

Greg Albright
4/25/08
FMST 085: Fan Cultures

Self-Conceptions of Jazz Fan/Musicians

This paper seeks to examine the practices of jazz musicians and their interactions with jazz music as fan text(s). Interviews were solicited from members of the Swarthmore College Jazz Ensemble and other student performing groups, focusing on their conceptions of their playing; in particular, whether they consider their jazz performance to be a manifestation of their fandom of jazz (if they do consider themselves fans at all). In addition, it will engage the question of what can be considered “text” in the convoluted world of jazz performance as rewriting.

Jazz fans, like jazz music, are difficult to categorize. This project does not seek to lay out a comprehensive analysis of jazz fandom, or to create any of the possible categorizations that may or may not exist within the world of jazz fans. It instead moves us towards a better understanding of jazz fandom via fans' self-conceptualizations of their fan practices. This interview-based survey focuses on fans who are also amateur jazz musicians, in order to determine the place of musical performance within the respondents' fan experience. Performance is used here and throughout to mean "musical performance" as opposed to "performance" in the context of "of identities," for example. Additionally, it should be noted that "performance" refers here not only to formal, audience-attended concerts, but also to practice and "jam" sessions with other musicians. The improvisatory nature of jazz necessitates this understanding of each new playing of a piece as a new iteration of the source text, or perhaps as a new text in and of itself.

Performance played a different role in each of the two fan experiences featured here. In fact, the self-conceptions of the two respondents' musical performance resulted in two opposing formulations of performance and its place within jazz fandom. Sarah¹, who plays clarinet and tenor saxophone, repeatedly explained her jazz fandom as a means to improve her jazz performance with such statements as "I was a fan of his playing, but partly because [listening to] his playing would make me a better player." She was also quick to distance herself from traditional stereotypes of fans, saying: "I wouldn't say I'm a fan like people are fans of comic books ... I'm not interested in, you know, like, slasher fiction about fake jazz musicians getting together. I'm just interested in it from a musical

¹ Names have been changed

perspective, not from like a fantasy perspective.”

This distancing from stereotypically ‘low’ fan forms reveals a concern with high and low culture that reflects issues present in many fandoms, though particularly in jazz². In different sense, Sarah’s responses demonstrate a positioning of jazz fandom and fan activity as subordinate or ancillary to musical performance. When asked about the correlation between her status as a musician and her status as a fan, Sarah said “If I’m learning someone’s solo³, I’m learning it so that I can become a better musician, rather than feeling like I’m involved in their life or feeling like I’m creating something that’s intimately involved with their own jazz experience.” That Sarah conceived of her fan practice as ancillary to her musicianship is interesting in and of itself, but more interesting is that another musician/fan respondent conceived of the relationship between his musicianship and fandom in an opposite manner.

John, a piano player, positioned his playing as ancillary (though important) to his fandom. When asked about his fan practices, he said “What I mean when I say ‘jazz fan’ is that I enjoy the playing of jazz, and—well, perhaps that’s really *why* I’m a jazz fan, and not *part of* being a jazz fan. So I should say is that I’m a jazz fan because I really enjoy listening to jazz and learning about jazz.” Unlike Sarah’s conception of her fandom, John’s does not have performance at its center. Later, he said “The most important thing I do to engage in the music is talking to people, or reading books about it.” Performance, though, did arise in John’s responses, particularly as a primal scene of his jazz fandom: “I didn’t really listen to music before I played jazz. Like, I didn’t listen to jazz music.” In

² See Frith 1

³ Common practice among jazz musicians-in-training; players listen to recordings of canon artists’ improvised solos and mimic the recordings to hone improvisational skill.

that sense, the existence of his fandom is predicated on his musical performance.

Nonetheless, the term “ancillary” is appropriate, considering the centrality of other fan practices in John’s conception of his own fandom.

Performance of jazz music played an important role in both fan experiences, regardless of the opposite status of their conceptions of performance. Both musician/fans featured here mentioned similar reasons for wanting to play jazz (as opposed to other musical genres): “...if there’s an opportunity to solo or any sort of thing like that, or to play around with the form⁴, that’s always really cool,” said John. Sarah’s statement shows a similar interest: “I like that there’s not necessarily a rigidity in jazz, where you can sort of do your own thing.” It is this spirit of individual creation and rewriting of the source text that rings most true in terms traditional fan studies, but which, when placed in a jazz context, problematizes the idea of the source text. Consider John’s statement: “I think that it’s very interesting to both be able to listen to a song and to do your own version of it ... that definitely enhances later listening experiences that I might have.”

Here, John’s idea of performance is not only of performance as a reaction to the source text, but also as an influence on future listening. He describes his hypothetical later listening experience as influenced by the text of his own performance, which was in turn influenced by the initial “text” recording. It is not only this cyclical nature of jazz performance as rewriting that makes discussions of jazz as fan text difficult; the initial source itself is also difficult to pin down: Is the text the original recording? The popularized and/or canonized recording? The sheet music (“chart” in jazz parlance)

⁴ The ordering and amount of improvisation, pre-written music, and bridging material; also, making decisions regarding time signature, tempo, etc. for the performance of a piece of jazz music.

dictating the tune's melody and chord progression? A favorite live performance? The musician/fan respondents here referenced recordings as textual sources, and the chart is inarguably a source on some level for all but the most free of free-jazz players. Ultimately, it may be productive for future investigations of jazz fandom to attempt to answer the "what is text?" question on a case-by-case basis.

The relationship between musical performance and fandom, though the focus of the interviews for this project, was not the only topic discussed in the interviews. The jazz fans and fan/musicians (beyond the two featured here) also referenced topics including but not limited to commercial interactions, the (non-musical) academic/educational value of jazz fandom, narratives and meta-narratives of jazz, and the positioning of jazz in relationship to classical and popular music⁵. This last concern, and the concern with musical performance that this paper examines, are more specific to jazz fandom, and thus less prevalent within media studies, but scholarship already exists to engage more "traditionally fannish" aspects of jazz, some which are listed above. This project hopes to inspire future examinations of jazz fans as a part of the fan studies oeuvre.

⁵ Frith

Works Cited

Personal and email interviews conducted April 21 and 22, 2008. Names of respondents will be released per request, and with the consent of the respondents. Email galbrig1@swarthmore.edu with questions.

Frith, Simon. "Is Jazz Popular Music?" *Jazz Research Journal* 1 (2007). 19 Apr. 2008
<<http://politicaltheology.com/ojs/index.php/Jazz>>.