

SEEING JAZZ

BY ROBERT O'MEALLY

From the book *Seeing Jazz: Artists and Writers on Jazz*.*

INTRODUCTION

The title *Seeing Jazz* is a layered play on words that refers to the artistic and literary works here as visualizations of music—visible equivalents to the sound of jazz—and also to “seeing” in the metaphoric sense of understanding: to get hip and then hipper, to hear jazz more deeply than ever before, to dig this music, to say “yes, I *see*.”

Seeing Jazz presents jazz music as an expression of the United States in the 20th century—the music of *e pluribus unum* with a swinging beat—and as a multicolored blue cornerstone of what the world knows as *modernism* in art. As such, this music has had an impact on many other modern musics, at home and abroad, “classical” as well as “popular.” Jazz is part of a super-charged cultural continuum in which painters, sculptors, photographers, poets, novelists, and essayists have worked (and played) to capture with their pens and brushes, their wood and paper, and with light the irresistible note and trick and dance of the music. This book reflects in jam-session style the creation of the still-emerging jazz culture, in which the music is a constant point of reference and sounding board: jazz, the lowdown high-fly music of inspiration an perfection in form.

How does one begin to define this music that was born in the port towns and big cities of black America and adopted by the world as its own?

From the earliest shy flights of James Reese Europe’s military “jass” bands of the 1910s to the latest experiments by bold jazz innovators, three aspects of jazz have emerged as definitive: complexity of *rhythm*, the magic of *improvisation*, and conversational *call and response*. These terms provide the title and theme for each of the three chapters in this book.

Seeing Jazz is an evocative experiment—a place to begin, not the last word. It is not an encyclopedic effort to gather all of the jazz paintings and poems from around

the world and across the century of this music's existence. Rather it is a playful attempt to illustrate how this music has made its cross-disciplinary mark. It also endeavors to capture the fullspirited extravagance of joy so unmistakable in the music; it strives to *swing*.

RHYTHM

Examples of *rhythm* veer toward the mystical: the first thunders that drummed the world into being, the dance of the spheres and of the sea, the ebb and flow of desire and procreation, the cadence of blood through human veins. Jazz music's rhythms echo these primal sounds along with those of its origins as an American music owing debts to Europe, Asia, Native America, and Africa—especially Africa, where the music's polyrhythmic character and drum and dance-beat attitudes found their beginnings.

Jazz crystallized at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century in the black communities of the United States, and if we listen closely as Sidney Bechet advises, we hear its history deeply drumming. We hear spirituals, blues, vendor's cries, marching bands, street corner idlers telling lies. We hear the sound of trains—wheels on tracks, whistles, brakes, conductors' calls, easy (and uneasy) riders. In the music of Mary Lou Williams, for example, we hear modern city rhythms—steady and winging in one instance, barbwire jagged and discontinuous in the next.

The rhythms of jazz have also inspired poets and visual artists. Both depict the drama of jazz players in action. Both accept the harder task of capturing in line and image the feeling and the meaning of the music. Both *see* jazz and make their audiences see it, too.

But how does one *see* jazz in this sense. How does one *write* or *draw* the rhythms of this music? Writers like Toni Morrison, Ntozake Shange, Amiri Baraka, Albert Murray, Michael Harper, and Rita Dove (just to name some leaders in the literary jazz aesthetic) not only tell the stories of jazz characters but pace their lines to approximate the dance-beat cadences and other rhythmic features of jazz music. Through playfully syncopated repetitions, their words perform a jazz dance on the page. No wonder Langston Hughes specified that one of his books, *Ask Your Mama*,

be read aloud to jazz accompaniment; the words for him were solo notes sounded and scored in a jazz-rhythm pattern.

Through much of the century, visual artists literally have drawn jazz musicians, dancers, instruments, and sheet music. Henri Matisse, Piet Mondrian, and Jean Dubuffet make jazz music sound through their paintings, make us *see* the music. These and many others have created visual jazz compositions through their manipulation of *lines, figures, tones, structures, colors, and rhythms*. Note how the language of aesthetics overlaps from art form to art form. In some sense, do not all artists—whether dancers or architects, sculptors or poets—desire that their works have rhythm?

In visual art, a jazz rhythm may be visible in repeated images or human figures (with variations from image to image). Thus do the artists follow jazz's impulse to play 4/4 along with 3/4 or 6/8, to mirror jazz's complexly swinging, polyrhythmic character. Like writers, some visual artists divide their work into sections that approximate the structures of jazz: the A section swinging into the B section and back to A before onto C (the *vamp, chorus, riff, solo space, outchorus*, etc.) with rhythm always at the base. Stuart Davis and Romare Bearden describe the effort to achieve a sense of the *jazz interval* in their works, the *skip tones, jump spaces*, and silences in anticipation of the next sound. Others achieve a percussive sense of color—jazz drum songs for the eye.

Perhaps most profoundly, writers and visual artists who project jazz rhythms into their art express a jazz timekeeper's base-clef sense of life. The feeling, as Ralph Ellison once put it, that as blues-beset as life may be (look at the photo of Billie Holiday) the real secret is somehow to make life *swing*, to survive by staying in the groove. *Look at the photo of Billie Holiday.*

IMPROVISATION

The word *improvisation* derives from the Latin *im + provisus*, meaning “not provided” or “not foreseen.” In some sense, all artistic creation depends on the ability to improvise, to extemporize an unscripted drama, to blow a note not heard before, to fill the blank canvas of the moment. But in the making of jazz music, improvisation is a definitive hallmark, a *sine qua non*: a something without which, *not*. Jazz is substantially a performer’s art where any charts or notations are provisional guideposts, notes indicating a work’s general direction but never its final lines or last word. It is a music in the oral tradition, one in which a composer/arranger’s latest changes may be shouted out during on-stage performance and where the performer may introduce a shift in direction while playing, in the unforeseen moment of jazz creation.

Jazz’s improvised character is balanced with the fact that it is never a free-for-all; it has both an improvised freshness as well as a composer/arranger’s sense of completeness and finish. Duke Ellington told his band to plan the notes as written but also “to keep some dirt in there, somewhere.” In other words, even when Ellington’s band played pieces with no solo spaces indicated, he wanted his players to keep the made-up-on-the-spot dimension, something the score expected but did not ask for explicitly, something of the performers’ improvised own, some “dirt.”

At their best, jazz compositions sound like frozen improvisations, just as solos by such jazz artists as Thelonious Monk and Miles Davis sound like liquid compositions. The jazz improvisor’s solo statement not only tells the soloist’s own story (see Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem on this subject) but must complement the composer/arranger’s overall conceptions. In other words, true jazz musicians are co-composers of every work they play. The audience delights just as much in a particular composition as in a particular band’s or player’s treatment of it on a given day.

All of which has implications and challenges for the other arts. The sculptors, painters, photographers, and authors whose works appear here also operate *in the moment*. Romare Bearden insisted that, like a jazz soloist, he played with the possibilities within the framework of his conception: he soloed, he improvised. Jean-Michel Basquiat, Alexis De Boeck, and others gave their work a swingingly improvised dimension. They kept “some dirt in there, somewhere,” too.

This in-the-moment quality is most obvious in the work of jazz photographers like William Claxton, Herman Leonard, and Anthem Barboza. Like jazz players, jazz photographers must be so well trained that they can see an image, have an idea, and execute instantly. As Ornette Coleman advises, they “forget about the changes in key and just play.” And when it come to jazz art (musical, literary, or visual) the ability to play is the thing. Technique, however painfully hard earned, is taken for granted and “forgotten.” When the bandleader points to you, can you create a composition on the spot? With little or nothing formally provided, are you composed? Can you improvise? Can you play?

CALL & RESPONSE

Call and response refers to the Sunday service: “Say ‘Amen’ somebody”—“AMEN!” This interaction between preachers and congregations all over black America has become an integral feature of cultural expression in the United States. Born in West and Central Africa, where one experiences it in exchanges among singers and instrumentalists (as well as dancers and sculptors), in the U.S. this pattern occurs in church songs and sermons and also in word songs, play songs (such as “Little Sally Walker”), blues, rags, and in jazz. You say something; I say something back.

Call and response in jazz may consist of a two-part song within the single self—a dialogue between the pianist’s right hand and the left; an instrumentalist/singer’s exchange between the voice and the accompanying *box* or *axe*.

Jazz call and response also identifies complicated exchanges between a single voice and other voices: soloist and the chorus of other players; soloist and the congregation of listeners and dancers. These conversations in the language of jazz may be friendly or exhortative in the mode of the preacher and the amening congregation. They may be mutual praise songs or friendly games of leap frog.

They may also involve knock-down competitions, challenges, games of innuendo, ritual insult, mockery. Sometimes signifying contests (also called “cutting contests”) involve big-mouthing and virtuoso sounding off. Dizzy Gillespie and Roy Eldridge were fearsome cutting contestants because, while they loved to whisper and pray through their horns, they also knew how to lie, wrangle, cuss an opponent down and, if need be, out. Call and response could be sweet, call and response could be rough.

It is a fascinating phenomenon that the call and response circle in jazz often widens to include dancers and listeners who are not dancing, but whose rapt attention and well-timed foot tapping become part of the total performance. In our (post-) modern world, jazz listeners respond to musicians' calls sent by radio or record (and C.D.) players. The hearer's response to jazz music may be to think things over yet again; the response may be to push back the furniture and dance or to turn the lights down low and have a very private party. Like jazz improvisors who transform every composition they play, listeners add their own sweet or bitter notes to the music and make it their own.

To the jazz musician, the "call" of jazz may come from an almost indescribably subtle attitude of a dancer. It may come from the example of Louis Armstrong, sounding like a century-full of music buzz-toned through the barrel of a single magic horn.

Visual and literary artists are parties to this dynamic process of jazz calling and responding. For not only do they respond to the work of people in their own fields (novelist Ellison to novelist Dostoevski, muralist James Phillips to the muralists of Mexico), they also call and respond to jazz music and its makers. This book's sections on rhythm and improvisation tell part of the story of how this process works. A jazz rhythm by Max Roach (a call) becomes a rhythm of color in a Roland Jean collage (a response); an improvisation by Charlie Parker becomes an improvised line in a Norman Lewis sketch. Writers hear the call of the music and respond with words that swing and chapters that take a jazz shape. Call, countercall; call, recall; call, response.

Perhaps above all, these writers and visual artists respond to jazz music's beautiful call for unequivocal excellence. "If I could write a poem as perfect as Parker's solo or paint a picture as evocative as Ellington's Mood Indigo," these works seem to say, "well then maybe, wherever they are, Bird and Duke would respond to me across the distances of space and time, would give to me a full-throated, full-spirited *amen*."

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