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“Feeling My Way”: Jazz Improvisation and Its Vicissitudes—A Plea for Imperfection

Jazz music harbors tensions that cannot be resolved simply by jockeying concepts into the right positions. In a fine little book using the words as its title, the jazz chronicler Ted Gioia called jazz “an imperfect art.” In this essay, I shall explain my own reasons for thinking the description to be apt and why this imperfection is nevertheless one of the music’s most interesting features.

A newcomer to jazz who listens to a certain recorded performance of “My Funny Valentine” by Miles Davis is likely to be shocked at its roughness. He will hear cracked notes not quite in tune, sloppy triplets, unaccountable pauses, arbitrary shifts of rhythm, and chaotic runs that go nowhere. Knowing that performances of similar quality in “classical” music would never see the light of day, he will be puzzled to learn that many such jazz performances are recorded and issued to the public.

Strikingly, improvised jazz also exhibits a chronic defect of an almost opposite kind, namely, that much of the music seems routine, predictable, and formulaic. A main feature of Theodor Adorno’s harsh critique of jazz turns on the charge that the jazz musician’s spontaneity is a myth—indeed, that on the whole the music is monotonous. In the same spirit, Winthrop Sargeant, whose classic study of jazz betrays a peculiar love-hate relationship with its subject, declares that “a sturdy repetition” of the music’s basic elements always underlies “the apparent freedom of improvised” jazz. After listening to too many performances that merely shuffle through a sequence of orderly but tired clichés, a listener may be tempted to conclude that the charge is basically correct.

One might pair the problems and dub them the formalist’s complaints. The reason for calling them “formalist” should be clear: Music that is disordered, chaotic, and musically confused will for obvious reasons fail to satisfy formalist criteria of aesthetic excellence. Just as obviously, music that is formulaic, banal, and oversimple will fail to satisfy the formalist. Of course, jazz performances can be messy, or routine, or both at the same time—for reasons that are not very interesting—as when simple phrases are executed badly by beginners. I want to set such cases aside in order to address the deeper issue that the formalist’s complaints jointly reflect. As we shall see, the formalist focuses too narrowly on the sheer acoustic dimensions of the music at the expense of other considerations—in particular, those that concern (1) the cultural matrices of the music and (2) the process by which it is generated.

After considering some resources for talking the formalist out of the grounds for his complaints, we shall see there remains one dimension of the music’s imperfection that these strategies cannot rationalize. However, I shall argue that even this residual imperfection can be regarded as a vital aspect of improvised jazz, provided it is framed the right way.

In order to set the stage for the discussion, we need to detail some of the features of improvisational activity.
the prospective model, artists make decisions about what is to come next in light of an overall conception. With the retrospective model, “the artist can start his work with an almost random maneuver—a brush stroke on canvas, an opening line, a musical motif—and then adapt his later moves to this gambit.” The jazz improviser may proceed from his opening move in any number of directions.

However, we need to sharpen up Gioia’s simple statement and make some of its formal parameters more explicit. I shall label these parameters: situation, forced choice, and no script.

i. Situation. We need to appeal to the first of these three conditions in order to prevent Gioia’s statement from collapsing into the blueprint perspective. After all, musical composition too can begin with a motif, chord, or interval and then adapt later moves to the gambit. True, a compositional practice where the composer is stuck with whatever he has laid down so far after his initial musical brush stroke would be analogous to the situation of the improviser. However, this is not what standard composition is like. A difference between ordinary compositional practice and improvisation is that while the composer can erase moves subsequent to the gambit and redo them, the jazz improviser cannot do so. He can only build upon the steps he has just taken. This is what I mean by referring to the improviser’s situation.

ii. Forced Choice. Composers are allowed to take time out, but the improviser must plunge ahead. He must go on to do something. He can of course fall silent. In composed music, a stretch of silence can clearly be a part of the work. (A final measure of a work that is devoted to silence is not equivalent to a final measure of nothing.) By contrast, a pause in the process of composing the work does not become part of it. However, a pause in an improvisational performance, for whatever reason, goes down as part of the music. There is no taking time out.

iii. No Script. Finally, we have a negative condition. Like the improviser, the performer of a composed work is faced with many possible notes to play, many possible ways of inflecting those notes, and many possible ways of placing them rhythmically. However, the work-performer is guided in the placement of the notes by the highly specific directives prescribed by scores. In dealing with his options, the improviser cannot, qua improviser, rely upon such directives.

Putting these together, the improviser is continuously faced with decisions that are forced upon him, not prescribed for him, and unrevisable once made. He finds himself in a feedback loop. He must produce on-the-spot responses to something unalterable, namely, the music already laid down; and his responses continually force further choices. This becomes nicely complicated when players make on-the-spot responses to the actions of other players. Note, by the way, that nothing is clearly established by these formal parameters of the music about its likely quality.

As it stands, our bald characterization gives a picture of the improviser as an existential hero taking irrational leaps into darkness. This is a perspective to be avoided, not only because it is unwarranted, but also because its implausibility feeds the opposite, equally unwarranted, point of view—cynicism about the process.

Some of improvisation’s aura of mystery can be dispelled by the insightful comparisons Garry Hagberg has made between musical improvisation and speech. There is no more reason to regard improvisation as an impenetrable mystery than there is to see unscripted conversation in that light. The likely explanation for why we lack a consistent attitude toward the two is that while most of us do converse with each other, no general cultural obligation obliges us to improvise music. Most of us are mere spectators of performers who do have this ability. From this perspective, naturally, there is a tendency to be amazed. Obviously, research needs to be done to understand the cognitive psychology of improvisation. (John Baily’s work at the University of London on the spatial layouts of certain instruments, e.g., the Afghan rubáb, suggests that improvisatory cognition involves thinking partly in terms of movement and not simply in terms of sound.) However, the nearly nine hundred pages of Paul F. Berliner’s massive study of the topic makes a strong case that improvisatory jazz practice is mainly mysterious because it is difficult to systematize the large stock of musical materials, basic skills, and practices it draws upon.
Consideration of these materials brings us to caveats that really do seem to qualify the freedom of the improviser; and they may seem to do so in ways that add fuel to the formalist fire. It is time to address the type of complaint that Adorno and Sargeant make.

The formalist will insist that improvisational jazz practice is much more hidebound than indicated by the abstract schema presented earlier. The alternatives for improvisers are not wide open, but are circumscribed by the character of the music’s materials. Musicians in the classical tradition of Iran must first learn some three hundred elements that make up the repertoire of what is called the radif. Similarly, jazz improvisers must master a stock of musical figures and phrases out of which they gradually learn to construct solos of their own. They also internalize a cache of musical forms, e.g., meters and chord progressions, that function as frameworks for the direction that improvised solos will take. Improvisers do not create ex nihilo.

If we were to take a certain kind of case as a paradigm, the distinction between improvising music and performing a musical work seems stark. The kind of free, rhapsodic improvisation we heard from the likes of Keith Jarrett, for instance, seems to inhabit a world of its own, completely unrelated to playing tunes or compositions. Normally, however, while improvising a solo, a jazz improviser is also tokening a work-type—a Broadway show tune, for example. Such tunes must be included along with the elements of the framework within which improvisers improvise. Indeed, in mainstream jazz they supply the chord progressions that the players track. (A clarification is important here: A genuinely improvisational performance, even though based upon such a miniwork, is not itself a musical work, with everything that this concept implies. In particular, as I have argued elsewhere, such a performance is not reidentifiable in multiple instances.)

At this point, the formalist makes his move: Consider how little complexity there is in the thirty-two-bar AABA show tune, or in the twelve-bar blues form. Surely, the simplicity of such forms, Adorno insisted, cannot help but negatively affect the jazz that results from performing them. Now, contrary to Adorno, much can be said in favor of many of these musical miniatures in their own right. Furthermore, jazz composers often come up with ingenious variations on these miniworks, which in turn provide new frameworks for improvisation. However, in order to profile the point I want to elaborate, I shall not take up a defense of these miniworks as works. The claim here, rather, is that even if we were to grant their simplicity, there is no reason to conclude that the improvised music that results from playing these miniworks will itself be routine in character.

A well-known distinction by Kendall Walton between a work’s standard features and its variable ones helps here. By some measure or other, instances of almost any kind of music could be deemed monotonous. A string quartet is monotonous in its use of strings. Bach’s music is monotonously duple or triple in meter. But, of course, such observations reflect inappropriate ways of measuring. A better way to do so is by reference to a work’s deployment of those standard features—to its variable features, in short. Consider some cases.

1. Reviewing Charlie Parker’s Savoy studio recordings, the critic Max Harrison came up with the following results: Of some fifty recordings that embrace some thirty titles, twenty-two rely on the phrases or chord progressions of familiar simple tunes, e.g., “Back Home in Indiana,” “Honeysuckle Rose,” and the blues. Nine of the recordings use “I Got Rhythm” chords. Parker’s range of favored keys was also quite limited. A broader survey of 257 items of his whole recorded output shows them all to be based on equally standard materials. However, the results of Parker’s use of them are hardly routine. As Harrison explains, Parker’s solos

... develop their ideas—in terms of harmonic inflection and rhythmic variation as much as melody—with a precision quite foreign either to popular song writing or to ... a reshuffling of stock phrases. ...
he looks for ways to exploit them with constantly fresh effects. And it is easy to strengthen the evidence about the case. The alternate recording “takes” that the Savoy and Dial record companies made of Parker’s performances often take very different courses than those on the original record releases. So, a characterization of musical materials does not tell how a player will use them.

**ii.** To illustrate the same point, compare the approaches of two jazz pianists, Art Tatum and Thelonious Monk.

Tatum commonly used show tunes as a basis for his splendid improvisations. He used his prodigious technique and understanding of harmony to break down pieces like “Tea for Two” or “Sophisticated Lady” into their motives. These motives he then reharmonized, sometimes to the limit of recognition—while adding numerous countermelodies—augmenting the results with rhythmically and harmonically elaborate variants on the basic “stride” bass pattern.

Although one of the greatest of all jazz composers, Monk often relied on material similar to that used by Tatum for improvising. But he brought a very different approach to it. Although Monk sometimes seasoned his spare ruminations with astonishing harmonic moves, his solos effected continual revisions of themes more by accentual displacement than by elaborate harmonic variation. He concentrated on varying the thematic lines themselves, rather than playing different notes on the same chords.

The different ways these two players approached their material illustrates a common point—that dependence upon a common stock of materials does not entail uniform and therefore monotonous results. True, the elaborate abstraction of the tunes Tatum and Monk played could not be understood except by reference to these works independently of the performers’ deconstruction of them. However, far from undermining the inventiveness of jazz improvisers, the use of such materials underscores it. And the moral of the comparison can be generalized. The wild mockery of George Russell’s recorded assault on “You are my Sunshine” would be meaningless without a grasp of the piece on which it is based.17 But the distinctiveness of the performance, as an exploitation of that piece, is obvious.

The argument can be illuminated by reflection upon that category of jazz dubbed “free jazz,” as instanced in the fifties by Lennie Tristano, in the sixties by Ornette Coleman, and more recently by bands likely to be heard in New York at the Knitting Factory.18 Now, the label “free” does not really apply here without qualification. Setting up no expectations whatever, sheer free improvisation would bear no musical significance at all. True, free jazz operates on bases substantially different from those of mainstream jazz. However, like all jazz it exploits a stock of materials. (Where the latter is predicated on harmonic motion, swing, etc., free jazz exploits such qualities as texture and dynamic level.) But in both kinds of case, a recitation of materials does not tell us what an improviser will do with them.

But do jazz critics not often echo the formalist’s charge? Consider Whitney Balliett’s description of the playing of trombonist George Brunis, that his solos on a certain July evening in 1972 were “still intact, note for note, thirty-five years after he invented them.”19 Let us assume that observations of this sort are sometimes apt. (For all his swing and drive, it might be claimed, Lionel Hampton tends to construct his vibrophone solos out of a basic stock of jazz motifs.) However, it is not reasonable to generalize from such cases to claims about the entire field. It would make no sense for a critic to single out Brunis or Hampton for negative appraisal if the assumption is that improvised jazz performance suffers systematically from such defects. Indeed, a look at other cases, as we have seen, casts significant doubt on the generality.

**iv**

Let us now turn from the formalist’s charge that much of the music is monotonous to the complaint that it tends to be disorderly. The criticism is not without merit, as the description of the Miles Davis performance at the beginning of this paper suggests. But surely, beautifully crafted jazz solos do turn up on recordings—Coleman Hawkins’s “Body and Soul,” Bix Beiderbeck’s “Singin’ the Blues,” and Charlie Parker’s version of “Embraceable You,” to cite three. A point analogous to the one made at the end of the previous section applies here: It is conceptually confused to single out the defects of specific performers or performances if the underlying
claim is about the putative defectiveness of the music as a whole.

However, one must admit that the special status enjoyed by the splendid cases cited above almost marks them as small miracles. Even Charlie Parker is not as reliable a producer of musical order as a formalist might wish. However, just as we had resources for mitigating the sins of the first type, we can bring arguments to bear on the present charge.

Jazz has characteristics that seem inherently "wrong" to the ears of a formalist, even by comparison with the modest but reasonably well-made show tunes that the music often uses. In jazz, these materials are profoundly disturbed by agendas coming from different quarters. Let us consider two versions of this thought, both of which depend upon recognition of the cultural matrices out of which the music arises and within which it flourishes.

One group of jazz scholars has recently been making such a case by situating jazz within a specific social context. One might call the position nonconformism. In jazz, we hear what Nathaniel Mackey terms a "fractured" subjectivity reflecting the special circumstances of African Americans under the conditions of social represssion. (For example, Mackey cites the anger in the "willfully harsh" tone of players like Albert Ayler.) In the words of Jed Rasula, the "voices" in jazz will sound "disunified, ... strategically contrapuntal," because they are intended to "glance off and ... evade the dominant code." So, as Krin Gabbard says, "formalist" critics place too much emphasis on "internalist principles of unity and coherence" in jazz. Indeed, jazz players actively resist formal coherence. In terms somewhat less shrill, nonconformism asks listeners to be sensitive to sources of musical significance in jazz that express African American alienation.

There is much to be said for the approach. Of course, the nonconformist faces the problem of providing criteria for deciding when a performance really does bear the kind of meaning these theorists want to attribute to it rather than being, simply, disordered music bearing little or no significance. More importantly, nonconformism surely has limited application. The argument that we should be more appreciative of the anger in Albert Ayler's playing will hardly help us appreciate the apparent roughness of jazz performers to whom we have no reason to attribute social alienation at all—white jazz figures like clarinetist Pee Wee Russell, for instance, whose solos often strayed from the path of musical logic. Conversely, what are we to say of jazz performances that do not exhibit this kind of disorder at all? Nonconformism would marginalize such cases only on penalty of espousing an objectionably narrow essentialism. (Contrary to what is often assumed, essentialisms are not all of the formalist kind.)

Whatever be the virtues of nonconformism for our understanding of the features of some jazz performances, the problem we are addressing is a more general one. This suggests that we need to broaden the position just described into a view that might be called syncretism.

The amended position also maintains that the formalist's demand for more qualitative consistency in jazz is predicated upon narrowly European criteria. The syncretist argues that the distinctive features of jazz are resultants, so to say, of culturally distinct practices—or families of practices—one European and the other African. So, the claim against the formalist is that he brings inappropriate criteria to bear on forms of music that result from this interaction.

Consider blue tonality, for instance, which almost certainly arises because of the overprinting of European scalar practice by an African one tending toward pentatonism. Adorno could not see that out of this interaction something new emerged—a tonality with as much individuality and interest as any one of the medieval modes. The reason he could not do so was his arbitrary Eurocentric scalar absolutism, according to which certain scales are considered inherently correct. As a result, he regarded the "bent" notes that reflect blue tonality as "exciting stimuli" that the ear can only try to correct back to the "right" note. In short, he considered them to be mistakes.

It should be noticed, by the way, that Adorno sometimes tries to condemn jazz on both of the formalist's counts at once. We can see this in his approach to jazz rhythm, e.g., what we call "swing." On the one hand, this rhythm consists of "exciting stimuli"; that is, accents that objectionably depart from the metric regularity to which they supposedly ought to adhere. On the other hand, Adorno states, this irregular overlay does not disturb the "crude unity" of the "underlying rhythm."
The problem is that, although Adorno’s view does mirror the two main components of swing, it does so in caricatured form. What he cannot see—or hear—is that the two strata just identified catalyze each other, so that, contrary to him, the musical phrases are disturbed. By judicious note-place ment in the musical superstructure, it is felt as moving independently of the underlying pulse but also as constantly being recaptured by it. Sargeant does understand the matter, as illustrated by his description of the so-called “stop time” solo, where the rhythm section’s music is temporarily reduced to a skeletal pulse behind the soloist:

A soloist’s improvisation [then] plays against ... [the underlying] rhythm, filling up the intervals ... with percussive patterns and ... cycles that answer to different systems of accent from that represented by the fundamental rhythm. ... The listener’s sense of rhythmic orientation is disturbed. ... He fights the sense of unrest that this phenomenon induces, and then is relieved by the appearance of the faithful fundamental pulse which appears just where he expected, or hoped, to find it.  

Adorno does not appreciate how, from the interaction of note-placement in a musical superstructure against a relatively steady rhythmic infrastructure, new musical qualities emerge.

One of the main sources of the apparent disorder in jazz is the way the European melody is deflected in it by African influences: Unlike European melodies, African ones are typically “end-repeating.” When African melodies are varied, the part that changes is usually the beginning, while the endings remain comparatively similar to each other. This is particularly noticeable in vocal blues. To the Eurocentrist’s ear, the music seems to be running out of ideas just when it is supposed to be most charged with them. A more charitable view—even on the formalist’s own grounds—would be that the common endings bring unity to the previous variety. However, we cannot entirely rationalize jazz melody while remaining within the formalist perspective. For instance, melody in jazz is deflected by rhythmic agendas that have partly African roots. Consider the way Louis Armstrong would repeat a three-note figure many times—as in the wind-up solo of “West End Blues.” If we regard the music from the point of view of the characteristic features of European melody, we will not get the point of the effort. If we hear it the right way, the music seems bursting at the seams with its powerful rhythmic inflection.  

The most difficult features of jazz melody for the Eurocentric ear to appreciate, however, are those that reflect the relationship between jazz melody and speech, a connection that clearly reflects African practice. For instance, African music brings “call-and-response” effects to jazz, e.g., the echoing pairs of riffs one hears particularly in swing music. To the formalist, insensitive either to the ground of such practices in linguistic practice or to their rhythmic function, such devices can seem pointlessly repetitive. In jazz, horns and voices have mirrored each other almost from the beginning. Instrumental lines will often be intentionally pushed off course to convey the effect of an expletive, a sob, or a laugh. Voices in jazz learned to sound like horns, as in scat, while horns learned to “speak.” The strategy by which horn players sound conversational becomes particularly pointed when several of them dialogue with each other. In such cases, the formal musical values of abstract sound structures give way to quasi-linguistic ones.

According to one view of this linguistic dimension of the music, jazz performers often engage in what Henry Louis Gates calls “signifying.” To signify in speech is to engage in a distinctively evasive kind of African American repartee. The effect—which listeners on the other side of the social line are intended not to get—is typically satirical or mocking. In this vein, Robert Walser devotes an essay to recuperating the Miles Davis performance cited at the beginning of this essay by arguing that the trumpet man was playing off on white pop singer Tony Bennett’s approach to the famous jazz standard. At this point, the syncretist’s argument begins to dovetail with that of the nonconformist.

To generalize the syncretist’s position, the salient features of jazz are resultant of the intersection of originally distinct practices, which become transfigured in the music by their interaction. The syncretist would try to convince the formalist that the peculiar harmonic, rhythmic, and melodic values that give jazz its special interest are emergent ones, not just more of the
same values already well embodied in European music.

Even if we bracket much of the apparent disorder in improvised jazz by appeal to the strategies discussed so far, the formalist may still feel that much of the music is fraught with a kind of disorder that cannot be placed in a better light by these means. As indicated at the beginning of this paper, we need to frame this residual element of disorder in the right way in order to articulate what might be said in mitigation of it.

Improvisation involves risk. In a situation involving risk, something of value must be at stake—in this case, the formal character of the musical product. However, the situation in jazz is distinctive. The risks one takes in building a bridge—to consider a case of a different kind—do not typically become qualities of the resulting structure. In the case of jazz improvisation, however, this is exactly what does happen. The risk-taking process itself becomes an ingredient in the result. But that is not all. In the bridge-building case, plans can be revised in the middle of the project if trouble arises. With improvised music, all attempts at revision too become part of the music. To frame this delicate situation correctly, we need to augment our formal account of the parameters of improvisation in section two with the concept of a regulative ideal, or, more precisely, a short hierarchy of such ideals.

i. An improviser (a) presents music intended to be worth hearing, by (b) determining a significant number of its features as he plays. Players may not always satisfy (a) while satisfying (b). However, it is a regulative ideal that an authentic player will aim to do both. If so, then even at this basic level—level one, let’s call it—a player like the putatively un inventive George Brunis was taking some risks.

ii. In one of his essays, André Hodeir concentrates on a particularly unexpected F# in a famous recorded performance of “Bag’s Groove” by Thelonious Monk. Such an example illustrates a secondary regulative ideal beyond the first-level obligation. A distinctive feature of jazz is the way its players look for opportunities to make daring moves. In its reflection of this goal, the title of one of Whitney Balliett’s collections of jazz criticism, The Sound of Surprise, is particularly apt.

This second-level ideal appears to govern musical practice in much improvised music outside jazz as well as in. In classical Iranian music, it is those “parts of the radif that lend themselves to far-flung improvisation [that] are valued; those that have predictability ... are lower. ... The exceptional and unexpected is valued.” Incidentally, the unexpected in jazz improvisation is quite different from the unexpected in a composed work. While we can look forward to the same “surprise” in a musical work on subsequent hearings, this is not the case with genuinely improvised music.

In connection with this secondary ideal, consider Sargeant’s vivid description of collective improvisation:

When ... players ... are not quite sure what is going to happen next the music takes on the aspect of a tussle in which individual players may actually try to unhorse each other, as well as the audience, by means of conflicting rhythmic impacts. When players, dancers and audience alike are hanging desperately to their sense of rhythmic orientation on one hand and are violently disturbing (or listening to it being violently disturbed) on the other hand, the result is jazz in its purist form.

Interestingly, in such a context, instrumentalists do not have to reach out very far musically in order to unbalance fellow players. A musician working by himself, however, has a more difficult project, namely, to outdo himself.

A daring player may pick notes that carry him to the edge or even beyond the bounds of what is acceptable in that style. Or he may go to or beyond the limit of what he is able to further develop. Undertaking to put his musicianship to tests that it may fail raises the risk-ante, obviously. Indeed, taking the more radical chances this regulative ideal dictates can adversely affect the realization of even modest first-level aims. Understandably, many improvisers only rarely exhibit this kind of daring; and few are this adventurous all the time.
iii. Finally, while we cannot safely generalize the point across the world’s improvised music, every jazz improviser acknowledges a tertiary regulative ideal to break out of the hand-me-down repertoire he has internalized. All players have heard the kind of advice Charlie Mingus was always giving, namely, to reach “beyond their formulas.” Such players do not merely strive to surprise us while working within an inherited style, but they look for ways to change those boundaries themselves. Such revisions typically meet with resistance, of course. Bandleader Cab Calloway was not sympathetic with the young Dizzy Gillespie’s attempt to break out beyond his formulas into the new harmonic territory of bebop. (Calloway said he wasn’t going to have any of Dizzy’s “Chinese music” in his band.)

Most improvisational efforts fall within the options sketched by the first two levels. But it is standard within the institution of jazz that players will look for opportunities to go beyond them. There is obviously no recipe for how to do this. Something like courage is required. But even the most willing revolutionary may be able to accomplish nothing useful if the time is not right for that change. We can, of course, cite exemplary cases of such breakouts. Looming above all others—according to most accounts—was Louis Armstrong, whose approach to rhythm took the music away from the ragtime syncopation that had earlier defined it, and thereby liberated the soloist to be a freely swinging performer. Beyond Armstrong, the obvious short list of such cases includes Charlie Parker, Ornette Coleman, and John Coltrane. Coleman, for instance, broke with the steady “netted” rhythm of mainstream jazz in favor of a constantly varying tempo rubato.

Now every jazz player knows that even the approximate realization of these regulative ideals is frustrated by practical considerations. Consider Benny Goodman’s players during the band’s sensational run at the Paramount Theater and the Pennsylvania Hotel in 1937, when they were obliged to play as many as ten shows a day. Under such pressure, they had little alternative but to work out basic solos on tunes like “Sing, Sing, Sing,” and to play them repeatedly with only slight variations. (The problem was compounded whenever players were obliged to repeat solos note for note because they had become record hits.) However, jazz improvisers had all-ways understood these demands for what they were—compromises of their main aims.

Let us now bring the foregoing to bear on the unresolved dimension of the formalist’s complaint. As we should see, it is not that the formalist is just wrong. The values he profiles are values we all prize. However, those values are systematically compromised by other aspects of the music, which are no less interesting. We can understand the problem better with the help of a particular kind of example.

In the long-playing-record era, some instrumentalists gained a reputation for unusual consistency in their improvising. The critic Nat Hentoff once drew attention to the remarkable consistency of Paul Desmond’s alto sax lines, for instance. In Desmond’s music, Hentoff said, we heard a mind moving with “eerie swiftness.” This sounds like a description of music to which no formalist could object. Hentoff’s point is that Desmond seemed able at once to invent both a germinal musical idea and a set of fully realized implications of it. The whole gave the effect of having been composed at leisure. But the description is curiously problematic. Just because Desmond’s mind moves with such “eerie swiftness,” we are not sure we do hear it moving swiftly—because we are not sure we hear it moving at all.

Here we get support from a jazz composer, who happens to be an improvising pianist as well, George Russell. According to Russell, a jazz composition should have the “intuitive” sound of uncomposed jazz—that is, the sound of music “being improvised.” In other words, even composed jazz should provide an image of music that is being searched out as it is being played by a player feeling his way. One is not obliged to like this sound, any more than one is obliged to like the twanginess of blue grass music or the florid sound of La Scala sopranos. But it is part of the sound of music of that kind.

And we get help from the aesthetician Francis Sparshott, who gives a vivid, friendly description of the intuitive sound of which Russell speaks. As Sparshott puts it, an improviser will often be trying to do two things at once, changing his mind about where he is going, starting more hares than he can chase at once, picking up where he thought he had left off but resuming what was not quite there in the
first place, discovering and pursuing tendencies in what he has done that would have taken a rather different form if he had thought of them at the time.\textsuperscript{44}

Now, Hentoff may be guilty of slight hyperbole in his description of Desmond’s playing. However, for the sake of argument, let us assume he is correct. If so, Desmond’s playing is quite different from the kind Russell had in mind. On the one hand, we may feel that this adds to Desmond’s luster: He is able to cover his tracks, so to say, by embedding his explorations seamlessly into the well-wrought music he plays. But if we never hear Desmond groping, or recovering his balance, then we may wonder just how daring he really is. The point is not to resolve the case with certitude. It is an illustration of a general tension built into our reception of this kind of music. It reflects, in part, the importance we place on the process by which improvised music is made.

I can be interested in how a bit of unfamiliar music of any sort will go. I can do this without having a sense of any actual activity transpiring before me at all. Indeed, there may be none—as with a piece of computer- or tape-generated music. With improvised music, too, I obviously have an interest in how the musical line will proceed. However, I am also interested in the player’s activity itself. I am interested in his on-the-spot gambits and responses. If things are going well, I wonder if he can sustain the level. If he takes risks that get him into trouble, I worry about how he will deal with it. If he pulls the fat out of the fire, I applaud. My overall interest in such music is predicated on both aspects of it—the quality of the result and the adventurous character of the actions that generate it.

The situation has a paradoxical quality. Indeed, the truth implicit in the formalist’s twin complaints might better be characterized as a dilemma: The tidier a player’s performance, the more routine it is liable to be. The more ambitious the performance, the more likely it is to be messy. In the degree to which a player’s performance takes on the smooth quality Desmond’s playing exhibits, its searching character will correspondingly tend to slide from view. To the extent that this searching quality is evident, the more likely we are to register disorder in the music.

The problem I am addressing here, note, is distinct from a purely formal tradeoff in jazz that is superficially similar to it. It has often been noted that group improvisation in early New Orleans music faced the difficulty that the players could only preserve some harmonic order because the musical parameters were restricted harmonically. A variant problem arose in the bop era, when the criterion for what notes were harmonically acceptable for soloists to play was greatly expanded. The tradeoff was that accommodations had to be pared down in order to avoid unwanted clashes with the player out front. (Free jazz solves the problem by loosening the criteria of what acceptably coordinates with what.) However, the double bind of which I am speaking here cannot be reduced to this formal problem. It can be identified in solitary performances, where no problem of coordination arises.

Clearly, the dimension of the music just reviewed is complicated by aspects of the music that syncretism and nonconformism profile. However, even if we were to bracket the features of jazz that it is the business of those perspectives to rationalize, I suggest jazz improvisation would be subject to contingencies that reflect its sheer improvisational character. This is the most fundamental reason for calling the music “an imperfect art.” But the imperfection is a vital dimension of the music, for along with it come compensations for those listeners whose attention is not controlled by strictly formalist considerations.

First, there is the general compensation that comes from expanding one’s focus beyond the character of the musical product to include the activity of generating that product. The listener who cannot do this will remain bewildered by the music’s chaotic aspects. And he will miss the excitement of savoring that the music is being carved out as it is being played—which happens to be, after all, the music’s raison d’être. An aesthetician might say that a jazz improviser is the artist who comes closest to exemplifying the Croce-Collingwood view of art before our very ears—a view of art as activity, and not merely as disherited product. The phenomenology of our appreciation of such music is striking: We find ourselves slipping back and forth between our hopes for the ultimate quality of the music and our fascination with the activity by which it is generated—even when those actions appear to threaten the quality of the resulting music. The
strain contributes to the music’s fascination, rather than detracting from it.

Compensations also arise from our appreciation of the ways players convert their confrontation with the problem we have described into an individualized feature of style. Miles Davis’s playing, for instance, typically consisted of short, meditative bursts of notes interspersed with pauses. The pauses were not merely the breathing spaces demanded by playing a wind instrument. They allowed Miles partly to transform hesitations about what to play into the music played.

Finally, there is the compensation that derives from the off-the-wall moves with which players try—and often manage—to redeem the imperfections for which their daring is responsible. I conclude with a classic example.

In the early notes of the famous a cappella introduction to his Okeh recording of “West End Blues,” Louis Armstrong leads off with a thrillingly nervy trumpet flourish. But one can sense that from the starting line he is going too quickly into those first notes. Louis’s musically beautiful third-measure solution seems to be as spontaneous as the gesture that got him into trouble in the first place. He slows down the overall tempo just a little and, as Gunther Schuller notes, in such a way as to place the new notes in a definite rhythmic relationship to the previous tempo, so that he preserves an underlying pulse through the change.45 Much of the beauty of the passage reflects, first, his spontaneous plunge into the unknown and, second, his equally spontaneous solution to his self-created problem. The moment is a brief one. But it is out of such stuff that the finest improvisational jazz is made.

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1. The title of a recording by guitarist Eddie Lang issued on Brunswick 6254 in 1932. This essay, in a much earlier version, was prepared for an anthology that did not see the light of day. After laying it aside, I took it up again and extensively reworked it. I have been helped by the comments and views of Philip Alpers, Jane Ashby, Emily Foster, Roosevelt Porter, and Diana Raffman.


3. The performance is on Columbia CS 9106, My Funny Valentine: Miles Davis in Concert.


6. Gioia, The Imperfect Art—Reflections on Jazz and Modern Culture, p. 60. The description is prompted in part by Bill Evans’s liner notes to Miles Davis’s famous recording, Kind of Blue (Columbia CS 8163). Evans borrows the idea from a description of a form of Oriental visual art in which the artist is required to be spontaneous.

7. I am sensitive to the question of which pronoun to use here—“he,” “she,” or “s/he.” The problem is exacerbated in this case by the fact that women are still, unfortunately, in the minority in the jazz business. To use “she” or even “s/he” gives the misleading impression that the facts are otherwise.

8. I am here making a very rough allusion to some concepts in Jean-Paul Sartre’s philosophy. See his essay “Jazz in America” in Frontiers of Jazz, ed. Ralph de Toledano (London: Frederick Ungar, 1966). It is hard not to believe that Sartre saw jazz as a kind of metaphor for his existentialist vision of human life.

9. See Garry Hagberg, Art as Language (Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 82–83. Hagberg argues that we do both without the necessity of working out—in a mental “template”—either the rules of grammar or their application to the case at hand prior to actually generating words.


16. Ibid., p. 17.

17. As recorded at a live performance in the Stuttgart Beethoven Hall, “George Russell at Beethoven Hall,” BASF recording MC ZS125.

18. Groups like Tiny Bells, for instance, or the Saturnalian Trio.


26. Adorno, On Popular Music, p. 26. Curiously, neither the formalism nor the absolutism is a view Adorno maintains outside his diatribe against popular music, which for him includes jazz. Again, see this author’s “Adorno’s Critique of Popular Culture—The Case of Jazz Music.”


30. See the seminal essay on the matter by Jeanette Murphy in Popular Science Monthly (September, 1899) for details.


36. Except, of course, in recorded form, which, as I have argued elsewhere, constitutes a problem.


39. The historical platitude about Armstrong is probably an oversimplification. Jelly Roll Morton was clearly a swinging performer in his own right. However, the music that came to be called “swing” in the 1930s probably did evolve under the influence of Armstrong’s style.

40. See his own words about the matter in Michael J. Budds, Jazz in the Sixties (University of Iowa Press, 1978), p. 69.

41. Another type of case does not concern us here: those in which solos were worked out in advance as elements in jazz compositions, as in much of the work of Jelly Roll Morton and Duke Ellington.


43. Cited in Harrison, A Jazz Retrospect, p. 61. In connection with George Russell’s idea that the music should sound as if improvised, one is reminded of Wayne Booth’s concept of an implied author in literature, adapted interestingly by Kendall Walton in his “Style and the Products and Processes of Art,” in The Concept of Style, ed. Berel Lang (The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), pp. 45–66. Artworks often look or sound as if made in ways they are not made, e.g., Mozart’s “Musical Joke.” Likewise, in the composed jazz of which Russell speaks, we hear music that sounds improvised.


45. Again, see the acute analysis of the performance by Gunther Schuller, Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development.