Networks, creativity and all that jazz

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Abstract

Jazz – probably more than any other musical genres – is directly associated to innovation and creativity throughout the diversity of styles it represents and the many changes it has been subjected to. The evolution of jazz must not be viewed, however, as the result of a series of radical departures from previous existing idioms, but, on the contrary, lies in the continuous reorganization and rearrangement of mutually shared conventions which dominate at a specific time in a specific place. Jazz music, in this sense, symbolizes the past heritage of key innovators as much as the new sounds that characterize its future. The leading artists who gradually developed the jazz language did not emerge as isolated geniuses. Each style should therefore be considered as the collective achievement of a dense network of collaboration, in which each individual embodies the bits of influences he has received from others. Bebop, for example, would have never been so widely acclaimed if Charlie Parker had not benefited from the support of artists such as Dizzy Gillespie, Max Roach or Thelonious Monk, who have all contibuted to shape the evolutionary trajectories of jazz. The labels for which these artists have recorded also play an important role in this success story. By allowing the commercialization and diffusion of their music, labels, such as Dial Records for example in the case of bebop, have in fact helped institutionalize jazz styles on a much wider basis, and therefore should be considered as intermediate organizations linking creativity and the market for creative goods, in a world where artistic values outweigh economic incentives.

For this study, we constructed the networks of collaboration among jazz artists using the recording sessions of different labels. We then analyzed the specific interaction structure between individuals and the multiple relations which best describe the jazz community. Although artists appear to be very unequally treated, we find strong clustering as well as short average distances between them, no matter the style they are most oftenly associated with. We show that the dense network structure for each label is directly related to the presence of interlinked stars connecting different styles together, which therefore facilitate the adequacy between conventional and more innovative performances.

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