

Jazz Improvisation: The Joy of Influence*

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THE STUDY OF JAZZ IMPROVISATION includes several issues that are of interest to ethnomusicologists: the transmission of a musical tradition, the process of improvising, and how listeners understand improvisation. Historical and music-theoretical methods are predominant in the scholarly literature of jazz, with less attention paid to questions which might seem basic to an ethnomusicological approach, that is, a holistic approach that seeks to make connections between musical performance and other aspects of culture.¹

This paper addresses two such questions: First, what relationships exist between an individual jazz musician and his or her precursors in the jazz tradition? Second, what are some possible sources of the meaningfulness that performers and audiences find in the process of playing and listening to jazz? These questions are discussed in the context of examining several improvisations by tenor saxophonist Joe Henderson, which quote and transform a melody by Charlie Parker. After an explanation of the analytical perspective on the concept of influence, the Parker original and the Henderson transformations are presented, followed by a possible interpretation.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCE

The tracing of artistic influence is a common practice in humanistic scholarship. The concept of influence has received a strongly-worded reinterpretation in a series of books by literary critic Harold Bloom. Beginning with *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), Bloom describes the process of influence as one where poets must struggle to overcome the influence of their precursors in order to be able to create on their own. In Bloom's terms,

Poetic influence—when it involves two strong, authentic poets,—always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main tradition of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, wilful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist (1973, 30).

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Bloom insists on focusing on the anxiety-ridden nature of poetic influence because the Romantic poets and their heirs tend to deny that such relationships exist. The fact that such a theory of artistic influence can itself exert considerable influence on writing about literature shows that nineteenth-century concepts of originality, organic unity, and a distaste for derivativeness are still part of our critical ideas. With respect to jazz, one can see this clearly in Gunther Schuller's celebrated analysis of Sonny Rollins's "Blue Seven" solo, which he believes represents the most advanced step in the evolution of jazz towards motivic coherence ([1958] 1986, 86). Notably absent from Schuller's analysis is the question of whether the performers or their intended audience share his criteria, which derive from the study of Western art music.

I cite Bloom because his ideas are a justified reaction to earlier approaches to the analysis of poetry, which ignore extratextual data in favor of the syntactical relationships within a poem. Analyses of jazz improvisations that treat the written version in the same way as Western art-music composition would be treated do much the same thing. But it would be inappropriate to adopt Bloom's theory for the study of influence in jazz, because his ideas apply only to the Romantic and twentieth-century American poets about whom he writes. In other words, rather than applying criteria from the study of Western art music or literature to jazz, a holistic approach seeks the musical concepts and modes of interpretation that are suggested by the music and by African-American expressive culture in general.

I recognize the importance of distinguishing the differences between music and language and the hazards of applying to music modes of analysis initially developed for language (Feld 1974); nevertheless, I feel the theory of African-American literature proposed by literary critic Henry Louis Gates is relevant to the study of jazz improvisation for the following reasons: (1) an important early inspiration for the theory was as musical as it was literary (I refer to Ralph Ellison's writings on African-American music;² (2) the theory is attentive to the context and process of both literary creation and musical performance; and (3) its critical criteria are drawn from African-American expressive culture. Gates's theory, set out most fully in his book *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), rests on the concept of signification, not in its standard English sense of denotation or reference, but in its black-English sense of verbal figuration or repetition with a difference. (Gates spells his version of the term with uppercase S and parenthesized g to distinguish it from the standard English usage.)

Gates derives his theory from his observations of black-language use and from close reading of the black literary tradition. He bolsters it with data from two areas: first, the corpus of myths and texts dealing with Esu-Elegbara, the trickster figure in West Africa, and his New World descendant, the Signifying Monkey; and second, black music, especially jazz. The Signifying Monkey is the trickster hero of the stories about the Monkey who figuratively tells the Lion that the Elephant has insulted

him in some way. The Lion, reading literally, rushes off to avenge his honor, only to find out from the Elephant that he has been tricked. He then returns to trounce the Monkey but finds himself “signified” upon once again.

Gates cites numerous examples of Signifyin(g) in black expressive culture, both vernacular—as in the ritual exchange of insults known as “the dozens”—and literary, as in Ralph Ellison’s Signifyin(g) on the title of Richard Wright’s novel *Black Boy* with the title of his own, *Invisible Man*. Gates defines Signifyin(g) as a mode of language use that shifts the focus from the literal meaning of a statement to its figurative import, from the sense to the sound of the words themselves, or from the syntagmatic or linear aspect to the paradigmatic or associative aspect of language. At least since Roman Jakobson called attention to it, this has been recognized as a characteristic of much poetic language. One of the points Jakobson makes is that poetic language is distinguished from everyday language by its “focus on the message for its own sake” (1960, 356). What makes Gates’s Signifyin(g) theory unique is the particular combination of the subject matter, the often competitive nature of the process, and the cultural and historical rootedness of this type of language use for African-Americans.

Creativity in such a language environment is not based on a concept of complete originality (if such a thing is possible), but on repetition and variation, where meaning depends as much on the transformation of existing material as it does on originality. Accordingly, Gates favors a revision of the way African-American literature is regarded—to show not a series of imitations of European models, but a body of works which read and interpret each other, repeating common themes in a different way.

The revision that Gates puts forward for the study of African-American literature can be applied to the study of jazz in order to make that study more holistic. As Gates points out, “There are so many examples of signifying in jazz that one could write a formal history of its development on this basis alone” (1988, 63). The central questions are these: how does an individual deal with the influence of his or her precursors, and how are the transformations he or she makes of the precursor’s work meaningful for audiences?

Rather than anxiously concealing their influences, some jazz improvisors, like the writers discussed by Gates, make them obvious, and celebrate their debt to their precursors. Hence my title, “The Joy”—not the **Anxiety**—“of Influence.” By invoking and reworking music that is familiar to the audience, the jazz performer involves the audience in the process and makes it meaningful for those who recognize the sources. This also can be accomplished in ways that are more similar to the vernacular-speech kind of Signifyin(g) than the literary. Often a performer will take up an idea from a soloist or an accompanist and later transform it during the same performance.

The examination of these processes of transformation, or Signifyin(g), represents a more culturally specific mode of interpretation than does the application of analytical procedures developed for Western art music. Several musical examples of these transformative processes are offered below. (All musical examples were transcribed by the present author.)

ANALYSIS

Alto saxophonist Charlie Parker recorded “Buzzy,” a 12-bar blues in B-flat, for Savoy in 1947, along with Miles Davis, Bud Powell, Max Roach, and Tommy Potter. The “head,” or theme, is made up of three statements with slight changes, of the same riff, or motive (see Ex. 1.) This is not an unusual procedure: constructing a tune from a riff was common practice at the time, and Parker’s well-known composition “Now’s The Time” is another example.

It is the “Buzzy” theme that tenor-saxophonist Joe Henderson chooses to transform during his improvisations on two performances of a 12-bar blues in F. The first transformation is heard on his “If,” from the album *Unity*, recorded in 1965 with Woody Shaw, Larry Young, and Elvin Jones. At the end of Henderson’s third chorus, he ends a phrase with something that sounds like “Buzzy” (mm. 10-11), then builds the next chorus entirely on a statement of the “Buzzy” motive and transformations of it. The motive sounds a perfect-fourth lower here because Henderson uses the same fingering on the tenor saxophone as Parker used on the alto (see Ex. 2).³ One might argue that the appearance of Parker’s motive at the end of Henderson’s third chorus is a coincidence, but the fact that Henderson moves on to construct the entire next chorus on a restatement of the motive in its original form, followed by two transformations, shows it to be a conscious manipulation of Parker’s idea. Rather than avoiding the resemblance to Parker, which the final phrase of the third chorus suggested, Henderson emphasizes the connection.

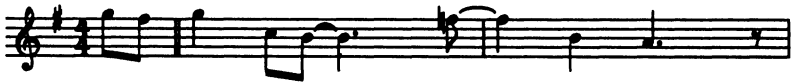
We hear much the same thing on another F-blues, Freddie Hubbard’s “Bird Like,” recorded by Henderson sixteen years later. Again, Henderson ends a chorus (his eighth) with the “Buzzy” motive (m. 11) and builds the next chorus on its restatement and transformation. And again, it seems probable that the use of the Parker motive in the next chorus is deliberate and meant to link Henderson’s improvisation with Parker in the listener’s mind (see Ex. 3.)

The title of this tune, “Bird Like” (with reference to Parker’s nickname “Bird”), might be a clue leading in Parker’s direction. The melody is reminiscent of Parker’s non-riff-based, developmental melodies, such as “Blues for Alice” and “Au Privave.” Whatever the intended meaning of the title, Henderson used the Parker motive in this way only on these two recorded performances.⁴ He has recorded dozens of blues tunes, most of them in F, B-flat, and C; while many include Parkerisms, none includes “Buzzy.”

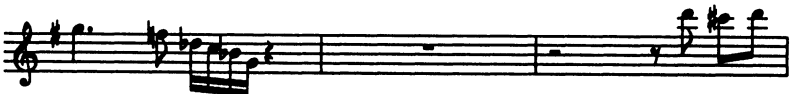
Example 1 Charlie Parker, "Buzzy" (Savoy SJL 2201), mm. 1-4. Key: E flat



Example 2 Joe Henderson, "If" (Blue Note BST 84221), choruses 3 & 4.
Key of this and subsequent musical examples: B flat



"Buzzy" quotation...



Example 3 Joe Henderson, "Bird Like" (Fantasy F-9626), choruses 8 & 9

The musical score is written in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It consists of seven staves of music. The first four staves contain the main melody, featuring various rhythmic patterns and triplets. The fifth staff is a rest, followed by a "Buzzy" quotation on the sixth staff. The seventh staff continues the melody with more complex rhythmic figures.

"Buzzy" quotation...

Two further examples of transformation can be heard in Henderson's second solo. In his third chorus, Henderson returns to the motive (mm. 7-10) on which trumpeter Freddie Hubbard had constructed his sixteenth, and final, chorus in the solo that precedes Henderson's, and plays it twice as fast, with a slight alteration in rhythm, in a different part of the chorus (see Ex. 4a and 4b.) Neither passage requires extraordinary facility on the instrument, but it is just this kind of repetition with difference—doubletime, at a different time in the musical form—that could be considered musical Signifyin(g).

Later in the same solo, Henderson bases his entire twelfth chorus on repetitions and transformations of a drum-fill played by Steve Houghton (m. 12) at the end of his eleventh chorus (see Ex. 5). This sort of interplay between soloist and accompanist is quite common, but researchers often omit it when transcribing solos and analyzing musical procedures.⁵

Before discussing these examples further, I should point out that they were chosen not because the performances from which they are taken are “masterpieces,” but because they are ordinary examples of mainstream jazz as it has been performed since the bebop era. Similar transformation could be found in a large proportion of recorded jazz from the last thirty years.

INTERPRETATION

What do these examples show about Joe Henderson's relationship to the jazz tradition? It seems apparent that, rather than anxiously concealing his stylistic debt to Charlie Parker, he emphasizes his knowledge of, and admiration for, Parker's work by beginning two blues choruses, recorded sixteen years apart, with a well-known Parker motive—which he not only repeats, but transforms so as to imprint his style on Parker's. There are other aspects of Henderson's style which recall Parker, but here he uses a motive which the knowledgeable but not necessarily specialist jazz listener would be likely to understand. The transformation is enough to make it clear that it is Joe Henderson who is playing, not Parker, but not so much that it entirely obscures the Parker motive. The traces of musical influence are left audible, just as the title of Ellison's *Invisible Man* contains an echo of the title of Wright's *Black Boy* for the knowledgeable reader.

Examples 4b and 5, which transform motives played during the same performance by other members of the group, show the sort of Signifyin(g) which might take place in a conversation. Henderson makes use of the Hubbard and Houghton motives not to refute them or to mock them, but to repeat them in altered versions in order to continue the dialogue.

In the context of a lecture and performance he gave, Henderson made several comments that seem to support the approach to improvisation that I have suggested. When asked what he listens for while playing, he replied:

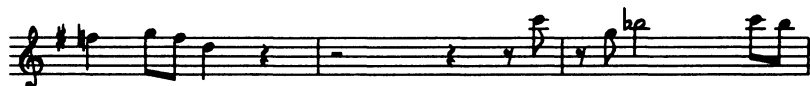
I'm plugged into things that I'm hearing the rhythm section do. I'm plugged into things I hear the piano player do, the bass player, the drummer, because it's kind of a communal, community-type of situation we're involved in. We're not playing for ourselves, we're playing together, with each other. You might hear the drummer do things that add to what I'm doing as a soloist (1985).

Example 4a Freddie Hubbard, "Bird Like" (Fantasy F-9626), chorus 16

The image displays a musical score for the chorus of "Bird Like" by Freddie Hubbard. The score is written on five staves of music, each beginning with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/4 time signature. The notation includes various rhythmic values such as eighth and sixteenth notes, rests, and slurs. The first staff contains the first measure, the second staff the second measure, the third staff the third measure, the fourth staff the fourth measure, and the fifth staff the fifth measure. The music concludes with a double bar line at the end of the fifth staff.

Example 5 Joe Henderson, "Bird Like" (Fantasy F-9626), choruses 11 and 12

(Houghton--drums)



How might an audience derive a meaningful experience from observing such a musical process? Their shared knowledge of the Parker source and shared delight in Henderson's transformation of it could serve to unite them as a group, while the musician's use of such tactics, like the ones in Examples 4 and 5, could alert performers and audience alike to the fact that the process of playing jazz is a group activity, not a forum for soloistic display.

This brief discussion is meant only to suggest the potential that exists for a more holistic analysis of jazz. Obviously this study only scratches the surface of a fully contextual analysis. There is much need for micro-analysis of jazz performances along the lines of "the ethnography of musical performance."⁶ It might be objected that these Henderson examples draw on fairly standard, mainstream performances, and therefore have little to say about the jazz avant-garde. I suggest, however, that it is just these traditional procedures that many avant-gardists (Ornette Coleman, for example) are reacting against (or taking off from—for example, in Coleman's "Congeniality" and "Bird Food"), and that use of this approach, describing conventional practices, could help analysts to interpret performances that otherwise are difficult to explain. By being attentive to these kinds of transformations, and to the cultural values and practices that underlie them, a more holistic jazz criticism could contribute greatly to our understanding of jazz, and perhaps of other improvised musics as well.

NOTES

1. The historical and analytical approaches most often applied to jazz are best exemplified by the following two positions: Schuller in 1958 held thematic structural unity to be his most important criterion for the evaluation of jazz improvisations. He believes the average improvisation to be "mostly a stringing together of unrelated ideas" ([1958] 1986, 87). Frank Tirro applies criteria derived from the study of Western art music compositions to notated jazz improvisations: "Musical development and the expansion of motivic material in the extended improvisation of a great jazz performer is comparable to that found in notated compositions of Western music. The best jazz solos are indeed constructive in nature and may be evaluated syntactically as are other teleological compositions of the notating Western composer" (1974, 286).

The scholars who have taken an ethnomusicological approach include the following: Charles Keil approaches jazz performance through its "engendered feeling" rather than its "embodied meaning," and suggests that "syntactic analysis is a necessary condition for understanding [African and African-derived music, especially jazz] but not sufficient in itself" (1966, 338). Lawrence Gushee discusses individual and social constraints on jazz improvisation (1981). Lewis Porter touches on several points discussed here, particularly the need for a black perspective in research on jazz and the importance of musical quotation in jazz

improvisation (1987). And Paul Berliner, who called the latter publication to my attention, discusses related issues in a paper, entitled "Musical Ownership: Editing Jazz Repertoires," which was presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology in 1987.

2. Gates cites an Ellison story, "Little Man at Chehaw Station," where Ellison's music teacher admonishes him always to play at his highest capacity, even in hick towns (like Chehaw Station), because a time would come in just such a place when someone in the audience would know the music thoroughly (Gates 1988, 64-65).

3. The physical aspect of jazz improvisation deserves further study. It may be that an improviser's choice to play using the physical motions he or she has learned to associate with certain musicians may be interpreted by listeners as a choice based on "purely musical" factors. In other words, influence in jazz might work as much through motor memory as it does through musical memory. This idea is not new to ethnomusicology; a statement of it can be found in Blacking (1973, 110-111):

So often, the expressive purpose of a piece of music is to be found through identification with the body movements that generated it, and these in turn may have their origins in culture as much as in the peculiarities of an individual. . . . Obviously the most deeply felt performance of any piece of music will be that which approaches most closely the feelings of its creator when he began to capture the force of his individual experience with musical form. Since this experience may often begin as a rhythmical stirring of the body, it may be possible for the performer to recapture the right feeling by finding the right movement.

4. This observation is based on my study of nineteen records Joe Henderson recorded as a leader from 1963 to 1987, in addition to two he recorded as a sideman.

5. Ingrid Monson of New York University discusses this topic in her paper, "It's Like Sayin' That You All Are Talkin' About The Same Thing': The Interactional Dimension of Jazz Music-Making," which was presented at the SEM annual meeting in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1989. This is the topic of her dissertation research.

6. On the ethnography of musical performance, see Herndon and McLeod (1980) and Béhague (1984).

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