

Improvising With a Groove – Pedagogic Steps Towards an Elusive Task

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“That’s an interesting point! Now let’s play it from the ninth.” That was the answer a friend of mine received from the well known jazz-saxophonist and -educator Jerry Bergonzi when he asked him, if the ability to improvise wasn’t closely connected to the ability of musical interplay. He didn’t want to spend another hour of his valuable lessons on training the technical ability to play bebop scales automatically from different chord tones. In retrospect he is able to relate to the above cited answer. Today he also advocates the point of view that musical interplay is executed on the basis of musical skills and that such skills are acquired preferably by hard practice on the basis of a structured curriculum. It is evident that the development of a structured curriculum and of associated teaching methods require a deep insight into the structure of the subject that should be taught. The revealed tension, that results in the realm of musical teaching and learning processes out of the necessity to arbitrate between the demands of the subject, the conditions of institutionalized teaching and learning processes, and the students claim for self determination can’t be resolved principally but only individually and situationally on behalf of the student. And, as a personal statement, I can say that the importance of self determination in Jazz and popular music has always been one of the aspects I appreciated most in practicing this kind of music.

Since the year 1993 I have been engaged in the learning of grooves at the traditional academy. That was the time I started studying percussion at the University of Music in Mannheim (Germany), together with about 15 other students in the first year of the newly established “Jazz and popular music” program. And it was really exciting to experience the meeting of the alien.

In my memory, the fundamental attitude which characterized the personal contacts between the classical- and the jazz-world these days, was mutual interest and respect. So, in contrast to the current idea of a hierarchical organization of (music) culture, of high culture and popular culture, with all its connotations of legitimacy and social power, I experienced, that most musicians as music practitioners know to appreciate the aesthetic force and the technical challenges of musics that do not fit into their own cultural background or preferences. And I would claim that the main attraction for our classical fellow students was the capacity and the practice of musical improvisation demonstrated by the Jazz-teachers and -students.

To improvise in Jazz or popular music traditionally means to improvise in a groove-context. The cultural roots and the educational traditions of the music-cultural practices that enable groove and improvisation in groove-based music are different from the traditions of Western art music (see e.g. Berliner 1994, pp. 36-59; Green 2008). Groove, as primarily a bodily experience, is an essential feature of the musical matrix that is needed

to initiate and to enhance social interaction in the way it is executed in improvised Jazz and popular music. As a consequence, if we think about the possibilities and perspectives of integrating groove-based music into the academic educational system in a way that respects its traditions, it should be helpful to look for possibilities and approaches to an academic understanding of the musical phenomenon of groove.

In their report of the 1st IASJ Jazz Education Conference, Rainer Tempel and John Voirol have shown that in the community of jazz educators there is some serious dispute about the propriety of Jazz-teaching methods that work in the tradition of Western systematic studies. Regardless of the consensus about all the wonderful progress that has been made in establishing Jazz and popular music in the academies, the most successful teaching strategies, the ones that fit best into the Western world, seem to highlight an understanding of the structures of musical artifacts. At the same time, these methods tend to neglect specific forms of improvised musical and social interaction, which are the actual sites that are required and produced by Jazz and popular music (Tempel/Voirol 2010, Smit 2004). With this lecture it is my hope to help and find some of the bricks that are necessary to build an academic conception of Jazz and popular music as musical practices. I am convinced that such a conception is absolutely essential as a bridge pier and as a self-conscious basis for the Jazz fraternity in the academic world. With such a fundamental orientation, that fits into and shows connections to traditional ways of Western academic thinking, it becomes possible to start working on building a bridge (– in the way, Jazz musicians do): A bridge as a place which is needed to close the gap that exists in the academic world, besides personal contacts, between the classical-beach and the groove-based Jazz-beach.

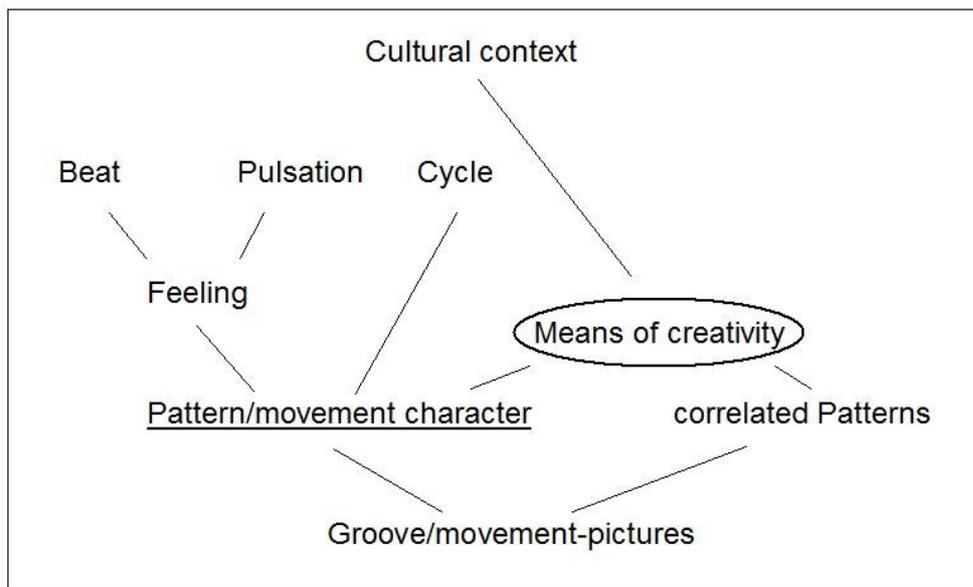
What is this thing called groove?

There are a lot of motivations and reasons to look for and to work on scientific explanations of musical grooves. Of central importance is the enormous popularity of groove-based music and its importance for the initiation and formation of social interaction. The cultural impact of groove is experienced by the individual as a bodily-mediated offer for cooperation and interaction. Therefore, to look at groove from a scholarly perspective as a cultural phenomenon means to deal with body-based and contingent music-cultural practices. Such practices challenge the traditional ideal of an alma mater, which offers “pure” mental nourishment, free of practical requests, and, by doing so, constructs an opposition between body and mind.

This opposition is also seen and felt in the jazz community and it is easy to find voices that raise the question, if jazz, as a way of living and feeling, as routinized musical practice or “complex of doings” respectively (Reckwitz 2002, p. 258), can be learned on the basis of scientific knowledge about discrete aspects, like harmony lessons, ear-training, music history, and so on (e.g. Tempel/Voirol 2010). Another frequently used argument in this realm is the assumption that most young jazz musicians, as a consequence of academic education, play, on the one hand, with a really amazing virtuosity and technical perfection, but, on the other hand, well-behaved and uninspired, with a lack of emotional commitment and expression (e.g. Berendt 1991, p. 78). Here is not the place to discuss such normative aesthetic judgments in detail.

What I'm going to present below is a model of groove-structure which offers insights to the phenomenon of groove on a rational basis and helps to classify scientific research on it. Such a background is a necessary precondition to be able to ask in a further step if and how, under which conditions respectively, groove as a musical practice can become a subject of a challenging academic education.

Groove-structure
(see also Klingmann 2010, pp. 207, 219, 381)



The actual starting point of the musical practices from which grooves can emerge is the performance of rhythmic patterns. The term “pattern” refers here to the audible aspects of cyclically repeated movement patterns with specific movement characters. This can mean e. g. basic quarter-note patterns, like the cha cha cha-cowbell or a walking bass line, as well as complex syncopated riffs or percussion patterns that measure cycles of two bars. In groove contexts these patterns refer to various, correlated structural conditions which are shaped by culturally determined rules, the ascriptions of meanings, and interpretations. The site of groove creation comes into being through the agent's practical¹, routinized and improvisational use of means of creativity on the basis of “embodied capacities” (Schatzki 2001, p. 7). These tools are located in between the formative rules of re-constructable structures and the unpredictable situational conditions of “musicing” (Elliott 2005), music making respectively.

The following deliberations can only provide a rough survey on different insights into the multidimensional groove-phenomenon and don't raise the claim of completeness. I am going to distinguish three aspects, as listed below, which are correlated – and separated here only for analytical reasons:

1. Means of creativity on the pattern-level
2. Means of creative pattern interpretation and correlated patterns
3. Means of creativity on the level of culturally ascribed meanings

Let me take up the first point:

(1) Pattern-design and Feelings

First of all, the ability to play a rhythmic pattern “con filin” (see Washburne 1998) requires the competence to play it as a perceptible gestalt. It is one of the core features of groove-based music that patterns are interpreted in style specific ways, which can show various “deviations” from an equally divided time grid. This is one of the reasons, why theoretical and practical groove knowledge can hardly be conceptualized solely on the basis of traditional score notation. We can distinguish the following means of creative pattern interpretation.

(1a) Specific beat subdivisions/specific pulsation-designs

In recent years a lot of empirical studies have been conducted under the heading “expressive timing”. So we find e. g. considerable research that investigates the question, if there exists something like a universal swing-ratio which produces a swing feeling. The results are diverse, but it can be established, that the actual performance of the typical long short interpretation of the pulsation that divides the beat in swing depends on various factors including the artist, the instrument, and the instrument's function in the ensemble. Moreover, it could be shown that in a band performance different swing ratios can emerge at the same time (see e. g. Friberg/Sundström 2002).

Polak (2010) has analyzed pulsations in African djembe music and provided good evidence that it is appropriate to think and talk of these specific interpretations not as “deviations”, but as discrete metric configurations. These provide, just like scales, stable foundations for expressive and creative musical interpretations and performances.

(1b) Expressive timing at the pattern level

Patterns that are performed on the basis of style specific pulsations are not always played “tight” in the sense of an exact reproduction of a predefined beat subdivision. An early study on the expressive performance of rhythmic patterns has been presented by the Cuban musicologist Olavo Alén Rodríguez (1995), who analyzed traditional Afro-cuban drumming. Phil Maturano (2000, 2001) has originated a method to work on the development of the “special feel” needed and transmitted by afrocuban music. His concept of Relayed Time Shifting (RTS) focuses on the possibility and the practice to play patterns in Afro-cuban groove-based music in a alla breve as well as in a 6/8 pulsation context. He calls his target with the term “interweaving feel”, which refers to the ability for a fluent and ongoing shift between the pulsation contexts.

(1c) Synchronized phase shifting

I use the expression “synchronized phase shifting” for the possibility of a stable shift of patterns in relation to the beat or to correlated patterns. Early findings on this subject have been published by Prögler (1995, see also: Washburne 1998).

Well known examples of this aspect are the practices to play in front of the beat or laid back. The bassist Rufus Reid characterized his body-emotional feeling, evoked by the musical practice of playing in front of the beat, like this: “It’s like if you are walking into the wind.” (Berliner 1994, S. 351) An example of unsynchronized phase shifting is the composition “drumming” by Steve Reich, that explores and shows the musical effects of a continual and ongoing shift of patterns against each other. Using the synchronized

phase shifting, we play a pattern with a certain feeling by variation of its relation to the beat and other patterns.

We are now getting to the second point.

(2) Correlations

John Miller Chernoff has stated as a fundamental structural element of (African) groove-based music performance: “[...] in African music there are always at least two rhythms going on.” (Chernoff 1997, p. 42) This means, that in African-American rhythmic/groove-interpretation various movement characters, that are connected with incorporated body-emotional states, interact with one another, form new “pictures”, and have to continuously be interpreted and balanced. In this realm the following definition of rhythm, given by John Dewey, is enlightening:

“In the definition that was given of rhythm as ordered variation of manifestation of energy, variation is not only as important as order, but it is an indispensable coefficient of esthetic order. The greater the variation, the more interesting the effect, provided order is maintained [...]” (Dewey 1980, p. 164)²

(2a) Melorhythmic Variation

The ethnomusicological term “melorhythm” (see e. g. Nzewi 1997, p. 35) means that rhythmic patterns, played on drums or other instruments, can show a melodic aspect. So, if two drums play melodic patterns, further patterns can be constructed in the perception of their combination. It is evident that in this case a variation of one of the audible movement patterns can have a profound impact on the perception of a correlated pattern and on further patterns, which are not played by one of the musicians but constructed from pattern relations.

(2b) Accentuation

A recurring accentuated sound articulation in the performance of a pattern can produce additional pattern structures inside a given pattern. Gerhard Kubik (1988, pp. 97-99) calls such structures “timbre sequences”. In consequence, the energies and the offers for interaction, transmitted by a rhythmic pattern in groove-based music, can be influenced by its accentuation and by the modifications of its accentuations.

(2c) Metric modulation

An important possibility for the performance of solos in groove-based music are, as I have shown elsewhere in detail (see Klingmann 2010, pp. 142-156), partial rhythmic and metric modulations. The isolated rhythmic modulation of a pattern in a groove can be realized by a stable change of the related pulsation. An isolated metric modulation by imposing an extra beat and an extra cycle can be achieved e. g. by the repetition of isolated rhythmic cells of a pattern or by the successive displacement of patterns.

Let me now make some short remarks on a third dimension of creative and improvisational groove performance, which is, beside the pattern and its correlations with other patterns, the embeddedness of this musical practice into the contingent sites created by social interaction.

(3) Ascribing Meaning

Grooves are created in concrete situations of social interaction. In these interactions social agents have to use their incorporated dispositions of perception, acting, and interpretation in a situationally adequate, practical way. Hence, the incorporated movement patterns with their characters, and the movement pictures that can emerge out of their interaction, are connected on different levels with socially ascribed meanings. They appear as means of the creation of social interaction in the medium of music.

(3a) Pattern interpretation as a medium which produces an needs social interaction

Chernoff describes the relation between rules of groove production, (which are) determined culturally or structurally, and the actual musical practice he has experienced in Africa, as follows:

“The music works more by encouraging social interaction and participation at each performance than by affirming a fixed set of sanctioned conceptions or beliefs.” (Chernoff 1979, S. 126)

And he also states, as a fundamental precondition for the reception and the production of African groove-based music, the active participation of everyone involved in the process of music making, and explicitly highlights the importance of an active audience by claiming “[...]: without participation there is no meaning.” (Chernoff 1979, S. 96) In consequence, the performed patterns have to call for interactions, in the first place, or at least have to refer to a potentially common background of experience. On this basis grooves can provide ways of experiencing the world that meet fundamental social and emotional needs of men. Charles Keil (1994, Keil/Feld 1994) uses in this realm the term “participation consciousness” and addresses thereby, among other things, the experience to be part of an all-embracing whole and to feel unified with one's spiritual and social environment.

(3b) Pattern interpretation as reference to cultural contexts

The actual interpretation can locate a rhythmic pattern in different cultural backgrounds and grooves. The cascara pattern played on timbales in a salsa piece e. g. is also played in a traditional Cuban rumba, but with a different timing and instrumentation (see e. g. Puente/Payne 2000).

(3c) Patterns as messages or signals

Finally, rhythmic patterns can be used as signals that direct the development of a piece of music, the arrangement respectively. Impressive examples of this can be found in the Afro-Cuban tradition of bata-drumming, in which patterns and pattern variations are used as messages or signals that determine the concrete form of a piece as the result of a complex “performance composition” (see Amira/Cornelius 1999, Nzewi 1997, pp. 67-69).

As a conclusion, on the basis of the model of groove-structure described above, groove in a musical context can be conceived as a rhythmic quality, that may emerge in the medium of rhythmically transmitted communication, based on emotionally intonated pro-

cesses of interaction. These are performed in the way of a context specific and practical interpretation of incorporated knowledge and rules, including a synchronization of cyclically repeated movement patterns, and are aimed at a bodily cooperation and “pendular motions” - in contrast to the gesticulative rhythmical movement used in the tradition of Western opus music. In successful groove-practice a state of intuitive understanding is reached and interaction becomes unified action in the “now”, from which autonomous, rhythmically triggered, emotions emerge.

So What?

Where are the new perspectives, opened up by the presented model of groove-structure? Aren't groove-knowledge and groove-practice still located in different “worlds”? Doesn't the repeatedly underlined importance of incorporated knowledge for the practice of groove confirm its irrationality? And isn't this a way to codify the gap between the academic-world and the groove-world?

In other words: Where is the practical benefit? Or, to put it in another, even more essential and sharpened question: Is it necessary to have theoretical groove-knowledge to play a groovy rhythm? The answer is, of course: No! Nevertheless, hope exists to resolve the mystery of groove through scientific research. And, even if it is not possible to formulate universal groove-rules, the findings may help us to construct educational methods to work on various groove aspects as effectively as possible. Furthermore, they could be helpful by providing and organizing the resources that are needed to create the spaces that are essential for the acquisition of groove specific musical experience.

The advantages offered by the theoretical assumptions of the presented groove-structure model could be illustrated by the discussion of a further question, that is virtually an inversion of the question about the practical benefits. Which is: Is theoretical groove-knowledge harmful to the ability to play a groove? My answer on that question is: It depends on the underlying concept of knowledge and on its use. If knowledge means that a superior mind sees through, controls, and dominates a weak and undependable body, along with his trappy and greedy emotional world, then groove-knowledge and groove-practice have nothing in common.

As a matter of fact, in order to play a groove a wealth of musical experience is vital. Musical experience is acquired in the practical, music based contact with fellow men and in the handling of musical “artifacts”, in specific and contingent musical practices respectively. It stores an individual, music related creative knowledge (see Klingmann 2010, pp. 319-320, Kaiser 1992, 1993). John Dewey has explained convincingly that aesthetic experience and the connected ability to undergo the relations between experienced qualities, are of crucial importance for the processes of aesthetic creation.³ He describes the world of art as “thinking” and states:

“A painter must consciously undergo the effect of his every brush stroke or he will not be aware of what he is doing and where his work is going. Moreover, he has to see each particular connection of doing and undergoing in relation to the whole that he desires to produce. To apprehend such relations is to think, and is one of the most exacting modes of thought. [...] To think effectively in terms of relations of qualities is as severe a demand upon thought as to think in terms of symbols, verbal and mathematical.” (Dewey 1980, pp. 45-46)

In the thirties of the 20th century, Dewey as a pragmatist already traced a path which challenges and attacks the conventional dichotomies in the milieu of art. He explicitly rejects theories that glorify art as a reflection of an ideal, that has to be put on a “far-off pedestal” because of his awe-inspiring character and, of course, shapes a character that despises the material world and the popular (by definition self-indulgent and easily available) pleasure. On the contrary he develops a philosophical position that anchors art in the normal processes of living with their ordinary experiences and everyday enjoyments (Dewey 1980, p. 6, pp. 10-12).

This point of view is currently pursued by Richard Shusterman, who in the early nineties took up a philosophical position that appreciates popular art and popular aesthetics. He also highlights the fundamental importance of the body, its crucial role in perception, and the impact of bodily experienced pleasure for the fulfillment of an ethical and “good life” in a philosophical sense (see e. g. Shusterman 2000, pp. 170, 245, 258-260). Shusterman also talks about the “bodily dimension of philosophy” (Väkevä 2002, S. 4), the need of a “cultivation of skills of enhanced awareness” (Shusterman 2006, p. 5), and of a “conception of philosophy as a distinctively embodied and somatically self-conscious practice of transformative cultivation of the self” (Shusterman 2008, p. 18). This position has recently also been discussed in detail by music educators (see Shusterman 2010).

The example of Shusterman shows that the idea of an embodied and action-relevant knowledge, as it is included in the presented model of groove-structure, is part of today's philosophical discourse. Hence, the most important perspective and challenge I can see, is to integrate groove as an autonomous musical practice into the traditional academy by seeking and conducting the closing of ranks with selected academic traditions. The widespread idea of a contradiction between an understanding of groove as a measurable and reproducible structure, on the one hand, and a groove-concept that ties its understanding exclusively to conveyable musical experience, on the other hand, is not appropriate. It fails to see, that the practical use of means of creativity in groove-based music refers back to various competences that could be enhanced in different ways.

“An artist, in comparison with his fellows, is one who is not only especially gifted in powers of execution but in unusual sensitivity to the qualities of things.” (Dewey 1980, p. 49)

To pay attention to both aspects stays a permanent pedagogical challenge and is a major task for those who are responsible for and engaged in the teaching of “academic” grooves.

Thank you for your attention!

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- 1 "Practice" here refers to: „(...) embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding." Schatzki (2001, S. 2)
- 2 "[...] the history of music shows that in fact the primitive rhythms, like those of the African negro, are more subtly varied, less uniform, than those of the music of civilized folk [...]." Dewey (1980, p. 166)
- 3 "Hand and eye [,ear and body, H.K.], when the experience is esthetic, are but instruments through which the entire live creature, moved and active throughout, operates. Hence the expression is emotional and guided by purpose. Because of the relation between what is done and what is undergone, there is an immediate sense to things in perception as belonging together or as jarring [...]." Dewey (1980, p. 50)