

Jazz, Japan, Analog: A Conversation

Mark Katz and Kevin Fellezs

The following conversation was inspired by Mark Katz’s recent research on jazz listening cafés, or jazz kissa. This work, which will appear in the next edition of *Capturing Sound* (University of California Press), is an extension of his long-standing interest in the relationship between music and technology. It also grows out of a larger project on global analog cultures. Kevin Fellezs joined Katz for a lively conversation on Zoom on February 19, 2026. They began by exchanging stories about record collecting and crate digging, which set a comfortable tone for the conversation that followed. The journal is grateful to Mark for generously sharing his work and to Kevin for agreeing to serve as interviewer.

–Darren Mueller, associate editor for the *Journal of Jazz Studies*

This content has been lightly edited for clarity and readability.

Kevin Fellezs (KF): Your chapter discusses jazz kissa as part of what you are calling the analog revival. As you point out, it’s not really about the technology per se, but more about aesthetics, sensibilities, traditions, and values. The analog gives material and materiality to that discourse. So, I want to ask you about how you’re thinking about jazz kissa as underlining the aesthetics and sensibilities of the analog. To get there, perhaps you can describe jazz kissa, or jazz cafés, for readers who might be unfamiliar with them?

Mark Katz (MK): Kissa is short for *kissaten*, which literally means “tea-drinking shop” in Japanese. A jazz kissa (or in Japanese, *jazu kissaten*) is a type of cafe or bar where people come to listen to jazz played over a sound system, traditionally with a turntable and vinyl records. The first kissas appeared in the 1930s and today there are hundreds, though they don’t all feature jazz. There are rock kissas, classical music kissas, and so on.



Figure 1. A patron talking with the bartender/owner at the jazz kissa Minton House, Yokohama (photo by Mark Katz)

KF: As I mentioned in an earlier email exchange, I lived close to Jazz Nutty when I was living in Japan. Nearby, at the Takadanobaba station, there's Miles, which is within walking distance. I went to both of them. I have to say I'm not a fan, personally, of kissa, especially with the spoken and unspoken rules. I often think, "Man, I could listen to the LP at home—I don't really need this!" But I get the reason why people like kissa and seek it out, especially in Tokyo, which, as you discuss, provides this kind of refuge from the intense urbanity of the city.

In your chapter, you make a major distinction between the jazz kissa and what you call the Western kissa, which allows for a little bit more talking in the background and things. I actually haven't been to a Western kissa, but the major distinction seems to be about the value given to silence and its effect on focused listening. Traditional Japanese kissa are known for requiring a kind of deep listening. Could you talk a little bit about how the analog and the digital place different sorts of values on silence and what we might call a kind of immersive, or contemplative listening?

MK: The first thing that comes to mind is the irony that, for the most part, analog is noisier than digital. You have the sound of the needle running through the record's groove. It's an iconic noise readily associated with analog. Tape also has its own noise. There isn't really an equivalent noise associated with CDs or streaming.

But when it comes to jazz kissaten, analog seems to either facilitate or go hand in hand with quiet, contemplative listening. I think part of it is the ritual aspect of analog playback. Even if you're just the listener, when you're sitting in one of these cafes you're often watching someone clean a record, put it carefully on the spindle, gently set the stylus down, and then place the jacket on a little display. These analog rituals invite a kind of silent respect and contemplation.

Of course, you could have records playing in the background of a noisy party. But I think the record as an object perhaps invites more of that kind of ritualization than a CD. There aren't a whole lot of ritual acts with putting on a CD—and even less with, say, clicking a mouse. If you look at the variety of different technologies, I think the more involved the process, the greater possibility that it can be treated in a ritualized way. And I think silence comes in there.

Speaking historically, these cafes arose in response to competing visions of jazz in Japan in the 1930s and '40s. One vision was jazz as dance music, music whose native habitat is a noisy club. The other was jazz as art music—something that should be respected through silent listening and contemplation. So, these kissa were actually a response against the kind of disrespectful treatment of jazz, or maybe just what people would have regarded as low-class jazz—you know, dance tunes.

So, in Japan there's a very specific historical context for jazz and these cafes arose as an alternative to dance clubs. If you walk into a kissa and start dancing, people are going to look at you funny. It just wouldn't be appropriate.

KF: Yes, I think so. If you look at the kinds of records that are played, they're often from the bebop era forward, right? You rarely hear big band swing in those places.

MK: That's right. In my field notes, I always wrote down a list of what was being played and, yes, it's mostly bebop or post-bop—sometimes it's jazz singers like Ella Fitzgerald or Sarah Vaughan, but not usually dance music. I didn't hear a lot of Bix Beiderbecke, or swing. Occasionally, I heard some really weird experimental jazz in some of these places.

KF: Yes, that's rarer, though. The other thing I've noticed is the predominance of African American musicians, right? It's mostly going to be your Blue Note or the old Prestige records—there's a real sort of fetishization of that period. You don't really hear too many Japanese artists, for instance.

MK: My sample size isn't huge, but I don't remember hearing or noting any Japanese jazz in the places I went. I mostly heard music by artists from the US and Europe. At Jazz Nutty, for example, the first thing you see when you walk in are giant speakers and framed photos of many of the great African American jazz artists from the '50s and after.



Figure 2. Jazz Nutty (Tokyo) (photo by Mark Katz)

Just to offer some specifics, here's a sample of some of the things I heard, as I recorded them in my field notes and sometimes identified with the assistance of the Shazam app.¹

¹ As Katz noted, the typical practice is to play a full side of an album, as was the case at each of the places mentioned; here he listed a few individual songs from those sides.

Eagle Yotsuya (Tokyo), June 10, 2024:

- Phil Woods and Lew Tabackin, “Lew Blew” (1980)
- Marcus Miller and Miles Davis, “Lost in Madrid, Pt. 1” (1987)
- The Gary Burton Quartet, “Syndrome” (1985)

Jazz Cafe Narcissus (Tokyo), June 10, 2024:

- Eje Thelin, “It Ain’t Necessarily So” (1964)
- Guido Manusardi Quartet, “Take the Coltrane” (1983)
- Kenny Dorham, “Monaco” (1956)
- Sonny Criss, “Willow Weep for Me” (1956)

Kissa Kissa (Brooklyn), June 3, 2025:

- Bill Barron and Ted Curson and His Orchestra, “Big Bill” (1964)
- Grant Green, “Blues in Maude’s Flat” (1962)

KF: In Western kissa, the owners talk about their affiliation with the slow movement, and that these places represent a kind of a slow listening. It’s not streaming—it’s very conscious, right? Could you say more about that kind of politic that runs parallel to this sort of analog culture?

MK: I definitely see the analog revival as either part of, or participating in, a larger slow movement, and that’s something that’s been going on for decades. I believe it started in Italy with slow food, but there are many, many variations on slow culture—the idea is that it’s resisting what seems to be the inextricable acceleration of life in our modern world. It’s trying to either push back against that or find refuge from it. And slowing things down is very explicit in the rhetoric and discourse of these Western kissa.

There’s a term in South Korea that I recently found out about called emotional charging or recharging station. I’ve only done a little bit of research so far, but in Korea that term can describe various things. It could be a forest, or it could be a coffee shop—but there are also a number of places that play vinyl that would be considered an emotional charging station. These places seem to participate in a specifically Korean version of the slow movement. Life in South Korea has accelerated over the past few decades and the stress is said to be incredible for people, especially in the big cities. They find these places to slow down.

In the chapter I mention an interview I did with a woman in Japan who’s about thirty and works in Shibuya, a very busy area of Tokyo. She told me that she would just duck into a kissa just to have a cup of coffee and slow her life down a bit.

KF: An interesting aspect of these jazz kissas and this sort of interaction with the analog is that it all takes place in a public space. So, it's kind of a private listening but in public, right?

MK: Yes. In Japan, I did talk to people once or twice, but it was usually the master or whoever was serving. I can only speak for myself and for what I've observed, but even though people don't talk with each other, I felt a sense of camaraderie and sat in companionable silence with them. In the chapter I tell a story about listening to some slow jazz record. It was very peaceful, and I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the wall. Then I opened my eyes and saw that two people across from me were also closing their eyes. We didn't make eye contact, but we also weren't avoiding each other either.

I did ask this question to people who said they were regulars at some of these places, and that even though they won't talk to each other when they're there, they might hang out afterwards. Also, there is a distinction, sometimes at night, especially when they're serving alcohol, that some kissa loosen the rules about talking. When I went during the day, it was often really quiet, and then occasionally when I went at night, there would be a little more talking.

KF: But they're still quiet places overall.

MK: Oh yeah. I think the kind of public-private connection is very interesting and is something I'm not sure that I've experienced in quite the same way in the US. It's more like if you go to a coffee shop and you're doing work and you don't necessarily talk to people. But the kissa atmosphere isn't the same. It is a pretty distinctive setting.

KF: Yeah, because you're all participating in the same activity, right? We're all listening to the same record.

MK: That's right, it is a shared experience.

KF: Do you see parallels between people privately listening to earbuds in a public place like the subway? There's another dimension to this that I've heard about from colleagues and family members who will use headphones in public as a way to keep people *away* from them. They're not actually listening to anything, but are signaling to everybody else: don't bother me; I'm otherwise preoccupied.

MK: I think there's a distinction to be made here. At these cafés and bars we were listening and experiencing the same phenomenon—a piece of music—in the same space. But we weren't talking. So, there is a kind of sociability without talking. I did feel a kind of connection with these people because of the shared experience. You don't have to talk to someone to feel a connection with them.

In the other scenario that you're talking about—where people are listening to their own music or just trying to signal “don't talk to me”—I would say there's an antisocial collectivity where everyone is in the same space saying, “Back off—don't ask me to sign your petition, don't ask me for money, don't strike up conversation with me.” So, it's quite different, and I've experienced both. I have to admit that sometimes I participate in the antisocial form of communal listening as well.

KF: Your chapter also explores the distinctions between the analog and the digital. In the end you conclude that that border is pretty fuzzy—it's not as sharp and distinct as most people think. So, I really wanted to ask you about the kind of thingness of the analog that you say is attractive for people who were born after we were, those who are digital natives so to speak. I often tease my students by asking them if they ever leave their room without their phone. And no one ever does, right? Then I say I purposely do at times and they're always like, “Oh, don't you feel unsafe?” But I'm used to it, actually. Most of my life was in a world without a smartphone. So, it doesn't feel that weird to me.

Anyway, returning to your point about “thingness”—the value people give to the analog is attached to a kind of materiality. The sensibility and value associated with the analog is not there with the digital in the same way.

MK: I think that you're right to say that perhaps the main appeal of analog is its thingness. One of the ironies about the analog revival is that it's not primarily about sound. The argument I make is that it's about vibe, which is a multisensory experience that often combines listening with eating, drinking, and talking in a social space. Since I'm not a young person, I try to understand what it'd be like to grow up not having things as sounding objects to play music with—I think many people feel a loss with the digital, like something is missing. An object can be grounding. You want to be able to touch something to know it's there, and to know it's real.

KF: Right. I, too, have noticed how thingness and vibe-ness, if you will, are even more important than the music-ness of this analog turn.

MK: Today, the provenance of music is becoming murkier and murkier. When you hold a record and put it on a turntable, there's a materiality to it—the album is engraved and there's almost a primitiveness in the sense that all you need to activate it is to put something sharp on it and spin it around. There were decades where record playing machines didn't even use electricity. There is something kind of elemental, I suppose, about holding a record.

KF: That's right. The materiality of these media formats is part of their charm. We can think about the contemporary collector of vinyl LPs, who may not own a turntable and uses them exclusively as art displayed on the wall.



Figure 3. Yoshida Masahiro, now-retired owner of Eigakan (Tokyo), holds his signed copy of the Max Roach's 1962 album, *It's Time*. (photo by Mark Katz)

MK: There is something about knowing that it is authentic. Scholars, you know, scoff at the concept of authenticity because it's constructed and always a moving target. But when people talk about a record being authentic, that's meaningful to them. So, I think the thingness of recordings and recording technology is central to the analog revival.

KF: Maybe it's the return of the authentic through the material. And there has to be a realization that maybe the baby has been thrown out with the bathwater in terms of the discourse on authenticity and the commodification of sound. You know that materiality also gave us other things. It gave us the LP jacket that people will now buy just to put on their wall. As you say, it doesn't necessarily have to do with the sonic or the musical. It's a testament to all these other things that come with the sound.

MK: Right. I'm teaching a graduate seminar called "Analog" this semester and I gave the students an assignment to go record digging. I gave them certain parameters: they had to be in a store for one hour and they had to come home with a few records. Many felt anxious at first because they hadn't done that before. But when we had a discussion afterwards, so many of them were really taken by the experience. They talked about it as meditative, and as helping them get out of their heads to escape from whatever they were dealing with. If they went with other people, it was a social experience where they compared records. I wasn't trying to do this, but I think I turned a lot of people into record buyers and listeners because they're sending me questions about what record player to buy! I think that kind of experience—even just record shopping before they listen to the record—is meeting a kind of need that they didn't realize they had and is offering a valuable emotional experience for them.

KF: I agree. But I'm a crate digger, too, and my wife would be happy if I only spent an hour in a used record store. This brings up something else for me. As you point out in your chapter, the digital is sort of the default of the contemporary moment. But you also argue that we should not understand the digital and the analog as oppositional, that rather that they are "best understood in relational terms." You mention all these kinds of overlaps between the analog and the digital. For instance, even the most strident sort of analog kissa promote themselves in digital spaces. The bands you discuss such as Manic Third Planet and Ensemble Tikoro produce cassettes but also make their recordings available as digital downloads. And anybody who goes to Bandcamp knows you can download the digital stream, but you can also pay for an LP, a cassette, or what have you.

So, I guess my question is related to what we've just been discussing, which is, how these objects provide something beyond their commodity status. Maybe this is commodity fetishism (in Marxist terms), but it does seem like we want to make a world that isn't Mark Zuckerberg's metaverse, right? We don't want to live in an AI world, right? We want to live in a "real" or "material" world.

I'm interested in hearing about how you think AI might fit into all of this. But I want to get there through an older technology that I think relates to this discussion: the Fostex 4-track cassette recorder. For musicians, that machine was revolutionary. People were suddenly thinking, "Wow, I can do what the Beatles did for *Sgt. Pepper's*." It allowed them to create something that sounded more like commercial, mass-release, mass-produced music.

MK: I'm glad you brought up the four-track. I think part of the analog revival is actually fueled by generational shifts, such as younger people inheriting a parent's or grandparent's cassette or record collection. A composer who uses a reel-to-reel player told me that older people would put them out on the street, and she would just pick them up. This kind of generational turnover has been central to the resurgence of vinyl and tape.

But in any case, I think you could talk about the 4-track recorder using the same kind of democratizing discourse that people use for AI right now—as in, "anybody can make music." So interestingly, both participate in the same kind of discourse about technology opening possibilities because it lowers barriers to entry for people.

KF: So what about AI? How does AI change the equation for someone who types in a prompt versus a musician who has practiced for years to be at least competent on their given instrument and realizes their song on a 4-track machine? What if both of these paths result in the same or similar song?

MK: I'm going to be writing about AI in a different chapter in *Capturing Sound*, but there is some overlap with the analog revival. Recently I was listening to music on YouTube and I came across an album that looked like it was from the 60s. It had an image of a record album with the usual wear, where you could see the circle of the disc creating an indentation on the album cover. It was some kind of garage band that I hadn't heard of. And then I realized it was created by AI, which infuriated me but fascinated me at the same time. I think some of these new digital technologies are being used to simulate analog. In fact, certain plugins make it very easy to use a digital audio workstation to add vinyl noise or tape hiss to your recording. I mean, you can go to YouTube and just look up tape hiss and record it for yourself. The bigger point I'm making is that the analog revival is inescapably part of a digital world. It's very hard to experience analog, talk about analog, consume analog today without digital being part of the discourse or the experience.

KF: On YouTube there are those “Chill Jazz” channels—those new age-y kind of things.

MK: Yeah, those playlists by mood.

KF: I don’t know if they’re AI generated or not.

MK: I’m sure a lot of that is AI generated.

KF: I was wondering if you thought that instrumentation has anything to do with people’s sense of the authentic. Does it matter, in terms of authenticity, that most, if not all, of those “soft jazz on a rainy day” AI channels feature acoustic instruments because there’s a need to provide some sense of real-ness to the proceedings? Would the illusion be destroyed by using “obvious” electronic touches such as synth saxes or sampled loops?

Additionally, I don’t know if you’ve seen them on YouTube, but there are all these purportedly unheard, uncensored jazz and blues tracks from the 1920s or 1930s that are really explicit—in-your-face sexually explicit, far beyond the barely-hidden double entendre of much of the blues of the period. But, as I listened to these tracks I realized, this is AI. This is not some dusty, now-unvaulted recording by the Andrews Sisters, or previously unknown contemporary of theirs, on which they are singing explicitly about sex.

MK: Yeah, well, I guess that gets back to the authenticity thing. Because we are in this post-truth era, we could make the connection between AI-generated music slop and authoritarianism—a sense of the truth is whatever I say it is because I’m the more powerful person. We don’t have to get into that now, but I do think the analog represents authenticity in a way that’s meaningful to people. Even if we scholars might be a little skeptical of authenticity as a concept, I think it gets to the materiality of analog technologies and recording media.

KF: Something we haven’t talked about yet is the idea of oblique listening. I didn’t know if you wanted to get into that.

MK: Oh yeah, sure. Oblique listening is something I think is interesting and something I want to think about more. All of us scholars are professional music listeners, in addition to whatever else we do. And I think the default in academia, in terms of music scholarship, is that you listen attentively and ideally in a silent environment. I will tell my students things like, “You’re not going to really

understand the music if you're listening on earbuds while walking across campus and talking to your friends. You should sit in a quiet place and listen."

KF: Right—in your own jazz kissa.

MK: Yeah, exactly. You should occupy your own jazz kissa. But I think we're actually the outliers. I think most people do listen to music in noisy environments and are not necessarily focusing on the music—and that's where the vibe comes in. So, one of the interesting things that I found in the Western kissa phenomenon is that there's a tension between what the owners of these places want and how their customers behave. So, they're all putting up signs saying, "Be quiet. I created this haven for quiet listening." But customers come in and just talk over the music. At first, I wondered if this is just a failure of these Western kissas.

I was inclined to be dismissive of the kind of person who goes to a place that plays vinyl and then doesn't pay attention to it. But I've concluded that the music is very important to those seemingly inattentive listeners. It is not something that they attend to specifically, but it is a key part of this sensory mix that involves sights, non-musical sounds, music, smell, taste, and conversation. So, it's actually a key component of this vibe that they're seeking out, one that takes them out of their everyday world.

So, my thinking is that this kind of listening—where they're neither focusing on it nor ignoring it—is oblique, you know, coming at it from an angle instead of straight on. It's actually a common way of listening to music in the world and is not something that scholars should dismiss as inattentive, ignorant, or disrespectful.

So I don't think these Western kissa have failed. They just haven't done what the owners thought they would do. But they have met a different need that the customers really value.

KF: That's what comes out in the chapter as a whole. There are different modes of listening that are facilitated by the analog. All the notions attached to the analog facilitate a certain kind of listening that we still seek out as a way of relating to music.

I'm looking forward to reading the rest of the project as it grows. What's next?

MK: Thank you. I'm wanting to do some research in South Korea. That's a really fascinating place with its own distinctive analog cultures.²

KF: Taiwan would be another place, too. In Taiwan they'll break open a new record for you to listen to before you buy it. "You want to listen to it?" Sure, right?

MK: Oh, yeah, I love that. I really want to go record shopping in Taiwan now.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Mark Katz is John P. Barker Distinguished Professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His most recent book is *Rap and Redemption on Death Row* (2024), co-authored with incarcerated musician Alim Braxton. His other books include *Capturing Sound: How Technology has Changed Music* (2004, rev. 2010), *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip-Hop DJ* (2010); *Build: The Power of Hip Hop Diplomacy in a Divided World* (2019), and *Music and Technology: A Very Short Introduction* (2022). He was co-editor of *Music, Sound, and Technology in America: A Documentary History* (2012) and served as editor of the *Journal of the Society for American Music* (2012–15). He is the Founding Director of the U.S. State Department hip hop cultural diplomacy program, Next Level (established 2014). He is currently preparing a third edition of his first book, *Capturing Sound*, and in 2027 will be in residence at Yonsei University in Seoul as a Fulbright Distinguished Scholar, where he will be researching analog culture in Korea.

Kevin Fellezs is an Associate Professor of Music (ethnomusicology) at Columbia University. His recent book, *Listen But Don't Ask Question: Hawaiian Slack Key Guitar Across the TransPacific* (Duke University Press), is a transnational study of the ways in which Hawaiian belonging is articulated by Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) and non-Hawaiian guitarists in Hawai'i, California, and Japan. The book was awarded a 2021 Honorable Mention for the Best Subsequent Book award from the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association. His first book, *Birds of Fire: Jazz, Rock, Funk and the Creation of Fusion* (Duke University Press, 2011), is a study of fusion (jazz-rock-funk) music of the 1970s, which was awarded the 2012 Woody Guthrie Book

² After this interview took place, Katz was awarded a Fulbright to conduct research on analog cultures in Korea in the spring semester of 2027.

Award. He has published articles on music from Hawaiian slack key to jazz, heavy metal, Broadway musicals, and *enka* in *Jazz Perspectives*, *the Journal of Popular Music Studies*, and *the Journal of the Society for American Music*, among others, as well as in numerous anthologies.