Dizzy à la Mimi: Jazz, Text, and Translation

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When jazz circulates across cultural, national, and geographic boundaries, interesting things often happen. From its beginnings as an American Afro-diasporic art form, the music has grown to encompass a vast worldwide array of subidioms, and while some of its original sociopolitical functions and stylistic elements endure in new contexts, others are decidedly altered or reinterpreted.1 Inevitably, a great deal is lost—and much is gained—in translation. Indeed, the metaphor of translation, along with various concepts and methodological strategies drawn from the field of translation studies, has lately offered a small number of jazz scholars, such as historian Celeste Day Moore and musicologist Brigid Cohen, enlightening ways of understanding the music’s international diffusion and transformation.2 This recent research exemplifies a broader interdisciplinary convergence of musicology, literary criticism, and translation studies.3 Yet much more remains to be said about jazz’s globalization from a translational perspective. In this regard, it is hard to imagine a more inviting place to begin than

For their advice and support, I thank Luciane Beduschi, Wolfram Knauer, Ellie Martin, Celeste Day Moore, and Isabelle Perrin.


the collaborative relationship between the French singer, lyricist, and translator Mimi Perrin (1926–2010) and the African American jazz trumpeter and composer Dizzy Gillespie (1917–93). These two creative artists crossed paths in two different fields: they recorded a jazz album together in the early 1960s and Perrin translated Gillespie’s memoir into French almost twenty years later. Their partnership therefore not only raises translational questions of language, meaning, and cultural exchange within each field independently, but also involves direct intersections between music and literature.

Needless to say, Gillespie, a seminal influence on bebop and Latin jazz, is by far the better known of the pair. The trumpeter’s musical worldview tended to be broadly internationalist, with an especially robust strain of pan-Africanism evinced by his lifelong involvement with Afro-Cuban music and musicians. Still, several of his important career landmarks took place in France. On his first tour abroad, at the age of nineteen in 1937, he spent six weeks in Paris with Teddy Hill’s Orchestra, and over the years he returned to the city many times, including a 1989 visit for a duo concert with drummer Max Roach, released on a commercial album that was an artistic high point of his late career. His most consequential appearances in the French capital were undoubtedly three big band concerts that he gave at the Salle Pleyel in 1948, today regarded as pivotal events marking modern jazz’s arrival in Western Europe.

However, Mimi Perrin’s legacy, rather than Gillespie’s, is at the heart of the present study. A graduate of the Sorbonne with a degree in English literature, Perrin first emerged on Paris’s jazz scene during the 1950s as both a pianist and a singer. In 1959, she experienced an epiphany upon hearing Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross’s Sing a Song of Basie, an album whose overdubbed, lyricized vocal recreations of Count

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5 Gillespie and Fraser, To Be, or Not... To Bop, 73–77; Shipton, Groovin’ High, 38–41, 359–60; Max Roach and Dizzy Gillespie, Paris 1989 (A & M 396 404-2), rec. 23 March 1989.

6 Gillespie and Fraser, To Be, or Not... To Bop, 326–36; Mike Hennessey, Klook: The Story of Kenny Clarke (London: Quartet Books, 1990), 69–73; Shipton, Groovin’ High, 202–7.

Basie’s big-band charts typified the art of vocalese. Setting out to emulate the American group, she organized an ensemble of six singers, Les Double Six, for whom she composed a repertoire of original French vocalese texts based on American jazz recordings. Their first album was devoted to music by the American Quincy Jones, then based in France, who attended some of their initial rehearsals. Les Double Six toured internationally for seven years and recorded three more albums—all with multiple vocal overdubs—including *Dizzy Gillespie and the Double Six of Paris*, featuring the trumpeter himself. But in 1966 Perrin fell ill and was compelled to disband the group and abandon her professional musical career (although she remained involved with music as a teacher, occasional writer, and collaborator on sporadic creative projects). She thereafter pursued a new vocation as a literary translator. Over the next forty years, she produced French editions of several dozen English-language books, including many science fiction and spy novels as well as several memoirs and biographies of jazz musicians.

Translation was a constant, core aesthetic principle for Perrin, not merely in her literary occupation, but even in her musical work, where it functioned as a conceptual heuristic, as idiosyncratic as it was productive. Her translational philosophy was at all times highly creative: whether dealing with Anglophone literature or inventing vocalese lyrics, she keenly explored the imaginative

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8 Dave Lambert, John Hendricks, and Annie Ross, *Sing a Song of Basie* (ABC-Paramount ABC 223), rec. August–November 1957. The term “vocalese” was invented by the critic Leonard Feather in 1953 to describe the practice of “taking a jazz solo already established through an improvisation on records ... and recreating this solo, adding lyrics to it” (“Feather’s Nest,” *Down Beat*, 28 January 1953, 17). On the origins of vocalese, see Lee Ellen Martin, “Validating the Voice in the Music of Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross,” Ph.D. Diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2016, 24–57.  


possibilities that arose from sweeping art works into a new cultural orbit defined by
the use of the French language. Her decisions about which elements of Gillespie’s
musical compositions, and of his memoir’s text, to transmit as faithfully as possible,
which to transform, and which to eliminate, naturally reflect her own individual
convictions and dispositions. They also speak to larger issues of how texts and
music may be variously understood and transformed by different linguistic
communities, thus raising questions about which aspects of expressive culture are—or,
at least, can potentially be made—accessible to socially remote audiences, and
which elements unavoidably remain elusive.14 Perrin’s goals and strategies in
translating Gillespie’s memoir and in lyricizing his compositions can, in both
instances, only be fully comprehended by first taking stock of her habitual working
methods in general and then considering, in that light, how she dealt with the
trumpeter’s works in particular. Her oeuvre as a whole, encompassing both jazz and
literature, presents many original, creative solutions to complex, intertwined,
crosscultural problems of sound, music, and meaning. It has much to teach us.

Mimi Perrin as Literary Translator: Text, Dialect, and
Improvisation

Perrin’s musical sensibility shaped her work as a literary translator. Three years
before completing her translation of Gillespie’s memoir, she described to an
interviewer how she had recently set about transforming an English poem into
French, comparing her process to the way she wrote jazz lyrics. “Just like with the
Double Six, I tried to find an equivalence of sound, of sonorities,” she explained. “I
felt the balance, the rhythm, the equilibrium of the phrases. I identified the ‘key
points,’ the main consonants, emphases, and intonations that I needed to find for my
French translation—sonorities, emphases, and syllables that sounded similar to the
corresponding English text.”15 Analogies between poetry and music are, of course, a

14 A recent monograph addressing the inevitability of mistranslation in a global literary context is
Emily Apter, Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability (London: Verso, 2013). Also see
University Press, 2014), xvii–xx; and Edwards, Practice of Diaspora, 22.
15 “Ces phrases écrites, je les entendais dans ma tête, et dans ce cas, comme dans celui des
Double-Six, je cherchais à trouver une équivalence de sons, de sonorités. Dans les deux cas, il me
fallait reproduire des sonorités correspondant à d’autres sonorités, à des paroles et à des phrases. Je
me récitais inlassablement cette strophe du poème en anglais. Je sentais le balancement, le rythme,
l’équilibre des phrases. Je repérais les ‘points,’ les consonnes principales, les accentuations, les
intonations pour retrouver dans ma traduction en français, des sonorités correspondantes, des
accentuations, des syllabes sonnant semblablement et correspondant au text anglais” (Carrière and
Cullaz, “2 X 6 = Mimi,” 56).
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longstanding theme in Western aesthetics, yet Perrin’s literary musicality involved more than just a close attunement to sonority and rhythm and a desire to reproduce the sounds of consonants, emphasis, and intonation. In a 1986 essay entitled “Improviser Comme Les Jazzmen” [“Improvising Like Jazzmen”], she compared her prose translation method to jazz improvisation in the sense that she exercised considerable interpretive latitude, treating English texts as simply a point of departure, loosely analogous to a jazz musician’s chord changes.

One literary phenomenon that not only permits but indeed requires translators to use a great deal of discretion is written dialogue featuring oral dialect. Dialect, as Perrin was very much aware, poses especially thorny problems because it is both literally impossible to preserve linguistically in a new language and inherently embedded in a specific cultural context. A typical case in point is the African American sociolect commonly known as “black American English”—which pervades Gillespie’s memoir. Corpus-based studies have shown that translated texts typically observe standard grammatical rules more consistently than does literature originally written in the target language, perhaps because translators tend to be more intent than other writers on avoiding oral locutions. Thus, more often than not, any dialect occurring in an original text becomes normalized in translation.

A characteristic example from classic literature is Charles Baudelaire’s nineteenth-century edition of Edgar Allan Poe’s short story The Gold-Bug, which translates the English text’s stereotypical antebellum African American dialect into crisp, standard French. Dialogue by Poe such as “And dis all cum ob de goole-bug! de putty goole-bug!” becomes, in the hands of Baudelaire, “Et tout cela vient du scarabée d’or? Le joli scarabée d’or!” [“And all this comes from the golden beetle? The pretty golden beetle!”].

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19 Isabelle Perrin notes that indelicate attempts to preserve features of dialect in translation can risk lapsing into absurdity (L’Anglais: Comment Traduire? [Paris: Hachette Supérieur, 2000], 64).
Perrin treated black American dialect rather differently. Showing a sensitivity to the texture and tone of African American speech as well as its literal meanings, she sometimes intentionally deviated from French linguistic norms in order to imbue her translated texts with a sense of otherness. Her transformative approach is illustrated especially clearly by her translation of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, an epistolary novel written in the rural southern African American speech patterns of a bygone era. The book’s French version, *La Couleur Pourpre*, which was published in 1984, hews closely to the original’s overall trajectory and narrative content; at the same time, Perrin chose to inflect its prose dialogue with oral locutions characteristic of provincial French dialect. In her 1986 essay, she elucidated how she dealt with Walker’s text, demonstrating that, for instance, she conveyed the literary tone of the character Celie’s line “I ast him to take me instead of Nettie while our new mammy sick” with the French wording “J’ai dit au père qu’il avait qu’à me prendre au lieu de Nettie, tant que notre nouvelle maman elle est malade” (“I said to father that he just had to take me instead of Nettie while our new mom, she is sick”). According to Perrin:

My word-for-word was “je lui ai demandé de me prendre” [“I asked him to take me”], but my French Celie can’t speak this way. In English, the tone is given by “ast” and the absence of “is” at the end of the phrase. So I compensated by a heavier turn of phrase—“qu’il avait qu’à” [“that he just had to”], by Gresset’s favorite anaphora, and by “au père” [i.e. “I said to father that” rather than “I asked him”] to regionalize it.

Perrin also infused the French text with linguistic elisions and contractions—if less plentifully than did Walker in the original—that approximated the American novel’s vernacular tone: where the English-language version contains words with dropped syllables and consonants such as “cause” and “somethin,” the corresponding

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23 Perrin writes, “Here are my black Americans transplanted right in the middle of Charentes (or Poitou, why not?)!” [“Voilà mes Noirs américains transplantés en plein milieu des Charentes (ou du Poitou, pourquoi pas?)!”] (“Improviser Comme les Jazzmen,” 123).
26 The references are to the translator Michel Gresset, whom Perrin discusses earlier in her essay, and to the linguistic device of anaphora, here deployed by means of the pronoun “il” [he] referring to the preceding “père” [father].
27 “J’ai traduit ‘I ast him to take me instead of Nettie while our new mammy sick’ par ‘J’ai dit au père qu’il avait qu’à me prendre au lieu de Nettie, tant que notre nouvelle maman elle est malade.’ Mon mot à mot était ‘je lui ai demandé de me prendre,’ mais ma Celie française ne peut pas parler ainsi. En anglais, grâce au ‘ast’ et à l’absence de ‘is’ en fin de phrase, le ton est donné. Donc j’ai compensé par une tournure plus lourde ‘qu’il avait qu’à,’ par l’anaphore chère au sieur Gresset, et par ‘au père’ pour faire ‘terroir’” (Perrin, “Improviser Comme les Jazzmen,” 123).
translation uses contractions such as “p’têt” and “j’crois” (from “peut-être” [maybe] and “je crois” [I believe]). In these instances, written literary conventions yield to the aural logic of humanly performed sound.

Yet the French translation of The Color Purple still inevitably lacks the original’s full depth of African American cultural resonance. Some translation scholars have gone so far as to accuse Perrin of ethnocentrism for taking liberties with aspects of the novel that they consider intrinsic to its expressive power in confronting the brutal legacy of black Americans’ social oppression. Although such criticisms are objectively valid to the extent that, by employing French dialect, her translation culturally reorients the text, they tend to gloss over, rather than forthrightly acknowledge, literary translation’s inherent logistical complexities and philosophical tensions. The French version retains the book’s American setting, conveyed through direct references to American place names, as well as occasional descriptions of racial physiognomy and black cultural practices; it unequivocally remains a novel rooted in African American history. Yet Perrin still faced the reality that some of the original English version’s vernacularisms are simply untranslatable—they cannot be transmitted or paralleled in French, and no amount of literary creativity or ingenuity on her part could ever truly compensate for their loss. Dizzy Gillespie’s memoir presented her with the same dilemma.

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30 These include references to Macon, Georgia, and Monticello, Georgia (Walker, The Color Purple, 1–3; Walker, La Couleur Pourpre, trans. Perrin, 9–11); and descriptions of characters’ appearances, such as “Under all that powder her face black as Harpo” (Walker, The Color Purple, 44), which is translated as “Sous sa couche de poudre son visage est aussi noir qu’Harpo” (Walker, La Couleur Pourpre, trans. Perrin, 58).

31 For example, “Lord, I wants to go so bad” (Walker, The Color Purple, 25) is translated by Perrin as “Seigneur, j’ai si envie d’y aller” [“Lord, I have such a desire to go there”] (Walker, La Couleur Pourpre, trans. Perrin, 36); “How us gon do this? I ast Shug” (Walker, The Color Purple, 121) is translated as “Comment on va faire? je demande à Shug” [“How are we going to do it? I ask Shug”] (Walker, La Couleur Pourpre, trans. Perrin, 143).
To Be or Not... to Bop: Translating Jive

Gillespie’s To Be, Or Not... To Bop is one of the longest autobiographies by a major jazz musician.32 Completed in 1979 in collaboration with the trumpeter’s longtime friend, historian Al Fraser, the five-hundred–page book interweaves its primary first-person narrative with transcribed interviews quoting dozens of the trumpeter’s social intimates and professional colleagues, as well as occasional conversational dialogues between Gillespie and other musicians.33 “While it is a personal story (Dizzy’s), it is also a piece of history which has been approached scientifically,” Fraser explained at the time of the book’s publication. “What I tried to do in terms of a literary angle was to give Diz a Big Band of all his major relatives, friends, and associates, who each come in and speak a solo regarding him, while Dizzy plays the narrative.”34 As an overtly communal text, the book is somewhat redolent of the sort of “eclectic narrative form” that Robert Stepto has identified in nineteenth-century African American slave narratives;35 it also calls to mind late-twentieth-century modes of ethnography that interweave many speakers’ words without imposing a single unified interpretive perspective.36 Its finished state certainly reflects the editorial decisions of its transcriber and compiler, Fraser, not to mention its publisher’s input.37 Still, Gillespie’s own authorial presence, however heavily mediated, dominates the entire memoir. The story is his.

In a preface to the book’s French edition, Gillespie (who was not fluent in French) acknowledges the considerable challenges his multivoiced work posed to its

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32 Gillespie and Fraser, To Be, Or Not... To Bop.
33 Ibid., xviii. For more on the composition and reception of Gillespie’s memoir, see Maggin, Dizzy, 353.
translators. Recalling that he personally invited Perrin to undertake the translation on account of their long friendship and his high regard for her musicianship, the trumpeter drolly muses that “as she is equally versed in two languages, Shakespeare’s... and my own, I thought that this project would give us the pleasure of ‘being and bopping’ together, one more time.” Invoking the book’s titular play-on-words, which Perrin opted to retain untranslated, he wryly counterposes his own language against the Bard’s Elizabethan English. The distinctions among different English linguistic idioms—oral and written, “orthodox” and vernacular—indeed constitute one of the book’s chief translational challenges because its prevailing authorial narrative, with a relatively “standard” grammar and lexicon, continually alternates with the African American spoken parlance, jive vocabulary, and occasional lighthearted profanity of its quoted dialogue and interview transcripts.

These contrasting linguistic registers also roughly correlate with two different ways in which Gillespie’s book signifies as a markedly African American text: its “standard” English narrative voice mainly tends to do so denotationally via its relatively straightforward semantic content, while its quoted speech—in transcribed interviews and recounted dialogue—also conveys such meanings connotatively, through the language’s associative sociocultural implications.

Factually speaking, Perrin’s translation is extremely faithful to Gillespie’s story, mirroring the English version chapter by chapter as it traces the trumpeter’s life from his South Carolina upbringing through his globetrotting career as an internationally renowned artist. Like the original, the French text is irreducibly a memoir of the

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39 “Comme elle est également versée dans deux langues, celle de Shakespeare... et la mienne, j’ai pensé que ce travail nous donnerait le plaisir d’être et de bopper ensemble, une fois de plus” (Gillespie and Fraser, Dizzy Gillespie: To Be Or Not To Bop, trans. Perrin, 13). According to Perrin, Gillespie asked his American editor to require that Perrin be designated his book’s translator. See Carrière, “Son Amie Raconte,” 11.

40 In an early review, the writer Claude Brown deemed the trumpeter’s vernacularisms an “especially precious” element of the memoir (“In Love with the Trumpet,” The New York Times Book Review, 3 February 1980, 4).

African American experience, candidly discussing matters such as the misgivings that Gillespie’s generation of jazz musicians felt about Louis Armstrong’s “plantation image”\(^{42}\) (“bon Noir de plantations”\(^{43}\)). But on the infrequent occasions where the translation condenses or eliminates short portions of the text, the excised passages tend to contain direct American cultural references or unmistakable African American vernacular language.\(^{44}\) For instance, Perrin deletes two paragraphs where Gillespie describes the salutary influence of his wife, Lorraine, as a check on his ego.\(^{45}\) The trumpeter writes that he:

> came home one day and told Lorraine, “Hey I just came through Harlem, and, boy, those people up there really dig me. One thing about me, Lorraine, you have a husband who has that ‘common touch.’”
>
> “You’re right,” Lorraine said. “You’re one of the commonest muthafuckas I ever saw in my life.”\(^{46}\)

This omitted exchange would not have been easy to translate for French readers. Cultural references, such as the mention of Harlem, carry implications—in this case, uptown Manhattan’s largely African American population (“those people up there”)—that are essential to the text’s meaning and that American audiences are more likely than non-Americans to infer tacitly, by virtue of everyday familiarity. Equally difficult to translate are the text’s oral colloquialisms—quoted words such as “boy” and “dig”—as well as its phonetically-spelled jovial profanity (“muthafuckas”\(^{47}\)), associated with mid-century American jazz musicians’ jive argot.\(^{48}\) The entire anecdote hinges on the multivalent adjective “common,” employed as

\(^{42}\) Gillespie and Fraser, To Be, Or Not... To Bop, 295.

\(^{43}\) Gillespie and Fraser, Dizzy Gillespie: To Be Or Not To Bop, trans. Perrin, 276.

\(^{44}\) Mimi Perrin’s French publisher asked her to slightly reduce the volume’s length (Isabelle Perrin, Email communication, 17 October 2015).

\(^{45}\) Gillespie and Fraser, To Be, Or Not... To Bop, 122; Gillespie and Fraser, Dizzy Gillespie: To Be Or Not To Bop, trans. Perrin, 110.

\(^{46}\) Gillespie and Fraser, To Be, Or Not... To Bop, 122.

\(^{47}\) A comprehensive French lexicon of music-related African American vernacular speech describes “Muthafucka” (“Motherfucker”) as “one of the most ambiguous words of black American speech, which, depending on the tone and context, can be a serious insult, a term of respect or affection, or simply a neutral term designating someone” [“L’un des mots les plus ambigues du parler négro-américain qui, selon le ton et le contexte, peut être une insulte grave, un terme de respect et d’affection ou un terme neutre désignant simplement quelqu’un”] (Levet, Talkin’ That Talk, 274–75).

both a term of praise and, with a vernacularized superlative suffix (“-est”), a pejorative epithet. Perrin’s French text judiciously bypasses this passage rather than attempting to convey it through an inevitably inadequate translation.

In places, though, Perrin’s translation imparts a vernacular tone, somewhat like her edition of *La Couleur Pourpre*, by reproducing the trumpeter’s jocular, scabrous language with approximate French slang equivalents. Gillespie’s pithy summary of his music’s message, “get the fuck outta the way,” becomes “magnez-vous le cul, sortez-vous de ce merdier” [“move your ass, get out of this crap”]; Miles Davis’s exclamatory “Aw, shit” becomes “Bof” [“pshaw”]. Elsewhere, when Perrin eliminates informal reported speech from a given passage, she compensates by introducing nearby oral locutions where the original has none. Gillespie’s exclamation encapsulating African American musicians’ reaction to the World War II military draft—“Ahhh, they got me!”—receives no French equivalent, but two sentences later Perrin converts the sentence “I already had in mind what I would do if they called me” into “Moi, je n’avais pas du tout envie de me faire piéger” [“Me, I had no desire at all to let them get me”]. The latter phrase employs the self-referential grammatical construction, typical of spoken French, known as left dislocation—“Moi, je” [“Me, I”]—even though the corresponding English text lacks any analogous speech-like usage.

Still, the French translation very often pares away or moderates the original’s plentiful colloquialisms. Many quotations are rewritten in the form of reported speech, such as when Gillespie, in a transcribed dual interview with drummer Kenny “Klook” Clarke, describes the two musicians’ collaborative working methods during the 1940s:

> I’d think of something and bring it, and say, “Hey, look, Klook, look at this here, man,” and show him on the piano.

> He’d say, “Yeah, lemme try that.” And in trying it, he’d do something else, something to aid this; and by him doing that, I’ll think of ten other things to do.

In French, Perrin writes this passage as “Par exemple, si j’avais une idée, je l’exposais à Klook au piano, et lui à la batterie cherchait à l’encadrer ou à la mettre en valeur par des figures rythmiques; et ce faisant, il me suggérait dix autres idées! C’était un

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49 Gillespie and Fraser, *To Be, Or Not... To Bop*, 142.
50 Gillespie and Fraser, *Dizzy Gillespie: To Be Or Not To Bop*, trans. Perrin, 124.
51 Gillespie and Fraser, *To Be, Or Not... To Bop*, 234.
53 Gillespie and Fraser, *To Be, Or Not... To Bop*, 119.
54 Ibid.
55 Gillespie and Fraser, *Dizzy Gillespie: To Be Or Not To Bop*, trans. Perrin, 107.
57 Gillespie and Fraser, *To Be, Or Not..., To Bop*, 141.
échange très fructueux”58 “[For example, if I had an idea, I’d show it to Klook on the piano, and he would try to frame it or highlight it on the drums with rhythmic figures; and by doing this, he would suggest ten more ideas to me! It was a very fruitful exchange”]. Her translated sentences impart less of a sense of informal affability than does Gillespie’s transcribed dialogue—“Hey, look,” and “Yeah, lemme try that”—and they meanwhile explain Clarke’s musical contributions in slightly more detail than does the original. Whereas Gillespie’s anecdote evokes a conversation in which jazz musicians discuss their music with a lot of phatic sociability and implicit inference, French readers instead receive a retrospective account featuring more concretely articulated explanation. Throughout the memoir, quoted speech is especially liable to be eliminated in translation when it contains dialect or profanity.59 At one point, where Gillespie recounts Don Redman’s sardonic, jive-laden alternate lyrics to the song “Jingle Bells”60—containing lines such as “Don’t cha know that Santa Claus is hip,” and “Say, daddy, you’re gonna have a ball”—Perrin simply skips the entire passage.61

All things considered, Gillespie’s memoir in translation stays true to the English original’s biographical facts and chronological organization, but the trumpeter’s personality comes across as slightly more orthodox and conventional—more introspective and less playfully voluble—and displaying relatively few, if any, demonstratively African American speech patterns. In short, denotative meanings are largely preserved while connotative cultural associations are significantly reduced. This outcome should not, first and foremost, be attributed to Perrin’s free literary decisions; it is essentially unavoidable, given the untranslatability of vernacular sociolects with their attendant subtextual cultural meanings. Connotatively, what remains, in her French version of To Be or Not... To Bop, is a smattering of informal argot, giving it a colloquial, sociable tone, much like the verbal contractions permeating La Couleur Pourpre. It may be no coincidence that the same sorts of linguistic devices—slang words and truncated or elided syllables—also permeated, and more prominently so, Perrin’s vocalese lyrics for Les Double Six. And although the dynamics of intercultural exchange and transmission unfolded rather differently in a musical setting, there was another, more unexpected, common thread linking Perrin’s musical oeuvre to her literary career: the process of translation itself. In jazz, the principal object of her translational labor—the essential content that she sought to convey in the French language—was not semantic meaning but musical sound.

58 Gillespie and Fraser, Dizzy Gillespie: To Be Or Not To Bop, trans. Perrin, 123.
59 See, for example, “muthafucka” (Gillespie and Fraser, To Be, Or Not... To Bop, 233; c.f. Gillespie and Fraser, Dizzy Gillespie: To Be Or Not To Bop, trans. Perrin, 209); and “damn, what is this shit?” (Gillespie and Fraser, To Be, Or Not... To Bop, 101; c.f. Gillespie and Fraser, Dizzy Gillespie: To Be Or Not To Bop, trans. Perrin, 93).
60 Gillespie and Fraser, To Be, Or Not... To Bop, 175.
61 Gillespie and Fraser, Dizzy Gillespie: To Be Or Not To Bop, trans. Perrin, 154.
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Perrin’s Translational Aesthetics of Vocalese

Mimi Perrin’s chief musical innovation was that she invented texts that sought to recreate the phonology—the audible sonority and articulation—of the instrumental recordings upon which they were based. In 1978 she recalled how, when composing lyrics:

I started with what I called the “points” in a given instrumental phrase, which I carefully analyzed by listening and relistening for a long time. The “points” that I singled out corresponded, for me, to vocal sonorities—to consonants and syllables, such as the letter I or A, or to “shhh” or “fá”—depending on the instruments and players. So these “points” provided the key to basic, essential sonorities; from them I derived syllables, the syllables suggested words, I made these words into phrases, and the phrases eventually constituted a “story.” The “points” also provided the secret of the “attacks,” which varied a lot depending on the instruments and the players.62

Perrin conceived of her method of choosing words that echoed jazz instrumental sounds as a sort of translation process:

I had to transpose these different [instrumental] “attacks”—to “translate” them vocally, so to speak. To “translate” the saxophone attacks and sonorities, I had recourse to what we call, in linguistics, spirant palatals and plosives: “fff” and “bhhh”; for the brass instruments, there are the consonants that explode—“pah”—and sometimes dentals—“tah” and “dah.”63

She consistently invoked this translational metaphor, in various interviews, when describing her modus operandi.64 Naturally, replicating instrumental sonorities and articulation by means of sung texts is quite different from translating in the everyday literary sense of converting one language to another while preserving semantic

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64 See, for instance, her comments in the television documentary episode Deux Voix par Tête (Central Variétés, ORTF television broadcast, dir. Claude Fayard, 25 March 1966).
meaning. If Perrin’s creative process involved translation in any conventional, non-metaphorical sense of the term, it was as a form of “homophonic” translation—preserving sound rather than meaning—and it was not interlingual but intersemiotic, involving a shift between semiotic systems—from instrumental music to French text—rather than a change of language. Her lyrics could at times give the impression of being wordless scat vocables (perhaps especially when heard by non-Francophone listeners), an effect magnified by her tendency to pair reiterated words with melodic motivic repetitions, to intensify rhythmic accents with monosyllabic words, and to use a wide variety of syllabic elisions and argot that also imbued her texts with a sense of colloquial informality.

Perrin often allowed her imagination free rein, devising lyrics whose meaning bore little, if any, relationship to anything that the original jazz instrumentalists might conceivably have had in mind. (In this respect she markedly differed from her original American inspiration, Jon Hendricks, whose lyrics for Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross typically involved subject matter that was at least plausibly congruent with the actual jazz performers’ American cultural milieu.) Among her most inspired and technically dazzling texts is a 1960 setting of Quincy Jones’s uptempo big-band composition “Rat Race,” which the Count Basie Orchestra had first recorded just over a year earlier. While Jones’s title evokes an American colloquial metaphor—the frantic modern-day struggle for urban professional success—Perrin took the term “rat race” literally, describing a madcap chase after a scurrying rodent, renamed “La Course au Rat.” Les Double Six’s crackling recreation of the original horn chart features a tour-de-force solo by Perrin herself, showcasing her authoritative vocal virtuosity.

The Basie Orchestra’s “Rat Race” recording consists of an introductory twenty-four-bar piano solo plus a dozen blues choruses by the horns—two four-chorus full-

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67 On Hendricks’s use of song titles as a creative point of reference, see Lee Ellen Martin, “Jon Hendricks, Father of Vocalese: A Toledo Story,” M.M. thesis, University of Toledo, 2010, 11–12. According to Martin, “Hendricks would often call up composers and ask them the meaning behind their specific works” (ibid.).

Example 1. “Rat Race” (“La Course au Rat”).
Example 1. “Rat Race” (“La Course au Rat”). Continued.
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Example 1. “Rat Race” (“La Course au Rat”). Continued.

band statements framing a four-chorus interlude featuring tenor saxophone solos by Billy Mitchell and Frank Foster.59 Perrin’s lyrics for the opening ensemble section call attention to the rat—“R’gardez donc par là, c’est là qu’il est le rat” [“Say look over there, there’s where the rat is”]—and exhort a tomcat to catch it—“Parti par là-bas, dis matou, va là-bas” [“Get away down there, say tomcat, go down there”]. Her culminating full-ensemble choruses proclaim the rat’s successful evasion of its feline pursuer, with the final soli break declaring “Il est perdu le rat... Perdu!” [“It is lost, the rat... Lost!”]. But the center of attention is inevitably Perrin’s breathtaking, acrobatic rendition of the saxophone solos; one contemporary journalist calculated

59 Basic experts Loren Schoenberg and Philippe Milanta concur that the saxophone soloists are Mitchell, first, followed by Foster (email communications, 15 and 16 April 2015).
that she sings approximately 250 words in forty-two seconds.\textsuperscript{70} At a patter-song tempo of approximately quarter-note $= 285$ (nearly ten eighth-note syllables per second), she delivers an imaginary play-by-play commentary on a frenetic, careering, and ultimately fruitless pursuit (Example 1 displays her lyrics along with a musical transcription and broad-brush English translation).

Perrin’s chosen array of both consonants and vowels in “Rat Race” is quite varied—evidently her stated ideal of recreating instrumental phonology was not an inviolable principle—but the vocal solo nonetheless illustrates a number of her homophonic translational techniques, echoing saxophone sonorities and articulation. Occasional passages are dominated by Ps, Bs, or Ds at syllabic onsets, such as “pas la peine de vous donner” (mm. 1–2) and “pas besoin d’balai pour prendre le rat, non pas d’balai vaut mieux s’aider des dents?” (mm. 10–12), which ends emphatically with a triple consecutive assonance: “–der des dents” [day day dah]. Elsewhere, she highlights multiple assonances, such as the reiterated “ou” [ooh] vowel pair in “courant partout tout comme un fou, oui comme un fou” (mm. 29–30) and the extravagantly attenuated “–träi” [tray] and “–très” [treh] pairs, echoed by “vais” [vay] and “–ner” [nay], that span the top of her second chorus: “J’vais l’entrai... l’entrai... ner, très loin, très loin” (mm. 13–16). These two passages also exemplify Perrin’s propensity to yoke word reiterations to motivic duplications, a device she employs still more demonstratively moments after she begins, with “oui, j’l’aurai” four times, “ce maudit rat” twice, and then “oui je l’aurai” again (mm. 3–6).

At various points, concurrent textual and motivic reiterations also decisively accentuate scat-like syllabic effects. According to Perrin, when composing lyrics she would start out by “lis[ing] to the first phrase and ... try[ing] to affix onomatopoeias to it. For example, ‘abada’ is transformed into ‘par là-bas’”\textsuperscript{71} (“right down there”). The latter three words appear twice in succession in “Rat Race” (mm. 43–44). Other scat-like vocalizations include “T’as oublié dis” (phonetically “tah-oo-blee-ay-dee”\textsuperscript{72}) set to eighth-note triplets (m. 48); and a liberal use of B and D consonants (mm. 40–42) in conjunction with the nasal phoneme “–on” (“bonds ... d’abandonner ... mon bonhomme”). Immediately before “T’as oublié dis,” a string of ten single-syllable words unfolds: “là dans ton trou, si tu veux, dis mon rat,” with “trou” metrically accented on the down beat and “veux” initiating an effusive melodic ascent (mm. 46–47). Perrin often uses single-syllable words to stress phrase endings, such as “toits” (m. 9), “dents” and “loin” (mm. 12 and 16; discussed above), and “bonds” (m. 40).\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{70} Philippe Adler, “La Voix Humaine, cet Instrument...,” \textit{Jazz Magazine} 60 (June 1960): 41.

\textsuperscript{71} “J’écoute la première phrase et j’essaie d’y coller des onomatopées, par exemple \textit{ahada} se transformera en \textit{par là-bas}” (quoted in Jean Tronchot, “Ce Chant Que Jouent, Cette Musique Que Chantent Les Double Six ... Cette Bande de Copains Terribles,” \textit{Jazz Hot} 171 [December 1961]: 17).

\textsuperscript{72} Compare, for instance, the 1945 Mary Lou Williams/Milt Orent composition “In the Land of Oo-Bla-Dee,” recorded by Dizzy Gillespie (Victor 20-3538; mx. D9-VB-1791-1), rec. 6 July 1949.

\textsuperscript{73} Discussed in Isabelle Perrin, “L’Ecriture du Vocalise à la Française.”
“She actually made the French language swing, for perhaps the first and last time, by particularly using jazz musician’s slang,” remembered Ward Swingle, a member of Les Double Six who sang on the “Rat Race” recording. Adopting a thoroughly vernacular linguistic idiom from start to finish, Perrin makes abundant use of near-untranslatable oral slang expressions, such as “pas du bidon” [“no kidding”/“ain’t no jive”] (mm. 6–7) and “pas d’boniment” [“no claptrap”] (m. 32), and she heightens the text’s informal, speech-like quality with plentiful elisions as the music hurtles headlong through more syllables than its melodic pitches can fully absorb. Barreling into her third chorus, she unleashes a sweeping ascending glissando (mm. 26–27) that encompasses four syllables (“ça il n’y a”), and midway through the same chorus she begins a phrase by cramming six syllables (“Vous m’avez l’air de ne”) into four eighth notes (m. 33). Four bars later, Perrin flies through five syllables (“ce que je vous ai”) in the space of just two eighth notes (m. 37). At such moments, with demotic parlance overflowing beyond the limits of comprehensibility, semantic meaning dissolves into pure musical sound.

Bebop in Sci Fi: Gillespie and Les Double Six

Les Double Six recorded their album with Gillespie in mid-1963, three years after “Rat Race.” The twelve-track LP turned out to be their leader’s pièce de résistance; in a published review, critic Leonard Feather quipped that “Miss [recte Mrs.] Perrin deserves, at the very least, the Légion d’Honneur.” Her imagination more fecund than ever, Perrin wrote lyrics that spun extravagantly fantastical fictional stories, often incorporating self-reflexive themes that spotlighted the album’s real human participants. Several of her texts even dealt directly with the topic of linguistic translation, touching upon some of the literary and aesthetic issues that she routinely faced as a musician and lyricist. If her translation of Gillespie’s memoir had preserved most of the book’s denotative references to African American culture while somewhat reducing its connotative blackness, Perrin’s vocalese renderings of the trumpeter’s compositions had the opposite effect: they maintained much of the music’s connotative expressive content—its jazz idiom and in particular its distinctive instrumental phonology, re-performed by an ensemble that included a

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74 Swingle went on to found the Swingle Singers.
77 Perrin’s birth name was Jeannine Quintard; she married Jacques Perrin in the 1950s (Broussard, “Partition pour un Thriller,” 134–35).
number of American singers and instrumentalists—but their semantic, denotative meanings had relatively little to do with anything that the original versions may conceivably have signified.

The Gillespie album reunited various intersecting circles of longtime friends and musical associates of different nationalities. It was initially the brainchild of Quincy Jones, an ex-member of Gillespie’s orchestra, who requested new vocal charts from the band’s pianist and arranger, Lalo Schifrin, whom he had first met several years earlier in Schifrin’s native Argentina. The rhythm section consisted of the former house trio at Paris’s Blue Note club: French bassist Pierre Michelot and two American expatriates, Kenny Clarke—who, like Michelot, had played on Les Double Six’s debut album—and pianist Bud Powell. The trio initially planned to record their instrumental tracks by themselves, expecting Gillespie to add horn parts in New York that could be overdubbed along with the vocal arrangements. But in the end the trumpeter decided to fly to Paris to join Schifrin and Perrin at the recording session. He, Powell, and Clarke—three major bebop innovators who had not all played together since 1946—listened, along with Michelot, to recordings that Gillespie had made with either big bands or small groups during the 1940s and early 50s, and treated them as schematic guideposts for their new versions. Powell, in precarious health, required some encouragement from the trumpeter, but performed more than creditably; Gillespie, according to Quincy Jones, had “rarely played so well,” and Clarke later recalled the session as “fantastic.” The finished album’s dominant creative presence, however, was Perrin. Once she had received Schifrin’s vocal arrangements and heard the new pre-recorded instrumental tracks, she began writing words modeled on the phonology of the trumpeter’s earlier discs.

Having discovered that Schifrin and Gillespie both shared her love of science fiction, Perrin decided to compose lyrics on sci-fi and fantasy themes. She

79 Carrière, “Son Amie Raconte,” 11. It was at Schifrin’s suggestion that Jones had first moved to France to study composition with Nadia Boulanger. See Lalo Schifrin, Mission Impossible: My Life in Music (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 82; and Jones, Q, 122.
81 Ibid., 149.
83 Pullman, Wail, 340.
84 “Dizzy a rarement aussi bien joué que dans cet album” (Maranza, “Les Double Six de Paris,” 30). Gillespie’s biographer Donald Maggin writes that on this recording the trumpeter was in “terrific form” (liner notes for Dizzy Gillespie, The Verve/Philips Dizzy Gillespie Small Group Sessions [Mosaic MD7-234], 14).
transformed the trumpeter’s original 1945 recording of “Blue ’n’ Boogie” into “Le Monde Vert” (“The Green World”), referencing imagery from the vegetation-engulfed setting of Brian W. Aldiss’s 1962 novel, *Hothouse*. Gillespie’s own composition “Hot House” (which predates Aldiss’s novel) became “Le Manoir du Loup Garou” (“The Werewolf’s Castle”). And the original 1951 rendition of “Tin Tin Deo” was recast, in a spiritually-tinged, primitivist vein, as “Rites de Vaudou” (“Voodoo Rites”). On its bridge, Perrin placed a number of Ps and Ts at syllabic onsets, mimicking the clarion phrases that Gillespie had played, along with saxophonist John Coltrane and vibraphonist Milt Jackson, on the earlier disc:

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Partout autour des piliers
Préparons, préparons le rite.
Partout autour des piliers
Préparons, préparons les rites du Vaudou.
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Les Double Six crisply articulate the final Ts on each “partout,” eliding them with the initial As of the next word, “autour” (i.e. “par-too-toe-toor”). Their diphthongs on the final syllable of “piliers” (“pee-leeyay”) imitate the delicate mordent ornamentations of Gillespie’s trumpet.

“Mimi is a perfectionist,” Schifrin told *Down Beat* magazine for a cover story on Les Double Six the following year. “She knows there are no miracles. Everyone listened endlessly to the original Gillespie records to get the exact attack and phrasing.” Perrin’s vocalese setting of “Two Bass Hit,” retitled “Tout à Coup T’as Peur” (“Suddenly You’re Afraid”), reproduces brass instrumental articulation by placing Ts at the beginning of eleven of its first fourteen lines. It also features a variety of internal rhymes—four “ou” vowel pairs within the first two lines, as well as “ien” and “oi” twice apiece in lines four and five respectively:

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Tombé tout à coup
Tombé dis-nous d’où?
T’es v’n’u, pourquoi?
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88 Dizzy Gillespie, “Blue ’n’ Boogie” (Guild 1001; mx. G555), rec. 9 February 1945.
90 Dizzy Gillespie, “Hot House” (Guild 1003; mx. G568A), rec. 11 May 1945.
92 Feather, “...With a French Twist,” 20.
Parions, tu m’as bien l’air d’un terrien.
Toi, pourquoi t’être envolé?
Toi t’as qu’une tête
Qu’attends-tu de nous?
Si tu nous le dis, tu n’êtr’ pas repentiras pas.
Toi, tu m’as bien l’air d’un terrien
Toi, pourquoi t’être envolé?
Tu pourras planter ton camp
Tout près, tout près d’notre tribu.
Tout te plaira (x 4)
T’es beau pourtant, t’as pas quatre têtes.

[Fallen all of a sudden
Fallen—tell us, where from?
Why have you come?
Bet you’re an earthling.
Why have you flown here?
You’ve got only one head
What do you want from us?
If you tell us, you won’t regret it.
You seem like an earthling.
Why have you flown here?
You can set up camp
Near by, near by our tribe.
Make yourself comfortable (x 4)
You’re beautiful, even though you don’t have four heads.]

Here, Perrin whimsically places Les Double Six in the role of extraterrestrials addressing an invading earthling whose humanoid features are depicted as oddly aberrant.94 The expressive intentions of Gillespie and his co-composer, John Lewis, when they first recorded the piece—with its title punning on a baseball term—in 1947, will never be known for certain.95 But it seems highly unlikely that they would have had in mind anything remotely connected to this French text’s semantic meanings. In an extreme case of homophonic translation, all that remains of the original are its pitches, rhythms, and articulatory intricacies. And, of course, the trumpeter himself.

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94 Among the science fictional precedents for this sort of ironic reversal is Jean Renoir’s 1927 futuristic film Sur un Air de Charleston, in which a well-dressed African protagonist arrives by spacecraft to explore the bewildering “unknown land” [“terres inconnues”] of France (Jean Renoir, 3-Disc Collector’s Edition [Lions Gate, 2007]).
95 According to Kenny Clarke, “Two Bass Hit” was initially entitled “Bright Lights,” and its original version was composed solely by Lewis while he was serving in the U.S. Army in France around the end of World War II (Ira Gitler, Swing to Bop: An Oral History of the Transition in Jazz in the 1940s [New York: Oxford University Press, 1985], 227).
The LP was a novel venture for Les Double Six in several respects. Rather than simply basing their renditions on existing recordings, as they had done previously, the group was now using custom-written arrangements and prominently featuring new instrumental improvisations (as well as, in a couple of instances, Gillespie’s singing). This was first and foremost an original vocal jazz project with star instrumentalists—it contained just three brief vocalese settings of horn solos from pre-existing recordings. Conceptually, the disc looked both forward and backward. While its transatlantic instrumental-vocal combination was new to all participants, the recording process was likely a nostalgic experience for Gillespie. Not only did he enjoy a musical reunion with past associates, listening together to his records from former times, but he even found himself sharing the limelight, on two tracks, with vocalese renditions of saxophone improvisations by his late friend and fellow bebop pioneer Charlie Parker (1920–55), who had died eight years earlier. Transcending, in its way, both time and space (two of the rhythm-section tracks were recorded in Chicago by Gillespie’s regular sidemen before being overdubbed in Paris by Les Double Six), and reuniting living musicians with one another as well as, symbolically, with a departed confrère, the album provided an apt venue for Perrin’s futuristic lyrics.

Several of Perrin’s texts concoct faux-mythological tales. A setting of Parker and Gillespie’s 1945 disc “Groovin’ High” portrays real jazz musicians embarking on a supernatural adventure. Retitled “La Vallée des Dieux” (“The Valley of the Gods”), the lyrics tell of the trumpeter and Les Double Six arriving in a valley where they discover Charlie Parker ensconced. During the head melody, with soprano Claudine Barge shadowing Gillespie in unison while Perrin and Eddy Louiss re-enact Parker’s role an octave lower, the vocalists figuratively tell Parker, “Tu t’es perdu, tout étonné de venir tomber là, Parmi un monde oublié que ne regarde que toi” [“You—you’re lost, all surprised to have fallen down there among a forgotten world that looks only at you”]. In her vocalese recreation of Parker’s original solo (transcribed in Example 2), Perrin, ventriloquizing the saxophonist, recounts an oneric vision:

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96 The additional tracks were recorded by saxophonist James Moody, pianist Kenny Barron, bassist Chris White, and drummer Rudy Collins. See Donald L. Maggin, Liner notes for Gillespie, The Verve/Philips Dizzy Gillespie Small Group Sessions, 13.
98 Dizzy Gillespie, “Groovin’ High” (Guild 1001; mx. G554A-1), rec. 28 February 1945.
99 Perrin supplied journalist Nat Hentoff with notes describing each of the lyrics’ stories in English, which Hentoff summarized in his liner notes for the album’s U.S. release (Nat Hentoff, Liner notes for Dizzy Gillespie and the Double Six of Paris).
100 The three singers are identified in Feather, “...With a French Twist,” 20.
Tandis que tout autour de moi la ville dormait, tout rayonnant là, parût un être voilé, moi de lui jouer un air, riez donc, qui me permit de voler, puis tourbillonnant dans la nuit, j’avalais les rayons de lune, quel bonheur pour moi de fuir loin de ma vie, car il y a long temps qu’en rêvais tout en soufflant mes notes à tout vent. Près d’hui parut, tout illuminée la Vallée des Dieux, tout comme dans mes rêves, plus rien ne m’étonne!

While all around me the city slept, all shining, a veiled creature appeared. I played an air on him—laugh then—which let me fly, swirling into the night. I swallowed the moonbeams—how happy I was to flee far from my life, since I dreamed long ago of blowing my notes to the winds. Before me the Valley of the Gods appeared all illuminated, just as in my dreams. Nothing surprises me any more!

It was hardly uncommon by the 1960s for jazz musicians to invoke space age themes—they occur in the work of artists ranging from Duke Ellington and Clark Terry to George Russell and Wayne Shorter. Yet Perrin’s science fictional tale, with its surreal fantasy setting, is in some ways more akin to the sorts of Afrofuturism associated with writers such as Samuel R. Delany or Octavia Butler and musicians such as Sun Ra. The lyrics weave a necromantic phantasmagoria, transporting a real historical figure to a celestial spirit realm. Swept up amongst intangible elements of the natural world, Parker is liberated from terrestrial life’s social constraints and quotidian obligations.

Some of Perrin’s other lyrics for the album describe imaginary conversations between the participating musicians, all within science fiction scenarios. The opening track, “Owl,” retitled “The Sword of Rhiannon” after the 1953 Leigh Brackett novel of that name, concocts a dialogue with Schifrin, whose arrangement is modeled on Gillespie’s 1947 big-band recording. In “Anthropology,” renamed “Le Bonnet de Dizzy” [“Dizzy’s Hat”], the singers ask a fictionalized Gillespie-character where he got his hat, which they believe to be the magical source of his musical talent and inspiration. Bassist Pierre Michelot is featured on “One Bass Hit,” which adds an additional reflexive dimension by raising the theme of linguistic...
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Example 2. “Groovin’ High” (“La Vallée des Dieux”).

translation, albeit still in an interplanetary context. Entitled “Pierre dans L’Espace”[“Pierre in Space”], the chart is based on Gillespie’s 1946 big-band score, with Michelot taking the solo double-bass role that Ray Brown had performed on the original.105 In its opening chorus, call-and-response vocal interplay recreates the instrumental version’s alternating reeds and muted trumpets:

\textit{Saxophones (i.e. low voices): Pierre nous parle}
\textit{Trumpets (i.e. high voices): Traduis-nous}

\footnote{105 Dizzy Gillespie, “One Bass Hit, Part 2,” (Musicraft 404; mx. 5609), rec. 9 July 1946.}
Saxophones: Allons n’le ratez pas, Pierre nous parle
Trumpets: Traduis-nous
Saxophones: Croyez la, croyez la parole d’or.

[Saxophones: Pierre, speak to us
Trumpets: Translate us
Saxophones: Come on, don’t fail—Pierre, speak to us
Trumpets: Translate us
Saxophones: Believe, believe the speech of gold.]

With these words, the Francophone singers acknowledge their native language’s non-universality and recognize translators’ vital role in enabling communication across linguistic—and, in this setting, attendant intergalactic—boundaries. In an apparent reversal of Perrin’s own intersemiotic translation process, bassist Michelot finds himself being exhorted to convert linguistic utterances into, presumably, his own non-verbal instrumental idiom.

Another text dealing with the topic of translation is “The Champ,” a blues riff first recorded in 1951. Gillespie himself opens the track with a sixteen-bar a cappella scat improvisation whose non-pitched delivery heightens the illusion of impenetrable speech. Entering along with the rhythm section, the vocalists sing the first chorus soli and are joined by the trumpeter for the second:

Porteur d’la bonne parole, v’là Robie le Robot (x 3)
Ecoutez l’porte-parole des planètes, Robie le robot (x 3)
Pas de doute
Regardez-le filer loin à toute allure
Notre Robie le Robot (x 2)
Regardez-le filer loin à toute allure
Record battu.

[Bearer of the good word, here’s Robby the Robot (x 3)
Listen to the planets’ spokesman, Robby the Robot (x 3)
No doubt
Watch it zoom away at top speed
Our Robby the Robot (x 2)
Watch it zoom away at top speed
Record beaten.]

Saluting Robby the Robot, the stalwart science fiction automaton who debuted in the 1956 film Forbidden Planet, Perrin’s lyrics implicitly treat scat vocables as a mysterious techno-futuristic extra-terrestrial language, one whose speakers may be elusive. The narrating chorus’s insistent textual repetitions, which are characteristic of blues lyrics,

are given a mechanistic hue by their subject matter, suggesting machine-like replication.

Perrin’s most linguistically sophisticated French text for the album happens also to be her shortest. “Oo-Shoo-Be-Doo-Bee,” a song that Gillespie first recorded alongside its composer, vocalist Joe Carroll, in 1952, receives a new arrangement with the trumpeter himself singing the original lyrics. The notion of scat as a translatable language is inherent in the original composition: its verse describes two lovers strolling through a park and its chorus recounts their conversation, which consists exclusively of “Oo-shoo-be-doo-be, ooh, ooh” repeated over and over, rifflike, except for the bridge, where the lyrics explain, in English, that this scat phrase “means that I Love You.” Les Double Six sing the “Oo-shoo-be-doo-be, ooh, ooh” text, overdubbed, in unison with Gillespie—a rare instance of them performing scat—and Perrin’s supplementary original French text consists of just four lines: two interludes between Gillespie’s vocals and his instrumental solo (played by trumpet and baritone saxophone in octaves on the original disc), and a short coda. The complete vocal arrangement is therefore macaronic, comprising English, French, and scat.

Monolingual Anglophones may conceivably perceive Les Double Six’s brief French vocal interjections in much the same way that they hear the wordless scat phrases; the interjections are in fact so fleeting and laden with assonances (“tu” and “du”; “nous” and “tout”; “dis” and “n’y”) that such listeners might hardly have time to even realize that, for a moment, they are no longer hearing non-linguistic vocables. For French speakers, however, Perrin’s lyrics offer further reflexive commentary on the multilingual setting. The interludes that follow Gillespie’s opening vocal chorus ask:

Veux-tu nous traduir’ c’que tu nous dis là (x 2)
pour tout dire, on n’y comprend rien du tout (x 2)

[Do you wanna translate what you’re saying to us there? (x 2)
Frankly, we don’t understand it at all (x 2)]

Whereas the English lyrics treat only scat as incomprehensible and needing interpretation, Les Double Six’s request for translation can be heard, especially from

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108 There are various precedents for jazz lyrics that treat scat as a translatable language. These include Milt Orent’s lyrics for Mary Lou Williams’s composition “In the Land of Oo-Bla-Dee” (which Gillespie and Carroll recorded in 1949), and Louis Armstrong’s recording, with Budd Johnson, of “Sweet Sue (Just You)” (Victor 24321), rec. 26 April 1933. See Brent Hayes Edwards, “Louis Armstrong and the Syntax of Scat,” Critical Inquiry 28, no. 3 (2002): 626–27.

109 On the recording, the sung coda appears to include two or three extra words, difficult to discern by ear, in addition to the lyrics as printed with the album’s French-issue liner notes, which is my source of reference here.
the perspective of monolingual Francophones, as referring to Gillespie’s English text as well as to his scat syllables. The vocal ensemble makes this assertion more directly at the coda, where they sing:

Tout’ tes bonn’ paroles
ne veulent rien dir’du tout!

[All your good words mean absolutely nothing at all!]

The obvious humor rests on perspectival ambivalence: the French vocalists, although fully active participants, comment on their shared musical undertaking from a somewhat disassociated vantage point—they are collaborators, yet also observers. With these parting words, Les Double Six concede that a Franco-American artistic partnership, however successful, inevitably meets a communicative hurdle once language enters the picture. This sense of confronting an obstacle was a motivating impetus—perhaps the fundamental impetus—of Perrin’s career as both a lyricist and literary translator; on behalf of Francophones, she dedicated herself either to overcoming the language barrier by translating English texts, or, in the case of vocalese, to producing a parallel alternative in her own language.

Mimi Perrin’s dual legacy in both music and literature, grounded throughout in translational aesthetics, is sui generis in the jazz world. Nevertheless, much wisdom remains to be gained from considering various other aspects of jazz from a translational perspective—translational, that is, in the literal sense of an interlingual literary process as well as a metaphor applicable to music or other cultural practices. Gillespie’s To Be or Not... to Bop is just one instance among many, and interlingual translations of jazz-related texts can often shed valuable new light on familiar issues, particularly in terms of the transformations they effect and the misperceptions they cause. Consider the distortive consequences of James F. Bezou’s 1947 English rendering of the Belgian author Robert Goffin’s Louis Armstrong biography; Bezou presents some of the book’s fictionalized dialogue in highly stereotypical—indeed, offensive—African American dialect that is completely absent from the French original. Or the impact of David Noakes’s decision to excise, from his English translation of André Hodeir’s classic postwar French text, Jazz: Its Evolution and

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110 The French word “paroles” also subsumes the English terms “speech” and “lyrics.”
111 For instance, Goffin depicts a fictionalized scene where Armstrong’s mother tells her husband, “Dès que nous le pourrons, Willy, nous fuirons ce quartier de misère” [“As soon as we can, Willy, we’re going to get away from this miserable neighborhood”] (Robert Goffin, Louis Armstrong Le Roi du Jazz [Paris: Éditions Pierre Seghers, 1947], 17). Bezou translates the sentence as “‘Willy,’ said Mary suddenly, ‘tain’t no two ways ’bout it—we’s gwine leave dis heah mizzable dump!” (Robert Goffin: Horn of Plenty: The Story of Louis Armstrong, trans. James F. Bezou [New York: Allen, Towne, and Heath, 1947], 10).
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Essence, a seventy-plus–page chapter, entitled “The Religion of Jazz,” which excoriates the author’s fellow critic Hugues Panassié. And how, we might wonder, did Panassié’s wife, Madeleine Gautier, along with her colleague, Marcel Duhamel, go about translating the affected jive language of Mezz Mezzrow and Bernard Wolfe’s Really the Blues? And what, more recently, became of Miles Davis and Quincy Troupe’s unabashedly vernacular prose when translated into French by Christian Gauffre? With every change in language, the original authors’ meanings, feelings, attitudes, and experiences grow more remote.

But despite its pitfalls and inherent deficiencies, translation always remains a vital means of facilitating intercultural communication and understanding, and in the realm of music, where Perrin’s impact was most unique and lasting, metaphorical translational processes have an even greater ability to function in creative, transformative ways. As Les Double Six’s album with Gillespie demonstrates beyond doubt, this capacity grows when the object of translation—such as instrumental music—lacks words, making it more conducive to freely inventive intersemiotic processes. In such cases, the elements that a translator adds, alters, or eliminates may ultimately be just as significant, or more so, than what she or he transmits unchanged. “Improvising like jazzmen,” Perrin’s simile describing her own literary translation process, is equally descriptive of how she composed vocalese lyrics—it invokes translation’s processual, performative dimension rather than the static products with which the process begins and ends. If her career as a lyricist was impelled by a desire to reorient jazz away from its cultural origins for the benefit of Francophones, she nonetheless realized this vision by means of a guiding principle—the privileging of individual improvisatory agency within self-defined constraints—


114 A sample: Troupe writes “But [Charlie Parker] was cool, with that hipness he could have about him even when he was drunk or fucked up. Plus, he had that confidence that all people have when they know their shit is bad” (Miles Davis with Quincy Troupe, Miles: The Autobiography [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989], 57). Gauffre translates these sentences as “Mais [Charlie Parker] était relax, avec cette élégance qu’il pouvait avoir même quand il était seul ou raide. Mieux, il avait cette confiance qu’ont tous ceux qui savent que ce qu’ils font fait vraiment mal” (“But [Charlie Parker] was relaxed, with that elegance that he could have even when he was drunk or stiff. Plus, he had that confidence that all those have who know what they do is really bad.”) (Miles Davis with Quincy Troupe, Miles: L’Autobiographie, trans. Christian Gauffre [Paris: Presses de le Renaissance, 1989], 49).


that she rightly credited to her chosen musical idiom’s African American aesthetic roots.

What Perrin’s literary and musical collaborations with Gillespie exemplify, above all, is the inherently participatory dimension of translation as a mode of intercultural communication that, with rare exceptions, involves two or more people. Translation often occurs without any literal human interaction: an author’s and translator’s roles may be distinct, separated by any length of time, such that their social connection is purely metaphorical—a joint endeavor to express a given set of thoughts, ideas, or feelings. For Perrin and Gillespie, however, translation was, particularly in music, a truly collective enterprise involving real, face-to-face contact. The French-language memoir, to some degree, and the 1963 jazz album, without question, were the fruit of a partnership based on mutual respect, understanding, and an enduring friendship (the two of them saw each other for the last time during Gillespie’s final European tour, in 1991, when they talked late into the night at Paris’s Méridien hotel). That personal bond represented, in its way, a human legacy as profound as the book and music they created together through many hours of labor and laughter. “He had a great hope in humanity,” Perrin reflected after Gillespie died in 1993. “And if there were more people in the world like him, things would surely be better.”

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117 “Il avait un grand espoir dans l’humanité, et s’il y avait dans le monde plus de gens comme lui, les choses iraient sans doute mieux” (Carrière, “Son Amie Raconte,” 11).


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