VEDA, TORAH, AND "*THE REAL BOOK*": A COMPARATIVE HERMENEUTIC OF CANONICITY

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Abstract: Barbara Holdrege's seminal article, "Veda and Torah: The Word Embodied in Scripture" and her extended work on the same topic, "Veda and Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture," create a bridge between the Jewish and Hindu textual traditions. This comparison of the two traditions suggests that the hermeneutics of canonicity displays a narrative logic, which can then be applied to other canons and even kinds of canons. In this paper I extend the comparative hermeneutic developed by Holdrege to another text, which is mostly unfamiliar to scholars, "The Real Book." The Real Book is the canonical text for jazz musicians. I will be putting the interpretative activity of the Rabbis and Brahmavadins on a spectrum with jazz interpretation and improvisation, which will show the exegetical logic of canon and interpretation across distinct media.

Barbara Holdrege's seminal article, "Veda and Torah: The Word Embodied in Scripture"[1] and her extended work on the same topic, *Veda and Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture*,[2] create a bridge between Jewish and Hindu textual traditions. This comparison of the two traditions suggests that the hermeneutics of canonicity displays a narrative logic, which may then be applied to other canons and even *kinds* of canons. This is a very different way of looking at scripture, as Holdrege indicates when she writes, "One of the purposes of the present inquiry is to call into question the very category of scripture as it has generally been conceptualized by Western scholars." (Holdrege 1994, 106) In this paper I extend the comparative hermeneutic developed by Holdrege to another text, which is mostly unfamiliar to scholars, "*The Real Book*." *The Real Book* is the canonical text for jazz musicians. It is a collection of sheet music comprised

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[1] Barbara Holdrege, *Between Jerusalem and Benares: Comparative Studies in Judaism and Hinduism*, ed. Hanaya Goodman. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994)

[2] Holdrege, Barbara. 1994. *Between Jerusalem and Benares: Comparative Studies in Judaism and Hinduism*, ed. Hanaya Goodman. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994)

of jazz standards. Most jazz musicians agree that the songs contained in the book are key knowledge for any jazz musician. I will be putting the interpretative activity of the Rabbis and Brahmavadins on a spectrum with jazz interpretation and improvisation. I will argue that Jonathan Z. Smith's conception of canon for religion can be extended to cover other sorts of canon, in this case the jazz musical canon.

The Jewish canon's history is very well known. The key hermeneutic moves are instantiated in the Mishnah, Midrash and Gemara. Each remove from the canon is in turn legitimated in terms of its connection to the canon. The canon itself begins with Josiah and 2 Kings, the Deuteronomistic History and can even be dated at 621 BCE. Revisions followed during the period of exile when it became part of the Pentateuch. The canonization of Deuteronomy was part of a larger political project to "strengthen the monarchy and the priesthood by centralizing the court and the Temple cult in Jerusalem." (Bruns 1992, 69)

The Vedic canon is not literary, but oral. Nevertheless, "even though preserved in memory only, the texts of these poems were as firmly fixed as if they had been printed. We may thus speak of these recited Vedas as "books." (Fenton 1993, 27-8) The Vedic corpus was recognized as early as 400 BCE. But as Witzel points out, 'The Four Vedas have been transmitted in various *sakhas* or "branches," or as we usually call the, in "schools"...Therefore, originally there was no canon of Vedic texts, no Vedic "Scripture," but only a canon of texts accepted by each school."[3] Nevertheless, scholars still use the term "Vedic Canon" to refer to all the texts contained in all the different school's collections even though each school would reject some of the other schools' inclusions. We may therefore, without too much violence to the traditions, compare the two canons. The canons of Hinduism and Judaism play a central role in Jewish and Hindu practices, and it is interesting that they have developed many common attributes. Holdrege writes, "Both the brahmanical and rabbinic traditions constitute elite textual communities that have sought to shape and articulate the central norms of their respective societies through codifying symbol systems and practices in the form of scriptural canons of which they are custodians." (Holdrege, 1994: 104). But the key commonality for this paper is the emphasis on interpretation in both traditions.

[3] Michael Witzel, "The Vedic Canon and its Political Milieu," Harvard Oriental Series, Opera Minora 2, (Cambridge, 1997).

It is important to note that the terms "Veda" and Torah" are ambiguous. Both terms have more and less restrictive meanings. "Veda" can be used to mean simply the first four Vedas, the Rg-Veda, Yajur-Veda, Sama-Veda and Atharva-Veda. It is also used so that includes other texts such as the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas and the Upanishads. Thirdly, it sometimes includes the Hindu epics, the Mahabharata and Ramayana. Finally, it is sometimes used most broadly to refer to all brahmanical texts, teachings and practices. (Holdrege, 1994: 108) The same holds true of the Torah. The most restrictive sense is that which includes the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses. It is also used to refer to the Hebrew Bible as a whole. Thirdly, it is sometimes extended to include the Mishnah, Talmud and Midrash. And finally, it is sometimes used to indicate "all the laws, teachings, and practices of the normative rabbinic tradition." Holdrege, 1994: 113) But in the end, it is the first meanings for both Veda and Torah that confer legitimacy. Holdrege writes that, "…any text, teaching, practice or person that wished to attain normative standing within the Rabbinic tradition could only do so through becoming incorporated within the ever-expanding domain of Torah." (Holdrege, 1994: 114) The jazz canon has a similar ambiguity. There is great disagreement over what is canonical in jazz."[4] It may seem that jazz is not the sort of thing that could be canonical. It is ever-changing; indeed it embraces change, and its *modus operandi* is modification. But as Jim Merod writes, 'The great body of work that makes up the jazz archive, however, has proven itself—for the majority of its one-hundred-year -long life—to be a resistant, essentially inassimilable cultural complex." (Merod, 1995: 4) And if there is one book that encapsulates this history, it is *The Real Book*.

Outrageous as it might seem, bringing *The Real Book* into the same conversation with Veda and Torah should yield some insights. Whenever we bring together two fields of inquiry there is at least some probability of something new coming to light. Neusner argued that when the methods of comparative religion were applied to Judaism, he would expect the data from Judaism to have a reflexive effect on the study of comparative religion." (Neusner, 1968: 38-9) As Jonathan Z. Smith put it, "Judaism should look different when interpreted from the perspective of the history of religions, and the history of religions should be

[4] The controversy over Ken Burn's exclusion of Fusion jazz from his documentary on jazz is just one example of "Canon wars" in jazz. The book written to accompany the documentary series is *Jazz*: *A History of America's Music*, Geoffrey Ward and Ken Burns, (Knopf, 2002).

altered by the act of interpreting Jewish data. (Smith, 1982: 36) Following this logic, bringing a music text into the conversation could also yield a change to how we think about both the musical and religious canons.

The creation of tradition always begins in a framework of limitation, whether it is religious, literary or musical canon. It then must come to grips with a changing world, and then permutation arises. The permutations are allowed into tradition as long as they are deemed to adhere to a set of transformation rules. So there is a double limitation, first in the creation of canon itself, but then again in the restrictions on how the limitations can be overcome. This paper will explore religious and musical canonicity and show the inner logic or dialectic of canon and interpretation.

The Real Book has taken on several forms, although its history is not comparable to that of the Veda and Torah. *The Real Book* is only forty years old, and it makes no claim to be anything other than a useful compendium of songs for jazz musicians. There is also an admitted arbitrariness in the presence of some songs in *The Real Book*. Some songs were included primarily because the compilers happened to be friends with some musicians and asked for copies of their tunes even though there had been little or no history of those songs in the jazz tradition.[5] The authorship of *The Real Book* is unknown. We do know that the two men who compiled *The Real Book* were at Berklee College of Music in the 1970s, and we know they had a fair amount of interaction with bassist, Steve Swallow and guitarist, Pat Metheny, who have provided us with some information about the creators of *The Real Book*, *The Real Book* itself and the effect it had upon jazz and jazz musicians. The two musicians' primary interest was in making money by providing a service for jazz musicians."[6] While *The Real Book* did not claim divine inspiration, it did make a claim to truth. The term, "Real Book" was not simply a pun, although it certainly was one, it was also claiming to be providing the correct melody and chords for the songs in its book. The jazz bassist, Steve Swallow, paraphrases the authors and says, "We've noticed there is a need for an accurate fakebook; the ones we've been looking at are wildly inaccurate." (Kernfeld, 2006: 130) At this point in jazz history, more

[5] Barry Kernfeld, The *Story of the Fakebooks: Bootlegging Songs to Musicians*, (Scarecrow Press, 2006). Some of Pat Metheny's songs did not yet even have names when they were put into *The Real Book*.

[6] Pat Metheny states that *The Real Book* was "an idea that seemed to them to many people at the time to represent a gap that needed filling." Kernfeld, 129.

and more jazz musicians were attempting to learn the core songs of the jazz tradition in order to become better musicians. At the same time, however, there were few authoritative sources. (Ibid: 141) The publishing industry, for reasons I will not go into, was not producing the sheet music that jazz musicians wanted, so two individuals took on the task of compiling the correct music, knowing that doing so would yield a profit. But here the musical canon diverges from the religious canon. The authors did not bother to get permission to print the songs from the composers and owners of the songs, with the exception of those who realized they would not be receiving royalties. The compilers simply made a decision to "steal" the music. The composers who were consulted (generally the friends of the authors and their musical network), generally for reasons of accuracy, were aware of the illegal nature of the book, but it seemed rational for them to have their songs in rather than not in. Steve Swallow said, "...I knew they were breaking the law. I felt that what they were doing was morally ok, morally justified. I'd resolved that. Beyond that, I felt it was to my advantage to have my tunes in the books, so I gave them all my lead sheets. They then asked me if I'd approach some of my friends, because they wanted to get sheets from the composers when they could." (Kernfeld, 2006: 131) The decision turned out to be a rational one for most of the composers of the songs who were consulted. Kernfeld writes, "Its roughly 400 titles were made available to successive generations of aspiring jazz musicians, a good number of whom subsequently recorded these jazz themes and then paid composers and publishers their licensing fees in the normal way." (Ibid: 131) So it is was even beneficial for the composers and owners, although this may not have outweighed the loss of income in royalties for the last forty years.

In one sense, it was a rejection of authorship that contrasts significantly with religious canon. In another sense, however, it was a testament to the authorship of the songs since the composers are acknowledged. The composers were listed on the music. They just weren't paid for it. Moses, on the other hand, or God himself, depending on your view, was not paid for their authorship either. In the case of the Vedas, we don't have any clue about the authorship of the foundational Hindu texts. But authors of divine texts are not typically paid for the job in any case. *The Real Book* was very much "this- worldly," and in its genesis, it was the product of an original sin. *The Real Book* thus has a notorious historicity of illegitimacy, which is particularly odd for a canon, since the concept of canonicity is generally linked to legitimacy. Indeed, legitimacy in a religious tradition is most often

grounded by reference or linkage to the canonical texts of the tradition. In jazz, however, its canonical text arose in a clearly illegal fashion, as a violation of copyright and thus illegitimate at birth. Its legitimacy, of a canonical rather than legal kind, came over time as jazz musicians embraced its usefulness. It was its obvious usefulness rather than its sacredness that was appealing.

Why did *The Real Book* catch on and become so popular? After all, the percentage of jazz musicians with *The Real Book* or one of its imitators is probably higher than 95%. I am a jazz musician myself, and I don't think I have met a jazz musician who did not have one. The reason for its popularity has not only to do with its canonical role, but its usefulness for learning how to improvise, which was the skill most desired by jazz musicians and distinguished them from classical musicians. Learning to improvise involved a deep knowledge of songs. Certain kinds of song lend themselves to improvisation. Songs with chords that change no more than twice a measure, songs that fit within logical patterns or forms and songs with distinctive melodies and catchy but repetitive rhythms, all are good fodder for improvisers. This was true, for example, of much film music in the prior decades, which is why they became a part of the jazz canon. Historically, *The Real Book* contains a sampling of songs from the various key periods of jazz history, music of the swing, bebop, cool, hard bop and fusion periods. At this point in history there were many musicians ready for the challenge presented by *The Real Book*. Kernfeld quotes Metheny, who stated that "suddenly there were many young musicians whom felt very comfortable with the vast array of harmonic vocabularies (from standards to Joe Henderson and beyond) and were at home with modern rhythmic styles as well as things that looked to the rock music of the time as sources of material." (Ibid: 138)

The songs of *The Real Book* were the result of a "standardization" of a genre of popular music already established prior to *The Real Book*. This parallels religious canons. But like religious canons, once its contents are inside, they accrue a greater legitimacy as part of the canon. The music of the jazz canon was regarded as important prior to it being collected together into *The Real Book*, just as the Jewish and Hindu scriptures had a certain status even before they were collected into the Torah and Veda. But in all three cases the status of what was collected became much more central to and even constitutive of the traditions when they were formally compiled.

There is an important hermeneutic dimension to the compilation of *The Real Book* because the compilers not only compiled, they corrected. They were aided

in some of their corrections by several musicians considered to have authoritative understandings of the songs. However, these authoritative understandings were not necessarily those of the original composers. Kernfeld remarks how the advisors were often influenced by reharmonizations that had become popular. Steve Swallow remarked that "we spent the entire day going over their harmonizations of standards, like "My Romance/' with an eye to getting the sort of common practice reharmonizations that had evolved from Miles Davis and Bill Evans and Sonny Rollins and the like." (Ibid: 131) Thus we see that canonization in jazz does not always express fidelity to an original *urtext*, but instead settles upon harmonizations that are accepted by the consensus of the jazz community, as this consensus was understood by the compilers.

It is the sacredness of the Vedic and Jewish canons that prevents anything as radical as outright improvisation, but the kind of creativity involved in interpretations by virtuosic exegetes is similar in form and logic with the fully improvisatory interpretation of jazz. In all these cases we see a foreground interacting with a background in an oscillating expansion and contraction. In religious interpretation a holy text is brought into hermeneutics because of the need to come to terms with obscure passages. Other, clearer, passages are brought into play to clarify them. But what happens in the end is that the text changes with the interpretations. Following Gadamer, any interpretation is a fusion of horizons. But there is an oscillation between greater or lesser fidelity to the text, which really means an oscillation between the horizons of interpreter and interpreted. In this oscillation there is a fair amount of room for creativity. The passages one chooses to juxtapose, the narrative and the environmental interaction (historical, ideological, political, economic etc.) all open the process to creativity.

The narrative logic follows from Jonathan Z. Smith's characterization of canonicity as first limiting discourse and then opening it. Jonathan Z. Smith writes that "canon is best seen as one form of a basic cultural process of limitation and of overcoming that limitation through ingenuity." (Smith, 1982: 52) We see this same process of limitation and ingenious overcoming of the limitation in the key book of the jazz tradition, *The Real Book*, which is, paradoxically, a "fake book."[7] A fake book is a bootleg collection of songs for musicians. Even though *The Real Book* is not a religious text, we can still notice certain key features of

[7] Thus "*The Real Book*" was meant as a pun.

commonality with religious texts. In fact, it is the argument of this paper that the non-religious character of *The Real Book* will help clarify the basic logic of canonicity.

The Jewish canon and the rabbis who tended it became the center of Jewish life after the destruction of the Temple for the second time with the collapse of Jerusalem in AD 70. (Oxtoby, 2002: 71) If there could be said to be a "Jazz Temple," Berklee College of Music was it. The compilers were students there and the advisors were often teachers. Berklee was one of only two colleges of music at the time that gave degrees in jazz, and the only one that had an institution wide mission centered on jazz. It is useful to compare the role of Berklee's relation to *The Real Book* with the Jewish temple's relationship to the canon. It is a fact of Jewish history that Judaism moved from a Temple oriented community toward a text oriented community as a consequence of the Jewish Diaspora. Since jazz musicians generally left Boston when they left Berklee, there was a similar diasporic effect. It is not surprising that the students took *The Real Book* with them, along with its conception of the jazz canon. The compilers themselves not only left Boston, they left *The Real Book* behind as well, at least in terms of printing the book for sale. They surely maintained the same connection to its canon that other jazz musicians had. The reprinting from then on was in the hands of others, and the number of reprints has come to swamp the number the original compilers printed. Hal Leonard finally printed a legal edition with the same songs and the best accuracy seen yet in a 'Real Book.' So *The Real Book* has finally shed its unsavory illegal past. In a sense, the canon has been "perfected" by constant revisions. But, interestingly, just as *The Real Book* achieves a kind of perfection, the level of heritability goes down because of a change in the medium of transmission. *The Real Book* is now instantiated in the digital medium, particularly in the "Band in a Box"[8] user group collections found on the net."[9] These are much more extensive than the "hard" Real Book books, and they have the added advantage of "alterability," which facilitates the general mutability of jazz standards. But there is a digression in accuracy since the charts are supplied by group members not always too concerned about accuracy.

There is no sense of the sacred applied to the songs of *The Real Book*, but

[8] "Band in a Box" is a computer program that works as a "play along" band for practicing musicians. See http://www.pgmusic.com/bandbox.htm

[9] http://a.webring.com/hub?ring=bandinaboxusers

there is a canonical center of gravity to the songs. Just as religious practices are grounded in religious canonical texts, the musical practice of jazz performances is grounded in the consensus among jazz musicians. *The Real Book* is not really coextensive with this canon—a book that included every canonical jazz song would be far too large to be manageable, but it is symbolic of the consensus. The consensus theory of jazz canonicity argues that it is not really *The Real Book* that determines the jazz canon, but the consensus of jazz musicians and listeners. *The Real Book* overlaps with the consensus, but it is not in itself the consensus. One could even argue that the consensus is an epistemological ideal and that the consensus changes moment to moment. But *The Real Book* has a more stable status, and so it is therefore the representative of the consensus. A survey of jazz musicians would probably yield agreement over the significance of *The Real Book*. Pat Metheny said, "Honestly, at the time, neither I nor probably anyone else considered that *The Real Book* would ever have much of a life beyond the few interested parties who were around the scene at that time...No one knew at the time that it would ever become an almost Biblical reference work to young musicians."(Kernfeld, 2006: 136) Metheny's reference to "Biblical reference work" indicates the status of *The Real Book*.

It is interesting to note the effect *The Real Book* had on musicians, namely of improving the accuracy and consistency of jazz performance. Steve Swallow said, "I had graphic evidence for myself of what a huge improvement *The Real Book* was, because in order to walk to the ensemble rooms where I taught my ensembles at Berklee, I had to run the gamut of rehearsal rooms down a corridor...so to get to my ensembles, I would hear 20 or 30, either guys playing standards or sessions going on with several guys playing standards...A month after *The Real Book* was published, all of a sudden I was hearing the right changes to tunes that had been butchered." (Ibid: 136)

Interpretation, improvisation, creativity and freedom, all have a similar set of logical relations with canonicity. While religious and jazz interpretations of canonical texts or songs both attempt to maintain a solid connection to the original "urtext", jazz allows rather more freedom, even clear alteration of the original. In solo sections the melody may be jettisoned altogether in favor of a completely new melody created on the spot by the soloist. Only the broad harmonic structure remains. The precise harmony is even subject to change, but only according to rules of alteration. There is also a canon of appropriate alterations of the harmony.

Meaning in music operates a bit differently than meaning in language. It is a commonplace that a sentence can mean different things depending on the context. The same is true of melodies. The meaning of a given melody is partly a function of the harmony that accompanies it. Thus, not only does jazz alter the foreground, the melody, it alters the background, the harmony. Reharmonization and melodic improvisation are allowed in jazz, and both change the meaning of a song.

Melodic improvisation began as mere embellishment of the melody with a repeating chordal background. Then liberties were taken and musicians felt free to vary the melody much more. They would even change the melody altogether. The limit on the allowed changes was the harmony. As long as all changes were consistent with the harmony, they were allowed. Reharmonization is possible because most melodies can fit with several different harmonic backgrounds just as sentences can fit with many different contexts. The limit on reharmonization is fidelity with the original melody, although even this limitation is often ignored in the solo sections. However, in spite of all the exceptions—for jazz is all about exceptions—jazz displays a logic of oscillating fidelity between the arrayed elements of the canon, the melodies and harmonies of important jazz songs. We will see below that textual interpretation does something akin to reharmonization when it juxtaposes disparate passages, which is one of the primary techniques of Midrash.

The juxtaposition of disparate and unrelated passages for metaphoric meaning has an openness similar to jazz improvisation. The clearest cases are those of Midrash in the Jewish tradition, but the Kabalistic tradition also engages in interpretive improvisation. And interpretation is not far from the improvisation engaged in by Christian preachers. Timothy Lubin discusses several methods of interpretation in the Jewish and Hindu traditions, some of which stray so far from the attempt to find original meanings that they approach improvisation.

Timothy Lubin notes that the large number of ways a text can be approached leads to the creation of what he calls "Virtuosic Exegetes." He writes, "Midrash or Brahmana is assumed to demonstrate total mastery of the subject, an ability to encompass the entire scope of all divine knowledge as it is manifested in the sacred canon (or in the ritual of worship), and a creative curiosity that leads the exegete to experiment with novel applications of the principles of exegesis, and even to develop new techniques." (Lubin, 2002: 448) Some of these techniques involve juxtaposing textual passages, juxtaposing ritual and cosmic elements to identify linkages, non-literal gloss, lexical affinity, verbal affinity, hermeneutic

etymology, numerical affinity, appeal to convention or natural patterns, parable and allegory. It is not necessary to examine each one in order to get a sense of the variety of techniques available to the Jewish and Hindu exegete, and that some of these go rather far from "original intention." One example will have to suffice. Lubin writes, "The most common and important exegetical device in the Rabbinic tradition is the technique of juxtaposing biblical passages (and other texts) utterly out of their original context as a means of throwing light on the topic at hand. While these juxtapositions often seem surprising to the newcomer to Midrash, the principle is quite sophisticated. The adduced text is deemed relevant usually on account of some detail that rises to importance only in the new, exegetical context." (Ibid: 434) Lubin uses the following example to show how this works:

Then the Lord said to Moses, *Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward* (Ex. 14:15 [through the Red Sea])...R. Meier says, "[Said the Holy One,] "If I created dry land for the sake of the primal Adam, who was only one man, as it is said "God said, Let there be water below the sky be gathered into one area, that the dry land may appear" [Gen. 1:9], will I not make the sea into dry land for the sake of this holy congregation?!" (*Melhilta Beshallah* 4, 1 216. Lubin, 2002: 435)

The passage above does not worry that the passages are unrelated in the original text, one from Genesis, the other from Exodus. In fact, it is understood that the Torah as a whole is an interpretive tool for its own interpretation. We are *supposed* to juxtapose passages in this way. This is one of the ways that obscure passages become clear. "Words of Torah need each other. What one passage locks up, the other discloses." (Midrash Rabbah, Bemidbar, 19, 7) This means we can use one passage to clarify another, even when the passages may originate from different authors and different time periods. The rabbis understand scripture as already hermeneutic. They are able to understand difficult passages by referring to other clearer passages, even if the passages are widely separate in the Torah and date and place of origin. The reason this works is made clear by Jacob Neusner, who argues that in order to understand this interpretive allowance we must understand that for Midrash the Torah is not an historical text from a past time but the word of God, and this means that it is meant to have contemporary significance as well. It addresses the present as well as the past. The process of Midrashic analysis is a form of "writing with scripture," writing an analysis of scripture in the present. The Torah is not history; it is "paradigm." (Neusner, 2004: 13) Neusner is saying that scripture informs the present and was always

meant to do so. Neusner writes, "the idea that time and space separated the Rabbinic sages from the great events of the past simply did not register." (Ibid: 11)

We may then conclude along with Bruns that "What all this means is that Midrash is not linear exposition-not a species of monological reasoning but exegesis that presupposes or starts out from alternative readings and anticipates and indeed, encourages or provokes them in turn."(Bruns, 1992: 111) This openness to interpretation is nearly improvisational. It is asking for new interpretations rather than privileging one. With this constant reinterpretation it is not surprising that the rabbis developed principles for creating new interpretations. For example, the rabbis developed a set of principles governing the use of one passage to illuminate another. This is comparable to the principles of improvisation in jazz. One can alter the meaning of some passage as long as one follows the "transformation" rules of the tradition. The same is true in jazz. Dauer gives rules for early improvisational procedure [altering a melody]: "tone substitution is determined by a set of tone- skipping procedures, e.g., the tone before the preceding tone or the tone after following tone of any given tone in a scale is used in place of it."[10] This procedure is not something jazz musicians would employ today, but they would apply other procedures. For example, jazz musicians often "quote" other songs as part of their solos, which is very similar to Midrash juxtaposing passages. It is not difficult to see that interpretation of this sort would create "virtuosos" of interpretation.

Timothy Lubin describes these virtuosos in terms that would apply equally well to an accomplished jazz musician. ""What makes such interpretation persuasive is not simply the persuasiveness of the techniques per se but the special qualities of the exegete himself. The rabbinic or brahmanic sage might well be considered a virtuoso in his domain…in the modern sense of someone extraordinarily skilled in the techniques of his art." (Lubin, 2002: 447) Both the exegete and the jazz musician become incredibly adept at rethinking canonical works. What this shows is that just as a melody has no intrinsic meaning, "the power of a text is not intrinsic to it. On the contrary, the text draws its power from the situation in which it makes its unexpected appearance because this is a

[10] Alphons M. Dauer, "Improvisation: Zur Technik der spontanen Gestaltung im Jazz." Jazz-forshung/Jazz Research (1969) 1:113-132, quoted in Raymond F. Kennedy, "Jazz Style and Improvisation Codes," *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, Vol. 19 (1987), 39.

situation that belongs to a definite history and that is structured by this history to receive just this text as it will no other." (Bruns, 1992: 68) Change the harmony and the meaning of a melody changes. Juxtapose a passage from Genesis with one from Exodus, and the meaning changes. As Gerald Bruns puts it, "so what matters in a text is not only what lies behind the text in the form of an originating intention, but what is in front of the text where the text is put into play." (Ibid: 105) What is "in front of" the text is the interpreter with her own horizon. The fusion of horizons produces an arena of play that opens up possibilities, and these can be pursued either interpretively or improvisationally. Midrash famously exploits these possibilities to the edge of improvisation, what Bruns calls the "the legendary extravagance of Midrash, whereas a single verse or word or letter will be given not a single, settled, official construction but a series of often conflicting and disputed expositions." (Bruns, 1992: 106) Midrash understands that interpretation is in the present and thus brings the concerns of the present into dialogue with the text. "The context of its composition" (Ibid: 106) is only the starting point. The interpreter of Midrash realizes that he is working with "something moving rather than fixed, something that is always a step ahead of the interpreter..." (Ibid: 111) Compare the following statement from Max Roach: "After you initiate the solo, one phrase determines what the next is going to be. From the first note that you hear, you are responding to what you've just played; you just said this on your instrument, and now that's a constant. What follows from that? It's like language; you're talking, you're speaking, you're responding to yourself."[11] Roach is saying that a solo can take on a life of its own as the logic of creativity is employed. It is the same with Midrash; once Midrash starts it may enter unseen paths to the interpretation of scripture. Once this level of interpretation is reached, interpretation nears improvisation.

One could argue that jazz is hermeneutic and exegetical because of its affinity to language. Robert Kraut argues that jazz can be fruitfully analyzed as if it were a language, and that this is how jazz musicians think of it. The view that "'music is a language like any other language" is widespread among jazz musicians." (Kraut, 2005: 9) My own view is that jazz is not a language but that it is still a semiotic enterprise. Ole Kuhl's "A Semiotic Approach to Jazz

[11] Quoted in Paul Berliner, Thinking in Jazz (University of Chicago Press, 1994), 192.

lmprovisation" [12] makes this case in a detailed analysis of forms of reharmonization. Kuhl writes, "The tenor of my presentation will be the view that... jazz musicians, by nature are actively engaged in making sense of their lives and the world they live in, and that such a semiotic behavior can be studied cognitively and neurobiologically inside a semiological paradigm." (Kuhl, 2007: 1.) Melody and harmony are meaning contexts and therefore open to interpretation.

Just as we underestimate the discretion the exegete has, we also overestimate the discretion of the jazz musician. Jazz musicians do not play just anything, even when they leave the melody completely. The "jazz improviser, as may have been popularly assumed, does not begin with a completely blank situation—nor does he ramble aimlessly. He creates within a learned probability system of stylistic norms that implies a defined goal."[13] The improvising jazz musician is a juggler of meanings and a manipulator of context, but there are theoretical (harmonic) and historical (stylistic) limits that are recognized, if somewhat loosely given the emphasis on creativity. Thus the rabbi engaging in Midrash is freer in his interpretations than previously assumed, and the jazz musician is less free than previously thought. This realization brings jazz improvisation and scriptural interpretation closer together in the spectrum of oscillation.

Bringing together our conceptions of interpretation and improvisation we get a better sense of the oscillation of foreground and background in both. In jazz, the oscillation of foreground and background is a matter of altering the melody over and mainly repeating harmony. But jazz also alters the harmony, although that is generally (but not always) to a lesser degree than melodic alteration. Paraphrasing Frank Tirro, Kennedy writes, "A jazz musician commits the changes of chord sequences to memory and, while a rhythm section maintains the harmonic structure throughout the performance, he improvises a solo to coincide with the particular harmonic framework. In the process the jazz improviser reuses and reworks material dictated only by conventions of the style in which he

[12] Ole Kuhl, "A Semiotic Approach to Jazz Improvisation," *The Journal of Music and Meaning*, Vol. 4, (Winter 2007).

[13] Kennedy, The paraphrase is of Frank Tirro, "Constructive elements in jazz improvisation," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 27 (1974) Tirro, 41.

performs."[14]

Musicians interact with *The Real Book* in a variety of ways, some of which are parallel to that we see in Vedic and Torah interpretation. As we have seen, in Midrash a passage from one part of the Torah is juxtaposed with another and a series of connections are made. In jazz, a similar process occurs. Two motifs from the song, or even from two different songs may be brought into a harmonic relationship and thus create a third hybrid motif that is then developed by mutation and so on. As the jazz musician gets better and better at this they begin to have the distinctive experience of creative freedom. I believe that if exegetes were faster, they might experience the same thing. But I do not doubt that exegetes have ecstatic moments as they engage in more and more exegesis and come to certain realizations about God, reality or truth.

Both Jazz fake books and Vedic texts are stand-ins for a reality behind them. Vedic texts are really mere inscriptions of the "urtext," which is the chanted sound. Jazz, similarly, is not the score; it is the sound of jazz standards (or other song that stands in some relation to the jazz standards). So in a sense, the texts are really already interpretations, interpretations of a prior reality of sound. So there is no sense in either case of literary foundationalism.

For the Vedic tradition, the sound that has an even greater significance. The sound of the chanted Veda actually serves to keep the universe intact. Barbara Holdrege has argued that the Vedic and Jewish canons also both contain a view of the canon that is cosmic in scope. Both the Vedas and the Torah were understood to be blueprints for the universe. And chanting passages from the Vedas was supposed to have a constitutive role in the maintenance of the universe. Holdrege writes of the Vedic corpus, "The core *sruti* texts, the Vedic *mantras*, are represented in the mythological speculations of Vedic and post- Vedic texts as having a trans-historical dimension, in which they constitute that eternal, suprasensible knowledge which exists perpetually on the subtle level of creation as the source or "blueprint" of the universe." (Holdrege, 1996: 110) The Torah is also claimed to be a blueprint for the universe." (Ibid: 131-196) It is actually quite surprising that two religions so far apart geographically could both come to the same cosmic view of their texts.

While it is obvious that there is nothing cosmic about *The Real Book*, its lowly origins being so well known, there is a comparable (but not equal)

[14] Kennedy, again paraphrasing Tirro, 40.

extension of significance to the book. *The Real Book* contains both the history and theory of jazz. There is knowledge embedded in the jazz canon, namely how to play jazz as well as the course of jazz history. If a person really understands *The Real Book*, they pretty much know the history and theory of jazz. So in spite of the fact that *The Real Book* is not in any way cosmic, there is somewhat of analogy in that while the ritual recitation of canonical text in religion has a world constitutive role, the performance of jazz standards keeps the genre alive. Like rituals for Chinese ancestors, in which the doing of the ritual keeps them alive, thus does the performance of jazz keep it alive.

Finally, Veda, Torah, and *The Real Book* share the attribute of rejection by some adherents. It is significant that the creation of the canon always arrives with its antithesis not far behind. The very existence of a canon suggests a set of boundaries that are at issue. The existence of a canon is an assertion of quality and legitimacy, both value judgments. Canon almost always asserts both aesthetic greatness and ethical legitimacy. Any assertion is always against a background of resistance and counter-assertions. The logic of resistance ultimately moves to a point of outright rejection, if nothing than as a logical endpoint. Thus we see a Hindu group, the Brahmo Samaj, famously reject the Vedic canon. The Torah had no significant group reject scripture in the way the Brahmo Samaj did, but the Chinese Legalist rejection of the Confucian canon was similar in its rejection to the Brahmo Samaj's rejection of the Vedas. Jazz musicians sometimes reject *The Real Book* songs in favor of either original or more contemporary songs. On this point, the similarity between the Brahmo Samaj and some jazz musicians can be seen when we note that some jazz musicians refuse to play standards at all in favor of originals or free jazz. In jazz, however, "setting aside" the book has a different meaning, for one does not set it aside until one has internalized a good portion of its contents. The idea is to commit to memory the music one used to have to read. In a sense, the *telos* of the jazz canon is rejection. One is supposed to transcend *The Real Book* and internalize the music itself. Jazz musicians speak of "getting off the page." The other two canonical texts are not meant to be transcended. They constitute eternal reference points.

While the grouping of Veda, Torah, and *The Real Book* may seem incongruent, we see there are reasons to think about them together. In neither case does canonicity reject change; canonicity instead gives us a reference point for building principles or guidelines for interpretation and jazz improvisation. We see that the interpretation of religious texts displays a similar pattern to what we see

in improvisational music. The interplay between canon and interpretation as an oscillation becomes clear when we consider improvisation as an extended form of interpretation and Midrash a more limited form of improvisation. Improvisation simply takes the creative moment of interpretation to its logical conclusion. The logic of canonicity is therefore limitation and creative overcoming not only in religious contexts, but also musical contexts.

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