

**The subliminal discourse of Dizzy Gillespie in the video of “Poor Joe”, by Joe Willoughby:
Cold War and racism, bebop and cannabis**

Eixo temático geral 3: Teoria e análise da música popular

Keywords: Sounds and images of Dizzy Gillespie. Cold War and racism. Bebop and cannabis. Subliminal discourse in music. Text(context)-sound-image trinomial.

Abstract: This paper delves into bebop icon Dizzy Gillespie’s performance in a 38-second video excerpt of “Poor Joe” (Les Blank, 2018; available at [redacted]), a mambo song by Joe Willoughby. This fragment concentrates a wealth of musical meanings in its text-sound-image trinomial [redacted] can be appreciated in the way Dizzy (1) plays the trumpet, (2) sings the lyrics, and (3) occupies the stage with ample body movements or subtle facial expressions (Gillespie, 2020; Gillespie, 2021). We depart from two diametrically opposed statements about the use of marijuana. The first, from 1930, is a very biased and predatory viewpoint by Harry Anslinger,¹ the founder and first director of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics during Herbert Hoover’s US presidency. The second statement is corroborated by several scientific sources from referential literature about cannabis.² In our analysis of this video recording, we found evidence of a telling connection between the oppressed black culture in the USA and the international politics during the Cold War (Gillespie and Fraser, 1980). Pressed between two opposite forces, namely (1) the US’ pre-World War II official and radical position against marijuana and (2) a formula that employed jazz musicians to counteract Russian accusations of racism, Dizzy Gillespie found his way. He constructed this performance on stage based on a planned choreography and deliberate practice, making his intentions seem spontaneous. Thus, he managed to help the official viewpoint of the government about democracy, without giving up the Afro-American tradition of marijuana consumption.

Our methodological procedures include qualitative and quantitative data extracted from video photograms, sound spectrograms, lyrics of the song, and literature relating racism and cannabis. The results reveal a highly interconnected scenario in which Dizzy Gillespie developed strategies to succeed in his jazz career and, at the same time, preserve his Afro-American heritage. We show that his images and sounds in “Poor Joe” are the result of a well-thought scheme, as opposed to a spur-of-the-moment improvisatory act. Dizzy meticulously choreographed interferences in the song by adding, emphasizing and encoding new words over the original lyrics as shown in red bold font in Ex.1.

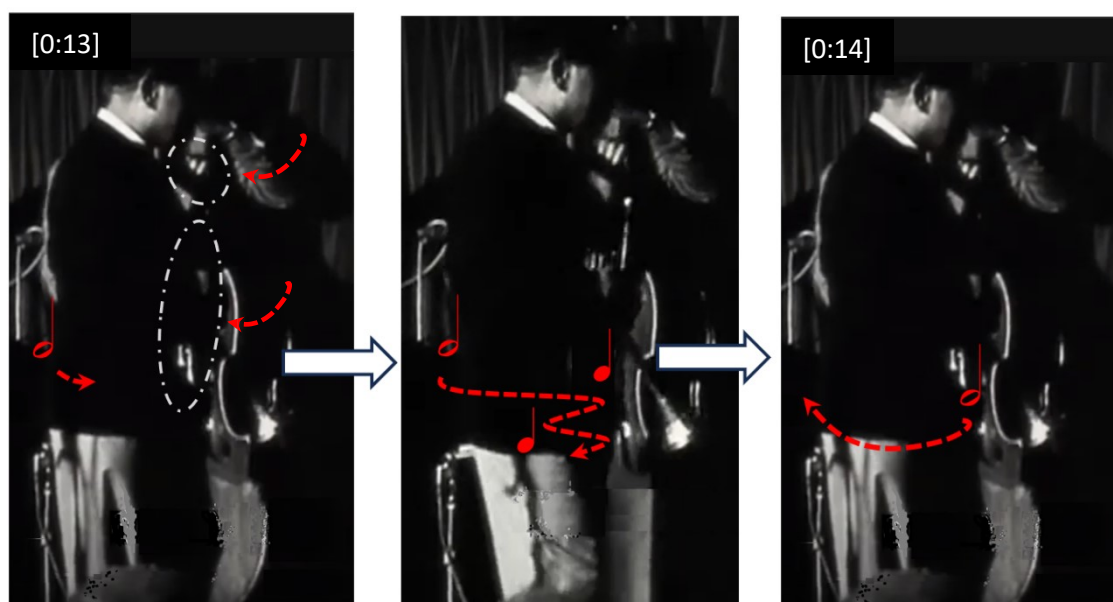
¹Laura Smith (2018) reproduces Anslinger’s words: “*There are 100,000 total marijuana smokers in the US, and most are Negroes, Hispanics, Filipinos, and entertainers. Their Satanic music, jazz and swing, results from marijuana use. This marijuana causes white women to seek sexual relations with Negroes, entertainers, and others.*”

² Paul Sharp and Graham (2000, p.238) observe that “*Cannabis has been used throughout the world for thousands of years and by all types of social classes, including Queen Victoria in the 1800s*”.

“Poor Joe”	
Joe Willoughby’s original lyrics	Dizzy Gillespie’s version of the lyrics
(VERSE 1) Sue and Joe went to Barney Joe had one, just too many So when Sue said "it's time to leave" He started keep roaring uppishly	(VERSE 1) Now , Sue and Joe went to Ben-ny Joe had one, just too man-y So when she said, “it’s time to leave!” He start-ed roll-ing a peace leaf
(REFRAIN) Poor Joe, he tried to beat his wife Poor Joe, he nearly lose his life Poor Joe, every time he raise his hand She knock him in the head with de frying pan	(REFRAIN) Poor Joe, he tried to beat his wife Poor Joe, he nearly lose his life Poor Joe, every time he raise his hand She knock him in the head with de frying pan

Ex.1 – Lyrics of “Poor Joe”: original words by Joe Willoughby and interferences of Dizzy Gillespie (in red).

As a bandleader, Dizzy was very democratic with his musicians. For example, he contracts his kinesphere³ on stage to let them shine. Ex.2 shows him bringing his trumpet and hands down and close to his body (in [0:13]) to elegantly and discretely conduct the solo flute by only marking the tempo with lateral movements of his hips (in [0:14-0:20]).



Ex.2 – Dizzy Gillespie contracting his kinesphere (arms, hands and trumpet) on stage to conduct the solo flute with only marked lateral hips movements.

³ We use the concept of kinesphere created by Rudolf Laban (Laban, 1974; Rengel, 2001) for dance and theatre, adapted to music as the space explored by performers with body gestures and facial expressions [REDACTED].

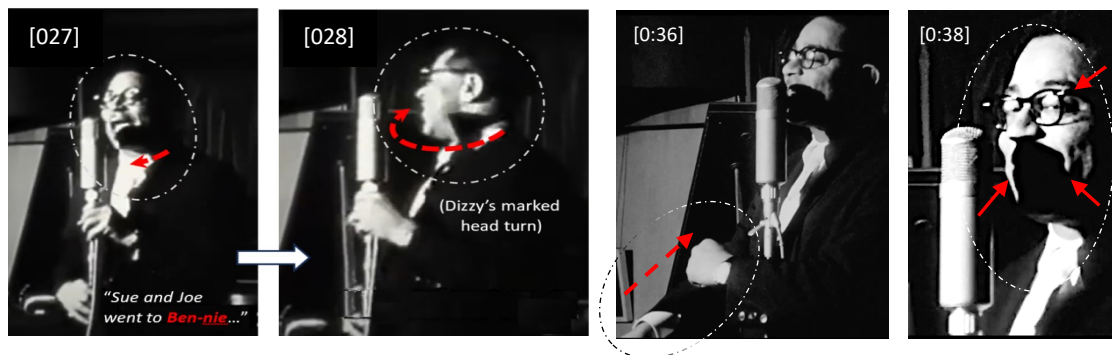
Ex.3 illustrates the difference between the concepts of “naturalness” versus “spontaneity” in live performances (Chion, 1994; [REDACTED]). After placing the trumpet on its stand (in [0:21]), Dizzy Gillespie, with calculated gestures, gives the impression that he is spatially lost on stage (in [0:22]). But he is not. He has memorized the exact timing to put down his trumpet and, pretending he doesn’t remember where the mic stand is, he finds it in the final split of a second before his entry as a singer (in [0:24]).



Ex.3 – Dizzy Gillespie’s calculated gestures give the impression of spontaneity on stage.

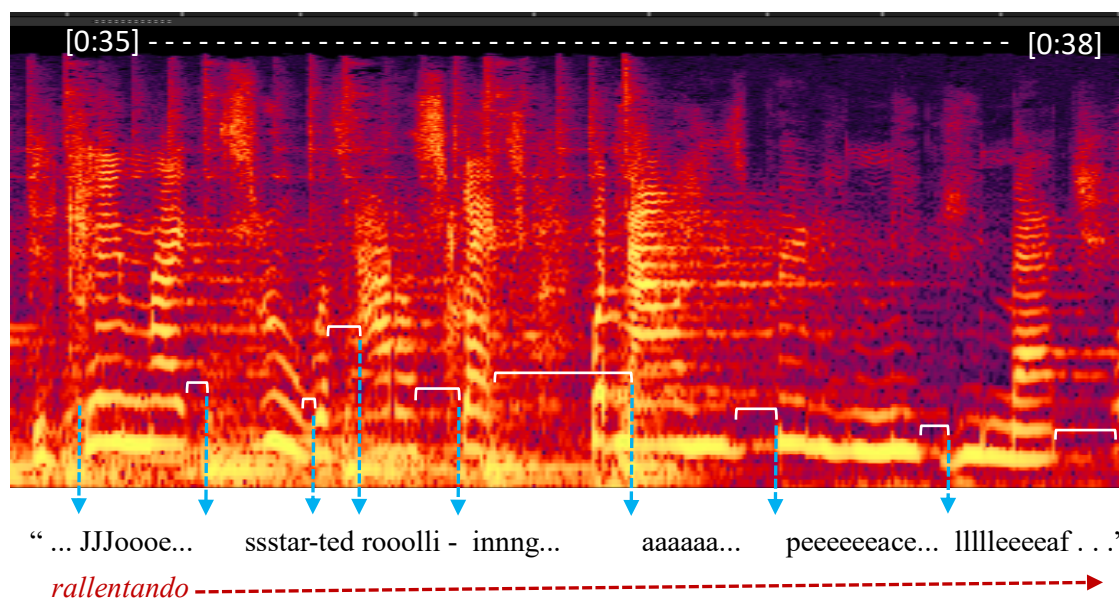
Finally, as a black North American, Dizzy agreed to help improving the US racist image abroad with jazz, but he did not renounce to a tradition of his cultural ghetto, i.e. the consumption of marijuana, even if it was considered illegal at the time. In this sense, his rendition in one the verses of “Poor Joe” is revealing (Ex.4). Musically speaking, he frames his discourse with an integrated superimposition of carefully selected words, sounds and images. In the beginning of the verse, he adds the word “now” to the lyrics as if he is preparing the audience to what they are about to hear and see. He uses *staccato* and *marcato* articulations⁴ to emphatically mark the syllables of the words, such as in the rhymes “Ben-ny” ([in 0:27]), and “ma-ny” ([in 0:30]), anticipating the exaggeration that he reserves to the very end of the verse. His percussive approach to the text is also reflected in his rhythmic body language, as in the quick and jerky head turn (in [0:28]) that he explicitly does to fill the pause after the word “Benny”. Then, he completely alters the mood of the lyrics, by substituting the phrase “He started keep roaring uppishly” by “He started rolling a peace leaf” (in [0:35-0:38]), phrases which phonetically sound very similar, but bear a completely different meaning. The choreography that accompanies this radical interference in the song also includes a tempo change and two encoded gestures. First, he adds a *rallentando* while rolling up the sleeve of his shirt (in [0:36]), as if he was pedagogically explaining the hidden meaning of the word “rolling” to the audience. And he completes the final act by staring at the cameraman to show his naughty look and smile after declaiming “peace leaf” (in [0:38]), a slang for marijuana at that time.

⁴ The most noticeable characteristic of Dizzy Gillespie’s swing rhythms in bebop derives from his nuances and combinations of the *staccato* and *legato* articulations, as he declares in the complete interview video (Gillespie, 2021).



Ex.4 – Subliminal meanings in Dizzy Gillespie’s pronunciation and choreography in “Poor Joe”: emphatical syllabication, marked head turn, rolling a sleeve, and naughty smile and eyes.

A sound spectrogram of the last verse (in [0:35-0:38]; see Ex.5) shows that Dizzy’s marked syllabication becomes more interspersed with intentional silences. It also shows his careful pronunciation, adding increasing voids between all syllables, especially because the word “peace” is the only one in the verse that have the marked attack of a plosive consonant.⁵ Although these articulations bear the same crystal-clear sound of his bebop *staccato*, the exaggerated syllabication he uses - “He star-ed... roll-ing... a peace... leaf” - gains here the status of a coded message ignored by most of his white public. In other words, he is stating that black North Americans didn’t agree that rolling a marijuana cigarette was a crime.



Ex.5 – Dizzy Gillespie’s strategies to emphasize his radical change in the lyrics (“...Joe started rolling a peace leaf...”) of the song “Poor Joe”: exaggerated syllabication, void spaces (bebop *staccato*), and a marked *rallentando*.

⁵ In English, the sound envelope of the plosive consonants (“p”, “b”, “t”, “d”, “k” and “g”) have the most percussive attacks, as they are produced after a complete closure of the mouth followed by an explosion of the air (Crystal, 2008, p.372).

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