The Philosophy of Jazz as
Transcribed by Michael Johnson
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

What has been said about jazz in philosophy—and there has been precious little—is largely reactive, which is to say dismissive or polemical. Given this bias and the dearth of writings in general, it isn’t surprising that nobody has developed an adequate account of the project of jazz from a philosophical perspective. What is surprising, however, especially considering the state of jazz in philosophy, is that outside the philosophical world—in literary criticism and musicology, for example—writings about jazz are numerous and oftentimes philosophical. I write the following paragraphs with an eye to this unusual situation.

It is my intention to approach jazz as the literary critic and musicologist have done, i.e., creatively, but to do so with a certain reflexivity. In so doing, I hope to reveal something philosophical about jazz.

There is a peculiar difficulty here, however. Because jazz is not a thing which can be captured on the page, either with words or with notes, the success of this project depends entirely upon its performance. In other words, I can’t tell you what I want to tell you in crisp analytic language while staying true to my subject; in order to convey anything at all, I am obliged to employ a series of riffs and runs.

We begin, therefore, with this preface: an Acknowledgement of the task at hand. Three movements follow: Resolution, Pursuance and Psalm. The first is like a melody: here we are concerned entirely with the what can be said. The second is like a revaluation of this melody, wherein we realize there is something deeper. The final movement is like a solo rooted at the source of the melody; here we are entirely detached.
from what we thought we were playing at the beginning. The suite ends with thanks and [silence].

RESOLUTION

What is critical to realize when one is approaching anything designated ‘not you’ for the first time is that it is not you. The number of people who have made this mistake is absurd.

Adorno writes: “The sexual appeal of jazz is a command: obey, and then you will be able to take part” and later, putting words in the jazzhead’s mouth, “I will only be potent once I am castrated.” We can understand this as follows: Adorno has a bone to pick. More clearly: when someone hates something so much as to resort to misapplications of the Oedipus complex to legitimate that hatred, we must read between the lines to see what’s going on.

Yet on one level we can understand what Adorno is saying; he writes: “Freedom in reproduction is no more present [in jazz] than in art music.” He’s taking issue with the existence of arrangements, with the fact that jazz is often found art. To clarify: there are people who make it their business to go diving in the dumpsters of commodity music for the explicit purpose of finding trash to turn into jazz. Hence *Come Rain or Come Shine*—have any lyrics been so insipid?—*Cherokee, Blue Moon* and countless others.

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1 One note before I begin: this paper will be full of generalizations with a function. Do not read ‘black’ as meaning ‘all blacks’ or as presupposing that there are only the poles of blackness and whiteness. Nothing can be said without seeming to draw boundaries; if you want to miss the whole point, please feel free to get caught up in them.
We can boil down Adorno’s point to this: once crap, always crap: no amount of arranging of a commodity tune will every make it art.

But what is art for Adorno?—first: What isn’t art? Adorno writes: “The function of jazz is thus to be understood as above all one which is relative to the upper class…which knows the right dance steps. To it, jazz represents…the inexorability of social authority…” Here, he’s suggesting that jazz maintains the status quo. Perhaps the opposite is true of Adornian art. To this effect, Paddison writes:

For Adorno, art (and indeed society itself) must seek to become conscious of and to integrate that which previously had been neglected by established structures. But in so doing the structures themselves are compelled to change radically. The process is thus a dynamic one which, of its very nature, is opposed to static and established systems, although at the same time it is still to a considerable extent dependant on traditional structures for material.

Adornian art, then, is that activity which prevents established artistic structures (the ‘status quo’) from stagnating by revealing that which is not those structures and incorporating that ‘not’ into those structures. Such activities are art specifically because there is creativity involved, which is to say an assertion of one’s freedom from established structures while participating in those very structures (“for material”). It follows that art maintains the balance between individual and community.

Continuing this line of reasoning, there are two pseudo-arts which can destroy this balance. Should the individual create without an eye to pre-existing structures (is this even possible?) then the individual will lose touch with other individuals, communication will cease, and individuality will lose meaning. Conversely, should the doing of art be appropriated by the community, then individuality will vanish, artistic structures will

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2 And by extension (though perhaps only partially) social structures
stagnate and the community will lose all semblance of civilization. *This is where Adorno locates jazz.* Remember: “I will only be potent once I am castrated.”—Read: *in order to be an individual I must sacrifice my individuality to the collective.* This is how he sees jazz: as a tool of the culture industry, the use of which will cause the downfall of civilization via the loss of individuality.

Given where Adorno places freedom in music—specifically, in composition as opposed to arrangement—this understanding of jazz isn’t surprising. After all, the compositional process isn’t as highly valued in jazz as that of revaluation. To this effect jazz pianist Orrin Evans has said: “Jazz isn’t a music, it’s what you do to music.”vi We can extrapolate that the jazz isn’t found in the composition, but in the arrangement, be it written or improvised. If this is the case, then jazz cannot be considered art if Adorno is right in placing freedom exclusively in the compositional process.

While this leaves jazz in a bad spot, it doesn’t leave art music in a very good one, as Paddison informs us:

> [Art music] thus attempts to reveal cracks in the ‘false totality’ through which that which is ‘not yet identical’ may still be glimpsed. However, such music dare not affirm this ‘glimpse of truth’ because such an affirmation would immediately deliver it up again to the culture industry. Hence the paradox of what for Adorno constitutes authentic music in the twentieth century: it is compelled to destroy meaning in order to preserve it. vii

In other words, presently the products of art music—if they are not destroyed—are too quickly transformed into marketable clichés by the culture industry (listen to any pops recording) and are therefore unable to affect any transformation. It follows that art (music) can no longer perform its balancing task. Adorno implodes.

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Here’s the mop.

Sartre has an entirely different notion of freedom than Adorno. Adorno wants to say that an imprisoned man isn’t free because of his external condition; Sartre wants to say that an imprisoned man is free because of his ontological condition. That is: given a set of rules (Sartrian “facticity”), Adorno isn’t free until he has the ability to change that set of rules, whereas Sartre considers himself free so long as he relates to that set of rules in a certain way. Again: for Adorno freedom is experienced physically, for Sartre, psychologically. A dash of Kierkegaard: is his preacher free even though he gives the same sermon every week?—Only if he experiences that sermon with newness each time.

What we are trying to say is this: Adorno’s conception of freedom is limited. By necessity, at times we are forced to find our freedom elsewhere; there is a type of art corresponding to this.

If Adorno is right vis-à-vis the machinations of the culture industry, then now’s the time. What is this art?

Adorno locates freedom in the space of composition. Why are the products of this type of assertion of freedom, I mean creativity, subject to misuse by the culture industry?

Defecation continues indefinitely. Nothing is added; it is a cyclical process. Philosophical argumentation, while similar in some respects, produces something new each time; we are brought somewhere different. This is an assertion of Adornian freedom (apparently). Note its linearity. Again: Unlike defecation, whose function is fulfilled in the doing, philosophical argumentation is product-oriented. That is: we are
not satisfied unless it produces something interesting, unless it brings some otherness to
the established structures of philosophy. Here we find Adorno.

The problem with this kind of creativity, as we’ve seen, is that it can be
misappropriated by the culture industry, thereby undermining its balancing function. It is
exposed to this misappropriation precisely because there is a product to misappropriate—
have you heard the theme of Beethoven’s fifth as a cell phone ring? *The problem is that
the creativity is too easily packaged:* if there is an object which stands for—which *is*—the
creativity, it can be used by the culture industry.

_What is needed is an art without a product._

Again: one can never tell whether or not a Sartrian prisoner is *experiencing*
freedom:³ it is something he does which cannot be seen. Beauvoir has an agenda, which
is why she fails to see this point. (Aside: that does not make her agenda wrong.)

Transcendent masculine (yang) activities and immanent feminine (yin) activities
are only apparently as they are. Both are understood to be Immanent when one considers
that the ‘man’ cannot do ‘masculine’ things when he is imprisoned. *Transcendence is not
a quality which can be seen*—it can be present in both apparently transcendent and
immanent activities. What I mean is this: there is better way to characterize an action
than Beauvoir realizes.

In _Waiting for Dizzy_, Gene Lees writes: “Improvisation teaches you the magic of
being in the moment you’re living in.” ³ To get what he’s saying we must know a bit
about what goes into jazz improvisation. When I improvise I am not playing random
notes; there is a certain logic to them. This logic can be described by a set of rules, but

³ Though such a prisoner is always free
these rules are not the \textit{essence} of the improvisation; the improvisation precedes the rules. Nonetheless, in order to become fluent in the language of improvisation I practice these rules for hours. But because practicing these rules is a \textit{grammatical} exercise—that is: I’m not \textit{saying anything}—I’ve got to forget them when it comes time to perform. In other words, there is a difference between practicing and performing. Practice is not creative: we don’t practice being creative. The creativity comes in—in jazz, in anything—in the way in which we dance with the rules. Practice is about becoming fluent so that we can \textit{say something}. Performing is the actual speech. I repeat: the point of practice is to become so fluent in the language in which you are operating that you become our tools—your instrument and the rules—so fluent that there is no gap between creativity and its expression: it’s as if through practice you are destroying yourself so that God can speak through you.

Don’t be frightened—this isn’t mystical, it’s logical (though maybe \textit{this} is cause for concern). Let this thought experiment be proof: Imagine that you are singing; now imagine that you become conscious that you are singing. Are you still experiencing yourself singing, or are you experiencing your consciousness of it? Be aware that these are two profoundly different experiences.

Paradoxically, when you become conscious of yourself singing, you are no longer singing; that is: while you understand there to be a singer, the singing and a song, these three are hopelessly separate—Try to find a connection. What connects the singer, for example, to the connection? You’re regressing. So long as you understand there to be three (or even one) \textit{essentially} distinct entities (entity) here, then they (it) will be forever
isolated. You can have no access to the experience of the singing, which is the singing, while you are conscious of it.

When you are practicing the rules of jazz—or any rules—you are practicing them consciously. That is: when I am practicing I think to myself, ‘5th, 3rd, root, 7th of C minor 7, to 3rd, flatted 9th, 7th, natural 7th of F dominant 7, etc’, or if I don’t think these things I visualize them. This isn’t creative, it’s grammatical. I may play the same thing during a performance, but I am not doing it self-consciously: I am not interposing thoughts between myself and my playing. I become my action, and so my ‘muse’ can sing. This is what is meant by “destroying yourself so that God can speak through you”: the expression of creativity depends upon our not thinking about the rules.

But we could object: “Why can I not think my way through creativity, as an engineer thinks his way through a bridge design?” The problem here is that we don’t understand the nature of imagination.

Imagination is not creative; imagination is a synthetic faculty. To see this unpack ‘newness’. Adornian art brings the ‘new’ to light in the sense that it incorporates the not-pre-existing-artistic-structures into those structures. When thinking about this don’t try to imagine what this ‘not-’ is like: when we see the world we tend to forget that we are seeing through a lens: both what we see and what we do not see depends entirely upon its shape and smudges. Consider its shape: There is more to the world than what is suggested by the grime. Adornian art does not polish the lens to reveal what is hidden behind the smudges, it warps the lens, thereby showing us an entirely new world with previously unimaginable things revealed or obscured by the smudges. That is: it puts us

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4 Or perhaps ‘auralize’
in touch with the limitations of whatever lens we have been using by showing us that it is
groundless, by showing us that there is no essential reason for it.

Imagination can never, ever, do anything but polish the lens. It operates
piecemeal, inventing all sorts of non-existent things by putting parts together, or by
hypothesis, guessing what must be, given the way things ‘are’. This is all good stuff, but
it requires the lens for leverage. As such, it can never change the lens.

Such a change—which is to say, art—can only come about when we do not use
our imagination. That means we cannot try to change the lens, because any attempt to do
so must employ our imagination. But what’s in this word ‘try’? When I am trying to do
something rather than simply doing it, I am conscious of myself doing it; that is to say,
when I try to do something, there is a separation of actor, action, and goal: thoughts (e.g.
imagination) wedge themselves between myself and the other parts of the Action. It is
only when I act without trying, which is to say without conscious intention, that I can
change the lens. Nothing new can ever be intended; creativity depends on the destruction
of self.

It seems, then, that when Lees writes: “Improvisation teaches you the magic of
being in the moment you’re living in”; he means this: if you experience your singing—
this is being in the moment—rather than your consciousness of yourself singing, then
something magical will occur, to wit, creativity will be brought into the world through
you.

What’s more: recall that above we said, “Transcendence is not a quality which
can be seen—it can be present in both apparently transcendent and immanent activities.”
Having considered Lees, we can now say that there are two kinds of actions: those which
are done “in the moment” and those which are not. The former are what we have been
calling Transcendent; but they cannot be labeled as such by any save the actor—and only
by the actor after the completion of the action, since consciousness of the action pulls the
actor out of the moment. The observer cannot label the action ‘Transcendent’ because
actions appear to be either transcendent or immanent. What makes an action
Transcendent is the mind of the actor, not the action itself.

That said, there is a notable case in which the observer can know the action to be
Transcendent. In the case of a Transcendent performance which has so entranced an
observer that he is his observation of the performance, as opposed to his consciousness of
his observation of the performance, he ought to be aware of the creativity of the
performance and therefore of its Transcendence. Keep this in mind.

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Listen to Lees again: “Improvisation teaches you the magic of being in the
moment you’re living in.” This is complex: We’ve understood his “magic” and his
“moment”, but what about this notion of improvisation as teaching? How can
improvisation teach somebody something—anything? And who exactly does it teach—
the improviser?—the observer?

Baraka writes in his “Jazz and the White Critic” that: “The major flaw in [the
white critic’s] approach to Negro music is that it strips the music too ingenuously of its
social and cultural intent. It seeks to define jazz as an art (or a folk-art) that has come out
of no intelligent body of socio-cultural philosophy” and later that: “It is the philosophy of
Negro music that is most important.” What he’s saying is this: there is something
preceding the music. *We* might say that the music isn’t a thing; *it stands in for a thing.* But then we need to ask: what is this thing?

Elsewhere (“The Changing Same”) Baraka writes about a set of lyrics: “[This] is not just a song but the culture itself.” These are the lyrics: “I got to dance to keep from cryin.” Compare this to Ellison’s: “[The blues’] attraction lies in this, that they at once express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit.” But is *this* a “philosophy”?

Baraka and Ellison are saying the same thing—n.b.: jazz blossoms from the blues—specifically, while you can’t always choose your situation (i.e., ‘the rules’) you can always choose the way in which you react to your situation—through ‘dancing’—through “toughness of spirit”. Jazz stands in for this…but we repeat: is this a *philosophy*?

Above we said that jazz is often found art. What we meant was this: there isn’t a whole lot of new *what* in jazz: many “jazz” tunes are really pop tunes; Duke’s harmonies were hijacked from Debussy; original tunes are often built over on the structures of old ones. There is a reason for this.

Signifyin(g), according to Gates, is a black rhetorical strategy which is used to communicate indirectly, to revalue and to cultivate a think skin. Consider the ‘dozens’. If I say: ‘word to yo’ momma’, you have a choice; to wit, you can either get upset because I’ve claimed to have copulated with your mother, or you can say something worse about my mother (for example), thereby making the choice mine. Whoever gets

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5 Gates uses the ‘(g)’ to distinguish the black rhetorical signifying from semiotic signifying.
upset first loses. The function of this exchange is hidden: it isn’t said, it’s done. This is training in keeping one’s cool: practice.

In signifyin(g) the content of the words is gutted—communication is occurring indirectly. This is another way of saying that the words are revalued: the what of the words is overshadowed by how they are used, that is, by their figurative implications. Meaning becomes use.

This seems simple enough…yet before we can really grasp signifyin(g) we must admit that, like most things, it comes from somewhere; use your imagination…

You live in a world where you have no personal freedoms and where you are constantly informed of you inferiority. If you take this world at face value for too long, you’re likely going to be faced with a decision: adapt or die (physically or spiritually). Should you choose the former, what will you do? You will place less importance on the conditions of your life (over which you have no control) and more importance on the way in which you deal with those conditions (over which you do have control). In short: you will choose to revalue the what of your existence: how life is lived will become far more important than what is actually lived. If you are successful you will discover Transcendent freedom in apparent un-freedom.

Now loosen the scenario a bit. Let’s say you gain some apparent freedom, but are still denied the power to develop new cultural forms. Using the survival technique you’ve learned while un-free, you can open a cultural space for yourself by revaluing the forms of others—that is: by injecting creativity into how you perform other-what you can make art. This is the project of the jazz musician.

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6 The following is meant to be a logical argument, not a historical one.
Certainly we can locate the socio-cultural content of jazz here, but do we want to call the birth of signification \textit{philosophical}?

Signifyin(g) is a technique. Associated with it are certain practices which are called “signifyin(g)” and which \textit{train} the practitioner in the technique. Insofar as signifyin(g) is a practice or a technique, we cannot call it philosophical—though perhaps ‘therapeutic’ in the Wittgensteinian sense—in the same way that we cannot call jazz \textit{per se} philosophical. This makes sense when we realize that jazz (blues, rap, etc) is musical signification. So why does Baraka say that: “It is the philosophy of Negro music that is most important”?

We don’t want to say that there is no philosophy here. But Baraka seems to be suggesting that somehow some black thinker \textit{intellectually created} (!) some philosophy which he the then built into a number of practices whose purpose is to convey the meaning of that philosophy. The imagination’s inability to create renders such an idea impossible. What \textit{is} possible is that a certain philosophy co-arose with musical and non-musical signification. \textit{We cannot say that one caused the other}…But that doesn’t mean that no philosophy exists.

But perhaps we want to understand ‘philosophy’ differently, here. Perhaps we should understand it as ‘the love of wisdom’ rather than ‘the lust for knowledge’. The word wisdom implies a performance. To this effect Dōgen writes: “To think that practice and enlightenment are not identical is a non-buddhist view.”\textsuperscript{xii} That is to say, wisdom is not found in thinking about wisdom but in practicing it (in our language ‘\textit{performing} it’); the very thought ‘I am wise’ bespeaks un-wisdom specifically because it is not a “practice” (a performance). The value of philosophy as it is commonly done is purely
therapeutic from this perspective: a useful philosophical argument tears down another argument and itself in the process. Again: leave the boat after you’ve crossed the river.

The philosophy of jazz, then, in the traditional sense, can be found in the space of rules (‘practice’, in our language). The aspirant hears things like “you have to learn the rules before you can break them” and these things can be argued. Pedagogy finds its home here. But such things are only tools, meant to be left by the wayside when the aspirant becomes a master.

But if we are using ‘philosophy’ in the non-traditional sense—why not give Baraka the benefit of the doubt and say that he is talking about wisdom?—then Lees suddenly becomes intelligible.

Lees writes: “Improvisation teaches you the magic of being in the moment you’re living in.” Improvisation is a technique—musical signification. The aspirant doesn’t realize this. The goal in mind while practicing altered patterns, diminished patterns, whole tone patterns, etc is not to experience ‘Transcendent freedom’—after all, what’s that? The goal is simply to learn to play jazz. Again: the aspirant is only trying to learn a music; he does not realize that it is a technique, which is to say that it does something. Nonetheless, one day the aspirant performs and God speaks. This is what it means for improvisation to teach: it reveals creativity to the musician, it allows the musician to perform wisdom (but this is redundant—wisdom is performative).

This is not unique to jazz: improvisation just happens to be one technique by which we can access creativity. Whenever you hear that Handel or Bach or Mozart had divine inspiration, this is beneath that. All that is necessary is that there be a set of rules with which to dance, a set of rules to learn and then forget. What makes jazz different
from art music is not the end result at all—hence Duke’s: “‘Jazz’ is only a word and really has no meaning…I don’t believe in categories of any kind”—but rather the nature of the technique.

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There are two characteristics of jazz technique which are critical to us here. These are: the emphasis on how and the publicity of the creative act.

What we are calling the ‘what’ of music includes (not exclusively) the harmony, the song form, and the theme; what we are calling the ‘how’ of music includes the rhythm, the timbre and the approach to the harmony. Repetition per se is also associated with the ‘how’, but somewhat differently than rhythm, etc.

Were I to claim—as I want to—that the how isn’t important in art music, while the what isn’t important in jazz, you might be inclined to object: ‘There is repetition in a theme and variations…and where is there not rhythm!’ Or: ‘Bebop is filled with harmony—in order to play a tune you’ve got to know the changes!’ But consider the problem of jazz transcription: I have spent upwards of 17 hours transcribing 6 or so minutes of improvisations—the Davis, Coltrane and Adderly solos over So What on Kind of Blue (see appendix). The reason this transcription took so long was because the rhythms being played were felt by the musicians, not thought. As such, Coltrane blows irregular septuplet figures (as in measures 9 and 10) which don’t want to be notated, and Miles screws with the beat so much that you never know whether the note he’s really playing (can we say this?) is on the upbeat or the downbeat (as in measure 59). Now that’s not to say that these things cannot be adequately notated, but they cannot be

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That is: ‘chords’.
usefully notated. What I mean to say is this: you will never be able to accurately repeat a jazz performance from sheet music. There are no Gunther Schullers of jazz who can hear a solo by looking at its transcription—something’s missing.

A better system of ‘notation’ for jazz is the recording: in this medium timbre, rhythm, etc can all be adequately captured and therefore reproduced: but reproduced by ear. We might say, therefore, that jazz is an oral tradition, whereas art music is a written one.

In response to the bebopper’s objection: granted bebop and other forms of jazz are filled with harmony. And knowing the harmonies is important, as is knowing the structure of the tune, etc (though ‘knowing’ can mean ‘feeling’, here). But these things are just there. Sonny Rollins did not compose the structure of Oleo, George Gershwin did (Oleo is built on I Got Rhythm), and the harmonies and song form Gershwin used were hardly original. Rollins is acknowledged as the composer of Oleo, not because it is essentially his tune, but because it is his signification: he did something creative with a given what. In the end the harmonies of Oleo are not significant: it’s the way they are approached which bears weight. That is to say: if you listen to the harmonies of any bebop tune, you will be bored to death because they simply repeat, over and over and over again. If, however, you listen to how the soloist dances with the harmonies—is he playing a whole tone scale? is that a tritone substitution with a flatted 5th?—then things start to get interesting. The creativity here is found in the doing.

As for repetition, one must consider what is actually being accomplished. A theme and variations is just that: a theme with repetitions containing thematic development. We might even be inclined to say that the sine qua non of a theme and
variations is repetition. So why do we want to say that repetition somehow figures uniquely into jazz? The key to repetition in art music is development. Repetition in art music is simply bad unless it goes somewhere. (Aside: this is not always the case in 20th century music, but such music is stuck in the Adornian paradox; for a different explanation I refer you to page 139—or thereabouts—in Benston.) This is not the case for jazz. When Mingus dictates a tune that begins with a Bach piano cadenza (Taurus in the Arena of Life on Let My Children Hear the Music), he is repeating Bach without development, but this isn’t the point; what makes his use of Bach not vapid isn’t what it is, but what it does. He is using Bach to communicate indirectly something entirely different—and so we must look at the function of the quotation, not the content. But we’ve already discussed this kind of repetition: it’s called signification.

Still we could ask: “Doesn’t the presence of repetition and rhythm, etc in art music mean that it emphasizes both how and what.” Certainly not because of repetition, as developmental repetition is thematic—not repetition per se—and therefore belongs entirely to the what. As for rhythm and timbre, we can only say this: while these things are present, they are subordinated to that which can be usefully notated; it is the reverse in jazz.

This distinction between the oral and the written is critical—a novel is not a civilized form of storytelling, it is merely a different technique. There is no basis to say one is superior…unless one has a particular purpose in mind.

The other important characteristic of jazz technique is the publicity of the creative act. That is to say, a jazz musician (most often) comes to a performance with a set of rules to guide each tune (a loose arrangement), but doesn’t create the final product until
he is on stage with his fellows. The reason for this is simple and one we’ve discussed in depth: the creativity in jazz is found in the *how*, which is to say in the doing of it. This is not the case with art music. While there is certainly creativity involved in the performance of a symphony, for example, the true performance—that is, the primary creative act—is in the composition—this is why Adorno reveres the compositional process: it is not the interpretation\(^8\) of a score which will reshape established artistic structures,\(^9\) it is the composition.

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Now there is nothing wrong with the split between the composer and the observer—indeed, much beautiful music has been created in this way. But a problem has arisen, specifically, the problem Adorno has illuminated, which interacts with this kind of music badly precisely because of this split. Think of it like this: the composer is writing the observer a letter which contains truly enlightening poetry, but the letter is intercepted and replaced by one which says all the same things but in limerick form. Or better: the composer is sending a Christmas card containing a parable to which is added a little paper cross which says “Happy Birthday Jesus!” Or better still: in place of breathing instructions, an index card saying: “Learn how to breathe properly today! Only $19.95 + $3.95 S&H!”

What we mean is this: so long as there is a space between the composer and the observer, there is room for cuteness, proselytizing and (notably) advertisement\(^10\) to poison the creativity. We know the rest of the story. What might not be clear, though, is

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\(^8\) I am aware that ‘interpretation’ is contentious.
\(^9\) At least not structures outside of the interpretation of the piece itself: this creative act is limited in scope.
\(^10\) …and self-aggrandizement (Leonard Bernstein, perhaps; Fussell, pages 118-119), etc…
what is actually happening to the creative parcel. When the composer composes, art is being created because he is composing rather than thinking about composing: there is no space between him and his composition. When the observer receives the composer’s creation, it can do its work on the observer only if he is listening, rather than thinking about listening. If these conditions are met, then the composer and the observer become a single (logical) entity thereby allowing the source of creativity in the composer to speak to (that of) the observer. This unity is shattered when a middleman tries to do something to the creative parcel. In other words, if somewhere along the line somebody attempts to use the art for some purpose—this is fragmentation, thinking—it ruptures: with the insertion of intention, the art is grounded in the very artistic structures it was to reshape, and as such it becomes incapable of doing anything but reinforcing those structures since the intention requires them for leverage. Naturally, the observer is left in no better shape than the art; both are stuck. This is why we have said that we need an art without a product.

Above we saw that a composer cannot usefully notate the how. This implies that the parcel to be intercepted is always only of the what: any how is added in the performance and will only not interfere if it is unself-conscious, as it will otherwise fragment the art. Again: the how (e.g., timbre) must be allowed to enter into the art without intention because of the uncreative nature of imagination. Furthermore, the how vanishes after the performance even if it is recorded, since it must be recreated without intention each time—note Baraka in “The Jazz Avant-Garde”: “Imitation means simply reproduction…for its own sake. Someone who sings like Billy Holiday [that is: with the

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11 I.e., if the composer is composing and the observer is listening
intent to sing like Billie Holiday]…produces nothing.”  

xiv We might say, then, that the how is ethereal, that we cannot touch it, but can only let it touch us. A music which is made up of the how—I mean jazz—should, therefore, be immune to misappropriation.

This ought to raise a few eyebrows. The very fact that we hear jazz in commercials, for example, seems problematic. And what about Adorno who criticizes jazz precisely because he sees it as a tool of the culture industry? How do we square these things with what we have said?

Above we quoted Evans: “Jazz”, he said, “isn’t a music, it’s what you do to music.” This is a broad definition of jazz and a strange one.

Think of some jazz whats. The classic ending of Take the A Train, original tunes like I Remember Clifford, the blues form, etc. It’s important to realize that these aren’t jazz for Evans. Jazz is “what is done with” them, that is: how they are approached. The notion of a jazz canon, therefore, is absurd: it is inappropriate to call anything jazz without first qualifying it in a certain way.

The term ‘jazz’, for Evans, must only be applied to spontaneous composition: after it is composed it is no longer jazz. What makes the jazz what it is is not a set of whats, but rather the way in those whats are treated now. Remember: “Improvisation teaches us the magic of being in the moment.” That recording has become a what from which you can learn and which you can appreciate, but it is not jazz because it isn’t happening presently. It’s a snapshot of a moment, not the moment itself. There is a reason live music is better than recorded music.
So all those jazz *whats* that have been misappropriated don’t force jazz into the same bad spot as art music. The creative content of jazz cannot be found in commercials or in society music: therein lies only the ash from jazz *done* long ago.

And now we come to the point: Adorno believes that art can no longer accomplish its task because it has been hijacked by the culture industry; recall: “[Art] is compelled to destroy meaning in order to preserve it.”—and we have a paradox. There is another artistic course of action which he doesn’t see because he has a limited notion of freedom, and thereby an equally limited notion of art. What he misses is that it is possible to do art rather than to *say* art, and that *done* art cannot be used by the culture industry precisely because it leaves no (creative) trace: a filmed explosion cannot burn anyone. This is the power of jazz—now’s the time, *here* is the art.

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*Definition, jazz (revised Adornian)*: a creative musical act which need not “destroy” meaning in order to “preserve” it because the meaning revealed is only accessible in the moment of action. Fire your canons—but I digress…

**Pursuance**

We’ve seen what jazz *really* means to Adorno’s conception of the state of art, but so far we’ve taken this conception for granted. Happily, this does something.

We have not been trying to say anything about Adorno here, but have been revealing something about jazz. It just so happens that Adorno is a convenient tool. While using him may gut his writings of their creative function, the damage only lasts as long as we believe that we’ve been discussing Adorno—who is *he*, anyway?
One might be inclined to suggest that we’ve ruined our own creativity by using Adorno in this way, especially given what we’ve said above. But this is not the case as we’re really not trying to say (or do) anything at all.

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Now forget about ‘jazz’. Duke says, “‘Jazz is only a word and really has no meaning…I don’t believe in categories of any kind”, and Nat Hentoff, “[Trane] didn’t like the term ‘jazz’…since he felt all music to be one, without labels” and Artie Shaw, “Jazz, or Swing, or Bop, or whatever-you-want-to-call-it (since these words are nothing but labels for something pre-verbal…”, and Rudi Blesh, “The names, like ‘ragtime’ (poor ragged music) and ‘jazz’ (sexual intercourse), only served to belittle the music.” Names have uses. Why are we calling something anything? What makes us see something as distinct from everything else?

We live simultaneously in two worlds. One world contains distinctions between things: We say: that is my car. But what is a car? Can we really say that a car is anything but its use? It is built into our linguistic world. (Adornian) art functions to alter this linguistic world, and may—at some point—morph that world in such a way as to make cars impossible. That is: The system of use within which cars are situated is malleable and as such the need which they fulfill has a life-span. There is nothing essential about cars—they are waves on the ocean.

It must be the case that we live in a second world as well, a “pre-verbal” world, a world from which we can act to change the linguistic world—because imagination cannot

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12 Some credit must go to Herr Wittgenstein for inspiring the following riff.
create: we cannot intend to change our tools because they are in our very heads—all intended action uses the linguistic world as leverage—and yet we do change them.

The linguistic world cannot even be said to exist until we create it out of the non-linguistic. This emerges from that.

So what is ‘jazz’? Can we locate the essence of jazz? We have not said a single thing about what jazz is in this essay, we have only alluded to what jazz does.

Above, we guessed at the origins of jazz, but what does this mean? Did we mean to suggest that somehow jazz was caused by something else? How can something without an essence have a cause? How can anything with an essence be caused? There are no causes. Do we really want to say that jazz has an essence? Certainly there is a kind of music which tends to have certain “jazzy” characteristics—none of which are necessary or sufficient—but we called these the whats. We said that jazz is found before all that; we said that it is an action, not a thing. In looking for the origins of jazz, we were looking for the conditions surrounding its emergence—it too is a wave. Look to the water.

What makes music creative is not the product—whether or not some of that creativity is embedded in some what—we’ve seen that the creative happens in the moment, without thought—that is, non-linguistically. If art reshapes artistic structures, then after the moment of creation, the art object (or the ash) becomes a part of those artistic structures. As such, the word ‘art’ is most often used incorrectly.

If ‘jazz’ refers to a technique, then it refers to something that does something. This is a tool with a life-span. Jazz emerges by necessity—before jazz it could not have
been created because there was no reason for the technique: jazz emerged with the human need to reshape the linguistic world while bound and gagged.

The ash of jazz is the way it is because of the world around it. To make value judgments about a music, an art, anything, based upon what it looks like is to miss something fundamental. If I say ‘jazz’ is such-and-such, then I am asserting that there is such a thing with an essence called ‘jazz’ which is such-and-such as compared with another thing with an essence. But where did these essences originate?\textsuperscript{13} Clearly jazz had a beginning. Therefore it must have got its essence from something. But how did that thing give jazz an essence—where did it get such a thing as an essence to give? And how, if jazz is essentially distinct from that thing from which it was born, was that essence given to jazz? The gap between two essences is impossible to bridge. And if that thing didn’t have an essence, then how could it give one to jazz? And if jazz doesn’t have an essence, then how can we distinguish it as something caused by something else?

This whole notion of causality is ridiculous. By extension so is the project of assigning inherent aesthetic value to music (or anything else). Nothing inheres.

All we have is conditions—there are certain things which tend to accompany other things within this vast system. Clouds tend to accompany rain, but they cannot be said to cause the rain; they are only a condition. Likewise, certain conditions accompanied the emergence of jazz.

One such condition was the existence of art music. Further: The cross-pollination between art music and jazz is profuse, and they can be said to condition each other throughout the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. But in the end they are non-different. Where do you draw

\textsuperscript{13} This is hinting at Nāgārjuna’s Mālamadhyamakārikā and his analysis of conditions.
the (essential) boundary of jazz? We’ve seen that you can’t. The same is true for art music.

The word ‘emergence’ implies something that we’ve been missing. The point is that we’re used to understanding the world linguistically because we are makers of tools; but this is not the way things are. What distinguishes jazz from art music is not some sort of essence, it is the nature of the techniques. The knowledge of the difference between good and evil is precisely this: the ability to use tools—I mean the ability to build linguistic divisions between things in order to do things, or better, in order to have the leverage necessary to intend to do things. The reason we have indigestion is not because we have this ability, but because we’ve taken it for reality. Art reminds us of our mistake.

Again: there is a reason that jazz exists; it does this when words are unsafe. It arose when there was a need, just as art music arose when there was a need. But these things aren’t somehow distinct: they are simply counterbalances in a system of counterbalances.

The system cannot rupture itself: a soap bubble pops only when some outside force is applied.

Metaphor is a technique by which the imagination is coaxed into surrendering to the non-linguistic. It doesn’t often work.

Imagine an ocean. Can it be said that the ocean is made of just waves or just water? Certainly not, as we cannot imagine water as formless or waves as substanceless. Yet on some level the water and the waves are distinct since waves come and go but water is eternal. Looking deeper: we see that waves themselves are distinct—it makes
sense to talk about individual waves. And indeed this can be quite interesting, for we can analyze how they interact, and how they form and crash. Water isn’t nearly so interesting to discuss, but it’s always there: the reality of each wave.

What causes the waves?—this is a bad question.

What conditions the waves?—the other waves.

What causes the water?—this doesn’t make sense.

So forget about ‘jazz’. There is no ‘jazz’ involved here. The waves don’t ever freeze. The word ‘jazz’ came about intentionally; that much Blesh tells us, remember: “The names, like ‘ragtime’ (poor ragged music) and ‘jazz’ (sexual intercourse), only served to belittle the music.” The musicians never meant the music to be discussed because it is not a thing. It does not exist to be talked about: it slips from our grasp whenever words come to mind.

So throw away Adorno, throw away Baraka, throw away Blesh—now let’s get down to it.

**PSALM**

Coltrane composed a suite called *A Love Supreme*. In the liner notes he writes: “This album is a humble offering to Him. An attempt to say ‘THANK YOU GOD’ through our work, even as we do in our hearts and with our tongues.”

Elsewhere in the notes Hentoff is quoted:

By the time *A Love Supreme* hit, Trane struck such a spiritual chord in so many listeners that people started to think of him as being beyond human. I think that’s unfair. He was just a human being like you and me—but he was willing to practice more, to do all the things that somebody has to do to excel. The real value in what John Coltrane did was that what he accomplished, he did as a human.
What makes Trane’s accomplishments human? Practice: technique—This *does* something (*and then vanishes*).

Thanksgiving—like jazz—also *does* something: it’s a technique. And the technique works, whether or not God exists. God can have no bearing on techniques because techniques are human: tools. What’s more, the idea of God is a technique akin to thanksgiving—they do similar things.

When Trane says “THANK YOU GOD” he is saying something useful. We needn’t assume that (Trane believes that) some Being is listening to Trane and welcoming his thanks—indeed, Trane’s conception of God as omnipotent, omniscient, etc precludes this (note: why would such a being care to receive thanks?) Instead, think of it like this: Trane devoted his life to music and became incredibly good. In our terms, that means he destroyed his (musical) self through practice so that he could experience Transcendent freedom from the set of rules associated with jazz. That’s all well and good…except imagine that he attends a cutting session and blows away the competition: no other musician can keep up with him. This means that he has power within the jazz world. If he lets himself believe that *he* is great because of this power, then he’ll become arrogant and cease to be creative. That is: the thought that his power is somehow *his* will split his creativity. This is the final obstacle for the practitioner: in order to remain creative, he must—interpret this word how you will—*believe* that he has not caused his creativity, that he is not the source of his own Transcendent freedom…despite years and years of practice.
He can do this by displacing his conception of the source of his creativity. In other words: if he believes that God, for example, gave him his power—and he does: elsewhere in the liner notes he’s quoted: “‘I humbly asked to be given the means and privilege to make others happy through music…I feel this has been granted through His Grace.’”xviii—then any danger of arrogance is destroyed. Thanksgiving fosters this belief and reinforces it.

What’s more, given what we know about imagination, this technique can’t be considered just a trick or sleight-of-hand. Consider: We’ve said that imagination cannot create; any self-concept is the work of the imagination; the imagination needs a lens for leverage; no lens is essential; therefore, no work of the imagination can be essential; from which it follows that all self-concepts are vacuous. In short: we are never who we believe ourselves to be. And as such, we cannot legitimately call our selves ‘the source of our creativity’ because the very notion of a ‘self’ is insubstantial.

One could object that: “The impossibility of knowing the essential self does not imply the impossibility of there being an essential self.” Perhaps. But not only does this have no bearing on thanksgiving, as thanksgiving is psychological not ontological, our second discussion regarding the origins of jazz does imply the impossibility of an essential self: there are no causes, only conditions. Belief in essences is a linguistic error which thanksgiving can correct.

Above we’ve said that what makes us human is our use of tools. Trane remains human because he used certain tools—musical and spiritual—to accomplish what he did. This means he wasn’t born with his horn pressed to his lips.

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So through practice we’ve reached quite a height. **Why?**

A technique makes sense within the linguistic world; the source of a technique cannot be in the linguistic world. That is: we are tool users, not tool makers: Tools exist because there is a need; we do not create this need….what *can* we create?

We use tools; this means we act. But if we focus on the goals of our actions, they will never be reached: it is only when we act that we approach our goals. This means that we are entitled to act, but not to the fruits of our actions. *These* are not ours, though we may enjoy them.

It seems that we have freewill, that I can do whatever I want (given a set of rules *for leverage*). Nowhere in the contract of freewill is there a spoiled-brat clause.

If we can only reach our goals when we act, then we are spinning our wheels when we are not acting. That is: we are stuck; this is pathological. This makes sense because thinking never accomplished anything: hypothesizing? Where’s the ground? Piecemeal? A chimera is chimerical. We are entitled only to act because that is all we *are*, what we are doing. Goals are insubstantial.

It’s not just that we *have* freewill—this is part of it: when we are not experiencing our Transcendent freedom, we are caught in a web of lies.

So what is jazz? What is a technique? A technique does something. It has a function. If we are caught in a web of lies when not experiencing our Transcendent freedom, then the practice of jazz is a lie. What differentiates a technique from other tools is that a technique is negative: that is, it destroys what is built up by other tools—*and vanishes itself during the performance*. Consider thanksgiving destroying arrogance, for example—in the end it destroys itself (it, too, is a certain arrogance).
Earlier we discovered the roots of jazz in survival: signifyin(g) became a means to escape an oppressive linguistic world. How does it accomplish this? Jazz is the art of musical how. That means the creativity is in doing. Signifyin(g), then, is the general art of living by doing. When one is signifyin(g), not practicing signifyin(g), but really signifyin(g), then one is injecting creativity into one’s treatment of other-what. We’ve seen what this means: intention falls away, and all that is is the act. Jazz trains this—Trane jazzes that.

We said that not experiencing one’s Transcendent freedom is pathological. This means that we’re not in touch with reality. Consider: this is ontological freedom. When we are not experiencing our Transcendent freedom we are caught in a web of lies. Whose lies? The lies we are telling ourselves. That is: the lies of the self. We have imagined ourselves to be.

The following drama unfolds: I am X, I am not not-X; I need not-X to be complete; I suffer. Or perhaps a more complicated example: you are stuck in traffic trying to get somewhere. If you focus on your goal, you will be miserable; if you simply act—that is: allow “magic of being in the moment” to overcome you—again: if you surrender—then there will be no suffering. You will not have assembled a self to suffer: you will be your action, not a thing that can suffer.

The point is to stop thinking and simply live. This is what jazz is all about—the experience of Transcendent freedom and the destruction of the self: improvisation is the former after technique vanishes, doing the latter. The source of creativity is a mystery, but one which can be experienced if we’re willing to admit our relation to it. This is why Trane (g)i(ve)s thanks to God. There is so much here: a Love Supreme…
And so I leave you with this. Show don’t tell: These riffs and runs have been philosophical, I think, but equivocally so. My desire here has been to reveal something about jazz which one cannot know just by listening to a few recordings—that is: all this is grounded in doing jazz. I cannot speak—[sung] A Love Supreme, A Love Supreme…

THANK YOU
[SILENCE]
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Endnotes:


ii My thanks to Stephanie Swales (BMC ’04) for pointing this out.

iii Adorno, page 480.

iv Adorno, page 474.

v Paddison, page 87.

vi Evans said this in a lecture at Haverford College on 11/6/03.

vii Paddison, page 89.

viii In Gottlieb, page 603. Gottlieb’s Reading Jazz is a collection of jazz reportage, autobiography and criticism.

ix Baraka, page 14.

x Baraka, page 190.

xi Ellison, page 3.

xii Cook, page 11.


xiv Baraka, page 73.

xv “The Mirrored Self”, “Jazz Is”, “The Trouble with Cinderella”, and “Flying Home”, in Gottlieb, pages 36, 626, 161 and 533, respectively.

xvi Page 12.

xvii Page 11.

xviii Page 4.