Telling tales: witnessing and the jazz anecdote

Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people’s experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next. (Thiong’o, 1999:289)

He lies like an eye-witness...  
(Volkov, 1981:1)

Understanding anecdote

The conventional jazz narrative is dominated by mythologies, chronological ‘packaged’ histories, stereotypical imagery and colourful stories that often oversimplify and romanticise issues surrounding the music. Notably, the role of the jazz anecdote is something that forms a part of any jazz musician’s everyday life and yet seems to be the most uncritical of methods used to discuss the music. Anecdote derives from the Greek meaning ‘unpublished’ but, unlike the more fashionable ‘oral history’, the word normally implies an uncritical and less academic approach. Indeed, the semantic connotations of anecdote have allowed it to slip virtually unnoticed, and without critical appraisal, into the canon of jazz history. The boundaries between anecdote and other forms of narrative, such as oral history and testimony, are often blurred; however, I have deliberately chosen to use the term ‘anecdote’ as a descriptor within this article, and all that the term implies, with the aim of raising the semantic stakes.

Anecdotal accounts of jazz are an essential ingredient in musicians’ interactions and discussions of music. The deeply social nature of the music, its celebrated oral tradition and the obsession with documentation have established anecdotal stories as a primary means of communicating historical information. Indeed, jazz documentaries, publications and everyday conversations - between musicians and enthusiasts alike - usually contain a multitude of anecdotes ranging from the humorous to the mythological. This isn’t something new; from historical accounts of early jazz history to commentary on the contemporary jazz scene, anecdote is rife and the discourse is littered with informal narratives and first hand accounts. Jazz historians often explain the music away through mythological or anecdotal stories, as if the informal biographical (and often non-musical) accounts of players can unlock doors to a single, unified meaning in the music itself. Indeed, commentators often look for the meaning of works in the biography of artists or draw conclusions from a number of strange and disparate sources. For example, if you read Ross Russell’s biography of Charlie Parker, you could be mistaken for thinking that Charlie Parker’s eating habits can explain his genius and unlock doors to the effect that the music has on us. The following paragraph is used within the context of Parker’s early development as a musician:
For ten cents you could buy sandwiches made up from brains or pigs' feet or pigs' snouts, or "short thighs", which were roasted legs of chicken. That was Charlie's favourite. He'd eat two or three every night, using change his mother gave him for spending money, so that he would always have a little something in his pocket for anything that he needed. (Russell, 1994: 51)

Russell's text exemplifies the romanticised view of the jazz artist, reinforcing the 'great man' theory where any biographical detail is relevant by virtue of association.

In trying to get to grips with the nature and importance of anecdote in jazz practice, I searched for a critical framework in which to place my ideas and observations. In formulating my approach, I examined the function of anecdote and the way in which jazz professionals and enthusiasts make use of it. Although a seemingly innocent and informal method of discussing jazz, anecdote functions on a number of complicated and contrasting levels. As a fundamental part of jazz as social practice, anecdote remains relatively untouched in terms of critical appraisal. In the current climate of opening up the discourse critically, this fact is surprising, given the way in which anecdote presents the historian with a number of complex questions. Anecdote, particularly when it acts as a form of testimony, performs an interesting role within the historicising process. Used as a means of understanding events, anecdote contains the ability to blur boundaries around more conventional readings of the past. As a means of expression, anecdote confuses the relationship between past and present; anecdotal accounts are almost always constructed in retrospect, yet their narrative is capable of giving the recipient the sense of experiencing an event in the present. In this sense, an event that happened fifty years ago can be recounted as if it just happened yesterday. Within this context, anecdote should be regarded as problematic both historically and for the historian, as it has the capability of blurring the distinction between primary and secondary source material. Despite its obvious temporal separation from the event, anecdote typically offers itself to interpretation as a primary source. When used as part of an oral history, for example, anecdote takes on the guise of a primary source by conveying an historical experience through a 'first-hand' account. However, given the temporal break between many an event and anecdote, regarding anecdote as if it were a primary source can be misleading. Even with our reservations about the objectivity and accuracy of 'first-hand' accounts as evidence (as seen in the Volkov quote, above), anecdote's ability to blur historical distinctions further complicates the historicising process, and helps to create many of the myths on which jazz is founded.

In attempting to explore the roots of these anomalies, and to place my observations within a wider critical context, I examine the role of anecdote within four broad categories: anecdote as entertainment, anecdote as appropriation, anecdote as mythology and anecdote as testimony. This list is not designed to be exhaustive but offers a number of perspectives on the differing functions of anecdote. From these perspectives, I evaluate the role of anecdote within jazz practice and examine the implications of reading established explicit 'natural' practices as implicit ideology.
Telling tales

Anecdote as entertainment

When I was a kid, that um.. My mother - we lived in an old town in Louisiana named Butte Louisiana - she sent me down to the pond to get a pail of water one day, and I came back, and my mother was on the porch, and she wanted to know 'where's that water?' I said, 'Well momma, there's a big old rusty alligator in that water.' She said, 'Oh boy, go and get that water - don't you know that alligator's as scared of you as you is of him?' I said, 'Well, if that alligator's as scared of me as I is of him momma, that water ain't fit to drink.' [laughter]
(Louis Armstrong, Columbia/Legacy 1997)

The most common understanding of anecdote is that of an entertaining story, the content of which should not be taken too seriously. At a time when jazz has entered the institution and has in many ways aligned itself with classical practice, the jazz anecdote maintains the distinctiveness of the music and helps to differentiate it from other, more 'serious' artforms. Jazz musicians continue to recount the history of the music through anecdote, often under the guise of serious historical study. Anecdote serves as an important ingredient in jazz practice as, in contrast to the majority of classical musics, the history of the artform is still considered recent. Historians can still draw on first hand accounts of the music in its formative years by musicians who 'lived through' the experience. Secondly, anecdote has a relevance to jazz practice as it ties in directly with the celebration of oral traditions. Where the recording undermines the value of oral history, crystallising standards, anecdote maintains much of the fluidity of oral history. Anecdote tends to be altered during each recitation, according to the context in which it is delivered. Bill Crow comments on this process:

Anecdotes, arising from an oral tradition, have their own rules. A good story will often acquire modifications and improvements as it is retold. If the teller can't remember a particular detail he needs to move the story along, he will invent one and half believe in its veracity as he invents it, because it fits the situation. Things that happen to one person will sometimes be attributed to someone else who seems a more appropriate protagonist. Once a good story enters the jazz world, it takes on a life of its own.
(Crow, 1990: ix)

Additionally, the entertaining aspect of anecdote can be used to avoid critical readings of jazz altogether, particularly when taken together with a journalistic approach to jazz history. Krin Gabbard discusses the writing style of Gunther Schuller in the seminal works Early Jazz and The Swing Era:

In both books, however, he [Schuller] rejects scholarly prose in favour of journalistic terms such as "truly magnificent", "totally unredeemable", and "heartrenderingly moving". Because Schuller is also devoted to the myth of jazz's autonomy, he seldom
The Source

considers the music’s contextual and historical relationships. His consistent reluctance in *The Swing Era* to press his analysis beyond his own impressions is most explicit when he states, for example, that Billie Holiday’s talent is “in the deepest sense inexplicable”, or when he writes of Ben Webster “as with most truly great art, Webster’s cannot be fully explained”, or when, after a few words on Lester Young’s mastery of understatement, he calls Young “The Gandhi of American jazz”.

(Gabbard, 1995a: 11-12)

Here, Gabbard cites the writings of Gunther Schuller as journalistic prose - uncritical texts (under the guise of a scholarly study) that help to promote jazz’s mystery and the autonomy of the artist. Through these informal, often entertaining, journalistic accounts anecdote is rife, with analysis of the music enmeshed in a string of subjective, voyeuristic or irrelevant stories. From this perspective, the widespread myth of jazz as a purely autonomous, natural practice is promoted, with questions surrounding the music’s social function and development ignored. Gabbard’s criticism of Schuller illustrates this point; when the subject matter becomes too challenging or when the autonomy of the music is in danger of being questioned, Schuller refers to his musical experience in informal or journalistic terms. Mirroring this technique, anecdote functions as an essential tool in promoting an unscholarly approach to the music. The reader is engaged by the entertaining rhetoric of the text and is placed in a position where they are encouraged to receive the music as autonomous, and in uncritical terms.

However, the widely accepted function of anecdote as entertainment should not be discredited, as the practice is an essential and often engaging part of the jazz discourse. At its best, anecdote has the power to introduce people to the music and its history through attractive prose and entertaining narrative. As a form of communication, anecdote can unlock the imagination and create a situation where events are ‘relived’ as if for the first time. Whether it is accounts of arguments in the studio or on the bandstand, or descriptions of the wood-shedding practices of jazz icons, anecdote brings the reader into the musician’s world through its persuasive and entertaining value. From this perspective, anecdote, especially in its oral form, has a greater immediacy than biography or autobiography in that it is consumed as an unmediated narrative, divorced from editorial control and reflective accounts. The Louis Armstrong anecdote stated above appears in several texts including a reissue of the 1954 album, *Louis Armstrong Plays W.C Handy*. The reissued version includes not only musical out-takes but also studio dialogue and an interview with W.C Handy himself. Here, anecdote is acknowledged as an important part of jazz practice. Within the framework of an historically important recorded document, anecdotal stories bring the listener into the world of the studio; the recording gives the listener a voyeuristic view into the window of the past, allowing them to witness an event taking place. When receiving the reissued material, we not only hear Armstrong play, but also get to listen to his interplay with other musicians and sample his humour first-hand. The story cited is humorous, and also gives the listener an opportunity to hear what one of the ‘geniuses’ of jazz history has to say. This underlines the fact that when a work is canonised or a musician is mythologised, their associated paraphernalia gain an intrinsic value, almost regardless of content.
Following this to its logical conclusion, it would be quite conceivable for Columbia records to release an album of pure anecdotes and studio chat - *Louis Armstrong’s Entertaining Stories* perhaps? As a representative example of a reissue that is considered historically important, the Armstrong/W.C Handy ‘artefact’ shows how anecdotal content is now placed alongside musical content when viewing jazz in its historical context.

Anecdote can provide the collector with a useful addition to their recorded material, and can present the listener with a new and pleasurable way into the music. On a more critical level, however, the function of anecdote as entertainment should be treated with caution. It could be argued that, through entertainment, anecdotal narrative has the power to promote implicit ideology, precisely because it has the power to stimulate the reader in the act of consumption. In effect, anecdote as entertainment can be used as an aid to manipulation and the promotion of a dominant ideology through the lowering of the listener's critical awareness; in making assumptions about the informal nature of dialogue, we are perhaps open to influence on a subliminal level. Bill Crow cites an amusing example of the way an anecdote has become associated with the bassist Red Kelly. For thirty or forty years, Kelly had become linked with an incident where he made a mess at a party one evening and returned the next day to make amends. On his return he accidentally sat on the hostess’s tiny dog, breaking its neck, and proceeded to hide the dead animal under the lid of the grand piano before making a swift exit. However, Crow contacted Kelly and received the following explanation:

The truth about that story is, I was on my way to work in Seattle one night with a trombone player named Mike Hobi, and he told me this story that he’d read someplace about the guy and the dog. I latched onto it, because I just loved it, and started telling it to people. I guess because of my erratic behavior, people said, "Oh, you're just telling a story about yourself." I said, "No, it ain't me." But they would just say, "Ah, bullshit." Finally you just tell the story, and everybody assumes it's you. Total strangers would come up to me and say, "Are you the guy that sat on the dog?"

After years of going through this, it got to where I had finally resigned myself, where I didn't even deny any complicity in it at all. People would come up to me in Florida or someplace, and say, "Are you the guy with the dog?"

"Yeah, that's me."

So I finally come back to Seattle and run into Mike Hobi, and he says, "Listen, tell me the story about you and the dog again." And he's the guy that told it to me! There are some colorful things you do, but that was not one of them! It just got completely out of hand.

(Crow, 1990: xi)

Crow goes on to acknowledge the fact that some readers will continue to attribute the story to Red Kelly, even though they have read his explanation. Crow makes the important point that readers will continue to recite Kelly’s story in its current form precisely because it is the sort of thing that 'should have happened to him'.
If executed well, the telling of an entertaining anecdote results in the desire to re-tell; a sharing of favourite stories similar to the delivery of a joke. Through this progression, dominant ideologies can be promoted, along with their accompanying mythologies. The informal character of anecdotal narrative aids this phenomenon; if something is not perceived as ‘political’ or ‘ideological’, then there is no harm in repeating it to others. From this perspective, the function of anecdote as entertainment should be regarded as an ideological practice precisely because it is perceived as ‘natural’, part of our everyday existence. The fact that anecdote is described as humorous leads to it being considered insignificant, lacking in power and influence. However, I would argue that precisely because of its perceived insignificance and harmless nature, anecdote should be considered as having powerful ideological potential.

**Anecdote as appropriation**

Unlike jazz autobiography, the function of anecdote in jazz practice has remained relatively untouched in terms of critical study. However, critical appraisals of jazz autobiography can inform discussions on the role of anecdote, as similar issues surround the two. In particular, like autobiography, anecdote can be used as a facilitator for several forms of historical appropriation. Christopher Harlos discusses the way in which, historically, jazz autobiography has provided musicians with the vehicle to seize a kind of narrative authority over the music they produce (Harlos, 1995b). In Harlos’s view, personal accounts can bring the ‘discursive voice’ into the world of jazz history, enabling the musician to speak where only music had existed before. In effect, autobiography acts as a counter-measure against established norms and conventions of writings on jazz, breaking down the hierarchy of ‘narrator’ passing judgement on ‘performer’. Similarly, jazz anecdote helps to give voice to the jazz musician in a more informal sense; the musician has the power to take control of the discourse through informal narrative and first-hand accounts of events as they happen. Anecdote empowers the musician through informal dialogue, functioning in many senses to undermine the value of formal, critical and mediated ‘abstract’ commentary. In this sense, anecdote serves as a vehicle for appropriation, giving musicians the potential to discuss the music on their own terms, to take control of the discourse and to contrast with external commentary. Arthur Taylor’s seminal text *Notes and Tones* is one of the most famous collections of informal interviews with influential jazz musicians. Within the text, jazz musicians have the opportunity to give voice to issues ‘in their own words’. The narrative is supposedly unmediated, as musicians are talking directly to a fellow musician, someone who speaks ‘their’ language. The assumed ‘otherness’ of the musician is summed up in the foreword to the text:

> My predominant motivation in publishing *Notes and Tones* was that it was inspired by the real voices of musicians as they saw themselves and not as critics or journalists saw them. I wanted an insider’s view.  
> (Taylor, 1993: 5)
Here, Taylor echoes Harlos's view of musicians appropriating the historical discourse, taking control of the jazz narrative. Indeed, the text functions as a valuable medium for Afro-American musicians to speak on issues surrounding race, politics and media exploitation. The collection of informal interviews documents musicians' view of jazz history, previously disenfranchised Afro-American artists being the 'real voices' implied in Taylor's words. When viewed in this sense, a simple, explicitly unmediated agenda gives way to an implicit, political discourse that uses anecdote and informal narrative as an aid to historical appropriation.

Political and historical appropriation can be seen in a number a jazz texts. Following on from Taylor's body of work, a clear example of this kind of appropriation can be seen in an anecdote cited in Howard Brofsky's 'Miles Davis and My Funny Valentine: the evolution of a solo' (Brofsky, 1997). This article aims to establish Miles Davis's recorded versions of My Funny Valentine as works of genius born out of a heated racial and political context. Brofsky discusses the way in which Davis's recorded legacy of the 1950s and 1960s 'wrestles' the ballad away from the popular recordings of white jazz musician, Chet Baker. Baker's version of My Funny Valentine had received tremendous popular acclaim and had been dubbed by many critics of the time as being a 'jazz classic'. Brofsky analyses Davis's versions of the ballad, and describes them as stealing the limelight away from Baker, placing them firmly in the realm of the genius. In the article, the locus of both racial tension and narrative logic revolves around an anecdote cited in Bill Cole's biography of Miles Davis:

It seems more than just an accident of history that Miles should dramatically walk into Baker's (not Chet) keyboard lounge in Detroit with the Max Roach/Clifford Brown quintet performing and begin playing My Funny Valentine. This was early 1954, and Miles was playing single with a local rhythm section at the Bluebird bar, not far from Baker's. Drugs had now taken their toll and pushed him near the point of no return. That night, he suddenly walked into the lounge where his competitor group was playing, and interrupted the band with his own rendition of his favorite ballad, and walked out. (Brofsky, 1997: 144)

As a backdrop to this anecdote, Brofsky describes an historical context that is laden with racial and political overtones. Through an anecdotal account of the time, Brofsky aims to demonstrate how Miles was supposedly fraught with racial tension to the point where he was overcome by emotion and driven to perform My Funny Valentine as a political gesture. From this perspective, anecdotal evidence provides the key to understanding an historical event; Brofsky uses anecdote to reinforce his views on the racial, political and historical context. However, when viewing this account from Miles Davis's perspective, Brofsky's use of anecdote as appropriation comes to light. The following is stated in Miles Davis' autobiography:

But they got the story all wrong when they say I just came stumbling in out of the rain with my horn in a brown paper bag and walked up on stage and started playing My Funny Valentine. They say Brownie - that's what we called Clifford - let me play
because he felt sorry for me, that he stopped the band from playing whatever it was that they were playing, and then I stumbled off the bandstand and back out into the rain. I guess that would make a nice scene in a movie, but it didn't happen… That's just legend. I might have been a junkie but I wasn't as strung out as all that; I was on the road to kicking my habit. (Davis/Troupe, 1989: 163-4)

Although denying the incident, Miles does state that he sat in with the band. However, Davis's bemusement is taken a stage further by more recent historical developments. Bill Kirchner points out that this event could not possibly have happened as it is recounted, as not only did Miles spend a limited amount of time in Detroit in 1954, more significantly, the Max Roach/Clifford Brown group had yet to be formed (Kirchner, 1997:140). This example demonstrates how anecdote can be used to appropriate historical events and help to promote a specific ideology. Brofsky's politicised reading of the event is exposed through his dependence on an inaccurate anecdote; the focal point of his argument is challenged as his main source of 'evidence' is questioned. Here, we have a clear example of how an attractive narrative has more apparent credibility than dry historical facts when promoting a specific agenda. The use of anecdote in this context highlights how unreliable evidence can enter jazz folklore and become more significant than fact. In effect, rhetoric has the power to exert influence over fact, helping to promote appropriated and mythologised readings of the past. Perhaps more significantly, this example demonstrates how history should be considered a fluid entity, concepts of 'fact' and 'truth' changing according to perspective and interpretations of cultural value.

Anecdote as mythology

Anecdotal evidence has become synonymous with jazz practice in both practical and theoretical terms. As an example of the power of anecdote, I will recount my own anecdote of an anecdote told by the legendary jazz historian Dan Morgenstern in 2000. Morgenstern was giving an oral presentation of his life in jazz, living and working with the 'greats' at an international jazz conference. Whilst acknowledging the magnitude of Morgenstern's knowledge and first-hand experience of jazz history taking shape, I was amazed at the low level of critical engagement with his subject matter and the general awe-inspired response to the material being presented. The silence and total obedience of the audience was disrupted only when Morgenstern uncovered one of the great untold secrets of jazz history. A gasp ensued as, wait for it, Morgenstern confessed to witnessing Billie Holiday… 'eating chicken in a basket in a nightclub'.

This relatively funny and somewhat surreal story highlights both jazz musicians' and enthusiasts' thirst for anecdotal stories, where any account of the past is a credible and relevant account, as long as it fits in with established convention and is told by someone in authority. The obsession with anecdote feeds our desire for insight, information and the reliving of the past, but the fascination far exceeds simple voyeurism in its function. As a method of communication, anecdote not only provides us with a sense of entertainment but also plays a significant role in shaping our perceptions of the music and its practitioners. Anecdote can help to inform the
Telling tales

history of the music by contextualising events whilst simultaneously constructing jazz mythologies. When listening to Morgenstern, I was struck by the way his story commented on how jazz ‘greats’ are mythologised, taken out of the environment of the real to the extent where they cannot be perceived to function as human. The thought of Billie Holiday eating chicken in a basket was beyond the comprehension of some audience members; a simple human act was received almost as a myth in itself. In effect, the historicising process can lead to facts being recounted almost with disbelief; mythology is more real than ‘truth’, especially when placing the autonomous artist in the realm of the social.

Anecdotal accounts not only inform and comment on jazz mythologies; they can also play an integral role in creating them. Randy Weston recites his first-hand account of an early encounter with Thelonious Monk:

When I finally discovered Thelonious, I went to his house... after hearing him the second time. I went by and asked him if I could come by to see him, and he said ‘yes’: I went to his house. And I was in his house about nine hours...I'll never forget this because he had a picture of Billie Holiday on the ceiling and he had a red light on a small piano. So, being a young musician, I started to ask him a lot of questions - he didn’t answer any question, at all. And I must have stayed there about maybe one hour, asking him questions, he never said anything, you know. I stayed inside that room...close to nine hours...just with him, and all of a sudden it got very quiet, it got very silent. And finally, I said “Well, Mr Monk, thanks very much for inviting me, you know, I think I’d better leave, right?”. He said, “Okay, come by and see me again” and I left and I was completely perplexed, see. When I went back to see him again a month later, he played the piano almost two or three hours for me. Then I realised, because I’ve done a lot of reading of Sufism and mysticism - I realised, in ancient cultures a lot of the masters, they communicate without words, you see. And Monk, he was a master of that. (Seig, 1991)

Here, the historical event is transformed into mythology through anecdotal mediation. The entertaining narrative assists in constructing an aura around the artist that can be recounted time and time again. Weston’s words are constructed in the present and placed in an historical context; we have a first hand account of an experience with Monk that is vividly remembered, down to the colour of lamplight and the picture of Billie Holiday on the ceiling. In retrospect, however, by attempting to make sense of his unusual experience, Weston constructs a narrative that is outside the physical boundaries of his encounter. Over the course of time, new meanings have been assigned to this experience; the implication now is that Monk has been transformed into an ancient mystic, communicating through musical gestures, not words. Whilst delivered in a seemingly innocent fashion, Weston’s anecdote epitomises the historical process of appropriating past events to suit contemporary narratives; Monk’s genius and his link to a ‘primitive’ past are perceived as natural phenomena through the myth-making process.
The Source

Anecdote not only functions as a source for the creation of myth, it can also be used to develop and perpetuate existing mythologies. The following account was given by Wynton Marsalis in Ken Burns’s Jazz:

And out of all of this comes Buddy Bolden; a dark-skinned negro from the church. Buddy Bolden’s innovation was one of personality. So instead of playing all this fast stuff, he would bring you the sound of Buddy Bolden. Buddy Bolden invented that beat that we call the big four; that skip on the fourth beat or so legend has it...[demonstrates the musical process of change from music pre-Bolden to post-Bolden].... Now I have the big four. So when I phrase it, I’m gonna sound like me and I’m gonna play with another entire feeling and groove. You’re playing to not make it sound like trumpets, but like Buddy Bolden.

(Burns, 2001)

Here, Marsalis not only talks about the legendary figure of Buddy Bolden, but also proceeds to enact mythical events and creative solos through informal conversation and performance. The result is one that places Marsalis firmly in the position of interpreter, but essentially, what is he interpreting, bearing in mind that there is no recorded evidence of Bolden’s music? On several occasions, Marsalis has placed himself in the position of musical conduit for the forefathers of jazz history, enacting mythical performances and conversations between jazz artists in the pre-recorded era. Within this context, Marsalis is not just assuming the role of interpreter, he assumes the authorial position of Bolden himself whilst recounting history. Throughout the account, Marsalis flicks between the guise of historical observer and the role of creator. Through Marsalis’ words, the boundary between the imaginary and the real is blurred; Bolden the legend is given a new voice which historical circumstance denied him. However, rather than dismiss Marsalis’ sentiment as an act of fantasy, his position of cultural interpreter encourages us to consume this as a legitimate part of the historical process. Marsalis, perceived as being firmly rooted in the traditions of New Orleans, can in effect make the impossible appear possible. Through Marsalis’s experience and authoritative stance, we are encouraged to take this mythological development of the Bolden legend as serious. In contexts such as these, anecdote takes on greater significance both when spoken by an authority figure and when working within the framework of the ‘serious’ film documentary.

Anecdote as testimony

Taking a step back from its role as entertainment, mythology or appropriation, it is interesting to examine the context in which anecdote is created. One of the most historically important functions of anecdote is the giving of historical testimony. As an act of witnessing, anecdote provides the musician or jazz enthusiast with an opportunity to tell their story in their own words. First-hand accounts are often relayed through oral narratives, stories that are later recounted in text-based or recorded form. Indeed, there has developed a growing need for jazz musicians to record their accounts of music ‘as it happened’; jazz libraries, archives and educational institutions increasingly facilitate the giving and documentation of oral
testimony. However, this process is often considered essential without questioning why. As jazz historians, we know that testimony must be ‘a good thing’, but perhaps have not investigated the full implications of why accounts of the music in musicians’ own words mean so much to us. Most obviously, testimony is seen as an essential ingredient in the telling and preservation of history, offering the recipient a direct route into the past.

It is within this context that a critical reading of anecdote as testimony can be established, examining the role of the jazz ‘witness’ in the historical process and uncovering the multifaceted use of first-hand accounts of the music as it happened. When searching for a critical framework in which to place anecdote and testimonial accounts, I thought of the use of witnessing in Claude Lanzmann’s epic documentary Shoah (1985), the powerful and disturbing film that gives voice to survivors of the Holocaust through testimony. Whilst the two discourses, jazz and the Holocaust, seem far apart, both rely heavily upon testimony when accounting for, preserving and attempting to understand historical events. Within the academic environment, however, disciplines such as media studies, psychoanalysis and history have established frameworks for evaluating testimony in historical discourses, whereas jazz studies has no such formal method of analysis. Here, an interdisciplinary approach to jazz studies uncovers innovative and critical ways of approaching the subject.

Historical testimony

When used as testimony, jazz anecdotes function primarily to support the recounting of historical events in the lives of significant musicians. In effect, first-hand accounts of the music serve to support uncomplicated readings of the music ‘as it happened’. Jazz musicians and enthusiasts use testimony as a primary vehicle for understanding the music and its place within society both in oral accounts and text-based readings of the past. The importance of anecdote as historical testimony is recognised throughout the jazz world and used widely by those dedicated to constructing a canonical framework for the music. Archives, libraries and jazz documentaries seek out first-hand accounts of music as it happened, and more frequently, as we saw in the Armstrong/W.C Handy release, records are released with previously un-issued tracks containing studio talk and conversations with artists.

In more general terms, testimony has become an increasingly crucial means of understanding and interaction within the media saturated world, enabling people to relate external events to personal experiences. The proliferation of ‘real life’ documentaries and eye-witness account programmes on television epitomises this trend. Audiences seem to feel the need to understand events by hearing from those who have experienced them first-hand; from Jerry Springer to the tragedy of September 11th, testimony is used as a primary vehicle for interaction and understanding. Felman and Laub’s study of testimony as historical act provides a useful framework from which to compare jazz to other testimony-dominated discourses (Felman and Laub, 1992). Within their study, Felman and Laub examine testimony as a literary and discursive practice and discuss the reasons why testimony has gained a heightened cultural significance in recent times. As evidence, testimony is used to inform the historical process on many levels. For
example, testimony may be called for when facts are not clear or when historical accuracy is challenged or in doubt. First-hand accounts of events help to set the record straight or give weight to a dominant interpretation of the past. Indeed, testimony is also called upon when truth is in doubt or an historical judgement has to be made, such as in a courtroom situation. Within this context, witnesses take the stand ‘under oath’, their testimony acting as evidence to uncover ‘truth’.

When viewing historical events such as the Holocaust, the relevance and function of testimony is easily understood. In coming to terms with events so traumatic and incomprehensible, testimony is necessary in order to piece together events in an attempt either to resolve issues or to uncover historical truth. On the other hand, within a jazz context, testimony is presented almost as a cosmetic appendage to an already defined history. Historical facts, events or indeed, truths, are already inscribed; the role of the witness is to give enhanced significance to an already written history. When comparing the two discourses, the practice of recounting and receiving testimony are poles apart. Within the world of Holocaust study, every historical account is placed under the critical spotlight, every shred of ‘evidence’ questioned, appraised, and qualified. Indeed, the role of witnessing within the study of the Holocaust amounts to the study of the critically subjective. In the majority of cases, it is acknowledged that the full extent and depth of historical events and traumas will never truly be realised; to tell the ‘whole story’ would be to undermine the significance and complexity of the historical event. The discipline of Holocaust studies recognises the complexity of the historical process and understands the need to examine everything from language and narrative to the role of mediation and historical perspective. Within the now-established norms of the jazz world, every act of witnessing serves to feed into a common legacy; the supposed ‘ultimate’ and objective truth behind the music and its heritage.

Clinical testimony

Once the limitations of historical accounts are acknowledged, we need to uncover alternative functions for the giving of testimony. If something is ultimately subjective, why is it still necessary or important to give testimony? Why, when a witness has seen an event that is already historically inscribed, do they still feel the desire to recount personal experiences? Felman and Laub comment on this phenomenon:

[Is testimony] a simple medium of historical transmission, or is it, in obscure ways, the unsuspected medium of a healing?
(Felman and Laub, 1992: 9)

Testimony not only has an important historical function, it also serves as a vehicle for ‘healing’. The saying ‘a problem shared is a problem halved’ has a resonance with this process, whereby bearing witness to an event creates the need to re-live that experience with others. In this process, the giving of testimony acts as a form of therapy for the witness, creating not only a need to ‘tell’ but also a need to be ‘heard’. Within the field of psychoanalysis, clinical testimonies such as these function as an essential part of the healing process, helping both subjects and the recorders of their testimony, vendors, to come to terms with traumatic events. Clinical testimony is
bound up in a complex web of relationships; to ‘share’ an experience does not only allow the witness to ‘exorcise their demons’, it also creates in the receiver a deep felt desire to know more or to re-live events. Writers on Holocaust testimonies often describe the paradoxical array of feelings attached to clinical testimony. For example, Lawrence Langer recounts an interview where the witness states “you won’t understand” and “you must understand” in the same testimonial account (Langer, 1991: xiv). Similarly, students studying Holocaust testimonies often feel the need to share their experiences with others. In effect, the act of receiving testimony instils in the vendor the desire to give testimony, thus perpetuating the process.

Within the context of jazz, the giving of testimony does not have the same traumatic historical undercurrent as Holocaust testimony, however, first-hand anecdotal accounts often function in clinical terms. Jazz musicians will express the need to tell their story, almost as if to relieve themselves of the burden of history. Once told, a testimonial account of the past is ‘out there’, to be witnessed by others and to be re-told to future generations. The following accounts were given by the drummer Ben Riley when talking about the music of Thelonious Monk. Riley offers several anecdotes about his relationship with Monk and experiences in Monk’s band and attempts to explain why Monk chose to withdraw from performance altogether:

He was a very sensitive, I can say, a very sensitive person. And, er, I think a lot of things happened to him that he took - he held within, he never would release them. And, and I think - in the end I found it finally caught up with him, you know…

I would go back to the fact that, er, the group Sphere I was involved with. Well, our first album was dedicated to Thelonious, and the music that we wanted to play was his music. And we decided that, maybe, if this album was good enough, it would encourage him to play again. But, the morning - the day that we went in to record, he passed away that morning while we were in the studio. So we never - he never had the chance to hear the music…

(Seig, 1991)

The sad and regrettable nature of Riley’s experience is clear within this passage. Obviously, his attempt to get Monk playing again was in vain and Riley felt that a number of issues were left unresolved. Here, we have a clear example of how testimony can function in a clinical form. When Riley speaks, there is both a sense of unease in his voice and a need to share his experiences with others, as if to seek some form of resolution. In this sense, clinical testimony is used not only as an attempt to understand the past but also as an emotional release.

Poetic testimony

When dealing with testimonies, historians often question the detail of accounts and explore the extent to which the truth is articulated. As we examined earlier, oral accounts of the past often contain inaccurate readings or skewed versions of events. However, within studies of clinical testimonies, the search for complete facts and
entirely accurate accounts can amount to a futile exercise, given the historical
distance between event and its testimony, and, occasionally, the traumatic nature of
the historical events. Some historians have dismissed oral testimony as unreliable
when facts are omitted, changed or remembered differently. How can the historian
draw a series of conclusions from inaccurate information, when something did not
happen entirely in the way in which it is presented? Indeed, a traditional historical or
legal reading of an inaccurate testimony would be to dismiss it as unreliable
evidence. By adopting a psychoanalytic methodology, however, the problem of
'inaccurate' or fragmented testimony can be addressed by understanding the
process in poetic terms. When a known participant in an historical event recounts a
story with a number of anomalies, it would obviously be wasteful to consider
everything the witness is saying as useless and/or insubstantial. In the foreword to
his study of Holocaust testimonies, Langer states:

[S]ince testimonies are human documents rather than historical
ones, the troubled interaction between past and present achieves a
gravity that surpasses the concern with accuracy. Factual errors do
occur from time to time, as do simple lapses; but they seem trivial in
comparison to the complex layers of memory that give birth to the
versions of the self we shall be studying…
(Langer, 1991: xv)

In this context, poetic testimony can be understood not as a statement of truth, but
rather as a means of access to the truth as process. As the term suggests, poetic
testimony can unlock doors in the recipient's mind, enabling them to transcend the
minutiae of detailed facts and attempt to understand emotion on a psychological
level. When applied to jazz testimony, many of the traumas evaporate, but the need
for poetic understanding can still be called upon. Take again the anecdote cited by
Howard Brofsky. We have already seen how this information could be considered
inaccurate as, if we believe either Bill Kirchner or Miles Davis himself, the events
could not possibly have happened in the way in which they were presented. Brofsky
used the anecdote as a form of testimony to reinforce his political agenda and
interpretation of the racial and political context of America in the 1950s. Viewed from
the perspective of poetic testimony, the initial dismissal can be re-examined or re-
read with the aim of tapping into Brofsky's perspective and emotions. Once moved
into a position where minor details of events are ignored, access can be gained to
the function of testimony on a poetic level. The anecdote, credited to the artist
Richard (Prophet) Jennings, may be historically inaccurate, but opens doors not only
to the experience of the witness but also to the emotion of Brofsky and his reading of
the period. Here, Brofsky's citation of an historically questionable anecdote can be
viewed as a useful form of poetic testimony, as it aims to articulate a mood or feeling
experienced within a particular point in history. There is a word of caution here, as in
order to fully appreciate the poetic function of the Brofsky anecdote, we must be
aware of its factual limitations; the fact that an historical account is given in
testimonial form often makes this process difficult to decipher.

Poetic testimony enables us to enter the discourse on a deeper level, trying to
access given emotions and experiences of a specific historical context. In other
words, although not representative of something that happened factually in its

129
Telling tales

entirety, poetic testimony retains a symbolic function, unlocking doors to historical experience and emotion. Poetic testimonies give the reader access to a means of expression; not an expression of exactitude and detail, but an expression of emotion or experience. Taken in this light, the bearer of witness is not simply an historian who documents things, but is someone who retains their own cultural baggage, either in the way they experience events or recount them retrospectively. Indeed, poetic testimony could be seen as a counter to empirical evidence by acknowledging cultural ideology and the subjective in the writing of history.

Anecdotal language and the narrative of history

By placing jazz anecdote within the framework of disciplines such as media studies, history and psychoanalysis, the discourse is given a necessary critical perspective. Jazz narratives often concern themselves with readings of history; studies of other disciplines can inform this process, especially when they represent historical study at its most intense. For example, when comparing jazz narratives to Holocaust testimonies, the foundations on which jazz anecdotes are based are radically questioned. Unlike conventional jazz narratives, Holocaust studies acknowledge the need to recognise the subjective; no single testimony can speak universally. History, from this perspective, can never be fully understood. Within such an environment, every text or historical account is subject to questioning and appraisal; there are no single authorial voices within history, the struggle for authorship is still a rather contentious issue. Within Holocaust studies, the acknowledgement that there are no absolutes could in turn lead to a place for Holocaust deniers to enter the discourse. However, in defence of this appraisal, current thinking would say that to deny Holocaust ‘deniers’ a voice would be to ultimately weaken the discourse, as complete historical appropriation can signify the ultimate form of ideological censorship. Strength of Holocaust testimony is created in the volume and diversity of accounts; the process is ongoing, with every testimony serving to inform the bigger picture. Unlike the world of jazz, which tends to simplify and crystallise its history into a single consumable package (now available in a DVD boxed set), there is a recognition in Holocaust studies that the bigger picture will never be fully realised. The role of the historian within the study of the Holocaust is a sensitive one, where duties and modes of interpretation are clearly defined; writers aim to make sense of their subject matter without laying claim to absolute understanding. The role of documentary evidence aims to be as impartial as possible, with the documentary mediator assuming a passive role. In comparing, for example, Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah with Ken Burns’s Jazz, the directors’ roles would seem grossly opposed. However, on closer inspection, a lot of similarities can be seen in the two documentaries. Both films function on an epic scale, offering readings of events in history. The two films draw on testimonial evidence to inform historical discourses bound up with politics, trauma and oppression. However, as historical documents, Burns’s narrative can be read as a closed, authorial narrative; a defined entity, depicting the frozen history of jazz in retrospect. Lanzmann’s documentary, on the other hand, treats the historical subject matter as yet to be understood; the voices documented remain in the present, provoking thought and stimulating further conversation. The work in effect invites active participation in the act of consumption, encouraging readers to use the documentary experience as a platform for further discussion. However much Burns’s
film sparks conversation, discussions usually focus on uncritical commentary, reflecting on a body of ‘evidence’ that underpins an already inscribed history.

When comparing jazz to other disciplinary approaches to historical testimony, it clearly becomes apparent that jazz testimony and other testimony dominated-discourses operate at opposite extremes of the critical spectrum. When examining testimonies, the need for a sensitive, thorough and critical framework for discussion is largely self-evident when considering the extremely traumatic and devastating effects of history.

The writer’s function is not without its arduous duties. By definition, he cannot serve today those who make history; he must serve those who are subject to it. (Albert Camus in Felman and Laub, 1992: xi)

Through the examination of various functions of jazz anecdote, I have deliberately chosen examples from various contexts (film, recording, literature, spoken word) to demonstrate how widespread the use of anecdote is. As a method of conveying ideas and information, anecdote is enshrined in a number of everyday practices and media, from jazz biography and personal testimonies to discussions of musical performance and jazz practice. However, rather than treating anecdote as a purely entertaining and immaterial part of the jazz discourse, I would argue that its use influences the historical process at every level. Indeed, more attention needs to be paid to anecdote’s ability to construct and perpetuate certain ideological views under the guise of entertainment and impartiality. When aiming to account for the value and function of anecdote in the jazz discourse, it is useful to consider the role of narrative and language in our understanding of history. There is a symbiotic relationship between history and narrative; narrative is the point where chronology ends and history begins. As cultural subjects, we relate to and understand history through the narrative process. In turn, narrative could not exist without language; language is the means through which our identities are shaped and our understanding of history is inscribed. Within this framework, history is as reliant on narrative as narrative is on language, therefore, our sense of history and cultural identity is deeply shaped by both the power of language and narrative form. In a jazz context, the concept of language as power is embodied within the world of the anecdote and, in many cases, anecdotal language provides the key to understanding jazz identities. As a vibrant means through which the past is understood, anecdotal narrative assumes a powerful position in conveying ideas and experiences. Through attractive narrative, anecdote can enable history to be presented in a convincing form, its persuasive rhetorical power shaping both historical identity and value. In other words, if history is narrative and narrative is language, then anecdote has the potential to play a central role in the creation of jazz history. Whether used within the context of entertainment, historical appropriation, jazz mythology or testimony, anecdote serves as an essential component in the historicising process. Indeed, our recognition that anecdote plays a crucial role in the way both jazz history and practice develops should encourage us to place anecdote to the forefront of a critical jazz discourse. By moving anecdote from the margins of jazz to the centre of study, readers and practitioners of jazz can gain a heightened critical awareness of anecdote and its historical function, previous implicit ideological power can be made
Telling tales

explicit and its full historical and political potential realised. Indeed, the next time somebody has a tale to tell, perhaps we will consider that we are hearing more than an entertaining story, we are bearing full witness to a jazz history in the making.

References


Filmography


Discography