Jazz Aesthetics and the Democratic Imperative in Education: A dialogue

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Abstract

What appeared decades ago as solely a European model—Thatcherism—is now a global trend with no apparent end in sight. Neoliberalism in the public sector, and within the educational sphere particularly, pervades within a larger pattern of hegemonic ideologies. In sum, market forces and global capitalism make it quite difficult for public education, both nationally and internationally, to retain its democratic ethos, the historical aim of common schools. Is there an antidote to corporate, global capitalism ideologies undermining the democratic aims and the common good in public education? In this article the authors assert that, indeed, there are discursive spaces where scholars and citizens can turn. One space is the arts, especially jazz. In jazz the discursive, social practices of improvisation, call and response and the tradition of ‘standing on the shoulders of those who came before you’ (honoring elders) facilitate deep democracy.

This article borrows both from the metaphors and discursive practices of jazz, including improvisation and the habits of mind fostering deep listening and hearing one’s fellow combo members. The authors argue that as in jazz, education can embrace and return to its democratic impulses. In so doing the consumers of public education—students, families, and local communities, can systematically resist the destructive consequences of neoliberalism. Moreover by embracing the aesthetic of jazz in public education, consumers can exploit the concomitant the more constructive opportunities of the ideologies of neoliberalism, namely innovation, creative autonomy, and individual liberty. In the end civility in public discourse is rendered possible by such an aesthetic move. The authors welcome dialogue and debate on their arguments.

Keywords: jazz, democratic education, common good, discursive practices, neoliberalism

Introduction

Crossing the street in uptown New Orleans, near where one of the authors lives, a young truck driver stopped at a busy intersection and when the traffic light changed, he did not move. He was, as became apparent, texting. Just as predictable as his texting, the driver...
behind him blew his horn. The irritating sound of the horn was as obnoxious, if not more so because of its loudness, as the irritating (and dangerous) texting. This instance of the lack of patience and civility in an everyday interaction is but one small example of a larger problem: the lack of respect and civility for one another that all too often characterizes our daily interactions. Although this particular incident may appear to be quotidian, it is this sort of civil violence that, in other situations, can transform into incidents marked by physical violence.

Throughout the history of jazz, musicians and critics alike have often espoused the idea that jazz aesthetics, broadly defined, creates an artistic and cultural context that leads to mutual respect and trust among performers. Victor Goines, along with the other members of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, shares the belief that if individuals, whether musicians or listeners, adopted these habits of heart and mind, it could change our collective civil experiences for the better. In seeking to develop this line of thought further, specifically into the realm of education, we start with two assumptions. First, that if jazz is to have a substantial impact on American culture as it has in the past, then more work must be done to emphasize its aesthetic focus on developing individual creativity and engagement into collective, societal transformation. The continuous, small acts of compromise that individual musicians, as part of a jazz ensemble, engage in every time they play can—and should—inform the way that we work to develop a deeper, richer democratic society within American culture. Our second assumption is that if this change of social vision is successful, we will also see broader social outcomes over time such as reductions in gun violence, higher graduation rates, and stronger, healthier communities. Admittedly, these social outcomes are optimistic and could only be realized as a result of substantial changes in civil society.

If we can look at this conception of jazz aesthetics as guided by thoroughly democratic impulses, we see that the same sort of give and take that is inherent in social change is the building block of jazz composition and improvisation. There is a need to be heard, to express one’s point of view, and, by extension, represent one’s personal identity. At times in jazz, this self-expression transforms on stage and in recording studios to what Mirón has previously called social, ‘collective identity’ (Mirón, 1996; Torres, Mirón, & Inda, 1999). The drive to represent personal identity in jazz takes on a sociological significance in performance as a social, relational identity emerges among musicians. This development that the dynamic of jazz renders possible holds both the promise of a democratic form of artistry as well as its challenges.

To paraphrase the filmmaker Ken Burns (Burns & Novick, 2001), this phenomenon is the inherent tension in a democratic society between the individual and the collective, or between the personal narrative of struggle and the history of our still-evolving democratic society. On the bandstand, there is constant negotiation taking place and as in a democracy, this negotiation is not always defined by agreement. The way they work through problems and disagreements on the bandstand not only makes them better musicians—it makes them better people.1

Returning back to the everyday realm of citizenship and social interaction, the grand promise of democracy remains unrealized. It is from this perspective that we wish to further explore the democratic impulses inherent in jazz aesthetics and what this unorthodox line of inquiry could mean specifically for thinking about education. But first, we need to explore our second assumption.
In the midst of national tragedies such as the Sandyhook and Columbine school shootings, the killings of Oscar Grant and Trayvon Martin, and the noxious and divisive politics of gun control and educational reform, what is necessary is an inspirational and regenerative hope that is grounded in history and the roots of our national struggles for democracy. We can no longer tolerate a society that permits either the homicidal murder of Black youth in our cities or the slaughter of innocent children in predominantly White, affluent suburbs. Similarly, we can no longer imagine positive educational futures based on rhetoric and policies that separate the fate and wellbeing of students, teachers, and communities.

In order to solve these seemingly intractable social problems, we propose to develop a form of design thinking for school reform, in dialogue with jazz aesthetics. It is from such an exploratory position that we seek collective means to come to terms with the ‘little things.’ The (now obnoxious) horn-blowers in New Orleans (and New York and Miami and Los Angeles …) must learn to listen—to breathe deeply and reflect—and in the process come to realize that a momentary delay in traffic is not the end of the world.

**Jazz Aesthetics: Principles of Tension**

Jazz is considered the quintessential American art form. Invented in the red light district of New Orleans at the turn of the nineteenth century, Jazz was born of a mix of African and European music traditions with its infusion of democracy, improvisation, and individual freedom of expression, collaboration, and a democratic impulse during live performance. In a democracy, citizens have rights, such as the freedoms of expression and of association. The same is true in Jazz. It is important to not only understand the history of Jazz, but it is also very important to understand and embrace one’s own personal history and that of one’s family. Knowing this history will help young people to better know and to understand who they are. It will also provide the foundation for how youth can experience music and the arts. One thing that Jazz has taught its artists is that it is easy to identify how we are different. But Jazz has also taught us that it is more important and necessary to identify our similarities. This holds true in our quest for real democracy. Music is and always will be the universal truth! While there has been a history of segregation in our country, Jazz music at its highest has chosen not to recognize segregation. The music has always been inclusive and brought us together as a people, as a nation, and in the world community (Goines, 2012).

From this conception of jazz aesthetics and the social history of the music, three fundamental tensions are visible that highlight the structure of the artistic form which can inform discussions around school reform from an unconventional angle. These realms of contention are musical tradition versus artistic invention, compositional structure versus improvisational freedom, and the individual versus the collective. Rather than viewing these three pairings as reductive binaries, engaging with the history of jazz and the development of jazz aesthetics will show how these areas of concern exist as continuums, overlapping and diverging in varying ways.

**Musical Tradition and Artistic Invention**

Since the advent of bebop in the late 1940s—the first true cataclysm in the development of jazz—musicians, critics, and fans alike have evoked the term of tradition—with veneration
to call up the music’s legacy and its relevance in the present age and with disdain as it impedes current and future changes (Lopes, 2002; Nicholson, 2005; Nisenson, 1997). Beyond the rise of bebop, to the advent of the *avant garde* movements of the 1960s, through to the incorporation of electronic and hip hop elements into musical performance in recent years, conceptions of tradition in this musical heritage have often served to spur many of the radical changes in the music’s history.

The reason for these changes lies in the inherent tension between a tradition to be built upon and the individuality of the improvising jazz musician. With the completed composition of jazz performances always built around live performance and improvisation (Gioia, 1988), jazz aesthetics is grounded in an act of *becoming*—a musical form that is always changing and shifting, never just one thing.

To take but one example, while some contemporary jazz musicians continue to perform jazz standards from the Great American Songbook, some musicians, such as pianist Brad Mehldau (1997), have started to favor new standards in the form of contemporary pop songs. In this instance, it becomes evident that the adoption of tradition can mean different things to different musicians and the consequences for the music are, by necessity, multi-faceted. Working within a tradition, the lone musician still has significant freedom and responsibility to create something new from the material at hand.

*Compositional Structure and Improvisational Freedom*

Beyond the approach that individual musicians take to adapting, rejecting, or developing a particular style of performance based on their predecessors, the structure of jazz performance itself also demonstrates a balance between stasis and change. In this manner, the democratic impulses of jazz aesthetics become more apparent.

Although early forms of music that would eventually come to be known as jazz in places such as New Orleans, Kansas City, and Chicago in the first decades of the twentieth century were characterized by a polyphonic manner of group improvisation, the work of Louis Armstrong marked the advent of the improvised solo and would elevate it to a hallmark of the jazz performance (Yanow, 1994). This elevation of the individual voice from within the collective has subsequently become one of the central criteria upon which jazz musicians are appreciated.\(^2\)

Whether on the band stage, in the recording studio, or simply jamming in the basement, jazz performance, in consequence, begins with the individual. Why is this simple fact so significant? The short answer is that in the language and artistic rendering of modern jazz, this solo form that Armstrong and his successors realized laid the foundation for much of jazz aesthetics (Gioia, 1988). Other elements of the music, such as call and response playing, which have roots in the music of West Africa (Jones, 1962/1999), necessarily follow the solo or, at minimum, inherently depend on solo performance. The jazz group as a collective enterprise responds, by necessity, to the individual, the idealized creative self-expression of the soloist. Without an improvised solo performance, modern jazz as an organized art form does not exist. A co-author of this paper, Goines puts it succinctly: ‘A musician can play jazz alone. But its relationship to democracy is best demonstrated when a group of musicians who come together to play music and to perform. Everyone can participate in jazz; everyone in the room is an educator and a student at the same
The experience of jazz (and the arts more generally), like education, is far reaching and life changing; jazz is based out of the fundamental goal ‘to engage and to be engaged’ (Goines, 2012).

In contrast, however, the opposite of this is true: modern jazz as an organized art form does not exist without the prerequisite response from the other members of the group. This interaction is at the heart of the call and response technique in jazz (Marsalis & Ward, 2009). To quote Marsalis and Ward:

*Because* the accompaniment is improvised, a soloist is required to quickly communicate the logic of what he or she is playing—as quickly and completely as possible. Everyone follows the music *as it’s being born*, requiring each person to listen and speak with the same intensity . . . . (2009, p. 22, emphasis added)

For example, in looking at two of the classic piano trios—the Bill Evans Trio and the Keith Jarrett Trio—the balance between individual voice and group dynamics produces music that is not reducible to one instrument or style of playing, but to a collective identity—the music of which, in live performance, often comes across as being the result of telepathic communication.

Within this process of negotiation that Marsalis highlights, jazz aesthetics moves from an abstract concept or set of guiding principles to something more tangible and a guide to seeing how the practical aspects of jazz performance are rooted in democratic principles. The need to not only be able to express yourself, but to do so in a collective context; the need for the collective to be responsive to the voices of individuals; and the understanding that the individual voice is stronger as part of the collective than it is independently: these are the guiding principles which reveal that in the form of negotiation that jazz performance requires, democratic engagement is not only valued but necessary.

*The Individual and the Collective*

In its essence, as Marsalis has noted, jazz is ‘the creative tension between self-expression and self-sacrifice … a tension that is at the heart of swinging, in music and in life’ (Marsalis & Ward, 2009, p. xvi). This theme—which we will term an exploratory conception of jazz—runs throughout Marsalis’ writings and performances, as well as in the work of other musicians shaping jazz today. This tension—between tradition and innovation, between form and expression—points to the tensions that Goines (2012) highlights about the individual and the collective in the jazz experience.

While jazz is of course not the only genre of music to foster collective engagement, it is singular in its historical roots. Whether or not jazz can be considered the only truly American art form, its centrality in the cultural history of this country and in the way its people interact is beyond question. The connections between jazz music and struggles for civil rights, whether in the music or in the personal lives of musicians, show how the ideals of struggle and resistance are inseparable from the democratic ideals of jazz aesthetics (Hobsbawm, 1993; Jones, 1962/1999; Kofsky, 1998; Stanbridge, 2008). Of additional relevance today is the lived experience of jazz as a collective expression and fulfillment of identity that holds the strongest potential to restore civility and respect for humanity in the increasingly polarized society that we as a nation inhabit.
These conceptions of tradition versus innovation and composition versus improvisation underscore the manner in which the aesthetics of jazz, realized in every performance, are built on a conception of personhood and creativity that blurs the lines of the individual and the collective. Each player has their contribution which is foundational to the group’s musical expression, the sound of which is a unique composite of creative individuals brought together at a particular moment for a common cause: the jazz performance.

From this perspective, then, we can say that jazz has both design elements—an aesthetic structure—and the freedom of individual expression. This innate freedom to create embodied in improvisation is both an artistic privilege of the individual as well as a responsibility of both the soloist and the musical group to listen. This enables not only an appropriate musical response, but one that mutually enhances the performance. It is this balance, this reconciliation of opposites, that marks the great jazz performance. Jazz is always an interactive struggle, then, for power among unequal relations. We would argue that when fully realized, this negotiation results in increasing equality among members of the band as it privileges the individual’s right to create and to experience human freedom.

**Jazz Aesthetics as Design for Democratic School Reform**

Just as jazz aesthetics are defined by tensions, so too is contemporary school reform mired in political controversy and obstacles to meaningful change. It is to this matter that we now turn to bring the democratic impulses of jazz aesthetics into dialogue with school reform.

Whereas the nation is currently experiencing political gridlock, the tension in education reform today is not as much between Democrats and Republicans as it is between policymakers and political leaders who shape policies influencing many economically-deprived neighborhoods and the schools, families, and communities that experience the daily ramifications of those policies (Anyon, 2005; Payne, 2008). The neoliberal ideology that underpins many of these changes in educational policy-making—from the rise of school choice models based on market logic to the elevation of standardized testing—pervades our political discourse with a style of rhetoric that emphasizes the new and the innovative, the will of the entrepreneur over the everyday realities of students growing up in an increasingly inequitable society (Apple, 2006; Lipman, 2011). Whereas traditional public schools, the teachers that teach in them, and the curricula that they work with are depicted by such reform advocates as being outdated, burdensome, and an abject failure to American citizens, this new form of schooling is provided as the solution to what is often decried as an educational crisis (Berliner & Biddle, 1995).

This logic and its prevalence in the political and public discourses that shape our contemporary democratic society may best be understood in simple terms as a classic example of the Gramscian notion of cultural hegemony—a function of political and economic power dominating the ideologies and beliefs of society along the particular economic and epistemological perspective of elites through cultural institutions rather than through direct (or military) force (Gramsci, 1971). It is all-too-simple to espouse ideals of equality in education, but the structures of substantial policy change are not afforded as tangible solutions to educational inequities in the present moment.

In considering the democratic imperative in jazz performances when looking at educational reform, it becomes clear that neoliberal trends seek to bypass, rather than
embrace, a democratic imperative. In seeking to eschew the past in favor of a bright new future, much of the logic behind educational reforms of the moment is grounded in ideas of disruptive innovation and entrepreneurial initiative rather than in an historical continuity or sense of collective identity or democratic purposes. From such a critical perspective, it is necessary to start to imagine progressive alternatives within current reform initiatives to revitalize and sustain education reform that is truly democratic. It is important not to understand jazz aesthetics in this instance as a strict model or as mere metaphor. Instead, we approach this task from the perspective of design thinking (Rowe, 1987) as a starting point of inquiry. Applied in a variety of fields including design and urban planning, design thinking serves as a concrete way to realize larger ideas of school reform within the everyday realities of education.

In consequence, we will conclude this look at an exploratory conception of jazz with a focus on three areas of educational thinking that, through such design thinking, could be revived for more beneficial student experiences and, ultimately, for a more vibrant, equitable democratic society. These specific areas are the recent revitalization of community schooling (or other such attempts to build neighborhood schools within a choice model); arts education (jazz as well as other art forms); and culturally relevant pedagogy. It is in elucidating jazz aesthetics further as it applies to specific issues of contemporary concern with the scholarly work on different aspects of education reform that we hope to make a contribution to a new form of conceptualizing education reform for improved democracy.

Community Schooling

As an increasing number of urban school districts are moving to a portfolio school model (Bulkley, Henig, & Levin, 2010), many parents and communities are searching for alternative ways of schooling that contrast the dominant college-prep, strict discipline models of charter schools that have proliferated in recent years. In some instances, these searches entail more privileged families moving to private schools; in other instances, families are taking up the mantle of democratic engagement by working to create their own community-based schools. Similarly, just as the Harlem Children’s Zone has gained attention across the educational landscape and within the context of President Obama’s Promise Zones Initiative (Office of the Press Secretary, 2014), bipartisan legislation has been recently proposed to Congress that calls for the expansion of community schools that have wrap-around services (Hoyer & Schock, 2014).

The emphasis on parental control in recent decades has been the basis for many conflicts around the role of government and individuals within the processes of public schooling (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Henig, 1995). This recent rise of community-level organizing around community schooling provides a strong example of place-based policy that can echo—in meaningful, tangible ways—the unity of individual and collective perspectives in jazz performance. Although the long-term success of such schools is yet to be determined, recent research has shown the possibilities of such movements that bring together numerous individual experiences and perspectives to establish new collective identities and goals based around educational change (Beabout & Boselovic, in press; Blank, Melville, & Shah, 2003; Warren, 2005). By giving more attention not only to educational
governance models but to the ways in which students and communities experience schooling, greater flexibility can be achieved in individual schools which allows the form of governance and curriculum to be shaped further by experienced teachers and local communities. Such a democratic form of this give and take, the combination of design thinking that allows for community engagement, can serve as an epistemological foundation for thinking of new ways to create stronger schools that better serve specific communities.

Arts Education

Within schools themselves, the increased use of standardized testing as articulated in both President Bush’s *No Child Left Behind* (2001) and President Obama’s *Race to the Top* (2009) has put pressures on teachers and schools to convey specific forms of knowledge to students in a way that is often regimented, in line with Freire’s (1961/2000) conception of banking education. These federal laws make it increasingly difficult for educators to develop the skills of critical and creative thinking within students. In this sense, the tension between compositional structure and improvisational freedom within jazz aesthetics can play a role in reimagining how we might design teaching to satisfy the dual ends of imparting specific content knowledge while also developing the skills necessary for democratic citizenship.

Arts education, and arts-integration more specifically, serve as a potentially powerful educational model that would allow the process of schooling to allow for more creativity in the classroom and for greater student engagement (Deasy, 2002; Ruppert, 2006; Stiegelbauer, 2008). An increasing field of research around non-cognitive factors in the learning process (Farrington *et al.*, 2012; Lee & Shute, 2010) highlights the need to engage the social-emotional learning of students with greater intentionality and individuality. We believe that designing classrooms and curriculum for greater engagement around an arts education model can be a possible means for achieving these ends. By transitioning schooling away from rigid bodies of specific knowledge that cause teachers to rely upon narrow forms of pedagogy to a schooling form that is more creative and engaging, we believe that improved student achievement and more engaged citizenship will follow.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

At the level of interactions between teachers and students, the ideal of valuing both tradition and invention in jazz aesthetics bears clear significance. Delpit (1995) initially argued that teachers should develop the critical ability to understand and be adept at different forms of communication in students by valuing their own lived experiences and the norms of mainstream society. It is just as important today for the purposes of democratic citizenship that such a model for student development be maintained. In a similar vein, the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995, 1997) also holds potential for teachers and schools seeking to improve student engagement and student achievement by valuing students for who they are, rather than seeing them as inept within systems of education that have historically underserved them.
On a more foundational level, we are arguing here for greater room for the student to shape his or her educational experiences by being thought of not as a passive receptacle for given knowledge, but to be engaged by teachers who understand the importance of developing critical and creative individuals. As Mirón has previously suggested, in building off of the thinking of Freire (1961/2000), what is needed in times of great inequity and struggle is a pedagogy of resistance that functions to radicalize democracy, forms of education that signify a ‘passionate—emotionally violent—sensibility, and deployment, of love in the service of social justice’ (Mirón, 2013, p. xiii). While the push for increased college access to Black and other minority students is an encouraging trend in one sense, the increasing focus on college-prep curriculum in many urban schools over the last decade functions to decrease, rather than improve, the ability of students and teachers to engage in learning as a sort of meaningful performance, a give and take that values both the individual efforts and abilities of students as well as the collective experiences of learning within a vibrant and supportive social context.

It is our hope that these three initial ‘conversations’ based on a dialogue between jazz aesthetics and school reform can serve as a foundation for revitalized ways of thinking deeply and meaningfully about how best to develop our schools as public institutions in a rich and sustainable democratic society.

**Conclusion**

Jazz is there and gone. It happens. You have to be present for it. That simple. (Keith Jarrett, cited in Moon, 1999)

That’s the thing I love about jazz musicians—you don’t need to talk that much. (Stefano Bollani, cited in Jazz Echo, 2014)

By providing an exploration of jazz aesthetics and an exploratory conception of jazz as a foundation for understanding democratic engagement in everyday life, our goal has been to elucidate how such a model for democratic thinking can inform current developments in education reform as well as the broader experiences of citizenship and urban life. Just as the field of jazz has become increasingly heterogeneous in recent years as the boundaries between jazz and other fields such as classical and hip-hop have become increasingly blurred (Ross, 2007), it is our hope that in the coming years, education can consist of more moments along the lines that pianists Keith Jarrett and Stefano Bollani discuss, involving deep engagement with the present moment, with creative and collective learning, and with dialogue between individuals which function to achieve ends that go beyond themselves. By bringing jazz aesthetics and education reform into greater dialogue, we have sought to present a particular, unorthodox strategy for thinking in new and productive ways about how public education can be envisioned within the context of broader social changes. It is relevant, in closing, to cite Marsalis’ discussion of the struggles of saxophonist Charlie Parker and how he overcame the musical obstacles of his time period to create something radical and new: ‘When root objectives are lost, it becomes impossible to give birth to new things. The best that you can hope for is to create another form with an entirely different meaning’ (Marsalis & Hinds, 2004, p. 9). Rather than merely looking nostalgically to an ideal past that does not exist or seek contentment within the current
options for educational reform of the moment, we hope that this introductory dialogue can serve to support the work of teachers, communities, and researchers looking to build off our collective experiences to create a fundamentally new vision for democratic education reform.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes
1. The authors are indebted to Victor Goines and draw upon the thoughts that he shared as part of his lecture on the themes of jazz and democracy, given at Loyola University New Orleans in October 2012.
2. The opening cadenza of Louis Armstrong’s horn in his legendary recording of ‘West End Blues’ (1928/1999) stands not only as one of his most memorable performances, but more importantly as a radical announcement of the potential of the individual voice within the context of the jazz collective. This particular performance can be accessed from the website: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_eEV

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