

Improvisation and Spirit:

The Cult of Jazz

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*“Some day music will be the means of expressing universal religion. Time is wanted for this, but there will come a day when music and its philosophy will become the religion of humanity.”*

- Hazrat Inayat Khan

### *Synopsis*

A great and growing body of scholarly work exists considering the relationship between music and religious ceremony. Though sometimes appearing solely as accompaniment to varied forms of worship, music has long been directly associated with mystical experience. Participants of religious rituals which include music often report experiences of trance or ecstatic states which are then understood by these participants as mystical or transcendent. Music can act as the catalyst or control in these contexts, allowing or initiating the mystical and transcendent. In such cases, the role of the musician is to concentrate on producing the correct atmosphere for the worshiper; the musician does not personally experience an altered state of consciousness. Though this is the most common relationship of musician to religious activity, not all religious contexts manifest a division between performer and worshiper. In this essay, I will show jazz music to be an idiom that can be legitimately called a religion in which the musical performer directly experiences mystical trance experiences. I do not wish to label jazz as a religion in the traditional sense, rather I wish to recognize and legitimize jazz and its concomitant communities as a system bearing all of the hallmarks of human religion. For some, jazz is the medium through which they experience the mystical and transcendent, organize cosmos from chaos, and experience deep catharsis usually associated with more traditional religions.

Using information collected from a series of personal interviews with musicians from several improvising traditions as well as material from other scholarly sources, I have found that improvising musicians commonly experience instances of trance. This experience acts in two ways, either reinforcing the musicians' pre-existing religious beliefs or, in the case of many jazz musicians, by creating a pseudo-religious community replete with rituals, mystical experiences, temples, and spiritual ascetics (The image of musician as artist-ascetic, subsisting on bread and water while sacrificing all for his art is not a new one). In this essay, I will show how experiences of trance during jazz improvisation create and inform a lifestyle and worldview that can legitimately be called a religion. In the absence of traditional religious belief, jazz music can provide musicians a way to discern the sacred from the profane.

### *Music and Religion*

Music has long been integral to religious ceremonies, cosmologies, creation myths, and mystical experiences. Due to music's simultaneous immediacy and intangibility, it is a natural component in spiritual discourse. Addressing this association and the unique characteristics of music as a medium, David Borgo (2003) writes, the “ability of music to symbolically express paradox and its temporal organization may explain why it is so often linked with transcendental states across various cultures” (6).

Sufi musician and mystic Hazrat Inayat Khan (1991) wrote at great length about the relationships between music, one-ness with God, and human experience. Khan taught that, “all creation has come from vibrations, therefore man loves music more than anything else as he, like all of creation, is a vibration” (54). Furthering his claim of music’s importance and presence in all of the world’s religions, Kahn further notes:

David, whose song and whose voice have been known for ages, gave his message to the world in the form of music. Orpheus of the Greek legends, the knower of the mystery of tone and rhythm, had through this knowledge power over the hidden forces of nature. The Hindu Goddess of learning, of knowledge, whose name is Sarasvati, is always pictured with the *vina*. What does this suggest? It suggests that all learning has its essence in music. (5)

Here Kahn is affirming his belief in sound and music as the root of all knowledge and truth, worldly and spiritual. In another essay about the traditional role of sound and music in religious cosmologies Khan states,

In the *Vedas* of the Hindus we read: *Nada Brahma* – sound, being the Creator. In the works of the wise of ancient India we read: ‘First song, then *Vedas* or wisdom’. When we come to the Bible, we find: ‘First was the word, and the word was God’, and when we come to the Qur’an we read that the word was pronounced, and all creation was manifest. This shows that the origin of the whole creation is sound. (17)

According to Khan, all of creation is realized in music, while all of nature and human experience is a manifestation of a larger cosmic harmony. This way of understanding music leads to an implicit recognition of both creating and listening to music as acts of communion with God. Similar sentiments abound in the world’s religions.

Looking further into the relationship of music and religion, Sufism, a mystical sect of Islam, includes the practice of *sama’* (literally, listening). This Sufi tradition consists of chanting or singing passages of the Qur’an, commonly with instrumental accompaniment. *Sama’* is regarded as a very important yet dangerous Sufi practice restricted to mature adepts due to music’s implicit sensual nature. Some religious leaders feared that not all listeners could focus on the spiritual dimensions of *sama’* and instead focus on the sensual beauty of the experience or the singers themselves. Carl W. Ernst reports, “...one early Sufi said, ‘*Sama’* is forbidden for the masses, so they may preserve their souls; it is permitted for ascetics, so they may attain the goal of their efforts; and it is recommended for our companions [the Sufis], so they may enliven their hearts’” (1997, 182). Furthermore, “those who focus on the exterior manifestation of music to the exclusion of its inner form are deluded...the highest form of spiritual audition in *sama’* is the concentration on the manifestation of beauty in the divine revelation itself, in the Qur’an” (183). In the West, the classical music tradition flourished with many seminal composers directly employed by the Church. Musicologist Mary Dalton Greer (2008) suggests that Johann Sebastian Bach, both a committed Lutheran and church music composer, felt a “special affinity with the divinely ordained House of Aaron.” She

suggests that in his role of setting scripture to music, Bach understood himself as a continuation of the priestly line of Aaron (as described in the book of Exodus) glorifying God by setting scripture to beautiful music. Not until the nineteenth century did Western art music see a break with the Church and increased secularization. Still, mysticism, spirituality, and glorification of God can be found in the music of Beethoven, Berlioz, and Wagner regardless of religious affiliation. Other non-Western faith traditions incorporate music further as it plays a central role in possession cults around the world, beckoning supernatural beings to become contemporary with or reside momentarily within worshippers.

Augmenting the religious traditions already discussed, Gilbert Rouget (1985) cites many possession cults around the world that use music as the seminal vehicle for mystical experience. Music in these cases is, however, always present as an external phenomenon experienced by the listener, not the performing musician. This is reinforced by Rouget: “As far as musicians are concerned things are relatively simple: they do not, in principle, go into trance” (103). He later points out that, “to do so would be incompatible with their function, which is to provide for hours on end and sometimes on several consecutive days, music whose execution must continuously adapt itself to the circumstances.” Musicians can be extremely powerful in the ceremonial setting. “In Haiti, Métraux tells us that “...a talented drummer can induce possessions or halt them just as he wishes”” (112). This illustrates how great the musician’s power over the devout may be and alludes to the sobriety required to musically direct a religious ceremony. This sobriety is required during the Sufi *dhikr* ritual in which musicians improvise for long periods of time but do not enter trance. James Stoyhoff, a clarinetist and performer of several Middle Eastern musical traditions, attested to this in a personal interview reporting never having experienced trance while improvising. Describing his experience of performing with dancers in Greek and Balkan traditions, he described the presence of mind required during improvisation (JS). As the clarinetist and leader he is expected to create a musical environment that is directly related to the dancers. He is in effect, “choreographing an improvisation (for the dancers) that at the same time has to be musically consistent with the *maqam* and also rhythmically feeding them (the dancers).” If he were to go into a trance, he would lack the presence of mind to direct the performance. This implies that the musician’s intent, open-ness and willingness to allow them self to enter the trance state is crucial to the occurrence of any trance or mystical experience. It should be noted however that Stoyhoff’s experience is not the rule as Ud’ player Issa Boulos, who often performs in similar situations as Stoyhoff, stated in an interview that he experiences an altered transcendent state, every time he plays (IB). The focus on mental sobriety is not as pronounced in all improvising traditions as the performers do not always have extra-musical responsibilities. Jazz music, for example, is an idiom wherein musicians have historically been very aware of the relationship between their music and human spirituality. In a personal interview, saxophonist Dave Liebman put it this way: “That’s our (jazz musicians’) job, our job is to get out of body, it’s to get out of the moment – to be in the moment to such a degree that you’re out of the moment” (DL). Echoing Liebman while asserting his spiritual view of improvisation, pianist Kenny Werner referred to the *buzz* he experiences while playing music as the same he experiences in personal religious pursuits as well as past drug use. He stated, “When I improvise I would say that I am motivated by or attracted to the notes that

enhance that buzz, that oneness between me and the instrument,” and that, “I play for that. I certainly don’t play for any sort of artistic standards. I am not interested in the art or the state of the art, I am interested, for myself, in music as a vehicle to reach those states that I used to enjoy so much with drugs” (KW). These sentiments reflect many jazz musicians’ attitudes that experiences of trance or altered states are expected and sought in all of their musical activity.

### *Trance, not ecstasy*

As we approach the reported experiences of improvising musicians, it is important to define and differentiate *trance* from *ecstasy*. Though the term “ecstasy” is commonly used by ethnomusicologists to “indicate states of consciousness that are musically based, and in some cases also mystically oriented” (Racy, 6), I prefer and will use the differentiation of ecstasy from trance offered by Gilbert Rouget. He differentiates these commonly confused concepts, asserting that ecstasy is associated with immobility, silence, solitude, sensory deprivation, recollection and hallucinations, whereas trance is characterized by movement, noise, in company, sensory over-stimulation, amnesia, and no hallucinations (1985, 11). Though it is impractical to declare a hard and fast rule generalizing musicians’ experiences during improvisation, trends exist. Certainly the improvising musician is moving and engaged in physical activity, creating “noise,” in the company of other musicians, stimulated, and reports lack of memory or, “amnesia.” Though not all of these characteristics need be present for an experience to be considered trance, they describe most improvising musicians’ experiences thereby naming them as trance rather than ecstasy.

Regardless of the improvising idiom, musicians commonly experience similar phenomena but call it very different things dependent upon their pre-existing worldview. In eleven personal interviews conducted with musicians of various improvising traditions including jazz, Arab *maqam* repertoire, electronic, Greek, and free jazz, the experience of trance during improvisation was reported ten out of eleven times. Though a series of questions regarding each musician’s personal spiritual attitudes and experiences of trance while improvising was prepared, interviews were informal allowing the interviewee to direct conversation, often inadvertently inferring answers to the prepared question. I found that trance has been consistently understood by musicians as a spiritual or mystical phenomenon regardless of the musician’s personal attitudes toward human spirituality.

During an interview, Palestinian Ud’ player Issa Boulos described the altered state experienced during improvisation as weightless, absent, and perhaps paradoxically, as “being one with the instrument...that something else (other than the performer) keeps the process going somehow” (IB). Describing what he sometimes experiences during improvisation, jazz saxophonist Chris Potter said during an interview,

I have had those really extreme experiences where I really feel that I’m not even a participant, really. I’m kind of watching it happen like everyone else even though I’m playing. I’m putting forth physical effort and you know, coming up with musical ideas. There is a space that I’ve achieved a few times that really feels like the music is playing itself and

that the audience and me and the rest of the band are all kind of on some wavelength. There's no effort at all, its just happening to all of us. (CP)

Woodwind player and improvising electronic musician Charles Gorczynski said that “you forget there are people in the room, you don't know where you are, and you're serving what's already happening. That's the moment when you lose [your] inhibitions” (CG). Many musicians echo Potter's statement of being absent or removed rather than presently performing the music. Jazz pianist Jon Cowherd said that when in that improvisational space the music “takes its own path and...that you can reach that state of not really thinking in a way – you're just reacting and letting whatever happens happen” (JC). In his essay *Jazz Performance as Ritual: The Blues Aesthetic and the African Diaspora*, Travis Jackson quotes an interview with saxophonist Antonio Hart in which he had asked Hart “what was running through his head” while playing. Hart replied saying, “I, you know, I'm gone. When I'm playing, when the situation's right, I'm usually gone. I'm not even on Earth anymore, you know. I'm really not here... 'Cause I'm like in a trance, man. I'm not there” (50). These musicians are all reporting a loss of personal ego and sense of self that simultaneously (and paradoxically) deepens and perhaps annihilates their association with an audience. These musicians also speak of a feeling of great catharsis and exhilaration (or exhaustion), after having been in this state.

The musicians I interviewed have all agreed that the trance state does not occur every time they play music. Rather, certain internal and external circumstances must be met. Chris Potter articulated this as a combination of the acoustics and feel of the room, his band's attitude, the audience, and his personal mood state:

I think it really depends on the situation, depends on the band but really depends on the audience too, how open they are...Certain things can make it more difficult like, the way the room is designed, if people are far away or you can't see them or you can't hear them very well. Maybe that makes it harder to make a connection, but you can usually feel some energy coming back at you from the audience which has a big effect too. And of course the biggest thing is your own head-space... A few times it's happened that if I'm going through something difficult (in life) and trying to figure out how to resolve some large problem...Maybe it's just that when you have a problem you're more willing to be humble. I know that's a loaded word but maybe if you're at a point where you realize you really don't have the answers sometimes you can open yourself up in a way that's hard to get to when you're doing well. (CP)

Potter is here implying that for him, music is acting in a way traditionally associated with religion. His transcendent experiences while improvising music have lead him to greater understanding in his life and aiding him in, “questioning my assumptions so that I can really be open(ed) up to have access to something real and not just the way that I think it's (life is) supposed to be.” He continues, saying, “Music is very connected to that experience for me because you know, music is the biggest kind of – I don't know how you describe it, um, ritual like thing that I do that can show me where I'm at” (CP). Potter's statement shows that even though he may not understand exactly what the trance

experience is, it is profound and it is helping to orient his understanding of himself and his life.

### *Physiological Clues*

New physiological clues exist which may offer insight into what actually happens to musicians on a neurological level while they improvise. While not entirely explaining the musicians' experience, these new findings legitimize musician's claims of being outside of their normal cognitive state while they improvise. They commonly report not actively making decisions while performing, instead being outside of themselves watching or hearing the music being made as if they were part of the audience. Doctors Charles Limb and Allen Braun (2008) may have found neurological evidence for this phenomenon in their study of six professional jazz pianists. They devised an experiment during which brain activity was monitored via functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) while the musicians played a memorized piece of music as well as an improvisation. The authors note:

Our results strongly implicate a distinctive pattern of changes in prefrontal cortical activity that underlies the process of spontaneous musical composition. Our data indicate that spontaneous improvisation, independent of the degree of musical complexity, is characterized by widespread deactivation of lateral portions of the prefrontal cortex together with focal activation of medial prefrontal cortex. This unique pattern may offer insights into cognitive dissociations that may be intrinsic to the creative process: the innovative, internally motivated production of novel material (at once rule based and highly structured) that can apparently occur outside of conscious awareness and beyond volitional control.

These findings suggest that during the act of improvisation, the parts of the brain that contribute to self-monitoring, focused attention and structured reasoning are largely deactivated. The deactivation of the aforementioned structures seems to be associated with, "defocused, free floating attention that permits spontaneous unplanned associations, and sudden insights or realizations" (ibid, 7). In short, Limb and Braun suggest the importance of intuition and the loss of active personal direction. This description certainly correlates to improvising musicians' reports of trance during instances of musical improvisation. However, correlation does not necessarily assure causation. Regardless of the neurological activity associated with improvisation, the musicians I interviewed refused the veracity of explaining their experiences as purely physiological. Rather, musicians preferred to recognize the experience as mystical, mysterious, and often with spiritual undertones commonly associated with perceived manifestations of God. Addressing the inadequacy of trying to understand musical improvisation solely in a reductionary or analytical light, saxophonist Evan Parker articulates his holistic understanding of improvisation:

There's an analogy with the spokes on a revolving wheel. Everything's in motion, the rim of the wheel is supported by the spokes, but when the whole thing is turning you don't see the spokes any more. If the thing didn't have that speed of rotation, it would make sense to count the spokes and think about them one at a time. But the whole point is to get the thing revolving and the spokes are only there to enable the rim of the wheel to turn. There's some kind of equivalent of that in the music. You could, you can, after the event, slow the thing down and look at how all the pieces fit together. But the whole point is that the pieces fit together that way in order to generate the speed of movement which *is* the music...The music is not what you hear in analysis, it's what is there in the real time of performance. (Borgo, 2005, 54)

Furthermore, musicians commonly share the opinion that by labeling or attempting to codify the experience, the music and the experience are diminished. Addressing this issue, saxophonist David Liebman said,

To me, it's really nobody's business what you do, how you feel about it...when a guy goes out and says, "This is the reason I'm this way," implying that that (musical and mystical experience) is what did it...I have a big problem with that...It's a little irresponsible, a little jive to call it whatever you call it. It's obvious... There's nothing to do but do it. If you do it, you're doing it, you don't have to call it anything... (When) jazz guys have the need to designate, enumerate, label, codify...it really turns me off. (DL)

Improvising musician Ken Vandermark does not prescribe to any particular faith tradition but agrees with the presence of an unnameable spiritual component of improvised music. In an interview he said that his experience of trance during improvisation is, "an example of (an) experience that can't be codified by rational explanation...and that is one of the examples of why I feel there is some kind of spiritual basis to human kind's existence" (KV). Vandermark clearly understands improvised music as an avenue of pursuing human spirituality without resorting to what he in conversation referred to as a "religious bias," a term I have adopted and will use to refer to any way by which a person understands their spirituality within a religious system.

### *Jazz As Ritual, Jazz As Religion*

Western culture has grown increasingly secular and relativistic with fewer people looking to traditional faiths as a means of realizing any spiritual component of their existence. Despite this decline of traditional religions, most people still seek orientation toward a concept of objective reality, a sacred element to life. For people without an existing religious bias, jazz can become that sacred compass informing their spiritual worldview. Mircea Eliade (1958) writes that we can know the sacred nature of something because that *sacred* (thing or experience) *shows itself to us* (7). The sacred thing that shows itself in the jazz world view is the music *qua* music. Music in this case

ceases to simply be music, it is an *heirophany*, a manifestation of the sacred. It is not the music itself that is worshipped in the cult of jazz, it is *sacred* music. Referring to instances of heirophany in other cults, Eliade says, "...what is involved is not a veneration of the stone in itself, a cult of the tree in itself. The sacred tree, the sacred stone or tree; they are worshipped precisely because they are *heirophanies*, because they show something that is no longer stone or tree but the *sacred*" (12). In the cult of jazz, performance spaces, rituals of performance and listening, and people become sacred by their association with jazz music. Explicating this further, Eliade states:

Religious man's desire to live *in the sacred* is in fact equivalent to his desire to take up his abode in objective reality, not to let himself be paralyzed by the never ceasing relativity of purely subjective experiences, to live in a real and effective world, and not in an illusion. This behavior is documented on every plane of religious man's existence, but it is particularly evident in his desire to move about only in a sanctified world, that is, in a sacred space. (1959, 28)

This desire was implied by Chris Potter in his previously quoted statement citing his desire to, "have access to something real and not just the way that I think it's (life is) supposed to be" (CP). Citing people's need for cathartic experience, Vandermark said that humans seem to be "built to believe in a higher power" (KV), and seek spiritual experiences not only in religious tradition, but elsewhere as well. Persons experiencing or seeking spiritual elements in their lives may refer to it as such in their speech, and the use of terms and ideas otherwise associated with religious communities is prevalent in the jazz idiom. Paul Berliner's book *Thinking in Jazz* includes an interview with drummer Paul Wertico. He describes himself as,

not necessarily a religious person, by and large, but there are many times where I'll play music and just kind of look up and say, "Thank you." And it's a real strange feeling. It's like I'm in touch with something so big and the joy is so incredible. And I don't even know why. It's not like I'm looking up and I know there's a heaven and a hell, but it's like I'm thanking the big picture for just the opportunity as a human being to feel this way – which is incredible. (393)

Seminal musicians in jazz's history have described music as their spiritual path, their informal religion, and have warmly embraced jazz music as a method to connect to some higher transcendent plane of existence. An important example of this is jazz saxophonist John Coltrane who said, "My goal is to live the truly religious life, and express it in my music...To be a musician is really something. It goes very, very deep. My music is the spiritual expression of what I am, my faith, my knowledge, my being" (Nisenson 42). Coltrane explicitly characterized his music as being simultaneously a spiritual offering, an ecstatic and transcendent experience, and celebration of his spiritual reality. Compositions such as *Psalm*, *Ascension*, *Dear Lord*, *Om*, *The Father and The Son* and *The Holy Ghost*, and *Song of Praise* attest to his spiritual understanding of his music. Coltrane's 1964 recording, *A Love Supreme*, featured liner notes describing his religious

awakening and explicitly displayed his growing sense of music as spiritual expression. The liner notes read, “During the year 1957, I experienced, by the grace of God, a spiritual awakening which was to lead me to a richer, fuller, more productive life. At that time, in gratitude, I humbly asked to be given the means and privilege to make others happy through music.” The music recorded on *A Love Supreme* is pulsing and modal with Coltrane’s repeated phrases setting up the vocal chant of, “A love supreme”, that occurs during the second movement of the work.

The jazz tradition includes many indirect parallels to organized religion such as its pantheon of revered patriarchs and “saints”. Jazz’s venerated, hyper-talented and creative musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis and Bill Evans have long had dedicated followers attempting to copy them in every way; not only musically but in their dress, speech, and lifestyle. These musicians are respected as larger than life artists with a direct line to the divine creative *Other*. John Coltrane’s association of music and spirituality has even led to his being revered as a saint by the Saint John Coltrane Church in San Francisco. The church’s website states that its mission is, “To bring souls to Christ; to know sound as the preexisting wisdom of God, and to understand the divine nature of our patron saint in terms of his ascension as a high soul into one-ness with God through sound.” Sunday Mass at the Saint John Coltrane Church includes conventional preaching as well as weekly live performances of Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme*, often culminating in a cathartic jam session. In addition to jazz’s pantheon, jazz performance itself can be highly ritualized. Travis Jackson writes, “the emphasis placed by musicians on ‘taking it to another level,’ their many mentions of spirituality, and participants’ church-derived responses to jazz performance suggest a ritualized view of jazz performance” (56). I argue that many additional parallels exist between jazz and traditional rituals and religions. Performances from the “American Songbook” of jazz standards bear a resemblance to the traditional body of Christian hymns, Sufi *sama*, and devotional Buddhist *sutra* chanting. Fellow musicians and dedicated listeners act as a congregation of fellow believers increasing the ritualistic tone by exhorting the musicians in away one might expect in a Baptist Church or possession cult. Jazz musician and ethnomusicologist Melvin Butler said, “You can see a jazz club as a secular church...” (MB). I agree, as clubs and specialized performance spaces often assume a “holy” tone reminiscent of churches and temples. The door to the club or performance space - often guarded by a spirit or god (door man) - acts as a threshold “that separates the two spaces (and) also indicates the distance between two modes of being, the profane and the religious” (Eliade, 1958, 25). In the sacred performance space, ritualized etiquette informs listeners when to applaud, speak, how to act, proper vocabulary, and sometimes even how to dress. This atmosphere is implicitly religious and echoes the organization and environment that can lead to the induction of trance states in both performers and audience members. In his book *Flow*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi states:

The audiences at today’s live performances, such as rock concerts, continue to partake in some degree in these ritual elements; there are few other occasions at which large numbers of people witness the same event together, think and feel the same things, and process the same information. Such joint participation produces in an audience the condition Emile

Durkheim called “collective effervescence,” or the sense that one belongs to a group with a concrete, real existence. This feeling, Durkheim believed, was at the roots of religious experience. (1990, 110)

While several musicians interviewed spoke of their experiences of music’s power to connect performer and audience, Vandermark explicitly connected live musical performance with shamanistic ritual saying,

Ritual experience in that (musical) environment, I can see a direct lineage to this kind of, lets say, shaman type thing where you’re bringing people into an environment where they’re losing themselves for a time and, at its best, having a transcendent experience. At its highest it’s an experience shared by the performers and listeners...In a sense, the twenty-first century shamans are artists. (KV)

### *Jazz Musician as Shaman: Conclusion*

The musician’s concept of the trance experience is heavily influenced by their pre-existing spiritual beliefs. Self identifying Christian improvising musicians I spoke with referred to the trance experience as a manifestation (experiential heirophany) of the Holy Spirit or God himself. In an interview, Jon Cowherd associated altered states of consciousness with the creative power of the Holy Spirit influencing his compositions and improvisations in solo and group settings. Melvin Butler echoed this and spoke of the act of improvising music as an act of glorifying God. While improvising, Butler commonly seeks to “manifest the presence of God through sound,” and to “offer praise through musical sound. To manifest the presence of God, invite the presence of God, so other people can sense it, so that God can be glorified directly by what I do” (MB). These are clear examples of musicians syncretizing their mystical experiences into their pre-existing concepts of God and human spirituality. If a musician has no pre-existing religious bias, these experiences can be understood as very human, mysterious and mystical. To several musicians I interviewed that have no pre-existing religious bias, experiences of trance are perceived as profoundly human and extremely important cathartic experiences. To these musicians God is not in the picture, yet the experience remains extremely powerful. Vandermark stated,

The thing that music expresses to me or connects me to is humanity, not spirituality. And maybe that’s a position of antagonism toward what I see as problematic about a spiritual bias in terms of religion but, when I’m in a musical situation...there are countless times where what I’m sharing with the people, the feeling in the room, the connection with the people, performers and listeners; I think that’s a human experience. That’s almost like a ritual human experience that brings people together and says that in the now, we are unified. I don’t see that as necessarily being spiritual...I see that as an immensely human gesture and a necessary human gesture. In my experiences with that, I’m not feeling a sense of God, I’m feeling a sense of humanity – and that’s a powerful feeling. (KV)

His is an extremely human and non-spiritual view of his trance experiences that simultaneously embraces the mystery of the experience. Mystical experience, ritual associated with jazz performance, and the sense of community these things engender can transform the act of playing of music in a room into a deeply religious experience for performers and listeners alike.

I must clarify again that I do not mean to call jazz a religion in the standard use of the term, rather I am asserting that jazz music and the accompanying lifestyle are a way for the initiated to organize cosmos from chaos. Jazz, for some, is a medium by which the *sacred* can be differentiated from the *profane*; and in that sense is a worldview orienting religion. When a musician makes the statement, “Jazz is my religion,” it can legitimately be understood as a method by which the musician experiences, understands, and organizes implicit or explicit spiritual elements in their life. Addressing the role of jazz music in his life Chris Potter said, “In jazz, something that appeals to me very much...is that it’s a great social thing. It’s reacting to the other people in the band and their energy and you know, heating up that to try and create something that’s bigger than the sum of its parts. Philosophically that really appeals to me and I think that I’ve gotten to use music as a way of learning a lot about how to live and checking myself out,” and that it is the most, “ ritual like thing that I do that can show me where I’m at” (CP). Potter’s case is a great example of jazz serving a religious purpose.

In addition to jazz musicians’ primary mystical experience during improvisation, they can also act as spiritual guides or shamans, guiding and facilitating trance or ecstatic experiences for listeners. In a theological sense, the musician is acting as a shaman flying away on a celestial journey, becoming contemporary with the gods and facilitating a transcendent experience for themselves and listeners alike (Eliade, 1959, 53-54). While admitting that many other valid avenues exist for humans to pursue transcendence, David Liebman asserts that, “Improvising musicians are the guys to show that...the potential for a higher level of consciousness is possible” (DL). In leading others to transcendence, the jazz musician tacitly accepts the role as spiritual leader of the cult of jazz. This shamanism is the final link marking jazz as not just a musical idiom, but a legitimate religion. Initiates of this religious tradition continue to partake in the jazz idiom as a framework in which to grow and understand their own lives, consider spiritual elements of human existence, and effectively grow in relationship with others.

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