

## Horn OK Please:<sup>1</sup>

### Two Worlds Of Improvisation—Jazz Music For Indian Listeners

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Indian musicians listening to jazz experience both familiarity and disorientation. Many aspects of the music seem similar to the familiar world of *rag* [melody] and *tal* [rhythm], but are combined in ways that make sense only sporadically, if at all. A typical jazz audience reaction is often similar to (if rowdier than) that of *rasikas* [connoisseurs] in a *mehfil* [small, intimate concert setting]; but what are they reacting to? Furthermore, the term jazz catalyzes controversy. The idiom is younger than the century, and has undergone so many transformations that the jazz styles of 1925 and 1965 share few commonalities. One jazz aficionado's list of great performers and artistic/aesthetic priorities may vary wildly from another's. It is confusing, but no different from the way jazz musicians feel about Indian music! While they know that tremendous concentration, virtuosity, and musicality are involved, they are intimidated by their lack of an educated perspective from which to listen to the music of India.

"Jazz", as I use it in this paper, refers to a subset of African-American art/dance music performed from the beginning of this century to the present, and particularly those sub-genres known as "swing", "bop", and "hard bop". My remarks may apply vaguely to other sub-genres, but aim primarily to reflect these three (which comprise most of the jazz performed today).

The jazz tradition had its roots in the emotionally-laden vernacular music of African Americans living in the South at the turn of the century. When these musicians met gallicized creole artists in New Orleans, their folk style merged with the refined and Europeanized art of the creoles. Jazz emerged on the national scene in the 1920s and 1930s as a popular music used both for dancing and the display of virtuosity. The musicians based their improvisations on songs familiar to their audiences. The largest source of material for the jazz repertoire was the Afro-American idiom called "blues"; the second largest was the music of the American theatre. Even today, many jazz performances include songs based on blues structure (see below) or drawn from musical plays of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. To understand the music we must know something about the structure of these songs, and also how they became vehicles for spontaneous improvisation.

## The importance of harmonic structure

In Indian music, everything is heard in relation to a fixed and unchanging drone that provides a context within which melodic lines and song structures have meaning and form. In Western music (whether it is art music or popular music), melodic lines are heard as the expression of a “harmonic structure”. This is a crucial concept in understanding Western songs; those with simple harmonic structures have relatively simple melodies, but complex harmonic structures can be very challenging.

Basic to Western musical grammar is the “chord”; European theory defines a chord as the combination of the first, third, and fifth note of any scale. Thus, if we sound Sa, Ga and Pa together, they form what a Western musician calls a chord — more specifically a “triad” (because there are three pitches involved). The triads as mapped onto the Hindustani Bilawal *that* [scale] are as follows (where S R G m P D N would be equal to the diatonic major scale of C, thus C D E F G A B, or “do re mi” etc.):

1. S G P
2. R m D
3. G P N
4. m D Ś
5. P N Ṛ
6. D Ś Ḡ
7. N Ṛ ṁ

Notes in the scale are related by ties of varying strength; among the strongest are those relating Sa to Pa, and Sa to ma. It is common to alternate a triad based on Sa with a triad based on Pa: Western musicians call this a “one-five” sequence. Similarly, if we play S/G/P followed by m/D/S, it is a “one-four”. These are very simple forms, but jazz musicians routinely use four, five and six pitches in chord form; a little arithmetic shows the number of combinations is enormous! The melodies of Western folk songs tend to have predictable relationships with simple chord sequences; the art songs of the same culture have more surprising relationships with more complicated chords. Educated audiences appreciate harmonic complexity as much as audiences in India enjoy the intricacies of a compound *rag* [here, melodic mode] like Puriya Kalyan or Basant Bahar, and trained listeners can identify the harmonies underlying an improvisation on first hearing.

The songs of the American musical theatre are known for harmonic and melodic variety; jazz musicians consider them happy vehicles for improvisation. An artist may announce a song by a particular composer — for example, “All The Things You Are”, by Jerome Kern — and play only a few notes without variation, improvising the rest of the performance with

occasional reference to the original tune. Only the harmonic underpinning, provided by piano or guitar, remains constant. Fortunately, it is unnecessary to follow harmonic structure to be able to enjoy jazz improvisation fully. By the same token an understanding of *rag* structure or *tabla theka* is not a prerequisite to the enjoyment of *shastriya sangeet* [classical music].

## Structural parallels between Hindustani music and jazz

All understanding makes art more rewarding, but there is much even the uninformed listener can appreciate. In Hindustani (i.e., North Indian) music improvisation is guided by the rules of *rag*. Artists may stretch those rules, may flirt with rule violation — but even the

most avant-garde performer recognizes the intuitive constraints of *rag* structure and remains true to them. In jazz, improvisation is guided by harmonic structure. Notes are chosen freely, but must fit somehow with the chords. Improvisors may flirt with rule violation; and as long as there is an intuitive connection with the harmony it is considered art, not error.



Sangeet Natak Akademi

Kersarbai Kerkar (1892-1977)

In Hindustani music a variety of terms refer to different types of improvisation, such as *alap bistar* [slow, systematic development on individual notes], *tan* [rapid sequences of notes], *laykari* [rhythmic play], etc. Musicians may use any of these types of improvisation, but must follow implicit aesthetic rules. In fact the great vocalist, Kersarbai Kerkar, said there was no such thing as improvisation in Indian

music; by this she probably meant to imply that the music is at some level very systematic and ordered. In jazz there are no terms for particular types of improvisation. Each musician is expected to develop ideas individually; and there is no requirement that, for example, fast lines come after slow lines (as in Hindustani performance). If someone wishes to develop a solo on the contrasting qualities of extremely fast and extremely slow lines, s/he is free to do so, provided that the result is musically satisfying.

In Hindustani music, improvisation is constrained in time by the rules of *tal* [here, metre]. The drums provide a rhythmic framework ornamented with variations. When the improviser develops his or her ideas, the drum gives the time cycle's outlines; the melodist may diverge radically from the time cycle, but always returns, usually to the first beat (known as *sam*). In jazz there are often two separate levels of rhythm at the same time. Improvisation is shaped

in time by “harmonic rhythm”, repetitively outlining a consistent sequence of chords with continuous variation. Simultaneously bass and drums provide embellishments on the basic pulse: we can call this the “pulse rhythm” (jazz players usually call it “the beat” or “the time”). The harmonic rhythm is cyclical and repetitive, and moves over a fairly long period of time.

The following is a map of time structure in Hindustani music (using the cycle *vilambit ektal* [slow, twelve-beat cycle] as an example):

Dhin + + +	Dhin + + +	Dha + ge +	Te re ke ta
Tun + + +	Na + + +	Kat + + +	Ta + + +
Dha + ge +	Te re ke ta	Dhin + + +	Na + + +
Dhin			

Primary beats are indicated on the left of each group (marked by an initial upper case character), with ornamental or secondary beats filling up horizontal space to the right (in lower case). Each of the twelve main impulses subdivide into four secondary impulses (which are widely varied in performance). The actual pulse of the music seems to move at the “quarter-beat” level, leading to a set of forty-eight pulses from *sam* to *sam*. One complete cycle is called an *avartan*; its repetition is a recurring structural element in Hindustani performance.

There now follows a map of time structure in jazz (using the basic harmonic cycle of “the blues” as an example):

I + + +	I + + +	I + + +	I + + +
IV + + +	IV + + +	I + + +	I + + +
V + + +	IV + + +	I + + +	I + V +
I			

Primary chords are indicated on the left of each group in Roman numerals, with ornamental or secondary chords filling up horizontal space to the right. The twelve main impulses subdivide into four secondary impulses (which are extensively varied in performance). The music seems to move at the “quarter-beat” level, making a set of forty-eight pulses from the first chord to the first chord. One complete cycle is called “the form”; its repetition is crucial in performance.

To appreciate fully the structure of Hindustani music we must understand the *rag* structure and the metric cycle in use. Once the listener is tonally and temporally oriented, s/he is free to enjoy the embellishments, ornaments, and rule-bending that take place in North Indian improvisation. To appreciate fully the structure of jazz music we must understand the

harmonic cycle in use. Once the listener is tonally and temporally oriented, s/he is free to enjoy the embellishments, ornaments, and rule-bending that take place in jazz improvisation.

In Hindustani music, technique and athleticism are respected, but connoisseurs know that these are not the final criteria by which quality is judged. A young artist may be very fast, but not as “musical” in the final analysis as an older artist whose musical ideas are fully developed and freed from excess. In Jazz music, technique and athleticism are respected, but connoisseurs know that these are not the final criteria by which quality is judged. A



young artist may be very fast, but not as “musical” in the final analysis as an older artist whose musical ideas are fully developed and freed from excess.

### **Instrumentation in jazz**

An aspect of jazz that often disturbs listeners from Western or Indian classical genres is the volume level. The saxophone, trumpet, and trombone are considered noisier, ruder, and less sophisticated than instruments from refined chamber

traditions like those of Europe or India. Unflattering associations with brass bands are inevitable. But when jazz emerged on the American scene in the 1920s and 1930s it was primarily dance music; ensembles had to create a powerful sound that would compel audience members to get up and move. As skilled improvisors became common, many audience members chose to listen rather than dance, but the music’s dynamic parameters were fixed. (While so-called “chamber jazz” performers work at a very low volume, they are exceptions to the rule.)

Another sometimes disturbing aspect of jazz is the use of “noise” in performance; when a saxophonist makes a piercing scream or a low, rasping honk it can seem strange or ugly. But in African and African-American song, a singer’s roars or screams to emphasize a point of powerful emotion are deeply appreciated. It is natural for instrumentalists to seek such expression as well, sometimes creating lines less from notes and rather more from shapes, gestures, and colours.

Jazz is an urban music, a highly developed form which employs the city's chaos and contrasts as a formal artistic element (whereas Hindustani music seeks unity of mood above all). Listening to jazz properly means hearing many different layers of sound, whether it is the drummer playing games with the beat, the bassist pushing the others along with a propulsive lower-register line, the piano articulating chord structures, or the solo saxophone or trumpet above it all. While in Hindustani performances there are rarely more than three improvising artists, in jazz we find sometimes six, seven, or eight simultaneous improvisors. What keeps it from chaos is that each musician reacts constantly to the total ensemble sound, and works to enhance that totality.

## Other Types Of Jazz

In the past thirty or forty years a number of innovations in jazz have broadened the expressive possibilities available. These include “free” jazz, “modal” jazz, and “extended” forms. Free jazz does not rely on a song or pre-established harmonic framework, focusing instead only on collective improvisation. When performed by musicians who have worked together for years, free jazz is fascinating; it is like listening to a conversation between witty, articulate, deeply empathic people. When performed by less sensitive players it is merely self-indulgent. Modal jazz emerged as the result of musicians' increasing exposure to the music of India and the Middle East. Artists like Miles Davis and John Coltrane explored the possibilities of exotic scales rather than chords; this meant abandoning harmonic structure in favor of drone-based accompaniment. In this respect a recording like John Coltrane's “My Favorite Things” is quite similar to Hindustani music. The improvisors, however, don't stick to one scale but shift spontaneously from one to another. While Hindustani listeners may find it undisciplined, modal jazz offers many delights to someone steeped in Indian melody.

Extended form refers to longer jazz pieces structured not on song forms but according to the artistic drive of the composer. Thus an extended form might be: introductory ensemble theme; short interlude by trumpet, bass, and drums with set harmonic structure; melodic line over a different harmonic structure; change of rhythm and percussion improvisation;



Yale University, Music Library, Stanley Dance Collection

*Coleman Hawkins (1904–1969)*

repeat first ensemble theme; collective improvisation by two saxophones; repeat second melodic line, etc. Such structures exist as a whole (not as a set of harmonies and melodies to be repeated over and over), and tend to be shaped by a particular composer's artistic genius. One excellent exponent of extended form was the great bassist/composer Charles Mingus.

## Final thoughts

There are many ways of listening to a musical tradition, and each depends on a person's cultural perspective and background musical knowledge. I have tried to show Indian listeners what the important features of jazz are, and how to approach them from an Indian musical perspective. It is important to remember that these two traditions, Hindustani music and jazz, share many common features as outlined above. The most important thing they have in common is their approach to creating a new vision of a pre-existing musical idea, an approach that stresses the *process* of the music through performance rather than a fixed, unchanging product.

Below is my own list of acknowledged greats in jazz. As one builds a library of jazz music, one cannot go wrong by starting with these masters of their tradition.

Saxophone: Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins, Charlie Parker, Stan Getz, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman.

Trumpet: Louis Armstrong, Roy Eldridge, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis.

Piano: Earl Hines, Art Tatum, Thelonious Monk, Oscar Peterson.

Bass: Jimmy Blanton, Oscar Pettiford, Ray Brown, Charles Mingus, Charlie Haden.

Drums: Sid Catlett, Max Roach, Art Blakey, Elvin Jones, Edward Blackwell, Billy Higgins.

Composers: Duke Ellington, Charles Mingus, Thelonious Monk, Gil Evans.

## Notes

- 1 The highly-decorated trucks in India often carry the sign "Horn OK Please" to encourage overtaking traffic to sound the horn as a warning. In jazz jargon "horn" refers to an instrument.

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