

The Aesthetics of Art as Improvised Performance: An Inquiry into the Nature of the Improvised Jazz Solo

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An issue today in jazz is the nature of the improvised solo, and how improvisations are judged according to their stylistic and historical contexts. It is beyond the scope of this essay to undertake a complete survey of the many issues that are relevant to the aesthetics of jazz and jazz improvisation (and admittedly, there is much work to be done in this area). Nevertheless, it is the intention of this paper to attend to certain terms and issues that will, hopefully, help to establish a useful context for jazz and jazz criticism. These involve, principally, two issues: 1) the idea of jazz as a performance/performer oriented process (and, accordingly, the complete responsibility of the improviser for the quality of the music), and 2) the critical evaluation of improvisation (as performance) in terms of its technical and artistic elements from this performer oriented perspective.

The question was raised by Ted Gioia in his book *The Imperfect Art*: "How does one judge performance art which emphasizes the performance more than the art?"¹ One immediate response might be that we judge the performance, and the performer indirectly through the performance. The performance *is* the art. How do we judge performances? We might do so by looking at them in light of the skill and artistic sensibilities that the artist demonstrates within his performance. However, before we begin to address these issues, it is necessary to look at improvisation and the distinction between art forms that exist as objects and art forms that exist as processes.

Jazz improvisation is essentially an art that is embodied within the activity that produces it, more than an art form which continues to exist as an art object well after its creation. Nevertheless, the invention of Edison's phonograph in 1877 and the evolution of recording to its present state allow improvised performances to exist as art objects in the form of recorded performances. Improvisations can, and often are, dis-

cussed as nouns as opposed to verbs. Accordingly, improvised performances are recognized, notated, documented, critiqued, studied, and analyzed without the student being present to the countless performances represented within the wide ranging output available in recorded form.

Yet, when we speak of the "art" of jazz improvisation, we are referring essentially to the activity within which the art "form" is embodied more so than any resulting reproductions. We would hardly characterize a print of a van Gogh as "the work," although it provides a fair and adequate representation of the work for us. Likewise, although a recording may embody and represent an improvised performance, most would agree that as an activity, the improvisation has ceased to exist. Accordingly, one might understand improvisation essentially as a process (a verb), a "transient" art, as opposed to a product or art object (a noun) which we might describe as a "permanent" art form.

While a recorded improvised performance (as a noun) and the performance itself (as a verb) may have what Wittgenstein referred to as an "internal similarity," the jazz critic must be directed first and foremost toward the idea of jazz improvisation *as a performer oriented art/process* (as a verb). The critic may use recordings to assist him in his procedure, but always with the realization that the real-time skill and artistry of the performer are the essential means by which the art is realized and judged. The "work" of a jazz artist is inseparable from the event that leads to its realization.

Unlike the creation of a score that embodies a composed work, the work of jazz is realized in the doing; it is an ephemeral, real-time art form. Unlike traditionally notated compositional forms, improvisation is directly connected to and is entirely dependent upon the performing artist; a score, on the other hand, is dependent on a performer only for its exemplification. According to Nelson Goodman, "...the constitu-

tive properties demanded of a performance...are those prescribed in the score...."² "A performance of a musical work...belongs to..."³ and "...complies with...[and]...also exemplifies the work or score."⁴

Jazz improvisation is, first and foremost, an activity and we come to appreciate the activity that leads to the creation of the art as opposed to an art object. Gioia writes:

When viewed as an object of contemplation, jazz may well fail even the most basic tests of aesthetic success. Created spontaneously as improvised art, jazz lacks the more refined beauty of, for example, sculpture or architecture. Yet when judged as an activity, jazz need make no apologies: the vitality and intensity of the jazz performance can become almost hypnotic, captivating both musician and audience in a fleeting and unique performance.⁵

Gioia explains that jazz, as an object, fails the basic tests of aesthetic success; jazz improvisation as a process completely fails as an object, period. However, it is not clear whether or not he is defining the vitality, intensity and the resulting hypnotic effect produced in the jazz performance as aesthetic elements, although the context does suggest that he is. In any event, he is attempting to delineate a different or less traditional area of aesthetic inquiry—a realm of aesthetic judgment that acknowledges and applies to the particular form of spontaneously creative activity that jazz is. Once we can understand the nature of improvisation as an activity, we have established a context within which we may begin to examine the art from an aesthetic perspective. Jazz improvisation is principally a "doing." And as Frederick Turner writes, "...any 'doing' which is not routine or repetition is already within the artistic sphere and is governed by aesthetic criteria."⁶

Turner, furthermore, observes: "It should already be clear that there is a close relationship between performative utterance and performance...in the oral tradition...."⁷ As jazz is principally embodied within and transmitted through an oral tradition, Turner's idea is worthy of a closer look.

J. L. Austin makes the distinction between language that acts and language that describes in

his book *How To Do Things With Words*.⁸ The "performative utterance" is, essentially, a verbal act which simultaneously and coincidentally realizes the act to which the term being used refers. For example, if I say "I apologize for my behavior yesterday," the statement is itself the act of apologizing. Nevertheless, as language oriented beings we are mainly used to using language to describe and refer to activities, events, places, and things. Language can describe these activities, events, places, and things regardless of when they exist or are taking place—they may have already happened or existed; they may exist or be happening simultaneously somewhere else; or they may exist or take place at some future time or place. Language and that to which it refers always maintain a separateness of domain in much the same way that a menu is not a meal, and a map is not the territory it represents. The literature and language of the musical score are not unlike language in the non-performative sense—a symbolic "language" that defines in an abstract way something that becomes realized only later in performance.

Jazz improvisation, however, is performative in the sense that the creation of each musical idea occurs simultaneously with its realization during the performance. The improvised musical phrase has a close affinity in concept to the performative utterance, as its statement and its essential nature are one in the same. In language, these utterances are initiated by the performer spontaneously. The vocabulary of the language of the performative utterance exists prior to the utterance itself (as does the "vocabulary" of jazz, in the form of scales, chords, forms, and rhythms, before the improvised musical statement). However, the act itself arises spontaneously from the speaker or performer, and comes from nothing before it that prescribes the action. It implies or refers to nothing outside of itself.

Unlike the performative utterance, an improvised jazz performance is not also dependent (for its validity) on other extenuating circumstances that apply to the musical statements that are made, or that the performer or other persons should also perform certain other actions. Nevertheless, there is an intrinsic connection between these two domains of human action.

Bill Evans, concerning the "realtime" nature of jazz improvisation, makes a comparison to another art in which the artists work is produced spontaneously:

There is a Japanese visual art in which the artist is forced to be spontaneous. He must paint on a thin stretched parchment with a special brush and black water paint in such a way that an unnatural or interrupted stroke will destroy the line or break through the parchment. Erasures or changes are impossible. These artists must practice a particular discipline, that of allowing the idea to express itself in communication with their hands in such a direct way that deliberation cannot interfere. The resulting pictures lack the complex composition and textures of ordinary painting, but it is said that those who see well find something captured that escapes explanation. This conviction that direct deed is the most meaningful reflection, I believe, has prompted the evolution of the extremely severe and unique disciplines of the jazz or improvising musician.⁹

In improvisation, the responsibility of the music falls entirely on the shoulders of the performer. Although the music has a direct and inseparable connection to the performer, it would be difficult to judge the music without including the musician in the judgment. It is interesting to note that Evans compares the spontaneous art that he is speaking of to ordinary painting, as Gioia makes a similar comparison in his statement:

Our interest in jazz, it would seem, is less a matter of our interest in the perfection of the music, and more a result of our interest in the expressiveness of the musician...These creations are judged accordingly: not by comparison with what some Platonic ideal of perfection but by comparison with what other musicians can do under similar conditions. Our interest lies primarily in the artist and only secondarily in the art. The music is his music, the expression is his expression, and the success is his success just as the failure is his failure.¹⁰

Gioia raises the issue of perfection. As a creative process, the art of performance allows no second chances. The level of refinement that a composer can bring to a score or an artist to the canvas is not possible in the spontaneous domain of jazz improvisation. As art is often thought of as the quintessence of human accomplishment, and musical art the most lofty and sublime of the art forms, jazz is often criticized for its imperfection and its occasional rawness. Art has always been thought of as rising above the mundane, and any art that allows its human element to remain—with its uniquely human imperfections—is bound to be occasionally viewed with derision. This is so, particularly when such an art is viewed by those with elitist mentalities.

Jazz improvisation involves the spontaneous creation and rendering of melodic phrases in a manner which interacts with the harmonic and rhythmic framework of the composition (as well as the established melody, though it is not present during the improvisation), the other performers—particularly what they play, and the circumstances of the moment that surround the performance. Improvisers are often judged regarding a particular context—the mood of the moment, and the degree to which they interact with other players.

An improvised solo is not unlike a spontaneous monologue (perhaps the term dialogue is more appropriate, as other musicians usually accompany the improviser). The performer is guided by his knowledge and experience of the music and the "vocabulary" he has developed in practice to reflect on the musical context offered by other performers, and the circumstances and ambiance of the environment. In this respect, we are talking not so much about a work, but the artist at work. Critical standards must be directed toward an understanding of jazz as an event—a process uniquely and directly governed in "real time" by the artist *ad libitum*.

Perhaps a comparison between jazz and figure skating may prove useful. Skill is one essential component required by great figure skaters. A specialized skill, systematically applied, and directed toward a particular practical purpose, is often referred to as a technique. The artist's overall use of a wide range of different techniques is known as his or her "technique." A skater's performance is judged, in part, for the

technical ability of the skater as it is represented in the performance. Nevertheless, as R. G. Collingwood tells us, "The technical skill which...[the artist] acquires does not by itself make him an artist; for a technician is made, but an artist is born."¹¹ Accordingly, a skater's performance is also judged for its artistic qualities, in a second program that attempts to represent and is judged according to the skater's level of artistic ability.

We would never judge the figures left on the ice by an artistic and technically skilled figure skater as the "work" of the skater, much less a work of art. That is not to say that such figures could not be judged for their aesthetic qualities. Indeed, in previous Olympic figure skating competitions the skater was judged according to his or her ability to produce the most perfect figures on the ice. Nevertheless, the skater's work is judged in the domain of its realtime performance as it occurs by observing what is being done as it is done; not what remains behind.

Given our understanding of jazz improvisation as a "realtime" phenomenon, and the recognition of the subjective nature of improvised conduct, how, specifically, might jazz artists be evaluated? Perhaps the figure skating model may serve as an appropriate paradigm for jazz criticism. Although a skater's program is, for the most part, pre-planned (as is the basic structure underneath a jazz improviser's performance), the gesture, nuance, detail, and movement embodied in the performance occur in the doing. The imperfections of any falling, slipping, or bobbling are figured into the evaluation, but such imperfections do not make the art of figure skating any less of an art.

Technical ability figures directly into the aesthetic quality of any performance, as it is directly and integrally bound to the expression of an artistic idea. Kenny Barron observes: "The more your level of hearing gets better, the more you can hear complicated kinds of ideas, and assuming that you are technically proficient enough, you can execute those ideas."¹² Accordingly, jazz artists, it would seem, should be evaluated at the technical, as well as the artistic level. These are simply two perspectives of a particular performance.

In jazz performance, the *technical* dimension could be seen as including:

- ◆ *Fluidity*—the proper orientation of improvised rhythms to the rhythmic pulse, the ability to move forward in an unencumbered manner toward a melodic, rhythmic, or motivic goal or point of resolution
- ◆ *Basic technical competence*—the ability of the improviser to negotiate the instrument in a manner demanded by the musical context including the avoidance of harmonic, rhythmic, and melodic disorientation
- ◆ *Intonation*—in the non-artistic use of intonation: playing in tune
- ◆ *Aural skill*—the ability to hear and reproduce pitch and rhythm, and melodic phrases on the improviser's instrument
- ◆ *An understanding of chord quality and function*
- ◆ *A knowledge of materials*—repertoire, chords and chord spellings, progressions, and substitutions

The *artistic* dimension would include the improviser's ability to:

- ◆ Generate *rhythmic development and interest*
- ◆ *Play rhythmically*—including the ability to swing with conviction in a manner appropriate to the style and circumstances of the performance, and the use of syncopation and cross-rhythms in a way which enhances the rhythmic fabric of the music; the
- ◆ Relate *the improvised melody to the harmonic and rhythmic context* of the composition and the accompaniment—including the idiomatic and expressive use of melodic dissonance and its resolution
- ◆ *Develop or investigate a motive or melodic phrase*—the ability to "tell a story" or plan a solo so that it has a direction, a sense of development, or an evolutionary component (such as an introduction, a climax, and a denouement)
- ◆ *Create unity and variety*—developing enough similarity or relatedness between the musical ideas to make the improvisation coherent, but also enough variety to maintain the listener's interest
- ◆ *Play with taste*—playing in a manner appropriate to the mood and emotional quality

of the musical context, the appropriate and idiomatic use of accent, dynamics, range, space, and other expressive techniques

- ◆ *Interact*—quoting, imitating, and reworking phrases played by another improviser in the group context
- ◆ *Be original*—playing with a personal style, and a unique sound and approach to improvisation

The instrument the performer plays would, also have a direct bearing on the evaluation of the performance. A line played by a *saxophonist* that is musically appropriate and aesthetically acceptable within a particular musical context, may be ineffective if played the same way by a *pianist* in the same context.

Any element of performance that defines a uniquely human element is an appropriate and useful aesthetic criterion. Gesture, articulation, nuance, the cycles of breathing, heartbeat, as well as other movement such as walking are essentially revealed in the jazz performance. Improvisation is, it would seem, more connected to the more primal aspects of human nature than most other art forms as it is almost entirely spontaneous. This aspect of improvisation, as we have seen, is sometimes used as a basis for criticizing it as an art form. Nevertheless, what is more important in art than the expression of what is uniquely human regardless of any imperfections?

There is, moreover, one additional thing to keep in mind regarding any approach to jazz that involves criticism: not all jazz is improvised. There are many aspects of jazz that exist and remain as permanent forms and could indeed be viewed as art objects. The jazz composition and the jazz arrangement are the “objects” of jazz to which the more traditional standards of criticism can be applied. Indeed, even recordings are seen as the “works” of the artist although, in the truest sense, they only embody the performance of the artist. However, with the understanding that recording itself is an art form, recordings are being made more today from a perspective that emphasizes the *art of recording*, as opposed to viewing the recording mainly as a documentary tool that allows the artist’s performance to endure.

In closing, it need only be said that *processes* reveal the aesthetic dimension of human nature as much as (if not more than) the *products* that result from these processes. As Gioia reminds us, “...jazz...needs to justify itself against the criticism that its finished products cannot stand alone, separated from the forces that created them, as great works of art.”¹³

Notes

1. Ted Gioia, *The Imperfect Art: Reflections on Jazz and Modern Culture*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 104.
2. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach To A theory of Symbols*, 2d Ed., (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1976), 117.
3. *Ibid.*, 236.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Gioia, *The Imperfect Art*, 98.
6. Frederick Turner, *Natural Classicism* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 257.
7. *Ibid.*, 40.
8. J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962).
9. Bill Evans, from the album notes to Miles Davis, *Kind of Blue* (Columbia CK 52861).
10. Gioia, *The Imperfect Art*, 101.
11. R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), 15-41, 109-11, 121-22, quoted in Philip Alperson, Ed., *The philosophy of the Visual Arts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 385.
12. Kenny Barron, interviewed by Paul F. Berliner, in *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*, Philip V. Bohlman and Bruno Nettl eds. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 250.
13. Gioia, *The Imperfect Art*, 105.