

Crossing Boundaries through Multiculturalism and Jazz

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“Jazz music. Because it's a combination of European harmony, African and Latin rhythms, instruments from every culture, East Indian philosophies.”

One student's response to survey question “What does multiculturalism mean to you?”

1. Introduction

My academic background is in the area of sociology, statistics, and economics – I generally work with quantifiable data and am somewhat uncomfortable in dealing with issues that I cannot connect to such data. At the same time, I have long been a fan, listener, and collector of jazz – from the times I heard groups headed by Sunny Murray or Andrew Hill, or Marion Brown playing solo alto saxophone, while I was a graduate student at the University of Toronto, to the opportunities I had while on sabbatical this past year to hear musicians such as William Parker and Pauline Oliveros.

Issues of multiculturalism and immigration occupy my current research interests and time and, in this paper, I draw some parallels between multiculturalism and jazz. In terms of the Guelph Jazz Festival Colloquium, I approach this topic as a sociologist and hope that I develop ideas that will be worthwhile for those with a primary interest in jazz. I will indicate some parallels between multicultural principles and jazz practice and principles, drawing on some of my research concerning attitudes about multiculturalism and using examples from jazz. The paper concludes with suggestions about what each might learn from the other, crossing at least one set of boundaries – that between academic disciplines.

2. Multiculturalism

Over the last forty years, Canada has become more multicultural, with immigration of people of many cultures and origins – primarily from Asia and Latin America – not present in Canada in large numbers in earlier years. A popular image of multiculturalism is that governments responded to this new diversity by funding an endless round of ethnic festivals – dancing, music, food, and crafts. While this is a part of multicultural practice in Canada, given the low profile of multiculturalism as policy and given the limited funding of its programs, this is a minor part of the way in which Canadian society has transformed itself over the last thirty-five years. To me, multiculturalism is a set of principles that apply to social relationships in the context of diversity – principles such as acceptance of diversity, equal access, overcoming barriers, harmony, and culture as

resource. It is the widespread acceptance of these principles that has made Canada a more accepting, open, and democratic society.

The research findings for this paper come from surveys of undergraduates at the University of Regina. In these surveys, there was general acceptance of multicultural principles and limited concern about some of the possible problems of multiculturalism. While students were split on the issue of government support for multicultural festivals, they generally supported multicultural principles. One finding relevant for this paper is that students identified multiculturalism more with ways that individuals and groups interact in society rather than merely attitudes. While forty per cent said multiculturalism meant acceptance, respect, toleration, or appreciation, even more – just under seventy per cent (including some of the same responses) – said that multiculturalism meant things like living together, working together, interacting, combining, mixing, or sharing. From a sociological perspective on multiculturalism, I consider this encouraging – students look on multiculturalism as not just a state of mind but a way of interacting in Canadian society. Some students suggested that multiculturalism is a process of producing a new society – creation of a unity or societal whole.

Multiculturalism is limited – as principles, policy, and practice it has been unable to deal with many of the systemic inequalities of opportunity and condition that exist in Canada, and has not always been effective at helping overcome discriminatory and racist ideas and practices. One of the difficulties in dealing with the concept of multiculturalism is that it has multiple meanings. As a concept, it can refer to any of policy, program, practice, educational approach, sociological concept, symbol, ideal, ideology, theory, or description of Canadian society. Having such a variety of meanings may be part of the reason that there is much confusion about and criticism of multiculturalism – some have said it is divisive, threatens national unity, is regressive, impractical, no more than a symbolic gesture, or top-down. There was limited concern among students about these problems but more concern about jobs and opportunities.

I review these survey findings to demonstrate that support for multicultural principles is strong, at least among one group of young respondents. These students said that multiculturalism has relatively limited problems associated with it, but provides a way for individuals and groups to relate to each other in a positive manner. At the same time, there are limits to a multicultural approach – so far it has been unable to adequately address labour market and equal opportunity issues.

3. Aspects of jazz and parallels with multiculturalism

While there are different views of the history of jazz, in my view jazz has been multicultural from the beginning. Initially a music and form of expression primarily of African-Americans, this music was not produced in isolation from other musical and societal influences (Ellison, 285). As it developed, other influences and participation became more common. As a musical form and practice, jazz has continued to transform itself over the last one hundred years, so that it has become a truly multicultural product and process, cutting across many cultural and geographic boundaries.

In this section of the paper I outline what I consider to be some principles of jazz and draw parallels between these and multicultural principles (Figure 1). I will not comment on the technical structures and forms of jazz – these are well beyond my abilities and expertise. Rather, I provide examples of music and musicians illustrating the principles – examples drawn from my listening, experiences, and reading. For the latter, I rely especially on two books – Gene Santoro’s biography of Charles Mingus, *Myself When I am Real: The Life and Music of Charles Mingus*, and Ross Russell’s, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*. In examining parallels, jazz as cultural expression and practice, is more limited than multiculturalism. The latter deals with social interactions in society as a whole, whereas jazz is a small subset of society’s social interactions, involving only one musical form and practice, albeit an important one.

The words in the multiculturalism column of Figure 1 come from the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* and many could be used to describe both jazz and multiculturalism as social interaction. Social relationships among people take many forms and multicultural principles constitute one set of principles and procedures guiding, governing, and suggesting ways that individuals and groups of different cultural background can interact. Jazz is similar in having implicit procedures for interaction involving musicians, audience, settings, industry, and community – in this paper I deal mostly with social interactions in the music and among musicians.

A basic principle of jazz is maintaining tradition, sharing this tradition with others, and incorporating new elements into the music. This involves using traditional musical forms, respecting the history and traditions of these forms, and being knowledgeable about and capable of using these traditions. At the same time, jazz musicians are familiar with other musical forms and traditions and, in varying ways and amounts, incorporate these into jazz. This mix varies, with some jazz relying primarily on tradition and not stepping outside too much outside these boundaries. For example, Anthony Braxton both maintains tradition, as evidenced by albums such as *What’s New In the Tradition* or *Charlie Parker Project 1993* (Guthartz), and explores a wide variety of alternative musical forms. Any number of other examples – Willem Breuker, Marilyn Crispell, or Archie Shepp – could be provided.

Ross Russell argues that Kansas City jazz from the 1920s through 1940s was a sort of country cousin to New Orleans jazz, simpler than the latter, relying initially on folksong and ragtime, and drawing on newer urban blues. “Kansas City style began as a grass-roots movement and retained its earthy, proletarian character to the end.” (Russell, 32) As for the Charlie Parker quintets of the late 1940s in New York City, Russell notes that

Rather than having been thrown overboard, let alone diminished, ... the classical ideas of jazz were more strongly in evidence than before. In a real sense, bebop was a vigorous, at times violent, reaction to the overorchestrated jazz and superband that had appeared in the late swing period. In another sense bebop was a stringent reaction against the commercialism of Tin Pan Alley with its unending production line of popular tunes and overblown arrangements and the song pluggers who harried bandleaders to perform and record them. Bebop was a true musicians’ revolt, conceived and executed by professionals. (Russell, 209)

Charles Mingus had a multicultural ancestry. While he is said to have claimed that he was “Irish, Indian, Mexican, and Nigger” (Santoro, 49), Santoro traces German, Chinese, and African-American ancestry in his background. His initial bass influence was Red Callendar, but he worked with Lloyd Reese, who provided Mingus with the opportunity to listen to Bach, Beethoven, Ravel, Debussy, and Benny Goodman (Santoro, 37). Later, Mingus incorporated Mexican, Columbian, Haitian, Chinese, and Indian influences into his music.

Multiculturalism means not only diverse ancestry and culture, but preservation, enhancement, sharing, respecting, and valuing cultural heritage. These same words could just as well be used to describe how jazz musicians handle tradition, showing the strong parallels between multiculturalism and jazz with respect to one’s own and other traditions.

If jazz involved only tradition, it would become stale and predictable, as many forms of music become, even when performed well by very capable musicians. It is the principles of interaction and improvisation that make jazz an exciting, forward-looking, and dynamic enterprise. Social interaction in the form of interaction of musical ideas and practices is the essence of jazz. This involves listening to other musicians, being sensitive to their ideas and direction, being able to respond, using one’s own musical knowledge and abilities, and working as a team to produce music of interest to musicians and audience. When sociologists talk about human social interaction, it is the ability to delay reactions and anticipate responses that makes human interactions truly social. When I observe and listen to Gerry Hemingway in performance with other musicians, what better example could there be of such social interaction. Ross Russell argues that

Lester Young was one of those musicians unusually sensitive to his musical surroundings, unlike Armstrong and Hawkins who played in much the same way, often in spite of them. The intimate, lyrical playing that one hears on the small band dates with Billie Holliday contrasts with the aggressive and flamboyant style on the Count Basie orchestral records. (Russell, 158)

A related aspect of interaction is improvisation, using various combinations of musicians’ own traditions and other traditions and forms, and developing these in an innovative and creative manner. This may produce new musical forms or variants on old forms – in either case, this feature of jazz clearly distinguishes it from much other western music. Referring to the bebop revolution of the nineteen forties,

The mainstream of musical ideas that shaped the new music emanated from Kansas City. Lester Young set new standards – melody, polyrhythms, lighter sound ideas, longer improvised line. Reed and rhythm section men first to respond, brass last. After Lester Young came Charlie Parker, another Kansas City saxophonist cast in Lester’s image, the first to fully grasp Lester’s ideas, make them his own, and use them as the foundation for his own style, which was still newer, more flexible and daring, freed from the impositions of the large jazz orchestra, and so conceived that it became a model for the playing of all jazz instruments. (Russell, 206)

In the schematic diagram, I have matched interaction and improvisation with equality and harmony – Ajay Heble’s “wrong notes” make it clear that this does not refer to harmony in the musical sense! Equality and harmony refer to forms of social interaction

– providing all with the opportunity to participate in interaction on some reasonably equal basis and being able to recognize, understand, and work with others. Interaction and improvisation in jazz rely at least partly on such principles. Santoro says of the New York scene that Mingus encountered in 1947,

Jazz, especially Bird's bebop, was a model. It highlighted the individual, yet depended on group communication. Its spontaneity and equal partnership on the bandstand opposed bureaucratic rulebooks and refuted segregation. And it was born in black America. Who had a more telling perspective on the brave new world? (Santoro, 78)

In terms of interaction in the larger social sphere, sociologists may not consider this as improvisation, although Keith Sawyer is one sociologist who uses the performance metaphor of Erving Goffman "by emphasizing the *improvisationality* of everyday performances. Because we don't have a script for our conversations, we have to *improvise* our lines" (Sawyer, 1). An understanding of improvisation in jazz may provide insights into how each of us conducts our daily social interactions, as well as suggesting ways that we improvise and select strategies for longer-term life activities. As individuals encountering others, we improvise in our activities, responding in new ways to new situations and challenges. Some of us are more successful at this than are others, just as some musicians are considered superior improvisers. And just as improvisation in jazz produces new and unusual results, so does improvisation in daily life.

Jazz as a musical form has gone through amazing changes during its short history. Improvisation and incorporation of ideas from other traditions and other musicians have meant that jazz has never stood still, but has always been a process of developing new musical forms. Creativity and change may come through encounters with musicians from other backgrounds. Witness the changes that Charlie Parker or Charles Mingus helped instigate upon coming to New York. On a smaller scale, in February I had the opportunity to hear the William Parker clarinet trio, with Perry Robinson (clarinet) and Walter Perkins (percussion). The encounter of these three musicians produced a unique sound, one that carried each of them beyond what they would have achieved individually. In my view, the strength and creativity of each brought out the best in each of the others. Russell notes how the prosperity of Kansas City during the depression of the 1930s meant regular employment for jazz musicians in the many clubs. This "attracted unemployed jazz musicians from all over the Southwest and, in some case, other parts of America" (Russell, 9). It was this continued encounter of different musicians, with new musicians arriving on the scene and working with those who were more established that helped produce both a Kansas City sound and rapid changes in jazz style. Later, in the 1940s, bebop's "insurgents had arrived in New York from all parts of the country; and most of the major cities made their contributions" (Russell, 211). Jimmy Cobb also notes the diverse contributions of the musicians to the *Kind of Blue* session headed by Miles Davis (Khan, 7).

Another aspect of jazz is the ability, knowledge, virtuosity, and individuality (Ellison, 245-6) of musicians. When I saw and heard William Parker and Peter Kowald perform as a bass duo at Victoriaville, I was amazed at the ability of each and the sounds they jointly produced. The *Down Beat* reviewer of this performance felt there was insufficient

interaction, arguing that “Kowald and Parker only connected in spurts” (Buium, 54). Perhaps my recollection is incorrect, but to my eyes and ears, there was incredible virtuosity with more than adequate improvisation and interaction. For me this was the highlight of the year’s Victoriaville – as well as the Konrad Bauer (trombone)/Aki Takase (piano) encounter that produced a similar level of virtuosity and interaction, and was better liked by the *Down Beat* reviewer. In Kansas City jam sessions

technical mastery of an instrument was only a starting point. One required a thorough command of the musical materials of the day – the blues, standard tunes, ballads, and the riff originals from the Moten-Basie repertory. It was necessary to know harmonic and melodic content of this music by heart and this taken for granted. “What counted were fresh musical ideas.” (Russell, 26)

Ability and virtuosity, producing teamwork, constitute a resource for the music, just as the heritage and culture of individuals and groups constitute a resource for society. These resources help define jazz and shape society; they are part of a process that creates a different music and society. It is interesting to note that section 3:1 (g) of the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* states that one part of multicultural policy is “promote the understanding and creativity that arise from the interaction between individuals and communities of different origins.” Such a statement could refer directly to jazz.

A final aspect of jazz that I identify is dedication – of musicians, audience, and individuals associated with the music. To practice jazz, musicians must be dedicated to producing and extending a demanding form of music in a setting that is often difficult or unfriendly. It is also the dedicated individuals associated with the music, such as festival organizers, producers of discs, photographers, and writers, that have helped make this music widely available.

The biography of Charles Mingus shows how he was dedicated to combining tradition, practice, technique (114), group effort, self-organization (97, 169-70), mentorship (108), audience (149), sensitivity to and support of political causes, and connections with other art forms such as poetry. While his life had aspects of disorganization, confusion, sexism, and despotism, his musical legacy demonstrates his perseverance and dedication. Santoro’s evaluation is that

The artist in Mingus, like the moralist, was anchored in a respect for tradition. His mentors had underlined the central importance of dedication and drill to technique. Art demanded order and discipline. Without structure, only chaos spoke. He was more interested in Tatum than Parker; they drew on overlapping harmonic ideas, but Tatum was more obviously rooted in fundamentals, from the classics to stride piano. And yet Mingus’s best music mingled styles. His complex life seemed to demand new forms of expression. (Santoro, 67).

In the schematic diagram, dedication is matched with overcoming barriers, although these are only roughly parallel. I placed the principle of overcoming barriers at the conclusion of the diagram, not because it is less important, but because it is proven to be the most difficult and problematic aspect of multiculturalism, one where the promises of multiculturalism have often been unmet or thwarted. That is, barriers to participation such as discrimination, in-group networks, selective hiring and appointment practices, and “affirmative action” for groups favoured by the powerful, all create inequalities and exclusion for those not so favoured. Dedication alone cannot overcome all these

obstacles and this is where properly designed multicultural and other policies can help overcome some of these obstacles.

In jazz, self-organization and connections with community have been important. Mingus was associated with the Newport Rebel Festival (Santoro, 168-170), production of his own records (Santoro, 237), and organized the Jazz Workshops. Individual commitment has been matched with group efforts (Sun Ra Arkestra, Horace Tapscott) and connections with community (AACM, Vision Festival, Guelph and Victoriaville festivals). Russell notes that “for black urban Americans of the twenties and thirties, jazz and blues were cultural necessities, not luxuries” and in locations such as Kansas City “the bedrock of support for jazz and blues came from the city’s Afro-Americans” (Russell, 5). Community can play a similar role in society at large. Building support networks and establishing strong communities have been one means that immigrant groups and others outside the mainstream have used to survive and find a place in society.

In summary, there are many parallels between the principles and practices of jazz and those of multiculturalism. The parallels are not exact, but in each case traditions and culture are preserved, shared, appreciated, and expanded. Each provides a model and lessons for the other – I now turn to a short discussion of these.

4. Possibilities and limitations

Each of multiculturalism and jazz has assisted in crossing boundaries and transforming society and culture. In the case of multiculturalism, expansion and understanding of diversity, along with the work of people of many backgrounds, has made Canada more open, accepting, and democratic, at least in the cultural sphere. Jazz has created a variety of new musical forms, influencing western and world music, and simultaneously developing its own new forms of expression. Each of multiculturalism and jazz has limitations, so each can build on and learn from the other and, by adopting principles and approaches from the other, can be strengthened.

Multiculturalism has much to learn from the practice of jazz and has more shortcomings than jazz. After all, multicultural principles deal only with some inequalities and it is the broader social relations, institutions, and structures of society that affect everyone. In contrast, jazz is a much more limited enterprise, with implications for only a limited number of musicians, listeners, and other participants.

In Canada, some critics of multiculturalism consider it to be a tool of policy-makers, a top-down way of managing diversity. Policy-makers and policies can set out various principles and rules that are to govern institutions, but they cannot change the way that people interact with each other in the social sphere. In the end it will be up to Canadian citizens and institutions (businesses, schools, cities) to become more accepting of diversity and create conditions whereby individuals of all backgrounds can more equally participate in society. It is here that jazz principles such as dedication, self-organization, improvisation, and innovation have lessons for multiculturalism. If multiculturalism is to

become more effective in pursuing equality and overcoming barriers to participation, individuals and groups, acting independently and in institutions, need to be committed to the principles of multiculturalism in more than words. The commitment of musicians to building a better music provides an excellent model for building a better Canada through citizen participation.

The creativity and innovation of jazz musicians, and their ability to improvise and interact with each other in different settings provide a model for social interactions in society. Sociologists such as Erving Goffman have considered daily social interaction to be performance, and have examined the manner that people present themselves in acceptable ways. But perhaps sociologists should look on social interaction as creating possibilities of improvising and innovating, rather than merely conforming to existing patterns. Jazz shows the value of maintaining traditions at the same time as extending them – our business, government, and educational institutions could learn from this.

On the other side, individuals and institutions involved in jazz have often been exclusive and hard to approach, so multiculturalism has lessons for jazz. Principles such as respect, understanding, and acceptance could be more widely applied in jazz. Musicians have often been ready to participate with others, although some have been exclusive and scornful of attempts to experiment. Experimenters have sometimes regarded traditionalists as backward and uninteresting, and traditionalists have been suspicious of experimenters. But the industry, and some of the audience are the main culprits here. The Victoriaville and Guelph festivals show that experimental music can attract a broad audience. The jazz industry could certainly learn from the principles of multiculturalism – to provide more opportunities for all jazz musicians to expand their presentation of music.

Both jazz and multiculturalism have limits. While the appeal of jazz could certainly become more widespread, some innovative forms seem destined to appeal to only a minority. And jazz, at least at its best, is limited in being a form that can be practiced only by a few very capable musicians. After all “jazz is very much the work of professionals and a professional elite at that” (Russell, 1). While participation could be broader, the split between professional musicians and an audience is unlikely to be overcome. And in the end, jazz is only music, not all of life.

There have been many successes of multiculturalism – making society more accepting of diversity and helping to improve the life chances of those outside the mainstream. But it is in the latter area that it has been severely limited. For the most part, it concerns only culture and the principles of multiculturalism have so far been unable to reduce the systematic inequalities that are built into our society. Inequalities of income, wealth, education, and expertise continue to mean very different life chances and opportunities for different individuals. If we are to overcome these, multiculturalism is only one part of a program for a better society.

5. Conclusion

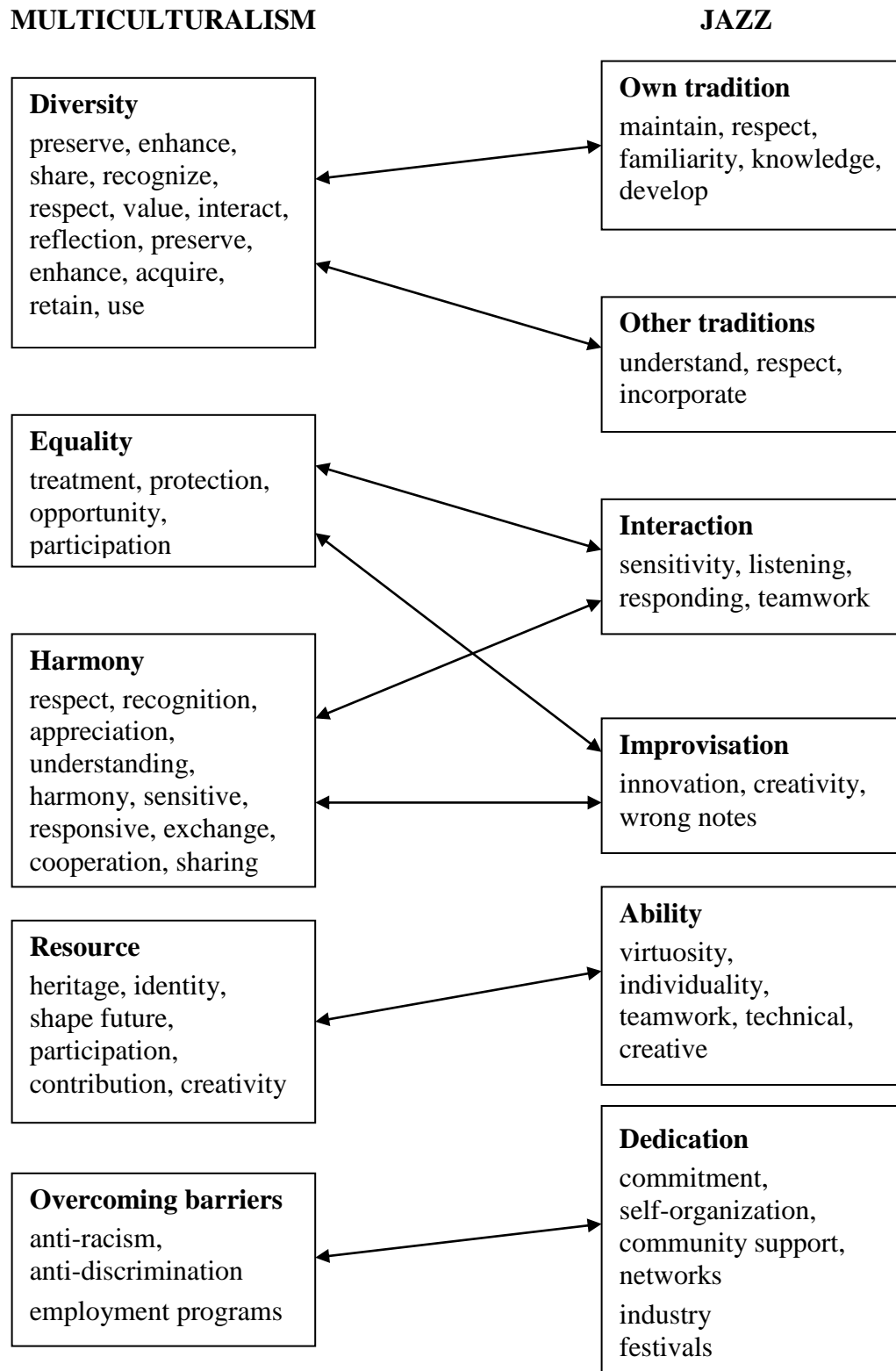
The principles and practices of multiculturalism have helped cross and change boundaries in the cultural sphere and have affected other areas of society. In Canada, increased diversity of the population and multiculturalism have contributed to opening the cultural sphere, to overcoming barriers in social relations among individuals and groups, and to participation in Canadian institutions. At the same time, barriers to social mobility have not always been removed, and economic and social inequalities remain as a serious problem in Canada. In other cases, new boundaries have been created, as opportunities for some have become more limited. One lesson of jazz is that boundaries do not magically disappear but overcoming them requires continued work and social interaction. In this respect, student responses in the surveys are encouraging because they identify multiculturalism with ways of interacting and, in some cases, processes of creating a better society.

One lesson of multiculturalism for jazz is that principles of inclusion, respect, understanding, and equality can play a positive role in improving interaction, maintaining tradition, and creating new cultural forms. Again, these require effort – of the sort that we see here in Guelph, in Victoriaville, and in many other festivals.

Hopefully I have demonstrated in this paper that a dialogue across academic boundaries can be useful. Perhaps it is sociology that has more to gain from such a dialogue than does jazz – understanding the importance of collaboration, improvisation, and creativity. Given the limited appeal that much jazz currently has, perhaps multicultural approaches can improve its exposure and acceptance.

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Figure 1. Social interactions in multiculturalism and jazz

Note: Words and phrases in the multiculturalism column come primarily from the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act*. See Gingrich and Fries.

Appendix – Understandings of multiculturalism survey

Because little research had been done on meanings and understandings of multiculturalism, I decided that I would attempt to investigate how people thought about multiculturalism, what they considered it to be, and what meanings they attached to the concept. The findings I have do not come from a sample representing all Canadians but from undergraduate students at the University of Regina. In the Fall 1998 semester, the Survey of Student Attitudes and Experiences surveyed seven hundred undergraduate students about a variety of issues, including their views on multiculturalism and immigration. This sample is reasonably representative of undergraduates at the university. The sample is multicultural, with diversity being primarily multi-European, mainly second through fourth generation offspring of immigrants from many parts of Europe, plus a sampling of aboriginal and visible minority students.

In the survey, there was general acceptance of multicultural principles and limited concern about the problems of multiculturalism. Three-quarters of respondents agreed that diversity is an essential aspect of Canadian society, ninety per cent agreed that institutions should provide equal access, and eighty-four per cent agreed that having people from many cultural backgrounds enriches Canada. While there was limited recognition of the existence of barriers, three-quarters of students supported eliminating such barriers when they exist. Students were, however, split on the issue of government support for multicultural festivals.

In spite of strong support for multicultural principles, there was less support for affirmative action type programs or specific programs aimed at improving prospects for members of racial or ethnic minorities. Concern about availability of jobs, especially among male undergraduates, appears to have influenced views about multicultural policy. For example, only one-quarter agreed that non-white individuals face restrictions in job and educational opportunities. Also, many respondents, again especially males, felt that white males are hurt by employment equity requirements.

There was limited concern among students about problems that multiculturalism might present for Canadian society. Only seven per cent found retention of cultural practices to be offensive, fourteen per cent said multiculturalism makes it hard to know what it means to be Canadian, and thirty per cent said multiculturalism has divisive effects.

Respondents wrote short explanations of what multiculturalism meant to them – that is the source of the quote that compares multiculturalism to jazz. For the most part, diversity and harmony were the two themes that students commonly recognized – there was less recognition of the other three themes, with almost no recognition that multiculturalism aims to overcome barriers.

Students did not interpret multiculturalism as dealing with broader issues of diversity, such as dealing with issues of equitable treatment and inclusion of women or gays. While students were split on the issue of treating gay and lesbian couples as married for tax laws and job benefits, those expressing support for such treatment were more likely to

express support for multiculturalism. This suggests that those who supported diversity tended to be supportive of multicultural principles and did not view it as problematic.

One finding relevant for this paper is that students identified multiculturalism with ways in which individuals and groups actually interact in society more than considering it merely a set of attitudes. Approximately seventy per cent of written responses indicated that multiculturalism meant things like living together, working together, interacting, combining, mixing, or sharing; in contrast, only forty per cent (including some of the same responses) said that multiculturalism meant acceptance, respect, toleration, or appreciation. From a sociological perspective on multiculturalism, I consider this encouraging – students look on multiculturalism as not just a state of mind but a way of interacting within Canadian society. Some students suggested that multiculturalism is a process of creating a unity or a societal whole – a process whereby a new type of society is produced.

I review these survey findings to demonstrate that support for multicultural principles is relatively strong, at least among one group of young respondents. These respondents indicated that multiculturalism had relatively limited problems associated with it, but provides a way for individuals and groups to relate to each other in a positive manner. At the same time, these findings suggest limits to a multicultural approach – it does not appear to deal adequately with job and equal opportunity issues.

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