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## **THE BUSINESS OF IMPROVISATION: LESSONS FROM THE HISTORY OF JAZZ-BASED IMPROVISATION APPLIED TO THE ORGANIZATION**

The study of jazz-based improvisation hopes to reveal how individual creativity occurs within a collaborative, dynamic environment. Within jazz music, this means how improvisers relate with other band members. Within organizations, the implications are further reaching; a quick decision made at a critical moment may result in much larger consequences. Innovation through creativity is thought to be one of the keys to organizational survival (Vera & Crossan, 2005).

Since the 1998 Organization Science special issue, spurred by the 1995 Academy of Management symposium on the topic, the jazz metaphor for organizational improvisation has been in the lens of business research (Meyer, Frost & Weick, 1998). Zack's (2000) re-visitation of this special issue attempts to make clear that any future lessons garnered from the jazz-organization metaphor need to consider all the genres of jazz. Indeed, by definition, improvisation drives innovation in jazz, and many artists seek to innovate creative new sub-styles based on past works. Swing, bebop, cool jazz, and avant-garde jazz have taken influence from each other yet created vastly different styles of improvisation. This paper's historical account of jazz improvisation attempts to consider the diverse improvisation style throughout the history of jazz.

Reviewing the last century of jazz music, this paper investigates how lessons drawn from jazz improvisation could prove valuable to organizations in a variety of scenarios. An essential part of a North American art form, improvisation has made jazz unique. From the beginnings of jazz in the early 1900's to present day, instances of note-worthy and landmark improvisation are examined. Improvisation in jazz can be compared to problem solving and decision-making in groups. Implications for formula in decision-making, use of group size, and commercial success are discussed.

As organizations are thought to perform improvisation regularly (Weick, 1998; Vera & Crossan, 2004), understanding this metaphor may prove especially fruitful for innovative organizations seeking consistent renewal. The jazz metaphor for business is unlikely to fade and despite more recent attention, empirical investigation of improvisation in organizations remains scarce. This retrospective account of jazz history, though conceptual, provides fresh understanding of how improvisation works in and for organizations and leaders.