TED GIOIA

Jazz: The Aesthetics of Imperfection

I

Jelly Roll Morton, the celebrated New Orleans pianist and composer, once confided that he had invented jazz in 1902. Morton, as even his admirers admit, was a man prone to exaggeration, particularly on the subject of his own achievements. Yet even if we had no other reason to doubt him, this extraordinary claim would probably still make us uneasy. How could anyone *invent* jazz? It seems rather to be like electricity or North America—things not consciously invented, but only recognized, after the fact as it were, by some especially observant or fortunate individual.

Those with a taste for historical exactitude may feel comforted by imagining some definite date in the past when musicians, perhaps on cue from Jelly Roll or one of his contemporaries, threw away their written scores and started to improvise. The history of jazz, however, is scarcely so tidy—even the earliest Afro-American musicians were apparently playing without written parts, and improvisation, far from starting with jazz, has a rich history as old as music itself.

Yet improvisation, if not restricted to jazz, is nonetheless essential to it. Morton's music, as well as that of the other early jazz masters—Louis Armstrong, King Oliver, Sidney Bechet and others—reflects its central role. More than any of these artists' compositional or technical innovations, improvisation remains even today the most distinctive element of a jazz performance—so much so that a jazz instrumentalist is evaluated almost entirely on his ability to "take a solo." Certain composed works—Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, for example—may sound "jazzy," but what we hear is not jazz until the spontaneous element of improvisation is added to the written parts.

For the trained musician, this calculated disregard of the written score can prove to be exasperating. Pianist Lilian Hardin, later to become Mrs. Louis Armstrong, studied music for three years at Fisk University before becoming involved with jazz. Yet such formal training was of little use when she auditioned for her first job in a jazz band. Hardin later recalled:

> When I sat down to play I asked for the music and were they surprised! They politely told me they didn't have any music and furthermore never used any. I then asked what key would the first number be in. I must have been speaking another language because the leader said, "When you hear two knocks, just start playing."
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> It all seemed very strange to me, but I got all set, and when I heard those two knocks I hit the piano so loud and hard they all turned around to look at me. It took only a second for me to feel what they were playing and I was off.[1]

Yet if improvisation is the essential element in jazz, it is also the most problematic. Perhaps the only way of appreciating its peculiarity is by imagining what other art forms would be like if they placed an equal emphasis on improvisation. Imagine T.S. Eliot giving nightly poetry readings at which, rather than reciting set pieces, he was expected to create impromptu poems—different ones each night, sometimes recited at a fast clip; imagine giving Hitchcock or Fellini a handheld motion picture camera and asking him to film something—anything—at that very moment, without the benefits of script, crew, editing, or scoring; imagine Matisse or Dali giving nightly exhibitions of his skills—exhibitions at which paying audiences would watch him fill up canvas after canvas with paint, often with only two or three minutes devoted to each "masterpiece."

These examples strike us as odd, perhaps even ridiculous, yet conditions such as these are precisely those under which the jazz musician operates night after night, year after year. Jazz demands that the artist create something new and different at every performance; musicians who "cheat" by playing the same or similar solos over and over again are looked down upon by colleagues and fans. In 1978, David Hollenberg wrote in criticism of a performance by pianist Ray Bryant:

[1] Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya* (New York, 1955), p. 93.

> How much is improvised? Tonight, Bryant played *After Hours* in a note-for-note copy of the way he played it on the *Dizzy, Rollins, and Stitt* album on Verve some fifteen years ago. Was it written then? Or worse. Has he transcribed and memorized his own solo, as if it were an archeological classic? It was fine blues piano indeed, but it is odd to hear it petrified in this way. Similarly, Bryant concluded each set tonight with a gospelish blues (in C, of course) that was, note-for-note, the same both times. The hall had been cleared at the break, so the few of us that snuck through both sets were faced with the strange fact that some of the freest sounding pieces of the evening were the most mechanical.[2]

Here it is not the musical quality of Bryant's performance that is under attack—Hollenberg admits that the piece in question was "fine blues piano indeed"; instead, it is the lack of the crucial improvisational element which disturbs the critic.

Bryant's case is not unusual. Most jazz musicians find it far easier to rely on certain stock phrases which have proved themselves effective in past performances than to push themselves to create fresh improvisations. Albert Lord, in his landmark work *The Singer of Tales*,[3] has shown that this practice is also common to the oral poetry tradition and probably reaches back to Homer if not earlier. The daunting task of improvisation, whether in music or poetry, can scarcely be achieved without some reliance on these memorized phrases. Even so, Hollenberg's criticism is justified: any style that is based entirely on these clichés rarely sustains our interest. For the jazz musician this conflict between his need for spontaneity and his equally strong desire to stay within the confines of the familiar lies at the heart of his music. This is an aesthetic choice he cannot avoid. And though some have suggested that jazz is an intuitive art which defies conscious reflection and, hence, has little to do with aesthetic decisions, in this instance I would argue that they are wrong. Jazz is as much an intellectual art as an emotional one.

II

Yet does not jazz, by its reliance on spur-of-the-moment improvisation, relegate itself to being a second-rate, imperfect

[2] David Hollenberg, "Caught: Ray Bryant," *Downbeat*, May 18, 1978, p. 42.
[3] Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960).

art form? Does not its almost total lack of structure make even the best jazz inferior to mediocre composed music? Why, we ask, should the spontaneous prattle of an improvising musician interest us as much as the meticulously crafted masterpieces of the great composers? The dilemma jazz faces was stated with clarity by composer Elliott Carter, when he suggested that the musical score serves the essential role of preventing "the performer from playing what he already knows and leads him to explore other new ideas and techniques."[4]

One is tempted to reply that some of the most gifted composers of Western music—Beethoven, Bach, Mozart, Chopin—were themselves skilled improvisers who took great interest in the challenge of spontaneous creation. But this is more of an evasion than an answer. That Mozart improvised in his spare time is no more a reason for glorifying improvisation than is the fact that Mozart enjoyed bawdy jokes a reason for elevating them into an art form.

Our problem remains, and despite its neglect by most jazz critics, it is the central problem of jazz criticism. It has become commonplace to assert that jazz is an "art"; yet those who glibly pronounce this word seldom move on to a discussion of how jazz compares (if at all) with the established arts. If jazz music is to be accepted and studied with any degree of sophistication, we must develop an aesthetic that can cope with that music's flaws as well as its virtues.

It is hardly worth noting that the improvisations of Beethoven could scarcely have been as perfect as his compositions; still I feel confident that I am not alone in being willing to exchange—were such an exchange possible—a half-dozen of his written works for just one recording of Beethoven improvising at the keyboard. Can I justify this desire on the grounds of something more than idle curiosity? Must improvised art be branded as second-rate art?—as art which is necessarily less worthy of our attention than that which is the result of careful planning? If we hope to elaborate a conceptual framework which will allow us to accept jazz on its own terms—and not as the bastard child of composed music—we

[4] From John Rockwell's *All American Music* (New York, 1983), p. 166.

must develop what I would like to call an "aesthetics of imperfection."

An aesthetics of jazz would almost be a type of non-aesthetics. Aesthetics, in principle if not in practice, focuses our attention on those attributes of a work of art which reveal the craftsmanship and careful planning of the artist. Thus the terminology of aesthetic philosophy—words such as form, symmetry, balance—emphasizes the methodical element in artistic creation. But the improviser is anything but methodical; hence these terms have only the most tangential applicability to the area of jazz. The very nature of jazz demands spontaneity; were the jazz artist to approach his music in a methodical and calculated manner, he would cease to be an improviser and become a composer. For this reason the virtues we search for in other art forms—symmetry, design, balance between form and content—are largely absent from jazz. In his act of impulsive creation, the improvising musician must shape each phrase separately while retaining only a vague notion of the overall pattern he is forging. Like the great chessplayer who, we are told, must be able to plan his attack some dozens of moves ahead, the jazz musician's opaque medium forces him to struggle to create a coherent musical statement. But, unlike the chessplayer, he is not given nearly unlimited time. His is an art markedly unsuited for the patient and reflective.

III

Perhaps this unremitting emphasis on spontaneity helps to explain the peculiar personalities of so many of jazz's most noted practitioners. If the jazz artist is impatient and unpredictable, it is only because his art stresses precisely those mercurial qualities. This is not to say that the jazz life breeds unreliability or instability. The line of causation probably moves in the opposite direction: the jazz world offers a creative outlet for the musical talents who, for often unrelated reasons, lack the patience and decorum to succeed in the more traditional areas of musical activity. One can scarcely imagine a Charlie Parker or a Lester Young thriving in a situation

which demanded the production of elaborate symphonic scores, or the ability to survive in the environment of the conservatory or university music department. For artists such as these, jazz provides the most suitable area in which they can develop and exercise their talents. Indeed, only a particular type of temperament would be attracted to an art form which values spur-of-the-moment decisions over carefully considered choices, which prefers the haphazard to the premeditated, which views unpredictability as a virtue and sees cool-headed calculation as a vice. If Mingus, Monk, Young, and Parker had been predictable and dependable individuals, it seems unlikely that their music could have remained unpredictable and innovative.

Even the most dispassionate admirer of jazz must find it unsettling to dwell upon the recurring historical correlation between improvisational brilliance and mental instability among jazz's foremost musicians. This disturbing tradition, as old as jazz itself, stretches back to the enigmatic turn-of-the-century figure Buddy Bolden—by most accounts the first musician to play New Orleans-style jazz—whose performing career was cut short in 1906 by his lapse into paranoid schizophrenia. For another quarter of a century Bolden survived in a mental institution, finally succumbing to "cerebral arterial sclerosis" in November, 1931; but his music was scarcely so long-lived: it is known to us only through intriguing and often contradictory descriptions by those who had heard Bolden play. About the only detail these accounts agree on is the loudness of Bolden's playings. The classic account is Morton's, which describes how Bolden's horn could be heard ten or twelve miles away on a clear, still night.[5] In the words of Frankie Dusen: "Bolden blew the loudest horn in the world."[6] Another old-time jazzman remarked on another aspect of Bolden's playing which is perhaps more to the point, at least in its emphasis on the acute psychological pressure which an improvising musician can bring to bear on himself in attempting to remain innovative and creative: "That fellow studied too hard," he said of Bolden, "always trying to think up

[5] Alan Lomax, *Mr. Jelly Roll* (Berkeley, 1950), p.60.
[6] Donald Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden* (New York, 1978), p. 102.

something to bring out. He could hear you play something and keep it in his head—then go home and think up parts."[7] Morton's evocative characterization of Bolden's disorder is hardly so elegant: "he went crazy because he really blew his brains out through the trumpet."[8] Bolden's recurring appearance in jazz lore as an almost legendary founding-figure serves as an apt, if somewhat distressing, reminder of how often jazz's foremost practitioners have lingered at the far end of eccentricity and on the borderline of mental disorder.

In any event few can deny that, as jazz developed, its leading innovators began using their music to display a frenzied, devil-may-care attitude which stressed the most demanding elements in the improvisational process. At the same time this more "progressive" approach to the music was well suited to the technical virtuosity which many postwar jazz artists brought to their craft.

These founders of modern jazz—Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Bud Powell—favored breakneck tempos, far faster than those of even the most spirited numbers of the big band era. Whatever time the early jazz musician had to contemplate his solo leisurely as he played it was soon forsaken as modern jazz developed. Parker and Gillespie attacked the chord progressions of songs such as "Cherokee" and "I've Got Rhythm" at such furious tempos that the soloist often had only a mere second to adjust to a chord before the next one was upon him. Hitherto jazz had relied upon the spontaneous creativity of its musicians, but now it seemed that it was their reflexes that were being tested. To the old-timers of jazz, these frantic and frenetic performances could be quite unnerving. Even an intelligent and adventurous swing era musician like Dave Tough found his first experience with modern jazz to be a frightening one. Tough recalled:

> As we walked in, see, these cats snatched up their horns and blew crazy stuff. One would stop all of a sudden and another would start for no reason at all. We could never tell when a solo was supposed to begin or end. Then they all quit at once and walked off the stand. It scared us.[9]

[7] Alan Lomax, p. 60.
[8] Alan Lomax, p. 60.
[9] Marshall Stearns, *The Story of Jazz* (New York, 1956), pp. 224–225.

The heirs of the beboppers valued these same attributes: speed, virtuosity, intensity, and stamina. With the recording of John Coltrane's composition "Giant Steps" in 1959, the development of these musical obstacle courses reached a level of complexity that was almost perverse in the demands it made on the soloist.

With the coming of the new wave of avant garde jazz musicians, the improvisational element in jazz was further emphasized in a different manner. Earlier generations had incorporated improvised solos into a framework of music that was still largely composed. If we study the earliest jazz recordings, we notice that only a small portion of the music was devoted to improvised solos; even in early modern jazz a great number of compositional elements remained—with the beboppers at least the harmonic progressions and some melodic lead lines were set in advance. But with the assault of the avant garde, even these last vestiges of composed music were often discarded. This reliance on "total" improvisation had been attempted earlier by Lennie Tristano and other progressive musicians of the "cool" school of jazz, but these tentative forays into the unknown were only child's play when compared with the more iconoclastic works of the next generation of innovators. (Perhaps it is misleading to speak of "generations" in the context of jazz where important innovations are separated by only a few years. Harmonic developments which occurred over centuries in classical music take hold in the jazz world over a few decades; the development of jazz harmony between 1940 and 1960 is in many ways equivalent to—because parasitic on—the developments in Western harmony between 1780 and 1920.)

By the time we reach the early seventies, total improvisation had spread from the avant garde back into mainstream jazz. Keith Jarrett's *Solo Concerts*, released during this period, contains two hours of highly melodic and easily accessible music, not a single note of which was composed in advance; Jarrett claims to enter his solo concerts with no preconceived notions of what he is to play, and his confident reliance on the inspiration of the moment is at times almost frightening.

What we have seen in the history of jazz is an increasing reliance on the improvisational element. Even with the earli-

est practitioners this aspect was present, but as jazz matured improvisation came to play a greater and greater role, at first accounting for less than half of the music, now often accounting for almost all of it. As though it were following some musical law of entropy, jazz has evolved away from the firm ground of composed music towards the *terra incognita* of complete improvisation. Accordingly, if improvisation is, as I have claimed, the problematic element in jazz, it has only become more so with the passing of time. Some see this increasing reliance on improvisation as a step towards total artistic freedom; others, less sanguine, see the music falling into the abyss of formlessness.

IV

Certainly it is wrong to claim that there is *no* form in improvisational music; it is rather a different type of form. We must distinguish between two different ways of adhering to form if we are to understand how jazz differs from most of the other arts. I would like to call these two different types of form the blueprint method and the retrospective method.

The blueprint method is most clearly represented, as one might gather from its name, in architecture. Here the artist plans in advance every detail of the work of art before beginning any part of its execution. For the architect this plan takes the form of a blueprint; for the painter it is revealed in preliminary sketches; for the novelist it is contained in outlines and rough drafts.

Some may feel that the blueprint method is the only method by which an artist can adhere to form. But I believe this judgment to be quite wrong. We can imagine the artist beginning his work with an almost random maneuver, and then adapting his later moves to this initial gambit. For example, the musical improviser may begin his solo with a descending five-note phrase and then see, as he proceeds, that he can use this same five-note phrase in other contexts in the course of his improvisation.

This is, in fact, what happens in Charlie Parker's much analyzed improvisation on Gershwin's "Embraceable You."

Parker begins with a five-note phrase (melodically similar to the "you must remember this" phrase in the song "As Time Goes By") which he employs in a variety of ingenious contexts throughout the course of his improvisation. Parker obviously created this solo on the spot (only a few minutes later he recorded a second take with a completely different solo, almost as brilliant as the first), yet this should not lead us to make the foolish claim that his improvisation is formless.

Improvisation follows not the blueprint method but the retrospective method. The improviser may be unable to look ahead at what he is going to play, but he can look behind at what he has just played; thus each new musical phrase can be shaped with relation to what has gone before. The same technique can be applied to the other arts, but this is generally the exception rather than the rule. A noteworthy example would be Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road*, which was reputedly typed on a roll of paper instead of on individual sheets; thus the novel was written in a continuous manner without the benefit of rewrites. (It is perhaps worth noting that Kerouac was one of Charlie Parker's greatest admirers, and remarked at least once that he would like his writings viewed as a kind of literary counterpart to a jazz improvisation.) Kerouac's novel is a rare exception, if only because most artists want to take advantage of any benefits that may accrue from careful planning or rewriting.

Typically the retrospective method will be employed either by the artist who is extremely impatient, or else by one who is under acute time pressure. One of the clearest examples of this institutionalized haste is found in early Italian fresco painting. The gesso on which the fresco was painted dried very quickly and the artist was obliged to complete that portion of the painting with great speed. Bill Evans, in his liner notes to Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue*, describes a similar approach found in a school of Japanese art:

> . . . the artist is forced to be spontaneous. He must paint on a thin stretched parchment with a special brush and black water 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 practice 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.[10]

The notion that deliberation interferes with the artistic process fits well with the spontaneous demands of improvisation, yet is at odds with the much different attitude found in those arts built upon the blueprint method. Examples from the visual arts notwithstanding, jazz is the most extreme example of a reliance on retrospective form. Although other performance arts (theater, choreography) have experimented with improvisation, such attempts have usually been peripheral to the art form as a whole; certainly none have allowed improvisation to play as dominant a role as has become the case with jazz. The reasons for this, as we shall presently see, are all the more interesting when one discovers that they are completely external to the art forms themselves.

V

Who has exerted the greatest influence on twentieth-century art? Joyce? Pound? Eliot? Picasso? Le Corbusier? Most would dismiss such a question as being alluring yet fruitless. The artistic pantheon is the truest exemplar of pluralism—works of art are incommensurable, particularly when the works in question are taken from different artistic realms. How can we assert that Picasso's *Guernica* is more important than Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* when we are unsure of the very grounds on which such comparisons should be made? For this reason, the conventional logic goes, it is best to leave such ratings to those who evaluate prizefighters or hit records.

But even with this acknowledged, I still believe that there was one person whose influence on twentieth-century art surpassed the rest, and this is all the more peculiar when we consider that he himself was not an artist. I am referring to Thomas Alva Edison. The influence of this autodidact inventor from Milan, Ohio, is probably overlooked for the simple

[10] From the liner notes to Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* (Columbia PC 8163).

reason that it is so pervasive; his inventions set off repercussions in ways that Edison himself would never have understood. His invention of the motion picture camera was his clearest contribution to the arts; not only did this development make the cinema possible, but Edison's own early forays into filmmaking were among the most significant demonstrations of the potential of this art form.

But there is at least one more art form indebted to Edison—jazz. In 1877 Edison was the first to apply already existing technology in inventing the phonograph; now for the first time sounds could be recorded with the same precision that books achieved in recording words. Few realize how important the existence of the phonograph was to the development of improvised music. Hitherto, the only method of preserving musical ideas was through notation, and here the cumbersome task of writing down parts made any significant preservation of improvisations unfeasible. But with the development of the phonograph, improvised music could take root and develop; improvising musicians who lived thousands of miles apart could keep track of each other's development, and even influence each other without ever having met.

With this in mind I believe we can now answer the question posed in the last section. Why has improvised music reached a level of sophistication not found in, for example, improvised theater or improvised dance? The reason is clear: the development of the phonograph made it possible for musical improvisers throughout the world to share a common heritage and react to the innovations of others. Perhaps with the introduction of low-cost video recorders we may see improvisational theater follow a similar path.

This is not to make the absurd claim that jazz did not exist before it was recorded; in fact jazz had been developing in New Orleans for some two decades before the historic recording session of February 26, 1917, at which the Original Dixieland Jass Band (ironically a group containing only white musicians) made the first jazz record. Yet the existence of the recording industry was necessary if jazz was to develop at all, rather than die out as a passing fad or persist as mere folk music. The clarinet player Buster Bailey claimed that the musicians in Memphis began to improvise only after they had

heard recordings made by the New Orleans players. As the jazz scholar James Lincoln Collier has noted, before jazz was preserved on records it "was an obscure folk music played mainly by a few hundred blacks and a handful of whites in New Orleans, and rarely elsewhere."[11]

These early recordings found a ready audience and other bands sprang up to fill the public's demand for jazz. Only two years after these first recordings were made, Leon "Bix" Beiderbecke, who was destined to be one of the legendary figures of early jazz, developed his own style by studying them. His biographer describes how Bix would place the wind-up gramophone to the left of the family piano and pick out the lead instrument's melody note for note. To catch the more complex phrases he would slow down the gramophone manually. Only through this laborious imitation of recorded jazz was Beiderbecke able to develop his own celebrated style.[12]

This reliance on recordings was repeated again and again by most of jazz's greatest innovators. Most jazz scholars agree that the turning point in Charlie Parker's musical development occurred when Parker began studying and memorizing the recorded improvisations of tenor saxophonist Lester Young. The number of instrumentalists who have benefitted from studying Parker's own recordings is legion—it would include virtually every noteworthy jazz saxophonist under forty years of age. Time and time again it has been the recording, rather than the live performance, that has propelled the development of jazz over the past sixty-five years.

By the time Thomas Edison died in 1931, jazz had swept the nation; the second generation of jazz musicians—Duke Ellington, Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young—had already begun performing. President Hoover, wishing to mark Edison's passing with an elaborate ceremonial gesture, suggested that the great dynamos which provided America with power should be stopped for three minutes in honor of the man who had contributed so much to American technology. Hoover's advisers rejected the plan; the consequences of shutting America down, even for only a few minutes, would be cata-

[11] James Collier, *The Making of Jazz* (New York, 1978), p. 72.
[12] Richard Sudhalter and Philip Evans, *Bix: Man and Legend* (London, 1974), pp. 35–39.

strophic. Edison, it seems, had helped to unleash powers which no one could now stop, and the implications of which Edison himself had only vaguely grasped. In the world of art as well, Edison's pioneering inventions unleashed forces which are still reverberating in those two great art forms—the cinema and jazz—which were born in our own century.

VI

After having seen how peculiar jazz is, in comparison with the other arts, we may despair of justifying it as a true art form rather than as an elaborate craft. Improvisation is doomed, it seems, to offer a pale imitation of the perfection attained by composed music. Errors will creep in, not only in form, but also in execution; the improviser, if he sincerely attempts to be creative, will push himself into areas of expression which his technique may be unable to handle. Too often the finished product will show moments of rare beauty intermixed with technical mistakes and aimless passages. Why then are we interested in this haphazard art? What we are talking about is, as I have stressed, an aesthetics of imperfection. Can our imperfect art still stand proudly alongside its more graceful brothers—painting, poetry, the novel, etc.—in the realm of aesthetic beauty?

Clearly any set of aesthetic standards which seeks perfection or near-perfection in the work of art will find little to praise in jazz. Yet this approach, however prevalent, is not the only valid way of evaluating works of art. A contrasting, if not complementary attitude looks at the art not in isolation but in relation to the artist who created it; it asks whether that work is expressive of the artist, whether it reflects his own unique and incommensurable perspective on his art, whether it makes a statement without which the world would be, in some small way, a lesser place. This, I believe, is precisely the attitude toward art that delights in jazz. We enjoy improvisation because we take enormous satisfaction in seeing what a great musical mind can create spontaneously. We are interested in what the artist can do, given the constraints of his art. We evaluate Louis Armstrong or Charlie Parker not

by comparing him to Beethoven or Mozart, but by comparing him to other musicians working under similar constraints, and our notions of excellence in jazz thus depend on our understanding of the abilities of individual artists and not on our perception of perfection in the work of art. In short, we are interested in the finished product (the improvisation) not as an autonomous object, but as the creation of a specific person. When we listen to Charlie Parker's records we take delight in probing the depths of his abilities as an artist, and even his failures interest us because they tell us about the musician who created them.

This approach to jazz, I realize, goes against the grain of much recent criticism. The paradigm of the now dominant view is "deconstructive" criticism in which the work of art is viewed as totally divorced from the artist who created it. With this autonomy of the work of art, the artist's intentions in creating art are no longer of interest. Implicit in much earlier art criticism was the belief that it is permissible to interpret the work in ways the author never envisaged (this belief is at the foot of Freudian and Marxist interpretations), but with "deconstruction" the artist has completely disappeared—he is not even given the dubious honor of being psychoanalyzed. What we are left with is the bare work of art itself.

In this light, any defense of jazz based upon its ethos of individualism is bound to appear anachronistic. It focuses attention on the individual at the very time when he seems to have fallen out of favor with most critics and philosophers of art (and not only there: the last few decades have witnessed an attack on the individual in fields as disparate as sociology, history, anthropology, the theory of meaning, linguistics, the history of science, and psychoanalysis). An aesthetic based on the individual artist has always bothered many by its extreme implications. How few of us would agree with Ruskin's assertion that Gothic art is superior to other types of art, despite technical imperfections, because it gave scope to the creativity of the individual artist. Such a radically individualistic aesthetic has dangers of its own, but to a certain extent Ruskin is worth taking seriously: he calls attention to a simple, yet easily neglected fact, namely that art exists not in isolation but only as the product of an artist. Such a truth may temporarily

elude the dispassionate spectator at an art museum or the reader of a novel, but it is ever present to those in attendance at a jazz performance. In its own odd way, jazz has perhaps the most firm ethos of individualism of all the arts.

Traditional approaches to aesthetics which search for platonic ideals of art—which often present high culture as the consumption of polished and perfected "masterpieces"—are not without their merits. An appreciation of the human, and hence imperfect element of art could, however serve to counter the obvious excesses of such a critical attitude pursued in isolation. The viewer of art, whether critic or spectator, can and should be more than a mere consumer of impersonal objects—he can legitimately attend both to the realities of the work of art and to the creative act which produced it.

Thus, an aesthetics of imperfection, one which accepts this human element in art, may not be restricted to jazz, but might be valuable in shaping our attitudes towards other artistic disciplines. Such an attitude, like jazz itself, is bound to seem peculiar in the light of recent intellectual trends. Yet by confronting the apparent imperfections of jazz, we may come to find that these so-called peculiarities are the common ground of all artistic endeavors. Our interest in the creative artist, far from being an immature obsession with cultural "heroes," may lie at the heart of our appreciation of even the most disinterested and "perfect" art.