Studying Something You Are Part Of: The View From the Bandstand

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Being an active participant in an artistic world you want to study both helps and hinders your work. If you know what the people you want to study are talking about when they talk about their work, you already know what it might take an outsider months to learn. You can frame questions in a way they understand easily, identify things you don't understand (which will become, as you investigate them, the growing points of your study), and participate yourself in the activities you want to observe write about.

But you will also encounter obstacles. You will find it difficult to ask colleagues about things "everybody knows," because asking will seem foolish to them. You will also begin your research with preconceptions, ideas you just take for granted as so obvious not to require thinking about.

So we have to make further distinctions which, treated as binary, provoke classifications and help us create types which can organize what we know and what we learn, and alert us, through ambiguities, to things we want to know more about. We will use, as the raw material for this analysis, our current research on the jazz repertoire, in which we are interviewing and observing jazz players about what songs they know, how and where they learned them, how players use their individual repertoires to arrive at a collective repertoire for a particular performance, how individual repertoires become a shared cultural resource in a community of players, and many other questions relevant to the repertoire phenomenon. (Early reports on our research are found in (Becker and Faulkner 2006; Becker and Faulkner 2006b)

We are both experienced musicians, with many years of playing behind us. Faulkner still plays professionally several times a week and is an active member of a local community of working musicians. He can thus observe the processes of performance construction as closely as Roy observed machinists' collective work choices. On the stand when these discussions take place, he can observe exactly and precisely how collective choices are made, what criteria are invoked, who knows and doesn't know what songs, etc. Becker is no longer an active member of such a community, but has many acquaintances in his area, plays occasionally with others, and is in a position to ask a lot of questions and to make occasional observations.

We can distinguish, first, what we, as researchers, know from what we don't know. We know what the "standard" repertoire for jazz players is. But we immediately recognize that we may (1) think we know something ("researcher thinks" condition) but in fact (2) may or may not actually know it ("researcher knows"). If we're lucky we discover this from our observations and interviews and it makes us rethink what we know. This distinction generates four types. I can correctly think I know something: I do know what I think I know. I can think I know and be wrong: I don't know what I think I know. And, conversely, I can think I don't know something I actually do know, or correctly think that I don't know something. In the form of a truth table, this is:
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Each situation has its characteristic advantages and disadvantages. Without cataloguing all of these, we can note, for instance, that a researcher who bases an interview question on false knowledge may be embarrassed by a more knowledgeable interviewee. On the other hand, a researcher can use accurate knowledge to pose questions that will provoke an interviewee to explain some aspect of his work the researcher would like to know more about.

We soon see that these terms are insufficient for what we know and want to talk about. Keep in mind that in any situation of interviewing or observation, we are involved with one or more other people, and they also may know or not know the things we are interested in. This adds two more columns to our table, which is now a table about researcher-subject interaction: the second person may think he knows and may actually know, or either or both of these conditions may be false.

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And so on through all sixteen possibilities which the addition of the new variables creates. Each additional variable doubles the number of possible combinations. Some will be empirically unlikely, but anything can happen, and usually does in the field. The more variables, the more difficult it is to think up names for the situation. The first might be called "shared knowledge," but after that our imaginations stopped working.

This analysis of what can happen in the field lets us identify some common problematic situations for researchers in the arts who are themselves practitioners.

*Embarrassment.* If, thinking I am quite knowledgable, I ask a question which the person I'm talking to will think I should, as a responsible participant in the interaction, know the
answer to, he may wonder whether and how he should be talking to me. (In truth table terms, this would be the situation of \( X \rightarrow \neg X \).) Am I trustworthy? Should I be treated as an outsider who needs everything explained? Or, worse yet, am I someone who cannot be trusted at all? And consider this complication: I might ask such a question when I know the answer quite well, hoping merely to use it as a way of getting the person to talk at length about something so that I can check on what he knows and thinks on this point.

A tenor player was telling me about some of the musicians he worked with in New York before moving to Brazil, and he assumed I knew who those players were and what they had recorded in part. I did not know what he was talking about, but he assumed I knew something about the types of rhythms and their major proponents (players). So: I'm talking to a musician and he thinks I should know about these matters, as a responsible participant in the interaction. When I didn't he said, "Do you want me to spell that for you?" This was a particular rhythm he was talking about, about which I knew absolutely nothing. Talk about embarrassment. He then named three other Brazilian rhythms and, seeing that I did not know anything about them, said "Okay," and moved on, after I shrugged my shoulders.

He said, "There are many distinctive, important, and cool rhythms in Brazil beside the internationally much better known samba and bossa nova." And then he told me "some of the more significant ones" are: "baiao, chorinho, forro, pagode, marcha rancho, maracatuu, and frevo."

I did not know any of these Brazilian rhythms.

*Crippling prejudices*. One of our most educational experiences to date, in the sense of learning something we didn't know before, came when we confronted the phenomenon of the rapidly shifting jazz repertoire. This appears in the quite different tunes that players of different ages knew. We have to say here that we are both of an older generation, though we would like to think that we keep up with current trends. Between us, we have probably spent over a hundred years playing jazz and popular music in a variety of venues. So, when we began our work, we were quite sure we knew pretty much everything there was to know about the jazz business.

One thing we "knew," as many players of our vintage think they "know," is that younger players do not know all the tunes they should know. This view was expressed forcefully by Dick Hyman, a pianist known for his ability to play in a variety of styles and to play tunes from the Teens through the present day. In an article called "150 Standard Tunes Everyone Ought To Know," he said:

Too often, younger musicians don't know the tunes that are still the common currency of players in all styles of jazz. . . . Although I agree that not only jazz but popular music in general has been fleeing from the discipline of chord changes, I believe that a musician, and in particular a pianist, is gravely under-prepared if he or she embarks on a career based primarily on the Dorian mode. Sooner or later
someone is going to ask you to play "Stardust." (Hyman 1982a. See also Hyman 1982b).

But our interviews and experiences soon showed us, once we paid attention to what people were saying and doing, that young players were not so much ignorant of an older repertoire as they were learning a repertoire of what one pianist called, in an interview with Becker, and with biting irony, "jazz compositions." These compositions, by players like Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Chick Corea and others. did not follow the standard patterns of the classical jazz standards Hyman listed, tunes which, in fact, almost all older players did know but many younger players did not.

Hyman's complaint was mild. It's more often expressed as "These goddamn kids don't know any goddamn tunes!" An example from Faulkner's field notes, recorded after a job:

Dave started in on a piano player who "doesn't know any tunes and has to have the music in front of him to play blues in F." He was very heated about this. Here is the line I remember as we were standing around filching hors d'oeuvres. I said to Paul [pianist], "Let's do 'Alone Together,'" I think that was the tune I suggested. Paul said "I don't know it but Dave can tell me the changes [as we play]." Dave's response was, "I don't want to do that. I have to do that with a piano player who doesn't know any tunes who should remain nameless, he doesn't know tunes and I have to tell him through the entire gig, this change, that change. It's a drag. If I get a call to do 'Rite of Spring' then I won't take that kind of gig, you get Don Baldini to do that, he can read that kind of music. You call me to do a gig with standards, tunes....But if you call someone to do a gig and he doesn't know any tunes, then he shouldn't take the gig in the first place. Don't take the gig if you don't know tunes, so I end up having to tell him the chord changes on every tune because he doesn't know them."

We were more easy-going in our approach to this phenomenon but, even though we had learned some of these songs, we did not fully know the conditions of work that led players to absorb this new repertoire rather than the older one. We did understand and share, to some degree, the heavily moralistic response of Dave to this situation.

Briefly, the players of our generation worked in small groups, often assembled on an ad hoc basis to play together one time only, which put a premium on every player having a working knowledge of what we can call "the Hyman repertoire." These groups played for parties, for dancing, as entertainment in local bars, etc. Younger players play much more often for listening, and the audiences they entertain want to hear, if they express themselves at all, the newer jazz repertoire, what we can call "the Shorter" repertoire" or, equally likely, original compositions in that style by the members of the group themselves. This model is much more like the rock music model, in which each band has its own repertoire. When you know that repertoire, you are not equipped to play with a random assortment of other players without substantial amounts of rehearsal time.
Being able to observe the repertoire in action, on the bandstand and on the job, led us to see that our insider knowledge was partial, limited to the perspectives of the older subgroup of players we belonged to. In the language of the truth table, the researchers were + -- (thought they knew about the younger group's practices and beliefs but didn't) and the younger players we interviewed and observed were + +; they knew and understood their own practices.

**Mutual Exploration.** We discovered some interesting topics in our discussions with other musicians, some of which we might say that neither we nor they fully understood. Our discussions with them took the form of a sort of mutual exploration as we tried to see what the answer to the question we had uncovered could be. In these cases, what we jointly discovered was that each of us in fact did know the answer, but hadn't known that we knew it. So it was a case of -- X -- X.

Becker was interested in the fairly common situation in which someone is called on to play a song they don't know at all. This is something that everyone knows how to do, something that interviewees had mentioned and that had happened to both of us. Since it seems like a contradiction in terms--how can you play what you don't know?--he took the opportunity to ask about it during an interview with a bass player he had played with in the past, but had now engaged in a more formal interview:

Don and I were discussing what tunes he knew and where he had learned them. He has an enormous repertoire, ranging from Dixieland tunes from the Twenties to a lot of contemporary compositions, so this was a lengthy discussion. Then I asked him if he had ever had to play a tune he didn't know at all. He said that of course he had, everyone had to do that sometimes. I asked how he did it, and he looked sort of puzzled and finally said that he wasn't sure. "But, I'll tell you what, let's try it and see what happens. Play something I don't know and I'll follow you and tell you what's going on."

I thought for a minute and picked a very obscure tune from the 1940s (I had probably learned from hearing Glenn Miller's Orchestra play it on the radio), "I'm Stepping Out With a Memory Tonight." No jazz great ever recorded it, so it was not likely it would be known because of that. (It was, however, recorded by Glenn Miller and several other big bands of the 1940s, as well as by the singer Jeri Southern). I told Don the name and he said he had never heard it. I started to play it, in the key of F. Don, like any bass player would, watched my left hand closely, to see what bass notes I was playing that he could pick up on. He had no trouble with the first two bars, a standard I VI II V progression. The third bar goes from the major chord on the tonic--in this case, FM7--on the first two beats, to the same chord with an E in the bass. As soon as I played the E, Don said, "Stop right there. That's a clue." I said, "What's a clue?" He said, "That E. When you play that, I know almost for sure that the next note is going to be an Eb going down eventually to a D. And that means the harmony is almost surely going to be F7 going to BbM7, maybe a Gm7. Then I'm home free."
He added, "You know, there are clues to things like not only what the next chord
will be but when you're going to play a big Las Vegas ending."

As soon as he said this, I knew exactly what he was talking about, knew that I
would have made essentially the same analysis of the possibilities that he had
made, and would have come to the same conclusion. And thus would have been
able to play at least that part of the tune as he was able to do it. (Although, being a
bass player, he did not have to be able to play the melody.)

In other words, interviewer and interviewee, together, created a question pertinent to the
research and then collaborated to find an answer to it.

Answering the question the researcher posed has the happy result of creating new
problems for study. Because what the joint exploration of how to play a song one doesn't
know made clear is the formulaic nature of the popular songs which furnish the basis for
the older repertoire. These songs are typically constructed around a few harmonic
patterns, in a few highly standardized forms (so many bars, divided in one of a few
possible ways). That standardization makes it easy to guess at how a song is put together,
and that makes this form of collective action among relative strangers possible. As a
result of this use of our insider knowledge, we now had this to investigate: how do
players learn and use the formulas?

Making tacit knowledge explicit. Bringing this implicit or tacit knowledge to the surface,
making it explicit and thus amenable to further investigation, creates new and interesting
problems for investigation. If the researcher and the interviewee use a shared and highly
conventional language, the interview can proceed quickly and without incident. But
suppose the question seems (suddenly or otherwise) ambiguous to the interviewee, and he
begins to question the implicit premises on which it is based. Consider this extended
example from Faulkner's interview with a tenor saxophonist, who has raised the question
of "what it means to learn a tune, I mean really learn a tune . . . . at what level do I know
the tune?" and he goes on like this:

The example I always use that spurs my thought processes on is when somebody
says to me, ‘Let’s play ‘Woody ‘n You,’ whatever.’ And I like wow, [say] I used
to know that tune, but I don’t know it now, I can’t remember, I know how the
melody goes, which is important, obviously, or maybe not, but in this case I know
it, maybe, but I might get stuck on the bridge, what key it modulates to or where
the bridge starts, but ‘we’re going to play this tune.’

Now I might know this tune because I remember the changes, the chord changes.
But if I were an actor, for example, and I memorized my lines, and say for
example we’re doing this show and I go up on my lines and I forget what my next
line is, do I know the play at that level where if I go up on my lines am I screwed
or do I know the play at a level where I know what’s going on, I know where we
are, I know the meaning of what I’m talking about, and if we screw up we can get
out of it because I can improvise because I know where we are, and know what
we’re talking about. I’m not just spewing lines. I’m not just playing licks. . . . I haven’t just memorized the changes. I can hear the changes. I don’t have to know the changes but I can blow over them.

[Discussing playing Coltrane's "Giant Steps"] I practiced it by rote, practicing a lick over every dominant chord, every tonic chord, just memorizing exactly…but at some point, at some point, the more I played it I could play it the way I play a blues. At some point it started to…. [He paused. And I added or inserted “work.”] Yeah, it worked, it got to that level in my subconscious, like when you play a blues now you don’t have to think, I mean you can [think] but if we do it usually screws us up. But we could play a blues without thinking, we could play rhythm [i.e., "I Got Rhythm"] changes probably without thinking, a lot of standards without thinking. ‘Stablemates,’ I’d have to think. I’d have to think, but you know it would be a great exercise playing ‘Stablemates’ and not thinking or playing ‘Stablemates’ in another key, try playing ‘Stella [by Starlight]’ in another key, without accompaniment and see if you can…without trying to intellectualize the chord changes, OK, I’m not going to play ‘Stella’ in B flat, I’m going to play it in E. I’m not going to try to transpose every chord change up a tritone or something I’m just going to try to blow . . . . That’s when you really know a tune when someone says, ‘Let’s play Stella in B’ and you just blow on it, and [you] don’t think about the chord changes.

Faulkner enters the conversation, which now becomes a mutual exploration of these problems of "knowing a tune," saying "I went through that with 'Smoke gets In Your Eyes' and the following conversation ensues:

Oh,” he said, “the bridge—right?” “I worked on it for forty five minutes,” I continued, and I told him about how I spent a weekend learning it along with the line on Dizzy’s “BeBop,” breaking both of the tunes down and really getting them in my head. I talked about some of the interesting parts of “Smoke.” He said, “If I were to try to play that tune, ‘Smoke Gets In Your Eyes,’ first of all I probably couldn’t, ‘cause I don’t think I can hear…that’s a weird one, because if you don’t know the melody, where the melody goes on the bridge . . . ” He started singing the melody. He sang the last note of the A section with emphasis, with a questioning look on his face. I sang it too and told him that the first note of the bridge is the same note that the tune starts with. [There is a key change in the bridge to several sharps, but the note on the horn is the same, in effect]. There seemed to be some mutual learning taking place at this moment in the interview. I asked, “So how would you learn that, would that be a memorization issue, I mean you memorized it by knowing that the bridge, the melody, starts on the same note could be a drag, if that’s what you are relying on, because if you’re blowing on it, then all of a sudden . . . . You’re locked in. You’re locked into that…or just knowing that…knowing the harmony. So it modulates down a major third? Is that right?” We continued to try to break down the harmony on this tune and sang certain parts of the bridge and what notes we are on at what points in the tune and, for him, what keys we go in and out of. After a forty
seconds or so of doing these puzzles with the tune, he concluded, “I think” he said.

In this extended example, interviewer and interviewee use their shared knowledge of the details of this song, of common harmonic practice in jazz, and of the construction of popular and jazz tunes to explore the meaning of knowing, thus opening up for the researchers a new terrain of investigation they had not previously formulated explicitly.

Coda

Studying something you are a part of, and interviewing people who you have worked with and will work with again raises difficult questions that fieldworkers in more traditional research situations don't have to address but, at the same time, offers wonderful possibilities for data gathering not open in the same way to outsiders.

Is it necessary to be a member of the community to exploit such possibilities? The question often arises in other areas: must a researcher be black to understand what goes on in the black community? Can a man understand women's experiences and vice versa? Do you have to be a junkie or a whore to study those worlds? The extreme cases make clear that the answer is "No."

The answer is no because, almost always, what we want to know and need to know is not some deep emotional thing about how it feels in the dark night of the soul at three o'clock in the morning when you need a fix and can't find a connection. What we always want to know is how people find connections and what kinds of business arrangements exist between the two kinds of actors, and what the contingencies of such a life are. Other positions than insider make that possible.

What kinds of positions do that? When Eleanor Lyon (1974) studied a small theater organization in the Bay Area she went to the place they performed, told the director about the research she wanted to do, and worried about "getting access." But the director didn't share her qualms about confidentiality and the other things we usually worry about. He asked her a simple question: "What can you do?" Meaning: can you act, sing, dance, construct sets or props, make costumes, something like that that might be useful to their enterprise. She said, honestly, that she couldn't do any of that. To her surprise, he said, "Great, you can hold book," which, she found out, meant that she would sit next to him during rehearsals, give actors lines when they forgot them, and (most importantly) take down the "notes" that he wanted to give the actors after the rehearsal. It was the perfect place for a sociologist to be. She wasn't a theater person, and didn't become one, but she was in the middle of everything. She was right there and knew everything, but wasn't of any importance to any one, having nothing that anyone else wanted. She couldn't give someone a better part or influence the casting in any way, for instance. So everyone talked to her about everything, no one hid anything from her (why should they?), she had the run of the place. It was the perfect spot for a sociologist.
This is a common possibility. Many organizations need helpers, people to do small unskilled but important jobs. There's a picture in *Sidewalk* (Duneier 2000) of Mitch Duneier sitting on a milk crate in the snow on 6th Avenue, freezing, near where the men he was studying sold second hand books. He was watching someone's books for him while he went to eat or go to the bathroom. That's the kind small job he did for them, and his willingness to do such chores was why he could see and hear everything without having to be a black crackhead or any of the other things these guys were. He made himself useful, he had a place in the scheme of things.

In contrast, we have a position in the musical world independent of being sociologists. We would be there and have been there even though we weren't doing a study. In this paper, we've outlined some of the advantages and disadvantages of doing research this way.


—. 2006b. "'Do You Know . . . ?' The Jazz Repertoire: An Overview." *Sociologie de l'art*.


