

Jazz, Improvisation and Enchantment

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Abstract: This essay explores the experience of enchantment – essentially, sheer wonder – in and as jazz. It identifies melody and melodic lines as the key dynamic, following some of the chequered story of melody in jazz, including both its most noticeable practitioners and those who have been indifferent or hostile to it, here identified as modernists engaged in disenchantment. Particular attention is paid to chamber jazz as an art often consciously concerned with enchantment, and to improvisation as a hallmark of enchantment. A sharpish distinction is drawn between enchantment and two other modes in music and elsewhere which drive it out: the Dionysian (hot orgasmic unity) and Apollonian (cold hyper-separate control). Artists whose work is considered include Bill Evans, Thelonious Monk, Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, Miles Davis and Charlie Haden, as well as the traditional-music fiddlers Martin Hayes and Knut Hamre and, in a coda, Jerry Garcia.

Keywords: enchantment, disenchantment, wonder, jazz, chamber jazz, solo piano, trio piano, melody, improvisation, modernism, Bill Evans, Thelonious Monk, Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane



I am concerned here with the experience of enchantment in, and as, jazz.¹ I must therefore concentrate on that subject but it does not follow, and I do not hold, either that enchantment is the only or even necessarily the most important thing in jazz, nor that the merits of all jazz can be judged accordingly. It follows that there are other, perfectly good ways and reasons to enjoy jazz which have nothing to do with enchantment.

This essay can be read alone, but it also offers a supplement to *Art and Enchantment: How Wonder Works* (2023). I shall begin by giving a summary of enchantment as I define it which is necessarily extremely brief, upon pain of both repeating myself and leaving insufficient space to explore the particularities of enchanting jazz. Readers who wish to learn more about enchantment as such and in other domains should refer to the book just mentioned and the earlier *Enchantment: Wonder in the Modern World* (2019).

Enchantment

The heart of the experience of enchantment is sheer existential wonder. Such wonder is an instance of what Wittgenstein (2001: 72e) calls ‘bedrock’. As such it is a primitive concept which cannot be further analysed, only described and perhaps understood (as distinct from ‘explained’).

As so often, it is helpful to consider the sharpest contrast-class. In this case it is will, including, or especially, any kind of will-to-power and therefore system or programme. In this important respect, and characterising modernity by its overarching project – ‘the rational mastery of nature’, including human nature (Plumwood 1993) – enchantment is neither pre- nor post-modern but *non-modern*; it can neither accommodate nor be accommodated by that

project. This is not to say that it isn't often entangled with power-relations; only that even so, it remains distinct and other.

A vital characteristic of enchantment is that it is entirely relational: one is enchanted *by*, or in wonder *at*. And the more intense it is – from charm, through delight, to full-blown joy – the more relationality becomes reciprocal, with the perceiver also perceived. Thus we may also understand enchantment as an encounter in which there is a discovery of profound common ground across a gap of difference, sometimes extreme. In this process, differences are not extinguished; they remain, but cease to matter so much. Enchantment is thus neither Dionysian (where difference is obliterated in hot, formless orgasmic unity) nor Apollonian (where difference rules in an exercise of cold, one-way dominance and manipulation). In the former no one is left to be enchanted or enchant; in the latter no relationship at all, *stricto sensu*, is possible. Music, together with all other forms of enchantment, artistic or otherwise, resists or evades both modes, or else is locally extinguished thereby.

Another way to understand enchantment is how Weber (1991: 282) describes it, namely as 'concrete magic': that is, it is both concretely embodied, embedded and situated, in the most precise possible way, *and* deeply and ineffably mysterious. As such, it is equally material and spiritual, outer and inner, object(ive) and subject(ive); in Bortoft's (2012: 103) apt image, it is 'upstream' of these key modern distinctions, albeit with much older roots.

In this connection, Victor Zuckerkandl (1956: 145) writes percipiently that music

rejects the claim which either world makes [on] it, the physical world and the world of the psyche; thus it extends beyond both of them in the same fashion. Music makes us aware, unmistakably and inescapably, that 'beyond the world of things and places' is not, as common belief has it, identical with the world of the psyche; nor is 'beyond the world of the psyche' identical with the world of things and places. A third stage must exist which is neither...²

It follows, as he adds, that music involves 'an internal transcendence; it does not lead away from the phenomenon but into it, to its core' (Zuckerkandl 1956: 147).³

By the same token, the enchantment of music cannot be understood the two most common explanatory strategies, both reductive: 'down', to neurophysiology, and 'up', to God or His secular placeholder, psychology. As Wittgenstein (1979: 77e) observes, 'Physiological life is of course not "life". And neither is psychological life. Life is the world.' That is why I argue in my 2023 book, to which this paper is a companion-piece, that starting from epistemology is already hopeless. In the words of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2004: 484), 'The tug of war goes endlessly on: one side reduces reality to representation (culturalism, relativism, textualism), the other reduces representation to reality (cognitivism, socio-biology, evolutionary psychology)'. What we need instead, which enchantment flags up, is 'richer ontologies'.

Now because of its infeasible 'concrete' dimension, which is always changing, albeit at highly varying rates, enchantment cannot last forever or be complete. (This is a hard truth to learn in personal practice.) And because of its 'magic' dimension, it cannot be mastered, manipulated or created at will. (Another hard truth, especially for the idealistic and the ambitious.) The latter point could also be put thus: enchantment is wild, which finds an elective affinity with wild nature which has not yet been disenchanting, measured and commodified into 'resources'.

Enchantment can, however, be a central value in one's life, including shared lives. One can keep the door open to it, as a principle and a practice, and even resolve to work with it (cooperatively, as equals) and learn from it. And artists, in particular, can and, if they cherish it, must work hard – using all the will and skill at their disposal – to create the

conditions it favours. These notably include a delicate balance between mastery of the relevant tradition and its craft, on the one hand, and openness to change on the other. Hence another affinity, one between enchantment and improvisation.

Finally, in all these respects enchantment is ultimately an experience, and a heightened and deepened appreciation of, being alive. Since the source and sustainer of life is the Earth, enchantment is therefore also ecological, and all its various instances are finally kinds of natural enchantment.

Jazz

The origins of jazz include African drum rhythms, African-American blues, European classical music, European and North American folk songs, and hymnal harmonies, and such hybridity accounts for much of its vigour and adaptability. When Dino Saluzzi, an Argentinian bandoneón-player, and Anders Jormin, a Swedish bassist, play ‘My One and Only Love’, a classic American song, the result is completely organic.

Jazz has an anomalous cultural status, however. It is ‘popular’ because its status as an elite art-form is insecure, yet not that many people listen to it. At the same time, it is ‘elite’ because it is often musically complex and demanding, yet it stands outside the classical pantheon. In addition, jazz has had to contend with a sense of being overtaken by other art-forms and left with a shrinking audience.

Some jazz musicians have responded to this development by trying to move it from the clubs and traditional venues into music schools, universities and classical concert halls. Intellectualisation and institutionalisation may confer more respectability but it’s a mixed blessing, because it also tends to disenchant. I’m not talking about degrees of education but rather what the approach is. Does the music live and breathe and move? That is the question when enchantment is at stake.⁴

From this perspective, relative marginality (although not total obscurity) is not entirely a bad thing. Mainstream success attracts capital, and capital, on any significant scale, tends to corrupt. Yes, making a living becomes harder, but so does selling out. In any case, it is clear that enchantment remains quietly but powerfully present in jazz. That is not surprising, given that it uses mostly acoustic instruments, places great value on improvisation and usually honours its own rich tradition. We shall go on to consider one lineage of musical enchantment in particular centred on piano solo and trio jazz, or what I call ‘chamber jazz’.

At the same time, enchantment in jazz is also embattled. Much jazz sets out to demonstrate Apollonian technical mastery in aid of a Dionysian exaltation of fierce feeling, thus passing over the quiet fire of melody both ways. Sometimes the precision of form is sacrificed along the way, including any ‘magic’, for a spurious musical freedom. And commercial vulgarisation, ruthlessly will-driven, remains a permanent siren call (as jazz-funk, which even Miles Davis couldn’t render musical, should remind us).

Kind of Blue and Bop

One of the key events for enchantment in modern jazz took place over two days in the spring of 1959, in a church converted into a recording studio on East 30th Street in Manhattan, where Miles Davis had assembled a sextet, alongside himself on trumpet: Bill Evans on piano (except for one track where Wynton Kelly played), Cannonball Adderley on alto saxophone and John Coltrane on tenor, Paul Chambers on double-bass and Jimmy Cobb on drums.⁵ *Kind of Blue*, released later that year, became the best-selling jazz album ever and proved extremely influential among musicians, both in and outside the jazz fold. Tōru Takemitsu listened attentively to it. So did Terry Riley and Steve Reich, with deep consequences for their own music; and through them, the thread stretched to Brian Eno’s influential ambient

and generative music, ‘music as a place rather than an event’ (in Williams 2009: 252). But to understand why and how, we first need to know something about what preceded it, namely bop, or bebop.

The bop revolution of the early 1940s, led by Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, all but swept away the swing era, at least as far as jazz musicians themselves were concerned. Faster and denser than the swing it largely replaced, with more emphasis on complex harmonic changes rather than melody, it embraced elitism, ignoring or aggressively challenging audiences.

There were several strands to the development of bop. These include young men’s valorisation of power, speed and technique; a quest for status which meant keeping ‘lesser’ players off the stage; an iconoclasm born of contempt for the requirement for contemporary swing bands to please large paying audiences, most of whom were white; and a further dimension of racial politics, positioning this new music as uniquely black and sufficiently esoteric in that respect to leave white players as well as audiences behind. All these motivations are completely understandable, but that doesn’t alter the fact that their cumulative effect on jazz was disenchanting in a distinctly modernist way. Parker was indeed, to quote a recent piece (Penman 2014: 29), ‘a Picasso of syncopation: a beady-eyed Cubist playing four versions of a tune at once.’ That’s just the problem.

Jazz improvising had been based on the harmonic progressions (chord sequences) of the great but relatively simple popular songs of the day. For example, there are hundreds of tunes, both swing and bop, based on the chords of ‘I Got Rhythm’. The harmony stays the same, a different ‘tune’ is written to fit it, and every time you have a solo you can simply use the patterns or ‘licks’ you’ve learned that go with those chords.

Parker introduced more notes for each chord, drawn from the scale or key that those chords come from, and sophisticated chord substitutions, slight alterations to the chords that provided the opportunity to use more chromatic notes, giving bop a certain unresolved dissonance. Now the speed of bop meant that the chords were passing so fast that there was no time to construct anything particularly meaningful from the vast array of rapidly moving sequences of possibilities. Consequently, players started to rely more on already-set patterns, culminating in a more-or-less complete system which discouraged individuality, leaving only competitions as to which player’s mastery of the system was most complete. In the process, bop increasingly showcased virtuoso mastery for its own sake. The resulting egotism and intellectualisation, with a distinctly male inflection, along with the lack of space resulting from so many notes played so fast, actively discouraged enchantment.

After Parker, this way of playing became the main focus of jazz improvisation. Acquiring chops is necessary but players began practising patterns first and tunes later, and this is still part of how jazz is usually taught at major music colleges like Berklee and Juilliard. Parker used a lot of patterns that crop up over and over, but this was through necessity rather than musical choice; if you are playing that fast, you have no choice but to play by numbers. With later players, however, it was no longer a necessary evil but deliberate.

Running rapid and complex patterns over a multitude of chord changes reached an extreme with John Coltrane, epitomised in his *Giant Steps* of 1960. Also played extremely fast, the odd way the tune changes key makes it even more difficult to handle. *Giant Steps* is practically a necessary conclusion to a certain way of improvising that concentrates on functional harmonic change.

The tunes on *Kind of Blue*, in sharp contrast, are almost all what is called modal. Loosely speaking, modal harmony means fewer chord changes, so fewer chords per bar; one can therefore play in just one ‘mode’ (in jazz, really just another name for a key with its appropriate scale) for four or even eight or more bars at a time. As a result, you can stretch

out and allow melodic ideas to develop, rather than simply stick to patterns of notes in order to get through the piece. Compared to bop and other non-modal jazz, there are fewer changes from one key to another, giving the player more opportunity to develop a coherent theme with variations. As Davis (in Kahn 2000: 67) says, ‘You don’t have to worry about [chord] changes and you can do more with the [melody] line. It becomes a challenge to see how melodically inventive you can be’. In short, it’s easier to be musical rather than just athletically technical. (I realize that many, it seems, especially men, it seems, actively prefer the latter, and there is a cult of the virtuoso. But enchantment is our focus here.)

The same approach also brought tempos down, while a less frenetic pace allows the music to breathe and, crucially, leaves gaps for improvisation to cross and interweave. Modal music is more open and open-ended; since every possible note isn’t already supplied, there is still room for the imagination of the listener. All in all, then, compared with the breathless rush of bop, with its imperious atmosphere and harmonic lockstep, it’s not surprising that so many people have found *Kind of Blue* enchanting. But I’m not saying that modality is a precondition for musical enchantment; rather that it liberates possibilities for melody, which I believe is.

The modal idea in jazz, and the musical values it carries, didn’t come from nowhere. Davis and Bill Evans took it from the French ‘Impressionists’, whose music they had carefully studied. Evans (in Kahn 2000: 187) even compared Davis’s effect on jazz, introducing modality as the basis of compositions, to that of ‘Debussy and Ravel, who crystallised and brought to real refinement the raw conception that Satie had.’ The musical relationship between Davis and Evans is at the heart of *Kind of Blue*. Davis (in Pettinger 2002: 61) later recalled that ‘Bill had this quiet fire that I loved on piano. The way he approached it, the sound he got was like crystal notes or sparkling water cascading down from some clear waterfall.’ Anyone who has heard the album will recognize the truth of this description. (Davis wasn’t always so generous, claiming sole composing credit for one of the best tracks, ‘Blue in Green’, when in fact – as he admitted, on occasion – he and Evans had composed it together.)⁶

Takemitsu’s appreciation of *Kind of Blue* nicely complements Evans’s own liner notes, entitled ‘Improvisation in Jazz’, in which he compared it with the rigorous spontaneity of *Suiboku-ga* or *sumi-e*, Japanese ink painting, in which erasures and corrections are impossible:

There is a Japanese visual art in which the artist is forced to be spontaneous. He must paint...in such a way that an unnatural or interrupted stroke will destroy the line or break through the parchment. Erasures or changes are impossible. These artists must practise a particular discipline, that of allowing the idea to express itself in communication with their hands in such a direct way that deliberation cannot interfere...This conviction that direct deed is the most meaningful reflection, I believe, has prompted the evolution of the extremely severe and unique disciplines of the jazz or improvising musician.

Bill Evans and the Village Vanguard Moment

Another seminal moment took place two years later, on 25 June 1961 at the Village Vanguard in New York City, when Evans played five sets with Scott LaFaro on bass and Paul Motian on drums. The material came largely from what has come to be called the Great American Songbook, alongside original compositions affined with both ballads and the compositions of Ravel and Debussy. (One of the best recorded interpretations of Evans’s music, *Conversations with Bill Evans*, is by the French classical pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet.)

Thankfully for the subsequent development of jazz, it was recorded. But tragically, ten days after the final set at the Village Vanguard, that trio, Evans's first and perhaps finest, died with bassist Scott LaFaro when his car ran off the road in upstate New York.

Evans (in Williams 2009: 159) commented later, 'What gave that trio its character was a common aim... The music developed as we performed, and what you heard came through actual performance'. Not, that is, through trying to reproduce an already composed idea, no matter how faithfully or even originally. This is surely what makes jazz special in contemporary Western music, and potentially so enchanting.

Another time, Evans (*ibid.*) explained that 'I believe that all music is romantic, but if it gets schmaltzy, romanticism is disturbing. On the other hand, romanticism handled with discipline is the most beautiful kind of beauty. And I think that kind of combination was beginning to happen with this particular trio.' Romanticism handled with discipline, or what Cyril Connolly (1981: 3) calls 'the maximum of emotion compatible with a classical sense of form', encapsulates a great deal about enchantment in all the arts.

Essential to such discipline are limits. Just as you don't get the mystery or 'magic' without the 'concrete' precision, without limitation that is recognized, respected and worked with, you don't get freedom, or freedom becomes meaningless. Evans (in Shadwick 2002: 117) observes that 'The only way I can work is to have some kind of restraint involved – the challenge of a certain craft or form – and then find the freedom in that... I think a lot of guys either want to circumvent that kind of labour, or else they don't realize the rewards that exist in one single area if you use enough restraint and do enough searching.'⁷

As a result, Evans played fewer notes, but what he did play resonates with meaning, given life by the silence between and behind them – the gaps where spirits or gods (*kami*, in Japanese culture) live. Then there is the intense relationality of the trio. The music emerges not as something imposed by a star on a supporting band but as a complete confluence of the pianist, bassist and percussionist playing as equals. Fred Hersch (1997), whose quietly brilliant playing makes him one of Evans's leading successors, explains:

Evans's trio, simply put, was about dialogue. In order to create a context for their musical discussions he, LaFaro and Motian stood their instruments' conventional roles on their heads. In most classic rhythm sections, the bass has much of the responsibility for the actual keeping of time while the drums add color and rhythmic energy to complement what the bass is playing... Evans created the musical space that allowed LaFaro to act as a second, contrapuntal soloist... Motian really became the trio's timekeeper, though not in any normal way... So each player made an equal contribution to the whole musical fabric. This is jazz as chamber music – yet it never loses sight of swing in its quest for lyricism.

Paul Motian, Evans's longest-serving drummer, was a vital participant in this process. The saxophonist Joe Lovano (2011), talking about how a piece with even a minimal structure can come together with the right players, said: 'playing with Paul Motian taught me about that. Feed in the melody, then let it happen, and how it flows from that moment on comes completely from your imagination and everybody's collective imagination.'

I would only add that the collaborative improvisation of the musicians includes, crucially, the musical idea itself – the hidden lining and meaning of the tune. As Merleau-Ponty (1968: 151) puts it, the tune 'sings through [the performer] or cries out so suddenly that he must "dash on his bow" to follow it'. Isn't that what connects each musician in a band as they play together? You can't see the tune or touch it; in a sense, you can't even hear it, because by the time you do, it has already changed! Musicians and audience alike can feel it, however.

Another jazz musician whose work is consistently attended by enchantment is the guitarist John Abercrombie and his trios and quartets. In the documentary 'Open Land', he both describes his style as, and attributes it to, 'a looseness' – that is, a relaxed, flexible and fluid approach to rhythm, melody and harmony which isn't afraid of open spaces unfilled by notes, or gaps between them, or unpredictable changes. This attitude – indeed, this discipline – honours some key requirements for enchantment and its dynamics. They also describe well the work of the pianist Bobo Stenson and his quartets, to the same enchanting end. (Not coincidentally, Stenson and Abercrombie both record mainly for ECM, a notably enchantment-friendly label.)

A Lineage of Enchanting Jazz

I believe there is a certain lineage of musical enchantment. What is a lineage? In this context, it is a line of descent, or more precisely of transmission, in which some quality, and an ability or affinity respecting that quality, is communicated through one person to another. (*Not*, note, a method.) The quality in this case is enchantment, the progression from wonder through delight to joy, in one or two tributaries of the great river of music.

The East Clare fiddler Martin Hayes (2000), for example, speaks of a musical community extending from his family and neighbours back into a past where the imagination can roam freely. And 'apart from the tunes, technique and style I learned, the most important insight I had access to from the old musicians was knowledge and experience of an intangible yearning in their souls, a yearning which they sought to satisfy in music....they are the carriers of soul, they open a window to that mythological past.' (Yearning is an emotion that also comes up strongly in enchanted love. In both contexts, it stands at a certain distance from desire.) As important as his skill, it is Hayes's rootedness in the concreteness of his native musical traditions that enables his music to transcend locality and enchant people from the other side of the world.

These particular lines of transmission – and it's interesting that the concept of line, so important to enchantment in visual art, also shows up here – run between the following musical communities. First, French chamber music of the late-nineteenth/ early-twentieth century, which we have already discussed. This was one influence on the gift to world culture, sparkling with enchantment: the Great American Songbook.

The two together, French chamber music and the Songbook, fed back into the jazz originating in black American blues, especially what I am calling chamber jazz: solo and trio piano jazz. But the Songbook also directly influenced bossa nova, as it developed from samba and choro in Brazil in the late 1950s and early 60s, led by João Gilberto and Antonio Carlos Jobim, and interpreted and extended by them together with Caetano Veloso, Elis Regina, Rosa Passos and others. And there have been many fruitful exchanges between jazz and bossa nova, most famously in the persons of Stan Getz and Jobim.

The principal early conduit for these streams into chamber jazz, albeit not the only one, was Bill Evans. Whether or not his influence on any subsequent artist was direct or mediated, the approach of his trios, in their original and later incarnations, provided the template for virtually all subsequent piano jazz graced by enchantment: grace, lyricism and a *wabi*-like economy, growing spontaneously from the interplay of each member. Indeed, it could be argued that as a result, the piano trio became a principal locus of melodic enchantment in jazz.

Other sterling exemplars of melody include the elegant creativity of Duke Ellington, the genius of Thelonious Monk, as well as Sonny Rollins's glorious celebration of life, immediately come to mind. As for contemporary artists who figure in this musical world, even in this distinguished company a few stand out for the Elvish beauty of their playing:

Geri Allen, Bobo Stenson, Marilyn Crispell, Marc Copland and Elan Mehler, for example, in addition to Hersch, in whose work something steely is also at work. Maybe the otherwise unclassifiable Masabumi Kikuchi belongs here, too. I would also include Frank Kimbrough, whose compositional genius is on display in the 61-track collection *Kimbrough* (2021) put out by Newvelle Records. (Incidentally, Newvelle is heartening evidence of the continuing tenacity of good jazz – on the margins, maybe, but thriving.)

Some artists act as a nexus of enchantment. I don't believe that is accidental; having made enchantment, in this case musical, central to their professional and personal lives, they attract it as well as others who share that elective affinity. There are parallel figures within other traditions who act as centres of musical networks, attracting or generating enchantment. (In Irish traditional music, for example, Donal Lunny and Philip King.)

In jazz, an instance is Paul Motian, as band leader and composer as well as drummer. More jazz musicians constellated around him than I can possibly name, among whom those working with enchantment made up a large proportion. Another obvious example is the bassist, composer and band leader Charlie Haden, who incorporated the best jazz standards – tunes with an undisputed place of honour in the repertoire – in his very being and, with apologies to the exceptions, seems to have played with almost every contemporary worth listening to. That includes albums with two pianists emanating the kind of dignified, graceful enchantment that only comes when the music is put first (in which cause, overt technical virtuosity only creates problems): Hank Jones and Chris Anderson.⁸

Another example is another fine bassist, Marc Johnson, who held that position in Evans's final trio, and who often plays together with the equally exceptional percussionist Joey Baron. Still another is the Brazilian pianist Eliane Elias, for whom Evans was an early inspiration, who often plays alongside Johnson, and whose music spans both jazz piano and bossa nova. (It also includes a touch of Aphrodite, inviting enchantment from another source.) There are also the veteran bassist Ron Carter, the guitarist John Abercrombie and the drummer Peter Erskine. Simply put, if a concert or recording includes any of these artists, there is a very good chance enchantment is also in attendance.

Remarkably, Manfred Eicher, later the founder of ECM, the label which has probably made enchantment more welcome in its recordings than any other, was present and impressed as an eighteen-year-old at the Village Vanguard sessions on that summer day in 1961. Many years later, when asked if he had had any exemplars in mind for ECM's sound, he replied, 'A very good model, all the time, was for me the sound of Miles's *Kind of Blue* and Bill Evans, how he sounded there' (in Williams 2009: 258). A chance meeting, as we say in Middle-earth.

Jazz and Modernism

In both visual art and music, similar cultural dynamics often respecting enchantment play out. For example, a strong parallel could be made between Monk and Matisse, allowing for obvious differences of context. Both artists were markedly modern, not simply in the technical sense of when they lived but in their restlessly innovative spirit; yet neither were modernist in our sense here, brashly iconoclastic. Both succeeded in remaining true to the best of the traditions they inherited while extending them, each in their own unique way.

Like a painting by Matisse, a tune by Monk is immediately distinctive. Drawing upon classical music, hymns and gospel music, and popular songs, both Monk's playing and his own compositions charm and delight. His 'voice' is unique and unmistakable, idiosyncratic but unerring as it releases the enchantment of standards from the Songbook, to which he added some of his own. Monk's solo piano ballads and standards in particular are some of the

most tender, humane and heartfelt music ever made – civilised, in the true sense. And he succeeds without any blinding technical displays, blistering speed, or aggressive attacks.

Russell Hoban (1992: 207), having heard Monk play live, recorded this affectionate tribute:

Always the slant rhyme with Thelonious, that was his Thelonious assault on the grey and civil devils of the ordinary....Under your magical hat at the helm, your keyboard was the wheel by which you steered precariously our frail vessel on the edgelines of the actual. Peerless navigator, ardent darer that you were, dark albatross of the farther frequencies.

(‘Say it slant’ was Emily Dickinson’s advice to poets, of course.)

Ira Gitler describes Monk’s ‘Ruby My Dear’ as ‘sentiment without sentimentality’, something that applies equally to Matisse.⁹ That parallel suggests another, this time between Bill Evans and Bonnard. Both could be identified as Romantic, both worked all their lives within the narrow but deep confines of chamber jazz and figurative painting respectively, and both were consciously concerned with enchantment, producing warm and bright compositions in which the sadness of loss is never far away. Equally, both men persisted in doing so in a cultural climate of avant-garde hostility, both artistic and critical, which regularly condemned them as irrelevant or even reactionary.

The pianist Cecil Taylor, for example, is the acme of a modernist musician. Here is critic Simon Adams (1999: 94-95) describing Taylor’s ‘totally abstract and non-tonal’ style:

What harmonic signposts he stabbed out with his insistent left hand were soon swamped by a swirl of atonal, chromatic clusters of notes produced with open palms, fists and elbows as well as the traditional ten fingers in order to overcome the limitations of piano’s fixed pitch. There is no thematic development, rather a series of statements... Often played at high volume and ferocious speeds, his music was and remains tumultuous, orgasmic even.

In jazz, unlike the cold Apollonian spirit of modernist classical music, modernism tends to the Dionysian (‘tumultuous, orgasmic’). Taylor’s attack, volume, speed and atonality were identified as modernist virtue, and not only by him. Unsurprisingly, Taylor (in Shadwick 2002: 118) criticized Bill Evans in 1965 – ‘uninteresting’, ‘lacking in vitality’, ‘Competent... that’s all’ – in a way almost indistinguishable from Picasso’s invective about Bonnard.¹⁰

The modernist attitude, as exemplified by Taylor and others, is curious, and the more one thinks about it the curiuser it gets. As we saw with visual art, to judge a work of art by whether it is modern, contemporary and the latest thing or not is to hold that its value can be calculated as a function of its supposed location and velocity in relation to an overall direction of art as a whole. Every actual artwork in this disenchanting calculus of progress and regress becomes a cipher, a mere instance of this or that ‘position’ – as if art were science, where new knowledge can and should replace what was known before.

Evans was well aware of the modernist trap. In the mid-70s, he was increasingly attacked as someone whose music had been ‘left behind’. Evans (in Kahn 2000: 186) pushed back, criticising ‘this preoccupation with “who’s the most modern” instead of “who’s making the most beautiful, human music”’. ‘It may very well be the most modern thing as well,’ he added, ‘but to make just avant-garde the criterion has gotten to be almost a sickness, especially in jazz.’

Perhaps modernists are simply enchanted by modernist art? I don’t think so. Such art may be many things: thrilling, all-consuming, upsetting and so on, but it does not entail

delight and joy. Nor do those who produce it intend it to. So in that sense, there's no problem; everyone is making or getting what they want. But I would add, in case anyone is still tempted to stretch enchantment to cover it all, the attacks by modernists, both in their constancy and their bitterness, are a giveaway. Something else is going on, something more like a programme, or even (god help us) a Truth.

John Coltrane and Free Jazz

The leading modernists in jazz were probably Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane. I am going to concentrate on the most famous and influential of the three, Coltrane and his quartet (McCoy Tyner on piano, Jimmy Garrison on bass and Elvin Jones on drums). Tyner (in Adams 1999: 199) once remarked that they worked together 'like four pistons in an engine'.¹¹ It is a metaphor that is both apt and significant – not an organism, say, or a conversation. Nonetheless, in *A Love Supreme* (1965) and *Ascension* (1966), Coltrane's influence on contemporary and subsequent musicians was far-reaching, and so were the consequences for enchantment.

Ironically, these albums were modal, like *Kind of Blue*. Instead of taking the opportunity to linger, reflect and follow a melodic path, however, Coltrane plays, rapidly and increasingly loudly, as many as possible of a tune's chord- and scale-pitched notes, with various substitutions; it was, we might say, harmonically exhaustive. Coltrane's approach combined undoubted technical prowess in this respect with an ascetic temperament and sound – sourly, but not completely unfairly, described by Philip Larkin (1970: 187) as 'that reedy, catarrhal tone' – and a desire for a religiously universal music.

The result was what Ira Gitler (in Kahn 2000: 66) earlier called 'sheets of sound'. As another music critic, Richard Williams (2009: 132), puts it, each set of harmonies 'represented a conundrum to be overpowered rather than resolved: his solution was to try to play every possible extension of, and substitution for, every chord in the form of a flood of arpeggio-based runs, usually executed at maximum velocity'. Coltrane himself (in Kahn 2000: 169), questioned in 1960 about his 'angry tone', put it this way:

The reason I play so many sounds – maybe it sounds angry – is because I'm trying so many things at one time, you see. I haven't sorted them out...there are some that I know, some harmonic devices...but I haven't played them enough, and I'm not familiar with them enough yet to take the one single line through them, so I play all of them...¹²

This is the problem, because sounds can only be meaningful precisely as *particular* ones – 'one single line' – and therefore *not* others. Miles Davis (in Williams 2009: 82) once suggested a practical solution. When as bandleader he complained to Coltrane about his interminable solos and the latter responded that he just didn't know how to stop, the ascerbic Davis replied, 'Try taking the fucking horn out of your mouth.'¹³

Now this music may be many things but enchanting is not one of them. Rather it is an instance of tendentially complete Apollonian control, ideally total mastery, in the service of a Dionysian experience of overwhelming emotion with a strongly religious inflection. (Mythically, Apollo and Dionysus, so apparently opposite, were brothers under the skin, and were originally sometimes worshipped together.) Enchantment is thus doubly missed.

Coltrane's music was increasingly dominated and driven by spiritual striving. As Williams (2009: 143) puts it, Coltrane started 'using his music as a vehicle for religious expression.' His religion was syncretic, taking in everything from Islam, Christianity and Vedanta to the Kabbalah, and he wanted to turn music into an ecstatic and cathartic

expression of universal spiritual truth. That drive combined with a modernist willingness to jettison the mother-tradition in an all-embracing search for purity that closely parallels both Mondrian's and Kandinsky's Theosophical modernism, which helped impel them into visual abstraction.

The consequences were severe. Treated as part of an agenda, a *vehicle* for something else ultimately more important and valuable, music unavoidably becomes instrumentalised. Enchantment cannot long survive being treated as a means to an end, no matter how noble or 'spiritual'. And music is its own magic. Monk described Coltrane as 'a perfect musician, who can give expression to all the possibilities of his instrument. But he seems to have difficulty expressing original ideas on it. That is why he keeps looking for ideas in exotic places'.¹⁴

By 1965, Coltrane has started to move further away from the conventional harmonic system into more atonal playing (which resonates with that Schoenberg and other modernist classical composers, albeit not applied serially). He had been listening to Ornette Coleman, whose album *Free Jazz* (1961) was largely responsible for the term and much of the movement. Coleman still played tonally but only very loosely, and in the context of a raucous and relentless collective improvisation that was largely form- and structure-free.

Another musician closely associated with free jazz, the saxophonist Albert Ayler (in Adams 1999: 100), stated that 'It's not about notes any more, it's about feelings.' Notice the attempt go straight to artistic mystery, bypassing the craft that enables precision. What better way to lose the 'magic' of the concrete? In this respect, at least, a work of art is either a success in particular, which entails judicious if not inspired choices, or not at all.

But free jazz fills up every possible gap in which a god could live, and eliminates every silence that could sustain and give meaning to tones. Indeed, ironically, the lack of structures leave nothing to transcend; if the whole thing is 'transcendent', then transcendence cannot take place. By the same token, if there are no wrong notes – if it's impossible to make any mistakes – then there are no right notes either. So without any parameters resulting from the constraints of structure, improvisation itself, the crowning claim of free jazz, becomes impossible.

Hence the criticisms made by Miles Davis (in Kahn 2000: 185) – 'You have some kind of form. You have to start somewhere...' – and Monk: 'There's a new idea that consists in destroying everything and finding what's shocking and unexpected, whereas jazz must first of all tell a story that anyone can understand.'¹⁵ And that points to another problem, one we already found with the harmonic changes of bop: they can't take you anywhere because they don't go anywhere. Only a melodic line can do that, and since free jazz tries to go everywhere at once, it goes nowhere. There is no narrative arc in which to find yourself, or by which to be moved. So ultimately, although they didn't start from the same musical place as free jazz, the effect of Coltrane's indiscriminate 'sheets of sound' was equally disenchanting. (Interestingly, Ayler also shared Coltrane's aspiration to use music as a vehicle, as per his album *Spiritual Unity*.)

In 1966 Elvin Jones left Coltrane's quartet, three months after McCoy Tyner. Jones (in Dyer 1998: 206) said, 'At times I couldn't hear what I was doing – matter of fact I couldn't hear what anybody was doing! All I could hear was a lot of noise. I didn't have any feeling for the music, and when I don't have any feelings, I don't like to play.' A year later, Coltrane was dead.

The posthumous assessment of Coltrane's music by critics is summed up by Ben Ratcliff: his influential *Ascension* 'is not a success in particular... Instead, it was a success in general, a paradigm.'¹⁶ In other words, as the music you actually hear it was frankly a failure, but it was a success anyway because it was 'culture-changing'. What clearer example could there be of the triumph of a modernist theory of art over the art itself? Art's success is now to

be judged on political, social or cultural grounds. Precisely the same thing was taking place at about the same time in visual art, especially as conceptual art.

Williams (2009: 81) draws an interesting contrast between Coltrane and his contemporary Sonny Rollins, asserting that although Rollins ‘was a wonderfully sophisticated improviser, with a much admired gift for thematic improvisation...Coltrane represented the future.’ Simon Adams (1999), too, criticizes Rollins for merely playing and improvising brilliantly while failing to ‘revolutionize’ jazz like Parker or Coltrane. Monk’s comment on this sort of nonsense, both critical and musical, is apt: ‘Where’s jazz going? I don’t know. Maybe it’s going to hell. You can’t make anything go anywhere. It just happens’.¹⁷

Sonny Rollins

In *Sonny Meets Hawk*, an album released in 1963, Rollins (aged 32) duets on tenor saxophone with the doyen of his generation, Coleman Hawkins (aged 59). It’s a moving dialogue between the two artists, a generation or two apart, with Rollins challenging the older man, one of his own exemplars, with obvious delight, and impelling Hawkins in turn to new creative heights. In respecting him Rollins honours the tradition itself, and the result was great music.

It’s instructive to compare the filmed session from 1950 featuring the bop giant Charlie Parker (aged 30) and Hawkins again (then 46). There’s no dialogue at all; Parker doesn’t respond or even seem to listen to Hawkins, he just waits for his chance to brush him aside with speed and chops. Now Parker’s virtuosity cannot be denied, but that’s just the problem, especially when allied to a sense of owning the future. This is the very spirit of modernism. But ego plus entitlement do not enchantment make. What can is will and skill in the service rather of the music: the tune, the tradition, and its sources and exemplars.

But the background of Parker’s bop is also helpful in grasping what is special about Rollins. As we have seen, bop became a system, based on harmonic scales and patterns and playing fast changes with as few and small spaces as possible. In music as elsewhere, method, when it is elevated from servant to master, becomes enchantment’s enemy, and the more so the more ‘complete’ it is. But a theoretical and systematic attempt to avoid method – in this case, that of conventional functional harmony – is no better, as the fate of free jazz, as well as twelve-tone serialism, shows. The underlying programmatic mode remains unchanged, and the negative obsession with system simply confirms its centrality. Enchantment, in contrast, isn’t ‘about’ anything.

Predictably, there were many imitators of Parker, almost as many as there were and still are of Coltrane, who joined him in attempting to wring every possible note and combination of notes out of every tune. You can follow a method or system, and you can copy someone performing it. All you can do with someone who is unique, however, is be inspired to develop your *own* style. That’s not so easy, and it’s why virtually no one sounds like Monk or Rollins except themselves. As the composer and bassist Esperanza Spalding says:

[The] element of musicianship is like the ghost in the machine of all the specific skills that a musician can cultivate. There are a lot of physical skills in terms of intention and intensity, and then somehow in the midst of all that, there’s a voice, an individual way of interpreting melody...and I don’t know where it comes from anything that [artists] practise.¹⁸

What is particularly distinctive about Rollins’s playing, and his improvisation in particular? It was initially (in the 1950s) influenced by Parker, and later, to some extent, even by Coleman

and Don Cherry, but what concerns us here was identified by the critic Gunther Schuller (1958: 6): against the dominance of solos lacking melodic cohesiveness and direction, ‘what Sonny Rollins has added conclusively to the scope of jazz improvisation is the idea of developing and varying a main theme, and not just a secondary motive or phrase which the player happens to hit upon in the course of his improvisation and which in itself is unrelated to the ‘head’ of the composition.’ And Schuller notes the tradition at work in the encouragement that Rollins received, and has always acknowledged, from Monk in the late 1940s.

Of course, Rollins’s solos are full to overflowing with motifs that he has ‘happened to hit upon’, but the point, and his genius, is that they are all related, in one way or another or more than one, to the ‘main theme’ (Schuller 1958: 9). (It helps that the themes themselves – often standards from the Songbook – are so strong.) The effect, then, is that of musical narrative, with all its enchanting potential. It is very much to the point here that the etymology of enchantment is *en chantment*, in Old French, from the Latin *cantare*: to be, to find oneself, in a song – or, by extension, any narrative.

So as Pierre Schaeffer (2001: 41) succinctly puts it, ‘The moment at which music reveals its true nature’ (wherein lies its enchantment) ‘is contained in the ancient exercise of the theme with variations.’ And because Rollins is so good at doing so, in a voice that is instantly recognisable but inimitable, presence kicks in.

In 2018, in the course of an interview,¹⁹ Rollins speculated poignantly that although he loved melody, and loved the Songbook for its glorious melodies, we – ‘the collective we’ – are ‘going away from melodies’. He discerned ‘a paradigm shift toward something else’, which he couldn’t identify. The subject of loss (hence elegy), and perhaps renewal (hence hope), is too much for me to address here. I will only say that if he was right, which seems likely, then how very sad. Yet I don’t believe that melody, rooted as it is in the soul of the human animal, can ever die altogether. So it might well continue to blossom anew, in new circumstances.

Improvisation: the Freedom of Limits and the Limits of Freedom

The double meaning of ‘playing’ in music, of which improvising is the supreme example, is no coincidence. To play music is to create with absorption in the activity for its own sake, not as a means towards some other goal. Nor is there anything ironic in it, keeping an eye on one’s status as the Adult in the Room.

I have elsewhere (2023) argued that improvisation is at the heart of musical enchantment, including a near-equivalent in notated classical music when it is played in the spirit, so to speak, in which it was composed. Similarly, in traditional music there is apparently considerable repetition, but that need be no bar to enchantment. There is a world of difference between mechanical repetition, which deadens, and organic repetition – the kind you find in growing food, cooking, raising children, love-making and so much else – which strengthens and deepens life. The repetition in traditional music is of the second kind.

As Martin Hayes puts it, speaking for many musicians, ‘When the music is really going well you feel like you’re just participating in it. You feel like it’s just happening to you, with you and out of you.’ He adds,

I think audiences crave reality in music. They crave the feeling that the experience is genuine, that it’s happening in this instant, in front of them. That there’s an aliveness and some element of risk being taken. That there’s some emotional vulnerability in it. All of these things need to be happening for anybody to feel anything.²⁰

Still, jazz is probably unique in the honour it accords to complex and sustained improvisation, with the possible exception of North Indian classical music. In the latter there is explicit recognition of the imperative importance of structure – specifically the progression of notes in the specific raga, and *tala*, the piece’s time-signature – in enabling inspired improvisation. But both art-forms also share the pentatonic scale (more rigorously in the Indian tradition) as well as microtones and ambiguous tones through ‘bending’ notes, and open-ended notation.

Furthermore, just as in the best jazz, Indian classical music is predicated on respect for the music and the tradition, which is gently but rigorously applied not only to the musicians but audiences as well. As Jameela Siddiqi (2018: 104, 103) says, ‘the entire Indian classical music system is based on restraint’, and rather than drawing attention to themselves or their virtuosity, performers ‘should act only as a medium through whom a raga unfolds...’ And in that unfolding, there are two kinds of sound: heard and unheard, of which the latter, living in the gaps between audible notes, is held to be more important.

It’s important here to notice the necessity of *form*. In precise parallel to what D.W. Winnicott (2005: 134) observed – ‘in any cultural field it is not possible to be original except on the basis of a tradition’ – it is not possible to play anything new or original except on the basis of the limits and boundaries that form entails. As Ron Carter put it recently, describing improvisation, ‘I’m playing freely within the form.’²¹ To destroy the form is therefore also to destroy the meaning of what is played, along with its freedom. This is the Dionysian mistake.

By the same token, the potential for enchantment is thrown away by overkill, filling in every gap of silence between and behind the notes. But it is also diminished by the Apollonian security of always sticking to the exact score, always knowing exactly what the next note to be played is. Carolyn Abbate (1983: xix) contrasts someone acting ‘like a mechanism, playing strictly according to graphic prescriptions, against the improvisational being, who goes to places the notes might lead without (at the time) knowing where’, and she calls improvisation ‘an alliance between courage and humility’. That seems exactly right, and the opposite in music, combining a method or system with ego, is an alliance between cowardice and arrogance.

Knut Hamre (in Maurseth 2019: 143), the Hardinger fiddle master, has provocatively described himself as ‘a nothing’ while playing. He explains that ‘it isn’t me playing, even though I’m the one physically making the music. Something else is playing through me. The actual individual, in this case the person Knut Hamre, is unimportant. It is never about me, but an art that is much greater than myself. That is why I am a nothing.’²² Yet it takes a very special person to be able to become nothing. I am reminded of something another musician, the pianist Elan Mehler, told me: ‘A “voice” is something you can’t consciously develop. It’s what’s left when you take out everything else that’s getting in the way.’

Of course, a musician, like any artist, must learn the craft, ‘all the specific skills’ to which Spalding refers. Nonetheless there is, by its very definition, no method for improvising (any more than there is for creative writing, properly so-called). When it comes to what an artist does with her or his skills, the only ‘method’, as T.S. Eliot famously said of poetry, is to be very intelligent. In this vital sense, although art can be learned it cannot be taught.

Hamre (in Maurseth 2019: 161) identifies craft – the hard-won knowledge of technique – as an indispensable prerequisite of art, and praises it fulsomely. Yet it is insufficient for what he distinguishes as art. Indeed, ‘The person with better craftsmanship might be far more capable than the artist. Yet they will never produce art... After all, you can never force out that special something from hard work.’ Thus at some point ‘you need to forget about being good at playing... That’s just dreadfully boring.’ (Pause for applause!) He concludes that ‘when all is said and done, the main difference between an artist and a craftsman is that the artist has the gifts required to make his art soar.’

A musician working with the enchantment of a tune is not afraid to play it slowly, quietly, and simply, nor to leave gaps between the tones, or at times to simply play the melody. Then speed, attack, and variations, when they do occur, stand out and mean something. One unmissable practitioner is the alto saxophonist Lee Konitz, whose style begs to be described as ‘bland’ in the deeply appreciative sense applied by Chinese literati to the severe and subtle ink Chinese landscape paintings of which François Jullien (2004: 37) remarks that ‘Nothing here strives to incite or seduce; nothing aims to fix the gaze or compel the attention.’ I’m also reminded of his teacher Lennie Tristano’s definition of the musical ego trip, so much in evidence in the formulaic popular music of the contemporary culture industry, of ‘emotion without feeling’.²³

Any bass solo by Charlie Haden will also serve as an example of enchantment-led music. To quote Joachim-Ernst Berendt, Haden ‘was the first [modern] bassist who consistently avoided playing changes or following pre-established harmonic schemes, but instead created a solid harmonic foundation out of the passage of independent melodies.’ As he adds, ‘In technical terms, Haden was not a virtuoso. His virtuosity lies on a higher level... He is a master of simplicity, which is among the most difficult things to achieve.’²⁴ And as Frédéric Chopin (in Jullien 2004: 177) said, ‘Simplicity is the final achievement.’²⁵

One instance of pure jazz enchantment along the same lines is Cannonball Adderley’s alto sax work on ‘Know What I Mean?’ (1961) He brings an exuberant, slightly anarchic spontaneity to Bill Evan’s elegant swing, perhaps especially so on ‘Elsa’. You can’t find a movement or a school or a sect on the result; it’s just great agenda-free playing, which renders any demand for more churlish and inflated.

I also want to mention another saxophone solo, one of the most beautiful, I think, ever recorded: Paul Desmond’s, on alto sax, on ‘Concierto de Aranjuez’ (1975). Desmond is well-known among horn players for saying he had had to give up practising because ‘I ended up playing too fast’. He could play fast when he wanted to, of course, but the quip has a deeper truth to it, because if you have the nerve as well as skill to play slowly – as we noted of Charlie Haden – then there is space and time to do runs, including fast ones, in a creative way. Indeed, Desmond’s solo is so assured, and it develops so organically, it almost sounds scored, but there is no reason to think it was. Desmond simply had a great sense of structure and development in his solos, a good ear and a solid knowledge of the piece, so he improvises on the melody, playing different motifs in different registers to create a dialogue with himself within a musical narrative that takes you into the heart of the piece, and of you.

All the pianists, solo and trio, in the ‘lineage of enchantment’ know this. To pick some examples almost at random, Enrico Pieranunzi calls improvising ‘composing in real time’.²⁶ Fred Hersch, after recovering from a prolonged coma and loss of motor function in both hands, said: ‘I had to learn to work with a more limited palette, technically, as a pianist. At the same time, I felt stronger than ever, creatively. I found that I had more interesting things to say musically. I had more to express, and what I had to say didn’t require pyrotechnics.’²⁷ And in the liner notes to a recent live solo album, he comments, ‘There was no agenda to the evening other than playing songs I love in a wonderful acoustic space on a fine instrument.’²⁸

Marc Copland harmonizes: ‘At the beginning of a musician’s journey, one tends to believe that playing fast is difficult; as that journey progresses, one realizes that playing slowly is much more difficult’.²⁹

Stefano Bollani has compared jazz to good sex: it ‘should be natural... From the skeleton of a song, we improvise all the time, and we never talk about the musical direction we want to go in. If we have to tell each other what to do then the love affair has gone wrong.’ That, says Bollani, is what makes jazz the most rewarding genre to work in – not money or fame or even sex, but for the music.³⁰

Beyond this (as I once realised while listening, in excellent company, to the pianist Alan Broadbent), standards and ballads, properly played – that is, never exactly the same way twice – are the music of romantic love itself. For what is love but a theme with endless variations, an old song renewed and made fresh? And doesn't the entire natural world improvise, as we do, within limits?

Dark Star and the Dead

I now want to engage in a swerve, but not an irrelevant one. (It is generationally revealing, but that really is irrelevant.)

Certain instruments are indispensable in certain musical contexts. Take away the piano, double-bass or saxophone and most jazz would cease to exist. Rock, on the other hand, is unimaginable without the electric guitar (but not acoustic), and folk without the acoustic guitar (but not electric). And there is an intimate enchantment to the acoustic guitar that in the right hands is unique. John Fahey and John Renbourn come to mind, each drawing on deep wells of traditional music on either side of the Atlantic.

A few instruments speak across more than one genre. The acoustic double-bass is one. Although rare in folk music, it features in a significant number of the best works by singer-songwriters, from John Martyn's *Solid Air* to Van Morrison's *Astral Weeks*, Phoebe Snow's eponymous album, Tim Buckley's *Happy Sad*, and albums by Pentangle. I think its presence was as important there as it is in chamber jazz.

Let me turn to an instance of improvisation – famous or infamous, according to taste – in the debatable land between jazz and popular music. The electric guitar is central to it, underlining the way it isn't quite in jazz, yet this music shares with jazz lengthy and sustained improvisation in a way that I think makes it legitimate to consider in this chapter. I mean the guitar-work of Jerry Garcia and The Grateful Dead.

The Dead were at the heart of 1960s counterculture, and as Robert Stone says, 'of that holistic magic vision of the garden set free, the music of Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead is the purest single remnant. It was supposed to be an accompaniment to the New Beginning. In fact, it was the thing itself, all that remains with us.' The Dead went on to become one of the most durable and, in their own way, successful bands ever. Above all a live act, between 1965 and 1995 they played more than 2,000 concerts and released few albums, but paradoxically, they probably have more recorded music in circulation than any other performing group. And they are loved, Garcia especially. Patti Smith (in Higashi 2005: 148) says simply, 'He generated love; he was the sun personified.'

Yet 'more than any other band of their stature,' writes Nick Paumgarten (2002: 43), the Dead also 'have legions of haters – real hostility...' Such visceral, not to say irrational hostility is not uncommon when an artistic form where enchantment is central becomes so popular as to be difficult for modernists to ignore. Other such artists to whose work enchantment is central – J.R.R. Tolkien, for example, in fiction, and Pierre Bonnard in painting – attract just the same sort of reaction, and for a similar reason.³¹ And like them, the Dead, as Paumgarten (2002: 44) notes, 'resisted irony'. A precise opposite would be Frank Zappa, who revelled in it and framed almost everything he performed or recorded ironically except his own uncompromisingly modernist compositions. (Like the Maoist modernist John Cage, Zappa loved Edgard Varèse.)

This point is important, because irony disenchant. It is also perhaps the prime signal used by modernists to identify themselves as being on the bus, to adapt a metaphor from the Dead's heyday, and its lack to identify those who are not. (Quite why to distinguish between Us and Them should be so important is another question; it seems to be an animal thing.)

Like any good trio or quartet, whether jazz or classical, the Dead were, in the words of their bassist Phil Lesh (in Paumgarten 2002: 53), ‘a living organism of several people’, and their music at its polyphonic best came across as ‘music being made, not executed.’ It must be said that the price for extensively improvised music, given the unbiddability of enchantment, is the risk of a bad night. And the Dead had ‘em. But despite its cultural invisibility since the 1970s, the Dead remained, by most estimates, the most popular touring band in rock history, so plenty of people were willing to take that chance. In an interview in 1972, Garcia put it this way. (His ‘magic’ refers, of course, to enchantment.)

The things we do depend so much upon the situation we’re in and upon a sort of magic thing. We aren’t in such total control of our scene that we can say, ‘Tonight’s the night, it’s going to be magic tonight.’ We can only say we’re going to try it tonight. And whether it’s magic or not is something we can’t predict and nobody else can predict, and even when it’s over and done with, it’s one of those things where nobody’s really sure. It’s subtle and it’s elusive, but it’s real.³²

However relational the band, though, Garcia was its very heart, and he enacted that role in his electric guitar-playing above all. (It certainly wasn’t his singing.) As Paumgarten (2002: 45) notes, ‘Garcia’s guitar style and sound are immediately recognizable’ – precision of voice leading to presence – and Lesh, doing my work for me, says that Garcia ‘was always a source of wonder. When he played, it would be this endless stream of glorious melody’ (*ibid.*).

Dylan (in Higashi 2005: ix), after Garcia’s death, spoke without irony:

There’s a lot of spaces and advances between The Carter Family, Buddy Holly and, say, Ornette Coleman, a lot of universes, but he filled them all without being a member of any school. His playing was moody, awesome, sophisticated, hypnotic and subtle. There’s no way to convey the loss.

The essence of Garcia’s improvised soloing is arguably in the best performances of ‘Dark Star’, including the one recorded in *Live/Dead* (1969). He is himself the dark star around which the music revolves, and in this modal piece averaging 30 minutes, with only three short verses, his serpentine lines soar, ascending in supple loops and arcs before falling to disappear, reappear, shudder and climax.³³ They cry and caress, a living thing, calling out to anyone who loves either life or the electric guitar, and doubly so if both.

The enchantment present is especially unmistakable against the technically polished but finally lifeless typical rock guitar solo, constructed with nothing left to chance and any artlessness carefully built in. (Examples: Don Felder’s solo in ‘Hotel California’, any solo by Walter Becker of Steely Dan, and most of Eric Clapton’s.) It also stands out against the curse of electric guitar playing: brief riffs, again technically skilled but which, even when tacked together, fail to make a whole, tell a story or (what amounts to the same thing) go anywhere. In this sense, at least, the late Jeff Beck and his countless epigones are not guitarists to be admired or emulated.

As Garcia once remarked, ‘you don’t get adventure in music unless you’re willing to take chances.’³⁴ Nor are there any rehearsals for living a life. Each one begins anew, and if you want life in your art, then after all the practising you have to forget it and get out there, as one Grateful Dead album is entitled, without a net. And treasure it when it happens! Let me close by quoting Hamre (in Maurseth 2019: 163) again:

Despite having lived a long time, I can count on one hand the number of times when I’ve experienced real soaring on stage. It’s exceptional, in other words...yet I always know it

when I hear it... In those moments, the soaring opens all my senses and everything becomes more intense – almost unbearably so.... Of course, if you purposefully strive to attain the sublime, then you're bound to be disappointed. You need to be a state of deep concentration to be able to free yourself from yourself. Only then can the soaring begin.

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¹ Also see Curry 2018, 2019 and 2021. I am deeply indebted to Walter T. Carpenter for first introducing me to jazz many years ago. I would also like to thank Garry Todd and James Longworth for their invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this paper; any remaining errors result from ignoring their advice.

² This point coincides precisely with D.W. Winnicott's concept of a liminal third or transitional 'thing', which is integral to Curry 2023 book.

³ This point accords seamlessly with the later philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, which also figures importantly in my 2023 book.

⁴ For example, it's not clear to me that Jason Moran's approach is an advance on that of Cyrus Chestnut, say.

⁵ For general information on *Kind of Blue*, see Kahn (2000) and Williams (2009).

⁶ See Kahn 2000: 98.

⁷ Quoted in Shadwick 2002: 117.

⁸ Charlie Haden and Hank Jones, *Steal Away: Spirituals, Hymns and Folk Songs* (Verve, 1995); Charlie Haden and Chris Anderson, *None But the Lonely Heart* (Naim, 1997).

⁹

[https://id3512.securedata.net/theloniousrecords/linotes/Genius%20of%20Modern%20Music%20\(Gitler\).htm](https://id3512.securedata.net/theloniousrecords/linotes/Genius%20of%20Modern%20Music%20(Gitler).htm) (accessed 21.6.2022).

¹⁰ See Curry 2023, chapter 4.

¹¹ Quoted in Adams 1999: 199.

¹² Quoted in Kahn 2000: 169.

¹³ Cf. Leonard Garment, *Crazy Rhythm: From Brooklyn and Jazz to Nixon's White House, Watergate, and Beyond* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2001): 406.

¹⁴ <http://jazz-quotes.com/artist/thelonious-monk> (accessed 10.10.2022)

¹⁵ Monk quoted in <http://jazz-quotes.com/artist/thelonious-monk/> (accessed 10.10.2022). Monk was actually referring to Coleman – 'I believe that what is happening to jazz with people like Ornette Coleman, for instance, is bad' – but his point applies at least equally to late Coltrane.

¹⁶ Quoted in Williams 2009: 146, 81.

¹⁷ <http://jazz-quotes.com/artist/thelonious-monk/> (accessed 16.6.13).

¹⁸ Quoted in *Music3Sixty Magazine* (n.d.).

¹⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dE5iuR9gRmg> (accessed 9.10.2022).

²⁰ Quoted in *The Irish Times* (17.08.2013).

²¹ From a webinar with Ron Carter and Cornell West at the Stella Adler Center for the Arts (31 April 2023).

²² Quoted in Maurseth 2019: 143.

²³ Quoted in <https://jenniferwilhelms.com/lennie-tristano-feeling-and-emotion/> (accessed 11.10.2022)

²⁴ Quoted in the liner notes to Charlie Haden and Chris Anderson, *None But the Lonely Heart* (Naim, 1997).

²⁵ Quoted in Jullien 2004: 177.

²⁶ Quoted in Thomas Conrad, liner notes to Pieranunzi's *Dream Dance* (CamJazz, 2009).

²⁷ Quoted in *The New York Times* (28.1.2010).

²⁸ Solo (Palmetto, 2015).

²⁹ Quoted on the back of *Haunted Heart*, Marc Copland Trio (hatOlogy 690, 2010).

³⁰ Quoted in *The Guardian* (13.11.2009).

³¹ Again, see Curry 2023.

³² In *Rolling Stone, Special Collectors Edition: Grateful Dead* (2013): 29.

³³ Spectacularly so at 8:06 minutes into the song, if you're wondering.

³⁴ *Rolling Stone* (1995): 46.