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Exploding the Narrative in Jazz Improvisation

Tell a story. This oft-repeated directive for an improvised solo has become a cliché of jazz musicology. Its validity is unarguable, having been restated in various forms by countless artists from Charlie Parker to Cecil Taylor. But we seem to lack the analytical tools to describe in detail how, under what circumstances, or indeed whether this wordless spinning of yarns even *could* happen, let alone what the content might be. In the constellations of jazz lore, the storytelling imperative seems to hang there, fixed in the firmament, along with "If you have to ask, you'll never know" and other hip tautologies.

In a renowned piece of jazz musicology, Gunther Schuller asserted that the musical "coherence" of a jazz solo—present, he claimed, only in the work of figures such as Louis Armstrong, Coleman Hawkins, and Charlie Parker—could be proven using the standard "reduction" tools of Western music analysis.[1] Brian Harker echoes this sentiment, stating that the coherence of an Armstrong improvisation amounts to a kind of "story."[2] For Harker the hallmarks of this story seem to include demonstrable relationships among musical phrases (a trait that seems more reminiscent of verse than narrative) and the gradual build to a climax. But perhaps we can view purely musical coherence as just one facet of a larger, richer, and more complex narrative structure.

George Lewis furnishes a provocative description of African American improvised music as the encoded exchange of personal narratives.[3] Some guiding questions then become: What is the nature of these exchanged narratives, and how are they rendered musically? In the 1990s a wave of important scholarship on African American music addressed some of the ways in which meaning is generated in the course of jazz improvisation.[4] Much of this work focuses on the crucial role of interactivity and group interplay in the dialogical construction of multiplicities of meaning. Here one draws on a notion of communication as process, as a collective activity that harmonizes individuals rather than a telegraphic model of communication as mere transmission of literal, verbal meanings. For example, the musical notion of antiphony, or call and response, can function as a kind of communication, and nothing need be "said" at the literal level to make it so. What definitely *is* happening is that the interactive format, process, and feeling of conversational engagement are enacted by the musicians. In a context like jazz the presence of this kind of dialogical process is constant throughout a performance, as *sustained antiphony*.

But musical dialogue forms only part of the whole story. In the outtakes to John Coltrane's "Giant Steps," there emerges a revealing, poignant moment of candor among the musicians.[5] While rehearsing the precipitously difficult piece in the studio, John Coltrane can be heard saying to his struggling colleagues, "I don't think I'm gonna improve this, you know . . . I ain't goin be sayin nothin, (I goin do) tryin just, makin the *changes*, I ain't goin be, tellin no *story*. . . Like . . . tellin them *black* stories." Amidst the confounded mumbles of assent from his bandmates, one colleague rejoins, "Shoot. Really, you make the changes, *that*'ll tell 'em a story." Surprised by this idea, Coltrane responds, "You think the changes're the story!" Overlapping him, a second bandmate riffs, "(Right) . . . that'll change *all* the stories (up)." His voice cracking with laughter, Coltrane admits, "I don't want to tell no lies (on 'em)." After a group laugh, the second colleague trails off in a sort of denouement, "(The) changes *themselves* is *some* kind of story (man I'm tellin you)."[6]

These few seconds of banter could yield a symposium's worth of exegesis; the antiphonal, multilayered, Signifyin(g) exchange suggests striking notions of how musical stories can be told. "Making the changes"—i.e., negotiating the harmonic maze that forms the piece's improvisational structure—forms just one facet of the real-time construction of an improvised statement in this idiom. A list of other conventional ingredients might include conveying a steady rhythmic momentum ("swinging"), displaying a strong and personal timbre, constructing original melodic phrases, and amassing these phrases into a compelling "whole." From his concern that he isn't "tellin' no story," it is easy to suppose that Coltrane was thinking along these lines, trying to create a "coherent," Schulleresque narrative arc over the scope of a given saxophone solo. However, his hint at larger concerns of cultural connection ("tellin' them black stories") suggests that his intentions transcend the étudelike nature of this clever harmonic progression, and even rise above this compositional idea of coherence. With these four words he seems to reach for musical statements in which no less than his whole community could hear its inexhaustible narrative multiplicity reflected. Indeed, his dogged pursuit of such an ideal is documented over the course of dozens of takes.

Moreover, his is a quest for veracity: "I don't want to tell no lies on 'em." One might wonder what notes, chords, and rhythms have to do with evaluations of truth, and one might be tempted to interpret the laughter that this comment elicits as an affirmation of the absurdity of this idea. But in fact this construction is common usage among jazz musicians, and the group outburst just might be a laugh of assent. Just weeks ago I heard a fellow musician criticize a bandmate for "telling lies" onstage; according to my colleague, his bandmate was playing what he thought their bandleader wanted to hear instead of following the general directive to make his own statement. For Coltrane, telling musical lies might have meant playing in an overly self-conscious, premeditated, or constructed fashion that rang false to his ears. This comment suggests that Coltrane strives to create an authentic representation of his community through telling his story as truthfully as he can. This trope of truthfulness has broad implications for the politics of authenticity and its role in the narrativity of black music; there is a clear connection between "telling your story" and "keeping it real."

My main interest in Coltrane's extemporaneous exchange with his quartet lies in his sideman's observation, "Really, you make the changes, *that*'ll tell 'em a story." Perhaps Coltrane's bandmate means to locate the kind of narrativity his leader seeks not only at the level of a philosophical imperative placed "on" the music but also precisely "in" the moment-to-moment act of making the changes. The sheer fact of Coltrane's maintenance of his musical balance in the face of such arduous challenges tells a compelling, even richly symbolic story. For what one hears is necessarily the result of much effort, time, and process—in short, of *labor* (meant with all of this word's attendant resonances).

This notion really does "change all the stories up": it implies a shift in emphasis from top-down notions of overarching coherence to bottom-up views of narrativity *emerging* from the minute laborious acts that make up musical activity. And given its focus on these acts and the rigors that they presuppose, the comment could also be read as a celebration of the athletics of black musical performance (or perhaps the performativity of black musical athletics). An improvisor is engaged in a kind of highly disciplined physical activity, of which we only hear the sonic result. If we embrace this fact, we are led to consider the storytelling implications of this physical labor that we hear as music; surely the rigors of this embodied process tell "*some* kind of story."

In this vein, I would like to discuss what I call *traces of embodiment* in African-American music, and suggest what we might learn from them: how musical bodies tell us stories. I propose that the story that an improvisor tells does not unfold merely in the overall form of a "coherent" solo, nor simply in antiphonal structures, but also in the microscopic musical details, as well as in the inherent structure of the performance itself. The story dwells not just in one solo at a time, but also in a single note, and equally in an entire lifetime of improvisations. In short, the story is revealed not as a simple linear narrative, but as a fractured, exploded one. It is what we take to be the shifting, multiple, continually reconstructed subjectivities of the improvisors, encoded in a diverse variety of sonic symbols, occurring at different levels and subject to different stylistic controls. Taking a similarly exploded form, this paper may seem fragmented. Indeed it must be, because it is only through this process of examining the puzzling shards of these exploded narratives that we may reveal a mosaic with a discernible underlying pattern.

Hearing the Body

In my previous work I develop the claim that music perception and cognition are embodied, situated activities.[7] This means that they depend crucially on the physical constraints and enablings of our bodies and also on the ecological and sociocultural environment in which our music listening and producing capacities come into being. I argue that rhythm perception and production involve a complex, whole-body experience and that much of the musical structure found in rhythm-based music incorporates an awareness of the embodied, situated role of the participant. I show that certain kinds of rhythmic expression in African-derived music are directly related to the multiple roles of the body in making music and to certain cultural aesthetics that privilege this role.

Recent neurological studies have affirmed the cognitive role of body motion in music perception and production. According to these researchers, a perceived rhythmic pulse is literally an imagined movement; it seems to involve the same neural facilities as motor activity, most notably motor sequence planning.[8] Hence the act of listening to music involves the same mental processes that generate bodily motion. One might suppose that musical elements might be more efficacious in eliciting sympathetic behavior if they represent aspects of human motion somehow. Such sounds might include the dynamic swells associated with breathing, the steady pulse associated with walking, and the rapid rhythmic figurations associated with speech. Note that each of these three examples occurs at a different timescale. In fact, it is interesting to observe the rhythmic correspondences among these groups of behaviors:[9]

Bodily activities	*Musical correlates*	*Timescale*
Breathing, moderate arm gesture, body sway	Phrase, meter, harmonic rhythm, dynamics, vocal utterances	1–10 seconds
Heartbeat, walking, and running, sexual intercourse, head bob, toe tap	Pulse, "walking" basslines, dance rhythms	0.3–1 second (approximately 60–180 beats per minute)
Speech, lingual motion, syllables, rapid hand gesture, finger motion	Fast rhythmic activity, "bebop" melodies, etc.	0.1–0.3 second (3–10 notes per second)

It is plausible that musical activity on these three timescales might exploit these correspondences.

A variety of truisms support this view. For example, most wind-instrument phrase lengths are naturally constrained by lung capacity. Indeed, any instrument that produces sustained tones can be used to evoke the human voice. The throbbing of urban dance music often makes sonic references to foot stomping and to sexually suggestive slapping of skin. Blues guitarists, jazz pianists, and *quinto* players in Afro-Cuban *rumba* are said to "speak" with their hands and fingers. All such instances involve the embodiment of the musical performer and the listening audience.

A recent review by Shove and Repp highlights the often overlooked fact that musical motion is, first and foremost, audible human motion.[10] To amplify this view, Shove and Repp make use the "ecological level" of perception as suggested by J. J. Gibson.[11] At this level "the listener does not merely hear the *sound* of a galloping horse or bowing violinist; rather the listener hears a *horse galloping* and a *violinist bowing*." In this ecological framework the source of perceived musical movement is the human performer, as is abundantly clear to the listener attending a music performance. We connect the perception of musical motion at the ecological level to human motion. This suggests that musical perception involves an understanding of bodily motion—that is, a mutual embodiment. For musical performers the difference between rhythmic motion and human motion collapses; the rhythmic motions of the performer and of the musical object are essentially one and the same.[12] Dance is then a natural response to the movement that music represents.

Kinesthetics

The term *kinesthetics* refers to the sensation of bodily position, presence, or movement resulting from tactile sensation and from vestibular input. We rely on such awareness whenever we engage in any physical activity; it helps us hold objects in our hands, walk upright, lean against walls, and guide food into our mouths. In these cases there is a strong interdependence between the kinesthetic and visual senses. Similarly, in the playing of musical instruments we must treat sonic and kinesthetic dimensions as interacting; we must bear in mind the spatiomotor mode of musical performance.[13] For musicians, musical competence involves the bodily coordination of limbs, digits, and, in the case of wind instruments, breathing.

John Blacking raised the issue of kinesthetics in musical performance by comparing two types of kalimba ("thumb piano") music among the Venda community of South Africa.[14] One very physical type, practiced by amateur boys, featured complex melodies that appeared to be secondary artifacts of patterned thumb movements; the regularity of the movements generated the jagged melodic result. The other type, a more popular style practiced by professional musicians, had simpler melodies with small intervals and flowing contours, directed more by an abstract melodic logic than by a spatiomotor one.

From my experience with jazz improvisation on the piano, I have found that the kinesthetic or spatiomotor approach and the melodic approach form dual extremes of a continuum. We augment our aural imagination by exploring the possibilities suggested by the relationship between our bodies and our instruments, and we judge the result of such experimentation by appealing to our musical ear and aesthetics. Among pianists who have exploited this relationship in jazz, Thelonious Monk has been the most influential. His compositions and improvisations provide an exemplary nexus of kinesthetics and formalism. Often his pieces contained explicitly pianistic peculiarities, including the repeated use of pendular fourths, fifths, sixths, and sevenths (as in "Misterioso" and "Let's Call This"), whole-tone runs and patterns ("Four in One"), major- and minor-second dyads ("Monk's Point," "Light Blue"), and rapid figurations and ornamental filigrees ("Trinkle, Tinkle").[15] All of these idiosyncrasies fit, so to speak, in the palm of the pianist's hand, while often wreaking havoc for horn players (or, even worse, vocalists). Such physical patterns are simpler and apparently more primal for finger coordination than any nonconsecutive pattern. Monk was able to place these simple patterns in unconventional rhythmic and melodic relationships to yield new compositional and improvisational possibilities. The embodied-cognition viewpoint suggests that a musician's internal representations of music are intimately tied to his or her connection with the instrument, which forms part of the music-making environment. The musician's relationship with the instrument can leave its trace on the music itself—that is, it can be communicated musically as Monk demonstrates so vividly.

Aesthetics of the Body

Again, when we speak of cognition via the body and its interaction with its physical environment, we must also discuss the social and cultural forces that construct the concept of the body. An important conceptual distinction between European and African musics involves precisely this status of the body—the degree to which the physical situatedness of the music-making or listening body is acknowledged. The above discussion of Thelonious Monk suggests that his highly experimental musical techniques emerged in an environment where he felt perfectly at ease exploring the relationship between his body and the piano, even allowing his musical ideas to be subject to this relationship. It attests to the idea that African-American music often features an embodied approach to music-making. By this I mean that one does not regard the body as an impediment to ideal musical activity, and that instead, many sophisticated musical concepts develop as an extension of physical activities, such as walking, strumming, hitting, cutting, scratching, or more figuratively, *speaking*.

Speech

As is commonly observed, jazz improvisation bears metaphorical attributes of speech and conversation. Ingrid Monson's book *Saying Something* provides an elaborate discussion of this metaphor. One often hears instances of the metaphor in African-American musical pedagogy, where "'to say' or 'to talk' often substitutes for 'to play.'"[16] Such usage underscores what musical performance does have in common with speech as an activity or behavior, as well as what music has in common with language as a symbolic system. Among the traits that link musical performance to speech, we see that:

- Like speech, musical performance is a *process*, a salient mental and physical activity that takes place in time.
- Like speech, musical performance is interactive, characterized by dialogue, call-and-response, and collective synchronization.
- Like speech, music has *semiotic* dimensions, which enable sonic symbols to refer actively to other parts of the same piece, to other music, or to contextual and extramusical phenomena—as with the rhythmic correspondences between finger motion and speech itself.

Note that these aspects of speech and performed music are not restricted to the domain of semantics; that is, they are not solely concerned with the "intrinsic" meanings of words or notes. Rather, these specific aspects depend upon the act of performance.

Performativity

Similarly one might imagine that visual and other contextual factors in a musical performance co-articulate musical meaning along with the sonic trace. We may call these elements *performatives*. In an essay entitled "The Grain of the Voice," Roland Barthes pointed out that performance of composed music also carries this "extra" dimension.[17] In addition to the meaningful intramusical dynamics, supplemental meaning is generated by the presence of a music-making body, and the sonic traces it leaves behind. Hence the "grain" of the voice, by announcing the vocalist's physical presence, signifies a rupturing of the disembodied, self-contained world of the classical work. The personhood of the performer insinuates its way into (for Barthes, European classical) music performance through its roughness, its resistance, its departure from the ideal disembodied musical object. The physicality and resistance of the voice point to its producer, the performer, and to the act of it being produced. The grain of a musical performance reminds the listener of the physical sensation of using the voice, or other parts of the body: "The 'grain' is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs."[18] These physical encodings in musical performance have intensely expressive powers. The meaning of a vocal utterance is constituted not simply by its semantic content or its melodic logic, but also by its *sonorous* content.

Sound

Tellingly, among many jazz musicians, a most valued characterization is that a certain musician has his or her own, instantly recognizable *sound*, where "sound" means not only timbre, but also articulation, phrasing, rhythm, melodic vocabulary, and even analytical methods. Generally it came to mean a sort of "personality" or "character" that distinguishes different improvisors. Though it is a complement if someone tells you that you "sound like Coleman Hawkins," it is even higher praise to be described as "having your own sound." Trombonist and improvisor George Lewis writes,

> "[S]ound," sensibility, personality and intelligence cannot be separated from an improvisor's phenomenal (as distinct from formal) definition of music. Notions of personhood are transmitted via sounds, and sounds become signs for deeper levels of meaning beyond pitches and intervals.[19]

This view supports the widespread interpretation of improvisation as personal narrative, as that which gives voice to the meaningful experiences of the individual.[20] Cecil Taylor wrote of John Coltrane,

> In short, his tone is beautiful because it is functional. In other words, it is always involved in saying something. You can't separate the means that a man uses to say something from what he ultimately says. Technique is not separated from its content in a great artist.[21]

Often, then, an improvisor's original playing style is bound up with his or her (possibly idiosyncratic or self-styled) technique. In many cases the autodidactic approach plays a large role for improvisors, for whom the creation of music is embodied in one's relationship to one's instrument. Hence the inseparability of "sound," or embodied creative approach, from a "phenomenal definition of music"—a personal sense of what music is and what it is for.

The notion of personal sound functions as an analytical paradigm, a kind of down-home biographical criticism. An individual's tone, rhythmic feel, and overall musical approach are seen as an indicator of who he or she "is" as a person. Musicians' interactive strategies in music might be seen as an indicator of their interpersonal behavior; their rhythmic placement ahead of or behind the beat may reflect how "fiery" or "cool" their temperaments run; their melodic inventiveness and harmonic sophistication might parallel their offstage urbanity and wit. Admittedly, such stereotypical characterizations beg to be broken down; rarely does a musician's offstage personality fit such conventional wisdom. Indeed, one could also view "musical personality" as a kind of *mask* that the performer wears onstage, Signifyin(g) on his or her offstage identity as well as on performance itself. But in either case, the notion of personal sound, relating musical characteristics to personality traits, reveals much about how music, life, and personal narrative can be conceptualized together. In this sense, Sound provides a kind of Afrological animation of the "grain" in European performance.

Many have tried to establish "motific development" in Coltrane's individual improvisations as that which creates structure and hence meaning.[22] But it seems to me that such structure is merely a consequence of a greater formation—Coltrane's "sound," his holistic approach to music, which yields these elements. I do not wish to imply that Coltrane had no mind for "structuring" an individual solo; but these sorts of analyses stem from the critical tools of the *listener* rather than the improvisor. As a musician, I personally believe that the improvisor is concerned more with making individual improvisations relate *to each other*, and to his or her conception of personal sound, than he or she might be with obeying some standard of coherence on the scale of the single improvisation.

Temporality of Musical Performance

Yet another fundamental consequence of physical embodiment and environmental situatedness is the fact that *things take time*. In intersubjective activities, such as speech, musical performance, or rehearsal, one remains aware of a sense of mutual embodiment, a presupposition of "shared time" between the listener and the performer. This sense is a crucial aspect of the temporality of performance. The experience of listening to live music is qualitatively different from that of reading a book. The former requires a "co-performance" on the part of the audience, one that must occur within a shared temporal domain.[23]

The performance situation might be understood as a context-framing device. In his study of music in South Africa, John Blacking wrote, ". . . Venda music is distinguished from nonmusic by the creation of a special world of time. The chief function of music is to involve people in shared experiences within the framework of their cultural experience."[24] There is no doubt that this is true to some degree in all musical performance, but we can take this concept further in the case of improvised music. The process of musical improvisation in a jazz context can be seen as one specific way of framing the shared time between performer and audience. Time framed by improvisation is a special kind of time that is flexible in extent, and in fact carries the inherent possibility of endlessness. Instances like Paul Gonsalves's 27 choruses (over 6 minutes) of blues on Ellington's "Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue" and Coltrane's sixteen-minute take on "Chasin' the Trane"– significantly, both live recordings—attest to the power that the improvisor wields as framer of time, deciding both the extent and the content of the shared epoch.[25]

The experience of listening to music that we know to be improvised differs significantly from listening knowingly to composed music. A main source of drama in improvised music is the visceral fact of the shared sense of time: the sense that the improvisor is working, creating, generating musical material at the same time in which we are coperforming as listeners. As listeners, we seem to experience any music as an awareness of the physicality of the "grain," and a kind of *empathy* for the performer, an understanding of effort required to create music. In improvised music empathy extends beyond the concept of the physical body to an awareness of the performers' coincident physical and mental exertion, of their "in-the-moment" *process* of creative activity and interactivity. Listening to Coltrane on "Giant Steps," one cannot help but agree with his colleague, who suggested that the breathtaking *reality* of Coltrane improvising and creating his way through this maze tells quite an awesome story indeed, one that at the very least elicits our empathy.

Exploding the Narrative

In these and many other ways the embodied view of music facilitates a nonlinear approach to musical narrative. Musical meaning is not conveyed only through motific development, melodic contour, and other traditional musicological parameters; it is also *embodied* in improvisatory techniques. Musicians tell their stories, but not in the traditional linear narrative sense; an *exploded narrative* is conveyed through a holistic musical personality or *attitude*. That attitude is conveyed both musically, through the skillful, individualistic, improvisatory manipulation of expressive parameters in combination, as well as *extramusically*, in the sense that these sonic symbols "point" to a certain physical, social, and cultural comportment, a certain way of being embodied. Kinesthetics, performativity, personal sound, temporality—all these traces of embodiment generate, reflect, and refract stories into innumerable splinters and shards. Each one of these fragments is "saying something." The details of what the music is saying, and of how it does so, are as infinitely variable as are the individuals who enact and embody it.

In concluding, it is worth reminding ourselves that representations of African American culture have been plagued by racist mythologies surrounding the idea of the body. Historically, African American cultural practice has been seen by mainstream Western culture as the realm of the physical, the sensual, and the intuitive, in diametric opposition to the intellectual, the formal, and the logical. As Susan McClary and Robert Walser have argued, I must stress that "to discuss the bodily aspects of cultural texts or performances is not to *reduce* them" but rather to elevate the crucial role of embodiment in all aspects of cultural and perceptual activity.[26] An enlightened treatment of embodiment gets beyond that old mind-body binary, particularly in its racialist manifestations; and it also happens to affirm the African American aesthetics that gave birth to this powerfully embodied music.

NOTES

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6. Transcribed by Steve Coleman and Vijay Iyer, 2000.
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13. See John Baily, "Music Structure and Human Movement," in *Musical Structure and Cognition*, P. Howell, I. Cross, and R. West, eds. (London: Academic, 1985), 237–258.
14. John Blacking, *How Musical Is Man?* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973).
15. Recordings of all of these compositions can be found in the compact disc compilation *Thelonious Monk: The Complete Riverside Recordings* (Berkeley: Riverside Records, 1986), originally recorded 1955–1961.
16. Monson, *Saying Something*, p. 84.
17. Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image, Music, Text*, S. Heath, ed. and trans. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 179–189.
18. Ibid., p. 188.
19. Lewis, "Improvised Music Since 1950," p. 117.
20. Ibid.
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22. Roger Dean, *New Structures in Jazz and Improvised Music Since 1960* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1992); Ekkehard Jost, *Free Jazz* (New York: Da Capo, 1981), pp. 92–94.
23. See A. Schutz, "Making Music Together," in *Collected Papers II: Studies in Social Theory* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), pp. 159–178.
24. Blacking, *How Musical Is Man?* p. 48.
25. Duke Ellington, *Ellington at Newport (1956)*, compact disc reissue (New York: Columbia Records, 1990), track 3; John Coltrane, *The Complete 1961 Village Vanguard Recordings*, compact disc compilation (New York: Impulse Records, 1997), disc 3, track 1.
26. Susan McClary and Robert Walser, "Theorizing the Body in African-American Music," *Black Music Research Journal* 14.1 (Spring 1994): 80.

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