

Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation

Book Review

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Phil's Rating: ** (2 stars)

Paul Berliner's *Thinking in Jazz – the Infinite Art of Improvisation* is an ambitious book, initially stunning in its intended scope. Berliner sets out to do nothing less than expose the reader to the full spectrum of jazz music culture: everything from the communities from which jazz musicians emerge, to the interpersonal dynamics of jazz ensembles, to the economic landscape of the business of jazz, on down to specific techniques of jazz improvisation.

Berliner's goal is to fully reveal the mysteries and intricacies of jazz improvisation – by his own account a musical form in which there is much “more than meets the ear.” The specifics of jazz creation and evolution are widely perceived to be hidden in the backrooms and dark recesses of dimly-lit, smoky nightspots and the author's apparent intention is to turn jazz inside-out, exposing its inner workings to the blanching light of academic inquiry.

In the course of his research, Berliner conducted thousands of hours of interviews with many of the foremost purveyors of the music – artists such as Art Farmer, Kenny Barron, Doc Cheatham, James Moody, and many, many more – a process which produced in excess of 3000 pages of transcript. Throughout the book, Berliner uses excerpts of these interviews to illustrate, illuminate, or reinforce his concepts and conclusions.

The author attempts to wrestle this daunting amount of content into digestible form by breaking the book down into five sections: the first four comprising the “meat” of the book; the last consisting of copious musical examples, some 250 pages in all. It is in the first four sections that Berliner covers the sociology, the musicology, and the economics of jazz culture, always with a focus on jazz improvisation: what is its source?

how do musicians learn to play it? what are the techniques used in its creation? Often jazz listeners view the form's improvisational aspect as something akin to sorcery – the myth that improvisational facility is inherited by bloodline or acquired in a mysterious pact with the devil. But Berliner's focus is consistent: to demystify improvisation and to present improvising in the jazz idiom as a skill acquired through consistent applied effort, often using the metaphor of learning to speak a language.

The book begins with examining how students of jazz go about learning to play the style, in particular sounds and sources to which they are exposed and the formal and informal sources of education they may seek. Berliner emphasizes the importance of the social context of the music, examining characteristics of an environment conducive to producing skilled improvisers. He observes that “children who grow up around improvisers regard improvisation as a skill within the realm of their own possible development.”(pg. 31) The author also considers reasons why young people might choose to play jazz instead of other musical forms such as the opposing motivators of social acceptance or, on the other hand, rebellion against social norms – variously reflecting or contradicting the larger culture. (pg. 33)

The communities from which jazz players emerge and in which they are seasoned are considered here and Berliner does not gloss over the significant role the African-American church has played in formalizing the aesthetic discriminations of many jazz players. On the secular side, the legendary jazz jam session is examined here as well, the role it plays in helping develop the skills of budding players, and the social ties which are forged in this often-exclusive and always very competitive environment.

Part II of *Thinking in Jazz* looks at how musicians learn to improvise within the jazz idiom. The reader is introduced to the importance of learning the standard

repertoire. Here Berliner undertakes an often-meticulous dissection of the theoretical constructs of the music and, in particular, emphasizes the importance of harmonic structure in dictating or suggesting the actual notes, phrases, and melodies that improvisers seem to conjure out of thin air. He provides the reader with diagrammatic illustrations (Figure 3.1) of several standard harmonic structures common in the jazz repertoire. Expanding the language metaphor, the author devotes considerable real estate to the jazz vocabulary and the musicians' quest to acquire fluency.

It is a circuitous progression, however, from development of basic improvisational technique to the creation of an original sound or what is known in jazz parlance as "finding one's voice." The author looks at specific techniques used by aspiring players to achieve that end such as transcribing solos and dissecting and analyzing their mechanics, or time spent "woodshedding," i.e., practicing instrumental technique. Assimilating the conventions of the genre such as rhythmic feel, articulation, scales, chords, compositional form, we are shown how jazz musicians seek to emerge from the shadows of their mentors to eventually blossom as individual creative artists. Crossing the bridge from imitating one's idols to musical originality is considered the goal. According to Berliner it is only the handful of artists who manage this transition that produce "compelling visions with major ramifications" for the music. (pg. 276)

Part II also includes an in-depth discussion of specific techniques used by jazz players when creating improvisations such as generating variations and the all-important covering up of mistakes. Additionally, a few other concepts essential for any serious student of the idiom to grasp such as the interplay of improvised and pre-composed material, the functions of specific phrases within a soloist's improvisation, and the primacy of the tune's melody are also presented.

In Part III, Berliner delves into the repertoire: how the music is arranged and, more specifically, what parts of a performance are arranged, what parts improvised, and how are those decisions arrived at.

This analysis is followed by an in-depth dissection of the jazz rhythm section which includes an attempt to define the elusive “groove,” and a look at the roles of drummers, bassists, and piano players (guitarists are conspicuously absent from this discussion). Lots of pithy quotes are to be found in here. For example, Kenny Barron’s description of how he goes about locking with the drummer is particularly insightful. (pg. 356) Lou Donaldson discusses how he likes the piano player to lay it down. And there’s a fantastic bit from Gary Bartz about how Art Blakey went about building the intensity of solos from the drum chair, in effect driving the bus from the back seat! (pg. 372)

Berliner also looks at group interaction, even taking a stab at that long-debated and highly-subjective question: When is it *really* happening? And when it’s not happening what are the reasons for that? (Possible examples include players who don’t get along, or the over-amplification of the bass and how it robs the music of subtlety.) Berliner makes it clear, however, that when the music’s happening the result is an almost spiritual state and musicians who taste of that experience never desire anything else. (pg. 415) George Duvivier’s comments on page 390 about spontaneous convergence of the musicians’ minds touches on the real magic of this music – that when it’s happening, it’s as if the whole band is thinking with one mind, like a flock of birds who seem to turn all at once in mid-flight.

There are many factors which can impede or ignite that sought-after state, among them power politics, and the relative gifts, personalities, and egos of the players.

Berliner conducts an examination of the internal dynamics of bands, and attempts to analyze the chemistry of particular ensembles. For example, Fred Hersch discusses an engagement in New York he played with the great bassist Sam Jones, and how it took him a couple of nights for him to adapt to Jones's "rhythmic" style (what Berliner calls his "comprehensive adjustment to another artist's musicality"). (pg. 428)

In Part IV Berliner includes an examination of the jazz performance context, venues of various types, and the unique challenges they pose to performers. Room acoustics, problems with instruments, etc., are considered. The author also looks at that which Portia Maultsby has called the "mode of presentation" – what performers wear, how they carry and present themselves. The audience's reaction (or lack thereof) and its impact on the performance (or lack thereof) are also considered in this section of the book. The making of jazz recordings and the recording session as a unique performance context are also examined. In one particularly incisive quote, the great bop trombonist Curtis Fuller laments the brief time commonly allotted to the making of most jazz records (when compared with the production schedules for popular recordings) and attributes the lack of ground-breaking jazz records in recent decades to this fast-food method of recording.

In Berliner's epilogue, "The Musician's Odyssey," the author likens the experience of the jazz musician to a mythical journey – one in which the protagonist is on a never-ending quest in pursuit of an artistic Holy Grail. There is no end to this journey, he proposes, so the point of the journey can only be the journey itself. Berliner expands his focus here to encompass the international jazz community, and emphasizes the discipline and rigor with which jazz musicians pursue their aesthetic ideals – ideals

which are inseparable from the forces which shape their internal and external landscapes.

Thinking in Jazz is a very ambitious book. The author's attempt to encompass so many subjects in order to impart a clear understanding of how jazz is made is admirable, though only marginally successful. This seems at least partly due to the sheer scope of the book. It simply takes on too much and nearly collapses under its own weight. Any one of these subjects could easily be the subject of an entire book.

For me the book is a mixed bag. Buoyed by incisive interviews with some of the most important figures in jazz in the last fifty years, the book has its moments. It is on the insights of these practitioners that the book ultimately relies for its credibility and value. There are many, many gems in here – stories and anecdotes and insights which are recorded nowhere else to my knowledge. Berliner has done a great service to the cultural history of America by preserving and disseminating them, and for that reason alone he deserves credit.

But the book's dominant technique of extracting from interviews one or two bite-sized quotes seems to serve only to support the author's own preconceptions rather than allow the points to flow organically from the interviews themselves. These excerpts are presented outside the larger context of the interview and, as a result, the exact import of the quote is sometimes less than clear.

I'm not quite sure who this book is intended for. It is much too technical for lay listeners to comprehend and not nearly comprehensive enough to be of use to aspiring players. I can only conclude that Berliner's intended audience is a small circle of academics. This is a slippery slope for the author because although the book veers in the direction of an instructional manual, it is not a viable forum for that type of discussion. It

seems that the book includes far more technical detail than is needed to illustrate its points – in fact, at times it seems that Berliner is trying to tell us everything he knows about the subject, rather than concentrating on conveying the salient points.

Unavoidably, the author confronts the inherently paradoxical nature of writing about music: the very real problem being that reading about music is ultimately a good deal less informative than listening to it. There are many, many references throughout the book to specific sounds which, unless actually heard, are fairly pointless. Sometimes these references are related to a specific recording or cross-referenced to one of the included transcriptions, but more often they are not.

For example, in Chapter 3 Berliner admirably attempts to explicate the role of harmonic structure in jazz music – a concept which I believe is absolutely essential to truly understanding and appreciating the idiom. However, the only way to really grasp this concept is to *hear* it. No twenty volumes of prose can substitute for a ten-minute musical demonstration. Ultimately, it is far more enlightening to know the sound than to know the concept.

Kenny Barron comments on “how much more complex jazz is than it is possible to verbalize.” (pg. 348) Jazz music has an inherent, non-verbal logic of its own which not only may not benefit from elucidation, but may actually be resistant to it. This is not to imply the futility of musical description, but only to emphasize that knowing *about* a particular musical concept is not a substitute for knowing its *sound*.

But in my opinion the primary shortcoming of this book is its fundamental failure to communicate effectively. Berliner’s insights are unfortunately impeded by his prose which is obtuse, bloated, and hopelessly pedantic. *Thinking in Jazz* is a difficult and often impenetrable read. Berliner’s passages consist of some of the most needlessly

overwrought prose I have ever read. Vast tracts of this book are virtually unreadable except by academics with an elevated tolerance for needless bombast.

Much of this book reads like a legal brief, not a description of an art form. Berliner appears to be much more concerned with impressing his peers in academia than with communicating his ideas in a clear and succinct manner. Sadly, this sort of turgid writing is the dominant style of the book. Slogging through 504 pages of this stuff is – to be sure – not much fun.

Berliner deserves credit for his extensive interviews with actual practitioners of the form and for his Herculean effort cross-referencing and organizing that volume of material. But from my perspective this would be a far better book if he merely transcribed and transmitted that material – truly allowing the musicians to speak on the subject – and dispensed with his own lifeless and cumbersome prose entirely.

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