

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.¹ His notorious tendency to act without forethought reminded some press commentators of the celebrated African American art form's characteristic spontaneity.² This was more than a little odd. Trump? Could this corrupt, capricious, megalomaniacal racist really be the Coltrane of contemporary American politics?³ True, the leader of the free world, if no jazz lover himself, fully appreciated music's enormous global appeal,⁴ 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.⁵ 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]).

² Lawrence Rosenthal, "Trump: The Roots of Improvisation," *Huffington Post*, September 9, 2016 (https://www.huffpost.com/entry/trump-the-roots-of-improv_b_11739016 [accessed May 14, 2019]); Michael D. Shear and Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Trump Will Take an Improvised Approach With a Wave of Executive Actions," *The New York Times*, January 22, 2017, A13. See also Vijay Iyer with Daniel Fischlin and Eric Porter, "'Opening Up a Space That Maybe Wouldn't Exist Otherwise': *Holding It Down* in the Aftermath," in *Playing for Keeps: Improvisation in the Aftermath*, ed. Daniel Fischlin and Eric Porter (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 89.

³ Charles M. Blow, "The Rot You Smell is a Racist Potus," *The New York Times*, July 29, 2019, A21; Eric Lipton, Maggie Haberman, and Mark Mazzetti, "Inside Ukraine Aid Freeze: An 84-Day Clash of Wills," *The New York Times*, December 30, 2019, A1, A10; David A. Graham, "Trump's Dangerous Love of Improvisation," *The Atlantic*, August 9, 2017 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/get-on-board-the-trump-trane/536379/> [accessed May 14, 2019]).

⁴ Sacha Baron Cohen, *Da Ali G Show*, Season 2, Episode 3, March 7, 2003 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNQST9M9cbo> [accessed May 14, 2019]).

⁵ Donald J. Trump with Tony Schwartz, *The Art of the Deal* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987), 71; Nichole Rustin-Paschal, *The Kind of Man I Am: Jazz Masculinity and the World of Charles Mingus Jr* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2017), 84; Farah Jasmine Griffin and Salim Washington, *Clawing at the Limits of Cool: Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and the Greatest Jazz Collaboration Ever* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008), 149.

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exhibit despotic tendencies to the point that it had created a “crisis of democracy”?⁶ 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,”⁸ and a decade later Dave Brubeck and his wife, Iola, declared that the idiom “embod[ied] 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

⁶ Jelani Cobb, “House Cleaning,” *The New Yorker*, February 18 and 25, 2019, 21; Bob Woodward, *Fear: Trump in the White House* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018); Cass R. Sunstein, ed, *Can It Happen Here? Authoritarianism in America* (New York: Dey Street, 2018).

⁷ U.S. Congress, “H. Con. Res. 57,” in *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History*, ed. Robert Walser (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999 [1987]), 332–33; Kabir Sehgal, *Jazzocracy: Jazz, Democracy, and the Creation of a New American Mythology* (Mishawaka, IN: Better World Books, 2008); Gregory Clark, *Civic Jazz: American Music and Kenneth Burke on the Art of Getting Along* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 70–76.

⁸ “Earl ‘Fatha’ Hines Calls Jazz ‘Pro-Democratic, Anti-Fascist,’” *New York Amsterdam News*, March 10, 1945, 7B. See also “‘Fatha’ Administers Louisville U. Lesson On Race Prejudice,” *Billboard*, April 28, 1945, 19. Trumpeter Louis Metcalf took a similar stance during the same era; see Sean Mills, “Democracy in Music: Louis Metcalf’s International Band and Montreal Jazz History,” *Canadian Historical Review* 100/3 (2019): 366–72.

⁹ Iola Brubeck and Dave Brubeck, “Jazz Perspective,” in *Jam Session: An Anthology of Jazz*, ed. Ralph J. Gleason (New York: Putnam’s, 1958 [1956]), 224. Discussed in Stephen A. Crist, “Jazz as Democracy? Dave Brubeck and Cold War Politics,” *Journal of Musicology* 26/2 (2009): 159.

¹⁰ Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 417.

¹¹ J. A. Rogers, “Jazz at Home,” in *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Touchstone, 1992 [1925]), 223.

¹² Robert Goffin, *Jazz: From the Congo to the Metropolitan*, trans. Walter Schaap and Leonard G. Feather (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, and Co., 1944), 240; Willard Moore, “Jazz Weapon Against Fascism,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, September 16, 1944, 8. Discussed in David W. Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big Band Jazz in New Deal America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 141–43.

¹³ Marshall W. Stearns, *The Story of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 294–95; Willis Conover, Interview by Cliff Groce for *The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project*. August 8, 1989 (<https://memory.loc.gov/service/mss/mfdip/2010/2010con01/2010con01.pdf> [accessed May 16, 2019]); Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 15–17; Mark Laver, “Freedom of Choice: Jazz, Neoliberalism, and the Lincoln Center,” *Popular Music and Society* 37/5 (2014): 542–46; Danielle Fosler-Lussier, *Music in America’s Cold War Diplomacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 84–86.

history, jazz has been called democratic on account of its capacity to further the cause of racial equality.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."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 Ellison¹⁶—more ardently so, even, than by Ellison himself.¹⁷ Their most prominent twenty-first-century inheritor is the trumpeter and composer Wynton Marsalis,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.¹⁹ The democracy metaphor has, if nothing else, proven to be an

¹⁴ Leonard G. Feather, "Retrospect of the Year in Jazz," *The New York Times*, December 21, 1941, X6; Frank M. Davis, "Rating the Records: Democracy in Jazz," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, January 13, 1945, 13; John Hammond with Irving Townsend, *John Hammond on Record: An Autobiography* (New York: Ridge Press/Summit Books, 1977), 51; Tad Hershorn, *Norman Granz: The Man Who Used Jazz for Justice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 106; Cornel West, *Democracy Matters* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 91. For further discussion, see, for example, Lewis A. Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 120–49; John Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 34–53; and Lisa Davenport, *Jazz Diplomacy: Promoting America in the Cold War Era* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 24–26.

¹⁵ Sterling A. Brown, "Spirituals, Blues, and Jazz," in *Jam Session: An Anthology of Jazz*, ed. Ralph J. Gleason (New York: Putnam's, 1958 [1945]), 26. Discussed in Graham Lock, *Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 131–33.

¹⁶ Robert G. O'Meally, "Introduction: Jazz Shapes," in *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writings*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally (New York: Modern Library, 2001), xii–xiii; Stanley Crouch, "Blues to Be Constitutional," in *Considering Genius: Writings on Jazz* (New York: Basic Books, 2006 [1998]), 172–75. See also Stanley Crouch, *The All-American Skin Game, Or, The Decoy of Race* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 36.

¹⁷ William J. Maxwell, "Ralph Ellison and the Constitution of Jazzocracy," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 16/1 (2004): 48–52. For a thorough overview of Ellisonian jazz criticism, see Andrew San-chirico, "The Culturally Conservative View of Jazz in America: A Historical and Critical Analysis," *Jazz Perspectives* 9/3 (2015): 289–311.

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.

¹⁹ Daniel Fischlin, "Improvocracy?" *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 8/1 (2012): 9–10 (<https://www.criticalimprov.com/index.php/csieci/article/view/2148/2658> [accessed May 18, 2019]); Mark Laver, "Freedom of Choice: Jazz, Neoliberalism, and the Lincoln Center," *Popular Music and Society* 37/5 (2014): 546–53. See also Tracy McMullen, "Identity for Sale: Glenn Miller, Wynton Marsalis, and Cultural Replay in Music," in *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, ed. Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 140–42.

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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,”²⁰ the most widely recognized democratic values.²¹ Composer and pianist Muhal Richard Abrams for this reason deemed improvisation “a human right”²²; cultural critic Albert Murray called it “the ultimate human (i.e., heroic) endowment.”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,²⁴ to Trump in modern times.²⁵ Even the discipline and knowledge that are, according to

²⁰ Paul Rinzier, *The Contradictions of Jazz* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 59.

²¹ Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, 2nd edition (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992 [380 B.C.E.]), 232; Astra Taylor, *Democracy May Not Exist, But We’ll Miss It When It’s Gone* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2019), 17.

²² Muhal Richard Abrams, Lincoln Beauchamp Jr., George Lewis, and Roscoe Mitchell. “Improvisation is a Human Right”: Chicago Slow Dance: The AACM in Conversation,” *Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice*, September 27, 2011, 8 (http://www.improvcommunity.ca/sites/improvcommunity.ca/files/research_collection/850/Panel_Mitchell_Abrams_Lewis_Transcription.pdf [accessed May 24, 2019]). Quoted in Mark Laver, *Jazz Sells: Music, Marketing, and Meaning* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 234.

²³ Albert Murray, *The Hero and the Blues* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1973), 107. Quoted in Stanley Crouch, “Blues to Be Constitutional,” in *Considering Genius: Writings on Jazz* (New York: Basic Books, 2006 [1998]), 175. See also Albert Murray, “Improvisation and the Creative Process,” in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 111–13.

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).

²⁵ When asked, “Is there a master plan to your deal making or is it all improvisational?,” Trump replied, “It’s *much more* improvisational than people might think” (Glenn Plaskin, “Playboy Interview: Donald Trump,” *Playboy*, March 1990, 55–72 [<https://www.playboy.com/read/playboy-interview-donald-trump-1990>] [accessed May 24, 2019]). Quoted in Lawrence Rosenthal, “Trump: The Roots of Improvisation,” *Huffington Post*, September 9, 2016 (https://www.huffpost.com/entry/trump-the-roots-of-improv_b_11739016] [accessed May 14, 2019]). Another despotic political figure known to act improvisationally was Ahmed Ben Bella, the first Algerian president, whom Elaine Mokhtefi has described as “a great master of improvisation” under whom “Algeria’s stated democratic and humanitarian ideals were thwarted regularly with arrests, torture, and banishment” (*Algiers, Third World Capital: Freedom Fighters, Revolutionaries, Black Panthers* [London: Verso, 2018], 59 and 74).

composer and scholar George E. Lewis,²⁶ vital preconditions of improvisation in jazz and other Afrodiasporic 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.”²⁷

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.”²⁸ 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 aesthetics²⁹—remains prevalent today; spontaneous collective musical creativity is often said to embody egalitarian and humane values such as “mutual respect and co-operation”³⁰; a “spirit of dialogue and difference”³¹; “generosity”³²; and “openness, mutuality, and collaboration.”³³ 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.”³⁴ Other influential cultural critics have shared this view,³⁵ which plainly evokes democracy’s inherent tension between individual liberty and communal

²⁶ George E. Lewis, “Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives,” *Black Music Research Journal* 16/1 (1996): 114.

²⁷ Billy Taylor, *Jazz Piano: History and Development* (Dubuque, IA: William C. Brown, 1982), 23. Discussed in Benjamin Givan, “Rethinking Interaction in Jazz Improvisation,” *Music Theory Online* 22/3 (2016) (<http://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.16.22.3/mto.16.22.3.givan.html> [accessed May 24, 2019]).

²⁸ Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993 [1980]), 105. Quoted in Dana Gooley, *Fantasies of Improvisation: Free Playing in Nineteenth-Century Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 115. Raymond A. R. MacDonald and Graeme B. Wilson overstate this claim, writing: “the reality of improvisation is that it functions almost exclusively in group contexts” (*The Art of Becoming: How Group Improvisation Works* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2020], 39).

²⁹ Gooley, *Fantasies of Improvisation*, 297.

³⁰ Martin Williams, *The Jazz Tradition*, 2nd revised edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 263.

³¹ Fischlin and Heble, “The Other Side of Nowhere,” 17.

³² Tracy McMullen, “The Improvisative,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, Vol. 1, ed. George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 122–23.

³³ Georgina Born, “After Relational Aesthetics: Improvised Music, the Social, and (Re)Theorizing the Aesthetic,” in *Improvisation and Social Aesthetics*, ed. Georgina Born, Eric Lewis, and Will Straw (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 41.

³⁴ John A. Kouwenhoven, *Made in America: The Arts in Modern Civilization* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1949), 264.

³⁵ Ralph Ellison, “The Charlie Christian Story,” in *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison’s Jazz Writings*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally (New York: Modern Library, 2001 [1958]), 36; Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017 [1993]), 104–105; Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, *Jazz: A History of America’s Music* (New York: Knopf, 2000), xxi.

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equality.³⁶ “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.”³⁷

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,³⁸ Western art music is typically thought to express markedly inegalitarian values, which have fallen out of favor in contemporary liberal societies.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ “This music that we deal with is very democratic—it’s collective creativity,” Roach explains of jazz. “In [Western classical] music ... there’s two people who control everything—that’s the composer and the conductor. ... The chorus, they’re a bunch of serfs, the whole orchestra, that’s serfs; these people are like slaves—they just do the bidding of this one person who has written it and this conductor who is the ‘driva man,’ so to speak (the driva man with us in slavery was the guy who used the whip to make sure we worked from sun-up to sun-down).”⁴¹

³⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin, 1968 [1762]), 96, 112–14; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Library of America, 2004 [1835 and 1840]), 288–91; Robert A. Dahl, “Is Equality Inimical to Liberty?” in *A Preface to Economic Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 7–51; Richard Norman, “Does Equality Destroy Liberty?” in *Readings in Social and Political Philosophy*, ed. Robert M. Stewart (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986 [1982]), 282–96. Discussed in Maxwell, “Ralph Ellison and the Constitution of Jazzocracy,” 43–45.

³⁷ Gregory Clark, “The Rhetoric of Jazz,” in *The Routledge Companion to Jazz Studies*, ed. Nicholas Gebhardt, Nichole Rustin-Paschal, and Tony Whyton (New York: Routledge, 2019), 358. See also Sehgal, *Jazzocracy*, 21.

³⁸ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 459. Discussed in Nancy S. Love, *Musical Democracy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 54–59. See also Mark Evan Bonds, *Music as Thought: Listening to the Symphony in the Age of Beethoven* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 99–103.

³⁹ Heinrich Schenker, “Rameau or Beethoven? Creeping Paralysis or Spiritual Potency in Music?,” trans. Ian Bent, in *The Masterwork in Music: A Yearbook, Volume III (1930)*, ed. William Drabkin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 5–6; Paul Fussell, *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 21–23; Susan McClary, “The Blasphemy of Talking Politics During Bach Year,” in *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance, and Reception*, ed. Richard Leppert and Susan McClary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 13–62.

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=mWiqHT1IH>)

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.

xd8 [accessed August 6, 2019]). See also Aaron H. Esman, “Jazz: A Study in Cultural Conflict,” *American Imago* 8/2 (1951): 221.

⁴² de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 215; James A. Morone, *The Democratic Wish: Popular Participation and the Limits of American Government* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), xi.

⁴³ de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 524; Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Knopf, 1963), 50.

⁴⁴ Crouch, “Blues to Be Constitutional,” 172.

⁴⁵ Justin Poindexter, *Let Freedom Swing: Concert Resource Guide* (Jazz at Lincoln Center, n.d.), 7 (https://academy.jazz.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/17-18_Let-Freedom-Swing_Concert-Resource-Guide-1.pdf [accessed May 17, 2019]); Ben Ratliff, “Marsalis, Clinton, and Others Dissect Jazz at Symposium,” *The New York Times*, December 11, 2003, B2; Ted Panken, “Clinton, Marsalis Offer Views on Jazz and Democracy,” *Down Beat*, March 2004, 20.

⁴⁶ George Lipsitz, “Songs of the Unsung: The Darby Hicks History of Jazz,” in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 11.

⁴⁷ Noam Chomsky, *What Kind of Creatures Are We?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 60.

⁴⁸ Wynton Marsalis, *Sweet Swing Blues on the Road* (New York: Norton, 1994), 155–56.

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,"

⁴⁹ James Madison ("Publius"), "The Federalist X," in *The Debate on the Constitution*, ed. Bernard Bailyn (New York: Library of America, 1993 [1787]), 408–11.

⁵⁰ Taylor, *Democracy May Not Exist*, 64–66.

⁵¹ Robert A. Dahl, *How Democratic is the American Constitution?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Sanford Levinson, *Our Undemocratic Constitution: Where the Constitution Goes Wrong (And How We the People Can Correct It)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Michael Tomasky, *If We Can Keep It: How the Republic Collapsed and How it Might Be Saved* (New York: Liveright, 2019), 1–23; Nikole Hannah-Jones, "The Idea of America," *The New York Times*, August 18, 2019, 14–26; Jesse Wegman, *Let the People Pick the President: The Case for Abolishing the Electoral College* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2020).

⁵² Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Free Press, 1997 [1922]), 179. Alan Stanbridge takes the view that, ironically, Wynton "Marsalis's vision of jazz does, indeed, serve as an accurate metaphor for the current state of American democracy" insofar as it displays "an axiomatic assumption of cultural superiority, a narrow nationalistic chauvinism, a fundamentalist faith in tradition, and a hostile dismissal of difference" ("From the Margins to the Mainstream: Jazz, Social Relations, and Discourses of Value," *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 4/1 [2008]: 5 [<https://www.criticalimprov.com/index.php/csieci/article/view/361/959>] (accessed May 29, 2019)).

⁵³ Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 317–18; Fischlin, "Improocracy?," 8; Scott Currie, "The Other Side of Here and Now: Cross-Cultural Reflections on the Politics of Improvisation Studies," *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 11/1–2 (2016): 4–6 (<https://www.criticalimprov.com/index.php/csieci/article/view/3750/3980> [accessed May 25, 2019]).

broadly connoting liberty and equality, and applicable to both political systems and cultural habits and mores.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 definition⁵⁵—and, on the other, the actual governmental or social systems routinely described as such in common parlance.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.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.”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 do⁵⁹—even if this goal may never be fully attainable by actual societies and governments.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Arend Lijphart, *Democracies: Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-One Countries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 1; James Miller, *Can Democracy Work? A Short History of a Radical Idea from Ancient Athens to Our World* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2018), 176; Jürgen Habermas, “Three Normative Models of Democracy,” *Constellations* 1/1 (1994): 4. The philosopher John Dewey once wrote that “a democracy is more than a form of government. It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (*Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* [New York: Macmillan, 1916], 101). Quoted in Mark Laver, “The Share: Improvisation and Community in the Neoliberal University,” in *Improvisation and Music Education: Beyond the Classroom*, ed. Ajay Heble and Mark Laver (New York: Routledge, 2016), 245.

⁵⁵ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines democracy as “government by the people; *esp.* a system of government in which all the people of a state or polity ... are involved in making decisions about its affairs ... [A] form of society in which all citizens have equal rights, ... and the views of all are tolerated and respected; the principle of fair and equal treatment of everyone in a state, institution, organization, etc.”

⁵⁶ Robert A. Dahl, *On Democracy*, 2nd edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015 [1998]), 26–27.

⁵⁷ Miller, *Can Democracy Work?*, 4; Bernard Crick, *Democracy: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 7–8; M. I. Finley, *Democracy: Ancient and Modern*, 2nd edition (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1985), 9.

⁵⁸ Daniel Belgrad, “Improvisation, Democracy, and Feedback,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, Vol. 1, ed. George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 290; emphasis added. See also idem, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 191; Scott Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain’t: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 6; and Clark, “The Rhetoric of Jazz,” 359.

⁵⁹ Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 90–100; Tracey Nicholls, *An Ethics of Improvisation: Aesthetic Possibilities for a Political Future* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 162; Tracy McMullen, “People, Don’t Get Ready: Improvisation, Democracy, and Hope,” in *People Get Ready: The Future of Jazz is Now!*, ed. Ajay Heble

* * *

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.⁶¹ 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.⁶² Communities with relatively few citizens are better suited to universal participation in deliberative assemblies.⁶³ 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 Musicians⁶⁴—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.⁶⁵ Participation would also be inclusive to the greatest practical degree.

and Rob Wallace (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 276; Edward W. Sarath, *Improvisation, Creativity, and Consciousness: Jazz as Integral Template for Music, Education, and Society* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2013), 214.

⁶⁰ Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 8; Taylor, *Democracy May Not Exist*, 13.

⁶¹ Robert A. Dahl asserts that citizens of democracies have opportunities to “formulate preferences,” “signify preferences,” and “have preferences weighted equally in the conduct of government” (*Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971], 2–3). In a later work he offers a revised formulation: “democracy provides opportunities for (1) effective participation, (2) equality in voting, (3) gaining enlightened understanding, (4) exercising final control over the agenda, (5) inclusion of adults” (Dahl, *On Democracy*, 38). Naturally, Dahl’s rigorous, social-scientific conception is by no means universally accepted, but its core elements are fairly uncontroversial and provide a useful point of reference for present purposes.

⁶² Love, *Musical Democracy*, 4–5.

⁶³ Dahl, *On Democracy*, 100–114; Finley, *Democracy*, 51–58.

⁶⁴ George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 102–105.

⁶⁵ Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson define deliberative democracy as “a form of government in which free and equal citizens (and their representatives) justify decisions in a process in which they give one another reasons that are mutually acceptable and generally accessible, with the aim of reaching conclusions that are binding in the present on all citizens but open to challenge in the future” (*Why Deliberative Democracy?* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004], 7). See also Cass R.

Sometimes jazz really does fit this description fairly well. Inclusive attitudes—inviting voluntary participation by all—are not uncommon among amateur musicians,⁶⁶ 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.”⁶⁷ During the first half of the twentieth century, jazz bands of all kinds habitually expected open participation by social dancers.⁶⁸ 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.⁶⁹

In the case of professional bands that play for listeners whose participatory role is confined mainly to observing, exhorting, and applauding,⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹ 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.”⁷² Another is the World Saxophone Quartet, whose members, according to cofounder Oliver Lake, “know that

Sunstein, *Conformity: The Power of Social Influences* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 114–15.

⁶⁶ James Lincoln Collier, *Jazz: The American Theme Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 267.

⁶⁷ Steven L. Isoardi, *The Dark Tree: Jazz and the Community Arts in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 15–17; Michael Heller, *Loft Jazz: Improvising New York in the 1970s* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 103–105.

⁶⁸ Howard Spring, “Swing and the Lindy Hop: Dance, Venue, Media, and Tradition,” *American Music* 15/2 (1997): 200–201; Gena Caponi-Tabery, *Jump for Joy: Jazz, Basketball, and Black Culture in 1930s America* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 52–55; Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 27.

⁶⁹ Dana Gooley, “The Outside of ‘Sitting In’: Jazz Jam Sessions and the Politics of Participation,” *Performance Research* 16/3 (2011): 43–48. Mark Doffman has observed jam sessions that welcome open participation but where “hospitality is conditional” and a clear hierarchy exists between “guests and hosts” (“The Tomorrow’s Warriors Jam Sessions: Repertoires of Transmission and Hospitality,” *Black Music Research Journal* 33/1 [2013]: 81).

⁷⁰ Turino, *Music as Social Life*, 26. Philip Auslander discusses the role of jazz audiences during live improvised performances (“Jazz Improvisation as a Social Arrangement,” in *Taking It to the Bridge: Music as Performance*, ed. Nicholas Cook and Richard Pettengill [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013], 55–57).

⁷¹ Dahl, *On Democracy*, 10.

⁷² Paul Steinbeck, *Message to Our Folks: The Art Ensemble of Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 3.

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the music is the leader of the band.”⁷³ 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.⁷⁴ 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,⁷⁵ 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.⁷⁶

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;⁷⁷ “the leader of a jazz band has to exert the control of no control.”⁷⁸ Singer Betty Carter always expected the musicians she hired “to be themselves with me,”⁷⁹ and guitarist Danny Barker, as a sideman, appreciated “liberal-minded bandleaders who ... left you alone.”⁸⁰ Pianist Fred Hersch even admitted that “at times, I have to fight not to tell anyone else what to play.”⁸¹ 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.”⁸² But ultimately,

⁷³ AAJ Staff, “A Fireside Chat with the World Saxophone Quartet,” *All About Jazz*, April 8, 2004 (<https://www.allaboutjazz.com/a-fireside-chat-with-the-world-saxophone-quartet-world-saxophone-quartet-by-aa-j-staff.php?page=1> [accessed June 18, 2019]).

⁷⁴ Rinzler, *The Contradictions of Jazz*, 72.

⁷⁵ Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, 434–39.

⁷⁶ Nate Chinen, “The Bad Plus Has Big News: Some Subtraction, Some Addition, For a Whole New Sum,” *WBGO.org*, April 10, 2017 (<https://www.wbgo.org/post/bad-plus-has-big-news-some-subtraction-some-addition-whole-new-sum#stream/0> [accessed June 4, 2019]). See also Bill Beuttler, *Make it New: Reshaping Jazz in the 21st Century* (Amherst, MA: Lever Press, 2019), 141–50.

⁷⁷ James Liska, “Wynton and Branford Marsalis: A Common Understanding,” *Down Beat*, December 1982, 15.

⁷⁸ Marsalis, *Sweet Swing Blues on the Road*, 20.

⁷⁹ Michael Bourne, “Betty Carter: It’s Not About Teaching, It’s About Doing,” in *Down Beat: The Great Jazz Interviews*, ed. Frank Alkyer and Ed Enright (Milwaukee, Hal Leonard, 2009 [1994]), 269.

⁸⁰ Michael White, “Interview with Danny Barker,” *Smithsonian Jazz Oral History Program*, July 21–23, 1992, 54 (https://amhistory.si.edu/jazz/Barker-Danny/Barker_Danny_Transcript.pdf [accessed June 5, 2019]).

⁸¹ Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, 420.

⁸² Ben Sidran, *Talking Jazz: An Oral History*, Expanded edition (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), 105; original emphasis.

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.”⁸³

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”⁸⁴—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.⁸⁵ In jazz, Clark writes, “there are structures of authority that apply. There is a leader who sets the agenda.”⁸⁶ 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.⁸⁷ 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.⁸⁸

The leader’s greatest power is of course in selecting the band’s membership.⁸⁹ 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.⁹⁰ 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

⁸³ Liska, “Wynton and Branford Marsalis,” 15.

⁸⁴ Marsalis and Hinds, *To a Young Jazz Musician*, 47.

⁸⁵ Maxwell, “Ralph Ellison and the Constitution of Jazzocracy,” 43–44.

⁸⁶ Clark, “The Rhetoric of Jazz,” 359.

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.

⁸⁹ For a thorough overview of the many practical considerations entailed in putting together a band, see Hal Galper, *The Touring Musician: A Small-Business Approach to Booking Your Band on the Road* (Van Nuys, CA: Alfred, 2000): 54–59.

⁹⁰ Dahl addresses the democratic principle of inclusive citizenship (*On Democracy*, 76–78).

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this way or comp that way,' because he hired me to play the way I play.'"⁹¹ "If they don't like the way you play," notes drummer Akira Tana, "they just won't call you for another gig."⁹² Count Basie once even fired a musician almost immediately after hiring him, before even playing a show, because he found the player obnoxious.⁹³ 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 claimed—stopped the music and told his fellow trumpeter to "get the fuck off the stage."⁹⁴

Ensemble leaders also decide how much their band members are paid. Invariably, the leader makes the most, sometimes by far;⁹⁵ bassist Chuck Israels recalls being paid just \$40 by his employer, pianist Bill Evans, for a mid-'60s gig that earned \$1,000 total.⁹⁶ Sidemen may all be compensated equally—in 2005 saxophonist Sonny Rollins paid each of his musicians \$2,000 per performance.⁹⁷ 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;⁹⁸ Russell Procope: \$9,621; Jimmy Hamilton \$11,342; Harry Carney: \$13,512; and Johnny Hodges: \$20,379.⁹⁹ Such pay inequities are of course found in most pro-

⁹¹ Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, 418.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 435.

⁹³ Monk Rowe and Romy Britell, *Jazz Tales from Jazz Legends: Oral Histories from the Fillius Jazz Archive at Hamilton College* (Clinton, NY: Richard W. Couper Press, 2015), 40.

⁹⁴ Miles Davis with Quincy Troupe, *Miles: The Autobiography* (New York: Touchstone, 1989), 374. For alternate accounts see John F. Szwed, *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," *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]," *YouTube*, June 27, 2016 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1f7D4_EWyI (accessed June 7, 2019)]).

⁹⁵ Ingrid Monson, "Riffs, Repetition, and Theories of Globalization," *Ethnomusicology* 43/1 (1999): 52.

⁹⁶ Marc Myers, "Interview: Chuck Israels," *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]).

⁹⁷ Sonny Rollins, Handwritten Memo, Sonny Rollins Papers, The New York Public Library Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Box 23, Folder 4.

⁹⁸ 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, Payroll Tax Deductions, August 3, 1969 (http://www.paulgonsalves.com/resources/PG_69_Week_wages.jpeg [accessed August 6, 2019]).

⁹⁹ 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.

fessional 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.”¹⁰⁰

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,¹⁰¹ or Charles Mingus, who was not above slapping his band’s pianist midway through a set.¹⁰² 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;¹⁰³ saxophonist Sidney Bechet was jailed after a 1928 dispute with banjoist Mike McKendrick escalated into gun violence.¹⁰⁴ Drummer Buddy Rich’s verbally abusive offstage behavior was notorious.¹⁰⁵ 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

¹⁰⁰ Alan B. Krueger, *Rockonomics: A Backstage Tour of What The Music Industry Can Teach Us About Economics and Life* (New York: Currency, 2019), 68.

¹⁰¹ Michael Lydon, *Ray Charles: Man and Music* (New York: Riverhead, 1998), 347–48. A recording of the incident can be heard at Styleomatic, “Ray Charles Busted Live with Stage Antics,” *YouTube*, July 18, 2010 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rO297o2XB1g> [accessed August 6, 2019]).

¹⁰² Terry Gross, Interview with Aretha Franklin, *Fresh Air*, National Public Radio Broadcast, October 11, 1999 (<https://www.worldcat.org/title/fresh-air-with-terry-gross-october-11-1999-interview-with-aretha-franklin/oclc/972884443> [accessed June 7, 2019]).

¹⁰³ Gene Santoro, *Myself When I Am Real: The Life and Music of Charles Mingus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 212.

¹⁰⁴ John Chilton, *Sidney Bechet: The Wizard of Jazz* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996 [1987]), 83–84.

¹⁰⁵ Bill Milkowski, “The Buddy Rich Tapes,” *JazzTimes*, March 1, 2002 (<https://jazztimes.com/archives/the-buddy-rich-tapes/> [accessed August 6, 2019]).

wouldn't dare to say it. It was my gig."¹⁰⁶ 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.”¹⁰⁷ The leader may monitor each solo’s length, too. “They know when I make that roll, they got a certain distance,” explained Art Blakey, referring to his famous snare drum press roll. “They say, well I got three choruses to play.”¹⁰⁸

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.”¹⁰⁹ 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’”¹¹⁰ Pianist Hal Galper commented that “many bandleaders ... expected lots of control, and they taught you through fear, intimidation, and terror teaching.”¹¹¹ 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.”¹¹² 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

¹⁰⁶ Terry Gross, *All I Did Was Ask: Conversations with Writers, Actors, Musicians, and Artists* (New York: Hyperion, 2004), 215.

¹⁰⁷ Dan Ouellette, *Ron Carter: Finding the Right Notes* (New York: Retrac Productions, 2013 [2008]), 309.

¹⁰⁸ Sidran, *Talking Jazz*, 105.

¹⁰⁹ Sonny Rollins, Letter to Kobie Watkins, June 2, 2010, Sonny Rollins Papers, The New York Public Library Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Box 107, Folder 2. Misaddressed, the letter was returned to sender.

¹¹⁰ Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, 298.

¹¹¹ Hal Galper, “Interview for the Magazine Chet’s Choice,” *HalGalper.com*, n.d. (<https://www.halgalper.com/interviews-2/interview-for-the-magazine-chets-choice/> [accessed June 7, 2019]).

¹¹² Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, 401.

really concerned about the featured artist. We wanted that person to be satisfied and we'd go to great lengths to accomplish it."¹¹³

The musical and interpersonal dynamics that these various jazz artists describe are undoubtedly extremely creative.¹¹⁴ They may be fully spontaneous.¹¹⁵ And they are often highly interactive, necessitating mutual responsibility and trust.¹¹⁶ 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."¹¹⁷ 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."¹¹⁸ Pianist Paul Bley disliked musical collectives because he felt they encouraged "over-democracy," with "the poorest players playing with the best."¹¹⁹ 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."¹²⁰

¹¹³ Milt Hinton and David G. Berger, *Bass Line: The Stories and Photographs of Milt Hinton* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 247.

¹¹⁴ Keith R. Sawyer, *Group Creativity: Music, Theater, Collaboration* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003).

¹¹⁵ Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 179–95.

¹¹⁶ Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Peter Reinholdsson, "Making Music Together: An Interactionist Perspective on Small Group Performance," PhD Diss., Uppsala University, 1998; Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz, "The Fierce Urgency of Now": Improvisation, Social Practice, and Togetherness-in-Difference," in *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Cocreation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 198.

¹¹⁷ Franck Médioni, "Sonny Rollins and David S. Ware: Sonny Meets David," *All About Jazz*, October 21, 2005 (<https://www.allaboutjazz.com/sonny-rollins-and-david-s-ware-sonny-meets-david-by-franck-medioni.php> [accessed June 17, 2019]). Elsewhere, Rollins remarks of his band: "It's ... basically ... me. ... That's how it is in this type of group, it isn't a collective group like the MJQ were, for instance" (John Fordham, *Shooting from the Hip: Changing Tunes in Jazz* [London: Kyle Cathie, 1996], 337).

¹¹⁸ Eitan Y. Wilf, *School for Cool: The Academic Jazz Program and the Paradox of Institutionalized Creativity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 86.

¹¹⁹ Will Menter, "The Making of Jazz and Improvised Music: Four Musicians' Collectives in England and the USA," PhD Diss., University of Bristol, 1981, 190. Quoted in Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*, 93.

¹²⁰ Don Glasgo, "Able Bodied: An Interview with Hal Galper," *Jazz Improv* 3/3 (2001): 54.

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,¹²¹ has often been characterized as hands-off, maximizing his sidemen's liberty to experiment spontaneously together.¹²² "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.¹²³ "He never told us what to do ... And Miles never talked about the mechanics of music, the notes and keys and chords of it."¹²⁴ 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."¹²⁵ 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."¹²⁶ "Every night Herbie, Tony, 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."¹²⁷

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,"¹²⁸ 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."¹²⁹ In fact, Davis himself acknowledged giving

¹²¹ Todd F. Coolman, "The Miles Davis Quintet of the Mid-1960s: Synthesis of Improvisational and Compositional Elements," PhD Diss., New York University, 1997, 71, 109, 147; Keith Waters, *The Studio Recordings of the Miles Davis Quintet, 1965–68* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 57–59.

¹²² Michelle Mercer, *Footprints: The Life and Work of Wayne Shorter* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 99; Denise Sullivan, "Branford Marsalis: Speaking His Truth," *Down Beat*, May 2019, 32.

¹²³ Brooks Johnson, "Herbie Hancock: Into His Own Thing," in *Down Beat: The Great Jazz Interviews*, ed. Frank Alkyer and Ed Enright (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2009 [1971]), 149.

¹²⁴ Herbie Hancock and Lisa Dickey, *Possibilities* (New York: Viking, 2014), 60–61.

¹²⁵ Milt Hinton, "New Giant of the Bass," *Jazz* 2/2 (1978): 51. Quoted in Ouellette, *Ron Carter*, 117. Carter also said, however, that Davis would give Hancock and Williams verbal instructions.

¹²⁶ Davis and Troupe, *Miles*, 273.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 278.

¹²⁸ Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, 299.

¹²⁹ Ralph J. Gleason, *Conversations in Jazz: The Ralph J. Gleason Interviews*, ed. Toby Gleason (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 160.

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.”¹³⁰ The trumpeter also remembered telling Hancock to use sparser keyboard voicings and, on some occasions, not to play at all¹³¹—the pianist recalls this as well.¹³² 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-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.”¹³³ “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!”¹³⁴ 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 sidemen¹³⁵—or even occasionally not to pay them for their work.¹³⁶ 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.”¹³⁷ But in the end the Second Quintet was no democracy. It was more of an autocracy.

¹³⁰ Arthur Taylor, *Notes and Tones: Musician-to-Musician Interviews*, Expanded edition (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993 [1982]), 13.

¹³¹ Davis and Troupe, *Miles*, 275.

¹³² Hancock and Dickey, *Possibilities*, 62.

¹³³ Miles Davis, “Freedom Jazz Dance (Session Reel),” *Freedom Jazz Dance: The Bootleg Series Vol. 5*, Rec. October 24, 1966 (Columbia/Legacy 88985357372, 2016). Discussed in Waters, *The Studio Recordings of the Miles Davis Quintet*, 3–4 and 169–70.

¹³⁴ Gene Kalbacher, “Miles Davis: ‘I Think the Greatest Sound in the World is the Human Voice,’” *Jazz* 4 (1984) (<http://hepcat1950.com/mdiv8504.html> [accessed August 6, 2019]).

¹³⁵ Griffin and Washington, *Clawing at the Limits of Cool*, 149–50.

¹³⁶ Ouellette, *Ron Carter*, 105, 115, 118.

¹³⁷ Hancock and Dickey, *Possibilities*, 60. Discussed in Kwami Coleman, “The ‘Second Quintet’: Miles Davis, the Jazz Avant-Garde, and Change, 1959–68,” PhD Diss., Stanford University, 2014, 93–

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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,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.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”¹⁴⁰ while always expecting members of his orchestra to subserviently execute his compositional vision rather than simply pursuing their own imaginative impulses.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

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.

¹³⁸ Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't*; Monson, *Freedom Sounds*.

¹³⁹ On Mingus in this regard, see Janet Coleman and Al Young, *Mingus/Mingus: Two Memoirs* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1994 [1989]), 24–27. Gabriel Solis writes: “the Jazz Workshop was perhaps the most ironic of all of Mingus’s ventures, because while it was founded on the premise of artistic ‘freedom,’ it was also founded on the enormous ego of its leader” (“Review: Avant-Gardism, the ‘Long 1960s,’ and Jazz Historiography,” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 131/2 [2006]: 339). On Roach, see Gregg Bendian, Interview with Sonny Rollins, Oral History of American Music, Yale University Library, June 7, 2016; and Eugene S. Robinson, “The Day Jazz Great Max Roach Flipped Out,” *Ozy*, February 21, 2019 (<https://www.ozy.com/true-story/the-day-jazz-great-max-roach-flipped-out/89498> [accessed August 6, 2019]).

¹⁴⁰ Duke Ellington, “The Race for Space,” in *The Duke Ellington Reader*, ed. Mark Tucker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993 [1957]), 295.

¹⁴¹ Stephen D. James and J. Walker James, “Conductor of Music and Men: Duke Ellington Through the Eyes of His Nephew,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Duke Ellington*, ed. Edward Green (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 42–48; Gerald Early and Ingrid Monson, “Why Jazz Still Matters,” *Daedalus* 148/2 (2019): 12.

aspirational messages. But advocacy ought not come at the expense of truth.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.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.

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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 *wanting jazz—the music and the culture—to be different than it is*. This will require ... a willingness to see faults in, and *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,” *Jazz and Culture* 2 [2019]: 21); emphasis added.

¹⁴³ Irving Kolodin, “The Dance Band Business: A Study in Black and White,” *Harper's*, June 1941, 72–82; Nat Hentoff, “Race Prejudice in Jazz: It Works Both Ways,” *Harper's*, June 1959, 72–75; Ajay Heble, *Landing on the Wrong Note: Jazz, Dissonance, and Critical Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 201–23; McMullen, “Identity for Sale”; Sherrie Tucker, “A Conundrum is a Woman-in-Jazz: Enduring Improvisations on the Categorical Exclusions of Being Included,” in *Gender and Identity in Jazz*, ed. Wolfram Knauer (Hofheim: Wolke Verlag, 2016), 241–52.

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