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Nichiren Buddhism in the Contemporary Jazz Improvisation of Herbie Hancock & Wayne Shorter

Abstract

This essay explains how Nichiren Buddhist philosophy and practice of Soka Gakkai International (SGI) in Japan inspired the contemporary jazz improvisation of musical legends Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter. The essay concludes with the jazz aesthetics of spontaneous musical improvisation formulated by Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter based on the Nichiren Buddhist theory and practice of “value creation” by tapping our Buddha nature as the source of infinite creative possibilities.

Keywords

Jazz, Improvisation, Aesthetics, Nihilism, Value Creation, Aesthetic Value, Beauty, Novelty, Variations, Spontaneity, Extemporaneity, Japanese Philosophy, Buddha Nature, Unlimited Possibilities, Multiple New Perspectives, Nichiren Buddhism, Lotus Sutra, Tendai Buddhism, Soka Gakkai International

Introduction

This essay analyzes contemporary jazz improvisation in the music of jazz legends Herbie Hancock (b. 1940) and Wayne Shorter (b. 1933), who have both been longtime members of Soka Gakkai International (SGI), a lay branch of Nichiren Shōshū Buddhism in Japan.¹ It is shown how Hancock

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and Shorter developed an innovative jazz aesthetics of musical improvisation based on the teachings of Nichiren Buddhism, which itself has its roots in Tendai Buddhist philosophy and the Lotus Sutra. Hancock and Shorter describe how the Nichiren Buddhist theory and practice of chanting the title of the Lotus Sutra functions to activate indwelling Buddha-nature as the inexhaustible source of unlimited creative possibilities, thereby providing the basis for ongoing “value creation” through musical improvisation. According to Hancock and Shorter, the practice of Nichiren Buddhism enables one to realize Buddha-nature as the reservoir of latent potentialities, thus to facilitate the aesthetic creative process of spontaneous improvisation by opening up to the multiplicity of possible variations, new perspectives, and novel inventions at each moment, both in jazz and in everyday life.

The Conversion to SGI Nichiren Buddhism of Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter

Herbie Hancock’s autobiography is titled *Possibilities* (Hancock, Dickey 2014), which is named after his jazz album *Possibilities* (2005), as well his documentary film called *Possibilities* (2006), which highlights his musical collaboration with Wayne Shorter in their tours throughout Japan and other countries, aimed toward the goal of creating the value of world peace. In his autobiography Hancock describes his religious conversion to SGI Nichiren Buddhism and explains how it radically transformed his capacity for musical composition and extemporaneous jazz improvisation. Similar accounts of religious conversion to SGI Nichiren Buddhism and its impact on their musical performance can be seen in the lives of his two closest musician friends, these being Wayne Shorter as recorded by Michelle Mercer in *Footprints: The Life and Work of Wayne Shorter* (Mercer 2007), and Tina Turner as recorded in her autobiography *I, Tina: My Life Story* (Turner, Loder 1986/2010), which inspired the 1993 Hollywood film *What’s Love Got To Do With It?*

As explained in his autobiography, Hancock first became interested in SGI Nichiren Buddhism in 1972 during a jazz concert in Seattle upon hearing an extraordinary solo by Buster Williams, the bass player in his band Mwan-

was jointly sponsored by the Northern Arizona University (NAU) Philosophy Department, and the NAU School of Music, along with several other partners. The context of this paper was that Herbie Hancock was originally invited to participate in the conference, and so due to my background in Japanese philosophy, religion, and aesthetics, I was invited by the conference organizers to respond to Herbie Hancock by explaining the role of the Lotus Sutra, Tendai Buddhist philosophy, and SGI Nichiren Buddhism in his style of contemporary improvisational jazz music.

dishi, who was also a member of SGI Nichiren Buddhism: “Buster started playing, and what came out of him was amazing. Astounding! [...] Then, when the rest of the band joined in, the place exploded [...] All of us in that room had just shared a spiritual experience and Buster was the spark that made it happen.” He continues: “When we got back to the dressing room, I grabbed Buster and said, ‘Where did that come from? Whatever made you play bass like that, I want some of it!’” Buster Williams then explained that his electrifying bass solo was inspired by his practice of Nichiren Buddhism. Hancock reports: “Buster had been awake in his room, chanting the words *Nam Myoho Renge Kyo* over and over. He hadn’t slept at all, but when it came for the gig, he had more energy than all the rest of us put together” (Hancock, Dickey, 2014, 152–153). It was shortly thereafter that Herbie Hancock became a member of Soka Gakkai International and took up the practice of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

Like his friend Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter underwent a dramatic religious conversion to SGI Nichiren Buddhism. Shorter has played saxophone for Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers (1959–1964), Miles Davis (1964–1969), Weather Report (1970–1985), and then with his own jazz bands. Along with Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Lester Young, Sonny Rollins, Stan Getz, and others, Wayne Shorter has been recognized as among the greatest saxophone players in the history of jazz. Hancock and Shorter played together in Miles Davis’ second quintet, and have since composed and performed as collaborators throughout their careers. Shorter was first introduced to the SGI Nichiren Buddhist practice of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo by his wife Ana Maria, who in turn was introduced by Herbie Hancock. But as recorded in Mercer’s biographical account, Shorter converted to SGI Nichiren Buddhism in the summer of 1973, when his band Weather Report opened for Santana on a tour of Japan, at which time he attended a ceremony with SGI president Daisaku Ikeda and became a member of Soka Gakkai International (Mercer 2002, 153–154). The application of SGI Nichiren Buddhist theory and practice to jazz improvisation has been taken up in a dialogue between Hancock, Shorter and Ikeda, as recorded in *Reaching Beyond: Improvisations on Jazz, Buddhism, and a Joyful Life* (Hancock et al. 2017). Thus in the present essay I have endeavored to clarify the contemporary jazz aesthetics of value creation through extemporaneous musical improvisation based on the philosophical teachings of SGI Nichiren Buddhism, as articulated by Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter, as well as their spiritual mentor, SGI president Daisaku Ikeda.

As documented by Jason C. Bivins in *Spirits Rejoice: Jazz and American Religion* (2015), American jazz musicians have been influenced by many religious traditions, including early gospel music in the “black church” of Christianity, Judaism (Benny Goodman, Dave Brubeck), Islam (Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers), Baha’i (Dizzy Gillespie), Hinduism and Yoga (John and Alice Coltrane, “Mahavishnu” John McLaughlin), Scientology (Chick Corea), Zen (Gary Peacock), and various other paths. Ian Carr (1992) documents how the improvisational jazz pianist Keith Jarrett studied the esoteric philosophy and practice of the Russian mystic G. I. Gurdjieff, and then went on to record, for the first time, Gurdjieff’s music for contemplative dance movements in his 1980 album *G.I. Gurdjieff: Sacred Hymns*. However, after exploring different spiritual traditions, both Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter both dedicated themselves to the practice of Nichiren Buddhism. Thus while Nichiren Buddhism does not have an exclusive or necessary connection to jazz, it is the path that Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, their close friend rock diva Tina Turner, and many other jazz musicians have adopted. It should further be noted that while different jazz artists have sought inspiration from various spiritual traditions, what distinguishes the approach of Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter, is that they explicitly and systematically use the philosophical teachings of SGI Nichiren Buddhism to formulate a jazz aesthetics that explains their own creative process of extemporaneous jazz improvisation. As a prelude to our analysis of improvisation in the contemporary jazz music of Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter, it is therefore necessary to first briefly explain some of the key philosophical doctrines as well as the central practice underlying SGI Nichiren Buddhism.

The Philosophy and Practice of SGI Nichiren Buddhism

Herbie Hancock undertook a spiritual journey that finally led to the practice of Nichiren Buddhism based on the Lotus Sutra and Tendai Buddhist philosophy. The thirteenth-century Tendai Buddhist monk Nichiren Daishonin (1222–1282) held that enlightenment was not attained by rebirth into a heavenly paradise as for Pure Land Buddhism, nor is it achieved by detached contemplation of emptiness or nothingness as taught by Zen Buddhism, nor through the secret rituals of Shingon Buddhism. According to Nichiren Buddhism, enlightenment can most easily and quickly be achieved by chanting the sacred title of the Lotus Sutra: [*Namu*] *Myōhō Renge Kyō* (南無妙法蓮華經), “Devotion to the Lotus Sutra.”

The Nichiren Buddhist practitioner recites the mystic title of the Lotus Sutra while focusing attention upon the Gohonzon (object of devotion), a mandala scroll wherein the characters for “Nam-myoho-renge-kyo” are inscribed down the center in Nichiren’s own bold calligraphy. According to Nichiren, the main teachings of Tendai philosophy are all encoded in the Gohonzon. As explained by Hochswender (2006, 65–66), in Nichiren Buddhism the title of the Lotus Sutra inscribed on the Gohonzon reveals the “three truths” of Tendai Buddhist philosophy.

1. *myōhō* (妙法) or the “mysterious law [of emptiness],” corresponds to *kūtai* (空諦) or the spiritual truth of emptiness;
2. *rengē* (蓮華) or “lotus” symbolizes ordinary phenomena, correspond to *ketai* (仮諦) or the material truth of conventional existence;
3. *Kyō* (經) or “teaching,” corresponds to *chūtai* (中諦) or the truth of the middle way.

Thus at the philosophical level, chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo affirms the middle way between the material world of phenomena and the spiritual world of emptiness. It is claimed that by chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with resolve one can manifest any goal, including ordinary material desires of conventional existence such as wealth, success, and romantic love, as well as the highest spiritual aspirations such as attaining Buddhahood. As stated by Hochswender: “You can chant for anything. Nothing is too small or too big. You can chant for a parking space, and you can chant to become enlightened” (2006, 106). Likewise, the jazz musician can chant to actualize the latent potentiality of Buddha-nature toward the aim of increased value creation through spontaneous improvisation.

Today the bestselling work on SGI Nichiren Buddhism is *The Buddha in Your Mirror* by Woody Hochswender, Greg Martin and Ted Morino, with a Foreword by the jazz musician Herbie Hancock (Hochswender *et al.* 2001).² In this work it is explained:

Ultimately, we chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to reveal our Buddhahood [...] As Daisaku Ikeda has written: “When you invoke Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, you call forth your Buddha nature, or Nam-myoho-renge-kyo within you. Then you yourself are Buddha” (Hochswender *et al.* 2001, 56–57).

² In 1991 the lay movement of Sōka Gakkai International (SGI) or the “Value Creating Society,” founded by its three presidents Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, Josei Toda, and Daisaku Ikeda, broke off from the orthodox priesthood of Nichiren Shōshū Buddhism over a series of disputes.

As stated here, chanting the title of the Lotus Sutra, Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, functions to activate one's indwelling Buddha-nature. The "original enlightenment" (*hongaku*, 本覺) of Buddha-nature is characterized by the key Tendai (Chinese: T'ien-t'ai) Buddhist philosophical principle of *ichinen sanzen* (一念三千), "three thousand realms in a single moment of life:"

T'ien-t'ai formulated this truth as the principle of "three thousand realms in a single moment of life" [...] The theory holds that all the innumerable phenomena of the universe are encompassed in a single moment of a common mortal's life. The macrocosm is contained within the microcosm (Hochswender *et al.* 2001, 20).

The doctrine of Buddha-nature as possessing "three thousand realms in a single moment of life" signifies that each moment is a micro-cosmos of the macro-cosmos, such that everything is interconnected with everything else in the cosmic net of relationships. It is this doctrine of Buddha-nature as possessing "three thousand realms in a single moment of life" that underlies the core SGI Nichiren Buddhist teaching that each moment of life has unlimited creative possibilities.

Another aspect of the doctrine of "three thousand realms in a single moment of life," is the Tendai philosophical principle of "mutual containment of ten worlds" (*jukkai gogu*, 十界互具).

A core Buddhist principle called the Ten Worlds [...] teaches that we are continually experiencing varying states of being that operate at a level far below the conscious mind. The states, from lowest to highest, are (1) Hell, (2) Hunger, (3) Animality, (4) Anger, (5) Humanity, (6), Heaven, (7), learning, (8), Realization, (9) Bodhisattva, (10) Buddhahood (also called enlightenment or absolute happiness) (Hochswender *et al.* 2001, 101).

These "ten worlds" constituting the full mental spectrum ranging from hell to Buddhahood are depicted on the Gohonzon mandala diagram inscribed by Nichiren Daishonin. One can be in the life condition of anger, yet due to the "mutual containment of ten worlds" within the *ālaya* or "storehouse" of one's deeper subconscious mind, by chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo before the Gohonzon one can instantly shift to the life condition of a compassionate Bodhisattva, or to the fully illuminated state of a peaceful Buddha, thereby to achieve sudden enlightenment. Thus like the Tendai Buddhist philosophical doctrine of "three thousand realms in each moment of life," the principle of "mutual containment of ten worlds" underlies the core SGI Nichiren Buddhist teaching that each moment of life is a microcosm of the macrocosm that has unlimited creative possibilities.

The Philosophy of 'Value Creation' in SGI Nichiren Buddhism

The lay movement of Nichiren Shōshū Buddhism founded by Tsunesaburo Makiguchi in 1930 was called *Sōka Gakkai* (創価学会) or "Value Creating Society." Makiguchi coined the neologism *sōka* (創価) or "value creation" based on the Japanese terms for "creation" (*sōzō*, 創造) and "value" (*kachi*, 価値). Tsunesaburo Makiguchi developed the educational philosophy of "value creation" distinctive to Soka Gakkai teachings. One of the original contributions of Makiguchi was to introduce the idea that the aim of Nichiren Buddhist practice is *creation of values*, including aesthetic, moral, and religious, as well as practical this-worldly values. His disciple Josei Toda greatly expanded the movement in Japan during the post-World War II period, adding a new vitalistic philosophy, where the Buddha is understood as "life-force" (*seimei*, 生命), so that by the practice of chanting the title of the Lotus Sutra, one becomes fused with the inexhaustible life-force or cosmic power of Buddha-nature. Daisaku Ikeda, the disciple of Josei Toda, went on to internationalize Soka Gakkai into a global movement in over 190 countries, so that it is now Soka Gakkai International (SGI).

SGI synthesizes the teachings of Nichiren Buddhism based on the Lotus Sutra and its interpretation by Tendai Buddhist philosophy, with the modern humanist educational philosophy of value creation established by Tsunesaburo Makiguchi. Ikeda explains:

Central to Makiguchi's Pedagogy was his theory of value. In his schema, he modified the neo-Kantian value system of truth, goodness and beauty dominant in Japan at the time and reordered as beauty, benefit (also translated as gain or utility) and goodness. He defined beauty as that which brings fulfillment to the aesthetic sensibility of the individual; benefit as that which advances the life of the individual in a holistic manner; goodness as that which contributes to the well-being of the larger human society (Ikeda 2010, 15).

According to the value creating philosophy of Makiguchi, the purpose of education is to teach how to overcome suffering and realize happiness through creation of values, including beauty, goodness and practical benefit. In his book *Soka Education*, Daisaku Ikeda points out that Tsunesaburo Makiguchi's pedagogy of value creation was strongly influenced by Dewey's theory of education in American pragmatism, where ideas and actions have the instrumental value of usefulness, to be tested by experiments for their

practical benefits in everyday life (Ikeda 2010). Following Dewey's pragmatism, Makiguchi reformulates the trinity of cardinal values as beauty, goodness and truth, in terms of beauty, goodness, and practical benefit or gain, thereby replacing "truth" with the pragmatic value of *usefulness* in everyday life. SGI Nichiren Buddhism thus emphasizes not only the goal of spiritual enlightenment, but the pragmatic aim of attaining "this-worldly benefits" (*genze riyaku*, 現世利益).

A major theme in the Kyoto School of modern Japanese philosophy as formulated by Keiji Nishitani is the existential task of countering "nihilism" at the level of negative nothingness by breaking through to the level of positive nothingness that affirms life just as it is in its suchness (Nishitani 1961/1982). Likewise, the theme of overcoming nihilism as meaninglessness or absence of value has also become central to SGI Nichiren Buddhism. As the counter to the negative life-denying attitude of nihilism, SGI Nichiren Buddhism emphasizes the positive life-affirming act of "value creation." Hochswender asserts: "Nichiren Buddhism [...] looks at a world that has been stripped of its meaning and says 'create value'" (2006, 52). In *The Buddha in Your Mirror* it explains how for SGI Nichiren Buddhism, chanting the title of the Lotus Sutra in front of the Gohonzon as a mirror of our Buddha-nature is itself the antidote to the existential problem of nihilism or pessimism (Hochswender *et al.* 2001, 26). He adds:

Chanting "Nam-myoho-renge-kyo" is the wellspring of this optimism and growth, what [SGI Nichiren] Buddhism calls "value creation." This wellspring enables practitioners to turn everything in their lives, joys and sufferings alike, into causes for absolute happiness (2001, 115).

SGI president Daisaku Ikeda describes the pervasive existential attitude of nihilism in Japan and throughout the world as the materialistic life condition arising from an "absence of values" or "loss of values" (Ikeda 2010, 59, 80). Ikeda asserts: "Japanese society is rife with materialism and scandalous corruption [...] that demonstrate our loss of values and sense of purpose" (2010, 80). According to Ikeda, the existential problem of nihilism as the absence of values, like the Buddhist problem of universal suffering, is countered by the Nichiren Buddhist practice of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to the Gohonzon, which results in the achievement of happiness by actualizing the latent possibilities of Buddha-nature for creation of values, including the values of beauty, goodness and practical benefit.

Daisaku Ikeda internationalized Soka Gakkai into a global movement based on his notions of education, culture and peace. By culture he means creation of new and higher values, including new aesthetic values created by the multivariate arts, such as music, painting, poetry, literature, theater, and other artforms. According to SGI president Ikeda, musicians and artists have a special gift for value creation. In Ikeda's words:

The spirit of art and the spirit of peace are naturally bound together. Artists are the standard bearers for the creation of peace. I am convinced that art, as an expression of life itself, constitutes the highest form of value creation (Mercer 2007, 268).³

For Ikeda, just as existentialists attempt to create meaning in an otherwise meaningless existence, musicians have the power to counter nihilism through value creation, including the aesthetic value of beauty realized through music and other arts, moral values of compassion and kindness, pragmatic values of this-worldly benefits, modern humanistic values of individualism, freedom, rights, justice, tolerance, democracy, and equality, and the spiritual value of peace, including outer peace as social harmony and eradication of war, as well as the inner peace of nirvana. But as emphasized by Ikeda in the above citation, "art, as an expression of life itself, constitutes the highest form of value creation" (Mercer 2007, 268). Ikeda thus holds that while there are many ways to extemporaneously create new values at each and every moment of life, the highest form of value creation is production of the aesthetic value of beauty through the multivariate arts such as music, painting, and poetry, including the great American artform of jazz.

In the bestselling SGI Nichiren Buddhist work titled *The Buddha in Your Mirror* with a Foreword by Herbie Hancock, it is asserted that the practice of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is the way to activating the creative potentialities of Buddha-nature in each pulsating moment of life:

Chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo enables us to open every potential hidden in the depths of our lives. This has been Buddhism's greatest discovery. It opens the treasure reservoir within, giving us access to unlimited potential (Hochswender *et al.* 2001, 175).

In the jazz aesthetics of Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter, the Nichiren Buddhist practice of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is thus the key to unlocking the hidden potentials of Buddha-nature toward the end of producing maximum value creation through spontaneous improvisation, both in music and in everyday life.

³ Ikeda cited by Mercer.

The Contemporary Jazz Improvisation of Herbie Hancock

Herbie Hancock is a contemporary virtuoso improvisational jazz pianist and composer whose musical genres include both acoustic and electric jazz, rhythm and blues, funk, and hip-hop. He is known for the brilliant improvisational piano solos in his early Blue Note recordings, his extemporaneous musical performances with Wayne Shorter in Miles Davis' second quintet, and as the leader of his own bands, including his breakthrough electric jazz/funk fusion records. At this point he has won fourteen Grammy Awards as well as an Academy Award for Best Original Score in the jazz film *Round Midnight*.

Hancock describes how his improvisational jazz style has been influenced by such notions as "controlled freedom" (Hancock, Dickey 2014, 60, 126), "being in the moment" (2014, 23), "opening up to possibilities" (2014, 65), "minimalism" (2014, 65–66), "suggestion" (2014, 78), "power of letting go" (2014, 151), "openness to new directions" (2014, 151), and other principles of SGI Nichiren Buddhism based on the Lotus Sutra and Tendai Buddhist philosophy. Hancock clarifies how according to Nichiren Buddhism, by awakening to Buddha-nature as the reservoir of unlimited potentials, one opens to the new possibilities, multiple perspectives, and novel variations available at each moment of life, which in turn enables the process of value creation through spontaneous jazz improvisation (2014, 287).

Herbie Hancock asserts that the two most influential mentors in his life have been Miles Davis, one of the greatest trumpet player and band leaders in the history of jazz, and Daisaku Ikeda, the president of SGI Nichiren Buddhism. In his Foreword to *The Buddha in Your Mirror* (Hochswender *et al.* 2001), Hancock says Miles Davis once advised him to take a minimalist approach that eliminates all excess notes to achieve maximum simplicity, and "this opened up the sound so that whomever I would be improvising with could make much more of a contribution to exploring the possibilities of a melody" (2001, xi–xii). For Hancock this meant playing sparsely, thus opening up an empty space for his fellow jazz musicians by "inspiring them to tap their possibilities," thus to heighten the spontaneous improvisational skills of everyone in his band (2001, xiv). He adds: "I saw it only after I started my practice of Nichiren Buddhism" (2001, xii).

Hancock recalls one of the fundamental teachings that he received from his mentor Daisaku Ikeda, the president of the SGI Nichiren Buddhism:

Daisaku Ikeda is a man who encourages the creative expression of the individual [...] I learned from him that any given moment can be looked at from an infinite number of perspectives [...] This impacts everything from how I might put together certain music on a record I'm making—how I improvise—to how I look at the people I encounter in the various realms of my life (2001, xii–xiii).

As stated here, the Buddhist teaching that Herbie Hancock learned from Daisaku Ikeda was that *any given moment can be looked at from an infinite number of perspectives*, and it is this teaching that directly influenced his creative ability to *improvise* as the musical skill whereby one explores the possibilities of a melody. Again, Hancock underscores his central theme, that by unlocking the full potentiality of indwelling Buddha-nature through the chanting practice of SGI Nichiren Buddhism, each moment of life is seen as a microcosm of the macrocosm that has unlimited creative possibilities, such that new aesthetic values can be created in each moment through unexpected novel variations by the musical process of spontaneous improvisation. For Hancock it is this ability to actualize the creative potentials of Buddha-nature that enables one to see each moment from multiple new perspectives, which in turn opens the capacity for spontaneous improvisation both in jazz music and in life.

Influenced by Miles Davis's innovative electro-jazz experiments, Hancock further explored the possibilities of electric jazz using newer technology, especially his 1973 electronic synthesizer jazz/funk album titled *Head Hunters*. He writes: "My arsenal of electronic instruments just kept growing, and with computers now in the mix, the possibilities of how to make music seemed limitless" (Hancock, Dickey 2014, 220). From the SGI Nichiren Buddhist teachings of Buddha-nature as the source of unlimited possibilities, Hancock came to see that he was not bound to the tradition of classical jazz music as played on the acoustic piano, but could expand his technique of spontaneous improvisational jazz performance into electric jazz, as well as crossovers into funk, hip hop, jazz-rock fusion, and other genres. In this context he describes how *Head Hunters* became the top selling jazz album of all time for awhile:

Within six months *Head Hunters* went gold. And it just kept on going, eventually passing Dave Brubeck's classic *Take Five* to become the biggest-selling jazz album of all time. Today that top spot is held by Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue*, which was released back in 1959 and still keeps selling. But for a while, at least, *Head Hunters* was at the top (2014, 183).

Further explaining the unprecedented commercial success of *Headhunters*, he adds: “And because most of the guys in the band were also SGI members, we did a lot of chanting together” (2014, 182).

One of the highlights in the musical career of Herbie Hancock occurred in 2007 with the release of his jazz album *River*, which earned the Grammy Award for Best Album of the Year. Hancock had already won ten Grammys, but this was the only jazz record that had ever won Album of the Year since Stan Getz and Joao Gilberto’s *Getz/Gilberto*, which introduced the *bossa nova* style of Brazilian jazz to the American audience back in the 1965 awards over fifty years earlier (2014, 318). Each track of *Rivers* includes Herbie Hancock on keyboards and Wayne Shorter on saxophone. The second track “Edith and the Kingpin” also features the vocals Tina Turner, another member of SGI Nichiren Buddhism.

For Herbie Hancock, the Nichiren Buddhist practice of chanting *Nam-myoho-rence-kyo* in front of the *Gohonzon* is what the Lotus Sutra calls *upāya* (J. *hōben*, 方便), a pragmatic tool or expedient device to attain Buddhahood and actualize the latent creative potentials of Buddha-nature. Inspired by his study of the philosophy and practice of SGI Nichiren Buddhism, Herbie Hancock formulates a jazz aesthetics based on tapping Buddha-nature as the locus of unlimited possibilities by opening up to multiple new perspectives, that itself underlies the actualization of novel variations in the creative process of spontaneous improvisation, both in jazz and in life. This actualization of creative potentials in Buddha-nature itself results in maximum creation of new and higher values, including beauty, goodness, and practical benefit.

A Nichiren Buddhist Jazz Aesthetics of Value Creation

In a recent issue of the magazine titled *Lion’s Roar* devoted to Buddhist practice and teachings, Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter co-authored an article setting forth an aesthetic manifesto for young jazz musicians: “To the Next Generation of Artists” (Hancock, Shorter 2016, 14). For Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter, it is “openness to the unknown” in each new moment of life that enables realization of Buddha-nature as the source of new possibilities for aesthetic value creation, which itself facilitates discovery of novel variations and musical permutations in the process of spontaneous jazz improvisation.

The aesthetics of contemporary jazz improvisation inspired by SGI Nichiren Buddhism is further elaborated in *Reaching Beyond: Improvisations on Jazz, Buddhism, and a Joyful Life* (Hancock et al. 2017),⁴ coauthored by Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, and Daisaku Ikeda. In this book Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter enter into an impromptu dialogue with their mentor Daisaku Ikeda, the president of SGI, about how the chanting practice of Nichiren Buddhism can unlock Buddha-nature as the universal reservoir of infinite possibilities, thereby to maximize value creation through jazz improvisation by opening up new perspectives, novel variations and musical permutations at each and every moment. Wayne Shorter here emphasizes that the requirement for the creative process of spontaneous jazz improvisation is “to ‘be in the moment’ while creating value extemporaneously” (Hancock et al. 2017, 83). The jazz musicians and other artists inspired by the Nichiren Buddhist practice of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo aim to overcome nihilism by creating new life-affirming values, including the aesthetic value of beauty, the moral value of compassion, and the spiritual value of peace, which embraces both world peace and the inner peace of nirvana.⁵ In his east-west intercultural dialogue on the process of extemporaneous improvisation in contemporary jazz music with Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter, SGI president Daisaku Ikeda writes:

Whether an artist or not, each of us can create infinite, unhindered beauty. People who, while enduring and overcoming hardship, dedicate themselves to others, create a noble hymn to humanity, a beautiful painting of an indestructible life that they can leave behind (2017, 200).

Thus according to Ikeda, as well as Hancock and Shorter, the value creation process of producing beauty, art and aesthetic experience through spontaneous improvisation is not limited to musical performance, but is fundamental to both jazz and everyday life, hence resulting in the transformation of life into art.

⁴ Originally published in Japanese as *Jyazu to bukkyō, soshite jinsei o kataru*, ジャズと仏法、そして人生を語る, 2003.

⁵ See my essay, “Peace & Compassion in Whitehead and the Lotus Sutra” (2001). This essay received the 2001 Niwano Peace Prize in Japan.

Conclusion

In this paper I have endeavored to clarify how jazz musicians Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter applied SGI Nichiren Buddhist theory and practice to articulate a contemporary jazz aesthetics of value creation through spontaneous improvisation. For Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter, the SGI Nichiren Buddhist practice of chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo to the Gohonzon is the key that unlocks the treasury of Buddha-nature as the inexhaustible source of creative possibilities. Thus according to the contemporary jazz aesthetics propounded by Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, and other jazz musicians inspired by SGI Nichiren Buddhism, it is the activation of Buddha-nature as the matrix of unlimited potentiality that induces the artistic process of value creation through spontaneous improvisation as an openness to the multiplicity of alternate perspectives, new possibilities and novel variations at each moment, both in jazz music and in everyday life.

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