

Metaphors in the Discourse of Jazz

Kenneth W. Cook kencook@hawaii.edu

Russell T. Alfonso ralfonso@hpu.edu

Introduction:

Our aim in this paper is to provide a brief, but, we hope, informative and insightful look at metaphors in the discourse of jazz. Typically speaking, a discourse is an exchange or interchange of thoughts and ideas, a conversation on some matter or topic in an area of interest or concern. A metaphor, we learn from Lakoff and Johnson, is essential to and ubiquitous in our understanding of any concept; without metaphor, language would be semantically impoverished, save perhaps technical terms of science. Chief among the metaphors in the discourse of jazz addressed in this essay is the term “groove”. Most jazz musicians have an intuitive sense of what “groove” is and for this reason we have decided to analyze this concept as a metaphor.

This paper is divided into three main parts:

(a) In the first part we recapitulate some of the main threads of a theory of metaphor that was presented in Lakoff and Johnson’s work *Metaphors We Live By*. This will begin to provide some initial grasp of key metaphors jazz musicians, critics and audiences use in their musical discourse, their conversations about musical performance, experience and practice.

(b) In the second part, we summarize Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s work on the psychology of optimal experience [what he calls *flow*] because “groove” is an ideal psycho-physical musical state the jazz musician strives to achieve, affording, as it does, a moving and inherently rewarding experience.

(c) In the final section, we turn to Paul Berliner’s *Thinking in Jazz*. What his book suggests concerning the concept of “groove” provides an insightful jumping off point from which further and deeper discoveries can be made vis-à-vis the nature of our understanding of this core concept pervasive in the discourse of jazz.

“Groove” as a musical metaphor can be understood as a kind of location, destination or mode of travel, and therefore, an occupied space where people can congregate, or a means of directing or channeling movement. Groove is also the *power* or capacity to direct movement as in channeling water in an aqueduct, or as Neil Powell puts it in his *The Language of Jazz*, “the usage [of] ‘groove’ derives from the shellac or vinyl gramophone record: to be *in the groove* [spatial metaphor] or to *groove along with* [psychological metaphor] is to empathize with the music to the extent of being *sent* by it [directional metaphor].” [p.57]

Thus we see our paper as interdisciplinary, for we attempt to understand a *musical* concept through a *linguistic theory* of metaphor that is grounded in a kind of *psychological* experience.

I. Lakoff and Johnson on Metaphor

Metaphorical Structuring: The first point we wish to emphasize concerns the relation between metaphor and experience. According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphorical concepts partially structure one experience in terms of another. [p.77 *Metaphors We Live By*] For example, the metaphor *argument is war* partially structures the experience of having an argument in terms of the experience of war. Another example, closer to home for us, would be a musical one: *music is a journey*, involving a high sensitivity to the musical terrain and the challenges that are faced when exploring it. For instance, the following remark by contemporary jazz pianist Brad Mehldau about his trio's performance instantiates this metaphor: "at various times one of us gets lost, the trick is to get good at being able to find your way back again." The musical metaphor clearly structures the experience of music-making in terms of the experience of taking a journey, exploring places, and the potential risks involved. What Lakoff and Johnson have in mind is, for the most part, what they refer to as "natural kinds of experience," which, they claim, are products of:

- ⌚ Our bodies (perceptual and motor apparatus, mental capacities, emotional makeup, etc.)
- ⌚ Our interactions with our physical environment (moving, manipulating objects, etc.)
- ⌚ Our interactions with other people [including those within our musical culture, i.e., our institutions, conventions, practices, etc.] [p.117]

Of course, *musical* experience and practice are realized through:

- ⌚ Coordinative bodily capacities for music-making
- ⌚ Musicians' interactions with their instruments and the physical ambience of the performing space: stage, club, concert hall, and so forth
- ⌚ Finally, there is a felt sense of musical congruity or empathy with other musicians and the audience.

Musical experience constitutes a wide spectrum, but the musician in general, and jazz musicians in particular, aim at perfecting performance often through painstaking practice, and this process cannot be realized without the impact it has on optimizing musical experience.

II. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi on Optimal Experience

In broadest and most general terms, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes optimal experience as follows: “we have all experienced times when, instead of being buffeted by anonymous forces, we do feel in control of our actions, masters of our own fate. On the rare occasions that it happens, we feel a sense of exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment that is long cherished and that becomes a landmark in memory for what life should be like . . . [such] moments usually occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. Optimal experience is thus something that we make happen.”[p.3] An example from jazz performance appears to validate this: “soloist Walter Bishop Jr. suddenly switched from streams of even eighth notes to a repeated asymmetrical pattern, whose accents fell in progressively different places in relation to Michael Carvin’s accompanying swing figure [groove], creating varied schemes of rhythmic counterpoint. Instantly aware of the pressure between the two parts, both performers smiled as they sought to steady their components [settle into a groove] in the face of their growing tension, not knowing when they would find alignment [find the groove]. When after eight measures the patterns finally coincided [in the groove], the two musicians laughed with enjoyment” [pp. 373-74]

The term Csikszentmihalyi used for this kind of experience is *flow*, which for us conveniently parallels the notion of groove. He writes “In our studies we have found that every *flow activity*, whether it involved competition, chance, or any other dimension of experience, had this in common: It provided

- ⌚ a sense of discovery [*finding* the groove],
- ⌚ a creative feeling [*creating/setting up* a groove] of
- ⌚ transporting the person *into* a new reality [getting *in* the groove].

It pushed the person to higher levels of performance, and led to previously undreamed-of states of consciousness. In this growth of the self lies the key to *flow activities*.” [Ibid]

As it happens, *flow* is essential to our understanding the metaphorical notion of “groove” in the parlance of jazz culture. In one important sense, “groove” in the lexicon of jazz performance is a channel that concentrates and directs intentions, actions and emotions of musicians just as an aqueduct directs the flow of water to certain geographic locations. If a musician *falls out of* the groove or is not *in* it, then the music falters and falls short of one of its primary aims: the exhilarating and empowering feeling that is the intrinsic reward of the jazz musician.

Enhancing the *quality of flow*, according to Csikszentmihalyi, is a function of “the two theoretically most important dimensions of experience,” namely challenge and skill, constituting what he calls the *flow channel*., [p.74]. For example, with the aim of making music, a novice jazz musician, who has relatively little skill and comparably little challenge, learning to improvise takes on the rudimentary task of randomly playing notes of a C major scale in response to a C major7 chord. He is likely to have a pleasurable experience because the

challenge does not exceed his skill level. At this point the musician is temporarily in the channel of flow, but only remains so until his skills improve as a consequence of practice, and in such a case, boredom could result. On the other hand, the challenges might be overwhelming, demanding a fluid performance through a complicated sequence of chords. This in effect would raise the level of anxiety. In either case, i.e., excessive anxiety or excessive boredom, the performer would be displaced from the flow channel. To get back into the “groove” and overcome either boredom or anxiety, the musician must modulate musical challenges which in turn would demand an increase in his repertoire of musical skills. Here we have an example of the conditions that are conducive to advancing a player’s performance and experience to progressively higher levels. Paraphrasing Csikszentmihalyi: The qualities of a group’s groove, achieved through the masterful manipulation of musical elements, ultimately transcend the technical features of jazz to provide improvisers with a rich, varied experience, a dimension of which is distinctly joyful and sensual. [p. 388-9 *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*]

In the next section we turn to what Paul Berliner understood about the meaning of groove after having interviewed many jazz musicians or having read their accounts.

III. Paul Berliner on “Groove”

“Groove” finds a place in a variety of different locutions in the discourse of jazz: finding the groove, being in the groove, falling out of the groove, staying right in/with the groove, creating a groove, having or not having the groove, Latin groove, slow/relaxed groove, etc. In his description of what “striking a groove” means, Paul Berliner writes:

“[A] feature of group interaction that requires the negotiation of a shared sense of the beat, in its most successful realization, [is known] as *striking a groove*. Incorporating the connotations of stability [settling into a groove], intensity, and swing, the groove provides the basis for “everything to come together in complete accord” [p.349 *Thinking in Jazz*]

He goes on to provide quotations from practicing professional jazz musicians commenting on the nature of “groove.” For example, Charli Persip remarks “when you get into that groove, you ride right on down that groove with no strain and no pain . . . That’s why they call it a groove. It’s where the beat [pulse] is, and we’re always trying to find that. ” [ibid] The “groove” is something to get *settled into*. As Lou Donaldson puts it: “I don’t care what kind of style a group plays as long as they settle into a groove where the rhythm keeps building instead of changing around.” [ibid] In other words, “the groove depends on the musicians’ ability to maintain a *consistent* beat.” [p.350] Donaldson then goes on with an analogy stressing the qualitative component of groove: “It’s like the way an African hits a drum. He hits it a certain way, and after a period of time, you *feel* it more than you did when he first started. He’s playing the same thing, but the quality is different—it’s *settled* into a groove. [ibid]

Summarizing the main features of groove we enumerate the following: being in the groove is

- (a) effortless/spontaneous performance
- (b) a performance aim/goal
- (c) rhythmically consistent but qualitatively variable in intensity
- (d) affective congruity, a *felt* shared sense of musical time, rhythm and tempo

Conclusion:

In conclusion, we believe that a promising strategy for fully engaging and appreciating the “groove” metaphor is to understand it in terms of an optimal experience that is both affective and structured in ways related to spatial-temporal experiences.

We hope that our interdisciplinary approach, relating as it does, the disciplines of linguistics, psychology and music, has provided a launching point towards future research in the understanding of jazz and its metaphors.

References

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