

RESEARCH ARTICLE

What We Talk about When We Talk about Live Smooth Jazz: Sonic Suburbanization, Multipurpose Places of Assembly, and Collective Memory in Regional Cleveland

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Abstract

Writing about jazz often emphasizes urbanity and focuses on a geographically bounded scene. This can obscure what people do with jazz to affirm community across distances, in the context of Black suburbanization. Likewise, the construction of jazz as an art music oriented around a canonical past does not allow a full understanding of what musicians do with commercial culture to construct community in the present. In this article, I present the notion of sonic suburbanization to foreground the ways Black people exert agency through musicking, claiming suburban space and affirming community across urban and suburban lines. This is live performance that is “both/and”: Both suburban and urban; both community and commercial. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Cleveland, this research focuses on the ways live smooth jazz performers invoke multiple musical histories while congregating heterogeneous Black identities across boundaries. To demonstrate the crossovers of live smooth jazz, I begin by outlining the idea of sonic suburbanization. I then note the proximity of Black music genres in a context of racial segregation. Despite suburbanization’s role in dislocating Black geographic cohesion, live musical performance continues to affirm a crossover Black community through interposing an array of sensibilities. Finally, I point to the conceptual schemas of musicians in the scene who foreground continuity with jazz, pop, and gospel. Live smooth jazz performers take pride in rhetorical effectiveness and genre versatility as part of connecting to the audience. Although some scholars attend to smooth jazz outside “real jazz,” musicians in the scene view smooth jazz as real jazz.

A group of African American musicians called Forecast perform an instrumental cover of “Inner-City Blues” outside the city of Cleveland, in a shopping mall located in the suburb of Richmond Heights. Marvin Gaye’s 1971 hit protesting exploitative living conditions in the inner-city comes alive in the suburbs. The saxophonist covers the melody, whereas the electric bass, keyboards, vibraphone, and drums lock the groove. After the head, the vibes player takes a solo, improvising with a Roy Ayers inflection.¹ The drummer infuses the backdrop with his gospel chops, putting polyrhythms in the pocket. The keyboardist voices chords that would be at home in church, even as the dense clusters suggest Herbie Hancock.² These musicians have something in common with the Funk Brothers, the in-house Motown studio band of jazz musicians that performed on Marvin Gaye’s original release of “Inner-City Blues”; the audience members bobbing along to this live band have something in common with the jazz venues where members of the Funk Brothers would perform in Detroit when not at

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¹Lem Adams, the vibes player for Forecast, describes Roy Ayers as his primary inspiration. Associated with feel-good music, vibraphonist Ayers bridges jazz, funk, and pop and has been nicknamed the “godfather of Neo-soul.”

²Herbie Hancock developed a chordal vocabulary in the 1960s with rich upper structures. Although heavily criticized for his subsequent movement into synthesizers and jazz-funk, both his chord voicing and his jazz-funk sensibility inflect the Forecast sound.

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Motown.³ They sound like church. They sound like R&B. They evidence the “Cleveland hump”; that subtle quality of groove said to be characteristic of groups in the area. They are not afraid of pop music. They market themselves as smooth jazz.

This performance of “Inner-City Blues” is an urban protest anthem in the suburbs, shaped by the contradictions of crossover.⁴ What we talk about when we talk about smooth jazz is the subject of this article.⁵ It puts complexity against narrow constructions of genre and place. It is about crossovers: The crossover of Black people into the suburbs, the crossover of jazz into higher education, and the continuing relevance of an integrated radio format (smooth jazz) to a predominantly Black music scene.⁶ It is about relationships realized through musicking—and what it means when “this performance (of this work) takes place at this time, in this place, with these participants.”⁷ The process of Black suburbanization—alongside the shifting racialization of genre—presents ambiguities that exceed tidy conceptual containers. I argue that live smooth jazz is a dialogic activity exploring multilayered relationships.

In Cleveland, smooth jazz does not just mean a record by a distant performer. It means a live performance by local musicians on Saturday night. Some of these same sounds and sensibilities of groove by the same musicians can be heard in area churches on Sunday morning. These community theaters connect Black people across divides just as the church connected post-civil rights Black communities.⁸ There is an intimacy in this music scene that makes it distinct from a scene of strangers.⁹ It is community culture. What is more, it spans the urban/suburban divide. Gigs occur across regional Cleveland, from the urban core to the exurbs. The genre registers Black struggle, while performing the possibility of decent suburban living. It makes a claim on space, a smooth space for people to inhabit, if only for the course of an evening.

To demonstrate the crossovers of live smooth jazz, I begin by outlining the idea of sonic suburbanization. I then note the closeness of Black music genres in a context of racial segregation. Despite suburbanization’s role in dislocating Black geographic cohesion, live musical performance continues to affirm a crossover Black community. Finally, I point to the conceptual schemas of musicians

³Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 159.

⁴For an argument about Motown asserting a “black identity to serve its crossover agenda,” see Andrew Flory, *I Hear a Symphony: Motown and Crossover R&B* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 5. In this paper I attend to geographic more than market crossover. That said, the imagination of the suburbs and the mainstream are linked in important ways. Also, the housing market, like the popular music market, is a market.

⁵This title echoes Tricia Rose’s subtitle in *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop—and Why it Matters*, a book that explores how ideological baggage is attached to the genre of hip hop, the urban genre par excellence in the contemporary cultural imagination. Exploring market friendly representations of urban authenticity, Rose critiques the way reductive associations between genre, people, and place can obscure music’s significance across a complex cultural landscape. Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop—and Why it Matters* (New York: Civitas Books, 2008), 224.

⁶J. Mark Souther, “In the Shadow of the Suburban Dream: Black Struggles on the Urban Fringe,” *Reviews American History* 33, no. 4 (2005): 594–600; College jazz has become a major location for the place of jazz and there is a “disproportionately high number of white males enrolled (and also teaching)” in college jazz programs. David Andrew Ake, *Jazz Matters: Sound, Place, and Time Since Bebop* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010), 119; On smooth jazz as an integrated radio format, see Robert Walser, “Popular Music Analysis: Ten Apothegms and Four Instances,” in *Analyzing Popular Music*, ed. Allan F. Moore (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 16–38.

⁷Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 10.

⁸This larger context for smooth jazz and the overlap between smooth jazz musicians and church musicians point to some of the shifting ways of understanding post-civil rights Black culture. Religious studies scholar Anthony Pinn notes that the African American middle class has remained liminal after the civil rights movement: “The black middle class expressed a feeling of living between two worlds, one generated by economic success and the other premised upon racial classification . . . Yet despite gains, middle-class blacks found themselves in search of a stabilizing force, a community.” Pinn argues that religion was a key means of mediating difficult discrepancies. Struggling with the uncertainty of this in-between status—considered foreign to both poor Black people and middle-class whites—middle-class Black people “returned to their religious roots.” My argument about smooth jazz runs parallel to Pinn’s, albeit in its secular variant. Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church in The Post-Civil Rights Era* (New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 28–29.

⁹George Lipsitz writes about “intimate and personal cultural moments with strangers” in George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 8.

who foreground continuity with jazz, pop, and gospel in the scene. Live smooth jazz performers take pride in rhetorical effectiveness and genre versatility, as part of connecting to the audience.

Claiming Space, Affirming Community: Sonic Suburbanization

Studying the scene around live smooth jazz involves making sense of the changing meanings of community since the 1960s civil rights movement. Some scholars have suggested that, since the legal victories of that decade, members of the Black middle-class have separated themselves from poor Black people through geographically realized class distinctions.¹⁰ Others disagree.¹¹ Scholars also present different conceptualizations of structure and agency in shaping where people live. Against arguments that emphasize structural determinism in shaping residential choice, Cleveland historian Todd Michney argues that we should listen to “assessments of Black agency made by upwardly mobile African Americans themselves.”¹² As with Black settlers on the urban fringe, musicians exert significant agency in imagining community: Smooth jazz musicians in Cleveland use the cultural resources available to them to construct a larger regional Black community, including urban and suburban identities.

Scholarship on smooth jazz tends to approach the genre in relation to its place in genre narratives or taste categories. By exploring it ethnographically, this article disturbs scholarly conventions that tend toward a well-drawn scene in a clear category. In Cleveland, smooth jazz is a music of crossings. It vibrates beyond city limits, while reverberating with urban history. Sonic suburbanization musically symbolizes the role of Black people as active agents in the making of suburbia. It is a form of spatial entitlement, laying claim to suburban spaces while invoking histories of Black urbanity.¹³ Never as uniform as either detractors or celebrants depict, suburbs are dynamic communities, extending the complexities of urbanism.

Smooth jazz brings people together in a felt, crossover community that is layered by multiple registers of musical meaning. For scholars who associate dissonance with liberatory politics, smooth jazz is uncomfortably consonant. Still, this sonic order disturbs another order, the order that naturalizes suburbia as white—and the order that naturalizes the Black experience as dissonant. It affirms the right of Black people to claim the suburban ideal. Suburban Black smooth jazz repositions jazz as an expression of consonance and belonging beyond the city. Sonic suburbanization suggests that urban dissonance is not the only option for Black people—or at least should not be. Smooth jazz is easy music to listen to, resembling on a sonic register the smooth experience of an air-conditioned shopping mall. Nevertheless it is more than that. Its grooves resound with the Black search for space, for leisure and living beyond the constraints of the urban core. It echoes the urban. It sounds suburban. Still and all, it resonates.

Sonic suburbanization resounds with collectivity and the collaborative creation of Black music. Of course, it contains contradictions. It is a commuter genre, accessed by car culture—that emblem of private choice—across a dispersed geography. This is music of call and response, not isolated consumption, performed at times in shopping malls, those icons of consumerism. Sonic suburbanization invokes histories of freedom sounds, pointing to the shared memories of commercial culture to create connections. Nevertheless, this definition of freedom, in its claim to the conventions of suburbia, differs from definitions of freedom associated with rejections of orderly, functional harmony. The aesthetic of this freedom is not obtained through sonic disruptions of aesthetic radicalism (e.g., associated with “free jazz”), but rather through the radicalism of Black people laying claim to suburban space against the racialized limits of the housing market. The music harmonizes a contradiction,

¹⁰William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, The Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 7.

¹¹Earl Lewis states that “class in the Black community must be viewed as part of an intraracial discourse.” Earl Lewis, “Connecting Memory, Self, and the Power of Place in African American Urban History,” *Journal of Urban History* 21, no. 3 (March 1995): 358.

¹²Todd M. Michney, *Surrogate Suburbs: Black Upward Mobility and Neighborhood Change in Cleveland, 1900–1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press Books, 2017), 8.

¹³Gaye Theresa Johnson, *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race, and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

resonating with both collective Black freedom struggles for expanded housing and the individual private choice of the suburbs. That said, the movement to the suburbs has not simply been one of smooth sailing.

The reality of the suburbs for Black people has meant greater access to places to live, greater amenities; it has also meant blockbusting and disinvestment, reasons to protest. If hard bop was the sonic protest of the 1950s and 1960s, smooth jazz is the sounds of community, leisure, and protest in the shadow of the suburban dream.¹⁴ In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lorraine Hansberry writes about a Black family seeking better conditions beyond the limited housing options of the urban core. This suburban dream resounds in smooth jazz. However, it is also a dream deferred: A smooth suburban life simultaneously realized and denied.¹⁵ Smooth jazz sounds suburban, but it is critical suburbia; music registering a critique of a society of discriminatory housing practices, where upwardly mobile Black people can only access “surrogate suburbs” and “secondhand suburbs.”¹⁶ Many Black people have gained access to previously restricted neighborhoods, but not on equitable terms. The space of the suburbs thus both carries and complicates dynamics associated with urban jazz.

Classic texts on Black music take place in an urban place, with an urban genre already in mind. In *Urban Blues* by Charles Keil, blues is the genre and urban is the place. Travis Jackson’s *Blowin’ the Blues Away* focuses on jazz in urban centers. Cleveland smooth jazz breaks with these geographic assumptions.¹⁷ Many smooth jazz performers play primarily in the suburbs, as well as at some urban events. Smooth jazz also breaks from jazz’s high cultural prestige as music for listening. Listening and socializing are not clearly separated in this scene. Musicians enact relationships while performing, seeing themselves as part of a larger social event in a “multipurpose place of assembly.”¹⁸ They perform for drinking, for dancing, for dining, and for grooving. Smooth jazz events cross suburban and urban lines, popular and elite jazz histories, and promote a crossing between social and musical relationships. With the migration of Black people to the suburbs since the 1960s, smooth jazz is one of the ways Black people create continuity with the past and community across the dispersed geography.

I argue that live performances of smooth jazz in Cleveland are interactive communal events that evoke collective memory through dialogic engagement. Smooth jazz communities are built through the resources made available from mass mediation. My focus on live smooth jazz in and around Cleveland frames smooth jazz in “multipurpose places of assembly” that serve as “community theaters.”¹⁹ These events shape the meaning of the music and illustrate the complexity of social bonding and emotional connection; they cannot be reduced to notes on a page, or harmonic analysis. They evoke the collective memory of music in Black Cleveland across the dispersed geography of post-1960s Black experience: Churches, clubs, urban bars, and suburban restaurants. The performance of “Inner-City Blues” in a suburban mall reminds us of the importance of attending to change. In the cultural imagination, jazz is urban and suburbs are white.²⁰ However, neither the image of the urban nor that of the suburban is as simple as iconic images might have us believe. The choice is not between *Leave It to Beaver* or *Straight Outta Compton*. If the fight for access to the housing market was a key

¹⁴Scott Saul, *Freedom is, Freedom Ain’t: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); Souther, “In the Shadow of the Suburban Dream.”

¹⁵Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984).

¹⁶Michney, *Surrogate Suburbs*; Thomas J. Sugrue, “A Dream Still Deferred,” *New York Times*, March 27, 2011.

¹⁷A tradition of jazz writing positions the genre as expressing the dissonance and dynamism of the modern city. See Ake, *Jazz Matters*, 77.

¹⁸For the phrase “multipurpose places of assembly,” see Small, *Musicking*, 21.

¹⁹For the development of “community theaters” as a place where performers and audiences negotiate what music means, see Guthrie P. Ramsey, *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 77.

²⁰For a consideration of a dialectical relationship between a white suburban jazz movement of the 1980s and a Black urban jazz movement of the 1990s, see Ake, *Jazz Matters*, 98, 110; For an important theorization of smooth jazz as both Black and suburban, see Charles D. Carson, “‘Bridging the Gap’: Creed Taylor, Grover Washington Jr., and the Crossover Roots of Smooth Jazz,” *Black Music Research Journal* 28, no. 1 (2008): 1–15.

struggle of the civil rights era, it follows that attention should be paid to negotiations over meaning and community outside the urban core.

Smooth jazz performers mobilize multiple tributaries of music history while engaging audiences. Live musical gestures link to a long chain of recordings and venues. Social meanings of the music in this context are multiple and dialogic. Live smooth jazz in Greater Cleveland's Black community is dialogic in at least two senses of the word: First, in the relationship between performers and audiences, and second, in its references to the history of recorded music.²¹ Performers have dialogic literacy: They read audiences as the audiences respond to them.²²

Live smooth jazz performances involve many layers of citationality. To take one example: Forecast and other prominent Cleveland smooth jazz groups, such as Horns and Things, perform "Inner-City Blues." Each performance carries the residue of other performances and recordings. There is the Marvin Gaye original; there are Grover Washington's recordings of the tune; there are a number of newer recordings, such as the one on Everette Harp's *What's Going On*.²³ At another level, performing "Inner-City Blues" references the musical context from which the Motown musicians on the Marvin Gaye version, known as the Funk Brothers, emerged: The Detroit jazz and blues scene.²⁴

The Motown/Jazz connection is more than incidental to Cleveland smooth jazz performers.²⁵ Musicians covering Motown tunes are aware of the jazz ingredients mixed into the original Motown sound.²⁶ Smooth jazz covers of "Inner-City Blues" connect to rhythm and blues, pop, and jazz, revealing resemblances across genre lines.

Cleveland smooth jazz is improvised music that "makes sense" to people through collective memories. These memories are formed through rooted community institutions, routes of traveling musicians, and rootless radio waves. Musicians require a great deal of knowledge to make music that makes sense to the audience, even if this knowledge is not legible within certain modes of institutional

²¹George Lipsitz writes: "Popular music is nothing if not dialogic, the product of an ongoing historical conversation in which no one has the first or the last word." Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, 99.

²²A third sense of the dialogic in the jazz literature privileges the relationship of musicians interacting with one another. This is an important part of smooth jazz, but not the focus of this study. Here I focus on how the musicians privilege the relationship with the audience. See, for example, Tracey Nicholls on jazz as a conversation between musicians. Tracey Nicholls, "Dominant Positions: John Coltrane, Michel Foucault, and the Politics of Representation," *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation* 2, no. 1 (2006).

²³Some albums featuring "Inner-City Blues" and/or "Mercy, Mercy Me": CTI All-Stars, *CTI Summer Jazz at the Hollywood Bowl*, CTI Records CTI 7076, 1977, CD; Grover Washington, *Inner City Blues*, Verve 0602517655089, [1972] 2008, CD; Grover Washington, *Grover Live*, G-Man Productions 0 85365 48752 9, 1997, CD; Everette Harp, *What's Going on?*, Hollywood, Blue Note CDP 7243 8 53068 2 2, 1997, CD; Gerald Albright performs "Inner City Blues" on *A Twist of Motown*, GRP B0000115-02, 2003, CD; Allen Hoist plays "Inner City Blues" on *Nu Jazz Essentials: The Best Nu Jazz Selection*, Wagram, 3596972106323, 2009, CD. Although not a Clevelander, Everette Harp's website points to some of the cultural affinities between smooth jazz, gospel R&B, and other Black music genres: "As the 90's progressed and smooth jazz artists began incorporating more hip-hop and classic R&B grooves into the music which came to define the genre, Everette Harp found himself ahead of the curve. Raised in church and weaned on gospel and soul music, the Houston born saxman on his first two Blue Note recordings, *Everette Harp* (1992) and *Common Ground* (1994), was already leaning this way, combining dynamic funk edges and urban textures into the mix. His popular 1997 tribute to Marvin Gaye's 1971 watershed album *What's Going On* combined the best of his two worlds, modern day contemporary jazz and the classic soul he grew up with." "Biography," Everette Harp, accessed on September 20, 2022, <http://www.everetteharp.com/biography.php>.

²⁴The studio band for Motown, the Funk Brothers were "jazz musicians first." Geoffrey Himes, "The Funk Brothers and Motown Jazz," *Jazz Times*, updated April 25, 2019, [https://jazztimes.com/archives/the-funk-brothers-and-motown-jazz/#:~:text=What%20made%20the%20Funk%20Brothers,Kenny%20Burrell%20and%20Elvin%20Jones](https://jazztimes.com/archives/the-funk-brothers-and-motown-jazz/#:~:text=What%20made%20the%20Funk%20Brothers,Kenny%20Burrell%20and%20Elvin%20Jones.). *What's Going On* was among the first Motown releases to acknowledge the contribution of the Funk Brothers on the album.

²⁵This Motown legacy—and the jazz story baked into that legacy—resonates for many Clevelanders. Dana Aritonovich writes: "Motown's history in Cleveland is not just of a place to sell records; Berry Gordy knew that if Cleveland audiences responded well to a Motown act at a live venue like Leo's Casino, they were ready to go national." Dana Aritonovich, "The Only Common Thread: Race, Youth, and the Everyday Rebellion of Rock and Roll, Cleveland, Ohio, 1952–1966" (M.A. thesis, Cleveland State University, 2006), 122.

²⁶For Ken Leegrand of Horns and Things, his opportunity to play with The Funk Brothers during their performance in Cleveland was a high point in his jazz career. He told me: "These cats could play . . . Everything just sounds authentic." Ken Leegrand, interview with the author, December 16, 2019.

prestige. The musician enters a conversation already in progress, populated with other voices and listeners. Context matters a great deal.²⁷ Several streams shape Cleveland music. An inventory of the cultural memory of Cleveland includes not just smooth jazz, straight-ahead jazz, R&B, funk, and gospel, but the spaces of Black Cleveland—the spaces of Black urban clubs and Black suburbanization.²⁸ It also includes wider nets of expansive, creative interests.²⁹ Linked to popular music and the Black middle-class, smooth jazz goes against the grain of jazz as “authentic” urbanity or as U.S. classical music.³⁰

This article focuses primarily on a group of artists who market themselves as smooth jazz in the greater Cleveland area—and the social space their performance helps to create. These musicians share a circuit of venues. They have an overlapping repertoire.³¹ A musician from one band can sub in for another fairly easily. These groups perform in downtown clubs, suburban clubs, ex-urban clubs, shopping malls, parks, hotels, churches, and a range of other venues and events. The fact that gigs now happen at the zoo or a university dental center reflects the shifting contexts of jazz. These groups also participate in festivals and reunion events together.

The annual Stafford Park Jazz Reunion is one event where many of the bands in this scene gather to perform. The organizers of this event make no distinction between jazz and smooth jazz. Taking place in Maple Heights, a predominantly Black suburb of Cleveland, the jazz reunion aims to “keep jazz strong” and to be “positive” for local youth. It raises funds to offer music lessons to kids and to get them “out of the streets.”³² Although suburban in location, the community is mixed income: A significant percentage of residents live in poverty and a lot of the kids do not have instruments.³³ Groups include Forecast, Horns and Things, Hubb’s Groove, and the sponsoring group, J.A.M. (Just About Music). These groups—and associated musicians—constitute a smooth jazz scene that is closely interconnected with church, R&B, and the jazz tradition.³⁴ Their efforts resonate across multiple layers of identity and multiple histories.

By foregrounding voices of Black Clevelanders, I illuminate how categories have not caught up to demographic change, shifting racialization, or new institutional norms. If defenders of “real jazz,” as smooth jazz scholar Charles Carson asserts, tend to assume boundaries around “race, class, and music without questioning them,” these discursive boundaries can be quite out of sync with institutional realities, obscuring the place of jazz.³⁵ Like Portia Maultsby’s reading of Dayton Funk as

²⁷George Lipsitz synthesizes Bakhtin with the line: “Everyone enters a dialogue already in progress; all speech carries within it part of the social context by which it has been shaped.” Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, 99–100.

²⁸Joe Mosbrook’s history of the Cleveland jazz scene includes attention to clubs that welcome multiple genres. Joe Mosbrook, *Cleveland Jazz History* (Cleveland: Northeast Jazz Society, 2003). Samuel Floyd and Guthrie Ramsey invoke and attend to structures of feeling that cross genres and key into collective Black experience. Samuel Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Ramsey, *Race Music*.

²⁹See Robin Kelley on the importance of attending to aesthetics and pleasure in Black aesthetic production. Robin D. Kelley, *Yo’ Mama’s Dysfunctional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (New York: Beacon Press, 2001), 35. On the importance of attending to creativity, instead of music emerging from structural determinism, see Joseph Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-based Hip-hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), 28.

³⁰In his writing on Grover Washington Jr., Charles Carson writes that the exclusion of smooth jazz “from discussions of jazz styles . . . is tantamount to denying members of the black middle class the right to self-identify as both black and middle class.” Smooth jazz does link to Cleveland’s Black middle class, but it is also part of the routes and grooves that connect Black Clevelanders across the greater Cleveland area together. Carson “Bridging the Gap,” 13.

³¹In addition to “Inner-City Blues” and “What’s Going On?” a musician jokingly refers to “People Make the World Go Round,” a song recorded in 1971 by The Stylistics (later recorded by Ramsey Lewis, among others), as a “national anthem” of smooth jazz in Cleveland. Ken Leegrand, interview with the author, December 16, 2019. Every group in the imagined community seems to play these tunes. Other standard repertoire includes work associated with Anita Baker and work by Sade, such as the oft-covered “Cherish the Day.”

³²“J.A.M. History,” J.A.M.—Just About Music, accessed on September 20, 2022, <https://jamjustaboutmusic.wixsite.com/music>.

³³According to the 2010 census, the poverty rate of Maple Heights is 22 percent. The community is more than 70 percent African-American. “Maple Heights city, Ohio, Quick Facts,” United States Census Bureau, January 16, 2020, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/mapleheightscityohio>.

³⁴Frequently, these musicians market themselves as “smooth jazz,” though the labels “contemporary jazz” and “jazz” are also used.

³⁵Carson, “Bridging the Gap,” 14.

representing a “diverse, yet cohesive” community, my argument positions the music in relation to larger social forces and representations of multilayered Black identity.³⁶ Right now, the place of jazz in Cleveland includes a straight-ahead scene with close proximity to college jazz programs and a smooth jazz scene with close proximity to Black churches.³⁷ This smooth jazz scene confounds certain dividers between the authentic and the inauthentic.³⁸ Given the importance of mass commercial culture to people’s lives, in shaping their structures of feeling, including the people who attend live concerts, playing for an audience involves dialogic awareness of popular culture. Performing live with an understanding of what the audience has heard on the radio is an essential skill for the smooth jazz musician.³⁹ Writing about Black Cleveland smooth jazz groups is to write about musicians unembarrassed by pop or suburbia, even as their view of pop and suburbia focuses on Black pop musicians and Black suburban spaces rarely found among common images of suburbia.⁴⁰ Sometimes they perform with vocalists, but more often than not a saxophonist covers the melody a vocalist would sing.⁴¹ Musicians in this scene don’t seek to appeal to conservatory jazz norms; they appeal to the diverse sensibilities of Black Clevelanders across suburban and urban lines.

Performers in this scene feel a responsibility to connect to the crowd. For these musicians, the distance between the audience and the musicians is the musicians’ problem. They care who listens. A good smooth jazz musician does not only know what she wants to play, she also knows what the audience will hear when she plays. She knows that the audience brings reference points from popular culture and she knows how to dynamically invoke those references. It is a dialogic relationship. The musicians are not only concerned with “saying something”⁴² to other musicians within the jazz tradition, but also with listening for how they will be understood within the ongoing conversation of popular music and the ongoing influence of the church. They adapt. They are concerned when people clap, or when they don’t, when they shout, or when they don’t. The process of co-creation is thus not just a process of musicians creating together, but of musicians processing in real time what audiences know and what they respond to. Being legible to academic standards of jazz is far less important to these performers than being engaging to audiences on terms (or sounds) meaningful to those audiences. Multiple tributaries of popular meaning shape this environment, not simply a canon of great jazz works. Many of the Stafford Park Reunion smooth jazz groups have connections to popular music, including the R&B scene that emerged around Cleveland’s pop sensation, Gerald Levert.

³⁶Portia Maultsby, “Dayton Street Funk: The Layering of Multiple Identities,” *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology*, ed. Derek B. Scott (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2009), 259–82.

³⁷Rather than accept the “smooth jazz”/“serious jazz” divide at face value, I take these genre categories as what Karl Hagstrom Miller calls, in another context, “points of contention rather than assumed point of departure.” Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 11.

³⁸Referring to a famous disagreement between Miles Davis’s popular appeal and Wynton Marsalis’s neoclassical inclinations, Paul Gilroy once wrote about terrain that confounds essentialist or anti-essentialist understandings of “folk cultural authenticity and pop cultural betrayal.” Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 99.

³⁹Robert Glasper notes that the tendency for smooth jazz musicians to perform Anita Baker, among other popular Black artists, is part of their appeal and audience size: “The average smooth jazz person probably has a bigger audience than the average jazz person. What’s the reason for that? . . . It’s probably because they are playing songs that people know.” Quoted in Bill Beuttler, *Make It New: Reshaping Jazz in the 21st Century* (Mountain View, CA: Lever Press, 2019), 208–9.

⁴⁰For one argument against reductive understandings of suburbia, see Amanda Colson Hurley, *Radical Suburbs: Experimental Living on the Fringes of the American City* (Cleveland, OH: Belt Publishing, 2019).

⁴¹Conventional histories of the modern jazz era, Jessica Perea notes, “have deemed vocalists as inherently commercial or popular, and therefore not ‘real jazz.’” Jessica B. Perea, “Voices from the Jazz Wilderness: Locating Pacific Northwest Vocal Ensembles within Jazz Education,” in *Jazz/Not Jazz: The Music and its Boundaries*, eds. David Ake, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and Daniel Ira Goldmark (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 230.

⁴²For attention to “saying something” to other musicians, see Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Benjamin Givan, “Rethinking Interaction in Jazz Improvisation,” *Music Theory Online* 22, no. 3 (2016).

Genre Connections amidst Racial Divisions

The scholastic jazz movement and grant-oriented institutions host one narrow definition of jazz.⁴³ Smooth jazz hosts a broader definition, linked to the Black church, Black popular music, and jazz history. In the context of the automation and deindustrialization that heavily impacted Black workers, the tension between jazz as an elite art genre and jazz as a popular genre is not an abstraction. It plays out alongside immediate demographic divides of racialized class stratification in the city. One moment illuminating this gap involves the passing of the Black R&B/pop star Gerald Levert.

Levert is one of the key figures in the history of Black pop in Cleveland, a global superstar who sustained connections to his roots. He cultivated groups like Men at Large and the Rude Boys and shared many connections to the local smooth jazz scene. Several smooth jazz musicians performed with Levert or in connection to venues he frequented. However, when *The Plain Dealer*—a mainstream Cleveland paper—covered his death in 2006, the paper received strongly distinct responses from readers across the color line. As one reporter put it, “Black readers were complimentary and grateful that the paper acknowledged Levert’s passing with such sensitive and vigorous coverage. White readers were puzzled—some even stunned—at the fuss over somebody many of them had never heard of.”⁴⁴ The response “underscored the notion that there really are two Americas.”⁴⁵ The affinities between Cleveland’s pop, jazz, and gospel have continued, even as this music has not always been audible beyond the (geographically dispersed) Black community.

Cleveland is one of the most segregated cities in the country. Like many other northern cities, discriminatory housing practices shaped it⁴⁶ and its geography of race.⁴⁷ During the great migration, the number of Black people moving to Cleveland increased enormously, even as the places where they could live decreased.⁴⁸ Constrained housing tracts were the only housing option for many Black migrants.⁴⁹ The long history of discrimination continues to shape the contours of daily life in Cleveland, even as there has been movement to the suburbs.⁵⁰ Projects grounding African American music in urban space have made insightful contributions. I stand on the shoulders of these scholars, beginning from another starting point, another great migration. Historian Andrew Wiese states that in the four decades after 1960, “the number of African Americans living in suburbs grew by approximately 9 million, representing a migration as large as the exodus of African Americans from the rural South in the mid-twentieth century.”⁵¹ This shifting demographic process of suburbanization since the 1960s has occurred alongside an array of processes disrupting clear connections between culture and place.⁵² It has also created conundrums of community and identity for a Black

⁴³As one Cleveland musician put it: “there weren’t always grants. Now, there are grants The scholastic jazz movement was burgeoning in the 1980s, so the 1980s were . . . a lot of things that happened then are still operative.” Ernie Krivda, interview with the author, Cleveland, August 7, 2013.

⁴⁴Daphne Carr, *Nine Inch Nails’ Pretty Hate Machine* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2011), 108.

⁴⁵Carr, *Nine Inch Nails’ Pretty Hate Machine*, 108.

⁴⁶Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York and London: Liveright Publishing, 2017).

⁴⁷George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).

⁴⁸Kenneth Kusmer, *A Ghetto Takes Shape* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 71.

⁴⁹African-American writer Charles W. Chesnutt writes about the constrained possibilities for residential access in Cleveland: “It is about as difficult for a Negro to buy property on the Heights . . . as it is for the traditional camel to pass through the traditional needle. This exclusiveness is maintained by care in sales, and by restrictive clauses in deed.” Quoted in Russell H. Davis, *Black Americans in Cleveland* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1972), 222.

⁵⁰See Michney, *Surrogate Suburbs*; J. Mark Todd Souther, *Believing in Cleveland: Managing Decline in “The Best Location in the Nation”* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017); William Keating, *The Suburban Racial Dilemma: Housing and Neighborhoods* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

⁵¹Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 1.

⁵²Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, “Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference,” *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (1992): 6–23. Lipsitz writes: “The isomorphism of place, culture, nation, and state can no longer be taken for granted.” George Lipsitz, *American Studies in a Moment of Danger* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 15. Mark Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993). Martin Stokes writes: “The production of locality and place is no longer considered the inevitable and benign result of small-scale, face-to-face interaction,

middle-class gaining wealth and spatial access, while still facing racism.⁵³ The image of the urban nightclub has been replaced by the reality of shifting locations for jazz and Black suburbanization. One performer in the car culture of Cleveland smooth jazz summarizes the new fluid place of jazz concisely: “It is a jazz venue if you play jazz in it.”

Live Smooth Jazz: Multiple Overlapping Histories

Is jazz “popular music”? Is some of it “popular music” and some not? Will some of the participants assume that jazz is “popular music” and others assume that it is not?

—Charles Hamm⁵⁴

“It is clear,” jazz studies scholar Christopher Washburne writes, “that a complete rupture has arisen between those who consider themselves ‘serious jazz listeners and performers’ and smooth jazz.”⁵⁵ In Cleveland, there is no complete rupture. In fact, smooth jazz represents a site of crossings and continuity. Many smooth jazz musicians in the scene use the word “jazz” without a modifier. Some connections are familial: The “serious” jazz organist Eddie Baccus Sr.’s son Eddie Baccus Jr. is a successful smooth jazz saxophonist. Other connections are musical. Keyboardist for J.A.M. Alphonso McDuffie lists influences from across the great divide: Jeff Lorber and Errol Garner.⁵⁶ The repertoire for smooth jazz group Horns and Things has included “Sweetest Taboo” by Sade and “Billie’s Bounce” by Charlie Parker. The barrier between the canonical jazz of Charlie Parker and a smooth jazz cover of Sade is opaque only for some.⁵⁷ Others frame the divide in a complex way, contesting its history and its field of meaning. Although there are certainly some musicians who suggest a complete rupture in the Cleveland scene, there is more often a both/and than an either/or among musicians who work in smooth jazz. Smooth jazz and “serious” jazz are fundamentally contested concepts.⁵⁸ This contestation has to do with geography, history, institutions, and audiences. It has to do with how people in a segregated city connect to each other and make sense of jazz in the present tense; how people make music and make meaning.⁵⁹

Many musicians participate in both the straight-ahead scene and the smooth jazz scene. The key values of smooth jazz—connecting to the audience, grooving, bodily response—are often seen by practitioners as fundamentally continuous with jazz history and Black aesthetics more broadly. In the scene, the current state of straight ahead is frequently framed at a distance from Black spaces of congregation. Instead, it is framed in terms of art (instead of helping the audience bear a burden) and

but instead a project in which many actors have an interest and a stake. Locality, as many investigators have stressed, is constructed, enacted, and rhetorically defended with an eye (and ear) on others, both near and far.” Martin Stokes, “Music and the Global Order,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 50.

⁵³See Mary Pattillo, *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril Among the Black Middle Class* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

⁵⁴Charles Hamm, *Putting Popular Music in Its Place* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 117–18.

⁵⁵Christopher Washburne, “Does Kenny G Play Bad Jazz?,” in *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*, eds. Christopher J. Washburne and Maiken Derno (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 125.

⁵⁶In his argument on appropriations of classical music virtuosity by heavy metal musicians, Rob Walser makes the point that this divide looks different depending on where one is on it. Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 107.

⁵⁷This is a reference to Christopher Small’s statement that the “barrier between classical and vernacular music is opaque only when viewed from the point of view of the dominant group; when viewed from the other side it is often transparent.” Christopher Small, *Music of the Common Tongue: Survival and Celebration in African American Music* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 126. Also referenced in Walser, *Running with the Devil*, 107.

⁵⁸Throughout this article, I use straight ahead synonymously with the “jazz tradition” or acoustic jazz. See Scott DeVeaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography,” *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 3 (Fall 1991): 525–60.

⁵⁹Musicologist Guthrie Ramsey asserts that ethnic identity and musical practice “glean important traces of meaning from the dialogue occurring between the present and the past.” Moreover, both musical codes and ethnic markers are unstable: “What they mean depends on many contingencies, such as historical context, geographic location, who is uttering them, and who is interpreting them.” Ramsey, *Race Music*, 38.

listening (instead of grooving).⁶⁰ For many, smooth jazz sounds like community; straight-ahead jazz sounds like the concert hall or like college. If serious jazz lost some of its community connections when it accomplished greater prestige, smooth jazz kept its community connection without losing its connection to serious jazz. This community sensibility helps to stitch together Black Cleveland across a fragmented geography.

The history of jazz writing has often framed the genre “within the inflexible dialectic of ‘commercial’ versus ‘artistic,’ with all virtue centered in the latter.”⁶¹ There is no shortage of dismissals of smooth jazz as commercial product; the “other” to art.⁶² Nevertheless, the primary divide in Cleveland jazz is not “commerce vs. art” but “audience-oriented vs. institution-oriented.” This divide has to do with reaching Black audiences, not bolstering jazz’s bid for inclusion in higher education.⁶³ Interactive grooving is valued over sitting still; playing by ear is valued as much as reading music. The smooth jazz tradition is frequently regarded as enacting the power of the Black music and the power of community, rather than the norms of academic jazz.⁶⁴ Many in the scene assert that this audience orientation is fundamentally continuous with jazz history.

Smooth jazz musicians sometimes critique college-educated jazz players as analytical and narcissistic: They stand on stage, playing complex runs for themselves, as if they were in a practice room, with no audience present. Serious jazz is difficult because it is technically challenging within a paradigm of complexity. Smooth jazz is difficult because it is attuned to the challenging of reaching another person, letting audiences in.

For the late African American Cleveland jazz broadcaster Bobby Jackson, smooth jazz has origins in the tradition of “real jazz.” He created a radio program that makes this point. On “The Roots of Smooth” he suggests that the history of smooth jazz should be linked back to the smooth playing of musicians like Johnny Hodges, not the smooth salesmanship of corporate boardrooms. He contests the frames in which smooth jazz is understood, suggesting smooth as a sensibility embedded in the jazz tradition, not a brand. For Jackson, smooth jazz is “the texture of music . . . that conveys a certain feeling of calmness or of well-being in the listener.”⁶⁵ Smooth jazz also involves “a spiritual level that is not easily explained in words but felt in your heart and soul. It is rich and can reach a listener in profound ways that require no explanation.”⁶⁶ Musicians across jazz genres in Cleveland knew Jackson as someone who was keeping the jazz scene alive, “serious” jazz included. His show sought to reclaim smooth jazz from a limited corporate definition. Corporate radio “made them all sound just alike What they didn’t take into account was that communities had their own musicians . . . their own way of speaking. Their own culture. But they homogenized all of that.”⁶⁷ In his broadcasting work, although he critiqued corporate homogenization of smooth jazz, he redefined and reclaimed smooth jazz to fit within a framework of “real jazz” that wasn’t subsumed to corporate interests or control. For

⁶⁰My approach here is informed by scholars of the cultural dynamics of race, ethnographers who seek to understand “place-specific dynamics” and how race is “reproduced or contested in social interactions in particular public contexts.” The task for these scholars is to “describe the interpretive work of social subjects in particular locales and to appraise how that work is variously supported or undermined in social interactions.” John Hartigan, *Race in the 21st Century: Ethnographic Approaches* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 31.

⁶¹DeVeaux “Constructing the Jazz Tradition,” 530.

⁶²For example, Stuart Nicholson writes: “The essence of the music was to get onto playlists that were constructed with the lowest common denominator in mind to appeal to the broadest possible constituency. The music was unadventurous, nonchallenging, and unthreatening because it had to be, programmed to attract audiences and thus advertisers . . . The ‘smooth jazz’ phenomenon appeared to be transforming an art form back into a commodity by responding to commercial logic.” Stuart Nicholson, *Jazz-Rock: A History* (New York: Schirmer, 1998), 222.

⁶³College jazz has become a major location for the place of jazz and there is a “disproportionately high number of white males enrolled (and also teaching)” in college jazz programs. Ake, *Jazz Matters*, 106.

⁶⁴For Samuel Floyd, academics tend to miss the essential power of the music, presuming “cultural and artistic goals different from those of the tradition from which jazz springs.” Samuel Floyd suggests that academic jazz writing tends to “give the impression that the music is merely a species of European-derived music, causing both these critics and their listeners to miss the point of the music’s real and essential aesthetic power.” Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 272–73.

⁶⁵Bobby Jackson, “Roots of Smooth,” 2013, accessed December 19, 2014. <http://www.thejazzmind.com/rootssmooth>.

⁶⁶Jackson, “Roots of Smooth.”

⁶⁷Bobby Jackson, interview with the author, Cleveland, July 8, 2013.

Jackson, smooth jazz bridged into serious jazz, even as he experienced pronounced racial borders in the city.

When Jackson first arrived in Cleveland in the 1980s, he found a segregated jazz scene in a segregated city. He made sense of how larger groups interacted in the city after encountering how smaller groups interacted in two jazz clubs. One club was predominantly white. The other was predominantly Black:

They had these two clubs . . . They were side by side. Sixth Street Under was owned by a Black establishment . . . the other . . . was owned by a white establishment. And I would stand there and watch white patrons go into the Bop Stop and watch Black patrons go into Sixth Street Under . . . and I thought to myself . . . I'm smack dab in the middle of downtown, where everybody uses it. And this is how they use it . . . the contrast was very stark . . . it was kind of . . . a microcosm in what I was dealing with.

For Jackson, this stark racial contrast maps onto a distinction between a definition of jazz as art and a definition of jazz as community. In Jackson's interpretation, this shift to art has led to white interest in jazz and a disconnection from Black audiences. The communal aesthetic of jazz is the prime casualty of jazz as art:

In the Black establishment, true to form, African Americans were interfacing and interacting with the music because it is our music. It is a communal music. There is call and response . . . people will talk to the musicians . . . the musicians will talk to the audience. That is comfort for me. But I would go into the other club . . . the European style music as art and not as a communal thing . . . it is like "sh, sh, sh, sh, quiet. This is jazz." I'm seeing all of this within the same block. It kind of made the reality of the city that I am dealing with.

During our interview, Jackson, who has a capacious interest in jazz across genres, did not mention that the white club genre primarily played straight-ahead jazz. He did not mention that the Black club primarily hosted smooth jazz. However, this lack of genre distinction accentuates the point: Jackson did not primarily hear a division between serious jazz and smooth jazz, or art and commerce. He heard a divide between jazz for listening, with a predominantly white demographic, and jazz for interacting, attracting a predominantly Black demographic. Smooth jazz is an activity in Cleveland that happens in public, serving social needs.

Saxophonist Chris Coles plays smooth jazz and straight-ahead jazz; he observes the divide (and the way the divide is depicted) with a critical historical interpretation. An African American musician born in the city of Cleveland, Coles has experienced the breadth of jazz performance, playing in clubs and pursuing jazz studies in higher education. He finds limited thinking on both sides of the serious and the smooth divide. Both sides have a point, but not the whole point. With his college jazz degree, he told me, some smooth jazz musicians have assumed that he "wouldn't be able to play with feel."⁶⁸ He enjoys proving them wrong. He thinks many people have construed straight-ahead jazz all wrong. People's

views of what straight-ahead is [are] so skewed . . . then you get this idea that it's a listener's music. You can groove there. Count Basie's not grooving? Not dance music? Ridiculous . . . It's interesting how people describe my playing They say you've got that Kenny Garret, straight-ahead thing I think the straight-ahead thing is still grooving, it's just archaic.

Coles is a student of the timelines of Black popular culture. He also recognizes the importance of timeliness. Audiences don't always want a history lesson: "Inner city Cleveland is a mostly Black area If you're playing at [the venue] Kings and Queens . . . the last thing they want to hear is you running

⁶⁸Chris Coles, interview with the author, Cleveland, November 8, 2013.

the gamut of the last sixty years of jazz.” Smooth jazz musicians, he states, “play to those type of crowds.”

He notes that people link smooth jazz to race, but does not fully agree: “If we did a survey, people would say, it’s kind of Black smooth jazz.” Although he recognizes this association, he does not think it is clearly linked in this way: “It goes back to the segregation thing . . . People hearing a certain kind of music and associating [it] with a culture or a people . . . rather than hearing it for what it is. It’s music.” For Coles, the segregation of sound is linked to people’s persistent, if flawed, conceptual structures. Here, Coles defines the dominant category of music, assumed to be universal, as including smooth jazz. This definitional work goes against taxonomic schemas that leave popular music and jazz outside of the unmarked category of (Western art) music. In so doing, he plays on the specific and the universal, illuminating the politics of prestige in musical discourse. He is aware that smooth jazz resonates in Black Cleveland, as he is aware that, by defining smooth jazz as part of the dominant category of music, he unsettles the assumption that universalist prestige is available only to a certain high cultural definition of “music.”⁶⁹ Coles also notes the divide between aural and literate musicians, a divide that often occurs because of institutional norms. College programs foreground reading, whereas the Black church—and the smooth jazz scene—foreground aural skills. For Coles, one approach to musicality is not better than the other, although he does critique higher education for privileging reading over aural: “The schools force that down your throat: You better be a reading musician.”⁷⁰ In the institutional ideology of college jazz, “having eyes” is privileged over “having ears,” yet having ears is just as valuable: “There are some musicians who can’t read in the area . . . but I’d rather have some of them than some of the guys who don’t have ears.” Even if they do not read music, they can create a groove, connect with other musicians, and connect with the crowd. They connect to a collective sensibility.⁷¹ The Black intellectual tradition has long recognized that education and formal educational attainment are not synonyms.⁷² That jazz is now part of formal educational structures has not shifted this basic point.

Coles celebrates the rhetorical effectiveness of smooth jazz. He describes an important learning experience in which he played with great exertion at a smooth jazz gig: “I remember one time I did a gig . . . I’m sweating, I’m trying to bring Jesus back . . . This dude came up and played the melody, then he played the C major scale and the audience loved it . . . I was like: How does that work?” There is a real challenge in seeming simplicity: “A one-chord vamp seems simple, but . . . what can I create over this one sound? . . . I think of Miles Davis when I think of someone like that . . . he realized that the general public is not trying to hear something forty years ago . . . They’re trying to hear something with some hump and backbeat.” Here, Coles evokes Miles Davis’s engagement with popular sensibilities. Coles evokes the charged word “simple” in a context where the construction of complexity is the price of admission to legitimacy.⁷³ Nevertheless, he also shows the limitations of this paradigm. Neither his collegiate jazz virtuosity nor his performance of exertion resonated with the social

⁶⁹Monson notes that universality “and ethnically assertive points of view . . . often coexist in the same person and are best conceived as discourses upon which musicians draw in particular interactive contexts.” Monson, *Saying Something*, 202.

⁷⁰For one example of a documentary that addresses the historical place of reading in jazz, see: *Errol Garner: No One Can Hear You Read*, DVD, directed by Atticus Brady (New York, NY: First-Run Features, 2012). For a consideration of the limitations of the oral/written binary, see Kenneth E. Prouty, “Orality, Literacy, and Mediating Musical Experience: Rethinking Oral Tradition in the Learning of Jazz Improvisation,” *Popular Music and Society* 29, no. 3 (2006): 317–34.

⁷¹For a consideration of African American literacy as “the ability to accurately read their experiences of being in the world with others and to act on this knowledge” see Elaine B. Richardson, *African American Literacies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 35.

⁷²Recognizing the collective wisdom of those denied formal education by white supremacist structures is a key part of the Black intellectual tradition. Maya Angelou writes: “She said that I must always be intolerant of ignorance but understanding of illiteracy. That some people, unable to go to school, were more educated and even more intelligent than college professors.” Maya Angelou in Stephanie Stokes Oliver, *Black Ink: Literary Legends on the Peril, Power, and Pleasure of Reading and Writing* (New York: Atria, 2018), 90.

⁷³Walser writes: “Many academics who write about popular music have continued to assume that rock harmony is simple, even ‘primitive.’ There are two problems with this view. First, calling something simple does not explain its function, and second, all rock harmony is not simple.” Walser, *Running with the Devil*, 47.

meanings of the occasion. Likewise, there is nothing “simple” about smooth jazz performances for a number of other subtle and not-so-subtle musical reasons (smooth jazz drummers, e.g., play a chops style that is notoriously virtuosic). That said, Coles incorporates his jazz education into the smooth jazz setting, altering and renaming chords and pushing audience expectations while staying focused on connecting to the audience: “Let’s say we take a major seventh chord . . . Sometimes what I do is I rename the chord . . . I’m more likely to play notes that do not work in theory with chord . . . E-major-seven, I might play E-major-seven-sharp-nine and sharp-five.” For Coles, the both/and of smooth jazz and straight ahead is to recognize the breadth of the tradition, to recognize the importance of engaging the audience and merging groove with layered knowledge. He cares about reading music and he cares about reading the crowd. He cares about listening for the groove and he cares about listening to historic recordings. Bobby Jackson and Chris Coles forward a definition of jazz, which includes Johnny Hodges, Miles Davis, and Forecast, that resists the way jazz canonization has shifted musical meanings. Both Jackson and Coles highlight the way that jazz performance practices have shifted upon entering an institutional art world that values listening, literacy, and complexity. They do not reject this world, nor do they regard it as the complete picture. They foreground continuity, not rupture, between smooth jazz and the jazz tradition.

Interplay between Live Performance and Recordings

Live smooth jazz in Cleveland foregrounds rhetorical effectiveness, audience interaction, and skillful invocations of cultural memory. Musicians connect with audiences in real time—and Cleveland audiences are notoriously demanding. It is hard to play for a Cleveland crowd, even if the music is smooth. The sociality of smooth jazz is something that cannot be captured by recordings.⁷⁴ In some straight-ahead jazz contexts, recordings are the sine qua non of jazz legitimacy.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, even in this tradition, recordings reveal only part of the picture.⁷⁶ Ken Leegrant is acutely aware of the limits of recordings in the context of his emphasis on the sociality of audience-engagement.⁷⁷ Leegrant connects to the people in the crowd while on stage and mingles with audience members during the break: “You want to draw your audience in to be part of what you are doing.”⁷⁸ He is interested in being in relationship with audiences, on-stage and off.⁷⁹

As Leegrant sees it, the musician is at the service of the community. “Every time you perform you have to engage your audience. It doesn’t matter how you feel. It doesn’t matter.” This attitude privileges the needs of the community, not the interiority of the suffering artist. “They’re coming to see you. You can help them get rid of the stuff that they’re dealing with everyday, so your job is to kind of help them unload some of that stuff. If you don’t engage them, you’re not assisting them.”⁸⁰ Music serves a social function around collective celebration. Part of connecting to the audience is connecting to the repertoire that shaped their structures of feeling.

⁷⁴Although recordings matter a great deal in the jazz tradition, liveness is an esteemed value in jazz contexts, even, paradoxically, in the context of a recording. Reflecting on this, Gabriel Solis writes: “Never mind that the process of recording inherently involves significant sound manipulation: the point is that the aesthetic of jazz is such that recordings are engineered to create a simulation of live sounds, to present the impression of ‘being there.’” Gabriel Solis, “A Unique Chunk of Jazz Reality: Authorship, Musical Work Concepts and Thelonious Monk’s Live Recordings from the Five Spot, 1958,” *Ethnomusicology* 48, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 315–47; On smooth jazz recording techniques, see Peter Westbrook, *The Flute in Jazz: Window on World Music* (Rockville, MD: Harmonia Books, 2011), 199.

⁷⁵See David Ake’s discussion of this point, noting one teacher’s “valorization of recordings.” Ake, *Jazz Matters*, 105.

⁷⁶Charles Mingus: “It’s a funny society that’s raised mainly on hearing records, they very seldom get the chance to know what the difference is, hearing live music.” Mingus in Ake, *Jazz Matters*, 104–5.

⁷⁷Leegrant is the Horns and Things smooth jazz saxophonist who was a mentor to both Chris Coles and Forecast saxophonist Riley Richard.

⁷⁸Ken Leegrant, interview with the author, Cleveland, December 16, 2019.

⁷⁹For Leegrant, this type of relationality is a continuation of jazz history—something missed by a focus on recordings alone. Dizzy Gillespie and James Moody “were showmen, which made their music that much more engaging, because there was that personal touch.” Leegrant is keeping alive a social part of the jazz tradition that even the most acute listeners to albums might miss.

⁸⁰Ken Leegrant, interview with the author, December 16, 2019.

Recordings matter to smooth jazz musicians, but these are as frequently the records that have shaped audiences' lives as those that have shaped "the jazz tradition."⁸¹ Although smooth jazz recording techniques resemble those approaches (such as compression) associated with R&B singers and associated with inauthenticity by some critics, live performances are evaluated in terms of their real-time engagement with the audience.⁸² Smooth jazz performers invest significant energy and creativity into performances that are dynamic and distinct from the recordings being covered.⁸³

Performing radio hits allows for creative reinterpretation and self-expression. Monica Carter points to the importance of a melding of innovation with liveness in her group Sweet 16: "For us to get hired to play live, people don't want to hear how it is on the radio. If you come out, express yourself. If you're paid to take the stage, express yourself." Referring to a tune her group covers by Bill Withers, Carter states: "Play it how you hear it . . . people respect you because you put your stamp on it. I don't want to be a copycat when I play out. I want to be able to take people to places they're not expecting, not how they just heard it on the radio."⁸⁴ Audiences want familiar repertoire, but they want innovative live versions of that. Smooth jazz performers balance their desire for self-expression with audience interests, including audience interests in hearing the performer express the self.

Comparing straight ahead and smooth, Carter notes that audiences are not always interested in analyzing technique on display—a tendency she associates with the straight-ahead genre. For Carter, people go to hear music for reasons other than to dissect chord changes or make critical judgments. "You've had a long week and you just want to unwind."⁸⁵ They approach music with an interest in feeling good, or at least feeling better: To take a phrase from George Lipsitz, this is "music to change life."⁸⁶

Repertoire often originates in R&B. Ken Leegrand takes evident pride in his group's discernment in selecting and interpreting songs. Being a smooth jazz performer is about creative reinterpretation; it is also about effective curating. He is proud that his group may have been the first to cover Sade in the Cleveland scene. Now, everybody does it. For Leegrand, choosing and preparing the cover for the instrumental group is a creative act. In covering "Sweetest Taboo" by Sade, the group "always had our own hook." After Lionel Richie and Diana Ross performed "Missing You," Grover Washington covered the tune. So did Horns and Things, "but ours was different." For these musicians, playing live involves engaging audiences through expressive originality in connection to the lineages of Black popular culture (including "serious" jazz). "The identity," Leegrand tells me, "is in your sound and in your approach."⁸⁷ Many smooth jazz musicians might perform the same tune, but they play it in different ways.

For a genre considered to be an inauthentic, programmed commodity, Cleveland smooth jazz musicians are closely attuned and highly attentive to one of the hallmarks of "real" music in all its complexity: Performing live.⁸⁸ Most studies of smooth jazz focus on the circulation of smooth jazz radio and recordings.⁸⁹ If smooth jazz is commercial music, it is also live music in dialogue with commercial culture. If it is pop, it demands an understanding of pop's symbolic power.

⁸¹DeVeaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition."

⁸²Westbrook, *The Flute in Jazz*, 199. See Carl Wilson for commentary on the characterization of R&B recording techniques as "inauthentic." Carl Wilson, *Let's Talk about Love: Why Other People Have Such Bad Taste* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 54.

⁸³For drummer Monica Carter, crafting a smooth jazz tune to perform for an audience involves creative adaptation: "I will take a cover any day with my band. Take the words from the cover. Add a different feel to it. Then just flip it and make it [our] own." Monica Carter, interview with author, Cleveland, September 3, 2013.

⁸⁴Monica Carter, interview with author, Cleveland, September 3, 2013.

⁸⁵On this point, see Wilson, *Let's Talk about Love*.

⁸⁶This continues a tributary of blues and jazz in which, to quote George Lipsitz, musicians "play music to change life, to make an audience move rather than just realizing abstract technical goals." George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 179.

⁸⁷Ken Leegrand, interview with the author, Cleveland, December 16, 2019.

⁸⁸"Live performance," as Philip Auslander writes, "has long been understood as the realm of the authentic, the true test of musicianship undisguised by studio trickery." Philip Auslander, "Liveness: Performance and the Anxiety of Simulation," in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, ed. Elin Diamond (London: Routledge, 2015), 207.

⁸⁹Previous studies of smooth jazz have invoked space in different ways, but have done so with an attention primarily to recordings as the starting point. I start with live performance in places: Christopher Washburne locates Kenny G's smooth jazz on the

Clarence Smith is the electric bass player in the band J.A.M. He developed as a musician as a side gig, while working full time at Lincoln Electric. He is now retired from his day job, while other members of the group still work. Near his suburban home in Maple Heights, two jazz clubs are at the mall. J.A.M. performs covers of Sade, Roberta Flack, and Anita Baker among many others. Smith describes this group as “real pocket,” with covers oriented around a collective groove and built with a fresh sense of time. Over time, they “got to be real technical . . . breaks, riffs and more orchestrated.” Still, they have an adaptive sensibility: They are ready to meet the audience where they are. Smith’s philosophy on performing is shaped by years of experience playing for Cleveland audiences. These audiences have been both urban and suburban. Smith, like many smooth jazz performers, is closely attuned to audience reactions: “When you see the people aren’t really into what you’re doing, you get out of the song.” Being a smooth jazz musician means not taking self-indulgent solos and adjusting when sounds are not landing with listeners. It also means dynamically reinterpreting and blending a familiar repertoire in exciting succession:

Cleveland crowd likes to hear nonstop action. When you connect ‘em with good breaks, good beginnings, and good endings, they can hear their favorite song and you done put something else on it. That’s when you know you got ‘em. They get excited. If you don’t have a song ready, you better talk to ‘em, joke around before you get your next song going. Gotta keep ‘em pumped up. Cleveland is a hard place to play. If you ain’t got it, they’ll let you know. “Well, I heard that song before and it’s nothing different.” If you’re doing something good, they will let you know. Overall, I love playing for a Cleveland crowd because it really gets you together.⁹⁰

When playing smooth jazz, artists are not protected from audience reactions by prestige or ostentatious virtuosity. They are exposed to the audience and challenged with connecting to them. Partly due to their concerted attention to audience interests and their musical versatility, his groups have been generally successful with crowds, merging jazz and R&B approaches: “We can take R&B songs, slow it down and then we would swing it. We would put a swing feel inside the R&B song and the guys would improvise right off that part of the song. We could do that with anything: ‘What’s Going On.’ Any Chaka Khan songs.” Basically, Smith’s group developed the ability to disarm crowds by meeting their expectations, before creatively diverging from them.

In describing the kinds of clubs where he plays now, Smith emphasizes the challenges that different kinds of venues present for reaching the audience. The most difficult venues are bars where it is “harder to get a hold” on the audience because they are drinking: “Unless you really hittin’ them hard to make them turn around, they not listening to the music that much.” However, “once they spin around in the stool, that’s when you know you have ‘em.” In restaurant venues, conversely, audiences tend to be immediately receptive. They are there to listen while eating. Audiences “also dance when they hear a song that they really like.” The band responds accordingly by performing to support the dancers. Meeting the demands of a Cleveland crowd not only involves impressing audiences with a layer of creative complexity over a familiar repertoire, but also knowing when to reduce the components of an arrangement in order to leave space for dancing: “If you get to the point where they dancing, then you take the extra hook and we might not do it. We might have a time signature change and we might not do it. We don’t want to throw nobody off the beat when they dancing. You reach a crowd like that.” Musicians’ preferences in repertoire and taste can be realized only after meeting the audiences where they are.

Interplay between Live Performance and the Church

Clarence Smith’s move to the suburbs paralleled the movement of some churches to the suburbs. Indeed, the church is a key locus for the development of jazz musicians: “Most of the cats out now,

charts; Charles Carson locates Grover Washington’s smooth jazz in Black suburbia; Robert Walser locates integrated smooth jazz on the radio—and in the bedroom. Carson “Bridging the Gap,” 1–15; Washburne, “Does Kenny G Play Bad Jazz?,” 123–47; Walser, “Popular Music Analysis,” 16–38.

⁹⁰Clarence Smith, interview with the author, Maple Heights, Ohio, August 22, 2013.

came out of the churches and into the jazz field.” Smith notes that in his current suburban neighborhood of Maple Heights, there is more live entertainment than in the Cleveland area: “People are now having more live bands at their private affairs, birthday parties, anniversaries, even in churches.” For example, Smith’s church has an event featuring jazz music alongside comedians called “Jesus, Jokes, and Jazz.” From Smith’s perspective, gospel “is basically what smooth jazz is.” He hears only slight distinctions. In gospel, there is “more action on the snare” whereas the music “breathes more in jazz, but it is almost the same.” In Cleveland, the line between smooth jazz and instrumental gospel is often more about performance context than musical content.

One illustration of the proximity between gospel and jazz is the trajectory of Monica Carter’s *Sweet 16*. Raised in a middle-class neighborhood of suburban Warrensville Heights, Carter’s father had been a performer in Alabama prior to moving to Cleveland.⁹¹ In Cleveland, he was a gospel singer in the Mighty Righteous Souls and Carter had an upbringing as a performer of gospel quartet music.⁹² Now, her smooth jazz group can be found online performing “People Make the World Go Round” with Riley Richard. The group, however, began as a gospel group called *Women of the Spirit*. The overlapping smooth jazz church audience catalyzed a transition into smooth jazz: “We started to play gospel, then we would go out, people would ask if we played jazz. So, I started this band.”⁹³ Although Carter leads a smooth jazz group, she remains rooted in gospel, performing as a church drummer at Bethany Christian, Antioch Baptist, and Glendale’s Seventh-Day Adventist. She is not alone in moving back and forth between smooth jazz and gospel.

In fact, musicians who move between church and club sometimes illuminate the musical connections between the two contexts in surprising ways. One pianist dramatically demonstrated the stylistic overlap by playing a smooth jazz tune during our interview in the sanctuary of his suburban church: “I could play that same song, right here on Sunday morning or even at a more contemporary church, and they think it’s a church song. They think it’s a worship song. There’s no difference.”⁹⁴ Similarly, Monica Carter told me that crossing this sacred/secular division during church can be a joke among musicians: “One day we were in worship and [a musician] started to play an Anita Baker song. The musicians started laughing and we looked out there and everybody is still in worship. It is just hilarious.”⁹⁵ The humor hinges on the proximity between smooth jazz and gospel sounds. The gospel context easily absorbs melodies heard on smooth jazz radio. Likewise, smooth jazz musicians often learn to play and find steady employment in church. Although scholars agree that both popular music and gospel music influenced jazz history, few are comfortable accepting either contemporary commercial jazz or commercial gospel as part of the cultivated tradition taught as art music. However, from the view of Black Cleveland, the continuities between commercial jazz, commercial gospel, commercial pop, and jazz history connect comfortably. They enliven community spaces.

Conclusion

If historical writing on jazz reflects a “near century-old eagerness to advance the music’s respectability,” and this fight for cultural prestige has improved Black music’s space in the academy, this positioning “has come at a price.”⁹⁶ Part of the price of this bid for prestige may be a failure to attend to the

⁹¹For more on the history of migrants from Alabama to Cleveland see Kimberley Louise Phillips, *Alabama North: African-American Migrants, Community, and Working-Class Activism in Cleveland, 1915–45* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

⁹²Growing up in an Apostolic household, “nothing but gospel was allowed . . . I could not listen to love songs.” However, gospel also serves as a foundation for going elsewhere: “gospel is that flavor where if you can play gospel, you can play anything. Growing up in a gospel church . . . sometimes we just play off feeling, you don’t know where the song is going to go. It kind of puts you ahead of the game when you learn gospel first.” Monica Carter, interview with the author, Cleveland, September 3, 2013.

⁹³Monica Carter, interview with the author, Cleveland, September 3, 2013.

⁹⁴Phillip K. Jones II, interview with the author, Warrensville Heights, August 10, 2013.

⁹⁵Monica Carter, interview with the author, Cleveland, September 3, 2013.

⁹⁶Stephen F. Pond, *Headhunters: The Making of Jazz’s First Platinum Album* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 188. Pond, *Headhunters*, also notes “people’s discomfort at dealing with the commercial aspects of any music” (x).

public ear;⁹⁷ the ways music is meaningful in people's lives.⁹⁸ Smooth jazz's meaning absorbs histories of recorded music as well as past and present spaces of Black congregation in the greater Cleveland area. The arts of dialogicality and collective memory are vital to the structures of feeling in Cleveland smooth jazz. Smooth jazz musicians listen to the tradition. They listen to the audience as the audience listens to them. They play songs that people know.

Smooth jazz is a crossover genre in several senses of the term. It registers the social tensions of Black suburbanization. Smooth jazz events cross suburban and urban lines; popular and elite jazz histories; and social and musical relationships. These crossovers represent a counterpoint to the crossovers achieved by "the jazz tradition" over the course of the twentieth century: Jazz crossed over from low culture to high culture; jazz crossed into higher education; and white students and teachers increasingly crossed into college jazz programs. Jazz ascended the cultural hierarchy, even as the communities from which it sprang did not correspondingly ascend the economic hierarchy. This smooth jazz resonates with the critical legacy of Black music, privileging the community over the individual, while claiming mainstream suburban sounds and spaces.

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⁹⁷In another context, Susan McClary writes about an academic avant-garde that has retreated "from the public ear" and "has in some important sense silenced itself. Only to the tiny, dwindling community that shares modernist definitions of the economy of prestige does the phenomenon make the slightest bit of sense." Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 66.

⁹⁸Established modes of writing reveal "nothing about most of the culturally expressive features of the music." Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 273.

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