

## Hacking Viral Jazz’s Gendered Hierarchies: Grace Kelly’s Entrepreneurial Polygeneric Art

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*GO Time: Brooklyn*, saxophonist Grace Kelly’s new video album... fully embraces the way musicians are making music supremely immediate to their fans... Kelly: “This new album was created so I could connect with fans all around the globe and have them feel the magic of new music by experiencing it more viscerally through their screens,” Kelly said. “I want them to feel as if they’re in the studio with me, making it.”<sup>1</sup>

Jazz saxophonist Grace Kelly exemplifies a polygeneric artist successfully implementing new approaches to performance across media platforms in a complex process delivering online followers more immediate and intimate access to her creativity and musical persona. As Kelly affirmed in this 2018 *Down Beat* interview, her creative output offers fans a more “visceral” engagement through their screens and makes them “feel as if they are in the studio” with her; here she portrays fans as co-conspirators in her creative process. Kelly is also a pioneering boundary-breaking, genre-mixing project leader. Through the “viral jazz” context, she has cultivated an innovative performance practice for instrumentalists that incorporates expressive gestures and dance choreographies in a style that eschews established conventions within more traditional jazz spaces, such as jam sessions or music festivals.

Platform music scholar Nancy Baym highlights the *relational labor* required of musicians like Kelly who are active in online music cultures. For Baym, relational labor refers to the ways in which musicians “build and maintain enduring relationships, getting to know their audiences and letting their audiences get to know them.”<sup>2</sup> She locates the African American concept of the “jazz gig” as a term appropriated and modified as the “gig economy” by critics of neoliberalism. The gig economy characterizes the ever present, ever flexible online affective and material labor conditions in which “emotional and relational

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<sup>1</sup> “Premier: Watch a Video from Grace Kelly’s ‘Go Time: Brooklyn,’” *Down Beat*, May 17, 2018, <https://downbeat.com/news/detail/premiere-watch-a-video-from-grace-kellys-go-time-brooklyn>.

<sup>2</sup> See Nancy Baym, *Playing to the Crowd: Musicians, Audiences, and the Intimate Work of Connection* (New York University Press, 2018), 20.

work are untethered from organization rules and norms.”<sup>3</sup> Kelly, the case study of this article, clearly demonstrates patterns of affective and material labor within a precarious jazz industry, one with a historically exclusionary, invisibilizing, and even hostile environment for female instrumentalists and women of color.<sup>4</sup>

Only recently have scholars investigated how the particular infrastructures and algorithmic filters of various platforms impact jazz artists such as Kelly and their performance strategies, forms of creativity, and adaptability to these environments.<sup>5</sup> Through the creative and participatory affordances of TikTok and YouTube, some jazz artists have successfully developed engaging output while extending their professional profiles and connecting with new “taste communities.”<sup>6</sup> Despite the growing body of research on online music cultures,<sup>7</sup> the extent to which these platforms impact artistic practice and career potential in jazz, as a masculinized and often exclusionary space, is a relatively recent field of study. Beyond Judd and Burkhart,<sup>8</sup> those studies of online jazz networks pay scant attention to the ongoing gendered and intersectional dynamics of current networked jazz cultures.

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<sup>3</sup> Baym, *Playing to the Crowd*, 20.

<sup>4</sup> For multiple historical examples of entrenched forms of exclusion and invisibilization, see Nicole Rustin, “Mary Lou Williams Plays Like a Man! Gender, Genius, and Difference in Black Music Discourse,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Summer (2005): 445–62; Daphne Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Belknap Press, 2021); Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday* (Vintage, 1999); and Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (Free Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> For relevant studies on jazz on TikTok, see Benjamin Burkhart, “Fly Me to the Moon’: Jazz on TikTok,” *Musicological Australiaca – Journal for Austrian Music Studies* (2005): 123–47; D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye, “JazzTok: Creativity, Community, and Improvisation on TikTok,” *Jazz & Culture* 6, no. 2 (2023): 92–116; and Bondy Kaye and Jean Burgess, “Algorithmic Recommender Systems and Everyday Data Cultures: The View from Jazz TikTok,” *Selected Papers in Internet Research 2021: Research from the Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. AoIR – Association of Internet Researchers, United States of America, 2021*, <https://spir.aoir.org/ojs/index.php/spir/article/view/12088/10224>.

<sup>6</sup> Chris Cottell, “Musical Videos as Works: Documenting Audiovisual Jazz Practices in Social Media Communities,” *Sonic Scope – New Approaches to Audiovisual Culture* February 15, 2021, <https://www.sonicscope.org/pub/fzoh7la3/release/2>; Andy Cush, “The New Weird Virtuosos Making Jazz for the Post-Internet Age,” *Pitchfork*, January 31, 2023, <https://pitchfork.com/features/article/the-new-weird-virtuosos-making-jazz-for-the-post-internet-age/>.

<sup>7</sup> Juan Bermúdez, *Musicking TikTok: A Musical Ethnography from a Glocal Austrian Context* (Bloomsbury, 2024).

<sup>8</sup> Hannah Judd, “Virals, Memes, and the Lick’s Circulation through Online Jazz Communities,” *Twentieth-Century Music* 19, no. 3 (2022): 393–410; Burkhart, “Jazz on TikTok.”

Motivated by this gap, this study seeks to expand recent knowledge in relation to the affordances of online platforms like TikTok and YouTube for music makers, and especially female jazz musicians. Key interest relates to how jazz musicians variously retain or reject established gendered jazz performance conventions when targeting (often younger) online jazz fans and emerging jazz audiences. Further, as a jazz and gender equity scholar, a cis-gendered white woman, and as a practicing polygeneric saxophonist, I seek to promote greater equity in jazz leadership and performance, therefore exploring to what extent such platforms preserve proto-typical jazz hierarchies or conversely enable greater inclusion and creativity for under-represented musicians remains paramount. In the following, I examine if and how participatory music sites such as TikTok disrupt prior performative expectations for women in jazz. I also explore various ways that these platforms encourage new forms of creative expression while also reproducing entrenched (yet strategic) techniques such as self-exoticization, self-surveillance, and self-objectification which can reaffirm or even amplify past gendered and sexualized hierarchies.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, the study queries to what extent the seemingly democratic and creative experimental affordances of YouTube and TikTok can stimulate different and potentially more equitable modes of music expression and participation, especially for women. Yet as Melanie Kennedy and others argue, the immense popularity of online platforms like TikTok among girls and women may offer new spaces for socializing, identity formation, and promotional performances even as such spaces simultaneously elevate an ideal and privileged image of girlhood (and by extension womanhood) within a postfeminist and neoliberal context.<sup>10</sup>

A second key aim of this article is to offer a critical feminist perspective on current modes of music performance and promotion within the jazz genre recently coined as “viral jazz,” a category primarily aimed at young, virtuosic, and

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<sup>9</sup> For examples of how these hierarchies and forms of self-objectification play out online see Kyra Gaunt, “YouTube, Twerking & You: Context Collapse and the Handheld Co-Presence of Black Girls and Miley Cyrus,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 27, no. 3 (2015): 244–73; and Rosalind Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10 no. 2 (2007): 147–66.

<sup>10</sup> Kennedy offers a case study of teen celebrity Charli D-Amelio as an exemplar of female popularity on TikTok, a platform that popularizes conventionally attractive young, wealthy, white girls in various routines, including dancing and lip-syncing to popular music or short, apolitical goofy skits. These performers and style of content acquire the most followers and praise in such online spaces, especially when they avoid feminist rhetoric or statements. See Melanie Kennedy, “If the Rise of the TikTok Dance and E-Girl Aesthetic Has Taught Us Anything, it’s that Teenage Girls Rule the Internet Right Now: TikTok Celebrity, Girls and the Coronavirus Crisis,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 6 (2020): 1069–76, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549420945341>.

boundary blurring musicians actively producing “content” online.<sup>11</sup> Viral’s jazz new aesthetic is explored to uncover the various ways in which established and canonical jazz performative conventions currently coalesce in video streaming formats, yet are enacted through a process of modernization and adaptation to these platforms’ unique affordances.<sup>12</sup> It is within the context of viral jazz that I highlight Grace Kelly’s innovative online performance practice, her *polygeneric* creation and curation of media and music, and her unique jazz-oriented techniques of connection with her followers.

The article is structured in three parts. First, for theoretical grounding, a brief review of key feminist and intersectionality concepts related to the transformation from pre-digital to modern online networked jazz-oriented media is provided. Second, a survey of the genre of *viral jazz* examines in what sense the audiovisuality of music-oriented platforms retain or challenge the representational aesthetics of conventional jazz spaces and media. The final section offers a close reading of Korean American jazz saxophonist Grace Kelly and her prolific online performances and promotional strategies. Here, I reveal how new knowledge regarding prior demands for women in jazz can stimulate innovative promotional and performance contexts for virtuosic multi-instrumentalists. Yet these contexts betray long-standing hierarchical gendered categories such as the vocal/instrumental binary<sup>13</sup> and encourage uneven evaluative criteria of jazz instrumentalists in relation to gender and race.<sup>14</sup> Given

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<sup>11</sup> See Cush, “The New Weird Virtuosos Making Jazz”; and Judd, “Virals, Memes, and the Lick’s Circulation.”

<sup>12</sup> These conventions, variously rehearsed and embedded throughout the twentieth century, include the performance of tunes circulated in the *Real Book*, displays of technical virtuosity during an extended solo, symbolic “phallic” displays through positioning of particularly iconic masculinized solo instruments such as the trumpet, and more recently the suppression of expressive bodily movements (and seemingly feminized corporeal displays like dancing). Such conventions prevail in jazz club concerts, festivals, and jam sessions today. See Krin Gabbard, “Signifyin[g] the Phallus: Representations of the Jazz Trumpet,” *Jammin’ at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (The University of Chicago Press, 1996); and Rustin, “Mary Lou Williams Plays Like a Man!” for more examples.

<sup>13</sup> See Lara Pellegrinelli, “Separated At ‘Birth’: Singing and the History of Jazz,” in *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, ed. Nichole Rustin and Sherrie Tucker (Duke University Press, 2008), 31–47.

<sup>14</sup> Suzuki highlights the various ways that critics and jazz musicians have reacted to female saxophonists on the bandstand. Such reactions belie an ideological promotion of gender and sex binaries subsumed within the heterosexual matrix. This implies that prolific female saxophone soloists transgress the gender and heterosexual binary through their success and virtuosity. Race further complicates this equation, such that non-white women would strategically enlist (or downplay) cultural and racial categories to acquire more prestigious gigs or visibility in jazz performance contexts. See Yoko Suzuki, “Gender Sexuality and Jazz Saxophone Performance,”

the continued power of these early ideological and promotional jazz categories, online platforms are revealed as failing to fully upend the hyper-masculinity and male domination promoted by pre-platform jazz institutions. Nevertheless, they afford new opportunities for especially virtuosic and entrepreneurial jazz musicians such as Kelly and multi-genre jazz-oriented vocalist and composer Laufey, two of the few female jazz musicians to have shattered the glass ceiling in both online and live music performance contexts.

My ethnographic and performance analysis of the gendered dynamics of viral jazz integrates multiple methodologies and frameworks, including digital ethnography, performance theory, feminist media analysis, and a survey of jazz performance reception contexts online. I borrow liberally from the fields of media studies, popular music and jazz studies, and feminist and intersectional theory for my critical insights about the types of performativity emerging from viral jazz platforms. While focused on the present, my analysis places these new performance and reception concepts within a much longer history of audiovisual and jazz-oriented media.

#### FEMINIST AND INTERSECTIONAL THEORY FOR PLATFORM MEDIA

While media scholars looked optimistically to digital platforms for potentially enabling broader access for under-represented groups and increasing participation and creativity for artists,<sup>15</sup> recent studies temper these predictions, drawing attention to segmented and uneven representations. These include genre-oriented playlists on Spotify that privilege male artists<sup>16</sup> and biases in relation to gender preferences in music recommendations systems (MRS) on

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in *The Routledge Companion to Jazz and Gender*, ed. James Reddan, Monika Herzig, and Michael Kahr (Routledge 2022), 156–67. Other examples of gender expectations and jazz performance include Keith Karns, “Hard Bop Cool Pose: Bebop, the Blues, and Masculinity in the Music of Lee Morgan,” in *The Routledge Companion to Jazz and Gender*, ed. James Reddan, Monika Herzig, and Michael Kahr (Routledge 2022), 81–91; and Sarah Caissie Provost, “Bringing Something New: Female Jazz Instrumentalists’ Use of Imitation and Masculinity,” *Jazz Perspectives* 10, no. 2–3 (2017): 141–57.

<sup>15</sup> See Patrick Burkart and Tom McCourt, *Digital Music Wars: Ownership and Control of the Celestial Jukebox* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York University Press, 2006); and Lawrence Lessig, *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (Penguin Press, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Tamas Tofalvy and Júlia Koltai, “‘Splendid Isolation’: The Reproduction of Music Industry Inequalities in Spotify’s Recommendation System,” *New Media & Society* 25, no. 7 (2021): 1580–1604; and Yifei Wang, Jui Ramaprasad, and Anand Gopal, “Dancing to the #challenge: The Effect of TikTok on Closing the Artist Gender Gap,” *ICIS 2022 Proceedings*, 7, <https://aisel.aisnet.org/icis2022/social/social/7>.

platforms such as TikTok and YouTube.<sup>17</sup> Prior to such critiques, theorists of arts and music media initially and enthusiastically predicted that search engine capabilities could potentially override industry gatekeepers while also providing platforms for a broader diversity of artistic content, as projected by Anderson's "long tail" economy.<sup>18</sup> Deeper investigation revealed that previously embedded divisions within arts institutions such as the Grammys,<sup>19</sup> which for decades rewarded mainly cis-gendered white men, have at best reproduced and often, through a phenomenon known as "bias disparity," augmented such biases online.<sup>20</sup> For example, Ferraro et al. discovered that female artists account for no more than twenty-five percent of recommended artists on YouTube and Spotify.<sup>21</sup> Ann Werner's study about the biases produced through Spotify's *related artists*, *browse*, and *discover* features also revealed how modern music platforms intensify such inequities by continually gendering music and building on "ideas of difference already existing in genre and artist representations of pre-streaming popular music cultures." This gendered streaming outcome is a central component of algorithmic culture.<sup>22</sup> With regards to race, Ruha Benjamin and others have explored how the "discriminatory designs" of search engines inform public taste in ways that are exclusionary, racist, and often unevenly gendered.<sup>23</sup> When we align these findings to studies of gender divisions within the broader music industry, we see similar statistics: women often account for less than

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<sup>17</sup> Andres Ferraro, Xavier Serra, and Christine Bauer, "Break the Loop: Gender Imbalance in Music Recommenders," *Proceedings of the 2021 Conference on Human Information Interaction and Retrieval* (2021): 249–54, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3406522.3446033>; O. Lesota et al., "Analyzing Item Popularity Bias of Music Recommender Systems: Are Different Genders Equally Affected?," *Proceedings of the 15th ACM Conference on Recommender Systems* (2021): 601–6, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3460231.3478843>

<sup>18</sup> Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More*, (Hyperion, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Callie Ahlgrim, "Only 12 Black Artists have Won Album of the Year at the Grammys — Here They All Are," *Business Insider* (2024), <https://www.businessinsider.com/black-grammys-winners-album-of-the-year>.

<sup>20</sup> Dougal Shakespeare, Lorenzo Porcaro, Emilia Gomez, et al, "Exploring Artist Gender Bias in Music Recommendation," arXiv.2009.01715 (2020), [https://chato.cl/papers/shakespeare\\_2020\\_gender\\_bias\\_recommendation.pdf](https://chato.cl/papers/shakespeare_2020_gender_bias_recommendation.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> Ferraro et al., "Break the Loop."

<sup>22</sup> Werner defines algorithmic culture as "algorithmic forms of ordering cultural content... when algorithms decide ordering, visibility, and value ascribed to cultural commodity." See Ann Werner, "Organizing Music, Organizing Gender: Algorithmic Culture and Spotify recommendations," *Popular Communication* 18 no. 1 (2020): 78–90.

<sup>23</sup> Werner, "Organizing Music, Organizing Gender"; Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Polity, 2019); Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York University Press, 2018).

fifteen percent of the highest-ranking roles as musicians, producers, songwriters, and DJs.<sup>24</sup> Recognizing these disparities proves necessary for understanding the current media landscape.

Further, the dominant visual strategies for representing women of the past also play a prominent role in jazz-oriented social media. Within pre-digital jazz-oriented media, women musicians were often filmed in object-oriented positions, such as as novelties (exhibiting extreme versatility) or in gender confirming roles that accentuated their femininity, youth, conformity, or sexual allure and attractiveness.<sup>25</sup> Yet these visually attuned media often under-accentuated these women's vast skills as instrumentalists, soloists, or composers, traits more traditionally associated with male artists.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the fact that more women were filmed rather than recorded speaks to the industry's visual priorities when representing the creative work of female musicians of the pre-war and post-war eras.<sup>27</sup> These forms of representation ultimately impacted women's careers, limiting possibilities for sustained employment, and contributed to their erasure within jazz histories and textbooks.<sup>28</sup>

As a result of this erasure and the persistence of such gendered expectations and forms of exploitation, women have struggled to acquire prominent roles within the music industry in the twenty-first century.<sup>29</sup> This is unsurprising given the prevailing gendered and sexualized narratives that have accompanied the internationalization of the music industry.<sup>30</sup> Here, the experimental

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<sup>24</sup> Stacey Smith, Katherine Pieper, Marc Choueiti, et al., "Inclusion in the Recording Studio? Gender and Race/Ethnicity of Artists, Songwriters and Producers across 700 Popular Songs from 2012–2020," *USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative* (2021), <https://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/aai-inclusion-recording-studio2021.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> Kristin McGee, *Some Liked it Hot: Jazz Women in Film and Television* (Wesleyan University Press, 2009); Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: "All-Girl" Bands of the 1940s* (Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> Tucker, *Swing Shift*; Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery*.

<sup>27</sup> McGee, *Some Liked it Hot*, 211.

<sup>28</sup> Relevant histories and studies detailing these exclusionary dynamics include Linda Dahl, *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen* (Limelight Editions, 1984); Sonya R. Lawson, "Inclusive Jazz History Pedagogy," in *The Routledge Companion to Jazz and Gender* ed. by James Reddan, Monika Herzig, and Michael Kahr (Routledge, 2022): 322–25; and Ramsey Castaneda and Amanda Quinlan, "Picturing Women in Jazz: An Analysis of Three Jazz History Textbooks," in *The Routledge Companion to Jazz and Gender*, ed. James Reddan, Monika Herzig, and Michael Kahr (Routledge, 2022): 265–77.

<sup>29</sup> Tahira Clayton, Amanda Ekery, and Hannah Grantham, "Toppling Systemic Exclusion: Women's Roles in a Century of Jazz," in *The Routledge Companion to Women and Musical Leadership: The Nineteenth Century and Beyond* ed. Laura Hamer and Helen Julia Minors (Routledge, 2025): 579–89, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003024767>.

aesthetics of early technological reproduction exoticized, sexualized, and promoted stereotypical representations of female musicians as novelties. Black women in particular were portrayed in damaging characterization such as the “Hottentot” or “Jezebel”<sup>31</sup>; images of the alcoholic, love-sick, yet “naturally” emotive blues singer also predominated.<sup>32</sup> In Billie Holiday’s first filmed performance, the Duke Ellington short *Symphony in Black: A Negro Rhapsody on Black life* (Paramount 1935), she is portrayed in one of these pervasive “controlling images” as a downtrodden, love-addicted blues singer. These jazz-era tropes and representations, replicated in various media, have conditioned audiences to expect such essentialized performance personas.<sup>33</sup> Online audiovisual platforms—as “infomediaries” replacing older music and film media intermediaries—inevitably inherit many of the dominant values of these prior media institutions. To what extent, then, can online music spaces shield participants from encountering or re-enacting these clichéd and confining representations?

TikTok has emerged as a space dominated by girls and women. For feminist internet scholars, including Melanie Kennedy and Sophie Bishop, TikTok has redefined girls’ “bedroom culture,” transforming it “from a space previously conceptualised as private and safe from judgement, to one of public visibility, surveillance and evaluation.”<sup>34</sup> Kennedy’s findings expand on Rosalind Gill’s analysis of a pervasive postfeminist media culture in the early twenty-first century. Gill’s media survey reveals several transformations regarding the representation and self-presentation of women. These include: a shift from “objectification to subjectification,” an emphasis upon “self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline,” and “an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference.” For her, these strategies “coexist with, and are structured by, stark and continuing inequalities and exclusions that relate to ‘race’ and ethnicity, class, age, sexuality and disability as well as gender.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (Routledge, 2008); Janell Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Routledge, 2018).

<sup>32</sup> Other prominent blues women were characterized as either hypersexual or as alcoholic, lovelorn victims. See Griffin, *If You Can’t Be Free*; and Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*.

<sup>33</sup> See for example Beyoncé’s re-enactment and tribute to Josephine Baker in 2006, “Beyoncé’s 2006 Fashion Rocks tribute to Josephine Baker,” YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jVP2qlBAtm8>.

<sup>34</sup> Kennedy, “If the Rise of TikTok Dance,” 1069; Sophie Bishop, “Anxiety, Panic and Self-Optimization: Inequalities and the YouTube Algorithm,” *Convergence* 24, no. 1 (2018): 69–84.

<sup>35</sup> Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 149.

For Black girls and women, networked cultures have enabled unprecedented exposure to Afro-diasporic cultural expressions, such as popular dance forms (e.g., twerking). YouTube has subsequently stimulated viral engagements with Black culture, accelerating forms of appropriation by white mainstream society that erase the roots of various Afro-diasporic cultures from which such practices originate. About online twerking performances, popular music and media scholar Kyra Gaunt theorizes a “context collapse” and “connection without constraint” by online audiences; the pervasiveness of such online performances exposes latent racialized, sexualized, or ageist attitudes. Inherited racial ideologies and structures of privilege then materialize and proliferate within new media ecosystems. Recognizing their continued role within online jazz-oriented spaces remains paramount when examining the new behaviors and values expressed in relation to the performance of personal subjectivities within networked jazz platforms and their “algotorial,” ephemeral connections.

Considering these pervasive and oft-reductive sensibilities within current media, there exists a heightened risk for female performers (and especially BIPoC women and girls) as they develop their presentation of musical, sexed, and gendered bodies online.<sup>36</sup> Further, the “unfair” gendered metrics of reception contexts—and especially through MRS’s on platforms like Spotify and TikTok—serve to further complicate comprehension of the interconnections informing performance practice within the broader media culture. In other words, social media formats may enable or discourage more progressive and inclusive spaces for music performance and networking within jazz.

#### VIRAL JAZZ NETWORKS AND AESTHETICS

Within the growing world of what Nate Chinen and jazz pianist Vijay Iyer refer to as “viral jazz,” online contexts have afforded new opportunities for showcasing innovative jazz performances and forms of creativity.<sup>37</sup> While no single definition exists, viral jazz refers to the online output of predominantly young(er) male jazz artists, known for mixing different musical genres and engineering new and quirky performance techniques (such as duets with the self). It also refers to the dynamic and broadly dispersed online network of jazz-inflected videos, tracks, memes, and discursive engagement with jazz artists and communities of

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<sup>36</sup> Kyra Gaunt, “YouTube, Twerking & You: Context Collapse and the Handheld Co-Presence of Black Girls and Miley Cyrus,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 27, no. 3 (2015): 244–73; Bishop, “Anxiety, Panic and Self-Optimization.”

<sup>37</sup> Iyer quoted in Nate Chinen “What is Viral Jazz?,” *NPR*, October 12, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/10/12/1128152356/viral-jazz-louis-cole-domi-jd-beck-mononeon>.

practice. These artists and their multi-mediated projects have acquired massive visibility (e.g., followers, discourse) on online platforms such as TikTok and YouTube. Jazz inflected artists might mix genres, borrowing sounds from pop, fusion, soul, and rock. In their musical output, many of them frequently refer to other media and genres (in a process of intertextuality) such as film, popular music videos, or even science fiction.

Hannah Judd follows one facet of viral jazz through her analysis of the viral meme, “the lick,” claiming that its circulation and function as a mimetic device enabled insiders (e.g. “jazzbros”) to “signal belonging and individuality within a larger jazz community.” Judd reveals how through humour and gimmickry, the critical insider discourse prompted by videos and memes of the lick, became a key mechanism in online spaces for forging new jazz identities.<sup>38</sup> Through these converging intertextual aesthetics,<sup>39</sup> young jazz musicians have acquired new audiences and performance opportunities outside traditionally gatekept venues such as jazz festivals and nightclubs. These online platforms have proven beneficial for those most adept at prioritizing and modernizing the aesthetics of audiovisual media for Generation Z. Favorites of online jazz critics are Louis Cole, DOMi & JD Beck, Clown Core, and MonoNeon, each of whom commandeer a significant online presence through their creation of novel, intertextual, and multi-disciplinary jazz-inflected art online. Virtuosity, humor, and insider jazz language pervade recent meme-y videos such as MonoNeon’s bass funk arrangement, “Is Outer Space Gay or Straight” (2023), which they recorded over Theo Von’s 2022 interview with physicist Neil deGrasse Tyson.<sup>40</sup> As *Pitchfork’s* Andy Cush declared, these jazz viral stars are indeed weird, prolific, young, and virtuosic—and yet they are also mostly male and white.<sup>41</sup>

While female jazz artists have taken to TikTok and YouTube, their unique yet modern rendering of popular songs from the American Song Book more frequently attract condemnation by jazz critics than their male peers. Such criticisms often appear in familiar gender-laden dismissals, as exemplified by the reception to jazz star vocalist, multi-instrumentalist, and composer Laufey. Laufey is credited with making jazz popular for teenagers and especially girls, a feat many critics consider remarkable but less aesthetically relevant.<sup>42</sup> Artists such as Postmodern Jukebox, Raye, and Grace Kelly have revived the audiovisual aesthetics of traditional (and now romanticized) media, including Hollywood

<sup>38</sup> Judd, “Virals, Memes, and the Lick’s Circulation,” 393.

<sup>39</sup> Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers*.

<sup>40</sup> MonoNeon, “Is Outer Space GayOrStraight (feat. Theo Von & Neil deGrasse Tyson),” YouTube video, January 10, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LbTGZ5DjdOA>.

<sup>41</sup> Cush, “The New Weird Virtuosos Making Jazz.”

<sup>42</sup> Chinen, “What is Viral Jazz?”; Cush, “The New Weird Virtuosos Making Jazz.”

film and television, for their online jazz content. Their content, which often highlights more popular or crossover jazz vocal repertoire, reflect influences from early swing, Broadway musicals, film soundtracks, and Disney animations of the pre- and post-war periods. These adaptations garner significant popular attention yet acquire fewer reviews from jazz critics than their male counterparts. Unsurprisingly, those projects featuring women in leadership roles fail to receive the same critical appraisal as the largely instrumental, fusion-oriented coterie of “jazz dudes” online. This dismissal by jazz critic Nate Chinen is representative:

By my own reckoning, “viral jazz” describes an aesthetic rather than a set of quantifiable viewer metrics. To that end, I wouldn’t apply the term to, say, the insufferable outflow of Scott Bradlee’s Postmodern Jukebox, which has racked up more than 1.8 *billion* YouTube views.... The Postmodern Jukebox formula... features blockbuster pop hits dipped in a fondue pot of smarmy anachronism. (A typical upload from last year transplants Dua Lipa’s “Levitating” to the loamy soil of 1920s hot jazz...). Neither for that matter is someone like the breakout vocal star Samara Joy, despite her heavy traction on TikTok. Joy has proven adept at delivering snackable digital content, but the core of her musical appeal—as I’ve recently experienced it in club and festival settings, and on her fine new album, *Linger Awhile*—rings familiar, even conservative, in its basic contour.... Joy is an irrepressible talent harnessing modern means toward traditional ends.<sup>43</sup>

Here, Chinen reserves the more esteemed and innovative “viral jazz” appellation not to eclectic mixes of pre-war popular vocal jazz genres in modern arrangements (or vice versa), but to those performances eschewing connections to a feminized or perceived retrograde practice and repertoire of the Great American Songbook.<sup>44</sup>

The most transformative artist attracting Gen Z audiences to jazz recordings is the Icelandic vocalist and multi-instrumentalist Laufey Jónsdóttir who has been touted as “saving jazz” by various pop media platforms including *Rolling Stone* and *Vogue*,” an honorific bristled at by jazz fusion bassist and online pundit Adam Neely.<sup>45</sup> Despite his interest in equity and inclusivity, Neely promotes a conservative view of jazz membership. He provides two primary reasons for discrediting Laufey and excluding her from the jazz pantheon: 1) most of her

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<sup>43</sup> Chinen, “What is Viral Jazz?”

<sup>44</sup> For example, consider the prior performance conventions and repertoire of Hollywood era female artists. Artists such as Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Peggy Lee, or Billie Holiday performed musical numbers in film and on television in a jazz style and fronting a big band.

<sup>45</sup> Adam Neely, “Is Laufey jazz?,” YouTube video, September 26, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68zOvCLwL8>.

tunes are originals, as opposed to new versions of tunes established as canonical (e.g., those in the *The Real Book*); and 2) the ways that these “heartfelt” originals incorporate Gen Z teenage girls into this perceived retrograde-oriented jazz experience. He also cites his dislike of theatrical musical genres (so-called Disney musics) and his belief that jazz needs to be experienced in small club settings. Ultimately, Laufey’s success at adapting her music to online contexts are defined by Neely as distinctly “not jazz,” a tautological argument that inevitably precludes growth, change, and adaptation to new media and for younger audiences. When women, especially vocalists, acquire mainstream accolades for modernizing jazz, male pundits step up to debate their authenticity with age-old gate-keeping limitations. While Neely provides a relatively nuanced discussion of these topics, the need to discredit women who achieve mainstream success belies long-standing dynamics within the jazz industry that effectively invisibilized earlier women artists from modern jazz histories, especially those most connected to popular styles of the day.<sup>46</sup>

When reviewing the viral popularity of jazz-trained female musicians like Laufey and Grace Kelly, music critics often attribute this popularity to the revival (“resuscitation”) of so-called romantic or nostalgia genres. Consider this description from an otherwise largely positive review by Ammar Kalia for *The Guardian* in 2024:

Even more astounding than her rapid ascent is the type of music that Laufey makes. Across her two albums, 2022’s *Everything I Know About Love* and 2023’s *Bewitched*, she has perfected a mix of 1950s-inspired classic jazz vocals with luscious symphony orchestrations and confessional Taylor Swift-esque songwriting, spawning a new form of pop. Playing like TikTok’s answer to Norah Jones, Laufey is making crooning jazz palatable to teen audiences for the first time in decades, her torch songs harking back to a sepia-tinted world they have never known.<sup>47</sup>

Yet in the same interview, Laufey pushes against this characterization as one not often levied at young male jazz instrumentalists who revive older genres like

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<sup>46</sup> Examples of once popular women now largely excluded include Lil Hardin Armstrong, Peggy Lee, or Hazel Scott and those groups attracting significant female fans, including the many all-girl bands of the 1920s, ‘30s and ‘40s such the Ingenues or the International Sweethearts of Rhythm. See McGee, *Some Liked it Hot*; Tucker, *Swing Shift*; and David Ake, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and Daniel Ira Goldmark, ed., *Jazz/Not Jazz: The Music and Its Boundaries* (University of California Press, 2012).

<sup>47</sup> Ammar Kalia, “TikTok Jazz Sensation Laufey: ‘It’s No Longer About the Genre, It’s About the Felling and Mood,’” *The Guardian*, March 3, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2024/mar/03/laufey-jonsdottir-iceland-bewitched-tour-grammys-interview>.

bebop or fusion in their modern works (such as Snarky Puppy and Sungazer, two popular fusion-inspired groups highly revered by critics). In response to this nostalgic label often applied to women, Laufey retorts: "The music I make has older inspirations, but the lyrics are very modern. I don't see myself as somebody who should have existed in a different decade. I'm very much a 21st-century girl and love living in this time, since there's no better time to be a woman."<sup>48</sup> Her determination to situate her creative output in a contemporary aesthetic reflects a broader desire by contemporary jazz women composers to be included in modern music innovations.

Like many viral jazz-influenced musicians, Laufey is a multi-instrumentalist who combines music from different styles, eras, and even media. The visual aspects of non-jazz film and music video certainly influence how her music is promoted online. Like other viral jazz musicians, including Grace Kelly, Laufey studied (classical and) jazz at the Berklee College of Music. Like other young virtuosos, Laufey controls all facets of her music, from the arrangements to the performances and recording mix. "It's more mature because I've grown as a person," she says. "Not a single note is played on the songs without me being in the room, and it's all musicians playing real instruments. We're all just trying to bring classical and jazz music to new audiences."<sup>49</sup> Here, Laufey affirms her authorial and artistic voice by maintaining total control of her musical output, as if to pre-empt misconceptions about the presumed male authorship of her sound and aesthetic.

#### GRACE KELLY'S VIRAL JAZZ

One artist successfully navigating the gender biases and self-optimization metrics of social media algorithms is Grace Kelly, a Korean American saxophonist, composer, producer, dancer, and vocalist who has established an active online presence on a variety of platforms including YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. As a result of her exceptional skills, Kelly was awarded a scholarship to the most well-known jazz conservatory in the United States, the Berklee School of Music, which she briefly attended before leaving to tour with national star and global jazz ambassador Wynton Marsalis. While Kelly remains consistently involved in public performances, educational initiatives, and marketing activities, her successful musical career requires an active online presence. As of 2025, she has performed one thousand concerts in thirty-five

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<sup>48</sup> Laufey cited in Kalia, "TikTok Jazz Sensation Laufey."

<sup>49</sup> Laufey cited in Kalia, "TikTok Jazz Sensation Laufey."

countries, recorded fifteen albums, and toured or recorded with numerous musicians, including Lin Manuel Miranda, Lee Konitz, ?uestlove, Gloria Estefan, Jon Baptiste, and Wynton Marsalis. She has also performed as part of the house band for the Late Show with Stephen Colbert.

Kelly has received numerous awards including the Down Beat Rising Alto Saxophone Star as the youngest ever artist recipient in 2009, an award she won again in 2017. In the 2020s, she produced various multi-genre projects, ranging from soul and popular music to metal with her all women quartet, Rammenstein. In 2024, inspired by *Charlie Parker with Strings* (Mercury, 1950), she released *Grace Kelly with Strings, At the Movies*, an album of original film music arrangements of some of her favorite scores. This album typifies her genre bending proclivities and features music from popular film songs, animated Disney shorts, and crooner ballads from the post-war era. Each track features Kelly on a different saxophone or woodwind instrument. In addition to her many online and public performances, Kelly also supports philanthropic initiatives, such as She's the First, an NGO that helps girls acquire funds and opportunities to attend school. For this project, Kelly composed, recorded, performed, and sang the anthem "She's the First" (2016), which is proudly featured on the organization's website. This song is often used in educational programs at the NGO's various sponsored schools.<sup>50</sup>

Given the variety of activities undertaken by Kelly, mapping her career trajectory can provide critical insight to aspiring jazz artists as they embark on their own performance careers. Berklee jazz educator and scholar William Banfield positions Kelly as exemplary of a new kind of jazz artist who has bypassed the music industry's traditional pathways. He identifies several ways in which younger, so called "digital natives," currently harness the internet to establish new types of musical careers. Some of these newer approaches include: working independently rather than with major labels; non-categorically defining themselves as multi-instrumentalists; resisting genre labels; aligning themselves more closely to hip hop rather than adopt bebop-based language; and exploiting online communication platforms to interact directly with their audiences.<sup>51</sup> Kelly adheres to these strategies, especially in her ambition to break down expected genre and performance conventions for jazz saxophonists. She materializes this through her unique combinations of singing, dancing, and modernizations of

<sup>50</sup> See Grace Kelly, "She's The First' Anthem by Grace Kelly," YouTube video, November 2, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nHYMosFFtQ&t=10s>. More information about this important NGO can be found on their website: <https://shesthefirst.org/anthem>.

<sup>51</sup> William Banfield, "It Don't Mean a Thing Without My Web Fan Base Thing: A Dance of Cultural Relevancy in Jazz Education Culture Today," in *Artistic Research in Jazz: Positions, Theories, Methods*, ed. Michael Kahr (Routledge, 2021): 106–7.

familiar popular songs with a jazz and improvised aesthetic. Further, she avidly creates content for her online community and does so at a prolific rate, sometimes publishing one video per day.

In an interview with Kelly in 2023, she acknowledged the relentless activities required of the new jazz entrepreneur, claiming that the old-fashioned model (enlisting support from a PR agent, manager, and producer) has ceased to exist in today's world. Searching for antecedents, she draws parallels to pre-digital entrepreneurial activities like busking. For her, busking resembles the short videos posted by artists on TikTok; she claims "you have like a few seconds. Is someone going to stop and listen to you? Will they throw money or walk on by?" Kelly hopes that the virtual busking on TikTok serves as a social media business card, attracting new audiences to her live performances that are much more geared towards extended "musical storytelling." When making videos, she also considers the potential reaction of her fans. As she speculates, "when you have hundreds of thousands of people strolling by or scrolling through... what is going to get their attention?" For Kelly, social media and TikTok constitute vehicles for a "growth model." Yet this expansionist framework may also be burdensome. "I feel a bit torn sometimes about social media," she acknowledged. "There needs to be a fine balance. I know there are going to be some videos that go up that are not going to get attention from new people, but I put up that video for my fans, or to show something new that I am working on." Acquiring new fans through social media promotes deeper engagement with her longer-form recorded work. She observed: "Sometimes people only look at social media and they have no idea of the history or discography of an artist. People will write to me with 'Hey do you have any records or music?'" She responded rhetorically, "Actually I have fifteen albums out. I have been doing this a long time."<sup>52</sup>

With respect to the performative and aesthetic preferences cultivated on social media, Kelly identified some of the different approaches she undertakes in musical storytelling to engage audiences. As she claims, "it is hard to get that all out on social in a way that is cohesive and will get someone's attention and I think that is also part of the storytelling technique of how you can think of social media as a physical business card. How do you display that information of yourself and your story and connect with new audiences? That is something I am still trying to figure out."<sup>53</sup> Because connecting with new audiences is partly maintained through an active online presence, she regularly creates stories with pictures or videos for Instagram and TikTok, or she asks questions of fans to stimulate reciprocity. These techniques allow her to develop online

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<sup>52</sup> Grace Kelly, telephone interview with the author, November 7, 2023.

<sup>53</sup> Kelly, telephone interview with the author.

relationships—what Nancy Baym refers to as the “relational labor” expressly invested in securing more intimate connections with fans.

Social media also affords promotional opportunities; if Kelly has a new product, she creates new promotional material. Here her approach tends to be “out of box, more genuine...” such as “telling a story about how I wrote a song or [I] play a snippet of the song.” Seeking to optimize the “algotorial” logics of these platforms, she tries to anticipate who’s on the other end and asks herself, “When they watch this how would they react, would this feel like an interaction you would have at a live show? What would keep them there, what would make them want to follow me? With a video, you’ve got [only] a few seconds.”<sup>54</sup> Her knowledge of how audiences engage with or are attracted to short videos led Kelly to create a wide variety of highly entertaining content. These include: musical dance numbers with other attractive and multi-versatile musicians such as with her frequent partner, violist Mia Asano; Kelly playing her saxophone in more novelty settings such as for eight small puppies (at a very soft volume); or posting official concert performances for big band, such as Kelly and Leo P with the youth-centred 8-bit Big Band playing the theme from “Pokemon” at the Berklee College of Music in 2020.<sup>55</sup>

Despite the widely reputed ephemerality of online communities, when I asked Kelly about the pressures of this new entrepreneurial context, she reminded me of the genuine connections she cultivates with fans online. “Sometimes with social media,” she said, “people feel like oh this is something I have to do, but they forgot that there is someone else on the other end, but you can be creating a genuine connection with someone and maybe you will never meet them... you have those interactions as if you are with them in person.” In her study of music platforms, Baym alerts musicians to the new ways in which performers must develop connections with their fans. She claims: “When we ask musicians to be direct, unique, and personal with their audiences, we ask them to redefine a relationship that has been structured in particular ways for decades. We ask them to do more work, work that requires relational, communicative, self-presentational, entrepreneurial, and technological skills that music work had not previously demanded.” The combined skills required for making connections with fans online speaks to the broad range of knowledge and time required for artists such as Kelly in the current online “gig economy.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Kelly, telephone interview with the author.

<sup>55</sup> 2SAXY, “#Pokemon Theme Saxy Style - The 8-Bit Big Band featuring Grace Kelly and Leo P,” YouTube video, March 28, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H5MYHX6JTbI>.

<sup>56</sup> Baym, *Playing to the Crowd*, 6–8.

Recognizing these boundaryless and multi-faceted demands, Kelly admitted the difficulty of keeping up with the pace of digital media in the gig economy, stating:

I think it can be very overwhelming to constantly be in the rat race of creating content, yet this has become part of an independent artist's job. To wear these different hats, in music school, you know twenty years ago, you could just be focusing on the music, and the idea of you have your manager, you have someone doing everything else for you. I think that that has changed drastically in today's world. Of course, we still have managers, agents, people who will help. But artists have to wear all the hats now, they are the ones posting videos, talking directly to the fans, like I write all of my own copy, writing an email blast to my fans, because I think it is more genuine .... There are certainly moments when I wish I could just focus on doing the music, [when] it is feeling so overwhelming to do videos and all this. I'm learning how to navigate better; these days I'll go turn off social media and my phone off for a week or a month or however long it takes to do a project, but then I'll go into another mode, and I will really promote my work and engage because I want people to know about this project.<sup>57</sup>

While Kelly acknowledged the need for self-promotion in today's online performance world, she also recognized that the failure to do so could potentially inhibit the prospects of talented younger jazz musicians. As she said:

I see a lot of people; they will work so hard on their art which they will not promote at all and nobody knows it exists.... For some of my official media, I have video editors, I have a gal who works with me and very much knows Gen Z culture and can help with doing captioning and capturing something that a younger generation will also relate to. I enjoy learning these things and how to communicate with audiences online.

When queried about her thoughts regarding gender and diversity online, including the longstanding theme of "women in jazz," she responded with optimism:

We still have a lot of work to do when it comes to women in jazz, and I am really excited about the progress we have made as far as seeing more young women playing *all* the instruments. I have this feeling that there is more spotlight on women in the festival circuit, just hearing about great projects and female artists, that really excites me, and I very much applaud the folks in charge of programming jazz festivals, to really think about the diversity, the different voices, the women and jazz and pushing that to the forefront.

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<sup>57</sup> Kelly, telephone interview with the author.

I know a lot of young girls who have reached out to me directly and they say to me, “You are my inspiration for playing the saxophone, I didn’t think it would be possible to play this instrument, and I have never seen anyone do it before you and I didn’t think I could do it.” I am very encouraged by that. That is a big responsibility that I take very seriously.<sup>58</sup>

Kelly’s reflections about providing an inspirational model for young girls relates to the old feminist adage that you can’t be what you can’t see. And so Kelly’s activity both online and in live performance arenas provides an ongoing presence in contexts most likely to reach and inspire young women.

Despite some gains by female musicians like Kelly via social media’s expanded growth potential,<sup>59</sup> many young popular music artists like Mitski and Halsey have complained about the incessant pressures of twenty-four-hour-a-day marketing engagements expected of female artists, lamenting the “parasocial” relationships demanded by fans of their music.<sup>60</sup> In response to the overwhelming pressure and fatigue of online expectations, Mitski famously experienced burn-out during an excruciating yet sold-out 2019 tour, after which she dramatically closed all her social media accounts. This led to fierce critique and frustration from online fans accustomed to nearly daily updates of this musician’s personal life. In a 2022 interview with the BBC, she claimed that returning to the industry left her with dread. She recalled that as her fanbase grew in scale, the pressure of appeasing “an ardent fanbase (some of whom called her mom), started to mess with her head.” She continued: “You develop this constant ticker in your mind of people’s potential criticism or commentary on whatever you’re making, even in the in the middle of making it.... And that will never really go away, I don’t think.”<sup>61</sup> This self-scrutinization and anticipation of audience reaction relates to Kennedy’s observations about the negotiation of subjectivities undertaken by female creators in online environments. Gill’s theory of internalized surveillance aids in understanding the debilitating facets of social media cultures surrounding global stars such as Mitski, Laufey, and Kelly.<sup>62</sup>

Scholars of digital music industries, including Gaunt, Choi, and Emília Barna, have recently examined the precarity and opportunity of the modern

<sup>58</sup> Kelly, telephone interview with the author.

<sup>59</sup> Grace Y. Choi, “Who Run the Music? Girls! Examining the Construction of Female Digital Musicians’ Online Presence,” *Popular Music and Society* 40, no. 4 (2017): 474–87, doi:10.1080/03007766.2016/117419; and Kennedy, “If the Rise of the TikTok Dance.”

<sup>60</sup> Andrew Chow, “Halsey Is the Latest Artist Complaining About the Music Industry’s Reliance on TikTok,” *Time*, May 23, 2022, <https://time.com/6180377/halsey-tiktok-label/>.

<sup>61</sup> Mark Savage, “Mitski Quit Music... and Coming Back Fills Her with Dread,” *BBC*, February 2, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-59943542>.

<sup>62</sup> Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture.”

female artist's popularity on TikTok, where girls dominate as followers of young adult female performers.<sup>63</sup> These studies reveal how girls and young women of different backgrounds are afforded new opportunities because of the availability and accessibility of digital audio workstations and online distribution and reception networks since the 2010s. In her ethnography of primarily young, female musicians promoting digital performances on YouTube, Vine, and SoundCloud, Grace Choi found that women musicians were increasingly self-producing and experimenting with new musical personas. Yet despite these empowering contexts, some young women still experienced highly negative critiques of their body types and viral images.<sup>64</sup> These dynamics also play a role in online jazz communities such as #JazzTok, where some members reputedly left the group after experiencing harassment, bullying, or other abusive behavior "related to race, gender, culture, religion and political beliefs."<sup>65</sup> Bondy Kaye glosses over this fact in his study of the musician community engaged in collaborative musicking (e.g. asynchronous improvisation) via the #Jazztok community on TikTok. Yet such experiences are common for women in jazz (and other under-represented groups), including for Kelly, as reflected in the negative appraisal of her performance aesthetic as "gimmicky" (which I discuss below). Such experiences certainly merit further investigation as online contexts gain in power and prestige.

While Kelly remains a popular viral jazz performer because of her unique artistic expression and active community of followers on TikTok, she fails to rank in the highest echelons of tagged #jazz performers on the platform. Benjamin Burkhart's analysis of the most popular #jazz videos on TikTok in 2022 and 2023 discovered that most of the top one hundred videos garnering more than 500,000 views featured young, white female vocal jazz performers singing tunes from the Great American Song Book.<sup>66</sup> These findings suggest that female instrumentalists such as Kelly face different reception criteria than vocalists. Burkhart's popularity data also dramatically contradicts the presentation of "stars" within modern jazz contexts, especially the predominantly male instrumentalists headlining jazz festivals and jazz clubs.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Emília Barna, "Bedroom Production," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Popular Music, Space and Place*, ed. Geoff Stahl and Mark Percival (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022): 191–204; Gaunt, "YouTube, Twerking & You"; Choi "Who Run the Music?"

<sup>64</sup> Choi, "Who Run the Music?"

<sup>65</sup> Kaye, "JazzTok," 109.

<sup>66</sup> Burkhart, "Fly Me to the Moon," 134.

<sup>67</sup> Kristin McGee, "Gendered Interventions in European Jazz Festival Programming: Keychanges, Stars and Alternative Networks," in *The Routledge Companion to Jazz and Gender* ed. James Reddan, Monika Herzig, and Michael Kahr (Routledge, 2022), 190–204; Myrtle

Burkhart's study also indirectly confirms the "viral surveillance" metrics of the online bedroom producer, as theorized by Kennedy in relation to TikTok.<sup>68</sup> Of the women dominating the top one hundred videos, some claimed that they strategically organized their videos in response to how participants did or did not react to their performances. For example, one vocalist realized that if she were to perform without make-up and with clothing covering most of her body, her content would attract fewer viewers than if she were to wear her hair down, apply false eyelashes, and choose clothing accentuating particular body parts.<sup>69</sup> Although he mentions gender coding in relation to instrument association in jazz, Burkhart dedicates relatively little attention to those gendered dynamics and ideologies conditioning such performance strategies. In his view, "some of the prototypical jazz musicians on TikTok are relatively young women in their early twenties who conform to a certain prescriptive beauty norm."<sup>70</sup> While Kelly resisted commenting directly upon such bodily dynamics in her interview, her sartorial style often prioritizes bold and brightly coloured body suits, tank tops, form fitting leggings, and eye-catching neon hair coloring and glittery make-up. In this sense, she both conforms to such standards but also undermines them through a more eclectic, kitschy sartorial style.

Other media scholars, including Sophie Bishop, have emphasized the rewards of normative beauty presentations online. Bishop argues that through forms of "visibility labour" and "self-optimization," YouTube's algorithm "ultimately rewards hegemonic and normative performances of femininity, in line with the desires and needs of brands and advertisers."<sup>71</sup> Acknowledging such assertions within online jazz performance contexts sheds light on the pressures for women (and increasingly content creators of all genders) to adapt to these visibility regimes, such as how contemporary performers attempt to reframe and optimize the visually-, bodily-, and beauty-oriented zeitgeist of audiovisual media today.

To examine Kelly's polygeneric instrumental performances online in relation to these critical insights, I conducted a twelve-month walk-through study of jazz saxophone performances on TikTok in 2024 and 2025. During this time, I gathered the top twenty-four videos with the search term #jazzsaxophone at monthly intervals. My algorithm-driven data collection led me to discover more

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Picaud, "We Try to Have the Best: How Nationality, Race and Gender Structure artists' circulation in the Paris Jazz Scene," *Jazz Research Journal* 10, no. 1-2 (2016): 126-52.

<sup>68</sup> Kennedy, "If the Rise of the TikTok Dance."

<sup>69</sup> Burkhart relayed this example in "Platform Jazz: Performing Jazz on TikTok," an online conference presentation at *Mediations of Music and Power in Online Music Cultures*, September 21, 2023, <https://ecrea.eu/page-18206/13054010>.

<sup>70</sup> Burkhart, "Fly Me to the Moon," 140.

<sup>71</sup> Bishop, "Anxiety, Panic and Self-Optimization," 81-82.

predictable patterns of visibility and valorization within the current industry.<sup>72</sup> Those videos listed in the top twenty-four featured performers who are (by my observation) predominantly white, male, young, and often conventionally good looking.<sup>73</sup> Women saxophonists accounted for under twenty percent of the top videos; three of the most popular female saxophonists were young, talented, and conventionally attractive. These top lists rarely included Kelly, who generally does not tag her performances with the #jazzsaxophone or #jazz label. In this sense, she undertakes a tactic adopted by many female and boundary blurring jazz artists who resist the jazz label altogether.<sup>74</sup>

In the following, I consider the accentuation of normative beauty and body expectations for top ranking viral jazz performers. I highlight the creative performance and marketing strategies undertaken by Kelly as a performer who blurs the expected performance conventions for women in jazz through her combination of dance moves with more typically masculine or “hard-hitting” instrumental soloing techniques. Through this unorthodox combination, Kelly cultivates a uniquely eclectic and polygeneric viral jazz aesthetic.

#### KELLY'S EXPERIMENTAL POLYGENERIC PERFORMANCE AESTHETIC

By highlighting the combinatorial strategies taken by Kelly, it is apparent that creating content provoking awe and wonder as well as recognition through the textual referencing of well-established popular and mainstream jazz music genres, helps to broaden the aesthetics of viral jazz. Kelly exemplifies what jazz scholar Gabriel Solis describes as the *poly-* or even *omnigenericism* of Afrofuturistic jazz-oriented musicians such as Kamasi Washington, Flying Lotus, and Thundercat. For Solis, these “musicians and their audiences are liable to connect multiple genres, creating new fusions, and even to view all genres of music as potentially available to them.”<sup>75</sup> For example, in one YouTube video

<sup>72</sup> Laura Pellegrinelli et al., “Equal at Last? Women in Jazz, by the Numbers,” *NPR*, January 12, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/12/953964352/equal-at-last-women-in-jazz-by-the-numbers#:~:text=In%20the%202019%20NPR%20Music,a%20third%20of%20those%20rankings.>

<sup>73</sup> My assertions are based on visual assessments of the performers and their names. This approach can be problematic, considering the complex gender, race, and cultural background identifications that are self-proclaimed by many musicians (that cannot be confirmed via visible assumptions). Yet I have chosen to do so for the broader findings, which cohere to national statistics in countries like the United States, Australia, and the Netherlands.

<sup>74</sup> See Picaud's study, “We Try to Have the Best,” on how female jazz vocalists often refrained from such jazz labels in their self-promotion.

<sup>75</sup> Gabriel Solis, “Soul, Afrofuturism & the Timeliness of Contemporary Jazz Fusions,” *Daedalus* 148, no. 2 (2019): 24.

with more than three million views, Kelly performs a duet (with backing rhythm section) of “Fish & Chips” from her visual album *Go TiME: Brooklyn* (2018). This video features kindred artists, including the energetic and entertaining baritone saxophonist Leo P with whom she has a band called 2SAXY.<sup>76</sup> Here, Kelly’s demanding jazz dance performance draws from multiple genres including funk, front-line marching bands, and rock. This highly charged performance reflects the kind of intensity and multi-versatility that viral jazz artists demand of themselves. The duo’s ecstatic style attracts fans who now expect Kelly’s unorthodox, but celebratory, online performance gestures and choreographies. In another YouTube video from the same visual album, Kelly performs a “Rock-it” (Herbie Hancock) infused version of Michael Jackson’s “Billy Jean.”<sup>77</sup> Her lengthy soprano solo exhibits her extended range, her uniquely syncopated, rapid-fire articulations, and her affinity for multi-phonics and other expressive timbres. In the viral jazz ecosystem, this long-form video (at six minutes) is featured alongside her other, short-form TikTok videos. This approach constitutes part of the total viral profile of Kelly’s virtuosic, multi-disciplinary, polygeneric jazz. In these and other online videos, Kelly has gained a reputation for her “over the top” performance energy, her exceptional technique, and her multi-disciplinarity that combines dance with saxophone playing. In doing so, she disrupts the gendered conventions attached to past performance scripts of virtuosic instrumental soloing in audiovisual media.

Kelly’s intense physical style betrays influences from the funky, sometimes flirtatious or erotic feminine expressions codified within Black popular dance styles featured in funk, rhythm and blues, and hip hop. Yet, her saxophone playing also displays the “powerful” and confident masculine performance expectations so often represented historically in jazz writing and media.<sup>78</sup> These same expectations are also passed down through anecdotal narratives about “strong” female instrumentalists active within jazz spaces.<sup>79</sup> Jazz saxophonist and scholar Yoko Suzuki offers an analysis of reoccurring anecdotal narratives about how “hard-hitting” female saxophonists are often portrayed as embodying a masculine performance style. Such estimations often led to suspicions about the

<sup>76</sup> See Grace Kelly performing “Fish & Chips” from her visual album *Go Time: Brooklyn 2* with baritone saxophonist Leo P in 2018 on YouTube: “GRACE KELLY GO TiME: Fish & Chips Feat. Leo P #2Saxy”, May 9, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C0fj6Bwrp6M>.

<sup>77</sup> See Grace Kelly, “Grace Kelly GO TiME Brooklyn: Billie Jean,” YouTube video, August 2, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=taZ7e7dOTP8>.

<sup>78</sup> Karns, “Hard Bop Cool Pose”; Gabbard, “Signifyin[g] the Phallus.”

<sup>79</sup> For example, see the reception of Mary Lou Williams, Lil Hardin Armstrong, and Terri Lyne Carrington in Rustin, “Playing like a Man!”; Provost, “Bringing Something New”; and Jones, “Jazz without Patriarchy.”

performer's sexual orientation and subjectivity on the bandstand, where the heterosexual matrix prevails.<sup>80</sup> The common assertion of "playing like a man" through masculine instrumental displays relates to Jack Halberstam's theorization of "female masculinity."<sup>81</sup> Such technical displays are therefore presumed by male musicians and others as exceptions to normative performance conventions for women in jazz. For Suzuki and others, the jazz world reifies a compulsory masculinity and heterosexuality where "women are either heterosexual who can be the object of men's sexual desire, or 'dykes' who do not fit into this man-made institution."<sup>82</sup> The question then arises: To what extent can online platforms and viral jazz's seemingly experimental and genre-defying aesthetics enable transgression or the undermining of such long-standing gendered codes and proscriptions within jazz?

Many of the most popular #jazz videos on TikTok appear to further perpetuate what Burkhart refers to as "hegemonic cultural divisions," where women perform feminine identified standards in a beauty conscious, conservative style. However, in her online videos, Kelly has confounded these gendered performative expectations with her combined online/offline performance style that sidesteps the rigid binary conceptions of the masculine jazz body, including her combination of sensual and funky expressive dance moves, her colourful, yet sexy sartorial style, and her aggressive saxophone gestures and solos. Choi, Barna, and Baym's insights regarding the accessibility of the "bedroom production" context and the relational connections and deterritorialized agency (despite the logics of bias in algorithms) afforded by social media remain useful for understanding Kelly's successful creative performance context.<sup>83</sup> It is this combination of creative agency and relational connections in online media that allows Kelly, as a polygeneric female jazz instrumentalist, to disrupt these otherwise heavily policed and gatekept musical and performance boundaries of jazz. Yet it is precisely this mixing and destabilizing of styles that has left Kelly's purist jazz-oriented viewers both astonished and perhaps confused by the ways in which she rejects conventional jazz scripts. When asked if she had ever received negative appraisals, she recalled how some TikTok commentators assume incorrectly that she has an extensive marketing team controlling her look and performance style.<sup>84</sup> To illustrate another negative response, she recalled one instance where one viewer posted

<sup>80</sup> Sherrie Tucker, "When Did Jazz Go Straight? A Queer Question for Jazz Studies," *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 4, no. 2 (2008): 1–16.

<sup>81</sup> Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Duke University Press, 2018).

<sup>82</sup> Suzuki, "Gender Sexuality and Jazz Saxophone Performance," 165.

<sup>83</sup> Choi, "Who Run the Music?"; Barna, "Bedroom. Production"; Baym, *Playing the Crowd*.

<sup>84</sup> Kelly, telephone interview with the author.

that her mentor, saxophonist Phil Woods, would be deeply disappointed by her so-called gimmicky TikTok videos. Ironically, it is the gimmicky nature of most viral jazz that imbues her performances with the aesthetics of this dynamic genre. In response to such criticism, she responded rhetorically, claiming that Woods would have only continued to encourage her to “take jazz to new places and territories.”<sup>85</sup> By resisting these purist and binary concepts of instrumental jazz, Kelly has altered the possible performative model for all jazz musicians, but especially for women, gender expansive artists, and non-white musicians who all travel with a different set of cultural baggage and creative ideas in the performance space.

Ultimately, Kelly’s case illustrates how online networks, and their attention economies work to create a hyper-critical and visually oriented set of expectations for (women) musicians in jazz. While their ease of accessibility can offer innovative and inter-textual modes more sensitive to equity, diversity, and inclusion, as Robin James illustrates in her study of EDM pop videos, such resilient performances (where pop stars enact narratives of damage that they then overcome performatively) can simultaneously reinscribe a hyper-Capitalist commodification of women’s bodies for a highly precarious, accelerationist, neoliberal, and “always online” arts media ecosystem.<sup>86</sup> Further, through seemingly unintended outcomes such as popularity and gender bias, such networks and modes of creativity disproportionately benefit conventionally attractive, white, androcentric performers. They also disproportionately profit mega media and tech corporations over the under-represented musicians aspiring to combine a performance career with a highly active online music and arts participation.<sup>87</sup> Yet, despite the global economic dominance of such media, Kelly and others constituting the new viral jazz, have found ways to transform the audiovisual aesthetics of online platforms by integrating a broader variety of artistic media and stylistic sources. Kelly, Laufey, and others also promote

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<sup>85</sup> Kelly, telephone interview with the author.

<sup>86</sup> James analyses several videos from the 2010s of female pop stars such as Beyoncé in which narratives of harm or damage are staged, and during which these resilient women then perform an overcoming of this damage. She refers to this narrative as the “Look I Overcame” narrative. One example is Beyoncé’s “Video Phone” video from 2008 in which she is surveilled by “the man” but then turns the camera around to surveil her oppressors and therefore expressing her own power and agency. See Robin James, *Resilience & Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism* (John Hunt Publishing, 2015).

<sup>87</sup> Chris J. Cottell, “Musical Videos as Works: Documenting Audiovisual Jazz Practices in Social Media Communities,” *Sonic Scope – New Approaches to Audiovisual Culture*, February 15, 2021, <https://www.sonicscope.org/pub/fzoh7la3/release/2>; Tiziano Bonini and Alessandro Gandini, “‘First Week Is Editorial, Second Week Is Algorithmic’: Platform Gatekeepers and the Platformization of Music Curation,” *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 4 (2019): 1–11.

intertextual performance styles that combine a performative ecstasy with genre-blurring virtuosity. Such a combination has become the key criteria for popularity and participation in this online ecosystem.

## CONCLUSION

As Suzuki reveals, women jazz instrumentalists maintain complex forms of identification in relation to jazz performance practice, at times expressing how their gender and race are experienced variously as assets in the acquisition of cultural capital to “double negatives” in essentialist jazz lineages and performance expectations. Especially within online social media networks, pre-digital audiovisual media tropes in relation to jazz and gender are always already mapped onto the bodies of online jazz artists, informing how they adapt and pioneer new performance scripts for the future.

Considering the lack of representation of women jazz saxophonists online and the near absence of non-white women jazz instrumentalists, Kelly's successful artistic output on TikTok disrupts these sites of bias and domination, allowing her to break the expected scripts. The viral jazz ecosystem affords Kelly, and her contemporary Laufey, greater agency in self-promotion; online, both artists actively condition the terms of their interpersonal and relational relationships with fans and the industry. With the rise of bedroom production and female agency on social media, such ephemeral online networks seem to provide unprecedented visibility for some. In this context, virtuosic female performers such as Laufey and Kelly acquire visibility and credibility as jazz musicians by modernizing prior jazz aesthetics and obtaining new jazz fans in unprecedented numbers—by the millions. Such shattering of the glass ceiling by Kelly would seem a welcome development. Yet, white male jazz saxophonists still dominate the top circulated videos on #jazzsaxophone within TikTok, a testament to the enduring power of technological, algorithmic, and intersectional forms of structural discrimination that reinforces a narrative of the male jazz hero laboring assertively and with technical skill. Despite these continued challenges, Grace Kelly has ostensibly become the first female viral jazz instrumentalist to promote a multi-instrumental, multi-disciplinary, intertextual, and polygeneric jazz style. Her uniquely viral entrepreneurial art offers a new path for young women wishing to perform traditional jazz instruments differently.

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