

Transcription (ii)

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In jazz the act of fixing in notated form music that is entirely or partly improvised, or for which no written score exists; also the resulting notated version itself. The term is also applied to the traditional practice of memorizing and reproducing a recorded improvisation without necessarily notating it. It should not be confused with Transcription, the process of copying sound from one source to another, or Transcription, a type of sound recording. This article deals with the principles, purposes, techniques, and history of transcription and discusses its value as a means of disseminating jazz and as a tool for studying it. For a discussion of the ways in which transcribers have adapted the symbols of standard Western notation to jazz *see* Notation (jazz) §4.

1. Introduction.

As with other forms of music transmitted by oral tradition, there was little need initially for jazz to be notated. Much of it was improvised or relied on certain musical conventions – melodic patterns, chord progressions, rhythmic devices – known to and shared by players and learned through imitation. Although musicians might glean similar principles of melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic transformation from published compositions (e.g., theme and variations, arrangements of popular songs), they could absorb the distinctive sounds of jazz and the specific techniques of jazz improvisation only through listening to the music.

The first musicians who wished to learn jazz had to find ways to translate the music they heard into something they could play. Most commonly they achieved this by developing their aural memory – by learning something in one context and attempting to re-create it later in another; by imitating phrases played by teachers or colleagues; and by copying parts directly from recordings or piano rolls, often by slowing down the speed at which these were being played and repeating passages many times. Many musicians who engaged in such activities had no need of notation, but some found it a useful bridge between the acts of listening and performing; by notating a solo, a player might come to understand the basic principles of improvisation and thereby generate fresh, original statements. Thus transcriptions facilitated analysis as well as performance.

2. Techniques and applications.

Transcription as practiced by jazz musicians is usually a self-taught skill. There are no fixed rules for transcribing jazz, nor is there a standard set of symbols used to indicate pitch inflection, articulation, rhythmic deviation, and other expressive devices. Transcription is merely an extension of the technique, learned by every music student, of taking aural dictation, in which it is necessary to listen

accurately, to construe analytically, and to notate. Repetition is an integral part of the process; accordingly, tape recorders are generally easier to work with than record players, and reel-to-reel machines offer more flexibility than do cassette players. With digital technology, difficult passages may sometimes be unraveled with the help of a function which allows the listener to create a loop that repeats between any two selected points; however, even this operation is no match for the flexibility of manipulating a reel-to-reel tape by hand to hear a particular moment of sound, or for the simplicity of playing such a recording at half-speed, whereby complex chords, sounding an octave lower than normal, and rhythms may be revealed. A graphic equalizer may further assist the transcriber to perceive cloudy textures.

Transcription becomes considerably more complicated for those wishing to study jazz. Unlike performing musicians, who may adopt an attitude of practical efficiency towards transcription, scholars have been concerned to bring a high level of detail and scientific rigor to the task. These different approaches roughly follow Charles Seeger's categories of "prescriptive" and "descriptive" notation (described in his article in *Musical Quarterly*, 1958), and also reflect the different philosophies behind performing and study editions. Whereas the player might intuitively know how to interpret or adjust notated rhythms to make them sound like the rhythms in a recorded performance, the scholar is interested in describing them as precisely as possible; in an effort to give a faithful graphic representation of an aural document, scholarly transcriptions therefore tend to exhibit a plethora of signs and symbols. Yet ironically, the more the transcriber travels in the direction of accuracy and precision, the more he or she departs from a score that may actually have been used in performance or one that may easily be read and interpreted in the future.

Western notation is weak in its ability to represent the rhythms and timbres of jazz. Thomas Owens (1974) made a preliminary attempt to analyze a slow-paced solo by Charlie Parker using the melograph model C (an electronic instrument that produced graphic representation of pitch and amplitude over time). Owens found that the machine (which was designed by Seeger) revealed many complex details of pitch, duration, and vibrato; for example, some scale steps received a variety of intonations in different contexts, and many notes were of lengths for which we have no symbols (e.g., fifteenth notes or nineteenth notes). However, on account of the "extreme rhythmic complexity of Parker's improvised melody," it revealed a high margin of error in reading pitches.

Milton Stewart and Richmond Browne, building on the hand graph method described by Bruno Nettl in *Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology* (New York, 1964), proposed a "grid" notation to help show more clearly the rhythmic displacement in an improvised solo. This makes use of vertical lines of different lengths within bars to indicate subdivisions of the beat, and then positions the pitches of a solo in relation to the lines. Stewart also added superscript symbols designed to give "a clear visual representation of articulation patterns and the resultant structures" (1982). But the resulting transcriptions, while in theory more accurate, are difficult to use. Neither the melograph nor the grid notation system has been widely adopted by transcribers of jazz. It was hoped that computer-aided transcription might yield a greater degree of precision in measuring the parameters of the music, but there is no strong evidence of any meaningful developments in this direction, and it may be that

computers are essentially too rigid to reflect the subtleties of jazz; moreover, even if a computerized analysis were set up to capture the minutiae of the music, the resulting transcription would inevitably be unreadable in any kind of practical musical way.

No matter how much transcribers aim for accuracy, consistent notational practice, and expressive detail in their scores, the goal of capturing the essential element of jazz on paper may ultimately remain elusive; somehow it is a process at odds with the aesthetic values of the music and the creative spirit of its practitioners. Lee Castle acknowledged this problem and spoke for all transcribers in his preface to *Louis Armstrong's Immortal Trumpet Solos* (New York, 1947) when he wrote, "I have tried to compile what I think to be typical Louis. It wasn't easy, for black dots on white paper just can't express what's in his soul." And in many instances players have found it impossible to reproduce their own solos: James Moody, for example, on examining a transcription of his recording of *Cherokee*, exclaimed good-humoredly, "I don't even know how to play all those things" (1973).

3. History.

While many professional jazz musicians regard transcription as an integral part of their own education, few have discussed the transcribing process in any detail (though Andrew White presents an account of his approach to the subject in *A Treatise on Transcription*, 1978); writers on jazz have also largely passed over the subject. As a result the history of jazz transcription still awaits fuller documentation and can be suggested only in broad outline. The informal process of transcribing jazz – copying solos or individual parts from recordings – probably began as soon as the latter became available, in the late 1910s. Even earlier, players had engaged in the same activity as they strove to emulate what they heard others perform in clubs, cabarets, and dance halls, at parades, and on riverboats. Recordings, however, made it easier for musicians to absorb other ideas and techniques, and at least one major figure, Freddie Keppard, supposedly resisted making them for fear that rivals would steal his tricks.

From the 1920s professional jazz musicians have used the transcribing process to learn from other professionals. When Charlie Parker, at the age of 16, worked in the band led by George E. Lee, he reportedly played solos taken from recordings made by Lester Young. (David Baker, at Indiana University, and other contemporary jazz educators have maintained the tradition, requiring students to memorize improvisations by Young, Parker, Armstrong, and other outstanding soloists.)

Another application of the technique, in which musicians have been obliged to re-create solos they or others have played in earlier performances, has been common in big bands: Tommy Dorsey, for example, required Buddy DeFranco constantly to reproduce the first solo he had improvised on *Opus no.1*, and Thad Jones cited the onus of repeating his original solo on *April in Paris* (with its interpolation of *Pop Goes the Weasel*) as a reason for his leaving Count Basie's orchestra. New members of bands with a long history of recording – such as that led by Duke Ellington – were often expected to know important solos played by their predecessors and to reproduce them as an act of homage; this was also an acknowledgment that such solos helped define the identity of the piece in question as well as the ensemble itself. Several trumpeters in bands led by Fletcher Henderson and Benny Goodman, among others, paid lip service to King Oliver's solo on *Dippermouth Blues* when they

performed *Sugar Foot Stomp*. The same respect for instrumentalists has been shown by singers, among them Eddie Jefferson, King Pleasure, and Jon Hendricks, who have set lyrics to notable recorded solos, and by groups such as Supersax, which has specialized in performing arrangements of Charlie Parker's improvisations.

It is not possible to define precisely the moment when transcriptions were first notated. A signal event, however, was the appearance in 1927 of two collections of Louis Armstrong's improvisations, *50 Hot Choruses for Cornet* and *125 Jazz Breaks for Cornet*, published by Melrose Brothers of Chicago. The former publication claimed in its foreword that it differed from others of its type: "The solos in this book depart in principle of production from any solos on the market. They are genuine improvisations obtained, not by the old method of the artist writing down his solos one note at a time, but from actual recordings." Armstrong supposedly recorded his improvisations in the Melrose offices, where presumably a staff member notated them. Although no copy of these recordings has been traced, the "hot choruses" in the collection do bear a resemblance to the work of Armstrong in the late 1920s, so perhaps the publisher's claim may be believed. In addition the foreword made clear the practical application of the solos: "All that is necessary is to place this book on the music stand next to the orchestration – then when the orchestration reaches the cornet strain read your book instead of the orchestration." In the same way, *125 Jazz Breaks for Cornet* offered the jazz soloist solutions that Armstrong himself had employed, or might employ, in the relevant context.

In 1927 Melrose also advertised collections of solo breaks by Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller and arrangements of solos by Frankie Trumbauer, Ted Lewis, Jelly Roll Morton, Goodman, Miller, and Armstrong. Some of these publications may have involved the use of transcription, but it is difficult to determine how much; the arrangers employed by Melrose, and other publishers, may have been working from lead sheets, orchestrations, actual recordings, their own imagination, or any combination of these. Indeed, when staff arrangers produced sheet music or orchestrated versions of jazz pieces that had already been recorded, they sometimes incorporated solos taken from the recording. Examples of this may be found in sheet-music versions of Duke Ellington's *The Creeper* and *Birmingham Breakdown* published by Gotham Music Service in 1927.

In the 1930s transcriptions began to appear in periodicals aimed at jazz musicians, such as *Metronome* and *Down Beat*; Armstrong's *West End Blues* was the first transcribed solo to be published in the latter, in 1936. As writers turned their attention to jazz subjects they sometimes used transcriptions to illustrate their points. An early instance of this may be found in Roger Pryor Dodge's article "Jazz Trumpets and Harpsichords" (*Hound and Horn*, 1934), in which the author transcribed several versions of Bubber Miley's trumpet solo on different recordings of Ellington's *Black and Tan Fantasy*. Many transcribed music examples appeared in Winthrop Sargeant's *Jazz, Hot & Hybrid* (1938), and the composer Lou Harrison helped with notation in Rudi Blesh's history of jazz *Shining Trumpets* (1946).

The early 1940s saw the publication of a number of folios of transcriptions (or what were advertised as transcriptions). Like the volumes published in the 1920s, these were intended for players who wished to imitate their musical idol, or at least to perform in a style that was strongly identified with a particular soloist. The Robbins Music Corporation issued a series devoted to pianists, among them Teddy Wilson, Earl Hines, Bob Zurke, Fats Waller, Mary Lou Williams, Willie "the Lion" Smith, and Art

Tatum. Some of these folios included the word “transcription” in their titles, while others used “arrangement” or a similar euphemism (for example, *Teddy Wilson Piano Patterns*, *Rube Bloom Piano Impressions*). Again, the question of whether these publications contained actual transcriptions or merely arrangements in the style of major figures has yet to be answered fully. The uniform length of most of the solos raises doubts about authenticity; whereas the average recorded or live performance would be fairly extended, the published versions often end tidily after one or two choruses.

Other publishing firms that issued folios of transcriptions were M. M. Cole in Chicago and Harms and Leeds in New York. Leeds published a major series of solos by boogie-woogie and blues pianists and also collections of “warm-up exercises” by such artists as Rex Stewart and J. C. Higginbotham; the volume by the last named was said to contain “exact transcriptions from original recordings made by J. C. Higginbotham.” The practice of identifying the soloist as the transcriber was unusual, and frequently the identity of the transcriber (or arranger) was not revealed; when in 1947 Leeds issued *Louis Armstrong’s Immortal Trumpet Solos*, however, the transcriber was a well-known trumpeter and admirer of Armstrong, Lee Castle, who also wrote a preface to the collection.

As jazz education burgeoned in the 1960s and 1970s, there was a corresponding growth in the publication of transcriptions. The second of John Mehegan’s four volumes on jazz improvisation, *Jazz Rhythm and the Improvised Line* (1962), consists largely of transcribed solos by artists ranging from Bessie Smith to Oscar Peterson. Some enterprising transcribers, such as Jamey Aebersold and Andrew White, started their own mail-order distribution services, while others, among them Don Sickler, Dave Berger, and Alan Campbell, have had their transcriptions issued by major publishing firms; Sickler later formed his own company. Many more transcribers, however, work in isolation and do not circulate their scores beyond a limited geographical area.

From the 1980s, while transcriptions continued to serve a practical pedagogical function, their use broadened through the jazz repertory movement and the increasing interest in jazz shown by musicologists and music theorists. Transcriptions are essential for musicians active in jazz repertory groups, which aim to re-create past styles and recorded performances, since in many cases the original scores (or any other kind of written parts the players may have used) are unavailable or have been lost. The accuracy of such transcriptions, as well as their faithfulness to the original recordings and flexibility of interpretation, varies considerably, depending on the musicians involved and the context in which they are performing. Among the major figures who have been involved in jazz repertory are Gunther Schuller (who has transcribed and performed compositions by Morton, Ellington, and others), Chuck Israels (leader of the National Jazz Ensemble), Martin Williams (who organized the Smithsonian Jazz Repertory Ensemble), Gary Giddins and John Lewis (who formed the American Jazz Orchestra), and Doug Richards and Andrew Homzy (both of whom have established successful repertory ensembles in colleges).

Transcriptions intended for the purpose of study rather than performance may be found in musicological and theoretical dissertations on jazz; among these are works by Thomas Owens on Charlie Parker, Charles Blancq on Sonny Rollins, Lewis Porter on John Coltrane, Franz Kerschbaumer on Miles Davis, Barry Kernfeld on Cannonball Adderley, Coltrane, and Davis, Scott DeVeaux on Coleman Hawkins and Howard McGhee, Ron Radano on Anthony Braxton, Mark Tucker on Duke

Ellington, Felicity Howlett on Art Tatum, Steve Larsen on versions of Thelonious Monk's *'Round Midnight*, and Greg Smith on Bill Evans (ii). Some published works are also notable for their inclusion of transcriptions – for example, Schuller's *Early Jazz* (1968), Brian Priestley's *Mingus: a Critical Biography* (1982), and *Benny Carter: a Life in American Music* (1982), by M. Berger, E. Berger, and J. Patrick – as are such periodicals as the *Annual Review of Jazz Studies*, the *Journal of Jazz Studies*, and *Jazzforschung*.

By the mid-1980s only one major scholarly edition of transcriptions had appeared – James Dapogny's *Ferdinand "Jelly Roll" Morton: the Collected Piano Music* (1982). This volume represented a landmark in the history of jazz transcription and is exemplary in its thoroughness, attention to detail, and high editorial standards; it is a source intended for both study and performance, and thus accommodates the aims of scholars as well as those involved with repertory. In 1989 the Smithsonian Institution, in conjunction with the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, initiated the Jazz Masterworks Editions with the aim of publishing transcriptions and analyses of classic jazz recordings; unfortunately the project failed after only three volumes, which were devoted to individual pieces recorded by Ellington (among them Billy Strayhorn's *Take the "A" Train*).

Far more influential is Jamey Aebersold's series *A New Approach to Jazz Improvisation*, which he began in 1967 and which by 2000 numbered 87 volumes. These method books combine aspects of a lead sheet with those of transcription, whereby the melody and chord progression to a given popular standard or jazz tune is transcribed from a particular "definitive" (i.e., first, or most popular) recording, and that transcription of the theme is followed by the transcription of a solo from the same recording. Although they offer little of substance from a theoretical standpoint, Aebersold's volumes exhibit meticulous care in the transcription of melodies and chord progressions of famous jazz recordings and are enormously popular with those involved in jazz education. The demand for such "accurate" transcriptions has fostered the democratization of the music, enabling a great many more people to play jazz in a reasonably idiomatic manner. However, with too much emphasis placed upon notation and the notion of a definitive recorded version, this approach engenders the fossilization of jazz, and it is debatable whether it is entirely beneficial for the future of the music.

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