

Yes to the Mess, A Book Except

by Frank J. Barrett

Jazz players assume that no matter how incoherent or unpredictable the current situation appears, they'll find some positive pathway out, some creative possibility to uncover and explore. Without such a mindset (a bias toward positivity), they would have trouble performing at all because, by the very nature of the art form, they find themselves in the middle of messes all the time. Jazz musicians can't stop in the middle of a number to problem solve or put situations in order or say to other players, "I don't like those notes you played. They didn't match with what I had in mind, so let's go back and do it over." The major reason why improvisation works is that the musicians say an implicit yes to each other. Like the managers at Herman Miller who found ways to get rid of wasps and make honey, jazz musicians succeed because they have faith that whatever is happening has potential to lead in innovative directions

Because jazz improvisation borders on chaos and incoherence, it begs the question of how order emerges. Unlike other art forms and other forms of organized activity that attempt to rely on a predeveloped plan, improvisation is widely open to transformation, redirection, and unprecedented turns. Since we cannot rely on blueprints and can never know for certain where the music is going, we can only make guesses and anticipate possible paths based on what has already happened. As jazz critic Ted Gioia writes: "The improviser may be unable to look ahead at what he is going to play, but he can look behind at what he has just played;

thus each new musical phrase can be shaped with relation to what has gone before. He creates his form retrospectively [*italics added*]."

A jazz musician might begin by playing a virtual random series of notes, with little or no intention as to how it will unfold. These notes become the materials to shape and work out, like pieces of a puzzle. The improviser then begins to enter into a dialogue with the material: prior selections begin to fashion subsequent ones as themes are aligned and re-framed in relation to prior patterns.

In a sense, jazz improvisation is much like bricolage, the art of using whatever is at hand. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss first coined the term bricolage; those who practice it are bricoleurs. They tinker with a myriad of disparate materials and put seemingly unrelated things together into some semblance of order. They are junk collectors who bring order out of chaos. Both bricoleurs and jazz musicians examine and query the raw materials available and then entice order, creating unique combinations as they work through their resource.

Similarly, the jazz improviser attends closely to what is happening, seeing the potential for embellishing on motifs, linking familiar with new utterances, and adjusting to unanticipated musical cues that reframe previous material. In this continual exchange, each interpretation has implications for where to proceed. Jazz improvisation involves constant attention to such musical "yes and..." cues. There's always an obligation to look back on what has happened and extend it.

Organizations tend to forget how much improvisation, bricolage, and retrospective

sense making managers need to complete daily tasks. In an effort to control outcomes and deskill tasks, managers often attempt to break complex jobs down into formal descriptions of work procedures that people can follow automatically. In a perfectly rational world, such strategy makes perfect sense, but that's rarely the way work actually gets done. Many, perhaps most, tasks in organizations are indeterminate, undertaken by people with limited foresight. To meet their duties, employees frequently need to apply their own resourcefulness, cleverness, and pragmatism. They play with various possibilities, recombining and reorganizing, to find solutions by relating the dilemma they face to the familiar context that preceded it. So it is with many jobs in organizations. They require bricolage—fumbling around, experimenting, and patching together an understanding of problems from bits and pieces of experience, improvising with the materials at hand. Few problems provide their own definitive solutions.

Although jazz players are best known for their soloing, jazz itself in the final analysis is an ongoing social accomplishment. Players are in a continual dialogue and exchange with one another. Improvisers enter a flow of ongoing invention, a combination of accents, cymbal crashes, and changing harmonic



patterns that interweave throughout the structure of the song. They are engaged with continual streams of activity: interpreting others' playing and anticipating based on harmonic patterns and rhythmic conventions, while simultaneously attempting to shape their own creations and relate them to what they have heard.

In order for jazz to work, players must develop a remarkable degree of empathic competence, a mutual orientation to one another's unfolding. They continually take one another's musical ideas into context as constraints and facilitations in guiding their musical choices. Here's what saxophonist Lee Konitz has to say about this interactive interplay and the challenges it constantly presents:

I want to relate to the bass player and the piano player and the drummer, so that I know at any given moment what they are all doing. The goal is always to relate as fully as possible to every sound that everyone is making... but whew! It's very difficult for me to achieve. At different points, I will listen to any particular member of the group and relate to them as directly as possible in my solo.

Players are continuously shaping their statements in anticipation of others' expectations, approximating and predicting what others might say based on what has already happened.

Traditional models of organization and group design feature static principles in which fluctuations and change are seen as disruptions to be controlled and avoided. Jazz bands are flexible, self-designed systems that seek a state of dynamic synchronization, a balance between order and disorder: a "built-in instability." In jazz, ongoing negotiation becomes very important when something in-

terrupts interactive coherence. Given the possibility of disorientation and miscalculations, players must be able to rely on one another to adjust, to amend direction. Drummer Max Roach recalls a performance of "Night in Tunisia" when Dizzy Gillespie and his fellow players lost the sense of a common beat.

When the beat got turned around, it went for about 8 bars. In such a case, someone has to lay out. You can't fight it. Dizzy stopped first because he heard what was happening quicker than the rest of us, and he didn't know where "one" was. Then it was up to Ray Brown and Bishop and myself. One of us had to stop, so Bishop waved off. Then it was up to Ray Brown and myself to clear it up. Almost immediately, we found the common "one" and the others came back in without the public realizing what had happened.

When the players do successfully achieve a mutual orientation to the beat, they develop what they call a "pocket," or what some refer to as "achieving a groove." Establishing a groove is the goal of every jazz performance. Groove refers to the dynamic interplay within an established beat. It occurs when the rhythm section "locks in" together, when members have a common sense of the beat and meter. Establishing a groove, however, is more than simply playing the correct notes. It involves a shared "feel" for the rhythmic thrust. Once a group shares this common rhythm, it begins to assume a momentum, as if having a life of its own separate from the individual members.

When musicians "hit the groove," they don't experience themselves as the source of that activity. This is ironic in a time when we put so much emphasis on autonomous skilled agents making rational, individual choices. When groups hit a groove



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they talk about it as if the source of this activity comes from somewhere else. They apply masterly skillful activity and yet remain radically open to the surrounding situation that is calling forth a response. Musicians often speak of such moments in sacred metaphors: the beauty, the ecstasy, the divine, the transcendent joy, the spiritual dimension associated with being carried by a force larger than themselves. They talk about these moments in language strikingly close to what has been described as an autotelic experience, or flow: a state of transcendence in which they are so absorbed in pursuit of the desired activity that they feel as if they are being carried away by a current, like being in a flow. Not surprisingly, when musicians are able to successfully connect with one an-

*...You are lost,
tangled in the golden threads
covered
with turquoises,
silent,
or perhaps
in your village,
in your race,
grain
of corn spread out,
seed
of flag.
Perhaps, perhaps now
you are transmigrating
and returning,
coming to the end
of the journey,
so that someday
you will see yourself in the center
of your homeland,
insurgent,
alive,
crystal of your crystal, fire in your fire,
ray of purple stone.*

*Excerpt from Ode to Cesar Vallejo from Full
Woman, Fleshly Apple, Hot Moon
Selected Poems of Pablo Neruda*



other at this level and establish a groove, they often find themselves able to perform beyond their capacity. This dimension is perhaps the most elusive, if vital characteristic of jazz improvisation.

Pianist Fred Hersch recalls that playing with bassist Buster Williams inspired him to play differently:

Buster made me play complex chords like Herbie Hancock sometimes plays—that I couldn't even sit down and figure out now. It's the effect of the moment and the effect of playing with Buster and really hearing everything, hearing all those figures.

And Buster Williams recalls that when playing with Miles Davis, the music took on a life of its own.

With Miles, it would get to the point where we followed the music rather than the music following us. We just followed the music wherever it wanted to go. We would start with a tune, but the way we played it, the music just naturally evolved.

Imagine a self-organized flock of birds, wheeling this way and that. There's no single controller, and yet a discernible pattern emerges into the communal effect as a sort of natural art. That's really what jazz is at its best, something for all organizations to emulate. Wouldn't it be wonderful if leaders could create organizational cultures in which people are able to engage in skillful activity in the context of responsive others. The best leaders are not detached and predominantly analytic, although these are important skills to develop. The very best leaders know when it's important to be fully and passionately engaged in problems and situations, and for enhancing creativity and innovation, the crucial first step is an affirmative move.

This is what improvisational leaders do. They come at challenges from different angles, ask more searching questions, and are born communitarians. They're not going for easy answers or living off of old routines and stale phrases. Instead of focusing on obstacles (a form of negative self-monitoring), they create openings by asking questions that entertain possibilities. They're looking for the groove, the flow, knowing that like Sternin, it might carry them somewhere they never expected to go, somewhere they never imagined they could get to. Critically, too, improvisational leaders assume that the improv will work: that the mess is only a way station on the path to a worthwhile destination. The message here is powerful: start by asking positive questions; foster dialogues, not monologues; and you can change the whole situation, maybe even your life. ■

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