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Swedish Stories? Culturally Dependent Perspectives on Jazz Improvisation as Storytelling

Sven Bjerstedt

I come to be a storyteller; I'm not a jazz musician, I'm really a storyteller through music.¹

The concept of *storytelling* as a description (or prescription) regarding jazz music—such as in this quotation from the very first sentence in pianist Randy Weston's autobiography—is a very old and very common trope in jazz discourses. Arguably, however, this usage seems to have been taken for granted, and has not been sufficiently investigated and problematized. One of several important aspects of the concept of storytelling as applied to jazz music has to do with the music's semantic potentiality and the ways in which it may be used to present references that are relevant to performers and audiences. To an extent, this relevance may be described as a form of authenticity. The aim of this article is to contrast perspectives on jazz improvisation, storytelling, and authenticity as presented in American jazz literature with statements on these topics made by a number of Sweden's leading jazz musicians in recent qualitative interviews. The picture that emerges, I will argue, includes interesting interconnections between two kinds of authenticity: *tradition-authenticity* and *self-authenticity*.

Living Your Music Or Just Playing It

The viewpoint that jazz solos can (or should) refer to extra-musical phenomena is prominent in numerous sources. Samuel A. Floyd, describing the jazz improviser's storytelling as “non-verbal semantic value,” points to examples of musicians achieving a “telling effect,” specifically referring to Albert Murray's description of “how the solo instruments in Ellington's band, for example, state, assert, allege, quest, request, and imply, while others mock, concur, groan, 'or signify misgivings and even suspicions.”² This idea can be seen in the case of Louis Armstrong, who maintained that he saw his playing as a way to paint pictures, images of things that happened to him in his life:

¹Randy Weston and Willard Jenkins, *African Rhythms: The Autobiography of Randy Weston* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 1.

²Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 277.

“When I blow I think of times and things from outa the past that gives me an image of the tune ... A town, a chick somewhere back down the line, an old man with no name you seen once in a place you don’t remember. ... What you hear coming from a man’s horn—that’s what he is.”³

According to George E. Lewis, much European (“Eurological”) musical improvisation has been defined by its promoters in terms of “pure spontaneity, unmediated by memory,” and he speaks, perhaps somewhat provocatively, of “the elimination of memory and history from music, emblematic of the Cageian project.”⁴ In Lewis’s view, the distancing of personal narrative is typical of contemporary Eurological music, while he argues that personal narrative is, by contrast, typical of Afrological improvisation. He quotes a statement to that effect by Charlie Parker: “Music is your own experience, your thoughts, your wisdom. *If you don’t live it, it won’t come out of your horn.*”⁵ Parker’s view is arguably one that has deep roots in African American culture. Such roots are noted by Christopher Small, writing on singing in African American churches, who remarks that “the key to the singer’s power in the church was not the possession of a beautiful voice [...] but authority, the authority of one who has lived what he or she sings about, and the ability to communicate the sense of the experience. *If you haven’t lived it, they say, you can’t sing it.*”⁶ This notion may be included in the assessment of jazz; to pick but one instance, in Eric Nisenson’s response to the question why he finds “so much more emotional and visceral impact” in the music of Sonny Rollins than in the music of Joshua Redman, he states that “*Rollins lives his music and Redman only plays it.*”⁷

Signifyin(g) and the Globalization of Jazz

This emphasis on personal narrative in jazz improvisation can be seen as being closely related to the African-American rhetorical practices of *signifyin(g)*, requiring an engagement with codes with which the audience is familiar.⁸ In the words of Floyd, *signifyin(g)* is “a system of referencing [...] drawing from Afro-American folk music.”⁹ Summing up several interesting perspectives on storytelling in jazz, Simon Frith holds that

the “story” in music describes an entanglement of aesthetics and ethics; *such a narrative is necessary to any claim that art has something to do with life.* A good jazz

³Brian Harker, “‘Telling a Story’: Louis Armstrong and Coherence in Early Jazz,” *Current Musicology* 63 (1997): 66.

⁴George E. Lewis, “Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives,” *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no.1 (Spring 1996): 107, 109.

⁵Ibid., 119. Emphasis added.

⁶Christopher Small, *Music of the Common Tongue: Survival and Celebration in African American Music* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1987), 105. Emphasis added.

⁷Eric Nisenson, *Blue: The Murder of Jazz* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 235.

⁸Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁹Samuel A. Floyd, “Ring Shout! Literary Studies, Historical Studies, and Black Music Inquiry,” *Black Music Research Journal* 11, no. 2 (Fall 1991): 285.

performance, that is to say (like any good musical performance), depends on rhetorical truth, on the musicians' ability to convince and persuade the listener that what they are saying matters. This is not a matter of representation or "imitation" or ideology but draws, rather, on the African-American tradition of "signifying"; it puts into play an emotional effect, a collusion between the performer and an audience which is engaged rather than detached, knowing rather than knowledgeable. This is the reason why popular music (and I don't believe the argument is confined to African-derived forms, though it helps to explain their remarkable global impact) must be understood *not to represent values but to embody them*.¹⁰

Near the turn of the twentieth century, W. E. B. Du Bois made similar observations in his landmark text *The Souls of Black Folk*, arguing that being at the same time African and American will entail psycho-social tensions and a deprivation of true self-consciousness. Du Bois referred to these phenomena as a double consciousness, a sense of "looking at oneself through the eyes of others."¹¹ To theorists building on Du Bois's account of African American consciousness as being divided, Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of *double-voiced discourse*, though obviously not addressing African American perspectives in particular, has offered fruitful perspectives on the cultural self-articulation of African Americans.¹² Gates quotes approvingly a definition of signifyin(g) proposed by the literary critic and anthropologist Roger D. Abrahams: "the language of trickery, that set of words and gestures which arrives at 'direction through indirection.'"¹³

Ingrid Monson describes improvisation as "repetition with a signal difference,"¹⁴ a phrase borrowed from Gates's analysis of signifyin(g) as a literary procedure. This description relates in interesting ways to Judith Butler's interpretation of human action as improvisation and, in particular, of gender as "a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint."¹⁵ Arguably, Monson and Butler both take improvisation to exemplify the paradoxical conditions of human agency: to act is to recreate and to deviate at the same time. In the words of Butler, human action, that is, improvisation, can never deny the way a human agent is "constituted by norms," "constituted by a social world I never chose," constituted, "invariably and from the start, by what is before us and outside us."¹⁶

Floyd contends that "all African-American music making is driven by and permeated with the memory of things from the cultural past," and that "a compelling cultural and musical continuity exists between all the musical genres of the African-American

¹⁰Simon Frith, "Music and Identity," in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: SAGE, 1996), 117. Emphases added.

¹¹W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 132. Originally published in 1903.

¹²Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981); *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press Slavic, 1986).

¹³Gates, *Signifying*, 74.

¹⁴Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 103.

¹⁵Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 3.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 3.

cultural experience.”¹⁷ For instance, he points out, the soprano saxophonist Sidney Bechet saw African American music as “expressive of cultural memory.” Floyd uses this term to refer to the subjective knowledge of members of a culture: “nonfactual and nonreferential motivations, actions, and beliefs.”¹⁸ LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka] and several other writers have followed these ideas, interpreting free jazz, emerging in parallel with the civil rights movement in the United States, as a social and cultural response to the appropriation and exploitation of African American music.¹⁹

These kinds of descriptions of jazz and its relationship to social, cultural, and historical forces, as detailed above, are based mainly on American sources and American conditions; by contrast, Swedish scholarship that engages with these kinds of perspectives is scarce. This leads to a certain asymmetry in the sources in the present article: while the Swedish interview material that I have collected is contemporary and deals primarily with improvisation, the American material spans the course of several decades and includes additional aspects besides improvisation, such as the music’s relationship to broader cultural practices. Nevertheless, the socio-cultural context is of importance to Swedish jazz as well. In the context of a relatively limited body of research, it has proven difficult to develop an adequate analytical framework within which to view issues such as authenticity and personal narrative. Arguably, due to contemporary currents of globalization, several forces, discourses, contexts, or networks are relevant: the American (in particular, the African American) tradition as well as local (i.e., Swedish) and global (transnational) discourses. Ken Prouty emphasizes a view that the globalization of jazz (or, for that matter, of other American contributions to world culture) can be viewed as a two-edged sword: “For many Americans, globalization represents a challenge to American ideas [while] [f]or many others around the world, globalization heralds not a challenge to American hegemony but an extension of it.”²⁰ Commenting on European jazz approaches, Prouty quotes an American musician’s view regarding adequate roots for jazz playing: “jazz isn’t based on classical music, it’s based on blues and church and emotion and spirit—the real shit.”²¹ However, in their book with the significant plural title, *Jazzs*, Colas Duflo and Pierre Sauvanet sum up current globalization tendencies in jazz: “the use of themes out of European, Middle-Eastern and Eastern popular music,” and they state that “whatever the future of jazz will be, its history will not be written in the United States exclusively.”²² In brief, then, the future of jazz may include many new sources, and the music’s bonds to African American culture may be redefined. Within such a context, can the concept of signifyin(g) be of relevance and value to the analysis of musical practices outside the realm of black music? There seems to be no reason why it should not.

¹⁷Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 10.

¹⁸Ibid, 8–9.

¹⁹See David Borgo, “Negotiating Freedom: Values and Practices in Contemporary Improvised Music,” *Black Music Research Journal* 22, no. 2 (2002): 165–188.

²⁰Ken Prouty, *Knowing Jazz: Community, Pedagogy, and Canon in the Information Age* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 152.

²¹Ibid, 175. The musician in question was Robert Glasper, quoted in the documentary *Icons Among Us: Jazz in the Present Tense*.

²²Colas Duflo and Pierre Sauvanet, *Jazzs* (Paris: Musica Falsa, 2003), 70. Translation by the present author.

Stuart Nicholson quotes the Italian musicologist Stefano Zenni's perspective on the role of signifyin(g) in European jazz:

All black music is a continuous process of signifyin', of conversing constantly with elements of the tradition, of turning everything around all the time, playing with music and words, overturning their meaning with all the "voices" that echo in music. When music is produced in Europe, it is logical that its signifyin' doesn't draw on blues or spirituals, of course, but on a different cultural heritage that ranges from archaic Nordic tunes to the effervescent Mediterranean cultures, which also have their own particular relationship, in their own particular way, to African-American music (in their case via the Arabic and North African interface), passing through the weighty tradition of classically "educated" music.²³

Needless to say, musical traditions are constantly being reworked, for instance through pastiche and/or parody, and this phenomenon is certainly present in Swedish jazz, with the work of pianist Jan Johansson being but one example; the ways in which he included and treated traditional folk music material from Sweden, Russia, and Hungary in a jazz improvisational approach has been an important, influential inspiration to generations of musicians in Sweden and elsewhere.

Thus, with American jazz literature and discourse as a point of departure, several perspectives on jazz music emerge as highly important and relevant with regard to an investigation of storytelling in jazz improvisation. For instance, the potentialities of double-voiced discourse in jazz improvisation; the importance of transformation of preexisting musical material, playing on cultural memory while playing with musical ideas; as well as the relationships between the music and the life of the performers and the audience—all of these are cornerstone principles of improvisational discourses arising from American traditions. In the following sections, these perspectives will be weighed against those of a number of Sweden's foremost jazz musicians.

The Adequacy of "Storytelling" to Swedish Jazz Improvisation

In a recent investigation²⁴ including extensive qualitative interviews with fifteen Swedish professional jazz musicians of national and international renown, the informants were asked to comment on how they understand the term storytelling as a picture or description of what jazz improvisation is about: Do they support it? Does it work as a metaphor for their own experiences as improvisers?

The strategic selection of participants (eleven men and four women) focused on (i) a high artistic level—some of them are very successful internationally—as well as on (ii) a documented willingness to engage in verbal communication regarding topics related to their profession. In addition, the selection was guided by (iii) the aim to include a large proportion of informants well experienced in educational aspects of their trade. When

²³Stuart Nicholson, *Is Jazz Dead? (Or Has it Moved to a New Address)* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 177.

²⁴Sven Bjerstedt, *Storytelling in Jazz Improvisation: Implications of a Rich Intermedial Metaphor* (Malmö: Lund University, Malmö Academy of Music, 2014). While the interviews were conducted in Swedish, they have all been translated into English by the author. The book includes both the original and translated versions of the quotations. Unless otherwise indicated, all interview quotes are excerpted from this source.

asked about the utility of the storytelling metaphor, my informants' responses were very revealing, highlighting many different issues and concerns.

Peter Asplund (b. 1969, trumpeter and composer) is very supportive of the storytelling metaphor: "One hundred percent. Really." Joakim Milder (b. 1965, saxophonist, composer, educator, professor in improvisation and ensemble at the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm) responds in a similar vein: "Yes, definitely." Lars Jansson (b. 1951, pianist, composer, educator, professor in rhythmical music at Århus Music Conservatory, Denmark) agrees, offering a description of the bass player Red Mitchell's solo playing as an explanation:

You paid attention. You paid attention. Just as a story-teller who can captivate his children by the camp fire ... Wow! Easy to follow, easy to understand the logic in the choice of notes and the rhythm and the breathing of the phrases, all that, the gestures.

However, Ann-Sofi Söderqvist (b. 1956, trumpeter, composer, teacher in composition and arranging at the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm) maintains that "it is a matter of something more abstract." Using the trumpet soloist Miles Davis as an example—and thereby positioning herself within a jazz tradition closely tied to an American context—she points out how difficult it is to answer the question "what is it really that you tell?"

I think [Davis is] a real story-teller when he plays. But what does he tell? That isn't that easy to make concrete. [...] I experience a lot of melancholy, quite a bit of loneliness in his expression. At the same time, I think there is a shimmering light, something almost a bit sublime, which also makes the other musicians around him raise themselves in a way. And he has a tone that goes straight into you. I only have to hear one note to know that it's him. But melancholy, loneliness ... it isn't at all certain that he feels it that way. Maybe he doesn't feel that way at all. Maybe it's only me thinking of it that way, because it hits something within me. [...] "This is the sort of human being I am" maybe what you tell, in a way. And then there is ... That is the beauty of jazz music, that space.

Söderqvist seems to point here to the possibility of conceiving of storytelling in jazz improvisation not as necessarily a *narrative structure*, but as a *statement*, e.g., as an expression of an emotional state. This is as an important alternative or complement to a strictly literal interpretation of "storytelling" in jazz contexts.

The process by which jazz improvisers tell stories can be problematized in several ways. In Lars Jansson's opinion, such problematization can be the product of ways of thinking that are determined by cultural contexts: "That it's fluffy, that it's difficult, that it's mysterious—and yet it's so simple; that opposition is what I think we have difficulties with in the West. We want orderliness, to be able to explain things, to prove ... " Like Ann-Sofi Söderqvist, Jansson also seems open to an interpretation of storytelling in jazz improvisation as an expression of the player's emotional state. Specifically, he points to the significance of the player's own accumulated experience. Jansson perceives a connection between storytelling in jazz improvisation on one hand and the improviser's personal and musical maturity on the other:

If you think about storytelling and you identify it as ... content in music, then maybe you have to be a little older, too. [...] I think I've got more structure, more content,

more sound and expression over the years. I think so. And that's because you have worked with yourself on different levels. Experienced more things. [...] if you tell stories from your heart, then you carry your own luggage. Maybe therefore this storytelling ability that you are asking about demands that you get a little older, that you have received a few blows, that you have been around a little.

Gunnar Lindgren (b. 1941, saxophonist, educator, senior lecturer at the Academy of Music and Drama, Gothenburg University, co-author with Lennart Åberg of *Jazzimprovisation*, 1978) views storytelling as an essential function of jazz improvisation, as well as of several other modes of artistic expression. He suggests that the way a story is told depends on the storyteller:

Storytelling, that's exactly what it begins and ends with. [...] It really is the story of the heart, and it does not matter whether it's told through a saxophone or through a line and a gesture in a theatre. It's really the same thing. [...] If the same story is told by ten different persons, that story will be different every time. [...] That is to say, the one who tells it can give it an expression which is just his own [...] the great storytellers, you know ... It must be that it comes with a kind of sincerity and naturalness.

In order to demonstrate the essence of a musical story's *authenticity*, Lindgren offers a parable where the real-life stories in a person's own experience are contrasted with those built on second-hand information.

Chet Baker, and Miles, [...] and Bix Beiderbecke. They had one thing in common. That was an irrepressible sort of melodiousness in their music. While we others often have phrases or sequences or whatever you wish to call it, that do not feel like a tale or a story where a human being is telling something, but it sounds as if they have learnt a story. Pretty much as if you say: "well, I read in the local paper this morning, it was a [...]," well, you know, tell some damn story. But if you had seen this, and experienced it, the same story, then you would have told it in a different way and probably been able to captivate people in a totally different way. Because you have details that make it seem authentic and credible when you tell it. [...] the difference between the best musicians and the second best is that the latter tell ... stories out of the local paper, you know, and the former tell their own stories. Even if it is the same story.

In referring to these musical heroes, Lindgren clearly positions himself within a jazz tradition that is still closely tied to an American context. More important, however, is that the point he makes in doing so is not primarily about the importance of being authentic to this tradition but about *the importance of being authentic to yourself*. To illustrate this, Lindgren describes jazz improviser Chet Baker as a truly authentic storyteller. He shares his recollections of a situation where Baker seems to have perceived Lindgren in the same way.

I have always had this incredible admiration for Chet Baker. And I played at a local venue here with my group, Opposite Corner. It is a number of years ago now. And I played a ballad there and it turned out very well, [...] And then I suddenly see how he [Chet Baker] comes walking slowly, slowly towards the stage, [...] and he came damn close like this ... [whispers] "I really liked your playing" and I was damn happy, you know, and then he went ... back. And when he came he turned ... [whispers] "I really mean it." You see ... The fact that it was a person who played melodiously and whom I had looked up to ... whom I identified with, you know ...

The statements by Söderqvist, Jansson, and Lindgren cited above all seem to point to an interpretation of storytelling which these informants seem to consider crucial: that jazz improvisations ought to *express the players' own emotional experiences in a truthful and direct manner*. The following responses from informants provide further exploration of this idea. Elise Einarsdotter (b. 1955, pianist, composer, jazz educator at the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm) points out that listeners can experience considerable differences in messages conveyed by musicians.

It's almost strange sometimes how you can listen to two musicians who play the same tune, and maybe with the same notes, on the whole. And one of them conveys something, or perhaps a lot, and the other one conveys nothing, or perhaps very little. It has a lot to do with the tone, I think. The intention and the tone.

Lena Willemark (b. 1960, singer, violinist, composer) thinks that storytelling “in a way” gives a good impression of the improviser’s task:

I think I use it quite a lot, actually. A desire to tell a story—and it doesn’t always have to do with words, it has to do with expression. [...] I use “conveying” a lot, too. To convey. But if you are to convey something, you have to be there in yourself.

Anders Jormin (b. 1957, bass player, composer, educator, visiting professor at the Sibelius Academy, Helsinki, Finland, professor in improvisation at the Academy of Music and Drama, Gothenburg University) regards improvisation as “the form of music where you have the possibility to play yourself.”

And it also is a form of music which demands you and me. It doesn’t demand a style. Improvisation to me is not a style, it is personal expression. [...] We all know that there is a great way to express something. Well, there are several: it can be movement, that is, the body—but it can also be speech. All human beings have that in common as a means of expression. Body and speech. But for some reason we choose something outside of our body: an instrument. Why do we do that, and what happens in that act? [...] In the storytelling phenomenon there may be this connection between expression and voice, which you either look for in an artificial way when you play your saxophone, or that you have for free, seemingly, when you sing or tell a story.

Jormin points to the saxophonist Wayne Shorter as a representative example of a storytelling musician. His way of playing is described by Jormin as “very simple, naïve, without frills, straight to the point, with a tone that reminds you of a ... well, a thunderous voice, in a way.”

It is extremely firm and apparently convinced—and really storytelling in some way ... with connections far back in time, in a way. That may be the most storytelling one, I think. And he also plays in an apparently non-virtuoso manner nowadays. But we who have studied music understand, of course, that it’s on a level where he has gone in circles, deeper and deeper into a spiral in some way.

Joakim Milder, too, calls attention to Shorter, in particular his way of

sometimes playing incredibly little and taking very long pauses, and sometimes being very active. Everything is governed by and depends on what needs to be expressed. So it isn’t centered on his achievement. At all, really.

Nisse Sandström (b. 1942, saxophonist, educator) comments on the point that storytelling could be viewed as a question of *how* rather than of *what*, pointing out that he does not view the storytelling of jazz improvisers as the communication of a certain message:

It is about how you convey this. Stanley Turrentine ... when I hear him I really hear a black priest. Not literally, of course, but the black priest's rhythm. [...] Rhetoric. [...] It is in his marrow. It isn't something he has learnt, but he has been influenced, in church, by the priest's way of standing out there, conveying this rhythmic message. And Turrentine does it with his tenor.

Sandström reports the opinion of a fellow saxophonist which he thinks might be of relevance to the picture of the jazz improviser as a storyteller.

Warne Marsh told me: "You are the most melodious saxophonist I have heard. It's unbelievable," he said. I guess I am a melodist. That is what I do, simply, play melodious phrases. But I don't know if it's a story. Of course, on one hand you could say that it is. Maybe it's two aspects of the same thing. You play melodiously.

I believe that a reasonable interpretation of Sandström's—or Marsh's—emphasis on the melodious quality of improvisation would be to conceive of it as an *attitude*, a posture or way of behavior in the improviser—if by voluntary choice, or as a consequence, rather, of a personality trait or of an emotional state. Sandström's description of his impressions of a certain Lester Young solo seems to me to corroborate such an interpretation. Sandström offers his reflections on how the saxophonist Lester Young appears as a storyteller in a particular solo improvisation.

The cool is born with Lester Young when he plays "These foolish things" in 1944. [...] He does not assert himself. It's as if he has ... "After you, sir." At the same time as he's playing this marvelously. Enormous tones. [...] His rhythmic timing. [...] Sometimes he plays rather similar to Louis Armstrong or Bix Beiderbecke, that is, gentle lines, [...] diatonically. [...] The way he begins is like a story. You start a bit quietly, like. And then he proceeds in this ... and tensions set in, which he himself creates, through his choice of notes, and through the rhythm. He goes into a few rhythmic things that occur ... bapp-ba-daa, bapp-ba-daa [sings] ... and, hell, then it's a story. And the tempo makes it easier to tell a story, because it's a ballad, not too slow a ballad, but a sort of walking ballad ... makes it easier to convey this storytelling thing.

Just like Gunnar Lindgren, Sandström locates himself within a commonly accepted jazz tradition through his many references to musical predecessors. Also, in the same way as Lindgren, Sandström seems to do this primarily not in order to argue that it is important for a jazz improviser to remain authentic to the tradition but, rather, in order to make the point that a jazz improviser ought to convey his message, tell his story, by means of a personal attitude or way of behavior, displaying his emotional state.

So far, the passages from my interview informants that I have included have emphasized the jazz improvisation's function as an expressive statement made by the improviser, i.e., a "soloist" perspective. However, situational features are clearly also of relevance. In my study, *contextual* aspects of jazz improvisation were emphasized by all informants; these contextual aspects of the concept of "storytelling" as a description

of jazz improvisation were highlighted by one informant in particular. Roland Keijser (b. 1944, saxophonist, multi-instrumentalist) agrees with the description of the jazz improviser as a storyteller. He extends it into a picture of the communication and response from the rest of the jazz group as well.

If you are a small company, comparable to a smaller jazz group, quartet or quintet or something like that. If someone plays a solo, that is, tells a story—then the others sit and listen, and perhaps make comments, or ask some question, support, “yeah,” like, or laugh—that is, they contribute. [...] You relate to it. OK, now he’s doing his solo, and we back him up.

Keijser also meditates on the character of storytelling in jazz. In his opinion, elements such as group communication and tradition can be emphasized if storytelling is perceived as *relating*, *recounting*. Keijser points out that storytelling in German would translate as

Wiedererzählung, that is, recounting, as in *raconter*, *re-*. That is to say, a story isn’t just something that I make up instantaneously, which is the wet dream of the wannabe jazz musician, like, but it also is that you tell a story of something that already exists, that you recount something and pass on something. You simply are in a tradition. If you have this picture of a bunch of buddies sitting, then it could be like someone is telling a story about something that you ... try to remember! How the hell was it, do you remember when we were ... in [the Swedish town] Enköping twenty years ago. It could be that situation, kind of [...] scenario, you remember certain common things identically, but then there are a little different colors ... Then there will be a rich sound, sort of. But if you think that you sit there as a gang, and someone’s going to tell a story about an experience you have in common, and then everyone agrees one hundred percent in every tiny detail: Yes, it was exactly like that! Then it probably does not swing.

Once again, here is an outlook on a jazz improviser who is clearly inscribed in a tradition (of recounting) but who, in Keijser’s view, must face the task of telling his *own* version of a commonly known story. Keijser’s extended description of the storytelling situation in jazz improvisation can easily be further expanded to include the audience as well—in a somewhat more peripheral relationship to the improviser at the story’s center.

If you speak about the traditional jazz club, then it just becomes an extension of that group. It’s a few people who sit a bit further away in the room and who may not be personally so closely acquainted with those in the center, as it were. But they, too, hear the story that’s told, and may already be familiar with it, to a great extent. That is to say, the person who tells the story can do it in a very internal way. Let us say that it’s about a story that the orchestra, this smaller group in the center, have in common, like this thing that happened in Enköping. It can be abused, or unfortunately turn out that way, that it only deals with what we who sit here learnt last semester at the Academy of Music. [...] But otherwise, if it’s a good storyteller who has not got stuck in that rather internal way of telling a story, then of course those who are sitting a bit further away from the center, that is, the audience, can also appreciate the story. [...] I am also thinking that a good storyteller can be someone who does not have any experiences at all in common with the rest of the group, but who catches their interest and gains their support, and also captivates

the audience, because it really is a darn unique personality. [...] Such as [the Swedish saxophonist] Frippe Nordström, for instance.²⁵

Comparing some of the great saxophonists in jazz history (Lester Young, Dexter Gordon, Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane), Keijser concludes: “they are very different kinds of stories—at the same time, there is a great affinity.” He directs attention to the fact that it is also possible for an individual musician to tell many different kinds of stories.

Such a guy [is] John Coltrane ... I do not think it ever happens that I laugh when I hear him play. It is very serious—in one way or another, depending on which period in his life: [...] that religious nerve, [...] that incredibly beautiful ballad playing in a more conventional spirit ... [...] Or his early stuff as well, where he has to play all the notes in the chords, neurotically, [...] that is an entirely different story, sort of.

A number of perspectives on jazz storytelling have emerged from the statements cited above. The interviewees emphasize a number of qualities in the improviser: (i) *expressing an emotional state*; (ii) *being authentic to oneself*; (iii) “*being there*,” and (iv) *relating to context* in terms of tradition as well as the concrete improvisational situation. The first three of these categories, I suggest, might be thought of as relating to the notion of *self-authenticity*.

In other interviews, informants express views that the concept of storytelling, though familiar as a part of the broader jazz tradition, was not exactly perceived by the informant as the most appropriate means to display the essence of jazz improvisation. One of the concept’s limitations might be that “storytelling” could be viewed as some sort of technical device which, while not a necessary condition, could or could not be applied in the process of improvising. Lennart Åberg (b. 1942, saxophonist, flautist, MD of Radiojazzgruppen, co-author with Gunnar Lindgren of *Jazzimprovisation*, 1978) calls attention to two concrete examples of storytelling jazz improvisation. He relates how the trumpeter Clark Terry on one occasion used

that gimmick, switching with fluegelhorn, so that he played a duet with himself, kind of. And he produces phrases just like talking, in a way, instrumental. With his sound and all. You know, he has a very special sound. You could speak of storytelling there. Even dialogue.

Åberg’s second example is Charlie Parker’s introductory phrases on the recording of “Parker’s Mood”:

ba-dobede-dweedede—de-dweedede-deyde ... You can hear that it is someone complaining. You have all the blues lyrics tradition at the bottom of it, so you add that, of course.

Åberg views storytelling jazz improvisation as a phenomenon occurring mainly in instrumental solos in blues and ballads.

There you tell about something personal, experienced. It is not as if you can tell: “oh, yesterday a strange thing happened to me,” and then you tell about that when you

²⁵Bengt “Frippe” Nordström (1936–2000) was a pioneering Swedish free jazz musician and producer, famous for recording Albert Ayler’s first LP in 1962.

play a solo. [...] You hear an expression in the person playing that gives you the feeling that he is telling you something—or opening himself up, his feelings, showing himself. It can mean that as well. You show your feelings. But the faster the tune, the farther away I think you get from that storytelling thing.

In Åberg's opinion, then, as I take it, to view jazz improvisation as an exercise in storytelling might have certain limitations in practice. If this seems reasonable from the listener's perspective, then it might perhaps also be argued that from the musician's perspective, a storytelling mode or attitude could be chosen or employed if and as the improviser pleases. Commenting on a similar argument, Gunnar Lindgren provides an example which he clearly considers regrettable and objectionable. Lindgren recalls how he once reacted when he read about the saxophonist Juhani Aaltonen's response to a question about his musical ambitions.

He said like this, you know: You know, I would like to be an excellent actor, that's what I aim at, who's able to go into any part I like ... [...] go into any part whatsoever and do a great job. [...] in relation to these things, Chet Baker, authenticity and the melodious quality, I find it difficult to accept his view.

Lindgren seems to find it possible, in principle, for a jazz improviser to adopt a position such as the one ascribed to Aaltonen: to tell any story. However, given his opinion that jazz improvisations ought to express the players' own emotional experiences in a truthful and direct manner, Lindgren seems to find this kind of musicianship objectionable since the aim to be able to *act any part*, to tell any story, might appear to be incompatible with—or even contradictory to—the aim to *be yourself*, to tell your own story.

To this point, I have argued that a non-literal, non-narrative interpretation of storytelling would seem reasonable in order to understand the perspectives presented by several of my informants. Naturally, such questions of interpretation ought not to be accepted without discussion and problematization. Some of the informants were not prepared to accept non-literal interpretations of the term “storytelling” unreservedly. For instance, Anders Jormin points out that different meanings of concepts could and should be distinguished. Telling a story, communicating, and being personal, he argues, are different concepts and should not be used synonymously.

You can communicate in other ways than with stories. [...] “Personal” can mean easily identifiable. But that is not the same phenomenon as if it is perceived as storytelling.

Jormin thinks that the concept of storytelling probably “can catch something essential.” But he directs attention to the fact that certain jazz musicians—even though they “perhaps are not Cage disciples”—do not perceive it as an ideal or even as a possibility.

They don't tell anything. It's music, period. Why increase the complexity and imagine that there is something in between the notes? There's a, should we say, rather harsh line among jazz musicians. And then there are others, to whom I myself certainly belong, who have a more poetic, spiritual vision of the music, that there really is something, where you either imagine that you have a vision or a mission, even, maybe, or that something is said, at least, but it's beyond words. Then you could speak of some kind of storytelling, anyway, perhaps.

Jonas Kullhammar's (b. 1978, saxophonist, composer) attitude towards storytelling in jazz improvisation appears to be more ambivalent. His words, I suggest, may be colored by conflicting (literal versus non-literal) interpretations of the concept of storytelling.

When I play myself, I have never tried that: ah, I will tell a story. I want to improvise in some way. But at the same time I find that, in a way, some tunes I have written actually ... are about something. They sort of came about in a certain mood, or because of something or in connection with some event in my life, you know. And in some way that comes back to me when I play the tune.

At the outset of this section, I stated that the concept of storytelling was mentioned early in most interviews and remained a central topic throughout. Interestingly, however, two of the informants did not find it particularly relevant as a description of jazz improvisation. I consider their stance to be closely connected to matters of interpretation. Bengt Hallberg (1932–2013, pianist, composer), for instance, seemingly tends to understand the term storytelling in a near-to-literal sense. Perhaps as a consequence of this interpretation, he views the description of jazz improvisation as storytelling with some skepticism.

It may be something about storytelling, that you still have a need to express yourself, even if you think that it's mostly about notes and rhythms, not about what you could characterize as events or drama or ... Well, it could be a wordless drama, but ... what's that?

Sixty years ago, Hallberg as a young piano soloist was mentioned as a "storyteller" in a blindfold test in an American jazz magazine. He does not recall the name of the magazine but remembers that he was very surprised by this designation and has no idea regarding which the qualities were that had given cause for it.

To me the approach was, how should I put it, purely theoretical. If it's an A-flat seventh, then you play those and those ... [...] Then there were not as much expressions of emotion at that time, either. Or perhaps they were unconscious. But it wasn't something that I strove for ... [...] Rather, it was to ... shape the music according to a logical pattern, a distinct pattern.

Hallberg imagines that the term storytelling could possibly serve as "a way to characterize coherence and ... that the music leads somewhere. [...] That there's a desire to ... how should you put it ... to follow the flow of time ... in a reasonable way, a musical way." Personally, however, he is hesitant about the value of the concept of storytelling as a description of jazz improvisation.

You do not think of stories, but of structures. And contrast. [...] Monotony can be very charming sometimes, but unbearable in the long run. [...] Still, it ... hangs together in some strange way. Perhaps that's the art of storytelling. [...] It becomes a question of organizing time.

Ulf Johansson Werre (b. 1956, pianist, trombonist, educator, teacher at the Department of Musicology at Uppsala University) shares Hallberg's skepticism.

On a superficial level, you could view the abstract content of a good improvisation as a story, but I don't think you should do that, rather, it's on a standard of its own.

[...] In certain solos you can hear: wow! It's revealed ... the meaning of being a human being. How could you translate that into words? [...] It would only be ridiculous. [...] Good jazz music [...] brings forward the essence of human life, I think. [...] To reduce that to a story would be to flatten it out. It's no story. You bring to life parts of the human brain that you did not know existed.

Johansson Werre further discusses a number of reasons why certain descriptions of the jazz improviser's task may render erroneous conceptions of what it really is about.

I have avoided the word "storytelling" because it's so fashionable. It's used about the same way as the word "predictable." I don't like that word either. "Predictable" is used by people with blunt ears. As soon as they have heard how a phrase ended, or how something sounds when it's finished, they say: "I see. Exactly what you would have expected." Then they write: "It was predictable." But if you would have interrupted the phrase right in the middle of it and asked them: "OK, now sing how he's going to continue this!"—how many do you think would have hit the mark? Not one. On the contrary, it's often a false and untalented rewriting of something that was logical and intelligent, I think. So I avoid it. And with "storytelling," there's the risk that you immediately turn to language and compare with words. And that there must be a comprehensible meaning in that which has been played. I don't think that music really is about that. Music is a world of its own. You can say that you play in a storytelling way, but I don't think that what you have told can be translated into a story of words.

Since Johansson Werre appeared during the interview to be quite skeptical and hesitant regarding the use of the concept of storytelling with reference to jazz improvisation, I chose to bring up questions of interpretation in our conversation. In particular, I was interested in how he perceives the meaning and intent of Lester Young's question "But what is your story?" Johansson Werre clarifies that he does not take this to mean that "it should be possible to write down on paper what I mean"—rather, it should be taken metaphorically, as "a way to describe what I mean:" "OK, now you have showed that you know a lot, but what adventures do you have in store? Where is your personality?" In a sense, then, it would seem that Johansson Werre also adheres to the view that 'story' and 'storytelling', when interpreted in an appropriate non-literal manner, may be relevant descriptions of jazz improvisation.

Qualities Pertaining to Storytelling

In the replies to the introductory question in the interviews ("What makes a good jazz improvisation good?"), qualities pertaining directly or indirectly to storytelling are notably predominant. This section briefly presents a number of these replies thematized in a number of subsections. The next few sections enter more deeply into some of the predominant themes.

Improvisatory Character: Risk, Resistance, Non-Perfection

Many of my informants expressed the view that an improvisation has—and must have—an improvisatory character; they provide complementary perspectives on what this may imply. Jonas Kullhammar emphasizes the fact that the music *is improvised*: that the

musicians challenge themselves, “take chances and risks in their playing. [...] Resistance, and the relation to resistance, that is what I find the most interesting.” *The aim not to repeat oneself* is mentioned by several informants. However, Nisse Sandström adds: “you really shouldn’t be so afraid of that, because you can’t be so unique that you don’t repeat yourself.” Kullhammar explains this aim: “I want to go on, I want to become better.”

When music displays little or no resistance, it may be the result of the musician’s striving for perfection, says Kullhammar. However, in his opinion, perfectionism does not correspond to the idea of improvisation, “because it *won’t* be perfect. [...] There are many modern superstars on the saxophone, for instance, who don’t affect me, because it is too smooth, in a way. It’s too easy. They can play anything, you know, without any resistance. And it doesn’t touch me.” Sandström agrees:

The funny thing is that it doesn’t have to be perfect. [...] Hank Mobley plays with a human touch. That is, he isn’t overly technical. He plays a bit stumblingly and a little sloppily, but [...] it’s filled with human warmth. [...] Some of my favourite records, which you can’t outdo, are live recordings, where it also happens that the musicians misunderstand each other. [...] I’m drawn into something that I can’t resist, where everything that happens is exciting.

In brief, these statements indicate that a significant aspect of jazz improvisation may be that the lack of perfection that is arguably a condition of much improvisatory activity is outweighed by some other quality, such as showing oneself as a human being with discernible human qualities (such as, for instance, courage or warmth).

Separate Elements Concur to an Expression

As noted above, a number of informants seem to advocate an interpretation of storytelling in jazz improvisation as the direct and truthful expression of the players’ own emotional experiences. Needless to say, the ways musicians may go about this will call for further investigation and problematization. The subject is touched upon by several informants. Elise Einarsdotter quotes approvingly the concise response of the trumpeter Rolf Ericson when he was asked about his thoughts during solo playing: “*intonation—timing—dynamics.*” However, the urge to analyze the storytelling aspect of jazz improvisation through a number of separate but concurrent elements may be problematic in itself; a holistic perspective seems to stand out as more appropriate to some of the informants. For instance, Joakim Milder points out that separate elements (such as phrasing, gestures, ornamentation) ought not to be viewed as isolated qualities; an improvisation is successful “when the whole performance corresponds with that which is to be said, and then it is about all parameters. It is dynamics and density ... Simply when you have found the optimum way of saying something.”

Ann-Sofi Söderqvist points to the difference between “playing show trumpet” and “trying to express something:” “For all soloists I like I think there is something ... it’s something urgent. You want to express something very strongly.” Lena Willemark offers several alternative formulations: “the nerve I can feel there is, [...] that it is a matter of life and death, [...] that it comes from deep within. A need to express.”

These statements point, I believe, to the need felt by some informants to focus not on some set of separate elements that together would make up a successful and meaningful jazz improvisation, but rather to try to attain an adequate understanding of it through some appropriate corresponding holistic expression (such as perhaps, for instance, ‘urgency’, ‘nerve’, or ‘need’).

A Personal Voice

The notion of a personal improvisational “voice” may be as old as jazz itself. Several informants express their views on this topic. When Joakim Milder listens to a jazz improvisation, an essential part of the experience is

hearing a voice that tells something. [...] It’s a real-time telling, fabulation, which in many ways isn’t far from conversation. That is, most conversations are improvised. And really, to me, it is the same qualities that captivate me in a musical improvisation as in hearing a good rhetorician speak. I look for voices, really, to a great extent. So that is what is captivating. [...] That has much less to do with how you express yourself [...]—this is a voice and a storytelling that I want to hear.

In Lennart Åberg’s opinion, it is mainly the very great jazz soloists (such as, for instance, Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins, and John Coltrane) that can be perceived as having a personal voice “that nobody else has, and that is so strong, and has such specific contents” of leading the listener’s thoughts to a storyteller. Hearing Miles Davis, Åberg may perhaps not experience “that he tells any story, but he creates moods and expressions that are general in a way. A feeling of life or something like that.” Less skilled jazz improvisers do not reach this level, according to Åberg: “it won’t be about those aspects.” These remarks by Åberg seem to indicate that one perspective on storytelling in jazz improvisation may be that the ‘story’ resides, to an important extent, *in the instrumental ‘voice’* of the improviser.

Expression, Story

Several informants view music as having greater expressive potential than language. Hence, ‘stories’ told in music may differ in significant respects from those told in language. Joakim Milder points out that a musical expression should not be confused with a specific meaning.

It is as if we had those expectations of music, too, that there is something there to understand. [...] Actually, we play instead of, it is that simple. [...] There is a need, when music becomes a necessary way of communicating, [...] It is simply a degree of urgency. This needed to be expressed.

Hence, Milder maintains, music does not carry a truth value that is testable for the listener:

Only the sender knows the purpose and can judge if this was in accordance. [...] That is a job that all musicians have to do, and that I feel is the truly essential thing in the art of improvising. To be able to capture music, and that it comes out as unadulterated as possible.

Nevertheless, even though there are limits to what can be verbalized, the listener can perceive different qualities in a jazz improvisation. Though Ann-Sofi Söderqvist emphasizes the difficulties to say something in general terms about them, she offers a few examples of this kind of experience: the listener is *emotionally influenced*, s/he senses that the improviser is in touch with his/her *inner flow* and that the improvisation is going on *just now*.

What touches me I experience as good. [...] to reach out from the stage. [...] When I feel that someone has contact with her inner flow, when I feel that this person is playing from the inside out, so to speak ... what that is, of course, is extremely subjective. [...] it's a bit more uninteresting to hear, if I can hear very clearly which exercises someone has been practicing, or which phrases they have been practicing. [...] But when you have the feeling that it is happening in the moment [...] a note that contains a lot can be of great value in itself. And if they have good timing, a driving rhythm, that's also of great value.

Lars Jansson emphasizes the experience of solo *content*. Even though it may be impossible to verbalize this content, given the view that music's expressive potential exceeds that of language, the first word he uses in order to describe it is "story":

You have to tell a story when you play a solo. It's an abstract thing. You don't tell it in words, you tell it in notes when you tell it in a solo, an improvisation. But clearly, if a musician only plays with masterly skill but with no soul or content, the listener will often get tired. You want to be touched by the one you hear playing. And that goes for all great musicians such as Billie Holiday and Coltrane and Miles and Bill Evans, that is, they mirror their own life in their playing, their music. And that is what touches us. So content is extremely important.

Peter Asplund compares the jazz improviser's task to that of telling a bedtime story:

A good improvisation is about the same thing as a good, captivating story when you sit at a child's bedside at night, who wants you to read or make up a story before she goes to sleep, you know. It should contain ... it should start from the beginning and be exciting, have a plot, and then a lot of exciting things should happen and there should be some sort of unravelling ... Ask questions, too, that make the child interrupt you from time to time and say: but what was that, and that person? And all that is made up in the moment. You want the audience to be like this little child who is captivated by this story.

It is the storytelling quality that makes the jazz improvisation stand out, in Asplund's opinion: "I buy a record with Miles Davis because he tells good stories. [...] all the great jazz musicians are good storytellers." The *jam sessions* and *cutting contests* of the Swing Era, he maintains, were not a matter of playing loud and strong, but

who reached the audience emotionally? It wasn't about straining your muscles on stage, it was about other things. To tell a story that was so incredibly captivating and great and emotionally varied that there was nothing to add afterwards. I think I have experienced that now and then. Live, and above all on record with the great old masters. Storytelling on a high level.

This way of interpreting storytelling in jazz improvisation, as I take it, distinguishes between different manners of improvising in a way that is similar to Ann-Sofi

Söderqvist's distinction, mentioned previously, between "playing show trumpet" and "trying to express something." In some of the interviews, interesting aspects of the latter approach are presented. Several qualities in a soloist are considered to be of relevance for such storytelling. Peter Asplund especially mentions knowledge of the *vocabulary* of jazz language and a sense of musical dramaturgy. Gunnar Lindgren emphasizes *ornamentation*: a jazz improvisation, as well as a verbal story, can be monotonous and boring if it lacks "life in the ornamentations."

Anders Jormin views the successful improvisation as a question of *coming close to one's own inner voice*.

If I for instance am playing on my own ... I hear some form of music, a structure and a possible development of a musical course of events within me. [...] And I'm happy afterwards if I managed to capture that vision or that music that dashes past or arises out of the moment, if I manage to capture it and manage to translate it to my instrument, in this case to the double bass. And it takes preparation and craftsmanship on a masterly level. It also takes a mental and spiritual state of concentration and openness at the same time. [...] It doesn't have so much to do with sounds as with my coming really close to my inner voice.

Again, a number of responses indicate that 'storytelling', interpreted as the communication of an inner vision or an emotional content, is considered by the informants to be an apt description of important aspects of jazz improvisation.

Simplicity, Presence, Free Creation of Coherence

Lars Jansson points out that good jazz improvisations are often *simple*:

If you transcribe a good solo, a good soloist, you can be surprised that it is so logical and inside, that it is so simple. It can be completely diatonic, no chromaticism, sort of. Nothing strange, difficult, substitutions or ... dodecaphonic series or anything—just very simple. But WOW, you just get carried away. [...] Then it is the sound and the presence ... and something larger.

Obviously, many replies to questions about music that include some variant of the question "What is good?" will depend heavily on the respondent's aesthetic proclivities. Throughout the interviews, I had to bear in mind that the informants' perspectives on storytelling in jazz improvisation would necessarily be tinged with matters of taste, which, on the other hand, would by no means make them any less interesting or valuable. Bengt Hallberg considers it important that the listeners are familiar with the piece of music that is the point of departure for the improvisation, if they are to perceive it clearly and "be able to judge it correctly:" "Naturally, you can conceive of a totally free improvisation, but then you rather address a specialized audience or ... no audience at all." In Hallberg's opinion, good jazz improvisation is *the creation of coherence* ("sammanhang") *in improvised variations over a well-known material*: "that it is coherent, that there is a ... what do you say, narrative thought behind it. But it is difficult to express in words what that might be."

Ulf Johansson Werre maintains that the soloist ought to be able to *raise above the form of the musical material and create freely*: "A jazz improvisation is actually

simultaneous composition. That is, you should rise above the skeleton of chords and scales.” In Johansson Werre’s opinion, this is mainly a question of creating “a good rhythmical phrase; rhythm has a meaning of its own.” Moving easily on a level above the form of the musical material is also a question of courage:

to dare to take hold of the course of events by playing things that you don’t really know beforehand. [...] Then you have a split second to choose your direction, and then you try to create something that sounds like a completed composition out of an embryo of a musical idea. [...] To an intelligent listener you communicate the feeling of joy of creating in the present, when that quality seems to be there. [...] As long as you think you can hear that the performer is thinking about where he is and is relating to the vertical in the music, there is still something missing. All that must be there intuitively. [...] The more free you are above this material, the greater the listener’s experience. [...] this is something of the most fantastic you can do as a human being. It is great and divine, in a way. To me it is really about being free. [...] Freedom is to have a musical form to work with, and to reach far enough to be able to turn it inside out, intuitively. [...] The inner song, that I believe is the be-all and end-all to me. What you hear within you, that you will play well. [...] A really great improviser has a rich and very nuanced inner musical life. That is, every second you hear a lot of possibilities within you. [...] You have an inner logical hearing that you only have to manage to find on the instrument.

My conjecture is that Johansson Werre’s description of commendable qualities in the jazz improviser, though perhaps based on a particular aesthetic outlook, would meet with agreement from many jazz musicians, regardless of their stylistic inclinations.

Swedish Stories

Throughout the discussion of my informants’ perspectives, I have attempted to arrange responses in a way that would make clear a number of perspectives that I regard as important, and to present them in the best possible sequence, in order to clarify similarities and differences between conceptualizations, opinions, and perspectives. Needless to say, several other ways of selecting and presenting the material would have been possible. The present version is the result of a complex—interpretive and intuitive—reflective process. At the risk of oversimplification, I will try to sum up briefly a few of the issues that have been highlighted.

“Storytelling” in jazz improvisation is not necessarily interpreted by my informants as a narrative structure. (When, occasionally, the term is understood in a near-to-literal sense by an interviewee, this may raise his or her doubts about its applicability to the field of jazz improvisation.) Rather, it is interpreted in a non-literal, non-narrative manner as a statement, for instance, as an expression of the player’s own emotional experience.

In the view of several informants, such an expression ought to be presented in a direct and truthful way. The concept of authenticity is considered crucial. At the same time, storytelling in jazz improvisation is also interpreted as a contextually situated activity where not only the soloist is of importance but the fellow musicians and the audience as well.

A number of aspects are mentioned in the interviews where musical “stories” clearly are seen as different from linguistic ones. Among other things, it is noted that even though listeners may conceive of an improvisation as a “story,” it does not follow that the improviser has actually intended to tell one. Since improvising is at the core, informants believe, there is no need to strive for perfection; it is more important that the improviser show herself as a human being. The personal instrumental “voice” is of utmost importance. In the opinion of some, “storytelling” in jazz improvisation might be best understood through holistic concepts (such as, perhaps, “urgency,” or “need”). Furthermore, in general, music is viewed as having more expressive potential than language; hence the content of musical “storytelling” is not considered translatable into words.

Based on these interviews, nothing seems to indicate that any “Eurologist,” Cageian “elimination of memory and history from music”²⁶ is emblematic of Swedish jazz music. The ideal of musical output as personal narrative (reminiscent of Charlie Parker’s words, “If you don’t live it, it won’t come out of your horn”) is very much present in the Swedish interview statements.

What, then, may the reasons be for the persistence of the concept of self-authenticity in contemporary jazz music? In part, it may be the result of jazz critic Hugues Panassié’s notion that it was indeed possible for the jazz musician to express his true self, regardless of the loss of meaning associated with modernism.²⁷ For instance, it might be argued that such a romantic, anti-modernist view informs Gunnar Lindgren’s statement that acting rather than playing oneself poses a threat to jazz performers. Notably, however, perspectives of signifying(g) and notions such as cultural memory or double-voiced discourse appear to be absent in the musicians’ perspectives on their craft. Based on this interview study, the authenticity that these Swedish jazz musicians address seems to be a *self-authenticity* rather than a *tradition-authenticity*.

It may be useful to take a closer look on the discursive construction²⁸ of this concept of authenticity which, according to several accounts, is at the heart of discourse on improvisation. Charles Hamm discerns narratives of authenticity in writings on the mid-twentieth century ragtime revival. According to Hamm, the ragtime revivalists were concerned with *historical authenticity* (who and when) as well as *stylistic authenticity* (how), whereas *social authenticity* was “not considered;” ragtime’s “new social setting and cultural meaning had nothing to do with its original environment and audience.”²⁹

The notion that jazz is in some sense a black music has been, and still is, a common one. In the words of Ben Sidran, jazz can be seen as “a product of a peculiarly black voice (blues) in a peculiarly white context (Western harmony).”³⁰ Hamm comments

²⁶Lewis, “Improvised,” 109.

²⁷See Tom Perchard, “Tradition, Modernity and the Supernatural Swing: Re-reading ‘Primitivism’ in Hugues Panassié’s Writing on Jazz,” *Popular Music* 30, no. 1 (2011): 25–45; and “Hugues Panassié contra Walter Benjamin: Bodies, Masses, and the Iconic Jazz Recording in Mid-century France,” *Popular Music and Society* 35, no. 3 (2012): 375–398.

²⁸See Jonathan Potter, *Representing Reality: Discourse, Rhetoric and Social Construction* (London: Sage, 1996).

²⁹Charles Hamm, *Putting Popular Music in its Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 12.

on how a racialized perspective on musical authenticity permeated discourse on jazz early on: “The idea that jazz was an authentic black product [. . .] was widely accepted, though not always clearly articulated.”³¹ Still, Hamm argues, such authenticity claims may be questionable; in his view, writers on ragtime and jazz have formulated a modernist narrative borrowed from writings on folk and popular music, emphasizing values from a purist, authenticist perspective.

In an influential article on authenticity in music, Alan Moore advocates a shift of focus from performer to listener. He points out that in order to understand better what ‘authenticity’ in musical performance may refer to, we ought to focus not so much on the originators’ intentions but rather on the reasons that various perceivers may have to find a performance authentic. Authenticity, Moore holds, is not inherent in musical sound; rather, it is a matter of interpretation: “It is ascribed, not inscribed.”³²

The view of authenticity as authentication has been a fruitful one in recent research on jazz.³³ This perspective involves the question regarding *what* is being authenticated: the performer, the audience, or an absent other. Depending on the answer, different kinds of authenticity may be perceived. In the words of Scott DeVaux, “ethnicity provides a core, a center of gravity for the narrative of jazz.”³⁴ Sidran holds that there is a close relationship between the sounding music and its socio-cultural context, including racial perspectives:

Because a jazz musician cannot escape his own cultural referents and because the idioms of jazz force the musician to stand naked, emotionally, before his audience, jazz music has always maintained, indeed, has stimulated, a race consciousness.³⁵

The relation between authenticity and *essentialism* is a problematic one; just as the idea that there are “white” and “black” sounds of jazz is a problematic one. The stance of many modern jazz musicians will probably include a dynamic relationship between universalism and Afro-centrism, between “universalist and ethnically assertive points of view”³⁶ where concepts such as *colorblind vision* and *de-ethnicization*, but also *authenticity* and *Eurocentric/Afrocentric hegemony*, are seen as important. Against racial sound stereotypes, we might argue that jazz is universal and open to all; still, its origins are African American. Ingrid Monson points out that

the idea of the modern artist is a double-edged sword. If it enabled African American musicians to partially break out of a race-based, second-class citizenship by appealing to merit and genius, it also provided a rhetoric through which white musicians could

³⁰Ben Sidran, *Black Talk* (New York: Da Capo, 1981), 33.

³¹Hamm, *Putting*, 13.

³²Alan Moore, “Authenticity as Authentication,” *Popular Music* 21, no. 2 (2002): 210.

³³See, for example, E. Taylor Atkins, *Blue Nippon: Authenticating Jazz in Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), and Richard Ekins, “Authenticity as Authenticating – the Case of New Orleans Revivalism: An Approach from Grounded Theory and Social World Analysis,” *Popular Music History* 7, no. 1 (2013): 24–52.

³⁴Scott DeVaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition,” in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 487.

³⁵Sidran, *Black Talk*, 68.

³⁶Monson, *Saying Something*, 201.

insist that the music be understood as colorblind, and those who emphasized its African American history dismissed as reverse racists, or in more recent terminology, essentialists.³⁷

In her discussion of music making and society, Monson sums up a few points that seem to unite a number of definitions of an African American cultural aesthetic in music: “vocalization of sound;” “swing, or groove;” “interplay between the sacred and the secular;” and “embodiment.”³⁸ Additionally, the central importance to jazz of oral culture is pointed out by Marion Brown, who writes that “The principle of the ear as a primary sensor prevails among Afro-Americans as well as in most African societies.”³⁹ Sidran expands on several of the perspectives mentioned by Monson; viewing the development of jazz as a manifestation of black oral culture as opposed to white literate culture, he points in particular to black music’s *vocalized tone* and to the different *approach to time* in an oral culture. The concept of storytelling may be fitted into this picture. Kevin Gaines elaborates on how African-influenced rhythmic conceptions have been expanded during a long process of development where “the jazz soloist’s effectiveness as an improviser was measured by his ability to ‘tell a story,’ articulating the gaps in signification between speech and music, or between rhythm and melody, to the satisfaction of audiences.”⁴⁰

It must be noted, though, as Monson points out, that since individual jazz musicians have fashioned their sounds drawing upon multiple aesthetic perspectives, the “sonic relationships” among black and white musicians are characterized by a considerable complexity. May we infer, then, that jazz is colorblind? Monson argues that in a “racially stratified social structure,” this is not the case: even though non-African Americans may master the “sonic parameters” of African American musical style, they will still have a different social relationship to the music than an African American. In articulating this argument, Monson may be seen as relating closely to the “anti-anti-essentialism” of Paul Gilroy.⁴¹

Arguably, Swedish jazz improvisers may attach relatively less importance to tradition-authenticity—or, in the words of Moore,⁴² authenticity of execution, or third-person authenticity. In a sense, then, the “third person” (meaning, in effect, the African American jazz tradition) may be perceived as comparatively distant, perhaps unattainable, even, to Swedish jazz improvisers in a way that may render the quest for “first-person” (self)-authenticity more relevant, realistic, and feasible to Swedish musicians than an attempt to attain “third-person” (tradition)-authenticity.

³⁷Ingrid Monson, “Jazz as Political and Musical Practice,” in *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society*, ed. Gabriel Solis and Bruno Nettl (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 29.

³⁸Monson, “Jazz as Political,” 30.

³⁹Marion Brown, “Improvisation and the Aural Tradition in Afro-American music,” *Black World* 23, no. 1 (1973): 15.

⁴⁰Kevin Gaines, “Artistic Othering in Black Diaspora Musics: Preliminary Thoughts on Time, Culture, and Politics,” in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards and Farah Jasmine Griffin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 208.

⁴¹Monson, “Jazz as Political;” Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993).

⁴²Moore, “Authenticity as Authentication.”

It should go without saying, however, that generalizations regarding these issues are neither desirable nor possible.

Are the ideas of signifyin(g) and storytelling, as they emerge from African American jazz traditions, relevant to non-African American (in this case, Swedish) contexts? Stuart Nicholson would seem to suggest that they are, pointing to the relevance of signifyin(g) in European jazz contexts, though they draw on different cultural heritages. It would seem, though, based on the results of the present interview study, that even though Swedish jazz improvisers often position themselves through references to musical predecessors within a commonly accepted American jazz tradition, they do not conceive of indirection and allusions as especially important to their art, at least not to the extent suggested by Nicholson. Primarily, they value and aim at *self-authenticity*, seemingly finding that quality far more essential to their craft than playing on cultural memory in double-voiced discourse. From a general perspective, this may be seen as an indication that musical improvisation is always situated in a socio-musical context. It also points to the interesting dynamics of the concept of authenticity in jazz discourse. As noted initially, the usage of the concept of storytelling as a description/prescription regarding jazz music is arguably in need of further investigation and problematization. I believe that the results of the investigation presented in this article show that from the perspectives of Swedish jazz improvisers, one crucial aspect of their understanding of the old and common concept of jazz storytelling emerges as a notion of self-authenticity. Though the mechanisms may be similar, the stories are their own.

Abstract

This article is based on my Ph.D. empirical study which includes extensive qualitative interviews with fifteen Swedish jazz improvisers regarding their views on the term ‘storytelling’ as a metaphor in the field of jazz improvisation. Through comparisons with American literature on jazz music, this article points to a number of interesting relations between “American” and “Swedish” storytelling in jazz. While the notion of authenticity emerges as central to both American and Swedish jazz, the results from the Swedish interviews point to interesting interrelations between two aspects of authenticity: tradition-authenticity and self-authenticity.