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INSPIRATION IN JAZZ IMPROVISATION

Paul Rinzler

Inspiration is Improvised

To create a work of art, one must first have an idea of where to start: this starting place can be a metaphor, an idea defined technically by the materials of the art, a concept, a goal, or the like. Coming up with this starting point is what we call inspiration (brilliant or hackneyed).

Inspiration is linked to jazz improvisation because they are both processes that are unconscious (in the sense of unplanned) and spontaneous, since the demands of the musician require that he create in real time as the music is performed, and no time is available to reflect, consider, or revise. Still, there is some opportunity in improvisation to consciously determine what gets created, outside of real time. For the non-improvised arts, such as most forms of writing, sculpture and musical composition, the artist can take a much more leisurely approach to inspiration. Inspiration can occur on its own schedule, for example, in the middle of the night, during a daydream, or in seemingly incongruous situations. But for a jazz musician, if it doesn't happen within the next sixty-four measures or so, it's not going to count.

Every creative process must begin with some idea that just pops into one's head. One of the mysteries of consciousness is that there is no other way a creative idea (or any idea, for that matter) can initially be generated. Consider the situation in which the inspiration for a work of art is defined by the joining together of two or more ideas: a sculpture made from ice cream, for instance, or a musical composition in which only one note is varied through dynamics or rhythm. While we may point to the sources of

the individual ideas that connect directly with the inspiration (perhaps the sculptor is waiting for inspiration, is hungry, has a bowl of ice cream, and *voilà!*), the very first moment in which the inspiration hits is always spontaneous and unconscious. If one has determined that such a moment was not such, then one can probably go further back in the creative process at least one more step to a spontaneous and unconscious event. While it is difficult to prove that all crows are black unless you examine every single crow (the very next one just might be white), every crow ever examined has always been black, and every example of inspiration can ultimately be seen to have been created in the moment and without conscious deliberation.

Inspiration in Public

The jazz musician waits for inspiration and displays it in public, before an audience. That sounds like a risky thing to do, and it is! By presenting inspiration in public to an audience without the ability to revise or reconsider, the jazz improviser risks presenting inspirations and creative ideas that perhaps should not have been presented, that is, inspirations of lesser quality. So we have to take the good along with the bad in jazz improvisation.

However, this risk is mitigated by several factors. First, a jazz musician generally learns to improvise within the limitations of style, and the characteristics of style serve to limit what may be created. Inspirations, therefore, are corralled to some extent, and creative ideas will have similar basic characteristics that render them safe enough. In bebop, for instance, a norm of the style will help insure that an improvisation on a bebop tune will sound like a bebop solo. Second, the jazz musician practices, through every public performance, the ability to draw on inspiration in public, and learns, over time, which risks are safe, which aren't, and which risks may not be safe but are nonetheless worth it if the jazz musician really wants to push the envelope every now and then. Third, jazz musicians are inspired far less often than how it may appear to the casual listener. Most of what most jazz musicians play most of the time is stock, repetitive material that is not inspired: standard licks that everyone plays, in addition to even more mundane material such as arpeggios or scale fragments. The best jazz musicians are, of course, regularly inspired and make creative jazz more often than lesser jazz musicians, but reliance on material that has been played many times before occurs with every jazz musician. It is part of the logic of improvisation that one needs a stable foundation (the non-creative material) on which one can then securely rely in order to create something inspired.

Introspection into Jazz Improvisation

I can recall how I improvise, so I can, as far as memory will allow, take a somewhat objective look at my process of improvisation and inspiration. As far as I can see, my inspiration comes out of the thin blue air. An idea, an approach or a method, will seemingly come out of nowhere and present itself to me. Perhaps some unconscious part of me, as I improvise, is working on the problem of what to do that might be new and creative, but this has to happen at the same time as I'm improvising something that is presumably more prosaic and less inspired. Inspiration is then even more hidden from conscious view, as the primary part of an improviser has to be focused on the immediate problem of improvising the very next note, in the moment, uninspired though it may be.

But there is another way to be inspired that is more clearly spontaneous and of the moment. In contrast, the rote nature of the tried and true material on which jazz musicians rely for much of their improvisations actually aids inspiration in this way. I notice in myself a type of blankness or emptiness sometimes when I improvise, especially before inspiration has hit and I am relying on that rote material. Playing such rote material doesn't require much attention (that's exactly why it's rote), so my attention is not so focused. It's as if I'm daydreaming musically. Then, unbidden and by some unconscious process, something I've just played will present itself to me as ripe for development. I will realize this within a fraction of a second after I've played it, and that is the exact moment of inspiration. What I do, then, is to start anywhere, even if it's rote material; scan what is produced for interesting, creative possibilities; and then exploit them. It is then primary in the creative skill of a jazz musician that the musical potential in that inspiration is often made actual within a split-second, immediately after the possibility is presented.

Collective Inspiration

As amazing and tricky as inspiration is for a jazz musician, things get much more fascinating, as well as complicated, when a group of jazz musicians take advantage of the opportunity to improvise together.

Normally, improvisation in jazz means that a single soloist (a saxophonist, for instance) improvises a melody with the support and backing of a rhythm section (piano and/or guitar, bass, and drums). While the rhythm section is certainly not reading, every note they play from a score and therefore can be considered to be improvising in a broad sense, improvisation is generally understood to mean what the saxophonist (or other soloist) is doing: spontaneously composing a primary melody that is supported by the rhythm section, which is understood to be in a secondary position. The rhythm section plays well-defined roles that create this secondary position: the pianist and/or guitarist

play chords, the bass player plays a walking bass line (an outline of the chords, one note per beat), and the drummer plays various characteristic rhythmic patterns.

However, jazz musicians have the option of breaking out of these well-defined roles. This doesn't happen as often as it might. In its ultimate manifestation, when the entire group is improvising, there is the opportunity for a kind of collective inspiration to occur.

For example, I recently played several gigs at Grappolo's restaurant in downtown San Luis Obispo with a group led by Darrell Voss, a drummer and a Cal Poly Music Department graduate, and which also included a guitarist from Los Angeles named Jay Graydon. The combination of the musical personalities in this group (especially, from my perspective, the interaction between myself and Jay Graydon) led to some of the most inspired collective improvisations and fresh creativity in which it has been my pleasure to take part.

The ending to one tune that this group performed is a good example of collective inspiration. Typically, endings to jazz tunes are improvised by a jazz group collectively, but not in a truly substantive way: the musicians rely on a relatively few number of stock formulas that can be easily and quickly applied with no pre-planning. (The most common is the tag ending in which a short phrase at the end of the tune is repeated three times.) On this particular tune, however, something went wrong with the ending and the group was not aligned rhythmically, creating a disjointed and awkward rhythm. Because the group had already established the tradition of having few boundaries when it came to creative ideas, it didn't take long (not even a second?) for the entire group to decide, almost as one mind, to take this mistake in the ending as a source of inspiration and to develop it through collective improvisation. (Mistakes are a part of any improvised music, and it is standard procedure in jazz for a mistake to become the source of inspiration.) We continued playing a series of disjointed and awkward rhythms deliberately as our ending to the tune, with some very interesting clash of rhythms resulting. It was one of the high points of the entire series of gigs.

The basic inspiration for this ending—the idea to play disjointed, clashing rhythm—was nearly simultaneous in the group, after the mistake in the ending created the first disjointed rhythm. Once this basic inspiration was fully recognized, it was then followed by smaller inspirations that addressed which specific rhythms to play that might help develop the initial inspiration: one of us might lay silent for a short time to highlight the first, unexpected rhythm after such a silence or one of us might repeat a rhythm to establish a ground against which other rhythms would clash. These smaller, more specific inspirations were unique to each individual in the group, but the basic inspiration was common to the entire group.

I am not suggesting that some mystical, single consciousness was created somehow in the group that led everyone to the same basic inspiration. First, the group inspiration was not simultaneous for everyone: although everyone got the idea within a fraction of a second or so, that is not simultaneous (although there is nothing preventing the same idea occurring to different people at exactly the same time). Secondly, I recall seeing how the idea dawned on everyone in the group, both by visually reading their facial expressions and body language as well as by interpreting how assertively they played the disjointed rhythms. Once everyone fully grasped the inspiration, the disjointed rhythms were played securely, especially against the clashing rhythms from others in the group (one must hold onto one's rhythm very securely when cross-rhythms are also happening). But that was not an instantaneous process, even though it only took a second or so.

While it might not literally be that everyone in the group was of one mind through this inspiration, it just about felt like that, and it certainly sounded like it.

So What?

Jazz musicians have developed the art of improvisation to dizzying heights. Improvisation at the highest level, even by a single soloist with rhythm section accompaniment, requires an artist who is in close and deep contact with the sources of inspiration, whatever they might be. Group improvisation and group inspiration, however, takes the process of improvisation, already incredibly rich with a single soloist, and makes it multi-dimensional. Such group inspiration completely fulfills the promise of jazz as an improvisatory and collective musical enterprise, and does so much more deeply than the more mainstream approach in which a single soloist is supported by a background rhythm section. The tension between the individual, who must ultimately receive inspiration as an individual, and the group, with whom the individual must coordinate, is perfectly balanced as well as greatly heightened. To be musically inspired, nearly on demand; to be able to improvise that inspiration accurately, meaningfully, and expressively; to share that exact inspiration with others in the ensemble as if all were of one mind; and to then fearlessly share the result in public with an audience, as it happens, as naked as an artist may be, is quite a wave to ride and to hear. 