

Article

Charting the Spiritual Experience in Jazz

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Abstract: This article examines the spiritual dimension of jazz performance by looking at first-person accounts of improvising musicians and locating their experiential descriptions within a spiritual framework. The spiritual context is here defined as the realm of invisible processes that support and underpin the visible and auditory dimensions of improvised music. By collating evidence through first-person accounts, a series of themes emerge (wonderment, force, inspiration, letting go, happening, connection, being yourself, meaning and staying in the present), which, when seen as parts of a holistic process, can provide important components that are often missed in jazz education and jazz performance.

Keywords: jazz; improvisation; spiritual; invisible realm

1. Introduction

In this article I explore the idea that improvising musicians experience two fundamental modalities within the process of playing music, and more specifically, improvised jazz. One is the visible realm of the music itself; the understanding of theory, the technical ability and the interaction with fellow musicians that cohere to create the auditory phenomenon of music. This visible realm is more than adequately represented by the proliferation of jazz theory books, online courses and degree programs, which primarily focus on chord scale theory. Chord scale theory is the process by which the musician learns to synchronise the “correct” scales to generic chord sequences found in jazz compositions, as well as how to employ various idiosyncratic jazz devices such as chromatic passing notes, enclosure techniques (employment of notes that surround chord tones), chord–tone placement and rhythmic patterns. These skills, alongside working on technique, sight reading, band communication skills, arranging and composing, form the fundamental curriculum that can produce a musician who sounds like they are playing in the style of “jazz”. However, there is also an invisible realm that manifests in the dimensions of subjective experience; memory, resonance between audience and players, flow states, values, feelings, and sometimes even transcendent moments when the player loses their sense of self, and the music takes over.

This invisible realm is not confined to jazz or indeed music at all. Connections between music and spiritual/religious experiences have been described by many writers in both fields; for example, jazz pianist and educator Jean Michel Pilc (1960–) has described improvising in jazz as a “state of grace” (Pilc 2012) where the music is a gift that is received through an act of surrender, and this corresponds to the work of jazz pianist and educator Kenny Werner (1951–), who describes improvising from what he calls “the space”, whereby the musician forgets themselves and receives the music also as a gift (Werner 1996). These types of descriptions closely correspond with descriptions of prayer and meditative experience found in the writings of contemplative monks, such as Thomas Merton (1915–1968) and Thomas Keating (1923–2018), who both talk about the loss of self within the contemplative experience and a subsequent surrender to a higher force, which leads to the “gift” of contemplation—being at one with God. The tension between the visible and invisible realms has been considered in studies such as that by Rinzler (2008), who looks at the pull of opposites in jazz from the relationship between creativity and tradition, art versus commerce to individualism and interconnectedness. It is the integration between the



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invisible and the visible that, as the musician matures, often becomes the more important goal of music-making, and through published interviews (Fewell 2014; Berliner 2009) with various musicians associated with jazz and improvisation, I look at what constitutes this invisible realm via first-person descriptions and key themes that emerge.

The research synthesis model as described by Cooper (2017) outlines the method employed in writing this article. The seven steps are as follows:

- Formulate the problem;
- Search the literature;
- Gather information;
- Evaluate the quality of the studies;
- Analyze and integrate the outcomes of the studies;
- Interpret the evidence;
- Present the results.

(Cooper 2017, p. 16)

In this instance, the problem was trying to understand and gather evidence on the subjective experience of jazz musicians as it pertains to those phenomena that are not to do with the visible realm of music, such as technique and theory, and more to do with feelings, values, conscious and subconscious thought processes, and the mystery of the improvisational process. The relevant literature was that of interviews with jazz musicians, specifically jazz musicians that are well known (in jazz circles) and have had years of experience playing at high-end professional levels, where the learning process is already automatic, and subsequently experiences of flow and ideas surrounding the philosophy and values around playing have had time to mature. The interviews were also selected based on the interviewer or interviewee directly covering the theme of the internal processes of improvisation, and this direct correlation is how the quality of studies was considered viable. The analysis involved recognising and gathering recurring themes and terms that occurred through these various accounts, and the way this has been presented has been via a series of categorised themes.

Saxophone player Art Pepper (1925–1982) and jazz pianist and author Mark Levine (Levine 1995) represent relatively opposite views on playing jazz in the following two quotations. The first is from Pepper:

“I forgot everything, and everything came out. I played way over my head. I played completely different than he did. I searched and found my own way and what I said reached the people. I played myself, and I knew I was right and the people loved it, and they felt it. I blew and blew, and when I finally finished I was shaking all over; my heart was pounding; I was soaked in sweat, and the people were screaming; the people were clapping, and I looked at Sonny, but I just kind of nodded, and he went, ‘All right.’ And that was it. That’s what it’s all about.” (Pepper quoted in Floyd 1995, p. 139)

The contrasting quotation is found in one of the more popular jazz theory books written by Mark Levine:

“A great jazz solo consists of: 1% magic 99% stuff that is Explainable/Analyzable/Categorizable Doable.” (Levine 1995, p. vii)

Pepper summarises the intensity and pathic, spiritual qualities of the improvisational experience when a musician transcends their expectations and plays something with meaning that connects with the audience and is in some way transformative. Levine, on the other hand, atomises jazz into a theoretical practice.¹ Soelle (2001) a philosopher and theologian, proposes that “everyone has experienced mystical or spiritual dimensions within their life, regardless of whether the experience is framed as ‘spiritual’”. Soelle describes “common patterns” that emerge from cross-referencing numerous accounts of mystical experience:

“Some essential features of such mystical overwhelmingness are a feeling of being one with all that lives, an immersion or diving into a hitherto unknown whole, a

cessation of the ego and a simultaneous discovery of the real self, amazement, and an intensive, unfathomable joy. These dimensions are often described as basic mystical experiences.” (Soelle 2001, p. 20)

In studying a range of first-person accounts of jazz musicians, there are clear areas of common ground between the mystical experience that Soelle (1929–2003) describes, and the invisible dimensions of music making that can contribute to the understanding of what could be meant by spiritual in the context of improvisation. Selected interviews from those carried out by Fewell (2014) with 25 professional improvising musicians, primarily from a jazz background, will be used alongside first-person accounts from musicians such as Keith Jarrett, Miles Davis, Charles Mingus and John Coltrane to provide the data for this article. Through studying and analysing these interviews and gradually refining the data down to the most relevant topics, themes emerge that correspond to the ideas found in Soelle. These themes are wonderment, force, inspiration, letting go, happening, connection, being yourself, meaning and staying in the present. Each of these themes will be looked at in turn, but as will be seen, the themes overlap and are all constituent parts of an overall process.

2. Wonderment and Force

The initial step of becoming a jazz musician is the desire to play in the first place, and this initially occurs through the act of hearing jazz, either live or on a recording, and connecting with it in some way. The saxophone player Joshua Redman described hearing the Sonny Rollins album *Saxophone Colossus* (Rollins 1956) as a “monumental experience” (Ratliff 2008, p. 130); Marilyn Crispell said she was crying and shaking when she heard *A Love Supreme* and that it was a “totally spiritual experience” (Fewell 2014, p. 186). In the case of Pat Metheny, he recounts hearing Wes Montgomery as a young jazz fan, and that he was immediately hooked. For every jazz artist, there is usually a formative experience when they heard something and were overcome with a sense of wonder, amazement or curiosity, which eventually led to a vocation in jazz.

The philosopher George Steiner suggests that art induces a sense of familiarity, as if a particular art-object is specifically oriented towards that particular person’s psychic make-up.² He says that “It is as if the honeycomb of each individual receptivity, of each individual psychic indwelling, were intricately specific” (Steiner 1991, p. 183), and that there is an immediate resonance between the art-object and the person that it fits. Soelle says that this sense of wonder can also have its darker side, a sense of something that blends “amazement and fright” (Soelle 2001, p. 85), as seen in the vivid description at the beginning of Miles Davis’ autobiography where he talks about his encounter with a blue flame as a three-year-old child when he was playing around a gas stove.

Davis describes the following encounter:

“ . . . I remember being shocked by the woosh of the blue flame jumping off the burner, the suddenness of it . . . I saw that flame and felt the hotness of it close to my face. I felt fear, real fear, for the first time in my life. But I remember it also like some kind of adventure, some kind of weird joy, too. I guess that experience took me someplace in my head I hadn’t been before. To some frontier, the edge, maybe, of everything possible. I don’t know; I never tried to analyse it before. The fear I had was almost like an invitation, a challenge to go forward into something I knew nothing about. That’s where I think my personal philosophy of life and my commitment to everything I believe in started, with that moment . . . In my mind I have always believed and thought since then that my motion had to be forward, away from the heat of that flame.” (Davis and Troupe 1990, p. 1)

Davis’ description fuses joy and fear, and whilst this has no specific musical content, this experience seemed to shape Davis philosophically, driving his values around music-making as something that replicated the initial experience of being taken to an edge of creative possibility and opening up a challenge, which he would navigate in virtually every musical situation he found himself in, “ . . . to go forward into something I knew nothing about” (Davis and Troupe 1990, p. 1). Jazz musician and multi-instrumentalist Joe McPhee (1939–)

explains that there is a “force” that drives the music and is also the centre of the music (Fewell 2014, p. 99). This idea is echoed in numerous accounts of other jazz musicians, for example, pianist Marilyn Crispell (1947–), who describes playing as trying to connect with a “universal energy”, whilst Irene Schweizer describes being touched by a feeling of “force” and “strength” in the midst of playing. The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) suggested that music provides a symbolic analogue of our emotions and feelings:

“ . . . the inexpressible depth of all music, by virtue of which it floats past us as a paradise quite familiar and yet eternally remote, and is so easy to understand and yet so inexplicable, is due to the fact that it reproduces all the emotions of our innermost being, but entirely without reality and remote from its pain.” (Schopenhauer 1969, p. 264)

Here, the central force of music is our own emotions, feelings and inner life. Equally, life itself and our experience in the world are what make up the impetus behind the symbolic language of the music. Armstrong’s credo that “what we play is life” (Armstrong 2001) has been echoed as a philosophy throughout jazz history. For example, jazz pianist Hampton Hawes (1928–1977) says of the correlation between an ordinary day and the creating of music:

“Everything you do is important and connected with everything else whether you’re playing piano, harp at St. Peter’s gate, or checkers in the park. The way you get up in the morning, smell the leaves, have your juice or something funny like a jelly sandwich and a malt, scratch a dog’s head and say hello to some kids, drive your car, go to the can, feel the sun—that’s where imagination and soul come from.” (Hawes 2001, p. 91)

For Hawes, the central force of his music is the internalisation of his own lived experience, so the idea of force from an internal perspective is made up of the musician’s imagination, including all of the musical influences and life experiences that the musician has absorbed over the years. Galper (2005) says that the person is the instrument, whilst the mechanical instrument—like the piano or Saxophone—is merely an output device that serves as a mediation between this inner force and its symbolised form through musical language.

The idea of force can also be seen as external, where the musician, having developed the prerequisite skills, aligns themselves with a musical energy or source that they tap into. For example, trumpeter Roy Campbell Junior (1952–2014) describes this external force as “something beyond myself that creates what I’m doing. In other words, I would say that I’m an instrument of an instrument” (Fewell 2014, p. 131). The jazz pianist Matthew Shipp calls his own process “ . . . reverence to an animating force” (Fewell 2014, p. 109), Marilyn Crispell calls it connecting with a “universal energy” (Fewell 2014, p. 185), and Saxophone player Albert Ayler describes how he “soared with the spirits” and could “tap into the universal” (Bivins 2015, p. 32).

In all these examples, there is a sense of something bigger than the musicians that is outside of them, but that they can access. Some musicians, such as Keith Jarrett, have gone into more detail over the mechanics of this process. For example, Jarrett proposes that there are three figures at play when he improvises, and these are the improviser, the spontaneous composer, and the listener. The improviser “ . . . sits there, confident in his ability to find some way from A to B (although he has no idea what B is)”. The spontaneous composer “ . . . sends down material . . . on the spur of the moment whenever the improviser calls for it”, whilst the listener is there “ . . . monitoring the proceedings and trying not to judge too quickly or intervene” (Lake and Griffiths 2007, p. 241).

From Jarrett’s perspective, the spontaneous composer is the “force”, generating ideas for the improviser and the listener. Whilst Jarrett’s description does not imply any kind of mystical or religious content, the variety of accounts around this category of “force” moves across a spectrum of interpretations, from agnostic descriptions like Jarrett’s, through to Coltrane’s more religious proclamations that it was “God” channelling the music through him (Howison 2012). The notion of this force is open to interpretation, and whether it is

external or internal, it is an experience validated by a wide variety of improvising musicians and is part of the invisible realm of spiritual experience within music. The next section examines the themes of inspiration, letting go and happening within the context of musical improvisation.

3. Inspiration, Letting Go and Happening

The word “inspiration” is etymologically connected to the “influence of God” (Fewell 2014) and to being breathed into; to put “spirit” and life into the human body. In musical terms, it is having some form of inner guidance as to what to play next. If “force” is like Jarrett’s “spontaneous composer” who sends the music down, then inspiration is the “improvisers” domain, taking from the source of the music and creating ideas from it. As with the concept of “force”, there are internal and external factors to consider. External sources of inspiration are found in looking at other artists working in the genre, or as guitarist Jim Hall suggests, in other art forms such as paintings, poetry and literature (Hall 1991). Collaborations with other musicians or artists can add a new level of inspiration, as can situations arising in social contexts, as Wadada Leo Smith says:

“... we have to now come up with something that would make an audience feel that we have both researched and been inspired by these geniuses that preceded us. And we have to come up with something new and inspirational to fit the times. Why do I want to play an ‘ooh-bop shabam’ like from 1939 when I’m looking at the World Trade Centre towers falling down in 2001? I don’t think those things fit, or are an apt response to the human condition today.” (Fewell 2014, p. 174)

Bassist and composer Charles Mingus was inspired by the injustice of his times (Dunkel 2012) to compose and perform politically motivated and socially relevant music, and he created the “workshop” approach³ for his rehearsals to ensure that inspiration and innovation would be encouraged within the performances. There are times when inspiration wanes, and this can take place over a single solo or over a matter of years. Miles Davis famously went into a hiatus between 1975 and 1980 because as he says “... It just stopped and all of a sudden, I couldn’t play anything” (Davis and Troupe 1990, p. 499). He lost his inspiration and because he was a musician with a sense of integrity, he refused to play gigs just getting by on technical ability. Davis began painting instead and eventually came back to create brand new contexts for his playing once he rediscovered his inspiration. As jazz pianist and educator Barry Harris says:

“There are drought periods ... and then, all of a sudden, there’s an oasis. Because you never know when the revelations will come to you ... you have to practice every day, even when you’re not inspired, so that you’re at your instrument to receive the revelations when they do come.” (Berliner 2009, p. 494)

Inspiration, by all accounts, seems to come in waves over the course of a musical career, but this should not stop the musician making sure that the technical skills and vocabulary and ear training are all at peak level ready to capture the “revelations”—as Harris calls them—when they do come. From an internal perspective, there seems to be a process that allows the musician to draw from the “force” of the music to generate inspired ideas. Pianist Fred Hersch suggests that inspiration is “... like you’ve got this third ear that oversees the whole business—the craft part—and that’s what tells you what to do when you solo.” He explains, “If you’re going to repeat a phrase, repeat it in a different way, change it a little bit; make it say something; make it speak differently ... ” (Berliner 2009, p. 207). This implies that the imagination is working in relation to the source of creativity in a dialogue, and this idea is also found in how Coltrane describes his own process when he says “The reason I play so many sounds ... is because I’m trying so many things at one time, you see. I haven’t sorted them out. I have a whole bag of things that I’m trying to work through and get the one essential, you know ... ” (Porter 1998, p. 158). This suggests that there is something “essential” Coltrane is searching for in the process of making music,

and that what we hear in his playing is not an attempt at some aesthetically pleasing or technically brilliant solo to impress his fans, but an internal process based on musical rigour, artistic value and inspiration.

If inspiration could be thought of as a form of artistic input, then the output relies on the musician's ability to let go and allow the music to flow through them. Pianist and educator Kenny Werner says that "Improvisation . . . requires a total surrender to the moment. It's similar to what yoga master Amrit Desai often says about 'letting go', coming down from your 'thinking center' and into your 'heart center'" (Werner 1996, p. 16). The central idea is for the "chattering" mind (or the cognitive region of the brain) to stay out of the way whilst intuition and musical instinct become the guides. As Fewell explains:

"When you say 'being in a place where I can get out of the way,' I think that's one of the necessities of improvising. I always feel music flows best when I'm guided by instinct more than my intellect." (Fewell 2014, p. 185)

This intimates that the "I" that is trying to fulfil the more egoistic needs of external gratification, power and control has to move aside, and in doing this, the more spontaneous side of music is able to emerge. Any attempt to force the music via willpower with preconceived ideas usually comes out as convoluted, with a lack of continuity and wholeness. However, if the musician is able to let go into the music, to allow the inspiration to guide the solo and to tap into the source of the music, then the result is something unexpected. As jazz pianist Marilyn Crispell explains when she allows herself to relax into the improvisation: "The more I feel I have to make something happen, the less it happens. And the more I just relax into it, the more it really happens, including the very intense stuff" (Fewell 2014, p. 188). Here, Crispell is suggesting that by letting go and relaxing, the music takes on a new direction, which is more than the player was necessarily anticipating. This is also described by pianist Keith Jarrett who, in discussing the importance of staying with the process of playing, rather than worrying about the musical product, says the following:

"But, what is amazing about the process is that, without attempting it, forms reveal themselves . . . I should not play down here the difficulty: it is by no means as easy as it sounds to be ready for those forms to emerge. (To allow this we have to be incredibly intimate with all possible forms). It is perhaps the hardest musical discipline I know of to allow the music to take place, despite oneself . . . every nanosecond there has to be a reaffirmation of principles and, if necessary, a realignment of priorities." (Lake and Griffiths 2007, p. 241)

Jarrett makes an important point that these "forms" emerge not through arbitrary and uninformed exploration, but through a knowledge of forms within a genre that includes a comprehensive technical ability that invites the possibility of these inspired "happenings" to emerge. This "happening", which is the result of "letting go", can either be a collective thing when the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts, or an individual thing when something new is discovered. In terms of the individual, one of the most famous accounts in jazz when a "happening" occurred is when Charlie Parker found his vocabulary⁴, and in his own words "came alive". In each case, the musician seems to know that there is something more to uncover than what they are currently playing, and they stay with this problem until the solution comes to light.

Music's ability to induce trance states and altered reality (Aldridge and Fachner 2006) is another way these happenings occur. In the 1960s, Coltrane improvised for long periods over repetitive modal pedals in order to develop new directions in his playing with the intention of not only changing his own state, but the state of those listening (Porter 1998). He was consciously looking for these "happenings", which is why his solos were so long. In effect, Coltrane facilitates the existence of the music, and then he lets the music lead him. On these trance states, Coltrane states:

"That may be a secondary thing . . . but I haven't reached the stage yet where I'm trying consciously to produce effects of that kind. I'm still primarily looking into certain sounds, certain scales. The result can be long or short. I never know.

It's always one thing leading into another. It keeps evolving, and sometimes it's longer than I actually thought it was while I was playing it. When things are constantly happening, the piece just doesn't feel that long." (Cole 2001, p. 140)

Here, Coltrane not only implies that the experience of time is altered as he plays, but also that he is in a relationship, or dialogue, with the music, and that he is not fully in control of it. Pianist Fred Hersch also outlines the idea that musicians cannot just recreate these happenings through acts of will and technical mastery alone. As he says, even if he practiced for hours⁵, he would not be able to recreate some of the moments where the music really comes alive. It is as if the musician is able to temporarily transcend their own ability. This idea of transcendent moments in improvisation is encapsulated in the following statement from jazz pianist Jean Michel Pilc:

"Rather, 'it' is an availability to the general rhythmic energy, an openness to the overall pulse, which leads to a state of zero inertia. When all players are in the zone, it swings, grooves and pulses by itself . . . in such a state you simply feel everything that is happening and react to it. You become it." (Pilc 2012, p. 57)

Here, Pilc uses words like openness and availability to a force that seem to suggest something beyond the musicians' self-contained autonomy. The result of this openness is that the music takes on a life of its own, and the musicians lose themselves into the flow of the music. The process of improvisation and the preceding themes that have been looked at so far generally take place within a group context, so the next theme to be explored is how the musician connects both to other musicians as well as their audience. Paradoxically, the draw of jazz for many musicians is also the sense of musical individualism, and how jazz musicians develop a unique voice within collective improvisation; this theme will also be explored in the next section.

4. Connection and Being Yourself

There are various perspectives involved when jazz musicians talk about connection. The first way connection is described in first-person accounts is with the other players. Trumpeter Joe McPhee talks about "connectivity" as the spiritual dimension of his musical practice (Fewell 2014, p. 100), and Rosemarie Hertlein equates spirituality with "connectedness" itself (Fewell 2014, p. 54). Joelle Leandre says that we are pulled towards sound, and this connection is spiritual (Fewell 2014, p. 199). The musicians can still maintain their own approach, style and musical concept in relation to a piece whilst working together to create unified performance. When a group really "connects", it sounds effortless; however, with a group where not everyone is fully engaged, or one of the group is more interested in their own musical pursuit, then the sense of connectivity is lost, and little new or inspiring material emerges.

One of the important considerations in group work is to listen to each other and be sensitive to what is going on in the music. Bass player Henry Grimes says how "improvising with others involves listening to them, giving them welcome . . . taking everything to a higher level together" (Fewell 2014, p. 244). Sometimes this happens better in groups that have rehearsed together for a long time, and sometimes this happens when the musicians have never met each other. Musicians need to be humble enough not to try and do their "stuff" (Nicholson 2005) over the tune to impress the audience or fellow musicians, but to connect through listening, responding, supporting and engaging with any interesting idea that emerges. Sometimes a more spiritual experience of connection can come about when the musicians enter a collective "flow state" together, as pianist Myra Melford describes:

"And you're describing an experience that really indicates that state where we no longer feel the boundaries of our own body or who's playing what—you're just *in* the sound, one with the sound, in a sense. That's certainly like an ultimate spiritual state to aspire to, and I think it is very healing." (Fewell 2014, p. 285)

Further to a sense of connection within the band, is connection between audience and band where a kind of energy is transmitted back and forth in a loop, as saxophonist Oliver Lake says:

“There’s a space you get to when you close your eyes and you’re just trying to go with the flow and make a communication with the musicians and a communication with the audience . . . My goal each time I play is to make a complete connection.” (Fewell 2014, p. 289)

The importance of the audience in playing a role in the music is echoed in many accounts of jazz musicians, for example, Bill Cole talks about how the audience—through listening—are also participating in the music (Cole 2001). Live performance venues for musicians to jam in are important not just for jazz education, but to keeping jazz alive as a form of evolutionary and innovative music. Coltrane explains that understanding the theory of jazz is of no importance to the listener, but just the emotional quality that is communicated:

“I never even thought about whether or not they understand what I’m doing . . . the emotional reaction is all that matters—as long as there’s some feeling of communication, it isn’t necessary that it be understood. After all, I used to love music myself long before I could identify a g minor 7th chord.” (Cole 2001, p. 171)

The jazz musician, in general, communicates feeling and emotion first, and this is what creates the connection. Marilyn Crispell talks of the importance of energy transmission (Fewell 2014) from the listener, which affects the music, and that whilst a recording can capture some of this spiritual connection, the live venue is where this really happens, she proposes that it is much more “powerful” to share physical space with the players because there is a feedback loop between player and listener. There is also the connection between the player and their music. The player needs to feel a connection to their actual sound first, and this is often overlooked in the hierarchy of jazz pedagogy. When we consider the established jazz icons like Miles Davis or Dizzy Gillespie, it often only takes one or two notes to recognise them, as Iyer explains: “The story dwells not just in one solo at a time, but also in a single note, and equally in an entire lifetime of improvisations” (Iyer 2004, p. 395).

The musician’s individual style and personal sound is another vital part of the equation when it comes to the spiritual aspects of jazz—in this instance, the idea that the “spirit” of the person, what constitutes their essence and uniqueness, is reflected in their music. The development of a personal style takes a considerable amount of work and time, as jazz pianist Bill Evans explains:

“I always like people who have developed long and hard, particularly through introspection and a lot of dedication. I think that what they arrive at is, usually, deeper and more beautiful than the person who seems to have that ability and fluidity from the beginning.” (Goldstein 1993, p. 94)

Evans is not just talking about technique, but about developing a personal language that comes initially from the process of listening to others, and then slowly discarding those things that do not fit and learning to adapt those things that do into a personal voice and comprehensive musical language. When discussing gig preparation, jazz guitarist Jim Hall says how he never listens to other players when driving to a gig. If he was listening to someone like Pat Martino, even though he loves his playing, part of Martino’s style may influence him and, as he says, the audience are coming to listen to Jim Hall, not Pat Martino (Hall 1991).

Style is what Pat Metheny calls the “envelope”, the real message is inside—the emotion, feeling, source. However, the envelope is still important and reflective of the source (Niles 2009). Whilst this category does stray into the visible realm of sonic and technical modalities, the process of bringing this together, whereby the language reflects and expresses the player, does remain an invisible and very personal journey, and there is an internal side to the process of discovering a unique voice. Style is an amalgamation of all the musician’s musical influences, as well as their personality coming through their music.

That is not to say that a highly-strung person will automatically adopt a style to replicate this, but that core elements of the personality—humour, integrity, warmth, intellect—will be reflected in the external packaging of the music.

In developing a personal voice, learning from the jazz tradition is important and the first step is the assimilation of other styles. When it came to playing solos in performance, Mehldau makes the following observation about those who did not listen to jazz and absorb any influences:

“What did they play? It was sort of like playing scales up and down the horn. What was striking was that they all sounded the same: One would think that with all the freedom that an improvised context could have, they might all play something different. But collectively, the kids who weren’t really listening to jazz actually encompassed a style of sorts, and that style was dictated by their limitation. The limitation was due to the fact that they hadn’t absorbed anything; they hadn’t begun to even mimic like we were.” (Mehldau 2019)

This is what Mehldau calls rootless creativity and is not the solution to originality. Mehldau himself is a musician who has forged a unique style that drew on but also deviated away from the core modern playing style developed by particularly Jarrett, Hancock, and Chick Corea in the late 1960s, and which had a considerable influence on most piano players of that era onwards. As Mehldau says, “True originality, and thus true creativity, never takes place in a historical vacuum; it is always rooted to something that has gone before” (Mehldau 2019).

In finding one’s musical voice, there is also the importance of the player’s relationship to their chosen instrument. The connection to a particular timbre, resonance, depth and feel of an instrument is an emotional and spiritual part of the process. When double bassist Charlie Haden died in 2014, many musicians paid tribute to the spirit of the sound of his double bass. For example:

“When I first heard Charlie Haden (on *Survivors’ Suite*—ECM 1085), I imagined his Bass must’ve been constructed without glue or joints, carved from one single tree: the tallest, most awe-inspiring tree from the world’s oldest forest. It came as no surprise then to discover as I heard more, that every note Charlie chose became the root of the music, nourishing the musicians and listeners, and connecting the music to the earth.” (Django Bates, quoted from *Digressions, Charlie Haden’s Virtual Wake* 2014)

What Bates is suggesting is that sound, encapsulated in one note or many, can articulate the spirit or essence of the player. The unique sound of the person is found in their phrasing, note choices, relationship to the instrument, personal sound, articulation, and the limits of their technique. These various aspects of style amalgamate to create a unique artistic voice. So far, this article has explored the themes of wonderment, force, inspiration, happening, connection and being yourself, all of which I have situated within the overarching theme of an invisible realm beneath the actual sonic events of music. Two more final themes of meaning within music and the importance of staying present within the performance will conclude this discussion.

5. Meaning and Staying in the Present

If style is the external packaging, there is also the internal dimension of the musical language, which is the meaning behind what the musician is doing. Meaning in music can have many different interpretations, such as how close the performer gets, through their art, to expressing their feelings and personality in relation to the underlying spiritual significance within the piece. As an example of the importance of meaning behind the music, there is a recorded conversation in between takes of *Giant Steps* (recorded in 1959) between Coltrane and his group. In the transcript, Coltrane expresses his disappointment with regard to his solo:

“I don’t think I’m gonna improve this, you know . . . I ain’t goin be sayin nothing, (I goin do) tryin just, makin the *changes*, I ain’t goin be, tellin no *story* . . . Like . . . tellin them *black stories*.” (Iyer 2004, p. 394)

Coltrane wanted to express the “truth” through his playing, as he said himself; “I think the majority of musicians are interested in truth . . . If you play something phony you know that’s phony” (Porter 1998, p. 259). So it is of no surprise that his concern is also about the inherent meaning within his playing, rather than just the technical aspects. The symbiotic relationship between the performer and the song is encapsulated in the example of Billie Holiday singing *Strange Fruit* (Cone 2013). Her own painful childhood, personal political drive and deeply expressive vocal style brought the club she was singing at to a standstill every night she performed it. In the history of jazz, it is arguably one of the most spiritually powerful performances captured on record. In the case of *Giant Steps*, there is not a particular message, but as the other band member says, the ability of Coltrane to be able to play over those changes and amount of creativity and commitment that has led him to that point *is the story*.⁶

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1934–2021) spent years studying people who engaged in activities that involved skills such as mountaineering, music, running, cooking, etc., and found that the common denominator within these pursuits was that people whose skills matched the activity would often enter an experience that he termed *optimal experience* or the *flow state*:

“We have called this state the flow experience because this is the term many of the people we interviewed had used in their descriptions of how it felt to be in top form: ‘It was like floating,’ ‘I was carried on by the flow’.” (Csikszentmihalyi 2002, p. 40)

An abbreviated list of the qualities that make up the flow experience includes the following:

- “You are completely involved in what you’re doing: you’re completely focused and concentrated.
- There is a sense of ecstasy—of being outside of everyday reality.
- There is a great inner clarity: you know what needs to be done and you get immediate feedback on how well you’re doing.
- You know that the activity is doable, that you have the necessary skills to complete the task successfully.
- You lose your sense of self and all of your worries and concerns drift away.
- You lose track of time and you are completely focused on the present moment.
- There is an intrinsic motivation—whatever produces flow becomes its own reward.” (Csikszentmihalyi 2002)

This is a secularised interpretation of what others may call spiritual experience, and Csikszentmihalyi himself makes parallels between religious experience and flow, proposing from his perspective that mystics and spiritual pilgrims in prayer and meditation are experiencing the same thing as a mountain climber in the midst of a great climb⁷, and that the experiences cited by the jazz musicians in performance are also experiencing flow.

Csikszentmihalyi suggests that the flow state itself is the meaning: “The purpose of the flow is to keep on flowing, not looking for a peak or utopia but staying in the flow” (Csikszentmihalyi 2002, p. 54), and the key component to flow is staying in the present moment and losing a sense of normal time. Improvising musician Wadada Leo Smith describes the importance of the present moment and how accessing it within improvisation leads to transformation:

“First of all, improvisation is an event that takes place in a specific zone or dimension, and that dimension is called the present . . . When this inspiration flows, it creates a dynamic connection with a force or element that brings in the context of transformation. Improvisation, because it’s done in the present, has already achieved this powerful element of transformation.” (Fewell 2014, p. 145)

Smith's quote draws together a number of previously discussed elements, describing how when inspiration "flows", it creates a relationship with a central force, which creates a "happening", or transformation as he calls it. Most of Kenny Werner's (Werner 1996) book *Effortless Mastery* is about getting the musician to become present, not worrying about what has happened—if the musician has made a mistake, for example—or what is going to happen, or worrying about how the musician can impress the audience in the next chorus. In staying present, the musician is able to focus on each note as it occurs and stay with the flow of the music, maintaining a heightened awareness of what is going on around themselves, thus responding to the music as it changes. The musician stuck in the past or future is playing from their "thinking" brain, worrying about past and future, and this rarely leads to inspiration, happening or transformation.

When the musician puts all their attention into playing, the music becomes automatic, where muscle memory and intuition take over and the player becomes one with the music. This is described by jazz pianist Jean-Michel Pilc in terms of a group playing; "when all players are in the zone, it swings, grooves and pulses by itself . . . in such a state you simply feel everything that is happening and react to it. You become it" (Pilc 2012, p. 57). He describes this as a "state of grace" when the musician not only "becomes" the music, but through openness and awareness, the musician is hearing things from an out-of-body perspective, and he grounds this in his own educational practice with music students, commenting on situations where the music is not flowing:

"The foundation these musicians are missing is some kind of sub-conscious energy, something rooted in the deepest areas of the brain, a deep and firmly grounded perceptive sense of music which allows you, in the moments of inspiration, to feel like you are not playing at all and you are actually in the room with the audience, listening to the music, enjoying every bit of it while your body double is playing. The state of grace." (Pilc 2012, pp. 29–30)

Pilc is describing the source of this state of grace as a "subconscious energy" in the brain, and that the musician must take a perceptive stance grounded in the present when they are aware of all that is going on around them. In a sense, the ability to stay present and in the moment is the *keystone* that brings all the other processes together. Because when you experience a piece of music that completely changes the course of your life (the theme of wonderment), you are fully present to the unfolding of this event. Further, the processes described in making music within an improvisational context—deriving music from a force, whether external or internal; finding inspiration in the moment, connecting to players and audience, letting go and allowing the music to happen and take on its own life, and being yourself musically and existentially (not doing what others expect of you)—all require present moment awareness.

6. Conclusions

Using first-person accounts of improvisation as the primary data, the themes of wonderment, force, inspiration, letting go, happening, connection, being yourself, meaning and staying in the present have been examined. I suggest that each theme is an important constituent part of the invisible realm of music-making that could be termed the spiritual side of playing jazz. Rather than being distinct and discrete themes, these dimensions of spiritual experience flow into each other and interact in a holistic process but breaking them down into themes is a useful means of thinking about the characteristics of how this invisible realm of experience unfolds. The implications for studies such as this, which attempt to understand areas of experience that are somewhat nebulous, and yet, as seen in the interviews, vitally important to the musicians, are to avoid the atomisation of the jazz learning process and embrace and validate all areas of learning and experience within the jazz tradition. Emphasis in Higher Education on employability and theory-first approaches in jazz—those tangible metrics that tick boxes that are more to do with statistics than individual experience—can be a danger to the possibilities of holistic learning, even for

those who do not have the opportunity to go into HE and learn from YouTube videos, which is also a growing trend.

If jazz is reduced to formulas, copying earlier styles and working primarily on technique and reading in order to play on cruise ships and in background wedding venues, then it will eventually become a museum piece, because essentially, jazz survives because it has a recognisable *spirit* to it—it is subversive, dissonant, innovative, evolutionary, syncretic, free and open to constant change—and it is that side of it that keeps it alive to this day, with musicians such as Hiromi Uehara, Snarky Puppy, Herbie Hancock or Maria Schneider as examples of this spirit in action. This is why researching what constitutes spiritual experience in jazz is so important and needs to be reinvigorated within jazz pedagogy and discourse.

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Notes

- ¹ This quote is taken out of context to make a point, but Levine does acknowledge the “magic” of jazz in other sections of his book.
- ² Steiner states “What I would call a ‘wobble’ in our psychic coordinates of temporality creates an opening for, a ‘hold’ for and sensation of familiarity with, the poem, the painting or the melody” (Steiner 1991, p. 180).
- ³ No music was to be read. The group had to learn all parts by ear, which took a lot longer but meant they had really absorbed the piece and could play around with it and push it emotionally and structurally (Saul 2003).
- ⁴ In like manner, Charlie Parker describes an eventful December evening in 1939 during a period in which he had “been getting bored with the stereotyped changes that were being used all the time . . . and I kept thinking there’s bound to be something else. I could hear it sometimes but I couldn’t play it. Well, that night, I was working over ‘Cherokee,’ and, as I did, I found that by using the higher intervals of a chord as a melody line and backing them with appropriately related changes, I could play the thing I’d been hearing. I came alive” (Berliner 2009, p. 223).
- ⁵ “I was playing this week, and I played all this technical stuff that I couldn’t sit down and play now—even if I could practice it for eight hours. At that moment, the music was happening. Everything just fell into place in my hands and in my head. I felt I was expressing something with everything I played. When I’m playing well, there’s a certain freedom of just being able to do anything really” (Berliner 2009, p. 217).
- ⁶ “However, his hint at larger concerns of cultural connection (‘telling’ them black stories’) implies that his intentions transcend the etudelike nature of this clever harmonic progression, and even rise above this compositional idea of coherence. With these four words he seems to reach for musical statements in which no less than his whole community could hear its inexhaustible narrative multiplicity reflected” (Iyer 2004, p. 394).
- ⁷ “A mountaineer expands on the same theme: ‘When you’re climbing, you’re not aware of other problematic life situations. It becomes a world unto its own, significant only to itself. It’s a concentration thing. Once you’re into the situation, it’s incredibly real, and you’re very much in charge of it. It becomes your total world’” (ibid., p. 59).

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