

II-V-I and Finding a Groove: Ethics in the Improvised Relationship

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The concept of ethics in an improvised relationship may well be established out of the paired notions of “fixedness” and “fluidity.” Since the relationship is shared, it seems that one’s improvising may not be able to travel freely, and must rather maintain at least some attention for the others that are also sharing the relationship. This attention for the other and for how those participating in the relationship best operate is given as an imperative for each of the individuals to find a “groove” together. Fixedness and fluidity are identified in Ingrid Monson’s book *Saying Something* as elements related to the performing rhythm section and the soloist, respectively. The rhythm section, according to Monson’s text, provides the stability of time-keeping and tempo, while the soloist has the opportunity to use their chorus as a spotlight for improvisational virtuoso. The senses of each are drawn out of their relationship to the other and the community that they share.

Out of this pairing between a rhythm section and a soloist, performing musicians ideally aim to find a groove with one another. Monson suggests this notion as one that “supplies underlying solidity and cohesiveness to freely interacting, improvising musicians” (67), and is echoed by musician This is an element of a performing relationship that goes beyond a song’s sheet music or its helpful lead sheet, and is rather described as a “feeling” that emerges within and is shared by those that are participating. It exists in the space of the performance and in the way that the musicians and their instruments listen and speak to each other. Since the groove comes about through a sort of unity between the individuals, the feeling is a shared one, described as “a rhythmic relation or feeling existing *between* two or more musical parts and/or individuals” (68). The phrase to “find a groove” implies that it is seen as a potentiality, but that it is perceived to exist independently of the actual music that is played: already perceived but still needing to be reached, and something that is mutually produced out of the relationship. Improvisational relationships place a moral imperative upon finding this groove, so that sharing it is what makes the relationship a successful one.

Rather than simply place a “groove” as something that is to be arrived upon by the performing musicians, *Do You Know...?*, by Robert Faulkner and Howard Becker, suggests an analogy of “tuning” as an arrival point of harmony between all persons present during the performance: tuning is “a gradual fitting together of individual lines of action into a coherent collective act” (190). This analogy places an explicit imperative upon the performer that is given by surrounding others, and who must then “tune” themselves according to their surroundings. For example, one must be able to play polkas at a Polish wedding, or tunes from “The Great American Songbook.” Faulkner and Becker’s study seems to be deeply rooted in sociological conditions that extend beyond the smaller relationship of the players. Although the players are themselves audience members, “the audience” also includes show patrons, the club owner, or other persons who have hired the band to play. Each individual has their own tastes and desires, and are guided by their own ideas of what would make for a satisfying relationship.

The ideal specifications of repertoire arise from those sociological conditions. Each of these members of society must be pleased by having the right songs played, and by having those songs played well. So the “virtue” identified in *Do You Know...?* is quite directly embedded within the society in which the relationship exists. Here, in contrast to Monson’s study, it exists as a moral imperative that is fundamentally based upon the “repertoire” that a player has to please all present audience members. One can sometimes answer “yes” to the question, “Do you know *x* tune?” if one knows the common II-V-I format of many of the classic jazz tunes (prior to bebop and to the transformation of jazz to a form considered as a higher art)—so one may then be able to improvise based upon this format and the tune’s chosen key. So the ethical imperative to be able to say “yes” and to play the tune well is given sociologically: a player must please the audience members, which include the other players, as well as the club owner where the performance is taking place, as well as the wider audience viewing. Since there are these several types of individuals that a musician must please, it seems as though the imperative is extended from beyond just the other musicians, but, in a more businesslike sense, is also coming from the economic needs of the club’s owner and patrons. Each of these has their own particular tastes and desires, and Faulkner’s work identifies a player’s repertoire as the primary element which would satisfy each member of the performance’s cultural gathering. However, over the course of the work, Faulkner and Becker come to the realization that simply having a “repertoire” and the accompanying technical skill are not enough to account for the complexity of the improvising relationship. Their discussion is restricted to performances as “jobs” that are socially guided, and the study seems to find some difficulty in accounting for the ability to improvise beyond the given structures of a job and a repertoire.

What this discussion seems actually to allude to is that, rather than being a skill derived from learning the common traits of classic tunes, for an ethical relationship to exist one must personally maintain an *aptitude* for it to take place. In this sense, the “restrictions” of a given performance, as described by Faulkner and Becker, may be rephrased in a more positive sense as *bumpers* that give direction to the performances and the tunes that are chosen. There is, indeed, a concrete necessity for a player to have a level of familiarity with his instrument and with the songs that he performs, but the groove that the group of players finds may only occur together, not individually. Additionally, even if they do play a tune that each is capable of, the groove of their improvised relationship might sometimes occur through some discord. Of course, in order for that groove to be found as it is described in Monson’s account, it seems as though players must have comparable levels of skill in order to play together satisfactorily. For a song to be played “well,” however, is not to be understood in terms of whether its sheet music has been replicated satisfactorily enough. The agency of each side of the relationship includes their natural possibility for both harmony and discord, each contributing to a relationship whose ideal function as a groove is one that is then aesthetically pleasing. So the “aesthetic virtue” that is discussed throughout Monson’s text maybe understood as an aspect of an ethical system of relations within an improvised

relationship. Her study detects this ethical necessity to play well as something that is produced aesthetically, and is then transformed into a groove, a feeling.

That original question of Faulkner and Becker's study concerning the necessity of repertoire expected the similar notion of "tuning" to ideally occur as a product. Its allusion to listening for the right combination might be compared to finding the right aesthetic space between players. However, the study primarily talks about notions of responsibility which, it seems, are directly related to the societal imperatives presented to a player. A good performance would exist within the structure of knowing a repertoire and playing with/for an audience, where one's repertoire allows a performer to play satisfactorily to the audience that surrounds him/her. This would then result in an "enactment" (Faulkner 194) of these capabilities to accomplish what may be called a "groove"—while Monson writes about hitting that groove as something fulfilling which "just happens" (Monson 142). The difference here is that if the groove is the best state of existence for the relationship, Faulkner's writing points towards the necessary structures for it to occur, and says that they will allow for the proper "turning" for a groove to occur as an explicit goal. On the other hand, if a groove is described as something that simply happens, then that aspect of intentionality is removed. One would instead intend to accomplish a certain feeling with their audience with which to share a groove.

The dependencies on fundamental structures, as in Faulkner and Becker, and the aptitude for gaining a feeling, as in Monson, reveal a certain tension, but one that informs the sense of ethics in an improvised relationship. This tension is articulated by musician Don Byron as simultaneously "being conscious of yourself as part of a people that are both totally necessary to a society...and totally *reeling* from it" (Monson 202). This relationship can become quite interesting when improvised music causes the borders between performer and audience to become rather indistinct, so that it is not a simple producer/recipient relationship. Although the primary contributors of the improvising relationship may be the rhythm section and the soloist, or the society and the individual, this relationship produces a certain level of tension. Sometimes the relationship might groove, and sometimes it might shift into one of discord—the potential for such a circumstance results in an implicit tension between the two. This is more of an aesthetic aspect of the relationship, however, because its potential strength and unity lie beyond the simple points in time where performers might harmonize or not. But if this discord does come about, it exists productively: a "coherence through contradiction" (Monson 214). The nature of the improvised relationship includes the potentiality for both groove and discord as part of a positive process, so that the tensions between the stability of the rhythm section and the free improvising of the soloist engage with one another to create a unified, though separate, movement.

Works Cited

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Suggested Readings

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