

The IASJ Journal of Applied Jazz Research

Volume 1
Issue 1 2022 *IASJ Journal of Applied Jazz
Research*

Article 11

2022

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Recommended Citation

Pinheiro, Ricardo (2022) "Exploring Jam Sessions in New York," *The IASJ Journal of Applied Jazz Research*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 11.

Available at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/iasj_journal/vol1/iss1/11

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Exploring Jam Sessions in New York¹

Ricardo Pinheiro

Abstract

This paper addresses the relationship between jazz jam sessions in Manhattan, and the concepts of Scene, Ritual and Race. These issues emerged during research that, from an ethnomusicological perspective, focused on the role of jam sessions in Manhattan as a privileged context for the following:

- i) learning performative styles of jazz,
- ii) developing the creative process,
- iii) constructing professional networks,
- iv) establishing of the status of musicians.

Studying and analyzing the jam sessions at five jazz performance venues in New York, I demonstrate the vital importance of participating in jam sessions by examining their relationship with this performative occasion (Pinheiro 2008).

Keywords: jazz; ethnomusicology; jam session; ritual

¹ This text is a modified version of the article “Jam sessions in Manhattan as rituals” (Pinheiro, 2012).

Introduction

My experience as a musician, jazz professor and researcher, led me to choose the jam session as an object of study, and shaped my analytical perspectives. As a jazz student in Portugal and the U.S.A., I participated in countless jam sessions. Initially advised by more experienced professors and colleagues, I sought to develop my performative capacities and directly engage with the real world of the professional jazz musician. These events constituted a privileged point of contact between the world of academia and the world of jazz performance, both completing and enriching the classroom experiences. Some musical and social processes that take place in jam sessions, such as the choice of the repertoire and the social skills required both on- and off-stage, were unknown to me.

As a researcher, I became aware that jam sessions, despite their importance in the historic and current configuration of the jazz universe, have not yet been formally studied. Jazz researchers have paid special attention to the analysis of different jazz styles and the biographies and interpretative styles of renowned musicians, while neglecting the study of the creative process, the interaction, the musical meaning, and the socialization processes of musicians, which are key factors for a full comprehension of the jam session. Consequently, it is not surprising that jam sessions have not received much attention from jazz scholars, but has been studied to some degree by sociologists, most notably through the work of William Bruce Cameron (1954) and Lawrence D. Nelson (1995)².

Jam session, “blues aesthetic,” and the jazz scene

I define a jam session as a performative occasion ideally open to the participation of musicians, who access a repertoire of “jazz standards,” which they use to improvise, interacting

² One of the few exceptions is Joseph Peterson’s Master’s Thesis, *Jam Session: An Exploration Into The Characteristics of an Uptown Jam Session* (2000).

collectively. These sessions take place regularly, usually in the evening (often late in the evening, lasting until dawn), in jazz venues like bars and clubs. (Pinheiro 2008: 8).

The joint musical dialogue that musicians develop in jam sessions is predominantly based on a shared musical language and aesthetic, namely the “blues aesthetic” (Baraka 1971, Jackson 1998 and Murray 1970, 1976). As Travis Jackson points out, a “blues aesthetic,” based on African American cultural traditions, presupposes musical characteristics and evaluative and standardized criteria common both to musicians and audiences (Jackson 1998: 95-133, and 2002: 23-82). It is based not only on the particularities of “blues” as a musical idiom (that is, in the use of call and response phrasing, the “blues” scale, etc.), but also on a specific set of aesthetic characteristics present in other African American cultural forms, such as creativity, expressiveness, the unique artistic character, and interaction (Baker 1984, Feld 1994, Powell 1989 and 1994). It comes from the learning of practices deriving from and continuously informed by African American music and culture. Unlike the concept of a “black aesthetic,” used by some authors like Baraka (1991), which asserts that the particularities previously mentioned are the result of a genetic code common to all “blacks,” the “blues aesthetic” (according to Jackson), presupposes that these are acquired, as a result of the engagement of individuals with African American music and culture. Utilizing verbal and performative communication, and through transcription (made universally possible with the availability of audio recordings), musicians take part in the various aspects of the “blues aesthetic,” i.e. learning to interpret, learning to produce new music, and, in general, interacting authentically with the sounds and other stimuli that shape a jazz performance.³

Jam sessions in Manhattan are part of the “jazz scene,” a socially built stage, on which several players from different institutions and backgrounds, relate to one another. Musicians, audiences, and other agents of the milieu, critics, for example, interact musically and socially in

³ It is also important to note that this aesthetic is not a closed system—it can coexist with others coming from the western classical tradition, like rock, electronic music, etc.

musical venues, universities, and other jazz-related institutions. I chose the concept of “jazz scene” not only because it is used by jazz musicians to designate their universe. It also suggests, unlike the term “jazz community,” that there is a dynamic universe of study, where interactions between players and institutions take place, not only locally but also at national and international level (Straw 1997; Jackson 1998). The term “jazz community” has been used in jazz literature with the purpose of characterizing the musicians as a marginal, cohesive, and clearly differentiated group, within which individual and collective interests coincide (Becker 1951, Cameron 1954, Esman 1951, Merriam and Mack 1960).

Jam sessions as a ritual

I analyzed jam sessions as a ritual since, as in any other ritualized activity, and according to Christopher Small (1987a, 1987b), it occurs on specific performative days, times, and venues, organized in a way which emphasizes the role of the musicians (also see Jackson 1998, 2000). There are conventions regarding the behavior of the parties, and a standard repertoire which shapes the performance, serving as the starting point for the musician’s improvisations. The musicians communicate utilizing symbolic patterns and actions (Victor Turner 1977, Mary Douglas 1973) which are determined by the jazz tradition.

Jam sessions generally occur at the beginning of the week, due to the availability of the musicians to participate in them. On the other days of the week, many play in clubs, Broadway theaters, and other performative venues. Jam sessions begin at around 9.30 p.m. and can go on until dawn. They take place in specific venues like jazz clubs and bars, which are important venues for jazz performance in Manhattan, where they play a crucial role in the process of establishing the professional reputation of the musicians. These places are crucial for the musicians’ artistic development, enabling them to achieve visibility in the context of the “jazz scene” (Pinheiro 2008). They are generally organized in a way which enhances the central role of the musicians in jam sessions--for example, the Lenox Lounge bar is located in a room apart from the one where musical

performances take place. In the case of Small's, the stage takes on a central role in the layout of the space. The bar is located on the side, and in front of the stage there are chairs without any supporting tables. This layout is similar to that of a small concert hall.

In my study, the analysis of the performative venue was determined by its importance, not only as a material reality, but also as a representation (Lévi-Strauss 1953, 1955, 1956; Pocius 1991; Shields 1991). The jazz clubs and bars where I conducted observations are important places for negotiating and setting characteristics of the groups (Halbwachs 1950: 146), supporting a collective memory that shapes and is shaped by the jazz tradition. This is reflected in the decoration of venues—for example in the pictures of the musicians hanging from the walls. This collective memory is related to what Feld and Basso call “Senses of Place,” a set of meanings and connections to places shared by individuals or groups (Feld and Basso 1996: 3-11).

Analyzing jam sessions as a ritual also enabled me to observe the conventions which shape the behavior of the participants and their role in the organization of the event. The leader of the “house band” plays a key role in structuring the event. Based on his/her decision-making power, he/she shapes the jam session utilizing the direct relationships he/she sets up with all the parties involved (“house band,” other musicians, audience, and manager or owner of the venue), hiring the musicians who make up a “house band,” deciding on the repertoire of the first set, and managing the participation of the musicians in the second and remaining sets. The musicians comprising the “house band” perform in the first set, inducing the participation of the others. In the context of their participation, the members of the “house band” work together regularly and have the opportunity to meet new musicians. Musicians who do not belong to the “house band” participate in the second and remaining sets of the jam session with the aim of becoming known in the Manhattan jazz scene. They are usually young students or recent graduates in jazz studies; they can also be amateur musicians, or even, in one-off occasions, renowned musicians who take the occasion to perform live to discover new talents and promote themselves.

When the norms that rule the behavior of musicians are broken—for example, when a musician uses the opportunity to show off his/her technique and instrumental mastery, neglecting the collective interaction, the group may apply provisions of a prescriptive nature, to regulate the functioning of the performative occasion, establishing and resetting the musical values. Criticisms are usually verbal and made in private or utilizing more subtle behaviors of non-verbal communication.

Analyzing jam sessions as a ritual also enabled me to ascertain the existence of a standardized repertoire, which constitutes yet another structuring element of the performative occasion. This repertoire represents a “*lingua franca*” for musical communication among musicians. Starting from a shared knowledge of several compositions, they interact utilizing collective improvisation, using the repertoire as a melodic and harmonic matrix that shapes the creative process. I addressed three main types of “standards,” according to their formal, melodic and harmonic origin and nature: “blues,” compositions which are part of the “American Songbook,” and original compositions of jazz musicians. The first type comprises compositions which, aside from possessing certain aesthetic characteristics, are made up of twelve bars organized in three groups of four. In terms of the harmonic structure, the complexity of the “blues” varies according to the composer and the interpretation of the musicians (Pinheiro 2008: 83-90).

Compositions which are part of the “American Songbook” are mostly widely disseminated works of the first half of the 20th century, characterized by simple melodies and forms like A-A-B-A and A-B-A-C (or A-B-A-B’). These are, generally, songs that were made popular by Broadway musicals and Hollywood movies. They were mostly written by European-Americans, and jazz musicians adopted them as part of their repertoire (*ibid.*: 90-92). The third kind of composition addressed in this dissertation was written by jazz musicians, and is characterized by a greater melodic, harmonic and formal complexity. A group of compositions stands out from the repertoire of the jam session, which I called “the core repertoire.” These compositions represent the most

famous “standards” in the “jazz scene” and fulfill a key pedagogical role in the musical education of young jazz musicians.

The repertoire of jam sessions is more diverse than that of formally organized concerts. However, this diversity may vary according to the knowledge and mastery of the repertoire by the musicians. The repertoire refers the musicians to the history of jazz, namely to recordings and performances widely disseminated, facilitating the transmission of aesthetic patterns which set the scene for their performance.

Analyzing jam session as a ritual also enabled me to pay greater attention to the structuring of the performance of a “standard.” The performance of a piece follows a proscribed pattern:

- i) selection of the repertoire and musicians,
- ii) performance of an introduction,
- iii) melody exposition,
- iv) “solos,” “trades,” “head-out,” and
- v) finales or endings.

The repertoire is generally selected by the musicians during a conversation held on the stage just before the performance. This procedure, which requires a great deal of mutual respect⁴, may have a positive impact in the improvisation process, namely in terms of trust building among the participants, and it may also stimulate musical interaction.

At the beginning of the performance of a composition, before the melody, a small introductory section is often performed. This is usually created by using typical harmonic patterns and melodic sentences known to jazz musicians. The performance of introductions may be decided upon verbally, but it is musically negotiated. This negotiation is based on the aural skills of the

⁴ According to information collected during fieldwork, for many jazz musicians this is a crucial element to achieve a “democratic” and ideal jazz performance.

musicians, as well as on their knowledge of jazz traditions. Introductions may use the melody and harmony of a section of the composition--for example, the last section A is often used as an introduction. I noticed in most of the jam sessions where I did field work, that the introductions consisted of the typical "III-7, VI7, II-7, V7" harmonic progression with many variants, or by a V7 sus chord in the key of the piece. Other harmonic solutions may also be used, especially those which appear in well-known, iconic jazz recordings. This tests musicians' knowledge of the jazz tradition and is a key element in the performative process in jam sessions.

The decision regarding who will interpret the melody of the composition is usually made utilizing a verbal agreement among the participants. The entire process of melody exposition is related to important creative aspects--there are countless ways in which to interpret the melody of a composition, namely in terms of notes chosen, attack, timbre, ornamentation, and other stylistic elements. Attention should also be paid to the active role of the other members of the group (for example the rhythm section) in the creative process of a jazz performance, especially in terms of creating a musical environment which will directly support and influence the exposition of the melody. These musicians also improvise their accompaniment according to the interpretation of the melody, which may be played by several musicians. This depends on the form of the composition and the instrumentation of the band. For example, the melody of a composition with the 32- bar, A-A-B-A form may be interpreted by a trumpet in the A sections, and by a saxophone tenor in section B, which may happen with or without previous verbal agreement. The solo section takes place after the melody and constitutes one of the most decisive moments of the performance. Accompanied by the rhythm section, each participant has the chance to clearly demonstrate his improvisation skills. The first solo is generally given to the musician who played the melody. The structural entity of a solo is the "chorus,"⁵ representing the duration and nature of the harmonic

⁵ In jazz terminology, improvising over the entire form of the tune is called "taking a chorus," which has no relation to the use of the term "chorus" in songs that are found in verse/chorus format.

structure underlying the melody, which repeats itself cyclically. Each solo will have the duration of a certain number of “choruses,” depending on the choice of the soloist, or any other limitations to his performance. In playing his solo, a musician shall define the harmony in melodic terms, while he interacts with the other participants. He/She must be capable of responding to the rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic suggestions of his/her stage companions. Occasionally, after the section of solos and before the restatement of the melody, there may be an optional section of “trades.” “Trades” are the exchange of short solos of equal duration among the musicians, while the harmonic structure and the form of the composition are followed. Each one of these small, improvised sections may last from a bar up to a “chorus.” In a section of “trades,” the first soloist will improvise for a certain number of bars, establishing the duration of the next improvisations that will be “traded.” If the soloist improvises for four bars, the other musicians will do the same; in this instance, the “trades” are called “fours.” In most cases, the improvised sections alternate between each soloist and the drummer. For example, in the case of a quartet with saxophone, piano, double bass and drums, the order of the “trades” will generally be: saxophone - drums – piano – drums – double bass – drums – saxophone –, and so on. Playing “trades” tests the knowledge of the musicians on the structure of the repertoire, and requires a high degree of concentration, especially during the sections when the drums are playing⁶. During these segments, one only hears the drums improvising, without any accompaniment. Thus, it becomes clear that jam sessions utilize communication between participants that involve symbolic patterns and behaviors set by jazz traditions.

Although, as in any other ritualized activity, jam sessions are structured events, it is important to state that its structure is not inflexible. On the contrary, according to the anthropological approach which was developed around ritual starting in the 70’s (Bell 1989, 1992), Turner 1967, 1969, 1977, 1983, 1986), I see jam sessions as events which, ensuring the unity and

⁶ In these sections, drummers usually play intricate patterns that might make less experienced players lose the beat.

continuity of the group, may stimulate its transformation. Seen in this light, jam sessions are important in the expression, transmission, setting, and the strengthening and transformation of aesthetic and performative values shared by the musicians in Manhattan's jazz scene. For example, in the interactive context of jam sessions, musicians may develop new approaches to improvisation, as happened in the 40's with the advent of bebop, and in the 90's in the jam sessions of Small's Club. Musicians such as Kurt Rosenwinkel, Mark Turner, John Ellis, Aaron Goldberg, Jason Lindner, or Jeff Ballard, when attempting to develop their musical knowledge of jazz, explored different rhythms and sonorities, some coming from South American, European and Middle East cultures, and in doing so defined a generation of jazz musicians.

Race

In the context of jam sessions, I looked at the way in which the aesthetic and discursive constructions of race, in conjunction with the performative venues and their spatial environment, shape the social and musical behavior of the participants, including influencing the selection of the repertoire and the improvisation itself. The racial imagination, defined by Radano and Bohlman (2000) as the "the shifting matrix of ideological constructions of difference associated with body type and color that have emerged as part of the discourse network of modernity," equally contributes to the discussion on the issues of "belonging" and "ownership," or of the "Self" and of the "Other" which music articulates. In the jazz universe, these questions can easily be seen—for example, in the clubs in Harlem, where musicians consciously structure their jam sessions in an allegedly "authentic" manner, they are linking the practice of jazz to a specific place (Harlem), and group (African Americans). Musicians like Melvin Vines and Dave Gibson state the importance of Harlem as a symbolic place for African American culture, and advocate that it is the ideal venue for the practice of jazz, a music which reflects, through the musical performance, "total equality" and "democracy" (Pinheiro 2008: 75-76).

However, it is not only the racial imagery that stimulates the construction of music. Music likewise contributes to the discursive constructions around race. This fact is made clear in how some African American musicians see European Americans, inspired by their musical performance. Melvin Vines, the leader of the House Band in St. Nick's Pub in Harlem, stated that the latter overwhelmingly approach music from an intellectual perspective, in detriment of the emotional perspective, a broad assignment of characteristics allegedly common to all European-Americans. On the other hand, we can see how several European-American researchers (Alan Merriam 1956, 1958, 1959, 1960; Richard Waterman 1952a, 1952b, 1963); John Miller Chernoff (1979), postulated the existence of an "African musical essence" in jazz, feeding the stereotype of African Americans possessing innate capacities regarding dancing and rhythm.

Learning and Socialization

Jam sessions in New York are important for learning and transmitting the main performative and aesthetic characteristics of jazz, playing a key role in its survival as a cultural expression. In the scope of this performative occasion, musicians acquire performance experience, enlarge their knowledge of the repertoire, and develop a professional attitude. Many participate in jam sessions to complement their formal education conducted outside the professional performative contexts. Some musicians and authors see the formal learning of jazz, sometimes outside professional performative circles, as incomplete. They justify their position invoking the fact that some academies of music and universities frequently adopt patterns of musicality originating from the western classical tradition, neglecting practices which do not meet the said criteria of that tradition (Ake 2002, Kingsbury 1988, and Nettl 1995).

Jam sessions also represent a key context for the socialization of jazz musicians in New York. Within the scope of this performative occasion, they establish their status in the "jazz scene" and meet new colleagues with whom they collaborate. Countless work opportunities appear

because of jam sessions. This performative occasion becomes thus an important means for the integration of musicians into the professional performative circuit.

Conclusion

Jam sessions represent a crucial social performative context for the development and training of jazz musicians in Manhattan. When they participate in jam sessions, they develop creatively, and they construct social networks; by doing so, they enter, and integrate themselves into the labor market. The performative and social practices in jam sessions foster the transmission and reconfiguration of the aesthetic, social and cultural values which determine jazz performance, representing an important means for its perpetuation.

Studying jam sessions enabled me to analyze countless aspects of the “jazz scene,” whose context is constantly changing. It represents a privileged means of multifaceted study, which includes:

- i. i. the transversal characteristics of the jazz performance,
- ii. ii. the traits which shape the process of building cultural identities,
- iii. iii. the aesthetic principles which determine musical performance,
- iv. iv. the behavior of the musicians,
- v. v. the processes of musical learning and socialization,
- vi. vi. the establishment of power relationships among musicians, and
- vii. vii. the discursive and musical meanings within the context of performance, which shape and are shaped by the cultural and historic traditions of jazz.

Future analytical perspectives on jazz must continue to emphasize musical events, contexts, and concepts, which shape its performance, evaluation, and interpretation. The perspectives of the musicians and main parties in the “jazz scene” are essential, both in terms of the understanding of

musical, social, and cultural practices, and as regards the reinterpretation of the historic perspectives in jazz literature. I hope that this study, given its importance for musicians and for the jazz scene, will open a new way forward for future interpretations of jam sessions, stimulating the in-depth analysis of this performative occasion.

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Biography

Ricardo Pinheiro completed a Degree in Music at Berklee College of Music, Boston; a Degree in Psychology Sciences at the Universidade de Lisboa; and a PhD in Musicology (Ethnomusicology) at the Universidade Nova de Lisboa.

He studied with Mick Goodrick, George Garzone, Wayne Krantz and Salwa Castelo-Branco.

He played/recorded with Peter Erskine, David Liebman, Chris Cheek, Tim Hagans, Andrew Rathbun, Perico Sambeat, Matt Renzi, Jon Irabagon. He teaches at the Escola Superior de Música de Lisboa and is the Director of its Master's in Music Program.

He played and participated in conferences and meetings in Austria, Greece, Spain, France, The Netherlands, Germany, U.S.A., Denmark, Italy, Poland, South Africa, Croatia, among other countries, and published articles in journals such as *Acta Musicologica* of the International Musicological Society, the *Jazz Research Journal*, or the *International Review for The Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*.