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Whiplash, Buddy Rich, and Visual Virtuosity in Drum Kit Performance

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Abstract

The 2014 film *Whiplash* depicts successful jazz drumming as an athletic exhibition of speed and endurance, in a manner that reflects its protagonist's idolization of Buddy Rich (1917–87). The crowd-pleasing virtuosity of Rich and *Whiplash* has drawn critics' ire, but this article interrogates the ideas of musical authenticity that underpin their complaints, and offers a more productive analysis of the film's drum kit performances and their inspiration, informed by a range of jazz, film, and performance scholarship. Specific attention is drawn to the performances' visual attractions. *Whiplash*'s fast editing style and shots of exertion – grimacing, sweat, blood – give non-expert viewers a sense of drumming's physical and mental demands, and much the same is true of Rich's exaggerated movements and expressions, whether seen live or (as is commonly the case) amplified by a screen's mediation.

According to Roger Parker in the *Oxford Companion to Music*, the term 'virtuoso' has, since the late eighteenth century, been 'generally used to dignify a singer or instrumentalist of great talent . . . its most common association being with such celebrated 19th-century soloists as Paganini and Liszt'. Parker also points to a more negative connotation that has existed since the nineteenth century, though, wherein the term describes 'a performer whose talent was "merely" technical, unduly crowd-pleasing, and lacking in good taste'.[1] This understanding, which might be dubbed '"mere" virtuosity', comfortably describes common perceptions of the two drummers discussed in this article: Andrew Neiman and Buddy Rich. Neiman, played by Miles Teller, is the fictional protagonist of the film *Whiplash* (dir. Damien Chazelle, 2014); Rich was the famous real-life virtuoso who Neiman idolizes. In what follows, I offer a more productive analysis of their popular drum kit virtuosity, primarily by finding a more central place for visuality in our understanding of how such performance works, while interrogating the ideas of musical authenticity that underpin critics' complaints.

In *Whiplash*, Neiman, an ambitious first-year student at the fictional Shaffer Conservatory in New York City, is invited to join the institution's competitive big band by its director, Terence Fletcher (J. K. Simmons). Fletcher draws Neiman into a relationship of emotional and physical abuse, means by which he hopes to inspire at least one of his students to greatness. By the film's end, it appears he has succeeded, as Neiman triumphs over the

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1 Roger Parker, 'Virtuoso', in *The Oxford Companion to Music*, rev. edn, ed. Alison Arnold (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199579037.001.0001/acref-9780199579037-e-7172.

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odds Fletcher has stacked against him by performing an impromptu drum solo in a Carnegie Hall concert. *Whiplash* was a critical and commercial success overall, nominated for 'Best Picture' at the Academy Awards and grossing nearly $49 million in worldwide box office against a budget of only $3.3 million.[2] It has also been criticized, though, for its depictions of music – and specifically jazz – education and performance. Richard Brody decries Fletcher's methods as 'utter, despicable nonsense', for instance, and is disappointed that the young musician characters 'don't play much music', the film thereby suggesting that 'the musician's life is about pure competitive ambition . . . and nothing else'.[3] Neiman's triumph is to the detriment of relationships with family and friends, and largely athletic, as we see him in practice sessions sweating profusely and bandaging his bloodied hands, striving only to play at ever faster tempi. Drummer Peter Erskine describes even the flashy final solo as 'a very passé sort of thing' that would be unlikely to succeed on a real stage today.[4]

Simple criticisms of *Whiplash*'s accuracy are misguided. Beyond the obvious and valid 'but it's *a film*' defence, Ian Pace points to real histories of teacher–student abuse in music education, for example, suggesting that the film 'makes some very pertinent points about bullying and the pervasive power games that conservatoires promote'.[5] Nicolas Pillai's reading of the climactic drum solo as 'the moment when one psychopath [Fletcher] creates his successor [Neiman]' is also significant here: *Whiplash* does not celebrate the process it depicts.[6] There are bigger targets for the critics' distaste, however. As Richard Williams writes:

> *Whiplash* . . . is about the education of a young jazz drummer. And my problem is that the student drummer in question . . . is white, and idolises Buddy Rich. He is also being taught to play a cold, unfeeling kind of music that has nothing to do with jazz as I understand it – and reminds me very much of the sort of stuff the members of Rich's own big band were trained to play.[7]

For Williams, jazz's African origins are critical, 'most particularly and obviously – although not at all exclusively – in the area of rhythm'. The portrayal of a battle for the big band's drum stool between several white students (all men, too) therefore appears problematic, while Williams further suggests that Elvin Jones, Tony Williams, or any one of the many significant African American jazz drummers would be a more appropriate idol than Rich. Rich was also white, of course, but for Williams he was, moreover, 'a boorish show-off to whom technique

2 Box Office Mojo, '*Whiplash*', www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt2582802/.

3 Richard Brody, 'Getting Jazz Right in the Movies', *The New Yorker*, 13 October 2014, www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/whiplash-getting-jazz-right-movies.

4 Sean J. O'Connell, 'Drummer Peter Erskine on Jazz Flick *Whiplash*', *KCET Artbound*, 24 February 2015, www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/drummer-peter-erskine-on-jazz-flick-whiplash.

5 Ian Pace, 'Music Teacher Sentenced to 11 Years in Prison as Abuse Film *Whiplash* Prepares for Oscars', *The Conversation*, 20 February 2015, https://theconversation.com/music-teacher-sentenced-to-11-years-in-prison-as-abuse-film-whiplash-prepares-for-oscars-37786.

6 Nicolas Pillai, '*Whiplash* is a Horror Film – So Jazz Critics Should Stop Worrying', *The Conversation*, 21 January 2015, https://theconversation.com/whiplash-is-a-horror-film-so-jazz-critics-should-stop-worrying-36156.

7 Richard Williams, 'The Trouble with *Whiplash*', *thebluemoment.com*, 19 January 2015, https://thebluemoment.com/2015/01/19/the-trouble-with-whiplash/.

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was everything';[8] for Brody, similarly, '[a] loud and insensitive technical whiz, a TV personality, not a major jazz inspiration'.[9] A 'mere' virtuoso, in other words, who inspires similar qualities in Neiman.

Without wishing to downplay valid concerns about representation in Hollywood film (concerns also raised in relation to writer–director Chazelle's next film, *La La Land* (2016), whose male lead is another white jazz musician),[10] we should again acknowledge authentic aspects of *Whiplash*'s depictions. Rich enjoyed much popular success in his long career as (primarily) a big-band drummer and leader, and today remains a relative household name. Whether we admire him or not, he is therefore an entirely plausible hero for Neiman, a naïve white teenager. Furthermore, while not formally trained himself, Rich tended to hire musicians for his band (almost always white and male) directly from Shaffer Conservatory's real-life counterparts.[11] Along with the big-band tradition as a whole, these institutions have often been criticized for encouraging conformity (cold and unfeeling, perhaps) over individuality in their (often white and male) jazz musicians.[12] Williams's problem, then, is arguably not with 'the way it [*Whiplash*] presents jazz to a general cinema audience' as such, but rather with *what* jazz the film presents to its audience.[13] Or, to counter Brody's parallel point, *Whiplash*'s idea of jazz might be narrow and exaggerated, but it is hardly 'a grotesque and ludicrous caricature'[14] – that is, unless a popular form of jazz performed commonly by white men, and in which a white drummer can be applauded for apparent 'mere' virtuosity, is itself such a caricature.

Visual aspects of virtuosity have long been acknowledged, perhaps especially in relation to Liszt, about whom Robert Schumann famously wrote in 1840, '[i]f Liszt were to play behind the scenes, a considerable portion of the poetry would be lost'.[15] Visual aspects of various kinds of percussion performance have also been recognized, such as in Aiyun Huang's assertion that '[a]ll percussion works are inherently theatrical because of the visceral nature of percussive gesture and corporeal sensibility required of the performer'.[16] Supplementing observations from her own performing experience with the findings of music cognition

8 Williams, 'The Trouble with *Whiplash*'.

9 Brody, 'Getting Jazz Right in the Movies'.

10 See Noah Gittell, 'The *La La Land* Backlash: Why Have Critics Turned on the Oscar Favorite?', *The Guardian*, 6 February 2017, www.theguardian.com/film/2017/feb/06/la-la-land-criticism-race-gender-jazz-awards.

11 Rich had a particularly strong association with the Berklee College of Music. According to Pat LaBarbera, who played in Rich's big band for several years, 'Buddy donated his book to Berklee . . . in the early 1970s. After that, many young players could study the charts, play them in ensembles and be ready for the call.' Pelle Berglund, *Buddy Rich: One of a Kind – The Making of the World's Greatest Drummer* (Lavallette, NJ: Hudson Music, 2019), 269.

12 See Alex Stewart, 'Contemporary New York City Big Bands: Composition, Arranging and Individuality in Orchestral Jazz', *Ethnomusicology* 48/2 (2004), 175–6.

13 Williams, 'The Trouble with *Whiplash*'.

14 Brody, 'Getting Jazz Right in the Movies'.

15 Robert Schumann, 'Franz Liszt: Concerts in Dresden and Leipzig' (1840), in *Schumann on Music*, ed. and trans. Henry Pleasants (New York: Dover, 1965), 158.

16 Aiyun Huang, 'Percussion Theater: The Drama of Performance', in *The Cambridge Companion to Percussion*, ed. Russell Hartenberger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 129.

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research,[17] Huang suggests that 'percussionists have long used their intuition to "act out" what their instruments cannot naturally do'.[18] The visual attractions of those instruments are additionally significant, of course: one 1924 trade article appealing to dance orchestra musicians, for example, claimed that

> [t]he drummer not only needs a good battery of traps and equipment to carry out the proper effects, but he also appreciates the advertising value to his orchestra of the showy appearance of a big drum section. His pedal-played cymbal must be augmented with at least one oriental crash cymbal and his bass drum must have a special artistically decorated head with electric light attachment.[19]

For some, though, visuality is musically suspect. Lawrence Kramer ties it directly to criticisms of 'mere' virtuosity in Liszt's case, arguing that 'Liszt's association with visuality is at least partly responsible for the persistent suspicion attached to him even by many of his admirers, and for the curbs put on his prestige from his own day to ours'.[20] The story is similar in the jazz drumming context at hand here. Rich has been criticized specifically for his 'antics and theatrics',[21] as we shall see, yet even he proclaimed in a 1968 interview, 'I don't use gimmicks, I don't use lights or painted sticks or a turn-around platform. I'm not supposed to be a clown or a showman. I concentrate on what I play – because I want to play good.'[22]

In the following, an analysis of *Whiplash* reveals a visual bias in its depiction of drum kit performance and suggests a similarly crucial role for visuality in Rich's career. To fully appreciate that role, I approach visuality as a *feature* rather than a *flaw* of popular drum kit virtuosity. I examine the nature of biases against 'showmanship' in jazz, as well as related concerns over the visibility of white musicians in the jazz tradition, in order to more critically assess the positions of *Whiplash* and Rich – and the 'mere' virtuosity they allegedly represent – relative to that tradition. Most broadly, I consider how analysis and criticism can account for the multiple potential layers of visual appeal and mediation present in performances by Neiman and Rich. By affirming the essential visuality of those performances, we gain a better

17 Michael Schutz and Scott Lipscomb investigated the influence of gesture on perceived note duration in marimba performance, for instance. They found that 'short' and 'long' strokes employed by marimbists had no effect on the actual duration of the sounding note, but that perceived duration was affected: 'audiences distinguish note length through sensory integration [i.e. through *seeing* the gesture as well as *hearing* the sound] rather than acoustic recognition', and therefore '[s]trategic use of gesture gives the performer a mechanism for shaping the audience's musical experience'. Michael Schutz and Scott Lipscomb, 'Hearing Gestures, Seeing Music: Vision Influences Perceived Tone Duration', *Perception* 36/6 (2007), 896.

18 Huang, 'Percussion Theater', 131.

19 'Drum Sales Are Steadily Increasing', *Music Trade Review*, 13 September 1924, 55. Quoted in Matt Brennan, *Kick It: A Social History of the Drum Kit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 114.

20 Lawrence Kramer, *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 74.

21 Ethan Iverson, 'The Drum Thing, or, A Brief History of *Whiplash*, or, "I'm Generalizing Here"', *Do The M@Th*, https://ethaniverson.com/rhythm-and-blues/the-drum-thing-or-a-brief-history-of-whiplash-or-im-generalizing-here/.

22 Les Tomkins, 'Buddy Rich: Interview 3' (1968), *National Jazz Archive*, https://nationaljazzarchive.org.uk/explore/interviews/1621494-buddy-rich-interview-3?.

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understanding of why they have captivated many audience members, and more generally of how drumming and the drum kit are experienced in today's Western culture.

Visual bias in *Whiplash*

In an interview on *The Tonight Show*, Jimmy Fallon prompts Miles Teller about his role playing Neiman – and the drums – in *Whiplash*: 'it *has* to be really you playing'. 'Oh yeah, I mean, I started playing when I was fifteen', replies Teller, avoiding the point somewhat before describing the training that transformed him from a self-taught 'rock drummer' into a convincing 'jazz drummer' for the film.[23] Teller has also implied that his drumming was authentic in other interviews: 'It would look weird if you were holding back because you didn't want to make the noise, so you just actually have to play. It was all a seamless kind of process. My mum's saying that this will always be her favourite movie. Because it's her son, playing music.'[24] Numerous articles and discussions can be found online on the topic of whether Teller actually performed the drumming in *Whiplash*, and these often reach the same conclusion: 'it's really him playing in the movie',[25] or 'that is, indeed, Teller playing the drums'.[26]

Missing in these observations is the crucial distinction between what we *see* and what we *hear*. 'We had a visual double occasionally for a few little shots of hands. But almost everything you see on-screen is Miles himself', according to Chazelle.[27] While some audio was also recorded live on set, though, most of what we hear, notably including the tracks for the more difficult performance scenes, was pre-recorded by an uncredited studio musician.[28] The reactions of viewers, and Teller's own remarks (whether he misleads by omission intentionally or not[29]), are nonetheless revealing. For one, there is an apparent lack of 'imaginative resistance' among audience members here, in the sense that Ben Winters invokes in describing how his own immersion in a film's fiction is disrupted when actors fail to convincingly impersonate classical musicians.[30] Trained observers may notice the problems in *Whiplash*: Erskine asserts that 'his [Teller's] hands are a mess in terms of technique, holding

23 The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon, 'Miles Teller is a Self-Taught Drummer', *YouTube*, 1 October 2014, https://youtu.be/BgTZDSJKLks.

24 Tim Robey, 'Miles Teller on *Whiplash*: "Faking it wasn't an option"', *The Telegraph*, 16 January 2015, www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/film-news/11347972/Miles-Teller-on-Whiplash-Faking-it-wasnt-an-option.html.

25 Arielle Dachille, 'Does Miles Teller Really Play The Drums?', *Bustle*, 3 February 2015, www.bustle.com/articles/62255-does-miles-teller-play-the-drums-in-whiplash-let-him-answer-the-question-for-you.

26 Mike Scott, 'Is *Whiplash* Actor Miles Teller Really Playing Drums for Damien Chazelle's Jazz Drama?', *NOLA.com*, www.nola.com/movies/index.ssf/2014/11/is_miles_teller_really_playing.html.

27 A. A. Dowd, '*Whiplash* maestro Damien Chazelle on drumming, directing, and J.K. Simmons', *AV Club*, 15 October 2014, https://film.avclub.com/whiplash-maestro-damien-chazelle-on-drumming-directing-1798273033.

28 Chazelle in GoodyAwards, 'Did Miles Teller Play the Drums in *Whiplash* Movie', *YouTube*, 4 December 2014, https://youtu.be/w51lkYV20W0. The lack of credit was allegedly due to the drummer's status as a union member recording for a non-union session. O'Connell, 'Drummer Peter Erskine on Jazz Flick *Whiplash*'.

29 Ben Winters notes that the 'deception' that actors performed their own music 'is often propagated in the popular press or other promotional material surrounding a film in a bid to convince the moviegoing public of the authenticity of performance scenes'. Ben Winters, *Music, Performance, and the Realities of Film: Shared Concert Experiences in Screen Fiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 47.

30 Winters, *Music, Performance, and the Realities of Film*, 47–66.

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the sticks, etc.';[31] in Figure 1, for example, note how the pad of Teller's right thumb does not appear to be in contact with the stick, where it should form the basis of the fulcrum. General audiences seem to be convinced by what they see, though, and if Teller *looks* convincing, there is no question for many viewers that 'it's really him playing'. Along with Teller's claims, this points to the importance of visuals to the film's idea of drum kit performance.

It is worth examining the visual construction of *Whiplash*'s climactic drum solo – the film's most focused depiction of performance – in detail. This comprises 101 shots (up to and including the last shot of the film, which covers the band's re-entry for a final chord, and accounting only for visible cuts), of which only six clearly show Teller's face, hands, and instrument in the same frame. More often we see close-ups of Teller's face and upper body *or* the instrument being struck. Though it may be Teller we most often see on screen (and Chazelle notably claims that, 'even shots where we didn't have to have him, a lot of the times we ended up having him'[32]), it is therefore possible that those 'few little shots of hands' for which the director admits using a visual double carry relatively significant weight in terms of authenticating the performance. Even where we do see Teller, though, framing and editing obviously played a crucial role in making the actor look believable. 'It was a matter of choosing the best takes to keep his drumming in sync', recounts editor Tom Cross.[33] The scene's short average shot length of just 2.85 seconds (at the original 24fps) may, in part, have been a matter of necessity in this regard.

The fast editing style did have other intended functions, though. For one, Chazelle suggests that the visual style was partly a means of illustrating musical movement:

> When someone is playing drums, they aren't actually moving around a space, they're just moving their arms and limbs. They're stuck behind the drum set. So to film someone playing the drums and make it feel as kinetic as a car chase or a shootout or a battle scene was the challenge. It comes down to the tempo of the camera moves, the tempo of the cuts, the alternation between close and wide. I was just trying to think as musically as possible – to make a movie the way a musician would.[34]

Cross clarifies that 'Damien wanted to create a rhythm and a pace through the quick cutting . . . He wanted the cutting to be overt so the audience would feel the editing and the speed.'[35] He further suggests Chazelle 'wanted the viewer to feel the physicality of practicing and playing';[36] 'he really wanted the cuts to feel brutal and violent. He told me that he wanted the

31 O'Connell, 'Drummer Peter Erskine on Jazz Flick *Whiplash*'.

32 GoodyAwards, 'Did Miles Teller Play the Drums in *Whiplash* Movie'. Figure 1 shows an example of a shot for which a double could have been used – but seemingly was not, given the problematic stick grip discussed previously.

33 Bill Desowitz, 'Inside the Making of the Savage *Whiplash* Finale with Editor Tom Cross', *IndieWire*, 9 January 2015, www.indiewire.com/2015/01/inside-the-making-of-the-savage-whiplash-finale-with-editor-tom-cross-189403/.

34 Dowd, '*Whiplash* maestro Damien Chazelle on drumming, directing, and J.K. Simmons'.

35 Laura Blum, 'Film Editor Tom Cross Brings on *Whiplash*', *thalo*, 16 December 2014, www.thalo.com/articles/view/997/film_editor_tom_cross_brings_on_whiplash.

36 Desowitz, 'Inside the Making of the Savage *Whiplash* Finale with Editor Tom Cross'. Cross notes that Chazelle drew on his own musical experience, intending to recall 'the life or death stakes that he [Chazelle] remembered growing up as a competitive jazz drummer'.

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Figure 1 Two stills from the same shot of *Whiplash*'s climactic drum solo, with my zoom showing Miles Teller's right-hand grip.

music scenes to feel like the boxing scenes from *Raging Bull* [dir. Martin Scorsese, 1980].'[37] The final such boxing scene (Jake La Motta's 1951 rematch with Sugar Ray Robinson) was, in turn, modelled on the famously quick-cutting shower-murder montage in *Psycho* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1960).[38]

The content of the images was also important to *Whiplash*'s creators, however. William Forde Thompson, Phil Graham, and Frank A. Russo distinguish between filmed performances in which a performer's whole body is generally shown (suggesting 'a total performer'), and those – like in *Whiplash* – in which 'contemporary and highly edited cinematography works montage-like with extreme close-ups and fast-cuts to "dismember" bodies, lingering on isolated body parts'.[39] In a montage, meaning inheres in the differences and relationships between shots, and in *Whiplash* the filmmakers took care to balance shots of the mechanics of performance with emphasis on the faces of – and eye contact between – Neiman and Fletcher. Close-ups of Neiman's face (or parts of it) in fact comprise roughly a quarter of the final solo's shots, and in several cases last considerably longer than the average 2.85 seconds. Cross

37 Steve Hullfish, 'Art of the Cut with Tom Cross, ACE of *Whiplash*, *JOY*, and *La La Land*', *ProVideo Coalition*, 8 July 2016, www.provideocoalition.com/art-cut-tom-cross-ace-whiplash-joy-la-la-land/.

38 Tim Grierson, *Martin Scorsese in Ten Scenes* (London: ILEX, 2015), 58. Scorsese envisioned his scene as 'a kind of edited sequence of punishment that this character's taking', in which '[t]he glove corresponds to a knife'.

39 William Forde Thompson, Phil Graham, and Frank A. Russo, 'Seeing Music Performance: Visual Influences on Perception and Experience', *Semiotica* 156/1–4 (2005), 209.

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reports that this emphasis on 'our characters' was added because an original version of the scene 'didn't work emotionally'.[40] The filmmakers thus avoided a potential pitfall of the 'dismembering' editing style, when research shows that one role of visual aspects of music is, as Thompson et al. summarize, to 'personalize the music, drawing performers and listeners closer together in a shared experience'.[41]

That most shots during the final solo are close-ups of Neiman or his instrument paints him as an isolated figure, notwithstanding those moments of connection with Fletcher. This sense is amplified by the roughly ten seconds mid-solo during which the sound of the instrument fades from the audio track, replaced by a faint 'whooshing' sound – of the blood flowing around Neiman's body, perhaps. The absence of active audio directs the audience's attention to the visual, where successive shots show Neiman's face, glistening with sweat and carrying a pained expression (Figure 2), and a drumstick hitting a cymbal (itself covered with beaded sweat) in 'out of time' slow motion (Figure 3). These techniques again recall *Raging Bull*'s final boxing scene, in the subjects and forms of the shots (close-ups of Robert De Niro as a sweaty La Motta (Figure 4); the use of slow motion), and how in large part – as Tom Shone puts it – '[w]e hear nothing but Jake's breath, and flashbulbs, through whistling wind. He might as well be alone, with his demon – the minotaur become his own maze.'[42] Just as Scorsese wanted to communicate the fighter's own experience,[43] *Whiplash*'s creators suggest in this moment not only the great *physical* effort Neiman expends (as in the many other shots of grimacing, sweat, and even blood) but also the *mental* demands of his solo.[44] Neiman's performance is full, then, of the 'desperation and peril' of Carolyn Abbate's drastic music ('real music: the performances', with all their 'responsibilities and anxieties' for the performer),[45] a concept I cite again via Winters and his discussion of film depictions of musical performance. Those depictions, writes Winters, tend to emphasize 'the physical and mental demands of performance and the concomitant effort such performance is seen to require'.[46] In Neiman's solo, that effort is certainly *seen*.

The fast editing style of the solo scene is the exception rather than the rule in *Whiplash*, but the film also emphasizes those physical and mental demands through the blood, sweat, and tears present in its other performance scenes and broader narrative. In one shot showing

40 Hullfish, 'Art of the Cut with Tom Cross, ACE of *Whiplash*, *JOY*, and *La La Land*'.

41 Thompson et al., 'Seeing Music Performance', 204.

42 Tom Shone, *Scorsese: A Retrospective* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014), 106.

43 Scorsese: 'I wanted to do the fight scenes as if the viewers were the fighter, and their impressions were the fighter's – of what he would think or feel, or what he would hear.' Quoted in Shone, *Scorsese*, 105.

44 Discussing jazz performance on screen broadly, Peter Elsdon notes how 'a close-up shot is quite prescriptive and usually suggests a particular reading' to the viewer, and further that '[a] close-up or extreme close-up connotes intimacy or access to the thoughts of the subject framed.' Peter Elsdon, 'Framing Jazz: Thoughts on Representation and Embodiment', in *Watching Jazz: Encounters with Jazz Performance on Screen*, ed. Björn Heile, Peter Elsdon, and Jenny Doctor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 45.

45 Carolyn Abbate, 'Music – Drastic or Gnostic?', *Critical Inquiry* 30/3 (2004), 506, 511.

46 Winters, *Music, Performance, and the Realities of Film*, 72. The relatively silent moment of interiority in *Whiplash* is also reminiscent of a similar technique in *Shine* (dir. Scott Hicks, 1996), used to suggest pianist David Helfgott's battle with his mental illness during a concert performance; see Winters, *Music, Performance, and the Realities of Film*, 80–1.

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Figure 2 Shot of Andrew Neiman's (Miles Teller) face, from *Whiplash*'s climactic drum solo.



Figure 3 Shot of a drumstick hitting a cymbal, from *Whiplash*'s climactic drum solo.



Figure 4 Shot of Jake La Motta's (Robert De Niro) face, from *Raging Bull*'s final boxing match.

Neiman immediately after a gruelling rehearsal, for example, Chazelle notes in a commentary track the intention that the character's face appear swollen like a boxer's post-fight,[47] while a scene of Neiman dipping his bloody, practice-damaged hand into a jar of ice is once more lifted from *Raging Bull*. Neiman faces competition throughout *Whiplash*, such as for the Shaffer big band's drum stool or in formal band contests,[48] and further events notably include

47 Damien Chazelle and J. K. Simmons, 'Commentary with Writer/Director Damien Chazelle and J.K. Simmons', in Damien Chazelle (dir.), *Whiplash* (2014), DVD (Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2015).

48 Matthias Heyman, 'How Do They Know Who Wins?: The Representation of Jazz Competitions in *Whiplash*'. Paper presented at the conference *Documenting Jazz*, Edinburgh (UK), June 2021.

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his involvement in a violent car crash while travelling to one such contest (curiously foreshadowing the crucial event in *Bleed for This* (dir. Ben Younger, 2016), in which Teller portrays real-life boxer Vinny Pazienza and his battle to recover from a similar accident).[49] *Whiplash*'s suggestion of parallels between drumming and boxing specifically is not novel: a 2007 *All About Jazz* article argues that the practices 'share qualities both primal and sublime', for instance.[50] More generally, while Pillai reads *Whiplash* primarily as a horror film, the more obvious model is surely the sports film, in which the protagonist – often paired with the authoritarian coach – overcomes various obstacles on their rise to athletic greatness.[51] During his final solo, Neiman pushes himself towards a climax that can easily be interpreted as sexual, too: read again those pained expressions, vigorous hand movements (often ambiguously out of shot, but physically reflected in Teller's shoulders), and phallic drumsticks (Figures 3 and 4). The solo, especially as seen, is a masturbatory demonstration of Neiman's virility, through which he attains the conventional masculine-heroic status of the virtuoso. As Robert Walser notes, virility and virtuosity share the Latin root *vir*, man, and virtuosity consistently appears 'concerned with demonstrating and enacting a particular kind of power and freedom that might be called "potency"'.[52] This may be particularly true in what Alex Stewart calls 'the almost exclusively male or homosocial universe of jazz',[53] as well as for drumming, which is traditionally coded as masculine.[54] Clearly, *Whiplash* works only to cement such associations.[55]

Though *Whiplash* won the Academy Award for editing, Brody argues that it 'has no music in its images. There are ways of filming music that are themselves musical, that conjure a musical feeling above and beyond what's on the soundtrack, but Chazelle's images are nothing of the kind.'[56] It is significant, though, that the filmmakers' conception of the music – fast,

49 Thank you to the anonymous reviewer who drew my attention to this similarity. The existence of a boxing drama film entitled *Whiplash* (dir. Lewis Seiler, 1948) is another curious coincidence. The 2014 film is named after Hank Levy's composition 'Whiplash', first recorded in 1973 for Don Ellis's album *Soaring*, and performed in the film's infamous 'not quite my tempo' rehearsal scene.

50 Mark Merella, 'On Drumming and Boxing', *All About Jazz*, 1 September 2006, www.allaboutjazz.com/on-drumming-and-boxing-by-mark-merella.php.

51 Pillai, '*Whiplash* is a horror film'.

52 Robert Walser, 'Eruptions: Heavy Metal Appropriations of Classical Virtuosity', *Popular Music* 11/3 (1992), 278. James Deaville also notes how 'the effects of virtuosity have been variously interpreted either as release or as domination over women spectator/auditors'. James Deaville, 'Virtuosity and the Virtuoso', in *Aesthetics of Music: Musicological Perspectives*, ed. Stephen Downes (London: Routledge, 2014), 290.

53 Alex Stewart, *Making the Scene: Contemporary New York City Big Band Jazz* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 12. Stewart associates Rich explicitly with 'the competitive, hypermasculinist relations of more patriarchal jazz worlds' (311). See also Jayne Caudwell, 'The Jazz–Sport Analogue: Passing Notes on Gender and Sexuality', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 45/2 (2010).

54 On drumming and gender, see Brennan, *Kick It*, 238–42.

55 The major female character in *Whiplash* is the girlfriend with whom Neiman breaks up in order to focus on his studies, and further engage in an implicitly homoerotic relationship with Fletcher. Together with other elements, including Fletcher's common use of homophobic slurs, this suggests an interpretation of the film as a commentary on toxic masculinity.

56 Brody, 'Getting Jazz Right in the Movies'.

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violent, and mastered through individual athletic prowess and commitment – is actually communicated primarily through their images. Regarding the final solo, editor Cross even states that they 'looked at the scene silently to make sure it played purely visually'.[57] Like Brody, we might find the film's vision of virtuoso drumming problematic, but here again we should consider its relationship to a broader reality in which precisely that – vision – is key. In the remainder of this article, I present a visually conscious assessment of Neiman's inspiration: Buddy Rich.

Buddy Rich: 'mere' virtuoso

From the beginning, Buddy Rich's career was an audiovisual one.[58] Born in September 1917, by just eighteen months old Rich was a feature in his parents' vaudeville show as a novelty child drummer. As 'Traps, the Drum Wonder', Rich soon became the main attraction and apparently, for a period, the highest-paid child star in the world.[59] At age 12, he appeared in a short Vitaphone film: *Buddy Traps in 'Sound Effects'* (dir. Murray Roth, 1930). The video is lost, but the audio survives, and the marketing copy gives a further sense of the short's content and Rich's now well-rounded abilities: 'Buddy twirls his drumsticks, tap dances unbelievably, and sings amazingly well. He beats music out of chairs, paintings, pots and pans, glasses and everything imaginable. He is one of a kind!'[60]

By the 1940s, Rich was a well-known big-band drummer, and appeared in several feature films as a member of Tommy Dorsey's orchestra as well as leader of his own band. With Dorsey in *Ship Ahoy* (dir. Edward Buzzell, 1942), for instance, Rich stars in two numbers: 'Hawaiian War Chant' features a drums-and-trumpet duet with Ziggy Elman, while at the climax of 'I'll Take Tallulah' Rich abandons his kit to dance and juggle drumsticks with Eleanor Powell. There are no close-ups or quick cuts here; whether drumming (or rather miming, albeit to his own playing[61]) or dancing, Rich's whole body is shown, framing him as the 'total performer' referenced by Thompson et al.[62] Rich continued to develop this identity elsewhere: in two 1947 live reviews of Rich's own band, Hal Webman tellingly refers to 'those infrequent occasions when Rich sits in at the tubs',[63] and how he 'wisely holds his drumming efforts to a minimum' (despite calling him 'unquestionably . . . one of the greatest drummers ever'), while praising his singing, dancing, and 'clowning'.[64] Later, Rich recorded three vocal

57 Blum, 'Film Editor Tom Cross Brings on *Whiplash*'.

58 For a concise summary of Rich's early career, see Brennan, *Kick It*, 156–62. For a more comprehensive biography, see Berglund, *Buddy Rich*, or Mel Tormé's more personal *Traps the Drum Wonder: The Life of Buddy Rich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

59 Tormé, *Traps the Drum Wonder*, 15.

60 Berglund, *Buddy Rich*, 26. Berglund also quotes several lukewarm contemporary reviews.

61 Rich's remarks about the filming process for 'Hawaiian War Chant' pre-empt Teller's: 'The whole band was faking to the prerecorded soundtrack except me. I did it live! It would have looked phony any other way.' Berglund, *Buddy Rich*, 110. The audio heard in the final film is nonetheless the pre-recorded track.

62 Thompson et al., 'Seeing Music Performance', 209.

63 Hal Webman, 'On the Stand: Buddy Rich', *Billboard* 59/17 (26 April 1947), 38.

64 Hal Webman, 'On the Stand: Buddy Rich', *Billboard* 59/43 (1 November 1947), 40.

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albums (the first, *Buddy Rich Sings Johnny Mercer*, in 1956), opened two ill-fated New York City clubs (Buddy's Place, 1974, and Buddy's Place II, 1975–6), and hosted three pilot television episodes of his own variety *Buddy Rich Show* (1982). In his biography of Rich, Mel Tormé argues that it was through regular guest appearances on *The Tonight Show*, hosted by Johnny Carson and beginning in 1966, that Rich became 'an identifiable personality in his own right . . . to the mass public, who instantly loved the give-and-take of quips, barbs, and laughs between Buddy and Johnny'.[65]

Rich's fame was nonetheless founded on his drumming ability – his talk show appearances invariably included a performance – and it was as a drummer that he continued to have most success. 'The Drum Wonder' became, in adulthood, 'The World's Greatest Drummer', a label that sticks more than thirty years after his death in 1987.[66] Notably, Rich is revered by fellow drummers, topping *Modern Drummer* magazine's list of 'The 50 Greatest Drummers of All Time' in 2014.[67] For Matt Brennan, 'Rich's key contribution was to raise the benchmark for technique and execution on the drums', and indeed his technical ability continues to impress even by modern standards.[68] The criticisms that we have already seen applied to *Whiplash* – that there was little substance behind Rich's speed and that he was problematically individualistic – have a long history, though. In 1939, for example, critic George T. Simon wrote that Rich, playing with Artie Shaw's band, was 'cursed with the misconception that the drummer is supposed to do more than supply a good background. As a result, Buddy in his enthusiasm plays too much drums, consequently breaking up the general rhythmic effect.'[69] Shaw himself recalled complaining to Rich in that same year that his playing was 'like a drum solo accompanied by the band'.[70] Even the actual solos for which Rich became famed are not immune to criticism: in a 1960 review of the drum-battle album *Rich Versus Roach*, for instance, Max Harrison compared Rich unfavourably with his peer Max Roach, asserting that 'Rich's contributions are little but technical displays while Roach shows, as everyone would expect, a great deal of rhythmic imagination and a more flexible approach to his instruments. There is a great variety, more light and shade, in his solos.'[71]

Rather as in much nineteenth-century criticism of classical virtuosity, Rich is here seen to be in service of *himself* more than *the music*. The parallel is inexact, of course: classical music became firmly established as a composer's art in the nineteenth century, with influential

65 Tormé, *Traps the Drum Wonder*, 123.

66 See, for example, the title of Pelle Berglund's recent biography, *Buddy Rich: One of a Kind – The Making of the World's Greatest Drummer*.

67 Adam Budofsky, Michael Dawson, and Michael Parillo, 'The 50 Greatest Drummers of All Time', *Modern Drummer*, March 2014, www.moderndrummer.com/article/march-2014-50-greatest-drummers-time/.

68 Brennan, *Kick It*, 161.

69 George T. Simon, *Simon Says: The Sights and Sounds of the Swing Era – 1935–1955* (New York: Galahad Books, 1971), 124.

70 Burt Korall, *Drummin' Men: The Heartbeat of Jazz – The Swing Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 267. Rich, for his part, claimed that his style 'had little to do with showing off. I was trying to do things that would clarify and energize a chart.' Korall, *Drummin' Men*, 269.

71 Max Harrison, 'Buddy Rich and Max Roach: *Rich versus Roach*. Mercury MG 20448' (review), *The Jazz Review* 3/3 (March–April 1960), 29.

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critics promoting ideals of *werktreue* and of instrumental music's aesthetic autonomy, and judging virtuosic liberties and physicality harshly against them,[72] whereas jazz has always been primarily a performer's art. It is for this reason that Antoine Hennion hears 'an aesthetic of virtuosity' in John Coltrane's *Giant Steps*: in jazz, the bodily act of performance *is* the making of the work of art, rather than a reading *of* the work that can only (per Romantic and then Modernist aesthetics) either realize or detract from it.[73] The art, and a jazz performer's contribution to the making of it, might still be judged more or less successful, though, and for reasons similar to those used in arguments against classical virtuosi. A vein of Rich criticism closely echoes one put against Liszt, in fact, for his performing style that, in Kramer's words, 'courts visual excess and foregrounds the performer's body'.[74] Pianist Ethan Iverson, in a critique of both Rich and *Whiplash*, finds fault again with Rich's aural 'hyperactivity' – the way he 'would cram everything he could into every corner', playing 'almost as much during the band parts as during the solos' – but also notes his 'antics and theatrics' and labels him a 'stage band drummer' ('"Stage band" suggests a big band in a floor show [in] Las Vegas, playing for burlesque, crooners, dinner, dancing, and the occasional hot instrumental capped by drum fireworks and a final blaring "Ta-dah!"').[75] Rather like Williams, Iverson thereby distances Rich from a central tradition of jazz drummers exhibiting what he terms a 'devotional', specifically African attitude to performance. According to Iverson, jazz drummers should be concerned with the collective and with the 'feel' of the music, and not with individual – and implicitly visual – showmanship.[76]

Much of the recent criticism of Rich, as exemplified by those articles that link him to *Whiplash*, is an understandable and welcome corrective to the 'world's greatest drummer' line of celebration he has inspired elsewhere. Such celebration is especially fraught in recognition that Rich – a white and conventionally handsome man – achieved his status with the support of an institutionally racist and sexist entertainment industry. This is a particularly important acknowledgement in a visually conscious assessment of Rich: put simply, he would not have had the same opportunities (and especially the many audiovisual opportunities) to become a star had he looked different. Moreover, though Rich worked with and professed admiration for many significant African American jazz musicians,[77] those opportunities towards stardom involved his contributing to a relatively white, commercial, and arguably exploitative corner of the jazz world. One of the more famous Rich performances, for example, is his drum battle with Gene Krupa in a 1952 Jazz at the

72 See Dana Gooley, 'The Battle Against Instrumental Virtuosity in the Early Nineteenth Century', in *Franz Liszt and His World*, ed. Christopher H. Gibbs and Dana Gooley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

73 Antoine Hennion, '"As Fast as One Possibly Can . . .": Virtuosity, a Truth of Musical Performance', in *Critical Musicological Reflections: Essays in Honour of Derek B. Scott*, ed. Stan Hawkins (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012), 137.

74 Kramer, *Musical Meaning*, 74.

75 Iverson, 'The Drum Thing'.

76 Iverson's statement, '[d]rum solos are like a piano concerto: a platform for the celebration of one', also suggests that he sees such solos as inherently opposed to the 'devotional circle' of jazz, in line with common notions of the drum kit as a purely accompanimental instrument. Iverson, 'The Drum Thing'. On those notions, see Brennan, *Kick It*, chapter 4.

77 Rich recalled a 1944 stint with Count Basie's band, for example, as 'one of the monumental things in my life . . . Just the memory of performing with that band is important to me.' Korall, *Drummin' Men*, 283.

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Philharmonic (JATP) concert at Carnegie Hall (later released on record as *The Drum Battle: Gene Krupa and Buddy Rich at JATP*, in 1960; the battle also toured other venues with JATP). Addressing the relationship of publicly staged instrumental battles to the contests that had a long history in private jazz and pre-jazz jam sessions, Katherine Walker argues that 'the promotion of sensationalized, combative cutting in publicly staged battles – such as those featured in the Jazz at the Philharmonic concert series – detached the surface act of cutting from the spirit, purpose, and meaning of competition' in the latter.[78] Specifically, private jam sessions offered 'a competitive environment that was nevertheless highly cooperative, productive, and community-centered', directed towards the education and elevation of black music and musicians, whereas their public equivalents exploited white fascination with supposedly 'primitive' black culture for commercial gain.[79]

Iverson makes the point in deliberately polemical terms: 'if you think Buddy Rich is the greatest jazz drummer, you are racist'.[80] He affirms elsewhere that 'all the very greatest jazz drummers have been African American'.[81] There is no doubt that Rich's stardom comes at the ongoing expense of popular recognition for the contributions of black jazz drummers in particular. In a recent *Reader's Digest* feature on '7 Greatest drummers of all time', for example, Rich appears alongside fellow white jazz drummers Krupa and Joe Morello in a list that features Art Blakey as its only person of colour.[82] While calling out this injustice, though, we can also recognize that certain jazz ideals cited by those who downplay Rich's significance are constructs, much like the ideals that concerned earlier critics of classical virtuosity. Authentic jazz is commonly proposed to be spontaneous, essentially African American, and a form of art. The conventional story of the jazz tradition, furthermore, is one of continuous stylistic evolution. By default, Rich does not meet the bar set here for jazz 'greatness'. He was a white man best known for promoting composed, commercial, swing-oriented music decades after the advent of bebop (the innovations of which he railed against).[83] He performed with great speed, power, and precision, and developed a style identifiably his own, but did not instigate wider changes in how the instrument (and, more broadly, the music)

78 Katherine Walker, 'Cut, Carved, and Served: Competitive Jamming in the 1930s and 1940s', *Jazz Perspectives* 4/2 (August 2010), 207.

79 Walker, 'Cut, Carved, and Served', 192. Soon after the JATP tour finished, Rich criticized the format as 'not jazz. It's just honking and noise.' However, he laid the blame partly at the feet of the 'bopsters', who 'set back music and jazz 20 years with their bad habits and foolishness'. Berglund, *Buddy Rich*, 190.

80 Iverson, 'The Drum Thing'.

81 Ethan Iverson, 'Modern Hollywood Discovers its Jazz *Soul*', *The Nation*, 24 December 2020, www.thenation.com/article/culture/jazz-soul-pixar-hollywood/.

82 Eva Mackevic, '7 Greatest drummers of all time', *Reader's Digest*, www.readersdigest.co.uk/culture/music/7-greatest-drummers-of-all-time. Brennan draws attention to the complete absence of women from many such lists, including longer lists such as the aforementioned *Modern Drummer* '50 Greatest'. Brennan, *Kick It*, 241.

83 According to George T. Simon, writing in 1953, Rich 'clings to the theory that a drummer should set and hold the beat, that it's up to him to keep the band going. Consequently he has great disdain for most bop drumming. To him a drummer has no right to break up the rhythmic flow with constant explosions and extraneous back beats that most of the time do nothing but interfere with what's going on. . . . "I don't know what some of those guys think a left hand is for," he says.' Simon, *Simon Says*, 38.

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was played in the manner of, say, Kenny Clarke (who established new roles for the bass drum and ride cymbal and thereby helped to invent bebop itself).[84] Rich is therefore not a major figure in most 'serious' jazz histories, but greater fault here may lie with those histories: Scott DeVeaux argues that the aforementioned ideas about jazz authenticity originated in association with specific social and political goals, particularly at the time of the bebop revolution (which explicitly opposed swing-era big-band commercialism), and were adopted by the broader jazz world for reasons of cultural and historical legitimation – the idea of a unified, evolving jazz tradition being attractive even as it ignores obvious discontinuities between styles.[85] Other conceptions of the music and its history are possible, and one's estimation of Rich's contribution to both will depend largely on one's chosen perspective.

Rich, and Neiman after him, belong to a jazz tradition that has visuality at its centre. Krupa was their key predecessor as a drummer: Brennan notes how 'flamboyant showmanship . . . combined with the visual of Krupa's commanding, grunting presence and cinematic good looks' to give him 'his irrepressible star quality'.[86] Jazz showmanship is not the sole preserve of drummers, though. Much early jazz and swing-era performance was visual in nature: Catherine Tackley discusses the Original Dixieland Jazz Band's (ODJB) 'awareness of the demands of variety theatre, in which acts had to be visually as well as aurally attractive', for instance, and shows that the consequent integration of dancers into their 1919 London performances resulted in these being 'perceived as an "act" which was visually and choreographically, rather than solely musically, entertaining'.[87] (Tackley also challenges those who dispute the ODJB's broader authenticity, arguing that the band and their music 'were clearly rooted in and representative of the New Orleans musical tradition', reflecting that city's 'wide racial mix' and productive mingling of musical practices.[88]) While some later jazz moved away from visuality, there was also continuation, not least where the careers of musicians such as Rich successfully spanned several supposed 'eras' of jazz history. There are important disclaimers to make around this visual tradition – the connections to minstrelsy, the privileging of certain identities and pandering to racist tastes[89] – but it has also been consumed by large audiences and for valid reasons, and therefore warrants attention.

To be clear, I do not mean to equate prejudice against Rich's playing with the considerably more damaging prejudice still faced by black musicians, for which Rich holds some responsibility as a willing participant in a racist industry. Nonetheless, the former prejudice exists and clouds assessments of Rich, balancing the 'world's greatest' label but only by placing

84 See Anthony Brown, 'Modern Jazz Drumset Artistry', *The Black Perspective in Music* 18/1–2 (1990), 39–47. Brown's article traces an evolutionary lineage running from the swing era innovations of Chick Webb, Jo Jones, and Sid Catlett, to the bebop developments of Clarke and Roach, with the latter's style positioned as the culmination of previous developments.

85 Scott DeVeaux, 'Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography', *Black American Literature Forum* 25/3 (1991).

86 Brennan, *Kick It*, 141–2.

87 Catherine Tackley (née Parsonage), *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain, 1880–1935* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 125–6.

88 Tackley, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain*, 136–7.

89 Miles Davis, for example, complained of 'that clowning shit he [Dizzy Gillespie] used to do for all them white folks'. Miles Davis and Quincy Troupe, *Miles: The Autobiography* (London: Picador, 1990), 153.

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him in the similarly uncritical category of 'mere' virtuoso, via judgements based on subjective taste and constructed ideas of authenticity. Moving forward, I wish primarily to *understand* Rich's work, and in that regard, to dismiss him for failing to live up to ideals held by others is unhelpful.[90] Instead, Rich must be met on his own terms, and those of his audience. In particular, while Rich might have claimed that he was not a 'showman',[91] I am convinced that such a visual identity – understood in a neutral rather than derogatory sense – was an intentional and central part of his appeal. Indeed, for it not to have been seems improbable, given that Rich's performances were so often – and still are – *seen*, his legacy stretching from vaudeville now on to YouTube videos with sensational titles and millions of views (e.g., 'BUDDY RICH IMPOSSIBLE DRUM SOLO *HQ*', nineteen million views at time of writing[92]). The next section therefore explores visual aspects of Rich's playing in more detail.

Rich's visuality

> To see Rich sitting behind his drums, grimacing, covered with perspiration, bearing down on an extended single-stroke roll as if focusing a laser upon the head of his snare drum, then exploding around his set in a staggering display of coordination and endurance, was to witness high drama.[93]

Tom Piazza's evocative description of a Rich solo (which could apply just as easily to Neiman's final solo in *Whiplash*) draws attention to both the visual appeal of Rich's playing ('To *see* Rich') and the particular nature of that appeal. Today, the dominant image of Rich is not of the joyful, carefree performer seen in *Ship Ahoy*. In Iverson's terms, it is of 'the sweating white athlete'.[94] Particularly in the extended, climax-of-the-set solos of his later career leading his own big band, from 1966 until his death in 1987, Rich promotes an idea of the drum solo as athletic endeavour. He does so largely visually ('grimacing, covered with perspiration', so exhibiting Abbate's desperation and peril) and to great effect ('high drama').

Generally speaking, the virtuoso-as-athlete trope is less common than its effective opposite. James Deaville notes how 'evident visible and audible ease in performance has been valorized as a sign of virtuosity, within the paradox that only hard work could produce such apparent effortlessness'.[95] Liberace might be compared to Rich in many regards, as another popular twentieth-century virtuoso whose fame spread through performances on audiovisual

90 I am not the first to recognize the extremes in Rich's reception, and to seek a productive middle ground. See, for instance, the response to Iverson by Mark Stryker, 'Traps, The Drum Wonder', *Do The M@Th*, https://ethaniverson.com/2015/03/01/traps-the-drum-wonder-by-mark-stryker/. Also Andrew Gilbert, 'The Legacy of Buddy Rich', *JazzTimes*, https://jazztimes.com/features/profiles/buddy-rich-legacy/.

91 Tomkins, 'Buddy Rich: Interview 3'.

92 TheSoundMen, 'BUDDY RICH IMPOSSIBLE DRUM SOLO *HQ*', *YouTube*, 17 January 2010, https://youtu.be/9esWG6A6g-k.

93 Tom Piazza, 'Arrogance in Swing Time', *New York Times*, 22 September 1991, www.nytimes.com/1991/09/22/books/university-presses-arrogance-in-swing-time.html.

94 Iverson, 'The Drum Thing'.

95 Deaville, 'Virtuosity and the Virtuoso', 290.

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media – performances which emphasized visuality, moreover, and which have been derided by 'serious' critics for displaying style over substance (in this case relative to the norms of the classical tradition).[96] Yet Liberace's performances convey effortlessness and a domestic intimacy, in the way his hands glide across the keyboard, in his knowing smiles to the audience and camera, and in the fancy-domestic candelabra that adorns his piano. Rich is different perhaps simply because his instrument and style *do* require more physical effort; certainly, his perspiration was not 'fake'. Then again, the athletic style was one that he deliberately pursued through his musical choices, one that the evidence of *Ship Ahoy* and other screen appearances suggests could have been replaced wholly or partially by an impression of ease, and one that notably also aligns with long-standing – and commercially exploitable – ideas of drumming as 'primitive'.[97]

In a 1985 televised interview with Larry King, Rich spoke clearly of the potential effects of visuals in response to King's question about whether an audience could be 'fooled by histrionics':

> There's a million things you can do, there's all kinds of gyrations to go through, and faces, and, er, making it look a lot more difficult than it is, because it really isn't that difficult. And you can make an audience feel, by the visual aspect of playing, that you are playing way above what you are really playing musically.[98]

Rich's remarks do not constitute a *mea culpa* as such – he again insisted he was 'not so much of a showman' and appeared to aim the words above at drummers who 'can't play'. Some level of showmanship is inevitable, though. I draw here on Philip Auslander's notion of musical personae, wherein '[w]hat musicians perform first and foremost is not music, but their own identities as musicians, their musical personae'.[99] These personae 'reflect the priorities of the performance context' and are thus not fixed, though they are subject to expectations based on the audience's prior knowledge of the same performer; Auslander stresses that the audience co-creates the persona by negotiating a 'working consensus' with the performer.[100] Rich projected a 'serious' attitude in interviews as well as performances (recall 'I concentrate on what I play – because I want to play good'[101]), and that attitude was also apparent when he was unknowingly recorded ranting at his band on their tour bus.[102] We do not

96 See Ivan Raykoff, 'Liberace's Musical/Material Appeal', *Oxford Handbooks Online*, May 2018, http://oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935321.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199935321-e-175.

97 On drumming as 'primitive', see Brennan, *Kick It*, chapter 1.

98 thecrippledrummer, 'Buddy Rich Interview on Larry King recorded 11/25/85', *YouTube*, 1 July 2018, https://youtu.be/i9yQYmvnczs.

99 Philip Auslander, 'Musical Personae', *TDR: The Drama Review* 50/1 (2006), 102.

100 Auslander, 'Musical Personae', 103, 117.

101 Tomkins, 'Buddy Rich: Interview 3'.

102 Certain lines from these widely distributed tapes inspired dialogue in the TV series *Seinfeld*, and this aspect of Rich's character also provided more serious inspiration for the character of Fletcher in *Whiplash*. Writing about *Whiplash*, Kevin Whitehead draws a direct connection between Rich's 'abusive' bandleading and his 'old-school drum fireworks'. Kevin Whitehead, *Play the Way You Feel: The Essential Guide to Jazz Stories on Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 304.

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need to decide here whether Rich's serious, athletic musical persona was 'genuine' or not, though, or how consciously he might have performed it; the important point is to acknowledge that we *do* always see a persona when we see him perform and that it *is* always a creation. To quote Jenny Doctor, Peter Elsdon, and Björn Heile in the introduction to their edited volume *Watching Jazz: Encounters with Jazz Performance on Screen*, '[t]his way of thinking should dispel any idea that watching jazz performers on screen can or should be seen as thoroughly different from watching actors'.[103]

In his own chapter in *Watching Jazz*, Elsdon furthers the musician–actor comparison by arguing that 'jazz on film is never unmediated'.[104] Actors are only one cog in the filmmaking machine, and when we see Rich on screen – the only opportunity we now have to see him – we must always account similarly for his mediation by camera operators, directors, and editors. This is as true of a documentary concert film as it is of *Ship Ahoy*. It is as true of watching Rich as it is of watching Neiman. Rich's contribution to the creation of his own persona is greater than Teller's contribution to the Neiman persona, of course, and those who filmed Rich have relatively less influence than did Chazelle and his colleagues. Yet that influence is still present, and both Neiman and Rich are therefore mediated virtuosi.

With all this in mind, I turn now to examine one common component of a Rich solo – a component that was, in fact, imported directly into Neiman's final solo in *Whiplash*. Bill Reddie's *West Side Story Medley*, an arrangement of themes from the Leonard Bernstein musical, was commissioned by Rich for the 1966 engagement of his then-new band at the Chez Club in Hollywood, and recorded there for the album *Swingin' New Big Band*. Thereafter, it was a popular element of Rich's performances – including several that were filmed – until his death, generally ending the final set. On record, the piece lasts for nearly eleven minutes, passing through renditions of Bernstein's 'Prologue', 'Somewhere', and 'Something's Coming' before a ninety-second Rich solo that leads to a brief band finale. Live, however, Rich treated the medley's structure flexibly and primarily as a vehicle for his solo display. The piece could run up to and beyond fifteen minutes, incorporating one or two extended drum solos totalling half or more of its duration, and often cutting one or both of 'Somewhere' and 'Something's Coming'. The most extreme format, in which the 'medley' actually consisted only of the three-minute 'Prologue' and a longer solo, was common from the mid-1970s onwards.[105] Whatever the structure, though, a Rich solo always brought the piece towards climax and the band finale, and this solo regularly featured a gradually accelerating single-stroke roll – that is, a roll executed with the hands playing alternate single strokes: right, left, right, left – performed on the snare drum. Rich began the roll slowly and deliberately, before quickening to a visual and sonic blur.

The accelerating single-stroke roll was so common that Tormé describes it at length. The *West Side Story* solo 'was different every time Rich played it', he writes, but nevertheless

103 Jenny Doctor, Peter Elsdon, and Björn Heile, 'Introduction', in *Watching Jazz*, ed. Heile, Elsdon, and Doctor, 20.

104 Elsdon, 'Framing Jazz', 37.

105 These conclusions are drawn primarily from analysis of bootleg audio recordings collected at Mike James, 'Live recordings from Buddy Rich concerts', *Mike James Jazz*, http://mikejamesjazz.com/br_clips.html.

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'took on a specific form' that included the roll – 'a supersonic display of precision and speed that left even the most jaded watchers and listeners gaping in disbelief' – to build to a climax and the band's re-entry.[106] The tension between jazz as a supposedly improvisational music and the use of such a stock device is worth noting here. Heile examines audiovisual recordings of 'serial' live performances by Duke Ellington's band to challenge the myth of jazz as essentially improvisatory, arguing that Ellington instead gave the audience what they wanted – namely, what they recalled from his records, including solos repeated almost note-for-note.[107] Drawing again on Auslander, Heile finds that Ellington's musicians still *performed* spontaneity, including through visual means, and thereby encouraged their audience to understand what they experienced as spontaneous at least in *quality*, if not as literally improvised. Rich's repetition is less straightforward because the roll is not present on the *Swingin' New Big Band* recording, and is part of a solo that changed in shape and detail in other ways, too. It is nonetheless possible that some audience members would expect it, from having previously seen and/or heard (or heard about) other performances in which it occurred. From today's perspective, when we can see Rich perform the roll in several videos on YouTube alone, this expectation is more likely to be present when we encounter another *West Side Story* solo. It is therefore key to the device's effect that Rich appears invested in its execution, so that the roll does not seem a mere obligation.

Visuals are not just an 'addition' or 'enhancement' here, though. The accelerating single-stroke roll is as much a visual device as a musical one. Sonically, the roll has an overt narrative drive that should not be underestimated (and that perhaps partly explains why it is also the first sound heard in *Whiplash*, over a black screen),[108] but no timbral or dynamic variation, and is also unmetered. It is, then, relatively *unmusical*. The audience's attention is thereby directed to the visual, and not only to Rich's ancillary 'investment' gestures (effortful facial expressions and so on; gestures that represent 'a link between the music and the expressive intention of the musician') but also to his instrumental actions (those 'responsible for sound production)'.[109] Simplicity is crucial here. Rich starts the roll slowly so that we can *see* what he is doing, and we therefore see that there is no 'trick' involved. He could generate much the same sound using a double-stroke roll (right, right, left, left), for instance, exploiting the way the stick rebounds off and back on to the drumhead to achieve high velocity more efficiently (with two strikes per downward stroke). Instead, he uses a single-stroke roll for a clearer – and, at faster speeds, more spectacular – cause-and-effect relationship of action to sound. This is drumming in its most elementary form, reduced to a straightforward and largely visual expression of athleticism – the musical equivalent of the 100-metre sprint

106 Tormé, *Traps the Drum Wonder*, 125–6.

107 Björn Heile, 'Play It Again, Duke: Jazz Performance, Improvisation, and the Construction of Spontaneity', in *Watching Jazz*, ed. Heile, Elsdon, and Doctor.

108 From a screen-music perspective, the roll resembles the accelerating snare-drum figure in Bernard Herrmann's theme for *Taxi Driver* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 1978), albeit extended towards a much quicker final pace.

109 Manfred Nusseck and Marcelo M. Wanderley, 'Music and Motion – How Music-Related Ancillary Body Movements Contribute to the Experience of Music', *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 26/4 (2009), 335.

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(and a challenge that has since become the basis of the 'World's Fastest Drummer' competition, marketed as 'extreme sport drumming').[110]

Rich's deliberately didactic and unmusical use of single strokes encourages not merely an abstract comprehension of his athletic ability but more particularly a 'bodily empathy' with his actions even among non-drummers and non-musicians and perhaps to the extent that the audience member actually moves their body in mimicry.[111] Paul McIntyre discusses this effect in filmed jazz performance, drawing on observations from psychology regarding 'embodied cognition' (the idea, quoting Marc Leman, that 'music is performed and perceived through gestures whose deployment can be directly felt and understood through the body'[112]) and 'motor resonance' ('observers feel physically stimulated by others' actions'[113]). McIntyre concludes that 'performers' use of gesture, embodied cognition, and motor resonance . . . allow viewers not only to empathize with musicians but also to feel "part of the music", partaking of a shared experience'.[114] Rich's apparent success in this regard is evidenced by his audiences' responses: on live recordings, the roll can reliably be heard to elicit loud cheers of both encouragement and celebration (rather like those that might be directed at a sportsperson). Audience members understand what Rich is doing here – for a while they can even *do* what he is doing – and are therefore all the more impressed when he proceeds beyond their own limits and expectations.

That the roll seems to 'work' for Rich's live audiences calls into question McIntyre's further suggestion that the perception of a shared experience 'depends . . . crucially' on filming and broadcast technologies to create 'an illusion of intimacy and direct presence'.[115] It might be that one or more of drumming, Rich, and the accelerating single-stroke roll present a special case, given factors such as the size and simplicity of the instrumental gestures involved.[116] Undoubtedly, though, those technologies still amplify the effect. The framing of the roll in

110 Since 1999, the World's Fastest Drummer contest has challenged drummers to record the highest number of single strokes within sixty seconds, as measured by a device known as a Drumometer. The current record, set in 2013 by Tom Grosset, stands at 1,208 strokes (an average of 20.133 per second). The competition has also expanded to encompass feet as well as hands, and various 'endurance' challenges. World's Fastest Drummer website, www.worldsfastestdrummer.com/.

111 The World's Fastest Drummer arcade game similarly exploits the 'anyone can try' appeal of the single-stroke roll. World's Fastest Drummer, 'The New WFD Arcade Game', www.worldsfastestdrummer.com/WFDtheGame.html.

112 Marc Leman, 'The Functional Role and Bio-kinetics of Basic and Expressive Gestures in Activation and Sonification', in *Musical Gestures: Sound, Movement, and Meaning*, ed. Rolf Inge Godøy and Marc Leman (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 127, quoted in Paul McIntyre, 'Jazz Performance on Screen: Mediatization of Gesture, Bodily Empathy, and the Viewing Experience', in *Watching Jazz*, ed. Heile, Elsdon, and Doctor, 175.

113 McIntyre, 'Jazz Performance on Screen', 174.

114 McIntyre, 'Jazz Performance on Screen', 184. Concerning virtuosity specifically, Deaville relates that 'audience members have historically reported some form and degree of corporeal and/or psychic empowerment through the experience of virtuosity'. Deaville, 'Virtuosity and the Virtuoso', 287.

115 McIntyre, 'Jazz Performance on Screen', 184.

116 Ivan Raykoff similarly points to Liberace's use of television 'to make his music and his ingratiating personal touch both physically and materially comprehensible for his audiences', via devices including close-ups of his hands and direct-to-camera smiles and winks, but also notes how the pianist used props and costumes to achieve similar effects in live stage shows. Raykoff, 'Liberace's Musical/Material Appeal'.

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Figure 5 Sequence of shots from *Buddy Rich at the Talk of the Town*, covering the accelerating single-stroke roll in Rich's *West Side Story Medley* solo.

a 3 January 1970 BBC broadcast – *Buddy Rich at the Talk of the Town* (prod. Terry Henebery) – is typical (see Figure 5). As the roll begins, an on-stage camera zooms in to show only Rich's hands, sticks, and snare drum, responding to Rich's focus on that instrument and offering a clear view of the roll's execution. As the roll accelerates into the climactic section of the solo, this close-up shot alternates first with a view of audience members applauding, and then with a long shot from the audience's perspective showing Rich in the context of his band (who are all turned to watch him), zooming towards a front view of the drum kit. This long shot draws attention to the posture and movement of Rich's entire upper body, which hunches over the snare, and moves up and down with apparent effort as he uses the bass drum to re-establish metre underneath the continuing roll. The original close-up then returns with a slightly wider angle, showing Rich's face hunched into the top of the frame, dripping sweat as he stares down at almost ninety degrees.

The same core elements are emphasized by the camera's mediation here as in *Whiplash*: the movements of hands, the concentration and physical effort required, and the connection established with others (the live audience, in Rich's case). Aside from their power to bring Rich into the audience's own space (on television or, now, computers and other devices), the close-ups in the BBC broadcast additionally enhance the inherent intimacy of his accelerating roll. Rich cradles the snare drum not only between his legs, as is standard, but also with his upper body. He consistently played with poor posture, but his hunch here is an exaggeration, and the final shot in the sequence further emphasizes it by using Rich's torso and head as a visual frame for his hands and instrument. While the intimacy conveyed may be constructed, though, it is clearly opposed to the exhibitionist 'gimmicks' that Rich derided in rock drum solos, and which Brennan traces from the 'ever-larger drum kits' of the 1970s onwards to the 'ridiculous heights' (quite literally) of Mötley Crüe's Tommy Lee, whose

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live performances have been enhanced by stage set-ups including two 'which effectively saw Lee and his kit riding on an actual roller coaster during his solo'.[117] Rich was often showier, of course, particularly in more obviously entertainment-led contexts – he even once performed upside down, on an episode of the television show *What's My Line?*[118] By contrast, his performance of the accelerating single-stroke roll – an essential component of his virtuoso-soloist act – was more serious, drawing attention inward to the body and a purer kind of musical-athletic challenge. However, it was nonetheless showmanship, in which a visual impression of effort and commitment authenticated what was unashamedly 'mere' technical display. This may have been unconscious, Rich's formative and continuing experiences on stage and screen having moulded him into an instinctive showman, but in any case – and whatever his own protests about such a label – Rich the virtuoso clearly *was* a showman who must be understood visually as well as aurally.

Conclusion

Rich competed against his peers in numerous drum battles throughout his career, but even a Rich solo can be understood as a kind of battle – against his own limitations, and those of his instrument. The former understanding is illustrated by ongoing discussions about the relationship between Rich's drumming and his general health. Rich suffered from heart and back problems through the latter years of his career yet kept a busy touring schedule. The aforementioned 'IMPOSSIBLE DRUM SOLO' YouTube video comes from a *West Side Story Medley* performance at the Concert for the Americas festival, held in the Dominican Republic in 1982.[119] This now also circulates in online discourse as the solo during which Rich had a heart attack, but managed to finish the performance anyway.[120] The truth is less certain: band member Dave Stahl recalls that Rich might have been 'close to a heart attack', and it is not clear if he saw a doctor.[121] Yet the myth itself is instructive in how it draws on and feeds broader perceptions of drumming as physically demanding. Rich, we are encouraged to believe, had a heart attack during a solo *because* a drum solo is a physical challenge; Rich is great *because* he could overcome even a heart attack to deliver a performance, thereby demonstrating his ultimate commitment to the music. The image of Rich sweating and grimacing authenticates the myth, to the extent that some of that online

117 Brennan, *Kick It*, 236–7.

118 Asked about this, Rich explained that it 'was something that one of their directors thought of doing', and dismissed drummers who used such gimmicks regularly as 'full of shit'. Jim Warchol, 'Buddy Rich: View From The Top', *Modern Drummer*, January 1977, www.moderndrummer.com/article/january-1977-buddy-rich/.

119 TheSoundMen, 'BUDDY RICH IMPOSSIBLE DRUM SOLO *HQ*'.

120 See, for instance, Still_I_Rise, 'TIL that Buddy Rich had a Heart Attack During a Drum Solo. He Finished the Solo, Took a Bow, THEN Went to the Hospital', *Reddit post*, 11 March 2014, www.reddit.com/r/todayilearned/comments/203uiu/til_that_buddy_rich_had_a_heart_attack_during_a/.

121 Stahl remembers that Rich 'definitely hyperventilated and for a period of time after the gig he was out of it'. Rich's daughter, Cathy, states that he had 'a mild heart attack' and that she found him 'unconscious on the floor' of his dressing room after the show. Soon after, in early 1983, Rich suffered a severe heart attack and underwent triple bypass surgery, yet travelled to London for a stint at Ronnie Scott's only eight weeks later. Berglund, *Buddy Rich*, 309–10.

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discourse focuses on where in the video one can supposedly see the heart attack occur.[122] Such comments can only be speculative, but one thing is certain: we cannot *hear* a heart attack occur, just as we cannot hear Rich's perspiration and facial expressions.

The idea of drumming as physically demanding was picked up in *Whiplash*, of course. It can also be seen elsewhere today: the Pound workout encourages participants to '[c]hannel your inner rockstar with this full body cardio-jam session inspired by the infectious, energizing, and sweat-dripping fun of playing the drums',[123] for instance, while a 2008 *BBC News* story claimed that '[p]laying the drums for a rock band requires the stamina of a Premiership footballer',[124] on the basis of a limited study involving Blondie drummer Clem Burke. More substantial studies focusing on rock and heavy-metal drumming have since confirmed that these can be relatively athletic activities, but again, for the present purposes, the existence of the idea is more important than the evidence for it.[125] Millions have seen Rich and Neiman perform, and the images of those performances therefore wield significant influence over popular understandings. To what extent a virtuoso-drummer-as-athlete trope has now solidified, and whether its place in the cultural imagination might be challenged by a more nonchalant vision of drumming virtuosity, are questions worthy of future study.

The development of the drum kit during the twentieth century places special emphasis on the role of audiovisual media in communicating the instrument's performance practices. This is another area that warrants further enquiry. Such media undoubtedly amplify the inherent visuality of drumming in the performances discussed here, not only by broadcasting them to large audiences but also through specific visual tactics executed by filmmakers. Andrew Neiman, as the audience experiences him, is therefore obviously a collaborative construction, but so is Buddy Rich, and not just in contexts such as *Ship Ahoy* where composition and choreography extend filmmakers' control to the gestural level. Rich performed his 'serious' virtuoso persona live, but the audience members who co-create that persona have done so in far greater number via mediated visions of his musicianship. The screen seemingly gives us direct access to Rich's body, a clearer view of *his* mastery of his instrument, yet the filmmakers' choice of what we see is still that: a choice that informs our understanding in particular ways. Alongside acknowledging that Rich's virtuosity is visual, then, any analysis must recognize that his visuality is not entirely his own.

That Rich nonetheless used visuality as a component of his playing, thereby attracting the attention of filmmakers and audiences and bringing the drum kit into the musical

122 See, for instance, user comments in Still_I_Rise, 'TIL that Buddy Rich had a Heart Attack During a Drum Solo', and in Arcanist1337, 'Buddy Rich's Insane Drum Solo at the Concert of the Americas', *Reddit post*, 28 August 2014, www.reddit.com/r/videos/comments/2etwfy/buddy_richs_insane_drum_solo_at_the_concert_of/.

123 Pound, 'About', https://poundfit.com/about/.

124 BBC News, 'Rock Drummers "Are Top Athletes"', 22 July 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/7518888.stm.

125 S. E. De La Rue, S. B. Draper, C. R. Potter, and M. S. Smith, 'Energy Expenditure in Rock/Pop Drumming', *International Journal of Sports Medicine* 34/10 (2013). Bryan Romero, Jared W. Coburn, Lee E. Brown, and Andrew J. Galpin, 'Metabolic Demands of Heavy Metal Drumming', *International Journal of Kinesiology and Sports Science* 4/3 (2016), www.journals.aiac.org.au/index.php/IJKSS/article/view/2567.

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foreground, returns us to that other idea: that we see him battling against the limitations of his instrument. Drummers have been stereotyped as noisemakers rather than musicians, and the drum solo as an uninteresting part of any concert.[126] Recalling Huang's suggestion that percussionists tend to '"act out" what their instruments cannot do', visual appeal arguably substitutes for the 'missing' musical elements of melody and harmony in the performances examined here. The accelerating single-stroke roll, in particular, is a considerably more engaging device when seen as well as heard, at least when performed with the apparent commitment of Rich or indeed Neiman. This suggests that visuality is especially important – or even essential – to popular drum kit virtuosity, and therefore that drummer-soloists aiming for broad appeal are bound to face critical opposition: their playing will either be *heard* as meaningless noise or *seen* as excessively theatrical. The commonly held musical ideals of which visuality, and 'mere' virtuosity more broadly, fall foul – in jazz as earlier in classical music – are not inherently correct, however. That visuality is part and parcel of performances by Neiman and Rich should not automatically lead to their dismissal on the basis of pre-existing values, but instead encourage the reappraisal of those values in light of how the performances are shown to work. Returning to Brody's opinion that Rich was 'a TV personality, not a major jazz inspiration', then, we might ask: can he not be both?

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126 See Brennan, *Kick It*, chapters 2 and 4.

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