

Reconfiguring Rhythms: Jazz, Queerness, and Subversion of the Norm

Ria Panchal

INTRODUCTION

As a queer student, my decision to create a graphic work exploring the intersections of jazz and queer theory was inspired by Salim Washington's assertion that jazz is an inherently avant-garde and perpetually evolving medium, as well as class discussions on the genre's origins in challenging dominant ideologies. These ideas align closely with my understanding of queer theory, particularly the ways in which certain cultural elements, due to their inherent resistance to normative structures, can be strongly associated with queer symbolism without explicit connections to the LGBTQ+ community. Recognizing that jazz has been historically male-dominated, I sought to explore how other communities might have employed the genre and the social practice of jazz as a tool of subversion. I felt that using a combination of original artwork and text would most effectively convey the intricacies of queer artistic expression, given that artists like Sun Ra utilized visuals, theatricality, and camp alongside their music to convey their message, and that queer culture often emphasizes aesthetics that defy convention.

When it comes to questions of sexuality, jazz has historically been constructed as a heterosexual branch of performative arts.¹



Jazz style and performance is often heard and seen as hetero-masculine, emphasized by the style and dress of performers.

In an investigation of when jazz “went straight,” Sherrie Tucker acknowledges its reputation as the “official soundtrack of heterosexual love and romance.”²



As a result, the question of if and how jazz intersects with queerness can be a difficult one to answer.



Is it possible to find queerness within jazz? What might we be looking for? How would one go about “queering” jazz?

Do we unearth queer performers from histories of jazz?

Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, both rumored to be queer, were famously partners in music and close friends. Rainey often incorporated her love for women into her music.³



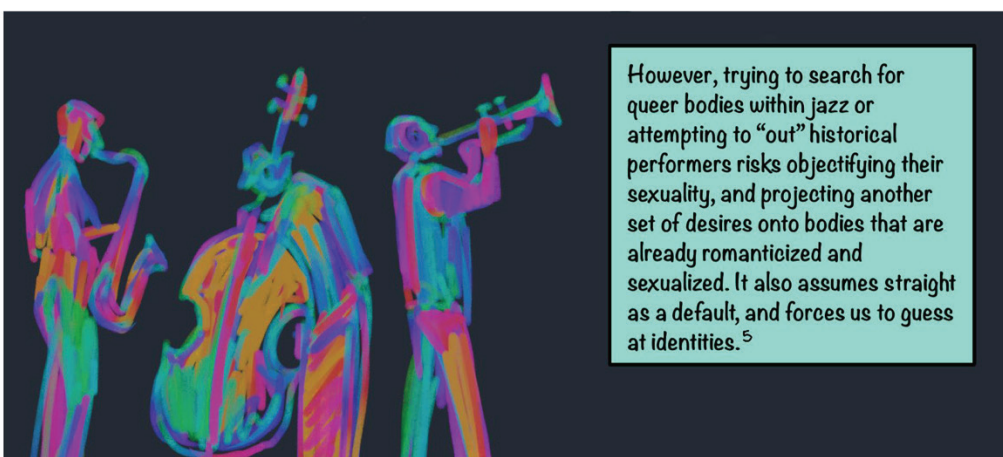
Billy Strayhorn, known for his collaboration with Duke Ellington, was openly gay.³



Gladys Bentley, along with several other performers, performed at clubs in male drag during the Harlem Renaissance.⁴



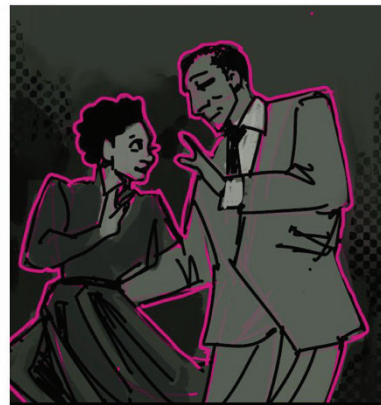
However, trying to search for queer bodies within jazz or attempting to “out” historical performers risks objectifying their sexuality, and projecting another set of desires onto bodies that are already romanticized and sexualized. It also assumes straight as a default, and forces us to guess at identities.⁵



Might we instead search for queerness in histories and themes of jazz, or in the music itself?



Racism meant that jazz was deemed taboo, and the clubs and saloons where it was performed provided spaces for people who had been rejected in other contexts, and for performances of gender fluidity.⁶



Jazz was often associated with romance and desire, fitting within a definition of queerness as sexuality alternative to what was "normal" at the time.



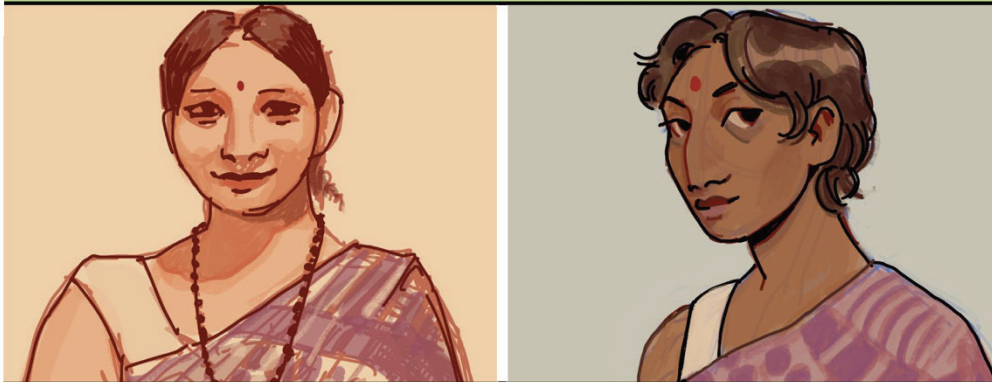
However, implying jazz was queer because of its historical association with sexual deviance might risk repeating racist rhetoric, and exoticizes New Orleans as the romantic, colorful, hyper-sexual birthplace of jazz. Even if the origins of jazz were in queer places, this might not be useful in queering the music now.⁷

An alternative definition of queerness is “everything that is in conflict with what is considered dominant and normal.”⁸



Queer performativity does not stop at cross-gender expression, but pushes beyond the standards of normativity.

Drag does not only engage with gender crossing, but with temporal crossing, blurring boundaries across ages. Normative gender often condenses temporal events into a singular gender identity, and crossing boundaries of time can be transgressive.⁹




As an American college student, if I “wore” my grandmother’s gender as my own, I would not wear it the same way she did in 1969 in India, and my performance of her gender would not be perceived as normative.



Incorporating temporality into drag creates a montage of different meanings — anticolonialism, historically distinct meanings of womanhood, a parody of gender roles, love for my grandmother...⁹

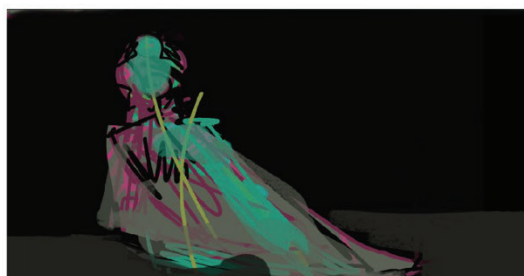
In an alternative vision of queer temporality and drag, Chris Stover uses Sun Ra as an example, a jazz composer known for his eclectic and theatrical performances. Stover describes a scene from the *Helsinki 1971 Concert and Interview* film:¹⁰




A “whirling dervish” in tights and a cape dances onstage,



Another spins ecstatically,



A writhing figure in a long white robe scurries, “insect-like,” off the stage.¹⁰



Sun Ra is interviewed in a flowing gown, jester’s neckwear, and shining headpiece. Stover sees this performance as a kind of drag — a “willfully eccentric mode of being.”¹¹

Sun Ra’s rendition of Coleman Hawkins’ “Queer Notions,” arranged by Fletcher Henderson in 1932 and released posthumously in 2020, is used to demonstrate Sun Ra’s own version of temporal drag.¹²

As José Muñoz puts it, “to disidentify is to read oneself and one’s own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded.” Muñoz shows how gay Latinos’ subversive reimagining of traditional depictions of masculinity transforms the way their cultural identity is perceived.¹³

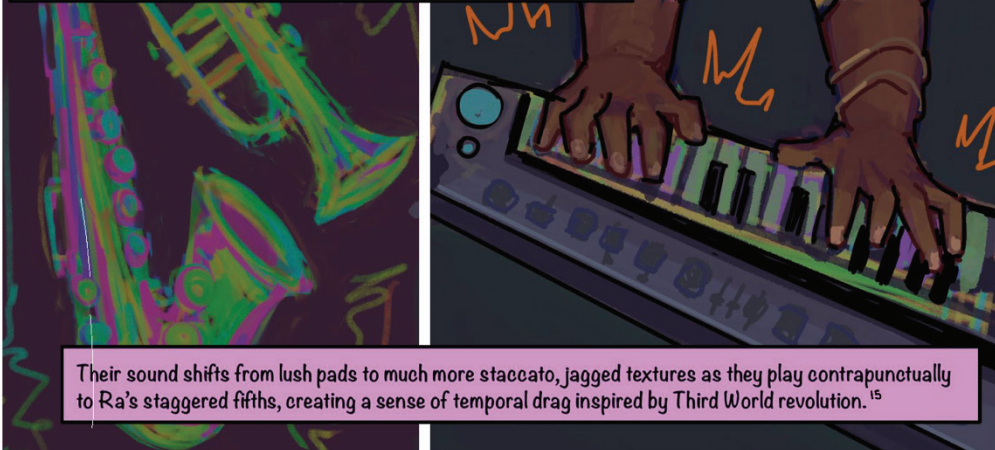


Similarly, the Arkestra’s performance of “Queer Notions” disidentifies with the temporal practices of mainstream swing. Compared to Henderson’s “cool, misterioso” performance, it is bacchanalian — pushing forward “wildly, like it is about to lose control.”¹¹

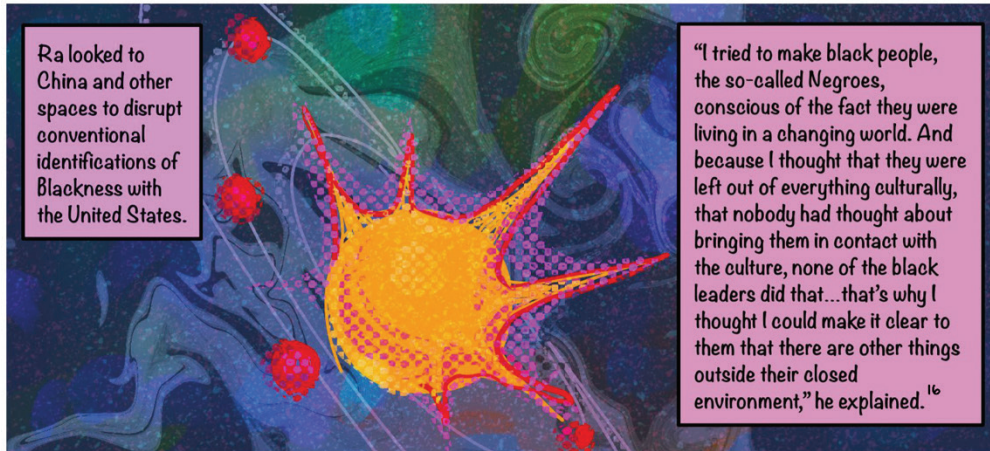


Ra pushed each member of the ensemble to disidentify with the conventional logic of their instruments.¹⁴

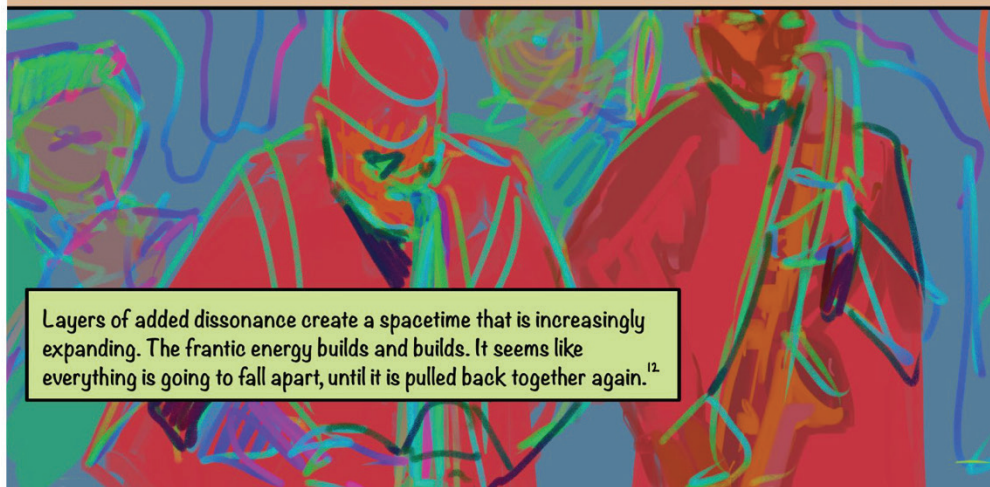
On Ra’s composition “Overtones for China,” the horns of John Gilmore, Pat Patrick, and Charles Davis demonstrate Gilmore’s early use of multiphonics to deconstruct usual linear styles, an approach he called “playing against the [other] musicians.”¹⁵



Their sound shifts from lush pads to much more staccato, jagged textures as they play contrapunctually to Ra’s staggered fifths, creating a sense of temporal drag inspired by Third World revolution.¹⁵



Sun Ra's arrangement of "Queer Notions" embodies all these ideas. The Arkestra begins the piece with a brooding piano introduction, dramatically reconfiguring the swing-era textures of Henderson's original release with minor and major seconds and colorful extensions, while a synthesizer responds to the big band's punctuated syncopations.



When asked why he chose to honor this song, Sun Ra explained that the original composers transcended normative ideas of masculinity: "Fletcher was really part of an angelic thing. I wouldn't say he was a man. I wouldn't say Coleman Hawkins was a man, because they did things men haven't done, and hadn't done before."¹⁷

The Arkestra's performance, with its collapse of past, present, and future, seems to follow this spirit. Their staggered, disidentified swing is an expression of Muñoz's insistence that "the present is not enough" — that it is "impoverished and toxic" for queers that do not have the privilege of normative tastes, and who must create alternative ways to imagine time and space.¹⁸

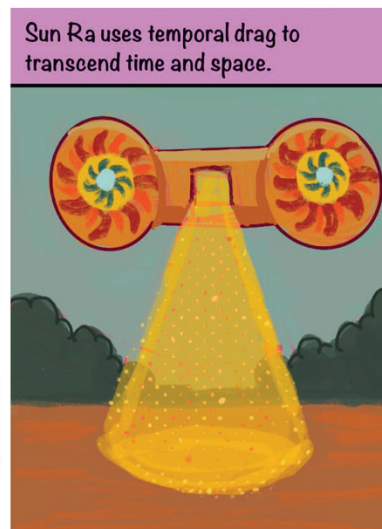
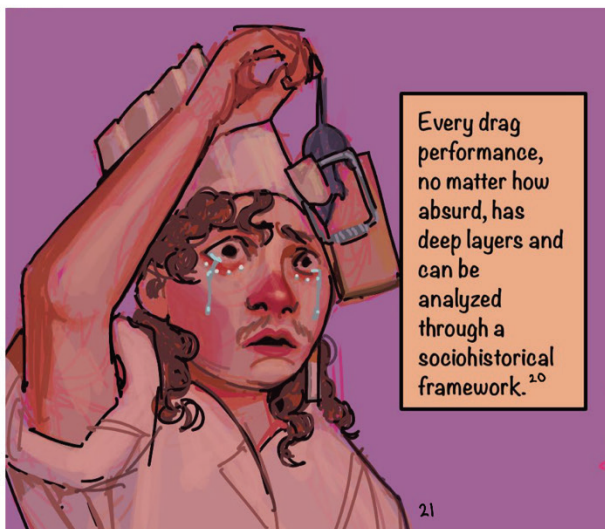


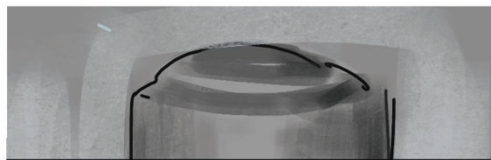


Sun Ra's own sexuality might inform this analysis of his music: he expressed a disinterest in sex, leading many to believe he was asexual or closeted. However he perceived himself, his layered identities — Black, queer, American — come together in his ability to break convention and challenge the dominant vision of the future.



As Sun Ra said, "They say that history repeats itself; but history is only his story. You haven't heard my story yet."¹⁹





This has long been difficult to reach for not only queer people, but for other marginalized groups in America.



In his performances, Sun Ra resists the assumption that music follows a straight line, and is something fixed and knowable.



Jazz in itself is a political stance. As an African-American art form, it seeks to establish a more democratic and egalitarian social practice in its aesthetic vision.²⁵



It is avant-garde as a primary principle, seeking to disrupt convention.²⁵



It connects different times and places.²⁵



In this way, jazz and queerness are inextricably tied together — not just by shared bodies, spaces, and histories, but by their desires to transcend the norm and resist the “straight line” of normative philosophies.

POSTSCRIPT

This graphic work was Ria Panchal's concluding project for a "Jazz and the Common Wind," a course I offered through Cornell University's Africana Studies and Research Center and the Societies for the Humanities in the spring of 2024. The purpose of the course was to track "the Common Wind"—spirit of abolition—as it traversed the Atlantic world from the 19th century Haitian Revolution to the US Civil War, from anticolonial struggles to contemporary movements for ecological and gender justice. The course, of course, focused on how music and aesthetics embodied ideals of freedom, and located jazz as one manifestation of this multinational movement to build a better world beyond plantation capitalism and its afterlives.

After weekly seminar meetings and writing assignments in which the class dialogued with the work of Fred Moten, Katherine McKittrick, Robin D.G. Kelly, Daphne Brooks, Salim Washington and Haitian-American baritone Jean Bernard-Cerin among others, students were encouraged to think broadly about a final project that could take various forms of their choosing: a research paper, a podcast, and a mini-memoir were all submissions. Panchal proposed the following graphic essay about jazz's latent queerness. I responded with an emphatic "yes." This is, in my mind, exactly the kind of work that jazz studies pedagogy is uniquely positioned to encourage within the humanities. After Panchal sent me the final project, I was awe-struck by the art style, the power in which it conveyed so much with such little text, the way in which the aesthetic mapped the kind of queer temporality that Panchal tracked in the work of Sun Ra.

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ENDNOTES

I am indebted to Dr. Benjamin Barson for his guidance and support while I was preparing this work. In particular, his insights on the broader historical context in which Sun Ra existed and performed, as well as his suggestions regarding my analysis of musical theory, were invaluable. This project would not have been possible without his mentorship and encouragement.

- ¹ Sherrie Tucker, "When Did Jazz Go Straight?": A Queer Question for Jazz Studies," *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 4, no. 2 (2008), 6.
- ² Tucker, "When Did Jazz Go Straight?," 1.
- ³ Jim Lopresti, "JAZZ: The Queer Touch," *Gay Men's Chorus of South Florida* (blog), March 11, 2022.
- ⁴ Tucker, "When Did Jazz Go Straight?," 6.
- ⁵ Tucker, "When Did Jazz Go Straight?," 4.
- ⁶ Natalie Weiner, "Jazz, the Blues & the LGBTQ Roots We Ignore," *Tidal*, June 24, 2020.
- ⁷ Tucker, "When Did Jazz Go Straight?," 5.
- ⁸ Ege Altan, "Improvising Theatrical Jazz in a Queer Time and Space: Aishah Rahman's Unfinished Women Cry in No Man's Land While a Bird Dies in a Gilded Cage," *Language, Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies (LLIDS)* 2 no. 1 (September 2018): 99-109.
- ⁹ Elizabeth Freeman, "Packing History, Count(Er)Ing Generations," *New Literary History* 31, no. 4 (2000): 727-44.
- ¹⁰ Chris Stover, "Sun Ra's Fletcher Henderson," in *Queer Ear: Remaking Music Theory*, ed. Gavin S.K. Lee (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 159.
- ¹¹ Stover, "Sun Ra's Fletcher Henderson," 161.
- ¹² Stover, "Sun Ra's Fletcher Henderson," 170-174.
- ¹³ José E. Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 20.
- ¹⁴ Val Wilmer, "John Gilmore," *The Wire*, 17 (July 1985), 14.
- ¹⁵ Sun Ra, *Sun Ra and his Solar Arkestra Visits Planet Earth*, Saturn, 1966.
- ¹⁶ John Szwed, *Space is the Place* (New York: De Capo Press, 1998), 173.
- ¹⁷ John C. Reid, "It's After the End of the World," *Coda* 231 (April-May 1990), 30.
- ¹⁸ José E. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 27, quoted in Stover, "Sun Ra's Fletcher Henderson," 162.
- ¹⁹ Szwed, *Space is the Place*, 317.
- ²⁰ Stover, "Sun Ra's Fletcher Henderson," 175-180.
- ²¹ Image of drag king Percy Non Grata's performance of a Ratatouille-inspired funeral for Remy the rat, who said of performing drag that it was "genuinely beautiful" that he now can be "exactly who [he] f**king wants to be" on and off stage. Photography by Greyson Askew for "I get to be this forever: How a trans artist found 'home' in the drag king scene," *Pink Magazine*, 30 September 2023.
- ²² Muñoz, "Stages." In *Cruising Utopia*, 98.
- ²³ Altan, "Improvising Theatrical Jazz in a Queer Time and Space," 99.
- ²⁴ Altan, "Improvising Theatrical Jazz in a Queer Time and Space," 104.
- ²⁵ Salim Washington, "'All the Things You Could Be by Now': Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus and the Limits of Avant-Garde Jazz," in *Uptown Conversation*, ed. Robert O'Meally,

- Brent Hayes Edwards and Farah Jasmine Griffin (New York: Columbia University Press 2004), 27-28.
- ²⁶ Image from *We Insist! Max Roach's Freedom Now Suite* (Candid 9002, 1960).
- ²⁷ Image from *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus* (Candid 8005, 1960).
- ²⁸ Inspired by “Young Michael Scott Shaking Ed Truck’s Hand” (meme), <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/young-michael-scott-shaking-ed-trucks-hand>.

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