

## *The Repertoire of Jazz Jam Sessions in N.Y.*

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### **Introduction**

This article provides a general view of the repertoire played in jazz jam sessions in Manhattan, a privileged context for learning jazz performative styles, developing the creative process, building professional networks, and establishing status of the musicians. It is the result of research carried out with professional jazz musicians who live and work mainly in New York, one of the most important stages for jazz activity in the world.

In 2004 and 2005 I observed jam sessions in five jazz clubs in Manhattan - Small's, Smoke, Cleopatra's Needle, Lenox Lounge and St. Nick's Pub -, some of which are/were historically significant for jazz and jam session practices (Pinheiro 2008). In addition to being one of the few performance venues that officially hosted jam sessions in Manhattan during the observation period, these clubs were selected because of their location on different areas of the city.

Based on substantial fieldwork and on the analysis of musical and discursive practices, in this article I highlight some of the features of the repertoire frequently played in jazz jam sessions.

### **The repertoire of jam sessions**

The jam session is a performative occasion ideally open to the participation of musicians, which takes place weekly, at night, in jazz performance spaces such as bars and clubs, and

which can last for several hours until dawn. Through the performance of jazz standards, musicians improvise and interact collectively (Pinheiro 2008, 2011).

The joint musical dialogue that musicians develop in jam sessions is predominantly based on a shared musical language and aesthetic in the jazz scene, the “blues aesthetic” (Baraka 1971, Jackson 1998, and Murray 1970, 1976). As Jackson (1998) points out, the “blues aesthetic”, grounded in the African American cultural tradition, presupposes musical features and evaluative and normative criteria common to musicians and audiences. It is based not only on particularities of the blues as a musical language, but also on aesthetic specificities existent in other forms African American cultures such as creativity (Baker 1984, Feld 1994, Powell 1989 and 1994). It results from learning practices derived from and continuously informed by African American music and culture.

In jam sessions, musicians play a standard repertoire which constitutes a structuring element of the performative occasion. This repertoire represents a *lingua franca* for musical communication between musicians. From the common knowledge of a set of compositions, they interact through collective improvisation, using repertoire as a melodic and harmonic matrix that informs the creative process.

There are three main types of musical pieces, according to their origin and formal, melodic and harmonic nature: Blues, pieces that are part of the American Songbook, and other original compositions by jazz musicians. The first type includes compositions that, in addition to having certain aesthetic features, are made up of twelve bars organized in groups of four. The complexity of the harmonic structure of a Blues varies depending on the composer and the musicians’ interpretation.

The compositions from the American Songbook are, for the most part, highly publicized works from the first half of the 20th century, characterized by simple melodies and AABA and ABAC (or ABAB’) forms, and popularized through musical theater from Broadway and Hollywood movies. Most of these pieces were composed by European-Americans, having been later adopted by jazz musicians as part of their repertoire. The third type of compositions played in jam sessions are originals by jazz musicians, and have greater melodic, harmonic, and formal complexity. In the repertoire frequently played in jam sessions, there is a group of compositions that I call “core repertoire”. These pieces represent the most famous standards in the jazz scene and have a decisive pedagogical function in the musical development of young music students.

The repertoire played in jam sessions is more diverse when compared to the music performed in formally organized concerts. However, this diversity can vary according to the knowledge and mastery of the pieces by musicians. The repertoire refers musicians to the history of jazz, namely to famous phonograms and performances, facilitating the diffusion of

the aesthetic standards that structure musical performance.

The analysis of jam sessions also allowed to pay special attention to the structuring of the performance of a standard. This can be divided into: selection of repertoire and musicians, introduction, melody exposition, solos, trades, head-out, and endings.

The repertoire is usually selected by agreement through a conversation between the musicians, which takes place on stage in the moments that precede the performance, reflecting a relationship of respect between them. This fact may have a positive impact on the improvisational process, namely in terms of building trust between participants, and may stimulate musical interaction. The decision about who interprets the melody of a composition is made in most cases verbally, through an agreement between the participants. The entire process of melody exposition is related to important creative aspects. There are numerous ways to interpret the melody of a composition, namely in terms of notes, attack, timbre, ornamentation, and other stylistic elements. It is equally important to note the active role of the remaining members of the group (for example the rhythm section) in the creative process of a jazz performance, especially in terms of creating a musical environment that directly influences the melody's exposition. These musicians also improvise their accompaniment according to several parameters of melody interpretation.

The melody can be played by various musicians. This depends on the form of the piece and the band's instrumentation. For example, the melody of a 32-bar AABA composition can be played by the trumpet in the A section, and by the tenor saxophone in the B section. This may occur with or without prior verbal agreement. The solo section takes place after the melody exposition and constitutes one of the most important moments of the performance. Accompanied by the rhythm section, each participant can clearly demonstrate their improvisational abilities. The first solo is usually taken by the musician who played the melody and will be developed on the harmonic and formal structure of the selected composition. The structural entity of a solo is the "chorus", which represents the duration and nature of the harmonic structure behind the melody, repeating itself cyclically. Each solo will last for a certain number of choruses, depending on the soloist's choice, or any other performance limitations. During the solo, musicians must melodically define the harmony, while interacting with the other participants. He/she should be able to respond to the other musicians' rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic suggestions.

After the solo section and before the melody restatement, there is sometimes an optional "trades" section. This consists in the exchange of short solos of equal duration between the musicians, while the harmonic structure and form of the composition are followed. Each of these short improvised sections can last from a bar to a "chorus". In the course of a "trades" section, the first soloist improvises in a certain number of measures, establishing the duration

of the following improvisations. For example, if the first “trades” section has the duration of four measures (in this specific case, the “trades” are called “fours”), the other musicians will use the same number of bars to improvise. In most cases, “trades” include alternating sections between soloists (saxophone, trumpet, guitar, piano, and double bass) and drums. For example, in the case of a quartet with saxophone, piano, double bass and drums, the order of the trades can be: saxophone - drums - piano - drums - double bass - drums - saxophone -, and so on. Playing “trades” tests the musicians’ knowledge of the repertoire’s structure, requiring a strong focus on form, especially during the drum sections (during these segments, you can only hear the drums improvising, without any accompaniment).

In jam sessions, at the beginning of the performance of a piece, before playing the melody, musicians currently perform a small introductory section. This is usually constituted by certain harmonic patterns and typical melodic phrases known to jazz musicians. The performance of intros can be decided verbally, even though is musically negotiated. This negotiation is based on the musicians’ aural abilities as well as their knowledge of the jazz tradition. The introductions can also be constituted by the melody and harmony of a section of the composition. For example, jazz musicians in jam sessions commonly to use the last A section as an introduction. I noticed, in most of the jam sessions observed, that the introductions were often comprised of the common harmonic progression III, VI, II, V in various variants, or by the V7sus chord in the key of the piece. It is also possible identify in jam sessions other harmonic solutions, especially those that appear in famous jazz records. That said, it becomes clear that jam sessions require communication between participants, involving patterns and symbolic actions determined by the jazz tradition.

## Conclusion

Although, as in any other ritualized activity, jam sessions are structured events, it is important to mention that their structure is not fixed. On the contrary, according to the anthropological approach that developed around ritual from the 1970s onwards (Bell 1989, 1992; Turner 1967, 1969, 1977, 1983, 1986), I define jam sessions as performative events that, while ensuring the unity and continuity of the group, can stimulate its transformation (Pinheiro 2012). Following this perspective, it is crucial to identify the importance of jam sessions in the expression, transmission, fixation, strengthening and transformation of the aesthetic and performative criteria shared in the jazz scene in Manhattan.

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