

Pocket as Authored Space: Distributed Authority in Embodied Ensemble Practice

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Abstract

Groove-based ensemble practice complicates conventional accounts of musical authorship because consequential musical direction may emerge without a single, continuously identifiable leader. This article examines how embodied interventions in rhythm-section practice can acquire temporary authorial consequence through what I describe here as consequential uptake: their perception and negotiation by other musicians such that they begin to shape subsequent collective action. Drawing on reflective practitioner inquiry, three bounded cases examine changes in ride-cymbal surface, displaced keyboard placement, and competing trajectories at a harmonic arrival. I use authored space as a local analytical framing for the shared musical conditions produced through such interactions. The analysis distinguishes contribution from authorship and argues that distributed authority need not imply either equality or consensus: influence may remain asymmetrical, contested, and temporary. I therefore treat pocket not as an individual possession or fixed temporal location, but as a relational field in which embodied propositions become musically consequential through ensemble response.

Keywords: authorship; authority; groove; ensemble interaction; embodied practice; artistic research

1. Who speaks when nobody is visibly leading?

Musical authorship is readily associated with identifiable originating figures: composers, songwriters, bandleaders, conductors, or improvising soloists. Groove-based ensemble practice complicates this picture. In jazz and related practices, musical organisation emerges through interaction among performers whose contributions continually affect one another rather than simply realising a predetermined hierarchy (Monson, 1996). Accounts of distributed creativity similarly locate creative processes across interacting people, materials, practices, and environments rather than within an isolated individual (Clarke & Doffman, 2017). Jazz poses a particularly visible problem for singular authorship because collaborative performance can generate creative material whose production and attribution are distributed across participants (Leo, 2020).

The rhythm section makes this problem tangible. A drummer can change the definition of a ride-cymbal surface; a bassist can establish a trajectory towards an arrival; a keyboardist can displace an otherwise unchanged chord pattern. None of these actions necessarily constitutes authorship merely because it occurs. Yet each can alter the conditions within which other musicians subsequently make decisions. This relational understanding is consistent with work treating groove as participatory and embodied rather than reducible to notated rhythmic content (Seow, 2025) and with my subsequent account of the pocket as a site for developing ensemble listening, role awareness, and responsive musical decision-making (Seow, 2026c).

The problem, then, is not simply whether musical creativity can be distributed. Existing scholarship already gives strong reasons to answer that question affirmatively. The narrower question pursued here is when a particular intervention within that distributed field becomes authorially consequential. I argue that the relevant threshold is neither origination nor contribution alone, but what happens relationally afterwards: whether an intervention is perceived and negotiated by others such that it becomes part of the shared condition shaping what the ensemble does next.

2. From contribution to authored space

Ensemble performance depends on more than simultaneous participation. Musicians continuously anticipate, monitor, and adapt to one another while retaining differentiated roles and perceptual perspectives (Keller et al., 2014; Linson & Clarke, 2017). Studies of joint musical action similarly suggest that effective coordination requires both integration with others and preservation of self–other distinction rather than dissolution into a single collective agent (Liebermann-Jordanidis et al., 2021). This distinction matters because coordination alone does not establish authorship. Musicians may adjust successfully to one another without any particular intervention substantially reorganising the shared musical condition.

My earlier work describes ensemble fluency as a relational and embodied capacity to make musically appropriate decisions in real time with and for other musicians (Seow, in press-f). This includes perceptual orientation to unfolding sound: hearing relationships contextually, anticipating where they may lead, and responding accordingly (Seow, in press-a). The Intentional Pocket framework and subsequent ensemble-groove work likewise treat listening, role awareness, and adjustment as interdependent capacities rather than isolated technical accomplishments (Seow, 2026c, in press-e). They underpin the argument but do not by themselves distinguish an ordinary contribution from an authorial one.

I use consequential uptake as a local analytical term for that distinction. Consequential uptake occurs when an embodied musical intervention alters the conditions to which other performers must subsequently respond, whether through accommodation, reinforcement, resistance, collision, or withdrawal. Uptake therefore does not imply agreement, imitation, or obedience. What matters is that the intervention has become consequential for subsequent collective action.

I use authored space to describe a shared musical condition whose subsequent organisation has been consequentially shaped through performer intervention and ensemble response. This framing does not require authority to remain with the initiating musician. Existing improvisation scholarship has already described authority as distributable across performers and performance systems (Martin, 2018). Here, the narrower concern is how that authority becomes active in situated ensemble practice. Authority refers to the temporary capacity of a performer, musical function, gesture, or emergent condition to orient what happens next. This does not give musical materials independent intention: a condition becomes authoritative only insofar as performers perceive it and organise their next actions around it. Authorship therefore lies not simply in originating an action, but in its relational consequence.

3. Practice-led analytical orientation

This article develops its argument through reflective practitioner inquiry rather than an experimental study of ensemble behaviour. Artistic research permits practice to operate not merely as an object of analysis but as a site through which situated knowledge can be generated and articulated (Borgdorff, 2012). In my own work, I have used reflective practitioner inquiry to examine forms of tacit ensemble knowledge that become visible through repeated acts of playing, listening, adjustment, and pedagogical reflection (Seow, in press-f). Related practice-led analysis has examined how embodied cueing, temporal grounding, and anticipation shape musicians' navigation of unfolding ensemble situations (Seow, in press-b).

The three cases that follow isolate moments familiar from my professional practice as a drummer, bassist, keyboardist, and ensemble educator. They serve as bounded analytical cases rather than evidence of generalisable causal effects. Each asks what changes when a particular intervention enters an already active ensemble field: what the intervention contributes, how other performers might have to negotiate it, and under what conditions that negotiation would constitute consequential uptake. Figure 1 summarises this recursive process, in which an intervention becomes consequential only through its uptake, resistance, or collision within a changing shared condition.

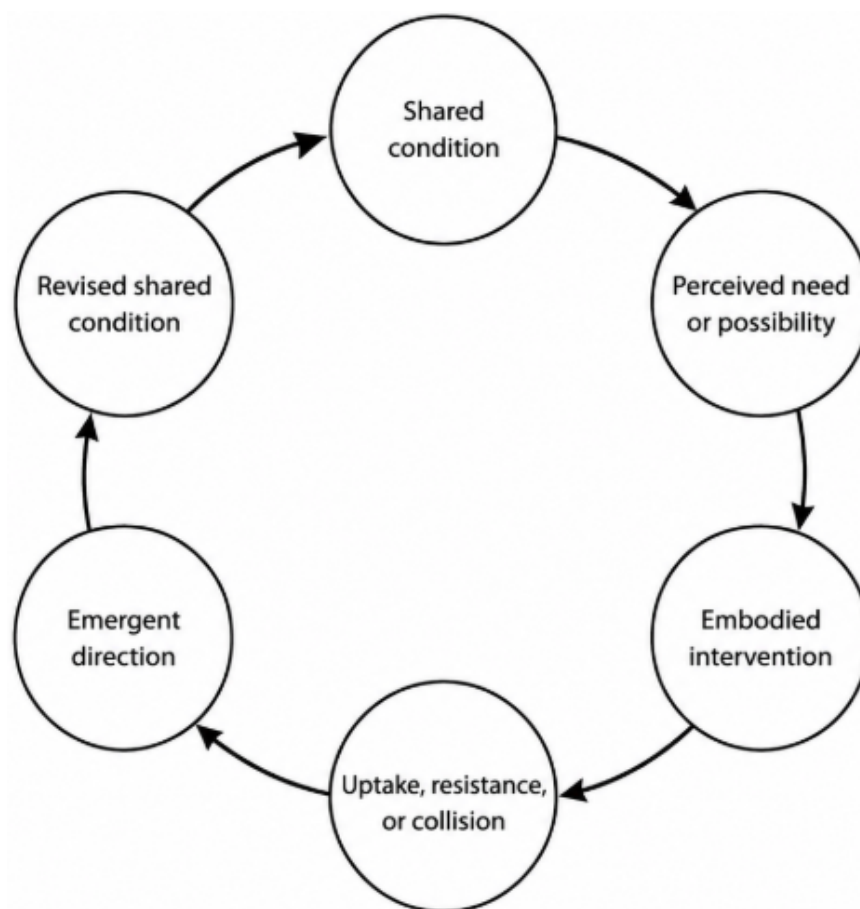


Figure 1. Relational process through which embodied intervention may become authorially consequential.

4. Case 1: When the ride surface redirects the band

The first case concerns an ensemble whose collective time has begun to drag. Groove is not reducible to the temporal accuracy of isolated events; studies of jazz and groove performance instead emphasise interaction, entrainment, and performers' negotiation of shared time (Doffman, 2009; Poole, 2021). Within that relational field, a drummer can intervene without changing the basic ride pattern. The relevant variables may instead be placement, touch, attack, rebound, and the balance between stick definition and cymbal wash.

In this case, I respond by digging into the ride slightly more firmly, placing the time somewhat further forward, increasing stick definition, and reducing wash. These are small embodied changes, but they alter the temporal surface presented to the ensemble. My previous practice-led work has treated groove fluency as involving differentiated touch and sound-function rather than rhythmic execution alone (Seow, in press-c). Work on contemporary ensemble musicianship likewise argues that timbral choices acquire meaning through the functions they perform within a shared musical texture (Seow, 2026b). Practitioner-facing work on drumset vocabulary also shows how changes in accent logic and phrase direction can alter the function of otherwise familiar material (Seow, 2026a).

None of these changes is authorial simply because the drummer initiates them. The threshold is reached only if other musicians perceive the altered surface and begin to reposition in relation to it. They might lean towards the increased propulsion, stabilise against it, or resist it. If that new condition reorganises their subsequent actions, consequential uptake has occurred. The drummer initiates the intervention, but the temporarily authoritative condition is now the shared temporal surface around which the ensemble negotiates its next actions. This is consistent with treating temporal grounding as an embodied relational capacity rather than a fixed metric location (Seow, in press-b).

5. Case 2: When displaced placement reorganises the ensemble

The second case shifts from timbral intervention to temporal placement. Consider a keyboardist repeating a stable chordal figure within an established groove. The notes, harmony, voicing, and broad rhythmic pattern remain unchanged, but the player begins to place the figure slightly later against the prevailing temporal reference. Research on microtiming shows that small timing deviations can shape the perceptual and stylistic character of groove. However, their effects depend on musical context rather than following a simple formula for producing groove (Senn et al., 2016).

For this argument, the key issue is not whether the displacement is objectively early or late by a particular number of milliseconds. It is what the displacement does relationally. A sufficiently perceptible change in placement can create a new temporal proposition for the other players. The drummer may preserve the existing reference, accommodate the keyboardist, or intensify the contrast; the bassist may mediate between the two. The resulting pocket is therefore not located exclusively in any one performer's timing. It emerges through the ensemble's negotiation of competing or converging temporal tendencies.

This extends my earlier treatment of the pocket as something developed through listening, role awareness, and responsive adjustment rather than individually possessed (Seow, 2026c).

More recent work on ensemble decision-making likewise treats temporal grounding as a capacity that becomes musically meaningful through coordination with other performers (Seow, in press-e). The keyboardist's displacement therefore becomes authorially consequential only when it changes the conditions under which those performers subsequently act. If nobody perceptibly reorganises around it, it remains a contribution. If it prompts accommodation, resistance, or a redefinition of the shared temporal relationship, consequential uptake has occurred.

6. Case 3: Competing trajectories at an arrival

The third case concerns a failed transition into a harmonic arrival. As the ensemble approaches a V–I resolution, the bassist has already begun a fill that projects a directional path towards the arrival. The pianist then introduces a V–IV/6–V/7–I walk-up without accommodating the bassist's active trajectory. Neither idea is intrinsically incorrect. The problem is relational: two directive gestures now claim the same transitional space.

My work on harmonic flow treats harmonic relationships as directional rather than merely classificatory: musicians hear not only what a harmony is, but how it functions in relation to what precedes and follows it (Seow, in press-d). Related work on walking bass likewise treats target orientation as a means of directing attention towards phrase and harmonic arrivals rather than understanding the bass line as a succession of locally correct notes (Seow, in press-g). The issue here is not whether either musician has generated valid material, but how simultaneous trajectories interact as the ensemble approaches a shared destination.

Here, the pianist's walk-up collides with a transition that the bassist is already shaping. The bassist responds by laying out. That withdrawal should not be interpreted simply as successful leadership by the pianist. Instead, it can be understood as a repair action: yielding to prevent competing trajectories from further obscuring the arrival. Consequential uptake therefore includes resistance, collision, and withdrawal as well as accommodation or reinforcement.

The case exposes the negative boundary of distributed authorship. Distributed authority does not mean that every musician should contribute simultaneously, nor that the strongest or latest intervention automatically becomes authorial. When a performer introduces a competing directive without recognising an already active musical trajectory, authorship can become imposed rather than distributed. What fails is not the progression itself but the relational uptake required for the ensemble to make the transition cohere.

7. Distributed authority: mobility without equality

The three cases locate authorship neither wholly within the initiating performer nor within an undifferentiated collective. In each, a musician introduces a proposition into an already active field of relations. That proposition may then acquire consequence because other performers accommodate it, reinforce it, resist it, or redirect themselves in relation to it. Authorship is therefore distributed not because everybody authors everything equally, but because the capacity to shape the shared musical condition can move among performers, functions, and emergent relationships over time. This is compatible with Martin's (2018) account of

distributed authority in improvisational systems, while shifting the present focus towards how particular interventions acquire consequence within situated ensemble interaction.

Distributed accounts of creativity and agency can flatten differences in influence. Ensemble roles remain differentiated, and particular musical situations afford some performers greater capacity to redirect collective action than others. A drummer may exert unusual influence over temporal grounding; a bassist may make an approaching harmonic or rhythmic trajectory especially difficult to ignore; a keyboardist may alter the harmonic or textural field within which the other players operate. Such differences fit relational accounts of ensemble practice precisely because interaction does not require symmetry. Distribution describes mobility, not equality.

Consequential uptake does not remove individual agency. Accommodation is one possible response, but so are resistance, maintenance, and counter-proposition. A musician who refuses another player's emerging direction may exercise considerable agency even while acknowledging that direction through the act of resisting it. Research on distributed cognition and joint musical action similarly shows that effective coordination can preserve differentiated perspectives and autonomous action rather than requiring performers to converge into a single collective agent (Linson & Clarke, 2017; Liebermann-Jordanidis et al., 2021). What matters here is not simply whether musicians detect one another's actions, but how those actions enter subsequent musical decision-making.

Authority, on this account, is provisional. A performer may temporarily orient the ensemble without becoming its leader in any durable sense. The condition established through one intervention can itself be displaced by the next. At the same time, established role relations, expertise, stylistic expectations, and interpersonal dynamics continue to constrain who can plausibly redirect whom. Distributed authority therefore does not mean equal agency, symmetrical influence, permanent decentralisation, or the disappearance of hierarchy. It identifies a narrower musical phenomenon: the temporary movement of consequential influence through ensemble interaction.

Authored space is best retained as a local analytical framing, not a general theory of ensemble authorship. The term identifies the shared condition that becomes available for collective negotiation once an intervention has consequentially altered what follows. It does not assign ownership of that condition to a single performer. The space is authored through the relation between proposition and uptake, and its organisation remains open to further intervention. Pocket, viewed in these terms, is one particularly revealing instance because temporal, timbral, harmonic, and embodied decisions continually create conditions to which other musicians must orient.

8. Conclusion: who speaks in the pocket?

Pocket is often described as belonging to an individual musician: a drummer has good pocket, a bassist sits behind the beat, or a keyboardist locks with the rhythm section. The cases considered here suggest a more relational account. Individual contributions matter, but they become authorially consequential only when they enter the perceptual and practical field of other musicians and begin to shape what happens next.

Consequential uptake provides a threshold between making a contribution and temporarily shaping shared musical conditions. Authored space names those conditions without requiring singular ownership, consensus, or stable leadership. Authority can move as musicians accommodate, resist, reinforce, or redirect one another, while differences in role, expertise, and influence remain intact.

Who speaks in the pocket, then? The answer is not simply the musician who initiates an action, nor an ensemble imagined as a single collective author. It is whichever performer, gesture, function, or emerging musical condition becomes consequential for what the ensemble does next.

Not equally. Not permanently. But consequentially.

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