

## Jazz Musicians and South Slavic Oral Epic Bards

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Albert Lord writes in *The Singer of Tales* (2000:13) that for the South Slavic oral epic poet, or *guslar*, “the moment of composition is the performance.” The *guslar* is concurrently performer, composer, poet, and singer. In performance, he participates creatively in shaping the tradition of which he is a part rather than acting merely as a transmitter. Similarly, though in a much more restricted sense, European art music of the late nineteenth century embraced a concept of performance—as contrasted to presentation—in which the musician provided “linear tension that went beyond what could be notated . . . and freely manipulated every part of every phrase . . . to achieve a performance that was itself inherent to the process of communication” (Ledbetter 1977:149-50). Until the 1920s, students of Franz Liszt and Theodor Leschetitzky, the unrivaled moguls of nineteenth-century pianism, flourished in a veritable hothouse environment of idiosyncratic performance styles.<sup>1</sup> Such discretionary powers today have been abrogated by the modern notion of “fidelity to the score.”<sup>2</sup> However, echoes of nineteenth-century performance practice resonate today among jazz musicians, who view their improvisatory art as a process of communication with a live audience that itself participates in the performance event. This essay explores the startling kinship that the jazz musician shares with the *guslar*.

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<sup>1</sup> Harold C. Schonberg, music critic of the *New York Times*, concisely summarizes the perplexing situation that this introduces for modern listeners (1963:132):

By present standards, their (Liszt’s and Leschetitzky’s students’) playing tends to be capricious, rhythmically unsteady, unscholarly, and egocentric. But we blame them for the very things for which they were praised in the nineteenth century . . . . When listening to pianists born before 1875, it is necessary for us in the latter half of the twentieth century to change our entire concept about the very nature of music.

<sup>2</sup> John Miles Foley (1998) addresses a similar (and equally misguided) notion that has long been applied to textualized oral epic poetry.

Comparisons between various oral performance traditions and jazz music have often been made, directly or implicitly,<sup>3</sup> and it is logical and natural to associate these groups since each artist produces his art “live” in performance, without text, and before an audience. That one discipline is verbal art and the other musical need not overshadow the common ground that they share: both involve specialized languages. Each art form is subject to traditional rules that govern a spontaneous and ever-changing mode of aural expression. Most important, perhaps, is that both art forms share the medium of live performance, which makes unique demands on the artists and essentially defines their manner of composition.

Indeed, the comparison is so immediate and attractive that it may thereby invite hasty and inaccurate assumptions. For example, whereas the oral poet is fluent in an epic language of formulaic phrases, he does not simply stitch together ready-made formulas to produce a familiar but “new” recombination. Likewise, jazz improvisation consists not of combining and recombining memorized motivic elements but of composing, within the parameters of traditional rules, new musical phrases that resonate with and respond to familiar chord progressions, themes, or styles. Jazz musicians and oral epic bards focus upon process rather than product, which is to say that their “product” exists only as the performance event itself, which temporally frames the “process” of creativity.

A brief (and necessarily selective) review of relevant scholarship that explores creative processes in traditions of oral composition—both verbal and musical—will provide a wider perspective from which to investigate similarities between the jazz musician and the *guslar*. Margaret Beissinger has examined varieties of structural modification within oral composition by Romanian epic singers, or *lăutari*, who “are able to employ variation and innovative patterning within the traditional boundaries of epic song” (2000:110). She asserts that the smallest unit of musical composition within the Romanian epic tradition is the melodic formula, a traditionally derived element with which the *lăutari* construct linear sequences of larger systems that she calls “musical strophes” (101). Thus the Romanian epic singers’ creative process involves an improvisatory “re-assembly” of traditional elements.

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<sup>3</sup> See Beissinger 2000; Lord 1960/2000:37; Titon 1978; Barnie 1978; Gushee 1981; Bronson 1954; and Treitler 1974, 1975, and a related article (1977) in which he discusses “reconstruction versus reproduction” of Gregorian chant as compared to the traditional concepts of improvisation and composition.

In a detailed study of the transmission of Gregorian chant, Leo Treitler writes that it is misleading to consider the medieval sacred singer's improvisation a "special" practice lest it be invoked solely as a rationale for explaining the unusual characteristics of problematic transmissions (1974:346). He conceives of a practice that involves elaboration and variation upon a *Grundgestalt*, or "fundamental model," and explains that "the singer learns one melody and imitates its pattern in inventing another like it. At some point his inventions do not refer back to the models of concrete melodies but are based on his internalized sense of pattern" (360).

Correspondingly, Lawrence Gushee (1981) demonstrates how oral-traditional jazz composition (as instanced by four performances of "Shoe Shine Boy" recorded by saxophonist Lester Young in 1936 and 1937) proceeds along several tracks at once. Gushee distinguishes between features of a broader, collective style ("swing") and those that are idiosyncratic to Lester Young. Particularly relevant for our purposes is his statement that transformation and varied repetition are fundamental creative processes for jazz musicians. Among the varieties of musical transformation, Gushee focuses particularly on formulas, which he defines within parameters of melody, phrase, and harmonic structure as reflected in melody.

### **The South Slavic Oral Epic Poet**

In *The Singer of Tales*, Albert Lord outlines three phases of the *guslar's* training (1960/2000:21-26). In the first phase, a boy of about 14 or 15 years of age who has decided that he wants to be a *guslar* himself spends much time listening to others singing. Familiarizing himself with epic poetry, he learns epic's themes, stories, characters, and names of distant places. In phase two, the boy or young man begins to sing privately with or without *gusle* accompaniment.<sup>4</sup> In doing this, he is learning the physical aspect of singing the rhythms and melodies of epic song. He learns the weight and "feel," so to speak, of the ten-syllable epic line and is learning to think rhythmic thoughts. The third phase lasts indefinitely, beginning when the young man sings his first song all the way through to a critical audience.

Children learn language through the repetition of words and phrases and constantly reshuffle their increasing vocabulary within the syntactic patterns that they have assimilated as they expand their powers of verbal

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<sup>4</sup> The *gusle* is the bowed, single-stringed, fretless musical instrument with which the *guslar* accompanies himself as he sings.

communication. So too, the beginning *guslar* learns by heart a number of rhythmic formulas that express the most common ideas of epic poetry and practices substituting and reshuffling words and phrases within formulaic patterns as he gains fluency in his tradition's art form. Kernel patterns represent component elements of the idiomatic structure of his poetry and essentially constitute a special poetic language. The procedure is equivalent to "multiprocessing"—learning to use many levels of the language at once.

David Rubin explores various forms of coding information that is stored in memory during the learning process and examines psychologists' suggestion that language is the model for all cognitive processes (1977). Among the forms of coding that he identifies is the recognition of melodies; his essay cites studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of musical coding. Research subjects recognized a wide range of melodic transformations among familiar and unfamiliar melodies. Varieties of recognizable transformations include transposed melodies, inverted melodies, and melodic contours or interval series. Not surprisingly, the study found that rhythm can assist in recalling lists of words or numbers and that changing the rhythm can hinder recall (175-79). Most important, perhaps, for our discussion is the assertion by Frederic C. Bartlett in his 1932 study of the mechanisms of memory: "Remembering is a process not of reproduction but of reconstruction."<sup>5</sup> In other words, exact repetition of an archetypal utterance is not the goal of the oral composer; instead, by imitating a traditional pattern, he creates or invents a "new" one. This reality has implications for the South Slavic epic bard as well.

Lord explains that the beginning *guslar* generally follows no definite program of study nor does he have a sense of having learned this or that formula or set of formulas. He learns to think rhythmically by means of a careful memory and sensitivity for conceptual, paradigmatic formulas that reflect the structure of rhythmic thought appropriate to his poetic tradition. This is a far cry from memorization of a fixed text, however, and compares more accurately perhaps to children who are learning to draw houses or cats. They do so not by "memorizing" the image of a particular house or cat but by remembering the traditional elements that constitute their mental image of each: walls and roof, or paws and whiskers.

Lord goes on to describe sets of formulas that express the most frequent actions, characters, time, and place (1960/2000:35). The "formula" as defined by Milman Parry is "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential

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<sup>5</sup> Bartlett 1972, quoted in Treitler 1974:344.

idea” (1971:272). What Parry calls “systems,” in turn, involve methods of adding, substituting, or omitting function words—a conjunction, for example—in order that a formula fill a particular rhythmic slot:

We may say that any group of formulas makes up a system, and the system may be defined in turn as a group of phrases which have the same metrical value and which are enough alike in thought and words to leave no doubt that the poet who used them knew them not only as single formulas, but also as formulas of a certain type (Parry 1971:275 [1930:73-147]).

For example, *u Stambolu* (“in Istanbul”) or *a u dvoru* (“and in the castle”) participate in a system of substituting vocabulary in order to balance rhythmically a two- or three-syllable noun within a prepositional phrase so that it can occupy the first (four-syllable) hemistich of the ten-syllable South Slavic epic verse (*deseterac*). Thus, through much practice and habitual usage, the singer internalizes his knowledge of the basic shape and syllabic weight of formulas until he develops an intuitive sensitivity to rhythmic proportion and completeness of form. The singer’s internalization of both the “tactile sensation” of the ten-syllable line and the traditional rules that govern composition allows him to sense in advance the completed shapes and sizes of hemistich and verse.<sup>6</sup>

An appropriate analogy might be that of a pedestrian crossing the street. Just as the poet/singer is skilled in sensing and adjusting in performance the shape of forthcoming verses, so a pedestrian (skilled in walking, as it were) senses the diminishing distance of the approaching curb. Several feet before reaching it, the pedestrian knows which foot will first touch the curb; should he desire the other foot to touch first, he alters step size accordingly—and in advance—in order to transition smoothly from street to sidewalk. Both movements, that of singer through the temporal distance of the *deseterac* and that of pedestrian across the spatial distance of the street, are governed by rapid and continual calculations that are made possible by much practice at internalizing the governing principles of each action, whether it be the traditional rules of oral epic poetry or eye/muscle coordination.

The performance setting, or arena, is especially important because of the demands it makes on the singer’s skill. Whether singing at coffeehouses on market days, or at weddings, or during Moslem religious festivals, the *guslar* was required to gauge his audience’s receptiveness to the length of

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<sup>6</sup> On oral traditional rules for the *deseterac*, see Foley 1990:158-200; 1999:69-72.

tale that he provided and often had to adjust the length in order to suit different situations. We must keep in mind that the singer composed as he sang and that, drawing from a rich language of formulaic phrases, he was fluent in compositional techniques governed by the traditional rules of his art. Thus command of rhythmic formulaic structures enables the singer to compose “new” phrases that resonate within the traditional epic language. Since the *guslar* does not sing verbatim from memory, it becomes quickly apparent that he has phenomenal speed and facility at composition.

Lord maintains that the *guslari* benefited from illiteracy with respect to their epic tradition, since their skills involved hearing language, not seeing it (1960/2000:20). Lord’s claim is problematic, however, since, as Foley points out, in other oral traditions literacy is not necessarily a handicap.<sup>7</sup> Until a generation or two ago, the notion prevailed among jazz musicians that the earliest artists and innovators of jazz musical idiom were necessarily musically illiterate and that a conservatory training in traditional Western musical theory would have proven harmful to the natural development of a true jazz style. However, my interviewees explained that this presumption was simply part of the lore that recalled a “golden age” in which many (but not all) jazz artists were “untrained” musicians. They commented that if that were true, one would be hard-pressed to account for Scott Joplin or Benny Goodman or Dave Brubeck or, today, Winton and Branford Marsalis, since very few, if any, modern jazz artists are unfamiliar with traditional music theory or are unable to read music. The myopic concept of “oral” art as being fundamentally separate from “written” art, or the idea that a “Great Divide” necessarily exists between them, throws up an obscuring filter that blurs the reality of a natural repertoire of language registers (see Foley 2002:26, 36).

### Interviews with Jazz Musicians

In an effort to cast light on the compositional techniques of South Slavic epic poets and thereby on their art, I interviewed by telephone and in person three professional jazz musicians about their concepts and techniques of improvisation. What they have to say about their own art may prove enlightening to the ongoing investigation of the *guslar*’s art.

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<sup>7</sup> In his later work, Lord implicitly discards the requirement of illiteracy: as long as the (traditional formulaic) systems continue, it does not matter whether the singer composes with or without a knowledge of writing (1991:25).

In order to benefit from their combined perspectives, I selected musicians from different musical backgrounds. Martin Langford, a well-known saxophone soloist at clubs in Houston, Texas, is a university-trained jazz musician. Langford makes his living as a freelance jazz saxophonist and teaches at his home. David Salge, who lives and works in the Seattle area, has a graduate degree in clarinet performance and has played in ballet and opera pit orchestras for several years. He is now primarily involved with klezmer music, which attracts him in part, he says, because of its blending of elements from traditional East European folk music and American “swing” music of the 1930s and 1940s. Larry Slezak grew up in New York City and spent much of his adolescence listening to musicians in Harlem jazz clubs in preparation for his own career as a jazz saxophonist. Slezak performs in Houston and teaches jazz saxophone and stage band at Rice University.<sup>8</sup>

A few preliminary remarks about terminology should precede our further explorations. Ensemble music consists of melody and harmony; the soloist’s melody moves above an underlying harmonic progression provided by other players. Jazz harmonic theory encompasses a great number of chords and chord progressions that successive jazz artists during this century have traditionalized by repeated usage. Jazz theory is not a body of rules, *per se*, but rather a collection of melodic and harmonic pathways that have gained popularity among players. Homer uses the term οἴμασι/*oimai* (pathways) to denote the knowledge that the Muse teaches to poet/singers.<sup>9</sup> Foley describes these “pathways” as vectors that the poet/singer knows how to navigate successfully and suggests that the Homeric *oimai* are parallel to hyperlinks on the Internet (1998:19-21). As one expects, the more brilliant artists, “jazz legends” we might say, have imprinted their own preferred

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<sup>8</sup> Telephone, email, and personal interviews were conducted between April 10, 2002 and May 25, 2003. Notes and transcripts of interviews (edited by me and approved by the interviewees) are available at the website for the *Center for Studies in Oral Tradition*: [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org). My deepest thanks go to these three musicians for their kindness and patience in answering my questions and, more importantly, for their insightful comments concerning jazz improvisation and how it is so different in many ways from the textualized music of classically trained musicians.

<sup>9</sup> *Odyssey* 8.479-81: πᾶσι γὰρ ἀνθρώποισιν ἐπιχθονίοισιν ἀοιδοὶ / τιμῆς ἔμμοροί εἰσι καὶ αἰδοῦς, οὐνεκ’ ἄρα σφέας / οἴμας Μοῦσ’ ἐδίδαξε, φίλησε δὲ φύλον ἀοιδῶν (“For among all men living on the earth, singer-poets / partake of honor and reverence, because to them / the Muse has taught the **pathways**, since she loves the tribe of singer-poets”) [my emphasis].

pathways upon the body of traditional jazz harmonic theory, and subsequent usage has traditionalized them.

Melodic and harmonic pathways that gain prominence through widespread usage in a localized geographical region generate a tradition or style of jazz performance—as found, for example, in New Orleans, Harlem, or the West coast. The South Slavic oral epic register also reflects regional varieties or dialectal differences within the broader context of the Serbo-Croatian language. That is not to deny the deeper, secondary level of epic speech that resides within the individual epic singer’s personal verbal compositional style. Stephen Erdely writes that the South Slavic singer/poet reveals idiosyncrasies of personal style when he changes the contours of his melodies by generating rhythmic, motivic, and modal variants.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, Foley distinguishes between regional and individual varieties of epic speech with the terms “dialect” and “idiolect.” Epic dialect encompasses “the range of multiformity observable in the larger (regional) tradition of singing,” whereas idiolect constitutes “the range of multiformity found in the practice of one singer” (Foley 1990:312, and 1995:155-57). Using a musical example, we may link the jazz dialect or style of the “swing” era (1930s and early 1940s) to the so-called “high hat” rhythm pattern, whereas the ragtime era is commonly associated with a more rudimentary syncopation:

#### High Hat Rhythm



#### Ragtime Rhythm



Each pattern is a dialectal representative of an inexhaustible range of rhythmic multiformity characteristic of a particular jazz style. Idiolectal rhythms, on the other hand, reside within the performer’s personal collection of preferred rhythm patterns, which are necessarily subsumed within the larger, dialectal range.

<sup>10</sup> Erdely 1995:630-32; see also Beissinger 2000:98-100.



*Martin Langford*

Martin Langford plays and teaches saxophone, clarinet, and flute in Houston, Texas. He is a graduate of the prestigious jazz performance program at North Texas University in Denton, Texas.

WF: Would you explain what jazz improvisation means to you?

ML: First, improvisation means that I have to temper my stylistic choices to audience composition so that my music will have the most consonance with my listeners. Improvisation involves very quick decision-making, and there are quick choices to make, all of which depend on the first and most important choice: what style or styles will do best with my audience tonight? Improvisation is making choices about chord changes, rhythms, tempos, and what kinds of notes I want to incorporate, like leading tones that want to go up to the next higher note—do I want my solo to go that direction, or not?

WF: Do you rely on rhythmic and melodic patterns during improvisation?

ML: You mean “licks.” Yes. I rely on licks in a pinch. You know, mistakes happen in the process—not big ones that anybody would notice, but little things, little things that are mistakes to you. That’s when I can incorporate a beat or two.

WF: A “beat or two” is not very much material. What length, generally, is a lick?

ML: Licks are usually two to four bars. A lick is a sentence; a bar is like a word, but the length of a lick depends on the frequency of chord changes. Longer licks give you more time to think.

WF: So . . . is a particular lick not made up of the same material every time you play it?

ML: No. Unless you happen to use it again under the very same circumstances, but that’s unlikely. Licks are more like somebody’s signature: because of the curve of an “S” or the shape of the flag on an “F,” you know whose it is. You can still use it yourself, but it’s not going to be exactly like the original. It doesn’t have to be.

WF: You mentioned earlier that improvisation entails making several choices very quickly—chord progressions and leading tones. What other kinds of choices do you have to make?

ML: I have to decide what kind of melody I’m going to play over the chord progressions. It’s not really like a conscious decision that you weigh in your mind but more like what I want to do at the moment because of what I’m hearing right then. I may want to mirror interval distances at the beginning or end of a melody, or mirror rhythms. Or I might decide to go double time or half time. Rhythms themselves are characteristic of different jazz styles. For instance, you could characterize all of 1920s jazz with the rhythm:



WF: Then, is improvisation melodic variation?

ML: More or less. But it's more than that because it's your own melody you're playing, but you're incorporating different styles.

By “mirroring” melodic intervals or rhythms, Langford refers to an improvisational device called inversion, by which a pattern of intervals or rhythms is played backward—or less commonly, retrograde inversion, when a pattern is played backward and upside-down. For example, the rhythm pattern



when inverted becomes



and the intervals



(a perfect fourth followed by a minor third, followed by a perfect fifth) in retrograde inversion become



“Double time,” also called diminution, does not necessarily refer to tempo but means that the rhythm is halved, so that quarter notes become eighth notes, eighth notes become sixteenth notes, and so on. “Half time,” known also as augmentation, is the reverse of double time.<sup>11</sup> These variational devices have become institutionalized among composers of art music as

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<sup>11</sup> The paradoxical logic behind the term “double time” (which effectively halves the time that it takes to perform a passage) refers to a doubling of the note value signified by the lower number in the time signature, which describes the type of note that will occupy one beat. For example, a 4/4 time signature in which the quarter note occupies one beat would, in double time, become a 2/2 time signature in which the half note occupies one beat.

reflected in their musicological designations—inversion, diminution, augmentation—much like rule-governed patterns within language. The “emic”/“etic” relationship<sup>12</sup> of these terms broadens our perspective by providing evidence of a creative continuum among improvisatory artists, both verbal and musical. “Emic” or ethnic terms—such as “mirroring,” for example, with which our informants identify variational devices employed in jazz improvisation—and their analytic or “etic” cousins (inversion, diminution, augmentation) help to illuminate the kinship shared by the *guslar*/jazzman and poet/composer.

In his performance of *The Wedding of Mustajbey's Son Bećirbey*,<sup>13</sup> the South Slavic *guslar* Halil Bajgorić employs variational devices identical to those Langford describes. For example, by using augmentation or “half time” Bajgorić produces a retardation in syllabic delivery rate without slowing his tempo in verse 87. Compare (from the C sharp in the third measure—*-ca na čekrku*) to verse 88 (from the third measure's C-sharp half note—*rezervu nosi*):

300  
87   
vO - na sto - ji pu - ca na če - kr - ku—  
(line 87: *That button was located by a winch—*)


305  
88   
Mo - mak vi - no za re - zer - vu no - si:  
(88: *The young man was carrying wine a reserve:*)

Bajgorić doubles the note values of syllables 6-9 in verse 88 (pitches are identical to those in 87). Without slowing the tempo, he has rhythmically halved the motive's delivery rate by doubling note durations.

Likewise, he shapes melodic motives by using “mirroring”:

<sup>12</sup> For an expanded discussion of the terms “emic” and “etic,” see Ben-Amos 1969.

<sup>13</sup> For a musical transcription and analysis of the first 101 lines of Halil Bajgorić's performance of *The Wedding of Mustajbey's Son Bećirbey*, see Foster 2004. A full transcription and English translation of Bajgorić's poem are available in Foley 2004, and both the acoustic and textual records can be heard and read at [www.oraltradition.org](http://www.oraltradition.org).

222  
63   
vA na ple - či' tri tan - ke ko - šul - je:  
(63: . . . and the second of golden thread,)

The second measure of verse 63 consists of two eighth notes and a quarter note followed by their rhythmic inversion, a quarter note plus two eighth notes. Bajgorić also generates variation by using “double time” or diminution:

204  
58   
Ka - žu da su ve - za stam - bol - sko - ga,  
(58: Some say they're of Istanbul fashion,)

210  
59   
Ka - žu da su kro - ja bu - gar - sko - ga;  
(59: Some say they're of Bulgarian style;)

He intensifies an existing sense of urgency in verse 58 by repeating the opening syllables (*Kažu da su*) and doubling their delivery rate in the first measure of verse 59. Bajgorić compresses their duration from four beats in 58 to two beats in 59 and, without increasing tempo, effectively increases the song's momentum. We would be enlightened to discover the “emic” or ethnic terms with which the South Slavic *guslar* referred to these improvisational devices common among jazz musicians, if indeed such terms exist. Jazzman and *guslar* share also a central concern for their audience's reactions.

Before discussing his techniques of improvisation, Langford points out the necessity of first gauging the composition of his audience in order to select which set or sets of stylistic (dialectal) choices will most likely succeed. He calibrates the musical style of the performance by relying on his sensitivity to conditions in the performance arena. For him, improvisation embodies rapid selection from a personal repertoire of chord changes, rhythms, and tempos. Langford goes on to describe a lick as a sentence and a bar (or measure) as a word. The duration or size of a lick depends on the frequency of underlying chord changes. His description recalls the *guslar's* “word,” which denotes a unit of meaning—a phrase, scene, or entire tale—and is not restricted by our lexically derived notion of

size.<sup>14</sup> Langford likens the improvisatory lick to a signature that need not be identical to all instances of its use, although, as an idiolectal expression, its authorship is instantly recognizable in other stylistic contexts.

*David Salge*

David Salge is solo clarinet with *The Best Little Klezmer Band in Texas*<sup>15</sup> and has recorded with Janice Rubin<sup>16</sup> and with Greg Harbar's klezmer group *The Gypsies* that *Rolling Stone* reviewed recently as being traditional but also innovative.<sup>17</sup> Salge has been assimilating and perfecting the klezmer style now for ten years, before which time he was principal clarinet with the Houston Ballet Orchestra and associate principal with the Houston Grand Opera Orchestra.

WF: Is improvisation a part of your work with the klezmer band?

DS: I suppose you could call it improvisation. I do improvise, but I'm reluctant to include myself with jazz improvisers. It's really more of an ingrained style, or styles, of playing based on a knowledge of harmonic progressions and klezmer dance rhythms. Klezmer is very traditional—eight-bar phrases, melodic minor scales, usually with the raised fifth and seventh. What I do is start with the backbone, a tune or a "head," that's played over a sixteen-bar chord progression. Many of the traditional tunes popular for dancing are pretty simple sixteen- or thirty-two-bar melodies that we repeat several times, then segue into another tune so the dancing continues. As we repeat, the melody may become more ornamented, or new material is created in that framework over the same chords. As other instruments play the melody, I improvise figuration or countermelodies to sort of "make an arrangement" on the fly.

WF: What does the new material consist of?

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<sup>14</sup> See Foley 2002:11-21 for an explanation of what *guslari* mean by a *reč* ("word") in an epic poem.

<sup>15</sup> CD, *The Gypsies, Schleppin' West* (Private Label, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> CD, Janice Rubin and Friends, *Feels Like Family* (Houston: Heymish Music, 1995).

<sup>17</sup> In "What Are You Listening To?" (*Rolling Stone*, 846 [August 3, 2000]:21), Trey Anastasio of *Phish* comments on David's several extended improvisatory solos from *The Gypsies'* CD, *Gypsy Swing* (Global Village: 1995, UPC: 759401080622): "We pump this groove into our skulls until four in the morning. We've listened to them twenty-thousand times."

DS: Well, I start with what I like but always defer to what the audience seems to like. Sometimes klezmer has a specific dance that accompanies it. In fact, dance rhythms dictate the klezmer tradition. Klezmer is what happened when Eastern European Jewish traditional dance music met “swing.” It’s like *The Andrews Sisters* in Yiddish. There are songs that we usually play very traditionally, others that are pure swing, and others that combine those influences in various ways. For example, we do *The Andrews Sisters*’ hit “Bei Mir Bist du Schon,” starting with a rendition in their style but then jumping into a hora.

WF: How much of the new material that you mentioned earlier is traditional?

DS: All of it is traditional. To go too far outside the tradition is to leave klezmer behind. I have cadenza moments, though, that are new, as you say, in the sense that things get looser as the song goes on. But in cadenzas, too, I’m in melodic minor keys and I’m using those traditional dance rhythms. Now, after we get started—after the violin, trumpet, or I play the melody—I’ll start adding figuration as the vocalist sings. Maybe I’m not aware of playing licks. I call them figurations. You can recognize the character of other players in their figurations. It happens very quickly; it’s spontaneous; there’s no time to think; it’s an ability that has to be ingrained deep inside you. Charlie Parker once said “First you master your instrument; then you master the chord changes; then you forget that shit and just play.”

WF: Can you tell me more about figuration?

DS: Figurations are very short, and they always hang on the harmonic structure. Arpeggiation<sup>18</sup> is the basis; then I connect the notes of the arpeggio with scalar melodies. The harmonic progression is what unifies all this—it remains unchanged. My figuration is always—or it should be—within the bounds of the traditional scale and rhythms. I don’t know how old those are . . . probably centuries old. But remember, what we now call klezmer dates from the ’30s.

WF: Can you tell me any more about what you mean by “deferring to what the audience seems to like”?

DS: Yes. Of course, we want to please our audience, so they’ll have us back. Or maybe someone in the audience who’s never heard us before will call us or recommend us. But klezmer is tradition-bound—in a good way, though. The fact that these traditional Yiddish melodies and rhythms merged with swing style means that it’s a “new” way of hearing an older tradition. We’ve got people from the old country who come up after the show, and they loved it; they remember how it was. But there are young people, too, who enjoy it very much. We don’t discourage what any of them want—we don’t have the famous placard off to the side.

WF: What’s that?

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<sup>18</sup> For non-keyboard instruments such as the clarinet, arpeggiation consists of playing the notes of a chord in succession, rather than in unison.

DS: The old joke that says “Requests—\$5, *Feelings*—\$50, *Proud Mary*—\$500.”

As does Martin Langford, David Salge bases the calibration of his range of choices on the audience’s responsiveness. He reiterates what Langford has described of the “personalized” or idiolectal quality of licks or what he terms “figurations.” Salge refers to improvisatory composition as an ingrained style of playing based on the performer’s knowledge of harmonic progressions and dance rhythms associated with the klezmer tradition. New material created from scalar and arpeggiated ornamentation echoes the overarching framework of a repeating chord progression. His reluctance to use the term “improvisation” stems, perhaps, from an awareness of the peripheral position that klezmer holds in relation to more well-known forms of popular music or to the much more esteemed jazz music genre.

Salge admits to improvising countermelodies and to playing “figurations” that are based on traditional scales and rhythms in order to “make an arrangement” on the fly. His description of the spontaneity that is required to do this and the fact that such a skill demands deeply ingrained musical pathways recalls what Albert Lord tells us of the *guslar*’s training and skills.

Most intriguing to me is that Salge repeatedly emphasizes the centrality of musical traditions in the performance of klezmer music: “To go too far outside the tradition is to leave klezmer behind.” The dance rhythms and modalities of klezmer music are traditionalized pathways that constitute the register unique to its performance. He asserts that dance rhythms dictate the centuries-old klezmer tradition, but that its melding with swing style in the ’30s has created what he calls “a new way of hearing an older tradition.” Diachronic evolution of this sort is essential to oral epic traditions in order to maintain the process of self-renewal.

### *Larry Slezak*

Larry Slezak has been a jazz performer for a longer period of time than Salge or Langford and has the distinction of having apprenticed, so to speak, by listening to jazz artists in Harlem clubs. When I asked what musical benefits he derived from growing up in New York City, Slezak explained that the jazz environment cannot be obtained from recordings: “A lifestyle nurtures its own music, and since I happened to live in New York City, my learning experience was more complete than it would have been if

I had not had access to that environment.” Slezak’s proximity to the performance arena allowed him to hear and see Harlem jazz in the setting for which it was created.

WF: Would you tell me how or why your having grown up in New York City was important to you as a developing jazz musician?

LS: It’s not important. That is, a person can learn the skills and develop them without access to the music’s environment, but it’s harder for them—they’ll have to catch up later. Maybe you know Dennis Dotson, a brilliant trumpet player here in town. Well, he learned jazz trumpet by listening to recordings as a kid in Rusk, Texas, where he grew up. When he came to town, he caught up quickly by listening to other players here. Growing up in New York just made my learning more complete. Without it, it takes more effort, but you can catch up later. The music itself is only one aspect. As a white kid, I put myself in the environment where jazz came from. Music is the result of people in an environment—audiences, neighborhoods, bar owners. Ghetto audiences were pretty tough; if they didn’t like something, they’d tell you to get off the stage.<sup>19</sup> I was something different to them, though, and special. People used to invite me to their houses for dinner because they knew me as “the white kid who comes to Harlem to play his horn.” One time, a homeless man came up to me outside a club and pushed twenty dollars at me. In those days, I was an angry young man who despised all worldly things—you know, like personal appearance. It was his way of telling me that a jazzman needs to dress better than I was dressing. It really made an impression on me.

WF: Would you explain what a lick signifies?

LS: What you mean by lick is something like “. . . up the stairs” or “. . . around the corner.” *You* like to use these words. You have these particular words you like, but you might have to change something to make it fit when you use it.

WF: What do you mean? Where does a lick “fit,” as you say? Is this what is meant by improvisation?

LS: No. Improv’ is when you play a different melody to a familiar harmonic progression. A melody is like something worthwhile you have to say, and you say it in your own words—licks—but you’re saying it within the framework of a particular progression of chords. The harmony is what doesn’t change. It’s the foundation that you improvise *on*. Licks are like short phrases that you yourself tend to use often, because they’re how you think when you communicate. It’s a lot like language: there are general concepts that everybody learned a long time ago. You can change

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<sup>19</sup> Foley (2002:83-84) reports that the ethnographer Matija Murko observed a humorous and quite effective bit of negative audience response in Yugoslavia. “Murko merrily told the story of a bard who received perhaps the ultimate critical review: during one of his rest-breaks the audience greased the string of his *gusle*, rendering it unplayable and terminating that night’s performance without discussion or appeal.”



a lick from “. . . around the corner” in one situation to “. . . to the corner” in another situation, because some little detail of the new situation is different and you need to say it that way. You don’t stop and think about it; you just say it. You make it fit the situation. Improv’ is guided by general concepts that can be changed.

WF: Then, improvisation is not “variation”?

LS: No. An improviser is *first* of all a melody player. The melody is what you create. Your melody is what you say at that moment, and it depends on what has just been said around you. It speaks to what has just been said. When you’re having a conversation, do you think of your speech patterns as variations? Are they variations of some model? Is there ever only one way to say what you’re saying, or do you use the words you like but make them fit what you’re talking about?

WF: Are there local jazz traditions, styles of playing? Could you comment on some characteristic differences between local traditions? I don’t mean differences between individual players, but differences—if any—between, say, geographic regions in this country.

LS: Sure, there are styles of playing that are characteristic to different parts of the country. For example, the term “New York drumming” denotes aggressive playing, kind of an “in-your-face style.” West Coast jazz is mellow; it works by insinuation. Then there’s the term “Texas tenors.” It refers to the way of playing you tend to hear in this part of the country—a kind of tone. Each style brings up different interpretive associations. Like a Brooklyn accent. You’ll hear the great majority of people in Brooklyn speaking with the same accent, but then on another level, you’ll still hear differences within that accent between individual speakers.

WF: Like the phrase “Get outta heah” that I used to hear when I lived briefly in the Bronx?

LS: Yes. Exactly. When they said that to you, they meant—in a good-natured way—that they didn’t believe something you said. It’s got the same English words that we use all over the world, but when you’re in the Bronx, you’ll know, or you’ll soon learn, that they’re not telling you to “get out.” It’s like a local style of language.

WF: What characteristics or abilities does a good improviser have that a not-so-good one lacks? And let’s assume that both players have more than adequate technical command of the instrument and good pitch.

LS: Yes. I know what you’re saying. I can name two things that make an improviser great. First, in some measure, there’s a connection between hand and ear. Do you know what I mean? A good improviser can play something that not only fits but fits perfectly, because his hands are as skilled as his ears and they’ve got a great connection. He also has to have a concept of melody—a vocation for melodies. Then he must have a sense of derring-do. Without that, an improviser won’t get anywhere. It’s linked to personal confidence—like bungee jumpers, the exhilaration is in not knowing what will happen.

Slezak stresses the influence that a music's "environment" exerts on its essential characteristics and explains that the music itself is only one aspect of the art form. However, to say that a good musician can learn and develop jazz skills—though with more difficulty—without access to such an environment further discounts the notion that early jazz artists were necessarily untrained. Just as illiteracy was not a requisite condition for the South Slavic epic singer, whose skills did not require literacy, the jazz artist with a good "connection between hand and ear" need not suffer from possessing a conservatory training.

For Slezak, jazz licks are short compositional phrases that comprise the formulaic repertoire of the individual musician. Licks obey traditional harmonic and stylistic rules of the jazz idiom in the same way that the South Slavic *guslar*'s idiolectal phrases conform to the epic register. In fact, he likens the jazz lick to lexical phrases—" . . . up the stairs" or " . . . around the corner"—to which we default in conversation because of personal preferences for particular words. When a phrase must bear a slightly different meaning for use in another situation, fluency allows us instantly to recast the phrase to fit new situations: "Licks are like short phrases that you yourself tend to use often, because they're how you think when you communicate." In short, the jazzman's collection of licks corresponds to the *guslar*'s repertoire of idiolectal expressions. Most importantly, Slezak tells us, the improviser is a melodist. Improvisation refers to the re-creation of "new" melodies over familiar harmonic progressions. With speed and accuracy, the jazz musician shapes melodies in his own words—licks—by means of a fluent knowledge of the traditional register.

Slezak again draws a parallel to language: "[In language] there are general concepts that everybody learned a long time ago. Improv' is guided by general concepts that can be changed, [and when] you need to say something in a different way, you don't stop and think about it, you just say it. You make it fit the situation." Clearly, "variation within limits" oils the generative engines both of jazz improvisation and orally composed epic poetry. Foley's proverb comes to mind as a fitting descriptor of the techniques that relate *guslar* and jazzman: "Oral poetry works like language, only more so" (2002:127-28).

## Summary

With regard to their definitions of improvisation, we do not have complete accord among our interviewees; nonetheless, what they describe as its process recalls much of what we know about South Slavic epic singers'

techniques of composition. Both groups of artists compose within a framework of generative traditional rules that are, at the same time, extremely flexible. Theirs are art forms that embrace the oral epic concept of “variation within limits.” Jazz musicians improvise within the parameters of a tradition-dependent harmonic progression; the South Slavic *guslar* composes within the bounds of traditional epic language.

As a continuing interview strategy, I strove carefully to keep my questions free of “leading terminology” that might have suggested a desired response. David Salge, our klezmer performer, said at first that he did not think he used improvisation. However, his description of “figuration” was remarkably similar to how our mainline jazz performers described improvisation. All three agreed that composition happens so rapidly that one must be utterly fluent with the traditional material with which one works.

Both Slezak and Langford used word- or sentence-related metaphors to describe component parts—licks—of their improvisations, although the former seemed to resist using the word “lick,” as though the term were inaccurate or had become hackneyed from overuse. Langford defines “lick” as a sentence and the musical bars that comprise a “lick” as words. Slezak, on the other hand, drew the analogy of prepositional phrases to clarify his definition of “licks.” For the *guslar*, a “word” may be what we term a colon, line, series of lines, narrative pattern, or whole tale (Foley 2002:17-18). To define “word,” the *guslar* relies on criteria that reflect the nature and requirements of his art. The *guslar*’s “word,” regardless of how large it may seem in contrast to our text-based notions, remains his basic unit of verbal expression and, as such, compares directly to the jazz musician’s understanding of “lick” as the basic unit of musical utterance.

Jazz licks form a collection of traditional musical phrases/motives, both dialectal and idiolectal, from which the performer draws when he wishes to substitute or redirect pitches, rhythms, or melodic material during improvisation without straying from the stylistic idiom. By drawing from his toolbox of traditional devices, the performer fills a desired melodic or rhythmic slot with quickly composed formulaic material. In short, jazz licks provide a multiform system of composition. Licks are “prepackaged” only to the extent that they must fulfill the rhythmic and harmonic requirements of a particular jazz idiom. Both the *guslar* and the jazz musician are fluent in specialized languages, and it is especially noteworthy that all three of our interviewees describe the processes of jazz improvisation in terms of language.

Note-for-note or word-for-word memorization of component sections of their composition is thus not the key. Facility at rapid composition

requires an internalization of the governing principles of the style of music or the rhythmic formulaic structures of the oral poetry that one wishes to improvise. The jazz artist draws upon a broad, style-specific musical vocabulary of melodies and rhythms and, under the governance of traditional rules, composes anew for each performance.

Though in some ways worlds apart, the performance of South Slavic epic shares a great deal with the performance of jazz music. Unfortunately, inexorable cultural and technological forces of the twentieth century have irrevocably altered the *guslar*'s performance environment, and by the late 1970s, as his audience dwindled, he eventually found himself without interlocutors. Oral tradition abhors monologue; subsequently, the *guslar* has faded into history.<sup>20</sup> From our discussion with jazz musicians who are part of ongoing performance traditions, we gain insight into the power and depth of the live audience's influence over improvisatory oral art. Dialogue between artist and audience and, to a broader extent, Larry Slezak's "environment" exert an indispensable, life-giving force upon oral traditional poetry. Perhaps if we listen carefully, we will hear the ephemeral song of the oral poet as he sings other traditions in other environments.

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<sup>20</sup> The publication series *Serbo-Croatian Heroic Songs* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press) chronicles, however, a precious remnant of that tradition. See also Foley 2004.

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