

## Playing Together

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**Between literary and sociological experimentation, the publication of the email exchange that led to the book by Howard S. Becker and Robert R. Faulkner on jazz repertoires reveals the secrets of the creative process.**

Reviewed: Howard S. Becker and Robert R. Faulkner, *Thinking Together: An Email Exchange and All That Jazz*. Ebook published by Annenberg Press, 2013. Printed version edited by Dianne Hagaman, preface by Franck Leibovici, Les laboratoires d'Aubervilliers & Questions Théoriques (co-publishers), 2013, 350 pp.

Available in electronic form since the summer of 2013 and published in paperback in October 2013 by Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, *Thinking Together* is a singular scientific and literary object – as innovative as it is enthralling, brilliant and full of humour – whose background story must be recounted before its content can be discussed.

### Behind the scenes of the writing process

In 2010, the contemporary artist Franck Leibovici (the author of the preface to the book), who was interested in the work of the great American sociologist Howard S. Becker, particularly his book *Telling About Society*<sup>1</sup>, suggested to Becker that he might take part in his conceptual work entitled “forms of life”. Published by Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, the project was intended to show the work of different artists as being organically part of – and resulting from – an “ecosystem”. Leibovici thus developed an eminently constructivist perspective, considering each work to be the product of a history, collaborations, a context – forms of life which were decisive elements shaping these artistic and literary creations.

Following a suggestion by Dianne Hagaman, a photographer and the wife of Becker, Becker sent Leibovici the entire set of messages comprising the electronic correspondence he had exchanged with his colleague and friend Robert Faulkner over a two-year period from 2003 to 2005, while they had been working on what was to become *Do You Know? The Jazz Repertoire In Action*<sup>2</sup>, a work about the knowledge and know-how of “ordinary musicians”. During that period, the two sociologists rarely met face-to-face, because Becker was living in California and Faulkner in Massachusetts, but they exchanged hundreds of emails to conduct discussions around a “simple” question: how do musicians build up a repertoire of shared jazz standards?

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<sup>1</sup> Becker, H. S., *Telling About Society*, University of Chicago Press, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Becker H. S., *Do You Know?... The Jazz Repertoire In Action*, University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Both Becker and Faulkner are musicians who have explored the places of work of “ordinary” instrumentalists (bars, clubs, weddings, etc.), the former as a pianist and the latter as a trumpet player. Becker was born in 1928, Faulkner in 1938. The two have vast experience as both musicians and sociologists, and they used this experience as the foundation for the hundreds of emails exchanged. This body of communication between the two is therefore the *form of life* that makes up the work (the book *Do you know...?*). The exchange was first staged by Leibovici in the form of a public reading at Aubervilliers, with the artist reading Becker’s messages on stage and Becker himself reading those written by Faulkner. Now the full material has been presented in *Thinking Together*. There is no commentary (apart from Leibovici’s preface and an unsigned prologue attributed to Becker), with the simplicity of the work’s guiding principle forming an integral part of its radicalism: hundreds of emails between Becker and Faulkner presented one after another in chronological order, with each message preceded by standard information: From, Date, Subject, To. No more, no less.

The result is both disconcerting and fascinating, lying somewhere between literary and sociological experimentation. On a literary level, first of all, the work was the product of an epistolary exchange, a full-fledged genre well established and even canonical in French literature, from Abélard and Héloïse to Péric and Lederer. The particularity of this genre is that the texts are not written for publication, which lends them outstanding documentary value and spontaneity. *Thinking Together* does not depart from that standard, save for the fact that the letters exchanged here are electronic messages. It is clear that emails addressed to a close friend tend to situate discourse halfway between the written and oral forms. However, that effect is accentuated here by the complicity between these two ordinary musicians used to playing gigs in bars, sharing “the culture of a deviant group: the dance musician”<sup>3</sup> and providing many examples of musicians’ cryptic references and banter. The authors therefore often express themselves in very familiar language, and Faulkner is especially casual, peppering his sentences with “duh”, “ahem” and other signs of irony and distance from his own discourse and academic life. The language is frank, which is particularly disorienting coming from two academic writers. Howard Becker, for example, writes “fuck it”, which might seem fairly normal in an email between old friends but the fact that this discourse has been elevated to the status of a published text lends that same discourse an incongruity that is both striking and, it must be said, deeply gratifying.

The overall structure is also unsettling, even though it merely presents the messages one after the other in the order of their writing. Responses to emails are sometimes instant (at times we find up to twelve emails exchanged over the course of a day) or else delayed several days, while in the meantime a parallel exchange might be (re)initiated on a related subject. Topics thus interweave, discussions drift, an aside leads to new questions and throws up new subjects for reflection. We can better feel and see intellectual proliferation at work and the authors’ excitement when a lead turns out to be fruitful or when they both think of the same thing at the same time. Out of a vague idea (“A thought on a thought” is the subject of the first email), a much clearer project quickly develops when Becker, on the second day of emails and in the ninth message exchanged, begins a long email to Faulkner with, “Rob, this is fabulous. We just keep writing back and forth, we’ll have a whole Thing, if you know what I mean.” And so the process begins, with the authors working consciously and continuously on what would become *Do you know...?* and – even if some private jokes are at times

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<sup>3</sup> This is the title of one of the chapters of Becker’s first major works, *Outsiders*, published in 1963 in the USA.

recondite, which contributes to the poetics of the text – everything that would remain implicit in a solo author’s notes unfolds through the dialogue.

## **Complete freedom**

As is often the case in the interactionist tradition, and with Howard Becker in particular, an initial idea that seems relatively simple and almost anecdotal quickly turns into a powerful research tool that leads to a number of complex and fascinating questions. It would be impossible to provide a full description here of all the avenues explored by the authors over the course of their two years of email exchanges on the formation and circulation of musical “repertoires” and the musician’s profession in general.

We shall thus confine ourselves to discussing the main theme, which is the question of the interactions between different types of actors who are able to define what should be played during a musical engagement, or gig. The first type: the group of peers, the musicians, for whom the knowledge of an extensive repertoire and/or the capacity to adapt in order to play tunes they do not know are vital professional skills. But who knows what? How, depending on their generation (Becker is ten years older than Faulkner and their references and standards are not the same) or according to the type of network to which they belong, do they know or not know such and such a (type of) tune? The second type of actor: the public. It is largely through their rapport with the audience that the repertoire of ordinary musicians develops; they are often more like craftspeople providing a service than independent artists, unconstrained by any commercial commitments. In other words, in order to make a living from their live musical performances, they must adapt to their audience and have the ability to play what is requested. Finally, the employers, “bosses” with whom they negotiate what will take place during the evening – from the style of music to the musicians’ fee – and who frequently consider the musicians to be their employees (which, objectively speaking, they are). The latter also play an important role in developing the repertoire of tunes that must be known in order to “do the job” in a modern jazz club, an Italian wedding or a bar mitzvah. These different actors are brought together throughout the email exchange through the two authors’ recollections, particularly Becker who no longer plays publicly but draws on more than 60 years of experience. We also encounter peers, audiences and employers through the fieldwork Robert Faulkner undertook for the book. For he still plays, and makes a point of using his activity to observe and hold discussions with fellow musicians, as well as carrying out formal interviews.

There are numerous discussions on how to process the empirical material, particularly on the relevance of the notions and concepts evoked during the analysis and interpretation. A passage on p.60 serves as an example (or counterexample), in which Becker dissuades Faulkner from evoking Bourdieu’s sociology because Bourdieu was, according to him, “a fucking philistine” (Becker’s arguments are highly debatable on this point). However, in the great constructivo-relativist tradition of the Chicago School of Sociology, particularly in the wake of Everett Hughes (one of Becker’s mentors), one of the most useful tools for the authors is comparison: between eras (1950s, 1970s, 2000s), places (bars, restaurants, cabarets, concert halls), but also between different professional spaces such as a kitchen or operating theatre where people also have to coordinate by sharing knowledge and common practices in an environment that is continually shifting (“all the other places where people come together on an occasion to do something they have perhaps never done before together, or not in that way, or not in that place, or not with those other people in the audience, or whatever”, p. 135).

In *Thinking Together*, Howard Becker and Robert Faulkner, with an average age of 80, provide us with a remarkable example of youth and freedom. Now retired and free from all constraints, they can allow themselves the academic irreverence and freedom of which researchers in the social sciences can only dream, carrying out activities whose daily practice tends to drift ever further away from an ideal of intellectual autonomy in a milieu obsessed with benchmarking and the standardisation that results from the neo-management of research. Free from the need to conform to respectable attitudes and from an academic conformism that is increasingly present and oppressive, Becker and Faulkner (and Leibovici, who started the project) achieve a true *tour de force* here: characterised all the way through by the spontaneity and humour of the two authors (who, paradoxically, do not see themselves as “authors” when they are writing), *Thinking Together* is a striking work of literature that also reveals a true rigorous scientific process and contrasts with a mandarin, erudite discourse, tirelessly questioning without ever sacrificing its youthful enthusiasm.

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