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Call for papers #2 : Playing Jazz

- Actualités/News -

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New deadline > june 30th 2016

We "*play* music" : the English language uses this notion to characterize musical practice. Pure chance ? As Johan Huizinga underlines it in *Homo ludens*, the semantic concordance of play and music is no English exception : German uses *spielen*, French uses *jouer* (whereas other romance languages don't : Italian uses *suonare*, Spanish, *tocar*), and this reference can also be found in Arabic, as well as a few Slavonic languages. According to Huizinga, this fact appears as the "deep-rooted psychological reason for so remarkable a symbol of the affinity between play and music" [1]. We could add a more specific, historical concordance between jazz and play : born in the 20th century, jazz is contemporary of a particular attention given to play within art worlds. [2]

Based on these observations, this call for papers for a special issue of *Epistrophy* invites scholars to confront jazz and play. What kind of play is at stake in jazz ? What are we "playing with" when we play jazz ?

Playing (with) jazz : what are the rules of the game ?

We must first consider the "rules of the game". Unlike moral rules, which forbid certain behaviors, game rules open a field of possibilities that do not exist prior to playing. They seem specific as they distinguish themselves from ordinary, prescriptive rules : creative game rules make possible the potential game space while determining what is being played. "Everywhere else, we set something that already exists ; in games, we set something that did not yet exist and that is created by these same rules [3]." On the other hand, it is interesting to note that English distinguishes play from game, and this distinction assumes two radically different ways of considering the status of game rules. As highlighted by psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott [4], while games are settings in which the rules are established prior to their unfolding, most often explained in instructions (as is the case with chess, Monopoly...), play refers to the creative and mischievous activity of young children, for which there is no prior set of rules, *i.e.* before they actually create their own game. The rules of play are thus shifting, perpetually changing, and often ignored by the player himself. This is why, according to Winnicott, play is an essentially creative type of game, akin to art making.

The relevance of this distinction can be questioned within jazz practice. How do play and game fit in jazz practice ? and in composing ? With regard to game, playing jazz would merely consist in applying harmonic and rhythmic conventions studied beforehand, simply ingested then repeated over and over by performers. Conversely, to assume that jazz is a playfully free activity could mislead us to the opposite pitfall : indeed, doesn't the practice of jazz suppose learning a certain number of common "game codes", which enable musical interaction, playing together [5] - including in free jazz ? Where can we thus locate "jazz", between these two apparently opposed modalities of play ? In other words, how does jazz - and the musicians' attitude towards creation - play *with* its rules (however different they may be, depending on periods or styles) ? Or even : how do they defy such rules ?

The pleasure of playing jazz

Games are a form of entertainment, a diversion, and this implies a form of "gratuity" : they bracket the stakes of ordinary life, the time frame of playing. For all that, this moment of distraction is essential to our lives.

The only good thing for men therefore is to be diverted from thinking of what they are, either by some occupation which takes their mind off it, or by some novel and agreeable passion which keeps them busy, like gambling, hunting, some absorbing show, in short by what is called diversion [6].

Popular, danceable and amusing, jazz has long been associated to entertainment. Without falling for the usual cliché, we know that jazz is also made of playful and cheerful moods, of clowns, from Fats Waller to Dizzy Gillespie, and of a humorous spirit it shares with play [7]. Charlie Parker's or Martial Solal's puns on the names of standards make them just as unrecognizable as their melodic, harmonic or rhythmic appropriations. Undeniably, jazz constantly assumes a playful character without, however, denying its seriousness (or even its learned nature). This absence of a clear opposition between the playful and the serious, typical both of play and jazz, could help us question the notions of pleasure and intensity that musical creation takes up. The discourses of jazzmen about the pleasure they take in playing are legion, throughout history, from Sonny Rollins : "I really enjoy playing [8]", to Émile Parisien : "We push, search, tease, have fun. It's a very playful type of music [9]". Is this publicized pleasure a means to reach an unacknowledged form of seriousness ? How can the playful and the serious be considered as both sides of a same art form ?

Playing together : interplay and confrontation

Playing jazz is also playing together. A fundamental feature of jazz, "interplay concerns all the relationships between musicians during performance. In other words, how each performer considers the others' musical proposals" [10] to build a common discourse. If we often compare collective improvisation to a more or less organized conversation, what parts do prescriptive rules (musical parameters determined prior to playing, presence of a score, game codes, etc.) and creative rules (musical interplay, creative accidents, etc.) have within different jazz styles ? How thick is the line between interplay and game when interpreting a standard ? As of the 1960s, jazz has growingly dealt with interaction. Is this due to the increasing use of interplay that became a privileged inventive tool in jazz ? (In this sense, is Bill Evans's 1962 album *Interplay* a manifesto ?) To what extent is interplay a game rule in jazz ? Which rules are preset, which ones gradually invented ? For example, (how) does interplay in Miles Davis's second quintet differ from "playing jazz together" in swing or bebop improvisations ?

Jazz also presents a modality of "playing together" that deals with confrontation, most notably in jam sessions, during which improvisers spar with each other (sessions also called "cutting contests" - one of the most famous one being the "Lester Young / Coleman Hawkins Kansas City Battle"). What about interplay as a competitive arena ? The jazz scene as an "agonistic space" [11], yet not separated from the dimension of play [12], could be analyzed here.

Authors are thus invited to reflect upon :

Jazz's game rules : what attitude does the jazz musician adopt when faced with his/her own rules ? How does he/she play with them ? How does he/she navigate between both poles of game and play ?

The pleasure of playing : does the musicians' often ostentatious pleasure of playing imply that jazz is a form of entertainment detached from daily life, or does jazz ground music, via play, in seriousness, however unadmittedly ? Can this publicized pleasure be analyzed as a signifying [13] practice by jazzwomen and men ?

Interplay : within an interlocutory or an agonistic space, how does jazz organize itself collectively, and following what criteria ? This dimension could be analyzed from a musical, sociological or anthropological perspective : "Good jazz improvisation is sociable and interactive just like a conversation [14]" Can we then consider the jazz band as a fully-fledged social space, a form of "living together" ?

The perspectives sketched out here call for a variety of disciplinary approaches. Papers should be sent by June 30th 2016 to the following email address [epistrophy @ epistrophy.fr](mailto:epistrophy@epistrophy.fr), with a title, a summary and a short biography. They can include pictures, music and/or video material in separate files - please consult our guidelines for details on formats and so forth.

[1] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens, A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949 [1938], p. 158.

[2] Many jazz works point to this, explicitly referring to the idea of play : « Numbers Game » (Hampton Hawes) ; « The Shell Game » (Elvin Jones) ; « The Bead Game » (Joe Henderson & Lee Konitz) ; *Domino* (Roland Kirk) ; « Playground », « Toy Tune », « Mahjong », « The Chess Players », « Ping Pong » (Wayne Shorter) ; « Toys » (Herbie Hancock) ; *Score* (Randy Brecker) ; *Cobra : John Zorn's Game Pieces Volume 2* (John Zorn) ; *The African Game* (George Russell) ; « It's all in the Game » (Louis Armstrong) ; *Losing Game* (Lonnie Johnson) ; *The Waiting Game* (Tina Brooks) ; *Waiting Game* (Zoot Sims) ; « Games » (Nat Adderley) ; « Video Games » (Pat Metheny & Ornette Coleman) ; « What Games Shall We Play Today » (Chick Corea), etc.

[3] Colas Duflo, *Jouer et philosophe*, Paris : Presses universitaires de France, 1997, p. 83.

[4] Donald Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, London : Tavistock, 1971.

[5] Laurent Cugny talks about a "common practice" of jazz. See *Analyzing Jazz*, trans. Bérengère Mauduit, Rochester : University of Rochester Press, 2016 (in press).

[6] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, # 136.

[7] Miles Davis even proposed a Big Fun back in his day.

[8] January 1986 interview, in Ben Sidran, *Talking Jazz : An Oral History*, New York : Da Capo Press, 1995.

[9] Quoted in Laure Devisme, "Émile Parisien", *Citizen Jazz*, 22 June 2009, online : <http://www.citizenjazz.com/Emile-Parisien,3462753.html>.

[10] Laurent Cugny, *Analyzing jazz*, *op. cit.*

[11] Christian Béthune, *Le Jazz et l'Occident*, Paris : Klincksieck, 2008, p. 235-238.

[12] Roger Caillois also uses the concept of « agôn » to define the competitive dimension of play. Using his typology of types of play (agôn, alea, mimicry, ilinx) could thus be another way to analyze jazz. Roger Caillois, *Men, Play and Games*, Champaign : University of Illinois Press, 1991 [1957].

[13] Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey : A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1988.

[14] Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something. Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 84.