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Live Music and Existentialism

In *America Day by Day*, Simone de Beauvoir vividly describes a jazz trio performing in a small New Orleans bar, where the musicians play with a raw, unguarded sincerity, creating a shared moment of profound connection between the performers and the audience. This scene encapsulates several key existentialist themes: the fleeting nature of time, the pursuit of freedom and authenticity, and the dynamic between the self and the Other. Live music, as Beauvoir illustrates in her descriptions of the jazz clubs in New Orleans, becomes more than entertainment—it is a shared experience that demands immersion from both performers and audience members. In this paper, I argue that live music's temporal, communal, and emotional dimensions uniquely embody the principles of freedom, authenticity, and human interconnectedness that are at the heart of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy.

Live music is not merely a static art form in the way a painting is—it is a shared moment in time that cannot be truly replicated or preserved. While recorded music can be revisited endlessly, a live performance exists only in the present. This ephemerality demands that both the performers and the audience engage fully in the moment, creating an experience that is deeply existential in its fleeting nature. The way that live music exists only for a small moment before dissolving into memory is, arguably, its most profound existentialist feature. The following section will explore how the fleeting nature of live music reflects existential ideas of temporality and freedom, grounding these thoughts in the philosophy of Beauvoir and Sartre.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre makes the distinction between being-in-itself, the ways in which objects exist in the external world, and being-for-itself, which describes the conscious human experience. About temporality, he writes: "In contrast to the Past, which is in-itself, the Present is for-itself. What is its being? The present has its own antimony: On the one hand, we readily describe it in terms of *being*; what is present is opposed to the future, which is not yet, and also to the past, which is no longer. But, on the other hand, a strict analysis that aimed to rid the present of everything it is not—i.e., its immediate past and future—would in fact find nothing but an infinitesimal instant (*Being and Nothingness* 181). This understanding of the present as both elusive and central to human consciousness highlights the ways in which live music becomes an existential experience. As Sartre argues, the present is never static—it is a process of becoming—a brief intersection between the past and the future. Live music embodies Sartre's idea of the "infinitesimal instant," as each note dissolves into memory as soon as it is played, which requires both the performer and the audience to fully immerse themselves in the moment.

Simone de Beauvoir captures this ephemeral nature of live music in another scene in *America Day by Day*, when she describes a performance where a young trumpeter "[gives] of himself so completely that his whole life seems committed to every note" (*America Day by Day* 226). The trumpeter's commitment to his music reflects Sartre's concept of being-for-itself, as he consciously chooses to assert his freedom to live authentically in the present. This phenomenon is not just isolated to the experience of the performer; it is shared with the audience, who experiences the music in the same ephemeral moment. Beauvoir writes: "You can't listen only with your ears and your mind; he offers an experience in which you must immerse your whole self" (226). She also writes about the dynamic between jazz performers and their audiences,

claiming that white men in New Orleans do not view jazz with the "respectful enthusiasm of concertgoers"—they are amused by it instead. In contrast to this, she writes that after her friend R. asks the trumpeter a question, he "beams" and looks at them smiling as he continues to play (226). This experience brings Sartre's notion of being-for-others into play, as the performer's sense of self is shaped by the audience's gaze. As the trumpeter looks to his listeners for recognition, his performance becomes a shared existential act, where both the performer and the audience confront each other as equals. Through live music, then, we find a vivid parallel to Sartre's ideas of the present. It is an experience that can only be lived, not reproduced, and it offers a fleeting yet profound reminder of our temporality and authenticity.

In addition to embodying the transient nature of human experience, live music fosters a sense of community among individuals, momentarily dissolving the boundaries between people to create a collective experience. This collective moment is often emphasized through the shared energy, emotion, and attention that connects the performer and the audience to each other. In a live setting, the act of listening and participating in music becomes a communal ritual that transcends individual perception. The venue becomes a shared space where listeners find themselves united by the performance, which challenges the conventional idea of isolation in existential philosophy. Arguably, the audience members' collective focus on the performance they are experiencing fosters a temporary sense of unity.

Existentialism often emphasizes the isolation inherent to human existence, where the individual's search for meaning is framed within the context of a world that offers no inherent purpose. However, live music can be seen as a temporary escape from this isolation. By immersing themselves in the communal energy of a performance, listeners and performers alike experience a shared connection that transcends their individual separateness. The audience, as

Sartre's idea of being-for-others suggests, is constantly shaping the self of the performer through their gaze, and likewise, the performers engage with the collective energy of the crowd. This shared experience of live music contrasts with the more existentially oriented perspective that Sartre describes, where individuals are trapped in their subjective experiences. The collective act of music-making and listening provides a transcendent existential connection to others.

In *America Day by Day*, Beauvoir captures the power of music to bridge human divides, particularly in her reflections on the jazz performances she sees in New Orleans. She notes the way that jazz performers—particularly the young trumpeter she describes—offer their music not as entertainment but as a form of life itself, inviting listeners to share in the experience. She claims that "compared with art, poetry, and printed music, jazz has the privileged emotional impact of a communication that is immediate and fleeting, like the very moments it transfigures. If these men's lives are often tormented, it's because instead of keeping death at a distance, like other artists, they are always mindful of the marriage of existence and death" (226). She describes the trumpeter's performance as not just an artistic act but an existential one, where each note carries the weight of human mortality. By choosing to engage in the present moment, the performer reflects an understanding that life, like the music, is fleeting. Additionally, the audience choses to become part of this shared temporality, as the music they listen to reminds them of the urgency of living fully in the present. This shared acknowledgement of impermanence connects them not only to the performer but to each other, creating a moment of collective recognition.

In these intimate jazz clubs, Beauvoir finds that the performers' music serves as a way to overcome existential isolation. Her observation that the trumpeter "[offers] an experience in which you must immerse your whole self" further underscores the idea that live music demands

an existential participation (226). This total engagement in the present moment unites people in a way that is rarely possible in everyday life, fostering a sense of community where individual boundaries blur and a collective experience emerges. Thus, live music provides an avenue for human beings to connect with one another in a world marked by existential isolation. As Sartre's being-for-others suggests, we are constantly shaped by our interactions with others, and live music, in this sense, offers a rare opportunity for people to experience this phenomenon in real time. The performer, by offering their music, reaches out to the audience, who reciprocates with their attention, energy, and emotional engagement, creating a profound moment of connection that transcends the individual's isolated experience of existence.

Furthermore, live music has the unique ability to facilitate deep emotional encounters that go beyond mere entertainment. For both the performers and the audience, live music creates a space for catharsis and a confrontation with one's emotions. This can take the form of joy, sorrow, exhilaration, or even existential anxiety—emotions that might otherwise remain unexpressed in the everyday world. The immediacy of live music amplifies these emotions, as it offers a rare opportunity to feel emotions authentically and in real-time with others. The experience of live music can also serve as a form of escapism, as the music creates a temporary separation from the pressures of everyday life.

Beauvoir provides a perfect example of this in *America Day by Day*: "The band doesn't try to please or dazzle anyone; it plays the way it feels like playing. If the bass player—a young black who's only eighteen, despite his girth—sometimes closes his eyes in a trance, this isn't servile mimicry: he's just giving himself over to the music and the promptings of his heart" (222). The bass player's immersion in the music highlights the freedom inherent in the act of performance, as he surrenders to the emotional prompts of the music itself. His trance-like state

becomes a form of liberation, where the performer's personal expression transcends any expectation or judgement. Beauvoir continues: "Right next to the band, there are two very young white men with black hair who are listening with religious attention and laughing amicably with the musicians between pieces… They're probably young people who are stifled with American civilization and for whom black music is an escape. They look at us as much as we look at them, for our presence must also be somewhat unusual" (222). The two young men sitting near the band represent the audience's engagement with the music as a form of escape. They feel stifled by the rigid structures of American society, and they find refuge in the music they're experiencing. They do not just listen to the music—they live within it, and their emotional engagement offers them a temporary release from their everyday struggles.

Through the music, the jazz club offers a rare opportunity for mutual liberation, enabling both the audience and the performers to temporarily transcend the limitations of their societal roles, embracing the music's transformative power. The shared space has no hierarchy (even with respect to race as Beauvoir mentions), and there is no distance between the performer and the audience. Instead, the performance becomes a collective act of emotional expression where both parties experience catharsis and release. The music creates a bubble of freedom, where participants can step outside of their daily lives, if only for a fleeting moment, and be transported to a place of pure, emotional connection. In this sense, live music is not just a performance or an event—it is a shared emotional journey that allows people to escape their individual experiences and find solace in something transcendent and greater than themselves. Beauvoir's description of the jazz club emphasizes how the live music environment provides a release from societal pressures, giving space for personal expression and emotional connection that can provide catharsis and liberation. She also writes about the liberating power of the performing arts in *The*

Second Sex, specifically with respect to gender roles: “Through artistic expression [women] seek to go beyond the very given they constitute… Women’s situation encourages her to seek salvation in literature and in art” (*The Second Sex* 741-742). Beauvoir’s reflection on the performing arts highlights how live music becomes a powerful medium for transcending the boundaries imposed by society, offering a moment of authentic self-expression.

Additionally, studies on the prevalence of online live music events during the COVID-19 pandemic affirm the importance of live music in providing a sense of belonging and connection, especially during times of societal disruption. One study found that these events provided opportunities for socialization between families, spouses, and friends, creating a collective experience that “accentuates a feeling of belonging and a renewal of significance” (Frederico Leocádio Ferreira et al. 8). This sociological analysis shows that live music gives audiences and performers a profound sense of interconnectedness and the ability to transcend present social problems. Similarly, another study that examined the role of live music performances in intensive care units speaks to the ability of live music to provide an escape from stressful, oppressive experiences. Patients described these performances as intensely beautiful and liberating, with one patient claiming that these performances gave him the ability to “[cry] and [get] a break from the awfulness of [the ICU]” (Dreyer et al. 5). Clearly, live music serves not only as a source of emotional catharsis but a profound existential experience that enables individuals to break free from the societal constraints that often define their lives. By embracing the immediacy and authenticity of live music, performers and listeners alike transcend their individual isolation, momentarily stepping into a space of collective freedom and emotional connection. This act of liberation, as Beauvoir and Sartre might argue, allows individuals to

reclaim their existential agency and engage with the world—and others—in a more authentic and meaningful way.

Another important aspect of live music is the performer-audience dynamic, which speaks to Sartre's concept of being-for-others—the idea that our sense of self is not solely derived from our internal experience but is also shaped by how we are perceived by others. In *Being and Nothingness*, he writes: "The Other holds a secret: the secret of what I am. He makes me be and, in so doing, he possesses me—and this possession is nothing other than his consciousness of possessing me… In this way, my project to reclaim myself is fundamentally a project to reabsorb the other" (*Being and Nothingness* 483). This highlights the profound impact that the gaze of others has on the formation of the self. For a performer, this encounter with the audience's gaze becomes an important moment in their emotional and existential experience—their awareness of the audience's gaze shapes their identity in the moment of performance. While a musician might find themselves empowered by this dynamic with the audience, these interactions might also limit them. The performer's project to express their art authentically is, arguably, always in tension with the need to be seen and understood by the audience. In this sense, the act of performing music becomes a negotiation between the musician's desire for personal authenticity and the external validation provided by the audience. The audience's reception, whether through applause, criticism, or even silence, becomes a mirror that both confirms and challenges the performer's sense of self.

This can be seen in Beauvoir's depiction of R., a musician she meets in a jazz club, in *America Day by Day*. She talks about his experiences joining the navy to play the trumpet in a military band, yet she claims he still "ardently wishes to become a musician" (223). Interestingly, he doesn't seem to consider himself a musician despite his job as a trumpeter. His aspirations

reflect his genuine passion for his art, yet his position within the military band constrains him. R. is constantly navigating how his identity is shaped by both his own desires and the perceptions of others. In the jazz club, R. and his friend C. "[listen] with religious attention and [laugh] amicably with the musicians between pieces" (222). Beauvoir, R., and C. stay for a long time, but they eventually leave. In response to this, Beauvoir writes that "The blacks beg us not to take R. and C. with us; they're so happy to play for people who really love jazz and understand it" (223). Clearly, there is a mutual recognition between the jazz musicians and their audience, as they both share a mutual respect and love for the music. When the musicians beg their entranced audience not to leave, it becomes clear how meaningful the audience-performer relationship is to them, who crave not just recognition but mutual understanding. This dynamic allows the performers to see themselves not only through the gaze of the audience but also as individuals capable of transcending societal constraints through their art.

While I believe that these perspectives on the relationship between live music and existentialist ideas are valid, others may argue that live music is merely a form of commodified entertainment in a capitalist society like America. This perspective is worth considering, as Beauvoir speaks about the commodification of cultural experiences heavily throughout *America Day by Day*. For example, she describes the relentless advertisements that use Native American stereotypes to sell a wide variety of products. Additionally, while she has transformative experiences at the jazz clubs in New Orleans, she also speaks on the disconnect between Americans and the music they listen to. She claims that "It's clear that white Americans understand jazz less and less. It's not, as I thought, their daily bread" (265). She also writes that "the American is bathed in music," pointing to portable radios, music playing in factories and taxis, and a music-on-demand delivery service as several examples of this fact (265). Despite

this, she notices that this music is never the authentic jazz she experienced in New Orleans: "Most often, it's 'sweet music' that's offered in the successful clubs, or a 'sweet jazz' that's a bastardization of jazz… Since blacks can earn their living only through a light clientele, they are necessarily complicit in this perversion" (265). She feels great frustration at the commercialization and overconsumption of music in American society. She also claims that "Americans have gradually emptied this passionate music of all its human and sympathetic content… [These artistic movements] are produced and reproduced mechanically without an awareness that they no longer have anything to say" (267).

Building on Beauvoir's critique, the commodification of music poses a direct challenge to its existential and transformative potential. When music becomes a product rather than an authentic form of expression, its ability to foster genuine emotional connection is diminished. The jazz clubs of New Orleans, which Beauvoir highlights as rare spaces for freedom and shared understanding, stand in stark contrast to the sanitized, mass-produced music present in American society. This commodification aligns with Sartre's notion of bad faith, where individuals deny themselves the complexities of freedom by adhering to fixed roles and superficial identities. For instance, the "sweet jazz" that Beauvoir describes, which is molded to satisfy the tastes of a "light clientele," exemplifies this idea. Sartre would also look down upon these disingenuous forms of music, as he writes: "The one thing that counts, is to know whether the invention is made in the name of freedom" (*Existentialism is a Humanism* 25). When musicians are constrained by economic pressures, they may feel compelled to compromise their artistry and reduce their music to a marketable product. Furthermore, this might take the most alienating form of Sartre's being-for-others—the musicians become defined entirely by the expectations and demands of their audience.

However, this critique does not negate the potential for live music to resist commodification, even in a society like America. The intimate, unsanitized performances Beauvoir experiences in New Orleans suggest that spaces for authentic expression and connection can persist even within a commodified culture. In the face of these tensions, the role of live music in existentialist thought becomes twofold. On one hand, it serves as a powerful example of freedom and mutual recognition, creating spaces where individuals can express themselves authentically and connect with others. On the other hand, it also illustrates the challenges of maintaining authenticity and resisting bad faith in a world that so heavily prioritizes commodification over genuine expression. Beauvoir's frustration with America's commercialization of music reflects a broader existential concern—the difficulty of preserving freedom and meaning in a capitalist society driven by profit and consumption. Ultimately, the dual nature of live music as both a potential site of cultural liberation and a victim of commodification reflects the existentialist struggle to reconcile individual freedom with societal constraints. For Beauvoir, the jazz clubs of New Orleans symbolize a fleeting glimpse of what music can achieve when it remains true to its roots, offering a powerful reminder of the importance of authenticity, mutual recognition, and emotional connection in art.

Live music, especially as Simone de Beauvoir describes it in *America Day by Day*, is far more than mere entertainment—it is a profound existential act. The temporal, communal, and emotional dimensions of live music exemplify the transient and authentic nature of the human experience. The fleeting nature of live performances demands a full engagement with the present moment, which relates to Sartre's ideas about time, specifically the present moment being an "infinitesimal instant" where the past and future converge to form one's consciousness of now. Musicians, through their commitment to performing in the moment, embody Sartre's notion of

being-for-itself, freely choosing to live authentically through their art. Meanwhile, the audience's attention is exchanged with the performers' passion, reinforcing Sartre's idea of being-for-others. In the shared gaze between performers and listeners, live music becomes a collective affirmation of freedom and impermanence.

Furthermore, live music is especially significant within existential thought due to its ability to dissolve boundaries between individuals, creating a momentary sense of unity that transcends individual isolation. The communal energy within a performance space transforms the act of listening into a shared ritual where individual experiences merge into a collective moment. This dynamic reflects Beauvoir's reflections on the jazz performances she attends in New Orleans, where she observes how the band's sincerity and immersion in their art invite their audience into an authentic encounter with the fleeting nature of life. Therefore, live music can serve as both a reminder of an existential isolation and human mortality and a powerful means of overcoming it. Ultimately, live music embodies the transient nature of existence, offering participants a space for catharsis, emotional liberation, and mutual recognition. Whether in a New Orleans jazz club, an online pandemic-era performance, or even an intensive care unit, live music provides a rare opportunity to embrace life's impermanence and escape its challenges with sincerity. It is through these shared moments of vulnerability and engagement that live music becomes more than sound—it becomes a shared act of defiance against isolation and a celebration of human existence.

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