



## **Impressions: On Jazz Improvisation, Memory, and Desire**

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“Never play anything the same way twice” – Louis Armstrong

“One of the things I like about jazz, kid, is that I don’t know what’s going to happen next. Do you?” – Bix Beiderbecke

### **Introduction**

I think I know, as much as one can, that I am in many ways somewhat anxious, and often insecure. I am though, also quite passionate, very much driven, and work exceptionally hard. This has been true in my childhood. In my adulthood. These traits seem to remain. They influence and impress upon me, in all that I do and all that I am.

#### **A**

At a point in my life I found psychoanalysis. It filled me with passion, was exciting and dynamic. It spoke to me. I read everything I could find. Freud, Klein, Winnicott, Bion, Ogden, Benjamin, and more. All that I could get my hands on. Each article or text sparked an interest in another, unweaving the mystical labyrinth of ideas and concepts that provided me a sense of how I may engage in the work. I found instructors and supervisors to show me the way. They listened to me and we thought together, played together, and I grew.

I immersed myself in psychoanalytic theory. All my training experiences were psychodynamic/psychoanalytic. I received exceptional individual and group supervision from a diverse group of local psychoanalysts. I was treating patients, taking coursework, attending seminars, receiving supervision, and voraciously consuming any and all literature I could find in the psychoanalytic domain. I studied with tremendous energy, focus, and rigor. My technique was developing, and I was being challenged as a clinician in an intensive manner. It was exhilarating.

#### **A**

At a point in my life I found jazz. It filled me with passion, was exciting and dynamic. It spoke to me. I listened to everything I could find. Miles, Duke, Fitzgerald, Coltrane, Mingus, Paul Chambers, and more. All that I could get my hands on. Each song or solo sparked an interest in another, unweaving the mystical labyrinth of ideas and concepts that provided me a sense of how I may engage with music. I found instructors and other musicians to show me the way. They listened to me and we thought together, played together, and I grew.

I immersed myself in jazz theory. All my band experiences were in jazz combos. I received exceptional individual instruction and performed in bands with a diverse group of local jazz musicians. I was playing music, rehearsing solos, attending seminars, receiving instruction, and voraciously consuming any and all literature and music I could find in the

world of jazz. I studied with tremendous energy, focus, and rigor. My technique was developing, and I was being challenged as a musician in an intensive manner. It was exhilarating.

## **B**

At a point, I realized that what I was playing wasn't all that good. It felt alright in the moment, but if I heard something played back, I hated it. I found the music that I played to be dry, uninspired, and overly technical, even though I had spent countless hours practicing, studying music theory, working on technique, listening to jazz, and tuning and caring for my instrument. I was often anxious and pressing. My insecurities led me to second guess and doubt, which I dealt with by trying to be as expert as possible. Both my memory and desire were flooded with a need to not play the "wrong" note. I needed to learn to play music that was living and breathing, to authentically *improvise* in the truest sense of the word. I believe this was also a good description of my clinical work early in my career, and frequently even now.

The similarities between the properties of music and those of psychoanalysis are plentiful. Music contains rhythm, pitch, volume, and timbre. And music has the ability to find us and move us, and lift us up in ways that literal meaning cannot. Nagel (2010) offered that "music and psychoanalytic concepts are polyphonic [and] that music and psychoanalysis reciprocally enrich each other" (p. 651). As a musician tends to these properties during performance, so does the analytic therapist give attention to "other nonsymbolized levels of activity where affective communication is occurring and meaning is being constructed" (Knoblauch, 2005, p. 815). Knoblauch (2000) acknowledges that there is great importance in not just what is being said in session, but that the rhythm and tone intersubjectively create meaning. Rhythmic meter can lend awareness to the temporal quality of exchange and affective experience (Lombardi, 2008). The prosodic, or tonal, dimension of speech can carry meaning as an affective signal (Knoblauch, 2000), a countertransference response (Meltzer, 1984), an unconscious form of establishing reverberation between patient and therapist (Markman, 2012), and as part of a larger harmony "through which physical resonances become increasingly synchronized, complex and more richly and deeply related" (Blum, 2016, p. S180). Other properties, like volume, are also important, as any therapist can express an appreciation for the meaning conveyed behind a patient's whispered utterings versus another's shouted declarations.

Jazz improvisation involves spontaneous performance. It is neither pre-determined nor written and remains unknown to the performer until which time it is performed. A talented improviser may build themes upon which they elaborate throughout the performance. They may take risks and even play what would be considered a "wrong" note at times. They may embellish variations of the song's main melody or delve into discursive musical patterns and statements. Improvisation is an assertion of self that occurs without premeditated thought. This form of expression is easily likened to free association. Lichtenstein (1993) notes that in psychoanalysis "freedom from neurotic inhibitions and/or symptoms is the goal, and the freedom to express oneself spontaneously to the analyst [free association] is the method" (p. 228). The patient is encouraged to participate in therapy through improvisation. The analyst works with the impediments to that process, so that the

process becomes the goal as Ferenczi noted when he stated that “the patient is not cured by free-associating, he is cured when he can free-associate” (Phillips, 1994, p. 67). The relational therapist participates in therapy also through improvisation. This is influenced by the therapist’s awareness of countertransference, the use of “evenly-suspended attention” (Freud, 1912), and an acknowledgment of reverie (Ogden, 1997), among other forces. Nonetheless, the obstacles to improvisation for the relational therapist are abundant, and for me, frequently included an attachment to both memory and desire.

Improvisation does, however, exist within its own framework and contours. To the untrained ear, jazz music can appear formless. In reality, the structure of jazz is simple and highly repetitive. The format of standard, traditional jazz is so similar from song to song as to appear close to uniform. Further, the harmony (pattern of chord changes) to many songs share common features. Perhaps most notably is the *ii-V-I*<sup>1</sup> sequence, which appears frequently in jazz. Any jazz musician has played and practiced this sequence of chords a countless number of times. Even further, western tonal music contains a grand total of 12 notes. These qualities, along with tempo, rhythm, style, and instrumentation, create the frame of traditional jazz music. *Despite these apparent limitations, an infinite number of possibilities in performance emerges.* As a young jazz musician, I found this intimidating.

John Coltrane once commented:

I think that the majority of musicians are interested in truth. They’ve got to be, because saying a musical thing is a truth. If you play a musical statement and if it’s a valid statement, that’s a truth right there in itself, you know. If you play something phony, well, you know that’s something phony [laughs]. All musicians are striving for as near certain perfection they can get, and that’s truth there, you know. (Kahn, 2002, p. 9)

In a similar manner, the psychoanalyst Ogden (2015) noted that “*genuine thinking, which is predominantly unconscious, seeks out the truth (reality)*” (p. 290) and that “analytic thinking is concerned *only* with the present, with ‘what *is* happening,’ not with what *has* happened, or what *will* happen, thereby freeing the analyst of his dependence on memory and desire” (p. 291).

Early in my playing, I mistook this concept of truth as what may best be described as “correctness.” In my anxious and insecure mind, there was a *right* note to play. In my anxious and insecure mind, there was only what *had* happened and what *could* happen. The notes mattered to me, and they mattered a great deal. They were everything. The chart (sheet music) in front of me was paralyzing and suffocating because it contained too many potentialities, leaving too much room for mistakes, too many ways of going wrong, too many betrayals of truth, too many things that had to be *known*. And I had to know. I needed to be virtuoso.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a pattern in which the second chord (ii) of a scale (minor in tone), is followed by the fifth (V) chord (major), which then leads back to the first (I) chord (major) of scale, creating a satisfying tonal resolution.

Creating something *true*, whether it be in analysis or music, is rich with many impediments, obstacles, and resistances. One's own mind, whether as analyst or musician, in intersubjective connection with a patient or with other musicians, faces numerous challenges. I had been focused so intensely on what *was* and what *would* be that my ability to truly listen was drowned out by the cacophony of the past and future, of theory and technique, of right and wrong. I thought that perhaps if only I *knew* more and studied more that I could be better prepared and in being better prepared I felt the illusion of safety and "correctness." As I have sat with patients, memory and desire stand perhaps most significantly in obstruction of connection and truth. As I have performed music with others, memory and desire stand perhaps most significantly in obstruction of improvisation and its pursuit of truth.

Bion (1967/1992) provides a powerful tool of instruction for learning jazz improvisation in his paper *Notes on memory and desire*, (with the necessary edits):

"[Jazz improvisation] is concerned neither with what has happened nor with what is going to happen, but what is happening" (p. 380).

"Every [song played] by the [musician] must have no history and no future" (p. 381).

"The [musician] should aim at achieving a state of mind that [in each song performance] he feels he has not [played the song] before. If he feels he has, he is [playing the wrong song]" (p. 382).

Each performance varies in significant ways from the previous. Even if the musicians and venue remain the same, each musician is different from the last performance, from the last song, from the last note. Each may be different in mood, energy level, or focus, but each is also different in that the performer has lived one day/week/month longer than the last performance, and they have played the song at least one more time than before. The moment in time is new. It thusly requires a fresh and original approach. While Bion (1967/1992) writes here of psychoanalysis, it is also about jazz in my mind: "In any session, evolution takes place. Out of the darkness and formlessness something evolves. That evolution can bear a superficial resemblance to memory, but once it has been experienced, it can never be confounded with memory" (p. 381). What the pianist played over a chord sequence during the first solo will be different from the last time the pianist played that chord sequence, mere minutes ago. It will certainly be different from the previous week. I may have accompanied that pianist through those chord changes in a specific way, and it may even be in a way that we both found pleasing and resonant, but to attempt to repeat the exact same experience would be foolish. Not only would it be impossible, but it would be stale and lifeless. It would be untrue.

Ogden (2015) described Bion's brief notes on memory and desire as "an impossible paper" (p. 285) but writes that it is not really about memory and desire, rather it is about intuitive thinking and "the fact that we cannot be taught how to interpret what we sense concerning the patient's unconscious psychic truths. Nor can we be taught how to convey to the patient that we have intuited these truths" (p. 286). Bion is describing unconscious forms of experience and communication. What is consciously known is irrelevant in that "it no longer applies to what is happening now, even though it may have been relevant to

what happened in yesterday's session or earlier in today's session" (p. 295). The analyst may feel enticed to remain with what is remembered and rely upon "the knowledge of theory, to bolster a feeling of competence" (Casement, 1985, p. 16) and relieve anxiety, remaining ensconced in an illusory place of safety and comfort. As a musician, the relief that I experience in playing something I recall and liked from practice or a previous performance serves only my narcissistic need for comfort and a respite from the terror of the moment and its possibilities. It is, therefore, false.

In my musical practice routine is a regimen of scales, arpeggios, etudes, technical variations, study of theory, listening, and much more. These things remain deeply meaningful and necessary. They are attended to, but only so that they may then be forgotten so that musical performance can become proprioceptive and intuitive, separate from conscious intention. This is no different than my work as a clinician. I remain dedicated to rigorous and intensive study in both disciplines. Then, I try to let go of it. I try to be without memory and desire in the consulting room and on the stage. I try to intuit and call forth something true, based on what is unconsciously perceived.

Eventually, my individual music teacher, (of 15 years at that point), became frustrated with me and threw out the chart. "Stop thinking man, and just play what you feel, but ya gotta listen, man. Ya gotta listen" he demanded. "The notes don't fucking matter, just listen!" As Bion (1967/1992) noted when beginning to let go of memory and desire, there was a sudden and penetrating sense of anxiety that flooded me in that moment which I needed to find a way to tolerate. My teacher started to play, just randomly it seemed, and insisted that I do nothing but listen, and so I just held my bass, leaning against it perhaps for safety and solace and for many minutes just listened to the formless, freely associated notes that thundered from his bass.

The notes had tension, dissonance, arrhythmic moments, and atonal moments. It was messy. So I just listened and listened and listened and listened. I listened and the listening began to transition to feeling. And so I just felt and felt and felt and felt, whatever that means. I could begin to hear things, but in an ineffable manner. There were themes that seemed both familiar and yet as if I had heard them for the first time. I began to hear ways in which he deviated from tradition. I began to *feel* the rhythm of his playing more deeply. I began to *feel* the notes that he was playing more deeply. Apparently sensing my reverie, he mumbled "now play man." At first it was frightening to simply play without a sense of what I *should* play. As the notes rang out, I found myself increasingly immersed in what was happening, so that distractions both internally and externally began to fade away. As the notes rang out something formed, and to this day I cannot consciously recall what it was and what we played, but I will never forget the feeling of playing something in the present, without concern for the past or future. It felt true. It was, perhaps, the very first time in the history of thousands of hours of playing that I could say that.

I find myself increasingly surprised during performance, frequently not realizing what I will play until it has been played. My increased ability to musically say something that feels true reverberates through the other musicians I perform with, which then elicits a similar response. To the greater degree that I can improvise without memory or desire, I help to facilitate the same with the other members of my combo. It has emerged for me

that I frequently do not know what I will say to a patient until which time I have said it. As in music, the patient's response in these moments feels more alive and fruitful. It feels as if something true occurs. It feels as if we are both co-creating a space of genuine improvisation, less inhibited by the past and future.

## **A**

At a point in my life I became increasingly comfortable with intuition. It has filled me with trepidation, but has been exciting and dynamic, and spoken to me. I still read everything I can find. Hart, Aron, Layton, but also Toni Morrison, Ta-Nehesi Coates, and Frantz Fanon. All that I can get my hands on. Each article or text sparks an interest in another, opening ideas and notions to consider and reflect upon for who I am, not as a musician or clinician, but as a person who is also partially a musician and partially a clinician. I enter a space with patients in which we listen together, think together, feel together, and play together.

## **C**

What I came to learn was that as intellectual an endeavor as jazz can be, the soul of the music comes from abandoning predilection and staying in the moment. Yes, there is a frame. Style, tempo, key and rhythm have been mutually agreed upon before beginning a tune. This frame stands in service of intuition. It facilitates it. I must be able to open my ears to truly hear what others are expressing so that I can engage with them in something living. Something true. The etudes, drills, and theory must be forgotten. Like in jazz, the clinical experience is alive, fresh, organic, and spontaneous. Like in jazz, study is necessary. Memory and desire, however, can interfere in the pursuit of truth and must be abandoned. It is only then that I may hear the patient so that we can create together. It is only then that I may be effective as an instrument of inspiration, healing, and possibly, change. Slowly, I have begun to develop the ability to listen wholly. Even if I have played the same song one thousand times with the same musicians, it is not *then* what it *was* but is something different and unique. I attempt to hear the song as if I had never heard it before. If I attempt to force a jazz lick in where it doesn't belong simply because it has worked in the past or I am fond of it or I have practiced it numerous times, it will feel stifling and dead. I must allow myself to be open to something new every time and allow my mind to intuitively and unconsciously call forth the fruits of my study.

While I seek what is true, the process does not feel borne of "knowing" or "correctness." Connections and links are made on levels outside of conscious awareness that have been played, rehearsed, and practiced thousands and thousands of times. The relentless pushing toward something creates a tension that cannot be satisfied with rote and formulaic prescriptions.

## **Coda**

As I've grown as a clinician, I've thought about the many different things I have learned and the struggle to synthesize it all. The voluminous canon of psychoanalytic literature and the generous wisdom my supervisors have entrusted me with can sometimes feel like overwhelming things to master. It is then that I remember that like with music, true creative and generative expression can come only when I allow myself to be wholly in the moment. I can never master anything, nor does the patient need me to.

These ideas excite me, but I am aware that they present an ideal. And they are just that: an ideal. I fail to achieve it far more than not. I still dig it.

As Charles Mingus once said, “Better Git It In Your Soul.”

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