Current research into jazz has not given sufficient attention to the jam session as a musical and social context in which improvisation occurs. Originating from “cutting contests” in which jazz musicians demonstrated their skills and creativity in a competitive format outside the arena of commercial performance, jam sessions established a format for small-group improvised jazz performance that has endured to the present day.

Jam sessions are recreational activities; initially found at times and in venues removed from the public sphere, they acquired an almost mythical status during the Bebop Era among jazz enthusiasts, who regarded the music produced at these sessions as more authentic than other jazz performances. This led to a commodification of the jam session, which further complicated an understanding of the jam session in jazz.

Weber’s concept of ideal types is utilized to construct a model of the jam session in jazz, and Goffman’s depiction of encounters and the play of games forms the basis for a description of the jam session. Jam sessions depend upon knowledge of principles of music theory and performance strategies to enable the construction of improvised solos and accompaniments for the performance of songs in the jazz canon. Equally important to the jam session are the social interactions that form the jam session encounter.

Historical accounts of jam sessions and participant-observation of jam sessions in the Chicago and Cincinnati areas and interviews with jazz educators and performers are utilized to obtain an understanding of the musical and social conventions necessary to sustain a jam session.

This study has significant implications for jazz research. First, it provides a clearer understanding of what constitutes a jam session. Second, it provides a means of understanding jazz as a performance art and a process.

For research in the social sciences, it demonstrates how a seemingly unstructured gathering can be understood as an amalgam of sociological and musical structures. It also helps to situate the jam session as an example of a focused gathering within the broader context of social interaction.