

Colloquy: Revisiting Kenny G

Listening Past Kenny G: Crossover Jazz and the Foregrounding of Black Sensualities

Charles D. Carson

During the first commercial break at Super Bowl XLV in 2011, both fans *and* critics of smooth jazz got a special surprise. Luxury car manufacturer Audi spent tens of millions to air an ad satirizing the infamous Scared Straight program, a program typically used to deter juvenile delinquents by putting them in a room with prisoners who share their own stories as warnings against a life of crime. In the Audi version, however, silk-trimmed-smoking-jacket-and-ascot-sporting prison inmates confront polo-clad Chads in a decisively tamer program dubbed, *Startled Smart*.¹ Through warnings about the perils of Bananas Foster and admonitions against owning too many falcons, “at risk” youths are urged to avoid landing in “luxury prison” by purchasing a car from a hip company like Audi, rather than a stodgy old brand like Mercedes-Benz or BMW. In an effort to show just how dangerous this luxury prison could be, and thus why it should be avoided, the follow-up ad featured an interview with the prison’s “Head of Riot Suppression”: Kenny G.² In this role, Kenny G plays smooth jazz saxophone licks over the prison’s intercom (Figure 1) in an effort to soothe disruptive prisoners and stave off potential riots over things as absurd as, say, a caviar shortage. He is so effective in this capacity, in fact, that his playing puts them to sleep.

¹ Audi, “Startled Smart,” Superbowl Commercial, 2012, reproduced at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQrAJp84jLk>.

² Audi, “Kenny G: Head of Riot Suppression,” Superbowl Commercial, 2012, reproduced at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wXWrAGp2XRY>.



Figure 1. Kenny G playing his saxophone over the prison intercom.

This tongue-in-cheek depiction says much about the public opinion of smooth jazz. Namely, it is elitist, dull, and most tellingly, white. Set in a fictionalized version of a white-collar prison inhabited almost exclusively by foppish white male inmates, the depiction makes clear the race, class, and gender implications of smooth jazz. Moreover, this caricature is explicitly mapped onto Kenny G, as his humorous self-portrayal plays upon the public's reading of him. He is shown here to be reserved and controlled, if not slightly un-self-aware, as he speaks to the off-camera interviewer. His affected fastidiousness in dress and demeanor subtly hints at homosexual stereotypes (Figure 2) like those lurking just behind the criticism of smooth jazz as not being "masculine" enough, a subtlety that almost immediately evaporates in favor of a cringy, heavy-handed prison sex joke a few moments later. After explaining that even just a shortage of caviar could cause the inmates to get "pretty unruly," he makes a casual reference to his predecessor in riot suppression—a flugelhornist who "couldn't cut it; he played all the wrong notes"—an obvious insider jab at earlier crossover jazz sensation, Chuck Mangione (also white). Furthermore, an ironic exchange in which he pointedly insists that "Kenny G does not take any bribes"—before immediately pointing out all of the bribes he has accepted around his office—seems to speak to the accusations of commercialism leveled at crossover jazz artists as "sell outs."



Figure 2. Kenny G in costume as the “Head of Riot Suppression.”

At the same time, some of his more impulsive responses often reveal a darker, more defensive side, such as when he is asked about his prison nickname, “Kenny Z.” His response, delivered in the same deadpan cadence as the rest of the interview, aims beyond the camera’s comedic lens and centers on his detractors in the real world: “Anyone who calls me ‘Kenny Z’ around here... I’ll f*** them up.” But more revealing is his follow up to this hollow posturing, “I’ll play an E; I’ll play an Eb... they can’t touch me after that.” The naïveté of his toothless musical threat—lacking the kind of technical specificity that has come to flavor dominant discourses of jazz mastery and masculinity—collapses the racial, economic, and sexual tropes present in the ad into the musical sphere.³ Namely, that smooth jazz is too simple, too effete, too commercial, too “white.” The successful pairing of smooth jazz with stereotypical depictions of (hyper)whiteness thus makes clear the supposed problems of the music: *it ain’t Black enough*.

If popular depictions such as those in the car commercials discussed above attempt to show how smooth jazz is perceived as not “black enough” to be “real” jazz, it does so by ignoring the realities of the history of African American performance traditions. Black popular musics—the many subgenres of jazz included—have always relied heavily upon the kinds of interplay between genres

³ For more on tropes of mastery and masculinity in jazz, see Nichole Rustin-Paschal, *The Kind of Man I Am: Jazz, masculinity and the World of Charles Mingus Jr.* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2017) and Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., *The Amazing Bud Powell: Black Genius, Jazz History, and the Challenge of Bebop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

that characterize crossover jazz, and the commercial potential of such transgressions has always been at the center of this practice. To say otherwise denies agency to artists whose musical and economic goals have not always been as diametrically opposed as our current discourses of authenticity would have us believe. Moreover, it places discourses of Black authenticit(ies) in the hands of critics, scholars, and other musicians who are being exclusionary in attempting to police what is “really” Black. Given his disproportionate popularity, the classing, (de)racialization, and gendering of Kenny G in popular culture has become, in effect, the lens through which we evaluate all forms of crossover jazz.

To be clear, this is not a defense of Kenny G. I, myself, am not a fan. But to malign a whole musical (sub)genre because of the work of a single white artist is to dismiss the work of a significant number of other crossover jazz artists, many of whom are Black, who have at the center of their practice the same kinds of innovative creative approaches that helped to create jazz in the first place. (This is to say nothing of their audiences, which, as Brian F. Wright points out in his introduction, are far more diverse than detractors would have us believe.) Elsewhere, I have written about how the success of Kenny G was actually prefigured by the visionary work of Black crossover jazz artists, a fact he has acknowledged, even as he continues to take credit for creating smooth jazz itself.⁴ Viewed from this position, we can recognize continuities between even the earliest endeavors in jazz and contemporary practices that “bridge the gaps” between art, commerce, and accessibility.

What I suggest here, then, is a rethinking of the contemporary crossover jazz narrative that acknowledges but ultimately decenters the impact of Kenny G and his brand of smooth jazz. What if jazz studies took a broader view of crossover jazz, one that included a wider range of musics that fused contemporary Black popular music and jazz? Rather than dismissing jazz-adjacent genres as not “Black enough,” what if we instead focused on the ways in which these genres *do* engage with Blackness in novel, and often subtle, ways? More to the point, in a society in which contemporary crossover jazz is synonymous with Kenny G for much of the listening (and non-listening!) public, what does it mean to have “Black” genres and artists engaging in such crossovers? How are discourses of Blackness (and concomitant discourses of authenticity) imagined, sustained, or re-imagined in the wake of a pop culture juggernaut like Kenny G?

I argue they do so through a recentering of the Black *body* in ways that counter stereotypical conceptions and depictions of Blackness. By focusing on the sensual—where sound and body meet—Black artists are able to operate within

⁴ Charles D. Carson, “‘Bridging the Gap’: Creed Taylor, Grover Washington Jr., and the Crossover Roots of Smooth Jazz,” *Black Music Research Journal* 28, no. 1 (2008): 1-15.

a domain that seeks to reclaim Black corporeality as a site of individual and collective agency. Rather than engaging in a tacitly deracialized rhetoric in attempts to wrest jazz back from the death-grip of Kenny G's "Songbird," I prefer that we focus on examples of *Black* artistic production that emphasize issues of race and representation in crossover jazz. To that end, I offer up a handful of examples of crossover musical spaces wherein the centrality of Kenny G-flavored jazz might be challenged, reconfigured, or outright ignored in an effort to engage with continually shifting discourses of race, genre, and authenticity in contemporary popular music.

Genres that fuse jazz and Black popular music like Quiet Storm, neo-soul, or even more recent developments like lofi hip hop draw heavily upon musical markers of jazz—such as its instrumentation, extended harmonies, blue notes or similar figures, or even aesthetic approaches to production—to convey a variety of articulations of Blackness. In these contexts, jazz has been and continues to be used by such fusion genres as a sonic and aesthetic signifier for styles that do not merely seek to transgress generic boundaries, but in fact to celebrate more inclusive expressions of identity through sensuality, intimacy, and sexuality.⁵

Here, I borrow from Amber Jamilla Musser's work on sensuality and intimacy in her study of queer femininity in communities of color. Musser recenters the body in discussions of the "sensual excesses" of experiences of art through a mode she terms "brown jouissance." Brown jouissance, as Musser describes, is a "reveling in fleshiness." It eschews the decoupling of the bodily and experiential modes at the center of transcendent ecstasy in favor of a "sensuous materiality" that "grapple[s] with a complex matrix of gender, race, and sexuality."⁶ That Musser begins with a close reading of Lyle Ashton Harris's portrait of jazz legend Billie Holiday is not accidental. Jazz has long held a prominent place in the popular imagination of the Black body (and vice-versa). But what Musser's reading adds is the way in which our understanding of these artistic expressions—whether visual or aural—are shaped by our *own* experiences of the body. The mix of pleasure and pain that we see in the singer's visage is not Holiday's. It is, in effect, a citation; it is a visual echo of Harris's relationship with his own body. Such is the case with the genres explored in this essay. They

⁵ For a discussion of such varied expressions in earlier genres like Motown and disco, see Andrew Flory, *I Hear a Symphony: Motown and Crossover R&B* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), and Alice Echols, "I Hear a Symphony: Black Masculinity and the Disco Turn," in *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 1-38.

⁶ Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2018), 2-3.

cite jazz, and through that, the Black body. Jazz is perhaps a means, not a goal. Like Harris's portrait of Holiday, jazz provides a means by which Black bodily experiences are accessed and made legible through expressions of sensuality and intimacy. Black popular musics like Quiet Storm, neo-soul, and lofi are thus grounded in the "fleshiness" of sensual excess. One could argue that it is this fleshiness—this engagement with the materiality of the body—that separates the aesthetics of these Black crossover styles from the more mainstream smooth jazz projects of artists like Kenny G, which often rely on more conventional discourses of sexuality for their affect.

As I have done elsewhere, here I claim that the engagement with jazz styles in Black popular forms like Quiet Storm represent a fusion of elements associated with the "urbane sophistication" of the new Black middle class beginning in the 1970s and those of the Black popular music vernacular. In uniting these threads, Quiet Storm was able to tap into both the contemporary relevance of popular music, and the evolving cultural capital of jazz through a carefully curated set of musical and stylistic references. Such amalgamations enabled artists to draw upon authenticity—say, that of the Black experience—while capitalizing on looser meanings jazz held across the broader popular music market. The result allowed the music to maintain connections to Black artistic authority without wholly alienating a wider (and "whiter") audience. Moreover, the connections to jazz—however loosely conceived—helped to "elevate" popular genres like Quiet Storm above the din of competing genres in the late-1970s/early 1980s. As a sonic marker of Blackness, the sensual excesses of jazz elements were particularly legible to Black middle class audiences, enabling them to retain connections with their culture, even if tempered by the broader desires of the mainstream popular music industry.⁷ Functionally, then, Quiet Storm addressed any number of aesthetic, cultural, or even political concerns and served as a metaphor for conversations about race, class, and collective identity taking place within a Black community in the throes of what Mark Anthony Neal calls "postindustrial nostalgia."⁸

This situation continued to evolve throughout the 1990s. Many of these elements of Black culture had trickled into mainstream (read: white) culture, in some instances through popular subgenres like smooth jazz itself. Neo-soul, in turn, emerged as a response to this diffusion of Black expressive practices, and

⁷ For more on the class implications of these aesthetic choices in related genres, see John Howland, *Hearing Luxe Pop: Glorification, Glamour, and the Middlebrow in American Popular Music* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2021).

⁸ Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 126.

its indebtedness to genres like jazz, blues, and R&B helped to root the music within discourses of Blackness that had only intensified in the wake of late-1980s hip hop.⁹ When Meshell Ndegeocello sings about “digging” her lover “like an old soul record,” she is drawing on tropes that connect earlier forms of Black expression to ideas of purity, authenticity, immediacy.¹⁰ Here, immediacy is both sonic and emotional; the “real,” unmediated sounds of the “old soul record” echo the similarly unmediated emotional space she holds for her lover. After all, what is intimacy if not unmediated emotional space? Through the grooves of the record, the sonic is made tactile, situating the aural-emotional experience solidly within the Black body, and within expressions of brown *jouissance* that sidestep reductive categories of sexuality in favor of sensual immediacy. This is not background music for a sexual encounter—a simplistic critique often leveled at smooth jazz. Rather, it is a means for Ndegeocello to know her lover through a reading of her own body.

In many ways, lofi hip hop is the sonic opposite of smooth jazz, particularly in terms of the latter genre’s insistence on sonic clarity, production, and “polish.” In the same way that, say, neo-soul sought to craft an updated mode of sensuality and intimacy rooted in a post-modern sonic aesthetic that blended jazz and contemporary soul, so too does lofi hip hop seek to reference the sonic associations of jazz to further its own agenda of promulgating a new experience of intimacy, one that is simultaneously individual and collective. It is a music for “imagined communities” comprised of individuals who relish the immediacy of the sensual, the collective experience of solitude, and transgressive power of surrender situated within what Adam Harper calls the “sonic, ontological and cultural threshold of closeness.”¹¹ Harper continues: “Distance and closeness define each other: intimacy has no meaning without an establishment of distance prior to that intimacy or that jeopardizes that intimacy.”¹² Conceptually, lofi is a “frame” through which deeper meanings drawn from the music and listening experiences are constructed and interpreted through discourses of intimacy.

Streaming platforms like YouTube, Soundcloud, and later Spotify facilitated the creation of a virtual community centered around a quasi-ambient instrumental style comprised of softly-distorted analog/acoustic drum samples,

⁹ Sarah Fila-Bakabadio, “Pick Your Afro Daddy’: Neo Soul and the Making of Diasporan Identities,” *Cahiers d’Études Africaines* 54, no. 216 (2014): 919–44.

¹⁰ Tammy L. Kernodle, “Diggin’ You Like Those Ol’ Soul Records: Meshell Ndegeocello and the Expanding Definition of Funk in Postsoul America,” *American Studies* 52, no. 4 (2013): 181–204.

¹¹ Adam Harper, “Lo-fi Aesthetics in Popular Music Discourse” (Ph.D. dissertation, Oxford University, 2014), 55.

¹² Harper, “Lo-fi Aesthetics in Popular Music Discourse,” 55.

vintage synth melodies (where the use of emulators mimicking the sounds of a Fender Rhodes or Clavinet again reinforce the connection to 1970s jazz fusion), and extended-chord voicings, all run through filters that add hiss, fuzz, or vinyl crackle effects to enhance the “lo-fi” (i.e. “low fidelity”) quality of the tracks. Whereas Kenny G’s flavor of smooth jazz seems intent on concealing the traces of its production aesthetic—rendering the processes of commercial production invisible in an effort to “hide the seams” from the listener—the various sonic qualities that we identify as lo-fi do the opposite. Like Ndegeocello’s old soul record, they foreground the *medium*. Their sonic textures highlight the fragile nature of the analog conduit connecting the sender and receiver and thus underscore the distance between them. The snaps, crackles, pops and room noise that characterize the lo-fi soundscape therefore become a marker of emotional immediacy much in the same way the pleasure-pain so evident on Billie Holiday’s face grounds Harris’s in his own bodily experiences. Several of the discourses of authenticity upon which jazz so heavily relies—emotional immediacy, heightened expression—re-emerge in contemporary crossover genres like lofi as a means of engaging with racialized bodies in increasingly de-racialized, disembodied virtual spaces.

Let’s speak plainly: many people don’t like smooth jazz because they believe it isn’t “Black enough” (whatever that means) to be considered “real” jazz (whatever *that* means). This investment in jazz as a racialized discourse is a key issue for many critics of the music, regardless of color, since discourses of jazz authenticity often rely heavily on their relative proximity to Black expressive practices, whether real or imagined.¹³ Within the jazz community, artists, critics, and scholars (this author included) derive authority from their facility with the techniques, styles, and repertoires informed by such practices. As such, there has traditionally been a concerted effort to police the boundaries of the genre. The further from the accepted norms of jazz performance practice you stray, the less “authentic” your performance. But this kind of genre policing is a double-edged sword. Ignoring its racialized implications allows us to exclude people like Kenny G, but it also threatens the more popular-oriented work of artists like Cannonball Adderley, Ramsey Lewis, or Nina Simone—to say nothing of the traditions of experimentation and invention that continue to inspire artists of any color, from Louis Armstrong, to the Association for the Advancement of

¹³ See Eitan Y. Wilf, *School for Cool: The Academic Jazz Program and the Paradox of Institutionalized Creativity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

Creative Musicians, to Kamasi Washington, and beyond.¹⁴ Ultimately, this thinking is reductive, siloing Black-derived genres, and those who participate in them, off from the fuller range of artistic expression typically afforded to non-Black genres and musicians.

Of course, tangled up in all of this are related discourses of complexity and virtuosity, albeit historically of the Western European-derived sort.¹⁵ The critique of the lack of what some might call “musical sophistication” that is often leveled at crossover genres like smooth jazz, then, becomes tacitly associated with an artist’s unwillingness to participate in the kinds of displays of complexity prized by the jazz cognoscenti. I say “unwillingness” as opposed to “inability” because some artists *choose* not to participate, whether for artistic or commercial reasons. Within certain Black expressive spheres, *immediacy* or *accessibility* itself can be understood as alternative modes of virtuosity, modes which “are often unrecognized, ignored, and underrepresented in the designation of knowledge systems.”¹⁶ In the context of smooth jazz, this misreading of complexity and virtuosity often works to support discourses of authenticity. Other white musicians who have occasionally skirted the boundaries of what some might call “real” jazz—including Pat Metheny—have largely been able to sidestep criticism by (sometimes quite self-consciously) engaging in the kinds of displays of musical virtuosity, complexity, and “sophistication” that have become associated with such racialized discourses of jazz authenticity.

Kenny G’s position as a stand-in for the entirety of crossover jazz inadvertently highlights the issue of the erasure of Black subjects and genres. The question remains whether Kenny G’s ubiquity has displaced Black performers (and perhaps their related subgenres) to such an extent as to undermine the music’s connections to the Black experience. With Kenny G at the helm, is smooth jazz somehow redefining jazz as less “Black?” These questions are vital, to be sure. However, the way in which they are framed threatens to weaponize Black identity against itself by erasing Black artists who

¹⁴ For more on the exclusion of Black experimental traditions, see George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

¹⁵ To wit, the valuation of the Swing to (post-)Bebop continuum (jazz’s “common practice period”) is based on discourses of modernism. See Alfred Appel Jr., *Jazz Modernism: From Ellington and Armstrong to Matisse and Joyce* (New York: Knopf, 2002). More recent scholarship has troubled this “high modernist” framing in favor of discussions of jazz and afro-modernism(s). For an example that expands this approach in interesting directions, see Sarah Politz, “‘We Don’t Want to Be Jazz-Jazz’: Afro-Modernism, Jazz, and Brass Band Music in Benin,” *Jazz and Culture* 1 (2018): 12–48.

¹⁶ Matthew D. Morrison, “Blacksound,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Western Music and Philosophy*, eds. Tomás McAuley, et al., (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), 555–578.

do not comply with hegemonic ideas about jazz and Black authenticity—a sort of “respectability politics” of jazz. Let us not forget that the current curatorial, neo-conservative/preservationist philosophy of, say, Wynton Marsalis has not only thrived in opposition to the immense commercial successes of crossover jazz artists like Kenny G, Dave Koz, Chris Botti, and perhaps even Norah Jones, but it has its roots in Stanley Crouch’s pointed criticisms of Miles Davis’s increasingly pop-influenced work from the late-1970s onward. The point being that Black musicians *have* participated in crossover jazz, often in ways that re-assert Black performance practices and traditions, if not outright question and re-define them. Roberta Flack, Anita Baker, Sade, or the work of “mannered, feminized quiet storm maestros like Freddie Jackson and Luther Vandross” immediately come to mind.¹⁷ So perhaps, rather than wringing our hands over what Kenny G owes to jazz and jazz-influenced crossover genres (or vice versa), it makes more sense to explore what these musics do *on their own*.

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¹⁷ Jason King, “The Sound of Velvet Melting: The Power of ‘Vibe’ in the Music of Roberta Flack,” in *Listen Again: A Momentary History of Pop Music*, ed. Eric Weisbard, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 172-199.

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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Charles D. Carson is currently Associate Professor of Musicology/Ethnomusicology at the University of Texas at Austin, where he teaches courses on contemporary art music, popular music, hip hop, and jazz. His research interests include African-American expressive cultures, American music, artistic citizenship, and music and tourism. He has presented and published on a variety of topics ranging from smooth jazz to theme park music.