

Melodic Study, Deep Listening and the Importance of Context

THERE ARE SO MANY BOOKS AND CURRICULA to assist in the study of jazz—particularly soloing—it can be mind-boggling. Yet I’m continually amazed that with all of the development in jazz education in the last 40 years, there is almost no discussion regarding the value of listening to historical jazz recordings.

As a young player, I was certainly influenced by the ideology of the day; I didn’t listen, either. Of course, as now, we had favorites. Mine at that time were Wayne Shorter, John Coltrane and Lester Young. The funny thing was, I did not connect with the idea that as young musicians, these guys had influences, too. Jazz is almost never discussed in relation to mentorship; what we mostly hear of is the illusion of innovation, the idea that fully formed musicians created a sound out of the ether. It is only logical that this myth would affect how we perceive the music, and as a result, affect the outcome of our development.

When I was playing with Art Blakey, he walked by while I was learning a Coltrane solo, lick-style, meaning that I was learning the solo as it went by, not really trying to retain the information (much the way most musicians and laypeople *still* listen today). It was almost like a contest—*could I pick it up as it flashed past?*—instead of being a part of my musical development. When Art asked me, “When Coltrane was a young player, what do you think he listened to, tapes of himself in the future?” I was flummoxed. That was a turning point for me, because I had to accept the idea that Coltrane and his contemporaries didn’t develop their originality by rejecting the music that came before them, but by embracing it.

The scale-based, linear philosophy preferred by

modern players has advantages and disadvantages. For one, it allows a young musician to develop a type of vocabulary very quickly, as well as a sense of what to play on the chord changes of

American popular standards. The downside, to my ears, is that it creates a “stay in your lane” environment, with the result that, often, a band of skilled instrumentalists will play correctly



Branford Marsalis

ERIKA GOLDRING

over chord structures, start and stop at the same time, but will not actually listen to one another while playing. As a result, over time, the songs tend to have a repetitive predictability, in tempi and in development.

A philosophy based on deep and thorough listening is difficult for many because it takes so long to develop. In the book *Bounce*, by Matthew Syed, he clarifies the often-used “10,000 hours” colloquialism made famous by Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Outliers*. While studying the practice habits of successful athletes, Syed learned that the average amount of practice per year for them was a thousand hours. Accordingly, the idea of doing something for 10 years, with minimal results in the first five or six, is not a very popular one in our times. But what can be gained by the art of listening is what many of us should seek, and no music book can provide: context.

What I mean by context, relative to music, is tone, phrasing, hearing—all of the things that make any music unique. In modern classical music, much of that has been attributed to the composer and the artistic director (conductor); however, if you were to study baroque music, you would find that there are almost none of the dynamic or expressive markings associated with classical music in subsequent years. It was, and still is, incumbent on the musician to understand how the music *sounds*, and how it is phrased, in addition to ornamentation. This is what I learned, gradually, in another context: when I started listening to Lester Young.

When Wayne Shorter wrote “Lester Left Town,” I knew it was related to Mr. Young’s death in 1959, but it didn’t occur to me that Shorter was one of Young’s musical progeny. For years, I had listened to Shorter playing on the epic Miles Davis box set *Live At The Plugged Nickel* (compliments of Conrad Herwig, my comrade in Clark Terry’s Big Band in 1980, who first played it for me). On a version of “The Theme,” Shorter takes off on a melodic flight that I didn’t recognize as based on the Young classic “Lester Leaps In.”

Listening to Young not only changed how I played, but how I listened. That also goes for my time with Charlie Parker, Duke Ellington, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet, Frank Sinatra, Warne Marsh, Sonny Rollins and Keith Jarrett, to name a few of the musicians I studied with intensity and specificity.

While I am not advocating abolition of harmonic study—it is very important—I am proposing the inclusion of melodic study. In an academic setting, it is especially difficult to create a curriculum around the latter. Harmony is much easier to codify than melody.

Harmony is something you can learn and know without necessarily being able to hear it. There are many examples of that way of learning and playing throughout the jazz world. The lack of melodic study is so apparent, that in its absence, it has been necessary to redefine what jazz is, to separate it from its origins, declaring the old music the lesser cousin of the newer. One can say that every change in form is a development in artistry. But to my knowledge, there is

no form of music, save popular music, where this is considered a valid perspective.

At North Carolina Central University, where pianist Joey Calderazzo and I teach, transcribing by ear and playing along with recordings in lessons is an essential part of the curriculum. The reason I support playing along with recordings is that there are few times when musicians play alone, yet much of jazz study is often practiced in isolation.

As a result, to my ear, many soloists sound isolated from the group performance, leaning on technical brilliance in place of musicianship. This isolation can also be detected in the body language of the soloist, who often disengages from the group as soon as his or her solo is completed.

The first recording my students learn is “Back To The Land,” from the Lester Young Trio. It is a brilliant introduction to swing: Prez’s solo is technically simple, but stylistically difficult. Nat Cole fills the role of the pianist and bassist so well that, for years, I didn’t even realize there was no bass player. As Calderazzo has said, Mr. Cole was one of the last of the great stride players, and one of the first of the small-group bebop players.

While the popular notion is to go “modern” as soon as possible, the modern players I listened to were, at their core, traditionalists. Their modernity was a development, not an ideological mandate. One of my recent students came to NCCU in the graduate program, where essentially he listened to early jazz for the first time in his life. When we first met, he was playing with his band in Wisconsin, and intended to go to New York. When I heard them play, I could tell the songs were originals, because there was no melody to be found in them. In most cases, when I express such an opinion, students and musicians I speak with feel insulted and angry, but this young student was curious about my thoughts on his music and showed an interest in finding out for himself.

As he started listening to Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet, his ears started to hear the music for the first time, overriding the accumulated habits learned over the years. Of the many things he wrote to me that year, this is among my favorites:

“I would always ask you and members of the quartet about certain moments in concerts. How did that moment work? I would always receive answers like the following: the *music* dictated that, that is what the *music* called for. For a while I felt that these answers were vague and frustrating. I wanted something more concrete, a rule or logic that would allow me to wholly understand what was happening. Turns out that I just need to accept that the music does not need me to be good; it already is. I can make the decision to participate, though.” Well said, sir. Happy listening. DB

Dedicated to changing the future of jazz in the classroom, saxophonist and NEA Jazz Master Branford Marsalis has shared his knowledge at such educational institutions as Michigan State University, San Francisco State University, Stanford University and North Carolina Central University, with his full quartet participating in an innovative extended residency on the NCCU campus. Visit him online at marsalismic.com.

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