Autism and Jazz
A paper presented by John Clifton at the Guelph Jazz Festival Colloquium in September 2001

When I began to think about the topic of autism and jazz, I wondered if I’d find enough information for a fifteen-minute talk. After a little investigation, I found myself with an embarrassment of riches. For now, I touch on a variety of issues as a sort of introduction.

To begin, I wish I had something to say about a jazz musician who had autism or another developmental challenge. I suspect the subject would be fascinating in the way that the life of Billy Tipton, a female saxophonist in the thirties who passed as a man in order to get work in an all-male jazz band, is fascinating. People with autism do frequently pass as “neurotypicals” and hide their autistic traits in an effort to negotiate more smoothly through a world where the “well” and the “normal” tend to be more privileged and where the stigma of illness still carries its own freight. I suspect some jazz musicians were-are autistic but we just don’t know about them. Recently there has been speculation about Bud Powell. From the world of classical music, we do have the example of Glenn Gould, perhaps the finest pianist Canada has produced. Since his death, there has been speculation that Gould had Asperger’s syndrome—a form of autism characterized by normal to high intelligence, fewer problems in communication compared to classic autism, but difficulties in making sense of the social and emotional world of neurotypicals. Gould was described by critics as “weird,” “idiosyncratic”, “nuts”, and “wacky”. Later I consider one physiological reason that might explain why we might not discover many improvisational jazz artists among autistics.

Regarding why am I going to talk about autism and jazz, the call for papers for this colloquium sought “to promote an exchange of cultural forms and to encourage new, socially responsive forms of community building.” Papers were invited that would “explore how jazz and improvised music enable diverse constituencies to come together in new understandings of collectivity.” There was a lot in this that intrigued me—“jazz”, “community building”, “diverse communities coming together”. Over the last decade, I have worked with the members of a constituency—some of whom have autism, or Down’s syndrome, or other developmental challenges—and it seemed to me that this constituency could benefit from some socially responsive forms of community building. The need in this area was signaled in the eighties when the National Association for the Mentally Retarded changed its name to Community Living. The idea was to stop highlighting mental disabilities by using the term “retarded” that had become an epithet of contempt like “moron”, “idiot” and “imbecile” before it. Instead stress would be put upon the value of changing attitudes about how a community needs to respond to differently abled constituents.

What I first thought, in regard to jazz and community living (the philosophy not the organization) was the hoary yet worth repeating truth that music can enhance the life of—well—almost anyone. Researchers in music therapy tell us that responsiveness to music survives considerable intellectual or neurological impairment and so perhaps a few words inviting members of the music industry to ensure that their audiences are as inclusive as possible will not seem out of place. People with developmental disabilities are often impoverished and many would welcome similar discounts to those for students and seniors (at least until government bodies are more forthcoming with adequate funding). As well as
an awareness of some hard economic realities, more problematic, I suspect, is the issue of audience decorum. Not everyone is able to remain seated during a performance; not everyone can refrain from shouting occasionally. At the Guelph Jazz Festival, accommodations to this reality are best achieved not in the concert hall but in the Saturday afternoon jazz tent where the atmosphere of a street party prevails—reminiscent of the gin mills, after hours clubs, and dubious night spots where jazz was born—except that it’s daytime, there are a few more children and less of the smell of marijuana smoke.

But, one might ask, why should jazz and improvised music have a greater interest in these matters than, say, purveyors of classical music or rock’n’roll? I will return to this with a few remarks on jazz’s sometime conception of itself as political. For now, I’d like to address how this discussion eventually became focused on autism and jazz rather than on, say, Down’s syndrome and jazz or, more generally, community living and jazz.

I chose to highlight autism and jazz because autism was raised during a keynote speech during this very festival last year and in a very interesting context that, I think, deserves further investigation. I discovered this reference to autism during my Internet search which began with keywords such as “jazz”, “developmental disabilities”, “mental retardation”, and so on. Sometimes these entries sparked hits involving music therapy or fund-raising events. It was when I entered “autism and jazz” that a review of the Guelph Jazz Festival appeared. I think the only other related topic with nearly so high a profile on the Internet was a reference to the fact that Wynford and Bradford Marsalis have a brother with autism. Some of you will remember what I suspect may have been the first intersection between jazz criticism and autism from George Lewis’ keynote address at the colloquium, but when I encountered it, it was in LaDonna Smith’s review of the festival in the online music publication called The Improviser. I would like to revisit Lewis’ remarks with the help of Ms. Smith on whom I rely gratefully in the following.

According to Lewis, the white-dominated music system has been responsible for “cultural theft”, “racialized notions of authenticity”, “exclusion of African American artists implying further nobilities on the white side”. Lewis’ discussion was an indictment of the Euro-American music scene—one perpetuated by power, greed and a deeply entrenched indifference to culturally normalized forms of oppression. It was at about this point in Lewis’ discussion that jazz criticism met autism and it was not love at first sight. Lewis used an analogy of an “‘autism of culture’, the inability to perceive other minds, other cultural backgrounds and meanings. A Eurocentric music training doesn’t equip students to hear anything that is different to their own experience as anything but noise. To hear only noise is to remain removed from the slave’s message.” There is much in these words with which one can agree. What I would like to complain about here is not Lewis’ message but rather his way of putting it. I think that Lewis’ reference to autism in this context involves an interesting use of what American essayist Susan Sontag called, in her 1978 book of the same name, “illness as metaphor.”

According to Sontag, certain mysterious and intractable diseases become “awash in significance.” Much fear and dread are felt in regard to them. Soon other things come to be described as disease-like. For examples: when Edmund Burke wanted to address the French in regard to the French revolution, he said “your present confusion, like palsy, has attacked the fountain of life itself”; Hitler accused the Jews of producing “a racial tuberculosis among nations”; Sontag herself once described “the white race as the cancer of human history.” And then there is my personal favourite: D.H. Lawrence’s description
masturbation as “the most dangerous cancer of our civilization.” For Sontag, “especially mysterious diseases seem to have been used as metaphors for what is felt to be socially or morally wrong.”

I am not trying to impute any of the views contained in the foregoing to Lewis. Rather, in light of these examples, I think it is clear that Lewis is using autism as a metaphor and, since this “cultural autism” keeps us removed from the slave’s message, it is being used to criticize something felt to be socially and morally wrong.

Sontag persuasively criticizes such metaphors as “cheap shots”. The use of such metaphors stigmatizes people who have the real disease. “Only in the most limited sense is any historical event or problem like an illness”. I am reminded of a blind man I once knew who hated hearing the expression “blind to the truth”. I suspect that members of the signing community are “sick” of hearing that some indifferent political functionary is “deaf to the appeals of the disadvantaged.”

Having considered why the use of illness as metaphor may be considered unhelpful, I would like to consider why Lewis’ metaphor, while objectionable, is nevertheless not arbitrary. According to Simon Baron-Cohen who first coined the term “mindblindness” in regard to autism in 1990, persons with autism, to a greater or lesser degree, are unable to appreciate the existence of minds with thoughts and emotional lives that differ from their own. This deficit is evident in the “Sally-Anne Test” wherein a person with autism (Anne) witnesses another person (Sally) putting a marble in a box. After Sally has departed, the experimenter removes the marble and puts it in another box. When Sally returns, the experimenter asks Anne where Sally will look for the marble. While most people will say that Sally will look in the box where she left it, the person with autism will say that she will look for it in the new box. This has been taken as evidence that autistics are unable to take the perspective of another person or “see the world through their eyes”. It is from this interpretation of autism that Lewis draws his analogy.

At the level of symptomatology, the experience of the autistic person does vaguely resemble the person trapped in a Eurocentric perspective and unable to appreciate the value of music derived from other cultures. However, if Lewis is interested in showing how black musicians have suffered under the domination of white supremacism, I think the oppression he is talking about would be better kept in sight without the distracting and stigmatizing reference to an autism of culture. In fact, though Lewis’ metaphor appeals to some symptomatic similarities between autism and cultural ignorance and insensitivity, the matter is further complicated by the view of another researcher, Gail Gillingham, that autistics do not experience “mindblindness”. Rather, their apparent symptoms of indifference are related to the stress and anxiety caused by a sensory system that can become overwhelmed by ordinary events that neurotypicals are able to take in stride. Thus persons with autism frequently avoid eye contact because to contemplate the gaze of another person is too intense an experience. Gillingham maintains that this understanding of autism is confirmed by the writings of autistics themselves and that “when we listen to those with autism, we discover a totally new picture of the condition. We find individuals who long for relationships with us, who have cognitive skills intact and are able to communicate with us in ways we never dreamed possible.”

Here, I would like to return to a question raised earlier about whether or not autistics are likely to become jazz or improvised music practitioners. While continuing my research into these matters, I happened upon another pertinent reference, once again in that
highly useful review of the Guelph Jazz Festival by LaDonna Smith. This time she was reviewing Marshal Seoules’s discussion wherein the “limbic system”, a group of brain tissues between the brain stem and the neo-cortex was described as the site where improvisation takes place. If Seoules is correct about this, then perhaps autistics will not be good at improvisation, for the limbic system has been implicated in the development of autism by some researchers. The amygdala is a part of the limbic system and some experimenters have found that when the amygdala is removed or damaged, animals exhibit behaviours similar to autistic individuals—social withdrawal, compulsive behaviours, and difficulties adjusting to novel events or situations. The amygdala also responds to sounds, sights, smells and emotion-related stimuli. Many autistic people have problems with sensory overload in these areas. However, while noting that perhaps an abnormal limbic system might inhibit the production of improvised music, there are also some reasons to suppose that people with autism may well be capable of producing improvised music and jazz if they are interested and encouraged. Musicians working with persons with autism have noted that many show “unusual sensitivities to music. Some have perfect pitch, while many have been noted to play instruments with exceptional musicality.” Researchers have also observed that improvisational interactive music therapy helps autistic children to gain self-awareness and better relatedness to others in social interactions. Also, let’s not forget Glenn Gould. What these considerations suggest is the interesting possibility that some jazz and improvised music that is being produced by autistics is not being appreciated because most people have a neurotypical-centric music training. Regarding autistic jazz fans, I know at least one young man who attends the jazz tent annually, listens to jazz CDs, and has expressed interest in the view that jazz is a music created by an oppressed people. He says he can identify with that.

Finally I would like to return to the question that was raised earlier about why jazz rather than some other sorts of music might have a greater interest in matters pertaining to autism and to the philosophy of community living. In his recent study of jazz entitled Landing on the Wrong Note, Ajay Heble, the artistic director of the Guelph Jazz Festival, observes that “festival organizers have taken for granted the idea that jazz is, and ought to be seen as, a political activity…it has served and will continue to serve important cultural and political ends (desegregation, decolonization, civil rights, struggles for equality, and access to self representation).” I know that people with autism have experienced some of the sorts of problems that are faced by other marginalized groups. They have been subjected to forced institutionalization and segregation in educational and residential settings. Their lives have been misinterpreted. They face discrimination in the workplace and suffer from social isolation. They live dissonant lives in a world made up mainly of neurotypicals. They are frequently landing on the “wrong note” and hence their feelings of isolation reflected in the title Nobody Nowhere, the autobiography by Donna Williams who has autism. But autistic people and others who are served by the philosophy of community living are not looking for pity or goodwill any more than did their predecessors in their struggle against segregation or for civil rights. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson puts it in her remarkable book, Extraordinary Bodies:

“They are not looking for compensations for a medical catastrophe. Rather they are seeking accommodations by systemic changes based on civil rights.”

References
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