

Jazz and substance abuse: Road to creative genius or pathway to premature death[☆]

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Abstract

Jazz music and jazz musicians have often been linked for better or worse to the world of addictive substances. Many talented jazz musicians either had their careers sidetracked or prematurely ended due to their addiction to drugs and/or alcohol. The rigors of nightly performances, travel, and for many musicians a disapproving society exacted a toll that impacted the creativity of many artists of the genre. The fact that drug and alcohol use had a significant impact on the performance levels of numerous jazz musicians in the 1940's and 1950's has been much discussed, but more study of that impact is warranted. While recent research has provided new information regarding this challenging topic, there is still much to learn. Indeed, a number of questions for inquiry may be posed. Among those questions are the following: Was the work of these jazz artists truly inspired? Would their creative output have been enhanced had they not been addicted to substances? What was the impact of the addictive substances on their ability to function as creative artists and is there evidence to refute or verify that impact? Are there identifiable traits in certain artists that allowed them to be creative in spite of their addictions? This examination presents an evaluation of the evidence of the link between creativity and substance abuse especially as it relates to selected jazz artists during this time period and how they remained creative and actually prospered in their careers in spite of addictions to controlled substances.

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The power and mystique of jazz and its creators has been an ongoing challenge for many jazz historians and researchers. As author James Lincoln Collier noted in 'The Making of Jazz', jazz has always been obsessed with the new and experimentation (Collier, 1978). The development and demonstration of creative genius as it relates to the jazz musician has been one of the most elusive elements of this American-bred music. Creativity in the art of jazz is demonstrated in many ways in a myriad of stylistic permutations. However, while the house of jazz has many mansions, it has always been primarily an improviser's art. With few exceptions the seminal figures who made revolutionary and permanent changes in jazz were not the composers, but the improvisers (Sales, 1992, pp. 6,11).

The improviser's individual style, tone, ideas, and structure express not only their unique personality, but also their response to their surroundings. The impact of Armstrong in the 20's, Parker in the 40's, and Coltrane in the 60's is not evident without accounting for the social, economic, and psychological demands of jazz artists at that time (Sales, p. 5). Jazz performers have consistently exploited environmental, social, experiential, psychological, and emotional factors

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as they simultaneously combine the elements of listening, composing, and performing to construct a musical portrait on an ever-changing sound palette. That palette, however, has been inextricably woven with the thread of substance abuse throughout the history of the music (Spencer, 2002, p.247). Jazz music and jazz musicians have often been linked for better or worse to the world of addictive substances. They are often characterized not only by their creative genius, but also by their tendency to overindulge in alcohol or drugs.

There is a widespread popular impression that there is a positive correlation between success in jazz and drug use that is probably attributable to the publicity generated by a few famous jazz artists, and to the public's interest in the romantic legend which couples talent, drug use, and early death" (Winick, 1959, p. 249). Rauch stated that stretching boundaries by accessing the new, unmeasured, edge is the journey of the artist, which for some creates a need for mind-altering substances that relieve the stress caused by that creative activity (Rauch, 2000, p. 345) "There is an almost mythical expectation that drugs raise[d] inspiration to levels... much harder to reach under normal conditions" (Ten Berge, 1999, p. 257). During one of the most prolific periods of jazz creativity, 1940–1960, many of the most creative jazz legends wrestled with addictions to drugs and/or alcohol. It was during this time that bebop, the quintessential example of jazz performance tradition, reached its zenith as the conceptual model of modern jazz, and a large group of innovative and virtuosic jazz musicians came into prominence (Wills, 2003, p. 255). Many talented jazz musicians either had their careers sidetracked or prematurely ended due to their addictions. Charlie Parker probably best exemplifies the addicted jazz star as he abused his body with alcohol and drugs off and on throughout his adult life. [It was] a life complicated by ulcers, cirrhosis of the liver, debts, broken marriages, suicide attempts, and institutionalizations (Owens, 1995, p. 44). His appetite for alcohol and drugs is well documented. In the index to "Bird Lives" there are nineteen references to Parker's alcoholism and thirty references to his drug habits (Spencer, 2002, p.134). One recollection was by pianist Hampton Hawes, who "watched him line up and take down eleven shots of whisky, pop a handful of bennies, then tie [shoot] up, smoking a joint at the same time. He sweated like a horse for 5 min, got up, put on his suit, and half an hour later was on the stand playing strong and beautiful" (Hawes & Asher, 1979, p. 14). Yet, Parker is always mentioned when it comes to naming the icons and primary innovators of jazz.

Parker has been blamed for causing an epidemic of heroin addiction among jazz musicians of the bebop era. Maggin's biography of Stan Getz states that "Heroin use [became] almost a rite of passage among young jazz musicians...and one reason was the example of Charlie Parker" (Maggin, 1996, p. 87). Parker's genius became a justification for everyone in jazz to use drugs. The use of drugs was almost taken for granted by some elements of the music industry during that time period. In fact, to some degree the government sanctioned the use of addictive substances such as alcohol and tobacco because of their significance as revenue sources.

According to Miles Davis, "Many of the great bebop players were heroin addicts" (Davis with Troupe, 1989, p. 129). In that set heroin was one of the greatest symbols of hipness (Fitterling, 1997, p. 33). Heroin extended the natural high that playing produced and stretched out the process of winding down after performing. It served to soften the edges of the gritty world in which musicians were forced to earn their living. And, as some said, it made it easier to perform at the accelerated pace bebop music demanded by slowing everything down. Drummer Art Blakey said, "it didn't make anyone play better, but it did make you *hear* better" (Ward & Burns, 2000, p. 358). Indeed, from the beginning, the use and abuse of addictive substances have been a part of the jazz scene. Hentoff suggested that the kind of stimulant or depressant chosen by an addictive personality in jazz was connected with the kind of music he plays and that heroin addiction was coincidental with the rebellion of bebop musicians as also expressed in the dress and language (Hentoff, 1961, p. 81). Red Rodney remembered, "Heroin was our badge. It was the thing that gave us membership in a unique club, and for this membership we gave up everything else in the world. It ruined most people" (Ward and Burns, p. 358). Parker, himself, stated, "any musician who says he is playing better on tea [marijuana], the needle, or when he is juiced, is a plain, straight liar" (Keepnews, 1988, p. 91). To be sure, not all jazz musicians of the era were substance abusers. Performers such as Art Blakey and J.J. Johnson overcame early substance problems to go on to long, successful careers. Two notable artists, bebop icon Dizzy Gillespie and hard bebop genius Clifford Brown, were among those who avoided problems with substance abuse. Although Gillespie was a rebel, resentful of authority, and unwilling to compromise his ideas of how the music should be played, he struggled all his life to keep alive the link between jazz music and ordinary people, even though it was his own innovations that would help to destroy that link (Ward and Burns, p. 293). It was his philosophical approach to harmonic usage that formed the basis of bebop style. His dedication to his family life and to sharing his music kept him from involvement with drugs. Of Clifford Brown, Sonny Rollins said, "Clifford was a profound influence on my personal life. He showed me that it was possible to live a good, clean life and still be a good jazz musician" (Ward and Burns, p. 387). Brown was well known for his upbeat

personality and his dedication to his artistry, often showing up early for gigs and recording sessions to be thoroughly prepared. A passion for chess was apparently his only known vice. He was respected by his fellow musicians for his character as well as his musicianship, and was known for his eagerness to share information with young, aspiring players. However, the connection between drugs and jazz was so strong during this era “that it was... a major news story when a prominent jazz musician... announced that he was no longer taking drugs” (Spencer, p. 249). In a survey of 409 New York City jazz musicians by Nat Hentoff at the 1957 Newport Jazz Festival, the level of drug use was significant. In that survey Hentoff reported that 82% of the surveyed players had tried marijuana, 54% were occasional users, and 23% were regular users. He also found that 53% of the surveyed players had tried heroin, 24% were occasional heroin users, and 16% were regular users. Only a few musicians were said to be using cocaine (Hentoff as cited in Spencer, p. 249). Since the respondents in this survey self-reported their usage, the statistical validity of the results is difficult to ascertain. Likewise, the results of studies such as those done by Wills that applied statistical values to information garnered from biographical data may also be questioned. Why some engaged in addictive behavior while others did not, remains a valid question. There have been a limited number of empirical studies on the effects of drugs on musical performance, which may, in part, be due to the secrecy and discretion utilized by substance abusers. Much of the information garnered by researchers has been anecdotal. Many studies dealing with this phenomenon (Todd, 1968; Andreasen, 1987; Rauch, 2000; and Smale, 2001) have focused on writers rather than musicians. Andreasen documented four times the numbers of addicts and mental illness among creative people than among the control group suggesting the existence of psychological difficulty in connection with creative expression (Rauch, 2000, p. 345). Rauch proposed the concept of “the Poet Syndrome”, a phenomenon that was defined as the hypersensitivity, or psychic sensitivity of an artistic person as correlated with the use of opiates as self-medication (Rauch, p. 343). Using participants recruited from three different populations (writers, artists, and musicians), as well as a control group with similar demographics, Kerr, Shafer, Chambers, and Hallowell found that there was little relevant statistical correlation between substance use and creativity. However, this study also found that if the individual perceived that there was a positive effect during the creative process, or that they had had previous experience with a substance, there was more likelihood for its use and abuse (Kerr, Shafer, et al., 1991, p. 152). Chesky and Hipple also dealt with perception as a link to attitudes and behaviors related to drug use (Chesky and Hipple, 1999, p. 188). Jamison (1993), Post (1994), and Ludwig (1995) used biographical information of creative artists to carry out their assessments (Wills, 2003, p. 255). These researchers all concluded that there was a positive link between psychopathological deviation and creativity. Wills specifically investigated the psychopathology of jazz musicians by using information culled from the biographical material relating to some 40 American jazz musicians. His conclusions supported the findings of his predecessors.

Winick reported that some... studies have reported that marijuana sometimes causes temporary psychosis and that there is a decline in performance on objective musical aptitude test(s) (Winick, 1960, p. 243). Winick further found that even though a musician’s technical ability may be slightly retarded while on marijuana, he is likely to have had so much practice that the impairment may not be serious, or even audible, especially if he is playing a relatively familiar piece [i.e. a known pattern] (Winick, p. 244). However, he did find that the respondents in his study felt that there would be more of a problem with new or relatively unfamiliar material. He further speculated that the perception of playing better resulted from the user having his dependency affirmed every time he takes it, and thus he feels relatively free to “let go” and express himself [musically] (Winick, p. 244). The mind of the addict works by analogy and association, and is thereby able to make an amiable reconciliation of the most antagonistic facts of experience (Smale, 2001, p. 466). One could surmise that playing familiar material, which most successful jazz players have done by covering a standard repertoire that remains little changed even today, and feeling free to express themselves with a music that stressed personal expression as a condition for success were contributing factors in affirming the positive correlation between drug use and jazz musicians. While some researchers have documented a positive link between substance use and creative artistry, the question of better documenting the specific impact on the performance levels of jazz artists remains. Respondent-driven sampling, as espoused by researchers Salganik and Heckathorn, has shown promise in garnering better empirically valid information about hidden populations such as substance users (Salganik and Heckathorn, 2004).

Addiction is often perceived as a state or behavior whereby physiological or psychological need precludes the logic of drug or alcohol use. In a 1957 report, the World Health Organization defined addiction as “a state of periodic or chronic intoxication detrimental to the individual... produced by the repeated consumption of a drug (natural or synthetic).” Their definition included characteristics such as “(1) an overpowering desire or need (compulsion) to

continue taking the drug and to obtain it by any means; (2) a tendency to increase the dose; [and] (3) a psychological and sometimes a physical dependence on the effects of the drug” (W.H.O. Report, 1957). Jung in the “Psychology of Alcohol and Other Drugs” also defined addiction, or dependence as he called it, as the development of a strong physiological or psychological need to use alcohol or drugs (Jung, 2001, p. 40). Krystal and Raskin believed that “the etiology of addiction reside[d] in the psychological structure and functioning of the human being rather than in the pharmacological effect of the drug” (Krystal and Raskin, 1970).

According to Thorvald Brown in “The Enigma of Drug Addiction”, drug addiction is both physical and emotional (Brown, 1961). Harris Isbell hypothesized that “addiction is caused by human weakness and is symptomatic of personality maladjustment” (Isbell as cited in Brown, 1961). Another theory (interactional theory) contends that behavior results both from a weakening of an individual’s connection to conventional society and from a social environment where other behaviors can be learned and reinforced (Thornberry as cited in Chesky and Hipple, p. 188). Is it logical to suppose that jazz musicians of a certain era who abused drugs were maladjusted, weak personalities who were disconnected from society? If so, how was their level of creativity so high?

Frederick Spencer in “Jazz and Death: Medical Profiles of Jazz Greats”, stated that alcohol intoxication parallels general anesthesia [in that it] impacts the higher centers of the central nervous system by dulling inhibitions such as shyness and social ineptitude. A euphoric state is followed by the disturbance of the areas of the brain that control speech and the limbs (Spencer, p. 98). Winick and Nyswander surmised that drinking could be one way that aggression is channeled especially for those who have also used drugs. Indeed the still unresolved societal paradox of condoning and condemning controlled substances such as alcohol is responsible for much inner conflict for many performers (Winick and Nyswander, 1961, p. 98). Regarding drugs, Spencer commented that addicting drugs induce alterations in the mind and mood producing a sense of well being by depressing or stimulating the central nervous system (Spencer, p. 123). Rauch surmised that the experience of addiction varies, and most addicts have specific preferences as to the drug chosen, the circumstances surrounding use, the social aspect of the environment, and the route of administration. Different drugs have different effects. Alcohol and barbiturates tend to act as depressants while cocaine and amphetamines are stimulants. Rauch also suggested that there are often significant differences in personality type between the lone user and the social user (Rauch, p. 344). Whether “psychoses, mood disturbances, intoxications, or severe characterological defects serve as sources of inspiration, allowing innovators to perceive reality in novel ways or [whether] they inhibit creativity” was the premise of Ludwig’s research (Ludwig as quoted in Rauch, p. 345). As Rauch further stated, [while] “similarities exist between creativity and various forms of drug use, cultural prejudice prevents society from analyzing, interpreting, and learning from these similarities.” She concluded that it is through creative expression that the artist builds communication skills, and self-esteem, and expresses and marks the emotional chaos within (Rauch, p. 345). Brown concluded that drug abuse is a learned phenomenon fueled by a desire to detach oneself from oneself or in effect to escape (Brown, 1961). One respondent in Winick’s survey indicated that “heroin makes me feel better. I can execute things a little more freely, [and] it lets you concentrate and takes you away from everything” (Winick, p. 245). Another factor that Winick’s survey related to drug use was the need to “unwind” after playing emotionally demanding music for five or six hours (Winick, p. 247). Was it the alterations in mood and mind or the attempts to escape reality that forged the genius of these artists? A perusal of the social, economic, and legal factors of the times may hold at least part of the answer to the questions about jazz musicians and drug usage.

The traditional performing venue for the jazz musician has been the nightclub. It is only in the last approximately forty years that the concert hall has supplanted the nightclub as a performing venue of preference for jazz musicians. Complete with its offerings of alcohol, food, and social companionship, the nightclub has always provided an environment ripe for excess. Bandura theorized that behavior [is] strongly determined by specific environmental factors (Bandura as cited in Chesky & Hipple, 1999, p. 188). Since environment has always played a significant role in drug and alcohol abuse, it is logical to theorize that consistent exposure to this environment posed a problem for many jazz musicians. As Winick stated, “From the epidemiological point of view, which would regard addiction as a contagious disease, the world of jazz contains a large number of potential hosts to the disease of addiction and a number of carriers. The environment is a uniquely favorable one for the spread of the contagion” (Winick, p. 250). The activities of peers (behavior modeling) [likely] play[ed] an important role in actual drug use behavior (Oetting and Beauvais as cited in Chesky and Hipple, p. 188). Even perceptions of peer behaviors could have served as an internal rationale for behavior such as drug use. Many aspiring jazz artists perceived that emulating every aspect of their role model’s behavior, even to the extent of drug use, would help them play more like their hero. Likewise, the historical

association of many clubs with members of the underworld also posed significant problems of acceptance and legitimacy for jazz musicians. The underworld association also made it easier for users to secure their drugs.

The rigors of nightly performances, travel, and for many musicians a disapproving society exacted a toll that impacted the creative psyche of many artists of the genre. Despite much psychological and physical pain, these artists excelled in their artistic endeavor. Performing in environments that were conducive to developing addictions, coping with the psychological pressure of maintaining a high level of performance in a competitive atmosphere, and dealing with negative societal and psychological factors contributed to a fragile psyche that provided the impetus for addiction. In a profession where the performance venues usually served alcohol, where drug use was, if not accepted, in effect tolerated, where for many years the “road” consisted of different hotels or rooming houses in different cities every night, and where the usual hours of engagement were at odds with the rest of the world, substance abuse was not surprising. Todd suggested that drugs and drink, which offered relief from the awareness of the reality of their environment, could have a special appeal to artistic persons, who might have had difficulty coming to terms with their environment (Todd, 1968, p. 522). Artists’ tendency to rebel against convention may have also fueled their indulgences. Using popular musicians as the focus of their research, Wills and Cooper confirmed a connection between occupational stress and mental health and substance misuse (Wills and Cooper as cited in Wills, p. 358).

Indeed, when the expectation of performance levels and the competition for work are factored in, all who were involved in the performing arts profession were subjected to rigors and a fragility of acceptance that caused many self-image problems and created doubts in the performers’ minds. In Winick’s survey the environmental circumstance of the “one-nighter” was cited by 21% of the respondents as a cause of drug use. Musicians [during this time] usually traveled by charter bus [or car], covering long distances in a day. They often arrived just before they were to perform unkempt and tired, and many resorted to stimulants to maintain their freshness (Winick, p. 246). In that same survey 53% of the respondents related drug use to the awareness of one’s upward or downward mobility [within the profession] with younger players wanting to accelerate their rise to the top and older players trying to compensate for what they regarded as professional failures (Winick, p. 246).

The societal problem of racism was an additional challenge encountered on a regular basis by black performers. The entertainment industry was one of the few professions where persons of color could achieve social status and economic independence prior to the Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s. However, for many African American jazz musicians, the association of jazz music with illegal and immoral activities precluded their ability to gain economic stature. Indeed, because jazz was considered an outsider’s music, the jazz musician was often marginalized. It could be speculated that drug use reinforced this feeling of estrangement from society and, through their music, became an expression of protest for jazz musicians.

Performing conditions were often less than ideal. Even though they were stars on the stage, many of the performers were treated with little respect by club owners and patrons. This may have been due to the itinerant nature of the work whereby artists would work on a club for several nights or weeks and then move to another club. In the case of many African American performers, their performance on stage was often the only location in the club where their presence was welcomed. Most were not allowed to frequent the non-stage areas of the clubs or to mingle with the patrons, many of which were white. Indeed, most performers had to enter through the service entrance of the club. Only in after-hours clubs where the music would continue until dawn was there a relaxation of the strict codes against mixing. In addition, accommodations for black artists, especially on the road, were not the comfortable stylish hotel rooms afforded to artists of stature today, but were often rooming houses or homes in the local black community. In many cases these accommodations were the only ones available due to segregation laws and discriminatory practices. The frustration of African American musicians with their treatment as well as the treatment of Blacks in general became more critical during and immediately after World War II. This was, in part, the motivation that gave rise to bebop. As Dizzy Gillespie noted, “My music emerged from the war years... and it reflected those times... Fast and furious, with chord changes going this way and that, it might have looked and sounded like bedlam, but it really wasn’t” (Ward and Burns, p. 334). It was a reflection of the self-assured, uncompromising spirit of its originators. Performances during and after the war, especially in social and economic centers such as New York, were highly controlled and scrutinized through a system that required a work permit card, known as a cabaret card, in order to play in establishments that served alcohol. The cabaret card law, an antiquated statute dating back to Prohibition days, prevented performers from securing employment if they had a police record. It was a system fraught with inequities, graft, corruption, and personal influence. Even though narcotics violations were not the only reason for denial of a card, the threat of the loss of a work permit was an additional pressure that may have exacerbated the abuse of substances.

The cabaret cards had to be renewed every two years. Favor in the granting or renewal of one's card was a matter of connections or required the hiring of legal representation. It was lack of legal representation during a drug charge hearing that resulted in one of Billie Holiday's initial convictions on drug charges. Access to legal counsel was problematic for many in the community of jazz musicians. Holiday, Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, Jackie McLean, and Thelonius Monk were among those who suffered the loss of their cabaret cards at some point during their careers due to drug violations. Indeed, this system, which favored some and punished others, may have had an impact on the status of the musical world of the time by influencing drug use or non-use.

Audience acceptance and acknowledgment has always been an important aspect of the performing artist's self-image. During and after World War II, acceptance of the "new" style of jazz, i.e. bebop, was slow. In fact the nature of the music, as it evolved from a participatory dance music to a more esoteric artistic music designed for listening, created a challenge for artists to secure recognition for, and acceptance of, their endeavors. Likewise, a ban on the use of rubber products for recordings during the war, limited the dissemination of the music to a widespread audience. Audiences of this period were highly involved in the performances and engendered quality as well as quantity in their musical tastes. With audiences demanding high level performances night after night and competition from other musicians seeking a spot at a particular venue or with a given band, many performers resorted to an artificial method of inspiration. Art Pepper, one of a number of white musicians who embraced the new bebop style stated this about his drug addiction, "This is the only answer for me. If this is what it takes, then this is what I'm going to do, whatever dues I have to pay...And I knew I would get busted and I knew that I would go to prison...I realized from that moment on I would be... a junkie" (Spencer, p. 248). Another white musician, pianist Bill Evans stated, "It's like death and transfiguration. Every day you wake in pain like death, and then you go and score and that is transfiguration (Lees, 1990, p. 156).

While the conditions were less than ideal and the demands of the profession great, were these the factors that led so many jazz performers to abuse alcohol and illegal drugs? Artists such as Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane, and Billie Holiday, to name a few, all dealt with addictions at some point in their careers. Yet these same names are often mentioned when one lists the great innovators and influential performers in the history of jazz music. A 1947 article by Ralph Matthews in the "Philadelphia Afro-American" newspaper related some of the appeal for substances. In the article he stated that "music makers had to 'send themselves' in order to reach the heights demanded by their [audiences]. Outside stimulants [helped] keep up the maddening pace."

The case of jazz singer Billie Holiday is another example of artistry that flourished in spite of addiction to alcohol and drugs. Holiday, like many of her contemporaries, suffered from circumstances of her formative years that easily could have prompted a desire to escape from herself. Isbell believed this desire fueled the propensity for the use of mind-altering substances. Holiday was constantly abandoned to friends and relatives as a child and was raped at age eleven. Her life growing up in the waterfront red light district of Baltimore exposed her early to the seedier side of life. She identified with the social hierarchy of the nightlife hustlers who became a surrogate family for her. However, her association with such a lifestyle provided a dysfunctional model of socialization for her. The traumatic experiences of her childhood contributed to an insecurity and a feeling of rejection that was debilitating. Her desire for acceptance may have accounted for her abnormally dependent personality, which resulted in a life of promiscuity in her youth and a series of failed relationships in adulthood.

Holiday, like her contemporaries who struggled with similar conflict, was unable to come to terms with her personal dilemmas except through her music. It is somewhat of a paradox that Holiday, much like Parker, could create an emotional power in performance unparalleled by most, but could never conquer the emotional problems of life outside of music except through the use of drugs and alcohol. It has been said that the richest artistic endeavor is the result of tangible, dramatic, life experiences. Stanley Crouch stated that, "Jazz is phenomenal in its capacity to give form to experience not just of the past, but of [also]... the present" and Holiday, herself, stated that "[a]nything I... sing, it's a part of my life" (Brooks).

Ralph Ellison has said that "[t]rue jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group as well as the conventions and techniques of music"(Ellison as cited in Brooks). The innovators of this era were significant in the unique nature of their individual musical voice. Yet, each was also a paradox of emotions that leaves one wondering if the conflict of personal emotion was the source of their creative musical genius.

Holiday, in particular, was at the same time a tough woman who was quick to fight if challenged, perceived by many as arrogant, controlling even haughty. At the same time Holiday exhibited weakness, fragility, and vulnerability. She was haunted by an inferiority complex and was dominated and controlled by her husbands, managers, and pimps.

There were numerous reputed affairs, and it has also been suggested that she was bisexual. Yet, she remained committed to marriage suffering through three unions to abusive, controlling men. Her lifestyle and social interaction provided an easy entree to the world of drugs. In her world the negative stigma of drug usage was much less prevalent than in the rest of society. In fact, it was her first husband, Jimmy Monroe, who introduced her to heroin. In spite of a habit that eventually caused her demise, Holiday recorded and performed for over twenty years. Her ability to wring the raw emotion from the lyrics of the tunes she performed exemplified her talent for unifying melodic and rhythmic ideas to express the meaning of the song lyrics. As noted jazz singer Carmen McCrae has stated, “Lyrics are the most important things that a singer has to work with. Your words are your tools” (Brooks).

Holiday became an expert at using those tools to express the tragic sense of life. Her use of a limited melodic range, little more than an octave and a half in her prime, was initially by design to display a sparseness and economy of embellishment that allowed the meaning of the lyrics to be clearly expressed. Years of substance abuse and cigarettes eventually reduced what was already a rather small range by jazz vocalist standards to little more than an octave. Her stark, minimalist renditions of tragic ballads of unrequited love and misery set her apart from other vocalists of the period and initiated a change in musical approach to such tunes that is still evident today. She struck a chord with a wide audience by setting herself apart from the work of her contemporaries, much as Charlie Parker did in the instrumental world of the time. Her work has been compared to an expert painter creating a masterpiece with one or two colors (Brooks).

Stuart Nicholson summed up the significance of Holiday’s contribution with the comment that “so inspired and conscientious [was] the application of her musical gift that her work appeared touched by genius. She created a body of recorded music that is amongst the most critically acclaimed of the Swing era. Even today, this work ranks with the finest of all recorded jazz” (Nicholson, 1995). While there are many who would challenge such a statement, it is evident from her recordings and comments from her peers and jazz historians that her place among the giants of jazz is secure and well deserved. That she accomplished this feat while in the grips of a monstrous heroin habit is a testament to the talent and ability that she possessed.

Likewise, Parker led a life of contradictions. Ralph Ellison wrote that Parker “stretched the limits of human contradiction beyond belief.”. Ralph Ellison wrote. “He was lovable and hateful, considerate and callous; he stole from friends and benefactors and borrowed without conscience, often without repaying, and yet was generous to absurdity. He could be most kind to younger musicians or utterly crushing in his contempt for their ineptitude. He was passive and yet quick to pull a knife and pick a fight. He was given to extremes of sadness and masochism, capable of the most staggering excesses and the most exacting physical discipline and assertion of will” (Ward and Burns, p. 306). He was obsessive about learning to play jazz spending hours practicing and learning songs, often mastering one song at a time in all twelve keys. At times, he lived a peaceful, calm domestic life especially with third wife, Chan Richardson, with whom he had two children. Yet, he could also go on drinking and drug binges that would last for days causing him to not eat or sleep and to miss gigs and recording dates. He engaged in such bizarre behavior at one point that he was arrested and institutionalized at Camarillo Mental Hospital in California for several months. He had a ravenous appetite that extended to every area of his life. The same hunger that drove him to devour drugs, alcohol, and food and to pursue women at a pace that astounded even his streetwise compatriots also allowed him to amass little known facts on every subject from auto repair to nuclear physics and to memorize the most complicated charts after a single reading (Ward and Burns, p. 310). His recordings rank among the masterpieces of jazz recordings and are consistently cited for study by aspiring jazz musicians to this day.

Music has always been, and will forever be, a communicative art form. Emotions and feelings that cannot be expressed via other channels find their voice through music. Jazz is a performer-oriented rather than a composer-oriented music in which the emphasis on the creation of the moment by the ensemble present supersedes, but does not ignore the written instructions of the composer. Thus, jazz music is uniquely positioned to offer artists liberty that they may not experience in any other facet of their life. In particular, jazz music allows performers the freedom to alter the original melody, rhythm, and sometimes harmony to recast a composition in their own image based on their own emotions and experiences.

It is in this manner that innovators such as Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, and other jazz legends placed their unique stamp on the true American classical music of the 20th century. Free from musical constraints and able to escape, even if momentarily, the challenges and horrors of their lives, these gifted individuals utilized skills developed not in a traditional classroom, but a classroom of life experiences and auditory memory that provided them with inspiration and information to forge new musical paths.

Even though the use of substances that were either depressants or stimulants ultimately destroyed their physical bodies and created a life of difficulty within the legal system, their creativity remained unfettered. The fact that they continued to use drugs suggests that there may be a circular interrelationship among several factors: The degree to which a musician feels rejected by his culture, the stimulant he takes, and the music he plays. This relationship may provide a social context for stimulant use independent of whatever individual personality variables may be relevant (Winick, pp 251–252). The substances they imbibed may have been instrumental in liberating these artists mentally from preoccupation with their life circumstances and subsequently, may have provided the opportunity for these artists to tap into their utmost level of creativity.

The limited number of empirical studies and the difficulty of being able to quantify much of the available data preclude strong conclusions on the effect of substance use on jazz artists. Thus, there is a limited basis for answering the question of whether these artists' creative output would have been enhanced without their addictions. Still unresolved is the question of whether that level of creativity can be reached without mind-altering substances. To many, the answer to that question is yes. Indeed, as demonstrated by the extensive list of creative people throughout history who have not resorted to chemicals to assist their inspiration, creativity is a gift that can be manifested in a number of different ways. The sources of creativity are myriad and are as complex as the real life existence of those who are creating. As Wills concluded, "psychopathology is neither necessary nor sufficient for creativity" (Wills, p. 359).

However, it would also be erroneous to ignore the documentation of the number of jazz musicians who, for whatever reasons, abused drugs yet were highly creative. To be sure, the personality weaknesses shown by Miss Holiday, Mr. Parker, and others made them more susceptible to the use of drugs and alcohol. Both Holiday and Parker had absentee fathers, which may have contributed to their predilection for obsessive, compulsive behavior as well as their addictive personality traits. Likewise, the environment and other circumstances of their lives contributed to their propensity to resort to chemicals. Yet their creative achievements stand as models of the highest levels of inspiration. It is hard to imagine what might have been had the lives of such geniuses not been short-circuited by the results of their addictions.

While Billie Holiday did not succumb to as early a death as some of her counterparts, especially Parker, who at the time of his death was only 34, but thought to be 55–60 by the coroner who performed the autopsy on his body, the untapped potential that was languished on drugs and alcohol by these artists shall never be fully revealed or appreciated. It is our loss. The insanity of their compulsive and destructive behavior created a legal morass that ultimately precipitated the disintegration of their careers and the destruction of their lives. It is unfortunate that the liberation they sought and expressed so readily through their music escaped them throughout their personal life.

Spencer states that alcohol and heroin have been condemned as wholly injurious to jazz musicians, in that inhibitions may be removed allowing the players to attempt more original patterns in improvisation (Spencer, p. 251). However, the reality based on the available body of empirical data is that the effect of most drugs on any work requiring mental or physical dexterity is inevitably deleterious. Similarly, Yardley notes that in "reading *Jazz Anecdotes* one can't help but note that even more than in American literature, alcohol has been in jazz an instrument of distraction and debilitation masquerading as inspiration" (Yardley, 1990, June 10). In spite of the accomplishments of the exceptional artists noted herein, for most jazz musicians substance abuse has had a negative effect on their careers. Even the great ones may not have achieved their complete potential because of their addictions. They certainly were not afforded an extended life span with which to pursue that ultimate potential. There is still much to learn about the connection between creativity and drug abuse among musicians, specifically in the jazz idiom. Empirical evidence shows that while there is a link between creativity and psychopathology, the extent and impact of that link warrants continued study. Was their work inspired? The test of time, and extensive critique and study of their work, says yes. Would their work have been as inspired had they not been addicted? Whatever creative benefits may have been perceived, the reality is that for most jazz artists, particularly during the creative period from 1940–1960, substance abuse did more harm than good, and rather than being the road to creative genius, it was the pathway to premature death.

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