

Jazz Improvisation, the Body, and the Ordinary

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The present essay is intended as a small corrective or counterbalance to the recent interest in aesthetics in things bodily. While elements of this turn to the body are themselves a welcome corrective—particularly to a certain sterility and abstractness in the analytic aesthetics of an earlier generation—it runs the danger of distracting us from what strike me as two central facts in aesthetic experience. 1) When I am brought to wonder about my relation to a work of art, as to the world, the pertinence of the (of my) body to that wonder goes without saying. If you will, it is part of what the word “aesthetic” already says. One can, of course, choose to become absorbed by the fact that the body is present. The form of this absorption in much recent writing has been a certain excited embrace of the body, as if aesthetic delight and awareness of the (of my) body were synonymous. But what asks to be noticed in thinking about aesthetic experience is that we should ever need to be reminded about bodies at all, as if a condition for the possibility of aesthetic experience is that the human senses, when so engaged, strain to forget themselves. 2) When I come to describe my relation to a work of art, I find that there is a difference in kind between my seeing something and my merely seeing it (or not really seeing it), and between my hearing something and my merely hearing it (or not really hearing it). One might even describe the goal of aesthetic creation as one of getting us to take an interest in the difference between our seeing or hearing something and our merely seeing or hearing it. But those who become absorbed by the role of the body in aesthetics risk losing this difference, since it is not a difference simply in or about my body. Specifically, it is not rightly understood as a difference in or to my eyes or

ears, nor as a difference in what my eyes or ears report or take in. This is not to say that it is a difference in or about my mind.¹

In what follows I will be presenting a critique of a now classic instance of an author embracing the body—in this case, as the key to understanding improvised conduct—at the cost of his aesthetic experience. The motive behind my critique is to offer a contrasting picture of how novice jazz improvisers learn their skill. In particular, I will be asking what they learn in learning how to forget their training and practice, learning how to sound other than rehearsed or contrived or canned. My remarks are directed in response to David Sudnow's pioneering account of the phenomenology of improvisation, *Ways of the Hand*.² In this book Sudnow describes his attempt to teach himself jazz improvisation in isolation, focusing on the role the body plays in his acquiring competence, and declaring his experience to be representative of most contemporary jazz practitioners. There will be occasion here to compare elements in Sudnow's account to elements in Augustine's account of learning language, and thus to consider Wittgenstein's criticism of that account. My exposition and critique of Sudnow's body-centered project occupies the bulk of this essay. At the end, I summarize an alternative to Sudnow's account that I have offered elsewhere, one in which the procedures of improvisation—those that most interest practitioners and enthusiasts—are shown to be identical to those at play in our ordinary, everyday actions.

I. Jazz improvisation and the body

How does one learn how to improvise jazz? I want to begin by suggesting that progress in this area depends less on the particular approach of a teacher and the response he or she elicits from you, and more on your re-

1. To make sense of this difference is one of the motives behind Wittgenstein's several dozen remarks on aspect-seeing in the later pages of the *Investigations*. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), pp. 193–229, hereafter referred to as PI.

2. David Sudnow, *Ways of the Hand: The Organization of Improvised Conduct* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978; reprint, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), hereafter referred to as WH.

sponse to the two positions you occupy—the one who practices and the one who monitors his own practice, or the one who makes novice attempts to improvise and the one who hears full-blown improvisations in his head—the positions, as Emerson might say, of the present self and the next or higher self. By claiming that with jazz improvisation there is a sense in which the roles of student and teacher must merge, I mean to stress that the learning takes place in an act, as with learning how to walk or talk or throw a baseball or ride a bike. The lesson is next to nothing, the practice is everything. But further, it may be that what you think you are doing in your attempts at improvising is more telling of how far you will go than your particular doings are. That is, the sign of progress is not your ability to do new things (move around to different parts of the keyboard, say) but is rather your reconception or reconfiguring of your doings, as if learning here entails finding out what your goal is, or what it is you want to do. In that sense, an outcome of working at improvising is akin to the outcome of psychotherapy.

These remarks might seem to harmonize with the description David Sudnow gives in *Ways of the Hand*, and what I have to say about his book should be read through my sense of indebtedness to it. That nevertheless I think Sudnow's phenomenological account is flawed adds, if I am right, a further element to my characterization of how one learns to improvise—namely, that some practices can appear to be a radical reconfiguring of one's doings without being so, perhaps especially if one is caught up (as I think Sudnow is) in a peculiarly sociological stance or picture of what it means to set out to do something, to decide on a course of instruction. Sudnow envisions the acquiring of improvisatory competence as a more or less self-prescribed undertaking, the way buying a car is: you decide what you want, you obtain the needed resources, you apply them to the thing that first caught your eye, and you get what you expected. But such a picture falsifies the experience of learning how to play jazz no less than it falsifies the experience of learning a language.

Sudnow's account of his course of instruction following an embarrassing debut at a jazz club reveals for me the ground of his stance. Here are

the opening two paragraphs from the chapter he calls “Going for the Sounds”:

Over the next few years, committed to becoming skilled at jazz, but not tied to the occupation and a need to make a living at it, I played for the most part at home and alone, venturing only occasionally into situations of performance... Although I was advised from time to time to start working as a musician, that by getting a steady job my playing would ‘come together,’ and while I could see the sensibility of the advice for gaining skills at relaxing in my approach to improvisation, I was not attracted to the work situations someone with my skill level would be at first compelled to pursue. I saw no crucial point at working in noisy bars, where no one seemed to listen to the musicians, when I could play at home, on my own schedule. I had been making what I regarded as real progress on many fronts, sensed that I had a basic grasp over the feelings of what jazz play was like, knew about my play that for all its lacks there was the necessary potential for relevant skills to develop and figured after a year of lessons, with a firm understanding of the theory of the keyboard, chord structure, and melodic principles, I was in position to learn the rest by myself in solitary practice.

I did things for several hours each day that more or less seemed reasonable. I practiced various technical exercises that I knew all musicians worked with, spent much time investigating the keyboard to discover new sorts of melodic configurations, finding various intervallic relationships to be explored, evolving ever-new pathways constructed on principles similar to ones I had been instructed about (so that the characteristic jazz sound was present), listened to a small collection of records (seldom trying the horrendous task of solo-copying), and aimed always for what I felt to be the most sophisticated and intricate examples of contemporary jazz piano playing. For the most part, my practice sessions were given over to playing a handful of songs, doing my improvisations. (WH, 34–35)

I find several things about this account immediately striking. The first is Sudnow’s understanding and rejection of the advice that he should perform more often in public. He takes the advice to be, or to mean, that performing regularly would serve to make him (only) more relaxed. The second is Sudnow’s conviction that what remains for him to learn can be developed “in solitary practice.” And third, in the course of listing six or seven elements of his solitary practice, Sudnow mentions that one thing he did not do was transcribe some jazz solos, a task he calls “horrendous.”

Sudnow appears later on to acknowledge the unrepresentativeness, not to say peculiarity, of this approach to learning jazz improvisation. He says near the end of his book that “had I been more inclined and perhaps occupationally compelled to learn by first getting some simple sentences [i.e. phrases, licks] together, a different course of socialization might have evolved” (WH, 143). But it then appears in the somewhat lengthy footnote he attaches to this sentence that the “different course of socialization” he has in mind is one which would have forgone not only social science but the intellect altogether, as though his course of instruction ought to seem unusual, out of the ordinary, only against a romanticized ideal of the natural musician:

One does not have to learn about places [i.e. notes, scales, chords and patterns] by their names to become an improviser, though most beginners do much of this these days, and most recent jazz vocabulary shows it... To speak colloquially, you must practice your scales... (WH, 143)

With this as an example of what Sudnow means by speaking “colloquially”—which I take to characterize a remark more like “You gotta get your chops together”—one begins to wonder what kind of language this sociologist means to advance in place of it. He continues in the footnote:

The most complex possibilities are not inconceivably attained by listening to records and doing no theorizing. But in modern literate circles, where a language undergoes continuous and substantial modification over single generational careers, where playing fast and intricately has come to competitively differentiate performers in a scarce marketplace, where being a good musician means to be multilingual—in such a set of circumstances, speaking [again] colloquial sociology, the days of that young man and his horn, sitting every night on the edge of the bandstand, practicing every day, learning to speak jazz like one first learns to speak a first language, are poverty-stricken and numbered. (WH, 144)

I will return momentarily to the analogy between learning to speak jazz and learning to speak a first language. For now I wish to point out the remarkableness of the suggestion that the alternative to the life of solitary

practice is the life of the illiterate working musician, the man married to his horn for whom the stage and the street are all the classroom he needs. Why does Sudnow overlook even the possibility of practicing with other musicians? Most jazz musicians of whatever musical background, schooled and unschooled, enter their jazz studies by playing in groups with other players, both better and worse than themselves. Academic approaches to teaching jazz vocabulary have not undermined the fact that knowledge of it is acquired, shared and passed on among a community of musicians not just swapping advice but trading fours, not just talking about it together but doing it together. Given the prevalence of this practice, Sudnow is overstating matters when he portrays “that young man and his horn” as a romantic figure. A better candidate for the romantic figure in his book is Sudnow himself; it is Sudnow, after all, who appears as a middle-aged university professor working at home with his piano and typewriter, practicing in solitude for five years while writing down his trials and revelations, then bursting at last onto the jazz and literary scenes simultaneously.

We ought to look at two other passages from Sudnow’s book that will fill in the picture of his education in jazz. The first of these elaborates on “the crucial turning point in [his] progress toward competent play,” the experience of watching his mentor Jimmy Rowles at the piano. Here Sudnow is at his most eloquent in suggesting the importance of how the hands and body move:

I watched him night after night, watched him move from chord to chord with a broadly swaying participation of his shoulders and entire torso, watched him delineate waves of movement, some broadly encircling, others subdividing the broadly undulating strokes with finer rotational movements, so that as his arm reached out to get from one chord to another it was as if some spot on his back, for example, circumscribed a small circle at the same time, as if at the very slow tempos this was a way a steadiness to the beat was sustained.

...I found over the course of several months of listening to and watching Jimmy Rowles, and starting to play slow ballads myself [...] that in order to get the sound of a song to happen like his, his observable bodily idiom, his style of articulating a beat, served as a guide. In the very act of swaying gently and with

elongated movements through the course of playing a song, the lilting, stretching, almost oozing quality of his interpretations could be evoked. ...I found that I could get much of his breathing quality into a song's presentation by trying to copy his ways. (WH, 82, 83)

The second passage I want to cite is a conflated summary of the lessons Sudnow learned from watching Jimmy Rowles in action; it also contains what could serve as the motto for his book:

I had come to learn, overhearing and overseeing this jazz as my intractable hands' ways—in a terrain nexus of hands and keyboard whose respective surfaces had become known as the respective surfaces of my tongue and teeth and palate are known to each other—that this jazz music *is* ways of moving from place to place as singings with my fingers. To *define* jazz (as to define any phenomenon of human action) is to *describe* the body's ways. (WH, 146)

I would like to juxtapose these words to that part of Saint Augustine's account of learning a language that Wittgenstein quotes at the beginning of his *Philosophical Investigations*:

When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out. Their intention was shown by their bodily movements, as it were the natural language of all peoples: the expression of the face, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body... Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires.³

In both accounts, I want to say, the movements of parts of the body—especially the sound-producing parts (Sudnow's intractable hands, Augustine's trained mouth)—play a surprising and what seems to me an unnatural role. Both accounts emphasize what is communicated to them by bodily movements, what Augustine calls "the natural language of all

3. Augustine, *Confessions* I.8; quoted in PI, §1.

peoples.” For him, this means his elders’ pointing, as much with their eyes (and looks of anticipation and interest) as with their outstretched arm and index finger; for Sudnow, it is the gentle swaying and embodying of the beat in the hands and playing posture of his mentor Jimmy Rowles.

I do not mean to deny the importance of these moments. They are undoubtedly among the natural responses captured in Wittgenstein’s conception of our “agreement [...] in judgments” (PI, §242)—a conception which includes our ability, for example, to pick out as infants and toddlers what “picking out” something is: to know which way to look when someone is pointing to something (from elbow to fingertip, not vice versa), what to read as encouragement in response to our babbling, what for the infant *constitutes* a response, and so on. But even if these movements and gestures are a kind of natural language, it does not follow that when we describe the *looks* of pointing we have captured what *pointing* is. Similarly, we do not capture what talking is when we describe the series of motions of a well-trained mouth saying something. Since I have argued elsewhere⁴ on Wittgenstein’s behalf that nothing may capture these to our satisfaction—that is, that our natural responses to the world are not grounded in any fact about us or about the world—my criticism here is not that these descriptions are inadequate, but that the ground they mean to gain cannot be won by phenomenological description.

Where one wants to take issue with Augustine, however, is not so much in his stressing the importance of his elders’ movements as in his imagining how his practice, his self-instruction, proceeded—namely, deliberately, or deliberately, e.g. in his imagining himself guiding or directing the muscles of his lips, tongue and jaw. This is the feature of Augustine’s account that Wittgenstein is addressing when he says: “Augustine describes the learning of human language as if the child [...] already had a language, only not this one. Or again: as if the child could already *think*,

4. William Day, “Philosophy and ‘The Literary Question’: Wittgenstein, Emerson, and Strauss on the Community of Knowing,” Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1999. See pp. 92–95.

only not yet speak" (PI, §32). Whatever thinking there is at work in a child's taking our cues, repeating our sayings, accepting encouragement, trying out these sayings in various circumstances (sometimes with the named object present, sometimes not)—and whatever problems there may be with our speaking here of the child "taking cues," "repeating," "accepting," "trying things out"—Augustine bypasses these in favor of, or by means of, a description he feels some confidence in, one involving the mechanics of what his elders did, the mechanics of what his mouth did, and the implicit assumption that their interrelation is unproblematic. In addition, Augustine pictures his mastering of language as taking place in solitary practice. He imagines himself learning how to voice his desires not in his encounters with his elders but in between those encounters, or if in their presence then in a place that might as well have been set off from his elders. Augustine's picture is this: his elders teach him the names of objects; he, mute and apparently inactive, attends to their sounds and movements (and they do not so much encourage him as put on a show for him); then he goes off and practices reproducing their sounds, practices making conversational music on his vocal instrument. But because the steps to socialization, to putting on forms of life, have already been taken somehow—and not only, or not even at all, in the moments of instruction with his elders but prior to those moments—there is no reconstituting, reconfiguring transformation for Augustine's practice to bring about. Training his mouth to form word-sounds changes nothing essential about *him* any more than training his body to do back flips would. He practices making sounds the way a novice pianist practices his scales—not to see what music can be made of them, but mechanically, imagining that he knows what the result of the practicing will be.

I have emphasized the place in Augustine's picture of language where he portrays his childhood self as practicing alone, by himself, in order to suggest both how much more convincing a role solitary practice has in Sudnow's account of one's development as a jazz improviser, and how nonetheless his practicing is described in remarkably similar terms. It is simply so much guiding and adjusting and encouraging the achievement

of particular bodily movements, all in the absence of speaking or playing with others. Does Sudnow's writing reveal a more mindful self-transformation than we find in the brief passage from Augustine's *Confessions*? It might be significant that Sudnow's musical growth forces him to alter the way he speaks and writes, as he says explicitly at one point (WH, 141), and his style becomes more evocative toward the end of his book. But what is his model for these transformations? *What* is being transformed? Sudnow explains:

It was not that a sort of jazz line would appear, something better than another had been, and then one a bit better still, with gradations that would reveal readily detectable shifts in a range of isolatable components of my ways. The distinction under fleeting regard was not as between a street corner conversation and a passage in Rilke, [was not] as between the ordinarily competent jazz pianist's solo and the elegance of a Herbie Hancock improvisation. It was like the difference between the aphasic's or stammerer's or brain-damaged speaker's or new foreigner's attempts to put together a smooth sentence, and the competent three-year-old's flowing utterance: Daddy, come see my new doll. Former ways had been lacking at the level of difference, between features of action that all the jazz on the records minimally share and the sorts of struggling amateur efforts that would never pass for competent play at all. This level [that is, competent play] becomes my descriptive concern as it was my practical one. (WH, 85)

Let me highlight two problems that I have with this passage. First, I do not find that Sudnow's description of his descriptive concern is accurate to the likeness between learning to play jazz and learning a first language. The problem with his description is evident when one looks at the competent three-year-old, who somehow gets to her flowing utterance without passing through the stages occupied by the aphasic or the stammerer or the retardate or the new foreigner (and hence without passing through the stage represented by Augustine). My alternative for drawing out the likeness between learning jazz and learning language, as I began to advance when discussing Sudnow's young man with his horn, is to say that jazz improvisation is a form of life maintained in a community of fellow-speakers, and so one in which flowing utterances are arrived at, when they are, in (musical) conversation.

Here I need to say more about that feature of most jazz players' training which Sudnow neglects, viz. the work of transcribing an improvised solo from a recording. Transcribing a solo once meant that one risked wearing the record out—which is, not unimportantly, what one would say of a toddler who repeated a new word or favorite phrase over and over. “Wearing the record out” designated a rite of passage, the worn record serving as a record of the accomplishment, its sound pattern having been transferred from the record's surface to the player's memory, so that when the sounds in the grooves became all but inaudible to everyone else they were hyper-audible, clearer than a bell, to the one who had worn the record out. When a novice transcribes and practices the inflections and nuances of a model jazz solo, she begins to learn not only how to make a “characteristic jazz sound,” but *what* in the sound matters most. She learns why, given all the things that (for example) a pair of trained hands can say at the piano, *these* things are worth saying.

One area for investigation that touches on this discovery of what is worth saying is the following: What is the connection between “developing your ear” and “finding your voice”? That question can take the form: Why are the better players invariably the better listeners? And does that connection suggest that players play the way they listen, just as we might discover that most of us write the way we read: superficially, or carefully, or playfully...? It does seem that I can come to know how someone listens (or reads) by learning how he or she plays (or writes). If the better players are the better listeners, this would suggest that the practice of listening, like the practice of interpreting a text, makes demands that are akin to those of performing.⁵ The moral would then be that the novice improviser should begin finding his way by finding his way of listening, by discovering what sounds interest him, what he most wants to hear. And the way this is done traditionally is by his transcribing and practicing those jazz solos that speak most forcefully and eloquently to him. My sense of

5. Cf. Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 37–38.

Sudnow's project—and, if you like, the motto of my critique—is that Sudnow undermines the work of the ear by his fixation on the ways of the hand. (Aren't hands and ears equally parts of the body? But the work of the ear is not something I can come to know by watching my mentor's ears, hoping to see what they do. In other words, "the work of the ear" is emblematic of an otherwise unspecified activity—but one knowable in, for example, the music someone makes at the piano.)

This brings me to a second problem with the passage cited above. Granting that Sudnow acknowledges other avenues for learning how to improvise, and granting for the moment that one can get there on Sudnow's path, where, for him, is "there"? He tells us that it is a level of competence that falls short of, but is on the way to, Rilke and Herbie Hancock. Sudnow means to suggest that while the steps to the sort of artistic mastery a Rilke or Hancock exhibit may be many and large, the difference between mastery and mere competence is more one of degree than of kind. But I have questioned Sudnow's assurance that his description of the development of improvisational skills is essentially complete. If it were, we could now characterize what these higher levels of musicality consist in, at least to say with Sudnow that they consist in such-and-such ways of the body ("To *define* jazz [...] is to describe the body's ways"). And yet there is no reason to believe that what may define one man's competence is sufficient to characterize another man's mastery.

Equally in Sudnow's and in Augustine's accounts, we are asked to believe that the quasi-introspective, guiding-of-the-body description is not simply one to set alongside others (others made from, so to speak, other perspectives), but that as a first-person narrative it is a privileged description, the transcription of each man's willful doings. I have already suggested reasons for considering Augustine's description of his instruction unusual and unnatural. Sudnow's account of his hands' ways may faithfully transcribe his understanding of the feel of improvising, but I do not see how I can, or why I should, relate it to anyone else's. And I imagine that Sudnow, in a certain mood, would not want to attribute his interest in the improviser's hands to anyone else. Creating that interest is *his* achieve-

ment. But, then, seeing his achievement as an acquired taste suddenly makes it appear less important. I would suggest, as an alternative to Sudnow's interest, that a willingness to refigure or bethink oneself in one's ordinary (musical) doings is the best indication of one's (musical) progress and genius.

II. Jazz improvisation and the ordinary

I have made the case for this alternative understanding of our interest in jazz improvisation in an essay recently published elsewhere.⁶ In order to draw the present essay to a close and prepare the way for its successor, I want to end with a comment or two about the philosophical task of explaining a human practice, such as the practice of improvising that is carried out in jazz. The task of elucidating a practice is the task of making transparent its conditions. But the conditions of a practice are not just any old concomitant of the practice. Neither are the conditions *necessarily* elucidated by a study of what always or generally accompanies the practice (e.g. the body's ways), any more than they are necessarily elucidated by a study of the practice's empirical origins.⁷ The conditions of a practice are, I want to suggest, what sustain it, or what lead humans to continue to choose it—what facts about the human, one might say, the practice continues to trade in.

In looking for the conditions of a practice (as opposed to the motive for an action) one is looking for something Wittgenstein means by "very general facts of nature"—"Such facts as mostly do not strike us because of their generality" (PI, 230). Wittgenstein's central thought at this juncture of the *Investigations* is that our concepts "correspond" to these generally unremarkable facts of nature (e.g., to the fact of our shared responses

6. William Day, "Knowing as Instancing: Jazz Improvisation and Moral Perfectionism," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58:2 (2000), pp. 99–111.

7. Cf. Wittgenstein, "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*," *Philosophical Occasions: 1912–1951*, ed. James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1993), pp. 115–155. For a critical discussion of Wittgenstein's notions of perspicuity and explanation, see Frank Cioffi, *Wittgenstein on Freud and Frazer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), and Day, "Philosophy and 'The Literary Question,'" pp. 53–74.

when someone points something out by raising his arm and extending his index finger). Wittgenstein observes that if certain facts of nature were other than they are, then concepts seemingly as fixed or permanent for us as “remembering,” “observing,” “proving,” etc., would be quite other than they are. To help clarify this claim he suggests that we “compare a concept with a style of painting. For is even our style of painting arbitrary? Can we choose one at pleasure? (The Egyptian, for instance.) Is it a mere question of pleasing and ugly?” (PI, 230). Since “style” has its ambiguities (perhaps Picasso can be said to have chosen to paint “in a primitive style”), I prefer to say on Wittgenstein’s behalf that what lie beyond the arbitrary are the *conditions* of a style. These are no more of my choosing than are the conditions of my concepts, or that I arrive at self-consciousness already immersed in a language. By “conditions of a style” I mean to include the facts of the present, social and historical moment—the ways in which the present state of painting, say, exemplifies (or extends, or rejects, or renews...) a tradition of painting. One might say: only insofar as I can choose to *paint* can I choose the conditions that lead me to paint as I do, in my own style. And of course I may fail to choose the conditions of my style even to this extent. I may merely apply paint in some manner or other, or merely mimic the painting of some painter or other. The catch, of course, is that *these* will then become the conditions of my painting, and my painting will end up revealing them, to my detriment. (Just as we cannot choose the conditions of a practice, so neither can we choose the consequences of ignoring those conditions.)

It is from such considerations that I am led to ask: What are the conditions of the practice of improvisation found in jazz, with its privileging of immediacy over exactness, and of singular statements over unifying concepts? In words I found two paragraphs back, this question becomes: Why do jazz practitioners and their audience continue to choose this practice rather than other, related practices (in particular, the practice of performing composed music)? What sustains it? What facts of the human is it trading in? My answer, to put it briefly, is that our interest in what follows what, in what makes (or fails to make) continuing sense as the improvisa-

tion unfolds, is an interest in the improviser's ability to sustain his own thought 1) in the midst of others, as well as 2) in the face of the temptation to fall back on familiar, learned ways with his instrument. One might word this by saying that the improviser battles with the twin threats to self-trust that Emerson identifies as 1) conformity and 2) consistency.⁸ But then the interest that jazz improvisation trades in is akin to a moral interest, and one which we may take with respect to our lives at any moment, battling the ordinary inducements to our own conformity and consistency. If we can imagine a people who lacked the capacity to take an interest in this battle of the self with itself, then we can imagine a people for whom "spontaneity" (and "immediacy" and "singularity" and "style" itself) would mean something altogether different from what they mean now.

If my progress as a jazz improviser makes demands on me, it is not the demand for my piano-playing hands to do certain things. My hands may know many ways; the question is why they should ever move beyond notes that come handily, to play notes whose relations to one another I have yet to measure, whose depths I have yet to sound. Progress in improvised conduct is a form of progress in self-knowledge. Might not this, too, be the (my) body's doing? Naturally; and what not?

8. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self Reliance," *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Robert E. Spiller, Alfred R. Ferguson et al. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971-), vol. 2, pp. 25-51.