

PART FIVE

Jazz takes

16 Valuing jazz

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When the United States Congress declared that jazz deserved to be ‘preserved, understood, and promulgated’, 1987 became a watershed year in the history of valuing jazz: a music that had first entered the written historical record as ‘discordant jass’ now possessed the status of ‘a rare and valuable national American treasure’.¹ Yet it could be said that such a statement attempts to erase the history that made it necessary. Even the Congressional discussion that preceded the resolution shows that the conflicted history of jazz is not so easily swept away.

Although John Conyers, the resolution’s chief sponsor, at one point mentioned the ‘Afro-American roots’ of jazz, he, like the other speakers, emphasised the music’s global success. He spoke of having encountered jazz in Japan, Moscow, Africa and the Caribbean, and he hailed the spread of jazz, along with its generative force to produce musical fusions, as bases for international respect and understanding. However, he raised important issues of ownership and identity when he commented: ‘I have been in countries throughout Europe in which many people thought that the art form [jazz] was their art form.’

Constance Morella underscored the idea that the global success of jazz is a sign that it has transcended its origins when she remarked that ‘jazz is no respecter of political philosophies, and in fact jazz belongs to the world’. However, when Mervyn Dymally praised the rise of first-rate Japanese jazz composers and musicians as a sign of the music’s importance, Conyers steered this line of thought to the success that American jazz musicians have found in Japan. He praised Japanese people not as participants in jazz, but because ‘in Japan our jazz artists have been afforded great honor and recognition, as well as remuneration . . .’; in Japan, jazz ‘is studied with great care’.

Texas representative Henry Gonzalez touched on the origins of ‘the Afro-American rhythm, which we now call jazz’, but spoke more admiringly of the ‘truly 100 percent American contribution to bringing it out of the purely Afro-American center’, citing for the record three Texans – one black, one Mexican-American and one white – who contributed much to its history. Lindy Boggs of New Orleans and Ike Skelton from Kansas City spoke for the record about the special contributions of their home cities to the development of jazz but, like the other speakers, they made no reference

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to the historical factors that explain why the recognition they were seeking had been so long coming; it appears to have been simply an oversight.

The tensions and elisions of this debate left their mark on the language of the resolution itself: 'Whereas, jazz has achieved preeminence throughout the world as an indigenous American music and art form, bringing to this country and the world a uniquely American musical synthesis and culture through the African-American experience . . .' Jazz is thus at once African-American in its origins and universal in its achievements but, most of all, it is somehow uniquely American in its essence. The resolution promotes a particular vision of Americanness in an international context, one that strikingly erases the history of American racism and thus evades the question of why this resolution was sought – primarily by members of the Congressional Black Caucus. Jazz is reified, treated as a thing, a product, a collective achievement rather than as a variety of ways of music-making in which particular people have engaged in particular historical circumstances. History is not welcome here because truth is divisive; one imagines that only by inviting all of their colleagues to share in the credit for jazz could the resolution's sponsors have hoped to get it passed.

All of the participants in this debate agreed implicitly that there *is* one thing called jazz that has a continuous history of artistry and a coherent generic identity – a tacit stipulation that effaces the long history of contestation that has accompanied the music (see DeVaux 1991). Jazz is compared to classical music once during the discussion, but no one compared jazz to other forms of music so as to explain why it should be elevated above them, beyond making generally admiring references to the artistry and popularity of jazz. And ultimately, the resolution is purely symbolic: it urges recognition, understanding, documentation, archival support, preservation, celebration and promulgation, but it proposes no actual plans to accomplish any of this. That Congress has seen fit to recognise the artistry of jazz is an important fact to which others might later appeal, and from which they may draw support, but the resolution itself allocates no funds to anyone.

This Congressional colloquy throws into relief a number of enduring tensions among the ways in which jazz can be valued, and has been valued over the century of its existence. Considered as part of the long history of criticising jazz and arguing about its merits, the scope of the debate is limited; absent, for example, are the sorts of overtly racist denunciations of the music that would have been part of the record had such a resolution somehow been introduced in an earlier decade. Still, this part of the day's proceedings ended with a final sign of anonymous dissension: 'A motion to reconsider was laid on the table.' Even in 1987, the artistic stature of jazz could simply be gainsaid by those who preferred not to dispute the issue openly.

To proclaim that *jazz is* something – whether African-American, American, universal, or somehow all of these things at once – is to assert that a set of historically contingent cultural practices has a fixed, universal *essence*. It is an attempt to ground value outside one's own experience, however much it is motivated by one's own experience of value. It could thus be called a religious impulse and, as such, its conclusions may be respected but not proven. To value something is to make a kind of use of it. Proclamations of value are always interested, partial and polemical, all the more so when they deploy the rhetoric of universality, which is a claim to special privilege; were it not, it would not need to be made.

Much writing about jazz resists such thinking. Mark Gridley, the author of the most widely used jazz textbook, forthrightly urges enjoyment of jazz rather than understanding of its history: 'teaching "jazz HISTORY" for the sake of history might prevent teaching the essential listening skills that truly develop APPRECIATION for jazz' (Gridley 1984, 2). But what has enabled such pleasures, and what are their consequences? Exactly this attitude was criticised by LeRoi Jones in 1963:

Usually the critic's commitment was first to his *appreciation* of the music, rather than to his understanding of the attitude which produced it. This difference meant that the potential critic of jazz had only to appreciate the music, or what he thought was the music, and that he did not need to understand or even be concerned with the attitudes which produced it, except perhaps as a purely sociological phenomenon . . . The major flaw in this approach to Negro music is that it strips the music too ingenuously of its social and cultural intent. It seeks to define jazz as an art (or a folk art) that has come out of no intelligent body of socio-cultural philosophy.

[*'Jazz and the White Critic'*: quoted in Walser 1999, 257]

Such an approach, Jones might say, is ultimately narcissistic: Gridley is promoting consumption of the music, and to do this he aims to increase the pleasure that listeners experience from jazz, and insists that too much historical knowledge can subvert this primary goal. He thus attempts to increase one aspect of the value of jazz – the pleasure it can give certain contemporary audiences – at the expense of all others. Jones mounts the counter-argument that jazz history must aspire to be as complex as the history of jazz has been. And that history, I would add, is a history of multiple pleasures, interpretations, arguments and uses – a thorny, sometimes unpleasurable history of how jazz has been valued.

Thus this chapter broaches an aspect of jazz history with which scholars seldom engage directly, by sketching and comparing a sampling of the ways in which jazz has been valued. If I will mostly neglect what many people would consider one of the most common aspects of value – money – it

is because I maintain that all financial transactions involving jazz are secondary to the fact of its being valued for other reasons. However much financial transactions shape the social worlds of jazz by affecting the lives of musicians, fans, critics, club owners, concert promoters, record company owners and employees, money is never exchanged for jazz unless something else of value is believed to be provided in return, and it is those other things that will be my concern here. A history of jazz styles is a history of sensibilities, values and ways of valuing.

Arguing about values

Consider the index of a published collection of readings in jazz history, comprising nearly a hundred years of critical, personal and analytical commentary (Walser 1999). One list of references steers the reader to various understandings of the nature, character or purpose of jazz:

- as African-American music
- as American music
- as ceremony or ritual
- as classical music
- as entertainment
- as experimental music
- as folk music
- as instinctive music
- as intellectual music
- as play
- as primitive music
- as symptom of modernity
- as universal music
- as youth music

These are contradictory assessments of the essence of jazz and, as such, they are ways of valuing it, of defining its significance, of simultaneously using and exalting it. The historian's task, I would argue, is not to sift through the evidence and issue a ruling that declares only one of these valuing to be true, but rather to embrace them all in order to apprehend the music's full cultural significance.

A little further down the same index we find the category of 'jazz, effects of, beneficial':

- awakens interest in music
- cathartic release
- communication
- creation of community

emotional escape and rejuvenation
enriches understanding of classical music
expresses attitudes about the world
expresses a variety of emotions
expresses freedom
expresses identities
expresses individuality
fun
gratifies sexual impulses
'healthy paganism'
heroic action
'musical socialism'
orgasm
overcomes racism
protests injustice
promotes wind instruments
provides examples of African-American achievements
reconciles individuality and group identity
records the spirit of its times
source of pride and self-knowledge
spiritual experience
unifying force
used to explore and affirm identities and relationships

And there is also a list of 'jazz, effects of, harmful':

atrophy of the brain
corrupts youth
defiles musical culture
degenerating effect on popular songs
demoralizing effect on workers
expresses negative emotions
intoxicating effect
mental, physical, and moral damage
'morbid eroticism'
orgasm
promotes sloppy technique among music students
'triumph of sensuality'
violates natural law

This last list is useful because a historian cannot really account for the appeal of a mass-mediated cultural phenomenon for some people without thinking about how it also produces dislike or indifference in others. (That 'orgasm' appears in both lists is a tribute to the cultural complexity of sexual pleasure.)

As sounds, images and people move around the planet, they find themselves in new contexts within which their significance and worth is assessed. Because jazz coalesced during the age of mass-mediated culture, its scope has been global for nearly all of its history. Constant recontextualisation produced a host of contradictory arguments, speculations and declarations of its meanings in various times and places, all of which are now a dauntingly complex but precious part of its legacy. As early as 1922, a journalist for the *New York Times Magazine* traced the global diffusion of jazz (although most of what went by that name we might now categorise as Tin Pan Alley song with ragtime inflections) through the media of recordings, sheet music and peripatetic musicians, marvelling at the music's ability to win converts in many cultures and to stimulate cross-cultural fusions. Lands the west had thought exotic now thrilled to the exotic sounds of the west's most popular music.

When *The Appeal of Jazz*, the first British book on the topic, was published in 1927, its author, R. W. S. Mendl, wrestled with the problem of how to account for jazz's attractiveness for many different audiences: 'That a form of music which originated among black people should have developed into . . . the most widely popular form of music in the world's history is a phenomenon sufficiently remarkable to lead us to probe it still further.' On the one hand, he suggested that syncopation offered many people an 'instinctive delight in emphasizing with your feet a beat which was not stressed by the players', the pleasure of breaking with convention. On the other hand, he related the popularity of jazz to the upheavals of modernity, including the World War and new forms of speedy transportation, implying that jazz expressed, fitted and made sense of these restless times. Not everyone experienced these historical changes similarly, though, and Mendl even points to how the British reception of jazz necessarily differed from the American, most importantly because the absence of African-Americans in one context and their fraught presence in the other affects the music's significance, but also because he and others associated the speed and dynamism of modernity most strongly with the United States.

The perception that jazz was a means of breaking with convention, of resisting regimentation, has sometimes acquired a dimension that is overtly political. Novelist Josef Škvorecký has recounted the Nazi restrictions on jazz in occupied Czechoslovakia, attributing to the music an *élan vital* that evades, for as long as it sounds, totalitarian control. Ben Sidran explains the political value of jazz as the result of its preservation of the sensibilities and priorities of oral culture: 'Black music was in itself revolutionary, if only because it maintained a non-Western orientation in the realms of perception and communication . . . This strength has been shared by all Americans, black or white, who at any point took exception to the underlying

assumptions of mainstream society and has been available simply through the experience of black music' (quoted in Walser 1999, 301). Jazz critic Charles Delaunay hailed jazz as civilisation's lifeline to France during the dark days of World War II. For him, jazz was not black music and 'much more than American music': it was 'the first universal music', New Orleans's blend of the 'artistic sensibility and wit' of Franco-Spanish culture, the 'methodical precision and coolness' of Anglo-Saxon culture, and the 'epic temperament' and vigour of Africa (Walser 1999, 131). For both Škvorecký and Delaunay, the power of jazz to furnish hope and strength in the face of barbarity proved that wherever it came from, it could speak emotionally to anyone and it belonged to the world. Although certainly not everyone has valued the music in this way, Škvorecký and Delaunay spoke for many when they praised jazz for its positive capacity to create shared human bonds and life-affirming experiences. Both furnished examples of how jazz could, through mass mediation, come to be vitally important in contexts that were far removed from the music's origins.

The rhetoric of universalism, however, can also be used to celebrate the particular. When Billy Taylor and other African-American musicians call jazz 'America's classical music', they are appealing for the same transcendent status that German music has enjoyed: 'Americans of African descent, in producing music which expressed themselves, not only developed a new musical vocabulary, they created a *classical* music – an authentic *American* music which articulated uniquely American feelings and thoughts, which eventually came to transcend ethnic boundaries' (*ibid.*, 328). Without disguising the music's origins, Taylor elides its meanings so that a small, marginalised group of musicians could become spokespersons for a kind of unified American essence, which despite this specificity had universal appeal. As with the classical canon that served as the model for this representation of jazz, many styles, uses and meanings must be blurred together. Taylor sought respect for the black originators of jazz and pointed to the widespread appeal of their music as evidence that they had created real art, which for him was art that had transcended the conditions of its origin. His argument implies nothing less than the claim that jazz musicians triumphed over the inequities and brutalities that limited their lives to produce something better – something that, if not exactly reflective of American realities, represented, we might say, what America ought to be, presented a vision that others also recognised as an ideal worthy of celebration. This is a powerful rhetorical move that is grounded in important truths.

Still, this influential formulation papers over fundamental contradictions. As Everett Taylor Atkins remarks in his study of jazz in Japan, 'few cultures are as concerned with "authenticity" as jazz is. It is an obsession

that potentially undermines the rhetoric of jazz as a “universal language”, for “authenticity” implies particularism, not universalism’ (1997, 11). Atkins analyses a long history of Japanese participation in jazz that has been marked by anxieties about authenticity – the nagging feeling that no matter how much Japanese audiences were moved by this music, no matter how well Japanese musicians learned to play it, it was not really theirs. Moreover, he points out that ‘Jazz’s “universal” pretensions are subverted not only by its fetish for “authenticity”, but also by its close association with American military might and cultural arrogance, particularly in the Cold War era’ (*ibid.*, 8). In such a context, the value of jazz could not be considered apart from larger issues of cultural identity, modernisation and American hegemony. Indeed, when it was promoted by the government and the mainstream media during the Cold War, jazz became celebrated for exemplifying the value of individuality, in ways that effaced, for political purposes, the cooperative and collective aspects of jazz.²

For Atkins, the concept of authenticity is divisive and unfair: ‘one historical crime – robbing black artists of their rightful profits and credit for creating this music – does not justify another – denying the significance of non-black artists in shaping jazz’ (41). Thus does the very idea of what constitutes African-American culture become a matter of debate. For example, Jelly Roll Morton absorbed ragtime, blues, hymns, minstrel songs, French and Italian opera, Tin Pan Alley songs and the ‘Spanish tinge’ of Caribbean music on his way to becoming one of the most influential of jazz musicians. Morton himself celebrated the richly multicultural environment within which jazz developed: ‘we had so many different styles that whenever you came to New Orleans, it wouldn’t make any difference that you just came from Paris or any part of England, Europe, or any place – whatever your tunes were over there, we played them in New Orleans’ (Walser 1999, 17).

Indeed, the role jazz has played in breaking down social barriers is another reason it has been valued. As early as 1919, the *Chicago Defender*, one of the country’s pre-eminent black newspapers, pointed with pride to the accomplishments of black jazz musicians whose excellence had attracted white audiences: ‘It is a well-known fact that the white people view us largely from the standpoint of the cook, porter, and waiter, and his limited opportunities are responsible for much of the distorted opinion held concerning us.’ Through their demonstrations of musical excellence, black musicians were ‘jazzing away the barriers of prejudice’ (Walser 1999, 15–16). Leonard Feather, John Hammond and other critics have made strong claims in this regard, but perhaps no one has put it as elegantly as Joseph Bechet (Sidney’s brother): ‘this jazz music helps to get this misunderstanding between the races straightened out. You creep in close to hear the music and, automatically, you creep close to the other people’ (Lomax 1950, 121).

Sometimes, however, the value of the music is that it marks difference, as when participation distinguishes ‘hip’ from ‘square’, or musicians from others. Howard Becker characterised jazz in the late 1940s as a ‘service occupation’, in which professional musicians hired to play dances had to accommodate their employers’ choices of repertoire, style and tempo, and made up for their lack of artistic control by isolating themselves socially (Walser 1999, 179–91). Insider status also means different things as the music’s cultural location changes: in the late 1930s to be knowledgeable about jazz was to participate in a broadly shared public culture, but in the 1960s there were many possible subcultural affiliations that involved jazz. Like any other cultural activity, jazz can be ‘articulated’ (as Stuart Hall puts it) to particular ideologies; the meanings of jazz changed somewhat when *Playboy* presented it among the trappings of a swinging bachelor’s luxury life, distancing it from earlier associations with social dance, exotic spectacles or black artistry (Walser 1999, 261–2).

Such articulations are complex cases within the general set of reception issues, one of the most enduring of which is the possibility that what white people heard might be different from what black musicians thought they were playing. One of the earliest published discussions of jazz, a 1917 article in the *New York Sun*, shows how enthusiasm about jazz could easily be based in the same fantasies that supported blackface minstrelsy. On the one hand, its author praises jazz musicians’ musical skills and links their innovations to modern life and art. On the other hand, he imagines that jazz puts him in touch with the exotic spectacles of the African jungle, quoting a musicologist to make this point: ‘The music of contemporary savages taunts us with a lost art of rhythm. Modern sophistication has inhibited many native instincts, and the mere fact that our conventional dignity usually forbids us to sway our bodies or to tap our feet when we hear effective music has deprived us of unsuspected pleasures’ (Walser 1999, 6). With one hand, such explanations criticise white society for having repressed too much that is valuable and thank black musicians for giving it back; with the other hand, those same musicians are labelled ‘savages’ for having successfully done so. This is the same mechanism that Nathan Irvin Huggins identified at the heart of the minstrel show: white performers in blackface could indulge in every vice that they had forsworn in everyday life, and at the same time pin the guilt for such indulgence on black people as they imagined them.³

The same tensions are at work in one of the most often-cited documents of jazz history, Ernest Ansermet’s 1919 review of Will Marion Cook’s Southern Syncopated Orchestra, which included at the time a young clarinetist named Sidney Bechet (reprinted in Walser 1999, 9–11). Jazz critics and historians value Ansermet’s enthusiastic comments because he was a respected orchestral conductor, one of the very first classical musicians to go

on record with favourable evaluations of jazz. Even as he marvelled at their complex timbres, their rhythmic innovations, their ability to play without written music and Bechet's virtuosity as a soloist, however, he was troubled by his inability to understand why Cook's musicians were doing the things they were doing: 'I couldn't tell whether these artists feel it is their duty to be sincere.' He sees that their improvisatory freedom is not absolute: 'they can let themselves go, in a certain direction and within certain limits, as their hearts desire'. But when he struggles to describe the effects of their music, he spills out similes that seem very distant from the disciplined efforts of professional musicians: 'it seems as if a great wind is passing over a forest or as if a door is suddenly opened on a wild orgy'. He also imagined that the relative lack of harmonic innovation he heard in Cook's music was a sign that Negro musicians had not yet ascended high enough 'in the scheme of musical evolution'. Still, Ansermet was excited by these musicians' own pleasure in playing, by the way they exulted in their creativity and mastery.

Thus those who would universalise jazz are responding to a long history of denigrating jazz and its makers. The city of New Orleans today glories in (and markets) its reputation as the birthplace of jazz, but in 1918 the editors of the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* emphatically denied that jazz had been born in their city, or declared at least that they could take no pride in such an origin (Walser 1999, 7–8). They created a striking image of cultural and racial hierarchy, a house containing a 'great assembly hall of melody', where many are welcomed to music, and an 'inner court of harmony', to which fewer pass on to enjoy 'truly great music'. In the basement is the 'servants' hall of rhythm', where one can hear 'the hum of the Indian dance, the throb of the Oriental tambourines and kettledrums, the clatter of clogs, the click of Slavic heels, the thumpty-tumpty of the negro banjo'. The tapping foot appears again as a locus of taste and social order; the *Sun* had endorsed it but the *Times-Picayune* sternly denounced such vulgarity. The very fact that jazz engaged and energised the body proved to many its essential meretriciousness.

Black bandleader and writer Dave Peyton was similarly concerned about the rough timbres and techniques, with the added anxiety that 'mushy, discordant jazz' would hold back racial progress: 'We listen to many of the famous white orchestras with their smoothness of playing, their unique attacks, their novelty arrangement of the score and other things that go to make for fine music, and we wonder why most of our own orchestras will fail to deliver music as the Nordic brothers do' (Walser 1999, 59). Like the editors of the *Times-Picayune*, Peyton assumed that there was but a single scale of musical value, and he worried that black musicians had some catching up to do. In contrast, Langston Hughes, writing at the same moment,

cared more about celebrating difference than proving equality according to white standards: 'Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand' (*ibid.*, 57). Ways of valuing jazz do not simply split along the fault-line of race; it is crucial to realise that arguments about the value of jazz proceeded within communities as well as among them.⁴

Tom Turino has analysed a fascinating transformation of musical values among Peruvian musicians in his book, *Moving Away from Silence* (1993). Traditionally, music of the Andean highlands is composed collectively: musicians sit together improvising until one of them hits upon a musical idea that some of the others like, whereupon they may imitate and confirm it or suggest alternatives. Once it gains enough support, a melody becomes part of the new composition, and this non-verbal process of joint composition continues until the new work is complete. When highland people emigrated from the Andes to metropolitan Lima, the music of their origin became a crucial symbol and enactment of their newly fragile and marginalised cultural identity. In order to preserve this symbolic power, urban musicians found themselves travelling back to the mountains to learn the latest songs, which they would memorise and reproduce back in the city. But by faithfully copying the sounds of their homeland colleagues, they necessarily abandoned the process of collectively improvised composition that had always been used to produce those sounds. The urban musicians replicated their rural counterparts' songs, but their values had radically changed: achieving certain sounds became more important than following certain practices; copying replaced composing; music acquired a single, authoritative point of origin instead of arising from spontaneous collaboration and interaction; product succeeded process; authenticity triumphed over creativity.

It is easy enough to see such musicians as Wynton Marsalis, the jazz repertory ensembles and virtually the whole of jazz education as having managed a similar shift of values (see David Ake's comments in Chapter 13⁵). When jazz enters the institutional context of the academy, it must contend not only with the classical measuring stick, but also the tendency to teach whatever can be easily or efficiently taught and measured, which may have little to do with how jazz is valued in other contexts. And whatever the worth of live recreations of music of the past – and it is considerable – the old sounds can no longer express or engage the same values. Musical innovations become frozen in repetition, the cutting edge becomes a classic model, experiments become lessons. Miles Davis complained that jazz had become stagnant in the 1980s: 'I didn't even go to listen to most jazz groups anymore, because they were only playing the same musical licks that we played way back with Bird, over and over again' (Walser 1999, 374). Davis blamed jazz critics for

rejecting expressive innovations – at the end of his life, he was championing Prince as the musician he admired most: ‘For me, he can be the new Duke Ellington of our time if he just keeps at it’ (*ibid.*, 376) – and he was always sensitive to shifts in values and the opportunities they present, as when he wrote around 1968: ‘We were playing a searching kind of music, but the times had changed. Everybody was dancing’ (*ibid.*, 369).

One of the most heated controversies in jazz history was sparked by the appearance of free jazz. Its supporters heard it as the next step in the evolution of jazz, one that mirrored classical music in its harmonic development but also restored the early jazz tradition of collective improvisation. Some went even further: ‘It’s a vision that considers self-expression synonymous with social responsibility, and individuality synonymous with spirituality . . . In discussing his harmolodics music system, where every player is free to take the lead at any time, Ornette [Coleman] poses it not just as a liberating paradigm for jazz performers, but for everybody’ (Tate 1992, 117). The other side regarded free jazz as the barbarous noise of ‘nihilists’ trying to ‘destroy the music that gave them birth.’⁶ Critics and musicians alike divided according to a set of binary oppositions that ascribed values to the new music:

progressive	retrogressive
creative	destructive
explorative	self-indulgent
democratic	nihilist
restoring tradition	repudiating tradition
saying something new	abandoning coherent statement

Because the critical commentary on free jazz bristled with such terms of value, it is an excellent example for the argument that musical evaluations are underpinned by moral and ethical commitments.⁷ All judgements of value are specific to the judge’s goals and needs, and limited by that person’s perspective and attitudes about what is good: play, order, rebellion, transcendence, esteem for originality versus the respect due to past models that establish the boundaries within which excellence must be sought.

Scott DeVaux (1991), building on the historiographical work of Hayden White, identifies two modes of emplotment that have shaped a great deal of jazz history: the Romance, the triumph of musicians and their music against indifference and racism to become a central part of twentieth-century culture; and the Tragedy, the moving tale of musicians whose genius could not save them from self-destruction. DeVaux also discusses two other concerns that have shaped jazz narratives: racial authenticity and agoraphobia, or fear of the marketplace. We might add to this list adherence to innovative musical technologies of the nineteenth century (piano, saxophone,

valve trumpet – arguably jazz’s most important instruments – and, around the turn of the twentieth century, the drum set) rather than the innovative musical technologies of the twentieth century (synthesiser, multi-track recording, effects, electric bass, sequencing, turntables, sampling, pedal steel guitar). The main exceptions to this division are the electric guitar (and, to a lesser extent, the vibraphone and the Hammond B3 organ), which in jazz utilises only the most basic amplification and tone modification, and the microphone, which is skilfully used to capture a wide range of timbres that would be inaudible without it. Even so, to both of these means of performance has been attached a certain amount of suspicion – unlike the amplified acoustic bass, piano or other instruments, where technology is perceived as transparent and unproblematic. These larger narratives about jazz have affected not only historiography but also our perceptions of the music itself. We enjoy jazz in part because we enjoy the stories it seems to tell us about triumph and tragedy, identity, commerce and technology. And we also enjoy it because of the stories it enables us to tell about the world.

Performing values

To this point, I have developed my discussion of valuing jazz through examples of verbal discourse. But musical discourse can also be a source of historical information and, despite the fact that the preceding survey of ways in which people have valued jazz could continue indefinitely, I will turn now to the question of how values are performed. It has often been said that the best jazz solos are not simply virtuosic displays; a good solo must tell a story, it must say something. But what are jazz musicians saying? This is a question that is as difficult as it is fundamental; few writers have raised it and even fewer have persuasively answered it. Ingrid Monson takes the trope of ‘saying something’ as the title of her important book (1996) yet, beyond noting that quotation and allusion are meaningful practices within jazz improvisation, Monson has relatively little to say about what jazz musicians are saying when they perform. In that book at least, Monson chooses to remain true to a fieldwork paradigm that requires discussions of value to be tightly grounded by what informants tell the ethnographer. This is a method that is of limited value to jazz history, then, because it is so attached to present contact, verbal articulation and the insider’s perspective. It is not at all easy to correlate the pleasures that musicians experience with what they say about music, since their thinking and speaking about music takes place within complex discourses that both enable and limit various kinds of conception and expression. As Michael Denning puts it, ‘a culture’s own understanding of its genres is an important part of its rhetoric and must

be attended to', but 'To be content with the terms the culture used, with the culture's self-understanding, is to abdicate the historian's task, which is to understand the way a culture's social and political unconscious overdetermines its self-consciousness' (1987, 77). Analysing music, which requires attention to non-verbal discourse and multiple perspectives, can thus be an important means of fulfilling the historian's task.

This is tricky business, of course; a host of formalist analyses of jazz have revealed less about their objects of study than about the power of entrenched analytical methods to set the terms of legitimation and other kinds of valuing. But these difficulties should not discourage us from trying to create a more substantial hermeneutic tradition for jazz studies. As LeRoi Jones put it, 'Failure to understand, for instance, that Paul Desmond and John Coltrane represent not only two very different ways of thinking about music, but more importantly two very different ways of viewing the world, is at the seat of most of the established misconceptions that are daily palmed off as intelligent commentary on jazz or jazz criticism' (Walser 1999, 260–61). If this is true, we should be able to hear these differences and to analyse them.

I want to contribute to the project of developing the hermeneutics of jazz by discussing a warhorse of the repertoire, Louis Armstrong's 1928 recording of 'West End Blues'. The opening cadenza of this performance is perhaps the most praised solo in all jazz, yet there has been little contextual analysis of its power and meanings. From Hugues Panassié and Robert Goffin to Martin Williams and Gunther Schuller, we run the gamut of marvelling at Armstrong's exuberant escape from convention to celebrating his logical constructions and technical advancements. What is largely missing is analysis of Armstrong's performances in terms of their rhetorical force, and interpretation of the significance of such performances within the contexts that shaped their production and reception.

In formal terms, Armstrong's cadenza is easily enough described. It consists of two contrasting phrases, the first starting high but dropping quickly before climbing to a sustained note at the top of the trumpet's range, and the second picking up from there and then swinging down two octaves to pause on a low note, before the rest of the players enter and the song's verse commences. Harmonically, the cadenza begins by articulating what will turn out to be the song's relative-minor key area, with the second phrase moving through some bluesy licks and proto-bebop angular circumlocutions to arrive on the seventh of the dominant chord.

Armstrong develops a number of motivic notions during the cadenza: repeated whole-tone and minor-third descents, chromatic ascending triplets in the second phrase that are not unrelated to the ascending triplet arpeggios of the first. Though it is unmeasured, the cadenza is nevertheless swung,

and each of its moments seems to develop or comment upon previous moments. It thus achieves – and this particularly pleased Schuller – organic unity.⁸ But one does not need to share Schuller’s formalist and Eurocentric agenda to perceive and be affected by such details, for this is just another way of describing Armstrong’s engagement with powerful blues conventions of variation and response. Even when they do not use the same terms to describe their experiences, different audiences may well be excited about the same things.

I am going to begin with my own experience, too, because I think that the process of figuring out how to perform a reasonable facsimile of Armstrong’s cadenza has taught me a few things. This is an approach that my colleague Elisabeth Le Guin, in her forthcoming book on Boccherini, has dubbed ‘carnal musicology’, the premise of which is that attention to the physicality of performance – how various parts of the body must bend and tighten and vibrate and stretch – can perhaps be as valuable as any other means with which we try to recover and understand musical meanings.⁹ Armstrong’s is a virtuoso performance, one that extended both the higher and the lower limits of what was considered the trumpet’s usable range. Having benefited from Armstrong’s model and the achievements of other players he influenced, as well as from other traditions of trumpet virtuosity and pedagogy, I am, at my best, able to play it. But few if any of Armstrong’s contemporaries could have nailed it night after night as he did, let alone composed it in the first place. Working on this cadenza and other Armstrong solos reminds me that he redefined the instrument: after a hiatus of more than one hundred years, the extreme range, power, precision and improvisatory skills of the eighteenth-century *clarino* trumpeters were reborn with him.¹⁰ That it is difficult for many people, even trumpet players, to recognise Armstrong’s virtuosity now is simply due to his success: no player who came after him was untouched by his influence, and so the breathtaking creativity and prowess that impressed Armstrong’s contemporaries can pass unnoticed by many people today.

The ‘West End Blues’ cadenza inscribes a number of historical developments and aspects of its context. Armstrong had switched from cornet to trumpet around 1926 and the OKeh record label had changed over to the electrical recording process in 1927; both of these factors helped make this recording sound newly crisp, real and powerful. The strength of Armstrong’s playing recalls the pre-amplification days during which he developed his style so as to include the commercially advantageous attribute of volume. And the very idea of a fanfare, which this cadenza clearly evokes, comes most immediately from the deployment of such in theatre and cabaret bands (in which Armstrong often played) to announce new events and to quieten audiences.

The first note of the cadenza is very risky: as one goes higher on a brass instrument, the notes of the overtone series get closer together, and since this particular note (a concert G, or an A as it is played on the B♭ trumpet) requires a fingering that adds a significant amount of tubing to the instrument's length, it turns out that one could just as easily hit the note a whole step above or the one below as the right one. I found that hitting this note consistently depended entirely on approaching it with total concentration and the right attitude and posture. As I got better at imitating Armstrong's sound, my physical stance came to resemble his: body erect and balanced with weight slightly forward, a feeling of power focused throughout the chest and arms as they encompass the trumpet, in a manner that is wholly unlike the sensations I experience when playing in the styles of, for example, Miles Davis or Clifford Brown. That feeling of power is essential if a solo this difficult is to be played persuasively and without missing or cracking any notes; it is in fact virtually impossible to play this cadenza softly.

It could easily be objected that my identification with Armstrong is wholly imaginary, that there are perhaps many possible ways of playing such a solo without purporting to stand as he stood and feel what he felt. Certainly, many aspects of Armstrong's identity and experience are distant from my own: he was Southern, black, born in New Orleans near the turn of the century, and so on. But we both have played the trumpet at a high level of skill, and that is not an irrelevant connection. In fact, there are not infinite means of producing the same sounds on any instrument, and my identification is grounded in a keen sense of the limits of the human body for manipulating an airstream in collaboration with a piece of brass tubing. Once, as I was about to undergo some dental work, I confided to a friend my worries: one miscalculation, and I will have lost an octave of my range. He cheerfully suggested that I could just as well look forward to a slip that gave me an extra octave, but it doesn't work that way. Trumpet players evolve their technique for greatest efficacy with certain configurations of bone, muscle and air column. I approach Armstrong's music much as he did as a simple matter of efficiency – and efficiency is paramount when working near the limits of what the body can do. Approaching those limits, one is warned by pain, and sometimes I have had to do what Armstrong did innumerable times: put the pain aside, and not let it affect the concentration, the focus, the occupation of a physical stance of power and confidence that this cadenza both requires and articulates.

For what Martin Williams has described as Armstrong's 'power, sureness, firmness, authority, such commanding presence' (1983, 59) is surely evident throughout 'West End Blues'. The strength and accuracy, the unflinching rhythmic complexity and swing, the long spun-out phrases that play against the periodic tendencies of the tune – the latter two in particular more

than foreshadow what would be taken to be core innovations of bebop. Yet a paramount influence is the blues, a complex mixture of oral and written traditions, of rural and urban entertainment. We hear this in Armstrong's phrasing, his pitch choices and alterations, in his vocal call-and-response with clarinetist Jimmy Strong – although Armstrong's 'commanding presence' turns this into call-and-RESPONSE.

Armstrong's vocals are often compared to his trumpet style, and in phrasing and pitch choice this is apt enough. But the daring leaps, wide tessitura and clear, brilliant timbre that are so characteristic of Armstrong the instrumentalist contrast sharply with the gentle, albeit sometimes raspy, probing of a few notes that often marks Armstrong's vocal recompositions of melodies. Unlike his trumpet playing, his vocals reflect the influences of the popular crooners of the 1920s and of the microphone, the technological innovation that enabled this whole approach to singing. According to one source, Armstrong himself traced his practice of scat singing, unrestrained by fixed lyrics, to his experiences of Jewish *davening* (ritual praying and head-banging) when he worked and lived closely with the Karnofsky family as a boy in New Orleans (Bergreen 1997, 267).

Armstrong's trumpet playing, specifically the rhetorical style of his phrasing and vibrato, reflects the strong influence of the recordings of Caruso and other operatic singers, to whom he listened devotedly, often improvising along with the records, from the moment he first could afford a phonograph until the end of his life (Giddins 1988, 151).¹¹ Armstrong perfectly exemplifies what is true of jazz more generally: it not only instantiates the persistence of African retentions and what has been called the 'changing same' of African-American culture, it reminds us that African-American traditions do not simply articulate some essence of African-American character or practice but rather embody the agency and creativity of African-Americans as they engage with and adapt to a changing world by appropriating styles and mixing discourses. Armstrong's music (like all music, perhaps) is thoroughly multicultural. So is Earl Hines's piano solo, which combines swing, elegance and flourishes that betray the influence of Chopin and other European composers.

It is worth emphasising that all of these sounds come to us from a record – an object that was manufactured for sale. Armstrong was denounced throughout much of his career for being too 'commercial': such accusations were common in the 1940s, but Schuller dates Armstrong's fall from late 1928 (1968, 130), only months after he recorded 'West End Blues'! 'By January 1930', Schuller argues, 'the creepy tentacles of commercialism had begun to exert an alarming degree of stylistic constraint' (1989, 165). This charge simply would not have made any sense to Armstrong, whose career as a professional musician freed him from hauling coal and rags, and

who saw nothing wrong with wanting to reach lots of people with his music. For his part, Armstrong complained about the beboppers with their ‘weird chords’ in 1948: ‘These young cats now they want to make money first and the hell with the music . . . And look at them young cats too proud to play their horns if you don’t pay them more than the old-timers’ (Walser 1999, 153–4). That each side could blame the other’s failings on the same cause is a reminder that the commercial context of popular music is not a symptom of that music’s artistic failure; rather, how we understand that commercial context has much to do with how we value the music. When one writer cites *Kind of Blue* as the only jazz album to reach double-platinum sales status (Nisenson 2000, ix), he is certainly appealing to the album’s commercial popularity as some sort of corroboration of its artistic worth, but he is just as surely thereby defining jazz such as to exclude Kenny G, a multi-platinum artist whose recordings can be found in the jazz section of any record store. Arguments over whether certain music is good jazz, or is jazz at all, depend less on simple facts of musical procedure or commercial context than on complicated investments in prestige, identification and values.

One of the main points of this chapter is the claim that self-awareness about our values is important, at least as much so for historians as for anyone else. This directly contradicts the approach of many eminent jazz critics and scholars, such as Schuller: ‘In writing this book, my approach to the subject was essentially simple. I imagined myself coming to jazz without any prior knowledge or preconceptions and beginning, *tabula rasa*, to listen to the recordings – systematically and comprehensively’ (1989, ix). Schuller thus attempts to forget that he has values, not to mention expertise. But there is no way he can escape either, and his insights spring from his allegiance to the values of modernism. How many jazz musicians would agree with his proclamation that ‘the greatness of jazz lies in the fact that it never ceases to develop and change’ (*ibid.*, 846)? Miles Davis might, but Louis Armstrong would not; Herbie Hancock perhaps, but not Wynton Marsalis. As Sidney Finkelstein argued in 1948, ‘the entire fetish of originality, which causes the most creative musicians often to be called “unoriginal” and the greatest fakers to call themselves “original” composers, is a product of commercialism . . . With the rise of the market and the music industry, “originality” became a necessary part of a salable commodity’ (Walser 1999, 137). Schuller’s modernism is inseparable from the commercial contexts that enabled jazz to spread around the globe and enabled someone like Armstrong to climb to stardom. We have no way to think about jazz apart from the context within which it is being thought about, apart from the values that lead us to think about it in the first place. And the tactics we use to legitimate jazz produce their own investments and new pleasures. The meanings of jazz change even as we try to explain it or justify our pleasures,

and ways of valuing have consequences that can be evaluated in terms of value.

'West End Blues' ends with the trumpet sustaining a high C (i.e., sounding B \flat) for four bars – hanging on to that gloriously yearning fifth scale degree, which appears so often in J. S. Bach's trumpet parts because it is such an effective use of the instrument. Armstrong follows with urgent repetitions of a high, bluesy riff, played out of strict time in a rhapsodic burst, with a deft squeeze back up to the high C and an elegant wind-down. After an almost melancholic piano interlude, the band delivers its closing figure, with Armstrong landing in the middle register on the tonic, his warm, vibrant sound radiating assurance and fulfilment. For Armstrong's contemporaneous audience – many of them, like him, black migrants from the South to northern urban centres – this was the sound of success and achievement.¹² Other musical figurations of fulfilment have arisen, yet the powerful, inventive, confident persona Armstrong projected in his performances and recordings has continued to move and attract many people over the years.

Cootie Williams, a trumpeter for many years in Duke Ellington's band, was known for two distinct approaches to the instrument: high, clear, lead trumpet playing, and the growling, gutbucket sound that was an essential component of Ellington's 'jungle music'. Williams used to say of this contrasting pair of voices: 'Those were my two ways of being' (quoted in *Dance* 1970, 106). Similarly, Christopher Small's work has called our attention to the performative and relational aspects of what he accordingly calls 'musicking'. Small highlights the ways in which music serves as a means of trying on identities, living out ideals, articulating and performing relationships.¹³ Sidney Bechet would have agreed: 'The man singing it, the man playing it, he makes a place. For as long as the song is being played, *that's* the place he's been looking for' (Walser 1999, 4). For Bechet, jazz is supremely valuable because it helps us understand the world, it tells us who we are and where we came from, it teaches us what to do, and, most of all, it lets us experience utopia.

One person's utopia, of course, is another's purgatory. We now take it so much for granted that jazz is a soloist's art that we can easily fail to notice how Armstrong at this moment was perhaps the strongest force in transforming jazz's primary orientation from collective improvisation to the dominance of soloists. This is a change in values. King Oliver's band, for example, offered an experience that combined individual freedom with social harmony as horn players interwove their lines with relative equality. With Armstrong, we celebrate the individual virtuoso, for whom other musicians provide an accompaniment, a framework or a stage.

While he was recording 'West End Blues', I doubt that Armstrong was thinking about relationships or identities, nor about revolutionising music,

nor about the daily challenges and potential humiliations of being a black man in a racist society. But all of these aspects of his context contributed to making his artistry possible, meaningful and powerful. He was, at least in one sphere, supremely capable, and his heroic stature as a musician sustained and inspired him in his whole existence.¹⁴ He lived this way of being for himself and for everyone who listened. Many of us can still recognise and respond to Armstrong's pride, extraordinary mastery, dignity and sureness. When we do, when we value his jazz, we are valuing a way of being that was more important to him and to many others than anything else, because in a perfect world, that's the way everyone would feel all of the time.