Journal of Jazz Studies vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 47–58 (2023)

Colloquy: Revisiting Kenny G

Aesthetic Abjection: Kenny G From the Saxophonists' Perspective

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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.[1] It is therefore a global 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.[2] 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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[1] 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, Pedagogy, and Canon in the Information Age* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), 115-150.

[2] Adrianne 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 it if weren't for him paving the way. And boy did I get slammed for that. But I stand by it![3]
>
> -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 😀)."[4] 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.[5] 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.[6]

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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[3] Mindi Abair, interview with the author, January 18, 2018.
[4] martysax, "Kenny G," *Sax on the Web* online forum, December 14, 2004 (Accessed March 20, 2023), https://www.saxontheweb.net/threads/kenny-g.17935/.
[5] 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.
[6] 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.[7]

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.[8]

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."[9] 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.[10] 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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[7] Groovesax, "Kenny G," *Sax on the Web* online forum.

[8] 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.

[9] 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*, 2nd Edition (Medfield, MA: Dorn Publications, 1994), 6.

[10] 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 E♭ on a soprano sax for forty-five minutes.[11] 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.[12] 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."[13] 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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[11] 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.

[12] 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.

[13] 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.[14] 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.)"[15] 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).[16] 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."[17] 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.[18]

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[14] 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/.

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

[16] 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.

[17] Pickett, interview with the author.

[18] 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

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

him and the saxophone as retro novelties is perhaps the biggest factor in modern 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.[19] 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."[20] 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."[21]

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

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[19] Bill Dahl, "Louis Jordan Biography, Songs, & Albums." *Allmusic.* Accessed May 4, 2023, https://www.allmusic.com/artist/louis-jordan-mn0000287604/biography.
[20] David Ake, *Jazz Cultures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 43.
[21] Ake, *Jazz Cultures,* 43.

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 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."[22] 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.[23]

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.

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[22] Arnold Shaw, *Honkers and Shouters: The Golden Age of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1978), 66.
[23] Ake, *Jazz Cultures,* 56.

CONCLUSION

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.[24] 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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[24] 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 Adrianne Honnold (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, forthcoming in 2024).

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