

Improvised Jazz and the Transcendental Experience

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

“Improvised Jazz and the Transcendental Experience” is designed for use in high school English classrooms. Two goals provide the unit’s basic structure. They are:

- The unit will afford students the opportunity to experience the major works of Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson in a meaningful, engaging way.
- The unit will introduce students to a form of art they are generally unfamiliar with: improvised jazz.

The unit is built around the idea that improvised jazz provides a tangible example of the transcendental experience Whitman and Emerson describe. Though the unit, as written, is most immediately useful to English teachers, I believe that, with some adjustment, the unit could also be useful to high school music teachers who want to provide their students a more meaningful understanding of improvisation.

BACKGROUND NARRATIVE

My Pre-IB/AP sophomore English course is a chronological survey of American literature. Students read traditional, exemplary works and examine the historical, cultural, and ideological contexts in which those works occur. Our fall semester begins with fiction and poetry by and about the Puritan colonists, and ends with the revolutionary realism of Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*; the spring semester is given to the many manifestations of Modernism in the American canon. Whenever possible, I encourage students to make meaningful connections between the works they read and the life experiences they have so far accumulated. This can be a very rewarding practice. Our study of the Massachusetts Bay Puritans inevitably leads to provocative discussions of contemporary morality, parental expectations, moral hypocrisy, and other engaging subjects. The literature of the Enlightenment, especially potent in a major election year, often prompts students to actively question the many references they hear to the values and ideals of the American founders. The writing of the American Transcendentalists – essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson and poetry by Walt Whitman, most importantly – has so far prompted no such engaging discussions. Students who have successfully navigated the ideology of the Puritans and taken in the tenets of the Enlightenment seem to balk at the much less tangible notions of the Transcendentalists. How frustrating! The ideas of Emerson and Whitman are very meaningful to me, and I am driven to help my students grasp the great depth contained in the major works of these two important figures.

I have often found that students themselves are one of my most valuable sources of advice in the process of developing and implementing curriculum. During the previous

fall semester, after a fairly dispirited two-week encounter with Emerson and Whitman, I asked my students to suggest reasons they found the reading less meaningful than I hoped they would find it. The general consensus involved the literature's "believability factor," as one student phrased it. Students seemed to find the Transcendentalists' ideas too vague, too detached from students' sense of daily reality, to be meaningful. A single passage (and a terribly important one, too!) was cited by almost every student as supporting evidence of the "un-believability" of the Transcendentalists' vision. In the essay *Nature*, Emerson describes the transcendental moment:

Standing on the bare ground – my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God...I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty.
(Emerson, 190)

This passage (and several similar passages in other works) suggests an all-consuming, selfless experience of the present – something my students very quickly informed me is certainly not encouraged by Bellaire's rigorous IB/AP curriculum. "It's hard to have a transcendental experience when you have six hours of homework every night," one student said. I yielded, acknowledging the fact that my students' intricately structured lives contain much too little time for quiet reverie. Soon, though, I was ready to press on with the importance (and the beauty, and the truth) of Emerson's observation. "Very well," my students collectively (and with growing frustration) told me, "If you're going to convince us that this transcendent moment-'transparent eyeball'-'part and parcel of God' stuff is legitimate, we're going to need a real example – from your own experience!"

Ah, the painful pleasure of teaching insightful children! My students are not much impressed by stories of cliffs and canyons, of waking up at dawn thousands of feet in the snowy Santa Rita Mountains, so most of my examples were, unfortunately, quite useless. Then it hit me. Possessed by the spirit of realization, I said something to this effect: "Improvising musicians – especially jazz musicians – strive for *exactly* the kind of selfless, conduit-of-the-Supreme experience Emerson describes in *Nature*." They weren't completely convinced, but I was – convinced, that is, that I could teach the Transcendentalists much more successfully if I built a curriculum unit around this intriguing connection. Here was the germinal moment of what I hoped would become a meaningful part of my fall curriculum. Using listening activities, selected critical readings, and one crucial short story (James Baldwin's masterful "Sonny's Blues," a piece I love but have not yet integrated successfully into my curriculum), I might produce a unit which not only allows students to better understand the writing of Emerson and Whitman, but also gives me a structured forum for introducing my students to some of the music that means so much to me: the penetrating works of Miles Davis and John Coltrane.

STUDENT OBJECTIVES

During the course of “Improvised Jazz and the Transcendental Experience,” students will develop a strong, meaningful understanding of the American Transcendentalists. They will read a variety of important works by Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson. They will write about and discuss these works thoroughly. Students will read a number of short pieces on the nature of improvised jazz. They will write about and discuss these short pieces, and they will consider the common ground the pieces share with the writing of Whitman and Emerson. Students will listen to a variety of recorded works, particularly those of John Coltrane and Miles Davis. They will write about and discuss the recordings they listen to, focusing specifically on the recordings’ improvised passages. Students will complete a cumulative activity requiring them to consider improvised jazz as an example of - a “forum” for - the type of transcendental experience Whitman and Emerson describe. As they complete this cumulative activity, students will read and discuss James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues,” a short story which effectively demonstrates the transcendent power of improvised jazz.

GENERAL TEACHING STRATEGY

I expect to implement this curriculum unit *after* introducing my students to those Romantic works that generally prompt more favorable responses. (I typically use Henry David Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience* and excerpts from *Walden*, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, and various short works by Herman Melville.) Working with Whitman and Emerson should be a less daunting task for students who have a good, working knowledge of Romanticism: its birth and development as an artistic movement and its unique manifestations in American literature.

I will begin the curriculum unit with a three-day study of selected poems from Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. I will make an effort to choose poems that focus on the experience of transcendence, a subject of considerable importance in Whitman’s writing. Students will write about and discuss “Song of Myself,” “I Sing the Body Electric,” “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” and several other poems. Next, students will focus for three or four days on several lengthy excerpts from Emerson’s major essays and lectures: *Nature*, *The American Scholar*, *Self Reliance*, and *The Divinity School Address*, among others. Again, I will attempt to direct students’ attention to the experience of transcendence, a subject Emerson treats in complex and challenging ways.

I will use excerpts of critical and reflective writing to introduce the idea that jazz improvisation can provide a concrete example of the transcendent experiences Whitman and Emerson describe. This will include liner notes from selected jazz albums (Bill Evans’s brief but very meaningful treatment of Miles Davis’s *Kind of Blue*, for example), essays by Leonard Feather and other critics, and interviews with Davis, John Coltrane, and other musicians. Students will spend two or three class periods listening to selected

performances, discussing and writing about these performances, and – hopefully – coming to a meaningful understanding of the music they hear.

Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues,” the centerpiece of his collection *Going to Meet the Man*, will effectively draw the unit to a close. In the story, Baldwin’s Sonny, a jazz pianist whose life bears some resemblance to the lives of John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, and other musicians, experiences epiphany during an especially powerful, improvised performance. Baldwin’s description of Sonny’s experience closely parallels Emerson’s description of his own transcendent realization. It is my hope that the curriculum unit’s listening activities, when combined with the powerful “Sonny’s Blues,” will provide a tangible example of Emerson’s transcendentalism. If all goes according to plan, this will make the difference in my students’ willingness to open themselves to Emerson’s challenging (but very rewarding!) ideas.

SELECTIONS FROM WHITMAN’S *LEAVES OF GRASS*

Critical analysis

Few scholars would dispute the claim that Walt Whitman is among the greatest of all American poets. His single book, *Leaves of Grass*, a book which Whitman added to and revised until he died, is an indispensable text. First published in 1855, Whitman’s book shocked and delighted and repelled American readers. Ralph Waldo Emerson immediately praised the book, calling Whitman an important new voice on the American literary scene. Other readers found the book self-indulgent, rambling, even obscene. The book’s centerpiece (in the 1855 edition and in all subsequent editions) is the poem “Song of Myself,” a lengthy treatment of the poet’s conception of himself as a universal being. Whitman starts with one person - himself - then move outward to encompass a larger, national community (that of the United States - Whitman was intensely patriotic) and eventually include the entire cosmos. (Or “kosmos,” as Whitman often wrote. The poet made frequent use of the Elizabethan habit of coming up with “original” spellings of common words.)

Teaching strategy

Students will read several of Whitman’s best-known poems. They will start with two shorter pieces, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” and “I Sing the Body Electric.” In working with the former, students will concentrate on Whitman’s ability to speak both as an individual and as the voice of a people, mourning the loss of President Lincoln. The ability to powerfully and artistically express ideas shared by many is also a quality of John Coltrane’s music; always part of the cultural vanguard, Coltrane incorporated into his music spiritual and philosophical ideas which were quickly gaining popularity during the final phase of his career. “I Sing the Body Electric” is a celebration of physical being. The poem should help students begin to make contact with Whitman’s idea of the universal being, a concept manifested in Emerson’s thought as the Over-soul.

Next, students will spend several days working with Whitman's masterpiece, "Song of Myself." They will read the poem in perhaps three or four sections – I have found that the text becomes burdensome for most students if assigned as a single reading. I will ask students to focus again on Whitman's notion of the individual-as-universal; and I will require them to find and analyze passages having to do with this notion. Each day I will read selected passages aloud, ask for comments, then ask students to share with their classmates the passages they identified for homework and the analyses they wrote of those passages.

EXCERPTS OF EMERSON'S MAJOR ESSAYS

Critical analysis

A spiritual mentor to Whitman and a contemporary of Henry David Thoreau, Emerson is one of the most important American essayists. His works, which include "Nature," "Self Reliance," "The American Scholar," and many others, are often difficult for high school students to read, but persistence pays: in his essays, Emerson achieves a complexity of thought that is almost unparalleled in American prose; I have found that those students who are willing to give Emerson the effort he requires are often richly rewarded.

Emerson believed in what may be called an **Over-Soul**, or an Over-Mind. This is a tricky but crucial concept to comprehend. The Over-Soul is the binding energy of life, the essential force we share with everything else in the world. An understanding of the Over-Soul can allow human beings to feel profoundly *connected* to each other and to the world in which they live. The idea of the Over-Soul is present in many religious traditions. The notion of the Holy Spirit, regarded as an essential aspect of God by Christians, is very similar to Emerson's Over-Soul. The Holy Spirit is understood as the binding force that connects members of a Christian community to their God. The enlightenment of the Buddha is another useful parallel. Frustrated with several failed attempts to reach a point of total spiritual consciousness, the Buddha sat down under a tree and vowed not to rise again until he had achieved the supreme awareness he knew was available to him. It took a while, but eventually the Buddha reached just this sort of awareness. He knew in the deepest, most profound way possible, that everything in the world is but a transitory part a single, binding force.

Helpful in understanding the idea of the Over-Soul is the transcendentalists' strong belief in "the divine within." Emerson believed very strongly in the notion that God is present in everyone and everything. This "God" is not necessarily a Christian God. Emerson read avidly in all of the major world religions, and he often seemed much more attracted to Eastern concepts of spirituality than they did to traditional Judeo-Christian ideas. When Emerson uses the term "God," he could just as well use the terms "divine," "ultimate," or "transcendent." Emerson offers a very meaningful example of the divine within in his address to the Harvard Divinity School. In this important lecture,

Emerson implies that Jesus had realized more fully than any other person in history the fact that each person contains the essence of God. This realization, Emerson believed, not some literal divine parentage, qualified Jesus as a son of God. Jesus, according to Emerson, understood in the most profound way possible that God was within him. Emerson's lecture created quite a scandal, as many of his listeners thought he was implying that Jesus wasn't terribly unique - that any one of us could also have the same realization. In a way, they were right. Emerson did believe that any of us could achieve the greatest spiritual awareness, but he held Jesus up as an example of one person who actually did it and maintained it for quite some time.

Teaching strategy

Students will read excerpts from several of Emerson's major essays. Some of these excerpts are found in the students' textbook; others will be photocopied. Students will answer questions about the excerpts, and they will analyze important passages independently and in small groups. The essays students will work with include *Nature*, *The American Scholar*, *Self Reliance*, and *The Divinity School Address*. Students may also work with brief passages from Emerson's other essays and from his poetry, as well.

IMPROVISED JAZZ AND THE TRANSCENDENTAL EXPERIENCE

Overview

Improvisation is generally defined as "spontaneous composition and performance." Perhaps students are most aware of improvisation in stand-up comedy. (Drew Carey's popular *Whose Line is it, Anyway?* places groups of comics in situations which require quick thinking and an ability to perform "on the spot.") I have found that students certainly understand the basic idea of musical improvisation. An improvising musician "makes stuff up as he goes along," students typically say. But most students have not yet had the occasion to think about the *processes* – physical, psychological, even spiritual – that make musical improvisation "work." This section of the curriculum unit will introduce students to these processes and ask them to consider improvisation in the light provided by Whitman and Emerson's ideas of the transcendental experience.

It is important to me that students realize that, in spite of the standard definition given above, improvisation does not just "happen." I want my students to understand that sophisticated, artistic improvisation is an expression of experiences: the experience of long hours practicing; the experience of musical communication with one's fellow performers; and, perhaps most importantly, the experience of living, of learning to express one's life in musical terms. I want to instill in my students the idea that expressing oneself through musical improvisation takes formidable skill and considerable artistic sophistication.

Teaching strategy

I will present improvised jazz in two ways. Students will read selections from liner notes, short essays, and interviews, all of which will focus on the processes of “spontaneous composition,” and students will listen to a variety of pieces that correspond (either directly or more generally) to the selections they read. In every case, I will give students a brief, written introduction to each reading and recording they experience. I think such introductions will help students form a useful “framework” for understanding a subject with which they might not have previous experience.

Students will write briefly after listening to each piece. I may suggest specific directions or simply ask students to write freely. We will discuss these written remarks as a large group before moving on to the next recording. Incidentally, I have found it most effective for students to listen to a piece once, then to respond to the piece while it plays a second time. This way, students are not distracted by any other activity during their first encounter with the piece, and they are not forced to rely solely on their memory of the piece for inspiration to write.

The first selection students will read will be my own introduction to the subject. I find that writing my own introductory notes, rather than relying on those in some outside source, allows me to begin each teaching unit in a more focused, immediately useful way. I will ask students to consider and discuss any experiences they have had with improvisation: ad-libbing in theater classes, improvised solos at concerts, improvisation in the context of stand-up comedy, and so on. Students will write briefly on their sense of what improvisation in any medium requires of the artist. We will discuss the ideas students have about improvisation then move on to the unit’s first featured artist.

Miles Davis

Trumpeter Miles Davis embodies an idea frequently encountered in Whitman, Emerson, and other writers of the American Renaissance: a pursuit of truth, be it artistic or philosophical or something in between, must involve a willingness to change, to abandon the old and to clear a path into the unknown. In his “Homage to Miles Davis,” Amiri Baraka writes, “Dizzy Gillespie recently told me...that Davis ‘was like a man who had made a pact with himself...to never repeat himself.’ Davis himself has said it is like a ‘curse’ to constantly change. But change is a manifestation of his deep sensitivity, forever impressed with the real, and the real is in constant motion.” (Carner, 43) As an artist, Davis exemplifies Whitman’s injunction to live fully in the present, to leave oneself open to the currents of the ever changing “real.” With one noteworthy exception (a reunion with the arranger Gil Evans at the Montreaux Jazz Festival), Davis never “looked back” as an artist, in either his recordings or his public performances.

As a first introduction to the music of Miles Davis, students will read pianist Bill Evans' liner notes from the classic album *Kind of Blue*, an indispensable recording and one which has provided meaning in my life for many years. Evans's brief essay, entitled "Improvisation in Jazz," likens *Kind of Blue*'s loosely structured group improvisation to a delicate and spontaneous form of Japanese visual art. Of the Japanese artists Evans writes:

[They] must practice a particular discipline, that of allowing the idea to express itself in communication with their hands in such a direct way that deliberation cannot interfere. The resulting pictures lack the complex composition and textures of ordinary painting, but it is said that those who see will find something captured that escapes explanation. (Evans)

This description echoes that of the transcendental experience found in Emerson's *Nature*, "...all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me." (Emerson, 190) In Evans's notes, the artist allows his performance to flow through him "in such a direct way that deliberation cannot interfere." In Emerson's essay, the author experiences transcendence when "all mean egotism vanishes." The musicians who recorded *Kind of Blue* and the man who wrote *Nature* were successful because they located themselves entirely in the present. In doing so, they were able to leave themselves open – psychologically, artistically, and spiritually – to the limitless wonders of every moment.

After students read and discuss Evans's liner notes, they will listen to two pieces from *Kind of Blue*. "So What" is the album's first track, a two-chord piece "based on 16 measures of one scale, 8 of another and 8 more of the first." (Evans) I will give students a simple "outline" of the piece, indicating the soloists' names, the order in which they are heard, and the names of the instruments they play. (The last component might seem unnecessary, but I have often found that students who listen to little or no instrumental music have a very difficult time differentiating between the sounds of various horns.) The essential observation I hope students will make as they listen to "So What" is that the three soloists - Davis, John Coltrane (tenor saxophone) and Julian "Cannonball" Adderly (alto sax) – use the same musical "space" to improvise in three very different ways.

"Flamenco Sketches," the final track of *Kind of Blue*, is a much different work, a slower, more meditative piece, and the source of my favorite solos on the album. Students will again focus on the great diversity the improvising musicians bring to the same basic musical structure, from Davis's haunting, muted trumpet solo to Evans's delicate, single note piano solo.

Students will next listen to a live recording of the standard "Stella by Starlight," captured on the album *The Complete Concert 1964: My Funny Valentine + Four and More*. This piece, like "So What" and "Flamenco Sketches," features exquisite improvisation by each of its soloists. Unlike the previous pieces, though, "Stella," like the

other songs the group performed at this historic concert, is driven by anger. Davis had argued vehemently with his group just before the concert began, and at show time, “everybody was madder than a motherfucker with each other and so I think that anger created a fire, a tension that got into everybody’s playing, and maybe that’s one of the reasons everybody played with such intensity.” (Davis, 185) As students listen to “Stella by Starlight,” they will notice that an audience member cries out in obvious approval of Davis’s early soloing. This amusing and revealing outburst should point students toward another quality improvising musicians share with the American Transcendentalists. It is commonly held that a highly receptive audience can invigorate soloists during their performances. In a 1966 interview with Frank Kofsky, John Coltrane said of such an audience, “...when you know that somebody is maybe moved the same way you are, to such a degree or approaching the degree, it’s just like having another member in the group.” (Woideck, 134) The creative spirit flowing through the improviser during his performance enters and moves the audience member in an equally powerful way. Similarly, Whitman and Emerson both describe a process by which an “enlightened” individual, a person who is able to live in the wondrous present, can have a positive effect on those around him.

John Coltrane

Saxophonist John Coltrane pursued his artistic goals with the same passionate desire for creative truth that defined the much longer career of his one-time band-mate Miles Davis. But unlike Davis, Coltrane held goals that were as frequently spiritual as they were musical. More accurately, perhaps, Coltrane’s music represents a fusion of such goals, blending performance, meditation, and worship in an almost seamless fashion. Many of Coltrane’s greatest works are very consciously spiritual in nature. *A Love Supreme*, *Meditations*, *Ascension*, and *Om* are four such recordings, albums whose musical patterns follow – and become – patterns of worship. I believe Coltrane, more than any other jazz musician, exemplifies the quest for transcendent experience described in the works of Whitman and Emerson.

Students will read an introduction to Coltrane’s life and music the night before we begin listening to the pieces described below. This introduction will consist of my general musical biography of Coltrane and a variety of excerpts from essays, liner notes, and interviews. Because many of the pieces students will hear are very challenging, I think a focused introduction will help students approach the music along a more sympathetic path.

I expect to spend two full class periods presenting the Coltrane’s music to my students. We will begin with what is perhaps Coltrane’s best-known recording, a modal interpretation of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s “My Favorite Things.” I believe this piece will be an effective starting place for three reasons. First, it shares a great deal with the Miles Davis recordings students will have already listened to; second, it is a tune most students will quickly recognize; third, and perhaps most importantly, it is included on a

video recording, *The Coltrane Legacy*. The video will allow students the opportunity to watch the musicians as they create, a rare treat with Coltrane's group. I will encourage students to listen closely to the ways in which Coltrane uses the song's melody as a launch pad for extended improvisation. Students will also view Coltrane's performance of the meditative "Alabama" and a brief interview with drummer and long-time Coltrane band member Elvin Jones.

After responding to "My Favorite Things," "Alabama," and the comments of Elvin Jones, students will listen to Coltrane's treatment of another well-known piece, "Greensleeves." Two versions of this traditional song are included on *The Complete 1961 Village Vanguard Recordings*, a boxed set capturing four of the most frequently discussed performances of Coltrane's career. The performances of "Greensleeves" follow the same general pattern as "My Favorite Things." Coltrane states the melody at the beginning of the piece, improvises briefly, re-states the melody, then begins an extended improvisation over a hypnotic two-chord vamp. Pianist McCoy Tyner solos after Coltrane, then Coltrane re-joins the group, improvises briefly once more, states the theme a third time, and closes the piece. "Greensleeves" is certainly as tuneful as "My Favorite Things," but both of its soloists seem less reserved, more willing to explore than they seem on the earlier piece. This looseness will further emphasize the effect a live audience can have on a performance. The version of "My Favorite Things" preserved on *The Coltrane Legacy* was recorded for television, and is a much tighter, much more restrained performance than the "live" versions of "Greensleeves." Students will write briefly about these differences.

The next piece students will hear is the Coltrane original "India," included in four intriguingly different versions on the *Village Vanguard* set. "India" offers even less formal structure than "My Favorite Things" and "Greensleeves." The piece begins with an extremely simple theme, then quickly becomes an impassioned blowing session, with Coltrane and bass clarinetist Eric Dolphy exploring their instruments powerfully and exhaustively. Students will consider the creative freedom such a minimally structured piece lends the soloists, and they will discuss this freedom in terms of the music's aesthetic "value." Specifically, students will consider the idea that, as the improviser achieves greater and greater creative freedom, his music becomes more and more difficult to listen to, a criticism leveled at Coltrane throughout the 1960s. An interesting parallel to consider might be the notion that those who accept the Transcendentalists' challenge to live fully in the moment, to "suck out the marrow of life," as Henry David Thoreau intended to do during his time at Walden, are ultimately less "valuable" to society because of their extreme self-involvement. (Perhaps this might be a useful opportunity for students to grapple with one of Emerson's most challenging phrases. On achieving transcendence, Emerson writes, "all mean egotism vanishes." Several students struggle with the idea that egotism [something Coltrane's music was frequently accused of] can actually subside as a person becomes more and more intensely aware.) This provocative idea has fuelled several interesting discussions among previous groups of students. Using Coltrane's art and the Transcendentalists' still-radical suggestions as

reference points, the issue should come alive for students and encourage useful, critical thinking as a result.

Finally, students will listen to one of Coltrane's most abstract pieces, "The Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost," from the album *Meditations*. This challenging performance finds Coltrane, saxophonist Pharoah Sanders, the quartet's standard rhythm section, and drummer Rashied Ali practicing full group improvisation with almost no formal structure. Of course, structure inevitably develops, even in the most extreme settings, as the performers communicate musically with one another, influencing one another's performance, but "The Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost" remains a challenging piece to appreciate. Students will respond to the performance in writing and discussion, perhaps revisiting the ideas of individual absorption in the moment referred to in the preceding paragraph. Students will also consider the extent to which the sort of positive, participatory audience involvement we have discussed can occur in the context of a performance like this one.

JAMES BALDWIN'S "SONNY'S BLUES"

Critical analysis

"Sonny's Blues" is the centerpiece of James Baldwin's *Going to Meet the Man*, a remarkable collection of short stories published in 1965. "Sonny's Blues" is built around the terrible tensions that plague the lives of Sonny, a pianist and recovering heroin addict, and his older brother, a high school teacher. As the story begins, Sonny, recently released from prison, is staying in his brother's home. His brother is desperately afraid that Sonny will resume his drug habit, and he makes every effort to make sure this does not happen. Sonny, who does not resume his drug habit (and does not want to do so) struggles with issues of identity and expression. Gone are the sleepy security of heroin addiction and the reliable regularity of prison life. Present are the innumerable trials of daily living. Sonny expresses the desolation he has experienced:

It's terrible sometimes, inside, that's what's the trouble. You walk these streets, black and funky and cold, and there's not really a living ass to talk to, and there's nothing shaking, and there's no way of getting it out – that storm inside. You can't talk it and you can't make love with it, and when you finally try to get with it and play it, you realize *nobody's* listening. So *you've* got to listen. You got to find a way to listen. (Baldwin, 133)

A few moments later, looking down on a Harlem street from a window in his brother's apartment, Sonny says, "All that hatred down there, all that hatred and misery and love. It's a wonder it doesn't blow the avenue apart." (Baldwin, 135) Music, both individual expression and the sublime camaraderie that can develop between musicians whose playing gels, will be Sonny's refuge from the dangerous and unpredictable world.

The story's final scene, which finds Sonny sitting in with a group of old friends in a Manhattan nightclub, is the best fictional account I have ever found of the transcendent beauty of improvised music. Sonny has not "been near a piano for over a year," and his performance is awkward at fist, tenuous and hesitant. When the band's leader, a bass player named Creole, urges the band into a blues, Sonny's performance begins to come to life. Sonny's playing locks into the groove Creole has established. The narrator, hearing this, observes:

Creole began to tell us what the blues were all about. They were not about anything very new. He and his boys up there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness. (Baldwin, 139)

In this revealing passage, the narrator echoes two important ideas students will have written about and discussed after listening to selections by Miles Davis and John Coltrane. First, the narrator recognizes the importance of treading new creative ground, of making every piece new every time it is played. Second, the narrator makes it clear that the audience is a crucial part of the performance of improvised music.

The story's last two paragraphs describe the transcendental, restorative experience Sonny has with the piano during his solo. As Sonny plays, the narrator is able to hear the pianist's life experiences. Music becomes the medium of exchange, so to speak, the forum in which Sonny can express himself most completely and the forum in which his brother can understand Sonny's life most meaningfully.

Baldwin's presentation of this transcendental experience shares a crucial concept with Emerson's concept: the notion that transcendence is a temporary state. Baldwin's narrator, having experienced the exhausting emotional outpouring of Sonny's performance, observes, "And I was yet aware that this was only a moment, that the world waited outside, as hungry as a tiger, and that trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky." (Baldwin, 140)

Teaching strategy

Given the background students will have in both Transcendentalism and improvised jazz when they begin reading "Sonny's Blues," it is possible that very little formal instruction will be necessary as we make our way through the story. I will provide students a brief introduction to the story, the collection in which it is found, and Baldwin's literary aesthetics, but I expect students will recognize most of the story's key passages without my intruding upon their reading. I suspect a set of questions will be adequate; this will ensure that students *do* see the confluence of the two currents in Baldwin's story.

A final written assignment will ask students to examine the potential for creativity the encounter in their own lives and the extent to which they can successfully apply the ideas they have worked with during this curriculum unit to both their thought processes and their various daily activities.

LESSON PLANS

Many of the activities I will use are described thoroughly in the text of the curriculum unit. Sample activities for several parts of the unit follow:

Questions for listening activities:

- **List the instruments you hear.**
- **Describe the overall tone (emotional, musical, etc.) of the piece.**
- **Describe the various solos you hear.** (It is likely I will ask students to describe specific solos, allowing them multiple opportunities to listen to those solos while they write.)

It will probably be useful to play the various pieces in “segments,” rather than in their entirety. Coltrane’s music, especially, typically involves *very* long solos, and most high school students do not have the musical “foundation” (or the attention span) to focus on such solos.

Questions for Whitman’s “I Sing the Body Electric”:

1. Review the lengthy, descriptive list Whitman includes in the second section of the poem. What, generally, does Whitman admire about the men and women he describes? (77-78)
2. Explain: “As I see my soul reflected in Nature, / As I see through a mist, One with inexpressible completeness, sanity, beauty, / See the bent head and arms folded over the breast, the Female I see.” (79)
3. Explain: “The man’s body is sacred and the woman’s body is sacred, / No matter who it is, it is sacred - is it the meanest one in the laborers’ gang? / Is it one of the dull-faced immigrants just landed on the wharf? / Each belongs here or anywhere just as much as the well-off, just as much as you, / Each has his or her place in the procession.” (80)
4. Explain: “Have you ever loved the body of a woman? / Have you ever loved the body of a man? / Do you not see that these are exactly the same to all in all nations and times all over the earth?” (81)
5. Explain: [two related passages] “O my body! ... I believe the likes of you are to

stand or fall with the likes of the soul (and that they are the soul,) / I believe the likes of you shall stand or fall with my poems, and that they are my poems..."

"O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul, / O I say now these are the soul!" (82-83)

Questions for Whitman's "Song of Myself"

1. "You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books, / You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me, / You shall listen to all sides and filter them for your self." (23) **Briefly explain the reading experience Whitman expects of those who partake of his poetry.**
2. "All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses, / And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier... / Has any one supposed it lucky to be born? / I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I know it." (27) **What does Whitman mean by this?**
3. Re-read, then carefully explain, section 17.
4. Explain: "In all people I see myself, none more and not one a barley-corn less, / And the good or bad I say of myself I say of them." (38)
5. Explain: "I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least, / Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself." (71)
6. Explain: "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)"
7. Why, in the poem's final passages, does Whitman tell the reader, "If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles" and "Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged, / Missing me one place search another, / I stop somewhere waiting for you." Is Whitman stalking his readers? Is he some kind of shape-shifting alien? Are his poems worth as little as a certain substance people might really find "under boot-soles"? What's up here?

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