

Jazz & Innovation: How the Jazz Culture Fosters Creativity

Written by: Jeff Perry
Minneapolis-based jazz guitarist

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What do you think of when you hear the word jazz - smoky, candlelit nightclubs? Street performers on the steamy sidewalks of New Orleans? The swing dance craze? Or do you think of the word as a verb – to “jazz up” a presentation for example? What you might not think of first when you hear the word jazz is innovation. That is, unless you are a jazz musician.

In fact, when you examine the world of jazz you will find a culture and a model that has been, and remains a hot bed of innovation. Reflecting the definition above, Jazz musicians have a long history of introducing new ideas: new forms, new techniques, new sources, and new styles. Jazz musicians have found new ways to play their instruments, new ways to establish unique identities, and they have both expanded and re-invented their roles. The very cornerstone of the music “improvisation” demands spontaneous creativity or “instant innovation” from every jazz player every time they perform.

Over the past hundred years, jazz musicians have been striving to “get different.” The culture has them continuously seeking answers to questions such as: “How can I come up with something that is different from what everyone else is doing?” Or, “How can I stand out from my peers/competitors and be recognized as unique?” Like a business seeking to stand out, if jazz musicians are to succeed at standing apart,

they must find answers to these questions in real ways that can be implemented and have impact.

Jazz players have had an unstoppable drive to find ways to innovate and they have time and time again succeeded. What has allowed for this success? In large part the music’s innovative engine is driven by its culture of Individualism. The improvisatory and individualistic nature of jazz asks its practitioners to find ways to differentiate themselves from their peers – to attain a unique, recognizable sound. Further, improvisation asks its artists to differentiate themselves from themselves - to sound fresh and different every time they perform. Both of these challenges involve an ongoing quest to find greater resources (internal and external) for expression.

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Innovate – n. To begin or introduce something new; be creative (American Heritage Dictionary)

While improvisation is not the only way innovation occurs in jazz, no other is so stark. This “immediate realization of ideas” - asks individuals to make a significant personal statement: to communicate, to tell their story, and to do it in the moment. It’s very difficult to hide when the spotlight is so focused on a player. Improvisation places great demands on the individual to continually find new creative ways to use the abilities they have to make that personal statement and to do it in a way that both earns the respect of their peers and connects with their audience. This demand necessitates innovation.

A NEW AMERICAN MUSIC, A RADICAL INNOVATION

The jazz model is historically new and musically is a radical innovation. It is not that frequent in history that a new music is born. Since the time of Bach 300+ years ago, Western music has seen Baroque, Classical, Romantic, and Avant-garde musical forms emerge – 4 sub styles in 300 years. In the United States, we had unique ingredients to

not only provide the possibility for a new kind of music but a music so innovative it would produce at least double the number of sub styles in less than 100 years. It has also produced a long list of players who have developed a unique and personal sound, changed the way instruments are played, and invented new ways music is played.

Musically, the combination of two ingredients, European and African musical traditions, led to the opportunity for the birth of jazz. These two traditions melded European harmonic and melodic concepts with the rhythmically advanced musical heritage of Africa. By fusing aspects of both traditions, taking the strengths of both, new possibilities emerged and a musical innovation began.

Jazz is also adept at combining freedom and form. Jazz allows for maximum personal interpretation however it does have form, rules if you will. Except in extreme forms, players operate within guidelines. Songs have themes, structured forms, and harmonic frameworks. However, these themes, forms, and frameworks are pliable in jazz and allow individuals to operate with freedom paralleled in no other

music. To contrast, European musical tradition requires musicians follow the instruction of the composer — every note, the length of the note, even the volume of the note is dictated. There is no room for personal interpretation. It's quite the opposite in jazz.

American musical tradition gives the individual the freedom to interpret, change, and personalize music based on the abilities and character of the

instrumentalist — the individual. Similarly, American business, especially over the last hundred years, has seen innovation after innovation in virtually every area of human endeavor. Could this excessive creativity also be a product of this culture of the individual? If you want innovation in your company you may want to ask how, and if, your company fosters freedom and the "culture of the individual"?

INNOVATION PROCESSES

There are several key processes jazz artists engage in to establish a unique identity, to "find their sound": the Process of Fusion, the Process of Reinterpretation, and the Process of Improvisation.

1. The Process of Fusion goes back to the roots of jazz (and the roots of this country). Jazz music was born from a melting pot of musical styles — ragtime, brass bands, spiritual, blues, Classical, and gospel. Since its inception jazz has never stopped its tradition of "acculturating" - adopting from other sources. It has continued to add influences from Europe, Africa, Cuba, Brazil, the Middle East, Jamaica, and India. Some players have even turned to animals (wolves, whales) or city sounds (trains, car horns) for sonic ideas.

Like Chrysler's mini-van was a fusion (van body on a car frame), or McDonald's breakfast burrito (traditional ingredients in a non-traditional wrap), Coltrane's ethereal version of "Sound of Music" was a fusion (Broadway music performed as an extended, hypnotic jazz waltz). Miles Davis pioneered, among other things, the incorporation of Rock sounds and rhythms into jazz in the late 60s and was collaborating with Hip-hop artists before his death in the 90s. The designer of Nissan's newest luxury SUV took inspiration in the interior design from the Prairie-style houses of Frank Lloyd Wright.

While the process of fusion generally stays the same, the practice of it varies with the individuals seeking new sources. By seeking the sources that are of most interest, players combine these influences in personal ways that contribute to finding their sound. As Peter Drucker says, "to innovate, search intentionally for opportunity." The process of fusion is the intentional searching for opportunities from other traditions and finding ways to incorporate them into your sound to advance your uniqueness.

2. The Process of Reinterpretation has a long history in jazz. "Standards" are songs that have been recorded and performed for decades such as Gershwin's "They Can't Take That Away From Me" or "Sweet Georgia Brown" dating back to the 1920's. Standards continue to be a proving ground for innovation. They provide inspiration and allow artists the chance to reinterpret what their predecessors have done while adding their own sensibilities and influences. While highly respected, jazz culture does not hold these songs to be "sacred." As Gary Hamel says, "Orthodoxy is the enemy of renewal."

To jazz musicians, the way Standards can be reshaped is as limitless as the imagination. Any basic part of the structure (or all of them) can be re-interpreted, added on to, and re-cast. The time, feel, or attitude can be drastically altered. What was initially a ballad does not have to stay that way. It can be performed at medium or fast tempos. Pepsi Co promotes a culture of re-interpretation by calling "thinking outside the box" a core competency for its managers. They define it as "creating opportunities by rethinking or re-conceptualizing the business."

Reinterpretation seems to be occurring in every area of design and invention from toothbrushes (Waterpik, Oral B), to automobiles (PT Cruiser, Beetle), pens (Grip Write), speakers (Bose), phones (hands-free, picture taking), computers (i-Mac), food (baked potato chips, drinkable yogurt), and shoes. Like jazz musicians, "The best companies may look to the past as a source of inspiration, but they don't allow it to become an excuse for imitation. They look to history for continuity but not for repetition" (Fast Company, June 2003).

Kohl's department stores reinterpreted the typical labyrinth layout to favor a "race track" layout that lets customers quickly navigate through the store. The upstart chain now has more value than one of its large competitors and with fewer stores. Reinterpretation may not only help differentiate, it can be profitable.

3. The Process of Improvisation. What do you think of when you hear the word improvisation — Second City Comedy Club? "Winging it"? Making it up as you go along? How about creating opportunity in the moment, or instant innovation?

Improvisation is the brand marketing of the jazz world. This is where you reveal to the public and your peers who you are. Are you fast and furious or subtle and subdued? Are you conservative or radical, a clone or an original? Improvisation is also the chance to communicate your personal ideas. While provided with a form and an outline, there is in addition a blank slate on which to make your statement — freedom balanced by rules or guidelines.

To improvise in jazz requires two components — technique and concept. Like the "core competencies" of the business world, without mastering technique, you are limited in your ability to perform. Without a concept or vision, you have nothing to use your technique for. Improvisation in jazz is a personal statement that is the expression of your ideas supported by the means to do so.

While the process of obtaining technique is fairly mechanical, developing a unique approach is not. To be a successful creator takes conception — an idea, a vision of what beauty or efficiency is and how it can be captured and shared. So where does conception or vision come from? Among musicians it usually comes from listening to and learning from other musicians — finding a mentor or mentors.

Early on a creator's concept is often shaped by his or her mentor's concept. Eventually with enough time and enough variety of influences and experimentation, one can develop his or her unique conception. The ability to develop a unique, personal concept is as open as time and effort will allow but also somewhat determined by our personal strengths and weaknesses. Great innovators and "All great managers share the same insight — don't try to change someone's nature — try to help them be more of what they are." (First, Break All the Rules, Buckingham & Cohen). It is in their strengths, in being more of what they are, where improvisers find the minute nuances that distinguish them from other players.

However to find out who they are, innovators need a culture of experimentation. The jazz culture allows risk taking and, like the innovative giant 3M, tolerates mistakes. Like some successful inventions prove, mistakes can be opportunities. And like many great inventors, the more successful ones also produce the most failures. The most exciting improvisers are those that push their limits and take the most risk. The most magical moments in jazz occur when an individual pushes that limit, takes the risk — and succeeds. It is because the culture provides freedom and tolerates mistakes that so many magical creations— innovations — have occurred in jazz.

INNOVATION IN ROLES

As in any team, each member of a jazz group has a role to play. Through executing that role each part blends into a whole and music is made. However, in Jazz's culture of freedom, the roles of instruments have been questioned and reinterpreted. Roles have seen both evolution and recasting. For example guitarists, once confined in Jazz to a background role, have since evolved to situations where guitarists are the primary composer, soloist, and bandleader. Pat Metheny is not only the primary voice of his group, but one of the most innovative (and best selling) artists in jazz today.

Even more historically in the background, bassists also have re-defined their role to

become bandleaders, composers, and first-rate soloists. Charles Mingus and Jaco Pastorius are great examples. Drummers have also become band leaders — Buddy Rich led his own group for many years. Bill Bruford (of Yes fame) leads a group called Earthworks. At times Bruford carries the melody on electric drums tuned to pitches. Bassists leading bands? Drummers carrying the melody? What gives?

These, and many other players broke their roles because they were individuals who wanted their voices heard in ways that their traditional role would not allow. Thus they had to challenge traditional thought and find

new ways to express themselves. They had to create their own group or find an established group that was willing to accommodate their vision. They brought innovation to the very nature of their role.

Jazz allows people to lead and establish their voice in spite of their proscribed role. The individual often determines what their role will be rather than the instrument they play. It's similar to what Al West, CEO, SEI Investments Co. calls "fluid leadership." He says at SEI "people figure out what they're good at, and that shapes what their roles are. Different people lead at different parts of the process." Sounds like jazz to me!

FREEDOM

This word that is so omnipresent in the American lexicon is what leads to innovation in jazz and what leads to innovation anywhere. Business leaders talk about the need to get out of the way of people so they can do their best work — to take away boundaries that prevent creativity. Jazz, through its values and processes has minimized boundaries and maximized freedom for

a hundred years. As long as that doesn't change it will continue to be reinvented.

Organizations and people that want to be more creative and innovative may wish to look to the jazz model for ideas especially because it has proven itself for so long. By allowing freedom, balanced by rules, guidelines and values, the culture necessary for innovation may be

possible for you to attain. By encouraging the Process of Fusion, the Process of Reinterpretation, and the Process of Improvisation you and your organization may find its "unique sound" and with it see new ideas, new services, and/or new products.

Now the next time you hear the word jazz, think innovation!

AUTHOR

Jeff Perry is a Minneapolis-based jazz guitarist and Recruitment Account Executive at StarTribune. He has studied at Berklee College of Music in Boston, MA and has a B.A. in Jazz Studies from the American Conservatory in Chicago, IL.. Contact jperry@startribune.com. Visit www.jeffperryjazz.com