

Metaphors in the Discourse of Jazz

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A rich source of musical understanding is the “language” of jazz and improvised music. A rewarding route to that understanding--rewarding because it affords a deepened sense of musical appreciation--is the metaphor. Generally speaking, metaphors, according to Lakoff and Johnson, have the power to effect the “coherent structuring of experience.”

A live jazz performance is a group activity structured in part by the concept of *journey*, and a successful journey is one that is described by another metaphor, namely, *groove*. In his book *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*, Paul Berliner writes in a section called “Striking a Groove:”

“Among all the challenges a group faces, one that is extremely subtle yet fundamental to its travels is a feature of group interaction that requires the negotiation of a shared sense of beat, known, in its most successful realization, as striking a groove. Incorporating the connotations of stability, intensity, and swing, the groove provides the basis for ‘everything to come together in complete accord’.”

The groove is something you can get into or fall out of, just as on a journey one can get lost. In describing his group’s performance, jazz pianist Brad Mehldau remarks “at times one of us gets lost, [but] almost never are we all lost together. The trick is to get good at being able to find your way back again, to quickly realize [that you are lost], then listening to the other guys, to see *where* they are and then coming back to it [the groove or the form]”

Building on previous work by Powell, Cook and Alfonso, we look at some of the key metaphors to understanding jazz and argue that realizing what Berliner calls “the infinite art of improvisation” is most effectively communicated through a family of metaphors that interrelate in nuanced ways, metaphors of *space* and *time*, and the metaphorical uses of *groove* and *swing*, in addition to the extended uses of verbs such as *strike*, *fall* and *find*.

Key words: jazz, metaphor, journey, groove, improvisation

References

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