

## Colloquy: Revisiting Kenny G

### Introduction: What Kenny G Can Teach Us About Jazz

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In December 2021, HBO released *Listening to Kenny G*, a documentary that explores the life and career of Kenneth Gorelick (b. 1956), one of the most controversial figures in all of jazz history.<sup>1</sup> Its release set off a firestorm of discussion, with a subset of incensed jazz fans taking to internet message boards, social media posts, and comments sections to express their continued outrage at the musician and the smooth jazz style with which he is associated. It seems that, even thirty years after the peak of his popularity, one thing remains clear: many in the jazz world are still mad about Kenny G.

Kenny G is the bestselling instrumentalist and bestselling saxophonist of all time. He is, in short, the most commercially successful artist in the history of jazz, a position that he holds despite the vehement objections of many within the jazz community. As a surrogate for the supposed evils of crossover success, the specter of Kenny G has haunted jazz discourse for nearly four decades. Ever-present, he serves as an ongoing focal point of mockery and derision for jazz fans, critics, and musicians who are nonetheless compelled to bring him up again and again. By contrast, most jazz scholars have remained hesitant to engage with Kenny G, likely both because of his negative reputation and their own discomfort with what he has come to represent. Even today, as jazz studies increasingly reckons with its own gatekeeping tendencies, the idea of taking Kenny G seriously is, for many, a bridge too far.

The time thus felt right to revisit Kenny G and his position within jazz history and culture. This colloquy—featuring contributions from myself, Kelsey Klotz, Charles Carson, and Adrienne Honnold—is an attempt to offer fresh perspectives on Gorelick that go beyond the surface-level, gut reactions that have largely dominated his reception. In this introductory essay, I provide an overview

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<sup>1</sup> Penny Lane, dir. *Listening to Kenny G* (HBO Documentary Films, 2021).

of the common criticisms levelled against Kenny G; I then deconstruct them and some of their underlying implications. As I argue, the popular backlash against him has much to teach us about the prevailing values of contemporary jazz discourse.

#### THE CASE AGAINST KENNY G

Kenny G has been a contentious figure for decades and, as such, it would be impossible to catalog all the different complaints that jazz musicians, critics, and fans have directed at him and his music. Broadly speaking, however, their arguments tend to revolve around one of four overlapping categories: the internal function of his music, his sound and musical style, his relationship to jazz culture, and his public persona. Together, these criticisms form the accepted evidence in the case against Kenny G and are therefore worth exploring in detail.

First, some argue that Kenny G's music does not meet jazz's established musical criteria. Here, his critics tend to describe his music as not improvised, not collaborative, lacking a blues sensibility, and lacking a swing feel. In the HBO documentary, this position is espoused by Will Layman, jazz critic for *PopMatters*, who provides multiple reasons why Kenny G's music "isn't jazz." In addition to its lack of complexity (specifically its lack of bebop harmony), Layman explains that "Part of what makes jazz interesting is the sense of call and response and dialogue among the musicians. And what you hear in Kenny G's music is no conversation at all. This is a solo project. This is not sex, this is masturbation."<sup>2</sup> Tied to these arguments is the belief that Kenny G's music is also too "simple," that his emphasis on major and minor keys, his use of diatonic melodies, and, especially, his seemingly limited technical abilities on the saxophone stand at odds with jazz's core values.

Second, Kenny G's critics tend to express a strong aversion to the sound of his music, and to the sound of the smooth jazz style in general. With its soft timbres, its consonance, its dynamic swells, its effortlessly resolving harmonies, its sonic emphasis on pop production techniques (most notably, reverb and echo), and its catchy melodies, smooth jazz deliberately invokes notions of romance, sentimentality, and femininity. It is a type of comforting, "easy listening" music that, by design, is meant to have widespread appeal. In the 1980s and 1990s, these qualities helped popularize it both as a radio format and

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<sup>2</sup> *Listening to Kenny G*, 00:28:11-00:28:33. After the documentary was released, Layman published an expanded version of his critique, in which he compared Kenny G's music to a "7-Eleven chimichanga" and described it as "little more than pleasantly empty." See Will Layman, "Kenny G and the Problem with Art that Asks Very Little of Us," *PopMatters*, January 12, 2022, <https://www.popmatters.com/kenny-g-art-asks-little>.

as a form of seemingly inoffensive background music played in work environments, elevators, and on the Weather Channel. Yet, ironically, smooth jazz's mass appeal and its deliberate "inoffensiveness" are precisely what offends so many of its critics. For them, Kenny G and his contemporaries have created a form of "wallpaper" music, one that is tied too closely to capitalist productivity (in the documentary, *New York Times* critic Ben Ratliff explains that he negatively associates Kenny G's music "with a corporate attempt to soothe my nerves."<sup>3</sup> This argument holds that smooth jazz is not art, but kitsch, an overly commercialized, emotionally manipulative sham artform that deceives its listeners into feeling that they are experiencing the "real thing," when in fact what they are experiencing is a cheap, mass-produced knock-off. Making the point explicitly, ethnomusicologist Christopher Washburne describes Kenny G's music as "nonadventurous" and "highly accessible" and argues that smooth jazz "provides few intellectual and emotional challenges to listeners, and [its] musicians produce recordings that overtly cater to their fan base, creating a clear dividing line between *making art* and *selling records*."<sup>4</sup> Likewise, in her contribution to this colloquy, Adrienne Honnold argues that saxophonists in particular repudiate Kenny G because they perceive him to be a "sell out."

A third complaint aimed at Kenny G is that he is detached from jazz culture. Here, his critics argue that he does not deserve to be called a jazz musician because, as a young man, he did not follow a traditional jazz apprenticeship model (e.g., learning the ins and outs of bebop improvisation, "paying his dues" by working with established jazz musicians, etc.).<sup>5</sup> Others argue that Kenny G's music deliberately stands apart from the jazz tradition. In the documentary, Ratliff states that "Way up on the list of things that are central to jazz is the fact that it is a hundred-year continuity. People playing jazz currently are always in a kind of dialogue with people who played jazz fifty years ago... In the music of Kenny G that continuity is absent."<sup>6</sup> In an expanded form of this argument, Kenny G's music is also interpreted as a type of theft or co-optation, one in

<sup>3</sup> *Listening to Kenny G*, 00:04:04-00:04:10.

<sup>4</sup> Emphasis mine. Christopher J. Washburne, "Does Kenny G Play Bad Jazz?," in *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*, eds. Christopher J. Washburne and Maiken Derno (New York: Routledge, 2004), 132.

<sup>5</sup> Notably, Kenny G began his career playing in high school and collegiate (often fusion-oriented) jazz bands and then played professional with a variety of funk, R&B, and jazz fusion bands. This particular apprenticeship model is actually far more common today and its repeated dismissal by critics and fans in some ways highlights wider discomforts about jazz's increasing institutionalization within U.S. music schools. For more, see Eitan Y. Wilf, *School for Cool: The Academic Jazz Program and the Paradox of Institutionalized Creativity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> *Listening to Kenny G*, 00:26:47-00:27:12.

which he has crassly repurposed some elements of jazz for his own financial gain. In the documentary, journalist and scholar Jason King notes,

[Kenny G] seems to draw from this rich and venerated history of Black music without necessarily contributing much back to the form... He's such a deeply problematic figure because he really extends this long and troubling history of appropriation in popular music, where Black artists innovate, and then white artists come along and stylize and then receive greater financial remuneration.<sup>7</sup>

As previously mentioned, Kenny G is the bestselling instrumentalist of all time. According to the Recording Industry Association of America, his albums collectively have sold 48 million units domestically, with 12 million of those sales alone coming from his 1992 album *Breathless* (Figure 1).<sup>8</sup> As musicologist Robert Walser wrote in 2003, "If he is counted as 'jazz,' he is easily its biggest current star."<sup>9</sup> To call Kenny G a "jazz musician" would therefore not only give credibility to a white man who has found disproportionate commercial success within a Black idiom, it would also make him one of the most dominant forces in the genre. This is a position that many of his critics simply find unconscionable.

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<sup>7</sup> *Listening to Kenny G*, 01:02:41-01:03:09.

<sup>8</sup> "Gold & Platinum," Recording Industry Association of America, accessed January 21, 2023, [https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab\\_active=awards\\_by\\_artist](https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=awards_by_artist). The documentary claims that, when factoring in international sales, Kenny G has sold more than 75 million records worldwide. Although it is beyond the scope of this colloquy, Kenny G's international success, especially in Asia, also deserves much more scholarly attention.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Walser, "Popular Music Analysis: Ten Apothegms and Four Instances," in *Analyzing Popular Music*, ed. Allan F. Moore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 35.



Figure 1. Cover of Kenny G's Bestselling 1992 Album *Breathless*.

Lastly, Kenny G's public persona itself poses a problem. Like his sales figures, this problem is tied to his whiteness. Yet, here, the issue is not just that he is white, but also that he is considered "lame."<sup>10</sup> Compared to the standard, racialized image of the hip, cool, Black jazz musician, Kenny G stands out like a sore thumb—so much so that his lameness is easily reduced to a visual meme, such as the widely-disseminated photo of him and Miles Davis (Figure 2). In this regard, his interviews (including the ones in the documentary) have tended to further harm his image among jazz fans, as his public statements often imply that he doesn't really know much about jazz history. Kelsey Klotz's essay in this

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<sup>10</sup> I acknowledge that this term is problematic and ableist. Nevertheless, it is still commonly used within mainstream jazz discourse to describe Kenny G and his music. For example, in Pat Metheny's famous anti-Kenny G rant (which I discuss later in this essay), Metheny describes Kenny G's playing as "lame-ass, jive, pseudo bluesy, out-of-tune, noodling, wimped out, [and] fucked up." See "Pat Metheny on Kenny G," reproduced at Jazz Oasis, accessed January 15, 2023, <http://www.jazzoasis.com/methenyonkennyg.htm>.

colloquy explores the frustration of these moments, situating Kenny G's lack of self-awareness within a wider "ignorance of whiteness."



Figure 2. Kenny G and Miles Davis, 1987.

#### DECONSTRUCTING THE BACKLASH

While I have no doubt that Kenny G's detractors genuinely believe their case against him, their critiques are far more complicated than they tend to acknowledge and, ultimately, they reveal much more about the dominant values of mainstream jazz discourse than they do about Kenny G or his music. For the sake of brevity, I will limit myself to five overarching lessons that we might take away from the Kenny G backlash.

**1. Attempts to exclude Kenny G's music from jazz on musical grounds highlight the impossibility of defining jazz through any single set of musical criteria and demonstrate that musical judgements about jazz are ultimately subjective.**

Jazz's history is long and complex, and its borders have always been under constant negotiation.<sup>11</sup> As such, it is difficult to define it solely in musical terms.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the instability of musical genres, see David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016); for more

Nonetheless, many critics, fans, and musicians continue to insist that jazz has a narrow set of musical criteria. For those invested in policing jazz's boundaries, such narrow definitions are rhetorically useful, especially when trying to exclude Kenny G and smooth jazz from "real" jazz. However, they also run the risk of excluding many of jazz's most celebrated and venerated artists. For example, if "real" jazz required a bebop harmonic language, then Louis Armstrong's music wouldn't count, and if it required improvisation, then neither would many of Duke Ellington's compositions. If expressions of sentimentality were disqualifying, then *Charlie Parker with Strings* (1950) and *Chet Baker Sings* (1954) would be out. If we are to exclude recordings that are simply star vehicles for a single featured soloist, then we'd also have to throw out Coleman Hawkins's 1939 rendition of "Body and Soul," one of the most canonical recordings in jazz history. And if the problem is that Kenny G's music employs pop production practices, such as artificial reverb, then we'd have to do away with much of the material released on ECM Records, including recordings by Keith Jarrett, Pat Metheny, Jan Garbarek, and more. All of which is to say that there are always exceptions to the rule(s) and that any serious attempt to reject Kenny G and smooth jazz on purely "objective" musical grounds would have extreme, unintended consequences.<sup>12</sup>

As jazz scholar Tony Whyton argues, common critiques of Kenny G "rely on two fundamental assumptions: that there is such a thing as a tangible jazz community and that, within this community, there are identifiable standards by which Kenny G can be judged."<sup>13</sup> Both, Whyton shows, are flawed premises, which upon closer inspection reveal that "our sense of what jazz is—and, perhaps more importantly, isn't—is socially located and subject to change."<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, whether or not Kenny G should be considered jazz is a question of personal taste: its answer depends, largely, on whether or not someone likes his music, and whether or not they like jazz. Understandably, admitting this can be difficult for those deeply invested in gatekeeping jazz discourse, as such a subjective (and potentially inclusive) conception of the music would inherently challenge their personal authority over the genre's definition.

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on the complexities of policing jazz's borders, see David Ake, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and Daniel Goldmark, eds., *Jazz/Not Jazz: The Music and its Boundaries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> For more on the complexities surrounding strict definitions of jazz, see Lewis Porter, "Definitions," in *Jazz: A Century of Change* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), 13-38.

<sup>13</sup> Tony Whyton, "Not a Wonderful World: Louis Armstrong Meets Kenny G," in *Jazz Icons: Heroes, Myths and the Jazz Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 57-81.

<sup>14</sup> Whyton, "Not a Wonderful World," 71.

**2. Kenny G's commercial success demonstrates that jazz is still a form of popular music and therefore it might call into question jazz's elevated status in the cultural hierarchy.**

In the United States, jazz is now considered a “serious” artform—with many embracing Dr. Billy Taylor’s characterization of it as “America’s classical music.”<sup>15</sup> This status has brought increased respect to once-derided parts of African American culture and, importantly, has allowed jazz musicians to receive financial support from private and public organizations dedicated to promoting prestigious musical forms.<sup>16</sup> Yet, the cost of jazz’s acceptance as “high art” was exclusion: In order to associate jazz with the values of Western classical music, its proponents argued that jazz was (now) removed from the concerns of the commercial marketplace and from popular music in general. Under this rationale, jazz is more worthy because it is superior to, and disconnected from, pop, R&B, rock, hip hop, etc.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, styles of jazz that appear to be too closely tied to popular genres—such as fusion and smooth jazz—need to be disavowed if jazz is to maintain its elite position.<sup>18</sup>

It is important to note that jazz’s ascent within the cultural hierarchy is a relatively recent phenomenon, and that in the 1980s, when jazz’s elite status was still yet to be fully solidified, Kenny G and smooth jazz posed a real danger for those invested in the jazz-as-high-art project. As Washburne explains, “A rise in the popular appeal of smooth jazz raises a threat to the fragile jazz economy, creating even a greater need for the jazz community to distance themselves from smooth jazz styles. In other words, why fund jazz as art if it is commercially

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<sup>15</sup> William “Billy” Taylor, “Jazz: America’s Classical Music,” *The Black Perspective in Music* 14, no. 3 (Winter 1986): 21-25.

<sup>16</sup> As sociologist/pianist Howard S. Becker explained in 1982, “if I can argue cogently that jazz merits as serious consideration on aesthetic grounds as other forms of art music, then I can compete, as a jazz player, for grants and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and faculty positions in music schools, perform in the same halls as symphony orchestras, and require the same attention to the nuances of my work as the most serious classical composer or performer.” Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds*, 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 132.

<sup>17</sup> This is, of course, a false distinction and as Catherine Tackley argues, “in practice the interchange between jazz and popular music was and is vibrant and ongoing.” For more, see Catherine Tackley, “Jazz Meets Pop in the United Kingdom,” in *The Routledge Companion to Jazz Studies*, eds. Nicholas Gebhardt, Nichole Rustin-Paschal, and Tony Whyton (New York: Routledge, 2019), 97-104.

<sup>18</sup> For this disavowal’s legacy on U.S. music curricula, see Loren Kajikawa, “The Possessive Investment in Classical Music: Confronting Legacies of White Supremacy in U.S. Schools and Departments of Music,” in *Seeing Race Again: Countering Colorblindness Across Disciplines*, edited by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Luke Charles Harris, Daniel Martinez HoSang, and George Lipsitz (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 155-174.

sustainable popular music?”<sup>19</sup> Likewise, in his essay “Is Jazz Popular Music?,” sociologist Simon Frith notes that, by the late 1980s, the rhetorical distinction between “jazz” and “pop” had “become essential if jazz was to enjoy the support of grant givers and college authorities.”<sup>20</sup> Through his record sales and widespread popularity, Kenny G demonstrated that smooth jazz was not only a form of popular music, but a commercially successful one at that. Accepting his music as a credible type of jazz, therefore, might call into question jazz’s newfound high art status and potentially even lead to reduced institutional support for other, less popular jazz musicians. These anxieties continue to animate contemporary jazz discourse, even if that particular threat seems to have subsided; they are the reason, for example, that jazz fans appear to be so offended by the quantity of Kenny G’s record sales but have little concern for the amount sold by Eminem, Adele, or Coldplay. For many, it isn’t the money or fame they dislike *per se*, as much as the association of jazz with the popular.

In the end, Kenny G is simply one of many musicians who found crossover success by melding elements of jazz and other popular styles. In this sense, he is part of a lineage that extends back through fusion, soul jazz, hard bop, cool jazz, rhythm and blues, and beyond.<sup>21</sup> The issue is simply that, under the modern project to present jazz as an aesthetically autonomous art form, these have been retroactively reframed as inferior, less canonical styles.<sup>22</sup> In fact, as Charles Carson explores in his contribution to this colloquy, the current distaste for Kenny G among jazz critics, scholars, and musicians has actually fueled a wider dismissal of crossover jazz more broadly, even when those musical styles are firmly grounded in Black cultural and musical practices. Contrary to Ratliff’s claim in the documentary, however, Kenny G *is* a part of a jazz tradition, it just happens to be one that he and his fellow critics do not recognize or value.

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<sup>19</sup> Washburne, “Does Kenny G Play Bad Jazz?,” 139.

<sup>20</sup> Simon Frith, “Is Jazz Popular Music?,” *Jazz Research Journal* 1, no. 1 (2007): 13.

<sup>21</sup> See Charles D. Carson’s essay in this colloquy, as well as his “‘Bridging the Gap’: Creed Taylor, Grover Washington, Jr., and the Crossover Roots of Smooth Jazz,” *Black Music Research Journal* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 1-15; Kevin Fellezs, *Birds of Fire: Jazz, Rock, Funk, and the Creation of Fusion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Brian F. Wright, “Jaco Pastorius, the Electric Bass, and the Struggle for Jazz Credibility,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 32, no. 3 (2020): 121-138; and David Ake, “Jazz Historiography and the Problem of Louis Jordan,” in *Jazz Cultures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 42-61.

<sup>22</sup> Scott DeVeaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography,” *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 3 (Autumn, 1991): 525-60.

**3. Kenny G has a large Black audience, an inconvenient fact that complicates dismissals of his music as “not jazz.”**

Jazz is celebrated as a historically Black musical form and, as previously mentioned, Kenny G’s critics frequently depict his success as a form of cultural appropriation (i.e., as just another example of a white man making a living by ripping off Black music). Moreover, Kenny G’s racial privilege was obviously a contributing factor in his success, as the engrained racist logic of the music industry meant that labels, radio stations, and retailers were far more willing to invest time and capital into promoting his music than they were for comparable Black artists.<sup>23</sup> But this issue of appropriation is complicated by the demographics of Kenny G’s audience, specifically his substantial Black fan base. Although it is difficult to determine its exact extent, it is inarguable that—thanks, in part, to his support from the music industry—in the late 1980s and early 1990s Kenny G had a larger Black listenership than most, if not all, of his jazz contemporaries. This is an inconvenient fact that many jazz critics, fans, and scholars simply choose to ignore. Notably, when they do engage with it, they often attempt to explain it away using convoluted arguments. Take, for instance, this passage from Washburne:

On the one hand, [Kenny G’s] economic success and popularity... are reminiscent of previous generations of white musicians who, through the co-optation and appropriation of Black music styles, were able to enjoy great financial benefits, more so than their Black colleagues. On the other hand, [his] position is a sort of double co-optation because not only has he appropriated the stylistic parameters of Black music, but he has also appropriated a large Black audience in the process.<sup>24</sup>

To say that Kenny G has “appropriated a large Black audience” is to entirely dismiss the agency of that audience—to, in effect, treat them as unthinking fools who have been tricked into liking his music. Although it is clearly not Washburne’s intention, this argument reinforces problematic stereotypes of Black primitivism, simplicity, and gullibility. And as Charles Carson has previously demonstrated, these dismissals are part of a longstanding disregard for the aesthetic tastes of the Black middle class, a significant demographic that remains almost wholly overlooked within jazz studies.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> In the documentary, Kenny G ultimately acknowledges that his career “probably benefitted” from white privilege in some ways. *Listening to Kenny G*, 01:03:16–01:03:48. For more on this moment, see Klotz’s contribution to this colloquy.

<sup>24</sup> Washburne, “Does Kenny G Play Bad Jazz?” 135.

<sup>25</sup> See Carson, “Bridging the Gap.”

If modern fans and critics still have difficulty accepting Kenny G as a jazz musician, it is important to note that many Black institutions historically had no such trouble. For example, in 1989, the Soul Train Music Awards named Kenny G's *Silhouette* "Best Jazz Album" and, five years later, *Breathless* won the award again, beating out Terence Blanchard's *The Malcolm X Suite*. Likewise, in response to *Breathless*'s immense success, the NAACP honored Kenny G with their Image Award for "Outstanding Jazz Artist" in 1994, just one year after they had given it to Wynton Marsalis; in 1998, he was given the award a second time. These institutions obviously have their own ideological investments that deserve further exploration, and there is certainly much more to say about each of these four moments within the context of jazz and Black music history. But ignoring these complexities only perpetuates a simplistic understanding of Kenny G and of jazz itself, one that runs the real risk of perpetuating anti-Blackness.

**4. The visceral backlash against Kenny G's music highlights the toxic masculinity that still often undergirds popular jazz discourse.**

Kenny G's music revolves around outward displays of gentle emotionality. It is perhaps surprising, then, that the anti-Kenny G discourse is so vicious—and often so violent. In *Listening to Kenny G*, this is demonstrated through a montage of YouTube clips, including one in which a man uses a machine gun to destroy a copy of *Breathless*. Yet these violent fantasies are not only relegated to the obscure corners of the internet, they also appear in statements by mainstream jazz musicians. Most infamously, after Kenny G released an overdubbed version of Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World" in 1999, jazz guitarist Pat Metheny wrote a public rant in which he disparaged Kenny G for supposedly having defiled both Armstrong's and jazz's legacies (and for seeming to present himself as Armstrong's musical equal).<sup>26</sup> Notably, Metheny ended his rant with an explicit threat: "if I ever DO see him anywhere, at any function—he WILL get a piece of my mind and (maybe a guitar wrapped around his head)."<sup>27</sup>

What is it about Kenny G and his music that elicits such extreme emotional responses? According to Walser, "Violent reactions to Kenny G's music... surely betray a widespread cultural discomfort with, even contempt for, sensitivity. For many people, to admit to being moved by this music would seem to betray manipulation and emasculation."<sup>28</sup> Musicologist Aaron West similarly ties these

<sup>26</sup> In the documentary, Kenny G responds to Metheny's claims by noting that he received permission from the Louis Armstrong Foundation to release the recording, and that he donated all the profits from it to charity. *Listening to Kenny G*, 01:05:23–01:05:38. For an extended analysis of Metheny's rant, see Whyton, "Not A Wonderful World."

<sup>27</sup> Emphasis in original. See "Pat Metheny on Kenny G."

<sup>28</sup> Walser, "Popular Music Analysis," 37.

reactions to Kenny G's physical appearance (and, by extension, his Jewish ethnicity): "To many, Kenny G's slight stature, curly hair, and unusual playing posture, conjures an effeminate nature. His physical presence is the antithesis of the masculine rock vocalist or the brooding jazz figure and can be viewed as weakness or femininity."<sup>29</sup> Understood in this way, critiques of Kenny G's supposed "lameness" are essentially gendered. His music is soft, sensitive, and sentimental, and as a style, smooth jazz's comparatively large female fanbase has led the genre to be associated with femininity—which, as West implies, jazz fans often misogynistically treat as synonymous with "weakness."<sup>30</sup> The aggressive, over-the-top reactions to Kenny G thus in some ways stem from his refusal to meet the expectations of what Nichole Rustin-Paschal terms "jazzmasculinity," an idealized form of Black masculinity that is tied to the demonstration of mastery, virility, and heterosexual conquest.<sup>31</sup>

Gender and sexuality-based critiques of Kenny G's music remain common, even today. For example, West highlights one particularly homophobic Amazon review that, making the subtext of its critique explicit, simply states "kenny g = kenny gay."<sup>32</sup> But, as with the undercurrent of violence, these sentiments also exist within the mainstream. Take, for instance, critic Gary Giddins, currently the co-author of one of the most popular undergraduate jazz history textbooks. Writing for *JazzTimes* in 2003, Giddins theorized that one possible explanation for the "G" in Kenny G's stage name is that he "has a G-spot."<sup>33</sup> Will Layman's

<sup>29</sup> Aaron West, "Caught Between Jazz and Pop: The Contested Origins, Criticism, Performance Practice, and Reception of Smooth Jazz," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Texas, 2008), 139.

<sup>30</sup> For more on the gendered reception of smooth jazz, see Kristin McGee, "Promoting Affect and Desire in the International World of Smooth Jazz: The Case of Candy Dulfer," *Jazz Perspectives* 7, no. 3 (2013): 251–285. For a broader analysis of the intersections of gender and sentimentality in popular music, see Emily Gale, "Sounding Sentimental: American Popular Song from Nineteenth-Century Ballads to 1970s Soft Rock," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 2014).

<sup>31</sup> Nichole Rustin-Paschal, *The Kind of Man I Am: Jazzmasculinity and the World of Charles Mingus Jr.* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2017); for other recent analyses of jazzmasculinity, see *The Routledge Companion to Jazz and Gender*, edited by James Reddan, Monika Herzig, and Michael Kahr (New York: Routledge, 2023).

<sup>32</sup> West, "Caught Between Jazz and Pop," 139.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Whyton, "Not A Wonderful World," 65. For the original, see Gary Giddins, "Cadenza: I Remember Chirpy," *JazzTimes*, January/February 2003, 88. Notably, in the first edition of the trade book that serves as the basis for their aforementioned bestselling textbook, Giddins and co-author Scott DeVaux wrote, "There are many things to dislike about smooth jazz—for example, everything." Although they removed this sentence for their textbook, it is difficult to believe that the underlying sentiment See Gary Giddins and Scott DeVaux, *Jazz* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2009), 560.

aforementioned claim that Kenny G's music "is not sex" but "masturbation" likewise highlights how these sorts of masculine anxieties—specifically, jazzmasculine anxieties—continue to fuel critics' condemnations. Therefore, perhaps the most important lesson we should take away from the ongoing gendered backlash against Kenny G is that violent, homophobic, and misogynistic rhetoric are still problematically normalized in popular jazz discourse.

**5. Public disavowals of Kenny G now serve as an important form of virtue signaling in mainstream jazz discourse.**

Why is it that so many jazz fans feel the need to publicly expound on their hatred of Kenny G? Why not simply decide that his music is not for them and move on? In part, the answer is that reactions to Kenny G and smooth jazz now often act as a litmus test for jazz credibility. For jazz fans, public criticisms of Kenny G's music are meant to demonstrate their superior taste, sound critical judgment, and their deep knowledge of jazz history. Moreover, they also serve as a way to process personal anxieties related to one's own positionality. For those worried that they may not be Black enough, hip enough, or jazz enough, publicly "Othering" Kenny G as an outsider and interloper has become an important way to signal that they are on the "right side" of jazz discourse—that they are, in fact, "one of the good ones." In both instances, these disavowals should be understood as performative. Today, public expressions of anti-Kenny G sentiments serve a significant function within the formation of modern jazz communities: they are a necessary rite of passage that proves that the speaker belongs.<sup>34</sup>

CONCLUSION

My goal in this essay is not to convince anyone that they should like Kenny G or his music. Rather, I have attempted to demonstrate that a careful consideration of the backlash against him can provide useful insights into the underlying values and contradictions of contemporary jazz discourse. If nothing else, the lesson that Kenny G can teach us is that jazz history is often much more complicated—and much more interesting—than it first appears. Take, for example, that Kenny G/Miles Davis photo (Figure 2). Although it is now used to mock Kenny G and visually demonstrate his status as a jazz outsider, this is, in fact, his photo—*he* was the one who released it to the world. And, at least

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<sup>34</sup> For more on how modern jazz communities are formed and negotiated, see Ken Prouty, *Knowing Jazz: Community, Pedagogy, and Canon in the Information Age* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012).

according to him, Davis's seemingly disapproving facial expression obscures the real story of its origin:

That photo was taken backstage at Lincoln Center when I was [Davis's] opening act for some concerts... He sticks his head into my room and he goes, "Hey, you play that song, it's called 'Songbird.'" I go, "Thanks, Miles! Can we do a picture together?" And then somebody was there, and that was the picture. So, that's just the way Miles looked at me. He wasn't looking at me like he was mad... I remember that picture, because that's when Miles actually said to me: "I like what you are doing." Wow. There is a great stamp of approval right there.<sup>35</sup>

Kenny G's recollection of this moment is certainly open to debate. But even the most skeptical reading of it would have to contend with the complexity of this historical moment: This photo was taken backstage on the opening night of the 1987 JVC Jazz Festival in New York City, where Kenny G shared a bill with Davis for two shows. Media coverage of the concerts noted that

The crowd went wild when athletic fusion player Kenny G jumped offstage while playing a solo and walked up and down the aisle without missing a note. The charismatic Davis, sporting a red trumpet and high-energy funk band, drew the same kind of reaction by merely lifting his green sunglasses and staring at the audience.<sup>36</sup>

That is to say that, despite their different performing styles, *both performers* were enthusiastically embraced by the assembled crowd. Furthermore, this was not the only time the two had shared a stage: less than two weeks earlier, Kenny G and Miles Davis had performed at the Ohio Bell Jazz Festival outside of Cleveland, on a program that also included Freddie Hubbard and Woody Shaw, Dizzy Gillespie and James Moody, and Chick Corea (Figure 3).<sup>37</sup> These two events were part of a larger constellation of jazz festivals in the 1980s and they raise important questions about what jazz meant to the musicians, their

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<sup>35</sup> Lyndsey Parker, "Kenny G sets the record straight about his haters and that infamous Miles Davis photo," Yahoo Music, November 29, 2021, <https://www.yahoo.com/video/kenny-g-sets-the-record-straight-about-his-haters-and-that-infamous-miles-davis-photo-if-youre-around-long-enough-quality-is-always-going-to-rise-to-the-top-211127943.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Ken Franckling, "1987 JVC Jazz: Compelling Music, Many Milestones," UPI, reproduced at <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1987/06/27/1987-JVC-Jazz-Compelling-music-many-milestones/3013551764800/>.

<sup>37</sup> For an extended analysis of the current smooth jazz scene in Cleveland, see George Blake, "What We Talk about When We Talk about Live Smooth Jazz: Sonic Suburbanization, Multipurpose Places of Assembly, and Collective Memory in Regional Cleveland," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 17, no. 1 (2023): 1-19.

promoters, and their audiences. But, simply put, on those stages Kenny G and Miles Davis *were* jazz for a substantial number of people—a moment in time that is ultimately preserved by their photograph together.

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**Stevie Ray Vaughan & Double Trouble**

**Freddie Hubbard-Woody Shaw All-Stars**  
**Dizzy Gillespie Quintet with James Moody**  
**Chick Corea Elektric Band**  
**Kenny G.**  
**Miles Davis**

Freddie Hubbard  
Woody Shaw  
Kenny G  
Dizzy Gillespie  
Miles Davis  
Chick Corea  
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Figure 3 – Newspaper Advertisement for the 1987 Ohio Bell Jazz Festival.

There are legitimate criticisms of Kenny G, some of which are explored in this colloquy. Yet, for too long, the discourse surrounding him has been dominated by knee-jerk dismissals built on problematic foundations. Critics and scholars, with a few notable exceptions, largely have been unwilling to question or deconstruct this backlash and, as such, have tacitly endorsed it and its

rhetoric.<sup>38</sup> Regardless of whether Kenny G's music matches our personal tastes, allowing the popular criticisms against him to stand perpetuates narrow definitions of what constitutes "real" jazz and, in so doing, does a disservice to the music's richness and complexity. As Walser notes, "Arguments about Kenny G are arguments about what jazz has been, is, and should be."<sup>39</sup> These are, to my mind, arguments still worth having.

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<sup>38</sup> In addition to the work cited previously, I also recommend Carl Wilson's review of *Listening to Kenny G*, which provides a nuanced take on the documentary and the Kenny G backlash. See Carl Wilson, "Let's Talk About Kenny G: A new HBO documentary rethinks the legendary—and legendarily despised—smooth jazz colossus," *Slate*, December 2, 2021, <https://slate.com/culture/2021/12/listening-to-kenny-g-jazz-hbo-documentary-music-box.html>.

<sup>39</sup> Walser, "Popular Music Analysis," 36.

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## Kenny G and the Ignorance of Whiteness

Kelsey Klotz

Kenny G has often refused to consider whether or not he conceives of himself as a jazz musician. In interviews, he typically turns these questions around, asking “What kind of music do *you* think I play?” But in recent years, Kenny G seems to have overtly embraced jazz. His latest album, *New Standards* (2021), is the result of his desire to “do jazz”: in the 2021 documentary, *Listening to Kenny G*, he notes that he likes jazz standards, but that he wants to “do an album that sounds like I’m doing those standards, but they’re my new creations.”<sup>40</sup> In fact, two of the tracks, “Blues Skies” and “Milestones,” actually use the titles, though not the tunes, of “old” jazz standards. His recent live performances also highlight jazz history in what he calls “sax education” lessons, during which he plays “old” tunes like “Girl from Ipanema” and “Naima.” Kenny G’s shift toward claiming jazz indicates that he newly believes it is part of his job to play “old jazz tunes” for audiences, even as he continues to claim that he created a new sound: “you can call it a new sound of jazz,” he says, “a new jazz sound that appealed to a lot of people.”<sup>41</sup>

Despite this seeming turn toward jazz, throughout *Listening to Kenny G*, the titular saxophonist offers conflicting and contradictory examples of his simultaneous knowledge and refusal of jazz. In one scene, he names jazz musicians depicted on an art piece in his recording studio. He lists Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Dexter Gordon, before stumbling on a pianist wearing a hat: “This keyboard player, gosh, I’m not 100% sure who that is.” Someone in the background suggests it is Thelonious Monk (it is).<sup>42</sup> In another scene, archival footage shows Kenny G explaining to Charlie Rose that, while he finds the technique of Charlie Parker and John Coltrane “phenomenal,” “that music was never heartfelt for me... it wasn’t anything that I wanted to

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Many thanks to Eugenia Siegel Conte for her thoughtful comments and incisive edits on this essay.

<sup>40</sup> Penny Lane, dir., *Listening to Kenny G* (HBO Documentary Films, 2021), 00:25:25–00:25:31.

<sup>41</sup> *Listening to Kenny G*, 00:56:37–00:56:47.

<sup>42</sup> *Listening to Kenny G*, 00:25:43–00:25:54.

emulate.”<sup>43</sup> In his 2004 chapter on Kenny G, Christopher Washburne documents a 2002 interview with Ted Pankin, in which Kenny G asserted that “Charlie Parker would squeak a lot, and that’s why they called him Bird, because his reed would chirp,” a story that appears nowhere in the jazz titan’s legend.<sup>44</sup>

As frustrating as it may be for self-identified jazz folk, it is important to relive these cringeworthy moments. Not because they demonstrate some of the ways in which Kenny G is a ridiculously easy target for jazz critics and historians (to the point that I sometimes wonder if he is actually trolling those audiences), but because they reveal a key performance of whiteness—that is, the expectation and ability to make largely unimpeded choices about one’s life and livelihood. While Kenny G can shift between claiming and being ambivalent toward jazz, most Black jazz musicians across the twentieth century did not have the same musical choices available to them. Burton Peretti documents the experiences of bassist Milt Hinton, who explained that “There’s no place for a Black violin player in this world,” and saxophonist Benny Carter, who told jazz scholar Morroe Berger that as a Black musician, he “felt that there was no future in being a symphonic musician.”<sup>45</sup> Miles Davis’s autobiography includes the statement, “I knew that no white symphony orchestra was going to hire a little Black motherfucker like me, no matter how good I was or how much music I knew.”<sup>46</sup> These musicians—who were well-known in the jazz field—felt unable to craft musical identities outside of white mainstream society’s racist expectations of them. In what follows, I focus on one moment of simultaneous refusal and embrace of jazz featured in *Listening to Kenny G*, in which Kenny G discusses his collaboration with the deceased Stan Getz. Doing so demonstrates the musician’s ability to choose, and to not choose, jazz—and to choose, and to not choose, ignorance—in a uniquely white way.

Choosing ignorance (choosing to not know) represents a performance of whiteness. Race exists as a lived reality that has been used to justify the dehumanization of racial Others through slavery, acts of violence and terror, legal discriminations, and daily microaggressions; it is also a construct, however, with spoken and unspoken rules, behaviors, and speech acts defined and re-defined over the course of centuries. As I argue in *Dave Brubeck and the*

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<sup>43</sup> *Listening to Kenny G*, 00:27:33–00:27:41.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Christopher J. Washburne, “Does Kenny G Play Bad Jazz?,” in *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*, edited by Christopher J. Washburne and Maiken Derno (New York: Routledge, 2004), 126.

<sup>45</sup> Burton Peretti, *The Creation of Jazz: Music, Race, and Culture in Urban America* (Urbana-Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 74.

<sup>46</sup> Miles Davis, *Miles: The Autobiography*, with Quincy Troupe (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 59.

*Performance of Whiteness*, these habits are rehearsed in every interaction we have with ourselves, people we consider to be like ourselves, and people we consider to be Other.<sup>47</sup> The performance of whiteness is thus not a singular act, but rather is part of the repeated norms that guide everyday life, highlighting broad social conventions. Although whiteness is not a monolith, and its performance includes subtleties and variations, ultimately, across the documentary, as in his career, whiteness defines Kenny G's persona.<sup>48</sup>

#### PLAYING "WITH" STAN GETZ

Although Kenny G has collaborated with musicians across a wide spectrum of popular music, his primary collaborations with jazz musicians have been with *dead jazz* musicians: Louis Armstrong and Stan Getz.<sup>49</sup> The Stan Getz performance appears on the song "Legacy" on *New Standards*, and in the documentary, Kenny G insists that, "The jazz community's gonna hate it. I know they're gonna hate it."<sup>50</sup> Kenny G's presumption is no doubt based on the absolute firestorm of criticism that erupted after he "played with" (overdubbed) Louis Armstrong on "What a Wonderful World" in 1999. In that episode, as Brian F. Wright notes in the introduction to this colloquy, jazz critics and musicians were overwhelmingly appalled that Kenny G would co-opt

<sup>47</sup> Kelsey Klotz, *Dave Brubeck and the Performance of Whiteness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

<sup>48</sup> It is worth noting that Kenny G is also Jewish, although that part of his identity does not seem to occupy a prominent part of his performing persona (he mentions it once in the documentary while relaying an anecdote from the 1980s). The relationship between Jewishness and whiteness in the United States across the twentieth century is fraught, and it is important to highlight the anti-Semitic violence and discrimination carried out in the name of white supremacy. However, the documentary strongly suggests that Kenny G conceives of himself as a white man. For more on Kenny G's Jewishness, see: Sasha Rogelberg, "Without his Saxophone, Who is Kenny G?" *Jewish Exponent*, January 20, 2022, 18. For more on race, Jewishness, and whiteness, see Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks: and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994); Marc Dollinger, *Black Power, Jewish Politics: Reinventing the Alliance in the 1960s* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2018); Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Kelsey Klotz, "Negotiating Jewish Identity in *The Gates of Justice*," in *Dave Brubeck and the Performance of Whiteness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023); Deborah Lipstadt, "Anti-Semitism Is Thriving in America," *The Atlantic*, May 3, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/05/poway-shooting-shows-anti-semitism-flourishing/588649/>.

<sup>49</sup> Kenny G has name-checked Armstrong and Getz for decades as being musicians he admires, and musicians who he thinks his audience doesn't know, but should know. See George Varga, "Kenny G: Changing His Tune," *Jazz Times* 29, no. 1 (May 1999): 53-54.

<sup>50</sup> *Listening to Kenny G*, 01:19:10-01:19:14.

Armstrong, using his jazz credibility and popularity to imply that the two were musical equals. A fiery, Kenny G-excoriating letter in response by white guitarist Pat Metheny was shared and re-shared across jazz communities.

Indeed, some critics did not like the Getz track—but not in the way Kenny G imagined. As critic Will Layman writes,

In some manner, digital samples of notes recorded by Getz were cobbled together to create this track. Getz not only didn't consent to duet with the G Force, but he never phrased this melody, he never connected these notes, he never put his *musicianship* into this work. There's more to playing the saxophone than the digital recreation of tone.<sup>51</sup>

However, the vitriol directed toward Kenny G's prior Armstrong performance is not evident in reviews of the Getz performance: the *Down Beat* review by John McDonough didn't even mention this track.<sup>52</sup>

In reality, there was never any risk that critics would unleash the same torrent of fury on Kenny G for his track “with” Getz for a number of reasons. While respected, Getz is not as beloved as Armstrong. Though Getz helped popularize bossa nova in the United States, he is not credited with innovating a new approach to jazz improvisation (as Armstrong is). And Getz is white. To be clear: I don't make this final point out of some feeling of white grievance that white people can't get a fair shake in jazz. Rather, as musician/scholar Jason King explains in the documentary, “[Kenny G] really extends this long and troubling history of appropriation in popular music, where Black artists innovate, and then white artists come along and stylize and then receive greater financial remuneration, greater critical acclaim.”<sup>53</sup> However, many jazz critics and historians who objected strongly to Kenny G's appropriation of Armstrong operate within a frame that has, since the mid-1950s, largely tried to subvert that white-dominated music industry by recognizing Black jazz musicians' musical value and efforts, if not their commercial value.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Will Layman, “Kenny G and the Problem with Art that Asks Very Little of Us,” *PopMatters*, January 12, 2022, <https://www.popmatters.com/kenny-g-art-asks-little>.

<sup>52</sup> John McDonough, Review of *New Standards*, by Kenny G, *Down Beat*, April 2022, 46.

<sup>53</sup> *Listening to Kenny G*, 01:02:54-01:03:09.

<sup>54</sup> As Ingrid Monson writes, by the mid-1950s, white critics began a turn toward Blacker aesthetics, awarding more Black jazz musicians recognition in critics' awards, and placing more Black jazz musicians on the cover of *Down Beat*. There are, of course, important exceptions to this overriding narrative, particularly in the white backlash of the 1990s. See Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 67–69. I explore the concept of meritocracy within jazz communities in Kelsey Klotz, “Moving House and Herding Cattle: Dave Brubeck and the Possessive Investment of Whiteness,” in *The*

But again, Kenny G demonstrates little awareness of the difference between Stan Getz and Louis Armstrong within “the jazz community.” Indeed, a lack of self-awareness pervades the documentary—most notably when he is asked if he thinks being white benefited his career.

Kenny G offers a long monologue in response, explaining, “I’ve honestly never put a lot of thought into the color of my skin and my career and my success. Honestly haven’t.” He muses about whether record producer Clive Davis would have signed him if he was Black, before concluding, “So I’m gonna say I probably benefited from that. I’m kinda thinking that I got that door opened for me. Yeah, I think that’s a good question. I’ve never really thought about it like that and I think, I think I benefited.”<sup>55</sup> Throughout this monologue, Kenny G speaks with a slight smile (Figure 1), suggesting openness and honesty, at times shaking or nodding his head to emphasize a point. It is, in some ways, a vulnerable moment; but one that after a nearly 40-year career—pursued against the backdrop of multiple scandals revealing the entertainment industry’s continued privileging of white and male members (a few notable examples include MTV’s seeming refusal to play music videos by Black artists, Justin Timberlake’s 2004 Super Bowl halftime controversy, and Eminem’s massive popularity), not to mention multiple uprisings in response to racism in Los Angeles (1992), Ferguson, Missouri (2014), Minneapolis (2020), and so many other cities in the United States and worldwide—is unbelievably and blindingly short-sighted.

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*Oxford Handbook of Political Economy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. Dale Chapman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>55</sup> *Listening to Kenny G*, 01:03:10-01:03:59.



Figure 1. Kenny G reflecting on his white privilege, *Listening to Kenny G* (2021)

A lack of self-awareness or recognition, while problematic from a jazz historical perspective, represents a crucial, overdone performance of whiteness in which an individual is unable to perceive distinctions in oppressions or to comprehend how an individual can impact other individuals. Many white people have not had to consider themselves as racialized subjects whose lives and livelihoods have been shaped by whiteness. As James Baldwin wrote decades ago, “They [white people] are in effect still trapped in a history which they do not understand and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it.”<sup>56</sup>

Writer Ralph Ellison calls white people like this “sleepwalkers” because they are unaware of their place among others in the world.<sup>57</sup> Choosing to be unaware and to lack knowledge, and to not be held responsible for that lack, is a fundamental privilege of whiteness, (re)performed over the course of centuries. Philosopher Charles W. Mills calls such lack of racial knowledge on the part of whites (as well as some people of color) “white ignorance.”<sup>58</sup> White ignorance can stem from “straightforward racist motivation,” but it does not have to; Mills writes that colorblindness is a form of white ignorance often not based in bad faith, but nevertheless refuses to recognize historic legacies of structural discrimination. And, as Sherrie Tucker writes, white people do not “have to

<sup>56</sup> James Baldwin, “A Letter to My Nephew,” *The Fire Next Time* (1962; repr. New York: Vintage, 1992), 8.

<sup>57</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952; New York: Vintage International, 1995), 8.

<sup>58</sup> Charles W. Mills, “White Ignorance,” in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 11–38.

choose or know about [their] privilege to benefit from it.”<sup>59</sup> White ignorance insists that ignorant white people are still morally good and creates distinctions between one “innocent” white person and racist, violently anti-Black white individuals. As journalist Reni Eddo-Lodge explains, “We tell ourselves that good people can’t be racist... We tell ourselves that racism is about moral values, when instead it is about the survival strategy of systemic power.”<sup>60</sup>

But whiteness has never been invisible; people of color have survived by knowing how it operates, whether or not white people choose to know. As Sara Ahmed writes, “the power of whiteness is maintained *by being seen*; we see it everywhere, in the casualness of white bodies in spaces, crowded in parks, meetings, in white bodies that are displayed in films and advertisements, in white laws that talk about white experiences, in ideas of the family made up of clean white bodies.”<sup>61</sup> White ignorance is not an accident; it is at once a privilege and a performance re-played throughout history—and that performance is on full display in *Listening to Kenny G* and throughout Kenny G’s career.

#### KNEE-JERK REACTIONS AND THE PERFORMANCE OF RACE

When I critically analyze performances of whiteness, there is often an implicit assumption that I simply don’t like whatever musician/organization I examine; this is rarely ever true, but not irrelevant. I never felt terribly strongly either way about Kenny G. While my brothers and I kind-heartedly mocked my mother’s interest in Kenny G as children, I also had teachers in jazz camps shut down any Kenny G bashing, saying that many people obviously found Kenny G’s music meaningful, and that they hoped they could create music as meaningful. I have taught Kenny G in jazz history classes, opening up conversations about the extent to which virtuosity, or commercialism, or production, might define the jazz genre.

But the HBO documentary changed things for me. I was baking cookies as I watched, and at several points felt the need to jam my flour-covered fingers aggressively at my iPad to pause the documentary and let out a rant, venting my frustration with my rolling pin or in long text messages to my (rather amused) spouse. I was surprised by the rage I felt toward a musician about whom I’d previously given relatively little thought and had in fact defended. Given the extent to which Kenny G flies in the face of much of the jazz tradition, it is

<sup>59</sup> Sherrie Tucker, *Dance Floor Democracy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 314.

<sup>60</sup> Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 63-64.

<sup>61</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism,” *Borderlands E-Journal* 3, no. 2 (2004): para. 14.

understandable that many of us embedded in some way in the jazz field would cling to knee-jerk dismissals of his music. Tuning into and analyzing these knee-jerk dismissals, however, can often tell us much more about the field and our place within it. As ethnomusicologist Eugenia Siegel Conte argues, “Our emotional life, health, and connections to ethics and community engagement always drive our observational efforts; and rather than ignore or obscure them, perhaps we should find ways to acknowledge them more fully in our own work.”<sup>62</sup> Conte calls this work *diagnostic embodiment*, or a scholarly way of interpreting what we as academics “observe, question, privilege, and feel in [our] fieldwork with professional groups.” As Wright explains in the introduction to this colloquy, my knee-jerk reaction was performative (even if only performed to myself and my spouse), but more than that, it was part of an individual and collective performance of race consciousness.

The critical discourse around Kenny G has always been about race, whether implicitly or explicitly. And as much as Kenny G performs whiteness, so, too, do some of us in our hate of Kenny G. Critics and historians see too many aspects that reflect Kenny G’s individual white privilege *and* the ways the music industry is set up to systemically privilege white musicians. Many of us have been steeped in a particular race consciousness about the history of jazz in terms of the dichotomy between who has contributed and who has benefited; as one of the genre’s most famous exponents, Kenny G is anathema to the racial paradigm constructed and defended by many jazz critics and historians. Many reactions to, and against, Kenny G can be described using Sara Ahmed’s conception of love and the nation. For many in-group jazz musicians, scholars, and listeners, hating Kenny G is performed as an act of love for jazz, a music we also often worriedly frame around narratives of preservation and death; as Ahmed explains, “Because we love, we hate and this hate is what makes us together.”<sup>63</sup> For us, and particularly for those of us who are white, hating Kenny G is a low-risk, emphatic re-assertion of our reverence for jazz as Black music in some minimal way. We receive the added benefit of getting to be “good white people” for recognizing Kenny G’s performance of whiteness and acting to save jazz from his clutches without necessarily having to do anti-racist work in the jazz field.<sup>64</sup> This (much harder) work should include, in part, decision-making about who,

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<sup>62</sup> Eugenia Siegel Conte, “‘Sounding Good’? Choral Activism and Advocacy,” “‘Here in this Generous Room’: Space, Voice, and the Curation of Affect in Euro-American Choralism,” PhD diss., (University of California, Santa Barbara, forthcoming, 2023).

<sup>63</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (London: Routledge Press, 2004), 43.

<sup>64</sup> Robin DiAngelo, *Nice Racism: How Progressive White People Perpetuate Racial Harm* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2021); Shannon Sullivan, *Good White People: The Problem with Middle-Class White Anti-Racism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2009).

what, and how we teach, promote, research, and hire, and recognizing systems of white supremacy and their impact on us as individuals—acts with subversive potential within the systems of white supremacy that have long defined our field.

POSTSCRIPT: KENNY G, WOMEN, AND JAZZ

One last thought: This essay has focused on Kenny G’s performance of whiteness. However, a full analysis would necessarily be more intersectional. In particular, I am interested in the role gender plays in jazz critics’ ranging disinterest or dislike of Kenny G. I can’t ignore the sense that hating Kenny G is also part of a long tradition of demeaning women’s choices in the spheres of popular music and, especially, jazz. I am reminded of my mother, and all of the other women for whom Kenny G’s music was significant. While gender identity or expression cannot unilaterally define what people are or are not fans of Kenny G, I am left wondering what the at times gender-based derision of Kenny G did for women who were or might have been interested in jazz. Despite anecdotal grumblings about how few women attend live jazz performances, NEA Surveys of Public Participation in the Arts have, since 2002, affirmed and re-affirmed that, in a binary understanding of gender, men and women attend jazz events at roughly equal rates (Table 1). This suggests that those anecdotal grumblers likely have a more limited understanding of what counts as jazz performance, defined by historically gendered conceptions of what does and does not “count” as “jazz.”

	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>
<b>2002</b>	10.8%	10.7%
<b>2008</b>	7.9%	7.7%
<b>2012</b>	8.3%	7.9%
<b>2017</b>	8.5%	8.7%

Table 1. Self-reported jazz attendance rates divided by gender, NEA Surveys of Public Participation in the Arts<sup>65</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Tom Bradshaw and Bonnie Nichols, “2002 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts,” National Endowment for the Arts, March 2004, <https://www.arts.gov/impact/research/publications/2002-survey-public-participation-arts>; Kevin Williams and David Keen, “2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts,” National Endowment for the Arts, November 2009, <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/2008-SPPA.pdf>; Bohne Silber and Tim Triplett, “A Decade of Arts Engagement: Findings from the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, 2002–2012,” National Endowment for the Arts, January 2015, <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/2012-sppa-feb2015.pdf>; Mary Anne Carter, “U.S. Patterns of Arts Participation: A Full Report from the 2017 Survey of Public

To be clear, I am not arguing that there are jazz sounds or subgenres that are somehow inherently more male or female, but rather that there are sounds and subgenres that have historically been associated with masculinity or femininity, and further, that in addition to women historically being excluded from jazz, jazz that has been associated with women has also been excluded from pervasive patriarchal definitions of jazz. As Wright notes in the introduction to this colloquy, “attempts to exclude Kenny G’s music from jazz on musical grounds highlight the impossibility of defining jazz through any single set of musical criteria and demonstrate that musical judgements about jazz are ultimately subjective.” I would add that those subjective musical judgements about jazz are rooted in raced, gendered, and sexed (among other identifiers) understandings about the music, the places it does or does not inhabit, the people who perform it, and the people who write about it. Consider, as an example, Wright’s initial description of critics’ objections to Kenny G’s music, and to smooth jazz more generally: “With its soft timbres, its consonance, its dynamic swells, its effortlessly resolving harmonies, its sonic emphasis on pop production techniques (most notably, reverb and echo), and its catchy melodies, smooth jazz deliberately invokes notions of romance, sentimentality, and femininity.” From its “softness” to its “swells” to its simplicity to its association with popular music, smooth jazz is already always abundantly gendered—even before associations with “notions of romance, sentimentality, and femininity.” Even pianist Fred Hersch’s reaction to Kenny G immediately feminizes his sound while simultaneously distancing it from “real” jazz: “My gut reaction is that it’s like Paul Whiteman trying to make a lady out of jazz... he [Kenny G] is not a jazz musician.” Hersch continues with a sentiment familiar to any woman who has been told to smile more: “He’s the only person I’ve ever seen who is able to smirk while playing the saxophone.”<sup>66</sup>

The 2016 film *La La Land* offers one high profile and fictionalized example of what I mean by jazz’s exclusion of women and genres that jazz critics and musicians have associated with femininity.<sup>67</sup> Jazz pianist Sebastian (Ryan Gosling), horrified upon hearing that potential love interest and aspiring actress

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Participation in the Arts,” National Endowment for the Arts, December 2019, <https://www.arts.gov/impact/research/arts-data-profile-series/adp-18>.

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Varga. Recalling such additional expectations that women musicians should also look good, saxophonist and bandleader Peggy Gilbert once remarked, “The girl bands were hired as attractions for the men, and club managers were always reminding us not to take the music so seriously, to smile more. How can you smile with a horn in your mouth?” Quoted in Jo Ann Baldinger, “The Dixie Belles—Peggy Gilbert’s Not-Ready-For-Retirement Band,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 8, 1981: Calendar Section, 4.

<sup>67</sup> Damien Chazelle, dir., *La La Land*, (Summit Entertainment, 2016), DVD.

Mia (Emma Stone) hates jazz, immediately takes her to a jazz club to explain why she is wrong (Figure 2).<sup>68</sup> Sebastian starts by telling a story about how jazz was born in New Orleans flop houses by people who spoke five different languages and couldn't communicate with one another except through jazz, and Mia responds, "Yeah, but what about Kenny G?" The audience sees Sebastian immediately tense up, flabbergasted that Kenny G would even be part of a conversation about jazz. Mia presses on: "What about Kenny G, I mean what about elevator music? You know? *Jazz* music, that *I* know. From *my* life." Jazz audiences might see Sebastian clutching his fist to his mouth, as if holding in bile (either metaphorical or literal), as a sign of masculine restraint, as he forces out through clenched teeth, "What about it?" Mia adds that she finds jazz relaxing, and Sebastian, identifying something tangible that he can argue against, insists that jazz is *not* relaxing, offering as evidence that Sidney Bechet had once supposedly shot somebody for saying he had played a wrong note (he does not mention that the person he shot was a bystander). Mia continues, still relaxed and apparently not picking up on the existential tension she has created in Sebastian, explaining that where she grew up there was a radio station that people put on when they had a cocktail party and everyone would talk over it. Sebastian looks defeated, his head in his hand, rubbing his brow in frustration. He changes his tack, explaining that the problem now is Mia has never seen jazz live: "You have to see it! You have to see what's at stake... It's new every night. It's very, very exciting," he says earnestly. Sebastian, the prototypically hyperbolic mansplainer characteristic of director Damien Chazelle's jazz-oriented work, is clearly positioned to the audience as being in the right; he is, after all, the character who knows the most about jazz and its history. However, Mia has a definition of and history with jazz, as well (jazz music from *her* life)—one that is entirely discounted by Sebastian's canonical knowledge musically and experientially in a scene that clocks in at less than two minutes. In those two minutes, Sebastian speaks for a total of about 71.5 seconds, Mia speaks for just 25 seconds, and music plays by itself for 6 seconds.

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<sup>68</sup> *La La Land*, 00:43:40-00:45:30.



Figure 2. Sebastian (right) explains jazz to Mia (left) in *La La Land* (2016)

But what would happen if we understood Mia's experiences of jazz to have legitimacy? What impact would that have on histories of jazz? If we as jazz scholars are to truly understand the apparent disjunct between self-reported jazz audiences and jazz audiences we witness at "typical" jazz venues, then we must shift our definitions of jazz to include the perspective of audience members. In other words, further study is needed of Kenny G and smooth jazz from the perspective of gender justice, as well as the critical privileging of masculinity in the creation of genre definitions; this work might redress some of jazz's longstanding issues with regard to gender inclusivity in particular.

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#### ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

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## 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*.<sup>69</sup> 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.<sup>70</sup> 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.

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<sup>69</sup> Audi, “Startled Smart,” Superbowl Commercial, 2012, reproduced at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQrAJp84jLk>.

<sup>70</sup> 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.<sup>71</sup> 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

<sup>71</sup> 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.<sup>72</sup> 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

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<sup>72</sup> 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.<sup>73</sup>

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."<sup>74</sup> 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

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<sup>73</sup> 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.

<sup>74</sup> 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.<sup>75</sup> 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."<sup>76</sup>

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

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<sup>75</sup> 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).

<sup>76</sup> 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.<sup>77</sup> 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.<sup>78</sup> 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.”<sup>79</sup> 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.”<sup>80</sup> 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,

<sup>77</sup> 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.

<sup>78</sup> 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.

<sup>79</sup> Adam Harper, “Lo-fi Aesthetics in Popular Music Discourse” (Ph.D. dissertation, Oxford University, 2014), 55.

<sup>80</sup> 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.<sup>81</sup> 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

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<sup>81</sup> 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.<sup>82</sup> 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.<sup>83</sup> 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.”<sup>84</sup> 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

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<sup>82</sup> 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).

<sup>83</sup> 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.

<sup>84</sup> 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.<sup>85</sup> 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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<sup>85</sup> 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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## Aesthetic Abjection: Kenny G From the Saxophonists' Perspective

Adrienne Honnold

When I tell someone that I am a saxophonist, it is not uncommon for them to animatedly reply, “Oh, like Kenny G!” Admittedly, this response used to frustrate me. Like most saxophonists, Kenneth Gorelick was not an artist or an image with whom I can easily relate. In fact, I had been (informally) taught to disavow him as the antithesis of everything that we stand for in the saxophone community. Despite our objections, however, Kenny G has come to symbolize the saxophone in the public imagination—indeed, he might be one of the only living sax players that a non-musician can name. In this essay, I explore the saxophone community’s complicated relationship with Kenny G, and why we have so often dismissed one of the most prominent, public-facing representatives of our instrument.

### THE SAXOPHONE COMMUNITY

I played my first professional gig in a symphony orchestra in 1996, and I self-identified as a member of the saxophone community a few years before that, as a teenager. Overall, this community is made up of passionate musicians—a blend of students, amateurs, semi-professionals, and professionals from all over the world. Although membership in this community is unofficial, it is often determined through a combination of factors: knowledge of equipment (horn makes and models, mouthpieces, necks, reeds, and even neck straps); participation in community music-making; active engagement in social media and online interest groups; and attendance at professional conferences hosted by the North American Saxophone Alliance and/or the Jazz Education Network, along with official membership in those groups.<sup>86</sup> It is therefore a global

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<sup>86</sup> Ken Prouty’s exploration of online jazz communities references the “self-identification” or “self-selection” as a core identity for members of the group, along with the way that these forums play a crucial role in community formation. See Ken Prouty, *Knowing Jazz: Community*,

community, one that is enthusiastically connected through its love of the saxophone and a shared commitment to the instrument's performance and promotion.

But, like most enthusiastic communities, we are also a protective bunch. The relative newness of our instrument has instilled in us a collective sense of yearning for legitimacy, especially in the classical field. And not unlike those in the jazz community, we often see ourselves as underdogs fighting for respect and prestige. As part of this mindset, saxophonists are quick to dismiss artists and styles that may tarnish their instrument's image. Many therefore see the disavowal of Kenny G and his music as a necessary step to protect the saxophone's reputation.

As Brian F. Wright notes in the introduction to this colloquy, Kenny G haunts contemporary jazz discourse; he also haunts the discourse surrounding the saxophone. I witnessed and participated in this discourse firsthand as I researched my dissertation on the saxophone and popular music in the Twenty-First Century.<sup>87</sup> As part of this project, I interviewed several prominent modern saxophonists including Mindi Abair, Mike Burton, Jeff Coffin, Sal Lozano, Branford Marsalis, Lenny Pickett, and Kirk Whalum. To my surprise, several of these players brought up the subject of Kenny G unprompted, which led me to discuss him and analyze this discourse in more depth than I had initially planned. In the following section, I draw on material from these interviews and from public saxophone forums to explain the complex basis for Kenny G's negative reputation within the saxophone community.

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*Pedagogy, and Canon in the Information Age* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), 115-150.

<sup>87</sup> Adrienne Honnold, "Unacknowledged Ubiquity: The Saxophone in Popular Music," Ph.D. dissertation (University of Birmingham, 2021). The dissertation explored the saxophone's associations with cool/kitsch, gender/sexuality, and race, weaving the interview data throughout three case studies of commercially successful popular songs from the early 2010s that prominently featured the instrument.

## THE PLAYERS' PERSPECTIVES

When one of my first records came out and someone asked me about the whole Kenny G thing... I was just like, look I don't slam him because he brought a lot of notoriety to the saxophone and a lot of us probably wouldn't have the chance to be successful if weren't for him paving the way. And boy did I get slammed for that. But I stand by it!<sup>88</sup>

-Mindi Abair

In online discussion forums, rank and file members of the saxophone community openly denigrate Gorelick for his inability to meet their accepted standards. This can be seen clearly in the many threads that discuss Kenny G on the *Sax on the Web* site (a prominent online discussion forum for the saxophone community), where users regularly engage in a rambling constellation of sarcastic comments about the musician. For example, in one post, responding to the question, "How do I sound like Kenny G?," user martysax quipped, "have curly hair and play from one side of your mouth? (just kidding 😊)." <sup>89</sup> This exchange, and the many others like it, allude to the seemingly common perception among saxophonists that there are fundamental problems with Gorelick's tone and technique.<sup>90</sup> On another thread from the same forum topic, a different user had this to say about his tone:

There is one thing about KG that REALLY BOTHERS me... I can't stand this kind of soprano saxophone sound... KG's sound affects me like nails being run across a blackboard.... you know, that awful screech.<sup>91</sup>

In the same discussion, responding to someone who wrote, "if you don't like it, don't listen to it," user Groovesax explained:

Excuse me Bill, but if you go out in public you are forced to listen to him. In the plane, in the elevator, in the freakin sandwich shop where I got lunch today!... The grace notes, the vibrato, the shmaltzy little rubatos... I will say this, though, it does give a shmuck like me... the hope that we can play

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<sup>88</sup> Mindi Abair, interview with the author, January 18, 2018.

<sup>89</sup> martysax, "Kenny G," *Sax on the Web* online forum, December 14, 2004 (Accessed March 20, 2023), <https://www.saxontheweb.net/threads/kenny-g.17935/>.

<sup>90</sup> It should be noted that there are several different viewpoints posted regarding Kenny G, but the users with a negative perception of his playing seem to be particularly vocal and sardonic in tone.

<sup>91</sup> Roger Aldridge, "Kenny G," *Sax on the Web* online forum.

watered down programmed music and the general public will actually consider us to be really good sax players.<sup>92</sup>

Conspicuously absent from these critiques are substantive descriptions of what technical standards his critics are using to judge Kenny G's playing and why those standards are appropriate.<sup>93</sup>

One of the most significant goals that a saxophonist works toward is having a unique, distinctive tone. In many ways, Kenny G has done just that: he has a singular sound that is immediately recognizable. And yet, as the saxophonists in the aforementioned forums attest, many reject this aspect of his playing, in part because they interpret the timbre of his soprano sax playing to be "screechy," "edgy," or "nasal"—words that stand apart from their agreed-upon timbral ideal, which is often described as "dark," "full," or "round."<sup>94</sup> Moreover, as martysax points out, Kenny G also plays out of the side of his mouth, an important factor that is partially responsible for his pinched sound. According to traditional saxophone pedagogy, the mouthpiece should be placed directly in the center of the mouth (the widest part of the aperture of the embouchure), so that the reed can vibrate to its fullest potential. This allows the musician to produce a free, unencumbered sound. When saxophonists in these forums criticize Kenny G's tone and technique, they tend to invoke a similar ideal, "universal standard" of saxophone playing. Yet, such claims are more complicated than they may appear. For instance, Lester Young, one of the most celebrated jazz saxophonists of all time, also played with an unusual embouchure, but his nontraditional tone or technique are never used to question his integrity or authenticity. Moreover, as Robert Walser observes, negative assessments of Kenny G's technique seem to be concealing the real problem that saxophonists have with him, which is his image.<sup>95</sup> That is to say, saxophonists seem to be most offended by what the decidedly "uncool" Kenny G represents rather than what he sounds like.

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<sup>92</sup> Groovesax, "Kenny G," *Sax on the Web* online forum.

<sup>93</sup> As Prouty notes, members of online music communities often engage in the act of deciding "who's in and who's not" through an undefined—and often shifting—set of criteria. See Prouty, *Knowing Jazz*, 138.

<sup>94</sup> Jazz saxophonist David Liebman's book, *Developing a Personal Saxophone Sound*, provides an assemblage of adjectives that are commonly used to describe saxophone sounds that further highlight the instrument's versatility and capacity for expression: "light, airy, cutting, brassy, bright, full, fuzzy, deep, dark, nasal, piercing, clear, smooth, shimmering, silky, biting, watery, tinny, cool, harsh, dry, sour, screeching, lush, luxurious, velvety, and bell-like." See David Liebman, *Developing a Personal Saxophone Sound*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Medfield, MA: Dorn Publications, 1994), 6.

<sup>95</sup> Robert Walser, "Popular Music Analysis: Ten Apothegms and Four Instances," in *Analyzing Popular Music*, ed. Allan F. Moore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 34-35.

First and foremost, Kenny G's choices have led other saxophonists to question his integrity. For example, in 1997 he famously set a Guinness World Record for the longest continuously played note, using circular breathing to play an Eb on a soprano sax for forty-five minutes.<sup>96</sup> This appeared to be a publicity stunt that took place at J&R Music World in Manhattan, the renowned home entertainment and computer superstore located across the street from City Hall and one block from the World Trade Center, which was an integral stop for the popular musical elite to promote their newest albums.<sup>97</sup> Circular breathing is also a fairly common extended technique that many professional saxophonists are capable of doing, although few are interested in taking it to such extremes. From their perspective, then, Kenny G's "World Record" was nothing but an attention-grabbing stunt. Although the public may have been impressed by it, this moment was widely interpreted within the saxophone and jazz communities as an act of vanity, one designed to convey a false sense of virtuosity.

Two years later, Gorelick released a recording he made of himself playing over Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World." As Wright discusses in the introduction, this recording was interpreted as another example of misguided hubris, one that seemed to imply that Kenny G saw himself as a worthy successor to Armstrong's legacy. For many, this was an arrogant and blasphemous undertaking. For instance, in my interview with Jeff Coffin, the saxophonist with the Dave Matthews Band and Béla Fleck, Coffin explained, "[Kenny G's] playing on ["What A Wonderful World"], I'm not so crazy about... I don't begrudge him, do your thing, you know? But I don't really like it. But you can't argue with his success and people love him. It's all ok at the end of the day. I don't think he's very respectful in some ways, but he's a good saxophonist."<sup>98</sup> In contrast to the online forum participants, Coffin does not dismiss Gorelick's tone or technique. Instead, he adopts a nuanced and diplomatic approach, demonstrating a relative ambivalence about Kenny G's recorded output while still critiquing what his actions represent. Coffin implies that the choices made by Kenny G effect the image of the saxophone, and that is the most troubling aspect of his mainstream success.

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<sup>96</sup> The category has since been cancelled by *Guinness*. See "The Longest Note Record Gets Broken, Or Maybe Not," *Morning Edition*, NPR, May 11, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/2017/05/11/527895011/the-longest-note-record-gets-broken-or-maybe-not>.

<sup>97</sup> Sotheby's. "J&R Music World: A New York Institution," *Sotheby's*. August 18, 2021. Accessed April 30, 2023. <https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/j-r-music-world-a-new-york-institution>.

<sup>98</sup> Jeff Coffin, interview with the author, May 31, 2018.

Kenny G's outsized income also appears to deeply trouble the saxophone community. According to unverified online sources, Kenny G may be worth anywhere from \$50 to \$200 million.<sup>99</sup> By contrast, most professional saxophonists earn a modest income as professionals and supplement their salaries through teaching. They make a good living, at best, but are nowhere near as globally recognized or financially compensated as Gorelick. Kenny G's fame and money clearly play a role in saxophonists' negative reception of him. Likewise, many of them appear to think that they could simply *decide* to play like Kenny G and earn millions of dollars for themselves, but they don't do so because it would be "selling out."

For saxophonists, the public's perception of Kenny G is also a problem. For example, in 2010, Kenny G appeared in the music video for Katy Perry's hit song "Last Friday Night (T.G.I.F.)"<sup>100</sup> The video is a nostalgic parody of John Hughes films of the 1980s: Katy Perry plays the main character that undergoes a "geek to chic" transformation in the midst of a wild party. In keeping with a major trend in the popular music of the era, "Last Friday Night" includes a noteworthy yet brief saxophone solo performed by Lenny Pickett. In the video, however, it is Kenny G who mimes along to the track (Figure 1).<sup>101</sup> Interestingly, Pickett did not mind this substitution and in fact acknowledged that Gorelick's "image" was more appropriate for the video. As he explained to me, "I think because Kenny G is a more immediately recognizable retro character than me. He's an '80s guy. What he's famous for is 'Songbird' and things like that from the '80s, and he has a very '80s kind of look... I kind of liked [his appearance in the video]. I thought it was really funny."<sup>102</sup> Kenny G's presence in this video (Figure 2) shows his willingness to be the punchline about the ubiquity of saxophone solos in the '80s, one that treats the instrument as the marker of a silly, bygone era.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> A simple google search of "Kenny G net worth" garnered several websites of dubious provenance that discussed this topic, such as "Kenny G Net Worth," *Celebrity Net Worth*, 2023, <https://www.celebritynetworth.com/richest-celebrities/Kenny-gnet-worth/>.

<sup>100</sup> Katy Perry, "Last Friday Night (T.G.I.F.)," Music Video, Capitol Records, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KlyXNRrsk4A>.

<sup>101</sup> Pickett said in his interview with me that he "unwittingly" participated in the saxophone becoming almost a "complete joke" in the 1980s because of over-saturation in mainstream popular music, a decade where saxophone solos could be found in just about every genre of popular music. Lenny Pickett, interview with the author, January 24, 2018.

<sup>102</sup> Pickett, interview with the author.

<sup>103</sup> Around the same time as "Last Friday Night," Gorelick appeared in a series of high-profile mockumentary-style Audi advertisements that debuted during Super Bowl XLV (2011) where he uses his saxophone playing to soothe "luxury prisoners." In both instances, there is a presumption that the directors of these projects specifically chose him for these roles because



Figure 1. Kenny G miming along to the saxophone part in "Last Friday Night (T.G.I.F.)"



Figure 2. Kenny G being carried away by the partygoers in "Last Friday Night (T.G.I.F.)"

Despite the wealth of complaints about his technical abilities, musical choices, and commercial success, at the moment, Gorelick's willingness to be the butt of jokes and his embrace of (and capitalizing on) the public perception of him and the saxophone as retro novelties is perhaps the biggest factor in modern

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audiences associate him with a retro kitsch. See Charles D. Carson's contribution to this colloquy, as well as Honnold, "Unacknowledged Ubiquity" 228.

saxophonists' unfavorable opinion of him. Kenny G consciously presents himself and the saxophone as silly and frivolous, and this image is reprehensible to the larger community of saxophonists whose greatest fear is not being taken seriously.

#### HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS

Kenny G was not the first musician to play an outsized role in the public perception of the saxophone. Over the course of the Twentieth Century, figures like Rudy Wiedoeft, Jimmy Dorsey, King Curtis, Michael Brecker, and Branford Marsalis, among many others, have crossed over into the mainstream with varying degrees of success and controversy. Many others—Steve Gregory (“Careless Whisper”), Raphael Ravenscroft (“Baker Street”), and Candy Dulfer (Prince; “Lily Was Here”)—remained mostly anonymous while providing iconic saxophone solos that came to epitomize the so-called “second saxophone craze” of the late 1970s and 1980s.

However, like Kenny G, saxophonists that achieve crossover success have regularly been treated as separate from “real” jazz, especially in retrospect. Perhaps the most famous example of this phenomenon is Louis Jordan (1908–1975). Known as both the “King of the Jukebox” and the “Father of R&B,” Jordan embodied a shift in popular music from swing to rhythm & blues, and his success as a saxophonist, bandleader, and songwriter was virtually unmatched in the immediate post-war years: Between 1942 and 1951, he and his band, the Tympany Five, had fifty-seven hits on the *Billboard* charts, and over the course of his career he had four million-selling records.<sup>104</sup> As David Ake notes, Jordan has been treated as separate from jazz history, despite the fact that his bands “attracted extraordinarily large audiences, swung furiously, and featured fine soloists.”<sup>105</sup> The issue, Ake argues, is that Jordan’s commercial success “coincided almost perfectly with the emergence of bop” and, like Kenny G, “the seeming lightheartedness of Jordan’s music flags him as a problematic figure for critics attempting to paint jazz since the 1940s as a serious art form.”<sup>106</sup>

Although their playing styles are very different, in many ways Louis Jordan paved the way for the sort of mainstream, crossover success Kenny G enjoyed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In fact, Jordan and Kenny G have much in common: in their respective eras, they were both huge stars, they both came to

<sup>104</sup> Bill Dahl, “Louis Jordan Biography, Songs, & Albums.” *Allmusic*. Accessed May 4, 2023, <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/louis-jordan-mn0000287604/biography>.

<sup>105</sup> David Ake, *Jazz Cultures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 43.

<sup>106</sup> Ake, *Jazz Cultures*, 43.

represent the saxophone in the popular consciousness, and ultimately, they were both showmen who were interested in reaching as large an audience as possible (a goal that for Jordan, as a Black man in the 1940s, certainly carries a different meaning than it did for Kenny G in the 1980s). Both also understood that their goals would place them at odds with jazz's critical discourse. As Jordan explained to Arnold Shaw, "I loved playing jazz with a big band. Loved singing the blues. But I really wanted to be an entertainer—that's me—on my own. I wanted to play for the people, for millions, not just a few hep cats."<sup>107</sup> Such a populist sentiment, however, placed him at odds with jazz discourse, both today and in Jordan's own time. As Ake explains,

Given Jordan's light-hearted stage presence, his penchant for humorous and backward rural imagery, and his danceable, riff-based, blues-grounded musical approach, we can begin to understand the Tympany Five's absence in jazz history texts. For if we follow the evolutionary narrative constructed by many historians—that the complexity and seriousness of the bebop style demonstrates jazz's claim to art-music status—then Louis Jordan's seemingly frivolous approach must lie outside of that elite world.<sup>108</sup>

Likewise, as previously mentioned, this sense of "frivolity" is the same issue that modern saxophonists have with Kenny G's music and persona.

As Charles D. Carson notes in his essay in this colloquy, separating crossover musicians from "real" jazz has had a significant, negative impact on how we have come to understand jazz history. But it also has real consequences for modern musicians. For instance, in my interviews, I asked each saxophonist if they had learned about Louis Jordan or others like him in their professional studies. They all emphatically said no—even those whose goals were, like Jordan's, to "play for the people." Thus, more than fostering an incomplete conception of jazz history, this lack of academic or pedagogical engagement with Jordan and his stylistic successors has cut off potentially productive creative avenues for modern saxophonists who might benefit from a more inclusive understanding of their instrument's history.

## CONCLUSION

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<sup>107</sup> Arnold Shaw, *Honkers and Shouters: The Golden Age of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1978), 66.

<sup>108</sup> Ake, *Jazz Cultures*, 56.

As demonstrated by the online forums, many in the saxophone community tend to think of Kenny G in extremes. Either he has too much or not enough of the things that they deem valuable: He has no authenticity, no integrity; he has no taste; his skills are not good enough for “serious” jazz; he is a sell-out; he has too much money; he is too frivolous; etc. As such, they have cast him and his music out, subjecting it to a form of aesthetic abjection. They seem to believe, as I once did, that this ostracization is in their best interest. But the disavowal of such a prominent performer has the paradoxical effect of devaluing the saxophone, of undermining the public’s understanding of what our instrument is and why it matters.<sup>109</sup> It also, in some ways, closes off creative approaches that future saxophonists might rightfully want to explore.

From my personal standpoint, I don’t prefer to listen to Kenny G or smooth jazz, but I have come to appreciate him for continuing to promote the saxophone’s popularity. I have also come to realize that saxophonists don’t need to continue to engage in forms of aesthetic abjection to “preserve” the reputation of our instrument or legitimize our existence. Instead, we should embrace a diversity of players and styles and highlight the adaptability and versatility of the saxophone—which, ultimately, is its superpower. These days, If I tell someone that I play the saxophone and they say, “like Kenny G!,” I just nod and say, “Yes, that’s right.”

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<sup>109</sup> I’ve discussed the aesthetic gatekeeping that is prevalent in the saxophone community and the ways that it has the effect of perpetuating the marginalization of underrepresented groups in my dissertation and also in a chapter of an edited volume, “Exhuming Elise: Rehabilitating Reputations,” in *Contemporary Perspectives on the Legacy of Elise Hall (1853–1924)*, eds. Kurt Bertels and Adrienne Honnold (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, forthcoming in 2024).

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