6. Hearing Between the Lines: Impressions of Meaning and Jazz's Democratic Esotericism

WILLIAM DAY

1.

Music is not speech; but like speech, it makes a claim on the listeners, or implicates them, inviting them, inviting or insisting upon their response. Stanley Cavell, in his late writings on music collected in the posthumous volume *Here and There*, arrived at a suggestive formulation to express this peculiar fact about music. His formulation is inspired by the crossing of thoughts of Walter Benjamin and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Benjamin, in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, marks a distinction between music and speech. There he characterizes the spoke word as "*afflicted* by meaning," and he posits that this fact of speech provokes a "mournfulness" that in the seventeenth century sought an outlet in music.[1] Wittgenstein, as if to bring together what Benjamin pushes apart, suggests in the *Investigations* that "understanding a sentence in language is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one may think. [...] Why is just *this* the pattern of variation in intensity and tempo? One would like to say: 'Because I know what it all means.' But what does it mean? I'd not be able to say."[2] If, following Cavell, we join Benjamin's and Wittgenstein's claims, and agree that something can count as "understanding a theme in music" even as music happily

1. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. J. Osborne (London: NLB, 1977), 209 and 211 (my emphasis); quoted by Cavell in "Impressions of Revolution," in *Here and There: Sites of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2022), 275. See also Cavell, "Benjamin and Wittgenstein," in *Here and There*, 122-24; "An Understanding with Music," in *Here and There*, 253; "Kivy on *Idomeneo*," in *Here and There*, 258-59.
2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, rev. 4th ed. (Chichester and Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §527. See Cavell, "Impressions of Revolution," 278; Cavell, "An Understanding with Music," 253; "Philosophy and the Unheard," in *Here and There*, 261; and "A Scale of Eternity," in *Here and There*, 280.

fails at being "afflicted by meaning," then Cavell's formulation of our relation to music more or less follows: "Music allows the achieving of understanding without meaning, that is to say, without the articulation of individual acts of reference on which intelligibility is classically thought to depend."[3]

Saying that "music allows the achieving of understanding without meaning" doesn't deny the *relevance* of speaking about musical meaning, or of asking what a passage of music means. Rather, it reveals why the question "What does this music mean?" so often yields contrasting forms of exasperation, as if either the question must have an answer to justify our interest in these sounds, or it shows that one doesn't understand what draws anybody to make music in the first place (what some imagine is music's inherent ineffability). But since we *do* have things to say about how a musical work or performance strikes us, we need another formulation to capture what our descriptions of music do if they don't affix a meaning. Cavell, noting that our accounts of what is interesting in a stretch of music can conflict and yet seem to us equally apt, says that these different accounts "are to be thought of not as discoveries but as *impressions* and *assignments* of meaning." We should think of the claim of music on us, its invitation or insistence that we respond to it, as music's "willingness to accept assignments of meaning and its power to transcend all its assignments." While we might apply this formulation to any of the major arts, Cavell insists (I believe rightly) that this aspect of Western music, beginning roughly in the seventeenth century, "is itself more revolutionary than any subsequent change within it or within any political event of which it could be said to form a part."[4] One is left to ask: Why is music's ability to welcome our individual impressions and assignments of meaning revolutionary? And what makes this feature of music more important politically than any other feature or event of our political life?

In moving from these preliminary thoughts about musical meaning to the political dimension of what we say about improvised music in the tradition known as jazz, let me begin with an anecdote. Some years ago I was at the Jazz Standard in New York City, listening to a late set by Ravi Coltrane's quartet. In the middle of the set, Coltrane announced a tune by his drummer Johnathan Blake called "Clues." He repeated the ti-

3. Cavell, "Impressions of Revolution," 276.
4. Ibid., 278.

tle, slowly as if for emphasis, and then they began playing "Clues," a tune I hadn't heard before. After the first several bars, I recognized that it was a kind of quirky paraphrase or variant on Thelonious Monk's "Evidence." Not an obvious variant — not a contrafact[5] of "Evidence" the way that "Evidence" is straightforwardly a contrafact of Jesse Greer's "Just You, Just Me" — but a tune that alluded to "Evidence" not only by its title but in its bar structure and pointillistic melody line. Between sets, Coltrane's bassist Dezron Douglas strolled by to say Hi to someone at the next table. I spoke up to tell him that I enjoyed their sideways adaptation of Monk's "Evidence," and he seemed taken aback; he responded something like, "Oh hey, you caught that! I've got to go tell Johnathan — hardly anybody notices that." This surprised me. I tried to downplay *his* surprise: Well, I said, Ravi did announce it *twice*.

My reason for offering this anecdote will become clear shortly. It's not a perfect anecdote for my purpose: it'd be better if it involved an improvised moment in a jazz performance. And my purpose is not to note something exceptional in how I listen; quite the opposite. But my exchange with Douglas has the virtue of marking the occasion that got me thinking about how listening to improvised jazz, particularly when performed live, exemplifies most fully the feature of musical listening just mentioned — namely, that our listening can pick us out, despite ourselves, and despite our sitting in seeming communion with others. What we hear in a singular, passing, spontaneous musical moment invites us to *notice* that we're hearing it. And noticing something often depends on our giving voice to it, whether we do this in words or similes, or by a gesture, or perhaps by singing or whistling or playing. I will be arguing that it is this feature of a jazz performance that has relevance in the old and new debate over the relation between jazz and democracy, a debate that, in my experience, has been confused and misguided.

2.

The sense that jazz is fundamentally democratic or an emblem of democracy, a claim first essayed almost a century ago in J. A. Rogers' magazine article "Jazz at Home,"

5. In jazz parlance, a contrafact is a musical work based on the chord progression of a prior musical work.

then elaborated and complicated in Ralph Ellison's novels and essays, is as pervasive in discussions of jazz as it is vague — as pervasive and vague as the sense that jazz is fundamentally American or an emblem of America.[6] So it is not surprising that a range of writers, from diverse academic and cultural backgrounds, have tried to articulate what it means to say that jazz is democratic — sometimes to assert the connection, at other times to contest it. Let me offer an instance of each, and then raise a question or two about the terms of the debate as well as its coherence. (I put aside for now the broader claim that music-making *of any sort* is somehow emblematic of democracy, whether because of its procedures or because of music's familiar but open structural forms.[7] Much of what I have to say positively below about the connection between jazz and democracy may strike you as equally applicable to other forms of music-making and music-listening. My interest here, nonetheless, is in highlighting differences in how one can, or is invited to, listen to improvised jazz.)

The best-known living proponent of the thought that jazz is an emblem of democracy is likely Wynton Marsalis, but let me turn to his friend the late Stanley Crouch, who offers perhaps a more erudite formulation of it.[8] For Crouch as for Marsalis, the claim is that there are many aspects of a blues-rooted jazz performance that are expressive of (Crouch will say "metaphors" of) an ideal of democracy. He

---

6. See J. A. Rogers, "Jazz at Home," *Survey Graphic*, Harlem Number 6, no. 6 (1925): 665-67 and 712: "Moreover jazz with its mocking disregard for formality is a leveler and makes for democracy [...]. Where at present [jazz] vulgarizes, with more wholesome growth in the future it may on the contrary truly democratize." For Ralph Ellison, see *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writings*, ed. R. G. O'Meally (New York: Modern Library, 2001); see also Steve Pinkerton, "Ralph Ellison's Righteous Riffs: Jazz, Democracy, and the Sacred," *African American Review* 44, no. 1/2 (2011): 185-206.

7. For one recent instance, see Alex Ross, "Requiem for a Festival," *The New Yorker*, August 28, 2023, 62: "And he [Louis Langrée, Mostly Mozart's music director] pointedly analyzed Mozart's symphonies in terms of 'musical democracy' and harmonious multiplicity. He singled out a passage in the Andante of Symphony No. 39, in which a quintet of winds takes turns playing a simple pattern of four eighth-note pulses followed by a winding sixteenth-note pattern. The magic of the passage depends on five musicians listening to one another and establishing a collective flow." It's clear enough from the context of Langrée's remarks (made during the last concerts of the Mostly Mozart Festival's final season, before it was to be subsumed into Lincoln Center's Summer for the City series whose programming is decidedly more pop-oriented) that the comment had political, i.e. rhetorical, intent. (Ross: "He threw shade at the powers that be.") One might harbor the suspicion that *every* assertion relating music-making to democracy has merely rhetorical intent. I will try to undermine this suspicion, arguing for a non-rhetorical sense in which attending to exemplary jazz improvisation has political import for a democracy.

8. Twenty-first-century writers in this camp include Kabir Sehgal and Gregory Clark. See Kabir Sehgal, *Jazzocracy: Jazz, Democracy, and the Creation of a New American Mythology* (Mishawaka, IN: Better World Books, 2008), and Gregory Clark, *Civic Jazz: American Music and Kenneth Burke on the Art of Getting Along* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015). See also Stephen A. Crist, "Jazz as Democracy? Dave Brubeck and Cold War Politics," *The Journal of Musicology* 26, no. 2 (2009): 133-74.

emphasizes the role of improvisation, the practice of "constantly" reinterpreting a tune's "meanings," of challenging sentimentality, and not least "the demands on and the respect for the individual in the jazz band," which "put democracy into aesthetic action."[9] Crouch then extends the metaphoric identification with democracy, from the jazz performers' procedures to the jazz performers themselves. He emphasizes the racial and social mix of personalities joining to make jazz: "That fresh synthesis was the product of a down-home aristocracy of men and women whose origins cut across class and caste [...] but who all had in common the ability to make musical sense during the act of playing." This synthesis, he claims, "actually enhanced our understanding of the music's democratic richness," since "the whole point of democracy itself is that a society is best off [...] when it eliminates all irrational restrictions on talent, dedication, and skill."[10]

This and related views have been broadly criticized recently by Benjamin Givan. He speaks of "a pair of myths" that underlie their origin. One "myth" is the polemical claim that, because jazz's roots are in America, it exemplifies what the U.S. Constitution itself exemplifies, an ideal of democracy in which the freedom to reinterpret and amend the basis of a society is always live. (In Crouch's phrase, this flexibility shows that the U.S. Constitution "values improvisation.") This claim is easily dismissed, Givan says, because the reality of America's form of government is that it is inegalitarian and antidemocratic, much as its founders intended.[11] But the second "myth," as Givan identifies it, is more intimately tied to jazz procedures and so requires from him a more extended rebuttal. It's the idea that jazz is democratic in allowing practitioners to express their own spontaneous musical thoughts in a collective that consequently grants each member a kind of equal autonomy. Givan undermines this view with a lengthy but unremarkable description of "how jazz improvisers ordinarily work together — as musical performers and as human beings, often subject to a bandleader's unilateral dictates." He then argues as follows: If "the music's *actual* performance strategies" are said to model, "in terms of interpersonal dynamics,

9. Stanley Crouch, "Blues to Be Constitutional," in *Democracy & the Arts*, ed. Arthur M. Melzer, Jerry Weinberger, and M. Richard Zinman (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 103-16; the quoted excerpts are from 109-11.
10. Ibid., 115-16.
11. Benjamin Givan, "How Democratic Is Jazz?", in *Finding Democracy in Music*, ed. Robert Adlington and Esteban Buch (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 58-79; the quoted excerpt is from 61.

what governments and human communities *ought* to do," then jazz on the bandstand and in the recording studio clearly fails at modeling the democratic ideal. And this is because, as Givan's examples and discussion remind us, "most professional jazz groups don't truly aspire to egalitarianism or inclusivity at all."[12]

3.

I find myself troubled by each of these proposals, specifically by what the effort — either to establish the link between jazz and democracy or to break it — is meant to show. If, say, we grant that the jazz tradition presents us with a metaphor of democracy, as Stanley Crouch puts it, what follows? Is a dedication to democracy instilled, or saved, through its metaphors? Is a dedication to jazz? When Crouch further argues that jazz is not simply about "protesting the social conditions of Afro-Americans" but is a "fresh synthesis," and that consequently it enhances "our understanding of the music's democratic richness," I have no qualms with his defense of jazz's ability to convey "every passion."[13] But how does the music succeed in *expressing* its democratic richness, and how am I to register my understanding of that expression? The claim "Jazz is democratically rich" would seem to raise our prior question of how music can be said to take on assignments of meaning — unless, that is, Crouch imagines that our understanding of the democratic richness of a music is unrelated to our understanding *of that music.*

In Benjamin Givan's repudiation of the link between jazz and democracy, he mostly avoids the question of how music takes on meaning and instead focuses on the real-life interactions among musicians within jazz performance groups and collectives. Here my perplexity is not with Givan's observations about the interpersonal messiness of jazz practice, which I find more or less uncontroversial. But I am struck by what Givan takes democracy to entail or require, and consequently by the aspects of jazz that he sees as pertinent to considering its relevance for democracy. Let me elaborate by noting a crucial difference between Givan's and my understanding of

12. Ibid., 62 and 64.
13. Crouch, "Blues to Be Constitutional," 115-16.

what is essential to democracy, and then a second, consequential difference between his and my interest in a jazz performance.

Givan cites myriad sources — sources he neither interprets nor interrogates — to illustrate the meaning of "democracy," but he appears to settle on the twin characteristics of "liberty and equality" (or sometimes "freedom and equality").[14] And he finds both of these lacking in actual jazz practice as they are in actual American governance. But that's to say that Givan's understanding of democracy is all about how a society is *organized* (and so, democracy from the top down) — in other words, how well a society's distribution of power and opportunities for participation reflect the etymology of "democracy" as "rule by the people."[15] There's nothing explicitly wrong with that view of what matters politically, beyond the fact that (again) it would seem to bear no obvious relation to how anyone understands the sounds being made in any instance of jazz music-making. But in contrast to that view, there is a long tradition in political thought — arguably traceable to Plato, undeniably manifest in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and deepened in America by Ralph Waldo Emerson — that begins its consideration of democracy by asking what must be necessary if "the people" are to acquire the ability to "rule" themselves (and so, its concern is with democracy from the bottom up). The assumption of this line of thinking is that self-rule is not a natural talent (though it may be a latent ability) for human beings living together. For us to rule ourselves, each ruling all, we must each develop an interest first of all in acquiring a self, each its own self. And that is everywhere thwarted, in Emerson's formulation, by the twin enticements of conformity and consistency; or as Rousseau famously puts it (likely alluding to Plato's allegory of the cave): "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." Rousseau's solution to this condition is ambiguous as to whether it is to be carried out at the level of the political or the personal. At any rate, it requires that some among us be "forced to be free."[16] Emerson's solution, more practical if less certain of success, is a personal demand on his readers, to pursue and to find what there is for them to think and to say, to find a self worthy of the trust he

14. Givan, "How Democratic Is Jazz?", cf. 62, 69, and 71.
15. Ibid., 62.
16. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, in *Rousseau:* The Social Contract *and Other Later Political Writings*, 2nd ed., ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 43 and 55. On Rousseau's solution to human enchainment, see Steven Affeldt, "The Force of Freedom: Rousseau on Forcing to Be Free," *Political Theory* 27, no. 3 (1999): 299-333.

describes in "Self-Reliance" this way: "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men, — that is genius."[17] For both Rousseau and Emerson, in other words, citizenship in a democracy, however constituted, cannot and does not grant the automatic satisfaction of a given set of demands (including "liberty and equality"). Instead, "citizen of a democracy" names the responsibility and requirement that one pursue and find one's voice in order to realize the only freedom that is possible for human beings living together politically, each speaking exactly and only their own thought.

Here is where my second difference from Givan becomes crucial, a disagreement about which standpoint towards a jazz performance is pertinent to considering its relation to democracy. Givan is all but exclusively concerned with the political or interpersonal interactions in and among members of jazz performance groups. It's good that Givan is looking up at the stage to try to discern what others see as an example of democracy in action. But I'm struck by the fact that, in looking to the stage for democracy enacted, Givan is not at all concerned with the music being played up there. His gaze is directed at whether, for instance, the ensemble has a defined leader, and if so, what "extramusical power hierarchies" exist; or if the band is nominally leaderless, whether there are "ínternécine strains"; and so on.[18]

I want to propose that, in following the intuition of a link between jazz music and democracy, we instead consider the position of the jazz listener. This shift in focus will not exclude the position of the jazz performer on the stage — who is, of course, also listening. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere that the exemplary jazz improviser who is receptive and responsive to what they hear is an emblem of what Emerson means by self-trust, which I just identified as a requirement for democratic citizenship.[19] But the jazz audience, no less than the jazz performer, is in a position to hear things. What does the jazz listener hear? And how does what she hears bear on her role as citizen in a democracy (even if that democracy is nascent, ideal, or otherwise merely potential)?

---

17. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance" (from *Essays: First Series*), in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 259.
18. Givan, "How Democratic Is Jazz?", 64-67.
19. William Day, "Knowing As Instancing: Jazz Improvisation and Moral Perfectionism," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58, no. 2 (2000): 99-111; "The Ends of Improvisation," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68, no. 3 (2010): 291-96.

4.

What she hears will depend, of course, on what she is listening to, and on how well she is listening. So let's imagine that she is in the presence of an exemplary jazz performance — there are probably dozens in progress as you read this — and that consequently her opportunities for hearing things are plentiful. Here are some candidates for what she could be hearing. The jazz soloist's improvisation may contain allusions to other tunes, or a phrase reminiscent of something Bud Powell plays on his famous 1951 recording of "Un Poco Loco." Or she may notice how the shape of the tune differs from the version that she heard played at an earlier set or the night before, or how the underlying changes sound familiar while the tune does not, or how the melody is familiar while the underlying changes are not, or how the tune became clear only after several minutes of what seemed like unstructured group interplay. More generally, there may be striking moments of responsiveness among the players, or a breakdown in communication that, once they got on track again, seemed to amuse them. Or she may notice how the rhythm clicks the way it does on recordings by Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, or how the drummer mixes the propulsion of Tony Williams with the messiness of Han Bennink, and so on. Now imagine that she does hear one or more of these features of the performance as she listens and follows where it goes. Is there any *political* significance to these impressions of what she is hearing?

The first thing to note is that what she hears is, to varying degree, necessarily impressionistic and necessarily allusive. There are two causes of this allusiveness. One cause, peculiar if not unique to jazz performance, is that some significant portion of what she hears is of the moment and won't be repeated. The spontaneous allusion, the phrase reminiscent of Bud Powell, this or that bit of responsiveness, the breakdown and resulting amusement among the players — all of these will be missed if one wasn't paying attention when they flew by. The next performance or next set will hold *different* surprises. A second cause of this allusiveness is that what one hears in jazz performances accumulates over time — which is to say that jazz performance is a cultural practice, and that what one hears is directly related to one's embeddedness in the culture. If one doesn't know Thelonious Monk's "Evidence," or that Bud Powell recording,

or this or that melody or set of chord changes, or has never heard Art Blakey or Tony Williams or Han Bennink play the drums, certain things will pass one by.

This "culturally embedded" aspect of jazz listening, I contend, is distinct from what we might call jazz-theoretical knowledge — for instance, the awareness of substitution chords, Coltrane changes, Russell's Lydian Chromatic Concept, various extended techniques for achieving unexpected sounds, and the like. The latter sorts of knowledge can also inform one's hearing, but they are akin to the knowledge of, say, a virologist or endodontist; we might characterize these as training-knowledge as distinct from exposure-knowledge. I grant that the distinction isn't sharp and absolute. Still, a feature of the distinction is that, for the little-trained but culturally-embedded listener, there may be no explicit or established ways or set of tools for *demonstrating* what she hears (as one can demonstrate, be trained in or even write a manual about, substitution chords, Coltrane changes, and the like).

For precisely these reasons, I want to propose that jazz performance bears more than a passing resemblance to the historical practice of philosophical esotericism. What I mean by drawing this connection is the following: like philosophical esotericism, jazz performance is a practice of public expression[20] that communicates differently to different audiences; and a not inconsequential part of its communication or expression occurs "between the lines," through hints and allusions, by what is left out as well as by what is included, requiring of the listener a genuine desire and devoted attention to take it in. Arthur Melzer's rich history of esoteric writing, *Philosophy Between the Lines*, details four forms of philosophical esotericism, each corresponding to one of four different motives for writers of the past to adopt the practice of secret writing.[21] The form most emblematic of jazz performance is one Melzer labels "pedagogical esotericism," where the political import of this practice is perhaps most subtle.[22] If a philosophical writer understands the aim of education to be the

20. While jazz performance, as a form of public expression, is typically without words (unlike esoteric writing), still, as is being argued here, there is something that counts as *understanding* the expression.
21. Arthur M. Melzer, *Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 2014), chs. 5-8.
22. As one would expect, Melzer owes much of his understanding and presentation of the history of esoteric writing to Leo Strauss; see, e.g., Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 1952, 1988). But among those who either exploit or explain *pedagogical* esotericism, names more and less familiar (besides the most obvious, Plato) include Kierkegaard, Emerson, Nietzsche, and Jacob Klein. For an extended instance by the last named, see Klein's virtuosic *A Commentary on Plato's* Meno (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 1965, 1989).

development of the free democratic citizen as detailed earlier — one who desires to find her own voice despite the ongoing threats to that project[23] — the writer will typically adopt esoteric practices. The reason that the writer will choose to educate between the lines is because they cannot *give* the reader a self, one who "thinks from out of [her] own care, future, and fate." Instead, the reader must be instructed through allusions, indirection, and so on; she "must start from [her] own personal perplexity, draw upon [her] own lived experience, and make use of the inner activity of [her] own powers…"[24]

As it happens, a form of pedagogical esotericism is also the method of the best jazz instructors. When saxophonist Steve Lacy was asked what he learned "from actually playing with Monk and talking with him," what he relates (as I describe elsewhere) are not explicit instructions — e.g., "Instead of outlining the notes of the chord, substitute the notes of the chord built on the tritone" — but implicit suggestions of an attitude to adopt while improvising: "Let things go by"; "Make the drummer sound good"; "Don't pick up on my things […]. I'm accompanying *you*." And as I say in that earlier piece: "In jazz, the accompaniment — in this case, Monk's playing — is like a text that asks to be read by the soloist, as it were, *between* the lines."[25]

5.

Here, then, is a first aspect of the jazz listener's pertinence to democracy: In learning how to notice what there is to notice in an exemplary jazz performance, fed by her

23. As mentioned, those threats include passivity and subservience, conformity and consistency. "The free democratic citizen" is my name for what I take Strauss to mean when he says (speaking of a liberal education) that what can be achieved in a democratic republic is not a "universal aristocracy" but "an aristocracy within democratic mass society." See Strauss, "What Is Liberal Education?", in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1968, 1989), 4-5. I believe I understand the reason for Strauss's pessimism about a universal aristocracy. I also believe — writing as the world's longest-standing democracy enters the 2024 election season — that there is ample reason to share Strauss's pessimism. But with regard to adopting *pedagogical* esotericism (as opposed to the other three forms with their corresponding motives), such pessimism is neither required nor need be assumed. This difference in attitude marks the crucial difference between Strauss and Emerson concerning what Strauss calls "the literary question." See Day, "Philosophy and 'the Literary Question': Wittgenstein, Emerson, and Strauss on the Community of Knowing" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1999), https://philpapers.org/rec/DAYPAT-2.
24. Melzer, *Philosophy Between the Lines*, 215.
25. See Day, "Knowing As Instancing," 108-11.

own fascination and powers — or say, in learning how to hear between the lines — she learns what interests her, beginning from *wherever* she begins (perhaps drawn by the polyrhythmic beat, or the look of the musicians on the bandstand, or the harmonic textures, or sounds of ecstasy bordering on disorder) so that she comes by stages to appreciate the same sounds as before but now for different, and likely more fertile, reasons. To paraphrase Cavell, she learns how to take an interest in her own experience, a crucial step on the road to her representative individuality.[26] One may be inclined to identify this as the aim or outcome of aesthetic experience generally. That it is also the aim of democratic experience, of being granted a voice as a citizen among equals, is the central claim of the tradition of political thought outlined above. Or as Emerson puts it:

> The world is awaking to the idea of union, and these experiments show what it is thinking of. It is and will be magic [...]. But this union must be inward, and not one of covenants, and is to be reached by a reverse of the methods they use. The union is only perfect, when all the uniters are isolated [...]. Each man, if he attempts to join himself to others, is on all sides cramped and diminished of his proportion; and the stricter the union, the smaller and the more pitiful he is. But leave him alone, to recognize in every hour and place the secret soul, he will go up and down doing the works of a true member, and, to the astonishment of all, the work will be done with concert, though no man spoke. Government will be adamantine without any governor. The union must be ideal in actual individualism.[27]

However, and despite this allegory of jazz listening as a hearing between the lines, the second thing to note is that, if she gives voice to one or another of her listening impressions — whether to a friend or to the stranger at the next table — there is nothing that stands in the way of their understanding her, having heard what she heard. They may, in fact, notice the allusion, the similarity, etc., *only because* she mentions it and

---

26. See Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 12.
27. Emerson, "New England Reformers" (from *Essays: Second Series*), in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, 599.

so redirects their attention to recall or rehear it. That is to say, her observations carry the peculiar epistemological status of a Kantian aesthetic judgment: they are not like the answer to an arithmetic sum (which is not a matter of taste), nor like a preference for Sichuan cuisine (which is *merely* a matter of taste). They are instead observations that rest on subjective experience but are nonetheless "universal," potentially or ideally shareable by everyone. And thus, if our listener voices her impression and if her friend or neighbor at the next table recalls or recognizes or otherwise registers that aspect of the performance that she gives voice to, a small but not insignificant connection is made between them, a community of surprising intimacy is formed. And forming community, needless to say, has political significance — particularly when (as with jazz listeners sharing the discovery and surprise of what they just heard) it reveals the paltriness of most other political communities.

On the other hand, her friend or neighbor may *not* have heard (the significance of) what she heard. Or worse, they may deny that anything of the sort was there and suggest that she is (in a derogatory sense) "hearing things." She knows that this rebuke is a live possibility, given the nature of critical expression, which requires words that are somehow tied to a felt experience that is not guaranteed by the shared sounds of a performance. That live possibility — the possibility that the words we find to describe what we hear will be met with skepticism or ridicule — may constrain us from trying to find words in the first place, perhaps because we don't trust our own experience, or because we ourselves begin to doubt that *it was* as we heard it. If, as Cavell has suggested, "describing one's experience of art is itself a form of art; the burden of describing it is like the burden of producing it,"[28] we can now add that the *political risk* in talking about one's experience of art can be like the political risk in making it.

Learning to accept this risk in describing your growing experience of a music of unending richness and complexity is a democratic virtue, one worthy of the best sort of citizen. And taking on this risk is most acute when your experience is of a live jazz performance, where the fleeting allusions and quotations and interactions, because they *are* fleeting, resist every measure of *testing* your experience. (That's why

28. Cavell, "Music Discomposed," in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 193.

my opening anecdote — my identifying Johnathan Blake's "Clues" as an allusion to Monk's "Evidence" — isn't an ideal instance of risk-taking, because I *could* test it, and did, by asking one of the performers.) That brings me to the second aspect of the pertinence to democracy of the jazz listener: her nascent or fully realized virtue, essential to the life of any democracy that is more than a democracy in name only, lies in accepting the risk of voicing what she hears when she finds, to a growing degree, that she can hear jazz between the lines. And what if the conditions of "liberty and equality" — conditions that make possible the development of an art form that continually and to an ever-expanding degree engages one's capacity to discern and give voice to what one hears — are themselves made possible by such experiences of hearing?[29]

29. Formative versions of this essay were read at the 13th International Jazz Research Conference at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Graz, Austria in June 2022, and at the 39th Annual Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics — Rocky Mountain Division in Santa Fe, New Mexico in July 2023. I want to express my thanks to the organizers of and participants at these two events.