

A Summary and Reflection on  
*“Improvisation, Creativity and Consciousness: Jazz as an Integral Template  
for Music, Education, and Society”*

*for*

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**ABSTRACT**

Although only 2% of Americans bought jazz albums in 2014<sup>1</sup>, Edward Sarath is as confident as ever that jazz music can help our world on a scale that most would probably not consider. Fellow for the American Council of Learned Societies, the Ford Foundation, the National Center for Institutional Diversity, and the National Endowment of the Arts (X3),<sup>2</sup> sets out in his book, *Improvisation, Creativity and Consciousness*, to not only prove the need for major changes within academia’s approach to jazz education and overall musical pedagogy, but also how powerful an effect such changes could have on society. I have structured this review in three parts: The introduction will serve as background on the author and subject matter, accessorized with my own opinions. Part 1 is a discussion of the books themes and contents accompanied by my own commentary, and Part 2 is my takeaway and opinions on the book.

**INTRODUCTION**

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<sup>1</sup> David La Rosa, “Jazz Has Become The Least-Popular Genre In The U.S,” *Jazz Line News*, March 9, 2015, 10:54AM, accessed October 29, 2017, <https://news.jazzline.com/news/jazz-least-popular-music-genre/>.

<sup>2</sup> “Ed Sarath,” Ed Sarath RSS, 2003, accessed October 28, 2017, <http://edsarath.com/wordpress/>.

Besides being recognized as a world class flugelhornist, composer, and arranger, Sarath is credited for designing and founding the University of Michigan's Bachelor of Fine Arts in Jazz and Contemplative Studies curriculum, which is considered to be "the first program at a mainstream institution to significantly integrate meditation practice and related studies into an academic curriculum."<sup>3</sup> Courses associated with this major include Psychology and Spirituality Development, Islamic and Jewish Mysticism, Asian Studies, Buddhist Studies, and others.<sup>4</sup> Even within his book, Sarath incorporates Egyptian Cosmology, Yogic philosophy, Darwinian theory, Abrahamic and Asian mystical lineages, and shamanic and indigenous traditions to name a few non-Western fields of study.<sup>5</sup>

Through his explanation of this unique approach to music education, there exists an underlying theme. As the title suggests: "Jazz...as integral template for society," the theme is indeed of bold character. How many of us can say that we've even considered this proposition? You may also be asking, 'what would merit the reading, let alone

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<sup>3</sup> "Ed Sarath," Ed Sarath RSS.

<sup>4</sup> "U-M School of Music, Theatre & Dance - Department of Jazz & Contemporary Improvisation - Degree Programs." Accessed October 29, 2017.  
[http://smt.d.umich.edu/departments/jazz\\_improv/bfa\\_jazz\\_contemplative.htm](http://smt.d.umich.edu/departments/jazz_improv/bfa_jazz_contemplative.htm).

<sup>5</sup> Inclusion of complex mathematics, physics, and sciences, namely the neurosciences, which he relates to an individual's employment of extra-sensory abilities, like remote-cognition. He couples this with case-studies on psychokinesis, and discussion on the idea of consciousness without physical substrate. Explanation of how the "infinite array of influences that comprise the totality of the event", the event being improvisation in a given environment, affects the event itself. He explores parts-to-whole (PW) and whole-to-parts (WP) perspective in the context of how collective consciousness affects the experiences of the participant/observer anomaly that exists within any musical playing situation. Not only does Sarath describe this phenomenon as a result of the workings within a 'system' (a system being the participants and their states of consciousness) from which it spawns, he also superimposes a 'hierarchical/macrohierarchical stratification matrix', which is the notion that "all systems or system components are part of a broader scheme of systems." He compares this phenomenon within the context of performer-listener consciousness and the consciousness of the individual improviser, by examining it using four parts: individual musician within an improvising ensemble, ensemble level, ensemble-audience level, and the ensemble-audience-environment totality. Combined with controversial topics like race relations and the masculine/feminine dynamic, a truly all-inclusive, no-holds-bar environment is created.

writing, of a 500 page book supported by nearly 300 scholarly sources, on how jazz music: “America’s art form,” one that “is as much a part of our cultural heritage as baseball and our Constitution”<sup>6</sup> relates to “intersubjective consciousness” or “systematic meditation practices”<sup>7</sup> for instance? Sarath himself offers the answer best within his own introduction: “The point is not to endorse a particular meditative pathway or philosophy but rather to underscore...that overarching worldview directly shapes where we look for solutions to problems and avenues for progress, and also what doors remain habitually closed to further exploration.”<sup>8</sup>

Although Sarath is firm in his delivery of how spirituality and scientific reform play directly into the process of a jazz musician, he acknowledges that “spiritual function that has long been attributed to the arts...was and still is quite foreign” in the US, and confesses that even his associates believed “there was no place for meditation in an academic setting.” When he first proposed his ideas to faculty and staff at the University of Michigan in 2000, (they) were met with a “cautious silence.”<sup>9,10,11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Tom Larson, *History and Tradition of Jazz* (Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Pub. Co., 2002), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Ed Sarath, *Improvisation, Creativity, and Consciousness: Jazz as Integral Template for Music, Education, and Society* (SUNY Series in Integral Theory, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 14.

<sup>8</sup> Sarath, 16.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>10</sup> David Grubin. “‘Improvisation, Creativity, and Consciousness’ by Ed Sarath.” *The Buddha*. April 8, 2010. Accessed October 29, 2017. <http://www.pbs.org/thebuddha/blog/2010/apr/8/improvisation-creativity-and-consciousness-ed-sara/>.

<sup>11</sup> Sarath, *Improvisation, Creativity, and Consciousness*, 9.

## **PART 1**

*Improvisation, Creativity, and Consciousness: Jazz as Integral Template for Music, Education, and Society*, is based around two main ideologies. One is the role of educational systems, and two: the relationship between art and Integral Theory. Integral Theory in a nutshell, as described by integral philosopher Ken Wilber, who Sarath credits as the leading figure in the field, employs the study of various cultures and “what they have to tell us about human potential - about spiritual growth, psychological growth, social growth - within a composite, comprehensive map.”<sup>12</sup> Sarath also relates integral philosophy to the “nondual relationship between human consciousness and the cosmic wholeness.”<sup>13</sup> While requiring hearty explanations, breakdowns and discourse in order to convey these systems of thought, Sarath makes it a point to regularly reinforce the idea that the concepts being discussed are all naturally occurring in nature, and already exist fully within human behavior and interaction.

Atop the aforementioned two base ideologies, the book is broken into three main parts, each consisting of several chapters, and the book as a whole reads very much as a cumulative discourse. Part 1 deals with Integral theory and is explained by introducing a comprehensive model called All Quadrants All Levels (AQAL), which features four states of human perception: the the interior individual, the interior collective, the exterior individual, and the exterior collective. Sarath explores how this model is applicable directly to how jazz musicians evolve within their individual creative process, and within a collective environment. He outlines four potential identities that an artist can embody

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<sup>12</sup> Sarath, *Improvisation, Creativity, and Consciousness*, 23.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

at any given time: “Interpretive Performance Specialist, Freelancer, Mainstream Jazz Musician, and Contemporary Improviser-Composer-Performer—the first three of which are limiting to individuation/innovation, and the last of which is highly conducive to this integral creative goal.”<sup>14</sup>

Amidst all of the complex theorems, Sarath does makes sure to acquaint the reader with the principle idea and core practice he feels is essential toward experiencing the benefits of the knowledge at hand; meditation. He points out that “the prevailing Western view is that an individual cannot be aware without being aware of something. In contrast, the subjective traditions of the East—the Vedic tradition of India, and the Buddhist traditions of China and Japan—include formalized meditation techniques predicted to lead to the direct experience of a foundational state of self-awareness devoid of mental content.”<sup>15</sup> Besides discourse on how meditation can alleviate physical and cognitive limitations present within musical practices, Sarath goes on to relate achieved states of consciousness through the act of meditation with spontaneous musical exploration. He even alludes to how Indian and microtonal music, as well as Arabic and Hindustani musics emerge from a “common improvisatory ancestor.”<sup>16</sup>

Before Part 2 arrives, Sarath briefly introduces the current state of education; a topic which he devotes entire chapters on later; a topic which can summed up with his proclamation that the “Matrix of Materialism continues to constrain education to a small portion of what it can, and must, be.”<sup>17</sup> He also adds that “grades, awards, or even

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<sup>14</sup> Sarath, *Improvisation, Creativity, and Consciousness*, 234.

<sup>15</sup> Frederick Travis, R.K. Wallace, “Autonomic and EEG Patterns During Eyes-closed Rest and Transcendental Meditation (TM) Practice: The Basis for a Neural Model of TM Practice,” *Consciousness and Cognition* 8, issue 3 (Sept. 1999): 403.

<sup>16</sup> Sarath, 174.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 145.

monetary incentives, pales compared to the sheer force of archetypally driven, individuating thrust for growth,"<sup>18</sup> growth being a concept alluded to throughout the book. But Sarath doesn't just state the problem, he offers a solution, in the form a detailed yet concise chart of the relationship between 'conventional music school' approach and that of the 'integral music school,'<sup>19</sup> as well as a 25 page, three-part 'change strategy.'<sup>20</sup> He proclaims that "the integral approach (to music education) celebrates the transcendent richness in all music and the inherent musicality in every individual."<sup>21</sup>

Parts 2 and 3 deal more directly with jazz music and their roles within the state of the jazz community at large. In this reviewer's opinion, Sarath has succeeded in preparing us for his main discourse through our travels in Part 1, allowing us to now reap the rewards of our newfound "tools....(that) can (now) be directed at jazz itself."<sup>22</sup> He discusses how jazz education today is missing out on incorporated broader views of integral-theory-based teachings of the music, and how the "conservative orientation of jazz education in musical academe...has inherited "materialist" tendencies," and is skewed with "external, environmental constraints."<sup>23,24</sup> Sarath makes use of charts to convey how he sees jazz education has evolved over the years; categorizations which include conventionalism, two types of postmodernism, and finally, the 'integral' approach. He argues that jazz education has become devoid of the the "inner

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<sup>18</sup> Sarath, *Improvisation, Creativity, and Consciousness*, 227.

<sup>19</sup> Sarath, 295.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 309-324

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 302.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 146.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 147.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 154.

mechanics by which improvisation, composition, and performance catalyze transformed consciousness;” an understanding that the many of the most revered jazz musicians of all time held dear.<sup>25</sup>

Although jazz is the main focal point, Sarath doesn't ignore the impact classical music has on jazz and its important place within musical academe, as he distinguishes conventional vs. forward-thinking schools of thought regarding the roles and processes of improvisation and composition: “Mozart and Bach would spontaneously improvise entire works and then recall and notate their improvisations,”<sup>26</sup> he recalls within the context of the idea that improvisation has the ability to lead the musician toward a greater state of transcendence than does composition. Although grounded in this viewpoint, Sarath does admit that the “general process categories may blur at points,” and even tells of transcendental experiences of Mozart, Brahms, and Hindemith.<sup>27</sup> Sarath even makes sure to discuss classical music's integration within that of other cultures and its relationship with jazz, and notes that “Debussy genuinely appropriated Javanese gamelan influences without anything resembling formal study of that tradition, just as Coltrane assimilated influences of Indian music similarly without formal study thereof.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Sarath, *Improvisation, Creativity, and Consciousness*, 160.

<sup>26</sup> Sarath, 197.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 197.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 240.

## PART 2

Viewpoints that cross through the recognized borders of science and spirituality pose challenges for both audiences and authors. They ask readers to re-examine their conditionings and beliefs and self reflect, and they require writers to transmute information sensitively with an understanding that their viewpoints may be met with resistance. While seasoned metaphysical theorists, and forward-thinking psychonauts may find Sarath's plunge into the disassemblance of the mind straightforward, to a common jazz musician, there most probably will be a learning curve, and perhaps some apprehension. Despite Sarath's ability to convey that jazz music already incorporates such detailed processes, and that musicians already experience and deal with these advance systems of thought, digesting it all might be overwhelming to some, and a good brain workout to others.

Interestingly, while the premise of the book is to invite in a sense of freedom from the bounds and limitations of academe-based, and otherwise Western/European classically structured confines of musical pedagogy, there is an aire throughout the book of strong unwavering belief systems. Sarath states that "the purpose of human existence is to connect with the cosmic wholeness," and that "the purpose of engagement in any area of endeavor is to realize it as a vehicle for this development."<sup>29</sup> He also backs the proclamation that jazz (not classical music) embodies "the real power of music," and that "the majority of fully realized musicians will center their creativity in the primary activities of improvisation and composition."<sup>30, 31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Sarath, *Improvisation, Creativity, and Consciousness*, 36,76.

<sup>30</sup> Sarath, 73.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 103.



While Sarath does makes clear his unrelenting viewpoints concerning the power of improvisation-based musical expression, he does make it a habit to assure the reader that he himself is aware that this outlook is indeed controversial, and acknowledges potential skepticism. He openly states that “whether one is inclined to embrace or reject these possibilities, (he) believe(s) the case that is emerging for their validity must be at least seriously considered.”<sup>32</sup> Within the context of the role of education in the discussion, he boldly acknowledges that “curricular models will not only need to undergo change but the entire educational enterprise must be overhauled from the ground level on up,” and that it will require “deep inquiry” on the part of both students and faculty.<sup>33, 34</sup>

The book, while dense and complex, does include a sort of step-by-step progressive method for achieving this heightened integrated collective consciousness state within performance environments, and could certainly be utilized by real-world performing musicians and music educators. Despite criticism, and other factors working against his philosophy, Sarath’s book is a direct example of the his contribution to “sustain dialogue and generate practical initiatives that help the field of musical study expand its demographic and creative horizons.” I also do believe that Sarath’s very ability to not only relate topics concerning music and nature as they exist within a spiritual ascetic (as opposed to a Western-scientific aesthetic), while presenting supporting information, and experimental evidence to support the validity of said topics, surely must be recognized as a feat within itself among music scholars. To even attempt

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<sup>32</sup> Sarath, *Improvisation, Creativity, and Consciousness*, 217.

<sup>33</sup> Sarath, 347.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 361.

to cater a non-Western-scientifically based breakdown of reality is hard enough to pass through the mainstream systems of education and Western-societal informational outlets, which he has already done, but to discuss them through such a specific lense makes for an undeniably interesting presentation to say the least.<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps even more admirable, is his apparent concern for the current state of human consciousness, and while it may be a stretch to some readers, Sarath believes that the “ecopathology that threatens the physical environment is inseparable from, and thus fueled by, the ethnopathology and epistemo-pathology that are sustained in the prevailing paradigm of musical study.” The book, is very much an elaborate and long-winded approach to this understanding, and an valiant attempt to prove that by fusing improvisation, creativity and consciousness together, a “new paradigm of understanding and practice for education and society,” will emerge.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ed Sarath, " Ed Sarath RSS, 2003, accessed October 28, 2017, <http://edsarath.com/wordpress/educational-initiatives/dma/>

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 205.

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