2000

The sheer need to sing : the healing effect of jazz in Sheila Jordon's life

Vicki-Lyn Burns
San Jose State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses

Recommended Citation

Burns, Vicki-Lyn, "The sheer need to sing : the healing effect of jazz in Sheila Jordon's life" (2000). *Master's Theses*. 1973.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31979/etd.xbcj-m35k>

https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses/1973

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Master's Theses and Graduate Research at SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@sjsu.edu.

INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

**Bell & Howell Information and Learning
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600**

UMI[®]

**THE SHEER NEED TO SING:
THE HEALING EFFECT OF JAZZ
IN SHEILA JORDAN'S LIFE.**

A Project Report

Presented to

The School of Music

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Vicki-Lyn Burns

May 2000

UMI Number: 1399777

Copyright 2000 by
Burns, Vicki-Lyn

All rights reserved.

UMI[®]

UMI Microform 1399777

Copyright 2000 by Bell & Howell Information and Learning Company.

All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

Bell & Howell Information and Learning Company
300 North Zeeb Road
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

© 2000

Vicki-Lyn Burns

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

APPROVED FOR THE SCHOOL OF MUSIC

Dr. Theodore Lucas

Dr. Daniel Wyman

Dr. William George

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

Abstract

THE SHEER NEED TO SING: THE TRANSFORMATIVE EFFECT OF SINGING JAZZ IN SHEILA JORDAN'S LIFE

By Vicki-Lyn Burns

This document addresses the topic of the life and career of Sheila Jordan (b.1928). It examines the relationship of the singer to the music that she sings in light of the cultural contributions of the African Diaspora in America.

Research into the singer's life and her relationship to both the music of jazz and to her fellow jazz musicians shows that "extra-musical" experiences during performance have had a depth and complexity that may be termed as "spiritual." She herself has described such experiences similarly in articles and interviews, including the one conducted for this paper. Other jazz singers and instrumentalists have also described these "extra-musical" experiences.

Acknowledgments

This document would not have been written without the help and encouragement of many people.

I would first like to thank Dr. Hafez Modirzadeh for his encouragement and guidance as my original document advisor. I also wish to thank Dr. Mira Zussman for her encouragement and enthusiasm in the early stages of the project. I especially wish to thank Dr. William George for taking on this project at such a late date as well as Drs. Lucas and Wyman for agreeing to serve on my committee.

To my friend Ian Anderson I wish to extend my thanks for his generosity in lending me the use of his computer and especially for help in typing and formatting this document.

Most of all, I wish to thank my family: my parents, Dr. Robert A. Burns and Dr. Betty-Ann Burns, for their generosity and love, and my brother, Cory A. Burns, for his encouragement. Finally, I wish to offer special thanks to my father for his expert advice in preparing this document. I am very fortunate and deeply grateful.

Contents

Introduction: Questions and Connections	1-3
Chapter One: Early Influences on the Vocal Jazz Style of Sheila Jordan: Style Comparisons	4-19
<i>The Jazz Style of the 20's & 30's: Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, and Billie Holliday</i>	5-10
<i>Louis Armstrong and the Development of Wordless Vocal Improvisation or Scat</i>	10-12
<i>The Influence of BeBop on Vocal Jazz: From Scatting to Vocalese</i>	12-19
Chapter Two: Biography of the Artist: Sheila Jordan	20-24
<i>Communitas and Liminality: Keys to Understanding the Jazz Subculture</i>	24-26
<i>Sheila Jordan's Life and Artistic Development: 1950 to the Present</i>	27-33
Chapter Three: The Transformative Experience of Jazz Performance in the Lives of Sheila Jordan, Robert Johnson, and Other Artists	34-56
Conclusion	56-58
Bibliography and References Cited	59-61
Appendix: Interview with Sheila Jordan	62-82

Introduction

Questions and Connections

This thesis is an accompaniment to an April 1993 performance given in partial fulfillment of the Master's degree in music and explores several personal issues in jazz singing. First, I admire Sheila Jordan's singing style and have been personally inspired by her choices in repertoire and instrumentation as well as by the risks she takes in her improvisation. In fact, it was after listening to her recordings with bassists Harvie Swartz and Arild Andersson that I decided to experiment myself, singing with only a string bass for accompaniment. So, Jordan's approach to mastering the art of vocal improvisation in the jazz idiom is personally inspiring and has motivated the following work. Second, I wanted to discover what motivated Ms. Jordan to make different stylistic choices when she sang:

- 1) Did she consciously work with different scales or chord arpeggiations as many jazz instrumentalists do in their improvisations?
- 2) How did she interact with the other musicians who were accompanying her?
- 3) How similar or different were her choices to my own when I sang?
- 4) And, most importantly, I wanted to discover what Ms. Jordan experienced subjectively while singing: was hers a similar experience to my own?

It was, therefore, a further exploration of my own relationship to jazz that led me to compare my experience of singing this music to Sheila Jordan's. At times it has seemed an almost transcendent experience for me, and I have found it to have a transformative effect

in my life. I describe this experience as “spiritual,” although it is not tied to a particular religion. I realize that what I am describing is subjective, and while I am not stating that jazz is “inherently spiritual,” it has become clear from my discussion with Sheila Jordan and from supporting quotations from other jazz musicians and listeners that I am not alone in my observations.

Thus, in both reading about Sheila Jordan’s life and speaking with her in interviews, I have come to the conclusion that she and I do have similar motivations when we sing, especially regarding the more transcendent and transformational qualities of our experiences. Both she and I have overcome difficulties in our lives through developing artistically as jazz vocalists, and what has motivated artistic growth has been in part this transformative experience while singing. In order to put Jordan’s experience of music and its transcendent or spiritual effects on her life into perspective, I have organized this paper into three parts: the first section is a general overview of the history and styles of vocal jazz with a particular emphasis on the singers and vocal styles of the 1940s be-bop era. This was the period that most influenced Jordan’s style. The second section of this paper is devoted to chronicling Jordan’s life and artistic development. In the third section I present research that links jazz and the early cultural and spiritual traditions of African Americans to show that there may be a historical link between jazz and spiritual experience. In order to explore this topic in a socio-cultural framework, I have chosen the theories of Victor Turner from his book *The Ritual Process*, those of Neil Leonard in *Jazz: Myth and Religion*, and Michael Murphy’s theory of transformative practice in *The Future of the Body*. For ideas about trance and its relationship to music, I have

consulted Gilbert Rouget's *Music and Trance*. The bulk of historical evidence presented in Chapter Three is based on information presented in Michael Ventura's article "Hear That Long Snake Moan" and in Julio Finn's *The Bluesman: The Musical Heritage of Black Men and Women in The Americas*. I am also indebted to Paul Berliner's thorough research on the interaction of jazz musicians in performance as reported in his *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*.

In this paper I hope to show that there can be a relationship between performing music, especially jazz which is inherently improvisational, and the spiritual dimension of a musician's or singer's life. In fact, it could be said that for some musicians, jazz or music itself may become a spiritual discipline. When asked by an English reporter what religion he espoused, Charlie Parker answered, "I am a devout musician." Sheila Jordan, who has often called Parker her guru, echoes him by saying "Music is a religion to me, and it's also a love affair."¹ And while it cannot be proven that there is a spiritual dimension to this or any other music, I believe it is important to explore the topic from the musician's perspective because such examination may lend a greater depth not only to our understanding of musicians' lives but also to our experience of their music.

¹ Neil Leonard, *Jazz: Myth and Legend* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986) 46.

Chapter One

Early Influences On the Vocal Jazz Style of Sheila Jordan: Style Comparisons

A jazz musician's or jazz singer's style can be defined as the unique approach she or he takes in interpreting the lyrics, melody, rhythm or harmonic structure of a particular song. This song may be from the "standard" repertoire, that is, the popular music from roughly the 1920s through the 1960s, or it may be an interpretation of an original composition. A jazz musician's interpretation of a composition can vary widely within certain musical parameters. This interpretation can be a slight variation in melody or rhythm, resulting in a few changed notes as the opening melody is performed, or comprise a complete departure from the original tune during a solo improvisation. The skill with which this type of interpretation is done determines the mastery of a jazz musician's art.

For singers as well as instrumentalists the freedom to experiment with different techniques of improvisation is what allows for the development of an individual style. While there may be a common musical vocabulary built on such things as different ways to phrase a particular passage in the lyrics of a song, or similar motific patterns used in creating a "scat" solo, it is the way in which an individual vocalist combines these techniques that makes his or her style unique. Two or three different singers can sing the same song and offer entirely different interpretations. For example, Billie Holiday may sing W. C. Handy's "The Saint Louis Blues" in a slow, almost mournful ballad style. Ella Fitzgerald, on the other hand, may sing it at a much faster tempo with an infectious swing

that almost makes the lyrics “I’ve got the St. Louis blues!/ I’m as blue as I can be/ My man’s got a heart like a rock/ That’s in the deep blue sea” sound not mournful but playfully ironic. Such originality has always been prized among jazz musicians and singers alike.

The Jazz Styles of the 1920s & 1930s: Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, and Billie Holiday

The history of vocal jazz parallels that of instrumental jazz; the two musical disciplines developed side by side. In fact, instrumentalists and vocalists have often learned from each other and influenced each other’s styles in an almost symbiotic way. This has been true even in the early years of jazz. In the 1920s trumpeter Louis Armstrong (who was also a singer) was inspired by the blues singer Bessie Smith, who was becoming popular at that time. He was most affected by the emotion expressed in her vocal sound:

She used to thrill me at all times, the way she would phrase a note with a certain something in her voice no other blues singer had She had music in her soul and felt everything she did Her sincerity with her music was an inspiration.¹

Bessie Smith’s vocal power has been described as having “. . . hardness and roughness . . . edged with deep sorrow even in the most frisky and humorous songs.”² It was this powerful sound or timbre that may have affected the growling rough tone of such instrumentalists as Armstrong and saxophonist Coleman Hawkins, both of whom were her

¹ Joachim Berendt, *The Jazz Book: From New Orleans to Rock and Free Jazz* (New York: Lawrence Hill and Co. Publishers) 64.

² Berendt 64.

contemporaries and both of whom were noted for a vocal quality in the way they played their instruments.

In addition to Smith's raw, vibrant tone quality, there are other features of her style, which made it distinctive. This was especially true of her treatment of rhythm when she sang. As Linda Dahl says of her singing: "Through her mastery of time, so essential to an effective jazz performance, she succeeded in conveying deep intensity of feeling and multiple meanings in her material."³ Another distinctive feature of Smith's style lay in her handling of melodic elements during improvisation:

Bessie's way was to restrict the range of a song to no more than five or six notes and to construct her phrases so economically that a change in direction of just one note could have a startling dramatic or emotive effect . . . she used improvisation in its fullest sense on the melody of a song to express a deeper meaning than that of the words on their own.⁴

Finally, for Richard Hadlock and numerous other instrumentalists, Smith's highly individual musicianship was a source of inspiration: "In her work, instrumentalists recognized the sort of individuality they tried to express on their own horns and strings."⁵

In the 1920s when Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong first came to prominence as performers, blues and jazz were nearly interchangeable terms. Smith, who is not usually thought of as a jazz singer but as a blues vocalist (given the title "Empress of the Blues" by her fans and fellow musicians), often performed with jazz instrumentalists such as Armstrong. One of the reasons for the unclear distinction between the blues and jazz of

³ Linda Dahl, *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of Contemporary Jazz Women* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1984) 99.

⁴ Humphrey Littleton quoted in Dahl 99.

⁵ Hadlock quoted in Dahl 100.

this era is that the roots of jazz are found in blues and in the spiritual music, which later developed into gospel music in the late 1920s. Blues and gospel are very similar in form and musical content. The most distinguishing factor between them is the description of secular life in blues lyrics, contrasted with lyrics often taken directly from biblical passages giving rise to the term “gospel music.” The similarities are the use of the blues scale, repeated phrasing, and the strophic structure of the songs themselves.⁶ In cities like New Orleans, where there were many different cultural representations, the resulting musical mix, which gave rise to both blues and gospel traditions, came from diverse influences. For instance, the strophic form of blues and gospel music could be a syncretization developed from combining the call and response of the slave songs with the European ballad forms popular in the 19th century.⁷

Because of the respect she commanded as a singer, Bessie Smith’s vocal style influenced musicians other than Louis Armstrong and his contemporaries. In the decade following her rise to fame, another singer who epitomized the early 1930’s swing style claimed to be influenced by both Smith and Armstrong.⁸ She was Billie Holiday, who some think was the first true jazz singer.⁹

Billie Holiday, born Eleanora Fagan in 1915, claims that she started learning to sing jazz after listening to Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith on the victrola that belonged to

⁶ Barry Kernfield, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1988) 122, Vol. 1.

⁷ Paul Oliver, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Gospel, Blues and Jazz* (New York: Norton, 1980) 43.

⁸ Billie Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984) 10.

⁹ Berendt 329.

the madam who ran the New York brothel where she worked.¹⁰ Holiday had no formal musical training but was so inspired by what she heard that she began “sitting in” with some of the local instrumentalists in New York City.

In the early thirties, during the beginning of the swing era, it was not uncommon for a singer to perform with a full compliment of instrumentalists. Bessie Smith and her contemporaries Ma Rainey and Alberta Hunter often performed with as many as seven instrumentalists. This group could consist of a rhythm section (piano or guitar, bass and drums) and a horn section including trumpets, saxophones and trombones or tuba. This combo format was also used by exclusively instrumental groups. Louis Armstrong made historic recordings with combos named the “Hot Five” and “Hot Seven” respectively.¹¹

By the mid-1930s, however, these combo formats were eclipsed in popularity by the development of a larger scale jazz ensemble often called a “big band.” Composed of sections of brass (trumpets or trombones) and saxophones (alto, tenor and baritone sax) as well as a rhythm section, this format became the popular form of jazz, more to the public’s taste because it was music they could dance to. Singers like Billie Holiday began to sing with big bands for the exposure to the public and the desire to earn the kind of money a more popular form of the music would generate.

After winning a contest at the Apollo Theater in New York City, a proving ground for new talent in the 1930s and 40s, Holiday landed a job singing with the Count Basie Orchestra in 1937. Her melodic inventiveness and rhythmic phrasing were unique enough

¹⁰ Holiday 10.

¹¹ Will Friedwald, *Jazz Singing: America’s Greatest Voices from Bessie Smith to BeBop and Beyond*

to gain the acceptance of her fellow musicians and to bring her to the attention of Artie Shaw, a white clarinetist who then hired her to sing in his band.

While singing with Shaw's band was notable from a historical standpoint (Holiday was the first black singer to perform with an all-white ensemble), the time she spent with this and with Count Basie's band was not particularly productive. She worked better in smaller groups, forming close bonds with her fellow musicians. Her relationship with tenor saxophonist Lester Young became legendary; the recordings they made together were unusual for the kind of melodic interplay they displayed between singer and saxophone.

Like Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday's vocal style was especially notable for her rhythmic invention. She would phrase a lyric in such a way as to hold a note over several bar lines or delay an entrance to deliver an especially dramatic effect, later "catching up" in tempo, never losing her place in the musical flow. On recordings with Lester Young, who would play behind Holiday as she sang, pauses in her phrasing would be filled in with a kind of melodic commentary on the emotions she expressed. It was the emotional depth that she brought to her interpretation of lyrics that caused some critics and historians to proclaim Holiday as the first true singer of jazz.¹² She took the strong emotional content and blues phrasing of earlier artists such as Smith and Rainey and applied these techniques to not only the popular music of the day but to songs of her own composition like "Don't Explain" and "God Bless the Child." The resulting style was both delightful and baffling

(New York: Scribner, 1990) 28.

¹² Friedwald 29.

to other musicians and to critics who were unable to find words to describe her singing. As Holiday herself recounts in her autobiography, Ralph Cooper tried to describe her singing to the manager of the Apollo Theater: “You never heard singing so slow, so lazy, with such a drawl. It ain’t the blues. I don’t know what it is, but you go to hear her.”¹³ Lucy O’ Brian describes the same effect in the words of a music critic: “Her soothing, sedated voice welded echoes of the old classic blues with the new sophisticated structure of swing.”¹⁴ O’Brian goes on to quote critic Ian Penman who sums up Holiday’s style in this way : “ Her greatest unconscious art . . . was the way in which she poisoned the popular song.”¹⁵

Louis Armstrong and the Development of Wordless Vocal Improvisation or Scat

One of the most recognizable characteristics of vocal jazz is scatting or wordless improvisation, something that Billie Holiday herself did not do. Learning to scat and using it as part of one’s vocal styling is something that some, but not all jazz singers choose to do. In fact, some singers view scatting as “moving into the territory of the instrumentalist.”¹⁶ However, there are some who discover in scatting a whole new range of musical expression. Ella Fitzgerald, for example, had an almost instrumental timbre when she improvised, choosing to sound like a trumpet or a saxophone in her phrasing. Others, such as Carmen MacCrae or Sarah Vaughan, explore the different timbres and

¹³ Holiday 39.

¹⁴ Lucy O’Brian, *She Bop: The Definitive History of Women in Rock, Pop and Soul* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995) 17.

¹⁵ O’Brian 17.

¹⁶ Felice York, Personal Interview, May 1996.

ranges of their own unique instruments without attempting to imitate an instrumental sound. Each artist, then, is free to develop an individual approach to this challenging art.

Louis Armstrong (1901-1971) has often been credited as the inventor of scat singing. His famous vocal solo on “Heebie Jeebies” (1928) is one of the first recorded examples of scatting. Although it is difficult to pinpoint the origins of this vocal technique, it is likely that in some form it has been performed since the turn of the century. Jelly Roll Morton claimed to use it as a novelty as early as 1906, when Armstrong would have still been a child.¹⁷ In fact, the practice of scatting may be much older than the turn of the last century. Its origins may lie in the West African tradition of setting syllables to drum or percussion patterns. Considering the melodic and harmonic complexity of jazz, this technique may have been applied to imitating horn lines instead.¹⁸

Certainly the early scat recordings of Louis Armstrong bear this out. His vocal improvisations often sound like an extension of his trumpet playing :

His vocals[are] . . . more like a direct extension of his horn work than the other way around. On “Hotter Than That” (1927) and “ West End Blues” (1928) for example, Armstrong experiments with transposing the functions of the voice and the trumpet: He trades call and response phrases with another musician but sings back his answers where you would expect him to play them.¹⁹

Regardless of whether he originated this jazz vocal style, Armstrong certainly contributed to its development stylistically. He also brought it into the awareness of a greater musical audience through his recording songs like “Heebie Jeebies,” “Basin Street

¹⁷ Friedwald 28.

¹⁸ Kernfeld 1093.

¹⁹ Friedwald 28.

Blues,” and “Squeeze Me” (1928). It was not until nearly two decades later in the 1940s that scat singing would develop into a still finer, more complex art form through the bop improvisation of vocalist Ella Fitzgerald.

The Influence of BeBop on Vocal Jazz: From Scatting to Vocalese

The development of bebop, or, more commonly, bop, was the pivotal moment in the evolution of modern jazz. Before the inception of bop in the 1940s, most jazz was performed for dances and parties, not usually for an attentive audience like other art music. In fact, jazz style was dictated as much by commercial considerations as by the creative impulse of its musicians and composers. The best illustration of this is the big band sound, which remained popular from the mid-1930s with the birth of swing to the early 1950s when rock ‘n roll made its debut. While big bands led by Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller, Duke Ellington, Count Basie and others provided both black and white musicians opportunities to play music for a living, many felt stifled by musical forms that became formulaic and so did not provide enough room for personal expression during solo improvisation. In order to compensate for this lacuna in their creative lives, some musicians sought work in smaller jazz combos. These groups had three, seven or more members instead of the sometimes sixteen or more musicians that played in a big band. In a smaller combo a jazz musician could take longer solos and introduce original compositions or arrangements. One could also experiment with format, tempo, style and instrumentation in ways that were unavailable in a big band format. It was in this type of

creative environment that bop was born.²⁰

Nearly every innovation made in the styles of jazz from its beginnings early in the twentieth century has been through the creativity of African-Americans, and bop is no exception. Leroi Jones maintains that for Black musicians the music of swing in the big band era became culturally inadequate:

Swing had no meaning for blues people, nor was it expressive of the emotional life of most young Negroes after the war. The tasteless commercialism of most of the swing bands had rendered them virtually incapable of serving as vehicles for any serious musical expression.²¹

Bop, on the other hand, became such a vehicle. Unencumbered by the economic considerations of popular music, innovators Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie were free to exercise their creativity in the development of this new style. Suddenly, their contemporaries were faced with learning a new musical language. Bop presented a challenge for some because the style was more technically demanding than swing, which had preceded it. The tempos were faster and melodies were more disjointed, employing wider intervallic leaps than in earlier "standards." Bop harmony was characterized by both a greater complexity and faster harmonic rhythm. Even though experimentation with this new form of jazz began in a combo format, Billy Eckstein, and later Dizzy Gillespie, used bop and their own vocal stylings in forming a new big band sound, thus proving, along with the earlier contribution of Duke Ellington, that classical composers were not the only ones to use many instruments as a palette of sound from which to choose artistically.

²⁰ Berendt 16.

²¹ Leroi Jones, *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music That Developed from It* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1963) 181.

Bop has been viewed as a primarily instrumental music. There have been singers, however, who have sought to master this style since its beginnings in the 1940s. Ella Fitzgerald, Betty Carter, and Anita O'Day are all examples of singers who set out to learn bop in the course of developing their own styles. A number of these vocalists began their careers singing with big bands. However, big band swing was just as creatively frustrating for a singer as it was for an instrumentalist. Each felt stifled by similar limitations in form and format. Anita O'Day, a popular singer in the 1940s and 1950s who sang with the successful bands of Stan Kenton and Gene Krupa, said: "[In the big bands] there's no real singing. You're handed arrangements; everything is planned for you and you just do your part."²² Apparently, popularity and success were not enough for O'Day, who wanted the freedom to develop herself artistically. What she and others such as Fitzgerald and Carter did was to venture out with a smaller combo and start to play at the same clubs in which bop instrumentalists performed. More singers started sitting in at jam sessions as well, for this is where instrumentalists developed their craft.

Most instrumentalists were supportive of singers learning bop. Ella Fitzgerald tells of going to hear Parker and Gillespie and being invited to literally "jump in" and sing: "Listening to Dizzy made me want to try something with my voice that would be like a horn. He'd shout 'Go ahead and blow' and I'd improvise."²³ For Fitzgerald, scat singing was the same as an instrumentalist taking a solo. In some ways a singer wanting to sound like an instrument seems ironic, since early instrumentalists Louis Armstrong and Coleman

²² Dahl 144.

²³ Bud Kliment, *Ella Fitzgerald* (New York: Chelsea House, 1988) 66.

Hawkins were striving to emulate vocalists like Bessie Smith. Both the sound of Armstrong's trumpet and that of Hawkins' tenor saxophone owe much to the sound of the human voice.

During the bop revolution, instrumentalists affected some singers' styles more than others. As Sheila Jordan says, except for Billie Holiday, whom she admired for sheer emotional intensity, she didn't listen to other singers much: "I'm ashamed to say it wasn't the singers who affected me . . ."²⁴ Jordan drew her inspiration instead from the playing of Charlie Parker and others who were developing this new art form: "In High School, with the few pennies I got, I was down there buying Bird [Charlie Parker] and Dizzy and [Thelonious] Monk records. I couldn't get enough of this music . . . I knew that I was going to learn from these guys, especially Bird."²⁵ What Jordan, Ella Fitzgerald, and others wanted to incorporate into their singing was an instrumental timbre, phrasing, and over-all approach to improvisation in this new jazz idiom. In other words, it became important for a singer to be seen as another instrument in the ensemble rather than someone who only sings lyrics. This approach to improvisation could be utilized as part of performing a song in which lyrics were sung first, and then an improvised scat chorus would be performed, or additional lyrics could be used to perform instrumental sequences. This last type of bop vocal style, employing additional lyrics rather than scat syllables, is called *vocalese*.

The term *vocalese* in jazz differs from classical *vocalise* in more than just spelling.

²⁴Dahl 238.

²⁵Dahl 238.

The classical style refers to a type of vocal composition without lyrics, often with piano accompaniment. Many of these pieces were published as vocal exercises in the 19th century. Vocalise can also be used to describe melismatic passages in a work that has text. Jazz vocalese is almost completely opposite by definition, in putting lyrics to instrumental tunes or solos. In actuality, the singer who performs vocalese could be said not to be improvising in the truest sense of the word. She is, however, proving her technical virtuosity by singing challenging lyrics to an equally challenging instrumental solo. In fact, the lyrics of vocalese are often very poetic, sounding in some cases like the poetry of the Beat movement in the early 1950s. Some of these poets, inspired by the bop movement would read their poetry with a jazz combo playing in the background; Allen Ginsberg, Diane Di Prima, Anne Sexton, and Jack Kerouac among them.

The first vocalese to become popular was written by Eddie Jefferson and recorded by King Pleasure and Blossom Dearie in 1953. The words, which are wedded to James Moody's solo on "I'm in the Mood for Love," have an almost stream-of-consciousness quality about them. Jefferson called his vocalese version of the song "Moody's Mood for Love":

There I go, There I go, There I go, There I go--Pretty baby
you are the soul who snaps my control—
such a funny thing but every time you're near me I never can behave—
You give me a smile and then I'm wrapped up in your magic--
There's music all around me, crazy music,
Music that keeps holding me so very close to you--
Turns me your slave--come and do with me any little thing you want to, anything,
baby.
Just let me get next to you--Am I insane or do I really see Heaven in your eyes?

(Transcribed from King Pleasure's 1952 recording)

Although Eddie Jefferson collaborated with King Pleasure (whose real name was Clarence Beeks) in the early part of his career, it was Pleasure who got all the attention and later the credit for “Moody’s Mood.” Will Friedwald says that Pleasure got the attention because he had the superior vocal instrument.²⁶ Pleasure’s rich baritone and supple virtuosic phrasing (necessary for attempting difficult bop melodies) influenced singers Jon Hendricks and Dave Lambert, who, with British singer Annie Ross, later formed the landmark vocal ensemble Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross. According to Friedwald, both Lambert and Hendricks independently of one another sought out King Pleasure to work and record with him. Hendricks was hired to perform some of Pleasure’s lyrics on the song “Don’t Be Afraid” (changed to “Don’t Get Scared” in Pleasure’s reworking), but when he asked Pleasure for a copy of the lyrics, Pleasure laughed and said mysteriously, “I wrote mine, now you write yours.” This forced Hendricks to be creative on the spot and led to his writing more lyrics of his own.

The recording of “Don’t Get Scared” was made with both Hendricks and Pleasure in 1954. Quincy Jones was the arranger, and instrumentalists backing them included Lucky Thompson (saxophone), J. J. Johnson, and Kai Winding (trombones). “Don’t Get Scared” was one of the few actual recordings that Pleasure made, and it is worth noting that he attracted the attention of talented instrumentalists as well as vocalists.

Dave Lambert, who was then performing with a group of singers under his own name, recorded “Sometimes I’m Happy” with Pleasure in 1953. On this tune Lambert

²⁶ Friedwald 237.

took the place of Slam Stewart's bass solo, adding his own interpretation to the song.

Both Lambert and Jon Hendricks used their experiences at these sessions to help create their own styles of bop singing. They brought both vocalese and lightning fast scat singing over difficult changes to their performances as Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross.

Vocalese was popular with other vocal ensembles as well. Skeeter, Mitch, and Jean (of which Sheila Jordan was a member) sang from the late 1940s to the early 1950s in some of the same Detroit clubs that bop instrumentalists performed in. In the 1980s and 1990s, Manhattan Transfer, a jazz based vocal ensemble, still perform vocalese as a regular feature of their concerts.

When a singer scats or performs a wordless improvisation, he or she uses many of the same techniques that instrumentalists use. These might include a simple embellishment of the melody, arpeggiation of chordal harmony, and a variety of rhythmic devices. Some singers are fond of what is known as backphrasing or "tag along," which is singing behind the beat. Others sing either before the beat or use syncopation in their phrasing. More challenging techniques might be to develop musical motifs or ideas, improvise on alternate changes (chords other than what is being played as an accompaniment), sequencing musical ideas or motifs, and quoting fragments of other melodies during a solo.

The syllables used by a jazz singer will vary with each individual. It is almost as if a unique language has been created for scatting and each singer sings in a slightly different dialect. Some are seemingly nonsense syllables sounding like the novelty songs of the 1940s and 1950s (e.g., "The Three Little Fishes"). Other scatting imitates an instrumental sound such as a trumpet or saxophone. Some singers use a variety of other sounds when

they take a solo. Some groan or cry or sing high-pitched glissandos or sighs. Not limited by the technology of any particular musical instrument, the possibilities of expression in jazz singing are endless.

It was this freedom of expression in singing the bop style that attracted a select number of vocalists. Learning to reproduce the complexities of bop with the voice was even more challenging for a singer than an instrumentalist, even if the singer could play the piano. A singer, of course, has no keys or buttons to push to reproduce a sound. The few who became virtuosi such as Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Betty Carter, and Sheila Jordan discovered that bop, employing both scatting and vocalese, provided greater opportunities to explore their creativity than the popular music of the day.

Chapter Two

Biography of the Artist -- Sheila Jordan: The Singer's Early Years: 1928-1950

Sheila Jordan has been singing jazz since the late 1940s, when she was still a teenager. Respected and encouraged by bop era pioneers like Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, she has developed a distinctive vocal style influenced as much by instrumentalists as by other vocalists.¹ Her popularity as a singer has grown slowly over the past 50 years, and in the 1990s, Jordan has finally become recognized as a major influence in the development of vocal jazz.

Jordan's delayed success may be in part due to her lack of interest in commercial, or popular, singing. Rather than trying to become a commercial success, she has focused instead on developing a sense of artistic freedom. The choices she has made in repertoire and her unconventional tone quality and phrasing have made her both unique as an artist and difficult to market. She says: "For me to go and sing something that I don't believe in is in essence taking away from my art. I would rather do anything except music I don't believe in."²

Jordan was born Sheila Dawson in Detroit Michigan on November 18, 1928. Her mother Margaret Helen Hull, only 16 at the time, was unable to care for her, and so she sent her to live with her grandparents who lived in Summerhill, a rural mining town in

¹ Linda Dahl, *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of Contemporary Jazz Women* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1984) 144.

²Dahl 240.

Pennsylvania. For the first 15 years of her life, Jordan lived in extreme poverty. Her grandparents' house was without electricity, water, or heat (except for a coal-burning stove). Her grandfather, who was part Native American, would often hunt for their food, raising her on squirrel, rabbit, pheasant or whatever else her family could find to eat. Her grandmother also worked extremely hard, chopping wood and washing the family's clothes by hand.

Poverty was just one of the hardships that made her childhood difficult. Jordan was afraid of ridicule and prejudice because of her mixed heritage, Native American, French, and Welsh: "I didn't say anything about my background for years because of the harassment. It's like being born black but being able to pass for white . . ."³ One of the few forms of entertainment available to her in Summerhill was the music played in the local beer gardens. Jordan often accompanied her grandfather there to listen to the different kinds of music performed, such as folksongs, Broadway show tunes, and the popular music of the late 1930s. She soon started singing what she heard, and it became clear to those who heard her that she was developing a natural talent. It wasn't long before Jordan was invited to sing in amateur competitions and at the local radio station. Even though she was recognized as a singer by the adults in her community, she rarely sang at school, and so to a great extent she remained unnoticed by her peers. She was solitary as a child, and to ease her loneliness she would sing to herself on the long walks to and from school.

³ Dahl 236.

I was constantly singing as a child . . . It was very natural for me to sing in this environment because we lived underneath a huge hill like a mountain. There was just something about singing in the mountains, in nature, that went together. I can sit here now and see myself and remember the wonderful feeling of the freedom of voice and soul.⁴

During her first year in high school, Jordan's mother reappeared in her life. They moved back to Detroit, and it was there that Jordan first became exposed to jazz. In fact, it was on a jukebox at a local high school hangout that she first heard the music of Charlie Parker and knew immediately that bop was the music she wanted to perform:

I went to a high school in downtown Detroit, and they had a fantastic jukebox nearby. It had Charlie Parker and His Reboppers. This was in 1942, and I said, "That's what I want to do. I want to sing this kind of music." From then on I tried to find out where that music was.⁵

Jazz was to be found in the black neighborhoods of Detroit, and it was there that Jordan went as often as she could. Because of her race she found it difficult to get into the clubs, but it was not the black people in the community who gave her trouble: it was the police.

I was constantly harassed by the cops. It was a bore and it was terrible. I was always being taken down to the police station and questioned. The car was always being stopped if I was in the company of young black women and men . . . 'Cause they didn't want white and black people associating-- that's how sick it was.⁶

Jordan persisted in forming friendships with young black women and men and in learning their cultural values. The community of black musicians was a world she felt comfortable in. Soon she found a group of young musicians, Tommy Flanagan, Barry Harris, and

⁴ Dahl 236.

⁵ Dahl 237.

⁶ Sheila Jordan, interview with Howard Cutler, *Cadence Magazine* (1987): 7.

Kenny Burrell, to socialize and learn with. All four have since gone on to become influential musicians. Although she was the only white person in the group, Jordan did not feel like an outsider; she identified with the others through a shared experience of poverty and prejudice:

Poverty . . . Poverty and being looked down upon . . . even though you're just as good a human being . . . I felt very close to Black people when I was growing up, I felt black. You know, I got very turned off of white people when I was young 'cause of their biased attitude . . . their sickness."⁷

Jordan and her friends were able to survive the pressures of inner-city adolescence by learning the challenging music of bop. She, Barry Harris, and Tommy Flanagan used to follow Charlie Parker around when he was in town. Because of their ages, Jordan and Harris 15 and Flanagan only 14, they were not always able to get into the jazz clubs to hear him. In "Sheila's Blues," Jordan's autobiographical piece that she often uses as an opening number when she performs, she tells of Parker opening an outside door that led to the stage so that the three young musicians could hear him play:

Well . . . we were always chasing Charlie Parker. . . . I think he even wrote that song for us . . . Chasin' the Bird! When he used to play at the clubs where you had to be old enough to get in . . . Well, I used to forge my mother's birth certificate and wear a hat with a veil and dyed my hair real blonde and wore my high heeled shoes that were killing my feet . . . But I was gonna go in that door anyway. But the man who owned the club wouldn't let us stay! So we went back in the alley sitting on the garbage cans! Yeah! Bird knew we were there and he opened up the door and played for us . . . Oh what a treat, what a treat, what a treat for a 15 year old kid!"⁸

Touched by his personal warmth as well as his musicianship, Jordan began

⁷ Jordan, interview with Howard Cutler 7.

⁸ Sheila Jordan, "Sheila's Blues," from *The Crossing*, Blackhawk Recordings, 1986.

following Parker everywhere she could. In a sense he became her musical guru and later became a good friend. He encouraged her to learn and to experiment musically, trusting in her developing creativity: "I was very fortunate to have grown up in the time that Bird was alive. He called me the kid with the million dollar ears . . . He was very encouraging."⁹

While still in Detroit, Jordan formed a bop-influenced vocal group with two other singers, Leroy Mitchell and Skeeter Spight. The three singers experimented with vocalese and helped each other learn to scat. Jordan says Spight "was one of the most fantastic scat singers . . . totally by ear, by feeling. He taught me how to scat. He said, 'Just relax and let the sound come out and listen to the changes.'"¹⁰ Jordan sums up her experiences growing up with other budding musicians this way:

So I was surrounded by very enthusiastic young people growing up, who were into jazz . . . we were all Bird freaks. [They] were like my brothers. We were all so close. There wasn't anything strange going on. We weren't getting dope and getting high; we were just kids trying to learn this music 'cause we loved it so much.¹¹

Communitas and Liminality: Keys to Understanding the Jazz Subculture

Victor Turner describes the kind of intense bonding that Jordan shared with her contemporaries as forming a *communitas*. He uses this Latin term to denote a social relationship (in this case, also referred to as a youth sub-culture) that develops among adolescents who have not yet become accepted as adults in a tribe, or in this case, mid-

⁹ Jordan, interview with Howard Cutler 8.

¹⁰ Dahl 240.

¹¹ Jordan, interview with Howard Cutler 8.

twentieth-century American society. Turner describes these adolescents as being in a liminal state, a period of transition just before initiation into adulthood. One of the distinguishing characteristics of being in a state of liminality is that social or cultural boundaries may dissolve between members of the *communitas*, making it easier to form close bonds with one another: "Among themselves, neophytes tend to develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism. Secular distinctions of rank and status disappear or are homogenized."¹² This dissolution of social and cultural boundaries may help to explain why Sheila Jordan and her friends found it easier to relate to each other despite superficial differences in their racial and ethnic backgrounds. While his theories on liminality and *communitas* are predominantly based on studies done on later tribal cultures, Turner sees this ritual process at work in modern American society as well. In the "beat" and "hippie" movements, the culture of youthful rebellion provides ample evidence for comparison with tribal cultures, each examples of a type of *communitas*:

In modern Western society, the values of *communitas* are strikingly present in the literature and behavior of what came to be known as the "beat generation," who were succeeded by the "hippies" . . . These are the "cool" members of the adolescent and young-adult categories--which do not have the advantages of national *rites de passage*--who "opt out" of the status-bound social order and acquire the stigmata of the lowly . . .¹³

Significantly, jazz became the preferred music for those involved in the "beat movement" and Charlie Parker became a role model for beat poets and writers as well as jazz musicians. Neil Leonard, who uses Turner's theories in *Jazz: Myth and Religion*, has this

¹² Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1969) 95.

¹³ Turner 112.

to say about the subculture that formed around be-bop:

Jazz sects along with many of their religious counterparts, are, to use Victor Turner's terms, "liminal" or "liminoid," existing on the fringes or cracks of the social structure. They consist of adolescents, ethnics or artists (sometimes all at the same time) in the fissures or on the edges of the received order. Flourishing in egalitarian, simply organized groups and guided mainly by peers, they operate at a remove from many ordinary responsibilities and preoccupations and freely question conventional standards of behavior.¹⁴

While Jordan and her group of friends may have formed a classic *communitas* in the sense that Turner has defined it, because she (and some of her comrades) have remained jazz musicians as adults, one might question the transitional nature of the larger *communitas* of jazz musicians. In fact, because these musicians have chosen to remain in a permanent sub-culture rather than be reintegrated into society, it could be said that in this case Turner's definition may be only partially adequate to describe the jazz sub-culture.

The decision to remain in this permanent sub-culture may have been dictated by the realization by many jazz musicians who are African-American that their cultural contributions would never be accepted fully by mainstream American society. Leroi Jones suggests that white musicians may choose membership in the sub-culture while for black musicians membership is obligatory:

The important idea here is that the white musicians and other young whites who associated themselves with this Negro music identified the Negro with this separation, this non-conformity, though, of course the Negro himself had no choice. But the young Negro musician of the forties began to realize that by merely being a Negro in America, one was a *non-conformist*.¹⁵

¹⁴ Neil Leonard, *Jazz: Myth and Legend* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986) 25.

¹⁵ Leroi Jones, *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music That Developed From It* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1963) 188.

Sheila Jordan's Life and Artistic Development: 1950 to the Present

Jordan left Detroit after graduating from high school in 1950 and went to live in New York City. She knew that Parker lived there, and she wanted to get to know his pianist, Duke Jordan. Jordan was a realist however, and so soon she knew that it would be difficult if not impossible to make a living as a jazz singer. She made the decision to go to secretarial school to learn skills that would allow her to get decent paying day work. Her nights, however, were devoted to jazz. About moving to New York she said:

I always loved to sing. I've never had any illusions about becoming this great well-known jazz singer. I just loved the music. I was just chasing Bird when I came to New York . . . He was my idol, my guru.¹⁶

Jordan met and married Duke Jordan and although their relationship did not last very long, she was not bitter about their divorce. She raised their daughter alone and today is proud of her daughter's success as a record company executive.

Her musical education did not stop with going to hear Parker and occasionally sitting in. She began studying with Lennie Tristano on the advice of the legendary bassist Charles Mingus. Tristano, a well-known bop and avant-garde pianist, taught her harmony, theory, ear training and sight-reading for two years, from 1951-1952. While these studies provided the bulk of any formal music training that Jordan had, when asked about her training with Tristano, she also mentions his ability to translate learning about music to learning about life: "He changed their lives, his students, I mean. He showed them a way

¹⁶ Jordan, interview with Howard Cutler 8.

through music that they could face life . . .”¹⁷

In developing her improvisational style, Jordan not surprisingly learned many of Charlie Parker’s solos by heart. When she started studying with Tristano, Tristano had her demonstrate this knowledge to him and, being satisfied with her accomplishment, had her do the same with the solos of Lester Young:

When I went to Lennie, one of the first things that Lennie asked was that I should learn a Bird solo. And I said that I know most of the Bird solos; he said,” You do? Then let’s hear you sing them.” So I sang it, and he said,” You do!” OK, then you’re going to learn a Pres solo.”¹⁸

When I interviewed Jordan for this paper, I was curious about her scatting technique. Aware that she had studied with Tristano, I wanted to know if she consciously chose the notes for her solos as some instrumentalists do, from the chord changes or related scales, or if she scatted more spontaneously. She informed me it was the latter:

VB: “ Now here’s a question about your improv. Because you’ve been doing it so many years, do you think consciously about which notes you’re choosing, or do you just sing?

SJ: No, I listen. I found out early that the two most important things to me in this music were the things I wear on the side of my head, my ears. I find that I can hear what the musicians . . . where they’re going. I can hear what I’m feeling. I go for notes. Sometimes these notes surprise me. I don’t know where they come from. I think I’m a

¹⁷ Jordan, interview with Howard Cutler 10.

¹⁸ Jordan, interview with Howard Cutler 10

natural improviser. I think from listening to Charlie Parker when I was a little kid, and listening to his records over and over, and that--such a need to do it--singing all those bebop lines, I learned hearing those skills harmonically.”¹⁹

Jordan stopped studying with Tristano in 1952 when her daughter Tracy was born. She felt that she needed to concentrate on raising her child. However, during the 7 to 10-year period following this decision, Jordan found that she missed singing. Through the help of a friend named Jacquie Howe, she got a singing job at a club called Page 3 in Greenwich Village. Regular exposure in a New York jazz club helped her career greatly. It was there that jazz composer George Russell, known for his discovery of unusual talent, heard Jordan and was impressed enough to offer to help in recording her. Through his influence, *Portrait of Sheila*, her first album, was recorded in 1963.

Shortly after her album was released, Jordan started receiving high praise from reviewers and fans; a great future as a jazz singer of individuality was predicted for her. Russell decided to record with her again, this time on an album of his own called *Outer Thoughts*. He got the idea of having her record “You are My Sunshine,” a song she had learned in the beer gardens of her Pennsylvania childhood. A song the miners loved to sing, “You are My Sunshine” was especially poignant because of the symbolism of being in dark mines all day, rarely seeing the sun. Jordan’s version of the song is a deeply felt blend of jazz, blues and country folk:

I learned the channels that I must take to get across the feeling that I want to display through black music . . . now “Sunshine” was for the coal miners.

¹⁹ Sheila Jordan, personal interview, August 1983, 11.

“Sunshine” and “Blue Skies” were their favorites. They liked songs that talked about light; their lives were so filled with darkness.²⁰

Russell and Jordan were so pleased with their project that they decided to expand on it. A documentary was made about the miners and “You are My Sunshine” was the haunting centerpiece of its soundtrack. While this new exposure brought her recognition, her sparse treatment of “You Are My Sunshine” caused her to be labeled avant-garde by some reviewers. This mixed reception by her reviewers may have contributed to the album’s lack of wide acceptance. Consequently, Jordan found it not only more difficult to get bookings at jazz clubs, but also less easy to obtain backing for more recordings. Jordan believes that the avant-garde label comes from reviewers not knowing what category to put her in because she does not sound like anyone else: “I think many writers call me an ‘out’ singer because they can’t compare me to other singers.”²¹ Thus, after an auspicious debut, Jordan nearly disappeared from the jazz scene for the next decade. During this period, she chose opportunities to perform in which she would not have to compromise her art and, unfortunately, found that these fell few and far between:

Of course I have been involved with and associated with avant-garde groups, church liturgies written by jazz composers--‘cause there were no other places for me to sing . . . I feel that I can certainly put my emotions and musical feeling into any kind of creative music . . . I always find a place to express the music that I need to express, whether it’s the subway station, the church or my home.²²

In the 1970s Jordan began experimenting with both instrumentation and with

²⁰ Dahl 241.

²¹ Dahl 241.

²² Dahl 241.

repertoire. She decided to take a real chance musically and perform with just an upright bassist. While it took courage to sing with such sparse accompaniment, the combination showcased her musicianship, especially when she scatted. Her album, *Sheila*, recorded with bassist Arild Andersen in Norway in 1978, contains both technically challenging scatting on “Confirmation,” a bop standard written by Charlie Parker, and emotionally searing ballad work in a medley dedicated to Billie Holiday. The starkness of bass and vocals suits her ballad choices, songs such as Holiday’s “Don’t Explain” and “God Bless the Child.”

Another collaboration begun in the late 1970s to early 1980s was with the composer/pianist Steve Kuhn. She started performing with Kuhn in the early 1980s, touring often with his band in both the U.S. and in Europe. Kuhn’s compositions were a challenge for Jordan, who took her time in approaching them artistically: “They are very unique, special and very personal, so it took a long time before I could do his compositions.”²³

It was also during this time period that she met and started working with bassist Harvie Swartz, a musical partnership that each has become well known for. Singing with just a bass for accompaniment is challenging but extremely rewarding for Jordan who finds an intimacy in her musical relationship with Swartz: “. . . I have to place implicit trust in Harvie. I mean, he could devour me musically if he wanted to--I think I could improvise my ass out of it--but if he wanted to he could, you know, because it is just a bass and

²³ Dahl 242.

voice.”²⁴ Their work is featured on *Old Time Feeling*, an album released in 1990. Jordan frequently uses Swartz in larger recording projects as well, including *The Crossing*, recorded in 1986.

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, Jordan has finally begun to receive some of the recognition which had earlier eluded her. She has continued to perform, is teaching workshops, and is now in great demand as a clinician. Her workshops range from the East Coast’s “Jazz in July” at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, to the “Summer Jazz Workshop” at Stanford University in California. I had an opportunity to observe Jordan teach at Foothill college in Palo Alto the day before I interviewed her in August 1993.

Jordan’s teaching style combines explaining technique and storytelling in a relaxed engaging manner. Her favorite way to warm up an audience, whether in concert or in a classroom is to sing the blues, specifically “Sheila’s Blues” which is autobiographical and often changes each time she sings it. In singing these blues of her own invention, Jordan relates not only much about her own life, but also about the essence of blues singing in general--how to tell a good story and keep the audience interested.

Her next step is to sing a more challenging blues, a bop blues tune based on “rhythm changes” or “blues with a bridge.” At the workshop I attended, Jordan took the aspiring jazz vocalists through the challenging “Billie’s Bounce,” a blues tune written by Charlie Parker. In only 10 to 15 minutes all of the participants had taken a scat solo on

²⁴ Jordan, personal interview 5.

this tune, one which is considered very challenging in the bop repertoire.

When Jordan talks of her own experience as a singer she always mentions the roles that both jazz and Charlie Parker have played in her life. Parker's influence is clearly more than musical since she has more than once called him her "guru." Jazz for her is also more than music; it is, in fact, more like what Michael Murphy, pioneer of the human potential movement, calls a "transformative practice." By taking her raw experience and forging an artistic vision from it, Sheila Jordan has become in a sense a musical alchemist, one who transforms her life's trials into a creative musical expression. As Charlie Parker himself put it, "If you haven't lived life, it won't come out on your horn."²⁵

In the next chapter, I will further explore Jordan's relationship to her music, which she has found to be personally transformative and spiritually uplifting. I will draw upon the research of Gilbert Rouget in *Music and Trance: A Theory of the Relations between Music and Possession*, as well as further discussion of Victor Turner's theories of Communitas and liminality in relation to states of communal ecstasy in subcultures. Also, I will explore the impact that early African-American culture and spiritual practices may have had in the development of jazz both as an art form and as a transformative practice.

²⁵ Joachim Berendt, *The Jazz Book: From New Orleans to Rock and Free Jazz* (New York: Lawrence Hill and Co. Publishers 1975) 51.

Chapter Three

The Spiritual Dimension of Jazz Improvisation

and its Roots in the African Diaspora:

The Transformative and Spiritual Experience in Sheila Jordan's and Robert

Johnson's Life and Art

While jazz itself may not be inherently spiritual or religious, many musicians who have performed it and audiences who have enjoyed it have described their experience of this music in spiritual terms. For the purposes of this paper, the term “spiritual” will be defined as describing an extra-musical or “mystical” experience during a musical performance. These extra-musical elements might include: a heightened sense of connection with the other musicians one is performing with or with the audience members, a sense that one is co-creating the music with a force outside oneself (or that the music is flowing through rather than being created by the musician), and experience of being outside one's body while performing. In addition to these extra-musical elements, some musicians and listeners find jazz performances healing and personally inspiring. Paul Berliner discusses how these experiences may grow out of an intimate level of musical communication between the musicians as they play:

Typically the highest points of improvisation occur when group members strike a groove together, defining and maintaining a solid rhythmic ground for their musical exploration . . . At such times the facility artists display as individual musical thinkers combines with their extraordinary receptiveness to each other. It is the combining of such talents in the formulation of parts that raises these periods of

creativity to a supreme level.¹

The supreme level that Berliner talks about is described to him in terms that point toward an experience of religious or spiritual ecstasy:

The intensity of impassioned performances can take on a religious quality, a “spirituality” evocative for some players, of their early participation in African American church services. “The band I played in with Roy Haynes and George Adams was very spiritual,” Don Pate says. “The energy was so intense and the spirits were up so high, the band was really hot.”²

Sometimes members of a group will experience an almost telepathic level of communication and be able to anticipate each other while improvising:

The exceptional state of communication artists describe sometimes allows them to... anticipate phrase by phrase, idea by idea the progress of another’s musical thoughts. “It’s like when the soloist improvises a figure. Before he finishes a figure, I can almost telepathically know where he’s going with his next idea,” Keith Copeland explains.³

Another extra-musical element that often arises during performance is the feeling that something outside the performer is guiding the musical flow. This particular experience is one that singers sometimes speak of. Carmen Lundy talks of how similar her experience of singing jazz is to her previous singing in church:

I can remember some unbelievable things from that time which I experience even now when I sing jazz. Sometimes I really feel I am just the vehicle, the body, and that something is really singing through me, like I’m not controlling everything that I’m singing . . . That’s what I mean by the spiritual thing.⁴

Other musicians and singers echo Lundy’s description. Abbey Lincoln says:

¹ Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994) 388-9.

² Quoted in Berliner 391.

³ Quoted in Berliner 390.

⁴ Quoted in Berliner 392.

“Sometimes I hear the sound coming from me and I know I’m not controlling it. It’s like being a medium. It uses me.”⁵ Drummer Billy Higgins says almost the same thing about playing: “Music doesn’t come from you it comes through you.”⁶

When I interviewed Sheila Jordan, she also mentioned this phenomenon. I asked her about what kinds of thoughts or feelings went through her mind when she sang. She replied: “I don’t have any. It’s almost like something else; another force takes over when I sing.”⁷

It can be argued of course, that all forms of music and art have a spiritual dimension. However, what is especially significant in this case is that jazz and its source, the blues, are primarily the artistic creations of African-Americans. Taken from their homeland, their culture and religion forcibly suppressed, they wove the fragments of a remembered past and its musical tradition into the form and structure of European culture. This new hybrid form of music, later given the name jazz, was formed by a process called “syncretization,” a blending of elements from various cultural sources. Music and other forms of art are not the only syncretizations by Africans living in the New World. Perhaps the most important syncretization was in the area of religion. Because music is an expression of a people’s culture and often has its roots in their spiritual worldview, it becomes important and indeed necessary to examine the beliefs of a people in order to truly understand their culture.

⁵ Neil Leonard, *Jazz: Myth and Legend* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986) 41.

⁶ Quoted in Leonard 42.

⁷ Jordan, personal interview, August 1993 4.

While it may seem that blues and jazz are purely secular forms of music that developed within a popular culture which was not spiritually motivated, by uncovering the roots of African American music (or indeed nearly all music created by members of the African diaspora in the New World), it becomes clear that many forms of this cultural expression are based in a syncretized form of religious worship. Much of the slave trade from Africa to the Americas and Caribbean islands came from the West African coast, an area sometimes called Yorubaland, encompassing the modern states of Nigeria, Ghana, and Dahomey (now called Benin). The slaves themselves were from various tribes in this region and many, who had been rivals, were forced to become allies on board slave ships. According to Maya Deren, these forced alliances produced the initial syncretization of African beliefs:

The original Negroes had been imported from many African states, predominantly Yoruba, Dahomey, Loango, Ashanti and Mandingo. . . . All brought with them their particular traditions, their languages, their gods, their rituals, their dances, their drum beats, the memory of their homelands and the names of their towns and rivers. . . . Encouraged by the communal need of unity on the economic and political level and by the personal requirements of intermarriage, they integrated, around this core of what they had in common, the great diversity of their tribal systems.⁸

A similar process occurred throughout the Caribbean islands of Jamaica, Trinidad, and Cuba and in the South American country of Brazil. In each of these places the worship of African deities combined ancestral elements and elements of Christianity and Native American cultures to produce unique practices of worship. In Brazil these practices became known as Macumba, Candomble, and Umbanda; in Puerto Rico and

⁸ Maya Deren, *The Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (New York: Documentext, McPherson and Co., 1970) 58.

Cuba the African derived religion is known as Santeria; in Jamaica and Trinidad it is known as Obeah (or Bongoism) and Shango (named for the African Orisha or God), and in Haiti the worship is called Voudon or Voodoo. It is from Haiti that slaves were brought to New Orleans, which is thought to be one of the birthplaces of jazz music. New Orleans is also famous for other unique cultural contributions, including its mysterious metaphysical tradition called Voodoo or Hoodoo.

Michael Ventura argues that jazz, blues, and rock 'n roll all had Voodoo as their common ancestor. Ventura claims the history of jazz began with the stilling of the drums once played regularly at Congo Square in New Orleans. This event occurred in 1875 with New Orleans enacting its first "Jim Crow" laws as a way of seeking to control the ritual celebrations that were held there.⁹ The descriptions of these celebrations told of dancing and singing to the sounds of drums, while women and men, imbued with a personal sense of power, gave a kind of spiritual testimony to the others gathered there:

I, the Voodoo Queen with my lovely handkerchief am not afraid of tomcat shrieks--
I drink serpent venom! I walk on pins, I walk on needles, I walk on gilded
splinters. I want to see what they can do! They think they have pride with their big
malice--but when they see a coffin they're as frightened as prairie birds. I'm going
to put gris gris all over their front steps and make them shake until they stutter!¹⁰

This sense of power, especially associated with the role of women in the Voodoo tradition, is what makes Linda Dahl believe that there may be a connection between the Voodoo priestess, or mambo, and the blues singers who later carried themselves with a similar deportment: "The defiance, pride, posturing and boastfulness and the vivid symbols

⁹ Michael Ventura, "Hear That Long Snake Moan," *Whole Earth Review* Spring 1987: 41.

¹⁰ Linda Dahl, *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of Contemporary Jazz Women* (New York:

of these Voodoo-Queen songs [are] qualities that mark the later compositions of the blues women [i.e., Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey et al].”¹¹ However, in piecing together the fragments of legend, there may be an even more direct connection between the mambo and the blues woman.

Jazz has its origins in the red light district of New Orleans called “Storyville.” There, in the houses of prostitution (usually run by women or madames) jazz was first played for the entertainment of these women and their clients. According to Ventura, who quotes Storyville historian Al Rose, there was an understanding that the madames of each house would not resort to working voodoo in a magical way against each other: “. . . an association of Storyville madams which met regularly agreed to refuse to use the services of Lala and the other [Voodoo] practitioners on each other.” Ventura goes on to say, however, that there was a favorite Voodoo queen among the madams, Eulalie Echo, who was called upon regularly to remove hexes and provide medicinal cures. Her real name, he says, was Laura Hunter. She was both godmother and guardian of Jelly Roll Morton, and she raised him as her child.¹²

Morton, whose nickname Jelly Roll was given to him precisely because he grew up playing music in the company of such madams, was born in 1885, only ten years after the celebrations were halted in Congo Square. It is tempting to speculate on how much his godmother may have shared of her spiritual practice, about which Morton seems to have

Limelight Editions, 1984) 6.

¹¹ Dahl 6.

¹² Ventura Spring 1987 41.

spoken little, but what is known is that in the late 1800s, Voodoo was still practiced in New Orleans in the very same area that is claimed to be the birthplace of jazz. Most importantly, Voodoo and jazz are both an expression of African-American culture and both were supported by the same community of people.¹³

Voodoo, an intact system of worship in New Orleans, may have become somewhat fragmented in the last hundred years or so, but many of its elements have survived in the folk practices of African-Americans as well as in the images used in the lyrics of blues tunes. Thus there remains a continuity of culture and spiritual ideas that link African-Americans and their ancestral past. Ventura writes of the great New Orleans saxophonist Sidney Bechet's description of his music being "the remembering song." Bechet states "there's so much to remember of the long song that started back there."¹⁴

Because the blues tradition is the parent of jazz, it might be instructive to look at those elements in the music which hint at a connection to spiritual practices that are African in origin. The most obvious clues are some of the words, which are now, slang in American English usage but had their origins in Africa. Many blues songs mention the word "mojo" for instance, which although it has come to mean "magical" or "powerful" in a spiritual sense, had its roots in the Congo word for "soul," says Robert Farris Thompson.¹⁵ Even in the latter part of this century there are people of African descent (and indeed others who come from the South) who carry what is called a mojo or conjure

¹³ Ventura Spring 1987 41.

¹⁴ Ventura Spring 1987 30.

¹⁵ Quoted in Ventura Spring 1987 30

bag containing objects they believe are imbued with a certain power or luck. These mojos are thought to have influence over others, as in acquiring money, a lover, or giving the power to heal or harm.¹⁶ One of the most well known blues songs to deal with Voodoo (or Hoodoo as it has been called in the bayous of the Mississippi) is “Hootchie Cootchie Man,” written and performed by Willie Dixon:

The Gypsy woman told my mother
Before I was born
You got a boy child comin’

I got a black cat bone
I got a mojo too
I got a John the Conqueror
I’m gonna mess with you!

On the seventh hour
Of the seventh day
Of the seventh month
The seventh doctor say
‘He was born for good luck’

And that you see--I got seven hundred
dollars--don’t you mess with me!

Because I’m here, everybody knows I’m here.
Well I’m the Hootchie Cootchie Man
Everyone knows I’m here!¹⁷

A “hootchie cootchie” man is another name for someone who knows how to create magical charms and imbue them with of spiritual power. In some areas of the south he is called a “root doctor” or a “conjure man.” This song describes not only the power this kind of man may possess but also some of the charms associated with that power. The

¹⁶ See Additional Source.

¹⁷ Julio Finn, *The Bluesman: The Musical Heritage of Black Men and Women in the Americas* (London:

black cat bone and John the Conqueror are both ingredients in a typical mojo bag. The bone is for luck and the John the Conqueror is a root (jalop, related to the morning glory vine) carried for victory and strength in overcoming obstacles. High John the Conqueror is a figure in African-American folklore. Zora Neale Hurston explains his origins this way:

High John de Conquer came to be a man, and a mighty man at that. But he was not a natural man in the beginning. First off he was a whisper, a will to hope, a wish to find something worthy of laughter and song. Then the whisper put on flesh. His footsteps sounded across the world in a low but musical rhythm as if the world he walked on was a singing drum . . . The sign of this man was a laugh and his singing symbol was a drum beat . . . it was an inside thing to live by. It was sure to be heard when and where the work was the hardest, the lot most cruel. It helped the slaves endure . . .¹⁸

Hurston continues saying, “freedom for the slaves came and so High John went back to Africa from where he had been summoned . . . but he left his power here and placed his American dwelling in the root of a certain plant. Only possess that root and he can be summoned at any time . . .”¹⁹

High John The Conqueror, as both a folk hero and an object of magical power, is important to understanding the roots of the African-American aesthetic. Most importantly, “he” is a symbol of hope for the oppressed. What began as a magical means to defeat slavery has continued in the latter part of this century to be a way to defeat any obstacle.²⁰ Angela Davis speaks of the root as “metaphorically capturing the soul of Black American culture.”²¹ She further states the importance of role of Voodoo in African-

Quartet Books, 1986) 150.

¹⁸ Quoted in Finn 134.

¹⁹ Quoted in Finn 135.

²⁰ See Additional Source.

²¹ Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie*

American culture:

As African-American literary, visual, and performing artists--and critics as well--would later realize, African-American religious practices based in the West African and especially Yoruba religion permeate the culture as a whole. The articulation of a specifically Black aesthetic . . . cannot locate itself in the living tradition of African-American culture without taking seriously the practices variously called conjure, voodoo or hoodoo.²²

Blues singers and instrumentalists have long alluded to their belief in the power of Hoodoo in the lyrics of their songs. In many of these songs, the singer identifies personally with this power, claiming that he or she is a supernatural force to be reckoned with:

The blues repertoire is saturated with songs attesting the bluesman's credence in Hoodoo. To him, they conjure the supernatural forces he uses to overcome the obstacles in his path for the bluesman who believes in Hoodoo thinks of himself as a privileged being in league with mighty spirits.²³

While these beliefs may have been common to many bluesmen and women, there is perhaps no one whose connection to this magical-spiritual worldview is more legendary than the bluesman Robert Johnson.

Robert Johnson : Bluesman

Robert Johnson was born in Mississippi in 1911. His family was poor; they were all cotton pickers. Johnson's father had been chased out of town by a white lynch mob, and so Johnson's memories of his childhood were marred by racism as well as poverty. Surrounded by a sense of misfortune, he searched for something that would give him a

Holliday (New York: Pantheon, 1998) 157.

²²Davis 159.

²³Finn 145.

sense of purpose in his life. He found it in the music that was played by his neighbors and friends, the blues. Until he was about the age of nine, he lived with his stepfather and his brother Charles. His brother gave him some lessons on the guitar, which Robert soon abandoned for the blues harp, or harmonica. By the time he had reached his teens he was ready to start playing the guitar again and took lessons with a local guitar legend named Son House. His teacher had scant praise for his talents, however, and urged Johnson to return to playing the harmonica:

We'd all play for the Saturday night balls and there'd be this little boy standing around--Robert Johnson. He blew the harmonica and he was pretty good with that but he wanted to play the guitar. And such another racket you never heard! It'd make people mad, you know. They'd come out and say, "Why don't y'all go in there and take that guitar away from that boy!" . . . I'd come back in and I'd scold him about it. "Don't do that Robert. You drive people nuts. You can't play nuthin'. Why don't you blow harmonica for them?"²⁴

This incident occurred around the time Johnson was 15. Soon afterward, his wife, also in her teens, died in childbirth, and Johnson, who was not known for his openness about his personal life, disappeared for two years. The legend that has grown up around his life states that he went deep into the bayou, a wilderness of swamp and forest. It was there, the story goes, that Johnson met up with the devil at a crossroads, selling his soul for the ability to play the blues on his guitar. After he emerged from seclusion and began to play in the local bars again in Mississippi, he seemed a new man. His technique became legendary, and his old friends who had once derided him were now just as eager to offer him praise. As Son House recalls:

²⁴Finn 212.

We were all playing . . . one Saturday night and all of a sudden somebody came through the door . . . I said, "Look who's coming through the door!" Willie looked and said "Yeah, Little Robert." I said "And he's got a guitar!" . . . Robert finally wiggled through the crowd and got to where we were . . . I said to him "Well boy, you still got a guitar, huh? What do you do with that thing?" . . . He said "Let me have your seat for a minute." So I said "All right, and you better do something with it too!" . . . So he sat down there and finally got started . . . And man! He was so good! When he finished, all our mouths were standing open. I said "Well ain't that fast! He's gone now!"²⁵

There are several possible explanations as to what happened to Johnson in the backwoods of Mississippi. Perhaps he spent the two years away from his family and friends, devoting all of his time to practice and composing, and so his rudimentary skills as a musician improved through this self-imposed isolation. This theory does not explain why Johnson himself referred to 'selling his soul' in return for this phenomenal talent, however. His contemporaries were also convinced of his supernatural ability, and no one seemed to doubt his story when they heard him play.²⁶

Julio Finn makes the case that Johnson's white biographers may have missed some important clues that could put Johnson's experience into a religious as well as a cultural context. Hoodoo, he explains, was still practiced in the South at the turn of the century, especially in small towns and rural areas. It was well known that the root doctors and conjuremen lived way out in the bayou areas, and Finn believes that Johnson may have retreated there to become apprenticed to one of the conjuremen. Most telling was the story that Johnson "met the devil at the crossroads" because the symbol of the crossroads has a great depth of meaning in the spiritual traditions of the African diaspora. It is at a

²⁵Finn 213.

²⁶Finn 220.

crossroads or intersection between the world of man and the world of the spirits that one goes to contact the Yoruba god (or more properly orisha), Ellegua or Legba. In Nineteenth-Century New Orleans he was called Papa Legba or Lebat and was known as the opener of the gates between matter and spirit. Could Johnson have been going to perform a ritual at the crossroads so that Papa Legba would open the gateways of creative expression for him? Brought up as he was in the Christian South, he may have even referred to this ancestral spirit as a “devil,” for it has been a common practice for Christians to label the gods of a non-Christian people as devils or demons. According to Finn, the blues itself has been often labeled the “devil’s music.” He points to the content of the lyrics as a clue to why this is the case. They are filled with allusions to African spiritual beliefs that are pre-Christian in origin.²⁷

While there is no way to definitively prove what happened to Robert Johnson, Finn points out that the description of events makes sense in terms of the African diasporic traditions.²⁸ A young man at a time of spiritual crisis comes to a “crossroads” in his life and offers up his life of sorrow in desperation to what he believes is a supernatural force. In return, it seems as if his life is transformed. His spirit has changed, and he has achieved what others perceive as supernatural abilities to perform music. If he had been living in Brazil or even in West Africa, his experience might have been viewed as an initiation of some sort, for according to Finn, there is evidence that a priest or sorcerer (called a *griot*) in West Africa would also have been a musician: “The role of the *griot* in West African

²⁷Finn 220.

²⁸Finn 220.

society extends far beyond the realm of magic. The fact that music is at the heart of all the *griot*'s activities is further proof of the vital part he plays in African life."²⁹

Robert Johnson's spiritual crossroads may have come for him as a personal crisis. Not only was he unable to perform music well on the instrument of his choice (thus humiliating himself in front of his chosen peers, the bluesmen); with the death of his young wife, he may have felt his world was coming to an end.

Sheila Jordan: Jazz Woman

There was also a time in Sheila Jordan's life when she experienced a deep spiritual crisis; for her it was an acknowledgment of her addiction to alcohol and of the toll that it was taking on her life and her singing. She came to this realization in an unusual way. She describes her experience as a sort of vision or dream in which a spirit comes to her: "I don't know whether I dreamed it or whether it actually happened. It was almost like a spirit came up to me and said, 'If you don't stop what you're doing to yourself this is all going to be taken away from you'."³⁰ While she did not stop drinking right away, Jordan says that this was a turning point, (or in her words, a "crossing") which eventually led her to that choice. She wrote a song called "The Crossing" to commemorate her decision. In it she describes the spirit of jazz, "this music," as the force that sets her free. In my conversation with her, she mentions that she took the idea of the "higher power" that one connects to in a 12-step recovery program like Alcoholics Anonymous and put it into the

²⁹Finn 221.

³⁰Dahl 240.

perspective of her own life and art. Jazz becomes a gift of her higher power:

I wrote "The Crossing" for my decision, when I decided I didn't want to drink or drug anymore . . . I was in such elation that I found that I did not have to drink or drug, that I had a choice, choices, that I wrote "The Crossing." And that's basically about finding one's own way. How does one overcome, or stay away from something that's killing them? . . . I took the thing from the 12-step program that I'd been fortunate to find, and that's a higher power . . . when I sing, "the love I have when I'm singing for you . . . the spirit of the music sets me free" and that's what it is . . . the music comes to me through a higher power.³¹

In one way, the decision to stop drinking may have been a critical turning point for Jordan, but her relationship to music, the force which she has said both in word and in song to have saved her life, had been a source of healing and transformation since she was a child. She describes it as a medicine, a way to help ease the pain of growing up, of dealing with poverty and prejudice and, finally, as a way to rid herself of addiction:

I remember when I was a kid I used to sing when things were bad... the music pulled me up . . . It always helps me every time I'm in pain or in trouble, singing always helps ease the pain. It's like a medicine, you know, a marvelous healing and I think people who really sing for the sheer need to sing, forgetting all the "celebrity conscious" type thing . . . people who are really into the music, especially jazz music 'cause it's so creative . . . do it as a part of their life.³²

Jordan's approach to her music has been as much spiritual as artistic. She credits her relationship with Charlie Parker for opening the musical pathway that has become like a spiritual discipline for her, one that might be compared to meditation, for example. This path gave her an appreciation of earlier jazz artists as well:

I was inspired firstly by Charlie Parker. He was my musical guru. After that, everybody else that played with Bird, or played that music, I was into, and then I went back to Pres through Bird. I was able to appreciate Billie Holiday . . . but before Bird I couldn't have that . . . Bird was my path, Bird was the person who

³¹ Jordan, personal interview 17.

³² Jordan, personal interview 2.

opened my heart to jazz music.³³

Jazz as a spiritual path or discipline can also be called a “transformative practice.”

This is a term that Michael Murphy uses to describe an activity such as the practice of a martial art or meditation that can lead to a heightened sense of awareness and what he calls “metanormal” or extraordinary behavior.³⁴ This behavior can result in what might be termed “miraculous” events such as:

Extraordinary perceptions of things outside the organism, including apprehensions of a numinous beauty in familiar objects, voluntary clairvoyance, and contact with entities or events that are inaccessible to the ordinary senses . . . [and] the supreme intellectual capacities evident in some works of genius by which great artistic or other productions are apprehended *tout ensemble*, all at once . . .³⁵

This extraordinary behavior can also include incidents of spiritual healing. These, he says:

. . . sometimes occur in the midst of powerful emotions or trance, when perceptual constancies are suspended. They frequently lift their subject up, raising his or her “center of personal energy” as William James puts it, establishing the self- however briefly- in a larger power and sufficiency.³⁶

The jazz musician through his “transformative practice” of creating new musical ideas by improvisation can himself become a potent symbol for those involved in the jazz subculture or *communitas*. At times, as in Jordan’s experience of Parker, it may seem as though he or she becomes like a guru or spiritual guide. The almost miraculous feats performed by Parker, Bud Powell or others on their instruments would sometimes be subject to a near religious veneration by both fans and other musicians. Neil Leonard goes

³³ Jordan, personal interview 12.

³⁴ Michael Murphy, *The Future of The Body: Explorations into the Further Evolution of Human Nature* (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1992) 27.

³⁵ Murphy 28.

³⁶ Murphy 258.

so far as to compare jazz musicians to tribal healers or shamans bringing a kind of religious ecstasy to their followers:

The shaman transported listeners or ritual participants to upper and lower worlds where they visited gods or consorted with the dead and jazzman [sic] transported their audience to heights and depths inaccessible through ordinary experience.³⁷

It was this sense of “ecstasy” that accompanied listening to musicians like Parker and later John Coltrane that inspired musicians and others in the jazz subculture to change their lives, sometimes quite dramatically. Sheila Jordan left Detroit when she was still a teenager to follow Charlie Parker to New York, and Leonard tells of musician Bob Dorough’s response to Parker: “Oh it was crazy how we dug Bird,” Dorough said. “I mean, even though we thought of Bird as a sort of god, it seems he was occasionally induced to visit and blow with lesser mortals . . . we loved every note he played . . . It was like idolatry . . . We were Bird-happy, Bird-struck, Bird-bent . . .”³⁸ At the time Dorough was a student at Columbia University, but he later quit to become a full-time musician.

Spiritual or transcendent experiences are not limited to those who listen to jazz. Many musicians, too, have described their experiences while playing or singing. These experiences can vary widely in both intensity and frequency. What is interesting is that many musicians attribute these experiences to a spiritual force of some kind. According to Leonard, even Duke Ellington referred to the times when the musicians’ muses were all one and the same as a “mystic moment.”³⁹

³⁷ Leonard 36.

³⁸ Quoted in Leonard 37.

³⁹ Leonard 54

Sometimes these experiences are described as having a “magical” or supernatural quality. Musicians may find themselves in an altered state of consciousness when they play. Leonard argues that music has always been described in magical terms, that it has always had a mysterious dimension:

Music has long been related to magic, despite attempts since Pythagoras, or earlier, to demystify it. In the case of jazz, even schooled players--those exposed most rigorously to European rationalizations--insist on its fundamentally supernatural nature. While he admits that jazz can be discussed in logical terms, pianist Cecil Taylor, a graduate of the New England Conservatory of Music, maintains that part of this music is not to be analyzed exactly. It's about magic and capturing spirits. And this supernatural aspect is what fascinates him. Music has those qualities which transform the environment . . . it certainly transforms the players . . . Art works in really mysterious ways.⁴⁰

Perhaps one of the most mysterious, transcendent experiences that musicians have described while playing is to have the physical sensation of floating outside the body, of feeling displaced or some how disassociated from everyday reality in the flow of musical improvisation. Berliner quotes Ronald Shannon Jackson:

With certain groups, like Albert Ayler, Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman . . . and now my own group, The Decoding Society, there is a level of playing which we try to reach which is the same thing that people do when they do transcendental meditation and yoga. They talk about “out of body experiences.” That's what this music is . . . In order to play, something transcends. Something happens with the physical, the spiritual, and in the mental state in which they combine, and their energy is turned free. It's a cleansing experience which in a religion they would say “It's of another world.” The state I'm talking about even transcends emotions. It's a feeling of being able to communicate with all living beings.⁴¹

Other musicians express similar thoughts about these extraordinary experiences. While it does not seem to be a common phenomenon, the “out of body” experience seems to be

⁴⁰ Leonard 53.

⁴¹ Berliner 393.

one of the peaks in a performer's musical career. As Leroy Williams explains:

It's a beautiful, floating feeling that is hard to describe in words. It's a wonderful feeling, almost like getting out of your body. I never know when it's going to happen, but when everybody is there and it happens, it really happens . . . You and your instrument are one, there's no separation . . . It's like you're in tune with the universe.⁴²

When I interviewed Sheila Jordan about her experiences singing jazz, I was curious to discover whether she had ever had something like this happen to her. I have had a similar experience while singing and wondered if she had, too:

VB: "I had sung with a band before, a rock 'n roll kind of band and never really had that kind of experience. But when I started singing standards, there was one night in particular, when I almost felt like I was . . . standing outside myself."

SJ: "Oh, I've done that."

VB: "And there was like a force that seemed to be flowing through me. It was a wonderful experience. I knew it was a spiritual experience and I wanted to explore that."

SJ: "Oh, I've had that. I've had that several times, but you don't get it a lot, 'cause you couldn't cope with that if you got it so much . . . I mean, if you get that all the time . . . it's like anything . . . it becomes common . . . I remember the first time I had that I thought I was floating over myself, then looking down at myself, and that's happened with me . . . I've had about six of those, five, six in my lifetime thus far. I've been waiting for another one to happen, but it hasn't for quite a few years, and several times that happened with the bass."⁴³

Sometimes when Jordan is improvising, she loses track of "reality" and has lapses in her memory. This can result in her forgetting the lyrics as she is singing or sometimes forgetting a whole series of events in an evening during a performance.

⁴² Berliner 393.

⁴³ Jordan, personal interview 2.

You know, I remember one time I was singing, and I came back to reality, as they call it, and I blew the lyric . . . I mean a lot of times people will say things that I did, or sang, or said, and some of them I'm aware of, and some I don't even remember doing. Somebody even said something to me the other day about the concert Saturday night, and I don't even remember that . . . I don't remember it at all . . . But it's just having a good handle on the music, feeling free enough to go anywhere with the music, and trusting who you are with.⁴⁴

What Jordan describes is remarkably similar to the experiences of those who are "possessed" in African Diasporic religious traditions such as Voudon and Santeria. The sensation of "being outside oneself" and the loss of memory that accompanies this experience are common phenomena among the initiates of these traditions. This sort of experience occurs primarily when an Orisha or Loa (the African deities in Haiti) takes possession of an individual during a religious ceremony:

Descriptions of possession by those who have experienced it are, on the contrary, very rare . . . We are dealing in part with states that entail more or less total post facto amnesia, so that, generally speaking, the majority of those who are possessed are in no position to describe their condition . . . the possessed person never, in principle, remembers anything about his trance following his return to consciousness.⁴⁵

In both jazz and a religious tradition such as Voodoo or Santeria, the trance states that accompany improvisation or possession are induced musically. In Candomble (an African based tradition from Brazil), for example, this state might be brought on by a particular chant or drum pattern associated with a particular Orisha:

In the *Candomble*, "when possession is long in coming, the priest or priestesses ring the *agogo* (an African style double bell made of iron) close to the girls' ears as they dance, and then it is by no means rare for the divinity, spurred on by this deafening

⁴⁴ Jordan, personal interview 5.

⁴⁵ Gilbert Rouget, *Music and Trance: A Theory of Relations Between Music and Possession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) 9.

noise, this barbaric sound, to make up his mind at last to mount his horse.”⁴⁶

In jazz, such “trance states” often occur when the rhythm section plays solidly behind each soloist and simultaneously “locks in” to a particular sound, freeing the musician to soar to new improvisatory heights. Singing becomes most enjoyable for Sheila Jordan when she is set free to “float” above the rhythm section. In order to become more attuned to what the musicians are playing behind her, she often closes her eyes and focuses on sound alone:

I close my eyes a lot when I sing because it helps me to concentrate better . . . especially if I’m doing the bass and voice because that’s really total concentration . . . And I have the same feeling when I’m singing with a rhythm section, but I might be a little more conscious of it because I’m aware of the drums. The drums will always get to me, because if the drums are too loud they immediately break whatever trance I’m in, and whatever groove I’m in, you know?⁴⁷

I asked her later about playing with drummers particularly. I wanted to know if she liked strong, energetic players or those who tended to be softer, playing always with brushes rather than sticks. She mentioned a particular drummer that she worked with, Smitty Smith: “He plays great, he gives me a lift . . . it takes me a while to get used to the fact that he’s a little stronger than most drummers I work with . . . But I like it because it kicks me—it moves me in another direction.”⁴⁸ This feeling of transcendence seems to be linked with a sense of being secure with the other musicians and with reaching an extraordinary level of musical communication. The singers and instrumentalists that achieve this often find that they perform beyond their usual abilities and these feats leave them feeling

⁴⁶ Roger Bastide, quoted in Rouget 83.

⁴⁷ Jordan, personal interview 5.

⁴⁸ Jordan, personal interview 6.

inspired and exhilarated. Berliner quotes one musician as saying:

Jazz musicians interact and learn from one another when they perform. That's what jazz is. Many times I've listened to recordings I've made and said, "Wow, I don't remember doing that! I've never practiced that before!"⁴⁹

Art Pepper, an alto saxophonist known for his "hard bop" style, tells of an experience that he had playing in session with Sonny Stitt. Stitt had come into the Blackhawk, a San Francisco jazz club and challenged him to play alternate choruses of the bop classic "Cherokee":

I forgot everything and everything came out. I played way over my head. I played completely different than he did. I searched and found my own way and what I said reached the people. I blew and blew, and when I finally finished I was shaking all over . . . the people were screaming, the people were clapping . . . I looked at Sonny . . . and he went "All right!" and that was it. That's what it's all about.⁵⁰

Through what may be termed as having extra-musical or "mystical" experiences while performing the complex music of jazz, Sheila Jordan and the other musicians have been able to transform their lives in beneficial ways. One could almost say that through their music they have been able to transcend pain and hardship and bring a sense of healing to themselves and to others who listen to them. One example of this was Jordan's rendition of the song "You Are My Sunshine," which she recorded as a tribute to the miners and the world she grew up in.

When I first asked her about this song and what I had thought about its meaning, I believed that perhaps I had read too much into it, and that I may have misinterpreted what

⁴⁹ Berliner 390.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Leonard 68.

was meant and the process she may have gone through in singing it. However, she said:

No, but it's right. What you're reading is true. I will say this though, that song could've been anything, whatever that out-of-work miner had requested . . . It could've been "Shine On Harvest Moon" or "Blue Skies" . . . it just so happened that it was "You Are My Sunshine." I'm not thinking so much in terms of, I should say feeling in terms of, oh, lovers, or unrequited love . . . I'm thinking about the miners and the sun not coming up for them.⁵¹

What Jordan has done in her interpretation of this song is to infuse her performance with not only her own experience in her childhood, but also the emotions and experiences of those she grew up with. What she has accomplished is a kind of artistic alchemy by taking her raw experience and interpreting it through a jazz rendition of an older folk-style song and turning into her own artistic creation. This work of art is not for her alone, however. She shares its emotional intensity with those she grew up with and with society as a whole, offering a rare glimpse into their lives as well as her own.

Conclusion

In writing this paper it has been my intention to bring aspects of jazz performance that are not strictly musical into focus. These extra-musical elements such as a heightened sense of awareness, a near-spiritual ecstasy, and even what is perceived of as an "out of body" experience seem to be more indicative of a spiritual or religious dimension than one that is purely musical. Even though these experiences do not seem to be common in musical performance, they occur often enough to be a recognizable phenomenon for both musicians themselves and for sensitive listeners. Furthermore, there is an aspect of healing

⁵¹ Jordan, personal interview 16.

that seems to accompany these experiences both for the musicians themselves and for their audiences. Neil Leonard and Michael Tucker have both described jazz as a shamanic art form. A shaman's role in tribal society is to access information from other dimensions to bring healing to an individual or to the tribe as a whole. Tucker says that in the twentieth century jazz musicians act in a similar way to heal a fragmented society, one which has no single coherent culture or worldview:

Jazz musicians have long been--and continue to be--some of the greatest shamans of the twentieth century. More than any other music of this century, jazz challenges us at the core of our being, questioning and stimulating our ability to synthesize body and soul, dance and dream at the mythopoeic heart of life. Speaking at the Berlin Jazz Festival in 1964, Dr. Martin Luther King underlined the importance of jazz in the fight against the sense of meaninglessness which has afflicted so many this century: "Jazz speaks of life . . . when life itself offers no order and meaning, the musician creates an order and meaning from the sounds of earth which flow through his instrument."⁵²

As an art form that requires both technical mastery and a high level of creative freedom jazz is uniquely suited for those seeking a discipline that provides focus and empowerment as a way to order a life that may be fragmented and difficult. For Sheila Jordan and others such as Charlie Parker and later John Coltrane, jazz is more like a spiritual discipline or a religion.

Performing with others forms close bonds among musicians that become the basis for a subculture or *communitas*. *Communitas* in turn fosters the kind of trust between fellow artists that nurtures creativity and experiences of transcendence. Coltrane, whose work was often linked with religious or spiritual themes, believed musical expression to be

⁵² Michael Tucker, *Dreaming With Open Eyes: The Shamanic Spirit in Twentieth Century Art and Culture*

a gift from God. He as well as Sheila Jordan stopped taking drugs and drinking alcohol as a result of a deeply spiritual experience. On the liner notes of one of his most famous recordings *A Love Supreme* (1964), he speaks of a spiritual awakening that occurred in 1957 that allowed him to both break his drug dependency and experience the spiritual dimension of music.

The path of music for the jazz musician is a path to wholeness. Through a kind of artistic alchemy the jazz artist may forge together the fragmented parts of the self and achieve spiritual healing. While it is impossible to pinpoint just what it is about the music that makes it a transcendent and spiritual force, the testimony of those who create this music and those who have been touched by its beauty indicate that for them jazz can be as powerful as a religion. Whether this experience is as remarkable as astral projection or as simple as singing to ease a sense of loneliness and isolation, the power of music to heal and restructure people's lives is well attested by both jazz musicians and singers alike. For Sheila Jordan it can be summed up as the guiding principle in her life, "the sheer need to sing."

Bibliography and Works Cited

Books

- Berendt, Joachim. *The Jazz Book: From New Orleans to Rock and Free Jazz*. New York: Lawrence Hill and Co. Publishers, 1975.
- Berliner, Paul F. *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Dahl, Linda. *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazz Women*. New York: Limelight Editions, 1984.
- Davis, Angela Y. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "MA" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. New York: Pantheon, 1998.
- Deren, Maya. *The Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*. 1953. New York: Documentext, McPherson and Co., 1970.
- Finn, Julio. *The Bluesman: The Musical Heritage of Black Men and Women in the Americas*. London: Quartet Books, 1986.
- Friedwald, Will. *Jazz Singing: America's Great Voices from Bessie Smith to BeBop and Beyond*. New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1990.
- Holliday, Billie. *Lady Sings the Blues*. New York: Penguin Books, 1984.
- Jones, Leroi. *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music That Developed From It*. New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1963.
- Kernfeld, Barry, Ed. *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*. 2 vols. London: Macmillan, 1988.
- Kliment, Bud. *Ella Fitzgerald*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988.
- Leonard, Neil. *Jazz: Myth and Legend*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- McEvedy, Colin. *The Penguin Atlas of African History*. London: Penguin Books, 1980.

Murphy, Michael. *The Future of the Body: Explorations into the Further Evolution of Human Nature*. Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1992.

O'Brian, Lucy. *She Bop: The Definitive History of Women in Rock, Pop and Soul*. New York: Penguin Books, 1995.

Oliver, Paul, Ed. *The New Grove Dictionary of Gospel, Blues and Jazz*. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1980.

Rouget, Gilbert. *Music and Trance: A Theory of Relations Between Music and Possession*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.

Tucker, Michael. *Dreaming With Open Eyes: The Shamanic Spirit in Twentieth Century Art and Culture*. San Francisco: Aquarian / HarperCollins, 1992.

Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969.

Articles and Other Sources

Jordan, Sheila. Personal interview. August 1993.

Jordan, Sheila. Interview with Howard Cutler. *Cadence Magazine* (1987): 5-16.

Ventura, Michael. "Hear That Long Snake Moan." *Whole Earth Review* (Spring 1987): 28-43.

---. "Hear That Long Snake Moan." *Whole Earth Review* (Summer 1987): 82-93.

York, Felice. Personal interview. May 1996

Sheila Jordan: A Selected Discography

"Sheila's Blues." From *The Crossing*. Blackhawk Recordings, 1986.

"The Crossing." From *The Crossing*. Blackhawk Recordings, 1986.

"You Are My Sunshine." From *Outer Thoughts by George Russell*. Milestones Recordings, 1961.

Additional Source

Note: For nearly five years, I was employed by a small metaphysical bookstore and Botanica (an herb and candle shop) in Oakland, California. It has been my own experience and observation that the African-American customers who frequent this store still follow the folk traditions that they have brought with them from the South. Most notable are the creation of “mojo” or “conjure” bags, which may contain charms such as a black cat bone, a mojo wishing bean, or a lodestone (a natural magnetic stone said to attract money or love). The most requested item by far, however, has been High John the Conqueror root, (jalap root, which is related to the morning glory root) an item most customers swear by.

Appendix

Interview with Sheila Jordan by Vicki-Lyn Burns

SJ: . . . Now, don't get a "C." (laughter).

VB: Well, actually I don't know if they're going to grade this particular thesis, because it's a Master's. But they might grade it, and I would love to get an "A."

SJ: I think it was a thesis. I think it was--I'm almost positive.

VB: I've done a little bit of work on it so far and they gave me a credit for it so I'm not sure. My program at San Jose State is that I would do a recital--which I've already done--and also a paper, which needs to be almost Master's thesis length. I'm just basically calling it that, and I did my recital last semester, and actually had Smith play with me, which was really nice. He was sweet to do that for me. Yeah, what I'd like to talk to you about, and this is something that I've picked up from reading some things that you've said about singing, is the fact that some of the adjectives that come out when musicians talk about jazz and even when some people that are very devout listeners talk about jazz, that it's almost a spiritual kind of thing, and that there's a kind of emotional healing that can go on, either in listening or in actually creating. To give you a little bit of background about my own experience, when I was about 17, I started to learn standards. And I had sung with a band before, a rock and roll kind of band and never really had that experience. But when I started singing standards, there was one night in particular when I almost felt like I was sort of standing outside of myself.

SJ: Oh, I've done that.

VB: Yeah, and there was like a force that seemed to be flowing through me that was me, but also something else. And I thought, "Wow, this is really wild!" And it was a wonderful experience. It wasn't something that I could say was necessarily because I was Catholic at the time, it wasn't something I could say belonged in church, but I knew it was a spiritual experience, and I really wanted to explore that.

SJ: Oh, I've had that. I've had that several times, but you don't get it a lot, 'cause you couldn't cope with that if you got it so much.

VB: Yeah, you might burn out on it, in a way.

SJ: Wow! What would there be left? I mean, if you get that all the time . . . it's like anything . . . it becomes common. But I've had that. I remember the first time I've had that I thought I was floating over myself, then looking down at myself, and that's happened with me . . . I've had about six of those, five, six in my lifetime thus far. I've been waiting for another one to happen, but it hasn't for quite a few years, and several times that happened with the bass.

VB: Ah, that's interesting. In fact, my brother, who was with me when he heard you the other night, mentioned that he felt that the bass almost sounded like a voice itself.

SJ: We're very tuned in as a duo. It's too bad you didn't get to hear the duo the other night.

VB: I would've loved to have heard it live. I have heard you on recordings.

SJ: Yeah, oh, it's not the same as all. And we've grown so. But that whole healing thing, that's very, very true. I mean it's really right on it because I remember when I was a kid I used to sing when things were bad. I had a very, very, very, very bad childhood, and the music pulled me up . . . It always helps me, every time I'm in pain or in trouble, singing always helps ease the pain. It's like a medicine you know; it's a marvelous healing, and I think people who really sing for the sheer need to sing, forgetting all the money, all the celebrity-conscious type thing and people who are really into the music, especially jazz music 'cause it's so creative, I believe do it as a part of their life. And it's like an extension of what you do: it's like an extension of walking, eating sleeping. I really don't know what I'd do if I couldn't sing. I suppose I'd find another outlet, some kind of artistic outlet. But it's very important, and I know I've had it ever since I was a little kid, and it was always my shelter. So that's amazing you know that and that you've had that experience because I don't know many people who have. Maybe they have but they don't talk about it. You know I don't talk about it too much. I've written about it sometimes in a couple of articles when I was interviewed. Because I think I remember reading something on Sonny Rollins sometime, who had an out-of-body experience. And I remember thinking, "Oh my God, I don't know what made me think I was so unique that I was the only one to have one of those." And then in a way I was kind of relieved, too, to know that somebody else had it, especially somebody I admire as much as Sonny Rollins.

VB: Wow. Well, actually I wasn't expecting you to talk about an out-of-body experience quite so dramatically. But one of the primary focuses of my paper will

be comparing the jazz musician in a community of other musicians, creative people to, say, a shaman in a traditional culture. In reading about people doing shamanic journeys, the kinds of things that happen are, say, an out-of-body experience where they go to a healing place, bring back information from whatever spiritual dimension it is, and bring it back to the people, and offer it back to the people as a kind of spiritual offering. I was really struck with the almost poetic image--although of course you know he's more than just an image--of Charlie Parker and his nickname "Bird." The idea of flying to me was kind of like a remarkable---

SJ: (laughter) That's really not how he got that name!

VB: Oh, I know! (laughter)

SJ: He got that name very, very funny---

VB: Oh really? Oh, wow, I hadn't heard the story.

SJ: The story that I heard was that they were in this car and they were driving on a back road or something and they were very hungry and he leaped out and he caught a chicken and they killed it and ate it. (laughter)

SJ: And so they called him "Bird," but I don't know if that's true.

VB: (laughter) Well, that's a great tall tale.

SJ: That's the story I heard from a long time ago.

VB: Oh, wow. Did they stop to cook it? (laughter)

SJ: Either that or they took it home.

——interruption in interview——

SJ: OK, you gonna ask me some questions?

VB: Yeah, the specific question mostly was about healing and also how you feel when you sing. Do any particular thoughts go through your mind or do you feel almost like you're in a . . .

SJ: I don't have any. It's almost like something else, another force takes over when I sing. You know, I remember once I was singing, and I came back to reality, as they call it, and I blew the lyric. Whereas if I'm not conscious of any of this at all, I guess, and I close my eyes a lot when I sing because it helps me to concentrate better.

VB: I was going to ask you about that.

SJ: Yeah, you know it's not out of fear of looking in people's faces. Oh, once in a while I look in people's faces, but I actually can concentrate better, and especially if I'm doing the bass and voice because that's really total concentration. And just fitting in with the bass, the sound, and just letting myself go, but I pretty much abandon all kinds of . . .

VB: . . . conscious thought?

SJ: Yeah, really, and even movements. I mean, a lot of times people will say things that I did, or sang, or said, and some of them I'm aware of and some I don't even remember doing. Somebody even said something to me the other day about the concert Saturday night, and I don't remember that.

VB: Wow.

SJ: I don't remember it at all. It's like I really can't remember. But it's just having a good handle on the music, feeling free enough to go anywhere with the

music, and trusting who you're with.

VB: Yeah.

SJ: Like I have to place implicit trust in Harvie. I mean, I must really trust him to the fullest, because he could devour me musically if he wanted to . . . I think I could improvise my ass out of it (laughter), but if he wanted to he could, you know, because it is just a bass and voice. I'm just talking about this musical setting in particular. And I have the same feeling when I'm singing with a rhythm section, but I might be a little more conscious of it because I'm aware of the drums. The drums will always get to me because if the drums are too loud, they immediately break whatever trance I'm in, and whatever groove I'm in, you know?

VB: Can I ask you a specific question about the drums? The gentleman that was playing with you on Sunday night--his name was Cy Clark? Or Mike Clark?

SJ: Mike Clark.

VB: I actually heard of him before, he's a pretty well known drummer. Did you feel comfortable with his, his---

SJ: Yes.

VB: OK, because he was a lot louder for instance than the guy that I play with, who'd never got beyond brushes, really, with me, and I kind of like a drummer to play with sticks. I like to hear the real sound, the tones of the drums come out, and . . .

SJ: Well, a lot of people have said to me when I use Smitty Smith if he's available--I used him on my string quartet album, and I've used him in a couple of club dates that I've had, in a couple of jazz club things that I've done--and they say, "God,

I can't imagine Smitty playing for you if he's so strong and so original and so busy, you know, into his own thing." But he plays great; he gives me a lift, you know and it takes me a while to get used to the fact that he is a little stronger than most drummers that I work with. But I like it 'cause it kicks me, it moves me in another direction. I mean, they were doing some unbelievable stuff behind me, double timing and all kinds of stuff. And I just kept right on where I was, and I felt it, but it didn't jar me.

VB: Did you feel like you could float right on top of it?

SJ: Oh, yes! Absolutely, and it was OK, and I knew I was safe. You know, I don't think that they would've been able to do that to many other singers. 'Cause they said afterwards, "Aw, we knew you could take it!" (laughter)

VB: Oh, wow, that's great!

SJ: Oh my God, that was really wild! I liked Mike Clark. I don't like that club.

VB: It's so hard to sing in.

SJ: I can't hear myself in there. That's a hard club to work, you know. When something like that comes up I usually say, "Oh, I'll never do that again." You know, if it's an uncomfortable situation. And then I always end up trying it once more thinking, "Oh, next time it'll work." But it's always the first set. By the second you've sort of adjusted to what the room really is. It's a tough room to work. There's no doubt about it.

VB: I think it might be partly the way it's constructed . . .

SJ: It is.

VB: . . . a huge ceiling, and . . .

SJ: Absolutely, and of course the first set I didn't have a monitor; the second set I did. So, I try to not beat myself up over gigs like that anymore, and you know, up until a few years ago, I'd do a gig like that . . . people would come and hear me, and I'd be so embarrassed that I wasn't coming across the way I'd really wanted to. They weren't getting the full value of what I could really do, you know, the mood, the sound, the whole thing, the communication. But I don't do that anymore. It doesn't matter to me anymore. It's nice if it's there; it's nice if it's happening. I'm just very glad to be singing wherever, and some times, some places are going to be better than others. But to have one of those spiritual awakening things, or spiritual trips, or whatever you want to call them--that's not the place to have it! (laughter)

VB: No, definitely not.

SJ: It has really be . . . I think it's all in where you are too, and where you are with the music. These things can happen when you don't even expect it, it just, "Whoa!" and it's there. I had one in Kimball's.

VB: Oh, really?

SJ: With Harvie, just the bass and voice. And you know they had a bar in there, and it was before they remodeled the Kimball's West--here they used to have the balcony upstairs. I remember I had one of those on a set. I had about three of those with Harvie.

VB: Wow. So, do you think it's a combination of you and whatever other musicians specifically, or is it just, you know, maybe the day went really well . . .

SJ: I think it's where I am. I think it's where I am.

VB: Hmm . . . OK.

SJ: I think it's abandoning all fears of it not being OK, abandoning all fears of "How am I gonna do this?" I don't really ever think about, "Oh, well, I'm doing this tune, but I don't work out." Naturally after doing a tune for a while you might fall into patterns . . . that's why it's nice with the different piano players. Sometimes they'll play another change which'll totally take you somewhere else, so you don't rely on some of the stuff that you've been doing.

VB: Right. So it gives you a different perspective in other words?

SJ: Right, absolutely, yeah. But I don't know what causes those things; I have no idea. They're just wonderful when they happen, and I just take it for what it is.

VB: So, here's another question along the same line but specifically about improvisation. I've talked with classical musicians that have had wonderful transcendental experiences, too, but I think that there's some thing very special about being able to improvise, like bringing your own experience through the music. Listening to Billie Holiday, for instance, and hearing her pour all of her experience into the art and using it almost like a hammer and anvil, to make this beautiful work of art out of all this stuff that she's pouring into it. I hear the same thing in your singing, that you've taken your own raw experiences and shaped them and bent them, more in a way almost like a painter might, rather than, say a classical musician. In some ways I think that jazz musicians are more in tune with other kinds of artists who use more of their individuality.

SJ: Yes. I think so. Well, that's why they had for a while the poetry in jazz, and I worked with a multimedia group years ago where they painted and danced, and I mean they showed slides, and you know they had this whole thing going. It is in your experience, and the experience is the reason. As I said earlier, my only release in life, with the pain that I grew up with as a child, was through music. So again, it's gonna come out in the music. It's all gonna come out in the music. And it's getting over the fear of going with your emotions, you know, sometimes you'll be improvising, and you hear it--I never force improvisation. If I feel like the other night, the tempo started rushing, and I said, "Wait a minute, this tempo is rushing." I'm not comfortable improvising on this, so I'm just going to get through the lyrics with as much feeling as I possibly can give it, and I'm gonna get out. Because I was not comfortable with the time, because the time had shifted.

VS: Now here's a question about your improv. Because you've been doing it so many years, do you think about, consciously, which notes you're choosing, or do you just sing?

SJ: No, I listen. I found out early in this music that the two most important things to me in this music were the things I wear on the side of my head, my ears.

Both: (laughter)

VB: That's great.

SJ: That really I had to hear, you know, and I was blessed with good ears. Charlie Parker said I had million dollar ears--he really did.

VB: Oh, that's so sweet.

SJ: When I was young, he said, "You have million dollar ears." So I find that I can hear what the musicians . . . where they're going. I can hear what I'm feeling; I go for notes. Sometimes these notes surprise me. I don't know where they come from.

VB: Hm. So have you done a lot--I know you studied some with Lenny Tristano, and I'm sure he worked changes with you, and maybe even scales and those kinds of things. Do you feel that that is really what made you a great improviser, being able to do that, or just . . .

SJ: I think I'm a natural improviser. I think from listening to Charlie Parker when I was a little kid, and listening to his records over and over, and that--such a need to do it. See, I was always a singer. I was born a singer. I sang since I was three years old. I just never knew what kind of music I wanted to sing until I heard Bird. But I think that these were the most important lessons I could ever get in my life, singing with Bird records. Singing all those bebop lines. I learned hearing those skills harmonically. I learned that, just hearing them.

VB: So, this is another one of my--I guess, it's certainly not an original idea with me, but I really feel that the people that learn it from hearing it, internalize it in a deeper way than those folks that, say, learn the Charlie Parker licks off a page . . .

SJ: Right. That's right. I heard what was going on and I agree, I think it's like making homemade spaghetti sauce and buying it in a can.

Both: (laughter)

VB: That's great!

SJ: It is!

VB: That's a wonderful comparison.

SJ: I mean they're both good. And of course, that's not to say that you shouldn't study theory, and you shouldn't study all that stuff if you can--but I would never discourage a natural talent from singing this stuff. And in today's world there's no reason that you can't learn this stuff, because it's there for you. There's too many schools that are teaching it, and it doesn't cost a fortune so you can't go and learn it. But in my day, you know, you took some piano lessons, if you could even afford that, you know. When you came from a poor family, music is the last thing. If you want to sing, OK, do it on your own, but we're not going to send you to any school 'cause we can't afford it--it's enough we put bread on the table.

VB: Yeah. I had a similar experience, actually, growing up in Maine. I didn't have music lessons until I was 15 and then didn't know how to read until I got to college.

SJ: Sure, you know, it's how you grow up with it. So, luckily I did have these Bird records, and I was tuned into Bird, and I did know the minute I heard him that that's the music I would devote my life to. Not necessarily, you know, going around making money at it, but just supporting the music whether it was to go hear it, or to constantly keep Charlie Parker's name alive, or to sing it--whatever. I'm sure if I lost my voice tomorrow, I would still be going around encouraging people to listen to this music, and not to forget people like Monk and Bird and Art Tatum and all these fantastic musicians, Dizzy and Miles, you know?

VB: So you were inspired by them?

SJ: I was inspired firstly by Charlie Parker. He was my musical guru. After that, everybody else that played with Bird, or played that music, I was into, and then I went back to Pres, through Bird. I was able to go back and appreciate everybody, appreciate Billie Holiday, love Billie Holiday, you know, the emotion. But before Bird, I couldn't have heard that.

VB: Hm, that's wonderful. So you used that kind of as a pathway to . . .

SJ: Bird was my path. Bird was the person who opened my heart to jazz music. He was the one, and through him I could then understand people like Pres, and feel it. I should say feel it, not even understand, but feel what they were doing, and feel Billie Holiday, you know?

VB: OK, I'd like to ask you about a couple of songs that you've done. One of them is "You Are My Sunshine," which I still have never heard, and I would love to hear it. I've just heard about it, read about it . . .

SJ: You should send me a letter, and tell me. If I have a copy of that I should maybe tape it for you.

VB: That would be wonderful, if you could do that. What I would do is basically be using it in my thesis. The thing that I wanted to talk to you about a little bit, because I've read about your experience of the song and what it meant to you, was that after you had basically gone through your childhood with all the painful stuff that was a part of that, to then be able to take a song from your childhood and do something different with it, and yet still offer it, in a sense , to your past.

SJ: In the documentary.

VB: Yeah, in a sense.

SJ: Well, I didn't really do that. George Russell wrote the arrangement. George was impressed with the way that I sang, and he said, "I'd like to know where you came from to sing like that." So, I was telling him about the coal mines and growing up in the mines, and the heavy alcoholism and the community and the whole trip. 'cause it's all people did-- they worked in the mines and they got drunk on Saturday night. Then Sunday they sobered up, and then they went back to work in the mines again. And most of the money in my household went to alcohol. I don't think that we would've had to have been quite as poor, except that it did come up during the Depression, the last years of the Depression. But "Sunshine" was. I don't know, it's probably in one of those interviews, but I'll tell you again quickly. I went back. My grandmother was still alive, and we went down to this club in Aaronfeld, "Scoopietown," which is where Charlie Bronson's from. His family were miners too. And we went in there and the miners were all out of work. But of course some of the old miners were in there sitting around having their drinks, and so my grandmother was talking about how I was now singing in New York, and she made up this big thing like how I was this big star which was totally out there, you know?

Both: (laughter)

SJ: I just couldn't believe she was doing this, but she was proud and that was sweet, but oh my God! I mean, I understand my daughter now (laughter), how she must feel. I can now 'cause I do that, too, with her, but you know, it's just being

proud of somebody. But anyway, to make a long story short this miner asked, "Oh, well, do you still sing 'You Are My Sunshine'?" I said, "No, I don't do that anymore." So George Russell said, "Oh, let's do that." There was an old beat up piano. So he went over and he sat down, and he started playing it, and my grandmother pushed him off. She said, "No, no, that's not the way it goes." My grandmother was a piano player. My grandmother was very musical, as was my great-grandfather. He was supposed to have a beautiful voice. So she sat down, and she played it, and I sang it, and then he came back to New York and he wrote a thing. I took him to the mines and showed him how all the mines were now closed up, 'cause they were converting everything. I mean they weren't using coal very much any more. So, that's what happened. He came back, he wrote "Sunshine," and he wrote this whole documentary on the coal mines, and he said, "I want you to sing the first chorus alone." I said "Without any . . .," and he said, "Yes, without anything."

VB: That's interesting.

SJ: I said Oh, well, that's no problem I used to sing alone all the time. You know, when I was in Pennsylvania walking down the street. I mean we hear stuff, hear the hits of the day, and sing 'em. I just put myself back when I was a little kid walking down the road trying to learn a song, sang it like, with the same feeling I did then. And that's how "Sunshine" was born. Then he brought in all of these wonderful, different colors with the different horns. It's quite a masterpiece, I think.

VB: Well, it's something I've always wanted to hear, and I've looked for it in stores, and . . .

SJ: You'll have to write to me to remind me and, you know why?
Because if you don't, I'll forget.

VB: That's OK. I know that you've got a lot of stuff that's going on, so
...

SJ: Yeah, I'm trying to think . . . maybe Roger has a copy of it.

VB: Oh. I could call him up. Foothill.

SJ: But you have my address, don't you?

VB: Yes, I do. You gave it to me.

SJ: OK, so write me a note and just tell me, and I'll just jot you off a
copy, a tape. It probably won't be the best recording, but you'll still get to hear it.

VB: Yeah, it would be something that I'm just wanting to hear. I'm not
going to analyze it. What I wanted to talk about was the emotional content...

SJ: Yes.

VB: And also the fact that the lyrics are especially poignant, and . . .

——interruption in interview——

SJ: Where were we?

VB: We were still actually talking about "You Are My Sunshine." The
thing that seemed to remind me of a shamanic kind of experience was: here is a young
person who's gone off to the city, kind of discovering herself artistically and creatively,
and applying that to this song of her childhood. And in a sense because of the
documentary, you were bringing it back to them, and offering a piece of yourself in a way
for a healing of your own childhood, perhaps--I know I'm reading a lot into this.

SJ: No, but it's right. What you're reading is true. I will say this. though, that song could've been anything, whatever that out-of-work miner had requested, it could've been--it could've been "Shine On Harvest Moon." It could've been "Blue Skies." It could've been anything, you know, so it just so happened that it was "You Are My Sunshine." So when I sing "You Are My Sunshine," I'm not thinking so much in terms of, I should say feeling so much in terms of, ah, lovers, or unrequited love, or love. I'm singing basically about the miners, and the sun not coming up for them. So I think that emotion is there, and he just happened to request that tune, but I'm sure he didn't request it because he felt, "Oh, well, there we never see any sun." It was just of those old country songs that people sang. They learned those songs as little kids. Lot of time you hear that song like little kids sing it at camp fires and stuff.

VB: But to me, even though it may be a really simple song, there's some simple older tunes that I think in some ways you can put so much of your own experience into them, and change the meaning.

SJ: Oh, yeah, like there's this old folk tune I do that I recorded which is called "The Water is Wide," have you ever heard of it ?

VB: Oh, it's a beautiful song. I think it's from Appalachia isn't it ?

SJ: No, it's an old Scottish ballad. It's public domain.

VB: Oh, wow. I would love to hear that, too!

SJ: Yeah, I have that, I have a cassette here of that.

VB: Because actually I really love Scottish folk music too. That's my other favorite kind of music.

SJ: So I could put that down for you, just to remind me I have to take a couple of tapes to this guy.

VB: Sure.

SJ: It's on here, "The Water Is Wide."

VB: Oh, super. I will definitely write to you and request that one, too.

SJ: I'll put them both on.

VB: Well, the other song that I wanted to talk with you a little bit about was the song that was the title of your album, *The Crossing*, which seems to me to be very much a song of healing . . .

SJ: It was a song of healing.

VB: And personal recovery.

SJ: I wrote "The Crossing" for my decision, when I decided that I didn't want to drink or drug anymore. I'm not a song-writer, but the few things I've written have something to do for a very, very specific meaning. And "The Crossing" was like, I was in such elation that I found, that I did not have to drink or drug, that I had a choice, choices, that I wrote "The Crossing." And that's basically about finding one's way. How does one overcome, or stay away from something that's killing them? You know? How do they do that? Oh, I could've mentioned a 12-step program in there, but I took the thing from the 12-step program that I'd been fortunate enough to find, and that's a higher power.

So I used that in the song, I think the lyrics are something . . . "Some have found it through religion, putting faith in God each day . . ." I never commit myself to

what it is.

VB: Is it in some ways, though, the spirit of jazz, that comes through?

SJ: Yes, well, that's why when I sing, "The love I have when I'm singing for you . . . the spirit of this music sets me free," and that's what it is. Meaning that the music comes to me through a higher power. And this higher power saved my life in a sense because I had a very spiritual awakening with this. I remember as if it happened yesterday. I had this, you know, your head talks, there's voices come in your head, and this voice said, "If you don't stop doing what you're doing to your body, I'm going to take this gift away from you." And I remember that, and I said, "Whoa!" You know? But I didn't do it right away. I quit drinking at that point--I might have had a little slip too--but then I got into drugs because I didn't think. "Oh, well, I'm not a drug addict. I'm only an alcoholic." But this voice kept coming back to me. I would remember hearing that it was the same thing when my house burned down a year ago. I'd worked all these years to get a house, and it was the same kind of thing. That house was a place for any musician who even needed--what do they call it in the Bible? Refuge?

VB: Yeah.

SJ: You know, that's what that house was supposed to be . . .

VB: What a wonderful gift.

SJ: For anybody who really . . . I mean, not for people who were going to come in there and drug and drink 'cause I couldn't have that, no with my own disease. I'm a recovering addict and alcoholic. Recovering, I say--I'll never be recovered. But I'm recovering one day at a time. But I used to even tease Joe Henderson, "Now Joe, if

you ever get like stuck you know.” (laughter), (laughter) I have a house you know? But it was burned down. But I get a lot of strength through music again. Luckily, I didn’t lose my life. Nobody else was hurt, but I worked to buy this house for years, for me, for people who did this music who might have a problem one day laying their head down somewhere.

It was a beautiful house. It was on top of a mountain, and I had five acres. And that’s what it was gonna be. In fact, if I ever got money I was gonna have the barn made into a workshop for young singers, or old singers, any singers. Just singers, and kids that wanted to play the music. When the house burned down, I was very fortunate in the sense that I wasn’t there. I was on the road doing music, and the day after I found out about it. I was in town one day, and I found out about the house and I went out of town again for two months, and it was all music, and, boy, don’t think that music didn’t heal me. That music was such a healing force, that I can’t believe how it just was OK. It was really gonna be OK. And I have another house now.

VB: Wow.

SJ: It’s not that house, but it’s a lovely, lovely house. I was insured. The insurance company was a great insurance company, and I always had again this voice that said, “It’s gonna be OK. You’re not gonna like the way it was done, but it’s gonna be better.” And it is. I have a new piano, a new Yamaha, a wonderful sounding piano, and the house is warmer. It’s not as big as the other house, but I use every room (laughter). I couldn’t use the rooms in the other house, but I always kept them for the musicians. But I’ll find a place for the singers and the musicians. I have this one singer

friend of mine. I'm so scared, you know, 'cause she's getting, up there now, not my age yet, but she's ten, fifteen years younger. She says, "I'm so worried." I said, "Look at me, what have I told you? (laughter) What have I told you? Did you forget what I told you?" And she said, "Yeah, I always have a home." And I said, "That's right. You're not gonna be a bag lady." So that's the kind of way I live. Giving to the students. I mean, first of all, I don't think you're a good teacher if you hold back anything. Why would I want to hold back anything? Why would I want to keep from giving to somebody, because I was afraid they would do it better? Well, I would hope they would do it better, right? (laughter) So I think in order to be a teacher, you get the same feeling you get when you feel good about what you're singing, when you're communicating with the musicians. And I think when you're communicating that message to the singers that you're working with, you feel wonderful about it, and I love to teach.

VB: Yeah, I can tell.

SJ: And I never hold back one thing, not one thing do I hold back. If I don't know something, I'll say, "I don't know. Talk to a piano player." It might be a little bit too sophisticated for me." But I'll teach them what I found out and what I learned. So, the music is a healing force, definitely. We're very lucky to have it.

VB: Yeah, I think so, too.

--end of interview--