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Creativity in Jazz

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Abstract

Common discourses around jazz generally acknowledge the centrality of creativity to the music, but scholarship on what precisely creativity *is* in jazz, and how it might best be enhanced is not well developed. Building on the important work in this area begun by scholars such as Ed Sarath and R. Keith Sawyer, I first investigate the extensive scholarly literature on creativity, drawing predominantly from social science and education contexts, and then apply some of the most relevant frameworks to jazz. These frameworks draw several key aspects of jazz practice into sharp relief, in particular the respective roles of individuals and ensembles and the ways they work in common, and the provenance of musical materials in creative jazz practice. With these key ideas acting as a theoretical lens, I view the historical practice of three unquestionably creative jazz musicians: Ornette Coleman, Miles Davis and Duke Ellington. The choice of these musicians in particular is important because their example, when understood through the lens of creativity, in part authenticates some of the traditional tools by which we investigate jazz, historically, while at the same time pointing towards some different, less commonly discussed attributes. Most important, the creativity lens reveals important ways in which creative practice can be attributable to understandable procedures that are available to all accomplished musicians, not just a few “great men”.

Thus my conclusions call into question more traditional modes of jazz history and criticism which, while acknowledging the music’s collective nature, tend to emphasise the roles of individuals as primary in jazz. Instead, my research suggests that creativity is best achieved in group contexts where diversely gifted participants work collaboratively in egalitarian, interactive, improvised settings. Individuals do make significant contributions to this mix, and in terms of creative advances in jazz – and in terms of achieving meaningful self-expression – the most important quality individual musicians can pursue is the development and expression of unique musical voices. In addition to improvised interactivity among unique individual voices, the adoption of musical materials from outside of jazz and their transformations (along with similar transformations of musical materials already common currency among

jazz musicians) can be shown to serve both the expressive goals of musicians and propel jazz in creative and potentially fruitful directions. It is the improvised colloquy of such individual voices, transforming received and newly acquired musical materials in the service of self-expression, that contributed to the lasting allure of the music attributed to Ornette Coleman, Miles Davis and Duke Ellington.

Saxophonist Jan Garbarek is proposed as a contemporary musician who has made use of all of these strategies in forging jazz music that demonstrates fidelity to the core processes of jazz while only provisionally embracing some of the style features of earlier forms of the music – style features that common jazz discourses have tended to emphasise at the expense of the processes that gave rise to them.

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... Thank you.

PART ONE: CREATIVITY IN JAZZ