Groovin' High and Low: exploring the jazz vernacular

Haftor Medbøe 2012
h.medboe@napier.ac.uk

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ABSTRACT

Debate over origin and authenticity aside, the musical language of jazz is today spoken and understood amongst a diversity of communities the world over. Standard repertoire, evolved formal structures, and aesthetic tenets provide a lingua franca supported by discourses on historical narrative, 'state of the nation', and the future of jazz amongst the genre's interconnected scenes.

It is widely accepted that jazz was initially forged in the multi-cultural crucible of its birthplace – in a fusion of the inter-continental musical practices and disciplines of its originators. Where there is nothing to suggest that jazz was consciously constructed as a musical 'auxiliary language', inclusive of cultural difference and universal in message, there are nonetheless parallels with developments in linguistics of that time.

The germination period of jazz coincides with the first World Congress of Esperanto in 1905 and follows just a short time after the 1889 Paris convention of Volapük. Zamenhof (Esperanto) and Schleyer (Volapük) individually constructed their universal oral and textual languages from assorted European linguistic stems. In contrast, jazz can be observed to have emerged and developed as a democratically defined cultural medium, although equally a sum of diverse constituents.

It is a tragic irony that aspirations for cultural tolerance and cross-border understanding as embodied by Volapük and Esperanto so narrowly preceded the two great wars of the 20th Century – and unsurprising that, by virtue of its wartime associations with both imperialism and liberation, interpretations of the cultural functions of jazz have become increasingly complex. Where Esperanto and Volapük fell by the wayside in the wake of the rise of National Socialism, jazz music rode the wave of the globalised marketplace to become a truly world music.

This performance-based presentation will investigate the application of language based speech pattern to rhythmic phrasing and melodic shaping in musical improvisation. By contrasting spoken phrases in a variety of

languages and dialects, a basis for rhythmic and tonal improvisation will be arrived at that demonstrates the significance of the musician's 'native tongue(s)' in musical gesture.

Taking referential starting-points from Steve Reich's use of sampled speech and the spoken word manipulations of pianist Henry Hey, this paper will be presented through the use of pre-recorded speech and live electronic looping of guitar.

As a young boy growing up in Denmark, my grandmother frequently stopped me in mid flow to inform me that I was “speaking Volapük” – many years later I discovered that this wonderful sounding word was not simply another term for “nonsense”, but was in fact the name of an Esperanto-like “world-speak”. Vola – world, Pük – speak.

Intersections between the nonsensical and the constructed have been an abiding feature in my long relationship to jazz!

My first impressions of the unintelligibly haphazard bebop ramblings of Charlie Parker later matured into an appreciation of their inherent structure and meaning - and that appreciation came to form a guiding reference for my own musical expression.

More importantly perhaps, the notion of jazz as a musical “world-speak” has been an equally strong theme in that relationship.

I both learned to verbally communicate *and* discovered jazz music at my grandparents’ house on the Danish island of Als …

… and, one might observe, that it’s these two defining experiences that enable me to stand in front of you today and talk about jazz.

My first spoken language wasn’t English, but Sønderjysk – an ostensibly rural dialect of High Danish … and very much a language connected to the ever-shifting border between Denmark and Germany.

My introduction to jazz was entirely accidental. During my early teens, I discovered jazz by playing the records left behind in my grandparents’ home by my mother and her sisters. Through the speakers of an old Dansette, I heard a diverse hodgepodge of artists from Sidney Bechet to Louis Armstrong, Max Roach to Clifford Brown, Eartha Kit to Billy Holiday.

Although I had no idea of what it really was that I was listening to, its historical context or any attached cultural meaning, the music spoke to me. It was immediate and it was captivating.

Back for a moment to Volapük – and not only because the word rolls so nicely off the tongue.

I've recently become interested in examining various similarities and discrepancies between some of the more significant auxiliary languages (or auxlangs as our linguist friends refer to them) and jazz music:

In common with Esperanto (c.1880), Volapuk (c1880) and Ido (1907) jazz has diverse 'linguistic', or rather 'ethno-stylistic' roots and is similarly a hybrid cultural construct.

Auxiliary languages and jazz music were incubated within a mere half-century of one another as responses to, or perhaps products of, a brave new industrialised world.

Where the common-tongue aspirations of mutual understanding embodied by auxlangs were put under severe pressure during the two great wars, jazz swept the globe on the coat tails of the emerging US world power.

Both jazz and auxlangs were perceived as threats to totalitarian rule. While speakers of Esperanto were persecuted, jazz (we know) was pejoratively dismissed as 'Negermusik" by the Nazis.

Ultimately, we can argue that the 'uptake' of jazz has come to eclipse that of any constructed auxlang – although history may yet come to surprise us.

So, why this interest in comparing spoken and musical language?

In common with our experience of Europe's jazz history, many European jazz musicians begin their apprenticeship by emulating iconic American players.

Trumpeters look to Miles, Dizzy and Clifford,

Sax players to Parker, Coltrane and Brecker

Pianists to Bud Powell, Bill Evans and Herbie Hancock

Vocalists to Ella, Sara and Billie and so forth …

The commonly cited "secret to success" as a jazz musician is that you should first absorb and assimilate the solos of your favourite players and then, somewhere down the line, these will coalesce in becoming your individualised, yet historically and stylistically informed, creative voice.

I was recently made aware of comparable 'rites of passage' that take place in folk music – f.x. Martin Carthy's adoption of various regional accents in his singing - until in later career settling for his own.

As an educator, this emulation "recipe" can leave a potentially sour taste. It's of course lazy in its over-simplification to criticize the efforts of often-cited American music schools by accusing them of creating jazz "clones" through their educational programmes – but it is at the same time interesting to observe the activities and output of more individual-centred programmes offered by some European academies where difference, we're told, is amplified rather than perhaps being seen as subservient to tradition.

The "paying of dues" (in jazz parlance) risks leading to an inverted pyramid of individuality – by which I mean … that if each player is a product of his or her predecessors (and they in turn of theirs), surely the "message" becomes increasingly watered down until the individual voice is a one-part-in-a-million component in the virtual soup. Or in other words, can we ever witness a modern-equivalent of the pioneering singularity of a Louis Armstrong, a Billie Holiday or a Charlie Parker?

These and other questions of 'authenticity' often haunt the jazz musician throughout his or her career. Finding a balance between the weight of respect for the music's history (loaded as the history of jazz is), history's chosen idols, the development of a jazz pedagogy and the need to fit into the music's

commercial machineries can squeeze out the individual voice of all but the most robust and headstrong musician.

As a result, many musicians that I've talked to (and I might include myself here) undergo what might be termed the "mid-life or mid-career jazz crisis".

Suddenly the musician is faced with more questions than answers when grappling with the essences of jazz.

What am I saying?

Who am I saying it to?

What language are we all speaking?

What languages do we all understand?

Are we adopting a vernacular/dialect?

Are we putting on an accent?

Is the 'blues' a universal condition?

What can I bring to black American culture – does anybody really care?

What connection do I honestly have to 1940s show tunes?

A common question at the earlier stage of the jazz musician's journey is: "I'm playing all the right jazz scales over all the right jazz chords – how come it doesn't sound like real jazz?"

The answer most usually given is that the student should emulate the phrasing and time feel of established or 'hall-of-fame players or, in other words, press themselves into a tried and tested mould.

Later, the question becomes: "Ok – I've been making it all sound like jazz now for a good long time. How do I make it sound like ME?"

The answer to this is much more complex.

I remember someone explaining to me why they loved BB King's playing so much: "It's like he's talking to you through his guitar – and with just 5 notes, he's still telling one hell of a story" – and being awe struck by George Benson's seemingly effortless connection between his singing voice and that of his guitar.

And here, and you might say finally, I get to my point.

Creative identity amongst jazz musicians can of course be measured in many ways. Differences in timbral quality, a harmonic, a melodic or a rhythmic approach separate one player from another. The tired observation that "hearing just a single note is enough to identify Miles", is tired because it was as true when he was still alive, as it is today.

Sometimes the difference is significant, but often far subtler. I always enjoy reading the "Invisible Juke Box" in the Wire Magazine where a musician is asked to identify by sound only what is being played. Correct answers are by no means guaranteed.

Yet when we hear the speaking voice of someone that is known to us, it's much easier to discern his or her identity. Without the artifice or the intervention of a musical instrument, individual character is far easier to identify.

The correlation between speech and music is of course not an original idea.

Some practical applications of speech/music correlation:

Charlie Mingus Jazz Workshop – the clown

Gavin Bryars – A man in a room gambling (narration with string quartet)

Henry Hey – Palin McCain (musical arrangement of speech)

In my role as a teacher I often employ written text as a starting point for improvisational phrasing. A sea of materials is available on the melodic and harmonic mechanics of improvisation, but far fewer teaching/learning aids concern themselves with connecting these tonal aspects with the rhythmic.

The exercise entails the student selecting a phrase – randomly generated, or from a given text. The student is then asked to speak the phrase, in their natural speaking voice.

A metronome is then introduced, and the student asked to place the phrase within the temporal framework. This often results in each of the phrase's syllables being given equal duration and a robotic performance outcome.

Which encourages discussion on what 'feels natural' in the performance of a rhythmic phrase and, conversely, what feels abstracted or (at worst) ungainly.

Narrative techniques of suspense, anticipation, false-ending, increased/decreased tension and so forth naturally come into focus.

We work with increasing lengths and numbers in text-derived phrases before introducing pitch to the equation.

Here we examine the 'natural' melodic curve of a spoken phrase. Of course this works better in some languages than others. Few would argue, for example, that there is more melodic variation in Norwegian as opposed to Danish! They say that Norwegian language follows the peaks and troughs of its mountainous countryside, … where Danish language reflects an altogether flatter topography.

This melodic curve is then amplified in our attempts at finding a melody that feels as natural as the placement of the rhythmic phrase within a temporal framework.

Although in relative infancy, this speech-to-playing approach has reaped measurable benefits in student performances. Where in the past, my students often expressed difficulties in formulating coherent improvisational strategies (whether in the spotlight as soloist – or in the shadows as ensemble member)

they are now more likely to have (to paraphrase Ingrid Monson) “something to say”.

That in the act of “sayin’ something” (Monson 1996) they are speaking from a highly individualized point of reference, can (in my mind at least) only be a positive in in engaging with a globalized music form.

I’ve recently been fooling about with a variety of these approaches by revisiting my mother-tongue of Sønderjysk. I should point out that I’m always a big hit with the pensioners back home in Denmark, because, in abstentia, my version of the language hasn’t been corrupted by progress – rather it’s caught in a time-warp. By the same token, I’m told that I speak High Danish like a cross between the Queen and a newsreader.

The track that I’ll put on now is an example of Sønderjysk as recorded by the dialect’s preservation society. As with regional dialects the world over, linguistic dilution threatens its survival and its protection falls often to the elders of the community.

This is a track that I’ve been drawing inspiration from during my own practice sessions. With varying degrees of success, I attempt to follow melodic contour, rhythmic pattern, gesture and space in improvising a corresponding melody.

A fairly stark contrast to the years spent playing over the recordings of the ‘lions of jazz’ or to Aebersold’s identikit trios.

As I have my guitar with me for a long overdue reunion gig with Allan later on today, I’ll try to give you a rough demonstration of what I’m banging on about.

I guess in summing up, I’ve tried to paint a picture of what I believe is a career-long struggle for many non-American jazz musicians: that of being heard over the roar of jazz history and heritage, and in doing so, attempted to offer some modest points of departure in addressing such problems.