

Why TV is Bad for Jazz

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I'm sure every one of us has used YouTube at some point to check out video footage of the Jazz Greats. I'm a bit of a YouTube junkie but I have often pondered on the notion of a new generation of jazz musicians who have heard the great albums through YouTube videos. On the one hand they are very lucky to be able to see footage rescued from various parts of the world but are they using it correctly? We didn't really have Youtube and getting hold of decent video footage of jazz greats was not easy (and expensive). We had to guess about visual clues for directing bands and had virtually no information on any communication (besides the music ones) between band members. That's why everyone says go and 'SEE' live jazz, it's much more than just sound. I certainly use video in my 'classroom' but with an extensive study we can categorise certain performances (the Miles Davis Four and More album/video spring to mind) to illustrate important non-musical communication between musicians. However, I believe too much access to Jazz on Video can actually be harmful to budding jazz musicians.

Many towns now have no or very little live jazz and so on a student budget, it may be difficult to see good quality live jazz. Many jazz concerts (especially high calibre artists) are very expensive and many only play in large concert halls usually found in the larger cities of the world. I'm certainly not trying to discourage seeing live jazz for there is no substitute. But, the next best thing is video. With the recent advances in broadband and video encryption, we are able to digitise VHS recordings and archived footage of many of the jazz greats. In a recent search on YouTube I found some video footage of the great Phineas Newborn. I knew the video existed (from the Montreux Jazz Festival in 1979) but knew that it would probably never be published. I have an automated search on YouTube for Phineas Newborn in the hope that it would magically materialise on there. And bingo, after 5 years of searching, there it was. Very rare, some of the only existing colour footage of him. I was overjoyed. Sadly at the time of the recording illness had taken its toll on Newborn and his playing was not at his prime. It didn't matter though; it was such a joy to see him play in full colour. This study is a double edged sword. Seeing amazing footage certainly has advantages for students of the music and it certainly has advantages for musicologists and historians. But, there may be substantial disadvantages with using video footage as a means to learn how to play jazz.

As a teacher I am constantly trying to find new ways of explaining concepts in jazz education. We have an overwhelming source of material in the form of audio-visual resources found on the Internet. Any new student of jazz has a resource greater than most University Libraries right in their own home. Story time:

A hypothetical 15 year old has just discovered jazz. His mum and dad went away for the weekend and said boy went through his dad's record collection. 'Hmm' he thinks, 'who is his Charlie Parker'? He puts the record on and hears this new and exciting music called bebop. The music grabs him by the ears and he gets that hungry feeling in his stomach to listen and to find out more. He fires up the family computer, starts up Spotify, opens up the YouTube homepage

and while that loads he is reading about Bird's life on Wikipedia. In the space of about 10 seconds he has a good proportion of Bird's recorded output, some video footage of him in action and a complete biography in text, not to mention pictures. The boy spends 2 hours reading about, listening to and watching Charlie Parker. He looks at his watch and 'oh man, its 2am, I better go to bed'. Loaded with information he goes to bed. In the space of 3 hours all of his Christmases have come at once; he's has discovered someone he loves, someone who has inspired him beyond all belief. The ultimate role-model if it weren't for Bird's bad habits. Habits aside, the boy has made a start to the most amazing journey, a journey into the discovery of the music of Charlie Parker. He wakes up the next day feeling fully satisfied about his discovery. He is overloaded with information. He watches another video with his breakfast. Why listen to audio when you can 'see' a concert he thinks. After breakfast he chats with his friends' online, updates Facebook, twitters about his amazing night with Charlie Parker. His friends' write back laughing at him for listening to such 'old' music. They give him a link to a song about drugs and violence by an emerging hip-hop artist, no-names mentioned...So here's my 50 cent (s).

Kids today are bombarded with information. Any subject that requires attentive attention to detail is sadly becoming less important in the minds of the kids. You only have to read the average essay or worse, an email by a 15 year old. As a University Lecturer I read essays written by 18-23 year olds and even some of those contain 'text' ahem, I mean 'txt' language. Jazz is no exception.

Used in the right way, the Internet and all of its facets is an amazing tool for any subject area. As musicians we can now listen to the music of Indonesia whereas 10 years ago, it was much more difficult to get hold of that music. However, music by its very nature is centred on sound rather than sight. It is true that one can enhance the experience by seeing the music performed live, without doubt. You could argue that one would learn more from seeing the creative process in action. This is the subjective area that I would like to explore more. It has long been recognised that reading music during a performance could have negative implications on the delivery of the performance. I know from my own experience, I play much better when I'm not reading. Many concert pianists prefer to memorise the music and not have any music to distract them from the sounds. Videos of the jazz greats reveal that hardly any of them used notation in any form unless playing with a big-band and even then not many did. There reason is that visual input can distract one from an auditory input. I've not looked into the science of how this functions within the brain. But, I know from my own experience that when I'm stimulated visually as a means to make music my brain somehow adapts and uses some of its power from other areas. This may mean decreased awareness of sound. Why else would I play better without music?

My point is, when learning jazz the student MUST listen for hours and hours (over years) in order to internalise phrasing, swing and the language of jazz. By viewing video our vision senses are stimulated and therefore our auditory sense is diminished in order to compensate for the extra stimulation. That diminution of the auditory sense may be a disaster for the aspiring jazz student. Over time the student may miss out on really hearing the finer details of a nuanced performance. If you watch any professional performer, at some point during their performance they are likely to close their eyes. It's not for the visual benefit of the audience but rather so the performer can focus more on sound without the distraction of a visual stimulus.

The study of the negative impact of the use of video in jazz education is an area of untouched research. There are obvious benefits for historical and musicological study. I would say the main benefit for music students is to 'see' their heroes in action as a means of inspiration. It is also useful to see how bands communicate in a non-musical way to get the desired performance. I feel however that long-term use of video as a substitute for audio and a means of acquiring the skills to become a jazz musician may have detrimental effects on the student. To be a jazz musician requires a highly developed auditory sense and the trained ability to process that information through the mind almost instantly. By listening and transcribing music not only is the student acquiring the 'information' for the formation of the jazz language but they are also training their ear and mind to be able to listen on a deeper level and faster level.

When used in conjunction with pure audio, video can be combined with audio as two separate resources of study. In this configuration video will enhance the student's learning. The added visual stimuli will inspire the student. Seeing what your favourite player looks like while they play is a tremendously exciting experience. I can vividly remember the first ever time I 'saw' Keith Jarrett play. The same with Charlie Parker, John Coltrane and Thelonious Monk. The people behind the music are important just as the historical and social impacts of the music. Students should learn about all the facets of the music. Jazz is such a unique music in that it grew out of social, political and racial issues; one cannot ignore where it came from and the figures that helped shape it.

To summarise, video should not be a substitute for audio (which could happen with the advent of today's technology and the way kids are educated). Its use is optimised when used as an extra resource alongside pure audio. Video should never be used as a substitute for attending live jazz concerts but it is useful when students are unable to see live jazz in person due to limitations on funds and/or transport. Video remains a very important resource for musicologists and historians and that area is only going to get better as time goes on. Services like 'Jazz on The Tube' (emailed jazz videos straight to your inbox) are wonderful for fans, historians and music students. But care must be taken, it is very easy to become addicted to seeking video and may become counterproductive when that time could be used listening intently to audio. There is no substitute for sound despite the attractive and exciting nature of video. Learning jazz through videos is like learning to speak through watching someone's lips. You will learn but the process is limited. Why don't we all lip read? Because more details are acquired through sound. Tone and inflection can completely alter the meaning behind a sentence. It's the same in Jazz. Imagine watching Charlie Parker play without sound. We can learn from looking at scores and transcriptions but we are limited but the lack of being able to notate all the information. Strings of eighth notes in a transcription of a Parker solo are ultimately useless. All of the important information such as phrasing, rhythmic displacements, accents and tone is missing. These are things that are only available through sound. Video or visual stimulus may distract the student of these elements through watching a video of Bird in flight.