

THE SECRET LANGUAGE  
OF THE JAZZ MUSICIAN

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To the outsider, the language of the jazz musician is almost impossible to decipher. As a linguistic code, the jazz musician's argot is his defence against an unknowing and often hostile world. The nature of the music, often called 'the only original musical art form of North America' is of a complexity which requires a new lexicon other than classical European musical terminology. Thus neologisms have been created by necessity.

This article is an attempt to clarify the 'mystical' language of the jazz musician. It is limited to a brief history of the music; a new etymology of the noun/verb jazz; a short glossary of terms which were found either on records or through other more direct sources; a comparison of musical creation with linguistic creation in the Chomskyeian sense; parallelism between 'spoken' and 'written' musical language and spoken and written human language; a conclusion which relates the music called jazz to its etymology.

A Brief History of the Music.

A good source of jazz's musical history is Feather (1960: 21-51).

Jazz is now in its eightieth year. It began as brass band marching music which evolved to a musical form known as jass. There is an interesting chronology, in that jazz can be dated in its major divisions by referring to social upheavals in American society.

The first period of jazz occurred between World War One to the Prohibition decade: Traditional Jazz, or Dixieland.

The second period, called swing, lasted until World War Two. The third period is called Modern Jazz, and it can be sub-divided into many categories from 1945 to the present. It is a fact that all types of jazz music are being played now, and that the musical tradition of jazz remains the same. That is: an emphasis on improvisation, based on human speech sounds, a strong sense of rhythm, which is the primary aspect of all music, and an open-ended assimilation of any musical source which the jazz musician can use. Jazz is the answer to twentieth-century music, of which it is a child. Jazz means: 'to speak'.

#### An Etymology.

The origin of the word jazz has been sought by many scholars, be they musicologists, or linguists. Unfortunately, the bias of each group has led to a fantasy world of

speculation. There is the question as to which form the term jazz took first, a verbal or a nominal form.

Feather, (op.cit.) seems to favour the verb form. This opinion is reinforced in *Dearling and Dearling* (1976: 21). It is stated that the first use in connection with any kind of dance music goes back to a song used in the Deep South during the 1880's, concerning a man called Johnson, jazzin' around. Jazz has been traced to the Latin rooted ego anus (Shirley 1977:36) by Don Shirley, a scholar and performing musician.

To follow his etymology would be a good game for a Romance Languages philologist.

There are other explanations of jazz found in Mencken (1974: 235). Names of performers are used to give an official name to the music. There is also the creole noun 'chasse' which seems probable, and fits with the following.

Here is a new etymology. Given the fact that jazz music came from early twentieth century creole and brass bands from the New Orleans area, it is more than probable that the etymon /ʒɑs/ can be related to the Acadian and Creole verb form jaser. There is a possible relationship to the noun, brass. Since jazz was spelled jass until circa 1920, (Feather 1960: 21 and 24) the well established rhyming game occurred, brass band becomes jass band. This type of word manipulation occurs very often among musicians,

and it is seen and heard even now. A striking example is the term bop, or Hey bop a re-bop; which was the name given to modern jazz by a New York City disk jockey.

Perhaps the most fascinating linguistic evidence is the verb jaser itself. The primary meaning is 'causer, babiller', with a secondary meaning of: 'prononcer des paroles humaines, en parlant du geai, de la pie, du perroquet, etc.' (Bélisle 1954: 671).

Thus to jaser is to speak as does a bird. Charles Parker the fountainhead of Modern Jazz otherwise known as 'Bird' or 'Yardbird' would appreciate such information.

The use of such a creole loan word would exclude the 'square' performers and listeners from the elitist jazz bands. Again, obscure terminology is still being used by modern jazz musicians. There is a standardizing tendency, but certain words have entered the lexicon and are used unknowingly, by people who have never heard or even seen a jazz musician.

#### A Short Glossary of Terms.

There is a great irony in such expressions as 'nitty-gritty' and 'having a ball', being mouthed by politicians, Shriners, and even the clergy. The expressions are clearly obscene, or at least vulgar. Verification of jazz argot terms may be found in Wentworth and Flexner 1960, and

Gold 1964.

In the original oral presentation of this article, ten words were examined, based on accompanying tapes. The words are: cool; re-lax; stevereeny; constituent; said on two separate occasions; expubident; worthy, as a pejorative; funky; ground glass and gunpowder; worser; and bop. It is impossible to present the phonostylistic and idiolectic effect of many of the above in writing. Thus the list has been cut to four words, some relatively familiar, others obscure and rare.

Cool denotes a particular school of jazz, which occurred in the early nineteen fifties.

'When "cool" came in with the early Fifties, this monosyllable assumed every grammatical function, operating as verb, adjective, noun.' (Goldman 1971: 292)

The first recording by Miles Davis was entitled Birth of the Cool, nominal function. 'Cool it', is often heard at jam-sessions with the meaning: stop playing, and cool used as an adjective still has a connotation of a smooth, aloof hipster of the Fifties.

Expubident, an adjective, has never to my knowledge been mentioned or analysed in any Jazz Dictionary. It was probably coined by 'Babs' Gonzales, a bop singer and educator. The term exists in a nominal form, expubidence, the name of Gonzales' own publishing company (Feather 1976: 154, 155).

It is possible, though this should be checked with Mr. Gonzales, that expubident has as a base form exuberant. It was the custom of bop singers to stretch syllables, change consonants and create new 'nonsense' words. In technical language, Gonzales did some very standard linguistic mutations, often seen in textbooks on diachronic phonetics. He performed a classic metathesis; devoicing, /b/→ /p/; and phonemic shifting, /r/→ /d/; /ə/→ /I/.

All jazz singers and musicians have an obsession with the spoken word. The saxophonist Lester Young memorized the lyrics to all tunes upon which he was to improvise.

The adjective worser was uttered by Erroll Garner on one of his records. It is simply a reinforced comparative adjective, used by a musical genius in a tense situation. Worser has met the same fate as the sub-standard ain't.

Bop, alluded to above, is an onomatopoeic noun and verb, referring to the new sounds of the revolutionary jazz of the Fifties. Its probable introduction into jazz argot is the style of playing by drummers such as Kenny Clark, who would pump out unusual 'bopping' sounds on the bass drum, which had before only been used as a metronome-like keeper of strict four-four time. The melodic instruments would follow his patterns, creating new melodies,

and changing the musical language.

Musical Creation and Linguistic Creation.

It is clear that a relationship exists between musical creation and linguistic creation.

Especially in jazz music, the act of listening and speaking musically relates to either the Saussure or Chomsky chain of communication. The correspondence between the act of speech, the reception of it, and the return to the speaker from the speaker/listener is remarkably similar to the actions of jazz musicians in performance. One can speculate about Langue and Parole, or Competence and Performance as it relates to the performing musician. His langue or competence is the stock-pile of the music which he has mastered and remembered; his parole or performance are what he can do with the items he has mastered. The changes he makes in musical performance equal creation.

There is one way out for the jazz musician, and for persons who (in music) like to speak. It is improvisation, and conversation for speakers of human language. Improvisation has for the last few hundred years been a lost art in European music. Conversation is almost non-existent among people in the western world. There is a strict correlation between conversation and musical

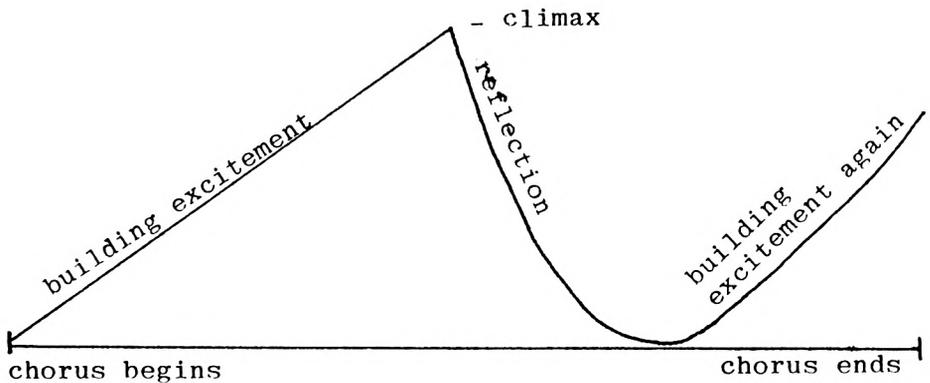
improvisation (Francis 1958: 188).

Jazz is parallel to spoken language, classical European symphonic music is more akin to written language; a novel is perhaps the best example. Each form of music has its own idiom, remarkably paralleled to the two linguistic/literary forms. The best analogy is to compare a conversation with written dialogue in any novel. The former is spontaneous, actual, innovative, ephemeral, and free. The latter is reproduced, potential, fixed, frozen in print, and at its worst, stultified. The human voice can never be duplicated by print. The musical voice of the jazz musician's performance has now been transcribed, but again, it is impossible to render by musical notation the exact phenomenon of a jazz musician's improvisation.

What is clear is that symphonic music and jazz music are in 'complementary distribution'. Each form is creative, but as of this moment in time, it is the jazz idiom which is a more open-ended form because it is based on human speech, as opposed to the constrictions of print or magnetic tape reproduction. Speech is primary. It is the main force behind linguistic change or diachrony as is jazz, it is hoped, the prime mover of twentieth century music.

Linguistics is often related to other fields (Hall 1964: 411-415). Prosodic musical features can be related to linguistic substrata of various composers' music.

In the minds of certain musical pedagogues, 'content' features are as well relevant to musical creation. (Kriss 1977: 54-55) How to improvise? One makes the analogy to spoken conversation. It is a question and answer situation. This is a standard jazz blues situation. Over a twelve bar chorus, one creates an interplay of at least three ideas. See below for an 'eargraph'; it approximates a sentence pattern in many languages.



The eargraph is a schematic of musical and linguistic conversation. It can be repeated formally until the 'three ideas' have been exhausted. The length of the form depend upon the conceptual ability of the speaker/player. Another good example of musical and paralinguistic dialogue is found in the trading of 'fours', where four bar solos are exchanged, modified, answered, and convoluted by the performers. (Mencken 1974: 744)

#### Conclusion.

To play jazz and to listen to its sounds is an act of mutual creation. The secret language of the jazz musician is very open to anyone who wishes to consult the vast number of books which concern themselves with the trade language of the practitioner.

'Jaser' means to speak in the manner of a bird. The 'secret' of the jazz performer's music and his argot is found in the etymology of the word itself. Jazz is musical speech.

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