The Institutionalization of Jazz Pedagogy as Observed in the Greater Salt Lake Area of Utah

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THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF JAZZ PEDAGOGY AS OBSERVED IN THE GREATER SALT LAKE AREA OF UTAH

by
Jens Watts

Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of graduation requirements for University Honors

School of Music
Brigham Young University
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ABSTRACT

THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF JAZZ PEDAGOGY AS OBSERVED IN THE GREATER SALT LAKE AREA OF UTAH

Jens Watts

School of Music

Bachelor of Arts

Although traditionally an oral art form, the learning and teaching of jazz music has undergone a shift towards institutionalization and formalization in the last fifty years, principally in the form of method books and the presence of jazz in educational institutions. This study documents this trend by a comparison of jazz pedagogy experienced by and used by professional musicians in Utah with that which is recorded in Paul Berliner’s Thinking in Jazz. The informality of education for Berliner’s interlocutors contrasts starkly with the institutionalized education of most of the participants in this study.
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I. Introduction

Paul Berliner’s seminal work *Thinking in Jazz* describes the modes of learning and teaching jazz improvisation used by some of the most important musicians of the art form. Berliner used personal interviews with several important jazz musicians, supplemented by quotes from historical jazz musicians, musicological discourse and his own experience playing jazz music. Most of his research took place in the 1980s. Writing as broadly as possible, he uses this information to explain the general state of the art form concerning conceptualization of jazz music. Most of the musicians in his study learned to improvise through mentorship from more experienced musicians during performances, jam sessions, one-off lessons, and other informal encounters.

This study seeks to add to the field of jazz studies through comparison of his study and the lives of jazz musicians currently in the state of Utah. A difference in region and generation between his sample and mine promises to show important differences in learning and teaching improvisation. I posit that, between the time when musicians in his study began to improvise and the formative periods of the musicians in my study, the informal model has been challenged by the advent of written materials for improvisation, principally *The Real Book* and Jamey Aebersold’s play-along series, and the institutionalization of jazz pedagogy, as evidenced by the presence of private lessons in jazz
improvisation, summer jazz music camps, and advanced degrees in jazz studies.

The learning of jazz improvisation has therefore shifted to rely on formalized settings for most students of the idiom in the state of Utah.
II. Methods

Participants in this study are professional musicians with extended experience playing jazz music. They live in Cache, Salt Lake, and Utah counties and are active to some degree as performers and pedagogues. The sample used includes fourteen musicians: four pianists, three saxophone players, two guitarists, two trombone players, one vocalist, one drummer, and one trumpet player.

Participants were interviewed in their own homes or in public spaces. The mode of the interviews was semi-formal, with the questions focusing on broad topics that the musicians could talk about at length. Transcripts of these interviews were cut and organized according to similar topics. Quotes presented in this paper are slightly edited for clarity, including deletion of filler words and repetitions.
III. Learning to Improvise

Many of the musicians in this study owe their career in music to the support and mentorship of musical family members, ranging from music-loving parents to a grandfather who was a “world-class jazz guitarist.” This support often came first in the form of playing music around the house. One musician remembers: “We had a CD of the Glenn Miller Orchestra, and I learned every single solo on that CD ... I didn't know I was learning them. I was just singing along with them because that's what I did.” This provided her with early opportunities for aural training, in a way very similar to the experiences of musicians Jerry Coker and George Johnson Jr., as recorded by Berliner.¹

While many of the musicians in Berliner’s sample heard jazz and other African American music regularly around the house, it was more of a novelty for these predominately white households in Utah. The Glenn Miller CD mentioned earlier was the only jazz recording that musician remembers growing up with. Similarly, pianist Steve Erickson remembers that his family subscribed to a monthly record service, which provided records of Beethoven symphonies and Mozart concertos, but also included records of the Woody Herman Big Band, J. J. Johnson, and Oscar Peterson from time to time. Another musician had John Denver, the Beatles, and the Beach Boys playing in the home, only hearing jazz

¹ Berliner, 95.
music “here and there. Jazz music’s slow acceptance in the state of Utah is evidenced by the fact that jazz DJs made in their first appearances on Utah AM radio in the mid-1940s, while rock DJs were already gaining popularity in the early 1960s.²

Rather than listening to jazz recordings, one musician’s family members exposed him to the idiom by practicing regularly with Aebersold play-along records. Another musician was exposed to the play-along records through their private teacher, who would put them on at the end of lessons. These experiences suggest that educational impulses assisted in the acceptance of jazz musicians among the Utah community.

The education of childhood piano lessons led some musicians to the jazz style indirectly. Pianist Clint Sudweeks remembers his first piano lessons including pieces by Beethoven, Chopin, Mozart, Schumann, and Schubert. But these pieces didn’t satisfy him:

I wasn’t crazy about it ... classical music wasn’t really doing it for me. I was a good piano player; I practiced pretty well, and I got pretty good. But it didn’t really shine for me. And so, I became aware maybe around [age] twelve or thirteen of other bands that I really liked, like Coldplay, Ben Folds, Keane, Aqualung, the Fray, U2, and a lot of these bands had really active piano parts, and there was a lot more freedom present, I guess. And so, I learned about chord harmony, and I learned about how songs were made.

² Yorgason, “All Too Rare,” 351.
After this development, this pianist began studying with a jazz pianist so he could "learn to solo like Ben Folds." It was only then that he was exposed to such figures as Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and Chick Corea. It was then that he was "bit by the jazz bug, and once you get bit, you can’t go back."

Pianist Kurt Reeder began playing piano independently and then took a year of formal lessons with a teacher. At the end of that year, he was playing Scott Joplin rags, and his teacher “had put the word ‘jazz’ in [his] ear.” A few years later, he had his first training in jazz improvisation with a new teacher:

My teacher was not someone who taught me the ins and outs of theoretical concepts and harmony … He would bring three CDs to every lesson from the library, and we would listen to a track off of each one in our lesson. And he would say, “Pick an album,” and I’d pick one, and he’d say, “Okay. Next week, when you come back, you need to be able to tell me by heart who the personnel is, when this was recorded, and what stylistic things or textures or whatever you hear that you enjoy.” And then … he’d say, “I want you to tap along [on] the jewel case. Try to tap a groove with the tune.”

This unique lesson experience was seminal for this pianist and jumpstarted his appreciation of history and rhythm in jazz music.

Erickson had a few piano lessons as a child, but his explorations on the piano started him on a path of aural learning. At age four, he wanted to learn piano, but his aunt, who was teaching his sister, said he was too young. He relates: “She’d play her lesson on the piano. When she was done, I would climb up on the piano bench. I didn’t really play her pieces, but I would pretend to play
her pieces.” This began his efforts to learn melodies by ear. After a while, he got better at it: “We had albums, and I remember sometimes picking out melodies from the records that I was listening to, because sometimes we’d listen to them a lot.” He also began learning songs from the radio or TV, such as the themes from Sesame Street and Gilligan’s Island.

Aural explorations at a young age were also helpful for jumpstarting other musicians on the path to improvisation. Ben Nichols, a saxophone player, “started transcribing before [he] really knew much about jazz.” His first transcriptions were of guitar solos on songs by Aerosmith, Dream Theater, and John Petrucci. This prepared him for when he started private lessons and was assigned to transcribe Charlie Parker’s solo on “K. C. Blues.” Similarly, when he began playing his instrument, Nelsen Campbell would have fun playing along to Tower of Power, Chicago, and Earth, Wind and Fire. He remembers: “I just learned all the horn lines by ear, and I’d start learning the solos by ear. And then when my dad brought home J. J. Johnson [records], I did the same thing ... I just thought it [was] fun.”

On the other hand, when he first began transcribing, Ray Smith had a hard time learning by ear. “I spent three weeks just feeling like I was totally in the dark, because I couldn’t hear anything.” After these three weeks, he finished transcribing an eighty-measure Cannonball Adderley solo. One tactic he learned
to speed up this process was to play a record at half speed and record it on a cassette tape to play along with. The fact that this player had such difficulty with transcription at first may suggest that young musicians have more successful first aural training with styles of music that are less harmonically and melodically complex than jazz.

Besides private lessons, summer music camps also provided important early direction. Jay Lawrence began learning to improvise through camps such as Lake Tahoe Music Camp, the Stan Kenton Music Camp, and a 1974 music camp at BYU featuring instruction by Aebersold, David Baker, Dan Haerle, and Rufus Reid. Smith also attended camps such as these, and ended up using the things he learned from them to run his high school jazz band when he had an apathetic jazz band director. He and a few other students “were the ones that were spearheading everything,” recruiting new members, holding sectionals, and once even taking their band to a festival without their director, all which would not have happened without the summer training.

Even more than musical training, however, summer music camps taught young musicians lessons of character. David Halliday remembers seeing a difference between fellow camp attendees as far as discipline and maturity, which prompted him to decide which of the two types of young people he wanted to emulate. He also gained motivation from the “chance to meet a bunch
of other people your age who are trying to do the same thing that you’re trying to do.” The exposure to a social world of budding jazz improvisers helped to strengthen his resolve to improve and work towards a career in music. Campbell also attributes some influence towards being a professional musician from meeting and being connected with musicians at summer camps.

Early training was extended into learning on gigs, where many musicians gained some of their most valuable knowledge. This includes learning tunes aurally from other musicians. Both Halliday and Brian Pappal began regularly doing gigs soon after beginning jazz lessons in earnest, which led to them gaining a lot of their improvisational vocabulary from the musicians they played with. A valuable experience for Erickson was playing in a local college jazz band. In addition to learning from rehearsals and performances, he gained access to the director’s extensive record collection, from which he could borrow several albums every week.

Learning from professionals was especially important for Lawrence since he had less university training than the other musicians in this study. When he began forming groups as a young adult, he got musicians to play with him who “made [him] look better” and forced him to “stand on [his] tiptoes musically.” This led to him later securing a regular gig which provided further education: “In between shows, I didn’t go gamble or drink, and so I would line up lessons
when people were anxious to make a few extra bucks. … And so, I just kept
learning and asking questions and kind of learning on the band stand.” Of all the
musicians in this study, Lawrence’s education most resembles that of the
musicians in Berliner’s study.

However, these experiences are the exception rather than the rule in this
study. The institutionalization of jazz education\(^3\) has ensured that most students
of the art form learn to improvise in a formalized setting, such as private lessons,
summer camps, or secondary and tertiary schools.

It has been said that “jazz education has one truly iconic sound: Jamey
Aebersold as he counts off ‘One, two, one-two-three-four’ in his Indiana accent.”\(^4\)
Many musicians in this study grew up musically using Aebersold’s educational
books and play-along CDs. Kristen Bromley’s first experiences playing jazz
music, in a school combo, were using Aebersold books. They would play along
with the tracks and “based on [her] little, limited understanding of the guitar,
[she] would try and find notes that just sort of worked.” These books were also
important for vocalist Hayley Kirkland, who used them to practice improvisation
before she could regularly sing with instrumentalists.

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\(^3\) Wilf, *School for Cool*, 4–8.

The theoretical approach of the Aebersold play-along series was designed to allow beginners to improvise without yet having undertaken “the arduous discipline of aural learning.” And yet, Berliner writes that “the jazz tradition generally elevates aural musical knowledge, with its associated powers of apprehension and recall, to the paramount position.” He suggests that the two disparate approaches tend to create a generational gap. Whereas the older musicians in his study “learned jazz by ear, absorbing models for melodic shape, phrasing, and inflection,” the younger ones have tended to rely too much on theory.

In this sample of Utah musicians, all resemble the younger musicians described by Berliner. While they acknowledge the superiority of aural learning, the abundance of written materials for learning improvisation has led all of them to rely to some degree on sight rather than hearing. Lawrence admits: “I learned a lot of tunes from the fakebook and not too many by ear. But if you're going to do it right, you should learn off the recordings, I think.” He even recalls purchasing the first edition of *The Real Book*. He got a call and upon picking up the phone, a friend at the other end exclaimed: “There's a guy selling fake books out of the trunk of his car. He'll be there for another 45 minutes … hurry down!”

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5 Thibeault, 70–71.
7 Berliner, 93.
8 Berliner, 248.
Since the first editions of *The Real Book* were illicit according to copyright law, Lawrence had to rely on word of mouth to procure one. Corey Christiansen also spent a lot of time with *The Real Book* to gain his knowledge of standards. Erickson used the *Best Chord Changes* fakebook series by Frank Mantooth for much of his learning of standards, although he also learned many tunes aurally.

While these materials were important in formative years, the musicians eventually turned away from them. As Sudweeks explains, “I think [lead sheets] are really valuable, especially at the beginning. [But] you don’t want your nose in *The Real Book* or the Aebersolds forever, like training wheels.” This stands in contrast to jazz musicians in earlier days, as recorded by Berliner. He writes: “Although youngsters rely heavily on aural means of learning, most eventually learn to read music in order to gain access to additional material.”

Since most these Utah musicians began reading sheet music, their trajectories were flipped from the more traditional, aural learners.

As an example, learning from Aebersold books did not satisfy Nichols. During his studies in high school and his bachelor’s degree, he worked on patterns and scales from these books. He relates:

> I was practicing all these patterns and ideas in all keys, but not really practicing improvising. So, when I got up to take a solo, all that I really felt comfortable doing was regurgitating patterns over a chord progression. Of course, there was some variance and variation, but it

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9 Berliner, 64.
wasn’t like I was really improvising. It felt like I could improvise pretty comfortably in certain contexts, over tunes that I was really comfortable with, especially modal type stuff … But, over stuff with lots of changes, [I] didn’t feel super comfortable.

Once he began his master’s studies, however, his private instructor encouraged him to practice rhythm. This included exercises such as playing a line and then playing it again at a different place in the measure or delaying and anticipating resolutions. It was through this training that Nichols felt he could improvise in earnest.

One advantage of beginning with written materials is improved sightreading, which Erickson believes a “professional has to be able to [do].”

While in high school, Reeder would sightread a few lead sheets from *The Real Book* in page order every day, and then leave the book open for the next day. Sightreading from the *Charlie Parker Omnibook* in addition to *The Real Book* gave Brian Woodbury valuable sightreading practice.

Learners of jazz improvisation in more recent years do benefit from the abundance of lead sheets and improvisational method books. Other materials used include *Blues Scatitudes* by Bob Stoloff, Dan Hearle’s *Jazz/Rock Voicings for the Contemporary Keyboard Player* and *Scales for Jazz Improvisation*, and Jerry Coker’s *Patterns for Jazz*. Many also cite the mobile app iReal Pro as a stand-in for the functions of both a fakebook and a play-along CD.
Although the musicians in this study dedicated long hours to practicing improvisation and learning standards in their high school and college years, most have other priorities now. Even for musicians in their thirties, practice tends to be as little as thirty minutes a week. Nichols used to learn several new tunes in a week, but now he has to make an effort to learn one a week. Campbell used to practice tunes and licks in all twelve keys but has not done that for several years now. One musician remarked that they could not remember the last time they had to learn a new tune. According to another musician: “iReal Pro has saved me a couple of times when somebody called a tune that I rarely play.”

Several musicians described their eventual goal as being able to improvise as unconsciously as possible. Sudweeks believes that an improviser should “practice hard and work all the ideas out in the practice room ... but once you get on the bandstand, stop thinking about it.” Bromley remembers that at first, she tended to improvise as freely as possible, but since undertaking detailed training in theory, she thinks about her choices in soloing carefully. She laments: “It’s hard to relinquish the control and just let myself go again.” On more difficult tunes, Campbell naturally concentrates more on the notes and rhythms he is playing. However, on a more familiar standard, he can play almost effortlessly: “I love going to the jam and playing tunes that I really know, and just watching the Jazz [basketball] game on TV.”
In summary, although informal learning experiences were important to jazz musicians in Utah, their education has been much more formalized and institutionalized than those in Berliner’s study. This shift in education has also affected how these musicians in turn teach others how to improvise in the jazz style.
IV. Teaching Improvisation

Linguistic metaphors abound in relation to learning to improvise. Berliner notes in *Thinking in Jazz* that conversation is one of the principal metaphors for the performance of jazz music.\(^{10}\) Smith has similar beliefs: “I fully subscribe to Suzuki’s idea that you learn to play the way you learn to talk. And absolutely, how do you learn to talk? Not by taking out a book and learning to read words and sound out stuff. That’s much later. How do you really learn to talk? You’re hearing it around you. It surrounds you all the time.” He applies this by having his beginning students start improvising with radio stations playing music such as classic rock, reggae, or hip-hop, focusing on helping them figure out what key the song is in and whether the eighth notes are swung. Jaden Bueno also mimics child linguistic acquisition in his pedagogy. He will start a novice by playing short phrases for them to copy.

Most of the musicians in the study treat listening and transcription as analogous to assimilation of a language. One of the musicians requires his students to have a “journal of phrases” that they have learned by ear. From there, they are to learn to play those phrases on other tunes. He explains: “You learn phrases and words, and at first, it’s awkward to insert those into your soloing, but eventually it becomes just second nature.” Nichols always has his students

\(^{10}\) Berliner, 348.
doing some sort of transcription project, which they can then apply to other tunes. Many of the musicians remarked that only the students that listen to jazz music regularly progress in their learning of improvisation.

Given that transcription of an entire solo is a long process with many different possible methods, musicians differ in how they assign transcription projects to students. One musician is opposed to learning entire solos, since most of the time the student will only remember a few phrases from the solo in the future. Instead, this musician prefers to just have the students learn a few phrases from solos that they like and apply those in their vocabulary.

Most teachers value transcriptions of entire solos and give detailed instructions for their students with the goal of maximizing rewards from the time spent transcribing. Halliday has a “ten-step journey through a transcription” for his students, which begins with learning the head of the tune by ear and includes transcribing the chord changes, arpeggiating the chords on their instrument in time with the harmonic rhythm, and learning the solo well enough to sing along with it.

Christiansen also has a formalized step-by-step transcription process, but his is tailored to learning phrases. This process includes learning the phrase in twelve keys, as well as learning to play the phrase in context. To achieve this, he has the student identify which chord the phrase is played over in the recording
they are transcribing from. Once they know what part of the form the phrase is
played over, the student is required to play with a play-along track and play
nothing else except that line at the appropriate time in the form. This encourages
the student to internalize where in the form the phrase works well. Then, the
student can improvise over the rest of the form, but still playing the line at the
appropriate time.

As far as teaching standards goes, it is common to teach tunes by ear, but
also allow students to use lead sheets and chord charts to check their work. One
teacher tells his students not to play when looking at sheet music, but to
memorize parts of it at a time and then play them while the sheet is turned over.
Another encourages their students, when applicable, to learn to sing the words
and melody of a standard before learning it on their instrument. However,
another feels that learning words is less than necessary for learning a standard
well enough to improvise over it. Some encourage students to learn standards
from a Broadway cast recording or musical theater-style singer first, if available,
after which they could listen to an instrumental recording. Campbell simply tells
the student to learn from the oldest recording they can find. In general, the
musicians in the study believe that learning from more than one recording is
necessary to get an accurate idea of the melody of a standard.
An interesting disparity in methods for teaching improvisation arises with the twelve-bar blues progression. Two musicians use the blues as a starting point for beginners learning to improvise in the jazz style, which is a common technique among pedagogues.\(^\text{11}\) One of these musicians justifies this because of the blues’ ubiquitousness in jazz, rock and bluegrass, emphasizing its usefulness for a working musician, while the other uses it to begin because of its being well suited to call and response. Through the call and response, this musician will teach simple licks that the player can later apply to standards.

On the other hand, some musicians are opposed to beginning with a blues progression. Woodbury prefers to start with modal tunes because of their greater permissibility of notes than the blues. Erickson is strongly opposed to starting with a blues because students tend to play one scale over the whole progression. He prefers to start with simple tunes of his writing that have a few non-diatonic chord changes. That way, the student can improvise with just a few scales while also beginning with the idea of needing to change scales with the harmonic rhythm of the tune.

Despite their widespread usage by the musicians in the study themselves, most do not teach with either *The Real Book* or Jamey Aebersold’s books. About the latter, one musician believes they provide “an easy way to teach

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\(^{11}\) See, for example, Williams, “Easing into Jazz Improvisation.”
improvisation ... because there are right notes and wrong notes and you can just fix that, but there’s no attention given to playing compelling melodies or developing ideas.” This musician appears to notice what Berliner noticed when he wrote that some musicians “confuse theory with performance practice,” thereby omitting some of the most salient elements of the jazz style in the service of a theoretical model.

Musicians in this study avoid The Real Book for several reasons, including the presence of errors, its incapability of providing the full picture of a tune’s performance practice, and the fact that it is relied on too much among young musicians. Campbell also notes that since the lead sheets in The Real Book were transcribed from a recording, there is no reason that a student should not also use a recording to learn a tune.

What most sets the musicians apart as pedagogues is their ideas of what makes a good improviser. An older musician equates good improvisation with theoretical knowledge, specifically the knowledge to be able to produce a melody that aligns with the harmonic structure of a jazz standard. Campbell believes good melodies aren’t enough, but the soloist needs to interact with the rhythm section. In a similar vein, Woodbury believes rhythm is more important than pitch. Reeder gives a succinct summary of this approach by saying, “Ultimately,

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12 Berliner, Thinking in Jazz, 248.
what connects people to music is ... rhythm, beautiful harmony, and melodies that are digestible.” These three approaches appear to be a reaction to the more traditional ideas of the older musician, especially because Reeder does not consider himself a “great linear player.” These responses suggest that some of the younger musicians have reacted against the traditional model of improvisation to teach in ways that emphasize other theoretical concepts besides playing changes.

Teaching improvisation can also serve ends other than just producing convincing improvised solos. One teacher believes “if you can play jazz, you can play anything.” For her, teaching and learning improvisation is most valuable because it opens doors to work as a musician playing various styles of music.
V. Conclusion

The present study suggests that jazz musicians in Utah have strong ties to the general trend towards institutional jazz education, given that the participants would not have their current proficiency in jazz improvisation without their past training in schools, universities, summer camps, and private jazz lessons. However, they differ in their reactions to the availability of lead sheets, improvisational method books, and play-along recordings.

This study could be extended by a direct comparison between jazz musicians in Utah and those in another area of the United States. Such a comparison could reveal how differences in culture have impacted the presence of jazz and jazz pedagogy in Utah. Study of jazz pedagogy also could be illuminated by comparison with other musical traditions which have been transformed from an aural traditional into an institutionalized one, such as has happened with some traditions of folk music around the world.

In his work School for Cool, anthropologist Eitan Wilf suggests that academic jazz programs can blur the line between formal and informal pedagogy.\footnote{Wilf, School for Cool, 14.} Further research on institutionalized jazz education in Utah could examine teaching of jazz at major universities in the state and to what extent, if at all, it crosses the formal/informal boundary.
The effects of institutionalization on the art form of jazz have yet to be entirely documented. However, the dedication and craftsmanship of those musicians who love the music suggest that jazz will continue alive and well for years to come.
Bibliography


Yorgason, Laurence M. “All Too Rare: The Rise and Fall of Jazz DJs on Utah AM Radio, 1945-1965.” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 77, no. 4 (2009): 351–64.
Appendix: Persons Interviewed

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