

Review

The creative process in the context of jazz jam sessions

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This paper discusses jazz musicians' creative processes in the context of jam sessions from an ethnomusicological perspective. It is the result of research carried out with professional jazz musicians working and living primarily in New York City. As an important context for sharing musical information, jam sessions will be analyzed as a framework for the demonstration of ideas, musical skills and approaches to jazz improvisation. Trying to fill the gap in jazz studies that concentrate on the analysis of harmonic progressions and specific melodic patterns, this discussion around the jazz musicians' creative processes in jam sessions is informed by the social and cultural settings that contribute to configuring jazz performance. The characterization of creative processes in jam sessions is made according to the structural organization of a "standard tune" performance, namely, the selection of repertoire and musicians, and the performance of an introduction, melody exposition, "solos", "trades", "head-out", and ending. The main aspects that influence the musicians' creative process in the context of these events analyzed in this paper are: musical competence, different types of interaction between participants and audiences, and the characteristics of performance space. These aspects are closely related to aesthetic principles that are common to most jazz musicians, and that are rooted in the African-American cultural tradition.

Key words: Jazz, improvisation, jam session, New York.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper jam sessions will be analyzed as a framework for the demonstration of ideas, musical skills and approaches to jazz improvisation. Some of these issues emerged during my PhD research that is, from an ethnomusicological perspective, the role of jam sessions in Manhattan as a privileged context for learning the performative styles of jazz, the development of the creative process, the construction of professional networks and the establishment of the status of musicians (Pinheiro, 2008).

As a researcher, I became aware that jam sessions, despite their importance in the historic and current configuration of the jazz universe, have not yet been studied in detail. Most of the jazz researchers have paid special attention to the analysis of different jazz styles and the biographies and interpretative styles of renowned musicians, neglecting the study of the creative process, the interaction, the musical meaning, and the socialization processes of musicians, which are key factors for a full comprehension of the jam session. Consequently, it is not surprising that the timid interest that jam sessions have raised in academia has only had some visibility in the field of sociology, especially through the work of

Cameron (1954), Nelson (1995) and Peterson (2000). Trying to fill the gap in jazz studies that concentrate on the analysis of harmonic progressions and specific melodic patterns, this discussion around the jazz musicians' creative processes in jam sessions is informed by the social and cultural settings that contribute to configuring jazz performance.

Musical ethnography is the main methodological approach adopted in this study (Béhague, 1984; Seeger, 1997; Jackson, 2002). Analyzing musical performance as a process, allowed me to focus on the places, time, people involved and their expectations, and to study interaction between musicians and audiences, trying to understand the rules and codes that are implied in these events (Jihad, 1991, 2000; Qureshi, 1987). Between 2003 and 2005, several ethnographic interviews were conducted in Portugal and the U.S. with renowned jazz musicians and other participants in jam sessions.

I define jam session as a performance event in which any jazz musician can participate. It usually takes place weekly in jazz clubs after 9.30 pm, and it might last for several hours, until dawn. Using a "core" repertoire as a starting point for improvisation, musicians develop

musical “dialogue” rooted in aesthetic principles that govern jazz performance (Pinheiro, 2008: 8).

Jam sessions are structured events, in which social and musical interaction between musicians and audiences is central. The performance groups are configured according to the number of participants, their instruments, and the musicians’ order of arrival. Often, they do not even know each other. There is no previously announced program (*ibid.*).

The act of participating in jam sessions is frequently denominated by jazz musicians as “jamming” or “jammin’”. This term, according to Keith Sawyer, is also used in other forms of expression, for example in theater, and involves informal activity that results in group creation of an artistic product based on improvisation (Sawyer, 2003).

THE CREATIVE PROCESS IN JAM SESSIONS

Selection of repertoire

The musicians’ creative process in jam sessions is influenced by the selection of repertoire, not only due to its role as the basic structure for collective improvisation, but also because of the importance of this collection of songs in the establishment of relations between musicians in the course of performance.

The repertoire is usually selected in a conversation between musicians that takes place on stage prior to the performance, reflecting a relationship of respect. This might have a positive influence in the improvisational process, namely in terms of producing trust between participants, as well as generating creative musical interaction.

Sometimes, the selection of repertoire can give rise to competition between musicians, especially when a person starts performing the melody of a particular song without previous agreement. According to the musicians I interviewed, this behavior makes the jam session environment hostile for its participants, affecting their interaction. Other musicians like trumpet player Payton (2003) suggest that this occurrence is a challenge and an important learning experience, especially in terms of the development of aural skills.

Melody exposition

The decision on who will play the melody of a song is taken most of the times verbally, through an agreement between participants. The whole process of melody exposition is related to important creative aspects. This fact contests the simplistic idea that jazz musicians only improvise in the course of their solos. There are multiple ways of interpreting the melody of a song, namely on the level of pitch, attack and release, timber, ornamentation, and other creative stylistic elements. It is also important to note the active role of other band members (like for

example rhythm section) in the creative process of a jazz performance (Monson, 1996), especially in terms of producing a musical environment that shapes directly melody exposition. These musicians also improvise their accompaniment.

Several musicians can interpret the melody of the same song. This depends on the form of the tune and the instrumentation of a band. For example, the melody of an AABA form song, may be played by a trumpeter in the A sections, and by a tenor saxophone in the B section. This can occur with or without a previous verbal agreement.

Solos

The solo section takes place after the melody exposition, and is one of the most important moments of the performance. Accompanied by the rhythm section, each participant has the chance to demonstrate clearly his or her improvisational skills.

The musician who played the song melody usually takes the first solo. His solo is constructed over the harmonic and formal structure of the selected song. The structural entity of a solo is the “chorus”. It represents the duration and nature of the harmonic structure that lies underneath the song melody, and it repeats cyclically. Each solo will last a certain number of “choruses”, depending on the soloist’s choice, or any other performance constraints.

In the course of his solo, a musician should be able to define melodically the harmony, at the same time that he interacts with the other musicians that are playing. He must be capable of responding to any rhythmic, harmonic and melodic suggestions made by his fellow stage mates.

Trades

After the solos section and before the restatement of the melody, there is usually an optional “trades” section. It consists of trading small solos of equal length between musicians, at the same time the harmonic and formal structure is followed. These small improvisations can last from a bar to a whole “chorus”.

In a “trades” section, the first soloist improvises over a certain number of bars, establishing the length for the following improvisations. If he or she improvises over four bars (in the specific case the “trades” are named “fours”), every other musician will do the same. In great deal of the cases, the improvised sections are alternated between each soloist and the drummer. For example, in a quartet with a saxophone, piano, double bass and drums, the “trades” order will be: saxophone, drums, piano, drums, double bass, drums, saxophone, drums, and so on.

Playing “trades” tests song structural knowledge of the musicians, demanding extreme concentration, especially during drum sections. During these segments, we can

only hear the drums improvising.

Introductions

In the beginning of a song performance, before the melody exposition, it is frequent to use a little introductory section. This section is usually made of certain harmonic patterns and typical melodic phrases, known by jazz musicians. The introductions may be decided verbally, but are usually musically negotiated. This negotiation is based on musicians' aural skills and their knowledge of jazz tradition.

Introductions can also be made of the melody and the harmony of a certain section of the song. For example, it is usual to use the last A section of a certain song as an introduction. In most jam sessions where I made ethnographic field research, introductions were made of the typical III, VI, II, V harmonic progression in several variants, or the V chord of the song key.

Other harmonic solutions are possible, especially the ones played in famous jazz recordings.

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE CREATIVE PROCESS

The creative process of jazz musicians in jam sessions is strongly influenced by different factors such as: physical space, kinds of communication between participants, and musicians' musical skills.

Physical space

The venues where I observed jam sessions are in different Manhattan neighborhoods. Each of them has a particular history, environment and is visited by different kinds of audiences and musicians. Due to discrepancies in the space characteristics of these venues, each jam session is a distinct event not only in terms of its organization, but also in terms of the improvisational approaches of the musicians and the way they relate themselves musically. For example, in clubs located in Harlem (St. Nick's pub and Lennox Lounge), the creative process involves a greater degree of interaction between musicians and the audience (Pinheiro, 2008).

Double bass player Scott Colley defends that the acoustic quality of the performance space is also crucial for the improvisational process of the musicians in a jam session. The sound of his instrument varies from one club to another, even with the same equalization and amplification system. This fact makes certain improvisational choices work in certain environments but not in others.

Interaction between musicians

The creative process, routed in communication between

participants, is closely related to decisions concerning rhythmic, harmonic and organizational aspects. In the course of a solo performance, musicians, besides improvising over the harmonic structure of a particular song, share musical suggestions. Some of them refer interaction as a vital factor in jazz performance, due to the importance of negotiation of musical ideas. As ethnomusicologists Ingrid Monson and Paul Berliner suggest, jazz musicians often use the metaphor of "conversation" to explain interaction between musicians (Monson, 1996, Berliner 1994). Scott (2003) refers to "conversation" to stress the importance of interaction in the course of jazz collective improvisation.

"I know immediately when some of the men I'm playing is listening to me, and that's the only musicians... I'm probably more clear on it that I was at the when I moved to New York and I was just... I thought that was really something that I was suppose to do, stand back there and play time for people who weren't listening to me, but now I kind of... to me music is a language so the fundamental... the fundamental thing that I look for in all music is communication, conversation. So it doesn't matter if the music is written or improvised. That process of hearing each other and reacting to each other is fundamental, so anytime that's lost I'm not interested in the project. It's kind of like I wanna have a dialog whether... even if I'm playing something that's very simple or if it's a groove oriented project of some kind of thing where is... I do not mind playing something simple as a back drop or something else, but I wanna know that there's a conversation. So when I was playing in jam sessions I could recognize that immediately, if a horn player was improvising over something I was playing. I can tell whether or not they're listening to me and I wanna know that what I'm doing even if it is in the background at that particularly moment is...what I'm playing is influencing what they're doing, and vice versa (Colley, 2003)."

Interaction between musicians is an essential part of jazz performance in jam sessions, namely in terms of repertoire selection, introductions, "trades", and the establishment of solos order. During solos, musicians suggest and trade rhythmic patterns and melodic ideas. The ability of the musicians to interact is strictly connected with musical competence.

Interaction between musicians and audiences

Observations of jam sessions in New York indicate that audience reactions are important in evoking musical responses from the musicians. Even verbal interaction between musicians and audiences is crucial in reaffirming the informal and participative atmosphere of the jam

session (Pinheiro, 2008).

In my observations, I realized Harlem jam sessions tend to have more interaction between musicians and audiences. In the Upper West Side jazz clubs such as Cleopatra's Needle or Smoke, audiences don't usually demonstrate and verbalize emotions. This attitude is close to the one adopted by classical music audiences (Kingsbury 1988). But for jam session musicians in Harlem, the audience is a crucial part of the performance. Interaction between musicians and audiences is a central element in the configuration of the event (Pinheiro, 2008).

Interaction plays an important role as a fundamental characteristic of a collective memory in African-American tradition (Berliner, 1994; Monson, 1996; Jackson, 1998). In Lennox Lounge and St. Nick's Pub, I found not only a great deal of audience response to occurrences on stage, but also more intensity in those responses. These appear usually when musicians use musical elements related to the "Blues Aesthetic" (Murray, 1970, 1976; Jackson, 1998), such as rhythmic patterns, question and answer phrasing, or the blues scale. The use of these elements, according to the African-American musicians I interviewed, is opposed to the excessive intellectualization of the musical approaches European-Americans use.

Musical competence

Musical competence is assessed during performance, and deeply connected with the musicians' creative process in jam sessions. In New York, the status of these events varies according to the average competence level of the participating musicians. For pianist Aaron Goldberg, musical competence facilitates trust between musicians, fomenting teamwork and the occurrence of new musical happenings. If the competence level is high, musicians interact as if they know each other musically. Performing with an unknown competent musician can also originate future collaborations and the development of a musical relationship.

Parameters that define musical competence in the context of a jam session are broadly accepted by jazz musicians in New York. One of the most important of these parameters is the quality of a musician's sound. Goldberg (2003) states that the sound of a musician must strike the listener somehow and be convincing.

You know, I mean, does he make a beautiful sound from his instrument or if not a beautiful sound, at least a personal convincing sound? You know, that sticks in my head (Goldberg, 2003).

Musicians' rhythmic sense is also a very appreciated competence factor in the context of the jazz scene in New York. Competent musicians have not only a strong rhythmic feel, but also a special way of placing musical notes in time. According to some musicians I interviewed,

this is reflected in the listener's will to "tap the foot".

Competent musicians also have their own "voice" and are versatile, in the sense that they know and have control over several kinds of repertoire, and adapt to different situations as for example the performance of a ballad or a fast "burning tune".

Besides having skills to play melodies correctly, competent musicians also must have harmonic knowledge. According to Goldberg (2003), this understanding is visible through the capability to define melodically the harmony of a song, or at least to show knowledge of the chord changes in case a musician chooses to play "out" (Playing "out" consists usually in superimposing melodically other harmonies that are not being played by the other musicians in the group).

Musicians' competence is also reflected in the mastering of a song form. The usual functioning of a jam session is at stake when musicians can't distinguish the various sections of a song, risking the form of a performance number. It is crucial to follow the structure of a song throughout the performance, in order not to get lost in the course of a solo. Mastering a composition's structure is also crucial when entering the melody restatement section. This ability is also vital in the articulation of improvisations in "trades" sections, or any other kinds of momentary arrangements.

According to pianist Goldberg (2003), the capability to create "beautiful" and "profound" melodies is also another important aspect of musical competence. Besides that, a competent musician should be able to connect melodies to each other in a logical way, giving coherence to musical discourse. Some musicians have suggested that listening to a solo should be like reading a good book. The listener should be intrigued by the sequence of musical ideas, willing to "turn the page" of the solo. Others recur to the "story telling" metaphor, addressing the jazz solos construction process. An interesting solo narrates a story with eloquence, and is usually structured in three parts: a beginning, middle part, and an ending.

Finally, a competent musician should also have the aptitude to listen, synthesize, and be influenced by the musical choices of the other musicians on stage.

CONCLUSIONS

The musicians' creative process in the context of jam sessions in Manhattan is complex, being influenced by multiple factors. Interaction is one of the most important agents in terms of shaping musical experience, along with musicians' competence and space characteristics. It is important to be aware that this process is deeply embedded in certain performance and aesthetic principles that are shared by most jazz musicians.

I hope that this study will open a new way forward for future interpretations of jam sessions, stimulating the in-depth analysis of this performative occasion, given its

importance for musicians and for the “jazz scene”. Future analytical perspectives on jazz must continue to emphasize musical events, contexts, and concepts, which shape its performance, evaluation and interpretation. The perspectives of the musicians and main parties in the jazz universe are essential, both as regards the understanding of musical, social and cultural practices, and as regards the reinterpretation of the historic perspectives in jazz literature.

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