

# Placement Context Report: Jazz and Cultural Capital

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In the UK Jazz is regarded as a high form of art, yet seemingly only found in upmarket specific jazz venues that cater for primarily for high-end diners, or Informal and often unpaid, jam sessions in the local pub. I wish to discuss the idea of 'capital' other than simply economic outcome. This relates directly to my placement observing Jazz undergraduate students, and in turn can help identify the relationship between study and professional praxis.

Whilst researching the term 'cultural capital', it was interesting to note that there seems to be different theories surrounding the term.

initially it presented itself as:

*'A theoretical hypothesis which made it possible to explain the unequal achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success. Capital meaning the specific 'profits' which children from the different classes can obtain in the academic market.'*<sup>1</sup>

However their measurement of the yield from scholastic investment takes account only of monetary investments and profits, or those directly convertible into money, such as the costs of schooling and the cash equivalent of time devoted to study. Essentially 'Capital' was being associated only with the cost of schooling, and attributed directly to the students potential earnings in later life.

*'Arts in education has been shown to contribute in important ways to the factors that underpin learning, such as cognitive abilities, confidence, motivation, problem-solving and communication skills. These are more compelling than claims to significant improvement in attainment on standard tests where the evidence is much less convincing. It also questions the hierarchy of subjects that means we're interested in whether studying music improves ability in maths, but not whether studying maths improves ability in music.'*<sup>2</sup>

It could be argued that here, the 'cultural capital' is being used as 'educational capital', ie the application, conscientiousness, time management and discipline required to learn a musical instrument can be reassigned to a subject that will arguably attain more conventional 'monetary capital' in the long run.

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1. Social Theory Re-Wired New Connections to Classical and Contemporary Perspectives  
Edited By Wesley Longhofer, Daniel Winchester, April 22, 2016 by Routledge P186

2. AHRC Cultural Value Report, March 2016 (<https://www.ukri.org/publications/ahrc-cultural-value-project-report/>)

I teach peripatetically at an independent secondary school, and have witnessed first hand extremely accomplished Jazz students who have achieved highly both academically and practically in Music, who have decided not to continue with Formal Music education, and have pursued potentially more stable career paths such as law or Medicine. The school has a widely regarded and flourishing music department, with many highly regarded professional jazz musicians as instrumental teachers. There are ample opportunities to engage in performing a vast array of genres, and also to discuss with the tutors 'real world' aspects of being professional musician. Having access and having awareness to this at a relatively early secondary school age allows the students to make informed choices through their exposure to Cultural capital. In contrast I have also seen students who struggle with more academic core subjects, but because of the highly creative and inclusive atmosphere within the music department, have thrived and ultimately have decided to further pursue their formal musical education. In either instance, the idea that a career choice should not be entirely based upon future income, and other forms of 'social capital' such as respect amongst peers and a social working environment can be important factors to consider as well as the flexibility of being self-employed (as are most Professional musicians based in the UK currently).

The gifted music student who chooses to study Law will have an understanding that being a Jazz musician holds high cultural capital, and will respect this despite any income differential.

The term cultural capital comes from French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, who, essentially outlined how culture is used in society to distinguish the "refined" people and practices from the "vulgar" versions of the same. These findings are particularly relevant to Jazz, as at one time or another the genre has been seen as appealing to both the 'refined' and 'vulgar'!

*'Bourdieu was a French sociologist and public intellectual who was primarily concerned with the dynamics of power in society. His work on the sociology of culture continues to be highly influential, including his theories of social stratification that deals with status and power. Bourdieu was concerned with the nature of culture, how it is reproduced and transformed, how it connects to social stratification and the reproduction and exercise of power. One of his key contributions was the relationship between different types of such capital, including economic, cultural, social, and symbolic.'* <sup>3</sup>

*'Bourdieu's (1986) conceptualization of social capital is based on the recognition that capital is not only economic and that social exchanges are not purely self-interested.'* <sup>3a</sup>

In 'Distinction' *'Bourdieu's work emphasises structural constraints and unequal access to institutional resources based on class, gender, and race.'* <sup>3b</sup>

It is difficult to compare his initial findings to the present day as this book was published in 1984 so not only pre-internet, but most definitely an era where equal opportunities weren't as prevalent as today.

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3, 3a, 3b Tristan Claridge, *Bourdieu on social capital* – theory of capital (<https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/category/theory/>)

From 'Distinction':

*"...nothing more clearly affirms one's 'class', nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music". 4*

Bourdieu claims that knowledge of music represents a distinctly "pure" knowledge because its presence is marked less by an outward display (as with museum or restaurant visiting) and more by the inner recognition of listening. Here, Bourdieu is limiting his observations to classical music, but his broader point is that in separating itself from the "real world", classical music is opposed to the immediate gratifications of "light" or popular entertainment.

A distinction is made here between high and low culture in the ways that these worlds are organised and the connections of the former to the finest achievements of past European civilisation.

Whilst those with high levels of cultural capital feel at home with culture and understand the language needed to debate it, those with low levels of cultural capital can seem disenfranchised and feel out of their depth. The lower classes often self-exclude themselves from the throws of high culture precisely because it feels alien to them. Hence, the common phrase: "it's not for the likes of us".

Bourdieu's approach is based on his wider sociological theories of habitus (the assumptions, habits, taken-for-granted ideas and ways of being) and fields of practice (a sociological concept for a social arena in which agents and their social positions are located).

In terms of the development of a musical habitus, a child who grows up in a household in which they are encouraged to play a "noble" instrument like the piano or violin is already accumulating promising mastery over legitimate musical culture. Their upbringing is preparing them for membership of a polite world, a world which, according to Bourdieu:

*"is justified in existing by its perfection, its harmony and beauty, a world which has produced Beethoven and Mozart and continues to produce people capable of playing and appreciating them" 5*

Secondly, however, the lower and dominated classes are, for Bourdieu, left to consume less revered and "challenging" types of music. At the time that Bourdieu was writing, distinct affinities existed between petite-bourgeois consumers and what he termed "middlebrow" music. The popularity of Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" amongst technicians and engineers was a case in point. Lower class respondents in domestic or manual work, on the other hand, tended to favour the popular waltzes of Strauss or *"music whose simple, repetitive structures invite a passive absent participation" 6*

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4. Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Harvard: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd. p18

5. Bourdieu, P, 1984. *Distinction*: p77

6. Bourdieu, P, 1984. *Distinction* p386

I suppose the modern day equivalent comparisons can be made within the jazz world, for example Muzak 7 ('Elevator' or 'Ceefax' music in the UK) is specifically used to achieve the passive absent participation that Bourdieu talks of, yet today some of the most revered jazz artists are considered by the populous as Muzac Jazz.

A quick search on *Amazon.co.uk* reveals that one of the most downloaded albums of the genre is entitled 'Jazz Muzac' featuring Art Blakey, Thelonius Monk, Gil Evans and Stan Getz amongst other giants.

*'Although jazz has a rather ambiguous meaning musically, the results of comparing its social usage genre-wise seem to suggest that jazz is preferred more among the middle class and those with relatively high educational attainment, than among the working class and those with a low degree of scholarly merits.'* 8

Jacques Ranciere claims that *'the poor and disenfranchised should feel perfectly able to teach themselves whatever it is they want to know.'* Furthermore *'anyone can lead, and the oppressed should not feel bound to experts or reliant on others for their intellectual emancipation.'* 9

Having recently observed a series of lectures in Jazz improvisation and arranging at HE level, I can concur that the students were, indeed given a substantial amount of material to work through, however how successful they were at understanding the concepts that the material conveys is down to the amount of work they are prepared to undertake in their own time and out of the classroom.

Paul Berliner conducted extensive interviews with Jazz Musicians as a key part of researching into his book *'Thinking in Jazz : The Infinite Art of Improvisation.'* He divided his observations into 'Internal goods' and 'external goods' offered by choosing a career as a jazz musician.

The 'internal goods' of jazz evidenced in the descriptions of work offered by interviewees could be said to include:

- attaining a sense of creative or emotional fulfilment
- emulating or surpassing the established standards
- the achievement of improvement in skill or technique
- the feeling of community or collective unity in the group,
- recognition and appreciation of technical or aesthetic achievements of others,
- experiencing the transcendental, 'in-the-zone' power of improvisation and groove.

External goods such as money, status and power were also valued, and tended to be disdained or recognised as more likely obtainable in other (better paid, higher profile) artistic fields.

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7. Muzak: *'A brand name for recorded music that is played quietly and continuously in public places, such as airports, hotels, and shops, to make people feel relaxed'* (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>)

8. Erik Nylander and Andreas Melldahl, *Playing with Capital: Inherited and acquired capital in jazz school auditioning*, 2015, Poetics Amsterdam, p48, 83-106.

9. Rancière, Jacques, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Stanford University Press 1991 p67

For all the interviewees, intuitive and transformative exposure to jazz, and the subsequent desire to become a fully-immersed jazz practitioner was commonly expressed. But because professional jazz musicianship is low-paid work and largely devoid of financial security and continuity, one might expect these internal goods to be highly valued initially, but only able temporarily to offset the demands of economic necessity. In genuine practices the internal goods to be obtained from attaining excellence will, far beyond that which is economically 'rational', outweigh the external goods to be obtained via other avenues. <sup>10</sup>

Finding gainful employment as full time Jazz musician is often difficult, and with the very few exceptions who might obtain a publishing deal, the aspiring jazz professional often must find their own opportunities. An increasingly popular way to do this is via sponsorship.

The sponsorship of major Jazz events such as festivals is a key indication of how large companies view the Jazz idiom. One of the main sponsors of the Montreal Jazz Festival is a company called SAQ who specialise in boutique spirits and Fine Wines. A glance at their website shows their products (and prices!) are targeted to a wealthy demographic. <sup>11</sup> This gives an indication that a company such as SAQ believes that on the whole, the audience is a suitable representation of their key demographic, and worth investing in sponsorship and ultimately advertising to.

I sent their customer service department an email with the following questions:

*Which type of demographic do you hope to appeal to by advertising at the Montreal jazz festival, and do you feel that sponsoring a jazz festival would be seen as raising your brand exclusivity?*

They very kindly answered: *'We are a Montreal based business, so general exposure within our local area is beneficial to us, however the smaller venues that more intimate concerts are performed is a good opportunity for us to promote our brand'*

So it seems that some companies realise that the performance of Jazz has potentially wealthy admirers and appreciators, which goes some way to assert the notion that Jazz holds a reasonably high value of cultural capital within society.

As Jazz is now a widely recognised subject of study offered by HE Institutions, it could be seen as a practice appreciated by those closer to what Bourdieu terms the 'field of power' and, as an aspirational way for companies such as SAQ to offer potential customers a way to transcend their immediate socio-cultural circumstances.

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10. Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz : The Infinite Art of Improvisation*. University of Chicago Press, 1994. p6

11. SAQ Boutique Beverages [www.saq.com](http://www.saq.com)

## ***Jazz and Cultural Capital***

As WW1 ended and mainstream radio began broadcasting, jazz music became the soundtrack of the 1920's. The cultural capital of Jazz transcended its economic lower class background to become popular music.

Jazz cultural value has significantly increased since then and it is now thought of amongst elitists as a disciplined art-form, similar to how Opera was perceived in the late 19th Century in that it was treated by the higher class as a signifier of cultural wealth and acknowledged by the institution as an educational and cultural asset, or interest.

Sub-culturally, Jazz has always been evolving, or some might say rebelling against mainstream popularity. From the Free Jazz movement of the 1950's and 60's whose influential exponents included Ornette Coleman and Charlie Parker (Although Parker was known later for his Bebop contributions, he was an early protagonist of the Free Jazz movement) to the experimental Fusion of the 1970's and 80's whose protagonists such as Herbie Hancock and Chick Corea are considered very much part of the mainstream teaching of Jazz in further education nowadays.

It's difficult to compare Jazz to earlier forms of popular music, as the popularity of early Jazz coincided with the availability and affordability of the mass-produced home record player. The original Phonograph was invented around 1877 by Edison, and whilst early examples were prohibitively expensive (as were making recordings) to the masses, they soon became affordable around the turn of the century creating a perfect storm for the new genre of Jazz to ride the waves.

Though clear distinctions between popular, classical, folk and other broad areas of music are recognised today, it was not always so. Much music of the 17th and 18th centuries now called "baroque" or "classical" was broadly popular and not enjoyed solely by the upper classes. Songs of composers such as Handel and Haydn were not only widely heard in their day, but also were performed in private homes and public settings by amateurs for their families and friends.

Nowadays Handel and Haydn would be broadly classed as 'Classical' music and thus hold high cultural capital.

'Bebop' started in racially segregated nightclubs in the 1950's, where it was performed in 'dive' bars. It is now seen as one of the most aspired to forms of improvisational jazz, and is not only taught at Universities, but is considered a high art form with many of its exponents hailed as Jazz Masters (such as Miles Davies and Charlie Parker).

So we can identify a pattern here. Once 'popular' styles of music have reached a certain age, or seem have run their popularity course they get picked up by the next generation and given revival as a higher art form, thus raising their level of cultural capital.

It's possible that certain era's may enjoy a renaissance such as the 'roaring twenties' in which case we would hope to see an upsurge in the demand for Jazz musicians.

How cultural capital can be quantified in the future I believe, is largely down to educational institutions, and the commitment to the advancement of the art.

*'Critical art is an art that aims to produce a new perception of the world, and therefore to create a commitment to its transformation.'* <sup>12</sup>

The cultural capital of Jazz will continue in an upwards trajectory as long as institutions continue to offer high level training and qualifications. As long as Jazz is considered to be a pursuit of high art (by way of exposure through performances and qualifications facilitated by HE Institutions) amongst the current and next generation of alumni, its cultural capital should increase. Whether Jazz musicians' wages will increase alongside is another matter, however an increase in cultural capital will increase the validity of the genre, which ultimately will improve the prospects for the future Jazz professional.

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12. Rancière, Jacques, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* 2009  
Continuum, London 2009 p134

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