

The Relationship between Contrafacts, Quodlibets,  
and Quotes in Jazz Composition and Improvisation  
Perry Thoorsell

The contrafact is an important part of jazz music, especially jazz post 1940. There are musical, historical, and legal reasons for why this is so. This paper looks at the relationship between contrafactual composition (the composing of an alternative melody to an existing set of chords) and the usage of quodlibets, or quotes, in improvisation.

The ideas behind contrafact are not original to jazz. Varieties of this musical technique were known in Europe since the 1200's. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, "Quodlibet, (Latin: "what you will") musical composition in which several well-known melodies are combined, either simultaneously or, less frequently, sequentially, for humorous effect. Quodlibet can also refer to an amalgamation of different song texts in a vocal composition. While simultaneous combinations of two or more melodies go back to the 13th century (motets using, for example, a chant melody and a secular tune), quodlibets were especially popular in the 15th and 16th centuries. In Germany numerous instances are found in manuscript collections of polyphonic (multipart) songs. An English example is the Cries of London by Orlando Gibbons. Perhaps the best-known quodlibet is the finale of J.S. Bach's Goldberg Variations for harpsichord (published 1741). Terms related to quodlibet technique include fricassée (French: "hash"), ensalada (Spanish: "salad"), centone (Italian: "patchwork"), and, in later centuries, medley and potpourri."

<sup>1</sup> The quodlibet is an ancestor to the modern "mashup" in which multiple songs are juxtaposed. The mashed-up tunes may be related or unrelated depending on the arranger's intentions.

The humorous nature of quodlibet is significant for contemporary society in light of intellectual property (IP) law. IP law in mediaeval Europe was certainly not codified to the extent that current law is. This does not argue that outright plagiarism was any more acceptable then than it is now. The quodlibet seemed to avoid the stigma of plagiarism with its whimsical character. It may have evoked some outrage with certain ribald lyrical aspects but, the compositional similarity was received with fondness. Popular and folk melodies were spread throughout Europe by medieval troubadours and minstrels. Not only were there language and dialect differences to encourage the *ad hoc* crafting of new lyrics but, these songs often went on for hours. Human memory being fallible, it was inevitable that some extemporaneous composing and editing took place. The quodlibet generally existed in a separate space from

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/art/quodlibet>

“serious” composition however, the long list of serious composers who were aware of quodlibet and used it on occasion includes J.S. Bach, W.A. Mozart, Louis M. Gottschalk, and Charles Ives.

For a more complete understanding of this subject we should also consider these related ideas: parody, and the drawing of inspiration from popular, folkloric, or secular music, both important concepts for laying the groundwork for better understanding of quodlibet. The American popular songwriter, Irving Berlin, was a complaining party in a lawsuit brought against the publishers of Mad magazine over a series of parody lyrics which were to be sung to preexisting melodies including eight of Berlin’s tunes: “You’re Just in Love,” “Easter Parade,” “There’s No Business Like Show Business,” “Blue Skies,” “Always,” “A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody,” “The Girl That I Marry,” and “Cheek to Cheek.” The United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit ruled in favor of the defendant in 1964, enshrining parody as “fair use” and not a copyright infringement. This suit and the verdict are ironic since Berlin’s 1911 hit song “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” was involved in some controversy over perceived plagiarism from Scott Joplin and Steven Foster.

Serious composers have often made liberal use of popular, folkloric, or secular musical material. It may well be that folkloric material is particularly absent of many of the copyright protections covering popular music but, these serious composers have generally not hidden the true source materials and have given as much credit as possible to the sources of their inspiration. Grieg, Liszt, Bartòk, Chopin, Brahms, Smetana, Dvořák, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Copland all number among composers extensively utilizing folkloric materials.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the birth of jazz music, saw an entire genre arise out of the mixture of popular, folkloric, and secular musical traditions which abounded in New Orleans. Much of this source material was not credited or well documented. The very origins of jazz itself from such an amalgam of preexisting musical material made it inevitable that jazz would lend itself so well to contrafact and quodlibet. The 12-bar blues form also gave rise to innumerable new songs based on this form with many variations, small and large, to both the harmonic accompaniment and in the melodic material.

The bebop revolution of the 1940’s had many drivers. The fact that contrafacts are legally considered original works meant that the musicians could retain potentially valuable publishing rights. This also had important licensing implications for the recording companies which were able to keep more revenue “in-house.” The new contrafact melodies were much more stylistically interwoven with the improvisations of the beboppers and made the music a more unified genre and not just the extemporizing of a few mavericks.

The catalogue of jazz contrafacts includes compositions based on dozens of the popular songs of the 1920's and 1930's such as "After You've Gone," "All God's Chillun Got Rhythm," "All of Me," "All the Things You Are," "Back Home Again in Indiana," "Blue Skies," "Cherokee," "Come Rain or Come Shine," "Darn That Dream," "Easy to Love," "Embraceable You," "Fine and Dandy," "Honeysuckle Rose," "How About You?," "How High the Moon," "I Didn't Know What Time It Was," "I Get A Kick Out Of You," "I Got Rhythm" (easily the most popular source tune ever with dozens of known contrafacts. Contrafacts based on "I Got Rhythm" became so ubiquitous that a jazz musician need only say "rhythm changes" and the band knows exactly what to play. The entire body of contrafacts based on "I Got Rhythm" are collectively known as Rhythm tunes), "I Love You," "I'll Remember April," "It Could Happen to You," "It's You or No One," "Jeepers Creepers," "Just in Time," "Just You, Just Me," "Love for Sale," "Love Me or Leave Me," "Lover," "Lover, Come Back to Me," "Night and Day," "Oh, Lady Be Good!," "On Green Dolphin Street," "Out of Nowhere," "Pennies from Heaven," "Rose Room," Rosetta," "'S Wonderful," "September in the Rain," "Softly, as in a Morning Sunrise," "Someday My Prince Will Come," "Stompin' at the Savoy," "Sweet Georgia Brown," "Take the "A" Train," "Tenderly," "The Song Is You," "There Is No Greater Love," "There Will Never Be Another You," "What Is This Thing Called Love?," "Whispering," "Yesterdays," "You Can Depend on Me," "You Stepped Out of a Dream," and "You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To."

The correspondence between a contrafact and a source tune is not always one-to-one. There is most likely no similarity between the two melodies, as expected. The harmony or harmonic rhythm may experience some adjustment however, leaving just enough in common to confidently apply the contrafact label to the new piece. The form generally is the same, with one significant exception which warrants description: "I Got Rhythm" is by far the most popular source for contrafacts but, the tag at the end of the last 8 measures is not used in most contrafacts based it. Gershwin's AABA form, 8, 8, 8, 10, somehow became 8,8,8 and 8 and this modification has now almost completely supplanted the original. A musician calling for "Rhythm changes" almost certainly is asking for a 32-bar form and would need to make a special request to get a 34-bar form from the accompanists.

The contrafact has become a tradition, continuing as newer popular tunes and original jazz tunes have now served as the basis for contrafacts. This list of contrafact source material includes "Blues for Alice," "Confirmation," "Dizzy Atmosphere," "Giant Steps," "Hey Joe," "Hot House," "So What," "Tune Up," "Wave," and "Woody'n You." The creators of bebop were the modernists of their time. The passage of time has enabled developing a view of bebop along the continuum of jazz history which reveals how connected bebop really was to the swing era and

Tin Pan Alley which preceded it. Bebop was an evolution as much as it was a revolution. The adoption of the song forms is an obvious observation. A subtler observation involves the melodic vocabulary which the beboppers had at their disposal. The many tunes which served as the basis for bebop contrafacts provided a wealth of quotable material. Now we see that the practice of using quotes is traceable to the earliest surviving bebop recordings.

Charlie Parker is arguably the most important figure in bebop history. A catalogue of 191 verified recorded Parker quotes (with another 92 possible quotes as yet unverified!) reveals that he drew material from a wide range of popular, contemporary, and classical sources.<sup>2</sup> In keeping with the traditionally humorous nature of classical quodlibet, Parker's quotes reveal his playful, whimsical side. It is significant that Parker was a leading composer of contrafacts with the following 20 songwriting credits (singly or in collaboration) "Yardbird Suite," "Relaxin' With Lee," "Scrapple from the Apple," "Anthropology/Thriving from a Riff," "Celebrity," "Chasin' the Bird," "Constellation," "Dewey Square," "Dexterity," "Moose the Mooche," "An Oscar for Treadwell," "Quasimodo," "Steeplechase," "My Little Suede Shoes," "Bird of Paradise," "Ko-Ko," "Warmin Up a Riff," "Bird Gets the Worm," "Donna Lee," and "Ornithology." In a fittingly ironic turn of events, Parker's non-contrafact compositions have served as vehicles for contrafacts by other musicians. Parker's "Confirmation" was the basis for contrafacts by Elmo Hope, Horace Silver, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins, Tal Farlow, and Wes Montgomery. Sonny Stitt and Tommy Flanagan also contributed contrafacts based on Parker's "Blues for Alice."

Dizzy Gillespie was also known to both use contrafact as a compositional tool and quoting as an improvisational tool. Gillespie has songwriting credits on the contrafacts "Dizzy Atmosphere," "Salt Peanuts," "Tour de Force," "Diggin' Diz," and "Groovin' High." Gillespie is famously heard quoting the popular tune "Laura" on the esteemed Jazz at Massey Hall recording. The Massey Hall connection is interesting here as all the participating musicians were significant to jazz history. Four of the featured musicians were also contributors to the body of contrafacts. In addition to Parker and Gillespie, Charles Mingus and Bud Powell were credited with contrafacts. Mingus wrote "Wham Bam Thank You Ma'am," "What Love?," and "All The Things You Could Be By Now If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother" (one of the instances when contrafact source material was not well hidden, many other examples make this relationship more opaque). Powell's contrafact credits include "Bud's Bubble," "Celia," "Frantic Fancies," "Wail," and "Get It."

---

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.chasinthebird.com/quotes\\_e.html](http://www.chasinthebird.com/quotes_e.html)

Further survey of musicians considered formative to the history of bebop continues to uncover a strong correlation between contrafact and quoting. Perhaps no other jazz musician is so associated with quoting during solos as Sonny Rollins. Rollins' contributions to the contrafactual lexicon include "Doxy," "Striver's Row," and "Oleo."

Dexter Gordon was also well-known to freely quote other tunes in his improvisations. Gordon's contrafacts include "Dextivity," "Apple Jump," "For Regulars Only," "Boston Bernie," "I Want More," "Fried Bananas," and "Dextrose."

The controversial side of Miles Davis's songwriting credit history notwithstanding, he did perform several contrafacts earlier in his career, significant due to his early apprenticeship with Charlie Parker. By the mid-1950's this had mostly tapered off although it should be noted that a modified version of "The Theme" (a Rhythm tune) was a staple of his concert repertoire into the 1970's. These Davis contrafacts include "Dig," "Little Willie Leaps," "Denial," and "Half Nelson."

J.J. Johnson was a Davis collaborator in the 1950's and during this time he contributed the following contrafacts: "Teapot," "Coffee Pot," "Boneology," "Jay Bird," "Jay Jay," and "Mad Be Bop." Not surprisingly, Johnson was known to include quotes into his solos too.

Thelonious Monk was another musician known equally for his original music and highly idiosyncratic style of playing the piano. It is less common to hear a quote in one of Monk's solos although they do make the occasional appearance (many instances can be found of Monk quoting his own compositions). Like many musicians, Monk struggled during his lifetime with the conflict between taking the music seriously while not taking oneself too seriously. Through this lens we see a certain therapeutic value to the occasional injection of levity into music. Monk was considered a groundbreaking pioneer from the 1940's on. Consideration of his many contrafactual tunes shows that he was much more connected to the history of jazz than may have been immediately apparent to the audiences and critics of that time. His contrafacts "Bright Mississippi," "52nd Street Theme," "Hackensack," "Little Rootie Tootie," "Rhythm-a-Ning," "In Walked Bud," and "Evidence" all have the concise forms of their respective source tunes.

Horace Silver frequently injected quotes into his solos. This aspect of Silver's performing kept his music from ever sounding overly self-important or stuffy. This is an important lesson for the young musician still seeking their own identity. Although Silver is known for leading his own band and playing mostly his own compositions, we know that his pieces "Mayreh," "Juicy Lucy," "Finger Poppin'," "Room 608," "Tippin'," "Split Kick," and "Quicksilver" are contrafacts.

John Coltrane is often cited as a very serious musician. His practice regimen is legendary, and his artistic achievements are indisputable. Even Coltrane was able to use the rare quote to great effect, all the more striking due to its surprise value. As a composer who

experimented with many forms along his creative journey, he also wrote contrafacts including “26-2,” “Liberia,” “Countdown,” “Impressions,” “Satellite,” and “Fifth House.”

Some quotes have become iconic, like the Thad Jones solo with the Count Basie Band’s version of “April in Paris” into which he inserts “Pop Goes the Weasel.” The well-placed quote provides an extra hook to draw the listener in from the abstraction which otherwise might lose their interest. To be most effective, the well-placed quote relies on intentionality so as to avoid descending into ridiculousness. A bit of sentimentality may be acceptable without crossing over into abject corniness. The quote should first be recognizable, or its message is lost to the audience. Next, it should bear some commonality with the tune. This can involve the underlying harmony. Using this approach on “Take the “A” Train” we see the harmony of the first four bars moving from the I chord, up a whole step to the V7/V. This movement is shared by many other tunes including “Oh, You Beautiful Doll,” “Peg ‘O My Heart,” “The Girl from Ipanema,” “I’m Looking over a Four-Leaf Clover,” “Só Danço Samba,” and “For All We Know.” Awareness of harmonic motion instantly opens up some more melodic possibilities available to the soloist.

Another place where the use of quotes has great utility is in thematic continuity development. The tune “Blue Moon,” broken down into its constituent words, blue and moon, can be thematically linked on the moon side with “Moondance,” “Paper Moon,” and “Moon over Miami,” and even “That’s Amore,” or we can stretch the association a bit further to include “When You Wish upon a Star,” “Sunny,” or “Mars” from Holst’s planets. The other thread on “Blue Moon,” blue, might see us going through colors. “Blue Room,” “I’d Like some Red Roses for a Blue Lady,” “Yellow Rose of Texas,” or “On Green Dolphin Street” can be part of this thread. We might find intentional contrariness presented with a theme of opposition. Imagine “Alone Together” treated with “Send in the Clowns” “I Love a Parade,” or “There’s No Business Like Show Business!” The imagination of the soloist can synergistically impart meaning to the note selection greater than mere tune recognition. The listener is left to seek any deeper meaning in the solo, or meta-messages in the choice of quotes.

The contrafact is a link between the present and past of music. It imparts a continuity to jazz and demonstrates that jazz does not simply spring forth fully formed but is part of an evolutionary process. Likewise, quoting creates links between the jazz of the moment to the musician’s cultural legacy. This legacy is not only which jazz albums were studied but includes school band, television and movie themes, radio, and the songs the family sang in the car, in short, every musical thing the musician has experienced. While there are composers of contrafacts who are not well-known as frequent quoters, just as there are musicians known to quote who don’t have a legacy of contrafacts in their portfolios, it is inescapable to note the

strong correlation between contrafact and quotes. Great music can and does exist on its own without much humor involved. We are all fortunate to be able to enjoy serious music on the one hand and less-serious music on the other. There is certainly room in the musical universe for all of these human experiences and emotions.