



Jazz and Nothingness

An Existential Approach

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Jazz: La Rêve Américain	4
Chapter 2: Jazz: L'Existence précède l'Essence	9
Chapter 3: Jazz Performance	17
Chapter 4: Black Existential Philosophy	29
Conclusion	35
Bibliography	

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INTRODUCTION

One of the more familiar images surrounding jazz and its performance is that of the musician and his complete commitment to freedom. Bound up inexorably in the immediacy of the moment, he (and I do mean he, given the male-dominated history of jazz) finds in his instrument and his improvisation a means for self-expression and self-realisation, at once highly alert and unaware of anything but the present. Past and future dissolve before him as he drives the music forward. Sweat leaks from his temples. At some point, something in the music gives way, and he leaps – irrevocably – into the unknown, abandoning comfort and security once and for all for the call of the unfamiliar and unexplored. Or something along those lines.

At least, this is what the French philosopher and public figure Jean-Paul Sartre made of it, claiming in a 1947 article that jazz speaks to the ‘best part of you, to the toughest, the freest, to the part which wants neither melody nor refrain, but the deafening climax of the moment’.¹ For Sartre, jazz served as a musical embodiment of some of his key existentialist principles, a convenient artistic representation of the freedom that, according to him, lies at the heart of human existence. The image is, of course, a flawed one. But while his descriptions of the music are at times reductive, the question remains: were Sartre’s views on jazz altogether misguided, or did he observe something in it that might justify the existentialist lens through which he experienced jazz performance?

Given the importance of jazz in the history of 20th-century and 21st-century music and its complex engagement with African-American and European culture, the relationship between jazz and philosophy is a domain with rich intellectual potential; but with the first book devoted exclusively to the philosophical study of jazz appearing only last year, further research in this area seems both necessary and timely.² The aim of this dissertation, then, is twofold: first, it sets out to explore and evaluate the philosophical and aesthetic affinities between jazz and existentialist

¹ Sartre, J. P., ‘I Discovered Jazz in America’, *Saturday Review*, November 29, 1947, p. 49.

² See Brown, L. B., Goldblatt, D., and Gracyk, T., *Jazz and the Philosophy of Art*, New York, Routledge, 2018.

thought. Second, it attempts more generally to highlight the relevance of jazz to aesthetic theory. As the authors of *Jazz and the Philosophy of Art* remark in their book's introduction, Peter Kivy's call for a move towards a pluralistic approach to the arts bears repeating here:

‘(...) progress in the philosophy of art in the immediate future is to be made not by theorizing in the grand manner, but by careful and imaginative scrutiny of the individual arts and their individual problems, seen as somewhat unique, individual problems and not necessarily as instances of common problems of some monolithic thing called “ART”.’³

Much of the discussion brought up in this dissertation will be applicable to music (improvised or otherwise) more generally, however, it is with Kivy's suggestion in mind that I focus on jazz as an individual artform, with its own distinct concerns, values and aesthetic ‘problems’. My aim here is not to argue for a complete separation of jazz from all other music, but rather to present it as an interesting case to explore and examine in its own right. A philosophical approach to jazz will, inevitably, focus on different aspects of the artform than a broader philosophy of music might, and will thus provide us with a closer and more nuanced understanding of the ways in which this music is performed and received. Similarly, I suggest that an existentialist perspective, such as the one I outline in this dissertation, offers an alternative angle from which we might theorise about jazz – one, I hope, that will help to account for notions of freedom, consciousness and identity within the music.

To better understand the relationship between jazz and existential philosophy, we must first consider the socio-cultural framework within which both flourished and came into contact. For this reason, the first chapter of this dissertation consists of a brief historical contextualisation, with a special focus on the ways in which American and French culture interacted in pre- and post-war France. Chapter two then explores aspects of Sartre's philosophy in relation to jazz as a broader genre. Drawing from Sartre's notions of consciousness, as well as different discourses surrounding jazz and its ‘essence’, I present jazz as a self-reflexive (and self-negating) practice that is

³ Kivy, P., ‘Differences’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 51, no. 2, 1993, p. 131.

marked by a particularly interesting struggle for identity. In chapter three, I extend this idea to jazz performance and jazz improvisation. More specifically, I explore the idea of jazz as a virtual Sartrean subjectivity, or *being-for-itself*, and the implications this might have for the experiences of listeners and jazz musicians alike. Finally, chapter four discusses the relevance of black existential philosophy, a philosophical movement that ‘addresses the intersection of problems of existence in black contexts’.⁴ Ultimately, jazz can (and I suggest should) be historically interpreted within the quest for a disalienation of black consciousness, a concept that is theorised upon by the black existential philosopher and social critic, Frantz Fanon.

⁴ ‘(...) *une pensée qui interroge l’intersection de problèmes d’existence dans le contexte noir*’. Gordon, L. R., ‘Sartre et l’Existentialisme Noir’, *Cités*, vol. 22, 2005, p. 90.

1. JAZZ: LA RÊVE AMÉRICAIN

The reception of jazz in 20th-century France was one that oscillated between feelings of fear and desire. In the years following World War I, jazz criticism quickly became a vehicle for debates about larger issues such as national identity, cultural ownership and France's growing need to change the way they engaged with other cultures. Jazz symbolised these challenges; it was a music that more than anything represented an Otherness, one that offered an alternative to the traditional Western values that, due to the Great War's atrocities, had been called into question.

As jazz grew in popularity, it came to exemplify those qualities commonly associated with American modernism: French writer and devout catholic Paul Claudel, for instance, spoke of the 'rhythmic pulsation and nervous uniformity of the pistons of a steam engine interrupting the cyclical roaring of the dynamo that one feels across all of American life and of which jazz is the supreme expression'.⁵ Others saw in this whirlwind of American progress a promise of a new and better life, in which jazz might even serve as the 'foundation of a new sentiment of music capable of being the expression of a new epoch'.⁶ These views formed part of a larger discussion about jazz's place in the Old World, and what follows is a necessarily brief exploration of the parts of that discussion that are most relevant to this dissertation.

Jazz was not only an American music, at least not according to French critics; it was *une musique nègre* too. Among those that championed jazz as an embodiment of African primitivism was Hugues Panassié, founder of the Hot Club de France, music critic, and adamant supporter of *le jazz hot*. Rather than a phenomenon of modernism, Panassié claimed that jazz was a valuable reminder of what Europe might be if it could return to the virtues of a simple past:

Far from representing 'the nerve-wracking life of our century', 'the noise of the machine' and other foolish theories which have been brought forth from time to time,

⁵ Claudel, P., 'L'Élasticité Américaine', *Oeuvres en Prose*, Paris, Gallimard, 1985, p. 1205.

⁶ Jeanneret, C. E. ('Le Corbusier'), quoted in Blake, J., *Le Tumulte Noir: Modernist Art and Popular Entertainment in Jazz-Age Paris, 1900-1930*, Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999, p. 140.

*jazz represents the reappearance of such a primitive musical conception as had arisen many centuries ago among the people of Europe and elsewhere.*⁷

Panassié spent most of his career protesting against what he would later call the ‘progressivist jazz mafia’.⁸ Jazz, he claimed, should remain untainted by the white man’s intellectualism and music theories, and instead remain pure, simple and – above all – black. After all, the ‘hot white style’ that ‘white American musicians’ had attempted to create for themselves was itself a ‘contradiction of terms’,⁹ as the ‘spirit of the Negro musicians’ is (and will always be) the ‘only real jazz spirit’.¹⁰

Not all who assumed jazz was an expression of a single and timeless ‘black consciousness’ thought this was praiseworthy.¹¹ In a 1935 issue of *La Revue Musicale*, critic André Suarès spoke of the jazz performer as a ‘monkey drunk on himself, without morals, without discipline, fallen into the undergrowth of instinct, revealing his naked flesh with every bound, together with a piece of flesh even more obscene, his heart’.¹² It seems, then, that French critics argued less about the simeanings had or could have for Europe and, more specifically, for France. Equipped with imageries of both American modernism and African primitivism,¹³ they sought to make sense of this new music, while simultaneously satisfying a deeper and more desperate need for the arts to express essential features of national culture and race.

André Schaeffner recognised this European need for essentialism early on. Although he had previously claimed that each people ‘only has one music through

⁷ Panassié, H., *The Real Jazz*, translated by Anne Sorelle Williams, New York, Smith & Durrell, 1942, pp. 6-7.

⁸ ‘*La Mafia Progressiste*’, see Panassié, H., *La Bataille du Jazz*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1965.

⁹ Panassié, H., ‘La Vrai Physionomie de la Musique de Jazz’, *La Revue Musicale*, vol. 15, no. 146, 1934, p. 367.

¹⁰ Panassié, *The Real Jazz*, 1942, p. 81. For an in-depth discussion of Panassié’s writings on jazz, see Perchard, T., ‘Tradition, Modernity, and the Supernatural Swing: Re-reading Primitivism in Hugues Panassié’s Writings on Jazz’, *Popular Music*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2011, pp. 25-45.

¹¹ Jackson, J. H., *Making Jazz French: Music and Modern Life in Interwar Paris*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2004, p. 27.

¹² Quoted in Gumpłowicz, P., ‘Vers le Droit de Cité. Naissance de la Critique de Jazz, Paris 1930-1934’ in *Musiques et Musiciens à Paris dans les Années Trente*, edited by Daniele Pistone, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2000, p. 397.

¹³ Perchard describes how ‘the nonintellectual machine and the supposedly preintellectual black musician were superimposed to create the image of a para-artistic music, motorized by timeless urges’. Perchard, T., *After Django: Making Jazz in Postwar France*, Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 2015, p. 26.

which it prays, dreams, or dances’,¹⁴ his views changed when he was asked to contribute an article on jazz for the first edition of the *Encyclopédie Française* in 1935; jazz had become the ‘characteristic of our musical civilisation’, an eclectic fusion of different influences and cultures, and those who insisted on a ‘purity’ regarding either jazz or French culture, were simply ignorant and unwilling to face the cultural changes of the times.¹⁵

If the French had not yet lost confidence in their notions of national identity at this time, they would undoubtedly do so in the decade that followed. By 1945, the aftermath of the Nazi occupation, the economic crisis, national trauma and wounded pride that now tormented the country culminated in a post-war generation that – more than ever – sought a radical cultural transformation and a rejection of the traditional Western values that had formed the foundation of the collaborationist Vichy Régime.¹⁶ They found what they were looking for in a new music that had been developing for several years on the other side of the Atlantic: bebop was new and exciting, an experimental and self-consciously daring type of jazz, the likes of which the French only now discovered as Americans started flooding back into the country. Jazz cellar culture in Paris¹⁷ ‘soon became identified with different aspects of Liberation life: the noisy antics of unfettered youth, the infatuation with America, the exploration of avant-garde intellectuals such as Sartre (...)’.¹⁸

Just as jazz offered a contrast to the bourgeois aesthetics that had previously dominated French culture, so too Sartre’s existentialism offered an appealing intellectual rebellion against philosophical movements that were considered to have become outdated, out of place and (as of recently) untrustworthy. Sartre’s radical commitment to freedom, anti-essentialism and the individual’s responsibility catered to a generation that desperately needed to come to terms with its country’s recent

¹⁴ Coeuroy, A. and Schaeffner, A., *Le Jazz*, Paris, Jean-Michel Place, 1926, p. 9.

¹⁵ ‘Introduction Chapitre III – Les Besoins Collectifs et la Musique’, *Encyclopédie Française*, tm XVI, 16’72-11. See also Schaeffner, A., ‘Vogue et Sociologie du Jazz’, *Encyclopédie Française*, tm XVI, 16’72-11 and -12, and Jordan, M. F., *Jazz Changes : A History of French Discourse on Jazz from Ragtime to Be-Bop*, PhD diss., The Claremont Graduate University, 1998, pp. 288-289.

¹⁶ Nettelbeck, C., *Dancing with DeBeauvoir: Jazz and the French*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 2004, pp. 60-72.

¹⁷ In post-war Paris, many underground basements (or ‘caves’) in the city’s Saint-Germain-des-Près quarter featured live jazz.

¹⁸ Nettelbeck, *Dancing with DeBeauvoir*, 2004, p. 63.

past, while it also provided a way for them to make a ‘clean break’ with it.¹⁹ Above all, existentialism was a philosophy of the present, a philosophy of action – of possibility and choice. Along with this new school of thought and its immense popularity among the French youth, jazz no longer simply stood for an essentialised American modernism or African primitivism, but a way of life, of existence, an expression of a new and different dimension of human consciousness. Sartre’s 1947 review illustrates this sentiment well:

‘(I)t is not the century-old chant of Negro slaves. Nor the sad little dream of the Yankees crushed by the machine. Nothing of the sort: there is a fat man who blows his lungs out in the weaving motion of his trombone, there is a pianist without mercy, a bass player who tortures the strings without listening to the others. They are speaking to the best part of you, to the toughest, to the freest, to the part which wants neither melody nor refrain, but the deafening climax of the moment.’²⁰

Meanwhile, African-American musicians, writers and artists found in France a different kind of freedom: many jazz musicians brought back stories of a country without racism, in which they received the recognition, respect and freedoms they were denied in the United States. In his autobiography, Miles Davis recalls returning to America after a visit to Paris in 1949: ‘Paris was where I understood that all white people weren’t the same, that some weren’t prejudiced and others were. (...) I knew how white people treated black people and it was hard for me to come back to the bullshit white people put a black person through in this country.’²¹ As Tyler Stovall points out, the idea that France was a colour-blind nation had ‘more to do with conditions in the United States’ than the conditions in France.²² Nonetheless, in the years after World War II, many African Americans moved to Paris as a political

¹⁹ Baert, P., ‘The Sudden Rise of Existentialism: A Case-Study in the Sociology of Intellectual Life’, *Theory and Society*, vol. 40, no. 6, 2011, p. 638.

²⁰ Sartre, ‘I Discovered Jazz’, 1947, pp. 48-49.

²¹ Davis, M. and Troupe, Q., *Miles: The Autobiography*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1989, pp. 128-129.

²² Stovall, T., *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light*, New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996, p. xiv.

protest against American racism and, as a result, this period became one of the most vibrant and creative episodes of African-American life in France.²³

French intellectuals of the post-war period now saw African-American jazz musicians as fellow artists and thinkers,²⁴ as individuals, rather than ‘exotic specimens of a primitive culture’ or personifications of an essential American cosmopolitanism.²⁵ It is to this shift that we may start to trace back the increasingly close and complex engagement between the artistic African-American community in France (particularly in Paris) and French intellectual movements such as existentialism. After all, the two had common ground through which a fertile exchange could take place: the interaction between African-American jazz musicians and French culture and philosophy rested on a ‘reciprocal fulfilment of needs’ and ‘trading of freedoms’ that gave both parties more opportunities for ‘self-expression and development’.²⁶ It is this mutual ‘fulfilment of needs’ with which I am concerned here, and which forms the underlying theme of the chapters to come. Jazz, I argue, fulfils a particular psychological and cultural human need. At the same time, Sartre’s philosophy is a useful tool with which to articulate these needs, and shares a remarkable affinity with the ways in which jazz is created, received and reflected upon in this world.

The following two chapters will evaluate jazz at the hand of several Sartrean notions of consciousness and creativity. Ultimately, this will be done on two separate levels: in chapter two, I will examine jazz as a genre or totality, and in chapter three, I will examine jazz as the individual instances of jazz performance, with a focus on jazz improvisation and subjectivity. But before proceeding, a brief overview of Sartre’s existential philosophy is necessary.

²³ Stovall, *Paris Noir*, 1996, pp. 130-131.

²⁴ This applied to African-American musicians, artists and writers alike.

²⁵ Stovall, *Paris Noir*, 1996, p. 163.

²⁶ Nettelbeck, *Dancing with DeBeauvoir*, 2004, pp. 72-73.

2. JAZZ: L'EXISTENCE PRÉCÈDE L'ESSENCE

Central to Sartre's philosophy of existence lies a fascination for two irreconcilable modes of being: that of pure being (*being-in-itself* or objectivity), and that of consciousness (*being-for-itself* or subjectivity). An object, Sartre claims, is both non-relational and non-dependant. It is neither passive nor active, since passivity requires a sustained relationship with the other. Nor does it 'conceal' or 'disclose' anything about itself to the consciousness that perceives it.²⁷ It simply *is*. As alterity is completely irrelevant and 'unknown' to it, it exists and is 'isolated' within itself, escaping even temporality through its inability to exist in-relation-to.²⁸

Consciousness, on the other hand, is always consciousness *of* something; it implies the being of that table, this pen, the being of the world. Conscious being (or being-for-itself), then, is a being that implies in its being a being that it is not, a being other than itself. It exists as consciousness only insofar as it exists in-relation-to. Even in its ability to be conscious of itself, consciousness is faced with a struggle to grasp itself as it 'is', since once it directs itself towards itself, it inevitably engages in a positional act that separates it from itself, much like a subjectivity necessarily separates itself from its object. Following this assumption, Sartre concludes that a *nothingness* lies at the heart of all consciousness. The being-for-itself is both an external and an internal nothingness: 'it is what it is not' (consciousness implies the being of something it is not), and 'it is not what it is' (in trying to grasp itself, it necessarily negates itself, thus rendering itself incapable of complete self-identification).²⁹ It is this negation, this 'possibility of secreting a nothingness that isolates it', that Sartre terms *freedom*.³⁰ Yet we must not understand this to mean that freedom is some kind of 'property' that 'belongs, along with others, to the essence of a human being'.³¹ Rather, there is no distinction between conscious being and 'being-

²⁷ Sartre, J. P., *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, translated by Sarah Richmond, Abingdon, Routledge, (1943) 2018, p. 6.

²⁸ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 2018, p. 28.

²⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 2018, p. 129.

³⁰ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 2018, p. 61.

³¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 2018, p. 61.

free’; it is a ‘permanent structure of the human being’ to be free.³² Freedom, then, is crucial to Sartre’s understanding of human consciousness, and will inform much of my discussion of jazz in the pages that follow.

Jazz and the problem of essence

Whoever approaches jazz (and there have been quite a few who have)³³ in search of the musical features that define it, will inevitably be confronted with the decisive heterogeneity that seems to undermine such a pursuit. A formal definition that does not at the same time exclude a great deal of what is typically considered jazz is hard to come by, and it is no surprise that – in recent years – jazz theorists have become increasingly reluctant to engage with such definitions. Scott DeVeaux, for instance, has said that the concept of a “jazz tradition” reifies the music, insisting that there *is* an overarching category called *jazz*.³⁴ Similarly, philosopher Jerrold Levinson points out that ‘the prospects of identifying the *essence* of jazz—that is, a single feature, or even ensemble of features, that can serve as jazz’s *sine qua non*—are not bright’.³⁵

These concerns are justified. But while we must not overlook the complications involved in the attempt to arrive at a strictly musical definition of jazz, there are ways in which we might approach jazz that focus less on its supposedly distinctive musical features (though these may play an important role in our historical understanding of the music), and more on the cultural meanings and discourses that surround it.

Throughout its history, jazz has been met with several radical ‘transformations’ that threatened to fracture its identity (and indeed, in many ways, succeeded in doing so). The first of these distinctive breaks arguably came with the arrival of swing music, however, it was bebop above all that prompted a ‘frequently acrimonious,

³² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 2018, p. 61 and p. 74.

³³ See Hodeir, A., *Jazz: Its Evolution and Essence*, translated by David Noakes, New York, Grove Press, (1954) 1956, or Panassié, *The Real Jazz*, 1942. Other examples include Gioia, T., *The Imperfect Art: Reflections on Jazz and Modern Culture*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1988, and, more recently, Brown, Goldblatt and Gracyk, *Jazz and the Philosophy of Art*, 2018.

³⁴ DeVeaux, S., ‘Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography’, *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 25, no. 3, 1991, p. 530.

³⁵ Levinson, J., *Musical Concerns: Essays in Philosophy of Music*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 133.

occasionally hysterical' polarisation within the jazz community, the result of which 'determined how the music would henceforth be described and understood'.³⁶ As DeVeaux has suggested, bebop sufficiently opposed all jazz that had come before, both musically and ideologically, that it would have been warranted to consider it a new music altogether. In deciding to accept and include bebop within the jazz tradition, the jazz community chose to see a continuity in discontinuity, and jazz's reputation as a 'living cultural form' that 'constantly extends, reaffirms and replenishes itself' was – perhaps somewhat ironically – solidified.³⁷

Such a description of jazz isolates it from other music, while simultaneously failing to account for this isolation with any precision; indeed, the reluctance of jazz musicians to speak about the 'essence' of their artform in anything but ambiguous terms seems to contradict their willingness to declare what jazz is certainly *not*.³⁸ DeVeaux explains that,

'(...) in the heat of debate, definition is a powerful weapon; and more often than not, such definitions define through exclusion. Much as the concept of purity is made more concrete by the threat of contamination, what jazz is not is far more vivid rhetorically than what it is.'³⁹

Meanwhile, jazz is an 'oppositional discourse', both in terms of its 'ethnicity' (as a music of an ethnic minority) and its 'economics' (as a music resisting commercialism).⁴⁰ It seems, then, that the discourses that have shaped and informed the cultural meanings of jazz rest on its image as a negating artform, or, to borrow Benny Green's term, a 'reluctant art'.⁴¹ Neither popular music, nor art music, jazz exists in "self-imposed" isolation,⁴² separating itself from other music in what we

³⁶ DeVeaux, 'Constructing the Jazz Tradition', 1991, p. 538 and p. 539.

³⁷ Russel, R., 'The Evolutionary Position of Bop', republished in *The Art of Jazz: Essays on the Nature and Development of Jazz*, edited by Martin T. Williams, New York, Oxford University Press, [1948?] 1959, p. 195.

³⁸ Consider the quote 'if you have to ask what jazz is, you'll never know' (usually attributed to Louis Armstrong) or articles such as Marsalis, W., 'What Jazz Is – and Isn't', *The New York Times*, July 31, 1988, p. 21 and p. 24.

³⁹ DeVeaux, 'Constructing the Jazz Tradition', 1991, p. 528.

⁴⁰ This latter relationship is a complex one, and DeVeaux explains that it is peculiar that jazz – 'a music that has developed largely within the framework of modern mass market capitalism' – is nonetheless construed within the inflexible dialectic of "commercial" versus "artistic," with all virtue centered in the latter'. DeVeaux, 'Constructing the Jazz Tradition', 1991, pp. 529-530.

⁴¹ Green, B., *The Reluctant Art; The Growth of Jazz*, New York, Horizon Press, 1963.

⁴² DeVeaux, 'Constructing the Jazz Tradition', 1991, p. 553.

may here call a mode of ‘non-being’. At the same time, jazz seems to continuously assimilate the musical materials of other genres into itself, an inclination that further complicates the search for a set of essential features that might distinguish jazz from other music. The question remains: is it possible to identify anything distinctive that unites all that is referred to as jazz, across all its historical and contemporary appearances? In the following section, I will draw on Brown, Goldblatt and Gracyk’s three-part historical definition of jazz, as well as Sartre’s notion of self-reflexivity, to inform my own understanding of the music.

Self-reflexivity and self-negation

As a creation of and for human consciousness, art is often understood as a manifestation or expression of that same consciousness, and – depending on the medium – is taken to inevitably reflect certain aspects of it as a result. Jazz is no exception, and while I return to this later in the context of individual jazz performances, it is also worth exploring in relation to the phenomenon of ‘jazz’, here denoting an enduring concept that brings together all individual instances of jazz under a single, unifying denominator. Green, for example, has argued for a ‘psychological history’ of jazz, claiming that a ‘creative activity can have its complexes and its repressed desires as certainly as those who practise it’.⁴³

To be sure, the idea of different kinds of music not only being the expression of selves on the individual level, but carrying with them a selfhood on a larger scale too, can be found in approaches that deal with such concepts as collective subjectivity, memory and trauma.⁴⁴ Historical consciousness is important here, and jazz in particular relies a great deal on an engagement with its past in order to justify its self-continuation, where a strictly formal or musical approach would otherwise fail. A fruitful way forward in conceptualising this self-continuation of jazz through

⁴³ ‘You speak (...) as if jazz were a person as well as an art,’ a student said in response to this suggestion. Green, *The Reluctant Art*, 1963, p. 51.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Schiller, M., ‘The Sound of Uncanny Silence: German Beat Music and Collective Memory’, *Lied und Populäre Kultur/ Song and Popular Culture*, vol. 59, 2014, pp. 171-205.

engagement with its past is, I believe, to consider it in light of Sartre's writings on self-reflexivity.

Self-reflection, Sartre contends, is a complex and problematic mode of consciousness. As I have explained earlier, consciousness for Sartre is defined by a structural nothingness that even in its consciousness of self must engage in a positional act towards (and so necessarily also outside of) itself. Since self-reflection can be understood as 'the for-itself as conscious *of* itself', it too must necessarily exist in an act of self-separation.⁴⁵ But it cannot be so simple; to reflect upon myself, I must not only separate myself from myself in terms of the 'reflective' and the 'reflected-on', I must also necessarily *be* the consciousness I reflect on, for to be otherwise would mean I cease to be myself.⁴⁶ In other words, 'it is necessary at the same time for the reflective consciousness to be, and not to be, what it reflects on'. Through self-reflection, consciousness opens up the possibility for itself to *be what it is*, yet can only do so in the mode of 'being-been';⁴⁷ the result is a conflicted mode of consciousness that, struggling to objectify and internalise itself (that is, to be in unity with itself, to *be what it is*), nonetheless fails to do so. The very structure of human consciousness hinders this project of self-identification. As Sartre explains, the reflective being and the being reflected upon 'must be the *same being*, but precisely, in so far as that being reclaims *itself*, it brings into existence an absolute distance between itself and itself, within the unity of being': both the reflective being and the being reflected upon must exist in the 'form of the for-itself' for self-reflection to be possible, yet insofar as both beings exist as a for-itself, they exist only as nothingness, or non-being.⁴⁸

We might find a comparable form of self-reflexivity in jazz – in fact, Brown, Goldblatt and Gracyk's historical definition of jazz establishes jazz as a reflexive practice that exists in historical relation to earlier instances of itself. In *Jazz and the Philosophy of Art*, the three authors present their definition, modelled on Stephen

⁴⁵ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 2018, p. 218.

⁴⁶ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 2018, pp. 219-220.

⁴⁷ '(...) this nothingness (...) must "be-been"'. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 2018, p. 220.

⁴⁸ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 2018, p. 222.

Davies's three-part definition of art, which 'arises from the challenge of linking recent avant-garde art to art's Paleolithic origins'. Their definition reads as follows:

'A piece of music is jazz if and only if (1) it was produced before 1920 and falls within the style parameters of early jazz, or (2) it non-accidentally exemplifies a style publicly recognized as jazz within the subsequent jazz tradition (...), or (3) it employs or modifies some stylistic traits of earlier jazz and successfully reflects an intention to satisfy appreciative practices governing some period in the jazz tradition.'⁴⁹

While (1) escapes the need for it (being only applicable to historical recordings or instances of what the authors call *proto-jazz*), conditions (2) and (3) require – indeed, could not exist without – a form of reflexivity. It is with these two conditions that I am concerned here, as they reflect how jazz is currently produced, and offer a reflexive understanding of jazz that need not reify any of its strictly musical features.

According to Brown, Goldblatt and Gracyk's definition, then, contemporary music can be jazz 'by virtue of reflexive practice, either in the intentional preservation of established jazz styles or in innovation' that is grounded in an awareness or consciousness of – and an intentional interaction with – its past.⁵⁰ It may seem that the latter condition is most relevant to us here; it allows for jazz's apparent lack of musical essence, while at the same time suggesting some form of continuity of jazz through its self-reflexivity. Jazz that fulfils this condition becomes *what it is* (jazz) by virtue of being self-reflexive (engaging with its past), and intentionally creating a continuation or extension of what is, at that time, the jazz tradition. Thus, Ornette Coleman's musical innovations in the early sixties became jazz, because they engaged with jazz's past, while also existing as an intentional continuation of it. When one listens to the album *Free Jazz*, for example, one can clearly discern rhythmic and melodic elements of the bebop tradition, as well as a sustained relationship with the extra-musical value of freedom that has historically been intertwined with jazz practise. But there cannot be a complete identification of jazz with itself here: while Coleman's free jazz can be seen as jazz by virtue of its reflexive engagement with

⁴⁹ Brown, Goldblatt and Gracyk, *Jazz and the Philosophy of Art*, 2018, p. 69.

⁵⁰ Brown, Goldblatt and Gracyk, *Jazz and the Philosophy of Art*, 2018, p. 4.

jazz's past, its reflexivity requires it, at the same time, to separate itself from all jazz that has come before (as *not being* that jazz). Jazz, then, becomes the source of its own negation. A self-alienating, and self-negating art form, jazz exists as its own possibility to radically alter itself, precisely because it must separate itself from itself as a self-reflexive practise. The result is a form of music that 'is' only insofar as it 'is-been', a form of music that exists within the present only through its relationality to both itself and other music, or – to paraphrase jazz pianist Bill Evans – a music that is not so much a what, as it is a how.⁵¹

Have we settled for an understanding of jazz as self-reflexive practise that accepts only music that innovates and opposes what has come before? It certainly seems so. We might say that the preservation of earlier jazz (which nonetheless makes up a large part – if not majority – of current jazz practise), should count as a complete identification of jazz with itself. Such an act of intentional self-affirmation, however, remains a positional act: without some form of reflexivity, and so without some form of separation between jazz-now and jazz-then, 'preservation' would not be possible. To play in the style of the swing era means something radically different now than to have played in that same style in the thirties, which in its turn meant something different than to have played that same way in the seventies. In this way, both self-affirmative and self-negating reflexive practices bring jazz into a complex and conflicting relation to itself. Jazz must inevitably be, and not be, the jazz it brings itself in relation to in order to ensure its continuity. Indeed, we might say that *jazz must exist as its own nothingness*.

It is important to acknowledge that this theory may be applied to all music, indeed even to any form of human creativity. Jazz, however, is a particularly interesting case to study here; as a form of music whose cultural significance has often included values of 'dispossession, opposition, and contradiction'⁵² – a music in which 'change' is often taken to be 'the only constant'⁵³ – jazz displays a remarkable affinity

⁵¹ In an interview, Bill Evans explains he understands jazz as 'not so much a style, but a process of making music'. Cavrell, L., *The Universal Mind of Bill Evans*, Rhapsody Films, (1966) 1991, VHS.

⁵² Rasula, J., 'The Media of Memory: The Seductive Menace of Records in Jazz History', in *Jazz Among the Discourses*, edited by Krin Gabbard, Durham, Duke University Press, 1995, p. 152.

⁵³ Hentoff, N. *Jazz Is*, London, W. H. Allen & Co., 1978, p. 8.

with Sartre's notions of consciousness (or being-for-itself), self-reflexivity and self-negation.

While the reasons behind this common representation of jazz are complex and at times hard to disentangle, they most likely involve a combination of the following: First, from its early beginnings on, jazz has struggled for a sense of identity. Being an artistic product of two cultures that existed in a strained relationship with one another at the best of times, jazz came into being through a duality, an assimilation of (and interaction with) the Other, that seemed to give jazz its specific identity, as well as cause its lack thereof. Second, jazz has – as we have seen earlier – existed primarily as an 'oppositional discourse', both in terms of its ethnicity and its economics. Third, jazz has been subject to an extremely rapid changeability, such as is rare to find among other artforms, moving from its simpler origins to its most avant-garde manifestations within less than a century. And finally, jazz's close historical connection with both auralness (as opposed to notation) and improvisation contributes to its reputation as a self-reflexive artform, or a music that, in Duke Ellington's words, embodies 'the freedom to play anything, whether it has been done before or not'.⁵⁴

Within the limits of this dissertation, it will not be possible to discuss the individual implications and complications of each of these statements in depth. However, in the chapter that follows, I examine one of them – jazz improvisation – and the ways in which it informs notions of subjectivity and temporality in jazz performance.

⁵⁴ 'Why Duke Ellington Avoided Music Schools', *PM*, December 9, 1945, republished in *The Duke Ellington Reader*, edited by Mark Tucker, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 253.

3. JAZZ PERFORMANCE

Such genre-specific changeability as I have illustrated in the previous chapter is, of course, only possible insofar as the practising jazz musician engages with self-reflexivity on a first-level basis as well; jazz could not be a self-negating (or self-affirming) genre if its practitioners did not individually carry out self-affirming and self-negating acts within or between specific performances. Miles Davis's stylistic breaks with what was at the time considered the 'identity' of jazz, might not have been considered jazz had he not decidedly affirmed himself as a player within the bop tradition first. And if he had not taken artistic risks within individual performances, his playing might not have witnessed such fast-paced changeability.

This chapter, then, focuses less on jazz as a genre, and more on jazz as the jazz musician's artistic 'creation': performance. I use the word creation here to highlight the active and temporal nature of jazz performance, and its commitment to the process of creation, rather than the creation's final product or, if one prefers, the 'work of art'. For the time being, I assume (as several have before me) that jazz exists first and foremost as live performance.⁵⁵ The mediation of jazz through recordings complicates and calls into question much of this discussion, and requires separate consideration, as I touch upon in my conclusion.

The for-itself of jazz improvisation

As we have seen earlier, there is no reason to believe that there is any musical essence to jazz. By following this thought, are we also to conclude that improvisation is not essential to jazz? The answer to this must surely be 'yes', since there are countless examples of jazz in which improvisation is barely present. The fact remains that, throughout the history of jazz, improvisation has been intimately connected to jazz practice, as well as jazz music's reception and representation. And although

⁵⁵ See, for example, Rasula, 'The Media of Memory', 1995, and DeVaux, S. *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997, pp. 365-366. For an in-depth discussion on the complications of jazz phonography, see Brown, Goldblatt and Gracyk, *The Philosophy of Art*, 2018, pp. 234-254.

improvisation is in no way exclusive to it, jazz has, for many Western listeners, become the ‘paradigm example of improvisation’ in music.⁵⁶

Let us decide to define musical improvisation as the spontaneous or extemporaneous action of determining aspects of the music *as* one is playing it.⁵⁷ It is true that this can be expected of any performing musician; Anthony Gritten, for example, speaks of how the performer enters a ‘contract’ with the musical work they perform, while simultaneously also having a ‘responsibility’ towards the ‘unfolding present’, the ‘here and now’.⁵⁸ Music, Gritten argues, is always ‘running away with itself, always drifting onwards and outwards’ and, as a result, the performing musician exists constantly between present and future, living and acting in the ‘conditional “if-then” tense, listening, looking, and preparing for what (she believes) will follow even as she plays what is nominally here and now’.⁵⁹

All music performances require a degree of spontaneity and commitment to the requirements of the present. Nonetheless, there is an important distinction to be made between the performance of a musical work and (jazz) improvisation: while the focus of the former is necessarily on the performed work, the focus of the latter is, as Ted Gioia points out, on the ‘creative act’ or process itself.⁶⁰ At the same time, we must not assume that this means that musical improvisation is simply a sort of ‘spontaneous composition’⁶¹ or a ‘creation of a musical work as it is being performed’,⁶² as others have previously done. The artistic product of a composition is remarkably different from the artistic product of an improvisation. Brown, Goldblatt and Gracyk argue that, in musical improvisation, the performance process ‘gnaws into the very essence of the aesthetic object’; the distinction between the artistic process and artistic product

⁵⁶ Brown, Goldblatt and Gracyk mention that improvisation ‘has long been a common (...) feature of music throughout the world’. Brown, Goldblatt and Gracyk, *Jazz and the Philosophy of Art*, 2018, p. 181.

⁵⁷ I draw on Brown, Goldblatt and Gracyk’s preliminary definition of musical improvisation (to make decisions about the music one is playing as one plays), but have replaced decision making with ‘determining’.

⁵⁸ Gritten, A. ‘Alibis and Why Performers Don’t Have Them’, *Musicae Scientiae*, vol. 19, iss. 1, 2005, p. 144. For a comparable argument, see Cook, N., ‘Making Music Together, or Improvisation and its Others’, in *Music Performance Meaning: Selected Essays*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2016, pp. 321-343.

⁵⁹ Gritten, ‘Alibis’, 2005, p. 149.

⁶⁰ Gioia, T., *The Imperfect Art*, 1988, p. 101.

⁶¹ Gioia, *The Imperfect Art*, 1988, p. 33.

⁶² Alperson, P., ‘On Musical Improvisation’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 43, no. 1, 1984, p. 23.

seems, in the case of musical improvisation, to collapse.⁶³ In musical improvisation, then, the aesthetic object *is* the artistic process, whereas in composition, the aesthetic object is merely the result of the artistic process.

The problem with this is that it places musical improvisation in direct opposition to what we have previously learnt about the in-itself: that it simply is. Can the (active) process of musical improvisation still strictly be seen as an aesthetic *object*? Or is the divide between in-itself and for-itself no longer valid here?

According to Sartre, the aesthetic object exists outside of temporality, and is – ultimately – an ‘irreality’.⁶⁴ He draws the distinction between the real artistic object (the oil on the poplar panel, the actual painting) and the aesthetic object (Mona Lisa).⁶⁵ To contemplate the aesthetic object is to contemplate an imaginary object, and the imaginary can be unreal in four different ways: it is either (1) posited as non-existing, (2) posited as absent, (3) posited as elsewhere or (4) not posited as existing (it neutralises itself).⁶⁶ We may feel as if we see Mona Lisa in the painting, but in no way can we claim to think that the painting *is* Mona Lisa, or that Mona Lisa is really *there*. ‘However lively, appealing, strong the image, it gives its object as not being’; the imaginary is, essentially, a nothingness.⁶⁷ It is only when consciousness goes through a ‘radical change in which the world is negated’ that it can become imaginative: to form the aesthetic object ‘Mona Lisa’ for ourselves, we must negate the actual painting, the strokes of oil, the poplar panel, the frame.⁶⁸

Having reached this conclusion, Sartre presents the imaginary as a type of consciousness (an ‘imaginative consciousness’),⁶⁹ in which the object is not a real object (it does not exist), but is the consciousness itself; the imaginary object is ‘never

⁶³ Brown, Goldblatt and Gracyk, *Jazz and the Philosophy of Art*, 2018, p. 216.

⁶⁴ Sartre, J. P., *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*, translated by Jonathan Webber, London, Routledge, (1940) 2004, pp. 188-195.

⁶⁵ I use the Mona Lisa as an example, however, Sartre uses other artworks to illustrate his point.

⁶⁶ Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 2004, p. 12.

⁶⁷ Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 2004, p. 14.

⁶⁸ In the following pages, I use both the Webber and the Philosophical Library translation, according to the clarity of the translation provided. Sartre, J. P., *The Psychology of Imagination*, translator unknown, New York, Philosophical Library, (1940) 1948, p. 274

⁶⁹ Sartre, *The Psychology*, 1948. Webber translates this as the ‘imaging consciousness’ (Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 2004).

anything more than the consciousness one has of it'.⁷⁰ Furthermore, the aesthetic object is not, as some may think, 'realised' in the real artistic object. The painting simply presents a 'material analogon' of Mona Lisa, but does not transfer her to the real or 'objectify' her.⁷¹

What irreality could music possibly refer to? Surely, Sartre argues, music (along with certain other forms of art)⁷² cannot partake in this distinction between the real artistic object and the unreal aesthetic object; the artistic object *is* the aesthetic object. It refers – as Sartre initially asserts – to nothing other than itself.⁷³ In response to this objection, Sartre contends that we do not grasp music as a 'dated event', but as an analogue as well:

'For me that 'Seventh Symphony' does not exist in time, I do not grasp it as a dated event, as an artistic manifestation which is unrolling itself in the Châtelet auditorium on the 17th of November, 1938. (...) In the degree to which I hear the symphony it is *not here*, between these walls, at the tip of the violin bows. Nor is it 'in the past' as if I thought: this is the work that matured in the mind of Beethoven on such a date. It is completely beyond the real. It has its own time, that is, it possesses an inner time (...). The Seventh Symphony is in no way *in time*. (...) It occurs *by itself*, but as absent, as being out of reach.'⁷⁴

While this may apply to many work-performances, it still does not – indeed cannot – explain musical improvisation. We have concluded earlier that, in musical improvisation, the creative process and the created object are indistinguishable. If we were to try and separate the 'real' creative process (and simultaneously its 'real' created object) from its 'irreal' aesthetic object (that does not exist in time but somewhere completely beyond it), we would also have to assume that the imaginary aesthetic object or consciousness 'occurs by itself'. This would mean we experience the improvisation as if the real actions of the improviser within time would not disturb what Sartre calls 'the absolute succession' of the music's aesthetic object that our

⁷⁰ Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 2004, p. 15.

⁷¹ Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 2004, p. 189.

⁷² Sartre also discusses cubism, for example. Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 2004, p. 190.

⁷³ Non-formalists would disagree.

⁷⁴ Sartre, *The Psychology*, 1948, pp. 279-280.

consciousness creates.⁷⁵ It would also mean that, although the aesthetic object's appearance to us depends on the improvisation taking place within time, the improvisational process does not constitute the aesthetic object, but is merely an analogue of it. But this cannot be true; the 'aesthetic object' of a musical improvisation cannot exist outside of time. Indeed, its temporality is its most defining feature. Even if the listener were, through an act of consciousness, to create and sustain some imaginary 'absolute' of the music being created, this imaginary would not only depend on the improvisational process unfolding before them, it would inevitably *be* the improvisational process unfolding before them. It is precisely because the artistic object of the improvisation is a creative process, that we cannot speak of an active negation of the 'real' artistic object in order to form an imaginary (aesthetic) one.

In being a temporal process, musical improvisation seems to escape objecthood ('in-itselfness') in a way that a painting, a dance choreography, a literary work or even a musical work might not. Where a musical work already exists as a 'thing' (albeit an imaginary one with its own inner temporality) before the performance has taken place, a musical improvisation could only become an imaginary aesthetic 'object', (insofar as it becomes some sort of 'absolute succession') after the improvisation had taken place. So long as the improvisation is unfolding, it cannot be an in-itself (yet). But by the time the improvisation has ended, it already no longer *is*, at least not in the way a musical work *is*; its process has ended and so too has its created 'object'.

We have seen that musical improvisation seems to escape a certain in-itselfness. We have also seen that Sartre's aesthetic object is a type of imaginative consciousness (a being-for-itself), rather than a real 'object' (a being-in-itself), because it acts as a negation of the world, and because it only 'exists' insofar as we are conscious of it. But we have concluded that this idea of the aesthetic object is still unsatisfactory with regard to musical improvisation. The musical improvisation seems to assimilate a for-itselfness in a different way than does Sartre's aesthetic object

⁷⁵ Sartre, *The Psychology*, 1948, p. 279.

does: if the imaginary, aesthetic object acts as a consciousness because it negates the world, *a musical improvisation acts as a consciousness because it negates itself*.

It is here that temporality becomes crucial to our discussion. Temporality, Sartre claims, is the only form in which the being-for-itself can exist, for ‘it is in time that the for-itself’ is its own possibilities ‘in the mode of non-being’.⁷⁶ What Sartre means by this is that a being’s self-negation is only possible insofar as that being is temporal. Let us consider the traditional division between past, present and future: in order to reflect on my past, I must posit myself firstly as being that past (otherwise it would not be ‘my’ past)⁷⁷, while simultaneously not being my past (because I can only be present). But ‘present to what?’, Sartre asks – to which I might reply: present to the saxophone I am playing, to the pianist hunched over his keys, to the audience.⁷⁸ I am present to things if I am ‘intentionally directed outside’ myself on to those things, as ‘not being’ those beings.⁷⁹ But I am also present to myself: present only because I am able to confront myself as a past self (however near in the past that may be) ‘in the mode of not-being’.⁸⁰ At the same time, I can also confront my future. The future is my present before it *is*, or the ‘determining being which the for-itself has to be, beyond being’.⁸¹ Sartre concludes that the present *is not*:

‘It is presentified in the form of flight. (...) It is the flight out of co-present being and away from the being that it was, towards the being that it will be. At present, it is not what it is (past) and it is what it is not (future).’⁸²

Time separates me from myself, in the same way that it separates musical improvisation from itself. As jazz saxophonist Eric Dolphy once said, ‘after it’s over, it’s gone, it’s in the air; you can never capture it again’.⁸³ In musical improvisation, it is impossible to go back and rewrite a section of the music; its past is in the past, and

⁷⁶ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 2018, p. 162.

⁷⁷ Sartre insists on the present tense: I must be my past, in the mode of ‘being-been’. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 2018, p. 220.

⁷⁸ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 2018, p. 181.

⁷⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 2018, p. 183.

⁸⁰ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 2018, p. 73.

⁸¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 2018, p. 187.

⁸² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 2018, p. 184.

⁸³ Dolphy speaks of music, but his views are clearly influenced by his experience as an improvising jazz musician. See Eric Dolphy, *Last Date*, recorded 2 June 1964, Fontana, 1964, LP.

no longer is. For as long as the improvisation lasts, the improviser must ‘plunge ahead and do something’.⁸⁴ Nor is it possible for the improviser to pause the musical improvisation and resume it later with renewed energy or inspiration. Since the improvisation is an unfolding temporal process, it cannot at any given time ‘repose “in-itself”’, because it never simply *is* itself.⁸⁵ Like Sartre’s being-for-itself, musical improvisation seems necessarily always to ‘metamorphose itself completely all at once, in form and content, to sink into the past and to produce itself at the same time *ex nihilo* in the direction of the future’.⁸⁶

Together with its heterogeneous nature at the level of jazz as genre, and perhaps even also enhanced by its inclination towards propulsive rhythms and syncopation, jazz’s close connection to improvisation highlights its reputation as a music bound to the ephemerality of the present, or – to borrow Sartre’s words – as a music that, like ‘bananas’, ‘must be consumed on the spot’.⁸⁷ Its relation to the temporal (through improvisation) also highlights the emphasis that is often placed on jazz as activity or performance, rather than as a reified work that exists in-itself. It is through this idea of jazz ‘as process’ that jazz performance seems to manifest Sartre’s for-itself, or subjectivity.

Virtual Subjectivity

Whether or not music can be (or have) a form of subjectivity is the topic of much debate; some have argued for the existence of a ‘*virtual* musical persona’ or ‘agent’,⁸⁸ while others maintain that the persona theory essentially draws attention away from the music itself, and towards some self-deluding ‘artifice’.⁸⁹ I will not attempt to engage with these latter claims here. Nor do I wish to claim that the presence of a

⁸⁴ Brown, Goldblatt and Gracyk, *Jazz and the Philosophy of Art*, 2018, p. 187.

⁸⁵ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 2018, p. 181.

⁸⁶ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 2018, p. 210.

We must not interpret this as jazz musicians simply improvising music ‘out of thin air’, but as a complex interplay of internal negation, in which improvisers both identify with and negate their past improvisation and/or preparation of that improvisation.

⁸⁷ Sartre, ‘I Discovered Jazz’, 1947, p. 48.

⁸⁸ See, for example, Cone, T., *The Composer’s Voice*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1974, or Hatten, R. S., and Robinson, J., ‘Emotions in Music’, *Music Theory Spectrum*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2012, pp. 71-106.

⁸⁹ Kivy, P. *Antithetical Arts: On the Ancient Quarrel Between Literature and the Arts*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2009, p. 101.

virtual persona in jazz is the only way such music may be experienced as meaningful or moving. Rather, it is my intention to demonstrate that the virtual persona or subjectivity, here interpreted as an imaginary Sartrean being-for-itself, may be especially relevant to the ways in which jazz improvisation is experienced by listeners and musicians alike.

As I have mentioned previously, musical improvisation acts like a for-itself (a consciousness) because, in being a temporal process rather than an object, it is able to negate itself. But who or what is this for-itself? Is it the subjectivity of the improvising musician that negates itself, or the subjectivity of the music – the musical improvisation itself? At first glance, the latter seems implausible; we might argue that any individual sound is an in-itself (it simply *is*, and then it is not). To experience sounds as music means to experience individual sounds as existing within a temporal structure, something only consciousness can do, precisely because it is a temporal mode of being. Music, then, only *seems* to act like a for-itself because I (a for-itself) ascribe temporality to it.

Equating the musical improvisation's perceived subjectivity with that of the improvising musician seems less controversial, but comes with its own complications: as David Ake justly points out, listeners often engage in 'musical anthropomorphizing', 'in which they ascribe human qualities (...) to music' and often 'turn around' to ascribe those same qualities to the performer (or composer) of that music.⁹⁰ And while it may be true that there are often 'parallels' between the performer's personal life and the qualities perceived in the music, there is no reason to suggest that performers need to have the same subjectivity in their personal life as they have on stage or 'within' their musical improvisation.⁹¹

Nor can the improvisation's subjectivity be said to coincide completely with the *listener's* subjectivity: to experience a certain agency within the music certainly requires the listener to actively imagine that agency, yet – as we have seen before –

⁹⁰ Ake, D., *Jazz Matters: Sound, Place, and Time since Bebop*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2010, p. 18.

⁹¹ Ake, *Jazz Matters*, 2010, p. 18.

the imaginary is constantly shaped and informed by the unfolding improvisation, which in its own turn is shaped and informed by the improvising musician's direct actions within the present. It seems, then, that in order for the music's virtual subjectivity to emerge within the improvisational process, it must be distributed between the performer and listener.

A possible interpretation of such a shared responsibility in art can be found in Sartre's writings on creativity.⁹² The aesthetic object, he writes, is always necessarily created through a 'joint effort' of artist and audience.⁹³ It cannot be the artist's creation alone, for artists can never quite experience their work as a 'thing'; indeed, the artist is 'too familiar with the processes' of which their artwork is the result, too bound up within their own subjectivity to perceive it at the distance required for it to achieve objecthood.⁹⁴ John Coltrane once lamented this inability to contemplate his music outside of his own subjective creation:

'Sometimes I wish I could walk up to my music for the first time, as if I had never heard it before. Being so inescapably a part of it, I'll never know what the listener gets, what the listener feels, and that's too bad.'⁹⁵

Since the created object escapes artists, since it seems to them 'always in a state of suspension', artists require an audience.⁹⁶ In fact, Sartre claims that the artwork as object cannot exist without the audience's presence; it is the audience that constitutes it as such. 'Without ignorance', he goes on to suggest, 'there is no objectivity'.⁹⁷ The audience must be sufficiently separated from the artwork (as not being that artwork), so that the artwork might impose 'its own structures' and features upon the spectator that awaits and perceives them.⁹⁸ At the same time, we should not assume that the artistic creation makes an 'impression' upon the spectator 'as light does on a

⁹² Sartre focuses on literary creativity, however, we will see how these ideas relate to (as well as complicate) our discussion of jazz improvisation.

⁹³ Sartre, J. P., *What is Literature?*, translated by Bernard Frechtman, Abingdon, Routledge, (1948) 2001, p. 31.

⁹⁴ Sartre, *What is Literature?*, 2001, p. 29.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Thomas, J. C., *Chasin' The Trane: The Music and Mystique of John Coltrane*, Garden City, Doubleday, 1975, p. 205.

⁹⁶ Sartre, *What is Literature?*, 2001, p. 28.

⁹⁷ Sartre, *What is Literature?*, 2001, p. 30.

⁹⁸ Sartre, *What is Literature?*, 2001, p. 31.

photographic plate'.⁹⁹ It is the audience that creates it, gives it meaning, and ultimately makes it possible for there to *be* an artwork. Art, then, acts as a 'synthesis of perception and creation', a 'harmony between objectivity and subjectivity': both the object and the subjectivities that create and disclose it are essential for art to exist.¹⁰⁰

But what of an artform in which the object is, as we have established, identical to the creative process? Indeed, what of an artform in which the audience, too, is 'familiar with the processes of which the artwork is a result'.¹⁰¹ In live musical improvisation, listeners are intimately connected with the artist's creative process. Though a separation of artist and audience is still required – without it, they would merge into one another – this separation has become less strict; the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity has started to blur. And it is here, within this weakened separation, that the musical improvisation's virtual subjectivity, or being-for-itself, can emerge.

The embodiment of live performance is a crucial factor here. As a listener, I am in closer contact with the artist's subjectivity, since I have made myself a witness of their creative process *as it unfolds*. It is precisely because of my physical presence to the performing musician and their creative act, that I am more likely to imagine the musical improvisation as an extension or expression of their subjectivity. This same closeness has also sufficiently weakened the positional act that separates me from the improvising musician, so that I might direct myself through an imaginary gesture, outside of myself, and upon the music's imagined being-for-itself. Suddenly, I experience this subjectivity as if it were my own. But it is important to note at the outset that this being-for-itself, as well as this 'weakened' separation between musician and listener, is imaginary. While I *am* more intimately involved with the temporal process of the musician's creation, while I *am* witnessing it as it unfolds, I am still confined to my own subjectivity; the chasm between the musician's consciousness and my own has not been bridged, and any impression I have that tells

⁹⁹ Sartre, *What is Literature?*, 2001, p. 31.

¹⁰⁰ Sartre specifically speaks about reading here, but concedes that the same applies to the aesthetic contemplation of all art. Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, 2001, p. 31 and p. 44.

¹⁰¹ See previous page.

me I am able to somehow ‘grasp’ theirs through their musical improvisation, is created by an act of my own imagination.

Thus, when Sartre suggests that ‘true jazz’ is ‘the relationship of the man with his instrument in the moment he is playing, where the notes are the ones he wants’, and that ‘when Charlie Parker played, it was not someone else, with a music already played, already predetermined’, but ‘Charlie Parker himself’, he is right – but his statement is also incomplete.¹⁰² Indeed, the subjectivity that Sartre recognises in Parker’s playing is both more and less than what he describes here; we may experience Parker’s improvisation as his temporal relation to his musical instrument, and to the notes that he creates with it through an act of freedom, but this experience is an entirely subjective one. That is, the for-itself that I experience within the music is an imaginary creation of my own.

On the other hand, I must recognise the improvising musician’s for-itself, as much as they must recognise mine. While I must assume that what I am hearing (a musical improvisation) has its source in the subjectivity of an Other,¹⁰³ musicians also expect – indeed, even require – the subjectivity of the listener, so that their improvisation may escape their own subjective creation and exist in the world as an aesthetic object.

Here we might find what Sartre calls the mutual recognition of the Other’s freedom.¹⁰⁴ ‘My freedom, by revealing itself’, he claims, ‘reveals the freedom of the other’:¹⁰⁵ the more I experience my freedom (freedom being the ‘permanent structure’ of human consciousness)¹⁰⁶ – either as creating the musical improvisation as a jazz musician, or as imagining the improvisation’s for-itself, and so actively producing the aesthetic object as a listener – the more I must demand of the other’s freedom. Art,

¹⁰² ‘(...) le rapport de l’homme à l’instrument au moment où il joue, où les notes sorties sont celles qu’il veut. C’est ça le vrai jazz! Quand Charlie Parker jouait, ce n’était pas un autre, avec une musique déjà jouée, déjà marquée: non, c’était Charlie Parker lui-même.’ Quoted in Sicard, M., *Essais sur Sartre*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, 1989, p. 306.

¹⁰³ I must assume that the artist’s actions, though spontaneous, are intentional actions.

¹⁰⁴ Again, Sartre’s focus is on literature, but this can be applied to musical improvisation as well. Sartre, *What is Literature?*, 2001, pp. 34-45.

¹⁰⁵ Sartre, *What is Literature?*, 2001, p. 41.

¹⁰⁶ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 2018, p. 74.

then, is always an ‘act of confidence in the freedom of men’, and as soon as I recognise myself as ‘pure freedom’, I must also demand the same of the other.¹⁰⁷ This idea will form the basis of the following chapter, in which I will examine jazz from a racial perspective.

¹⁰⁷ Sartre, *What is Literature?*, 2001, p. 47.

4. BLACK EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY

What are the implications of an artform that demands the recognition, or at least assumption, of a subjectivity that has routinely been denied? To answer this question, I turn to a philosophical context which Sartre has often been associated with. Black existential philosophy is an intellectual movement that raises questions of black existence, as they arise in the situated experiences of black people ‘in-the-world’.¹⁰⁸ After all, as philosopher Lewis Gordon explains, the ‘question of existence’, insofar as it pertains to the existence of conscious being, is an ‘empty’ one, one that is characterised by relationality, and that must necessarily be posed within a contextualised framework.¹⁰⁹

In his essay, *Black Orpheus*, Sartre praises the writers and poets of the *Négritude* movement for their ‘awakening to consciousness’ through literature, and their subsequent demand for the recognition of their subjectivity.¹¹⁰ Earlier, he had written about the ‘black problem’ in the United States, commenting on the different ways in which African-American citizens were refused their individual personhood, and treated, in most situations, as if they were ‘machines’.¹¹¹ It is important to note that, while Sartre did serve as a catalysing figure in the self-avowed *existential* examination of black issues, Sartre was by no means the first to engage with them: philosophers and writers of African descent, such as Anna Julia Cooper and William E. B. Du Bois, had previously grappled with ideas of what it means to be black in a world where ‘blackness’ is ultimately defined from without, and imposed upon black

¹⁰⁸ A) My use of the term ‘black people’ (rather than ‘people of colour’) demands explanation: while we must be sensitive to the many negative connotations of the word ‘black’, this chapter requires a specific racial descriptor, for the simple reason that we are dealing with notions of *anti-black* racism. Similarly, the use of the term ‘African Americans’ is out of the question, since our discussion here does not relate exclusively to the particular racial dynamics of the United States.

B) I make use of Heidegger’s ‘being-in-the-world’ here, a concept that highlights the relational being of consciousness, and that formed a crucial foundation for Sartre’s philosophy.

¹⁰⁹ Gordon, L. G. (Ed), *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, New York, Routledge, 1997, p. 4.

¹¹⁰ Sartre, J. P., ‘Black Orpheus’, *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1964, p. 16.

¹¹¹ Sartre, J. P., ‘Retour des Etats Unis: Ce qui j’ai appris du problème noir’, *Le Figaro*, June 16, 1945, p. 2.

people.¹¹² These philosophical enquiries all necessarily had an ‘existential impetus’ insofar as they dealt with a situated black *existence*, and it is for this reason that we must not regard black existential philosophy as a ‘fundamentally Sartrean or European-based phenomenon’.¹¹³ I have chosen, therefore, to devote this chapter to the writings of a philosopher who is often considered to be the most influential figure of black existentialism, and who, despite being philosophically indebted to Sartre, requires separate attention.

Frantz Fanon was a francophone intellectual from the Antilles who, having witnessed the atrocities of colonial subjugation, as well as European anti-black racism during his time in France, grew more and more frustrated with the ways in which black people were treated in a society dominated by whiteness. His seminal work *Black Skin, White Masks* speaks of the various sentiments that the black person adopts when confronted with the white Other. Black people, Fanon argues, exist in constant comparison to their white oppressors, for whom they are reduced to a ‘fixed concept’ of blackness.¹¹⁴ ‘Sealed into that crushing objecthood’,¹¹⁵ and denied their possibility of existing as self-conscious, subjective beings, they have developed a readiness to view themselves in the third person – in short, they have become alienated from themselves.¹¹⁶

‘I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave ships, and above all else, above all: “Sho’ good eatin’.”’¹¹⁷

Fanon concludes his treatise with a call to action; in order for black people to achieve complete self-consciousness, they must engage in a mutual recognition of the Other,

¹¹² See, for example, Cooper, A. J. *A Voice from the South*, New York, Oxford University Press, (1892) 1988, and Du Bois, W. E. B., *The Souls of Black Folk*, edited by Brent Hayes Edwards, Oxford, Oxford University Press (1903) 2007.

¹¹³ Gordon, *Existence in Black*, 1997, pp. 3-4.

¹¹⁴ Fanon, F. *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Charles Lam Markmann, London, Pluto Press, (1952) 2008, p. 23

¹¹⁵ Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, 2008, p. 82.

¹¹⁶ Similar ideas can be found in Sartre’s concept of *bad faith* (which affects all human beings to varying extents), however, Fanon’s argument takes on a decisively racial dimension.

¹¹⁷ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 2008, pp. 84-85.

however, it is by *making* themselves recognised (as subjectivity) – and not by *being* recognised (as an object) – that they will be truly capable of asserting their human freedom.¹¹⁸ ‘The Negro’, he claims in the last pages of his book, ‘is not’ – not ‘any more than the white man’ is.¹¹⁹

Elsewhere, Fanon explains how black creativity aids this quest for disalienation, and notes particularly how bebop’s rise to popularity challenged white jazz fans and their essentialisation of blackness;

‘For them jazz could only be the broken, desperate yearning of an old “Negro”, five whiskeys under his belt, bemoaning his own misfortune and the racism of the whites. As soon as he understands himself and apprehends the world differently, as soon as he elicits a glimmer of hope and forces the racist world to retreat, it is obvious he will blow his horn to his heart’s content and his husky voice will ring out loud and clear. (...) it is not unrealistic to think that in fifty years or so the type of jazz lament hiccupped by a poor, miserable “Negro” will be defended by only those whites believing in a frozen image of a certain type of relationship and a certain form of negritude.’¹²⁰

What Fanon demands is not a return to a pre-colonial black culture (‘I do not want to exalt the past at the expense of my present and of my future’), for this would be to perpetuate the same essentialism that forms the foundation of racism.¹²¹ Rather, he calls for black culture and black art that highlights change, imagination, subjective creativity, and, above all else, a self-negation built upon cultural self-reflexivity.¹²² There is a paradox here: we are confronted with a need for black art, yet we must also reject the notion that this art expresses any essentialised, inherent ‘blackness’. That is to say, we must acknowledge that distinctively black art is a necessary stage in the process towards the liberation of black consciousness, but that ‘blackness’, insofar as

¹¹⁸ Historically, black people ‘steeped in the inessentiality of servitude’ were ‘set free’ by white men. They did not ‘fight for’ their ‘freedom’ themselves. Fanon’s focus, however, was on colonised black people, and he asserted that the ‘American Negro is cast in a different play’: ‘In the United States, the Negro battles and is battled’. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 2008, p. 171 and p. 172

¹¹⁹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 2008, p. 180.

¹²⁰ Fanon, F., *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated by Richard Philcox, New York, Grove Press, (1961) 2004, p. 176.

¹²¹ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 2008, p. 176.

¹²² See Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 2004, pp. 170-178. Fanon also speaks of a need for a black national culture.

it signifies a set of ‘essential’ features, collectively reduces black people to objectivity, and deprives them of their selfhood.

Before proceeding, then, it is necessary to say that I take it as a given that jazz came into being as a black (and, more specifically, an African-American) artform. It is necessary also to say, however, that it does not follow that jazz *today* remains an essentially black, or African American artform. Yet we have seen in chapter two that jazz relies heavily on its reflexivity and historical consciousness to ensure its self-continuity, and it is therefore crucial for any self-proclaimed existential aesthetics of jazz to engage with jazz’s situated existence as a black artform. For this reason, what follows relates to the particulars of the black jazz musician’s performance.¹²³

I now return to the question that I posed at the beginning of this chapter: what are the implications of an artform that demands the recognition, or at least assumption, of a subjectivity that has routinely been denied? We have seen in chapter three that live jazz improvisation carries an imaginary subjectivity (or for-itself), that is constituted by a joint creation and mutual recognition of subjectivities (that of the improviser and that of the spectator). The result is one of reciprocal necessity; insofar as I experience the musical improvisation as a meaningful expression of a for-itself, I must inevitably recognise the for-itself of the improvising musician who creates it. More still, I must *demand* its presence. I cannot assume the black musician’s improvisation is an expression of any inherent ‘blackness’ – indeed, to do so would deny the very subjectivity I have just claimed to witness an unfolding expression of.¹²⁴ Meanwhile, the act of making myself a ‘witness’ of the musician’s creative process is a positional one (I posit myself as not being the improvisation, and as not being the improvising musician), and must subsequently be experienced as an objectivity. If it were not so, and if I were to experience it purely as subjectivity, then it would be necessary that either the distance between myself and the Other would dissolve (I would have to *be* the improvising musician), *or* the distance between myself and the aesthetic object would dissolve (the improvisation would be a creation and extension

¹²³ I must acknowledge in advance the speculative quality of the following statements that, for the simple reason that I do not have the lived experience of a black person, can only be flawed.

¹²⁴ Consider the for-itself’s lack of essence, and its structural nothingness, that we have examined previously.

entirely of my own subjectivity; its structure or direction would never come as a surprise to me; the improvising musician would play no indispensable part in its existence).

The black improvising musician requires this positional act of the listener's subjectivity, as well as the listener's recognition of the *improviser's* subjectivity. The improvising musician demands the former of the listener, for without it the improvisation could not escape the musician's own subjectivity, and it would never achieve objectivity; that is, the creation could and would not exist in the world as an *objective product* of the musician's subjectivity. And the musician demands the latter of the listener, for without that recognition the improvisation would not corroborate the musician's subjectivity; that is, the creation could and would not exist in the world as an objective product of the *musician's subjectivity*.

It is here that we catch a glimpse of the assertion of black consciousness that Fanon speaks of. In order to achieve the dual requirement explained above, black improvising musicians must do one thing: they must improvise. To improvise means to include the listener into my creative process, a process which is – inevitably – subjective. It means to perform my subjectivity for the listener, to assert it, to make it known, and to demand at the same time that the listener answers with their own. It is in this way that the black improvising musician seems to be, through the process of their improvisation, closer to attaining the recognition of the Other. We must differentiate between the black and non-black Other, however, for both receive and achieve distinctively different possibilities for self-consciousness when attending the performance of a black improvising musician. The black listener, in recognising the consciousness of a black improvising musician, must also recognise their own, while the non-black listener, in revealing their own consciousness as a subjective witness, must simultaneously reveal that of the black musician. To borrow Sartre's words, then, improvised music 'is an act of confidence in the freedom of' human beings, but when that music is performed by a black musician, this act of confidence gains an additional dimension of disalienation.¹²⁵ For the black listener, this emerges as a

¹²⁵ Sartre, *What is Literature?*, 2001, p. 47.

possibility for self-consciousness in a world that has consistently denied the existence of black subjectivity. For the non-black listener (and perhaps significantly so for the white listener), this presents the possibility of challenging racist essentialism through the recognition of black consciousness, and thus contributing to the disalienation and realisation of self-consciousness (or ‘absolute freedom’) not only for themselves, but for all humanity.

It is no matter of contingency that jazz, a historically black artform, developed a strong connection to improvisation and extramusical values of freedom and self-expression. Nor is it coincidental that jazz is a heterogenous, self-reflexive and self-negating artform (see chapter two); the existence of jazz as such serves the black existential purpose of rejecting the essentialisation (and subsequent objectification) of black consciousness and black art.

Insofar as it aims to actuate an *objective* subjectivity (an ‘in-itself-for-itself’)¹²⁶, however, jazz must inevitably end in failure – for although jazz performance requires a mutual recognition between subjectivities, a ‘confidence in the freedom’ of the Other, it still cannot transform subjectivity into an objective truth. Such a transformation is, due to the irreconcilability of being and nothingness, of in-itself and for-itself, unattainable. My subjectivity cannot attain that of the performing jazz musician; I cannot place myself at the centre of their being. They are completely foreign to me. Have I fooled myself? Perhaps. And yet it is this very fooling, this very act of imagining the unfolding performance as a genuine manifestation or extension of the musician’s consciousness, that offers me a glimpse of a world, unreal though it is, in which my subjectivity and theirs can meet absolutely. For a moment, their world is mine. Their struggles are my struggles. The tune ends, the audience applauds. A man in the back whistles loudly. The musicians nod briefly at the people present: ‘thank you for recognising us’. I must once again return to myself – the imaginary world in which our subjectivities collide has dissolved. And then another tune is counted in.

¹²⁶ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 208, p. 735.

CONCLUSION

I have said earlier that jazz fulfils a particular human need. Throughout this dissertation, I have attempted to illustrate the ways in which it does so; I have offered a brief historical contextualisation of jazz in post-war Paris, where jazz came into contact with multiple figures of the French intellectual community, and offered France an alternative to its crumbling Western values. I have then engaged with several Sartrean concepts of consciousness and reflexivity to demonstrate that jazz is both a self-reflexive and self-negating artform. Moreover, I have examined jazz improvisation as embodying an imaginary being-for-itself that is distributed between improviser and listener, and that offers both parties a recognition of the Other's subjectivity. Finally, I have argued that this mutual recognition is made all the more meaningful by jazz's emergence as a black artform.

There are several objections that may be raised against this dissertation's central claim (that jazz performance displays remarkable affinities with an existential understanding of consciousness) – but there is one that must be addressed in particular: the existence of jazz recordings. If the emergence of an imaginary subjectivity within an act of jazz improvisation relies on my witnessing its temporal unfolding – that is, my presence to the improviser's creative process *as it unfolds* – then surely this subjectivity is lost as soon as the improvisation's creative process is reified. Indeed, jazz recordings offer such temporal reification. And surely, if we accept that jazz recordings play a significant role in the self-reflexive engagement of jazz with its past, we cannot justify the assumption that jazz invariably affords such imaginary subjectivity. While this objection deserves a more extensive discussion, my response here will be brief: first, I maintain that the specific imaginary for-itself that I have outlined in this dissertation requires the listener's physical presence to the musician's creative process. Second, I acknowledge (unlike several others)¹²⁷ that jazz recordings are as much a 'part' of jazz as live performance is. I am thus forced to conclude that in the case of jazz recordings, yes, something is lost. But something is

¹²⁷ For example, see Rasula, 'The Media of Memory', 1995, pp. 134-165.

also gained. To be sure, my ability to engage with the subjectivity of the Other through an imaginary act has been – if not completely denied – severely compromised. And yet, my own subjectivity is revealed to me perhaps even stronger than before; a recording is sufficiently disembodied, sufficiently abstracted from the creating musician and the creative process, so that I can experience the subjectivity I subsequently hear unfolding within it as the subjectivity of the music alone. Certainly, I may still envision the for-itself of the musician in his unfolding creative process (and I believe many do), but I may also fill up the music's for-itself with my own. I may make it entirely mine. And to the extent that I do so, I may recognise it as a creation whose source lies in my imaginative freedom.

A second objection may come in the form of Kivy's dismissal of the virtual subjectivity in music as a self-deceptive 'artifice'.¹²⁸ The imaginary for-itself that I have described in the previous chapters *is* an artifice. It must be. To experience the subjectivity of the improvising musician through their improvisation (or the subjectivity of the music through our own subjectivity) is *necessarily* an act of the imaginative consciousness. It is a creation of an *irreal* world in which the divide between objectivity and subjectivity can be transcended. But it is also in this subjective 'artifice' that jazz can be made meaningful, and so I end this dissertation with an appeal: in the quest for an understanding of jazz, let us not resort to objectivities and formal definitions. Let us turn instead to the creation and recognition of subjective meaning. And let us, above all, imagine.

¹²⁸ Kivy, *Antithetical Arts*, 2009, p. 101.

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