THE AFRICAN ROOTS OF JAZZ AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR JAZZ EDUCATION IN AMERICA

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Jazz is a complex and multidimensional musical art form whose definition can at times be the topic of much scholarly debate. Tucker and Jackson assert that the term conveys "different though related meanings" including among them, "a style characterized by syncopation, melodic and harmonic elements derived from the blues, cyclic formal structures and a supple rhythmic approach to phrasing known as swing."[1] Evans, describing jazz not as a style but as a creative process of spontaneity asserts, "It's the process of making one minute's music in one minute's time."[2] Jazz is generally considered to be born of the hardships of the African-American experience through slavery and racial inequality.[3] Taylor describes jazz as America's indigenous classical music "whose roots and value systems are *African*."[4] Given the diverse breadth and scope that jazz appears to encompass, a succinct characterization of this music may at times prove elusive. In that jazz is not only a musical style but also a reflection of the cultural and historic influences that helped shape it, a better understanding of the heritage of jazz will undoubtedly aid in the development of the contemporary student of jazz performance. In this paper I will trace the historical, sociological, and musicological developments of this music from its African roots to the inception of what we now refer to as jazz, and conclude with the implications of such research on jazz education in American schools.

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[1] Mark Tucker and Travis A. Jackson, "Jazz," *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.bu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/45011 (accessed November 29, 2010).

[2] Bill Evans, *The Universal Mind of Bill Evans: The Creative Process and Self-Teaching*, Produced by Helen Keane, DVD 45 min., Rhapsody Films, Inc. 1991.

[3] Mark Tucker and Travis A. Jackson, "Jazz," *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online.

[4] Billy Taylor, "Jazz," *The Musical Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (April 1982): 21, Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/742030 (accessed November 21, 2010).

African Music and Culture

Although there is a danger in essentializing the music of a continent the size of Africa, there do appear to be certain generalities that can nonetheless be drawn regarding the music and culture of Africa during the nearly three centuries of the slave trade to the New World. Floyd observes that, “In ritual, Africans expressed their worldview and symbolized intercourse between the material and spiritual worlds through Dance, Drum, and Song” that was inseparable “from the traditional communities in which it existed.”[5] As an inextricable part of all aspects of life, African music differed from Western art music in that it was *functional*. Songs were used by workers to ease and coordinate their effort as well as prepare the young for adulthood.[6] Songs and dance taught moral lessons, reaffirmed sex-role behavior and community values.[7] African rhythm (one of “the most apparent survivals of African music in Afro-American music”[8]) is controlled by the time-line[9], against which other instruments play the “multilinear rhythms that yield the exciting interlocking, cross-rhythmic, and polyrhythmic configurations of African music.”[10] Traditional African music, both vocal and instrumental, also made use of a vocabulary that included “melodic monophony, heterophony, and polyphony: parallel thirds; overlapping

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[5] Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from African to the United States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 23, 33.

[6] Amairi Baraka, *Blues People*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980), 29.

[7] Carol A. Campbell and Carol M. Eastman. “Ngoma: Swahili Adult Song Performance in Context,” Ethnomusicology 28, no. 3 (September 1984): 467, Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/851235 (accessed February 2, 2011).

[8] Baraka, *Blues People*, 25.

[9] Time-lines “are rhythmic patterns struck on objects such as bells, the bodies of drums, percussion sticks etc… Time-line patterns often represent the structural core of a musical piece, a condensed and extremely concentrated representation of the rhythmic possibilities open to the musicians and dancers.” Gerhard Kubik, "Africa," In Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.bu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/00268 (accessed January 19, 2011).

[10] Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music*, 28.

call-and-response events; and hand-clapping with off-beat syncopations."[11] Improvisation was also an important feature of African music. Artistic boundaries of the community were often stretched by the creativity of individual members, "particularly by the master drummers and by the venerable *griots*, who were virtuosi on a variety of musical instruments."[12]

American slavery and African-American Spirituals

In 1619, Virginia was the first English colony in North America to acquire slaves. Even after 1807 when Great Britain and the United States outlawed slave trade, the booming industry continued clandestinely until the outbreak of the Civil War.[13] Palmer notes that slave orchestras in the South consisting of bowed string instruments, homemade banjos, small percussion, and flutes or fifes "became a fixture of plantation life almost from the first. These plantation house musicians, many of whom learned some European music…probably combined it with African playing habits."[14] As plantation owners learned (sometimes the hard way) that loud instruments like drums and horns could be used to signal slave insurrections, such instruments were subsequently banned by the middle of the eighteenth century everywhere in North America except French Louisiana.[15] Since many alternative instruments such as xylophones and harps were too difficult and time consuming to make by hand, these instruments eventually died out, and for slaves, "the music that was left utilized mankind's most basic musical resources, the voice and the body."[16]

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[11] Ibid., 29.

[12] Ibid., 33.

[13] Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues: A Musical and Cultural History, from the Mississippi Delta to Chicago's South side to the World*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 26.

[14] Ibid., 32-33.

[15] Ibid., 33.

[16] Ibid.

Through hollering to each other across fields and singing together during work and worship, slaves of the Southern plantation from all parts of Africa developed a hybrid musical language over time "that distilled the very essence of innumerable African vocal traditions."[17] Qualities of this early singing, based on African tradition and the singer's natural harmonic resonances, exhibited qualities similar to European major scales but with flattening or wavering around the third, and sometimes fifth and seventh degrees.[18] Other qualities included call-and-response as well as "sliding, gliding, and quivering between pitches."[19]

The ring ritual was another important tradition that played a strong role in the life of African slaves. Through this ritual and its eventual syncretization with European practices, African performance traditions were thus retained in the New World. Characterized by "polyrhythms, cross-rhythms, time line, elisions, hockets, ululations, tremolos, vocables, grunts, mums, shouts, and melismatic phrasings of their homeland…they brought with them knowledge of and emotional attachment to Dance, Drum, and Song."[20]

The ring ritual was manifest in many forms including Sunday slave performances in New Orleans' Congo Square, and following church services.[21] By the mid-1700s, as slaves of the Southern states were being taught psalms and hymns by itinerant missionaries of the North[22], the God of Christianity was substituted for the African High God as slaves strove to maintain unity and a sense of identity in America.[23] As the new Christian God became central to the ring ritual, a new song for Africans emerged "in which they could express themselves as freely as they had

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[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music*, 38.
[21] Ibid.
[22] William Tallmadge, "Afro-American Music," *Music Educators* Journal 44, no. 1 (September-October, 1957): 37-39, Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3388786 (accessed February 2, 2011), 37.
[23] Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music*, 39.

in their homeland. This new song was the African-American spiritual."[24] Musically, the pitch structure tended to emphasize pentatonic scales while including additional scale steps of the major scale as decorative pitches.[25] Vocally, they contained the African characteristics of call-and-response and textural improvisation. As the songs of their ancestors did, they also made use of simile, metaphor, and personification. They were "imbued with the surreptitiously rebellious spirit that reflected the militant refusal of large numbers of slaves to cooperate with the practice of slavery."[26] Central to the ring ritual, it was sung and danced to, and included hand-clapping, stamping, patting, and shouting. "It was the 'song' in Dance, Drum, and Song."[27]

Emancipation and Reconstruction

The Emancipation of 1863 had a profound effect on the lives and consequently the music of African-Americans in American. Emancipation allowed for the decentralization and great migration of African-Americans—the now ex-slaves of the South in particular.[28] As Union troops occupied the South to enforce civil rights and integration, drumming was no longer forbidden and since praise meetings were no longer the only legal venue for black social gatherings, social life became more secular as well. Many black brass and fife and drum bands were formed, and jook houses emerged helping to facilitate the transformation of the group dances of the ring ritual to solo and couples' dances instead. "In these jooks, dances such as the funky butt, the buzzard lope, the slow drag, the itch, and the grind were danced to rags, to songs of legend and fable (called 'ballads'), to early blues, and to prototypes of the music that would

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[24] Ibid.

[25] Samuel A. Floyd Jr. and Marsha J. Reisser, "The Sources and Resources of Classic Ragtime Music," *Black Music Research Journal* 4 (1984): 30, Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/779473 (accessed February 16, 2011).

[26] Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music*, 40.

[27] Ibid., 43.

[28] Baraka, *Blues People*, 51.

come to be called jazz."[29] Before the Civil War, "while some of the earliest slave musicians were making purely African music, others were learning European dance music in an attempt to better their position in the slave hierarchy."[30]

The period of Reconstruction following the Civil War was chaotic and especially confusing for newly freed slaves. Due to the harsh economics of the time and lack of work, many African-American musicians took to the roads and became what were called songsters.[31] Palmer writes, "If they performed blueslike material, it was almost certainly either narrative ballads with a melodic flavor that approximated what later became known as blues, or songs called jump-ups that strung together more or less unrelated lines, most of them of a proverbial nature, over a simple chorded accompaniment."[32]

Meanwhile African-Americans of the late nineteenth century were dancing to rhyme-dance songs, spirituals, and medleys of folk tunes that came to be called "rags".[33] As the predecessor of classic ragtime, these folk rags were composed of strung together secular songs and spirituals in a form of A|B|A|B|D|E and so on. Floyd writes,

> Multimetric, additive, and cross-rhythmic configurations were retained in the transition of African music into African-American music…The folk rags were performed primarily by banjo players and by bands made up of fiddles, fifes, triangles, quills, and other instruments that contributed to the heterogeneous sound idea of the transplanted Africans.[34]

As folk rag music grew to become more raucous in the environment of the jooks and roadhouses (acquiring forms known as gutbucket, barrelhouse, rags, and blues), Christian blacks

[29] Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music*, 66.
[30] Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 39.
[31] Ibid., 41.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music*, 66.
[34] Ibid.

who strove for white values, approval, and acceptance, condoned such establishments and music. As these blacks held "race improvement" dances where they danced white society quadrilles, cotillions, waltzes and polkas, musicians "played for both kinds of functions and continued to syncretize the two musical styles."[35]

The Redemption of the South

In 1877, as the result of southern white resistance and backroom political dealings between Northern Republicans and Southern Democrats, Reconstruction collapsed as Federal troops were withdrawn from Southern states.[36] Following what was sometimes termed the *Redemption of the South*, brutally repressive segregation measures were instituted throughout the South eventually to be known as Jim Crow laws. Sharecropping replaced slavery as such organizations as the Ku Klux Klan, and Knights of the White Camelia ascended to scare and intimidate African-Americans and lynchings became routine. It was in this environment of segregation and disenfranchisement of the African-American that the seeds of blues music could blossom.

Handy describes the blues as "Negro folk music of the purest type", and is the "expression of the emotional life of the race."[37] The impetus and inspiration for the blues can be traced from the brutal enslavement of African-Americans, subsequently cast adrift into an often corrupt and hostile world following the failures of Emancipation in the South. "The music created was thus a response to new forms of thwarted individuality, by those who performed and

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[35] Ibid., 67

[36] Ken Burns, *Jazz- A Film by Ken Burns*, Produced by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick. DVD Disc 1, PBS Home Video, 2001.

[37] W. C. Handy, "The Music of a Free People," in *Readings in Black American Music*, ed. Eileen Southern (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1971), 203.

heard the music."[38] Based on a simple and elastic three-chord structure over which an almost infinite number of variations could be created, the blues employed all the African traditions and practices brought to the New World that preceded it, including flatted thirds, call-and-response, shouts and moans, timbral distortions and other features derived from the ring[39]. "Blues was the profane twin of the sacred music of the black Baptist Church."[40]

New Orleans

Initially spared the brunt of the inhumanities of Jim Crow laws, the city of New Orleans in the 1800s was one of the most cosmopolitan and musical cities in America.[41] A correspondent to the trade magazine *Metronome* complained that by 1888, the city was home to roughly twenty-five bands averaging twelve men apiece and "the colored race monopolize the procession music to a great extent as they are not workers at any trade."[42] "Citizens of every color and nationality marched to the music of brass bands. City streets were filled with parades of every kind; weddings, funerals, feast days, and the six to eight week carnival season that each spring led up to Mardi Gras."[43] Of the many ethnicities that made up the population of the city, it was also home to a prosperous community of free people of mixed race called Creoles of Color. "They identified with their European, not their African ancestors and they looked down on the darker skinned blacks around them."[44]

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[38] Ray Pratt, "The Blues: A Discourse of Resistance," in *Rebel Musics*, ed. Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble (Toronto: Black Rose Books, 2003), 127.

[39] Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music*, 75.

[40] Ken Burns, *Jazz- A Film by Ken Burns.*

[41] Ibid.

[42] Lawrence Gushee, "The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Jazz," *Black Music Research Journal* 22, Supplement: Best of BMRJ (2002): 157, Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/1519947 (accessed February 15, 2011).

[43] Ken Burns, *Jazz- A Film by Ken Burns.*

[44] Ibid.

In the 1890s, two new styles of music reached New Orleans "without which there could have been no jazz"[45], blues and ragtime. Fleeing the repercussions of Jim Crow laws and in search of better working conditions, African-American refugees from the Mississippi Delta (popularly regarded as the birthplace of the blues[46]) began pouring in a steady stream into New Orleans, and with them came the music of the blues.[47] Marsalis states,

> Now you have the people getting the spiritual sound of the church, and they are also getting that secular sound of the blues…and the musician who could understand both of those things and put them in their horns side by side so they could represent that angel and that devil, that was the ones who could play.[48]

"Born directly out of the folk rags of black string bands and itinerant pianists in whose performance all of the salient features of the new genre had been present", classic ragtime emerged featuring "sectional design, straight bass, multimetric pentatonic-like melodies, polyrhythms, and treble/bass polarity."[49] Floyd and Reisser assert that ragtime's structural format (usually five sections with the thematic form A|B|A|C|D) and some of its harmonic practices are "derived from nineteenth-century social dance music, while its rhythmic character derives primarily from African approaches to music-making."[50]

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[45] Ibid.

[46] Paul Oliver, "Blues," In *Grove Music Online*, Oxford Music Online. http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.bu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/03311 (accessed February 16, 2011).

[47] Ken Burns, *Jazz- A Film by Ken Burns.*

[48] Ibid.

[49] Floyd Jr. and Reisser, "The Sources and Resources of Classic Ragtime Music*,"* 35.

[50] Ibid., 51.

"Separate, But Equal"

In 1896, the Supreme Court of the United States upheld the constitutionality of Louisiana's state law requiring "separate, but equal" facilities in private businesses.[51] Resultant of this ruling, the well-educated Creoles of New Orleans soon found themselves classified with blacks as second-class citizens. Stripped of their property and rights as American citizens[52], the Creole musicians "began to lose the jobs where they had been working with whites, and they were no longer permitted to play Downtown, neither in the homes of the rich whites nor in the military parades."[53] As the darker blues-influenced musicians of Uptown New Orleans began to play their music in saloons, dance halls, parties, and picnics, the Creoles had no choice but to attempt integration into the black communities they had once scorned.[54] "Creole musicians merged their classical virtuosity with the blues-inflected music of black bands. Together they would transform every kind of music played in New Orleans."[55]

The Inception of Jazz

Initially, there was no name for the music that the black and Creole musicians created together, and older musicians referred to the music they played as ragtime to the end.[56] Tom Albert, a musician born in 1877 maintained that "in the real old days they called it jazz and ragtime…There wasn't any real difference between ragtime bands and the jazz bands…Jazz was [the term] used mostly though."[57] Floyd suggests, "The impetus for the development of this

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[51] Walter Hazen, *American Black History*, (St. Louis, Missouri: Milliken Publishing, 2004), 39.
[52] Romeo B Garrett, "African Survivals in American Culture," *The Journal of Negro History* 51, no. 4 (October, 1966): 242, Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/2716099 (accessed February 15, 2011).
[53] Baraka, *Blues People*, 76.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ken Burns, *Jazz- A Film by Ken Burns.*
[56] Ibid.
[57] Gushee, "The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Jazz," 160.

music was…the ring ritual of transplanted Africans extended and elaborated through spirituals and folk rags. They converged in the ring…and awaited the blues, which joined them directly."[58] Expressed in the music of ragtime bands of New Orleans funeral processions, the heterogeneous and contrasting ideal of the African ring ritual played out "in the form of two rhythmic groups: the front line of coronet, clarinet, and trombone and the rhythm section of drums and tuba (which would include piano and banjo when the bands moved indoors."[59]

New Orleans trumpeter and bandleader Buddy Bolden is celebrated as the first musician to play jazz music in America. Reputed to have a powerful and unique sound rooted in blues and ragtime, he attained citywide fame by 1897, and by 1906 Bolden was the best-known black musician in New Orleans and hailed as "King Bolden".[60] In this new style of music, Bolden and his band members not only read music but improvised as well. "In his blues-tinged, ragtime-inspired, unique improvisations Bolden continued the legacy of the ring, perceived and exploited the existing means of expressing it, and at the same time must have developed ways of communicating the newly emerging values of the period between Emancipation and the turn of the century."[61]

Jazz, as it emerged at the beginning of the century, was thus a music of improvisation and individual expression. As the quintessential American music, it was the culmination of all the musical developments in the country that preceded it. Giddins suggests, "It's not an African music...It's not a European music…it's something that comes right out of this soil."[62] A syncretic amalgamation of African and European musical practices, jazz exhibits qualities of syncopation

[58] Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music*, 84.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ken Burns, *Jazz- A Film by Ken Burns.*
[61] Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music*, 85.
[62] Ken Burns, *Jazz- A Film by Ken Burns.*

and polyrhythms, improvisation, call-and-response, blue notes, vocal-like tone quality manipulation, and emphasis on percussion to name but a few. Elements that "seem to point directly to Europe are the preference for certain instruments, harmonic systems, and contrapuntal procedures."[63] Just as the influences that contributed to the inception of jazz are many, so too are the ways in which we attempt to describe it.

Jazz Education in America

Current American jazz education is generally grounded in conventional Western music theory but specifically aimed at conventions particular to jazz including jazz harmony, improvisation, ear training, composition, and arranging. Much scholarly discourse can be found both highlighting the perception that academic jazz programs are too removed from the traditions of jazz and the professional jazz community[64], and criticizing the institutional intellectualization of jazz and the pedagogic framing of jazz within the confines of Western art music.[65] When considering these matters it must be remembered that "formalized academic methodologies are only part of the totality of experience for student jazz musicians."[66] In that jazz may be considered just as much a reflection of social and political issues as a technical art form, Alperson argues, "It is the rare jazz education program which turns its attention in a systematic

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[63] Mark C. Gridley, and Wallace Rave, "Towards Identification of African Traits in Early Jazz," *The Black Perspective in Music* 12, no. 1 (Spring, 1984): 55, Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/1214968 (accessed February 14, 2011).

[64] T. Ray Wheeler "Toward a Framework for a New Philosophy of Music Education: Logstrup as Synergy between the Platonic and Aristotelian Perspectives in the Music Education Philosophies of Bennett Reimer and David Elliott". Ph.D. diss., (University of North Texas ,2006), 6, http://www.proquest.com.ezproxy.bu.edu, (accessed November 25, 2010).

[65] Kenneth E. Prouty, "The History of Jazz Education: A Critical Reassessment*," Journal of Historical Research in Music Education* 26, no. 2 (April, 2005): 92, Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40215303 (accessed November 21, 2010).

[66] Ibid., 100.

way to the question of what it means to be a jazz musician."[67] Kennedy argues that at the undergraduate level in America, jazz programs are "concerned more with creating generic professional musicians and educators than jazz musicians."[68] In high schools, Vas draws attention to deficiencies not only in the teaching of jazz, but also in basic musical training in general. "Joy and creativity goes out the window…[as a] 'win, beat, get trophies' syndrome" prevails among school administration and teachers.[69] Improvisatory skills and stylistic concepts are forsaken for rote learning and 'getting it right'.

Conclusions

There appears to be no shortage of jazz ensembles, private jazz instrumental instruction, jazz history classes, and the like in American school systems. What may be missing however is the recognition of the inextricable link between the practice of jazz music and its social and historic heritage. In this way, jazz is much like American folk music. Within its fabric can be found the story of the struggles of the African-American, and indeed all Americans, as they made their way from the brutalities of colonial slavery, through the racial struggles of Jim Crow laws (and the ensuing racial riots of the 60s), to the world we live in today. Such an educational approach may require a new integrative approach to jazz education. Just as the roots of jazz music may be traced back to Africa, so too might American jazz education look to the African

[67] Philip Alperson, "Aristotle on Jazz: Philosophical Reflections on Jazz and Jazz Education," *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* no. 95 Research in Jazz Education (Winter, 1987/1988): 53, URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40318199 (accessed November 21, 2010).

[68] Gary W Kennedy, "Jazz Education," In *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, 2nd ed., edited by Barry Kernfeld. Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online. http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.bu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/J602300 (accessed November 29, 2010).

[69] Michael Vax, "Report to the American Federation of Jazz Societies: the State of Jazz Education in the United States in 1998," <http://www.mikevax.com/afjs.html> (2001), as cited in Kennedy "Jazz Education".

concept of *ngoma*[70] for inspiration to resolve the dichotomy between jazz practice and jazz as history. Similarly, Murphy suggests an ethnological approach to this issue, "that is, a holistic approach that seeks to make connections between musical performance and other aspects of culture."[71] Considering the many criticisms and challenges facing jazz education, perhaps as Bowman asserts, "Music education does not need a philosophy so much as it needs to become more philosophical."[72] Stubley maintains that we have a professional responsibility to "systematically explore all ideas and concepts that can potentially broaden and deepen our understandings of music."[73] As America's classical music, jazz deserves and indeed requires a representation in schools to do justice not only to the profound complexities and power of the music itself, but to the rich historical depth with which it is imbued.

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[70] *Ngoma* is central to music in East Africa and to music from other parts of Africa as well. It is multifaceted and embodies the complex relationship between music and all other aspects of life.

Steven Cornelius, "Week 3 – Music of East Africa," Boston University Online, http://vista.bu.edu/webct/urw/lc5116011.tp0/cobaltMainFrame.dowebct (accessed February 1, 2011).

[71] John P. Murphy, "Jazz Improvisation: The Joy of Influence," *The Black Perspective in Music* 18, no. 1/2 (1990): 1. Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/1214855 (accessed February 14, 2011).

[72] Wayne Bowman, "Philosophy, Criticism, and Music Education: Some Tentative Steps down a Less-Travelled Road," Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education no. 114 (Fall, 1992): 2, Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40318912 (accessed November 21, 2010).

[73] Eleanor V. Stubley, "Response to Bennett Reimer," *Philosophy of Music Education Newsletter* 4, no. 2 (June 1992): 9, Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/25666159 (accessed November 3, 2010).

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