

"Rethinking Jam Sessions: Jazz, Literature, and the Musicians' Discourse"

Ricardo Pinheiro, PhD

Universidade Lusíada de Lisboa, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Escola Superior
de Música de Lisboa

Abstract

This paper examines some of the most relevant works on the jam session, focusing on how this performative practice has been approached in jazz literature. Starting from bibliographical research conducted at the Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University, and fieldwork carried out between 2004 and 2005 in jazz clubs in Manhattan, I analyze to what extent these works reflect poor and decontextualized perspectives on a performative practice that is crucial for the development of the creative process, learning and construction of professional musicians' networks.

The few existing studies on the jam session, although providing substantial contribution for raising some important issues, are insufficient for obtaining considerable information about this practice in its musical, social and cultural settings, namely in terms of its functioning and role in the context of the jazz scene¹. The musicians' discourse is often neglected in most works on this topic.

¹ I chose the concept of "jazz scene" not only because it is used by jazz musicians to designate their universe, but also because it suggests, unlike the "jazz community", a dynamic universe of study, where a number of interactions between players and institutions take place, not only locally but also at national and international level (Straw 1997; Jackson 1998). The term "jazz community" has been used in jazz literature with the purpose of characterizing the musicians as a marginal, cohesive and clearly differentiated group, within which individual and collective interests coincide (Becker 1951, Cameron 1954, Esman 1951, Merriam and Mack 1960, Pinheiro 2011 and 2012).

Discussion

Sociologists William Bruce Cameron (1954) and Lawrence D. Nelson (1995) published two of the most noteworthy academic works on the jam session. These articles, separated almost for forty years, reflect the importance of jam sessions in the observation of social processes that occur during musical performance, and that are framed by the jazz scene. Cameron and Nelson examine some interesting issues related to the social structure and ways of communication between participants in jam sessions, describing a series of possible behaviors that contribute for structuring and developing the creative process.

Cameron pictures jam sessions as a “refuge” of amoral, illiterate, impulsive and instinctive individuals (1954: 181). He assumes that this kind of performative occasion functions as a “purification ritual”, constituting a fundamental experience for the reaffirmation of musicians’ aesthetic values.

“The jam session is a transitory recreational association of an elite. It is an informal but traditionally structured association of a small number of self-selected musicians who come together for the primary purpose of playing music which they choose purely in accordance with their own aesthetic standards and without regard to the standards of the buying public or of any acknowledged organizational leader or critic” (Cameron 1954, 177-178).

According to the author, this leads the musicians to deliberately position themselves away from the public and the rest of society. Consequently, Cameron contributes with a rather stereotyped vision of socially self-isolated, illiterate, and nonverbal jazz musicians².

² Cameron also stresses the importance of jam sessions as a way of experimenting new musical ideas, interacting with different musicians, and expanding musicians’ reputation in the context of the jazz scene. These events are thus depicted by the author as vital for jazz musicians: “(...) it is in the session that he [the musician] most meaningfully lives. This is what he practices and learns for. This is the focus of his life” (Cameron 1954, 180). Merriam and Mack (1960) stand further, admitting that jam sessions are crucial not only for musicians as individuals, but also for the jazz scene at large. According to the authors, jam sessions characterize the jazz milieu, reinforcing a unitary group feeling that brings together musicians, public and other actors in the jazz scene.

“If the reader perceives the significance of this, it will be obvious why most jazzmen, unschooled in logic and philosophical aesthetics, are at a loss to verbalize their aims and methods, and resort to jargon (itself unexplained) or else refuse to discuss jazz at all. As far as expressing and communicating their basic ideas to outsiders, jazzmen are not only non-literate but non-verbal as well” (Cameron 1954, 180).

This point of view gained substantial popularity in other jazz academic works, bringing up an authoritarian musicology, capable of judging the genius of “primitives” through the use of analytical criteria borrowed from the western classical musical tradition. This is particularly evident in the work of scholars such as Gunther Schuller (1968, 1991) and André Hodeir (1956).

Specialized verbal communication developed and maintained in the jazz scene, and that is portrayed negatively by William Bruce Cameron, has, according to Lawrence Nelson, specific important purposes: to distinguish jazz scene members from outsiders³, and to express sanction behaviors. According to Nelson:

Bringing one’s instrument to a jam session is a signal that indicates a willingness to perform; it also implies that the person is claiming to be capable of doing so competently. On occasion, the choice of song to be performed can send a nonverbal message (Nelson 1995, 98).

Nelson also observed the norms of behavior that constitute a central aspect in the social structure of jam sessions. He suggests the existence of three mechanisms that keep the event structured. The first one is the previous choice of a leader that takes several flexible control actions, such as choosing the repertoire that will be played. The second mechanism is the adoption of sanction behaviors that include disapproval expressions regarding any implicit rule violation. These behaviors can involve facial expressions or specific body

³ In “Lester Young: Master of Jive” (1985) Douglas Daniels analyses Lester Young’s verbal language, concluding that, contrarily of what Cameron states, the creation of verbal codes potentiates the proximity between musicians and audiences, specially through the use of shared meanings systems.

movements. The last mechanism that helps to keep jam sessions structured is, according to Nelson, every audience response to the music. Contrarily to Cameron, the author believes that the audience members are equally important in the social configuration of jam sessions, as much as the musicians.

It is interesting to note that William Bruce Cameron and Lawrence D. Nelson don't examine the particular spaces where jam sessions take place. This reflects lack of framing in their studies, particularly in terms of what space and time are concerned.

Two historical perspectives on jam sessions appear in Joseph Peterson's Masters Degree Dissertation in Jazz Historiography, *Jam Session: An Exploration Into The Characteristics Of An Uptown Jam Session* (2000) and Scott DeVeaux's chapter "The Jazzman's True Academy" in *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History* (1997)⁴.

DeVeaux describes jam sessions in Manhattan during the mid forties as the perfect occasion to observe the aesthetic and performative values of bebop jazz musicians. According to the author, the new set of attitudes and procedures redefined the concept of the entertainer jazz musician, now an independent and dignified artist who refuses to satisfy the taste of the general public. The bebop jazz musician could now maintain the balance between the formality of the stage concert and the informal atmosphere that connected jazz with its popular roots. According to DeVeaux:

The jam session, in short, underlies all claims for the legitimacy of bebop-not simply as a jazz idiom, but as the decisive step toward jazz as art (DeVeaux 1997, 202-203).

Jam sessions therefore encouraged techniques, procedures, attitudes-in short, the essential components of a musical language and aesthetic-quite distinct from what was possible or acceptable in more public venues (DeVeaux 1997, 217).

⁴ Peterson offers a historiographical perspective of the jam sessions, while DeVeaux builds his work on the social aspects of jam sessions in the forties.

Contrarily to Cameron, DeVeaux assumes that these new attitudes and procedures didn't have the main function of leaving out the white public and humiliating less competent musicians. According to DeVeaux, jam sessions represented the ideal occasion for practicing, learning, trade ideas, thus constituting a privileged social context for the establishment of professional competence hierarchies⁵, rather than being a substitute for formal education practices, which were more focused on the development of big band professional skills, such as sight reading. The author refers some of the most important jam session clubs during that time period, such as the Rhythm Club, Onyx, Minton's Playhouse and Monroe's Uptown House, categorizing them as musicians' clubs. However, he admits that these performative venues were also visited by "show business" personalities, gamblers and other kinds of night people. According to DeVeaux, the atmosphere in these jam sessions was not only competitive, but also friendly, loyal and encouraging, stimulating the development of audacious musical ideas⁶.

In "The Emergence of the Jazz Concert" (1989), Scott DeVeaux discusses jam sessions in the mid forties and its association with the concept of "true jazz". According to DeVeaux, jam sessions were not initially suited for traditional jazz listeners, but by the end of the World War II, these events had developed a dedicated and enthusiastic audience. This fact led to the organization of concerts with a jam session ambience that became one of the most well succeeded jazz live presentation forms (for example, the Jazz at The Philharmonic Series). DeVeaux compares jam sessions with the formal concert format and stresses that even though both were developed differently with their own aesthetic criteria, the first one was less rentable. The concert, based in less interactive principles borrowed from western "concert music", attracted enthusiastic audiences, while jam sessions were mainly frequented by young people who pursued a closer

⁵ According to DeVeaux, this kind of practice was rooted in African-American culture such as other verbal contests, in which aggressive answers and spontaneous creativity was highly valued (DeVeaux 1997, 211).

⁶ In *Shadow and Act* (1953), Ralph Ellison describes the environment of jam sessions in Minton's Playhouse. According to the author, jam sessions were the perfect spot for learning the jazz tradition, style and group improvisation techniques, as well as finding and developing an individual voice (pp.208-209). For Ellison, jam sessions stimulated the formation of a homogeneous scene, where a set of collective performative and aesthetic values resulted from group experience.

contact with the “essence of jazz”. According to the author, this group of people didn’t have enough money to spend at the club, which made jam sessions non-profitable for club owners:

Listening to jazz in theaters was simply part of the kaleidoscope of popular entertainment (DeVeaux 1989, 17).

As Club owners who opened their doors to jam sessions sourly noted, the most devoted fans of the music were often too young to support the music adequately (DeVeaux 1989, 20).

Even though examining jam sessions in specific performative spaces and time periods, DeVeaux does not explain to what extent this performative practice has changed overtime. Hence, he does not clarify what contemporary jam sessions have in common with the ones from the mid twentieth century, and what features are now different.

Joe Peterson (2000) centers his study on the concepts of “pure jazz” and “true jam sessions”, comparing Minton’s jam sessions in the forties with the ones at Cleopatra’s Needle in the end of the nineties.

By analyzing sessions from the present, one can access characteristics from the past that still exist today: However, many argue that are no true jam sessions left today. (...)What this paper hopes to explore is this argument, the argument defining true jam sessions, an argument that can be explored through the characteristics of sessions (Peterson 2000, 8).

According to the author, there are two contrasting historical approaches related with “true jam sessions”. The first is supported by Gunther Schuller and accuses commercialism of obscuring the original purposes of “true jam sessions”. The second, defended by DeVeaux, highlights the importance of commercialism as a responsible medium for the viability of jazz performance, especially in the bebop era when the public looked for watching jazz in its “purest form”.

Despite trying to compare jam sessions in the forties with the ones in the late twentieth century in Uptown Manhattan, Peterson evaluates the performative

occasion in two distinct time periods using the same analytic criteria, thus generating a static historical perspective and neglecting the importance of its multi-dimensional, over timely dynamic and mutable character. Even though suggesting that jam sessions are strongly related to artistic pleasure, learning, competition, and survival, Peterson does not explain clearly which of these features belong to the past and the present, how do they take shape in each of these time settings, and how these indicators evolved over the years. Peterson also does not clarify why these four elements are considered as “true”, and what criteria he used to produce this categorization, given the problematic quality of the word. It is also important to note the lack of reference to authors that identify with either one of these postulations and that the bibliography presented by Peterson is clearly insufficient to draw solid conclusions about this matter.

In the studies referred previously in this article, narrations, dialogues, analysis and ideas of the main actors in jam sessions are partially or totally overlooked. This fact impedes the clarification of fundamental issues in the study of jam sessions, such as musical meaning. The musicians' point of view about aspects of jam sessions can be found in some published interviews and autobiographies. In 1983, James Patrick published an article that contains a transcription of an interview with pianist Al Tinney. This article portrays, in first person, occurrences and procedures that took place in Monroe's Uptown House jam sessions between 1940 and 1943. According to Al Tinney, in the context of these jam sessions, after regular work schedule, a new musical expression was established from practice and development of specific conceptions related with artistic, politic and social principles. The interaction with other musicians stimulated the pianist to develop a new musical approach based on the usage of improvised phrases as theme melodies⁷. According to Tinney:

'We just started playing and, like I say, there started to become a unity, the music started developing. We would play different melodies on the same chord changes as an existing melody. We would take a song and use the same

⁷ About the “silent theme tradition”, also see Tirro (1967).

chord changes, but put a different melody on top, which would make it our song now. We'd put some sort of, not an obligato, but you could use it as an obligato to the actual melody, you see. It was that much of a counterline. So that's what started happening." (Al Tinney in Patrick 1983, 157).

Tinney also explains processes such as choosing fast tempos and complex harmonic substitutions, as a way of discouraging the participation of less competent musicians. Later on, these processes were incorporated as fundamental bebop characteristics.

Saxophonist Bruce Lippincott (1958) describes superficially the main occurrences in jam sessions. In "Aspects of the Jam Session", Lippincott provides some general information about calling musicians onstage; the choosing of repertoire, tonality and tempo; and the establishment of solos order. According to Lippincott:

The tune settled, the key and tempo decided upon, the piano-man usually takes an 8-bar intro. In the old days it was 4 bars, perhaps 2 (Lippincott 1958, 170).

Although this study is generic and prescriptive, Lippincott points out not only some important musical aspects, but also relational phenomena between musicians and audiences.

Audience applause for an individual soloist as he finishes his solo is often disconcerting. It disrupts the continuity of the piece (Jazz is like a relay race to most musicians, who hand the baton of melody from one soloist to the next). Also, audience applause can create a great deal of self-consciousness among the musicians; they may worry to the point of compromising their solo if they don't get clapped for; playing for the crowd and not for the group is not good, unless the group itself is bad (Lippincott 1958, 173).

Miles Davis, in *Miles: The Autobiography* (1990), underlines the importance of jam sessions in Minton's Playhouse for the learning processes upcoming musicians'. The trumpet player also describes the competitive atmosphere and some "sanction behaviors" that were part of the environment of jam sessions in Minton's Playhouse in the mid forties. According to Miles Davis:

"Minton's was the ass-kicker back in those days for aspiring jazz musicians, not The Street [52nd Street] like they are trying to make out today. It was Minton's where a musician really cut his teeth and then went downtown to the Street. Fifty-second street was easy compared to what was happening up at Minton's. You went to 52nd to make money and be seen by the white music critics and white people. But you came uptown to Minton's if you wanted to make a reputation among the musicians. Minton's kicked a lot of motherfuckers' asses, did them in, and they just disappeared-not to be heard from again. But it also taught a whole lot of musicians, made them what they eventually became" (Davis 1990, 53-54).

"If you got up on the bandstand at Minton's and couldn't play, you were not only to get embarrassed by people ignoring you or booing you, you might get your ass kicked" (Davis 1990, 54).

Conclusions

The analysis of the few studies on jam sessions underlines the predominance of sociological and historical perspectives. Cameron's and Nelson's sociological approaches are driven by the lack of focus on spatially and temporally situated practices. Cameron's perspective, racially problematic, is synchronic with Howard Becker's (1951), Alan Merriam's and Raymond Mack's (1960), and Aaron Esman's (1951) evaluation of jazz musicians. These authors, besides representing musicians as individuals that are isolated from audiences and society at large, feed the problematic stereotype of amoral, non-literate, impulsive and instinctive characters. Supporting the "primitivist myth", a concept brilliantly suggested by Ted Gioia (1989), these studies had a profound influence in jazz literature of the second half of the twentieth century.

DeVeaux's and Peterson's historical perspectives on jam sessions deal with temporally and spatially localized performative practices, raising some important issues. However, these authors study jam sessions focusing its relationship with the bebop era, leaving unexplained questions such as to what extent the configuration of this performative practice has changed overtime. I

argue that the literature on jam sessions here analyzed, even though raising some important issues, is incapable of providing analytical and up-to-date perspectives that can satisfactorily elucidate its musical, organizational, social and cultural framings, neglecting the critical relationship of this performance practice with the jazz scene.

Pinheiro (2008, 2011 and 2012) noted that 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. According to Pinheiro, the performative and social practices in jam sessions foster the transmission and reconfiguration of the aesthetic, social and cultural values that determine jazz performance, representing an important means for its perpetuation. The author analyzed several aspects of the jazz scene, an ever-changing context, such as: the transversal characteristics of 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 socialization, 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.

As noted in this article, the richness of the musicians' discourse, neglected by most of the literature here analyzed, provides new clues for the analysis of jam sessions. 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.

References:

Becker, Howard S. 1951. "The Professional Dance Musician and his Audience". *The American Journal of Sociology* 57: 136-144.

Cameron, William Bruce. 1954. "Sociological Notes on the Jam Session". *Social Forces* 33: 177-182.

Daniels, Douglas Henry. 1985. "Lester Young: Master of Jive". *American Music* 3: 313-28.

Davis, Miles. 1990. *With Quincy Troupe. Miles: The Autobiography*. New York: Touchtone. Orig. Pub. New York: Simon e Schuster.

DeVeaux, Scott. 1997. *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History*. Berkley: University of California Press.

Ellison, Ralph. 1953. *Shadow and Act*. New York: Vintage Books.

Esman, Aaron H. 1951. "Jazz-A Study in Cultural Confect". *American Imago* VIII (June): 219-226.

Gioia, Ted. 1989. "Jazz and the Primitivist Myth". *Musical Quarterly* 73:1: 130.

Jackson, Travis A. 1998. "Performance and Musical Meaning: Analysing "Jazz" on the New York Scene". PhD Thesis, Columbia University.

Lippincott, Bruce. 1958. "Aspects of the Jam Session". In *Jam Session: An Anthology of Jazz*. Ed. Ralph Gleason. The Jazz Book Club. London.

Merriam, Allan P., and Raymond W. Mack. 1960. "The Jazz Community". *Social Forces* 38 no. 3 (March): 211-22.

Nelson, Lawrence D. 1995. "The Social Construction of the Jam Session". *Jazz Research Papers* (IAJE) 1995: 95-100.

Patrick, James. 1983. "Al Tinney, Monroe's Uptown House, and the Emergence of Modern Jazz in Harlem". *Annual Review of Jazz Studies* 2: 151-179.

Peterson, Joseph M. 2000. "Jam Session: An Exploration Into The Characteristics Of An Uptown Jam Session". Masters Thesis. Rutgers University.

Pinheiro, Ricardo. 2012. *Jazz Fora de Horas: Jam Sessions em Nova Iorque*. Lisboa: Universidade Lusíada Editora.

Pinheiro, Ricardo. 2011. "Aprender Fora de Horas: A Jam Session em Manhattan Enquanto Contexto Para a Aprendizagem do Jazz". *Acta Musicologica* 83 (LXXXIII) (1): 113-134 – International Musicological Society.

Pinheiro, Ricardo. 2008. "Jammin' After Hours: A Jam Session em Nova Iorque", PhD Dissertation, Departamento de Ciências Musicais, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, Universidade Nova de Lisboa.

Straw, Will. 1997. "Communities and Scenes in Popular Music", in Ken Gelder e Sarah Thornton (eds) *The Subcultures Reader*. Nova Iorque: Routledge: 494-505.

Tirro, Frank. 1967. "The Silent Theme Tradition in Jazz," *The Musical Quarterly*, 53 (3): 313-334.