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Musical Writing

Barry J. Mauer
University of Central Florida, bmauer@ucf.edu

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This essay explores three approaches to "musical writing" from a course called "Writing About Popular Music." I designed the course with the help of Dr. Robert Ray at the University of Florida and continued to develop it with the help of Li Wei of the music program at the University of Central Florida.

Though this course offers standard approaches to music history, theory, and analysis, it also aims to produce new forms of writing about music that are themselves musical. To this end, the course explores how musical information is stored, organized, and received, and it transforms these musical practices into writing practices.

The course is framed around the following research questions:

1. If music communicates information, what are the modes by which it does so? What are the processes by which we assign meaning to music?
2. Are storage technologies (sheet music, phonographic recording) necessary conditions for musical innovation?
3. How do compositional strategies associated with music relate to writing in other disciplines? What is the relationship between the history of music and other histories?

To address these questions, we explore theories about composition, performance, syncretism, propaganda, mass media, appropriation, and information technology to look at important music genres and their representative figures, such as jazz (Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller), big band (Glenn Miller, Duke Ellington), popular vocal (Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald), and rock (Elvis Presley, Little Richard). These musical genres/styles/individuals not only coincided with transitional moments in music technology (recording studios, radio, long-playing phonographs, television, digital and sampler), but also represent stylistic and conceptual contrasts manifested in the dichotomies of "composition/improvisation," "vocal/instrumental," "rhythm/melody," "original/copy," "black/white," "understate/virtuosity," and "art/entertainment."

Listed below are the major projects assigned to the class. The remainder of my essay provides writing samples using three of these methods.

Assignments:
Project 1: Using Michael Jarrett's "ABC" method as a model, write a paper (3-5 pages) entitled "The ABCs of 'Black and Blue'" in which you explore five dimensions of Louis Armstrong's "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue." One of your "takes" should be a comparison/contrast among the performance styles of Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller, and Ethel Waters.

Project 2:
Option 1: Write a paper (4-6 pages) in response to the following hypothetical; in mid-1944, you receive a letter from General Eisenhower to your office in the U.S. Department of War Propaganda, requesting justification for continuing musical propaganda efforts. He asks the following three questions: Why continue to use entertainment as propaganda? Why use big band swing? Why use Glenn Miller (rather than Duke Ellington)? Discuss Miller's "In the Mood" to make your case, using Charles Eckert's structuralist Marxist method to explain how the song functions ideologically.

Option 2: Consider music as a means of persuasion and pick one or two examples from our discussions (e.g., Glenn Miller's military bands, Nazi propaganda music). Write a paper (4-6 pages) that addresses the following questions: 1) How does music affect our thoughts and perceptions, especially during wartime and political campaigns? 2) Through which means does music convey its embedded political messages? Can a musical work succeed both politically and artistically?

Project 3:
Option 1: Great stylists often model themselves on the work of someone in another field; Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols modeled his performance style not on a musical example, but on Laurence Olivier's performance of *Richard III*. Frank Sinatra modeled his ballad singing in part on the trombone playing of Tommy Dorsey. Your assignment is to openly

model your writing style on Sinatra's ballad style in order to examine the musical and dramatic lessons of the album *In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning*. Using the terms of information theory, explain the features of the style you develop.

Option 2: Write a paper (3-5 pages) in which you explore Frank Sinatra's album *In the Wee Small Hours* as a dramatic performance, using Bill Bruehl's theory of method acting as a guide. Your goal is to describe the persona Sinatra creates, the dramatic super-objective of the album and the sub-objectives in particular songs down to the level of individual lines and words.

Project 4:

Option 1: Using the theories of appropriation presented in this section, write a paper (4-6 pages) exploring the method of appropriation used by Elvis Presley and Sam Phillips in their collaboration at Sun Records, or in world music.

Option 2: Produce a multimedia project (audio or audio/visual) employing appropriation techniques learned in class. The project can include original compositions, but should show the kinds of "borrowing" discussed in our case studies. You may also choose to do a multimedia "documentary" about appropriation in music.

The ABCs of "Black and Blue"

Introduction

> *I'd like to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing 'What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue' -- all at the same time.*
> -- Rhinehart, from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

Michael Jarrett's *Sound Tracks: A Musical ABC, Volumes 1 - 3 Sound Matters* takes a novel approach to writing about music; Jarrett uses the alphabet as a kind of jukebox, with each letter cuing a short discourse on a musical topic. My "Black and Blue" project, demonstrated below, seeks to satisfy Rhinehart's wish in *Invisible Man*. Instead of hearing the song played from five recordings, however, I write five "takes" on the song, each cued by a different letter of the alphabet. Below are two "takes" I produced, cued by the letters *D* and *E*.

D -- The Double

A bully with a gun doesn't always get the art he orders.

New York gangster Dutch Schultz invested in a show at Connie's Inn, a Harlem nightclub catering to wealthy whites and serving booze during prohibition. Gangsters profited enormously from such clubs during prohibition, and nothing brought in the profits like famous entertainers on the bill. The show at Connie's Inn was called "Hot Chocolates" and it featured the biggest names in jazz - Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller, and Edith Wilson. The show contained the soon-to-be-famous Waller-Razaf composition "Ain't Misbehavin'", but Schultz wasn't satisfied. He wanted a song that allowed the audience to laugh at the expense of black people. Perhaps he imagined that such a reaction from the audience would generate more profits; perhaps he was just mean-spirited. He ordered Razaf to write "a song about a 'colored girl' singing about how hard it is to be black." [Citation?]

Andy Razaf, like his grandfather John Waller, made the most of his opportunities for advancement. John Waller had worked his way from slavery to become U.S. consul to Madagascar. Andy Razaf had worked his way from elevator operator in the Brill Building to become a significant lyricist in Tin Pan Alley at a time when few blacks worked on Broadway or in publishing. He wasn't about to demean himself, but he couldn't ignore the gun Dutch Schultz shoved in his face.

Razaf wrote:

> *Brown and yellows / All have fellows*
> *Gentlemen prefer them light*
>
> *Old empty bed / Springs hard as lead*
> *Feel like old Ned / Wish I was dead*
> *All my life through I've been so black and blue*
>
> *Even the mouse / Ran from my house*
> *They laugh at you / and scorn you too*
> *What did I do to be so black and blue?*

I'm white inside / But that don't help my case
'Cuz I can't hide / What is in my face

How will it end / Ain't got a friend
My only sin / Is in my skin
What did I do to be so black and blue?

These lyrics offer a double message - one for patronizing white audiences, another for blacks and sympathetic whites. The first stanza furnishes the narrative context for the song, a woman's lament over lost love. Louis Armstrong deletes it, thus changing the meaning of the song so that it only makes sense as a commentary on the plight of blacks in general. The line, "What did I do to be so black and blue?" refers to being very black (color) and very blue (mood). But it also means, *What did I do to get the shit beaten out of me?*

The next verse, "Old empty bed/ Springs hard as lead/ Feel like old Ned/ Wish I was dead" means *My lover is gone from my bed*, but it also means, *I'm so poor, my bed has no sheets and blankets*.

The rest of the song offers similar double messages. When Armstrong performs pop songs, he "doubles" the messages in his performance just as Razaf does in his lyrics. Louis had a gun pulled on him too (in Chicago) and he knew what to say to keep his skin, but he never stopped communicating to his core audience.

E -- The Editor

Louis Armstrong elevates the performer to unparalleled dignity in his 1929 recording of "(What Did I Do To Be So) Black and Blue." He edits the song; by dropping the first verse and introducing the lyrics with funereal strains on his trumpet, Armstrong makes a new composition. He removes the original narrative -- the story of a black woman losing her man to a lighter-skinned woman -- but retains the first-person voice and generalizes the story, speaking for anyone who can identify with the protagonist's position. In Armstrong's hands, the lament no longer dwells on lost love, but on the suffering of a whole race exposed to conditions of poverty, misery, violence, and despair.

Armstrong, perhaps the greatest inventor in jazz, was also its greatest storyteller, knowing what to put in to a song and what to leave out. In jazz, the player makes something new of the song; he makes the song express what he wants it to express. Another word for this practice is editing. In oral cultures, poets "riff" on existing stories, do their editing on the spot, in front of an audience, just as Armstrong did in front of crowded theaters, recording equipment and television cameras. In literate cultures, composers do their editing laboriously, over time, and out of sight. Armstrong never labored over editorial decisions; he edited joyously, spontaneously, in full view. By elevating the performer (one who edits on the spot) above the composer (one who edits out of sight), jazz inverts the hierarchy of European music; the performer no longer pretends to represent the absent composer's "intentions." He signals his own.

Leonard Bernstein once suggested that the reason philistines think jazz a "low class" music (he was writing in 1955) is that "historically players of music seem to lack the dignity of composers of music." He argued, however, that "the player of jazz is himself the real composer, which gives him a creative, and therefore more dignified status." (Giddins, 165)

Armstrong brought the tradition of oral poets into the electronic age. Like them, he took pleasure manipulating known material to his own ends. But unlike a poet or musician in an oral culture, Armstrong had a range of literate traditions from which to draw. Starting with the recordings of 1928 in New York City, Armstrong added the songs of many composers, including the Gershwins, Porter, Berlin, Kern, and Carmichael -- highly literate craftsmen -- to his repertoire. Armstrong honored the composers' melodies but invented on them constantly (with his unique rhythms, vocal inflections, and performance styles). His practice of "editing on the spot" became as important to the future of jazz as the repertoire he introduced, elevating the performance and, with it, the dignity of the performer.

Musical Structure/Ideological Force: Glenn Miller's "In The Mood"

The sample essay below arose from the insight that structuralist methodologies could bridge the gaps among various forms of communication, including music, writing, and film.

The Glenn Miller Story, the 1954 biopic starring James Stewart as Glenn Miller and Louis Armstrong as himself, reveals stark contrasts between these men and their music. These

contrasts can be mapped as a series of structuring binaries. Below I map the binaries associated with Miller and refer to the structuring elements as being either "used" or "unused." My model for this work is Charles Eckert's structuralist (Marxist and Freudian) reading of the film *Marked Woman*, which represented a major breakthrough in cultural studies, showing how the deep structure of a text could reveal its ideological operations. The writing sample about Glenn Miller's "In the Mood," below, demonstrates how Eckert's method can be used to study music.

A structuralist reading of "In the Mood" reveals its valorization of corporate technocratic values over modernist high art values. The first table below consists of materially verifiable data, with the *used* elements on the left and the *unused* elements on the right. In other words, the table lays out the options that were available to Miller, showing the choices he made for each option. The second table consists of inferences derived from the first table.

Table One: Verifiable Data

Used	Unused
4/4 rhythm	2/4 rhythm
riff-based composition	melody-based composition
repetitive arrangement	varied arrangement
simple 1-4-5 chord pattern	complex chord pattern
major key	minor key
fast tempo	slow tempo
ensemble featured	soloist featured
big band	small band
with leader	with no leader
instrumental	vocal
white band	black or integrated band
male band	female or mixed band
short song (but could go on)	long song
winds and brass separate roles	winds and brass together
scored	unscored
"clean" playing	"rough" playing

Table Two: Inferences derived from Table One

Used	Unused
secular	religious
for dance	for listening
for radio, jukebox, and record	for concert hall
for play and work	for sex
professional	amateur
machinic (train, telegraph, factory)	lyrical
not virtuosic	virtuosic
efficient	excessive, decorative

"In the Mood," but for what?

As in the modern factory, the Miller Orchestra's labor is divided, with winds and brass

taking separate riffs. The entire organization of skilled laborers (professional musicians) is led by a "manager" (Glenn Miller) and played according to a "blueprint" (score). The efficient performance and riff-based structure of the piece gives it an "industrial" sound (like machines moving in perfect counter-rhythm: the sounds of train and telegraph). The arrangement features an ensemble of machines and human workers performing well and at full capacity. Not surprisingly, the song was hugely successful on record, radio, and jukebox: modern machines in social spaces.

Although "In the Mood" features "black" musical traits (the 1-4-5 chord progression, swing rhythm, and riffs), and there is minor use of growling and glissando playing in the solos, Miller adapts the black forms by playing straight major chords (avoiding blue notes like flat fives and sevens), sweetening the sound with wind instruments played in unison and keeping the rhythm section and winds to mezzo-piano dynamics with mild crescendos while the brass "punctuates" with forté dynamics. The song appealed to the vogue among white youths for energy and vitality in music: it is uptempo, perfect for jitterbug dancing, designed for fun not contemplation, syncopated, and repetitive. There is no vocal part (although the song had lyrics written by Razaf), no displays of sheer virtuosity, and no artiness despite a surprisingly complex coda.

"In the Mood" feels overwhelmingly optimistic. The introduction swings, beginning with the winds in unison playing an ascending major arpeggio, then continuing with a telegraphic repetition of the high note five times before finishing the phrase. The brass then takes over from the winds, playing a repeated riff with a strong emphasis on the one and four beats, which the rest of the band punctuates. Then the piece settles into its "in the mood" groove, with the brass punctuating the four and one beats of every second bar until the twelfth bar; next the brass repeats the same note, in syncopated rhythm, eight times, ending on the four-one beats. When the piece hits full stride, the brass punctuates the four and one beats of every bar.

The arrangement clearly makes the ensemble the star. While "In the Mood" features soloists, none have the dazzling power of Louis Armstrong, whose playing heroically dramatized the individual in relation to the ensemble. By contrast, the Glenn Miller Band is a perfectly functioning machine, with each solo player exercising a controlled exuberance within the context of a corporate arrangement.

"In the Mood" suppresses anxieties about emerging social forces such as the increasing submission of the individual both to the group and to authority and the introduction of machines into every aspect of daily life. The song promises fun relations among individual, group, authority, and machine in which submission to the new social order does not pose a threat.

Frank Sinatra's Programmed Uncertainty: The Fermata and Other Deviations

(Try this -- begin with a list of key words and arrange a pattern from them. Then develop an essay from this pattern. Your reader will enjoy imagining a multitude of possible themes and arguments arising from your key words. Sinatra's frequent collaborator, Nelson Riddle, often begins his arrangements, particularly of well-known songs, with a musical method similarly designed to increase desirable uncertainty. He introduces tones the listener will find in the piece, but he doesn't spell out the melody; hence, the systematic uncertainty of all beginnings meets designed uncertainty half way)

Key Words: information / interruption / style / expectation / pattern / silence / deviation

> *The greater the uncertainty or entropy in a system, the less the probability that any one outcome will be implicated and the greater the information.*
> -- Leonard Meyer

1) What made Frank Sinatra the greatest musical stylist of the century?
Examining the style of his 1953 ballad record, *In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning*, we find a careful balance between redundancy, which reduces information, and entropy, which increases information. Redundancy provides a familiar context for audiences to test their expectations; at least eight of the sixteen songs on the album (three by Rogers and Hart, two by Arlen, an Ellington, a Porter, and a Carmichael) had become bona-fide classics before Sinatra made this record. And all the songs address the most familiar of popular music themes: affairs of the heart.

Sinatra cites these patterns in order to deviate from the courses we expect. In other words, Sinatra's style yields entropy, hence information. Sinatra virtually invented the Great American Songbook, and he did so by taking great songs from their original contexts in stage shows, Tin Pan Alley catalogues, and movies. Here, he "quotes" the

songs for his own purposes, placing them in a new context, the concept album, and giving them new dramatic and emotional weight. By creating a dramatic persona for *Wee Small Hours*, a man haunted by lost love who sings these songs as if to himself, Sinatra turns our expectations about music inside out, just as his dramatic character turns his own thoughts inside out.

When Sinatra repeats a line within a song, it means something different the second time, and the second delivery changes the meaning of the first one. For instance, in Arlen's lovely song "I'll Be Around," he sings, "Goodbye again / and if you find a love like mine / just now and then / drop a line to say that you're feeling fine." When he "repeats" the verse, he cuts the lyrics after "Goodbye again" and remains silent for an unbearably long period, picking up the lyric with "now and then," but well after the beat where he uttered those words previously. When Sinatra repeats the line, the stress changes (from "then" in the first delivery to "now" in the second), the moment of his return after the silence is lengthened, and he infuses the lyrics with greater dramatic significance; we learn that the character has been, all along, only rehearsing the lines to himself yet he still can't bear the separation called for in the "goodbye again" or the self-imposed isolation called for by the silence, which he ends with a pleading "now."

> So, how *many* ways to render an action?
> So, how many ways to *render* an action?
> So, how many ways to render an *action*?

(Try this - repetition and variation, or, ask the same question but get a different answer.)

2) What made Sinatra the greatest musical stylist of the century?

The sustained tones, hesitations, and varied emphasis of the continually vulnerable yet painfully aware romantic made Sinatra the most prominent auteur of popular song.

> *Sinatra . . . emphasized key words or notes through a combination of choices related to dynamics (loud or soft) and rhythm (short versus long notes) . . . early in his career Sinatra apparently decided that he liked to stress the first note of the final A section, coming immediately out of the bridge, and he stresses this note in at least one out of every four songs he does. It doesn't matter that this word often turns out to be as unimportant as something like "and" in "Where or When" or "I Only Have Eyes For You," or "soon" in "If I Loved You." . . . Jim Mayer recalled a conversation with Harold Arlen in which he asked the composer, "'What songwriter would ever use a fermata on the first note of an eighth-note triplet?' Harold thought about it and said, 'No one. It wouldn't work.' I said, 'Well, you did, in "Last Night When We Were Young." And you know, Frank Sinatra is the only singer who ever picked up on that.'"*
> -- Will Friedwald (146-7)

The fermata, a musical notation, indicates a moment of hesitation. Composers, recognizing the unwritable, denote an unpredictable interstice; hence a fermata is planned, yet fluid, uncertainty. When Sinatra holds or pauses longer than expected, as he does during the verse in "I'll Be Around," he reinvigorates the tradition of classic songs. Sinatra had a vast and wholly deliberate range of dynamics, from operatic force to aching whisper, more so, arguably, than most singers and therefore he held open more choices and thus more information. But he also knew how to increase the available choices by playing with other variables, by altering the stresses or holding a note longer than expected (the fermata) or by inserting silence. Sinatra uses the fermata to aggravate questions, begging the implied resolution, avoiding a verse or chorus sung the same way twice. And in the ballads, the haunted heart anthems (the slower, more contemplative songs that allow time in which to consider and maneuver) time provides proliferations of choice, considerations of a greater number of options, of futures.

Information theory tells us that the longer a musician holds a note, the more we expect a significant shift:

> *Musical meaning . . . arises when our expectant habit responses are delayed or blocked -- when the normal course of stylistic-mental elements is disturbed by some form of deviation . . . Three varieties of deviation may be distinguished. (1) The normal, or probable, consequent event may be delayed. Such a delay may be purely temporal or it may involve reaching the consequent through a less direct tonal route, provided that the deviation is understandable as a means to the end in view. (2) The antecedent situation may be ambiguous. That is, several equally probable consequents may be envisaged. When this takes place, our automatic habit responses are inadequate, for they are attuned only to a clear decision about probabilities.*

> *And (3) there may be neither delay nor ambiguity, but the consequent event may be unexpected -- improbable in the particular context.*
> -- Leonard Meyer

The fermata corresponds to Meyer's first variety of deviation since it delays the arrival of the consequent, the continued progression of a lyrical and melodic phrase. Fermatas become nodes from which new futures arise. The node, swelled with possible meaning, at once blocks the unfolding landscape of events and offers other unfoldings, other directions. A nodal space, at once framed, transcends its own function in narrative or exposition; it produces a deliberate vagueness, followed by the focus of technique, implying that style is thought.

3) What, in writing, produces the fermata-effect?

One possible answer: the interruption. The typical academic essayist labors to limit the meaning of words to an immediate context (the "style of rigor" -- "don't drift, don't remind your reader of other contexts"), but we won't. We'll interrupt the expected unfolding and deviate. We'll create our own styles, but how? Puns drift, are vague, are replete, since they burst and overflow, regenerating a myriad of other contexts. Get my drift? Quotation marks select nodal "places," offering yet another possible means of achieving the "fermata-effect" since they imply interruption by other voices -

> *Everything will be hesitation, disposition of parts, their alternations and relationships -- all this contributing to the rhythmic totality, which will be the very silence of the poem, in its blank spaces, as that silence is translated by each structural element in its own way.*
> -- Stephane Mallarmé.

Quotation marks interrupt by suggesting purposeful distance from common meaning, a distance both ironic and ideological, since they displace the composer's authority. Can you think of more ways to establish a pattern and then deviate from it while still keeping the pattern in view? Can you think of other ways to increase the density of information in academic writing? Do questions themselves produce desirable uncertainty? Since we expect certain questions in particular contexts, these questions produce less information than questions that are unexpected (and how does one expect deviations?) Imagine a book, as yet unwritten, about the role of the question in generating information. What questions would it ask? How would it interrupt itself?

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Barry Mauer earned his doctorate in Cultural Studies in May 1999 from the University of Florida in Gainesville and now teaches in the English Department, the Film program, and the Texts and Technology PhD program as an Assistant Professor at the University of Central Florida in Orlando.