‘A NATURAL WAY OF DOING THINGS’

Improvisation as a value in jazz music

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April 2006

Master’s thesis Conservatorium van Amsterdam

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1. INTRODUCTION

> *"He believed completely in musical spontaneity and the power of the moment, letting it happen, and the absolute value of improvisation. I mean this is the guy who started everybody playing loose. He really would take chances. He would go into the studio with a bare framework and just see what happened. And then he would sculpt the music. It was really different from the western tradition of writing everything out. What he did in that day really influences the process of music today. He really tapped into a natural way of doing things."*
>
> *John Scofield on Miles Davis*[1]

Improvisation has become a key element associated with jazz music. If you ask people to describe jazz music in a few key words, it is very likely that improvisation will show up among these key words. In magazines or books on jazz, be it studies on the subject or interviews with artists, improvisation is usually touched upon in one way or another. The quote of John Scofield illustrates this beautifully (and at the same time reveals some of his values and views on improvisation).

If it is discovered that a certain jazz artist performed a solo that was more composed than improvised (for example through comparing different takes of the same tune on a recording session), they will generally meet contempt for their lack of improvisation or spontaneity. Perhaps this is due to a misunderstanding of the amount of preparation in terms of instrumental mastery and learning the language of jazz, that is needed before anyone can actually improvise meaningfully in jazz. Either way, improvisation in this case seems to have turned into a norm; 'thou shalt improvise'. The central place of improvisation in jazz is also stressed in Paul Berliner's book 'Thinking in Jazz', aptly subtitled 'the infinite art of improvisation'. Summarizing, improvisation is considered by many something to aim for, a *value*.

Not satisfied with this general observation, I decided to investigate the matter a little further. Questions such as these arose:

- What is the source of this central place of improvisation? Why is improvisation so important to musicians and the audience? Is it linked to the African elements that we find in jazz music, or to the reasons other cultures give for improvisation as a key element in their music?
- What, if any, is the difference between the community of jazz artists themselves and the people who are more at a distance, such as critics and musicologists, in the way they perceive and value improvisation?

This thesis seeks to address these issues.

Due to time and space restrictions I have set several limitations in regards to the scope of the subject matter. First of all, in order to compare 'the community of jazz artists' and 'the writers about jazz' I have chosen to compare a selection of articles and books on jazz with quotes from jazz artists as collected by Paul Berliner in his book *Thinking in Jazz.* It is inevitable that the sample of artists that he interviewed, although large, is also biased; Scott DeVeaux points out in his review of Berliner's book (DeVeaux, 1998) that Berliner stresses continuity at the expense of historical developments, and that the vast majority in his sample of musicians grew up musically between the late 1930s and early 1960s. Another aspect DeVeaux sees as a weakness (1998, p.404), 'Berliner's reluctance to step beyond what musicians are able, or willing, to tell him'[2], serves the purposes of this thesis very well. If Berliner is reluctant to step beyond what jazz artists say, we may rely on the

[1] Interviewed in 1999 for online (mostly pop oriented) music magazine JamBands.Com. The interview was found on http://www.jambands.com/sep99/features/sco.html

[2] DeVeaux 1998, page 404.

well. If Berliner is reluctant to step beyond what jazz artists say, we may rely on the statements about improvisation to be coming from the artists themselves, not from Berliner.

Second of all, the 'writers about jazz' are found through searches in the academic database of the library of the University of Amsterdam (which is also linked to online catalogues of academic articles, such as JSTOR), and sometimes through references in other articles. In total, I checked about 100 references, and used the ones that were useful for the purpose of this thesis (see Appendix).

The subject matter 'improvisation' could lend itself to psychological inquiries about the processes involved when someone improvises, or to detailed musicological analyses of the outcome of improvisation. Indeed, a significant part of Berliner's book is dedicated to musical tools used by improvisers. In this thesis, however, the actual process of improvising is not dealt with in detail. Improvisation itself is more or less considered a 'given', and the focus is on the values that musicians and writers associate with it.

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 will give a broad outline of the reasons for the importance of improvisation in different musical cultures, which will provide some background information to the observations made in the next chapters. Chapter 3 will focus on the meaning of improvisation for the jazz artists themselves, and chapter 4 deals with the views of jazz authors. Chapter 5 will then compare the perspectives of artists and authors, and draw conclusions.

2. IMPROVISATION IN SEVERAL MUSICAL CULTURES

Before we can evaluate the meaning of improvisation in jazz music for practitioners and theoreticians, it is worthwhile to look at the importance and meaning of improvisation in various musical cultures. This chapter explores three cultural perspectives on improvisation: African(-American), European ('classical') and Arab/Iranian. In literature on improvisation these are cultures mostly cited as examples, and the perspectives differ from one culture to another. It is important to note that this section only provides a broad outline, and that there are many internal variations within these three cultures. The three cultures do however give an impression of the various values associated with improvisation.

'Africanisms'

Portia Maultsby (1990) argues that in all forms of African-American music, 'Africanisms' are recognizable. These African elements are not bound to specific sounds, but have to do with the attitudes toward making music, the 'way of doing things'. She does not mention improvisation as a specific category, but two of the elements she mentions can be related to improvisation:

- One of the African elements is the focus on music as a communal activity; the audience is invited to participate actively in the performance through shouting, singing along, dancing etcetera – in contrast to the European concert hall tradition which discourages any audience participation during the music.

As a result, performers make alterations in the music depending on the responses from the audience. This process can be seen in all kinds of African-American music, but also in other forms of performance (sermons and stand-up comedy come to mind). The dynamics between the performer and the audience are a common thread in African and African-derived music, such as 19th century folk spirituals or soul and hiphop. Not only is this communal ideal found in performer-audience interaction, it can also be found in interaction between performers. The call-and-response patterns one can hear in spirituals and work songs are a typical African element that also governs e.g. the 'shout choruses' in some of Count Basie's work.

- the tradition of 'folk spirituals' and work songs represents a mixture of individuality and community.

Instead of the ideal of a homogenous sound, individual ways of singing are encouraged, using variations to personalize the song. The norm is not homophony, but rather heterophony (several slightly different versions of the same melody sung simultaneously). 'Black audiences demand variety in music performances, and they expect musicians to bring a unique interpretation to each performance and to each song.' (Maultsby, 1990)

In summary, two typical African values found in virtually all African-American music stimulate improvisation: the *communal* ideal, an intense connection of performer and audience, and the *individual*, making a (well-known) song personal by using a unique way of singing/playing.

The first of these values is also found in other cultures. Stephen Blum gives an example of music used in mourning and religious rituals; lamenters are expected to be 'sensitive to the immediate needs and desires of those to whom their performances are addressed; presentation of a 'prefabricated' lament or praise song might be taken as a sign of insincerity' (Blum, 1998). Here, we see the value of *connecting to the audience* combined with the moral value of *sincerity*.

European classical tradition

Bruno Nettl (1998) explores the ambiguity of American (white) middle-class attitudes towards jazz and improvised music. On the one hand, seen from the Western classical tradition, improvisation is regarded as a lack of discipline (associated with the stereotype of jazz musicians as unreliable social outcasts). However, improvisation also presents a sort of attractive mystery for classical musicians, where improvised music is considered the most

'real', most essential form of music making. This is perhaps partly due to a misunderstanding of how much preparation is needed.

Blum (1998) signals a similar ambiguity. He quotes Jeff Titon, who suspects that American ethnomusicologists are interested in improvisation because of the value of human *freedom* they think it represents. Blum concludes that, as a result of this value, ethnomusicologists run the risk of neglecting the amount of preparation and the restrictions improvisers put on their music. In other words, if musicologists look for freedom in improvised music, they will surely find it, but they may overlook the fact that this freedom is usually bound by the 'language' in which musicians improvise.

The association of improvisation with freedom could be seen as a Western 19th century ideal: in the Romantic period, the artist was increasingly seen as a truly free human, who was detached from the world, and follows his ultimate individual emotions. A good example would be Chopin, who in correspondence wrote that improvisation included for him the freedom to play as he wished (referred to in Blum, 1998). He also noted that this could be accomplished easier without an audience. Here we see a possible collision of two values attached to improvisation: the ideal of (total) *freedom of individual expression* could interfere with the desire for maximum *participation of the audience.*

The view that improvisation is in itself of little value is sometimes foundin the Western classical tradition, but the history of Western music presents many examples of famous composers and performers who mastered the art of improvisation. At least until 1840, as Robin Moore (1992) states, improvisation was considered an important musical skill; even among composers, such as Liszt and Chopin (see above). Several social developments affected a change in the appreciation of improvisation at the end of the 19th century:

- composers were trained in relatively isolated institutions (conservatories) instead of in the social environment where the music was to be performed (previously courts, later also upper class homes);
- middle class people had gradually more access to musical instruments and wanted to imitate the musical practice of the upper class, causing changes in pedagogy.[3]

Moore concludes that 'the sense of communal involvement and understanding that one associates with improvisatory musical traditions, and that had existed between performer and audience in the courts of Europe, could no longer be associated with art music towards the end of the century.' (Moore, 1992) The distance between 'modern composers' in the Western tradition and the general public has increased significantly since. Moore advocates a less rigid canon of musical practices in order to restore communication between composer, performer and audience; this could also mean a rehabilitation of the value of improvisation in 'classical' music.

Iranian and Arab music

In Iran, contrary to the 'Western classical' view described above, improvised music (associated with *freedom* and *unpredictability*) generally has a higher status than composed music. In this society, freedom and unpredictability are apparently of higher value than predictability and discipline, values associated with Western classical music, where most prestige is attached to large and complex structures (Nettl, 1998).

Apart from the freedom connotation, in the Persian musical tradition, the value of improvisation is also found in establishing a connection to the audience. A 12th century author (quoted in Blum, 1998) writes that 'successful improvisation 'fires up' the assembled listeners and makes the king favorably disposed to reward the performer'. A Persian prince (referred to by Blum, 1998) reportedly said that the most important thing a musician should do was to choose from his repertoire the items that best suited the circumstances. This puts the value of improvisation into perspective from the listener's point of view: it is only important if it adds to the 'suitability' of the music.

[3] One could add other factors to this list.

A final value found in Persian/Iranian writing on improvisation is the possibility to react to other musicians playing or singing. Persian music has a specific name, javab-e avaz, for the situation in which instrumentalists respond to every phrase a singer sings. Similar reasons for improvisation can be found in Arab music. Ali Jihad Racy (2000) points out that improvisation in the Arab context had a significance because it 'evokes the social and artistic values of Arab listeners and performers'. He sums up several of these values and beliefs. Among these:

- improvisation is considered an intuitive art (transcending rationalization)
- improvisation is believed to be highly creative (and improvisers highly gifted)
- improvisation can appear highly personal, or individualized
- improvisation constitutes a merger between the familiar and the novel
- improvisation tends to involve the audience directly
- improvisation is associated with freedom
- improvising may generate a sense of mystical or emotional transcendence

Racy argues that improvisers in Arab music, playing instrumental improvised music known as 'taqasim', move between symbolic poles such as community – individuality, reason – intuition, or workmanship – inspiration. Arab improvising musicians are constantly in the area of tension between established practice and the new/individual/free, between staying rooted in the tradition and letting their individual creativity speak through it.

Conclusion

Looking at the aforementioned views held about improvisation, it seems that three major answers are given to the question why improvisation is so important.

The first one is *because it enables performers to connect with their audience in a unique way, ensuring a maximum level of involvement of the audience*. We could label this the audience participation argument. In the reviewed literature, this was the most common argument for improvisation.

A second answer is *because improvisation provides the musician with the freedom to follow his/her imagination, inspiration and talent*. This is the individual expression argument, found for example in Western culture. A tension may arise with one of the other arguments, since individual expression may go against what is wanted by the audience or played by other musicians. Therefore, in most cultures it is stressed that improvisers should not overlook their connection with the audience in striving for freedom.

A third answer concerns the interaction with other musicians: *because improvisation means that musicians are able to respond to each other*. This answer stresses interaction between musicians. This argument can be found in the African-American tradition (e.g in call-and-response patterns, although the boundary between performers and audience can be seriously blurred) and Iranian/ Persian music.

The next chapter deals with the degree to which jazz musicians use these arguments for the importance of improvisation.

3. JAZZ ARTISTS ON IMPROVISATION

A natural way of doing things?

One aspect of jazz music that struck Berliner (1994), as well as many of the jazz musicians he interviewed, is that at first improvisation seems an unintelligible process of a rather mystical nature. 'I used to think, How could jazz musicians pick notes out of thin air? I had no idea of the knowledge it took. It was like magic to me at the time' (Calvin Hill, p.1).[4] 'The cats seemed to be standing up and making something out of nothing' (Arthur Rhames, p. 2). Later on, musicians recognize all the study and practicing that goes into improvising: 'Jazz is not just 'Well, man, this is what I feel like playing.' It's a very structured thing that comes down from a tradition and requires a lot of thought and study'[5] (Wynton Marsalis, p. 63). Even though jazz improvisation may still be regarded as a 'natural way of doing things' in the way John Scofield described it (see the beginning of chapter 1), this is put in perspective by the realization that a lot of study goes into it[6].

Berliner points out, based on his interviews, that jazz improvisation is not an absolute thing. Rather, it is like a scale running from 'precomposition' in which a solo is virtually finished in the mind of the performer before it is played, to 'spontaneity' in which the harmonic progression is the guideline but no fixed melodies are thought out in advance. Of course, in the 'grey area' between the poles we find the 'storehouse of licks' that performers have, and from which they can choose what they are going to play on a certain tune; these are the building blocks from which new combinations can be made each time. The size of the blocks obviously determines the amount of decisions to be made while performing. Musicians themselves would not make the claim that all jazz must be improvised completely, generally speaking.

However, the 'stock phrases' should not be overused, because the jazz community as interviewed by Berliner is rather critical of a player who plays 'corny' or 'pitches his solos to the lowest common denominator' (anonymous, p. 253). The direction of the improvisation should be somewhat surprising to the musician himself, according to Buster Williams (p.268): 'If it was all thought out before it was done, there would be no need to do it, you know?' Several others also stress the value of not relying too much on prefabricated material. 'If I were to try to play mechanically, playing things that I've worked out before, it might make me sound real good, but it would also make me feel guilty – as if I haven't really done anything good. I'd prefer to make things up as I go along' (John McNeil, p. 269). Lee Konitz comments on a certain player (p. 270): 'He's like a lot of players who are always preparing and calculating for the home run when they solo. They can deliver that kind of a blow with the music and it's very effective. But for someone who demands more, the effect is suddenly over and done with and you're not going to get any more.' Implicitly, Konitz seems to point out that *real* improvisation is to be preferred over too many fixed components in one's playing. Charles Mingus, in his distinct manner, once commented in a concert situation to a young saxophonist: 'Play something different, man, play something different. This is jazz, man. You played that last night and the night before' (p.271).

The consensus seems to be that there is something valuable in 'making things up as you go along', even to the point of feeling insincere if you rely too heavily on fixed material. What could that value be? The answers that musicians gave to this question are grouped as follows: first we look at the three reasons identified in the previous chapter, followed by alternative explanations that musicians give for the importance of improvising.

[4] Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes and page numbers refer to Berliner (1994).

[5] Note that the amount of emphasis put on structure itself can be regarded as referring to a system of values. The last quote of Marsalis could indicate that he tries to enhance the respectability of jazz music by referring to structure, thought and study (values that are associated with Western classical music). More on respectability and comparing jazz to classical music in chapter 4.

[6] A lot of study does not inhibit 'natural-ness' per se. But a naïve position about improvisation, equating naturalness with 'every note is thought off in the moment', cannot be held.

Connecting with the audience

Some jazz musicians refer to connecting with the audience as vital for jazz music; John Coltrane regarded listening itself as 'an act of participation' in the music (Berliner quotes an interview with Coltrane). And Curtis Fuller says: 'If I wasn't concerned with the audience, I might as well stay in a room alone and practice' (p.458). If the audience is receptive to the 'message' of the musicians, the communication might be a real two-way thing, as Curtis Fuller (p.468) describes: 'I feed on the audience when I play. You have to speak the language that the audience knows. I could draw on a familiar figure that even a layman would understand, something in front of a current hit or a blues lick that's soulful. If I play that and I see someone sway or someone says 'Yeah!' I stay right on this because they understand where I'm coming from, and I've got this going for me.' Sometimes the 'vibe' from the audience is less audible, but still works for the musicians: 'In the Vanguard, I can feel the vibes of what the place will be like that night, just walking down the stairs. If the audience is attentive and excited, I can go to new horizons in my playing' (Kenny Washington, p.469).

A necessary condition for good communication is that the audience 'speaks the language' of jazz music. Several jazz musicians talk about this. 'One of the things that can be a pleasure about performing in Europe is that people do the research. They really know who you are, and they want you to play real jazz' (Lou Donaldson, p.456). Consequently, the 'level of sophistication' the audience has according to the jazz artists seems to play a role in the level of communication: 'this audience was nice enough to applaud after each piece, but you could tell they weren't really listening' (anon. p.464). 'Sometimes, we'd play in ways we thought were awful and we'd still get a standing ovation. It made some of the musicians cynical about the audience' (anon. p.464).

As jazz musicians have made music that has gradually become more formally complex, leading some critics to speak of 'America's classical music', this might have alienated part of their audience. Several jazz musicians quoted by Berliner experience a tension between their music and the audiences they play for: 'Some performers play worse when there's an audience than when they're alone, because they're so involved with the audience. Their music takes the back seat. They might play down to the audience, playing some silly things that get over, but that don't mean anything musically' (anon. p.465). And 'there are players who, under the pressure of commerce and looking for acceptance, have lost their own voices' (Chuck Israels, p.465). 'This is not to say that a true artist purposely cuts himself off from the audience. But his message has to be what he finds valuable' (ibid.).

We can see a similarity to the European 'widening gap' between composers/performers and audience, as described in the previous chapter. At any rate, the musicians themselves experience a gap between their own values and what they perceive as the audience's. On the whole, it seems that musicians seem less inclined to follow the typical 'African' value of maximum audience participation, in favor of more sophistication and complexity in their means of expression. This brings us to the second category of reasons for improvisation.

Individual freedom and expression

Most aspiring musicians trying to learn jazz do so by first copying solos from the great players. But in the end, the norm in jazz is that a mature player should have created a personal style, not simply copying someone else's. As Eubie Blake (p.144) says: 'Everybody puts his own personal *style* to the music. Of course, if he *doesn't*, then he just ain't a musician.' An improviser, according to many of the interviewed musicians, should 'sing' through his instrument, expressing personal feelings. The insistence of several musicians that 'if you can't sing it, you can't play it' shows the importance of an intimate connection between the musician and what he/she plays. Mutt Carey puts it this way: 'When I'm improvising, I'm singing in my mind. I sing what I feel and then try to reproduce it on the

horn' (p.180-1). This is emphasized even stronger by Percy Heath[7], saying that the way you play 'has to do with the way you feel that night. You hear that your kid was hit in the face three thousand miles away or you're lonesome and haven't found anybody to talk to or you're tired of the town and sick of each other; it all comes out in the music. You have to know how it feels to be miserable, how it feels to be sad, how it feels to be in the dumps before you can project it. When that slave cried out in the field, he wasn't just making music, he *felt* that way.'

This statement shows overtones of the value of *sincerity* associated with improvisation: improvising gives the performer a chance to focus on his/her feelings at that particular time and place. Tommy Flanagan expresses the priority of emotional expression over virtuosity as follows (p.261): 'I can feel better about what I play because I have been playing so long that I can express it better that I did twenty or thirty years ago, although I may have played better technically then. I play with more feeling now than I did then. I played what I *knew* I could play then, and now I play what I *feel* I can play, which is the way I've grown musically.' And Art Farmer, evaluating his own development as a musician, says (p.285): 'Basically, my ambition is just to be more expressive.'

In the discourse on soloing, it seems that jazz musicians stress the self-expression and the 'inner dialogue' more than communicating with the audience: 'If you're not affected and influenced by your own notes when you improvise, then you're missing the whole essential point.' (Lee Konitz, p.193), and 'When I play, it's like having a conversation with myself' (Max Roach, p.192).

On the other hand, a metaphor for improvising used very often among musicians is 'storytelling', which implies the presence of someone whom the story is told to (who of course needs to know the language, as explained earlier). Another tempering effect on pure self-expression is the fact that most mainstream jazz musicians play improvisations on a certain song. Each song provides 'different perspectives, different feelings, different moods. And those moods govern a lot of what's going to come out in your interpretation of the chord changes in your improvising' (Arthur Rames, p.203).

Harold Ousley, praising a rhythm section he worked with, says that 'they made it possible for me to put myself in a state of mind where I didn't block my ideas and was able to feel that freedom that we all strive for' (p.389). This is a clear case of a jazz musician stating that freedom is the ultimate goal of improvising. However, not many other examples were found in Berliner's book. A possible reason for this is given by Lewis (2000). He states that freedom in an African-American context is never an absolute thing, and he refers to Elvin Jones speaking on free jazz and Coltrane: 'There's no such thing as freedom without some kind of control, at least self-control or self-discipline.' Randy Weston on free jazz: 'I don't see how this music is more free than another. I've heard Monk take one note and create unbelievable freedom. Freedom is a natural development.' [8]

In summary, the expression of personality and personal emotions through music is highly esteemed by many jazz musicians. The goal of this is not 'total freedom', however. 'Sincere communication' seems to be what many jazz musicians aspire, in a way that is intelligible to musicians themselves and to a sophisticated audience.

[7] The quote that Berliner refers to comes from Whitney Balliet, *Ecstasy at the Onion, thirty-one pieces of jazz*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971.

[8] Jones and Weston were quoted in Arthur Taylor, *Notes and tones, musician-to-musician interviews*, New York: Da Capo Press, 1993.

Communication with other musicians

Group interplay is of vital importance to jazz music, acoording to many of the interviewed musicians. 'You can only really appreciate jazz if you listen to the whole group. The soloist's part by itself is just one line in a whole painting' (Bobby Rogovin, p.387). 'At some point when the band is playing and everyone gets locked in together, it's special for the musicians and for the aware, conscientious listener. These are the magical moments, the best moments in jazz' (Franklin Gordon, p.388). 'Jazz is a democratic form of music. When a piece is performed, everybody in the group has the opportunity to speak on it, to comment on it through their performance[9]' (Max Roach, p.417).

Of course, conflicts can arise between self-expression and good group interactions. 'It's one big group effort, and when everybody's in harmony, that's when the best things happen. You have to sacrifice your own ideas at times' (Leroy Williams, p.418). Fred Hersch struggles with this sometimes, but in the end, 'democratic' ideals about jazz prevail (p.420): 'At times, I have to fight not to tell anyone else how to play. It might not be what I had in mind, but that's the whole point of playing jazz, to be open enough to accept what someone else has to say.'

Then why is improvised group interplay so important that self-expression is sometimes sacrificed? The main reason seems to be that musicians value the creative input that others give in the context of playing together. Setting up call-and-response-patterns is one way of doing this, imitating other players' inventions is another. The words 'conversing' and 'conversation' are often used in this respect. This makes it possible for band members to engage in 'musical jokes'; Charles Mingus for example was renowned for his teasing comments on other band members, by quoting other songs, or melodies played by other band members.

Of course, 'there are ways in which musicians can sabotage a person's playing. Or, when one person is soloing, another can be talking loudly or looking elsewhere, obviously distracted. […] Things like that affect the whole group' (Art Davis, p.463). Max Roach (p.383) states: 'There are chances we all have to take when we're dealing with improvisational music, and sometimes clashes occur between musicians. That's why there is so much skill and sensitivity required to make the music come off well. There are also times when a clash isn't bad. It can create a tension, and something new can come of it.'

On the whole, however, jazz musicians favor possibilities for spontaneous interaction on the bandstand. Miles Davis deliberately left many aspects of the group interaction to be improvised, saying to his band members 'I pay you to practice on the bandstand', in order to produce music that was as 'fresh' and 'honest as it can possibly be.'[10] Ronald Shannon Jackson (p.389) adds: 'This music is really about the relationships between all the players. When the relationship is happening, you don't hear piano, bass, and drums… You hear the total communication of individuals.' A deep sense of communication seems to be the goal underlying the improvised interplay.

Something exciting occurs when musicians feel an almost telepathic connection; George Duvivier (p.390) says: 'Playing jazz is a spontaneous thing, and I've experienced times in which it was almost like I've been able to read a soloist's mind. I'll play a phrase, like a descending passage, at the same time he does. We'll come down together in unison or maybe in harmony, and we'll hear it and react to it almost after the fact. […] There are some things you just can't explain.' Coincidences[11] like these are treasured. 'Jazz musicians interact and learn from one another as they perform. That's what jazz is. Many times, I've listened to recordings I've made and said 'wow, I don't remember doing that! I

[9] Obviously, the degree to which musicians can 'comment' varies with the type of music. Traditional big band music for example is in that sense less democratic than Max Roach's own small ensembles. Viewing jazz as democratic might indeed be more of a wsi

[10] Berliner quotes Herbie Hancock speaking about Miles Davis on the video *Miles Ahead: The Music of Miles Davis* (1986).

[11] These 'coincidences' are more likely to occur if musicians play in the same (sub-)idiom, and if the musicians have played with each other for a sufficient amount of time.

never practiced that phrase before.' I played it because of what the other musicians were playing at the time' (Rufus Reid, p.390).

Of course, these peak experiences are the exception rather that the rule. Don Pate (p.395) says: 'It's like love. Sometimes, you look at somebody and decide you're in love, but you find out differently later. The greatest things don't happen in bands often, because the chemistry between the combination of players doesn't lend itself to the most positive or highest level of music. It seems like it's a stroke of luck or genius when everyone is matched perfectly and the music's really happening.' But when the chemistry does happen, individuals perform in a way they could not have done without the interaction with other musicians.

The most severe criticism found in Berliner's book concerns musicians who don't connect to the rest of the band: 'A lot of guys just practice their technique on the bandstand' (Keith Copeland, p.409). Wynton Marsalis (p.401) uses the conversation metaphor: 'Playing is like speaking. As we are talking now, I only know what I'm going to say a second before I say it. People who don't do it like this can be the worst people to talk to. When you're talking, they're thinking about what they are going to tell you next, instead of listening to what you're saying.' Like in real life, egos should not be in the way too much, or the conversation won't be fruitful: 'There has to be a certain empathy among all the players in a group before the beauty in this music can really happen. In some situations, everybody is trying to outshine everybody else' (Leroy Williams, p.414).

Summarizing, the evidence suggests that jazz musicians enjoy the improvised aspects of group performance – although sometimes inhibiting pure self-expression – for the possibilities of 'good musical conversation', which opens up musical perspectives that individual musicians would not have found on their own. Creativity, honesty and freshness are terms associated with this.

Other values: mystical aspect

The freedom of ideas in improvising, not relying too much on cliché phrases, is valued very much by musicians. An interesting aspect is the way in which musicians talk about the condition in which the ideas indeed flow freely. They described this more in terms of something happening from outside than something deliberately chosen. For example Bobby Rogovin (p.217) says: 'There are times when you don't even try to do anything new, and all of a sudden it will happen: you avoid all the clichés […] That's what playing is really all about, the magic that happens when you least expect it.' Fred Hersch (p.217) talks about a certain performance: 'Everything just fell into place in my hands and in my head. I felt I was expressing something with everything I played. When I'm playing well, there's a certain freedom of just being able to do anything, really.'

Musicians seem to agree that this state of bliss cannot be reached by 'trying hard'. Leroy Williams recalls the advice another musician gave him (p.219): 'Instead of trying to play the music all the time, you sometimes have to let it play you, and you have to be relaxed enough to let that happen.' In a similar vein, Barry Harris (p.267) commented on the lack of 'organic' development in one of his students' solo: 'Endings must come naturally. You're supposed to let it happen, not just to make it happen like that.'

Several of the jazz musicians that were interviewed tend to see good improvisation also as expressing a thing outside of themselves, rather than just self-expression; the references to 'the flow of the music' and the music playing the musician, instead of the other way around, show a transcendental or mystical side to the art of improvisation. Ronald Shannon Jackson makes the connection most clearly:

> 'There is a level of playing which we try to reach which is the same thing that people do when they do transcendental meditation and yoga. […] The state I'm talking about even transcends emotions. It's a feeling of being able to communicate with all living things.' Paul Wertico, talking about this kind of peak in playing, says that 'it's like I'm in touch with something so big and the joy is so incredible' (p.393).

Conclusion

Individual self-expression and communication among musicians seem to be the most frequently named reasons for the importance of improvising in jazz. To a slightly lesser degree, communication with the audience is also part of this view. The ultimate goal associated with good improvising is a state that transcends ordinary playing; this mystical aspect seems to be the 'holy grail' of improvised music for some musicians.

A lengthy quote from singer Carmen Lundy (p.391) sums up all of these aspects (interaction with the audience, with other musicians, expression/freedom, and the mystical dimension).

> 'What I hear in jazz is also spiritual.[…] When you are in a congregation, everybody, not just the choir, is part of the music – the person next to you, the people in front of you and behind you. You hear someone clapping this way, and someone else clapping another way. You feel this pulse […] and you feel this interaction between the people as the rhythm is going on. You are all beginning to clap more, and the spirit is getting more involved. […] In jazz, it's the same thing. No one in the group knows exactly what is going to be played next, so you all rely on your instinctive knowledge of music. It's that freedom of expression and expressiveness that comes through from a feeling you have of musical rapport with other people. It's something that you really can't touch, but you know when you are sharing it with another musician. […] Sometimes, I really feel that I am just the vehicle, the body, and that something is really singing through me, like I am not controlling everything that I am singing.'

Summarizing things in a more formal way, Berliner himself uses the following words in the epilogue to his book.

> 'To use one of the metaphors favored by musicians, improvisation is a musical conversation that the improviser enters on many different levels simultaneously. […] The inner dialogue by which individual band members develop the logic of their own specific parts comprises a conversation that they carry on with themselves […] ; the player converses with predecessors within the jazz tradition […] ; interplay within the band projects another kind of conversation, a group conversation. On another level, so does the interaction between players and audience. Finally, at the highest level are extraordinary transcendental experiences in which players feel, if only momentarily, 'in touch with the big picture' ' (p.497-8).

4. JAZZ WRITERS ON IMPROVISATION

The questions about improvisation found in writings on jazz are slightly different from those dealt with by jazz musicians. Writers hardly ever address questions like 'why is improvisation so important in jazz', but focus instead on 'what is the status of improvisation in different cultures surrounding the jazz world', or more philosophical questions like 'when is something called improvisation' and 'is the distinction "improvised jazz" versus "composed classical music" tenable'.

Derek Bailey (1980) is the only author who speaks directly about reasons for improvisation, declaring that 'improvisation has no need of argument and justification.' Somewhat contradictory to this statement, he then proceeds to give some arguments why improvisation is so important to him: 'It exists because it meets the creative appetite that is a natural part of being a performing musician and because it invites complete involvement, to a degree otherwise unobtainable, in the act of music-making.'
The two values behind the importance of improvisation for Bailey seem to be:

- it is (the most?) natural way of creative musicianship
- it is the ultimate involvement in making music (presumably because it is ultimately linked to the here and now)

He does not elaborate on this, however. Maybe Bailey's view is more like an artist's statement (Bailey is an improvising musician himself) than the result of any academic inquiry.

Improvisation as a relative concept

Richard Cochrane (2000) makes the interesting philosophical claim that improvisation to a certain degree is unavoidable, unless music is performed by machines. Here's his line of reasoning. In every musical situation, there are 'constants' (fixed parameters) and 'variables'; these variables could range from performance practice (exactly how fast *is* 'presto' in a given classical piece?) to dynamics (depending on the acoustics of the room) to choice of notes (as in jazz). In this sense, all music, regardless of culture, has both constants and variables, he claims. And improvisation, seen as the sum of all variables to be decided upon by the performer, is therefore a necessity, inherent to music as performed by human beings.

This view is shared, from a different angle, by Nicholas Cook (2004), who discussed group aspects of improvisation. He presents two opposed views: musicologist Ingrid Monson[12] who claims that the way jazz musicians improvise collectively has no parallel in Western art music, and sociologist Alfred Schutz[13] who wrote that musicians accommodating to each other happens in all kinds of musical settings, and therefore there is no principal distinction between a string quartet and a jam session.

Cook describes the pitfall in talking about jazz, which is to focus on the soloist, and to leave out the collective aspect. Similarly, the pitfall in talking about classical music is to focus on the written version of it, neglecting all the things musicians (especially in chamber music situations) do in order to sound good as a group (in terms of intonation, dynamics, articulation, timing). And so, 'because all this depends on the interaction between performers, it is just as much of an insult to accuse a classical musician of not listening as it is in jazz.' (Cook 2004, p.16)

Cook's point is that both in jazz and in classical music, improvisation in terms of musicians adapting to each other is absolutely necessary in order to make meaningful music. The difference is that in classical chamber music, improvisation often takes places at the 'sub-notational level', whereas jazz improvisation (also) involves the notes themselves. This is a gradual distinction. In the final paragraph Cook warns musicologists, whose discipline started as 'predicated on the study of notated texts', not to overlook performance factors. If

[12] Monson, *Saying something: jazz improvisation and interaction*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002.

[13] Schutz, 'Making music together: a study in social relationships'. In: Brodersen (ed.), *Alfred Schutz, collected papers II: Studies in social theory,* Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1964.

actual performances and interaction are considered, the sharp distinction some musicologists draw between 'fully composed' and 'fully improvised' will not be tenable.

In the same vein, Carol Gould (2000) argues that the distinction between jazz and classical music as 'improvised versus fixed' is too rigid. Classical musicians, in interpreting the score, do improvise in their own way (with regard to dynamics, phrasing, tempo variations, etcetera) according to the situation and their own personalities. Not only can there be considerable differences in performances of 'the same' classical work, one can also find considerable similarities between different improvised performances in jazz.

Besides, the history of European composed music is also filled with improvisation on the level of notes. For example, in Renaissance and some Baroque music, only part of a performance was written out, leaving room for the creation of ornaments and alternative ways of playing the harmony – comparable to the way a Fake Book used by jazz musicians contains only the melody and basic harmonies of a song. But also in later periods improvisation was held in esteem. Gould refers to an anecdote about Beethoven to illustrate this: 'When the young Beethoven auditioned to study with Mozart, he was asked to improvise. His playing was so finished and controlled that Mozart accused him of having prepared the piece in advance. Beethoven then asked Mozart to give him a theme on which he could improvise, proving that he could do so even on the spot. He did so, of course, beautifully. Mozart prophesied a bright future for the boy.'

The decline of improvisation in the romantic period is partly due, according to Gould, to the romantic concept of the artist as an 'authoritative and solitary hero'. (Gould, 2000) Composers put themselves in this position and did not tolerate the 'competition' of performers[14].

Another factor is that the 'classical canon' encompasses not only the current musical language but also pieces that were composed centuries ago, thus making it difficult to really become familiar with one specific musical 'language'. As an illustration, imagine having a fluent conversation in Shakespearian English. This is very difficult for people used to contemporary English. However, performing a Shakespeare play can still be done, if the actors do not improvise but stick to the original text. Thus, performing in a historic idiom is accomplished easier if most variables are fixed and possibilities for improvisation reduced.

Gould's conclusion is that both classical and jazz music 'have an element of fluency and immediacy about them.' This fluency means that not every detail is worked out in advance, because the skilled musician can decide on them in the course of performance.

The interesting thing is that the music that people claim to be 'free improvisation' does not only exist of 'variables' but also has quite a lot of constants: in that music, it is 'forbidden' for the drummer to play a steady beat for too long, for the pianist to play everything in one diatonic key etcetera. 'It is perfectly plain, then, that free improvised performances are surrounded by a great many prohibitions, to such an extent that the use of the word "free" must be considered questionable.' (Cochrane, 2000)

This may all be 'perfectly plain' to scholars and musicians, but it does not correspond to the popular notion that jazz musicians 'pick notes out of thin air'. Lee B. Brown (1991) states that the view of jazz as 'a sheer welling-up of untutored inspiration' is a misunderstanding that still lives on. He claims that this view was given new life by musicians and critics in the free jazz movement of the 1960s, which embraced freedom as a modernist value.

African and European values in jazz history

In recent scholarly views on improvisation in jazz music, it is striking how much emphasis is put in the description of 'African' and 'European' value systems and the influence they have had and still have on the values associated with jazz improvisation.

[14] Until the mid 19th century, many composers were also performers (e.g. Liszt and Chopin), so this argument may be valid only from the late 19th century onward.

Scott DeVeaux (1991), in a critical evaluation of the way jazz history is usually seen, concludes that certain parts of the story are often told and other parts often left out in order to construct 'the' jazz tradition. He demonstrates that writers from the 1950s who advocated bebop (whether seen as evolution or revolution) rewrote jazz history in the sense that 'jazz as autonomous art music' was the norm in jazz and that a clear distinction between jazz and commercial music was made, obscuring the commercial aspects of for example 1930s swing music. In this way, advocates and musicians in bebop and later styles tried to make jazz an acceptable art form, with a status comparable to European classical music. Leonard Feather even wrote in 1957, talking about the 'third stream' music mixing jazz and (modern) classical music: 'The increasing indications of a wedding, or at least a flirtation, with modern classical music mark a logical and desirable outcome of the jazzman's attempt to achieve musical maturity.' (quoted in DeVeaux, 1991)

It is clear that the model of 'mature music' for authors like Feather is the European classical tradition. According to DeVeaux, the price that was paid for this new status was that the roots in African-American culture, and aspects such as *spontaneity*, were seen as 'immature' elements. In that context, DeVeaux points out that composition was seen as superior to improvisation.

However, when some improvisatory elements *are* introduced in the Western-classical world, as was done by American composer John Cage, these are held in higher esteem than the improvisations in jazz, George Lewis (1996) claims. Although his music challenges some of the traditional Western notions about music, Cage clearly sees it as a part (or development) of the Western art music tradition. And, though his own use of chance might be called 'improvisational', he seems to dislike jazz music, at least denouncing it as a derivate: 'Jazz per se derives from serious music.' Speaking ironically, he added: 'I can get along perfectly well without any jazz at all.' (Cage interviewed in Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, 1987.)

Lewis (1996) then points out that Cage's introduction of improvisation followed bebop by 8 to 10 years and owes its invention to bebop in a sense, but that through an implicit Euro-centrism (or racism, one could say) only Cage's inventions were labeled 'art', 'experimental' and 'avant-garde'. In books on improvisation written from the Eurological perspective, jazz is mentioned marginally. Lewis sees a reflection of this balance of power in an interview in which John Cage commented on jazz[15], although Cage admitted not paying much attention to jazz. In that interview, jazz was portrayed as a sort of European music in a primitive stage, that could use some work. Lewis concludes: 'The work of black artists is defined by *whiteness*.'

In a short historical overview, John Gennari (1991) points out that the first critical writings on jazz, e.g. those of French critic Hugues Panassié in the 1930s, viewed jazz musicians as 'primitive men', unspoiled in a way, and born with a natural talent. These critics served more as advocates of jazz music (against a large amount of prejudice), than as accurate observers. Later, American critics like R.D. Darrell had a similar goal of stimulating interest in jazz; Darrell himself tried to interest audiences by comparing jazz to the European aesthetic values. Of course, the downside of this is that some of the unique aesthetic features and ideals of jazz were not appreciated. Other enthusiasts, who often came from rich families and were well-educated, started jazz magazines like Melody Maker and Downbeat, writing record reviews and embracing the anti-establishment connotations of jazz music. Not surprisingly, a lot of European aesthetic values are prominent in these writings.

In the 1950s, jazz writing was growing more serious, with more in-depth analyses in both musicological and social/political fields, Gennari states. Still, many prejudices continued to exist. In his book *Jazz: its evolution and essence* Andre Hodeir (1956) claims that 'the jazz musician does not meditate. If he happens to listen attentively to the work of an-

[15] Lewis quotes the interview from Michael Zwerin, *A lethal measurement*, in: Kostelanetz (ed.), John Cage, an anthology, New York: Da Capo Press, 1991.

other musician, he grasps what it has to offer through intuitive assimilation rather than by reflection.' Gennari labels Hodeirs position 'neo-primitivist', because it shows a remarkable resemblance to the thinking of the first jazz critics, such as Panassié. Hodeir emphasizes the European roots of jazz music but hardly notes the African principles that govern the aesthetics of jazz.

DeVeaux, Lewis and Gennari all state in one form or another that throughout jazz history, its African roots have suffered neglect or contempt, and that European elements were most prestigious. The notion seemed to be that jazz has a potential to be as 'artful' as the classical tradition, but at a price: it has to overcome 'the aesthetic limitations of its conception in the boozy New Orleans red-light district and its development in the mindless mass-entertainment rituals of the urban dance hall.' (Gennari, 1991)

This has led to a fundamental misunderstanding of what jazz is all about: European values were used to evaluate a music thoroughly rooted in African culture, accompanied by misunderstanding of the mind of the improvisers, as seen in Hodeir's work. But, given this situation, what values *are* to be associated with jazz improvisation, in order to understand its importance?

A key may be found in an article by Lee B. Brown (2000). He discusses two objections to jazz improvisations. One is that they can sound chaotic and disordered, the other is that too much emphasis is put on clichés and basic material over and over again. Brown calls both of these objections 'formalist' because they focus entirely on the audible product of the improvisation.

About the first objection, Brown says that jazz as a result of its character could be labeled 'wrong' in formalist ears, because of the different 'agenda' that jazz improvisation has. The 'chaotic' sounds were sometimes defended with a reference to the social struggles of African-Americans. Brown uses a more abstract version of this in defence of jazz: the formalists, he says, do not use the right criteria for evaluating jazz. Since jazz music combines African and European elements, it cannot be evaluated on exclusively European criteria. As an example, Brown refers to rhythmic tension (African) in places where a 'Eurocentric evaluation' would find too little melodic variation. Furthermore, Brown turns his attention to the process of improvisation, stating that jazz has an aesthetic ideal in which it is perfectly allowed, even desirable, to hear something of a *struggle* of the improvisers, something of the suspense of where he is taking the music. Both product and process are important in the aesthetic evaluation. This leads Brown to the conclusion that *'imperfection is a vital dimension of the music'* (my italics).

Brown attacks the second objection (too many clichés) by saying that people are not listening for the right things. Granted, most jazz musicians use certain phrases and popular show tunes (standards), but a detailed analysis of great improvisers shows a wealth of ideas and ways of using those phrases and standards.

To make a comparison with language, Brown's point is that it makes no sense to criticize people for using standard English words and common phrases. The point is how they use these 'standard' words and sentences to express their ideas. Here, the European value of 'originality in every aspect' is denounced in favor of the African value of *communication within the context of a tradition.*

The same point is made by George E. Lewis (1996). He explains the different sense in which 'Afrological' and 'Eurological' musicians define originality. The Eurological perspective attaches a higher value to originality in the sense of 'not related to anything in the past'. This is a contrast to the Afrological way of looking at innovation and improvisation: 'We must continue to add copiously to an already vast reservoir of artistic richness handed down through the ages.' (Muhal Richard Abrams and John Shenoy Jackson, Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, *Black World* 23, no.1, 1973.)

A related Afrological element, also found in some 'white' improvised music such as the 'downtown school' in New York (with people like Fred Frith and John Zorn) but not in John Cage, is an emphasis on personality of the improviser. Lewis states that *individuality* is Afrological, as opposed to the chance operations of Cage that leave out the individual entirely. This corresponds to the 'Africanisms' that Maultsby defines (see chapter 2).

The Eurological ideal is, by contrast, an 'autonomous' music, completely self-sufficient, without any external reference, based on the assumption that 'humans can build structures or domains that are complete and meaningful within themselves.'[16] This is why some European composers (such as B. A. Zimmerman) invented their own 'systems' in which musicians had to improvise for certain pieces, effectively providing them with a new language to learn.

Summarizing, the notions that in chapter 2 were called 'Africanisms' are in more recent writings emphasized as essential for a fruitful understanding of jazz music and improvisation. Key elements are the individual expressions of the improviser, and a sense of continuity (not originality per se). This combining of African and European values seems to suit jazz as a 'hybrid' music, although tensions between these value systems may still emerge if one tries to understand jazz music.

Jazz music and society

Interestingly, in an attempt to emphasize the uniqueness of jazz improvisation, some European values re-enter the stage. I am referring to DeVeaux's conclusion that 'as jazz entered the 1960s, authenticity was more than ever associated with ethnicity.' (DeVeaux, 1991) A famous example is *Blues People* by LeRoi Jones (1963). Jones (later Amiri Baraka) criticized the fact that critics were white middle class men: 'The irony here is that because the majority of jazz critics are white middle-brows, most jazz criticism tends to enforce white middle-brow standards of excellence as criteria for performance of a music that in its most profound manifestations is completely antithetical to such standards; in fact, quite often is in direct reaction against them.' (Quoted in Gennari, 1991)

This rather polemic point of view can be related to Baraka's central point in his book *Blues People*, that the roots of jazz and its meaning are found in the political and social struggles of African-American people. Another critic noted about this book: 'The tremendous burden of sociology which Jones would place upon this music is enough to give even the blues the blues.'[17]

Gennari (1991) evaluates Baraka's distinction between 'commercially' and 'artistically' oriented jazz musicians (e.g. Louis Armstrong versus Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker) as a false distinction. Elements of both 'entertainment' and 'art' are found in all artists mentioned. Note that this distinction can be seen as European in the first place. A more 'African' perspective seems to be that all music (jazz in this case) is communication, and that treating commercial success with suspicion is an element not part of 'African values'.[18] Gennari is very critical of James Lincoln Collier, who operates at the other end of the political spectrum, and views jazz heavily from the perspective of white middle-class values. Gennari criticizes Collier on his views of the economic side of jazz, the 'Chamber-of-Commerce perspective' Gennari calls it.

The central critique of Gennari to both Baraka and Collier is their emphasis on economics and politics over aesthetics: 'There seems to be no room for creativity that is its own best justification, for art that defines its own excellence, for a system of cultural value free of economic considerations.'

Gennari and DeVeaux shows that in retrospect focusing too much on the political aspect will not help to clarify why improvisation is an important aspect of jazz music. Of course, music usually functions in a social context. But political or economic freedom is something different from freedom of expression; although these two are sometimes explicitly or implicitly connected, simply equating will not do.

[16] R.R. Subotnik, *Developing variations: style and identity in Western music,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

[17] Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and act*, New York: Random, 1964.Quoted in Gennari (1991).

[18] But, as mentioned before, it is too much of a generalization to regard 'African' culture as homogenous.

Intuition, spontaneity, freedom, self-expression

Lee B. Brown (1991) discusses the views of André Hodeir, a French author who was one of the first to write systematically on jazz music, in the 1950s. Hodeir[19] defends the position that improvisation is not an *essential* element of jazz, based on the fact that improvisation is also found in other kinds of music. By simply quoting one example, Ellington's concerto for trumpet player Cootie Williams, a piece almost without improvisation, Hodeir arrives at this rather far-reaching conclusion. Although improvisation (on the level of notes) is not found in each and every jazz piece, Brown still advocates it as a central element of jazz music. He conducts a thought experiment by imagining a 'jazz music' where everything is written out as much as possible, inflections included[20]. The question then arises whether *spontaneity* (clearly missing in this case) is a necessary element in jazz. Brown states that 'our intuitions tell us that spontaneity has a jazz function', which is a bit unsatisfactory in itself. He elaborates on this by saying that the kind of spontaneity in jazz is not simply randomness, but a problem-solving principle. The problems to be addressed may be caused by the surrounding musicians, or by the 'dangerous moves' the performer himself willingly played previously.

Brown's critical discussion of Hodeir's views reveals some of his own values associated with jazz music. Although freedom by itself should not be seen as an absolute, it is clear that spontaneity has a key function according to him. However, he hardly mentions any reasons for its importance other than 'our intuitions'.

David Sterritt (2000) writes critically about the popular notion that improvisation gives a performer access to a means of immediate self-expression. He focuses on the fields of literature and cinema, but uses jazz (bebop in particular) as an example.

A famous example of this 'immediate self-expression' ideal are beat poets Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, who modeled their writing ideal after what they thought jazz improvisation was: 'immediate flash material from the mind'[21] which would produce a level of '100 percent personal honesty both psychic and social etc.'[22] Sterritt connects this ideal to the 'Dionysian' emphasis on 'immediacy, individuality, unpredictability, and freedom from sociocultural norms'. He claims that many jazz artists and critics hold the view that improvisation is a way to 'the authentic expression of a unique soul, spirit, or inner self.' (Sterritt, 2000)

This opinion is not tenable, however, in the light of how improvising musicians actually work. Moreover, Kerouac himself did not work 'from scratch' either, when he wrote with his own stream-of-consciousness method. There is evidence that parts of his famous novel *On the Road* were worked out beforehand (in his journal) or 'revised in his mind' many times before he committed them to paper. And Jean-Luc Godard, who experimented with improvisation in the field of film, explained that 'it's only because I have a narrative line in mind that I'm able to improvise and to go on shooting every day.'[23]

Then why has this ideal become so important? Sterritt suggests this may be due to the rise of mechanical reproduction of music at the start of the 20th century, and the associated predictability and loss of authenticity (because the sound of a record is always the same). To regain some of the prestige for jazz music, bebop advocates exaggerated the association with authenticity and individual expression, as Sterritt claims. It is obvious that

[19] Hodeir seems to have a rather Euro-centric view on jazz. For example, he considers formal complexity an important aspect, which leads him to remark that a Strauss waltz is more interesting architecturally than any jazz piece.

[20] Which is practically impossible, given the freedom for the performer which is always there to some degree; see Chochrane's view at the beginning of this chapter.

[21] Allen Ginsberg, 'A conversation', in: *Composed on the tongue; literary conversations 1967-1977*, San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1980.

[22] Jack Kerouac quoted in Tom Clarke, *Jack Kerouac: a biography*, New York: Paragon House, 1990.

[23] Quoted in Gene Youngblood, 'Jean-Luc Godard: no difference between life and cinema', *Los Angeles Free Press*, March 15, 1968.

great improvisers like Charlie Parker used 'stock materials', fragments of a few notes with a certain harmonic meaning. Therefore, the bebop advocates went too far in their claims.

This nuance is also found among jazz musicians quoted in chapter 3; no one seems to advocate the 'pure uninhibited self-expression without any preparation' as the ideal in jazz. The exaggerations Sterritt talks about are in a certain sense a thing of the past. If we look at the historical overviews presented earlier in this chapter, it is clear that an increasing amount of nuances is found, moving away from the one-sidedness that Sterritt attacks. However, in the 'popular mind' uninformed ideas about improvisation as immediate self-expression might persist despite the evidence against it. This is not to say that self-expression is not considered important. Sterritt and others merely try to put it in proper perspective.

William Day (2000) combines aesthetics with a moral point of view on improvised music. His moral stance, based on the works of American writer and thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), emphasizes 'being true to yourself'. The best jazz improvisations according to him are examples of 'checking one's experience', in which experiencing and judging that experience happen simultaneously. Day states that the value of improvisation lies not in originality per se, as if all improvisers aimed for innovation at the cost of 'musical sense'. Neither is improvisation just a 'shortcut' to arriving at the same goal as composed music. Improvisation in jazz has a value of its own.

To see this value, he suggests that we see (jazz) improvisations as a form of everyday activity, not as a work of art, remote from daily life, a 'lived activity rather than organized sound'. Day quotes Kant, who urges artists to have 'a certain audacity in expression'. Through a discussion of particular solos by Lennie Tristano and Charlie Parker, Day makes the point that true artistic genius is found in staying true to your own voice, while being sensitive to what the music needs at the moment it is played. As another example of this view, Day quotes Steve Lacy on his time in Thelonious Monk's band. Lacy's response to the question what he learned from Monk was that he 'learned to stick to the point, and to not lose the point, and not get carried away. And to play with the other musicians and not get all wrapped up in my own thing, and not to just play interesting notes just to be interesting.' (Day,2000) The (musical and moral) balance between individualism and interaction with others is to be found, according to Day, in the words of Emerson: 'It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.'[24]

To summarize it in a more down-to-earth way, Day's point is that improvisation provides musicians with great possibilities for self-expression; his moral point is that self-expression should be as sincere as possible, and that it should also be sensitive to the surroundings (group interaction). This resonates with the points made by jazz musicians in chapter 3 about the balance between self-expression and musical interaction.

Conclusion

Why is improvisation important in jazz music, according to the authors on jazz? First of all, they attack the popular notion that jazz is (largely) improvised, and classical music is not. Improvisation is a matter of degree. It also varies within the jazz tradition itself (compare big band music with free jazz). In evaluating the history of jazz and the history of writing about jazz, it becomes clear to several authors that a music with both European and African roots needs an understanding of both value systems in order to fully grasp its meaning. Too much emphasis on the European dimension has led to major misunderstandings. The authors that I have studied here hardly paid attention to 'group interaction', 'communicating with the audience' or mystical aspects as values associated with jazz improvisation. Self-expression, freedom and spontaneity, associated with authenticity, stand out as important factors to explain the importance of improvisation in jazz.

[24] R.E. Spiller, A.R.Ferguson e.a. (eds.), *The collected works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, volume 2, Belknap Press of Harvard University press, 1971. Quoted in Day (2000).

To put it differently, why would a jazz musician improvise? The answers given in this chapter:

- Because he has no choice; human music making always implies some form of improvisation (variation in musical parameters).
- Because in that way, he is most true to himself; it is a moral principle.
- Because this gives him possibilities for spontaneous, authentic self-expression – though moderated by tradition and context.

5. COMPARISON/ CONCLUSIONS

If we compare the views held by musicians and writers on improvisation, a few common threads emerge. First of all, they both attack popular misconceptions about improvisation, as if it was an untutored way of limitless self-expression. Secondly, they acknowledge the importance of expression and spontaneity, though within certain limits, such as context and tradition.

But of course there are also differences. An important feature prominent in musicians' views, but hardly mentioned in the writings about jazz, is the focus on communication. Musicians see this as a key reason for improvising; the possibility to communicate with tradition, with oneself in a sense, with other musicians of course, with the audience, and even with a transcendent dimension. In this respect, the jazz musicians' view is similar to views in other cultures where improvisation plays a role. Writers do not emphasize all of these points. It is clear that the focus on communication is related to the day-to-day practice of making improvised music.

Another difference is the attention the scholars pay to European and African values and the conflicts between them. This makes sense if we look at the different interests of musicians and scholars: musicians prefer to focus on communicating, one could say, and writers analyze the reception of the music, in other words the effect of the communication. This effect, not surprisingly, depends on the views of the listeners. Much evidence was found for a Euro-centric bias, neglecting the 'Africanisms' in the music, which led to incorrect judgments about jazz and (the importance of) improvisation. However, the fact that several articles in the last 20 years have dealt with this issue suggests a deeper understanding of jazz now compared to several decades ago.

This sensitivity of the hybrid nature of jazz music can also serve to distinguish between different kinds of jazz music. For example, some jazz music sounds more European-oriented (most records of the German label ECM serve as an example). Other jazz artists stick more closely to the African elements (such as 'swinging hard'), sometimes relating to other black music genres such as soul and hiphop. It is likely that the musical goals of these two groups of artists differ.

The formal argument for improvisation shifts the focus from jazz to music in general. This argument states that people never repeat something exactly, so there is always a slight variation, thus giving room for spontaneity, albeit on a modest scale. Improvisation in this broad sense is intricately linked to being human and not machine-like. Interpreting a fixed score is in this view also an activity in which personality, expression and fluency are essential ingredients. Perhaps the 'jazz ideals' of communication with the audience, with the past, with other musicians etc. are ideals not just underlying (the need for) improvisation, but are underlying music as such. In this sense, improvisation is definitely *a natural way of doing things.*

APPENDIX: BIBLIOGRAPHY

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