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Looking for the Band: Walter Benjamin and the Mechanical Reproduction of Jazz

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In his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin engages in an intriguing dialectical analysis of the manner in which twentieth-century technology has affected how art is produced, distributed, and consumed. On the one hand, he states that mechanical reproduction can destroy the "aura" of the original artwork, displacing it from "its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (220). Benjamin also acknowledges, however, that mechanical reproduction can have a liberatory effect through the manner in which it "emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual" (224). These theories can be applied in particularly illuminating ways to the study of the development of jazz in the twentieth century. In his essay, Benjamin makes a crucial distinction between "manual reproduction," which actually reinscribes the authenticity of the original work by virtue of its secondary status as a "forgery," and "technical reproduction," which disrupts and challenges all concepts of authenticity (220). Benjamin analyzes this distinction primarily within the context of visual art, however, where the "original" work exists in a physical and tangible form that can be compared with its reproductions. Jazz, in its earliest incarnations before the music became available on phonograph recordings, generally existed only during the instant of its performance, a performance characterized by spontaneity and improvisation. Lacking even the representational records of sheet music, a jazz performance, once completed, was gone, never to be repeated in the same way again. As such, since jazz could not be manually reproduced, once it was technically reproduced, the music was even more profoundly alienated from its aura of originality than were most other art forms, to the extent that one might question whether an "original" jazz performance exists outside the medium of mechanical reproduction. As soon as jazz recordings were made available to a wide audience, these mechanical reproductions became one of the primary ways through which jazz was studied and interpreted, by both critics and musicians. Thus what now constitutes jazz is the product of a dialectical development whereby an improvisatory art form, highly resistant to reproduction within the performance environment, was intimately and profoundly affected by the mechanical reproduction of sound.

The subject of jazz represents a particularly challenging problem for Benjamin's conception of the age of mechanical reproduction, as it does not readily fit into one of the basic dialectics on which his essay is based. Benjamin divides art into two essential categories. One category is what might be described as pre-reproduction artwork: forms such as painting, architecture, and sculpture whose ritual and cultic aura is destroyed or dissipated when technical reproductions remove the work from its original physical and temporal setting. The other is what Benjamin describes as "the work of art designed for reproducibility" (224): art such as film and photography that has the technology of mechanical reproduction built into its very structure, and thus, lacks the originary condition necessary for the possession of aura. Jazz, however, seems to occupy a unique position straddling the boundary between these two categories. As jazz had been in existence for several decades before it began to be widely recorded in the 1920s, it does not really fit into the category of a "work of art designed for reproducibility." Nevertheless, the birth and development of jazz is now primarily associated with the birth and development of sound recordings. Prior to the first recordings, few musical ideas in jazz were written down and the music existed almost exclusively within the transitory space of performance. As a result, this early jazz has been effectively lost to the historian. I do not intend to suggest that there is no connection between prerecorded and recorded jazz; clearly, recorded jazz is the product of a complex transmission of musical ideas from one musician to another that extends well back into the "prehistory" of the music. Without the records of sheet music, however, this aural transmission cannot be studied with any of the degree of scholarly precision that is customary in the study of Western classical music. Thus for most listeners unrecorded jazz is unknown jazz (Priestly 14). This circumstance is symptomatic of a significant perceptual gap that exists not only between jazz from before and after the advent of sound recording, but also between live and recorded jazz in general.

In examining this gap in our understanding of jazz, one must first endeavour to reconstruct the environment of "prehistoric" jazz. Benjamin states that one of the key elements in ritual art is a sense of distance:

“Unapproachability is indeed a major quality of the cult image. True to its nature, and to its nature, however close it may be.’ The closeness which one may gain from its subject matter does not impair the distance which it retains in its appearance” (243). Early jazz, lacking a written text, was supremely distant in that the music itself had no tangible appearance at all. This quality gave jazz its own distinct aura, one that both limited and enhanced its ritual power. Existing only during a brief moment in time, the impact of a jazz performance was necessarily limited to those individuals who witnessed it, it being impossible to convey the essence of such an experience through any verbal retelling of it. The intangible nature of jazz, however, also meant that a performance could have an extraordinarily powerful effect upon those who were listening. Benjamin claims that the ritual work of art “was, first and foremost, an instrument of magic” (225). In performance, the unpredictable improvisations and erratic rhythms and syncopation of jazz could present all the mysterious and ineffable characteristics of ritual magic to the uninitiated listener, and the impact of this “magic” could often be far more profound and lasting when there was no way to revisit the experience.

Jazz in its ostensibly ritual forms also had many significant limitations, however, most notably the fact that the music could not be preserved for the study and enjoyment of future generations. The unnotated music of jazz is an excellent example of what Michael Chanan defines as “*musica practica* [. . .] music by ear rather than music by the book” (13). Music by ear is musical knowledge that is transmitted by direct aural interaction between musicians and, consequently, its repertoire spans only two or three generations at most. Such music is also greatly confined spatially, being accessible only to those who are able to physically attend its performances. Prior to the development of the phonograph, various different musical styles were generally confined to the social groups in which they were produced. By the 1910s, however, music from a vast number of different ethnic and immigrant groups had been recorded and distributed in the United States and Europe (Garofalo 326). Similarly, early jazz was generally heard only by those who frequented the saloons and brothels where most of the music was performed. As a result, when the first jazz recording was made in 1917, most Americans, even though the music had been developing in their country for over twenty years, had never heard jazz. Yet, in the span of another twenty years, the phonograph and radio would carry jazz across the world, not only to countless scores of listeners, but also to future jazz musicians who might otherwise have never encountered this music. Thus, mechanical reproduction created an enormous potential not only for the distribution of jazz, but also for the creative development of the music.

One of the first major impacts of sound recording on jazz was the introduction of Western concepts of intellectual property rights. Musicians previously unconcerned about ownership suddenly felt compelled to be fiercely protective of their music. In 1916, Victor Records offered New Orleans trumpet player and bandleader Freddie Keppard the opportunity to make the very first jazz recordings. Keppard refused, telling them “We won’t put our stuff on records for everybody to steal” (Kraft 61). Ironically, it was precisely its initial resistance to commodification that made jazz so vulnerable to the new industry of sound recording. One of the major arguments used during this period to justify affording copyright protection to sound recordings was that sound recordings reproduced musical ideas that already existed as commodities in the form of sheet music and had, therefore, previously been legally recognized as intellectual property. However, since much of the jazz performed in the opening decades of the twentieth century was never written down, and therefore had no previous embodiment as a commodity, there were no preexisting legal concepts of property that record producers had to contend with when selling recordings of jazz. From a commercial perspective, the recording was the original embodiment of jazz from which all future concepts of property and authenticity were derived. Through the medium of the sound recording, a once intangible and elusive art form was transformed into a physical and reproducible commodity that effectively negated its previous existence.

The idea of sound recordings being the authentic embodiment of music was certainly not unique to jazz. The phonograph was first sold to the public in 1896, and from the beginning, the standard for this new piece of technology was to create “the illusion of real presence” (Thompson 135). In order to convince the public that the musical experience of listening to a recording was as good as, or indeed preferable to, attending a live performance, the Edison Phonograph Company embarked on an aggressive advertising campaign that portrayed the phonograph as being itself a musical instrument rather than a reproduction (Thompson 142). It is important to note that at this point the development of sound recording technology was primarily governed by a desire to recreate the live sound of the concert hall.

The first phase of this campaign began around 1900 and was characterized by the slogan “Looking for the Band,” under which the Edison Company presented a variety of advertisements depicting children, “primitives,” and other supposedly “innocent” individuals being completely dumbfounded upon hearing

music coming from a phonograph. The purpose of this campaign was to show that recording technology was so advanced and sophisticated that only the most civilized Westerners would not, upon hearing a sound reproduction, be compelled to search for the “real” band. In this way, the phonograph was depicted in terms of “technological impartiality and receptivity,” as an invisible medium providing direct contact between the artist and the listener (Gitelman 266-67).

To further emphasize the concept of the phonograph as a musical instrument, between 1915 and 1925 the Edison Company held thousands of demonstrations across the United States of what they called “tone tests.” During one of these demonstrations an Edison recording artist, preferably a female vocalist, would sing alongside a recording of her voice. Usually at some point the lights would be dimmed and the vocalist would walk offstage leaving only the recorded voice performing, ostensibly creating a situation whereby the audience would assume a human presence where there was none (Thompson 131-32). The following is a sample advertisement of the tone test circulated by the Edison Company:

Proved! Yesterday! to Walla Walla! No Difference! The end of the concert found the audience absolutely and completely convinced through its own personal experience, that there is no difference between an artist's living performance and its Re-Creation by the New Edison – that listening to the New Edison is, in literal truth, the same as listening to the living artists. (Thompson 159)

The nature of the tone test illustrates an intriguing development in the evolution of sound recording. Female vocalists were preferred for tone tests because the primitive recording technology of the time captured their voices better than the sound of any other instrument, and, since a recording obviously cannot adapt during a performance, in order to make the demonstration convincing, these vocalists were forced to alter their singing styles to match the sound of the recording (Thompson 156). Thus, while the sound of the phonograph was ostensibly governed by the sound of a live performance, it is clear here that the reproduction was now beginning to dictate the sound of the performer: the imitation had, in effect, become the original.

This development proved to be even more pronounced for jazz than it was for classical music. Once recordings of jazz became widely available in the 1920s, its audience increased exponentially; however, it was an audience that mostly had only encountered jazz through the medium of the recording. Thus, people who were inspired to attend live jazz performances after hearing jazz records came to these performances with certain preconceptions, often expecting to hear the same music they had heard on the phonograph. Perhaps even more significantly, an entirely new generation of jazz musicians were inspired to pursue this art form by the music that they heard on jazz records. Without recordings, it was extremely difficult to study the musical styles of particular jazz musicians unless one was effectively apprenticing and playing with them. The phonograph, however, created a “democratic educational potential” (Peretti 152) whereby anyone who could afford the machine and a few records could listen to and analyze the style and improvisations of particular musicians over and over again. As a result, in the decades following the first jazz recordings, the influence of recorded jazz came to be felt more and more strongly in the arena of live jazz. Recordings became the “source” of a significant portion of the jazz that has been performed in the twentieth century.

Benjamin is, of course, highly suspicious of the kind of claims that were made by the Edison Phonograph Company and other record companies regarding the “technological impartiality” and “authentic embodiment” of their medium. In describing the medium of film, Benjamin explains how, “it is impossible to assign to a spectator a viewpoint which would exclude from the actual scene such extraneous accessories as camera equipment, lighting machinery, staff assistants, etc.—unless his eye were on a line parallel with the lens” (232-33). Similarly, in the case of a studio sound recording, a spectator observing the recording process in real time would witness a scene filled with microphones, amplifiers, and recording engineers. Only by placing his or her ear to the speaker and listening to the finished product on the record would the spectator be able to hear the ostensibly “real” music. Thus the phonograph, like film, represents a medium in which the technology is meant to be invisible, or in this case, inaudible: “it offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment” (Benjamin 234). Benjamin is also quick to point out, however, that this “equipment-free aspect of reality” is, in fact, “the height of artifice” (233). The “illusion” of reality created by the phonograph is precisely that, for, as with film, the art that has been preserved on phonographs was profoundly affected and altered by the technology of mechanical reproduction and often differed from the live music of its time in significant and fundamental ways.

One of the most obvious effects of sound recordings is that they radically alter the space of performance, both for the performer and listener. The mental process of improvising, while the result of highly developed musicianship, can also be a highly spontaneous process for many jazz musicians. During a performance, the energy and mood of the audience can profoundly affect the musicians and the music they produce. In the studio, however, the jazz musician is removed from this environment, lacking, like the film actor, “the opportunity of the stage actor to adjust to the audience during his performance,” as his “part is acted not for an audience but for a metal contrivance” (Benjamin 228, 229). The audience is also removed from the performance environment and placed in the position of listening to music that is played, essentially, by a metal contrivance. They cannot experience the physical and visual presence, the “aura” of the musicians, nor can they interact with them and directly affect the music that is being produced. In its live forms, jazz is fundamentally about process rather than product, both for the performers and listeners (Johnson 3). Thus, the different process of performing jazz in a studio alters both how the music is produced and presented and how it is received.

There is certainly no shortage of problematic aspects that one can find in the early recording process. The space of a live performance carried with it a certain freedom from scrutiny that many musicians felt allowed them to be bolder and more spontaneous, to experiment and take the kind of risks that are necessary to push the envelope of their art form and create fresh and innovative music. The unforgiving posterity of the phonograph, on the other hand, unnerved many musicians, for it meant that every mistake they made, every note they missed, could be heard over and over again by thousands or even millions of people. Perhaps, more significantly, it also meant that the musicians themselves could listen to their performances from the perspective of a spectator, thus altering “the nature of interpretation” (Chanan 7). Within the space of a recording studio, individual takes are frequently studied and scrutinized, equipment is adjusted to improve the sound balance, and musicians are given a myriad of instructions on how to improve and “perfect” their performance. Yet, the pursuit of a perfect product seems rather antithetical to the spontaneous spirit of jazz. Theodor Adorno, though certainly no fan of jazz, complained that a “perfect, immaculate performance” was “realized in precisely that spontaneity which is sacrificed to fixation” (284), and many other critics also charged that sound recordings caused musicians to be more conservative with their performances and stifled their creativity (Chanan 120). Music that was once fresh and innovative had now, supposedly, become stale and predictable.

If sound recordings altered the nature of musical interpretation, they altered even more significantly the nature of listening. In a live performance, improvised jazz is always, to a certain degree, new and unfamiliar to an audience; however, a recording, even a live one, would seem to reify this spontaneous process and turn it into a fixed text, allowing listeners the opportunity to memorize and become familiar with improvisations. As Chanan asserts, this process of reification has often created a public desire for repetition whereby performers feel obliged to abandon “interpretation and its elements of spontaneity [. . .] precisely to ensure that the concert performance shall indeed be a copy of the record, and the concert-goer will not be disappointed” (118). Such expectations could be extremely frustrating for many jazz musicians, as they not only inhibited their improvisational creativity, but also tended to typecast them within a certain style and repertoire, making it difficult for them to explore other musical avenues without alienating their fans. In addition, beginning in the 1920s, many musicians began trying to learn to play jazz by imitating the recordings of their idols. A prime example of this is the now famous opening trumpet cadenza played by Louis Armstrong on his 1928 recording of “West End Blues.” It is unlikely that, before this recording was made, Armstrong had ever played that cadenza in quite the same way as he does on this recording. Since this recording was released, however, Armstrong’s solo has been transcribed note for note and hundreds, if not thousands of aspiring trumpet players have devotedly practiced it, trying to mimic precisely the rhythms, dynamics, and intonation of the recording. This development seems very peculiar within the context of jazz, since such precise repetition hardly seems improvisatory, nor does it emphasize the distinct, individual style of the performer: one of the defining characteristics of the jazz soloist (Gioia 16). Also, given the sometimes aggravatingly impartial nature of the phonograph, the devotion of some fans and musicians to the recordings of their idols has often meant that even recorded mistakes were copied and imitated, much to the chagrin of these “idols” (Millard 102).

The impact of recording technology on jazz was further complicated by the development of radio. One of the most significant impacts that radio had upon jazz and popular music was to introduce the concept of corporate advertising. Right from the earliest radio broadcasts in 1906, music was used by broadcasters to attract listeners. At first, the poor quality of recording technology dictated that radio stations broadcast mostly live music, and broadcasters, under the pretense of giving musicians free advertising, were able to

solicit unpaid performances. Musicians' unions, however, quickly began demanding wages for any radio work. Thus in order to mitigate their own costs, broadcasters began selling airtime to commercial advertisers (Kraft 63-68). Initially, this arrangement appeared to be a highly beneficial one for musicians, as it provided them with steady work and wider exposure. In the mid 1920s, however, remote-control broadcasting was introduced, allowing individual concerts to be broadcast live across the United States. Now advertisers needed to broadcast on only a small number of programs in order to reach a large audience and, consequently, many orchestras in rural areas and smaller urban centers were left unemployed (Kraft 68-70). In addition, in 1930 a process known as electrical transcription (ET) allowed for the creation of slow-spinning discs with fifteen minutes of programming on each side, as opposed to the earlier 78 rpm discs that would only hold about three and a half minutes. This technology allowed for the manufacture of discs with prerecorded advertisements or blank spaces into which advertisements could be inserted. By 1932, 75 percent of all radio stations used transcription disks, and by 1939 these "canned" broadcasts accounted for the bulk of programming on most smaller stations (Coleman 40). The obvious economic savings of prerecorded advertising would eventually all but eliminate live radio performances (Kraft 78-80). Thus the impact of radio combined with that of the phonograph actually had the effect of reducing rather than expanding employment opportunities for many musicians.

Equally disconcerting for jazz musicians, at least those who were fortunate enough to find employment, was the manner in which their music and their careers were governed by the demands of corporate advertising. For example, from the 1920s through the 1940s, jazz composers, most notably Duke Ellington, created hundreds of songs that were all roughly three minutes in length. This development has been primarily attributed to the limitations of early recording technology. ET discs, however, while not as technologically sophisticated or commercially viable as LPs, certainly provided the basis for the distribution of longer recordings well before the release of the LP in 1948. Interestingly, during this period jukebox operators accounted for a third of all records sold (Kraft 78), and by the late 1930s many radio stations had adopted the disc jockey format. Both of these groups often refused to play songs that were longer than three minutes because they "interfered with commercials" (Peretti 162). Such commercial resistance could hardly have helped with the development and sale of longer recordings and their attendant technology. In addition, since many record companies regarded "black" music as unsellable by itself, those musicians who made their living recording music for advertising were certainly not about to be given many opportunities to record jazz.¹ By the mid-1930s, with the "swing" craze in full force, music advertising had become an immensely lucrative, multi-million dollar industry. While numerous excellent jazz recordings survive from this period, much of the music the big bands were required to play could hardly be considered jazz at all. Even famous orchestras like those of Ellington, Basie, Goodman, and Miller made a substantial portion of their income playing trite and cliché popular songs to advertise everything from hand soap to war bonds. Musicians could often be heard complaining that "we do not sell music; we sell programming" (Chanan 17).

Clearly, the commercialism of the recording industry has had many negative and creatively damaging effects on the production and development of jazz. Nevertheless, the misuse of the creative potential of sound recording by commercial interests should not be used as an excuse to criticize or dismiss the medium itself. While the phonograph was seen by some to stifle freedom and spontaneity in musical performance, it also demanded new standards of professional competence (Chanan 127). The proliferation of recorded music across the United States and the world permanently raised the bar for musical performance, requiring musicians to maintain an extraordinarily high and consistent level of excellence. Before recordings, people whose musical experience was necessarily limited by their geographic location or economic status could be far more easily impressed by "virtuosos." However, once the sounds of those who were undisputed masters on their instruments,—musicians like Louis Armstrong, Coleman Hawkins, and Art Tatum, for example,—were heard in living rooms across the world, every musical performance would be rated against this new standard. While many recordings presented watered down distortions of jazz, the fear of posterity, while extremely stressful, also motivated many musicians to perform some of their best work for the phonograph, and this music was also studied by scores of others.

Of course, even if the musical quality of some recordings was high, there is still the criticism that these recordings turned improvisations into closed texts and encouraged only strict imitation from other musicians, thus inhibiting the creative development of jazz. This attitude is, however, unjustifiably patronizing to most jazz musicians. While there were undoubtedly some musicians who failed to comprehend the spontaneous nature of jazz from its records, there were also many others who used these early recordings as an educational foundation from which to develop their own performance styles. A three minute recording is an extremely reduced and restricted version of a jazz song compared to its live

manifestations, where additional choruses and extended solos can expand it into a ten or twenty minute piece. Thus early jazz recordings are very much like written scores of jazz standards that, containing only head arrangements and chord progressions, merely provide an outline upon which the spontaneity and improvisation of jazz performance is based. A recording like "West End Blues" was not simply imitated, but expanded and adapted into numerous different renditions by later jazz musicians. From this perspective, the jazz recording is no longer a closed text severed from the realities of musical development, but an integral part of a dynamic and fluid creative process that, by virtue of its tangible form, can continue to influence the musical development of countless future generations while also providing historians with invaluable "records" of this process.

The removal of the musician, in studio recordings, from the performance environment has also been far from universally regarded as being a negative development. Many musicians, both before and after the advent of sound recordings, found having to tailor their performances to audience expectations and preconceptions to be extremely frustrating and creatively stifling. Many also found the pressure of live performance, where one is expected to sound "perfect" every time, to be far more intense than that of studio recording, where musicians are allowed numerous attempts to perfect their performances. Glenn Gould, for example, claimed that sound recording was the ideal artistic medium for music, one where composers and musicians could experiment and expand their art free from the restrictions and the stress of having to entertain an audience, and refused to perform live for most of his career. He believed that the opportunities for "editorial intervention" provided by sound recording, where musical performances could be closely scrutinized and continually improved upon, allowed musicians to pursue and achieve a level of skill and creativity that would have been impossible within the limitations of live performance (Chanan 132).

Furthermore, from Gould's perspective Benjamin's claim that the film actor performs only for a "metal contrivance" seems rather short sighted. In fact, the film actor has a rather specialized audience present to view her performance, including a director, assistant directors, lighting technicians, costume designers, makeup artists, etc. Likewise, in the recording studio engineers, producers, other musicians, and the performers themselves all work together to refine and improve the quality of the music recorded, thereby forming a highly skilled audience that affects the performance in a far more deliberate and constructive way than an audience at a live concert ever could. Hence, while recordings cannot duplicate the sound of live performance, some would argue that they are actually better than the real thing.

The example of Glenn Gould highlights a significant and intriguing debate concerning what constitutes the "real" within musical performance and expression. Perhaps the strongest and most vehement criticism that has ever been leveled against sound recordings is that they are unnatural, that they have removed the human element from the production and transmission of music and replaced it with cold passionless machinery. It has also been argued, however, that "the moment man ceased to make music with his own voice alone the art became machine ridden" (Dellaira 28). From this perspective then, there seems to be little difference between transmitting musical ideas through microphones, phonographs, and speakers and communicating them through strings and brass tubing. Many advocates of mechanically derived art have claimed that it is, in fact, the stage, with all of its inherent limitations, that is a distortion of reality, and that it is only through media as film, photography, and sound recording that we can actually experience the "real" (Kittler 37). Film technology, for example, can make the slightest whisper clearly audible, thereby allowing Shakespearean actors to convey emotional subtleties contained in their characters' soliloquies in ways the actors could not in a live theatre performance, where they must project in order to be heard. Concerning photography, Benjamin states that it "can capture images which escape natural vision" (220), thus making it a more objective, and therefore, real medium than the painting, which is completely derived from human perception and interpretation. In terms of music, as the technology of microphones and sound mixing improved, studios were able to capture on record subtle musical elements that would have been inaudible in a live performance. Today, with compact discs and digital technology, many listeners argue that the quality of recorded sound is now vastly superior to that of most live performances.

On the subject of the relationship between painting and photography and between theatre and film, Benjamin states that "Earlier much futile thought had been devoted to the question of whether photography is an art. The primary question—whether the very invention of photography had not transformed the entire nature of art—was not raised. Soon film theoreticians asked the same ill-considered question with regard to film" (227).

One could readily make the same statement about the relationship between music and sound recording. While photography and film have mostly overcome these prejudices and been recognized as separate and

equal art forms, no such distinction has yet been widely recognized between music and sound recording: indeed, there is still no one generally recognized term to encompass what I will refer to as audio art, and literature on the subject is somewhat sparse.

In any major Canadian or American university library, a subject heading search under “photography” or “motion pictures” will yield thousands of entries. In the TRELIS library catalogue (which services the universities of Guelph, Waterloo, and Wilfrid Laurier), however, I found only twelve entries under the heading of “sound in art,” and searches in other library systems under this and related headings such as “audio art” and “sound art” yielded no more than a few dozen entries at most.

Scholars exploring the field of audio art often begin by addressing this identity problem. In *Wireless Imagination*, Douglas Kahn laments “the absence of anything remotely resembling a coherent tradition of audio art” (ix) and criticizes “the privileging of music as the art of sound in modern Western culture” (3). Similarly, in *Sound by Artists* Dan Lander states that “a theory of phonography (recorded sound) has yet to emerge” (12) and that “it is difficult to identify an art of sound precisely because of its historical attachment to music” (10). While both authors begin on this unfortunate note, the collections of essays they introduce reveal a large and growing critical community,² one whose work reveals not only how far the art of sound recording goes beyond the boundaries of music, only one of many raw materials available, but also how this technology can be used to redefine the nature of music. If sound recording technology can be used to expand the usage of auditory data and stimuli beyond what is naturally possible, why should this technology not also be used to expand the art of music beyond what is possible in live performance?

There are numerous cases one could cite whereby sound recording technology has been used to create “impossible performances” (Dellaira 19). In the arena of jazz, however, one of the most famous and successful examples is pianist Bill Evans’ 1963 album *Conversations With Myself*. Even in jazz there are certain inherent limitations to live performance. In the liner notes to *Conversations*, Gene Lees quite effectively articulates the particular impediments that Evans and his producer Creed Taylor were seeking to circumvent in this album: “It is no reflection on musicians with whom Bill Evans has worked to say that in general they limit him. If a bassist delays a split second too long in responding to something he does, a superb musical idea may be lost, or at least diminished. It is no reflection on them because they are human and therefore not mind readers.” This sentiment is also echoed by Evans himself: “Another condition to be considered is the fact that I know my musical techniques more thoroughly than any other person, so that, it seems to me, I am equipped to respond to my previous musical statements with the most accuracy and clarity.” Thus, seeking to create a more precise kind of “group” improvisation, Evans made a series of recordings that involved two separate overdubbings. He first recorded a single track, then a second track while listening and reacting to the first one, and then a third track in which he reacted to the combined sound of the first two tracks. This process created an extraordinary situation in which the listener hears music produced by three separate musicians, but only one mind.

In terms of its creative use of recording technology, *Conversations with Myself* is a truly revolutionary album. While essentially “unreal,” the music contains all of the crucial characteristics of jazz, including spontaneity, improvisation, and a distinctly individualistic sound, and it presents them in a fresh and original context. This unique blending of live musical elements with recorded sound illustrates not only the creative educational potential of the sound recording medium, but also the ability of jazz to transform this medium. As an art form dedicated to innovation and reinterpretation, jazz can, in instances such as the recording of this album, inject its spirit of artistic development into the media through which it is conveyed and expand their creative boundaries along with its own.

The history of jazz in the twentieth century stands apart from other contemporary artistic developments on account of its complex interrelationship with the evolution of sound recording technology. The visual art forms Benjamin discusses in his analysis of the age of mechanical reproduction are all essentially fixed elements embodied within a single medium. Painting and sculpture are physical objects that, even in their degraded reproduced forms, present images of ritual art, while film and photography are wholly constituted by the technology of mechanical reproduction. Ever since it encountered the medium of sound reproduction, however, jazz has existed in a kind of dual state developing both inside and outside of the recording space. More significantly, this development has involved a highly fluid movement of musical ideas and concepts between this medium and that of live performance. The sound recording captures certain elements of a jazz performance, which are then studied by other musicians, reintroduced into the performance space in a new context, and recorded again. While this process is unfolding, however, those elements of jazz that are unique to live performance—the interaction between musicians and the way they

respond to their audience—are also continuing to evolve within this space, influenced by ideas from both media. In addition, as sound recording technology has improved, jazz has developed artistic processes unique to the recording space, ones that also influence and are influenced by live performances. Thus, since jazz remains only partially structured by the technology of mechanical reproduction, it can be argued that its “aura” has only been partially destroyed. This observation should prompt us to reconsider whether the destruction of the aura of other art forms by mechanical reproduction is as absolute and final a process as Benjamin implies.

Notes

¹ For some innovative perspectives on the economics of jazz, see Collier, who argues that contrary to prevailing popular and scholarly opinion, live and recorded jazz was primarily patronized by, and therefore directed towards, white Americans; and Kofsky, who presents a bold and astute study of the role of race and racism in the jazz recording industry.

² See also Kahn (*Noise, Water, Meat*), Furlong, and Augaitis.

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