

## A thought on a thought

Pensamentos em ação

**Howard S. Becker**

Independent researcher  
hsbecker@earthlink.net

**Robert R. Falkner**

University of Massachusetts-Amherst  
181 Presidents Dr, Amherst, MA 01003, US  
faulkner@soc.umass.edu

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**Abstract.** Two musician sociologists asked themselves this question: how can four guys who have never met and who have no written music, meet, shake hands, and start playing in a way that sounds like they've been working together for years. Faulkner and Becker decided to answer this question with field research. Because they lived 3,000 miles apart they cooperated via e-mail, thus preserving a record of the creative scientific process as it really occurs.

**Key words:** music, repertoire, fieldwork methods

**Resumo.** Dois músicos sociólogos se fizeram a seguinte pergunta: como quatro caras que nunca se encontraram e que não têm nenhuma música escrita, apertam as mãos, e começam a tocar de uma forma que parece que eles estão trabalhando juntos há anos? Faulkner e Becker decidiram responder a pergunta com pesquisa de campo. Porque viviam a 3.000 milhas de distância eles cooperaram via e-mail, preservando, assim, um registro do processo científico criativo como ele realmente ocorre.

**Palavras-chave:** música, repertório, métodos de pesquisa de campo.

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### A thought on a thought

Sometime before June 2003, Robert R. Faulkner (Rob) and Howard S. Becker (Howie), sometimes addressed by Faulkner as "Count," started thinking seriously about a project to study jazz improvisation and the repertoire of jazz players. Since Faulkner lived in Massachusetts, on the East Coast of the North American continent and Becker lived on

the West Coast, they did almost all their work together by e-mail, except for a few meetings face-to-face<sup>1</sup>.

The correspondence continued for several years, and their book, *Do You Know? The Jazz Repertoire in Action* was published by the University of Chicago Press in 2009. A French translation, *Qu'est-ce qu'on joue, maintenant?* (La Découverte, Paris, 2011) followed.

In the fall of 2010, Becker and his wife, the photographer and writer Dianne Hagaman,

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<sup>1</sup> The text following was borrow of the book, *Thinking together: An e-mail exchange and all that jazz* with the permission of the authors and its publisher, the Annenberg Press. The license to reproduce it in **Verso e Reverso** was a result of a dialogue by email with Howard Becker between September/October, 2013. The whole book is available at Amazon in epub format.

spent three months, as they customarily do, in Paris. One day, Becker received an e-mail from a conceptual artist and poet named Franck Leibovici, who had read Becker's earlier book *Telling About Society* and thought they had some interests in common. They did, and Dianne and Howie got to know Franck, who soon invited them both to contribute to a large project he had underway at Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, called *des formes de vie*. He explains the details of this in his preface to this book.

It's enough here to say that Becker initially thought that he couldn't contribute to the project for what seemed to him the good and sufficient reason that he wasn't an artist and so had no idea what form a contribution could take. Hagaman, who had lived through the entire Faulkner/Becker project, from first thoughts to published book, had another, and better, idea. She remembered the hundreds of e-mails the two had exchanged and was convinced that they documented the story of the events that culminated in *Do You Know?* in a way that ordinarily never happens for any kind of sociological project. The accident of geography meant that the minutiae of communication, ordinarily condensed into a summary term like "story" or "development" had been written down in permanent form, and so were available for inspection. She and Becker read through the entire archive and came away convinced that the story of the project really was there in the electronic correspondence. (Her own contribution to Leibovici's larger project, "32 Cutaways," was a video piece.)<sup>2</sup>

Becker wrote to Faulkner about this possibility, who was immediately enthusiastic. Becker pasted all the e-mails together and sent the result to Leibovici, who was equally enthusiastic. The piece was one of a hundred that formed the corpus of the work that became the finished project (if a project like this can ever be said to be finished). Fragments appeared on two pages of the book documenting the project, (*des formes de vie*): *une écologie des pratiques artistiques* (Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers and *Questions Théoriques*: Paris 2012). And Becker and Leibovici "performed" a part of the correspondence that had been translated into French, Leibovici reading the

part of "Becker" and Becker reading the part of "Faulkner."

Leibovici decided that the appropriate way to display the correspondence would be in a book, but no obvious publication outlet came to light. Until Larry Gross, Director of the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Southern California proposed that the Annenberg Press, one of the school's activities, publish it as an electronic book. Everyone involved was enthusiastic.

Even after they discovered that meant more work to do. The e-mails were not in what you could call tip-top condition. Many were missing dates and other identifying information, and the whole corpus needed to be gone over to make sure that it would be reasonably clear to readers other than the people who wrote them. Hagaman undertook this job and scoured the couple's computers to find the most accurate set of originals from which to constitute an accurate account of the events that inspired and produced the major ideas of the book. Her meticulous work made sure that the materials were in the best shape they could attain.

Becker and Faulkner read the complete version and made some minor editorial changes, occasionally changing names and taking other measures to protect the anonymity of people who had not known that they were participating in a research project (in fact, of course, for part of the time neither Becker nor Faulkner were completely clear that they were doing a research project). Leibovici proposed that the document include a sort of "soundscape," made up of the tunes the two correspondents constantly referred to as they went about collecting the interviews, observations, and reminiscences that made up the bulk of the material they worked with. Electronic publication makes it possible to insert electronic references to such material and so, when a tune is mentioned for the first time in the correspondence, the title is clickable and the click takes you to a performance of that tune found on YouTube (which means that you may encounter a short ad before the music begins). Otherwise, the e-mails are presented as they were written, including all sorts of informalities, jokes, personal references, etc. which we have not tried to anno-

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<sup>2</sup> The contribution of Dianne to Leibovici's larger Project is available in her website: [http://www.diannehagaman.com/new\\_media.html](http://www.diannehagaman.com/new_media.html)

tate or explain. The semi-private language, we think, becomes understandable in a very short time.

Along the way, Larry Gross and Arlene Luck, the managing editor of the Annenberg

Press, kept the project manageable, letting us know when some idea would not be economically or technically practical.

All this proving that the old maxim is right: it takes a heap of people to make a book.

[2003]

### The correspondence

**Subject: Re: a thought on a thought**  
**From: Faulkner Robert <faulkner@soc.umass.edu>**  
**Date: 6/28/03**  
**To: Howard S. Becker <hsbecker@earthlink.net>**

Count. I do not know "I Can Dream Can't I?" but will learn it because if I don't it will just mean that you know yet another tune that I don't know and I hate that... hate that. I mean like hate like not knowing like tunes that you like know more tunes than like I do.

Do you have the music to the tune in question, not "There will Never Be Another You," the other one? I can't find it in my fake books.

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**From: Howard Becker <howardsbecker@gmail.com>**  
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"I Can Dream Can't I?" I think I play in E flat, but could be G too. what's the difference? Well, E flat might be better for the trumpet due to the range. My best memory of this tune now is (you won't believe this) the Andrews Sisters recording, with Patti Andrews showing that she really could sing if they let her do it. (I know this because Paul Taylor made a fantastic dance called "Company B" to a collection of Andrews Sisters recordings and that's one of the tunes—the dance is about WWII and soldiers and all that, very somber.)

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You might as well give up trying to know all the tunes I know, this is my big claim to fame and I was working on it when you were a toddler and besides I accompanied a lot of singers off and on and that will do it for you and then it just got to be a thing with me. It's only people like Mike Greensill, the British pianist we caught at Moose's, who are as crazy as me in this area, and I've got a bunch he never heard of. It was funny when I did the gig in Denmark, the bass player asked about tunes we would play (by e-mail) and I gave him a list of possibilities and he wrote back and said that he thought he knew a lot of tunes but I had managed to hit on seven he had never heard of before.

And I'm not counting the ones that I sort of know, but not all the way through, I'm missing some bridges here and there and they are hard to track down. Such as "We Go Well Together," or "Humpty-Dumpty Heart" (the one Glenn Miller used to play, not the hillbilly tune), like that.

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OK Mr. like Smartipants. I found Dick Hyman's two classic articles titled "Keyboard Journal" in the journal, ah, Keyboard. Jesus I am losing my mind here, as

you can easily detect. Anyway, Dick Hyman has some terrific things to say about how Bob James and Phil Woods, in Keyboard Jan. '82 and Phil in Down Beat noted that the new crop of players tend to be "deficient in repertoire. Too often, younger

musicians don't know the tunes that are still the common currency of players in all styles of jazz." Holy cow, exploitation as "common currency." The article is in, again to be redundant, Keyboard April and then in May 1982 pp. 56-57. Title? "150 Standard Tunes Everyone Ought to Know." Love it? Then in May "150 More Tunes Everyone Ought to Know," continued on page 64 which, like a dumbbell, I didn't get copied properly — Mr. scholastic scholarship. For this they cut off your head, or balls, or both, in Venice in 1300-1330. I will mail you the abbreviated listings and we will sit around the campfire and tell stories when I get my self to thy venue, like.

Why is this important, you ask? Well I have been tearing the fucking condo apart looking for this Dick Hyman Keyboard stuff for two months thinking that it would be a perfect example of the issue of "repertoire," and if Phil and James are complaining that the kids don't know any tunes, or know how to play on the Dorian mode and other revenge riffs of the ostinato people, then this is a nice fit with the learning the repertoire theme (like duh).

I plan on interviewing, ahem, if that's too dignified a word, about practicing and learning tunes. Or, better, you can insert your two cents, make that two paragraphs into "Shedding Culture."

"Sooner or later," Hyman says, "Someone is going to ask you to play 'Stardust.'"

The sentence before that is the gem, here goes:

"Although I agree that not only jazz but popular music in general has been fleeing from the discipline of chord changes, I believe that a musician, and in particular a pianist, is gravely under-prepared if he or she embarks on a career based primarily on the Dorian mode." Funnyha-ha. Not funny- strange. no? I looked at the list. I don't know "Yours Is My Heart Alone." I don't know "I Surrender, Dear" either. I don't know "Can't We Talk It Over." I do not know "Japanese Sandman." Oh well, I know "Stardust."

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Well, I don't really know "Yours Is My Heart Alone," but I think it's in my ancient fake book. "I Surrender Dear" was really a standard when I began and it was one of the eight tunes that Lennie T. played (along with "Don't Blame Me," "Ghost of a Chance," "What Is This Thing Called Love," etc.). "Can't We Talk It Over" is another one that I sort of know but not really, we never played it (as opposed to "Can't We Be Friends") and "Japanese Sandman" isn't anything you'd want to play, it's too simple, sort of like "Tiger Rag" or something like that. But he's right in that the Dorian mode will not get you through the night, especially if there are any requests. Does he have favorites of mine, like "Do It Again"?

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OK, here's the result of my research. "Can't We Talk It Over?" is from the 30s, I think, written by Victor Young and Ned Washington, recorded by lots of people. "Yours Is My Heart Alone" is from an operetta by Franz Lehar (give me a break, Mr. Hyman, enough is enough) and Sinatra recorded it with Tommy Dorsey and elsewhere. I don't have the music for either one in my fabulous ancient fake book. Tough shit.

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Where Hyman is wrong, I think, is that he doesn't take into account that the common currency changes. Tunes that used to be cc aren't any more, new ones are. Still, for a long time there was a core, you might say, that "everyone knew." In my day, it went back to the Dixieland tunes so that, even though no one played like that any more, we all knew, say, "Muskat Ramble" or "Riverboat Shuffle" or certainly knew "Basin Street Blues." Things were added: "How High The Moon," "Laura," etc., as these came into being and people liked their changes and someone made recordings of them.

Some of them became cc strictly because of recordings by jazz people, even when those were made for the wrong reasons. So everyone knows things like "Mean To Me" (I remember your recorded solo with the fake octave jump) or "What A Little Moonlight Can Do" just because Holiday and Wilson had that contract to record a bunch of new tunes every month.

Anyway, that's how the "canon" of "standards" gets constituted. There were core things that everyone seemed to think everyone would know. There were marginal tunes that nuts like me knew and taught to other people. There were tunes that hardly anyone knew (like the Alec Wilder tunes I like) because they were never popular or played much, and tunes that were popular on the Hit Parade and then disappeared but that some people liked to play (like me) and so kept slightly alive. There were show tunes that some nuts (like me) liked, like "Little Tin Box," and played whether anyone else did or not. Etc.

There was a lot of stability in the core of this thing because of classic recordings that kept things alive that otherwise would have disappeared.

If I remember correctly, Hawkins or Chu Berry or somebody made a classic recording of "I Surrender Dear" that all the saxophone players knew and wanted you to accompany them on their version of.

But then maybe ten years ago I began to run into young people who had never heard of, say, "Sunny Side of the Street" or "You Can Depend On Me," but did know "Joy Spring" or "Godchild" and other tunes of that kind which had become part of what their "everyone" knew.

I learned some of those tunes but not all of them, because by then I wasn't playing that much and my repertoire became increasingly eccentric as I had less and less to do with other players.

We could work on this together if you want. I think it's an interesting aspect of jazz playing that no one has thought much about until you started nosing about in it.

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Count. Just as I suspected, Hyman is swinging his Dick, as in who knows the most obscure tunes. This reminds me of the stat jocks who pride themselves on knowing all the fancy, and very obscure, new techniques, and make sure that you know that you don't know them. It's a shark tank, as one of my respondents (or is it informants) said: swim or die. Bullshit.

Anything by Victor Young has to be paid attention to.

If you change voice and treat yourself as an informant and pretend like I asked you the following question—"do you think the canon of tunes has changed?"—then you have now added an enormously insightful ditty to the domain of, ahem, exploitation. The core changes and you just depicted it. Just like these days, I hear, the standard jam session tune is "Giant Steps," like Giant fucking Steps. I can't even

play it. In effect, this is good and you should write this up, oops you already have, so can I use it, as in “treat it” as a document of changing canon, or what? I have no idea what I am talking about here, so this is definitely a Moose discussion (if you know what I mean). Do you know Mooch the Moose? It is very hard at the bridge is it not, check it out. Milt Hinton, by the way, in Bass Line, has a great photo of your hero Alec Wilder with Red (Norvo, not Mitchell).

The repertoire that one has to learn changes or, in our lingo, the standard repertoire and common currency changes, as you say, which means that repertoire is a construction (underlined), so that “exploitation” is constantly moving as a target to be learned, absorbed, played on and with, and so forth.

Musicians are not passively studying and learning the “record” — which brings to mind Eliot’s [Freidson] superb ethnography of professional practice (together) in *Doctoring Together* (1975), although “practice” is used differently in several important ways. Riverboat Shuffle? Huh? “Things were added...” is a big idea. In appendix B Eliot asked about techniques that had to be learned when the physician came into the medical group. Same question I’m asking of some of the musicians when it seems appropriate, i.e., when it doesn’t end up making the interviewer sound like a real cultural dope. “What the fuck are you talking about Rob? Why are you asking me that? You know it. I know it. What is this, some kind of ‘INTERVIEW’?”

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Rob, this is fabulous. We just keep writing back and forth, we’ll have a whole Thing, if you know what I mean.

I can imagine a very easy piece of “research” here, which would be to make a list of tunes from these various varieties we’ve been outlining and then ask a lot of different players if they know them, if and when they play them, where they learned them, etc. I’m a great fan of this kind of simple stuff. Like an old buddy of mine, anthropologist Henry Selby, did a study of witchcraft in a village in Oaxaca. he moved into a little house at one end of town with his family, then told the people next door he wanted to study witches and where could he find some.

They said, “Oh, too bad, there aren’t any here but at the other end of town there’s a lot of them,” and they named names. He goes to the other end of town, asks the same question, and they say, “Funny you should ask, there aren’t any here, but at the other end of town, where you live, there’s a lot of them.” and they named names. So he concluded that witches always live at the other end of town. Then he did a witch census: asked everyone in town to name all the witches they knew of. And his hunch was right: everyone could name some witches but they never named neighbors or close relatives. Because, Selby explains, you know those people too well to believe that they are flying around on brooms and causing people to die, but you have to have witches, because they are the cause of all diseases. So there have to be witches but they can’t be people whose naming would be too disruptive. QED.

The reason I went into all that is that his procedure was so simple: take a census of witches and see who names who. Which would be a sort of model for us asking what tunes you know and who else knows them and where did you learn them, etc.

And one reason this interests me is that in a couple of weeks I’m going to an NSF thing that my old buddy Charles Ragin is running in DC, about, ahem, qualitative research and how can NSF stop discriminating against it, etc. All the usual suspects will be there. And one thing I might do is to describe our research on the jazz canon, as described in the legendary e-mail correspondence of Faulkner and Becker (June, 2003), and show how we developed the idea and the research plan and all that, and ask what kind of proposal we could write that would actually



get NSF to give us some money. That ought to, as they say, set the fox among the chickens (is that what they say?).

I've actually been cutting up our correspondence and pasting it together and I'm going to add all this stuff to it. Who knows? We might have half a paper already. Good point about Eliot's doctor research. He's a smart one. Unfortunately, he's back east for the summer so I can't drag him into this.

(Well, why not? He's got e-mail in Sag Harbor.)

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**To: Howard Becker <howardsbecker@gmail.com>**

Count. Here is a recent adoption in my circle of players. The tune is called "Estaté" and I can't find it in my books, but Jay Messer, my guitar duo player has it in his book. So, here we go. One day, on a Sunday brunch, Jay says, "Do you know this," as he pulls out Estaté. I said no.

"Want to learn it," he asks. "Sure." He tells me another trumpet player, David Pignardi showed it to him a few months ago, maybe longer. Well if Dave likes it then I should like it, I reason; Dave has great taste and is forever on the prowl for new tunes. [this is important. we are into an alligator farming diffusion process here]. Jay pulls it out I take a look at it and Jay, to be helpful, plays through the whole thing. Remember we have people going to the buffet and eating and drinking coffee and bloody marys and not listening so, what the fuck, lets learn a new tune.

So after Jay plays through it I see the beauty of it, but the bridge goes way into the upper register so I'm going to have to either play it there, which is too high for the circumstances, or take it down an octave or have Jay improvise on the bridge for me. OK, here we go. It went smoothly. And we said, "let's keep working on it, I will." We agreed to have the tune enter the repertoire, our repertoire of tunes.

Two weeks later I am having dinner with a baritone player—who happens to be a professor of biology at Amherst College, Dominick, good guy. He says, do you know "Estaté?" I said, enthusiastically, or words to this effect, Dave showed it to Jay and Jay showed it to me and now we are playing it, great tune. Dominick says, "Want to hear Chet's recording of it with an Italian rhythm section." Dominick is a tech nut and downloads files and all that shit. He found it and has it. So up comes Chet playing Estaté; actually it is piano introduction with beautiful voicings and Chet enters in the lower register on low A flat (trumpet key) and has that sound, that flat, dark, vibrato-less, centered singing tone. I cried (leave that out of the ethnography) it was so beautiful immediately. I went home and the next day practiced the lower register on Estaté and really studied the bridge and how Chet had laid back and played it, behind the beat, effortlessly, actually he was singing it it seems, singing the lyrics to the tune.

On the technical side, I had to get a larger mouthpiece to fully get into the sound of the lower register on this and worked on Estaté through a huge mouthpiece for my cornet. After several months Jay and I did the tune again at the mob-run bistro and I nailed it on center, no wobbly tone in the lower register and somewhat Chet like. We mortals can only approach the absolute beauty and focused sound of a player like Chet Baker, the trick being that he starts in the center of the tone, the sound, and then goes deeper into it, with more relaxed meaning. Red Mitchell speaks of Sarah Vaughn being able to do this (*Cats of Any Color*, New York: Oxford 1995, p. 143-165). Now I fully know what Red is talking about.

Go further now. Dominick then played Jobim singing Estaté, on another downloaded recording. Jobim of course sings lyric and melody line for each phrase ahead of the rhythm section, for an entirely different effect and interpretation, which got me to thinking about playing it like that next time, if I could. Jobim's singing is hard to grasp, is hard for me to imitate as a player of the tune, so this is something I have to think about and, of course, work on in the shed.

That is the short history of one tune's adoption. Another is a tune that was a vehicle for Lester Young. More on that next time. Notice your observation on saxophone players wanting to play certain tunes, like those that Prez recorded. This requires the piano player to know the tune and know how to comp in the appropriate style; this is why Tommy Flanagan was so popular with tenor players, he knew how to comp and keep out of their way, knew the register where the two horns—piano and tenor—would not clash or compete to auditory attention [easy on the patois rob].

We are onto something and this should be included in whatever the format we are preparing. It doesn't matter to me right now, the most important thing is getting the observation down. So: questions for the Ragin crowd would be:

1. where do tunes come from? this is an adoption into a community of practice question and hence is relevant for a sociology of a. science, b. technology, c. capitalism, and d. art. duh.

2. how are tunes transformed? this is a Latour question about community of practice in action. Lee Morgan's "Ceora" is a reworking of the Gordon and Warren "I Wish I knew" which became embedded [oops Granovetter a la alligator farming] via Lester Young. Morgan's first part of Ceora is I Wish I Knew-like— and then moves to the "Shiny Stockings" ascending ii V I progressions. A Latour player can then tell you how on the bandstand, or laboratory for Dr. L, transformations occur. This is talk at the bar with a piano player and a guitar player, running this whole down for one another, and for an observer. I went back and broke it up and practiced this and then learned it this way. It worked and now "I Wish I Knew" is part of the, er, "MY" arsenal of tunes.

Notice what this means. It means I have to know a. Ceora, b. Shiny Stockings, and apply those to c. "I Wish I Knew." And I thought Latour was difficult. Same damn process.

3. what is the most efficient method for data collection? this is the survey design question in which the observer collects from all the members of the community a listing of events (er, tunes) of interest. who gives a fuck? well it is the accessibility of music and musicians that can be treated as the witchcraft equivalent design of a survey. Or do the prepared list approach: Which Tunes do you know? Provide a List. Remember John Walton's great article on leadership—the demographic approach, the reputational approach, the decision making approach. Same thing. Ask the open-ended question. Or, ask from a list.

Like, do you know "Dream Dancing"? When was the last time you played it? Do you know the first change and the melody note (actual knowledge) [B flat 7 flat 5—let's learn this Howie, sociology in action].

I think this is rather intriguing research by the way.

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**To: Faulkner Robert <faulkner@soc.umass.edu>**

This is getting to be more fun all the time and is making me a real believer in e-mail collaboration. I mean, like, wow! We are moving fast here.

First of all, of course, I'd like to learn "Estaté," which I have never heard.

(I have a funny thing with Chet Baker. My former sister-in-law's second husband was a jazz toady from LA who idolized Chet who would drive up to Sausalito every now and then, driving 100 mph down the center lane of the old three lane 101—remember that?—leaving death and destruction in his wake. He would arrive, monopolize their house, act like an asshole to everyone in sight, and take off. So I learned to not like him without ever meeting him.) Now I feel like you, you know a tune I don't know.

Also, I found that I have "I Can Dream Can't I?" but it's on a video of the Paul Taylor piece I told you about, so it will be a while until I sit down and write it out for you and me (because I remember some but not all of it).



Now. This is wonderful “data,” it’s exactly what we’d like to know, ideally, about how every tune got into everybody’s repertoire. We are only constrained by the necessity of being practical and reasonable and not driving ourselves crazy. “Estaté” is an interesting case of a tune that no one “needs to know,” it’s pretty much optional, I’m imagining. Other tunes are not so optional (or, we could say, optionality is a variable)—you need to know them and if you don’t you pay a price (set by who? collected by who?) in loss of jobs, or esteem, or selfesteem, or whatever. There are all sorts of degrees of this with all sorts of prices attached depending on who you play with.

If, for instance, I want to play “Little Tin Box, or “I’ll Remember Suzanne,” or any of the other completely unknown numbers I specialize in, then I have to—well, that’s why I got a copy of Finale Note Pad, so I could write them out for you and Benoit and Mads and Don Bennett, people who lack the breadth and depth of my cuckoo repertoire but can read a lead sheet. Because no one knows these songs, at least no one I know or run into. I can’t complain, “Jesus, these fuckers don’t know any tunes,” because you aren’t supposed to know them. You aren’t supposed to know “Estaté,” but it’s optional you can learn it. I don’t know (and, from what you say, you don’t either) “Giant Steps,” but there are circles in which we would be dinged for this lacuna in our collection.

And, of course, this story is fabulous for the detail on the actual process of transmission of a particular tune. If what you described happened enough times, “Estaté” would get to be something everyone in the Amherst Valley would be supposed to know, which I suppose it isn’t yet.

And this story is sort of a benchmark of what, in principle, we’d like to know about everything. The practical research question is: how near can we get to that without giving up the rest of our lives and accumulating so much detail we can’t work with it?

PS. Just had a message from Bill Bielby who wants to talk to me about his research on “homegrown rock bands of the late 1950s and early 1960s.” As you may have noticed in Footnotes, he thinks he is a musician because he once played rock and roll guitar. Anyway, there’s another area in which this process of repertoire building and change goes on, for which we have Stith Bennett to thank for some early insights.

And that reminds me, in a roundabout way, that we can incorporate stuff from Bruce McLeod’s book about how the repertoire of those society bands changed with the advent of rock and roll.

**Subject: Re: a thought on a thought**

**From: Faulkner Robert <faulkner@soc.umass.edu>**

**Date: 6/29/03**

**To: Howard Becker <howardsbecker@gmail.com>**

Count. This is fun and is leading somewhere, especially in the light of your concluding remarks on this e mail. Acquisition of repertoire is critical and taps into how a working community of practitioners operates; and it is a model of sorts for how we would like to understand the social organization of work, let alone the reproduction of culture.

“Estaté” is one, the other exemplar is the Lester Young tune, the one he made famous. I am especially in the groove on your observation that there are tunes that you have to know and others are optional. If you will forgive me here is a N x M matrix of people by tunes so that if we have five players and four tunes, voila:

Rob Howie Pat Dianne Wayne Satin Doll 1 1 0 0 0 MoonLight in Vermont 1 1 1 1 1 Stardust 1 1 1 1 0 Estate 1 0 0 0 0

In this make believe community of players Rob knows all four, Howie knows three, Pat knows 2, Dianne knows 2, the same ones that Pat knows, and Wayne, only knows the tune from his wedding that I played for Wayne and Cheryl. This kind of book-keeping via matrices allows us to start data collection on who knows what and hence is the preliminary material out of which culture acquisition, devel-

opment, and loss is built. In fact the recent ASR lead piece has the author fucking around with this kind of matrix, which is from Kathy Carley's work at Carnegie Mellon. One can have communities that are, for instance, using homomorphism and reduction:

11, or everyone knows all the tunes, has to. This is Club Date Musician.

10, or the elite knows one set and the others know another.

01, this is a split community 00, only the elite know the distinct set, and the others don't.

And so on. Big deal. duh. The fun is deriving this from respondents and informants because it is the issue of "what do you know about the events in the community?" "who knows what?" and, more interestingly, what happens when the tunes get added to the repertoire and become necessary to know, and, as you said, certain tunes lose their cache, necessity, and élan.

Observation: there was a time when every fucking client came up and asked us to play "Send in the Clowns." Now aside from the fact that Sondheim's tunes sound like they are the second alto part, no one in the band knew it, and it was perfectly clear didn't give a shit and was never going to learn it. That is important. In my work with George Masso, the great trombone player, he told me that the New York freelancers, those playing those fancy parties on the upper East side, had to, meaning like had to know how to play the recent on Broadway show tunes. Now that is a, ahem, demand condition.

Should we work the "Estaté" territory, I think so. I am going to interview Jay and Dave about it tomorrow.

How much this reminds me of Michael Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*, does it not. He talks about a "period eye." I am thinking of the crossovers between "gauging" — estimating quantities, volumes, ratios, for commercial purposes—and love lyrics from the Great American Song Book. This playing music with lyrics with people who know the lyrics is involving a public skill at interpreting songs; this has gone into disuse, has it not? That is too far out for me right now, let's stick with the empirical materials in our heads and on our horns. The stories are good because a working community has commitment to learn repertoire to improve skill level (that was Art Stinchcombe's point in several chapters in *Information and Organization*, and his grip about the neo-institutionalists with their alligator farming hazard models of adoption minus commitment).

Should I write up the "Estaté" and another example tomorrow?

**Subject: Re: a thought on a thought**

**From: Howard Becker <howardsbecker@gmail.com>**

**Date: 6/29/03**

**To: Faulkner Robert <faulkner@soc.umass.edu>**

This is fabulous. The NxM matrix is exactly right. What you are talking about are the kinds of such matrices there are. You lay out three kinds, I suppose this is something you would establish empirically, what kinds of distributions are there. Maybe I should go back and read, assuming I can find the fucking book somewhere, Simmel's piece on "Secrecy," which is really, as I remember, about who knows what and who doesn't know what and who is supposed to know what. It's got a different slant because it's about making sure that people don't know, it's about a situation in which from some point of view it's "good" that some people don't know some things. What we're talking about there's no reason for people not to know things, no one wants to keep it from them, it's a question of getting people to know the things they have to know for the situation at hand. And there's an important item to add to the stew: "the situation at hand," that is, whatever we have got ourselves signed up to do, whether it's play for a society wedding or play in a jam session with some eighteen year olds, or whatever.

Here's another story. I know this guy in his early 20s, son of a friend, A\_\_\_\_ E\_\_\_\_. He wants to play jazz piano and in fact gets some gigs here and there, hires himself

out to play for dinner at a Moose-like place sometimes. He takes lessons from an older guy, who started bawling the shit out of him because he didn't know any tunes. He'd come over occasionally—I'm getting to the point here—and we'd play four hands.

But we had a hell of a time finding things we could play, because he knew none of the standards, maybe three or four, and I knew none of the jazz pieces he had learned from lead sheets and fake books.

Yes, demand condition is a good way to talk about it, we can add that to the stew of variables we are concocting. Which is a reminder that none of this happens in a vacuum, not even a vacuum of musicians sitting around in the abstract learning and teaching tunes from and to each other. We're always doing it with some situation(s) in mind—jobs, workouts with other players, etc. So we'll need to list all those situations and see what kind of typology they can be made into.

Here's another thing that's interesting, the moral evaluation of all this, which we've already mentioned. Specifically: the feeling that those kids are stupid because they don't know the tunes they're supposed to know; that I'm stupid because I went to work and someone asked for (you should excuse the expression) "Send in the Clowns" and we didn't know it and maybe there'll be trouble because the client thinks we should know it, for Christ's sake, it's a big hit (even if it does sound like a second alto part, what a lovely description!); that it's "unreasonable" for people to expect me to know tunes like "Estaté" or "Little Tin Box," even though I might think they're great; that it's morally neutral whether one knows songs from this list (Estaté, Tin Box, Suzanne) whereas it's reprehensible not to know "Now's the Time").

And the time dimension—I think I'm repeating or restating what you've already said—it used to be necessary to know X but not no more; it will yet turn out to be smart to have learned X; and I guess you could just do a regular conjugation of all the tenses and see where it got you. There's another crosstab or two in here somewhere.

Yes, write up "Estaté." What should I be doing? I'll think about Baxandall.

**Subject: Re: a thought on a thought**

**From: Howard Becker <howardsbecker@gmail.com>**

**Date: 6/29/03**

**To: Faulkner Robert <faulkner@soc.umass.edu>**

Not sure what you had in mind about the lyrics and who knows them and that being a public skill. But I know that I always considered it more or less essential for no good reason to know the lyrics and that a lot of guys told Berliner that they thought you had to know the lyrics if you wanted to improvise on a song. The idea seemed to be that you got into the "meaning" of the song that way. In fact, I think this is a pretty wide spread belief, as is the idea that singing has something to do with improvising, so that you improve your improvising by singing stuff.

**Subject: Here's another twist on repertoire**

**From: Howard Becker <howardsbecker@gmail.com>**

**Date: 6/30/03**

**To: Faulkner Robert <faulkner@soc.umass.edu>**

Here's another twist on repertoire. When I was a kid in Chicago, which was in the days when you could get a job for a Saturday night by going down to the union hall. So one Saturday there was a polka band desperate for a piano player and I bumped into this guy there and next thing you know I'm supposed to show up at 9 o'clock, dark blue suit, red knit tie at this Polish hall. I asked what kind of music it was and he said polkas, don't worry, it's easy. And, in a way, it was. They had music but the piano music was just chords, and not very many different ones, although these polkas had multi-parts. You're probably familiar with, say, "The Beer Barrel Polka." We played things like that all night long and I sometimes had the

sense that there was some special thing I might have done here or there that an experienced polka player would have known to do but I didn't. But I didn't make any gross errors, even though I had only ever heard of about four of the things we played all night (e.g., "Pennsylvania Polka"). They all knew this stuff backwards and forwards—there were a lot of tricky clarinet duets, for example, and the drummer had to be down with whatever a polka drum thing is—but though I didn't know shit I got through the evening without any scars though without distinction. Which is to say that there are specialized repertoires that you don't have to know unless you play for those kinds of people. That's true of all the ethnic stuff, right? When we played Italian weddings, you had to be able to do a tarantella, "O Sole Mio," "Sorrento," "O Mama," etc. For Greeks, etc., it was tricky because of the 5/4 and 7/4 but this didn't come up often and when it did they gave you a book and you stumbled along and someone in the band knew that stuff or else how would we have gotten the job? When it was too weird they hired an ethnic band, like when we played a Syrian wedding and they had a Syrian band consisting of a tenor banjo and a tambourine to play when we were off.

There must be a general point in this but it's late so fuck it.

**From: Faulkner Robert <faulkner@soc.umass.edu>**

**Date: 6/30/03**

**Subject: Re: a thought on a thought**

**To: Howard Becker <howardsbecker@gmail.com>**

Count. Let me write up the "Estaté" story and the "I Wish I Knew" saga too.

As for the acquisition, diffusion, and abandonment of tunes, we do indeed have an actor x event matrix: this allows us to study the demography of knowledge in a culture production or reproduction setting.

What players know what tunes? Not a bad way of getting at working culture, and how people do things together on the basis of what they learn, teach one another, and share (or don't).

As for your Ragin conference on methods. I have thought about the three main kinds of data collection for a project like this. The three stay close to the actor's perspective and natural habitat. Notice how they also can be given an analytic boost up a level. Here goes:

1. Reputational Approach: musicians report on the canon, Informants report on what they play and what others play. Respondents tell what they play on their gigs and why, or what they used to play but now don't.

Tunes have reputations attributed to them by social actors.

2. Decision-Making Approach: observers observe and record musicians at work on the bandstand, at gigs, at parties, and so forth. The observers follow the decisions to play which tunes. One can interrogate musicians about their set lists after they play them and get at the reasons for the set being the way it is, or was. Observers watch leaders in interaction with clients, er, customers.

3. Archival Approach: observers collect the listings of tunes in fake books, study the contents of fake books and how they change. Tabulations from players are counted using ASCAP and BMI tapes and discs, and so forth. Observers create a running record (Webb, et al.) about what tunes get recorded by whom under what circumstances: BlueNote, Verve, Dial, etc. This is a tune x record x player matrix and is developed by using documents.

As you can see I have lifted John Walton's three major types of data collection in community power and leadership studies. Why this has not been imported into the study of working culture and professional practice (pun intended) is a mystery to me. Probably someone has already done this and I don't know about it.

Do you want to riff on this? Note the alligator farming feature of this with a twist. The three methods of studying tunes x players x setting or sites gets us quickly to: acquisition, diffusion, and abandonment of tunes and hence the study of repertoire. Repertoire is a word thrown around by the neo-institutionalists but lacks

empirical depth. We seem to be close to getting at this intersection of repertoire, acquisition, shed, and culture as revealed via a person x object matrix, i.e., player x tune.

Why don't you work on this and I'll start the "Estaté" saga, you have your side of it too. Notice the chain of interaction: Dave tells and shows Jay the tune, Jay works on it, likes it, and shows Me, then I shed it, and show it to you, actually I pitch it to you, because I now have a CD cut by Dominick who inquired about it and then we sat down and listened to Chet recording.

Dave—Jay—Rob—Howie \ Dominick

Thus events provide the linkages wherein networks are kept alive.

duh. not especially insightful, but one piece of who shows whom what (which is another way of opening up Atul Gawande article on surgeons and why surgeons need practice, and that's where we, the patients, come in - New Yorker January, 28, 2002).

### Tunes mentioned<sup>3</sup>

Basin Street Blues. Available at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w\\_lFzVduXeE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_lFzVduXeE)  
 Can't We Be Friends. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CPQwHt3f8Yo>  
 Can't We Talk We Over. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJROX18updc>  
 Ceora. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFq8wwp142Q>  
 Do It Again. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4SRoanHjOXI>  
 Don't Blame Me. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_w9YUhMDsF0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_w9YUhMDsF0) (removed from youtube)  
 Dream Dancing. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1moMfpwkCho>  
 Estaté. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQD1wJtkkU8>  
 Ghost of a Chance. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=inqrVosnESE>  
 Giant Steps. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DMNbVY2J90>  
 Godchild. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gfqQVvA9Lsl&list=RDm5X6N1ukA0g>  
 How High The Moon. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pzDNf36qpY>  
 I Can Dream Can't I? Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owG-NeMPj3k>  
 I Surrender, Dear. Available at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v5x\\_miuEDXk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v5x_miuEDXk)  
 I Wish I Knew. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NN8FtTEQtXk>  
 I'll Remember Suzanne. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQ8Xt2VUBjc>  
 Japanese Sandman. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UtdRE6ETUiM>  
 Joy Spring. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g8kvsLBoGWM>  
 Laura. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iw-p1HqD5SI>  
 Little Tin Box. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2Di5RT1myc>

Mean To Me. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpPg2Z6oCLM> (removed from youtube)  
 Mooch the Mouse. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ukL3TDV6XRg&list=RDtu14kEuqGJc>  
 Muskat Ramble. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0vpuFYQwZ5o>  
 Now's the Time. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YHobIUQMISw>  
 O Mama.  
 O Sole Mio  
 Pennsylvania Polka  
 Riverboat Schuffle. Available at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4wytOTkPL\\_c](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4wytOTkPL_c)  
 Send in the Clowns. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=04E8Y8nDfRQ>  
 Shiny Stockings. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3SF4BbBcpA> (removed from youtube)  
 Sorrento  
 Stardust. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lp5uBTsaURI>  
 Sunny Side of the Street. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z2dXXf0yFMQ>  
 The Beer Barrel Polka  
 There will Never Be Another You. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bRAgBkXw2iI>  
 Tiger Rag. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3TGSYmYVYdg>  
 We Go Well Together. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0G2bJOreXQ>  
 What A Little Moonlight Can Do. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldwDvw99HHs> (removed from youtube)  
 What Is This Thing Called Love. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yY82ZNEgNHY>  
 You Can Depend On Me. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IT7kivrf0o4>  
 Yours Is My Heart Alone. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUDAhqR0kVY>

<sup>3</sup> From time to time, songs are removed from youtube. We have no control over that. So, be prepared, if a link produces a message saying that a clip requested is no longer available, please use youtube's search function to find another version of the same tune. There will almost surely be one.