

Dædalus

Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

Spring 2019

Why Jazz Still Matters

Gerald Early & Ingrid Monson, guest editors

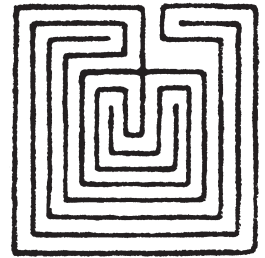
with Farah Jasmine Griffin
Gabriel Solis · Christopher J. Wells
Kelsey A. K. Klotz · Judith Tick
Krin Gabbard · Carol A. Muller





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“Why Jazz Still Matters”

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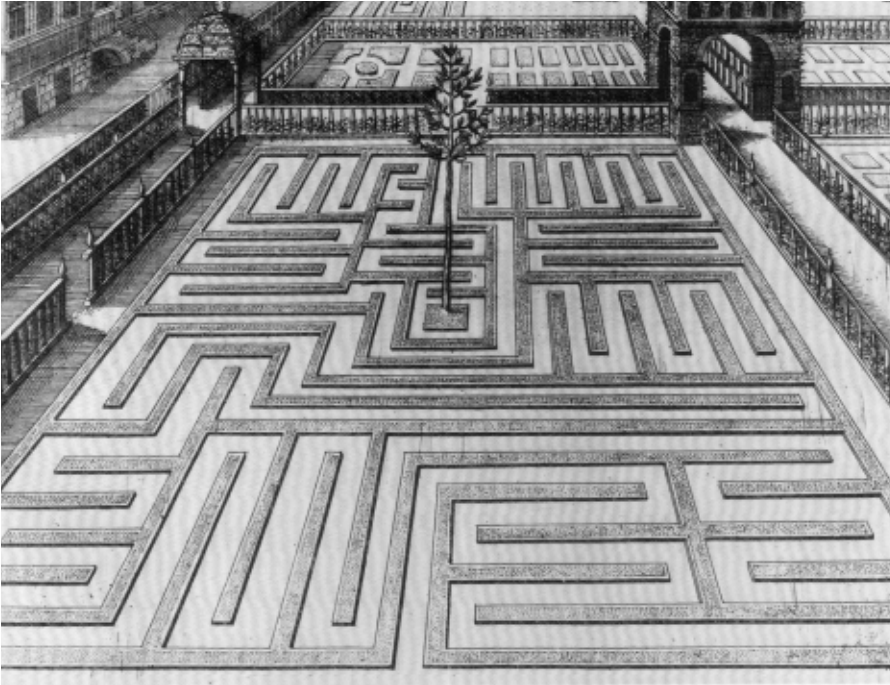
Inside front cover: Pianist Geri Allen. Photograph by Arne Reimer,
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Contents

- 5 **Why Jazz Still Matters**
Gerald Early & Ingrid Monson
- 13 **Following Geri's Lead**
Farah Jasmine Griffin
- 23 **Soul, Afrofuturism & the Timeliness of
Contemporary Jazz Fusions**
Gabriel Solis
- 36 **"You Can't Dance to It":
Jazz Music and Its Choreographies of Listening**
Christopher J. Wells
- 52 **Dave Brubeck's Southern Strategy**
Kelsey A. K. Klotz
- 67 **Keith Jarrett, Miscegenation & the Rise of
the European Sensibility in Jazz in the 1970s**
Gerald Early
- 83 **Ella Fitzgerald & "I Can't Stop Loving You," Berlin 1968:
Paying Homage to & Signifying on Soul Music**
Judith Tick
- 92 ***La La Land* Is a Hit, but Is It Good for Jazz?**
Krin Gabbard
- 104 **Yusef Lateef's Autophysiopsychic Quest**
Ingrid Monson
- 115 **Why Jazz? South Africa 2019**
Carol A. Muller

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Design for the hedge maze is by Johan Vredeman de Vries, from *Hortorum viridariorumque elegantes & multiplices formae: ad architectonicae artis normam affabre delineatae* (Cologne, 1615).

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Why Jazz Still Matters

Gerald Early & Ingrid Monson

I'd rather play something that you can learn and like that you don't know. I don't want people to know what I am.

– Miles Davis, 1985¹

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Perhaps, like Miles Davis, jazz itself is a mystique wrapped in an enigma, an essential or inescapable unknowingness that makes this music attractive for its audience. But if jazz is partly – through its challenging demands as a musical form, through the various changes through which it has sustained itself over the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, and through its aspirations to both embody and transform modernity – a music of clear and revealed intentions, it remains an art that many, even many of its devotees, do not fully understand. Even the word “jazz” itself is wrapped in mystery. How did the music come to be called this and what does this word mean? Jazz bassist Bill Crow points out that some have thought the word comes the French verb *jaser*, or to chatter. Others say that the word “arose from corruptions of the abbreviations of the first names of early musicians: ‘Charles’ (Chas.) or ‘James’ (Jas).” Some have thought it came from the slang word for semen or that it came from “jazzing,” a slang word for fornication.² Anthropologist Alan Merriam notes that there are also Hausa and Arabic words that may be related to the term: *jaiza*, the rumbling of distant drums, and *jazb*, allure-ment or attraction.³

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One of the reasons that the early music in New Orleans and after was so disapproved of by the bourgeoisie was because of the association with sex. The same reaction would occur roughly thirty-five or so years later with the advent of rock and roll, another rebellious form of music with a name associated with sex. Because jazz in its early days before World War I was performed in brothels, as well as at picnics and parades, an association with sex and the erotic is not surprising. As Gerald Early observed about Miles Davis, the black male body came to define a kind of black male existentialism functioning as “a symbol of engagement and detachment, of punishing discipline and plush pleasure that operated cooperatively, not in conflict, if rightly understood.” Furthermore, this new kind of sexuality, first associated with jazz and the margins, became, over time, idealized in mainstream culture.⁴

Many jazz musicians never liked the word “jazz,” among the most notable being Duke Ellington, drummer Max Roach, saxophonist Rashaan Roland Kirk, composer Muhal Richard Abrams, trumpeter Nicholas Payton, and Miles Davis, who said to his interlocutor in 1985: “You know I don’t like the word jazz, right? You’ve heard that? I hope that’s one of the things you’ve heard.”⁵ Many African American musicians viewed the word as a music industry label created by whites that demeaned, stereotyped, and limited them artistically. Bill Crow ends his meditation on the word jazz by noting: “As we enter the 1990s the sexual connotation of the word has almost completely faded away. ‘Jazz’ is now used to identify musical forms, as well as a style of Broadway theater dancing, a patented exercise regimen, a toilet water, a basketball team, a brand of computer software.”⁶ Within this metamorphosis lies a tale.

Jazz improvisation celebrates the heroic genius improviser, but, as musicians know, that brilliance often depends on the collective magic of the right band: individuals who compliment, anticipate, inspire, and upset each other into a communal whole greater than the sum of its parts. Indeed, two of the most influential heroes in jazz – Miles Davis and John Coltrane – are known by the brilliance of their quartets and quintets, which became the most revered models of group interplay. These collective musical relationships became generalized into idealized concepts of community that pervade our contemporary understanding of jazz. For Wynton Marsalis, the jazz ensemble is democracy in action: participatory, inclusive, challenging, competitive, and collective.⁷ For the interracial musical scene of the forties and fifties, jazz improvisation was often viewed as the ultimate integrated music, crossing the color line and social categories with aplomb.⁸ For others, black musicians created idealized and woke communities of color, which inspired the development of progressive black social and spiritual movements. Freedom links the musical aesthetics of jazz and its sociopolitical ambitions: associated with improvisation and desperately needed for racial justice and inclusion. For some, the political and cultural associations of jazz are primary, indeed, above the music itself, which can make jazz seem like a branch of social theory. Ralph Ellison criticized this tendency by wryly critiquing Amiri Baraka’s (LeRoi Jones) *Blues People* by noting that “the tremendous burden of sociology which Jones would place upon this body of music is enough to give even the blues the blues.”⁹ For others, the music must be addressed to the exclusion of the social and cultural. Music theorists are more comfortable on this terrain, but the most interesting recent work on jazz has emphasized the sound of the music,

the embodied experience of listening and performing as the link between the musical and the social.¹⁰

Jazz is a complex, highly blended, sometimes contradictory music and, indeed, since its inception, it has been hotly debated exactly what forms or styles constitute this music. Is it music theory or a technique that is applied to music? Is it one music or several loosely grouped forms of music that deal with improvisation? Its roots are African and European, classical and popular, dance music and art music. It has been called both cool and hot, earthy and avant-garde, intellectual and primitive. It has been influenced by Latin American and Afro-Cuban music, by Middle Eastern, Indian, and other forms of Asian music, by African music, and by varieties of religious music including gospel and the Protestant hymnal. Jazz also has roots in the American popular song (which makes up a good deal of its repertoire), the blues, hokum and circus music, marching band music, and popular dance music. It is known for being improvised and touted for the freedom it permits its players, but jazz in its heyday of swing was largely composed and tightly arranged; although many jazz players have soloed, relatively few, as might be expected, were exceptional, memorial, or highly influential soloists. In any case, why did so-called free music generated on the spot by the player become more highly valued by jazz players and audiences than notated music that, by its very nature, is presumed to have a greater range of expressiveness? Improvised music goes back to Western classical composers like Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart, who were superb improvisers, but has also existed elsewhere around the world for millennia. What makes jazz improvisation different? Singers made jazz popular, but the music is mostly instrumental, and the great instrumentalists

are considered its most important innovators. Because most of the great singers were women – from Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughn, Ella Fitzgerald, and Peggy Lee to Cassandra Wilson and Dianne Reeves – male bias on the part of both the musicians themselves and of critics (most of whom were and are male) likely skewed our sense of this music.¹¹

Jazz has always sought a popular audience with varying success but, since its earliest days, it has been a music that is often performed by musicians for musicians. This has made many listeners impatient with it, feeling that if one needs practically a degree in music theory to appreciate it, its practitioners should not expect untrained or casual audiences to be bothered with it. But on the other hand, its technical pretensions have made jazz a kind of status music with some audiences.

Early sound technology such as phonograph records and radio spread jazz around the world, and the speed with which it spread frightened many people in its early days, especially because the music in its inception appealed so powerfully to the young. Jazz emerged in the twentieth century, the Age of Music, when people not only heard more music than ever before but consumed it more voraciously than ever before in human history, largely attracted to music for its emotional and psychological effects. Jazz became the first, though not the last, popular music to be trapped by its intellectual pretensions, on the one hand, and its anti-intellectual appeal, on the other. Jazz has been condemned and promoted by various political ideologies and governments: Nazis called it “Nigger-Juden” music;¹² the Soviets thought of it as music of the workers and the dispossessed, on the one hand, and a sensationalized, bourgeois art, on the other; in the United States, it was once considered low-class,

dance hall music, on the one hand, and the music of democracy, the Only Original American Music, on the other. So powerful was the presence of jazz when it first emerged that it is the only music that has a social epoch named in its honor: the Jazz Age (1920s).

Jazz is, of course, about race in America not only because African American musicians were so central in its creation and African American audiences so important in their creative responses to it, but because whites played such a dominant role in its dissemination through records and performance venues and its ownership as intellectual and artistic property. (Whites also played jazz music from its earliest days and always constituted a major portion of its audience. Whites, both in the United States and in Europe, were leading critical interpreters of and writers about jazz as well.)¹³ It is a music that has always attracted intellectuals and artists, and thus the music's influence can be felt far from the bandstand or the dance floor or the recording studio. Jazz has spawned an influential, international lifestyle, an attitude toward life – the hot, the hip, and the cool – that is secular, obsessed with youth, fixated on the marginalized, and detached yet passionately self-centered, and that has attached itself to other forms of popular music, like rock and hip hop, as jazz has become, for many young music lovers, *passé*. This attitude of the cool and the hip has influenced literature, including the production of the so-called jazz novel and jazz poetry, as well as art, speech, dress, and antibourgeois habits of indulgence such as using illegal drugs like marijuana and heroin. Even interracial sex, considered rebellious by some and deviant by others, was associated with the *demi-monde* of jazz.

Every dimension of jazz outlined above is the subject of academic and critical study in a variety of fields including

English, history, American studies, musicology, African American studies, studies of the Americas, and culture studies. Indeed, jazz studies as an interdisciplinary field of research and pedagogy formally exists and has its own journal, *Jazz Perspectives*. What is this all about, anyway? And why should those with no interest in jazz care about any of this?

This issue of *Dædalus* gathers noted writers, artists, and scholars to explore the validity of three basic contentions about the “life” and “death” of jazz, which is, without question, the “deepest,” most technically difficult “popular music” ever created:¹⁴ first, that jazz was never simply a form of music or a congeries of musical styles, but was in fact a larger modernist artistic movement both in the United States and internationally that was a rebellious response against and, contrarily, a powerfully evocative intensification of the new mass consumer culture that signified twentieth-century urban life; second, that jazz's transformation from dance to art music, which occurred during and immediately after World War II, was one of the profoundly cataclysmic changes to occur in American popular culture that both reflected and affected larger social (race and gender), political (liberal reformism), and cultural (the impulse for liberation versus technical elitism) shifts that were swirling in the United States at the time; third, that jazz was, to a great extent, a pluralistic music during the years of its greatest popularity in the United States and that it has since become a vibrantly global art form, not only in Europe and Asia, but also in Panama, South Africa, and Ghana. Whether its future lies as a high-culture, transnational, privileged form of taste and practice or in a new synthesis joining jazz artistry with global hip hop and the popular is an open question. In either case, jazz today is

a form of cosmopolitanism. But perhaps that was always what it was striving to be. As *New York Times* jazz critic Ben Ratliff put it: “There is no American popular music so well miscegenated as jazz.”¹⁵

Whatever jazz today has lost in the size of its audience as compared with forms of popular music with bigger market shares, it has gained in the high esteem in which it is held in the business and art worlds as a sophisticated artistic expression (it is frequently used as mood music in upscale business establishments, in museums and galleries, and in commercials promoting upscale products) and in the institutionalization it has experienced as a formal course of study at many colleges and universities. Indeed, if it were not for colleges, universities, and high school jazz bands, and institutions such as Jazz at Lincoln Center and SF Jazz, it is quite possible that few young people in the United States would be playing or hearing jazz today.

As Ingrid Monson wrote, “The art music known variously as jazz, swing, bebop, America’s classical music, and creative music has been associated first and foremost with freedom. Freedom of expression, human freedom, freedom of thought, and the freedom that results from an ongoing pursuit of racial justice.” One has only to read, for instance, historian Michael H. Kater’s *Different Drummers: Jazz in the Culture of Nazi Germany* (1992) or author Josef Skvorecky’s extraordinary novella *The Bass Saxophone* (1977) to know how profoundly true Monson’s observation is – that jazz was a beacon, an act, a trope of freedom, an expression against repression that inspired many people around the world. But if jazz was, at one point in its history, about freeing oneself from artificial and arbitrary constraints in both popular and classical music, about freeing society from its restrictions and repressions, then, for many

of its fans and practitioners, it has now become about preserving and conserving a tradition, an ideology, a set of standards, a form of practice. Today, jazz is an art that can satisfy the compulsions of the liberationist and the conservative, of those who seek change and of those who prefer stasis.¹⁶

Is jazz still a relevant form of artistic expression, still a significant force in the world of popular music or the world of art music? In other words, is jazz so insufficiently hip that its pretensions and its conceit no longer matter as either a theory or a practice? Has it become, in many respects, like mainline Protestantism, a theory and a practice prized by its followers because of its limited and slowly declining appeal and its glorious history as something that once did matter? Is jazz simply a music trapped in the memory of itself, technically exhausted and imaginatively hampered, shadowed and sabotaged by its pop and R&B commercial doppelgänger, smooth jazz? Fifty or one hundred years from now will more accessible and commercial jazzers like saxophonist Kenny G and trumpeter Chris Botti be more remembered than trumpeter Wynton Marsalis and pianist Brad Mehldau? To be sure, for many of its fans and followers, jazz has gone from being an anti-establishment to an establishment art form, something that may have drained the art form of its purpose and its emotional correlatives. If jazz has acquired a new power, a new appeal, then what precisely is it and what is the relationship of this new power, this new appeal, to the power and appeal that jazz once had when it was the dominant music of the United States? Has jazz transcended the marketplace or is it a music that deserves to be protected from the desecrations of the market as we try to protect classical music? Protectionism, when it comes to the arts, has usually been a lost

cause. Jazz's advocates and supporters say that jazz is more popular, more listened to than ever despite its low market ratings, and this may be true: it certainly shows up in unexpected places such as, for instance, two unrelated Tom Cruise movies, 1996's *Jerry Maguire* (which features a long sequence with an avant-garde Charles Mingus tune) and 2004's *Collateral* (which features a trumpeter playing *Bitches Brew*-style Miles Davis jazz). And there continues to be art-house films about jazz, such as Don Cheadle's *Miles Ahead* (2016) about Miles Davis, Robert Budreau's *Born to Be Blue* (2016) about jazz trumpeter Chet Baker, and Cynthia Mort's *Nina* (2016) about jazz/folk singer Nina Simone.

There is no question that jazz is still *present* in the culture, but the larger question is: does jazz still *matter*? We think it does in ways that are rather astonishing in their implications. Jazz artists like Robert Glasper and Kamasi Washington and avant hip hop artists like Kendrick Lamar may forge a new synthesis of jazz, the avant-garde, and the popular that rivets new audiences or may provide a radically new relationship between art and the popular. The Black Lives Matter movement has inspired a florescence of socially engaged artistic expression in jazz (Terence Blanchard's *Breathless*), popular music (Beyoncé's *Lemonade*), and hip hop (Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*) that models itself on the artistic vision of jazz. We suggest that jazz improvisation remains a compelling metaphor for inter-relationship, group creativity, and freedom that is both aesthetic and social. Improvisation transforms, one-ups, reinterprets, and synthesizes evolving human experience and its sonic signatures regardless of their classical, popular, or cultural origins. The most innovative popular musicians are returning to its acoustic power, representing the screams of Aunt

Hester, as Fred Moten has put it, with the unconventional timbres and tones of haunting jazz.¹⁷ Understanding what has happened to jazz can tell us a great deal about the nature and influence of popular music as both a national and international art form.

This issue of *Dædalus* explores both the legacies of jazz and its futures from the perspectives of artists and academics engaged in multiple fields of study. The interdisciplinarity of the contributors emphasizes the fact that jazz, as stated above, was never only a music but rather was a music that served as a muse for an arts movement, enchanting and bewitching other creative artists to make and to critically examine their art: from novelists like Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray, Jack Kerouac, and John Clellon Holmes to poets like Amiri Baraka, Allen Ginsburg, and Michael Harper to painters like Romare Bearden and Jackson Pollock to dancers like Fred Astaire, Agnes de Mille, Norma Miller, and Savion Glover and to hip hop and spoken-word artists like the Roots, Kendrick Lamar, and Beyoncé. The essays in this issue critically examine the achievements of jazz as an artistic movement through historical case studies, engagement with contemporary jazz innovations, and projections of the art form's future. A mixture of historical reckoning and utopian possibility bracket the ever-changing character of jazz now.

This issue hopes to begin to answer for readers: What made and continues to make jazz different from other forms of music? Why did jazz happen? How did jazz, as popular music, gain and lose its popularity or, put another way, how did it lose its status as a music for the ordinary or casual musical palette? How did jazz's close association with the repertoire of the Broadway musical, a song form that itself ceased to dominate popular music with the rise of rock and roll,

affect its reception and reputation and its future? How did and how do musicians in other countries change jazz and how much did that change affect how Americans performed it? How have the changes that affect the selling of music affected jazz? Did jazz transcend social constructions of race or did it reinscribe them? How did jazz generate criticism of itself? Who constructs the official history of a

form of popular music like jazz? Can music without words, as most jazz is, contain any specific political meaning? Can a music fade away and not fade away at the same time?

In moving toward answering these questions, the issue's authors weave together a narrative about jazz then and now to approach an understanding of why, in its many ways and forms, jazz still *matters*.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Richard Cook, "Miles Davis: 'Coltrane was a Very Greedy Man. Bird was, Too. He was a Big Hog'—A Classic Interview from the Vaults," *The Guardian*, November 6, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/nov/06/miles-davis-interview-rocks-backpages>.
- ² Bill Crow, *Jazz Anecdotes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 19.
- ³ Alan Merriam and Fradley Garner, "Jazz—The Word," *Ethnomusicology* 12 (3) (1968): 382.
- ⁴ Gerald Early, *Miles Davis and American Culture* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 2001), 7, 16.
- ⁵ Cook, "Miles Davis."
- ⁶ Crow, *Jazz Anecdotes*, 21–22. Most recently jazz has been lauded as a business strategy or as a model for group creativity and collaboration. Greg Satell, "How Jazz Can Transform Business," *Forbes*, October 25, 2013, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/gregsatell/2013/10/25/how-jazz-can-transform-business/>. See also Adrian Cho, *The Jazz Process: Collaboration, Innovation, and Agility* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 2010); Penelope Tobin, *The Jazz of Business: Leadership in a New Groove* (United Kingdom: Dodgem, 2012); Frank J. Barrett, *Yes to the Mess: Surprising Leadership Lessons from Jazz* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012); and Keith Sawyer, *Group Genius: The Creative Power of Collaboration* (New York: Basic Books, 2007). See also Stephen Alexander, *The Jazz of Physics: The Secret Link Between Music and the Structure of the Universe* (New York: Basic Books, 2016) for an exploration of jazz's implications as a creative art that can explain scientific theory.
- ⁷ *Let Freedom Swing: Conversations between Sandra Day O'Connor and Wynton Marsalis on Jazz and Democracy*, DVD, pr. Robe Imbriano (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010).
- ⁸ Gene Lees, *Cats of Any Color: Jazz Black and White* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- ⁹ Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage, 1964), 249.
- ¹⁰ Vijay Iyer, "Improvisation, Action Understanding, and Music Cognition with and without Bodies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, vol. 1, ed. George Lewis and Benjamin Piekut (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 74–90; and Georgina Born, "On Musical Mediation: Ontology, Technology, and Creativity," *Twentieth-Century Music* 2 (1) (2005): 7–36.
- ¹¹ Few jazz listeners are aware of the achievements of the most important female instrumentalists and composers: Mary Lou Williams, Melba Liston, Carla Bley, Maria Schneider, Geri Allen, Terri Lyne Carrington, and Nicole Mitchell.
- ¹² It should go without saying that Nazism intensified the racist inclinations of conservative German music and art critics and the N-word was frequently used. See Michael H. Kater, *Different Drummers: Jazz in the Culture of Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press,

1992), 19. But in American literary criticism, for instance, think how common the phrase “Nigger Jim” was in discussing the slave character from Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. (The character’s name was simply Jim.) Critics ranging from T. S. Eliot to Ernest Hemingway used the expression. Indeed, despite how much he deplored the characterization, even Ralph Ellison used it. See Ralph Ellison, “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,” in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 50, 58. This is only to point out how much the N-word, far from being just a lower-class obscenity, penetrated the reaches of high culture. This realization only underscores the impact of the word on the Western world and how powerful its stigmatizing reach. It is important to recognize this.

¹³ For an interesting discussion of race and jazz among contemporary jazz critics, see Yuval Taylor and Will Friedwald, eds., *The Future of Jazz* (Chicago: A Cappella Books, 2002), 23–41.

¹⁴ James Lincoln Collier, in his biography *Benny Goodman and the Swing Era*, referred to the music of his youth, swing, the most popular form that jazz ever took, as “better—more sophisticated, more genuinely musical—than virtually any popular music before or since.” James Lincoln Collier, *Benny Goodman and the Swing Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 5. In his book, *Why Classical Music Still Matters*, Lawrence Kramer makes a point of saying that he was not aiming for his audience to “appreciate” classical music. As he writes, it is not his purpose to persuade his readers that “if people would only absorb some technical information, follow the instructions of an expert, and listen for some formal routines, they could come to understand this music and discover that it is not only ‘great’ but also good for them.” Lawrence Kramer, *Why Classical Music Still Matters* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 4. It is not our purpose here to do so either, although a certain amount of music appreciation is unavoidable in some of these essays because the writers love the music and inevitably wish for others to recognize its virtues as well as its importance. (Of course, Kramer, inadvertently, winds up doing his share of “music appreciation” outreach in his book.) But “music appreciation” is not a goal because it is, as Kramer notes, “condescending and authoritarian.” Kramer, *Why Classical Music Still Matters*, 4. It bears all the earmarks of middlebrow school lessons and the quest for bourgeois respectability. And it is, in the end, not persuasive because it diminishes the art it is trying to promote. The true goal here with these essays is to remind readers that the culture we have and the society we live in owe a great many of its admirable aspects to the monumental achievement of jazz as both a music and an art movement. Langston Hughes, in responding to the question of why he was not a member of the Communist Party, defended the need for the artist to be independent and for art to be free of political coercion from the state. He said memorably, “I wouldn’t give up jazz for a world revolution.” Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 122. In some vital ways, the essays in this volume, as is this introduction, are arguing that jazz itself was a world revolution.

¹⁵ Taylor and Friedwald, eds., *The Future of Jazz*, 23.

¹⁶ Jazz critic and novelist Albert Murray often scoffed at the notion that jazz represented freedom, saying that Ellington, for instance, was not interested in musicians being free but playing his music in the way he wanted it played. This, he asserted, was true for any bandleader. In Ian Carr’s *Keith Jarrett: The Man and His Music*, the pianist talks about how difficult it was to write music for his 1970s American quartet of saxophonist Dewey Redman, bassist Charlie Haden, and drummer Paul Motian. “That group was the hardest group in the world to write for. I had to write in everybody’s attitudes and still write what I heard, and still play what I wanted to hear.” So, in jazz, as in all music, neither the players nor the composer are truly free to do whatever they want. Each is constrained by the other. Ian Carr, *Keith Jarrett: The Man and His Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 80. Murray’s comments were made at a consultants’ meeting for the Ken Burns’s documentary *Jazz* and at a conference on Ralph Ellison at New York University, both of which Gerald Early attended.

¹⁷ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 19, 22, 32.

Following Geri's Lead

Farah Jasmine Griffin

Abstract: Drawn from a keynote delivered for Timeless Portraits and Dreams: A Festival in Honor of Geri Allen (Harvard University, February 16–17, 2018), this personal essay shares observations about Allen's intellectual and artistic leadership in diverse roles including bandleader, teacher, curator, and artistic visionary. In addition to discussions of Allen's music and recordings, this essay also focuses on her collaboration with the author and actor/director S. Epatha Merkerson, which resulted in two musical theater projects, Great Jazz Women of the Apollo (2013) and A Conversation with Mary Lou (2014).

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I followed Geri Allen's career for almost twenty years before I met her, going to hear her in clubs, festivals, and concert halls; purchasing records and then CDs; and reading any interview I could find. Surprisingly, our first meeting as friends, colleagues, and collaborators happened on the campuses of some of our nation's greatest institutions of higher learning. Geri was both an artistic and intellectual leader whose life-long project was to ensure the ongoing relevance of the music to which she'd devoted herself. She especially wanted it to be relevant to African American audiences. This informed her reading, her performance, and her pedagogical practices.

Geri's relationship to institutions of higher learning was not only as a performer, but also as a teacher, administrator, and someone deeply engaged with ideas. She was a voracious reader who kept up with new developments in the field of jazz studies and served on the faculties of the University of Michigan and the University of Pittsburgh. Our mutual friend the historian Robin Kelley and I were immediately struck by her brilliance and depth of knowledge when she visited the jazz study group at Columbia University. She would go on to collaborate

with that group for the next decade. However, it was an encounter with her at Emory University in March 2005 that would profoundly influence the direction of my own work. Musician, composer, and minister Dwight Andrews had organized a three-day series of panels and concerts celebrating the life and music of composer and music educator William Dawson. The conference “explored the role of race and ethnicity in the creation of music and other art forms, the intersection between concert and vernacular traditions; the cross-fertilization of artistic genres; and the impact of new modes of music creation and dissemination.”¹ In many ways, this description fits the multidimensional nature of Geri's work. Always interested in the role of race and ethnicity, she became even more interested in gender. She worked closely with artists across form and genre, continued to create new music, and sought new modes of dissemination. On the second day of the Dawson conference, before my presentation, I walked into the hall and saw Geri sitting there by herself. I had a brief fan girl moment: I didn't want to disturb her, but I did want to say hello. As I walked tentatively to her, she looked up, smiled, and said, “Oh my goodness, you're the lady who wrote that book,” and reached into her bag and pulled out my book on Billie Holiday. We hugged each other; I sat down, and there began one of the most important friendships and collaborations of my life. It was a transformative moment. I had been a bit of an interloper into the field of music with that book. I had not been trained as a musicologist or ethnomusicologist; I was not a musician, though I read and listened widely. Encouraged by my beloved community in the jazz study group at Columbia University, I took a chance and started writing. Although I hoped my colleagues in the academy would read the book, my ideal readers were lovers of the music

both within and outside the profession. I dedicated *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery* to my parents and to “black artists everywhere.”² And here was one of the most important artists, an ideal reader, affirming it and me. Recently, musicologist Guthrie Ramsey reminded me of the complicated reception of the book and I told him quite honestly that I don't recall being aware of that. I explained that once Geri responded in the way she did and because of the long conversations with her that followed, I felt that the work had been received in the way that I wanted it to, and that I wanted it to be part of a larger body of writing, some but not all of which would be academic. Geri helped make that possible, not only through literal opportunities, but also because she, along with Robin, Guthrie, and musician Salim Washington became my major interlocutors. I realize now that in many ways, I was following Geri's lead. For an all-too-brief moment in time, we accompanied each other as we attempted to experience a deeper intellectual, political, aesthetic, and spiritual relationship to and through the music we loved. In the pages that follow, I will not argue that Geri Allen was a genius. I take that for granted. She was. Instead, I hope to share the multitude of ways that genius manifested itself, especially in her quiet, steady leadership.

“Following Geri's Lead” takes on multiple meanings:

First, if we follow the shape and arc of her career, what does it tell us about the history and cultures of jazz? How will it reshape the histories we write? Here I mean not only what we write about women and jazz, but also about the broad and deep narratives we write about the music itself and her place in it.

Second, she is both collaborator and leader in many capacities. As a band-leader, she was an innovator and a visionary who created opportunities for others

through her inclusive and broad outlook. As a leader in the field of jazz education, she had distinct ideas about jazz pedagogy, and with the assistance of her brother Mount, she pioneered the use of technology in presenting the music and making possible performance collaborations not bound by shared location. For instance, as part of our tribute to Mary Lou Williams in March 2013, Geri helped to organize a cyber symposium with Internet2 technology to engage musicians and scholars in five venues simultaneously.

Finally, we might think about what it means to follow her lead as ancestor guide, inspiration, and example.

What follows is a set of deeply personal, preliminary thoughts on Geri as leader and on the implications of her life's work for our study, playing, and understanding of the music.

Geri's 2006 Telarc release *Timeless Portraits & Dreams* opens with the spiritual "Oh Freedom," melding almost seamlessly into the Antoine Roney original "Melchezedik," which includes ample quotation of Geri's own "Angels." This purposeful opening with "Oh Freedom" serves as an invocation: "the act or process of petitioning for help or support"; specifically, "a prayer of entreaty." A lesser-known definition of invocation is "a formula for conjuring," an incantation.³ Geri's choice to open with "Oh Freedom" is a gesture toward all of these meanings. It is indeed an invocation, a recognition, and an invitation to the ancestors and the Holy Spirit to guide and bless the endeavor, but also a way of honoring and walking in the black freedom struggle:

Oh freedom, Oh freedom, Oh freedom
over me,

And before I'd be a slave I'd be buried in my
grave,

And go on home to my Lord and be free.⁴

Geri includes the lyrics in the liner notes. This is no "by and by in the after life" song. It is a song of resistance sung by generations of freedom fighters. With this opening, she is making an offering to the tradition and a promise to the future. The spiritual flows into "Melchezedik," which Geri says is written for the King of Peace. But the name means the "king of righteousness" and it appears in the fourteenth chapter of the Book of Genesis.⁵ He is both king and priest. In bringing the two songs together, she reveals her understanding that there is no separation between the spirituals and jazz. For Geri, they are produced of the same culture, they are both sacred music, they both bear witness to a people's ongoing struggle to be free. This album includes a wide variety of black music: jazz standards, spirituals, and jazz originals. It features Carmen Lundy, Jimmy Cobb, Ron Carter, George Shirley, Wallace Roney, Donald Walden, and the Atlanta Jazz Chorus under the direction of Dwight Andrews. There are standards like Gershwin's "Embraceable You," Charlie Parker's "Ah-Leu-Cha," and lesser known jazz works such as "Just for a Thrill" by Lil Hardin Armstrong. On this recording, Geri once again uplifts the work of black women composers and includes works by Hardin, Mary Lou Williams, and her own beautiful blues "Our Lady" written not for Mary, Mother of Christ, but for our Lady Day.

This recording gives a strong sense of Geri's own sense of history. Jazz situated in, in conversation with, stretching, and at times led by other forms of black music culture. For Geri, jazz as a form was open to a vast array of influences but deeply grounded in African American history and culture. Here we have a celebration of the music in that context.

If the invocation is "Oh Freedom," the benediction is "Lift Every Voice and Sing," otherwise known as the Negro

national anthem, with which Geri closes the recording. In her most recent book, *May We Forever Stand: A History of the Black National Anthem*, the brilliant Imani Perry writes of the song:

It tells the singer to see herself or himself as emerging magnificently through struggle. It nurtures an identity rooted in community. It is a song that moves regionally and internationally, yet holds fast to a sense of particular belonging. It has had a remarkable longevity due to both its beauty and its vision.⁶

Certainly the same might be said of *Timeless Portraits and Dreams*, but most important, of Geri's own sense of the history of black music and especially the history of jazz, which also moves regionally and internationally yet holds fast to a particular "belonging."

I think of this album as a guide through Geri's own understanding and conception of the music she played and the way she believed it should be taught and passed on. First, jazz is not separate from other forms of black music. It is born of those forms that precede it and helps to shape those that follow. It is always in conversation with these other forms as well as music born of different cultures. This understanding informed her pedagogy. She believed the student of jazz needs to know the history and context of its birth and its development. She was a voracious reader and one of the most intellectually curious people I knew. She kept up with the latest jazz studies scholarship, not only to be informed by it but also to judge the degree to which it respected the context, the history, and the political and cultural import of the music.

In one of the best interviews I've read, conducted by Angelika Beener, Geri asserts:

It's OK for people to have opinions, that's fine . . . and it's OK to publish opinions, and that's fine. I feel strongly that there is

a renaissance of amazing scholars in this area of African American music and culture. I'm looking at the writers, people like Farah Jasmine Griffin, people like Robin D. G. Kelley, and George Lewis . . . people of that ilk, who really are establishing a level of responsibility for how we will write about the music and how we talk about the music. And I just feel that these are the ways to look, [instead of] getting so upset about some of these other things that are not really dealing with the real core of what is happening in the culture. Like the book that Kelley did on Monk . . . that sets the bar of what the expectation of jazz scholarship should be . . . real, substantive research on the music, based on a respect for the cultural criteria accepted by the field . . . [and] the folk. The music truly deserves this level of care. Ten years, you know, Kelley did that research. That kind of time and that kind of love and appreciation for the subject matter, is where I want to go personally to find out, what the facts were, on a much deeper level. These discussions about our innovators' contributions are thrilling. And I think we're going to see more of this.⁷

"A level of responsibility" – it resonates. Her sense of responsibility to the music, to its past and its future, to her peers and her students, a sense of responsibility that required a profound discipline, was daunting. In emphasizing the importance jazz history and tradition held for Geri, I by no means want to suggest an aesthetic conservatism on her part. This was not the case. For Geri, jazz was innovation. Among her earlier recordings were Afrofuturistic ventures. She is one of the few pianists to play with Ornette Coleman. She worked with Betty Carter, and Cecil Taylor was a major inspiration to her. So Geri was no traditionalist in the vein of Wynton Marsalis. She saw the music on a continuum. I think her emphasis on history and tradition stemmed from two things: 1) what

she feared was an effort to de-emphasize jazz as an African American form, a living tradition whose practitioners need to know, acknowledge, and honor it as a product of black culture; and 2) her desire to influence and inform the way that history was represented so that women and avant-garde artists were not marginalized or ignored.

A Conversation with Mary Lou was a theatrical piece born of the collaboration between Geri, actress S. Epatha Merkerson, and me. And although I will gesture toward the making of our shared projects, I want to talk about them in the broader sense of the kinds of *conversations* and collaborations Geri initiated and sustained with the other artists and with the tradition itself.

Conversation and dialogue are the words that most often come to mind when I think of Geri as leader. On the bandstand, even when she is the leader, she is in conversation. She may set the tone, suggest a direction, but always she seems to say “What do you think?” “Let me hear what you have to say.” She is creating space for your response, your questioning, and your questing. Sometimes she is goading you: “Go on . . . Go on . . . Keep Going . . . Jump! . . . OK, now come back . . . I got you.” Even Geri the soloist is in conversation, with those who inspire her, with the various emotions within her, with God, with herself, and with the future. Collaboration is a form of conversation as well. The source of my greatest joy, and not a little bit of frustration, were the collaborations I embarked upon with Geri and Epatha.

It all started with a conversation. A phone call and a series of discussions about her idea to do a show at the Apollo that would honor the great jazz women who performed there. She asked me to be the historian on the project and I agreed. And later, she set up a meeting between

herself, me, and Epatha, who had also agreed to work on the project.

It’s an afternoon, possibly January, during the week, a Tuesday or a Wednesday because I run from a seminar I conduct at the Schomburg to Epatha’s Harlem abode. She greets me with a warm smile and down-to-earth spirit. She, Geri, and I sit at a large round table . . . eating, drinking . . . was it tea? Wine? I don’t remember. I just know we are immediately comfortable. Three sisters who love this music and love black people, and we are laughing and singing, and Epatha is pulling up the music, and I am recalling obscure tracks and anecdotes, and before you know it, we are mapping this thing out. Geri is happy, quietly encouraging, laughing. Soon it becomes clear, when we start talking about our Queens, that we are also talking about folk not conventionally recognized as jazz artists. Our discussions reach the blues, gospel, and soul royalty, and pretty soon we get to Bessie, Mahalia, and Clara Ward, and I’m coming up with anecdotes about when this one performed and when that one performed, and at some point, someone asks “How can we organize this?” And one of us comes up with a conceit and a narrative about the Apollo as a sacred space, as hallowed ground. And at some point, I don’t remember when, Geri says, “I’m going to need somebody to write the script. Farah, you can do that.” “No, I cannot.” “Yes, you can, you just did. Epatha, you direct.”

And before either of us can object, Epatha is directing and I am writing the script and our debut show will be at the Apollo with Dianne Reeves, Lizz Wright, Tia Fuller, Terri Lyne Carrington, and Geri’s trio with Kenny Davis and Kassa Overall. Eventually what feels like a million more people join, including the Howard University a cappella choir, Afro Blue, the DJ Val Jeanty, two hoofers, and Maurice

Farah
Jasmine
Griffin

Chesnut. Because I add a bit about Pearl Bailey and Mom's Mabley, the oh-so-talented comedic actress Karen Malina White is on board. At the last minute, perhaps two days before our first performance, Geri would add an organ. But that was all to come. On that Tuesday or Wednesday in Harlem, I left Epatha's apartment elated and scared to death. "What have I gotten myself into? She needs a playwright not a historian."

Together, the three of us embarked on a roller coaster ride that started with a conversation and that included many more between us, the tradition we honored, Geri's vision and genius, and all the other artists on that stage and the brilliant, sophisticated, all-knowing Apollo audience who spoke to us during the show, during intermission, and afterward. "I love it, but how could you have Sarah Vaughan singing 'I'm Glad There is You?' when that was Gloria Lynn's song first and she sang it here at the Apollo and she was from Harlem. I know, 'cause I was here." I look at Epatha with a look that says "I told you so." And she breaks out laughing and we hug each other because we got through it and were the better for it. Now she was a director and I was a scriptwriter, something we both aspired to be, but had not articulated to Geri. She just knew and she presented the opportunity and said, "Do it." And we had to rise to the occasion because you have to bring your best when you are writing for and directing Dianne Reeves, Lizz Wright, and Terri Lyne Carrington. That demands a certain level of responsibility and discipline.

I don't know about others, but for Epatha and I, collaborating with Geri went something like this:

Geri: "Hello ladies, would you like to take a ride on a carousel with me."

Farah: "Why yes, I love carousels. They are pretty."

Epatha: "They are boring, but I like the company so let's go."

And then as we approach it, I ask "Where are the horses?" And Geri says, "Oh, there are no horses." So we get on and we strap ourselves in, and before long, we realize there are no horses because it's not a carousel, it's a roller coaster. And we realize it's not just any roller coaster, but a super duper, triple loop cyclone or something. And Epatha and I are holding each other screaming. But not Geri; she's just smiling because she can see the whole thing and while we are freaking out about being upside down, she already sees the end and knows we will survive. We get off, exasperated, and declare: "That's it. Can't do it. My nerves can't take it." Geri is gracious and thankful, and bearing gifts. The evening ends and we are giddy; days later, we have the postperformance meeting to evaluate what worked and what didn't. Geri sweetly says, "Would you ladies like to go on another ride with me?" And we both say, "Yes, can't wait."

Collaborating with Geri was exhilarating and exhausting and you are a better thinker and artist for it. You have grown creatively and spiritually, and you have been so steeped in love that you can't wait to return. Like the improvising artist, you bring all that you have to the moment, and then you step out on faith.

We learned to trust the process, to trust the vision, even as the nuts and bolts of making it happen seemed impossible. We went from the Apollo to three nights at Harlem Stage, where we debuted *A Conversation with Mary Lou* featuring the remarkable Carmen Lundy, thanks to the tireless Ora Harris and the Kennedy Center. And the process was a true collaboration. I wrote, they read, I rewrote. Epatha saw the stage and might tell us that what we thought we could do, we couldn't do,



Geri Allen, S. Epatha Merkerson, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (left to right). Sound check for *A Conversation with Mary Lou*, Harlem Stage, New York, March 14, 2014.

but we could do this instead. Epatha and I created ways to highlight Geri, we let her genius guide us, and the music guided all of us. We did it all in service to the music, and for Epatha and I, out of love for Geri. And in return, we got each other and these creative projects that were bigger than any one of us together.

From her reading of my book on Billie Holiday, Geri heard something in the sound of my writing, in the sound of my voice, spoken and written. “Your writing is very musical,” she would say. And she would try to get me to write a spoken word piece to be on one of her albums. “I’m a bad poet,” I’d say. But she would push back: “Would you write the liner notes?” “I’d be honored.” Geri had a sense of your capacity and your gift. She’d insist that you live up to it, that you step outside of your comfort zone. At first, she would feel out what felt safe and

lay the foundation for you to perform. “Read from the Billie Holiday book” while I play “Our Lady.” “Write the liner notes.” And then, certain that you could do something different, something more, certain of her vision and the broader picture, she would “encourage” you to take bigger risks by placing you in situations where you had to leap out on faith, and her belief in you.

An exploration of Geri’s collaborations reveals her insight as a thinker and a visionary. Her gift for seeing the whole picture, hearing its sound, was extraordinary. I think one course of study about Geri would be an exploration of her collaborations: with her own band, with Terri Lyne and Esperanza, and with Terri Lyne and David Murray. It might venture out to a consideration of her interest in technology and explore the collaboration with her brother in introducing

innovative technology into performance and the classroom.

As an aside, I want to say something brief about Geri's commitment to ensuring that the music reached audiences, especially black audiences that might not otherwise hear it. This was yet another way she sought to keep the music relevant. I helped her organize a series of residencies. She did them at Harvard, Princeton, and the University of Pennsylvania. Whenever possible, she held master classes for the students, performed with the jazz band, and gave a concert with her own band. But she also requested that we set up performance presentations at local high schools. In New York, we did it at the Thurgood Marshall High School and Geri knew that Kassa Overall and Maurice Chesnut could attract the students' attention with hip-hop rhythms. She wanted the young people to know that all jazz was their music, that they could bring themselves and the sounds of their generation to it. She seemed to say "Come on in. Join the conversation." As a professor of music and later as a director at the University of Pittsburgh, she sought out the best high school-aged musicians and built relationships with high school music teachers and church directors of music in search of musically talented young people. At the Apollo, our extravaganza was part of the Harlem Jazz Shrines Festival, a series that takes place every spring in different Harlem venues, theaters, churches, restaurants, and bars. A ticket to each performance cost \$10. Our *Great Jazz Women of the Apollo* was held on Mother's Day weekend, and one of the stagehands (someone needs to write a book about the Apollo's stagehands; I actually wrote them into the script and they were among the first to take a bow) thanked us for having the show during Harlem Jazz Shrines because he bought tickets for ladies from the senior center/nursing home and also

for a group of mothers from a nearby shelter for mothers and children. Beautiful things happen in Geri's wake. She set things in motion and there is a shimmering, ripple effect much like her shimmering playing on the piano. Where Geri led, love and beauty followed.

Geri found inspiration and influence far and wide. She was not bound by the tradition she held in such reverence. She was freed by it. As much as she was grounded in a sense of community, it was the basis from which she soared. When we think of her, we should also think of her as a cosmopolitan artist who traveled widely in her music, her ideas, and her person. That's one of the reasons I so love her recording *Flying Toward the Sound*; it encompasses her journey in this life and beyond.

The recording, though solo piano, provided yet another opportunity for collaboration. Carrie Mae Weems provided the photograph, cover concept, and art films. I wrote the liner notes. While I often visited Geri in the recording studio, it was a special treat to spend time on the set when Weems was making the films. In my liner notes for that recording I wrote:

She hails from a culture that celebrates flight as a metaphor for freedom. From the folk tales of the enslaved Africans who abandon the fields and fly back to Africa to the fugitive slave narratives of the 19th century; from Paul Laurence Dunbar's exquisite poem of 1899, "Sympathy," with its singing caged bird [the inspiration for Maya Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" (1970)] to Abbey Lincoln's "Bird Alone" (1991), African American culture is dominated by images and sounds of movement, mobility, fugitivity, and flight. Geri Allen is nothing if not deeply rooted in the cultures of Africans in America. She is also a highly accomplished, cosmopolitan, world-class artist. As such, like the music she plays she is always open to new influences.⁸

Upon hearing Native American legends, especially “Legend of the Flute,” that resonated with her own people’s love of music and near mystical celebration of flight, she found inspiration as well. *Flying Toward the Sound* is a musician’s journey. She conceived of the project in relation to three modern jazz pianists in whom she found inspiration and in whose lineage she falls: Cecil Taylor, McCoy Tyner, and Herbie Hancock. She does not play their music, instead she plays toward it, around it, through it, to her own voicing. The suite is titled “Refractions.” Like light entering through a prism, Geri envisioned the project as the music of Taylor, Tyner, and Hancock, entering the prism that is herself, only to be bent, reshaped, and colored anew, resulting in a flight of light and sound.

Until the recording of *A Child Is Born* in 2011, I would say *Flying Toward the Sound* was her most introspective and spiritual work. Here, she is an artist looking deep within and making connections between what she finds through this practice of interiority and that of the larger world. In nine original compositions, composed during her Guggenheim Fellowship, she engages the music of her guides, to meditate on the meaning of family, particularly motherhood and creativity: “Faith Carriers of Life” and “Your Pure Self (Mother to Son).” But it is “God’s Ancient Sky” that is the project’s spiritual centerpiece. It flies to places of great spiritual power—the Western Wall of Jerusalem, St. Mary’s of Zion in Axum, Ethiopia—and then over the great natural cathedrals—the ocean, the desert, the forest, and the mountains. The repetition played with her left hand gives us drama and a sense of permanence, it moves us along, while the melody played by the right is broad, spacious, and panoramic—it flies. At times, we are given roots, complex and twisted, but roots nonetheless,

while the right hand takes ever more risks. It glides, sails, dips, and soars. In its entirety, the song is almost sixteen minutes long embodying both the groundedness of a daily spiritual and artistic practice that allows for flights of creativity and improvisation in life and in music; parental love that provides a safety net for children to soar; and the jazz tradition that does the same for innovators such as Taylor, Tyner, Hancock, and Allen.

All the pieces that precede “God’s Ancient Sky” lead to it as light going through a prism. The first three are devoted to Tyner, Taylor, and Hancock. She introduces themes associated with each artist and then integrates them throughout. “Flying Toward the Sound” is for Tyner. “Dancing Mystic Poets at Twilight” is a highly percussive, polyrhythmic piece not unlike Taylor, who inspired it. “Red Velvet in Winter,” for Herbie Hancock, is orchestral, making use of the full range of the piano, a kaleidoscopic world in itself. Here, Geri leads and we gladly follow to a sonic universe of her making.

Let us imagine a study of jazz and a construction of jazz history in which she is not an addendum—“a woman in jazz”—but where she is a central component in any narrative we write, where it is impossible to think about the trajectory of the music without thinking about her. Where we place her in a lineage of those who influenced her and those whom she influenced, perhaps especially pianists, but not only pianists. Vocalists, percussionists, bassists, horn players, and those of us who are not musicians, but actors, dancers, writers, photographers, painters as well.

She hailed from a culture that celebrates flight as a metaphor for freedom, and through her music and her grace, she touched that longing, that struggle, and that capacity for freedom in all of us.

Following
Geri's Lead

ENDNOTES

- ¹ "In Celebration of William Levi Dawson: An Exploration of American Music and Identity at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century," conference at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, March 3–5, 2005.
- ² Farah Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (New York: One World Books, 2001).
- ³ Merriam-Webster, "Invocation," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/invocation>.
- ⁴ Geri Allen, "Oh Freedom," *Timeless Portraits & Dreams*, liner notes, Telarc, 2006.
- ⁵ Melchezedik: Melch = King, Saddiq = Righteousness.
- ⁶ Imani Perry, *May We Forever Stand: A History of the Black National Anthem* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), xiv.
- ⁷ Angelika Beener, "Geri Allen on First Christmas Album & Embracing It All," *Alternate Takes: Broadening the Jazz Perspective*, November 22, 2011, <https://alternate-takes.org/2011/11/22/geri-allen-on-first-christmas-album-embracing-it-all/>.
- ⁸ Geri Allen, "Flying Toward the Sound," *Flying Toward the Sound*, Motéma Music, 2010.

Soul, Afrofuturism & the Timeliness of Contemporary Jazz Fusions

Gabriel Solis

Abstract: The rise of jazz-R&B-hip hop fusions in contemporary Los Angeles offers an opportunity to reflect on the ways jazz matters to black audiences today. Drawing on recent Afrofuturist art and theory as well as on Amiri Baraka's analysis of the "changing same" in black music, this essay traces out the significance of work by artists as diverse as Kamasi Washington, Flying Lotus, Thundercat, and Robert Glasper, positing that their music tells us that jazz matters not only in itself, but also in its continuing capacity to engage in cross-genre dialogues for musicians and audiences who hear it as part of a rich continuum of African American musical expression.

We are, it seems, in an age of Afrofuturism. The release of the *Black Panther* feature film in February 2018 was greeted with a spate of think pieces across a range of media, explaining the term *Afrofuturism* for an unfamiliar audience. "T'Challa, also known as the Black Panther, the title character of the blockbuster movie, wasn't the first person to land a spaceship (or something like it) in downtown Oakland, Calif.," starts one such article.¹ Such pieces point back to bandleaders Sun Ra and George Clinton (and sometimes to Jamaican dub artist Lee "Scratch" Perry) to provide background for the film's mix of the old and the new, technology and the spirit, space-age Africa, and, eventually, a sense of diasporic culture that travels in both directions across the Black Atlantic – in ships in the sky rather than the sea – suturing the fissures rent by the middle passage, by war, and by colonial modernity's many terrors.

At the same time, we are in an age of *poly-* or even *omnigenericism* in music. That is, in many cases, musicians and their audiences are liable to connect multiple genres, creating new fusions, and

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even to view all genres of music as potentially available to them. This is notable, if only because of how strongly it represents a break from the immediate past. Over the course of a period from perhaps 1960 to 2000 (to speak in very rough terms), genre became not only the key way to interpret popular music, but one of its most powerful modes of creating a hierarchy of value. From the authenticity – and authority – of rock to the “Disco Sucks” campaign of the 1970s, and from the much-touted “realness” of country music to Wynton Marsalis’s increasingly strange, transphobic comments from the early 1990s on fusion as a kind of musical “cross-dressing,”² Baby Boomers and Generation Xers invested heavily in a discourse of genre purity as a way of attaching value to their chosen object of attention. That discourse seems less and less relevant every year.

Jazz – beyond the singular instance of Sun Ra – seldom enters into discussions of either Afrofuturism or the contemporary omnigenic black music so strongly connected with it. And yet, following the theme of this issue of *Dædalus*, I wish to look at the remarkable presence of jazz (understood broadly) at the heart of precisely these two phenomena. Indeed, despite the prominence of Marsalis’s voice as an arbiter of jazz in the 1990s and 2000s, it is my contention that the turn to stylistic plurality is reasonably seen as a return, a move that echoes and recaptures a crucial element of the ethos that underlaid jazz in the 1970s. My intention in locating jazz in relation to the speculative, Afrofuturist current of our contemporary moment is twofold in relation to claims about why jazz still matters: first, to ask about the music’s contemporary visibility and, second, to ask what we might still learn from it today. Ultimately, in answer to both of these questions, I argue that the relevance of jazz can be seen

in its value to a broad audience and to musicians who may not identify with the genre term “jazz” but who, nonetheless, make music in dialogue with it in one way or another.

If the contemporary meaning of jazz does not necessarily point to either a futurist position or an imbrication in the midst of a broader space of black popular music, its history certainly provides considerable precedent. To a remarkable extent, in fact, seeing the continuing relevance of the music requires an accounting that understands it as having always been more than a narrow style category, always more than simply a musical form. To see it today as the cultural metaphor, artistic movement, and range of sonic signifiers that it most certainly is, it is critical to recognize its broad background.³ Regarding this background, jazz occupied an odd place in the twentieth-century imagination: situated between worlds, it was “both/and” in many contexts. Racially, for instance, historian and journalist J. A. Rogers’s famous article in *The New Negro* saw it as a “marvel of paradox”: the music was both particularly African American, American, and, at the same time, universal.⁴ Also, aesthetically, as Ingrid Monson notes, pointing to mid-century jazz’s “Afro-modernism”: “at once more populist than its European [modernist] counterpart, yet committed to articulating its elite position relative to the more commercial genres of R&B and rock and roll.”⁵ And, indeed, generically, the music has been open to incorporation from the most disparate of sources – Western classical and Afro Caribbean, Nordic, African, and Indian musics have all informed it – and yet has also policed its boundaries; and of course, many of the musicians past and present who have played this music reject jazz as a genre label altogether. Here I explore an aspect of this in-betweenness, focusing on

the movement across genres as producing a kind of transcendence, and on the role of technology as a symbol of this genre-crossing gesture and as a generator of the music's sound and social meaning.

To get at this body of ideas and to clarify why they matter, I'll start with a discussion of a few pieces that clearly occupy a relation to both jazz and other forms of black popular music, in order to get at the musical aesthetics at play. I am being intentionally vague with regard to genre in this formulation. My point is to see both sonic signifiers of jazz and a jazz "impulse" in an explicitly polygeneric music scene, rather than one that coheres around style or other features of a coherent genre.⁶ Some of the music I discuss here clearly comes out of a primary orientation to jazz, but much of it draws on jazz from another space. This discussion leads me to a reading of Afrofuturism as a discourse in contemporary African American and African Diasporic arts. The central notion animating the study of this music is, to paraphrase Nigerian American science fiction author Nnedi Okorafor, that black speculative arts routinely trouble ontological boundaries, whether through a kind of liminality as "in-between-ness" or as "both/and-ness."⁷ Like the music discussed here, such work disrupts distinctions, such as that between science fiction and fantasy, between demotic and avant-garde, or more broadly between human and non-human, sitting at the intersection of the biological, the technological, and the cosmological.

My thinking on the intersection of polygenericism, Afrofuturism, and jazz was first prompted by a desire to reinvestigate cultural critic Amiri Baraka's ideas in the seminal article "The Changing Same: R&B and the New Black Music."⁸ In short, looking at the landscape

of African American music in the mid-1960s, Baraka, then writing as LeRoi Jones, saw an emerging gulf between the jazz avant-garde (the "New Thing" or "New Black Music," as he called it) and the working-class black audiences that had sustained jazz in earlier decades. Addressing the same question that animates this issue today – why jazz matters – he argued that there should be no alienation of black audiences from avant-garde jazz. Rather, as he saw it, there was much for black communities to find in the New Thing, that in fact the two kinds of music (R&B and New Black Music) explored the same territory, gave voice to the same longings, and did the same work, just in different registers. His argument goes into quite abstract, metaphysical directions: "To go back in any historical (or emotional) line of ascent in Black music leads us inevitably to religion, i.e., spirit worship. This phenomenon is always at root in Black art."⁹ And further, "The blues (impulse) lyric (song) is even descriptive of a plane of evolution, a direction . . . coming and going . . . through whatever worlds. Environment, as the social workers say . . . but Total Environment (including at all levels, the spiritual)."¹⁰ From James Brown to Albert Ayler, Sun Ra, and John Coltrane, "The song is the same and the people is the same."¹¹

Following Baraka, but offering a more mundane line of argument, I am interested in the fact that there was considerable mutual interest in making music across that genre divide within a few years of the publication of Baraka's article. This includes (but is hardly limited to) popular artists who embraced elements of the New Thing – such as the soul band Earth, Wind & Fire whose 1971 debut album, *The Need of Love*, opens with a nearly ten-minute free jazz piece, "Energy," or Nina Simone, whose work on songs such as "Why? (The King of Love Is Dead)"

brought inspirations from gospel-tinged R&B together with modal jazz to mourn the murdered African American leaders of the late-1960s – as well as avant-garde figures who incorporated signifiers of funk and R&B, such as Pharoah Sanders, whose long, timbrally noisy explorations dug into Afrocentric cosmologies with the underpinning of a funky, danceable groove, or Archie Shepp, whose album *Attica Blues* threaded together funk and “energy music” to protest the racialized, carceral state made increasingly visible by the policing initiatives now known as the Rockefeller Drug Laws. This has once again become relevant in the work of a group of young musicians originally from Los Angeles who have collaborated on a range of projects and who all traverse the boundaries between jazz, R&B, and hip hop, including producer and DJ Flying Lotus, saxophonist Kamasi Washington, bassist Thundercat, pianist Robert Glasper, and of course, rapper Kendrick Lamar.

I focus here on this group of Los Angeleno musicians, looking particularly, if fleetingly, at recent recordings including Flying Lotus’s *You’re Dead!*, Kamasi Washington’s aptly titled, massive album *The Epic*, and Robert Glasper’s work with his trio and a larger group called “The Experiment.” These make for a useful set, since they represent a breadth of genres and stylistic approaches that define the scene (from work that is straightforwardly within the jazz frame to work that is in significant ways outside that frame), and because they involve three distinct approaches to making work that might reasonably be called Afrofuturist. Significantly, each of these artists, in one way or another, makes reference back to mid-1970s jazz-R&B fusions, and each works in ways that interestingly disrupt not only genre boundaries, but also the expectations about the relationship to

technology that have constituted those boundaries in the recent past. Moreover, the return and reinterpretation of these sounds should remind and reiterate for us the historical significance of genre-spanning jazz fusions to African American audiences in the 1970s.

Flying Lotus’s *You’re Dead!* is the least obviously “jazz” project of those I discuss here.¹² The album’s scant thirty-eight minutes is composed of nineteen short tracks, the longest coming in at just under four minutes, and most running less than two. As a result, the album dispenses with the kind of extended, improvisational forms common to modern jazz; moreover, it does not use the kinds of song forms that remain the common language of jazz, even in the more heteroglot post-1970s era. Rather, its episodic structure makes up a single, longer form. What is most interesting about the piece is the way that Stephen Ellison (Flying Lotus’s given name) and his co-composers, including Stephen Bruner (Thundercat), Kamasi Washington, and Herbie Hancock, use brief snippets of a wide range of genres to represent the album’s concept: a meditation on the moment of death and its aftermath, seen from the perspective of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.¹³ That is, though the title suggests a sense of morbidity, it should be thought of as a piece aiming at an understanding of the process of death, a liminal state, and rebirth, a mystical perspective journalists have credited in part to Ellison’s upbringing as the nephew of Alice Coltrane. This narrative of rebirth can be heard on multiple levels – personal, social, cultural, and so forth – an interpretation Ellison indicates (without quite articulating) in interviews around the project, including, for instance: “The concept is so much more than ‘You’re dead as a person,’ to me. Even calling it *You’re Dead!* goes so deep into how I felt maybe a year ago,

where I was watching the music scene shift and change.”¹⁴

To get a sense of this, and a feel for the ways the piece deploys a language that ties together hip hop’s more experimental wing and mid-1970s electric jazz (El-lison specifically points to George Duke in interviews, but Stanley Clarke, Chick Corea, Joe Zawinul, Miles Davis, and others are apparent as well), it is useful to consider tracks three, four, and five: “Tesla,” “Cold Dead,” and “Fkn Dead.” In just under four minutes combined, they include a compendium of stylistic signifiers: double-time shuffle groove; additive, even-eighth patterns; a distorted electric guitar and electric piano pairing; a synth choir; and what I think of as a kind of cosmic slow jam. The thing that marks this as something other than the 1970s jazz fusion it most clearly resembles in its stylistic mix is the sonic quality Mark Fischer describes as “crackle.”¹⁵ That earlier jazz fusion consistently used the peak of high-fidelity recording techniques to produce music that sounded profoundly clear. Performers as diverse as Weather Report, Return to Forever, and George Duke all worked within the jazz aesthetic of their time, producing albums that attempted to capture a sound as close to an unmediated purity as possible. Flying Lotus, on the other hand, uses high levels of compression, distorting the sounds of his source material to sound intentionally lo-fi. Listeners may hear this as producing a temporal distance or a haunted, ghostly quality – as Fischer suggests recordings by fellow EDM artist Tricky have – or they may interpret the recording’s crackle as indicating a kinship with music from the era of analog recording; or they may see the sound connecting this album with the circulation of hip hop mixtapes.

None of this is improvisatory in the way jazz is commonly understood. Rather, El-lison describes the process of creating the

music as an inherently technologized, collaborative composition using the studio as a medium: playing licks, loops, and even just timbres with Hancock and others, and slowly cobbling things together into tracks:

When we did the “Tesla” song, I had some drums that I had already recorded – I kinda found a cool loop, and a little idea. Herbie had come by and I played some ideas, some things I was feeling. He got on my Fender Rhodes and I started humming ideas out to him, and those became progressions. Then we did another take, and then he got even more free with it. Eventually you get these really fast recordings, and you just kind of jump to moments.

It’s kind of the same as writing, with loops and stuff. It’s hard to explain, but it makes so much sense in my mind. Like, I try to put it together just like I would make a beat, even if I’m using [other] people – if I had records or chopping up samples from the Internet, I still do that with collaborations and working with people.¹⁶

This kind of creative practice – so much a part of the digital age, and yet still so fundamentally connected with longstanding models of musical interaction – explodes the distinction between improvisation and composition in interesting ways. It aims, ultimately, at a fixed musical object, and in that sense is clearly compositional; and yet, it happens in the moment, through interaction between musicians, in the studio, and in that sense is improvisational. Its reliance on the plasticity of digitally recorded sound makes it distinctively contemporary, and its combination of the human and the technological is a hallmark of Afrofuturism.

Kamasi Washington’s *The Epic* is something like the opposite of *You’re Dead!*¹⁷ Its seventeen tracks run nearly three hours, regularly extending more than ten

Gabriel Solis

minutes each, and most have some version of head-solo-head form. There is no obvious program to the project, in the way there is in *You're Dead!*, but its title and cover art imply a certain interest in cosmic hugeness and a sense of possibility. In line with this, on the whole, the album has a fairly unified sound. Critical commentators have pointed to John Coltrane as the key intertext, noting the ways Washington moves between a modal language, "Giant Steps"-derived harmonic complexity, and outside playing; the ways the massiveness of the arrangements resembles Coltrane's larger ensemble works; and so on.¹⁸ And Washington generally name-checks Coltrane in interviews. But there's really not very much on the album that sounds like Coltrane; rather, the project sounds as though it has picked up in the middle of the mid-1970s, "post-Coltrane" work. In this regard, Will Layman, writing in *Pop Matters*, compares it with McCoy Tyner, Pharoah Sanders, Gary Bartz's Nu Troop, The Crusaders, Miles Davis, Wayne Shorter, Joe Zawinul, and Archie Shepp.¹⁹

The album's commitment to a sound that is at once accessible and cutting edge can be most clearly heard in the final track, "The Message." The song's 7/4 funk groove supports a head and series of solos (Thundercat on electric bass, Washington on tenor, and Ronald Bruner Jr. – Thundercat's brother – on drums) that mine the timbres and shapes of 1970s polygeneric jazz (fusion and avant). The most interesting intersection between the human and the technological is best seen not on the album, however, so much as in Washington's live performances of this work in the year following the album's release. As captured in a live broadcast NPR made from Los Angeles's Regent Theater for the show *Jazz Night in America*, "The Message" achieves a size and scope reminiscent of the 1970s shows of

pioneering Afrofuturist funk-rock band Parliament-Funkadelic.²⁰ A voice-over introduces the song as sci-fi-inspired lights flash like a mothership landing. "This is a journey into music and sound," the voice intones. "Watch out and get ready to move your feet. Wherever you are, you will be a part of it." There follows an extended introduction that features the hip hop producer Battlecat, crafting an improvisation out of sampled clips of Washington's own saxophone solo from the studio recording of the song. Once again, the effect of the spectral is introduced, as Battlecat's sample is marked off from Washington's live sound precisely by crackle. The intersection here of a jazz-derived form (a precomposed head used to bookend and as the source for a series of improvised solos), a massed stage presence, and explicitly technologized sound – indeed a sound that might be called "cyborgian" for the ways it extends the human through first an analog instrument (the saxophone) and then a digital one (the sampler) – offers many ways to think of this piece and its performance as polygeneric.

Finally, I would point to two of Robert Glasper's recent recordings: the trio album *Covered* and the Experiment album *Artscience*.²¹ In comparison with Washington's *The Epic* and Flying Lotus's *You're Dead!*, *Covered* fits most clearly within the mainstream of contemporary acoustic jazz. Glasper uses the trio format to play densely interactive music that is rhythmically complex and harmonically varied, and that mostly uses songs as the basis of extended improvisation. He has actually played music that is much less obviously within the jazz frame – his album *Black Radio* won the 2013 Grammy award for best R&B album – but he has generally separated the two genres in his output, releasing jazz recordings under the Robert Glasper Trio and avant R&B under the

Robert Glasper Experiment. For what it's worth, the *Black Radio* albums draw on jazz (and hip hop and blues) within the larger R&B and neo-soul frame in a fairly programmatic way, pushing the idea of black radio as a polygeneric space, a space where listeners have heard compatibility in music well beyond the boundaries of genre. What makes *Covered* such an interesting album is that Glasper uses it to enact a further turn of the transgeneric screw, to bridge the two aspects of his own creativity, performing material mostly from the *Black Radio* projects but doing so in his trio format.

The opening cut from Glasper's most recent Experiment album, *Artscience* (a term clearly reminiscent of Sun Ra's "Myth Science"), continues this both/and hip hop–jazz fusion approach, and indeed explains it about as directly as it possibly could. This piece, "This Is Not Fear," opens with a minute-long collective improvisation by a quartet including Glasper on piano, Derrick Hodge on bass, Mark Colenberg on drums, and Casey Benjamin on saxophone. With its quick tempo and highly interactive sound, this sits clearly in a contemporary jazz world. As the track goes on, however, Glasper settles into a slower pace, laying lush, R&B-derived chords underneath the more frenetic work of the other three. These two sound streams continue as Benjamin's saxophone takes up a melody derived from Glasper's chord changes. Glasper intones over this sonic bed a manifesto for contemporary polygenericism: "The reality is," he says, "my people have given the world so many styles of music, you know so many different styles; so why should I just confine myself to one? We wanted to explore them all." At this, Hodge and Colenberg settle into a hip hop–derived groove with a strong emphasis on the downbeat, and turntablist Jahi Sundance enters with a

set of electronic sounds reminiscent of video game soundtracks. *Gabriel Solis*

I'm not the first to suggest a trans- or intergeneric frame for understanding black music, but it remains true that both scholarship and criticism (as well as aspects of the newly algorithmic systems of music marketing) remain aligned to a strong vision of genre as the key frame for the music. That said, I would point to a few instances of work in this vein that I take inspiration from. Musicologist Guthrie Ramsey's now classic book *Race Music* draws on the resources of oral history and a community-based view of African American music-making to uncover the ways similar frames of reference informed the music across a wide spectrum of genres and styles, from jazz to blues and from doo wop to hip hop in the period between the 1930s and the 2000s.²² His use of the term "race music" as a title is particularly telling, inasmuch as it points backward historically to a moment, in the 1920s and 1930s, when music by African American artists was marketed – and consumed, or so it would appear – not on the basis of genre (like blues, jazz, or R&B), but rather on the basis of a racialized community. Musicologist David Ake and colleagues likewise explore the gatekeeping function of the genre label "jazz" in their edited volume *Jazz/Not Jazz: The Music and Its Boundaries*.²³ Through a range of case studies, from the 1920s to the present, they showcase the extent to which jazz musicians have reached out past those boundaries – into pop, light classical music, avant-gardism, and more – as well as the ways jazz communities have policed the borders of the music.

The music I've discussed in this essay is similar in some ways to the repertoires looked at by Ramsey or by Ake and

others, inasmuch as they involve both a matter of working through current social and aesthetic issues across some genre divides, and a desire to reach across and around those divides to develop hip new sounds. And yet, given their particular place in time – at the end of a history that already includes the stories those authors are telling – they need more interpretive resources. Ramsey’s “blues muse” and the dynamic of “up South” that derives from the mid-century Great Migration may tell us something about this work, but not much at all about its technological bent or speculative leanings. And though the jazz/not jazz dyad may describe how some listeners respond to much of this music, I see something more complicated going on. If nothing else, most of the musicians here (with the exception of Glasper) could as easily be described as outsiders reaching across a boundary *into* jazz as insiders reaching out.

I draw on Afrofuturism as a way of framing this material because of that tradition’s clarity in identifying the critical engagement with speculative culture as a repository of black thought and resource for black liberation. In brief, Afrofuturism describes Afrocentric work in the arts and philosophy that investigates African diasporic engagements with a vanguardist orientation, technoculture, and/or the fantastical. The term Afrofuturism was first coined by Mark Dery, a cultural critic who identified a trending interest in both science and technology *and* science fiction among African American artists and intellectuals in the 1990s.²⁴ Writer and critic Ytasha Womack identifies a double process whereby the growth of the concept in the 1990s and 2000s took two forms: first, the production of an Afrofuturist ethos in new work, largely in literature, film, and the visual arts; and second, the reinterpretation of older black arts to find experimental, technoculturally

oriented, often mystical precursors.²⁵ Building on Womack’s groundbreaking exploration of the concept, black speculative arts scholars Reynaldo Anderson and Charles Jones have described it as “the emergence of a black identity framework within emerging global technocultural assemblages, migration, human reproduction, algorithms, digital networks, software platforms, [and] bio-technical augmentation.”²⁶

Musically speaking, this technotopian vision is commonly seen in spatial terms, in the outer space/Egypt (or perhaps better, Nubia) pairing, as for instance, in Sun Ra’s work, or on the cover art of Earth, Wind & Fire’s *All ’n All*. Aside from Ra, Afrofuturists have tended to focus on the soul/funk/hip hop continuum, in such figures as Jimi Hendrix, George Clinton, or Janelle Monáe, or on Jamaican Dub, as Michael Veal points out in his book on the genre.²⁷ The relative absence of Afrofuturist writing on jazz can be explained in large measure as the result of a historical accident. The dominant voices in jazz during the theory’s emergence in the 1990s were the so-called Young Lions, a group of musicians who were explicitly past-oriented and came off as luddites. Coalescing around Columbia Records’ marketing of Wynton Marsalis, this community of musicians *was* race conscious, even if they may not have been interested in more pan-Africanist politics of the generation before them; but, at least as Columbia and the PBS *Jazz* documentary would have it, they rejected both the fusion and avant-garde styles of jazz that defined the 1970s and early 1980s in favor of playing within a postbop style that was canonized in the 1950s and 1960s; and their decision to play acoustic music was couched in an explicit opposition to electric (and electronic) instruments.²⁸ Perhaps most important, they cultivated a specific antipathy toward hip hop,

the black music most clearly technological in both material and ideology as well as most relevant to the 1990s American zeitgeist.

However, looking beyond this particular constellation of references, there is much in Afrofuturism that comes to seem highly relevant to much jazz, and certainly to the work I am discussing here. Not only the orientation to technology as a resource for liberatory, improvisational music, or the extensions of the human into new realms through technology, or the intersections between science and mysticism, but also perhaps most significantly Nettrice Gaskin's vision of Afrofuturity as "the artistic practice of navigating the past, present, and future simultaneously."²⁹ Although theorists of Afrofuturism do not routinely identify polygenericism as a core component of the movement, I believe it is reasonably seen to be one. The multiplicity that marks both its spatiality and its temporality is similarly found in the genre orientation of its major figures. Sun Ra's work spanned approaches from as disparate of sources as swing jazz and electronic noise music; George Clinton's P-Funk project was explicitly an attempt to mediate between funk and psychedelic rock; more contemporaneously, Janelle Monáe has made a career of "tipping on the tight-rope" strung between hip hop, R&B, bubble gum pop, and more. What's more, the figures of the cyborg, the android, and the monster – all of which have been fixtures in Afrofuturist work since at least the 1970s – are themselves hybrid.

The response to the music I'm looking at here among jazz critics has been mixed, but I find the following telling: among the interminable end-of-year listicles in 2015, NPR's jazz critics poll rated *The Epic* at #4, after work by such established figures as Rudresh Manthappa, Maria Schneider, and Jack DeJohnette. Yet when they went

to publish the list, they gave Francis Davis the opportunity to pan the album:

Gabriel Solis

This sprawling 3-CD debut by a Los-Angeles-based tenor saxophonist who's recorded with Kendrick Lamar as well as Gerald Wilson is being talked about by its more fervent admirers as if it were jazz like we've never heard it before. It's not, though. Strings, voices, cosmic graphics, Washington's dashiki and all, it's merely jazz like we haven't heard it in a while – an intentional throwback to those "spiritual," early '70s Impulse, Black Jazz and Strata-East LPs whose greatest appeal might be to listeners too young to remember the dead end for jazz this sort of thing led to back then. Washington's obvious sincerity, while admirable, isn't enough to save *The Epic* for those like me, who do remember all too well. Then, I don't hear what others say they do in Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly* or Broadway's *Hamilton*, either.³⁰

The final throwaway line aside, Davis's complaint is that this work isn't original. I suggest the return to older material is not simply derivative, as Davis would have it, but rather part of an Afrofuturist "back to the future" gesture (and indeed, a return to the specifically Afrocentric, Afrofuturist past embodied in the technologically experimental, at times spiritually inclined, funky music of George Duke, Herbie Hancock, and Earth, Wind & Fire, among others) in order to take advantage of its potentiality for a futurity of the present.

To think further about the stakes of the polygenericism that ties these musicians' work together, and the investment in the technological as a resource for music that is profoundly human, it will be useful to turn for a moment to the notion of polygenericism as critique and as a mode of making the culture at large better. In musical cultural studies, the most extensive

recent meditation on this capacity of music is music critic Josh Kun's *Audiotopia*, which locates this possibility not only in the work of artists, but in the work of listeners. At base, Kun narrates the experience whereby cross-generic listening created for him "an alternate set of cultural spaces" through which he could envision a world larger and different than the one in which he lived while growing up.³¹ Drawing on sociologist Ruth Levitas's reading of Foucault's notion of "heterotopias," he describes recordings not as "maps of the future," but as "adequate maps of the present," believing we can find, in music's cultural polyphony, maps that "point us to the possible."³²

The same, I suggest, is true for musicians, as well as for audiences. For instance, Ellison (Flying Lotus) identifies jazz as a source of possibility for him, I think, precisely because he is inside it as a listener, but not fully inside it as a music-maker. The recordings I've looked at here express a range of critique, but together perhaps their most crucial intervention is in the critique of genre. It's not that they reject jazz so much as that they reject a genre-based conception of it. Indeed, each of them is happy to claim jazz as a description of their work; but in doing so for such varied work (and for work that moves past both the *sounds* of post-1980s acoustic jazz and its ideological attachment to genre purity and distinction from other forms of pop music) they push it to integrate into a holistic, poly- or even omnigenic black music. Nonetheless, while it is clear that the artists I have looked at here want to speak to an audience that is interested in hip hop, R&B, and jazz, it's less obvious that the industry either can or cares to help make that happen, or that listeners share their interest. While the first of these issues can be grasped using older methods, the latter two – listener's activity especially – are

much more difficult. One way to get at it is to look at the ways this music is embedded in a recommendation matrix by the streaming services through which many audiences now consume music. A glance at the "related artists" pages for Flying Lotus, Washington, and Glasper is instructive. In a sense, they tell a story about how an artist may or may not be understood beyond conventional notions of genre. Of the three, only Washington's really describes an omnigenic frame. Notably, while his page points to both Glasper and Flying Lotus, neither of their pages points to him or to each other. Glasper's is composed primarily of well-known artists solidly within the jazz world – Kurt Rosenwinkel, Kenny Garrett, Brad Mehldau, Roy Hargrove, Nicholas Payton – and Flying Lotus's includes almost solely other experimental, electronic, sample-oriented artists – Samiyam, Tokimonsta, Daedelus, Knxwledge, Shigeto. Washington's page points in both of these directions. Interestingly, his is also the only one of the three to point directly to other new or canonical artists associated with Afrofuturism, including Sons of Kemet, Alice Coltrane, Pharoah Sanders, and Sun Ra.

This is a good moment to stop and take some historical stock of the aesthetic critique embedded in polygenericism. This is not just the oddball feeling of a few musicians at the edge of things, but rather an emergent structure of feeling (much as I think Marsalis's rejection of fusion was in its moment), and one that can be multiplied over and over within the popular music world. It accounts for the rise of extended instrumental music with or without room for improvisation (whether in math rock or in electronic dance music) and the rise of explicitly hybrid styles (in work as diverse as that of Rhiannon Giddens, D'Angelo's *Black Messiah*, or

Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*). It also accounts for the move away from monogeneric listening – at least as a form of middle-class/elite distinction. While this is no doubt significantly related to the massive shift to online subscription listening, it is a site where jazz clearly matters, specifically the jazz of the 1970s. The critique of the 1970s fusion and avant-garde movements by the succeeding generation was that the music had lost its way: the experiments had led to a dead end and the way forward in jazz was to look at the moment before, to the early 1960s, and explore a new path from there.

The artists I describe here have found a relevance of a different type in 1970s jazz fusions. That music offers not a vision of

jazz as a specific musical style, but as an orientation to music-making that has the capacity to diffuse into many genres, indeed, into any genre. There is more to this, however, than simply a kind of flexibility or breadth to the jazz fusions of the 1970s as a way of understanding why jazz – this jazz – still matters: it is to be found in the shared Afrofuturist leanings that connect the music these artists are making today with that of the past. Beyond the specific elements that might mark art as Afrofuturist – the connection of Egypt and outer space, the interest in cyborgs and other posthumans, the investigations of fugitive myth-science – these works share an affect that we surely need at this moment.

ENDNOTES

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- ² Rafi Zabor and Vic Garbarini, "Wynton vs. Herbie: The Purist and the Crossbreeder Duke It Out," *Musician* 77 (March 1985).
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- ⁴ J. A. Rodgers, "Who is the New Negro, and Why?" in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892–1938*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).
- ⁵ Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 71.
- ⁶ A note is in order here about what I mean by "genre." The term is commonly used as shorthand to describe a musical style or tradition defined by a set of shared sonic features, forms, and, where applicable, textual themes. In addition, music scholars who have written about genre formation have pointed to two other defining features: first, industry practices (from studio norms, to venues, to PR and more); and second, audience behaviors. See David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and 20th Century Popular Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016); Fabian Holt, *Genre in Popular Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); and Keith Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1999). While I will primarily discuss aspects of style in this essay, in fact my contention is that the polygenericism of the music I am interested in here extends to both of these other aspects of genre production as well.

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- ⁸ Gabriel Solis, “Timbral Virtuosity: Pharoah Sanders, Sonic Heterogeneity, and the Jazz Avant-Garde in the 1960s and 70s,” *Jazz Perspectives* 9 (1) (2015): 48.
- ⁹ LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka], “The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music),” in *Black Music* (New York: Akashic Books, 2010 [1966]), 181–182.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 184.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 187.
- ¹² Flying Lotus [Stephen Ellison], *You’re Dead!*, Warp Records, 2014.
- ¹³ Arun Rath, “Music from Death’s Doorstep: A Conversation with Flying Lotus,” NPR: All Things Considered, October 12, 2014, <https://www.npr.org/2014/10/12/354599863/music-from-deaths-doorstep-a-conversation-with-flying-lotus> (accessed June 22, 2018).
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ Mark Fischer, “The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology,” *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 5 (2) (2013): 42–55.
- ¹⁶ Rath, “Music from Death’s Doorstep.”
- ¹⁷ Kamasi Washington, *The Epic*, Brainfeeder, 2015.
- ¹⁸ Adam Shatz, “Kamasi Washington’s Giant Step,” *The New York Times Magazine*, January 21, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/24/magazine/kamasi-washingtons-giant-step.html>.
- ¹⁹ Will Layman, “The Kamasi Washington Phenomenon,” *Pop Matters*, January 14, 2016, <https://www.popmatters.com/the-kamasi-washington-phenomenon-2495458272.html> (accessed June 22, 2018).
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- ²¹ Robert Glasper, *Covered: Recorded Live at Capitol Studios*, Blue Note Records, 2015; and Robert Glasper, *Artscience*, Blue Note Records, 2016. It is challenging to write about Glasper in this context at this point, inasmuch as he is most visible in the jazz press now for a set of misogynist comments exchanged in an interview between himself and pianist and blogger Ethan Iverson. Ethan Iverson, “Interview with Robert Glasper,” Do the Math, March 2017. (See Michelle Mercer, “Sexism from Two Leading Jazz Artists Draws Anger—And Presents an Opportunity,” *The Record: Music News from NPR*, March 9, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2017/03/09/519482385/sexism-from-two-leading-jazz-artists-draws-anger-and-presents-an-opportunity>, for quotes from and commentary on the Do the Math post, which is no longer available.) I abhor those comments, but still find the music compelling in relation to the topic of contemporary soulful jazz fusions.
- ²² Guthrie Ramsey, *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).
- ²³ David Ake, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and Daniel Goldmark, *Jazz/Not Jazz: The Music and Its Boundaries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).
- ²⁴ Mark Dery, “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose,” in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994).
- ²⁵ Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013).
- ²⁶ Reynaldo Anderson and Charles Jones, “Introduction: The Rise of Astro-Blackness,” in *Afrofuturism 2.0*, vii–viii.

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- ²⁸ *Jazz*, dir. Ken Burns, PBS miniseries, 2001.
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- ³⁰ Francis Davis, "The 2015 NPR Music Jazz Critics Poll," NPR Jazz: A Blog Supreme, December 21, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/ablogsupreme/2015/12/21/460527087/the-2015-npr-music-jazz-critics-poll> (accessed June 22, 2018).
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“You Can’t Dance to It”: Jazz Music and Its Choreographies of Listening

Christopher J. Wells

Abstract: Central to dominant jazz history narratives is a midcentury rupture where jazz transitions from popular dance music to art music. Fundamental to this trope is the idea that faster tempos and complex melodies made the music hostile to dancing bodies. However, this constructed moment of rupture masks a longer, messier process of negotiation among musicians, audiences, and institutions that restructured listening behavior within jazz spaces. Drawing from the field of dance studies, I offer the concept of “choreographies of listening” to interrogate jazz’s range of socially enforced movement “scores” for audience listening practices and their ideological significance. I illustrate this concept through two case studies: hybridized dance/concert performances in the late 1930s and “off-time” bebop social dancing in the 1940s and 1950s. These case studies demonstrate that both seated and dancing listening were rhetorically significant modes of engagement with jazz music and each expressed agency within an emergent Afromodernist sensibility.

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Like many jazz scholars, I spend a lot of time doing critical historiography, contemplating the sedimental layers of ideology jazz’s histories have accumulated over time and how those striations affect our view of the past. But there is one moment in my life that sticks out when I truly felt the gravity of jazz historical narratives. When I say gravity, I mean precisely that: it pulled me off my feet and planted my ass in a chair. At the 2013 American Musicological Society annual meeting in Pittsburgh, a live band performed Ted Buehrer’s painstaking transcriptions of Mary Lou Williams’s compositions and arrangements. My friend Anna and I lindy hopped our way through Williams’s best charts from the 1920s and 1930s: “Walkin’ and Swingin’,” “Messa Stomp,” and “Mary’s Idea.”¹ About halfway through, the band took up “Scorpio” from Williams’s *Zodiac Suite*, and I felt that groovy bassline throughout my legs and hips as delightful pockets of rhythmic

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dissonance invited me (and I presume also Anna, though I haven't asked her) to keep dancing . . . but we didn't. The music still felt "danceable," but we'd crossed from 1938 to 1944, and I felt a shift inside myself as I questioned whether letting my hips respond to that bassline would still be appropriate as the band crossed the "bebop moment": that early 1940s boundary separating jazz-as-pop from jazz-as-art.

The bebop moment has become a crucial, arguably *the* crucial, event in nearly every large-scale narrative treatment of jazz's history. As cultural theorist Bernard Gendron explains,

The bebop revolution has since been enshrined in the jazz canon as a contest of epic proportions, occurring at the major fault line of jazz history. Bebop is given credit for having transformed jazz from a popular dance music, firmly ensconced in the Hit Parade, to a demanding, experimental art music consigned to small clubs and sophisticated audiences.²

Gendron's historiographic framing is quite astute, and it is important we continue to reexamine this still potent narrative construct. I would advocate moving away from the idea of a bifurcating "moment" in favor of conceptualizing the cultural transition of jazz at midcentury as a long and often messy process encompassing many individual and collective negotiations among musicians, audiences, and institutions.

A critical element of the potent trope Gendron highlights is that the bebop moment marked jazz music's severance from practices of social dancing. This is encapsulated in a scene from Ken Burns's iconic, if oft-criticized, documentary *Jazz*: "No Dancing, Please." The sign fills the screen before panning upward to a sax player blowing in a smoky club. In this early moment from the eighth volume of *Jazz*, narrator Keith David explains,

Great jazz soloists abandoned dreams of having big bands of their own, formed small groups instead and retreated to nightclubs, places too small for dancing. . . . The jam session had become the model, freewheeling, competitive, demanding, the kind jazz musicians had always played to entertain themselves after the squares had gone home. The Swing Era was over; jazz had moved on. And here and there across the country, in small clubs and on obscure record labels, the new and risk-filled music was finally beginning to be heard. It was called "Bebop."³

Henry Martin and Keith Waters offer a similar framing in their ubiquitous tome *Jazz: The First Hundred Years*: "The beboppers, however, disassociated jazz from the jitterbugging crowds of the 1930s in an attempt to win respect for their music as an art form. The radical change in tempo also certainly affected dancing."⁴ Among the "key points" they use to differentiate bebop from swing are the following: "Deemphasis on dancing: Tempos considerably faster or slower than in swing; Rhythmic pulse less obviously articulated than in swing."⁵ Further scholarly accounts bolster this point. Even as he notably, and somewhat controversially, situates bebop as a contiguous extension of the swing era, historian David Stowe still reinscribes this trope, offering "big bands betraying their audience by playing undanceable tempos or lacing their charts with the controversial modernisms of what was coming to be called bebop."⁶ Stowe's emphasis on betrayal highlights another significant element of this narrative: that musicians claimed greater autonomy as artists by distancing themselves from popular audiences and from the trappings of mass entertainment.

Musicians and dancers have also reaffirmed this narrative. In his autobiography, Dizzy Gillespie attributes his band's

“You Can’t Dance to It” struggles in the late 1940s to a disjuncture between what his band was playing and what social dancers wanted.

Dancers had to hear those four solid beats and could care less about the more esoteric aspects, the beautiful advanced harmonies and rhythms that we played and our virtuosity, as long as they could dance. They didn’t care whether we played a flatted fifth or a ruptured 129th.⁷

Foregrounding and problematizing audience members’ bodies, Gillespie highlights the chasm between his own expressive desires and those of listeners who principally wanted “to dance close and screw.”⁸ Frankie Manning, arguably the most influential Savoy Ballroom dancer of the swing era, gives an account of bebop from which one would certainly gather the music was not for dancing. Manning writes: “I went to Minton’s Playhouse to hear some jazz, and I said, ‘What the heck is going on?’ . . . I was used to music for dancing, but this new sound was only for listening.”⁹ Though Manning’s parsing of listening and dancing highlights the very dichotomization of listener corporealities I seek to disrupt in this essay, his experience represents his generation’s perspective regarding the challenges bebop’s innovations presented to bodies entrained to the rhythms and tempos of swing, challenges that indeed dissuaded them from dancing.

Of course, as audiences stop dancing, they necessarily *start* doing something else, and equally critical to jazz’s ostensible transition is listeners’ new mode of performative engagement, as jazz audiences increasingly listened while performing the motionless, serious, and intellectually rigorous listening posture of the Western concert listener. Musicologist Scott DeVeaux argues that the rise of the jazz concert between 1935 and 1945 was crucial to repositioning jazz as a form

of serious art. As he explains, concert formats present a powerful cultural rhetoric within the United States, because of their associations with the “considerable social privilege” afforded European art music.¹⁰ Concerts, of course, also impose a specific choreography for audiences; DeVeaux writes, “The concert is a solemn ritual with music the object of reverent contemplation. Certain formalities are imposed upon the concert audience: people attend in formal dress, sit quietly, and attentively with little outward bodily movement, and restrict their response to applause at appropriate moments only.”¹¹ In a concert setting, musicians and seated audience members lay claim to cultural capital by performing the movements and nonmovements that mark the concert as an elite social space and the music performed as worthy of serious consideration. Both affirmations and contestations of the bebop moment as a singular point of rupture that marks jazz’s emergence as “art” necessarily position jazz listeners’ bodies as critical sites of deeply political performance both within and in opposition to social inscribed choreographies.

I contend that jazz studies as a field could benefit from more robust discussions of its audiences and of the social and aesthetic politics that shape how listening bodies contribute to the aesthetic discourses that mark jazz as lowbrow, highbrow, sinful, tasteful, primitive, modern, popular entertainment, and high art in various times and places. As both a practicing social jazz dancer and a scholar researching jazz music’s intersections with social and popular dance, I have had the privilege of engaging substantively with dance studies as a field. Dance scholars have developed a robust and deeply nuanced critical discussion of bodies and embodied expression that could certainly inform work in jazz studies, even when

dance is not our explicit subject. In this essay, I offer the concept of *choreographies of listening* as a theoretical tool meant both to place jazz studies in closer dialogue with valuable work on embodiment and performance emerging from the field of dance studies and to offer us useful language through which to more critically interrogate the complex and deeply contextual social performances of listening in which jazz's audiences engage. Toward that end, I develop and apply the concept through two brief case studies, one from the early 1930s and one from the late 1940s and early 1950s, that highlight shifts and unorthodoxies in black listener corporeality and complicate dominant narratives regarding black audiences' corporeal modes of dancing and of listening during these periods.

Black jazz audiences during the interwar period were particularly mindful of the intersection between seated listening and the projection of rigor and dignity. A series of events targeting black audiences in Atlanta during the late 1930s specifically bifurcated the space for seated listening and dancing listening. Advertisements in the *Chicago Defender* and the *Atlanta Daily World* – Atlanta's primary African American newspaper – promoted dance parties that also featured a separate “concert hour” when no dancing was allowed. The first such concert was held at Sunset Park in July 1938 and featured the Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra. The *Defender* reported that the Lunceford event separated dancing time from concert time: “During the concert hour before the ‘jam session,’ Lunceford entertained the crowd with what could be considered a floor show, but was styled as a concert hour – no dancing was allowed. At 9:30 o'clock, swing-time begun continuing until 1:30 o'clock.”¹² Two similar events were held at Atlanta's City

Auditorium, the first of which, also in 1938, featured Cab Calloway's band. Advertisements made clear that from 9 – 10 p.m. there would be “NO DANCING, in order that you may hear Cab at ease” with assurances that “at ten o'clock sharp, he will get ‘hotcha’ and ‘jam it’ until one-thirty o'clock the next in the morning.”¹³ The following year, City Auditorium hosted Count Basie's orchestra, offering a concert half-hour with “POSITIVELY NO DANCING” following a patron's interview in the lobby.¹⁴

To understand why these Atlanta concerts were exceptional, however, and why these audiences may have desired to enact the seated posture of serious listening, we must consider that these performances were organized as racially segregated events for black audiences only. The same *Daily World* article announcing Cab Calloway's 1938 appearance and its “streamlined” concert section also reveals that this would be City Auditorium's first “all colored double performance” and that “management is eager to see if Negro people really appreciate an evening all their own.”¹⁵ While it may have been their first jazz concert, the black Atlantans attending City Auditorium were not strangers to the role of attentive audience member for a serious concert performance. The venue regularly hosted not only jazz dances but also graduation ceremonies, community pageants, and operatic and concert recital performances by black singers, the kinds of events whose concordances with elite European culture musicologist Lawrence Schenbeck has convincingly situated within the African American social and intellectual project of racial uplift.¹⁶ In fact, earlier that month, the City Auditorium staged a pageant entitled “75 Years of Progress” that celebrated the development of the Negro race in America, and earlier in the year the auditorium hosted

"You Can't Figure 1
Dance to It" Cab Calloway Band Concert Advertisement, 1938

TONIGHT AT 9:00 P. M.
SEE and HEAR IN PERSON—The Nation's Favorite

**THE MIGHTY
Cab Calloway
AND HIS
Famous COTTON CLUB Orchestra**
At The Beautiful Air-Conditioned
City Auditorium

— Featuring —

- **BATTLE OF MUSIC** (8 P. M. to 8:15 P. M.)
BENNY GOODMAN vs. CHICK WEBB —via Auditorium's New Sound System
- **CONCERT** (9 P. M. to 10 P. M.)
Positively No Dancing during this Hour in order that you may hear Cab at ease.
- **“CHOO” BERRY**
Nation's foremost tenor saxophonist and co-composer of “Christopher Columbus”
- **PATRONS' INTERVIEW**
8:15—9:00 Via Loud Speaker By Raphael McIver

Buy Your Advance Sale Ticket Before 8 P. M. Tonight For
The Greatest Show Ever Staged In Atlanta... Adv. Price 65c
(DOORS OPEN AT 7:30 P. M.)

Source: *Atlanta Daily World*, August 4, 1938 (accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers).

Figure 2
Count Basie Orchestra Concert Advertisement, 1939

Tuesday Night - 8:00
See and Hear in Person - the Matchless
KING OF ALL SWINGSTERS—

COUNT BASIE
AND HIS
MIGHTY SWING ORCHESTRA
(Undisputed No. 1 Swing Band of the World)
AT THE HEALTHFULLY COOLED
City Auditorium

— featuring —

- **8:00 P. M.—Patron's Interview**
IN LOBBY BEFORE CONCERT—Via Loud Speaker
- **8:30 P. M.—Battle of Music**
CHICK WEBB VS. BENNY GOODMAN—Recorded Program
- **9:00 P. M.—Concert**
POSITIVELY NO DANCING During This Half Hour
- **HELEN HUMES & JIMMY RUSHING**
VOCAL SWINGSTERS

Buy Your Advance Sale Tickets Before 8 P. M. Tuesday night for the Greatest
Show Ever Staged in Atlanta. Advance Price 65c. At Box 85c. Doors open 7:30.

Source: *Atlanta Daily World*, May 14, 1939 (accessed via ProQuest Historical Newspapers).

spiritual concerts from the Tuskegee University Choir under the direction of African American composer William Dawson.¹⁷ Atlanta's black audiences thus already understood the specific rules governing audiences' corporeal performance in this elite cultural space: by sitting down, listening intently, and responding appropriately with limited movement, black audiences could acquire embodied cultural capital by performing the physical rhetoric through which seated audiences communicate respect, dignity, intelligence, and sophistication.

I introduce these hybridized concert events, which explicitly instruct audiences about how to position their bodies for listening, to suggest choreography as a useful analytic lens through which to approach listening practices and engagement with music, and specifically with jazz. My use of the term *choreography* follows dance scholar Susan Foster, who employs the concept to consider broadly the structuring of possibilities for how bodies can move and behave within a given space. Whether planned intentionally by a single person or formed organically through gradual shifts in tacit social mores, choreography, she argues, is a "hypothetical setting forth of what the body is and what it can be based on the decisions made in rehearsal and in performance about its identity." Foster claims we can thus read choreographies as "the product of choices, inherited, invented, or selected, about what kinds of bodies and subjects are being constructed and what kinds of arguments about these bodies and subjects are being put forth."¹⁸ Foster's work draws from a robust interdisciplinary conversation in dance studies that regards the body, whether moving or stationary, as always performative and always political.¹⁹

To see how movement's interaction with choreographies specifically influ-

ences listening, it is useful to consider the conjuncturally specific listening praxis ethnomusicologist Judith Becker has termed "habitus of listening." Building upon sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's framework, Becker offers this term as a way to understand the default mode(s) of listening within a particular sphere of musical practice. As Becker explains:

Our habitus of listening is tacit, unexamined, seemingly completely "natural." We listen in a particular way without thinking about it, and without realizing that it even is a particular way of listening. Most of our styles of listening have been learned through unconscious imitation of those who surround us and those with whom we continually interact. A "habitus of listening" suggests not a necessity nor a rule, but an inclination, a disposition to listen with a particular kind of focus . . . and to interpret the meanings of the sounds and one's emotional responses to the musical event in somewhat (never totally) predictable ways.²⁰

Tacit, socially constructed choreography is often central to the process of "unconscious imitation" to which Becker refers. The habitus generated by a musical space's choreography guides how one enacts the process of listening, what sensory information is a relevant part of this listening process, and what constitutes appropriate interaction between the various participants. When applied to jazz listening spaces, choreography indexes the implicit and explicit assumptions people make about their role (dancer, musician, concertgoer, and so on), how they should thus orient their body to communicate what it means for them to listen to the music being played (or that they are playing), and what their listening bodies communicate about the soundscapes and attendant values within a given shared space.

“You Can’t
Dance to It”

In discussing jazz musicians in the 1920s, musicologist Jeffrey Magee situates jazz musicians’ enactment of racial uplift as a form of cultural mastery that demonstrated fluency in Western concert traditions.²¹ By corporeally enacting the role of Western concert listeners, black audiences at City Auditorium also embodied an ethic of racial uplift through cultural mastery, situating themselves as educated, cerebral, and serious listeners. Crucially, performing the nonmovement of a seated listener also signaled that African American audiences were capable of corporeal discipline, a critical counter-statement to longstanding minstrel tropes that portrayed black bodies as fundamentally wild and subhuman. Corporeal discipline was thus central on numerous levels to the physical enactment of racial uplift.²² Control of one’s body was tied to positive moral values through the early twentieth-century discourse surrounding physical culture. As a precursor to the American bodybuilding movement, the concept of physical culture offered that individuals were capable of improving their bodies through educated, disciplined labor and were capable, through this work, of improving their worth and moral character. This concept became an especially potent tool for African American communities because it offered a counter-narrative to white supremacist genetic determinism.²³ It is also important to note that a still, seated listening posture draws attention *away* from one’s body, presenting a space where serious sounds meet serious minds (with perhaps the minor concession that there are ears involved). For African Americans at this time, emphasizing their cerebral prowess and sensitive intellect was a powerful tactic for contesting oppressive stereotypes that marked black bodies as wild, unrestrained, and dangerous and that sensationalized black

talent as the result of a savage and naturally gifted body rather than a rigorously cultivated mind.

For black musicians and audiences, aspirational desire for the cultural capital afforded serious music and musician-ship functioned at the point of intersection between two ideological formations in African American communities: the aforementioned racial uplift and, in the 1940s, an emergent discourse of Afro-modernism. Musicologist and pianist Guthrie Ramsey has situated Afro-modernism as an aesthetic and political consciousness through which Afrodiasporic people asserted artistic agency and autonomy by focusing on form and abstraction over function. For some musicians, this aesthetic sparked an ambivalence or even hostility toward dancing. From their perspective, listening without silence and without stillness communicated both a lack of respect and a lack of effort: that one was not *truly* listening. Operating from within this ideology, accounts of jazz’s transition to a form of art music tend to focus principally on the agency and actions of jazz musicians, suggesting that bebop players complicated jazz’s musical texture to such a degree that the sound itself rejected the dancing body and demanded pure, seated listening to be truly appreciated. As my second case study will show, however, some black youth moved against the new prescribed choreography of motionless listening, participating actively in bebop’s innovations in a manner every bit as rigorous as their seated counterparts.

Writing for the *Hartford Courant* in 1948, columnist M. Oakley Stafford offered the sort of frustrated antibebop rant commonplace among “moldy fig” critics in the 1940s. However, Stafford’s frustration in this case was not with the music itself but rather that in bebop’s “newest

phase,” a new form of social dance was emerging alongside it.

I'm Up To My Ears In The Bebop development. . . . Now the newest phase of it . . . A few weeks ago there was only the music . . . Sharp, discordant chords, absence of tune, and that sort of thing. No one danced to it. . . . Now the new development . . . They are dancing to it. They are doing what appears to be a combination of the modern dance with jitterbugging thrown in and even a step or two of ballroom stuff. . . . It is so definitely to current music what the modern dance was to dancing . . . Difficult to accept . . . Angular . . . Meaningful . . . And slow to get into your affection but once there, you love it. . . . Watch the up-and-coming set dance to it differently from the way they danced to jazz. . . . It is definitely not jazz . . . Worth watching . . . It grows on you.²⁴

While bebop's "undanceableness" is a central theme of its historiography, there is ample evidence that counter-choreographies existed among black youth who treated bebop as *their* popular music and developed new social dance forms that both reflected and added new layers to bebop's already complex tapestry of innovations.

Several major African American figures in jazz history have alluded to this phenomenon. As Amiri Baraka notably wrote in *Blues People*, "'You can't dance to it' was the constant harassment—which is, no matter the irrelevancy, a lie. My friends and I as youths used only to emphasize the pronoun more. 'You can't dance to it' and whispered 'or anything else for that matter.'"²⁵ When I interviewed Sylvan Charles, an eighty-one-year-old retired postal worker, Harlem resident, and self-identified "bebop dancer" about his experience with bebop as a teenager in the 1940s, I presented him with the common narrative that bebop music was not for dancing; his response:

"That's Ridiculous!" Charles first heard jazz music as a child growing up on the island of St. Croix. He and his friends got into bebop through listening to records in the early 1940s as young teenagers and started dancing to bebop records in church basements, at house parties, and, by 1945, at massive block parties all over New York City. These block party sites, according to Charles, included in a vacant lot adjacent to Minton's Playhouse where a record player perched on a flat-bed truck would play tunes such as Dizzy Gillespie's "Emanon" or Tad Dameron's "The Squirrel," both particularly popular among dancers.

Aligning with the counter-history Charles's reminiscences invite, Ramsey's discussion of Afromodernism explicitly eschews the strict bifurcation of high art and popular culture central to the white modernist paradigm implicit in most framings of the bebop moment. Ramsey highlights the black body's shifting relationship with popular culture and mass media as particularly critical to the post-war emergence of Afromodernist sensibilities.

If one of the legacies of nineteenth-century minstrelsy involved the public degradation of the black body in the American entertainment sphere, then one hundred years after minstrelsy's emergence, African Americans used this same signifier to upset a racist social order and to affirm in the public entertainment and the private spheres their culture and humanity. Although it has some precedent, the new attitude was so prevalent that it represents a huge departure from earlier modes of "racial uplift," especially the "politics of respectability" championed by the black professional and upper-class citizens, who sought to discipline black bodies into bourgeois submission.²⁶

In Ramsey's analysis, Afromodernism involved a resistant shift in embodied

Christopher J. Wells

“You Can’t Dance to It” practice – I would argue, an alternative choreography of listening – manifested as a corporeal shift away from the disciplined, corporeal engagement that marked the era of racial uplift. Indeed, Ramsey acknowledges the significance of social dancing in black popular culture but focuses the bulk of his analysis on the lyrical and sonic signifiers presented in popular recordings. As such, in exploring black audiences’ kinetic engagement with bebop music through emergent forms of popular dance, I seek to bolster and expand his emphasis on black corporeal autonomy as critical to Afromodernist liberation.

When asked about bebop’s “undanceable” nature, dancer and folklorist Mura Dehn replied, “It was very, very danceable – it was magnificent. It was not done by white people. It was mostly done by black people, and it was done in spurts.”²⁷ Dehn, a Russian modern dancer, engaged in a decades-long study of African American folk and popular dance from the 1940s through the 1980s. Her work plays a vital role in documenting a crucial yet largely unacknowledged cultural space in which bebop dance thrived as part of a nascent postwar black youth culture. Dehn’s account of bop dancing focuses on the early 1950s, when a new generation of young people, more cynical and politically radical than those ten years older, regarded bebop as *their* popular music. The dance element of the new culture, according to Dehn, lagged behind the music by about half a decade. During World War II, according to Dehn:

Musicians were ahead of dancers in their search of new forms. . . . In a furious assault of saxophone virtuosity the musician seems to disregard the dancer. He sweeps him off the floor, breaks his legs with irrational rhythms, stabs him with long whaling spasms, paralyzes with introvert monotony.²⁸

These younger bebop dancers represented a sharp generational shift in which the music activated young peoples’ bodies even as older dancers, like Frankie Manning and his contemporaries, resisted the change. In her drafts for an unfinished manuscript, Dehn relays a vivid description of the attitudes of black youth from a Mr. Bishop, an instructor of black physical culture at PS 28, a Brooklyn public school.

The post-war kids are brighter, more mature, aware of problems economic, social, political. Conditioned to present time unrest, insecurity. They don’t think in terms of the future. . . . They don’t want to be dominated. They are spontaneous, dynamic. I actually feel they are a better human material, conscious of their environment – good and bad. They don’t go for Jazz. They are Bop fiends. If they are interested in dance, everything else becomes secondary.²⁹

Bishop’s account parallels cultural historian Eric Lott’s description of the shifts in social consciousness among young Northern black people in the mid-1940s. Lott presents “bop style” as a defiant identity performed through a matrix of statements not just in music, but also fashion, language, and demeanor. Though dance is conspicuously absent from Lott’s account of bop culture in New York, his description of “an aesthetic of speed and displacement” and a “closed hermeneutic that had the undeniable effect of alienating the riff-raff and expressing a sense of felt isolation, all the while affirming a collective purpose” neatly fit Dehn’s positioning of the culture surrounding bebop dance.³⁰ Further, that the young black “cools” of the 1940s and 1950s found ways to move to this music is well in-line with Ramsey’s positioning of Afromodernism as a governing paradigm for black life and black aesthetics at midcentury.

What ultimately emerged from the younger dancers' experimentation was a new style that adapted and expanded earlier vernacular forms, most notably the lindy hop and the applejack. Applejacking became the most prominent style of bebop solo dance, done almost exclusively by men, often in formal and informal cutting contests.³¹ While individual dance steps known as the "applejack" date back to the 1920s or before, applejacking reemerged as a solo dance craze in the late 1940s. The applejack is a step with many similarities to the Charleston in which inward-pointed feet step over each other as the knees continuously cross. By the 1950s, this basic step had yielded a wide array of variations including corkscrews, fans, tic-tocs, and other steps oriented around shifts in toe-heel balance.³² Individual styles of applejacking emerged with varying degrees of complexity among different scenes. Dehn's handwritten movement descriptions of applejackers at the Audubon Ballroom identify a range of slides and dips as well as abrupt stops in the middle of steps, leading her to identify the Audubon dancers' style as "the most modern dancing I ever saw."³³ At the Savoy Ballroom, Dehn noted, "it is danced in a broad and sweeping way, with dips and slides, with diving and skating, mostly to Boogie-Woogie music. But its off-balance pendulum fits into the torn riffs of Bop."³⁴

Applejack dancers negotiated bebop's "torn riffs" and its fast tempos through a shift toward half-time, or "off-time," dancing. As Dehn described the phenomenon,

Time is cut in two. Instead of fast bouncing steps there is a resilient slow stepping with multiple jitters on each foot. It travels through the erect body to a wobbling head. It is still the basic Lindy formula, but a new rhythm has emerged. A half-time off-beat

Lindy. The preoccupation is to break up the beat. The position of the body becomes nonchalant, deliberately negligent.³⁵

Through off-time dancing, bebop dancers worked around one of the core features of bop's ostensible undanceability – that it was simply too fast – by effectively cutting the tempo in half at will through their own realization of pulse. This sort of metric and hypermetric play allowed dancers not only to keep up with bebop musicians, but to move in and out of time with them, analogous to the integration of "inside" and "outside" playing in a bop solo. In our interview, Charles also emphasized his strong preference for the groovy feeling of dancing off-time, and told me he had only recently been told by jazz musicians that he was dancing "half-time." The off-time tempo created space for complex nuances in dancers' engagement with musical rhythm as, in Dehn's words, "in New York, they also dance between the beats, forming a rhythmic counterpoint with the music."³⁶ This type of danced engagement aligns in interesting ways with Stowe's description of bebop musicians' technical reflection of broader sociopolitical shifts.

The sharp contradiction of the ensemble in bebop, together with the emphasis on individual virtuosity and dissonance (to swing-attuned ears) sonorities, suggests the heroic alienation of the postwar individual cut loose from Depression-era modes of commitment, or the racial militancy taking root among African-Americans in the late 1940s.³⁷

On a cultural level, bebop dancers are clearly part of Stowe's paradigm, yet they also fit within it on a technical level. In both its emphasis on individualism and its use of dissonance – understood as metric rather than harmonic – applejacking

“You Can’t Dance to It” fits neatly into a bebop aesthetic that exemplifies the “cultural mood of alienation” the music expressed.³⁸

While highly intricate and technically complex, applejacking was firmly entrenched in black popular culture. Black newspaper coverage of the emerging phenomenon suggests that the dance became popular via stage revues featuring the song “Applejack,” itself popularized by Lionel Hampton in 1948 and Lucky Millender in 1949. Dolores Calvin of the *Chicago Defender* reports seeing the dance for the first time both on stage and in the audience during a 1948 performance by Hampton in Newark, New Jersey.

The kids were jumping to “applejack” rhythm in the aisles. . . . The ones in their seats who couldn’t get to the aisles were yelling “applejack” followed by wild, uncontrollable hysterics. . . . We just sat glued to our chair, afraid to comment for fear of a hundred or more nearby juniors crashing our skull. . . . But nevertheless amazed and shocked at the goings on. [...] Then Hamp began Hamp’s Boogie. . . . That too, had “applejack” steps in it which he did quite willingly. . . . The singers, Wini Brown and Roland Burton were also on the “applejack kick.”³⁹

The applejack was one of several bebop-era dances associated in the 1940s principally with R&B music and specifically with a popular “jump blues” hit. An article in *Our World* that otherwise does not discuss dance extensively featured a half-page spread of a dancer engaged in the solo “applejack” and partnered “bebop.” As the author explained, “dig the new dances the cats are cooking. That should squash the deadpans who say bebop isn’t danceable.”⁴⁰ Indeed, Dehn frequently cites the applejack, along with the hucklebuck, as major postwar dance trends among the bebop “cools.” Though she emphasizes the applejack more, its

appearance alongside the hucklebuck is instructive regarding the porous transfer between bebop and other black styles of popular music. The popular song paired with the dance was an R&B recasting of Charlie Parker’s composition “Now’s the Time” and became a significant hit for Paul Wilson and his Hucklebuckers in 1949 (and later, of course, for Chubby Checker).

Often walking a playful line himself between “serious” art and popular entertainment, Dizzy Gillespie noted the heterogeneity in bebop audiences’ listening practices. Gillespie affirmed that bebop was, in fact, a “danceable” music in a 1949 essay he penned for the *Los Angeles Sentinel* defending his style of music through what he termed “counter-bopaganda”:

Another argument against bop is that people can’t dance to it. Well, I’ve seen people dancing to our band and to our RCA Victor recordings such as “Swedish Suite” all over the country. As a matter of fact they think the Afro Cuban rhythm affects [sic] are especially interesting to a dancer. But very often people don’t want to dance, they just want to come up to the bandstand and listen to the music. They pay their money and they take their choice. Is that bad?⁴¹

With the caution that this column, attributed to Gillespie, may well have been written by his publicist as was common practice at the time, this passage troubles two pervasive narrative tropes of bebop historiography.⁴² First, Gillespie seems to invite danced engagement with his music rather than expressing any resentment toward the ostensibly frivolous activity. He offers danceability as one of the music’s merits. Second, and highly related, he enthusiastically frames a bebop performance as a commercial transaction in which paying audiences purchase the right to interact with the music however they choose. This is not the attitude of a

heroic modernist nobly rejecting engagement with the commercial marketplace nor of one promoting antagonism toward popular audiences as a path to aesthetic liberation and ascendance to the realm of high art. Here, Gillespie demonstrates that, like generations of jazz musicians before him, he was himself far more comfortable with and invested in the role of “popular entertainer” than were those critics who positioned him as a “serious artist.” Indeed, as DeVaux has argued, even this pervasive image of bebop-musician-as-maverick-artist was itself a performative strategy crafted by skillful musician/entertainers such as Gillespie to satisfy the taste of white hipsters who craved the vibe of an authentic, anticommmercial jam session experience and were willing to pay for it.⁴³

Given Gillespie’s above claim, however, what are we to make of his retrospective disdain for those who wanted to “dance close and screw” and to whom a flatted fifth was ostensibly illegible? Gillespie’s frustration here is that dancing audiences failed to appreciate those aspects of bebop music he himself most prized: in this case, its extended harmonic language and layers of asymmetric rhythmic complexity. However, his lamenting criticism could also suggest that, while he was a brilliant musician, he may have lacked the kinesthetic “chops” to properly appreciate the subtle complexities of bebop dancers’ movement. In fact, bop dancers’ penchant for “off-time” dancing yielded a fluid range of intricate, multilayered relationships with “those four solid beats” in the music. It may be that the metric subtleties of virtuoso social bebop dancers’ treatment of pulse were as illegible to Gillespie as his flatted fifths were to them. What this possible disconnect suggests more broadly is that jazz history’s strong focus on musicians’ perspectives, through oral history and autobiography

as central source texts, likely skews our framing and understanding of audience members’ modes of listening and the range of movements available to jazz listeners in specific cultural and historical conjunctures. What I am explicitly asking for here is a paradigm shift in how we regard rigorous listening and musical fluency. It is possible to appreciate music in ways that may be illegible to musicians themselves, and the ontological fissures between bebop dancers and musicians should push us to imagine a robustly heterogeneous concept of “music appreciation” that moves beyond mere fidelity or lack thereof to the precise epistemologies through which musicians conceptualize and value their own work. Such a paradigm shift offers a counterweight to any clean, ideological narrative of jazz’s sonic evolution into a form of expression that can only be properly appreciated, and only properly respected, when audiences listen from a posture that performatively erases their own bodies as participating agents in the event.

Indeed, as a practice, bebop dance exposes the separation of the terms “dancing” and “listening” as a false dichotomy. Even as DeVaux critiques the prestige culture of the concert and concert hall, he reifies the value judgments of its particular choreography of listening when he claims that even in the Savoy Ballroom, the increasing virtuosity of jazz music led to moments where “dancing would occasionally be supplanted by listening” and claims that concerts required listening with undivided attention. Through multilayered metric play, bebop dancers made active choices about where and how to experience the musical pulse and phrasing, both how to ride it and how to deviate from it when they so chose. This musical experimentation with rhythmic dissonance and polymeter either immediately followed or was coterminous with

“You Can’t
Dance to It”

the height of off-time bop dancing. Such parallels place bop dancers not among some broad-brushed construct of “the masses,” those supposedly undereducated jazz consumers seeking some cheap form of casual listening pleasure ostensibly out of step with genuine musical innovation. Rather, the social history and temporal dynamism of bop dancing invite us to see African American youth as virtuosic listeners who not only responded to bop musicians’ innovations but also contributed their own layers to its invigorating soundscape as active participants in what musicologist Brigid Cohen, borrowing a term from cultural theorist Homi Bhabha, has called postwar New York City’s “vernacular cosmopolitan negotiation,” through which avant-garde musical innovation flowed across genres within the ethnically diverse social spaces that fueled multiple emergent modernisms.⁴⁴

To conclude, I would like to turn back to perspectives from dance studies and specifically performance theorist André Lepcecki’s notion of “choreopolitics.” Lepcecki offers choreopolitics as a specifically resistant mode of engagement with those structures enforcing choreographic constraints, which he terms “choreopolicing” or the authoritarian containment of movement that yields “a policed dance of quotidian consensus.”⁴⁵ While it is tempting to position the danced listening of applejackers as choreopolitical in a way the concertized, “choreopoliced” seated listening more often associated with bebop is not, it is a temptation I wish to resist. I posit, rather, that black nonmovement functions as a choreopolitical resistance to the overdetermined fetishization of black bodies. The performance of nonmovement, in erasing the body, resists the white gaze as well as the white leftist desire to mobilize the black

body as a site of liberation, not for black people from oppression but for white people from whiteness.⁴⁶

Indeed, both still and moving listening practices represent African American jazz listeners’ claims to corporeal agency in resistance to the various determinisms inscribed upon their bodies. Articulating the corporeal agency of listening bodies necessarily invites a more robust engagement with Ingrid Monson’s work on “perceptual agency” than space affords me here, but certainly the relationship Monson seeks to explore between the auditory and the political could productively involve both the internal experience and externally perceivable expressions of diverse listening bodies.⁴⁷ What is important to remember is that embodied, danced ways of knowing are and have long been central to jazz, as they are and have been to many forms of African American music. As cultural theorist Fred Moten beautifully writes in his work on the black radical tradition, “It was always the whole body that emitted sound: instrument and fingers, bend. Your ass is in what you sing. Dedicated to the movement of hips, dedicated by that movement, the harmologically rhythmic body.”⁴⁸ At the same time, ethnomusicologist Matt Sakakeeny’s evocative account of a silent march against violence in New Orleans demonstrates that a pointed refusal to make joyful noise can resonate with poignance as can a dignified listener engaged in active, defiant nonmovement.⁴⁹ Just as sound and silence can be both profound and banal, resistant and compliant, so too can motion and stillness. As Foster explains, individual performances can respond to choreographies on a spectrum ranging from conformity to subversion to total disregard. These performative responses to choreographic prescriptions both impact and are impacted by the particularity of

their circumstances as, in Foster's words, "both choreography and performance change over time; both select from and move into action certain semantic systems, and as such, they derive their meaning from a specific historical and cultural moment."⁵⁰ Recognizing jazz music's multiple conjuncturally specific choreographies of listening, as well as those audience performances that work within and against these choreographies, offers me a chance to highlight the word "matter" in this issue's theme of "Why Jazz

Still Matters," by which I mean the literal material bodies of jazz's audiences and how those audiences' modes of listening both inform and resist the narrative conceits of jazz history. It might also invite contemporary listeners to reflect on the ways we do, and specifically don't, listen to jazz and offer us more space to play within and against our own socially embedded choreographies as we consider how we listen, how else we might choose to listen, and why.

Christopher J.
Wells

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Anna Reguero DeFelice of SUNY Stony Brook, a fantastic dancer whom I met in New York City's swing dancing scene long before either of us became a musicologist. The performance in question was Indiana University of Pennsylvania Jazz Ensemble, "Mary Lou Williams: Selected Works for Big Band," American Musicological Society Annual Meeting, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, November 7, 2013. This anecdote first appeared in my 2016 post for the American Musicological Society's blog Musicology Now, and I thank the current editors for their blessing to reproduce it here. Christopher, J. Wells, "Choreographies of Listening: Some Thoughts from Doing Jazz History While Having a Body," Musicology Now, January 6, 2016, <http://musicologynow.ams-net.org/2016/01/choreographies-of-listening-some.html>.
- ² Bernard Gendron, "Moldy Figs and Modernists" in *Jazz Among the Discourses*, ed. Krin Gabbard (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 33.
- ³ "Risk," *Jazz*, dir. Ken Burns, DVD (Burbank, Calif.: Warner Home Video, 2001).
- ⁴ Henry Martin and Keith Waters, *Jazz: The First Hundred Years*, 2nd ed. (New York: Schirmer, 2005), 174.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.
- ⁶ David Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big-Band Jazz in New Deal America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 182.
- ⁷ Dizzy Gillespie with Al Fraser, *To Be or Not To Bop* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1979), 356.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 359.
- ⁹ Frankie Manning and Cynthia R. Millman, *Frankie Manning: Ambassador of Lindy Hop* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), 203.
- ¹⁰ Scott DeVaux, "The Emergence of the Jazz Concert, 1935–1945," *American Music* 7 (1) (1989): 6.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² "Harlem Band Swings Down in Atlanta," *Chicago Defender*, July 2, 1938.
- ¹³ Advertisement, *Atlanta Daily World*, August 4, 1938. Caps in the original.
- ¹⁴ Advertisement, *Atlanta Daily World*, May 14, 1939; and "'Cab' in All-Colored Show Week from Today," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 28, 1938.
- ¹⁵ "Cab Calloway's Coming this Thursday Awaited," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 31, 1938.

- “You Can’t Dance to It”¹⁶ Lawrence Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift and American Music, 1878–1943* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 2012).
- ¹⁷ Gamewell Valentine, “Pageant of Race Progress Viewed at City Auditorium,” *Atlanta Daily World*, July 12, 1938; and Gamewell Valentine, “Tuskegee Choir Presentation Looms Treat,” *Atlanta Daily World*, April 26, 1938.
- ¹⁸ Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 4. Foster’s work includes a robust review of the trajectory of the term choreography within dance studies, and thus I will not reproduce it here.
- ¹⁹ Though my discussion here centers on Foster, my thinking is also deeply informed by Kate Elswit’s concept of “archives of watching” as a means to do close readings of dance spectatorship by blurring the dichotomization of on-stage and off-stage bodies in concert dance spaces, as well as Andrew Hewitt’s notion of “social choreography” as “a way of thinking about the relationship of aesthetics to politics.” Kate Elswit, *Watching Weimar Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), xvii–xxiii; and Andrew Hewitt, *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 11.
- ²⁰ Judith Becker, *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 71.
- ²¹ Jeffrey Magee, *Fletcher Henderson: The Uncrowned King of Swing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 27–38. I riff on Magee’s argument in discussing black jazz listeners’ demonstration of aural mastery as a means of racial uplift in Christopher J. Wells, “‘The Ace of His Race’: Paul Whiteman’s Early Critical Reception in the Black Press,” *Jazz and Culture* 1 (2018): 84.
- ²² David Krasner has shown that prominent black dancers—specifically Ada Overton Walker—sought to rebrand black embodiment as fundamentally dignified and an expression of control in discipline through cakewalk performances and instruction in the 1910s. David Krasner, “The Real Thing,” in *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890–1930*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 109–118.
- ²³ Mark Whalan, “Taking Myself in Hand: Jean Toomer and Physical Culture,” *Modernism/Modernity* 10 (4) (2003): 597–607.
- ²⁴ M. Oakley Stafford, “Informing You,” *Hartford Courant*, March 18, 1948.
- ²⁵ LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow, 1963), 211–212.
- ²⁶ Guthrie P. Ramsey, *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 51.
- ²⁷ Mura Dehn interviewed by Maria Kandilakis, typescript, in Mura Dehn Papers on Afro-American Social Dance (hereafter “Mura Dehn Collection”) (New York: Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts), box 20, folder 216, 1.
- ²⁸ Mura Dehn, “The Bebop Era,” drafts for an unfinished manuscript on jazz dance, Mura Dehn Collection, box 1, folder 6.
- ²⁹ “Mr. Bishop” quoted by Mura Dehn in *ibid.* I discuss physical culture as a potent, malleable concept in black corporeality in my work on dance as spatial practice in Harlem ballrooms. Christopher J. Wells, “‘And I Make My Own’: Class Performance, Black Urban Identity, and Depression-Era Harlem’s Physical Culture,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Ethnicity*, ed. Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellars Young (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 21–22.
- ³⁰ Eric Lott, “Double V, Double Time: Bebop’s Politics of Style” in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 461.

- ³¹ In her writings, Dehn alternately identifies it as a trend of the 1940s or early 1950s. She also notes “girls also did Applejack—but seldom.” Handwritten notes for *The Spirit Moves*, Mura Dehn Collection, box 21, folder 60.
- ³² This sort of heel-toe motion is a fascinating running thread in African American popular dance including movements ranging from the “tic toc” and Charleston in the early twentieth century through the moonwalk and contemporary “floating” slides in various forms of hip hop dance.
- ³³ Dehn, “The Bebop Era,” 4.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.
- ³⁵ Mura Dehn, “Bop Time,” unpublished draft manuscript, typescript, Mura Dehn Collection, box 4, folder 80, 1.
- ³⁶ Dehn, “The Bebop Era,” 2.
- ³⁷ Stowe, *Swing Changes*, 11.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ³⁹ Dolores Calvin, “‘Applejack’ Replaces ‘Jersey Bounce’ with Dancers in the State of Jersey,” *Chicago Defender*, May 8, 1948. Unbracketed ellipses in the original; bracketed ellipses added by the author.
- ⁴⁰ Dave Hepburn, “Bebop: Music or Madness?” *Our World* 4 (1) (1949): 34–35.
- ⁴¹ Dizzy [John Burks] Gillespie, “Daddy of Bebop Says New Music is Here to Stay; Gives Reasons,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, July 28, 1949.
- ⁴² In an interview with Ronald Welburn, Billy Rowe, formerly an entertainment columnist with the *Pittsburgh Courier*, claimed that guest columns by famous musicians were often penned by those musicians’ press agents, but that “they would try to stick to how the person would react to this sort of thing and get his opinion and write the story.” See Ronald Garfield Welburn, “American Jazz Criticism, 1914–1940” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1983), 234–235.
- ⁴³ Scott DeVaux, *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
- ⁴⁴ Brigid Cohen, “Diasporic Dialogues in Mid-Century New York City: Stefan Wolpe, George Russell, Hannah Arendt, and the Historiography of Displacement,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 6 (2) (2012): 149.
- ⁴⁵ André Lepecki, “Choreopolice and Choreopolitics: or, the task of the dancer,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 57 (4) (2013): 20.
- ⁴⁶ For more on white “slumming” and the political left, see Wells, “And I Make My Own.” For its historiographic resonances, see Ingrid Monson, “The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48 (3) (1995): 396–422; and John Gennari, *Blowin’ Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
- ⁴⁷ Ingrid Monson, “Hearing, Seeing, and Perceptual Agency,” *Critical Inquiry* 34 (S2) (2008): S38.
- ⁴⁸ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 39–40.
- ⁴⁹ Matthew Sakakeeny, *Roll With It: Brass Bands in the Streets of New Orleans* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013), 169–173.
- ⁵⁰ Foster, *Choreographing Empathy*, 24.

Dave Brubeck's Southern Strategy

Kelsey A. K. Klotz

Abstract: In January 1960, white jazz pianist Dave Brubeck made headlines for cancelling a twenty-five-date tour of colleges and universities across the American South after twenty-two schools had refused to allow his black bassist, Eugene Wright, to perform. This cancellation became a defining moment in Brubeck's career, forever marking him as an advocate for racial justice. This essay follows Brubeck's engagement with early civil rights-era protests, examining the moments leading up to Brubeck's cancellation of his 1960 tour of the South. In doing so, I uncover new details in Brubeck's steps toward race activism that highlight the ways in which Brubeck leveraged his whiteness to support integration efforts, even as he simultaneously benefited from a system that privileged his voice over the voices of people of color. While Brubeck has been hailed as a civil rights advocate simply for cancelling his 1960 tour, I argue that Brubeck's activism worked on a deeper level, one that inspired him to adopt a new musical and promotional strategy that married commercial interests with political ideology. Brubeck's advocacy relied on his power and privilege within the mainstream music industry to craft albums and marketing approaches that promoted integration in the segregationist South. Ultimately, this period in Brubeck's career is significant because it allows deep consideration of who Brubeck spoke for and above, who listened, and for whom his actions as a civil rights advocate were meaningful.

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In January 1960, white jazz pianist Dave Brubeck made headlines after twenty-two colleges and universities across the American South refused to allow his interracial quartet to perform. Initially, eleven of the schools backed out of their contracts with Brubeck upon learning that he and two other white musicians, saxophonist Paul Desmond and drummer Joe Morello, would be performing with African American bassist Eugene Wright. After Brubeck informed the remaining fourteen schools of Wright's presence in his quartet, eleven more insisted Brubeck replace Wright with a white bassist, leaving only three willing to allow the integrated combo to perform. Brubeck refused to replace Wright, forgoing the \$40,000 in revenue (worth nearly \$400,000 today) he would have received had he instead performed with a white bassist.

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Representatives of the various schools insisted, one after the other, that their cancellations of Brubeck's contracts were not based in prejudice, but on principle and policy. For the schools and their administrators, Brubeck broke his contract; for Brubeck, contracts requiring segregation had no legal or moral basis.¹

Taken together, these cancellations became a defining moment in Brubeck's career. Jazz and entertainment newspapers, such as *DownBeat* and *Variety*, and black newspapers, including the *New York Amsterdam News*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Baltimore Afro-American*, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, and *Chicago Daily Defender*, covered the event extensively, and nearly all positioned Brubeck as a kind of civil rights hero.² After his death, many of Brubeck's obituaries remembered him as having stood up for civil rights when he refused to replace Wright in the segregated South.

This essay follows Brubeck's engagement with early civil rights-era protests, examining the moments leading up to Brubeck's cancelled 1960 tour of the South. I uncover new details in Brubeck's steps toward race activism that highlight the ways in which Brubeck leveraged his whiteness to support integration efforts, as well as the ways in which he benefited from a system that privileged his voice over those for whom he advocated. While Brubeck has been hailed as a civil rights advocate simply for refusing to appear without Wright, I argue that Brubeck's activism worked on a deeper level, one that inspired him to adopt a new musical and promotional strategy that married commercial interest with political ideology. Still, Brubeck's story is similar to those of other "white heroes" of jazz (such as Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, and Norman Granz): white bandleaders who though largely well-meaning were ultimately blind to racial politics and power dynamics, and whose careers were

the primary beneficiaries of their decisions to advocate for racial justice. In other words, Brubeck possessed the power to choose how and when to protest segregation, and because of that privilege, his image also benefited from those decisions.

Kelsey A. K.
Klotz

By his 1960 Southern tour, Brubeck had long been considered a "respectable" jazz musician: a racially coded term indicating that Brubeck was an acceptable choice for college campuses and concert halls, and could bring "new" (that is, white) audiences to jazz. Though he began the Brubeck Quartet in relative obscurity in 1951, Brubeck experienced a steep rise in popularity in the early 1950s, primarily through his performances on college campuses, and in 1954, he was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine – only the second jazz musician to be so featured (Louis Armstrong was the first in 1949). Brubeck's image quickly reached newsstands across the nation through other mainstream publications, such as *Vogue*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Life*. Brubeck frequently explained in interviews that his quartet brought a "new" audience to jazz music, one that was "serious" and that had previously been put off by jazz's supposedly low-brow, low-class associations.³ On a 1954 television broadcast with Dave Garroway, Garroway asked Brubeck if his picture on *Time* lent "a certain amount of respectability to the jazz business," asking whether or not that respectability was good for jazz.⁴ Brubeck answered, "Well, I think it's good, because the thing that's held jazz back has been the environment. And every time a club is run decently, there's an audience, a wonderful audience, that usually won't go into a nightclub." Brubeck explained that groups and musicians like the Brubeck Quartet, Gerry Mulligan Quartet, and Stan Getz (all white) were helping to "make converts" of nonjazz audiences. Though Brubeck's response to Garroway

was not explicit, words like “respectable” and “decent” signified white spaces, while “environment” tended to mean urban, was associated with drugs, alcohol, prostitution, and crime, and was therefore often coded black.

In a 1957 interview, Brubeck further explained that his “fan mail frequently mentions how they have become interested in jazz through us, even though they never liked it before. And that, by playing our records, they’ve become interested in most of the other jazz records of serious jazz artists.”⁵ Brubeck saw his appeal to “new” jazz audiences (that is, mostly white, economically privileged, and educated audiences) as performing a service to the genre; he often cited the fact that, in 1955, he was the first jazz musician asked to speak at the Music Teachers’ National Convention as evidence that he brought nonjazz audiences to jazz, and he credited his performances at colleges for students’ interest in other jazz groups, including the Modern Jazz Quartet, an all-black quartet. Such achievements, according to Brubeck, were never attributable to his group’s overwhelming whiteness; he initially seemed to ignore the fact that black jazz musicians’ access to colleges and other educational settings, as well as promotion in mainstream magazines, was significantly limited compared to his own.

In addition to Brubeck’s media image, critics and audiences also closely linked Brubeck’s sound to sonic signifiers of whiteness. From its earliest recordings, jazz critics described the quartet in terms that maintained legacies of musical binaries that understood black musicians as natural and emotional and white musicians as rational and cerebral. That white critics would consider white jazz musicians’ primary musical contributions to be intellectual, or of the mind, stems from a centuries-long legacy of European

and American primitivism that simultaneously viewed black musicians’ talent as being primarily emotional, or of the body.⁶ Using terminology from the European concert tradition, including “counterpoint,” “passacaglia,” “polyphonic,” “sonata,” “fugue,” and “canon,” and drawing comparisons between Brubeck’s music and that of Bach, Mozart, and Stravinsky, critics asserted Brubeck’s decidedly “intellectual” approach to jazz. That they did so in a language that, in the 1950s, was primarily reserved for white composers and musicians, further entrenched Brubeck’s music in sonic signifiers of whiteness.

Jazz critics’ use of terminology from European classical music to describe cool jazz generally, and Brubeck’s music specifically, ultimately determined what sounds passed as white in a typically black genre. For instance, in a 1955 article, Arnold Shaw mapped clear visual images of whiteness associated with colleges and concert halls onto Brubeck’s musical style: “When you first hear the Brubeck Quartet you are immediately struck by the novel blending of crew-cut and long-hair elements.”⁷ Shaw elaborated on the “echoes of Milhaud and Stravinsky” that listeners could find in Brubeck’s music, as well as the quotes and influences from Grieg, Chopin, and Rachmaninoff. He explained to his *Esquire* readers that “Brubeck is excited by the devices of counterpoint,” and he noted “delightful fugal exchanges” between Brubeck and Desmond. These “fugal” exchanges and counterpoint were often meant to describe Brubeck and Desmond’s method of improvising together, which usually took the form of “following the leader”: Brubeck might begin a chorus of improvised counterpoint first, and Desmond would follow, playing in the breaks of Brubeck’s solo. It was a method that was extremely familiar and even formulaic for

Desmond and Brubeck, but which critics overwhelmingly found to be a sonic indicator of intellect.

Descriptions of similar sonic resonances of classical music in the music of black jazz musicians were rare, even in cases that would have easily warranted them, such as in recordings by the Modern Jazz Quartet.⁸ Critics and audiences were simply more likely to accept Brubeck as an intellectual, to accept his music as cerebral, to view him as having credentials as a classical musician, and as being respectable because he was white. This facilitated Brubeck's entrance to spaces (including colleges around the country and segregated institutions in the South) and audiences to which, as a jazz musician, he otherwise would not have had access.⁹ However, that same relationship to respectability and intellect that came with Brubeck's whiteness may have also had the side effect of making Brubeck's protest all the more surprising to Southern universities and their administrators.

By 1957, Brubeck's relationship to white culture through image and sound had been well established by critics, audiences, promoters, and his own statements, and Brubeck, as with many musicians, had made no public announcement or action against racial prejudice or segregation. At that time, the civil rights movement was just beginning to take root, spurred in part by the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which declared segregation in schools to be illegal, the 1955 murder of Emmett Till, and the 1955–1956 Montgomery Bus Boycott. However, it was the 1957 Little Rock integration crisis that garnered the attention of many jazz musicians. On September 4, nine African American students attempted to enter the formerly all-white Little Rock Central High School. However, Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus had ordered

the Arkansas National Guard to the high school to bar the students' entrance. It was not until September 23, when President Dwight D. Eisenhower federalized the Arkansas National Guard, thereby shifting their purpose from preventing to facilitating integration, that the students were allowed entrance.

While jazz musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Charles Mingus, and their supporters openly decried the Little Rock integration crisis, Brubeck mounted his own private protest, even as he maintained his public silence. On September 10, small regional papers around Texas began to report that Brubeck and white jazz impresario Norman Granz had cancelled their upcoming concert dates at the State Fair Park auditorium in Dallas, Texas. Brubeck and his quartet were scheduled to perform on September 29, and Granz's Jazz at the Philharmonic was to perform on October 1. As Ingrid Monson explains, Granz had been cancelling Jazz at the Philharmonic concert dates at segregated venues like the State Fair Park since the late 1940s, and according to newspaper reports, had cancelled this date for that reason as well.¹⁰

But Brubeck neglected to explain why he cancelled the date; all newspaper accounts simply write that "Brubeck sent word only that his mixed group would be unavailable" – an unusual statement, given that at that time, Brubeck was regularly performing with white bassist Norman Bates.¹¹ Brubeck's cancellation of the date was only briefly mentioned in regional papers in Texas, Arizona, and Southern California; major newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* and black newspapers including the *Chicago Defender*, *Daily Defender*, and *New York Amsterdam News* mention nothing about the concert. Brubeck's September 29 concert, the cancellation of which was announced just one week after the

Kelsey A. K.
Klotz

beginning of the Little Rock crisis, is an unstudied moment in Brubeck's performance history that reveals a nearly inaudible moment in Brubeck's move toward race activism.

By all accounts, the reason for Brubeck's cancellation of this single concert was ambiguous; any publicly stated views on social justice and racial prejudice were nonexistent. However, a fan letter written to Brubeck a few weeks after the cancellation suggests that three years prior to Brubeck's infamous cancellation of his \$40,000 tour of the South, Brubeck was already protesting segregation, however quietly. In the letter, dated October 22, 1957, Betty Jean Furgerson, a black woman from Waterloo, Iowa, thanked Brubeck for cancelling the concert "because of the policy of segregated seating."¹²

Furgerson's relationship with Brubeck went beyond that of a simple fan who had once asked Brubeck for an autograph. Her family had close connections to members of the Duke Ellington Orchestra, with whom Brubeck had toured, and frequently hosted jazz musicians in their home beginning in the late 1940s, feeding them and offering them relaxation.¹³ Iowa musician Roger Maxwell recalled meeting Brubeck at Furgerson's family's house in the 1950s, explaining, "It isn't everyday that you can walk into a friend's kitchen and see an internationally renowned musician sitting in a breakfast nook. Mrs. Furgerson greeted me and Betty Jean said, 'Roger, have you met Dave?'"¹⁴ Even though Brubeck had not told the press why he cancelled the concert, Furgerson's account connected his actions to a conversation the two had in the privacy of her family home. As she explained, "I know from talking with you that you have deep feelings about such practices."

Reading Furgerson's letter alongside Brubeck's actions demonstrates the ex-

tent to which musical and political meaning was made at the level of the individual; that Brubeck's cancellation was meaningful to Furgerson was enough for her, even if it was an underpublicized, ambiguous, or invisible act to most of the country. For Furgerson, it was an affirmation of what she had discussed with Brubeck at her mother's kitchen table, writing,

All this is to thank you for acting like a decent, feeling human being. You can never know how much it means to me to know that there are people [who] react positively to injustices. Too many of us give lip service to it. It's much easier and less convenient and more comfortable. It is a terrible thing to have to deny people the beauty of your music because they fear unintelligently.

Furgerson's words speak to struggles for racial equality across the century, and in her final sentence, she links Brubeck's music, and his live performances in particular, to a broader political effort to disrupt segregationist practices.

One year later, on October 19, 1958, jazz critic Ralph Gleason reported that Brubeck had turned down a tour of South Africa worth \$17,000 (approximately \$145,000 today) because the apartheid-era South African government had refused to allow Eugene Wright to perform with the group – or even to enter the country. Gleason's article in the *Daily Boston Globe*, which was subsequently covered in the *Los Angeles Sentinel* and the *Philadelphia Tribune*, both black newspapers, focused on an interview with Brubeck regarding the cancellation. In it, Brubeck explained the effect his 1958 State Department tour of the Iron Curtain had on his understanding of racial prejudice as detrimental to American foreign interests within a Cold War context: "Prejudice is indescribable. To me, it is the reason we would lose the world. I have been through Asia and India and the Middle

East and we have to realize how many brown-skinned people there are in this world. Prejudice here or in South Africa is setting up our world for one terrible let down.”¹⁵ These words were later reprinted, without the explicit reference to South Africa, to explain why Brubeck had refused to appear in the South without Wright in 1960. Though Brubeck’s cancellation of the South African tour was an explicit foreign policy message from a former U.S. State Department–sponsored cultural ambassador, coverage was again nonexistent in mainstream papers like *The New York Times* and jazz magazines like *DownBeat*.

While Brubeck’s cancellation of his South African tour is notable, its coverage revealed an earlier near cancellation of a Brubeck performance at East Carolina College (now East Carolina University). This event offers a glimpse into the goals Brubeck had for his Southern performances with Wright, as well as the confidence he might have gained from a successful protest. On February 5, 1958, the Brubeck Quartet was preparing to go onstage in the ironically named Wright Auditorium when they were stopped by the Dean of Student Affairs for East Carolina College, James Tucker. Tucker informed Brubeck that the school’s policy would not allow Wright to perform. Brubeck’s account centered on his experiences with his 1958 tour abroad; he reported to Gleason that he told Tucker “that the next morning we were to leave for Europe sponsored by the State Department to represent this country and one of the best things we could do was to show that prejudice was not everywhere in the United States, as we were a mixed group. And they wanted to do this to us the night before!”

A retrospective by East Carolina University demonstrates the levels of bureaucracy the college went through to

allow Brubeck to perform without losing state funding: the president of the college, John Messick, telephoned North Carolina Governor Luther Hodges, who apparently reminded Messick that “because the school had signed a contract for the performance, it would have to pay the band whether they played or not.”¹⁶ According to Brubeck, Brubeck’s argument swayed the dean, who announced to the audience that the Brubeck Quartet would appear after all; Tucker told the waiting crowd that “Mr. Brubeck and his quartet leave tomorrow for a State Department tour of Europe and we want them to tell the world that North Carolina is not Little Rock.”¹⁷ Brubeck’s near miss resulted in institutional change at East Carolina College: later that month, the Board of Trustees enacted a new policy, one that no longer banned black performers outright, and placed the issue of campus performances by black musicians at the discretion of the administration, essentially, though not officially, allowing black musicians to perform on campus.¹⁸

Within the context of the civil rights movement, Brubeck’s 1957 cancellation and 1958 near miss may seem small; after all, it was only Furgerson’s insider knowledge that allowed her to recognize Brubeck’s cancellation as an act of protest, not any public statement from Brubeck himself, and the few papers that covered the incidents at East Carolina College did so many months after the fact. However, though three years is a short period historically, the difference between the racial politics and activism of 1957 and 1960 is vast: this was the period during which the first lunch counter sit-ins began in Wichita, Kansas (1958), Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (1958), and Greensboro, North Carolina (1960), before spreading across the South in 1960 to Richmond, Virginia; Nashville, Tennessee; and Atlanta, Georgia, to name a few high-profile

Kelsey A. K.
Klotz

protests, in addition to Northern cities, such as Waterloo, Iowa, where Furger-son lived.¹⁹ The visibility of Brubeck's protests likewise gradually shifted during this time period. As Brubeck continued to tour across the South, and with the permanent addition of Eugene Wright to his quartet, Brubeck eventually made public his commitment to combatting racial prejudice.

Five months after news of the South African tour broke, the Brubeck Quartet was scheduled to perform at the University of Georgia (UGA) in Athens, Georgia, on March 4, 1959. Shortly before the concert, Stuart Woods, a senior sociology major and the head of UGA's brand new Jazz Society, received publicity photos for the quartet that included Wright, and he immediately knew there would be a problem. Two years earlier, in 1957, UGA had instituted a policy banning integrated entertainment groups from performing on campus; similar policies were implemented in schools across the South following the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and the crisis in Little Rock in attempts to formally institute segregationist policies that had previously been standard practice. Furthermore, such pivotal historical moments also affected performers' engagement with racial politics on the bandstand. As Monson writes, "If in the mid-1940s playing with a mixed band was taken as a sign of a progressive racial attitude, by the mid-1950s a performer had to refuse to play to segregated audiences to meet the rising moral standards of the civil rights movement."²⁰ Stuart Woods had seen the Brubeck Quartet perform two years earlier, when white bassist Norman Bates was a regular member, and therefore had not anticipated any problems. With the addition of Wright and UGA's new policies, however, UGA's administration gave Woods no

choice but to cancel the performance. In press reports, Brubeck called the school's move to cancel the concert "unconstitutional and ridiculous," and he insisted that he would not perform with a white bassist "for a million dollars."²¹ Instead, *Variety* reported that Brubeck played a concert at Atlanta's Magnolia Ballroom, a black venue that became an integral staging ground for civil rights meetings.²²

Brubeck's cancelled concert reverberated across the UGA campus as students took sides debating integration and musical performance. The ensuing conversations make clear the complexity of the student body's feelings toward integration in an era and place that tended to simplify them. Woods immediately began a petition to repeal the university's policy requiring only segregated performing groups; but by April, it was clear that his petition had failed. Though the UGA Student Council denied his request for the body to sponsor a campus-wide poll to ascertain student opinion on the policy, the Student Council also denied a counter-motion that asked the group to make public its support of the policy.²³ Students wrote editorials in the independent student newspaper *The Red and Black* both in support of Brubeck and in support of the policy preventing Brubeck's appearance. Students in favor of the Brubeck concert argued that the quartet and other musical groups be allowed to play on the basis of skill and musical worth (a version of the "let's keep politics out of music" argument), or that students be allowed more autonomy to set their own policies (a riff on states' rights rhetoric frequently used in the South to fight against civil rights laws at the federal level).

For students and administrators against Brubeck's concert, Brubeck's near-performance at UGA ignited what historian Carol Anderson refers to as "white rage." As Anderson explains,

White rage is not about visible violence, but rather it works its way through the courts, the legislatures, and a range of government bureaucracies. . . . White rage doesn't have to wear sheets, burn crosses, or take to the streets. Working the halls of power, it can achieve its ends far more effectively, far more destructively.²⁴

White rage, Anderson argues, is often triggered by black advancement: "It is not the mere presence of black people that is the problem; rather, it is blackness with ambition, with drive, with purpose, with aspirations, and with demands for full and equal citizenship." In other words, those protesting Wright's presence in the quartet objected to the notion that Brubeck could not find a white musician who could equal Wright's musical ability. White rage was palpable on the pages of *The Red and Black*: Robert Ingram, a UGA student, suggested that all of Brubeck's records be broken, explaining that, "Accepting the skill of a Negro performer and even going so far as appreciating it is a giant step toward integration. We cannot afford to be the least bit broadminded – not even for the sake of art."²⁵ The support that UGA's policy banning integrated performing groups received across campus should not be surprising. After all, as many in the black press would point out, the policy was only two years old; in other words, it was enacted in the same year as the Little Rock integration crisis. Fear, however unfounded, fueled the rage that ultimately prompted Brubeck's own struggle against UGA's segregationist policies – and further, policies across the South.

Brubeck's experience with UGA set the stage for his 1960 Southern tour. In the lead up to the 1960 concert cancellations, Brubeck mounted a direct campaign for Southern audiences that included two

albums full of Southern songs: *Gone with the Wind*, recorded in April 1959 and released in August, and *Southern Scene*, recorded in September and October 1959 and released in the spring of 1960. *Gone with the Wind*, recorded less than two months after the UGA cancellation and as a commercial and financial safeguard against the experimental (and ultimately wildly popular) *Time Out* (1959), paid particular tribute to the state of Georgia through the inclusion of both its title track and "Georgia on My Mind." As Brubeck explained to Ralph Gleason after schools had cancelled his 1960 tour, "Let me reiterate: we want to play in the South. . . . Therefore, we appeal to them to help us."²⁶

Brubeck's plan, then, was to motivate Southern audiences to accept his integrated group through performances of popular Southern songs; in doing so, Brubeck again banked on his ability to attract "new" audiences to jazz. With *Gone with the Wind* and *Southern Scene*, Brubeck and his quartet-mates specifically chose popular Southern songs, including well-known minstrel songs by Stephen Foster ("Swanee River," "Camptown Races," and "Oh Susanna"), jazz standards ("Gone with the Wind" and "Basin Street Blues"), mainstream hits ("Little Rock Getaway," "Georgia on My Mind," and "Deep in the Heart of Texas"), and popular songs written by white composers from the perspective of black musicians ("The Lonesome Road," "Ol' Man River," and "Short'nin Bread"). Nearly all of the songs performed across both albums had been performed by popular musicians, such as Bing Crosby, Ray Charles, Julie London, and Frank Sinatra, in addition to well-known jazz musicians like Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, and Miles Davis. The diverse mix of original composers and subsequent performers in part indicate

Kelsey A. K.
Klotz

Brubeck's interest in promoting musical integration to the widest possible audience.

Whereas in Brubeck's early career, his image and music had been described and promoted as decidedly "white," with *Gone with the Wind* and *Southern Scene*, Brubeck explicitly advanced an integrated visual image by making Wright especially visible on both album covers. *Gone with the Wind's* cover artwork depicts the Brubeck Quartet on a covered pavilion surrounded by lush green trees, whose grandiose archways and pillars evoke a massive Southern plantation. Brubeck and Desmond, the group's more well-known members, are foregrounded, with Morello and Wright standing at a pillar in the background. The color photo could not be clearer: this is an integrated quartet. The cover of the later *Southern Scene* asserts the group's integration even more plainly. Amid illustrations of stereotypical scenes of the South (a plantation home and a steamboat) is a photo of the quartet in the shade of a tree on the bank of a river. Desmond, Wright, and Morello are seated together, wearing identical black suits, while Brubeck, in his gray leader's suit, leans over them, hand on Morello's shoulder. All four men are looking at the camera and smiling, and Wright, surrounded by his three white bandmates, is at the center of the image. The fact that apparently no one either objected to or noticed Wright's presence on *Gone with the Wind* prior to the 1960 tour suggests that Brubeck's image had previously been established as sufficiently white to render such an inclusion invisible—particularly to school administrators who may not have followed the quartet closely.

Throughout the 1950s, Brubeck's bassists were the least frequently featured members of the quartet. Therefore, Brubeck's decision to feature Wright prom-

inently on these albums, particularly on "Ol' Man River" and "Happy Times," is remarkable, and represents Brubeck's most explicit attempt to highlight Wright's musical contribution within the quartet directly to his Southern audiences. For those "in the know," these songs represented moments of sonic integration; for those who were not, the album demonstrated Brubeck's colorblind approach to music, in which white and black musicians could presumably freely cross what sound studies scholar Jennifer Lynn Stoeber has called the "sonic color line."²⁷ Simultaneously, Brubeck attempted to demonstrate why Wright was essential to his quartet's performances; and further, that Brubeck not only *would not* replace Wright, but he *could not* replace Wright.

According to Brubeck's autobiographer, Fred Hall, and liner notes for *Gone with the Wind* written by Teo Macero, Wright chose to perform "Ol' Man River."²⁸ The Brubeck Quartet's version is a bass feature that begins in a quick tempo with Wright performing the melody line, before a sudden transition to a half-time, bluesy improvisation from Wright. The song ends in a sudden and unaccompanied cadenza that tapers off as Wright descends in register, as if Wright's solo, like the Mississippi River, will "just keep rollin' along." As musicologist Todd Decker writes, "Ol' Man River" is "at its core—about the experience of being black in a segregated America."²⁹ The Brubeck version maintained the primacy of Wright's experience in performing a song that had, in its more than thirty-year history, been used as both a song of protest and a song of Southern nostalgia. In doing so, the quartet forced unwitting Southern segregationists to hear a song about the black experience in the South from a black man, supported by his white bandmates who insisted on Wright's integral musical

position within the quartet. That they did so in an album packaged for commercial audiences simultaneously cushioned the quartet from any overt retaliation from segregationists, and allowed Brubeck to advance his own subtle political ideology.

Brubeck not only highlighted Wright's musical contributions, but also emphasized the qualities of his personality that anyone, even audiences outside the music business, would understand as valuable character traits. According to liner notes written by Brubeck for "Happy Times," a Wright original and feature on *Southern Scene*, the song offered listeners a chance not only to hear Wright's composition, but to get to know Wright:

"Happy Times," an original by Gene Wright, is typical of the relaxed happy sound which has been the antidote to the history of trouble expressed in "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" [the previous track]. I think Gene's bass solo expressed the Wright attitude toward life—amiable, relaxed and smiling.³⁰

In these notes, Brubeck maps the easygoing and upbeat theme of "Happy Times" onto Wright's personality. To hear this song is essentially to enter into conversation with Wright: the arrangement chosen by the quartet makes it difficult for listeners to engage with any of the other musicians, as Brubeck and Morello perform accompanying roles and Desmond lays out. This allows Wright's voice, performed through his bass, to become the auditory focal point.

Brubeck does mention the other members of the quartet in the liner notes, but these primarily focus on Desmond's reactions to a certain take or a technique used by Morello, offering little in the way of information about Desmond and Morello's personalities and, in particular, do not focus on positive traits in as direct a manner as with Wright. However,

though Brubeck described Wright only in complimentary terms, the descriptions also adhered closely to negative stereotypes of black men as harmless to the point of subservience: an "Uncle Tom" stereotype represented solely through Brubeck's descriptions (not from any interview or quote from Wright) that nevertheless may have worked to Brubeck and Wright's advantage with Southern audiences ranging from squeamish to enraged at the thought of the quartet's integration. Nonetheless, in these liner notes, written just months after UGA had cancelled its concert over Wright's presence in the quartet, Brubeck makes the case that Wright is a crucial member of the group, explicitly marketing integration to Southern audiences.

As Brubeck navigated early civil rights protests, he worked to find an approach that suited his image and career, which he and his wife, managers, record producers, and advertisers had cultivated for nearly a decade. The result was a new musical and promotional approach for Brubeck, one that leveraged his whiteness to support integration efforts in the South. As Brubeck's concert cancellations became more visible, Brubeck became emboldened, and his indignation with policy-makers at Southern colleges and universities met the white rage of the segregationists protesting his performances. As Wynton Marsalis, trumpeter and artistic director for Jazz at Lincoln Center, once said, "[Brubeck] is important because he stood up for Civil Rights, when many of us – sat down."³¹ As a white man, Brubeck was able to simultaneously voice his anger and maintain a nonthreatening image in ways that, as Marsalis implies, black protesters typically could not. Ultimately, this period in Brubeck's career is important because it allows deep consideration of who Brubeck spoke for and

who he spoke over, who listened, and for whom his actions as a civil rights advocate were meaningful.

Certainly, the first person for whom Brubeck spoke was Wright, over whom Brubeck cancelled the South African tour, UGA concert, and 1960 Southern tour. But while Brubeck received glowing praise for doing so, Wright largely stayed quiet. In fact, Brubeck seemed to have shone a spotlight on issues Wright, a Chicago native, would rather not define him. An article in the *Pittsburgh Courier* by George Pitts quotes Wright as explaining that, "Whatever Dave does is okey [sic] by me."³² Wright continued, "If he wants to make the trip without me, it would be okey. I know he's all right, and I know if Brubeck decides to do something it will not be because of any feeling of his own on race." Wright's comments display considerable trust in Brubeck's decisions, but they did not have the impact many black journalists, including Pitts, desired. While Brubeck was lauded for his actions, Wright's experience with the press was more closely related to the criticisms faced by Nat King Cole, Duke Ellington, and Louis Armstrong when they failed to live up to the expectations the African American community held for highly visible black men – expectations that were significantly higher for black musicians than for white musicians.³³ Wright was subtly criticized by the black press for his comments: Pitts explained Wright's apparently unsatisfying statements thusly: "Wright finally found an opportunity to express his feelings, but all Americans knew his expression would be that of most Negroes who long have tasted the slurs of the Southland." The *Baltimore Afro-American* referred to Wright, a fairly dark-skinned man, as a "tan bassist," which suggests that the writer meant to criticize Wright for not being supportive enough to racial justice.³⁴ Despite such

criticism, Wright maintained his diplomatic stance in an interview decades later, as he recounted the story of a school that had initially refused to allow him to perform: "I won't say the name – that way nobody'll get hurt."³⁵

It seems as if, at least initially, Wright had little say in Brubeck's move toward race activism – even when Brubeck's protests positioned Wright as an activist as well. For example, in a 1981 interview, Brubeck spoke about the concert at East Carolina College, admitting that Wright had not known that the school was segregated and did not want to allow him to play; the school had approached Brubeck about the issue alone.³⁶ Further, Wright had not known that part of the compromise in allowing the quartet to perform at East Carolina College was that Wright stay in the background – so when Brubeck called him to the front of the group for a solo, Wright went. Likewise, Brubeck actually knew about the Southern universities' requirements for an all-white group: in a letter from ABC booking agent Bob Bundy to Dave Brubeck written three months prior to the cancellations, Bundy writes that the organization responsible for the Southern tour "will not accept . . . a mixed group."³⁷ Even though Brubeck likely had no intention of replacing Wright, he continued with his plans for the tour. Throughout this period, Brubeck made decisions that positioned both he and Wright as race activists, without seeming to understand the difference between what it meant for a white man to protest racial injustice in front of a white audience, and what it meant for a black man to do so.

Wright had the potential to be the focus of this story, and it certainly seems as if some audiences wanted him to be. But the fact that it was Brubeck at the center of this story, with Wright in the limelight, demonstrates the privilege Brubeck

had in potentially pushing Wright into a protest about which he was at best ambivalent. Brubeck's centrality to the story, however, also offered a unique challenge to audiences unused to hearing a white man explicitly position a black man as an integral part of his own career. Within the context of the early civil rights era, Brubeck's voice – as a bandleader, as an established musician, and as a white man whose career and image had been constructed around implicit norms of whiteness – simply weighed more than Wright's for many black and white audiences, members of the music industry, and Southern audiences. Further, Brubeck benefited from the lower standard to which these audiences held him, as a white performer, on issues of civil rights. William Pollard of the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, writing to commend Brubeck, agreed, arguing that “the majority race needs to lead the way in this respect,” emphasizing that “the perpetuation of racial discrimination is of their making.”³⁸ In other words, while it may have been Brubeck's responsibility to protest racial prejudice and segregation, the response to his actions reflected his privilege.

However, there lies an uneasy tension between Brubeck's outspoken support of integration and Wright's relative silence. That tension highlights a primary issue in white advocacy for racial justice causes: namely, that in supporting those whose voices have been systematically silenced throughout history, it can be easy to speak over the very voices advocates mean to amplify. Brubeck's actions and rhetoric were meaningful to countless fans and organizations, including the California chapter of the NAACP, who wrote to *DownBeat* and Brubeck, thanking Brubeck for taking a visible stand against prejudice, and clearly Wright supported Brubeck's decisions as bandleader. However, for Wright, Brubeck did not need to

take the steps he did. Had Brubeck been true to Wright's voice, he may not have cancelled any concerts; as Wright's comments above suggest, Wright knew Brubeck was “all right.” But though Wright was the reason for Brubeck's advocacy, Brubeck ultimately did not take this stand for Wright, but for people like Betty Jean Furgerson, whose letter to Brubeck made clear her belief that his actions could support her perspective. He spoke directly to his Southern supporters, appealing to their musical tastes, to make the case for musical integration. He inspired students like Stuart Woods, who attempted to reverse UGA's segregationist policy, and institutions like East Carolina College, which reconsidered discriminatory policies that prevented black musicians from performing. And, ultimately, Brubeck took this stand for himself, possibly for reasons based in both principle and self-interest. In interviews looking back on this period, Brubeck's indignance at justice unfulfilled is clear; however, his fear for his own livelihood is also apparent. But even if Brubeck believed he could have lost his career by confronting segregation more directly, and even if he believed he was making a broader stand against racism, it was Brubeck – his image and his legacy – that benefited most from his decisions. Brubeck's advocacy relied on his power and privilege within the mainstream music industry to craft albums and marketing approaches that amplified the music and beliefs of the African Americans with whom he had grown close. In doing so, Brubeck harnessed his white image in order to once again bring new audiences to jazz – and to his own music – in the segregationist South.

Kelsey A. K.
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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Ralph J. Gleason, "An Appeal from Dave Brubeck," *DownBeat*, February 1960.
- ² One exception was Norman Granz, who, as founder of Jazz at the Philharmonic, had been cancelling concerts at venues with segregated audiences since the 1940s. For Granz, Brubeck's insistence on performing in an integrated ensemble had not gone far enough: by 1960, Brubeck should have insisted that the audiences be integrated. Norman Granz, "The Brubeck Stand: A Divergent View By Norman Granz," *DownBeat*, July 1960.
- ³ Nat Hentoff, "Review of Jazz at Oberlin, by Dave Brubeck," *DownBeat*, December 1953; Dave Brubeck, "The New Jazz Audience," *Playboy*, August 1955; Ralph J. Gleason, "Brubeck: 'I Did Do Some Things First,'" *DownBeat*, September 1957; C. H. Garrigues, "Brubeck's Fans Learned About Jazz in College," *San Francisco Examiner*, November 3, 1957; and "Jazz Climbs Up the Social Ladder—With a Mighty Shove from Dave Brubeck," *New York National Enquirer*, March 16, 1958.
- ⁴ Dave Garroway, *Friday with Garroway*, November 12, 1954, NBC Radio Collection, Motion Picture, Broadcasting & Recorded Sound Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
- ⁵ Gleason, "Brubeck," 14.
- ⁶ Mariana Torgovnick argues that Homer's *Odyssey* anticipated later colonial encounters with the "primitive" Other. However, such binaries were widely used across the centuries by philosophers, historians, and critics to designate and denigrate an Other, whether defined by race, gender, sexuality, or other characteristics. Also see René Descartes, "Part IV," in *A Discourse on the Method*, trans. Ian Maclean (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 28; Simon Frith, "Rhythm: Race, Sex, and the Body," in *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 123–144; Ted Gioia, "Jazz and the Primitivist Myth," in *The Imperfect Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Mariana Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
- ⁷ Arnold Shaw, "West Coast Jazz," *Esquire*, September 1955, 127.
- ⁸ The Modern Jazz Quartet employed strict fugal arrangements and a blend of improvised and precomposed counterpoint, particularly between John Lewis (piano) and Milt Jackson (vibraphone). These include a strict fugue, "Vendôme," and the quartet's direct quotation of J. S. Bach's *Musical Offering* in "Softly, As in a Morning Sunrise."
- ⁹ Of course, being called "intellectual" was not a benefit within most jazz circles; "intellect" countered the improvisation required for "authentic" jazz performances. Therefore, Brubeck tended to promote the spontaneity of his music over his precomposition, explaining many times throughout his career that "composition is selective improvisation" (a quote he misattributed to Igor Stravinsky).
- ¹⁰ Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 63–64. The Dallas State Fair Park was a site of frequent protest for black activists fighting segregation on the grounds. In addition to the segregation of many of the rides and food establishments within the park, the State Fair held a "Negro Achievement Day," the only day in which black patrons could fully participate in the State Fair. Martin Herman Kuhlman, "The Civil Rights Movement in Texas: Desegregation of Public Accommodations, 1950–1964" (Ph.D. diss., Texas Tech University, 1994); Donald Payton, "Timeline: A Concise

History: Black Dallas since 1842,” *D Magazine*, June 1998, <http://www.dmagazine.com/publications/d-magazine/1998/june/timeline-a-concise-history>; and Kathryn Siefker, “NAACP Youth Council Picket Line, 1955 Texas State Fair,” *Bullock Texas State History Museum*, <https://www.thestoryoftexas.com/discover/artifacts/naacp-state-fair-spotlight-012315>. Kelsey A. K. Klotz

- ¹¹ “Brubeck Cancels Dallas Booking,” *The Daily Journal*, Commerce, Texas, September 10, 1957; “Brubeck Band Cancels Out Dallas Date,” *The Times*, San Mateo, California, September 10, 1957; “Jazz Combos Cancel Dallas Bookings,” *Tucson Daily Citizen*, September 10, 1957; “Jazz Groups Skip Trips over South,” *Corsicana Daily Sun*, September 12, 1957; and “Jazz Concerts Cancelled over Racial Issue,” *The Galveston Daily News*, September 12, 1957.
- ¹² B. J. Furgerson, personal letter to Dave Brubeck, October 22, 1957, Brubeck Collection, Holt-Atherton Special Collections, University of the Pacific Library, Stockton, California.
- ¹³ Betty Jean Furgerson, “Jazz in Iowa: Betty Jean (BJ) Furgerson’s Memories,” Iowa Public Television, http://www.iptv.org/jazz/bj_furgerson.cfm (accessed October 31, 2015). The Ellington Orchestra’s frequent stops could have been due to policies of segregation and discrimination in the area. Even though Iowa passed one of the first state statutes banning discrimination in the 1880s, the statute was not enforced in the 1950s, and many restaurants, cafés, and hotels in Waterloo—one of the state’s most segregated cities, then and now—denied service to blacks and other minority citizens. As Furgerson remembers, “I learned they came to those dinners because we only had family members other than band members. They knew they did not have to be on stage and/or talk or be the entertainment. They could relax!” Bruce Fehn, “The Only Hope We Had: United Packinghouse Workers Local 46 and the Struggle for Racial Equality in Waterloo, Iowa, 1948–1960,” *The Annals of Iowa* 54 (3) (Summer 1995): 185–216; Kyle Munson, “Black Iowa: Waterloo Rallies to Combat Violence, Racial Divides,” *Des Moines Register*, July 13, 2015, <http://dmreg.co/11RVh1e> (accessed November 28, 2015); and Theresa E. Shirey, “Common Patters in an Uncommon Place: The Civil Rights Movement and Persistence of Racial Inequality in Waterloo, Iowa” (honors project, Bowdoin College, 2014).
- ¹⁴ Roger Maxwell, “Jazz in Iowa: Backstage Conversations, Impressions and Remembrances, My Experiences with Popular and Jazz Artists,” Iowa Public Television, <http://www.iptv.org/jazz/backstage.cfm#brubeck> (accessed October 31, 2015).
- ¹⁵ Ralph Gleason, “Brubeck Cancels South Africa Because of Negro Artist Ban,” *Daily Boston Globe*, October 19, 1958.
- ¹⁶ Steve Tuttle, “When Music Broke the Color Barrier,” *East* 12 (1) (2013): 14.
- ¹⁷ Gleason, “Brubeck Cancels South Africa.”
- ¹⁸ Tuttle, “When Music Broke the Color Barrier,” 14.
- ¹⁹ Fehn, “The Only Hope We Had,” 213.
- ²⁰ Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, 61.
- ²¹ John Keasler, “Jazz Society Cancels Brubeck Appearance for Campus Concert,” *The Red and Black*, February 26, 1959.
- ²² “U. of Ga. Nixes Brubeck (Bassist a Negro) but OK at Atlanta ‘Race’ Spot,” *Variety*, March 4, 1959, 49.
- ²³ “Council Discusses Jazz Club Petition,” *The Red and Black*, April 16, 1959.
- ²⁴ Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 3.
- ²⁵ Robert Ingram, “Letters to the Editor,” *The Red and Black*, February 26, 1959.
- ²⁶ Gleason, “An Appeal from Dave Brubeck.”
- ²⁷ Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

- ²⁸ Fred M. Hall, *It's About Time: The Dave Brubeck Story* (Fayetteville, Ark.: University of Arkansas Press, 1996), 63; and Teo Macero, liner notes for The Dave Brubeck Quartet, *Gone with the Wind*, Columbia Records, 1959.
- ²⁹ Todd Decker, *Who Should Sing "Ol' Man River"?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 14.
- ³⁰ Dave Brubeck, liner notes for *Southern Scene*, Columbia Records, 1960.
- ³¹ Wynton Marsalis, "The Life and Music of Dave Brubeck," concert featuring the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, April 12, 2014, Rose Theater, Jazz at Lincoln Center, New York, <https://youtu.be/PQ-yXQItCGg> (accessed October 30, 2015). As for Brubeck, he firmly believed that jazz had "always been an example set to the world of true integration." "Editorial," *San Francisco Chronicle*, n.d., c. 1960, Brubeck Collection, Holt-Atherton Special Collections, University of the Pacific Library, Stockton, California.
- ³² George E. Pitts, "Give Brubeck Credit for a Slap at Bias," *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 12, 1960, 12. The "[sic]" is original to Pitts's quotation of Wright.
- ³³ Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, 29–65.
- ³⁴ "Tan Bassist given OK in Memphis," *Afro-American*, January 23, 1960.
- ³⁵ Hall, *It's About Time*, 87.
- ³⁶ Dave Brubeck, interview with Kerry Frumkin, WFMT, October 17, 1981, Brubeck Collection, Holt-Atherton Special Collections, University of the Pacific Library, Stockton, California.
- ³⁷ Bob Bundy to Dave Brubeck, personal letter, October 6, 1959, Brubeck Collection, Holt-Atherton Special Collections, University of the Pacific Library, Stockton, California. Many thanks to Stephen Crist for bringing this document to my attention.
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Keith Jarrett, Miscegenation & the Rise of the European Sensibility in Jazz in the 1970s

Gerald Early

Abstract: In the 1970s, pianist Keith Jarrett emerged as a major albeit controversial innovator in jazz. He succeeded in making completely improvised solo piano music not only critically acclaimed as a fresh way of blending classical and jazz styles but also popular, particularly with young audiences. This essay examines the moment when Jarrett became an international star, the musical and social circumstances of jazz music immediately before his arrival and how he largely unconsciously exploited those circumstances to make his success possible, and what his accomplishments meant during the 1970s for jazz audiences and for American society at large.

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By the late 1960s, when pianist Keith Jarrett was establishing his international reputation as a professional jazz musician, jazz itself was facing a crisis. The crisis, for both players and critics, was twofold: First, was jazz technically exhausted? That is to say, after the stylistic innovations of the post-World War II generation of artists – like saxophonist Charlie Parker and trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie’s bebop revolution; Jimmy Smith “squabbling” on the Hammond organ;¹ bandleader Sun Ra, saxophonists Ornette Coleman and Albert Ayler, and pianist Cecil Taylor in free, avant-garde jazz music; and Miles Davis and his minions in modal jazz, “freebop,” electric jazz, and jazz-rock – was there anything else that jazz could do? What was left for a saxophonist to achieve after what John Coltrane had done with his instrument? What more could a trumpeter do after Clifford Brown, Miles Davis, and Freddie Hubbard but repeat with variations what these musicians had done? Or as black writers/intellectuals Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray questioned, had jazz even

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progressed after Duke Ellington?² Had not Ellington in fact already done everything that the modernists were claiming was so progressive or free? Since jazz prided itself on the originality of its great soloists, the questions by the end of the 1960s were: Had originality and virtuosity reached its limits in this form of music? Was there anything new to be mined? Was jazz, like so-called classical music, which many felt faced the same problem, dead to its own future, condemned to mere virtuosic variations of its past? Jazz could continue to produce styles and forms of musical fusions, its own type of artistic sectarianism matching the sectarian fury of Protestantism, but had the music reached an endpoint? Protestantism had not really come up with any concept better than the Trinity; was jazz going to come up with anything better than Parker, Ellington, or Louis Armstrong?

As pianist Paul Bley put it in 1974, “If you accept the fact that everything left to be done has *been* done and been done well, then in terms of improvising in the jazz idiom, there are only a few little corners that were overlooked that are still workable.”³ What were these “few little corners”?

The second aspect of the crisis facing jazz was social obsolescence. Was the music still relevant to the audiences that made jazz matter in the past? The answer was not quite no – there were still students and counterculture, antibourgeois-yet-affluent types who enjoyed it – but certainly jazz was tending toward being an art form that was no longer popular, particularly with large swaths of the young.⁴ Indeed, the fact that jazz was considered art music at all posed a problem for a music that had once been played by dance bands and enjoyed a period of astonishing popularity during the big band era.⁵ Swing music may have been a distortion, an aberration, a mistake. Was jazz not supposed to be popular music? Was it not

classified by record companies and record stores as popular music? If jazz ceased to be popular music when it ceased to be primarily dance music, then what did it mean to be art music?⁶ Was jazz now mood music used for background, whether for romance or for film? If jazz artists in the 1960s were striving to be literally as noisy as possible, with ever-increasing experimentation with dissonance, atonality, and, ultimately, electronics, then surely many jazz musicians did not wish their music to be relegated to the background. But inasmuch as it aspired to art, jazz was increasingly becoming an art form that was no longer relevant.

As philosopher Theodor Adorno has pointed out, one of jazz’s strongest claims as the music of the twentieth century was that it was modern, even that it defined the sound, the aesthetic of modernity. Jazz was, above all else, the sound of the new. After all, it was jazz musicians, record companies, and critics who used terms like “progressive jazz” and “modern jazz” to characterize how current, how much in the vanguard, certain styles of jazz after World War II were supposed to be. But with the rise of rock music and its various offshoots, jazz could no longer make that claim of being the most progressive or modern contemporary music. Rock, with its electronic and amplified instrumentation, its anarchist pretensions, its blatant sexuality, was not only literally a bigger noise than jazz, but it was also far more exciting as a performance art, as a visual spectacle. Moreover, as rock – with performers like the Beatles and Bob Dylan – moved away from being a teen dance music (or a dance music at all), it began to challenge jazz on its own turf as a listening music. In short, by the late 1960s, jazz was not, for many, the music of the modern, although it was still trying very hard to be that. As audiences for jazz shrank and venues for playing jazz

disappeared, the question arose: Who needs jazz?

Like other forms of popular music, jazz has long had an internal conflict over commercialism. Ardent fans and many jazz musicians across eras have complained about commercialism ruining the authenticity or essence of jazz, although there has always been disagreement over what exactly made jazz authentic or true to itself. Jazz has had various schools of adherents: some believe that true jazz is Dixieland or New Orleans style; others favor swing and the big band era; while others prefer bebop or cool or soul jazz or the avant-garde. For those who believe that jazz's authenticity rests in a particular era or style, the rest of jazz is simply noise or, worse still, a kind of declension or even decadence. But even as jazz feared the corrupting forces of the market, it desired the social and economic relevance that the market could bring to the music. Jazz musicians wanted not just cult fans but a broadly appreciative audience, people who could understand and enjoy the music for its own sake. This led many older jazz musicians to denigrate rock as technically inferior, inauthentic music and, of course, to dismiss the taste of the audiences who preferred rock and teen pop music. If jazz could not keep a sizable audience, it wanted to keep its status. The fact that jazz was undeniably superior in a technical sense to rock and teen pop music was, for many jazz musicians, a sign of jazz's authenticity as music and its worthiness as an artistic endeavor.

The success of rock music in the 1960s exposed the unstable foundation of contradictions upon which jazz was built and its long struggle to reconcile these contradictions: jazz wanted to be accessible to the market in its immediacy and appeal and yet transcend the market in its technical complexity and moral superiority as uncompromised music. Adorno summed up this problem when he wrote

that jazz's attempt at "the reconciliation of art music and music for common use [*Gebrauchsmusik*], of consumability and 'class,' of closeness to the source and up-to-date success, of discipline and freedom, of production and reproduction" was never honest.⁷ In other words, jazz's attempt at being a synthesis of both popular entertainment and high art always made it inauthentic as a form of music. Jazz musicians would not have expressed it in this way at the end of the 1960s, but it was something that many of them may have intuitively or subconsciously felt. Was jazz reaching its limits because it was too ambitious in trying to be for both the masses and the elite? Was it inherently fraudulent and overly self-conscious in what it had to offer as art?

At this moment of identity turbulence and philosophical self-examination, against the backdrop of a supercharged consumer society, one of the major jazz musicians to emerge was Keith Jarrett, whose presence offered solutions to the crisis as well as another set of conflicts.

To be sure, authenticity in jazz was always tied to race. Is jazz black/African American music? The obvious answer would be an emphatic yes. Black American musicians, from Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington to Charlie Parker and Miles Davis, have been the major innovators in this art form. Black Americans conceived this music and it grew directly out of their culture. On the other hand, the first jazz recording, made in 1916, was "Livery Stable Blues" by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, a white band. Paul Whiteman's band, one of the most influential in the history of American music and a great purveyor of jazz, was a white band. In fact, one could write a credible stylistic history of jazz from its beginnings to the 1960s spotlighting only its major white performers: the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, Paul Whiteman, Bix Beiderbecke,

Gerald
Early

Frankie Trumbauer, Eddie Condon, June Christy, Mildred Bailey, Joe Venuti, Django Reinhardt, Eddie Lang, Harry James, Benny Goodman, Jack Teagarden, Artie Shaw, Stan Kenton, Bill Holman, Charlie Barnett, Woody Herman, Gene Krupa, Chris Connor, Lennie Tristano, Stéphane Grappelli, Jimmy Giuffre, Chet Baker, Bud Shank, Dave Brubeck, George Shearing, Stan Getz, Paul Desmond, Lee Konitz, Louie Bellson, Lee Konitz, Shelly Manne, Shorty Rogers, Bob Brookmeyer, Jim Hall, Gerry Mulligan, Buddy Rich, Gary Burton, Ran Blake, Zoot Sims, Dodo Marmarosa, Bill Evans, Chick Corea, Helen Merrill, Carla Bley, and Steve Swallow, among others. Indeed, whites have always made up a significant portion of jazz's audience, often the majority of the audience (a common observation made today), and whites have always played this music. It can, in fact, be safely said that probably more whites have played this music than blacks, simply because there are many more whites in the United States than blacks. (Certainly, during the swing era, there is no question that there were more white than black swing bands.) One could argue that the roots of jazz are just as much in marching band music, American musical theater, American vaudeville music, and Jewish Klezmer music as they are in African American culture. But while this argument could credibly be made, it is not likely that anyone in jazz criticism or scholarship circles these days would make it.⁸

It has been, however, a common belief among both black and white musicians that blacks were the best players, the most authentic. Whites, at least some of them, may have been superior musicians technically, but blacks played with more soul, more feeling, with more rhythm – so most people thought – because blacks were more authentically in touch with their feelings and emotions, had fewer of the hang-ups of civilized, white, bourgeois

life.⁹ For most of the music's history, audiences considered the jazz listening experience as essentially anti-intellectual. In fairness, people generally come to nearly all forms of music as an anti-intellectual, highly personal, and nonrational experience, but for much of the audience that jazz attracted, jazz intensified these feelings. African American culture, which many people, white and black, saw as being more instinctual than intellectual, had to be the true source for jazz as an aesthetic expression. Whites were simply too intellectual and too inhibited, "too tight-assed," as the expression goes, to be really good jazz players.

By the 1960s, considerable racial tension began to emerge in jazz circles, sparked by the civil rights movement and the growing militancy of African Americans. Black musicians, who felt that the music industry had shortchanged them and awarded white musicians the lion's share of fame and money, began to promote actively the idea that they were superior to white players, that the whites were interlopers, inauthentic, fakes – the greatest perpetrators of art forgery in the history of Western art. In addition, some jazz venues began to favor black musicians, or were thought to, because audiences believed black players were hipper. White critics and many white musicians claimed reverse discrimination, Crow Jim, as it was designated, adumbrating the same charge that would be brought against affirmative action in the 1970s and 1980s, although in this case it was not being made as a question of the black musicians being less qualified but rather that the music should not be politicized in this way.¹⁰ Jazz, in other words, should be colorblind: ironically, another kind of myth that has attached itself to this music over the years in addition to the idea that a jazz performance symbolizes democracy in its structure and organization. These liberal pieties only made racial conflict in the

music in the 1960s more fraught. Eventually, many white critics were denounced by some of the younger, more militant black jazz musicians as writers who did not understand jazz or black people.

This tension, often displayed on the pages of *DownBeat*, the leading American magazine on jazz, did two things: First, the racial rift underscored the sense, especially for young whites, that jazz was mired in the past, fighting the last war. The jazz that would become the most attractive for young audiences in the 1970s would not be black jazz or white jazz but integrated jazz, for which Keith Jarrett would become an important symbol. Second, the racial riff underscored for black and white musicians what most of them already believed, in different ways: that Europe was more receptive to and appreciative of jazz because Europe was a less racially hostile environment; Europe was where an integrated jazz could take form. Since the 1920s, black musicians have traveled to Europe to find that they were much more respected than in the United States, and that jazz seemed more highly regarded. Black American male musicians were also able to more easily enjoy interracial sex. White musicians, too, thought jazz was more respected in Europe, with more enthusiastic audiences. Europeans seemed much more amenable to listening to challenging instrumental music, much more willing to accept jazz as a significant art form. That Europe was the political and intellectual place of origin of philosophical racism, scientific racism, and colonialism, of the idea of the superiority of European culture, of the mythology of so-called classical music, yet could be so seemingly broad-minded about the presence of African American musicians and about jazz, could exhibit such *exceptionalism* in its acceptance of racial and artistic diversity in this regard, is a puzzling contradiction, the exploration of which is beyond the scope of this essay.

Keith Jarrett would become the symbol of European support for a new vision of a mixed-race or racially transcendent jazz because he himself *seemed* so racially miscegenated, as a player and as a presence. Many listeners and even fellow musicians thought Jarrett was black or biracial, which, in the United States, amounts to about the same thing. Jarrett wore his wiry hair as an afro, although this alone was not what convinced people like saxophonist Ornette Coleman and arranger Quincy Jones that Jarrett was black.¹¹ It was not uncommon for some white men in the late 1960s and early 1970s to wear their hair puffed out like an afro. For instance, Goldy McJohn, the keyboard player for the famous 1960s rock band Steppenwolf, styled his hair in this way, as did Magic Dick, the harmonica player for the J. Geils Band, another noted rock group of the period. But Jarrett was also known for his gospel-inflected melodies, which appeared to add substance to assumptions that he was black. Jarrett's playing has always been highly rhythmic; indeed, in some reviews of Jarrett's classical music recordings in a leading classical music magazine, Jarrett's rhythmic panache is duly noted, even highlighted.¹² Finally, Jarrett was (and is) an animated performer: crouching, bending, standing, and gesticulating while he played, accenting his playing, and even filling the silences, with his moaning and expressive vocalizations.¹³ (Classical pianist Glenn Gould and jazz pianist Errol Garner were known to hum or occasionally vocalize along with their playing but not nearly to the extent that Jarrett does.) These tendencies seemed histrionic to some, but they also fit with stereotypes of black performers "feeling more" of the music, becoming possessed by the nonintellectual or spiritual aspects of the music. In other words, Jarrett might be said, to use an old-fashioned jazz phrase, "to be getting hot"

Gerald
Early

when he started gyrating and moaning. It clearly made Jarrett distinctive, whether one liked the gyrations and groans. This combination of factors probably led many of his peers and many in his audiences, especially during the early days of his career, to think that he was black.

The most obvious way for jazz to avoid becoming a marginal music was to appeal to the young. And despite losing a good share of its audience in the 1960s, it must be remembered, first, that jazz was still being played on the radio at this time; second, that jazz was still being featured in movie and television soundtracks; and third, that jazz was still capable of producing commercial hits like pianist Vince Guaraldi's "Cast Your Fate to the Wind," Ramsey Lewis's "The In Crowd," Jimmy Smith's version of "Walk on the Wild Side," Eddie Harris's "Listen Here," Richard "Groove" Holmes's version of "Misty," Hugh Masekela's "Up, Up, and Away," and Herbie Hancock's "Watermelon Man," to name only a few. These jazz hits were enjoyed not only by adults on record and on jazz radio stations, but also by young people who heard them played on top 40 or pop radio, then the main source of music for young people in the United States and parts of Western Europe.

There were also certain jazz bands that appealed to teenagers who thought of themselves as particularly hip. Among those bands were the mid-1960s ensembles of black West Coast drummer Chico Hamilton. Hamilton, who had led an integrated "cool" jazz quintet in the 1950s that featured a cellist, was always interested in being cutting edge. (The cool quintet was featured significantly in the 1957 film *Sweet Smell of Success*, starring Tony Curtis and Burt Lancaster.) Among the young players featured in Hamilton's 1960s bands was electric guitarist Larry Coryell, who would become one of the

leading figures in the jazz-rock revolution of the 1970s. Another was Hungarian guitarist Gabor Szabo, whose tunes "Gypsy 66" and "Lady Gabor" would become popular among college and hip high school students of the period, both black and white. But the Hamilton band member who developed the largest youthful audience was saxophonist and flutist Charles Lloyd, who wrote "Forest Flower" for Hamilton, but made it wildly popular with his own band's recording in the late 1960s. Lloyd's band played not only in jazz venues but rock palaces like the Fillmore West and the Fillmore East. Trumpeter Miles Davis noticed Lloyd's success when his band shared a bill with Lloyd's at the Village Gate in 1967: "Man, the place was packed," Davis wrote in his autobiography.¹⁴ Lloyd became extremely popular in Europe as well as the United States. His band, for instance, was among the first to play in the Soviet Union. Most important, Lloyd's quartet featured pianist Keith Jarrett. Charles Lloyd was black and Keith Jarrett was white, although he did not quite seem white; and both men were young, playing jazz music that did not seem exactly black or white—just hip and modern (yet accessible). Jarrett's work with Lloyd was a kind of marriage of sensibilities that made it possible for Jarrett to become a change agent for jazz and for how Europe would influence jazz.

About the future of jazz, Paul Bley predicted in 1974 that "in terms of what improvisation is going to be about, there is no other place for it to go, except to electronics."¹⁵ No jazz musician of the period was more associated with electronics and particularly the sound of rock, the music most associated with electronic instruments, than trumpeter Miles Davis, who Chico Hamilton called "jazz's only superstar."¹⁶ Beginning in the late 1960s, Davis introduced electronic instruments in his recordings, at first, just an electronic

piano or electric guitar. But soon, with albums like *In a Silent Way* (1969) and *Bitches Brew* (1970), the latter the most commercially successfully record Davis would release after *Kind of Blue*, Davis was employing several electric keyboardists, an electric guitarist, and an electric bass player. Eventually, Davis would amplify his trumpet as well. Davis had become the father of the jazz-rock movement, regularly playing rock venues with bands featuring a new generation of international musicians of racially diverse backgrounds interested in electronics and rock.

Among those players was Keith Jarrett, whose stay with Davis in the early 1970s was not very long: less than a year between 1970 and 1971. Davis had been after Jarrett to join his band for some time. “The main reason I joined the band was that I didn’t like the band. I liked what Miles was playing very much and I hated the rest of the band playing together,” Jarrett said in an interview in 1974, a few years after he left Davis.¹⁷ Davis’s band spawned most of the major jazz-rock groups of the period: Chick Corea’s Return to Forever, Herbie Hancock’s Headhunters, Weather Report with Joe Zawinul and Wayne Shorter, the Mahavishnu Orchestra with John McLaughlin, and Tony Williams’s Lifetime. Williams, McLaughlin, Shorter, Zawinul, Hancock, and Corea all played with Davis during the late 1960s and early 1970s. At the time, everyone thought electronic music was the way of the future and that rock was the best vehicle not only to use electronic instruments but to make jazz modern again by attracting young people with the sound young people liked. But Davis’s various bands of this period were modern also because they were integrated. Remember how startling and edgy was the debut of the Jimi Hendrix Experience, a trio with two white English musicians, drummer Mitch Mitchell and bassist Noel Redding. And remember how significantly

both the sound and the reception of Hendrix’s band changed when he replaced Mitchell and Redding with Buddy Miles and Billy Cox, both black. White players like McLaughlin, Jarrett, Zawinul, Corea, Dave Holland, Mike Stern, Dave Liebman, and Steve Grossman all played jazz-rock with Davis.

The fact that Davis’s jazz-rock bands featured gifted young white players made it seem that much more cutting edge, while also making it even easier for Davis to cross over to young white rock fans. Davis had already associated with white musicians at critical points in his career: his *Birth of the Cool* recordings in the late 1940s made use of mostly white bands; his collaborations with arranger Gil Evans produced some of his most impressive orchestral albums; and his relationship with pianist Bill Evans was central to one of the most famous albums in post-World War II American jazz, *Kind of Blue* in 1959.

It was out of this moment of crisis, change, and opportunity that Keith Jarrett emerged as a star. But unlike his Davis bandmates, he would renounce electronic instruments and would avoid the jazz-rock movement entirely. On his early opposition to electric music, Jarrett explained,

It’s not going to change because for me it’s the answer. It may not apply to somebody else, although I could go into the philosophical aspects of it and make it almost an objective argument whereby playing electric music is bad for you and bad for people listening, which I do believe. I don’t feel any strong emotional thing about electric music being offensive, and I am certainly not afraid of electric instruments because I think there’s something unknown and vast about them. I don’t think they’re any more vast than a flute, but they give you the feeling that you’re dealing with something vast.¹⁸

Jarrett distinguished himself in the rattle and hum of jazz-rock and amplified jazz by becoming the rather petulant patron saint of acoustic jazz music as concert art music.

Between 1971, when Jarrett recorded his first solo piano record, *Facing You*, for the European record label ECM, and 1976, when *Bop-Be*, nearly the last of his recordings for Impulse! Records, an American label, came out, Jarrett released about twenty-five albums on four different labels – Atlantic, Impulse!, Columbia, and ECM – a staggeringly prolific rate of production, averaging over four albums a year, some of them multi-record sets.¹⁹ What is even more astonishing is that Jarrett performed his own compositions, improvised or written, for nearly all of these records. At this stage in his career, Jarrett rarely, if ever, performed or recorded jazz standards, either tunes from the Great American Songbook or originals by other jazz musicians.²⁰ Normally, no musician would put out this much product in such a short period of time for fear of flooding the market and overexposure. But Jarrett had such a legion of fans, and the recordings were so various – solo piano, piano-drum duets, piano trio, piano quartet, orchestral pieces of “serious music,” pipe organ solos – that Jarrett’s followers were scarcely satisfied. Not all of his fans liked everything he recorded – some of the records are a lot more accessible than others – but his fans were certain of the importance of everything he recorded. Rather than alienate his audience, this variety actually enhanced Jarrett’s standing as a significant artist. *DownBeat*’s review of his “serious music” album *In the Light* (1973) compared Jarrett as a composer to Beethoven.²¹ Even before the 1975 release of Jarrett’s improvised solo piano recital *The Köln Concert* – which would become the most commercially popular and critically celebrated

record of his career – Jarrett was recognized in *DownBeat*’s 1974 annual critics poll as the best pianist in jazz. Elsewhere in the music press, because of his impact as a player, a composer, and a bandleader, he was compared to a young Duke Ellington. There was no question that to a large swath of young jazz fans, or more precisely, young music fans, since many of his ardent admirers were rock devotees, Jarrett was a genius. Many jazz critics, and especially the younger ones, agreed. But not all of Jarrett’s peers were impressed: pianist Horace Silver, in a *DownBeat* “blindfold test” (a feature in which established musicians give their reactions to recordings played for them, without being told who the performers are), did not like the Paul Bley solo piano tune that was played for him, thinking it was Keith Jarrett.²² And in an interview, pianist Oscar Peterson refused to place Jarrett among the top three young jazz pianists currently on the scene. Peterson strongly preferred Herbie Hancock over Jarrett.²³ I believe it was pianist Joe Zawinul, a key member of Miles Davis’s early electric bands, a leading proponent of jazz fusion, and who personally and professionally lived a highly miscegenated life, who thought Jarrett’s anti-electronic music position was reactionary. A younger pianist, Anthony Davis, himself highly regarded at the time, found Jarrett imitative and superficial.²⁴

There is no question that it was Jarrett’s recordings with ECM during this period that shaped his reputation and his career. ECM not only made Jarrett a crossover star with a huge following in Europe – initially, ECM records were more easily accessible in Europe than in the United States – but also established Jarrett as an American jazz star with a European sensibility. It would be hard to call many of Jarrett’s ECM records “jazz” in our conventional understanding of that term. If by jazz we

mean music that “swings,” music that has a driving 4/4 pulse, a groove, something akin to the big band music of Count Basie or a bebop-oriented small group like Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers, or something like Ahmad Jamal’s or John Bunch’s music, then much of Jarrett’s ECM output of the period was not jazz. If swing was the major characteristic that blacks brought to jazz, then the above examples would have to be considered black jazz, whether played by black or white musicians. And Jarrett was more than capable of playing this sort of straight-ahead jazz. He had, in fact, done a stint with Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers, and his American recordings with Impulse! and Atlantic were closer to standard jazz or the experimental music associated with the black avant-garde as Jarrett was deeply influenced by Ornette Coleman. (Two of Coleman’s sidemen, bassist Charlie Haden and saxophonist Dewey Redman, played in Jarrett’s Impulse! bands.)

But more than any other single jazz artist, Jarrett legitimized a so-called jazz sound or type of improvisational music that did not swing. Jarrett surely did not create an interest among musicians for jazz without swing: as early as the 1920s there was considerable passion on the part of serious European composers as well as some American jazz players, both black and white, to create a symphonic jazz. After World War II, the Third Stream movement, led by musicians like Gunther Schuller and pianist John Lewis, who formed the Modern Jazz Quartet in the early 1950s and devoted that all-black band to many Third Stream efforts, renewed attempts to marry jazz and classical music. Stan Kenton and many white musicians on the West Coast in the 1950s were quite devoted to highly experimental forms of jazz, blending improvisation with modern atonal Western art music. But probably the single most important figure in the movement

of jazz without swing was pianist Bill Evans, whose impact can be traced to one recording: a six-and-a-half minute solo piano improvisation called “Peace Piece.”

Evans recorded “Peace Piece” in 1958 for his album *Everybody Digs Bill Evans*, one year before joining Miles Davis to record “Kind of Blue,” whose closing track “Flamenco Sketches” was heavily influenced by Evans’s composition. “Peace Piece,” which came about as Evans was rehearsing to play the Comden and Green tune “Some Other Time,” does not swing at all. It is, in fact, quite static, using the opening chords of “Some Other Time” as a repetitive figure over which Evans improvises. If there is any single piece of music that could be used as a possible source for Jarrett’s solo concerts it would be “Peace Piece.” Evans, who was quite capable of playing swinging piano and frequently did, became a highly influential pianist, particularly among white jazz musicians; in fact, during the 1960s, some avant-garde black jazz musicians like saxophonist Archie Shepp harshly criticized Evans as simply being a derivative of Debussy, beloved by white critics because his art music influences validated critics’ own Eurocentric cultural assumptions.²⁵ In the New Age music that arose in the late 1970s and early 1980s, largely inspired by Jarrett’s solo concerts, “Peace Piece” became something of an anthem, recorded, for instance, by popular New Age pianist Liz Story, among others. (Jarrett also became an icon for something called “folk” piano whose leading practitioners are George Winston and Ken Burns documentary film scorer Jacqueline Schwab.)

ECM sold and popularized this sound through its hundreds of recordings of musicians, mostly European and mostly white – from American guitarist Ralph Towner to English saxophonist John Surman to German bassist Eberhard Weber to Israeli pianist Anat Fort – who do not

swing. Jarrett, as a kind of miscegenated presence, in effect legitimated white jazz as something that does not swing but that is just as much jazz as its black counterpart.²⁶ The fact that there was such ambiguity about Jarrett's race and that he performed this type of music through a European record company may have had much to do with his success. There was something about this music coming from Europe that gave it a certain gravitas and something about this music coming from someone whom many people thought was black.

Jarrett's solo piano concerts are the most important and the most popular recordings of his ECM output, and *The Köln Concert* is the milestone. It has sold about four million copies, more than any other recording of solo piano music of any type. Musicologist and musician Peter Elsdon has written an entire book on *The Köln Concert*, and I refer you to it for details about the recording's importance in the history of both American and European music.²⁷ The work has clearly been suggestive to me and some of the assertions I have made in this essay. *The Köln Concert* was the follow-up to Jarrett's highly acclaimed *Solo Concerts: Bremen/Lausanne*, a three-record set spanning two concerts released in 1973. *The Köln Concert* was followed by a ten-record set of solo performances from Japan released in 1978 called *The Sun Bear Concerts*, which despite its cost, indeed, the sheer audacity of releasing ten records of solo piano playing, became a bestseller. When the set was released, *Rolling Stone*, in the illustration accompanying its review, pictured Jarrett as Mozart. (Ironically, the review itself was largely negative.)²⁸ Jarrett's solo concerts have changed over time, but the general content is the same: with no preconceived notions or ideas, Jarrett simply improvises music. In the solo recordings of the 1970s and 1980s, these improvisations usually

took the shape of long blocks of uninterrupted playing, sometimes punctuated by moments of dissonance and atonal modernism, but usually quite accessible with attractive and melodic (in a strangely old-fashioned way) folk- and gospel-like themes bubbling up in Jarrett's current of sound. Jarrett was stunningly capable of combining the modern with the nostalgic, perhaps better than any other performer in jazz, what was referred to in the 1970s as Jarrett's "homesick lyricism."²⁹ To young audiences, the solo concerts sounded fresh, highly rhythmic, and poignant, with a visibly agitated young person playing the piano as if possessed by his own music. With the solo concerts, Jarrett became, in many respects, a sort of jazz-like version of Franz Liszt. Jarrett played with such brio that no one could accuse jazz-without-swing of being feckless.³⁰

Jarrett's solo concerts did three things that significantly changed our understanding of jazz: Jarrett made jazz-without-swing a legitimate force in jazz performance, a movement in European jazz that made European jazz a force in the global jazz market starting in the 1970s. Second, Jarrett made solo piano playing commercially viable by showing that there was a considerable audience for it. Many jazz musicians shied away from solo jazz recordings either because they felt uncomfortable playing without the support of other players or because they thought the public considered such recordings "dinner music." (Bassist Charles Mingus put out the solo piano record *Mingus Plays Piano* in 1963 because he felt more jazz pianists should be playing solo piano as a test of their ingenuity and stamina. "All I can say is that if a bass player can attempt what I've done here, by myself, some of the other musicians who are full-time pianists ought to at least consider practicing more," Mingus said about this recording.)³¹ Jarrett

proved that the public was willing to take such records seriously and, as a result, the record companies flooded the market with solo piano records, some good, many bad. The advantage for the record company was that solo piano records were cheap to make. They required only a competent pianist and a well-tuned piano. But the rise of the solo piano record in the 1970s and 1980s also did much to turn young jazz audiences away from electronic instruments and jazz-rock and to accept jazz as an acoustic art, much in same way audiences accepted classical music. This occurred before trumpeter Wynton Marsalis came on the scene as a major force; he is often and I think wrongly given credit for this turn in jazz music.³² If anything, Marsalis was following the retromodernist movement that Jarrett had started. Third, Jarrett made the marriage between classical and jazz more viable than had any other jazz musician before him: not by trying to blend classical and jazz in his playing and composing, although he did do this with varying measures of success, but by marrying jazz and classical music together as a seamless, common sensibility of acoustic art. Jarrett gave jazz a true feeling of being concert hall music, not simply because it was being played in a concert hall, but because of the stature of the performer and the sacred act of his performance. In short, Jarrett did much to solidify jazz's reputation as, to use an old-fashioned term, a middlebrow art that validated both the middlebrow critics and audiences who adored him. It was jazz that made you feel good and listening to it was elevating, good *for* you. Jarrett momentarily solved some issues pressing jazz in the late 1960s, but ultimately, because he was white, he could not become jazz's hero or redeemer. He did not intentionally pose as a black, but once his audience came to recognize his whiteness in the late 1970s, he had in some ways reinscribed the problem

of authenticity coupled with the notion of privilege. Was being white an advantage for Jarrett that explains his success? Did Jarrett wind up reaffirming jazz as a white music? Is Jarrett somehow fraudulent because he is white? Did Jarrett become self-conscious of his race as Marsalis grew in popularity and was acclaimed the savior of jazz in the 1980s and 1990s, which led to his conflicts with the trumpeter? (Both Marsalis and Jarrett would be accused of being reactionaries, of misunderstanding what jazz represented. Jarrett, in the 1970s at least, wanted jazz performance to have the aura of classical music and the classical music experience; Marsalis wanted jazz music itself to be considered classical music: for Ellington, Armstrong, and Parker to be the equivalents of Mozart, Bach, and Brahms and for their music to be endlessly honored and performed. Jarrett was a synthesizer; Marsalis a consolidator and canon builder. For those who disliked either of these approaches, jazz was contrarily a tradition and that impulse that abhors tradition. Jazz does not seek middle-class respectability; it is essentially something oppositional to the middle class.)

The question I posed at the start of this essay – “Who needs jazz?” – returns in the end. Jazz might be defined as an instrumental music characterized by significant moments of improvisation, that is not attempting to be recognizably commercial, that a sizable segment of the public and the critics feel is emotionally exciting enough to offer new and fresh ways to engage music itself and our own identities. But *who* made the music, how we see that person in relation to the social and political contexts of our time, is equally important. Jarrett, in the 1970s, made a number of people “need” jazz in how he approached making piano, or in a larger sense, keyboard music. (In some respects, his success may have been possible, in part, because he played the piano, an instrument

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that has a special, mythologized place in Western art-making.) Inasmuch as Jarrett's audience became devotees, listening to his music, particularly the solo concerts, as if they were a religious experience, something transcendent, Jarrett became both a preacher and a therapist.³³

As Elsdon points out, Jarrett made jazz a truly trans-Atlantic phenomenon, opening new and young audiences throughout Europe to the music.³⁴ But perhaps Jarrett did something more. He made a European-sounding jazz something hip and even profound for audiences. Perhaps he made it easier for a considerable segment

of whites to find their way into jazz and their place in it without imitating blacks. But of course this is all complicated by the fact that he sometimes sounded like a black player and that he was, for a time, thought to be black. Nonetheless, Jarrett the American validated Europe through his jazz. Drummer Chico Hamilton once said, "There is virtually nothing new about music. We are still playing the European School."³⁵ Jarrett's approach to jazz may remind us that we Americans, both black and white, despite our independence, never really, for good and for ill, escaped Europe after all.

ENDNOTES

¹ Squabbling is an approach to organ playing using Errol Garner's piano technique.

² See Albert Murray and John F. Callahan, eds., *Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray* (New York: The Modern Library, 2000).

"I finally saw that Chico Hamilton with his mannerisms and that poor, evil, lost little Miles Davis, who on this occasion sounded like he just couldn't get it together. Nor did Coltrane help with his badly executed velocity exercises. These cats have gotten lost, man. They're trying to get hold to something by fucking up the blues, but some of them don't even know the difference between a blues and a spiritual—as was the case of Horace Silver who went wanging away like a slightly drunken gospel group after announcing a blues. . . . Taste was an item conspicuously missing from most of the performances, once again I could see that there's simply nothing worse than a half-educated Mose unless it's a Mose jazz-modernist who's convinced himself that he's a genius, maybe the next Beethoven, or at least Bartok, and who's certain that he's the only Mose jazzman who had heard the classics or attended a conservatory. . . . These little fellows are scrambling around trying to get something new; Duke is *the* master of a bunch of masters and when the little boys hear him come on they know that they'll never be more than a bunch of little masturbators and they don't want to think about it." Ellison's letter to Murray on attending the 1958 Newport Jazz Festival, *ibid.*, 193–194 (emphasis Ellison).

"By and large, I'm afraid that too many of these cats, some of whom have real potential, get so carried away with being MODERN and EXPERIMENTAL and SERIOUS that they not only forget what jazz is they don't even remember what music is supposed to do anymore. . . . Anyway, Duke and Count are still the bands to hear these days. They have assimilated about as much of the so-called Modern as will probably last anyway, and they still have the old identity and the old drive. A master is a goddamned MASTER, man. It's just as true now as it ever was: when you start fucking around with that goddamned Duke Ellington, you're subject to have yourself a new asshole cut." Murray's letter to Ellison, *ibid.*, 155.

Ellison's dislike of the modernist and progressive turn in jazz after World War II and his distrust of sociology explains why he so disparagingly reviewed poet/playwright/critic LeRoi Jones's study of black music, *Blues People* (1963) in Ralph Ellison, "Blues People," in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage, 1965), 247–258. Jones was a modernist and his book was highly sociological.

³ "Focus on Paul Bley," *DownBeat*, January 1974.

⁴ Jazz's biggest breakthrough with the young during the 1960s was not with college students or young adults but rather with children through the success of jazz pianist Vince Guaraldi's

soundtracks for the Charlie Brown (*Peanuts*) television specials, starting with *A Charlie Brown Christmas* in 1965. See Gerald Early, "How Innocence Became Cool: Vince Guaraldi, Peanuts, and How Jazz Momentarily Captured Childhood," in *The Peanuts Papers: Charlie Brown, Snoopy & the Gang, and the Meaning of Life*, ed. Andrew Blauner (New York: Library of America, Fall 2019).

⁵ Standard histories of jazz discuss this transformation at length; one important study devoted entirely to the transformation itself is Paul Lopes, *The Rise of a Jazz Art World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), esp. chap. 4 and 5.

⁶ Note that big bands like Ellington's, Count Basie's, Woody Herman's, and others still played dance gigs well into the 1960s. For instance, in the 1964 film, *The Pleasure Seekers*, Count Basie's band is featured playing dance music for young swingers. *Get Yourself a College Girl* (1964) features college students dancing to a jazz band. And Cal Tjader's band performs to a dancing audience in the 1968 film *For Singles Only*. There are several other such moments in films of the 1960s.

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, "Farewell to Jazz," in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 498. "The elements of jazz in which immediacy seems to be present, the seemingly improvisational moments—of which syncopation is designated as its elemental form—are added in their naked externality to the standardized commodity character in order to mask it—without, however, gaining power over it for a second. Through its intentions, whether that of appealing to an elevated 'style,' individual taste, or even individual spontaneity, jazz wants to improve its marketability and veil its own commodity character which, in keeping with one of the fundamental contradictions of the system, would jeopardize its own success if it were to appear on the market undisguised." Theodor W. Adorno, "On Jazz," in *Essays on Music*, 473.

⁸ A book on the history of the white jazz musician has been written. Richard M. Sudhalter, *Lost Chords: White Musicians and Their Contributions to Jazz, 1915–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). It is a worthy study, although the subject matter deserved a more coherent, better edited narrative.

⁹ Noted novelist Ralph Ellison, who was also a jazz critic and had ambitions as a youth of becoming a professional musician and composer, said this about the creative relationship of black and white musicians as he understood them growing up in the Midwest in the 1920s:

"This argument about who did what and who influenced whom imposes racial considerations which don't belong to discussions of culture. In those days when a musician was learning his instrument and trying to develop his own style he listened to any musician who had something to offer, who excited him; they weren't fighting the race problem but assimilating styles and techniques. The Ellington sidemen interviewed by Stanley Dance mention a number of white jazzmen who influenced their styles. It was the music, the style, the ability to execute that was important. If a white musician sounded good; if he had the facility with his instrument you took what you could use—just as they took what they could use from us. Jazz is Afro-American in origin, but it's more American than some folks want to admit." Ron Welburn, "Ralph Ellison's Territorial Vantage," in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, ed. Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 310.

¹⁰ Pianist Bill Evans, one of the most noted white musicians of this period, had this response to the suggestion of jazz being black music in a 1976 *DownBeat* interview:

"There's a sense of the hurt child in the people who want to make this only a black music. They haven't had much so they want to make jazz 100% black. Historically, I suppose, the black impetus was primarily responsible for the growth of jazz, but if a white jazz artist comes through, it's just another human being who has grown up loving jazz and playing jazz and can contribute to jazz. It's sad because all that attitude does is to turn that prejudicial thing right around. It makes me a bit angry. I want more responsibility among black people and black musicians to be accurate and to be spiritually intelligent about humanity. Let the historians sort out whether it's 67.2 percent black influenced or 97 percent. To say only black people can play jazz is just as dangerous as saying only white people are intelligent or anything else like that."

When pressed by the interviewer who clarified that he meant to ask about whether blacks were the true innovators in jazz, Evans continued:

“An innovator. That’s even more ridiculous. . . . But to say only black musicians can be innovative is so utterly ridiculous I can hardly consider the question. To be a human being is to have creative potential, and where this is realized is a matter of what a person commits himself to and is dedicated to. White, yellow, black, green or whatever, a person who loves and dedicates himself to jazz music can be creative, depending on his talent and commitment.” Len Lyons, “New Intuitions: Bill Evans,” *DownBeat*, March 1976, 36.

Needless to say, these remarks were controversial at the time (which is why *DownBeat*’s editor used some of them as pull quotes) and, if anything, would be more controversial today. But this underscores as well that the ambiguity surrounding Jarrett’s race was helpful to Jarrett until this ambiguity was largely cleared up by the 1990s, particularly when Jarrett’s feud with trumpeter Wynton Marsalis became something of an item in jazz circles. The racial dimensions of that feud were immediately apparent. See Gerald Early, “White Noise and White Knights: Some Thoughts on Race, Jazz, and the White Jazz Musician,” in *Jazz: A History of America’s Music*, ed. Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2000), 324–331. That essay juxtaposed bandleader Stan Kenton and Jarrett as two particular white career possibilities in jazz: one who absolutely refuses to “go native” in defense of whiteness in jazz and the other who “goes native” in a way that seems to transcend race.

- ¹¹ For Ornette Coleman’s belief that Jarrett is black, see “Interview with Jazz Pianist Keith Jarrett,” *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross, September 11, 2000. Quincy Jones expressed his belief that Jarrett is black in a conversation he had with me in May 2008 during the occasion of his visit to Washington University in St. Louis to receive a honorary degree.

Two near-contemporaries of Jarrett’s—guitarist Kenny Burrell and saxophonist Jackie McLean—represented racial ambiguity of another sort: they were light-skinned African Americans who could have passed for white but who identified as black and played almost exclusively with black musicians and in a style that audiences considered black. I remember some of my black childhood friends thinking that these musicians were white and being informed in no uncertain terms by the black adults around us that they were not. Jarrett has played with black musicians during his career but has not gone out of his way to do so. In the three regular working bands he has had over his career—the American quartet, the European quartet, and the “Standards Trio”—two of the musicians were black: drummer Jack DeJohnette and saxophonist Dewey Redman.

Jarrett also never identified himself as “going native” as did Austrian pianist Joe Zawinul, who made a point of saying in interviews in the 1970s that he was interracially married, that he had biracial children, that he enjoyed being around black people and black musicians, and that he enjoyed being mistaken for being black. “When I was with Cannonball’s [Adderley] band, I stayed in this one house in Florida with this little old [black] lady about 75. And she never knew that I wasn’t black. I always had a tan and looked kinda funny, you know—‘That light-skinned boy sure is nice!’” Quoted in Conrad Silvert, “Joe Zawinul: Wayfaring Genius,” *DownBeat*, June 1978. Also see, Conrad Silvert, “Joe Zawinul: Wayfaring Genius, Part II,” *DownBeat*, June 1978; and Ray Townley, “The Mysterious Travellings of an Austrian Mogul,” *DownBeat*, January 1975. Jarrett was never interracially married, nor ever presented himself as an insider among blacks. Therefore, the belief that he was black was based solely on his appearance and the charisma of his piano playing. In this regard, it can be said that those who believed him to be black, *wanted* him to be black.

By the way, in photographer Valerie Wilmer’s *The Face of Black Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976), a collection of her photos of black musicians, is a photo of Jarrett performing in a recording studio. The book has no page numbers but the photo is opposed one of saxophonist Coleman Hawkins and appears toward the end of the book. Surely, it was instances such as this that led many people to think that Jarrett was black.

- ¹² See a review of Keith Jarrett’s recording of Bach’s “The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 2,” *Gramophone*, September 1991; and “Collection: Bach’s Goldberg Variations,” *Gramophone*, October

1996, which features brief comments on Jarrett's recording of the Variations. On the whole, Jarrett's classical recordings have generally been well-reviewed in classical music publications like *Gramophone*. The most scathing attack against Jarrett in *Gramophone* appeared in a review of a solo recording by American composer and improviser Alvin Curran in which the reviewer called the solo performances for which Jarrett had become famous "anaemic [sic] vamps and arpeggios with which [he has] managed to persuade gullible audiences he was touching the divine when, in fact, he was manipulatively deploying melodic hooks and tried-and-tested harmonic sequences all designed to push the right emotional buttons." *Gramophone*, June 2011.

¹³ Some of this theatricality may have been Jarrett coming to grips physically with the piano. Bill Evans notes: "The piano is very mechanical and you're separated from it physically. You can only control it by touching it, striking it, and pushing a key down. Playing a wind or a stringed instrument is so much more expressive and so much more vocal because of its contact with the player." Lyons, "New Intuitions."

¹⁴ Miles Davis with Quincy Troupe, *Miles: The Autobiography* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1990), 291.

¹⁵ "Focus on Paul Bley," *DownBeat*, January 1974.

¹⁶ Gregg Hall, "Miles: Today's Most Influential Contemporary Musician," *DownBeat*, July 1974.

¹⁷ Bob Palmer, "The Inner Octaves of Keith Jarrett," *DownBeat*, October 1974.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ For Impulse!, see *Fort Yawuh* (1973), *Backhand* (1974), *Death and the Flower* (1974), *Treasure Island* (1974), *Shades* (1975), *Mysteries* (1975), *Byablue* (1976), and *Bop-Be* (1976). For Columbia, see *Expectations* (1972). For Atlantic, see *Birth* (1971), *The Mourning of a Star* (1971), and *El Juicio* (1971). For ECM, see *Facing You* (1971), *Ruta and Daitya* (1971), *Solo Concerts: Bremen/Lausanne* (1973), *In the Light* (1973), *Belonging* (1974), *The Köln Concert* (1975), *Luminessence* (1975), *Arbour Zena* (1975), *The Survivors' Suite* (1976), *Staircase* (1976), *Eyes of the Heart* (1976), *Hymns/Spheres* (1976), and *Sun Bear Concerts* (1976). Another point to be made about this density of recording activity is the idea of repeatability, which Peter Elsdon writes about in his book, *Keith Jarrett's The Köln Concert* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). In particular, Elsdon explores questions of Jarrett's repeating musical ideas in connection with the *The Köln Concert*'s "myth," if you will, of being pure spontaneous originality. Jarrett would claim in his liner notes to *Bremen/Lausanne* that nothing is ever repeated in his solo concerts. And certainly in the first eight or so years of his recording career, virtually nothing was repeated on any of his records, as if he were intent on building a reputation as a musician whose output was like one big live concert, or whose mind was so fertile that he did not return to anything, so wondrous was his nonrepeatability. Of course, the truth about the solo concerts was that material, particularly in the encores, was repeated. Also, Jarrett's solo performance as a concept developed a sound, a style, and a set of habits that became repeatable. If one listens to Jarrett's solo concerts over the course of his career, certain types of figures, chords, and rhythms are used over and over; in some instances, he comes perilously close to playing something he played before. His own limits and inclinations, and his preferences and avoidances dictate this as they would for any musician.

²⁰ The fact that Jarrett did not perform the traditional jazz repertoire at this time does not mean that he did not know it. "During his time as a bar-room pianist in Boston in the 1960s, Jarrett had learned as many songs as possible, and had built up a large repertoire of standard tunes." Ian Carr, *Keith Jarrett: The Man and His Music* (New York: Da Capo, 1992), 145.

²¹ "I think the direction that Jarrett has taken is as revolutionary as the one Beethoven introduced." "Review of *In the Light*," *DownBeat*, May 1974.

²² "Blindfold Test: Horace Silver," *DownBeat*, February 1975.

²³ Len Lyons, "Oscar Peterson: Piano Worship," *DownBeat*, December 1975.

²⁴ Francis Davis, "Anthony Davis: New Music Traditionalist," *DownBeat*, January 1982.

²⁵ For more on black musicians, especially Charles Mingus and Shepp, and their battles with the white critical establishment of jazz, see Eric Porter, *What is this Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), esp. chap. 3 and 5.

²⁶ Consider this remark by Joe Zawinul that endorses the mythology of the superiority of the hybrid: "Did you know there was a lot of African influence on Europe, classical music, in the old days? I mean Beethoven was a half-breed, you know. Friedrich Gulda told me this, and he's one of the great Beethoven interpreters. He said it is proven that Beethoven's grandfather was a blackman [sic] from Africa. And Beethoven was also Germanic. This mixture is what makes it." Ray Townley, "Joe Zawinul: The Mysterious Travelings of an Austrian Mogul," *DownBeat*, January 1975.

²⁷ Elsdon, *Keith Jarrett's The Köln Concert*.

²⁸ Bob Blumenthal, "Keith Jarrett's Ego Trip: Ten LPs!" *Rolling Stone*, March 1979. "Actually, the pianist's claim that music flows of its own will through his black receptiveness is just another variation on the New Narcissism."

²⁹ There has always been an element of nostalgia associated with Jarrett's music by marketers. Consider, for instance, the cover and title of his early trio album, *Somewhere Before* (1968), which features tunes called "New Rag" and "Old Rag," and where the group played occasionally like an old-fashioned jazz band. On the album *El Juicio* (recorded 1971, released 1975), there is an old-styled-like performance called "Pardon My Rags." On the 2007 album *My Foolish Heart*, Jarrett's trio performs two Fats Waller's songs, "Ain't Misbehavin'" and "Honkeysuckle Rose," almost as a parody of a swing-era small combo.

³⁰ Early on, some critics challenged Jarrett's claim that the solo concerts were something experimental in jazz or contemporary music:

"And what was so experimental about a pianist giving a recital? It could be the fact that classical pianists do not usually improvise but interpret somebody else's music, and jazz pianists almost never play solo (i.e. without rhythm accompaniment) for an entire evening. The experimental quality of [Jarrett's] venture fits the first case more readily than the second, for he, at least by virtue of the kind of music he made in the course of the discussed event, rarely answered the description of a jazzman. And once we disassociate him from jazz, we would be permitted to regard him as a generously endowed musician who revives the lost art of 'classical' improvisation—one that could have come about some hundred years ago." Ilhan Mima-gly, "Keith Jarrett Mercer Arts Center, New York City," *DownBeat*, January 1973.

³¹ Nat Hentoff, liner notes to Charles Mingus, *Mingus Plays Piano*, Impulse!, 1963.

³² The other musician, a contemporary of Jarrett, who was important in the turn from electronics and rock, was pianist McCoy Tyner, who recorded extensively during the 1970s. Tyner made his name as a member of saxophonist John Coltrane's band in the 1960s and Coltrane himself was probably the most lionized and influential jazz musician of the 1960s. Interestingly, Tyner won more *DownBeat* readers' polls and critics' polls in the 1970s as "Best Pianist" than Jarrett did. He also won more of these polls during this decade for "Jazzman of the Year" than Jarrett. Jarrett's thoughts in the 1970s on Coltrane's importance are noteworthy:

"One thing I can say is that Coltrane's influence after he died was very negative, mostly because he couldn't control it any more. He didn't intend there to be a big gap, he intended that there be more space for everyone to do what they should do. That's what his music represents to me, that there is a much greater potential than anyone thought before for a human being and an instrument." Bob Palmer, "The Inner Octaves of Keith Jarrett," *DownBeat*, October 1974.

³³ See Neil Leonard, *Jazz: Myth and Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) for his discussion of the cult-nature of various schools or approaches to jazz and how the successful jazz performer often speaks with the authority and charisma of a shaman. See also the classic study, Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

³⁴ Elsdon, *Keith Jarrett's The Köln Concert*, chap. 1 and 2.

³⁵ "Youthful Time: An Interview with Chico Hamilton," *DownBeat*, March 1971.

Ella Fitzgerald & “I Can’t Stop Loving You,” Berlin 1968: Paying Homage to & Signifying on Soul Music

Judith Tick

Abstract: “If you don’t learn new songs, you’re lost,” Ella Fitzgerald told The New York Times in 1967. This essay is a close reading of one performance of “I Can’t Stop Loving You” she gave at a concert in Berlin on February 11, 1968. The song, which had already become a global hit through a version by Ray Charles in 1962, turned into a vehicle through which Fitzgerald signified on “Soulsville,” or soul, a black popular style then sweeping the American music scene. References to Aretha Franklin’s “Respect” and Vernon Duke’s “I Can’t Get Started With You” are examples of the interpolations included here. The essay challenges the idea that the late 1960s were a fallow period in Fitzgerald’s career by highlighting the jazz techniques she used to transform one song into a self-revelatory theatrical tour de force.

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This essay depends upon a virtual community of semianonymous uploaders who have Web-posted Ella Fitzgerald’s Berlin 1968 concert in its entirety. Held on February 11, 1968, at the Deutschlandhalle, a roughly nine-thousand-seat arena in the American sector of Berlin – a divided city in a divided country – the concert was televised by and broadcast on West-German public television. As of February 2019, the YouTube clips of the concert have been viewed a combined 240,000 times.¹

Berlin 1968 challenges the idea that the late 1960s were a fallow period for Fitzgerald’s artistic achievement, a period in which her albums compromised her art to accommodate new trends in American popular music. It offers living proof, so to speak, that she had much to say about the potential interactions between pop and jazz and that old categories of “commercial” versus “authentic” cannot grapple with the individuality of her approaches. To be sure, she acknowledged her own

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*Ella Fitzgerald
& "I Can't Stop
Loving You,"
Berlin 1968*

receptivity to contemporary pop: "If you don't learn new songs, you're lost," she told an interviewer in 1967.

Unless you sing today's songs, all there is is the standards, the old show tunes. What new show tunes are there? "Hello, Dolly"? It has that old beat, it's an old type song. Can you think of anything else that's come off Broadway? Or out of the movies? Would the average kid want to sing "The Shadow of Your Smile"? It's an old type song. No matter where we play, we have some of the younger generation coming to the club. It's a drag if you don't have anything to offer them.²

"I Can't Stop Loving You" was not exactly a "new song" in 1968, but Fitzgerald's subversive interpretations reaffirmed the verse of a swing song she had recorded with Chick Webb in 1939: "'Tain't What You Do (It's The Way That Cha Do It)." "This is not the Ella I know," remarked one attendee at the 2014 Boston University conference on "African-American Music in World Culture," upon viewing the 1968 performance of "I Can't Stop Loving You."³ She and others in the audience expressed surprise at the sensuality on display and the singer's use of soul music as a vehicle for irony and self-exposure.

In this essay, I argue for recognizing the productive creativity that came from Fitzgerald's involvement with soul through a close reading of this one performance. While there are other examples, her ten-minute excursion at Berlin 1968 was a particular tour de force: such a work of theater that it makes the case for Fitzgerald's relationship to the pop music of her time as inspiration for self-revelation and innovation. Two precedents before Berlin 1968 shape the frame.

"We'd like to, and it's all in fun, ladies and gentlemen, we'd like to give you our interpretations of the new sounds, and

we hope you enjoy them as much as we enjoy trying to sing them. The new rock and soul." That was how Fitzgerald introduced one of her earliest forays into signifying on soul music on June 30, 1967, in Oakland, California. This important concert in her own history marked the last official appearance of Norman Granz's touring ensemble, Jazz at the Philharmonic, her home base for jazz from around 1949 through 1957, which made its farewell trek through the United States that spring along with Duke Ellington and Oscar Peterson.

Who would have expected, as one of her last numbers, that a bop version of Duke Ellington's "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)" would shift gears and proclaim, "It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Soul"? Was she capitulating to its market supremacy while demonstrating her mastery of a competitive singing style? Hardly. Instead, she was exposing the gulf between two kinds of vocality: the vernacular versus the cultivated voice, a dialectic running through American music history overall.⁴ As has often been (over)stated, rock and soul disdained conventional "prettiness," proclaiming authenticity through vernacular ties. In contrast, mid-century popular music, honed on theater songs from Broadway musicals and standards from Tin Pan Alley, embraced sonic ideals of beauty and tone. That said, what matters here is the way Fitzgerald, whose repertory was so identified with what we now call "The Great American Songbook," exploited this sonic opposition.

The straight version of the tune could not have been more sophisticated mainstream jazz, beginning with her own scatting and then turning into a display piece for hard-charging solos from each member of the background trio: Jimmy Jones on piano, Bob Cranshaw on bass, and Sam Woodyard on drums. As she bent

the lyrics, she recast her vocal style, mingling enough “wha whas” to evoke Janis Joplin’s version of Big Mama Thornton’s blues song, “Ball and Chain,” and emulating the expressionistic screams and wails of James Brown. She threw in the phrase about keeping the faith then associated in particular with Adam Clayton Powell’s unsuccessful bid for retention as a congressman (after having been ejected from the House a few months earlier), as well as with the fervor of the civil rights and black power movements.

You’d better believe, you’d better wha wha wha wha wha,

It makes no difference, [under her breath] to James Brown, if it’s sweet or hot,

You’d better keep the faith, baby, keep the faith, baby, and everything will be alright,

I tell you, it don’t mean a thing if you ain’t got no soul, daddy.

I couldn’t beat ’em, baby, that’s why I join ’em.

Even the lyrics demonstrate Fitzgerald’s ease in signifying. As a theorized aesthetic, signifying now enjoys such wide currency in many kinds of cultural production (having expanded its purview from its original home in folklore and literary criticism) that for the purposes of my argument, we need only clarify its relationship to black vernacular music by quoting the music historian Samuel Floyd as he references Henry Louis Gates: signifying is a process, practiced through “the transformation of pre-existing musical material by trifling with it, teasing it, or censoring it . . . demonstrating respect for or poking fun . . . through parody, pastiche, implication, indirection, humor, tone play or word play.”⁵ These techniques were employed here by Fitzgerald in her version of Ellington’s signature tune, especially wicked since the Duke himself

was on the bill that evening. The audience in Oakland, which drew on its large African American population, and young people from nearby Berkeley, its campus of the University of California a center for student activism and pop awareness, adored the parody version and had to be stilled. Post applause, whistles, and cheers, she announced: “We’re so glad you enjoyed that. We’d like you to know we enjoy soul, too.”

Judith
Tick

A few months later Fitzgerald ventured deeper into contemporary black popular music, again referencing soul, making it explicit before a very different, mostly white audience at a concert at the New York Philharmonic Hall in November 1967.⁶ After singing the title song from the musical “On a Clear Day You Can See Forever” (praised by *New York Times* critic John Rockwell for its “lines of pure sound” and “melting beauty”), she prefaced her performance of “I Can’t Stop Loving You” with a shout-out to what she called Soulsville. Rockwell labeled it a “boisterous excursion.” Too bad no tape from this concert is known to this author to hear what “boisterous” meant that evening.

Choosing “I Can’t Stop Loving You” as a vehicle was a shrewd but unusual choice. By the time she sang it, the song technically did not qualify as a new song. On the contrary, it was a standard. Originating as a country music hit (as debuted by its composer Don Gibson in 1958), its potential was tapped in 1962 when Ray Charles brilliantly reinterpreted it through gospel idioms. Introduced on his album, *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music*, Charles catapulted the song into one of the top 10 “Hits of the World,” popular in Britain, Belgium, Chile, Ireland, Holland, and Spain in the summer of 1962.⁷ It had even been covered in German by the Yugoslavian singer Ivo Robic, whose version, titled “Ein Ganzes Leben Lang

Ella Fitzgerald
& "I Can't Stop
Loving You,"
Berlin 1968

(A Whole Life Long)," made the German top 20 as of September 29, 1962.⁸ By the late 1960s, the song had already been covered by about fifty pop singers and several jazz musicians, including Count Basie (for whom its arranger Quincy Jones won his first Grammy) and Duke Ellington. Now it was her turn to explore the meaning of Soulsville at a time when it was no longer contained by Ray Charles's genre of rhythm and blues and was expanding to accommodate the impact of a new superstar, Aretha Franklin, who amassed a collection of million-record sellers in 1967 and 1968. Framed as Ray Charles's legacy and female counterpart in an *Ebony* magazine article by Phyl Garland, one of the few African American female journalists of the era, Franklin represented another generation of soul, a new elaboration growing out of gospel and rhythm and blues in ways that reflected the 1960s environment of political and cultural activism.⁹

Although soul was still a relatively new trade-music category in the mid-1960s, it had a long reach, understood as both racialized vocality and a code word for a new movement within black culture with political implications. Summing up a style that has generated a huge scholarly literature at this point, far beyond the needs of this essay, we need only recall how soul is typically defined as a fusion of rhythm and blues with gospel idioms as well as a state of political and social consciousness drawing its strength from civil rights activism of the era.¹⁰ When Aretha Franklin entered the arena of soul, an audience from two intertwined movements—the sexual revolution of the 1960s and the "women's liberation," or women's rights, movement (which later became known as second-wave feminism)—came in her wake. As it crossed over from the black world into the white charts, by 1970, Franklin's version of

"Respect" became an anthem of intersectionality, in which both gender and race shaped its reception, reaching black and white women, both within and separate from the women's liberation movement coalescing at that time. Well aware of Aretha Franklin, whom she had met as a young girl at her home in Chicago, Fitzgerald used "I Can't Stop Loving You" as a way to express competition, admiration, and ambivalence about the success of an artist used by a white reporter to redefine "authenticity" and parcel out vocal "blackness" in a cover story for *Time* magazine.¹¹ Fitzgerald was mainly concerned about the vocality of soul more than politics. Her signifying in Berlin 1968 expanded beyond the casual references in the Oakland concert to a display of competition between two ways of singing, the whole lit up with the electricity of a duel, a struggle taking place internally and externally all at once. Otherwise, there is no accounting for what happens in it: transgressive stage behavior that flouts protocol about the claims of the audience on a performer's priority, excursions into text quotations that reference other singers, a breathtaking "confession" about her own artistic priorities, abandoning the trio midstream, and ending with an obscure personal reference. These elements defy terms like scat or improvisation, and I am making the claim here that "theater piece" is a reasonable substitute for the final product.

O:00 – 0:53: *Introduction*.¹² "I Can't Stop Loving You" appeared at the end of the long concert in Berlin on February 11, 1968, near the start of her month-long European tour. Fitzgerald had brought with her the chart made by Marty Paich, one of her favorite Hollywood arrangers, and its mood set the tone from the beginning. With the Tee Carson Trio (Donald Carson on piano, Keter Betts on bass, and Joe

Harris on drums) playing Paich's spoof of burlesque music, Fitzgerald sashays on the stage, twirling her signature handkerchief like a prop. She begins unaccompanied, unfurling a long melisma on "I." Then an uncharacteristic bit of comic byplay flouts the contract between performer and audience when she stops dead and looks around as if she has told a private joke rather than gifted us with a mesmerizing musical moment. Back on focus, she shouts out the destination of our journey: "Soulsville!" decorated with a nervous giggle. Delivering an inaudible aside to the pianist, who then doubles over with laughter, she shares an inside joke with the musicians in full view of the audience. Thus, ambivalence is launched with inside/outside, person/persona in the mix.

Hearing Fitzgerald luxuriate in the song itself with her voice at its prime in a straightforward delivery for five minutes – longer than any commercial release of a pop song – it is clear that if she is going to live in Soulsville, it will be in a mansion. As the drummer enthusiastically beats out solid rhythm and blues, "officially" getting things going, Fitzgerald exercises her full powers at a very slow tempo, savoring the passionate "earthiness" that Aretha Franklin once associated with soul. Bending pitches, elongating particular words, shifting dynamics, moving ahead or behind the beat, and belting out the lyrics, she is hardly "covering" Ray Charles. He employed strings, which highlighted his own gravelly rhythm and blues voice, as well as a backup vocal group to evoke the call and response of gospel; his premeditated pitch alterations, calibrated to sound natural, display the control he exercised in the recording studio.¹³

4:19 – 5:03. Fitzgerald alters the narrative from a male to a female point of view through various techniques to turn it into a torch song. Although the mood of the original song celebrates nostalgia,

Fitzgerald takes on self-justifying resentment: "I know someone someone someone someone told you a lie, what a lie" she sings, as if an outsider has betrayed her. The hapless lover in Ray Charles's treatment affirming loyal nostalgia yields to a far more assertive woman living not just with loss but with recriminations in the classic manner of an old genre.

5:06 – 6:30: A "Text Jam." Enter Aretha Franklin and "Respect." Before finishing a third go-round of the tune, Fitzgerald stops the drummer, disrupts the lyrics, and launches an extended pastiche of phrases linked by the subject of romantic loss and pain. She refers implicitly to Aretha Franklin to launch the text jam. In 1967, Franklin had recorded the two songs referred to here: "Do You Love a Man" and "Respect." "Respect," Fitzgerald says. "Sock it to me. Give it to me all night long," Fitzgerald says, with a half-smile in her voice, hollering, swooping through chanting, moaning and shaking in gospel testifying. She trifles with sexual innuendo and then retrieves the word "respect" as a serious demand for dignity.

Have you ever loved a man like I've loved my man? You know how I feel this morning.

All I want is respect. In the morning, in the evening, give it to me all night long, give me respect.

I'm gonna tell it like it is this morning. I'm gonna tell everything, everything I know, yeah yeah yeah yeah.

You got a man, I got a man, she's got a man that's true.

We're gonna talk about our man, we talk about him, yes we do.

Do we love him? Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. (3x)

Early in the morning, all we gotta do is reach on the pillow, tears on my pillow, all night long. I'll be crying, yeah.

Alright OK, you win.

Ella Fitzgerald
& "I Can't Stop
Loving You,"
Berlin 1968

Other allusions follow as well, coming at us in fleeting moments. Among them are the Beatles' "Do You Love Me," Joe Williams and Count Basie's "Alright OK, You Win," and "Tears on My Pillow," a rhythm and blues song popularized by Little Anthony and the Imperials. "Tell It Like It Is" became an iconic cultural signifier in the mid-1960s as well. It meant black pride, authenticity, and candor about social justice and discrimination as well as personal truth-telling.

This textual mash-up of grammatically unrelated phrases is what I call a *text jam*. Precedence for this terminology comes from its musical counterpart: the term *vocal jam*, which appeared in a jazz magazine in 1946, when Fitzgerald's famous improvisations on "Oh! Lady Be Good" debuted in live performance.¹⁴ Second, the improvisation reflects Fitzgerald's practice of interpolating quotations and borrowing riffs from contemporary improvisations by instrumentalists and she transfers it here to words alone, drawing the listener in through vibrant and compelling free association.

What a jumble! The text jam works because Fitzgerald adopts the persona of an African American preacher. Music historian Tammy Kernodle has noted that,

She's engaging in something we call in Black Church culture "testifying." What she is doing is rooted in the Pentecostal church. The improvisatory nature of her talking about her experiences in this way, would have been read by audiences as "the Holy Spirit" taking over. She stops the drummer because he's hampering her "flow." In the church a good musician would know how to vamp with the singer to provide the right rhythmic and harmonic space for her vocal and harmonic improvisations to flow. It's obvious that he's simply trying to "recreate" what he thinks is the Pentecostal "shout" beat. It is but that

doesn't work unless the performance flows in that manner – when it does then the person transitions to a different rhythmic vocal style.¹⁵

Fitzgerald adopts rhetorical strategies of preaching, such as inserting dialogue through questions – "Do we love him?" – asking congregants to answer and affirm their willing participation. To bind the many sources into a unified experience, she signifies on that dialogic approach. Alternative vocal styles compete in this play-off performance. Shifting from one to the other, she acts out her own internal debates, showing that she too can sing with soul attitude, if she wished, and make it her own. At least for a while.

6:30 – 7:10: "This Ain't My Bag." The most startling moment in "I Can't Stop Loving You" breaks the mood of testifying at the moment of return to the original. Fitzgerald drops the preacher's robes from her shoulder. As if waking from a self-induced trance, Fitzgerald confesses in a normal street voice – startling to hear from the stage through a microphone – "this ain't my bag." She has broken the fourth wall, a theatrical term for the imaginary barrier between audience and actor, becoming the truth-teller with the audience bearing witness. Her revelation of an internal debate stops the action, as she displays her "bag" as the canon of American popular song, what we now call the "Great American Songbook." Instead of "I Can't Stop Loving You," she sings "I Can't Get Started With You," written by Vernon Duke with lyrics by Ira Gershwin. Shifting vocal personas, she croons the opening of this classic 1936 pop song. After we have heard Fitzgerald's offstage speaking voice, we hear her singing voice projecting the kind of material most closely identified with her success. Has all of the preceding amounted to little more than a comic simulacrum,

a persona, a mask adopted in pursuit of a musical adventure? Is she now “telling it like it is?”

The question is left hanging. By this time, her backup trio has given up trying to follow the singer-turned-runaway-vehicle and they sit back and wait.

Can't help lovin that man.

Do you love your man (2x) [Preaching to audience with rhetorical question]

[Speaking] There was a silence.

[Audience laughs at itself and applauds.]

Well, well, we can't do without 'em. We can't do without 'em, we can't do without 'em, yeah, let's tell it [synchronizing a pitch with the piano, laughing] I don't think I'd better preach no more.

Oh no, no, no.

“Can't Help Lovin' That Man” – another song title with “can't” in it – by Jerome Kern from the musical *Show Boat* (1927) signals a new happening. Persisting in her bemused quest to turn a Berlin audience into an African American congregation, Fitzgerald behaves again like a preacher, calling out her audience to respond. She thrusts the microphone into the faces of front-row folks, asking one woman after another: “Do you love your man?” It is a mock question, a virtual paraphrase of “Do you love Jesus?” Who in this respectable white, middle-class Berlin audience would reply? Reaching out to her audience as an evangelical, she talks to Germans sitting in the first row as if they were needing to confess, waiting to be saved. It is a bit of stage humor signifying on both the fourth wall and on the rhetorical strategies of evangelical preachers.

But not for long. Again, a dramatic subversive moment disrupts this flow. Positioning herself in the fluid relationship of a stand-up entertainer more than preacher, Fitzgerald laughs and delivers another

street-voice riposte: “There is silence.” Just as she is signifying, so now the audience signify on themselves by clapping their complicity. Years of experience in African American vaudeville in the 1930s and 1940s as well as years of touring stand behind this bravado. How challenging to talk your way in and out of this performative conundrum. Thus improvising her interactions, Fitzgerald mocks the trope of the loyal female encapsulated in the rhetorical question, “Do you love your man?” expressing her own brand of idiosyncratic feminism. She follows this with a few seconds of vocal parody of classical opera.

For a moment, it appears as if the text jam might be a turn-around moment on the way to an ending. Enough, perhaps. Instead, the singer has one more equally radical surprise.

Oh, I feel this morning

Yes

I can't stop

I can't stop, stop

I wanna talk about my man, yeah

I wanna preach about my man, yeah

Oh [holler style]

Oh [moaning style]

Cuz I'm the woman with the little skinny legs

Yeah yeah, cuz I'm the woman with the little skinny legs

Yeah yeah, yeah yeah, oh no, alright.

I can't stop loving you.

You. You.

She moves from preaching to testifying, delivering her own interrogation of her own identity. Interpolating a long moan on the word “Oh,” coming straight out of nineteenth-century African American vocality, she transforms herself into

Judith
Tick

Ella Fitzgerald
& "I Can't Stop
Loving You,"
Berlin 1968

a paradoxical smiling testifier, speaking private code with the phrase, "I'm the woman with the little skinny legs." We are in the muddle of another paradox, listening to a peculiar, potentially autobiographical text as delivered with insider irony and sharing backward glances at the band. "They know what I am talking about," she projects. Maybe so. And it doesn't matter if the audience is in on it. She has taken flight from convention.

The back story to this particular line retrieves a memory from her troubled past as a young girl. One clarifying bit of testimony can be found in an interview conducted by *Essence* magazine. There she said in response to a question about her early years, "I used to go to a theater on 148th Street [in Harlem] all the time. I'll never forget. My legs were so skinny, I used to wear boots so nobody could see the bottom of my legs. They would see me coming, and they'd say, 'Oh, here's that little chick with them boots on.'"¹⁶ With the confidence to display her own lack of it decades earlier, Fitzgerald proudly asserts her stature in the present. As she bears witness to her own past, she translates memory into improvisation on the spot. This is soul singing by signifying on her own life. She winds up this performance with the refrain from the original song, but at this point it is almost beside the point. The process has triumphed over the material, making the experience more important than the song.

Other performances of "I Can't Stop Loving You" in the late 1960s and early 1970s demonstrated her changing relationship with the material at the same time she privileged it in her repertoire. In three other publicly available versions, we watch a theater piece shrink and return to the genre of soul jazz, keeping some improvisational text in play and adapting to the venue and purpose of the

performance along the way. On May 19, 1968, she brought it to the Cave, a supper club in Vancouver, where she is backed by the club orchestra using Marty Paich's arrangement. "Here we are at the Cave and I'm preachin' and moanin'. Treat me like a woman, not a lady. Tell it to the Judge. Sock it to me." Then come two verses from "I Can't Stop Loving You." Without any reference to her "bag," the audience gets the message. Aretha Franklin's "Respect" is sublimated through allusions to a comedy show called "Laugh-In" and a shout-out to a vaudeville stereotype of the "Judge" being revived: Pigmear Markham, a legendary sketch comic in black vaudeville from the 1920s through the 1940s, who, in 1928, invented the sketch that included the line "Heah comes de judge."¹⁷

Two other high-profile performances of "I Can't Stop Loving You" occurred around this time as well. A dull version on her television special "An Evening with Ella Fitzgerald" was followed by a treatment running about six minutes on June 1972, as she brought the song to Norman Granz's concert in Santa Monica, which was intended to launch his jazz label, Pablo Records. Welcoming her old friend back into the flow and backed by the Count Basie Orchestra in the Paich arrangement, she displayed total comfort with her inventive soul singing, punching out her text repetitions and delivering a healthy shout or two. Just at the moment when her testifying was supposed to start, she interjected an ironic comment and then resurrected a blues lyric: "Whee, Can you hear me screaming this evening? I can't stop, I can't stop. I got a guy, he lives on a hill. If he don't, somebody else will. He's my main squeeze, Right on!" Thunderous applause. Beautiful. "I Can't Stop Loving You" had served its purpose.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Thejazzsingers Jazz in Holland, “Ella Fitzgerald in Concert in Berlin 1968 Parts 1–5,” YouTube, uploaded February 4, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ejbtLXoWaZU>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLQJ_xEpW0o; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zw3QfSXy0ME>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_U6rkq8gQg; and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y1NLBpZkGLY>.
- ² John S. Wilson, “Ella Changes Her Tunes for a Swinging Generation,” *The New York Times*, November 12, 1967.
- ³ This conference was sponsored by the Department of African American Studies at Boston University and organized by Professor Allison Blakely. “African American Music in World Culture: Art as a Refuge & Strength in the Struggle for Freedom,” Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts, March 17–22, 2014.
- ⁴ For the classic statement of these terms, see H. Wiley Hitchcock, *Music in the United States: A Historical Introduction*, 1st ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969).
- ⁵ Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1988] 2014), cited in Samuel A. Floyd Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 8.
- ⁶ She included not only “I Can’t Stop Loving You,” but also other black pop classics, including “Sunny,” a mellow ballad, and “Goin’ Out of My Head.” John S. Wilson, “Philharmonic Hall Sold Out, Naturally, For Ella Fitzgerald,” *The New York Times*, November 23, 1967.
- ⁷ “Hits of the World,” *Billboard Music Weekly*, August 25, 1962.
- ⁸ Jan Torfs, “Jazzfest in Mud Still Draws 35,000,” *Billboard Music Weekly*, August 25, 1962; and “Hits of the World,” *Billboard Music Weekly*, September 1962.
- ⁹ Phyl Garland, “Aretha Franklin—‘Sister Soul,’” *Ebony* magazine, October 1967.
- ¹⁰ Mellonee V. Burnim and Portia K. Maultsby, *African American Music: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 278.
- ¹¹ “Aretha Franklin: The Sound of Soul,” *Time* magazine, June 28, 1968.
- ¹² Thejazzsingers Jazz in Holland, “Ella Fitzgerald in Concert Berlin 1968 Part 5,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y1NLBpZkGLY>.
- ¹³ Ray Charles Robinson Jr., *You Don’t Know Me: Reflections of My Father, Ray Charles* (New York: Crown, 2010), 168.
- ¹⁴ Unsigned review, September–October 1946, reprinted in Ron Fritts and Ken Vail, *Ella Fitzgerald, 1935–1948: The Chick Webb Years & Beyond* (Lanham, Md.: The Scarecrow Press, 2003), 78.
- ¹⁵ Tammy Kernodle, email to the author, March 12, 2014.
- ¹⁶ Ella Fitzgerald, interview with *Essence* magazine, as quoted in Jim Haskins, *Ella Fitzgerald: A Life through Jazz* (London: Holder and Stoughton, 1991), 26.
- ¹⁷ On Markham, see Frank Cullen, Florence Hackman, and Donald McNeilly, *Vaudeville, Old & New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 724.

La La Land Is a Hit, but Is It Good for Jazz?

Krin Gabbard

Abstract: The debates around *La La Land* (2016) tell us a great deal about the state of jazz today and perhaps even in the near future. Many critics have charged that the film has very little real jazz, while others have emphasized the racial problematics of making the white hero a devout jazz purist while characterizing the music of the one prominent African American performer (John Legend) as all glitz and tacky dance moves. And finally, there is the speech in which Seb (Ryan Gosling) blithely announces that “jazz is dead.” But the place of jazz in *La La Land* makes more sense if we view the film as a response to and celebration of several film musicals, including *New York, New York* (1977), the *Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers* films, and especially Jacques Demy’s *The Young Girls of Rochefort* (1967). Both *La La Land* and Demy’s film connect utopian moments with jazz, and push the boundaries of the classical Hollywood musical in order to celebrate the music.

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Damien Chazelle, a serious jazz aficionado since childhood, has made the music central to both the plot and the score of his film *La La Land* (2016). If nothing else, the omnipresence of jazz in a film so widely honored suggests that jazz still has some resonance with audiences. But like almost every other American film that would represent jazz, *La La Land* runs smack up against racial issues. The film’s appropriation of jazz in the face of the music’s complicated racial histories has driven a backlash against the film.¹ Critics objected to the prominence of two white stars in a film about that uniquely African American cultural practice, jazz. To make matters worse, Keith (John Legend), the one important black character in the film, creates commodified pop music and even features tacky dance routines in his stage shows.

Although I found much of the film exhilarating and moving, I am more than a little uncomfortable with *La La Land*’s racial politics. Nevertheless, I argue that the film navigates some treacherous waters with intelligence and charm and that it

ultimately makes a strong case that jazz does indeed still matter.

Any understanding of *La La Land* as a “jazz film” must begin by situating it within larger traditions. A work of profound cinephilia, *La La Land* references multiple films, most of them in the musical comedy genre. But Chazelle does more than just quote from classical musicals, and he makes no attempt to recreate their aesthetics. As he has said in interviews, Chazelle was as devoted to seriously representing the emotional lives of his characters as he was to paying homage to American musical cinema. He wanted “to smash into that old-fashioned musical logic” by finding magic in the “grit and texture” of everyday life.²

A catalog of the many films and cinematic traditions that Chazelle has addressed in *La La Land* should start with his joking reference to Frank Tashlin’s *The Girl Can’t Help It* (1956). At the very beginning of *La La Land*, the outer edges of a square space containing the word “Cinemascope” suddenly expand to the traditional wide-screen ratio, recalling the opening scene of Tashlin’s film in which actor Tom Ewell appears to physically push the walls of the image to the outer edges of the screen. Chazelle has claimed another minor bit of inspiration, admitting that “Another Day of Sun,” the production number that follows the Cinemascope gag, was based on the scene in Rouben Mamoulian’s *Love Me Tonight* (1932) that begins with Maurice Chevalier singing “Isn’t It Romantic” in a simple tailor’s shop. Different groups of people hear the song and sing it themselves so that anyone passing by can also pick it up. Thanks primarily to a singing troupe of soldiers marching across the country, the song is finally passed to Jeanette MacDonald, who gives it her own operatic interpretation from high up in her chateau.

Chazelle had this scene in mind when arranging *La La Land*’s opening song “Another Day of Sun” to be passed from one motorist to another as they step out of their cars to sing in the middle of a gigantic traffic jam.

A more crucial influence on *La La Land* is the work of the French director Jacques Demy. In interviews, Chazelle regularly singles out Demy’s *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (1964) as his favorite film. The use of bold colors for costumes, interiors, and even cityscapes in *La La Land* recalls the look of Demy’s film, as does an emotionally charged conclusion in which the lovers are *not* reunited. Demy’s *The Young Girls of Rochefort* (1967) also comes up in Chazelle’s interviews. As in *Umbrellas*, actors sing in a quickly articulated style with a conversational tone, much like the vocals of French performers Charles Aznavour and Jacques Brel. “Another Day of Sun” features several actors singing in English but imitating the conversational style of the songs in Demy’s films. And like the agile motorists at the beginning of Chazelle’s film, actors seem to spontaneously break into singing and dancing throughout *Young Girls*. In *Umbrellas*, of course, no one ever stops bursting into song.

The soundtrack of *La La Land* has much in common with the scores that French composer Michel Legrand wrote for Demy’s films. Justin Hurwitz, who played in a band with Chazelle when they were teenagers and has composed the music for all four of Chazelle’s films, has talked about his borrowings from Legrand’s cinematic compositions. The best example may be Legrand’s practice of recording a jazz trio of piano, bass, and drums in front of a symphony orchestra. The music behind “Another Day of Sun” is an excellent example of how Hurwitz has made use of this practice. As a devoted jazz enthusiast, Legrand regularly borrowed from great American traditions.

Krin
Gabbard

La La Land
Is a Hit,
but Is It
Good for
Jazz?

Chazelle and Hurwitz have paid off that debt with their own tributes to Legrand.

Chazelle has also mined the rich veins of American musical comedy, especially the well-established trope of soon-to-be lovers transcending early stages of hostility through dance and song. We see this in the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers film *Top Hat* (1935), for which Chazelle has expressed admiration. Chazelle has also spoken of his affection for *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), another film in which an attractive couple are joined in song and dance before finding romance on the other side of their initial antagonism. In terms of *mise-en-scène*, *La La Land* prominently looks back to Hollywood musicals in "Epilogue," the long production number that closes the film and recalls the stylized, color-drenched scene designs for the extended ballet sequences that conclude *An American in Paris* (1951) and *The Band Wagon* (1953).

To their credit, Chazelle and actors Emma Stone and Ryan Gosling labored to create the seamless dance numbers that distinguish many of Hollywood's classic musicals. Compare the extended dance takes of Mia (Stone) and Seb (Gosling) with the screen performances of Fred Astaire, who insisted on long, unedited takes when his dances were filmed. Then compare these sequences to the numbers in a film such as Rob Marshall's *Chicago* (2002), which are cobbled together from numerous shots, few of which last more than a second or two.

La La Land is also distinguished by several scenes in which characters actually sing as they are being filmed, unlike the vast majority of performers in musical films who mouth words as they listen to playback. Often these words are supplied by someone other than the actor on screen. Chazelle has said that he likes "roughness," and he is more than willing

to sacrifice some of the surface sheen of the conventional Hollywood film. So, when Mia joins Seb at the piano for a short performance of "City of Stars," when Mia briefly sings "Someone in the Crowd" in a lady's room, and when Mia sings her climactic aria, "The Fools Who Dream," they are singing in real time and, as in the dance sequences, without edits. Although directors can do as many retakes as they wish in these situations, the performers take great risks when they present themselves live and unedited. In some ways, Gosling and Stone are like jazz musicians flying above the music without a net.

There are not many examples in cinema of actors singing in real time, but a few that do exist are worth mentioning. For *Pierrot le fou* (1965), Jean-Luc Godard recorded Jean-Paul Belmondo and Anna Karina singing outdoors, making sure that their vocals reflected their body movements, including the moment when Belmondo continues singing as he jumps down from a tree. This is as good an example as any of Godard's project of exposing and problematizing the conventions of dominant cinema. In a completely different appropriation of this tradition, Anne Hathaway laboriously tugs at our heart strings when she exudes "I Dreamed a Dream" live and in tight close-up in *Les Misérables* (2012).

Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* (1993) also deserves mention for one of the most elegant performances ever by a singer-actor. In *Short Cuts*, Annie Ross plays Tess, an older jazz singer with an elaborate romantic history.³ The same description can be applied to Annie Ross herself, but in creating Tess, Ross sings in a lower register and with a sharper attack than when she performs in clubs. She developed a voice and a singing style that is entirely compatible with the character of Tess. Ross's portrayal is even more compelling because

she sings in real time with her backup band, avoiding the moment in most musical films when the actor's speaking voice is unmistakably replaced by a dubbed-in singing voice. In *Short Cuts*, Ross separates herself from nearly all other singing actors who essentially sing as themselves when they perform on screen.

Among those critical of *La La Land*, the most vocal have denounced Emma Stone and Ryan Gosling for not being polished singers or dancers. But these criticisms ignore the extent to which Chazelle was trying to show real people going from ordinary speech and movement to song and dance without ceasing to be the same complex individuals they were before. Chazelle sought this effect in "A Lovely Night," the first number in which Mia and Seb dance and sing together. Gradually working his way into the number, Seb first begins singing in a voice very much like his speaking voice. When Mia is about to join in, we hear her clearing her throat. When Seb picks up Mia's purse and begins to look inside, she snatches it back in a gesture that is both choreographic and natural. Gradually, it all becomes choreography. And again, without edits.

The "A Lovely Night" number in *La La Land* illustrates Chazelle's conviction that the most challenging musical moments in a film happen when characters unexpectedly but organically begin to sing.⁴ The filmmaker must convince the audience that people are suddenly singing and/or dancing because there is no other way to express what they are feeling. Think of the opening of *Oklahoma* (1955), in which Curly can only admire the beauty of his land with song. Or when in *On the Town* (1949) sailors freshly turned loose in the wonderland of New York City cannot help but harmonize to "New York, New York."

In his definitive study of the Hollywood musical, Rick Altman has referred to

musicals like *Oklahoma* and *On the Town* as "folk musicals," distinguishing them from "fairy tale musicals" and "show musicals."⁵ In the show musical, most of the important numbers happen on stage or in some venue appropriate to performance, complete with visible musical accompanists. Examples would include *Cabaret* (1972) and the Busby Berkeley musicals of the 1930s. In the fairy tale musical, a couple is united by music as they cross social and class borders. The Astaire-Rogers films and Ernst Lubitsch's operettas (and Mamoulian's *Love Me Tonight*) are the best examples.

Rick Altman describes the folk musical primarily as a vehicle for building a community, but for my purposes, the films in this subgenre are distinguished by spontaneous song and dance in unlikely locations, almost always with nondiegetic music. People also sing in unexpected places in fairy tale musicals, but Altman puts these films into a separate category, having built his subgenres primarily around plot mechanics.

Chazelle has taken the folk musical to a different level by combining or, as he says, "smashing" the musical into the kind of emotional realism we associate with completely different film genres. And his goal in these collisions has been to make it all seem natural. This is precisely what Chazelle achieved in his first film, *Guy and Madeline on a Park Bench* (2009). Perhaps because he was working on an extremely limited budget (the film was his senior thesis as an undergraduate at Harvard), the film was shot in black and white, featured nonactors, relied heavily on improvised dialogue, and regularly used a hand-held camera to shakily zero in on the faces of actors.

For most of *Guy and Madeline on a Park Bench*, we could be watching an early Casavetes film or even a documentary, so loose is the editing and the progress of

La La Land
Is a Hit,
but Is It
Good for
Jazz?

the narrative. Music enters first when we see Guy (Jason Palmer) playing his trumpet along with a singer. Later, at a party scene, a character breaks into song and then joins one of the guests in a tap-dance competition. Audiences might tend to bracket off these early scenes with their diegetic soundtracks from the realism of the film's mostly nonmusical moments. But the film is almost over when Madeline (Desirée Garcia) sings to herself with nondiegetic sound while wandering through the park. Even more strikingly, when she later learns that Guy is still interested in her even though they had broken up earlier in the film, she exuberantly sings "Boy in the Park" about her first kiss with Guy. Not only is she singing and dancing in the restaurant where she works, but music suddenly emerges from nowhere and her coworkers join in the dance. The scene culminates when two women join Madeline in a tightly choreographed tap-dance routine.

Everything we have learned about Madeline, including her mostly affectless and musicless reactions to other people, has led up to the moment when a musical number reveals what has been inside all along. In the final moments of *Guy and Madeline*, when the title characters are reunited in Madeline's apartment, they return to the same low-key, matter-of-fact demeanor they exhibited before Madeline began singing "Boy in the Park." After making perfunctory small talk, Guy plays a long, unaccompanied trumpet solo while Madeline listens. Significantly, Guy does not need to sing or dance. He has jazz. And Guy is played by Jason Palmer, a professional jazz trumpeter who plays the filmed solos live.

When his solo ends, Guy looks up sheepishly, searching for a reaction. Chazelle ends his film just as we see Madeline breaking into a smile. But because of her performance of "Boy in the Park," we

have a good idea of how she feels. Madeline and Guy are a couple again. In a film that can only barely be called a musical, Chazelle has created an organic relationship between music and the inner lives of his characters.

Chazelle has expressed admiration for Dudley Murphy's two pioneering short films, *St. Louis Blues* and *Black and Tan*, both released in 1929. *St. Louis Blues* was a vehicle for blues empress Bessie Smith and her only performance on film. *Black and Tan* featured the young, regal Duke Ellington just as his music was beginning to make him a star. Chazelle has also mentioned Bertrand Tavernier's *Round Midnight*, a French film from 1986 that cast the eminent jazz saxophonist Dexter Gordon in a major acting role. The fact that all of these films are built around real-life jazz artists may explain why Chazelle took a chance on Jason Palmer as a protagonist in *Guy and Madeline* even though he had never acted before.

Clearly, Chazelle knows how difficult it would be to separate a jazz artist – and his inner life – from jazz. His casting of jazz artist Jason Palmer in *Guy and Madeline* is consistent with his request that Ryan Gosling develop his skills as a pianist prior to his appearance in *La La Land*. Whenever the audience sees Seb's hands on the piano keys, they are hearing a performance by Gosling, who frequently exhibits real talent and agility as a jazz pianist. (When we do not see Gosling's hands, the pianist is Randy Kerber, who has played with Nancy Wilson, Diane Schuur, Tom Scott, Al Jarreau, and Quincy Jones, among others.)

A jazz film that ought to be singled out for comparison with *La La Land* is Martin Ritt's *Paris Blues* (1961). Although they do not actually play their instruments, Sidney Poitier and Paul Newman do impressive bits of miming when they play,

respectively, tenor saxophone and trombone. And thanks to Billy Strayhorn and Duke Ellington, who wrote extraordinary music for the film, the jazz lives of the protagonists strongly resonate through the music.⁶ *Paris Blues* ends with the expatriate jazz artist Ram Bowen (Newman) deciding to stay in Paris and not return to his American home. His decision comes just as the film's other main characters are heading back to the States, including the American schoolteacher Lillian (Joanne Woodward), with whom he was having an affair. Determined to become a serious composer, Bowen is convinced that he can only achieve his goal if he remains in Paris and, as he tells Lillian, only if he works alone: "I got to follow through with the music. I got to find out how far I can go. And I guess that means alone."⁷

In *La La Land*, Mia goes off to Paris to practice her craft and becomes a huge success. Seb decides not to accompany her, even though that would have been a real possibility, as the fantasy ballet at the end of the film makes clear. But when it looks as if Mia will get a major role in a film that will shoot in Paris, Seb's advice recalls what Paul Newman said to Joanne Woodward: "When you get this, you got to give it everything you got." Although the woman in *La La Land* abandons the man, while it is the man in *Paris Blues* who walks away from the woman, both films embrace the myth that great art can only be created by a scrupulously isolated artist – and maybe only if it's in Paris.

Whether intentionally or not, *La La Land* has much in common with a jazz film that fits Rick Altman's definition of the show musical: Martin Scorsese's *New York, New York* (1977). In Chazelle's film as well as in Scorsese's film, the leading man is much more devoted to jazz than is the leading lady. In both, the man ends up performing in his own jazz club while the woman ascends to movie stardom. In

both films, the lovers break up and then reencounter each other in the last moments of the film. And in neither film do the lovers reconnect; the films do not shy away from the darker side of romance.

I would argue that *La La Land* is in some ways a response to *New York, New York*, whose glum ending probably prevented it from striking box office gold. The last big production number in Scorsese's film is the boffo performance of the title song by Francine (Liza Minnelli), who has the screen all to herself. In the scene at Jimmy's (Robert de Niro) club the Major Chord that immediately precedes Minnelli's big number, the music is portrayed in a much less sensational fashion. In fact, we see a modernist jazz group performing only for a few moments and certainly not in a spotlight. The camera quickly cuts away and follows Jimmy to the bar, where he flirts with some young women, and then into his office. Late in the film but hardly at the end, jazz has disappeared from *New York, New York*.

Scorsese's film concludes with Francine and Jimmy agreeing to meet later in the evening. But both independently decide not to meet, heading off in different directions as the film ends. At the end of *La La Land*, Seb and Mia also pass up a moment to reunite after several years of separation. And in addition to placing the name of one of America's two largest cities in their titles, *La La Land* and *New York, New York* share the practice of placing the characters' nonreunion immediately after a major production number. But there the similarities end. Instead of giving the production number to only one of his lead characters, Chazelle features them both. And instead of leaving the two leads entirely separate from each other, Chazelle brings them together in an extended sequence that could be one character's dream, the shared dream of both characters, or perhaps even the

La La Land
Is a Hit,
but Is It
Good for
Jazz?

audience's fantasy. The first part of *La La Land*'s concluding number revises the romantic history of Mia and Seb to eliminate all conflict and obstacles to their love affair. It then takes them into a fantasy world where they even end up with the same married life we have already seen Mia living with her husband (Tom Everett Scott).

The conclusion of *La La Land* allows us to have it both ways, first revealing how painful it is for Mia and Seb to recall the intense feelings they once had for each other. Chazelle abandons the feel-good conventions of the classical musical when the former lovers agonizingly lock gazes for the first time in five years. But this moment is immediately followed by a joyous fantasy of what their life together might have been and, for a moment, what it actually was. Comparing *La La Land* and *New York, New York* as "jazz films," Liza Minnelli's performance of "New York, New York" stands out: it is all Broadway and Las Vegas and prominently set off from the truncated jazz moment at the Major Chord that precedes it. Chazelle's film is much more a celebration of the music, infusing the final moments with jazz artists on-screen as well as Justin Hurwitz's jazz-inflected Legrand-esque score. The audience even gets a glimpse of Caveau de la Huchette, a jazz club in Paris that was a home for lindy hoppers after World War II and is still in operation today.

The mostly black musicians we see playing at the Caveau de la Huchette are miming to playback. The artists on the soundtrack are Los Angeles studio musicians, all of them white. Even today, and even when black musicians are on the screen, white musicians still have an advantage. But the studio artists are also skilled jazz musicians, including trumpeter Wayne Bergeron, who hits an A above high C as the scene at La Caveau

winds down. At least the black musicians are on-screen and not off-screen supplying invisible music for white lovers, as is so often the case with Hollywood films.

In an interview with Terry Gross, Chazelle talked about his love of jazz and his attempts to become a jazz drummer.⁸ He recalled that his father had a jazz record collection with LPs by Count Basie and Charlie Parker, among others. He was especially fascinated by the stories his father would tell him about Parker. But his favorite recording in his father's collection was *Clifford Brown and Max Roach*, released on Emarcy in 1954. Chazelle was especially taken with the track "Delilah." For what it's worth, this was the very first of many recorded collaborations between the distinguished trumpeter Brown and drummer Roach, who practically invented the art of bebop drumming. "Delilah" appears to be the first tune they recorded in the studio when they arrived there in 1954. Chazelle may have been reacting to the freshness of Brown and Roach's first moments together in the studio.

Chazelle says that he became enchanted with "Delilah" when he was thirteen, the age at which many jazz enthusiasts first fall in love with the music.⁹ Chazelle says he listened to the music repeatedly and that "it summed up my life." He spent a great deal of time on his drum kit trying to reproduce Roach's solo toward the end of the recording. I would add that "Delilah" is a stirring performance by all members of the Brown-Roach band, including tenor saxophonist Harold Land, pianist Richie Powell, and bassist George Morrow. Without insisting on any strong connection, I would simply observe that "Delilah" is in a minor key and has a certain brooding feeling that vaguely recalls Arabic musics. With its bright solos over a dark background, "Delilah" looks forward to *La La Land*, with its bright colors

and upbeat performances on top of a complex, emotionally fraught story line.

When asked to list his favorite drummers, Chazelle has named Roach, Jo Jones, and Buddy Rich, adding that he liked the “theatricality” of solos performed by Rich and Gene Krupa. This preference is surely compatible with Chazelle’s larger ambitions. He told Terry Gross that he always wanted to be a filmmaker, even when he was working hardest at becoming a jazz musician. At least according to Justin Hurwitz, Chazelle won awards as a jazz drummer at competitions when he was in high school. Nevertheless, Chazelle told Gross that his playing never “measured up” to that of his idols. He aspired to be an excellent drummer, in part because of an aggressive high school band director who was fond of saying “not my tempo” to the musicians in his ensemble.

Chazelle freely admits that his second film, *Whiplash* (2013), is autobiographical. If nothing else, the film documents the pain and exertion that are the inevitable side effects of pursuing perfection, at least for anyone who wants to be a great jazz drummer. And like the Paul Newman character in *Paris Blues*, Andrew (Miles Teller), the drummer hero of *Whiplash*, sends his girlfriend away, believing that he cannot succeed with romantic distractions.

When talking with Terry Gross about *Whiplash*, Chazelle was careful to add that his own teacher, on whom the character of Fletcher (J. K. Simmons) is based, was not at all as sadistic and violent as the character in *Whiplash*. Obviously, it makes a better story when Fletcher turns out to be so devoted to bringing out the potential he sees in Andrew that he is prepared to go to almost any extreme, even losing his job at the conservatory. What’s missing from *Whiplash* is a compelling reason why someone would want to suffer through brutal initiation rituals to

play lightning-fast, bombastic compositions with the kind of military precision that Fletcher demands. Late in the film, when Andrew goes to hear Fletcher in a jazz club, I was amazed to hear him playing jazz piano in the soft, lyrical mode associated with someone like Bill Evans, who never recorded anything like the harsh compositions in *Whiplash*.

Significantly, there are no important black characters in *Whiplash*, while Andrew aspires to play like the white show-off Buddy Rich.¹⁰ The driving, intense arrangements programmed by Fletcher recall the music that big bands led by white musicians such as Rich and Maynard Ferguson performed in the 1970s and 1980s. In *La La Land*, however, Seb wants to play a much less macho music than Andrew and is devoted to great African American jazz artists such as Thelonious Monk, whose solo on his 1967 recording of “Japanese Folk Song” Seb is resolutely trying to master in the opening moments of the film. There is nothing in *Whiplash* like this scene early in *La La Land* in which the white hero honors the black jazz artists who have inspired him.

Desirée Garcia, who became an important film scholar after acting in *Guy and Madeline on a Park Bench*, has defended Chazelle against the charge that a jazz film should not be built around two white actors. Pointing out that *Guy and Madeline* starred a black jazz musician and a Latina graduate student, she wrote that the casting of *La La Land* “says more about what it takes to get a movie made in Hollywood than the intentions of the director.”¹¹ Damien Chazelle wanted to make a big, splashy revisionist musical, and he could not get the funding without stars of the caliber of Emma Stone and Ryan Gosling.

Still, *La La Land* has its racial problematics: for one, Seb essentially declares himself to be the savior of jazz. But

La La Land
*Is a Hit,
but Is It
Good for
Jazz?*

I would add that Chazelle wanted Seb to be less sympathetic in earlier drafts of his script, even “something of a jerk.” He was to be more like the Seb of an early scene who scolds his sister for sitting on the fetishized stool he claims once belonged to Hoagy Carmichael. Even in the final version of *La La Land*, Seb is the kind of jazz purist everyone in the jazz community knows all too well: someone who not only loves the Real Thing, but also feels obliged to despise anything that does not measure up to his own notion of what jazz ought to be. Seb’s distaste for playing in a 1980s cover band at a pool party is not meant to be an endearing characteristic. In his conversation with Gross, Chazelle states that he has renounced his own purism and does not share the musical fanaticism he gave to Gosling’s character. Chazelle even claims now to like “I Ran,” the hit recorded by white rockers A Flock of Seagulls in 1982. In *La La Land*, Mia requests that the cover band play the tune, supposing – correctly – that it is exactly the kind of thing that Seb would despise.

Perhaps because of Ryan Gosling’s charisma, Seb is a much more sympathetic character in the release print of the film. And his jazz purism is compelling, especially when he earnestly delivers a jazz lesson to Mia after they have taken a walk on the Warner Bros. backlot. Chazelle made a point of shooting the scene in a real jazz club with a historic location. He chose the Lighthouse Café near the Hermosa Pier, where canonical jazz artists such as Miles Davis, Lee Morgan, Joe Henderson, the Modern Jazz Quartet, Chet Baker, Cannonball Adderley, and Art Pepper performed regularly in the 1950s and 1960s. When John Levine, the original owner, passed away in 1970, the club began featuring jazz less regularly.¹²

African American artists are performing at the Lighthouse when Seb passionately tells Mia how he feels about the music:

Every one of these guys is composing, they’re rearranging, they’re writing. Then they’re playing the melody. And now, look. The trumpet player, he’s got his own ideas. And so, it’s conflict and it’s compromise, and it’s just, and it’s new every time. It’s brand new every night. It’s very, very exciting. And it’s dying. It’s dying, Mia. It’s dying on the vine. And the world says, “Let it die. It had its time.” Well, not on my watch.

At worst, Seb is aspiring to be the savior of helpless jazz musicians, including the black artists on the stage – over whose music he is talking! And he is, of course, “mansplaining” to Mia, who may or not be impressed with his verbiage. One might also object to Seb’s military metaphor of “not on my watch.” Nevertheless, Seb delivers a compelling account of how jazz artists perform, and he most assuredly makes the case for the lasting importance of the music. For people like me, who are highly ambivalent about *La La Land*, this sequence at the Lighthouse Café is emblematic.

Later in the film, after Seb has become a member of Keith’s flashy pop band, Mia is undoubtedly sincere when she tells him that she now loves jazz. And she is enthusiastic about his ambition to open his own jazz club. To my mind, one of the most thrilling moments in the film is a set of quick shots followed by whip pans that show Mia ad-libbing her own eccentric – some would say “goofy” – moves while Seb dashes off piano riffs at the Lighthouse. Meanwhile, musicians on the bandstand are tearing through Hurwitz’s hard-bop composition “Herman’s Habit.” The scene has what film critic Richard Dyer has called the “utopian” qualities of classical musicals, even if we may wince at the sight of Mia surrounded almost entirely by appreciative black people.¹³ The fantasy here is that the music brings out the impulse in all of us to

move freely with grace and humor and that everyone, regardless of race, gender, and class, gets it. Pity that this fantasy is so typical of American jazz films in which black artists applaud and even congratulate white artists who have stolen their music. Chazelle has succeeded in capturing the utopian magic of the old musicals, but at least in *La La Land*, he seems to have overlooked the racial hierarchies that were implicit and frequently explicit in those films, beginning with Al Jolson's blackface appearances in the pioneering musicals of the 1920s and 1930s.

Shortly after the scene at the Lighthouse when Mia and Seb joyfully improvise their own call-and-response, the film lets us know that Seb has made a painful compromise by joining Keith's band. When we first see Keith and his large ensemble on stage with Mia in the audience, Seb has a moment alone in the spotlight playing what is clearly his own music on a grand piano. Little by little, however, as Keith takes over and begins to sing "Start a Fire," the music loses its magic. Although he smiles throughout the process, Seb moves from the grand piano to a stylized keyboard that looks more like a child's toy than a real musical instrument. Although the crowd reacts enthusiastically to the music, Emma Stone's capacious eyes reflect increasingly higher levels of disappointment as the camera cuts back and forth between the band and her reaction shots. Regardless of whether *La La Land*'s real-life audience is fond of John Legend, the film definitively characterizes the music as suspect when the stage becomes overpopulated with backup singers and gyrating dancers. Seb should not be surprised when he looks up to see that Mia has left the building.

I should also point out that all four of the people in Keith's group doing tacky dance moves, not to mention the featured piano player, are white. Are we to assume

that Keith has a racial agenda? A better way of thinking about the white people in Keith's band is to associate them with *La La Land*'s scrupulously multicultural casting. Think of the multiethnic dancers in "Another Day of Sun," as well as the Afro-Cuban band that suddenly appears in the back of a truck. Consider also the African American fiancé of Seb's sister, the numerous black jazz artists who regularly appear throughout the film, and the black dancers surrounding Mia when she dances at the Lighthouse. This is not to deny the centrality of white characters among so many people of color, but any race-based critique of *La La Land* must acknowledge the film's consistently multiethnic milieu.

At any rate, John Legend's character is by no means the villain of *La La Land*. A crucial scene in the film takes place when Seb has just begun rehearsing with Keith's band. Knowing that Seb is still an incorrigible jazz purist, Keith tries to talk him out of it. Chazelle has said that he wrote several drafts of dialogue for Legend. But after several takes, Legend insisted on ad-libbing his own dialogue.

But you say you wanna save jazz. How you gonna save jazz if no one's listening? Jazz is dying because of people like you. You're playin' to 90-year-olds at the Lighthouse. Where are the kids? Where are the young people? You're so obsessed with Kenny Clarke and Thelonious Monk. These guys were revolutionaries. How you gonna be a revolutionary if you're such a traditionalist? You're holding on to the past, but jazz is about the future.

Part of this speech may have been written by Chazelle, but I would guess that the final line was ad-libbed by Legend: "You're a pain in the ass, man."

John Legend, who is listed as one of the film's executive producers, clearly understands the tension in the film's script. But

La La Land
Is a Hit,
but Is It
Good for
Jazz?

Keith is not being entirely fair when he says that Seb wants to be a revolutionary. On the contrary, Seb is content to play the older, venerated music, and he never expresses a desire to reach out to young people.

Chazelle has said that building so much of the film around Seb's jazz purism and Keith's insistence that he must move on is "kind of meta." In other words, the film is commenting on itself by equating jazz with Hollywood musicals. Although *La La Land* is highly influenced by older movies, Chazelle hoped that his film could "push things forward, modernize, and update." And at least according to Keith, Seb must move on from his desire to play older, purer jazz, just as Chazelle must move on from blandly revisiting the conventions of the classical musical. It is significant that early in the film, Seb is trying to recreate a riff that Thelonious Monk recorded almost fifty years earlier. Keith acknowledges his admiration for Monk: a black artist sings the praises of another black artist. But for several decades now, it has primarily been white purists who have preserved the revered music of Monk and the other African American "revolutionaries." Wynton Marsalis, Wyliffe Gordon, Stanley Crouch, and many other eminent black artists and writers are profoundly invested in jazz purism, but the current jazz canon was mostly defined by white jazz writers like Martin Williams and Gunther Schuller, and many more still working today. Of course, there is also a long history of exploitation of black artists by white record producers and club owners. African Americans have surely wanted to preserve the great black music of the past, but their disempowerment has often prevented it.¹⁴

Chazelle says he sympathizes with both Keith's and Seb's positions, implying that he also understands someone's

preference for the older utopian Hollywood musicals as well as for the time-honored recordings of the first generations of black jazz artists. As the film ends, we see that Seb has opened his own jazz club where, as with most of the urban venues where people go to hear the music today, the setting is elegant, the audience sedate and mostly white. And what we hear in the club most definitely looks back to canonized jazz traditions. One of the first things the camera reveals inside "Seb's" is Francis Wolff's classic photo of a pensive John Coltrane in 1958. This is exactly the kind of place where I love to hear jazz in New York. Yet the positive images of Seb's club undermine Chazelle's assertion that there is a correlation between the film's revisionist approach to musicals and the need for jazz musicians to move past the music of the 1950s and 1960s. Chazelle has in fact pushed the musical into new territory, but Seb is still playing the older music. We know that Keith's performance of "Start a Fire" is not where jazz ought to go, if only because Chazelle has asked us to regard the music with the disappointment we see in Mia's face.

There may be no way around *La La Land*'s racial problematics, even if, like Desirée Garcia, we acknowledge the realities that Damien Chazelle confronted when he chose to make a big-budget Hollywood film. Several jazz enthusiasts and film scholars for whom I have great respect simply cannot forgive him for building *La La Land* around two white stars. Nevertheless, I have real admiration for a film that maintains its utopian charms even as it pushes at the boundaries of the classical Hollywood musical in order to celebrate that grand old music, jazz. The film also celebrates great black jazz artists such as Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, and Kenny Clarke who, as Chazelle tells us, still matter.

ENDNOTES

Krin
Gabbard

- ¹ For an especially powerful screed against the film, see Ira Madison III, “*La La Land*’s White Jazz Narrative,” MTV News, December 19, 2016, <http://www.mtv.com/news/2965622/la-la-lands-white-jazz-narrative/>.
- ² Damien Chazelle, commentary track on DVD release of *La La Land* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Summit Entertainment, 2016). Unless otherwise indicated, all statements attributed to Chazelle are from this source.
- ³ See Krin Gabbard, “The Hypertexts of *Short Cuts*: The Jazz in Altman’s Carver Soup,” in *Robert Altman: Critical Essays*, ed. Rick Armstrong (New York: McFarland, 2011), 20–37.
- ⁴ Desirée Garcia, conversation with the author, July 27, 2017. Garcia has written about ethnic musicals in which people sing spontaneously, a research project with strong connections to what Damien Chazelle has tried to achieve with American musicals. In my conversations with Garcia, however, she denies that she had much influence on Chazelle’s work and vice versa. See Desirée Garcia, *The Migration of Musical Film: From Ethnic Margins to American Mainstream* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2014).
- ⁵ Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
- ⁶ As was often the case when Strayhorn’s contributions were unacknowledged, the opening credits for *Paris Blues* simply read “Music by Duke Ellington.” Critics who have examined the scores for the film’s music argue that the majority of what we hear in *Paris Blues* was composed and arranged by Billy Strayhorn. See David Hajdu, *Lush Life: A Biography of Billy Strayhorn* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 208–211.
- ⁷ For an extended reading of the film, see Krin Gabbard, “*Paris Blues*: Ellington, Armstrong, and Saying It with Music,” in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 297–311.
- ⁸ Terry Gross, interview with Damien Chazelle, *Fresh Air*, January 5, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2017/01/05/508338063/la-la-land-director-aimed-to-make-a-film-even-musical-skeptics-would-love>.
- ⁹ Of the many jazz enthusiasts with whom I have spoken over the years, most have told me that their passion for the music began when they were thirteen or fourteen. See David Hajdu, “Forever Young? In Some Ways, Yes,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/24/opinion/24hajdu.html>.
- ¹⁰ See Richard Brody, “Getting Jazz Right in the Movies,” *The New Yorker*, October 13, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/whiplash-getting-jazz-right-movies>.
- ¹¹ Meredith Goldstein, “The Predecessor to ‘La La Land’ Was Set in Boston—And a Lot More Diverse,” *The Boston Globe*, February 24, 2017, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/names/2017/02/24/the-predecessor-land-was-set-boston-and-lot-more-diverse/r4J3X7cjoeacLQbJH0VB4J/story.html>. See also Desirée Garcia, “La La Land’s ‘Burst-Into-Song’ Style Echoes the Intimacy of Early Black, Mexican, and Jewish Productions of Yore,” *Zócalo: An ASU Knowledge Enterprise Magazine of Ideas*, February 14, 2017, <http://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/2017/02/14/la-la-lands-debt-ethnic-musicals-yore/ideas/nexus/>.
- ¹² “Nightclubs and Other Venues,” *Grove Music Online* (January 22, 2002).
- ¹³ Richard Dyer, “Entertainment and Utopia,” *Movie 24* (Spring 1977): 2–13.
- ¹⁴ An especially striking act of preservation by an African American artist that deserves mention here is Jason Moran’s project of reconstructing spaces where swing and bop artists performed in the 1930s and 1940s. See “Watch Jason Moran Explore the Story of New York City’s Most Iconic Jazz Clubs,” *The Vinyl Factory*, May 7, 2016, <https://thevinylfactory.com/films/jason-moran-staged-new-york-city-jazz-clubs/>.

Yusef Lateef's Autophysiopsychic Quest

Ingrid Monson

Abstract: Yusef Lateef's neologism for jazz was autophysiopsychic, meaning "music from one's physical, mental and spiritual self." Lateef condensed in this term a very considered conception linking the intellectual and the spiritual based in his faith as an Ahmadiyya Muslim and his lifelong commitment to both Western and non-Western intellectual explorations. Lateef's distinctive voice as an improviser is traced with respect to his autophysiopsychic exploration of world instruments including flutes, double reeds, and chordophones, and his friendship with John Coltrane. The two shared a love of spiritual exploration as well as the study of science, physics, symmetry, and mathematics. Lateef's ethnomusicological research on Hausa music in Nigeria, as well as his other writings and visual art, deepen our understanding of him as an artist-scholar who cleared the way for the presence of autophysiopsychic musicians in the academy.

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It is no secret that the use of the word "jazz" to describe the canonic music we associate with Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, and John Coltrane has long been contested. The "J-word," which, according to many, began as sexual slang, has been viewed as a marketing category, a white-perpetuated label to place African American music in a box, and a term that through its voyeuristic association with illicit activities became racially offensive. Duke Ellington found it a category he did not want to be associated with, a feeling shared by musicians across many generations from Charles Mingus and Max Roach to Nicholas Payton and Muhal Richard Abrams. Yusef Lateef was among those who objected to the word.¹ Lateef's word to describe this music was *autophysiopsychic*.

I call my music autophysiopsychic music. This word means music from one's physical, spiritual and mental self: i.e., music from the heart. In other words, my music is a conduit whereby and through which

Providence may reveal some of the beauties of creation to the ears of those who listen with their ears and their hearts.²

Lateef's word autophysiopsychic crystallizes a deep aesthetic, psychological, and ethical philosophy that lay at the center of his life as a musician, composer, Muslim, writer, visual artist, and professor. In this essay, I first explore Lateef's musical and psychological concept of autophysiopsychic as well as its relationship to Ahmadiyya Islamic understandings of spiritual development through knowledge and religious practice. Islamic ideas linking the physical, intellectual, and spiritual lie at the very center of his neologism, while its musical practice links his vision to compatible Western and African American understandings of acquiring an authentic, warm, and humane musical voice. Lateef wrote about the term autophysiopsychic late in his life, after having led a distinguished career as a bandleader, composer, and sideman.

I then trace Lateef's development of his personal voice and friendship with John Coltrane, as well as his wide-ranging intellectual explorations of music, mathematics, science, philosophy, organology, and his self-taught ethnomusicological study of Hausa flute playing in Nigeria. Throughout his life he pursued education in colleges and universities, including Wayne State University, Manhattan School of Music, and the University of Massachusetts Amherst, while simultaneously engaging deeply in Islamic study through the Ahmadiyya branch of Islam, which he joined in 1948. In 1988, he became a professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, part of the Five Colleges, where he taught until his retirement in 2002. Yusef Lateef was a lifelong autodidact who followed his interests to wherever they led. Like John Coltrane,

Max Roach, Charles Mingus, and Charlie Parker, he was an intellectual as well as a musician. Yusef Lateef was an artist-scholar of the kind that academia now welcomes, yet he had to wait until he was sixty-eight years old for his first full-time academic post.³ Lateef's view of the interrelationship between music, intellect, and humane development has much to tell us about why this music still matters.

Yusef Abdul Lateef's deepest discussion of the idea of autophysiopsychic music is found in his essay "The Pleasures of the Voice in Autophysiopsychic Music." Here Lateef attempts to describe the linkage between the character and personality of the musician and the emotional quality of the music created by him or her. Creating autophysiopsychic music, in his view, requires three kinds of voice: the audible voice, the dramatic voice, and the artist's own voice.

Sounds with audible voice give us the sense of a sound coming from the whole being of the musician – ; and they touch us – they seem to give us energy, or a sensation, rather than requiring energy to listen.⁴

To this he contrasts with "inaudible voice," or a person whose concern with other things, such as technique, may stand in the way of communicating his or her humanity.

Valid presenters use their technique, only to project their character, their vast array of experiences, thoughts, feelings, concerns and ideas that are entombed in their brain's memory – and more than that – I will say: they speak with their heart.⁵

The musician who successfully creates an audible voice has the ability to "transform the events of their mind and heart into sound," a process that he says is "not unlike elegant rational scientists – they only operate with deeply different

grammars." The heart, as Lateef notes, is "the seat of the intellect."⁶

When "the sound of the music seems to tell us what kind of person is playing" the autopsiopsychic musician has achieved a dramatic voice. The listener is drawn closer to the personality of the musician, who seems to project a character responsible for the sound. Throughout this essay, Lateef takes Lester Young as an example of what he means by his autopsiopsychic ideal. "When listening to his music," he noted, "your ear will tell you that his character was warm and sensitive."⁷

For Lateef, the development of one's own voice was an achieved (rather than natural) quality that linked the exploration of musical craft to the development of personal character. He explained Lester Young's musical voice as follows:

He could treat notes so as to indicate assurance, by rapidly dropping the pitch, or indicate incompleteness by leveling the pitch in a manner which would suggest continuation, or when he thought it appropriate he would avoid traditional tones, by applying innovative fingerings, whereby he produced a new genre of sound textures. In conjunction with the sound textures that he introduced let me say that: as a tone language uses changes in pitch to indicate differences in the meanings of words – Lester used changes of texture, pitch and nuance, tempered by his immaterial self, to indicate differences in feelings or to put the audience into a certain frame of mind. . . . He never sounded as though he was confronted with an ambivalence in deciding what was central to his message – always convincing, authentic, and the logos, the proof, or apparent proof of his artistry was always there, provided by the sound of his music itself, nurtured by the gentle soul that he was.⁸

Lester Young served as a model for Yusef Lateef's own tenor playing, as can

be heard in "Yusef's Mood" from 1957.⁹ As we will see, Lateef's own development of his personal voice can be charted through his exploration of the flute, the oboe, and non-Western instruments of many kinds.

In joining the Ahmadiyya Movement in 1948, Lateef entered an Islamic community that had attracted many other musicians of the bebop era, including Art Blakey, Ahmad Jamal, Dakota Staton, Sahib Shihab, and Idrees Sulieman, among others. The Ahmadi practice an inclusive multiracial form of Islam that stresses finding peace by following the path of God (Allah) and Islamic education.¹⁰ In the 1920s, members of the Ahmadiyya Movement published the first English translation of the Qur'an available in the United States. Although their first proselytizer, Mufti Muhammad Sadiq, intended to proselytize among all U.S. ethnic groups, his own problems as a South Asian in Jim Crow America led him to concentrate on African Americans. The Ahmadi in their early years were closely allied with Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association, but their insistence that whites as well as African Americans were welcome in their community put them at odds with other Islamic groups supporting black nationalism. The Ahmadi, because they believe their founder Mirza Ghulam Ahmad to be the Mahdi sent to reform Islam to its true meaning, are considered to be heretics and non-Muslims by many mainstream Muslim sects, despite their full observance of the pillars of Islam and practices of Islamic education.¹¹

In Islam, Yusef Lateef found a path of intensive study, as well as ethical and spiritual development that guided his life. Through the Ahmadiyya movement he studied the Qur'an, the Arabic language, as well as the deeds and sayings of the

Prophet Muhammad. A distinguishing feature of Islam to Lateef was its commitment to education, something that he emphasized in his 1975 doctoral dissertation.

In the light of commandments of the Quran and the traditions, the Muslims, at all times, retained learning and its diffusion a distinctive feature of their social life, as if it were an article of Faith with them. The culture and civilization of Islam is based on education.¹²

The dissertation compared Western and Islamic philosophies of education, and illustrated Lateef's wide reading in both education literatures.

A key teaching of Islam is that the path to spiritual development arrives not only through faith, but also through reason. According to Mirza Ghulam Ahmad,

The Quran has adopted two methods for the understanding of God. First, the method whereby human reason is strengthened and illumined for the purpose of setting forth reasons in support of the existence of God, and thus saves a person from falling into error.¹³

In *The Philosophy of the Teachings of Islam*, a central text for the Ahmadis, Ahmad explains over several chapters the process of evolving from the human being's "natural condition of barbarity to a moral state, and then to lift him from that state to the limitless ocean of spirituality."¹⁴ Key to transforming natural conditions into moral qualities is the acquisition of knowledge through reason. According to Ahmad, the Qur'an contains reasoned arguments for the existence of God that will persuade rather than coerce the penitent to follow the path of Islam. Acquiring knowledge leads to spiritual practice and its transformation into embodied knowledge.

These verses indicate that there is no virtue in the knowledge that is confined to

the mind and heart. True knowledge is that which emerges from the mind and regulates and trains all the limbs, and manifests in practice all the store of memory. Thus knowledge is strengthened and fostered through its impress being imposed on all the limbs by practical experience. No type of knowledge, however elementary, arrives at its climax without practice.

Here we see how Yusef Lateef's succinct definition of autophysiopsychic music as "music from one's physical, mental and spiritual self" includes in one word the process of spiritual development advocated by his religion. The final stage of spiritual development taught by the Ahmadis arises from arriving at the level in which a person can converse with God.

The cleansing water which removes all doubt, that mirror through which that Supreme Being can be seen, is converse with the Divine that I have just mentioned. Let him whose soul seeks the truth arise and search. I tell you truly that if souls are charged with true seeking and hearts develop true thirst, people would search for that way and would seek that path.¹⁵

Lateef's widow Ayesha Lateef stressed that, in Islam, reason and faith are one, but added that many Muslims don't understand that. Her own explanation notes that "the *work* of God, which is the creation, and the *word* of God, which is the revelation, should sync together." She also emphasized that "Yusef was not just a statistical Muslim. He absorbed the teachings and he made them his own."¹⁶ Throughout his life, these Islamic teachings guided Lateef's quest for knowledge and spiritual and musical development. Knowledge and reason provided the fulcrum through which he moved between his religious community, the professional world of music, and the academic scene of colleges and universities.

Yusef Lateef began achieving his own distinctive voice in autophysio-psyhic music in 1950s Detroit. In many ways, he pioneered a non-Western sensibility to improvisational exploration, characterized by the use of world instruments that would be taken up more broadly in the 1960s by partisans of the avant-garde. Although Lateef, who had been known as Bill Evans before his conversion to Islam, had met considerable success as a tenor saxophonist in Chicago and New York in the late 1940s, where he had worked with Eugene Wright and Dizzy Gillespie, his wife Sadie's ill health made him return to Detroit in 1951. Detroit's thriving jazz scene included musicians like Milt Jackson, Curtis Fuller, Barry Harris, Kenny Burrell, Elvin Jones, and Betty Carter. Although Lateef had a strong and confident tenor sax sound, Kenny Burrell encouraged him to add the flute and to study music theory and composition at places like the Larry Teal School of Music and Wayne State University. At the former, Lateef encountered the Schillinger system, a highly abstract and mathematical approach to thinking through rhythm, periodicity, and permutation. At the latter, he studied classical music, including Arnold Schoenberg and his serial methods of composition. In addition to flute, Lateef began studying oboe and exploring a variety of non-Western instruments.¹⁷

Detroit in the 1950s was home to a large Arab population. Lateef not only met co-religionists but discovered instruments from the Arab world through friends and at a Syrian spice store in the Eastern Market section of Detroit. These instruments included the argol, a double reed instrument, and the rebab, a string instrument.¹⁸ Ayesha Lateef explained his interest in world instruments:

I think a lot of it had to do with being an Ahmadi. Meeting Ahmadi from around

the world, particularly India or Asia and then later Africa. And then also you know, the recitation of the Qur'an you know, which in Arabic has a melody to it. I kind of feel like eventually it would have happened anyway whether he was a Muslim or not, but being Muslim fed it.¹⁹

In 1957 he lived in the Ahmadiyya mosque in Detroit where he served as its imam and developed a curriculum for Islamic instruction for children and adults.²⁰ That same year he recorded *Jazz Moods*, an album featuring for the first time these new instruments. "Metaphor" opens with a Middle Eastern sounding argol solo, accompanied by the rebab, which is followed by a more orthodox instrumentation featuring Lateef on flute and Curtis Fuller on trombone. The rhythm section included Hugh Lawson on piano, Ernie Farrow on bass and rebab, Louis Hayes on drums, and Doug Watkins on percussion.

Lateef sought to break the mold in his ensemble sound through the instruments of other cultures. He began doing research at the public library on the instruments of Japan, China, Africa, and India. He also began making his own flutes, such as the pneumatic bamboo flute. Lateef through his interest in organology and cultural variety was becoming his own self-taught ethnomusicologist.

In following the development of Lateef's particular voice, it is clear that he was particularly drawn to the timbral variety made possible through playing multiple instruments. Although some of his compositions sounded non-Western, Lateef's musical language was deeply rooted in the blues, jazz, and bebop, whose expressive sensibility he had developed on the tenor saxophone, which he also continued to play. On the flute and oboe, Lateef seemed to be able to inflect his melodies in new directions, as can be heard on

his extraordinary performance of “Oboe Blues” in 1959.²¹

Lateef moved back to New York in 1960, where he began working with Lonnie Hillyer, Charles Mingus, Babatunde Olatunji, and Cannonball Adderley, and became a first call for recording sessions. Shortly thereafter he was able to buy a home in Teaneck, New Jersey, where he moved with his family. He toured internationally with Adderley, including Europe and Japan. Lateef played swinging straight-ahead tenor in the group, but Adderley also featured him on flute, oboe, and even bamboo flute. Although he clearly could have continued a mainstream jazz career in the top groups of the day, Lateef’s quest for his personal voice led him deeper into his world music explorations.

On the album *Eastern Sounds* from 1961, Lateef added the Chinese globular flute, an instrument resembling an ocarina. After reading about this ancient instrument (also known as the *xun*) he searched for one in New York’s Chinatown. “The Plum Blossom” opens with an extended solo on the globular flute made up of four notes (A3, C#4, D4, E4) and accompanied by the rebab. His gradual development of a three-note riff-like theme, varied through embellishment and subtle rhythmic variation, showcases the appealing low register of the globular flute, the soft but swinging articulations of Lateef, and his ability to captivate with minimal materials. Joe Goldberg, who wrote the liner notes for the album, seemed not to know quite what to say about the Eastern references on the album and its unusual instrumentation, so he talked about the two pieces from film soundtracks and the straight-ahead tenor ballad “Don’t Blame Me” before tackling the oboe solo on “Blues for the Orient” and the globular flute. On this album, Lateef’s sonic experiments were balanced by straight-ahead pieces likely to appeal to any jazz fan.

In 1963, Impulse! allowed Lateef to record an album called *Jazz ’Round the World*, on which he played a variety of instruments and featured a selection of folk songs from around the world, including “The Volga Rhythm Song,” a Japanese folk song called “Ringo Oiwake,” and his own beautiful flute feature “Utopia.” In his autobiography, Lateef talks about the mixed reception he received.

Ingrid
Monson

While many have told me how much they enjoyed the Arabic and Asian mix of the album we created – Richard Williams (trumpet), Hugh Lawson (piano), and Lex Humphries (drums) – others have rejected it, feeling it’s not what they expected. Some were reluctant to accept it, but humanity is that way; there are divisions. I remember using an Indian drone instrument on a piece called “Chandra” and a doctor called me from Milwaukee. He was outraged that I did that as though I had violated something, transgressed a cardinal sin.²²

Lateef’s commitment to his artistic direction, in other words, cost him in some corners of the jazz world.

During the 1950s, Lateef also developed a deep friendship with John Coltrane. In notes in his personal papers, he created a timeline of his friendship with Coltrane. He first heard of him in 1946 and then met him for the first time at the Click Club in Philadelphia during a rehearsal with Jimmy Heath in 1949. When he returned to New York to record in 1956, he saw John Coltrane with Miles Davis at the Cafe Bohemia in the Village. In 1957, while recording with Savoy, he visited Coltrane on 103rd Street and they practiced together. Coltrane sometimes played Detroit, as he did in 1958 with Miles Davis’s group, and they saw each other. When Lateef and his family moved back to New York in 1960, he got together with Coltrane more frequently, even sitting in with him once at the Village Gate. They were both

deeply interested in symmetry, science, and religion and had similarly gentle personalities. In 1961, Coltrane gave Lateef a birthday present of a mandala-like diagram tracing multiple levels of symmetry in an expanded circle of fifths. Lateef included this in the opening of his *Respository of Scales and Melodic Patterns* in 1981, itself bearing witness to his own fascinations with symmetries, cycles, and scales from around the world.²³ Near the end of Coltrane's life, Lateef, Babatunde Olatunji, and Coltrane were planning to give a concert at Avery Fisher Hall in 1968, as well as collaborate on developing a family-oriented musical recreation center.²⁴

There has long been speculation as to whether John Coltrane was a Muslim. The prayer in *A Love Supreme*, with its decided emphasis on a singular God, thankfulness, and mercy, is in keeping with the monotheism of Islam and, for some, resembles the words of the Al-Fatiha, the first surah of the Qur'an.²⁵ It is also compatible with the Vedanta Hindu idea of the One, which became a larger part of his spiritual interests after meeting Alice Coltrane in 1963. According to Ayesha Lateef, some Ahmadis have claimed that Coltrane was an Ahmadi, but she notes that there is no record of him ever having joined the community. His first wife Naima was a Muslim, but she was not an Ahmadi. Ayesha Lateef, who mentioned how often her husband talked of Coltrane, thinks that the two may have had conversations about Islam and hears in *A Love Supreme* an "anthem for the one God according to Islam." She concludes that Coltrane "wasn't against Islam."²⁶

In the broadest sense, Lateef's interest in global musical instruments was also political. His Muslim faith and knowledge of the presence of Islam around the globe may have first opened his ears to the sounds of the Middle East, Africa, India, and Asia, but the 1950s were also a

key decade in the independence of African nations and a broader African-Asian alliance against colonialism. Islam itself was associated with an anticolonialist perspective on the African continent. Lateef showed his awareness of the African freedom struggle in his participation on Randy Weston's *Uhuru Africa* album in 1960 and Art Blakey's album *African Beat* in 1962. Here, Africans, jazz musicians, Latinx musicians, and Muslims collaborated on a pan-African sound that appeared just as the newly emerging African nations were joining the United Nations and sending diplomatic delegations to New York. On *African Beat*, Lateef played with Nigerian percussionist Solomon Ilori, Art Blakey, Chief Bey, Ahmed Abdul-Malik, Curtis Fuller, and several others. Lateef's beautiful flute sound can be heard on "Ero Ti Nr'ojeje."²⁷

Other autophysiopsychic musicians were also demonstrating global awareness in their music. John Coltrane's *Africa* album, for example, was released just days before Lateef recorded the *Eastern Sounds Album*; Max Roach's *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite* in 1960 had invoked Africa with Babatunde Olatunji's drumming on "Africa"; and bassist Ahmed Abdul Malik played the oud in the piece "Tears from Johannesburg" on his 1959 album *East Meets West*. Coltrane's recording of "India" in 1963 gestured East and by 1965 on the album *Kulu Se Mama* Coltrane began including instruments like hand percussion and shakers that went beyond standard jazz instrumentation. Exploring African instruments, in particular, was embraced by musicians interested in black power and cultural nationalism.²⁸

Yusef Lateef's strong interest in acquiring Western education and credentials also continued. After undertaking his first pilgrimage to Mecca in early 1966, he returned to New York and enrolled in the

Manhattan School of Music where, by 1969, he had received his bachelor's degree in flute performance and a master's degree in music education. For Lateef, Islamic education and Western education were twin paths that he undertook simultaneously. He enjoyed studying not only the flute under former New York Philharmonic flutist John Wummer, but also taking courses in literature and art history. By 1971, Lateef was teaching music theory at the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), while also enrolled in courses at the New School in philosophy and symbolic logic. Among his students were Albert Heath and Kenny Barron.

While teaching at BMCC, he began a doctoral program in education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst under the mentorship of music theorist and pianist Roland Wiggins. His dissertation "An Overview of Western and Islamic Education" explains to an English speaking audience the principles of qur'anic study and scholarship in dialogue and comparison with Western writers on education – including Thomas Jefferson, Karl Jaspers, Immanuel Kant, Bertrand Russell, Jean Piaget, and John Dewey – finding points where Islamic and Western views converge and diverge. Just before he received his Ed.D., and one day before he became eligible for tenure, Lateef learned that BMCC had terminated him – an action that smacks of an administrative manipulation all too common in educational institutions at the time. In the 1970s, jazz programs were not valued, their instructors usually served in the lower ranks of the administrative hierarchy, and African Americans were particularly vulnerable to being dropped. Lateef mused in his autobiography: "Despite being in possession of three post-graduate degrees, I was without a teaching position."²⁹

So he went on the road. Between 1975 and 1980, he took his band and family

around the world: England, Denmark, Norway, Pakistan, India, Ghana, Egypt, and Tunisia. During these years he added writing short stories to his long list of interests and began working on the scales and exercises that would become his famous *Repository of Scales and Melodic Patterns*, published in 1981. He spent the next four years as a senior research fellow at the Center for Nigeria Cultural Studies at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria, one of the original Hausa city-states and home to Nigeria's largest university. The Hausa are among the most prominent West African Muslim groups. He researched the Sarewa flute, played by Fulani herdsmen; taught research methodology to cultural officers at the Center for Nigeria Cultural Studies; and studied African music and drama. The fruit of this research was a book he coauthored with Ziky Kofoworola (a Nigerian dramatist) called *Hausa Performing Arts and Music*, published in 1987. The book is a serious piece of ethnomusicological research including interviews with Hausa herdsman, transcriptions, and organological diagrams of Hausa instruments. Lateef and Kofoworola had been commissioned by Nigeria's Minister of Culture to produce the book, and I think that the Society for Ethnomusicology should formally recognize Yusef Lateef's contribution to our field.³⁰

Lateef's *In Nigeria*, an album recorded in Lagos in 1983 with Hausa, Yoruba, and Tiv drummers, presents what he calls a hybrid suite of dance pieces accompanied by traditional drummers, which include reference not only to African life, but Jamaica (on "Mu Omi") and Indian raga with drone (on "Lalit").³¹ "Curved Space-time" features Lateef performing a call and response with himself on tenor and flute accompanied by traditional drums, including a talking drum. Quoting physicist Fritjof Capra on the elasticity of time

in Einstein's curved universe in the liner notes, Lateef thematizes a familiar ascending arpeggiated passage from John Coltrane's "Giant Steps" solo and responds on the flute to his tenor. The result is a kind of African "Giant Steps" accompanied by a warm, low-toned, resonant groove.

When he returned to Western Massachusetts in 1985, Lateef focused on composing, which led to the recording of *Little Symphony* in 1987, an album on which he played all instruments. Producer Nesuhi Ertegun helped arrange an Atlantic contract for the record and it won a Grammy in the New Age category in 1988. Finally, that same year, the University of Massachusetts hired Lateef as an associate professor of music. He was sixty-eight by then but went on to teach for fourteen years and was named a Five College Distinguished Professor of Music. While there, Lateef not only taught but started a record company called YAL, composed, wrote novels, and completed hundreds of visual artworks.³² His student Michael Didonna, a photographer and musician, created a short film in honor of Lateef called *The Gentle Giant*, in which he can be heard talking about some of his educational philosophy.³³ Michael Dessen, a trombonist, composer, and former student of Lateef, wrote the introduction

to Yusef Lateef's *Song Book*, offering insight into the kind of effect he had on his students.

The range and breadth of Lateef's musical travels is astonishing, but what is most inspiring to me is something else, something more difficult to explain. He brings an overarching, singularly intense mindset to all of his projects, using all the possible tools at his disposal—scientific and intuitive, old and new, individual and collective, distant and close to home—to probe the nature of his feelings and thoughts. As a student, I marveled at the ease with which he flowed among different approaches to making music, different states of consciousness. While working within technically complex frameworks, he is always able to keep his ears and imagination open to new possibilities, to unexpected directions that the material might generate.³⁴

Yusef Lateef's autophysiopsychic quest, fusing intellectual, physical, and spiritual development, reminds us of the long dedication of musicians to knowledge of multiple kinds.³⁵ Since the bebop era, jazz artists have viewed themselves as both an intelligentsia and a spiritual community devoted to musical exploration. Few artists have more thoroughly theorized the connection between the two than Yusef Lateef.

ENDNOTES

¹ For an overview of this debate, see Nicholas Payton, "On Why Jazz Isn't Cool Anymore," November 27, 2011, <https://nicholaspayton.wordpress.com/2011/11/27/on-why-jazz-isnt-cool-anymore/>; Terry Teachout, "When Jazz Was a Dirty Word," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 8, 2013, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324582804578344330801433790>; and Ivan Hewett, "Abdullah Ibrahim Interview: 'I Don't Like the Word Jazz,'" *The Telegraph*, November 14, 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/music/interviews/abdullah-ibrahim-interview-dont-like-word-jazz>.

² Yusef Lateef, "Reflections on the Social Relevance of Black Improvised Music," keynote lecture for the symposium "Lost in Diversity—A Transatlantic Dialogue on the Social Relevance of Jazz," Heidelberg Center for American Studies, Heidelberg University, Heidelberg, Germany, November 8–9, 2012. I thank Ayesha Lateef for sharing the text with me.

- ³ I am thinking in particular of the professorships of George Lewis at Columbia University and Vijay Iyer at Harvard University.
- ⁴ Yusef A. Lateef, “The Pleasures of Voice in Autophysiopsychic Music” (undated), <https://yuseflateef.com/literature/essays>.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Yusef Lateef, “Yusef’s Mood,” on *Jazz Mood*, Savoy, 1957. The track can be heard on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/SMVslFUIxoA> (accessed January 29, 2019).
- ¹⁰ Members of this community refer to themselves as “Ahmadis.” The religion itself is known as the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community or the Ahmadiyya Movement.
- ¹¹ A brief overview of the Ahmadiyya Movement can be found in Ingrid Monson, “Art Blakey’s African Diaspora,” in *The African Diaspora: A Musical Perspective*, ed. Ingrid Monson (New York: Garland Press, 2000), 337–338. A more comprehensive account of the Ahmadis and their intersections with other African American Muslim groups can be found in Patrick D. Bowen, *A History of Conversion to Islam in the United States, Volume 2: The African American Islamic Renaissance, 1920–1975* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2017). Pakistan, a traditional center of Ahmadi activity, declared Ahmadis legally non-Muslim, which led to their migration to other locations. The current headquarters of the Ahmadis is in London. See Al Islam, “Ahmadiyya Muslim Community,” <https://www.alislam.org/library/ahmadiyya-muslim-community> (accessed Jan 22, 2019).
- ¹² Yusef Lateef, “An Overview of Western and Islamic Education” (Ed.D. diss., University of Massachusetts, 1975), 10.
- ¹³ Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, *The Philosophy of the Teachings of Islam*, trans. Sir Muhammad Zafulla Khan (London: Islam International Publications, 2017), 86–87. I thank Ayesha Lateef for giving me a copy of this book.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 24.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 198.
- ¹⁶ Author interview with Ayesha Lateef, January 9, 2019, Shutesbury, Massachusetts. I thank Ayesha Lateef for meeting with me and sharing her observations and archival documents.
- ¹⁷ Biographical information, unless otherwise indicated, is drawn from Yusef Lateef and Herb Boyd, *The Gentle Giant: The Autobiography of Yusef Lateef* (Irvington, N.J.: Morton Books, 2006).
- ¹⁸ There are many romanized spellings for the argol, including *arghul* and *arghool*. I use the spelling that appears on Lateef’s albums.
- ¹⁹ Author interview with Ayesha Lateef, January 9, 2019, Shutesbury, Massachusetts.
- ²⁰ Yusef Lateef, “An Overview of Western and Islamic Education,” 7.
- ²¹ Yusef Lateef, “Oboe Blues,” on *The Dreamer*, Savoy, 1959. Yusef Lateef, oboe; Terry Pollard, piano; William Austin, bass; Frank Grant, percussion.
- ²² Lateef and Boyd, *The Gentle Giant*.
- ²³ Yusef Lateef, *Respository of Scales and Musical Patterns* (Amherst, Mass.: FANA Music, 1981). Physicist Stephon Alexander explains the multiple symmetries in Coltrane’s diagram in *The Jazz of Physics* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 222–226.
- ²⁴ Yusef Lateef, Coltrane timeline, personal papers. I thank Ayesha Lateef for sharing these documents with me.

- ²⁵ Coltrane's poem begins: "I will do all I can to be worthy of Thee O Lord. It all has to do with it. Thank you God. Peace. There is none other." John Coltrane, liner notes to *A Love Supreme*, Impulse!, 1964. The Al-Fatiha begins: "In the Name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy. Praise belongs to God, Lord of the worlds, the Lord of Mercy, Master of the Day of Judgement. It is You we Worship; it is You we ask for help." *The Qur'an*, trans. M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
- ²⁶ Author interview with Ayesha Lateef, January 9, 2019, Shutesbury, Massachusetts.
- ²⁷ Art Blakey, *The African Beat*, Blue Note, 1962.
- ²⁸ I discuss this interconnection in chapter six of my book *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- ²⁹ Lateef and Boyd, *The Gentle Giant*.
- ³⁰ Ziky Kofoworola and Yusef Lateef, "Hausa Performing Arts and Music," *Nigeria Magazine*, 1987.
- ³¹ Yusef Lateef, *In Nigeria*, YAL, 1983.
- ³² A major exhibit of Lateef's artworks titled *Yusef Lateef: Towards the Unknown* was held at the Trinosophes Cafe in Detroit in 2015.
- ³³ Michael Didonna, *The Gentle Giant* [film], <http://michaeldidonna.com/film/2016/9/22/the-gentle-giant>.
- ³⁴ Michael Dessen, preface to *Yusef Lateef Song Book* (Amherst, Mass.: FANA Music/YAL, 2005).
- ³⁵ For a rich description of the wide variety of learning philosophies in jazz, see Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

Why Jazz? South Africa 2019

Carol A. Muller

Abstract: I consider the current state of jazz in South Africa in response to the formation of the nation-state in the 1990s. I argue that while there is a recurring sense of the precarity of jazz in South Africa as measured by the short lives of jazz venues, there is nevertheless a vibrant jazz culture in which musicians are using their own studios to experiment with new ways of being South African through the freedom of association of people and styles forming a music that sounds both local and comfortable in its sense of place in the global community. This essay uses the words of several South African musicians and concludes by situating the artistic process of South African artist William Kentridge in parallel to jazz improvisation.

It's been really incredible to be an ambassador of South Africa and South African music when you go abroad. I feel like our heritage and culture has nothing to do with a skin tone. I really feel like it's got to do with South Africa and being South African, really trying to hold the flag very high, singing the national anthem, singing a lot of South African jazz repertoire, it's always very nice, and a very proud moment when you are overseas and you can say *this is my culture, this is where I come from.*

–Vocalist Melanie Scholtz, 2010¹

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I spent winter break 2018–2019 with University of Pennsylvania undergraduates in Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Pretoria. We visited a series of newly built or reconceptualized museums in the three cities, entities that had been created or reimagined in the post-apartheid era to reflect on South Africa's colonial and apartheid past and to move its peoples toward reconciliation and national unity in the present and future. We visited Cape Town's Slave Lodge, the District Six Museum, the Bo-Kaap neighborhood; we spent time climbing Table Mountain, Lions Head, and then rested in Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens; we listened to

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live music in the Mojo Hotel Food and Drink Market in Sea Point every evening; we watched the Goema festival musicians parading through the city center. At Mzansi Restaurant in Langa township, we heard and watched a marimba group perform while we ate. At the Amazink theater-restaurant in Kayamandi Township outside of Stellenbosch, we experienced an amazing musical theater production that resonated with the strands of Lady-smith Black Mambazo's *isicathamiya* and Mbongeni Ngema's *Sarafina* musical theater style but focused on personal stories. That was Cape Town. Then we flew to Johannesburg: visiting the Apartheid Museum and the Wits University Museum of Human Origins. Then onto a township tour of Soweto: stopping at Regina Mundi, a township restaurant, and the Hector Peterson Museum. On our final day, we traveled to Pretoria: first to the Afrikaans Taal (Language) Monument and then directly across its path, to the newly constituted Freedom Park.

Despite all of the monuments to the apartheid past, the only live jazz we could locate was at the Crypt restaurant of Cape Town's famous St. George's Cathedral, the site of much anti-apartheid resistance led by religious leaders like Archbishop Desmond Tutu. To reach the music, we walked through exhibits of acts of social and religious justice under apartheid. While the place was filled to capacity that night, it was hard to fathom the complete absence of South African jazz in early January – its peak holiday period – because South African jazz was arguably the music that most embodied the struggle for human and artistic freedom under apartheid. And yet, just after we landed in Cape Town, British-born South African jazz journalist and blogger Gwen Ansell announced and commented on the closing of Johannesburg's famous, if relatively short-lived, center for jazz: the Orbit.²

I had attended a very lively and sold out performance of South African multi-instrumentalist Kyle Shepherd and his band at the Orbit in late July 2018, and like so many others, struggled to understand how this amazing venue, a site of so much innovation and musical energy, had shut its doors. Sadly, what had happened to the Orbit was already true for so many other live venues for South African jazz: optimistically opened in the post-apartheid moment in Cape Town and Johannesburg, by early 2019, they had simply disappeared from the city's nightlife.

Even with the shuttered sense of live jazz venues in South Africa, like Ansell's blog post, my reflections on jazz and its purposes in post-apartheid and contemporary South Africa remain, nevertheless, largely optimistic. My optimism springs less from the capacity to propose a sustainable financial model for jazz venues, or a certainty that jazz as we know it – coming out of the United States with its distinctive sound and stylistic periods – will continue its close relationship with South Africa. Rather, I suggest that in many ways, South African jazz, like the nation itself, has come into its own since the 1990s, and as a result, South Africans are often more interested in defining a place for themselves, rooted in the knowledge of South Africa's own music histories, jazz or otherwise, than looking toward American musicians and models. While, ideally, everybody wants to make a living from their music – and often that means traveling to the global North with its more secure currencies – I will suggest that what sustains the drive to make music is rooted in a kind of post-apartheid embrace of the individual and collective freedom to use the music to explore the full range of what it means to be South African in the contemporary moment, to restore narratives previously suppressed, to celebrate place, to sound

local, and perhaps also to connect musically to other genres that are often deftly woven into the fabric of jazz improvisation. In other words, while South African jazz continues to exist in a condition of precarity, constantly threatened by loss and even extinction, it pushes its way to new modes of experimentation, renewal, human connectedness, healing, spirituality, and the celebration of newly found human freedoms: musical, political, and unfortunately much less so, economic.

In this essay, I respond to the question “why jazz?” by engaging interrogatively with how musicians relate to South Africa’s apartheid past, how they want to be in the present, and how they think themselves creatively into the future. I do so from an intergenerational perspective, remembering that the South African jazz community includes those born before apartheid, those who lived under apartheid, and a growing number of those who have recently gained diplomas, certificates, or degrees in jazz performance as the “born free” generation: that is, they never experienced the brutality of the apartheid regime and so carry mixed feelings about constant references to apartheid experience and history. That said, what is clear is that in post-apartheid South Africa, with the return of those who left the country in the late 1950s and 1960s, the creation of jazz education programs at several universities starting in the 1980s and the presence of a handful of annual jazz festivals and clubs in several cities, many South Africans at least know something about a category of performance called South African jazz. And yet, with all the monumentalizing of South Africa’s brutal past – new and reconfigured museums, tourism routes and destinations, documentary films, and new school history curricula – there are very few spaces or buildings that pay tribute to South Africa’s rich and varied jazz history. That heritage/history is

mostly heard in the living performances and recordings of old South African jazz standards or performed by contemporary musicians paying tribute to a living or deceased jazz legend.

Carol A. Muller

I begin my response to the question of “why jazz?” by briefly outlining some of the challenges in South African jazz infrastructure. This discussion draws on the stories, motivations, and experiences of a handful of musicians who speak to the many ways in which the relatively small South African jazz community positions itself in South Africa, living as jazz composers, improvisers, and performers in the post-apartheid era. I cover concerns about the long shadow of political history in jazz performance; about defining the styles of South African jazz history; on the place of memory in jazz; on the use of jazz as a medium of individual and collective healing; on gender, non-racialism, moving beyond categories, building relationships across genres inside the frame of jazz improvisation, restoring the past through the sounds of jazz; on the continuing dissension in jazz; and reclaiming a place in the writing of national history. Nurturing global connections through musical travel remains important for many musicians in terms of recording and performance opportunities. In the final piece of this essay, I contextualize the work of jazz in South Africa by refracting it through the discourses of a similar process of collaborative art and music-making directed by Johannesburg-based artist/performer/director William Kentridge. I came to Kentridge’s brilliant narrations of art-making when I hosted two South African jazz musicians in the Arthur Ross Gallery at the University of Pennsylvania in October 2018: saxophonist McCoy Mrubata and pianist Paul Hamner played their version of South African jazz surrounded by an installation of Kentridge’s black-and-white prints.

Writing about the 2015 Cape Town International Jazz Festival, a three-day annual fiesta of jazz, loosely defined, National Public Radio contributor Giovanni Russonello captured the why of South African jazz: under apartheid, the “major art of resistance” was jazz, with its blending of a variety of influences from South Asia, Africa, Cuba, and the United States; but since 1994, with the first democratic elections at the end of apartheid, South African jazz has lost its “revolutionary edge. Jazz musicians now enjoyed free rein, but played a less clear role in the national narrative” even as musicians have begun to play along with the digital revolution that accompanied the political transformation of the last three decades.³

This idea frames the first response to the problem of shuttered venues, which is found in comments about South African opera and jazz diva Sibongile Khumalo’s 2016 album *Breath of Life*. Blogger Majola Majola remarks that the recording of a live performance is a remarkable feat in a context in which the modes of musical production and consumption have been “transformed by technology, affecting monopoly in music consumption trends, and reconstructing the marketplace all together.” The positive side is that artists are put in the driver’s seat creatively, and they are able to control the business side of creating their music. The negative side is that there is far less demand for their work because of the diversification of the marketplace, the emergence of a range of alternative marketing platforms, and, as he remarks scathingly, because South African radio “treats local musicians like a loathed step child, condemning them to the destitute position of begging and bribing in order to be heard.”⁴ There is simply a lack of support for jazz in the old venues, yet there are new possibilities with new technologies and privately owned studios.

The second piece in the story of South African jazz is what seem to be musician-initiated spaces for jazz performance, composition, and recording. With the reduction in the cost of recording equipment, musicians have opened their own modest recording studios. There are far more privately owned recording music studios in Cape Town, for example, than there are live performance venues for jazz specifically. A quick Google search named eighteen such studios in the city. In the Johannesburg-Pretoria metropolitan area, seventeen studios are listed. While the studios are not just for jazz, they show the shift from commercial clubs to private studios, and show that musicians are assuming creative control, are freer to experiment with new musical possibilities, and are thus pushing the music in a wide range of directions.

A third dimension of the changing infrastructure for South African jazz is its ties to tourism – visitors can sign up for a four-hour “jazz tour” that will take them to a jazz venue and perhaps to the house of a jazz musician for a meal in both Cape Town and Johannesburg. There are several venues in the townships of Johannesburg and Cape Town that will occasionally host jazz performances: Afrikan Freedom Station and King Kong are art/coffee/jazz spaces in Johannesburg. There are restaurants/art spaces and community centers in the Langa, Nyanga, and Gugulethu townships in Cape Town. Jazz in the Native Yards is a production company that provides infrastructure and audio technology for such events. But most of these spaces, like the Orbit itself, will not be able to sustain themselves for more than a few years.⁵

The fourth piece in South African jazz infrastructure and capacity is the longer-term growth of jazz programs in universities, such as the University of KwaZulu Natal, the University of Cape Town, and

the University of the Witwatersrand. These programs were largely initiated by American jazz musicians: the first was Darius Brubeck, son of the late Dave Brubeck, who founded the Center for Jazz and Popular Music Studies at what was then the University of Natal in the early 1980s. Both Mike Campbell and Michael Rossi helped establish the jazz studies program at the University of Cape Town. There are similar programs in most South African universities. These music programs were radical interventions at the time of founding because they required bold solutions at the tertiary level for certifying the performance and repertory knowledge of so many skilled musicians who may not have had appropriate high school certification to enter the university, but who proved to be highly skilled performers. Brubeck and others were innovative and persuasive in finding ways to allow these musicians into university programs. Some of the early graduates of these programs are now themselves South African university teachers of jazz.

A fifth dimension of South African jazz infrastructure comes from organizations outside of the country that periodically host South African musicians and engage in some kind of educational mission. One of these is Jazz at Lincoln Center in New York City. South African born but educated in the United States, Seton Hawkins is the director of public programs and education resources at Lincoln Center, and in that capacity, he has created Jazz Academy videos on South African music and regularly contributes interviews he has conducted with South African jazz musicians to All About Jazz. I draw on the interview transcripts, Web pages with South African musician and recordings content, and Jazz Academy videos posted on YouTube as resources for this discussion.

It is impossible to convey the richness and sheer productivity of South African jazz, its histories, and contemporary meanings to local and international audiences in this essay. My purpose rather is to render contours of the complexity and diversity of contemporary music-making in South Africa and by South Africans, to capture the vibrancy of jazz as a creative, improvising, borrowing, and fusing vehicle for South African musicians, and to do so mostly in the musicians' own words. This means that only a handful of contemporary artists will be heard from here. In the spirit of a representative democracy, I hope that individual words speak to broader experiences, as I can only convey snippets of larger narratives and conversations. The sources of musicians' words are several: interviews conducted by others, promotional materials from the musicians, Jazz at Lincoln Center educational videos, the All About Jazz interviews by Seton Hawkins, and my own conversations with musicians. I have taken the liberty of extracting out from larger narratives, cutting and pasting, sometimes in favor of the pithy comment that conveys essential positions or a specific description, and at other times allowing for a fuller explanation. I have also found that veteran musicians often have more to say than the younger generation.

I start with born-free musician Vuma Levin, who is a guitarist, composer, and bandleader, and who captures the changing priorities of jazz since the end of apartheid:

I think it would be a mistake to say that any of our music today is divorced from apartheid. On the other hand, we are moving more towards asking existential questions. How do we make meaning for ourselves in this new age, in the absence of a common oppressor? . . . This notion of the human and its acts of cultural production as contingent and dynamic rather than fixed and

Carol A.
Muller

essential made a lot of sense to me. I'm half black, I'm half Jewish, and it would be difficult for me to point to some essential history that I could call my own. So [Homi Bhabha's] mimicry and hybridity idea was a perfect way to understand what I am, from the vantage point of things I picked up along the way, musical or otherwise. . . . When the African National Congress was developing this "New African" ideology, a lot of the African nationalists' ideology filtered into the music. You hear it particularly in choral traditions, and also in jazz musicians' work. . . . But in terms of the music I write, it's Vuma. It's a very personal thing.⁶

Then, I discuss three jazz veterans, brought together for a panel at Stellenbosch University in July 2010 by British scholar Jonathan Eato. The panel was recorded by filmmaker Aryan Kaganof and the African Noise Foundation and hosted on Vimeo.⁷ Fortuitously, it captured the voice of saxophonist Zim Ngqawana, who died so suddenly in May 2011. Zim Ngqawana performs/converses alongside veteran pianist Tete Mbambisa and drummer Louis Moholo-Moholo. For all three musicians, prioritizing freedom, not just politically, but culturally, musically, and spiritually, fed the purpose of their music-making.

After hearing Zim Ngqawana's composition "Qula Kwedini," based on a Xhosa traditional song, Zim elaborates on his search for freedom in life and music by explaining:

I did that (Qula Kwedini) music because I felt I was born into a culture, a group of people from the Eastern Cape, the Xhosa people, a society. I had to pay my dues, I had to acknowledge I was coming from somewhere. But that's not all my interest anymore. I've done that. I'm not that committed to a culture, tradition. People ask these questions of me, if I am committed to African music.

I am not really interested in African music. I am more committed to universal consciousness. The music that I play now reflects that.

The band I am working with now [in 2010] is in New York, William Parker on bass, Nasheet Waits on drums, Matthew Shipp on piano. I met them at the Vision Festival. . . . So the music I'm dealing is improvised, totally improvised music. 100%. That is what I want to do all the time. Not to over-rehearse the music, we never rehearse at home traditional music. I used to say to people it's strange that we have to rehearse for hours on end. I've never rehearsed for a prayer meeting or funeral, for traditional ceremonies. I always wanted to go back to that where I just do things naturally. And now I have arrived at that. We play without rehearsals. We meet thirty minutes before the gig and that's it. The music we create is amazing. The chemistry we have, it helps me transcend. And it's beautiful.⁸

A little later he sums it up:

I would like to leave my children the legacy of freedom, free thinkers, intelligent young people, no fear, no greed, not being bound by tradition, culture, history. I had to drop all of that. . . . I don't consider myself an African. I'm not interested in that. It didn't help me. . . . I have no identity, I am not interested in identity because identity is false.

There's another thing about improvised music, we have to come to the music as equals. Nobody's going to count you off, nobody's going to tell you where you have to start. . . . It's not a performance that I do, it's like being at home in the community. We are meeting, celebrating. It's not far out as a performance, I actually like to look at it as a meditation.⁹

Improvising musician Nduduzo Makhathini, who was born in 1982 and who has lived much of his life beyond the reaches of apartheid, reflects on the

push to freedom from tradition, culture, and language in Ngqawana's music. He pairs Ngqawana with the late great pianist Bheki Mseleku, who followed a similar path to rid himself of the shackles of identity. Makhathini commented to Seton Hawkins in 2018:

What's interesting to me is that for both Bra Zim and Mseleku, is that towards the ends of their lives, they were both moving towards trying to extract themselves from the Zulu nation in Mseleku's case, and the Xhosa nation in Bra Zim's case. They were trying to disown the idea of being a Xhosa or a Zulu music; they felt the tags were limiting and restricting them from universality. I find them to be really interesting people. . . . It has to do with trying to deconstruct these aspects I was describing earlier. Things like him being a Xhosa person and thinking around the memories of his upbringing. He wanted, maybe not to disconnect, but to go beyond that, and it comes through in his improvisation. I don't know if you've heard the live recording from Linder Auditorium [*50th Birthday Celebration* (2010)], which is completely abstract, but you can feel connection to the hymnals he drew from Abdullah Ibrahim's music. You can feel connections to traditional music, but there is a constant movement away from that, too. He was into teachings about dissolving, this Zen state of No Mind. It plays in an interesting way in his music, especially when he was playing with people like Matthew Shipp at the Vision Festival. It was about creating an alternative space for people to freely express themselves, whether through music, dance, painting.¹⁰

Free-jazz musician, drummer Louis Moholo-Moholo follows on from Ngqawana:

I'm happy, I'm happy that you say this because I started playing this avant-garde and I was blamed. Why don't you play your own

music? Your music, like now South Africa is free and we are dealing with the world . . . so the thing is we are about 45 million people, so we can't do mbaqanga all of us. It's good, but some of the music we did actually broke down the Berlin Wall. . . . The improvised music helped to bring down the wall. If you played mbaqanga music, it's ok, they knew about it. But then came this music, and it really pulled some punches. As I say, it's the first music that got into me, that makes sense to me. The free form: both hands free, feet free.

We're trying, but we've been damaged. How long will this go on? Coming back to South Africa and seeing this legacy, it's hurting, really. And I don't know what to do. I've been fighting all my life, to get this free music thing into the market. I've been fighting: I am one of the pioneers in this music.¹¹

Again, pianist, composer, and producer and the almost-born-free Nduduzo Makhathini reflects on the decades of Moholo-Moholo's fight for freedom in his music.

Jazz was always a music that could reflect people's pain, but in the Blues Notes' music, and Louis Moholo-Moholo's in particular, you find a confronting of what was going on in South Africa. There's an album of Louis Moholo-Moholo's called *Bra Louis—Bra Tebs* that has a song called "Sonke." On it, Bra Louis talks about how the music took them through pain, but also how it became a way of living and laughing together. It's such a powerful song, and also it sonically represents what it's talking about. It's got an ostinato in the bass, that to me represents the resistance, and then over that they develop these melodies over it and it goes abstract. But the ostinato remains. To me, it's a representation of what we've all been through, and Bra Louis captured the experience of exile in the 1960s in a profound way. He was trying to connect with a construct of home.¹²

Carol A. Muller

Jazz musician and film music composer Kyle Shepherd skeptically asks how one monumentalizes a living language, in response to us telling him that the Penn undergraduate class will visit the Afrikaans Taal (Language) Monument in Pretoria as part of our engagement with post-apartheid South Africa. Shepherd's question is wrapped in tones of emotional pain and anger, as he reflects back on his work with Afrikaaps, the Cape Town hip hop/spoken word collaboration from the early 2000s that sought to restore place and ownership of the language of Afrikaans to Cape Town's brown people.¹⁵ It was their ancestors who had originally forged the language of Afrikaans out of encounters with colonial Europeans. A language now widely recognized as originally written in Arabic script in the context of slavery, exile, and European colonialism, it was appropriated and repurposed as a whites-only language by the Afrikaner Nationalists in the twentieth century, as born out by the stories told and visually represented inside the Afrikaans Taal Monument in Pretoria.

Kyle Shepherd, Jitsvinger, and other Afrikaaps storytellers created a touring musical theater production to set the historical record straight, informed by academic research on the intertwined and complicated history of the Afrikaans language. Shepherd recalled with bitterness how the show was verbally slaughtered by the old Afrikaner journalists for the musicians' and poets' insistent restoration of the historical narrative of Afrikaans as one focused on the messy diversity and rich history of a language forged

in often brutal colonial encounters between those of European colonial disposition, and those who were exiled and imported from East Asia, Mozambique, Angola, and elsewhere as slaves. Quite literally carved in stone, the Taal Monument tells only one side of the story of Afrikaans history. But it stands, intentionally facing the more recently constructed Freedom Park, which in contrast monumentalizes the lives of those who fought the struggle for freedom from Afrikaner oppression. The Taal Monument remains a monumental reminder of the brutality of apartheid era exclusions and oppression. And it bears witness to the futility of building a museum to the language of a people. Perhaps like jazz and freedom itself, language should exist as a living entity, owned by no one group, freely shared, absorbed, borrowed, and localized.

I am tracking in my own musical way, chronologically, the story of Cape Town.¹⁶

At about the same time as the Afrikaaps project, Shepherd released a less controversial and more clearly jazz-inflected recording, a musical rendering of the restoration of a much-neglected piece of South African and human genetic history: the story of South African's KhoiSan, the first peoples, and indeed, the peoples with the most diverse and oldest repository of mitochondrial DNA. These are the people, denigrated and discarded by the apartheid regime, who are now believed to be the closest representatives of our human origins. And they are blended into the mixed heritage of so many people of the Western Cape. On Shepherd's *South African History !X* recording, the Khoisan are represented by the clicking sounds of Khoisan language and performance on the xaru, or musical mouth bow of the Khoisan peoples.

*We are ok in our skins with being South African and African musicians within the global space.*¹⁷

Sibongile Khumalo was born into apartheid, but also into a musically rich home guided by her father who was both classically trained and had a deep knowledge of and connection to Zulu music history and heritage. In the spring of 2016, a group of South African jazz musicians called Uhadi, which again, references the old hunting and musical bow of many Southern African hunter gatherer communities, was invited to perform at Lincoln Center. I talked with Sibongile about the use of the bow and its meaning for musicians in contemporary South African jazz and in the specific makeup of her New York City ensemble. Sibongile explained:

Uhadi is the name chosen because it references the root of our music, where we believe we come from as musicians, recognizing, acknowledging, embracing our traditional roots, our indigenous footprints, being comfortable with the past and present in how we shape the future of South African jazz. [South African jazz is] distinct from other kinds of jazz. These elements of our root music, of our folk music give us a distinct sound, they provide a distinct feature in the music, and basically we are comfortable with that, we are ok in our skins with being South African and African musicians within the global space.

So the string which you find in uhadi, refers to the taughtness, brought about by the tension which you find in a group [as diverse] as this, but also the flexibility of the string, if you loosen it a bit and allow it to take its own shape, it creates a space for the group to improvise, to make music as a group. It allows for the group, the name itself suggests the need for flexibility, which resonates at the same time, off that small

gourd that you find in the instrument that makes that incredibly loud noise. *Carol A. Muller*

All of us, except perhaps one, all of us are bandleaders in our separate spaces and we have come together to collaborate, to create something that might be definitive of a jazz sound that is not Xhosa or Zulu or Afrikaans or Indian, that might actually come to be identified as “South African jazz.” Because everybody interprets, has interpreted, jazz in the way that they know how, from wherever they come from in the context of South African music as a whole context. Somebody like [Hugh] Masekela is distinct in what he does, but there are other elements of music that comes out of a group, a collaboration such as Uhadi.

What you find in Xhosa music you might not find in Zulu music or Sotho music, so picking up on an ihubo, a Zulu sound of ukuhuba, which is the chant that a Zulu singing musician would make, this would be different for instance to a Xhosa sound, a Xhosa word – [she illustrates both kinds] and over and above that within the Xhosa space of music making, you find the Xhosa women split singing. I can’t do that.

Invariably the band adjusts to what they hear, because they are familiar with the sound that music makers make at home. A lot of this music we hear subliminally, a lot of this music is there, so you incorporate these elements into this music because you have a well to reference from. And it just sort of filters through.

Yes, the music has been created, the melodies are in place, the harmonies are in place, the words are in place, but certain things, I guess like any learned art form or style you have a vocabulary that you draw from. And it sort of manifests itself and forces its way through.

And in the jazz space because improvisation is such an essential element of it, being able to refer to the different languages

from back home is a big boon, it helps. It helps a lot.

CM: So language becomes a kind of musical palette for you in a way.

SK: Yes it does, yes it does.¹⁸

We know that South Africa's "First Lady of Song" Sibongile Khumalo's engagement with all kinds of music comes out of her childhood home, and specifically her relationship with her father, the late Khabi Mngoma, the well-known music educator, conductor, and choral director. In the early 2000s, Khumalo performed the role of the Zulu musical bow player and clan historian Princess Magogo in Mzilikazi Khumalo's opera *Princess Magogo*. Magogo had been a key player in Khumalo's childhood, as she recalls visiting her homestead and hearing her sing Zulu history accompanied on the musical bow. In the last several years, Khumalo has incorporated musical recollections of those rural visits into the sound of her live performances, and others have also rendered similar sorts of traces into jazz performances. This, of course, is not new to South African jazz, particularly, as Makhathini commented above, in the musical renderings of those who went into political exile: Abdullah Ibrahim was quintessentially a narrator of musical memory, and there are echoes of a South African traditional past in the free improvisations of all the musicians of the Blues Notes who followed Ibrahim into exile.¹⁹

Born in 1982 in KwaZulu Natal, a decade before the end of apartheid, Makhathini released eight distinctive solo recordings in four years. Also a producer of other South African musical projects, he sums up what shapes and motivates his music-making:

Growing up [in KwaZulu Natal], I heard a lot [of] traditional Zulu music. It was based on some of the ceremonies and rituals I

attended as a child. As a young man I became involved in isicathamiya and other various acapella music. But the biggest influence for me initially was the Zionist Church, and their use of the drum, meditative chants, and prophecy. The Zionist Church incorporated Christianity and ancestral beliefs. . . . So I was introduced to music as a mode for spirituality. . . . Later on, I became attracted to the idea of how improvised music could be a way of promoting healthy communities.²⁰

I really see my path in South African jazz as a hybrid, a hybrid of a product of South African jazz as well as being influenced by American traditional jazz, so hoping to join the Miriam Makebas with the Ella Fitzgeralds. You can really express yourself with jazz, you are not limited with pitch or melody or rhythm. It's like jumping on a train and you have no idea where it's going to go to. Sometimes it's going to take you to the same place, but most of the time it's going to take you to an unimaginably beautiful place that you never thought you would land up at.²¹

Longing to work with a poet rather than her own lyrics, Melanie Scholtz engaged with anti-apartheid poet James Matthew's writings, in a two-year compositional and performance project, *Freedom's Child*. Here we capture the power of the words of the poet in quotes with the reflections of the singer:

"Freedom Child you have been denied too long, fill your lungs and cry rage."

It's another gravity that hits you in the heart.

"I am black. My blackness fills me to the brim, like a beaker of well seasoned wine. . . . White men say black is the color of despair."

We must listen, go back and listen and to look at the poems in more depth and say, I am privileged, I am here as a result of other people's sacrifice.

"Pain and blood brings our liberty."

*We live in a world where everything is so easy, so convenient . . . we are not really feeding ourselves good things, we're not writing enough, we watch too much television, we don't really know what is going on around us. So when you read poetry like James's work it's like another gravity in your heart.*²²

After releasing *Freedom's Child*, Scholtz joined with hip-hop artist Jitsvinger, musician Benjamin Jephtha, and pianist Bokani Dyer to create something new, more modern, and to claim a place for the next generation of born-free South African musicians in *Our Time*. The recording possesses an intentional message about the privilege of being born free, about a new generation of South African artists, who are claiming the baton for new sounds and possibilities coming out of South Africa. As such, Scholtz creates a musical space for her generation, after reflecting back through a music and poetry collaboration on the gravity of what it meant to be an artist of color under apartheid in contrast to the sense of freedom she now celebrates in a democratic dispensation, at liberty to harness self-expression, love, joy, creativity, and passion without bearing the burden of an unjust political system. And it is Melanie Scholtz, this young woman jazz musician, who has the last word about the varied motivations and purposes of South African jazz.

In October 2018, we hosted the performance of South African jazz musicians pianist Paul Hamner and saxophonist and flute player McCoy Mrubata at the Arthur Ross Gallery on campus at the University of Pennsylvania. This was a joint project between Arthur Ross and the South African jazz musicians because, at the time, the Ross Gallery had an installation of South African artist William Kentridge. Hamner and Mrubata played their music amidst the visual treasure trove

of black-and-white Kentridge prints. Their music-making together was folded into a thirty-year friendship and musical partnership that had started before the end of apartheid, and in the odd logic of apartheid racial categories, involved them pursuing a partnership across the categories of "coloured" and "black" South Africa. When we talked with the musicians about the overlaps or conversations that might be rendered by locating their jazz performance in the context of Kentridge's art, we came up with very little. What connections could there be between three men who had grown up in very different circumstances largely based on apartheid racial categories: black, white, and coloured? While all three currently live in the same city, Johannesburg, and are about the same age, beyond a basic notion of the transformative capacity of Kentridge's prints and the work of transformation inherent in jazz improvisation, the question of some point of connection reached a dead end. That was the case then.

In drawing together the ideas about jazz as a form of artistic endeavor in contemporary South Africa and listening to conversations Kentridge has had with curators and others about his artistic process, I suggest that Kentridge's process is not that far from the work of contemporary South African jazz. Here are just a few examples: Kentridge, like all jazz artists, works collaboratively, picking out artists, including singers, dancers, visual artists, theater people, and composers, and they begin less with a clear sense of a precomposed piece or path to production than with a strong sense of the possibilities that come with collaborative experimentation, risk-taking, and questions. Each member of the team brings to the studio the hope not that they have answers, but rather that they understand first what the questions even are. They work with uncertainty, seeking out

Carol A.
Muller

the gaps, for the gaps might lead to imaginative leaps. Allowing for the absurd, comments Kentridge, liberates one from the traps of linear thinking, permitting the release of complexity, of collage over straight narrative. There is an openness to dislocation, fragmentation, dismembering, remembering, and remaking, to allow for new and novel ways of making art, theater, and music.

Kentridge starts at the place of the “less good idea,” he relishes the possibilities and virtues of bastardy, there is no need for authenticity, for purity, for any real feeling of a center.²³ Erasure is his method of construction; he urges the viewer/listener/reader and cocreators to be fully engaged in the making of the work/performance/installation. At the very core of his process, one might argue that Kentridge relishes the contingent, the improvisational,

the provisional, the spontaneous, even the unexpected. And he wants everyone to play: “play creates the conditions that help the other part to happen,” he suggests. “I am more moved when uncertainty remains,” he says elsewhere.²⁴

Frankly, I can think of no better description of the values and processes of South African jazz. Stretching the string, borrowing, juxtaposing, rendering, disappearing, reappearing, liberating, restoring, remembering. So far from the American centers of jazz composition, performance, and canonization, South African jazz embraces the freedom to expand creatively on all kinds of possibilities, and to experiment with a multitude of partnerships, languages, instruments, and sounds, relishing the power of peripheral thinking and all the “virtues of bastardy.”

ENDNOTES

¹ Melanie Scholtz, “Melanie Scholtz,” YouTube, uploaded November 8, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZZrHzZHicA>.

² See “RIP the Orbit: Time to Build New Jazz Spaces,” *sisgwenjazz*, January 4, 2019, https://sisgwenjazz.wordpress.com/2019/01/04/rip-the-orbit-time-to-build-new-jazz-spaces/?fbclid=IwAR3OKdJfIPInpqnXo-aOeECue8XxyIjNOh1VC_3jkHhvcR-FpU11KphHJY.

³ Giovanni Russonello, “Three Jazz Pianists, A Generation After Apartheid,” *A Blog Supreme*, NPR Jazz, March 28, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/ablogsupreme/2015/03/28/395541160/three-jazz-pianists-a-generation-after-apartheid>.

⁴ Majola Majola, “Sibongile Khumalo: An Eternal Breath of Life,” *noted.man*, March 16, 2016, <http://www.notedman.com/khumalo-breathes-life/>.

⁵ For Johannesburg, see, for example, “Afrikan Freedom Station,” *Gauteng: It Starts Here*, <https://www.gauteng.net/attractions/attraction-afrikan-freedom-station>; and “Johannesburg Jazz Safari,” *Coffee Beans Routes: Pan African Creative Travel*, <https://coffeebeansroutes.com/johannesburg-jazz-safari/>. For Cape Town, see “Where to Watch Live Jazz in Cape Town,” *CapeTownMagazine.com*, <https://www.capetownmagazine.com/jazz>; “Township Dinner and Jazz Experience,” *MyCapeTownStay.com*, https://www.mycapetownstay.com/Township_Dinner_and_Jazz_Experience; and “7 Top Jazz Venues in Cape Town,” *Travel by XO*, April 2, 2013, <http://blog.xoafrika.com/destinations/7-top-jazz-venue-cape-town/>. Please note, however, that the website presence does not necessarily mean that these events and spaces are still in existence; a website is not always taken down when a business shuts down.

⁶ Seton Hawkins, “Vuma Levin: Musical Painting,” *All About Jazz*, May 8, 2018, <https://www.allaboutjazz.com/vuma-levin-musical-painting-vuma-levin-by-seton-hawkins.php?page=1>.

⁷ See African Noise Foundation, “The Legacy,” *Vimeo*, October 14, 2014, on <https://vimeo.com/108933925>.

- ⁸ See “VISION Festival XV,” Arts for Art, <https://www.artsforart.org/vf14.html>. Prioritizing spontaneity, jazz singer Sathima Bea Benjamin would cite the aesthetic preferences of Duke Ellington as she experienced him in a recording studio in Paris in 1963: he used only one take. This resonates with the preference for fewer rehearsals articulated here by Ngqawana.
- ⁹ African Noise Foundation, “The Legacy.”
- ¹⁰ Seton Hawkins, “Nduduzo Makhathini: Jazz is a Shared Memory,” All About Jazz, February 1, 2018, <https://www.allaboutjazz.com/nduduzo-makhathini-jazz-is-a-shared-memory-nduduzo-makhathini-by-seton-hawkins.php>.
- ¹¹ African Noise Foundation, “The Legacy.”
- ¹² Louis Moholo-Moholo, *Bra Louis–Bra Tebs*, Ogun, 2005, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGwMcf6wMJg>.
- ¹³ Author conversation with Penn students, Kyle Shepherd’s Atlantic Films studio, Cape Town, January 2019.
- ¹⁴ Jitsvinger in Dylan Valley, “What is Afrikaaps?” YouTube, uploaded March 3, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SVpBHcR1_tU.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ See the promotional video for the 2012 release of *South African History !X* at Gallo Records, “Kyle Shepherd–South African History !X (Official EPK),” uploaded March 15, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HXSHivweibo>.
- ¹⁷ I interviewed Sibongile Khumalo for Jazz at Lincoln Center’s South African Jazz tour. For videos of the interview, see Jazz at Lincoln Center’s JAZZ ACADEMY, “South Africa’s ‘First Lady of Song’ Sibongile Khumalo, Part One–Four,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ynLrbN2pg2o>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-KE4uzokXZw>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-aCgNJRH_0; and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ZcgrqC1MPg>. See also Jazz Day South Africa, “Sibongile Khumalo,” YouTube, uploaded September 7, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NirSylhc7Y>.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ See Christine Lucia, “Abdullah Ibrahim and the Uses of Memory,” *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 11 (2) (2002): 125–143; and Carol Ann Muller, “Musical Remembrance, Exile, and the Remaking of South African Jazz (1960–1979),” in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival*, ed. Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- ²⁰ Hawkins, “Nduduzo Makhathini.”
- ²¹ Scholtz, “Melanie Scholtz,” interview as the 2010 Standard Bank Young Artist Award winner for Jazz. Some of the other women are keyboardist/singer Thandi Ntuli, saxophonist Linda Sikhakhane, and trombonist/singer Siya Makuzeni, all of whom are tightly connected to each other and to the broader history of South African jazz. See Thandi Ntuli, *Exiled*, Bandcamp, February 1, 2018, <https://thandintuli.bandcamp.com/>; Linda Sikhakhane, *Two Sides, One Mirror*, Bandcamp, January 16, 2018, <https://lindasikhakhane.bandcamp.com/>; and Siya Makuzeni, *Out of this World*, Bandcamp, September 12, 2016, <https://siyamakuzenisextet.bandcamp.com/album/out-of-this-world>.
- ²² The words and juxtapositions are drawn from an interview with Melanie Scholtz. See Slow-design Cape Town, “Freedom’s Child–Melanie Scholtz Sings J. Matthews,” YouTube, uploaded April 4, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQQ43kBZdSk>.
- ²³ There are many video recordings of Kentridge speaking of his process and rendering performances on YouTube. The most recent comes from his Brooklyn production “The Head & the Load.” See Park Avenue Armory, “Artist Talk: The Head & the Load,” YouTube, December 6, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjtUH5HSrWI>.
- ²⁴ William Kentridge and Rosalind C. Morris, *That Which Is Not Drawn* (New York: Seagull Books, 2014).

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Inside back cover: (top) Multi-instrumentalist Yusef Lateef performs with his quintet in 1958. Shown from left to right are Lateef, flute, Frank Morelli, baritone sax, Terry Pollard, piano, and Frank Gant, drums. Photograph provided by Ayesha Lateef. (bottom) Guitarist George Benson performs at the 2013 Monterey Jazz Festival. © 2013 by the Monterey Jazz Festival/Cole Thompson.



