Hook-Ups and Train Wrecks: Contextual Parameters and the Coordination of Jazz Interactions

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Abstract: This paper enumerates and discusses the importance of several parameters of context integral to jazz musicians’ ability to hear musical signs as meaningful, such as performers’ individual backgrounds and the various other styles of music available in the aural landscape, and how those parameters influence what the musicians play. Through discussion of several examples from an ongoing ethnography of jazz jam sessions, findings are presented that suggest that context is constituted by several variables, that different variables may become salient at different times, and that different interactants vary in their ability to attend to these variables. This study thus extends and elaborates frame analysis by showing that, while an interaction frame of the sort described by Goffman (1974) may perdue, it is subject to change, and the nature of the context it provides for interactions can change whenever a new interaction is initiated.
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“Hooking up,” “Gelling,” “Grooving”—Regardless of what we call it, when human beings engage in successful joint action, we derive pleasure from closely coordinating our actions with those taken by our co-participants. Whether we choose to work together with a group of others, or we are thrown into a group by the exigencies of work, family, war, or sport, we want the activity at hand to proceed smoothly. We want to understand the actions of those with whom we engage in joint action. We wish for our actions to be similarly understood and through those understandings to produce pleasant, successful interactions.

A key to such understanding is careful attendance to context. The meaning of any utterance or gesture can vary dramatically between contexts. This is perhaps most obvious when people use deictics, those words with shifting meanings like “you,” “me,” “he,” “she,” “it,” that only make sense in the context of an ongoing stream of conversation, wherein “you” and “I” both know what “it” is because I have earlier specified that I am talking about the waffle iron on the counter. All kinds of communication have some of the non-specificity of deictics. For example, Goffman (1972, 1974) showed how the same phrase, such as “I do,” uttered in different contexts can be mean very different things. In this paper, I will investigate how context matters to interactions by considering musical interactions amongst jazz musicians. I argue that the context of an interaction is comprised of several parameters that help guide interactants into making appropriate or productive utterances. Understanding how such parameters make up the contexts surrounding interactions, and how interactants invoke those parameters and interpret symbols in light of them is an important step that will help us predict why various kinds of joint action proceed in particular ways.
Goffman’s (1974) work on frame analysis provides the benchmark in interactionist studies of the role of context in interactions. Goffman discussed “frames” as types of perduring context, such as “play” or “theatrical performance,” and adumbrated some relevant parameters which may contribute to the construction of certain frames. Frames enable interactants to understand the import of verbal utterances, to decide whether, for example, a speaker’s statement is serious or in jest. Goffman did not seek to exhaustively describe any particular frame, or provide a discussion of the array of parameters that make up a frame and influence different kinds of interaction within a particular frame. The study at hand considers only one frame—that of jazz performance—and seeks to show how reference to the several parameters which constitute the frame can significantly impact the development of any particular performance. All of a musician’s musical utterances are “serious,” but they invoke a number of alternative ways to construct a jazz performance, and call on other players to adjust their own utterances appropriately. In considering the attention to parameters relevant to the frame of jazz performance, I suggest a direction for more clearly understanding interaction within primary frameworks in general, yielding insight for understanding how individuals’ actions are coordinated in task-oriented group behavior.

After presenting a brief introduction to jazz jam sessions and discussing the ethnographic research upon which this paper is based, I will go on to describe examples of musical interaction at jazz jam sessions. I then present an analysis of several salient contextual parameters which play an important role in allowing musicians to successfully communicate and perform with one another. The paper concludes with suggestions of how attending to certain contextual parameters may broaden our understanding of interaction, allowing us to understand more fully how and why coordinated task activity succeeds or fails.
What is a Jam Session?

“Jam sessions” have entered our collective vocabulary to describe various outlets for group creativity. While the term appears to originate in jazz, musicians from genres of music as varied as bluegrass, blues, rock, and celtic music hold jam sessions, breakdancers have jam sessions, basketball players have jam sessions, and even white collar office workers have jam sessions to brainstorm new product ideas or marketing strategies. What happens at any of these sessions is an exchange of ideas and a reaffirmation of the standards for a particular realm of practice. Jam sessions provide participants with a chance to have fun, to “get off,” and to show off their individual talents. But, perhaps most importantly, they also require participants to work together, to take each others’ ideas seriously, and ideally to build off of the contributions of each individual member. The outcome of this process is an group accomplishment, an emergent product greater than the sum of the individual contributions that make it up (Sawyer 2003).

The term “jam session” originated in jazz (Shapiro and Hentoff 1955) and the sessions themselves are still important to jazz musicians, not only as a space to have fun and collaborate with each other, but also as a place to learn the art of jazz and a place to network with other musicians. In jazz, jam sessions involve musicians getting together and playing compositions. These are often arcane jazz pieces written by past masters like Charlie Parker and Miles Davis, but they are just as likely to include compositions from the Great American Songbook—easily recognized songs of yesteryear like All of Me or I’ve Got Rhythm. At the weekly jam sessions I discuss in this paper, any musician off the street is free to take a stab at participating in the performance. After a band of pro musicians plays some compositions, others may either take
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over the instruments from the rhythm section (usually string bass, drums, and guitar or keyboard), sing, or bring their horn up, usually a trumpet or saxophone, and play some jazz.

These jam sessions are interesting from the point of view of symbolic interaction because the varying combinations of musicians, and the frequency with which they must communicate without speaking to one another, lay bare processes of negotiation undertaken by actors engaged in joint action. To a greater extent than practices which adhere to scripts, are peopled by a more constant cast of players, and which rely on agreements worked out well in advance of a performance—from plays and certain performance art works to performances by jazz bands who have spent more time rehearsing together—the success of a jam session relies on an ongoing stream of musical symbols through which musicians communicate their musical ideas with one another. Conventional meanings attached to these symbols allow the musicians to communicate with one another to create coherent performances which both they and their audience recognize as successful works of art. While there is some rigidity to these conventions (for example, there is relatively little variability to what people play for the melodies to particular tunes; keyboardists and guitarists are expected to play some chords to accompany soloists), others vary considerably based on different contextual parameters. Jam sessions are a particularly apt site in which to assess these variables as they bring together musicians who are not necessarily as like-minded as a group of musicians who choose to work together on a regular basis. Groups who have not rehearsed together are more prone to require players to make interpretations of the ongoing performance-as-context, interpretations which, though still salient for groups who work together frequently, are more blatant and conscious in the jam session. Thus we can observe how musicians’ backgrounds, for instance, in terms of their allegiance to particular sub-genres of jazz, or their education, provides a salient dimension of context which may compel other
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musicians to reevaluate their own playing. How we can come to discern salient parameters, and how this kind of analysis can be extended to a general framework for researching joint action will be considered below.

Data and Methods

This study is based on ethnographic work at two weekly jam sessions on the South Side of Chicago. Ted’s is a nightclub in a rapidly gentrifying district, a ramshackle holdout increasingly surrounded by high-priced highrise development (within a year of the completion of this study, the club was in fact forced by development to move). Amidst the fading orange-and-yellow-patterned wallpaper, nicotine-stained paintings of Charlie Parker and of a nude woman, and a rickety bar that canters to thirty degrees when an unwary patron bellies up to it, cutting-edge jazz is presented five days a week. On Sundays, septuagenarian sax player and club owner Ted sits by the door welcoming jazz musicians of all stripes and collecting four dollars a head from listeners to a jam session that tends to feature a great deal of experimentation and genre-bending. While plenty of orthodox jazz in the vein of Duke Ellington or Miles Davis is played at Ted’s, musicians here frequently delight in exercises of cacophony, even in spicing up old chestnuts like My Funny Valentine with R&B and hip-hop beats.

Steve’s is a neighborhood tavern. Students from the nearby college and longtime neighborhood residents join together every evening to swill beer and cocktails, and fill the air of the three-roomed bar with a dense blue haze of cigarette smoke, raucous conversation, and the bleeps and pings of video golf and pinball. Each Sunday, sax and trumpet players, guitarists and drummers play jazz over the din. Steve’s session caters a bit more to older players who eschew the experimentation characteristic of Ted’s in favor of masterful renderings of classic jazz.
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I joined these sessions as a tenor saxophone player, a grad student who sometimes augments his income performing music, playing jazz at least well enough to be accepted on the bandstand with other musicians. On most Sundays from mid-2002 to the end of 2003, and again from mid-2005 until September 2006, I attended the sessions at Ted’s and Steve’s, played with the bands, observed, and occasionally went to other sessions around Chicago throughout the week to see what they offered. With the permission of the club owners and house bands, I made audio recordings of the jam sessions at Ted’s and Steve’s, and took extensive field notes. To augment my own participant observations, in 2005 and 2006 I conducted twelve interviews with musicians that consisted largely of listening to and discussing recordings from recent sessions that included those musicians. Ten of these interviews were recorded and later transcribed. These interviews and my fieldnotes comprise the data upon which this paper is based.

The Music in Context

The time I spent playing at and observing sessions and talking about them with musicians showed that in order to complete a cohesive performance, musicians had to pay attention—either consciously or by the embodied habits engendered by years of practice—to several important contextual parameters. For the sake of clarity, the following examples of musicians attending to these parameters are divided into three subjects about which musicians at the jazz jam session communicate through music: Harmony, rhythm and tempo, and style. Of course, changes in any of these areas may imply changes in the others. Taking each in turn simplifies putting into words the complex experience of playing or listening to music.

Harmony
Harmony, the sequence of chords that undergird a composition, is not completely fixed in jazz, not even necessarily from one moment to the next during a single performance. Musicians frequently substitute one chord for another, or even suspend the changing harmony altogether while “pedaling” on a single note or chord for some time. Ran, a guitarist, described learning compositions as a process of preparing one’s self for various possible harmonic scenarios:

I was working on learning this tune, *What’ll I Do?*, before you came. It’s this nice waltz, I had three different versions, the changes [harmonies] were totally different between the three. So what I would do in that case is I would learn it—learn the melody, learn the changes the three different ways—and then try to go find a good chart [i.e., sheet music] and see what it says, and then make a judgment—“Alright, well, there’s lots of different ways to do this, but this is probably the way that people are gonna want to do it most often.” But a lot of those different changes, that’s where your ears come in because you just have to be able to go with what’s happening. You have to memorize the changes aurally, not visually because it’s subtle little things that, if you can just hear them, it’s so much easier…If you remember, “oh, there’s a million ways to do that,” the thing to do is just listen to what’s going on, otherwise you go out of your mind.

Now, these substitutions do not come completely out of left field. Certain ones feel better than others, and make sense aesthetically as well as conforming to jazz musicians’ notions of music theory. But, as conventional as these substitutions may be, there has to be a way for musicians to know when others are using substitutions, to shift on the fly so that the resulting
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performance is as cohesive as possible. They rely on various contextual markers to help them make these changes.

The next examples here show that imperfect attention to context can yield less-than-stellar performances when it comes to making harmonic substitutions. On 29 September 2002, at the session at Ted’s, I noticed that I could play an interesting substitution while playing the Miles Davis composition *All Blues*, “I could play a G-altered scale over the G7 chord that comprises most of the tune, and it sounded really good; got a good reaction from the crowd.” But playing the same composition on the same evening at Steve’s:

It was a very different experience…compared to Ted’s. Whereas the hip scales that I used at Ted’s were easy to do there, it was like pulling teeth to do them at Steve’s. I think the biggest difference may have been in the bass—Mack, the bassist, just wasn’t going along with it…not hearing the altered chord tones or not playing along with it. The rhythm section at Ted’s must have been going along with me, though I did not even realize it at the time.

The difference between my experiences at the two sessions is telling, and brings out a key aspect of the coordination of joint action in the jam session. The key communication which succeeded with the group at Ted’s failed at Steve’s, namely, my playing a particular scale which acts as a signal to other band members to accompany my improvisation with the substitution of a corresponding particular chord. Contextual differences between the two sessions help explain this confusion. Most important was the difference between the backgrounds of the particular musicians I was playing with. At the session at Ted’s, the musicians on stage were young—
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mostly under 30—and some had spent time in school studying jazz. These musicians were much more likely to have been exposed to the application of the altered scale that I played, which is not particularly common to jazz performed before about 1970. At Steve’s, I was playing with veteran jazz musicians. The drummer and bass player were both in their 50s. Though a young music school student was playing guitar, he was constrained by the choices of the older bass player who, unless he had gone out of his way to keep up with developments in jazz practice, would not have been adequately exposed to playing this scale to keep up an appropriate accompaniment. Indeed, it could perhaps be interpreted as a faux pas for me to have suggested it in the course of my improvisation.

Another example of communication about harmony during a performance was pointed out to me by Ran. During a performance of the composition *Up Jumped Spring*, a flautist and I, both reading from sheet music read and played an erroneous passage in which an E-flat-minor chord is written as E-flat-major, and we soloed accordingly. As Ran described it:

*Up Jumped Spring*, that section, that D to E-flat—Those are two minor chords [D-minor to E-flat-minor]. But in the [sheet music], it says D-minor to E-flat-major. When you were playing, you were reading it. Well I was like, “alright, he’s reading it, cool, I’m going to make sure I play the chord that I know is in there,” but then, when I was soloing, or when Andrew [a bass player] was soloing, I went ahead and played the change that I know to be right from the recording.

Here, we see some additional contextual factors at play. Especially notable is the only partial permeation of jazz music by an aesthetic ofaurality. Though, as Ran pointed out above,
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musicians are generally expected to use their ears to hear the harmonies in music, that can be overridden in practice by the use of written music. Thus simultaneously the recorded oeuvre of jazz, especially earlier recordings of particular compositions, and written scores of compositions both provide salient parameters of context. But at the same time we observe players’ status and education at play as important contextual parameters. Ran’s understanding of the competencies of the various performers, in particular the lack of aural competence on the part of myself and the flautist, allowed him to alter his own playing from the “right” harmony to the degenerate version we were playing. While this yielded a more cohesive performance than had he played the harmony he knows to be right, the best performance, from the perspective of a jazz aesthetic, would have demanded that the flautist and I relied on our aural skills, and ideally a greater familiarity with recorded jazz performances, to play that harmony correctly.

Finally, James, a piano player, pointed out to me that, even when accompanying seemingly atonal solos—what jazz players call playing “outside,” that is, outside the normal conventions of harmony—he is taking up those musical cues to help channel his playing in a particular direction:

If I’m playing with a guy and it gets more into the, some of the guys play more like this [pianist] McCoy Tyner album called The Real McCoy, if somebody’s playing more like [saxophonist] Joe Henderson on that kind of thing, he’s really leaving most of the inside playing behind and it’s really a lot more opened up than that, then I’ll stop using diatonic chords with extensions and I’ll move into basically what McCoy does, which is using open fourths.
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What James is essentially saying here is that he moves from normal chords, those he describes as “inside” and “diatonic,” to using a specialized technique that accommodates a considerable amount of aural ambiguity.

To clarify a bit, I asked “And that lets the soloist have more freedom to…?”

Yeah, have more room, have more room. Now, I’m not an expert at doing that kind of stuff. I can do it, and I got a lot better at playing it at Ted’s, but when I play with my own trio, I don’t get into that kind of harmony too often.

Again, we here find recorded performances providing a key reference point to musicians. This parameter of context helps guide them as they attend to the ever-unfolding context of the performance itself. This also points again to the fact that individual jam sessions form their own context. Here James associates the session at Ted’s with playing in the outside style.

They’ve Got Rhythm

Jazz musicians are concerned with time. If someone can maintain a consistent beat over the course of a performance, musicians say he has “good time.” This is particularly a judgment made of drummers and bass players, the timekeepers of the jazz ensemble. But maintaining good time is, like other dimensions of jazz performance, a group effort. Various musicians can influence a performance to slow down or speed up, and no one may be conscious of this change in time while it happens. Only when they find themselves ending a performance much more slowly than they began do they say to one another, “Hey, that slowed down a lot, didn’t it?” As I began an interview with Andrew, a bass player from the house band at Steve’s, he stressed that
this is one of his main concerns during the jam session, that “everything just skyrockets, speeds up a lot,” such that, “mainly, at Steve’s, what I’m thinking about is trying to keep at a good pace.” The following examples trace problems of tempo, and the related issue of rhythm, as musicians perform at the sessions.

The first example describes a performance of the Thelonious Monk composition *Epistrophy* at Steve’s on 27 November 2005, where, contrary to Andrew’s usual experience, the tempo slowed considerably. I noted that the performance got really slow, and I was not very comfortable playing on it. I later said to Dan [a drummer, who was not playing during this performance], who told me that the tune was very enjoyable, that I felt like I had clay feet when playing it. He said, sure, it got really slow. Rick [a sax player], perhaps tired of the slow tempo, played double time [twice as fast as normal] in a couple of spots, and got Bakari [the drummer] and the rest of the rhythm players to go along with this, and to later follow him back to straight time. Horace [a trumpet player] chose to play much faster than the current tempo when he came back in after the drum solo. Horace played about a measure by himself, with the other horns coming in at his faster tempo shortly thereafter. Bakari continued to play at the previous slow tempo for a while, but the bass and guitar had come in at Horace’s tempo, and the drummer finally fell in with everybody else.

This incident had something of the air of chaos about it momentarily, as Horace’s new speed was out of proportion to what the drummer was playing previously. Despite this discrepancy, most of
the musicians picked up quickly on the new tempo, and any apparent chaos disappeared when the drummer sped up his playing to meet the tempo and the band continued to a reasonably cohesive ending. In part this is explicable through Sawyer’s (2003) framework, wherein new musical utterances in the stream of a performance re-shape the context and enjoin other performers to produce utterances that conform to that context. But why was this one player able to make this change? Why did the re-entering bass and guitar players follow Horace instead of Bakari? In part, it may well have to do with the fact that Horace’s playing was better aligned to the players’ sense of the “right” tempo for Epistrophy, based both on the initial tempo of the particular performance and on recorded performances of this and similar compositions. But I would like to suggest that it was also contingent upon the relative status of the different performers. Horace is the nominal leader of the house band at Steve’s. This was only the first or second time I had seen Bakari there. It is my experience that, when presented with a choice between two players’ musical suggestions about how a performance should proceed, other players will follow the player with higher social status in the setting of the jam session. That status may be based upon a player’s status among professionals—whether he’s a “name” player who performs at major venues, versus whether he’s a “sideman,” an anonymous accompanist—or his status as a professional versus an amateur or hobbyist. Further, to some extent there are cliques of like-minded musicians who, among one another, tend to possess higher status than out-group musicians.

A second example of communication about rhythm and tempo comes from my interview with Andrew, the bass player at Steve’s. We were listening to a recent performance of the composition Invitation. My fieldnotes from that performance described a gaffe toward the ending:
To finish the tune, after Dan’s [drum] solo, Horace started to play the head. But he was playing it in half time [half as fast as everyone else]. The rhythm section kept at the original pace, and Basheer (an alto saxophonist) and one or two other horn players came in further along in the head with the “right” tempo.

After we listened to the passage in question, I asked Andrew what measures he takes in these situations to ensure that the performance will end well. He replied,

I just hunker down. Dan and Josh [the guitar player] are listening, and we’re going to hold our front. And I’m not going to go against the drummer, where he’s marking the measures, you know, his ‘one’ is where I’m going to put ‘one’ [the first beat of a measure of music], because that’s where it really, really, really trains [if a player doesn’t follow that ‘one’].

With respect to this particular performance

That was one of those things that I was just, I knew where he [Dan] was, and he also hit a big ‘one,’ and that’s where the horn players [Basheer, et al.] were, so, yeah, I’m going to be with Dan on that… It hasn’t really ever come up or been that big of a problem. Like I think the three of us [in the rhythm section] are going to try to be on the same page, I mean, like that might have been one of the worst. And it wasn’t even [so bad]—it came off as like an effect, like we’re just playing
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around. I don’t think it’s ever been a complete train wreck at that session….I think just because everyone is trying to listen and keep it together—I mean it’s hard, it’s real hard to go wrong when everyone’s trying to be right.

Here we see a case where Horace’s status did not enter into players’ considerations of whether or not to follow him—he was just plain wrong in the face of almost all the other players’ understanding of the ongoing performance. We also see the special status that Andrew gives to Dan, an experienced drummer whom he trusts to be in the right place. Finally, the overwhelming evidence from the ongoing performance suggested to the other players that the structure of the rhythm from that performance, rather than Horace’s half tempo, was the appropriate contextual parameter to attune their new musical utterances to.

*Who Says a Jazz Band Can’t Play Funk?*

The final type of material communicated about music, through music, that I will discuss here is style. To the uninitiated, jazz comprises a fairly homogenous style unto itself. But there is in fact a great deal of stylistic variation within jazz. Musicians may play in a classic “swing” style, reminiscent of the music of the 1930s and 40s, the “bebop” style which came to prominence in the late 40s, later “post-bop” styles, “outside” or “free” (i.e., from regular tempos and harmonies), or even borrow stylistic variations from what seem to be other genres of music entirely, such as rock, R&B, and hip-hop. As with the other variables mentioned above, it does not “work” musically if only one musician makes this change. There will be some aesthetic clash between the styles, and, unless others pick up on the newly introduced idea, it will most likely be dropped. If everyone in the group does go along with a new idea, they say that they
have “hooked up.” Whether we understand this metaphor of hooking up in its sexual sense of achieving erotic congress with a partner, the electrical sense of bringing life to an inert gizmo by attaching it to the power grid, or the drug culture sense of obtaining that sought-after quantity of a certain elicit something, musicians’ implication here is clear: they are playing what they feel to be good music. An example of this comes from a session at Steve’s on 9 October 2005:

The next tune was *Softly, As in a Morning Sunrise*. Ken took over the drums, Amiri joined on alto, and Clayton playing trumpet. Amiri turned around to look at Ken while he was soloing, I think trying to egg Ken into playing…something—I was not sure what. Anyway, Ken made some comical faces at Amiri, and laid some big fills [brief percussion improvisations] in, sort of outside, as what Elvin Jones might have played with Dolphy or Coltrane [Eric Dolphy or John Coltrane: two seminal figures in the development of avant-garde jazz in the 1960s], which seemed to be what Amiri was going for. Ken played a couple of different rhythms during Clayton’s solo. This included mostly straight swing, and again going into a sort of Coltrane-ish “outside” style for a couple of periods, with the drums playing bombastic fills, bass and guitar playing sustained chords. During my own solo, he played a hip-hop beat a during several sections…. I took the bait, [playing along with this new rhythm] it was fun, I think we all got a kick of it. But I was standing by the corner of the bar, and Horace started to fall out (laughing) when the hip-hop started. I looked at him, and he was not looking at me, he was leaning on the bar. He looked at Rick who also started laughing. I looked at Rick sort of intently
while playing, he also was not looking at me, just laughing away. It was not offensive to me, just kind of funny that they would react that way.

These examples illustrate the communication of a couple of different rhythmic patterns and styles of playing. On both these occasions, the switching between styles was largely engendered by this particular drummer—Ken—who carries the band into stop-time or into playing hip-hop or funk beats, or into playing outside or free. The rest of the musicians hook up with Ken—the communication is uniformly taken up by the other members of the band, as they change their playing to match these styles. It is interesting that a couple of musicians found the switch to hip-hop amusing—as if it perhaps did not fit. Something not reflected in the above passages is the fact that during the solo of a trumpet player in his mid-seventies on Softly, As in a Morning Sunrise, the band played a straight swing beat all the way through.

In this performance, different musical styles provide a significant context influencing all the musicians’ musical utterances. In addition to playing different rhythms, musicians also played different notes from musical scales more appropriate to the given styles. The other significant parameter of context here is the background of the various players. The shift to hip-hop or funk style is reserved for younger musicians. Rhythm players avoid these shenanigans when performing with seventy-something bebop musicians.

Discussion

Symbolic interaction (e.g., Blumer 1969, Goffman 1959), language philosophy (e.g., Austin 1975), and linguistic anthropology (e.g., Goodwin and Duranti 1992) all pay close attention to the role of context in spoken interactions. These studies suggest that various
parameters which contribute to interactants’ definitions of the situation influence the lines they can and will take in interactions. An example from Austin (1975) is perhaps most telling, namely his point that uttering the words “I do” have the effect of marrying one’s betrothed if and only if “the particular persons and circumstances in a given case [are] appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure [e.g., marriage] invoked (15).” Goffman’s (1979) discussion of “footing” takes a related tack, noting, for instance, that speech as quoted by a storyteller or narrator have a significantly different import than when they were first uttered by the original speaker.

But Goffman’s (1974) program of frame analysis is more germane to the discussion at hand. Here, he describes frames as cognitive schemes for understanding reality. Not only speech events, but all reality is perceived by individuals with reference to schemes that allow them to organize the events and things they observe. Thus the cascading of a waterfall is comprehensible by reference to an individual’s understanding of physics—or, perhaps, magic—while a candidate’s speech is understood by reference to the listener’s notions of rhetoric in politics. Goffman describes a variety of “primary frameworks”—modes for understanding constituted by various interaction rules and elements of context. Having established several of these frameworks, he seeks to describe the circumstances under which participants switch primary frameworks or come to understand that the frame in which they thought they were acting is in fact another frame, as, for example, when a rube playing 3-card monte comes to realize that what he initially framed as a game of chance ought in fact to be framed as a confidence scheme.

In the above examples from jam sessions, while the notion of a primary frame is useful, we see that much more can be said about frames. This paper is a search for the parameters which make up a frame at any given time and how they influence how musicians hear passages of
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music and potentially how they respond to them. As such, it moves below the level of the frame, a perduring structure, and considers the momentary parameters of context that facilitate interactions within a particular frame. As such, this effort is perhaps a more systematic version of Blumer’s (1969) statement on joint action, which holds that such actions are based at once on human beings’ possession of some perduring meanings, and on some meanings that are formed anew in any interaction.

The examples discussed above can help us move toward a greater understanding of how the variance of particular parameters of context contribute to interactants’ definition of a situation. Understanding interaction through frame analysis gives us the ability to distinguish varied realms of interaction, potential paths of action within those realms, and a remarkable ability to come to grips with the breakdowns that occur when interactants produce definitions of a situation based on different frames. Having come to understand a particular interaction as an instance of a particular frame our next step should be to understand the different parameters that influence how individuals interact within that frame at any given time. These are what I have dubbed “contextual parameters.”

Contextual parameters are implicated, perceived, and invoked at various times, in various combinations by jazz musicians. We can discuss them in the same terms we discuss other parameters in sociological analysis: Most of these contextual parameters are discrete, and unordered, as in the division of rhythms into “hip-hop,” “swing,” or “bossa nova,” or choices of compositions. Some are discrete and ordered, such as individuals’ maximal educational attainment—if they have no post-secondary education in music, a BA, or an MA. Certain other variables are continuous, such as the hierarchy amongst musicians or the gradations of tempo. Performers may understand any of these parameters as relevant or not at any given moment
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during a performance. We thus need to consider that there is an additional parameter at work in
the performance that informs musicians as to what particular variables must be considered at any
point in time in the performance. Others have referred to this parameter as entextualization—the
ongoing production of musical utterances, each of which builds a context for any subsequent
utterances (Sawyer 2003). It is captured at least partially in Parameter 1 in Figure 1 below, as the
ongoing performance. This performance at least provisionally determines among musicians
where any given parameter lies on a scale of attention/disattention. But it is worth noting that
during any performance, parameters which performers have heretofore entirely disattended may
quickly require their near-full attention. This was the case when, for example, Horace introduced
a radically faster tempo in his playing than that to which the other performers had grown
accustomed.

It is important to bear in mind that the “understanding” musicians have of music in
context can be something that is explicitly thought-out, or remain below the level of conscious
reflection. Though this paper has filtered the process of interpretation and interaction in music
through language, much of the symbolic interaction that goes on in jazz, including attention to
context, is not passed through a performer’s reflective consciousness, but is rather a somatic
experience, a felt experience that seems in fact natural to performers, engendered by years spent
player, asked why he played a passage in a certain way, replied, “I don’t know. I just felt like
doing it. It felt right, you know?” The experience of such right-feeling moments are naturally a
large part of the reason these musicians play jazz in the first place. Though not subject to rational
calculus, they are still iterable within the peculiar logic of jazz, and susceptible to analysis in
terms of parameters of context.
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We should also note that some musical utterances can be interpreted as a change in one or more parameters. At once, the use of an unusual scale may be understood as indicative of the parameter of harmony, and that use seen as working to elicit certain appropriate accompanying harmonies from members of the rhythm section. But if on the other hand it is read as indicating a new value of the parameter of status, or familiarity with music education, it could even be read as a musical affront to the older musicians on stage.

Let us now turn to the specific parameters discussed above and their potential role in performances. Figure 1 provides a summary of these parameters.

-----Insert Figure 1. about here-----

The first parameter to consider in the moment of any performance, following Sawyer (2003), is the *performance itself*. Whatever musicians have played up to a given moment constitutes a key contextual parameter influencing how new musical utterances will be heard and produced. And as was mentioned above, it also gives musicians an idea of what parameters they should be paying attention to during a particular performance. Playing *Epistrophy* at such a slow tempo was unpleasant. I merely played an unpleasant solo, while Rick played double time to overcome the monotony. We were constrained by the slow play to adjust our own musical utterances to conform with what others had come to play. Once Ken had begun to play a hip-hop beat during *Softly, As in a Morning Sunrise*, the other rhythm section musicians and I increased our attention to the parameters of style and rhythm and adjusted our playing accordingly.

*Individual performers’ backgrounds* provide another key parameter of context in jam session performances. This background is comprised in part by their *age*, which to some extent
determines the influence of the different currents in learning the practice of jazz when they were developing personalities as musicians, and is strongly associated with musicians’ familiarities with different styles of music. *Education* is a related variable. Most younger musicians (under about forty) at the jam sessions have spent time in colleges that teach jazz studies. Their competencies and proclivities are often quite different from older musicians who came of age while jazz music was more frequently learned through apprenticeships with older performers and who tend to be less conversant with contemporary theories of jazz performance. This was especially evident in the difference between performances of *All Blues* at Ted’s and Steve’s, and Ken’s choice to eschew a hip-hop beat until I was playing *Softly, As in a Morning Sunrise* with him.

*Status* is a salient component of individuals’ identity in the jam session, inasmuch as it in part determines who can get away with what, or even, perhaps, who tries what. The seasoned professional may carry the music a band is playing in a direction that a hobbyist or amateur playing at the session would not—if he even thought to attempt it. Thus, Horace, who is leader of the session at Steve’s and who has played professionally on and off for over twenty years, was in a position to command the band to speed up the tempo of *Epistrophy* and did so successfully. On other occasions I have watched as lower status musicians make contributions to the performance which are rejected by the other musicians they are playing with. It is possible (though I have the impression that it is unlikely) that my attempt at carrying the band at Steve’s into altered chords failed not because of ignorance on the part of some musicians, but simply that others did not like that idea, and did not feel any compunction, given my relatively low status, about causing me to lose face by refusing to follow. A more glaring example came in my observation of a young, not very good drummer who occasionally stopped playing during some horn solos. This is a device
which some musicians use to great effect to build tension during a performance, but which he was clearly overusing. A more experienced musician on the stand, visibly frustrated by this drummer, yelled to him to “Play!” Of course this also suggests that it is not only prestige that goes into whether or not the group latches onto ideas presented by individuals. Prestige tends to vary in direct proportion to skill and a solid sense of jazz aesthetics. The contributions of higher status individuals are thus more likely to sound good to other participants, to excite them and make them want to join in the fun.

*Styles* constitute a parameter influencing the context of jam session performances inasmuch as they provide different sets of conventions for musical phrasing and the selection of harmonies. For example, performing in the hip-hop style entails changing the rhythms played by drummers, bass, guitar, and piano players. Soloing musicians tend to change the rhythm of their melody lines, and often select from a somewhat simpler palate of notes (especially the so-called “blues scale”) in constructing their phrases. As mentioned above, the proclivity of individuals to work in particular styles is in part contingent on their age and education, but it is in part simply a matter of individuals’ taste.

*Compositions themselves* form a contextual parameter influencing musical interactions. Certain compositions lend themselves more to departures from structure than others. *Softly as in a Morning Sunrise* is a good example of such a composition. Its structure is relatively simple, meaning that musicians do not need to pay as close attention to keeping up with changing chords as they do with many other compositions with more complicated harmonies. Further, the composition was a favorite of John Coltrane, and was frequently used as a basis for passionate, rhapsodic improvisations by him and his bandmates. This history-of-performance-as-contextual
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parameter is reflected in my notes above, as I observed directly several instances of playing akin to Coltrane.

On a related note, we need to take into account the role the *entire oeuvre of jazz music* plays in performances. Not only do recordings of prior performances of a *particular* composition make a difference. *All* performances provide potential material for the improvising jazz musicians discussed here. This was noted above in my conversation with James, who pointed to a specific recording to illustrate his model for accompanying soloists playing outside phrases. Many of my informants cite the influence of particular performers and recordings on how they approach playing jazz at jam sessions. These recordings and personal styles of musicians past and present are a resource always present for performing musicians. On a related note, the canon of jazz as written in sheet music is also a significant element of context, and so is its potential disconnection from the recorded canon, as I found out when discussing *Up Jumped Spring* with Ran.

Taken as a whole, *jam sessions* in general serve as a parameter of their own context in the scope of jazz performance which in general mitigates the rigidity with which performers may adhere to conventional modes of playing compositions. I have heard bands slip into funk or odd harmonies or free playing on everything from simple blues tunes to medium-tempo compositions from the Great American Songbook such as *I’ll Remember April* or *What is This Thing Called Love* to ballads such as *My Funny Valentine*. This in part reflects of the ethos of the jam session: As an unpaid performance, it is a context in which to experiment, to have fun, and trying out new ideas on various compositions is encouraged here in a way that it would not be on a paid gig where customers—a club audience, or a client hiring a band for a wedding reception or corporate function—would frown on such experimentation (MacLeod 1993).
Finally, the differences between particular jam sessions are not to be discounted. There is something about the confluence certain regular participants that can lead certain jam sessions to be perceived as having certain atmospheres. For example, a musician once told me that the session at Steve’s was a “bebop” jam session. Indeed, my own experience seems to hold this to be true. Funk is less often a component of sessions at Steve’s compared to Ted’s (though, as we saw, it is not unheard-of), while bebop compositions considered obscure even by some professional jazz musicians are often played.

In practice, while these parameters are not infinite, neither are they limited to the several discussed in this paper. What is more, while there are always several potential parameters that may elucidate any particular musical utterance, the ideal moments in jazz performance, moments of hooking up, are instances in which the players share the same parameters for musical understanding. When all the performers are on the same page, for example understanding the parameter of genre as the most salient to which to conform their all of their own utterances, they will tend to evaluate the music most highly.

A jazz performance is, to some extent, somewhat of a special case amongst interaction frames. While an important aspect of most everyday interaction is the maintenance of a single line without breaking frame, such as not talking about family life during a business meeting, jazz performers value the kind of jarring switches from maintaining uniform lines of rhythm or harmony discussed above—to the extent that jazz is sometimes referred to as the “sound of surprise” (Balliett 1978). As we have seen, changes to any of the contextual parameters relevant to a jam session performance alter the ongoing possibilities for musical utterances. These changes do not entail a frame switch—all the while, the musicians frame their activity as a jazz
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performance. Thus, I am arguing in part here for increased attention to those parameters which constitute a frame, and at the same time can modify joint action within that frame.

Conclusion

This paper suggests a method for focusing our study of joint action. Having identified a particular frame in which individuals interact, to more fully understand the nature of the actions they take, how they produce utterances (verbal, musical, or otherwise) in the ongoing stream of interaction, the analysis above suggests that we then must attend to the various parameters of context relevant to that interaction. These parameters, some frame-specific, others common to various frames, influence interaction in relatively predictable ways. The ethnographer’s task is to discern them, and show how and when they are invoked.

This kind of work, developing schemes of salient contextual parameters for primary frames, can help us analyze any form of joint action. Though significant headway has been made in considering the role of contextual parameters in linguistic interaction (e.g., Goodwin and Duranti 1992), social science has largely neglected to bring this kind of analysis to bear on salient interactions outside the language sphere. For example, though the importance of context to interaction has been recognized in the social movements literature, particularly in Benford and Snow’s work (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow et al. 1986), studies of movements may benefit from the elucidation of the particular parameters relevant to any movement, to help us understand why certain messages gain “resonance” where others do not. A deeper understanding of why some movements succeed where others fail could be gained if social movements research returns to Goffman’s notion of “frames” as social constructs that exist outside individuals, within which messages can be interpreted, rather than discussing “framing” as an activity accomplished
by movement organizers. We could then look at the activities of these organizers as taking place within one or another frame—“movement solicitation” perhaps. This would help us understand their activities in much the way the activities of jazz musicians are understood in this paper, by considering the contextual parameters that exist beyond a particular interaction and analyzing organizers’ utterances as understood by potential adherents with respect to those parameters, which could include anything from their demographic characteristics to the medium through which movement operatives communicate.

Studying joint action with an eye to contextual parameters can help us make sense of a wide range of collective behavior. This analysis could help us take systematic accounts of the problematic coordinations of action in complex organizations, even as far afield as military engagements. Understanding the complex organizational structures associated with friendly-fire incidents, for example, can elucidate the concatenation of events that lead to such actions (Snook 2000). But producing a coherent explanation of the crucial moment in these encounters—the decision whether to shoot or not—requires careful analysis of the contextual parameters the individual doing the shooting can bring to bear upon the stream of information they are receiving while engaged with a potential enemy. Snook has brought something like this kind of analysis to bear on the investigation of the downing of two US helicopters in northern Iraq in 1994 by US fighter jets, showing that the pilots took account of contextual dimensions such as pre-flight briefings and their training in recognizing other aircraft before their decision to shoot down the helicopters. More such analysis could prove useful in a host of situations in which combatants must quickly decide whether an alter encountered on the field of battle is friend or foe. By knowing the parameters that combatants find relevant in assessing these situations, superiors
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may impart more complete or more appropriate knowledge and avoid regrettable and costly losses of the lives of friendly or non-combatants.

The theory offered here does not account for change. Clearly, in the case of jazz, the relevant contextual parameters have changed over time. We need only to look at the rise in the prominence of jazz studies programs at the collegiate level, and the aforementioned importance of such education as a parameter informing performance at jam sessions, to see that new parameters may be introduced. Can the applications of contextual parameters in jam sessions themselves create new parameters, even new paradigms, for musical practice? Anecdotal evidence seems to suggest it can: Those young musicians who play at Ted’s are referred to en masse by other musicians at jam sessions as having their own aesthetic. This aesthetic has been forged over time in the interactions of particular individuals at that particular recurring jam session. In the accepted history of jazz, jam sessions at Minton’s Playhouse in Harlem in the 1940s are widely cited as an important element in changes the stylistic practices which eventually yielded the bebop movement (Lopes 2002; Owens 1995; Stearns 1958; Tirro 1993). It does not require a profound theoretical leap to believe that particular loci of practice in other realms can themselves change the overall practice in different types of frames. The friendly fire incident detailed by Snook changed practice in the Air Force, increasing, at least temporarily, attention to some contextual parameters implicated in engagements. Baseball, in response to changes in certain contextual parameters, such as better-made balls and better pitchers, has frequently changed practices and even rules in the attempt to maintain some degree of competitive parity, some continuity of the frame of baseball as a game (Seymour 1960; James 2001).
The analysis undertaken in this paper gives us a working set of parameters to compare to other primary frames. Across all frames, we should expect that the ongoing stream of interaction is always an important parameter of context. And, inasmuch as interactants know each other’s background or construct an assumed background for alters based on stereotypes, aspects of personal identity and history provide a key contextual parameter. But identifying what particular aspects of personal history—age, education, gender, political party affiliation, taste in cuisine, etc.—are salient to any particular frame, and what other parameters influence interactions, is a task that must be taken up anew when we study interaction in any frame. It is only through careful ethnographic work, the analysis of audio and/or visual recordings, and careful dialog with “natives” about their practices, that a working picture of salient contextual parameters emerges. Eventually one comes to recognize points in the action when particular parameters become especially salient. For the jam session, while the ongoing performance is always the most important thing, it appears that performers tend to pay a considerable amount of attention to the personal characteristics of others, and secondarily consider such aspects as written or recorded music, or the feel of a particular jam session.

This paper has presented, I hope, a reasonably rigorous picture of musical practice, and by extension musical meaning-making and communication, by musicians at Chicago jam sessions in the early 21st Century. From this picture has emerged a nascent theory of how we may discover what aspects of a situation form a frame for joint action, how individuals can draw simultaneously upon multiple parameters of context to make their alters’ (communicative) actions comprehensible, and thus how they can meaningfully and appropriately react to those actions. In all frames, we would expect that the most important contextual dynamism must be sought in the ongoing interactions themselves. As much as several exterior, relatively fixed
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contextual parameters hold sway over any given jam session, within the ongoing session, meaning is negotiated and renegotiated continuously in terms of the ever-newly-created context of the particular performance. The novelty which those negotiations engender is ultimately what keeps jazz fresh, keeps the players interested in playing, and keeps audiences listening.
References


Figure 1. Contextual Parameters and their Implications.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Implication</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Ongoing Performance</td>
<td>New phrases tend to mesh with those previously played; Gauge of parameters relevant to a performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Personal Background</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Age/Education</td>
<td>Familiarity with substitutions; Proclivity of other players to attempt stylistic changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Status</td>
<td>Success in introducing new ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Stylistic preferences</td>
<td>Proclivity to change style of playing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Compositions</td>
<td>Constraints on harmonic substitutions; Suggestions of thematic material; Constraints on rhythmic patterns and style changes; Written editions’ contrast with recorded performances as a source of confusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Prior Performances</td>
<td>Suggestions of thematic material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The Jam Session</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. In General</td>
<td>Proclivity toward experimentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Particular Sessions</td>
<td>Limitations on stylistic changes</td>
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