Journal of Jazz Studies vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 1–19 (2023)

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.[1] 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 Adrianne 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

My thanks to Sarah Rude, Sean Powell, and Stephanie Doktor for their comments on early drafts of this article. I would also like to thank Carl Wilson, Mikkel Vad, and the Jazz Studies Collaborative Reading Group for prompting me to develop the arguments I present in this piece.

[1] 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."[2] 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

[2] *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.").[3] 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*."[4] Likewise, in her contribution to this colloquy, Adrianne 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.).[5] 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."[6] In an expanded form of this argument, Kenny G's music is also interpreted as a type of theft or co-optation, one in

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[3] *Listening to Kenny G*, 00:04:04-00:04:10.

[4] 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.

[5] 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).

[6] *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 renumeration.[7]

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).[8] As musicologist Robert Walser wrote in 2003, "If he is counted as 'jazz,' he is easily its biggest current star."[9] 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.

[7] *Listening to Kenny G*, 01:02:41-01:03:09.
[8] "Gold & Platinum," Recording Industry Association of America, accessed January 21, 2023, 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.
[9] Robert Walser, "Popular Music Analysis: Ten Apothegms and Four Instances," in *Analyzing Popular Music*, ed. Allan F. Moore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 35.

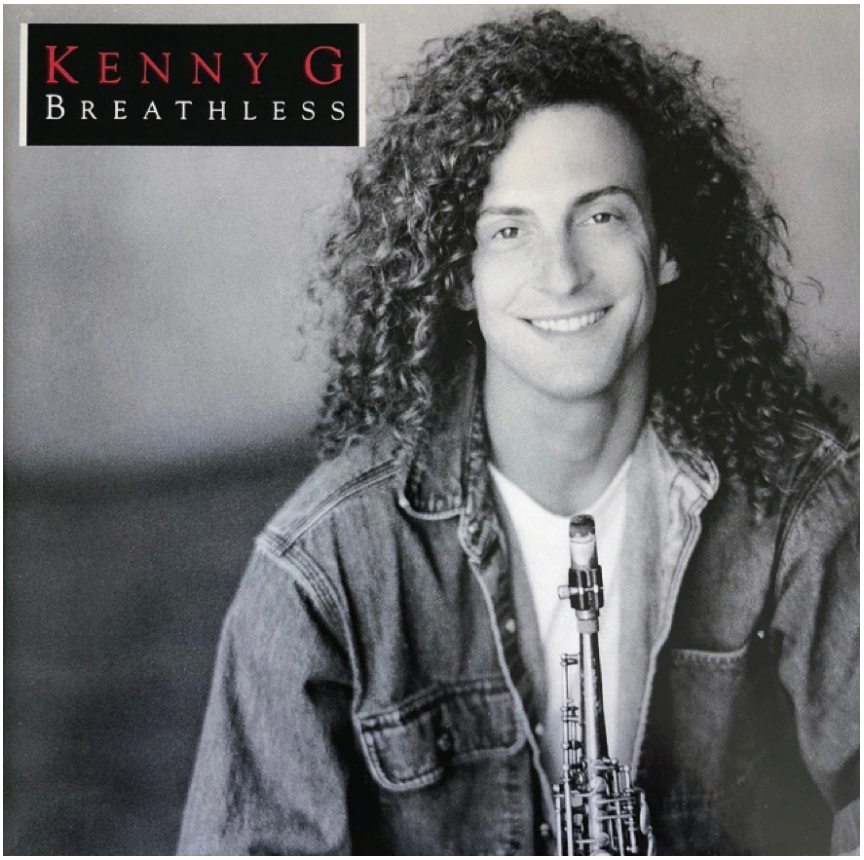

Figure 1. Cover of Kenny G's Bestselling 1992 Album *Breathless*.

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."[10] 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

[10] 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.[11] As such, it is difficult to define it solely in musical terms.

[11] 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.[12]

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."[13] 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."[14] 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).

[12] 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.

[13] 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.

[14] 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."[15] 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.[16] 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.[17] 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.[18]

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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[15] William "Billy" Taylor, "Jazz: America's Classical Music," *The Black Perspective in Music* 14, no. 3 (Winter 1986): 21-25.

[16] 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*, 25th Anniversary Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 132.

[17] 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.

[18] 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?"[19] 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."[20] 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.[21] 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.[22] 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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[19] Washburne, "Does Kenny G Play Bad Jazz?," 139.

[20] Simon Frith, "Is Jazz Popular Music?," *Jazz Research Journal* 1, no. 1 (2007): 13.

[21] 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.

[22] 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.[23] 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.[24]

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.[25]

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[23] 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.
[24] Washburne, "Does Kenny G Play Bad Jazz?," 135.
[25] 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).[26] 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)."[27]

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."[28] Musicologist Aaron West similarly ties these

[26] 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."
[27] Emphasis in original. See "Pat Metheny on Kenny G."
[28] 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."[29] 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."[30] 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.[31]

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."[32] 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."[33] Will Layman's

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[29] 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.

[30] 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).

[31] 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).

[32] West, "Caught Between Jazz and Pop," 139.

[33] 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 DeVeaux 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 DeVeaux, *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.[34]

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

[34] 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.[35]

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.[36]

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).[37] 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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[35] 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.

[36] 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/.

[37] 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.

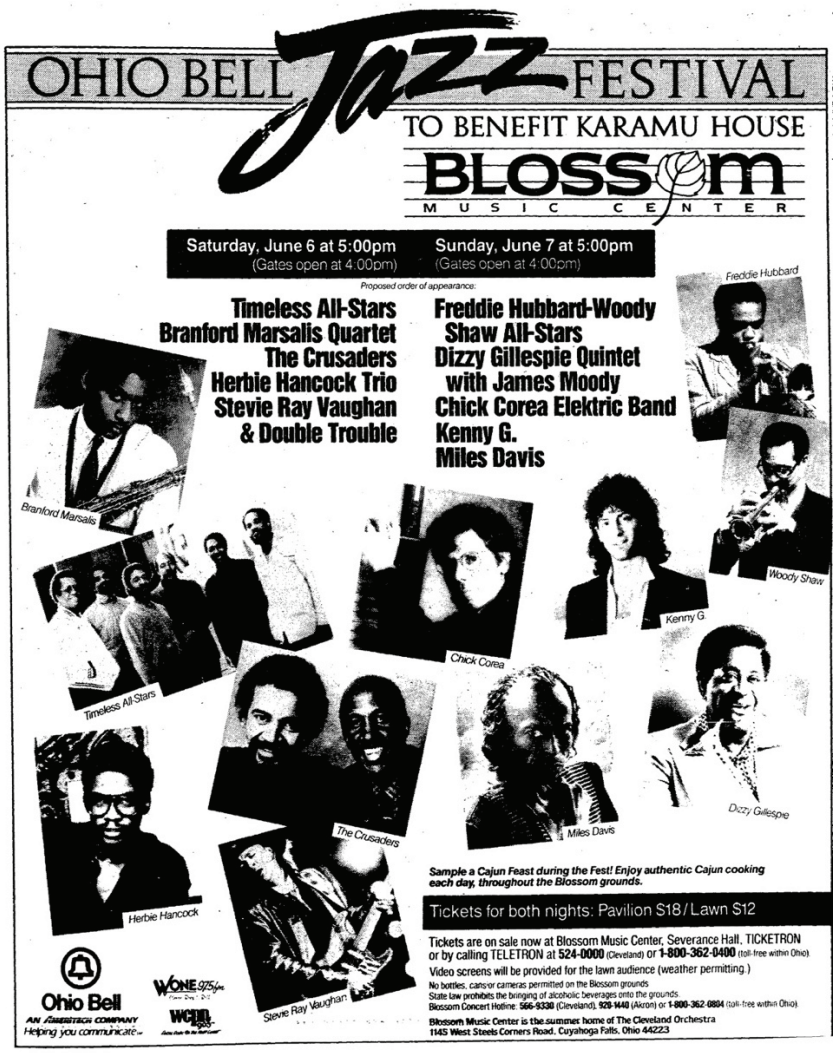

Figure 3 – Newspaper Advertisement for the 1987 Ohio Bell Jazz Festival.

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.[38] 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."[39] These are, to my mind, arguments still worth having.

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[38] 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.

[39] Walser, "Popular Music Analysis," 36.

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