Performing texts; playing with jazz aesthetics

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Abstract

Despite all the critical attention jazz has received in recent years from scholars in other fields—literature, history, political science, cultural studies—very little headway has been made in understanding what jazz aesthetics are and how they might inform other forms of cultural and artistic expression. Part of the difficulty lies in the time-bound, performative nature of the artform and the fact that it is primarily a non-discursive means of expression; that is to say, jazz does not translate well.

This dissertation attempts to evoke and inhabit jazz aesthetics rather than trying to define, categorize or delineate them. Alternating between close reading, formal musical analysis, musicology and narrative improvisation, this performance sounds much in the manner of a jazz set in which the musicians work through a series of styles, forms and settings. The texts and approaches taken here are a mixture of the familiar and the unexpected. Thelonious Monk is discussed as a formalist of the highest order; Langston Hughes is not read as a "jazz poet"; James Baldwin is argued to be more concerned with jazz brothers than literary fathers; Frank Zappa becomes one of the keepers of the jazz flame. Between these ostensibly conventional chapters lives a counter-melody, an "autobiography" at times parodic, satirical, self-reflexive and allusive that mimics, mocks, pays tribute to, improvises and signifies upon other less scholarly forms of "jazz writing".

Although any number of elements suggestive of a jazz aesthetic are located in various texts—defamiliarization, reciprocity, incremental repetition, collective contextualization—no attempt is made to codify or delimit an understanding of jazz aesthetics. Rather, the performance is meant to organically give rise to and embody the aesthetic process itself. Jazz is all about telling your version of the story in close aural proximity to others who are simultaneously telling theirs. Each individual narrative is both tempered and enlarged in a process of collective contextualization. I think that is about as (dangerously) close as one would want to come to capturing jazz aesthetics in a declarative sentence.

Recommended Citation


In jazz, the horns – the saxophones and trumpets – have traditionally been the music’s glamour instruments and its main focus. But the piano has played an important role in the development of the genre, both as a spotlighted solo instrument and due to its role in the rhythm section, and the world’s best jazz pianists have elevated it to a crucial element of any jazz ensemble. The piano’s importance in jazz stretches back to the time of Scott Joplin, at the turn of the 19th Century, when ragtime – with its jaunty, percussive rhythms – proved an important early building block in the evolution. Jazz is full of polyrhythms – in fact, polyrhythms are one of the defining rhythmic features of many styles of jazz music. For those with a healthy historical/social curiosity, most music scholars argue that the polyrhythmic aspects of jazz are the legacy of African-American musical practices and performance that ultimately trace their roots back to Africa, especially West Africa. How can you practice polyrhythms? In order to address polyrhythms, you first must develop a good sense of duple and triple time-feels by themselves. A good exercise to start with is to put a metronome at a moderate t
Improvised jazz performance be a musical work? What does the ideal jazz musician need to know? Why? How does the brain and mind work when playing and improvising jazz? What happens in a groove state or a flow state as it occurs during a jazz performance? Improvisers spontaneously compose creating fresh melodies over the continuously repeating cycle of chord changes in a song. Why should this be admired as aesthetically valuable activity?