a course on the history of hip hop. And that's been a course I teach every year, and so I've been able to really emphasize that -- and of course, it's not just, we're not just looking at song lyrics, I'm really ... I spend the first part of the class really emphasizing what it is the DJs were doing in the 1970s, and how that laid a musical foundation for everything that comes after, even when people are making beats on their phones or tablets or laptop computers, the logic of what they're doing ties back to what DJs did with vinyl records in the 1970s. And so I really -- for me, that's the fundamental musicianship component or theoretical component that students need to understand -- how, you know, what hip hop producers are doing. And so I've been able to put that into practice through that class. I was also fortunate enough to have a PhD student in Oregon, Shawn Peterson, who was working on a dissertation on the Soulquarians -- sort of the D'Angelo, you know, Questlove and the Roots, Erykah Badu, a number of artists in the late 90s, who were really kind of recording on each other's projects and forming this sort of movement, some, you know, associated with neo soul and hip hop in that era. And so Shawn was -- and still is -- a talented jazz bass player and composer, in addition to being a

musicologist. And so I had floated the idea to him that wouldn't it be cool to have a school of music ensemble that was modeled on the Roots, because he was doing research on the Roots? And I was like, Well, you know, it's a ... for those listening that might not know who the Roots are, they're a live ... instead of having a producer, a DJ producing the beats, they're basically an R&B setup and you know bass, keyboards, drums, and guitar; and they make hip hop beats using traditional instruments, right; but they sound... if you weren't really listening carefully or thinking about it too much, they developed a sound with live instruments that really mimicked the aesthetics, like the rhythmic feel, and the timbre, the characteristic timbres and rhythms of sample-based hip hop. So... which isn't easy to do.

Will Robin 33:37

So this is a way to basically create a kind of like, within the context of music school, we have all of our ensembles, and this will be a hip hop ensemble.

Loren Kajikawa 33:47

Yeah, yeah. So we basically created a hip hop ensemble. And what was great about it was it drew students from the jazz program, from the classical, you know, music side, and then some students who weren't even music majors. Who were, you know, who were MCs or, you know, maybe were... they played or they played traditional instruments, but they weren't music majors or they weren't involved at the time and any music classes...

Will Robin 34:11

So this becomes almost like a kind of like meeting space for all of these different ways of... of the musicianship category.

Loren Kajikawa 34:18

Yes, yeah. And so they started off doing covers, but then they did freestyle sessions where they would... where the group would improvise a beat, the MCs would freestyle, and they would write songs collaboratively together. And so they had a bunch of original songs. They even recorded an EP, and I think it's available even on iTunes. They ended up calling themselves the Ill Equips so that they, so... it was almost like it was part ensemble, part... they made a band. And yeah, it was really successful.

Will Robin 34:48

So starting an ensemble, teaching a class. I mean, these are kind of individualized solutions. But we're also talking about this system... I mean, you're arguing it's a systemic problem and I think that's probably the right way to view it. So like, what is the systemic solution? We can institute these ensembles and a lot of schools of music, I mean, plenty of schools would push back against it because of all of these investments, right? Is it burning everything to the ground and starting over? Like, what? What's the idea? I think actually, one of my colleagues asked you this when you gave the talk, and I think she meant it, both generously and confrontationally. But it's it's both a generous and confrontational question, which is like, what does the ideal way to teach music in both a liberal arts university and a music school -- two kind of separate but related things -- look like? Do we just need to, like, do these ensembles and classes at scale? Or do we have to have bigger conversations? I mean, I think the answer bigger conversations and every academic wants... they always want bigger conversations, too. Right. But ...

Loren Kajikawa 35:52

You know, I think there's no one size fits all solution. So I'm going to, I'm going to wiggle out of this question by saying that I think it really, it depends on where you're at. Everybody's at a different kind of institution with different politics. I don't think I can invent, like a solution for ... that's gonna work for everybody. But philosophically, I really do believe that we need to shake things up; that we need to get out of the boxes and the silos that we've become accustomed to and entrenched within. And so I think, for departments of music that are on university and college campuses that have that kind of diversity of interests and expertise, one thing that I think any music program can do is start thinking about who are the people that we're not collaborating with, but that are here and might want to collaborate with us? Who are the students that are already here paying tuition, but are not ... but we are not accessible to them. We don't have anything for them to participate in music, and the solutions can really come out of just -- Can we stop doing the same old thing? And I think they're ... the other thing I've learned working you know, for a decade now in higher education is that there are musicians everywhere on campus, not just in music departments. So there are people in anthropology, in American Studies, in Physics, in all these departments across campus who really are into music and play music. And I think that sometimes the narrow specialization of conservatory style thinking where there's a particular level that you have to play in, a particular repertoire that our students need to know, also blinds us from some of the cool things that we could be doing. It's just, there's so much more, so many different kinds of things that could be done that aren't being done, rather than...

Will Robin 37:48

Great, I think I mostly agree. Thanks. This was really great.

Loren Kajikawa 37:51

Thanks so much for having me. This was really fun.

Will Robin 38:00

Many thanks to Professor Loren Kajikawa of George Washington University for that great interview, I've got two book recommendations for you. Definitely check out Loren's great book from a few years back, Sounding Race in Rap Songs. And if you're interested in reading the essay that we talked a lot about today, "The Possessive Investment in Classical Music," It was published in 2019. within a larger collection of fascinating essays titled Seeing Race Again: Countering Colorblindness across the Disciplines, links to all that stuff and more over at our website, soundexpertise.org. For more on this week's show, you can follow me, Will Robin, over on twitter [@seatedovation](https://twitter.com/seatedovation). And you should absolutely check out the work of our incredible producer, the composer D. Edward Davis on Soundcloud [@warm_silence](https://soundcloud.com/warm_silence). You'll definitely want to tune in next week for a discussion of timbre, 80s pop, and yes, the music of Top Gun and Sonic the Hedgehog with music theorist Megan Lavengood. Subscribe to us wherever you get your podcasts and please tell your friends, tell your friends, tell your friends' friends. Tell your students, tell your parents tell your parents' students and your students' parents. See you next week.

39:00 [Music]