

A Concentric Model for Jazz History

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Authors and educators attempting to communicate a narrative history of jazz have consistently struggled to account for the sense of collectivity, contestation, and compromise embedded in the daily work of improvising musicians. Instead, our narratives have continued to foreground the work of individuals—bandleaders, composers, and soloists—in a chronological march toward ever-greater complexity and freedom. Countering this historicist orientation, bassist Steve Swallow says “The word ‘freedom’ is really meaningless to me—musically I don’t even consider it. I am a member of an ensemble, and most of what I do is in reference to the other music being made on the bandstand.”¹ In this article, I propose an alternative pedagogical model through which I explore the history of jazz in a way that honors the collective work at the culture’s core and that reflects the uneven, fluid, and largely non-chronological historical logic of the recorded age. We live at a moment in which Coleman Hawkins and John Zorn inhabit the same sonic space, with nothing more than a mouse click separating them in the experience of, for example, a young saxophonist. That saxophonist and her bandmates—if they follow the path taken by so many improvisers over the last century—will willfully distort, strategically misremember, and eclectically play with those source materials in personal and unbalanced ways. These strategies have been employed across the breadth of black American expressive practice, but the expansion of digital life over the past two decades brings such ideas of collectivity and contestation to the very core of our discussions of the music’s history.² Our students inhabit a world

1. Quoted in Martin T. Williams, *Jazz Masters in Transition, 1957–69* (New York: Macmillan, 1970).

2. In jazz scholarship and criticism, these notions of collectivity and contestation have inevitably intersected with questions of race, especially in considerations of the uneven dynamics at play in the formation of canons. See, for example, Gary Tomlinson, “Cultural Dialogics and Jazz: A White Historian Signifies,” *Black Music Research Journal* 11, no. 2 (1991): 229–64; George E. Lewis, “Improvised Music After 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives,” *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no. 1 (1996): 91–122; Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Ronald Radano, *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of

in which multiple pasts coexist, information is curated collectively, and ideas adapted from distant times and localities continually inform the present. It's time for our jazz history curricula to embrace these notions of distortion, conflict, imbalance, and play.

As an alternative to traditional chronological approaches, I propose a concentric model through which we might understand the history of jazz as a nested and interlocking set of subject positions in constant dialogue about the processes and products that have shaped and reshaped the jazz community. This concentric model places the interactive work of improvising musicians at the center of our inquiry in the classroom, exploring a wide range of participants in the scene that exert influence on the musical choices made on the bandstand. By addressing contrasting interactive systems from different times and places, we can demonstrate the contingency and fluidity of those systems. By analyzing the interactive contributions of an array of actors involved in the production of specific recordings and performances, we privilege the agency of individual musicians within the collective ritual while opening a space for the stories of those communities underrepresented in traditional narratives because of their gender, race, or class position.

This concentric approach builds on the work of Travis A. Jackson, focusing on processes of improvisational interaction while foregrounding a range of cultural forces with which musicians are in constant dialogue.³ Jackson diagrams these forces as a series of concentric frames around jazz performance, providing a flexible generalized system for exploring the dynamic interplay between performers and their environments. He argues that musicians' interactions are constrained by narrow musical frames such as melodies and harmonic forms, as well as broader expectations imposed by specific venues, event formats, and the normative behaviors of the jazz scene.⁴ Within these spatial, temporal, and behavioral frames, Jackson argues that performers and listeners actively create and enforce sets of shared communal performance standards, continually redrawing the boundaries of acceptable musical practice, though within tightly controlled parameters. Jackson's work allows us to understand jazz culture not as tied to the production of particular musical characteristics, but instead as dedicated to the development of a distinctive musical process. This process is marked by an abiding dedication to "creativity, distinctiveness, and

Chicago Press, 2003); and John Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

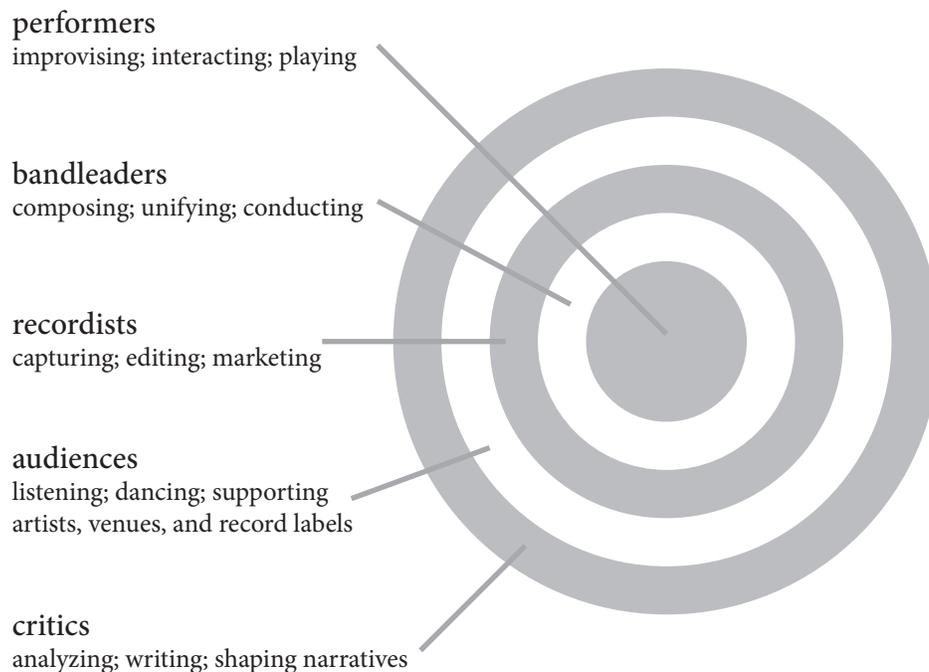
3. Travis A. Jackson, "Jazz Performance as Ritual: The Blues Aesthetic and the African Diaspora," in *The African Diaspora: A Musical Perspective*, ed. Ingrid Monson (New York: Routledge, 2000), 21–82.

4. Jackson, "Jazz Performance as Ritual," 65.

interactivity” within a well-defined ritual frame. In short, we may understand the jazz musician’s work as a “performative negotiation with structure.”⁵

Jackson’s general framework might be applied within a pedagogical context as a sustained survey of the work of a range of participants in the jazz scene—performers, bandleaders, recordists, audiences, and critics (**Figure 1**). The concentric model begins with a consideration of the core interactive musical practice that animates the community, exploring the ways that musicians learn to communicate and the ways that their interactions are shaped by particular times, locations, and shared histories. After a sustained discussion of these interactive processes, the concentric model expands outward to explore the important regulative roles maintained by a range of stakeholders across the jazz community. The first ring outside of that interactive, performative core is inhabited by bandleaders and composers, tasked with corralling musicians’ creative individuality into a unified ensemble identity. The next concentric ring is the realm of recordists and record label personnel, those participants who capture and construct performances and shape those performances through technological and editorial means. The third ring is the home of audiences, who participate in the scene as consumers, listeners, dancers, and connoisseurs. The

Figure 1. Concentric subject positions within the jazz community, adapted from Jackson, “Jazz Performance as Ritual,” 65.



5. Jackson, “Jazz Performance as Ritual,” 54.

outer ring is the world of the critic, contextualizing the labor of the other participants and shaping some of the most durable narratives that have solidified into “jazz history.” This concentric approach highlights the ways that these different groups of participants within the jazz scene enable particular interactive modes while constraining others, exploring collaborations and tensions between these actors while revealing the dynamic relationships that inevitably shape the sound of the music and the stories that we tell about it.

The concentric approach focuses on a particular set of relationships among actors within the jazz scene, offering a model that stresses the fluid, uneven, and contested interactions among these participants. Traditional chronological approaches often focus on a set of musical retentions that form the core of jazz style, using a sort of sedimentary model that places swing, call-and-response, and other musical elements at the deepest historical layer. In contrast, a concentric approach allows for the core to be understood as a particular approach to musical communication that is constituted differently in different times and places. Additionally, the concentric model demonstrates multi-directional and simultaneous exchange between participants in the scene. While the interactive improvisational process of musicians resides at the center of the circle, that practice does not represent a gravitational center around which the other participants orbit. This model allows us to explore ways in which musicians’ choices are affected by bandleaders, recordists, audiences, and critics just as we explore how the work of those actors is affected by changes in musical practice.

The specific organization of the concentric rings suggested here could certainly be debated. Some might argue that critics are “closer” to the core interactive practice of musicians than are audiences. Some would say that the work of recordists serves to freeze the work undertaken in particular scenes and spread those local ideas to distant corners of the jazz community. I advocate the organization suggested here because it allows us to build outward from a core of ephemeral improvisational practice toward more stable and rigid structures: the establishment of networks, scenes, and subgenres; and eventually toward the construction of narrative accounts of the music’s historical development.

Alone Together: Confronting Dominant Jazz Narratives

In focusing on the collaborative work of improvisers and deemphasizing chronological narratives, the concentric model directly challenges the most common approaches to teaching jazz history and offers an alternative that responds to current musical and social realities. Chronological approaches have consistently emphasized the work of individual geniuses, most of whom are men; by construing jazz as an interactive negotiation among many different groups, the concentric model makes more space for a consideration of the

contributions that women and other under-represented groups have made to the genre. This focus on the dynamics of the jazz community also creates space for students to explore narrative structures that more closely reflect the collaborative work that has shaped the sounds and practices of the jazz community.

Although scholars have for many decades criticized the ways in which traditional chronological narratives distort our understanding of jazz history, undergraduate jazz history classes are still, for the most part, organized around a paradigm of historical progression. Historians have consistently applied the language of evolution to their classroom explorations of stylistic change in jazz. In the most commonly told tales, the jazz tradition begins as an extension of African-derived folk music and proudly displays a full range of pre-slavery tribal retentions in its forms, textures, and rhythms. After the great individual geniuses of early jazz were “discovered” and legitimized by European and American concert music composers and consumers, the jazz community began an inevitable march toward complexity, subtlety, and modernity. In short, jazz musicians left behind their folk roots and began producing art.

This narrative model relies heavily upon an assumption of individual geniuses—inevitably bandleaders and instrumental soloists—as the central agents driving stylistic change. Borrowing heavily from the historiography of European music, these progress narratives have become central evidence within critical attempts to legitimize jazz as art over the last sixty years. Through close analysis of canonic recordings, critics have nobly drawn parallels between the high art of the colonial powers and an acclaimed musical expression of a systematically oppressed group, and their tales of the rise of jazz have become significant points of pride. As Scott DeVaux writes:

My courses in jazz history are designed to inculcate a feeling of pride in a racially mixed university for an African-American musical tradition that manages, against all odds, to triumph over obstacles of racism and indifference. For this, the narrative of jazz history as Romance is a powerful tool, and I have invested a good deal into making it a reality in my students’ minds through all the eloquence and emotion I can muster.⁶

The stakes are high for jazz as art, and the ongoing tethering of the progress of jazz style to the familiar teleological story of European musical progress has been arguably the single most important generator of the cultural capital necessary to turn jazz into a legitimate American form of high art.

Despite the success of this art-making process, the value and sustainability of Eurocentric narratives has been repeatedly and emphatically questioned. Historians’ broad use of sound recordings as primary historical documents has

6. Scott DeVaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography,” *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 3 (1991): 552.

enabled the kinds of legacy construction essential in codifying the hagiographic succession at the core of the narrative. Jed Rasula has offered perhaps the most direct critique of the vaunted position of recordings within jazz narratives, foregrounding the notion that recordings are inherently incomplete and partial snapshots of specific musical moments and arguing that the process of recording often obscures more than it reveals.⁷ Importantly, he focuses our attention on the role that recordings play in the life of musicians and asserts that this role is at odds with the use of recordings by critics and historians, writing:

Recordings . . . ruin chronology. Recordings circulate nonsequentially, privately, and defy reliable documentation of their consumption. Unlike verifiable personal encounters, recordings taint the prospect of historical succession. “Influence,” a staple of the biographer and historian, is rendered useless.⁸

Such notions of direct, chronological influence die hard, and they continue to guide the construction of textbooks, anthologies, and course calendars.

In his 2010 contribution to this *Journal*, Kenneth Prouty revealed the extent to which jazz history textbooks have focused on canonic recordings made by established artists as the foundation of their narratives.⁹ This focus is unsurprising, considering that recordings are the primary object of jazz history and that narratives of recognized figures form an essential backbone of a historical model built on assumptions derived from the well-established histories of the music of Western Europe. Familiarity with these artists and recordings is certainly core knowledge for aspiring jazz musicians, as discussions of the compositional and improvisational styles of particular musicians and anecdotes highlighting particular aspects of musicians’ practice contribute to the development of an invaluable professional dialect for musicians and a central form of socialization. In short, recordings have long been the central facts animating jazz history.

Indeed, Prouty argues that the canon has become “the ultimate expression of knowledge about jazz,” but that the notion of a single canon is inaccurate.¹⁰

7. Jed Rasula, “The Media of Memory: The Seductive Menace of Records in Jazz History,” in *Jazz Among the Discourses*, ed. Krin Gabbard (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 134–62.

8. Rasula, “The Media of Memory,” 143.

9. Kenneth Prouty, “Toward Jazz’s ‘Official’ History: the Debates and Discourses of Jazz History Textbooks,” this *Journal* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 19–43, <http://www.ams-net.org/ojs/index.php/jmhp/article/view/4/4>.

10. Kenneth Prouty, *Knowing Jazz: Community, Pedagogy, and Canon in the Information Age* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 9. Such challenges to the canon and considerations of the canon’s impact on pedagogy have been an important part of musicological discourse since the cultural turn in the 1980s. See Joseph Kerman, “A Few Canonic Variations,” *Critical Inquiry* 10, no. 1 (1983): 107–25; Marcia Citron, “Feminist Waves and Classical Music: Pedagogy, Performance, Research,” *Women and Music* 8 (2004): 47–60; and Katherine Bergeron and Philip Bohlman, eds., *Disciplining Music: Musicology and Its Canons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

These collections of sounds and associations are constructed differently and used in different ways by historians, performers, listeners, and cultural organizations. Clear, dynamic demonstration of the music's technical and social principles is a primary goal shared by jazz educators, and we are trained to make use of the strongest examples that open up particular conversations and perspectives for students. In the vast majority of cases, educators make use of such canonic recordings as indices of widely-distributed practices, not as monuments of musical greatness for its own sake. The narrative web of jazz history is built on such indexical recordings, allowing educators a kind of shorthand that is inevitable and necessary as part of the structure of a survey course. These exemplars overlap with traditional canons (after all, those recordings are canonic because they are exemplary), but educators inevitably build their own personal canons, as do musicians. Despite a similar process, educators' personal canons can support entirely different ideals of "the jazz tradition" than do classic anthologies and texts.

As Gabriel Solis has shown, this canonizing is far from the whole story.¹¹ Solis argues that these core objects become problematic when they are allowed to become ends in themselves, enabling a culture that replaces community membership with consumerism. Addressing the lasting influence of Thelonious Monk's work as a composer and improviser, Solis writes:

It is only through their humanization, through real and imagined re-embodiments that these recordings become meaningful . . . [Monk's] recordings themselves are well loved, but at least for musicians, their appeal is largely because of the many fruitful directions in which they point.¹²

Monk's work is, of course, widely known and distributed, and this ubiquity allows musicians and audiences to treat his work as a common resource. His canonicity is a prerequisite for such broad and lively engagement with his work. But importantly, Monk's particular style enables a wide range of responses and reconfigurations, providing a rich foundation upon which young musicians can, as Ingrid T. Monson notes, "say something."¹³

With a similar focus on musicians as active listeners and participants in the history-making process, Bruce Johnson suggests that our shared perceptions of jazz have been fundamentally distorted through our embrace of Eurocentric

11. Gabriel P. Solis, "A Unique Chunk of Jazz Reality': Authorship, Musical Work Concepts, and Thelonious Monk's Live Recordings from the Five Spot, 1958," *Ethnomusicology* 48, no. 3 (2004): 315–47.

12. Solis, "A Unique Chunk of Jazz Reality,'" 339–40.

13. See Ingrid T. Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); and Travis A. Jackson, *Blowin' the Blues Away: Performance and Meaning on the New York Scene* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

critical models.¹⁴ He argues that the jazz economy has internalized more than the hagiography of individual geniuses and the linear progression that charts the growth of jazz from simplicity to complexity, asserting that jazz communities have taken up the modernist commodification of art, building historical canons of recordings and denying the ephemerality and non-repeatability at the heart of jazz practice. Johnson insists that jazz must be understood as a set of shared practices and that the music's history should not be written as a march of increasingly complex canonic recordings. Instead, he says we must strive to "see history as a large, horizontal field of shifting constellations of ideas and alliances of forces."¹⁵ This reconsideration of the content of jazz history—laying bare the relationship between cultural products and the processes through which they are produced—has the potential to instigate a dramatic shift in the ways that students understand the tradition and their place within it.

Moment's Notice: Ethnographic Interventions

Ethnomusicologists have provided a firm foundation for the kind of reconsideration of jazz history advocated by Johnson. Reflecting on the entrenchment of the most common jazz narratives, Monson writes:

Since the late 1920s, when the extended improvised solo became one of the most prominent characteristics of the music, those fascinated by the beauty, power, and complexity of the jazz tradition have focused primarily upon the activities and achievements of individual soloists without considering the enabling function of the accompanists. Although the personal quality of the improviser—his or her magical projection of soul and individuality by musical means—has been rightfully at the core of what writers have wished to emphasize, the time has come to take a broader view of jazz improvisation and its emotional and cultural power.¹⁶

The musical and social negotiations at the core of jazz practice have been broadly and productively explored by ethnomusicologists over the last two decades. In their wide-ranging work, jazz ethnographers have addressed the socialization of improvising musicians and the processes undergirding collective improvisation while engaging with work in cognitive science, anthropology, and music theory. Their work—especially that of Monson, Paul Berliner, Charles Keil, and Travis A. Jackson—provides an essential corrective to the descriptions of improvisational style and narratives of stylistic change so often presented in jazz history courses.

14. Bruce Johnson, "Hear Me Talkin' To Ya: Problems of Jazz Discourse," *Popular Music* 12, no. 1 (1993): 1–12.

15. Johnson, "Hear Me Talkin' To Ya," 8.

16. Monson, *Saying Something*, 1.

In their foundational ethnographic studies of jazz practice, Monson and Paul Berliner grant substantial attention to the collective work of rhythm section musicians as they generate stylistic grounding for soloists and offer continuous rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic ideas that might contribute to soloists' explorations.¹⁷ Through their engagement with performers, Monson and Berliner reveal well-developed traditions of interaction and behavioral patterns to which individual instrumentalists are expected to adhere. They examine the hierarchies inherent within ensembles, placing responsibility on accompanists for the creation of the collective groove, while suggesting that the vast majority of individual assertions that might challenge that collective come from the soloist. In paying close attention to the internal dynamics of ensembles, their work represents an important shift away from the myth of the lone individual genius as the prime generator of stylistic change in jazz. Instead, we begin to see the music's progress as a contingent and fluid negotiation between performers with unequal voices and different stakes in the outcome of each performance.

Monson and Berliner conclude that interaction takes place squarely within well-defined stylistic boundaries and that performers are ultimately constrained by the collective knowledge regulated by participants in the scene. Charles Keil challenges this idea throughout his broad considerations of groove. In his 1966 response to Leonard Meyer's *Emotion and Meaning in Music*, Keil develops a typology of bass and drum styles employed by musicians active in the mid-1960s.¹⁸ Keil argues that the specific ways these players connect in performance fundamentally changes the type of music created. In his later discussion of "participatory discrepancies," Keil asserts that "music, to be personally involving and socially valuable, must be 'out of time' and 'out of tune.'"¹⁹ He suggests that groove emerges as a result of expressive deviations in pitch and rhythm between performers. Later work by Keil, J. A. Prögler, Matthew Butterfield, and Fernando Benadon attempts to quantify these participatory discrepancies, using new technologies to systematically calculate music's "out-of-timeness" and "out-of-tuneness."²⁰

In response to Keil and Prögler, Monson suggests that studies of participatory discrepancies have migrated into too quantitative a territory: "I think that

17. Monson, *Saying Something*; Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

18. Charles Keil, "Motion and Feeling Through Music," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 24, no. 3 (April 1, 1966): 337–49.

19. Charles Keil, "Participatory Discrepancies and the Power of Music," *Cultural Anthropology* 2, no. 3 (August 1987): 275.

20. J. A. Prögler, "Searching for Swing: Participatory Discrepancies in the Jazz Rhythm Section," *Ethnomusicology* 39, no. 1 (1995): 21–54; Matthew Butterfield, "The Power of Anacrusis: Engendered Feeling In Groove-Based Musics," *Music Theory Online* 12, no. 4 (2006), <http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.06.12.4/mto.06.12.4.butterfield.html>; and Fernando Benadon, "Slicing the Beat: Jazz Eighth Notes as Expressive Microrhythm," *Ethnomusicology* 50, no. 1 (2006): 73–98.

in this case,” she writes, “he has mistaken a product (measurements of discrepancies) for the culturally, bodily, musically, and socially interactive *processes* by which human beings create them.”²¹ She reminds us that the power of Keil’s work lies in its revelation of the remarkably high stakes at which such interaction occurs in improvisational processes. Studies of participatory discrepancies demonstrate that much musical interest emerges from those moments in which performers are not of a wholly collective mind; those moments of “out-of-timeness” and “out-of-tuneness” are the moments at which musicians most profoundly affect one another, and these are precisely the moments at which a group’s unique identity emerges. At the most basic level, the collective is actively created in every moment of performance. It is continually negotiated by individuals, and even though performers most often share a common frame of reference—a memory of a recorded performance, a stylistic etiquette, or simply a melody—the collective identity remains forever up for grabs. In foregrounding the importance of individual choices within the construction of every collective performance, Keil suggests that interactive standards should be understood as an open-ended matrix of possibilities, rather than as a rigid set of rules for acceptable action. This shift—from an assumption of performers’ work as the faithful performance of fixed roles to an acknowledgement of the intimate interplay between collective expectation and individual agency—is an empowering and inclusive pedagogical outcome for students considering their own emerging positions within the jazz community.

Although interaction within the jazz ensemble has been valuably and broadly theorized, the ways in which this interaction functions historically has been largely ignored. Ethnographers such as Berliner, Monson, and Keil tend to discuss interaction ahistorically, focusing on the powerful reproductive tendencies of structural schemas. Keil acknowledges the possibility of historically specific interactive processes but avoids engaging the idea that these processes might be productively positioned at the center of our narratives of musical and social change. Jazz historians have also begun to acknowledge the complexity and dialogue inherent in jazz practice, and some have readily acknowledged that we need to bring historical study into better alignment with that practice. DeVeaux writes:

Music continues to change: the explosion in new technologies, the increased pace of global interaction, the continued erosion of European art music as the measure of all things. The narratives we have inherited to describe the history of jazz retain the patterns of outmoded forms of thought, especially the assumption that the progress of jazz as art necessitates increased distance from the popular. If we, as historians, critics, and educators, are to adapt to these new realities, we must be willing to construct new narratives to explain

21. Ingrid Monson, “Responses to Keil and Prögler,” *Ethnomusicology* 39, no. 1 (1995): 88–89.

them. These alternative explanations need not displace the jazz tradition (it hardly seems fair, in any case, to deconstruct a narrative that has only recently been constructed, especially one that serves such important purposes). But the time has come for an approach that is less invested in the ideology of jazz as aesthetic object and more responsive to issues of historical particularity.²²

George Lipsitz echoes DeVaux's call for new models and suggests that the focus on interaction and process advocated by ethnomusicologists might serve as a productive foundation for a more inclusive set of stories, writing that "the history of jazz as creative act rather than created object can be represented in an infinitely diverse and plural number of equally true narratives."²³ He proposes "a history of rhythmic time created in unexpected places," replacing the Eurocentric "modernist time" of traditional narratives with a history of "dance time" that focuses on stylistic change as a dynamic, sustained conversation between drummers, dancers, and other participants in the jazz scene. Lipsitz asserts that this privileging of the collective enables an overdue reevaluation of the meaning and power of jazz within American culture: "The true genius of black music has not been confined to the production of individual 'geniuses,' but rather has been manifest in the plurality of new social relationships that the music has helped bring into being."²⁴

Dimensions and Extensions: Case Studies

In my jazz history course, I attempt my own response to this call for new approaches by using the concentric model as the core organization of my course design. Within this framework, I draw together historical and ethnographic modes of jazz scholarship, connecting the daily collaborative work of improvisers to narratives of stylistic and social change while focusing students' attention on the temporal and spatial contingency of interactive practices. In response to the work outlined above, my courses focus on the processes and pressures central to the daily work of improvisers. Their music is inherently collaborative, generated by groups of musicians and listeners working together in real time and interacting in dynamic networks to collectively create, revise, and challenge the details of the systems governing the music's creation. A historical consideration of jazz from the perspective of these interactive networks allows appropriate weight to be granted to the generative power of that collectivity.

22. DeVaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition," 553.

23. George Lipsitz, "Songs of the Unsung: The Darby Hicks History of Jazz," in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 22.

24. Lipsitz, "Songs of the Unsung," 24.

By the time jazz majors step into my classroom, most have already internalized a formalized understanding of jazz history founded on the dominant hagiographic narrative of inexorable chronological progress. At the same time, their experience as students and listeners has allowed them to construct a much more personal and flexible history that connects to their own development as improvisers. They may have encountered John Coltrane long before familiarizing themselves with the work of Johnny Hodges, and this experience allows them to read history sideways and backwards, just as Rasula describes above. I strive to help students to embrace those chaotic, personal readings of the tradition and to trust their own experiential knowledge just as they trust the proclamations of scholars.

Some educators might object to the trade-offs required in replacing a chronological course structure with a concentric one. In fact, I have heard these questions raised by my faculty colleagues and by students. In jazz history as in other parts of the music history curriculum, chronology functions as a default organizational structure. For both students and faculty, departures from this default structure run across the grain. In order to meet these challenges, I must combine a concentric pedagogical model with more traditional chronological structures. As an ongoing class assignment, I require students to develop a timeline of artists, recordings, and events that allows them to visualize a stylistic and contextual chronology as we navigate our concentric pathway. Additionally, we make use of a chronological textbook, DeVeaux and Giddens's *Jazz*.²⁵ I assign short sections of the text out of order throughout the semester, but the book's chronological structure provides students with an alternative approach to the one followed in class.

My goal is not to abolish history from the classroom altogether, but rather to provide a different lens through which to explore the processes driving the music's development. When discussing the work of recordists, in particular, it is essential for us to explore the development of recording technology chronologically. That technological narrative forms a backbone for later discussions of changing audience roles and the critical arguments that accompany the many technologically enabled fusions of the last forty years. In isolated moments, details of historical chronology emerge within the course as keys to understanding the development of specific stylistic and aesthetic movements. By decentering chronology in the organization of the course, we are able to foreground the multiplicity of perspectives contributing to the ongoing development of jazz styles.

In exploring the music's history as an ongoing series of negotiations and compromises, I organize the course as a concentric exploration of the overlapping work of several groups of stakeholders in the jazz community, as outlined above. The course begins with an extended consideration of the core interactive

25. Scott DeVeaux and Gary Giddens, *Jazz* (New York: Norton, 2009).

practice that animates the community before expanding outward to address the work of composers, recordists, audiences, and critics. The course participants engage with the collaborations and tensions between these groups, focusing on the negotiations and hierarchies that regulate jazz performance and the biases that inevitably inform narratives about the music's history. The process-focused concentric model is flexible enough to allow for much variety in the distribution of specific examples across the course's five units. Any artist, ensemble, recording, or performance network could conceivably be addressed from the perspective of any of the five subject positions defined by the model; I offer these case studies as a series of examples that resonate most strongly with my goals for the course.

Throughout the first unit, we focus on the direct, moment-to-moment interaction of improvisers as they attempt to create musically satisfying performances. This unit focuses on the musical and social processes through which musicians develop individual voices and negotiate with one another as participants in ensembles. We explore different approaches to melodic phrasing demonstrated by vocalists as diverse as Bessie Smith, Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, and Sarah Vaughan. We address the range of rhythm section approaches codified by Louis Armstrong's Hot Five, the Count Basie Orchestra, and the Cecil Taylor Unit.

The centerpiece of our discussion of interaction is our collective analysis of John Coltrane's 1964 recording *A Love Supreme*. We begin with Coltrane's own words, as recalled by Cecilia Foster:

John used to tell me how to listen to the music, so that I could get the most out of it. He would say things to me like, "You listen to a song, five times, Cecilia. Listen to it instrument by instrument. Play that song and listen to the bass all the way through. Listen to it again, and listen to the saxophone. Don't just listen to it once and then attempt to give it a critique."²⁶

As our listening continues, we engage with the specific interactive relationships between the members of the quartet—Coltrane's blustery give-and-take with drummer Elvin Jones, the spare formal guideposts provided by pianist McCoy Tyner, and bassist Jimmy Garrison's understated punctuations and interjections. Through careful listening and conversation, we attempt to uncover the sound of the Coltrane Quartet as the product of the ensemble's dynamic yet deliberate process. This unit also provides an important opportunity for the class participants to discuss other strategies for critical listening and to begin developing a shared vocabulary for describing the sonic details of musical recordings.

26. Quoted in Ashley Kahn, *A Love Supreme: The Story of John Coltrane's Signature Album* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 83.

Of course, we do not shy away from addressing the essential influence of older musicians on Coltrane's work; nor do we avoid discussions of Coltrane's unique compositional approach or the freedom enabled by Impulse! Records. Careful consideration of these forces helps us to understand *A Love Supreme* in its nuance and detail. However, our narrow consideration of the album provides rich insight into the interactive process at the core of jazz practice, and in this insight it is my hope that the concentric model enables a subtle but essential shift in the way my students conceptualize jazz history. Rather than considering the objects of jazz (prized recordings, performances, lineages, and biographies) as the endpoint of our inquiry, we might use those objects as keys that unlock the musical practices animating the culture and defining its many histories.

We then begin to move outward in a consideration of the nested rings of the concentric model. After establishing the course's core goal as a sustained exploration of improvisational process, we next address the range of cultural actors who inevitably influence performers' improvisational choices. The course's second unit focuses on the role of composers and bandleaders in shaping the sound of ensembles and on the substantial challenges associated with composing within an improvisational tradition. We ask questions about the strategies that composers utilize in amplifying the voices of individual performers while crafting durable musical identities of their own. Here, we take a sustained look at Miles Davis's turn toward modal improvisation and Duke Ellington's expansive orchestrations, as well as considering the ways in which the contrafact compositions of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie affected the contours of the bebop language.

One of the unit's most sustained discussions revolves around the notion of jazz standards. Our exploration of standards follows the work of Robert Faulkner and Howard Becker, defining this repertoire as a fluid category that emerges at the nexus of a body of songs, a specific group of performers, and a particular performance situation.²⁷ Through our consideration of standards, we ask questions about the limits of the term—recent semesters have included presentations on Brad Mehldau's recordings of the works of Radiohead and Dave Douglas's recent recordings of traditional American hymns—and its regulative power as a compositional category. Mehldau's work allows us to question the processes through which new compositions might gain status as standards, to which students consistently respond with anecdotes from their own experiences of new tunes that have become commonly known within their local performance networks. Douglas's recordings provide an opportunity to consider how standards are understood differently by different communities, yet always serve as a foundation for participation in a music-making ritual. By continually interrogating the unique structure of the standard as realized

27. Robert R. Faulkner and Howard S. Becker, *"Do You Know . . . ?": The Jazz Repertoire in Action* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

in performance—In successfully performing a standard, must a performer maintain the composition’s melody? Its form? Its phrasing?—we come to define the standard as an interlocking set of possibilities that must be animated by a knowledgeable performer. The substance of the standard is not an objective body of musical materials but a subjective set of practices employed in performance according to a set of shared expectations. In this conclusion, we return our focus to the shared processes and practices at the music’s core.

In our third unit, we consider the role of recordists and record industry personnel within the jazz community, focusing our attention on the many ways in which technological changes lead directly to changes in musical and social practice. We address the expansion of recording technology from acoustical recording and 78 RPM playback to analog and digital electrical recording and the new possibilities afforded by more recent playback formats such as LP and MP3 and new instruments such as electric guitar, synthesizer, and the personal computer. We explore label identity through a discussion of the work of Manfred Eicher at ECM Records. We begin to unravel the aesthetic and economic tensions between musicians, recordists, and critics as we explore the range of responses to the emergence of jazz–rock fusion in the early 1970s.

At the midpoint of this unit, the class engages in a focused exploration of Blue Note Records, specifically addressing the work of producer Rudy Van Gelder and Blue Note founder Alfred Lion in their shared development of the label’s signature recorded sound. Through a series of readings—oral histories, interviews, and analyses—and critical listening exercises, we uncover the relationships between musicians, recordists, and record label representatives at the heart of the Blue Note identity. We discuss the close musical relationship between Van Gelder and Lion as they worked together to craft the signature elements of the Blue Note sound—including warm and present ride cymbals, dry and detailed horns, clean and resonant bass, and a wide and deep stereo image. We interrogate Lion’s strict policy requiring musicians to rehearse before entering the studio, demonstrating the impact of this policy on musicians’ ability to explore the new compositional and improvisational avenues that define the label’s catalog throughout the 1960s. Through this inquiry, we reveal a range of choices, preferences, and ideologies supporting a broadly distributed process that enabled the production of one of the most distinct recorded catalogs in jazz.²⁸

The course’s fourth unit moves concentrically outward beyond the work of the members of the jazz scene responsible for producing and capturing sounds to consider the work of audiences. Despite the fact that they are not audibly present on most recordings, audiences maintain an intimate connection to the improvisational process. The needs of listeners profoundly affect the work of

28. For a detailed exploration of these relationships, see Nathan C. Bakkum, “Point of Departure: Recording and the Jazz Event,” *Jazz Perspectives* 8, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 73–91.

musicians, and we explore those interconnections here. We consider the political implications of a government-sanctioned outreach program such as that offered through Jazz at Lincoln Center. We discuss the aesthetic ideology undergirding the uncompromising and antagonistic approach of an artist such as Keith Jarrett. The unit also addresses the opportunities for intercultural conversation and compromise in music and dance enabled by the swing bands and Latin Jazz ensembles of the 1930s and 1940s. These choices enable a sustained discussion of the myths of artistic autonomy that have been imported from Eurocentric narratives and a consideration of musicians' position as participants in a creative practice that must be responsive to the changing needs of audiences.

In the course's fifth and final unit, we return to many of the questions outlined at the start of the semester. This unit progresses as a sustained interrogation of the roles of critics in shaping dominant narratives and public discourse both inside the jazz community and in musical culture at large. We define the critic's role quite broadly, extending our scope to include traditional journalistic media, blogs and Twitter, and the broader cultural criticism undertaken by writers such as Amiri Baraka.

The core questions addressed within this unit all focus on categorization and cataloging—the staples of jazz scholarship and criticism since the time of the earliest discographers. Specific sessions coalesce around questions about the relationship between jazz and hip-hop, definitions of the avant-garde, and the intimate connection between black expressive culture and the church. In the course's very final session, we undertake a critical evaluation of the 2001 documentary *Jazz* by Ken Burns. Using the critical insight gained throughout our semester of study, the class collectively interrogates the goals and biases of the film. By exploring a range of critical voices and controversies within the critical community, we begin to see the critic's role within the musical and social negotiations that have regulated the development of jazz style and practice throughout the tradition's history.

All the Things You Are: Conclusions

While this concentric approach has been conceived as a response to particular developments in jazz scholarship, a similar model could certainly provide a productive pathway for pedagogy in other areas of music history. An American Popular Music course might place at its core the types of collaborations required in the production of commercial recordings. Outer concentric rings might explore musical and cultural change from the perspectives of playback technologies, approaches to marketing and distribution, and audience engagement. A concentric approach to the Western classical tradition might begin from the perspective of performers before moving outward to consider the changing

roles of composers, theorists, and concertgoers. In each case, such an approach would allow for the voicing of a wide range of subject positions while drawing strong connections between historical actors and contemporary practices.

In the case of the jazz course addressed here, the concentric model responds to Monson's and DeVeaux's calls for "a broader view of jazz improvisation and its emotional and cultural power" that is "responsive to issues of historical particularity."²⁹ By emphasizing improvisational interaction as the core work of the jazz community, we replace the traditional focus on the objects produced by the community with an understanding of jazz as a living musical practice. Our comparative work allows us to explore this musical practice as dynamic, ever-changing, localized, and dependent on the agency of individuals. By exploring musicians' work thematically, we decenter teleological narratives—and their Eurocentric foundations—and embrace eclecticism and play as prime generators of stylistic change. The concentric model assures that the stories we tell about the music are narrated by a multiplicity of voices and from a wide range of perspectives. In this multiplicity, we are able to interrogate the assumptions and biases underpinning traditional jazz narratives.

Importantly, the concentric model's focus on process encourages a fluid and flexible approach to style that allows a broad range of sounds to be connected under the umbrella of "jazz." For young musicians, this is a powerful outcome of the course: jazz is not a relic, and jazz performance is not a mode of historical performance practice. My intent in this course design has been to guide students toward an embodied understanding of the ongoing development of jazz practice and to empower them to engage with that process in the development of their own personal stylistic approaches.

While the music has been carried around the globe and embraced by musicians and audiences from diverse backgrounds, jazz remains a black tradition regardless of the ethnicity of the performers and listeners. As a tradition with deep roots in black American expressive practice, the music carries a very specific sort of process at its core. Olly Wilson writes:

The essence of the black musical tradition consists of shared conceptual approaches to music making, and hence is not basically quantitative but qualitative. Therefore, the particular forms of black music which evolved in America are specific realizations of this shared conceptual framework which reflect the peculiarities of the American black experience. As such, the essence of their Africanness is not a static body of something which can be depleted but rather a conceptual approach, the manifestations of which are infinite. The common core of this Africanness consists of a way of doing something, not simply something that is done.³⁰

29. Monson, *Saying Something*, 1; DeVeaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition," 553.

30. Olly Wilson, "The Significance of the Relationship Between Afro-American Music and West African Music," *The Black Perspective in Music* 2, no. 1 (1974): 20.

I strive to demonstrate to my students that not only are the sonic manifestations of this process-focused musical culture infinite, but that the conceptual approach itself has been and continues to be subjected to countless challenges and negotiations, resulting in a temporally and spatially localized series of interactive logics. The details of a particular community's processes are established and negotiated through daily traffic within and around the performance network and its concentric frames. This traffic is localized in both time and place, influenced by the strengths, intentions, and histories of individual musicians and the communities that sustain them.