

Standards Today

A Journal of News, Ideas and Analysis

A publication of
**CONSORTIUM
INFO.ORG**
GesmerUpdegrove^{LLP}

October - November 2009

Vol. VIII, No. 6

CONSIDER THIS:

#61 Jazz, Jazz Standards, and Open Source

Andrew Updegrove

Could Louis Armstrong have out-programmed Bill Gates?

As anthropologists now realize, a new human species began to emerge approximately thirty years ago. Its appearance was typified by careless and informal dress (T-shirts; jeans; old sneakers). Some specimens were as likely to be nocturnal as diurnal (and sometimes both). Many shared common food (pizza) and drink (highly caffeinated beverages) preferences. Their spoken language was efficient within their societies (when they chose to communicate by speaking, which wasn't often). But traditional *homo sapiens* found their dialect hard to parse. A few demonstrated a less than ideal level of interest in matters of personal hygiene.



But the members of this new evolutionary branch were uniquely well adapted to exploit several economic niches that were themselves evolving. Indeed, in some business sectors they were to us as *Cro Magnons* were to Neanderthals – and they prospered accordingly. So it was that as the last millennium came to a close, these newly emergent gods of the business world had left their peers in the dust. The immutable laws of Charles Darwin had asserted themselves once again.

I speak, of course, of computer programmers.

Alright, so hordes of people with a special knack for coding didn't suddenly mutate out of the primordial ooze that was us. In truth, they just became much more noticeable as a group when they began making a gazillion dollars on stock options in companies like Microsoft, Netscape and Sun Microsystems. But that only leads us to a different mystery: *what did all the software programmers do before there was software to program?*

Back in the early 1980s I posed that question to a friend of mine who had taken the software route, teaching himself how to program after dropping out of physics grad

school. He gave me a pitying look, and stated what to him was obvious: "They were car mechanics and jazz musicians."

Well, sure, once you thought about it. And high school chemistry teachers, too, I expect. It's just that when they were spread around so widely, it was not so obvious to us, and a whole lot less remunerative for them.

All of which brings us to the point where we can consider this equally obvious analogical statement: *Standards are to classical music as open source is to jazz.*

Dig?

No question about it. Classical music, like technical standards, is complex and developed through a painstakingly exact process. Needless to say, people wouldn't pay a dime to hear a musician implement a Beethoven sonata unless she did so with precision and utter faithfulness to the score. Even "Pops" orchestras choose to "up" orchestrate popular music rather than monkey with the presentation of classical material. Instead, orchestras compete through the quality of their implementations, the ingenuity of the programs of music they assemble, and the talent of their ensembles and soloists.

The world of classical music also believes in copyright, as anyone who plays, or sings, it knows. We're not comparing classical music to consortium standards here, either – we're talking ISO. Join a chorus this holiday season, and you'll be asked to hand over a not insubstantial check to pay for your sheet music. No photocopying here, please – ASCAP is watching.

Jazz, of courses, is open source all the way – it's the ultimate freedom machine. Once you've grasped the melody line and basic chord structure of any song, you're on your own, encouraged to take the author's initial inspiration anywhere you wish. A jazz musician isn't judged by the faithfulness of his rendition but by what he codes at the musical keys.



A Real Fake Book

Even the legal underpinnings of jazz are different, at least in the trenches. No one who is really serious about jazz goes out and buys, say, an Oscar Peterson, Miles Davis or Mahavishnu John McLaughlin song book, setting down note for note what the great musician played. How could you? They played it different every time.

What you would do is buy a good "fake book," chock-a-block full of hundreds of jazz "standards" – songs with that certain ineffable magic that has led musicians the world over to include them in their repertoires for decades. Why a "fake" book? That's a detailed story for another time (if you can't wait, the Wikipedia page is [here](#)), but it's partly because many fake books are bootleg, *samizdat* compendia,

usually hand-scored, and typically with the sort of cheap, insertable plastic spine that allows you to produce and sell it for cheap. And also because all you'll see when you open a fake book are the melody line, lyrics and chord names – after that, you've got to fake it yourself.

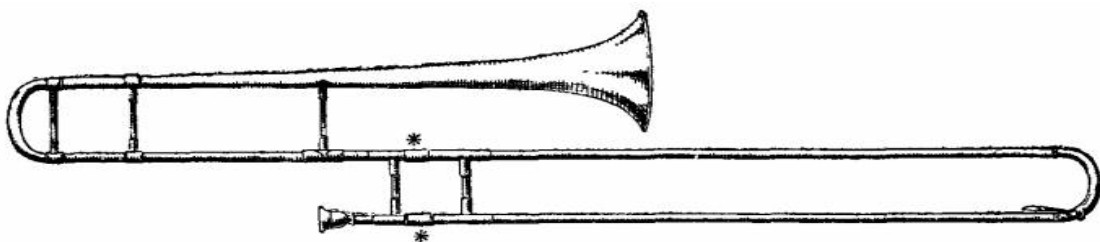
The fake book I picked up back around 1977 has 300 pages of the best music you could ever hope to riff on, from winsome WWI era favorites (such as "After You've Gone") to Age of Swing crowd pleasers (e.g., "One O'Clock Jump") to more contemporary classics (like "The Girl from Ipanema" and "Take Five"). Each one is a great foundation upon which to build.

As with open source, whatever recorded magic anyone builds on top of the kernel of a melody line goes back into the pot. Anyone who wishes can incorporate their runs and flourishes into their own interpretations, each musician adding to what came before and helping further weave the entirety of the jazz experience and musical techniques into a constantly evolving continuum of inspiration.

All of which has more to do with open source software than you might think. Indeed, the jazz analogy may help you understand open source software better than more prosaic explanations. For starters, just as there are pedestrian (like me) and master (like Thelonius Monk) musicians, there are master coders that are viewed as geniuses by their programming peers. In the eyes of those skilled in the software craft, the code of a master programmer is viewed as a work of art.

And what good is a work of art if no one can see it? Small wonder, then, that so many people are willing to create open source code for the appreciation of others, while proprietary programming gets done on the clock. Nor any wonder that many of the jazz musicians of yesteryear might find the keyboard of a computer as appealing today as that of a [Hammond B-3 organ](#) of yore.

So it is we see that classical music is indeed to a standard as jazz is to open source, and that computer programmers are not so recently evolved as they may have seemed at first to be. Perhaps classical musicians will have their own turn in the technology sun some day – and the stock options to go with it. But they'll certainly have to leave the long black dresses and tails behind.



Copyright 2009 Andrew Updegrave

Read more **Consider This...** entries at: <http://www.consortiuminfo.org/blog/>

Sign up for a [free subscription](#) to **Standards Today** at <http://www.consortiuminfo.org/subscribe/2.php?addentry=1>