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# The reciprocal relationship between jazz musicians and audiences in live performances: A pilot qualitative study

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## Abstract

Despite the centrality of live musical performance to jazz, there has been little scholarly attention placed on the performer–audience relationship. This pilot study explored the factors that assisted and hindered this relationship among players and audience members attending live performances at a London jazz club. Semi-structured interviews were held with seven jazz musicians and ten audience members who had been present at one of their performances in a London jazz club. The central question was 'what makes a successful jazz gig?'. Content analysis of responses identified that responses clustered in three major themes: the power of the audience, as experienced by both parties in positive and negative ways; the critical importance of venue size in moderating the quality of the performer-audience interaction; and the relative accuracy of each group's beliefs about what the other group sought from this relationship. A major finding was that performers set clear limits on the degree to which they are willing to take audience views or behaviour into consideration, whilst acknowledging the very considerable power of the audience to influence events for better or for worse.

## Keywords

*audience effects, audience response, jazz, jazz musicians, live performance*

## Introduction

The context in which music takes place has significant effects on how it is experienced by those involved (Sloboda, 2010). Recent research has highlighted how, for most people in contemporary industrialized societies, their predominant experience of music is one where they listen to recorded or broadcast music soundtracks alone (at home, while driving a car; North, Hargreaves, & Hargreaves, 2004). More often than not, music is a secondary accompaniment to some other

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primary activity (working, socializing, resting), and is used as a means of enhancing that activity, or regulating mood (Sloboda, Lamont, & Greasley, 2009). One key aspect of this solitary and remote mode of experiencing music is that opportunities for the performer to obtain information or feedback from the listener are severely limited, if not non-existent.

In contrast, live musical performances offer the possibility of a wealth of reciprocal influences between the people present together. Performers can influence listeners by how they look, their gestures, what they say, how they inhabit the shared space, as well as through the musical sounds they produce. But listeners have influence too, on each other and on the performers that can significantly contribute to the shared experience. Listeners become active agents who can significantly determine the overall nature of the performance outcome.

Recent music psychology research has, to a great extent, reflected the predominant mode of music listening in the societies where researchers are active. The vast majority of empirical work has been conducted on listeners and performers in isolation from one another, mostly using recorded sound materials as stimuli. Indeed, in an intensive research career spanning four decades, the second author of this paper (Sloboda) has never hitherto collected or analyzed any data relating to a situation where performers and audience were together in the same room, as a volume such as Sloboda (2005) will reveal. In this, he has displayed a typical bias of the research community, one that the current collaboration was designed – in a small way – to address.

Pioneering work which has addressed some broader issues of the performer–audience communication has included research on the effects expressive body movements of performers (e.g., Davidson, 2005, 2007), and a series of intensive studies of audience members' reasons for attending concerts, and their reactions to concert attendance (Dobson, 2010a; Pitts, 2005). One context for audience research is a generally noted decline in the prevalence of attendance at concerts, particularly classical concerts in North America and Europe over the last decades of the 20th century and into the 21st Century (National Endowment for the Arts [NEA], 2009). Understanding what motivates people for (or inhibits them from) concert attendance has become an increasing priority for the classical music world at large (Department of Culture, Media, and Sport [DCMS], 2006; Sandow, 2011). It is striking, however, that the agenda for these investigations is generally not being set by performing musicians themselves, but rather by arts organizations, concert promoters, and/or academic researchers. In particular, the issue of what performers might receive from their live audiences (as opposed to what audiences gain from the experience) does not appear to have been a focus of any significant investigation.

One possible reason for the relative lack of engagement of classical performing musicians with wider debates about audiences may be the nature of the dominant classical music culture as represented in the institutions and discourses that shape contemporary classical performers. As noted by Ford and Sloboda (2012), this is a culture which prioritizes the relationship between the performer and the composer over that between the performer and the audience. Ford and Sloboda remark:

> Since the 19th century, performers' attention has commonly focused on the musical score and the faithful transmission of the composer's intentions, rather than a charismatic rendition which draws authority from the performer or is tailored to suit a particular audience.

Many classical musicians may have been encouraged to believe that, in some rather important sense, audience response is not the key issue for their artistry, and so understanding that response and taking it into account when performing is not a high priority, and might even be seen, in extreme situations, as 'selling out on one's art'.

Jazz is, however, a genre where the cultural norms are rather different in terms of the settings and conventions of performance. It places improvisation at its core, and so its dominant discourse puts the performer, in the specific here and now, right into the driving seat. Jazz composers and arrangers of the 20th century such as Duke Ellington, Jelly Roll Morton, Fletcher Henderson, Gil Evans and Carla Bley have been the architects in innovations of style, harmony and structure. They continued a legacy begun by jazz musicians adapting and arranging folk music, popular songs, military music, classical forms, show tunes plus 'standards' from the 'Great American Songbook'. But equally important to the compositions have been what the musicians assembled make of it, in a given time and place, with all the specificities of mood, venue, audience, and atmosphere. The composer or arranger provides the materials from which the performers make jazz. One would, therefore, predict that successful professional jazz musicians should possess a rich and well-articulated understanding of the various factors that contribute to the achievement of a successful gig, including the dynamics of the performer–audience relationship.

It is therefore quite surprising to find that the existing jazz research literature has not systematically explored the performer–audience relationship in any depth, particularly as jazz is also suffering from the same decline in audience attendance that has been noted for classical music (NEA, 2009).

The voice of the jazz performer is certainly increasingly present in contemporary research. The contribution of studies, which interview mainly United States (US)-based jazz musicians, has been discussed by Berliner (1994) and Monson (1996), and is exemplified by the major 'Jazz Oral History Project' of the US National Endowment of the Arts (Peretti, 1990; Welbern, 1986). More recent work with a United Kingdom (UK) focus includes extensive interviews with contemporary jazz musicians of Walker and Burgess (2011) and MacDonald, Miell and Wilson (2005), and more focused studies by MacDonald and Wilson (2005, 2006) examining identity of experienced jazz performances, and Dobson (2010b, 2011) focusing on the perceived career demands of early career jazz musicians. However, with the exception of MacDonald and Wilson (2005), which is discussed further below, in none of these cases was there a strong focus on audiences, nor any attempt to link performer narratives with narratives from those audience members who heard them play. On the other hand, a recent exploration of the views of audience members attending a jazz festival in Scotland (Burland & Pitts, 2010) was equally one-sided in that none of the musicians involved were included in the study.

Jazz and the music performed 'under its influence' (Fordham, 1996) is a form based on innovation in compositional style, improvisation and communication between musicians. One may ask whether keeping the audience at some kind of distance from the artistic process is necessary to ensure that this innovation continues. If the jazz musician is too responsive to audience preferences, would the form continue to evolve? And if jazz musicians need to continue to develop their artistry and innovation in the act of live performance, what implications does this have for their relationship with an audience? In particular, what specific elements of the relationship encourage and enhance their artistry and what elements are disruptive and problematic?

Despite scholarly neglect of these issues, hints regarding their treatment by some jazz musicians can be found in the broader jazz literature and documentary footage. Some eminent jazz musicians have expressed strong views on how they regard their audience and what their artistic priorities are. For instance, trumpet player and composer Miles Davis was unequivocal in his view that 'the artist's first responsibility is to himself' (Carr, 1999). Pianist and composer Keith Jarrett startled his audience at the 2007 Umbria Jazz Festival when, in an angry, impromptu speech about being photographed by the audience, he declared, 'I think the privilege is yours to

hear us' (Jarrett, 2007). Pianist and composer Duke Ellington said he insisted on nothing from his audience: 'I play for the audience and if I'm lucky they have the same taste I have' (Ellington, 1974). Remarks such as these reveal a view of the artistic direction and integrity of the jazz musician as paramount, with the audience placed in the secondary position of being welcome to appreciate it, or not, as they wish.

Davis and Ellington have achieved a unique and enduring presence in jazz and are major influences of the form that developed over the lifetime of their performing and creative careers. Despite Keith Jarrett's infamous and controversial views on audience relations, he too is considered one of the most successful musicians of any genre of his generation and continues to perform sell-out concerts, worldwide.

The success of such artists as jazz performers and creators arguably results from their artistry and integrity rather than to any courting of their audience's opinion before making artistic choices. Clearly, however, the mere fact of their abiding popularity means that their music does have wide audience appeal.

The only recent research study which explicitly includes jazz performer's views of audiences is Macdonald and Wilson (2005). They interviewed 11 professional jazz musicians in two one-hour group interviews (five in one group, six in the other). Most players were known to the interviewer and each other. The interviews ranged widely over many topics, but there is one short section on audiences where the authors report that 'Attitudes towards the audiences and listeners ranged from antipathy to unconcern . . . They were perceived with some exasperation as wanting to hear only the replication of familiar music, or as not wanting to listen, only to drink' (p. 409). Whilst accepting that such dismissive reactions to audiences may indeed be prevalent among jazz performers, the internal dynamics of a single group of interconnected players may not be the most conducive to teasing out a fuller and more nuanced range of responses, particularly in a study where it was not an explicit intention to probe the complexities of performer–audience relations.

The main purpose of the current study was to extend our limited knowledge by systematically, and in some depth, bringing performer and audience perspectives together within an integrated research project designed specifically to explore the parameters of the performer–audience interaction in live performance. As befits a pilot investigation, the primary research question being posed is broad and open-ended; that is 'what makes a successful gig?', from the perspective of both performers and audience members. The specific concern of the study is to explore, through qualitative extended interviews, how jazz performer and audience see each other and how the jazz performer–audience relationship can contribute to the quality of the artistic experience.

## Method

### *Participants and recruitment*

Participants were recruited from jazz musicians and audience members attending eight public events ('gigs') at a small-scale jazz club (capacity of 100 people) in East London, 'The Vortex Jazz Club' ('The Vortex') between March and July 2010. This venue was chosen as a convenient recruiting base and was not itself the subject of the research. Equally, the specific gigs that the research respondents were drawn from were not the focus of the study, although the experiences audience members and musicians had there were useful as starting points for subsequent interview discussions. Although a variety of jazz forms and styles are performed at The Vortex, there is an emphasis on post-1960s jazz, which frames the stylistic scope of this study.

The principal researcher (first author) attended each gig, selected on the basis of the availability of the researcher to attend performances and also on the prior permission of the venue and the musicians performing on a selected date. With the cooperation and knowledge of the club's staff, audience members were asked if they were willing to be interviewed on their general experiences as a jazz audience member (not specific to the actual gig they were attending) and, if so, to supply their contact details. The audience members who volunteered for interview did not appear to have a specific profile. They simply answered that they would like to be interviewed when asked by the principal researcher or volunteered via a supplied form.

To ensure confidentially, the principal researcher was the only member of the team to hold this information. All those audience members who expressed a willingness to be contacted (12 in total) were contacted by email and interviews were eventually conducted with 10 of them.

Of the jazz musicians performing on each evening (30 in total), 14 were directly approached by the principal researcher to recruit them for an interview at a later date. Those willing were contacted by email and interviews were eventually held with seven of them. It is in one sense a limitation of the study that more musicians could not be interviewed; however, all were busy, regularly booked musicians of a high profile.

The audience members interviewed comprised seven males and three females, ranging in age from 30s to 60s. The performers interviewed comprised three drummers, three saxophonists, and a flute player. They were all male, and ranged in age from 20s to 60s. Three out of the seven musicians attended a conservatoire to study jazz specifically, one attended university to begin a music degree specializing in jazz, and three did not attend conservatoires to learn their craft.

None of musicians interviewed are contracted staff members of the authors' institution. Three of the interviewed musicians had performed previously but not regularly with the principal researcher; one musician was known to her, and three were unknown to her.

### *Materials and administration*

The interviews were conducted by asking piloted, open-ended questions, designed to encourage the participants to think and speak as freely as they wished. The interviews took the form of conversations, between the principal researcher (who is also an experienced professional jazz performer) and the participant, which included the constructed questions, but also consisted of prompts and further questioning to help the participants focus on the topic at hand or reveal more thought or detail.

The questions were designed so that both musicians and audience were asked similar questions about their experiences, good and bad, of live jazz performance. The open-ended nature of the questions hoped to reveal answers that would illustrate what elements of a live jazz gig really mattered to both parties. Although questions were asked about audiences, the participants were free to think of any aspect of a gig that came to mind. Appendix 1 shows the list of questions asked of both musicians and audience.

Two of the interviews with the musicians were conducted in rooms at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, London; the remaining five were conducted at each musician's home. Three of the interviews with audience members were conducted in rooms at the Guildhall school of Music and Drama, London; the remaining seven were conducted by telephone. The interview lengths were between 45 and 60 minutes. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

## Results and analyses

The recorded interviews were transcribed and were subjected to a thematic analysis using a grounded theory approach of organizing and analyzing data. Robson (2002) describes the aim of grounded theory as finding 'a central core category which is both at a higher level of abstraction and grounded in (i.e., derived from) the data you have collected and analyzed' (p. 493). Using the 'NVivo' research analysis software assisted the organization and categorization of the material into themes. The themes used for coding the interview material were based on the initial content analysis and on the original interview questions. Robson (p. 489) notes that early categories and underlying concepts tend to be more descriptive.[1]

In successive applications of the grounded theory approach, theory is built through repeated interaction with the described data, whilst comparing and questioning facets of the data (Robson, 2002). Within each initial theme, the interview material was analyzed qualitatively for similarities and differences of opinion and experience, both across categories of participant (jazz musician and audience) and within the categories themselves.

Three revised thematic categories formed the basis for the presentation of the project's findings:

1. *The power of the audience to impact on live performance*: how the musicians are affected by the power of the audience, how they manage their audience during live performance and the corresponding audience insights into this power (initial themes 1, 2);
2. *The impact of the jazz venue*: the affect of the venue on the audience, the musicians and their relationship (initial themes 3, 4);
3. *'I thought about you'*: jazz musicians' and audience members' beliefs about each other (initial themes 5, 6 and elements of 8, 9)

Although the quotations cited in this paper do not refer explicitly to the role of improvisation in jazz, it should be noted that any description of 'live jazz performance' means performance that includes improvisation. Where 'musicians' and 'audiences' are referred to in the following, the reference is always to jazz musicians and audiences specifically attending jazz performances. The term 'standard' refers to jazz tunes from either the 'Great American Songbook' or composed repertoire by noted jazz musicians that have an become an accepted part of the jazz repertory.

The final phases of grounded theory consideration are presented in the following sections for each of the three revised thematic categories in turn, laying out views from one group on each topic, followed by views from the other, and showing the researchers' process of analysis in drawing out similarities and contrasts in the views expressed and ultimately refining themes that address the original research questions.

### *The power of the audience to impact on live performance*

*Musicians.* Some of the musicians explicitly acknowledged the support an audience provides for their ongoing creativity whilst playing:

> You do get an extra bit of energy from being in front of an audience, gives you a real reason for being there, somehow it just sort of edges you in to a different kind of way of working. (Musician 1)

Within this acknowledgement there was appreciation and acceptance of the potential influence of the audience but ambivalence as to whether this was vital to their creative act during performance. There was a sense that the musicians were 'playing music' according to their own artistic priorities rather than 'performing' to meet the needs of an audience:

> That's what playing in public gives; I think it just gives you more purpose, more reason for doing what you do . . . they give the whole thing more presence, more meaning . . . and if the audience happens to like some of it, that's . . . a bit of a relief, really! (Musician 1)

Some reported that the presence of an audience created a sense of obligation, which went beyond the contractual and financial agreement with the promoter and audience. The very fact of someone choosing to come and listen became a motivational catalyst for giving of one's best:

> I feel you do owe some kind of debt to the audience because you've got to deliver something for them; people have gone to a lot of effort and the best way to deliver something to an audience is to try and be as honest as you can be to your own intentions in a given situation. (Musician 1)

Whilst there is an acknowledgement of the audience's power to influence play, this is countered by a view, held by some of these musicians, that the presence of the audience adds an important but not primary factor in promoting the interplay between musicians from an intimate exchange between themselves into a public event. Some reported going so far as to deliberately setting aside the audience's potential impact on their train of thought or creative process. This came not from any expressed hostility towards the audience, but more from a desire to keep performer and audience separate in order to allow for creativity to flow unimpeded by concern for the audience's opinion:

> You do it because that is what you want to do; it's my prerogative, my right, our right, to play our music and it's obviously the audience's prerogative also to decide whether they get anything out of it or not. (Musician 1)

> There'll be some people who know about my playing already, some people who don't, some people who may know about my playing when it occurs in slightly different situations. I can't start taking their opinions into account. (Musician 5)

Some of the musicians explored their feelings about the audience's role and reported embracing and actively working with it when it *felt* right to do so. When all is working well during a performance, the audience was more than a witness to the creative world of the musicians and had a stake in how the gig might progress:

> I reckon half of it is audience, yeah? Half of the gig's the audience and the feedback that you get from them . . . you say 'vibe' or something, but it is that thing, isn't it when you can feel that the people are going together on a journey and you can go more and more and more. (Musician 4)

However positive the response from the audience, becoming too dependent on it could become distracting, almost detrimental to future creative progress. The audience's power is held at bay, as a strategy for the musicians to maintain their perspective and grip on their performance. One musician reported that they'd 'hate to crave . . . or rely' on positive feedback to the point where they: 'judged (their) performance on it'.

Some of the musicians identified and had strong opinions on unhelpful responses generated by audiences during and directly after performances:

> When an audience doesn't sort of listen to the musical opinion of the group and then butts in and says their thing. That pisses me off. (Musician 2)

> Sometimes you get audience members who are quite 'ana-critical': 'Oh when you played that tune . . . I preferred the version you did with so-and-so . . . '. (Musician 7)

Just as a positive audience response was able to affect their play, unhelpful responses had a similar effect and often there was a refusal to accept this intrusion. This could involve the musician consciously altering their playing, their physical position, or even speaking out to alter their audience's behaviour. Similar to a stand-up comedian managing hecklers, some of the musicians reported taking their audience in hand and making efforts to put them back into the role that they felt the audience ought to play – that of the listeners and appreciators of the music:

> There was this couple, who came and sat, like, at the table, there [points closely in front] and they just started having this conversation. I must admit there were some points where I played *to* them – to put it nicely, or I just wafted in their direction, that was like, 'oh come on, just stand at the back' . . . It's not like you're trying to school people, necessarily on the spot but I thought I definitely should let them know somehow that it wasn't really ok. (Musician 7)

> So I did this gig with a keyboard player in a pub . . . and they [audience members] are sat right next to the band and all through the gig they were shouting and laughing, and it's like there, where you are [points to indicate proximity] and P's here, trying to solo, and I just lost it . . . whilst we were playing, I just had enough. (Musician 3)

Audience size was a consideration for all the musicians interviewed. There was a range of differing views on how the size of the audience might add or diminish its power and, in turn, the potential effect on their performance. Some argued that jazz and improvised music is intimate and personal in its expression and therefore requires a more select audience. In opposition to this, some felt that a small audience is disappointing and led to an unsatisfying gig:

> There's a paradox in this, because the more people that are in the audience, the more impersonal the experience gets for the musician. If you look out and you just see half a dozen people there, it's for real, isn't it! . . . There is a certain sense in which the experience is more acute with a smaller audience. I actually prefer it, to be perfectly honest. (Musician 1)

> A gig where nobody shows up, I mean, what you going to do? Play to like, five or 10 people? (Musician 4)

There were views on how the large audience can perhaps distort musicians' musical integrity and allow popularity to unduly influence or even limit creativity:

> People [musicians] play differently if there's a big audience . . . there can be the downside of musicians trying too hard when there's a big audience, or not going anywhere out of their comfort zone because they are too concerned with delivering. (Musician 5)

A common view was that a small but attentive and appreciative audience was worth more to these musicians than a large crowd who were less interested, with one musician expressing that they had done some of their best gigs to as little as four people.

*Audience.* Just as these jazz musicians identified the power of the audience's potential impact on live performance, the individual audience members interviewed also identified this power and talked about how they had witnessed it in action and what it might mean for live performance.

It was an internal and personal process for the musicians to manage this power; it was less so for these audience members, characterized by some not including themselves in the examples they described. 'The audience' were an external entity that these participants did not readily identify themselves as part of and some expressed sentiments that implied they felt separate from this audience, usually when the audience behaviour was disruptive or unhelpful:

> We felt more uncomfortable for the first while because the audience wasn't giving back at the level that we thought the performance merited . . . you know, clapping more enthusiastically, everybody sort of waits around for the other person to clap, nobody wants to be first, nobody shouts out if it's a good solo. (Audience 1)

However, there were clear ideas expressed by some audience members about the impact of audience power on play:

> 'I don't know if they [musicians] get a vibe from people [audience] being there . . . I think you can feel it sometimes when people get excited and it's a very good concert . . . (Audience 2)

Only one audience participant identified their own emotional responses to live jazz performance and regarded it as a communication between themselves and the musicians, but this was the exception:

> I get really emotional, really, really emotional and I just love it . . . at least that is what they get from me, every time. (Audience 3)

## *The impact of the jazz venue*

A theme expressed amongst both the musicians and audience members interviewed was the influence of the venue on performance and performer–audience relationship. A wealth of material was generated by the audience interviews about how much importance was attached to cost, comfort and accessibility and the way in which this impacted on their overall gig experience. For the musicians, their experience was influenced more by suitability of venue to their music, the venue's appropriate publicity and facilities. Important though this was to their own experiences, what threw the relationship into sharp relief were these audience members' views on venue size and its influence on their relationship with jazz musicians and how these jazz musicians experienced audiences in smaller, more intimate venues.

*Audience.* For the audience members interviewed, a significant factor in their choice of jazz performance was whether the venue allowed for them to make direct connections, physical or emotional, with the musicians. The audience participants found the smaller venues (approximately 300 seats or less) preferable to the larger ones (upwards of 1,000 seats) when it came to making these connections. They wanted to be close to the musicians, see them interact with each other and see them play as clearly as they could hear them. Large concert venues, by their very size, place the audience a considerable physical distance from the musicians and only allow restricted access to the musicians via stage doors. This did not provide these audience members with what they wanted: to be

with the musicians, intimately, as they performed, and having easy access to the musicians after the performance.

Although large concert venues allow for more people to see world famous jazz musicians perform on the international circuit, these audience members felt that the vital ingredient of intimacy was missing from their audience experience:

> Gigs at The Vortex and Café Oto [small venue in east London] I really like . . . it is quite intimate and quite small . . . you're pretty much on top of the audience and vice versa. I like that, it's great that you can go and see your heroes and they're 2 foot [sic] away from you and not only playing, they're also kind of just relaxing and you can go up and just say 'hi, I really enjoyed that set'. (Audience 6)

> I was right at the back with a friend at the sort of the top of the balcony [at The Royal Festival Hall, London]. I mean, you can't see very well. You can't see the fingers of the musicians; you can't see the facial expressions; you can't see the interactions that are going on between the musicians; you can't see how they cue people in and I felt I'd lost all that. I mean, the music was ok but I didn't feel I connected emotionally with the experience in the same way. (Audience 4)

Being physically closer and having immediate access to musicians enhanced these audience members' personal experience of live jazz performance and helped them bond with the musician. There was no view expressed by any of the audience interviewees as to how this might impact on the musicians negatively. However, this was expressed and examined by the some of the musician interviewees.

*Musicians.* This close proximity of audience to performer was problematic for some of the jazz musicians who felt the intimacy had the potential to breed over familiarity or intrusion. They spoke of experiences where audience members would call out music they expected to hear:

> Playing a few originals [performer-composed pieces] on a jazz gig and someone shouts out: 'Play a standard!' . . . someone in the audience [who] feels they know more than you . . . don't do it during the gig. (Musician 2)

Some musicians reported audience members striking up conversations with them immediately after a performance, as they stepped off stage. These conversations often contained opinions and unsolicited advice from audience members about what instruments might be preferable or what music should be played next time:

> Yeah, when people come up to you and try and give you advice. I had somebody after a gig come up to me and say: 'Erm, yes, very good playing. It's your cymbals; you need some brighter, crash-ier ones'. And I said: 'No I don't. I need a brighter audience'. (Musician 3)

> You do get people that very much think music, especially with jazz, I think, where . . . they'll tell an artist what he should or should not be playing and that's completely unhelpful for everyone, I think. (Musician 4)

These interactions were regarded by the musicians as unwelcome and experienced as hostile interventions from the audience and, although they had many anecdotes about such interruptions, they accepted the interruptions as a consequence of performing in a more intimate venue (for which there was an appreciation amongst some and some positive aspects were noted).

The relationship so far has been examined in the context of external factors that can affect live performance. The third section examines the relationship in terms of the internal world of both the groups and asks what they are thinking about each other and how this affects the musicians and the music performed.

## *'I thought about you'– jazz musicians' and audience members' beliefs about each other*

*Musicians.* The musicians interviewed were asked to think about what they thought the audience was thinking about during their performance. Some of the musicians hoped the audience would feel, think and be emotionally present during the gig and would enjoy seeing the musicians go through a transformative process:

> You're creating an unrepeatable and unique one hour of existence and hopefully a fair number of the audience recognizes that they are participating in this unrepeatable occurrence. (Musician 5)

The musicians hoped that their performance had more significance for their audience than only entertainment and that it prompted wider, philosophical considerations. Musician 4 hoped their audience might question 'their place in the world'.

Through speculation of their audience's thoughts it emerged that the musicians felt it was not for them to pander to what their audiences might want and to perform only to entertain. None admitted to significantly altering their playing or repertoire to consciously please their audience. This musician muses on the outcome of playing in such a way:

> Audience expectation is kind of double-edged. It can spur you on to really make something happen but it can also trap you in doing the things you know, from past experience, that audiences like . . . and there are clearly musicians whose stylistic direction has been determined by assessing, over time, what gets an audience going. (Musician 5)

The musicians suggested that they lead the emotional and experiential direction of the event and the audience is asked to follow. However, some musicians were very irritated and even intolerant if the audience's thoughts and responses were contrary to this and they rejected it as interfering or unhelpful. Musician 5 describes an insulting comment given after a performance but dismisses its capacity of derailing their future performances:

> Quite a well-known member of the audience . . . came up to me and said: 'I normally like what you do but that was absolute shit!'. So, even somebody who likes you might hear you in a different context and hate it. If you start worrying about any of that, you're not going to do anything. (Musician 5)

The musicians interviewed hoped their audience enjoyed their performance and felt a part of the event. Although affected by their audience's thoughts and responses, they were unwilling to allow their audience to dictate or unduly influence their artistic expression or direction.

*Audience.* Our audience interviewees showed in various ways that they were sensitive to the environment that jazz musicians tend to play in and they expected them to want a listening audience in order to give a good performance. There was some insight too into jazz musicians' need to have their own artistic integrity, aside from the audience's wishes and that the audience was to respect this:

> I would say most of them want to be heard at some point, so they practise and they go through everything they do because they love it and that's the right thing for them, but at the same time it would be great if people listened to them live. (Audience 1)

They reflected on what jazz musicians might be feeling during their performances and the majority felt that the enjoyment of playing and interacting with each other was key to the musicians' experience.

> I presume musicians like to play, they like to play together; they like to feed off each other and see how the audience reacts to that. (Audience 7)

Some of the audience members interviewed reported that they had needs that they hoped the musicians would fulfil. They wished for the musician to think about them and their needs, to be at their very best artistically and choose repertoire or a style of playing that reflected their taste.

> The type of vocalist I like is somebody who's got a really nice voice, a good quality voice, somebody who picks the songs that I like. (Audience 5)

> I guess I'm a little bit more into cutting-edge type music. Not necessarily that it has to only have been invented 5 years ago, it can be, you know, a style from the 50s but if they're playing it to make it very relevant now, that's what I would really like from the artist. (Audience 1)

The interviews generated rich material, which revealed emotionally charged, complex and occasionally contradictory sets of feelings around these jazz musicians' relationship with their audience before performance, whilst in the moment of play and after the performance had taken place.

All the musicians interviewed had a clear sensation of the power of the audience and the potential of that power. Whether they actively engaged with or disregarded the audience during their performances, none played down or avoided the issue of having to manage their audience and decide whether to consider them in their live performance.

The interviews of the audience members told a less intense story of the relationship, with acknowledgements and identifications of other audience members' behaviour, musicians' possible needs and motivations and an expression of what they required from jazz musicians and their performances.

## Discussion and conclusion

This investigation of the jazz performer and audience relationship has established three major findings. First, the audience is experienced as having considerable power to impact on the musician during play, in both positive and negative ways. Second, the size of venue was reported to have a considerable impact on the quality of the experience for both groups. Third, there were shared understandings, tempered by significant differences, in what the musicians and audiences thought was required for a good performance.

More specifically, the interview data indicates that there is a relationship in existence between jazz musicians and their audience members which they both willingly enter in to. However, this relationship has conditions attached by the musician. Although the seemingly blithe 'I do what I do, and hope the audience likes it' stance implies an almost carefree attitude

towards their audience, what underpins this is a serious requirement for the audience to maintain their role as listeners and not cross a psychological and, at times, physical boundary which the musicians have constructed. This boundary protects the musicians' choice of repertoire and interpretation of that repertoire through improvisation or arrangement and the right to play it an atmosphere conducive to focus and respect. The audience is welcomed and appreciated and is the catalyst for the musicians to deliver a good performance. The sense is that the music played only becomes a true performance once there is an audience to hear it. Several musicians talked of an unnamed dynamic that enables their performance to develop in quality if the audience is 'on their side' and the musicians will draw on the strength of this support during this performance.

The relationship is perceived to become strained when the audience cross this boundary such that their presence and strength of feeling impedes the creative flow, by, for instance, giving the musicians artistic 'instructions' ('play a standard!'), by taking advantage of the relaxed conventions of the smaller jazz performance space and offering unsolicited advice or opinion too soon after the performance.

These jazz musicians, through acknowledging the power of the audience's impact on their playing, have articulated both the positive and negative aspects of audience influence, but have set parameters on what they will and will not allow to influence their performance. They reported being able to exercise some choice in deciding whether to treat aspects of audience presence and behaviour as positive or negative. However, such is the power of the audience – particularly due to the limitations on 'breathing space' in smaller club venues and the corresponding proximity of audience feedback, both visual and auditory – that these musicians seem to experience an ongoing bittersweet struggle with their audience to keep at bay the aspects of the relationship which are unhelpful whilst drawing on those that make live performance a worthwhile activity for them.

For the audience's part, our participants reported less complex or conflicted feelings. They expressed clear views on what they valued most from the performer in the moment of play and the circumstance in which they listened to them, and also what they liked and disliked about aspects of the environment and the behaviour of other audience members around them. Their relationship with their chosen jazz musician was often characterized by practical needs, which they hoped would to lead to a fulfilling communion with the musician during play ('see the fingers of the musicians . . . see the facial expressions . . . see the interactions that are going on between the musicians') and a continued kinship afterwards ('you can go up and just say "hi, I really enjoyed that set"').

There were points where these audience members understood the needs of the musician and vice versa. From the interviewed musicians' perspective, they felt the audience was owed a good performance, which was based on the integrity of the musician playing their chosen music at their very best. This they saw possible if the audience offered them respect and allowed them their artistic freedom. The audience interviewees largely understood the needs of the musician and, in some cases, were equally as frustrated by intrusions and impediments to the performance.

The original research question asked what impact the jazz musician–audience relationship had on the quality of the artistic experience. This research suggests that the artistic experience for both parties is jeopardized more when the musicians are prevented from expressing their artistic freedom, either in the moment of play by interruptions (see Jarrett's statement about being photographed) or after the performance, when unsolicited audience analysis of the performance threatens to undermine the confidence of the musicians for future performances.

What of keeping the audience at a distance to ensure innovation, as Davis and Ellington suggest? There may be traction for this argument, as the musicians in this study did not like being told what to play by the audience ('play a standard!'), when they wished to present their own material. If they only looked back through musical history and performed firm jazz audience favourites and not new material, jazz would struggle to evolve and fail to attract new and younger players and audiences. But herein lies a tension and a possible signpost to the decline in jazz audiences (NEA, 2009). On the one hand our audience were clear about what they wanted to hear from their chosen jazz artists and what would keep them returning. On the other, the musicians insisted on their artistic freedom – 'it's my prerogative, my right, our right, to play our music'.

The tension that perhaps exists in this conditional musician–audience relationship may lie in the problem jazz has with the public perception of it as an art form. The smaller venues preferred by the audience are more informal environments, with alcohol for sale and a 'late-night' feel. This implies a more relaxed approach on everyone's part, but this was not backed up by the musicians' need for concentration and focus from the audience – a requirement aspired to from all performers of any art form. Although a silent, non-responding audience was not trusted or understood, a noisy, talkative audience, giving their personal views was also unwanted, so musicians regularly found themselves managing the expectations of jazz, along with the expectations of the audience in front of them, balanced with their own expectations and hoping that all three sets did not clash too harshly. Jazz audiences who have had access over many years to recordings and live jazz events have developed an ownership and expectation of jazz and perhaps were not fully aware that the musicians required an appreciative distance from them when it came to their artistic freedom.

A pilot study of this sort has inevitable limitations. Although the results are believed to be typical of the prevailing views held amongst UK jazz performers playing at the type of venue represented by The Vortex, only a small number of musicians were interviewed. Fourteen were approached in total and only seven were available at the time of the research. All the musicians interviewed were male, as female jazz musicians were not programmed on the gigs available for the research. Although this is an unfortunate and typical reflection of the gender balance in live jazz performance in the UK, there is no strong reason to believe that female jazz musicians would necessarily hold significantly differing views about their audience on the basis of their gender alone. MacDonald and Wilson suggest jazz is dominated by a 'patriarchal power structure' (2006, p.71), a theme also echoed by Dobson (2010b). However, it does not follow from this that women who play jazz will express a significantly different attitude or view to male jazz players.

All participants were recruited from one club, which promotes modern and contemporary jazz and improvised music, although it does not consciously set out to avoid programming other styles of jazz. If participants were interviewed from other venues, which programme other styles of jazz, such as early jazz (typical of pre-1940s), then it is of course possible that views may differ from both groups of participants from those of this study. Such comparisons, set in the context of a consideration of performer–audience relations in other musical genres (e.g., classical and popular), would be a desirable next step for a fuller understanding of the role of the audience in contemporary musical culture.

This study is intended to have practical as well as theoretical implications. The authors are using the results of this research to inform the jazz education curriculum in their institution. Consideration of the performer–audience relationship is rarely an explicitly identified component of the undergraduate and postgraduate training in jazz, and is generally 'picked up' through performance experience whilst students and post-training professional experience.

Using key findings from this research, a targeted component of audience-awareness is being developed for use in a group performance module where students devise and perform a concert for a live audience.

There are also practical implications for audience members. It is clear that many attendees at live jazz performances are not fully aware of the impact they have on performers, and what performers need from them to give of their best. Finding ways of educating attendees (or potential attendees) concerning their important role may be a component of empowering and reinvigorating audiences for live music. If, as Pitts (2005) has suggested, one of the reasons for non-attendance at live events is the sense that one is a passive observer whose presence or absence makes no difference to the performers, then this study is a very clear indication that, at least in the case of jazz gigs, whether you are there or not, and what you do while you are there, may critically influence what happens.

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## Notes

1. Nine initial themes were drawn out based on groupings facilitated by the NVivo process:

   (1) Power of the audience to influence play – musicians' comments;
   (2) Power of the audience to influence play – audience comments;
   (3) The impact of the venue on the gig – audience comments;
   (4) The impact of the venue on the gig – musicians' comments;
   (5) What the musicians think the audience think about them and want from jazz gigs;
   (6) What the audience thinks jazz musicians think and want from them and what the audience actually say they want from jazz gigs;
   (7) The nature of jazz – comments from audience on their feelings about the genre and why they attend live jazz performance;
   (8) Experiences in the moment of play – musicians' comments;
   (9) Experiences in the moment of play – audience comments.

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## Biographies

**Gail Brand** is a professor at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, teaching on the Jazz Studies programmes, the Music Therapy Masters Degree programme and the undergraduate

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John Sloboda is Research Professor at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. He has held the post of Emeritus Professor at Keele University since October 2008 and was a member of the School of Psychology at Keele from 1974, and was Director of its Unit for the Study of Musical Skill and Development founded in 1991. He was recipient of the 1998 British Psychological Society’s Presidents Award for Distinguished Contributions to Psychological Knowledge, and in 2004 was elected to Fellowship of the British Academy. His latest book is the *Handbook of Music and Emotion* co-edited with Patrik Juslin and published in 2010.

Ben Saul is a teaching professor at the Guildhall school of Music and Drama on the Music Therapy Masters degree programme. He works as a choral director, music lecturer, music therapy practitioner and researcher across music and health domains, being published in various books, periodicals and specialist reviews. He lectures on areas of specialism ranging from the role of improvising music making in assessment of complex biopsychosocial presentation in child development to the role of Elgar as a British Roman Catholic Composer. Ben has collaborated on a number of research projects with Gail Brand including working as Associate Researcher on ‘The Jazz Musician and their Audience’ research project.

Martin Hathaway is Head of Jazz Studies at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama and was made a Fellow of the Guildhall School in 2011. An experienced Jazz educator of young people as well as adults, Martin is Musical Director of the three Essex Youth Jazz Orchestras. As a saxophonist and composer, he is one of Britain’s leading jazz musicians, working in a range of musical situations from performing with Dame Cleo Laine to playing with the London Philharmonic Orchestra and the rock group ‘Radiohead’, appearing on their best-selling record ‘Kid A’. Martin will release his debut jazz quartet record in 2012.
‘Martin Hathaway, that splendid saxophonist, plays brilliantly’
Dave Gelly, *The Observer*

## Appendix 1

### *Questions: Musicians*

- What did you get from the performance at The Vortex on [date]?
- What did you get from the audience?
- Was the gig at The Vortex a success?
- What do you think audiences get from coming to your gigs?

- Can you think of a recent gig, perhaps in the last 12 months, where everything worked well, where the audience responded well and why you think it was a success?
- Can you think of a recent gig, perhaps in the last 12 months, where it didn't go well and why you think that was?
- What do you get from your audience that is enabling and helpful?
- What do get from your audience that is unhelpful?
- Does the size of the audience affect how you play?
- What role do you think improvisation plays in the process?

### *Questions: Audience*

- What do you get from going to live jazz gigs?
- How do you decide what jazz gigs to go to?
- What makes for a successful jazz gig? Think of an event that you attended recently.
- What makes for an unsuccessful one?
- What do you think jazz musicians get from performing in front of an audience?
- What role do you think improvisation plays in the process?