**Jazz by Design: Freedom Beyond Words**

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Music, art, and fashion have been uniquely interconnected and influential throughout history, reflecting social moods and shifts and defining times and cultures. Since its conception, the improvisation and freedom of jazz and its rhythms and rich sounds have inspired the works of many visual artists such as Stuart Davis’s vibrant murals (Smithsonian, n.d.). When jazz was embraced as the new music of the era in the 1920s, it also had a transformational effect on fashion. Most significantly, the iconic flapper in her short, embellished dress emerged as the symbolic figure of the time, propelled particularly by jazz dancing (Hannel, 2005). Jazz and flapper fashion shared common characteristics—both were radical departures from tradition. Both jazz and fashion also allow the freedom of expressing strong emotions and making bold statements without words, often in response to the collective voice of the people they represent.

Jazz, as a product of the forced migration/enslavement of Blacks to/in the US, embodies the idea of freedom and expression beyond words. Slaves in many cases were not allowed to practice the musical and other traditions they brought from their various African cultures. Though they were taught Western European musical instruments and musical aesthetics, Blacks expressed themselves within those taught traditions informed by their cultural instincts (Taylor, 1986). Jazz is the result of European instruments, scale system, harmonies, and song form and African rhythmic, melodic, and lyrical aesthetics (Southern, 1997). This personalization of expression within the constraints forced upon them was one way that Blacks found microcosmic outlets of/for *freedom* though they were still enslaved. Instrumental jazz has always been a personally expressive genre that has been a locus for expression of complex emotions that resist the constraint of words. As such, many jazz artists like Max Roach, Sonny Rollins, and John Coltrane were recognized during the Civil Rights Era for expressing the pain, frustration, yearning, and hope of Black Americans through their music (Monson, 2007).

In this study, we explored the intersections of jazz and design through the lens of “freedom beyond words” applied to a collaborative outlet, a creative stage installation design for a faculty concert featuring one of the coauthors, a jazz musician and scholar. The music included pieces of various jazz styles including swing, bebop, fusion, and free or avant-garde jazz. The concert was themed on more than one level. A sub-theme that informed the music selection was the performer’s departure from and return to jazz performance as a principal, and personally freeing, medium of artistic expression. A poem presented at pre-recital referenced that journey.

**Method.** Design thinking, a human-centered design process including Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype, and Test modes, guided the study (Doorley et al., 2018). ***Empathizing*** involves observing, engaging with, and immersing in the world of the humans central to the study/design to understand their needs and values and the design context. This stage involved multiple discussions with the performer related to jazz and the concert, helping to focus the study. The following considerations guided the design process: (a) the nature and defining characteristics of jazz music such as syncopations, polyrhythms, and personalization and improvisation (Jones, 1963); (b) the historic foundations of jazz as music born from and primarily innovated by African American musicians (Southern, 1997); (c) the performer’s style, vision of and approach to jazz, specifically to this concert, including his chosen performance attire; (d) the music included in the concert; (e) literature on jazz related to visual arts, color perceptions and visual interpretations of jazz by various artists; and (f) the stage, band set-up, and the available lighting.

In the ***Define*** mode an actionable problem statement, a unique design vision, is developed, grounded in the insight gained in the empathize stage. The vision for this project was to design a creative stage installation that reflected the nature of jazz and the specific pieces performed during the concert addressing three important factors: highlight the African roots of jazz, consider the performer’s own jazz performance aesthetic, and allow improvisation, a cornerstone of jazz music, throughout the design process. ***Ideate***, ***Prototype,*** and ***Test*** modes were carried out in tandem. Ideating involvesgeneration of different ideas and design solutions. Prototyping and testing involve development and evaluation of physical samples to test ideas and designs. Small-scale prototyping of design elements, assembly methods, and use of materials was done. Ideas were discussed with the performer and shaped based on the feedback and testing.

A picture containing curtain, several

Description automatically generatedThe considerations above informed the final design, specific elements, material choices, and methods used in the resulting installation with hanging and staged elements (Figure). Improvisation was practiced throughout the design and assembly process. Mostly textile and fashion related materials were used such as fabrics, crochet yarn, embroidery hoops, and zippers. The entire structure was assembled and secured on the fly bar using hundreds of safety pins. Circular shapes throughout the installation, formed with colorful fabrics enclosed in embroidery hoops, reflected percussion instrument shapes and the geometric motifs in African textiles. Zippers were used to create jagged, irregular patterns reflective of the angularity of bebop, fusion, and avant-garde jazz rhythms and melodies. Some fabrics were draped, others were knotted to symbolize the restraints experienced by enslaved Africans to practice their traditions. Braids, themselves decorative knots, reflected the choice to express in an assimilated aesthetic. Colorful and varied forms in the structure symbolized the expression of emotions and freedom beyond words despite constrictions, individuality and improvisation, and the rhythms and various styles of jazz. The installation begins with angular/irregular element made with fabric strips with African motifs and ends with similar element with added shapes and colors, symbolizing the African roots and continued African nature of jazz. The installation included other symbolic elements.

An engaging pre-concert survey was completed by the audience titled ‘design your jazz fashion fabric/garment.’ This also served to evaluate the design by examining it relative to people’s perceptions of jazz in relation to colors, textures, and fashion. The responses were varied, aligning with the history of creation and innovation in the jazz idiom that has ever been subject to individual expression. Two of the seven categories showed some consensus. “Color of jazz” was mostly described as blue/violet and “texture of jazz” as textured fabrics such as corduroy, tweed, and burlap. As evidenced by audience testimony, the installation was perceived as a performative aspect of the concert. Its design and execution aligned with the intent, selection, and execution of the music. Based on author evaluations, the scale of some elements could be enlarged, and more pronounced and rhythmic angularity could be incorporated for enhanced visual impact. Human-centered design was effectively applied for creative and symbolic stage installation design highlighting the nature and historic underpinnings of jazz.

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