



Listening to live jazz: an individual or social act?

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Abstract

Purpose – This article seeks to understand how audience members at a live jazz event react to one another, to the listening venue, and to the performance. It considers the extent to which being an audience member is a social experience, as well as a personal and musical one, and investigates the distinctive qualities of listening to live jazz in a range of venues.

Design/methodology/approach – The research draws on evidence from nearly 800 jazz listeners, surveyed at the Edinburgh Jazz and Blues Festival and in The Spin jazz club, Oxford. Questionnaires, diaries and interviews were used to understand the experiences of listening for a wide range of audience members, and were analysed using NVivo.

Findings – The findings illustrate how listening to live jazz has a strongly social element, whereby listeners derive pleasure from attending with others or meeting like-minded enthusiasts in the audience, and welcome opportunities for conversation and relaxation within venues that help to facilitate this. Within this social context, live listening is for some audience members an intense, sometimes draining experience; while for others it offers a source of relaxation and absorption, through the opportunity to focus on good playing and preferred repertoire. Live listening is therefore both an individual and a social act, with unpredictable risks and pleasures attached to both elements, and varying between listeners, venues and occasions.

Research limitations/implications – There is potential for this research to be replicated in a wider range of jazz venues, and for these findings to be compared with audiences of other music genres, particularly pop and classical, where differences in expectations and behaviour will be evident.

Practical implications – The authors demonstrate how existing audience members are a vast source of knowledge about how a live jazz gig works, and how the appeal of such events could be nurtured amongst potential new audiences. They show the value of qualitative investigations of audience experience, and of the process of research and reflection in itself can be a source of audience development and engagement.

Originality/value – This paper makes a contribution to the literature on audience engagement, both through the substantial sample size and through the consideration of individual and social experiences of listening. It will have value to researchers in music psychology, arts marketing and related disciplines, as well as being a useful source of information and strategy for arts promoters.

Keywords Audience, Listening, Jazz, Venue, Live music, Social behaviour, Arts

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Listening to music has never before been such an individually customised act: high-definition, portable music listening equipment means that choice of music, location of

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listening and level of concentration can be controlled with great precision. Why then would anyone choose to hear live music, amidst the distractions of other coughing, shuffling listeners, with the risk that the repertoire might not be enjoyable, or the performance below standard? Audiences for live classical music are declining (Kolb, 2001), and changing demographics are threatening new audiences for jazz (Hodgkins, 2009), causing anxiety for concert promoters and consternation amongst art music devotees. Nonetheless, the experience of live listening for those who attend is still powerful and immediate, transcending the ubiquity of recorded music and turning listening into an act of significance (Blessner and Salter, 2007). This paper draws on recent qualitative data to consider the psychological processes of live music listening, taking jazz audiences as a case study and examining the effects of venue and prior musical engagement on the experience of being an audience member. From this, we aim to draw broader conclusions about the collective nature of being in an audience, and to consider whether social interaction is a beneficial, neutral or detrimental quality of the live musical experience.

2. Spaces for listening

An understanding of live music listening needs to take into account the physical and social context in which a musical event takes place, alongside the processes and preferences which differently affect the experiences of each individual listener (cf. Kronenburg, 2010). The historically changing design of public concert spaces reveal the ways in which audience listening has moved from a social act, incorporating food, drink and conversation, to one in which individual attention is directed to the performers on stage. David Wiles (2003) documents the mid-nineteenth century shift from the music hall layout of chairs around tables, to the theatre-style format of chairs or benches facing the stage; a change that was driven partly by capitalism – “more space for more customers” (p. 150) – but which also had lasting effects on the interaction between performers and audiences, marking a “steady movement towards passive spectatorship” (p. 150). Wiles cites the modern comedy club as an exception to the prevalence of spectatorship over sociability, where audience members drinking together in groups are free to give their attention to the performers or to one another, and to form a sense of collective engagement with other audience members (p. 160). Another exception is the jazz scene, located in dedicated clubs as well as pubs, restaurants and arts centres, but more rarely to be found in the conventional concert hall (Riley and Laing, 2006, p. 7).

Interaction with the audience is an expected part of jazz performance (cf. Monson, 1997; Berliner, 1994), and listeners’ and players’ mutual responses to the immediacy of improvisation create an additional incentive to attend live gigs: “home entertainment recordings may offer impeccable sound quality, but they cannot replicate the interactive dynamics generated by enthusiastic audience members interacting with the performers as well as each other” (Oakes, 2003, p. 168). As our empirical data will show, preferred venues for jazz tend to facilitate communication between audience members and performers, allowing a good view of the stage, easy access to refreshments and the opportunity for conversation in a relaxed environment (cf. Burland and Pitts, 2010). Already, the balance between individual and social engagement is evident: venues are designed to enable good sightlines and clear acoustics for listening, but also to enable interaction with other audience members (cf. Burland and Pitts, 2012), since both elements are central to a fulfilling listening experience.

Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) assert that in larger, more formally controlled performance spaces, a sense of “social distance” between performers and audience members results in “an apparent audience passivity” (p. 50) – though they also offer a reminder that lack of physical response to a performance, while the social norm, is not necessarily indicative of lack of engagement. The conventions of quiet attention expected in a theatre or concert hall – and rather more ambiguously in a jazz club – are socially enforced not only out of respect for the performers, or even the art work “itself”, but for the mutual comfort of all listeners: “the reactions of other audience members reinforce [those] convention[s], as will be made clear to those who unwrap toffees or chat during a concert, a political speech or a funeral” (p. 54). Nonetheless, there needs to be some collective response to generate a sense of being “in audience”: a half-empty hall is as dispiriting to the audience as to the performers (and promoters), and modern theatre designs with good sightlines have the disadvantage of revealing the full extent of unsold seats, so implicitly judging the success of a performance even before it has begun (Mackintosh, 1993, p. 128).

The shared response of an audience needs to be visible and audible to fellow listeners, as well as to performers: in jazz, particularly, the response of the audience shapes the mood and energy of a gig (Kubacki, 2008), and even within the quiet conventions of classical music listening, audience members can be drawn into the performance through the evident attention of fellow listeners (Pitts and Spencer, 2008). But being among other listeners brings the risk of distraction, and orchestral concert-goers interviewed by Terry O’Sullivan were eager to point out “the unpleasant proximity of obese neighbours, noisy page-turners, hummers, finger- or foot-tappers and coughers” (O’Sullivan, 2009, p. 218), while acknowledging that rigidity in the conventions of concert-going would deter new and younger potential audience members.

Attention to individual experience within a collective context has only recently become a focus for arts marketing research, absorbing ideas from psychology of music on self-representation through music, which has shown to be a strong part of identity from adolescence (cf. North *et al.*, 2000) into later life (cf. Pickles, 2003). Gretchen Larsen and colleagues have considered ways in which “symbolic consumption” of music can be informative for arts promoters (Larsen *et al.*, 2009), illustrating how musical experiences and choices are situationally based, as preferences are adapted to reinforce membership of particular friendship groups or social contexts (Larsen *et al.*, 2010). Much of this area of research has focused on recorded music listening, and our study makes a further contribution to these theoretical frameworks by considering the additional variables involved in live music listening. Through the case studies that follow, we explore the responses of new and experienced listeners to the act of being “in audience”, considering the extent to which individual listening is affected by social engagement, and how the benefits of listening with others could be increased and promoted as a strategy for audience development.

3. Research contexts and methods

This paper draws on two case studies of jazz audiences, carried out at the Edinburgh Jazz and Blues Festival (EJF) in July 2007 and The Spin jazz club in Oxford in May 2009. Jazz audiences were chosen for three main reasons: to offer a point of comparison with existing studies of classical music listening (Pitts, 2005a, b; O’Sullivan, 2009); to engage with audiences previously found to be open-minded and receptive to a wide range of arts experiences (Riley and Laing, 2006, 2010); and to explore the particular

characteristics of live listening in a musical form where improvisation and personal interpretation is integral to performance.

These two case studies were selected in particular as representative examples of established, high-quality jazz events in festival and club formats, reflecting the different contexts in which jazz audiences experience live, collective listening. EJJF is described in its online publicity as “Britain’s biggest Jazz Festival, presenting international jazz stars, exciting new-comers, Scottish talent and Jazz on a Summer’s Day, the UK’s biggest one-day jazz event” (www.edinburghfestivals.co.uk, April 2009). Events at the festival take place in a range of venues, from The Lot, an intimate jazz club used throughout the year, and the temporary structure of the Spiegelzelt, featuring a mirrored interior with a bar and space for dancing, to the more formal settings of The Hub and The Queen’s Hall, both fitted out with some circular tables as well as conventional tiered seating. The Oxford club, The Spin, has been shortlisted for the Parliamentary Jazz Awards as Jazz Venue of the Year every year from 2006 to 2009: its publicity makes the claim that “many regard a club setting as easily the best way to experience live jazz and with its intimate atmosphere, excellent acoustics, candle-lit tables and evocative lighting, The Spin is the quintessential jazz venue” (www.spinjazz.com, November 2010). These two events between them therefore represented a variety of settings for live jazz, allowing us to explore the interaction of place and experience for listeners of all kinds, from festival tourists to weekly jazz club attenders, and from Dixieland fans through to experimental jazz devotees.

Research in both locations was carried out through a combination of qualitative methods: audience questionnaires, follow-up telephone interviews, participant observation by two researchers, interviews with the event managers and, in the case of The Spin jazz club, online diaries of listening activities completed by a small number of participants for two months. Respondent numbers were high in both cases, assisted through the use of face-to-face distribution and stamped-addressed envelopes in Edinburgh, and an online survey hosted by the jazz club’s web site in Oxford. Numbers of respondents, and the participant codes that will be used to refer to them in the discussion that follows, are detailed in Table I.

Permission to carry out the projects was sought from the organisers of the EJJF and The Spin who also verified the design of the questionnaire. Ethical approval was granted by each of our universities and participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity and their right to withdraw their data at any time. The large response rates in each context suggest that these modes of data collection were appropriate and non-intrusive on the listening experience. The 701 respondents at EJJF were almost evenly balanced for gender, at 48 per cent male and 52 per cent female, with a predominance of older listeners in retirement or professional occupations – the “many shades of grey” found in other studies of festival attenders (Maughan and Bianchini, 2004, p. 9). At The Spin, a much greater proportion of the 91 respondents were male (74 per cent), and also tended towards the over 55 age bracket (cf. Riley and Laing, 2010). Our respondents are therefore reasonably representative of jazz festival and club attenders, though the specificities of the Edinburgh and Oxford settings are also strongly present in their responses, giving a picture that has rich, local detail (cf. Maitland, 2009) whilst being indicative of wider trends and experiences.

The questions underpinning the data collection related to the characteristics of jazz audiences, what they found appealing about live jazz events, and the significance of jazz performances for listeners. The questionnaires included both closed and open questions and the interviews and diaries enabled us to gather more detailed

Event details	Methods and responses	Participant codes
Edinburgh Jazz and Blues Festival: 10 day programme of ca. 100 events across venues in Edinburgh	ca. 2,000 questionnaires distributed at a range of gigs and venues, with stamped addressed envelopes provided for their return = 701 responses Semi-structured telephone interviews carried out with a representative sample of those who provided contact details at the end of the questionnaire = 36 interviews	(EJF1-701) Q, questionnaire I, interview e.g. (EJF26Q)
The Spin jazz club, Oxford: weekly gigs in the upstairs room of a central Oxford pub, with house band and visiting artists	Online questionnaire advertised through flyers at gigs and on the club's web site = 91 responses Semi-structured telephone interviews carried out with a representative sample of those who provided contact details at the end of the questionnaire = 15 interviews Online diaries completed by 6 respondents, fortnightly for two months	(Sp1-93) Q, questionnaire I, interview D, online diary e.g. (Sp92D)

Table I.
Participants and codes

information about the participants' experiences of listening to jazz, following up some of the responses provided in the questionnaires. Respondents were asked about the frequency of their attendance, their reasons for choosing which gigs to attend, their perceptions of "typical" audience members, their recollections of particularly memorable gigs, and their preferences and experiences regarding live and recorded music listening. Telephone interviews were conducted with a purposive sample from each setting, selected to cover a spread of age, experience and frequency of attendance. The six volunteers who applied to complete our diary study at The Spin were all male, experienced listeners, to whom the somewhat demanding task of completing an online diary every fortnight for two months perhaps held greatest appeal: while this limits the representative coverage of the diary data, it does highlight the views of a significant demographic within the jazz club setting, and so provides particular insight on the nature of listening for those to whom it holds great value. The questionnaire, diary, and interview data were analysed thematically using NVivo software which enabled us to examine each event individually but also to draw comparisons between the two.

4. Thematic discussion: shared aspects of listening

Initial explorations of each of these studies have been published elsewhere (Burland and Pitts, 2010; Burland and Pitts, 2012): our intention here is to look beyond these specific events, and to consider broader questions of how live music listening is experienced collectively and individually. The thematic discussion that follows interrogates several possible explanations of the appeal of live music listening, from which we can identify potential implications for arts promotion, performance and future research.

4.1 *Being among like-minded listeners*

Much of the social interaction in a musical event takes place while the music is not playing – as audience members arrive, during interval conversations, at the bar, and as the audience disperses after the gig. Feeling comfortable amongst other listeners

provides a necessary context for enjoying the music; this is the source of challenge for arts organisations seeking to broaden their demographic, as the sense of being in a minority (by age, gender, ethnicity, experience) can leave newcomers on the edge of the experience (cf. Dobson and Pitts, 2012). Amongst both the audience groups that we studied, a feeling of “fit” was important in attending events: “the social aspects of being in a group where I feel at home that is often as important as the music *per se*” (Sp14Q). At Edinburgh, the sense of “light & happy people enjoying themselves” (EJF138I) was prevalent, though the presence of “proper jazz fans [...] actually wearing berets and a little jazz beard” (EJF199I) added to the feeling that the audiences were generally knowledgeable and committed. Audiences in both cities noted the problem of ageing clientele for live jazz, and were welcoming of parents bringing children to Edinburgh events, and students attending The Spin (where younger listeners are excluded because of licensing laws).

At The Spin jazz club, seeing friends and regular attenders was part of the social pleasure of going to gigs, while the more disparate Edinburgh audience, spread across many gigs and venues, were nonetheless sure of enjoying a “relaxed, social atmosphere” (EJF23Q). Sometimes attendance was a way of enriching friendships or spending time with partners, and the perceived cross-generational appeal of jazz made it conducive to groups who might otherwise have different tastes and needs for a night out:

Whereas some of the other things that I like, you know my husband might not like, or my parents might not like, you know, and it's not just the music that makes us feel good, it's the fact that we're all doing something together that we all enjoy and we can all talk about afterwards. It's, you know, there's a lot to it (EJF87I).

At both events, the majority of audience members attended with friends or partners, but were receptive to engaging in conversation with other listeners, stating that “you meet such enthusiastic and interesting people” (EJF119Q). At The Spin, where a regular audience and a small venue increased the chances of meeting someone familiar, attending alone was also acceptable:

I always go on my own apart from, I've got one or two acquaintances who sometimes say “are you going to The Spin on Thursday, I'll see you there”. And I've now met a couple of people who go regularly who I can tap on the shoulder and say “hi, how are you?” (Sp84I).

Respondents rarely mentioned having conversations about the music, though their own descriptions of gigs were detailed and evaluative, often showing a high level of knowledge and involvement. For a few avid jazz fans, however, chance conversations in the bar offered a welcome respite from feeling that their interest was not shared by other groups of friends: “you're talking to somebody who knows something about what you like, which in everyday life you don't, because some people think you're mad!” (EJF107I). More important than the quality of conversation, for most people, was the sense that such interactions were possible, but optional: “you can socialise if you wish (the venue is quite intimate) or sit there, ignore everyone and just enjoy the music” (Sp56Q). As noted earlier, the etiquette of jazz clubs is less clear cut than the “darkened auditoria, socially enforced silence and immobility” of a classical concert (Clarke, 2005, p. 20), and transgressions from the generally accepted level of conversation and movement were only rarely reported, usually with reference to venues other than The Spin or Edinburgh.

In addition to making the events socially enjoyable, the presence of a like-minded, appreciative audience was also seen to contribute to the quality of the gig: “the better

the atmosphere, the better the music a lot of the time” (Sp81I). Audience members cited instances of performers relaxing with the audience as a gig progressed, or of “the way that an audience responds can sometimes bring out more from a performer than you might have anticipated happening” (EJF125I): the sense of having an impact on a performance through the way in which they listened made being an audience member a participant, rather than passive, role in the musical event. The assumption that other audience members were enjoying the music in similar ways also enhanced the listening experience, and the hallmark of a successful gig or club was one where “people are there for the music rather than to be seen” (Sp72I). Audiences at Edinburgh were assumed to be “fairly knowledgeable about the music” (EJF150Q), and Spin listeners too were “always very appreciative of the high quality of music we are fortunate enough to be listening to” (Sp30Q). In this sense, listening is a collective act, and the solidarity of being with other enthusiasts both affirms and enhances the enjoyment of jazz: “it’s being amongst a group of people who are all enjoying the same thing” (Sp21I). The like-mindedness of audience membership appears to generate feelings of friendliness and relaxation, which in turn increase the sense of engagement and belonging felt particularly by regular attenders.

4.2 Making a connection with the musicians

The friendliness of jazz gigs noted above was not confined to the audience, but was also welcomed in the performers’ personas, extending the social nature of listening to the opportunity to connect with musicians and glimpse something of their motivation and personality. At The Spin, the two owners of the club are also members of the house band, and the audience expressed a genuine sense of knowing the players and appreciating their efforts to create a friendly, welcoming club:

Simply put, [they] are two of the nicest guys you could meet in jazz and their sponsorship and playing [...] brings out the best from guest musicians (Sp44Q).

Participating in a “club run by people who care about the music and about the audience” (Sp70Q) contributed to enjoyment of The Spin, but was inevitably less obviously present for Edinburgh audiences, owing to the larger, more commercial nature of the festival. In both cases, though, musicians who showed clear enjoyment of playing and communicating were highly valued, and helped the audience to feel part of the event: “you know, if they’re having a great night, you’re going to have a great night” (EJF124I). While the quality of playing was paramount to enjoyment of a gig, much more was expected of performers in addition:

I tend not to enjoy concerts as much if I feel that the musicians don’t interact with the audience on a personal level, you know if it’s purely down to the music and they don’t speak, I don’t enjoy it as much (EJF74I).

Interaction with the audience, and with one another, was taken as evidence that players were enjoying their music-making, and helped to make listeners feel welcome and involved: “you get the feeling from the musicians that the music really means something to them” (EJF106I). At The Spin, opportunities to interact with the musicians sometimes extended beyond the performance: “because the resident trio are the organisers, and the people who play are their mates, you know they hang around at the bar before and after and so on, and they’re normally very happy to socialise and have a chat while they’re at the club” (Sp25I).

The layout of venues, and the opportunity to sit close to the stage, was another contributing factor in feeling a sense of connection with the musicians. Audience

members liked to be able to see the performers' facial expressions and their hands, particularly, and sometimes favoured balcony seats in order to "look down on the musicians" (EJF114I). The powerful experience of "making eye contact with the musicians" (Sp56I) not only enhanced immediate engagement in the gig but could also generate lasting and vivid memories:

Probably one of the best jazz and blues concerts I've ever been to [was when] Buddy Guy came out with his guitar, and I was probably about four tables, five tables in front. He mingled with the crowd, and he took his main guitar and he stood with the guitar, pure solo guitarist, right in front of me, right in front of me. And I was just like absolutely just absorbed in the music, and just like phenomenal, absolutely phenomenal. It's probably one of my best moments ever, in a concert yeah, right next to, got this thing on my lap almost (EJF204I).

Audience members also derived pleasure – and perhaps also deepened their understanding of jazz – by watching the interactions between musicians and observing how players directed the ensemble and responded to one another's improvisations. Noticing how "the music moves – seemingly just on the nod – from one player to another" (Sp54Q) offers a visible guide to listening, making the players' reactions evident to the audience and inviting them to notice the same features of the music, in much the same way that television cameras highlight particular moments in an orchestral performance by focusing on an individual player during a prominent solo line. One listener at The Spin captured the sense of admiration and involvement that this afforded for him:

[...] there's just the sort of nod of the head and then the music moves from one man to another and the next one picks it up and does his virtuoso bit, and then we all clap and there's a smile, and then the drummer picks it up [...] You know, I don't know how they communicate with each other, and I [...]. well because I can't do it myself, you know, and just watching, it's just the way in which they can pick up the music and go on and play their own little bit of it, and [...] that's what, I think performance has a lot to do with it – I do like to see people perform, and it's very impressive (Sp54I).

There is a sense of unravelling a mystery in this response, as a non-player ("I can't do it myself") is dazzled by the level of skill and the seemingly hidden communication between players, while coming to understand something of how the music evolves within the ensemble. For those audience members who were players themselves, watching a live ensemble could be even more directly informative: "I play a bit of saxophone myself, but I like to watch what saxophone players are doing, you know, I mean what their embouchure looks like and things like that. And I love watching drummers" (EJF26I).

Forming a connection – whether intellectually, musically or emotionally – with the players and their performance, seemed to be an important part of what made live listening was a more concentrated, emotional experience than the recorded listening which was also an important part of many audience members' lives (Burland and Pitts, 2010). The visibility of the human effort and intention behind the music enhanced listeners' enjoyment: "when you see someone playing it you feel slightly different about it, because you can see the emotion a little bit more I think" (Sp81I). Respondents' comments about what they noticed – hands, embouchure, glances to other players, smiles, nods – revealed something of what they heard, and of how their understanding of the music was shaped by watching the players' interactions. These experiences were deeply personal, highlighting the individual nature of listening, as listeners' became

inwardly absorbed – a process reinforced in turn by the presence of other listeners doing the same.

4.3 Concentration and comfort in live music listening

The discussion so far has been a largely positive portrayal of live listening, which at its best combines a comfortable sociability amongst a like-minded audience with close attention to high-quality musicians, with audience and players alike finding the performance engaging and enjoyable. But there are many extra-musical variables involved in bringing about such a rewarding experience, and audience members were sensitive to all of these – seating, other audience members' behaviour, temperature, acoustics, and good access to the bar for the high proportion of listeners who “don't like listening to jazz without a drink” (EJF82I). The choice of venue, its comfort and ambience, played a leading role in shaping the live listening experience, contributing to an audience's readiness to listen. One regular Spin attender described the atmosphere on arriving at the club:

You go as it were to the pub, which I've been in many times in my forty years in Oxford, but you go up this side stairway and you go upstairs to this darkened room, and all the windows are blacked out. And you go on into that and it's, you get your hand stamped as you go in, and you pay your six quid or some ridiculously cheap price. And there's a small bar in there, and a lot of rather grotty chairs, and if you've booked a place you've got a seat, and if you haven't booked a place you have to look around and see if one's vacant, and slowly the room fills up with people (Sp54I).

While the “darkened room” of The Spin was “unpretentious and relaxing” (Sp84Q) to its regulars, even the most loyal listeners complained about the ineffective air-conditioning and admitted that “when attention to the music dips a bit and one starts to look more objectively around the room it is difficult to escape from the fact that it is basically a tacky dark, seedy room above a run-down pub that seems to have seen better days” (Sp38D). An outsider might wonder why audience members remained so enthusiastic about the venue despite its physical limitations, and indeed the listeners themselves were aware of this paradox: “I don't mind being fairly kind of, you know, fairly tightly packed in a jazz club – that actually contributes to the atmosphere” (Sp25I). In both Edinburgh and Oxford, audience members disdained the alternative of “sitting in rows like a concert” (EJF87I), and generally preferred the social interaction of sitting around the small tables which were a feature of The Spin and several Edinburgh venues including The Lot, The Queen's Hall, and The Hub, and which gave “a real feel of a jazz concert” (EJF124I).

On a practical level, sitting at a table also avoided the discomfort of spending the evening “with an alcoholic drink between your feet” (EJF74I). This was important for an audience for whom the threefold pleasures of attending – “have a drink, with friends, and listen to music” (EJF82I) – were closely linked. Audience members professed to be relaxed about the social chatter that was associated with drinking during gigs, but had sometimes experienced incidents where the unwritten rules of the jazz club had been transgressed:

I'm not fussy about people having a little natter and whatnot, sort of like you go into some folk clubs and you breathe a word and everybody's going “Shhh”. But I do hate it when the audience show disrespect to the musicians on stage. And that's the only thing that ever, I've had that happen once at the Barbican, when there was a row of people in front of me who spent the whole show running in and out to the bar and chattering. I was just so frustrated, it ruined my evening (Sp72I).

With these few exceptions, the implicit invitation to socialise offered by grouped seating and access to a bar was seen as a positive factor in generating the friendly atmosphere of a good jazz venue. A first-timer at The Spin recalled going “with some trepidation [but] as soon as I’d got a bottle in my hand all was well” (Sp54I). Sitting together around tables could bring unexpected connections between audience members – “sometimes you can meet people who don’t necessarily know each other” (Sp52I) – as well as offering a night out for friends or couples that was more sociable than attending a more formally presented performance; “time out with my husband and a bottle of red wine to share” (Sp29Q).

Listening amongst “a relatively serious and knowledgeable audience” (Sp12I) could sometimes leave listeners wondering if they were doing it “right”, assuming that others around them are “obviously true fans” (EJF107I) while they themselves might not have “the same kind of honed skills” (EJF25I). For the most part, the idea that the same gig could be differently received according to individual listeners’ levels of concentration, experience and insight seemed to be tacitly accepted, but one respondent reflected on whether his own listening could be further developed through deliberate effort:

I’ve been, the word worry is wrong, I’ve been interested in the extent to which other people hear music with a subtlety and an understanding which I don’t think I have. And I’ve been trying to find out about it. You know, I don’t know what is an A, I still don’t know musical notes, and would that make a damn difference. I’ve been reading in that area (Sp14I).

Elsewhere in the interviews from The Spin, we hear the other half of this conversation:

I was talking to an older academic who goes regularly to The Spin, and he’s just recently been doing a sort of course on “how to understand jazz”, and he doesn’t read music, he doesn’t understand it. And he said “well I don’t understand why I like this music, I can’t verbalise what it is I like about it”. And I said “well you don’t have to verbalise it” [...] Being an academic he wanted to put words to what was happening. And I’m not sure that’s always possible (Sp9I).

Listeners at all levels of experience sought out gigs and venues where there was a balance between “a liveliness and a fun about jazz as well as a seriousness about music” (Sp47I), providing a further illustration that the musical performance, while a strong aspect of the experience, is shaped by the atmosphere and ethos generated by the audience. Through their awareness of other people’s listening, and the possibility that this might be different from their own, audience members locate their own experience within a collective act, turning the inward, individual processes of listening into a social experience.

The flexible social negotiations of a jazz venue balance all three features of a live performance – the players, the music, and the audience – demanding that each is given equal consideration, and thereby recognising their contribution to the whole. The friendly and informal atmosphere that the audience enjoy is created through their use of the venue, and their shared decisions about how much to talk, how often to applaud, and when to go to the bar. Much more than in a classical concert hall, where the music and the players are prominent, and the audience are placed in sufficient comfort to enable them to keep still and silent, live listening in a jazz venue makes a difference to the event – and the event is deliberately constructed to allow this to happen. One Spin regular noted that the club had “the interesting characteristic of establishing a distinctly different ambience depending on the artists” (Sp34Q), and one might add that different audiences, and their levels of concentration and response, could also change the atmosphere in more or less positive ways.

5. Conclusions

The audiences in Oxford and Edinburgh demonstrated a high level of commitment to live listening, and while their views might not be representative of uses of music amongst the wider population (cf. Sloboda *et al.*, 2001), they offer new insight on how listening is experienced and understood by those for whom it is a valued and frequently undertaken activity. They show that attending jazz gigs has a strongly social element, whereby listeners derive pleasure from attending with others or meeting like-minded enthusiasts in the audience, and welcome opportunities for conversation and relaxation within venues that help to facilitate this. Interaction with performers, too, is a vital part of live listening, and can enhance enjoyment by highlighting particular musical features that are made evident through the players' movements and responses, and by giving a sense of the players' personalities and their passion for the music. Live gigs have a sense of immediacy and authenticity which fuels an enthusiasm for jazz and provides an impetus for future attendance, as well as for further exploration of recorded music.

Within this social context, live listening is for some audience members an intense, sometimes draining experience; while for others it offers a source of relaxation and absorption, through the opportunity to focus on good playing and preferred repertoire. Individual responses to listening sometimes included an evaluative element, though often listeners recognised that their own tastes and moods affected their level of engagement, and were reluctant to attribute failure to enjoy a gig entirely to external factors. They were, in other words, self-reflective in their listening, aware that their own attention was as vital to a good gig as the performers' energy and skill – though conscious too that their capacity to engage fully might be limited by discomfort or distraction, which are the risks of live listening. Considered as “symbolic consumption” (Larsen *et al.*, 2010), the listening experiences of these jazz audiences demonstrate a clear congruency between self-image as discerning, critical listeners and an understanding of jazz as music which repays concentrated yet relaxed engagement amongst like-minded listeners. These listeners expect to work for their enjoyment, through regular attendance and support for local musical provision, and through listening, playing or reading between gigs. At The Spin particularly, the audience members feel secure in the knowledge that the organisers of the events understand their needs and preferences, confirming the view that a qualitative understanding of audience experience is an essential tool for arts promoters. Lisa Baxter has written of the frustrations of increasingly outmoded forms of arts marketing, which measure audience numbers rather than engagement: she urges a move towards qualitative research to “attain a sophisticated perspective on people's attitudes, perspectives and needs in relation to the arts and to begin to appreciate the degree to which the arts resonate with their beliefs and values” (Baxter, 2010, p. 133).

Our research has shown that the social aspects of live listening are a rich source of pleasure and engagement for many listeners, within which their individual attention can be enhanced by the responses of other audience members, and the atmosphere that this generates. Shared taste and enthusiasm provides a context for individual listening, such that a positive (or even a negative) listening experience is socially reinforced, and offers a point of communication and connection with other attenders, who can be assumed to be potential friends by virtue of their shared choice of music and leisure activity. Experiences of being negatively affected by the presence of other people were reported rarely and viewed as exceptions, usually occurring when the unwritten codes of respecting other listeners – and indeed the performers – were broken. Live listening

is therefore both an individual and a social act, with unpredictable risks and pleasures attached to both elements, and varying between listeners, venues and occasions. Their successful combination is at the heart of the motivation to attend a live jazz gig: to enjoy high-quality music, in a welcoming and comfortable setting, amongst like-minded people.

These findings have potential applications to other performance contexts, especially those concerned about recruiting and retaining new audiences: classical concerts, for example, may benefit from the kinds of informality described above (Dobson, 2010). However, it is possible that there is an element of “fit” between the type of music and the expectations of its audiences which may not have relevance in other musical contexts. The social aspect of listening to jazz is clearly critical, and is therefore well-established in the conventions and settings of jazz gigs: achieving that sense of audience involvement in a classical concert hall might be harder, and might be experienced as feeling inappropriate, even by new listeners (Dobson and Pitts, 2012). There is a need also for further investigation of performers’ views on the social nature of jazz performance (cf. Kubacki, 2008) – and on the broader questions of communicating with audiences, both verbally and musically. Our research demonstrates the multiplicity of factors that contribute to an enjoyable listening experience, and shows the value of long-term attendance in enculturating listeners and enabling them to become more discriminating and self-reflective in their responses to different musical events. Undertaking qualitative research of this kind is in itself an act of reflection and engagement for audience members, at a time when arts organisations are increasingly recognising that such dialogue is necessary to retain the current generation of listeners and recruit their successors (Radbourne *et al.*, 2009). We would suggest that existing audience members are the greatest repository of expertise in live listening, and that the investigation and articulation of their experiences still has much to contribute to an understanding of how and why audiences listen.

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