BRINGING UP THE BODIES: COGNITIVE AGENCY IN JAZZ

by Bruce Johnson*

[This paper was presented at the first national conference of the Australasian Jazz and Improvisation Research Network, in Melbourne, June 204, 2017.]

What I want to argue for today is a revision of the dominant discourse framing creative agency in jazz. There are three reasons for this objective. First because that discourse tries to fit jazz into a box that was designed to contain something else, and it therefore deforms our understanding of the music. Second, that deformation functions to situate jazz as a second-rate category of music. Third, it also limits the potentiality of studies of improvisational forms to take a leading role in developments in the understanding of cognition.

DOMINANT DISCOURSE

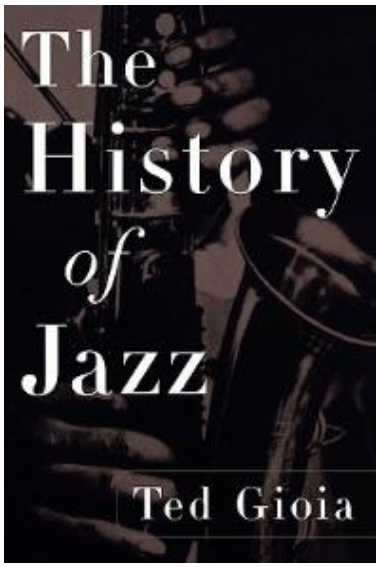
I begin, then, with what I have called the 'dominant discourse'. There is a well-established jazz narrative with which I am sure we are all familiar. Chronologically it begins in the early twentieth century, with emphasis on the African influence in New Orleans. The music then journeys to Chicago and New York and in this process it follows an aesthetic arc, from a primitive folk form ascending to a state of increasing artistic sophistication. This process is driven by a succession of overwhelmingly male US creative jazz geniuses. Their contributions are defined through 'great' recordings, which constitute a canon, and which can be understood through the analysis of written transcriptions.

The dominance of this model is being challenged by what is referred to as 'The New Jazz Studies'. The more traditional narrative still remains dominant, however, as in

---

**Bruce Johnson currently holds a number of honorary professorships in universities in Australia, Finland and the UK. He has long been active as a jazz musician, broadcaster, record producer and government advisor on arts policy. He co-founded the International Institute for Popular Culture in Finland, and his academic publications number several hundred, including author/editor of over a dozen books.*

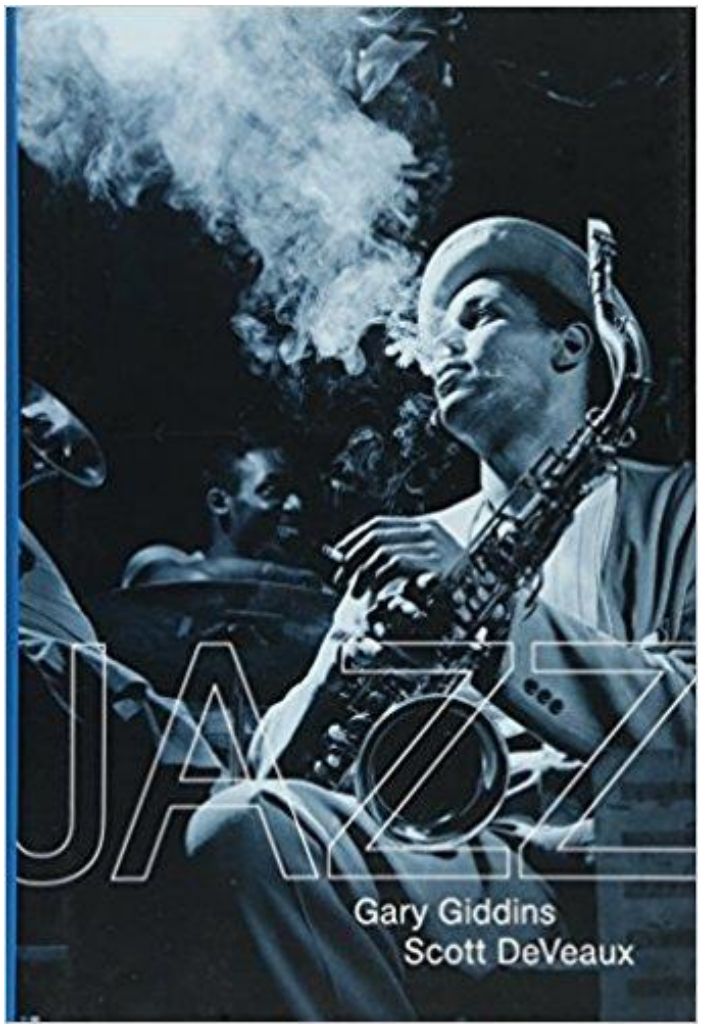
Ted Gioia…THE History of Jazz



for example, Ted Gioia's study, imperially entitled ***The*** *History of Jazz* (my emphasis), published by Oxford University Press, and which went to its second edition in 2011. Its conservative approach is unburdened by any of the problems raised by jazz scholarship over the last two decades. But even within the New Jazz Studies, the deeper implications of its challenges are still to be fully excavated. This is reflected in a supposedly state-of-the-art publication from 2009, by the prestige academic imprint Norton. It is called simply *Jazz* and follows the traditional model I have summarised, as exemplified in this sample of chapter titles for the early sections: The Roots of Jazz; New Orleans; New York in the 1920s; Louis Armstrong and the First Great Soloists. The soloists, with their 'classic' solos listed, are Armstrong, Bix Beiderbecke and Coleman Hawkins. The only surprise here is that this thoroughly conventional approach is co-authored by Scott De Veaux, one of the

leading names in the New Jazz Studies (De Veaux and Giddins 2009). This is what I mean when I say that the implications of the critical approach of the New Jazz Studies have drilled down only just so far.

Scott DeVeaux: the implications of the critical approach of the New Jazz Studies have drilled down only just so far…



This model is ultimately derived from a discourse based in the Enlightenment, which functioned to establish the superiority of Western consciousness through its High Art canon, in all the expressive forms. Chief among these was music, because it was held to be the most pure expression of the mind, unfettered by the material considerations of representing the physical world. In this model, it is the mind of the individual genius that is the prime creative agent. In the jazz example I have just cited, it is notable that the first pause for reflection in the story of jazz only comes when we encounter the individual genius – 'the first great soloists' - rather than the collective dynamic. Given how rarely jazz is a solo performance, we already should be becoming aware of a tension between this model and actual jazz practice.

JAZZ AND THE DISCOURSE

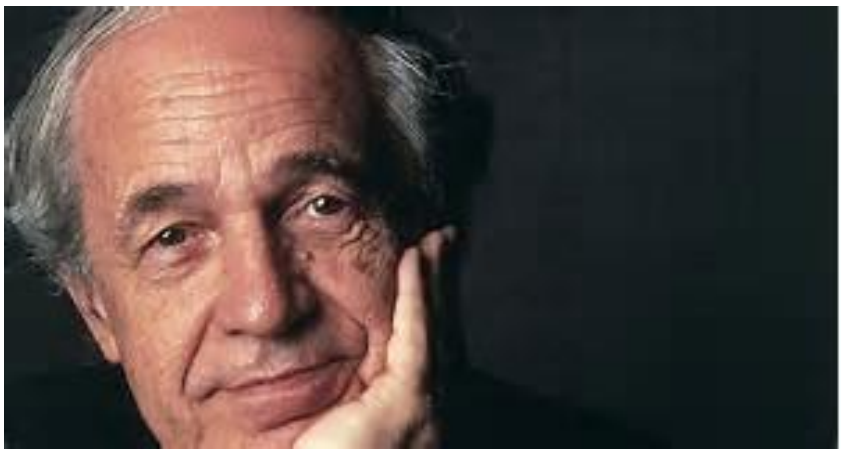
These tensions are prolific and profound. Consider the following fetishes of high art music. First, that 'individual genius' is primarily a composer rather than a performer. His status is much enhanced if he has had to battle physical conditions – ill-health, social, economic or political constraints, and of course dying early is a great career move. His work is thus a noble triumph of mind over hostile matter. The Cartesian model underpins this: the mind as the heroic organising principle exerting control over the body and the material world it is forced to engage with. At the same time, however, and unmasking the politics of this aesthetic, the artistic model is product rather than process-centred. That is, the art-work rather than the art process, is

Andre Pirro: why listen to music? To read it is enough…

central, enabling the commodification of genius. That is, art can be owned by those constructing the model: the book, the painting the statue, and in the case of music, the evidence of the creator's genius is the fixed text of a scored opus. The authentic MS is the central embodiment of the music, the reference point for the assessment of performances. This expression of the nobility of the creative mind is so holy, that for some, it is a kind of sacrilege that it should have to compromise itself through the vulgarity of material mediation; the eminent Sorbonne musicologist, Andre Pirro, declared 'I never go to concerts any more. Why listen to music? To read it is enough' (cited Johnson 2000: 181). Pirro's disdainful comment points us towards another pervasive aspect of this high-art model. That is, the dominance of visuality in the exchange of knowledge. From the scientific revolution, the hierarchy of the mind over the body also set up a hierarchy of the senses, in which the visual enjoys the highest epistemological authority. Francis Bacon, one of the founders of scientific inductive thinking, described his work in the early seventeenth century:

> *I … dwelling purely and constantly among the facts of nature, withdraw my intellect from them no further than may suffice to let the images and rays of natural objects meet in a point, as they do in the sense of vision. (Bacon 1960: 13-14).*

This controlling scopocentricity invades even auditory domains, as it is scored music that enjoys the highest status. Asked what constitutes 'good music', Pierre Boulez replied that if the score is 'not really well put together, well written, then I am already suspicious of something' (cited Johnson 2000: 169). Among all the senses, it is vision



Pierre Boulez: if the score is not really well put together… then I am already suspicious of something…

that is the primary medium of control. This again is consistent with an aesthetic based on the controlling agency by musical genius, through a score, the regimentation of performers by a conductor, and preferably in a concert hall quarantined from all unplanned noise.

The development of the jazz narrative has shown a steady gravitation towards this high art model. There are several significant moments in this process, and they represent the gradual separation of jazz from the body. For jazz writers from the 1940s, the arrival of bop had marked the ascent of jazz from folk form to art form, because bop represented a shift from a dance music to a music for static contemplation, a withdrawal from the commercialism of late swing, and the centralisation of the individual soloist engaged in increasing cerebral complexity. Surveying the bop scene from the standpoint of the late 1940s, influential writer Barry Ulanov placed the jazz musician thus: 'behind him is a history and a tradition. Before him is an art' (cited Johnson 2002: 99).

Barry Ulanov: behind the jazz musician is a history and a tradition. Before him is an art…

The shift was then given further impetus by the arrival of rock from the mid-1950s. This new youth music was regarded as formally primitive and aligned largely with working class youth who, in leaving school early represented a form of cultural incompetence, but earned the money that enabled them to become the chief market for rock. Jazz, especially in its more 'progressive' forms, thus provided a space in which a growing cohort of undergraduate youth were able to distance themselves

fastidiously from a community of aisle-jiving, delinquent plebeian youth. Jazz sought sanctuary from the exuberant corporeal vulgarity of rock in the rarefied temple of intellectual high art.[1]

This remains the dominant model for jazz, it underpins all the various infrastructures and protocols of jazz performance, ranging from the disdain accorded 'foot-tapping' jazz venues to the adoption of art-music discourses in band naming, venues, composition. During three terms I spent on the Music Board of NSW, assessing hundreds of funding applications each year, the pattern was overwhelming: the chances of receiving government funding for jazz projects were vastly increased the more they aligned themselves with a high art model.

PROBLEMS

Now I want to suggest that there are several problems with situating jazz as a satellite of art music. First – the rules were written for 'High Art'. Art music and art music discourse were, literally, made for each other. We are talking here about the idea of beauty, and I make a primitive analogy with beauty pageants: these emerged from a culturally specific conception of what constituted physical beauty. Women coming from outside that culture – let us say tribal African women, since that is apposite also to jazz - cannot hope to succeed in a western beauty contest unless they abandon their own culture's model of beauty, yet nor can they ever hope to compete on equal terms with the Euro-centric representatives of that model. Similarly, jazz cannot expect to be anything but a dim satellite within the High Art firmament. The history of jazz practices demonstrates their incompatibility with all the features of the aesthetic model of western High Art, that we summarised earlier.

Here is a quick summary:

In art music the score forms the basis of the canon, while for jazz, that canon is embodied in sound recordings. But the relationship between the score and the creator of art music is very different from the relationship between a sound recording and the jazz musician. The score is the product of composition; the recording is the product of performance. The score is a finished outcome to which the process of composing is subordinate; but for the jazz musician the primary site of creativity is

[1] These arguments are developed and documented at greater length in Johnson 2002: passim.

an extended body of performances, of which a recording is a momentary snapshot usually taken under artificial circumstances. The recorded work of the 'greats' like Louis Armstrong or Charlie Parker can give only the slightest glimpse of their creative evolution in performance. We know, for example, that Armstrong's 'classic' recorded solos were not the spectacular effusion of spontaneous brilliance, but the

A young Louis Armstrong: recorded work of his can give only the slightest glimpse of his creative evolution in performance…

outcome of a lengthy period of more or less repetitive workshopping in public performance (see Harker 2011: for example p. 50) . The 'canon' is a place to start, but hopelessly inadequate as a guide to a jazz musician's 'work'. This is all the more so when it is based on solos severed both from the other musicians against whom they are constructed, and the larger soundscape with which the performance is negotiating.

The experience of jazz is thus process-based, often referred to as composition in real-time. When we enjoy a jazz performance, it is the not a pre-completed product that provides the pleasure, but the unfolding process. The art music score is the dictatorial direction for an autonomous work by an individual compositional genius. Collective improvisation is by definition a group process with a high level of unpredictability, a 'sound of surprise' that would profoundly offend an audience for a symphony. The art music score is specifically intended to separate music from noise, that is, from the physical soundscape of ordinary life. Collective improvisation in social spaces is constantly negotiating with a soundscape that might include anything

from traffic passing a pub, the clink of glassware and cutlery, conversation and audience reactions including dancing and clapping. It responds to, rather than withdraws from social praxis.

Art music is ocularcentric in the sense that the performance is based on a score that is read. Collective improvisation is audio-centric; it is the agile ear that has primacy in the unfolding musical event. The myth of the artistic genius as the single cognitive agency has relatively little to do with the collective improvisation model that historically predominates in jazz. 'Central to the expressive power of a jazz performance is a set of practices that are described by art-music discourse as musical incompetence or transgressiveness' (Johnson 2002: 105).

This model is based on the fetishisation of the single creative intelligence to which everything else is subordinated as a mere 'instrument' of the mind. But in jazz, the body has a very high level of agency. I believe that everyone in this room is aware of the creative role that is played by the interaction between the body and the

Joachim Kühn: one day I sat down at the piano and just let my hands go without letting my head get in the way. And then I noticed that lines of my own were coming out…PHOTO CREDIT PETER SINCLAIR

instrument in improvisation. In fully scored music, the eye sends signals to the brain which then autocratically directs the body. In improvisation, that relationship is much more complex, compounded by physical interactions with other musicians,

audiences and the performance space itself. An improvised performance, in any medium, is shaped as much by the corporeal and material conditions as by what we think of as the mind. In improvisation it is possible to think too much. When Joachim Kühn realised that he was copying all his favourite US pianists, he 'also realized that this wasn't me. One day I sat down at the piano and just let my hands go without letting my head get in the way. And then I noticed that lines of my own were coming out. That was the beginning' (Benedict 2006: 1.01.02 to 1.01.22).

The early jazz historian Hugues Panassié encouraged attendees at his record sessions to experience jazz 'somatically rather than intellectually' (Perchard 2015: 30). He used gestural theatre which he invited his audience to mimic. This recognition of the role of the body and its physical interactions with the environment in musical improvisation is profoundly at odds with the Cartesian model of consciousness and agency. It is this essential corporeality that has so often led to a disdain for popular musics.

Hugues Panassié: he encouraged attendees at his record sessions to experience jazz 'somatically rather than intellectually'…

But I want to finish by suggesting that this collapse of the mind/body hierarchy actually restores a more meaningful model of creative agency.

I think I speak for everyone here when I recall how often I have encountered a disdainful scepticism about our research field. Jazz studies continues to be regarded as a trivial diversion among the more heavyweight music studies. We have probably responded with arguments for the cultural importance of the music.

But my conclusion proposes that the significance of our field goes well beyond that compass, and that what carries it there is precisely the way it violates the criteria of creative agency that have underpinned the High Art model. By that model, the centre of cognitive agency is what we think of as the individual mind. I think, therefore I am.

This insight is now under radical revision, retrieving an understanding of human consciousness that has been forgotten in the scientific paradigm. It has survived in such phrases as 'learning by heart', which is a residue of the pre-scientific belief that the heart is an organ of cognition. Similarly the phrase 'muscular memory' recognises the somatic component in identity formation and performance. Emerging theories of cognition are reconfiguring our understanding of the relationship between mind and body, arguing that cognition is not confined to the brain pan, but is in fact conducted through extended cognitive systems that require the participation of the body, and of the objects and other people with whom it engages. Gesture, for example, is not the expression of thought, but the means by which it takes place, as in for example, counting on our fingers. Studies of childhood learning have established that it is improved by the exchange of physical gestures (see for example Menary 2010: 13, 20; see further Johnson 2017: passim).

Now here is my conclusion: In the literature of extended cognitive systems, the overwhelming majority of experiments seeking to test these hypotheses involve the examination of visual stimuli. This bias itself locates these experiments within precisely the western paradigm that they are trying to challenge. My argument is that these experiments would be far more instructive if conducted in terms of auditory models. It is through sounding and listening that the visually based conceptual order is most effectively challenged.

Judith Becker has written that the study of 'music and emotion … dissolves intractable dichotomies concerning nature versus culture, and scientific universalism versus cultural particularism' (Becker 2001: 154). For physiological, neurological and phenomenological reasons, sonic experience destabilises a whole array of conceptual binaries like 'subjective/objective', 'self/other', 'culture/nature' and of course 'mind/body'. With distinctive force, auditory experience challenges the border between the material and the cognitive. A recent study of singing among Icelandic

Judith Becker: the study of music and emotion … dissolves intractable dichotomies…

men reinforced a general understanding that voice and gesture do not simply reflect individual identity, but are actually means by which it is formed (Faulkner 2013: 41, 42). The potential of deploying sonic practices in the exploration of emerging models of cognition has been demonstrated recently in a study of the way in which Psalm singing functioned to form community identity and belief systems in the early modern reformed English church (Tribble and Keene 2011, see especially pp. 94-105). This study, the most impressive analysis of the social function of music that I have read for decades, comes, it should be noted, from cognitive theory.

Emerging theories of extended mind and gestural cognition are re-establishing the linkages between thought, the body and the material world that had been severed by Cartesian dualism. The Cartesian paradigm and its aesthetic corollaries have outlived their usefulness. Nowhere is this more fully evident than in what has historically and culturally been the most widespread form of music making: collective improvisation. If we are looking for an Extended Cognitive System to study, we could not do better than to start with collective musical improvisation. We are not pursuing some minority enthusiasm. We are working with a form of social practice that has the greatest possible potential for exploring the dynamics of these re-emerging models of creative agency.

Sources

Bacon, Francis. 1960. *The New Organon and Related Writings*, ed. Fulton H. Anderson. USA: Bobbs-Merrill.

Becker, Judith. 2002 'Anthropological Perspectives on Music and Emotion', in J.A. Sloboda and P. N. Juslin (eds), *Music and Emotion: Theory and Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. 135 – 160.

Benedikt, Julian (dir.). 2006. *Play Your Own Thing: A story of Jazz in Europe*. DVD, Euroarts, 2055748.

De Veaux, Scott, and Gary Giddins. 2009. *Jazz*. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company.

Faulkner, Robert. 2013. *Icelandic Men and Me: Sagas of singing, self, and everyday life*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate.

Gioia, Ted. 2011 (2nd edn.). *The History of Jazz*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Harker, Brian. 2011. *Louis Armstrong's Hot Five and Hot Seven Recordings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Johnson, Bruce. 2000. *The Inaudible Music: Jazz, gender and Australian modernity*. Sydney: The Currency Press.

_____ . 2002. 'Jazz as Cultural Practice' in Mervyn Cooke and David Horn (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Jazz*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 96-113.

_____ , 2017. 'Sound Studies Today: Where Are We Going?', in Joy Damousi and Paula Hamilton (eds), *A Cultural History of Sound, Memory and the Senses*. New York and London: Routledge, pp. 7-22.

Menary, R. 2010 Introduction. In R. Menary (ed.), *The Extended Mind*. Cambridge Mass, London: Bradford/MIT Press. Pp.1-26.

Perchard, Tom. 2015. *After Django: Making Jazz in Postwar France*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Tribble, Evelyn B. and Nicholas Keene. 2011. *Cognitive Ecologies and the History of Remembering: Religion, Education and Memory in Early Modern England*. Basingstoke UK: Palgrave Macmillan