

# Woodshedding: Reproduction, Ideology, and the Work of Musical Virtuosity

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## Abstract

In the jazz imaginary, taking one's "axe" to the fictive "woodshed" has long described a solitary and disciplined process of cultivating virtuosic skill in preparation for the competitive arenas of public performance. Despite an abundance of jazz research, the woodshed and its complex social, aesthetic, and political entailments have gone almost entirely unaddressed in the literature. This paper traces the emergence of this peculiar object through a diverse archive of journalistic, critical, and historical sources—in and beyond jazz—to delineate the contours of virtuosity's everyday reproduction. I argue that the woodshed and woodshedding mark a constitutive ideological moment in the dynamic between private practice and public performance, a moment that uniquely expresses the gendered logic of social reproduction under capitalism. Attention to the woodshed illuminates largely unexplored relations between musical practice, reproductive labor, and aesthetic exemplarity that together constitute a dominant ideology of music-making in the United States.

KEYWORDS: virtuosity, jazz, labor, ideology, capitalism, social reproduction

## Introduction

On September 21, 2021, jazz historian Ted Gioia Tweeted a photo of trombonist Jacob Garchik's basement-cum-practice space, a shabby dwelling packed with creatively useful stuff. For Gioia, the candid image "captures the essence of the real jazz life"—a life tethered to hard practice in what musicians have nicknamed "the shed," or "the woodshed." A life in the shed is future-oriented and solitary, disciplined and rigorous, a demanding musical life largely unfolding beyond the public eye and ear. (1) In the snapshot of Garchik's cluttered woodshed we observe a morass of objects among which the trombonist carves his singular aesthetic path:

brass instruments, mouthpieces, LPs, sheet music, recording gear, a turntable, a keyboard, a snare drum, wires and cables, computer monitors, speakers, and boxes upon boxes of indeterminate papers and electronic devices. Somewhere in this mess—between the horn and the headphones, between the demanding etude and the scrawled-out transcription—lies the raw material of laborious musical transformation. *This* is the real jazz life, the mediated and hard-working life of the woodshedder.

The woodshed cuts an odd and largely unexamined figure in the variegated history of North American musical practices. Prior to its rebirth as metaphor in the lexica of twentieth-century urban musicians, the humble outbuilding was commonplace in rural domestic economies throughout the preindustrial United States. Arranged within a cluster of other utilitarian edifices, it was usually located adjacent to a kitchen for which dry, pre-cut firewood provided necessary cooking fuel and warmth for the household. Inside could be found a chopping block, axe or maul, and open space to store sundry tools and corded wood (Visser 1997). Half-concealed, the shed's out-of-the-way placement on the homestead spatially marked it as a reproductive structure distinct from other types of domestic and agricultural activity (Harris 2008). This apparently mundane form would find itself improbably changed in the imaginaries of city-dwelling jazz musicians, for whom hard work "in the shed" was necessary to survive the competitive arenas of public musical performance. Constellated with other labor-related lingo, the woodshed would metamorphose into a space of rigorous, experimental, and private musical effort. By mid-century, taking one's instrumental "axe" to the shed was *de rigueur* in an individualistic postwar ethos built on the solitary honing of "chops" (or technical skill) in intensive, even obsessive, practice routines. Across profound changes in the social and material parameters of music-making, the term of art and the creative effort it stands for have proved durable: the woodshed and woodshedding together continue to inform and shape contemporary musical practices through an enduring notion of self-transformation via rigorous musical labor.

I argue that the ubiquity of the woodshed in popular music discourses belies a profound social and political ambivalence. As Nick Gebhardt (2001: 184) provocatively suggests, jazz virtuosity has been conventionally understood through the lens of individual "act[s] of self-expression within an idealized intersubjective situation." Mythopoetic stories of virtuosic transformation in the woodshed flourish in popular histories, narratives, biographies, criticism, and, simply, the stories musicians tell. In turn, exemplary jazz lives and singular aesthetic acts continue to populate both the popular and scholarly historical imaginaries. I argue that while the woodshed undoubtedly reflects an "imperative to be an individual" embedded in the "very quotidian structures" and relations of capitalist modernity (Read 2017: 77), it also uniquely expresses the logic of social reproduction—of bodies, of gendered social relations, of sound—that shapes social life under capitalism. This logic appears in the woodshed's peculiar convergence of an embodied mode of reflexive material practice with an ideology of individualistic musical labor characteristic of a society mediated by the commodity form (Postone 1993). Here, ideology does not simply name the illusions or "false consciousness" of an underclass, but an imaginary of music's relationship to reproductive labor—one that shapes the social forms of creative activity. Attention to the woodshed helps us

grasp not only how embodied musical practices are ideological, but how ideology is materially instantiated *through* those practices (cf. Althusser 2014).

Despite its homespun conceptual richness and longstanding place in jazz lore, the woodshed has remained a lacuna in music research. The term finds, for instance, only passing reference in Paul Berliner's *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*, which is still perhaps the most thoroughgoing consideration of the materials and methods of jazz improvisation as social practice. Berliner (1994: 115) notes only briefly that jazz musicians understand "woodshedding" to name a solitary and self-disciplined "practice binge." While offering a nuanced account of jazz improvisation, interactivity, and musical metaphor, Ingrid Monson's *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (1997) does not address the notion of the woodshed or woodshedding. Similarly, Brent Hayes Edwards's recent *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination* (2017), an excellent review of epistolary, poetic, and naming practices in the jazz "literature," briefly touches on "cutting contests" in Duke Ellington's band—but neither axe nor shed appear. Among poets and critics for whom jazz is a creative point of departure, the situation is somewhat different. Nathaniel Mackey uses the notion of woodshedding as a figure for the preparatory and incomplete "play" between solitary poetic labor and performance in "communal" public space (Corbett 2015: 147), while Aldon Nielsen (2017: 15) imagines the woodshed as a "[jazz] physics lab," one whose experimental temporalities come alive on the bandstand. Fred Moten (2016: 128) takes these ideas further by reading the woodshedding jazz soloist as (paradoxically) a "black study group" in a transnational, centuries-long "Black radical tradition." In such accounts, the woodshed marks a spectral, multi-personal, and radical space of possibilities open to the relationality of Black music and its politics of resistance and fugitivity.

These latter formulations draw on the complex poetics of the shed to glean a certain compelling, politically emancipatory strain in jazz woodshedding as a creative practice. And yet, this orientation overlooks the complex of reproductive labor, musical practice, aesthetic achievement, and—as I will show—patriarchal authority embedded in the woodshed's enduring social form. On one hand, this article seeks to rectify this omission by examining the emergence of the woodshed in the popular imaginary. On the other, it reveals irrevocable links between the woodshed and the deeper mediations and social structures of capitalist society. Drawing attention to this mediated and mediating form across a heterogeneous archive, I argue that the praxical and ideological poles of the woodshed should be understood as mutually constitutive moments in the pursuit and production of virtuosity as an agential, corporeal capacity—one publicly received as an individual, bodily possession—which purports to modify or remake social and musical worlds. As an ideological engine of the "real jazz life," the woodshed is a key—if ambivalent—figure in the logic of exceptionality (cf. Gebhardt 2001) and exemplarity that suffuse United States musical life and practice.

## Genesis of the Shed

Alongside its functional role in reproductive activities like cooking and heating, the nineteenth century woodshed doubled as a site of physical punishment and

violence. By the last quarter of the century, this material character found new expression in an idiom of paternal authority typically expressed in humorous, punitive encounters between an angry father and a wayward son. Far more complex than a literary trope, however, the woodshed's transformed appearance in public life gradually gave shape to an emergent ideology, one that persists into the social forms of present-day musicking. An early iteration is found in Samuel Clemens's 1871 article "Mark Twain on Juvenile Pugilists" in the *Buffalo Express*, in which Clemens/Twain offers a comical narrative of the woodshed (Twain 1999). Hailing his son to the shed, a father equivocally admonishes the boy for getting in a fistfight while, at the same time, celebrating his son's victory over his competitor. On June 28, 1876, a quasi-dramatic woodshed scene appears in Salt Lake City's *The Deseret News*. This drama in miniature describes a boy deceptively skipping school to go fishing, only to face his father's punitive "trunk strap" later that evening:

Seven o'clock, a.m.—Boy has terrible toothache; can't go to school. Half-past nine a.m.—a solitary figure may be seen skulking through the streets leading to the creek; perch and chub bite. Half-past six p.m.—Scene, woodshed; dramatis personae, the old man, one trunk strap, one boy. Let's draw the curtain.

A June 1875 column in *New Orleans Times* reports "part of a letter written by a young gentleman, aged nine," in which the (fictional) victim describes his father beating him with a trunk strap in the woodshed as punishment for scaring his older sister. In the same paper in September 1875, a "Personal Paragraphs" miscellany section recounts the story of a boy "[moaning] to himself in the woodshed that 'the leather had fallen'" after he accidentally tears his coat. Such father-son woodshed dramas appear often in epigrammatic, comedic, or quipping passages, as in the "Americanisms" column of Philadelphia's *North American*, August 1878. There, the writer cautions young boys not to play cards "furtively" in the woodshed: "There is no knowing when the old man [read: father] will come bulging in with a rawhide that looks like a Russian Peace Commissioner." Similar scenes, often cast in an either comedic or moralistic tone, abound in the subsequent twenty-five years. By 1892, when political humorist Charles Bertrand Lewis writes in the *Idaho Statesman* of "A stern faced father—a woodshed—a rawhide and a boy hopping around and promising never to do so again," these encounters have undoubtedly taken on an idiomatic place in the North American vernacular.

The woodshed's specifically musical valences do not appear until the late nineteenth century but are audible well before the full flowering of a distinctive jazz practice in the United States. In September 1899, the *Biloxi Daily Herald* prints a remarkable joke entitled "He Didn't Like Chopin":

"A musician out of work, are you?" said the housekeeper. "Well, you'll find a few cords in the woodshed. Suppose you favor us with an obligato." "Pardon the pronunciation, madam," replied Peripatetic Paderosky, "but Chopin is not popular with me."

The layered wordplay here riffs on Americanized pronunciations of the names of Polish piano virtuosi Frédéric Chopin (read: choppin') and Ignacy Jan Paderewski while punning on the homophonic 'chords' of harmony and 'cords' of wood, the

latter to be found in any North American woodshed. Apparently nonproductive and useless, music itself comprises the butt of the joke. The out-of-work musician would obviously rather not engage the worldly, effortful labor required by the shed—he “don’t like choppin’.” His own creative practice, by implication, amounts to something unworldly or otherworldly.

Illuminating an important dimension of early jazz discourse, compelling (if sparse) scholarship has tracked the pun on “splitting” musical chords and chopping cords of wood into the specific parlance of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century barbershop quartets. Ethnomusicologist Max Brandt (1993) notes that “woodshedding” refers in this context to collective improvisation of harmonic form as an explicitly oral practice, distinct from harmonic unification in a composed score. As Gage Averill (2010: 124) puts it, “The woodshed, the place where cords...were ‘chopped’ (rehearsed or extemporized) gave its name to the informal ear singing of barbershop harmony.” Though evidence remains thin regarding the precise impact of vocal groups on jazz harmony (cf. Hobson 2014; Hobson 2018), specifically African American contributions to the development of barbershop singing in the nineteenth century are increasingly accepted, and recent scholarship suggests that urban barbershop practices had foundational roots in Southern plantation life. But barbershop quartets were destined to become a utopic heritage music for white musicians in the twentieth century, and notated arrangements gradually took precedence over the improvisatory woodshedding apparently central to the style’s early development.

By the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century, the woodshed emblemized the rigorous practice of musical material and, correspondingly, to be sent to the woodshed meant that one’s musical chops needed honing. These senses of the term spread widely. *The Musical Messenger*, a trade magazine for professional and semi-professional brass and wind players, clearly illustrates these connections, noting in 1920 that bad players should be compelled to grab their “bent up cornet[s]” and hit the “woodshed” alone (Kleffman 1920). Reporting on “Swing Slang” at the peak of the genre’s cultural influence, Louis Armstrong’s 1936 autobiography *Swing that Music* hips readers to the following, slightly softer definition: “WOOD-SHED: To experiment in private with a new song” (Armstrong 1993). A *New York Times* article entitled “Swing: What is it?” (Gilbert 1937) extends Armstrong’s definition to reveal the extent to which the term had become attached to swing music and “jazz”. In the piece, the journalist glosses “woodshedding” as a form of “experimentation” with specifically “Negro” roots, which generally took place in the context of freeform “jam sessions” and was associated in particular with Louis Armstrong and the New Orleans style. Similarly, *Down Beat* magazine’s *Yearbook of Swing* (Miller 1939: 176) offers a “Vocabulary of Swing Terms” that includes “woodshed,” which the magazine glosses as “a place for private rehearsal, often used as a verb, meaning to practice in private.” (2)

The profound impact of the New Orleans jazz style on northern urban—and ultimately global—musical practices, along with the partial roots of that style in southern African American vocal group harmony, lends credence to the notion that the imaginary of the woodshed and woodshedding was carried in larger rural-to-urban shifts in the first quarter of the century. Discussing the relationship between solo improvisation and barbershop harmony in very early iterations of New Orleans

jazz, scholar Vic Hobson (2017: 99) recounts Louis Armstrong's aside that his band would "woodshed on the weekend," "blowing" on contrapuntal figures drawn from barbershop harmony. Scholars have suggested that Armstrong's musical successes in northern urban centers in the century's first two decades helped raise awareness for southerners of creative work and economic opportunity in less segregated social and cultural environments like Chicago and New York City, which in turn gave continued impetus to the "Great Migration" of African Americans northward and the concomitant transformation of musical practices across the country. Charles Hiroshi Garrett (2008: 106-110) notes that even with the inevitable "loss and departure from southern cultural traditions," Armstrong's Hot Five and Seven recordings "symbolized African American achievement" across class barriers and Armstrong himself came to musically embody the "power" of public "black masculinity." The recordings—alongside early Armstrong "method" books, such as the 1927 transcription collections *125 Jazz Breaks for Cornet* and *50 Hot Choruses for Cornet*—unequivocally transformed national awareness of African American improvisational music and constituted a key foundation for jazz woodshedders in northern cultural epicenters (Weisbard 2021; Gioia 2011). Mediated in the shift from "hot" ensembles and big bands to small bebop combos by the 1940s, the woodshed ethos finds in the exemplary figure of Louis Armstrong the augur of the modern "soloist, the virtuoso, the scholar" whose musical example would prove definitive for later musicians (Moten 2017: 273). "You can't play anything on the horn that Louis hasn't played," Miles Davis pronounced three decades later (Chambers 1998: 209); his assessment delivering only the most hyperbolic version of what had become widespread sentiment.

## The Woodshed as Canon

Whatever its exact origins with respect to barbershop singing or the New Orleans ensemble style, the notion of woodshedding as collective practice was by mid-century largely eclipsed by a concept of the woodshed as a place of individual musical labor and self-transformation. Between the 1920s and the 1940s, semi-public "cutting contests" and jam sessions emerged as dynamic and competitive social spaces in which young instrumentalists learned to pass muster (Davis 2012; Walker 2010). Pianist/bandleader Earl Hines pointed out retrospectively that these events offered such "stiff competition" that neophytes were driven to the "woodshed" to "brush up on the horn if [they] wanted to compete" (Hadlock 1960: 13). As the swing era declined, this competitive activity increasingly provided the context for the development of a "hierarchy of professional competence" for musicians who would define the new musical and cultural language of bebop (DeVeaux 1997: 209). The postwar capitalist boom had significantly expanded musicians' opportunities for professionalization and autonomy, thereby laying the socioeconomic foundation for individual creative achievement in jazz. As Scott DeVeaux (1997: 170) notes, bebop emerged and was codified within the same social relations and capitalist market forces as earlier, putatively more commercial, expressions of jazz practice, and its characteristically "specialized idiom of the improvising virtuoso" would shape the musical and social content of jazz improvisation long after its initial inception.

It was in these networks of postwar musicking that a young Charlie Parker, likely the most emulated alto saxophonist in jazz, received his early comeuppance and contributed to the consolidation of a sensibility of the shed. The (possibly apocryphal) story is widely known. (3) Following Count Basie's late set at Kansas City's famed Reno Club, a sixteen-year-old Parker erringly thought he could hold his own in a jam session. Gary Giddins (2013: 40) offers the classic account:

Charlie decided to jump during [Jo] Jones's jam session, and after he played a couple of faltering choruses at a racing tempo, Jones struck his bell in imitation of Major Bowes striking a gong to stop an act on his radio show *Amateur Hour*. Charlie did not take the hint. After one or two more unheeded clangs, Jones lifted his ride cymbal off its stand and sent it crashing at Parker's feet, setting off a din of cruel laughter. Charlie left, vowing to return and show them up.

Parker's vow was spawned on the stage and forged in the crucible of the shed, where he would fastidiously memorize Lester Young tenor solos on recently recorded Count Basie Orchestra sides. After public humiliation at the hands of the jazz patriarchs, as Giddins notes, "virtuosity was the best revenge." And Parker would unquestionably have it. By the moment of his unfortunate death in 1955, hundreds of amateur recordings of the saxophonist's improvisations were in circulation—fodder for an emerging generation of woodshedders for whom Parker's musical language had become authoritative.

Humiliation, of course, does not comprise woodshedding's sole *raison d'être*. Addressing the musical labors of Sonny Rollins, philosopher Arnold Davidson argues that rigorous jazz practice can be construed as a form of ethical and aesthetic self-transformation. Davidson recounts that Rollins, finding performance wanting, would "go to the woodshed" and practice a relentless 15 hours per day (Davidson 2016: 526). Between 1959 and 1961, the tenor saxman took a pedestrian walkway on the Williamsburg Bridge in the Lower East Side of NYC as his shed, improvising a transformative location Fred Moten (2016: 136) memorably names the "eremitic bridge become practice room." Rollins's indefatigable musical drive reportedly found powerful impetus in the earlier figure of Coleman Hawkins, the swing-era modernist with whom Rollins would record in 1963. Davidson (2016: 533-534) writes, "It is precisely in playing with Hawkins that Rollins gives a new and intensified ethical-political attention to his modernity, a modernity that, in the terms of [Michel] Foucault, is at once a limit attitude and an experimental attitude." The groundwork for such an achievement, then, was laid in the shed, "prepared by a constant practice of exercises" that without "the challenge of exemplarity" or the exemplary predecessor was doomed to "remain static" (*ibid.*)

Beyond even the "obsessive...burning desire" (Giddins 2013: 27) of his forebear Charlie Parker or contemporary Sonny Rollins, the relentless woodshedder John Coltrane encapsulated what critic Nat Hentoff (1960) named the "fury of the search" motivating so many postwar jazzmen. This tale, too, is often told (*cf.* Ratliff 2008): a musical late-bloomer, Coltrane began sax lessons and serious practice in the mid-1940s while working a factory job in Philadelphia. He improved his skills in the Navy playing sax and clarinet in the Melody Masters, and then in jobs with Joe Webb, Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson, and Jimmy Heath, but later in the decade developed an addiction to alcohol and heroin that significantly impeded his

musical progress. The saxophonist would finally find his spiritual and creative voice in Miles Davis's band in the late 1950s after the trumpeter-bandleader took him to task for his substance abuse. In eternal pursuit of a higher musical order, the reborn Coltrane would weave a path through harmonic density to total freedom, irrevocably transforming the landscape of improvisation before his untimely death in 1967.

The saxophonist's impact on the perceived demands of woodshedding cannot be overstated. Composer/improviser John Schott (2000: 345) writes, "The obsession Coltrane demonstrated for practicing, purification, and rigorous treatment of musical material, an obsession virtually without precedent in jazz, became a posthumous boon to the burgeoning jazz education industry, which conferred on Coltrane the sainthood previously reserved only for Charlie Parker." This boon is nowhere so clearly exemplified as in the storied case of "Giant Steps," Coltrane's "daedal musical obstacle course" (Gioia 2011: 303) that has since become standard repertoire and an advanced jury piece in jazz pedagogy. Constructed of rapid harmonic rhythms in remote keys and typically played at a brutal tempo, the tune's etude-like structure strongly resists improvisational cliché and rejiggers the established parameters of bop virtuosity. Its initial 1958 recording on Atlantic was celebrated for Coltrane's dexterous and confident navigation of the demanding chord changes. Sideman Tommy Flanagan fares less well: unprepared for the tune's watershed complexity, the pianist offered a halting, abortive piano improvisation before finally retreating behind his bandleader's second solo.

The heavily woodshedded tune inaugurated among jazz musicians a "new studium," or "sense of devotion to form and discipline," that would permanently restructure jazz practice under the sign of Trane (Ratliff 2007: 130). (4) "[The] jazz world did not forget 'Giant Steps,'" Ted Gioia (2012: 127) writes, "Every serious jazz musician ought to learn and master it—not just because it might be called at the next gig, but simply for the mind-expanding lessons it imparts." The switch to the imperative in Gioia's account is instructive. Coltrane's studiously, laboriously worked-out capacity to improvise over the "Giant Steps" chord changes "come[s] down like law" (Ratliff 2018: 29) for later jazz players. For Coltrane, the theoretical works of composer Nicolas Slonimsky provided raw material to be woodshedded (re-recorded) in "Giant Steps"; for the saxophonist's followers and sycophants, it was both the recorded tune "Giant Steps" and its harmonic form that comprised a new imperative and example.

## Jazz and Social Reproduction

The historical woodshed was materially bound to non-productive domestic activities, such as food preparation and heating. Its mundane content included the tools and materials of unceasing, quotidian exertion—the unwaged work necessary to bodily reproduction. In an expanding lexicon of labor lingo, the metaphorical woodshed came to structure an ideology of musical practice hewed to that same non-productive, reproductive space. I propose here that the woodshed and woodshedding be understood together as an ambivalent figure within the rubric of social reproduction and, further, that the ideology of musical practice attached to this figure organically articulates itself through this rubric. I take the term 'reproduction' in this sense to comprise three inextricably entwined conceptual



trajectories: the reproduction of corporeality, the reproduction of gendered socio-musical relations, and the reproduction of knowledge in/of sound. Each reproductive moment differently inflects the social logic of the commodity-form under capitalism.

Frustrated with the demands of making a “good record,” a self-critical John Coltrane told interviewer Ralph Gleason in 1961, “Maybe I should just go on back in the woodshed and just forget about [making records]” (Gleason 2016). In a review of Coltrane’s seminal *Live at the Village Vanguard* LP the same year, critic Ira Gitler concurs: “Coltrane may be searching for new avenues of expression, but if it is going to take this form of yawps, squawks, and countless repetitive runs, then it should be confined to the woodshed” (Locke 2000: 147). For Coltrane, the woodshed stands for the disciplined labor of musical growth; for Gitler, a punitive isolation. The woodshed has not shed, as it were, these resonances. In one of Jake Wunsch’s (2021) most compelling interviews on his *News from the Shed* website, luminary saxophonist J.D. Allen draws out these and further tensions in “the role of practice” in the contemporary jazz milieu:

Well, first of all, practicing means I eat! If I don’t practice, then things are not gonna happen. A lot of people count on me, I count on myself, so practicing means I stay in the game. That’s the practical aspect of it. [...] The other side is that playing music is a protest of sorts for me. Anytime I pick up the horn, it’s saying, I’m in this world, but I’m not of this world. Because this is not a popular thing that we do. It takes a lot of heart. The fact that I pick up this horn, or if I see someone else picking up their horn, it’s saying to me that they’ve decided to live a tough life, but it’s a life they choose. It’s a protest, kinda a prick in the eye of capitalism. Like, yeah, I don’t have a million dollars, but I live a million dollar [sic] life. That’s my thing.

As a professional tenor saxophonist and composer, Allen needs the woodshed in order to make money and feed his family. Woodshedding pays the bills. At the same time, practice creates the possibility of being able to “stay in the game”; it is the means through which Allen is able to cut it in the highly competitive atmosphere of professional jazz performance. His choice to practice, then, is on one level simply a means to mundane ends like food and shelter. On another, it constitutes a self-imposed ethical obligation, a choice of how to live and grow creatively through hard musical work. These aspects converge on a notion of corporeal reproduction, the literal re-production of the body in the shed. Reproduction allows the body to regenerate through the consumption of food and other saleable commodities, and, in so doing, prepares it to expend bodily power for a wage or other remuneration. Karl Marx (1990: 270) famously defines this reproducible capacity as labor-power: “[The] aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being, capabilities which he sets in motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind.” Capital, Marx argued, relies on the commodification of this very bodily capacity to labor. Peculiar among commodities, labor-power is a use-value for capital that is simultaneously productive of value through the reproducible expenditure of “human muscle, nerve, [and] brain” power in a variety of labor processes. This paradoxically inexhaustible commodity is uniquely “produced *outside* of the circuit of commodity production”

(my emphasis) in the “non-capitalistic” spaces and times of reproduction (Bhattacharya 2017: 7-8)—such as the kitchen, or the woodshed. Allen recognizes the perversity of this condition and its corporeal demands, and he overtly positions himself against acquisitive, money-making pursuits, instead choosing to focus on the meaningfulness of a “tough” musical life. His axe, he surmises, can “prick” the eye of capital.

In view of the longer history of jazz practice, the work of woodshedding carries a laborious and masculine quality in relation to the musical activity of public space—whether cutting contest, live performance, or recording session. Marxist theorist Norbert Trenkle (2008: 145-146) writes that “modern masculine identity corresponds exactly to the profile of the demands of labor in a capitalist society based on universal commodity production.” That is, masculine subjectivity under capitalism mirrors the abstraction of the commodity-form, the isolation of a purely economic and competitive sphere of exchange, and the mediation of all social relations through labor. Masculinity finds its double and other in the purported sensuality, emotionality, and impulsivity attributed to women and the domestic sphere. Woodshedding unfolds within a reproductive locus constituted as feminized space and necessarily dissociated (Scholz 2009) from the sphere of social production. It articulates its masculine specificity within that space through precisely those values attached to the laboring male body and indexed through its appropriation of the language of effort and punishment to musical tools and techniques. The ideological woodshed emergent within these networks posits such practice as an exertive, physical conduit through which masculine musical knowledge and exemplary achievement in a sphere dissociated from the activity of everyday life become possible. I suggest that the rustic language of the shed indexes its apparent distance from the purportedly cerebral, non-sensual quality of music itself and, at the same time, from the abstract form of capitalist valorization instantiated through the process of exchange. In other words, woodshedding “materializes” music and nonproductive musical labor in one swipe, rendering music substantial, useful, and socially effective against the unvalorizable labor of (women’s) social reproduction. To inhabit the woodshed is, precisely, to reflexively dominate this gendered, devalorized space.

A self-disciplined woodshedder hopes to emerge from the shed a virtuoso with well-honed chops, primed to cut the competition and surmount the challenge of aesthetic exemplarity. The “reflexively embodied” (Crossley 2015) activity of woodshedding aims at once to transform the musicking body, musical material, and, as it were, the musical corpus. The commodity again plays a central part in the reproductive side of this process. More than mere support materials, musical commodities—like recordings and method books, among many other media formats—have had a constitutive role in the organization of the woodshed and thus, as Mark Katz (2010) points out, in the organization of jazz practice writ large. Sound and print reproductions of jazz solos, for example, circulated widely as commodities throughout the twentieth century and provided the raw material for woodshedders and emergent virtuosos, thereby materially driving the eventual consolidation of “jazz” as a distinct and distinctive set of musical practices and socialities. In the mid-1940s, electric guitarist Wes Montgomery consolidated his improvisatory language by carefully memorizing every Charlie Christian solo on the Benny Goodman Sextet sides; the contemporary shedder can, in turn, achieve

similar ends by working through a massive “Wes Montgomery Jazz Guitar Licks” repository on *Jazz Guitar Online* (Laukens 2022). Recordings of canonical solos and soloists, volumes of transcriptions, method and theory books, videos, websites, play-alongs and tune compendia, alongside innumerable instances of “Woodshed” columns in musical trade publications, together provide a vast resource for the material reproduction of jazz networks through self-directed practice. Consumption of these resources in the shed facilitates the “production” of corporeal musical capacities in a continuous feedback loop with the social demands and musical imperatives of the market. Mediated through the commodity-form, both productive and reproductive musical activity constitute a complex dynamic out of which new social forms and virtuosic milieus emerge.

## Conclusion

This article has sketched a brief account of the woodshed in jazz practices over more than a century. The links I establish here between this enduring figure and the character of social reproduction under capitalism attempt to map new critical resources for thinking about musical practice, while at the same time offering a reconsideration of the social loci of virtuosity. This analysis by no means exhausts—nor does it intend to exhaust—the social and political efficacies of jazz (see, for instance, Lewis 2007; Horne 2019; Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz 2013; cf. Moreno and Steingo 2010; Moreno 2016) or even of the woodshed itself. Rather, it reformulates the obvious but often overlooked point that musical practices are no less shaped by ideology than other social practices and, further, that such ideology has a material, embodied structure. Indeed, a tension emerges in the woodshed’s complex of labor-mediated social forms and relations. Jazz undoubtedly carved and carves a meaningful path into broadly impactful social, creative, and political activity for young men, and especially young Black men, in the U.S. and abroad. And yet, as I am suggesting here, there is an important sense in which the effort and ideology of the shed reproduces labor-mediated, gendered social relations and a logic of exemplarity specific to capitalist society—even when musical practice is articulated as a mode of resistance to capitalism and its myriad oppressions. In our aim to situate musical activity as labor or to analyze market forces on music as a commodity, music studies scholars must remain attuned to both the differentiating operations at work in ideologies of music and to the larger point that the very concept of labor is a historically and socially contingent abstraction (see Marx 1993). As political theorist Kathi Weeks (2011: 108) notes, critiques of capitalist exploitation and alienation—even Marxist ones—have often given way to the uncritical valorization of hard work as the final horizon of human activity and the very condition of a utopic future. With the spread of the logic of the woodshed across domains of music far beyond the limits of jazz, and even into realms of nonmusical cultural activity—certainly a topic for further research—the stakes could not be higher.

## Endnotes

1 The image comes from “amateur trumpeter” Jake Wunsch’s (2021) *News from the Shed* blog. “‘Shedding’ is slang for practice,” Wunsch tells his readers. “I gather the shed is where

it gets done.” The invocation is, we will see, a common one. To cite only a few of virtually endless contemporary examples, the Jazz Education Network provides “A Structured Approach to ‘Woodshedding’ Improvisation”; “guitar hacker” and author Graham Tippett (2022) offers fellow “woodsheddors” a trove of theory-based materials on his *Unlocking the Guitar* page; Chicago saxman Mike Lebrun (2022) writes a blog dedicated to jazz theory and practice called, simply, *The Woodshed*; and, with a sensational flourish, a *MusicRadar* piece (Laing 2020) announces that electric guitar virtuoso Joe Satriani was recently “shamed back into [his] woodshed” by a rising tide of young shredders.

2 At present, *Down Beat* runs a practice-focused ‘Woodshed’ column offering transcribed solos, theory, or other musical material for jazz practitioners. *Jazz Magazine* ran a similar column between 1976 and 1980. A ‘Woodshed’ section is also commonly found in contemporary non-jazz trade magazines, such as *Modern Drummer*, *Bass Player*, *Acoustic Guitar*, and *Guitar Player*.

3 Contemporary audiences may recall the debate surrounding director Damien Chazelle’s 2014 film *Whiplash*, which follows a young, white jazz drummer (Miles Teller) struggling under the brutal tutelage of an autocratic bandleader (J.K. Simmons). Celebrated for its energetic editing, direction, and sound mixing, the film nonetheless came under critical fire for depicting musical practice as an essentially (self-)abusive and competitive enterprise. One film reviewer (Wickman 2014) points out that Chazelle’s idea of musical practice and achievement rests on an obviously absurd story of Parker’s near-death experience playing with Jo Jones. (The altoist was, as the more extreme version of the myth goes, almost decapitated by a thrown cymbal—an event paid homage in *Whiplash*.) In keeping with the legend, the drummer protagonist of *Whiplash* streams sweat, blood, and tears under a volley of humiliating attacks on his abilities and personality until he finally surmounts all musical and social obstacles in the film’s glorious final set piece.

4 Illustrative of Coltrane’s ethic of “musical puritan[ism]” (Litweiler 1984), “Giant Steps” was likely nicked from a melodic theme in Nicolas Slonimsky’s *Thesaurus of Melodic Scales and Patterns*—a key text in the saxophonist’s rigorous practice. Quincy Jones reductively sums up: “Everything that Coltrane ever played was in that thesaurus” (Marchese 2018).

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