

THE CALL OF THE RAPTOR

AND ITS INCLUSION IN THE CREATIVE EXPRESSION OF JAZZ IMPROVISATION

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Abstract



Call of the Raptor

This presentation explores the owl as a figure in mythology and visual art, and its vocal calls as material for jazz composition. The Ookpik offers one point of entry into the owl's symbolic life. My Raptor Collection supplies a visual response. Recordings of the Northern Saw-Whet Owl, Great Horned Owl, and Eastern Screech-Owls now let us hear repetition, spacing, contrasting voices, and trills. I translate selected gestures into piano motifs and improvise from them. The claim is artistic: listening across myth, bird sound, and jazz can reveal new ways to think about communication and memory.

International Conference on Myths, Archetypes and Symbols: "Models and Alternatives"
Sunday, 27 September 2026 · Online Session 6

Abstract continued



The Call of the Raptor and Its Inclusion in the Creative Expression of Jazz Improvisation

Across myth and visual art, owls appear as watchers, messengers, and figures of transformation. Here, the Northern Saw-Whet Owl's recurring whistle suggests repetition and memory; Great Horned Owl duets suggest dialogue and communication; and the Eastern Screech-Owl's trill suggests movement and transformation. These parallels form the presentation's framework: Watcher → Messenger → Transformation.

A musical miniature develops these ideas in three movements: "The Watcher — Saw-Whet," "Between Worlds — Great Horned," and "Flight — Screech." Characteristics of owl vocal communication are abstracted into musical parameters—pulse, register, contour, repetition, acceleration, silence, and response—and transformed through jazz improvisation. My owl drawings extend the inquiry visually.

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The call as signal



THE CALL OF THE RAPTOR · CONTEXT

The communicative roles of raptor birds and the improvisational language of jazz mirror one another, each operating at the threshold between the audible and the ancestral.

The sharp cries of birds of prey do not read as noise, but as intentional signals—calls that carry urgency, presence, and meaning across space. In mythology, raptors exist as messengers and watchers between worlds, bearing warnings, insight, and a sense of the divine. Their voices interrupt the ordinary, drawing attention to what lies beyond the visible moment.

Jazz at the same threshold



THE CALL OF THE RAPTOR · CONTEXT

Jazz functions within this same threshold. It is not simply music, but a form of communication rooted in memory, spirit, and immediacy. Through improvisation, jazz musicians speak in real time, reaching backward and forward simultaneously, holding history and invention in a single breath.

A horn line arcs like a circling hawk, deliberate and searching. A drum pattern pulses with the rhythm of wings in motion. Both are grounded in responsiveness—an intuitive exchange shaped by listening as much as sounding.

Listening to the owl



THE CALL OF THE RAPTOR · CONTEXT

This relationship becomes particularly vivid through the vocalizations of owls. Each species offers a distinct sonic structure: the steady call of the Saw-Whet Owl suggests repetition and grounding, while more expansive calls evoke openness and space.

Trills, pauses, and call-and-response patterns parallel phrasing found in jazz, where silence carries as much weight as sound. There is rhythm in the intervals between their cries, phrasing in the rise and fall of their pitch, and improvisation in how those sounds shift across landscapes.

Sound as a living archive



THE CALL OF THE RAPTOR · CONTEXT

In both raptor communication and jazz improvisation, structure and freedom coexist. What mythology assigns to the raptor as messenger, jazz embodies as sound: a language that speaks what cannot be written but is deeply understood.

The cry of the bird and the phrase of the musician both act as carriers of meaning, moving across time, space, and experience. They call, they respond, they remember. Together, they remind us that sound itself can be a sacred living archive of instinct, history, and spirit.

What can an owl call mean?

Coast Salish

Owls are traditionally associated with deep wisdom, intuition, and spiritual perception (often referred to as a “sixth sense”).

Ookpik (Inuit)

Ukpik is the Inuktitut word for the snowy owl.

Navajo (Diné)

Owls (Né’éshjaa’) are approached with profound caution and strict protocols of avoidance.

Cherokee (Tsalagi)

Owls hold a complex dual role.

Northern Saw-Whet Owl



I. THE WATCHER — SAW-WHET

LISTEN FOR

Whistled notes at one pitch, about two per second

Piano idea

One high note, repeated alone. Then change the harmony beneath it.

Dm(add9) → E♭maj7/D → Dm

The watcher stays still as harmony shifts.

▶ **OWL CALL** ▶ **PIANO**

Cornell Lab · allaboutbirds.org · OPEN SOUNDS ↗
YouTube.com · OPEN OWL AUDIO ↗

Snowy Owl



PIANO STUDY

Silence between calls

Piano idea

Sustain a low note. Answer briefly in the upper register, then let the silence return.

A short animation follows the owl’s flight from the tundra to New York and beyond.

Cornell Lab · allaboutbirds.org · OPEN SOUNDS ↗

Watch the Snowy Owl video on YouTube

Great Horned Owl



II. BETWEEN WORLDS — GREAT HORNED

LISTEN FOR

Deep, stuttering hoots; the female’s higher reply

Piano idea

LOW D — D — A — C — D

HIGH F — F — C — E♭

Call → listen → respond → alter → respond

▶ **OWL CALL**

▶ **PIANO**

OWL + PIANO

Cornell Lab · allaboutbirds.org · OPEN SOUNDS ↗
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SOUND CUE

Eastern Screech-Owl



Owl design concept by Roman G. Mitchell · based on my drawings · AI enhanced

III. FLIGHT — SCREECH

LISTEN FOR

A sustained trill

Piano idea

E–F / E–F / EFEF / EFEFEFEF

Accelerate and climb:

E–F → G–A♭ → B♭–B → D–E♭

Then break into free improvisation.

▶ **OWL CALL** ▶ **PIANO**

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SOUND CUE

From recording to improvisation



SAW-WHET Repetition → memory → Watcher

GREAT HORNED Dialogue → communication → Messenger

SCREECH Movement → transformation

Pulse · register · contour · repetition · acceleration · silence · response

The calls become musical material for jazz improvisation.



Four color studies

The palette changes the mood of flight.

The Raptor Collection brings this image-making practice into the conversation with owl calls and jazz.

SOUND SOURCES · Cornell Lab of Ornithology, All About Birds

https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Northern_Saw-whet_Owl/sounds
https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Snowy_Owl/sounds
https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Great_Horned_Owl/sounds
https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Eastern_Screech-Owl/sounds
YouTube owl-call sampler: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u--6YLvrJRc
YouTube Great Horned duet: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8f0_JDErjFI

ARTWORK AND IMAGE CREDITS

Original design work: Northern Saw-whet Owl · Snowy Owl · Great Horned Owl · Eastern Screech-Owl
By Roman Mitchell, created from original concepts and embellished with AI.

PLAY VIDEO ON YOUTUBE

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