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# imaginatione

## Images of a Sound Portraits and Pictures of Jazz

Davide Sparti [TRANS. LISE HOGAN]

### Introduction

AS A MUSIC FORM of fluctuating status, jazz is earmarked by a fundamental contamination of contributions from various cultures – from the Afro-American vernacular expressed in blues or gospel music, to popular American song; from modern classical music to African diasporic elements and non-western sources such as Indian music. Perhaps because of its multiple sources, jazz had to wait a long time before attracting the interest of scholars who were not simply *aficionados*. Therefore, it is only recently that we have come to understand jazz as not merely a musical genre, and even less as a closed genre characterized by a precise origin, by a clear developmental trajectory, by a specific set of protagonists and by a catalogue of accumulated works. Rather, it corresponds to a field, a field where sounds, practices, discourses, and images are interwoven. The field of jazz, rather than merely *jazz*. In order to illustrate the extent to which jazz must be viewed as a cultural field, I will proceed with an analysis from the exhibit titled “Jazz Eye”, dedicated to jazz album covers, which took place last year at the Santa Maria della Scala Museum in Siena. This will allow me to discuss some of the relationships between music and visual art, and also to culturally re-contextualize jazz. It has always been claimed that jazz reflects the social and urban changes of its times, but little attention has been paid to the reverse affirmation, that is, that twentieth-century culture mirrors jazz, reacting and responding to its presence, re-elaborating its sounds in visual (as well as textual and choreographic) forms.

## Jazz and visual arts

First of all, regarding the interconnections between sound and images, it is important to avoid giving the impression that visual arts and jazz have been devoid of exchanges. On the contrary, there exist various relationships, although these have often been concealed, or presented in a tendentious manner. At a first, more superficial level, consider this quick review.

Apart from the usage of artworks which have lent themselves to the world of jazz album covers (from Rousseau to Matisse, from Hopper to De Chirico), various artists have been directly involved in the production of covers, for example, Romare Bearden, Michelangelo Pistoletto, or Andy Warhol. Numerous jazz musicians have payed homage to paintings, such as Coleman Hawkins' composition titled "Picasso." Correlatively, there are various jazz musicians who are engaged in the graphic and pictorial field, such as Ornette Coleman (always interested in contemporary art. Coleman started collecting artworks— in particular, Larry Rivers and Robert Rauschenberg – in 1960, after arriving in New York), or Sun Ra, whose onirical and cosmic graphics characterize the covers of the autonomously-run recording label Saturn Records. The trumpeter Bill Dixon and the drummer Daniel Humair also paint. Larry Rivers constitutes a model case with respect to the contact between the two realms. Author of the (collapsing) scene painting of *The Slave*, the drama of the Afro-American activist and poet Leroi Jones (later Amiri Baraka), Rivers, who himself played sax, often represented saxophonists engaged in improvising (as in his work *The Saxophonist*). As, and with, de Kooning or Kline, he regularly frequented jazz clubs such as the Café Bohemia or the Five Spot (following the urban restructuring of Tompkins Square Park in the early 1960s, the Five Spot – situated on the corner of St Marks and Third Avenue –, was demolished to re-open again a few blocks north of Cooper Square). Alternatively, Rivers frequented the Lower East Side (which became known as the "East Village" in the early 1960s) where the musicians knew the poets who knew the painters who knew the dancers who knew the musicians... Performing with jazz musicians and painters and ballet troupes and (male and female) poets was a common occurrence. Marion Brown and Archie Shepp (with his Judeo-Spanish wife Garth and their four children) also lived on East 5<sup>th</sup> Street in the East Village. The Nuyorican Poets Café, Slugs, and the Fillmore East were located here too. Here worked Romare Bearden, whose collage – like an improvised jazz solo – draws together and combines everyday objects and fragments of advertising material in an unusual and startling manner.

Staying within the horizon of visual arts but changing medium, we can also consider *Shadows*, John Cassavetes' first film (1958). Besides a sound track produced with great sensibility by Charles Mingus, the film reveals an improvised

use of the movie camera. Moreover, Cassavetes resorted to a particular device: he directed the film by only partly explaining to each actor the role of the other actors, in order to bring out an element of surprise during the course of filming.

As evidenced by the Sienese exhibition, from the onset of the 1950, it is the recording companies, especially the independent labels, who create the most innovative solutions in the graphic and photographic field, and in the use of characters, transforming the LP in an aesthetic object (Frank Wolff, for example, co-director with Alfred Lion of Blue Note Records, was a professional photographer). Although it was not able to keep up with musical development, *Impulse* introduced fiery colors to reflect the emergence of the *new music*. Consider today's ECM, whose covers favour black, white and gray overtones, expressing a need for space and freedom of movement that is amply reflected in the subtle, almost zen ambience of the music. The album cover not only characterizes the artist or the single LP (the image is introduced before the sound, and it is often the image that has the capacity to attract in the auditory world), but the well-defined identity of the recording company. With the arrival of the CD, the cover space is more restricted, but the cardboard covers colored with the peculiar tactile quality of the German company Winter and Winter, or the photographic images of the digi-pak from the Swiss company Hatology still reveals the capacity to express singularity. Moreover, Jazz-photography is not only evidence of the musical event – that is, it is not limited to merely commenting on the music. The art of the immediate snapshot and that of improvisation are confronted with the same performative spontaneity. As Barthes (1982) explained, the essence of photography does not stem from the frame (the cropping) but rather, from a sharp detail that flows outside of the framing and dazzles us. Yet, even jazz, as music of revelations and surprises, is characterized by the impact of unexpected moments – sound bites that strike us, tearing us away from the passive enjoyment of the piece. This is exactly what Roland Barthes calls *punctum*, that uncommon manifestation/occurrence that invades our perception and shatters the frame of our expectations.

### Music, protest and freedom

Secondly, the crossover of image and sound is articulated on the referential level of the content. Album covers – to remain on the subject – represent a mirror of the times and of their political changes.

Despite de-segregationist provisions, blacks in the 1960s could shave white men in barber shops, but they could not share a drink in the same club; they could look after the white man's children, but were not allowed to use the front door of the house. Even the drinking fountains in the parks were marked “White” (because of

discrimination in mortgage loans, it would not be until 1967, in Levittown, Pennsylvania, that an Afro-American family would be able for the first time to buy their own home). As a means of protest against such a situation, in 1960, four black men organize a sit-in in Greensborough, North Carolina. Before the end of the semester, six thousand students in the South emulate them (more than two hundred would end up in jail), and in 1961, they would number seventy thousand, including among them many white activists. The record *We insist. Freedom Now* by the drummer Max Roach actually depicts a sit-in event. Album covers begin to reflect the political significance that jazz musicians attribute to their own artistic mission.

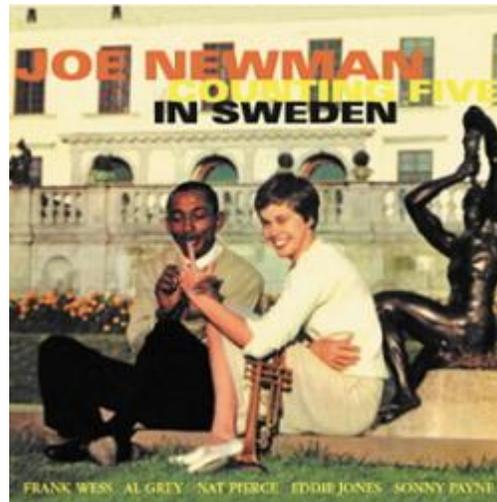


Segregation and discrimination determined travel arrangements, the clubs in which they could play (as well as their relationship with the audience – there were even laws that prohibited “fraternizing with white customers”), wages, and the opportunity to access the world of cinema and television. If it was common practice for whites to play with blacks in Afro-American clubs, it was unheard-of for blacks to play with whites in prestigious white clubs. As Lionel Hampton relates, he and Teddy Wilson, on tour with the group led by Benny Goodman, were systematically treated like servants, valets, or water-boys destined to assist the star. Like servants, they were made to enter the hotels through the service doors,

and whenever, by contract, they had the right to sleep in the building, they were lodged in the basement, next to the boiler.

When, in the 1960s, Sonny Rollins conducted the quartet with Jim Hall on the guitar (that is, the Sonny Rollins Quartet, not the Jim Hall-Rollins Band), the club owners and sound technicians invariably and immediately addressed themselves to Hall regarding any questions about the performance, ignoring Rollins (Nisenson 156). When, in a New York East End cabaret, Peggy Lee announced that she wanted to do an imitation of the great Billie Holiday, rejoicing broke out, while at that same time, Billie Holiday was on the street, unemployed and generally considered a drug-addict. Charlie Parker's mother remained a poor housewife while the record company cashed in millions thanks to her son's records. This disregard for Afro-Americans, moreover, infuses even the discursive approach to jazz. Who wrote the first book about jazz? A Belgian (Robert Goffin). Who compiled the first discography? A Frenchman, Delaunay. Who named the first streets or parks after jazz musicians? France (Bechet and Armstrong) and England (Max Roach Park in Brixton).

Going back to album cover images, even though cultural membership often tends to be concealed within abstract figures (Miles Davis' first album for Columbia, titled "Miles Ahead!" was initially released with the photograph of a white woman in a sailboat), from the end of the 1950s representations of black women (young models, rather than musicians) became less uncommon. However, as Gitler noted (Gentile et al. 47), a cover with a fully-dressed man and woman was withdrawn and substituted by a different image. The original image of *Counting Five in Sweden* depicted (black) trumpeter Joe Newman with his (white) wife Rigmor (the mixed, or interracial, union was considered an obstacle to the sale of the album...).



Let's not forget that in 1960, in New Orleans, the Afro-American drummer Ed Blackwell and his (white) wife Frances were imprisoned for miscegenation. And again, when the black trumpeter Roy Eldridge played in Artie Shaw's band, one piece was to be performed as a duet with the (white) singer Anita O' Day. But, the local authorities insisted that they place themselves at opposite ends of the stage, with two separate microphones. Hence, it is not surprising to find Ornette Coleman's famous cover with the Bill of Rights set afire.



Nor is it surprising, ultimately, that the record has never been re-released by Impulse, and that today it remains impossible to find. Voicing their resistance to this situation, the Afro-Americans organized political rallies where musicians did their own part. The Freedom Riders originated in 1961, a mixed group of people (blacks and whites, young and old, men and women, atheists and believers) proposing to travel from Washington to New Orleans using public transport and distributing themselves spontaneously in different places. “The Freedom Rider” is also the title of a drum solo on Art Blakey's album of the same name (Blue Note, 1961). In 1963, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, was dynamited, killing four children who were attending their Sunday school lessons. That same year, Coltrane, in “Alabama” mournfully evoked these deaths. The piece “The Funeral” was dedicated by Archie Shepp to the memory of Medgar Evers, Secretary of the NAACP in Mississippi, shot to death in Jackson by a white racist. “Malcom, Malcom – semper Malcolm”, also by Shepp, combines music and poetry to evoke the figure of Malcom X. In this piece, based on a poem reproduced in the liner notes of the album *Fire Music*, Shepp is simultaneously reciting poet and saxophonist, accompanied by the bow of the classically-trained contrabass player David Isenzon and the drumming of J.C. Moses. The trumpeter Lee Morgan composed a piece eloquently titled *Mr Kenyatta*, as well as *Angela*, dedicated to Angela Davis. Around the same time, the singer Nina Simone composed “Mississippi God Damn”, which becomes a sort of hymn among the activists during those years. Roach's recording *We insist. Freedom Now* should have been released in 1963, on the centennial anniversary of the Abolition of Black Slavery. The album's sub-title would become the name of a Black nationalist party (moreover, the use of music as political protest is not exclusive to the 1960s; closer to our times Lester Bowie expressed in *The Fire “this” Time* his indignation for the farcical proceedings of the Los Angeles police officers who had beaten Rodney King to death. The images of the beating, filmed by an amateur video, circulated throughout the world, and the acquittal triggered the worst riot since World War II).

### The creative process

Pertaining to the relationship between images and sounds, there is finally a third, more underground affinity between jazz (improvisation) and – certain – visual arts, centred on the notion of process, action and operation.

A good – historical – starting point is the convergence between surrealism and jazz, with its concern for the conscious/unconscious dimension of the artistic creation. Decades ago in his famous *Entretiens*, André Breton lingered over the surrealist practice of automatic writing, directed at opening up an access way to a deep and self-reproductive language revealing itself through the artist. Julio

Cortázar, in a conference titled “A few aspects of the short story”, has declared that the majority of his own short stories were born from unexpected associations and from ill-defined bridges in space and time – that is, they have been “decided” in a latent region, at the margins of his own will, in a non-diurnal area. (1994, p. 1317). Jazz arises from that same psychic region. Cortázar's comparison of improvisation to automatic writing is not unjustified. «Mi sono interessato al jazz perché in quel momento [gli anni Trenta] era la sola musica che si avvicinasse alla nozione di scrittura automatica, di improvvisazione totale della scrittura. Siccome ero stato molto attratto dal surrealismo ed ero immerso nella lettura di autori come Breton, Crevel, e Aragon (...) il jazz mi offriva un equivalente musicale del surrealismo, una musica che faceva a meno dello spartito» (Cortázar 215).

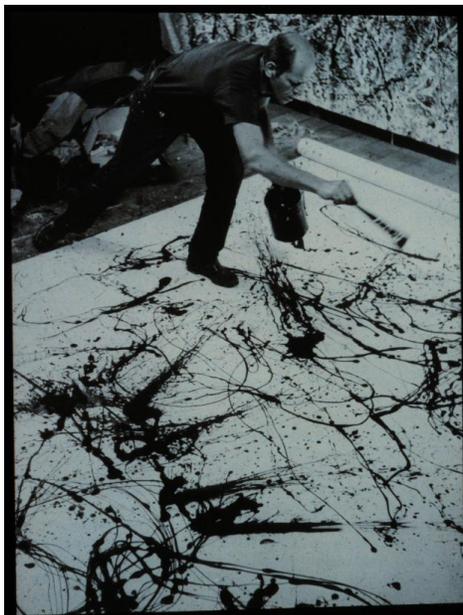
“I became interested in jazz because at that time (the Thirties) it was the only music that came close to automatic writing, writing as total improvisation. Since I had been attracted to surrealism and became immersed in reading authors like Breton, Crevel, and Aragon (...) jazz offered me the musical equivalent of surrealism, music that eschewed a score.”

In the figurative arts connected to surrealism, one should remember, on the one hand, the works of Dubuffet, who dedicated at least one work of art explicitly to jazz, *Grand Jazz Band* (Oil on canvas, 1944, exhibited in New York at the Museum of Modern Art), and, on the other hand, the works by Matta, particularly *Jazz 1* and *Jazz 2*.

Most of all, the surrealist reflection raises an epistemological question: can one play (create) something that is yet unknown? In her *Lectures in America* (181), Gertrude Stein wondered if there could be a way of expressing what one knows that did not come about as an outcome of our memory. Let's consider Keith Jarrett's earlier solo improvisations. There is in Jarrett an explicit attempt to make music emerge not as the implementation of a preconceived idea, but in such a way that it reaches expressive areas that the musician only knows in an obtuse way. This attempt especially assumes the form of a negative control: I control *myself* in such a way that music flows autotelically without being obstructed by the memory of what has been consolidated with the passage of time. Formulated differently, it is a matter of maintaining a state of maximum sensibility without relying upon specific ideas, activating a cognitive style that is not focused, nor fixed, for that matter, on determined models. Rather than being centered on one's ideas, it is necessary to de-center oneself, in order to let the tacit dimension operate. As Jarrett put it in an interview (1995), the jazz musician has to discover a way of starting an improvised performance without any mentally pre-established goals (a specific motif or melody in mind), as if enabling his hands to start the performance without him. It is as if the music – the emerging sounds – were

taking the lead. The modality of which we are speaking does not implicate a refusal of the musician's knowledge. Certainly, the latter proceeds in the light of a determined (and personal) conception of music. But he relaxes his cognitive control over the musical *direction*. We thus find a paradox: if we try too explicitly to obtain a state of autotelic flow, we obstruct it. Therefore we are back to the mental disposition of which the surrealists spoke: a particular state of vigilance, between relaxation and wakefulness, where the conscious and the unconscious are transitory and reversible. At the heart of the artistic creation, then, there is a sort of immobility, a state of readiness. Not a doing, and even less a non-doing, but a way of letting the music display itself through the artist.

The most relevant visual artist we can evoke in this area is Jackson Pollock, who explicitly invokes surrealism (he was interested in surrealist automatism, the idea of spontaneity in automatic design), as well as jazz. If we analyze Jackson Pollock's method of dripping paint on the canvas as a way to compose a work of art – something marked by a formal balance, by a correspondence amongst elements – the result is ridiculous: even a child could do it. Moreover, how does one frame this type of art? As a process, not a (finished) product. This can be seen in the famous documentary film on Pollock, shot by the art photographer Hans Namuth between 1950 and 1951: the work of art is primarily the operation, the performative process.



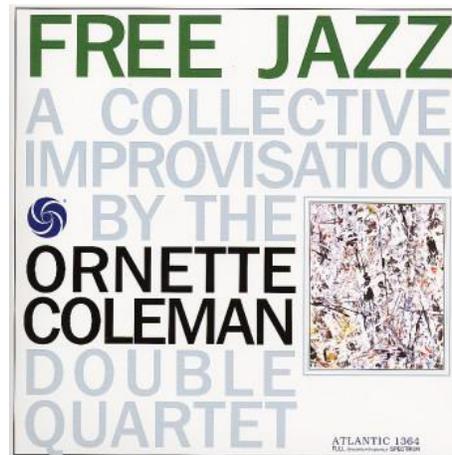


Henceforth the term *Action painting*, coined in 1952 by Harold Rosenberg (Pollock never defined himself as an action painter). It was only *ex post*, when the process was completed, that his works would be given titles. Although he adhered to an aesthetic, Pollock liberated himself from the category of the pre-designed and finished product (one can also think of the particular case of Calder's mobiles, or of Tinguely's self-destructing kinetic constructions: as of 1960, during an installation in front of New York's Museum of Modern Art, Tinguely fabricated self-destructing "objects", made from iron scraps and pieces of mechanical waste finely soldered together, objects destined to be reduced to dust from friction).

In Pollock's case, primary importance is given to the implications of the passage of the canvas resting on the easel – as a representational window – to the canvas laid down on the floor, an arena into which Pollock can enter, crouch down and turn in any direction, facing every bit of space and freeing himself from the tyranny of the horizontal line (it is important to be *inside* the frame Pollock told the magazine *Possibilities*, in the winter of 1947). There is no single access door to the painting: you can go in or out anywhere. The margin does not mark the end of the artist's world (and the beginning of the outside, or of reality), but lets it continue, indefinitely. This is valid in an analogous manner for improvisation. By privileging what is in due course, improvisation is, strictly-speaking, endless, notwithstanding

waning ideas and energy, and concluding narrative cycles. After the flow of music, there is nothing left of the improvisation except a memory – the trace – of something that has already passed. Hence, what remains cannot be represented as the refined, final outcome of a specific intention (cfr. Sparti 2007). It is important to avoid the fallacy of retrospection, which consists in looking at a *process* from the point of view of a refined *product*, as if interpreting the process only in function of an anticipated completion.

Thanks to his canvas laid down on the floor, Pollock also has better control over the drippings, so that they are not too randomly scattered (by dripping and mixing paint colors, Pollock is not so much inventing, but rather re-elaborating the technique of dripping which was already current among dadaists and surrealists – hence, his nickname “Jack the dripper”). It is not simply a matter of letting loose in an indiscriminate manner but rather of following an additional procedure: Pollock paints “in counterpoint”, on successive layers. Again, as in improvisational jazz, what is crucial is the capacity to remain open to the emerging music in such a way as to respond to it creatively. Control and the absence of control alternate in a process that requires the necessary confidence to almost let oneself be led by the changing course of the blobs of color. Which is really the confidence (and the desire) to *play*, in the musical as well as in the childish sense of the term. It is therefore not by chance that Ornette Coleman chose precisely Jackson Pollock's painting *White Light* for the cover of his most innovative album: *Free Jazz*.



This again evidences the fact that the way in which Pollock played with colors recalls the improvised jazz performance (nor is it by chance that Jane Ira Bloom

recorded “Chasing Paint”, improvising on the soprano saxophone with a visual inspiration provided by Pollock's works).

I would like to conclude this brief analysis with a look at the case of the painter Jeff Schlanger, and his particular visual approach to improvised music. Schlanger transcribes (or better yet, “incorporates”) in another artistic medium – the more spatial and “slower” medium of visual arts – the process of dynamic creation of improvised music. His attempt is not one of *representing* or of capturing a particular moment of the performance, but of witnessing a flow in the course of its execution. For this reason, Schlanger, who simultaneously uses two paintbrushes, starts painting when the performance begins, suspending his actions at the moment the performance ends.



Furthermore, he adapts his assault on the canvas in accordance with the musical progression, more or less intense or aggressive, more or less controlled or *splattered*.

## Conclusion

We live in a videocentric age which puts great emphasis on the completed and definitive object, and which has sanctioned the existence of a place of worship for it: the museum. But an improvisation – the verb reveals it better than the noun -- is primarily an *action*, the action of generating music during the course of a performance. By analyzing a solo as a finished product, we risk losing sight of “the phenomenon” itself: the emergence, sound after sound, of a musical sense. In the case of the composer, and especially because he, like many painters, can take all the time he wants to decide what to “express,” the process falls into the background and the text that he produces is relevant (also in evaluative terms). The term “composition” still refers to a created product, while the generating process itself appears to be subsidiary. On the contrary, precisely because it is not finalized in an external product (it produces a result, but not a product), improvisation is always an ongoing process, always exposing its own practice. In the improvised solo there is no goal *outside* the process that might constitute a development toward a conclusive end. And by definition, each process is “in progress” (a completed process is inconceivable). Those who paint or sculpt – typically – *accumulate* objects, solidifying the past, but those who improvise stand alone in the present. Improvisation exists only in its process, exhausting itself as it is produced. Driven by a different logic, a logic situated in, and contingent on, a creation in the present, the jazz musician does not play for eternity, and not even for the following day, but rather for – and in – the specific circumstances in which he finds himself, on this particular evening, with these particular musicians in front of this particular public, situated around him. (Béthune 112).

Although it maintains various relationships with the spatial arts (as we have seen), jazz becomes, all in all, a symbol of that process that always remains on the point of realizing itself, signalling and representing the actual passage of time.

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