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Jazz Improvisation and Stank Face

By Parris J. Baker
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Born at the end of the Reconstruction Era, Charles Joseph “Buddy” Bolden (1877-1931), was incredibly influential in creating the music we now know as jazz. Bolden, a cornetist, was an accomplished musician and well versed in various forms of music, such as ragtime, waltzes, marching band arrangements, and popular dance tunes. However, “King Bolden” had a uniquely proficient way of playing familiar songs with unfamiliar tempos, rhythms, and new and unusual guttural, raspy “blues” sounds.



Jazz, an African American art form, was born in New Orleans and is often thought of as the convergence of West African cadences, European harmonic and motivic structures, and the feel of gospel hymnals and spirituals, that were birthed in pain and freed in the music, far from the constraints of slave masters who regulated when and how enslaved blacks could communicate. In fact, it was “the ‘E’ Code Noir” (Black Codes) that allowed slaves to gather in Congo Square and to play music on Sunday (considered the Christian

sabbath).

King Bolden’s approach to playing music was rooted in improvisation, the process of composing innovative melodies within the original melody’s structure. There is a misconception regarding jazz improvisation that the

spontaneous composition is just making up music “in the moment.”
Improvisation is so much more than just making it up.

Music is a language and, like any spoken language, there are rules that govern the use of grammar, vocabulary, and various linguistic forms. There are also rules and structure for playing jazz. Think of jazz composition and improvisation akin to the difference between great speech writers and great orators. Great orators are not making it up. They have a tremendous command of language, spontaneous recall, and a feel for meter, intonation, and novelty. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech is a good example of a great orator improvising “in the moment.”

Early jazz improvisators, such as Bunk Johnson, Joe “King” Oliver, Jelly Roll Morton, and Sidney Bechet, became the major influences of great jazz musicians such as Louis Armstrong, John Birks “Dizzy” Gillespie, Miles Davis, Johnny Hodges, John Coltrane, and Charlie Parker. These incredible musicians were all known for their remarkable virtuosity, relentless practice habits, commitment to sound and innovation, and the courage to change something familiar into something novel. And somewhere in the amalgamation of virtuosity, practice, innovation, and courage is the creation of a stank face.

During Jazz Appreciation Month (April 1-30), I thought it would be appropriate to discuss the phenomenon called “stank face.” However, to understand “stank face” is to first understand what it is not. A stank face has nothing to do with odorous smells (that’s stink face), kitty litter (that’s smell), or flatulating (please, change your diet). Culturally, stank is another name for marijuana and, using African American Vernacular English, Black parents sometime nickname a child “Stank.” Stank face should not be confused with an “aha” moment, an “ill grill,” or a “mug” face. It is not the “ooh” and “ahh” impulse that opens your mouth wide and spontaneously jettisons you from your seat when LeBron James power dunks, Allen Iverson breaks someone’s ankles with his nasty crossover dribble, or Caitlan Clark makes a three-point shot from the logo. And finally, stank face is not the hip sound of James Brown or the hip-hop of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. It is not the groove of Michale Jackson, nor is it the funkadelic sounds of George Clinton (Make my funk the P-funk!).



The highest compliment one musician can receive from another musician is to see a “stank face” during a performance. The picture below, labelled stank face, is not a stank face at all, but a redefinition of the concept, produced primarily for commercial reasons. You cannot make a stank face on command. In fact, you cannot produce a stank face at all. A stank face is extracted from you, drawn out by a performer

who has exhibited superior technique while playing a particularly challenging composition, and playing it brilliantly.

However, those elements alone will not produce a stank face. The stank face is an organic response to an initially unexpected musical phrase or motif. Stank face is produced instantaneously “in the moment” and that moment cannot be replicated. The motif or phrase can be repeated, but not the stank face. The stank face will not reappear after you have heard the phrase several times because you are familiar with the sound and expect to hear it. The stank effect is gone!

The foundation of a stank face comes from a deep abiding respect and appreciation for the virtuosity of the performer and the complexities associated with the composition. Therefore, take care not to confuse the concept of “stank face” with music that is funky, “in the pocket,” hip, or cool. Granted, Stevie Wonder has produced some stank face moments.

When most jazz musicians hear John Coltrane’s Giant Steps (played at the original tempo of 286 BPM) for the first time, they produce a stank face: The brow of the forehead wrinkles in wonderment, eyes slit and the head tilts, sometimes shaking in disbelief. There is a crinkling of the nose and a tightening of the lips, the corners of the mouth pointing upward, followed almost immediately by a reluctant smile of appreciation and an exclamation of “damn!” or “woooo!”

If you want to observe a true “stank face,” please watch Lingus, on the album titled, “We Like It Here,” written by Michael League and performed by the five-time Grammy Award winning jazz fusion group Snarky Puppy. The stank face occurs during Cory Henry’s keyboard solo at the 6:10 mark, followed by successive stank face moments.

Buddy Bolten, the father of jazz, was a musical giant. A pioneer whose innovative music changed a generation of musicians and created a new listening audience. There are no recordings of Buddy Bolden’s music, therefore it is unclear if the King of New Orleans Black music produced a stank face in other musicians. However, oral folktales stated that when King Bolden played the blues, patrons would shout while they shimmed, “Aw, play it, King Bolten!” Must have been a 20th century version of the stank face.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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