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Beyond Jamming: A Historical and Analytical Perspective on the Creative Process

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Abstract

The process of the jazz jam session was analyzed from a historical and social perspective based on literature reviews, oral histories, interviews, and survey results. The analysis produced seven factors that facilitate the successful outcome of a jazz jam session. The factors include individual competence and knowledge of the field, practicing improvisation as the ability to overcome self-consciousness, establishing a mentoring system and role models, democracy and collaboration, leaders and sidemen, community support, and a continuous evaluation system. Each factor was defined and exemplified towards a model for group creativity with suggestions for further research and applications.

Keywords: creativity, jazz, jam session, group creativity, improvisation, music education

Introduction

The goal of this project is to document the creative process of a jazz group often referred to as “jamming” from a historical, social, and musical perspective, and offer strategies for transfer of the findings to any group setting. While there are some authors who have drawn parallels between the creative process of jazz musicians and general creative thinking techniques,¹ this article adds an in-depth historical and social perspective based on personal interviews, surveys, and a variety of historical documents. The broadened scope of “jam” settings and historical evolution enlightens the dynamics and social context of the creative process and also preserves essential historical facts of the first century of jazz history. In addition, analysis of the “jazz jam” process reveals seven factors that facilitate group creativity. Definitions and examples of these factors frame a possible model for innovative group interaction, thus serving the needs of our current creative economy.

Originally used as a verb, jam indicated cramming as many musicians as possible into one room. Carr, Fairweather, and Priestley (1987) suspect though that the idea of cramming the maximum number of ideas into each solo comes closer. The term jam session came to denote informal gatherings of musicians allowing for extended playing opportunities away from the demands of their regular jobs. The sessions also bring together artists from different bands and diverse playing levels.

Paul Berliner (1994) points out that sessions may arise spontaneously when musicians drop in on each other at practice studios. They might arrange invitational practice sessions lasting a long time, often playing one single tune for hours. Such relaxed environments were ideal for learning and the exploration of new ideas. Of course, nightclubs often offered more formally organized sessions during afternoons, after hours, or for Sunday matinees. Art Farmer recalls² just walking the streets at night and going from one place to another. Sometimes musicians would distinguish those sessions in terms of skills of the participants. Certain clubs hosted groups with more advanced players and potential jammers would not dare to sit in until they knew the repertoire. Probably some of the most documented and well-known sessions were in the 1940s in Minton's Playhouse, Monroe's Uptown House, and Small's Paradise Club in Harlem. On the other hand, other settings often not perceived as jam environments, such as "Jazz at the Philharmonic" or performances by "Riff" Big Bands were crucial in developing the language and etiquette of jazz performance in form of a repertoire of common beginnings and endings, accompaniment patterns, stylistic conventions, as well as musical skills for the participants.

Throughout its historical development from the New Orleans red light districts to concert halls, from party music to art form, from segregation to worldwide integration, from musical illiteracy to integration into the university curricula, the model of the jazz combo combining improvisation with collaboration has proven successful as an incubator for innovation and creativity. As economic development increasingly depends on novel ideas and creative group interaction, the study of the dynamics of the jazz model and factors influencing the process of group creation could encourage new models of entrepreneurship and business innovation. In his book *Jamming - the Art and Discipline of Business Creativity* (1996) John Kao takes a similar approach by analyzing the process of creative thinking as an analogy to a group of jamming jazz musicians.

This article presents an analysis of the historical and social context

of the jazz jam session as a tool for training young musicians, developing creativity, and professional networking. Based on interviews and excerpts from oral histories with prominent jazz musicians as well as survey data and personal experience as touring jazz musicians, a series of factors were identified that shape the creative group process in the jam session model. Examples for transfer to a variety of creative group settings and successful applications are also provided in order to encourage further investigation and discussion.

Historical Context

Early jam session culture is often romanticized as a purely non-commercial form of music making with a myth of primitivism attached, meaning minimal formal training. Ted Gioia³ finds a romantic portrayal of jazz life in the early writings of critics such as Hugues Panassié⁴ based in urban black folk culture. He points out how the primitive ideals of pioneering European jazz writers Hugues Panassié, Charles Delaunay, and Robert Goffin have formed an expectation of excitement and frenzy still present today. One of the most critical attributes of a jazz performance is the label “cerebral” in contrast to the praise “with feeling.”⁵ Lopes⁶ clarifies though that the pleasure of jam sessions was not an exclusive reserve of untrained musicians but also part of black professional musicians’ artistic lives. In fact, many of the celebrated early black artists were quite literate musicians, e.g., pianist Lil Hardin (Armstrong) who was a graduate of Fisk University, and many others who joined professional orchestras early on, requiring a high level of music-reading literacy.

As collecting “hot” jazz records became popular among white male jazz enthusiasts in the early 1930s, a new culture of jazz aficionados played a major role in the transition of jazz from entertainment to art. These increasingly large groups of jazz enthusiasts believed that the Great Depression had left behind real jazz as a stepchild of music commercialism. Besides being avid collectors, they formed hot jazz societies producing their own jam sessions and concerts, as well as their own recordings. In fact, jam sessions were viewed as the most authentic expression of jazz with the main focus on improvisation. The settings for such sessions were recording studios, hotels, clubs, inns, restaurants, and private homes. Hot clubs were established in numerous cities around the United States, inspired by the hot club scene in Europe. Eventually, Milt Gabler, John Hammond, and Marshall Stearns organized a national network for the emerging hot

club culture, the “United Hot Clubs of America” (UHCA) in 1935, supporting the presentation of organized jam sessions usually on Sunday afternoons, as well as small concerts and independent recordings, around the country. In order to avoid conflicts with the union, musicians usually received minimum union scale and the events were entitled Jazz Matinees.⁷

Jazz impresario Norman Granz successfully expanded the jam session concept from clubs into the concert halls and recording studios. The *Jazz at the Philharmonic* (JATP) series was based on the principle of staging concerts without previous rehearsals, thus inviting the audience to witness a jam session. Granz intentionally invited performers with contrasting styles and personality to be featured hoping for explosive excitement on stage similar to a revival meeting, such as the saxophone acrobatics of Illinois Jacquet. In fact, trombonist J.J. Johnson recalls during an interview with David and Lida Baker for the Smithsonian Oral History Projects standing behind the stage with Granz, where he exclaimed, “J.J., the only meaningful music is jam sessions and the Blues. All other music is pure bullshit.”⁸

Especially young audiences in the 1940s and 1950s responded to the exciting and unpredictable environment of these concerts, often spilling over into rowdiness. The concerts were recorded and released on Granz’s various labels together with large amounts of studio sessions produced without rehearsals and from first takes. Granz confirmed in a 1979 article in *Down Beat* magazine that the concerts were the most profitable aspect of his enterprise, while the recordings rarely recouped their investments.⁹

Even though these concerts were commercially successful, and Granz was also celebrated as a civil rights crusader due to his insistence on integrated audiences and performers, the history of jazz seems to have some surprising parallels to the history of boxing at this time. Staged “cutting” contests focusing purely on the competition between performers are quite reminiscent of aggressively pitting individuals against each other in a sporting event. Dizzy Gillespie drew on the image of boxing to exemplify the notion that in such public cutting contests the winner achieved not only a victory for himself but for everyone.¹⁰ He further notes: “Black people appreciate my playing in the same way I looked up to Paul Robeson or to Joe Louis. When Joe would knock out someone, I’d say, ‘Hey...!’ and feel like I’d scored a knockout. Just because of his prowess in his field and because he’s black like me.”¹¹

Furthermore, jazz record producer Bob Weinstock built the success

of the Prestige label on a jam session environment in the recording studio. He often sent his musicians into the studio without rehearsal and encouraged them to write original songs and record in long, jam-style takes.¹² Some of the best known jazz tunes are the results of these sessions, including Sonny Rollins' "St. Thomas" and "Pent-up House," John Lewis' "Django," Lee Konitz's "Subconscious-Lee," and the famous saxophone exchange of Sonny Stitt and Gene Ammons on "Blues Up and Down." In addition, the Miles Davis recordings *Relaxin' with the Miles Davis Quintet*, *Steamin' with the Miles Davis Quintet*, *Workin' with the Miles Davis Quintet*, and *Cookin' with the Miles Davis Quintet* were completed in two days of non-stop jam sessions on May 11 and October 26, 1956 with producer Rudi van Gelder at the request of Weinstock, before he released Davis from his contract with Prestige in order to record for the Columbia label, and are still considered some of his finest work. Concerns have been raised that such commercial exploitation of the after-hours jam sessions in the 1940s and beyond undermined the community-centered and mentorship core of such sessions by promoting the image of the competitive individualist and the angry maverick.¹³

Especially due to the after-hour nature of the sessions, noise issues, limited financial resources of club owners and musicians, and with the rise of a bohemian arts underground culture in New York, the informal gatherings of jazz musicians moved into the emerging New York City loft scene. In 1954 David X. Young, a twenty-three-year old painter from Boston, together with musicians Hall Overton and Dick Cary, moved into a large, low-rent place at 821 Sixth Avenue. Young recalled, "The place was desolate, really awful. The buildings on both sides were vacant. There were mice, rats, and cockroaches all over the place. You had to keep cats around to help fend them off. Conditions were beyond miserable. No plumbing, no heat, no toilet, no electricity, no nothing. My grandfather loaned me three hundred dollars and showed me how to wire and pipe the place."¹⁴

821 Sixth Avenue became the main after-hours gathering place for jazz musicians over the next two decades. Pianist and composer Dave Frishberg recalls "playing in a free atmosphere all night long without anybody complaining or hearing you except the guys you were playing with." Gatherings usually started after 11pm and continued into the morning hours with a general expectation of playing well and with drugs and alcohol freely available.¹⁵ The informal gatherings of musicians in the downtown lofts became the seeds for the fertile period of "Downtown Music,"

a series of boundary-pushing music presentations in loft venues from 1971 to 1987. Main venues were The Kitchen, where composers Steve Reich and Philip Glass premiered some of their most influential works, and Sam Rivers' loft, central for the avant-garde jazz scene.¹⁶ Notable is that similar to the commercialization of the jam sessions by the Jazz at the Philharmonic concerts, the open jam environment of the 821 Sixth Avenue loft scene now had transformed into more formalized public concert venues. The opening of the Knitting Factory in 1987 completed this transformative cycle.

Over the past two decades, economic demands on jazz clubs have risen and many performance venues have disappeared. In order to stay profitable club owners rely on food and drink consumption by paying audiences. Long-term jam session host Robert Porter confirmed that, "Most club owners do not understand jam sessions. Most of them aren't into it—they're about making money."¹⁷ He believed that it is now the responsibility of the jam session host to develop a positive relationship with the club owner and teach him or her about the function of the jam session, including the need to bring up the occasional "clunker" and have longer intermissions in order to allow for instruction and networking. As a result of diminishing public venues, jam sessions are increasingly found in private settings such as homes and educational institution, even as recently witnessed in Germany, in the facilities of a local auto mechanic on a Sunday afternoon.¹⁸

An additional component of this study was a survey conducted by the authors between April and November 2012. 370 jazz musicians ranging from beginners to professionals with a wide variety of experiences and instruments participated in the online survey in response to an invitation distributed through a variety of jazz and jazz research lists. In response to the question on where and how frequently they participate in jam sessions, it seems that rehearsal spaces and private homes are currently more frequent jam spaces on a weekly basis, followed by jazz clubs on a monthly basis (Figure 1).

The function of the jam session has taken on various forms due to the aforementioned historic, economic, and social changes. While it can be a tool to evaluate the skill levels of new players, often referred to as cutting contests,¹⁹ sessions now serve mostly as opportunities to enable musical connections, train young players through mentoring, hone improvisational skills in front of an audience, and develop repertoire and musical style.

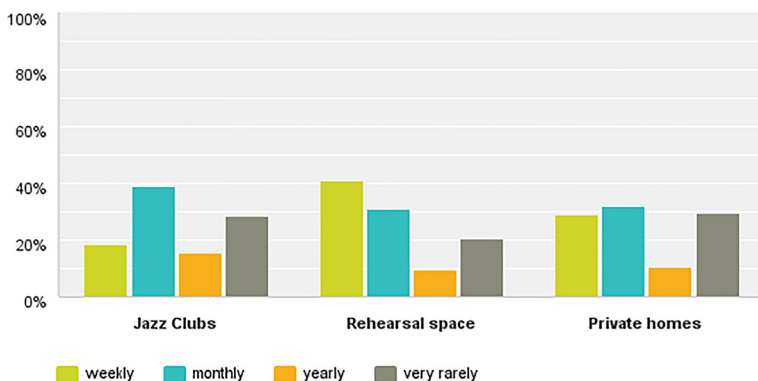


Figure 1. Where do you participate in jam sessions and how frequently?

Sessions may also become rituals of purification and affirmation for musicians after the confinement of performing commercial engagements.²⁰ Bobby Hutcherson remembers from the early 1960s:

There was [*sic*] so many really great musicians around in those days that were all—we used to have—we played these gigs in Los Angeles, and then we’d have after-hours. After hours we go from—we played from eight to twelve, have a break. After hours, we go from two to six. We go to the after-hours jam session, two to six. Everybody go for breakfast, and then we’d play that morning from 7:30 to 10:30. Got to bed, go to sleep, and get back up and do it again. That was the school.²¹

Survey data confirmed the importance of these functions as well as the crucial intrinsic motivation of pure enjoyment, as noted by 38 of 77 additional comments (Figure 2).

Social Context

A set of shared expectations and goals have shaped rules and norms for jam sessions that maintain a social structure and provide the basis for a successful creative outcome. These rules are highly flexible and open for revision depending on the circumstances of any particular jam session, but overall they help maintain a degree of stability.²²

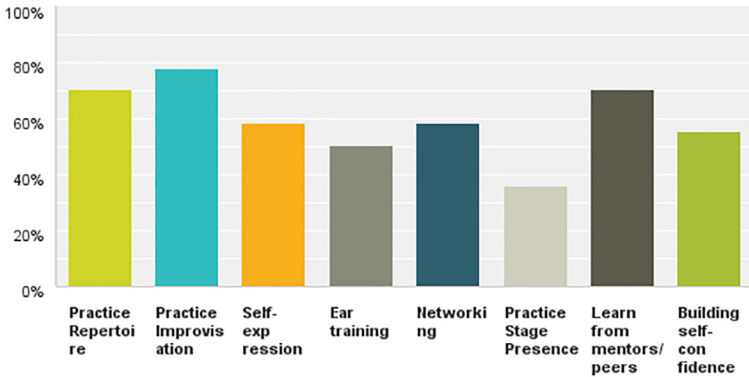


Figure 2. Why do you participate in jam sessions (mark all that apply)?

In fact, having limitations on the range of behavioral and musical choices enable creative collaboration and reduce individual uncertainty.²³ Musical structures include of course the grammar of music theory as well as songs. The chosen songs feature particular patterns of chordal structures and immediately provide information on time, chord progression, chorus length, and complexity. Musicians who are familiar with the song may use this information in creating variations on musical themes. Hence, the level of collaborative creativity then directly depends on the skill and knowledge level of all collaborating musicians, with the weakest participant dictating the limits of creative potential. Social structures include behavioral norms and communication codes. Such codes are also referred to as etiquette and usually include visual and verbal cues.

Traditionally,²⁴ the young players quietly observed what the older players did at jam sessions and learned the rules and etiquette of improvisation. Bassist Lynn Seaton recommends:

Well, I think it's smart if you're wanting [*sic*] to meet new people, to listen to them first. Especially if they're an established player you should know something about what they do, you know. And, I think that's smart.²⁵

Some of the rules include adjusting the length of one's solo to the standard that previous players at a session have set. Playing longer than

the previous soloists would be rude, playing less would indicate inferiority. Guitarist Corey Christiansen shares his thoughts:

And, don't take more choruses than anybody else. Usually, the best way is if it's your first time in a jam session maybe just not only listen for this during the tunes you're not playing on but when you get up there don't take the first solo. Listen to how many choruses, maybe the first and the second soloist and then you kind of gauge what's going to be appropriate for that session.²⁶

Jazz is often considered a model for democracy, especially in a jam session situation. Every participant is considered equal when entering the bandstand and everyone is expected to listen closely to one another in order to develop a collective direction. Of course outcomes vary as players are usually on unequal levels and might or might not have acquired the traditional etiquette rules.

...it's a sad sight to see somebody get up on stage and just be in way, way over their heads. And, in New York especially it's real cold and people don't show any mercy. And, they don't, you know, they say, well, that's the way you learn. You get up and you make a fool out of yourself. And, then you go home and shed for six months. And, then maybe you come back. But, that's the school of hard knocks. (John Goldsby)²⁷

Additional rules include respecting the host, keeping solos short and to the point, picking tunes that everyone knows (and to lay out if one doesn't know a particular tune), to listen first and get a feel for the level and dynamics of the players, to study tunes at home and not on stage, and to dress appropriately.²⁸ Saxophonist Chris Hankins believes:

You know, don't just play high, fast, and loud. And, you have to listen to the rhythm section. They may not want to do it that way. You don't just come in, take out your horn, and jump up on the stage and start playing. I think that people that, sometimes, and I, you know, it depends again

on where they get their education. But, people that learn it from books, or learn it in a very scholastic sort of way, they lose that feeling of respect. I mean it's the whole thing of showing up in t-shirt and ripped jeans to go do a performance where people are paying you money. And, if you look at Jimmy Heath, if you look at Gene Walker, I mean, he came in in a suit to play the gig the other night. It's a respect for the music and why you're doing it.²⁹

Several social mechanisms and communication tools are typically present to maintain basic etiquette rules. Nelson³⁰ identifies three such social mechanisms that help mediate the tension between the need for personal creativity versus the need for cooperation among the participants. First, a designated leader helps facilitate performers and their order of appearances, tunes, and tempos with varying degrees of control. Nelson refers to the second mechanism as "sanctioning behavior"³¹ consisting of facial expressions, body language, comments, or a change in performance level and expression if a participant is in violation of an "unwritten rule." Such violations include calling an unapproved tune, performing at an inappropriate level, or other etiquette breaches. Finally, audience response reflects on the social reality of the event. Low response might indicate a low level of cooperation on the bandstand, while active audience responses can raise the expression and cooperation of the musicians to a higher level. Other tools include the standard terminology known by jazz insiders, such as the "head" referring to the main melody of the tune, or "trading fours" to a practice of exchanging bars of four between the soloists and the drummer, or "rhythm changes" as a particular kind of form and harmonic structure. Gestures are used to indicate the next soloist or to end a song, the audience responds with applause or other body language that communicates approval or disapproval, and even the type of tune selected for a newcomer can indicate the expectations of the band. For example calling a simple blues means taking the level to the lowest denominator as an indication of uncertainty.

It is still not uncommon though for competitiveness, jealousy, and resentment to hamper cooperative attempts. Musicians have to pay their dues, meaning they have to prove themselves and show their commitment before being accepted into the jazz community.³² Another motivation for such "testing" of newcomers might also stem from the traditional need for

jazz students to be very self-motivated learners. For the determined players such failure and public humiliation at a jam session would result in the creation of a new practice regime to overcome musical weaknesses. One of the most popular stories about turning failure at a jam session into self-determined learning is that of saxophonist Charlie Parker. At the age of sixteen, he sat in at a jam session in his hometown of Kansas City with still limited skills and as a result couldn't keep up with the band. His failure was made public by drummer Papa Joe Jones throwing a cymbal at him to force him off the bandstand. As a result, Parker went back to a rigorous practice routine and became one of the most prominent icons of modern jazz.³³ Those who persevere will be able to add a certain element of soul and individuality to their interpretations, the very essence of jazz.³⁴

Touring musicians seek out sessions in different towns in order to socialize and find new ideas. Local players may also benefit from this interaction. Trumpeter Art Farmer mentions how as a fifteen-year-old growing up in Arizona, he took advantage of learning from touring musicians:³⁵

We would go over to where they were staying and invite them over to our house to play some. I remember some of the guys, if they had time, they would come over. They were very nice. They would sit down and play our little stock arrangements with us.

An incentive for club owners is the opportunity to get cheap entertainment on an off-night, which is why jam sessions usually occur during the week or on weekends after regular concert hours. Of course, the off-night scheduling could also be attributed to the high demands on audiences that such jam sessions might pose. Depending on timing and popularity, there might be long lines of horn players each taking a solo on a song, thus stretching the length of the song and the creativity of the rhythm section to its limits. Especially with varying ability levels of the soloists and the long repetition factor, the audience might be bored and lose interest. On the other hand, there is always the possibility of lightning striking in the form of some special interaction or a new player turning out to be very good. J.J. Johnson recalls one particular night during the legendary sessions at Minton's Playhouse:

They were mind-boggling to say the least—most of them—because you would have the top practitioners of the genre, shall we say, stopping in just to have some fun. I think the one that stands out in my mind over all the others was, on this particular occasion, the night four trumpet players had a go at it. On this given night there was Dizzy [Gillespie], Freddie Webster, Fats Navarro, Miles Davis, and a fifth trumpet player—it may have been Howard McGhee. Words could not ever describe what happened on the bandstand with these five trumpet players having a go at it. It was something not to be believed. I still don't believe it. It's too bad it wasn't recorded, and it wasn't.³⁶

The social structure of jam sessions can be described as concentric circles around a core of performing musicians clustering together on stage, with the second tier being the musicians waiting to get their turns, and the third tier any audience members attempting to look into that inner circle without disturbing the ambience.³⁷ Panassié (1942) confirms this focus on the performers and musical creation:

This is the music they are not permitted to play in the large commercial orchestras, which they have been forced to join to earn their living... The jam session overflows and is carried away with an enthusiasm for which one could search vainly elsewhere. During these hours, the musicians play out of a love of music, without attempting to create a “work” but simply because the music makes them feel intensely alive. Here certainly music is returned to its natural state and is delivered of all preparations and artifice.³⁸

Elements for Successful Group Creativity

The historical and social analysis of the jazz jam session reveals a variety of factors that seem to shape the successful outcome of the creative group process. The premise of creativity in the jazz jam gathering is based on Einstein's definition of finding new solutions by reconnecting familiar pathways: “Creativity is seeing what everyone else has seen, and thinking

what no one else has thought.”³⁹ Jazz performers engage in the jamming process with the goal of creating a new musical product of the highest possible quality. Thus an analysis of the seven facilitating factors during this process may reveal a transferrable model for group creativity.

1. Individual Competence and Knowledge of the Field

As illustrated earlier with the example of Charlie Parker’s dismissal from the stage by throwing a cymbal, limited competence and knowledge of one participant inhibits the creative potential of the whole group. Jazz musicians spend hours every day listening to, imitating, and transcribing famous jazz figures.⁴⁰ Benny Golson confirmed the process of reaching for the highest competency level possible:

By then, I knew John Coltrane. We were playing at all the jam sessions together and playing every day, trying to make out what this music was.⁴¹

In his book *Outliers: The Story of Success* Malcolm Gladwell (2008) described the similar example of Bill Gates who, due to his obsession with computer programming, had the opportunity as a high school student to spend countless hours in a computer lab with a group of like-minded peers as he helped a company with their payroll software. By the time he dropped out of Harvard he was way past the ten thousand hours rule of competency and ready for creative entrepreneurship.⁴²

The Beatles honed their skills in the Hamburg strip club Indra from 1960 to 1962. John Lennon recalled:

We got better and more confident. We couldn’t help it with all the experience playing all night long. It was handy them being foreign. We had to try even harder, put our heart and soul into it, to get ourselves over.

In Liverpool, we’d only ever done one-hour sessions, and we just used to do our best numbers, the same ones, at every one. In Hamburg, we had to play for eight hours, so we really had to find a new way of playing.⁴³

That’s eight hours a day for 270 days over 18 months, or 2,160 total

hours of performance practice—quick progress towards 10,000 hours of practice time, the magic number for mastery (Ericsson 1990).

2. Practicing Improvisation as the Ability to Overcome Self-consciousness

Participation in a jam session requires taking a series of risks. When a player decides to join the performers on the bandstand, he or she encounters an unknown group of musicians, possibly uses an instrument or amplifier that belongs to someone else, risks having to play unfamiliar repertoire, and engages in improvisation in front of an unknown audience. Don Squires compared the process to jumping into the deep end of the pool with the options of sink or swim.⁴⁴

According to recent research, jazz musicians actually train their brains in this type of risk-taking. Researchers Charles Limb and Allan Braun developed a special keyboard that musicians could play while lying on their backs in a brain scanner. Experienced jazz performers were asked to perform a piece of notated music and then improvise on a blues form.

We found that improvisation (compared to production of over-learned musical sequences) was consistently characterized by a dissociated pattern of activity in the prefrontal cortex: extensive deactivation of dorsolateral prefrontal and lateral orbital regions with focal activation of the medial prefrontal (frontal polar) cortex. Such a pattern may reflect a combination of psychological processes required for spontaneous improvisation, in which internally motivated, stimulus-independent behaviors unfold in the absence of central processes that typically mediate self-monitoring and conscious volitional control of ongoing performance.⁴⁵

Hence, through continuous engagement in improvisation, jazz musicians are actually training their brains to be risk-averse and to follow their intuition. According to the earlier definition of creativity, this is the trait needed to reframe knowledge into novel solutions. Similarly, Dennis and Macaulay (2003) introduced the metaphor of engaging in improvisation around a structured core in order to achieve higher levels of creativity, flexibility, and innovation in strategic marketing.⁴⁶ After further investi-

gation, the team suggested a jazz-based improvisation matrix comprised of the elements of musical knowledge, role definition, quasi-autonomous leadership, open communication, and self-reflexivity as a model for a market-based organization.⁴⁷

The willingness to embrace risks is not only fueled by improvisational training and exercises, but also by the attitude of believing in one's capability of finding new solutions. Participants in a jam session join the group with an attitude of openness towards new ideas and solutions for the musical task at hand. In a recent Stanford alumni magazine article, Marina Krakovsky discussed a variety of research studies on the power of attitude confirming the positive effect of improvisational training and the willingness to take risks.⁴⁸

3. Establishing a Mentoring System and Role Models

The mentoring aspect of jam sessions historically developed from a need to learn the art form through oral imitation with no written materials available. More established players instructed younger players on the bandstand and functioned as role models. Bassist Rich Armadi recalls:

So the jam session has been an integral force in my development because without it I would not have been able to learn the repertoire, learn to play with other players, get networking possibilities, and just be part of the scene. So I think it's of fundamental importance. And, it always has been, especially having come up with some of the older players like Von [Freeman] and all. They would often talk about their experiences with the jam session and how it was a place where they learned from each other, they heard other great players, and not only networked with them but learned by hearing their artistry and their approach to tunes or certain types of chord changes or what have you. So it's a fundamental aspect of our development.⁴⁹

In fact, jazz musicians still believe that engaging in jam sessions is a central learning experience for young players. Participants in the 2012 survey indicated a rating of 4.56 on a 5-point scale when asked to rate the importance of participating in jam sessions for aspiring jazz musicians

(n=365) with two thirds indicating “extremely important (5)” as their answer. Further evidence is a study on artistic creativity and interpersonal relationships conducted by Dean Keith Simonton (1984)⁵⁰ that documented the positive correlation of a large number of diverse models and mentors with a successful artist career.

4. Democracy and Collaboration

As discussed under the social context heading, successful jam sessions follow a series of rules and depend on equal collaboration by all participants. The collective product rises and falls with the willingness of each performer to engage in this truly democratic process of trading leadership and supporting roles and contributing towards the common good at every moment during a performance. The jamming process depends on a delicate balance of competence, personality match, and individual engagement. When asked about factors that cause problems at jam sessions, the 2012 survey respondents mentioned:

1. Limited repertoire and unprepared performers (69)
2. Self-focused players, show-offs not willing to listen, ego (61)
3. Too varied or low musicianship among all performers (54)
4. Uninvited players, playing too long (47)
5. Bad leadership, disorganized sessions (30)
6. Bad venue, sound issues (29)
7. Too many, unprepared vocalists, inappropriate repertoire (16)
8. Lack of artistic commitment by performers (16)
9. Too many horn players, soloists (14)
10. Exclusive leaders, performers hogging the stage (13)
11. Performers getting lost in the form (9)
12. Not knowing how to end a solo or tune (6)
13. Lack of confidence (4)
14. Missing mentorship (2)
15. House band abandoning stage (1)

The innovation labs especially at IDEO, the award-winning global design firm with a focus on a human-centered approach to innovation,⁵¹ operate on similar principles of democracy. IDEO aims to combine groups of people with high levels of various expertise, keep communication open at all times, trade leadership and support roles and ideas, and provide am-

ple time for the creative process. A crucial element is the ability and willingness of participants to exchange roles in the group and provide equal opportunity for each to step forward as a soloist while everyone else assumes supporting roles.

Another example for the principle of democracy is Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Co. (3M). The company has commercialized more than fifty thousand products over the course of a century. 3M's innovative success is the result of a deliberate corporate culture that fosters creativity by giving employees the freedom to take the lead with company support. William L. McKnight (1887-1978) was the leading force in establishing this culture and his philosophy was based on providing the opportunity for leadership (taking a solo) to anyone with an original proposal.⁵² Hence employees get an opportunity to develop proposals and ideas with a fifteen percent work time allotment for doodling.

The above list of inhibiting factors for a successful jam session includes environmental factors such as a bad venue or sound system. In her recent book *inGenius: A Crash Course on Creativity*,⁵³ Tina Seelig similarly noted the influence of space on creative group activity. Groups need adequate space for intense collaboration with the ideal configuration, lighting and colors, ambience, and environment that unlock the imagination. For example, recent studies indicate that blue walls foster creative thinking while red walls help focus attention.⁵⁴

5. Leaders and Sidemen

Bassist Lynn Seaton had this story to share:

And, I also remember the pianist. I wish I could tell you his name for the documentation of it all. But if a guy couldn't play then he would smash the keys, stand up, and yell, "next." He was, you know, one of the elder statesmen in Wichita.⁵⁵

While this is a more extreme example of leadership, it does suggest the need for guidance towards successful collaboration. When asked about the importance of a variety of set-up conditions for jam sessions, survey respondents indicated a 3.5 out of 5 rating for the importance of having a designated leader. Even though this is a mostly positive response, it also indicates an "it depends" attitude as each gathering features a unique set

of dynamics in terms of personality, skill levels, instrumentation, and environment rather than a “one size fits all” solution (Figure 3).

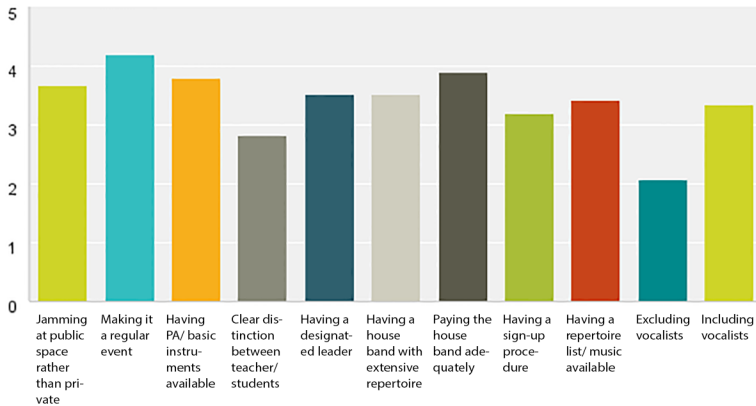


Figure 3. Rate the following jam session set-up conditions in terms of importance for maximizing the learning benefits/effectiveness.

Usually a jam session is led by an experienced performer who functions as a liaison between the venue management, the house band, the jam session participants, and the audience. Gatherings that attract large numbers of players, especially inexperienced ones, need much stronger leadership than smaller sessions with skilled players. For a variety of reasons, musicians might not be willing to take on such a managerial task and rather be what is commonly referred to as “sidemen.” As such they need to develop musical versatility in order to meet the demands of any musical settings they might get hired for. Saxophonist Chris Hankins points out:

But, you know, somebody needs to be the leader and kind of dictate how things go. But, it doesn’t have to be so like military sort of, this is the way it has to be. But, there has to be some sort of organization. Some sort of, you know, this is how it’s going to go. And, it doesn’t always have to be the same. I mean it depends on where you are. It depends on the level.⁵⁶

Acknowledging the variety of roles required for a specific situation, and gathering the ideal personnel and mix of leaders and sidemen, are two of the ingredients for the success of Pixar Studios.⁵⁷ The leader of this particular jam session was visionary and project manager Steve Jobs. The drummer and bass player in the group, setting the pace and musical framework, were computer scientists Ed Catmull and Alby Ray. The lead instrumentalist performing the tune was designer John Lasseter, and the venue owner providing the space, funding, and promotional network was George Lucas. In addition, each performer gathered a team of “sidemen” to collaborate with and switch off during the jam session in their specific areas of expertise. Through constant democratic interaction, peer evaluation, taking the lead when needed or supporting the common goal, this jam session team was able to make Pixar Studios one of the most innovative companies worldwide.

6. Community Support

In a 2002 NEA Research Report on the work-life of jazz musicians, Joan Jeffri documented a highly competitive field of self-employed individuals with lower than average income, requiring them to frequently moonlight. On the other hand, they displayed a strong degree of intrinsic drive and high educational level.⁵⁸ With the high supply and low demand parameters of the jazz performance job market, external motivators are limited and according to economic principles, competition should be driving down motivation for entering the field. Nevertheless, Kenny Barron recalls:

I don't know what it was about Philly, but, yeah, guys always—they hung out together. You played together. So all somebody had to do was say, “A jam session,” and everybody would be right there. It was great.⁵⁹

Hence, the intrinsic rewards of performing together are high and outweigh the extrinsic threats. As mentioned earlier, over half the comments on motivating factors for participating in jam sessions during the 2012 survey identified enjoyment as the main motivator. Furthermore, hanging out together at any time, and as often as possible, is also an important aspect of the jam session gatherings and community as mentioned in the preceding quote. The transformation of jazz from popular music to art during the

1940s was partially an outcome of the dedicated after-hours jamming that allowed for the development of new ideas, such as the legendary Minton's Playhouse sessions. The above observations seem to confirm Sternberg and Lubart's (1995) investment theory of creativity that is based on the premise that creative thinkers, like good investors, buy low and sell high.⁶⁰ Initially most of these ideas are rejected by society as useless but later hailed as classics.

Morrow's (2013)⁶¹ case study of a Nashville recording session documents where conflicts due to uneven power relationships (between the band Boy & Bear, producer Joe Chiccarelli, and their record label) can inhibit creative potential. In this case, the surrounding "community" of producer and record label were not in support of the group's artistic goal to create a novel product, and due to economic and contractual dependence, the musicians were forced to compromise their creative potential.

A variety of positive examples document these unique dynamics of small, intrinsically motivated communities whose ideas, after initial rejection, eventually prevail. The segregated community clustered around Indiana Avenue in Indianapolis during the 1930s and 40s was small but extremely supportive and full of opportunities. Indiana Avenue was lined with over forty clubs, and the teachers of Crispus Attucks High School believed in the creativity and potential of their students. A host of legendary jazz musicians including Wes Montgomery, Slide Hampton, Freddie Hubbard, J.J. Johnson, David Baker, Larry Ridley, Leroy Vinnegar, and many more were the result of this community investment.⁶²

Further examples include the community of Silicon Valley where small, fledgling companies collaborate on projects, form cross-cutting relationships and large professional networks, and as a result became the center of technological innovation; or the growing number of arts districts where small organizations collaborate in creating strong arts communities with increased economic impact.

7. Continuous Evaluation Systems

Visual and verbal cues continually guide the jam session process as participants present their ideas to performers and audiences. The immediate feedback shapes the group process and enhances the learning experience for participants. Organist Bobby Floyd had this memory to share:

One time we were playing a jam session. We were in France, somewhere in France. We were playing during a jazz festival but we were playing the gig at a hotel every night after the festival. And Wynton Marsalis' band happened to be in town. They were playing. They came to the jam sessions. And his whole band, they were on stage, the rhythm section playing. They were playing and a saxophone player got up and he, you could tell it was all about him. This saxophone player, he got up man, and he probably took about five or six choruses and wasn't playing anything, wasn't making any sense at all. They, and I learned this, I'm going to start doing this myself, the rhythm section, they were playing and they just faded. They just kept fading and came to a complete halt and left the horn player standing out there all by himself. And, he kind of looked around and he got scared. And he walked off stage. Then they faded back in. I said, "That was great."⁶³

Similarly, continuous evaluation and shaping of the performance process on the bandstand includes facial expressions, body language, comments, or a change in performance level and expression as discussed earlier during the social analysis. Participants also use specific cues and vocabulary to guide the format of the performance and respond to audience feedback. Through frequent participation in these sessions, jazz musicians "pay their dues" in order to find the right style, personality match, and acceptance by their peers. Pianist Dan Haerle confirms the high degree of learning through continuous feedback and frequent participation:

When I was an undergrad in college I worked in a club in Cedar Rapids. We played from ten until two. And there was a ballroom in Cedar Rapids called Armar Ballroom that was open until one o'clock. And all the road bands played there. You know, Woody Herman, Stan Kenton, Buddy Rich, whatever. You know, all those bands played at Armar Ballroom. They closed at one o'clock and the guys would find out where there was action going on. And, so they'd come down to this club I worked in at a

little bit after one o'clock and we'd have people sitting in. You know, like many nights. And so then a session would ensue and it would go until four or five in the morning. I mean, we'd walk out of the club and it would be getting light. And those were fantastic times. I got to play with some really amazing players. And I felt like I was just hanging on for dear life. But it was really stimulating, really excited me about wanting to play better. And it made me aware of what I couldn't do. You know, how I needed to practice and so forth. So the session was always a very enlightening experience. I came away from every session learning a lot. And those were very significant experiences for sure.⁶⁴

Recent research on brainstorming techniques confirms that groups who also engage in active debate and critical feedback on ideas beyond traditional brainstorming are able to generate more meaningful results.⁶⁵ Historically, brainstorming sessions were based on these four rules developed by Osborn (1957):⁶⁶

1. Come up with as many ideas as you can
2. Do not criticize one another's ideas
3. Free-wheel and share wild ideas
4. Expand and elaborate on existing ideas.

In the 2008 study by Feinberg and Nemeth, groups who took rules only as suggestions and continuously debated their results by far outperformed traditional brainstorming groups who followed the rules. Again, Pixar Studios incorporated this system of continuous constructive feedback in their daily meetings of the Brain Trust (eight directors), shortly named Daily, where creative issues and progress are discussed in an environment of trust and respect.⁶⁷

Conclusion

This analysis of the jazz jam session group model revealed seven common traits that facilitate the successful outcome of this traditional gathering of jazz musicians outside of commercial constraints. These seven traits were discussed and exemplified as possible facilitators for any

group engaging in the creative process. Jazz musicians have engaged in this model for over a century as a training ground for their improvisational, musical, and collaborative skills. Of course, individual circumstances and needs have to be considered, but the factors have the potential to provide a transferable model to be tested and adapted in a variety of settings.

The training of improvisational skills combined with the willingness to take risks is the basic premise of jazz as an art form. This analysis of the jazz jam session acknowledges jam-type gatherings as a training ground for musicians who engage in the process as much as possible in order to train these skills. Our current educational system, in an era of standardized testing, doesn't favor the principles of taking risks and learning from failure. On the other hand, the ability to generate ideas and take risks is currently cited as one of the most important traits for employment. In a recent article in *Forbes* magazine, contributor Ken Sundheim (2013) lists the number one trait of the ideal employee as the willingness to take action and take chances. He explains that, "While chances may lead to failure, they will more often lead to success and mold confidence while generating new ideas. Stagnant employees won't make your company money; action-oriented employees will."⁶⁸ As documented in the study by Charles Limb (2008), the brain can be trained in taking risks by engaging in improvisational activities. Hence, similar to employing the scientific process when engaging in research, there are principles for the creative process that unlock innovation and can be trained and codified. Dennis and Macaulay (2007) confirmed the need of training improvisational capacities in market-oriented organizations.

Experts in a variety of fields have discussed the metaphor of the improvisational process in jazz for group creativity (Barrett 1998; Bastien & Hostager 1988; Dennis and Macaulay 2003 and 2007; Holbrook 2007; Kao 1996; Sawyer 2006; Weick 1990). The focus of this specific analysis is on the concept of jazz jamming, the informal gathering of musicians away from commercial constraints. A combination of interview and survey results as well as literature reviews and examples led to the following seven factors that facilitate successful jam sessions:

1. Individual Competence and Knowledge of the Field
2. Practicing Improvisation as the Ability to Overcome Self-consciousness
3. Establishing a Mentoring System and Role Models

4. Democracy and Collaboration
5. Leaders and Sidemen
6. Community Support
7. Continuous Evaluation Systems

Tina Seelig (2011) proposed a model for creativity and innovation based on the triangular relationship of knowledge, imagination, and attitude enhanced by resources, habitats, and culture. She calls it the “Innovation Engine” and admits that mastery is complex but results can be achieved through practice and improvisatory engagement with the components. Similarly to Seelig’s model and based on the results of this investigation, we would like to suggest the jazz jam session model and its seven factors as a metaphor for group creativity. Suggestions for further investigation include qualitative and quantitative analysis of the impact of these factors in a variety of group settings as well as further analysis of various innovative groups. Furthermore, the process of improvisation and best practices for engaging and learning improvisational skills warrant further analysis.

Appendix A

Questionnaire administered to 370 participants between April to October 2012

The Jazz Jam Session

1. Please indicate your age.

- 18 and under 19 – 35 36 – 55 56 +

2. What is your instrument?

- woodwind brass piano/guitar bass drums vocals other: _____

3. How long have you played your instrument?

- Less than 1 year 1-5 years 6 – 10 years 11 -20 years 20+ years

4. How long have you studied jazz?

- Less than 1 year 1-5 years 6 – 10 years 11 -20 years 20+ years

5. How would you categorize your jazz expertise?

- Early Student Advanced Student
 Amateur Performer Professional Performer/ Educator

6. Where do you participate in Jam Sessions and how frequently?

- Jazz Clubs weekly monthly yearly very rarely
 Rehearsal spaces in schools weekly monthly yearly very rarely
 Private homes of friends/mentors weekly monthly yearly very rarely
 Other: _____ weekly monthly yearly very rarely

7. Why do you participate in jam sessions (mark all that apply)?

- Practice Repertoire
 Practice Improvisation
 Self-expression
 Ear training
 Networking
 Practice Stage Presence
 Learn from mentors/peers
 Building self-confidence
 Other: _____

8. How would you rate the importance of participating in jam sessions for aspiring jazz musicians on a scale from 1 – 5 with 5 being the highest score?

- 5 4 3 2 1

OVER

9. Rate the following jam session set-up conditions in terms of importance for maximizing the learning benefits/effectiveness on a scale from 1 – 5, with 5 being the highest importance and 1 being unnecessary:

- | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|---|
| Jamming at public space rather than private | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 |
| Making it a regular event | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 |
| Having PA/ basic instruments available | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 |
| Clear distinction between teacher/ students | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 |
| Having a designated leader | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 |
| Having a house band with extensive repertoire | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 |
| Paying the house band adequately | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 |
| Having a sign-up procedure | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 |
| Having a repertoire list/ music available | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 |
| Excluding vocalists | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 |
| Including vocalists | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 |
| Other: _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 |

10. What are some problems that you have encountered at jam sessions?

11. List 15 essential repertoire tunes for jam sessions.

Appendix A. Questionnaire (continued).

Endnotes

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15. Ibid.
 16. Peter Cherches, *Downtown Music, 1971-1987: An Overview and Resource Guide*. Compiled for the New York University Public Library, May 2007.
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 42. Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2008).
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52. William McKnight's principles retrieved from http://solutions.3m.com/wps/portal/3M/en_US/3M-Company/Information/Resources/History/?PC_Z7_RJH9U52300V200IP896S2Q3223000000_as-setId=1319210372704.
 53. Tina Seelig, *inGenius: A Crash Course on Creativity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), Chapter 5: "The Table Kingdom."
 54. Ravi Mehta and Rui (Juliet) Zhu, "Blue or Red? Exploring the Effect of Color on Cognitive Task Performances," *Science* 323, no. 5918 (February 27, 2009): 1226-1229. doi:10.1126/science.1169144.
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