

freedom, responsibility & transformation in jazz and society

from Buddy Bolden to Joëlle Léandre

To Walden the saxophone was, at once, his key to the world in which he found himself, and the way by which that world was rendered impotent to brand him either a failure or madman or Negro or saint.¹

—John Clellon Holmes, ‘The Horn’

*Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!
Bird thou never wert,
That from Heaven, or near it,
Pourest thy full heart
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.²*

- Percy Bysshe Shelley

Whilst improvised music in the jazzistic field³ may be one of the few human examples of ‘profuse strains of unpremeditated art’ it did not simply develop out of nowhere. Jazz has an inextricably complex history. The matrix of social conditions and the musical influences that led to the genesis of the jazzistic field are only a small part of the story. Jazz is simultaneously a style that promotes creative self-expression whilst being based on the collective nature of gospel music. This process in jazz contains a dialectic between opposing elements that musicians attempt to balance in order to explore the set of possibilities that are borne from the system of relationships that jazz is built upon. It is also influenced by, and impacts upon, ideas of the self, society and concepts of an ongoing process of a transitional process of becoming. This multidimensional process in jazz of becoming singular is no more apparent than in the improvised field. Historically, jazz was a space in which culture could happen, in which society could be challenged. It

¹ Clellon Holmes, John (1999) *The Horn* Thunder’s Mouth Press, United States

² Poem *To A Skylark* by Percy Bysshe Shelley

³ Henceforth mostly referred to as ‘jazz’ due to dastardly page restrictions on this essay.

was a place from which musicians could render the rest of the world impotent in its attempts to label, idolise or suppress them. Moreover, it is a style that has spread throughout the world, calling to and inspiring musicians to search for their own voices and to continue the struggle for transformation in an unjust world.

Coming Through Slaughter is Michael Ondaatje's novel about Buddy Bolden, the cornet player that was never recorded and yet is widely considered a master of modern jazz. Bolden was described by Jelly Roll Morton as being 'the most powerful trumpet player I've ever heard, or ever was known.'⁴ The contradictory and vague details about Bolden's career, life and descent into insanity are captured by Ondaatje in a novel that has been described as being a work of improvisation itself, a stylistic exercise in which the shadowy details of Bolden's life are explored in a non-linear, freeform novel that elegantly weaves vignettes and poetic ruminations on music with imagined interviews and haunting monologues.

Coming Through Slaughter has been described by Geoff Dyer as being 'arguably the best novel about jazz ever written.'⁵ It is set in New Orleans at the end of the nineteenth century and describes Bolden's obsession with death, his addiction to whiskey and the tragic details of his self-destructive love affair with two women. In the novel, Bolden states:

I wouldn't let myself control the world of my music because I had no power over anything else that went on around me, in or around my body.⁶

The history of jazz is as complex and intangible a matrix as the story of Buddy Bolden, and one that articulates the same desire for a space in which people could be free of both internal and external restrictions. Musically, the evolution of the jazzistic field involved a simultaneous development of diverse styles and different sounds. Yet the musical

⁴ Interview between Jelly Roll Morton and Alan Lomax, accessed online 18.01.08 at <http://www.wastedspace.com/jellyroll/index.html>

⁵ Dyer, Geoff *But Beautiful* (1998) Abacus, New York

⁶ Ondaatje, M. *Coming Through Slaughter* (1996) Vintage International, New York pp. 97-98

element was only part of the equation. Concepts of freedom, transformation and adaptation were fundamental to the genesis of the music that came to be known as jazz.

The social, cultural, political and physical space in which jazz gestated was one of severe repression. The slave migrants from Africa in the United States were victims of almost total ethnocide, systematically denied access to any part of their culture or society. However, Protestant slave workers were soon encouraged to play music because it helped them to work more efficiently. Through this seemingly small admission, music became a function, a place in which culture and society could happen. Jazz became the place in which people could express themselves.

Jazz music developed as an interaction between individuals that involved as much freedom in the music, between people, as they believed should be in society. The history of jazz is also imbued with a desire for a social transformation, an end to the inequalities of society and the hierarchies of social order. This desire for freedom and for social change is manifested in the music in the transformation of tracks and especially in the field of improvisation. The ability for an artist to transform a known song through the application of their own style is part of the freedom inherent in jazz. This freedom is the result of a complicated matrix including lack of cultural and political freedom of the societies from which jazz was born, and the subsequent view that transformation was essential to freedom. Thus, a piece of music was not simply seen as what it was, but what it could become. In this sense, the possibility for change was included in the being: even the composer of a piece was aware upon composing that it would probably never be played or performed the same way twice. In this sense, any piece of music could be seen as constantly in a state of 'becoming', containing infinite possibilities for transformation.

The music was also a multidimensional gestation that involved a search, as Max Roach put it, 'to discover new aspects of life and existence through sounds.'⁷ Jazz, and especially improvised jazz, required an ability to adapt all the time, to the situation, the circumstances and those of the people around you. This in turn required an ability to

⁷ Max Roach, cited in class.

recognise ‘mistakes’ as potential for new areas of exploration, and the idea of learning from these situations is fundamental to the jazzistic field.

Self expression, singularity and identity were also emphasized in this new form, a focus not only on the past but on the present and the future. The emphasis on who you are and where you are going was also crucial for a genre whose complicated matrix of history meant that where these mythical ‘roots’ lay was simply a matter of perspective.

Furthermore, the emphasis on concepts of freedom in jazz did not mean that this genre was lacking in traditions or definite structures.

The creation of an identity, musical or otherwise, can be described as a process of selection of particularities from an arc of possibilities. Anthropologist Ruth Benedict, working on concepts of culture in the United States in the 1920s, described the development of cultural traits as being a process of selecting certain characteristics from the great arc of human potentialities. She saw these possible combinations and elaborations as being so varied that the results were inexhaustible.⁸ This, in a sense, is exactly what the jazzistic field is about. Singularity lays in our personal adaptation of the options open to us, the results being infinite.

In this sense, the options open to us are those offered by our culture, traditions and society. Each culture classifies reality in its own way, and each member of a culture will identify themselves in relation to this particular classification. Inside this classification there is the possibility for common structure, and the potential to play with it. The learning of structure is still a matter of choices, albeit choices made *en masse* by a society. Tradition develops and redefines itself through history, sharing ideas, following some, discarding others.

Jazz exists in the same manner: with a set of rules and a set of possibilities that creates a system of relationships. This genre has some clearly defined structures and traditions, both musical and philosophical. This includes the dialogical structure of the ‘call’ and

⁸ Benedict, Ruth *Patterns of Culture* (2005) Mariner Books, United States.

the ‘answer’ that is present in all African American music, which comes from the gospel and concepts of ‘gathering together’ for Sunday morning sermons. There can be multiple or singular caller(s) and answerer(s), and it is the interaction between the two that is most important. There is also a complicated system of relationships in the jazzistic field that must be adhered to, which involves a symmetry, dialectic, a combination, an opposition and a dialogue between the body and the soul; rhythms and voices; multiplicity and singularity; call and answer; tension and release; symmetry and dissymmetry; composition and improvisation. While these rules exist, they are not in a hierarchical form but rather constitute a combination of elements, a dynamic structure.

Balancing these elements, an artist seeks to engage in a process of ‘becoming.’ Self-determination in jazz is a tradition, and the question of singularity is of paramount importance, especially in improvised jazz. This ongoing process of ‘becoming’ involves almost obsessive levels of work, practice and study. Yet whilst one can be inspired by other musicians and technical detail, one must endeavour to have their own voice and style. It also involves an internal contradiction, as Franz Kolgmann states:

Improvisation contains a contradiction in itself: on the one hand it is supposed to be an extemporisation, something created at this moment, and is, on the other hand, mainly the demonstration of expertise in what the musician has learned.⁹

French double bass musician Joëlle Léandre’s voice is one that believes very strongly in the integrity and responsibility of musicians. She describes herself as ‘an improviser who composes’ and is interested in contemporary classical, having studied with John Cage, as well as improvisation. Her work has been described as containing not just impeccable musicianship, but as being full of humour and heart.

Her work is highly political, both consciously and subconsciously, and her work with fellow female musicians in the trio *Les Diaboliques* contains multiple endeavors to revolutionise the status quo, both in the jazzistic field and in society. She was inspired by

⁹ Franz Kolgmann, interview handout.

jazz to give an outlet to her emerging voice, despite (or perhaps due to) being a quiet child. Classically trained, she is a clear example of a musician's search for expression of singularity, for a realm in which to express her frustration, her sense of justice, her fight for equality and her desire to be political through her music. She states:

We are totally *responsable* to do something when we arrive on stage... there are thousands and thousands of good trumpet players. You have thousands and thousands of bass players. It's once you arrive on stage to say something else about, probably, human, we are. About emotion, about craziness, about love, about frustration, about angry, a lot of things, this is music.¹⁰

Joëlle Léandre is concerned that the integrity of musicians, and the emphasis on singularity in the music, is failing with the commercialisation of the genre. She is conscious of the impact that the feminist and civil rights movements had on the evolution of her own voice and believes strongly in destabilising the existing hierarchy that exists in the jazzistic field. She has an intimate relationship with her instrument, including a period of technical experimentation that involved shoving bits of paper under the strings and filling the body with different objects to see how it affected the sounds.

Music is intensely political for Joëlle Léandre. Not only does she make a lot of noise with an instrument that is classically subordinated to the rest of the orchestra, but she also takes stylistic, compositional and improvisational risks that are calculated to destabilise the status quo. In fact, she is staging a revolution merely by fact of choosing to compose and improvise with an instrument so inferior that she refers to as the proletariat of the orchestra. Her sense of humour and strong sense of feminism are further aberrations in the primarily serious, male world of jazz. Nobody instructed her to choose this path for herself: as she rightly points out, she could be living a much more comfortable life as a music teacher.

¹⁰ Interview with Joëlle Léandre 11.01.09, see attached transcript.

Her roots certainly did not dictate her route, either, to paraphrase Paul Gilroy. Her family were not musicians, and were skeptical about her choice of profession, as well as her choice of instrument. Furthermore, she was classically trained and heavily influenced by John Cage, who had no time for improvised music. Yet Léandre decided that improvising with a double bass was going to be the platform upon which she would stage her revolution. She has interrogated composers who do not compose for the double bass and is very vocal about the ‘old, shit traditions’ that plague both classical and jazz music.

Highly provocative, Léandre likes to ask questions. Why aren’t there many women in jazz? Why doesn’t anybody compose for the double bass? Why is a double bass never in a string quartet? Why can’t you be funny on stage? She cites one of her primary influences as Marcel Duchamp, laughing as she explains the bicycle in his museum, and is almost violent in her desire to bring art, and especially jazz, down from its ivory tower. She says that Marcel Duchamp and Erik Satie are important influences on her work, and her life, saying that they are ‘so important *pour désacraliser l’oeuvre.*’

An interesting position for a woman who, as she says herself, can make art ‘at the top of the podium’ and is recognised as one of the finest musicians in her field. She rightfully refers to herself as a pioneer, along with Pauline Oliveros and Irène Schweitzer, and yet Léandre is not ready to rest on her laurels. She believes that the revolution is not yet over. The majority of positions held in the music industry are still held by men and she believes that a lot of hard work is yet to be done. This is another element of the responsibility of artists that Léandre insists upon. She states:

Now is the life, today and not tomorrow. This can be understood quite young, understood clearly. I can be an angry woman, and this is a good vibration. I can use inner rage to keep the utopia, the idea of changing the world. Artists have a job, to change the world.¹¹

¹¹ Léandre, Joëlle, transcript interview, see attached.

Joëlle Léandre is involved in a risky business. Improvisational jazz is an unpremeditated art, an abstraction of reality that was borne from a desire for freedom in American at the end of the 19th Century and has been harnessed by a French woman in the 21st Century who wishes to express her own desire for freedom, personally and globally. She states:

So its probably just my way, I like that. I'm a little bit gypsy, I love to be a little nomad, I love to travel, to leave.¹²

This is a long way from Bolden's declaration in Ondaatje's novel that the freedom he allows in the music is a reaction to the lack of control and constraints he feels dictate the rest of his existence. Yet both Bolden and Léandre have chosen jazz as the field in which they can express their desire for freedom, a place in which they can be heard. Moreover, it is the terrain on which questions can be asked and perceptions challenged. Music is an instrument with which one can challenge the initial thought patterns of people, and therefore perhaps it does indeed have a chance of challenging the thought patterns of a society as a whole in order to bring about social and political transformation. But more importantly, as Joëlle Léandre says, we have a responsibility first and foremost to 'be deeply sincere'¹³ to ourselves, to inspire others to be deeply sincere to themselves in turn. Furthermore, 'you need to love, deeply.'¹⁴ Perhaps these ideas alone are inspiration enough.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Léandre, Joëlle, transcript interview, see attached.

¹⁴ Léandre, Joëlle, transcript interview, see attached.

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