

Early Musical Development of Lester Young, Joe Pass, Charlie Parker and Bill Evans- How they learned to Improvise

Introduction

To introduce the research and to place it in a historical and cultural context, I have chosen to discuss briefly, the early musical development of jazz musicians Lester Young, Joe Pass, Charlie Parker and Bill Evans. From biographical sources and interviews I describe how the players appeared to have developed the skills needed to learn to improvise as youngsters. I then argue that the conditions necessary for the development of jazz improvisational skills do not explain the underlying psychological process, rather, how they are initiated and nurtured to maturity. This study seeks to explore and illuminate the learning process from a psychological perspective using the notion of a schema as the basis for understanding.

Lester Young, Joe Pass, Charlie Parker and Bill Evans were chosen for comparison, because they were all influential players whose unique voices changed the direction of the music in an innovative way. They were born in the early part of the twentieth century, when jazz was a new, popular and fast-developing music integrally linked with the cultural and social community. All were considered to be fine technicians, (Parker especially brought the technique of the saxophone to a new height) and their technical ability played a major role in their improvisational skill and the emotional communication of their musical ideas

Berliner's Learning Model

How did these four diverse players come to be interested in jazz and to be able to improvise? On the face of it, they appeared to have learned within musical and cultural environments described by Berliner (1994) from the testimony of the fifty or so jazz musicians he interviewed. Their childhood experiences were characterised by the following musical factors:

- ❖ Being surrounded by both live and recorded music, in the foreground and the background, as an integral and important part of everyday life.
- ❖ Having access to improvisers 'Children who grow up around improvisers regard improvisation as a skill within the realms of their own possible development. In the absence of this experience, many view improvisation as beyond their ability.' (Berliner 1994:31)
- ❖ Being encouraged to participate in musical performances, (particularly in more informal settings, for example, in church, in school, amongst friends and family and on the streets) at an early stage, often from the time they began to play an instrument and sometimes for money.
- ❖ Having access to informal educational environments in for example, record shops, jam sessions, musician's homes, gigs and so on.
- ❖ Playing and experimenting with a range of different instruments before settling on the right one. Many players made their own instruments as children, before acquiring a real one.
- ❖ Practicing and or performing very hard for some particularly formative part of their early life.
- ❖ Participating in jam sessions provided a way of practising and honing performance skills without the usual commercial pressures.
- ❖ Learning from mentors and peers within the jazz community.
- ❖ The responsibility for learning being placed firmly with the student as a result of the jazz community's emphasis on learning rather than teaching. It was the student's responsibility

to learn and to find out what they needed which encouraged self-reliance and individuality as the novice chose their own (often misguided) path of study.

- ❖ Using the jazz standard as a basic framework to provide the structure for both individual and collective improvising. Gradually developing the theory and practise by studying harmony and altering chords.
- ❖ Copying idols by ear from records and playing along with them, in order to gain fluency and to develop aural memory before striking out on their own and developing an individual style. This way of learning is described by Berliner and many of the players as the 'imitate, assimilate, innovate' model.
- ❖ During their formative years as young professionals, they were in thriving and competitive musical environments and had many opportunities to play and develop in a range of bands and situations and make a living.

If we look at some key aspects in turn and compare the biographical information about each musician, we may be able to tell to what extent the Berliner model is applicable to these musicians.

Being surrounded by music/early experience

All of the four musicians were surrounded by music as children and were blessed with supportive parents although all but Lester Young's parents were non-musicians themselves. They must have valued music highly to help their children as they did, providing lessons and instruments where they could. According to Shadwick (2002) and to several interviews with pianist himself, (1955 Downbeat October, 1975 Downbeat March and 1980 Contemporary Keyboard June), Bill Evans' initial exposure to music was through classical pieces, in particular listening to his older brother playing the piano. Trying to emulate him, Evans who was born in 1929, put in many hours from the age of five, (in 1934) when his lessons started and began the regime of long hours of practice that he continued throughout his life. (Both Pass and Evans are at pains to stress the importance of work and long hours of dedicated practise to coming to be able to express themselves through their instrument.) By the age of ten, Evans was a proficient classical pianist and good reader, but unable to improvise:

'I got medals for playing Mozart and Schubert, but I couldn't even play "My Country Tis of Thee" without the music.' (Downbeat Interview December 8th 1960)

By comparison Joe Pass, who was born in 1928 in Pennsylvania, appeared to have had no live musicians to emulate but listened to music at the movies, on record and on the radio. Joe was impressed by the guitar playing of silver screen idol Gene Autry and was given his first guitar by a family friend at the age of nine.

Lester Young was born twenty years earlier in 1909 and had the advantage of being surrounded by and involved in playing live music from being a small child. During the early part of the 20th century, there were few recordings made and scant access to record players for ordinary people. There was also still a large touring circuit of theatres dedicated to vaudeville shows, which the Young family played in. Young's father was a carnival/minstrel show musician who taught all his children to sing tunes as soon as they could walk. (Russell 1974:57) By the time they were five or six, they could all read music and play at least one instrument. The Billy Young Orchestra consisted entirely of the Young family, including Mrs. Young on piano and it travelled for nine or ten months of the year with tent shows and small circus companies, touring through Kansas, Nebraska, and South Dakota. From the age of eight, Lester was performing in a circus band, which played for the pre-show parade, the grand entrance, and the accompaniments for clowns, bareback riders and high wire acts. Young would therefore have learned to play as he performed, presumably playing music and instruments of greater sophistication as he developed.

There are a number of cultures in which children learn in this way; gypsy families give a violin to a child and they are put in the band, gradually picking up technique, intonation, melodies and harmony

as they go; they are not instructed formally in any way. The great advantage is that all experimenting and practise takes place within a structured, highly musical context in which rhythmic and harmonic elements are already in place. This way of learning also builds great confidence and the natural ability to improvise because it has been part of the learning process from the beginning.

Charlie Parker, who was born in 1920 in a Kansas City suburb, heard his father playing the piano when he was at home (he was a travelling vaudeville singer and dancer, whom Parker never saw perform). According to Russell (1973:35/36) his father played him recordings of Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Duke Ellington and Blind Lemon Jefferson. If this is so, it might help to explain Parker's later natural deep affinity with the blues, both melodically and in the strong and at times wailing tone he produced on the alto as a mature player. After 1931, his father faded from the scene, joining the Pullman railcars as a waiter, and it was a couple of years later that Parker became seriously interested in jazz and went out to hear the live music for himself. There is no documentary evidence that he showed any interest in music and when he did, the start was not auspicious:

His first flirtation with music was a fleeting as that of most children who ask for music lessons. At thirteen, he expressed enthusiasm for the sound of Rudy Vallee's saxophone on the radio, and his ever-obliging mother bought him a used and unplayable alto for \$45. After she invested a larger sum to repair it, his interest waned and the instrument was loaned to a friend. Giddins (1987:28)

Access to Improvisers

The only one of the musicians who appears to have had extensive access to an improviser as a child is Lester Young. As with many of his contemporaries, Young grew up surrounded by live music and improvisers, both within his own family and in the wider community because the music was integral to his everyday life. In a *Downbeat* interview of the mid fifties, he remembers his experiences as a small child, listening to music on the street:

'The family moved to New Orleans after I was born and stayed there till I was ten. I remember I liked to listen to the music in New Orleans. I remember there were trucks advertising dances and I would follow them around. I don't remember the names of all the musicians I heard.'

Competition for bands was so stiff that they would arrive in wagons before the gig and play in the street to interest their potential audiences for the evening. Wingy Malone describes what happened:

Down the street, in an old sideboard wagon, would come a jazz band from one ballroom. And up the street, in another sideboard wagon, would come the band from another ballroom, which had announced a dance for the same night at the same price. And those musicians played for all their worth, because the band that pleased the crowd more would be the one the whole crowd would go to hear and to dance to, at its ballroom later that night. Shapiro and Hentoff 1955:25.

'My father could swing. He liked to play. He taught and could play all instruments.'

Russell (1974:58) states that by the time Young had switched to alto in his early teens, he was already playing jazz on it and was reluctant to learn how to read on the instrument because he felt it impeded his flow of ideas. Young probably realised instinctively that the visual modality interfered with his aural perception of and physical execution of improvised ideas. The lack of reading would not have impeded him much as a player; Kansas City at the time resounded with bands that based performances on the development of riffs, collective improvisation and playing entirely by ear. Count Basie didn't commit any of his band pieces to paper until they went to New York in the early 1940's, prior to that point, the music only existed in minds of the players and as collaborative improvisations on the bandstand.

By contrast, Bill Evans appears to have had no direct access to improvisers, although he would have heard both jazz and popular music on record or on the radio, because he started playing boogie-woogie as a youngster. He was also playing in a dance band at the age of twelve as a dep for his older brother.

He said to Marion McPartland in a Boston Radio interview in 1979:

I used to be the fastest boogie-woogie player in New Jersey. I have a cardboard disc someplace that I made when I was 12, playing boogie woogie.

In common with Pass, Evans emphasised the amount of work it took for him to be able to improvise and he worked on it systematically:

I didn't have the facile talent that a lot of people have, the ability to just listen and transfer something to my instrument...Rather than just accept the nuances or the syntax of a style completely, I'll abstract the principles and put it together myself...I had to go through a terribly hard analytical and building process. But in the end I came out ahead, in a sense, because I knew what I was doing in a more thorough way. If you're a painter, you should be a draftsman too and an architect. You have to have a compositional sense and a structural sense.... I'm also thinking in terms of the language of music, which is more in the melodic sense. The way one idea follows another. Why does it have meaning? Why does it say something? Because it relates to the idea that precedes it or follows it. It's that kind of thinking that is a way to handle musical tones. Interview with Len Lyons Monterey Jazz Festival September 1975.

Like Joe Pass, he began by teaching himself to improvise quite naturally, and without imitating anyone, whilst doing dance band gigs, just by experimenting with different chords and melodic fragments.

The dance band that Evans joined when he was thirteen played stock arrangements and did not attempt to improvise. Shadwick (2002) describes how Evans began to improvise for himself, presumably out of boredom or curiosity:

Tuxedo Junction is in Bb. I put in a little Db D F thing, bang, in the right hand. It was such a thrill... the idea of doing something in music that somebody hadn't thought of, opened a whole new world for me. (2002:50)

In an interview Evans described how he developed his jazz technique by basing it on the traditional piano technique and playing jazz gigs:

Dan Morgenstein: Did you overcome the technical problems of the piano through classical music?

Evans: Oh, a lot of it, but, you know, I started playing gigs when I was twelve or thirteen, and the technique came from playing a great deal of jobs in jazz, along with what I had already developed in my earlier years from six to twelve, in classical music. And then I got a degree in piano and following that also when I was in the Army, from twenty on, and then moved to New York when I was twenty-five. For the next three or four years I did some very heavy practising, playing a lot of repertoire, a lot of Bach, Beethoven, Bartok, etc.

DM:Do you still practise classical music now?

Evans: Well, not much, not enough to really count; I would like to, because there's no substitute for spending a couple of hours with Bach, and I know it's necessary because it makes your fingers think in ways you would never let them think themselves. (Dan Morgenstein Interview Downbeat Magazine June 1964)

Charlie Parker would have had access to the best improvisers on record, at home, after his mother bought a victrola gramophone (sometime after 1927), but he only began to listen to live improvisers when, as a tall and mature looking fourteen year old, he began to frequent the night clubs and dance halls of Kansas City. As Giddins (1987) suggests: 'As provisionally popular music, jazz wasn't merely available; it was virtually inescapable.' (1987:18)

Like the New Orleans that Lester Young grew up in, Kansas City in the early 1930's had a thriving jazz scene. It was run by a notorious gangster Tom Pendergast and according to Russell (1973) and Giddins (1987), was a honeycomb of nightclubs that had been operating throughout Prohibition and as if there were no depression. There were cabarets, show bars, refurbished speakeasies, music lounges, taverns, bars, honky-tonks, dance halls, saloons and nightclubs.

All of these clubs had live music. The music started early in the evening and carried straight through the night till dawn, the official closing hour, though seldom enforced. At daybreak, roving musicians, finished with their regular jobs, would circulate through the district carrying their instruments and jam until well into the morning. (Russell, 1973:30)

Russell states that there was more live music Kansas City at that period, than in New Orleans Storeyville district before it was closed down at the beginning of WW1. Giddins describes the scene and musical environment that Parker absorbed, a little more colourfully:

The milieu that the teenage Parker made his own was soaked in the blues, and lavish with scorching rhythms and startling improvisational conceits. Playing absurdly long hours, sometimes round the clock, what with breakfast dances, matinees, dances and after-hours clubs, the bands specialised in fashioning head arrangements, which were invented on the bandstand through the communal mastery of a lexicon of riffs. Riffs-punching phrases, short and rhythmic, that picked up momentum with repetition- were the building blocks of big band arrangements and the basis for much improvisation. When the Kansas City sound spread across the country, many of those improvised scores were formalised and recorded. (Basie's "One O'Clock Jump" for example. Like New Orleans and Chicago before it, Kansas City was a hotbed for creative music financed by racketeers with no interest in music. Some thugs forced bands to work free weeks just to flaunt their power. Yet, when Pendergast went to jail for tax fraud in 1938, the Kansas City era in jazz began to fade. Giddins (1987:34)

It is impossible to overstress the significance of this in Parker's development as an improviser; the best jazz musicians in the country at the time were either resident there or came on frequent tours and Parker was able to get first hand experience of the sound, style and behaviour of these players. According to Russell (1973:55/56), Parker was absorbing the sound and feel of the music at the age of fourteen, several years before he would be able to play it with any fluency. He would apparently mime along with Lester Young, on his alto on the balcony (away from the prying eyes of the management), rather in the manner of the air guitarist; fingering the keys, hearing the flowing lines and imagining that he was creating the solo. Developing aural imagination in this way, in the vivid immediacy of the live situation, must have helped the music to develop in Parker's mind and enabled him to be innovative with those ideas in such a short space of time. Later, as a novice improviser, he took part in the many jam sessions that happened in Kansas City, not always successfully.

Joe Pass had access to improvisers from the radio and records but like Evans began improvising on his own, although without the support of a live band. His father would ask him to play along to tunes on the radio, to copy what he was whistling and then to fill up any gaps in the tune with his own melody. He described how he learned to do this:

But, I know how I learned, and what I practised. Like, for instance, somebody would play the guitar on the Sunday morning radio program, any guitarist- maybe Vincente Gomez or somebody, and my father would say, 'Get the guitar Joe, and copy it.' And I'd sit there and try, and he'd say, 'Did you get it?' and I'd not got it, 'cause I don't know what I'm doing. Then he'd say, 'Okay, learn this song,' and he'd whistle a tune and I'd find the notes, and then he'd say, 'Fill it up, don't leave any spaces.' That meant to do all the runs in between the phrases of melody..... That was the way I learned to play, by actually playing a lot and filling in all the spaces and not leaving gaps in the music. And then he would say, 'Play me a song - make it up.' He might do this every day. He didn't know anything about music, he didn't play an

instrument; but he wanted us to become something more than a steel worker like himself.
Interview in Guitar Magazine June 1974

The fascinating aspect of Pass's musical education is that a) his father took music and Joe's practise so seriously and saw it as a means of escape for him from a life in the steel mills and b) that as a non-musician, his father's suggestions (apart from the too long hours of practise) were entirely sound and useful for his musical development incorporating as they did, a wide ranging mixture of the aural, technical and theoretical. This combination of working things out for himself with regular encouragement and input from other sources (guitar manuals, radio broadcasts and sheet music), provided Pass with an excellent grounding upon which to base his jazz improvisation. It is interesting to speculate what might have happened if his father had sent him to a teacher; whether the results would have caused Pass to be a better player or a more balanced individual. (All of the four musicians mentioned here were addicted to either drugs or booze- Pass got off and stayed off heroin after a period of rehab in the Synonon hospital in the early 1960's while Parker and Evans were on it for most of their careers and Young was an alcoholic. The personal cost of compelling oneself or being compelled to play and perform as a child, is another question entirely. The addictions suffered by all the players could have been a result of many things including the response by society at large to their music and life style, or the obsession to be better players, just the need to stay awake all night.)

Practicing or Performing for Long Hours

Sloboda and Davidson (1994:184) cite evidence in their research that high achieving young classical musicians do moderate amounts of informal practice and high levels of formal practice and this appears to be also true for the four jazz musicians described here. The main difference is in the nature of the practice and the fact that the jazz musicians were largely self-taught and self-motivating, particularly as they approached adolescence. Ericsson et al (1993), found (from retrospective data), that professional violinists had accumulated approximately 10,000 hours of practice by the age of 20 and from their own accounts and descriptions, the jazz musicians probably did a similar amount. However, the four musicians did varying amounts of practice as children; Evans claims to have done three hours a day (booklet note The Fantasy Recordings on the Fantasy Label 1989) as a small child and certainly far exceeded that as young adult. His early practice seems to have consisted of learning the classical repertoire, and getting a good grounding in traditional technique, as well as learning the violin as a second instrument. Shadwick (2002:50) makes the point that this musical discipline:

In combination with his natural intellectual curiosity and wide reading habits, (it) would eventually make Evans a far more fully equipped musician than the vast majority of jazzmen of his generation. (2002:50)

In terms of jazz practice, apart from teaching himself on the bandstand, Evans also had the help of a mentor when he joined a professional band at the age of thirteen. Here Evans describes to Brian Hennessy how bassist George Platt helped him:

George would call out the changes for me without ever suggesting that I should have learned them for myself. Finally, instead of thinking of them as isolated changes, I worked out a system upon which traditional theory is based and I gradually began to understand how the music was put together. (Interview with Brian Hennessy, Jazz Journal, June 1985).

Later Evans described how he felt about improvising after he had done all of the hard work in practice:

Everybody has to learn certain things, but when you play, the intellectual process no longer has anything to do with it. It shouldn't anyhow. You have your craft behind you then, and you try to think within the area you have mastered to a certain extent. In that way I am relying entirely on intuition then. I have no idea of what's coming next, and if I did, I would be a nervous wreck. Who could keep up with it? (Interview with Dan Morgenstein Downbeat Magazine June 1964.)

Evans stated that it was not until he began to play with Miles Davies in his mid twenties in 1955 that he was fully able to express his ideas and feelings on the piano. He explains this as almost like a physical barrier that pianists have to overcome:

So pianists go through long periods where they're putting themselves into their instrument only to a limited degree. There comes a time after pushing very hard against the problem when they suddenly break through. Oscar [Peterson] is right. That's a very physical problem. You have to spend a lot of years at the keyboard before what's inside can get through your hands and into the piano. For years and years that was a constant frustration to me. I wanted to get that expressive thing in, but somehow it didn't happen. I had to spend a lot of years playing, especially Bach, which seemed to help. It gave me control and more contact with tone and things. (Interview with Len Lyons Downbeat Magazine at the Monterey Jazz Festival in September 1975).

Joe Pass also did a lot of practice from the ages of nine to fourteen, saying that he played for an amazing seven hours a day:

Pass: I guess it came sort of easy; I have certain difficulties, not a lot. But you've got to remember that I grew up playing the guitar. I started when I was nine, and by the time I was nine and a half or ten, I was doing seven or eight hours practise every day. I did two hours practise at six o'clock in the morning before I went to school, and another two hours as soon as I got home in the afternoon. Then I did four hours at night before I went to bed. I did that until I was fourteen or fifteen. I didn't like it – I hated it, but my father was very firm about it: he saw a little something happening, so he figured he'd just push. I don't remember too much how I felt about it except that I'd rather be outside playing ball and things. I never could ride a bike, like even today I can't do these things. But, I know how I learned, and what I practised. (Guitar Magazine Interview June Edition 1974).

As to what he practised, of all the musicians, Pass remembers best what he did and explained it fully. As well playing along to the radio, his father's whistling and his own tunes, he worked from a popular guitar manual of the day (the Nick Lucas Method), and the Carcassi classical guitar book, which involved, reading, learning chords and harmony from both written notation and chord symbols. He was teaching himself in a rounded way to include technical and reading skills, which would enable him to develop as a jazz musician and survive as a studio player, as his father had hoped. He also taught himself, with his father's encouragement, to learn and play all the scales in every key and every position on the guitar fingerboard, finding them for himself and relating them to the chords. He used this exercise as a warm up, at the start of his practice and was probably the most useful thing he could have done to create the foundation to develop as jazz musician. He also mentions making up innumerable scale patterns and playing them all over the instrument. From the same interview Pass describes how he learned his scales:

Did you learn scales?

Pass: 'Yes'. (Demonstrating about a dozen scales all over the fingerboard, and playing with impeccable technique).

Out of a book?

Pass: No, my father would say. 'Play a scale,' and I'd play one and he'd say, 'What about the rest? There must be one above,' so we'd figure them out. I'd start the scale on the root of the chord and I'd go as far as my hand would reach without going out of position, say, five frets, and then I'd go all the way back. So when I practised I'd start right away on scales. As well as the usual ones, I'd play whole tone scales, diminished dominant sevenths, and chromatic scales. Every chord form, all the way up, and this took an hour. Another thing I'd do which is something I get my pupils on, is to make up scale patterns. You do this so that the head and the fingers are doing the same thing. You can continue making up these lines for as long as you can without making a mistake and if you do make a mistake then you go back over it. (Guitar Magazine June Edition 1974).

In terms of specific jazz practice, which happened later for Pass, this took the form of listening to the jazz guitarists of the 1940's like Django Reinhardt, Jimmy Rainey, Barney Kessell, Wes Montgomery and also he was particularly influenced by Charlie Parker, amongst other horn players. Parker was the only person whose solos he copied note for note and this gave Pass his be-bop orientation and style. It is interesting to note however, that because Pass was improvising a long time before he took to any particular jazz style, he was able to get round the instrument easily and had developed his technique significantly in a number of areas, before he learned the jazz aspects and was therefore at a distinct advantage.

Parker, by contrast was beset with technical difficulties whilst simultaneously trying to learn to improvise, and his lack of knowledge about both music theory and the workings of the alto saxophone as an instrument, made his early progress painfully slow. Once he had decided to play the alto seriously, at the age of 15 however, he claimed to have done between 11 to 15 hours practice a day, for a period of 3 or 4 years. He was interviewed by fellow saxophonist Paul Desmond in 1954, a year before his death:

Desmond: Another thing that's a major factor in your playing is this fantastic technique that nobody's quite equalled. I've always wondered about that too...whether there was...whether that came behind practising or whether that was just from playing...whether that evolved gradually.

Parker; Well you make it so hard for me to answer you, you know,...because I can't see where there's anything fantastic about it at all. I put quite a bit of study into the horn, that's true. In fact, the neighbours threatened to ask my mother to move once. We were living out West. She said I was driving them crazy with the horn; I used to put in at least 11-15 hours a day.

Desmond: yes, that's what I wondered

Parker: That's true yes. I did that for over a period of three or four years.

Desmond: ...because that is the answer

Parker: That's the facts anyway. [Chuckles]

1954 Interview for Boston Radio, with Paul Desmond.

It is unclear what Parker practised at first, and whatever it was, the process was at the beginning, extremely slow. He showed, by all accounts, a decided lack of promise for one who was about to change the whole course of the jazz tradition a few years later. He appears to have asked an enormous number of questions, of peers, occasional mentors, and amenable bandleaders, who knew more about harmony and the technical aspects of saxophone playing, than himself, in an attempt to understand and learn how to improvise. According to Russell, Parker asked Lester Young about reeds and he refused to respond:

Trade secrets were not handed down all that easily to a kid musician in a back alley. There were a number of them to be guessed at, pried loose and gathered together. It was part of the difficult school of jazz, and the uneasy relationship between master and apprentice. Lester did tell him, in a gruff tone, that you had to "shape the air" that everything you did from the bottom of your belly to the tip of your tongue, had to do with the sound you made. It wasn't a matter of notes or pitches, but sounds. In order to be able to learn more from the experienced musicians, you also had to be able to do more. Some professional status was required. The rites called for ever greater degrees of proficiency. [1974:67/68]

From this excerpt we can gather that getting information from more experienced players was not all that easy and that youngsters had to reach a certain standard before the requisite advice was forthcoming. From Young's response, it is also clear that Parker was not of the standard, but only at the very beginning of learning how to play jazz.

During this period of momentous 11-15 hours a day practice, he describes going to a jam session, which he did frequently in the thriving Kansas City scene:

I got this job in this place, working, y'know, but prior to that, this was when they were laughing at me. I knew how to play...um...I figuredI had learned the scale. I'd learned how to play two tunes in a certain key, in the key of D for your saxophone, F concert. I learned to play the first eight bars of Lazy River and I knew the complete tune of Honeysuckle Rose. I didn't ever stop to think about different keys or nothing like that [laughter]. So I took my horn out to this joint where a bunch of fellows I had seen around were...and the first thing they started playing was Body and Soul...Longbeat, y'know? Shit! So I got to playing my Honeysuckle Rose... I mean...an awful conglomeration. They laughed me off the bandstand. They laughed at me so hard. (Interview with Marshal Stearns and John Maher in New York City, 1950).

From this illuminating excerpt, and from the fact that he laughs about it during the interview, it is clear that Parker's knowledge of both the saxophone and the music were extremely slight at this point in 1935. He acknowledges that he thought there was only one scale in concert F for the alto and comes immediately unstuck when someone calls a tune in a different key. More significantly for his future progress, according to Russell (1973:67/68), when he realised that there were twelve keys, he set about systematically learning each in turn, overcoming difficulties of fingering and tone and expanding his technique enormously. If he had bothered to ask more experienced players they would have suggested learning only those scales most used by saxophonists of the period, namely F, Bb, Eb and Ab, but by learning in his own way, he began to expand the possibilities for improved technique and sound on the instrument. After Parker, it became standard form to learn tunes in all twelve keys for practice and to be able to blow off lesser musicians at jam sessions.

It is also significant that he had only learned one and a half tunes, believing that was enough, when he must have heard dozens of players with a much wider repertoire. Perhaps they were the only tunes he could remember and perhaps he imagined he could play the changes from Honeysuckle Rose over Body and Soul thinking it was in the same key and only realising his mistake in the ensuing cacophony and rising laughter from the audience. It is quite clear that Parker had but a dim view of what was required at this stage, and the experience of the jam session focussed his attention both on his shortcomings and on what he needed to learn.

It might be interesting to note here that many jazz musicians believe that there are several types of practice all of which are different and necessary to become a fluent improviser: theoretical and technical practice at home; performance practice at home continuously playing standards; performance practice in public jam sessions and playing your gig. Each of these aspects requires a subtly different approach and attitude and develops various skills.

Parker had many other hard experiences at jam sessions, including one famous time when Jo Jones much respected drummer with the Basie Band, threw a cymbal at Parkers feet to get his to stop playing during a jam. Jones had lost his temper both with Parker's incompetence on the stand and his refusal to step down. On this occasion, which also ended with the audience laughing at him, Parker was determined to make himself a better player and to prove his detractors wrong. The jam session was a key learning experience for Parker because of its public, mainly masculine and competitive nature and the fact that you had to be reasonably competent in order to benefit from the activity. Jam sessions for Parker, not only taught him what he needed to learn, but later allowed him to develop his own style in a more informal performance atmosphere as well as showcasing his much improved abilities as a player. More practically, players were often booked for work during jam sessions, as the concept of auditioning didn't really exist. He suffered in his early days as a novice improviser at jam sessions, which were competitive in nature, mainly due to his youthful inability to grasp the extent of the experience needed to make the performance practise positive. Parker also practised at friend's houses and seemed to have needed the social element to spark his enthusiasm and help his understanding.

By the time Parker was seventeen however, the situation had changed somewhat. Jay McShann who was one of the few fellow musicians to have faith in Parker as a youngster and who later employed him in his orchestra, had this to say about him:

I first ran into Charlie in November or December 1937 at one of those famous Kansa City jam sessions. Charlie seemed to live for them. I was in the rhythm section one night when this cocky kid pushed his way on stage. He was a teenager barely seventeen, and looked like a high school kid. He had a tone that cut. He knew the changes. He's get off on a line of his own and I would think he was headed for trouble, but he was like a cat landing on all four feet. A lot of people couldn't understand what he was trying to do, but it made sense harmonically and it always swung. Musical ideas, that is what jam sessions were really about. Charlie was able to hold his own against older men, some of them with years of big band experience. He was a strange kid, very aggressive and wise. (Jay Mc Shann quoted in Russell 1973:93)

There is no mention by Lester Young of what or how he practised as a child, but one can assume that as a travelling performer there were many informal opportunities to practice and play collaboratively together with his family in the vaudeville, and imitate a range of music. He would have had the advantage of learning within an everyday musical environment and not in isolation. As all the family were also players, this would have seemed entirely natural to him.

As for specific jazz practice, when he was a teenager, he idolised two key players Jimmy Dorsey and Frankie Trumbauer and transcribed Frankie Trumbauer's solos from the records by ear, playing along with them.

When I had just started to play, I would buy all his records. I imagine I can still play all those solos off the record. He played C melody saxophone. I tried to get the sound of a C melody on tenor. That's why I don't sound like other people. (Downbeat Magazine Interview September 1954).

In attempting and succeeding to sound like a high alto on the tenor, Young changed his whole tone and timbre and spawned a generation of imitators. He described his idol thus:

Trumbauer always told a little story and I liked the way he slurred the notes. He'd play the melody first and after that he'd play around the melody. (Downbeat Interview September 1954).

Interestingly, in view of the current debate about the jazz as primarily a black music, all of Young's seminal influences were white and included as well as Trumbauer and Dorsey, the great Bix Beiderbecke, a cool, melodic and highly influential cornet player with a bell-like purity of tone.

He was also clear that once the idol's music was assimilated, you had to create you own style having got into the mind of an improviser so to speak, and developed a certain technical facility and fluency.

Every musician should be a stylist (imitator). I played like Trumbauer when I was starting out, but then there's a time when you have to go out for yourself and tell your story. Your influence has already told his.

When asked by the Downbeat interviewer (1954) about how kids should learn to improvise he says:

a good way of learning is jamming with records. Find somebody you like and play his records. That's the way I started. That way you can stop the record and repeat it. If it isn't in a key you like, you can slow it down.

Early Performing Opportunities and Jam Sessions

All of the musicians described above performed at an early age and often at the same time as learning to play their instrument. Joe Pass was working with a small trio at fourteen, playing at

dances and parties, as was Bill Evans, who played with a professional band in his early teens as well as depping for his brother's dance band. As mentioned previously, he was performing (and winning medals for), solo classical music on the piano from an even earlier age.

Lester Young was touring with his father's vaudeville show as a small child and was only sixteen when he first broke with his family and joined a professional band. Here he describes playing with the legendary King Oliver, star of the early New Orleans scene and widely attributed as being one of the earliest and best jazz trumpeters:

'After the Bostonians, I played with King Oliver. He had a very nice band and I worked regularly with him for one or two years around Kansas and Missouri mostly. He had three brass, three reeds, and four rhythm section. He was playing well. He was old then and didn't play all night, but his tone was full when he played. He was the star of the show and played one or two songs each set. The blues. He could play some nice blues. He was a very nice fellow, a gay old fellow. He was crazy about all the boys, and it wasn't a drag playing for him at all.'

Performing with such experienced and enthusiastic players would have been enormously instructive to Young; all the while he was developing as an improviser he was performing in interesting and musical situations with players who knew what they were doing, but who were relaxed and good natured at the same time.

Charlie Parker started comparatively much later than the others, but performed almost from the start (on a saxophone held together with cellophane and rubber bands), with school friends and dance bands. He was performing from the age of thirteen in a band called the Deans of Swing, despite his almost total ignorance of the music, mainly due to the fact that he owned a saxophone. In an interview, bassist Gene Ramey who later became a friend of Parker described hearing the band:

'The leader of Bird's band was a singer and pianist named Lawrence '88' Keyes, who later became well-known in the East. It was the first band Bird ever played in and he seemed to me then just like a happy-go-lucky kid. In fact the whole outfit was a school band and Bird was hardly fully grown at the time- he wasn't fourteen years old! Bird wasn't doing anything musically speaking, at that period, in fact, he was the saddest thing in the band, and the other members gave him something of a hard time.' (Jazz Review vol.3, no.9, 1960)

From this quote, and from the experience of the other musicians as youngsters, it is clear that semi-pro bands of teenage players were common (as now, in pop and rock), and that they were of a high enough standard to get dance gigs and small theatre dates, which the Deans of Swing did regularly.

All the musicians mentioned were performing either as children or by their early teens, often in more informal settings and helped either by peers or more experienced players. They were able to experiment and develop their improvisational skills in a performance context and to acquire the necessary skills long before they became fully-fledged professional players. Also playing for dancers as all of them did, would have provided its own discipline of rhythmic demands and reading skills.

Performing as youngsters also played a vital economic role for some of the musicians including Young and Pass as Pass explains:

-What was the first professional band you worked with?

Pass: 'Locally, I worked with a small group - guitar, guitar bass, and violin; we played at parties and dances. That was when I was fourteen; I worked weekends to help support the family. Sometimes I made more money than my father; we used to make five dollars a night.'
1974 Guitar Magazine June Edition Interview

Access to Informal Educational Environments/Self Tuition

All of the four musicians had access to informal educational environments in their everyday life, and their musical development was characterised by the ways they taught themselves. Indeed the only player to have had any formal tuition at all was Evans, who was taught classical piano. Parker, as a self taught musician used informal educational environments constantly, in particular learning from his peers and occasional mentors; learning from watching and listening to players at gigs and the hard way at jam sessions. All of the players learned much from transcribing their idol's records. Parker wore the tracks away of his recording of Lester Young's solos with the small Basie band in 1939 and before that according to Giddings (1993: 35) he had another idol, altoist Buster Smith who became a key influence for him. Parker followed him around and was particularly impressed by his prodigious technique and his ability to play tunes in double tempo. He memorised his records and admired his bluesy sound, fast playing and rhythmic drive. In turn, at a slightly later date, Pass took down Parkers solos after he started recording under his own name, in the late 1940's.

Parker's self-tuition continued for some time after he left Kansas City for New York in 1938 and scuffling around for work, he met guitarist Bidley Fleet with whom he began to develop his unique style. He practised with Fleet in the back room of a chilli house and according to Parkers own account, it was here that he finally became able to play what he had previously only heard in his head:

I remember one night before Monroe's I was jamming in a chilli house on Seventh Avenue between 139th and 140th. It was December 1939. Now I'd been getting bored with the stereotyped changes that were being used at the time, and I kept thinking there's bound to be something else. I could hear it sometimes, but I couldn't play it. Well, that night, I was working over Cherokee, and as I did I found that by using the higher intervals of the chord as a melody line and backing them with appropriately related changes, I could play the thing I'd been hearing. I came alive. (Giddings, 1983:55)

Pass's own musical educational environment was the family home, his father and the radio. According to the interview mentioned above, his father would also bring back odd pieces of music he'd been given and expect Pass to be able to play them. These included pieces like 'The Flight of the Bumble Bee' for piano. Pass was therefore constantly being given wide-ranging material to play whether it was suitable or not and he must have spent endless hours working things out for himself. Evans had formal tuition for classical piano throughout his childhood and later at Music College. His more informal education in jazz began at the age of thirteen when he joined a band of older musicians one of whom became a mentor. The switch from classical to jazz came for Evans during his college years on the outskirts of New Orleans where he experienced first hand, the brilliant improvisers who lived there and started to get more jazz gigs.

For all of these young players, the concept of being taught how to play jazz did not exist; aspiring improvisers had to learn by and for themselves; decide who to emulate and how to practice. This enabled the development of unique voices in the music because each person took a very different player to imitate, and almost never took the same route as someone else. They also tended to choose a musician to emulate who was an appropriate standard, and who appealed to them personally, so that they could realistically learn from them. During the early 1940's when Parker began to shake up the scene with his highly innovative playing, it was so technically and musically sophisticated and advanced that no-one could understand what he was doing, let alone imitate him. It was only after he recorded that musicians began transcribing his solos, and he influenced almost every musician of the era.

Transcribing from the records developed a range of aural and technical skills and was particularly important in developing the aural memory to hand connection. This prepares the beginner, so that when they come to think up their own musical ideas, the schemata for its physical execution is already in place. It is almost as if the novice learned the experienced improvisers template or schema as a basis on which to develop their own. Young describes this as the improviser telling his own story which is copied for learning purposes, but the underlying meaning is the same: a solo that unfolds in time cohesively like a narrative that speaks from the individual soul of the player.

Playing a range of instruments

Young played violin, trumpet and drums as a child, then alto, baritone and finally tenor saxophone in his teens. Both Pass and Parker played only one instrument, guitar and alto respectively, although Parker played baritone horn in the school marching band. Evans played violin as well as piano as a small child, and later took up the flute, which he played in the army during the war. When Parker lost, pawned or smashed up his alto he was often forced to play other instruments and performed on both tenor and clarinet without having practised either. The benefits of learning several instruments are clear; there is a greater understanding and appreciation of sound production and a broader range of skills encouraged.

Young learned his instruments in and with the family band, perhaps when they were needed. But when he was an adolescent he began choosing for himself, and also appeared to change instruments for his own practical reasons:

I played drums from the time I was ten to about thirteen. Quit them because I got tired of packing them up. I'd take a look at the girls after the show and, before I'd get the drums packed, they'd all be gone. For a good five or six years after that I played the alto, and then the baritone when I joined Art Bronson's band.....Played with him two or three or four years. He lives in Denver now, and all the men in the band have got families, like to stay close to home - all except me. Anyway, I was playing the baritone and it was weighing me down. I'm real lazy you know. So when the tenor man left, I took over his instrument. ('Hear Me Talkin' to Ya' Shapiro and Hentoff 1955).

Using the Jazz Standard

During the period in question i.e. 1930-1950, the jazz standard was the American popular song, written by professional songwriters and lyricists for Broadway shows, travelling musicals and movies. During the period that the four musicians were learning and becoming professionals, songwriters Harold Arlen, Rogers and Hammerstein, George and Ira Gershwin, Jerome Kern and Cole Porter were all writing beautifully crafted standard tunes. All of the four musicians used the standard American show tune as a basis for improvising and even Parker who altered the melodic and harmonic approach completely, still used the standard chord progressions to improvise over. In later interviews, Evans had a lot to say about his adherence to standards especially during the periods in the late fifties and early sixties when modal and free playing was fashionable.

Now, my melodic language is based on a very sophisticated Western harmonic concept, it's not like the Eastern concepts that just use the melody without the harmony. I want to deal with a unit that includes a good harmonic concept, one rooted in American popular music, jazz, Broadway show music, and any kind of music I've studied. Out of all this and out of classical music as well, I've tried to abstract principles of melodic language, ways that one idea can follow another, ways of treating an idea. I haven't done this self-consciously, but I have had an eye on it throughout my life. I've tried to find ways to be true to the tradition of the music and still find ways within the true language of music to have more freedom within the idiom. (Interview with Jim Aitkin in Contemporary Keyboard Magazine June 1980).

Although Evans experimented with some free playing, which he refers to as 'third stream', in the late fifties, he always returned to standard tunes with their rich melodic and harmonic sources for improvisation. He thought that the form unified his improvisational ideas, giving them structure:

When I play, usually it's all guided by a basic structural thought. There's some kind of structure, whether it be song form, or blues form, or perhaps just an outline over which to play. And that's the thing that dominates and unifies everything now. I learned to play off of that and get into it deeply enough, so that it could maybe sound like you're doing more than one or two structural things at a time. But it's still all coming out of one inner unified structural thought. (Interview with Les Tompkins 1972).

Parker improvised over standard progressions throughout his career, but as a mature player made up different melodies in his own style. His tune, 'Moose the Mooch' (the name of a well known drug

dealer at the time), is a complex and virtuosic be-bop line over the standard progression by George Gershwin of 'I Got Rhythm'. That way he was able to make an original statement at the same time as continuing to develop solos over changes he had been playing since his teens. Hence his improvisations are endlessly inventive, a fact shown by the numerous outtakes on his Savoy recordings, in which every solo is very different.

Young also played standards in his own way and his version of 'I Got Rhythm' is a tune called 'Lester Leaps In', a little riff which he expands and develops in the solo. Jazz musicians and jazz composers frequently write fragments or motifs as melodies so that they can be developed to their full potential in the solo, the most famous example of which is 'C Jam Blues' by Duke Ellington; a theme which consists of two notes. This is a similar albeit instantaneous process to that of Beethoven expanding his ideas from the first two-note motif in his Fifth Symphony-the smaller the motif, the greater the possibility for elaboration.

Pass similarly played standards throughout his career, composing tunes over standard progressions or more sophisticated blues sequences in a be-bop style.

Conclusion

Broadly speaking, how the four musicians learned, fits within the areas defined by Berliner, which should come as no surprise given the nature of his study. Obviously attempting to reveal some of the external environment in which the musicians learned to improvise is only one part of the process, and what remains hidden is the psychological and physiological changes that occurred at they learned. These questions are looked at in greater detail in my current research, which seeks to follow the development of the process of improvisation as it is learned through the framework of the schema. Regarding this present paper however, the major question is whether it is possible or desirable to transfer the contemporary cultural phenomenon present at the time all four musicians were learning, into the present day, more formal educational environment. The following questions were intended to be discussed in the second session of the Jazz Services programme at Leeds and I leave them with you. Any comments, suggestions, observations would be welcomed.

Session 2. Questions

Is it desirable to emulate similar conditions in teaching jazz improvisation today and if so, what would be the best ways to do this?

Some opening suggestions for the discussion:

Being surrounded by both live and recorded music- many children are surrounded by recorded music but not many are surrounded by live music any longer. In the American school system the class band ensures that children get to listen to and participate in this at least. It is relatively easy to organise in a specialist college or department (although the quality of real listening may have to be re-learned) but what might be done to encourage more listening to live music and in particular to jazz music for younger children? What comes out is that many of the great jazz musicians came from very ordinary backgrounds – their later skill was built on very common and everyday musical environments available to many.

Having access to improvisers-as babies and children appear to learn in an improvisatory way, the most natural way to teach them music ought to be through improvisation. It is then a much shorter step to teaching them the jazz idiom. If this were the case, teachers too would be required to improvise and children would therefore have access to them. How could children be given the everyday access to improvisers that Berliner found so important? Or are we attempting to emulate a procedure that was specific to a certain time and culture and should we be thinking along different lines?

Being encouraged to participate in musical performances- Berliner's point here is the supportive nature of the audience in many young jazz musicians early performing experience. (There is some academic evidence to suggest that young performers need psychologically safe places to perform and must be allowed to make mistakes in a non-judgemental environment.) Some took place in

church where the power of the emotional communication was valued over the technical prowess; others performed for relatives at home; still others went busking on the sidewalks. This area has been reawakened with the recent emphasis on community music where communal enjoyment takes first priority and technical achievement comes second. However apart from school, are there other informal social occasions where children can perform?

Having access to informal educational environments- These still exist especially in the pop and indie scene with their independent record shops specialising in vinyl and all-day rehearsal and jam sessions. An underground scene exists here in a way that it doesn't for jazz. Again is this a culturally determined aspect? Can informal educational environments be created or do they just develop because of interested groups of people?

Playing and experimenting with a range of different instruments- some youngsters are lucky enough to have this and others do not even get a chance at one instrument. Several of Berliner's interviewees describe making their own instruments as kids and even forming bands with them. How to persuade governments of the need to spend time as well as money allowing children to explore a range of experimental art forms including home-made instruments?

Participating in jam sessions- of primary importance to the learning improviser when he or she decides its time to start performing. These could be relatively easily set up in colleges and clubs and take place in the daytime for younger players. What do you think about the importance of the jam session?

Learning from mentors and peers- This would be relatively easily encouraged by placing more experienced performers with youngsters and by promoting peer assessment and education throughout other parts of the system. American Jazz Educator Hal Galper has proposed an apprenticeship scheme whereby a young musician works together with what he calls a 'jazz master'. What do you think about the importance of this?

The responsibility for learning being placed firmly with the student- this was fundamental to the way the four musicians above and most of the musicians in Berliner's study learned. Is this still the best way to learn about the music, through trial and error, slowly organically, but now of course, without the appropriate cultural environment? Or is it better to teach it formally like other types of music? What do you think about Wynton Marsalis's approach to the jazz canon? Is this necessary or inevitable once jazz goes into the conservatoire?

Using the jazz standard- Most of the players described by myself and Berliner were melodic improvisers using the standard as a framework. There are however many other valid approaches which might (and are) used to good effect within the education framework. How might one seriously teach the free side of improvisation? Is it just as beneficial and useful to learn? (John Stevens) Can a more communal, timbral and listening approach to improvisation also be used to introduce the music to youngsters? (Graham Collier)

Copying idols by ear from records- Transcription either aurally or notated is recommended by the jazz educators. Is this still a valid approach? Is the historical perspective required or is a freer more European, less prescriptive approach more suitable? Should we perhaps be starting from the popular music now?

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