

1962

The Conflict Between Musical and Commercial Values in the Minneapolis Jazz Community

Robert Stebbins
University of Minnesota

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/jmas>



Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Stebbins, R. (1962). The Conflict Between Musical and Commercial Values in the Minneapolis Jazz Community. *Journal of the Minnesota Academy of Science, Vol. 30 No. 1*, 75-79.
Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/jmas/vol30/iss1/18>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the Minnesota Academy of Science by an authorized editor of University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. For more information, please contact skulann@morris.umn.edu.

The Conflict Between Musical and Commercial Values in the Minneapolis Jazz Community¹

ROBERT STEBBINS

University of Minnesota, Minneapolis

In the world of symphony music people have long been aware of the frequent tensions that may develop between practical and aesthetic requirements. The most fundamental idea underlying the present study is that similar problems also emerge in the realm of jazz.

It is theorized that jazz offers to its devotees a world of musical and emotional values which often tends to become an all-absorbing interest, dominating the whole of their lives and actually causing them to form with others into quasi-communities based on their common musical interests. The practical requirements of making a living, however, may conflict with these tendencies, placing strains on the jazz community and causing some of its members to move outside its sphere.

The present study, which is only exploratory in nature, was designed as a field investigation of the jazz community of Minneapolis. Its purpose was to examine six hypotheses concerning jazz and commercial musicians.

The Hypotheses and the Experimental Design: The six propositions drawn from this theoretical background are listed below.

Hypothesis I. To the extent that to make a living the jazz musician must play commercial music he is in tension with his art.

Hypothesis II. The leisure time of the jazz musician will reflect his desire either to be concerned with what is musically meaningful (jazz for its own sake) or to turn his music into a pure source of a livelihood.

Hypothesis III. The relation between the jazz musician concerned with the intrinsic values of his art and his fans is like that between a religious leader and the laity. On the other hand, the relation of a commercial musician to his public approximates that of a mere occupational specialist.

Hypothesis IV. The jazz musician needs the laity for monetary support to a greater extent than does the commercial musician.

Hypothesis V. The jazz musician acts as a missionary for professional jazz while the commercial musician is interested only in the material gain.

Hypothesis VI. The jazz man depends on a special-

ized group for aesthetic support. The commercial musician plays for a more indiscriminating and unappreciative audience.

The major tasks involved in the investigation of these hypotheses centered around (1) the identification of the jazz community, (2) the isolation of categories of jazz and commercial musicians associated with it, and (3) the gathering of evidence from these two groups of musicians which would supply confirmation or refutation of the hypotheses.

It is possible to identify the jazz community in two ways: ideologically and physically. Considerable attention has already been devoted in the literature, Becker (1951), Esman (1951), and Stebbins (1962), to the discussion of the first and it is actually the main concern. For the purposes of this study, the jazz community has been identified as a quasi-community (for the concept of community, see Martindale, 1960: 132) — a tendency toward community formation which, because of the conditions of its origin, cannot become total.

However, the jazz community is not only a concept but a physical entity which may be ecologically placed within a given city. To be sure, its boundaries are not precise for, like our abstract definition, there is an indefinite fringe area. Also, many members of the jazz community probably do not live here but have homes in other sections of the city. Nevertheless, this section is most likely to have the greatest concentration of resident members.

The physical jazz community functions as a "Mecca," an area of town to which those of the jazz world gravitate for the night hours. Cameron (1954:177) mentioned that sessions were typically held in off-beat liquor spots located in the transitional zones of a city. Private homes were seldom used, because of the late hours at which these affairs took place. Also, there are probably more jazz clubs operating during the legal hours for business in this area, and here one finds the eating and drinking establishments which serve as rendezvous points for the leisure hours after formal night life has ceased.

The jazz community varies not only as to the quality of jazz but as to the proportion of jazz groups working here. In Minneapolis, redevelopment in the downtown section has liquidated several clubs and other types of music, such as western and some low level commercial music, compete with jazz for existing jobs. However, this is the jazz community of Minneapolis, and although urban renewal will undoubtedly relocate its almost solid Negro population, it is, for the interim, the jazz musi-

¹ The material on which this study is based was gathered from a sample of Minneapolis night club musicians who were interviewed during the fall of 1961. Each respondent had played with the same group of musicians for at least two weeks prior to the interview and was working five or more nights per week in the same night club. I should like to express my sincere thanks to Professor Don Martindale of the University of Minnesota who was consulted in the course of this study.

cian's habitat which he has successfully maintained against musical and social rivals.

The members of the jazz community were identified by (1) self-identification as members and (2) the assignment of special in-group terms to those who belonged and of different terms for outsiders. Also the present study was not conceived in statistical terms, although some statistical techniques were employed in the analysis of the findings. Instead the proposal was to isolate two groups of musicians for comparative study under field conditions. The line between musical activities and their effect upon the pattern of life of the individual can be diagrammatically represented as follows:

TABLE 1. The Field Design.

Musical Activities Effects		
Group "A" Jazz Musicians	Life devoted to jazz as a primary value	Core membership in the jazz community
Group "B" Commercial Musicians	Music is primarily played to make a living	Peripheral membership in the jazz community

The study design is of the type which Chapin (1955) described as an "ex post facto" experimental design. The independent variable was a decision for or against the intrinsic values of jazz, or as stated in the diagram, to a life devoted to jazz as a primary value or to a life where music is primarily played to earn a living. In this study it was assumed that such decisions had been made prior to the time of the study—hence the characterization as an ex post facto design. The dependent variable is the core or peripheral membership in the jazz community, a social effect in the present of the earlier decision. Groups "A" and "B" are assumed to be similar in all relevant characteristics except for the decision for or against the intrinsic values of jazz.

Expected and Found Differences between Jazz and Commercial Musicians: The basic data were gathered by the technique of a face-to-face questionnaire interview and were intended to verify or refute empirically the six hypotheses. The findings together with some of the EDRs and appropriate explanations will be presented. By EDR is meant the "expected direction of response" to items on the questionnaire which was administered to the two groups of musicians. The items were designed to indicate contrasting attitudes or behaviors of jazz and commercial musicians. When it was anticipated that the sample of jazz men would choose a questionnaire item more often than their commercial colleagues a positive EDR (+) was assigned, whereas a negative EDR (−) was assigned when greater selection of the questionnaire items by the commercial musicians was expected.

Hypothesis I: The Tensions of Playing Commercially. Although it had been expected that jazz and commercial musicians would respond differently to the questions as to whether they enjoyed their present playing jobs, the response to our questions did not reveal this. This could imply that the theory itself is at fault, or it could mean

that there is a difference between jazz and commercial job satisfaction. In this second case it would seem that our instrument is at fault in failing to isolate the true differences between these categories of musicians in job satisfaction. On the basis of personal experience and informal conversations with both types of musicians, the latter would seem to be the case.

When asked the general yes/no question: "Do you enjoy playing the style of music which you are currently performing?" it was noted that commercial musicians were more satisfied with their present job than jazz musicians. While the disparity is not great (a difference of one respondent), the fact that thirteen out of fifteen commercial musicians answered affirmatively requires some conjecture. It is conceivable that if any sample of skilled laborers was asked, "Do you like your job?" much the same result would be obtained. If they did not like their job, they would probably endeavor to secure more pleasant labor where they could answer "yes" to such a question. This neither implies that skilled laborers or commercial musicians consider their work as a vocation, nor that it is so enjoyable that it actually is similar to leisure. It is felt that this question should be viewed as too general to be differentiating between jazz and commercial musicians.

Each respondent also answered two more questions, of a more specific nature, which were directed at discovering whether or not they enjoyed their jobs. While the results produced important evidence of the theoretically expected sort, most of the found differences were slight. In the final analysis only three reasons may be presented as evidence of verification of the hypothesis. That the commercial musician is in greater tension with his art than the jazz musician is demonstrated by sizeable differences in the following items chosen by the respondents as reasons for enjoyment of playing professional music: (1) personally enjoy the style of music you are playing, (2) permitted to improvise, and (3) can improve as a musician.

Hypothesis II: The Desire to Make Leisure Activities Musically Meaningful. When asked to list their major leisure activities it was predicted that the jazz musicians would be more involved in musical activities than the commercial musicians. The results unmistakably bore out this prediction. Sixty-two % of the EDRs turned out as expected, and a chi-square analysis showed a significant difference at the 5% level between jazz and commercial musicians, when compared to total participation in musical and non-musical activities.

The respondent was then asked to name those leisure activities in which he associated with other musicians. Jazz men were expected to do this more consistently than commercial musicians, and positive EDRs were assigned to every activity. The results were significant with 57% of the EDRs being successfully predicted. There were also fewer jazz musicians who did not associate at all with other musicians.

In the last question concerning hypothesis II, the respondent was asked to rank his three major leisure activities by the amount of time devoted to them. By weight-

ing each rank it was possible to determine the total value placed on every activity by each sample. Then by assigning positive EDRs to musical activities and negative EDRs to the non-musical activities, an overall figure of 69% success in prediction was found. Reverting back to the first question of this series, it may be observed in Table 2 that the jazz men dominate in musically related leisure activities. Only in arranging and copying music (a legitimate commercial activity because they often read music) do commercial musicians participate at the same level as jazz musicians. In non-musical pastimes jazz men were the more frequent participants in four out of eight categories. The category of social activities is marginal, however, for all mentioning this category as a leisure activity were found to associate with other musicians when participating in it. Reading, television, radio, active sports, and health activities were the other most popular non-musical pastimes in the jazz musicians sample.

Using the subjective estimate by the respondent of how much time he devoted to his three major activities, it was possible to discover the relative importance of them. By this procedure it was found that musical activities are all-important for jazz men, and the non-musical activities are of little significance save the marginal activity of social life which includes after-hours events. Television and radio are the only other non-musical activities which compete for the jazz musician's time to any great extent. Commercial musicians, on the other hand, are more concerned with the non-musical when in a leisure capacity.

*Hypothesis IV: The Audience.*³ The respondents were asked if they had any other sources of income beside their regular jobs at the night clubs where they worked. Three categories of response were obtained: (1) other musical sources of income, (2) other non-musical sources of income, and (3) no other sources of income. Negative EDRs were assigned the first two categories and a positive EDR for the third one, but only one of these predictions was confirmed. The findings showed that fewer jazz musicians have auxiliary incomes involving music than do the commercial musicians. While a negative EDR was assigned in this instance, it represents somewhat of a contradiction. One could expect jazz musicians to supplement their income in a musically related way if they decided it was necessary to do so. From the theoretical background, however, it was predicted that they would not choose to do this with the frequency of commercial musicians.

Jazz musicians had a larger percentage of non-musical auxiliary incomes. There is no explanation for this in the literature. Probably these are the family men of the jazz community who are becoming aware of the difficulties attendant in making a living in jazz. Union pay scales do not rise with the cost of living, and it is quite possible that musicians are being forced more and more to augment their incomes from non-musical sources.

³ Hypothesis III was not directly tested by any specific item in the questionnaire. Hypotheses IV, V, and VI are essentially sub-propositions, however, and to the extent that these were confirmed Hypothesis III was also confirmed.

TABLE 2. Distribution Leisure Activities among Jazz and Commercial Musicians

Activities	EDRs	% of total sample of jazz musicians	% of total sample of commercial musicians ^a
<i>Musical activities</i>			
1. Practicing	+	67	40
2. Listening to music: records and live	+	67	13
3. Discussing music	+	20	0
4. Sessions	+	13	0
5. Arranging and copying music	+	13	13
<i>Non-Musical activities</i>			
1. Active sports and health activities	-	47	73
2. Passive sports: radio, television and spectator	-	13	33
3. Reading	-	33	20
4. University student	-	0	13
5. Social activities including after-hours events	-	33	13
6. Television and radio other than sports	-	60	33
7. Artistic activities other than music	-	13	7
8. Other miscellaneous activities	-	33	80

^a These percentages have as their base either fifteen jazz or fifteen commercial musicians.

It is perhaps significant in this connection that commercial musicians are higher in the third category. Those who work the better clubs in a city generally work longer hours because of the demand for dinner music. This raises wages. Moreover, any possibilities of over-scale employment are most likely to occur here. For these reasons commercial musicians might find it easier to survive on a single income. On the other hand, they would probably have larger families to support.

The evidence is inconclusive at this point. It cannot be said by these findings that the laity supplies the sole monetary support for the jazz or commercial musicians. A majority of both samples (67% of the jazz musicians and 56% of the commercial musicians) were employed in a second and sometimes a third job. However, these problems again suggest that the theory is not necessarily wrong, but does require some modification. Above all, it suggests that the instrument demands refinement, for inner attitudinal orientation may be obscured by a network of external conditions.

Hypothesis V: The Evangelistic Tendencies of Jazz and Commercial Musicians. The respondent was asked to select one of the alternatives from the following question: which of the following developments would you care to see occur in the style of music you are playing currently? (1) a wider acceptance by the general public with a subsequent move from the night clubs to the concert hall; (2) a continuation of this music in the clubs along with larger crowds; or (3) both of these. In Table 3 one finds the EDRs substantially verified. It can be said that Minneapolis jazz men are definitely interested not only in maximizing their wages within the night clubs

TABLE 3. Evangelistic Tendencies of Jazz and Commercial Musicians.

Response Categories	EDRs	% of sample of jazz musicians	% of sample of com'l musicians ⁴
1. A wider acceptance by the general public with a subsequent move from the night clubs to the concert hall	+	8	0
2. A continuation of this music in the clubs along with larger crowds	-	31	92
3. Both of these	+	61	8

⁴ The percentage base was thirteen jazz musicians and twelve commercial musicians.

but in establishing jazz as a serious form of music which is heard in the concert hall as well.

Hypothesis VI: The Specialized Group for Aesthetic Support. The question employed was designed to ascertain which of the following two categories of performance produced the best exhibition of musicianship among jazz men: (1) within a group of musicians playing before an audience or (2) at rehearsals and/or sessions. Definite conclusions were not possible. A majority of the respondents in either sample believed the audience situation was their best category of performance. This was expected for commercial musicians, but jazz musicians were thought to play their best at sessions and rehearsals. However, only two respondents chose this alternative.

These findings indicate that the specialized group for aesthetic support is the night club audience for both jazz and commercial musicians. While this may be true, there were signs that the question was misunderstood on several occasions. Also, evidence of ambiguity was found in the responses to a "why?" question which was aimed at probing further, the reasons for the respondent's choice of one of the two categories of performance. On this item, responses were so varied that coding was impossible. Furthermore, these results are not consistent with the hypothesis that the jam session is the main reason for the existence of the jazz community as well as the principle institution. It is conceivable that the night club audience serves as artistic stimulation for both types of musicians but further research is needed before any definite conclusions may be drawn.

SUMMARY: In dealing with hypothesis I three items were found which could be said to demonstrate the lack of tension found in jazz: (1) Personally enjoy the style of music; (2) permitted to improvise; and (3) can improve as a musician. It was felt that in view of the additional contradictory evidence gleaned from the general yes/no question relating to hypothesis I, these three items could be regarded as only a very tenuous verification of the proposition.

Findings pertaining to hypothesis II showed a definite corroborating tendency. Minneapolis jazz musicians appeared to be oriented toward musically related activities in their leisure time. This was not found to be true for commercial musicians, who showed a great interest in non-musical pastimes. Generalization beyond the Minneapolis music scene is hazardous. In larger, more anon-

ymous cities such as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, this pattern of leisure may be modified to a large extent, although it would probably remain musically oriented.

Hypothesis IV was neither supported nor totally refuted. The major result of the question constructed to test this proposition was that a majority of both samples were employed in a second and sometimes a third job. Commercial musicians were employed more frequently in musically related work than were jazz musicians who dominated in the non-musical realm. Consequently the average jazz man does not depend entirely on the laity for monetary support, but in the current music world he must find supplementary income, which in Minneapolis proved to be non-musical in nature.

In reference to hypothesis V the findings enable one to consider tentatively as valid, the proposition that jazz musicians are interested in promulgating their music. Commercial musicians appeared not to be intent on spreading their "gospel" but were most interested in the possible material gain.

It was discovered in hypothesis VI that the best category of performance was thought by both commercial and jazz musicians to be the audience situation. Jazz men were not expected to select this choice but instead were expected to be strongly represented in the rehearsal-session category. The possibility of the question being ambiguous should be considered and while it is possible that the audience is the most significant support group, one must then explain the validity of the session as the main institution in the jazz community.

Certain cautions should be exercised when generalizing from these results. Minneapolis today, is not a major center of jazz music and for this reason it may be atypical in some respects. Also, the possibility of cultural stigma should not be overlooked. Jazz, night clubs, and those who live a Bohemian life are subject to numerous social pressures in a less permissive milieu, such as that of Minneapolis. Thirdly, the sample groups were small and the individual respondents were not randomly selected but instead were chosen by the investigator as representing "typical" jazz and commercial musicians.

Despite the inconclusive findings on some of the hypotheses, a final point should, perhaps, be made in defense of the study. In a scientific study of a number of hypotheses springing from a single theory, the overall results are sometimes stronger than the findings on a single part. Despite all limitations, it was felt that this was true of the present work. The particular hypotheses and their sub-parts were drawn from a single theory, hence they represent, figuratively, the separate strands of a cable. Thus the argument as a whole acquires a kind of convergent strength.

Also, at every point to which the researches extended, new problems were discovered: (1) from the standpoint of the questions posed in this study, an ecological investigation of the quasi-community of jazz would be interesting, not only to locate its extent and the points at which it fades into the commercial community, but to establish the nature and properties of the living arrangements, eating spots, and the after-hours "Meccas"; (2)

considerable value would appear to lie in a complete study of the jazz community itself, together with an inventory and description of its component groups, its sessions, its cliques, its inner status hierarchies, and its politics; (3) although it was not dealt with in this paper, the larger study revealed an apparent tie between age and preference for jazz styles and it might be profitable to examine these phenomena at greater length, implementing them with a full socio-economic investigation of the class derivation of jazz musicians and a more complete inspection of age differences; and (4) Closely related to the previous issue is the prospect of examining the career of styles within the jazz community—who introduces them, and the course of their development. While many additional problems come to mind, these are indicative of the great untapped richness of sociological material in this area.

LITERATURE CITED

- BECKER, HOWARD. 1951. The Professional Dance Musician and His Audience, *American Journal of Sociology* 57.
- CAMERON, WILLIAM BRUCE. 1954. Sociological Notes on the Jam Session, *Social Forces* 33.
- CHAPIN, STUART F. 1955. *Experimental Designs in Sociological Research*, rev. ed., New York, Harper and Brothers.
- ESMAN, AARON H. 1951. Jazz—A Study in Cultural Conflict, *American Imago* 8.
- LARRABEE, ERIC and ROLF MEYERSON. 1958. *Mass Leisure*, Glencoe, Ill., Free Press.
- MERRIAM, A. P. and R. W. MACK. 1960. Jazz Community, *Social Forces* 38.
- MARTINDALE, DON. 1960. *American Social Structure*, New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- ROSENBERG, BERNARD and DAVID MANNING WHITE. 1957. *Mass Culture*, Glencoe, Ill., Free Press.
- STEBBINS, ROBERT. 1962. *The Minneapolis Jazz Community: The Conflict between Musical and Commercial Values*, University of Minnesota, Unpublished M.A. Dissertation.
- ULANOV, BARRY. 1955. *A History of Jazz in America*, New York, Viking Press.