

The Map is Not the Territory: Metaphor, Embodiment, and the Improvising Jazz Singer

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What does it feel like to improvise with the voice in jazz? And what can the language singers use to describe that experience tell us about the nature of improvisation itself?

Despite the centrality of improvisation to jazz singing, singers have been persistently under-represented in the psychological and cognitive literature on musical improvisation. This presentation gives voice to that overlooked experience, tracing the evolution of a research program dedicated to understanding the inner world of the expert improvising jazz singer — one that moves across a series of interconnected studies drawing on phenomenological inquiry, conceptual metaphor theory, and mobilities studies to build a progressively richer picture of what it means to improvise with the voice at an expert level.

Key findings include the discovery that jazz singers experience a state of flow during successful improvisation, and that the metaphorical language singers reach for — instinctively and often unconsciously — offers a uniquely revealing window into the embodied, situated nature of that experience.

Central to this work is the argument that improvisation cannot be adequately understood through cognitive or representational frameworks alone. The body, the environment, and the relationships between musicians all play a constitutive role in the creative act. Metaphor, in this context, becomes more than a descriptive device — it is evidence of the deep entanglement of body, mind, and world that characterises expert improvisation.

The presentation concludes by reflecting on the broader implications of this work, tracing a line from the inner world of the expert improvising singer to my more recent research, which positions singing and music-making as embodied practices of care for the self and others. In this way, understanding what it means to fully inhabit the act of singing becomes not only a matter of artistic or pedagogical interest but a way to contribute towards greater human flourishing.