

**Processes, Applications, and Ethics  
in Qualitative Research**

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## Blue Note Classics

### An Analytical, Comparative and Historical Study of Eleven Jazz Recordings

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In music, when one composes, the artist creates new musical statements based on established structures and the interpretation or transformation of these structures. The artist will be affected by his or her environment and, most importantly, the need to communicate through self-expression. The desire to communicate and express one's self is what drives the composer to create. Saxophonist David Liebman (1988), in his book *Self-Portrait of a Jazz Artist*, described the artist as "a person who spends his life trying to be in touch with his inner self and attempts to communicate these perceptions to the world through a chosen art form" (p. 1). Liebman continued by stating "an artist is constantly confronted with the dilemma of his need and ability to communicate to others what he feels" (p. 2).

While the act of composition must take into account the various elements of music—melody, harmony, rhythm, form, texture and the finer nuances—a composer has the luxury of time while the improviser does not. The composer can reflect and revise or, if so inclined, actually stop and begin again. The improviser, on the other hand, must "perform in real time, that is, they cannot go back and change what they have played" (Johnson-Laird, 1987, p. 77). The improviser uses the creative process in its purest form.

While improvisation has been an element in music for centuries, "jazz has brought about a renaissance in improvisation, providing a style which is conducive to spontaneous creation..." (Coker, 1964, p. 1). Coker continued:

Jazz music, with its roots in basic rhythms and simple melodies, has developed naturally into a blend of musicianship, humanity, and intellect, having universal appeal. Improvisation has existed in other styles, but in the classical music of Western civilization its use has been stifled by enlarged instrumentations and the complexity of compositional techniques which have made no allowances for this means of individual expression. The composer achieves the effect of spontaneity when his written music flows naturally and is well played (p. 1).

The jazz artist creates a spontaneous musical adventure by using "creativity, imagination, and craftsmanship" (Brown, 1981, p. 35). Coker (1964) stated, "the style of the individual player is affected by his personality, his intelligence, his talent, and his coordination" (p. 2). The artist's personality, imagination, craftsmanship and other personal factors are all important in the creative process of improvisation. However, as a creative process improvisation also depends upon how these individual factors interact with the environment which includes other artists. Liebman wrote (1988):

As a performing artist, the improviser is obviously affected by his psychological and physical state at the time of playing. The events of a particular day, either positive or negative, must influence the musician's temperament and therefore his performance. And of course if there is a physical ailment, it can directly influence technique and execution as well (p. 8).

Liebman continued:

A jazz group is a showcase for how people relate to each other. The actual situation is in theory like a democratic government. Everybody is supposedly free to have their say, meaning that the quality of vibrations among a



group of artists cannot help but be reflected in performance (p. 27).

## Purpose

The primary purpose of this study was to more fully understand the creative process of jazz improvisation. The research focused on discerning what personal factors enter into improvisation and apprehending how personal qualities interact with environmental factors which result in creative improvisation. The first objective of this study was to define the creative process and how an individual might participate in the process. Next, the creative process was studied as it applied to music. Finally, the unique qualities of jazz improvisation were examined as well as what factors might affect the jazz artist.

While jazz educators have made considerable progress during the past 25 years defining the problem areas concerning the creative process by focusing mainly on demystifying jazz improvisation by reducing it to its most easily understood components. Many excellent and innovative teaching aids have been developed to assist the music educator and student; however, they have been primarily concerned with the technical side of the music. Until recently, comparatively little research has been done concerning the creative and aesthetic aspects of this music.

## Methodology

To fully appreciate the creative process involved in jazz improvisation, it would be helpful to understand this process from the artist's perspective. In jazz improvisation, predetermined symbols, language and behavior provide the context in which an individual expresses his interpretation of reality; reality as interpreted by each artist based on their prior values, beliefs and experiences. This practice is known as symbolic interaction—meaning created through the manipulation of symbols, language and behavior. This process is best understood through methods of qualitative research.

Eleven musical examples from the Blue Note Record catalog were chosen to be examined so one might better understand how an individ-

ual artist affects the creation of a jazz composition and performance. The pieces examined include:

John Coltrane's *Moment's Notice*  
Kenny Dorham's *Blue Bossa*  
Benny Golson's *Along Came Betty & Blues March*  
Herbie Hancock's *Dolphin Dance & Maiden Voyage*  
Joe Henderson's *Recorda-Me'*  
Lee Morgan's *Ceora*  
Woody Shaw's *The Moontrane*  
Horace Silver's *The Preacher & Nica's Dream*

The 11 musical examples were selected with the assistance of jazz educators David Baker (Indiana University), Jerry Coker (University of Tennessee) and Dan Haerle (North Texas State University). These selections were chosen because of their historical significance as compositions and as performances. Each was recorded during a 10 year period, 1955-65, for the Blue Note Record label and represent, not only the unique sound and style of that company, but an evolution which occurred in jazz taking the music from bebop into post-bop and other contemporary styles. The 11 musical examples feature many of the innovative composers and performers that helped shape jazz during this time.

Since the artist's perspective concerning a creative endeavor was the main thrust of this inquiry, the data gathered for this study utilized qualitative research techniques. In an attempt to obtain a better understanding of the creative process in improvisation and to check for consistency, triangulation of data was applied. Triangulation was especially important since the musical samples being examined were recorded over 25 years ago; therefore, it was not possible to be in the natural setting to observe the event. Information was gathered from various sources: artist questionnaire, telephone and personal interviews with the artists, written and recorded input from respected jazz educators and professional musicians, books, record jacket liner notes and personal observations of the recorded material.



Living artists who were involved in each selection were sent a questionnaire to be completed in writing. The questionnaire was used to collect both specific and general information from the artist concerning the performance in question. It was also used as a means of introducing this project to the artists. In addition, the questionnaire helped to clearly define important areas of inquiry which would be examined during the interviews.

In-depth structured interviews were the main vehicle for obtaining information from the artists. During the interviews, the artists were encouraged to describe, to offer opinions and to explain from their perspective the creative process involved in jazz improvisation. While the final product or outcome was a major factor in the selection of the material examined, the research concentrated on discovering the process an artist would encounter in the creation of an improvised musical work. Quotations and anecdotes were used to express the artist's viewpoint and to gain perspective. In addition, respected jazz educators and other professional musicians by way of questionnaire, taped or personal interview also offered additional insights on the music, composers and artists being studied.

Finally, after organizing the data from the questionnaires and transcribing the taped telephone and personal interviews, a coding system was developed to coordinate and reduce the information collected. This information included how the leader or composer expressed his ideas and concepts concerning a musical composition, the rehearsal of the music, the relationship of the participants, the actual recording, and environmental and outside factors. An analysis of this information offered insight into the artists perceptions and the creative process involved in jazz improvisation. Specific questions concerning each piece include: How did the leader/composer get his ideas across? How much time was given to rehearsing a new composition? How were rehearsals conducted? Did the performers offer any input concerning the composition? How important was the interaction between individuals? What are the considerations when forming a group? What outside factors affected the performance?

## Findings

In general, an artist in mainstream jazz will create an improvisation within the framework of a tune, in which the melody is stated and then some of the performers are given the opportunity to create new material in relation to the tune. This provides a situation in which each improviser creates a composition within the original composition making the tune an ever changing creation. The fact that each improviser will create a new composition within the original composition is the most unique feature of a jazz performance. Since every individual is different, each artist, whether acting as the soloist or as an accompanist, will contribute their own interpretation of the composition which in turn will influence the other performers' interpretations each time the selection is performed. While the melody and basic structure of the composition will remain relatively intact, other elements of the work, like the harmonic progression, rhythmic feel or tempo, may be altered or changed depending upon the artists performing the work.

Eight of the 11 compositions examined in this study were recorded by groups formed only for the recording date with minimal rehearsal time (one or two rehearsals). The other three compositions, *Nica's Dream*, *Along Came Betty* and *Blues March* were recorded by working groups, which had the luxury of extensive rehearsal and performance time. Composers Horace Silver and Benny Golson were most concerned with rehearsal time. Both were also members of working groups, Silver was the leader while Golson was the musical director. Under their direction and due to the length of time each group had to work together, Silver and Golson were able to have extensive rehearsal time and the opportunity to perform their compositions before recording. In addition, most of the artists who participated in this study and who were involved in the recording of these selections would have preferred to have had additional time to acquaint themselves with the material.

The personal relationship which existed between the artists was acknowledged as important in the process of improvisation. These relationships were based on factors other than simply playing together. The familiarity and understanding between the artists was more of a factor in the success of a performance than was the amount of rehearsal



time or whether the group was a working unit. This understanding was sometimes described as "hearing the same way" or an appreciation for the others playing. Another important factor in understanding was "listening" to one another.

Often the artists played exceptionally well together, as if one person was playing two instruments. Benny Golson described this occurrence as "musical sympatico." While the artist was aware of this special empathy and discussed it with fellow artists, it could only be explained as an intuitive phenomenon.

In addition to ability and creativity, consistency of performance and compatibility of individuals are important considerations when forming a group. An artist needs to consistently produce material at a high level to actively participate and enhance the performance of the group. When listening to these recordings, it is apparent that these factors are present in the performances. It also became clear that to become a proficient jazz artist, an individual not only must study, participate in and listen to jazz music, but also be aware of other forms of music and cognizant of the surroundings and environment in which he or she lives.

While the composers and leaders were responsible for shaping the musical directions of the ensemble, the interaction that occurred between the artists, both as members of the group and independently, was extremely important to the success of the music. This became especially apparent since several of the artists appear on more than one recording under different leaders or as a leader in one instance and as a sideman in another. This occurred because these men were familiar with each other and shared compatible musical styles, recorded for the same record label and appeared on the music scene at approximately the same time.

Finally, the two most significant outside factors that affected the recording of the music examined in this study were Blue Note producers Alfred Lion and Frank Wolff and recording engineer Rudy Van Gelder. Through the support and skilled direction of these three men, artists recording for the Blue Note label were able to consistently create, perform and record innovative music, which has withstood the test of time.



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