Practice, Performance, and Play

The Religion of Jazz

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1 Introduction

For most jazz musicians, and especially that modern majority who have undergone formal training, performance is automatically assumed to be the ultimate purpose of the musical life. This can be a corruption of the original impulse: many musical careers start with exposure to recordings, which reveals a love of the music and a taste of musical joy, and the young musician seeks to recreate some of the sounds on the record to get closer to that musical joy. The complications of performance typically arise only later.

Indeed, we can identify a variety of motive causes which will impel any musician to varying degrees. The motivations will include impetus to play—for recreation of musical joy; impetus to perform—to display ones talents to others; impetus for mastery—to develop technical facility and dexterity; and sometimes impetus to innovate—to create notably new musical pieces or techniques. There is of course overlap between these categories, but it is notable that performance is often assumed to be the most important.

In this essay, I will examine other ways of arranging priorities within the life of jazz. I will show that performance need not be so disproportionately emphasized as a musical end, and will argue that in the present social context, it is crucial to make musicians aware of full spectrum of satisfying musical outcomes.

2 Performance as the measure of the music

The reflexive characterisation of the serious musician, is as a professional performing musician. Performance is implicitly identified with success for the vast majority of western-tradition musicians[1]. Jazz, as an improvised music, is uniquely situated in this regard. The conditioning of the young classical musician towards grades and competitions militates against social playing, and among professional players it is almost unheard of to convene for social play 'af-

[1]Outside of the western tradition, the use of music for ritual purposes results in a very different, more integrated idea of performance to which these arguments would not apply.

ter hours'. For musicians composing or 'covering' popular music, a similar dynamic applies; while the rehearsals may have a social element, and the impetus is often not professional, the musical object is in similar degree static and perfectible. Performance is almost necessarily entailed in the perfectible musical object; it follows that after a long struggle to 'get it right', a presentation of the fruits of one's efforts is desired.

Every excursion into improvised music, on the other hand, is as much a rendition of a process as of a piece, and is thus inherently non-perfectible. This both increases the scope for social playing and dissolves the intrinsic *telos* towards performance as the ultimate end. Although of course the jazz musician generally aspires to perform, this performance is often considered part of the developmental process, an essential part of learning the trade. While the jazz musician, like the popular and classical musician, seeks to improve in order to perform, it is particularly the jazz musician who performs in order to improve.

The relationship between jazz music and social interaction operates on two levels. In a rarefied sense, ensemble improvisation entails spontaneous interaction and forms a dialogue in itself which can fulfill the social needs of the participants. This is met in in the well-known archetype of the socially inept, prickly and awkward master musician with whom true communication is best attained musically. I myself have read of and indeed known many musical friendships in which extra-musical aspects of personality are irrelevant (sometimes thankfully!) as all the time spent together is focused on playing—and these are fond and profound friendships for all that.

On a more prosaic level, if improvisation is one of the defining characteristics of jazz, the case can be made that information is the other. The harmonic depth and sophistication of the music, and the huge breadth of musical sources informing it, mean that the jazz musician can be continuously learning about music as well as 'getting better'[2]. In the present day this information content is

[2]Parker's enduring interest in classical music is the archetype for this enduring interest, itself typified by his telephoning Mingus to play him improvisations over Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite*.

almost invariably dispensed by an educational institution, but traditionally this educational function was realised socially. Well-known examples include Barry Harris' educational sessions, and Gil Evans' open-door apartment in the forties. Although this informal approach to education lacks the structured presentation and standard curriculum of the jazz school, it does mean that there is no artificial end point after which the musician might be tempted to feel that their education was complete; learning was automatically a life-long developmental process fostered by discussion with other musicians.

Such interactions for the exchange of information form a further social component intrinsic to the lifestyle of the practicing jazz musician—one that has no counterpart in the professional lives of musicians of another stripe. The classical performer is typically unconcerned with the theoretical origins of the piece to be played, and one cannot imagine classical performers convening to discuss advanced harmony in any social sense (or in any sense at all)[3]. As for the rock musician, here one typically finds an outrightly anti-informational stance, based on antipathy and mistrust towards the very idea of musical knowledge or even musical notation. But for the jazz musician, this cultivation of musical (typically harmonic) *knowledge* is itself a source of musical satisfaction, comparable in significance to the satisfaction of performance.

It is important to recognise that the same distinction between the perfective and the improvised applies to musical *practice*; rote repetition of scales and rudiments are crucial for all musicians, but the jazz aspirant must balance his time with a sufficient quantity of improvising as well. Perfective practice can be dangerously beguiling as it is easy to quantify progress (particularly in terms of improved speed) and is in many ways much easier and less mentally demanding than the practice of improvisation. It is over-devotion to technical practice that can lead musicians to what we may term pseudo jazz: displays of technical mastery devoid of musical meaning. It is partly true to say that the spectacle of the drum festival is a celebration of this exaltation of the purely technical, a spec-

[3]Classical *composers* are of course a different animal

tacle that is decried by many drummers devoted to more musical expression.

These more musical drummers have typically devoted just as many hours to the cultivation of musical expression as the drum-fest merchants have devoted to their chops. Bob Moses, for example, continues to spend hours improvising two bar phrases—and has explicitly counseled students against practicing paradiddles in front of the television. Jack DeJohnette revealed his philosophy on these issues in an interview with *Modern Drummer* magazine:

> MD: Did you ever practice your ride cymbal to develop speed?
> Jack: I don't even know what that is. I don't ever think about how fast I can play. It's about sound, it's about music. I'm trying to create motion as opposed to showing off technique.

—although DeJohnette does reveal in a 2008 interview with *Traps* magazine that he still 'practices along with' (his term) the track *Countdown* from the album 'Giant Steps', which is probably as effective a way to work on cymbal speed as any.

It is one of the beautiful things about practice for the jazz musician that if they can move away from devotion to technique, an endless stream of improvisation becomes available to them. The legendary stories of Bud Powell practicing the same tune for days on end, or Parker trying to extemporise over a set of changes for hours with no repetition, give testament to this potential. When fully realised, this potential can, for the jazz musician, bring to practice many of the satisfactions of performance.

3 Performance motivations in jazz

We have seen that for the jazz musician, performance is only one source among several of musical engagement and satisfaction. However it remains a most significant source for most musicians. Here we examine whether there are aspects of the performance impulse particular to jazz musicians. Why does the jazz musician perform?

The current vogue for evolutionary psychology seeks to ascribe almost every cultural impulse to competition for selective advantage, and successful musical performance can certainly bring rewards in these terms. It is important to distinguish this factor as the source of an instinct rather than the experience of the instinct; for example, the deep joy some musicians experience in musical activity could be the manifestation of an instinct implanted for selective advantage, but the musician himself often only becomes aware of the selective advantage after the fact—if such selective advantage does manifest, which cannot be relied on. While some musicians do expressly state that improved mating prospects form part of their musical motivation—especially adolescent male musicians—this musical impulse typically does not lead one towards jazz, a genre in which these days any such rewards are doubtful, or deferred at best. Indeed, given that serious devotion to jazz music generally confers a selective disadvantage, and that the demands of the pursuit are such that some commentators have argued that jazz musicians shouldn't have girlfriends anyway, the committed jazz musician could be seen, from the standpoint of evolutionary psychology, as suffering from a mutation—congenital enlargement of the musical impulse. In any event, we may say that display of musical prowess for mate attraction is sadly less effective for jazz musicians, at least relative to required effort, than for musicians in other genres.

For most jazz musicians, similar arguments apply to to the idea of performance as a means of making a living. Simply put, very few musicians do make a living from pure jazz performance—at least, not from performance of the music that they most wish to pay. The value of original or even mainstream jazz presented as a show, rather than as background music, is low—it can be hard to believe that some great masters are playing regularly in New York for negligible sums or just tips[4]. Function or background music, along with teaching, is the principal earner. Although this need not be unsatisfying, it is almost always

[4]I am reminded of paying $3 to see Ronnie Cuber lead a quartet in Small's in 2010—but apparently even the Coltrane quartet, while recording *One Down, One Up*, were receiving only some $50 per man, per night.

an adjunct to the serious musical development, cultivation of craft, and assimilation of information that the musician has undertaken, and there is a long history of notable musicians refusing to play in these scenarios.

While professional pay is typically not a driver towards jazz performance, professional pride can be a powerful factor. A performance to display the fruits of one's musical labours reinforces professional pride and give a focal point to the musicians' personal investment in the music. Thus even—or indeed especially—when a concert is organised with little expected financial gain, the jazz musician will seek a venue and circumstance where the music can be received and attended to seriously.

Unfortunately, the poor availability of art-music venues and lack of wider societal support for jazz music generally mean that the venues available are more commercial in nature. An original jazz performance is likely to rub up against the widespread tendency to conflate the worth of one's efforts with the financial reward of those efforts. This aspect of jazz performance is bound up with the difficulty of obtaining an audience for original jazz material. Extending one's commercial source circle beyond friends and family is a challenging prospect; the next logical source of audience members is other jazz musicians, but these are typically more likely to be putting on their own gigs; the pervasive individualistic bent makes organising any form of mutual support structure a fraught enterprise.

It was mentioned above that jazz musicians use performance as a measure of their progress and indeed as a means of making progress. Improvisational facility is more severely tested under pressure, and in formal performance the fact that each rendition is necessarily 'the keeper'; even in the absence of an audience, this heightens the significance of the played material and the musician holds themselves to a higher standard as a result. This is one of the great advantages of performance for the serious jazz musician.

The great disadvantage of jazz performance is the demotivating if not demoralising effect that playing for tiny crowds, for small rewards, can have.

The unhappy fact is that most jazz musicians will struggle to sustain performance of original material given the exigencies of making a living through other means, maintaining social and personal commitments, and keeping fellow musicians aligned with their aims.

Happily jazz has a long tradition of offering semi-performance opportunities through the jam session. In classic accounts, the jam session is portrayed as extended collaborative practice, in which musicians could improvise chorus after chorus, and take more than one solo, on the same tune—with any single rendition potentially lasting for hours. Because one is playing primarily for one's peers at a jam session, economic disappointment or low audience turn-out become much less important. On the other hand, the heightened sense of musical responsibility is in full effect and many of the benefits of performance can be obtained. Presenting new, original music can be difficult in the jam session context but can be done, typically by structuring an evening as part gig / part jam session.

4 Transcending the play / performance distinction

We have seen that many of the common drivers towards performance that motivate musicians have reduced applicability to jazz musicians. In particular, given the economic realities for the professional jazz musician, the two main benefits of performance can be summarised as being the heightened musical significance of the performance moment, and the the professional pride of a competent presentation of work.

In discussion with a number of advanced players, however, I have found that this first benefit is often seen as a limitation to be transcended. Kenny Werner, both in personal presentations and in his book *Effortless Mastery*, of the importance of accessing a musical mindset the moment he sits to the piano—irrespective of context. Similar descriptions have been offered to me by Ari

Hoenig, Ferenc Nemeth, and a number of players on the Irish scene.

This approach requires the development of considerable mental discipline: the ideal is that every interaction with the instrument is a musical meditation independent of the presence of any audience, any desire or requirement to 'impress' (e.g. if playing for students), and any commercial pressure. The advantage typically cited is that it brings a sense of calm to the performance and helps to eliminate any nervousness or inhibitions that may attend the circumstances of performance. But the benefit can work the other way: every opportunity of playing the instrument can be invested with the significance of a gig, such that the pressure to perform, the idea that performance is what counts more than anything, is reduced. The satisfaction, the very specialness, of simply playing an instrument, perhaps dulled by years of rote practice and rehearsals directed towards performance, can be restored by this mental discipline, and the joy of just playing rediscovered. Recent interviews with Keith Jarrett, Jack DeJohnette, and Pharaoh Sanders suggest that these musicians have moved to this way of thinking in their late years.

5 Performance as an offering of the self

Seeking to move beyond a playing / performing distinction, as described in the previous section, is not particular to jazz musical practice. However, there is another twist that can be applied to the performance mindset that is more specifically a feature of jazz. We can argue that performance for the early-stage jazz musician consists of a series of demands of the audience, *viz* come to my gig, give me your money, and pay attention when I'm playing. In reading the biographies of some of the more spiritual practitioners of jazz, however, a shift of emphasis to a more offertory approach can be found. John Coltrane is perhaps the ultimate example of this mentality—and Miles Davis represents the antithesis.

Many jazz musicians take an early approach to performance of playing what they want to play to the best of their abilities, on the assumption that

if they like it themselves, there is probably an audience for it. Over time, this commitment to one's own musical vision generally becomes compromised, depending on the success met with in finding musicians who wish to realise the same vision, responsive audiences, and perhaps also the satisfaction obtaining from the music itself. The musician is part of a feedback loop with the environment in the widest sense (the 'universe'), and essentially positive feedback from the universe encourages the musician, while negative feedback discourages.

For the musician who can reconceptualise their playing so as to step out of this feedback loop, many of the performance concerns that may obtain dissolve. One important initial step towards this is the idea that improvisation is musical discovery rather than musical invention: because it is easy to conceive of the set of every physically playable improvisation within any given span of time, the improviser can decide to see themselves as selecting from alternatives rather than having to create an inspired musical thread from nothing. This again is a concept that has been mentioned to me by numerous instructors, and is a tenet of well-known educators such as Bob Moses.

At a certain level of development, this line of thinking can lead the advanced practitioner to be feel less responsible, less personally attached, to the fruits of their improvisation. It can reduce the extent to which the performer is demanding support from an audience, as rather than displaying their power of invention, they are sharing their discoveries. This can lessen any negative effect of the feedback loop described above. Note that this need not require a complete embracing of the hippie idea that music simply flows through the musician unchanneled; rigorous technical training is still compatible (witness Coltrane's deep theoretical development), but any suggestion of the performance as prideful display of this technical facility could be suppressed through this approach.

It is tempting to suggest that this alternative way of relating to performance is less accessible to young jazz musicians today; the prevalence of institutionalised education means that the required jazz information is heavily front-loaded and thus the young musician may become excessively information-

oriented. This contrasts with the extended periods of musical exploration undergone by Parker, Rollins, and Coltrane, who acquired their extensive theoretical information more slowly, in parallel with their personal musical discovery. The danger in being information-oriented is that musical ideas that are conceptually simple can be devalued, as the relevant information can be assimilated in short order, and superseded by more advanced information. In concrete terms: after four years' education, a jazz musician may fall into the trap of regarding the material of the early years as trivial compared to the later years'—whereas a full musical exploration of even one year's concentrated improvisation theory could sustain several years musical exploration.

In the wider sense, conceptualising improvisation as discovery rather than invention reflects a change in the notion of genius that can be traced to the Renaissance: whereas the ancient Greeks held that genius was a divine gift for which the recipient could take little credit, the rational, humanist currents begun with the Renaissance held that all creativity was the work of the creator. As divine inspiration could no longer be credited, artists became more personally responsible for their work. This puts the 'genius' under far more pressure to perform and changes their relationship with their output considerably[5].

6 Jazz as humanist religious practice

We mentioned above that evolutionary psychology has been brought to bear to explain the origins of the musical impulse. This link does not appear to have been developed in the literature much beyond the level of assertion, or even postulation of a possibility. Considerably more developed, and in some quarters more controversial, is the explanation from evolutionary psychology for the religious impulse. This is often cast as the frontier of a culture war: evolutionary psychology is in ways the zenith of the idea that the rational can explain all

[5]This was pointed out in a TED talk by Elizabeth Gilbert, discussing how to protect her creativity after enormous commercial success. `http://www.ted.com/talks/elizabeth_gilbert_on_genius.html`.

things, while the religious impulse is the ur-instinct, the oldest and most dearly held bastion of the irrational.

We will not get involved with this question here, but note that the debate has involved an exploration of some of the psychological and indeed physiological bases for the well-known benefits of religion (*viz.* religious people live longer, are happier & healthier, have more friends, etc.). Some of these bases are recognised in the formulation of humanist religions, which seek to offer the substance of a spiritual life without the necessity of self-abasement before some hypothetical deity. But those aspects of jazz performance discussed herein actually cover some significant portion of the same ground[6].

Firstly, rote practice can have a mental calming effect similar to meditation: sustaining concentration and awareness while drilling a scalar pattern or rudiment for an extended period has affinities with mindfulness practices. Practicing also requires an element of faith: results can be slow in appearing and the student must trust in the practice even when the benefits are not immediately apparent. Simply having faith is shown to improve mood and mental well-being, and it seems plausible that faith could be cultivated in one's attitude to practice to bring these benefits about. We note lastly that kinesiology asserts that co-ordinated physical movement can improve communication between the hemispheres of the brain, with additional mental well-being benefits—and many the practice instruments involve just such co-ordinated activity.

More tenuously, we can consider some parallels between improvisation and prayer. Here prayer is not supplicatory but rather a sense of connection to, even communion with, a larger, wider sense of being. This is well-documented in the case of Coltrane in particular, and also clearly applies to DeJohnette again: 'When I play, I go into an altered state, a different headspace. I plug into my higher self, into the cosmic library of ideas.' We discussed above how the shift in concept from invention to discovery can be beneficial for the improviser in a musical sense, but when developed to this larger context of connec-

[6]The basis for many of the following ideas is the book *Zen and the Brain*, by James H. Austin (The MIT press, 1998)

tion to the universal the benefits become considerably wider[7].

One of the more obvious ways in which religion and music overlap is in the similarity of deep musical enjoyment, and religious trance—the almost worldwide association of music with religion, and indeed with heightened spiritual states, is testament to this. Judith Becker has documented this, and explored some of the neurological underpinnings, in her book *Deep Listeners: Music, emotion, and trancing* (Chicago University Press, 2004). The jazz practitioner, immersed in and involved in the creation of live music, can have extensive opportunities of experiencing this spiritual transport.

Lastly, the sense of community offered by religious groups is responsible for considerable psychological benefits, and in some degree a jazz community can offer a similar sense. It is no exaggeration to describe many practitioners of jazz as devoted to the art, and sharing that devotion with others who experience the same intensity of practice makes for a powerful sense of community. The jazz community can even be said to cultivate a sense of itself as a mildly persecuted minority—which reinforces the community sense as it has done for many other fringe religions. This communion is at its height within a performing (or playing) musical group, and, as previously discussed, most particularly within a jazz group, due to the spontaneous musical communication between improvisers—which can be realised frequently in rehearsals and jam sessions, as well as less frequently in performance.

7 Conclusion

This essay has sought to examine whether the function of performance differs for the jazz musician from musicians of other stripe. We must conclude that the experience of being a jazz musician is, or traditionally has been, rich enough to offer comparatively more sources of fulfillment than performance alone, when compared with other musical styles.

[7]Of course, abnegation of the self in this way represents a disappointment of Enlightenment ideals of the proud individual, but it does appear to be a draw to human nature.

Meanwhile, it mus be recognised that commercial opportunities for jazz musicians remain few, especially for creative output—and this at a time when jazz education is producing thousands of highly trained musicians every year. This must impact the sustainable level of performance available: trained musicians will increasingly have to reconcile themselves to gigging infrequently, for very meagre rewards.

It is important, then, that jazz musicians realise that a life of professional performance is not the only worthwhile outcome of jazz training. Even if this cannot be attained by all aspiring jazz musicians, it is still advisable to keep the skillset sharp and maintain engagement, for the benefits in mental training, mental acuity, and community involvement that are available. In fact, just as there is something of a crisis in which the newly minted jazz musician finds that he or she has perhaps a one in fifty chance of sustaining a career through performance, there is some evidence of a wider spiritual crisis wherein newly minted Enlightenment rationalists find that biologically, commercialism and cheap travel are poor substitutes for the sense of deeper meaning once offered by religious communities. The challenge for new, humanist religions is to investigate the physiological bases for spiritual satisfaction and develop secular spiritual technology to address these needs; the advantage for the jazz musician is that rote practice, improvisation, and jam sessions might strongly resemble what such a secular spiritual technology would look like[8].

[8]See, for example, the Music For People bill of rights `http://www.musicforpeople.org/rights.html`.