

Jazz and Imagination:
A Sartrean Approach to Jazz Ontology
SCSMT
[Slides](#)
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Slide 1- Jazz and Imagination: A Sartrean Approach to Jazz Ontology (0:00-0:11)

Thank you and welcome to my talk. This talk seeks to reframe jazz ontology within Sartre's theories of the imagination (1941).

Slide 2 (0:11-1:08)

I would like to begin by asking everyone to audiate the first four bars to the jazz standard "My Funny Valentine," a lead sheet for which is provided on screen.

Proper jazz etiquette suggests that each person who performs this task heard a unique version of the tune. For instance, many heard the melody on their primary instrument while others heard a vocal performance. Perhaps someone tried to exactly recreate Chet Baker's moody rendition as opposed to Sinatra's confident presentation. Some will stick to the exact rhythms specified by the lead sheet, while others opted to pay homage to Miles's coy phrasings. The variations found in this simple task demonstrate the basic challenge of creating any ontological model of jazz, since each rendition rests on an individual's interpretation of the tune.

Example 1- A lead sheet for My Funny Valentine

MY FUNNY VALENTINE - ROGERS/HAR

(BRASS)

The lead sheet consists of 12 staves of music. The first staff is a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The melody is written in a simple, rhythmic style. Below the melody, there are two columns of chord symbols. The first column contains: Ab min7, F-7, D-7 b5, G7 b9. The second column contains: C-, C-(min7), C-7, C-6. The third staff continues the melody with a similar rhythmic pattern. Below it, the first column of chords is: Ab min7, F-7, Ab-6, Bb7 (b9). The second column is: Eb min7, F-7, G-7, F-7, Eb min7, F-7, G-7, F-7. The fourth staff continues the melody. Below it, the first column of chords is: Eb min7, G7, C-, Bb7, A7, Ab min7, D-7 b5, G7 b9. The second column is: C-, C-(min7), C-7, C-6. The fifth staff continues the melody. Below it, the first column of chords is: Ab min7, D-7 b5, G7 b9, C-, Bb7, A7 (#11). The second column is: Ab min7, F-7, Bb7 (b9), Eb6, (D-7 b5, G7 b9). The sixth staff continues the melody. Below it, the first column of chords is: Ab min7, F-7, Bb7 (b9), Eb6, (D-7 b5, G7 b9). The second column is: Ab min7, F-7, Bb7 (b9), Eb6, (D-7 b5, G7 b9). The seventh staff continues the melody. Below it, the first column of chords is: Ab min7, F-7, Bb7 (b9), Eb6, (D-7 b5, G7 b9). The second column is: Ab min7, F-7, Bb7 (b9), Eb6, (D-7 b5, G7 b9). The eighth staff continues the melody. Below it, the first column of chords is: Ab min7, F-7, Bb7 (b9), Eb6, (D-7 b5, G7 b9). The second column is: Ab min7, F-7, Bb7 (b9), Eb6, (D-7 b5, G7 b9). The ninth staff continues the melody. Below it, the first column of chords is: Ab min7, F-7, Bb7 (b9), Eb6, (D-7 b5, G7 b9). The second column is: Ab min7, F-7, Bb7 (b9), Eb6, (D-7 b5, G7 b9). The tenth staff continues the melody. Below it, the first column of chords is: Ab min7, F-7, Bb7 (b9), Eb6, (D-7 b5, G7 b9). The second column is: Ab min7, F-7, Bb7 (b9), Eb6, (D-7 b5, G7 b9). The eleventh staff continues the melody. Below it, the first column of chords is: Ab min7, F-7, Bb7 (b9), Eb6, (D-7 b5, G7 b9). The second column is: Ab min7, F-7, Bb7 (b9), Eb6, (D-7 b5, G7 b9). The twelfth staff continues the melody. Below it, the first column of chords is: Ab min7, F-7, Bb7 (b9), Eb6, (D-7 b5, G7 b9). The second column is: Ab min7, F-7, Bb7 (b9), Eb6, (D-7 b5, G7 b9).

"MILES DAVIS SEXTET VOL. 1 - JAZZ AT THE PABA" Miles - "My Funny Valentine"

Slide 3- Ontology and Jazz (1:08-4:26)

This is by no means a novel observation and several other authors have suggested their own solutions to this problem. Brian Kane (2018), building off of Jose Bowen (1993) and Georgina Born (2005), argues that normalized similarities between performances coded listeners with expectations about what will happen in each tune. The abstracted cultural expectations thus form the ontological basis of the tune. An individual performance can deviate

from these expectations, but that does not mean that any singular performance alters the cultural expectations. Rather, a tune changes ontologically only when a recording inspires numerous other musicians to perform the tune in a manner similar to the inspiring record. As more musicians replicate the changes of the initial record, the expectations of the listener change, and thus the ontology of the tune changes.

My issue with Kane's methodology is that while it may seem rational and logical to view individual recordings as an ontological starting point, a recording of jazz is fundamentally different than a jazz utterance (see Coultard 2007 and Benjamin 1935). Recording jazz makes permanent of what was originally spontaneous. In a recording, one thing will happen, in live improvisation there is always the possibility *that anything could happen*. While Coltrane's rendition of "My Favorite Things" is undoubtedly the creative genesis of nearly every jazz performance of the tune, Coltrane's recording is not exhaustive of the potential of his creative ability. What Coltrane recorded on October 21st of 1961 could have been drastically different than what he would have played on October 22nd. Due to his methodology, Kane is unconcerned with why a jazz musician performed the way they did, and only focuses on what was performed. This does not mean Kane's system is not helpful, but rather I see it as a way to aesthetically position recordings within their social frameworks, not as an ontological framework. Rather, an ontological system should capture what the performer attempts to create. A painter's palette board shows a blue, a red, and a mixed purple, but the painter's mind shows why the color came to be. In the same sense that we must inhabit the painter's mind if we want to understand what they tried to create, we must investigate the jazz musician's mind to find what they attempted to play.

Example 2- One of Kane's network models

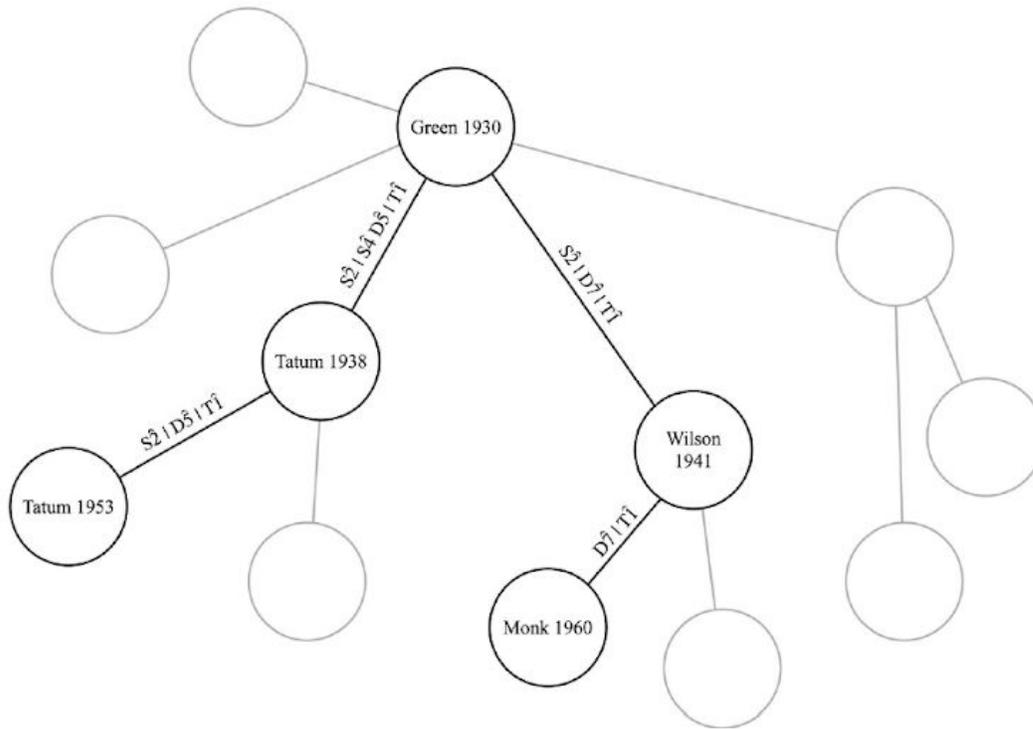


Figure 8 A model network for 'Body and Soul'.

Writers that study jazz improvisation as a performative act are better suited to approach an ontological investigation from this angle. As Ingrid Monson (1996) and Samuel Floyd (1995) teach us, the aesthetics of jazz are centered around the individual's ability to "say something" that expresses their in-the-moment identity. Since the performer creates a musical utterance that fundamentally has meaning to themselves, a system must be devised to explain what the tune is *to the performer*. Unfortunately, performative analysis of jazz does not attempt to create ontological systems, since it analyzes actions and not things. The phrase "saying something" implies an existence of the something to be said before it is said. Thus, an ontological system needs to be created that defines what the performer says, a la Monson, and answers where the performer found the original idea, a la Kane. I will attempt to create such a system by invoking Sartre's theories of the Imagination.

Slide 4- Sartre's Theories of the Imagination (4:26-6:52)

The existential and phenomenological philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1941) argues that our imagination is a fundamental tool in our interactions with the outside world. Through the imagination, we are able to internally reconstruct images of perceptions from the real world. Unlike perception, which is always focused on a singularity, in my imagination I can synthesize multiple perceptions together. A simple demonstration of this can be shown by the video of the die on the screen. The die is in the world, you can see it, you know that initially it has a "1" on the side facing you and when I flip the dice, it shows its "6" side. When the "6" is displayed, the phenomenological knowledge of the "1" has disappeared. There is no perceptual way to confirm that the die has a "1" on its backside. And yet it would be preposterous to assume that the backside face doesn't display a "1." Sartre argues this cognitive feat is possible by way of the imagination. While my perception of the die is always limited to a maximum of 3 sides, my imagination is able to construct the image of the die in which I am aware of all six sides at once. In my perceptions, I can discern that the die shows a "1" or that the die shows a "6." In my imagination, I can synthesize these two perceptions together, revealing a die with a "1" and a "6." It is important to note that although the die of my imagination seeks to recreate the die which I perceive, it is not the same die. One exists within the real world, and one is my idealized abstraction which exists only in my mind.

The difference between the die in the world and the die in my mind has a significant epistemological implication. While in perception I am always searching for new knowledge (an infinite task), this property does not carry to the imagination. I must construct the object of my imagination, which means I must be all-knowing about the object of my imagination. In this sense, my imagination represents my knowledge of an object.

I argue that in the same manner that the viewer of the die in the example above must use their imagination to discern the six sides of the die, the jazz musician must use their

imagination to answer the question: “what is this tune?” In the die example, the viewer’s knowledge is dependent on their phenomenological knowledge of the die. In the same manner, the jazz musician’s imagination rests on their phenomenological familiarity with prior musical utterances.

Example 3- Two perceptions of a singular die (screenshots for off-line viewers)



Slide 5- Jazz and Imagination (6:52-12:31)

Ask a sly jazz musician why they decided to play something and they will likely answer with “I just heard it that way.” While this is frustrating, this answer highlights the fact that audiation is perhaps the most important skill to develop if one is to become a successful jazz musician. If audiation is a sign of the musical imagination then we can reframe our phenomenological question on the die above to be about music by asking “what do you hear when you audiate a Dmin7 chord?”

A jazz musician is a tabula rasa. We are not preordained with jazz harmony, rather the jazz musician is thrown into the world and attempts to conceptualize their musical perceptions. A teacher may start by playing the notes D-F-A-C to a student and telling them that this phenomenon is “Dmin7.” The student studies this voicing, they internalize it, they learn to audiate it, and then they have finally mastered this version of a “Dmin7.” If I were to ask them to play a “Dmin7” they will imagine this voicing, and then play what they heard in their mind. But perhaps in their second lesson, the teacher introduces them to an inversion of the chord or perhaps the teacher teaches them about the possible chordal extensions they can play. Each new voicing is a new perception, but that does not mean the student conceptualizes them as distinct chords. They are all synthesized together as “Dmin7.” After perceiving and internalizing several variations, if I were to ask the student to play “Dmin7” a second time, they would now have a litany of voicings to sound, each one just as much of a “Dmin7” as the last. The student now has to choose which Dmin7 they hope to recreate for me. I argue that they figuratively rotate the “Dmin7” die of their imagination before deciding which would be the most appropriate version to play in this scenario.

In the same way a die displaying a 1 in my imagination does not represent the totality of possibilities of the die, performing one variation of a chord does not represent the totality of the possible ways I could have interpreted a Dmin7. Just because I play a lick does not mean I

could not have played another lick, nor does it mean that the unsounded lick is not part of the tune. They all combine and amass into my Dmin7.

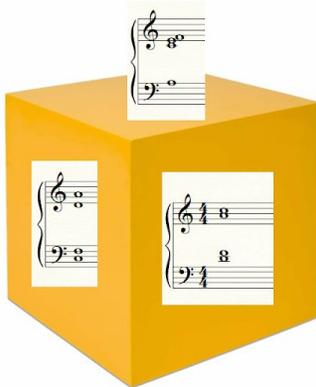
The word “my” is critical here. Since the concept of “Dmin7” is a personal grouping defined by the individual, there are no limits to how a musician chooses to express their internal understanding of “Dmin7.” For instance, it would be perfectly acceptable to play an Ab7(#11) where a lead sheet says Dmin7, not because of some a priori rule, but because I can imagine an Ab7(#11) during the 1st bar of “I Should Care,” it exists as part of my concept of “Dmin7.” Thus, the concept of what a “Dmin7” is goes as far as the individual musician wants it to go. Even as proficient of a jazz musician as I am, I constantly learn new ways to approach individual harmonies, since I am always hearing new ways other performers interpret chords and how they integrate them into their imaginations. Through this, my imagination of a tune is ever expanding.

My imagination of a Dmin7 also includes licks, melodies, and rhythms that could accompany the chord. We can expand this model to include larger progressions such as ii-V-I's, turnarounds, formal sections, and eventually entire tunes. Additionally, my imagination includes the different feels, tones, phrasings, lyrics and any other non-formal musical properties that are found in sonic recordings. These properties are also dependent on how they interact with one another. I may imagine this Dmin7 lick as appropriate when I played it in a Latin feel, but unsuitable to be played over a funk groove. Certain G7 voicings may be illogical after the Dmin7 voicing I just played, and so my imagination will reject those G7 voicings in these scenarios.

I can imagine “Summertime” in a myriad of styles, and when I perform the tune I often don't make up my mind on how I expect it to be performed until I am on the bandstand. The syncopated funk version I hear is just as present in my mind as the slow, bluesy rendition I arranged a few years back. I can voice the opening Amin7 in numerous ways, and I can solo on chorus after chorus without repeating an idea. I argue that this mass of possibilities is my version of the tune, but this version is different from Ella's, Sublime's, or the local pianist who sings at your favorite bar's version.

As my imaginative possibilities amass, my knowledge of the tune expands. Whenever I told my guitar teacher about a new tune or solo that I learned, my teacher would playfully respond “what chu know about that.” The implication of the statement is that the more you study the piece, then the better you will be able to implement it into your own playing. The further your knowledge, the better your performance. This is a central aspect of jazz, playing a tune is demonstrating what you chu know about a tune. If the imagination is a representation of our knowledge of perceptions, then it stands to reason that it is our source of jazz improvisation.

Example 4- A Hypothetical “Dmin7” cube



Slide 6- Jazz as a Three-Step Process (12:31-16:01)

From this analysis of the imagination, we can abstract out a process of jazz that accounts for both the performative and aesthetic aspects of jazz defined earlier in the presentation while also valuing the individual’s agency in the ontological creation of a performance. By defining such a process the creation of jazz will be split into three distinct steps as you can see on the screen. First, in what I will call step 1, a performer becomes familiar with a tune by internalizing other player’s versions of the tune as well as familiarizing themselves with common jazz practices such as turnarounds, reharmonizations, voicings, licks, etc. In doing

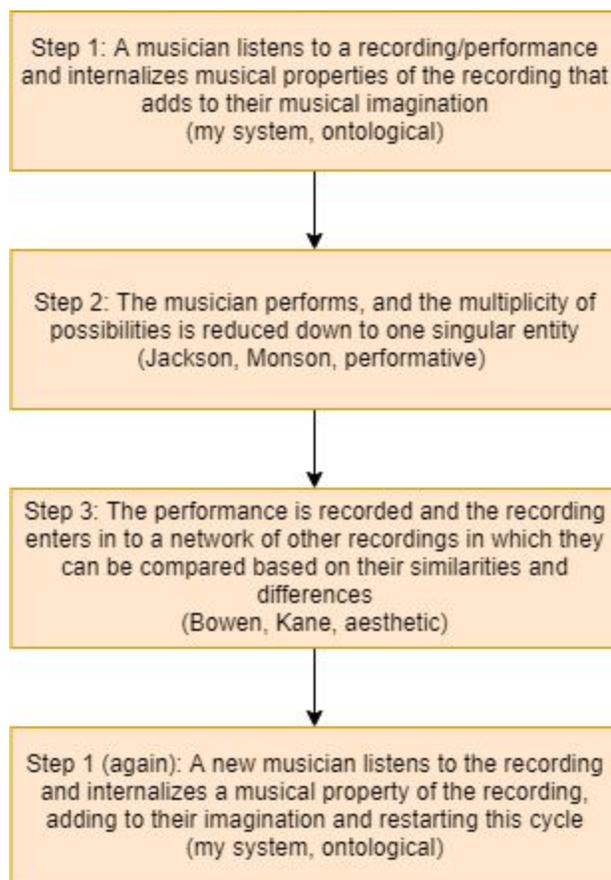
this, they create a personal, idealized version of the tune that accounts for the various and infinite ways in which they can perform said tune. The mental object represents the ontological basis of the tune that varies from person to person. At the end of step 1, a player is familiar with the corpus of musical features that may be performed when playing. While they may not know exactly how, in what order each, or which pieces will fit together, they already know all of the musical elements that *could be* involved. This collection is the object of the imagination that this paper has defined.

Then, in step 2, the jazz musician approaches the bandstand and each individual player presents an unplanned version composed of the previous imaginations they had already worked out. This is a complex process that requires each musician to sacrifice some of their imaginative potential of the tune so that the band can create a coherent, syntactic performance. The choice of which imaginative idea to perform represents the way the performer chooses to comment on the piece. This is the ritualistic performance practice that writers such as Monson, Travis Jackson (2018), Berliner (2009), Small (1987), etc., describe when focusing on the interactive nature of jazz. This performance, since singular, represents a mediation of the imagination. In this mediation, the music that the improvisor/s produce(s) is, by definition, different from what they imagined. While a skilled improviser can mostly recreate the sound they hear in their head, there are always some factors which cannot be accounted for. For instance, I may play an unintended note, or my tone might be different from what I had imagined. Regardless, it is still based in my imagination. There is no musical object in this step, just performed actions.

Finally, this process is heard by an external listener who has no agency over the produced sounds, usually in the form of a recording. This recording (step 3) makes permanent the in-the-moment sacrifices of each individual's imagination (step 1) that were required to create a coherent performance (step 2). Kane's network theory describes the implications of step 3. By showing how the created product can be discussed as part of a historical system Kane creates an aesthetic network of jazz recordings that develop meaning by their

differentiation from one another. If there is a product (recording) created, then the product created is a physical representation of that singular performance. This recording is ontologically different from the idealized, mental object of step 1. For example, the recording of “Watermelon Man” on *Head Hunters* is ontologically different from the imagined “Watermelon Man” that is in Herbie Hancock’s head. Once a recording/performance is heard, a different jazz musician internalizes the parts of the recording they find valuable, using the aesthetic frameworks suggested by Kane’s networks, and this circular process repeats itself.

Example 5- My Three-Step Process of Jazz



Slide 7-Further Avenues (16:01-19:30)

In cross checking my ontological method, I find it to be in-line with how jazz musicians discuss their art form. This is true regardless of me referencing my own experience as a jazz musician or when reading standard academic texts. I have yet to meet a musician who cannot audiate, who does not stress the importance of listening to records as a way of acquiring vocabulary, or who rejects the base premises of saying something or signifyin(g). For these reasons, I find it unlikely that a jazz musician would reject my use of Sartre.

If we accept the premise that the process of jazz can be divided into three parts, with the imagination serving as an ontological basis, then the implications of such a theory can offer a wide array of further exploration. Although Sartre's writings on the imagination are not what brought him his prestige, they do take on a large role in his more well-known works. Specifically, the imagination essentially forms what Sartre would later describe as "being-for-itself" in his magnum opus *Being and Nothingness* (1943). In contrast to being-in-itself, being-for-itself is unable to find a phenomenological basis for its existence, and thus becomes self-nihilating. In simpler terms, since the object that I imagine is not actually phenomenologically present, its existence is accompanied by a yearning to be in the world. With this yearning, there is an additional desire for action, I hope to bring about the object of my imagination. With each new imaginative desire there is also an ethical implication I put onto myself to see through the completion of my desire.

As Marc Hannaford's recent discussion of Yusef Lateef's theories of autophysiopsychic music shows, jazz musicians attach an ethical value to the performance of their music. Specifically, Lateef argues that moral performers are able to bring their musical imaginations to life through their instrument. This is remarkably similar to Sartre's theories of living in bad faith. Bad Faith, the ultimate sign of existential ethical failure, occurs due to our inability to maneuver in the world the way our imagination yearns for us to do. As we stated earlier however, the

ability to recreate one's imagination is explicitly tied to other musicians allowing musical room for such invention. This is not always the case, and thus means improviser's enter into the same existential torture that Sartre describes in his play *No Exit* (1944) in which the occupants of hell are tortured not by the devil, but rather by the mere presence of the other prisoners around them.

If this is the case, then the jazz musician lives in anguish. They struggle to meet the demands of their self-imposed freedoms. There is an anxiety to the existence of the jazz musician, be it from fans, other musicians, themselves, or record labels. How then does the jazz musician account for their own anxiety of being thrown into the world where they want to function as an ethical actor, but find themselves painfully aware of their impotence to fully do so? Further, this talk was free from theoretical analysis, and thus begs the question: is this a phenomenologically observable condition in the music? If so, how does it play out and how would we be able to theoretically quantify this condition? This is what I hope my future research explores. Thank you for listening.

A Photo of Sartre at the Piano



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