

## **Jam Sessions in Manhattan: Scene, Ritual and Race<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

This paper addresses the relations between jazz jam sessions in Manhattan and the concepts of Scene, Ritual and Race. These issues emerged during research that, from an ethnomusicological perspective, focused on the role of jam sessions in Manhattan as a privileged context for learning the performative styles of jazz, the development of the creative process, the construction of professional networks and the establishment of the status of musicians. Starting from the analysis of five venues of jazz performance in Manhattan, New York, I demonstrate the importance of participating in jam sessions in the professional careers of jazz musicians by examining their relationship with this performative occasion.

**Keywords:** Jazz, Jam Session, Ritual, Race, Performance

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### **Introduction**

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<sup>1</sup> This presentation is an excerpt of the following article from the same author: Pinheiro, Ricardo. 2012. "Jam Sessions in Manhattan as Rituals". *Jazz Research Journal* 6 (2): 113-133.

My experience as a musician, jazz professor and researcher led me to choose the jam session as an object of study, and also shaped my analytical perspectives.

As a researcher, I became aware that jam sessions, despite their importance in the historic and current configuration of the jazz universe, have been studied by only a few scholars (Cameron 1954, Berliner 1994, Nelson 1995, Peterson 2000, Walker 2010). Until the mid nineties, many jazz researchers have paid special attention to the analysis of different jazz styles and the biographies and interpretative styles of renowned musicians (Martin 1988 and 1994, Pressing 1978, Stewart 1973 and 1979, Strunk 1979 and 1983, Tirro 1974, for example). Since then, ethnomusicologists such as Paul Berliner (1994), Ingrid Monson (1996) and Travis Jackson (1998) have studied the creative process, the interaction, the musical meaning, and the socializing processes of jazz musicians, which are key factors for a full comprehension of the jam session.

The limited interest that jam sessions have raised in academia has only had some visibility essentially in the field of sociology, especially through the work of William Bruce Cameron (1954) and Lawrence D. Nelson (1995). Dealing predominantly with social processes that take place during the performative occasion, these authors do not examine the relationships between musical, social and cultural settings. Without referring to specific locations and time, and besides lacking a satisfactory articulation between performance practice and the environment, these studies miss the musicians' discourse.

I define a jam session as a performative occasion, ideally open to the participation of musicians, which takes place weekly, in the evening, in jazz venues like bars and clubs, and which can continue for several hours or even until dawn. Starting from a repertoire of "jazz standards", musicians improvise, interacting collectively (Pinheiro 2008, 2011, 2012).

In jam sessions, jazz musicians have a commonly understood jazz language and idiom, which is based on the blues. The joint musical dialogue that is developed in these performative occasions is predominantly grounded on a musical language and aesthetics: the "blues aesthetic" (Baraka 1971,

Jackson 1998, and Murray 1970, 1976). In fact, in jam sessions, musicians recurrently use the blues form, call and response phrasing, the blues scale and other particularities of the “blues” and the African American cultural tradition at large. As Travis Jackson points out, a “blues aesthetic” based on the African-American cultural tradition presupposes musical characteristics and evaluative and standardized criteria common both to musicians and audiences (Jackson 1998: 95-133).

Jam sessions in Manhattan are part of the “jazz scene”, a socially built stage on which a number of players and institutions relate to one another. Musicians, audiences, and other agents of the milieu, for example critics, interact musically and socially in musical venues, universities and other jazz-related institutions.

During my research, between 2003 and 2005, I observed jam sessions in five venues located in three different areas in Manhattan: Harlem (Lenox Lounge and St. Nicks Pub), Upper West Side (Cleopatra’s Needle and Smoke), and Greenwich Village (Small’s).

### **Jam sessions as rituals**

Taking into account the characteristics of jam sessions - a set of actions with symbolic value, configured by norms that shape jazz performance, and by decisions of the actors involved - I suggest we look at this performative occasion as a ritual: “a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place [...]” (Turner 1977: 183). As other rituals, jam sessions involve communication (Douglas 1973: 41, 97; Schechner 1987: 5), celebrate and assure the unity and continuity of the group, and might even stimulate its transformation (at a collective and individual levels) (Bell 1989: 31-41, and 1992: 118; Turner 1983: 223), through the possible development of new aesthetic values and performative attitudes. Through musical performance, jam sessions play a critical role in terms of establishing, expressing and consolidating values and beliefs shared by jazz musicians.

Analyzing jam sessions as rituals allows us to understand that, as in any other ritualized activity, and according to Christopher Small (1987a, 1987b), they

occur on specific performative days, times and venues, and are organized in a way which emphasizes the role of the musicians (also see Jackson 1998). There are conventions as regards the behavior of the parties, and a standard repertoire which shapes the performance in jam sessions, serving as the starting point for the improvisation of the musicians. These are communicated by means of symbolic patterns and actions) determined by the jazz tradition.

Jam sessions in Manhattan generally occur at the beginning of the week, due to the availability of the musicians to participate in them, and tend to begin at around 9:30 p.m., and can go on until dawn. They take place in specific venues - jazz clubs and bars - which are important places for jazz performance in Manhattan, where they play a crucial role in the process of establishing the professional reputation of musicians. These places are vital for the musicians' artistic development, enabling them to achieve visibility in the context of the jazz scene. They are generally organized in a way which enhances the central role of the musicians in jam sessions (like in regular jazz concerts). For example, the Lenox Lounge bar is located in a room other than the one where musical performances take place. In the case of Small's, the stage takes on a central role in the layout of the space. The bar is located on the side, and in front of the stage there are chairs without any supporting tables. This layout is similar to that of a small concert hall.

As suggested by Lévi-Strauss (1953, 1955, 1956), Pocius (1991), and Shields (1991), it is interesting to look at the performance venue not only as a material reality, but also as a representation. Following Maurice Halbwachs's discussion of "the collective memory" (Halbwachs 1950, 146), I understand certain jazz clubs and bars that hold jam sessions to carry deep importance. In these spaces and at these events, jazz musicians form and solidify their sense of group membership, both shaping and being shaped by a collective sense of the jazz tradition. For confirmation, musicians need only look at the pictures of musicians lining the clubs' walls, a shorthand reference to canonical players and their styles. Musicians and audience members at the St. Nick's Pub and the Lennox Lounge often compare these spaces with other Harlem legendary clubs such as the Cotton Club or Minton's Playhouse. These mnemonics evoke what Feld and Basso call "senses of place," a set of shared meanings and group connections associated with a locale (Feld and

Basso 1996, 3-11). For the clubs, it is a way to connect present performances with a history, as part of a strategy for promoting the space as a stage for “authentic representations” of jazz practice. This concept of alleged authenticity is used by Manhattan jazz club owners in promoting their spaces and events, as it plays a crucial role for the survival of these spaces in a tough and highly competitive market. For example, the Village Vanguard advertises its strong connection to jazz history by using the slogan: “(...) it’s where the ghosts of past jazz giants still play, where the best living jazz talent aspire to record (...)” The Lennox Lounge advertises “Harlem’s Historic Lennox Lounge,” and at the St. Nick’s Pub, one hears constantly about memorable past performances by Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane and Billie Holiday. Even the advertised idea of jam sessions as “real jazz” also fits this strategy.

Analyzing jam sessions as a ritual also allows one to acknowledge the conventions which shape the behavior of the participants and their role in the organization of the event. For example, the house bandleader plays a structuring role in shaping the jam session by means of his decisions and the direct relationship he sets up with all the parties involved. He or she is responsible for hiring the house band, selecting the repertoire for the first set, managing the musicians’ participation in the second and remaining sets, and interacting directly with the audience. The house band musicians play in the first set, stimulating the participation of other musicians. Their involvement in the jam session as members of the house band is important in affirming their status in the jazz scene, constituting regular work and the chance to meet new musicians. The remaining participants, who are in large majority jazz students or recently graduates, take the opportunity to play live, seeking some visibility in the scene. They sign a list that allows the leader of the house band to form the performing ensembles, according to musicians’ turn and instrument. The audience, constituted by musicians who are waiting to play and other spectators who do not participate musically in the event, listens to the performers and witnesses the whole process.

Participating musicians are expected to wait for their turn to play; have a minimum proficiency level according to other musicians onstage; play

interactively, privileging group music; know the repertoire, the jazz tradition and its preeminent players and composers; and play reasonably short solos.

According to Paul Berliner, jazz musicians learn gradually to evaluate the participation conditions in jam sessions that are adequate to their musical proficiency level. The author cites double bass player Rufus Reid, that states: “as a matter of respect, you didn't even think about playing unless you knew that you could cut the mustard. You didn't even take your horn out of its case unless you knew the repertoire” (Berliner 1994: 43).

There are several regulatory mechanisms for re-establishing the normal functioning of the event. When the norms that rule the behavior of musicians are broken, the group may apply provisions of a prescriptive nature, in order to regulate the functioning of the performative occasion, establishing and resetting the musical values. Criticisms are usually verbal and made in private or by means of more subtle behaviors of non-verbal communication.

Analyzing jam sessions as rituals also enabled me to ascertain the existence of a standardized repertoire, which constitutes yet another structuring element of the performative occasion. This repertoire represents a “lingua franca” for musical communication among musicians. Starting from a shared knowledge of a number of compositions, they may interact by means of collective improvisation, using the repertoire as a melodic and harmonic matrix that shapes the creative process. In my observations, I noticed three main types of “standards”, according to their formal, melodic and harmonic origin and nature: “blues”, compositions which are part of the “American Songbook”, and other original compositions of jazz musicians.

It is crucial to look at that repertoire as a key element for social and musical interaction between jam session participants. The repertoire refers the musicians to the history of jazz, namely to recordings widely disseminated, facilitating the transmission of aesthetic patterns which set the scene for their performance.

Musicians use these songs on and off the stage as a way of connecting (both musically and socially) and to build hierarchies of competence. For example, musicians who demonstrate knowledge and musical mastery of harmonically intricate or less popular songs, such as Tony Williams' “Pee

Wee” or Wayne Shorter’s “Orbits” might have their status reinforced, as they demonstrate a deep knowledge of the jazz tradition.

Analyzing jam sessions as rituals also enabled me to observe that they also involve communication between participants, comprising innumerable symbolic patterns and actions (Turner 1977) set by jazz traditions. For example, the performance of a piece is divided into: selection of the repertoire and musicians, performance of an introduction, melody exposition, “solos,” “trades,” “head-out,” and finales or endings. The repertoire is generally selected by the musicians during a conversation held on the stage just before the performance, on the basis of mutual respect and for logistical reasons. This procedure may have a positive impact in the improvisation process, namely in terms of trust building among the participants, and it may stimulate musical interaction.

Although, as in any other ritualized activity, jam sessions are structured events, it is important to state that its structure is not definitive. On the contrary, according to the anthropological approach which was developed around ritual starting in the seventies (Bell 1989, 1992, Turner 1967, 1969, 1977, 1983, 1986), I see jam sessions as events which, ensuring the unity and continuity of the group, may stimulate change over time in behavior patterns and culture, including norms and values. Seen in this light, jam sessions are important in the expression, transmission, fixing, strengthening and transformation of aesthetic and performative values shared by the “jazz scene” in Manhattan. For example, in the interactive context of jam sessions, musicians may develop new approaches to improvisation, as happened in the forties, with the advent of bebop, and in the nineties, in the jam sessions of Small’s Club.

### **Place, Race, Insiderness and Otherness**

Race as a social and ideological construction (Fields 1982, Kelley 1994, Omi and Winant 1987, Radano and Bohlman 2000) shapes social behavior, discourse, and idealizations of place, self, others, and of jazz history. In the context of jam sessions, I looked at the way in which aesthetic and discursive constructions of race, as well as performance venues and their

spatial environment, shape the social and musical behavior of the participants, as well as influence the selection of the repertoire and improvisation itself. The racial imagination, defined by Radano and Bohlman (2000) as the “the shifting matrix of ideological constructions of difference associated with body type and color that have emerged as part of the discourse network of modernity,” equally contributes to the discussion on the issues of “belonging” and “ownership”, or of the “Self” and of the “Other” which music articulates. In the universe studied, these questions can be seen, for example, in the alleged authenticity that the clubs and musicians in Harlem build around their jam sessions, linking the practice of jazz to a specific place (Harlem). Musicians like Melvin Vines and Dave Gibson state the importance of Harlem as a symbolic place for African-American culture, and advocate for it as the ideal location for the practice of jazz, a music which reflects, through musical performance, “total equality” and “democracy.” In fact, some Harlem performing musicians and even critics such as Ben Ratliff (1997) advocate that downtown clubs are expensive, “impersonal” and “cold,” suggesting that there is in Harlem a longstanding tradition of communion and informal participation in jazz performances. According to Ratliff, “it's rare to see musicians sit in with the band downtown, but it's a long and continuing tradition in Harlem” (1997). For the drummer of the house band in Lenox Lounge, David Gibson, clubs like Cleopatra's Needle are a “meat market” because “they try to make it commercial”. In Ben Ratliff's opinion, the environment of Harlem clubs is more “authentic” and makes the audience feel more comfortable and less pressured by economic policies like the ones that are imposed by downtown and midtown clubs.

However, it is not only the racial imaginary that stimulates the construction of music. Music likewise contributes to discursive constructions around race and gender. This fact is made clear, for example, in the idealization that some musicians make of others, inspired by their musical performance. Melvin Vines, the leader of the house band in St. Nick's Pub in Harlem, affirmed that white musicians overwhelmingly approach music from an intellectual perspective, to the detriment of the emotional perspective, awarding it with a characteristic allegedly common to European-American musicians.



On the other hand, and even though anthropology and ethnomusicology after Franz Boas firmly locate social factors rather than genetics as source of musical diversities and particularities, we can see how several researchers (Alan Merriam 1956, 1958, 1959, 1960; Richard Waterman 1952a, 1952b, 1963; John Miller Chernoff 1979), imply the existence of an “African musical essence” in jazz, fuelling the stereotype of African-Americans possessing inborn capacities as regards dancing and rhythm<sup>2</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

Jam sessions represent not only a crucial social and performative context for the development and training of jazz musicians in Manhattan, by means of the development of the creative process, but also by the construction of social networks, contributing to their entry and integration in the labor market. The performative and social practices in jam sessions foster the transmission and reconfiguration of the aesthetic, social and cultural values which determine jazz performance, representing an important means for its perpetuation.

Rituals both reflect social and cultural biases and regulate how those biases, processes and forms are to be played out. Studying jam sessions as ritual enabled me to analyze many aspects of the “jazz scene,” an ever-changing context. From this point of view one can grasp: the major characteristics of the jazz performance, the traits which shape the process of building cultural identities, the aesthetic principles which determine musical performance, the behavior of the musicians, the processes of musical learning and socializing, the establishment of power relationships among musicians, and the discursive and musical meanings within the context of performance, which shape and are shaped by the cultural and historic traditions of jazz.

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<sup>2</sup> Kofi Agawu’s work on the politics of representation, *Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions* (2003) focuses the origins, development and implications of the Africanist musical discourse, bringing substantial and valuable information to this discussion.

As performative occasions that involve a set of actions with symbolic significance formed by patterns that shape musical performance, jam sessions can be looked upon as rituals that, according to Turner (1977), involve fixed arrangement of actions concerning gestures, words, and objects performed in a appropriated space. As any other rituals, according to Douglas (1973) and Schechner (1987), jam sessions also involve communication between several actors. As any other rituals (Bell 1989, Turner 1983), they also represent a key role in terms of celebration and assurance of the unity and continuity of the jazz scene, also stimulating its transformation through the expansion of new aesthetic principles and performative approaches.

I hope that this study will open a new way forward for future interpretations of jam sessions, stimulating the in-depth analysis of this performative occasion, given its importance for musicians and for the jazz scene. Future analytical perspectives on jazz must continue to emphasize musical events, contexts, and concepts, which shape its performance, evaluation and interpretation. The perspectives of the musicians and main parties in the “jazz scene” are essential, both as regards the understanding of musical, social and cultural practices, and as regards the reinterpretation of the historic perspectives in jazz literature.

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