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Jazz Cultures – Term Paper

### Tristano's Vision: Learning from a Forgotten Innovator

Most serious jazz musicians and scholars are familiar with the name Lennie Tristano, but that same majority is largely unaware of his undeniable importance in the history of not only the music itself, but also its teaching and conceptualization. For reasons later discussed in this paper, Tristano has been essentially left out of the conventional jazz narrative. He was the first person in the history of this music to approach and conceptualize improvisation and improvised music as a multi-dimensional art form, considering the individual and his or her specific mental, physical, and emotional makeup. While history has chosen to remember the already constructed narratives of fellow jazz giants such as Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, and Ornette Coleman, the great milestones reached by Lennie Tristano in the late 1940s and early 1950s have only just survived thanks to the efforts of his disciples and scholars; Lee Konitz and Warne Marsh among many others. In this paper, the two track album *Intuition*, released by Tristano and his sextet in 1949, will be used to help illuminate Tristano's genius and the pertinence of his work to the modern conceptualization of jazz music and improvisation. Alongside said research, questions regarding Tristano's place in the historiographical makeup of jazz and the applications of his work to the modern conceptions of jazz and its formal instruction will also be considered.

Tristano (1919-1978) was first taught music by his mother, a pianist and vocalist. Blind from infancy, Tristano attended a school for the blind in Chicago as a boy and developed proficiency in music theory and studied several wind instruments. He remained in Chicago to study piano and perform and saw his first successes in the city. These successes helped attract to him two of his first and finest students, Lee Konitz and Bill Russo (Kelsey 1). In 1946 Tristano moved to New York, where he played with both Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker. After these experiences and taking on Warne Marsh as a student, Tristano had essentially formed the sextet that, in three years, would effectively break one of the largest barriers in the history of jazz with *Intuition*. Tristano did not just stumble into the production of this groundbreaking album. From his humble beginnings, Tristano had been formulating, pondering, and practicing with the goal to bring improvisation to a new level of clarity. During a panel session with Tristano students and his son, former student Connie Crothers informed researchers that Tristano originally wanted to become a psychoanalyst, before deciding to devote his life to music. Crothers continues on to describe Tristano as a man interested not in the top layer of personality, but in the depths of the character, or soul. She continues to reveal that Tristano encouraged all of his disciples to engage in “deep self analysis...fathoming the self to become more *real*” (Tristano Symposium, Crothers). When illuminated by Crothers’ account, it is becomes clear that Tristano was deeply sensitive to the nature of the human condition and also to the nature of improvisation itself. Tristano understood that for improvisation to be an act of “pure inspiration” (phrase used

by Lee Konitz – Karsten 1) new dimensions of creativity and new approaches to the conception of jazz improvisation needed to be explored.

It is important to note that before 1949, improvisation had peaked at a distinct form of jazz called 'bebop'. This style of jazz and improvisation was undoubtedly more difficult and technical than the techniques and styles that had been previously championed, but innately the style lacked humanity, as Tristano understood. Bebop calls for the rapid regurgitation of carefully planned and executed patterns and shapes, placed over a predetermined set of chord changes that loop endlessly. As well, bebop was being played at significantly higher tempos than ever before in jazz. This along with the preferred style of soloing forced improvisers to develop a vocabulary of 'licks' that will always fit over a given segment of the tune. Essentially, one could 'get by' playing bebop by simply playing a set of predetermined patterns over a given set of changes and thereby eliminate most of the creativity that comes along with spontaneous composition. Tristano was noted to have disliked very fast and very slow tempos, as they did not provide an ideal environment for the flow of improvisation, in his own opinion (Meadows, *Bebop to Cool*). Tristano sought to break through this seemingly inescapable prison of bebop scales, patterns, and changes. 'Line conception', or the act of spontaneously composing/playing an improvised melody or phrase, was something that was fundamental to Tristano's teachings. Not only did Tristano encourage his students to become closer to the music by singing their own improvised solos as well as the transcribed solos of the jazz masters, but also he advocated the creative spontaneity that allowed

such a line to weave in and out of the changes without fitting a cookie cutter mold. Furthermore, Tristano's uniquely multi-dimensional approach to improvisation incorporated a very deep conception and manipulation of rhythm and meter. Disciples such as Konitz and Marsh were taught to practice improvisations that incorporated polyrhythmic activity, superimposed meters, and irregular groupings of notes.

These teachings and fundamental understandings regarding improvisation guided Tristano towards forming a sextet with his students and others that were extremely advanced in the multi-dimensional art of conceptual improvisation that he was specifically looking for. He then recorded the album *Intuition* in 1949 that was effectively the culmination of his beliefs, and thereby provided the stage for free improvisation to be born. The historiographical narrative of jazz crowns Ornette Coleman as the jazz musician to first play 'free' and create the now widely recognized subgenre 'free jazz'. However, ten years before *The Shape of Jazz to Come*, Coleman's supposed first attempt at freely improvised creative music, Lennie Tristano had already begun experimenting with such a tool. On the album *Intuition*, there are two tracks, each of which is freely improvised. To the educated modern improviser, the sounds on this album do not seem to be completely free, however. Tristano uses voicings common to the bebop era, and the lines that he and the horn players improvise are deeply rooted in the bebop language while still being free from licks, patterns, and clichéd phrases. It is very clear in his teaching and his playing that Tristano held bebop pioneer Charlie Parker in the highest esteem (an interview with Warne Marsh revealed that

Tristano never cared for fellow bebop pioneers Dizzy Gillespie or Thelonius Monk). The vocabulary and knowledge of jazz that Tristano was working with was much condensed compared to the arsenal of lines, chords, and sounds that an improviser has today, and this has led to misconceptions about the essence of the music Tristano and his sextet was making in 1949. The conception that modern improvisers have of free improvisation has been changing since Tristano's time, and an unfathomable amount of musical growth has occurred in jazz since bebop. It is very easy to see how one could confuse Tristano's *Intuition* with bebop, or in today's categories, 'free bop'. However, in 1949, Tristano and his sextet had strayed from chord changes, melodies, time, and form like no composer or artist had done before in jazz. The freedom to do this must have originated within the realm of line conception. In his own words, Tristano believed that jazz was, "not a style, but rather a feeling" (Tabnik). Tristano firmly believed that 'building chops', studying the history and the masters, as well as expanding one's knowledge of music theory were *not* part of the path towards deeper improvisation and deeper connection with true feeling and intuition in jazz. He instead argued for a method of line conception that allowed the line to flow directly from the deepest emotions and feelings of the performer in order to perform a more 'real' and 'authentic' performance. Although Tristano was a master of chops, transcription, and theory, he knew they alone could not nurture the kind of inspirational feeling that improvisational masters, like Bud Powell in his own opinion, had already mastered. In the

following quote from 1975, Tristano describes the impact Bud Powell's playing had on his conception and practice of jazz and improvisation.

“This is what I've always strived for; to be able to sit down and play what you hear and feel...after I heard Bud, that changed everything. Because it simply meant that if you were really going to portray your feelings, your fingers had to be able to duplicate what you heard and felt...in whatever way it was organized in his brain and then transmitted through his fingers, whatever way that happened, it was absolute perfection...” (Tabnik).

*Intuition* is the first recorded example of freely improvised music in the history of jazz, even though Ornette Coleman is widely recognized as the foremost pioneer of free jazz (*The Shape of Jazz to Come*). While there is considerable argument that Ornette Coleman and like free musicians of the '60s may not have heard *Intuition* and thereby may have come to free improvisation in jazz via a different vehicle, Tristano student Lee Konitz still holds feelings of angst towards jazz historians and musicians alike who fail to give *Intuition* the credit it deserves. He said in one interview, “No one in all this talk, hardly ever mentions that [*Intuition*]. And you know damn well that these cats have heard that record somewhere along the line. It just doesn't come from no place” (Meadows).

Lennie Tristano was the first person in the evolution of jazz to found a school for the study of the music that uniquely incorporated all instruments as well as multi-dimensional approaches to both music and psychology (D. Frank, Tristano Masterclass). Lee Konitz was once quoted as saying that he considered Tristano both a musician and a philosopher (Karstin 1). While Tristano is widely

understood to have started a school before 1951, it was in that year that he founded the New School of Music in New York (Meadows 1). In the years prior, Tristano had already taken students such as Billy Bauer, Arnold Fishkin, Lee Konitz, Bill Russo, Sal Mosca, and Warne Marsh. When the New School was founded, Tristano took on more students, such as Art Pepper and Mary Lou Williams. In this New School, members of Tristano's original sextet like Konitz and Marsh were hired as instructors. Tristano's methods encouraged deep internalization of the music by way of singing. Tristano believed that the most desirable improvisation was one that came from deep inside the feelings, emotions, and even 'essence' of the player. Producing a vocal sound provided a deeper connection to the body, which Tristano believed would aid the improviser in his quest for inspired spontaneous composition. Tristano's students sang their own solos as well as along with the transcriptions of the masters he considered to be most inspirational. Some of these players included vocalists like Billie Holiday and Louis Armstrong, whom were studied for their genius and, as Tristano believed, the connection that they had to the 'real' as vocalists. Apart from the music, Tristano spent many hours with his students attempting to understand them and help them understand themselves, all in pursuit of a deeper connection to the human consciousness in order to free the music that Tristano knew was inside every one of them.

Whether consciously or not, it is thanks to Lennie Tristano's example that many jazz educators, scholars, and philosophers today have been able to incorporate these teachings into their own respective departments with their own

students. In 1987 at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Ed Sarath founded one of the first collegiate jazz departments in the world that incorporates what he calls 'Creativity and Consciousness Study' (Sarath). While the department does focus on mainstream jazz educational pillars, (learning standards, theory, history, etc) the branch of the department focusing on the creative mind is unique and mirrors many of Tristano's ideas and teachings. While still a student in Dr. Sarath's program, I partook in meditation practices, freely improvised performances with a wide variety of musicians and artists, and also used vocalization to strengthen internalization, just as Tristano's students were instructed to do. Similarly, many other jazz departments around this country and the rest of the world are using Tristano's vision of jazz education in conjunction with the ideas and practices of modern educational innovators such as Ed Sarath. These teachings, however, are still struggling to produce quality performers on a regular basis. My first hand experiences in many jazz departments across the country revealed to me that students are not achieving the deep connection and musicianship that Tristano and Sarath visualized in the creation of their respective schools and curricula. While there are most definitely a wide range of issues that could be responsible for this turnout, one of the most important is the general neglect of 'the self': the individual on his or her path to personal and cosmic understanding. This is, of course, a difficult area of study, even outside of academia. The pursuits of the human psyche could in effect boil down to this simple question of identity and personal-cosmic awareness, but when put in terms of formal teachings via music and improvisation, much is lost



and much is neglected due to the restrictions of testing and curricula. There is hope for mainstream jazz education, and I believe it lies in the area of personal development. Much care and attention needs to be given to the individual and his mental/quasi-spiritual journey towards ultimate expression through improvisation. It is no accident that university students are given the opportunity to study during their early development stages as adults. That time is crucial to the personal and musically developmentally identifying conceptions of identity, purpose, and expression, among others. Increased attention to meditation study, consciousness awareness and maturation, as well as the act of expressing one's essence and feelings via a musical instrument can and will help to nurture a deeper connection to the truth inside of each of us, the song that is waiting to be sung, or 'the real' as Tristano referred to it.

It may seem apparent that Lennie Tristano indeed had a profound influence on improvisation and its formal instruction within classical academia, however it is interesting to note that neither Tristano nor his specific methods have made their way into the historiographical context of jazz and its modern understanding. The narrative that has been constructed around this music fails to credit Tristano with the first attempt at free improvisation as well as the founding of the first two comprehensive schools to teach said practice. Scholars argue over the reasons behind these failings, and there seem to be two widely accepted views (Shim). One view suggests that Tristano's close knit sextet and his generally reclusive ways led to a decreased awareness to his music and teachings. It is noted that he earned his living primarily via private lessons that

he taught at his home. Tristano was a bit of a recluse, and after closing the New School in 1956, Tristano rarely performed again in the United States, making his last appearance in 1968. This kind of disposition and aversion to the public may have contributed to his lack of fame in the minds of some. Furthermore, Tristano was extremely opinionated about the music and the people who played it. In a genre of music and a working lifestyle characterized by openness, acceptance, and a collective pursuit of art and its most impressive applications and effects, it is easy to see how such a man would be forgotten or even pushed aside.

Tristano disliked very slow tempos as well as very fast tempos (Meadows). He instead preferred to play at a moderate tempo, which he believed was best suited for a flowing, inspired improvisation. He was once quoted as saying that he believed Charlie Parker was at his best in this tempo range, not at the extreme tempos found on tracks like Cherokee and Donna Lee. Tristano's aversion to drummers and rhythm section players in general may also have contributed to his lack of fame and recognition. Tristano had found a group that he felt comfortable playing with, and kept that group closely knit as he struggled with group dynamics throughout his career. It is important to note that Tristano was not incapable of playing fast tempos, nor was he incapable of sounding good with a drummer or rhythm section. Simply enough, Tristano had his preferences and he stuck to them.

A second theory regarding Tristano's seemed exclusion from the jazz narrative deals with race. Whether jazz historians are aware of it or not, the accepted jazz narrative in the United States is that of the African-American, not

that of a Jewish Caucasian living in New York. Regarding *Intuition* and the birth of free jazz, Ornette Coleman fits into the narrative quite easily compared to Tristano and his sextet. It is very easy for the historiography to reflect the struggles, successes, and innovations of the African-American jazz narrative and treat Tristano as a side note. There are even some groups that believe Tristano's exclusion is a direct result not of reverse-racism, but rather his own racist and/or socio-culturally prejudice undertones given his all-white sextet, student base, and sometimes irritable remarks about African-American jazz musicians such as Monk and Gillespie. Tristano was even quoted as once saying that Warne Marsh was the greatest tenor player of the time and his exclusion from fame was directly associated with his whiteness (Meadows). This view is misguided, of course. Tristano's entire conception of improvisation and line construction was based on the greats of bebop including Charlie Parker, who was of course an African-American from St. Louis. As well, Tristano believed in the beauty inside each human being and understood that the beauty and art within jazz and improvisation was not limited to one sex, one race, or one social status, but rather extended to the depths of the human condition.

Whether or not he has been remembered as one of the foremost progressive thinkers, improvisers, and teachers of jazz music in America is beside the point. It has been made clear that Lennie Tristano's dedication and vision produced extremely innovative compositions and nurtured the most capable of improvisers in Marsh and Konitz, and his ideas and practices that he applied to the New School were revolutionary and showed levels of multi-

dimensional thought and consciousness never before seen or heard in the music. Not only was Tristano an innovator in jazz education and theory, but he also the first musician in jazz to experiment with multi-track recording as well as the pioneering pianist behind walking bass lines in the left hand (Meadows). The time for arguing over why Tristano has been forgotten or why mainstream jazz education fails to address the individual and his or her needs regarding personal consciousness development is over. Instead, we must continue on where Lennie Tristano left off and pursue the refinement of perfect expression through the beautiful medium of improvised music.

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