Reading the Changes: Freud’s Improvisational Art
Michael Alcee

"The psychoanalyst's job is to turn neurotic misery into personal suffering that is beyond category--Freud/Ellington Mashup

A Jazz Art Form

Unbeknownst to himself, Freud ushers in psychoanalysis as a jazz art form. From his earliest work with Miss Lucy R. and Fraulein Elisabeth Von R. in Studies on Hysteria where he guides patients to ‘concentrate’ and yet openly report “faithfully whatever appeared before [their] inner eye or passed through [their] memory at the moment” to his primary advice to beginning therapists on evenly hovering attention, Freud champions both free association and a disciplined approach to following the dynamic changes of the psyche. His method requires and celebrates a spontaneous and improvisational receptivity to experience. In allowing patients the freedom to not worry about censoring any of their thoughts and feelings, he echoes Jazz vibraphonist Stefon Harris’ keen observation that: “There are no wrong notes on the bandstand!”

According to Harris, one shouldn’t force or commandeer the band but rather open and flow into new territory together, with both the ensemble and soloist truly listening and expressing simultaneously. With the complementary processes of evenly hovering attention and free association, Freud’s work mirrors the jazz aesthetic. His was a revolutionary movement towards mutual interplay and, to bend Sullivan’s phrase, profoundly observant participation. A 19th century poem by Frances Cornford sums up this lovely process best. Entitled “The Guitarist Tunes Up”, we learn that this musician leans into their instrument with ‘attentive courtesy’:

Not as a lordly conqueror who could
Command both wire and wood,
But as a man with a loved woman might,
Inquiring with delight
What slight essential things she had to say
Before they started, he and she, to play.

Jazz improvisation, like relational psychoanalysis, is a paradoxical enterprise of prepared spontaneity and disciplined freedom. It allows us to enter both into the highly technical and nuanced world of ever changing and dynamic harmonic moments, to study its complex architecture in the myriad diagnostic forms and possibilities, and yet also brings us into the non-linear emotional experience that emerges largely unbidden moment by moment. It is at once formulated and unformulated, with its creative possibilities occurring, as Freud originally showed us with Fraulein Elisabeth Von R., in the spaces and gaps:

“I would begin by getting the patient to tell me what was known to her and I would carefully note the points at which some train of thought remained obscure or some link in the causal chain seemed to missing.”
As analyst Donald Kalsched points out, echoing Winnicot’s notion of potential space, the creative moment occurs at the space between Adam’s finger and the finger of G-d in Michelangelo’s great rendering on the Sistine Chapel. This is also the home of jazz, which you can hear in the pregnant pauses and rests of a Miles Davis solo in the epic album Kind of Blue.

**Beyond Category**

As the mashup quote above suggests, Freud’s original objective for psychoanalysis was to help transform the patient’s neurotic misery into ordinary suffering. And yet, without realizing it, he was helping them find, as Christopher Bollas says, their own ‘personal idiom’, their own special music that Duke Ellington said defies any particular genre, that which is ‘beyond category.’ The point of analysis, like jazz improvisation, is to recognize and unearth old forms and create new ones through the special vehicle that is the relationship itself. We trade fours back and forth in relational psychoanalysis, become equal partners in learning how to read our own changes and listen deeply to each other, transforming our individual stories into creative works of art.

**Playing the Blues**

Every patient comes into psychoanalysis to play the Blues. Whether a 12, 16 or 32 bar version or a round of multiple choruses, it's so often the melancholy found in that crushed blue note that inspires seeking an analyst to help 'read the changes.' But it doesn't stop there.

In so many of our patients, sped up by the treadmill of anxiety and worry, yet sinking in the quicksand of neurotic misery, we come across the music of Coltrane's Giant Steps. Frenetically moving in and out of interconnected key centers and cruising at 120 beats per minute, a patient with this inner tune finds it nearly impossible to figure out how to even begin to solo on the changes—and so do we!-and doesn’t have the foggiest idea how to keep up with their own relentless music. In fact, they feel like there's no other song that can be played.

At other times, patients come in with a standard set of "I Got Rhythm Changes" or sometimes, if they're too cool for acknowledging their own contribution to their problems, they join us with "So What" chords, playing a modal tune that keeps them safe, but doesn't allow them to expand outside their comfort zone.

**Evenly Hovering Attention**

How did Freud help us to work with these myriad forms? Not coincidentally, he started psychoanalysis off on a solid jazz footing. In 1912, Freud developed the concept of evenly hovering attention as a method to guide physicians starting out in the relatively new practice of psychoanalysis. The simple approach was initially developed for pragmatic reasons, resolving the myriad challenges that arise in the sophisticated juggling act that constitute the therapist’s main tasks: listening and interpreting. Moreover, it resolved the problem of keeping in mind and not mixing up the many details of the patient’s story—names, dates, dreams, memories—and most importantly, of staying in the present flow of the patient’s experience of these issues. It enabled the analyst to free him/herself from the superhuman task of being consistently focused for many hours of the day—like driving without blinking-and strained to the point of burnout, allowing them to see multiple patients a day and without the need for notetaking.

Cognitively speaking, the suspension of attention allowed the therapist to consider a wealth of possible interpretations without a confirmation and selection bias, expanding the potential receptivity and the cognitive and emotional presence the analyst brought to the relationship. As
Robert Frost instructed poets, it enabled analysts to remember that “No surprise for the writer. No surprise for the reader.”

Freud’s dictum encouraged therapist to learn something new and surprising about the patient’s internal life and create a disciplined format within which the therapist can actively be on guard against facile confirmations of what is already known. Donnel Stern echoes this 100 years later in his guideline for therapists to court surprise, riffing on Noble prize winning poet Symborska’s notion that the job of the poet is to continually say “I don’t know” and keep on going.

**Multiplicity**

Harry Guntrip said about Freud that as a pioneer his word was the first and not the last. While Freud laid the foundation for the improvisational art that is psychoanalysis, interpersonal relational work has truly brought this to its logical conclusion with the concept of multiplicity.

Multiplicity is the fundamental operating system of the psyche and what unites the unconscious and conscious that Freud discovered and brings it together in a model of the mind and brain. It incorporates the mind’s capacity to dissociate, shift, and transport itself amongst a variety of different self-states, narratives, or as I like to think of it, different possible chord changes (i.e. Blues, Rhythm Changes, So-What Modal Changes, ii-v-I turnarounds). Bromberg notes that:

“A flexible relationships among self-states through the use of ordinary dissociation is what allows a human being to engage the ever-shifting requirements of life’s complexities with creativity and spontaneity. It is what gives a person the remarkable capacity to negotiate character and change simultaneously-to stay the same while changing.”

**Continuous Productive Unfolding**

Free association was the precursor to Donnel Stern’s concept of continuous productive unfolding, the improvisational, intersubjective, and relational equivalent of what Freud was working on from the very start. This unfolding, like jazz improvisation, is fueled by multiplicity—having a well-versed knowledge of the various chord changes in each ‘self-state’ or tune. The therapist learns how to put this together not just through interpretation but rather a shift in internal attitude which allows the relationship to change, enabling a new form to emerge. As Stern notes:

“It is not the interpretations, per se, that helped, but the freedom that made the interpretations possible in the first place.”

Both the therapist and patient can be the authority in ‘knowing more’ at some moments, being a step ahead, and yet, like good jazz players, listening intently to what they don’t know yet. They are free to not know and engage both the ‘expert’s mind’ and the Zen notion of beginner’s mind and use that to fuel the next ‘generation of clinical events.’ Improvisational at its core, this is what Freud didn’t yet know, his model starting in a classical analytic frame but moving quite organically to a two-person intersubjective relational mode.

**Right Brain Rising**

This oscillation between freedom and discipline is also rooted in the brain. Freud’s notion of primary and secondary process has now been validated in neuroscientific work that examines the
specialization of left and right brain functioning, and most recently, we have been seeing the ascendance of the right-brain’s crucial role in creative growth and the healing of trauma. Allen Schore highlights how the implicit right-brain works largely through dream-like image, symbol, metaphor, humor, and spontaneity, and how crucial it is as the engine of therapeutic change.

Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio’s recent book, *The Strange Order of Things* eloquently showcases the way in which our ‘right-brained’ feeling comes first, inspiring and motivating our greatest cultural innovations and products, and that joined together with the logic and language of our left-brains becomes something truly extraordinary. Daniel Pink in *In a Whole New Mind* illustrates the 21st century’s cultural sea change from a left-brained leaning computer age, to a right-brained leaning conceptual age that integrates right and left to make the best of both worlds!

In short, we have come back to Da Vici’s model of the ideal-Vitruvian man-- as uniting the square of logic and left brain functioning with the circle of feeling and right brain functioning.

**Music Lessons**

Bessie’s Blue’s by John Coltrane provides an immediately recognizable compressed musical idea. In only three notes, a focal theme is established that is explored, varied, and reharmonized much in the same way that occurs in therapy. The capacity of the therapist to articulate that melody—the dominant trend or relational pattern that pulls the various strands of a patient’s story together - goes very far in clarifying to what has been troubling patients at the same time that it points in the direction to how they can move forward. Much of the time, patients are playing the notes of their issues but are not aware of the melody and cannot synthesize it into a focal theme. They bring us their own invisible lead sheet and are hoping that we will give them feedback to be able to recognize their own music.

**Reading the Changes**

“How is it that we always discover new things when we are talking together?”

I was talking to jazz pianist who struggling with performance anxiety at gigs—freezing up internally when it was time for her to solo-- and confused in her relationships where she tends to emotionally take a back seat yet secretly yearns to be more in the spotlight.

“I don’t know, maybe it’s because we find something and fill in the spaces together. It’s funny how it just seems to makes its way into our field of vision, isn’t it? It’s like we have this great melody that we keep reharmonizing.”

We had been talking, like many of my conservatory students, about the paradoxical benefits and costs of Olympic level training, of the expansive straitjacket that is becoming an expert in a specialty craft. We were riffing together on how being in the role is a mixed blessing, how it’s not always so easy to be the golden child of the family.

She confided in me that it was being in the position of soloing and possibly taking away the focus from others was anxiety producing. After all, she knew how competitive this field was and it just felt cruel to be hogging so much. It wasn’t easy being this chosen one. Like the biblical story of Joseph, she wondered if people would resent her if she shined too brightly, that maybe they would want to unseat her, that she would lose her balance and fall. Or in Joseph’s case, would she be thrown into a pit?

“It’s like you’re only standing on one foot. And that foot is your expertise and if you don’t hold it up, you will inevitably fall and fall far.” An image of Icarus’s wings melting flashed through my mind.
“Well, I was one of the few pianists chosen for this program, and I don’t want all the other pianists who didn’t make it to feel like I was beat by this impostor. It’s my job to really show them that I belong here.”

“It’s like you don’t have room to slip, that you’re not allowed to be with the fact that being so successful also sucks!”

Her eyes widened with what appeared to be the beginning of a mischievous grin.

“Yes, I said it, it sucks”, and we both laughed. “I think the other foot that you’re not allowed to put on the ground is the one that is free to fail and fall. Without it, though, it’s no wonder you feel so wobbly at times.”

Like a dream, that golden child image kept stirring in me. It was like a riff I knew wanted to be brought back into the music. Internally, I remembered some of the harmonic changes from her family story, how she had been expected to make up for a brother who fell into drugs, and a father who had left the scene because of his own addiction problem. She was holding something very important up—the mantle of success and possibility—and up until this point, we had not yet found the form for it.

My mind wandered to a picture of Ryan Seacrest. I imagined him doing something scandalous, petty, and mean, and the troll-like backlash that would inevitably crash against this polished and wholesome spokesman. I shared that I thought it would be great if he did something like this, that he deserved it!

There was a tentative delight in this. To be the devil so willingly seemed a whole new set of harmonic changes to incorporate. It was like we put in some tritone substitutions and chromatic turnarounds to take one of those stately ballads and make it dissonant and edgy.

She connected this to the feeling she sometimes had in her relationship. She felt like she so often had to play the role of the good girlfriend, the caring and thoughtful one who, like with her brother, had to be ever-ready for something awful to happen.

My mind wandered again to another work of art: Oscar Wilde’s An Ideal Husband. How difficult and challenging it is to be an ideal husband because of the ways in which inevitably there will be so little room for error. We began to riff on how being an ideal girlfriend made it difficult for her to try out any other possible roles, or have the freedom to be too self-interested and more assertive.

I began to hear Sarah Vaughan’s version of “The Nearness of You” playing in my head. I shared with her this lovely moment in the tune where she completely reharmonizes the lyric “when you’re in my arms and I feel you so close to me, all my wildest dreams come true” with chromatic substitutions. What is at once an open longing also becomes a melancholy haunting, a complicated ache. We begin to note how the possibility of moving outside the stereotyped romantic ballad into the difficulties of losing oneself in a relationship can simultaneously coexist.

She started to think about her boyfriend, and how at times, he wouldn’t really take in her interests or her needs, and instead would use it as a springboard to talk about his own. It reminded her of the jazz concept of superimposition, when one plays a whole different set of chord changes over another one. When done right and with a rhythm section that is really tracking the shift, superimposition can sound really hip and interesting, like McCoy Tyner’s solo on Bessie’s Blues. In that tune, he jumps out of the regular blues chord changes, and soars into wholly new keys, making us feel as if we are temporarily launching into space and coming back down to earth.

Unfortunately, my patient sighed, when a player is just trying to sound cool and think about themselves, it all falls apart. She began to see that when her boyfriend’s narcissistic needs took
over the music, they weren’t truly playing together. Moreover, she began to notice how this played out both in her relationships and in her family, and how we were both recognizing and reconfiguring old forms into new possibilities. It was no wonder that we were discovering so much each session together!

**Bringing it All Together**

It has been patients like this who have taught me that psychoanalysis, as Freud truly intended it, is a jazz art form. Psychoanalysis makes room for us to be the trickster like Thelonius Monk playing with syncopated dissonances, the pensive Bill Evans with his lush and sophisticated voicings, the manic Charlie Parker frantically moving in and out of his bop solos, or the soulful otherworldly John Coltrane aching with love.

It is the art that celebrates the multiplicity of self, and provides a master class in learning the infinite variety of chord changes that comprise it. For as we see above, within each self-state is a different set of possible chord changes to know, share, and enjoy, and this happens best in the mutual improvisational interplay that Freud began.

Psychoanalysis enables the patient to be both bandleader, like Ellington quarterbacking the group, to virtuoso, dropping right in as the soloist. To riff on Harry Stack Sullivan, psychoanalysis’s main task is to reconnect the benevolent witness and the active participant, allowing us to both be subject and object in flexible and creative ways. As Freud had it, psychoanalysis expands our capacity to be free to love and work, to make new and original forms out of what is in our past and present, and in so doing, to be able to open up to the unchartered territory both within and before us in the improvisational moment that becomes our future.