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Citation: Cottrell, S.J. (2023). Charlie Parker, Massey Hall and Grafton 10265: Musical Instruments and the Telling of Tales. In: Cottrell, S.J. (Ed.), Shaping Sound and Society: The Cultural Study of Musical Instruments. . Abingdon, UK: Routledge. ISBN 9780367816070

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Chapter Five
Charlie Parker, Massey Hall and Grafton 10265:
Musical Instruments and the Telling of Tales
Stephen Cottrell

Introduction

This chapter tells the story of a particular saxophone, an alto model made by the Grafton company in the early 1950s and given the serial number 10265.¹ I consider how focusing on the object biography of musical instruments illustrates not only how they become imbued with qualities that are both constitutive and reflective of their time and place, but also how they can be seen as having ‘thing power’, as Jane Bennett (2010, 6) puts it, ‘the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.’ I draw attention to some of the conceptual overlaps between ethnographic writing and literary fiction in representing the lives of these musical ‘things’ and, in the case of Grafton 10265, I show how focusing on the biographical details of this particular musical object provides insights into the broader cultural patterns within which that biography is played out.

Writing about instruments—object biographies

Annie Proulx’s novel *Accordion Crimes* (1996) has as one of its central characters a green, nineteen-button diatonic accordion built by a Sicilian maker and musician in 1890 prior to his migration to the United States. Migration and assimilation are key themes in the book, and the green accordion reappears in the narrative at various points, providing a literary leitmotiv within a series of vignettes that evoke the different experiences of migrants pursuing the American dream across the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

We quickly infer in the novel that the accordion’s travels are themselves symbolic of the journeys these migrants undertake, and the accordion family becomes a metaphor for the multi-ethnic social panorama of the USA itself, with the quasi-protagonistic green accordion ultimately integrated among a wide range of other similar instruments:

He examined [the accordion], an old instrument, too old and too small. Leather bellows and still supple despite the dust. He picked it up and made a couple of chords, set it back on the counter, looked at the shelves of melodeons, Cajun open-valved diatonics, big square Chemnitzers, English and Anglo concertinas, a small single-voice bandoneon, electric piano accordions, Yugoslavian melodijas, plastic accordions, a Chinese mudan, a bayan from Russia, two Pakistani harmoniums, and row after row of Bastaris, Castigliones, Sopranis, Hohner Black Dots—god, look at them all, every immigrant in America must have pawned an accordion here (Proulx 1996, 400-1).

Proulx's story of the green accordion begins with the instrument's Sicilian roots before its migration to New Orleans and its various journeys to Quebec, Iowa, Texas, Montana and elsewhere. The literary theorist Rodney Stenning Edgecombe describes this approach as being a form of 'object biography', a literary device that he sees rooted in Homer, Alexander Pope and Hans Christian Andersen, and which functions at its best as 'a variant of the parable'. Edgecombe contrasts Proulx's approach with that of the poet Edwin Morgan who, he argues, 'treats the object biography in the context of animizing metaphor, and, within that frame, can render the "sentient" experience of things' (Edgecombe 2008, 554–6).

This distinction between simply recording the history of an object and capturing the subjective, socially animating nature of 'things' in certain contexts is also considered by Eliot Bates in *The Social Life of Musical Instruments* (2012). Unlike Edgecombe, who sees the green accordion only as a connective between Proulx's different narrative episodes, Bates argues that the centrality of the green accordion demonstrates how 'we can conceive of musical instruments as not only having some degree of agency, but even as protagonists of stories – as actors who facilitate, prevent, or mediate social interaction among other characters' (364). He goes on to give the saz – a Turkish lute – a central role in his own 'saz stories' (375), illustrating how the instrument becomes invested with human qualities in relation to both its morphology and its musical employment, and how it has been used to mobilize ideas about nationhood, materiality and musical sound in various social contexts (375-86). Kevin Dawe has written about Cretan lute cultures in similar terms, particularly in relation to gender politics, noting powers of transmutation invested in instruments that, among other things, 'transform individuals into a community, Cretan boys into Cretan men

[...] masculine ideals into a powerful discourse, and musical ideas into affecting sounds' (Dawe 2005, 63).

Capturing the rich panoply of symbolic associations, transformative potential, or agentic powers that might be invested in musical instruments is often a literary task. Obviously, the now widespread scholarly use of audio-visual media significantly enriches our understandings of how instruments sound, the contexts in which they are played, their relationships with the human body, etc. There is much about the study of musical instruments that is better captured using such media than through the inevitable two dimensionality of the written text. But there is still a great deal written about musical instruments, and in the stories we tell of them it is through the writing strategies we employ that we convey their essential characterization. If, as Bates suggests, instruments 'mediate social interaction among other characters', then it is through our reporting of these mediations and interactions, our storytelling, that we bring our characters—human and non-human—to life.

These observations will not be new to those familiar with discourses on the literary nature of anthropological texts. Clifford and Marcus's seminal *Writing Culture* (1986) and Geertz's *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (1988) are two key texts in this debate. In his introduction to the former, Clifford notes that 'Ethnographic writings can properly be called fictions in the sense of "something made or fashioned," the principal burden of the word's Latin root, *fingere*. But it is important to preserve the meaning not merely of making, but also of making up, of inventing things not actually real' (1986, 6). Geertz similarly observes that 'the responsibility for ethnography, or the credit, can be placed at no other door than that of the romancers who have dreamt it up' (1988, 140).

To be clear, as these various authors are, this is not to suggest that anthropological texts are works of fiction or that anthropologists are essentially novelists. Neither is true. But ethnographic texts do share some of the qualities of creative writing such that there are blurred boundaries between the imagination demonstrated by the novelist in constructing a world which is known to be 'unreal', and the recollection of memories – usually aided by fieldnotes, interviews, recordings etc. – on which the supposedly 'real' worlds of ethnographic description are based. These ambiguities are not confined to ethnography. Philip Lopate draws attention to similar dilemmas faced by those writing narrative (or literary) nonfiction, and queries the extent to which writers in this genre should allow

themselves to use the literary strategies and imagination employed by fiction writers when they are retelling stories that are, by their nonfictional nature, grounded in ‘facts and truths’ (Lopate 2013, 77–81).

Proulx notes at the beginning of her novel that in her text, ‘historic personages mingle and converse with invented characters. In some cases invented characters have been placed in real events; in others, real events have been slightly or greatly fictionalized’ (Proulx 1996, 15). Proulx may not be an anthropologist per se, but her approach to the construction of her literary texts resonates strongly with Clifford’s notion of ‘not merely [...] making, but also [...] inventing things not actually real’. Written texts, then, can seldom be identified purely as fact or fiction. Each inhabits a point on a narratological continuum in which these two concepts occupy opposite poles, notwithstanding that they are idealized positions that are seldom (if ever) reached in literary practice.

These points on the literary construction of texts are relevant here because in this chapter I take a similar approach to that of Proulx in her work, drawing, as most scholars do, on a variety of historical and other sources to construct a narrative about the life of a particular instrument. Or rather, like her, I want to use the literary conceit of an instrument’s biography to tell a story about the social and musical contexts in which that biography unfolded, to draw attention to the broader cultural currents that frame it.

The story of Grafton 10265

The district of 18th and Vine in Kansas City, Missouri, remains recognised today for its role in the development of jazz during the 1930s and 40s. Like Basin Street in New Orleans or perhaps 52nd Avenue in New York, it provides a geographical *lieu de mémoire*, as Pierre Nora (1984) puts it, a site of memory for a musical tradition that has been officially designated by the United States government as an ‘American National Treasure’.² Kansas City’s role in that tradition is well documented.³ Notwithstanding the general economic decline of the Depression era in the USA for much of the 1930s, the city remained economically prosperous because of its strengths in agriculture and farming and its advantageous location in the centre of the country. Its relative commercial success, coupled with a laid-back and sometimes illicit approach to licensing and alcohol laws on the part of influential local politician Thomas Pendergast, provided a context in which nightclubs,

cabarets, dance halls and similar all flourished. Segregation was also less strictly enforced in Kansas City than many other places, especially the southern states, and this too made the city attractive to many black jazz musicians who were drawn to it from elsewhere because of the numerous employment opportunities available. Bandleaders such as William ‘Count’ Basie and Jay McShann brought entire ensembles with them, and individual musicians such as saxophonists Ben Webster and Lester Young were also regularly heard. Most other US touring jazz musicians would have played in the city at some point during this period. All this led to the development of a particular ‘Kansas City’ style of jazz, characterized by an even, four-in-a-bar rhythmic groove rather than the two strong/two weak styles that were common elsewhere; a reduction of elaborate orchestrations to looser, riff-based charts that provided space for extensive soloing; and a heavy 12-bar blues influence that counteracted the 32-bar AABA structures underpinning many other jazz tunes of the time.

No musician is more closely identified with this Kansas City brand of jazz than the saxophonist Charlie Parker (1920–1955), widely and affectionately known as ‘Bird’, one of jazz’s most influential performers and one of its greatest icons. Parker was a native of the city, albeit that he was born on the Kansas side of the state line before moving to the Missouri side as a child.⁴ The local jazz scene made a significant impression on him during his formative years. He later recalled that he would ‘stand outside the club in Kansas City where Lester Young played – I was only twelve at the time and couldn’t go inside – and would listen for hours’ (quoted in Reisner 1975, 139). Parker would later become an important contributor to the city’s musical environment, which provided a springboard for his later national and international success. It is unsurprising, therefore, that when the city chose in 1997 to recognise the area’s jazz heritage by establishing in the 18th and Vine district the American Jazz Museum (AJM), built only a few blocks from the site of Parker’s childhood home, it should wish to include in that museum a tribute to the city’s most famous musical son. Nor is it surprising that the museum should choose to purchase for display an alto saxophone with which Parker was in some way associated, as a symbol of his connection to both jazz and the city. What is more notable, however, is that the instrument chosen was only briefly played by Parker, seldom in the United States, and it was made of plastic.

The instrument concerned was an acrylic saxophone with the serial number 10265 made by the Grafton company, a small British manufacturer, in the early 1950s. The Grafton story is itself somewhat novelistic, which contributes to the romantic myths surrounding this

particular instrument. The company was established in the late 1940s by Hector (Ettore) Sommaruga, a skilled Italian engineer who had migrated to Britain in 1936, having left first Italy and then Portugal – where he ran a musical instrument shop – following the rise of European fascism. He had also previously spent time in both Paris and London, working for a variety of instrument manufacturing companies. After being briefly interned in the UK at the beginning of World War II, because of his Italian passport, he was released and spent much of the war using his engineering skills to make surgical instruments. He established his own company, The Grafton Light Engineering Company Limited, the name being taken from the north London street in which the company was located. Eventually the company evolved to repairing musical instruments, particularly for the military.

Towards the end of the war brass sheets and tubes were expensive and in short supply, creating difficulties for those using brass to manufacture instruments. But Sommaruga recognised that synthetic plastic technology, particularly in relation to injection moulding, had advanced to the point where it might be used to produce musical instruments, and it could thus provide a more cost-effective alternative to traditional manufacturing methods. He set about designing a saxophone in acrylic nylon, a type of plastic, that could take advantage of these new technologies

An initial patent was lodged in September 1945, with full specifications being added in December 1946; the patent was awarded in July 1948.⁵ The patent text records Sommaruga's aspiration to 'manufacture a saxophone possessing all the conventional playing facilities, and moreover with a more pleasing appearance, greater solidity, less liability to break-down, improved tonal qualities – and all this at a greatly reduced cost of production.'⁶ There were also several innovations to the basic design of the instrument necessitated by working with this new material. These included reducing the number of pillars and altering their position on the body, changing the system of guards used to protect keys, and adapting the body so that pre-assembled unitary keywork could be fitted. The plastic body was not strong enough to accommodate the conventional needle springs which normally keep saxophone keys open when not in use, so these were replaced by coiled springs; this gave a slightly 'soggy' feel to the fingering, since the keys did not snap back as readily as a conventional instrument. Although the body was plastic, the neck remained made of brass, because of the difficulty of accommodating a mouthpiece on a plastic neck (see Figure 5.1).

<Figure 5.1 near here>

Caption: A Grafton Alto Saxophone (credit: Peter Cox).

A prototype was demonstrated as early as 1946 but instruments were not offered commercially until 1950, when they were advertised for sale at £58, about half the cost of a brass instrument at the time. The technological innovations underpinning the injection-moulding process that produced the Grafton were sufficiently newsworthy that British Moulded Plastics Ltd took out an advert in *The Times* to draw attention to their expertise in realising Sommaruga's design, complete with a picture of the Grafton alto.⁷

Grafton 10265 would have been assembled by injecting the acrylic nylon into preformed moulds. The body was moulded separately from the bell, the latter being produced in two parts prior to assembly. The two key guards and some of the pillars were also made separately and attached later, as was the keywork. The acrylic bell was ornamented by a delicately shaped brass insert, and the key guards flowed elegantly around the U-shaped curve of the instrument in a manner reminiscent of certain art deco figurations. The instrument was certainly stylish, and Sommaruga was perhaps influenced by the growing importance attached in his home country in the early post-war years to attractive designs as important elements of consumer goods, including plastic ones. As the design historian Penny Sparke observes, 'it was in the years after 1945 that plastics met high culture and coincided with the democratic ideals underpinning the "good design for everyone" movement. The most progressive implementation of that ideal took place in Italy, where [...] mundane products [...] suddenly aspired to the status of art objects, so sleek were their sculptural forms and so vibrant their colours.'⁸ Advertising copy of the time described the Grafton as 'a tone poem in ivory and gold', and though such advertising rhetoric is inevitably overstated, Graftons retain today a certain retro stylishness that continues to underpin their second-hand prices.

Although initial interest in the acrylic saxophone led to some commercial activity it was not a financial success. Its radical appearance was felt to be out of place in musically conservative arenas such as swing bands, in which the different sections were expected to present some level of visual uniformity. Notwithstanding the claims made in Sommaruga's patent, the instrument was not especially robust, and if dropped the body might crack. It also needed regular adjustment, which presented challenges for touring musicians. While the Grafton company in London operated an efficient repair system, others were hesitant to engage with the instrument

because of its unfamiliarity and the intrinsic difficulties of maintaining it. Somewhat disillusioned, Sommaruga left the UK again in 1953. John Dallas Limited retained the rights to the instrument and continued to manufacture it for several years, but by 1967 production had already been discontinued for some time and in 1968 the specialist tools and jigs required to produce it were mistakenly thrown out as scrap metal. None are likely ever to be made again.

When the instrument was launched, several popular UK saxophonists of the time were asked to endorse it, notably Freddy Gardner, Ken Mackintosh and Ivy Benson. There was little interest in the Grafton from classical performers. The visual prominence of its white body was not suited to traditional environments such as the symphony orchestra, and the classical saxophone scene in Britain in the 1950s was in any case very small. Perhaps the most high-profile British endorser was the jazz musician John Dankworth, who was pictured with Sommaruga and a Grafton alto in the music magazine *Melody Maker* in May 1950, having reportedly performed on the instrument at the opening of a music club the previous week.⁹ Dankworth also performed on a Grafton at one of the jazz concerts at the Festival of Britain in 1951, a festival designed to showcase the ‘best of British’ and stimulate the British economy out of its post-war slump. The innovative nature of the manufacturing process underpinning the Grafton most likely made it very appropriate for inclusion.

But none of these British names had the same international profile as the two most well-known American jazz players to adopt the instrument.¹⁰ Ornette Coleman was one of the Grafton’s most ardent supporters and used their saxophones for many years, having replacements sent over from England when he needed a new instrument, which was frequently.¹¹ He played it on perhaps his most influential album, *The Shape of Jazz to Come* (1959), the cover image for which clearly depicts him embracing his Grafton alto. The other significant jazz figure to use a Grafton was Charlie Parker.

The 1953 concert at Massey Hall

The details of Parker’s life and work are often hazy, not only because of his own frenetic lifestyle but also because of the slightly chaotic and marginalized contexts in which jazz was frequently performed at the time. Tracing the specific biography of Grafton 10265 is therefore challenging, and we gain only glimpses of Parker’s use of the instrument, in large

part through the pictorial legacy of his performances at this time and through occasional textual references.

There is a suggestion that Parker was playing the Grafton as early as spring 1952, in a little-known neighbourhood bar called McCanns in Leominster, Massachusetts, but there appears to be no documentary evidence to support this.¹² Certainly Parker was using the instrument in Montreal in February 1953, performing first a studio session for Canadian television on the 5th and then on the 7th at a club called Chez Paree. He also used the instrument on at least two occasions in the USA following these dates.¹³ This is perhaps slightly surprising, given that Parker was contracted to endorse King saxophones at the time and risked breaching this agreement if he were seen to play a competitor instrument.

But these earlier occasions are largely forgotten in jazz annals today. The continuing interest in Grafton 10265, and the reason that the AJM was keen to acquire it, is because Parker played it at a concert in Massey Hall, Toronto, on 15 May 1953 (see Figure 5.2). This event has come to be seen as especially iconic within jazz because it is the only occasion in which five leading lights of the jazz firmament of the time played on stage together: Dizzy Gillespie (trumpet), Max Roach (drums), Charles Mingus (double bass), Bud Powell (piano) and Parker. It also proved to be the last recorded meeting of Parker and Gillespie, who had together done so much in the 1940s to establish the fast-paced, harmonically complex musical language of bebop. The iconic nature of Grafton 10265 for jazz aficionados is not difficult to discern.

<Figure 5.2 near here>

Caption: Charlie Parker playing Grafton 10265 at Massey Hall, Toronto, in 1953 (Credit: Harold Robinson).

Prior to this event, Roach and Mingus, together with Mingus's then wife Celia, had established in 1952 a record label, Debut Records, and they recorded the Massey Hall concert with a view to releasing it on their label. It seems unlikely, however, that the other three soloists were aware that the concert was being recorded (Miller 1989, 66). Parker was at the time contracted to another impresario in New York (Norman Granz) so his proper name could not be used on the album cover. When the recording was released later in 1953, the group was described simply as 'The Quintet' and Parker was listed as Charlie Chan, perhaps

an oblique reference to his partner, Chan Parker. The original album cover had no pictures of the event and thus no trace of Grafton 10265, although a subsequent re-release by Fantasy Records in 1962 does show Parker playing the instrument.¹⁴ This later release also inscribes on the cover the phrase ‘The Greatest Jazz Concert Ever’, underlining the symbolic and quasi-mythical status with which the event had already been invested, less than a decade after it took place.

It is on these recordings that Grafton 10265 is brought to life. The saxophone is clearly audible (unlike some of the bass lines, which Mingus overdubbed for the original release) and played sometimes at blistering speed by Parker. Sommaruga’s supposedly ‘soggy’ springing system appears unproblematic in his hands. The sound is characteristically Parker’s: hard edged and forceful, with bursts of rapid note patterns interspersed with swoops and glisses and relatively little use of vibrato or indeed any sustained notes on which it might have been employed.¹⁵ We also get a sense of the musicians enjoying the event. Gillespie seems to be in a particularly mischievous mood as he shouts ‘Salt Peanuts’ over Parker’s solo during the performance of this eponymous tune.

But how did Charlie Parker, one of the most high-profile saxophonists of the day, come to be playing a white acrylic saxophone at a time when so few were in circulation and very few other people knew of them? In truth, nobody is sure, but this hasn’t prevented, and has perhaps encouraged, a certain mythology to build up around Charlie Parker and Grafton 10265. Principal among these myths is the idea that Parker was forced quickly to find a saxophone for the gig because, having pawned his normal one to purchase alcohol and drugs, he arrived in Toronto without one. For example, Parker’s biographer Ross Russell notes that ‘Charlie arrived in Toronto without his horn, and played with a white plastic alto lent by a local music store’ (1996, 312). But Mark Miller (1989, 20–21) has persuasively demonstrated that Parker was already playing the instrument on a previous visit to Canada only a few months previously and in the United States on several documented occasions during the intervening period. So a hasty visit to a local saxophone shop, who just happened to have one in stock, seems improbable. The serial number 10265 indicates that this was only the 265th instrument to come out of the London factory, so the chances of it showing up in an instrument retailer in Toronto just in the nick of time appear slight. A more plausible idea is that somebody connected with the Grafton company gave Parker the instrument in New York, as suggested by bass player Bill Crow in his autobiographical recollections *Birdland to*

Broadway. Crow notes that ‘One night at Birdland, Bird showed up on the bandstand playing an alto saxophone made of cream-colored plastic. Everyone speculated about the new instrument, some claiming it was an improvement on a metal horn, some deprecating it as a toy. Bird played it because the instrument company had given it to him. As they had hoped, people accepted the plastic alto because Bird was playing it’ (Crow 1992, 131–32).¹⁶ Whatever the veracity of these different ‘origin myths’, Parker’s significance within the jazz tradition, the mythologies that surround his own life (and death), the unorthodox look of the Grafton, and the particular significance ascribed to the Massey Hall concert have all encouraged a certain amount of mythologising around this particular instrument.

Reports of Parker playing Grafton 10265 after the Massey Hall concert are sporadic and difficult to confirm. There is very limited pictorial evidence of this, and thus the pictures taken of the Massey Hall concert by photographer Harold Robinson anchor the instrument in this Canadian environment, providing a paradox to the instrument’s appropriation as an icon of ‘American Jazz’ in the AJM. This linguistic slippage between ‘America’ and ‘United States’ is of course frequently encountered in jazz historiography and well beyond, and naturally it is the association with Parker, rather than Canada, for which the instrument is remembered.

After Parker’s death in 1955, Grafton 10265 remained in possession of Parker’s partner Chan for nearly 40 years – unplayed, it seems. The instrument was presumably in France, to where Chan had moved in 1971 after the breakdown of her relationship with another bebop saxophone player, Phil Woods. But in 1994 the instrument was once again in the limelight. Chan Parker had decided to auction a collection of memorabilia associated with her former partner and the Grafton was included in the sale. There was significant interest in the auction, organised at Christie’s in London, which the auctioneers further stimulated by organising a performance on the instrument by British saxophonist Peter King prior to the bidding commencing.¹⁷ The Grafton sold for £93,500 (at the time c.\$140,000), nearly half of the total amount raised for the collection overall. As Chan Parker herself observed after the auction, ‘It’s remarkable to think that some of the items went for more than Bird ever made’.¹⁸

The successful bidder for saxophone 10265 was Emanuel Cleaver, the then mayor of Kansas City. The museum for which it was intended opened three years later, in 1997. It remains on display in the AJM today, given pride of place in a protective glass case and surrounded by

other memorabilia relating to the Massey Hall concert: a poster, an album cover of an LP release, and a copy of the contract for the concert (see Figure 5.3). This inevitably somewhat nostalgic exhibit, consciously evoking jazz's halcyon days in Kansas City, contrasts with the otherwise modernistic, forward-looking décor of the museum as a whole. But it is here, at least for the moment, that Grafton 10265 has been laid to rest.

<Figure 5.3 near here>

Caption: Grafton 10265 in the American Jazz Museum

Credit: American Jazz Museum

Re-reading the life of Grafton 10265

Musical traditions often closely resemble belief systems, with musical creators seen to have supernatural powers and any artefacts with which they were associated becoming sacralised in a quasi-religious manner. Levi-Strauss, for example, writes that the musical creator 'is a being comparable to the gods' (1986, 18). Just as Mozart, Beethoven and others can be seen as the deities of Western classical music (Small 1987; Nettl 1995), so too are jazz's major creators treated hagiographically by those who identify closely with tradition. Perhaps the most extreme example of this is saxophonist John Coltrane's adoption, after his death, by the One Mind Evolutionary Transitional Church of Christ in San Francisco, for which part of the Sunday ritual is based around the music and poem of Coltrane's 1965 album *A Love Supreme*; stranger still, the church became part of the African Orthodox Church in 1982 and Coltrane was officially canonized as a saint.¹⁹ Parker has been spared this fate thus far, but after his death in 1955 it became fashionable in New York and occasionally elsewhere to inscribe the words 'Bird Lives' as graffiti in public places.²⁰ The hagiographic overlap with the widely used phrase 'Jesus Lives' is self evident.

In Kansas City this sacralization goes further: in an open public space just behind the AJM is a large statue of Parker's head set upon a pedestal, created in iron by the sculptor Robert Graham and unveiled in 1999, two years after the museum opened. The sculpture further emphasises the museum's status as a *lieu de mémoire*, powerfully symbolizing the cultural heritage of the 18th and Vine District while also seeming to use Bird's image to sanctify the

immediate area in which the sculpture stands. And inscribed in large letters on the pedestal is that quasi-religious aphorism: Bird Lives (see Figure 5.4).

<Figure 5.4 near here>

Caption: Charlie Parker memorial sculpture in the 18th and Vine District, Kansas City

Credit: Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library, Kansas City, Missouri

Brought home to Parker's birthplace, Grafton 10265 anchors the AJM collection, iconically reinforcing its owner's place at the heart of the museum and thus the jazz tradition celebrated there. Its association with one particular ritual event – the 1953 Massey Hall concert in Canada, that 'Greatest Jazz Concert Ever' – further lends the instrument a totemic significance. The quasi-mythical nature of that event, the unconventional appearance of the Grafton, the rareness of Parker's performances on it, and the fact that he died only two years after the concert itself, all serve to imbue Grafton 10265 with symbolic properties. Now the instrument rests in its Missouri reliquary, a hallowed historical artefact to which the jazz tradition's followers are drawn as they worship the memory of their spiritual hero.

Yet the glass case in which the instrument rests, necessarily protecting it from probing hands and the mid-western dust, also provides a barrier between those who come to pay homage to and the very thing that makes Grafton 10265 distinctive: its material nature. The acrylic nylon from which it is made would have a very different feel from the brass instruments that many would be familiar with, were they able to touch it. Plastic has itself connoted many different things since Sommaruga worked with it in the 1940s. Dankworth's performance on the instrument at the Festival of Britain in 1951 was appropriate because it drew attention to the innovative manufacturing process, the unusual material employed, and the flair and originality embedded in the instrument's design. Indeed, the Festival was designed to promote precisely those attributes in relation to British manufacturing as a whole during the immediate post-war period. It advocated a national design aesthetic which signalled a progressive future for British science, arts and technology and, as a contemporary promotional film observed, 'The skills that make the British workman famous [and the] design and craftsmanship and quality that go to make the fame of Britain's goods.'²¹ Grafton 10265 symbolised such characteristics in relation to musical instrument manufacturing. As the 1950 advert by British Moulded Plastics crowed, 'departing from convention and using

moulded plastics for the first time for this purpose [has produced] a handsome instrument to please the connoisseur'.²² Plastic goods were seen as modern, innovative and chic, and by extension, so was Grafton 10265.

But by the 1960s attitudes had begun to change. Plastic imitations of many products were becoming increasingly common and flooded certain markets. Plastic came to be seen as cheap, inferior, throwaway and, it was occasionally hinted, ecologically problematic (see Fisher 2013). Part of the often forcefully articulated negative responses towards Ornette Coleman's music – apart from the fact that his free jazz approach sounded so radically different from everybody else at the time – was because it was produced on a plastic instrument. Since the instrument was obviously cheap and inferior, the argument went, so the music must be also.

Parker was not so closely identified with Grafton saxophones to experience the same reaction, and his music was more widely appreciated. But if, previously, the plastic body of Grafton 10265 implied a cheap, disposable instrument of limited worth, this is today countered by its veneration as part of the permanent display at the AJM and the considerable amount of money used to acquire it. Indeed, Grafton saxophones in general have become collectors' items, partly because their 1950s retro looks are seen by many to be desirable, and partly because they can no longer be made. The pool of surviving instruments is a finite and likely diminishing resource, inevitably pushing up their resale value.

Perhaps the Grafton was just too ahead of its time. Certainly the principles underpinning its manufacture have been resurrected in the 21st century with the advent of additive manufacturing (3D printing), wherein plastic goods can be produced comparatively cheaply by dedicated printers controlled by computers. The technology has been used to produce many different instruments or component parts, including entire saxophones.²³ Such instruments are once again at the cutting edge of manufacturing technology although, at the time of writing, as with Grafton 10265, they remain somewhat marginalised in the world of musical performance and have not been widely adopted. Nevertheless, it could be argued that they have a technological kinship with Grafton saxophones, the story of which provides a rich historical resonance to these more recent developments.

Another important aspect of the material nature of Grafton 10265 is its whiteness. The usually golden sheen of other saxophones is often part of the instrument's allure. Gold is the colour most people associate with the instrument, notwithstanding that different coloured lacquers have sometimes been applied to saxophones to enhance their novelty value, particularly during the 1920s. But the body of a Grafton is quite distinctly white, and its visual difference is easily discerned even by those who may know little about the saxophone. This visual incongruity also contributed to some of the antagonistic attitudes shown towards Ornette Coleman.

This whiteness stands in contrast to the skin colour of many of jazz's leading practitioners. Indeed, for much of the twentieth century jazz was seen as a predominantly black musical tradition, not only within the USA itself but internationally. Notwithstanding that jazz and dance music were played by both white and black individuals and groups, jazz was most usually identified as an African-American music tradition, including by African Americans themselves. As Coleman himself put it, 'the best statements Negroes have made, of what their soul is, have been on tenor saxophone' (quoted in Litweiler 1992, 83). And, as I have observed elsewhere (Cottrell 2012, 315–27), the close association of the saxophone with black music culture meant that in the eyes of racist political regimes who were ideologically opposed to non-whites, the instrument itself was denigrated and sometimes proscribed.

The racial politics of jazz have been considered at greater length elsewhere (e.g. Peretti 1992), but it is relevant to note here that the arrival of bebop in the 1940s, as what can now be seen as a more modernist form of jazz involving complex rhythms and harmonies, angular melodic lines and elevated levels of individual virtuosity, was welcomed in part because it provided a more obviously sophisticated musical language which counteracted widespread but pernicious stereotypes of African Americans as rural, backward or ignorant. Bebop provided a mechanism that facilitated cultural resistance against white hegemony (Lott 1988; Porter 2002).

Kansas City jazz was very largely built on the skills of black musicians, and Grafton 10265 can be seen as symbolic of these racial tensions. In the legacy images involving the instrument during the period its whiteness is particularly distinctive. For example, in Harold Robinson's monochrome photographs of the Massey Hall concert (see Figure 2), the white Grafton contrasts notably with the dark stage and background, with the darker hues appearing

deliberately enhanced in the printing process. A similar contrast arises in the cover picture used for the Ornette Coleman LP *The Shape of Jazz to Come*, released in 1959, only six years after the Massey Hall event.²⁴ Again the white Grafton contrasts notably with Coleman's black sweater and, indeed, his black skin. In both these examples it is the white saxophone that is subservient to, in fact controlled by, the black performer. The white instrument is now pressed into service at the black man's behest, and these images provide a symbolic visual record of cultural resistance to white hegemony, musically encoded.

This reading of the relationship between the black jazz musician and the white instrument is reinforced by the display of Grafton 10265 in the American Jazz Museum. If the travels of Annie Proulx's accordion can be read as symbolic of the journeys of America's immigrant population over the course of the twentieth century, then it is not too far-fetched to observe that in the AJM, an institution conceived as a tribute to the black musicians of Kansas City who made the district of 18th and Vine their own, it is the *white* saxophone that is now isolated, constrained, put on display and subject to the curious gazes of passers-by. Grafton 10265 has become the exotic other. Divorced from its musical function, it rests in the heart of one of the USA's most important jazz cities, its white body providing silent testimony to the previous mastery of it by the black musician who brought it to life.

Conclusion

In his ethnographic study of banjo makers, Richard Jones-Bamman notes that 'Musical instruments are more than mere tools or artefacts. They are inscribed with the stories of those who build, play, collect, or simply preserve them in closets and attics. Each person handling an instrument potentially leaves an imprint – physical, emotional – adding to the tale and often being affected by the experience' (2017, 208). The way we relate these stories surrounding musical instruments requires us to be attentive to the literary narrative we construct, in a fashion that is sometimes not so very different from the novelist. We are not, of course, simply constructing fantasies, but we are telling stories: to recall Geertz's phrase, we are the romancers who dream those stories up. Here I am suggesting that focusing on the biography of one specific instrument – telling the reader its story – provides one literary strategy through which we can illuminate the broader social and cultural currents that lend that instrument its significance.

The texts produced by the novelist and the scholar have different objectives, but they share many attributes: choosing literary style with respect to characterisation and point of view; using specific narrative strategies directed towards a particular readership; dialogically blending presumed ‘facts’ with authorial experience and interpretation; relying on the reader’s imagination to both deconstruct the author’s words and reconstruct their presumed meaning in the reader’s imagination, etc. Once released into the world, the author has little or no influence as to how their text will be understood. As Roland Barthes famously puts it, ‘the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author’ (1977, 148).

Yet there are some important differences between novels and scholarly texts, particularly ethnographically-grounded narratives pertaining to musical instruments. Both Bates (2012) and Dawe (2007) draw attention to the importance of ethnographic fieldwork to illuminate the ways in which people relate to their instruments, to fully understand the multi-layered meanings that accrue and how, as material objects, instruments have agentive powers within the social networks in which they are implicated. The ethnographic present is a rather different place to the fantasy world arising from the relationship between the novelist and her or his source materials. It is also different from the approach taken in this chapter, which seeks to narrate a story about the biography of a particular instrument based on the reworking of historic data, without the opportunity for ethnographic engagement. Yet all these approaches, to recall Clifford’s words, require the writer not merely to make, but to make things up – to invent things which are not actually real.

One of the challenges that fiction writers face is knowing when and how to end a story. Edgecombe notes that literary object biographies often conclude with ‘misprizement and loss of dignity’ (2008, 560), with the object that has been central to the narrative somehow meeting an injurious and often ruinous end. He provides examples from Hans Christian Andersen and Oscar Wilde to illustrate the point, and notes that the green accordion that is central to Proulx’s *Accordion Crimes* meets a similar demise, crushed beneath the wheels of an onrushing truck on a north American highway.

It is tempting to see the fate of Grafton 10265 similarly. Obviously, the instrument has not been destroyed. It stands proudly in the AJM, a testament to the covetous acquisition that placed it there as well as to the protective environment that keeps it safe. But entombed

within a glass case in the AJM's main space, it provides another example of the silent objectification of musical instruments that museum incarceration inevitably confers. Bates (2012, 365) describes such museums as 'mausoleums, places for the display of the musically dead', and in the sense that the instruments they contain have been rendered mute and removed from the social networks that previously gave them life, this is true.

But although Charlie Parker may no longer live in any literal sense, his music does. His recordings ensure that his performances can be resurrected on demand, and as the instrument on which a small number of those recordings were made, Grafton 10265 is itself revived. Through the time-shifting portals offered by recording technology, it continues to animate social relations by affording material for discussion among jazz aficionados, providing aural models for aspiring jazz players who seek to learn about the technical intricacies of bebop, and supplying musical information to be pored over by critics or scholars. Even in its mute state in the AJM its agentive powers continue. It draws people to the museum to discuss the instrument's historical significance, its place in the 18th and Vine district, and its broader relationship with jazz worlds past, present and future.

In a final twist to the Grafton 10265 story, in 2021 the instrument was temporarily loaned to the Disney company, to be displayed in their EPCOT theme park at the Walt Disney World Resort in Bay Lake, Florida, as part of an exhibition titled 'The Soul of Jazz: An American Adventure'. The exhibition continues at the time of writing, purporting to offer 'a musical tour of several influential American cities'.²⁵ Thus another layer of meaning accrues to the instrument. Now it iconically asserts Kansas City's position in the history of American jazz for those beyond the AJM. Displayed among exhibits denoting other north American cities in which jazz evolved, it inflects social interactions and individual understandings among those who visit EPCOT to mull over the exhibition, just as it had done in the AJM. But since visitors to the resort are drawn in part through their identification with globally recognised animated characters such as Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and a host of modern equivalents, perhaps the instrument itself and the man who played it are now projected into this popular culture imaginarium. The interactions provoked by the Grafton are now components of a larger panorama of modern American identity shaped by negotiations which freely commingle subject and object, fact and fiction, and memory and imagination.

These ongoing discourses continue to inform our engagement with Grafton 10265, and as they evolve so too do the meanings we attach to this humble plastic saxophone. We thus retain a dialogic relationship with the instrument. As the philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) would have it, the Grafton can be understood to be one link in a chain of interconnected events that stretch back into the past and project into the future. Our understandings of the instrument and its significance are constantly evolving. The nature of its iconicity is continually being remade, forged from the ongoing interaction of myriad events and the discourses in which they are situated.

Or, to put it another way, Grafton 10265 lives.

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Notes

¹ I am grateful to Petter Frost Fadnes and Tom Perchard for their insightful comments on a draft of this chapter.

² In October 2017, Kansas City, Missouri was also designated a "Creative City" by UNESCO in recognition of its musical heritage.

³ See for example Driggs and Haddix 2006, Russell 1971.

⁴ The city of Kansas is divided by the Missouri river and thus split between the states of Kansas and Missouri.

⁵ These patents were lodged at the Patent Office in London: Provisional Specifications Nos. 604,407 and 604,418 were applied for on 14 December 1945, with Complete Specifications for both patents being lodged on 13 December 1946 and 13 January 1947 respectively. These were finally granted on 2 July 1948.

⁶ Patent Number 604,407, 1945, 2.

⁷ 'A new use for moulded plastics', *The Times*, 30 December 1950, 4.

⁸ <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2002723814?accountid=14510&pq-origsite=summon> (last accessed 19 December 2021). See also (Sparke 1993) and (Lees-Maffei and Fallan 2013).

⁹ See *Melody Maker* 20 May 1950, 2. I am grateful to Petter Frost Fadnes for bringing this to my attention.

¹⁰ It might be noted that David Bowie also played on a Grafton saxophone for a time, apparently having been given it by his father on his 14th birthday in 1961.

¹¹ When the supply of Graftons finally faded, Coleman reverted to a brass Selmer instrument, albeit one that was lacquered white.

¹² According to the liner notes accompanying the album *Charlie Parker, Boston, 1952* (UPCD 27.42)

¹³ 22 February 1953 at Club Kavakos, Washington and 9 May 1953 at Birdland in New York City. Details taken from discussion thread at <http://www.organissimo.org/forum/index.php?/topic/27379-why-did-bird-play-a-plastic-saxophone/> (last accessed 11 September 2021).

¹⁴ <https://www.masseyhallandroythomsonhall.com/our-history/masseyhall/jazz-stories-at-massey-hall/> The picture used is one taken by Harold Robinson, many of which can be found in Miller 1989. See also Figure 2.

¹⁵ There are various uploads of this recording on the internet. See for example https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4XSo_IK9Qto (last accessed 9 September 2021).

¹⁶ I am grateful to Alan John Ainsworth for bringing this reference to my attention.

¹⁷ A video of this performance can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MjY1NPUUp9U> (last accessed 19 December 2021).

¹⁸ *The Times*, 9 September 1994, 5.

¹⁹ See <https://www.coltranechurch.org/> last accessed (11 September 2021).

²⁰ The phrase ‘Bird Lives’ was later appropriated for the title of a biography of Parker (Russell 1996) as well as several albums by other musicians by way of tribute.

²¹ ‘Festival in London’, made by the Crown Film Unit for the Central Office of Information, 1951, 4’50” to 5’10”. The film may be freely streamed from <https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-festival-in-london-1951-online> (last accessed 9 September 2021).

²² ‘A new use for moulded plastics’, *The Times*, 30 December 1950, 4.

²³ Examples of 3D printed saxophones can be found at <http://www.vibratosax.com/index.php>, and <https://uk.3dsystems.com/blog/2014/08/worlds-first-3d-printed-saxophone> among others (last accessed 17 September 2021).

²⁴ Copies of this album cover are widely available on the internet. See for example <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Shape-Jazz-Come-Ornette-Coleman/dp/B000002I4W>

²⁵ <https://disney parks.disney.go.com/blog/2021/02/experience-the-soul-of-jazz-an-american-adventure-beginning-today-at-epcot/> (last accessed 8 October 2021).