Asher Tobin Chodos
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To the selection committee, Stanford University Music Department --

I am writing to apply for the position of Professor of Jazz Studies and Improvisation, which Professor Fujioka recently emailed about. I am a jazz pianist, musicologist and composer, filing my Ph. D. at UC San Diego in Fall 2019.

I was glad to receive Professor Fujioka's email, because I think I am a great candidate for this job. From my very first music studies as a child, jazz has been my primary musical identity. I understand the jazz tradition – its rigor, its beauty, its sometimes overwhelming weight – in a way that only a lifelong jazz performer can. I am also an academic, with a Ph. D., peer reviewed publications, teaching experience, commissions from the "contemporary music" world, and a deep understanding of the many things jazz can mean in institutions of higher learning. I have a large network of jazz musicians from outside academia, and I look forward to forming partnerships with them at Stanford. I can develop a high quality Jazz Studies and Improvisation program, and I have taught courses that would fit well with the affiliated academic centers mentioned in the job listing.

My many credits as a jazz pianist and composer include a straight-ahead trio album under my own name, *Salmon Up,* as well as an avant-garde album with Kjell Nordeson and Kyle Motl, *Panjandrums.* I am one of the featured pianists on Larry Polansky's album, *Three Pieces for Two Pianos,* which New World Records released in 2016. I have written orchestral arrangements of Duke Ellington's *Solitude* and *Mood Indigo*, as well as one of Ornette Coleman's *Lonely Woman* (which featured trumpeter Peter Evans). In 2017, I composed and performed a double piano concerto with the La Jolla Symphony. In 2018, the San Francisco Contemporary players premiered a major work of mine, a politically engaged wind quintet called *Big Show.* In 2019, I received a Fulbright award to develop a bilingual espionage opera about border politics in Mexico City.

When I'm teaching the practice of jazz, my style is based on the immersion method of language acquisition. I have a strong instinct for participatory learning over conceptual abstraction. I value transcription over the various chord-scale methods, and I use as much class time as possible actually playing. My suspicion of abstraction and reification in jazz pedagogy is shared by many professional jazz musicians, and is ultimately what inspired my recent article on the history of the blues scale. A scale, like the grammatical concepts of "mood" and "tense," is just a way of indicating the facts of usage. Such concepts can be interesting and even useful, but ultimately they are somewhat arbitrary. The most efficient way to achieve fluency is simply to practice. A jazz teacher's primary responsibility, then, is not to let these things harden into musical "facts" but to create an environment of warmth and trust where fluency can be modeled and the natural process of acquisition can take place.

Teaching jazz (or any musical subject) as part of a broader humanities curriculum, I model a different kind of fluency. Namely, fluency in critical thinking and the idiom of formal academic discourse. My courses use music to study culture and history – especially the history of race in America – but they also use music to improve research and writing skills in general. My lectures model the kind of academic inquiry I hope my students will do on their own: the arrival at an interesting question and the open-ended journey to find the answer. My primary responsibility is to help students learn to trust their own intellectual curiosity. This makes my classroom an environment where I can be intellectually demanding but not severe or punitive.

My dissertation is not about jazz, but departs from the same question-based critical approach that I use in my Jazz Studies research. After I saw a presentation by a leading researcher in the field of Music Information Retrieval (MIR), it occurred to me that we find ourselves in a strange position as a music culture: more and more of our musical taste is being shaped by software engineers who think of music in a totally different way from professional musicians or even music fans. Companies like Spotify and Apple Music make millions of music recommendations every day, but what actually goes into these recommendations? What assumptions about musical salience are embedded in their software design? Will these decisions privilege some genres over others? Humanistic authors have tended to assume that the answer is yes; that automated music recommendation will homogenize music consumption and neuter the critical faculties that music can and should nurture. Technical MIR researchers, on the other hand, have ignored the question altogether. My dissertation brings these two intellectual modes together.

The project combines three main strategies: (1) a legal history of streaming music, situating Spotify in the context of evolving US copyright law, (2) a critical reading of the Spotify platform, including both its user interface and underlying recommendation engine, (3) quantitative experiments that characterize Spotify's large-scale behaviors. In the end, I argue that, while we can indeed point to endemic shortcomings in the theory of musical meaning upon which the field of MIR (and Spotify particularly) is predicated, the apocalyptic scenarios envisioned by some alarmed humanists are not borne out.

My article on the blues scale ("The Blues Scale: Historical and Epistemological Considerations," published in *Jazz Perspectives* 11:2, May 2018) is the first history of this ubiquitous, and much maligned, musical idea. In this article, I show that before jazz music entered the higher education curriculum, there was little agreement about what belonged in the blues scale; in many ways today's consensus about it is a consequence of the rise of institutionalized (and commercialized) jazz pedagogy. I then argue that the various scales proposed over the course of the 20th century differ not only in pitch content but also in epistemological orientation. They differ, that is, in terms of what kind of knowledge they purport to represent. I argue that this musical idea remains contested today in part because of a persistent epistemological laxity that has silently marred most of its complex history.

Because of my profound engagement with jazz, my versatility as a musician and teacher, and my record of scholarly publications, I am excited about this job. I hope that we can discuss the direction you see the jazz program taking.

I thank you for your consideration and look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Asher Tobin Chodos

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