

## RESEARCH

# Playing Together: Analyzing Jazz Improvisation to Improve the Multiframe

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Musical terminology is often used when discussing narrative forms of art. However, this is seldom accompanied by a systematic application of musical concepts for use by artists in these other mediums. Comics, in particular, parallel music in terms of the multiframe, where various individual elements are perceived at once. Therefore, a useful analogy can be made between the multiframe and thematic and vertical musical construction. The interactivity among jazz musicians during a collective improvisation exemplifies this musical simultaneity, and this article creates an analogy between improvisation and narrative comics, deriving several analytical tools that can be used to inform the creation of more meaningful multiframe.

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Much consideration has been given to the simultaneity of comics panels on a single page, as well as to the musicality, particularly rhythmicality, *between* panels, but little consideration has been given to concurrent musicality, or the type of musical effect that is generated *among* panels. In musical terms, melodic—or linear—construction is favored over harmonic—or vertical—construction. But if a comics page is an instance of simultaneity, then the true analogy is not a solo instrument performing a through-composed melodic line, but an ensemble performing many such lines at once. While any work of multi-instrumental music could illustrate this harmonic analogy, we will focus on the collective improvisation of traditional jazz combos, as exemplified in the bebop and post-bop eras, to show how page layout, the multiframe, can be informed, and perhaps enhanced, by a more formal understanding of improvisation.

All music, with the obvious exception of a solo performance, has interaction between different instruments. In jazz, however, the defining feature is the will of multiple individual musicians in shaping the improvised composition from moment to moment. This is opposed to an orchestral score, which reflects but a single composer's will. What an orchestral score lacks, when compared to jazz, is responsiveness. An individual orchestral musician is necessarily restricted in how they react to the performance of another musician in the orchestra. In jazz, however, 'we find ourselves attending to the work *in the moment* in a way that is, although possible, not required by nonimprovisational forms of art' (Hagberg 2000, 95–96). It should be noted that while there are scored and orchestrated portions of most jazz performances, the general consensus among jazz instrumentalists is that improvisation is required for a particular song to truly be considered jazz. A vocal performance by Ella Fitzgerald, for example, might be in a *jazz style*, but would not be considered true jazz unless it contained an improvised element, such as scat or an instrumental interlude. For the purposes of this article, we will assume that the term *jazz* implies a performance that features improvised material.

Our goal in comparing comics pages to jazz performances is less theoretical and more analytical, laying out an approach to page creation that will allow writers and illustrators to strategize more meaningful interactions among panels. We have chosen our visual examples from classic and contemporary American superhero comics. As jazz is the most distinctive American realization of Western art music, the superhero comic is a distinctively American visual art. Again, the point of this article is not to advance this argument, but for our purposes, these constraints supply a useful limiting framework.

In addition to their superhero origins, the visual examples that we have chosen adhere to a simple grid layout. This allows us to discuss interactions among panels in a simplified fashion. However, the techniques we propose could be applied to any multiframe. It should also be noted that the particular parallels that we point out are not the only parallels possible. As with any analogy, there is a degree of arbitrariness to our interpretation. The value of our process is not in the analysis, but in the act

of analyzing. Approaching the multiframe as a collection of interacting panels can strengthen both narrative and visual composition.

### **Jazz Basics for Comics Creators**

Before comparing jazz to comics, a few key elements of improvisation should be clarified and myths dispelled. In a standard jazz improvisation from the bebop and post-bop eras, an instrument takes a solo over a predetermined harmonic and rhythmic form maintained by the rhythm section of the ensemble. Improvisation is not an anything-goes performance. This point often seems to be misunderstood, and at least at the semantic level might rightly be contradicted by the phrase 'to improvise.' However, there is little contention among established jazz musicians that while extemporaneous performance is the defining element of the music, this extemporaneousness is based on an underlying structure. If an ensemble performs the jazz standard *How High the Moon* (Lewis et al 1985), for example, after the melody, or 'head,' of the song is stated, then the harmonic structure is repeated as the form over which the solos are performed (Oakland 1998: 8). The notes a soloist chooses to play must work within that harmonic structure. The importance of such limitation shouldn't be understated.

This would seem to imply that jazz improvisation is a process of in-the-moment composition little different from a composer scoring a symphony. There are two key differences, however. A composer in the classical tradition 'enters the "timescape" of a work, and yet may also step back to isolate, reflect upon, and possibly revise any given moment, all toward fashioning a structure for performance at a time other than that at which it is created' (Sarath 1996: 3). An improvised solo offers no opportunity for reflection or revision. Just as importantly, jazz improvisation is a communal activity. While the focus is on the soloist, the rest of the band, the rhythm section that accompanies the soloist, improvises as well. The soloist, then, receives *constant feedback* from other musicians throughout the performance. It is from this interaction that we will draw our second analogy to the comics multiframe.

It should be noted that there are counterexamples for every 'rule' of jazz improvisation that we will address. We do not mean to deny alternative approaches

or to champion particular conventions as superior. In the same way that we have chosen superhero comics pages with simple layouts, we have chosen jazz performances with typical structures for the sake of clarity. The ideas we present could be easily expanded and applied to any collective improvisation and any comics page.

### **Sonny Rollins vs. Green Lantern**

While our ultimate goal is to compare the multiframe to collective improvisation, we will start with a single melodic line to establish some of the premises of our analogy. The most obvious element of a jazz improvisation is the melody created by the soloing instrument (even polyphonic instruments produce one line that could be identified as melody). This improvised melody is analogous to the narrative of a comic book. Melody is story. In fact, the term 'storytelling' has often been used by jazz musicians to describe their improvisatory process (Berliner 1994: 20). To put it another way, in wordless music the melody is what the song is about. A jazz musician is judged by their ability to tell a compelling story while improvising.

Saxophonist Sonny Rollins is often acknowledged as a master of thematic improvisation. More so than his mid-century contemporaries, his improvisations featured deliberate, intellectual development on recurrent themes. 'Intellectualism here does not mean a cold mathematical or unemotional approach. It does mean, as by definition, the power of reason and comprehension as distinguished from purely emotional outpouring' (Schuller 1958: 8). Perhaps the most famous example of Rollins' intellect comes in his solo on the song 'St. Thomas' from the album *Saxophone Colossus*. After the song's head is repeated twice, Rollins begins his solo with a simple two-note statement, A-D (all notation is presented in the tenor saxophone's native key of B-flat). In the next bar, using the same rhythm, he varies this to A-D#. In the next bar, he alters the rhythm and adds a third note, creating the pattern A-E-A. With this simple pattern established, he then plays with and develops it over the next six bars, before using a three-note variation as the starting point of his first extended eighth note lick, which carries the solo through the first four bars of the song's B section, before returning again to simple two- and three-note variations on his initial theme for the final four bars of the form (**Figure 1**).

**Sonny Rollins' solo on St. Thomas**

The image shows a musical transcription of Sonny Rollins' solo on 'St. Thomas'. It consists of three staves of music. The top staff is for Tenor Saxophone (T. Sax), the middle for Trumpet (T. Sax), and the bottom for Trombone (T. Sax). The music is in 4/4 time and features a two-note theme (G4 and A4) that is varied throughout the solo. The transcription is by Z Powers.

**Figure 1:** Sonny Rollins' solo on 'St. Thomas.' Transcription by Z Powers.

There are several ways that this type of improvisation is analogous to the comics multiframe. The most obvious parallel is to the visual representation of narrative action. In **Figure 2**, from Dennis O'Neil and Neal Adams' *Green Lantern/Green Arrow Volume One*, a three-by-three grid shows Green Lantern searching through a burning building (O'Neil & Adams 2004: 90). The subject here is Green Lantern himself, with each panel representing one key moment of action from his search. Adams' illustration shifts the angle of the 'camera' with each panel, adding visual variety to what might otherwise be a monotonous sequence. While the subject is the same, each panel presents a different variation on Green Lantern. This functions in a similar way to Rollins' variations on his two-note theme. Each successive variation is instantly recognizable as related to the initial theme, but also recognizable as distinct. The value of this style of improvisation is in how each instance of the theme relates to the others. Two or three notes alone constitute such a basic musical unit that they could hardly be called a melody. However, when taken as part of a developing string of two- and three-note variations, the initial instance is given meaning after the fact.

Similarly, if we were to take the initial panel from **Figure 2**, it would not contain enough information to be interesting. Superheroes boldly entering buildings is not the stuff of narrative. However, when the reader reflects on that first panel after absorbing the information in each successive panel, a progression is revealed. By panel 9, the figure of Green Lantern is almost completely distorted by flames. He's gone from hero to potential victim.



**Figure 2:** Adams, N (p, i) and O'Neil, D (w). *Green Lantern/Green Arrow Volume One*, page 90, ©2004 DC Comics.

This narrative element is interesting, but even more striking is how O'Neil and Adams create variations on several visual motifs. The first panel, for example, is echoed in panels 5 and 8. In each, Green Lantern is shown from behind, progressing forward. Panel 1 places the camera high above Green Lantern. In panel 5, the camera angle is lower, approximately eyelevel, and zoomed in. Green Lantern's figure almost crumples, his balance precarious, as a collapsing beam hits his head. In panel 8, a similar image is repeated, but this time Lantern's figure is now left foot forward instead of right, and the camera angle has crept slightly farther away and gone Dutch. In musical terms, panel 1 introduces a simple motif, which is reprised, in variation, in panels 5 and 8. If Rollins' first statement of his theme, a perfectly consonant descending 5<sup>th</sup>, is equatable to the first panel, then his first variation, a descending tritone (the most dissonant interval in standard harmony), introduces tension similar to the narrative and visual tension of panel 5. Rollins' second variation, with its third note, is similar to the wobbling quality of panel 8.

Rollins was not, of course, scoring the panels of a comic book while he improvised, and the same motif and variations could be compared to other panels on this same page. Panels 2–4, for example, illustrate a similar narrative and visual pattern. Each panel frames the subject in the lower left corner (Lantern, Lantern's hand, Lantern). Each panel shows an instance of Lantern utilizing his ring's powers. In the first two panels, the green energy is angled upward, and in the last downward, which works much like the added third note of Rollins' second variation, shifting the direction of the musical line.

With all these possible comparisons, and with all of them arbitrary, the point we wish to illustrate is not that comics should be drawn according to a preexisting musical structure, but that an understanding of motivic development can inform and enhance the effectiveness of a visual layout on a page. Creators like O'Neil and Adams seem to do this intuitively, but even in their case, one could point out ways in which inter-panel relationships could be made stronger, perhaps to greater visual effect. Comics creators can use this idea of thematic development to introduce alterations, inversions, extensions, and recapitulations in a way that is not explicitly addressed in the usual discussion of page layout.

Furthermore, there is a theoretical consideration here that is exemplified by an improviser like Rollins: Derrida's concept of the supplement. 'The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the *fullest measure* of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence. It is thus that art, *technè*, image, representation, convention, etc., come as supplements to nature and are rich with this entire cumulating function' (Derrida 1994: 144–145). Each variation on Rollins' theme is a supplement to all previous instances. Each new panel of a multiframe is a supplement to the frames before it. While Derrida goes on to argue that a supplement necessarily replaces that which it supplements, this is not the case within a multiframe, where the supplemented material is always a leftward glance away. Katherine Haake uses Derrida's supplement to inform her own instruction of creative writing. She proposes that writing should be a backward-looking act, the previous sentence dictating, in large part, the content of the sentence currently being composed. 'It is a way of writing that relieves us of the obligation to know what's coming next and gives us permissions to play' (Haake 2000: 186). Rollins was certainly a playful improviser. And a similar compositional style could be applied to the multiframe, providing a freer framework within which comics artists can practice their art, while at the same time enhancing the final product.

### **Joshua Redman vs. The Flash**

We have examined how a linear musical line relates to itself over time, and applied that to sequential panels within the multiframe. However, as Groensteen argues, 'successive images do not just make up a string, they comprise, from the outset, a totality. Readers approach the page both as a fraction of a story and as a visual unit' (Groensteen 2013: 135–136). If this is the case, we need to move beyond a single melodic line to collective improvisation to fully appreciate the potential of the jazz/comics analogy. The process of collective improvisation 'is a fundamentally pedagogical one, in which musicians actively learn from their collaborators during performance. Thus, ongoing pedagogical engagement is a necessary trait of a responsive, responsible improviser' (Thompson 2007). The analogy here is tricky. A comic can have several creators (writer, illustrator, inker, colorist, letterer) or a single author.

We are not concerned with the creators, however, but with the content on the page. For our analogy, panels equate performers/performances, the content of each panel occurring simultaneously with the others within the multiframe. Considering these interactions in terms of collective improvisation can provide a useful analytical tool for comics creators.

Joshua Redman might be the heir apparent to Sonny Rollins in terms of improvisational style, with Redman going so far as to declare that Rollins is his biggest influence (Redman 2005). Redman's 1996 album *Freedom in the Groove* begins with the track 'Hide and Seek,' a mid-tempo, backbeat, funk-infused 16-bar blues (Kynaston 1998: 8). After Redman plays an unaccompanied introduction and the whole band plays twice through the head, Redman begins his solo. The first chorus is thoughtful and thematically logical in a way that very much recalls Rollins. In the final bars of the first chorus, Redman kicks off an aggressive riff, hammering out an altissimo G# (in the tenor saxophone's native key of B-flat) that begins several bars of thematic play. At this point, the whole band, taking cues from Redman's sudden aggressiveness, plays with increased urgency.

While the band is already responding to each other at this point, the clearest moment of collective improvisation begins in bar 48. Here, Redman begins and on-again/off-again sixteenth note syncopation, ascending in a series of mostly half and whole steps (**Figure 3**).

Drummer Brian Blade picks up on this pattern and inverts the drum-beat. Guitarist Peter Martin inserts a series of quick chord substitutions and

**Joshua Redman's solo on Hide and Seek**

The image shows a musical transcription of a solo by Joshua Redman on the track 'Hide and Seek'. It consists of two staves of music. The top staff is labeled 'Tenor Sax' and the bottom staff is labeled 'T. Sax.'. The music is in 4/4 time and starts at bar 48. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The transcription shows a series of sixteenth-note syncopations and ascending half and whole steps. The bottom staff includes a '8VA' marking and a triplet of eighth notes.

**Figure 3:** Joshua Redman's solo on 'Hide and Seek.' Transcription by Z Powers referencing *The Music of Joshua Redman* (Kynaston 1998: 49), ©Trent Kynaston.

inversions that mirror Redman's syncopations. In bar 52, Redman is back on the beat, but Blade and bassist Christopher Thomas continue the syncopation, this time at the eighth note level. Listening to the performance, it is clear how Redman's decisions influenced the other performers, and how, conversely, when Redman feels his bandmates reacting in bar 50, he responds by continuing the ascending pattern. To put this in more general terms: the soloist made a musical decision that informed the musical decisions of his bandmates, whose decisions in turn influenced the soloist. Each musician chose what to play next based on what had come before. This is thematic improvisation at the group level.

In the Eisner, Harvey, and Shuster Award-winning *DC: The New Frontier* (Cooke 2004), creator Darwyn Cooke often creates inter-panel relationships that mirror this type of collective improvisation. Throughout, he utilizes a standard page layout: three panels stacked vertically, each one-third of the page. This division into vertical thirds is maintained even when the horizontal construction is altered, as is the case in **Figure 4** (Cooke 2004: 120). As in the *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* example above, the page is divided into a uniform three-by-three grid with prominent gutters. However, instead of featuring a series of actions performed by the character—in this case The Flash—his progress is represented indirectly. The first panel serves as a point of departure for the visuals that follow. In it, Flash, shown only as a red and yellow streak, enters a casino in a straight line. This streak is then taken up by the 'instrument' of the second panel, but this time the linear motion is replaced by a curve as Flash enters the casino floor. The curved motion is repeated in panel 3, and echoed by the addition of a mod-styled sign on the wall in the stairwell. This shape is repeated verbatim in panels 4 and 5 (more signs), and panel 4 introduces a perfect circular shape (hallways lights) that is repeated in panels 5 through 8 (peephole, helicopter, helicopter, helicopter), growing in size and prominence in each panel. In addition, panel 4 is set at a Dutch angle, inverting a similar angle from panel 2, and this new angle is repeated in panels 5 and 6.



Figure 4: Cooke, D (w, p). DC: The New Frontier Volume One, page 120, ©2004 DC Comics.

There are several other elements that could be added to this list of thematic visuals, including color and motion, but it should be clear enough already that Cooke's deliberate inter-panel relationships turn a small moment of action—for Flash, all this happens in no time at all—into a visually compelling, tense, meaningful multiframe.

It is telling that the best example of the collective improvisation analogy was found in a rather abstract comics page. In superhero comics, in particular, visual considerations such as these are often subordinated to narrative concerns. Inter-panel relationships, when they are explicitly designed in a thematic manner, focus on action in favor of image. In **Figure 2**, narrative dictates the content of the panels, but the visual variety of each panel, even when echoing other panels, lacks the deliberate repetition of form and shape found in Cooke's multiframe. This should not imply that narrative and visualization are mutually exclusive when it comes to informing the contents of a panel. Quite the opposite. The strongest multiframe would be one in which many elements appear from panel to panel, in variation, and respond to and resonate with one another. This is an extension of Groensteen's concept of accentuation, in which 'different kinds of accentuation can be used at the same time. The more of them the author brings together to make an image or a stanza stand out, the more remarkable the cumulative effect of the scansion will be' (Groensteen 2013: 153). Similarly, interactivity and thematic development among the multiframe increase the cumulative effect of individual panels.

As a jazz solo is enhanced by an attuned and responsive accompaniment—it might be argued that a standard improvisation is less a solo than a feature, one instrument temporarily taking the lead—so too does each panel in a comic gain meaning and visual integrity through its relationships to and among the other panels in the multiframe. To enhance these relationships, the analogy of panel to performer in a collective improvisation provides a useful analytical tool.

### **An Arbitrary Analogy**

There are countless analogies that might be identified between musical elements in a jazz performance and visual elements in a comics multiframe. The point of this exercise is not to create a universal method for comparing the two

mediums. The comparison is undeniably arbitrary. However, we believe that from a practical analytical standpoint, such comparisons are useful, with theoretical cross-pollination being one of the best ways to make original contributions in various artistic fields. This is particularly true in the case of jazz and comics.

The two mediums already share terminology such as rhythm and beat, and musical terms in general have been adopted into the language of analysis in other art forms with narrative elements. However, one area where this comparison has been lacking is with relationships that occur simultaneously. 'Recurring *relationships* serve to define and delimit parts, giving them individuality of their own. But they also connect; the individual entities they mark off demand, *because* of the relations, association and interaction with other individuals. Thus the parts vitally serve in the construction of an expanded whole' (Dewey 2005: 172–173). So it is essential that when individual elements of an artistic work exist simultaneously, they are crafted and arranged with deliberation and intellect in regard to each other.

At the same time, letting future decisions be informed by past occurrences—the contents of the next panel decided, in part, by the contents of the previous one(s)—can be a liberating practice. To reiterate Hagberg: 'In the perception of an improvisational work we find ourselves attending to the work *in the moment* in a way that is, although possible, not required by nonimprovisational forms of art' (Hagberg 2000, 95–96). For all the scripting, thumbnailing, sketching, and other preplanning needed to execute a comic successfully, giving in to improvisational impulses allows a comics creator to tap into a sense of play that, far from being arbitrary, imbues the multiframe with increased depth of meaning. What happens in the moment, the surprise of many parts coming together, can transcend the will of the creator, and might serve as a primary goal in comics creation.

### **Competing Interests**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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