

THE CHALLENGE FROM THE PAST

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Never before have so many students shown such an intense interest in learning how to play genres of four to five generations past. As a result, an unusual situation is challenging the survival of jazz education, the oral tradition (the master-student relationship,) and the apprenticeship system. This interest in earlier styles has created a break in the natural continuity of the music from one generation to the next because most of the heroes of earlier generations are not with us anymore.

THE ORAL TRADITION

The oral tradition is the most successful and reliable educational format for communicating unwritten knowledge to successive generations. Jazz studies fall into two categories: 1. factual knowledge (information that can be written) and, 2. experiential knowledge (information that cannot be written.) Of the two, experiential knowledge is the most difficult to learn as it takes time, trial and error and experience. This category of information was customarily handed down from one generation to the next in a continuous fashion by way of the oral tradition and the apprenticeship system. It cannot be and has never been codified and is at risk of becoming extinct.

Oral information is usually imparted in the form of the "colloquial axiom." An axiom, revealed by a master, contains a tremendous amount of musical knowledge that at first may not be readily apparent. "You've got to tell a story when you play, the faster you play, the slower you count, use space in your solo's," etc., are some of the axioms that abound in the history of jazz. Some axioms enlighten the student immediately, others may take years of trial and error and experimentation to understand. The essence of the master-student relationship can be found in a "hands on" approach to teaching and learning that includes adopting a masters attitudes towards learning, performance, music, life and instrument. It is an oft heard truism that "attitude is everything."

THE APPRENTICESHIP SYSTEM

The apprenticeship system is based on teaching by example. The most significant elements of a jazz performance are experiential in nature and internal to the performer. These elements are hidden from the listener. They cannot be learned by just listening to records. The control of energy and emotion, the uses of dramatic devices, listening to the total sound of the band and learning how to be an ensemble player, are but a few examples of the kind of knowledge that can be gained only by apprenticing with the masters. Traditionally, jazz musicians modeled themselves after their heroes from their preceding generation. Bird was influenced by Prez and Coleman Hawkins, Dizzy by Roy Eldridge, Nat Cole by Earl Hines, etc. Bird, Diz and their peers listened to and apprenticed with their heroes. These heroes, in turn, had learned from their idols by the same process, forming an unbroken chain in the flow of information from one generation to the next.

Unlike the past, today's students don't have opportunities to apprentice with their models. Their only access to the music is through it's recorded history and music schools. For reasons other than historical documentation, the practicality of the recorded history of jazz as a learning tool should be examined and put in perspective.

LEVELS OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

There are three distinct levels of personal experience involved with learning the music:

1. listening to recordings,
2. listening to the music live and
3. performing the music. Each level embodies a different way of experiencing the music and increases in it's intensity of physical and emotional involvement and the degree that it reflects reality.

RECORDED MUSIC

Recorded music is only a partial "description" of the music and falls far short of being a real experience. The impact of the records emotional and rhythmic content pales in comparison with hearing the music live. With earphones on and the volume up as loud as you could stand it, it still wouldn't approximate the experience of hearing it live. Play-along records suffer from the same deficiency. The experience is not interactive. The listener experiences the music in a passive state. You are hearing from "outside" the experience "into" it.

My musical education followed the same path as my peer's and predecessors. It began with listening to records day and night, playing along with them, trying to copy their sounds. It was in this beginning stage that I selected my first models and my initial musical tastes were formed.

LIVE MUSIC

The next stage of my development started when I began to hear, in person, the models I was listening to on record. I was dismayed to realize that the recordings had faithfully embodied the notes of the music but the music's emotional content was totally misrepresented. It was "swinging" much harder than I had imagined. Sound is more easily recorded on tape than emotion is. I had to radically readjust my approach to rhythmic articulation and energy output.

Listening to these models live provided an even greater degree of intensity of experience. The emotional content of the music was not filtered out as on a record. Although still in a passive state, I was more involved in the performer's music. The experience was more interactive because of the emotional bonds that were established between the performer and listener. It was more real but still not the "real" thing. Again, I was hearing from "outside" the experience "into" it.

I then grew enough as a musician to be able to work locally in "house rhythm sections," backing up many of the master musicians I had been hearing on record and in person. This led to another rude awakening. These guys were playing the beat much "broader" and intense than I'd thought. The quality and strength of their ability to play time and articulate their ideas was astounding. I had to go back in "the shed" again and reappraise my concept of rhythmic articulation. No amount of practicing seemed to be effective in this regard. I could not simulate the playing experience at home. The only way I was able to improve in this aspect was through continued performance.

PLAYING THE MUSIC

The next stage of my education started when I began to get hired as a sideman, touring in the bands of the jazz masters. This was when I learned that it's not important what you are playing, but how you play what you're playing. What was most illuminating of all was the importance of what you don't play! Think about this for a moment. It is impossible, by listening to a recording or a live performance, to tell what is not being played by a performer! It was in this aspect of the learning experience that the apprenticeship system and the oral tradition was its most effective. Experience was not the best teacher, it was the only one!

Playing the music is the "real" thing. When performing, you are directly involved in the music, feeling it physically, mentally and emotionally. Not only is your own personal intensity involved but others as well. It is an active state. You are now hearing the music from "inside" the experience "outward." There are all kinds of sensations associated with it. It is direct experience.

This experience also varies in its degree of intensity depending on who you are apprenticing with. For example; in 1972 I had the good fortune to be hired as the pianist with the Cannonball Adderley Quintet. Nothing had prepared me for the experience of playing with this band. Walter Booker and Roy McCurdy were the bassist and drummer, the most intense rhythm section I had ever played with to date. They had the "biggest" beat I'd ever experienced. Cannonball and Nat also had the same big, fat, beat. For a year I felt like a feather in a windstorm until I built my "beat" up in strength to match the band's rhythmic articulation and energy output. I could have only done this with them! Obviously the problems facing a young student today are daunting. The opportunities to apprentice with the masters of the art are decreasing yearly. The challenge we all face is nothing less than the rehabilitation of the oral tradition, the apprenticeship system and the master-student relationship. The reality is that some artistic knowledge will be lost from generation to generation. Eventually the music will change because time changes all things. The classical community has recognized this reality in its attempt to go back to the original tunings of earlier times, even to the point of

reconstructing the older instruments. Unfortunately for the classical community, their heroes have been dead for a hundred years or more. A similar reaction is being symbolized by the jazz community's inclination to revert back to acoustic instruments and less amplification. Fortunately, for the jazz community, many of the jazz tradition's inheritors are still alive.

Finally, one might be prompted to wonder how important is it to the present and the future of jazz to delve into it's past? Can the music survive without a thorough examination of what musical history has to offer? Some may not agree that it is necessary, but I do know this; whenever I've had trouble solving a particular musical problem, the answer was always waiting for me to discover, hidden away somewhere in the past.

It is, in the end, a losing battle. The best we can do is to fight the good fight and accept the challenge to preserve as much as we can of the rich legacy and tradition of jazz and cherish the music and musicians that have preceded us as a gift from our heroes of the past.

For an analysis of the roots of this crises, [view the article on Jazz In Academia and the Rants and Raves page.](#)