

Jazz Vocal Improvisation

The Effect of Role Conflict

Wendy Hargreaves

Background

- jazz vocalist, final stages of PhD at Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University, Australia
- part of my PhD study exploring how improvising jazz vocalists differ significantly from instrumentalists.

Data Sources

- 1) Anonymous, online survey of 209 Australian, currently performing, adult jazz instrumentalists and vocalists
- 2) 22 x 90-minute interviews of Australian jazz vocal performers and/or jazz educators in Australian tertiary institutions

Terminology

For the purposes of this presentation “improvisation” refers to the solo after the presentation of the head of a jazz song in a traditional jazz performance.

In these performances, vocalists use scat syllables instead of lyric for soloing.

The Effect of Role Conflict:

How the perceived role of the improviser conflicts with the perceived role of the vocalist

Descriptions of the role of the improviser

- to create the solo
- to create art
- to entertain
- to express oneself musically
- to feature a musician
- to display technical skill
- to create contrast to the head

Compulsory for instrumentalists

Instrumentalists improvise because “That’s what you have to do...That’s why you have the sax player.” (Mark Ham)

“I suppose on the whole I’ve come across more instrumentalists that improvise than singers that improvise because...you don’t have to improvise to make it as a singer.”

(Andrew Piper)

“...[T]here’s no such thing as a jazz instrumentalist who doesn’t solo.”

(Louise Denson)

Optional for Singers

“Generally instrumentalists are conditioned to be improvisers” whereas, “Not every singer scats.” (Jacki Cooper)

“It’s different for every singer, isn’t it, and they choose where they want to fit in the politics of the band and what improvisational role they want to take according to their own taste.” (Libby Hammer)

In discussing the jazz course at a university in Western Australia, Jamie Oehlers, co-ordinator of Jazz Studies, listed a desired outcome for vocalists as being “able to scat if they want.”

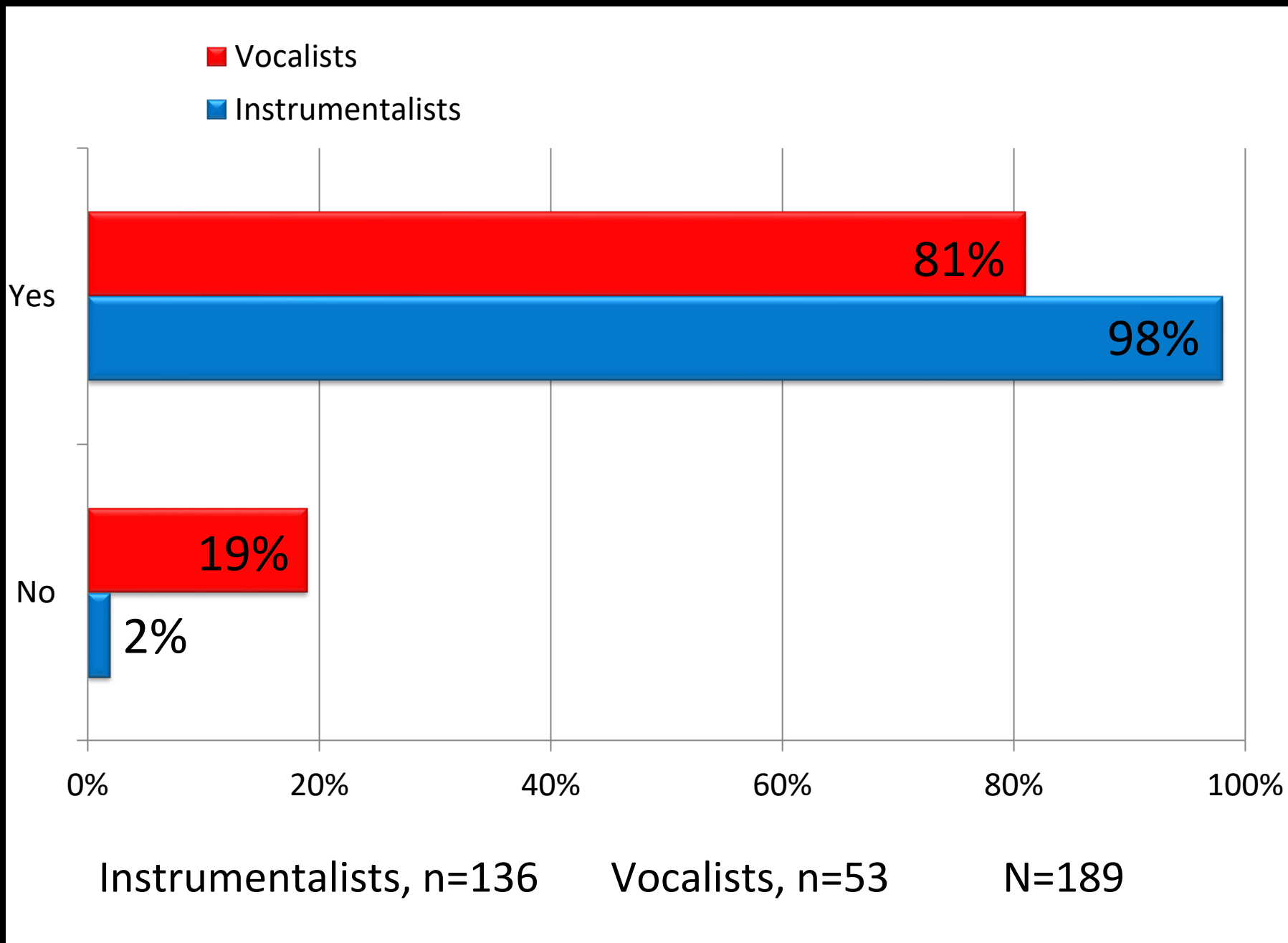
Jazz vocalists are faced with a
performance choice:

To scat or not to scat?

What are they choosing and
why are they choosing it?

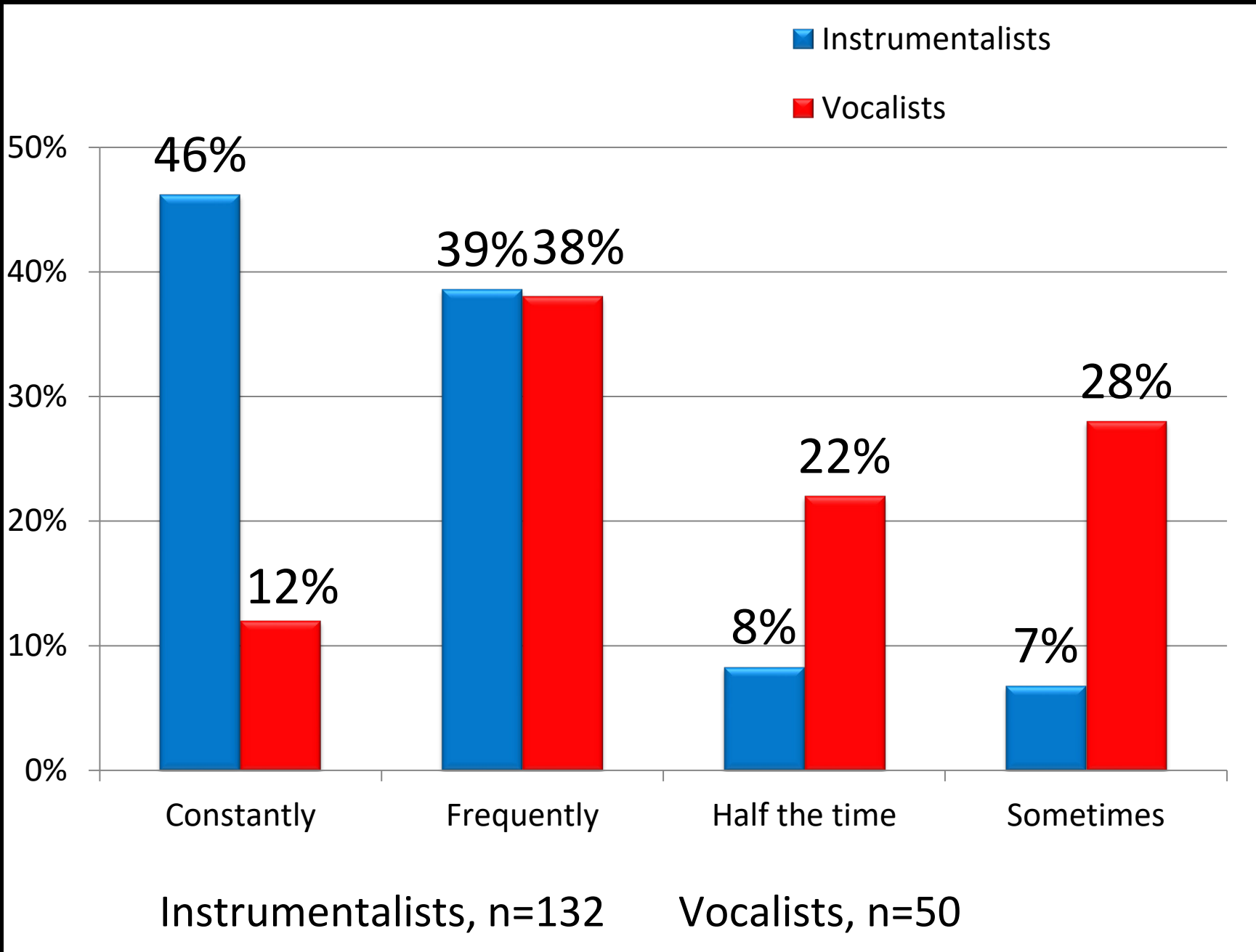
Survey question:

Do you improvise instrumental/scat
solos in public jazz performances?



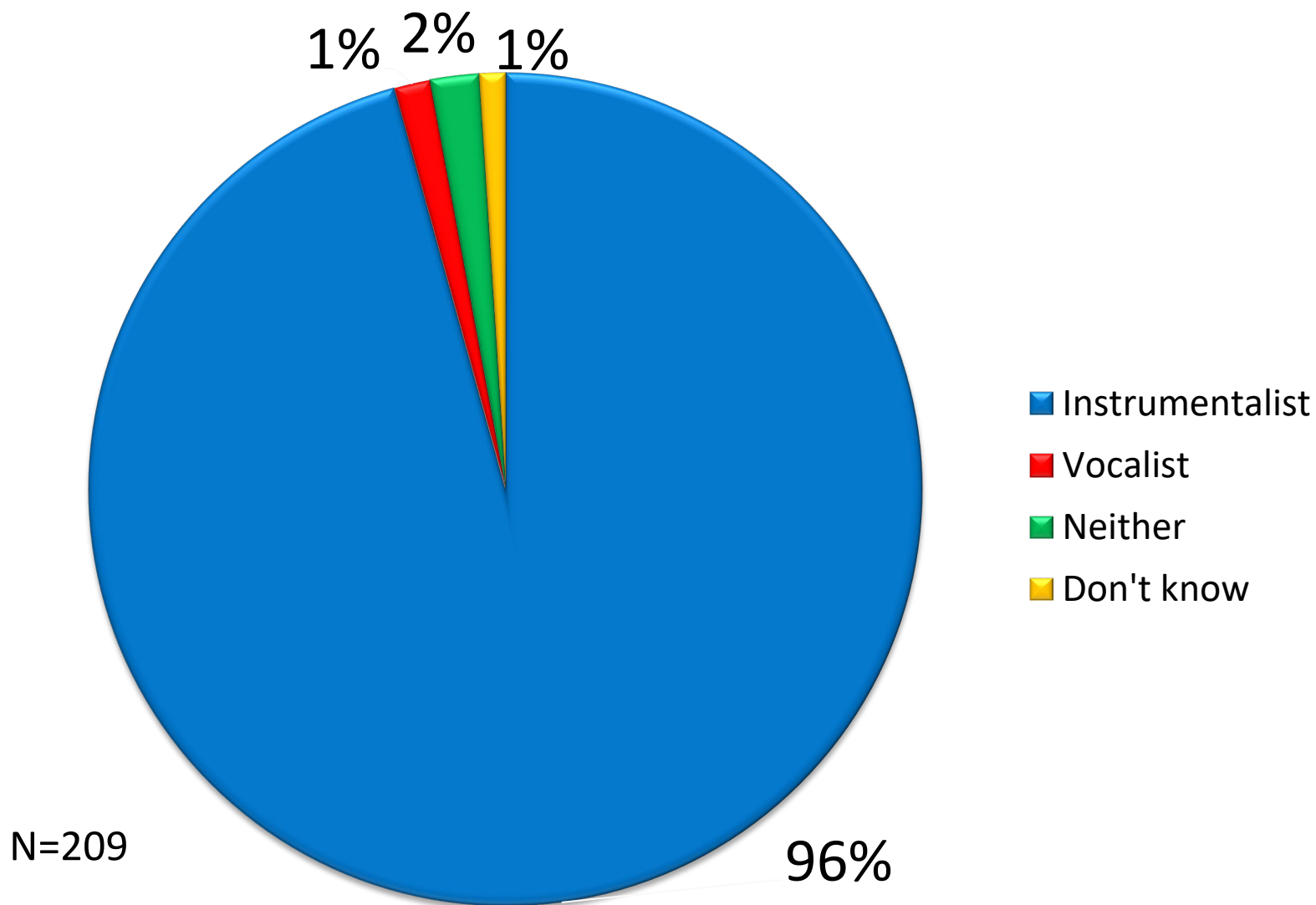
Survey question:

How often do you improvise an
instrumental/scat solo in
jazz performances?



Survey question:

Which musician is more likely to
perform the improvised solo
in a jazz song?



Singers don't appear to be taking up the option to solo as frequently as instrumentalists.

Interviewees gave six reasons they chose not to improvise a solo.

1) I don't improvise as much because...

...I prefer to focus on delivering lyrics
– that's what makes vocalists special

Maximizing the value of
verbal capability

“...[S]ome vocalists probably aren’t interested in [scat]. They’re more interested in telling the story because they can with the words.”

(Melissa Forbes)

“I do feel that the instrumentalists primarily fall into that role [of improviser] because that’s just what they do. I feel that the vocalists primarily don’t fall into that role because they can do something else.”

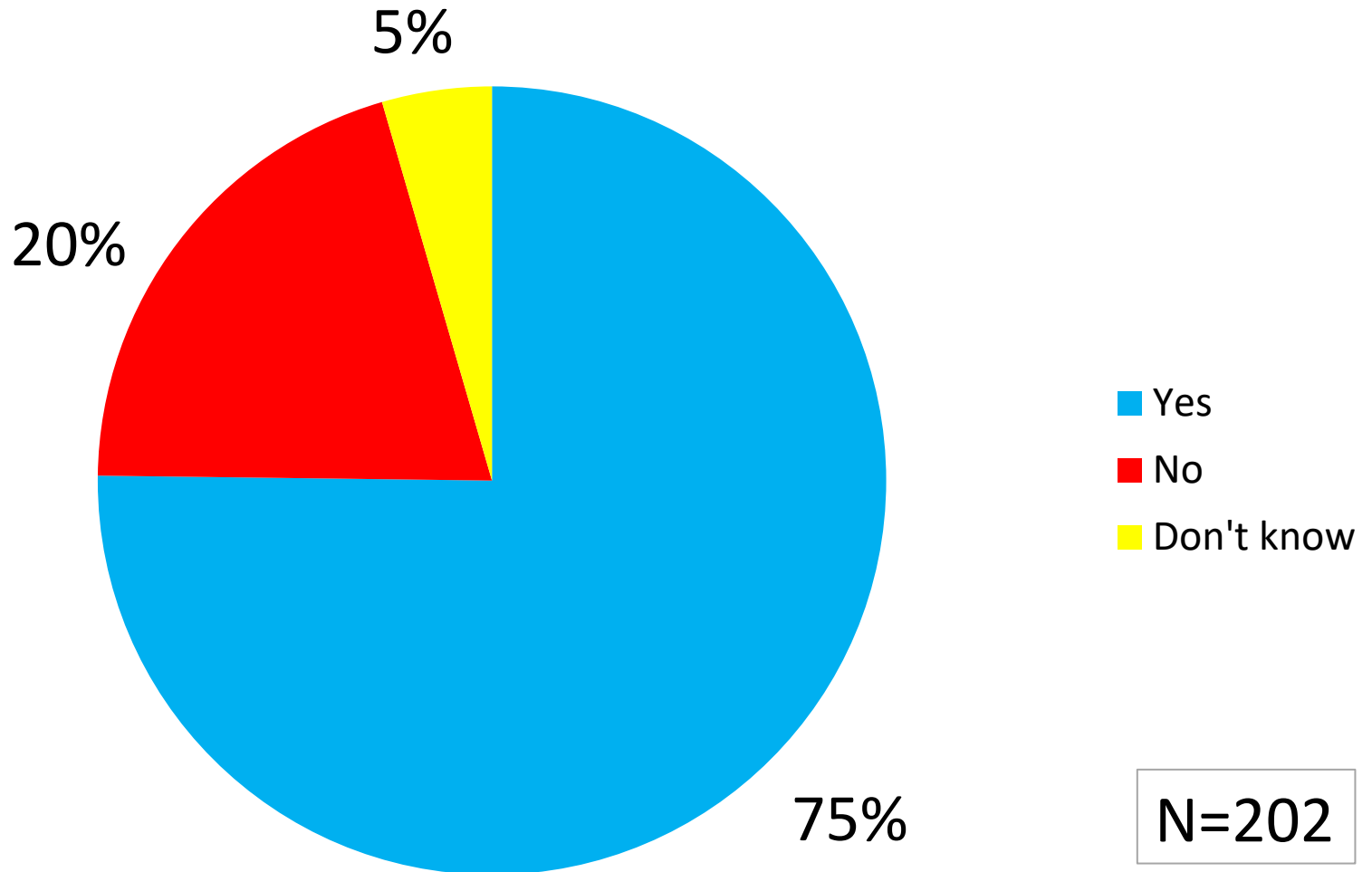
(Dan Quigley)

2) I don't improvise as much because...

...it disconnects me from
the audience.

Prioritising the
audience-singer relationship

Do you think vocalists have a stronger connection with audiences than instrumentalists because they sing lyrics?



“[Scatting is] quite confronting, I think, to most people because they go “what’s going on? I don’t understand this. I understand when someone’s singing me a song. Now what are they doing?”

(Michelle Nicole)

“I find that there is an expectation that instrumentalists improvise, while this is not usually the case with vocalists. Vocalists are more likely to be performing to a less knowledgeable audience who find scatting weird or they wonder if the singer has forgotten the lyrics.”

(Respondent 46)

“It is hard to connect with someone on a 'scatting' level. Audience members would rather hear a trumpet solo, because the trumpet doesn't have the ability to speak words to them and hence, they should solo.”

(Respondent 10)

3) I don't improvise as much because...

...I don't want to make the
audience uncomfortable.

Responsibility for the
audience's experience

“People get a little disgruntled by singers scattling because a lot of people don't understand why we do it. People come to see/hear a singer speak to them, make them feel good. Scatting doesn't do that for a good majority of people.”

(Respondent 10)

Sharny Russell reported choosing to stop improvising during a set in order to “give [the audience’s] ears a break...I really truly believe that if I got up and I scatted on every song that I sang like a saxophonist would do an improvisation on every song, I don’t think anyone would be coming to my gigs.

They would go nuts.”

4) I don't improvise as much because...

...the instrumentalists need a turn.

Fair division of labour

“...[I]f the vocalist sings the melody, then scats, then sings the head again, there's not much for the horn players to do. So solos are 'reserved' for the instrumentalists so they get some air time.”

(Respondent 39)

“I think for vocalists who are really good improvisers, they are sort of cutting out a little bit of the instrumentalist’s opportunity if they then take a fantastic scat solo. There’s less left over for the band.”

(Naomi Crellin)

“If a gig is already dominated by a vocalist its assumed as ‘fair’ to let the band improvise the solos.”

(Respondent 209)

5) I don't improvise as much because...

...the instrumentalists already
do the job.

Redundancy

“I did a gig the other night with my sextet ... who are all amazing improvisers. All very, very different styles. I just so wanted to sit down and listen to them. And I’m thinking, ‘Why should I do a solo? This is just silly.’ Like I’m totally superfluous.”

(Michelle Nicole)

“If you’ve got a jazz quartet, you don’t really need your singer to sing five choruses...”

(Mark Ham)

6) I don't improvise as much because...

... I like to save it up for a special moment.

Novelty value

“It gives the audience something different.”

(Mark Ham)

...to “pepper a programme”

(Ingrid James)

“I find [scat singing is] only appropriate in small doses in the right spot. It’s like sticking too much salt in your cooking. I have been to many gigs where I’ve heard singers, especially jazz gigs, where the whole meal is salt. I think it can be too much.”

(Ashley Lewis)

Overall, it's the added things about being a vocalist that cause the conflict when the singer assumes the role of improviser:

communication expectation

relationship expectation

To recap...

The role of improviser can be filled by either instrumentalists or vocalists.

Vocalists do not voluntarily assume the role of improviser as frequently as instrumentalists. Communication and relationship expectations contribute by generating conflict in perceived roles.

So what???

It matters because if the scenario where vocalists are choosing not to improvise is replicated in educational settings then we may be inhibiting effective vocal jazz improvisation education.

This can occur in two specific ways:

- 1) Decrease opportunities for gaining procedural knowledge
- 2) Decrease motivation

Pedagogical Consideration 1

The choice

Who makes the choice that
the vocalist will improvise in the
educational world?

“...[A]t Jazzworx I’ve got three girls there and they’ll come to me and say “they wanted us to improvise over such and such in the class the other day and I just said ‘no, I don’t want to do it’” ...

Whereas if a guitarist said that they’d just - Well, they wouldn’t say it! They’d just have a go.”

(Melissa Forbes)

Pedagogical Consideration 2

The expectation

Once the choice is clear, the expectation can be clear and reinforced.

“I still have ensemble teachers who will never ask if I'm taking a solo.”

Tom Barton

Voice Student of Bachelor of
Music Performance (Improvisation)

Pedagogical Consideration 3

Role Models

Consciously connecting vocal students with
vocal improvisation role models

“[The audience] don’t understand [scat] because they don’t see it. Where do they see it? Whereas if I play the saxophone they wouldn’t blink because they’ve seen a saxophone solo. They’ve heard saxophone solos and guitars. They hear it every day.”

“They’re not hearing [scat]. They don’t turn on their radio and hear scatting.”

(Michelle Nicole)

Pedagogical Consideration 4

Managing relationship expectations

- 1) with the instrumentalists

Michelle Nicole on improvising at jam sessions in New York:

“I just knew that they were going ‘oh God a singer.’”

She overcame their attitude by thinking:

“Oh buggar it. I’m here. I’ve been waiting until 5 o’clock in the morning just like you. I’m going to sing.”

Managing relationship expectations

2) with the audience

Eye contact can signal
a change of priorities from
relating to the audience to improvising.

In closing...

The role of jazz improviser produces a tension for vocalists who are accustomed to prioritising verbal communication in their traditional role.

The optional nature of vocal improvising may allow singers to avoid the conflict by avoiding improvising.

Awareness of the conflict in educational settings means we can consciously and proactively work to disarm it and ensure maximum efficacy for vocal jazz improvisation education.

In other words...

If jazz vocalists are expected to learn improvising at university, then we can increase the frequency that they scat by blocking the escape route of role conflict.