How Democratic Is Jazz?

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During his 2016 election campaign and early months in office, U.S. President Donald J. Trump was occasionally compared to a jazz musician. His notorious tendency to act without forethought reminded some press commentators of the celebrated African American art form’s characteristic spontaneity. This was more than a little odd. Trump? Could this corrupt, capricious, megalomaniacal racist really be the Coltrane of contemporary American politics? True, the leader of the free world, if no jazz lover himself, fully appreciated music’s enormous global appeal, and had even been known in his youth to express his musical opinions in a manner redolent of great jazz musicians such as Charles Mingus and Miles Davis—with his fists. But didn’t his reckless administration

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1 David Hajdu, “Trump the Improviser? This Candidate Operates in a Jazz-Like Fashion, But All He Makes is Unexpected Noise,” The Nation, January 21, 2016 (https://www.thenation.com/article/trump-the-improviser/ [accessed May 14, 2019]).


exhibit despotic tendencies to the point that it had created a “crisis of democracy”? And isn’t jazz a fundamentally democratic music?7

Certainly, many musicians have thought so. In the nineteen forties pianist Earl Hines called jazz “the expression of democracy,”6 and a decade later Dave Brubeck and his wife, Iola, declared that the idiom “embodied in its very form the democratic idea of unity through diversity”;9 drummer Max Roach more recently pronounced it “a democratic form of music” because “everybody in the group has the opportunity to speak on it, to comment on it through their performance.”10 Numerous writers have been depicting jazz similarly for almost as long as it has been around. “Jazz, with its mocking disregard for formality,” wrote J. A. Rogers in 1925, “is a leveler and makes for democracy.”11 At the time of World War II, some considered the music a bulwark against fascism;12 during the Cold War it was often thought to be an ideological weapon against communism.13 And for much of its

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history, jazz has been called democratic on account of its capacity to further the cause of racial equality.\textsuperscript{14}

Racial justice was evidently foremost in the poet Sterling A. Brown’s mind when he wrote in 1945, “of all the arts, jazz music is probably the most democratic,” adding that “completely democratic are the jam sessions … where Negro and white musicians meet as equals to improvise collectively.”\textsuperscript{15} Since then in the world of letters, the conviction that jazz manifests democratic values has been voiced especially eloquently by followers of the novelist and essayist Ralph Ellison\textsuperscript{16}—more ardently so, even, than by Ellison himself.\textsuperscript{17} Their most prominent twenty-first-century inheritor is the trumpeter and composer Wynton Marsalis,\textsuperscript{18} artistic director of New York’s influential Jazz at Lincoln Center program, who has made the “jazz-as-democracy” metaphor a central institutional tenet, even going so far as to suggest parallels between jazz improvisers’ creative liberty and consumer freedom under neoliberal capitalism.\textsuperscript{19} The democracy metaphor has, if nothing else, proven to be an


\textsuperscript{18} Wynton Marsalis with Selwyn Seyfu Hinds, To a Young Jazz Musician: Letters From the Road (New York: Random House, 2004), 46–47; Jennifer Odell, “Marsalis Master Class: An Exercise in Communication and Democracy,” Down Beat, April 2013, 86.

extremely malleable rhetorical device among jazz’s various advocates in the public sphere.

Time and again, these advocates highlight jazz’s common performance practice of collective improvisation. Some have argued that any musical improvisation inherently exemplifies “freedom and individual sovereignty,”\(^\text{20}\) the most widely recognized democratic values.\(^\text{21}\) Composer and pianist Muhal Richard Abrams for this reason deemed improvisation “a human right”\(^\text{22}\); cultural critic Albert Murray called it “the ultimate human (i.e., heroic) endowment.”\(^\text{23}\) But there is nothing necessarily democratic or liberatory in the exercise of this endowment per se, given that it has been the modus operandi of dictatorial political figures ranging from Hernán Cortes, the sixteenth-century Spanish conqueror of the Aztec Empire,\(^\text{24}\) to Trump in modern times.\(^\text{25}\) Even the discipline and knowledge that are, according to


\(^{24}\) Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 87. Discussed in Crouch, “Blues to Be Constitutional,” 175; and Laver, “Freedom of Choice,” 553. Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble contend that “Cortés’s actions ... are never improvisatory so much as they are predictably manipulative and adaptive, dictated by the self-interested goals of the imperial ideology he sought to enforce”); this view is predicated on an unorthodox, a priori definition of improvisation as having a “dissonant relation to hegemony,” as opposed to a conception, more akin to prevailing linguistic usage, without any particular “relation to hegemony” (“The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue,” in *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue* [Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004], 15).

composer and scholar George E. Lewis, vital preconditions of improvisation in jazz and other Afrodisaporic musics do not inevitably yield democratic outcomes; highly disciplined improvisation is frequently undertaken by solo musicians who, pianist Billy Taylor observes, may enjoy having the unfettered “freedom to organize all the elements of their music completely on their own terms.”

Democratic conceptions of jazz improvisation therefore take ensemble, rather than solo, performances as paradigmatic. “For most people,” writes guitarist Derek Bailey, “improvisation, although a vehicle for self expression, is about playing with other people.” The idea that group improvisation “harbor[s] positive visions of society and community”—which is traceable, Dana Gooley has shown, to nineteenth-century elite European aesthetics—remains prevalent today; spontaneous collective musical creativity is often said to embody egalitarian and humane values such as “mutual respect and co-operation”; a “spirit of dialogue and difference”; “generosity”; and “openness, mutuality, and collaboration.” John A. Kouwenhoven asserted some decades ago that ensemble improvisation in jazz exemplifies “the conflict which Emerson long ago recognized as the fundamental problem in modern civilization—the conflict between the claims of the individual and of the group.” Other influential cultural critics have shared this view, which plainly evokes democracy’s inherent tension between individual liberty and communal

29 Gooley, _Fantasies of Improvisation_, 297.
31 Fischlin and Heble, “The Other Side of Nowhere,” 17.
equality. But the widely held belief that jazz improvisation typically exemplifies democratic values is wrong. It has nevertheless endured, mainly because it so effectively bolsters broader political arguments concerning the music. Two claims, above all, have been served by it. One is an argument for jazz’s intrinsic artistic worth, especially in comparison to European classical music. Although symphony orchestras have occasionally been cited as models of ethical social structures, Western art music is typically thought to express markedly inegalitarian values, which have fallen out of favor in contemporary liberal societies. A democratic view of jazz therefore emphatically valorizes the music by casting it as less hierarchical and thus morally superior to a prestigious, elite idiom.  

6 “On the bandstand,” Gregory Clark contends, “an ensemble of individual musicians displays in action an intimate sort of democracy as each one adapts to the others’ playing.”

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40 Givan, “Rethinking Interaction in Jazz Improvisation.”

41 Henry CB, “Max Roach—Part 4—Jazz and European Classical Music” [Interview with Jomo Cheatham, 30 May 1993], YouTube, January 6 2010 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWiqHTIH
The other claim concerns jazz’s national identity as a specifically American art form. A conviction that the U.S. political system promotes intuitive, spontaneous—that is, improvisatory—modes of both individual and collective decision-making has circulated since at least the early nineteenth century, when Alexis de Tocqueville hailed Americans’ ability to solve local communal problems with “improvised assembl[ies],”\(^{42}\) meanwhile disapproving of their tendency to act based on “quick assessments” and “momentary chances and the skill to grasp them.”\(^{43}\) More recently, Stanley Crouch, one of Ellison’s intellectual heirs, has called the U.S. Constitution itself “a document that functions like the blues-based music of jazz. It values improvisation, the freedom to constantly reinterpret the meanings of our documents.”\(^{44}\) Marsalis has even publicly partnered with major political figures, such as former U.S. President Bill Clinton and Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, in arguing that “the traditions of experimentation and improvisation in jazz resemble the innovative approach of America’s democracy in placing so much faith in its people and in striving to invent something new, different, and perhaps, even better.”\(^{45}\)

Such polemics advance a laudable goal on behalf of the music’s African American creators by, as George Lipsitz puts it, “staking a claim by blacks for inclusion in the celebratory nationalism of the American nation that has routinely excluded them.”\(^{46}\) If jazz is indeed democratic, then Americans of African descent have apparently affirmed in their music the very same moral values that their oppressors avowed but flouted.\(^{47}\) “Strained and steamed by the disdainful violation of the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Constitution of the United States of America,” Marsalis writes, Black Americans “willed an art into existence to objectify the most precious aspirations of democratic thought, and to validate those same conceptions so compromised in their daily lives as to seem absurd.”\(^{48}\) Jazz, by this account, laid bare and helped to remedy America’s cruel political hypocrisy.

\(^{44}\) Crouch, “Blues to Be Constitutional,” 172.
Yet these polemics are predicated on a pair of myths. The first, of America as an exemplary democracy, is an idealized misconception belied by the demonstrably inequalitarian system of government that the nation’s staunchly antidemocratic founders intentionally designed.49 With its Constitution enabling the legal subjugation of certain social groups (e.g., nonwhites and women) and expressly mandating the overrepresentation of select minority interests (e.g., residents of relatively underpopulated states),50 the United States has for its entire history been characterized by gross political inequities and injustices.51 “The American people came to believe that their Constitution was a democratic instrument,” observed the political journalist Walter Lippmann in 1922, “and a great conservative fiction it has been. It is a fair guess that if everyone had always regarded the Constitution as did the authors of it, the Constitution would have been violently overthrown, because loyalty to the Constitution and loyalty to democracy would have seemed incompatible.”52

The second myth, less radically at odds with the truth but nonetheless decidedly hard to square with reality, is of jazz as a democratic art form, a common notion that does not do justice to the idiom’s considerably varied musical and social norms. As a number of writers have noted, jazz improvisation, even in ensemble settings, is by no means always egalitarian, liberatory, or democratic.53 Its methods do not always reflect its messages, and sometimes even contradict them. This second misapprehension can be laid to rest with only a basic awareness of how jazz improvisers ordinarily work together—as musical performers and as human beings, often subject to a bandleader’s unilateral dictates—and a straightforward understanding of democracy in its commonplace sense, literally meaning “government by the people,”

50 Taylor, Democracy May Not Exist, 64–66.
broadly connoting liberty and equality, and applicable to both political systems and cultural habits and mores.\textsuperscript{54}

To that end, it is first necessary to distinguish clearly between, on one hand, democracy in an abstract sense—consistent with its literal dictionary definition\textsuperscript{55}—and, on the other, the actual governmental or social systems routinely described as such in common parlance.\textsuperscript{56} Just as jazz’s aesthetic ideals may not always be perfectly realized in musical practice, democracy as a theoretical concept is not necessarily exemplified by self-described democratic regimes or organizations in reality. Indeed, all sorts of political regimes have claimed to be democratic, including many unambiguous dictatorships, to the point that the word “democracy” has sometimes functioned as little more than a nebulous term of approval, entirely detached from its abstract definition.\textsuperscript{57} In any event, the prevailing vision of jazz as democratic takes the music’s actual performance strategies—not just its ideals—as a model in “microcosm of the ideal democracy.”\textsuperscript{58} Viewed through a heavily romanticized lens, what jazz musicians literally do supposedly exemplifies, in terms of interpersonal dynamics, what governments and human communities ought to do\textsuperscript{59}—even if this goal may never be fully attainable by actual societies and governments.\textsuperscript{60}
An ideal democracy, according to the influential political theorist Robert A. Dahl, will define citizenship inclusively and allow opportunities for all included individuals to formulate and signify enlightened preferences, weighted equally. In short, participants must be able to make up their own minds freely about issues of collective concern, with everyone having an equal say. The mechanisms providing these opportunities can vary in practice: when there are many citizens, as with modern sovereign states, direct governmental decisions are usually taken only by a small number of elected representatives—an “aggregative” system. Communities with relatively few citizens are better suited to universal participation in deliberative assemblies. Jazz ensembles are certainly compatible in theory with the assembly model inasmuch as they nearly always have fewer than twenty participants and typically involve no more than half a dozen. But obviously, whereas a group of musicians is easily capable of voting on collective decisions that are separable from in-the-moment performance—as occurred at the 1965 inaugural meetings of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians—real-time music making does not lend itself to any such bureaucratic majoritarian process. A democratically improvising jazz ensemble would instead be one that functions by deliberative musical consensus in the course of performance, with each individual player’s contributions equally influencing the overall sounding outcome.
Sometimes jazz really does fit this description fairly well. Inclusive attitudes—inviting voluntary participation by all—are not uncommon among amateur musicians, and were exemplified by certain community jazz organizations of the 1960s, as well as, in some instances, within downtown Manhattan’s early ‘70s “loft scene.” During the first half of the twentieth century, jazz bands of all kinds habitually expected open participation by social dancers. And a small number of today’s professional performers regularly encourage their audiences to participate musically—the vocalist Bobby McFerrin often gives concert attendees opportunities to join him on stage, or invites them to sing with him from their seats. By contrast, the jam sessions that Sterling A. Brown commended for their democratic ethos—and which have been somewhat mythologized as inclusive and egalitarian—have in fact historically tended to involve closed circles of players, sometimes admitting only accomplished musicians.

In the case of professional bands that play for listeners whose participatory role is confined mainly to observing, exhorting, and applauding, ensembles without defined leaders may potentially come nearest, in their collective improvisations, to displaying the “logic of equality” which Dahl regards as the foundational democratic principle. One such group is the Art Ensemble of Chicago, who, in the words of their chronicler, Paul Steinbeck, “established their own social model based on the principles of cooperation and personal autonomy.”

Another is the World Saxophone Quartet, whose members, according to cofounder Oliver Lake, “know that

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71 Dahl, On Democracy, 10.

the music is the leader of the band.” And likewise Weather Report, a major jazz-fusion ensemble of the 1970s and ’80s, developed a notably egalitarian aesthetic that minimized disparities between its members’ audible prominence. Sustaining equally balanced ensemble roles, socially and musically, can be a delicate matter. Internecine strains, which can always arise from interpersonal disagreements and divergent individual artistic goals under the best of circumstances, are liable to be exacerbated when real or perceived inequities of power or status arise within groups who aspire to egalitarianism—as occurred in 2017 when pianist Ethan Iverson ended a seventeen-year stint with the cooperative trio The Bad Plus amid tensions over his role in the band.

But most professional jazz groups don’t truly aspire to egalitarianism or inclusivity at all. Very often, a band has one leader who unequivocally dominates, and the musical result is far from democratic in any ideal sense of the term. To be sure, most bandleaders agree that the best musical results are achieved when they allow their sidemen considerable creative leeway. “You don’t lead a band by telling everybody what to do,” explains Marsalis; “the leader of a jazz band has to exert the control of no control.” Singer Betty Carter always expected the musicians she hired “to be themselves with me,” and guitarist Danny Barker, as a sideman, appreciated “liberal-minded bandleaders who … left you alone.” Pianist Fred Hersch even admitted that “at times, I have to fight not to tell anyone else what to play.” And drummer Art Blakey, whose Jazz Messengers band included, over many decades, numerous musicians who were to become renowned leaders in their own right, said “you learn to sit back there and make that man play. … you get him out there, you make him feel good and make him play, and stay behind him.” But ultimately,

74 Rinzler, The Contradictions of Jazz, 72.
75 Berliner, Thinking in Jazz, 434–39.
78 Marsalis, Sweet Swing Blues on the Road, 20.
81 Berliner, Thinking in Jazz, 420.
whenever bands have a particular identified leader there is never any question about where the buck stops. Blakey, Marsalis recalled, was “one of the greatest leaders in the world, and the reason is that he doesn’t try to pretend that he knows stuff that he doesn’t know. But he’s the leader of the band, and when you are in his band, you never get the impression that you’re leading it.”

Proponents of the jazz-as-democracy metaphor have not been blind to this unequal power distribution—Marsalis notes that “swing has a hierarchy, like a government” and they have generally sought to preserve the metaphor by comparing jazz improvisation to democracy in practice, a rhetorical maneuver that jettisons the argument that the music represents an ideal to be emulated. In jazz, Clark writes, “there are structures of authority that apply. There is a leader who sets the agenda.” While such musical power hierarchies may accurately mirror how most self-described democratic governments actually function, they do not at all offer an egalitarian model; “control of the agenda” is, in Dahl’s view, a power that all participants would collectively share in any ideal democracy. More crucially, the leader of a professional jazz ensemble does not merely set a musical agenda, so to speak. As the remaining band members’ self-designated employer, she or he wields extraordinary controlling authority over their professional environment.

The leader’s greatest power is of course in selecting the band’s membership. Clearly small musical groups, whose personnel can often be extremely variable and whose very existence may be transient, are not readily comparable in this regard to a sovereign state, where citizenship is mainly determined by immutable criteria such as individuals’ parentage and place of birth. Nevertheless, an ensemble leader’s sole authority to bestow or revoke the right of each band member to participate decisively influences all else that happens musically and socially. Laissez-faire leadership attitudes are feasible largely because sidemen are handpicked. Pianist Walter Bishop Jr. remembered that, as a leader, Charlie Parker “never said ‘Comp

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84 Marsalis and Hinds, To a Young Jazz Musician, 47.
85 Maxwell, “Ralph Ellison and the Constitution of Jazzocracy,” 43–44.
87 Dahl, On Democracy, 38.
88 Elizabeth Anderson, Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don’t Talk about It) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017). During the first half-century or so of jazz’s history, when bands often toured regions of the U.S. where traveling African American musicians had few legal protections or sources of social support, membership in an ensemble—at the will of its leader—provided many players with their only shield, however limited, from hostility and deprivation. See Amy Absher, “Traveling Jazz Musicians and Debt Peonage,” American Music 37/2 (2019): 178–80, 188–90.
90 Dahl addresses the democratic principle of inclusive citizenship (On Democracy, 76–78).
this way or comp that way,” because he hired me to play the way I play.”\footnote{Berliner, \textit{Thinking in Jazz}, 418.} “If they don’t like the way you play,” notes drummer Akira Tana, “they just won’t call you for another gig.”\footnote{Ibid., 435.} Count Basie once even fired a musician almost immediately after hiring him, before even playing a show, because he found the player obnoxious.\footnote{Monk Rowe and Romy Britell, \textit{Jazz Tales from Jazz Legends: Oral Histories from the Fillius Jazz Archive at Hamilton College} (Clinton, NY: Richard W. Couper Press, 2015), 40.} Needless to say, in the rare instances when jazz musicians have had the effrontery to try to participate in a professional ensemble without the leader’s consent, the outcome has not generally been positive. Marsalis’s uninvited stage intrusion at a 1986 performance by Miles Davis’s band was summarily curtailed when Davis—at least, so he claimedstopped the music and told his fellow trumpeter to “get the fuck off the stage.”\footnote{Miles Davis with Quincy Troupe, \textit{Miles: The Autobiography} (New York: Touchstone, 1989), 374. For alternate accounts see John F. Szwed, \textit{So What: The Life of Miles Davis} (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 379; and Wynton Marsalis, “My 1986 Encounter with Miles Davis in Vancouver,” \textit{Wynton’s Blog}, April 28, 2015 (https://wyntonmarsalis.org/blog/entry/my-1986-encounter-with-miles-davis-in-vancouver [accessed June 6, 2019]). A recording of the event is available (Milestones: A Miles Davis Archive. “Miles Davis — June 27, 1986 Expo ’86, Vancouver [with Wynton Marsalis],” \textit{YouTube}, June 27, 2016 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1f7D4_EWyl [accessed June 7, 2019])).} Ensemble leaders also decide how much their band members are paid. Invariably, the leader makes the most, sometimes by far;\footnote{Ingrid Monson, “Riffs, Repetition, and Theories of Globalization,” \textit{Ethnomusicology} 43/1 (1999): 52.} bassist Chuck Israels recalls being paid just $40 by his employer, pianist Bill Evans, for a mid-’60s gig that earned $1,000 total.\footnote{Marc Myers, “Interview: Chuck Israels,” \textit{JazzWax}, February 26, 2019 (https://www.jazzwax.com/2019/02/interview-chuck-israels.html?utm_source=feedblitz&utm_medium=FeedBlitzRss&utm_campaign=FeedBlitzRss&utm_content=Interview%3a+Chuck+Israels [accessed June 6, 2019]).} Sidemen may all be compensated equally—in 2005 saxophonist Sonny Rollins paid each of his musicians $2,000 per performance.\footnote{Sonny Rollins, Handwritten Memo, Sonny Rollins Papers, The New York Public Library Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Box 23, Folder 4.} However, stark inequities are not unknown; the total individual earnings of the five saxophonists in Duke Ellington’s Orchestra during 1961 were as follows: Paul Gonsalves: $7,175;\footnote{For much of his tenure with Ellington, Gonsalves was in fact indebted to the bandleader because of cash advances accrued against his regular pay checks. See, for example, Paul Gonsalves, \textit{Payroll Tax Deductions}, August 3, 1969 (http://www.paulgonsalves.com/resources/PG_69_Week_wages.jpeg [accessed August 6, 2019]).} Russell Procope: $9,621; Jimmy Hamilton $11,342; Harry Carney: $13,512; and Johnny Hodges: $20,379.\footnote{Duke Ellington Collection, Smithsonian Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Box 117. These are the amounts the saxophonists earned only for playing with Ellington’s band; they do not include additional sources of income such as royalties, or performances and recordings independent of Ellington.} Such pay inequities are of course found in most pro-
professional musical genres: economist Alan B. Krueger notes that in the rock music world, “if a band achieves superstardom, there is a risk that the biggest star will leave unless he or she is paid a bigger share. This is when a band usually makes a transition from a democratic model, where all revenues are split equally, to more of an authoritarian one, in which the rewards are more heavily skewed to the stars.”

Some bandleaders casually enact and reinforce their dominant power and status in public through playful onstage banter. I can remember a 1994 club set where saxophonist Benny Carter joked to the audience while his bassist, John Lockwood, soloed: “We’re going to make him keep doing it until he gets it right!” During bandstand announcements at a 1997 gig drummer Elvin Jones repeatedly ribbed bassist Greg Williams, a former tuba player, by reciting lyrics from “When Yuba Plays the Rumba on the Tuba” while tapping out the 1931 song’s rhythms on his snare drum. Herbie Hancock, at a 2006 performance before several thousand spectators, kidded his drummer, Richie Barshay, for having “grown a beard to make himself look older.” Such teasing, however good-natured, does not evince a spirit of democratic egalitarianism. Yet it is mild compared to the onstage management style of, say, Ray Charles, who once had guitarist Eugene “Big Bubba” Ross involuntarily ejected during a concert, or Charles Mingus, who was not above slapping his band’s pianist midway through a set. Behind the scenes, leaders’ treatment of musicians in their employ can be far more egregious. In 1962 Mingus faced assault charges for punching trombonist Jimmy Knepper’s tooth out; saxophonist Sidney Bechet was jailed after a 1928 dispute with banjoist Mike McKendrick escalated into gun violence. Drummer Buddy Rich’s verbally abusive offstage behavior was notorious. All this hardly bespeaks latitudinarian leadership.

It is quite conceivable that—with the leader’s consent—once the music starts, all social and economic disparities could be set aside, with players improvising together as equals. But in fact, extramusical power hierarchies usually shape the collective performance dynamics. The leader decides which tunes the band will play. Asked whether his sidemen ever seemed flummoxed by his occasionally idiosyncratic repertoire, Rollins drolly replied, “Well, they might have thought so. But they

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wouldn’t dare to say it. It was my gig.”

Opportunities to solo are also granted by the leader. A warm personal friendship between bassist Ron Carter and guitarist Jim Hall, developed while performing as a duo with shared billing, became frayed after Carter started playing in a quartet that Hall led jointly with saxophonist Joe Lovano—and found he was not allowed equal solo time. “I was pissed off,” Carter recalled. “Everyone was open to take a solo except the bass player. What’s that shit all about? If the solos are spread around, everybody’s equal and I’m OK with that.” The leader may monitor each solo’s length, too. “They know when I make that roll, they go to a certain distance,” explained Art Blakey, referring to his famous snare drum press roll. “They say, well I got three choruses to play.”

When bandleaders feel the need to offer their musicians explicit guidance, they can be diplomatic: Rollins once wrote a cordial letter to drummer Kobie Watkins instructing him, “Regarding [the tune] ‘Patanjali’ it is imperative for you to ‘mark’ the beginning of each 8 bar chorus.” Or they may be blunt. “When I first joined Betty [Carter],” remembered drummer Kenny Washington, “I started doing this ballad, she stopped the tune right there and said, ‘Listen to me. I don’t want to hear no brushes on the snare drum on ballads. I can’t stand that.’” Pianist Hal Galper commented that “many bandleaders … expected lots of control, and they taught you through fear, intimidation, and terror teaching.” At any rate, band members usually do their utmost to fulfill their leaders’ expectations, with or without verbal prompting. “Most of the people I’ve played with,” noted pianist Tommy Flanagan, “from Coleman Hawkins to Ella Fitzgerald, give you the feeling that you’ve got to be on your toes all the time.” Milt Hinton, bassist in a rhythm section—along with pianist Hank Jones, guitarist Barry Galbraith, and drummer Osie Johnson—that recorded with many different musicians during the 1950s and ’60s, recalls that the quartet’s collective ethos was one of deference rather than coequal collaboration: “the four of us worked well together in all kinds of situations and this had as much to do with our personalities as our musical talents. None of us was arrogant. In fact, we were exactly the opposite, congenial and accommodating. Whenever we walked on a date we were

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110 Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, 298.
really concerned about the featured artist. We wanted that person to be satisfied and we’d go to great lengths to accomplish it.”

The musical and interpersonal dynamics that these various jazz artists describe are undoubtedly extremely creative. They may be fully spontaneous. And they are often highly interactive, necessitating mutual responsibility and trust. But they can be all these things without being even remotely democratic. A lone individual chooses the participants, decisively controls their working conditions, and has the final say on what and how they play. This is neither inclusive nor egalitarian. “I don’t believe that the word ‘democracy’ is the best word to use,” Rollins reflects. “You don’t want everybody doing what they particularly feel like doing … Once they become part of your group they have to give up their selves for … the greater good of the music.” Others feel similarly. “There are times when democracy doesn’t work,” a conservatory jazz instructor told anthropologist Eitan Y. Wilf. “In my band I’m the manager; I’m a dictator, but I’m a caring dictator. I’m a listening dictator. I like to get feedback … But … once I make my decision, that’s it—that’s the way it’s gonna be.” Pianist Paul Bley disliked musical collectives because he felt they encouraged “over-democracy,” with “the poorest players playing with the best.” Galper goes so far as to insist that “the logistics of performing in an improvised group experience are not democratic. They’re actually fascistic because, to have a group effect, one person has to be leading it from time to time.”

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Jazz is without doubt a multifarious art form whose players and listeners can be relied upon to hold diverse, often contradictory, opinions on any aspect of the music. Its ensemble performances are sometimes quite democratic, musically and socially, but often not. Yet, perhaps simply because freedom and equality are so widely esteemed values, discourse surrounding jazz has been more inclined to emphasize or even exaggerate these dimensions of its performance practices than to acknowledge the common interpersonal inequities that place creative constraints upon individual musicians. Testimony by members of Miles Davis’s famous 1960s “Second Quintet” provides a case in point. Davis’s leadership of the group, whose exceptionally interactive rhythm section featured pianist Herbie Hancock, bassist Ron Carter, and drummer Tony Williams, has often been characterized as hands-off, maximizing his sidemen’s liberty to experiment spontaneously. "We were all allowed to play what we wanted to play and shaped the music according to the group effort and not the dictates of Miles,” Hancock claimed. "He never told us what to do … And Miles never talked about the mechanics of music, the notes and keys and chords of it.” Carter likewise asserted that “in the six years I was with the band, [Miles] never made one comment to me on how to play or what to play.” Davis, too, sometimes denied playing any pivotal musical role beyond selecting the group’s members. “I was just the leader who put us all together,” he wrote. “Although they were learning from me, I was learning from them, too.” Carter and Ron would sit around back in their hotel rooms talking about what they had played … Every night they would come back and play something different. And every night I would have to react.

This was far from the full story, though. Other sidemen of the trumpeter’s remember often receiving forthright advice and instructions: “He told me the kinds of things he likes to hear and then showed them to me at the piano,” Flanagan recalled. “He used to tell me exactly how to do a lot of things,” said Rollins. “How to play behind people and so forth.” In fact, Davis himself acknowledged giving
members of his mid-'60s Quintet specific pointers: he asked Williams to make more use of his bass drum and sock cymbals and “suggested he cut all his phrases off on the fourth beat.”

The trumpeter also remembered telling Hancock to use sparser keyboard voicings and, on some occasions, not to play at all—the pianist recollects this as well. A 1966 recording of the Quintet rehearsing gives a glimpse of its leader’s commanding role—Davis spends three minutes providing Carter with extensive instructions about tempo, harmony, and pizzicato technique (“Pick the first part and slur the last part ... In the B-flat chord, end up on the fourth’’); he demonstrates piano voicings for Hancock’s benefit (“just say [plays chord] something like that’’); and he offers Williams various precise directions (“Triplets ... diddly-diddly-diddly-diddly-diddly, you know ... in the left hand, 'Tony’’).

While the sidemen feel free occasionally to offer one another additional spoken suggestions, Davis is always unquestionably in charge, at one point even telling Williams to “shut up.’’ “The reason I have a band,” the trumpeter wryly remarked some two decades later, “is because I can’t stand for somebody to tell me what to do!” Certainly on that day in 1966, nobody did.

Whenever the members of Davis’s Quintet assumed leadership roles themselves during the same period, they often explored quite different musical directions. Tenor saxophonist Wayne Shorter, on his album The All Seeing Eye, crafted five-part horn arrangements of darkly dissonant compositions; Hancock used Latin rhythms (on Inventions and Dimensions), funky grooves (e.g., “Blind Man, Blind Man” and “Cantaloupe Island”), and near-atonal ostinati (“The Egg”); and Williams’s musical language inclined more toward the avant-garde (on Life Time and Spring). Playing with Davis, though, all the considerable creative freedom they exercised was entirely subject to the approval of a leader who had the power to fire them summarily—as he had with other sidemen—or even occasionally not to pay them for their work. Davis’s leadership was mainly benevolent rather than dictatorial or coercive, and the group may have appeared to function democratically in its collaborative pursuit of what Hancock called “controlled freedom.” But in the end the Second Quintet was no democracy. It was more of an autocracy.

131 Davis and Troupe, Miles, 275.
132 Hancock and Dickey, Possibilities, 62.
135 Griffin and Washington, Clawing at the Limits of Cool, 149–50.
136 Ouellette, Ron Carter, 105, 115, 118.
Although jazz ensembles often function much less democratically than some of the music’s most prominent players and critics would have us believe, jazz improvisers’ typical working methods—grounded in discipline, dedication, knowledge, and experience—are a far cry from President Trump’s volatile, egocentric authoritarianism. Still, that comparison, however glib and inapt, may yet be salutary in that it prompts us to modestly reconsider certain prevalent claims about jazz’s aesthetics and political meanings. Performance practices do not always embody the same values that they strive to express artistically. Jazz’s social functions can be, and often are, emancipatory and democratic,\textsuperscript{138} whether its players’ sociomusical dynamics happen to be dictatorial or nonhierarchical in any particular instance. Artists such as Mingus and Roach, whose conduct toward others was not always irreproachably virtuous or egalitarian, have produced some of the idiom’s most celebrated creative statements that engage explicitly with questions of freedom and equality.\textsuperscript{139} Duke Ellington could describe jazz as “so free that many people say it is the only unhampered, unhindered expression of complete freedom yet produced in this country”\textsuperscript{140} while always expecting members of his orchestra to subserviently execute his compositional vision rather than simply pursuing their own imaginative impulses.\textsuperscript{141} If these circumstances seem contradictory, they simply reflect the distinction between means and ends—between what jazz expresses and how it does so. For the purpose of furthering progressive political causes or elevating jazz’s status, utopian depictions of the music can be legitimate, efficacious strategies that convey some of its vital

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\textsuperscript{94} and in Garrett Michaelsen, “Making ‘Anti-Music’: Divergent Interactional Strategies in the Miles Davis Quintet’s The Complete Live at the Plugged Nickel 1965,” Music Theory Online 25/3 (2019) (https://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.19.25.3/mto.19.25.3.michaelsen.html [accessed December 31, 2019]). Davis always exercised some degree of oversight, whether explicit or tacit, even during the frequent episodes when he was not playing and his band members would often venture into more experimental musical territory. See Hancock and Dickey, Possibilities, 63–66.

\textsuperscript{138} Saul, Freedom Is, Freedom Ain’t; Monson, Freedom Sounds.


aspirational messages. But advocacy ought not come at the expense of truth.\textsuperscript{142} The music, with all its extraordinary aesthetic and social diversity, has historically involved much inequity and intolerance even while exemplifying and promoting liberty and justice.\textsuperscript{143} If we want to understand what jazz musicians actually do, we should keep in mind that hopes and ideals are one thing; reality is another.

\section*{Bibliography}


\textsuperscript{142} An example of a contrary position, prioritizing present-day progressive advocacy over the recognition of jazz’s full historical range and complexity, is Kimberly Hannon Teal’s assertion that “wanting jazz without institutionalized sexism and other forms of discrimination means \textit{wanting jazz—the music and the culture—to be different than it is}. This will require … a willingness to see faults in, and \textit{let go of}, parts of the history and soundscape that currently define the music” (“Mary Lou Williams as Apology: Jazz, History, and Institutional Sexism in the Twenty-First Century,” \textit{Jazz and Culture} 2 [2019]: 21); emphasis added.


“Earl ‘Fatha’ Hines Calls Jazz ‘Pro-Democratic, Anti-Fascist.’” *New York Amsterdam News*, March 10, 1945, 7B.


How Democratic Is Jazz?


