

Selling London Jazz: Politics, Platforms and Performance in a Post-Digital Music Scene

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Abstract

This thesis analyses the circumstances surrounding the growth of the ‘new London jazz scene’ (LJS), from c.2016. The LJS stands out for its relative popularity, poly-generic influences, and young, multi-racial, mixed gender audiences and performers, which has seen the scene heralded as a novel ‘alternative’ within the British jazz art world. Through multimedia analysis and interview research, the thesis investigates the distinctive values, practices, and cultural products of the LJS.

By attending to British jazz education; the live performance ecology of jazz in London; practices of record production in the context of music streaming; and strategies of digital promotion and (self-)branding, I show how the LJS simultaneously engages and disavows the aesthetics, norms, and infrastructures of jazz as a genre. The scene is a ‘post-digital’ formation, whereby ubiquitous digitality is an ordinary, but ambiguous, feature of cultural production. I argue that during a societal turn against digital mediation, certain jazz principles - contingency, immediacy, and the value of ‘authentic’ live musicianship – underwrite the ‘scenic allure’ of London jazz. I also demonstrate how identity formation and promotional discourse in the LJS are grounded in ‘jazz populism’: a disavowal of jazz orthodoxy through stylistic hybridity and institutional critique.

Here, the multivalent politics of London jazz articulate with ongoing antiracist reckonings. While the scene has a rich, resistant potential as a form of critical multiculturalism, the LJS is a politically ambivalent formation. Symptomatic of wider tendencies in contemporary culture, this includes a fragmentary, individualised politics, and the recuperation of dissent by the cultural industries through an embrace of ‘diversity.’

The thesis updates music scenes scholarship and remedies the dearth of digitally-oriented jazz studies. It demonstrates how the study of contemporary scenes can further ongoing debates in popular music, media and cultural studies regarding platformisation, genre formation, the commodification of difference, and beyond.

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Abbreviations

APPJG: All Party Parliamentary Jazz Group

ACE: Arts Council England

BBC: British Broadcasting Corporation

DAW: Digital audio workstation

DCMS: Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport

JJA: Julian Joseph Jazz Academy

LJS: London jazz scene

MSP: Music streaming platform

NPO: National Portfolio Organisation

NYJO: National Youth Jazz Orchestra

PSM: Public service media

RAH: Royal Albert Hall

TRC: Total Refreshment Centre

TW: Tomorrow's Warriors

VNEB: Vauxhall Nine Elms Battersea development

1: Introduction

This was supposed to be a project on music streaming platforms, genre formation, and jazz. Having finished an MA in Critical Musicology in 2016, I found myself at the distant fringes of an exciting, burgeoning group of musicians, primarily London-based, emerging from institutional jazz education but oriented away from it. Operating across a few non-standard, often precarious, venues and cultural spaces, they were building a small but dedicated fanbase, mainly constituted by networks of friends, many themselves music-makers or otherwise involved in putting on or in some way documenting the music. The energy was concentrated in the south-east, areas like Lewisham and Greenwich, where many of these musicians lived and/or studied, but there were outposts scattered across London. In a rarity for British jazz, many key figures were women, many were Black, and most participants seemed to be (like me) in their mid-20s. With a couple of friends tangentially involved, by the time the ‘new London jazz explosion’ came onto my radar it was already being discussed using that fabled, vexed term, a ‘scene’.¹ As media coverage grew in quantity and excitement, my interests as a researcher were piqued.

When I began the long process of securing PhD funding in 2017, music streaming was in the ascendancy (although not yet dominant),² and critical research into the subject was comparatively thin on the ground. There was also a clear streaming-shaped hole in the (largely dated) music scenes literature. Meanwhile, jazz scholarship had, to date, little to say about the changing landscape of music production, distribution and consumption in the ‘digital age’.³ Here, then, was a neat, timely doctoral project with a relevant, bounded case study, as yet unstudied, that could help fill a gap in the literature.

It all seemed so simple at the time.

However, world events and my findings conspired to turn my tidy three-year project into something much more unruly. First, within months of starting the project in September 2019, the UK live music industry ground to a halt. The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying lockdowns from March 2020 saw venues shuttered for months on end. Many,

¹ I discuss ‘scene studies’ and the extensive debate over definitions and the potential utility of ‘scenes’ as a site of cultural analysis, in Chapter Two.

² Revenues for recorded music bottomed out in 2015 in the UK, and have since recovered with the uptake of streaming, accounting for over three quarters of recorded music revenue 2021 (Competition and Markets Authority, 2022). Streaming has also come to dominate global recorded music consumption, with 71% of listeners using the format as of 2023 (*Engaging with music 2023*, 2023).

³ Although the ‘digital age’ remains a favourite title for huge amounts of valuable scholarship, it feels an imprecise, almost quaint, term. I expand on this below, and in Chapter Two.

including some key jazz spaces in London, never reopened. Record production remained possible, but lockdown conditions presented big barriers for recording music predicated on real-time, face-to-face interaction between musicians. The British government's belated, desultory and market-driven attempts at 'cultural recovery' provided little insulation for the small and often unprofitable spaces, promoters and projects that are the lifeblood of emerging scenes like the London jazz scene (hereafter LJS) (Hodgkins, 2020; Banks and O'Connor, 2021). But while conditions of music production were strained to breaking point, the *consumption* of digital media and cultural content, including music, reached unprecedented heights, as globally locked-down populations sought to pass the anxious monotony of pandemic-time (Taylor, Raine and Hamilton, 2020). Platform providers were primary beneficiaries, with the crisis providing a unique opportunity for user recruitment (Vlassis, 2021; Zhang and Negus, 2021; Ryu and Cho, 2022). The conditions of research, and my objects of study, were thus upended from fairly early on.

My plans to root the project in observations and encounters at gigs were swiftly adapted. At first, the spurt of livestreamed gigs appeared to offer a suitable alternative, but after a few abortive attempts I gave up. Despite the efforts of musicians and organisers, these hermetically-sealed digital offerings only provided a glimpse of the dynamic and novel performance cultures and social formations I had seen at previous LJS gigs, and presented little satisfactory means of observing the audience, recruiting potential research participants, or getting a real sense for the scene in question. More fundamental, however, was the fact that I found livestreamed gigs profoundly depressing. Watching them underscored what was lost when face-to-face performances were impossible, and what was at stake with the continued closure of music spaces.

Of course, as any good media student would tell you, musical 'liveness' is an unstable thing, itself the product of multiple mediations, and I knew the apparent immediacy of in-person gigs is no less manufactured than its livestreamed counterpart (Auslander, 2008; Van Es, 2017; Sanden, 2019). But the fact that this offered no comfort when craving the contingent, intimate, collective experience unique to live gigs underscored the limits of this kind of analysis. Ultimately, scholarly interrogations such as these fall short of fully capturing the *feel* of liveness as experienced at a gig: the vibration of high volumes in your chest, the loss of self-consciousness within a crowd, involuntarily moving to the beat and the sheer thrill of seeing a group 'lock in' to a performance – or, for that matter, dodgy sound quality, being stuck behind someone tall, the drink spilled down your back, or the annoying group talking through a quiet bit. All of this, good and bad, was what I craved.

At its face a setback, this experience has left an indelible, vital mark on the analysis contained within this thesis and has set the direction of my research. The participatory shortcomings of livestreaming and the (thankfully temporary) absence of live gigs left me much better attuned to the real substance of what I was researching. As I will show, this formative experience of *digital inadequacy* has proven fundamental to understanding the shape, trajectory and significance of the ‘new London jazz scene’ and its reception by fans and then interlocutors on those terms – as a scene, as a sound, its relationship to the city, and its success in the marketplace. First, however, we need more detail about the scene itself.

1.2: Sounds

Although mostly described as jazz, the music tends to be thoroughly hybrid in nature. It often features quite short, catchy and repetitive melodic motifs, simple and static harmony, and an emphasis on textural density and variation, with the collective maintenance of groove a key priority.⁴ To this end, the musicians have drawn from the full spectrum of popular music’s recent past, particularly Black musics of the late 20th Century: dub, reggae, dancehall, house, R&B, jazz-funk, hip-hop, samba, highlife, and more, with Afrobeat being a standout sonic substrate.

While this magpie-like approach is nothing new in jazz, if one attempted to define a ‘London sound’ it would be through reference to the breadth and depth of its syncretism, with jazz often relegated nearly to equal partners with other styles. As a result, idiomatic aspects of jazz practice such as swing rhythms, extended solos emphasising individual, virtuosic expression, or engagement with the genre’s tradition through reinterpretation of ‘standards’ repertoire, regularly take a backseat. Notably, the LJS has foregrounded Black British musics otherwise largely absent from the conversation in jazz, with the fingerprints of UK garage, jungle, dubstep and grime particularly in evidence. These forms are direct descendants of Caribbean popular musics, reflecting patterns of migration from that region to London starting in the post-war period. Such polygenericism has lent weight to interpretations that place the LJS within a lineage of scenes that in some way ‘sound like London’, reflecting and constituting the intricacies of identity in the city (Bradley, 2013; Matera, 2015, pp. 145–200; Melville, 2019).

⁴ Improvisation theorist David Borgo has provided a detailed analysis of the ‘the power of repeating and overlapping cycles to invite sympathetic listeners into a heightened, participatory state’ through close study of the playing of prominent LJS musician Shabaka Hutchings (Borgo, 2022, p. 79). Hutchings’ sonic influence is immense within his milieu, and the ‘heightened, participatory state’ of audiences is a distinguishing feature of the scene, as I discuss in Chapter Four.

Stylistically, this has made for tracks that are drum- and bassline-forward. Although live instrumentation predominates, the music has a tangible dancefloor orientation, as the many electronic dance forms listed above might suggest. This speaks to a constituency accustomed to the production aesthetics and performance practices of club culture, and porous boundaries between DJ and live music settings. It also reflects the non-typical, and rarely jazz-specific, spaces where it has been incubated, where dancing and vocally responding to the music onstage is more typical than quiet, seated appreciation. In this respect, ‘new London jazz’ is heir to earlier scenes in the city that had sought to (re)unite jazz and the dancefloor, such as the ‘acid jazz’ and jazz-dance movements of the late 1980s and early 1990s (Weiner, 2018; McGee, 2020; Wilson, 2021b, 2021a, 2021c), or the broken beat moment in the early 2000s, which I discuss more in Chapter Four (Thomas, 2021a). There is direct continuity here, most notably the role of acid jazz figurehead Gilles Peterson, a DJ, broadcaster and essential cultural intermediary in all of these antecedent scenes. Peterson’s radio show, record label and festivals have all been pivotal in promoting many contemporary London jazz musicians.

Despite these lineages, though, the (re)emergence of jazz in London in the wider media landscape is typically framed as a novel and unexpected development. As the music began garnering attention around 2015, it was understood as cutting against the grain of contemporaneous popular music. The LJS’s use of live instrumentation was seen as a meaningful departure from house, techno and the myriad genres of ‘bass music’ that predominated in the more ‘underground’ musical circuits from which the scene drew its initial audience. It was also worlds away from leading tendencies in the pop charts, where the aftershocks of the commercial ‘EDM’ (electronic dance music) boom of the early 2010s and its hyper-synthetic, ‘digital maximalist’ sonics remained in evidence.⁵

1.3: Scene(s)

The growing appeal of the LJS in this period also appeared to subvert prevailing mainstream opinion in Britain since the turn of the new millennium, within which jazz has been typecast as a dead, or at least funny smelling,⁶ heritage form. But this itself is a recurrent trope in non-specialist treatment of jazz, a keystone in declinist narratives that invariably follow its

⁵ EDM’s distinctive aesthetic – in critic Simon Reynolds’s words, ‘ferociously digital, a flat glare, depthless and dazzling’ – was for a time omnipresent: intertwined with trap’s dominance in hip-hop, and leaving its imprint on pop ballads, grime, metal, and country music throughout the early- to mid-2010s (Reynolds, 2013, p. 681; Strachan, 2017). Its lingering influence is still widespread, including jazz, for example the work of prominent pianist Tigran Hamasyan. I explore the enduring influence and tensions surrounding digital/analogue distinctions in Chapter Five.

⁶ With apologies to Frank Zappa.

momentary recognition in the wider press.⁷ Framing jazz in this way helps amplify the apparent novelty of the artist or scene in question as valiantly resisting the music's terminal decline. The cyclical historicism of jazz culture is identified by some as a source of its dynamism. Jazz scholar Gary Giddins, for example, suggests that the 'cyclical history of jazz' can be understood as made up of 'cycles... fomented by radical evolutionary movements, each of which contains the seeds of its own destruction' (Giddins, 1998, p. 5). Cultural historian Andrew Blake similarly provides an account of what he calls the 'jazz revival cycle' in the British microcosm (Blake, 1997, pp. 113–116). The cyclical tendency has seen the repeated 'rediscovery' of contemporary jazz by British popular culture since its departure from the mainstream in the 1960s: the meeting of prog rock and 'modern jazz' in the late 1960s and 1970s in the music of John Surman, Mike Gibbs, Alan Skidmore and others; the aforementioned acid jazz movement; large ensembles from the 1980s like Loose Tubes and the Jazz Warriors, particularly Jazz Warrior alumnus Courtney Pine; the commercially successful pop and hip-hop crossovers of Jamie Cullum and Soweto Kinch, respectively, in the early 2000s, or the fleeting excitement that surrounded the 'punk jazz' of groups like Polar Bear and Led Bib later that decade.

Too often, 'rediscovery' efforts obscure points of overlap between the music's pasts and its present, marginalizing the continued presence of older musicians (many themselves veterans of previous revivals) (Webster and Mckay, 2017, pp. 19–20). As one interviewee wearily summarised: 'people are always fucking trying to debate whether jazz is cool or not... 'oh it's cool again'; 'oh it's shit again'. I'm 35 and I've lived through *three* jazz renaissances!' (P7). Not unreasonably, the excesses of the 'hype cycle' can breed a countervailing tendency within jazz circles: a feeling that *any* claims of real originality are broadly baseless, leading hotly tipped newcomers to be treated with reflexive suspicion. This research is thus partly animated by a desire to complicate the scene's emergence by unpacking its relationship to American jazz traditions, contextualising it within the longer sweep of British jazz history, and exploring many currents of global pop that exert influence on the scene. Doing so will help deflate some of the more excessive portrayals of the LJS as a unique 'renaissance' in the jazz world – claims which, it must be said, many scene participants have sought to downplay.

Key to the notion of perpetual rebirth and decline in the coverage of the LJS was a sense that, while potentially *played* by young people (at music schools), jazz was (crucially) *consumed* by

⁷ As jazz scholar Krin Gabbard points out, 2016's Oscar-winning film *La La Land* (probably the most notable recent pop cultural depiction of jazz) features Ryan Gosling's character 'blithely announc[ing] that 'jazz is dead' (Gabbard, 2019, p. 92). Declinist sentiments are also present in some academic jazz literature (e.g. Kart, 1990; Nicholson, 2005). However, this work tends to be markedly more considered and self-reflexive than the sweeping claims regularly made beyond the shores of the 'jazz art world' regarding the moribund state of the genre (Lopes, 2004).

an audience of mostly ageing, mostly white and overwhelmingly male obsessives. Although this inescapable caricature causes consternation among many jazz enthusiasts, the ‘pale, stale, male’ framing of contemporary British jazz is not a complete fiction, speaking to an actual, existing homogeneity on the national scene (e.g. Hodgkins, 2013; Wilks, 2013; Raine, 2020; Mcandrew and Widdop, 2021), and an environment where racism and sexism remains pervasive, often under the guise of ‘colourblind’ meritocracy. This is therefore one area where the London scene straightforwardly *does* stand out: for the youth of its participants, and the relatively large numbers of women, people of colour, and particularly Black women participants, onstage and off. This is a central point of distinction that sets the LJS at something of a remove from the institutional jazz ‘establishment’ in the UK.

It is important, from the off, to complicate this picture. The relationship between the LJS and the wider British jazz world is better understood in terms of process, or ebb and flow, than stark separation. A processual approach provides important clarity and moves past press and promotional accounts that bill the LJS as a discrete formation that burst onto the stage, unbidden, from ‘the streets.’ This is part of the issue with some ‘scene’ talk: it can impose a false unity that occludes underlying divisions,⁸ while simultaneously implying a sharp demarcation – of ‘them’ and ‘us’ – that erases significant *connections*. In keeping with other jazz scenes (Jago, 2018b, 251-252; Greenland, 2016, 16), and urban music scenes more generally (e.g. Finnegan, 2016; Shank, 1994), the umbrella term ‘London jazz’ more accurately describes a nexus of multiple, interlocking subscenes, normally revolving around certain musicians, venues or subgenres.⁹

Nonetheless, following its widespread adoption by participants and commentators, I use ‘scene’ throughout the thesis. In particular, its appealing fuzziness regarding genre, and its relationship to place, make it a productive means of discussing jazz in London. As I discuss more in 1.7 and 2.2, the ‘scenic route’ is also a conceptual framework and methodological approach that moves beyond a singular focus on consumers and consumption, concerned instead with a ‘far broader spectrum of musical activities [and actors] which also include performance, production, marketing, promotion and distribution’ (Bennett, 2006, p. 96). It is

⁸ Evident, for example, in frequent conflation of ‘London jazz’ with ‘UK jazz’, and vice-versa, much to the chagrin of jazz enthusiasts outside of the capital (Marmot, forthcoming; Anderson, 2016; Warren, 2018; Edwards, 2021).

⁹ Free jazz and free improvisation, for example, have small but impassioned followings in London with sympathetic venues such as The Vortex and Café Oto in Dalston or IKLECTIK in Elephant & Castle. ‘Straight ahead’ modern jazz can be heard regularly at sites like The 606 Club in Chelsea or Soho’s Pizza Express Jazz Club. However, the free flow of (some) LJS musicians between ‘new London jazz’ and these other sounds and spaces is rarely accompanied by audiences, something I interrogate throughout.

thus an ideal concept for anchoring this thesis, which is concerned primarily with production and producers; and circulation and the work of intermediaries. However, I use it, and specifically ‘the LJS’, advisedly: for some, inclusion within the ‘new London jazz scene’ bracket is an unfulfilled desire, while others wish to shake off its stubborn associations. The thesis does not attempt to litigate whether a given group or artist ‘really belongs’ to the scene, nor am I interested in passing judgement on whether a musician (or the scene as a whole) plays ‘real jazz’. Instead, the focal point is conversations and contestations surrounding genre and/or scene identity themselves. I want to uncover the motivations behind claiming or denying jazz identity, and what credibility or material benefits are gained and lost through association with the scene, and the genre. My hope is that the term’s very inadequacy helps index the tensions I am analysing: the connections and distinctions between the fullness of jazz practice in London, and ‘new London jazz’ as a constructed, mediated event, and/or a product of branding practices. ‘Scene’ is thus used under erasure. Think of it as being appended by an invisible question mark throughout.

1.4: Politics

Acknowledging these complexities is not to downplay the significant shifts regarding racial and gender representation in British jazz augured by the ‘new London jazz explosion’. This has an inherent political charge, with the LJS offering a long overdue course correction in a music that has, in Britain, too often seen women and people of colour pushed to the margins. Processes of marginalisation also must be understood in light of the deep-rooted sense of ambivalence and insecurity in British jazz. Jazz’s status as a music of *African American* origin has made its (at times reluctant) absorption by overwhelmingly white British cultural institutions a process of double dislocation. Here, the LJS is notable for how ever-present questions of legitimacy are navigated. Prominent Black British musicians operating within this milieu self-confidently assert claims of part-ownership of jazz, both through recourse to assertions of its originary Blackness and the long, often unsung, history of British jazz stretching back over a century. As I discuss below, the question of genre and ‘jazz’ status remains a live, highly contested issue; and as ever, debates over genre are always also about other classifications – race, gender, nationality, and so on. But what stands out is both the relative ease with which many participants chart a course past what jazz scholar George McKay calls ‘the residual problematic of America’ in British jazz, and how often the LJS appears to turn conflict around genre and belonging to its advantage (McKay, 2005, p. 36).

Further, the deep hybridity of the music being made is also ascribed a politics, ‘sounding out’ patterns of post-colonial migration, diasporic cultural production, and identity formation

through music-making in the context of a 21st century British cosmopolis (e.g. Fordham, 2018; Burke, 2021; Muir, 2023). This takes different forms. Liberal interpretations abound from within and without the scene, with participants and commentators alike finding comfort in the success of such an audibly hybrid and visibly multi-racial, mixed gender formation at a time when foundational liberal principles of tolerance and the importance of ‘diversity’ are increasingly called into question from left and right. But there is also an important anti-racist and decolonial strand, seen in the combative, anti-assimilationist practices of figures like Shabaka Hutchings, Sarathy Korwar, and Cassie Kinoshi which foreground the horrors of the British imperial past and its enduring influence on the present. These two tendencies co-exist, at times uncomfortably, but both structure prevailing interpretations of the scene as a ‘political’ entity.¹⁰ This provides the context for one research question underpinning the thesis: *how has the LJS been shaped by, and contributed to, a re-politicisation of popular culture, particularly with regard to the politics of identity?*

Here, the LJS forms part of a broader upswell of explicit politics in popular culture over the past fifteen years¹¹ – unsurprising, perhaps, during a period defined by the aftereffects of the Great Recession of 2007-2008 (Tooze, 2018). In Britain (as elsewhere), we have seen a retreat from the political centre, an increasingly sympathetic ear in government toward a resurgent far right and a partial revivification of socialist or social democratic ideals in mainstream discourse. There have also been frequent outbreaks of large-scale mass protest and civil disobedience around issues of racial injustice, police violence, climate breakdown, Brexit, and more.¹² All of these developments have taken place amid (and often thanks to) what political economist William Davies identifies as a ‘macroeconomic paradigm’ across much of the Global North ‘of

¹⁰ There is also an important third interpretative lens, which Jodi Melamed calls ‘neoliberal multiculturalism’ (Melamed, 2006). This worldview valorises difference for its economic potential while ‘simultaneously us[ing] colourblind and diversity discourses’ to occlude and entrench systemic racism – itself a constitutive feature of the neoliberal project (Hashimoto, 2021, p. 537; see also Kundnani, 2021). However, while an intensely political position, neoliberal multiculturalism functions precisely through the *depoliticisation* of race and racism, in ways fundamentally distinct from liberal or radical interpretations. I discuss the LJS and/as neoliberal multiculturalism in Chapter Four.

¹¹ Music critic Feargal Kinney, for example, has traced an upswell in explicitly political releases within British indie and alternative rock which, having been ‘politically quietist to the point of amnesia in the early ‘00s’ has responded to ‘changing demands of listeners in the 2010s’ (Kinney, 2022).

¹² These ‘social explosions’ in the UK have been broad but shallow in composition, rapidly emerging and dissipating in line with the ‘viral’ dynamics of social media platforms (through which many have been organised). As with similar movements globally during a decade of unrest, without institutional bases, organisational roots or (often) much of a coherent political programme, they have been short-lived, with ambiguous effects (Gerbaudo, 2019).

fiscal austerity plus unprecedented monetary largesse, a combination that produced stagnation in productivity and wage growth, but soaring concentrations of wealth' (Davies, 2024).¹³

As diagnoses of 'polycrisis' or 'permacrisis' show us (Tooze, 2022; Henig and Knight, 2023), conditions of such instability are now the norm, and have provided the backdrop for the entire adult lives of many in the largely millennial LJS (Gentili, 2021). On the ground in London, this has meant entrenched and widening conditions of precarity, including for class demographics who would once have been insulated from such economic conditions - a constituency that encompasses much of the scene (Dorling, 2023). With rents rising far quicker than pay, churn in housing is endemic as tenants remain perpetually in pursuit of somewhere more affordable (Hodkinson, 2019). Rising rents, penniless local authorities and bullish developers also imperil grassroots music spaces across the city, with venue closures a constant refrain throughout the 2010s and early 2020s (The Mayor of London's Music Venues Taskforce, 2015; Webster, Brennan, Behr, Ansell, *et al.*, 2018; Naylor, 2020; *Music Venues Trust Annual Report 2022*, 2022). These are conditions conducive to politicisation, but hostile to the formation of stable, durable cultural communities. Collective awareness of this fragility has burnished the LJS's status as something rare, and to be treasured. Discourse within and without the scene is patterned by this fact and the implicit understanding that, like most scenes (and especially in 21st Century London), its days are probably numbered.

1.5: The LJS as a post-digital scene

Returning to the research process, my shift in focus has also been a response to emergent themes in my data, which suggested that an overbearing emphasis on music streaming platforms was unsuitable. My participants repeatedly explained that, for most constituent members of this music community, streaming represents only one component of an overall digital media strategy. Beyond the absolute stars, it rarely provided a meaningful source of income. Streaming is not an afterthought – indeed, it is a central preoccupation, source of frustration and subject of critique for many – but it represents a means to a separate end, such as audience growth, gig bookings, or professional legitimacy. The murky, recursive relationship between music streaming stats, social media engagement, the traditional press, the activity of

¹³ This paradigm also artificially maintained near-zero interest rates, allowing a novel class of deep-pocketed and risk-prone venture capital firms to underwrite companies' pursuit of fast growth over profitability. This model has been key in the growth and success of tech startups, in particular, throughout the 2010s and is a core dynamic of 'platform capitalism' (Srnicsek, 2016). As economic conditions have shifted, so too have the fortunes of many still-unprofitable companies that emerged in the last decade. This includes music platform Spotify, which remains a lossmaking enterprise despite ongoing growth (Porter, 2024).

record label workers and beyond constitute a wider promotional assemblage, engagement with which is an onerous, frequently confounding, but ultimately compulsory feature of cultural work in contemporary popular music.

Attitudes toward streaming also cannot be neatly siloed from wider sets of actions and values in evidence within the scene, which taken together suggest a profound ambivalence toward digital mediation, ‘the algorithm’, and platform ubiquity. Contending with this ambivalence, which I discuss further below, is fundamental to my analysis of the LJS. The thesis also follows calls in critical media scholarship for work that ‘acknowledges but does not fetishise the power platforms possess’ in order to move past ‘platform determinism’ (Caplan, Clark and Partin, 2020). Working from this anti-determinist orientation, my argument is that the distinctive shape and trajectory of the LJS is the product of *contestation from below* regarding the use and meanings new technologies of music distribution, self-promotion, and social interaction. I investigate this primarily through recourse to participants’ and onlookers’ own *interpretations and negotiations* of social media and streaming platforms. I show how the LJS has enacted tensions between the ‘real’ and the mediated, benefitting in the process from the increased cultural premium placed upon spontaneity, serendipity and in-person encounter in the wake of wholesale digital mediation.

These are industry-specific sets of values and tensions, plugging into as-yet unresolved anxieties regarding the effects of digital technologies – upon the economics of music-making, forms of consumption, or diminishing musical quality – that have been widespread and persistent in recent years. In turn, these are refracted through nexuses of overlapping (and at time opposing) norms, histories, orientations toward technology, and aesthetic principles in multiple genres: jazz, to be sure, but also the many popular forms from the Black Atlantic and beyond that form the sonic bedrock of London jazz.

1.5.1: Platformisation

But alongside these specificities, debates regarding the threats and opportunities of the digital are also *conjunctural*, born from and constitutive of a wider critical turn in popular discourse. These are best understood in the context of rising disquiet with ‘Big Tech’, seeded by the revelations regarding platform complicity in US government surveillance in 2013, but beginning in earnest with the ‘techlash’ that followed the twin shocks to the Anglo-American liberal order in 2016, the Brexit referendum in the UK and the election of Donald Trump in the US (Dyer-

Witherford and Mularoni, 2021).¹⁴ These events prompted welcome and overdue public scrutiny of ‘Silicon Valley’ companies, their aggressive pursuit of scale, scant oversight or regulation of the tech industry, and the central role that their products – digital platforms – have come to play in communication, economic activity, social life, and culture. This is a far-reaching and thoroughgoing process: ‘platformisation’, defined by Poell et al as ‘the penetration of the infrastructures, economic processes, and governmental frameworks of platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life’ (Poell, Nieborg and van Dijck, 2019). There has been an avalanche of critical literature analysing platformisation processes in every sphere, at every scale, imaginable, ranging from banking (Langley and Leyshon, 2021), policing (Egbert, 2019) and warfare (Hoijtink and Planqué-van Hardeveld, 2022) to the most intimate features of everyday life, such as sex, dating (e.g. Bergström, 2022; Bown, 2022) or memory (Jacobsen and Beer, 2021).

Within the cultural and creative industries (CCIs), pre-existing entanglements with the consumer electronics and information and computer technology sectors (see Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 2018) provide particular shape to what media scholars David Nieborg and Thomas Poell call the ‘platformisation of cultural production’ (Nieborg and Poell, 2018). The intercession of social media and digital streaming have introduced new, influential cultural intermediaries, while concurrently intensifying pre-existing tendencies toward monopolisation and conglomeration, entrenching the power of already-dominant multinational corporations (Srnicek, 2016; Langley and Leyshon, 2017; Bonini and Gandini, 2019; Meier and Manzerolle, 2019). This is palpable in the music industries, where the streaming boom has transformed consumption practices and much else, but primarily to the benefit of the three major record labels, who remain dominant in the recorded music sector (Prey, 2020; Hagen, 2022).

The picture is similar in live music. Omnipresent digital devices have transformed the concert experience, turning even the smallest of gigs into platformised, transmedia phenomena thanks to new (although still contested) norms regarding social media documentation among audiences (Zhang and Negus, 2021). Backstage, however, developments such as the growing centrality of digital ticketing platforms have intensified prior tendencies toward oligopoly, compounding the influence of large American live music corporations in British gig promotion,

¹⁴ Implicating ‘Big Tech’, ‘social media disinformation’ or similar as a primary explanation for Brexit and/or the Trump election has been a common explanation in the years since (e.g. Ball, 2017; D’Ancona, 2017). However comforting it might be for its proponents, it is also inaccurate, and redolent of prior moral panics that have attributed perceived societal ills to new media technologies (Drotner, 1999). These simplistic accounts fail to contend with the complex and intractable economic, social, and political malaise, and (neo)liberal hubris, at the root of contemporary global turmoil, of which Brexit and the Trump election are merely two symptoms.

venue ownership and festivals (Frith *et al.*, 2021, pp. 10–29).¹⁵ Novel platform logics of datafication, granular classification and ranking, and algorithmic sorting might operate at a previously unthinkable rate and scale, but they neatly intersect with older CCI preoccupations: Nielsen ratings, box office takings, the Billboard Top 100, or indeed the industrial manufacture of media genre (Ryan, 1991; Negus, 1999; Lotz, 2021). The industrial context is therefore one of perpetual ‘disruption’ at the technical level, upending working practices and often rearranging consumption; but overlaying deeper continuity in terms of power relations, with incumbents maintaining substantial influence and market share. These twin dynamics loom large over studies of contemporary cultural production, and structures much of this thesis.

1.5.2: Post-digital malaise and the allure of the ‘real’

This ‘macro’ context is significant, and has been the subject of most platform literature to date. However, as per my discussion above, I have come to focus more on the second half of Poell *et al.*’s definition of platformisation processes: ‘the reorganisation of cultural practices and imaginations around platforms’ (Poell, Nieborg and van Dijck, 2019). A central thread of the project involves situating the LJS within the discursive shifts witnessed since the mid-2010s, which have thoroughly eroded the optimism (and credulity) once in evidence in media, academic and governmental approaches to the tech industry (Harnett, 2021). Silicon Valley companies and their platforms are now routinely positioned as complicit in intensifying extreme politics, enabling invasive surveillance, exploiting user data, entrenching multiple vectors of inequity, and degrading social life (e.g. Gilroy-Ware, 2017; Zuboff, 2019; Seymour, 2020; Crary, 2022; Han, 2022).¹⁶ Drawing on Taina Bucher’s concept of the ‘algorithmic imaginary’, I define this widespread platform scepticism as a ‘critical platform imaginary’, marked by oppositional ‘ways of thinking about what [platforms] are, what they should be and how they function’ (Bucher, 2016, p. 30; see also Carrigan and Fatsis, 2021, pp. 86–127).

Yet changing tides of public and policymaking opinion have barely slowed platformisation, compounding a collective sense of powerlessness. This transition in public sentiment forms part of what I call ‘post-digital malaise’: an inchoate, but strongly felt, attitude and orientation toward the digital that combines overarching concerns in the geopolitical or existential register, with the much more mundane sense of boredom, futility or uncanniness regarding platform mediation – the sense that these nominally cutting-edge entities are rearranging everyday life

¹⁵ Frith *et al.* refer in particular to three American corporations, Live Nation, Ticketmaster and AEG. Live Nation and Ticketmaster merged in 2010, deepening the sector’s oligopolistic tendencies (Frith *et al.*, 2021, p. 15; G. Smith, 2023).

¹⁶ Media scholar Geert Lovink has suggested that the ineffectual nature of this critical turn has only exacerbated the ‘acceleration of alienation’ through social media platforms, which he argues are themselves ‘sad by design’ (Lovink, 2019, p. 2).

for the worse and becoming ever-more dysfunctional in the process, a dynamic that tech critic Cory Doctorow defines as ‘enshittification’.¹⁷ This provides the context for my next research question: *what role have platformisation, and the growth of ‘post-digital malaise’, played in the formation and reception of the LJS?*

The scene’s flourishing within this critical platform imaginary is no coincidence. Most obviously, its primary age demographic means that most participants are ‘digital natives’, fluent in the affordances and habitus of large social media platforms from the late 2000s and early 2010s: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram. More precisely, this is a *post*-digital scene: technological ubiquity is an ordinary feature of daily existence; mobile devices and constant internet connectivity are embedded, embodied parts of social life rather than externalities; and inhabiting a ‘digital age’ is no longer a novelty (Fleischer, 2015; Mazierska, Gillon and Rigg, 2019, pp. 1–5).¹⁸ Participants are therefore quite well equipped to negotiate and capitalise upon the solvent qualities of platformised digital media – their tendency to dissolve divides between public and private, different media forms, or live performance and recording for example – in pursuit of recognition in the cultural industries.

But the LJS is also, importantly, a predominantly *millennial* cohort. Hence, most recall life pre-internet, and much of the scene’s constituency has direct experience of different eras of digitalisation: nostalgia for defunct social networks or memories of a time before the internet became ‘a place we could never leave’ (Lockwood, 2019). These affective connections to earlier forms of digitality are pivotal to understanding contemporary ambivalence in the LJS. Although itself thoroughly imbricated in the platformisation of cultural production, I show throughout that much of the platform-augured ‘reorganisation’ discussed by Poell et al has, in the London jazz context, been oppositional in character, with scenic practices animated by a desire to resist or escape post-digital malaise. Hence, I argue that much of the scene’s vitality and audience appeal has drawn from its symbolic resonance as something other, rooted in ‘real’ music-making, intense connection and organic community. While conflict over veracity and originality are perennial, generative forces in popular culture, part of the LJS’s allure stems from concerns that are very much of the moment, and overflow debates strictly about *musical* authenticity.

¹⁷ Doctorow summarises the process as follows: ‘first, platforms are good to their users. Then they abuse their users to make things better for their business customers. Finally, they abuse those business customers to claw back all the value for themselves. Then... they die’ (Doctorow, 2024).

¹⁸ Following Alexander Weheliye, ‘embodiment’ in this context foregrounds the corporeal and haptic qualities of digital devices - mobile phones and other ‘wearables’. These are qualities which he argues have left a significant mark on ‘contemporary black popular music’ through their ‘transposition into the realms of sensation via rhythm’ (Weheliye, 2017, p. 109). I explore adjacent issues in Chapter Five.

Indeed, contestation over ‘the real’, and a fracturing sense of shared reality, is a defining feature of the contemporary social world (Bratton, 2021, pp. 1–14). This is what media scholar Mark Andrejevic calls the ‘generalised savviness and reflexive debunkery’ that has accompanied ‘the popularisation of a hermeneutics of suspicion in the Internet era’ (Andrejevic, 2013, p. 112). Anxieties about the purported erosion of genuine aesthetic experience by digitalisation, the threat posed by generative artificial intelligence to artistic production, the industrial production and monetisation of authenticity via social media influencing, or any number of digital ‘fakes’ (deepfakes, fake news, fake streams, and so on) suggest that ‘the real is no longer what it used to be’ (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 12). Although writing at a different moment, cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard’s analysis is instructive here. Under conditions of such insecurity, he argues that greater premium is placed upon phenomena that seem to offer meaningful experience: ‘there is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of... objectivity and authenticity. There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience... and there is a panic-stricken production of the real and referential’ (Baudrillard, 1983, pp. 12–13). The flourishing of the LJS should be understood in relation to this phenomenon of ‘escalation’, although in complex and partial ways. Its success speaks to an otherwise unmet desire for genuine experiences of community and musical sociality among participants and onlookers, the kinds of face-to-face musical experience that Christopher Small termed ‘musicking’ (Small, 1998).¹⁹ But more importantly, it is also a product of skilful *positioning* by scene insiders and cultural industries intermediaries, who have been highly effective in leveraging these same discourses – of authenticity, community, the power of ‘real’ musicianship and the allure of the local ‘scene’ at a time of post-digital malaise – to garner attention and stake a claim to novelty within the marketplace.

1.6: Racialisation, genre, and authenticity

This brings us to another thread animating the thesis: what makes *jazz*, specifically, well-suited to the mobilisation of discourses of authenticity, collectivity, and reclamation in contemporary London? I argue that internal histories of the genre, its unique mobility, and its unstable cultural position has offered those invoking its name (even partially, and reluctantly) opportunities to mobilise jazz-specific discourses in ways that bolster claims to unmediated

¹⁹ As I discuss later, ‘musicking’ was the term adopted by writer Emma Warren to account for the musical participation she witnessed in London jazz. It has found traction among other scene commentators and insiders (Warren, 2019a, 2019b).

authenticity, risk-taking, and realness that assume heightened significance in the contemporary moment.

The British context, I suggest, is key. Previously, the arms-length relationship to ‘authenticity’ for those making jazz outside America has been a source of insecurity, resolved either through strenuous imitation or conspicuous rejection of Americanness in jazz. But lying at the periphery of global jazz tends to be framed as a source of strength and creative freedom for the LJS. Musicians appear able to claim jazz identities, engage with the music’s histories, and access genre-specific resources, but also feel comfortable shedding the genre when it suits, without need for justification. For British-Barbadian woodwind player Shabaka Hutchings,²⁰ this slippery relation to jazz is ‘an aspect of being a part of a musical diaspora. Not being from the place that jazz is born from means that I don’t feel any ultimate reverence to it’ (quoted in Bloom, 2018).

As I argue throughout, while irreverence toward genre, and jazz in particular, is a standout feature of the scene, the LJS is not characterised by frictionless, postmodern stylistic collage. Rather, the scene has flourished in a state of *productive, performative tension* with jazz: as a genre, a tradition, a community, a set of discourses, and an institutional formation. This tension, and the apparent ease with which the LJS assumes and sloughs off its jazz associations, ascribes critical edge to London jazz practice, and underpins its celebration elsewhere as providing a much-needed shot in the arm to global jazz. Critic Giovanni Russonello’s comments in *The New York Times* in 2018 made this apparent: ‘now more than ever, the easiest answer to that pesky question — what’s keeping jazz vital these days? — appears to lie in London’ (Russonello, 2018).

Even the scene’s rejection of the strictures of genre places participants within a noble lineage of jazz dissent: from Duke Ellington, through Charles Mingus, to Nicholas Payton and beyond, musicians have rankled at the designation ‘jazz’ (Early and Monson, 2019, p. 6). Antipathy has come from both ends of the jazz(ish) spectrum. Exponents of pop- and youth-oriented fusion sounds have sought to distance themselves from the genre’s reputation as an institutionally consecrated and elite form, while successive generations of experimentalists have strived to evade the limitations that they perceived jazz placed on their practice.²¹

²⁰ For the bulk of the period covered by this thesis, Hutchings’ primary instrument has been the saxophone, with his distinctive playing style on that instrument being one of the most instantly recognisable sounds within the LJS. However, he stopped playing the saxophone indefinitely at the end of 2023, concentrating instead on flutes (@shabakahutchings, 2023; Morris, 2024).

²¹ For example, the perception among proto-bebop musicians that playing dance-oriented jazz compelled them to entertain at the expense of artistic growth (Lott, 1988); the rejection of jazz idiomatic norms among proponents of European free improvisation in the 1970s (Piekut, 2018); or the belief of

Rejection of jazz is particularly pronounced among Black artists, for many of whom the term has represented a potent form of musical ‘Othering’. Here, the term is an unwelcome, extrinsic label, complicit in dispossession and control through naming by cultural industry powerbrokers and a white jazz critical establishment, as well as (for much of its history) key to inscribing a deep and profoundly harmful connection between the music, ‘deviance’, and race (Lopes, 2005).²² As saxophonist and scholar Adam Zanolini argues, the drive to elude definitional capture by musicians has been a driving force in jazz innovation, particularly at the outer fringes of the Black avant-garde (Zanolini, 2016, pp. 62–64).²³

1.6.1: London jazz and the absorption of the artistic anti-racist critique

These discursive currents flow through the London scene, where race, identity and processes of racialisation have been central to its spread and a defining feature of its collective identity, political orientation, and aura of alterity. Rising public awareness, outcry, and revanchist reaction regarding the constitutive role of racism and colonialism in the creation and maintenance of the global capitalist order have undoubtedly played a part in the LJS’s conception as *distinctively Black* even beyond the British context. As influential, much-missed American critic Greg Tate recently suggested: ‘the notion of black jazz actually has more weight in London now than in the fifty states of the union’ (Tate, 2022, p. 85).

The thesis unpacks what it might mean when this ‘weight’ becomes central to branding and promoting the LJS as a cultural product in the contemporary moment. The specific institutional entanglements of the LJS – themselves born out of the unique cultural position of jazz peculiar to the British context – make it an extremely rich case study for exploring dynamics of resistance and recuperation around questions of racial oppression, exploitation and marginalisation in the British CCIs. As cultural industry institutions and corporations have scrambled to signal ‘awareness’ or ‘contrition’ in response to a groundswell of anti-racism, we have seen a consistent emphasis upon symbolic, gestural or representational politics as notional redress in lieu of a meaningful interrogation of, or efforts to undo, root causes of that marginalisation – a politics of ‘diversity’ rather than one of justice (Gray, 2016; Saha, 2017,

Black avant-garde musicians in Chicago that etic critical jazz vocabulary was an artistic and political ‘trap’ (Radano, 1992).

²² These racialised associations were also central in establishing jazz as the music of the hip cultural underground, a substantial source of allure for (particularly white) jazz fans in the mid-century, and a connection which has since waned and which the LJS is framed as revivifying (Monson, 1995; Kelley, 1999, pp. 139–142; Saul, 2003, pp. 29–99).

²³ Fred Moten, in a characteristic formulation, describes these efforts to elude the ‘burden of naming’ as ‘a kind of antinomian antinomialism’ that provides Afro-diasporic music with its unique vitality (Moten, 2017, p. 295 n4).

2021, pp. 63–65). Arts organisations, broadcasters or record labels, alongside innumerable consumer brands, have employed very visible public pronouncements regarding their shortcomings (their institutional whiteness, structural racism, exploitation of workers of colour) to obfuscate a lack of substantive change in working practices, hiring policies or funding models that entrench these same problems.

The issue here is that the realm of culture is predicated on the representational and the production of symbols. Time and again in the cultural industries, we have seen how highly visible enactments of critique, through overtly ‘political’ cultural products that are in some ways ‘marked’ as the work of marginalised groups, are often actually spectacles of recuperation. Or, further, the cultural production of marginalised groups has been deployed as cover to mitigate more far-reaching critiques: of economic injustice, political misrepresentation, or discriminatory legal practices, for example.

This is a version of what sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiappello term ‘the absorption of critique’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007). Boltanski and Chiapello were concerned with how the ‘artistic critique’ of standardisation, ubiquitous commodification, and alienation in mid-20th Century Global North societies became a central driver of neoliberal regimes of accumulation. The artistic critique was one strand of critical thought that emerged after the revolutionary upheavals of 1968, ‘appealing to creativity, pleasure [and] the power of the imagination’ as a means to resist ‘the disenchantment and inauthenticity... which characterise the bourgeois world associated with the rise of capitalism’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007, pp. xxxv, 38).²⁴ The problems diagnosed by the artistic critique were very real, but the emphasis placed upon the ‘bohemian’ individual, imagination and interiority proved highly compatible with (and constitutive of) ascendant neoliberalism.

Drawing upon literature on race, media and the cultural industries, critical platform literature, and studies of state and corporate ‘capture’ of the politics of identity (Haider, 2017; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Saha, 2018, 2021; Sobande, 2019, 2022; Brown, 2022; Táíwò, 2022), the thesis unpacks how ‘the new London jazz explosion’ has been enfolded, enabled, and constrained by the intertwined dynamics of race-making, commodification and recuperation in the cultural industries and the ‘social industries’. The thesis traces the scene’s entanglement with the ubiquitous, ineffective efforts at improving ‘Equality, Diversity and Inclusion’ on the part of

²⁴ They distinguished this from the ‘social critique’ of the same era: more indebted to orthodox socialist and Marxist modes of thought, and concerned with finding collective means of overcoming the inequality and exploitation inherent in capitalist modernity. The successful transformation of capitalism post-68, they argue, was contingent upon successfully decoupling the social and artistic critical traditions.

public institutions and private companies (Ali and Byrne, 2023), and a digital media ecosystem where (hyper)visibly racialised cultural producers are ‘spectacularised’, branded and rapidly commodified (with or without their own involvement) (Sobande, 2021). In a modification of Boltanski and Chiapello’s work, I frame these articulations as *the absorption of artistic anti-racist critique*. Crucially, although this absorption is cause for concern, it remains a terrain and process of struggle. Aspects of critiques advanced by some within the scene – of the jazz world, the cultural industries, the British government and beyond – and the strong social justice currents flowing through the LJS still retain real power, eluding wholesale neutralisation or cynical appropriation.

1.7: Research design and methodology

In this section, I discuss my position as a researcher and my relationship to the scene, the qualitative methods used to gather data, and some of the challenges faced when conducting the research. I then outline my decision-making process when gathering the research sample, and walk through the methods of coding and analysing the data. I provide some background on my use of, and engagement with, social media content, musical recordings, and my minor use of ethnographic observation. The chapter ends with a discussion of anonymisation.

1.7.1: Positionality

While above I mention some pre-existing relationship to the London scene, it was a distant one, with a couple of personal friends occupying different cultural intermediary roles as the scene had begun to take shape. I moved to London in 2019 a few months before beginning my PhD with the intention of conducting research as a participant-observer and recruiting interviewees through cultural proximity, but this was prevented by the pandemic. Despite attending many LJS-adjacent gigs, and a familiarity with some key spaces (stretching back long before beginning my studies), it would be misleading to cast myself as in any way an ‘insider’.

As such, my role as a researcher has been much more external than hoped, and I am very alert to the potentially problematic aspects of conducting research in this manner. As a white, middle-class, male researcher approaching this scene, I am not only part of a massively overrepresented demographic within academia, but also fit the mould of precisely the kind of *musical* commentator, within and beyond the university, who has been consistently guilty of speaking for (or over) the subjects he studies under the guise of neutral expertise, with insufficient regard for the needs or wants of the community/scene/genre in question. This is a general dynamic in popular music, but has a complex legacy specific to jazz (Gennari, 2006;

Baraka, 2009, pp. 72–86, 145–155; Jones, 1963/2022). Research interviews (one of my key methods), can cement a problematic binary between ‘researcher’ and ‘researched’, underwritten by a tacit assumption of impartiality on the part of those making the enquiries. With scrutiny flowing in only one direction and with the voice of the interviewer typically suppressed in the final research, reliance on research interviews can mean that prevailing structures of power go unchallenged (DeVault and Gross, 2012).

There is also an adjacent issue, regarding differential levels of rapport dependent on the identity of interviewees. During this research process, there were moments when some white male participants, in particular, spoke with surprising candour about contentious subjects such as alleged ‘reverse racism’ within the British jazz scene. From one angle, this kind of honesty from participants is desirable as a researcher. However, while ultimately unverifiable, it felt likely that these statements would neither have been made in public nor in conversation with a Black researcher, for example. Reflecting on these disclosures seemingly afforded by fleeting, discomfiting moments of racial or gendered ‘solidarity’ also underscored what my own positionality was likely closing off during interviews with women and non-white participants, due to understandable guardedness on their part and clumsy or overly cautious questioning on my own.²⁵

With this in mind, I make no pretence of detached objectivity, in part as a way to mitigate the potentially high-handed or extractive tendencies that can accompany this kind of ‘outsider’ research. Hence, my attachments and critiques are unashamedly inflected by my identities: as a lifelong jazz fan, a committed anti-racist, anti-fascist and anti-capitalist, and someone with a genuine belief that music-making, broadly conceived,²⁶ is a unique force in auguring ‘collective flourishing’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, pp. 142–147). While sceptical about the simplistic idealism that sometimes accompanies efforts to ascribe participatory music cultures with an inherent political radicalism, I approached this project with a pre-existing conviction in the political potency specific to live, improvised music to facilitate collectivity across difference. Thankfully, this has only strengthened throughout the research.

²⁵ These jarring moments drew into focus the disjuncture between what economic geographer Nick Clare calls the ‘performed’ and ‘perceived’ positionalities of the researcher: I sought (at times probably in excess) to project my own sense of self during interviews (as a critical, anti-racist scholar whose work had an activist bent), but this rarely offset how I was read by interviewees (Clare, 2017).

²⁶ Meaning an understanding of musical participation that goes beyond the stage to incorporate all involved in making it happen.

1.7.2: Data collection

The primary source of data is a corpus of 37 in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews privilege the experiences and interpretations of participants, allowing 'respondents [to] use their own way of defining the world, assume that no fixed sequence of questions is suitable for all respondents, and allow respondents to raise considerations that interviewers did not think of' (Fielding and Thomas, 2016, p. 296). As Wengraf (2001) discusses, despite the improvisational, fluid nature of this approach, prior preparation is needed, and I prepared participant-specific questions based on previous correspondence and publicly-available information such as social media content or press coverage.

Interviews were conducted between September 2020 and August 2021, although one took place in December 2023 with a participant met and interviewed during the 'writing up' stage of my thesis. The interviews lasted between 60 and 180 minutes. On two occasions I conducted a follow up interview with participants due to time constraints limiting the first interview. The participants making up my sample ranged widely in profession, taking in musicians, promoters, photographers, journalists, artist-managers, record label workers, educators and more. They ranged in age between early 20s to late 60s, with a roughly 60/40 split between male and female participants. As is common in the cultural industries, many were what cultural geographer Michael Scott calls 'slash somethings', occupying a number of roles at once (pianist/radio host, writer/promoter and so on) (Scott, 2012, p. 242). Roughly half were primarily musicians. All participants drew most, and the majority all, of their income from music-related work at time of interview.

Participants were recruited via three main approaches. First, through 'snowball' sampling, using pre-existing connections to a few 'information-rich key informants', who provided initial access to the wider scene milieu and provided contacts for other potential participants (Oliver, 2006; Patton, 2014, p. 451). Recruitment required something of a balancing act. Although I wasn't seeking an empirically 'accurate' or representative sample, and did hope to speak to prominent and well-informed figures in the scene, I also wanted to avoid merely replicating existing distributions of attention that saw a handful of figures receive outsize coverage from the press to the neglect of others. To combat this, participants were asked for recommendations for contacts they felt went 'unsung' in prevailing narratives, and endeavoured to follow these 'paths less travelled' when recruiting others, seeking to use the interviews as an avenue of expression for marginalised or excluded participants (Arskey and Knight, 1999).

There were tangible and practical benefits to this approach that became clear as the research progressed. More professionally established participants, particularly ‘frontstage’ figures such as musicians, seemed accustomed to being interviewed, and some appeared to have had some media training.²⁷ This is not to suggest ‘slipperiness’ on the part of the interviewees - none of the participants provided ‘evasive answers [that] are typical of the media-trained modern politician’ - but rather a degree of reticence and perhaps a slight lack of enthusiasm for what they envisaged as another conversation retreading old ground about ‘new London jazz’, despite my attempts to move beyond dominant press narratives (Mann, 2016). As a result, it sometimes appeared that more prominent figures defaulted to ‘stock’ responses during interviews, answering questions they were accustomed to hearing in press interviews rather than engaging closely with the discussion at hand (something that could be verified through reference to published interviews). By contrast, figures who were otherwise more marginal in press coverage at times came across as more engaged and reflective during our interviews, providing rich data that frequently subverted my expectations.

Second, I also looked to existing media coverage to gain a working sense of the contours of the LJS. When starting fieldwork, there had already been a number of press, record label and other attempts to provide overviews of the ‘who’s who’ of new London jazz. These provided a good sense of where to look – and suggested important gaps. As with snowballing sampling, I also kept a close eye out for any interviews or social media discussions between prominent ‘insiders’ that hinted at important but underdiscussed potential participants.

Third, recruitment involved a lot of ‘cold emailing’. In lieu of face-to-face introductions at gigs, bars or elsewhere, many initial attempts were digital, around a third of which received no reply. Again, this was a meaningful barrier to a more thoroughgoing sample, but as discussed below, more potential participants were available and willing than might have been the case pre-pandemic.

It is worth lingering upon what might have been lost in the research process due to the inability to conduct sustained, in-person fieldwork. All qualitative research is in some ways improvisational, and the impossibility of gig attendance foreclosed one source of what jazz scholar Dan DiPiero calls the ‘contingent encounters’ (DiPiero, 2023) that constitute improvisation: ethnographic observation, and the chance meetings with sounds, sights and potential participants that might complicate my analysis. This is significant, given my interest in

²⁷ Some LJS musicians have taken part in career development programmes, discussed in Chapter Three, which offer media training.

the disjunctions between narrow media narratives of the LJS, and the more complex iterations of jazz practice in the city and in Britain at large. My reliance on desk-based research and secondary press and promotional literature could potentially contribute to reproducing some of these dynamics of exclusion and erasure, even in the act of their critique. Nonetheless, I am satisfied that these approaches have produced an adequate sample, in terms of the quantity and breadth of participant. As I demonstrate throughout, the approach taken to music scenes here tries to move back and forth between analysing the practices, identities, and social groups that formed the LJS ‘on the ground’, and the processes by which the scene was constituted and transformed by processes of circulation – on record, through social media platforms, in the press and so on. The thesis works from the principle that, in the wake of digitalisation, a sharp separation between face-to-face practice and forms of mediation has lost any coherence it might have once had: scenes today are typically always-already documented, mediated and circulated in some form from the beginning.

While by no means representative, the sample is holistic, and I would argue ‘scenic’: working from the premise that music scenes are made by interlocking constituent parties that go far beyond musicians themselves. Here, Tanya Kant’s robust defence of flexible and modest qualitative methods is helpful. She is straightforward in dismissing suggestions that there must be a ‘right’ sample size for qualitative research, arguing that qualitative samples are small precisely ‘because they are rich; full of utterances and modes of expression that take time to unpack and untangle’ (Kant, 2020b, p. 18). To suggest this study reached theoretical ‘saturation’ in the research process would presume that this was the definitive statement on London jazz, which rather misses the point of music scenes which are, as Barry Shank has argued, ‘over-productive signifying communit[ies]’ where ‘far more semiotic information is produced than can be rationally parsed’ (Shank, 1994, p. 122). It would also undersell the complications of the pandemic and the enforced limitations of doctoral study, particularly funding. Instead, like Kant, I am happy that the research sample is ‘big enough to allow for diversity of responses, but small enough to do justice to respondents’ (Kant, 2020b, p. 18). This itself strikes me as an important ethics of care in qualitative research, ensuring that participants’ time is actually well spent.

1.7.3: Pandemic limitations and remote interviewing

Due to pandemic lockdowns and the consolidation of remote working as a ‘new normal’, all but one interview was conducted remotely: three via phone, and the remainder using Microsoft Teams or Zoom videoconferencing software. All were synchronous. Methods literature often positions the screen or the telephone as an impediment to the establishment of rapport with

participants and the monitoring of body language and facial expression, sacrificing rich research data (Gilham, 2005; Irvine, 2011). Studies of remote interviewing formats, while acknowledging their practicalities, typically frame them at best as passable substitutes to the ‘real thing’ of in-person interviewing the methodological ‘gold standard’ that provides ‘thicker information, body talk and communication efficiency’ (Rettie, 2009, p. 242; Oltmann, 2016).

Even pre-pandemic such methodological axioms felt anachronistic, presupposing offline interviewing’s status as a somehow more ‘natural’ mode of engaging research participants (Bishop, 2018). This perspective tacitly casts technologically-enabled interaction as auxiliary to authentic sociality, a binary long since troubled elsewhere in media and communications studies (Kember and Zylinska, 2012, p. 27; Van Es, 2017; Cefai and Couldry, 2019). It also overlooks the artifice of *all* research interviews, regardless of format, underselling the effects that the formality of the interview process (consent forms, recording, note-taking etc.) has on how the conversation unfolds.

The forced move online for large swathes of social, professional and cultural life precipitated by COVID-19 has further called this offline-first perspective into question. Not only are most potential participants today technically proficient (with videocall software, for example), they are also more habituated to online conversation. In a 2019 comparative study of two interview-based projects (one in-person and the other via Skype), sociologists Brandy Jenner and Kit Myers found ‘neither reduction nor inappropriate excesses of rapport’ when conducting private interviews remotely, and outlined potential benefits of the format (Jenner and Myers, 2019).

Remote interviewing during the pandemic also had what felt like some unexpected upsides. One was logistical: as a researcher working hours away from my home institution, and living in a tiny space, working out mutually agreeable locations where the interview could easily take place was challenging. This became clear after my one face-to-face interview, where the recorded conversation was sometimes barely audible over the ambient clatter of the cafe. Remote interviewing mitigated some of these common audio issues and removed the need for participants to travel.²⁸

Conducting research during a complete standstill in the live music industries also afforded greater access. Musicians who were typically on the road throughout the year and reserved their interview capacity for journalists had unexpectedly empty calendars and diminished press

²⁸ Although technological glitches (internet drop-outs, recording failures or unreliable phone signal) presented their own challenges.

commitments, making some more willing and able to participate. The enforced pause of lockdown after the frenetic activity and work opportunities following the scene's explosion also made participants at times seem more reflective and retrospective, willing to take stock of the scene and view it in the round (something also evident in LJS press coverage during lockdown, e.g. Hutchinson, 2020). As interviews progressed amid ongoing lockdowns, the move toward the past tense in participants' discussion of the LJS was instructive, helping (amongst other things) concretise the periodisation provided above.

Synchronous two-way video created a greater sense of 'level playing field' in interviews, helping offset the ever-present extractive tendencies of social research. As Marnie Howlett suggests, sharing ones' home on camera can produce more symmetrical relationships than typical in in-person interviews, helping shift, even slightly, the conventional researcher-interviewee power dynamic where 'we purposefully enter the personal lives of our participants but they are less likely to enter ours' (Howlett, 2022, p. 394). The capacity for participants to *restrict* my observations could also build rapport. Speaking without video meant some initially shy participants more easily 'warmed up' during conversation, talking with greater candour than they otherwise might in-person (Seitz, 2016, p. 232).

1.7.4: Coding and analysis

Interview transcripts were coded using Nvivo qualitative data analysis software. I adopted an emergent approach to coding, using the framework of 'abductive analysis' that Steffan Timmermans and Iddo Tavory developed from 'grounded theory', the now-classic method of developing 'theory from [qualitative] data' advanced by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the 1960s (Glaser and Strauss, 2017/1967). Timmermans and Tavory's approach to abduction, 'the creative production of hypotheses based on surprising evidence', retains the emphasis upon 'mov[ing] back and forth between data and theory iteratively' in qualitative research, but stresses that 'surprising' findings should be assessed 'against a background of multiple existing sociological theories and through systematic methodological analysis' (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012).²⁹ Critical here is that, for Timmermans and Tavory, 'abduction comes first – temporally and analytically' (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). This departs from grounded theory's complete deference to the data, whereby any theory generation, critical speculation or even literature review comes downstream of empirical research.³⁰

²⁹ Deterdings and Waters suggest that many qualitative studies citing grounded theory as their method are in reality undertaking abductive analysis (Deterding and Waters, 2021).

³⁰ As with my discussion of positionality when approaching interviewing, the abductive approach also relies upon a necessary honesty about the partiality of social research.

Adopting this approach, I entered the interview process, and coding, with a solid basis in the scholarly literature and the widespread media coverage of the scene. Much discussion with participants circled around pre-existing media (mis)representation, which depended on my pre-existing immersion in the LJS media ecosystem. After initial thematic coding of interview data, I applied these preliminary codes to multimedia texts pertaining to the LJS (online press coverage, third-party interview transcripts, promotional literature), imported into Nvivo using the software's 'NCapture' web extension, which allows researchers to download social media posts, web pages and other media into the programme for coding (see Saldana, 2016, pp. 63–64). Placing these data in 'conversation' helped refine emergent themes and 'stress-test' hypotheses emerging in interviews against other scene representations.

Direct quotations from primary interview research are used alongside secondary multimedia material throughout the thesis. There are obvious and significant differences between these data, and I endeavour to make these explicit throughout, offering critical commentary on all forms of source material by and about the scene. However, the thesis consistently intermingles primary and secondary data, rarely seeking to draw a bright line separating 'insider' accounts from journalistic metacommentary, for example. A hard distinction between quotes from primary and secondary material would seem to sit at odds with a sample of participants that, after all, includes journalists, writers, broadcasters, and other promotional intermediaries, themselves involved in producing secondary media sources that feature in the thesis. As such, while the thesis never uncritically reproduces data from any source, the placing of (for example) press interviews 'in conversation' with my own primary research is a deliberate choice. This forms part of my holistic methodological approach to researching the LJS, and reflects a conceptual framework that understands music scenes as constituted both by the activities of its constituents and the processes of mediation.

1.7.5: Recordings, digital media, and live observation

Throughout the thesis, I avoid formal textual criticism or analysis using orthodox musicological techniques. However, I sometimes offer commentary on musical aesthetics, particularly as a means of tracing shared rhythmic vocabularies, textural features, production techniques or instrumentation between the LJS and its many musical tributaries. Chapter Five, in particular, features descriptive and critical readings of recordings. These are not load-bearing analytical features, but aim to provide a fuller aesthetic sense of the scene and attend to the fact that participants, and their music, are dynamic cultural subjects, not inert research objects. It is also an attempt to move past the widespread reticence, evident in much popular music, media, and cultural studies literature, to contend with the actual *sound* of the music in question, part of a

wider de-emphasis of the text in favour of allegedly more 'objective', sociologically-informed methods (Phillipov, 2013).

Such textual, particularly musical, neglect does a disservice to the practitioners of the scene in question. Although textual analysis can be guilty of excessive abstraction, it is worth remembering that it is also a way of *talking about music*. Although interviews were typically anchored by questions of cultural politics, digital platforms and scenic identity, it was notable how frequently the discussion turned toward the sounds of the scene, and some of these discussions feature in the research. Bearing this attention to sound, affect and experience in mind, I also offer some accounts of my own experiences at live LJS performances, particularly in Chapter Four. These again serve to foreground my own subjectivity in these discussions and revitalise the research topic at hand, a living, breathing musical community. For the most part, however, I draw on secondary accounts from other attendees, music journalists and other commentators.

My engagement with social media content has been inductive, predominantly following interview discussions. Again, I have not sought a representative or systematic view of the LJS via digital methods or social network analysis – attempting to map the scene as a network of associations, for example (Crossley, 2020). Instead, social media is used as an illustrative device, one which bears traces of social interaction, promotional activity, and provides some glimpses of underlying social and cultural networks, approaching content critically as a media text while alert to platform specificities.

By far the most frequently discussed platform was Instagram, which was the primary terrain for promotion, documenting live performances, and personal expression during the research. I did not have a pre-existing Instagram profile, but without one it was clear I was missing an important scenic activity. I set up an account in March 2021 with no content and unconnected from pre-existing social media profiles. I began by following a handful of the most prominent LJS figures (Nubya Garcia, Moses Boyd, Shabaka Hutchings), populating the feed initially only by following accounts that I deemed relevant to the research when suggested by Instagram's 'recommended accounts' feature, in an algorithmically-determined form of 'snowballing'. This was an attempt to gain insight into the scene's perception and propagation as a social network by recommendation algorithms; however, this approach eventually reached a kind of saturation. I then adopted a more purposive approach, but still only following those that appeared in my feed (for example, a musician or promoter tagged by someone I already follow).

1.7.6: Anonymisation

For the LJS, a reasonably small and intimate community, anonymity is a vexed issue. As qualitative methods scholar Janet Heaton suggests, anonymisation and pseudonymisation are default, underexplored social research practices, typically with limited consideration of their application or necessity (Heaton, 2022). Some scene researchers adopt blanket anonymisation of participants, venues and other identifiable features (e.g. street names), however this approach seems neither possible or desirable for approaching the LJS (Anderson, 2009). For example, given the small number LJS-specific venues, their significant differences, and their dispersal across London, disguising their identity would be futile for informed readers, and could hinder precise and concise analysis.

One can also overstate the efficacy of blanket anonymisation, which can produce a false sense of security in participants which can come at their cost (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012, p. 71). I have therefore approached anonymisation with the understanding that ‘anonymity is a matter of degree... [participants’] identities will be more or less difficult to recognise for different audiences’ (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012, p. 127).

Nonetheless, I assumed participants would be particularly reluctant to speak candidly or critically about peers, or cultural intermediaries with influence on future employment (e.g. record label workers or gig promoters) if they felt potentially recognisable from their interview transcript.³¹ All participants were thus made aware that their inclusion in the thesis will be pseudonymised unless they request otherwise.³² I use ‘codename aliases’ (e.g. P1, P2, P3), with an appendix providing an indication of their profession and age range to avoid any of the well-documented ‘problems with the politics, power, and paternalism of using pseudonyms in social research (Heaton, 2022, p. 127; see also Allen and Wiles, 2016). Where I directly quote participants who name an individual, group or organisation in a way that I deem would reveal their own identity, I have paraphrased in square brackets (Heaton, 2022, p. 126), e.g.

[LJS saxophonist] and I, we did a date... in Zurich. And because one of us was booked, we were able to be like, 'look, most of us are in [each others'] band - let's make it a double bill.

Following health communication researchers Amy Nimegeer and Jane Farmer’s approach to researching small, intimate communities, I use gender-neutral pronouns where possible

³¹ This was born out during research, with some participants double-checking that they were being de-identified before opening up in greater detail.

³² Participants were given an opportunity to use their real name, as there are incidences where this has clearly been a source of pride and even empowerment in the methods literature (Marzano, 2012, pp. 446–447).

throughout (Nimegeer and Farmer, 2016, p. 97). In the main, quotations provide only pertinent professional details, typically their role(s) and sometimes descriptions of professional experience. However, much of the thesis is *about* identity, particularly the experience of women, Black people and other minoritised groups in jazz. Identity characteristics like gender, ethnicity, nationality and so on *are* thus mentioned when strictly relevant, but cited only when volunteered by the participant during the conversation. I believe that this is a pragmatic, balanced approach to anonymity that sufficiently protects participants' privacy while enabling important and rich interview data to be effectively operationalised.³³

All participants were provided with consent forms and a detailed information sheet providing information on the purpose, duration and methods of the study. I received written and/or verbal confirmation from all those interviewed that they had read and understood this information, and consented to participating in the research.

1.8: Periodisation

All timelines of this sort are necessary simplifications, dependent on the exclusion of awkward outliers and important exceptions. Crucially, they can reinforce the kind of amnesia and claims of novelty of the sort that I am seeking to problematise throughout the thesis - as the following chapters demonstrate, jazz in London did not spring out of thin air in 2012. With these caveats in mind, we can approach the trajectory of the 'new London jazz scene' as follows:

Incubation: c. 2012 – 2015

In this period, many key musicians are still studying, either at school-age organisations or music colleges. There is limited attention from even local music press, and a small recorded footprint, mostly self-released via platforms like Bandcamp and Soundcloud or on compilations by label Jazz Re:refreshed. Now-defunct projects such as SumoChief, Myriad Forest or United Vibrations are accruing a following for their genre-ambiguous sound.³⁴ Important venues and events, such as Brainchild festival (2012), Steez (2013), and the Total Refreshment Centre (TRC) (2012), begin, with Steez in particular drawing large crowds in South London. Nonetheless, this is a formation primarily of 'insiders' connected by word of mouth and close, interpersonal relationships. At the same time, many young musicians are institutionally embedded, and at

³³ Without wishing to downplay the potential professional consequences, or personal embarrassment, that could arise from a participant's identification in the course of the thesis, this research is not highly sensitive.

³⁴ These groups all contained players who would go on to become figureheads for the scene.

this point (either established by participants or assigned by commentators) there is no clear separation of the 'LJS' from the London jazz world at large. Touring, when it happened at all, is to small, mostly genre-specific venues in England.

Evolution: c. 2015 – 2016

'The scene' begins to be discussed as a distinct phenomenon, gaining momentum and some press attention. A few full-length records, such as *Dem Ones* by Binker and Moses (2015), *Black Focus* by Yussef Kamaal (2016), and *Channel the Spirits* by The Comet is Coming (2016) are released to acclaim from beyond the specialist jazz press, with *The Comet is Coming* receiving a Mercury Music Prize nomination.³⁵ These records have a distinctive sonic aesthetic, with cover art and promotional materials establishing a slick and coherent visual style. A sense of scenic identity forms, one that is future-facing, at times moody, and streetwise. Interest is primarily from independent labels, including Gilles Peterson's Brownswood Recordings, with some national radio play for larger groups and a greater presence at the annual London Jazz Festival. Bigger artists begin touring abroad, and there is an increased (but still fledgling) digital media presence.

Explosion: 2017 – 2019

A flurry of coverage in the national press, particularly following the promotional campaign for scene-defining compilation *We Out Here* (released by Brownswood in early 2018) crystallises the 'London jazz scene' narrative. International interest grows with showcases at South by Southwest in Austin, Texas and the New York Winter Jazz Festival in 2017, and glowing 'scene reports' in *The Guardian*, *The New York Times* and *Rolling Stone*. This coverage often delineates between the LJS and the jazz 'establishment', and a small selection of musicians, venues and intermediaries receive most of the attention. Bigger artists start touring internationally as excitement builds. This marks a period of music industry incursion into the scene and a professionalisation among participants, with some signing to major, larger independent, or 'legacy' American jazz labels. London jazz acts regularly feature on the mainstream festival circuit in the UK and get top billing at the annual *We Out Here* festival, established in 2019. These acts begin filling non-specialist pop venues and clubs. Earlier 'scenic' incubators like TRC and Steez come to an end, although novel events like Deptford's Steam Down pop up. 'Jazz UK'

³⁵ The Mercury Music Prize is the UK's most prestigious music award, with a prize of £25,000. Nominees typically benefit from increased press coverage. The prize is infamous for a 'token jazz act', nominated most years but with little expectation of victory. Ezra Collective are the only exception to date (Mann, 2023).

editorial playlist becomes a key point of access on Spotify, and *We Out Here* track ‘Abusey Junction’ by Kokoroko sees runaway viral success.

Entrenchment and dissolution: 2020 – present

The COVID pandemic stalls much of the scene’s momentum. Now-established acts such as Nubya Garcia, Ezra Collective, Sons of Kemet and Kokoroko release well-received albums, and continue to tour internationally when possible. The scene-oriented narrative fades into the background in coverage of these artists. BBC 4 documentary special ‘Jazz 625: The British Jazz Explosion’ is broadcast in 2021. Figures both within and without the boundaries of the scene express discontent about how the London jazz story has been told. A new cohort of musicians begin to establish themselves in London; meanwhile ‘the new Scottish jazz scene’ starts to make waves in the music press through 2022. The 2023 ‘token jazz nomination’ for the Mercury Prize, Ezra Collective’s *Where I’m Meant to Be*, actually wins – however, there is a distinct sense that for ‘the London jazz scene’ as a discrete media entity, the circus has left town.

1.9: Chapter Outlines

This first chapter has provided some background to the ‘new London jazz scene’, summarising its prominent sonic features, its location within British jazz and popular music, and some of its political implications. I have discussed my research question, and situated my case study within the context of the platformisation of cultural production.

In the next chapter, I contextualise the thesis within three broad bodies of literature: studies of jazz and/as popular music; critical scholarship on race, racism, and identity; and studies of cultural production, the media industries and digital platforms.

Following the literature review, the four empirical chapters are organised in a roughly chronological fashion, tracing the scene’s trajectory from music school, to the live stage, into the recording studio, and finally its circulation within the landscape of (self-)promotion, marketing and branding. As with the periodisation above, this conceit is an organisational device rather than a strict, linear progression.

In Chapter Three, I consider the relationship of the LJS to institutional jazz education, beginning by surveying conflicts thrown up by the university’s emergence as the primary site for the

reproduction of jazz in the 21st century. By detailing the important role played both by formal conservatoire pedagogy and 'informal', school-age jazz education in London, particularly the organisation Tomorrow's Warriors, in the scene's development, the chapter complicates media accounts of the LJS as an insurgent, 'anti-establishment' formation. Despite this fact, the 'school-streets' divide in jazz discourse has been pivotal to the scene. I show how the critiques of institutional pedagogy articulated in scenic discourse, particularly with regards to the underrepresentation of women and people of colour in the classroom and on the curriculum, are part of a wider, politicised expression that I call 'jazz populism.' I draw on Jim McGuigan's theory of cultural populism to suggest that the laudable anti-elitist tendencies in London jazz are also bound up with processes of self-branding and an amenability toward commerce, which I suggest foreclose more far-reaching and coherent political critiques in the LJS.

Chapter Four examines the practices and politics of live performance in the LJS. It starts by tracing the scene's incubation in small venues, arguing that the contingent qualities of these spaces and the tight interpersonal networks of participants were key in fostering the genre fluidity and the high-energy, convivial multiculturalism for which the scene has become famed. I draw on dub and dance music scholarship to define the articulation of participants, technology and performer in these settings as the unique 'vibe' of the LJS, and unpack how this vibe articulated a kind of affective politics peculiar to the current conjuncture. The chapter then explores the ambivalent effects of social media, examining divergent methods by which LJS participants accrued or avoided online attention and underscoring the significance of post-digital malaise to the scene's self-conception. The chapter then considers how the incorporation of jazz into officially-sanctioned accounts of London's cultural 'diversity' has at times accompanied efforts at urban 'regeneration', contrasting the enthusiastic embrace of the LJS by the dominant culture to the criminalisation of grime and UK drill to reflect on what their diverging treatments tell us about race, space and music in contemporary Britain.

Chapter Five attends to the production and circulation of records. I begin by analysing the development of jazz record production norms, showing how these norms were based upon and helped reaffirm aesthetic and ethical commitments to 'honest' and authentic self-expression and a mistrust of technological mediation. I lay out the political economic conditions of record production today to contextualise the shared sense among interviewees that the live 'vibe' for which the LJS is famed has not always translated onto record, experienced as a relative aesthetic failure. I then investigate strategies adopted by London musicians to combat this, with some leaning into orthodox jazz record production norms and

‘analogue authenticity’, and others subverting them, making music precision-tooled for club settings via a wholesale embrace of digital recording techniques.

Chapter Six considers the role of promotion and branding. The chapter starts by attending to the promotional labour shouldered by LJS participants under conditions of limited support from cultural industry intermediaries. I show how most participants view this work as compulsory and as a potential threat to their creative practice, suggesting that social media has intensified the ‘burden of independence’. The chapters then considers the relationship between scene insiders and media interlocutors, arguing that digital media’s structural compulsion toward self-branding, and the imperilled state of contemporary cultural journalism, explain the production of numerous incautious, celebratory accounts of the ‘London jazz explosion’. While central in garnering hype around the LJS, these narratives have often been narrow, simplistic and at times exclusionary, and have bred resentment within the scene.

The chapter moves on to examine corporate sponsorship and brand ‘collaborations’ as funding mechanisms for the scene and its surrounding media apparatus. Musicians’ acceptance of these funding sources is rooted in record industry exploitation and hegemonic promotionalism, but I argue that growing dependence on brand money intensifies the fragility of contemporary music culture. The chapter explores why the London jazz ‘brand’ might be a particularly attractive commodity for advertisers, pointing to the polysemic nature of jazz; the LJS’s relationship of productive tension with the genre; and advertiser’s heightened appetite for visible ‘diversity’ and (nominal) politics in the contemporary moment. The chapter concludes by arguing that the LJS exemplifies how proximity to, and reliance upon, the advertising industry, branding, and consumer goods can undermine popular music’s potential to advance effective social critique.

Chapter Seven draws together my preceding arguments, summarising the contributions advanced by the thesis and considers some potential implications of the research.

2: Literature Review

2.1: Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of three broad areas of scholarship that ground the thesis: jazz studies; studies of media, culture and digital platforms; and critical studies of the intersection race, representation and marketisation. The first section explores developments in jazz studies, particularly since the 1990s, showing an increasingly diverse and reflexive field, but one which remains inattentive to contemporary jazz, before looking beyond American-oriented jazz scholarship to foreground the significance of migration, diaspora and complex processes of cultural transmission. The section concludes by examining the critical literature surrounding the concept of the music 'scene', and situates my own approach to the term within existing research.

2.3 considers media and cultural production research in the wake of platformisation, first exploring ethnographic and qualitative studies of personalisation and algorithmic recommendation, and studies of digital platforms' impact upon the music industry. I then consider social media scholarship, exploring self-branding practices, the leveraging of authenticity, and strategies of cultural workers (particularly influencers), to gain audiences and maintain visibility on-platform. The section concludes by returning to the music industries, exploring the intersection of contemporary social media with older preoccupations regarding the effects of technology on musical aesthetics and creative autonomy.

2.4 explores scholarship on racism, representation, and the making and marketing of racial identity in Britain. It begins by examining how experiences of racism and marginalisation intersect with and modify debates surrounding musical independence and autonomy. I discuss underlying causes for the valorisation of entrepreneurialism evident in some Black musical forms, looking to literature that suggests this has become generalised in the cultural industries, with potentially depoliticising consequences. I then situate the LJS within rising popular decolonial sentiment and the racial reckonings of the recent past, suggesting that rapid erosion of the legitimacy of previously influential 'post-racial' discourses in Britain provides crucial context for understanding the scene. The chapter concludes by considering the pertinence of recent theoretical developments in Black Studies to the thesis.

2.2: Jazz and/as Popular Music Studies

'New Jazz Studies' and its limits

Jazz scholarship has undergone a sustained period of diversification and maturation since the late 1980s. Writers like Lewis Porter, Krin Gabbard, Ingrid Monson, Scott DeVeaux and Robert Walser drew from recent and contemporaneous developments in cultural studies, literary theory, new musicology, popular music studies and beyond to augur a cultural and critical-historiographical turn in the field, ushering in the emergence of the 'New Jazz Studies' (Porter, 1988; Deveaux, 1991; Gabbard, 1995a, 1995b; Monson, 1995; Walser, 1995; Tucker, 1998).³⁶ Such work has opened up and broken down a narrow jazz teleology that has, in particular, underserved the role of collective authorship, place, milieu and meaning (i.e., questions of scene, addressed below) (Isoardi, 2006; Jackson, 2012; Gebhardt and Whyton, 2015; Greenland, 2016; Heller, 2016; Teal, 2021), and erased the contributions of non-normative jazz musicians (i.e. those that do not easily fulfil the archetype of the lone, male, African-American genius) (Solis, 2009; Whyton, 2010).

Jazz history prior to the New Jazz Studies had been moulded by the output of a handful of critics, whose advocacy set the parameters of jazz discourse and its historical record from the outset (Gennari, 2006). An important inflection point came between the late 1960s and early 1970s, as writers who had cut their teeth defending the modernist experimentation of bebop during the 'jazz wars' of the mid-1940s (Gendron, 1993) realised that their own conception of jazz had limits. Even as its aesthetic conventions were splintered by musicians' embrace of funk, rock, and the destabilising experimentalism of free jazz, this was also a period 'instrumental in crystallising standards and constructing the jazz tradition we know and recognise today', with influential critics effectively demarcating the genre's temporal and sonic boundaries, at the expense of avant-garde and fusion musicians whose jazz identity was called into question (Whyton, 2015, p. 239).³⁷

In large part, we have these efforts to thank for the growth in academic studies of jazz, both as a distinct specialism and in other disciplines, in the years that have followed (Tucker, 2012, pp. 267–269). But, starting from the late 1980s, a great deal of scholarship has been concerned precisely with complicating, expanding or outright demolishing what Gennari calls the 'Mount Rushmore' version of jazz history (Gennari, 2006, p. 341). There has been a particularly fruitful

³⁶ As with musicology, jazz studies lagged behind other disciplines in its turn to cultural studies and its 'literary theoretical relatives' (Krimms, 2007, p. 90).

³⁷ Although efforts at formal tradition making had begun in earnest in the 1950s (Whyton, 2012, p. 366). I discuss this more in Chapter Three.

seam of research into jazz and gender. Some has undertaken the belated and very much unfinished work of writing women back into jazz history (Placksin, 1992; Tucker, 2001; Rustin and Tucker, 2008; Heining, 2012, pp. 277–302; Kernodle, 2014; Teal, 2014; Reddan, Herzig and Kahr, 2022). Other, ongoing research calls attention to the massive gender inequities in the contemporary jazz world (e.g. Raine, 2020; McAndrew and Widdop, 2021; McMullen, 2021). A third seam examines the foundational role of masculinities ((hetero)normative, subversive, deviant, white, Black) in the formation, performance, transmission, and interpretation of the music (Gray, 1995; Monson, 1995; Kelley, 1999; Ake, 2005, pp. 62–82; DiPiero, 2023). Nichole Rustin-Paschal’s work on ‘jazzmasculinity’ is particularly instructive, the portmanteau denoting how ‘race, masculinity, and emotion give meaning to jazz’, in ways that float free of individual gender identity but have always been constrained by ‘stereotypes of racialised masculinity’ (Rustin-Paschal, 2017, pp. xii–xiii). Paschal’s analysis complements Sherrie Tucker’s discussion of the long and troublesome ‘legacy of problematic ways that sexuality and jazz have been linked in the field’, a crucial piece of analysis within the (smaller) body of work directly addressing jazz and sexuality (Tucker, 2008, p. 4; see also Barg, 2013; Fürnkranz, 2022; Meadows, 2022).³⁸ Tucker probes the many ways that jazz has undergone an active process of ‘straightening’ throughout its history along ‘concurrently co-constructed straight lines defining... sex, race, gender, class, and nation’, showing how the ‘myth’ of jazz as a ‘hyper-hetero-masculine space’ is foundational to jazz discourse and continues to ‘withstand correction’ (Tucker, 2008, pp. 5–6).

This work has been crucial in helping us better understand how multiple intersecting inequities – along lines of race, gender, class, geopolitics and beyond – have patterned acceptance within jazz circles, patronage from the music industries, treatment by the critical establishment, and as a consequence, inclusion in the jazz canon. Indeed, the canon-critical impulse, given early impetus by Scott Deveaux’s 1991 article ‘Constructing the Jazz Tradition’ (Deveaux, 1991), is perhaps one of the few genuinely unifying aspects of a field of jazz studies that is today markedly more diverse in subject matter, disciplinary location, methodological approach, and membership than it was at the outset of the New Jazz Studies ‘renaissance’ (Peretti, 1993).³⁹

³⁸ Tucker also makes explicit the role of homophobia and heteronormativity in the ‘neo-traditionalist’ approach to jazz, discussed in Chapter Three.

³⁹ The content of major edited collections in recent (and not so recent) memory is often closer to cultural studies, media studies and popular music studies than the formalist musicological approaches of years past, and has mostly moved beyond questions of individual genius or the close reading of iconic recordings (e.g. O’Meally, Edwards and Griffin, 2004; Ake, Garrett and Goldmark, 2012; Fagge and Pillai, 2017). However, in wider jazz scholarship there does remain a ‘lingering emphasis upon transcription and analysis’ of records, ‘[which] serves to diminish the importance of localised musical practice,

However, these laudable efforts to variously construct, deconstruct and reconstruct the jazz tradition (Hersch, 2008a; Tucker, 2012) have meant that most jazz research remains written in the past tense. Of course, good historical scholarship also illuminates the present, and much 'new' jazz historiography has done just that: Guthrie P. Ramsey's study of bebop pianist Bud Powell, for example, escapes the conventional confines of biography to provide a much wider analysis of the bebop's emergence as a thrilling, novel form of expression formed under conditions of extreme socioeconomic constraint, which in the process inscribed developing 'orthodoxies of jazz practice' with a 'new musical language of 'jazz manhood'" that have proven extremely stubborn and endure to this day (Ramsey, 2013b, pp. 142, 121). Likewise, Michael Denning's analysis attests to a foundational, still-resonant rupture, arguing that during the global circulation of recorded music in the early 20th Century, jazz initiated 'the first great conflict over popular music', a 'civil war' between the 'philharmonic' impulse (a love of harmonic complexity derived from eighteenth century European concert music)' and 'the noise of outcast and oppressed peoples' (Denning, 2015, p. 5). Denning's work helps us better understand the permanent irresolution of jazz's cultural status, and of renewal and reclamation that recur throughout this thesis.

Nonetheless, there is a certain irony in the fact that efforts to diversify or deconstruct the historical record has left jazz in the here and now underserved by the academy. As a result, current claims being made for and against the music in popular discourse often pass without scholarly comment, even as such commentary frequently recapitulates the reductive tendencies of historic jazz writing, criticism of which represents the bread and butter of contemporary jazz scholarship. Some underlying factors contribute to the ongoing supply of hackneyed, stereotypical and cliché-ridden writing about jazz. The repeated economic convulsions wrought by digitalisation upon the media industries, particularly journalism, have made for a threadbare music press today, leaving critical and expert coverage underfunded and in short supply (Hanrahan, 2013, 2018; Carter and Rogers, 2014; Hu, 2018; Powers, 2024). As recent studies of 'brand journalism' by media scholars such as Jonathan Hardy and Michael Serazio have suggested, PR copy or 'sponsored content' has proliferated in its stead (Serazio, 2020; Hardy, 2021; see also Järvekülg and Wikström, 2022). More thoughtful discussion of jazz can be crowded out as a result, and there is limited scrutiny of the claims made by or about ascendant figures who have moved beyond the insularities of the jazz 'art world' and, as a result, come to dominate contemporary mainstream discussion of jazz. This includes the London musicians I cover in the thesis such as Ezra Collective, Nubya Garcia or Shabaka

involvement, and discourse' and consigns whole swathes of musicians and scenes to obscurity (Jago, 2015, pp. 96–97).

Hutchings, and more prominent figures such as breakout American saxophonist Kamasi Washington. Meanwhile, jazz *scholarship* continues to look over its shoulder: although a figure like Washington, ‘the saxophonist widely viewed as the brightest star in the music’s firmament’ (Horne, 2019, p. 339) receives passing mention in a number of recent publications (e.g. Williams, 2018; Early and Monson, 2019), I can find only a handful of doctoral theses and one paper by Gabriel Solis that seriously contend with his work, despite nearly a decade passing since his 2015 debut release *The Epic* (Reynolds, 2017; Neil, 2018; Solis, 2019b).⁴⁰

As Nicolas Pillai and Roger Fagge suggest, the long ‘timescales built into academic publishing’ militate against the production of ultra-topical jazz scholarship (Fagge and Pillai, 2017a, p. 5). However, I would argue that the disregard of (often commercially successful) jazz or jazz-adjacent musicians and sounds also speaks to a neglect of contemporary popular music in jazz research that has endured even as it has moved into a reflexive, genre-critical and ‘post-canonical’ mode (Bohlman and Plastino, 2016a, p. 8). Despite the revitalizing effect that popular music studies has had upon the scholarly field, and the now well-established critiques of jazz’s institutionalisation as an art music, ‘the popularity of jazz remains an unpopular problem for jazz academics’ (Tackley, 2018, p. 98), and there seems to be a (perhaps subconscious) acceptance that the genre is best understood today simply as an *unpopular* music (Frith, 2007).

Reticence regarding the popular also speaks to a divergence in understandings of the ‘mainstream’. While a simultaneously vague and overdetermined term, typically identified in the negative (Thornton, 1995/1997, pp. 204–209), when used in everyday parlance and music studies at large, it typically indexes (among other things) a notion of *popularity*: the musical mainstream tends to be consumed by a plurality, if not majority, of listeners. By contrast, ‘mainstream jazz’ has undergone a warped version of what Jason Toynbee calls ‘mainstreaming’. Rather than forming around ‘an aesthetic of the centre, or stylistic middle ground’, or by ‘mapping a market on to hegemonic, mainstream taste’ (Toynbee, 2002, p. 150), mainstream *jazz* broadly designates a sound borne from fealty to the idioms, instrumentation and repertoire of a tightly-defined reading of the jazz tradition. The position of this central thread of jazz practice ‘within the broader mainstream of contemporary culture remains, for want of a better word, marginal’ (Stanbridge, 2008, p. 10). This is what makes the LJS such a fruitful and timely case study. In jazz terms, it has been genuinely popular. Groups like Ezra Collective, Yussef Kamaal and Kokoroko have been placed on the UK Album Charts, sold tens of

⁴⁰ Although Washington’s positioning within the pantheon of African American jazz saxophone heroes has been briefly explored by Fred Moten, who’s work I discuss below (Moten, 2017, pp. 270–279).

thousands of vinyl records, and registered hundreds of millions of digital streams, respectively (Brownswood Recordings, 2018; Griffiths, 2023; Marmot, 2024, p. 68). Amid an upswing (or perhaps at the peak) of pop culture's perennial cycle of interest in jazz, the thesis follows scholars such as Catherine Tackley and Simon Frith, who argue that we 'should take account of jazz precisely because it problematises popularity' (Tackley, 2018, p. 98); and, further, that 'something is jazz if someone cares to define it as such' (Frith, 2007, p. 18).

Jazz and media

Jazz is also a product of generative frictions with technology. The emergence of the commercial music recording market and music radio around the time of the genre's formation in the 1910s complicated the ontological status of improvisation and musical spontaneity from the start, as improvisation scholar Karl Coultard makes clear: 'jazz is the product of a dialectical development whereby an improvisatory art form, highly resistant to reproduction within the performance environment, was intimately and profoundly affected by the mechanical reproduction of sound' (Coultard, 2007, p. 1). Such knotty conceptual terrain has provided a fruitful starting point for scholarly inquiry into jazz and mediation more generally, with insightful literature attending to jazz and radio (Atkins and Parra, 2013; Johnson, 2014; Wall, 2019), film and television (Gabbard, 1996, 2016a, 2019; Heile, Elsdon and Doctor, 2016; Pillai, 2019; Solis, 2019a), and photography (Pinson, 2010; Cawthra, 2011; Ainsworth, 2022). This work underscores how what we understand as jazz – a coalescence of sound, dance, visual style, fashion, and iconography – has been all sutured together via multiple mediations and technological interventions under the aegis of the cultural industries.

With their direct attention to the entanglement of sound, discourse and consumer culture, studies of jazz and advertising are also pertinent to this thesis (e.g. Whyton, 2010, pp. 83–107; Taylor, 2012, pp. 101–127; Chapman, 2021). Critical literature on the topic is fairly limited, with jazz scholar Mark Laver's *Jazz Sells* the only book-length project dedicated to the subject.⁴¹ Laver adroitly unpacks the genre's dense tangle of frequently contradictory significations, suggesting that for consumers and the advertising industry targeting them:

Jazz is about... highbrow sophistication, folk authenticity, and lowbrow lasciviousness. It is about politics, nationalism and counterculture. It is about class, gender, and race. Perhaps, above all, it is about improvisation—both musical and social [to]day (Laver, 2015, p. 26).

⁴¹ There is more valuable literature to be found that examines advertising and popular music at large (e.g. Klein, 2009; Taylor, 2012; Holt, 2015; Meier, 2017; Bruenger, 2019), but as Laver suggests, meanings, values and interpretations specific to jazz also require dedicated inquiry.

Rather than assessing the veracity of these various ‘tropes of meaning’, Laver suggests that ‘jazz is always about all of these things at the same time’, with each being ‘immanent in every jazz utterance (Laver, 2015, pp. 26–27). Accordingly, jazz has been enlisted to promote innumerable products and services, used as a highly plastic sonic ‘shorthand’ in ‘highly sophisticated’ efforts at ‘affinity advertising’ to win over media-literate and discerning consumers (Laver, 2015, p. 21). Laver interrogates how the articulation of jazz to the sale of commodities through advertising has ‘reified, reproduced, and transformed’ this tense nexus of tropes (Laver, 2015, p. 27). This focus on the ambivalence of cultural commodification, and the *polysemic, productive ambiguity* of jazz is something of a lodestar for the whole thesis.

But beyond Laver’s work and a few other important exceptions (Porter, 2009; Fellezs, 2011; Chapman, 2018, 2021), jazz scholarship has been ‘hesitant to address the complexities of agency and structure as they relate to music’s commodification and circulation’ (Smith, 2010, p. 8 n5). The efficacy of music industry processes and/or the function of cultural intermediaries such as promoters or record labels tend to be studiously ignored, particularly apparent in analyses of jazz records. Despite the overbearing influence of recordings in jazz scholarship (Rasula, 1995; Jago, 2015; Pond, 2021), analysis typically remains angled toward ‘the intrinsic artistic qualities of the album... emphasised as the inadvertent, as opposed to deliberately commercial, causes of this success’ (Tackley, 2010, p. 172).⁴²

When journalistic and academic jazz writing does engage more thoroughly with cultural industry organisations, they are regularly positioned as a straightforwardly corrupting influence upon ‘an anterior musical purity’, speaking to the deep-rooted counterposing of art and commerce that have guided jazz discourse since bebop (Gendrons, 1993, pp. 136–138; Smith, 2010, p. 8).⁴³ Jazz literature that moves beyond such a framing has typically orbited around subgenres at the commercial peripheries of the genre: jazz-funk, jazz-rock, or smooth jazz, for example, that exist in ‘a state of permanent instability’ located in what Kevin Fellezs has called jazz’s ‘broken middle’, lying ‘between romantic autonomous art tendencies and more mundane commercial considerations’ (Fellezs, 2011, pp. 6, 83; see also e.g. McGee, 2013; Washburne, 2020). Once again, this brings us back to the foundational, diachronic instability of jazz. The genre has walked ‘the tightrope between commodification and artification from the git-go’ (Keil, 1994/2005, p. 296), its origins permanently up for debate: ‘the European provenance of classical music is secure, the performed relation between identity and putative provenance

⁴² I provide a fuller account of the literature on this topic in Chapter Five.

⁴³ The Frankfurt School critique of jazz is also discussed in Chapter Five.

unquestioned. Similarly, hip-hop's origin story is Afrodiasporic, wherever the music is performed. Jazz, however, is another story entirely' (G. Lewis, 2016, p. xi).

Jazz diasporas and jazz in Britain

Important, too, are the numerous publications that have brought New Jazz Studies approaches into dialogue with jazz beyond the borders of the USA (Cerchiari, Cugny and Kerschbaumer, 2012; Feld, 2012; Bohlman and Plastino, 2016b; Cravinho, 2022; Johnson and Havas, 2022). Despite ongoing efforts to propagate jazz 'origin narratives' that 'advocate and even demand exclusive fealty to American models', the thoroughly globalised nature of a music that was 'always already "international," created from transnational movements across the Black Atlantic and beyond' was mirrored by its rapid globalisation (G. Lewis, 2016, p. xi; Berish, 2019, p. 156). As the music has travelled, it has also changed, a process that jazz musician and scholar George Lewis calls the 'sonic diaspora of world jazz': 'under special conditions of performance in local scenes, musical traditions and practices become transformed and reimagined, taking on new meanings' (Lewis, 2016, p. xi; see also Braggs, 2016; Johnson, 2019). In the European context, these developments have often involved efforts in media, scholarly, and policy circles to assert a distinctly localised and avowedly non-American form of jazz (Jost, 1974; Nicholson, 2005, 2014; see Jordan, 2010; Washburne, 2010). Attempts to articulate a distinctive sensibility are typically framed as an 'emancipation of jazz from American influences' as local scenes have 'grown up' (Whyton, 2017, pp. 14–15; see also DiPiero, 2022, pp. 70–88).

Such teleological narratives of jazz 'maturing' outside the US are, as Tony Whyton argues, 'problematic, and misunderstand the complexity of cultural influence and exchange' (Whyton, 2017, p. 15). One troublesome side effect of the heightened recognition of the 'complex transatlantic geography' and 'shifting [geographical] centres' of jazz (Holt, 2007, p. 81) outside the US has been, on occasion, an excessive minimisation of the *original* transatlantic geography of the Middle Passage and the origins of African America in chattel slavery, through which ultimately jazz came into being. While jazz is never reducible to an aesthetic response to European colonial plunder and American white supremacy, the music's deep connection to African American political and cultural struggle, and its global resonance as liberation music for oppressed peoples, remains of cardinal significance (e.g. Atkins, 2003; Kelley, 2012; Denning, 2015). This is something that can be lost in depictions of the formation of jazz and its dispersion as a process of depoliticised mixture and cultural exchange (Okiji, 2018, pp. 39–44).⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Atkins also reminds us of the fact that the very processes of jazz globalisation were inseparable from 20th century geopolitics: the 'conditions of 'colonial modernity'' in the interwar period and the 'strategic

In Britain, one consequence of local efforts at the ‘emancipation’ analysed by Whyton and discussed above has been, until recently, a historical orthodoxy in British jazz that framed the contributions of Black musicians as fleeting and minimal (Heining, 2012, pp. 219–272; Banks and Toynbee, 2014; Wilmer, 2019). Scholarship since the turn of the century has started unravelling this version of events, uncovering the formative role played by Black jazz musicians such as Louis Moholo-Moholo, Bokani Dyer, Gordon Stretton, Ken “Snakehips” Johnson and, most significantly, Joe Harriott, in shaping British jazz (McKay, 2005, pp. 129–191; Banks and Toynbee, 2014, pp. 91–102; Tackley, 2014; Brocken and Daniels, 2018). Such work centres migration and the interplay between different music cultures of the Black Atlantic as a defining dynamic in British jazz. That only one of the listed musicians was born in the UK reveals the incoherence of tightly-bounded, hermetic visions of British jazz set apart from the global flow of populations and cultures. Beyond simply adding individuals to the historical record, Lindelwa Dalamba’s examination of the complex position of ‘South African jazz in exile’ within the London jazz scene in the 1960s, and Marc Matera’s analysis of the role of jazz in fostering solidarity among Black radicals from across the British Empire in interwar London, further underscore how race and diaspora have been both foundational and a constant source of friction throughout the history of jazz in the capital (Matera, 2015, pp. 145–200; Dalamba, 2019).

Migration and diaspora are fundamental to the most direct antecedent to this study, the edited collection *Black British Jazz: Routes, Ownership and Performance* (Toynbee, Tackley and Doffman, 2014b). The collection sought to correct historical blind spots (and deliberate erasures) regarding the contribution of Black musicians to jazz in Britain, while also attending to the complex interactions of jazz with contemporary Black British identities, interrogating whether and how racial discourses are a significant animating force shaping jazz in Britain today. The book’s ‘meta-theme of home and away’ offers a number of compelling means of thinking through the ‘problem of jazz – the quintessential music of African America – subsisting in another place, in another part of the African diaspora’ (Toynbee, Tackley and Doffman, 2014a, p. 18). Although the bulk of underlying research occurred before the LJS’s appearance either as a self-conscious assemblage or a media phenomenon, it provides crucial context, and features some figures who recur throughout this thesis. A number of chapters engage with musicians from the 1980s group the Jazz Warriors, including discussion of the education programme Tomorrow’s Warriors, whose profound influence on today’s scene I discuss in Chapter Three (Doffman, 2014; Dueck, 2014). Byron Dueck’s chapter is particularly pertinent,

realignments and upheavals associated with decolonization and the Cold War’ post-World War II (Atkins, 2003, p. xix).

providing a nuanced exploration of resentment among some white musicians regarding the perceived ‘advantages’ enjoyed by musicians racialised as Black. Dueck suggests that any potential advantages come at a ‘steep price’, with Black jazz players facing intense scrutiny from their peers and within the industry at large as a hypervisible, often exoticised minority in a majority white scene (Dueck, 2014, p. 218)

Kenneth Bilby’s chapter suggests that among the musicians interviewed for the ‘What is Black British jazz?’ research project underpinning the collection, ‘one detects a general ambivalence among the interviewees about both of the qualifiers here – ‘black’ and ‘British’. ‘Jazz’, it would seem, is the most stable term’ (Bilby, 2014, p. 76). One contribution of the thesis involves exploring how this might have changed: ambivalence regarding Britishness has, if anything, intensified, but Black LJS participants appear much more full-throated in their identification with Blackness, while non-Black participants and commentators rarely contest the status of the scene’s output as Black music. By contrast, the ‘stability’ of jazz that Bilby discusses is no more.

Rather than reifying ‘Black British Jazz’ as a neat, neutral entity, the authors continually interrogate the stability of the terms as a racial-musical designation, adopting an anti-essentialist approach that foregrounds ‘the slipperiness, variability, and changeability – of ‘racial’ and ethnic identities’ (Bilby, 2014, p. 69). This is an approach that I share, one which sees jazz in Britain (Black or otherwise) as forever a product of diaspora, migration and multiculturalism, and a site of identity contestation and formation. The collection represents a valuable scholarly move beyond a myopic focus on nation, ethnicity, or an ‘escape’ from American influence, approaching jazz instead as a discursive, cultural practice, hybrid from its inception and further to hybridizing as it travels. Jazz scholar George McKay summarises this approach when asserting that jazz is ‘fundamentally characterised as a *participatory* culture, containing a notable capacity to foster the creation of indigenous forms, to take its emphasis on improvisation... and recontextualise these within the local musical and cultural practice’ (McKay, 2005, p. 23).

It is also worth highlighting the few extant publications examining aspects of the ‘London jazz explosion’, alongside the deluge of press coverage. To date the only direct academic engagement is a 2023 chapter by cultural studies scholar Caspar Melville (Melville, 2023). Melville historicises the scene and its sounds through reference to the ‘boom and bust’ dynamics that have long structured British jazz, highlighting the unprecedented youth, and racial and gender diversity of the scene, while positioning the LJS at the head of many of the musical tributaries discussed in Chapter One. Melville’s account is informed by his excellent earlier book on the co-constitutive cultural, racial and spatial politics of London’s rare groove,

jungle, and acid house scenes (Melville, 2019). Accordingly, he emphasises that symbiosis between these ‘disc-based dance cultures’ and jazz has helped foster appetites for jazz among younger, hipper audiences today, touching also on the vexed issue of urban space, and the scene’s complex, ambivalent connections to formalised education.

Beyond academia, two publications from Emma Warren (2019b, 2019a) offer thoughtful, well-researched and occasionally critical reflections upon the central places of Dalston venue Total Refreshment Centre, and south-east London jam Steam Down, in the LJS story. *Noting Voices: Contemplating London’s Culture* (Iqbal, 2020), is a short set of reflections by DJ and broadcaster Haseeb Iqbal based on podcast interviews with some LJS participants. I have also drawn from journalist David Burke’s 2021 collection of twenty-five interviews with jazz musicians of colour throughout the thesis (Burke, 2021). Most recently, André Marmot’s *Unapologetic Expression: The Inside Story of the UK Jazz Explosion* (2024) attempts to provide a comprehensive account of the scene via 80 interviews with participants, autoethnographic reflection and some political and cultural analysis of the place of jazz in contemporary culture. This material is primarily documentary, making the case for the LJS’s inclusion in the broader sweep of British music history, and while Warren’s work, in particular, offers insightful critical perspectives, published work on the LJS has been largely affirmative and celebratory in character. Such an approach is very worthwhile, but leaves ample room for the more critically-informed and conjunctural analysis presented here.

Scene studies

The influence of space, place and locality on music cultures has long been a site of scholarly enquiry. Recent work in jazz has sought to move beyond the centripetal, urban-centric character of jazz discourse and scholarship, where the prototypical American coastal ‘jazz metropole’ of New York, and to a lesser extent New Orleans and Los Angeles, are constructed as the primary sites both for jazz invention and the nurturing of the tradition. Carson and Doktor have turned attention to what they term ‘nocoastjazz’, arguing for the study of the specificities of regional and rural jazz sites as more than pale imitations of more storied locales or staging posts for musicians *en route* to a career in the metropole (Carson and Doktor, 2022; see also Ake, 2010, pp. 77–102). They suggest three primary factors to this end:

(1) the scene’s relationship to place—specifically, the cultural, social, economic, and even geographic contexts; (2) the scene’s relationship to genre—or the relationship to varied musical styles and repertoire that motivate and sustain a given city’s jazz community; and (3) the scene’s relationship to its audience(s), which addresses modes of consumption as well as economic considerations for artists within the scene (Carson and Doktor, 2022, p. 4).

Beyond the US, Pedro Cravinho's recent research on the jazz scene in Porto outlines a consistent metropolitan bias in jazz scenes scholarship, particularly toward capital cities (Cravinho, 2022; see also Rodriguez, 2018). Such work is crucial to this project, helping us approach variously the status of British jazz as something of a peripheral, junior partner in the global jazz ecosystem; and the LJS as a constitutive part of the dominant musical metropole within a UK scene which, unlike its US equivalent, is intensely unipolar. As I discuss in Chapter Three, this project interrogates how the LJS might have benefited from the myopia of the media and cultural industries, themselves overwhelmingly located in London, in particular the tendency in press commentary to position the LJS as a metonym for 'UK jazz' more generally, something most scene insiders are at pains to reject.

The emphasis placed on the spatial and the local in Carson and Doktor's work complements a now well-established area of study and debate in popular music scholarship and adjacent fields (including cultural studies, youth studies, and cultural sociology), which offer numerous conceptual and theoretical tools for approaching localised music collectivities, including music worlds (Emms and Crossley, 2018); neo-tribes (Bennett, 1999); and scene (Cohen, 1991; Straw, 1991, 2015; Kruse, 1993; Shank, 1994; Kahn-Harris, 2006). These concepts emerged primarily in response to subcultural scholarship of the late 1960s and 1970s, which explored the social and cultural practices of urban working-class youth cultures through the lens of class and power, often presenting subcultural practices as important forms of symbolic resistance (Cohen, 1972/1997; Hall and Jefferson, 1975/2002; Hebdige, 1979/2012).

The academic study of music scenes came out of the lively, extended critical response to the subcultures literature. These critiques suggested that, for example, early subcultural analyses were inflexibly structuralist (Bennett, 2004), lacked engagement with actual music (Hesmondhalgh, 2005), preoccupied with semiotic decoding of media and 'spectacular' iterations of subcultural practice (Williams, 2007), and often inattentive to race and gender (see Hollingworth, 2015). As mentioned in 1.3, initial subcultural studies were also oriented primarily toward consumption practices, with little attention paid to production processes, or the influence of the media and cultural industries in shaping audiences, consumption practices, and processes of collective identity formation.

Post-subcultural studies have sought to overcome these shortcomings via a self-conscious embrace of complexity and ambiguity. While such fluidity is held to be 'the source of its generative power' (Straw, 2015, p. 480), it can neglect questions of political economy, and runs the risk of dissolving into ambiguity. Hesmondhalgh's (2005) critique of the neo-tribe concept, for example, argues that the emphasis placed on mobility and fluidity in cultural identities

overlooks the structural constraints hindering participation in and movement between different ‘tribes’, not least the enduring effects of social class. We can understand this as a reaction or overcorrection to the perceived rigidity of initial subcultural research, with its tight focus on resistant working-class cultural practices. This sidelining of class was also very much of its time. The postmodern movement between socio-cultural identity categories depicted in influential post-subcultural scholarship by authors such as Andy Bennett and Sarah Thornton bore traces of an emergent, classless conception of society characteristic of prevailing political culture in Britain in the 1990s in the wake of the social upheavals wrought by Thatcherism (Thornton, 1996; Bennett, 1999; see Griffin, 2011, pp. 247–251).⁴⁵ Hesmondhalgh also illustrates how scenes/subcultures/tribes approaches often reify a problematic and simplistic connection between popular music cultures and youth, something of specific importance for this study.⁴⁶ Part of the issue is that, with its widespread vernacular use and its amorphous academic uptake, ‘scene’ has often borne untenable conceptual weight, ‘designat[ing] both the effervescence of our favourite bar and the sum total of all global phenomena surrounding a subgenre of Heavy Metal music’ (Straw, 2001, p. 248).⁴⁷

With these reservations in mind, I will use ‘scene’ to frame the LJS. Although the scene concept has faded from view slightly since the rush of scenes scholarship between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s, the concept feels well-suited at a moment when ‘academic interest in the socialities of musicking seems to be surging’ (Cook, 2023, p. 170). Its conceptual breadth is appropriate, incorporating considerations of space and media representation (as well as shared style or politics) as crucial in forging collective music identity (Jackson, 2012, p. 54). It thus sits between the total fluidity implied by ‘neo-tribe’ and the insular, homogenous and potentially transgressive implications of subculture, connoting instead a ‘flexible, loose kind of space within which music is produced, a kind of ‘context’ for musical practice’, without presuming any ‘homogeneity and coherence of its constituent activities and members’ (Harris, 2000, p. 14).

Crucially for this study, the concept also has an inherent dynamism, understanding that all scenes follow time- and space-specific ‘logics of change’ which structure their emergence,

⁴⁵ This is not to say that these authors ignored class altogether, with Thornton explicitly emphasising the ongoing relevance of class and depicting her keystone concept of ‘subcultural capital’ as reliant on a *fantasy* of classlessness (Thornton, 1996, p. 28). But as Christine Griffin has argued, the active efforts to obscure class identities at play in the early 1990s British ‘club cultures’ analysed by Thornton could equally ‘be viewed as evidence of the *heightened* significance of class’ (Griffin, 2011, p. 250) (emphasis original).

⁴⁶ Hesmondhalgh floats ‘genre’ as a potential alternative but, given the intense contestation on that terrain in the LJS, the term seems ill-suited for this study.

⁴⁷ Jago notes that scene’s very longstanding everyday use in jazz culture means that the concept is, if anything, more muddled in jazz scholarship than in popular music writing in general

spread and disappearance (Straw, 2001). The notion that scenes are a moving analytical target is key to the best scene studies, evident for example in Barry Shank's masterful depiction of musical ebb and flow in 'rock'n'roll' scene in Austin, Texas, and its articulation with wider shifts in Texan cultural identity and American political life (Shank, 1993). Such work also suggests that scenes typically have a fairly short shelf-life: by the time of their transmission to the wider public via cultural intermediaries, the specific sets of social, spatial and cultural connections that constitute a scene are likely to have attenuated. This is a logic that jazz scholar Marian Jago has termed 'scenic entropy', whereby internal factors - a 'decline in shared conventions' and a 'gradual decrease in scenic energy' – combine with 'continually evolving cultural tastes in wider society', causing a given scene to 'hold less allure for those on the outside' (Jago, 2018, p. 21).

Used properly, 'scene' is the ideal meso-level concept for conducting conjunctural analyses, linking 'the intimacy of community' to 'the fluid cosmopolitanism of urban life' (Straw, 2001, p. 248) bringing the 'affective, performative dimensions of musical urban sociality' into view without losing sight of the structuring effects of 'wider institutional forces' (Stirling, 2020, p. 135).

One widely-cited scene typology is Bennett and Peterson's (2004) trichotomy of local, translocal, and virtual. Much contemporary scenes scholarship has tended to focus on music-making that sits toward the 'virtual' end of this spectrum: formations with tangential ties to physical location or live performance, often an outgrowth of net-native cultures such as vapourwave, hyperpop, mashup or 'lofi beats' (Born and Haworth, 2017; Harper, 2017; Winston and Saywood, 2019; Jones, 2021b). These are self-consciously digital forms that in some ways sound like the internet, or bear immediately apparent aesthetic and discursive traces of what Paula Harper calls 'viral musicking' practices (Harper, 2019). Indeed, while inattention or disinterest in platforms and digitalisation more generally is a significant lacuna in jazz research, there have been a some studies engaging with primarily (or exclusively) online communities and practices, such as 'JazzTok' (Kaye, 2023), virtual ethnographies of 'jazz meme communities' (Gesoff, 2023), or online jazz message boards and forums (K. E. Prouty, 2012; Sykes, 2017a; Barber, 2019).

But in music studies generally, there has been something of an overemphasis upon these low hanging fruit, and treating the virtual as discrete and containable terrain in the manner proposed by Bennett and Peterson feels ill-suited for our current moment. Following Will Straw's approach, I believe that while scenic activity flows on- and offline and therefore can be deterritorialised, scene still signifies locality and a degree of geographical specificity (Straw,

1991, 2001, p. 249). Music scholar Ruth Finnegan has suggested that these commitments to locality can frequently be more symbolic than concrete, with scene participants regularly travelling beyond their immediate surroundings to participate in music-making activities, in ritualised ways that are themselves significant to processes of collective identity-formation (Finnegan, 2018).⁴⁸ But, as Finnegan demonstrates, these rituals of participation maintain a significant connection to place. This holds in the London jazz context, evident in the prominent – at times excessive – discursive emphasis placed on how the LJS appears to express something essential about contemporary Britishness or London-ness. As such, we need more work attending to the much greater volume of scenes, aesthetics, and forms of musicking (jazz or otherwise) that, while profoundly marked by platformisation, do not substantively define themselves through recourse to internet culture or the digital, and remain much more tightly bound to place - in other words, post-digital music scenes. This is a gap that the thesis goes some way to filling, analysing the co-constitutive interaction of musical identity, locality, and the digital.

Indeed, I would argue that anxieties about sonic placelessness augured by platformisation underpin the allure of scenic discourse. This is something that emerges in cultural theorist Jeremy Gilbert's suggestion that aggrieved dubstep fans' efforts to assert the genre's significance and coherence in 2009 spoke to an 'apparent desperation of dubstep's self-conscious will-to-scenehood' (Gilbert, 2009, p. 120).⁴⁹ Gilbert's commentary outlines an incipient connection (and latent set of aesthetic judgements) between musical style, place, the digital, and scene formation: 'Like it or not, the flattened-out relationships of the digital universe just don't produce musics which carry the same affective charge as those emerging from dense locales of shared lived experience' (Gilbert, 2009, p. 121). As my discussion of *digital inadequacy* thus far might suggest, I broadly share Gilbert's position. The thesis works from the position that the 'will-to-scenehood' has only grown stronger in the years since, as the seductive draw of spatially rooted music cultures and the (brand) value of 'community' has intensified against a social backdrop of increasingly fragmented and imperilled communities being priced out of urban centres.

⁴⁸ I explore these ritualised forms of travel and their articulation with the local throughout Chapter Four.

⁴⁹ This was during a debate over critic Simon Reynolds' concept of the 'hardcore continuum' (see Reynolds, 2010), a widely adopted term that 'argued for the existence of an identifiable continuity between the producers of and audiences for a sequence of dance music forms to have emerged from urban London since the early 1990s', starting with hardcore, through jungle, drum & bass, and grime – with subsequent connections remaining up for grabs and subject to intense debate (Gilbert, 2009, p. 118).

2.3: Media, cultural production and digital platforms

Digital platforms: atomisation, personalisation, control

The concerns about waning *musical* sociality that underwrite the enduring allure of music scenes map onto other, longstanding anxieties. Diagnoses of waning social ties and the erosion of community belonging in the wake of industrial capitalism and the modern city are analytical preoccupations so deep-rooted in critical social theory and popular discourse that we could view such anxieties as themselves hallmarks of capitalist modernity (e.g. Wirth, 1938; Durkheim, 1897/2005; Sennett, 2006, 2021; Simmel, 1916/2012, 1903/2023). Recent work has placed these themes into relation with the digital. Anton Jäger's critical reading of Robert Putnam's classic analysis of isolation and loneliness in advanced global economies at the twilight of the 20th Century argues that we are witnessing a move from what Putnam called 'bowling alone' to 'posting alone' (online) in the 21st (Putnam, 2000; Jäger, 2022). Jäger refuses a simplistic digital pessimism, arguing that 'online culture thrives on the atomisation that the neoliberal offensive has inflicted on society' (Jäger, 2022). Instead, the 'push' factor of anti-social neoliberal policy programmes and the 'pull' of ubiquitous, private digital media are co-constitutive, and together have eroded opportunities for face-to-face encounter, hindered the maintenance of strong interpersonal bonds, and driven down civic participation, auguring the political upheavals of recent years.

Jäger's careful rejection of negative tech-determinism dovetails with the rich, unorthodox platform analysis of technology philosopher Benjamin Bratton. In *Revenge of the Real* (Bratton, 2021), Bratton makes the case for embracing features of contemporary technology that others within his orbit subject to critique: massive data capture, the dissolution of individual subjectivity through digital sensing, and the need for interventionist forms of governance and administration – what he calls a 'positive biopolitics', rooted in 'planetary-scale computation'.⁵⁰ Much of this is beyond the scope of the thesis, but his work usefully challenges under-examined axioms in the field, including the knee-jerk, blanket scepticism common in critical approaches to 'Big Tech', to which I am very prone. Alongside this provocative case for the rich potential in these technologies, he also offers one of the more concise, critical, summaries of their current faults, which he terms the 'pathologies of contemporary platforms':

First, their models of people are dangerously manipulative and calibrated for idiotic and dangerous ends. Second, their commandeering of planetary-scale computation for the modelling of instantaneous trivial desires produces negative social effects. Third,

⁵⁰ Bratton was writing in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which inflects his advocacy of this sort of data and platform use.

the establishment of planetary-scale computation prevents the emergence of the uses we need from it (Bratton, 2021, p. 68).

This wide-screen, polemical approach provides a useful anchor for the post-digital malaise discussed in Chapter One, and provides a starting point for much of the analysis that follows.

Equally important is careful, deliberative and empirical ‘bottom-up’ work. One such approach is offered by digital media scholar Tanya Kant. Kant provides a particularly nuanced account of the logics and effects of *personalisation*, a defining feature of the contemporary web. She demonstrates how personalisation processes are presented as intuitive and self-evidently beneficial for the user, but that this aspect of platform functionality is beholden upon, and provided as ultimate justification for, unprecedented amounts of user data capture and surveillance. Key here is the agency that is acceded by users to algorithmic systems, which are allowed to ‘determine what is “personal” on behalf of the user’ (Kant, 2020a, p. 10). Kant explores the ‘slippery’ technical processes, economic models and supporting discourses of digital personalisation, and attends to the ‘tense’ everyday encounters between web users and commercial personalisation algorithms, and argues that the tensions thrown up by these encounters cannot be understood simply through the lens of privacy or surveillance. Rather, user concerns stem from the personalisation process itself, whereby algorithms are ‘afforded the autonomous power to reorder and repurpose users’ web experiences in the users’ stead’, in an effort to anticipate their desires (Kant, 2020a, p. 12).

Kant argues that the mix of convenience, unnerving accuracy and laughable misrecognition thrown up by these encounters demonstrates ‘the performative power of algorithms in identity production’ for contemporary web users (Kant, 2020, p. 16). However, while detailing how commercial platforms in particular augur ‘process[es] of subjectivity constitution’, these are marked by ‘*epistemic uncertainties and struggles for autonomy*’ [emphasis original] on the part of users (Kant, 2020a, p. 11). A crucial theoretical contribution, therefore, is Kant’s analysis of algorithmic personalisation as a terrain of permanent contestation and ambivalence (Kant, 2020a, p. 14).

Minna Ruckenstein provides further insight into the ordinary and often uncanny qualities of algorithmic sorting, investigating the everyday (often frustrating and unintentional) encounters between users, algorithms, and the platforms that employ them. She shows that even highly tech-literate users are ‘often perplexed when thinking about [algorithms’] organisational implications’, and struggle to relay their understanding of how ‘algorithmic operations’ shape their personal and professional lives (Ruckenstein, 2023, p. 1). This sense of unease, perplexity, and inchoate opportunity regarding algorithmic processes, even among nominal experts,

better helps us understand the importance of the ‘emotional-experiential realm’ as a line of enquiry when researching the platformisation of cultural production (Ruckenstein, 2023, p. x).

Attending to user experience also helps ameliorate the challenges of studying ‘black boxed’ algorithmic systems themselves. Undoubtedly, the dizzying scale, complexity and secrecy surrounding the code underpinning big technology companies has made them increasingly ‘unresearchable’ from a technical standpoint (Parks, 2020, p. 645). But the ‘black box’ has become something of a cliché in media studies, and alongside the clear challenges presented by such an impenetrable research subject (Plantin *et al.*, 2018; Mackenzie, 2019), constant emphases on opacity can actually reify the inscrutable, unaccountable platform power being critiqued.⁵¹ Shifting toward users’ more everyday, ambivalent experiences of actually-existing platformisation, in keeping with the approaches taken by Ruckenstein and others (Schellewald, 2022; Gill, 2023), cuts against this tendency. It also responds to a consistent, but still rarely-heeded, refrain in critical media and communications literature over the last decade, where scholars like Tarleton Gillespie, Tanya Bucher, Kant, and Ruckenstein have called for greater and more sophisticated empirical focus upon user engagements, beliefs and interpretations of digital systems (Gillespie, 2010; Bucher, 2016). As Kant notes, ‘there remains something of a disconnect between “theory” and “documentation” in regard to the ways in which algorithmic encounters are felt and experienced at the level of the everyday’ (Kant, 2020a, p. 16).

Important here, too, is work that denaturalises the ‘user’ category itself. Critical scholarship shows us that the ‘user’ is an unstable thing, algorithmically parsed from sets of actions and other markers (location, time of day, device used) to probabilistically associate them with a contingent cluster of identities (gender, nationality, citizenship, ethnicity and so on), with little recourse to contest or even know what these assignments are (Cheney-Lippold, 2017). This process goes beyond constructing each user a stable profile or ‘data double’ that corresponds directly with their ‘actual’ self.⁵² Rather, the unpredictable and temporary nature of user profiling is much stranger, troubling the notion of bounded individual identity all together. Music streaming scholar Eric Drott, drawing on Gilles Deleuze, has theorised how

⁵¹ This tendency evokes what STS scholar Lee Vinsel calls ‘criti-hype’, where alarmist pronouncements about the disruptive and/or unaccountable power of novel technologies ends up uncritically parroting the inflated claims made by their proponents (Vinsel, 2021; see also Hong, 2021). The tenor of recent discussion surrounding cryptocurrency and artificial intelligence would be two obvious examples (Doctorow, 2023).

⁵² This notion, of online profiling simply observing stable ‘offline’ identity remains prevalent in contemporary discourse around recommendation, surveillance and privacy. As well as a simplification, critical surveillance scholars have argued that this underplays the role data capture plays in the active production of subjectivity, and that data in this context should be regarded as *performative* (Matzner, 2016).

recommendation systems used by music streaming platforms (hereafter MSPs) fracture each user into multiple, unfurling data doubles (plural) as a process of ‘dividuation’, ‘at the level of the subcomponents into which individuals can be – and have been – discomposed (Drott, 2018a, 2018b).⁵³ Accordingly, the logic of personalisation as operationalised under platform capitalism is inherently anti-collective and disempowering. As digital media scholar John Cheney-Lippold puts it, ‘our social identities, when algorithmically understood, are really not social at all... they remain private and proprietary’ (Cheney-Lippold, 2017, p. 5).

Partial platformisation and the music industries

Platformisation in music also remains unfinished. In attending to the ever-greater digital presence in contemporary music, contemporary scholarship can overlook the enduring significance of pre-existing modes of distribution and consumption. For example, while streaming continues to encroach on its audience share (Coddington, 2023, pp. 127–130), music radio continues to play a key role in the British music landscape. The specific configuration of the UK’s public service media (PSM) model has made for a radio landscape long dominated by the public broadcaster the BBC, through which musics that would struggle to find a home on commercial stations can enjoy national broadcast thanks to the corporation’s charter commitments ‘to reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom’s nations and regions’ (quoted in Ingham, 2024, p. 349). In approaching audiences not as segmented markets but ‘as members of musical communities’, the BBC provides ‘specialist shows [which] work both to celebrate such communities and to shape them’ (Frith and Cloonan, 2020, p. 688).⁵⁴ Jazz has received dedicated airtime accordingly (Wall, 2012; Saunders, 2024).⁵⁵ However, the scene’s demography and pop-oriented aesthetics have seen LJS artists escape purely specialist programming, featuring regularly across virtually all BBC music stations, most of which still have audience numbers in the millions, far in excess of most musicians’ streaming figures (Paine, 2023).

Similarly, the growth of the vinyl recording market in recent years complicates perceptions of recorded music’s drift into mobile, weightless ubiquity under the ‘magnetic power’ of the

⁵³ Other music streaming researchers have adopted Drott’s approach to dividuation in this context (Hracs and Webster, 2020; Labarca, 2020).

⁵⁴ Although the BBC is not immune from market logics. Saha suggests the impingement of ‘racial neoliberalism’ in British PSM has driven a move from multicultural policies to the pursuit of ‘creative diversity’, in ways that ‘constrains the expression of marginality’ and narrows cultural production by, for, and about, minoritised groups (Saha, 2018, p 103; see also Malik, 2013).

⁵⁵ Equivalent forms of ‘mild cultural protectionism’ (Michelsen, 2020, p. 226) are in evidence in other national PSBs across, for example, the European Union and Canada, and have played equivalent roles in developing audiences and a robust local ecosystem for homegrown non-commercial musics (Jago, 2018, pp. 252–253).

‘digital sublime’ (Mosco, 2004, p. 118). The return of physical music formats in recent years has been subject of some academic study (Bartmanski and Woodward, 2015; Devine, 2015; Harvey, 2017; Hrcacs and Jansson, 2017), but, as I show in Chapter Five, there is surely much more to be said about the resurgence of this archaic format in the post-digital conjuncture.⁵⁶

What these above examples demonstrate is the need to resist the shock of the new when analysing the platformisation of cultural production. Rather than a linear process of digital disruption and novel media technologies supplanting ‘legacy’ predecessors wholesale, the relationship is better understood as one of vexed co-existence. Nascent (and more recently dominant) platforms – streaming, social media, and other sites of what Alison Hearn and Sara Banet-Weiser call ‘platformed cultural work’ (Hearn and Banet-Weiser, 2020) – are deeply dependent upon residual media industries like the press, radio, TV networks and so on. Meanwhile, these older formats have continually adapted to the contemporary digital media landscape, with many themselves coming to more closely resemble platforms in form and function (Berry, 2020; Johnson, 2020; Fleischer, 2021).

Optimisation

Despite the flurry of scholarship addressing platforms and algorithms in the context of popular music, significant gaps remain. More work attending closely to ‘documentation’ of user experience of streaming, akin to the scholarship discussed above, would provide necessary empirical grounding for more speculative claims regarding contemporary music consumption practices (Webster, 2019; Siles *et al.*, 2020; Raffa, 2024). There is also an absence of serious engagement with the aesthetic effects of streaming, or proper interrogation of the emergent norms and value judgements in popular music post-platformisation (James, 2017; Kiberg, 2023). In music streaming literature, focus on technical or political economic shifts in music distribution and consumption ushered in by MSPs and social media has tended to defer substantive consideration of the aesthetic effects of these processes (e.g. Hagen, 2015; Marshall, 2015; Morris and Powers, 2015; Lüders, 2019; Watson, Watson and Tompkins, 2023).

By contrast, contemporary discourse is replete with sweeping assertions about the seismic and audible impacts of platformisation in music culture (Pelly, 2018; Chayka, 2019; Larson, 2022). However questions of cause and effect tend to go unanswered, and the terms by which musical quality, diversity and/or change is assessed remain vague (Hesmondhalgh, 2021). This is not to suggest that the new centrality of music streaming, social media promotion and virality have

⁵⁶ Vinyl sales are also themselves platformised through digital ‘storefronts’ such as Bandcamp or Discogs (Hesmondhalgh, Jones and Rauh, 2019; Cameron and Sonnabend, 2020; Ravens, 2020).

left no meaningful sonic marks in the pop music landscape – far from it – but more needs to be done to *demonstrate* these effects and their relationship to the ambivalent articulation of technologies, media industries, music-making and taste formation. As David Hesmondhalgh puts it, what is needed is ‘more dialectics, more contradiction, more situated critique’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2021, p. 18).

Jeremy Wade Morris’s work on the ‘optimisation of culture’ in the platform era offers helpful scrutiny and nuance to this end (Morris, 2020; Morris, Prey and Nieborg, 2021). Morris frames optimisation as a process whereby cultural workers strategically intervene in the production and presentation of cultural goods to ‘ready them [for] circulation, discovery, and use on particular platforms’ (Morris, 2020, p. 4). Through close study of the optimisation of music for MSP visibility, Morris shows that observable or effortful optimisation, particularly at the sonic level, risks being deemed illegitimate by users and/or platform moderators (see also Goldschmitt, 2020).

There are parallels here with earlier studies that suggest contestations over streaming optimisation are the latest iteration of longstanding tensions surrounding music that overtly, sonically adapts to suit the affordances of new technologies. Alexander Weheliye’s discussion of mid-2000s hip-hop subgenre ‘ringtone rap’, for example, depicts a set of aesthetic and ethical judgements based upon pre-platform forms of optimisation, suggesting that the style was ‘almost universally derided’ for explicitly seeking mobility by being tailor-made to ‘sound best when heard through cell phone speakers, and, therefore sell as many ringtones as possible’ (Weheliye, 2017, pp. 115–116). Similar misgivings regarding the encroachment of technological affordances and commercial ends onto music production appear to animate the widespread mistrust – in critical circles, and among listeners and musicians – of ‘Spotify-core’ (Beaumont-Thomas and Snapes, 2018) or ‘streambait’ (Pelly, 2018): music deemed cynical fodder for Spotify’s editorial playlists. The academic literature, and popular discourse, pertaining to musical optimisation thus again underscores how contestations over the ‘real’ and ‘fake’ thread their way through digital culture and pattern contemporary understandings of musical value.

Cultural autonomy, ‘selling out’ and entrepreneurship

The evident tensions threading through discussions of legitimacy, compromise and cultural optimisation dovetail with recent scholarship on cultural autonomy in contemporary music. Bethany Klein has recently made an impassioned and compelling case that while the ethical precepts underpinning the once-vital notion of ‘selling out’ – opposition to the ‘pursuit of

commercial gain at the expense of cultural autonomy’ – appear to be fading from relevance, they remain worthwhile and should be defended (Klein, 2020, p. 3). Klein suggests that the wholesale colonisation of everyday life by promotional culture and the dwindling sources of remuneration for contemporary cultural producers has meant that selling out is ‘a discussion that many musicians, fans and commentators have consigned to history’ (Klein, 2020, p. 1). While Klein provides the most systematic articulation of this thesis, adjacent sentiments are to be found elsewhere in music scholarship (Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 2015; Klein, Meier and Powers, 2017; Meier, 2017; Serazio, 2024, pp. 85–103).

This apparent triumph of what Mark Fisher terms ‘capitalist realism’ (‘the fatalistic acquiescence in the view that there is no alternative to capitalism’ (Fisher, 2018, p. 756)) is tangible in the cultural industries. Popular music scholar Ellis Jones suggests that this fatalism manifests as a ‘a depoliticizing of cultural actors’ decisions to engage with industries and practices that might once have been considered a betrayal of shared principles’, decisions which today are viewed as ‘inviolably individual (‘it’s their choice’) or as structurally overdetermined (‘what else would you do?’), in such a way as to put them beyond critique’ (Jones, 2021a, p. 4). The waning of selling out does not entail a total depoliticisation of music. Rather, as Michael Denning puts it, ‘it is not that the contemporary world of music lacks an audiopolitics, but rather that it is coded as the politics of the market’ (Denning, 2015, pp. 1–3).

At the same time, structural shifts in the music, cultural and technology sectors have served to neutralise and generalise practices of musical ‘independence’. Jones defines this as the drift toward ‘DIY by default’, whereby self-production, self-promotion and self-financing without the support of record labels and other industry institutions – and critically, without the drive to collectively build alternative institutions - becomes the norm (Jones, 2021a). The music industry critique that DIY music practices once articulated has been folded into central tenets of neoliberal myth-making that idealises the self-made, solitary innovator, ‘bootstrapping’ their way to success purely through their own hard graft.⁵⁷ The decimation of the music industries by coronavirus has intensified these sentiments, leading commentators to question the contemporary salience of the concept of musical independence (Edwards, 2020; Friedlander, 2020).

⁵⁷ Another instance of neoliberal capitalism’s incorporation of ‘artistic critiques’, discussed in Chapter One.

Marginalisation and entrepreneurialism

However, the high value placed on autonomy in cultural production (see Banks, 2010), and its apparent incompatibility with market forces, has always been complicated by the barriers to access that marginalised groups face in the cultural industries, where people of colour in particular have consistently been treated as artistically unserious and/or as ‘risky’ investments (Saha, 2018, p. 125). The longstanding ‘tendency of the music industries to at once exclude and exploit black music’ has inculcated a divergent value system regarding commerce and its potential impact on creative expression within some Black music cultures (Klein, 2020, p. 88). As I discuss further in 5.2, these twinned dynamics of exclusion and exploitation by the recording industry are responsible for the deep-set mistrust of the mainstream cultural industry organisations in jazz culture, dating from, at the latest, the advent of the American record business in the 1920s. At other inflection points in the genre’s history, notably the emergence of bebop in the early 1940s and the prominent influence of Black Power politics in American jazz practice in the 1960s, this has taken a more explicitly anti-corporate, even anti-capitalist form. Alternative conceptions of commerce and cultural autonomy are most evident in hip-hop. The valorisation of entrepreneurial ‘hustle’ set against the twin logics of exploitation and exclusion within the mainstream cultural industries provides a core theme for lyrical content and the wider discursive currents of hip-hop culture (Hess, 2005). These attitudes are also evident in Joy White’s study of young grime producers in east London. White uses the term ‘artist-entrepreneurs’ to describe the creative business practices embraced by those working in London’s informal urban music economy, showing how her young, working-class and predominantly Black research subjects pursue ‘self-employment and enterprise’ due to their exclusion from the job market and the mainstream creative industries (White, 2017, p. 61; see also Speers, 2016). Such enterprising efforts underwrite the organisational independence and ingenuous, DIY approaches to music production and distribution in grime practice. Resourcefulness in the face of marginalisation is thus etched into grime’s aesthetics and central to its internal values, and this extends to an ‘apparent comfort with commercialism’ at odds with other popular musics (Klein, 2020, p. 110). Here, corporate sponsorship and brand collaborations, for example, are not deemed inherently corrosive to creative expression or authenticity, but rather positioned as sources of financial independence from exclusionary music industry institutions.

This is therefore a proximity to commerce and embrace of entrepreneurialism borne of necessity, formed in the ‘constitutive exteriors of dominant capitalist cultures’ (James, 2021, p. 86). Similarly, Malcolm James and Melville provide detailed accounts of how equivalent independent entrepreneurial responses to the multiple societal exclusions produced by the

entanglement of racism and classism have been crucial in the formation of other ‘alternative music cultures of the Black Atlantic’ in London: reggae, jungle, rare groove, acid house (Melville, 2019; James, 2021).

But with hip-hop today the overwhelming centre of gravity in global pop music today (Coddington, 2023, pp. 1–20), the logics of the hustle float free of their oppositional origins as a practical method of circumventing the exclusionary logics of the mainstream cultural industries (Gilroy, 2013; Spence, 2013, 2015). What we might call principles of ‘market empowerment’ in contemporary music discourse are also deeply entangled with what Sarah Banet-Weiser terms ‘popular feminism’, the now thoroughly mainstreamed versions of feminist principles that circulate in popular culture today. Banet-Weiser suggests that feminist ‘themes that resonate within an economy of visibility, such as empowerment, confidence, capacity, and competence’ have come to predominate, and have been embraced by corporate brands and media institutions, canalised into a ‘a safely affirmative feminism’ oriented primarily toward individual(ist) uplift and propagated through the consumption of feminist consumer goods (Banet-Weiser, 2018, pp. 3–4).

Here, the immense wealth accrued by Taylor Swift or the ‘gendered version of post–civil rights Black entrepreneurialism’ enacted by Beyoncé in her female ‘hustler’ persona, for example, become feminist victories in themselves (Lordi, 2017, p. 134; McNutt, 2020), in ways that enjoin fans to participate through consumption and foreclose more thoroughgoing critique, ‘as if *seeing* or purchasing feminism is the same thing as changing patriarchal structures’ (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 4; see also Sun, Paje’ and Lee, 2023). Rosalind Gill argues that such feminist market empowerment discourses rely upon and advocate for an ‘individualistic, entrepreneurial ideology that is complicit rather than critical of capitalism’ (Gill, 2016).⁵⁸

This critical literature helps demonstrate that, while born from struggles for recognition and recompense waged particularly by Black musicians, today’s music industries are permeated by a deracinated celebration of the artist-entrepreneur (or the hustler, or the ‘#girlboss’ ...) ⁵⁹ as the source of creative and commercial dynamism in ways that deny any tension between these two poles. Within this discursive and economic frame, financial gain takes on inherently

⁵⁸ It is important to emphasise, with Banet-Weiser, the ambivalence of popular feminism. Women musicians achieving stardom on their own terms can call attention to and push back against prevailing ‘asymmetries of power in culture, politics, and everyday life’ in powerful way within a music industry that has long belittled and exploited women, and a popular music culture where ‘feminised’ musics continue to be routinely dismissed. But attending to ambivalence means considering whether these processes might also be ‘restructuring today’s feminist politics as an individual politics rather than a collective one’ (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. x).

⁵⁹ See Littler (2024).

empowering valence for cultural producers of all kinds, but particularly those in minoritised groups (Basu and Werbner, 2001; Kim, 2017), while individual self-advancement takes centre stage at the expense of structural critique of, for example, the *constraints* imposed by the commodification of culture.

Platforms, self-branding and the ‘authenticity industries’

The evacuation of the terrain of cultural independence and the waning efficacy of ‘selling out’ critiques cannot be thought separately from platformisation, itself the most recent iteration of a long process of corporate enclosure and neutralisation of the utopic, oppositional and collective ideals of the ‘open web’ (Turner, 2010; Barbrook and Cameron, 2015; Curran, Fenton and Freedman, 2016; Hesmondhalgh, 2019a; Wark, 2020, pp. 1–5). As Daniel Carter has argued, distinctive logics of the ‘hustle’ are hard-coded into platform affordances and deeply permeate digital culture at large (Carter, 2016).

In particular, contemporary platforms are characterised by relentless self-promotion. The field of social media studies has provided the most extensive interrogation of the structural pressures toward self-promotion and the crafting of a ‘personal brand’ on social media that compel users to be ‘entrepreneurs of the self’ in ways that blur lines between public and private or work and leisure, and heavily incentivise an instrumentalised approach to interpersonal relationships (Gill, 2010; Flisfeder, 2015; Hund, 2023).⁶⁰

Emily Hund suggests that the social media influencer, a relatively novel form of digital ‘microcelebrity’ who ‘provide “authentically” curated content to carefully cultivated online audiences’ represents a central archetype within this landscape, showing how many of these self-branding practices and distinctive methods of commodifying mediated intimacy online were born from users’ efforts to monetise large social media followings (Hund, 2023, p. 29). Hund suggests that the subsequent development of the ‘influencer industry’ has turned ‘every social media interaction’ into a ‘potential point of commerce’ (Hund, 2023, pp. 159–160). With ‘organic’ and ‘authentic’ forms of product placement and branding central to influencing’s economic model, the lines between self-promotion, explicit advertising, and non-commercial are often imperceptible in digital spaces.

⁶⁰ The compulsion to self-brand online intensifies and further internalises pre-existing conditions of cultural work under capitalism, where potential career progression is often predicated on exploitation of intimate personal connections and blurring of distinctions between work and leisure (Neff, Wissinger and Zukin, 2005; Gill and Pratt, 2008; Ross, 2009; Baym, 2010).

As ever-greater forms of digital connection become possibilities for monetary exchange, platformised cultural work is increasingly converging. This is the premise of Sophie Bishop's theory of 'influencer creep', 'the expansion of microcelebrity promotional practices... into more forms of work... [and] further into the lives of workers' (Bishop, 2023, p. 2). Amid the platform subsumption of the music industries, musicians today shoulder large amounts of promotional labour and are compelled to navigate the vagaries of social media spaces in pursuit of audience connection (Baym, 2018). As I show in Chapter Six, they must increasingly act like influencers themselves, presenting an 'easily digestible' self-brand to cut through the noise of social media, often more prominent than their actual music, (Coulter, 2022; Watson, Watson and Tompkins, 2023). However, the growing presence of influencer-like communications and relations across digital and cultural space is not without its critics, with declarations of resignation and discontent widespread in popular discussion (Deresiewicz, 2020; Jennings, 2023), pointing again to platformisation as a terrain of contestation and illustrating the wider climate of digital disaffection in the current conjuncture.

2.4: Race, racism and identity

21st Century racism in the UK

While the global Black Lives Matter insurrection of 2020 'exploded... as a challenge to blatant, deadly, harrowingly arbitrary racism' viscerally symbolised by the police murder of George Floyd in Minnesota, in Britain this impetus came at the head of a series of domestic outrages regarding state racism (Richmond and Charnley, 2022, p. 203). Stark inequalities in healthcare provision saw people of colour experiencing disproportionate rates of illness and death during the pandemic, with 'mortality rates among some Black and Asian groups... between 2.5 and 4.3 times higher than among white groups', overseen by an explicitly, unapologetically racist Prime Minister (Younge, 2021).

Two year prior, the breaking of the Windrush Scandal revealed that up to 50,000 people living in the UK descended from Black Britons who came from former colonial Caribbean territories between 1948-1973 had been 'illegalised, made destitute and banished' (Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2021, p. 21) after documents demonstrating their rights of residence had either never been issued or destroyed by the Home Office.⁶¹ The victims were collateral damage of the Conservative government's efforts to make the nation a 'hostile environment' for

⁶¹ As work by Kevin Le Gendre and Lloyd Bradley attest, the 'Windrush generation' and their descendants have had a seismic impact upon music culture, not least in London (Bradley, 2013; Le Gendre, 2018)

undocumented migrants, rendering explicit a much longer, bipartisan embrace of xenophobia and violent bordering practices that condemned thousands to die attempting to reach the UK and many more to persecution within Britain (Webber, 2019).

As Gargi Bhattacharyya et al argue, the state and media apparatus accepted, and even embraced, the victim status of those targeted in the scandal only by doubling down on hegemonic and sanitised understandings of empire, race and nation. The Windrush generation were cast as ‘good’ immigrants, contrasting their role in the construction of the post-war welfare state with the twin ‘threats’ of contemporary migration and ‘younger, law-breaking Black Britons’ to the body politic (Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2021, p. 26). Such performative state contrition thus reaffirmed that incorporation into the national fold for racialised and ‘migrantised’ groups remains perpetually conditional upon assimilation and compliance without complaint (De Genova and Roy, 2020). In turn, this strengthened an officially-endorsed climate of suspicion toward difference that underwrites the persecution, in particular, of the undocumented, and racialised groups who fail to meet established markers of ‘respectability’ (Meer, 2022, pp. 44–49; 74–75).

The preceding year, the Grenfell Tower fire claimed the lives of 72 working-class, predominantly non-white residents of a council-owned property in the wealthiest borough of London in ‘one of the most deadly preventable disasters in recent British history’ (Bulley, Edkins and El-Enany, 2019, p. xii). Years of complaints and campaigning by inhabitants regarding the building’s safety had gone ignored, and Grenfell failed multiple fire safety regulations at the time of the blaze. Accordingly, Gordon Macleod has argued that the fire should correctly be named an ‘atrocious’, a horrific spectacle of ongoing structural violence that the language of ‘tragedy’ serves to depoliticise, preventing meaningful justice (MacLeod, 2018). And while the atrocity lies ‘at the confluence of so many currents reshaping contemporary social life’ – poverty, inequality, deregulation, a disinterested and dysfunctional state – there is little doubt that Grenfell resonates loudly regarding ‘the racism that perpetuates inferior infrastructure and safety standards for people of colour’ (Madden, 2017, p. 3; see also El-Enany, 2017; Danewid, 2020). Understood together, as so many activists, scholars, and indeed LJS constituents have (Bakare, 2020a), these events toward the end of the 2010s have forcibly demonstrated the resilience of race and racism as technologies of exploitation, dispossession and the (b)ordering of social life, combining the spectacular and mundane, outright hostility with callous indifference, individual prejudice with impersonal bureaucratic cruelty – the structural with the interpersonal.

The subsequent public reckonings have drawn out how the ongoing reality of violence inflicted upon Black and Brown people in the name of state and nation today is founded upon the irresolution of yesterday's colonial dispossession. There are many decades worth of literature interrogating these processes (e.g. Césaire, 2000; Gilroy, 2002; Fanon, 2004; Sivanandan, 2008; Hall, 2021), but this work has until recently remained fairly well-contained within activist circles and the disciplinary siloes of the 'critical' wings of the social sciences, arts and humanities, leaving little mark on wider public consciousness or government policy, particularly in the UK.

Postrace, post-colony

Rather than a historical accident, this is a result of active and widespread efforts at containment in the immediate wake of formal decolonisation. These endure today in the form of a recalcitrant state and media apparatus who vociferously push back against any demand for acknowledgement, apology or redress. Such resistance represents the overt face of a much wider and mostly subterranean approach that historian James Trafford defines as the 'post-colonial cut', one which has worked to place the facts of imperialism (where acknowledged at all) a long time ago and far, far away. The post-colonial cut serves to deny the vast material wealth accrued and retained by the 'mother country' through colonisation, and 'disavow the violence in the world that it had terraformed' (Trafford, 2021, p. viii). Trafford argues that this cut underpins contemporary claims of exceptionalism, whereby Britain stands out as a bastion of tolerance even as it has relied on the 'redeployment of colonial strategies' at home and abroad (Trafford, 2021, p. x). The psychic 'compartmentalisation' that Frantz Fanon identified as pivotal in constituting the colonial order thus echoes in the strategy of spatio-temporal distancing that has followed, one that seeks to separate contemporary Britain from its imperial past (Fanon, 1961/2004, pp. 3–5).

Such strategies of active forgetting have been central in official efforts at painting Britain as an exemplary 'post-racial' society since the 1990s, 'postrace' here meaning 'the commonplace yet hubristic ideological contention that contemporary liberal democracies have transcended the logics of race and racism' (Valluvan, 2016b, p. 2241). Despite the nominally progressive politics of some of its advocates, in its disavowal of demonstrable, structural oppression, postrace is a quintessential form of liberal racism, amounting to a 'denial of inequalities' amid 'broader cultural retrenchment, nostalgic vitriol and coded xenophobia sweeping the political terrain' (Redclift, 2014, p. 580).

Anamik Saha ties the rise of ‘postrace’ to the entrenchment of neoliberalism, whereby an ideological climate of market fundamentalism and mistrust of the state or other collective institutions suppresses structural accounts of racial oppression, casting meritocratic personal resilience as the only possible solutions to inequality. Accordingly, the cultural politics of postrace under ‘racial neoliberalism’ manifest as consumer choice, conflating struggles for representation and justice with ‘a logic of niche marketing’ (Saha, 2021, p. 63). This produces a paradoxical situation where the unprecedented hypervisibility of racial difference in media representation, and a celebration of the rich commercial potential of (settled, fixed, inert) multiculturalism (Melamed, 2006; McNeil, 2012), is accompanied by a steadfast denial of racism.

Branding anti-racism

The intervening years have rendered this denial increasingly untenable, amidst an eruption of popular anti-racism in the form of street movements, political campaigns, and pop cultural expression. As Herman Gray wrote in 2019, ‘the idea of postrace in the midst of one of the most racially charged and turbulent moments of the new century so far is oxymoronic’ (H. Gray, 2019, p. 23). But elite responses to this ‘turbulence’ emphatically demonstrate both the cruel absurdity, and enduring structuring power, of racial neoliberalism. Olúfẹ̀mi O. Táíwò shows how, even as the foundations of postrace were shaken by anti-racist uprisings, existing institutional power has been buttressed by a combination of old-fashioned oppression and ‘performing symbolic identity politics... without enacting material reforms’, attempting to ‘rebrand (not replace) existing institutions, also using elements of identity politics’, a process that he terms ‘elite capture’ (Táíwò, 2022, pp. 4–5). While such efforts have often been received as manifestly cynical, they have shifted the dial for institutional and brand approaches to racial politics. Prior reluctance to engage the messy terrain of racial inequality has disappeared as institutions, corporations or brands falling over themselves to signal (vague) commitments to (ill-defined) causes, seeking to burnish their reputation by appearing responsible, caring, or socially aware, a process that Francesca Sobande calls ‘woke-washing’ (Sobande, 2019, 2023).

While forms of ‘brand activism’ and social justice marketing have long histories (Hardy, 2021, pp. 221–224), the Black Lives Matter uprisings and the pandemic resulted in a marked uptick in the use of ‘woke’ messaging: ‘*the corporate extraction of value from the struggles for recognition led by historically oppressed populations*’ (Kanai and Gill, 2020, p. 11; see also Rossi and Táíwò, 2020) (emphasis original). Rather than co-option, this deployment of ‘woke’

language and imagery, crucially, *transfigures* the underlying messages themselves, robbing them of specificity or genuine structural acuity. Gill and Kanai argue corporate and brand colonisation of social justice rhetoric also *aestheticises difference* in ways that not only makes (for example) racial and ethnic identities mere grist to the mill of diversity marketing, but render difference immutable, incommensurable, and inseparable from ones' personal brand (Sobande, Hesmondhalgh and Saha, 2023, pp. 1457–1460). This feeds back into a pre-existing drift in contemporary identity politics, where fixed, fractal conceptions of identity hinder efforts at movement-building as people 'close ranks... around ever-narrower conceptions of group interests' (Táiwò, 2022, p. 8) in ways that are diametrically opposed to the 'transformative, nonsectarian, coalitional' vision of identity politics pioneered by Black feminists of the Combahee River Collective (see Haider, 2017; Richmond and Charnley, 2022). Political critiques expressed in this atomised, anti-coalitional register closely mirror the 'logic of niche marketing' detailed by Saha, and are thus readily absorbed by, and articulated to, the interests of the state, existing media institutions, and capital.

This brings us back to the ecology of social media, the 'influencer industry', and self-promotion. Cultural producers have had to adjust to an environment where audiences appear expectant of social commentary from those they follow, and 'marketers and brand managers [have] abandoned their previously tightly held "apolitical" positions to join a highly visible racial justice movement' (Hund, 2023, p. 136).⁶² This marks an attendant shift in the music industries. Where previous 'branding templates' heavily discouraged vocally political musicians, at the expense of 'oppositional... critical or dissenting musics' (Meier, 2017, p. 143), today the converged musician-influencer must tread the line between 'performative' activism and appearing problematically politically disengaged. The rush to enlist (hyper)visibly 'political' minoritised musicians by brands and institutions is undoubtedly, in the main, driven by a 'profit-oriented logic [which] almost always trumps potentially resistant and activist ideas' (Sobande, 2019, p. 20). But this remains an ambivalent process, presenting unexpected avenues for such potentially resistant ideas to circulate against the odds. As I make clear throughout the thesis, the LJS example underscores that the commodification of politicised, racialised cultural production is a process *without guarantees*.

⁶² Influential, but controversial, 'activist influencers' have also become significant presences in contemporary political discourse, further muddying the line between political intervention, collective action and personal branding (Brown, 2022, pp. 192–226; Dean, 2023; Scharff, 2023).

Speculative theory and jazz

A final significant recent intellectual current has engaged jazz both as a research *object* and *critical practice*, most prominently within the grouping that Dhanveer Singh Brar and Ashwani Sharma call ‘U.S. Black Critical Thought’.⁶³ Since the turn of the millennium, these thinkers, largely in the American academy, have simultaneously transformed and revitalised North American Black Studies and become a ‘formative presence’ within the ‘aesthetico-political terrains of race and/or blackness as a site of discourse in the UK’ (Singh Brar and Sharma, 2019, p. 89).

This tendency is rooted in the radical, predominantly African American intellectual currents that emerged in the late 1960s and coalesced under the label of Black Studies. Black Studies as a tendency has, since its inception, interrogated the methodological and epistemological norms of the academy, its roots in the European Enlightenment, and its complicity in the ongoing subjugation of racialised ‘others’ as part of the project of capitalist modernity. Integral to this critique has been a suspicion of pre-existing disciplinary boundaries and the conscious troubling of separations between formal scholarship and artistic practice (Myers, 2023, pp. 1–14). As a result, jazz, and black music in general, comprises a key mode of intellectual production within both Black Studies and more recent ‘US Black Critical Thought’ – although this current remains curiously underacknowledged within more orthodox jazz studies literature (Iyer, 2024).

This is particularly apparent in American poet and theorist Fred Moten’s 2003 book *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* and the body of literature in dialogue with and seemingly inspired by Moten’s book and own subsequent work (e.g. Moten, 2017; Okiji, 2018; Le Mardi Gras Listening Collective, 2020; Brar, 2021; Reed, 2021).⁶⁴ Much of this contemporary work is poetic, abstract and can be dazzling in its breadth, depth and ambition. It also feels methodologically indebted to jazz: the writing often has deeply syncretic, improvisational and virtuosic qualities, exploding distinctions between genres of writing,

⁶³ Brar and Sharma cite Hortense Spillers, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Saidiya Hartman, Frank B. Wilderson III, Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, Nahum Chandler, and David Marriott in their ‘inevitably partial’ overview. Given the breadth of these’ writers work, and the profound difference in outlook between many of them, ‘U.S. Black Critical Thought’ is evidently a very heterogenous, umbrella term, but Brar and Sharma’s point is a valid one: the impact of these American intellectual currents upon ‘the present direction of travel for Black Arts and race thinking in the UK’ is palpable, and appears at least in part to have taken the place of the earlier, homegrown project of ‘Black cultural studies’ advanced by figures like Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy and Kobena Mercer through the 1980s and 1990s (see Hall, 1992/2019, pp. 83–95).

⁶⁴ Moten’s work, in turn, is deeply indebted and in constant dialogue with Amiri Baraka, whose work looms large in almost all engagements with jazz in ‘US Black Critical Thought’ (see Moten, 2010, pp. 110–111).

scholarly disciplines, media forms, or high/low divides in thought and culture.⁶⁵ The scholarship is rich and generative, not least because of its steadfast commitment to taking (Black) popular music deadly seriously: attending not only to ‘music’s relations to something else... [but on] music as something else *as itself*’ (Le Mardi Gras Listening Collective, 2020, p. 134) [emphasis added]. Such an approach sees music-making, dance, and their articulation as critical practices with inherent, unstable political implications, carrying a capacity to unmake and remake the social world, rather than an epiphenomenon downstream of the politics of representation. I draw upon some of this literature, particularly Moten, Brar, and Fumi Okiji throughout the thesis.

However, the speculative, ontological and ultra-theoretical mode of much of this writing at times amounts to an ‘outright rejection of the empirical’ (Saha, 2021, p. 152). This limits its utility for interrogating questions of practice, production, the everyday, and the lived experiences of music makers, all central concerns of the thesis.⁶⁶ The emphases and absences in ‘U.S. Black Critical Thought’ point to ‘historical faultlines’ between ‘the theoretical/aesthetic and the empirical/political’ that emerged in the 1980s and endure in some form today (Singh Brar and Sharma, 2019, p. 96). While Brar and Sharma analyse the particular institutional arrangements underlying this division as specific to *Black* British cultural studies, there is overlap here with the much-discussed split in cultural studies between analytical approaches that focus on questions of production, industrial processes, and political economy; and those oriented toward audiences, consumption, and textual interpretation (see Whannel, 2020).⁶⁷

⁶⁵ In some ways, there is meaningful overlap here with the (mostly British) ‘para-academic’ critical work, with roots in the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit at the University of Warwick in the 1990s, which flourished in the ‘blogosphere’ of the early 2000s. The ferocious curiosity and eclecticism evident in writing by figures like Kodwo Eshun, Nina Power, Jodi Dean, Alex Williams, and most of all Mark Fisher via his *k-punk* blog, placed ‘high theory’ in dialogue with ‘low culture’ and has proved highly influential (Reynolds, 2018, pp. 13–32). Immersed in psychoanalysis, post-68 cultural theory and heterodox Marxism (particularly the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari), these authors produced freewheeling, often polemical analyses that drew together subjects like underground dance music, British political culture, the media industries and internet subculture, in the process generating novel ways of thinking and talking about contemporary culture, politics and power. Eshun’s work has been taken up by some scholars in ‘US Black Critical Thought’, providing one direct point of connection, while both strands have found receptive audiences beyond the academy, particularly in the worlds of visual art and electronic music (Singh Brar and Sharma, 2019, p. 101).

⁶⁶ This work (with the exception of Harney and Moten’s *Undercommons* project (Moten and Harney, 2014; Harney and Moten, 2021)) also rarely attends directly to material questions or class relations, further entrenching the faultlines discussed by Brar and Sharma.

⁶⁷ Although as Hesmondhalgh has argued, this is not really a question of a binary opposition between cultural studies and political economy approaches to studying media and culture, and portrayals along these stark lines are less widespread than they once were (Hesmondhalgh, 2019b, pp. 73–74).

2.5: Conclusion

As the literature that initiated the 'New Jazz Studies' in the late 1980s made clear, the incredible multivalence of the music, its history, and its near-endless meanings necessitated an interdisciplinarity that, at that moment, was lacking. For musics such as London jazz, located within-and-against jazz while crossing into many other musical and cultural domains, this feels doubly true. Platformisation has only intensified the demand for breadth and, as I suggest, the digital is one area where jazz scholarship has been slow on its feet. This chapter has situated what follows within three broad areas of research: studies of jazz and/as popular music; studies of platformised cultural production; and critical studies at the intersection of race, colonialism, media and aesthetics.

However, some unifying tensions thread through this disparate scholarship: the personal and the collective; commodification and compromise; old and new; America and 'the rest'; and the undeniable, mercurial, presence and effects of race. As I show in the following chapters, these tensions recur throughout the story of London jazz, as sources of contestation, frustration and debate for many. But these are also generative tensions, profoundly contouring the scene's reception, serving as inspiration for much of its output, and in many ways driving its success. In particular, misgivings regarding the institutional position of jazz, hard-won but much-critiqued by many of the critical voices discussed in this chapter, represent a collision of older jazz values with the populist impulses of the current crop of jazz enthusiasts in the LJS. This is the subject of the next chapter.

3: Education

3.1: Introduction

Before the LJS came to the attention of the outside world, its key participants had to learn to play. London jazz musicians have access to a unique, interwoven set of music education pathways which have proven pivotal for many LJS constituents, particularly in the early stages of their careers. These institutional routes have drawn together important networks of musicians and other scene members, creating musical, social and spatial connections which indelibly mark jazz in London. The influence of commercial enterprise and the upsurge in media attention has undoubtedly been central to sparking the ‘London jazz explosion’, but it is these *non-commercial* elements that have laid the foundations for the shape of jazz to come, with some operating since the early 1990s and only gaining widespread recognition as the LJS surfaced in the late 2010s.

Institutional support for jazz in the UK is a multifaceted and uneven patchwork of higher education establishments, youth groups, volunteer-run advocacy organisations and industry-supported schemes. It is also subject to the same dynamics of intense regional inequality and centralisation that characterise Britain as a whole. Recent research reveals the deep roots of persistent and acute London-centrism in arts funding (Stark, Gordon and Powell, 2013; Leland, 2014; Dorling and Hennig, 2016; Redmond, 2019). This imbalance is readily apparent in music education provision (Henley and Barton, 2022, pp. 207–210), and specifically in public funding for jazz (Hodgkins and Fordham, 2021, pp. 87–95). Despite recent moves to redress some of the regional inequalities in arts provision, and the broader context of dwindling public funding for the arts across the board (see Behr, 2022; D. Henley, 2022), London’s economic and cultural dominance has been fundamental to the trajectory of the LJS. The city remains the centre of institutional gravity for large, umbrella arts funding bodies such as Arts Council England (ACE),⁶⁸ international events like the annual EFG London Jazz Festival, and is home to flagship cultural centres like the Barbican and the Southbank Centre, all of which play a role in incubating young jazz musicians. The Southbank in particular is a key node, providing a base for music education and advocacy organisations Kinetika Bloco and Tomorrow’s Warriors

⁶⁸ ACE recently announced swingeing cuts to funding for London-based arts organisations in the period 2023-2026 under the (dubious) rubric of decentralisation (Behr, 2022). However, London-based jazz advocacy organisations Kinetika Bloco, Serious, Brownswood, Tomorrow’s Warriors, and Jazz Re:freshed all remain National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs). Tomorrow’s Warriors and Jazz Re:freshed have received a substantial increase in ACE subsidy for this period (*2023-26 Investment Programme: Data*, 2023).

(hereafter TW), both keystones in the educational infrastructure of contemporary London jazz (Gardner, 2013).

The LJS is also embedded within structures of higher education, with many influential musicians attending at least one of a handful of prestigious music schools. Physical proximity to sources of public and charitable funding for making music, and unparalleled access to higher education, have clearly provided the strong institutional basis that has underwritten the LJS's emergence. There are sonically distinctive jazz scenes clustered around music schools across the UK,⁶⁹ but London has a unique quantity and density of music schools and conservatoires providing specialist jazz tuition (Riley and Laing, 2010). The capital's educational infrastructure also feeds into a live music ecology that, by dint of its size, provides a substantial domestic audience alongside a steady stream of tourists. As with urban centres of equivalent scale in the US, especially New York, these structural factors sustain a critical mass of working musicians London, in ways few other UK cities can.

Institutional music education, then, is an important rite of passage in the professional lives of many musicians on the scene. However, the LJS—university relationship is typically framed in *oppositional* terms, pithily summarised by jazz critic Nick Hasted as 'intimations... that this is music made by street-level radicals, tearing up the rulebook of jazz's academic establishment' which he rightly suggests is 'overly romantic' (Hasted, 2019c). That is, conversations about institutional education in London jazz employ the language of authenticity. Such a perspective places purportedly staid, circumscribed technical knowledge attained at music college (in one author's words 'the conservatory-honed noodlings of middle-aged musicians for affluent — and seated — audiences' (Hutchinson, 2018a)) in stark contrast with, and subordinate to, the '*real*' substance of jazz education: musicianship honed at jam sessions and club nights across the city (see for example Bakare, 2017).

The current chapter complicates this narrative. Most prominent LJS figures learned their trade in a range of settings: taking extracurricular, informal jazz classes as teenagers, feeding into the formal study of jazz after leaving school, while also learning their trade onstage playing with more established musicians, or at the jam session — a quintessential proving ground in the jazz world. I suggest *all* of these experiences have been fundamental, and are more tightly interwoven than the school/streets binary opposition suggests. Here, I follow Travis Jackson's discussion of the 'pathways' that musicians on the New York jazz scene have taken into

⁶⁹ The longstanding scenes centred on Leeds College of Music and Birmingham Conservatoire, for example.

learning and playing the music: ‘A thorough and usable jazz education, therefore, is more often than not idiosyncratic and encompasses more than what might be typically taught in a classroom’ (Jackson, 2012, p. 40).

While attending to the idiosyncrasies that constitute a ‘thorough and usable’ educational pathway, this chapter focuses primarily on the complex, vexed relationship between the scene and formal jazz education, arguing that such tensions represent a kind of generative friction within the scene, that underpins processes of collective identity formation. This is because although most prominent LJS musicians *have* followed well-worn educational pathways into professional life many view formal jazz education as emblematic of an inaccessible, inadequate and outdated institutional jazz ‘establishment’. Scene members have offered well-grounded critiques of jazz education: as complicit in maintaining the genre’s elite reputation, and symptomatic of deep class divides and race- and gender-based inequities in the British creative industries. The LJS’s rejoinder to the non-commercial ‘art’ music status of academic jazz, and its proximity to European classical music pedagogy, is expressed through a discourse of diversification and accessibility alongside an accommodation to the demands of commerce, a kind of pragmatic anti-elitism which I frame as ‘jazz populism’. Following cultural studies scholar Jim McGuigan’s ‘sympathetic critique’ of what he calls ‘cultural populism’, my use of ‘populism’ here does not carry the *intrinsic* negative connotation or dismissal common in its frequent pejorative use in political discourse (McGuigan, 1992, pp. 1–6; Moran and Littler, 2020, pp. 863–867). Indeed, as I discuss below, many valid and necessary critiques of institutional marginalisation and conservatism in the jazz world are expressed in a populist register in the LJS.⁷⁰ However, I do suggest that the turn to the market places political limits on the institutional critique advanced by the LJS.

3.2 traces the advent of jazz education and historicises key tensions thrown up by the academy’s absorption of jazz, as seen in debates over canon formation; authenticity; and technique, self-expression, and artistic identity formation. I lay out key points of convergence and difference between the institutionalisation of jazz education in the USA and Britain.

⁷⁰ It is worth emphasising the scene’s cosmopolitan and left-leaning character, given populism’s use as a ‘buzzword’ in analyses of the sharp rightward turn in contemporary British politics, particularly from the political centre-ground (see Mondon & Winter, 2019; Mondon & Yates, 2024). There are myriad examples of LJS output and discourse rejecting the upswell of nationalist and xenophobic sentiment in the UK (e.g. Broughton, 2024; Hasted, 2019a; Kalia, 2019; Searle & Boyd, 2021). The tendency toward ‘jazz populism’ evident in LJS discourse is thus, politically speaking, more aligned to a *left* populism (Mouffe, 2018). See Moran and McGuigan (2020) for further clarification on this point.

Section 3.3 then considers the centrality of informal music education to the LJS prior to university study, focusing on the TW programme and its use of canonical jazz repertoire. Revisiting the career pathways of the generation of Black British jazz musicians who rose to prominence in the 1980s, particularly the Jazz Warriors Big Band, I show how their experiences at the hands of the music industries and the British jazz ‘establishment’ in that era has structured the approach to teaching and the broader professional ethos promulgated at TW.

3.4 explores the scene’s ambivalence regarding institutional jazz education, and considers the consequences of the partial disavowal of the academy in the LJS. I show that the discursive antipathy toward jazz education evident in LJS discourse is notable for its explicitly politicised register, expressed in the ‘jazz populist’ terms outlined above. This section draws out how the critique of institutional jazz education in the LJS is used to articulate key points of political contestation in the current conjuncture, namely historic levels of inequality and the struggle for racial and gender justice in the cultural industries and beyond.

3.2: Jazz and the classroom

3.2.1: ‘Streets to schools’ and the problem of institutionalisation

Before addressing formal jazz instruction in the London jazz scene, it is worth unpacking the development of institutional jazz teaching. School curricula in the USA began to incorporate jazz from the 1930s, particularly in black communities, part of a range of community jazz education networks that coalesced in this period. These educational networks helped to consolidate the seriousness, professionalism, and exploratory ethos that defined the artistic approach of the bebop era (DeVeaux, 1997, pp. 45–65; Porter, 2002, pp. 61–69). Jazz courses in higher education establishments began to emerge in the USA from the 1950s, steadily growing in acceptance within the American conservatoire and university system throughout the latter half of the century and entering into the academy in the UK from the mid-1960s (Lopes, 2004, pp. 236–240; Heining, 2012, pp. 62–63). By the 1990s a ‘strong institutional base for jazz education in the United States’ had solidified, bringing about a subsequent ‘broader explosion of formal jazz education in postsecondary institutions’ (Chapman, 2018, pp. 27–29; 217–218). Learning jazz via higher education has become the new normal, both in the USA and further afield. As Mykaell Riley and David Lang suggested in 2010: ‘The day of the autodidact is largely over, replaced by a new era of university educated jazz musicians’ (Riley and Laing, 2010, p. 27).

However, this process has proved deeply controversial: ‘There are perhaps few discourses as contentious among jazz communities as those of jazz’s move into educational institutions’ (K. Prouty, 2012, p. 46). Much of the controversy stems from a widespread belief that there are ineffable qualities unique to improvisational jazz practice that can’t (or perhaps shouldn’t) be taught in a formal setting. This line of argument suggests that learning jazz in the classroom produces ‘cookie cutter’ musicians, technically proficient but unimaginative. Students’ reliance upon textbooks and systematised methods of teaching jazz is seen as fostering an academic, abstract understanding of playing jazz, one which hinders the development of a distinctive and personal artistic voice (Teal, 2021, pp. 105–107). Such a critique is founded upon a specific aesthetic ideology, where one’s identity is realised and life stories narrated through embodied improvisation, and in this context the personal idiosyncrasies of the autodidact musician become especially prized (Iyer, 2004; Hersch, 2018). As Larry Kart notes in his discussion of jazz education and its purported homogeneity, musicians began to turn away from the valorisation of unfettered, authentic expression through improvisation from at least the 1960s, demonstrating how multiple, divergent musical priorities have also existed in jazz for a long time (Kart, 2004, pp. 11–12). More broadly, the Romantic preoccupation with jazz innovation flowing from transcendent talent unfettered by the strictures of systematised learning is something of a shibboleth.⁷¹ It overlooks the centrality of rote learning of repertoire, harmony and melody, and close imitation of iconic musicians and recordings to the learning process of virtually all aspiring jazz musicians (Sun, 2015; Chinen, 2018). Similarly, jazz studies scholarship has shown that formal musical training was fairly common among early jazz musicians, long prior to the advent of university jazz education - despite the persistent origin story of jazz as a musical ‘gumbo’ of different styles mixed together by untutored street musicians in New Orleans.⁷²

Nonetheless, anxieties surrounding educational standardisation in jazz remain widespread. Alongside explicit critique, engagement with formal jazz education is pointedly absent from much critical literature.⁷³ Despite the bare fact that the university is far and away the main site

⁷¹ It has also frequently had distinctly primitivist overtones, attributing musical ability to some sort of untaught, unteachable African(-American) bodily ‘essence’ in such a way that diminished the huge amount of dedication and intellectual work involved in learning jazz (Gioia, 1989; Monson, 1995; Perchard, 2011).

⁷² Eric Porter argues that ‘contrary to myth, most early professional jazz players received some measure of formal training... include[ing] instruction in harmony, sight reading, and composition’ (Porter, 2002, p. 338n9; see also Chevan, 2002). The ‘gumbo’ metaphor is used prominently in the influential and much-critiqued 2001 PBS documentary series *Jazz*, a key vehicle for propagating jazz neoclassicism, discussed below (see Ake, 2019; Rice, 2008). See Okiji (2018, pp. 39–42) for a nuanced interrogation of how the ‘gumbo’ metaphor is a problematic simplification of musical creolisation.

⁷³ The comparatively small corpus of British jazz literature makes the absence of attention paid to formal jazz instruction in Britain particularly pronounced.

of jazz learning in the contemporary jazz landscape, the jam session retains pride of place in the critical imagination, with its interplay of competitive individualism and informal sociality still framed as the primary fulcrum of the music (Ake, 2010, pp. 144–149). Where formal jazz education is mentioned in the literature, it tends to be treated as an interloper, ‘something somehow foreign to [the jazz] community, a separate system provided by an outside source’ (Teal, 2021, p. 95). This distancing forms part of the broader argument about the insufficiency of formal jazz education and the interchangeable, mechanistic technicians it supposedly produces, subordinate to heroic figures from jazz history who (the story goes) honed their unmistakable sonic identities on the bandstand playing alongside revered elders (Prouty, 2005, p. 6). In this telling, ‘real [jazz] music – like real life – occurs in the streets, not in a school’ (Ake, 2012, p. 238), a pedagogical hierarchy which has proved profoundly influential and patterns much of the discourse surrounding the LJS.⁷⁴

Growing enrolment in jazz schools has also meant that the ‘problem’ of jazz education is perpetually framed as a novel one, despite versions of the critique of standardisation being a longstanding feature in critical commentary. Eitan Wilf’s introduction to *School for Cool*, a study of two prestigious US jazz programmes, summarises the contradictions thrown up by institutional jazz education. He suggests that the ‘institutionalised rationality’ of the classroom is widely perceived as antithetical to the ‘creative agency’ necessary to become a distinctive, successful jazz musician (Wilf, 2014, pp. 14–15). Such concerns permeate reflexive commentary on creative education in general (Alexander, 2007; Ashton and Noonan, 2013; Brook, O’Brien and Taylor, 2020b; Teal, 2021, pp. 99–100) but in jazz such anxieties are particularly pronounced, due to the singular importance placed on personal expression through improvisation and the music’s fluctuating cultural status and popularity (Hickey, 2009). Stuart Nicholson’s critique of standardisation in the academy draws together these two strands. He suggests that teaching new players through detailed study of a narrow selection of iconic recordings, styles and performers both stunts new players’ own artistic autonomy and further exacerbates jazz’s stereotypical framing as an inward and backward looking form, consigning it to a heritage activity rather than a dynamic, living thing (Stuart Nicholson, 2005, pp. 99–102; see also Ake, 2005, pp. 112–145; McKay, 2005, pp. 233–236).

This provides a contemporary veneer to a longstanding conviction: that university jazz education is both symptom and key cause of the disappearance of a mass audience for jazz, in particular its growing irrelevance among Black audiences. Key to this process are the ever-

⁷⁴ The specific modalities of the jam session in the contemporary London context are explored further in Chapter Four.

present twinned processes of dismissal and appropriation of black music and culture in American society (see e.g. Baraka, 2009, pp. 72–86; Lott, 2013). Early advocates for jazz’s entry into the American higher education system were met with elitist, often explicitly racist pushback from the musicological establishment, attitudes whose legacies have proven to be depressingly resilient in both the academic study and professional performance of European concert music (Bull, 2019; Ewell, 2021). Many of the first jazz programs, understandably given this level of animus, sought to legitimate their music as a valid object of study, using pedagogical and analytical techniques drawn from the European classical tradition in keeping with the tenor of much jazz criticism at the time (Monson, 2009, pp. 1–4, 133–137). However, ‘by placing itself squarely within the [classical] institutional community, jazz education sought to pacify its institutional critics by emphasizing its relationship to *their* methods and histories, rather than its ties to a larger jazz community’ (K. Prouty, 2012, p. 52).

There are echoes of this early attempt to mirror the institutional norms of the arts establishment in the activities of the jazz ‘neoclassicists’ from the late 1980s. The neoclassicist position, expressed most prominently and consistently by the ‘troika’ of trumpeter Wynton Marsalis and writers Stanley Crouch and Albert Murray (Gennari, 2006, p. 288), was that the genre represented a unique cultural expression of the national character – ‘America’s Classical Music’ – one which required institutional legitimation and public funding along the same lines as European concert music. Matthew Neil, following Lawrence Levine, frames this move in parallel with similar developments in Western art music. Neil suggests both underwent a process of institutional ‘sacralisation’ wherein any concern with a popular listenership and material support becomes subordinate to a sense of inherent, autonomous aesthetic value, and the attendant cultural capital that comes with the music’s status as high art (Neil, 2018). These sacralisation efforts bore fruit with Marsalis’s appointment in 1991 as artistic director of the newly-opened Jazz at the Lincoln Centre (JALC), a position he still holds. JALC has ‘rapidly become the world’s largest jazz institution and, intentionally, one of its most influential’, playing a ‘defining role in how the general public sees jazz and its historical canon of performers and composers’ (Teal, 2014, pp. 400–401).⁷⁵

⁷⁵ JALC’s influence extends beyond the US throughout global jazz. Alongside the indirect influence it exerts through standardised education, discussed below, we can look to the 2023 international tour with Marsalis and the JALC Orchestra Septet ‘with a focused theme of freedom and democracy’ and the recent opening of ‘Jazz at Lincoln Centre Shanghai’ as evidence of more active and direct efforts to propagate the neoclassicist perspective internationally (Xiang and Siu, 2021; *JLCO Touring*, 2023). The jazz-as-democracy metaphor is appealing, and widespread in jazz discourse, but as Benjamin Givan argues it is fundamentally flawed (Givan, 2020).

However, JALC and its attendant interpretation of history has been controversial from the outset. The neoclassicist approach sutures jazz identity to a 'polemical and revisionist' (and self-congratulatory) reading of the past (DiPiero, 2022, p. 81). This vision articulates 'a powerful microcosm of American exceptionalism', holding up jazz as a sonic manifestation of liberal democracy in action and the overcoming of racial divides (Chapman, 2018, p. 14; see also Monson, 2017). Further, jazz scholars such as Mark Laver and Dale Chapman argue that the circumscribed interpretation of jazz advanced by the neoclassicists complements and has become intertwined with core neoliberal ideological precepts, particularly competitive individualism, with jazz itself often 'repurposed as an unwitting metaphor for the market's invisible hand' (Laver, 2013; Chapman, 2018, p. 41).

Neoclassicist sacralisation is also unapologetically teleological and evolutionary in its reading of history. It looks to a small cast of jazz icons (roughly from Louis Armstrong to early John Coltrane), seeing their successive sonic innovations as accreting across a couple of generations to produce a jazz tradition, bound together by the common genetic thread of swing and marked by an almost total absence of women and white musicians (Ake, 2019, p. 82). Such a stance casts this thin slice of the canon in aspic, excluding a vast swath of sounds, performance norms and musicians from the bounds of acceptability.⁷⁶ This pathway to institutional legitimation has therefore involved tightly gatekeeping the canon via a normative understanding of African-American musical genius that is patriarchal, patrilineal, individualist, nationally bounded and aesthetically circumscribed (Deveaux, 1991; Teal, 2014).

The neoclassicist position has always been contested in the jazz world, with its critique a near-compulsory feature of New Jazz Studies literature. However, it remains hugely influential in mainstream jazz pedagogy. As David Ake and others have argued institutional jazz education often ends up propagating 'much the same ideal[s]' (Ake, 2005, p. 159; see also DiPiero, n.d.; Stover, 2014). It also represents one endpoint for the drive to demonstrate the music's 'seriousness' evident in the activities of enthusiasts and critics at least as far back as the late 1920s, many features of which the LJS has sought to confound, as discussed later in the chapter (Tomlinson, 1991). Efforts to consecrate jazz as a legitimate art form have worked in a mutually reinforcing manner with the restless, searching impulse that propelled successive

⁷⁶ As jazz scholar Bruce Johnson points out, the selective and sexist perspectives on jazz advanced by Marsalis and his ilk are intensified through recourse to 'high art' aesthetic legitimation of the music, 'which is itself overwhelmingly a masculinist construction already saddled with gender politics' (Johnson, 2022, p. 3). Unsurprisingly, these politics are also reproduced in the present, most notoriously in the failure of the Lincoln Centre Jazz Orchestra to hire a single woman musician in its history (Attrep, 2023, p. 93).

generations of jazz musicians toward abstraction and complexity, and away from the dancefloor and a mass audience.

3.2.2: The British context

British jazz has similarly seen a move toward institutional legitimization and away from a substantial popular audience, albeit more recently than in the US. While unable to make a special case for the symbolic resonance of jazz as uniquely expressive of a distinct national-political identity like the neoclassicists in the United States, British jazz advocates have benefited from a political landscape in which public provision for the arts has tended to be more abundant and stable than in the United States. The availability of public funding helped the establishment of a handful of jazz education programmes in the 1960s within and beyond the university,⁷⁷ although elite music schools ‘remained set firm against the intrusion of jazz into their curricula’ over the following couple of decades, with attitudes only gradually thawing through the 1980s (Heining, 2012, p. 85). Perhaps the most significant factor in cementing jazz’s place in the British university has been the substantial expansion of higher education and the policy emphasis placed upon the ‘creative industries’ as a pivotal sector in the British economy introduced by successive New Labour governments from 1997, with an accompanying growth in availability and enrolment in higher education jazz programmes. (Heath *et al.*, 2013; Smith and Moir, 2022, pp. 91–96). The spread of codified jazz education has also seen a wide array of British jazz musicians expressing familiar concerns about formalised education in step with those of their American counterparts, with jazz school representing a ‘potential source of ‘corruption’’ that threatens the values that they see as intrinsic to playing jazz (McKay, 2005; Banks, 2012, p. 79). There are also pragmatic misgivings about the ‘supply-side problem’ generated by the expansion of jazz education, whereby the abundance of jazz musicians outstrips demand, driving down pay (Umney and Kretsos, 2014; Hodgkins and Fordham, 2021, pp. 82–85).

As I expand upon below, the high levels of conservatoire attendance amongst LJS players is a departure from the Jazz Warriors generation of the 1980s, who felt excluded from elite music education establishments on the basis of race, class and genre. Despite the myriad misgivings

⁷⁷ In particular, the increased concern paid to culture by the Labour government of Harold Wilson in 1964 ushered in an era of decentralisation in funding and a (very) gradual unsettling of the elite consensus regarding the singular significance of the ‘fine arts’ and disregard for vernacular and popular culture that had hitherto structured postwar arts provision (Cloonan, 2007, pp. 25–30; Upchurch, 2004). Increased openness to new media forms and artistic genres opened the doorway to institutional support for jazz, with the first university course beginning at Leeds College of Music in 1965, the establishment of what would become the National Youth Jazz Orchestra (NYJO) in the same year, and the first jazz project receiving Arts Council funding in 1968 (Williams, 2012; Banks and Toynbee, 2014; Hesmondhalgh *et al.*, 2015, p. 21).

that pattern the scene's attitude to formal education, this represents a step in the right direction. The presence of former Warriors as senior faculty at institutions such as Trinity Laban and Guildhall is perhaps emblematic of this shift.⁷⁸ While this appears to be a significant first step in diversifying jazz student populations in higher education institutions, the most recent available demographic data on conservatoire attendance is more suggestive of stasis than change. Male jazz students have consistently outnumbered their women counterparts by around 4:1 since 2015,⁷⁹ and the student body in the same period has remained overwhelmingly white, fluctuating between 83 and 92 percent white students (*UCAS Conservatoires End of Cycle 2021 Data Resources*, 2021; Hodgkins and Fordham, 2021, pp. 131–135). The growing expense of higher education relative to the low remuneration available to most jazz musicians has meant that working-class students remain persistently priced out of formal jazz education, mirroring wider declines in working-class presence or representation in the British cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh, 2017; Brook, O'Brien and Taylor, 2020a). With alternative routes into the professional world increasingly attenuated, working-class musicians are arguably becoming more marginalised in jazz than ever. The centrality of higher education in British jazz may well be exacerbating the "insanely middle-class" demography of the [London] jazz scene' identified by jazz players interviewed by Umney and Kretsos (Umney and Kretsos, 2015, p. 328). I return to this issue in section 3.3.

In both British and American contexts then, the movement of jazz from popular to art music in the latter part of the 20th Century has been a complex, multicausal process (Lopes, 2004), and the 'seemingly inexorable move from clubs to schools' (Ake, 2012, p. 238) actually represents the partial success of jazz musicians and advocates in overcoming elite hostility to Black music. One consequence of this success on both sides of the Atlantic, however, is the trajectory of jazz 'through every era... up the cultural ladder', in turn driving the music's dislocation from 'the social milieu in which it had grown and gained mass popularity' (Whyton, 2006, pp. 74–75; Fellezs, 2011, p. 71), intensifying dependency on institutional patronage and elite largesse to keep jazz alive. Ironically, in adopting the conventions of classical music pedagogy and aligning itself with 'the Western tradition and its accumulated prestige' (Kajikawa, 2019, p. 167), the trajectory of institutional jazz education has ensured that formal jazz instruction is perpetually haunted by the spectre of illegitimacy on two fronts. First, as ultimately subordinate and inferior to the (white, European) classical tradition, and second as culpable for the music's

⁷⁸ Although ambivalence towards formal jazz teaching persists: Cleveland Watkiss, vocalist for the Jazz Warriors and currently a Professor of Voice at Trinity Laban has suggested that 'musicians are not taught to improvise' and that music schools 'leave no room for mavericks' (quoted in Burke, 2021, p. 68)

⁷⁹ Unfortunately no data is available for the attendance of non-binary or gender non-conforming students.

dislocation from its originary, 'authentic' (African-American, non-elite) milieu (Wilf, 2014, pp. 53–83). This double bind looms large in contemporary discourse about education in British jazz, further compounded by British jazz's typically subordinate status relative to the US. Within this discursive and historical context structures the strained relationship between LJS constituents, and perhaps the foundational site for most of their professional lives. Such tensions provide ample subject matter for media coverage seeking to signal the novelty of the scene and distinguish it from a wider (and symbolically overburdened) jazz context. However, while the university plays a pivotal role in the educational underpinnings of the scene and the media narrative that has propelled its rise, informal spaces of jazz learning are of equal significance to the music and the mythos of the LJS, as I discuss in the next section.

3:3 'Each one teach one': Tomorrow's Warriors and community music education

Most musicians in the LJS have learned the fundamentals of instrumental performance, jazz improvisation and repertoire at community music organisations prior to formal instruction at university. School-age specialist jazz teaching has provided the impetus for this musical community and continues to be a fertile source of new musicians. To distinguish from institutional fee-paying higher education, I am calling this formative education 'informal', but this is not to suggest a lack of seriousness. The approach to learning jazz promulgated by informal jazz practitioners has often been rigorous, demanding and, in the words of pianist Alex Hawkins, 'on occasion... every bit as didactic as the most strict of Berklee-style classes' (Hawkins, 2018, p. 40).

Informal instead denotes a pedagogical approach and learning environment distinct from instruction at school, university or in a professional setting. Lucy Green has argued that such informal spaces are of signal importance, often overcoming the shortfall in resources and expertise that pervades school provision of music education and fostering inclusivity in music education, increasing motivation among young musicians, and improving their skills (Green, 2002, 2008, pp. 5–8). Contemporary jazz in London bears out her thesis: while some LJS musicians cite inspirational schoolteachers and/or accommodating school music departments,⁸⁰ informal settings are a markedly more significant presence in LJS discourse.

⁸⁰ Drummer Moses Boyd has called the music department at Sedgehill School in Lewisham a 'music factory' during the 'golden pre-austerity days' (Considine and Boyd, 2019), and Mat Fox, founder of Kinetika Bloco, also ran the music department at Charles Edward Brooks school, where he taught trumpeter Sheila Maurice-Gray (Warren, 2018). Prominent LJS musicians like Boyd and Maurice-Gray

There are a few specialist organisations – e.g. the Julian Joseph Academy, Kinetika Bloko, the National Youth Jazz Orchestra (NYJO), the Abram Wilson Foundation, Blow the Fuse – which have been pivotal in nurturing the musicianship and enthusiasm for jazz of LJS players during their initial forays into music-making, the most significant of which is the organisation Tomorrow's Warriors (TW).

TW was founded in 1991 by Janine Irons and Gary Crosby. Crosby came to prominence as bassist in the Jazz Warriors, a pivotal ensemble in the story of Black British jazz founded in 1986. Formed by saxophonist Courtney Pine as part of an effort to combat the marginalisation of black musicians from the British jazz scene and their erasure from the historical record, the Jazz Warriors were renowned for fusing calypso, reggae and hip-hop with American jazz (McKay, 2005, pp. 163–166; Dueck, 2014; Moore, 2016, pp. 111–117). TW (and their now-dormant record label and management company Dune Music) is an effort by Crosby and Irons to maintain the legacy of the Jazz Warriors, by providing free access to jazz education for young people, specifically seeking to redress the persistent exclusion of black students from formal music higher education, for whom 'the promise of greater inclusion... has remained at best spasmodic, and at worst almost non-existent' (Doffman, 2013, p. 72). TW has thus been a lifeline for those otherwise frozen out of sites of jazz learning by institutional racism, providing training and an entry point into personal and professional networks, as Shabaka Hutchings has noted: 'when I moved to London it was only NYJO and TW, and NYJO was at the time known for not being very friendly to black people, basically. So if you were black and you wanted to have a community in jazz, you would more or less gravitate to TW' (quoted Burke, 2021, p. 195).

Kept afloat by a combination of charitable grants, public funding and private donations, the organisation began as a weekly open jam session, initially at the Jazz Café, moving to Soho's The Spice of Life in 2005 (Doffman, 2011; Melville, 2023, p. 128), before settling into a residency at the Southbank Centre from 2009. The organisation is now well-established and expansive, providing 24 hours of weekly tuition to over 100 young people (Warren, 2018).⁸¹ In keeping with the TW mantra 'each one, teach one', many of its most successful alumni return to give masterclasses, perform at fundraising events or work as permanent teaching staff. The

attended secondary school during a period of relative abundant funding for classroom music in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Garcia, echoing Boyd, has described this as a 'golden era [for] free lessons at school or holiday courses', 'irreplaceable' spaces for music-making whose disappearance Garcia (rightly) ascribes to Conservative cultural policy (quoted in Weiner, 2020). School music education is in a dire state at the time of writing, with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic compounding over a decade of severe cuts, meaning tomorrow's jazz musicians are likely to be even more reliant on the perpetually imperilled informal provision offered by the organisations discussed in this chapter (Underhill, 2020).

⁸¹ TW has also undertaken outreach schemes outside of London, including its 'The Jazz Ticket' scheme in 2017 which went to schools in eight cities across the UK (Holford, Crosby and Irons, no date).

2021 TW 30th Anniversary event ‘A Great Day in London’ demonstrated this reciprocal ethos, with over 100 TW members past and present, including Shabaka Hutchings, Denys Baptiste, Nubya Garcia and Zara McFarlane performing together at the Southbank Centre (Bradshaw, 2021).

TW has also sought to increase participation of women in jazz by establishing a dedicated all-women ensemble. The success of prominent TW alumni like Garcia, McFarlane and saxophonist-composer Cassie Kinoshi, and their willingness to keep contributing as guest teachers and performers at TW, appears to have dramatically increased the number of young women interested in playing jazz, as one TW teacher told me: ‘almost instantly, more girl musicians started turning up or felt more confident that they can come to the session, and hang’ (P14). TW’s efforts are more established than equivalent schemes in the US (see McMullen, 2021), and appear to be bearing fruit, approaching gender parity among students: of the 116 students enrolled in 2019-20 TW Artist Development Programmes, 42% were female and 58% male (*Tomorrow’s Warriors - Our Impact*, no date). The importance of TW and its alumni in nurturing women musicians should not be understated given the deep-rooted and ongoing reality of sexism and misogyny in the jazz world (Rustin and Tucker, 2008; Wahl and Ellingson, 2018; Raine, 2020a; Teichman, 2020; Mcandrew and Widdop, 2021; Pellegrinelli *et al.*, 2021).⁸²

The indelible influence of Tomorrow’s Warriors has not gone unnoticed in discourse surrounding the scene. The ‘Warrior effect’ is met with universal acclaim, and glowing profiles of ‘new London jazz’ often directly attribute the hybrid aesthetics and crossover success of Warriors alumni like Moses Boyd, Garcia or Theon Cross to their formative experiences playing in the organisations’ various ensembles. Such acknowledgement is an important corrective to an amnesiac tendency evident in some commentary about the scene, which suggests the LJS has sprung unbidden from a pop cultural landscape otherwise uniformly hostile to jazz. However, coverage of TW frequently verges on the formulaic and contains limited input from Crosby and Irons themselves - as one participant suggested, ‘they get talked *about* by everyone, and yet they’re not *there*’ (P24). Media discussion of TW helps reify a formal/informal binary through slippage and simplification, implying that there is clear water between the conservatoire and other jazz teaching organisations like Tomorrow’s Warriors.

⁸² TW’s work toward achieving gender parity is one of a number of important initiatives in the UK (e.g. T. Edwards, 2021; Flynn, 2020; Raine, 2020b).

This binary was employed to explain the burgeoning success of the scene from 2016 during an interview with a music journalist with intimate knowledge of the scene:

British jazz [was] always seen as a bit fusty. And then suddenly, it was like, ‘we’re going to stop promoting conservatoire kids’ – there was much more of an emphasis on grassroots workshops, things like Tomorrow’s Warriors (P3).

Here we can see how the mediation of informal jazz education in the LJS recapitulates an overarching school/streets divide. P3’s statement overlooks two crucial facts. First, that the prominent ‘conservatoire kids’ on the London scene *are*, by and large, TW alumni, and there is an increasingly close relationship between higher education and these informal spaces, with TW frequently functioning as a stepping stone into specialist higher education. For example, Crosby is a trustee of Trinity Laban and works at Guildhall, saxophonist Jason Yarde is an ‘inspirational educator’ (P2) at both TW and Trinity Laban, and TW has run a ‘Jazz Hang’ for 11–16-year-olds in partnership with Trinity Laban since 2020. Crosby’s own comments about TW ‘straddl[ing] the two camps... we’re on the street, but our ears are really in the music college’ confound suggestions that TW sits at a remove from formal higher education (quoted in Warren, 2018).

3.3.1: Canon and repertoire

Second, such a binary is predicated on retroactive assumptions about the content of the TW programme. Music journalist Derek Robertson’s account of the ‘The New Jazz Generation’ for livestreaming platform Boiler Room offers one example, portraying TW as ‘a place where learning traditional basics are secondary to honing individuality and experimentation... where rule-breaking and genre-bending innovations are constantly pushing the boundaries’ (Robertson, 2019). There is an obvious logic in drawing a straight line of causation between the music of the Jazz Warriors, steeped in the vernacular musics of the Caribbean, and the omnivorous approach to genre evident the LJS, but this is one more of the myriad narrative simplifications that have sprung up by way of explanation for the scene’s prominence.

Instead, and perhaps surprisingly, the TW programme is rooted in a broadly conventional and narrow conception of jazz repertoire and ‘the tradition’, one which is steadfastly American in its focus. This has explicitly been Crosby’s goal with TW, a product of his earlier frustrations with the relative neglect of this repertoire during his time in the Jazz Warriors: ‘I’m interested in black American jazz and the band [the Jazz Warriors] at the time, for me, was not producing jazz musicians, it was producing black musicians... I wasn’t learning the history of jazz and neither were the musicians in the band. So I used Tomorrow’s Warriors as that starting point’

(quoted in Doffman, 2013, p. 79). P14 had taught with the Warriors for many years, and attests to this fact when discussing the TW approach to repertoire and pedagogy:

The tradition of the music should be universal, we all use the same format to teach... by learning Louis Armstrong and going through that tradition in a logical way: go to the beginning, stage one, stage two, stage three... after a while... you pick up your own people that you want to add into the mix. But... you must learn the blues, you must learn the Rhythm Changes. And you must learn some of the basic standards... this is for survival... You want to work into your 70s or your 80s? You ain't going in a hotel playing [avant-garde jazz musician] Eric Dolphy! It's not gonna work!

P14 outlines an approach to jazz study that is striking in its orthodoxy. The emphasis on canonical teaching rooted in the 'traditional basics' is in many ways of a piece with Neil's theory of institutional 'sacralisation' detailed in 3.2, and tracks with what Tony Whyton identifies as an 'American' approach, 'one that seeks to unify and underline jazz as a canonical artform, celebrating the contributions of a handful of iconic individuals at the expense of a more pluralistic perspective', which he contrasts with a 'European' tendency that he characterises 'as more eclectic, reflecting both the multinational perspectives of different jazz communities and a lesser fixation with the idea of one 'authentic' canon' (Whyton, 2006, pp. 75–76; see also DiPiero, 2022, pp. 70–88). Enthusiasm for the classic lineage of American jazz at TW also appears to be passed onto its students, despite the subsequent ambivalence to the canon professed by today's scene figureheads. This comes through in Mark Doffman's analysis of TW rehearsals from 2010-11 which featured future scene figureheads, including Moses Boyd, Mark Kavuma, Reuben Fox and Rosie Turton. Doffman's close reading of the negotiation and interplay between these musicians – largely at the time inexperienced teenagers – reveal a group immersed in the idioms, sonic vocabulary, discography and personal histories of American jazz and its iconic figureheads (Doffman, 2013).

What requires further exploration is how a grounding in a canonical approach to pedagogy seems to have provided the roots for a scene lauded for its popular appeal, iconoclasm and its refusal to be overawed by either historic or contemporary American jazz. Clearly this is not a result of an innovative or disruptive approach to repertoire relative to conservatoires. Rather, TW's mark upon the London scene stems from its distinctive, extramusical *ethos*, a combination of fundamental precepts of community music provision and from some hard lessons learned by the generation of protagonists who came up in a previous jazz 'explosion' in the 1980s. More than any points of sonic continuity, it is this ethical and pedagogical thread that reveals the influence of the Jazz Warriors generation upon the LJS.

3.3.2: Racism and 1980s British jazz

As Hillary Moore details in her analysis of interviews with some of the Jazz Warriors', their work was often framed (and dismissed) in the racially essentialist terms that have so often inflected jazz discourse: as equal parts raw, impassioned, powerful; and untutored, ill-disciplined and lacking sophistication. The cohort at times leaned into this discourse, employing a form of strategic essentialism and adaptation of racial stereotyping 'to empower their own self-definition' as proud, politically-charged musicians whose musical practice helped 'self-script a triumphant and celebratory black identity in opposition to its white counterpart' (Moore, 2016, pp. 127–8). Part of this celebratory process of identity formation was enacted through their novel syncretic approach to jazz and Black diasporic musics, an obvious antecedent for today's scene.

But this also proved a double-edged sword, opening opportunities for restrictive pigeonholing via media coverage that proved hard to escape, something Crosby suggests in a 2002 interview with jazz scholar George McKay: 'I think the press wanted there to be separate black and white jazz scenes, even a split... [and] the black side of the Jazz Warriors is one part of the band's story that's survived, and seems to have become more significant than certainly I thought at the time' (McKay, 2002). The Warriors successfully forged their own path in the face of a British jazz establishment that was initially disinterested or outright hostile to their work, but this in turn further *enabled* the jazz mainstream, recording industry and press to place their output at arms-length. Black British jazz in the 1980s was thus simultaneously lauded, and siloed from a British jazz identity at large, one whose history and 'sound' was understood to be normatively white and was at the time becoming increasingly oriented toward a 'European' sound that was self-consciously 'distan[ed] from black aesthetic values' (Moore, 2016, p. 129; see also Stuart Nicholson, 2005, pp. 195–223).⁸³ Additionally, as Dueck details, the success of the Jazz Warriors bred resentment among some white jazz players in the scene who perceived Black musicians to have an unfair advantage on the assumption that audiences viewed them as 'authentic' jazz musicians by dint of how they were racialised (Dueck, 2014, pp. 210–214). This framing misses the fact that such assumptions are profoundly restrictive, and that as a consequence of such hypervisibility 'part of the experience of being a black British musician involves resisting or

⁸³ For example the work of Norwegian saxophonist Jan Garbarek, the Esbjorn Svensson Trio and much of the roster of ECM Recordings. Moore points to predominantly white ensemble Loose Tubes as the pre-eminent British exponents of this Euro-jazz tendency. One interviewee pointed to record label Edition Records as 'ECM-lite', a contemporary iteration of this purportedly 'very white, very mainstream' sound (P18).

negotiating with the demands of majority-white audiences for particular kinds of musical blackness' (Dueck, 2014, p. 211).

The widespread framing of the Jazz Warriors as primarily being a 'black' band also overlooks the significance of class. As Crosby notes, 'the more important factor... [was] that *our parents were working class*, we were descendants of poor immigrants... not many of us were encouraged by our parents to become musicians. There was no money or desire to pay for private lessons, to go to college, no extended family support networks' [emphasis original] (McKay 2002). The neglected class background of the Jazz Warriors generation is certainly significant, as their formative experiences as Black working class musicians saw them doubly excluded from the British jazz world. These experiences galvanised Crosby to create accessible, free infrastructure for learning jazz (Ratliff, 2005; Smith and Pine, 2006; Moore, 2016, pp. 126–130). Trumpeter and former Warrior Claude Deppa, similarly frames his experiences of racist exclusion from NYJO in the 1970s *and* his concern about the decline of community bands in working-class communities as the inspiration for co-founding Kinetika Bloco (Burke, 2021, pp. 84–5).

Despite the commitment to free access to education, TW does not appear to have the same class character as the Jazz Warriors of the 1980s. According to P14, 'I've noticed that there's been a marked shift... towards aspiring middle class black families sending their children to us'. This reflects a much wider shift in the relationship between class and race in the late 20th and early 21st Centuries, from a 'quasi-deterministic to a more pronouncedly probabilistic nexus of class and race', evident in the emergence of a small, but significant, Black middle class in the UK (Rossi and Táíwò, 2020, p. 2). As suggested in Chapter Two, a serious discussion of class remains a lacuna in LJS discourse.

While a handful of these young Warriors from the 1980s parlayed the flurry of attention into international careers, notably the 'mediagenic' Courtney Pine who became a genuine jazz star, the fame enjoyed during the 1980s uptick of what Andrew Blake calls the 'jazz revival cycle' was relatively short-lived and most only enjoyed social cachet, let alone decent remuneration, for a few years (Blake, 1997, p. 113; McKay, 2005, p. 164). Despite the focus rightly placed upon TW in light of the LJS's prominence, less attention is paid to other musicians from Crosby's generation or those younger members involved in the second iteration of the Jazz Warriors after its revival in 1990 (Sinker, 1990). One example is saxophonist Steve Williamson who, despite being signed by influential American jazz label Verve in the 1990s and collaborating with prominent musicians from across the world and a range of genres (including Ali Farka Toure, Abbey Lincoln, and The Roots), is a cult figure today (Edwards and Williamson, 2014,

2015a, 2015b; May, 2019).⁸⁴ With journalists, record labels and audiences moving on in the 1990s, ‘the story since... is often presented as one of decline, stasis or neglect’ (Banks, Ebrey and Toynbee, 2014, p. 17).

3.3.3: Professionalism and industry politics

It is not coincidental that the Jazz Warriors’ moment in the sun came during the transformations in British political culture brought about by Thatcherism. This was a period in which the paternalist approach to state provision for the arts that had coalesced during the postwar social democratic turn came under fire both from ascendant right-wing market fundamentalists, and a New Left suspicious of calcified and elitist separations between the ‘fine arts’ and ordinary popular (sub)culture (Williams, 1979; Cloonan, 2007, pp. 31–36). Andrew Blake paints the Warriors’ ascent to stardom as precisely a product of this conjuncture, the ‘yuppie moment’ of the late 1980s associated with Thatcherism’, which ‘opened the space for the expression of this young, black and upwardly mobile grouping — the first upwardly mobile generation of blacks [sic] in Britain. For a couple of years, black British jazz had a real social cachet’ (Blake, 1997, p. 115). That the trajectory of the Warriors’ generation was shaped by the prevailing winds of emergent neoliberalism is not to cast these musicians as Thatcherites — their relationship to the dominant political culture of the day was distinctly oppositional when compared to the American neoclassicist/neoliberal connection explored in 3.2. But their experiences of marginalisation from an arts and educational establishment that otherwise offered jazz musicians some respite from market forces came at a time when entrepreneurialism, social mobility without state support, and increased intimacy between arts and commerce were very much the spirit of the age. This patterned the Warriors’ navigation of the jazz world and the wider music industries. Crosby himself has attributed both the Jazz Warriors’ success and the durability of TW to a ‘professionalism’ that was a product of the ‘so-called Thatcherite revolution’:

it was an 80s attitude... Some people were good at getting funding, selling culture, being entrepreneurial... The acid jazz, the dance jazz... promoters that had felt shut out by the jazz circuit—a bit like us—they helped us out, we helped each other really... What that taught me though was the importance of jazz being more than blowing [playing] —and out of that

⁸⁴ Virtually none of Williamson’s records are available on major streaming platforms, a fate he shares with many other jazz musicians from the 80s and 90s. This era of jazz suffers particularly from gaps in the digital archive, exacerbating the lack of historical context in commentary on the LJS and other contemporary iterations of British jazz. Jazz is ill-served by streaming platforms, with metadata inconsistencies, a lack of vital visible contextual information like the musicians involved, and the incompatibility of typical search functions with the jazz standards repertoire (with potentially hundreds of very different recordings with the same track name) lying at odds with ‘core jazz values’ (Goldschmitt and Seaver, 2019, p. 76). These problems also impact classical, folk, and ‘world’ musics.

experience came the commercial development of the solid business we've built up based around the various music projects (quoted in McKay, no date).

This pragmatism toward commerce and appreciation of the value of personal enterprise is evidently born from the shared experiences of marginalisation by a generation of musicians whose involvement in the previous 'jazz explosion' of the 1980s was bruising, as media attention and professional opportunities waned as rapidly as they emerged, exacerbating a group relationship in the Jazz Warriors that could often be fractious (Sinker, 1990; Bilby, 2014, pp. 74–76). More significant even than depth knowledge of jazz repertoire and collective history, the commitment to passing on this hard-won *professionalism* and first-hand experience of navigating from 'the heady days of vanguardism to the prosaic struggle to keep up [one's] craft' is where the TW approach has left its mark on today's LJS (Gennari, 2006, p. 360). P14's statement above about the importance of learning the ropes of jazz performance for 'survival' as a working musician into old age hints at how fundamental a clear-eyed understanding of jazz as a career is to the TW approach. Crosby also often emphasises his view that, in jazz performance, 'the entertainment comes first', a product of his years of touring as a working musician: 'I learned a lot on the road with Courtney Pine. If people didn't come through the door, I couldn't put food on the table – it was as simple as that' (quoted in Jones, 2019). Irons also often expounds the centrality of professionalism in the TW programme, describing TW as primarily about offering young people 'a pathway into the industry and [help to] build sustainable, successful careers in music'.⁸⁵ Indeed, Irons suggests that TW is fundamentally *vocational* in its orientation: 'it's more like an apprenticeship than education as such' (quoted in Jones, 2019).

TW's disposition toward the industry underscores the organisation's role as a link between early music education and codified, formal learning, providing a space specifically aimed at skilled young performers whose attendance indicates a seriousness about pursuing jazz as a career. Other organisations such as South London carnival collective Kinetika Bloco act as a 'feeder' for more advanced musicians to step up, but have notably different relationships to jazz pedagogy and professionalism. For tuba player Theon Cross, where 'Kinetika is more inclusive... whatever ability you are, they'll take you... Warriors is more geared towards people who want to take it more seriously, more professionally, getting more into bebop' (quoted in Burke, 2021, p. 185). Similarly trumpeter Mark Kavuma has lauded Kinetika Bloco's prioritisation of audience engagement as inculcating a 'spirit of putting on a show' that has

⁸⁵ TW's mission statement expands on this: to 'champion and support young people from the African diaspora, girls and those whose financial or otherwise challenging circumstances would tend to lock them out of opportunities to pursue a career in the music industry' (Bradshaw, 2021)

‘really impacted the current London jazz scene’ (West and Kavuma, 2023), but underscored the pre-requisite of talent and dedication to entry into TW: ‘I started going to Tomorrow’s Warriors through Kinetika because a lot of the more advanced players were going there... *that was where the serious jazz begun*’ [my emphasis] (Kavuma, 2021). Centring professionalism and an orientation toward a career in music, twinned with an appreciation of bebop as ‘serious jazz’, as first principals sets TW apart from the general tenor of community music education, where learning an instrument and playing together tends to be framed as a valuable end in itself (Higgins, 2012, pp. 41-55, 71–2; Higgins and Willingham, 2017, pp. 173–194).

The industry orientation also diverges substantially from the much more explicit anti-industry (and at times anti-capitalist) stances adopted by jazz or jazz-adjacent education antecedents in London such as the Scratch Orchestra or drummer John Stevens’ influential organisation Community Music (McKay, 2005, pp. 234–241). TW undoubtedly *is* an organisation that prioritises some core tenets of community music: enjoyment, experimentation, collectivity and conviviality, and more generally the kinds of ‘ordinary sociability’ that music-making enables and is so valorised in the LJS, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter Four (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, pp. 102–114). As Crosby is often at pains to point out, he sees his role as a facilitator rather than teacher, allowing attendees to learn to play with each other of their own accord. In his words, ‘what makes Tomorrow’s Warriors different is that we allow magic to flow’ (Holford, Crosby and Irons, no date). This emphasis on autonomy and finding ones’ own way as a musician is markedly different from the prescriptive jazz pedagogy of the US classroom (DiPiero, 2022, pp. 83–5). Cross has made a similar point when reflecting on his time at TW, saying ‘it felt more like a youth club type environment through music. So the social element and the academic elements were both intertwined’ (quoted in Burke, 2021, p. 185).

But these nestle, at times awkwardly, alongside a harder-edged, pragmatic understanding of what is necessary to become, and thrive, as a *working* musician. One participant, a journalist and writer, explained:

[Crosby] would explicitly tell [TW students] about how the systems will appropriate them and rinse them unless they're very careful. So there [is] schooling ... around what economic influences or success in some forms could potentially do to them, and their community and the music they made, short term and long term (P12).

The professional support and unvarnished realism offered by TW undoubtedly provides its students with invaluable guidance for navigating the pitfalls that particularly face women and people of colour working as jazz musicians. As one participant, an artist manager who works with successful TW alumni made clear, it also appears to be working: ‘[LJS musicians], they’re

so savvy, and they're much more business-minded, they know what to demand and what to sign off' (P36). With instruction about the music business in short supply at elite conservatoires, discussed below, this support is especially useful. After all, many of the hallmarks of the '80s attitude' that Crosby touches upon have only intensified after decades of British cultural policy oriented toward entrepreneurialism (Hesmondhalgh, 2019b, pp. 179–181). Today's creative workers are not only expected to conform by the dictates of market logic but are increasingly held up as the ideal type of flexible, entrepreneurial subject, 'a harbinger of the increasingly precarious nature of all work in late capitalist economies' (Haynes and Marshall, 2018, p. 461). Jobbing jazz musicians have specifically been touted as prototypical exemplars of workers who flourish under such conditions (e.g. Oakes, 2009; see also Chapman, 2024, p. 174; Laver, 2013; Prouty, 2013). In popular business and management literature as in creative industries policy, the capacity to improvise and an apparent drive to perform unconstrained by material reward provides an artistic gloss for systemic insecurity, casting jazz players as inherently well-suited to navigate the precarity of musical labour in the low-wage, high-rent economic landscape of contemporary neoliberal Britain (McRobbie, 2016; Mould, 2018). Under such conditions, it might seem fair to suggest that TW students need all the help they can get.

However, I would argue that something is lost when hard work, career sustainability and entrepreneurialism are foregrounded as the means to overcome marginalisation and exploitation within the cultural industries. It cedes vital ground on the question of 'selling culture', as Crosby puts it, framing the logic of commerce and the current configuration of the cultural industries - in which precarity and hardship is all but guaranteed for most jazz musicians - as an inevitability. Rather than seeing the economic landscape into which it sends its alumni as a terrain of contestation and collective struggle against exploitation, such a view naturalises these inequities, suggesting only that they can be successfully (and individually) overcome through a combination of hard work and business savvy.

My intention here is not to accuse TW of 'selling out' or suggest that their efforts to inculcate a sense of seriousness and professionalism in their students is somehow tainted by commerce. Again, this is ultimately a pragmatic perspective, and one which has evidently left at least some of its students well equipped in their working life. It is also expecting too much to ask that a relatively small jazz education organisation offer a fully fleshed-out structural critique of the exploitation of creative labour under conditions of neoliberal capitalism. But the willingness to accept the terms of engagement set by the music industries and 'play the game' of commerce

and enterprise, evident at Tomorrow's Warriors, echoes loudly and problematically in the politics of the LJS where it is often more prominent.

At times this goes beyond a simple, and wholly understandable, concession to the compromises inherent in making culture under capitalism of the sort detailed by Jo Haynes and Lee Marshall in their study of musicians as 'reluctant entrepreneurs', compelled toward a business mindset despite reservations about its implications for their creative autonomy (Haynes and Marshall, 2018). Instead, for a number of LJS participants, processes of commodification and enterprise appear to offer liberatory potential, with prominent figures in the scene enthusiastically positioning themselves as 'artist-entrepreneurs', working for (as Joy White puts it) 'love *and* money', with creative practices and the hunt for career advancement and financial gain understood as coterminous and mutually beneficial pursuits (White, 2017). To repeat: this is not a question of 'selling out', but rather what Paul Gilroy has called 'buying in', an active, agentic decision based on the view that (self)-commodification might afford a degree of artistic and personal autonomy within an environment that hinders this at every turn (Gilroy, 2013, p. 34).⁸⁶ In the contemporary scene, as in TW, the foregrounding of a substantive and nuanced postcolonial politics of identity and representation, and critique of gender and racial discrimination, sits alongside an implicit (and occasionally explicit) valorisation of business acumen. While attitudes toward 'the industry' and processes of commodification are varied and ambivalent, there is a clear tendency to lionise the virtues of 'hustle' culture and the purported meritocracy of the market (Carbone and Mijs, 2022). This point arose during an interview with an up-and-coming drummer who had studied and worked in the US. They suggested that the London scene was distinctive, both for its substantially better-paid gigs relative to America, and the '*huge* business mindset' shared by those playing on the London circuit (P21).⁸⁷ They pointed to the career development opportunities available to British musicians, singling out the 'Take Five' initiative run by 'non-profit cultural organisation' Serious (*What we do*, 2024),⁸⁸ through which many significant figures in British jazz have passed:

⁸⁶ This is discussed in much more detail in Chapter 6.

⁸⁷ The scene's entrepreneurial streak comes through, for example, in rapper Novelist's boilerplate narrative of business success ('jets and planes... exponential gains', and so on) on Ezra Collective's 'More Than a Hustler' (Partisan Records, 2021), or saxophonist Wayne Francis's discussion of his friendship with drummer Moses Boyd being rooted in their shared 'business mindset' (Considine, 2019).

⁸⁸ Founded in 1986 as a tour production company, Serious has since become an umbrella arts organisation and NPO. The organisation is an influential force in British jazz, producing the London Jazz Festival since its inception in 1993, alongside the Take Five programme (Webster and Mckay, 2017, pp. 26–28).

it's incredible, like Shabaka did it, Nubya did it. I think Seb Rochford did it; Emma-Jean Thackray... they nurture you and introduce you to businesspeople... it's such a huge part of our careers (P21).

However, they suggested that this career orientation came at the expense of the necessarily collective, and social, aspects of honing ones' craft as a jazz musician:

In a way, it's amazing that there's the support... [but] I think it definitely does take time out of the musical-creative side of things, and maybe that is neglected... I mean, jams do happen... but definitely not as much as somewhere else... yeah, it's kind of mad how much emphasis has been put on [business and strategy] (P21).

These tendencies are bound up with the more full-throated embrace of what we could call 'market empowerment' discourse elsewhere in contemporary popular music. This is most obvious and influential in contemporary pop music's lingua franca, hip-hop (Coddington, 2023, pp. 1–16), following what Lester Spence has identified as its 'neoliberal turn'. Spence suggests that, in a meaningful departure from earlier iterations of the genre, contemporary mainstream hip-hop almost universally celebrates business success as inherently worthwhile, and frames struggles against economic and racial marginalisation under the rubric of competitive individualism (Spence, 2011, 2013). In the UK, Malcolm James has traced similar ideological currents, running through the self-made ingenuity of pirate radio entrepreneurs in the 1990s jungle scene into similar sentiments and practices that structured the grime scene and its surrounding mythos (James, 2021).⁸⁹

The 'jazz populism' of the LJS is bound up with this 'neoliberal turn' throughout popular music culture, with the anti-elitist inflection of the LJS and its coverage at times taking on some of the more problematic features that McGuigan identifies in cultural populism. In particular, the disavowal of institutional education has been paralleled with a partial accommodation to neoliberal market logics and a tendency to 'celebrate rather than challenge the norms of the dominant consumer culture' (Moran and Littler, 2020, p. 859). Viewing commercial success through this celebratory lens risks a problematic 'equation of popular culture with market choice', providing a subversive gloss to the conflation of economic and cultural value (Frith, 1998, p. 15). Hence, the growth of attention paid to the scene is framed as having resistant qualities in and of itself. This creates a counterintuitive situation where, despite its name, a so-

⁸⁹ Grime icon JME's contribution to Ezra Collective and producer Swindle's single 'Quest For Coin II' (Enter the Jungle, 2020) helpfully details the neoliberal undercurrents of this market empowerment narrative: 'I'm trying to have *offshore accounts*/I was brought up living hand to mouth... Now I'm trying to make sure that my youths... Got enough money for the rent this week' (emphasis added).

called jazz ‘mainstream’ lags far behind the LJS in most standard metrics of popularity – and the relatively substantial audience for the London scene is taken to *confirm* its alterity.

But this itself points to an important situation- and genre-specific wrinkle in the embrace of the commercial in the LJS, one which requires an explanation beyond a kneejerk diagnosis of ‘neoliberalism’. Because the very fact of the scene’s success *has* offered a source of legitimacy in and of itself, demonstrating a successful connection with an audience – a ‘people’ – otherwise unconcerned with, and excluded from, the jazz world. Opposition toward ‘establishment’ intermediaries who arbitrate access to jazz education and arts funding is thus articulated through a qualified embrace of circuits of commerce, in part due to the parallel form of professional education provided by organisations like TW and Take Five. In turn, this has allowed prominent figures to publicly articulate multi-faceted political critiques to a comparatively large audience, and these (for all their potential co-option) carry real weight. As Gilroy suggests in his discussion of ‘buying in’, ‘precious, necessary resistance can sometimes be difficult to distinguish from accommodation’ (Gilroy, 2013, p. 34). Such a position plays a central part in the expression of the LJS’s populist critique of formal music education – and the reductive ‘downstream’ mediations of this critique which underpin the branding of the scene as constitutively anti-establishment.

3.4: The LJS, the academy, and institutional critique

Before analysing this critique in detail, it is worth briefly elaborating the relationship between the scene and the university. Taking the scene-defining compilation *We Out Here* (Brownswood, 2018) as an example, 75% of the 32 musicians featured on the recording studied music at a specialist higher education institution, a large majority taking Jazz Performance or Jazz Composition courses (see Table 1). Of those who were educated to BA level or higher, the majority attended Trinity Laban in Greenwich, underscoring the pivotal role this single institution has played in drawing together personal and professional networks of young musicians who constitute the backbone of the scene.⁹⁰ Again, this kind of shared educational background is now the norm for most jazz musicians, but given how claims to outsider status have buoyed the scene’s rise to prominence, demonstrating the embeddedness of the LJS

⁹⁰ As Table 1 also shows, a significant minority (43%) of musicians featured on *We Out Here* were TW alumni, further underlining the integral role the organisation has played in the scene.

within established pathways into the jazz world helps to deflate some of the more overblown versions of this narrative.

It also helps us better understand how LJS scenic identity is articulated vis-à-vis the conservatoire: not as an insurgent music community claiming ownership of the genre from without, but as an insider/outsider, uneasily (but productively) straddling the porous divide between the classroom, the professional circuit, and the wider world of the popular music industries. Many of the critiques that arise in discourse within and about the scene are broadly consistent with those that have dogged university jazz education since the outset. Assertions of inadequacy, uniformity and inauthenticity are widespread, invoked to burnish the credentials of the LJS by comparison. Others are specific to the cultural position of jazz, and the scene, in the present conjuncture. Here, wider frustration with institutional amnesia and erasure regarding British colonial histories and legacies, a mistrust of elite mismanagement and expertise, and a pragmatic, pluralistic approach to the boundaries of both genre, and art and commerce are folded together into an expansive institutional critique of formal jazz education.

Artist	Higher Education*	Tomorrow's Warriors?	Other Informal Education	Career Development Programme	Other Higher Education
Alexander Hawkins	<i>No formal music education</i>				Oxford
Amane Suganami	<i>No information available</i>				
Artie Zaitz	Trinity Laban		Kinetika Bloko		
Benjamin Appiah	Middlesex University				
Cassie Kinoshi	Trinity Laban (Classical Composition)	Student			
Daniel Casimir	Trinity Laban/Birmingham Conservatoire			Take 5 2019	
Dominic Canning	Middlesex University	Student	Kinetika Bloko, Southwark Music	Take 5 2022	
Dylan Jones	Trinity Laban	Student		Abram Wilson	
Femi Koleoso	Trinity Laban	Student			
George Crowley	<i>No information available</i>				
Jake Long	Trinity Laban				
James Mollison	Middlesex University	Student			
Joe Armon-Jones	Trinity Laban	Student			
Kwake Bass	<i>No information available</i>				
Mansur Brown	Royal Academy				
Moses Boyd	Trinity Laban	Student		Abram Wilson	
Mutale Chashe	Trinity Laban				
Nathaniel Cross	Guildhall	Student	Kinetika Bloko	Take 5 2022	
Nubya Garcia	Trinity Laban	Student	Camden Music, Kinetika Bloko	Take 5 2018	
Onome Edgeworth	<i>No information available</i>				
Oscar Jerome	Trinity Laban				
Ricco Komolafe	Middlesex University				
Richie Seivwright	<i>No information available</i>	Student	Kinetika Bloko	Abram Wilson	
Ruth Goller	London Music School/				
Shabaka Hutchings	Guildhall (Classical performance, clarinet)	Student		Take 5 2010	
Sheila Maurice-Grey	Trinity Laban	Student	Kinetika Bloko		
Theon Cross	Guildhall	Student	Lewisham Music, Kinetika Bloko		Goldsmiths
Tim Doyle	City University (paired with Guildhall)				
TJ Koleoso	<i>No information available</i>	Student			
Tom Skinner	<i>No information available</i>	Student		Take 5 2011	
Twm Dylan	Trinity Laban				
Yohan Kebede	London College of Contemporary Music				

Table 1: Educational backgrounds of musicians appearing on *We Out Here* (Brownswood, 2018)

*(NB all specialist jazz programmes except where noted)

3.4.1: Inadequacy

One strand of critique offered is simply that formal jazz education is not fit for purpose. Comments made during an interview with an artist manager and strategist who provides industry expertise at music colleges in London, laid this out in stark terms. They suggested that ‘the lack of provision within London-based, top-tier conservatoires for skill sets to navigate to the music industry for their artists is criminal. It’s negligent - there isn't any’ (P18). They reflected on their negative experiences of what they called ‘the stranglehold that the conservatoires have on the jazz idiom’ as a gig promoter: ‘[there were] all these people trying to book their piano trio, sending me terrible emails with no vision and no content and no context and no idea’. They also took aim at the limited vocational training available to conservatoire students, suggesting that at the Royal Academy, ‘the only bit of non-musical education they [provide] was a lesson on how to become a teacher’ (P18). I spoke to a saxophonist and educator working in jazz for over 20 years who made a congruent point:

communicat[ing] with audiences is not something you learn at college... so there's hundreds of kids coming out of college that are just like: 'what do I do now? What I've learned is completely useless... why am I not touring with my beautiful tunes that I've spent the last three years writing?’ (P17)

While anecdotal, these claims repeats a familiar complaint in discussion of jazz education where the failure to attend to the exigencies of the ‘real world’ of work in the cultural industries drastically restricts the horizons of possibility for new graduates, a form of institutional reproduction dismissed pithily by Nicholson as ‘teachers teaching teachers’ (Nicholson, 2005, p. 99).

Nicholson and P18 are being polemical, and perhaps a little unfair, here.⁹¹ But the pragmatic moves made by jazz advocates past and present to ‘reconfigure rapidly disappearing jazz scenes’ by consecrating jazz as a high art form at home in the university *do* appear to have produced recursive tendencies, with the underlying assumption of jazz’s commercial irrelevance helping ensure its ongoing marginality in the popular imagination (Wilf, 2014, p. 204). Recent research bears this out, showing Leeds College of Music as the only major jazz

⁹¹Although they do have a point: while empirical data on this subject is sparse, a 2009 study of the relationship between informal networks and employment among jazz musicians in New York, New Orleans and San Francisco found that ‘jazz musicians with conservatory training face dampened earnings in these three cities’ (Pinheiro and Dowd, 2009, p. 504). Beyond a lack of preparedness for the world beyond college, they attributed this to other musicians’ ‘ambivalence about the merits of higher education instruction in jazz - particularly because of what they see as its cerebral and dry approach’ (Pinheiro and Dowd, 2009, p. 504).

conservatoire to provide any compulsory music business education as of 2021 (Hodgkins and Fordham, 2021, p. 84).

Some musicians I spoke to on this subject were often reluctant to attribute advances in their career to professional support they had received as part of a degree:

Interviewer

what role has [studying at Trinity Laban] played in your career?

P31

[pause] Okay, so yeah, this is anonymous? [laughs] I would say [pauses] a very small percentage... going to jam sessions, Tomorrow's Warriors... [are] kind of what aided my career... Trinity was a bit of a difficult time for me. I can only speak from personal experience, [but] because I had to work really hard to pay for my course... I remember, people saying that... when you're at music college, you should start a band... [and] that's where [my band] started. It was just at the end of me being at Trinity. I guess it's [my] actions... what aided to my career, I wouldn't say necessarily going to Trinity, in all honesty.

In our conversation they were circumspect and at times hesitant in their disavowal of music college as a factor in their career advancement - note the clarification they sought regarding anonymity, and their emphasis that they were recounting personal experience rather than an overarching statement about the shortcomings of jazz education. Such caveats suggest a reticence about being overtly critical of other individuals and organisations within their milieu, a recurring theme with musicians participants in particular, speaking to the intimacy and web of close personal connections amongst scene constituents that has at least partially survived the 'explosion' of the late 2010s.

But this hesitancy notwithstanding, as founding member of a significant LJS band, P31's suggestion that formal education was financially burdensome and ultimately inconsequential for their career paints a striking contrast between the importance placed on professional survival at an organisation like TW, and its seeming neglect at tuition fee-paying conservatoires. Scene constituents like P18 and P31 frame the pursuit of a career within the ambit of commercial popular music as a way out of the institutional-educational-establishment negative feedback loop that P18 describes as a 'stranglehold', despite being aware of the risks of exploitation and misrepresentation that come with engagement with the press and the cultural industries.

What is significant is the implication that, alongside potential access to a wider audience and more remuneration, the commercial pathway might afford greater *creative autonomy* (see

Banks, 2010). And further, if the conventional ways of teaching jazz are leaving graduates ill-equipped to find an audience for their work and maintain a sustainable career as a working musician, then the very commercial success of the LJS itself further entrenches the faultline between the scene and educational setting from which it emerged.

3.4.2: Americanisation

Alongside concerns about the usefulness of university jazz education for negotiating the contemporary cultural industries, many LJS musicians have suggested that university teaching in Britain is overly focused on American jazz. British and European jazz has long been animated by a fluctuation between emulation and disavowal of American jazz (Sykes, 2017b; Dias, 2019, pp. 126–132). While limited attention has been paid to the role that formal education plays in shaping this relationship (see McGee, 2020, pp. 1–34; S Nicholson, 2014), attitudes toward American jazz among my participants appear tightly linked to their experiences at higher education institutions. Many expressed discontent with the US-centric parochialism of conventional university syllabi. One participant made this clear in their account of developing their own sound upon graduating:

The music that I studied at music college, was... mainly American jazz. And... I felt that, especially the American jazz, wasn't very authentic to me. At the time, I was trying to play like all these wonderful musicians - like Freddie Hubbard, and y'know, people like that from the Blue Note era. And yeah, it didn't ring true to me and my experience of life (P35).⁹²

The reference to Hubbard and 'Blue Note era' is instructive, implying a period roughly between the mid-50s and mid-60s where the label established its distinctive, heavily mythologised visual and sonic signature. This was the same period in which a sharp dividing line was being drawn in Britain, between trad jazz revivalists who positioned themselves as 'the guardian[s] of the memory of jazz's roots', and Britain's homegrown jazz modernists, looking to the future and across the Atlantic for inspiration (Saitō, 2019, p. 90). And as jazz writer Christopher May has illustrated, Blue Note Records led the charge in this era in cementing jazz in the wake of bebop as a hip, serious art music which represented a unique cultural expression of masculine American Afro-modernity – not coincidentally also the period to which the neoclassicists looked to for inspiration (Christopher May, 2007; see also Cook, 2003; Magee, 2007). This normative understanding of patrilineal American jazz authenticity compounds the underlying marginalisation and exclusion of women in jazz. As work by music education scholars Pauline

⁹² British jazz musician and scholar Mike Fletcher has discussed a very similar experience, of coming to question the 'relevance' of the mid-century American jazz language he had learned in his formal studies and 'wonder[ing] how to speak this language in a way that reflected the time and place that I lived in' (Fletcher, 2017, p. 170).

Black and Erin Wehr shows (Wehr, 2016; Black, 2023), relatable women role models are key in encouraging aspiring female musicians into playing jazz, and as such a myopic emphasis on jazz as the product of heroic American masculinity in British music education could serve to reproduce the exclusion of women from the genre in the UK. This certainly affected P35, who singled out the absence of prominent women musicians as examples to follow when first engaging with jazz as a significant obstacle to her participation: ‘growing up as a girl, obviously... I had no role models... when I was studying GCSE music, we didn't learn about any female composers... [and] I didn't know of any successful jazz trumpet players. [laughs] So that was another crush to my confidence’.

P35's account shows how being immersed in a musical history whose meaning is already overdetermined by what John Gennari calls ‘jazz's heavy symbolic burden in the American imagination (“America's only indigenous art form,” “African-American classical music”)' can weigh even more heavily upon British musicians, particularly women, through canon-oriented teaching in formal institutions (Gennari, 2006, p. 370). It seems unsurprising that learning to play through mimicry of this storied period in jazz history failed to ‘ring true’ to her own experience and identity as a woman composer and instrumentalist with British and Middle Eastern heritage.⁹³ P35's experience also contributes to and reaffirms the well-established theme of insecurity toward America, a constitutive feature of British jazz (and popular music) since its inception (McKay, 2005, pp. 1–44; Abravanel, 2012, pp. 53–85; Hamilton, 2016, pp. 86–88).

Such misgivings about stultifying, American-centric *nostalgia* in British jazz courses sits alongside related accusations elsewhere of *myopia*: the belief that greater attention should be paid to the fullness of jazz histories closer to home. This is a fairly common refrain in British jazz discourse, evident in Nicholson's 2011 complaint that ‘no UK university, conservatory, or college offering jazz degree courses [that] includes courses on the history of jazz in the United Kingdom’ (Nicholson, 2014, p. 265n10). Within the LJS, the university is cast as perpetuating a longstanding erasure of Afro-diasporic musicians in particular, and their contribution to British jazz. Rising star tenor saxophonist Chelsea Carmichael has offered this critique, highlighting the occlusion of ‘the lineage of Black British excellence within jazz’: “The Conservatoire path is very American-focused... we have our own history and legacy [in the UK] and we don't do too much digging into it”. (*About | Chelsea Carmichael*, no date). Scene members have pointed specifically to the absence of Afrobeat pioneer Fela Kuti from British jazz syllabi, (e.g. Awoyungbo, 2020; Lewis, 2020) suggesting his absence – as arguably the most obvious

⁹³ I am being purposefully vague here for the sake of anonymity.

influence upon idiomatic jazz in London today, and an alumnus of Trinity Laban – is a particularly glaring example of institutional myopia. This came up, unprompted, during my conversation with an experienced pianist from the scene, suggesting that ‘I hadn’t even *heard* of Fela until I started playing with Femi [Koleoso]’ (P32).

The scene’s friction with university syllabi is situated amidst growing calls for institutional decolonisation in contemporary culture, evident in the centrality of citation and excavation in the cultural politics of the scene. By producing music that sits at the intersection of a wide range of musical traditions, and overflows the borders of both genre and nation, LJS musicians actively seek to problematise American-oriented pedagogy and historical neglect of Black Atlantic popular styles in jazz education. It is in this context that many LJS members deliberately eschew many of the quintessential sonic features of the neoclassicist sound that predominate in British and American jazz schools, something which music journalist John Lewis discussed at length in 2020. He notes ‘how utterly un-American these British musicians sound: listen to their music and you’ll hardly hear any swing or bossa nova rhythms, the usual pulse of American jazz’ (Lewis, 2020). In the piece, saxophonist Garcia makes clear that, while fluent in institutionally advocated jazz styles, she deliberately disavows this vocabulary, seeing it as inimical to her artistic project: ‘I can certainly play bebop over swing rhythms if I choose – it’s just that I make a conscious decision not to do so on stage’ (Lewis, 2020). This represented a relatively novel departure given Garcia’s past enthusiasm for canonical jazz saxophonists, according to P14: ‘I remember when I met Nubya, she was *only* into Dexter Gordon and Lester Young - Stan Getz!’

Garcia’s comments convey a sense that this is a self-assured cohort of musicians, whose active efforts to distance themselves from institutional norms have exorcised the insecurities felt by prior generations of (particularly Black) British jazz musicians toward American jazz. In media coverage, the disavowal of jazz education becomes flexible shorthand for the aura of novelty and oppositionality surrounding the scene, evident in Lewis’s commentary on Garcia’s band in an earlier live review: ‘most of them studied on the jazz course at Trinity Laban College in south-east London and clearly know their African-American jazz history, but this seems to be the first generation of British musicians making jazz that is *distinctly, defiantly, gleefully post-American*’ [my emphasis] (Lewis, 2019). Pianist P32 pointed to the gig setting as a key site for enacting this of ‘defiance’:

in an academic situation like [the Royal] Academy, it's almost like you're waiting for permission, you've got a big academic institution telling you what's jazz and what's not... [whereas] because jazz in London came off a live culture, I think for me there was a revelation that you

didn't need permission because you got your instant feedback [from the audience] on the bandstand... you don't need the institution to tell you what is and isn't jazz.

Their suggestion that audience feedback in a live setting provides a better register of artistic legitimacy that institutional 'permission' is a crucial one, underscoring the pivotal role that performance plays in the scene's formation, promotion and mythology, discussed further in Chapter Four. It also points to the final key point of tension between the LJS and formal jazz education.

3.4.3: (In)accessibility and jazz populism

At play in these discussions of jazz education's inadequacy is what Wilf identifies as two 'discourses of legitimation', which sit in dialectical tension in LJS discourse, 'one focusing on aesthetic modernism and the other on market demand' with degrees of emphasis varying between participants and context (Wilf, 2014, p. 72). One way that some LJS constituents bridge the divide between these two discourses of legitimacy is by valorizing accessibility, and the kinds of 'instant feedback' foregrounded by P32, over what they perceive as the aimless complexity of institutionally sanctioned aesthetic modernism.

Saxophonist Camilla George summarises this distinction: 'one thing I hated about some of the people at college was that they thought they were really clever writing stuff in 15 or 13 time signatures, but... it didn't sound like music. It sounded like an exercise to me' (quoted in Burke, 2021, p. 173). Similarly, P32 suggested that the move away from self-conscious efforts to appear 'clever' as a positive effect of the scene's success: '[jazz] always used to be seen as a sort of very mysterious, esoteric thing... like you needed a PhD to understand it. Whereas now... I don't think it's got such a kind of impenetrable mystique behind it'. For both these musicians, the real value of musicianship lies in nurturing a genuine connection and a communal affective experience amongst other musicians and the audience.

Shabaka Hutchings frames his work as driven by a similar impulse, where he seeks to 'break down the mystique of... cultural forms that are supposed to be so... revered' (Hutchings and Ghadiali, 2021, p. 143). This is done explicitly through foregrounding sonic accessibility as a way to draw in new listeners: 'my favourite thing... is to settle into a simple groove that everyone can dance to, and then go batshit crazy with free improvisation on the saxophone. If we do something accessible to the average listener, the pure jazz stuff is not so scary' (quoted in Hodgkinson, 2018).⁹⁴ This musical-political practice is a direct outgrowth of his experiences

⁹⁴ Other musicians such as Theon Cross and Binker Golding have explicitly cited the dance-friendly quality of their music as a means of, in Golding's words, 'giving back to people', underscoring the populist-aesthetic connection in the scene (Searle and Cross, 2019; Zimmerman, 2019)

as a classical clarinet student at Guildhall and his struggles with ‘the academy and European culture, its hegemony and hierarchy in relation to other forms’ (Hutchings and Ghadiali, 2021, p. 141). During his studies, his enthusiasm for jazz – and proximity to musical Blackness – was treated as undermining his classical musicianship and the ‘white cultural, European musical values’ his teachers were trying to inculcate in him, reproducing colonial understandings of Self and Other through the maintenance of cultural hierarchy (Hutchings & Ghadiali, 2021, p. 5-6).⁹⁵

However, George suggests that the scene’s efforts to overcome jazz affectation and institutional mystification have been fraught, creating fractures within the jazz world at large.

there are certain jam sessions, certain scenes where you know they think all of us [in the LJS] are crap... they’ve come straight out of the college vibe... [where] you have to show everybody how good you are, and there’s not that idea of developing artistry, which Black musicians have really done (quoted in Burke, 2021, p. 170).

The suggestion that criticism of the scene stems from a preoccupation with prominent signalling of sterile, self-conscious complexity in the ‘college vibe’, derived from university jazz education, resonates with the racist accusations of incompetence levelled at Crosby’s generation. A notable move made by George here is to call into question these critics’ criteria for assessing ‘artistry’, suggesting that these unnamed commentators mistake sonic simplicity and/or pop-derived aesthetics for a lack of sophistication.

She positions the scene as channelling the ethos of past Black jazz innovators whose practice was misunderstood: ‘I’m sure those gatekeepers do not like what’s going on, but then when bebop was emerging, people didn’t like that [either]... we will look back at this and the Afrobeat thing and think... actually people are drawing on their heritage which, to people who don’t know about those rhythms and those cultures, might seem like it’s blagging - but it’s not’ (Burke, 2021, p. 173). There is some cause to question the coherence of this reference to bebop given how elsewhere we have seen a qualified distancing of scene musicians from bebop aesthetics due to perceived contemporary associations to the exclusionary practices of university pedagogy, understood as complicit in reproducing institutional whiteness, something I return to shortly (DiPiero, 2023).

Evoking bebop in this context is also surprising given its place in jazz history as precisely the moment when ‘jazz had become *art*... no longer a music tied to the mundane realities of social dance or popular song’ (Deveaux, 2005, p. 16). The LJS is here being rhetorically positioned as

⁹⁵ As we shall see in Chapter Six, however, this commitment to demystification and accessibility has distinct limits.

inheritor of bebop's symbolic status as a moment of rupture from musical orthodoxy and a cultural movement defined by its oppositional *stance* vis-à-vis the jazz 'mainstream'. But George is seeking to legitimate an aesthetic and scenic ethos in London typically characterised by accessibility, openness, and an understanding of 'artistry' distinct from, or even at odds with, complexity as such, all of which sits at a clear remove from the cultural project of bebop. She does so by advancing a specific view of musical history placing the LJS as at the forefront of an ongoing cycle of Black musical innovation and white belittlement and misinterpretation. Her response demonstrates the complexity of the scene's relationship to jazz history and education and the malleability of the jazz tradition as it is employed by both the scene's detractors and advocates. We can see further proof of this in comments made by saxophonist Cassie Kinoshi, who addresses similar subject matter to George, folding it into a wide-ranging critique of the misplaced priorities of contemporary jazz education:

Jazz has always been about communication, of shared experience and emotion. So, when you concentrate on the virtuosity they teach in the conservatoires and remove the community with other people, that makes it a very cold thing. It's the classical approach, when jazz has come from dance. It's got 'refined' (quoted in Hasted, 2019a).

Kinoshi's critique exactly inverts the terminology used by early jazz advocates to tout the music's legitimacy and artistic parity with the classical canon, for whom the music's 'refinement' was a key indicator of its quality (Lopes, 2004). These statements further indicate how, for those in the scene, the hegemonic influence of pedagogical techniques, music theory and schemas of cultural value derived from European classical music, as disseminated through university jazz programmes, are complicit in the intertwined, and enduring sonic *and* social inaccessibility of jazz. Kinoshi continues:

It's removing the historical context of jazz, getting rid of where it came from and why it exists. Conservatoires teach jazz in the same way as classical music, without the emotion... that removes the blackness of it. And in Britain it's presented often as an upper-class genre... That removes the whole idea of jazz being a community genre for everyone... (Hasted, 2019a).

This is a succinct critique of the alienating effects of 'cold' and 'refined' classical hegemony and its problematic treatment of 'music separately from the social practices in which it is situated and therefore meaningful' (DiPiero, 2023, p. 53), while framing the emphasis on sociality and demystification in the LJS as representing a return to the spaces, sounds and communal experiences of authentic jazz: 'lots of my peers, like Moses Boyd and Nubya Garcia, and promoters like Total Refreshment Centre, make sure they maintain that dance movement and energy in the music, which has *brought people back*' [emphasis added]. Kinoshi's argument is

also notable for its refusal to separate aesthetic norms from questions of race or class, treating them as ultimately co-productive and self-sustaining, a point also made by P32:

when I was at [Royal] Academy, it was all public schoolboys. Literally all, like, I was the only girl there, I think there was one other black person there... So it was basically very, very white, very middle class. [pause] I think that had an effect on the type of music people were making, I honestly do (P32).

Both statements speak to the validity of claims about the inaccessible nature of jazz in London and the UK today. They gesture toward arguments made in recent critical literature, which has sought to demonstrate how formal music education serves as a site for the reproduction of elite cultural dominance, sexism and what DiPiero calls, following George Lewis, ‘Eurological epistemologies’ (DiPiero, 2023). It is also instructive that many of the most vocal critics of jazz education in the press and among my interviewees were women jazz musicians. I believe this reflects an undercurrent of problematic machismo in jazz colleges, which has been tied to a pedagogical culture of obsessive adherence to pedagogical and practice techniques derived from Western classical theory via bebop (McMullen, 2021; DiPiero, 2023). Jazz critic Nate Chinen describes this quasi-subcultural identity as the ‘jazzbro’, one that combines nerdy devotion to historical and theoretical knowledge with displays of masculine bravado, neither of which have done much to broaden the music’s appeal amongst the uninitiated (Chinen, 2013).⁹⁶ With jazz college now the main site for learning and playing jazz, I would contend that the phenomenon of the ‘jazzbro’ reflects and contributes to the enduring ‘white patriarchal culture of jazz education’ and further intensifies the sense of exclusivity and elitism that surrounds the music.

Clearly then, the institutional critique advanced both verbally and musically by many of the most prominent figures in the LJS is timely and incisive, a key component in the vital contribution the scene has made to undermining ‘white patriarchal culture’ in contemporary British jazz. As I have shown, part of the political project of the LJS involves explicitly recovering visions of the musical past that have been hitherto confined to the margins of colonial and Eurocentric music scholarship and jazz history. By drawing upon sources of inspiration from the numerous and global cultural heritages of the scene’s exponents otherwise marginalised in British jazz history, the work of artists like George, Shabaka Hutchings or Sarathy Korwar take on the kind of critical, decolonial valence outlined by Carmichael, one that draws from the past and directs new listeners to forcibly suppressed cultural histories, without being suffocated by

⁹⁶ A well-known representation, or caricature, of ‘jazzbro’ culture can be found in the marathon, masochistic practice session scenes in the 2014 film *Whiplash* (Jago, 2015, p. 108; Pillai, 2017, pp. 8–11).

the legacy of jazz greats. This critique, and the means by which is articulated, speak to the position of strength and confidence of contemporary Black cultural production in the UK.

We can see this, for example, in jazz journalist Nick Hasted's 2019 profile of London's 'new jazz generation' (Hasted, 2019c). Hasted frames the scene's practice as a 'reversal' in a manner similar to Kinoshi, setting the LJS against the '1960s drive to take jazz out of clubs and into concert halls' as a form of 'black classical music' - a process that drummer Moses Boyd understood as born from 'an inferiority complex. I don't mean to seem arrogant. But I don't need that validation' (quoted in Hasted, 2019). Rather than adjusting their sounds, visual style or performance practice on the terms of European concert music, LJS musicians are seeking to change these terms entirely. This is also in evidence in Shabaka Hutchings' 'Kofi Flexxx' project. At a performance in 2022 'apparently inspired by Hutchings's experience of the exuberance of school bands in the Caribbean' and involving young TW players, Hutchings described Kofi Flexxx as 'assical' music, using instrumentation and styles of arrangement derived from the European classical tradition, but pointedly 'with the class connotations removed' and that made you want to 'move your ass' (Muggs, 2022). Here we can see a succinct summary of the wider LJS project: dance-oriented and with an iconoclastic approach both to European elite culture and canonical features of jazz orthodoxy.

At the same time, these interventions are also fundamental to claims of the LJS's oppositionality – and as such its branding as a vital and novel artistic intervention in the jazz world. The principle discursive mode through which scene members conceptualise their relation to the jazz world and the music's history is in terms of *reclamation* and *rejuvenation*, often expressed through a depiction of the jazz tradition as fundamentally rooted in dance and entertainment. In other words, rather than reflecting a concern with historical accuracy, such a framing of the scene employs what jazz scholar Nicholas Gebhardt calls a 'poetic' approach to the music's 'myth of origins', to legitimate LJS aesthetics and performance conventions as firmly belonging within the jazz tradition (Gebhardt, 2011, p. 13). But as Raymond Williams has argued, any invocation of tradition is 'an aspect of *contemporary* social and cultural organisation... a vision of the past which is intended to connect with and ratify the present. What it offers in practice is a sense of predisposed continuity' (Williams, 1977, p. 116). In this sense, the populist overtones of discussions of the 'return' to the dancefloor and 'to the people' serves to provide post-hoc ratification, via a selective and flexible reading of the jazz tradition, for the scene's move toward pop aesthetics. These sounds and styles themselves then appear to be ascribed an intrinsically critical valence: dissolving generic boundaries and

cultural hierarchies, drawing from an institutionally marginalised legacy of jazz as entertainment to create a sound palette that is present tense and future-facing.

In this context, LJS musicians can successfully draw upon two otherwise contradictory sources of legitimacy. They simultaneously reify the art-versus-popular (or school-versus-street) binary to articulate their critique of elitism in jazz and position the scene as upending the ‘cultural ladder’ described by Fellezs; and *confound* this same binary, confidently moving between genre conventions, jazz styles and performance venues at either end of the spectrum. Kinoshi is a perfect example here: her work runs the gamut between heavy metal-inflected small-group jazz with her band Brown Penny, touring the world as a member of viral Afrobeat group Kokoroko,⁹⁷ and producing commissioned work for the London Sinfonietta (*Cassie Kinoshi*, no date).⁹⁸ Rather than a playful puncturing of the prestige assigned to highbrow culture through juxtaposition with popular forms, I would argue that the enduring distance between the two is precisely responsible for providing the gap within which the scene has flourished. While institutional music education has subsumed (certain kinds of) jazz, it continues to be structured by what Loren Kajikawa has termed the ‘possessive investment in classical music’ and remains both the preserve of a *material* elite and a site for the reproduction of elitist, Eurological cultural ideals (Kajikawa, 2019). This provides LJS artists with a distinctive musical offer and a countercultural aura of alterity, providing competitive edge in a jazz marketplace that is overcrowded and (typically) commercially unviable – while simultaneously maintaining access to sources of public and institutional support reserved for jazz as a result of its ‘sacralised’ status as a form of art music.

It is in this process of narrativisation or branding where the often thoughtful and nuanced critiques of musical elitism and institutionalisation evident throughout this chapter lose some acuity. Press and promotional literature has played a key role here, tending toward a simplistic, readymade narrative whereby the LJS are ‘reclaim[ing] the genre from its storied old guard’ (Whitehouse, 2018a). These narratives at times perpetuate the kinds of historical erasures (of, for example, Crosby’s generation of musicians) that participants have been so keen to avoid; and often reintroducing the essentialisms that the LJS is framed as undercutting. A 2018 profile from British broadsheet *The Times* is representative, opening by describing British jazz as

⁹⁷ Kinoshi played with the group in its ascendancy, but left in 2023 (Williams, 2023)

⁹⁸ Multi instrumentalist Emma-Jean Thackrey similarly spans the ‘cultural ladder’: while her primary instrument is the trumpet and she has a firm grounding in jazz, as I discuss in Chapter Five, the bulk of her recorded output is club-oriented, but she has also worked on a large-scale project with the London Symphony Orchestra, which she has framed as an effort in democratisation: ‘contemporary classical music... can be very segregated... I tried to make it as affordable as possible... to get the older, middle-class, white classical audience to listen to some beats’ (Sjerven, 2021a).

typically ‘the preserve of piano-doodling dads in turtlenecks... a world that brings with it clichés of ageing bohemians sporting complex facial hair arrangements whose natural habitat is an attic in Stoke Newington’, against which the author approvingly contrasts the LJS to demonstrate that ‘a jazz revolution really is afoot’ (Hodgkinson, 2018). Another prominent example here would be the satirical 2019 profile of a typical fan of ‘new’ London jazz for the online magazine *Vice*, in which the titular ‘Nu Jazz Lad’ is described as ‘distinct from those weird young people who are into Actual Jazz – the ones who wear porkpie hats and a general air of condescension and involuntary celibacy... [who] goes to Ronnie Scott’s in a waistcoat and laments that he wasn’t around during the Prohibition era’ (Haidari, 2019). These colourful collections of class, status, age, spatial and perhaps even tacit racial signifiers reifies that which it (and the scene) is nominally seeking to break down, invoking an archetype – the affected white jazz ‘hipster’ – who has been a recurrent feature (and figure of ridicule) for the bulk of the music’s history (Monson, 1995)⁹⁹. The complex relationship between the scene, marketing and promotion, and the press is discussed more extensively in Chapter Six, but here I want to highlight how the institutional critique advanced by LJS constituents themselves contains traces of these same stereotypes employed in external commentary about the scene.

If we return to Kinoshi’s statements about conservatoire jazz teaching being a ‘cold’ and ‘refined’ process that stunts ‘communication’ and ‘emotion’, as an example, we can see how her efforts to differentiate the open, accessible and anti-elitist qualities of the LJS from the British jazz landscape at large rest upon a set of nested binary essentialisms. These interlocking oppositions are a ‘somewhat rudimentary but remarkably persistent’ feature of jazz discourse, and permeate commentary of and about the LJS (Stanbridge, 2023, p. 6). We can visualise them as follows:

⁹⁹ It also has a notable local history in British pop culture, particularly television comedy, of the recent past. The characters Louis Balfour, presenter of the fictional ‘Jazz Club’ programme on the 1990s British sketch comedy *The Fast Show*; and/or Howard Moon, a main character from BBC sitcom *The Mighty Boosh* which first aired 2002-2004, are ‘screen parodies of jazz subculture which mine solipsism for humour’, depicting British jazz fans as archetypal out-of-touch hipsters in the Monson mould (Pillai, 2017, pp. 4–5; Marmot, 2024, p. 11). That these are both influential depictions in contemporary British pop culture is borne out by their close resemblance to the caricatures portrayed in the *Times* and *Vice* articles.

Hot	Cold
Community	Individual
Popular	Elite
Communication	Isolation
Movement/dance	Stasis
Emotion	Intellect
Body	Mind
Circular time	Linear time
Nature	Culture
Masculine	Feminine
Black	White

We can see here how the elite/popular distinction, which serves as a keystone of the scene's collective identity and 'unique selling point', in turn maps onto a whole series of far-reaching oppositions, which the discourse surrounding the scene serves to simultaneously prop up and undermine. But the presence, and tying together, of these essentialisms in the discursive construction of the LJS as rightful inheritor of jazz as the once and future popular dance music raises real problems.

Significantly, tying musical *blackness* to dance and entertainment – and ascribing this move with an inherent progressive politics - sidelines vital, radical currents in jazz that themselves have been intimately connected to Black politics. Returning to Camilla George's citation of bebop above is instructive here. Pioneering musicians such as Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and Max Roach actively sought from the end of the 1930s to escape the status of jazz as entertainment, forging a novel aesthetic based on conversational improvisation among musicians playing predominantly in small ensembles. Bebop musicians often quite deliberately embraced a forbidding level of complexity that sits at some remove from the populist, poly-generic and groove-oriented output of London jazz. In after-hours clubs such as Minton's Playhouse in New York, this 'polyrhythmic complexity and irregular phrasings' of bebop 'signal[ed] that it is a music meant for listening and not for dancing' (Belgrad, 2015, p. 226).

Such complexity sharply demarcated this radical new sound from dominant jazz-pop music of 1930s America: large swing ensembles, that were both modelled on European orchestral traditions in terms of performance norms, and oriented toward dance. The bebop context, then, was one in which a turn away from dance through the use of 'formal attributes emphasizing the African American musical idiom: polyrhythm, timbre, and a structure of call-and-response' served precisely *as* a rejection of musicking conventions derived from European models (Belgrad, 2015, p. 226). In this context, many bebop musicians 'reject[ed] their entertainer's stance for that of modern artists', self-consciously overcoming 'the limits placed

on black jazz musicians by the white-dominated music business' through music with a 'a sharp and, to many, an uncomfortable edge' (Ramsey, 2003, p. 106).

This was a political aesthetic, intimately connected to an incipient politics of African American autonomy, with the undeniable sophistication and blistering virtuosity of bebop musicians serving as an assertion of 'mental and creative prowess' that provided a 'weapon in political struggle' at a time where the white supremacist belief in the intellectual and cultural inferiority of African Americans was formally codified through segregation (Ramsey, 2003, p. 24; Lott, 1988). Indeed, Amiri Baraka (then known as LeRoi Jones) offered an influential interpretation that went further, reading bebop as an intentionally 'willfully harsh, *anti-assimilationist* sound' intended to 'restore jazz, in some sense, to its original separateness, to drag it outside the mainstream of American culture again (Jones, 1963, p. 65) (emphasis original).

We might look also to the close connections between free jazz and Black Power which emerged in America during the late 1960s.¹⁰⁰ A core group of influential artists and writers associated with the Black Arts Movement inaugurated this connection between jazz aesthetics and radical politics, understanding their approach to free improvisation as an assertion of 'jazz as the preserve of African American musicians and as speaking most directly and meaningfully to an African American audience', in direct 'defiance of European aesthetic discipline and rejection of integrationist ideology' (Anderson, 2012, p. 98). African American cultural production formed a central thread in Black Power movements, with music particularly valued as a method of fostering radical black consciousness, instigating social struggle, and uncovering suppressed 'continuity with the African past' (Ramsey, 2022, p. 202).

In keeping with the ideological heterogeneity of the moment, a constellation of geographically and aesthetically distinct jazz artists and movements came to represent the musical voice of the social revolution being pursued by writers, artists and other movement intellectuals, including Chicago's Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), Archie Shepp, the Sun Ra Arkestra. and Ornette Coleman.¹⁰¹ Free jazz in this context was understood as militantly political, avowedly Black, and antagonistic to the commercial music business,

¹⁰⁰ Although Robin Kelley pushes back the chronology, to include the Afrocentric, countercultural and self-consciously modernist activities of 'Black Bohemia' in the 1950s. This includes figures like Coltrane, Charles Mingus, Max Roach, and Art Blakey, who Kelley suggests are essential substrates that paved the way and overlapped with late 1960s free jazz and its politics of Black cultural nationalism (Kelley, 1997).

¹⁰¹ Despite the music's significance for the movement, not all notable free jazz musicians personally shared the politics and tactics of Black Power. Sun Ra, in particular, held a markedly different set of commitments (Kreiss, 2012).

representing, according to musicologist Guthrie Ramsey, ‘the most insistent consummation of social, cultural, and identity politics in jazz’s history’ (Ramsey, 2022, p. 204). The Black Power-free jazz connection established in the late 1960s and 1970s, then, provides an influential model of musical blackness in jazz directly antithetical to its status as popular music or entertainment.

These two examples underscore the heterogeneity of jazz practice and meaning. They provide two significant instances where a deliberate dislocation from the status as popular music, entertainment or dance music, and antagonism toward the commercial music business, has *itself* expressed a far-reaching social-aesthetic critique and explicit political praxis – rather than reflecting the stultifying effect of academic capture or colonisation by European norms. These significant nuances are lost when the ‘jazz populism’ of the LJS is simplistically discussed, and lauded, as a return to the music’s purported ‘roots’ as a form of Black dance music through recourse to ahistorical essentialism.

In addition, while the pragmatic willingness, evident in London jazz discourse, to engage with *and* critique both sides of the high/low divide and its correlates has often proved beneficial for the scene, without a coherent critique of the inequities and elitisms that pervade the cultural industries under capitalism the oppositional politics analysed in this chapter can only go so far. The tendency to laud the liberatory potential of jazz-as-entertainment the fact that the demands of record labels, cultural intermediaries (human and algorithmic), and mass audiences can be every bit as constraining upon artistic expression, sociability and the long-term durability of a musical collectivity as those of ossified institutions and what jazz scholar Alan Stanbridge calls the ‘dead weight of tradition’ (Stanbridge, 2007). While the growth in audiences, and diversity, augured by the LJS is something to be celebrated, the ‘jazz populism’ evident in the LJS shares the shortcomings of its capital-P Political equivalent: a reductive analysis of its opponent, and an inattention to material concerns in favour of the symbolic. This is key to understanding many of the tensions that have emerged as the scene has found a wider audience, and *some* have enjoyed substantial financial reward, which I discuss further in the following chapters.

3.5: Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how the longstanding debates that have raged around jazz’s entry into the academy profoundly shape the contours of the contemporary London scene, and are fundamental to the LJS’s cultural-political identity. Precisely because of its liminal position

across the school-streets divide, the scene has pragmatically (and largely successfully) benefitted from its association with both – even when, as I have demonstrated, this divide is more of a discursive device than an actually existing schism in the British jazz landscape. My examination of the historical background and pedagogical approach of TW provides necessary and underexamined detail for understanding the complexity of attitudes toward jazz education are in the London scene. Accounts that sharply delineate between informal learning as the point of departure for the multicultural, multi-hyphenate LJS, and the academy as a conservative institutional impediment to the effervescent creativity of the scene are appealing in their simplicity. But this kind of ready-made media account occludes messier, more interesting aspects of learning jazz in London, and rarely attend to the fact that discourse surrounding aesthetics, repertoire and genre often serve as proxies for more profound debates and intractable tensions. One such question arises from the centrality of the canon at *Tomorrow's Warriors*: how does pedagogical immersion in the aesthetics and repertoire of the heroic era of American jazz jumpstart a scene lauded for providing an ultra-contemporary soundtrack to life in the London of the late 2010s? London jazz stars today benefit from their intimate knowledge of the canon and their experiences of institutionalised jazz education primarily as a means to more accurately and comprehensively demonstrate their total distinctiveness *from* it, as I have demonstrated in my discussion of inadequacy, Americanisation and inaccessibility.

This logic also can extend further. While this chapter has attended to formal jazz instruction as the primary jazz learning pathway for most prominent scene members, there are of course other ways of learning jazz, and the scene contains notable musicians who have avoided the college route. These include two of the biggest jazz luminaries from London in recent years, drummer Yussef Dayes and pianist/rapper Alfa Mist, for whom their lack of formal instruction appears to function as a further point of legitimation within the scene (Shutti, 2016; Joshi, 2019). Both have pointedly discussed their perceptions of the conservatoire as an elitist institution of limited use for artistic or professional advancement, with their own independent route into jazz serving as a point of differentiation and authentication for those 'untainted' by institutional education. Here, we can see how the jazz populist inclination so central to collective identity formation within the LJS can also be deployed *against* much of the scene.

What is fascinating, and surprising, is that in the TW approach, professional durability is seen to flow from a grounding in exactly the sort of American canon-based pedagogy that is routinely critiqued as retrograde when delivered in a formal conservatoire context. For today's Warriors, the emphasis on developing depth knowledge of the 'universal' qualities of the jazz tradition is

grounded in a belief that such an understanding affords musicians a durable and sustainable career. This, in turn, can be used to nurture future musicians, and help sustain a musical community that has been strained in the past by repeated cycles of fleeting and fickle cultural industry incursion. The latent tensions in the TW approach therefore index and underpin some of the generative ambivalences that characterise the LJS in microcosm. We can see this in the simultaneous lauding of the ordinary sociability of collective music making while fostering a steely determination to ‘make it’ in the music industry; the emphasis placed upon mutual learning and collective self-education while adhering to a prescriptive syllabus and stressing technique; and the avowed commitment to fostering diversity and a distinctive (Black) British jazz identity while (or *through*) advocating for the primacy of the American canon.

Cutting across these intertwined discourses of legitimation are questions of identity, ownership and accessibility in jazz. I have suggested that these are addressed within the scene through recourse to ‘jazz populism’, in both aesthetic and discursive forms. The aesthetic strand is evident in the valorisation of groove- and dancefloor-oriented music and the unselfconscious, polyglot blending of a wide range of contemporary popular musics. We can see the discursive inclination toward populism in disavowals of the ‘jazz elite’ (of which prestigious conservatoires are emblematic) and corresponding claims to be reclaiming jazz music for ‘the people’, with particular emphasis on problems with institutional whiteness in the jazz world and the need to reconnect with Black musicians and audiences. Given the substantial presence of college graduates on the scene, this vocal repudiation of institutional education appears surprising at first glance, but in fact appears often to add weight to the scene’s partial disavowal of the jazz ‘establishment’ through which participants and interlocutors square the circles of institution and industry.

To conclude, we might also briefly consider what – or who – might suffer from the turn away from institutional jazz education and the embrace of jazz as entertainment. As one musician reflected during our discussion: ‘Currently, attention is maybe being diverted from concert music... I’m not saying it shouldn’t happen... [but] we also want to sustain music which needs to be listened to in quiet... [and] inevitably, the quiet people, or the people whose face doesn’t fit, will often be marginalised’ (P2). These are the kinds of music and musicians who have eked out some space in jazz educational institutions, for all their flaws – space which has otherwise been in short supply in the commercial music industries. These comments provide a useful basis for considering what sounds, styles, and ‘faces’ might have been left out of the frame during the scene’s rapid rise to prominence and its crystallisation as a distinctive anti-elitist, syncretic dance music, which I consider more in the following chapters.

4: Performance and the live music industry

4.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the key site in the formation of the LJS: the gig. Early scenic commentary speaks in idealised terms about the tight-knit spaces where the scene came into being as unique sites of creative practice and communal identity formation. Media and promotional narratives of contemporary London jazz have subsequently ascribed particular significance to these settings, framing them as potent rejoinders to societal alienation and atomisation. The distinctive qualities of LJS gigs at their most intimate and convivial have been key to the scene's growing popularity, but as I show in this chapter, this has ultimately attenuated the scene's coherence.

The precarity of live music, particularly at the grassroots level, is also fundamental to understanding the trajectory of the scene. Exorbitant rents, hostile regulatory regimes, and gentrification make extant musical spaces permanently imperilled, and hinder the establishment of new ones, and while the venues discussed below have all been essential to the scene's unique sonic ecology, many have disappeared or radically changed in recent years. (The Mayor of London's Music Venues Taskforce, 2015). Analyses of (for example) live jazz venues in Chicago from the late 1960s to the present (Lewis, 2008, pp. 85–96; Rothenberg, 2022); or of New York across a similar period (Teal, 2021: 23-59; Jackson, 2021: 90; Heller, 2017) show that these dynamics are a perennial feature of metropolitan jazz, and as Dale Chapman suggests, in many ways represent a constitutive tension in jazz culture: 'the jazz venue has often served as a crucial site for the negotiation of contested claims to urban space' (Chapman, 2018, p. 158). Unsurprisingly, therefore, these 'negotiations' are also crucial to understanding live jazz performance in London, and accordingly

4.2 considers small, intimate performance spaces where scene constituents first found their feet, and each other. Often borne from a shortage of 'proper' jazz venues and/or experiences of exclusion or alienation within the mainstream jazz circuit, these spaces and their surrounding social networks emerged within a relatively short time, scattered across the city but sharing key participants during the scene's most fertile period, 2013-2018. I discuss aesthetic and organisational principles of the venues, and analyse the significance of the LJS 'vibe', a distinctive atmosphere characteristic of these 'scenic' spaces, foundational to the scene's appeal and a defining facet of its branding and promotion.

4.3 then explores the documentation and circulation of live performance in the scene via social media platforms. This analysis complicates frequent suggestions that the LJS is predominantly characterised by accessibility and openness. The strategic and partial documentation of live performance on social media reveal how openness *and* exclusivity discourses comingle in London jazz, together helping maintain and convey an aura of subcultural vibrancy and rarity, that I conceptualise as ‘scenic allure’. The section articulates scenic allure to post-digital malaise, the growing perception of ubiquitous digital mediation as corrosive to ‘authentic’ sociality and music-making.

4.4 considers the scene’s place within the shifting configuration of urban space in London as it has grown in scale and stature. I focus on new jazz performance spaces made available by multiple ‘regeneration’ schemes, alongside parallel forms of urban renewal and gentrification that imperil the smaller, less commercial music spaces that incubated the LJS. I analyse the incorporation of live jazz into ‘placemaking’ efforts by local authorities and property developers, placing the treatment of the LJS in relation to grime and UK drill.

4.2: Small spaces, big vibes

South-east London is typically understood as the central locus of the LJS, with many scene participants living in the area, in close proximity to Trinity Laban and pivotal jam sessions such as Steez and later Steam Down (e.g. Aponysus, 2018; Levitt, 2018). However, in the context of live performance, the scene has been more of a city-wide phenomenon, with important venues emerging or assuming a new significance throughout London during the 2010s.

Each space and/or event series during this intimate, inward-facing phase had its own set of core participants, aesthetic priorities and performance norms. Total Refreshment Centre (TRC), the ‘unofficial headquarters of the capital’s new wave of young jazz artists’ (Spicer, 2022) in the city’s east was ‘a brilliant shambles’ (Gooding, 2019), with events often blurring the line between gig, club night and squat party. Veteran promoter and record label Jazz Re:Freshed’s weekly residency out west at Mau-Mau Bar on Portobello Road in Kensington was a more conventional gig setting, with a strong sonic connection to the west London ‘broken beat’ scene from which the organisation originated in 2003 (Bradshaw, 2011; Moses, 2016).¹⁰² South

¹⁰² Broken beat is a strain of electronic music that producers like 4hero, IG Culture and Kaidi Tatham developed out of drum’n’bass in the late 1990s, known for its prominent jazz and funk inflections and rhythmic complexity. While often overlooked in accounts of British dance music, broken beat aesthetics are an important influence on the LJS, particularly audible in the music of Emma-Jean Thackrey, Yussef Dayes, and the output of influential label 22a (Muggs and Stevens, 2019, pp. 164–168; 385–387).

of the Thames, Steez, with its open-mic element facilitating audience involvement, had ‘collided’ with the Tomorrow’s Warriors cohort in the mid-2010s, producing a rough-and-ready, multi-genre event usually housed in the back rooms of pubs across Lewisham and Honor Oak (Warren, 2018; Considine and Boyd, 2019; Iqbal, 2020).¹⁰³

For the LJS, these spaces represented what music industry scholar David Bruenger has termed the ‘critical nuclei’ of local music scenes, providing the ‘minimum viable conditions for the emergence of a music scene’, facilitating ‘the intersection of artist, audience and presenter [cultural intermediary]’ (Bruenger, 2019, p. 171).¹⁰⁴ Despite their dispersion, this constellation of participants and performance spaces were for a time tightly bound together, with regular gig attendance generating a collective identity and sense of creative and professional momentum.

P5 outlined how this process worked when reflecting upon their entrance into the nascent scene, which presaged their professional role as an artist manager:

my first entry was through TRC... before I was signing acts I was going to gigs at [Deptford pub] The Prince Albert in southeast, I think went to a Steez... between 2015 and 2016... But it was all osmosis, everything was fluid. You went to a gig, you met someone, you got invited to another gig, you went to that... It was like: 'who's got something going on?' The same people would be there... Church of Sound kicked off around that time as well. It was all TRC, Church of Sound, Steez, Prince Albert... (P5).

These comments were echoed in saxophonist Nubya Garcia’s account of the evolution of Steez in an interview with journalist Nick Hasted:

it started with us bringing our friends there, producers and DJs and creatives that we grew up with... those people had a sick time, and word of mouth is really powerful. Even with current nights now, like Steam Down in Deptford, it's a small venue and word of mouth. Not that much online activity (quoted in Hasted, 2019b).

The centrality of fluidity and chance encounter conveys something of the sense of heady excitement I noticed as a newcomer. Then living outside London and in my mid-20s, I was accustomed to being the youngest attendee (often by some decades) at British jazz clubs,

¹⁰³ Following the periodisation offered in the introduction, the timespan analysed in this section (roughly 2013 – 2018) is patterned by the establishment and disappearance of archetypal LJS performance settings, starting with the opening of jam night Steez at the Honor Oak Tavern in South London and TRC in Stoke Newington in the East of the city and ending with the closure of the TRC as a venue at the height of media clamour surrounding the scene. However, weekly jam Steam Down came into its stride toward the end of this period and continues at the time of writing, and Jazz Re:Freshed both long predates and outlives this period.

¹⁰⁴ This is by no means an exhaustive list of significant spaces and jams. Others could include Kansas Smitty’s in London Fields, Good Evening Arts in Kennington, Jazz at the Crypt in Camberwell, The Haggerston in Haggerston, Passing Clouds in Dalston, and more recently The Windmill in Brixton or Orii at The Colour Factory in Hackney Wick – among others.

perpetually aware of contributing to the habitual homogeneity of white, male audiences. As some friends became tangentially involved, I looked on with envy at the subcultural energy coalescing around jazz in London, and the sort of unselfconscious, convivial youth multiculturalism that Ash Amin terms ‘indifference to difference’ that appeared to underpin this blossoming scene (Amin, 2013; see also Gilroy, 2004; Valluvan, 2016). My earliest experiences in the flesh came around 2016, at TRC parties and their sister event series Church of Sound at Clapton church St James the Great. Much of what immediately stood out have become hallmarks of the scene: the absence of jazz performance norms; the unusual settings - often temporary or repurposed performance spaces with a tiny stage or none at all; and the close, overlapping ties among participants, which often seemed to blur easy demarcations between personal, creative and professional relationships. Most of all, the intense performances were met with vocal, energetic audience responses, which felt genuinely novel.¹⁰⁵

Taken together, these characteristics also made divides between stage/performer and dancefloor/audience extremely porous. This was summarised in a review of Steam Down’s 2018 Saturday night takeover at the small music festival Brainchild, a pivotal scenic incubator: ‘you can’t help but feel that everyone in the room is making this music. Whether through sound or movement, the collectivity extends beyond the ensemble with instruments in hand’ (Dalilah, 2018). One experienced musician participant made it clear that this was rare in the world of contemporary jazz:

I love places like Church of Sound, everyone’s in it together and it feels really electric. I definitely prefer that to an audience in a theatre... [where]] it feels like there’s no connection... I’ve played in loads of places all over the world, and I haven’t come across anywhere like those venues... they’re very unique... that’s probably one of the reasons why jazz has become quite popular with young audiences’ (P35).

¹⁰⁵ The promotional video for Ezra Collective’s 2018 ‘Fela Kuti Songbook’ performance at Church of Sound provides a good sense of the remarkable energy at some of these shows (see Ezra Collective, 2018).



Fig. 1: Zeitgeist Freedom Energy Exchange performing at Church of Sound, 23rd August 2019
Photo: Joe Hart, reproduced with permission

4.2.1: Informality, affordability and stylistic innovation

Time and again, scene insiders point to these small-scale performance spaces, relatively unconstrained by the demands of the cultural industries, as essential in the formation and trajectory of the LJS. These accounts show how two co-constitutive scenic hallmarks – social intimacy and stylistic openness – came together in the scene’s early performance environment, galvanising a collective identity, distinct aesthetic and a nascent media narrative that have come to define ‘new London jazz’.

One participant, a musician and gig promoter, also stressed the importance of *regularity* to the incubation of the scene, providing the basis for a dense web of connection between attendees:

in the first two, three years, [you’d] very regularly get the same types of people coming [to their event]. Who would go ‘oh, it’s Steam Down we’re gonna share an Uber... because that’s what we do every fucking first Tuesday of the month’... the same thing with Church of Sound, coming up from South [London] to get to Clapton together. So, you get those micro communities... and you can also go alone with the knowledge that you will be amongst friends. That atmosphere inarguably fosters the sort of community that you feel like you can go and be part of (P30).

We can see here the reliance on dedication by those involved, on both sides of the speakers: performers might receive low or no pay, but could expect an audience of engaged peers, rain

or shine. Consistent audience attendance relied upon a commitment to affordable entry over financial gain or the pursuit of audience growth among many event promoters.¹⁰⁶

The early days of TRC were exemplary here. Church of Sound founder Spencer Martin suggests that ‘almost every gig [TRC] put on was non-commercially viable. The musicians that they were inviting didn’t really have fans [and] their band wouldn’t really have a name’ (quoted in *The Current State of UK Jazz: London*, 2019). Prioritising affordability over commercial viability allowed consistent attendance by a core group, whose presence was anchored by ‘a sense of being a citizen, not a consumer... [with] status within the community broadly dependent on your contribution’ (Warren, 2019b).

In turn, this afforded for a certain of rhythm of participation that extended beyond the keystone venues and gigs around which scenic activity was anchored, taking in the mundane activities that surround performances - planning one’s journey, sharing transport, or sharing a meal together. Scene scholarship frequently foregrounds these kinds of activity as significant, and typically overlooked, components key to giving shape to a music scene. Stahl and Rochow (2016) for example have argued, building on Henri Lefebvre’s pioneering work on ‘rhythmanalysis’ that these kinds of social interaction, whereby scene members collectively navigate the mundane indeterminacies of everyday life, are foundational to collective identity formation in music scenes (see also DiPiero, 2022, pp. 122–126).

Repetition appears important here, providing a degree of longevity and ‘creating the grooves to which practices and affinities are linked’, with chance encounters in music spaces solidifying social connections while also extending ‘the spatialization of city cultures through the grafting of tastes or affinities to physical locations’ (Straw, 2001, pp. 11-12). Finnegan (2018) also provides a series of thoughtful reflections on how the regular, effortful movement across urban space to specific sites of musicking – churches, community centres, practice rooms and so on - is also a ritualised process. Finnegan argues that travelling together to participate in music forms a ‘rite of passage... part of the daily, annual, and cyclical ritual life of the city and its inhabitants’, deepening the social bonds between those who travel together to participate in music (Finnegan, 2018, p. 489). What scene scholarship offers here is a helpful template for understanding how ritualised. mundane extramusical activity, connected to place can be a powerful source of identification and bonding fundamental to music scenes, even apart from

¹⁰⁶ Adam ‘Rockers’ Moses, co-founder of Jazz Re:refreshed, suggests that low entry fees have been key to the organisations’ mission of ‘getting rid of barriers’ between jazz and potential enthusiasts (*We Out Here: A LDN Story*, 2018). Similarly, Steam Down was initially funded using a bucket for donations (Warren, 2019b); and Brainchild has had a commitment to affordable ticket prices since its inception in 2012.

the actual act of performing. The intimate ‘atmosphere’ identified by P30 flows from this rhythm of participation, providing a key substrate for what became understood as a coherent and bounded scene.

The apparent disregard for economic viability and commitment to self-organisation in this period also provides a point of identification with forms of independent cultural production adopted by music communities in London of generations past. Cultural studies scholar Caspar Melville’s granular account of London’s reggae, rare groove and jungle scenes provide adjacent examples from recent history, with Melville singling out the LJS as a direct contemporary descendent of these earlier formations (Melville, 2019, pp. 252). Those involved in the establishment of TRC also identified their own practice as a version of the ‘do-it-yourself’ ethos and its foundational principles of ‘autonomy, community and participation’ most closely associated with punk and early indie rock (Hesmondhalgh, 1999; Jones, 2021a, p. 28). This connection to non-jazz antecedents played a role in signalling some of the keystone venues of the early LJS, and later the scene more broadly, as in some ways an ‘alternative’ or ‘indie’ form of jazz relative to the British jazz mainstream, as I discuss further in 6.3.2.

It was also a response to the harsh economic realities faced by fledgling jazz musicians and a disinterest from pre-existing live jazz infrastructure. One participant discussed the difficulties they encountered as a teenager entering the city’s performance ecosystem:

the scene was quite a hostile place. It was like, quite a lot of pay-to-play venues, and promoters weren't really that forthcoming... back then, it was [pauses] a lot harder, a lot harder. The fees were low, the venues were really uninterested. So, we started putting on our own nights (P4).¹⁰⁷

Literally cutting out (or reducing) the middle-men in this manner alleviated financial pressures and made room for unexpected social and musical encounter, while minimising the incursion of music industry demands or the pressures of genre preconceptions. A musician participant with close ties to the venue highlighted the rarity of the kinds of informal space that were produced as a result of these activities, whether musical or otherwise, in an ‘increasingly gentrified city like London’: ‘you can’t overstate the value of physical spaces where people can come together, just to try and experiment with stuff... it’s getting increasingly difficult to find those spaces to be able to congregate’ (P29).

¹⁰⁷‘Pay-to-play’ gigs are a longstanding feature in jazz history at the lower end of the music food chain, and appear increasingly common for early career musicians across genres in the UK (Medbøe, 2015, p. 296; *The Fair Play Guide for Live Musicians*, 2023). There has been recent social media controversy in British jazz circles regarding jazz sessions – allegedly including Ronnie Scott’s – charging participants (@McCormackMusic, 2023).

Often, the fact that these were *accidental* jazz spaces alleviated the burden of tradition and expectation, offering fledgling LJS players a different challenge (and welcome relief) to specialist jazz clubs and the expectations of the (predominantly old, white, male, and wealthy) genre devotees in attendance. P4 was involved in running Steez, and emphasised:

there was always a jam session at the end and we had different acts, showcased them. You know, everyone played there, man - like Moses Boyd, Yussef [Dayes], Shabaka [Hutchings], played there. Nérija played there, like - and not just jazz as well, all kinds, singer-songwriters... King Krule [also] did a little undercover set (P4).¹⁰⁸

Those present in these new spaces were likely to be musicians, ‘creatives’ and/or keen music fans, but the eclectic and aleatory foundational principles shared between these first scenic venues meant that there was less deference toward jazz as an elite artform.

Shabaka Hutchings has compared this approvingly with jazz convention in the United States, where ‘people stand and listen to the music in a very reverential fashion. In London there’s less of that. People dance to the music. They listen to it, but they seem to be more engaged with their bodies’ (quoted in Sharpe and Hutchings, 2020). Such an irreverent approach treats jazz as one sonic ingredient among many, useful *insofar as it facilitates the desired atmosphere* (see Considine and Boyd, 2019). This dynamic is neatly encapsulated by the chance (and now mythologised) formation of one of the LJS’s most successful and aesthetically singular groups, The Comet is Coming, after Hutchings joined synth-and-drums duo Soccer96 for an impromptu saxophone solo mid-performance at TRC (Bočev, 2022). Hutchings statement also expresses a common narrative device used to differentiate LJS performance norms from their

Ample space was therefore available for musicians to ply their craft onstage and experiment, tempered by the imperative to hold the attention of audiences more attuned to techno, punk, hip-hop and so on. These kinds of genre-fluid practices have become something of a defining trope for popular music during 2010s (James, 2017; Riveros and Verano, 2021; Muchitsch, 2023; Rekret, 2024, pp. 50–75), and the scene is certainly situated within this conjunctural tendency.¹⁰⁹ But as I show throughout the thesis, such self-positioning against genre

¹⁰⁸ Other noted Steez ‘alumni’ include rapper Loyle Carner, and rapper/poet Kae Tempest, who work outside of the jazz idiom but have recorded with Ezra Collective and The Comet is Coming, respectively. Similarly, TRC had its roots in post-punk and psych-rock, providing formative space for groups like Snapped Ankles and Bo Ningen, and was also an important node in the London alt-folk scene. I would argue that the direction of influence runs primarily from these kinds of artists, via the performance settings, toward the jazz scene – rather than the opposite direction.

¹⁰⁹ As Thomas Johnson argues, genre-fluidity is only part of the picture, with MSP sorting processes producing, at the same time, a fractal proliferation of seemingly limitless micro-generic categories (Johnson, 2018, pp. 102–173).

boundaries has been ascribed greater critical edge in the LJS context, exactly because of its enduring, but partial, ties to jazz norms.

These formative experiences were in many ways as significant a form of musical education as those discussed in Chapter Three, as DJ and writer P16 suggested: ‘coming into this world really afforded these musicians a massive ability to grow, in environments that were much less pressured than the educational institutions where they were studying’ (see also Hasted, 2019a). One participant, a pianist, suggested their experiences at Steez were revelatory in this respect:

my route into the music... had been very traditional straight-ahead jazz. So, to then go to a night like that, where a lot of the other musicians’... route into the music had been completely different from mine... I was like: ‘oh, wow, I didn’t know, you could play like that’. Or ‘I didn’t know you could voice those chords like that’... I learned a lot from going to those nights. (P32).

Absent the rigorous demands of institutional pedagogy, young musicians were able to bring their jazz vocabulary to bear on other musics amid the exigencies of live performance. These settings were organised around a ‘politics of participation’ that were markedly different to typical jazz jam sessions (Gooley, 2011), and comparatively light on the kinds of insularity, preoccupation with genre norms, and machismo-fuelled competitive individualism in evidence at other jams in the city (Walker, 2010; Doffman, 2013, p. 76; Kernodle, 2014; Raine, 2020b).¹¹⁰

4.2.2: London jazz and good vibes

Media coverage, alongside my own primary research data, discussing this period speak of a distinctively heightened, at times euphoric sense of possibility permeating LJS gigs. Veteran music journalist Richard Williams provides a rich description of one instance of this charged atmosphere in his review of vibraphonist Orphy Robinson’s 2016 tribute concert for Bobby Hutcherson at Church of Sound.¹¹¹ Given Williams’ vast critical experience (Williams and Warner, 2019), and deep knowledge of jazz in the city, his account is worth quoting at length:

¹¹⁰ Nubya Garcia, for example, has said of Steez that ‘there was very little ego compared to other jam sessions’ (quoted in Rees, 2020), and that the scene in general is characterised by an emphasis on ‘feeling over chops’ (quoted in Orlov, 2018).

¹¹¹ Robinson is a key presence in British jazz who came up with the Jazz Warriors in the 1980s. His group for this concert was multigenerational, containing scene mainstays from that era such as ex-Loose Tubes bassist Dudley Philips; younger Jazz Warriors Byron Wallen, Tony Kofi and Rowland Sutherland; pianist and TW alumnus Robert Mitchell, who emerged as part of the influential F-IRE Collective in the early 2000s; alongside then-new young players like Garcia and Boyd. Formative gigs such as these demonstrate ties between young stars of the scene and their forebears that can be overlooked in some of the more excitable promotional discourse about and from scene.

Fans of contemporary jazz generally listen to their music with a silent attentiveness... mostly reserving their signs of approval until the end of a piece. That wasn't the case on Thursday. The unusual fervour of the music was matched by the response of the listeners, who shouted approval and encouragement during solos... somehow, on this occasion, the musicians had accessed a different spirit... the wave of emotion that can lift you to another level of feeling, in which inhibitions are broken down... The sound wasn't perfect, but it didn't matter a bit. Sometimes, for whatever reason, music goes beyond all the things that make it up and finds its way into a fourth dimension. This was one of those times (Williams, 2016)

Williams offers a careful and nuanced account of the distinctiveness of the scene's live practice, suggesting that the prominence of collective musicking, through vocal encouragement and/or bodily movement and other forms of enthusiastic audience participation at LJS gigs. Such participatory fervour, producing quasi-sacred, collective ecstatic experiences through musical performance is a central thread in African American musical practice, with deep roots in jazz history (see e.g. Ramsey, 2022, pp. 14-43; Jackson, 2018). However, Williams here thoughtfully voices the dominant interpretation of the London scene as a live phenomenon, as a significant departure from prevailing contemporary norms in British jazz. Other accounts have been more breathless: according to jazz journalist Chris May, the energy of the best LJS gigs conveys an unprecedented 'energy and sense of community... nothing like this has happened in Britain before' (May, 2019).

Following its widespread usage among scene participants and media commentators, I define the diffuse but potent energy identified by Williams as *vibe*, using Luis-Manuel Garcia's definition of 'collective, contagious affect' (Garcia, 2020a, p. 30).¹¹² The 'new London jazz vibe' has been fundamental to the scene's self-conception and its branding, frequently being as much subject of commentary as the content of the music itself. The distinctive affective register of this 'vibe' has proved central in press and promotional framings of the scene as significant in the history of British jazz; in the context of other contemporaneous jazz scenes and spaces within London and the UK; and within the global jazz art world (e.g. Russonello, 2017; Chinen, 2018, pp. 238–241; Hutchinson, 2018; Davies and Warren, 2019).

Despite its longstanding colloquial use in jazz slang, limited attention has been paid to *vibe* in jazz studies. However, Paul Berliner's exploration of 'vibes and venues' in his monumental study of jazz improvisation is instructive. He explores a wide-ranging 'bundle of variables', including venue scale, acoustics, sound reproduction, audience knowledge and responsiveness, and management practices, that interact in a given performance setting to facilitate and/or

¹¹² Indeed, commenter 'Shacklewell shuffler' under Williams' review used the term to convey the rarity of the experience: 'The whole vibe was unexpected and powerful' (Williams, 2016).

frustrate the efforts of jazz performers (Berliner, 2009, pp. 522–562). We can trace clear similarities between Berliner’s ‘variables’, and the frames of reference used to discuss the ‘vibe’ of early LJS spaces. But where Berliner points to, for example, a low-quality sound system as a variable that threatens the collective experience of vibe, music journalist P3 suggested otherwise with regard to the LJS:

All of those jazz gigs I went to earlier on in sort of 2016, 2015, they're all at clubs - Corsica Studios, a couple at Village Underground, TRC - places that... aren't really jazz venues. And the sound is shit!... but it's not really about that. It's about the vibe. And I think that's the thing to get across. Because I think often with jazz, you're sitting, you're really listening...¹¹³ But this is much more about being in the thick of it (P3).

The scene’s interstitial location between overlapping, at times contradictory, genre norms surfaces in this account. As I discuss further in Chapter Five, ‘inaccurate’ sound reproduction represents a problematical reduction of clarity according to normative ‘traditional’ jazz principles. But what these club settings afford is something different: volume. Here, dub scholarship offers a much fuller theoretical engagement with vibe, illuminating how it has been central, and elusive, in Black British diasporic musics. Malcolm James offers a useful dubwise description of vibe, as ‘the unfathomable sense of a sound system’s fullness; the feel of technology, sound and human participants in mutual relation’ (James, 2021, p. 46). James’s statement points to the *techno-social* aspects of performance practices derived from dub or other offshoots of ‘bass culture’:¹¹⁴ the interaction of speaker stacks, microphones, and amplification; their configuration in specific physical spaces; and shared conventions surrounding their use, particularly the expectation of low frequencies at high volumes, which ratchet up collective intensity and encourage mutual interaction between musicians and audiences.¹¹⁵ Garcia argues that this is a process of ‘social, sonic, and affective *attunement* – that is, of coming into... ‘sync’ with the ‘vibe’ of others’ (Garcia, 2020a, p. 30). The emphasis placed on vibe-as-volume in the LJS context signals, in these live performance contexts at least, the distance of the scene from the aesthetic ideologies of jazz practice; its indebtedness in

¹¹³ The tacit opposition of ‘really listening’ with dancing – or vibing – separates questions of embodiment from appreciation in ways that rely on a Cartesian split which I consider problematic. However, this is a recurrent frame used to assess the artistic value (or otherwise) of the LJS, as I discuss in Chapter Five.

¹¹⁴ Bass culture is a term taken from poet Linton Kwesi Johnson, used by musician and scholar Mykaell Riley to foreground ‘the direct and indirect impact of the Jamaican community and Jamaican music on the cultural and social fabric of multicultural Britain’, which he calls ‘An Alternative Soundtrack to Britishness’ (Riley, 2016, pp. 101–102).

¹¹⁵ This reveals how the LJS ‘vibe’ is beholden upon what Georgina Born calls the ‘multiple mediations’ of a given musical assemblage. The specific mediations at play here further highlight the scene’s rootedness in dub music and sound system culture (Born, 2005).

other genre cultures, specifically dub; and, accordingly, the enduring influence of Caribbean popular music culture in contemporary Black British jazz.

This literature helps clarify the meaning of *vibe* when invoked in LJS discourse: it indexes the intense and fleeting articulation of audience, performer, space, and technology for which the scene became famed. In its emic scenic usage, the term is analytically useful for two reasons. First, it reveals what the speaker deems valuable, and contingent, about the experience of (good) live music as a means of fostering social relations, made clear in its slang usage among LJS constituents: high-quality experiences are ‘vibes’ or, more often simply ‘a vibe’ (for example, ‘Even The Royal Albert Pub in New Cross Gate is a vibe on Sunday night’ (Koleoso, quoted in Khandwala, 2019)). By contrast, an unremarkable or unenjoyable event (if the ‘vibe’ was non-existent), it might be pejoratively labelled ‘dead’ (e.g. Tetteh, quoted in May, 2019). *Vibe’s* proximity to liveness, being (a)live and perhaps electrification (a ‘live wire’), and its absence being ‘dead’, points to a normative understanding of meaningful aesthetic experience as fleeting, desirable, inseparable from the corporeal, and beholden to *intensity*.

Second, a concept like *vibe* is used mostly in reference to affects generated by (dancing to) loud, bass-heavy electronic dance music in social settings (e.g. a club or a warehouse) (Henriques, 2010; James, 2021; Jasen, 2016; Vitos, 2017). Here, *vibe* is literally about vibrations, the bodily experience of music and sound beyond the auditory, which draw internal experiences into relation in a kind of social synchrony.¹¹⁶ Garcia depicts these qualities of *vibe* as potent, but fleeting, and hard to replicate outside of a devoted performance context (Garcia, 2020a). Garcia’s analysis helps us understand how the contingencies of technological and spatial mediation in early ‘scenic’ venues were actually central in generating feelings of intense *immediacy* and *togetherness* at these performances.

Accordingly, the intimate, convivial spaces of the nascent scene were also marked by a kind of sacral affect, another distinctive feature of the LJS *vibe*.¹¹⁷ There are similarities here with what Fred Moten, drawing upon Laura Harris, terms the ‘aesthetic sociality of blackness’, particularly with regards to Black music and dance and/as social life: ‘a social practice that is always also a spiritual practice, but is also fundamentally sensuous, fundamentally material’ (Moten, 2017, p. 275; Harris, 2018). I suggest that *vibe’s* use in the LJS indexes equivalent practices and affects

¹¹⁶ The co-constitutive relationship between social ‘vibes’ and physical ‘vibrations’ that I am discussing here is the analytical crux of DJ and theorist Steve Goodman’s 2009 book *Sonic Warfare*

¹¹⁷ Theology scholar Stephen Roberts’ recent account of ‘hearing God in electronic hum’ when listening to Gary Crosby discussing his music and spirituality on ‘What Now?’, the final track on Moses Boyd’s 2020 record *Dark Matter*, suggests that I am not alone in identifying this theological bent in LJS music (Roberts, 2021, p. 81).

to those that Moten calls the aesthetic sociality of blackness. Vibe thus extends beyond the hedonic, as Jeremy Gilbert argues when discussing electronic dance music's operation 'at the level of corporeal affect'. He suggests this vibratory function 'makes it a particularly important site for the generation of collective potential and for the exploration of 'possible worlds', of new ways of feeling and being which can have wider social and political consequences' (Gilbert, 2014, p. 183).

The term thus indexes the aesthetic and performative priorities of LJS artists who work between the organizing principles of sound system culture and wider electronic music. Examples might include drummer Moses Boyd's efforts to refract 'improvised music through the lens of sound-system culture' (Boyd, quoted in Guobadia, 2020); or Shabaka Hutchings, who adopted the rhythmic phrasing, melodic lines and performance practices of hip-hop and dancehall MCs when playing with Sons of Kemet to pursue his musical 'main concern', which 'was and always will be vibe' (Quoted in Smith, 2016). This has not gone unnoticed among audiences and observers: as one participant told journalist Kate Hutchinson at Steam Down in 2018, 'the vibe... was like being at a rave' (Hutchinson, 2018a). We can set this prioritisation of collective atmosphere and aesthetic sociality against another lineage of jazz performance norms, where audience engagement is secondary to the performer(s) prioritise self-realisation through virtuosic improvisation and untrammelled expression (Ake, 2010, p. 115; see also Hersch, 2018; Solis, 2009).¹¹⁸ As such, the emphasis placed upon nurturing vibe offers another qualified disavowal of jazz convention, foregrounding the putative novelty of the scene, as noted in a breakout 2018 profile in *Rolling Stone*:

these artists... share a sense of urgency, spontaneity and, frankly, fun that sets their music apart from crossover-ready jazz stateside. In London, musicians have created a jazz community that offers access and support to anyone who can blow, regardless of their background. And as it turns out, the music is that much better as a result (Orlov, 2018).

It also illustrates a proximity to club culture, DJing performance practices, and record collecting, further evidence of links to older London scenes with a relaxed approach to generic boundaries and an emphasis on vibe. For these antecedents, and within early LJS spaces, a dancefloor orientation enabled, and even demanded, practices and sounds that afforded a syncretism curtailed by ossified jazz club settings. Notable forebears here include the acid jazz scene centred around DJs Gilles Peterson and Patrick Forge at Camden's Dingwalls nightclub in

¹¹⁸ Miles Davis's legendary disregard for his audience – often arriving very late to gigs and/or performing with his back to attendees – best encapsulates this (admittedly slightly stereotypical) perception of the normative jazz performer.

the 1980s; or more recently, late lamented Shoreditch venue Plastic People, which was foundational to broken beat and dubstep (Beaumont-Thomas, 2015; Muggs and Stevens, 2019, pp. 164–168; 250–257; Warren, 2019a, p. 52; Melville, 2023, pp. 130–134).

These musicking conventions are vital to understanding the LJS vibe, and reveal the significance of music cultures that, although existing outside of jazz, exert real influence through their spatial, temporal and cultural proximity to scene participants. However, as discussed above, it is important to note significant forebears *within* the wider jazz tradition where cognate forms of participatory engagement and the pursuit of collective, euphoric transcendence through music – the pursuit of *vibe* – have been prioritised. These are what jazz scholar Jason Bivins identifies as the desire for ‘peak experience’ in jazz performance, a core part of musical-spiritual practice within the genre, across a range of styles from bebop, through fusion, and spiritual jazz (Bivins, 2015, pp. 202–206).

Such examples especially merit inclusion in this analysis due to their relative absence in from dominant narratives of the LJS’s trajectory, even as what Williams calls the ‘unusual fervour’ of the London jazz *vibe* has come to form a central narrative plank in non-specialist profiles of prominent musicians and jam sessions on the scene. In these accounts, the LJS *vibe* is frequently, and clumsily, interpreted as both a clean break from, and an active rejoinder to, the jazz world writ large, deploying an ahistorical and homogenising caricature of jazz performance practices. As with the examples discussed in the previous chapter, such accounts either ignore or deride a very longstanding and rich legacy of performance norms and musical sociality of particular significance in Black American jazz.

4.2.3: Channel the spirits: religion, joy, and the politics of performance

There is a distinctly spiritual flavour to these discussions of the participatory ritual of gig attendance and the hallowed, mysterious qualities of *vibe*. We can detect these currents in Guardian journalist Ammar Kalia’s description of the ‘weekly pilgrimage’ to Steam Down (Kalia, 2021), Emma Warren’s suggestion that the fusion of jazz and club music at TRC is a testament to the dancefloor as a ‘place of real communion’ (quoted in Kalia, 2022), or writer Hugh Muir’s account of the ‘air of something close to religiosity’ he witnessed at Ezra Collective’s 2022 album launch at Ronnie Scott’s (Muir, 2023).

More than just writerly flair, these framings speak to a meaningful relationship to spirituality and religion threading through live jazz performance in London, which contributes to ‘the communal, religious intensity of so many of the new London jazz events’ (Marmot, 2024, p. 54). Warren takes this further, describing *Steam Down* through reference to the Jewish practice of *shema*: ‘it means to hear, or to listen, and it suggests that to listen is to love... you receive and add to the music of *Steam Down* with your *shema*’ (Warren, 2019b, p. 6).¹¹⁹

In part, this sacral thread reflects ‘the resurgence of religiosity in contemporary Black British music’ (Melville, 2020). Melville attributes this to shifting patterns of migration to London since the 1990s, a period which has seen a marked increase in arrivals from Sierra Leone, Ghana and Nigeria and an attendant, ‘dizzying variety of Christian denominations and franchised evangelical ministries’. These diverse manifestations of West African Christianity are well represented in the LJS. For example, trumpeter Sheila Maurice-Grey received music lesson at her Pentecostal church as a child (Cornwall, 2022), drummer Ayo Salawu’s gospel-inflected style is derived from an upbringing playing in Nigerian church bands (Cashman-Wilson, 2018), and Ezra Collective are named after a biblical prophet, reflecting the devout Christianity of founding members British-Nigerian brothers TJ and Femi Koleoso, which plays an integral part of their musical practice (Ihekire, 2023). P14 saw the emphasis on *collectivity* in the LJS as flowing from the growth of TW attendees with a background in the church: ‘all of those guys do come from collectives... [it’s] a strong black church thing. They’re used to working in groups’.

Beyond Christianity, the scene also lies at the interstice of numerous Black Atlantic cultural traditions within which the political, spiritual and musical have often been mutually constitutive. This has been widely theorised in jazz scholarship (Berkman, 2007; Muyumba, 2009, pp. 37–40; Bivins, 2015), and is crucial to many analyses of dub and reggae (Hall, 1995; Beckford, 2006; Veal, 2007, pp. 192–219). Specific to the UK context, the interpenetration of spirituality and cultural politics is evident in African-diasporic musics in Britain like jungle and grime (Charles, 2019; Rambarran, 2021).

These tributaries run through the LJS, contributing to a scene with a shared musical-spiritual impulse that takes a panoply of different forms: the ‘radical vulnerability’ of Alabaster DePlume’s quasi-New Age ritualistic performance poetry (Currin, 2022);¹²⁰ *Steam Down*’s

¹¹⁹ Musician Neue Grafik, founder of Hackney Wick jam night Orii Community, also uses this vocabulary: ‘It’s not just a club night or a live gig. It’s a mentality. It’s spirit... what we try to do is really spiritual, trying to connect all the people who come together’ (quoted in Friar, 2023).

¹²⁰ DePlume’s objection to the ‘cult-like connotations’ of the writer’s description of his gigs as a ‘nondenominational communion’ suggest a degree of discomfort among some on the scene with this

commitment to the healing power of unity-through-ecstasy (see Akim, 2018; Cocklin, 2018); the centrality of pre-colonial African cosmology to Shabaka Hutchings' work (Keen and Hutchings, 2021; Lindevall, 2021); the audible influence of Rastafarian spiritual practice (particularly nyabinghi drumming) upon the work of some musicians with Caribbean heritage like Hutchings, Moses Boyd and Theon Cross (Warren, 2017; S. Smith, 2023), to name a few of the more notable examples.

I would argue that the sacral atmosphere surrounding LJS performance also manifests sonically, with the scene heavily indebted to an earlier high-point in the articulation of jazz to spirituality, the 'spiritual' jazz subgenre of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Graham *et al.*, 2024). Large group ensembles like Maisha, Levitation Orchestra and Matters Unknown provide obvious audible connections to the texturally dense, harmonically static work of figures like Pharoah Sanders or late-period John Coltrane (Solis, 2015). Recently, the Anglo-American jazz world has enthusiastically drawn from this era and aesthetic, evident in the upsurge in interest in Alice Coltrane's work, the critical acclaim and 'crossover' success of Pharoah Sanders' final record *Promises* (Luaka Bop, 2022), with LJS-adjacent producer Floating Points in 2022,¹²¹ and the huge success of American saxophonist Kamasi Washington (Beta, 2017; Freeman, 2022, pp. 94–112; Melville, 2023, p. 119).¹²²

As a result, in the incubatory spaces of the LJS, a hedonic commitment to having a good time was coupled with an earnest belief in the spiritually and socially transformative qualities of collective musical experience. At times, the entanglement of sincerity, levity and the sacred manifests quite explicitly, as in Ezra Collective's 2019 album-cum-manifesto *You Can't Steal My Joy*. Bandleader Femi Koleoso emphasises how, for the band, joy is a serious business:

Growing up as young people in London has challenges but... we've decided to focus on the positives. You can steal a lot of things from us - our ability to travel freely, our access to education, our right to a level playing field, even our ability to live life at its full potential - but as long as we don't forget our core truth, You Can't Steal Our Joy (quoted in *You Can't Steal My Joy* | Ezra Collective, 2019).

Koleoso counterposes joy as an outlook, that lies 'in your soul', with the more temperamental experience of happiness. Hutchings has made a similar distinction: 'music is supposed to be

reading. However, Warren has described DePlume's influential 'Peach' residency at TRC in similar terms, as has Melville when describing the atmosphere at Church of Sound, as I discuss below.

¹²¹ In fact, Hutchings 'stood in' for Sanders at a recital of *Promises* at the Hollywood Bowl in 2023, after Sanders' death the previous years (Cooper, 2023).

¹²² Two LJS stalwarts, Indian percussionist Sarathy Korwar and British-Bengali saxophonist Idris Rahman, have expressed reservations about the (re)turn to this soundworld, highlighting the frequent presence of clumsy, trope-laden evocations of 'Eastern' mysticism in the spiritual jazz canon. (Steel, 2020; Ghosh, Korwar and Rahman, 2021; see also Clements, 2008; Shipton, 2013, pp. 691–694; Fellezs, 2020).

about joy, rather than fun. It's a joyous celebration of the act of making... and from that celebration you can get to other levels' (*Video portrait: Shabaka Hutchings on Impulse!, curating at LGW, and music as joyous celebration, 2018*).

Saxophonist and poet Alabaster DePlume, similarly, sees 'prioritizing joy' as a means of combating cynicism, alienation and racism and thus a key component of his political praxis (Young and DePlume, 2022). Event producer P8 highlighted what they saw as a stand-out commitment to honest musical expression as assuming great significance at a time of societal strife:

That's the joyful thing about this scene, is it's just like they're going... 'let's throw it all up in the air. We're playing music that moves our souls and will hopefully reverberate with audiences: whatever your background, you'll see'... I think that's tremendously uplifting (P8).

These examples dovetail with wider developments in popular culture, where 'joy' has been having something of a moment.¹²³ Cultural expressions of joyfulness are often ascribed subversive or disruptive potential as Mehita Iqani suggests: 'when access to joy is limited by structures of power, accessing and expressing it become highly politicised acts' (Iqani, 2022, p. 3). Recent and newly-popular critical scholarship on joy and resistance makes clear, joyfulness takes on particular resonance for individuals or communities subject to systemic inequity (e.g. Lorde, 2007, pp. 58–64; Ehrenreich, 2014; Segal, 2018; Lu and Steele, 2019).¹²⁴ Meanwhile, the affective politics of joy are also entangled with the embrace of empowerment and positivity discourse in contemporary consumer culture and corporate communication, discussed in Chapter Two (Gill and Orgad, 2017; Sobande, 2019; Kanai and Gill, 2020).

The unique vibe of LJS live performance, with its high intensity, participatory engagement and abundant, unashamed spirituality coalesced within this wider discursive 'turn to joy' We can helpfully understand the scene, in this context, as a manifestation of an emergent contemporary 'structure of feeling' in the current conjuncture (R. Williams, 2015; Reynolds, 2023). Amid the political and economic turmoil of recent years, forms of sincere, joyful expression can have a rejuvenating effect, both as everyday micropolitics and a means of

¹²³Joy's status as a defining, politicised affect in contemporary culture is made clear in the 2022 special issue of *Cultural Studies* analysing the connections between joy, consumer culture and empowerment. Two contemporary musical examples with relevance to the LJS might be American rapper Kendrick Lamar's 2015 single 'Alright', an anthemic expression of Black joy in the face of state violence that was embraced during the global Black Lives Matter uprisings (Perez, 2019); or the 2018 album *Joy As an Act of Resistance* by Ezra Collective labelmates, none-more-earnest British post-punks IDLES.

¹²⁴ The bulk of the most incisive and influential work in this area comes from black, feminist, disability and queer theoretical traditions and their many intersections.

collective mobilisation against injustice.¹²⁵ Journalist Francis Gooding has made exactly this point, painting the LJS as ‘a counterpunch of communal warmth and spiritual affirmation... and a sound of joyful defiance in the face of the ongoing grind of life in the melancholy post-colonial landscape of Brexit-era Britain’ (Gooding, no date). Agent and promoter P5 expanded on this connection, describing the scene in conjunctural terms. They saw its flourishing as inseparable from, and in response to, a tense and uncertain political climate:

*The time was ripe! There was an audience waiting for it... and it was a reaction to social, cultural, political repression of the Tory government for so many years. We wanted live music that we could dance to, sweat to, that was exciting, that was expressive. Because that's what jazz music is (P5).*¹²⁶

Understanding the scene as constituted within this structure of feeling helps clarify how the earnest, joyful vibe of the enmeshed network of performer-participants and novel jazz spaces took on a politicised hue. It also resonated in affective and discursive registers that intersect with the significant contemporary movements for racial and environmental justice that have erupted in the UK over the last decade, which drew ‘strength and inspiration from cultural forms that promote feelings of collective joy’ looking in particular to sub- or countercultural popular music – music festivals, grime, and indeed London jazz - as a means to overcome ‘the alienating individualism of capitalist culture’ (Gilbert, 2017).¹²⁷ Within this socio-political context, participants in the scene were acutely aware that the convivial ‘indifference to difference’ evident in the early LJS had to be recognised as both ordinary *and* extraordinary. Warren’s account of TRC takes up this theme, voicing an idealism that animated the scene in this period: ‘the people spending time in this building were beginning to realise... an outward-looking re-imagining of London, where the city was still a place of possibility and boundless creativity... TRC was the cosmopolitan myth made real through the medium of space’ (Warren, 2019a, p. 69).

The ‘mythic’, cosmopolitan qualities of the scene have been particularly resonant in the British political landscape since the mid-2010s. This was, and remains, a conjuncture riven by economic stagnation, political instability, and widespread disaffection. As the authors of *Empire’s Endgame* pithily summarise: ‘Britain is not a happy place’ (Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2021, p. 2). Since the 2008 financial crash, the default official response to intractable crises has been

¹²⁵ DePlume’s recent performance of his anthemic song ‘I Was Gonna Fight Fascism’, alongside Sarathy Korwar and jazz bassist Ruth Goller, at a protest against recent legislation that ‘effectively bans asylum’ in the UK provides a helpful example here. See DePlume, (2023).

¹²⁶ Note, again, the rhetorical move made here to frame jazz as *essentially* a dance music, discussed in 3.4.3.

¹²⁷ For example, the Movement for Black Lives, Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil.

swingeing cuts to public services, a punitive and authoritarian approach to border regimes and migration enforcement, and the draconian quelling of dissent, typically couched in terms of patriotic responsibility. The scene coalesced within this febrile atmosphere, and the stakes have only been raised as it developed.

Jazz in London thus cannot be understood apart from the increasingly sclerotic governance of the country. Immanent to these political crises is a British political culture marked by the heady combination of declinist pessimism, nostalgia, and moments of intense, hubristic euphoria that Paul Gilroy diagnosed, with disconcerting prescience, as ‘postcolonial melancholia’ (Gilroy, 2004; see also Burton-Cartledge, 2021; Mitchell, 2021; Davies, 2022). For many within the scene, a shared sense of disillusionment with Britain’s direction of travel came to a head with the fractious debate around the UK’s membership of the European Union and the unexpected success of the (often unashamedly xenophobic) ‘Leave’ campaign in 2016 (e.g. Davies and Warren, 2019; Kalia, 2019; Thapar, 2020). P5 highlighted how the scene was imbricated in this climate, and animated by a desire for catharsis:

Operat[ing] in scene-type spaces, cultural DIY spaces..., that interaction created this energy where people were getting out of their system ten years of only knowing a Tory government, only knowing austerity politics, and only knowing a racist Britain - and it coincided with Brexit. This was all in the atmosphere... we were fucking pissed off by the rise of the alt-right... the rise of isolation (P5).

The lived, critical multiculturalism of the LJS has thus assumed an oppositional valence during a period where questions of race, ethnicity, migration and belonging have been deeply fraught and occupied centre stage in political discourse. The intense locality generated in these scenic spaces, for which the LJS became renowned, involved constant confrontation with history and a clear-eyed understanding of the constitutive displacements that brought this musical community into being. As writer Teju Adeleye, channelling A. S. Sivanandan, put it in the liner notes for 2018’s *We Out Here* ‘We Out Here is timely code for ‘we’ve been here, we are here, because you, dearest Blighty, were there.’ And we’re not bloody leaving’ (Adeleye, 2018).

At its most compelling, scenic practice in these spaces foregrounded the abrasive, ‘unsettled’ multicultural character of the LJS, and represented anything but an assimilative formation, calling attention to the ‘unresolved post-colonial condition’ of contemporary Britain (Hesse, 2000, p. 13), belying the comfortable ‘melting pot’ trope often employed in press accounts (e.g. Whitehouse, 2018; Hasted, 2019). Warren brings this to the fore with an evocative description of ‘the final moments of a sweaty Steam Down’, where MC Nadeem Din-Gabisi leads an audience call-and-response to a ‘decolonial riddim’:

Man will take down Cecil Rhodes statue

If I have to

Put the one spell, two spell on you

If I have to

Take down Babylon, one two, one two (quoted in Warren, 2019b, p. 14)

Warren details how the excitement of the audience elicits a live ‘wheel up’, the band mimicking a record being rewound and begun again to further hype the crowd.¹²⁸ Warren’s account, and Din-Gabisi’s lyrics, encapsulate the remarkable energy of the scene at its most dynamic, within which performances of this sort are understood by participants as always embedded within, and responsive to, overarching political and historical context.¹²⁹

It was this contrapuntal interaction between political exterior and scenic interior, operating in often accidental jazz spaces at the intersection of predominantly Afro-diasporic musical practices, that generated the collective energy and sense of possibility – the vibe – that captivated audiences (myself included), and generated rapturous accounts from journalists. But the ‘scenic allure’ of authentic (sub)cultural community, key to marketing ‘new London jazz’ performances as a highly attractive experience commodity, ensured that I was far from the only new arrival to the scene. The upsurge in critical interest in the scene, alongside a growing appetite for the LJS among audiences, altered the constituencies of some early ‘scenic’ spaces while enabling more successful musicians to play at larger, established venues. While at first glance a success story, it was also a process that unsettled the foundations of what rendered the incipient scene so alluring – the subject of the next two sections.

¹²⁸ This detail provides another glimpse of the blurred, syncretic performance conventions in London jazz, with the ‘wheel up’ (or ‘rewind’, among many other terms) an archetypal indicator of a good selection by a DJ and/or MC that threads through the lineage of dub, jungle, garage and grime (Fintoni, 2015). The impersonation of this technique with live instruments also hints at the collapsing distinctions between electronic music performance and production and jazz, and live and recording, which I discuss in further in Chapter Five.

¹²⁹ In this instance riffing on the ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ campaign which, following its inception at the University of Cape Town in 2015, has helped spark a long-overdue period of reckoning and reaction over the brutal realities of colonial history and confront the ‘connections between histories of colonial violence and contemporary forms of state racism’ (Bhattacharyya et al., 2021, p. 188; see also Chaudhuri, 2016; Newsinger, 2016). Efforts to topple statues of figures like Cecil Rhodes or the slaver Edward Colston have become perennial flashpoints in anti-racist and decolonial uprisings worldwide, providing a ‘public history lesson, an articulation of a global historical struggle against white supremacy’ (Richmond and Charnley, 2022, p. 40).

4.3: Social media and scenic allure

In this section, I analyse the ambivalent presence of digital documentation and social media at LJS gigs. These have been pivotal in documenting and promoting live events, but also seen as opening a gateway to bigger and different audiences who have threatened to dilute the unique aesthetic sociality of the LJS. For scene participants, contemporary London jazz at its most potent is, or was, a live phenomenon rooted in embodied and collective intimacy, something which eludes or resists digital mediation. Ultimately, for scene insiders (and, subsequently, media interlocutors), to really understand London jazz, *you had to be there*.

4.3.1: Distraction and vibe management

Working from this basis, scene constituents have actively sought to maintain a sense of attentive, embodied and relational engagement at gigs, which we can think of as a kind of managed openness. At Steam Down, these efforts - described by one audience member as 'vibe management' (Warren, 2019b, p. 6) - include a show of hands for new arrivals each week to foster 'collective ownership and sharing', and an opening call-and-response announcement telling those who want to talk to leave the dancefloor, asking instead for audiences to engage in 'conversation' with the music through dance and song (Iqbal, 2020, p. 31).

Other 'vibe management' strategies circle around the digital, with event organisers seeking to restrict how live events are recorded and placed into circulation. One theme here is disaffection with *distraction*. Errol Anderson, founder of influential club night and record label Touching Bass discussed this when describing working on events at TRC for music livestreaming giant Boiler Room (see Heugeut, 2016). His experience left him convinced of the enduring deficiencies of the virtual with regards to live music: 'there's a real human need for 'IRL' [in real life] interaction... unless virtual reality gets to a place where it can fully mimic real life, there'll always be an urge to link up' (Finnamore, 2019). This is an expression of what Rasmus Fleischer has termed a 'post-digital' sensibility: the 'desire for a music that is more collective, exclusive or "real"' that finds expression in a set of 'self-reflexive musical practices' that have emerged in the context of the 'super-abundance' of digital music (Fleischer, 2015, p. 256). Exhibiting exactly this self-reflexive tendency, Anderson instituted a policy of discouraging phone use at Touching Bass events to foster greater presence among those attending.

'Vibe management' represents an enforcement of performance norms that can reasonably be understood as a kind of gatekeeping. Moderating audience behaviour to minimise digital

documentation and enforce particular modes of engagement establishes emic values and practices at LJS live gigs - in these settings the fostering of dance, specific forms of audience engagement, and a broader pursuit of intensity. Here, we could look to the candle-lit tables, expectation of seated, silent appreciation, and a similar discouragement of constant phone use in evidence at other, more 'listening'-oriented jazz settings such as Ronnie Scott's or Café Oto in London – or, for that matter, the Village Vanguard in New York – as cognate methods of 'vibe management'. Both contexts are underpinned by an inherent sense that the music being made merits a degree of serious attention that sets it apart from a generic pop gig or club night – indicating a meaningful point of overlap with other jazz performance settings and norms that, elsewhere, LJS participants have placed at arm's length.

Closer examination of Anderson's 'no phones on the dancefloor' policy provides us with further indications that the spectre of digital incursion plays an important role in establishing the internal musical-ethical values of the scene:

I'd look around the room and everyone would have their phones up. And I'd think, 'but you're here though?'... Some of my favourite moments in life... there's no footage of it but... it's just as strong in your mind and memory. You can remember the smells. Why do you need to have a phone on the dancefloor? (quoted in Iqbal, 2020, p. 32).¹³⁰

Jazz oral history prior to social media is rife with precisely these kinds of moments that, while uncaptured on record or photograph, linger long in the collective memory. The word-of-mouth transmission and embellishment of recollections and anecdotes of this sort is itself an important form of sociality, contributing to the construction of a shared genre culture and a signal of insider status within the jazz world (Whyton, 2010, pp. 106-127). Marian Jago's account of the many disparate recollections of an infamous 1961 gig series at The Cellar jazz club in Vancouver by bassist Charles Mingus underscores how central the 'strong memories' Anderson mentions can be to scene formation. Jago shows how discussion and contestation over the particulars of Mingus's stay was a 'process of mythologization central to the life of a scene' that 'served as a tool for recognition... and a point of mutual experience that still, several decades later, separates those who were part of the scene from those who were not' (Jago, 2018, p. 182).

¹³⁰ The stubborn presence of digital devices in audiences during live performances has become a bugbear for many musicians (and audience members), in some cases leading to conflict with their fanbase (Gordon, 2022; Glitsos, 2018). It has also become something of a proxy war for generational disputes regarding etiquette at live performances, and the disruptive impact of internet music fandom (Baym, 2018).

I suggest that there is a longing for the kinds of mythologization that pre-dates digitalisation and ubiquitous social media, and that we can trace precisely the appetite for what we could call affective disintermediation in London jazz. As an Instagram commenter put it on footage of a Steam Down session: ‘this show so lit [exciting] there’s not a phone in sight’ (Big_money_mace, 2018). The irony and complexity of the LJS post-digital sensibility comes to the fore here: a grainy snippet of the performance is preserved and circulated via social media, helping spectacularise the *offline* qualities of a night lauded for the absence of digital documentation. Qian Zhang and Keith Negus frame this as a ‘paradoxical tension’ between the demands of the ‘experience’ and ‘attention’ economies, with the former dependent on the scarcity inherent in the real-time encounter of a physical concert, and the latter beholden to ubiquitous digital documentation in order to maintain a stream of arresting content (Zhang and Negus, 2021). P9 used to play with the house band and highlighted how the night flourished by embracing the self-consciously inadequate and ephemeral qualities of Stories:

[Steam Down] grew because people wanted to be in that room, not necessarily because they wanted to keep consuming the Instagram Stories or anything happening on social media... [audiences] came for not only the music and the vibe that was created, but the people in the space and the fact that there's no stage... it's a communal thing (P9).

The dissemination of in-the-moment footage from the dancefloor thus provided an alluringly imperfect snapshot of these performances, ultimately drawing the attention of the mainstream music industries.¹³¹ Internet studies scholar Crystal Abidin has noted a similar strategy adopted by social media influencers, describing it as the pursuit of ‘porous authenticity’ (Abidin, 2018). In this context, conscious *imperfection* in social media posts provides audiences a glimpse behind the curtain of a typically heavily posed and curated persona. Such porous authenticity entices onlookers ‘into trying to evaluate and validate how genuine a persona is by following... inconspicuous and scattered holes or gateways that were intentionally left as trails for the curious’ (Abidin, 2018).

P9 suggests that the ‘curious’ here ended up attending Steam Down in-person, wanting to ‘be in that room’, to confirm whether the vibe fleetingly made visible through Instagram Stories was genuine. Media sociologist David Beer has argued that the offer of this kind of digital immediacy has become a more attractive proposition for media consumers in the context of a

¹³¹ Instagram Stories can’t easily be preserved for citation as they disappear after 24 hours (Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, 2020, p. 88). However, early video available from the Steam Down Instagram feed help convey the energy of the first year of Steam Down, e.g. (Steam Down (@steamdown), 2018). Note the shift toward more conventional forms of audience-performer interaction and staging in recent footage e.g. (Steam Down (@steamdown), 2023). These recent events are now formally ticketed with a fixed £12.50 price, rather than the ‘pay what you feel’ system cited by Warren as key to the event’s accessibility.

growing disaffection with platform curation: ‘in the context of algorithmic systems, the impression of unmediation is a powerful thing’ (Beer, 2021).

4.3.2: The perils of attention

P30 similarly suggested that for the first years of the event they ran in east London, their digital footprint and promotional strategy ‘existed purely on Facebook and Instagram’. In this respect, moments of unexpected visibility online proved beneficial, highlighting how ‘it was helpful for us to have Yussef Kamaal go viral’, with a widely-circulated video of the group playing an impromptu performance providing substantial social media interest before they performed. But this points to another concern that marks the LJS post-digital sensibility, regarding a lack of control and autonomy over external *attention* augured by social media. P30 noted the unnerving consequences of this process, suggesting that outside awareness of their event series appeared to ‘proliferate naturally by its own algorithms... it wouldn't be a massive stretch to say that Facebook has decided who's coming to our gigs... That is fucking bonkers isn't it?’ (P30).

P30 went on to speak with regret about how the ease of use of social media had bred an incautious promotional strategy, to the exclusion of early participants:

when we started off, our crowd was basically our mates... [but] It multiplied over the course of three years... We were growing exponentially... that can change the essence of a night... [and] it's something that I'm keen to reverse. The first 10 [events] were much more diverse than the last five - last five, much more white... our inattention to that has led to a changing crowd, and a changing dynamic over the last few gigs.

Similarly, social media visibility had been vital for the career trajectory of Steam Down as a distinct group. P9 suggested that the hype generated by intermittent digital footage had drawn press coverage and, ultimately, music industry attention, with social media being ‘pretty much everything’ in this process: ‘we were able to build a career to the point where you can get signed to a label, just through your live shows and your presence on social media’ (Akim, 2018; Hutchinson, 2018a; Vinti, 2021).¹³²

But while the arrival of a major record label boded well for Steam Down the *band*, the same process had entirely different consequences for the *event*, initially so rooted in a tight-but-loose core of ‘30 people... family and friends coming through regularly because they believed in it’, as P9 put it. The chance appearance of American saxophone icon Kamasi Washington (see

¹³² Steam Down signed to Decca, a subsidiary of Universal, in 2020 (Marmot, 2024, p. 50).

Figure 2) indexed the tensions thrown up by the entanglement of closed and tight-knit interpersonal networks, and public-facing social media (Steam Down (@steamdown), 2019). P9 emphasised that ‘the only reason we had Kamasi Washington come through... [was] because our friends had brought him’, in line with a longstanding jazz tradition where out-of-town jazz musicians sit in at local jams when touring.



Figure 2: Steam Down bandleader Wayne Francis with musicians Kamasi Washington and Charlotte Dos Santos, August 7th, 2018. Taken from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BmLepnCnod7/> [accessed 04/03/23]

However, the affordances of social media – ‘vast engines of interpersonal surveillance’ that facilitate ‘superabundant visibility’ (Brubaker, 2022, pp. 61, 64) – turned this casual encounter between London and LA musicians into what P9 called ‘a moment’: ‘everyone was like ‘oh, my God, Kamasi Washington’s here’. The appearance of the most widely-hyped contemporary jazz musician worldwide provided a stamp of approval for the scene when the media spotlight was

at its most intense, which P9 raises as indicative of the growing centrality of the night (and LJS events at large) not just as a destination for scene initiates but for a new, and rapidly growing audience constituency.

One participant, an artist manager, portrayed Steam Down as a victim of its own success in this regard. They lauded the event for widening access to jazz among new audiences:

Steam Down was brilliant... the people who were playing, saw people who looked like them in the audience at the beginning. [So] a lot of young, Black and brown people in South London (P36).

However, they attributed its widening success to visibility both in 'new' and 'legacy' media, suggesting that this changed the intimate, multi-ethnic constituency of the night, in the process diminishing the night's collaborative and energetic vibe.

As it got trendy and Instagrammed, as it got supported by like the New York Times... it became a trendy hipster thing and the crowd, got diluted with like, kind of middle aged, white... men (P36).

At first glance this seems a problematic dismissal of a substantial audience segment in keeping with the recurrent, reductive caricatures about contemporary British jazz culture in LJS discourse. It bears repeating that 'middle-aged white men' have every right to enjoy and participate in jazz, and that this need not contradict or imperil its status as Black music. But P36's comments actual contain more nuance, explicitly connecting the linked role of press and social media incursion to a move from *participation* to *observation* at LJS gigs. Heightened attention to the scene augured the arrival of 'trendy' fans unaccustomed to the performance conventions and idealised norms of musicking that constituted the prized atmosphere of the early scene, and distinguished it from prevailing convention in British jazz at the time. In P36's eyes, the arrival of this neophyte audience caused a reversion to the mean at LJS gigs:

The problem there is, like, it becomes an observational experience. I think people got so excited, about British jazz because it felt very inclusive, participatory and it avoided the kind of voyeur-type thing where you're just looking at entertainment (P36).¹³³

We could see this as a shift from co-production to consumption in LJS live performance spaces, augured by increasing digital visibility, with the effect of *decreasing* the quality of socio-aesthetic experience. Indeed, one indication of this shift might be this thesis itself. As a white academic researcher and relative outsider, drawn to study the LJS precisely because of its

¹³³ P36's use of entertainment in the negative sits at odds with the commitment to entertain that many LJS musicians have mentioned, discussed in Chapter Three. This underscores the disparate and contradictory relationship to jazz and its contested status as 'art' music, or otherwise, within the scene.

unusual fame and the processes of its mediation, I could reasonably be accused of representing the quintessential ‘voyeur-type’ observer, despite my efforts to counteract this dynamic.¹³⁴ To return to the vocabulary of 4.2, the ‘dilution’ of the audience by a reversion to a more typical whiter, older, richer jazz demographic had an attendant effect on the ‘aesthetic sociality of blackness’. Evidently, the event organisers viewed the shift as a function of social media visibility, adopting a ‘digital detox’ equivalent to Anderson’s ‘vibe management’ strategy, adding a ‘no phones on the dancefloor’ request to their ‘house rules’ from 2019 (Heath, 2020).¹³⁵ However, the runaway success has had lasting consequences. Although the night has endured in some form, for many early participants it has lost its key spark – note P36’s use of the past tense throughout the anecdote above. For P9, the trajectory of Steam Down has resulted in a dislocation from the night’s founding principles and its community of early participants, leading them to distance themselves from the collective entirely:

I had to step away [from Steam Down]... [because] people who originally came don't feel like this is a space for them anymore. That's when you're like: "what am I actually doing? Am I doing what this was meant to do?" (P9).

4.3.3: Post-digital malaise and ‘real’ musicianship

At Steez, the ‘detox’ principle was taken much further. The night adopted a consciously ‘idiosyncratic’ approach to their promotional strategy, rebuffing media interviews out of a concern for reductive journalistic narrativisations of the nascent music community (Iqbal, 2020). Among formative London jazz spaces, Steez most explicitly adhered to the principle that ‘you have to be here to understand it’ (Warren, 2019b). This approach was taken further after the night ended in 2017, with musician and former organiser Luke Newman taking Steez’s entire web presence offline. The decision to scrub the event’s digital footprint was driven by concerns about the flattening effects of social media, press misrepresentations, and more fundamentally that you ‘can never tell everything that happens in the room’ (quoted in Iqbal, 2020). Such a strategy attempts to overcome what danah boyd and Alice Marwick call ‘context collapse’, the ‘flatten[ing] of multiple audiences into one’ on social media that can precipitate rapid decontextualisation, misinterpretation and a sense of lost agency for the subject (Marwick and Boyd, 2010; Gilroy-Ware, 2017, pp. 148–156). There is an abundance of literature from critical social media studies detailing the multiplicity of ways that internet users navigate context collapse (e.g. Davis and Jurgenson, 2014; Marwick and boyd, 2014; Petre,

¹³⁴ Although, in my defence, I am neither trendy nor middle-aged.

¹³⁵ The prohibition of photography and phones in general are long-established norms in queer nightlife and queer electronic music performance settings, intended to maintain the privacy, safety and enjoyment of attendees (see Garcia, 2020, pp. 337–340).

Duffy and Hund, 2019), but the outright withdrawal from social media evident in the case of Steez remains an outlier.

It also represents a striking departure from prevalent, commonsense understandings of the social web as an unavoidable feature of contemporary working life in the music industries and the pragmatic approaches taken by others within the scene, as discussed further in Chapter Six. Newman's decision reflects a tendency that Ellis Jones identifies among DIY music practitioners, who 'refuse to comply with the logics of the dominant social and musical platforms' as a form of 'cultural resistance' (Jones, 2021a, p. 138). Such 'resistance' was also born from the rocky experiences of Steez 'alumni' during their move from the relatively uncommodified space of the jam session into the popular music marketplace:

from that Steez community I think people learnt a lot from what happened to King Krule... he was picked up by a label, ascended to the giddy heights of popularity... a lot of people saw what happened when contracts and agents and the financial structures wrap around a person, because they become an economic unit (P12).

Organisers at Steez, then, responded to the unwelcome effects of outside attention by embracing their own version of opacity, resisting extractive practices by both cultural industries intermediaries and digital platforms. With few social media traces enduring after the jam came to an end, curious onlookers – human or algorithmic – were left in the dark. But these interventions have *deepened* the sense of exclusivity and mythology surrounding the event's foundational role in the birth of the LJS. Will Straw has analysed a parallel phenomenon in his study of Montreal's 'Mile End' post-rock scene, where a 'relative absence of images' of the scene 'enhances the sense that the music in Mile End is underground music... experimental and often transgressive... [and] not easily understood or decoded' (Straw, 2018, p. 22).

In a conjuncture characterised by what Kate Eichhorn calls the 'end of forgetting' thanks to ubiquitous documentation and (social) mediation, the absence of Steez from the cultural record resonates with kinds of post-digital desire for exclusivity and the 'real' detailed by Fleischer above (Eichhorn, 2019). Were Steez an isolated event, it likely *would* go forgotten. However, placed within the wider story of the scene's success, where other parts of the London jazz nexus have engaged (either reluctantly or enthusiastically) with social media as a way of conveying the distinctive energy of the scene, Steez can be held up as an example of the LJS as an oppositional, underground, resistant formation. Iqbal offers precisely this interpretation, framing the rejection of digital documentation at Steez as a 'deeply profound' act that demanded more 'genuine' connection with the event's participants:

in a time where... accessing history has become over-accessible through devices which saturate us with information... the lack of a digital footprint forces us to learn this information from those who were present (Iqbal, 2020).

These various examples suggest that the scene as a live entity has flourished by *leveraging ambivalence* toward the platformisation of everyday life, adopting a ‘both-and’ approach to digital culture and its negation. A discursive tendency throughout the accounts in this section, and in contemporary society writ large, is the post-digital malaise discussed in Chapter One: the collective sense that, despite the utopian promise that accompanied its emergence, hypertrophied digital communication has ultimately helped atrophy sociality, polarise politics, and degrade culture. This attitude toward the digital structures the approaches taken toward recording and promotion within the scene, discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. But the examples of Steez and Steam Down show it has also played an essential role in framing the LJS as a *live* phenomenon, in turn rendering the London jazz vibe into a rare, valuable – and eminently marketable – commodity.

Music strategist P13 framed the appeal of the scene in its tight-knit, emergent period in precisely these terms:

I think people were searching for, let's call them organic and communal live experiences... there was this idea of experiencing something that was ‘real’ - people actually playing real instruments... communing with each other and the crowd around them. I think [that] served a need (P13).

Here we can see, despite prevailing narratives regarding the populist and ‘anti-establishment’ credentials of the LJS, another instance where quite orthodox jazz values resurface. Hence, jazz can be held up as a novel offer of ‘real’ musicianship for a listenership tired of what was perceived as both the sonic and demographic homogeneity of electronic music spaces:

I think there were certain people - me included - that didn't necessarily want to go to just another house night... you can go to a lot of raves and you will get the same demographic... [whereas] these [LJS] events, at least at the beginning, were very inclusive, they were very open.... that was quite an appeal (P33).

For many, the terminology of inclusion and diversity are central means of narrating the distinctions between the LJS as a live phenomenon and prior scenes. The genuine novelty of the scene’s gender politics and the representation of women came into focus here. London jazz sits at the confluence of a number of preceding scenes and spaces – (post-)dubstep, dub reggae, grime, as well as jazz – within which the overwhelming dominance of men, onstage and off, is well-documented (Stirling, 2016, 2020, p. 126; Muggs and Stevens, 2019, pp. 385–387). An experienced music publicist discussed the scene along these lines, seeing the move

toward live performance as undercutting the ‘laddish’ aspects of prior club cultures (see Hutton, 2006, pp. 57–70):

the mid-noughties to 2010, it was still about DJs... which was quite laddish. I think with [the LJS], it became about inclusion... and it was more diverse. There were Black artists that brought different crowds, people of colour to their show, and that audience was a little bit more diverse in terms of just male and female [attendees] (P26).

Writer and DJ P16 made a congruent point, suggesting that the dedication required to hone your skills as a jazz instrumentalist provided a refreshing counterpoint for new audiences in an era of instant gratification:

You can become a DJ overnight, or you can become a rapper overnight... [whereas] you go into a room and see [LJS musicians] play... they've had to practice five hours a day on that instrument for the last 15 years. There's a human satisfaction in these days of hype, and in this period of instant-ness... It's almost like it takes you back in time... [to] where you are confronted with a spectacle of incredible artistry (P16).

Another participant involved with a key LJS record label, took this a degree further. Like P5 above, they tied processes of diversification to shifting performance practices and a wider politicisation of culture:

when I was in my 20s, I was raving to DJs. [Now] suddenly, you're seeing young people as much listening to live music with instruments... I think the freedom that's in this non-quantised music with improvisation and solos... it feels part of resistance to the really heavy social and political and environmental challenges of the last five years (P11).

These accounts helpfully demonstrate the allure of the scene as a live phenomenon, framed at once along fairly nostalgic lines (‘it takes you back in time’) and as a cutting-edge riposte to both a club scene that was laddish and exclusionary, and a wider jazz establishment. They also further underscore the current that runs through LJS discourse where musical ability, cultural politics, and resistance are threaded together, deploying a longstanding ‘trope of freedom’ that asserts an indelible connection between the ‘musical aesthetics of jazz and its sociopolitical ambitions’ (Early and Monson, 2019, p. 9).¹³⁶

P11 and P16 in particular also evoke critical analyses that tie a purported waning of political consciousness in popular music to its increasing technological dependence, made clear in P11’s equation of freedom and unquantised music and P16’s surprising suggestion that becoming a

¹³⁶ Although as Early and Monson point out, as a primarily instrumental music played around the world and for over a century, jazz has no neatly demarcated ‘sociopolitical ambitions’ and can thus be put to all manner of ideological ends.

rapper was trivially easy.¹³⁷ For example, Paul Gilroy has lamented the technological ‘de-skilling’ and digital ‘over-mediation’ of Black Atlantic music following what he regards as its anti-colonial and politically radical highpoint in the 1970s. For Gilroy, digitalisation has augured a turn away from the social aesthetics and antiphony which he sees as fundamental to the oppositional force of Black music production and performance (Gilroy, 2000, pp. 251–253; see also McNeil, 2023, pp. 127–130).¹³⁸

It is important to note that other participants and much LJS commentary take a different tack, rejecting binaries between ‘real’ instrumental music making and digital production or manipulation. However, this imputed connection between ‘real’ instruments and authenticity form a potent undercurrent in assertions about the novelty and rarity of LJS performance. On occasion, it takes a retrograde or even reactionary form. Saxophonist P7, for example, cited deskilling to emphasise the difference between a jazz gig and ‘just another house night’. Rather than positioning the instrumentalist as superior to the DJ, they argued that ‘DJing has changed as well’, from a technically demanding craft into a mere hobby that required limited skill or effort. For P7, this was symptomatic of the digital erosion (or even automation) of musical ability:

when I was a teenager, a DJ was someone that turned up to the fucking club with two massive boxes of vinyl, and you have to work that system. Now it's some fucking joker that turns up with a bloody (what's it called?) USB stick, and plugs into Ableton...¹³⁹ My sister fucking DJs! She has absolutely no experience whatsoever. She's not a musician. She's a mum of two kid (P7).

P7 is employing a discourse of musical authenticity that, while updated to incorporate early electronic dance music performance practice and vinyl records, feels long past its sell-by date. In its conflation of gender, musical skill and technology, it bears more than a passing resemblance to ‘rockist’ perspectives dating back at least to the 1960s (Hamilton, 2016, pp. 18–25). ‘Rockism’ (and P7) fetishises what pop music scholar Eric Weisbard calls ‘ideals of sweaty authenticity’ oriented around visible effort and ‘real’ instruments, in tandem with a mistrust of technologically-mediated and purportedly commercialised musical forms

¹³⁷ Quantisation used in this context refers to autocorrection processes in digital music production, typically for rhythm. Use of these tools is routine, but as P11 appears to be implying, quantizing is sometimes felt to ‘iron out’ micro-discrepancies that constitute a given musician or groove’s ‘feel’ (Keil, 1987). However, creative use of quantisation is central in modern popular music, notably the unique rhythmic sensibility developed by hip-hop producer J Dilla on the Akai MPC3000 drum machine (Charnas, 2022). The ‘J Dilla Feel’ is enormously influential in contemporary jazz and is a defining feature of the ‘recording-oriented aesthetic’ discussed in Chapter Five (Russonello, 2013; Reynolds, 2017, pp. 201–215).

¹³⁸ See Brar, 2021, pp. 36–40 for a nuanced rebuttal of Gilroy’s position.

¹³⁹ A widely-used digital audio workstation in electronic music production.

(Weisbard, 2016, pp. 196–197).¹⁴⁰ Rockism is also profoundly gendered, building upon antecedent binaries between ‘masculine’ swing and ‘feminine’ easy listening to naturalise rock’s status as ‘masculine and superior, Othering the inferior music as feminine or feminizing’ (Keightley, 2008, p. 327; Coates, 2003). In raising their sister’s status as a mother to delegitimize her musicianship and underscore the technological degradation of contemporary DJing, the subtext of P7’s comments couldn’t be clearer: thanks to digital deskilling, the labour and mystique of the old-school DJ has been literally domesticated.¹⁴¹

The surfacing of this ageing critique connecting technology to commerce and feminisation in pop music felt surprising at first glance, sticking out like a sore thumb in my field research and within a scene where the widespread presence of women musicians and DJs was both celebrated and commonplace. The connections drawn here between technologised musicianship, the domestic and effeminacy here point to the knotty complexity that always accompanies disputes over cultural authenticity. Dishearteningly, it also suggests that the optimistic assertions that the LJS had rooted out ‘laddishness’ in London’s underground music spaces were premature, and P7’s comments provide a reminder of the limits of a narrow focus on representation as indicative of more widespread progress regarding sexism and misogyny in popular music and jazz. In fact, P26 summarised this best:

I don't know... how much men have changed their viewpoints... There's obviously some incredibly talented musicians that happen to be women, [but] I'm slightly sceptical of media narratives [laughs] - just a few women doesn't mean that we've got this massive change! (P26)

But what these discussions of digital de-skilling in contemporary music indicate again is a productive ambiguity at the core of the scene. Media commentators and my interviewees seem comfortable employing multivalent, often contradictory visions of authentic musical performance to laud new London jazz: at once celebrated for the ease with which it blends musical styles past and present, digital and analogue; *and* held up as a radical return to a kind of ‘resistant’ instrumental musicality.

This section has traced the divergent strategies of social media use within the LJS. These have been variable: some practicing a calculated refusal of digital mediation, others experiencing an

¹⁴⁰ P7’s comments also evoke the controversies surrounding the use of electric instruments and effects in jazz, debates that themselves are gendered, as I discuss in Chapter Five.

¹⁴¹ Domesticity is often framed as a source of burdensome responsibility and unfreedom for the solitary male jazzman, the normative protagonist of the music in jazz discourse and iconography. Parenthood, particularly motherhood, is largely confined to the margins of jazz culture as a result (Provost, 2017; Rustin-Paschal, 2017, pp. 137–141) Website London Jazz News has an ongoing ‘Mothers in Jazz’ series, an effort to rectify this.

excess of attention through social media documentation, ultimately to the benefit of the Steam Down band but the detriment of scenic intimacy. However, taken together, within the rising profile of London jazz in its totality, they functioned in a complementary manner. As some ‘fabled’ nights like Steez disappeared from digital view, their mystique helped enhance the cultural currency of those nights that *did* persist, in turn burnishing the ‘scenic allure’ of the LJS.

4.4: Live music, ‘regeneration’ and displacement

4.4.1: The scaling of the scene and the waning of affect

The LJS’s growing reputation and audience base has, for some artists, opened up much larger stages. Mid-sized commercial pop venues (e.g. Brixton Academy, Scala, Koko) provide space for bigger acts, but many of these expanded performance opportunities have also been underwritten by institutional – largely public – funding. Large arts venues (in London the Southbank or the Royal Albert Hall (RAH), for example) are economically unviable and rely on state or other subsidy. Staging shows in these spaces otherwise, ‘according to [their] true costs, would be to restrict entry to a small super-rich elite’ (Frith, 2015, p. 269). In some ways then, the expansion of performance opportunities for LJS players in these venues represents jazz’s ascent up the ‘cultural ladder’, discussed in Chapter Three, in microcosm, with the platforming of the scene dependent on the institutional legitimacy conferred by playing art music. However, it also represents a move in the opposite direction by arts funding bodies and programmers seeking to dispel perceptions of cultural elitism. As P8, a programmer who has worked with the Barbican and the Southbank Centre, explained, hosting successful LJS performers has provided establishment art institutions with a much-needed multi- and subcultural lustre:

the Barbican is funded by the City of London, the financial district... [they] have no idea... about culture or art ... they just wanted prestige... we're benefiting off [the scene], and then their audiences come to the Barbican... that's really important to acknowledge, because otherwise arts-funded organisations will pat themselves on the back and go, 'how marvellous have we been?' - Because it can go in their annual reports, frankly (P8).

The embrace of LJS acts by arts venues underscores how the ‘scenic allure’ of London jazz has become a valuable commodity in the British cultural industries, building upon the scene’s reputation as a potent live experience. There are obvious symbolic resonances for scene members when a figure such as Nubya Garcia headlines at RAH, or indeed when a figure such

as Alabaster DePlume is ‘topping the bill’ at the Barbican (Brown, 2021; Walton, 2023).¹⁴² Some prominent LJS musicians have used these novel, larger platforms for political messaging. During Ezra Collective’s 2023 performance at Glastonbury Festival, Femi Koleoso called for greater funding for youth music, suggesting:

It's all well and good complaining about the youth of today... but let me tell you what actually works: putting a trumpet in their hands and saying 'go and play at Glastonbury... give young people an instrument and give them a chance (Glastonbury, 2023, Ezra Collective, 2023).

Similarly, Hutchings’ group Sons of Kemet performance at London’s Somerset House in 2019 to an audience of 3,500 people ‘crackle[d] with righteous political energy’, as the band articulated opposition to the Conservative government and then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson, playing in front of a screen emblazoned with ‘We Will Never Forget Grenfell’ and Johnson’s infamous racist description of ‘crowds of flag-waving piccaninnies’ (J. Gray, 2019)

But reflections by participants regarding the scene’s departure from its ‘own’, intimate spaces, reveal a diffuse, but deep sense of interpersonal, musical and political loss. The dwindling availability of convivial settings like TRC, Passing Clouds or Steez appears to have had a corrosive effect on collectivity, intimacy and solidarity. The resistant potential discussed as inhering in the network of fragile, fecund spaces where the scene was nurtured has dispersed as audiences have changed and smaller venues have disappeared. This has been felt in part as an aesthetic-performative loss – a diminished vibe, a waning of affect – something P23 experienced when seeing the Steam Down band on tour:

anything that relies on the energy in the room... Steam Down for instance. [They’re] nothing without an audience. I saw them at Love Supreme Festival and it was terrible... they were trying to do the thing that they do in Peckham [sic],¹⁴³ but it... was almost shambolic, because they didn't have anything coming back from the crowd, none of... the ritual of their gig... it was a really weird, dispiriting gig (P23) (emphasis original).

I encountered something similar at Garcia’s Prom at the RAH. As a space designed for the performance of European concert music, it offered little acoustic support for Garcia’s dub-stepped take on post-bop, and most of the detail of the performance was lost in a wash of bass and drums by the time it reached the upper circle.¹⁴⁴ While the prestige that performing at the

¹⁴² As Walton notes in their article, DePlume’s pairing of ‘billowy semi-improv cosmic jazz’ and disarmingly earnest poetry feels at first glance a particularly unlikely combination for pulling in large crowds.

¹⁴³ Steam Down as an event has moved venue since it started in 2018, but has never taken place regularly in Peckham.

¹⁴⁴ Equally, the sound quality seems to have been poor throughout the venue, as mentioned by critic Geoff Brown in his live review for *The Times* (Brown, 2021).

RAH confers is substantial, it also felt alienating, placing additional social barriers between Garcia and her audience alongside the substantial physical one separating stage from seating. Following Christopher Small, it seemed the setting ‘impose[d] its nature on the nature of the event taking place within it’, largely stifling audience-musician interaction and sociality, despite the band’s fervent playing and Garcia’s frequent efforts to engage the crowd between songs (Small, 1998, p. 6). Garcia herself has noted the shortfall in sociality evident when playing ‘prestige’ venues relative to that available in quintessentially scenic spaces like TRC:

I’m honoured to play Ronnie Scott’s, but if the audience doesn’t want to be there, or they haven’t come to see me, that isn’t a gig that’s the same as playing in a warehouse where your people are (quoted in Evans, 2018).¹⁴⁵

4.4.2: Gentrification and grassroots cultural production

Although some within the scene now enjoy regular bookings at well-established commercial pop/rock venues and publicly-funded arts spaces, the key incubators of the LJS explored in 4.2 have been in a state of flux since their inception. Those that have survived have often done so via a partial, pragmatic turn to more commercial practices. Steam Down has persisted, but has formalised into a ticketed event subordinate to the activity of the band, which operates as a more conventional outfit touring internationally and playing larger pop/rock venues in London (Iqbal, 2020). TRC still operates as a recording studio, rehearsal space and record label (Total Refreshment Records), but stopped hosting live events after its license was revoked by Hackney Council in 2018 (Warren, 2019a, p. 111; Sjerven, 2021b).¹⁴⁶ Founder Lexus Blondin has secured a degree of longevity for the TRC ‘brand’. TRC has had multiple partnerships with international media brands including a recent release with storied American jazz label Blue Note (Bergsagel, 2023), alongside occasional, peripatetic gigs and parties in London promoted using the venue’s name, including a Southbank Centre performance as part of the annual EFG London Jazz Festival. Here, the TRC name serves as a cross-promotional endeavour, providing a legitimacy exchange between established/establishment bodies and ‘new London jazz’. The rich symbolic capital accrued by the TRC ‘brand’ after many years as a lynchpin in London’s musical underground draws younger, hipper and more diverse audiences and signals a proximity to the

¹⁴⁵ Drummer Moses Boyd has made a congruent point, suggesting that the club-focused aesthetics of his music (discussed in Chapter Five) were poorly served by prestige venues: ‘What is a concert hall? There’s better acoustics in [Brixton club] Phonox... I’d rather play with their [sound] system with the music I’m playing’ (quoted in Hasted, 2019b).

¹⁴⁶ It has recently begun hosting occasional ‘audiophile’ listening sessions of new and classic jazz records on an ultra-high-end sound system; more on this in Chapter Five.

cutting edge of contemporary popular music for the institution, while the deep(er) pockets of the publicly-funded venue offers LJS musicians and cultural intermediaries a degree of recompense and security after the closure of genuinely 'scenic' spaces.¹⁴⁷

But, these examples notwithstanding, the contemporary landscape for grassroots music spaces remains dire. In the UK, music venues are at the mercy of landlords, business rates, alcohol licensing and planning regulations, and the sensitivity to noise of nearby neighbours (Webster, Brennan, Behr, Cloonan, *et al.*, 2018). These challenges are more acute in the capital, and have been dramatically intensified by the exogenous shock of the pandemic (*Cultural Infrastructure Plan: A Call to Action*, 2019; Anderton, 2022). Although the LJS, unlike other styles of jazz, has also found something of a home in clubland, the situation is also dire in these spaces, declining from over 3000 clubs in the UK in 2005 to 875 in 2024 (Ravens, 2024). The scene thus sprung up amid a long-term decline in grassroots music venues in London, with music journalist Anton Spice suggesting that for emergent jazz musicians, 'precarity is built into every performance' (Spice, 2022). Despite the upward career trajectory of some of its constituents, LJS spaces have been 'dropping like flies' according to one DJ, promoter and broadcaster:

TRC got closed down, and then quite a few other venues had been closed down, like Mau-Mau where Jazz Re:freshed was... the telling thing will be whether we're able to create a few more spaces able to harbour this sort of music, week in week out. Because you can't just rely on the festival circuit... It can't just be a one off (P33).

P33's emphasis on the need for *regularity* is crucial here, with small venues underpinning the ritual of constant performance, discussed in 4.2, that forms the bedrock of a musical community such as the LJS.

Housing is also perennially imperilled, enforcing mobility among scene members and further undermining scenic cohesion. As one writer put it:

this generation of musicians are living in perilous renting situations, paying exceptionally high percentages of their monthly income on rent at the whim of landlords, who can choose to evict them whenever they choose (P11).

The precarity of the London housing market has consequences for cultural memory in the scene. Steam Down founder Wayne Francis has suggested that the pace of rent increases has attenuated the vital relationship between different generations of musicians, pointing to the

¹⁴⁷ Michael Scott suggests that this is a standard pattern in the cultural sphere: lengthy, semi-formal and underpaid labour by cultural entrepreneurs such as Blondin accumulates extensive symbolic capital which can be converted into economic capital when entering the fold of more formal cultural industry institutions (Scott, 2012).

departure of broken beat pioneers from West London: ‘the problem with communities changing so fast is that you lose out on mentorship’ (quoted in Iqbal, 2020, p. 21). The disappearance of both a 17-year home for jazz-crossover music in West London in Jazz Re:freshed, and the musical elders who lived nearby, has remapped the scene and its relation to the city, altering the rhythms of participation (and the makeup of participants) that catalysed the LJS as a socio-cultural formation. The respective fates of these nights and venues are multicausal – personal burnout, financial woes, interpersonal conflicts – but all have struggled for survival in the inhospitable environment for small-scale or unprofitable performance that is 21st Century London.

But as the wealth of critical scholarship examining the relationship between creative policymaking and urban planning has made clear, creative scenes like the LJS are entangled with dynamics of gentrification and regeneration in complex ways (Zukin, 1982). Guitarist Oscar Jerome has discussed his discomfort with the role played by artists, musicians and other ‘creatives’ as ‘shock troops’ of gentrification (Smith, 1996; Ocejo, 2019, p. 450), summarising his understanding of this process: ‘gentrification is killing London’s communities... artists move into an area because it’s cheap and they make it cool... prices go up, locals sell to investors and artists are forced to move out’ (Cornwell, 2022). There has also been concern expressed by participants about the apparent distance between ‘new London jazz’ and the wider pre-existing local communities within which it emerged. Kamaal Williams has asked ‘what does it mean to be here?’ when reflecting on TRC, a space he felt ‘was quite separate from the local Turkish community’ who ‘run that whole area... I didn’t feel like it was connected to everything else around it’ (quoted in Warren, 2019a, p. 98).

Writer Haseeb Iqbal highlighted a similar separation in south-east London, revealed in an encounter with a Deptford resident who felt unwelcome at the ‘trendy-looking cocktail bar’ Buster Mantis, the first home to Steam Down, despite living in the area since the 1970s (Iqbal, 2020, p. 15). Likewise, the flourishing of jazz in south-east London symbolised the shifting demographics, and erasure of pre-existing culture, in the area for presenter Henrie Kwushue. Kwushue’s web series ‘Is Your Area Changing?’ interrogates the effects of rapid gentrification across three, predominantly Black areas of London, Dalston, Brixton and Peckham. She has described her uneasy encounter with a new jazz night in Peckham querying whether ‘first generation African and Caribbean kids living in Peckham’ would feel welcome: ‘it was just random, and nobody there was from Peckham, you could tell’ (Shadijanova, 2020). Jazz, for Kwushue, was clearly a potent symbol of the rapid displacement of existing, mostly working-

class Black diasporic communities in her local area, and it provided impetus for the entire project.

These points of tension are important to highlight, with the apparent dislocation of even avowedly community-oriented settings like TRC and Steam Down from surrounding social and cultural networks complicating claims of openness and access that anchor the scene's self-presentation and promotion. Equally, the anxieties expressed by LJS participants and commentators points to a shared awareness and political consciousness regarding the potential complicity of the London jazz zeitgeist in dynamics of arts-led gentrification, undercutting the prevalent depiction of cultural producers as 'unwitting causes or dupes of community erosion' (Pratt, 2018, p. 359). But as with much popular discourse, we can see how gentrification is deployed in the LJS context to group many, wide-ranging processes of urban and economic change (e.g. rising rents, 'night time economy' policymaking, the growth of urban tourism, conflicts over noise) together to lament the disruption of the 'social ecologies of city neighbourhoods' (Straw and Reia, 2021, p. 12). In their emphasis upon visible cultural spectacles of gentrification and rising inequality, these are also *demand-side* interpretations, foregrounding the ways that gentrifiers create a 'symbolic order' of 'physical and social signs' that are 'not "for" the existing members of these neighbourhoods' (Ocejo, 2019, p. 447). The effects of *supply-side* gentrification, by contrast, are more challenging to grasp in our day-to-day lives. Operating at the level of 'economic and political elites, large-scale and global actors (i.e., corporations, financiers), and market forces' (Ocejo, 2019, p. 447), supply-side gentrification rarely announces itself with the luridly aestheticised high-cost cultural goods (craft beer, imported American sale, vinyl records etc) and tone-deaf marketing campaigns whose presence in an area heralds a new 'frontier' of gentrification (Hubbard, 2016; le Grand, 2023). But it is these macro, top-down processes of urban development and regeneration that have proved most decisive in remaking the city, with significant and ambivalent downstream effects for London's music cultures.

4.4.3: New London jazz and urban 'renewal'

One example of the waning connection between space, scene and politics is evident in the collection of London jazz stars old and new performing at an inaugural concert series for the brand-new World Heart Beat Embassy Gardens concert venue built as part of the Vauxhall Nine Elms Battersea (VNEB) development. The programming of LJS-associated musicians new (drummer Jas Kayser and singer Plumm) and old (saxophonists Julian Joseph and Tony Kofi) at the venue reflects the ambivalent transformations that the scene's performance culture have

undergone in recent years. Embassy Gardens developers Ballymore have foregrounded the provision of the state-of-the-art music venue in their promotional materials as a core part of their effort to ‘establish a totally new community within central London’, framing its stewardship by local music education charity World Heart Beat,¹⁴⁸ as ‘demonstrative of our commitment to creating vibrant new neighbourhoods’ and a ‘reflection of our ongoing commitment to supporting arts and culture’ (Ballymore, 2018).

However, the Embassy Gardens housing complex came to national attention in 2021 not as a bastion of the arts, but thanks to its so-called ‘poor doors’ preventing lower-income residents from accessing many of the site’s luxury facilities. Journalist Oliver Wainwright suggested that the development ‘takes the iniquities of the real estate-industrial complex to extremes’, providing an ‘international investors’ playground where regular Londoners are pushed to the very edges, or cut out of the picture altogether’ (Wainwright, 2021). Embassy Gardens is thus something of a poster child for top-down regeneration, displacement, and housing inequality in contemporary London.¹⁴⁹ It has become emblematic of how unrestrained finance capital (often working hand in glove with acquiescent, austerity-stricken local government (Beswick and Penny, 2018)) is rapidly altering the urban fabric at the expense of ordinary people – and the music they make (Jeffs, 2020; Barker, 2021; Livingstone, Fiorentino and Short, 2021; Wainwright, 2021).

None of this calls the value of World Heart Beat’s musical education programme itself in question. However, the emphasis placed upon their provision for low-income children and charitable status in material promoting the VNEB appears central in PR efforts to dampen criticism of the project by providing a veneer of social conscience (e.g. Ballymore, 2018; 2022; N.D.). Carl Grodach and Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris define this as a “Trojan horse” approach, where ‘large-scale development projects’ foreground their provision of cultural spaces to quell community opposition ‘or as a concession to the negative externalities generated by a project’ (Grodach and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007, p. 353). This kind of ‘artwashing’ is now commonplace in urban ‘regeneration’ schemes globally, with a distinct, ignoble history in London (Mould, 2018, p. 105; see also Duman *et al.*, 2018; Hancox, 2018, pp. 238–40; Pritchard, 2020). The arts in this context offer a low-cost, high-yield way to court potential investors and ‘create an identity for redevelopment schemes’ (Cartiere and Zebracki, 2015, p. 8).

¹⁴⁸ World Heart Beat works with the Julian Joseph Jazz Academy (JJJA), a youth jazz organisation founded by the eponymous saxophonist and Jazz Warrior, discussed in Chapter Three. The JJJA counts a number of LJS notables, including some of my participants, as alumni.

¹⁴⁹ Architecture scholar Anna Minton describes Embassy Gardens as ‘at the pinnacle of new London: a playground for the rich, built on an inhuman scale’ (Minton, 2017, p. 1)

The presence of LJS artists at Embassy Gardens is one jarring example of the changing contours of live performance in the scene, but this pattern is replicated elsewhere. A few miles east along the River Thames is the Greenwich Peninsula development, singled out by Christoph Lindner and Thomas Sandoval as an archetype of the ‘aesthetics of gentrification’: ‘epitomiz[ing] the ultimate end of the neoliberal city – a site of spectacular excess where the forces of development... remake space according to the needs of global capital’ (Lindner and Sandoval, 2021, p. 14; see also Minton, 2018). Since 2015, the site has held an annual ‘Urban Village Fete’, a ‘placemaking event for the new communities of Greenwich Peninsula’ (*Urban Village Fete*, no date). The event regularly hosts LJS figures, with Gilles Peterson a mainstay since 2016, his radio station Worldwide FM curating a stage in 2022, and Kinetika Bloko and Jazz Re:Freshed playing in 2018 (*Greenwich Peninsula, London · Past Events*, no date).

A stone’s throw east again, one could also find a strong showing for London jazz at a concert series at the new multi-purpose venue Woolwich Works in 2021. Alongside performances by the London Contemporary Orchestra, this series of jazz gigs ‘showcase[d] some of the best black-influenced music in London... [at] a go-to destination to see London-based creatives’, hosted in the ‘blandly gentrified former weapons facility in South London’ (Barry, 2023). As with Embassy Gardens/World Heart Beat, there is a charitable dimension to the involvement of London jazz with Woolwich Works. The space provides the ‘new permanent home’ for NYJO, and a ‘creative club’ providing free music lessons for local young people, run by TW alumnus and former Jazz Warriors Byron Wallen (Searle and Wallen, 2020; *NYJO Appoints Six New Members*, 2021).

The extraction of these sorts of concessions from new cultural spaces is a meaningful achievement set within the rapidly worsening landscape for young people’s music provision. Understanding that they are operating in a city and a cultural sector in thrall to property speculation and rentier capital, scene participants are using the opportunities afforded by the jazz zeitgeist as a means both to sustain themselves financially and try and ‘pass it on’ to subsequent generations. Certainly, the catastrophic economic effects of COVID on the live music industry (e.g. Taylor, Raine and Hamilton, 2020; Anderton, 2022) are likely to have left the musicians involved (such as Ashley Henry, Emma-Jean Thackray, and Shabaka Hutchings) unlikely to refuse such a high-profile and (hopefully) well-paid opportunity. But ultimately the same dynamics are at play: Woolwich Works represents the cultural keystone in an urban regeneration scheme that reduced affordable housing stock and was opposed by locals (Citron, 2021). It provides another example both of how far the London jazz’s stock has risen since its effervescent ‘scenic’ period in the mid-2010s, and the intractable problems facing LJS

musicians navigating the fraught political economy of live performance in London and their place in the constantly changing urban landscape.

4.4.4: Placemaking and race-making: jazz, grime, drill

It is important here to attend to the cultural position of jazz and its role in drawing the music into the ambit of urban ‘regeneration’. Historically, these contestations have had an organic, improvisational and at times resistant quality. One obvious example here is the 1970s ‘loft’ scene in New York, where disused or marginal spaces in a rapidly deindustrialising urban environment were repurposed to provide venues for sonic experimentation and housing (Heller, 2016).¹⁵⁰

But the stubborn association of jazz with the cultural and economic elite in the current conjuncture often places the genre ‘in a more complicated relationship with issues of social justice’, with ‘important implications for performance venues themselves’ (Chapman, 2018, p. 158). These complexities are drawn sharply into focus when jazz in London is employed to launder the reputation of a notorious symbol of urban inequality, such as Embassy Gardens, through ‘aligning itself with a mode of Black musical production that has been “made safe” for urban consumption in the early twenty-first century’ (Chapman, 2018, p. 208; see also Porter, 2009; Moreno, 2016). This notion of the relative ‘safety’ of different black musics is pivotal, drawing attention to the boundary work evident in the programming at flagship cultural centres in Woolwich and Nine Elms, which make tacit claims about legitimate and illegitimate forms of Black musical expression in these new urban environments. Aspects of jazz performance in London (as in the US) can be incorporated into the ambitions of those seeking to remake the city in the image of finance capital, presented prominently as the acceptable face of neoliberal multiculturalism and deployed as part of developer PR efforts to ‘revitalise the city [through] a depoliticised notion of diversity’ (Melamed, 2006; Hashimoto, 2021, p. 546). By contrast, other notable homegrown genres remain firmly outside the bounds of acceptability, namely grime and UK drill.¹⁵¹ Those making *these* musics have consistently been met with active hostility by venue owners, the press and the state.

¹⁵⁰ Although ambivalences abound in these cases. As Chapman notes, while the loft scene was characterised by an explicitly anti-commercial and anti-music industry orientation, it nonetheless ‘marked an early moment in the city’s repurposing of industrial spaces as postindustrial sites of creativity’, in some ways providing a template for the kinds of dynamics to which a venue like TRC would both imitate and fall prey (Chapman, 2018, p. 158).

¹⁵¹ UK drill scholar Adele Oliver describes the genre as ‘the transatlantic love child of UK road rap, the unadulterated offshoot of British hip-hop, and Chicago drill, the southern-fried trap influenced zeitgeist of early 2010s rap music’ (Oliver, 2023, p. 2).

Subject to racist over-policing, moral panic, and ‘lazy alarmism’ from successive Conservative governments (Thapar, 2023) early grime and more recently UK drill shows have been effectively proscribed in the city in recent years, framed as a resolutely unsafe mode of musical performance and consumption (Thapar, 2017; Fatsis, 2019; Melville, 2019; Woods, 2020; James, 2021). As Dhanveer Singh Brar summarises, grime performance was met with official condemnation upon arrival, seen to ‘carry with it the capacity for ungovernable violence... a quality the music acquires from the people who make it and is generated in the areas they inhabit’ (Brar, 2021, p. 120). Brar’s analysis also underscores how the treatment of these forms of UK rap sit atop a grim, cyclical history of state suppression of Black music/spaces in Britain and its colonies (e.g. Johnson, 1976; Jackson, 1988; Gilroy, 2002; Melville, 2019).

Grime has seen belated, partial acceptance from public service broadcasters, large performance venues, festivals and other key nodes in the British cultural and creative industries since the genre’s ‘pacification’ and move toward the mainstream from around 2010 (de Lacey, 2023, p. 4).¹⁵² However, as UK drill coalesced as a coherent and wildly popular style in the period roughly coterminous with the LJS’s emergence (Thomas and McQuaid, 2022), it was (and continues to be) more intensely pathologised than grime ever was, surfacing ‘in the media as a cause behind London’s rising knife crime; a view shared by the Home Office... the London Metropolitan Police... and the Crown Court’ (Fatsis, 2021, p. 33). Alex de Lacey’s recent study of the genre’s treatment by the BBC reveals how even nominally sympathetic coverage by public service broadcasters rarely moves past purported links between the music and criminality (De Lacey, 2022). Media treatment of drill draws from and bolsters the ‘black urban crime narrative’ that film scholars Sarita Malik and Clive Nwonka have identified as a key genre in depictions of black British experience in post-multicultural British public service broadcasting (Malik and Nwonka, 2017). For Malik and Nwonka, ‘cultural verisimilitude’ – the assumption of social realism and the criminality of a racialised underclass - renders black urban crime narratives alluring as supposedly authentic media objects for consumption by distant audiences. Here the routine ‘emphasis upon difference’ that critical studies of race and media show are structural features of media representations of minoritised groups, are accompanied by an overwhelming emphasis on *deviance* (Aujla-Sidhu, 2021, p. 17). As such, where the presentation of the LJS as a joyous, intimate and multicultural ‘underground’ form underpins

¹⁵² Grime is now commonplace within the British media ecology, with MCs like Skepta and Lady Leshurr enlisted ‘by huge corporations to sell its products and services’ (Saha, 2021, p. 58), and others such as Big Narstie a regular feature in British light entertainment television programming (Yates, 2018). It has also (eventually) been embraced by mainstream popular music institutions, symbolised by Stormzy becoming the first solo black British headliner at Glastonbury Festival in 2019 (Walker, 2019) and Dave winning the Mercury Music Prize the same year (Lavin, 2019).

its 'scenic allure', drill is a predominantly black mode of subcultural production that is simultaneously commodified *and* pathologised.

As work by Joy White and others has detailed, the kinds of urban 'regeneration' of which Woolwich and Nine Elms are symptomatic go beyond the formal exclusion of vernacular and oppositional forms such as grime and drill from the cultural spaces they provide. They also actively displace the long-established communities responsible for these musics through the destruction of social housing and the vertiginous increase in rents that follows, all the while treating these neighbourhoods as *tabula rasa* for the creation of 'totally new communities', in the words of VNEB developer Ballymore (White, 2020). The irony here is that these institutional efforts at 'placemaking' from above are fundamentally inimical to actually-existing placemaking undertaken by the communities they displace, destroying the conditions of social reproduction upon which vernacular cultural expressions of locality depend. Putting aside the often dubious attempts to connect youth music cultures, location and violence, the visceral, hyperlocal sense of place narrated and produced by grime and UK drill is undeniable and, in its 'postcode scale', uniquely granular (Dodds, 2023; see also Barron, 2013). For both, 'sound, scene and comportment' are utterly 'specific to... local neighbourhoods', an 'organic outcome of race-class in London' (Brar, 2021, p. 117).

The contrast between efforts to incorporate elements of the LJS into urban regeneration schemes in London, and the parallel criminalisation of grime and especially UK drill should give us pause. Jazz in London has rightly been lauded for its role in forging new spatial and social relations through its distinctive sonic multiculturalism, however, it is also essential to interrogate why and how aspects of this music have been drawn into a very different kind of musical remaking of the city. Serious consideration of the divergent attitudes toward these respective scenes by the forces of the state, the media industries, and developer capital is particularly necessary given grime's role as an essential component in the aesthetic USP of the 'new London jazz' sound, and the close ties to, and evident admiration for, grime musicians in the jazz scene.¹⁵³ In a scene noted for its commitment to sonic intensity, some LJS musicians have singled out their adoption of, for example, the rhythmic patterns of grime MC delivery, or of well-known grime riddims, as offering crucial means of connection with audiences more familiar with these soundworlds than those of the orthodox jazz canon, providing a central aesthetic component in the LJS's project of widening jazz's appeal (Awoyungbo, 2020; Lewis, 2020). To return to the vocabulary of sections 4.2 and 4.3, grime culture in particular has been

¹⁵³ While grime is a perennial LJS talking point, music critic Will Pritchard's evident weariness with 'watching yet another jazz player do a rendition of a grime song' (Pritchard, 2021) suggests the novelty might have worn off among initiates.

a vital ingredient in the *vibe* for which London jazz became internationally prized. Further, grime sonics are a key component in the aesthetic eschewal of the genre signifiers and perceived cultural baggage of jazz, signalling the scene's proximity to contemporary popular music and apparent distance from high culture stereotypically connoted by the genre today (Laver, 2015). Here the enmeshing of race and *class* is clearly central, with grime and drill's unimpeachably proletarian credentials helping London jazz shrug off the genre's stubborn associations with the realm of elite consumption.

But as my analysis of urban regeneration schemes reveals, despite the formative role played by disavowing jazz 'elitism' in the LJS, some within the scene benefit from a residual association with these same generic tropes. Even as rapacious urban development, property speculation and gentrification has brought about the closure of pivotal 'scenic' places that have been key to the powerful allure of jazz in London, the enduring aura of artistic legitimacy, economic wealth, and cultural refinement surrounding jazz has opened up performance opportunities for established and emergent jazz musicians via regeneration-driven 'placemaking'. These new jazz venues are a far cry from the protean scenic spaces that nurtured the scene, shorn of their vital, combative *vibe* that made the scene so thrilling and particular. While themselves textured by the dynamics of gentrification, the LJS *vibe* as experienced in these early spaces articulated a vision of the city that was at times critical, at others idealistic and utopian, but genuinely compelling.

By contrast, the 'London-ness' of London jazz as employed by urban developers is, to return to Chapman's phrasing, 'made safe': employed to simulate cultural vibrancy and paint a vision of the city as a space of upwardly-mobile and conflict-free social harmony. As Samuel R. Delany has demonstrated in his analysis of gentrification in New York, urban 'safety' here functions as a metonym for *conformity* to dominant social norms – in this instance those of neoliberal multiculturalism (Delany, 2001, p. 122). This is thus an approach to urban (multi)culture that is wholly extractive, and folds the LJS into a wider leveraging of 'diversity as a resource', with the LJS's distinctive multi-racial makeup employed to rebrand controversial urban development 'as multicultural, diverse, worthy of development, and symboli[sing] the promise of a colourblind society' (Hashimoto, 2021, pp. 539, 537). We can see this as what Herman Gray calls a 'shift from antiracist struggle to antiracial ones: where race and gender signal lifestyle politics, rather than [a] struggle to rearticulate and restructure the social, economic and cultural basis of a collective disadvantage' (Gray, 2013, p. 772).

London Jazz and grime/drill performance's respective incorporation into and exclusion from processes of regeneration thus reveals the enduring, commercially productive malleability of

the former, while the latter remains indelibly marked by an unruly, noisy and ultimately *unacceptable Blackness*.¹⁵⁴ We can draw on sound scholar Jennifer Lynne Stoever's work here to put this distinction in explicitly sonic terms. Stoever argues that the divide between music and noise, a boundary she describes as the 'sonic colour line', has always been patterned by the entanglement of race and taste (Stoever, 2016). Accordingly, the LJS is glossed as representative of neoliberal multicultural musical harmony, set against the unacceptable, homogenous noisy 'Other' that is grime or, particularly, drill, despite the reality of extensive non-black participation in these musics.

Comparative analyses of these musics provides a powerful demonstration of how the emergence, acceptance and endurance of music scenes in London are inextricable from a wider articulation of race, class, genre and urban space. Drill, grime and London jazz are all subject to the 'race-making' practices of the media industries, wherein racialised 'commonsense' interpretations of disruptive new cultural forms are employed to 'fix' these forms and their producers into an established social and racial order (Gray, 2016; Saha, 2021, pp. 13–16). Drill becomes indicative of a 'putatively racial truth' regarding the supposed propensity for violent criminality among city-dwelling young black working-class men and thus a grounds for their ongoing domination (Schwarz, 2000, p. 16; see also Hall *et al.*, 1982).¹⁵⁵ Where lyrical invocations of crime are assumed to be confessions of guilt, deeper truths embedded in grime and drill accounts of 'life in a socially and racially unequal Britain', which give lie to comforting 'myths about the advent of post-racial times' are given short shrift by state and media onlookers (Fatsis, 2019, p. 1311). In this regard, as so many others, the criminality allegedly immanent to the culture being proscribed is actually *produced* by sensationalist reporting, hostile legislation, and policing practices.

By contrast, the 'jazz explosion' is put to work within well-established strategies of 'placemaking' and diversity marketing, articulating the music and its producers with a constellation of cultural commodities and genre signifiers to present an idealised vision of London as an affluent, harmonious cosmopolis (Laver, 2015, pp. 142–177; Stirling, 2020, p.

¹⁵⁴ I am speaking strictly about performance here. Grime and drill have been enthusiastically incorporated into other aspects of the urban landscape, particularly branding, and musicians' likenesses will doubtless plaster billboards in many of these new developments. Evidently, while some grime and drill imagery is welcomed into these spaces insofar as it stimulates further sales, the physical presence of its producers and imagined audience are not.

¹⁵⁵ Of course, the 'social truths' embedded in discourse about UK drill, and Blackness in general, have real consequences for LJS participants. Figures such as Moses Boyd, Daniel Casimir and Femi Koleoso have discussed the specific burden placed upon them as Black men when navigating majority-white spaces, in particular the need to adapt their bodily comportment to assuage racist perceptions of them as intrinsically threatening (Hutchinson, 2018b; Bakare, 2020b; Patalay, 2020; Broughton, 2024).

120). If, as Owen Hatherley has suggested when discussing the shifting fortunes of grime in the city, ‘urban branding excludes any music that still exists as a working-class force’, the folding of the LJS into the project of neoliberal urbanism hints at a waning potency of live jazz performance in London (Hatherley, 2018, p. 177).

4.5: Conclusion

Live performance in London jazz in some ways follows a time-honoured path in the life cycle of music scenes: scrappy newcomers eking out space in an unwelcoming environment, to make music for its own sake with a group of friends, gaining wider attention and more resources, with the processes of cultural industry co-option coming at the expense of some of the former ‘spark’ that brought the scene into being, eventually leaving a vacuum for new arrivals to fill. This is the dynamic of ‘how things begin’ that writer Emma Warren, the most attentive observer of the LJS, generalises from her account of *Steam Down* (Warren, 2019b). But this chapter has shown that close attention to the shifting contours of LJS gigs reveals features specific to the scene: its embrace and subversion of jazz performance norms, its (only ever partial) absorption into the British arts ‘establishment’, and its complex relation to the digital. In these instances we see again how sitting in productive tension – with jazz, with digital media, and with large publicly-funded arts institutions – has helped some within the scene to flourish, and burnished the reputation of the LJS at large.

The chapter has traced the rich, resistant potential of the LJS as a space of critical musical multiculture, by theorising the joyful, spiritual and politicised ‘vibe’ of the LJS at its most vital. The chapter also shows how platformisation impinges on contemporary music scenes, producing a disaffection with mediation evident in the clear and enduring appeal of face-to-face, embodied musical experience and an intensified investment in the concept of the scene.

But, as my analysis of jazz and urban development shows, the political valence of the scene cannot be taken as a given. The seeming appetite among policymakers, programmers and developers for the London jazz ‘brand’ as a visible, unthreatening form of cultural ‘diversity’ underscores the mutability of the scene’s politics, the intense efforts toward the recuperation of critical forms of culture into circuits of capital, and the enduring association of jazz with affluence. As the small, effervescent spaces where the LJS was incubated have dwindled, so too have the subversive performance practices and the intense audience-performer participation – the musicking - for which the LJS has been famed. Doubtless, the heightened profile of the

bigger stars means that groups like Ezra Collective or Nubya Garcia's band can expect to play to jubilant and interactive crowds in rock and pop venues. But many smaller spaces where younger, less notable musicians ply their trade skew, still, toward the stereotypical settings against which many of the scene have inveighed: expensive drinks; hushed and seated audiences; and a mostly wealthy, mostly white crowd.

5: Recording, Production, and Circulation

5.1: Introduction

Thomas Greenland suggests that ‘the vast majority of fans engages and self-identifies with jazz through the medium of recordings’ (Greenland, 2016, p. 35), and this remains the case in the LJS. Even as live performance has provided the crucible of scenic identity and media narrativisation, a relatively small collection of key recordings and record labels have been vital in constructing and disseminating a distinctive image, sound and narrative of London jazz.

Recordings confer prestige, reify music into a material commodity, aid promotion, and provide a source of income for producers. However, meaningful income in jazz is rare. As ethnomusicologist Travis Jackson observed of the 1990s New York jazz scene: ‘only the best-known artists earn money from record sales; most others record for different reasons’ (Jackson, 2012, p. 97). The ongoing digital transformations within the music business have undermined many prevailing logics in record production and distribution in the mid-2010s. However, these huge technical upheavals have failed to fully disrupt deep-rooted underlying economic realities of recording jazz, and the situation in London today remains much the same as that described by Jackson twenty years ago. The economic illogic of recording is thus a key latent tension patterning the relationship to recording in the LJS. This chapter explores the various motivations for recording among LJS participants, and interrogates longstanding and novel challenges that constrain the production of London jazz recordings. In the process, it discusses ways that these challenges have been mitigated by recording artists and cultural intermediaries operating in the scene.

Running parallel to these recent ‘macro’ political economic and technological shifts in record production, sales and consumption, is the permanently contested position of the recording in jazz discourse. Debates surrounding the purpose and primacy of records, essentially ontological in nature, have been central themes of the genre from its outset. While superficially resolved in the scene, closer examination reveals enduring tensions surrounding the ethics of record production and the record’s relationship to improvisation and live performance, evident in marketing discourse and attendant authenticity claims by participants and commentators. By focusing on what many informants saw as the aesthetic shortcomings of the LJS recorded canon so far, the chapter examines the pitfalls of ‘hype’ and high-energy live performance. I argue that concerns regarding inadequacy on record reveal some of challenges posed by the embrace of sonic hybridity, and the scene’s signature poly-generic aesthetic. While the scene has flourished at the interstices of many different genres, I argue that as a result, LJS recordings

are being assessed according to countervailing aesthetic criteria. For some releases, this has proved commercially invaluable and artistically validating, but others have been found wanting.

Section 5.2 provides some context, surveying the intimate, but vexed, historical relationship between jazz and the recording industries. The section explores discursive tensions thrown up by the entanglement of the two, and lays out central norms that have come to influence jazz record production since the first studio dates in the early 20th Century.

5.3 moves on to consider scene participants' motivations for recording alongside the many barriers hindering the production and release process. Despite the many constraints imposed by and upon recording, releasing an album or getting a record deal appears to retain important symbolic value. I then explore some apparent shortcomings of LJS recordings. I demonstrate a shared perception of relative aesthetic failure on this front, one that is partially structured by older tensions explored in 5.2, revealing a set of underlying insecurities regarding the scene's place in the wider jazz and popular music landscape.

5.4 then analyses two approaches taken by LJS participants to resolve or circumvent the tensions discussed throughout the chapter. First, 'direct-to-disc' releases use 'traditional' analogue technologies and techniques of record production, deploying discourses of craft and care to promote their recording commodities. I suggest that the emphasis placed upon analogue authenticity as a production *process* that 'truthfully' captures live performance often mutes deeper consideration of the musical content of the record. I also suggest that direct-to-disc recordings are a form of 'neo-craft' product, catering to a 'dominant paradigm of consumption' in the current conjuncture (Gerosa, 2024, p. 4). I then unpack a countervailing approach, evident on other LJS releases, where musicians exploit the full potential of contemporary digital technology to create records that foreground technicity and genre hybridity aimed toward a club setting, drawing upon and deepening the scene's close connections to electronic music and 'producer culture'. While apparently opposing approaches, I frame both 'direct-to-disc' releases and the club-ready digital productions of the LJS as strategies for overcoming the shortfall in 'vibe' on record analysed in 5.3 which, taken together, underscore the productively ambiguous relationship of the LJS to wider jazz norms. I also suggest both are framed as valuable exceptions to the unsatisfactory norms of contemporary digitalised music production and consumption, respectively.

5.2: Jazz on record

5.2.1: Documenting an oral tradition

Jazz developed from the mid-1910s, roughly contemporaneously with the emergence of music recordings as a distinct market, and the two are closely intertwined (Phillips and Owens, 2004). Recording enables the preservation of real-time performance, allowing for the playback and dissemination of aspects of improvised music that eluded prior technologies of musical reproduction such as the musical score. This made recording technology indispensable in jazz, a music that is about contingent, co-present performance and the improvisational, often iconoclastic engagement with sets of musical-cultural traditions that are *both oral and documented*. Fumi Okiji suggests that jazz's relationship to recordings represents a key innovation of the genre, providing a means to 'democratise' the 'African (American) oral tradition', wresting pedagogical control from the orthodox teacher-mentor relationship to create 'an oral tradition for the twentieth century' (Okiji, 2018, p. 88).¹⁵⁶ The record's role as an educational aide and point of access to the music's history is thus paramount, and for many 'recordings offer perhaps the only valid way of [jazz's] preservation' (Williamson, quoted in Phillips, 2013, p. 1). Working from this premise, record production is stereotypically understood as a process of *documentation*, with the 'recording ethos' of jazz being 'a simple one': 'sonically capture the performance with as little interference with the music as possible, while also keeping it as close to the aesthetic of a live performance as the recording process will allow' (Bierman, 2019, p. 209). The documentary approach valorises what Alan Stanbridge calls 'transparency' above all else, wherein a record is celebrated as well-produced 'on the basis of a range of qualities that are characterised by absence rather than presence' (Stanbridge, 2023, p. 221).

Transparency remains the preeminent normative frame by which jazz recording is understood, providing a key point of difference in analyses that distinguish jazz from pop and rock. Simon Frith suggests that in jazz, the recording is viewed as an 'end point', a secondary, imperfect rendering of a singular performance; whereas it is the primary foundation or starting point in pop and rock (Frith, 2007, p. 20). Philip Auslander offers a similar distinction when analysing live performance. He argues that the success of the 'authentic' rock concert is contingent upon a group's ability to reproduce the recording on-stage. In jazz, for Auslander, the inverse is true: a faithful rendition of a pre-existing improvisation committed to record would be deemed

¹⁵⁶ Okiji's nuanced discussion also highlights how oral traditions can be an extremely insular and patrilineal mode of musical transmission. Romanticizing this form of 'on the job' learning as authentic and pre-eminent, a common feature in LJS coverage, can thus reinscribe the status of individual (mostly male) jazz genius as the source and bearer of jazz essence (see also Moten, 2017, pp. 70–79).

pointless, or at least profoundly unhip, by those in the know (Auslander, 2008, pp. 90–97; see also Gracyk, 1996, p. 13; Hamilton, 2016, p. 17). These interpretations approach jazz records as possessing uniquely ‘objective’ qualities, expressed through a ‘discourse of realism’ which structures both how records have been *marketed* and *interpreted* (Katz, 2010, p. 1).

5.2.2: The music business and the ‘Culture Industry’ critique

However as Bierman points out (and as I will demonstrate throughout this chapter), the easy framing of recording as documentation in jazz is a ‘gross oversimplification’ (Bierman, 2019, p. 209). Instead, the recording studio, and the studio recording, have always been controversial subjects in jazz. For one, the record’s rich archival potential is tempered by the demands of the record *industry*. While the commercial relevance of the genre has historically fluctuated, jazz constituted a significant portion of the recorded music market in its ‘pre-modern’ era before the mid-1940s, having been the dominant style of recorded music in the preceding decade during which it accounted for a full seventy percent of US record sales (Laing, 2002, p. 321; Appelrouth, 2003, pp. 120–123; Frith, 2007, p. 14).

Jazz’s ubiquity and proximity to commerce in the 1930s was the basis for the most controversial and influential critique of jazz and recording. Theodor Adorno’s analysis of the genre posited it as the quintessential music of the ‘culture industry’, a term advanced by Adorno and Max Horkheimer to signal ‘the processes of standardisation, rationalisation, homogenisation and massification they see as inherent to commodified culture’ (Meier, 2017, p. 22; see Adorno and Horkheimer, 2006). Adorno heard these processes in the very substance of jazz, in particular the syncopated discrepancies of its rhythmic signature, swing.¹⁵⁷ For Adorno, swing revealed the music’s essence as an instrumentalised, mass-market product that simulated an illusory experience of freedom and individual subjectivity for listeners (Okiji, 2018, pp. 6, 27–30, 44–45). Cultural commodities like jazz records thus did important ideological work maintaining industrial capitalist hegemony. Through their standardised reproduction, portability and easy dissemination via radio, they represented and helped constitute a regime of cultural consumption that Adorno defined as ‘pseudo-individualisation’. This term implicates the products of mass culture work in providing consumers with an ersatz experience of autonomy and choice while concealing the ‘humdrum reality’ of industrial capitalism and quelling dissent, in turn helping to ‘frame capitalism as a just system and an inevitable reality’ (Adorno, 2002, p. 449; Meier, 2017, p. 25).

¹⁵⁷ Adorno offers no definition of jazz, but Carol Hamilton suggests that alongside the swing rhythm, his critique is aimed at the *style* of big band swing which represented the ‘dominant form of popular music in the 1930s’ (Hamilton, 1991, p. 33).

From this perspective, the essentially interchangeable qualities of jazz and popular music musical objects are concealed by the work of culture intermediaries, who through the work of ‘presentation’ and ‘plugging’ (marketing and promotion) play up minor differences between pieces of music, ‘endowing cultural mass production with the halo of free choice’ (Adorno, 2002, pp. 445–446). ‘Pseudo-individualisation’ names a key paradox that Adorno sees in the culture industry, where intermediaries want a ‘piece of music that is fundamentally the same as all the other current hits and simultaneously fundamentally different from them’. This illusion of choice in turn provides consumers ‘trademarks of identification for differentiating between the actually undifferentiated’ (Adorno, 2002, pp. 447–448).

Cultural studies, popular music studies, and jazz studies literature are littered with rejections and revisions of the Adornian position on jazz, popular music and consumer culture (Gracyk, 1992; Lewandowski, 1996; DeNora, 2003; Okiji, 2018; Hanrahan, 2021).¹⁵⁸ Rather than relitigate these debates here, I simply want to acknowledge that Adorno’s condemnations of jazz were an important early salvo in a fierce and unresolved battle over the music’s status, its relationship to recording, proximity to the music industry, and its capacity to advance a meaningful critique of capitalist modernity. Further, while Adorno’s analysis of swing as a mass culture confection that simulated ‘pseudo-individualisation’ among passive *consumers* is problematic and reductive, it does speak to a historical reality regarding the meaningful and audible effects wrought by the conditions of record *production*: the aesthetics of jazz were and are profoundly shaped by the imperatives of the cultural industries under capitalism and its modes of ‘presentation’.

While Adorno rarely explicitly contended with questions of race, subsequent scholarship has underscored how the production and circulation of jazz recordings as commodities has operated according to racializing (and frequently explicitly racist) logics from the off. We can trace the articulation of recording technology, cultural industries and race from the very first commercial jazz recording, ‘Livery Stable Blues’, recorded in New York in 1917 by the all-white Original Dixieland Jazz Band (Cuscuna, 2005, p. 64). The success of this novelty track marked the start of a close relationship between jazz and the incipient American record business, but in the process cemented a profoundly partial sound and vision of jazz at the core of the music industries (Tackley, 2010, pp. 167–175). Despite being marketed on the basis of their proximity to ‘exotic’ musical Blackness (see Phillips, 2013, pp. 77–103), these records often actually

¹⁵⁸ Music scholar Adam Krims suggests that the ‘exorcism’ of Adorno’s ‘spectral presence’ has been a near-ubiquitous feature in much cultural studies and popular music scholarship since the 1980s, in parallel to an Adornian revival in musicology (Krims, 2007, p. 91). One consequence has been a widespread neglect of Marxism *tout court* in popular music studies, despite ‘how distant Adorno’s theoretical premises lie from most strands of Marxism’ (Krims, 2007, p. 90).

served to dispossess African American musicians of meaningful control over jazz as it entered the circuit of commodity production. The treatment of early jazz by the recording industry forms part of a wider historical tendency where Black musical forms have been simultaneously lauded as uniquely authentic forms of expression, and abstracted from those who made it (Radano, 2010). This process was administered by predominantly white-owned record labels who reaped substantial returns, particularly during the heyday of swing in the 1930s (Klein, 2020, pp. 89–90). In turn, this meant ‘greater rewards and prestige [being] granted to white jazz musicians’ such as the enormously successful white bandleader Paul Whiteman, something that has ‘been the subject of bitter recriminations’ ever since (Born and Hesmondhalgh, 2000, p. 23; sees also Peretti, 2001, p. 587).¹⁵⁹

As Mark Katz notes, this discrepancy changed over time: ‘gradually... the recorded repertoire came to better represent the demographics and performance practices of jazz’ (Katz, 2010, pp. 80–81). Nonetheless, we can see that from the outset, the political economy of the recording industry and wider socio-political constraints have decisively shaped who and what makes it onto record in the first place, in ways often at odds with the jazz world ‘on the ground’. Jazz scholar Steven Pond summarises this point through reference to Jed Rasula’s influential critique of the ‘seductive menace’ of the recorded archive for scholars: ‘the predominance of recordings as source material distorts jazz history by omitting performances of significance, transformative improvisations, and audience reactions’ (Rasula, 1995; Pond, 2021, p. 5). While a simple point, it is one that bears repeating given the deep-set tendency toward ‘positivism [in] traditional jazz scholarship’, which has tended to treat records and their creators as transparent windows into jazz history (Tackley, 2010, p. 168; see also Jago, 2019).

5.2.3: Phonograph effects

In parallel with the influence exerted by the record business, the changing face of sound technology has also made a considerable difference to the genre. These are what Katz has termed ‘phonograph effects’, the sonic imprints brought about by a ‘change in musical behaviour... in response to sound-recording technology’ that produce ‘any observable manifestation of recording’s influence’ (Katz, 2010, p. 2). Phonograph effects are most apparent in early jazz. Between 1900 and 1940, primitive recording equipment and low-resolution, low-capacity recording formats like the 78rpm shellac disc dramatically affected what kinds of sounds could be easily recorded (Dowd, 2006). These constraints altered jazz

¹⁵⁹ Further, this ‘original sin’ of sidelining black musicians has bolstered reductive, binary narratives of jazz history as a process of black invention and white appropriation. Such accounts occlude the complexity of the music’s origins in racially mixed, mostly migrant and working-class communities in New Orleans and beyond. This is one cause of the stubborn essentialisms in jazz discourse discussed in Chapter Three.

instrumentation within the recording studio and onstage as musicians sought to better document their work, setting early aesthetic parameters that loomed large for subsequent generations.¹⁶⁰ Additionally, with records tightly constrained to three minutes or less, musicians were left with very little room for experimentation and, as Katz points out, appear to have barely changed their performance across takes (Katz, 2010, pp. 84–85; see also Tackley, 2010, pp. 170–171). As such, there was clear water between the succinct, only quasi-improvisational recordings of the 1920s and 30s by which listeners today (and critics and consumers in the wider world at the time) come to know the jazz of the era, and the kinds of music that audiences experienced live (Dingle, 2019, p. 261). Contemporary understandings of early jazz aesthetics are therefore drawn from records that reveal more about the technological and commercial constraints of the era than the live(d) experience of jazz performance in contemporaneous gig settings.

With the advent of more sophisticated recording equipment and relatively cheap, high-quality playback equipment, the traces of technological constraint on jazz recording became less audible. However, as Alan Stanbridge has convincingly argued, studio contexts where transparency is obsessively pursued themselves tend to leave a mark on the end product (Stanbridge, 2023, p. 221). In this mode of jazz recording (unlike other genres, or other media such as cinematography), naturalism is closely tied to sound *fidelity*, which often entails expensive equipment and specialist recording facilities. Perversely, the reliance on high-end gear often makes explicit the very artifice of the recording process, inflecting the performance being so faithfully documented. We could look here to influential jazz producer Rudy Van Gelder, who, ‘more than anyone in jazz history... is responsible for what most people regard as the true sound of jazz’ (Gabbard, 2016b, p. 52). His work is often lauded for its clarity, warmth and ‘faithful’ reproduction of instrumental sound (particularly piano), and is the model for Stanbridge’s theory of transparency, but Van Gelder possesses his own, distinctive sonic fingerprint, and employed substantial technological intervention and editing after the fact (Skea, 2001).¹⁶¹ ‘Transparency’ in jazz recording thus can be equally as technologised as, for example, pop or hip-hop production processes. The key difference is that the ideal-type jazz producer or engineer is operates under erasure – an approach that record production scholar Michael Jarrett calls ‘self-effacing’ (Jarrett, 2012, p. 129). As a result, ethnomusicologist Dean Reynolds suggests, ‘commonly, jazz recordists have used [post-production] techniques

¹⁶⁰ Katz suggests that the banjo and the double bass (replacing the tuba) were both used heavily in early Dixieland jazz to mitigate the challenges of primitive recording equipment, the latter of which in particular has become a defining feature of jazz instrumentation (Katz, 2010, p. 30).

¹⁶¹ Blue Note Records biographer Richard Cook even suggests that ‘A Van Gelder piano chord is even more instantly identifiable than the style of the pianist who’s playing it’ (Cook, 2003, p. 69)

surreptitiously, crafting the illusion of an unedited performance’ (Reynolds, 2018, p. 112). Conventional jazz record production ethics, then, are a specific, labour-intensive *process* that aims to generate *verisimilitude* as a way to signal cultural value. They sound out authenticity to the listener, according to pre-established values internal to the genre whereby ‘the record is held to be an artifact of a live event... [and] the general assumption has been that the musicians were subject to the same constraints – the same improvisational demands – as they would have been in a club or concert setting’ (Jago, 2019, p. 148).

From this perspective, creative forms of post-production - for example overdubbing or the use of musical samples - constitute an unacceptable form of trickery and a betrayal of core principles of spontaneity. Stanbridge characterises such criticisms as working from principles of ‘analogue’ and ‘acoustic’ authenticity, two overlapping sets of values used to police the boundaries of legitimate jazz practice (Stanbridge, 2023, pp. 141–150; 221–230). Some examples of this tension are George Avakian’s ‘fabrication’ of live audiences by overdubbing crowd noise onto several Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong albums as producer for Columbia Records in the 1950s (Mueller, 2015, pp. 17–18; Williams, 2017); pianist Lennie Tristano’s use of what jazz scholar Marian Jago has called ‘extended studio techniques’ in the 1950s (Jago, 2019) which caused debate in the pages of jazz magazine *Downbeat*,¹⁶² or the equivalent debates prompted by the incorporation of tape loops, effects and early forms of electrical synthesis by artists like Sun Ra and Rahsaan Roland Kirk (Bergstein, 1992; Holmes, 2017). Producer Teo Macero’s central role in Miles Davis’s move toward an electrified, funk-inflected sound in the early 1970s was also met with similar condemnation (Fellezs, 2011; Svorinich, 2015, pp. 102–108; Gabbard, 2016b).

These musicians and producers tested the limits of creative possibility in the recording studio in ways akin to similar efforts in progressive rock, European art music, dub music and its various descendants, and burgeoning hip-hop experimentalism (Tate, 2007, 2016a, pp. 50–55; Veal, 2007, pp. 38–42; Partridge, 2008; Iverson, 2019; Levitz and Piekut, 2020). Many jazz musicians were directly influenced by these novel approaches taken in other genres, viewing them as essentially avant-garde aesthetic techniques compatible with the innovatory tendencies that had characterised jazz since its inception. However, technological experimentation has been persistently met with ‘massive resistance’ by jazz critics and self-appointed ‘defenders’ of the music (Kelley, 2004, p. 404). Jazz purists of this sort frame transgression of these boundaries – for example jazz-rock, jazz-funk and other fusions involving

¹⁶² An ‘extended technique’ in jazz playing is a ‘musical device which extends beyond or deviates from the conventional... limits of the instrument’; Jago cites Tristano’s use of overdubbing, manipulation of recording speeds, and use of effects like echo and tremolo as examples of an extended studio technique.

electrified instruments and studio experimentation – as betraying a lack of artistic ‘seriousness’ and/or an unacceptable compromise to commerce through the adoption of practices from ‘lesser’ genres that represent ‘infidelity to the jazz tradition’ (Svorinich, 2015, p. 115).¹⁶³

The historical sketch provided in this section lays out some key contradictions thrown up by the articulation of jazz to recording technology and the record industry. The early adoption of new sound recording, manipulation and distribution methods is an essential feature of the music’s history, one that has been profoundly generative, shaping the form and direction of travel of the music. But it has also meant that jazz has had anxieties about recording, electrification, and studio production baked in from the start, with the debates about the threat and promise of recording and mass production providing another constitutive tension at the heart of the genre and key to its temperamental cultural position. Jazz recordings are media texts which therefore signify a lack, or an absence. They are ‘undeniably indispensable’ to jazz in general, ‘but as a document of the creative processes of jazz, they are also inadequate’ (Okiji, 2018, p. 89).

The intensity of these debates has dimmed in the 21st Century. As early as 2004, historian Robin D. G. Kelley was highlighting the détente between new forms of technology and the jazz tradition, evident in the practices of jazz-adjacent musicians operating in what he called the ‘new jazz underground... pushing technology to new limits and crushing all distinctions between genres’ (Kelley, 2004, p. 414; see also Reynolds, 2018). Such technologically-augmented stylistic eclecticism came further to the fore in American jazz throughout the 2010s (Tate, 2016b), amid the rising centrality of ‘electronic music and electronic production techniques... within the global popular music market’ (Strachan, 2017). In the wake of these developments, contemporary jazz players, including those within the LJS, can hold other popular musics as revered aesthetic influences and incorporate their production techniques and perhaps expect much more muted criticism regarding these styles’ inclusion within the jazz tradition relative to their forebears (see Walls, 2016). Equally important is the recovery of some jazz subgenres that have typically suffered from critical opprobrium or neglect.¹⁶⁴ But the terms by which Kelley underscores the novelty of adoptions of hip-hop and electronic production

¹⁶³ Wynton Marsalis is an archetypal contemporary ‘purist’ and vocal critic of jazz fusion. The connections between Marsalis’s neo-classicist stance and acoustic/analogous authenticity come into focus in his condemnation of Herbie Hancock’s fusion turn, where he argues Hancock’s use of synthesizers and novel studio techniques symbolise an unacceptable compromise to ‘puerile’ pop music (Fellezs, 2011, pp. 218–219).

¹⁶⁴ For example, Yussef Kamaal’s *Black Focus* (Brownswood Recordings, 2016), a scene-defining and commercially successful album ‘min[es] sounds once bemoaned by purists – soul jazz, spiritual jazz, fusion – for inspiration’, according to critic Stewart Smith (Smith, 2016a). I would add the Latin (particularly Brazilian) jazz-funk of the 1970s as a strong influence. However, as I discuss below, this willingness to recuperate jazz subgenres has its limits. See Washburne (2020) for analysis of Latin jazz’s commercial success and persistent marginalisation from the jazz (studies) mainstream.

practices and aesthetics in jazz nearly twenty years ago are strikingly similar to the journalistic vocabulary used to laud the ‘experimental’ and ‘genre-defying’ practices of the LJS when heralding the scene’s departure from jazz orthodoxy (Henry, 2021; see also Heath, 2022). Technological incorporation and genre defiance, in the LJS context, appear still to produce a frisson of transgression and novelty. This suggests that the ghosts of past conflicts regarding recording, technology and authenticity have not been exorcised completely from jazz discourse. The continued pertinence of these tensions, the challenges they pose for LJS constituents, and the strategies adopted to counteract them are the subject of the next two sections.

5.3: Recording London Jazz

5.3.1: Why record at all? Challenges and motivations

Selling records has always been a risky business. As with other cultural commodities, most records are unable to recoup their production costs and result in economic failure, and record labels rely on rare instances of success to compensate (Frith, 2007; Marshall, 2013b; Hesmondhalgh, 2019b, pp. 31–33). As a relatively niche form, jazz has an impassioned, but small, consumer base, meaning that even successful jazz records garner smaller sales relative to other, more popular genres and all but the biggest record labels operate with minimal budgets and tight margins.¹⁶⁵ Advances in cheap studio equipment and the digitalisation of recording technology have lowered the barriers to record production, but recording live instrumentation, particularly in an ensemble environment, remains expensive (Reynolds, 2018, p. 120). Recording a large group often requires specialist equipment, dedicated engineers, and rehearsal/studio space, the last of which comes at a particular premium in London. Income from selling records has thus typically been a small, unreliable income stream for working jazz musicians (Laing, 2002; Jackson, 2012, pp. 92–99). In this section, I consider how these factors have shaped approaches to record production and marketing within the scene. I then explore London jazz musicians’ motivations for recording, given the many impediments to producing an economically viable and aesthetically satisfactory record.

¹⁶⁵ Miles Davis’s *Kind of Blue*, the best-selling jazz album of all time, has sold around five million copies, less than ten percent of the best-selling album in any genre, Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* (Wyman, 2013; Chilton, 2019). There is equivalent disproportionality in the LJS context. Taking Mercury Prize nominees as an example, prominent LJS group SEED Ensemble enjoyed an 85% post-nomination uptick in sales of their album *Driftglass* between July – September 2019. However, this still left the band at under 1,000 units sold, with the next lowest-selling nominees, Black Midi, selling over five times more; and at the top of the list, indie group The 1975 selling nearly 150,000 records (*Mercury Prize data dump: Which nominees have seen the biggest boost so far?* 2019).

Reissuing and reimagining: the jazz marketplace and the archive

One pressing issue for emerging jazz musicians is the continued dominance of legacy artists and classic albums, with the bulk of listener attention and expenditure in jazz flowing toward the work of well-established (and often long-dead) American musicians. New record releases jostle for attention with a steady flow of reissues and archival releases, both from major labels and smaller independents, oriented toward an ideal-type avid consumer with a distinctive set of consumption habits and motivations. Jazz scholar Simon Barber has outlined these stereotypical ‘values held by jazz fans, such as a love for high fidelity sound and audio technologies... tendencies towards collecting and completism... [and] fetishism of the vinyl record’ (Barber, 2019, p. 455; see also Straw, 1997). One participant, a prominent musician within the scene, invoked the targeting of this market niche with reissues as a specific challenge facing contemporary jazz artists. They saw the vast archive of unreleased material in the vaults of large record labels as representing direct competition to newer acts by providing labels with a fallback option in lieu of supporting current working musicians:

Universal [Records] and these [other] companies, they've got loads of this unreleased Coltrane and Monk and Miles Davis, they're just waiting for when there's a slump [in sales]... because they know that jazz fans are suckers and will go out and buy the hardware. So, they'll make up for the[ir] loss (P7).¹⁶⁶

Many record labels certainly do expend more resources on exploiting their existing catalogue. Jazz producer Michael Cuscuna showed in 2005 that iconic label Blue Note released on average only 20% new music (Cuscuna, 2005).¹⁶⁷ The negative impact of reissues and an overbearing catalogue of recordings on the economic vitality of the genre today has long been cause for concern among enthusiasts. Critic Frank Kofsky, writing in 1977, attributed the growth of reissues to record label consolidation: small, independent labels might exhibit ideological and non-commercial commitments to fostering emerging and innovative musicians, but these aims

¹⁶⁶This approach to maximising revenue from existing intellectual property – arguably at the expense of investment in today’s musicians – is becoming increasingly central throughout the recorded music business. Critics have pointed to the prominence of nostalgic samples and/or interpolations of successful dance tracks from the mid-90s and 2000s in the charts as evidence that this kind of risk-averse form of profit maximisation is making its influence felt in the recursive aesthetics of contemporary pop (D’Souza, 2023; see also Williams, 2022). Some have attributed this phenomenon, where ‘the pop charts are littered with chunks of old intellectual property’ to the recent boom in publishing and masters’ rights acquisition by song funds and private equity firms (Greene, 2023; see also Ingham, 2022; Stassen, 2022).

¹⁶⁷There are also specialist labels reissuing archival obscurities from relatively unknown figures. In the UK these include British Progressive Jazz, Jazzman, or Jazz in Britain (see Graham, 2023). However, these are typically shoestring operations selling limited runs. I would suggest that they are competing for the money and attention of a mostly different audience to the LJS.

tended to be suppressed upon absorption by larger companies, who were more given to the pursuit of reliable profits by selling established artists and commercially proven styles (Kofsky, 1977, pp. 51–61; Gray, 1986).

Record companies have thus long since garnered a reputation for being disinterested, risk-averse and backward-looking in their approach to jazz, taking much of the blame for the genre's declining relevance to popular culture. In avant-garde jazz pianist Matt Shipp's assessment, the jazz record business is 'a death industry... If you're dead, that's good, because then you can be repackaged' (quoted in Jacobsen and Shipp, 1999). As Tony Whyton notes, 'here, jazz mirrors the world of classical music through the reverence shown to bygone artists' (Whyton, 2010, p. 86), citing Christopher Small's suggestion that 'for most people, a great composer is almost by definition a dead composer' (Small, 1998, p. 87).

Another challenge posed by the dominance of iconic jazz recordings is that many are products of both the latest in advanced digital remastering technology (Barber, 2019; Pond, 2021), *and* an earlier era of comparatively lavish record label budgets and extensive analogue recording infrastructure at the point of production, which have come to define the aesthetic conventions of modern jazz on record. As such, classic jazz production norms, and the expectations of consumers, are oriented toward a soundworld like Van Gelder's – high fidelity, warm, lush, and expensive – expectations that are continually reinscribed by a steady stream of remasters from this era (Mueller, 2015, pp. 267–271; Perchard, 2017, pp. 69–73). This can make for a starkly audible and unflattering difference between reissued, remastered classic recordings, and contemporary low-budget, often self-produced releases that seek to emulate this aesthetic.¹⁶⁸

The competitive dynamic between old and new has been intensified by the consolidation in the music and wider cultural industries since the 1990s. Having absorbed many prominent labels 'seen as synonymous with jazz' such as Blue Note, Columbia, Verve, Atlantic or Impulse! (and acquiring rights for the catalogues for others), the three major labels today are themselves subsidiaries of much larger entertainment conglomerates, auguring what Dale Chapman defines as a shift from 'stakeholder' to 'shareholder' logic (Chapman, 2018, p. 110).¹⁶⁹ They are thus compelled to maximise immediate profits and shareholder value, with underperforming

¹⁶⁸ This is noticeable even when comparing better resourced contemporary records to their reissued antecedents. Compare, for example, the sonic 'space' on 2003 'Rudy Van Gelder Remaster' of Joe Henderson's 'A Shade of Jade', taken from 1966's *Mode for Joe*, with the tighter and slightly airless production on Nubya Garcia's version of the same track, released on the *Blue Note Re:Imagined* compilation discussed below.

¹⁶⁹ Concord Music Group is an exception here, remaining independent and holding rights to the catalogues of important jazz labels including Riverside and Fantasy while releasing new jazz by artists including Garcia.

label subsidiaries always in danger of liquidation by decision-makers operating at some distance from the music industries altogether, let alone attentive to genre-specific economic realities or needs. Where label powerbrokers previously showed some willingness to shoulder risk as ‘stakeholders’ when underwriting new jazz due to its established cultural worth and prestige (Negus, 1999, pp. 48–50), by the mid-2000s ‘the diminished position of jazz at the major labels had long been firmly established’ (Chapman, 2018, p. 111). As a result, rather than cross-subsidising new signings with reissue revenues, many legacy jazz labels since the 1990s have diversified their roster of contemporary talent, focusing on ‘adult contemporary’ or singer-songwriters to the exclusion of current jazz acts.

The case of London jazz both reflects and complicates this picture. There have been instances of scene-specific reissues, with legacy record labels attempting to plug into the zeitgeist by reissuing archival material. One example is the launch of ‘audiophile vinyl reissue series’ ‘The British Jazz Explosion: Originals Re-Cut’ in 2021 by Universal-owned jazz imprint Decca. Compiler and jazz historian Tony Higgins promoted the releases as a timely response to the ‘tremendous health’ of the ‘current UK scene’ designed to ‘connect what’s happening now to the pioneers and mavericks of the ‘60s and ‘70s’ (quoted in Sexton, 2021). There are echoes here of the dancefloor-oriented compilations released by independent and major labels during the late 1980s and 1990s in an effort to capitalise on the popularity of jazz-dance and acid jazz in British clubs (McGee, 2012, pp. 25–26).¹⁷⁰

But more notable (and more heavily marketed) are moves that go beyond reissuing or compiling extant material to produce new work with a retrospective orientation. Blue Note has employed this strategy since the mid-1990s, steadily releasing records featuring reinterpretations of well-known Blue Note tracks by producers and beatmakers *du jour* from beyond the jazz world.¹⁷¹ The two recent *Blue Note Re:Imagined* compilations, released in 2020 and 2022, have adopted a similar template, but looking to emergent artists *within* jazz to revitalise the label’s image among younger listeners (Bungey, 2020). Both records feature a host of LJS stars ‘infus[ing] the spirit of the new UK jazz generation into the legendary label’s

¹⁷⁰ One participant, a singer and writer who had been around in that era, questioned the coherence of the terms by which these compilations were marketed: ‘they were trying to market it as acid jazz... but to listen to it: it’s actually sort of 50s and 60s swing, with lots of Hammond [organ]. They [we]re just trying to hang it on that marketing peg and sell it as acid jazz’ (P1).

¹⁷¹ British hip-hop producers Us3’s 1992 hit single ‘Cantaloup (Flip Fantasia)’, based on a lightly-reworked sample of Herbie Hancock’s ‘Cantaloupe Island’, was released on Blue Note, followed by a compilation of hip-hop remixes of Blue Note releases *The New Groove* in 1996, American hip-hop producer Madlib’s 2003 release *Shades of Blue*, and 2004’s compilation *Blue Note Revisited* (McGee, 2020, p. 26). This final recording looked to the then-novel production cultures and emergent dance music of mid-2000s London, featuring interpretations of Horace Silver and Gene Harris by broken beat producers 4Hero and Bugz in the Attic.

iconic catalogue, balancing the genre's tradition with its future', reflecting the 'talent and diversity' of contemporary British jazz (*About - Blue Note Reimagined*, no date). However, some interviewees suggested that the records felt like inorganic efforts to capitalise on the scene's success that were insufficiently conversant with the LJS's internal characteristics:

I'm not sure as a product, it's... as believable. I don't feel that you could get absorbed into it in the way that they marketed it... it didn't feel that it was something that appealed completely to the scene of people it was coming from (P26).

One participant, an experienced musician and teacher, suggested that the 2020 release bore the hallmarks of label strategy redolent of Blue Note's efforts at hip-hop crossover in the 1990s:

there's no way those guys got together and said, 'let's do a Blue Note album'. [Blue Note] offered them the opportunity to record for them: 'here's some money, do one of our standards'... remember Us3? ...It's the same thing again (P14).

2023's release *London Brew* followed similar lines. The album commemorates the 50th anniversary of Miles Davis's pathbreaking 1970 release *Bitches Brew*,¹⁷² and features London jazz notables playing new material inspired by the original record. Executive producer Bruce Lampcov made explicit the strategic intent of the project, borne out of signing a 'publishing administration deal with the estate of Miles Davis' in 2019':

One of the things I really wanted to do was help find a wider audience — especially a younger audience — for Miles' music... some friends introduced me to the [London] jazz scene. I went to a [Joe Armon-Jones] gig at Electric Brixton... the crowd was remarkably all of high school and college age... I thought, 'Well, this is perfect. This is exactly what I'm looking for.'" (quoted in Edwards, 2023)

Marketing these records as novel approaches to the past is counter-intuitive in the context of jazz norms. Jazz has always been anchored by reference to pre-existing material: some rely on 'standards', containing no original compositions at all, while others, as in the case of *London Brew*, make reference to others' tunes without directly reinterpreting them.¹⁷³ The cyclical incorporation of popular music material and its subsequent transformation through dialogical engagement with other musicians' 'takes' on the same compositions are constitutive features of the genre, serving as a kind of sonic historiography and a form of cross-generational homage. Each new recording of a jazz standard adds to the 'panoply of voices' associated with

¹⁷² The project began life as a series of anniversary gigs slated for 2020, delayed by the pandemic and eventually turned instead into a recording (Gottschalk, 2023)

¹⁷³ I am leaving aside debates over whether improvisation constitutes in-the-moment composition (see Berliner, 2009, pp. 270–295). I mean composition strictly in the sense of the song title, 'head' melody and basic harmonic structure – although even melody and harmony are frequently subject to radical reinterpretation when playing standards.

the composition, in turn ‘becom[ing] a part of the piece itself’ (Solis, 2008, p. 105). As such, regardless of the quality of the *musical* content of these compilations, their associated *marketing* campaign, foregrounding ‘reimagination’ as an innovative approach to the recorded canon, smacks of corporate synergy: a strategic simulation of novelty that brings Davis’s (newly licensed) 1970s material into the orbit of the current jazz zeitgeist, while maximising publishing and mechanical copyright revenues for both the new and old recordings (Moore, 2023).

These reservations notwithstanding, the *Re:Imagined* records and *London Brew* demonstrate one potential avenue for LJS artists facing a recorded music marketplace dominated by legacy artists. Through this form of legitimacy exchange, large labels benefit from the contemporary relevance of a popular scene, and access to a novel potential audience for jazz. Meanwhile, the group of younger musicians involved gain a flattering association with a legendary institution within the genre, hopefully being well compensated in the process.

It is, however, worth noting the absences here: those influential British jazz musicians who, still plying their trade today, are not bracketed as ‘heritage’ British jazz acts to be included in the Decca ‘Explosion’ re-issue series, nor deemed sufficiently current to be asked to ‘re-imagine’ classic material.¹⁷⁴ With these artists’ recorded repertoire confined to CD, a format that offers neither digital streaming’s convenience nor the reassuring tactility of the vinyl record (Straw, 2009), this means that absent vinyl reissue or a move onto MSPs, they risk being condemned to obscurity:

there have been musicians at the forefront of [the British jazz scene] who are internationally renowned, but somehow haven't broken through into general public consciousness in the same way [today]... the vinyl resurgence has played into it as well. Because a lot of that music took place in the 80s and 90s... [and] nobody was buying vinyl at that time, it was on CDs, so [today] you can barely even get hold of it digitally... specialist shops... don't have any of that music available because their focus is on vinyl (P34).

These musicians, collectives and scenes are vital parts of British jazz history, not least to the story of today’s LJS, but have fallen between narrative gaps due to vagaries of format, archiving and licensing. The neglect of their work in favour of projects assumed to have better commercial prospects further demonstrates the function of reissues ‘as tools by which the jazz tradition has been constructed’, compounding their exclusion and deepening the gulf between those included in the ‘core’ of the historical record, and those beyond its boundaries whose

¹⁷⁴ These might include Steve Williamson, Nikki Yeoh, Jason Yarde, Tom Challenger, and the various releases from two significant and often overlooked collectives, Loop and F-ire (Wall and Barber, 2011). There are many others, but participants mentioned these names with particular frequency.

work risks being forgotten (Pond, 2021, pp. 5–6; see also Deveaux, 2005; Whyton, 2010, pp. 85–102).

The realities of recording

Beyond the issue of reissues, creating new recordings also remains labour-intensive and expensive for most contemporary jazz musicians, who face an uphill battle to get their work recorded and in front of listeners. Even more challenging is seeing any kind of financial return. Among musician participants, only a few – including those who enjoy a degree of professional stability and public attention – suggested that they had received meaningful remuneration for recording sessions. P21 is a drummer, who was at an early stage in their professional life when we spoke, having just recorded their first album. They described the chance to release music under their own name as a ‘great opportunity’, but were pragmatic about the financial realities:

I've accepted that it's not something I'm going to make my living from [laughs]... I would hope that by the time I start to do a second or third album, I'll be at the level where it's like: 'Okay, cool. How can we make real money from this?' (P21).

Bassist P10 is a more established figure, having featured on significant LJS records and released albums under their own name. Their experience suggested P21's hopes to make ‘real money’ further down the line was optimistic, telling me that record income was:

not enough to sustain a livelihood. Definitely, the bulk of my earnings, I would say like [chuckles] 95% is from going out performing... even from doing other people's records, which will entitle me to PPL,¹⁷⁵ that's not enough to sustain musicians really (P10).

Many of my participants saw streaming as amplifying the inherent unpredictability of recorded music as a commodity, with the tiny rates of pay offered by most MSPs further curtailing its potential as a source of earnings. P7, for example, was dismissive of streaming income: ‘I don't even look at it on the statement. I don't even bother. Because it's like 30 quid [a year], it's cigarette money for a week or something’. Another participant was a critically acclaimed musician with a significant public profile, but suggested that ‘very, very little – about 10%, if that’ of even their limited income from recordings was derived from streaming (P29). A third had enjoyed a large streaming listenership by LJS standards, but still broadly concurred with other participants’ downbeat assessment of streaming economics:

¹⁷⁵ British copyright licensing society Phonographic Performance Limited, which collects fees on behalf of members primarily from radio, television and business licenses (Cloonan, 2016; Rutter, 2016).

[it's] only when something blows up... that you actually get to see a decent amount... you think you'd get a lot more for a million views, but you really don't... it's not something you can rely on, at all (P6).¹⁷⁶

Even this modest degree of income, and these opportunities to record, point to the relative success of the LJS: Umney and Kretsos's earlier research into the working lives of jazz musicians in London features no discussion of recording whatsoever, suggesting a change in fortunes for at least some jazz musicians in the interim (Umney and Kretsos, 2014, 2015).¹⁷⁷ Nonetheless, these musicians' statements suggest that recording is of limited immediate material benefit even for scene constituents with relatively bright prospects.

This begs the question: if these musicians make little to no 'real money' from releasing records, why persist in producing them? One response is that recording offers an avenue of meaningful expression distinct from performance, a point made during my conversation with one participant, a pianist. They suggested that music streaming had exerted a troubling effect on record production in this regard:

the danger with [music streaming] is that it frames... recording music as a commercial exercise, which it doesn't need to be. It can be an exercise in documentation. It could be an exercise in manifesto... it's important for the development of the music, that there are people dealing in all possibilities, you know? (P2).

P2's bracketing of commercial endeavours sets them apart from the general tenor of discussion within the scene, speaking perhaps to their proximity to the avant-garde jazz and free improvisation scenes in the UK. On these more experimental fringes, the uncompromising character of the music is frequently matched by similarly hardline attitudes toward the 'corrupting' influence of commerce upon artistry (e.g. McKay, 2005, pp. 202–212; Ho, 2011).¹⁷⁸

But for most others, there was pressing need for record production to provide *some* tangible economic reward, and thus the question regarding the purpose of production remained. My conversation with pianist P32 offered another answer. Like P21, they had only recently released their first record as bandleader with an influential independent British jazz label, and suggested

¹⁷⁶ These could of course all be instances of record labels taking large percentages of LJS musicians' streaming royalties, something often missed in discussions of low streaming payouts (Nowak and Morgan, 2021, pp. 69–71). However, all of those quoted in this section released via independent record labels, whose contractual terms have typically been more musician-friendly than major label equivalents (Mall, 2018, pp. 460–463).

¹⁷⁷ Their research was conducted 2011 - 2012, suggesting that the meagre returns recording provided jazz musicians pre-dates the move to streaming.

¹⁷⁸ The hyper-niche status of free improvised music also renders most concerns about corruption by commerce moot, as P2 mentioned later in our conversation: 'for me that kind of commercial thing... it's never really been a viable thing... [so] if no one's listening, then I *really* might as well do what I want! [laughs]'.

motivations derived as much from social pressure than economic strategy or artistic expression: 'when I put the album out, I didn't really know what I was doing. I didn't really mind... *I felt like I needed to put something out, just because everyone had stuff out.* So, I was like: 'well, I'll just write a bunch of tunes that I like... and see what happens' (P32) [emphasis mine].

Despite an unclear strategy for the record's release and little sense of the role it might play in career progression, this participant felt obliged to release an album to signal a degree of parity with others within their peer group. While P32 had few illusions that their album would directly lead to security or stardom, their comments underscore the enduring symbolic significance of releasing a recording with under ones' own name in the LJS. Durable industry logics of production and professionalism resurface here, in keeping with David Arditi's recent analysis of the continued symbolic significance of record labels. Despite the contemporary ease of self-releasing, Arditi suggests the 'ideology of getting signed' remains influential, rendering a record contract an end in itself, representing 'financial security, potential stardom, and... a clear marker of legitimacy', even absent any tangible or immediate remuneration (Arditi, 2020, p. 4). Similarly, music industry scholar Lee Marshall has suggested that releasing a record through a label with an established reputation 'remains a significant marker of status, a signal of having made it', and that this perhaps takes on heightened importance when 'anyone can make recordings available to the public' (Marshall, 2013a, p. 91).

Beyond the legitimating function of an album as such, recordings also serve a crucial promotional role in the contemporary music landscape, with platformisation affording unparalleled potential reach. While barely providing 'cigarette money', P7 conceded that a 'major upside' of releasing a record via streaming was 'the circulation... the main thing it's done is broaden my audience', helping increase gig ticket sales, which was a much more significant source of income. Similarly, P21's awareness of the limited immediate financial reward from their forthcoming release was tempered by this understanding, arguing the specialist LJS label with whom they were releasing their record had valuable brand recognition that would help increase future gig attendees:

it's going to be great promo, and will... get the music out to an audience... who haven't heard my stuff before - people who religiously follow [label]... it would be good for live gigs and selling out more tickets (P21).

For this participant then, the studio was still framed in reference to the stage, suggesting a reciprocity in terms of career progression between the two. Others elaborated on this connection, making it clear that gig promoters and venues still saw the album as a marker of

artistic seriousness. One trumpeter, speaking shortly before their debut album release as bandleader, reflected upon these pressures, suggesting it sat in tension with their desire for artistic development:

I think musicians shouldn't be pressured into releasing music. The music has to be ready... [but] especially when it comes to gig fees and stuff like that... that's definitely a big thing. When I speak to booking agents, they're like 'well, when you have an album out... the gig fee will definitely be different' (P31).

Recording thus appears a *necessity* for career progression, maintaining standing within the scene and the media, and/or a means to negotiate improved performance fees, before any consideration of creative fulfilment or the ethical and aesthetic discourses that surround recording in jazz. Returning to Arditi, it appears that at some level, releasing a record in the LJS context signals that a musician is 'serious', where 'being serious is synonymous... with being business-minded' (Arditi, 2020, p. 96). Evidently, then, despite the immediate financial hurdles, having studio recordings (and record label support) still holds influential symbolic weight, imbuing aspiring players with a prized sense of legitimacy, even if direct, tangible rewards remain scarce.

5.3.2: 'It's all better live': Relative aesthetic failure

However, unlike the substantial mutual influence between performance and recording in a *professional* sense, these two areas lie at a substantial remove in terms of aesthetic experience, a product of the conventions internal to jazz discussed above, and others peculiar to the scene. As a result, many interviewees framed the recording as an adjunct to the core of London jazz, the live performance. One music strategist and label head presented the live emphasis as 'unique' for a pop-adjacent scene like the LJS:

the audiences that have connected with this contemporary jazz scene have actually experienced it live before they've experienced it as an act of recorded music as it were... the recorded music has, in a sense, been subservient to the live experience, and I think that's quite unique (P13).

An agent who had worked with LJS acts during the scene's early days in the mid-2010s made a similar point, arguing the scene's success on the live circuit had disrupted industry common sense regarding the 'traditional route: releasing an album and touring it' as an audience development strategy. They saw the LJS as novel in this regard, presaging a wider industry turn toward gigging as the primary source of funds and away from substantive record label advances post-digitalisation (Bruenger, 2019, pp. 163–164):

what we had is a live scene getting picked up before the recorded output... there was no release needed for some of the acts... you know how everyone talks about how the

money is in live and not recorded anymore? Well, this is the first scene that's grown out of that model... and got the hype before any of the releases (P5).

Both participants are reproducing the 'hype' that P5 refers to here: the LJS is hardly unique for being primarily and initially a live phenomenon. As discussed, the pre-eminence of performance is foundational in jazz, and there are plenty of other influential scenes where recording has been ancillary to their initial development throughout popular music history – this is, for example, precisely the dynamic Barry Shank identifies in his influential study of the Austin rock'n'roll scene (Shank, 1994, p. 17). Nonetheless, these quotes illustrate a shared perception that recording and performance are incommensurable modes of artistic practice, and speak to a consensus among participants and media commentators that the scene, on record, has been subordinate and secondary to the gig.

For some, though, this has also resulted in the *relative aesthetic failure* of London jazz in studio recordings when compared to the intensity of live performance, a discrepancy that regularly arose in interviews. Some participants were explicitly dismissive of the scene's recorded output, employing a negative form of the 'transparency' ethos discussed in 5.3 to suggest, absent media boosterism or energetic live performance, some of the music was not as interesting as the 'hype' implied. Artist manager P23 argued that the prized atmosphere of LJS performances masked a fundamental shortage of musical quality, which records brought sharply into focus:

if I'm brutally honest ... a lot of the music from the London jazz scene, I think it's high on energy, and 'wow factor', but I don't think that the music's great (P23).

Manager and promoter P18 likewise claimed 'the album projects that have been released by the leading lights of the London jazz thing... by and large, they're quite underwhelming'. Prominent group Ezra Collective exemplified the gap between live performance and recording for some: P5 dismissed their much-anticipated debut release as 'just a crap album', suggesting that the group had been 'hyped as fuck, because they're a really good live band', an opinion shared by P23: 'they're really just a good live band. The records aren't super interesting'. It is worth emphasising that such blunt assessments were solely the preserve of non-musicians, part of a professional vocabulary borne from the messy and rarely glamorous work of professional cultural intermediaries. This category of cultural work involves bridging the gap between creative production and consumption, and relies upon this kind of business-like approaches to cultural objects and snap value judgements that blend aesthetic criteria and economic rationale (Negus, 2002; Lizé, Greer and Umney, 2022).

But musicians also appeared acutely aware of such perceptions. One reflected on criticisms within the wider jazz world of the scene:

a lot of people... think nobody here can really play, everyone's bullshitting, y'know? That [if] you take people away from [the] crowd jumping and down, then what have you actually got? These are all criticisms, and some of them, I think, are valid (P32).

This point inverts older jazz paradigms that frame the *stage* as the ultimate testing ground of musicianship (Berliner, 2009, pp. 58–86; Walker, 2010; Doffman, 2013). Such a perspective sees the distinctive interactivity and the presence of dance at LJS gig as a potential smokescreen and an impediment to the hushed, concentrated listening typical at conventional jazz gigs. The LJS 'vibe', in this context, masks the purported shortcomings of the scene's leading lights as instrumentalists or composers, which becomes harder to ignore on record. Similarly, during a discussion comparing playing 'straight ahead' jazz and the more pop-oriented music for which the LJS has been famed, one drummer told me that 'with straight ahead, you can't bullshit' (P21). While not offering any of their own examples of bullshitting on the London scene, they mentioned 'close friends who would, I think, say: 'absolutely!' Yeah, there's loads of bullshit - and they can't stand it' (P21). Another interviewee, an experienced saxophonist, suggested that 'certain sub-sets of jazz musicians... who maybe come from [a] bebop background' or play 'more of the canonic standard repertoire... often will feel that musically, this 'UK jazz wave' isn't as strong' (P27).¹⁷⁹

Other participants and commentators have been less directly condemnatory, instead attributing aesthetic shortcomings of the scene on record to the realities of the contemporary jazz business, and the very fact of the scene's success. Veteran Jazz Warriors vibraphonist Orphy Robinson has suggested that alongside the absence of records from some artists, 'the hype has pushed [other] young musicians to the fore prematurely, encouraging them to perform and release music before they are really ready' (quoted in Melville, 2023, p. 135). Another participant took up this theme, expressing concerns that the inexperience in the recording studio was symptomatic of the effects of rapid success:

what happens if you're touring the world all the time... is that you're not concentrating on yourself. That's why I worry... I want to see all these British guys... develop as artists.... I don't want this success to stop their development (P14).¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ This also comes through in saxophonist Camilla George's comments regarding her perception of hostility to the LJS within British jazz at large, which I analyse more thoroughly in 3.4.

¹⁸⁰ Wayne Francis, founder of Steam Down, envisioned the event on similar terms, as offering a much-needed regular space for scene members to congregate and nurture musical, personal and professional relationships amid the demands of touring (Heath, 2020).

Similarly, P5 highlighted the burgeoning opportunities to play lucrative dates outside of London and the UK for some of the bigger LJS musicians based on ‘hype’ without a body of recorded work. They suggested that this had produced a high degree of fluidity in the pool of jazz musicians in the city. In their words, ‘as soon as the spotlight turned on these artists, it was go, full-steam ahead... out on the road, non-stop, earning money, touring. Very little space to incubate, very little space to experiment, very little space to build and grow and develop together’ (P5). They implicated the growth of touring opportunities in the ‘sad’ fact that ‘you’ve not got a full album from certain acts yet, you haven’t had a follow up to certain acts yet’.¹⁸¹

The ‘pop model’ and smoothness

The combination of inexperience in the studio and instability induced by successes in the live arena was therefore understood as arresting the development of musicians specifically as recording artists. Some younger musicians foregrounded their inexperience in the studio, and the distinctive musical challenges posed by recording, during our conversations:

the art of recording is so intricate. And I'm literally like, I feel like a baby when I'm in the studio... it's such a different art form to performing live (P31)

I've never felt the same thing in studio as I do playing live on stage. I'm almost always more relaxed on stage... [recording] is so much more daunting... [it] feels like it has to be perfect... I think, unless you work as a session/studio musician, you don't actually spend that much time in the studio. (P21)

Alongside Robinson’s concern about underdevelopment, the emphasis placed upon intricacy and perfection here speaks to a model of record production that departs from the ethic of ‘documentary’ discussed by P2 above. LJS trumpeter Mark Kavuma has recently argued that jazz has increasingly internalised pop aesthetic values and release strategies, leading to the kind of anxieties regarding ‘perfection’ and ‘intricacy’ voiced by my participants. This, he suggests, also hinders emergent musicians’ ability to ‘honestly’ document their trajectory as an artist:

I feel like jazz has been affected by the pop model where you release an album [and] you might tour it for a year... Why can't we record two or three albums a year? ...a lot

¹⁸¹ The participant singled out the group Kokoroko, who at the time of interview hadn’t yet released an album.

*of my friends... are scared to put [records] out because they want it to be perfect... [but] there is never a time when you think everything's perfect (West and Kavuma, 2023).*¹⁸²

Kavuma's discussion of 'pop perfection' also bears the hallmarks of older ideologies of transparency. But it also resonates with statements by other participants, who sought to highlight the relative aesthetic failure of the LJS on record. As one participant, a DJ and radio host, suggested:

I think it's all better live! [laughs]... let's take Ezra Collective as an example... the recorded output... it's quite clean, the production on it. But when you're seeing these guys live, there's so much more of a vibe there... I reckon they will say that their primary currency would be the live setting, because of what they actually create on stage (P33).

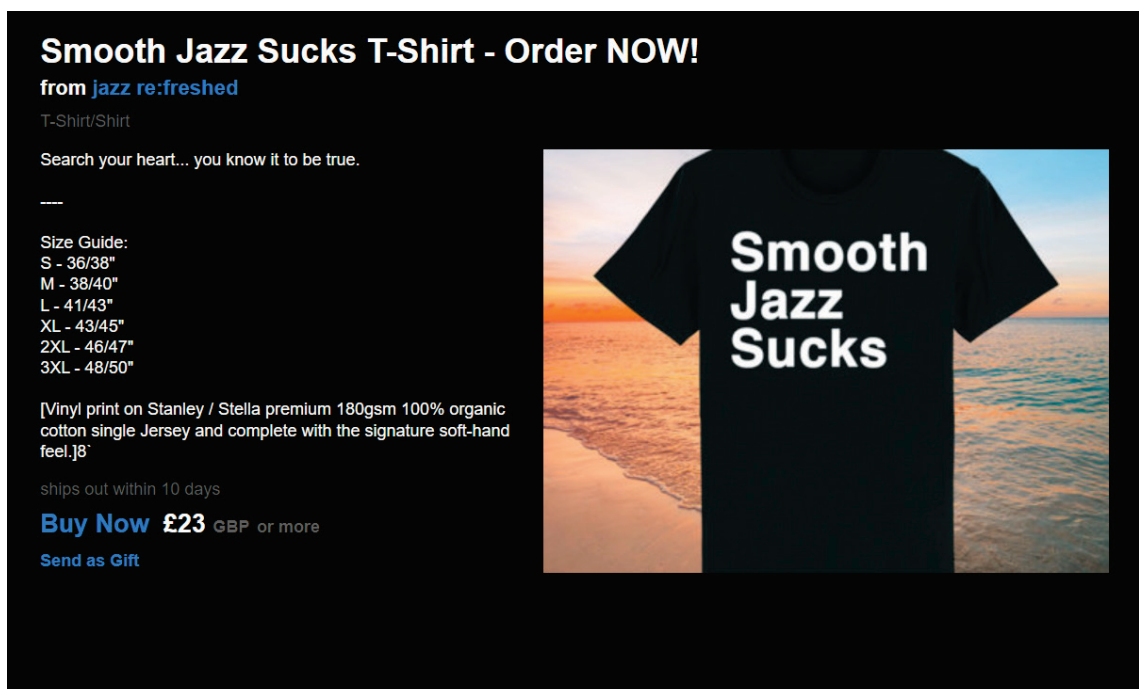
P33 paints the 'clean' production processes on Ezra Collective's records as culpable for their failure to live up to the raw energy that the band creates in a live context. According to this logic, the emphasis on perfection at the heart of what Kavuma calls the 'pop' model not only slows the output of LJS musicians but also denudes recordings of the scene's vibrancy. P12, a writer and broadcaster, also suggested that 'the recorded hasn't quite caught up with the live yet', while P33 reached for the language of vibe: 'I feel like a lot of the recordings have that *vibe smoothed out*. I don't know if it's because some of the musicians feel like in the studio, they've got to be more 'proper'. They don't... bring the kind of *hardcore energy or the bass weight or the heaviness*' (P12) (emphasis added). They argued that the dissipation of 'vibe' in the studio was a result of either the pressures of recording or a lack of technical expertise, suggesting that LJS releases that *do* 'bang' and capture the vibe of a live show tended to exhibit the 'producer culture touch' of a specialist electronic artist working alongside.¹⁸³

This is not a phenomenon peculiar to the LJS. In Travis Jackson's ethnography of the 1990s New York 'straight-ahead' jazz scene, some of the 'dedicated fans' he interviews describe the scene's recorded output as problematically 'perfect', and insufficiently 'stimulating [relative] to live performances, which have an edge that recording – because it reduces a multisensory experience into sound – cannot capture' (Jackson, 2012, p. 99). Jackson's study is at some remove from mine in time, space and subgenre, but there is a consistent vocabulary used to

¹⁸² He contrasts this with the more 'honest' approach of a bygone era, where jazz musicians recorded prolifically with less concern for perfection, offering 'a reflection of... that moment in time' (West and Kavuma, 2023).

¹⁸³ Here referring to DJs Four Tet and Floating Points, discussed below. These comments chime with Robert Strachan's thesis that the spread of music production software has normalised electronic music aesthetics throughout the popular music landscape. As a result, genuine expertise in dance music production – the 'producer culture touch' – has assumed greater importance in other musics, here proving essential for achieving requisite energy on the dancefloor (Strachan, 2017, pp. 13–18; Reynolds, 2018, pp. 126–138).

describe the relative aesthetic failure of recordings from the two respective scenes: smooth, lightweight, clean, and lacking edge. These are terms of considerable vintage in jazz discourse, typically invoked to delegitimise certain styles and musicians, from the frequent dismissals by jazz players and critics alike of ‘West Coast’ jazz in the 1950s as ‘square’, overintellectual, and somehow audibly ‘white’ (Jago, 2017, p. 136), to the vitriol routinely aimed at smooth jazz since its emergence in the late 1980s.¹⁸⁴ Smooth jazz offers the archetypal example of a style cast as ‘illegitimate’ pseudo-jazz precisely because its polished production bears the trace of the ‘corrupting’ influence of commercial pop, ‘synonymous with commercial interests and a musically conservative, even naive, aesthetic’ (Fellezs, 2011, p. 29; see also Washburne, 2004). Cutting against the heterodox attitudes toward genre so often invoked to distinguish LJS, this particular subgenre languishes beyond the pale for some on the scene, made apparent by Jazz Re:freshed’s popular line of merchandise bearing the tag line ‘Smooth Jazz Sucks’:



Smooth Jazz Sucks T-Shirt - Order NOW!
 from **jazz re:freshed**
 T-Shirt/Shirt

Search your heart... you know it to be true.

—

Size Guide:
 S - 36/38"
 M - 38/40"
 L - 41/43"
 XL - 43/45"
 2XL - 46/47"
 3XL - 48/50"

[Vinyl print on Stanley / Stella premium 180gsm 100% organic cotton single Jersey and complete with the signature soft-hand feel.]⁸

ships out within 10 days

Buy Now £23 GBP or more

Send as Gift

Fig. 3: Jazz Re:freshed merchandise for sale on Bandcamp. From <https://jazzrefreshed.bandcamp.com/merch/smooth-jazz-sucks-t-shirt-order-now>

The prevailing attitude toward ‘smoothness’ reveals an instance of accordance with orthodox critical convention in jazz, and suggests an edge case for the open-minded polygenericism for

¹⁸⁴ As ever with jazz, aesthetic judgements such as these can’t easily be separated from underlying socio-musical values structured by race and gender. Condemnations of smoothness are often proxies for misgivings about sonic ‘effeminacy’ or whiteness in jazz (McGee, 2013; Jago, 2017). Fellezs points out that critical commentary imputing qualities of racial inauthenticity to smooth jazz ‘as a genre created for white suburban consumption’ are undercut by awkward empirical reality. Particularly during its late 80s/early 90s heyday in the US, ‘smooth jazz ha[d] a significantly large middle-class black, Asian American, and Latina/o following’ (Fellezs, 2011, p. 30)

which the scene is lauded.¹⁸⁵ I would suggest that it reflects a degree of insecurity among purveyors of ‘new London jazz’ regarding their position within the wider jazz ecosystem, given the glossy, groove-oriented qualities of many Jazz Re:freshed releases which can come closer to smooth jazz than those involved running the organisation might care to admit. As such, while obviously tongue in cheek, this piece of branding is arguably an instance of the narcissism of small differences. It allows Jazz Re:freshed to obscure the relative aesthetic similarities between some of their catalogue and the smooth subgenre,¹⁸⁶ while staking a claim to insider status by sending up a style typically used as a punchline in the jazz art world. More broadly, the invocation of this kind of routine jazz vocabulary to discuss the shortcomings of London jazz recordings reveals the continued influence of some older aesthetic values upon a scene typically understood as at odds with jazz normativity. Undergirding these descriptions of problematically smooth/clean/lightweight recordings is a kernel of the venerable critique of interventionist production in jazz discussed above, whereby the artifice of the studio is inimical to jazz authenticity and the sterility of the production process is seen to render the ineffable, invaluable live vibe of the scene inert.

Despite the widespread acclaim with which most LJS releases have been met, an undercurrent of this strand of critique occasionally appears in commentary on the scene. Guardian critic Ammar Kalia’s review of LJS sextet Nérija’s 2019 release *Blume*, for example, suggested that: ‘When playing live, they’re a formidable force... here, though, they feel constrained by the studio’ (Kalia, 2019a), a sentiment echoed in the comments ‘below the line’ on the same article.¹⁸⁷ Similarly, critic Theo Kotz described drum and keyboard duo Yussef Kamaal’s hugely influential album *Black Focus* from 2016 as at times sounding ‘a little too languid, too lounge... [and] can feel safe’ in an otherwise positive review (Kotz, 2016). These statements suggest that the abundant potential of LJS musicians, so frequently lauded in press and promotional commentary, might not be translating onto record. Misgivings about excessive ‘smoothness’ or ‘safety’ are more widespread in the lukewarm critical response to the following record from the group’s drummer Yussef Dayes, 2020’s *What Kinda Music (Beyond the Groove/Blue*

¹⁸⁵ It is also out of step with an ongoing critical rehabilitation of smooth jazz (Beta, 2023). Greg Tate has also drawn out the influence of ‘the smoother funk-jazz’ of the 1970s from artists like Grover Washington Jr. and The Crusaders upon contemporary jazz megastar Kamasi Washington’s breakout 2015 release *The Epic*, suggesting that a rapprochement with this aesthetic is more than just a marginal tendency (Tate, 2016b).

¹⁸⁶ ‘Smooth’ might usefully describe the high-sheen jazztronica of Kaidi Tatham’s *Kaidi’s Sive* (Jazz Re:freshed, 2011) or David Mrakpor’s neo-soul single ‘My Life’ (Jazz Re:freshed, 2021), and that there is meaningful overlap in the soundworlds and sonic genealogies of these releases and the work of someone like Washington Jr.

¹⁸⁷ E.g. from ‘@nilpferd’: ‘that disjoint between studio and live performance seems to affect these artists’ solo efforts as well, particularly Nubya Garcia, whose live band is a wondrous thing not even really hinted at by the couple of EP releases to date.’

Note/Caroline, 2020), written with ‘bedroom producer’ Tom Misch (Hunter-Tilney, 2020; Krol, 2020; Skala, 2020). This certainly tracks with my own experience: Dayes, in particular, is an incendiary performer whose playing onstage could not reasonably be described as languid or lounge.¹⁸⁸ Accordingly, these records frequently *do* feel safe by comparison, struggling to capture the edge-of-your-seat unpredictability that characterises the scene (and Dayes’ playing) at its best.

This point was elaborated upon in an interview with P16, a DJ and writer. They made the case for what they called ‘tactical compliance’ by LJS musicians, suggesting that the incorporation of pop-derived aesthetics on record served the scene’s ambitions of populist accessibility by helping to reach wider, non-jazz audiences. But they singled out *What Kinda Music* as a compromise too far to pop sensibilities. They suggested that Dayes:

conceded too much... to a point of not full respect [sic]... it wasn’t groundbreaking at all... the question is: where does that tactical compliance become, y’know, not cool? When does the integrity dissolve? (P16).

While P16 is clearly reluctant to be fully condemnatory here, we can sense the spectre of ‘selling out’ discourse haunting discussions of aesthetic failure on London jazz records.

However, what was merely an implication from P16 comes fully into view in the strident dismissal of *What Kinda Music* by Dayes’ former Yussef Kamaal bandmate, keyboardist Henry Wu: ‘let me tell you something — that Tom Misch is wack [bad], it’s corny... **It’s good for the numbers and thirteen-year old girls** but... the man [Dayes] needs to come back to the roots’ (quoted in Biswas, 2020) (emphasis added).¹⁸⁹ As with P7’s conflation of deskilled, digitalised DJing and effeminacy in Chapter Four, Wu’s comments overlay the gender binary on the art/commerce divide in popular music. Here, the much-maligned figure of the female teenage music fan serves as ‘proof’ of *What Kinda Music*’s unacceptably ‘corny’ compromise to the market, a sexist framing of young girls as passive, frivolous adopters of prevailing musical trends that has a rich heritage in popular music discourse (see e.g. Gottlieb and Wald, 1994/2014; J. Williams, 2024). These residues of older, ugly hierarchies of masculine-musical value further complicate notions of a uniform commitment to gender equality in the scene.

But what also stands out is Wu’s reference to streaming metrics — ‘the numbers’ — in the same breath. This suggests an intertwining of pre-existing, gendered conceptions of artistic seriousness and commercial compromise, with emergent systems of value regarding

¹⁸⁸ Something I witnessed first-hand at his performance at Church of Sound in 2017 (see umoja 2021).

¹⁸⁹ This condemnation also reflects an unresolved ‘controversy... behind the scenes’ between Wu and Dayes which underpinned the split of Yussef Kamaal (Wu, quoted in Biswas, 2020).

illegitimate aesthetic compromise to streaming logics. Both Wu and P16's suggestion that the Dayes/Misch collaboration symbolised excessive 'compliance' to mainstream aesthetics therefore points toward wider misgivings regarding the malign influence of current digital modes of music circulation and consumption.

Smoothness and 'streambait'

Misch offers a helpful way into this discussion. *NME* journalist Jordan Bassett has cited the producer's earnest, unabashedly 'radio-friendly' and 'knowingly cheesy' mix of hip-hop beat-making practices, light funk and jazz-inflected harmony and instrumentation as providing an 'easy listening template' for a wider turn to smoothness in British pop, which Bassett termed 'schmaltzcore' (Bassett, 2018). Misch's work also performs exceptionally well on streaming services, having accrued over a billion plays as of 2021, with digital music industry analyst Cheri Hu citing him as an exemplar of streaming success for an independent musician due to 'prolific, consistent output' (Hu, 2019; Needham, 2021). Misch's sound is a quintessential example of the kinds of genre-fluid, mood- or 'vibe'-based music widely understood (and often derided) as a characteristic (anti-)aesthetic of contemporary streaming music culture (James, 2017; Pelly, 2018; Hesmondhalgh, 2021), with a host of influential genre-free editorial playlists on Spotify (upon which Misch, and other LJS artists have featured) functioning as significant distribution channels (Muchitsch, 2023).

But this kind of explicitly streaming-friendly music was a source of much consternation during interviews. One participant was concerned about the emergence of 'norms of what music should be' that resulted in 'musicians making music for the [streaming] playlist':

you can hear it... [pauses] in a general conservatism of the music possibly, and production values, and song length and reduction of improvisation... there's a whole seam of music, which maybe came out of the whole Kamaal Williams thing... you hear, it's suddenly become background music almost... very innocuous, very easy listening (P2).

These sorts of adjustments to streaming are what Jeremy Wade Morris, following Mark Katz's work on 'phonograph effects' discussed in 5.2, terms 'platform effects' (Morris, 2020). Morris suggests platform effects emerge as musicians and labels respond to the 'conditions of contingency' brought about by platformisation with strategies of 'optimisation', attempting to mitigate uncertainty and increase their audience.

Morris's analysis explores all platform effects (e.g. sonic, data, infrastructural) as of potentially equal significance. But for my participants, adjusting extramusical features of a recording in pursuit of greater visibility was a form of promotional strategy that most deemed acceptable

and good practice. By contrast, *aesthetic* optimisation - deliberately adjusting the sonic content of ones' music for the perceived demands of the platform - appeared something of a taboo. Many participants suggested that they knew *of* musicians who actively produced 'streambait' music in this way, but rarely provided specific examples, and were keen to disavow the practice and place it at arm's length. For example, when discussing what 'works' on streaming platforms, one participant suggested that 'people literally make very short tunes, just because they know it'll get playlisted ten times more' than a longer equivalent. I enquired if there were examples of this in the LJS:

I think they're starting to do it, yeah. [But] the artists I work with definitely don't do that. And they're against it, because they feel like it's super limiting (P36).

Trumpeter P31, when also asked if there were LJS musicians catering to the perceived demands of MSPs, similarly cast this as an illegitimate practice:

I think so, and I think if they do that's their loss. Because that should never be the motive, for creating music (P31).

To this end, saxophonist P7 sought to actively avoid any impingement of streaming data on their artistic practice:

when a track does well on Spotify... I do not then think to myself: 'on the next album, I have to write another song like that'... at the same time, I don't think to myself: 'well, I have to write a song that's the complete opposite of that', and so on... I'm conscious to make it not influence me, in that sense.

P7's comments suggest a concern about even unconscious sonic optimisation, which they deemed to be a corruption of their artistic practice, actively resisting any urge either to mimic recordings that seem to 'work', or too-vigorously disavow these same recordings. Streaming, then, seems to further complicate recording practices for those on the scene, providing another potential source of aesthetic failure: by seeming to incentivise passivity, brevity, and conservatism, the current regime of digital circulation and consumption raises the prospect of illegitimate aesthetic optimisation.¹⁹⁰

These varying interpretations of the relative aesthetic failure of some LJS records point to some key ambivalences regarding the recording on the London scene, where the medium is not only subservient to live performance, but also perhaps an interloper that threatens the purity of community cohesion and revealed a dearth of musical substance at its core. Here, concerns

¹⁹⁰ Music streaming researcher Benjamin Morgan found very similar attitudes among Australian musicians who argued that 'producing music solely for streaming is dishonest', born from a 'clear normative concept of what an artist *should* be' (Morgan, 2022, p. 163).

about economic realities and the threat of the music industry to artistic autonomy are brought to bear upon more well-established questions concerning the indeterminate status or location of the musical work in jazz (Okiji, 2018, p. 67). Georgina Born's analysis of the 'distinctive ontology' of jazz points to how this tendency, and the challenge it poses to concepts of the musical work derived from the European classical tradition, flows from the genre's unique entanglement of sociality and collective improvisation, record industry commodification, and the 'encompassing realities of race and class' (see Born, 2005, pp. 24–29). The result is a musical form with an inherent 'tendency away from expectations that produce hermetic, self-contained works' (Okiji, 2018, p. 67).

Such conceptual context better helps us to understand the anxieties produced by the apparent shortfall between the collective and embodied experience of vibe, and private, individualised listening, especially via MSPs. The liminal status of the LJS as a multi-generic, 'both-and' formation, incorporating the aesthetic criteria and audience expectations of jazz and other popular musics, means that the recordings *are* often perceived according to expectations of hermetic, self-contained works, as albums are typically understood in pop and rock. At the same time, there remains an enduring influence of jazz expectations - regarding the truth-telling function of the recording-as-documentary - among my participants. As a result, LJS releases are evaluated according to two sets of partially conflicting sets of values regarding the form and function of recordings as such, and are frequently found wanting both as jazz *and* pop records. One insightful example in this regard is jazz critic Daniel Spicer's review of Garcia's much-anticipated 2020 release *Source* for British experimental music magazine *The Wire*. Spicer offers fleeting praise for the dub- and drum'n'bass-influenced tracks peppering the album, before suggesting that 'where the jazz content is foregrounded, however, the music is less convincing', due precisely to its departure from jazz norms: deriding excessively 'busy' and un-swinging drumming from Sam Jones, the absence of 'anything resembling a walking bassline' from Daniel Casimir and Garcia's own 'paucity of harmonic complexity' (Spicer, 2020).

Such critiques bolster a sense among some onlookers that the LJS does not live up to its promise musically, breeding insecurities among musicians at the scene's centre. My participants' reflections on the shortcomings of LJS recordings are tightly bound up with the discussion of the challenges posed by mediating the ineffable qualities of embodiment and live performance and in Chapter Four. More fundamentally, they speak to the still-unresolved dislocations of technological reproduction and preservation in music, which has had 'the effect of desanctifying and desocialising the experience of music, because what was once an event becomes repeatable and what was once collective becomes privatised' (Reynolds, 2011, p.

122). While new jazz in London has frequently flourished in its position at the crossroads between jazz aesthetics and other musics, the above discussion offers some instances where the scene's complex relationship to jazz might present challenges.

In the following section, I discuss two divergent approaches taken within the LJS to at once alleviate, and capitalise on, these tensions. The first has seen participants lean further into the 'purist' production practices outlined in 5.2.3 in the context of contemporary post-digital malaise, foregrounding the use of vintage equipment and 'organic', analogue processes to document improvisation in the studio. The second involves LJS constituents taking the opposite tack, embracing hybrid aesthetics and production practices drawn particularly from electronic dance music to create records appropriate for DJ performance and club environments.

5.4: Production techniques and marketing records in the LJS

5.4.1: Artisanry and analogue authenticity: Direct-to-disc records

LJS constituents and music industry intermediaries have adopted a range of strategies for overcoming the shaky economic grounds for record production. One has been to double down on discourses of transparency and the ethics of analogue production discussed in 5.2. We can find the clearest iteration of the marketing of verisimilitude in the London jazz scene by looking more closely at the prevalence of 'direct-to-disc' LJS records released in recent years. With music streaming now the dominant means of global music consumption, physical recorded music formats represent a niche market. The marketing of vinyl records, in particular, relies upon its status as a more tangible and authentic means of music consumption than that purportedly offered by digital audio, one that has been distinct from (and potentially at odds with) the musical 'mainstream' since the advent of the cassette and the CD (Kruse, 2010). Leaving the validity of vinyl's claim to 'authentic' status temporarily to one side, it clearly reflects consumer demand, demonstrated by the much-feted 'vinyl revival' of the 2010s (Harvey, 2017). Having slumped in 2007 to an all-time low of 205,000 units in the UK, vinyl sales have subsequently rebounded, with 5.5 million units sold in 2022, generating more trade revenue than any other physical medium in 2022 for the first time since 1987 (Osborne, 2018; Mall, 2021; Krol, 2022). But while increasingly lucrative, and increasingly embraced by major pop acts, vinyl sales are still comfortably outstripped by CDs by volume, despite the steady decline in UK CD sales year-on-year (*UK recorded music revenues rise for an eighth successive*

year in 2022, 2023). These data suggest vinyl remains a relatively niche product, and in requiring specialist playback equipment, an expensive pursuit relative to digital streaming.

Direct-to-disc recordings intensify this same specialist logic. The term refers to ‘the process by which music is cut onto acetate from single-take live performances, without interference’, a technique that was largely abandoned with the adoption of magnetic tape in the 1950s (Perchard *et al.*, 2022, p. 232) but one that, in principle, preserves the take ‘as is’ (*Night Dreamer*, no date). Direct-to-disc record labels foreground the use of ‘traditional’, skilled production techniques and equipment in the studio to suggest a heightened level of care and expertise relative to the purportedly over-technologised digital work process of the modern recording studio. Here, the emphasis on small-scale, ‘neo-craft’ processes leaves a highly valued trace of the production process on the commodity itself (Ocejo, 2017; Gandini and Gerosa, 2023). We can understand this as an instance of what cultural sociologist Michael Scott defines as ‘hipster capitalism’ (Scott, 2017). He points to this heavily aestheticised micro-entrepreneurial cultural *production* as a distinctive contemporary phenomenon particularly evident in cities in the Global North. In Scott’s analysis, ‘hipster capitalism’ operates by drawing formerly ‘backstage’ cultural intermediaries and infrastructure, such as recording engineers and their technical equipment, to the fore, making production processes an increasingly central ‘frontstage’ aspect of branding, signalling taste, and generating revenue (Scott, 2017). The heightened economic value and cultural capital of consumer goods that foreground their ‘transparent’ and quasi-artisanal production processes is characteristic of the shift from ‘conspicuous consumption’ to ‘conspicuous production’ that economic geographer Elizabeth Currid-Halkett identifies as underpinning the ‘economic *and* cultural system’ of the contemporary ‘aspirational class’ (Currid-Halkett, 2017, p. 116).¹⁹¹ Conspicuous production complements the pre-existing organicist reading of vinyl as a form of music *consumption* that, by dint of its relatively niche status, has shaken off the ‘aura of mass-production’ (Chivers Yochim and Biddinger, 2008, p. 187).¹⁹²

The foregrounding of the direct-to-disc process as both a central source of value in itself, and key in enabling the kinds of musical interaction prized in jazz, is evident in the marketing copy of Dutch record label Night Dreamer, which has released four direct-to-disc records by LJS

¹⁹¹ This class constitutes most of the vinyl-buying public today and, I would suggest, much of scene’s participants and fans.

¹⁹² This in many ways follows and compounds the marketing logic employed to sell reissues, whereby ‘each jazz recording not only represents a snapshot of a historic period but, despite its mass production, is also a unique creation’ (Whyton, 2010, p. 87).

groups.¹⁹³ The label describes its recording process as an attempt to foster, and capture, ‘trust in raw musicianship vs. the vulnerability of exposure’ (*Night Dreamer*, no date). To this end, the label places its arsenal of vintage, super-high-end analogue recording equipment front-and-centre in its promotional material, framing both the technology itself and the music it captures as uniquely meaningful and rare in the contemporary moment: ‘an event, in and of itself, a meeting of talents, minds, generations and zeitgeist moments, captured in a unique and pure manner’ (*Gary Bartz & Maisha*, 2020).¹⁹⁴

The confluence of discourses of purity, vulnerability and rawness are crucial here, bringing contemporary preoccupations with the purported dishonesty of digital hyper-mediation to bear on the deep-rooted values of transparency specific to jazz (Jago, 2019). Adopting a logic of what Andy Hamilton calls a ‘positive aesthetics of imperfection’ positions the direct-to-disc process as providing consumers with a product that, in its very essence, facilitates the kinds of risk-taking that constitute meaningful improvisational jazz performance as an ‘open, spontaneous response to contingencies of performance or production’ (Hamilton, 2020, p. 290). Such a framing activates an affective investment in specific technologies deemed ‘warm’, human, and crucially fallible, counterposed with the cold, inscrutable sites of mainstream contemporary music production and consumption: the DAW and the music streaming platform, that are deemed in some way *problematically flawless*, stunting the risks and vulnerability necessary for authentic jazz practice (Osborne, 2018, pp. 22–28). P26 worked on public relations and marketing in the music industries, and said this contrast had been central to marketing direct-to-disc jazz releases:

I suppose it's... [about] showing... the obvious love that goes into it. Some of it is about really fancy equipment, but in essence, it's about capturing the energy of a scene, live... that's something that you can't really get from digital music: y'know, you're streaming, and you're clicking through, or you're leaving it to play and something's just come on. [Marketing] is just heightening that whole thing; [emphasizing] that it's a physical product.

These contrasts were central in in the promotional material for trumpeter Emma-Jean Thackray’s 2021 *Night Dreamer* single *Um-Yang*. Thackray suggested that the studio catered to her need for ‘everything to be natural and real’: ‘it had all the fantasy analogue equipment you daydream about one day being able to use... All the instruments were natural, woods and metals, no plastic in sight, and everything was to be hit or blown, all analogue’ (*Emma-Jean*

¹⁹³ Maisha and Gary Bartz, *Night Dreamer Direct-to-Disc Sessions* (2020); Sarathy Korwar and Upaj Collective, *Night Dreamer Direct-to-Disc Sessions* (2020); Emma-Jean Thackray *Um-Yang* (2020); and Charlie Stacey, *The Light Beyond Time* (2022).

¹⁹⁴ Taken from the promotional material for a release featuring American ‘elder statesman’ saxophonist Gary Bartz alongside LJS spiritual jazz ensemble Maisha (Freeman, 2020).

Thackray, no date). As Michael Palm has argued in his analysis of the vinyl revival, the perception of analogue as ‘synonymous with nature, and the digital’s... opposite’ is a relatively recent phenomenon which emerged during the 1990s alongside the growing ubiquity of personal computing and the internet (Palm, 2019, p. 644; see also Sterne, 2016). Palm situates the growing appeal of vinyl in the context of this relatively recent enthusiasm for ‘natural’ technologies, and frames the impulse as another instance of the post-digital condition, with the format’s ‘analogue purity’ offering enthusiasts a ‘reprieve from digital saturation’ (Palm, 2019, p. 657).¹⁹⁵ As I argued in Chapter Four, the post-digital provides a useful frame for understanding the distinctive allure of the intimate live performance setting of the LJS. And as with the heavily mediated immediacy of scenic gigs, vinyl records (and even more so for direct-to-disc releases) only take on their purportedly anti-technological and unmediated hue as a reaction to digitisation. Certainly, the ‘natural’ qualities ascribed to vinyl today are a considerable distance from the initial promotion and reception of a format which was heralded as a hi-tech, futuristic breakthrough in sound reproduction that promised miraculous fidelity on arrival (Barry, 2010; Mueller, 2015).

The trajectory of the format demonstrates the culturally and historically contingent ways in which sound technologies are interpreted and incorporated into wider systems of value. The value of direct-to-disc releases flows from what David Grubbs calls the ‘objectness of the record’ and its ‘compound, multidisciplinary character... as a medium for sound, but also as a medium for text, art [and] design’ (Grubbs, 2014, pp. x–xi). Such objectness is central to the value of vinyl records as a consumer good, but with *Thackray*’s comments we see how the prizing of tactility and objectness takes on heightened importance at the point of production and subsequent promotion, too. These are quintessential characteristics of the contemporary ‘hipster economy’, that places high value upon ‘neo-craft’ forms of *both* production *and* consumption. Gerosa argues that, as well as a significant site of economic value and cultural capital creation, the ‘hipster economy’ is a conjunctural phenomenon, a ‘consequence of the post-Fordist will to find an answer to industrial and capitalist alienation through a more authentic life’ (Gerosa, 2024, p. 62). But I would contend that direct-to-disc recordings are exemplary ‘hipster’ artefacts which, by threading together analogue authenticity and neo-craft discourses, point to the *digital* as a third source of alienation.

This is not a set of production practices and consumer desires that is limited to jazz, with forms of analogue purity evident across the board in other contemporary popular music genres. We could look to the move from roots reggae to more digitised styles like dancehall in Jamaica in

¹⁹⁵ Likewise, Paul E. Winter’s sees this opposition as central to ‘vinylphilia’ today, which ‘defines itself to some degree against the perceived dehumanizing aspect of digital technology’ (Winter, 2016, p. 56).

the 1980s for an example with connections to the LJS.¹⁹⁶ But Night Dreamer, and other audiophile labels such as London's Gearbox Recordings, promote their (ultimately impossible) attempts fully to capture musical spontaneity in a register that *is* reliant upon genre-specific practices, discourses, and values. We can see this too on Moses Boyd and Binker Golding's 2015 album *Dem Ones* (Gearbox Records, 2015). The album's sleeve notes state that the record contains 'no editing, overdubbing or mixing', an assertion of musical honesty that abuts equivalent truth-claims in rock discourse, while dovetailing with 'authentic' jazz production ethics that resonate with jazz audiences. As critic Richard Williams notes in his review, 'the process of recording direct to two-track tape and cutting the master directly from the result certainly helps preserve a sense of intimacy and immediacy' (R. Williams, 2015). Jago has detailed how such assertions remain a standard means of signalling jazz authenticity, with 'mainstream jazz artists such as Brad Mehldau and Joshua Redman continu[ing] to proclaim in their liner notes that their music has been recorded live, without technological mediation – that it is still "real" jazz' (Jago, 2019, p. 152). Here, the focus placed upon the *processual* aspects of direct-to-disc recordings in promotional and press literature ascribes these LJS releases with an authenticity, honesty and proximity to the jazz mainstream, often a way that circumvents discussion of the *musical* content of the records themselves. The conspicuous vintage production process also becomes a cipher for quality musicianship, pre-empting or neutralising suggestions of compositional or instrumental shortcomings as discussed in 5.3.2. Gearbox founder Darrell Steinman has made apparent:

Only good musicians need apply because you cannot clean up afterwards. That is the philosophy of Gearbox: to capture music as a snapshot in time. Production here is not about cobbling together bits of samples (quoted in Hodgkinson, 2019).

Recourse to artisan production processes has thus provided one means of mitigating the insecurities regarding the aesthetic shortfall between the live vibe and the recording in London jazz discussed in 5.3. In framing 'natural' recording techniques as fostering 'raw musicianship' and collective vulnerability, specialist labels like Night Dreamer and Gearbox are catering to (and producing) a consumer desire for phonographic verisimilitude and material musical artefacts. Such a desire has been intensified by growing disaffection with the supposed deficiencies of digitalised production and consumption, which have left 'intimacy and

¹⁹⁶ Literary scholar Louis Chude-Sokei argues that this shift was 'not just technological and generational... [but] *ideological* and deeply imbricated in the discourses of nationalism and dispersal, resistance and compromise... [in] a period of rupture and distortion, good people retreated into roots or "old school" aesthetics that were, ironically, made possible by analogue recording technologies' (Chude-Sokei, 2018, p. 183). As with Chude-Sokei's example, the leveraging of analogue 'objectness' in the LJS chimes with wider 'ruptures' regarding the digital and the future in the current conjuncture. Recall P7's comments in Chapter Four about the move away from vinyl indicating a terminal decline in 'proper' DJing.

immediacy' in short supply (see Hesmondhalgh, 2021; Sterne and Razlogova, 2021). At the same time, the emphasis placed on the noticeable sonic traces of bespoke audio production equipment (e.g. analogue 'warmth') pulls in a different direction. The depthless qualities ascribed to digital audio and computer record production are cast as inferior to the tangible workmanship of the direct-to-disc product, whose audible seams become hallmarks of care and quality. The production and marketing of 'artisanal' vinyl records reveals one strategy of mitigating aesthetic anxieties, and is another instance of the LJS flourishing at the interstices by successfully holding divergent discourses of authenticity, old and new, in tension. It simultaneously proffers such output as an innovative cultural response to our current climate of post-digital malaise, *and* as a natural progenitor of much longer jazz lineages.

5.4.2: Jazz recordings and club culture

However, rather than a defining mantra for approaching studio recording, the valorisation of 'analogue purity' appears instead to be project- or product-specific for these LJS musicians. Far from an analogue absolutist in step with established jazz convention, Thackray describes herself as equal part electronic producer and instrumentalist, with textures and techniques drawn from house music and hip-hop at the forefront of many of her releases (Cashin, 2020). Her approach to recording and post-production processes is innovative and highly interventionist, exploiting the affordances of the studio to operate as a one-woman band (Freeman, 2021).¹⁹⁷ Similarly, important releases by Makaya McCraven (2018b, 2018a), and Theon Cross (2019), for example, are unabashedly technologised concoctions.¹⁹⁸ Like Thackray, McCraven has discussed his 'conscious goal, to not 'just' be a drummer', seeing record production as an equally important and legitimate element of his artistic practice (quoted in Min, 2021).¹⁹⁹

Contemporary musicians within and beyond jazz are constantly developing novel approaches to their instruments to translate 'techniques and technologies of production... to performance contexts in which such technologies are not available, including traditionally "live"

¹⁹⁷ Thackray's 'Against the Clock' video for electronic music publication Fact offers a glimpse of her production process (180 Fact, 2018). The reliance on loops and live sample manipulation via an 'all-in-one' digital audio workstation (DAW) is typical in contemporary electronic/hip-hop production in a home studio, but some distance from the 'one take' analogue verisimilitude valorised by Night Dreamer (Strachan, 2017).

¹⁹⁸ McCraven is American, but has a close relationship with the London scene via Chicago label International Anthem. The label released 2018's *Where We Come From*, a session recorded and 'live remixed' over five days at TRC with 20 LJS musicians and producers, McCraven has described the process as working in 'the balance between of-the-moment technology and raw, organic interaction' (Freeman, 2018) to create 'a project at the crossroads of contemporary club culture and the tradition of the jazz craft' (Lexus, 2018).

¹⁹⁹ Pianist, producer and MC Alfa Mist also presents himself in a similar manner, decentring his role as an instrumentalist (Thomas, 2021b).

performance' (Reynolds, 2018, p. 136). Audiences are also more habituated to the use of laptop computers and software instruments onstage, thanks to the blurring of divisions between composition, production and performance ushered in by the ubiquity of the personal computer as a pre-eminent 'sonic technology' (Strachan, 2017). Here the conflicts around 'transparency' and the ontological status of the jazz recording discussed in 5.2 seem settled, with the studio a legitimate terrain for sonic experimentation and verisimilitude off the table amid the deliberate subversion of expectations and the aesthetic conventions of jazz on record (e.g. Guobadia, 2020; Thapar, 2020). Long-held beliefs in the problematic fixity of the jazz record and its function as a subordinate document of spontaneous improvised performance are undercut by recourse to other genre conventions in the LJS. This is another instance that reveals the LJS's distinctive fluency in electronic music, which has produced a set of recordings that are both steeped in the production practices and conventions of British bass music of the 2010s and feel genuinely conversant with the field of dance music – rather than merely cannibalising stylistic signifiers from the genre in pursuit of jazz novelty.

The relationship to recording in the sphere of electronic dance music is different again, departing from jazz conventions and those of rock and pop. Records are themselves the raw material for live performance and improvisational spontaneity by dance music DJs, an iterative relationship that in turn provides the substrate for future remixes, edits and other forms of reinterpretation either in the studio or when 'playing out' in a club.²⁰⁰ The elasticity of the record in electronic dance cultures therefore defers resolution regarding jazz on record. This is a significant distinction, underpinning an important set of connections that has helped establish the direction of travel for the LJS: the symbiotic relationship between instrumentalists, electronic music producers and DJs. One musician suggested that this symbiosis affected the kinds of music that LJS musicians put on record. They saw this as an artistically legitimate decision, one that was in keeping with the pursuit of high-energy vibe that has characterised the practice of London musicians when playing live:

when musicians... [speak] honestly, they'll make a track, let's say, 'danceable'... it's definitely been a trend amongst friends of mine, my generation... I think that's pretty honest - that's gone hand in hand with the live shows that we've done (P7).

This reading threads throughout scenic discourse. Drummer Moses Boyd, for example, suggests that the scene came to the attention of those beyond the confines of the London jazz circuit 'when DJs... got hold of tangible music', something that was only feasible because his

²⁰⁰ Nubya Garcia's 2021 release *Source # We Move*, a remix album of the previous year's *Source* that 'embrace[s] dance beats' is a prime example, with guest remixers reworking many of the tracks into (for example) drum'n'bass or house tunes well-suited for a club context (Cardew, 2021b).

compatriots were deliberately ‘making music *for the dance*... which has been missing for a long time in jazz in the UK’ [my emphasis] (Considine and Boyd, 2019). Boyd’s own 2016 single ‘Rye Lane Shuffle’ is instructive here. The track is a totemic release, singled out by one participant as ‘a massively important record’ and turning point ‘for this movement’ (P11). Originally written by Boyd as a teenager, the track (and, by extension, the scene) received unexpected global interest after prominent DJ Four Tet posted a short clip of a demo recording to Instagram and played the record during a set for influential livestreaming platform Boiler Room (Davies, 2018; Thapar, 2020). Four Tet went on to work with producer Floating Points to mix and master the track, which was subsequently released as a DJ-friendly 12-inch vinyl record, becoming a dancefloor staple that year.²⁰¹

‘Rye Lane Shuffle’ itself sounds like it has been recorded live, evincing little of the dance music-derived production techniques audible on some other recordings discussed in this section. This is perhaps a reflection of the track’s startling mobility, first composed many years prior and recorded initially without the context of a DJ set in mind. Its suitability for a club context relies instead on the tune and its arrangement:²⁰² an instantly recognisable and catchy ‘head’ melody, played by ensemble horns; a repetitive tuba/bass clarinet bassline and UK garage-adjacent drum shuffle pattern are unlikely to risk dramatically subverting dancers’ expectations, while its long intro and outro and tempo make incorporating the track into a club set reasonably practical for DJs.²⁰³ Boyd’s subsequent releases have more explicitly featured aesthetics and production techniques absorbed from numerous innovations at the outer reaches of twenty-first century popular music, coming to fruition on his critically lauded 2020 album *Dark Matter*. On this record, Boyd ‘dramatically cut[s] up, sample[s], loop[s], reproduce[s] and sample[s] again’ contributions from notable LJS figures including Nubya Garcia, Theon Cross and trumpeter Ife Ogunjobi (Vinti, 2020). Boyd’s absorption of the voracious experimental production practices of contemporary Black Atlantic forms strains at edges of jazz practices and production norms, ‘carving out a space where jazz and Afrobeat rub up against grime, broken beat and garage’s muscular, electronic rhythm’ to produce a record that is ‘more

²⁰¹ The 12-inch record was ‘developed by DJs and has remained the preserve of electronic dance music (it is louder, longer and has better bass frequencies than the 7” single, and its wider grooves can be accessed and manipulated more easily)’ (Osborne, 2018, p. 207).

²⁰² We can hear arranging practices derived from clubland in other entirely acoustic recordings in the LJS. For example, Theon Cross’s tuba bassline ‘drop’ after a full five and a half minutes of looping, staccato sax and a drum break on Sons of Kemet’s 2015 ‘In Memory of Samir Awad’, recorded live in-studio, is precisely the kind of tension-and-release-seeking aesthetic approach found in house and techno.

²⁰³ At 132 beats-per-minute, ‘Rye Lane Shuffle’ sits roughly in the middle of the 120 – 140BPM standard tempo range that Hillegonda C. Rietveld identifies as average for house music (Rietveld, 1998, p. 4).

passionate and sophisticated than much of what passes for musical eclecticism these days' (Morrison, 2020).²⁰⁴

Another all-encompassing blend of jazz and electronic musics in the scene is the 2017 release *Idiom* by Ezra Collective pianist Joe Armon-Jones and DJ/producer Maxwell Owin. The record leans heavily on many broken beat and deep house stylistic signifiers, with Armon-Jones providing loose, eddying keyboard explorations over complex, programmed drum patterns, dominant sub-bass, snatches of grainy vocal samples and synth pad swells. Even within a scene that prizes musical heterogeneity, the fluency with which the various styles are woven together is a point of difference here.

It also does very little to call attention to the blending of styles at play. In this respect, both *Idiom* and *Dark Matter* depart from other instances of jazz mixture, where the meeting of styles – and their pre-existing distance from each other – is self-consciously accentuated to highlight the apparent novelty of the music in question. This has been particularly evident with the culmination of the genre's move toward 'art', status discussed in Chapter Three. As Justin Williams has explored in his analysis of mid-1990s 'jazz rap', this kind of knowing approach to genre fusion can rely upon dominant cultural norms by naturalizing the separation of its constituent musics. In the case of jazz rap, this meant allying 'alternative' or 'conscious' hip-hop to jazz, understood as the apogee of Black musical sophistication, to stake a claim of distinction, underwritten by the presentation of commercial and/or gangsta rap as hip-hop's low other.²⁰⁵ This process explicitly relied upon, and reinscribed, the respective positions of jazz and hip-hop within a pre-existing hierarchy of genres (Williams, 2010; see also Maxwell, 2018; Reynolds, 2018, p. 130).²⁰⁶ The same could be said of the self-consciously 'retro' aesthetic of electro-swing, the ungainly mixture of vintage jazz and 'big beat' electronic music that proved popular on the mid-2000s European club circuit (McGee, 2020, pp. 171–223). By contrast,

²⁰⁴ For example, the rapid, compressed hi-hats on opening track 'Stranger Than Fiction' feel drawn from the hip-hop subgenre trap (Rekret, 2024, p. 75), over a dominant horn-driven bassline and a triplet-heavy kick drum pattern recalling the textures and rhythmic signatures of classic grime instrumentals. The squelching bassline on 'Shades of You' recalls acid house; and the heavily detuned vocals, 2-step shuffle and rolling bassline of '2 Far Gone' place it somewhere between UK Garage and the 'post-dubstep' of artists like Burial, Zomby or James Blake.

²⁰⁵ By contrast, a number of LJS releases featuring rappers exhibit an uncommon level of fluency in the melding of jazz with hip-hop, grime and ragga e.g. D Double E or Congo Natty with Sons of Kemet (Impulse!, 2018; 2021); Hutchings and Kojey Radical (Lonely Table, 2019); and JME or Loyle Carner with Ezra Collective (Enter the Jungle, 2019; 2020). These feel localised, distinct from the jazz/hip-hop blending increasingly commonplace in North American jazz, for example the work of pianist Robert Glasper (Ramsey, 2013a).

²⁰⁶ This novelty through distance does arise in the LJS context, for example the presentation of 'jazz-drill' saxophonist XVNGO's work as formally innovative and daring precisely because of the apparent gulf between the two (*Mac & Xvngo: Jazz Drill Pioneers*, 2022). Recent collaborations between jazz saxophonist and producer Venna and rapper Knucks are less self-conscious, more total, and thus more convincing jazz-drill hybrids (Garratt-Stanley, 2022; Merrion, 2023).

records like *Dark Matter* or *Idiom* involve unselfconscious LJS hybridity at its most total, with multiple aesthetic traditions meeting on equal terms with a functional end in mind: playing the record 'out' in a club setting.

This wholesale adoption of a set of methods, tools and ethics derived from the production cultures of hip-hop and bass music partially reflects a growing move in jazz toward what Dean Reynolds calls a 'record-oriented aesthetic'. Reynolds suggests this aesthetic 'privileges recording as a primary context of musical performance, even when it is performed outside of the recording studio' and 'retains [its] valences to other genres of mass-mediated, production-based music, including pop, hip-hop and electronic music', particularly with regard to the heightened attention placed on timbre, texture, and groove relative to other forms of jazz (Reynolds, 2018, p. 121).

But where Reynolds suggests that the record-oriented aesthetic signals a parallel move that dethrones the 'dominant aesthetic of "liveness" in jazz' in favour of 'the recorded medium as a *primary* context of jazz creativity' (Reynolds, 2018, p. 136), I argue that these records, and the pre-eminence of the dancefloor in the LJS value system, disrupt the live/recorded distinction more thoroughly. These records represent neither the inadequate, indispensable 'end point' of live performance that Frith frames as the natural status of jazz recordings; nor the hermetic 'works' that constitute the starting point of pop and rock practice. Having been explicitly 'made and designed for sound systems', with 'rhythms and frequencies... built to go through a sub[woofer] and a top and a mid', these records disrupt this linear schema altogether, in ways akin to the permeable boundary between studio experimentation, live performance and rapidly produced alternative 'versions' in dub culture (Boyd, quoted in Thapar, 2020; Perchard *et al.*, 2022, pp. 238–241). By muddying the distance between performance and recording, these records operate instead according to a *circular* logic: constituent features of the recording emerge in a live setting, are corralled together in the studio, experimented with after release when played 'out' by a DJ, *alongside* the different kinds of sonic development achieved when improvised upon during a live performance of the track with a band – in turn producing the conditions for future recording and remixing.

This is an approach to record production with audience appeal explicitly in mind, but which does not view the pursuit of accessibility as a compromise to commercial pressure or a dilution of jazz aesthetic principles. As Boyd notes in his discussion of the success of 'Rye Lane Shuffle': 'I kinda wanted it to reach more people than the stereotypical jazz audience without dumbing it down or selling out' (Considine and Boyd, 2019). As with the discussion of 'smoothness' and excessive 'compliance' with commercially-friendly aesthetics in 5.3, Boyd's reference to 'selling out' – once a cornerstone of discussion, debate and belonging in popular music culture, but

taken to be of dwindling contemporary relevance – suggests a sensitivity to the debates that provide the context for this chapter (Klein, 2020). Evidently, there remains a lingering awareness of jazz norms which tie record production to the problematic infringement of inadequate technical mediation and the market onto the creative process, even if Boyd’s ‘straight-ahead’ bona fides are well-established.²⁰⁷

The hybrid aesthetic of these records undoubtedly *does* aid professional advancement and commercial success. Drawing upon textures, beats, and instrumentation from other, more popular genres helps differentiate LJS musicians from the overwhelming quantity of recorded jazz past and present available to today’s music listener, while welcoming listeners otherwise sceptical of the instrumentation and broader soundworld of jazz. It certainly seems likely that Boyd’s status as an in-demand pop producer flows more from his evident fluency in bass music, hip-hop and beyond, and his willingness to incorporate this into his musical practice, than his experience playing mainstream jazz. Designing these recordings explicitly for a club context has also opened up novel opportunities for live performance, evident in Boyd and Armon-Jones’s gigs at London clubs Fabric and Corsica Studios in recent years, venues hitherto disinterested in contemporary jazz (Vinti, 2020; Kalia, 2022).

But Boyd’s comments demonstrate that within the polygeneric value-system of the London scene, while a commercially savvy strategy, precision-tooling jazz compositions for the club environment is also artistically *and* politically legitimate, amid a growing acceptance of electronics, sampling and post-production, elements that Boyd suggests were still ‘shunned’ by some ‘venues, promoters, and musicians’ on the London scene in his early years as a musician (quoted in Atlantic Re:Think, 2016). Here, the club orientation of these recordings can be interpreted as the apotheosis of the logics discussed in Chapter Three. In the LJS, values and aesthetics of electronic music are recruited to the project of reclamation, inverting what Scott DeVeaux called the ‘implicit entelechy’ of jazz institutionalisation by re-embracing the music’s ‘utilitarian associations with dance music, popular song and entertainment’ (Deveaux, 1991, p. 543). Such a framing situates the LJS simultaneously as legitimate heirs to the jazz tradition and cutting-edge innovators responsible for, in Gilles Peterson’s words, ‘finally breaking... the boundary between jazz and club culture’ (Peterson, 2018).

²⁰⁷ See, for example, his playing for a one-off performance of the ‘Charlie Parker Songbook’ at Church of Sound recorded for the EFG London Jazz Festival 2020, during which, as one participant put it, he was ‘swinging his arse off’ (P14) (EFG London Jazz Festival, 2020). His command of straight-ahead jazz perhaps provides him with the necessary security to so thoroughly operate outside that style.

The polygenericism that anchors these records therefore also sounds out the anti-elitist ‘jazz populism’ of London jazz. Elsewhere, LJS constituents continue to struggle with problematic genre baggage even when winning over sceptical audiences, as P10 recounted:

a quarter of gigs... somebody from the audience would usually say something like: ‘I don't usually like jazz, but I like what you were doing’... Amongst the general public, jazz has got a stigma about it... That's a problem, and a limitation.

By contrast, multi-hyphenate music of this sort, with sonics and tempi that meld easily into a DJ mix, expands the contexts within which London jazz can be encountered. In rendering jazz, or jazz-adjacent, music more mobile and functionalist, these records contain the potential for a healthy form of decontextualisation, offering a means of eluding the overdetermined symbolic and musical associations that elsewhere haunt LJS musicians and jazz at large. Heard on a dark club dancefloor, sandwiched between a house or a disco tune, a London jazz track can be shorn of the genre’s troublesome, stereotypical associations. This approach to recording provides another instance of LJS jazz populism in practice, both at the point of production and, when ‘played out’ by a DJ, enacted *as* performance. As Armon-Jones has suggested, ‘jazz, electronics and everything in between can work together on the dancefloor. The crowds all see it as one language’ (quoted in Kalia, 2022).

5.5: Conclusion

This chapter has traced the manifold complexities of recording patterning jazz history, demonstrating the co-constitutive relationship between recording technology, the political economy of the cultural industries and the music itself since the genre’s birth. The chapter argues that this ‘pre-history’ is vital to understanding jazz today, and has left a deep imprint on the contours of the LJS in at times surprising ways. Having outlined transparency and ‘self-effacing’ production ethics as jazz recording convention, I have shown how the scene’s recorded output to date has frequently been perceived as falling short of expectations generated by the LJS as a live phenomenon and the surrounding media hype. These experiences of relative aesthetic failure place important divisions in relief, within the scene and between LJS players and others elsewhere in the jazz world.

These aesthetic shortcomings on record also illustrate challenges posed by stylistic hybridity, which tend to go unremarked upon in the London jazz conversation. The fluid blending of sounds and traditions may be key to establishing the LJS as a cultural formation of note, but I have shown how on record it can see artists falling short of multiple sets of aesthetic criteria at once: insufficiently ‘jazz’ to please purists, but lacking the necessary ‘bass weight’ for electronic enthusiasts, for example. My discussion of ‘smoothness’ also maps the outer limits of the LJS’s genre pallet, and points of overlap with aesthetic norms held by the jazz ‘establishment’ that, elsewhere, the scene disavows.

A further complication are the inscrutable aesthetic criteria rewarded by digital streaming. I have argued that, where absorption of pop sounds or production techniques is commonplace and frequently celebrated in London jazz, strategic ‘sonic optimisation’ to maximise audience growth and/or streaming revenues represents an unacceptable compromise of artistry. Amid widespread discussion (and confusion) regarding the audible impact of digital streaming, the London jazz case suggests an emergent set of values that re-energise ‘selling out’ discourse, displaced onto the terrain of digital circulation.

I then explored two, seemingly opposing, strategies that appear to mitigate aesthetic failure on record: by leaning into analogue techniques, ‘craft’ production and the ideology of transparency; and by drawing from electronic music and prioritising the dancefloor. One obvious reading is to view the changing shape of recording aesthetics in the LJS as indicative of growing self-confidence among scene constituents. The polyglot, avowedly technological recordings discussed 5.4.2 are a substantial departure from the jazz orthodoxy evident in the ‘no overdubs’ statement in the liner notes for Boyd and Golding’s release in 2015, before the scene’s ‘explosion’. Certainly, this might demonstrate a growing readiness to subvert jazz norms by musicians after years of acclaim. But the apparent ‘virtues’ of analogue or acoustic authenticity still circulate in scenic discourse, with direct-to-disc labels such as Night Dreamer continuing to release records that employ long-held, and in many ways quite orthodox, jazz values – including by artists, such as Thackray, who elsewhere draw upon the capacities of modern digital production technology.

Instead, then, these various modes of recording provide another instance of a strategic and arms-length relationship to jazz norms and aesthetics that holds contradictory production ethics in tension. LJS players are able at times, to employ the organicist position that frames analogue studio recording as an artisanal pursuit oriented toward capturing spontaneous improvisation in time – an inherently doomed, but ‘honest’, attempt to capture lightning in a bottle. This emphasis on *craft* and *care* articulates the scene to Scott and Gerosa’s ‘hipster capitalism’ or ‘hipster economy’, a significant paradigm in contemporary consumer culture that

overlaps, productively, with longstanding jazz ethics, opening up a lucrative market of record collectors and vinyl-lovers, while also signalling partial fealty to jazz principles. By the same token, where London jazz records actively subvert jazz ideologies of transparency by leaning into tangibly synthetic soundworlds, they are able to 'plug in' to the rich, multivalent traditions of Black music-technology experimentation in particular (Rose, 1989; Weheliye, 2005; Zuberi, 2007; Brar, 2021). Doing so places the LJS at the head of other highly-prized musical forms of close cultural significance for many scene constituents, and heightens the scene's appeal for receptive non-jazz audiences.

In the process, these records and their producers further stake a claim to jazz as a popular music in the present tense and affirm a cultural populist position by returning to the dancefloor. However, without some pre-existing connection to jazz identity, use of these sounds and techniques would be unremarkable. It is precisely *because* of the ambivalent embrace of jazz status by those in the LJS that the subversion of transparency even registers as a form of transgression and undergirds the scene's claim to novelty and alterity within the jazz world, which have been so central to the scene's promotion. This thus provides helpful context for Chapter Six, which discusses promotional logics and processes in the LJS, and the crystallisation and commodification of the London jazz 'brand'.

6: Promotion and Branding

6.1 Introduction

This chapter explores two forms of promotion in the LJS. First, the multifaceted promotional labour undertaken by scene participants and cultural industry intermediaries to establish and expand an audience for LJS artists and their products: recordings, gigs, merchandise. Second, the way the scene and its constituents are engaged as a *means* of promotion by brands beyond of the music industry. As scholarship by Leslie Meier and Jonathan Hardy demonstrates, these two strands are thoroughly, increasingly intertwined, part of the ‘profound convergence’ that is ‘underway between media and marketing’ (Hardy, 2021, p. 6; Meier, 2017). Popular music and the personal brand of its producers provides a key source of credibility and cultural cachet in contemporary marketing practices. Here, music represents a promotional means rather than end in itself, with the value of the music rooted less in its symbolic value or its own commodity status than its abstract capacity to burnish the credentials of another commodity by association. With recording an unreliable source of income for contemporary musicians and a general economic devaluing of musicians’ labour (Klein and Meier, 2017, p. 282), advertising-derived income has become increasingly essential for music workers, whose adaptation to marketing incentives marks the growing influence of promotionalism. Alongside licensing music for advertising and the recruitment of an artist’s personal brand for promotional purpose, non-music brands also intervene in cultural sponsorship, financing music production, ‘curating’ live events series, or underwriting music criticism, with varying degrees of explicit branding involved in the process.

Where brand finances offer increasingly indispensable revenue in the creative industries, social media platforms are suffused by brand *logics* (Fuchs, 2013, pp. 112–113). Thanks to a dependence on advertising revenue, social media platform architecture maximises data extraction to enable ‘better’ targeted advert provision. Within these spaces, users, corporations and adverts co-mingle as nominal equals, collapsing distinctions between personal and (self-)promotional messaging. Users are structurally incentivised toward brand-like behaviour in pursuit of greater engagement, while brands strain to signal coolness or relatability by aping the informal linguistic conventions and aesthetic vernaculars of ordinary users (Findlay, 2021). The kind of communication and cultural production nurtured by social media platforms represent a distinctive, and particularly intense, form of what Sarah Banet-Weiser calls ‘brand culture’, within which ‘brand relationships... increasingly become cultural contexts for everyday living, individual identity, and affective relationships’ (Banet-Weiser,

2012, p. 4; see also Scolere, Pruchniewska and Duffy, 2018; Duffy and Pooley, 2019; Hund, 2023). With social media now essential promotional infrastructure for the creative industries, music workers expend substantial time and effort crafting promotional messaging and maintaining a relatable and believable personal brand within digital spaces. Further complicating the picture are purportedly collaborative, cross-promotional campaigns involving the production of new content that is avowedly artistic in nature. In instances where, for example, a rising musician and a hip streetwear brand release music with an accompanying clothing line, the flow of credibility is decidedly unclear, as are questions of ownership and compensation.

Part of the analytical challenge therefore involves parsing who is doing the promoting in the LJS, for what purpose, and to whose gain. The promotional strategies adopted by LJS participants, alongside the scene's articulation with the media industries and its incorporation into advertising campaigns by consumer brands, pivot on the polysemic nature of jazz in the 21st Century. The scene's ambivalent relationship to jazz (its institutions, sounds, traditions) represent a productive flexibility that has been astutely leveraged by its members for the purposes of promotion, and enthusiastically embraced by companies seeking to advertise a wide array of consumer goods.

I argue that the promotional efforts of musicians and cultural intermediaries in the scene have frequently hinged upon the LJS's status as an alternative to jazz orthodoxy, with the narrative of the LJS as a novel movement, anchored by social justice principles, proving key. They also offer an attractive marketing 'hook' for branding the LJS and, in turn, present a valued promotional means for other brands seeking to capitalise on the scene's reputation as a dynamic, youthful, multicultural formation.

Section 6.2 explores promotional labour undertaken by LJS participants themselves, particularly musicians. I show how interviewees regard this work as often impinging on their artistic autonomy, with social media representing a particularly dynamic and opaque promotional environment, within which participation feels obligatory but fraught. While contemporary digital tools enable more self-promotion than ever, LJS musicians actively seek to divest themselves from the 'burden of independence' and pass this labour onto professional third parties.

6.3 shows how the decontextualising effects of digital music distribution, and the hyper-abundance of cultural content, have heightened the importance of curation, human or otherwise, in connecting musicians to their desired audience. I discuss the role of Gilles

Peterson as a curatorial centre of gravity, and analyse the significance of ‘storytelling’ to contemporary promotional work, arguing that narrativisation processes in LJS promotional campaigns have catalysed the crystallisation of narrow, reductive accounts of British jazz.

6.4 considers the role of music writing, discussing the parlous state of contemporary cultural journalism. I frame the blurring of journalism and advertising as hindering the production of quality, critical coverage of popular culture, and trace LJS participants’ own involvement in brand sponsorship and advertising. Through analysis of some prominent LJS ‘brand collaborations’, I draw out how these advertising campaigns typically involve brands seeking to leverage what Jason Toynbee (2000, p. 25) calls ‘subcultural credibility’ by association with a racially- and gender-diverse, and politically informed musical culture with ties to the musical ‘underground’. I suggest that the functionalist nature of music-brand collaborations has at times instrumentalised and defanged the politics of the scene. The section ends by arguing that the scene, and broader popular music culture’s, dependence upon brand patronage has produced a situation of extreme cultural fragility, threatening the sustainability of grassroots music scenes and imperilling important archives of recent popular music history.

6.2: Music and digital promotion

Today’s musicians may be able to produce and distribute their music far more easily than their forebears as a result of digitalisation, but this has substantially increased the amount, and forms, of labour, they must undertake beyond making music (Morris, 2014; Baym, 2018; Haynes and Marshall, 2018; Negus, 2019; Wikström, 2020; Hagen, 2022; Murphy and Hume, 2023). Older forms of relational labour such as networking retain real importance, as I discuss further in 6.3.1, but a large proportion of this work now takes place online. The LJS’s embrace of digital promotion sets it apart from the British jazz world at large, which remains far behind the curve of digital adoption (Medbøe and Moir, 2017; Sykes, 2017a). This section discusses self-branding strategies adopted by scene participants and the work involved in digital promotion, tracing opportunities and challenges presented by the increasing centrality of social media as a means of self-presentation, networking and advertising, arguing that social media promotion has become a new space of contestation regarding musical integrity. I show how LJS musicians view promotional labour as a feature of their working lives that can be creatively fulfilling, but is more often understood as a burdensome constraint on their artistic autonomy.

6.2.1: Social media and self-branding

Intimacy and vulnerability

Some promotional labour remains comparatively direct and old-fashioned in its approach. P17 described themselves as having ‘zero’ interest in social media as an avenue of promotion, but lauded Bandcamp as a ‘massively important’ source of user data, affording direct contact with a fanbase in a way that mitigated the costs and risks of vinyl production:

we've built up a big mailing list... just from Bandcamp. That data has been really valuable and has made it possible... just be confident that next thing is going to sell out, just because you've got a ready market there (P17).

As a result, after over 20 years as a professional musician, P17 was enjoying a career resurgence and finally making consequential money from recordings, ‘able to sell to sell vinyl and make it work, and create an impression on the wider scene European scene.’ P35 singled out Bandcamp’s distinctive, ‘community-based’ orientation toward music enthusiasts. The mailing list automatically generated by the platform, beyond strictly economic uses, enabled meaningful interactions with fans whose use of the platform indicated that they were ‘music lovers’:

what's really boosted my fanbase is Bandcamp... you can write to all your followers... I have a mailing list of 6000 people... and because they're music lovers, they'll buy the thing or watch the thing... people can comment on those messages. I try and write back because I think it's important to communicate with your audience and to build a relationship (P35).

Both these musicians are undertaking what Nancy Baym calls the ‘territorializing’ of audience engagement by siloing fan communications within the framework of ‘producer-oriented’ platform like Bandcamp (Baym, 2018; Hesmondhalgh, Jones and Rauh, 2019). Prioritising this platform provides these participants with greater control over their promotional messaging. Its producer orientation, and the emphasis placed upon grassroots music communities and direct sales, shifts the ‘dialectic of participation and control’ that Baym identifies as key to musicians’ engagement with audiences (Baym, 2018, p. 118). For P17, this allowed for more sophisticated processes of datafication and audience segmentation around which to build a release strategy (see Hagen, 2022), while P35 used this data to build a more intimate connection with an inner circle of devotees, while targeting audiences with on-message communications tied to new releases or gigs. Another participant also highlighted Bandcamp’s participatory affordances as a *consumer*. These allowed for a much-prized sense of belonging and an active, two-way connection with the musicians they patronised, distinct from more ‘hierarchical’ modes of music distribution:

Bandcamp... allows everyone to be part of the community... I feel like the space between the players... and the people who buy the music... We're all welcome. There isn't a massive hierarchy of artists controlling everything and doing 'the special stuff' that everyone else has to passively absorb (P12).

For many participants then, Bandcamp represented the gold standard among music platforms, but it remains a niche concern, predominantly catering to extant jazz fans and dedicated 'music lovers'. Reaching beyond these existing converts relies on other promotional efforts, particularly social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and, especially, Instagram. As the discussion of jam session and successful band Steam Down in Chapter Four made clear, the potential benefits of social media as a promotional tool for London jazz are undeniable: recall former Steam Down member P9's comments that social media presence had been 'pretty much everything' for the group, acting as vital precursor to their signing to record label Decca and their ongoing success.

This was no isolated example. P32 emphasised the 'democratising' potential of social media promotion as a means to circumvent record label power:

if you're really savvy with social media, (which, sadly, I'm not at all!)... you can build a career like that. There's nothing really a major label can do for you that you can't do yourself (P32).

Similarly, P34 provided a nuanced long view of shifts in the promotional landscape they had witnessed since the late 1990s, pointing to the arrival of social media as transformative in facilitating 'much more direct contact with your audience.' As 'direct contact' implies, platform affordances have facilitated new, unexpected intimacies between music workers and their audiences, offering unparalleled 'behind the scenes' access for digital onlookers. Prior audience-musician relationships were governed by what Baym calls 'participatory limits', which structured ritualised encounter between musicians and their fans in performance settings, restricting interaction to performances or other pre-arranged events like record signings. The state of perpetual interaction made available by social media blur these limits, allowing for the flexible and ongoing maintenance of artist-audience relationships. This can mitigate the expense of formal promotional intermediaries by 'undo[ing] the separation between music and fan... changing the ways audiences participate not just with [artists'] work, but with them' (Baym, 2018, p. 169).

This new participatory landscape was something one participant found invaluable when trying to maintain an audience and fan community during the pandemic lockdowns, as gigging work dried up entirely. They began regularly performing via Facebook, after an impromptu show for their existing social media following:

I was... gearing up to do this event with my full band that didn't happen. [But] I was able to go live [livestream]... So the origins of me livestreaming were quite authentic and organic... It's a community, it's very intimate... I'm in your room with you, we're feeling that togetherness... that's why people come back every week, I think, because it's like a little club (P19).

Beyond providing vital income, P19 found these regular, intimate forms of audience engagement 'very sustaining, artistically... [and] spiritually', maintaining a sense of creative fulfilment by developing close, enduring relationships with audience members during a period of forced isolation. As with the heightened sense of mutual support and connection augured by 'producer-focused' platforms above, P19's experiences underscore the potential of platformised self-promotion beyond the purely economic, enabling unique intimacies that breach the participatory limits of domestic space at a time of social isolation. In these instances, livestreaming functions 'not as a poor substitute for, but as a rich complement to, in-person events' (Brubaker, 2022, p. 157).

But Baym suggests 'participatory limits' also offer valued boundaries for musicians, delimiting fan interaction to the gig setting or other clearly demarcated promotional contexts. These provide an important distance within a music industry that has long fostered, and profited from, 'parasocial' fan-musician relationships, the 'sense of knowing celebrities we've never met' that can be 'real and powerful' but has been conventionally confined to the imagination of the audience (Baym, 2018, p. 70; see also Baym, Cavicchi and Coates, 2017).

By contrast, norms governing social media spaces are ill-defined, fast-changing and separate from the established social cues and boundaries that surround live music settings. As Michael Serazio, borrowing from Erving Goffman, has argued in his study of the 'authenticity industries', 'as media tools afford and audiences demand something more "real"', there is a growing obligation placed upon those seeking an audience to 'frontstage the backstage': to breach earlier participatory limits and place ever-greater portions of ones' interiority on display (Serazio, 2024, p. 10). Such circumstances can intensify parasocial tendencies in music fandom, while simultaneously incorporating novel means of *reciprocity*, allowing audiences far greater access to artists' lives (Marwick and Boyd, 2011; Duffy and Pooley, 2019). Social media's muddying of these participatory limits can thus leave artists more vulnerable, bearing the weight of the 'false intimacy' experienced by fans (Baym, Cavicchi and Coates, 2017, p. 149).

In this context, some participants felt impelled to maintain a personable social media presence, suggesting that the pressure toward self-disclosure was out of step with their own pre-existing value. Here, two specific self-branding practices that Sophie Bishop identifies in artistic

promotional work within the ‘influencer economy’ of Instagram were mentioned: the ‘inclusion of the self in promotional content and a consistently upbeat performance’ (Bishop, 2023, p. 5).

Bishop notes the ‘mandate to share’ contained in self-branding practices – while conforming to delimited emotional ranges and a reliance on personal image – has particularly high stakes for women (Bishop, 2023, p. 6). P35 provided a telling comment in this regard, emphasising that she used social media ‘in a friendly, personal way. I’m not really into photos of me pouting’. With women’s appearance and self-presentation subject to constant scrutiny online, female cultural producers are expected to conform to prevailing beauty standards, in ways which are deeply entangled with the ‘now normative practice of self-branding, where the image of the body, what one looks like... *becomes* personal identity and self-worth’ (Hearn and Banet-Weiser, 2020, p. 8).²⁰⁸ At the same time, within jazz specifically and across artistic fields more generally, women ‘have historically been discounted as ‘real artists’, instead being frequently stereotyped as hobbyists’, with assertions of artistic seriousness risking being ‘undermined by a performance of hegemonic beauty’ (Provost, 2017; Bishop, 2023, p. 6).

Women musicians undertaking digital self-promotion are thus caught in something of a double bind, risking criticism for apparent failure to meet normative standards of self-presentation within the visual economy of Instagram, or otherwise inviting accusations of gaining a following for ones’ looks rather than musicianship. P35’s comments, then, underscore this fine line: remaining engaging and approachable, without inviting the omnipresent sexualised scrutiny that structures digital spaces for women.

P32 was deeply aware of the need to ‘include the self’ for the purposes of self-branding and promotion, but sought other ways to mitigate this requirement:

I hate taking my photo. I just feel really uncomfortable about it. I fully recognise that if I was better at that [taking photos], it would help me... [but] some people are more self-conscious than others (P32).

They preferred the ephemeral function of Instagram Stories to provide audiences with a reminder of their work without leaving a permanent record of the ‘self’: ‘I quite like the nature of it: it's just there, and then it's gone’ (P32). They also acknowledged the incentives to adjust

²⁰⁸ Such digital beauty norms are also heavily coded by race: the ‘racial economy of Instagram’ propagates images of female bodily ‘perfection’ (the ‘Instagram face’ or ‘Instagram body’) whereby ‘what are considered stereotypical proportions of Black women that have historically been over-sexualised, ‘Othered’ and considered deviant are now fetishised and praised on white bodies’ (O’Connor, 2023, p. 7).

ones' digital profile to remain 'upbeat': '[nobody] posts: 'here I am, with no money, feeling like shit' [laughs].

On this point, P27 despaired at what they called the 'toxic positivity' permeating Instagram, thanks to the 'huge pressure for people to present their lives... people only want to present positives'. As with Bishop, they argued that these were exactly upbeat *performances* that were 'not real', singling out the tendency for musicians to share their artist streaming stats:

90% of the people posting Spotify Wrapped as a celebratory thing, were just showing that they'd lost money...²⁰⁹ [but] it was put forward like 'this is the best thing ever. I can't believe the growth I've seen' - what, the fact that you have to work three other jobs to be able to afford to make your music? To then post something that's like uber-positive... [laughs] It's really messed up, when you think about it (P27).

These comments underscore how digital self-promotion is an 'affective practice', rewarding the performance of 'sincerity', positivity and self-disclosure, requiring those seeking audience response to 'offer up their affect convincingly and frequently' (Bishop, 2023, p. 7). P2, a writer, made an adjacent point, arguing that there was more extensive financial precarity underlying the press and social media depiction of a boom time for London jazz. They mentioned a 'passing comment' made to them by a prominent LJS musician who they had assumed was doing 'quite well' professionally as they were in a 'big band', but was facing financial difficulty after going unpaid for over three months upon return from a tour. P2 went on to discuss the stigma surrounding poverty among purportedly successful members of the scene, arguing that the digital veneer of success might well belie an underlying reality for musicians whose public profile far exceeds their actual income:

Poverty is still stigmatised. But it's but it's a reality for many musicians... I know plenty of musicians. who don't have enough money to buy food, genuinely don't have money to buy food, whose fridge is empty... people can't eat pixels! ...musicians need a basic amount of food and [money] in order to be able to make the culture that the digital economy requires (P2).

Older participants suggested the personable, relatable habitus expected on social media felt alien, requiring concerted effort to adopt. P32, unlike their peers 'didn't really grow up with [social media], in the same way a lot of them did. A lot of my friends are like 10, 15 years younger than me, so it feels very natural to them'. Similarly, having grown accustomed to Myspace as a means of discovering and distributing music in the early 2000s, P34 described

²⁰⁹ Spotify Wrapped is an annual marketing campaign that presents users and artists with 'individualized streaming data including most streamed genres, artists, and songs in a social-media-ready format', with producers and consumers encouraged share their stats online (Muchitsch and Werner, 2024, p. 12; see also Pelly, 2020).

having 'to be dragged kicking and screaming' into adopting newer social media platforms: 'when my band signed to a small independent label, they were kind of like 'you have to be on social media, you have to have Facebook and Twitter.' They felt this placed them at a disadvantage relative to younger compatriots in the scene, for whom, like P32, they suggested social media came 'naturally':

It's something that, for someone of my generation, just simply wasn't a part of how you learnt how to be an employed and employable musician... I do feel like musicians I've worked with who are a generation or two younger than me have a much more natural engagement with it than I do... It's just... part of how they share who they are. Whereas for someone like me, it feels very unnatural to share, necessarily, that much of myself (P34).

Many of P34's concerns about exposing intimate personal details within their ever-expanding promotional responsibilities speak to wider anxieties surrounding the erosion of personal and professional divides via social media and its privacy implications (Marwick and boyd, 2014; Richey, Gonibeed and Ravishankar, 2018). And as with the discourses deployed around analogue recording, these sorts of comments offer us a glimpse of a more general value system structuring the scene, whereby excessive mediation (of music or the self), is deemed 'unnatural' in ways that are patterned by age.

Mystique, musical craft and tailored dishonesty

But as P32 pointed out, this commercial imperative toward (intensively curated) candour and relatability can also sit in tension with aesthetic, artistic and ethical commitments:

So much in music is mysterious. And you want to keep a mystery to it... I don't want to give everything online. Because that that should come out in your music... I don't want to share everything with people (P32).

Such reticence goes beyond concerns regarding personal privacy and a separation of work from life, suggesting instead that excessive adjustment of ones' self-presentation and artistic practice to perceived platform demands would undermine the value and purpose of music-making itself. This is a preoccupation with hyper-connectivity's tendency toward problematic *demystification*, coming at the expense of aesthetic experience. These comments speak to cultural studies scholar Mark Anthony Neal's recent work on the 'crisis of the musical archive' brought about by digitally-enabled access to a deluge of contemporary and historic recordings. Neal suggests that frictionless, often cost-free consumption of this sort presents particular risks for Black music through the 'demystification of the labour that produces Black culture... render[ing] the archive disposable, truncated and in many ways irrelevant to commercial enterprise' (Neal, 2022, p. 3). He argues that muddied issues of ownership, and the

unprecedented ease of access, threatens to reduce digitalised Black cultural production past and present ‘at best, [to] ephemera... at worst, the ambient background of [its] continued exploitation and commodification’, suggesting that we must instead pursue ‘the continued work of mystification’ (Neal, 2022, pp. 3–4).²¹⁰

Some within the scene manage to square evident commitments to music’s ‘mystery’ and the ‘work of mystification’ with the demands of continued audience engagement. Shabaka Hutchings has discussed deliberately unfollowing all other social media accounts in 2020, instead using his Instagram profile solely as an outlet for broadcast: ‘I use social media for posting outwards, but I don’t get anything back inwards... I would rather just do my artistic processes and then talk to people in real life’ (quoted in Reed, 2021). Instead of actively maintaining connections within the scene or the industries, Hutchings’ page provides a steady stream of short videos charting, for example, his meditation practice, building his own instruments, reading recommendations, reflections on being framed as a ‘political’ artist, and extemporisations on his collection of flutes gathered when travelling the world (Morris, 2024).

Far from reducing the ‘separation between artist and fan’ as Baym discusses, this approach to social media precisely projects the mystique that P32 values, while aligning Hutchings with key hallmarks of jazz iconicity, particularly that of spiritual, quasi-monastic dedication to one’s practice (Whyton, 2010, p. 10). Yet it does so by leveraging the kind of intimate authenticity that constitutes the default mode of address on social media, by providing content that is ephemeral and often in a casual, home setting, distinct from explicitly promotional material like professional press shots or a media interview.²¹¹ The expectation that social media usage bears some resemblance to the quotidian reality of the poster verifies to audiences that Hutchings actually *lives* the life of his studious, devoted public persona – but it contains within it an emphatic rejection of the mandate of relatability typically deemed essential to fostering audience connection on social media. Taken together, this is a carefully curated and coherent social media profile that bolsters Hutchings’ status as a scene figurehead, and burnishes his image as a serious artist and intellect whose practice and values are oriented toward ‘artistic process’ and lie at odds with the workaday pursuit of audience engagement. Hutchings is thus engaged in precisely what Alison Hearn defines as self-branding practice, the ‘self-conscious

²¹⁰ Neal sees this partly as a crisis in (Black) cultural expertise and criticism, which I discuss below (see also Jenkins, 2022).

²¹¹ There are obvious points of comparison here with the strategic management of digital visibility adopted by nights like Steam Down and Steez discussed in Chapter Four.

construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of the self' (Hearn, 2008, p. 198), but in ways that dovetail with jazz values, and rarely engage in direct forms of promotion.

Hutchings' skilful extrication from the relational obligations of digital platforms is a luxury that other artists can ill afford. Those with smaller, less established audiences, and/or without equivalent label support,²¹² face more pressure to maintain fan relationships, strenuously cultivate more followers, and more actively court professional opportunities. Despite the assertions above that 'social media native' LJS participants were instinctively better attuned to social media logics, and comfortable with its demands, younger interviewees also expressed anxieties about the shifting terrain of digital music promotion. Many felt ill-equipped to navigate the impact of video sharing app TikTok on the music industries, in ways that bore many similarities to P34's earlier experiences with Facebook and Twitter, suggesting a cross-generational sense of reluctance to accommodate new logics of platformisation. One musician, in their early 20s when we spoke, was resistant to using TikTok 'unless I *really* had to at some point' although they were 'quite present on Instagram... [which] does get opportunities and is a way for people to support you from wherever in the world' (P21). They appeared uneasy about how pursuit of TikTok virality was affecting jazz musicians' practices:

it almost feels like people's goals, are to get loads of followers online and become 'TikTok famous'... People spend less time going out [to jams] and more time recording at home to make this killing one minute video that will hopefully go viral... I'm not really interested in that (P21).

The dominance of short video clips on social media often came up in interviews. One musician reflected on purportedly candid, casual videos posted by fellow musicians. They were sceptical about a recent 'little trend' they had observed of their peers 'posting daily practice schedules', querying whether they reflected the reality of day-to-day musical labour:

they're always doing something different, and it's like: well, [laughs] that's not really practising! My practising is so boring! Hopefully Day One and Day 55, I should be doing the same thing, which is absolutely rubbish to put on Instagram... [so] there's a little bit of, I would say, tailored dishonesty (P10).

P10's argument, that maintaining your skills as a professional is mundane and ill-suited to maintaining the attention of digital onlookers, speaks to what Duffy and Hund have termed the

²¹² Hutchings is signed to famed jazz label Impulse!, a subsidiary of Universal, which he has described as entering into 'a legitimate part of the jazz canon' (*Video portrait: Shabaka Hutchings on Impulse!, curating at LGW, and music as joyous celebration*, 2018). The label is closely associated with the 'New Thing' that emerged in the late 1960s: African American free jazz with close ties to Black radicalism, pursued by artists like Archie Shepp, Albert Ayler and Pharoah Sanders. Hutchings has revitalised the label, and press discourse typically places him at the head of this lineage of politically outspoken Black male saxophone experimentalists (e.g. May, 2020; see also Kahn, 2006; Whyton, 2010, pp. 82-106).

‘authenticity bind’ facing content creators online, where effective content must walk the line between visible inauthenticity and genuine realism (Duffy and Hund, 2019, p. 4985). Excessive authenticity, in this case, would reveal the tedious reality of quotidian musicianship, undercutting the romantic aura that still surrounds professional musicianship and encourages imaginative investment from audiences.

P10 offers the magnificent phrase ‘tailored dishonesty’ to describe the solution reached by some aspiring jazz players: posting flashy, pseudo-candid snippets of ‘practicing’ that cater to perceived audience and algorithmic desires. Compare this to the example of Hutchings’ approach to social media discussed above: the saxophonist’s reputation as a British jazz great imbues his many practice videos with a certain authority, while his professional success allows him the opportunity to travel widely, providing new locations and thus a visual hook, alongside a linear sense of his steady development and dedication to musical ‘craft’: ‘a mode of work strongly characterised by the historical continuity of time-served, incrementally constructed, and embodied expertise’ (Banks, 2019, p. 548; see also Sennett, 2008). The emergent musicians P10 discusses, by contrast, operates in what cultural industries scholar Mark Banks calls the ‘event-time’ of contemporary cultural work, where ‘a fixation on ‘the now’ is supported by the ubiquitous presence of digital production and communications technology’ (Banks, 2019, p. 545). Banks sees the fragmented, precarious nature of project-based cultural works mirrored, and mutually intensified, in the asynchronous temporality of social media spaces, with a lack of stable cultural industry employment necessitating regular content output to both maintain audience attention *and* catch the eye of record labels, promoters, peers and any other potential source of the next paid gig. Operating in event-time thus incentivises ‘tailored dishonesty’, making even nominally casual social media posts precision-tooled toward irruptive novelty to grab the distracted digital onlooker as they scroll on by.

An incipient divide between platform- and live performance-oriented jazz musicianship drew into focus during conversations surrounding short-form video. P21 claimed musicians who prioritised musical practices that suited solo content creation struggled in social contexts such as the jam or the gig which, in line with wider scene values, they saw as the ‘real-life side of music’:

you can hear when someone just like, spends time practising on their own. I guess it's a skill and a practice to be able to connect and improvise with other musicians, because it's not about what you want to play, it's based on what everyone around you is playing in the moment as well (P21).

As with P10, the vocabulary of craft structured their criticism:

[so what], if you can shred your incredible licks for like 30 seconds, but you can't play musically in a whole gig, y'know? [laughs]... [it] doesn't really mean anything... If you only know how to replicate or copy something for 30 seconds, it totally takes away from musicality (P21).

P7 doubled down on this theme, taking aim at the musical content of the clips fellow players used to promote their personal brand, framing it as an attention-seeking, aesthetically moribund departure from jazz principles:

On Instagram, you've got about four seconds to impress... I occasionally will listen to what people have put up there... it's shit, man... it has been twisted and concocted in such a way... to make it more 'Instagram-ready', basically... there's no development in this music whatsoever. And to me... that's the antithesis of jazz (P7).²¹³

As with the discussion of smooth jazz and 'streambait' in Chapter Five, comments like these gesture to points of overlap with more conventional jazz values in the LJS, and again this congruency circles around what David Beer calls the 'politics of circulation' (Beer, 2013). Where many within the scene are reluctant to police genre boundaries, these pieces of platform-ready content represented an unacceptable form of gimmickry that, by conceding wholesale to the circulatory logics of social media, lost legitimacy as forms of jazz.²¹⁴ My participants' comments show that the vexed question of musical authenticity, and attendant forms of boundary work, remain a live issue in the scene, again surfacing in discussions of platformisation when discussing self-branding practices on social media. P21's comments in particular suggest that overly strenuous efforts broaden ones' reach as a digital brand represents an atomised form of creative practice – a less authentic, potentially anti-social, acquiescence to the 'optimisation of culture' (Morris, 2020). Worse, this can come at the expense of effective collective performance on the bandstand. Post-digital malaise resurfaces, with the pseudo-participation of digital spaces understood as both a pale imitation of the authentic sociality and musicianship of the LJS, and a potential threat to artistic originality by leeching from the vitality of the 'real-life side of music'.

In framing platform adaptation as primarily a reluctant concession born out of necessity, these participants also gesture toward points of difference with other notable contemporary 'crossover' figures in or around global jazz. Musicians such as drummer and producer Louis Cole, keyboard and drum duo Domi and JD Beck, and bassist MonoNeon, grouped under the

²¹³ While P7 and P10 cited Instagram, the short clips that they are referring to are circulated through Instagram's 'Reels' feature, launched in response to the growing dominance of TikTok and which closely mimics the formatting and affordances of the newer platform (Bursztynsky, 2020).

²¹⁴ P7's description of the 'Instagram-ready' clips, at once intensely concocted and lacking development, conforms neatly to Sianne Ngai's theory of the gimmick: 'We call things gimmicks when it becomes radically uncertain if they are working too hard or too little' (Ngai, 2020, p. 49).

term ‘viral jazz’ by jazz critic Nate Chinen (following pianist Vijay Iyer) ‘known for jaw-dropping technical ability, jazz-inflected genre fluidity and an irreverent yet allusive savvy regarding image and platform’, have made a mark on wider popular music and culture through an enthusiastic and full-throated embrace of digital platforms and internet culture (Chinen, 2022). By contrast to those within the LJS, these musicians make ‘few concessions to pop accessibility’ (Cush, 2023) and are so thoroughly steeped in what Gibbs et al term ‘platform vernaculars’ that it manifests, I would suggest, in the music itself (Gibbs *et al.*, 2015). The emphasis placed on extreme and often comedic virtuosity and an aesthetics of rhythmic and textural overload in ‘viral jazz’ is akin to other ‘net-native’ (or to use a more suitable emic term, ‘extremely online’) forms (Gesoff, 2023).²¹⁵

Significantly, these artists seem to approach *platform-adapted promotion* as a creative opportunity rather than an enervating threat to their artistic autonomy (see also Kaye, 2023). Viral jazz content appears hyper-optimised to suit platform affordances (particularly YouTube and TikTok) without hint of reservation, producing garish music videos and meme-heavy social media content aimed to maximise circulation, seemingly unburdened by the concerns regarding jazz authenticity or their potential ‘IRL’ (in real life) reception in the jazz world. The difference here is also direction of travel: Chinen’s viral jazz stars are for the most part born of the internet, initially incubating a global fanbase and geographically dispersed networks of online collaborators, only latterly moving into gigging in the flesh.²¹⁶ This is some distance from the participants discussed above, who honed their musical ability as jobbing musicians and have only been dragged ‘kicking and screaming’ into social media participation relatively recently.

6.2.2: The burden of independence

But all interviewees tempered their reflections with an awareness of the burden of independence. P32 emphasised the challenges thrown up by ‘the whole ecosystem’ of digital streaming, social media and major record labels: ‘it’s a two-edged sword, because in some ways, you have a lot more responsibility. But then you also have a lot more autonomy.’ This metaphor neatly underscores how the migration of social media to the centre of the working

²¹⁵ Aesthetics oriented toward overload, irreverence and extremity (see James, 2015, pp. 49–78) are characteristic of this strand of ‘extremely online’ culture in general (Berry and Dieter, 2015; Spencer, 2022).

²¹⁶ Viral jazz acts are prime examples of ‘platform musicians’ a label which ‘both challenges and extends the categories and identities of musicians that were previously shaped by the recording business (“recording artist”) and events industries (“live performer”)', symptomatic of the platformisation of the popular music industries (Zhang and Negus, 2021, p. 551). Platform musicians are most prominent in contemporary hip-hop, particularly offshoots of ‘Soundcloud rap’ (Waugh, 2020).

lives of contemporary musicians has created a vast amount of novel bureaucratic labour, with most musicians now obliged to function as digital strategists and content creators to maintain their fanbase and attract industry attention (Negus, 2019). The valuable disintermediating capacity of social media was offset by a sense of compulsory participation on digital platforms:

we [musicians] all have to be our own PA [personal assistants] [or] PR [public relations] agents now... [so] you, personally, have to spend a lot more time answering directly and being engaging, even if you really don't feel like being particularly engaging (P34).

The perceived necessity of constant output to maintain audience interest points to another source of frustration, and a significant burden, for many musicians: trying to establish a sense of what 'works' as a strategy for social media promotion, in the face of dynamic and inscrutable platforms (Duffy, Pruchniewska and Scolere, 2017; Baym, 2018; Duffy and Hund, 2019; Morris, 2020). Participants were aware of the pivotal role now played by algorithmic sorting in shaping the volume and variety of content that users faced, and understood this as a need to maintain constant 'engagement' online to mitigate the risks of 'algorithmic invisibility' (Bishop, 2020). Even before considering any potential *creative* constraints of the pursuit of algorithmic visibility, my participants understood this as an arduous form of *bureaucratic* labour:

there is an awareness that if you let up on your engagement, you fall down people's algorithmic 'lists'... you might not make it through the many, many things that people are being bombarded with every day (P34).

You post some things just because you feel like you have to... but [you know] it's not gonna blow up, or go viral or anything. But you do it anyway, just to keep up with the pretence of staying in people's daily scroll (P29).

Beneath this regular stream of promotional content (Arriagada and Ibáñez, 2020) lies enormous amount of behind-the-scenes effort underwriting even casual-seeming material. Social media scholars have highlighted this as a characteristic tension of visually-oriented platforms, particularly their defining genre of photography, the selfie: 'the apparent disposability of the selfie, its seemingly inconsequential nature, masks the amount of labour that goes into it, and the commercial motivations underpinning it' (Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, 2020, p. 76). With the more recent predominance of short-form video, as platforms like Instagram have sought to emulate and out-compete TikTok, the demand for ever-greater production value has only deepened:

Y'know, doing a professional mix job of the audio, and having a DSLR [camera] and a lighting rig in your home [laughs]... to make a 10 second clip for people to watch (P27).

The labour and resources required for this purpose, P27 suggested, could ultimately be self-defeating:

You could argue that many [musicians] are now content creators, over music artists [sic]. How good would their music be if they were spending that time making the music... not making the content to promote it?

The optimisation of musical self-promotion practices to suit the production norms of ‘content creation’ work, and to court algorithmic visibility, here represents an instance of what Bishop calls ‘influencer creep’, ‘the expansion of microcelebrity promotional practices’ whereby ‘norms and practices that have been established within influencer culture have ‘crept’ out into art worlds, and creative work, more broadly’ (Bishop, 2023, p. 2). Parallel to this spread has been a marked professionalisation of content creation in recent years (Hund, 2023). As such, the compulsion toward ‘natural’ self-presentation on social media is something of a misnomer, with even purportedly off-the-cuff posts requiring potentially hours of work and expensive equipment – with the participatory rhetoric of ‘user-generated content’ that once underwrote social media discourse confined to a bygone era. What this makes clear is that the ‘threat of invisibility’ on digital platforms thus disciplines even reluctant cultural workers into expending time, effort and money upon high production value content now deemed essential for successfully ‘playing the visibility game’ (Cotter, 2019, p. 898).

Metrics

The multi-sided qualities of digital platforms make them vital means of gaining the attention and business of industry professionals as well as avenues for audience communication. P34 pointed out that quality video content seemed to have superseded recordings or sales figures for live promoters, creating career opportunities for fledgling bands:

if you're managing to upload really impactful 30 seconds/one-minute-long bits of video... you're far more attractive to a promoter than someone that's got nothing live at all. Even if they've sold a load more records, if [the promoter] can see that you're engaging live, they're more likely to book you (P34).

Platform quantification thus provides interested parties new means of assessing an act’s popularity beyond older indexes of success like record sales, through the display of various popularity metrics – YouTube views, Spotify plays, Instagram followers and so on. My participants were acutely aware of the decisive role metrics now played in their working life, representing what Baym et al have termed ‘a new form of dependence’ for contemporary music workers (Baym *et al.*, 2021, p. 3420). P31, for example, played on a track that had become unexpectedly successful across music streaming platforms. Alongside direct income from the record, in their view, the visible, public-facing metrics that accompanied this release had proven vital in their upward career trajectory:

'the numbers' mean so much, it's unbelievable... I don't necessarily think our music is better than anyone else in the scene. But... because the numbers are so high... I guess that's what people see, and therefore the opportunities become different... the algorithms are just super important. [laughs] can't live without them! (P31).

Where the individual preferences or hunches of promotional intermediaries might have previously led them to take a chance on a relatively unknown artist, some argued the 'shopfront' of social media and streaming platforms has superseded bookings made on qualitative, aesthetic grounds. In P34's words, today 'promoters look first to social and streaming media to see how popular you are before booking you, rather than judging whether they actually like your music.' P10 made a complementary point here, lamenting the loss of qualitative judgement that they attributed to a growing preoccupation with platform metrics. They spoke of their desire for:

a world where... nobody can see the Spotify or YouTube numbers. So therefore, you [could] just simply approach promoters with your music, and the quality of the music, and they're judging it in and of themselves. They're not thinking... 'oh, they've only got X amount of followers' (P10).

These statements potentially overstate the influence of personal taste on promoters' choices of action prior to the advent of platform metrics – commercial concerns, made from the data at hand, have always been decisive in music industry decision-making (see e.g. Weisbard, 2016, pp. 217–218). But Frith et al show how concert promoters hailing from the pre-digital era *do* tend to pride themselves on their professional intuition, maintaining 'a continuing belief in promotion as a craft, with its own mysteries, mentors and magic', irreducible to the logic of quantification undergirding platform infrastructure (Frith *et al.*, 2021, p. 49). My participants' reflections thus speak to changing values and practices among live music intermediaries in the music industries. This chimes with recent research attesting to extensive reliance upon streaming and social media metrics among music industry professionals when deciding who, what and how to promote (Maasø and Hagen, 2020).²¹⁷

The increasingly metricised music industries might seem primarily a technical shift, and one with potential benefits, providing artists with more detailed and granular ways to understand their fanbase and communicate their potential to intermediaries. But, certainly in the LJS, it also augurs a deeper and more problematic change, whereby platformisation erodes the role of the subjective and the qualitative in the work of promotion. This is a tendency that David Beer has observed in his analysis of 'metric power' in contemporary society. Beer argues that

²¹⁷ Although there remains an enduring belief in the intuitive and creative qualities of promotional work, as I discuss further in 6.3.

metrics as a form of measurement, 'ha[ve] the dual role of capturing and setting standards', and that their appearance of numerical neutrality obscures normative shifts: 'metrics can be organisational and technical in their appearance but they also present questions of judgement and fairness' (Beer, 2016, p. 45). One interviewee articulated this point, arguing that the benchmark for 'good' platform metrics were always shifting, creating perpetual insecurity among musicians even as the numbers themselves remained stable:

As time has gone on, the numbers and the parameters have become ridiculous - like, 1000 has become the new 100. And a million has become the new 1000... it's affect[ing] musicians psychologically, definitely... if your track has been listened to 4000 times - that's quite a lot! ...But it's like, 'oh, we need 10,000, or we need 100,000, or a million in order to do this', which I feel has damaged careers (P10).

Despite the objective appearance of platform metrics, their usefulness is contingent on how they are parsed, and as such 'they cannot resolve uncertainty because they themselves remain endlessly open to interpretation' (Baym *et al.*, 2021, p. 3421). As the discussion of promoters above suggests, the terms of interpretation remain firmly in the gift of intermediaries, something made further apparent by Spotify's recent decision to demonetise all tracks with fewer than 1000 plays. This move signals an industry 'floor', with insufficiently large numbers literally indexing worthlessness within the platform's framework (Guttridge-Hewitt, 2024). Following wider platform capitalist logics, this equates scale with value, and the blunt metric of the 'listen' with *meaning* for the user (see Seaver, 2021), consigning niche sounds and small (but potentially devoted) audiences to functional irrelevance.

Beyond the direct economic effects of 'metric power' in the contemporary music industries, P10 points out that the capricious qualities of these interpretative schemas – where an adequate number of streams one day indicates unpopularity and failure the next – can cause feelings of inadequacy that exact a psychological and professional toll.²¹⁸ Others agreed:

people start to question how relevant they are... [and] struggle with mental health... thinking when they release music, if it's not getting the streams they want... it's because they're not posting enough, because they're not engaging enough (P27).

Metrics are also inherently *comparative*, providing visual representation of the underlying processes of sorting and ranking upon which platforms function (Mau, 2019, pp. 31–33). By rendering discrete cultural objects commensurate, metrics naturally encourage invidious

²¹⁸ A musician interviewed in *The Guardian* regarding Spotify's new monetisation policy expressed the same misgivings as P10 about the mutability of metrics, suggesting the minimum payment threshold could change at any time: 'What if [the minimum requirement] becomes 2,000, then 3,000, and maybe 5,000?' (quoted in Ahmed, 2023).

comparisons for musicians. During a conversation about the breakout viral hit from *We Out Here*, 'Abusey Junction', one participant acknowledged that the music they made was stylistically worlds apart from the track's composers, Afrobeat group Kokoroko. Nevertheless, they acknowledged:

I'm... less successful than those guys. So, [when] I'm thinking of 'Abusey Junction', I'm also like: 'why is my fucking tune not viral?' ... maybe there's a part of me that is [jealous]... which colours my perspective about it (P30).

Participants repeatedly sought to retain critical distance from platform metrics and frame them as constructed and partial. But their aura of objectivity and the 'foundational' faith of numbers in an 'era of total computation' evidently make it hard to resist the 'affective force' of metrics, with many internalising this quantitative feedback as an empirically sound index of musical, and self, worth (Hearn and Banet-Weiser, 2020, p. 7). This chimes with Gross and Musgrave's findings that 'social media, data, and the near perpetual necessitated online engagement... means a reliance on metrics often comes to define the existence of aspiring musicians', and that this reliance can lead to strong feelings of anxiety, negative self-criticism and unhelpful comparisons with others (Gross and Musgrave, 2020, p. 65). However, where Gross and Musgrave single out aspiring musicians, the experience of the musicians discussed here – all established professionals, some having worked for many years – suggests a more generalised state of insecurity.

Exhaustion and resignation

LJS participants are evidently aware of the potential of the contemporary (self-)promotional landscape. With varying degrees of enthusiasm, most rely heavily on social media promotion to reach audiences and music industry powerbrokers. However, the accounts provided are shot through with palpable feelings of resentment, incomprehension and disempowerment. Diminishing support from older promotional infrastructures obliges most LJS participants to work it out for themselves using resources at hand, intuiting the 'rules of the game' of digital promotion through their own research, trial and error, or knowledge sharing with others at similar stages in their careers. Although sometimes successful, the effort expended navigating the fickle world of digital promotion takes its toll:

it does get quite exhausting. Because... it takes quite a large chunk of time out of the thing that you really want to be doing, which is practising, or writing music, or working on your production skills... none of us got into music to be social media or PR agents (P34).

Another participant felt lucky that they could sustain themselves through music. But they remained concerned that the resultant work was infringing on their band's music-making:

it's a massive amount of work to do it yourself... it's a dilemma really. Our bass player... really struggled... he was responsible for putting out vinyl, and he did an amazing job, but he suffered because he basically had to do all the work himself (P17).

Others echoed this sentiment. P4 provided a simplified outline of their work process, including some promotional activity:

I make albums, and then I put them out, and do everything creatively around that... data analytics, and mailing lists... trying to make sure it [the record] hits as hard as it does (P4).

They displayed enthusiasm for this kind of work. As with music industry professionals I interviewed, they rejected hard distinctions between direct cultural production and intermediary labour, arguing that 'releasing and promoting... is a very creative business'.²¹⁹ However, P4 remained 'much more interested in playing music', pointing out that the day-to-day realities of music-making also involved unglamorous, largely unacknowledged organisational labour:

There's various different projects I'm in at the moment... I'm calling people for rehearsals and trying to, like coordinate people - tens of people - it's very, very demanding (P4).

While aware that a more developed social media strategy was important for professional advancement, set against their other responsibilities it represented a bridge too far:

To try and do that [organisational work], and have a social media release schedule - nah man! [laughs] I can't do it, but I should! (P4).

The ambivalence on display regarding the extent and variety of promotional duties shouldered by LJS participants due to such 'compulsory independence' marks a point of departure. In the recent past, such rapid multi-tasking has been uncritically lauded within the creative industries. Angela McRobbie's analysis of the changes undergone in the London fashion world from the mid-1990s into the early 2000s, for example, details how the industry's endemic precarity, and the forms of multi-hyphenate creative worker it produced by necessity (see also Gill and Pratt, 2008), was glossed as an exciting, flexible, and empowering new form of labour, reflective of the 'upbeat business-minded euphoria... characteristic of the sector' (McRobbie, 2002/2016, p. 27). While this kind of sentiment is present in the LJS, as discussed in Chapter Three, it is tempered by more downcast, realist assessments that see the wholesale enmeshing of the

²¹⁹ The binary between 'creative' work by the 'talent' in cultural industries, and the 'non-creative' labour of (for example) A&Rs, strategists and promoters is a common one in scholarly and trade literature. P4 rightly states that creative labour exists on a spectrum, however it remains a useful heuristic when discussing different kinds of cultural work in the scene, and I use it (advisedly) elsewhere in the thesis.

music industries with social media as affording emerging musicians only a highly constrained and contingent form of autonomy. We can see further evidence here, then, of the downwards ‘transference of risk’ wrought by digitalisation, whereby the labour and economic outlay that might have previously been shouldered by record companies is today more often shouldered by artists, in the process exerting further ‘pressure to act according to a risk-laden and entrepreneurial logics’ (Lizé, Greer and Umney, 2022, p. 797).

It is worth dwelling momentarily on how common the vocabulary of obligation, exhaustion and inadequacy were used to describe digital self-promotion. Looking more closely at comments from P32 in 6.2.1, we can see that while advocating for the empowering qualities of social media, they gesture toward the huge amount and variety of promotional labour facing today’s emerging musicians, and the high levels of non-musical expertise required. Returning to the above quote:

There's nothing really a major label can do for you that you can't do yourself, if you know exactly what you're doing in terms of media, and PR, and posting, and using all of that to your advantage... [to] develop your brand [emphasis added] (P32).

This participant is offering a qualified ‘digital optimist’ reading of the contemporary promotional landscape. Similar sentiments emerged elsewhere: a writer and broadcaster cited ‘the power of social media’ as decisive in the LJS’s success relative to earlier iterations of British jazz, framing it as part of an industry-wide ‘paradigm shift’ that began over a decade previously:

I remember when... Arctic Monkeys... several people who I knew, who worked in Black music were all saying: 'oh, my God, this group has come from nowhere, they've done it all through social media and networking.' They built this huge audience without a record company... You don't necessarily have to be signed to Sony (P22).²²⁰

However, as David Hesmondhalgh, Anja Hagen, Thomas Hodgson and others have suggested (Hesmondhalgh, 2019a; Hodgson, 2021; Hagen, 2022), this upbeat reading of digitalisation and cultural production elides questions of access and power. It is undoubtedly true that cheap digital distribution and promotional mechanisms has been transformative, while the proliferation of social media platforms has afforded users a ‘shot at getting heard’, in the process ‘weaken[ing] the monopoly on culture and meaning formerly enjoyed by media and entertainment companies’ (Seymour, 2020, p. 13). Nonetheless, as outlined in Chapter One,

²²⁰ The role of social media (in this case Myspace) in the career of British indie rock band Arctic Monkeys is a longstanding, largely apocryphal piece of music industry folklore. That they are still vaunted as exemplary in this regard suggests that accounts of music industry circumvention, which Hesmondhalgh locates as a ‘tediously common’ feature of the highpoint of digital optimism ‘c. 2004-2008’ itself has a ‘long tail’ in music culture (Hesmondhalgh, 2019, p. 299).

existing major cultural industry players have retained or regained significant control, and social media and other forms of digital promotion strategy, in isolation, typically remain insufficient for sustaining a music career (Tschmuck, 2016, p. 24).

In the context P32 was discussing, for example, major record labels dominate flagship editorial playlists on music streaming services, devoting substantial, and increasing, resources to ensuring their releases are favoured by algorithmically-determined playlists like Spotify's 'Discover Weekly' (Morgan, 2020, 2022; Hodgson, 2021, p. 7). Playlisting is now pivotal in contemporary music promotion, with playlist placement regarded as 'the only game in town' for A&Rs at major labels (Hodgson, 2021, p. 10). Rather than a democratised level playing field, then, this 'game' remains rigged in favour of industry incumbents, with the private, interpersonal networks, preferential access to data, dedicated analysts, and playlisting specialists at the disposal of large music companies remaining firmly out of reach for independent artists or smaller labels.

Also significant is that, despite P32's upbeat assessment of the rich latent *potential* of digital self-promotion in the abstract, they felt it was of little concrete use for themselves, as someone who 'sadly' lacked the necessary 'savvy'. While almost all participants emphasised the role of good fortune in the music industries, many nonetheless echoed these sentiments, seeing their comparatively modest profile as a failure to realise what Ellis Jones has called the 'democratic promise' of the social web for aspiring cultural producers (Jones, 2021b). Here, the meritocratic myth that has long underpinned the music industries – where stardom comes from natural talent and charisma, rather than the labour of entire teams of public relations professionals, advertising agencies, legal professionals and so on – is inverted and internalised (Marshall, 2013b; Nowak and Morgan, 2021, pp. 72–3).

This shows us one problematic consequence of what Chris Nickell calls the 'two-faced virtual ecosystem' of digital self-promotion. The abundant promise that these technologies offer as 'democratic and open gateways' is perpetually offset by their actual functioning as 'gatekeepers that throw up hidden walls', attributed by participants to their own lack of digital literacy and business smarts (Nickell, 2020, p. 49). Those LJS participants who have succeeded are understood as deserving their acclaim as much for their heightened capacity for self-promotion, entrepreneurship and hustling as for any distinctive musical abilities. As comments above by P4 and P32 show, participants were inclined to blame themselves for an insufficient hunger for working on their media strategy and/or navigating social media affordances to 'game the system' for wider exposure.

Faced with prominent success stories featuring those seemingly ‘going it alone’, bypassing music industry gatekeepers via new digital tools and social media, those whose efforts are less fruitful find themselves at the sharp end of what Lauren Berlant calls ‘cruel optimism’, whereby ‘the object/scene of desire is itself an obstacle to fulfilling the very wants that bring people to it’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 227). The vestigial attachment to the ‘democratic promise’ of the digital, still vocally advocated by platform owners and their (social) media outriders in the face of increasing evidence to the contrary, becomes ‘an obstacle to [one’s] flourishing’ in ways that can be creatively enervating and exact a significant mental toll (Berlant, 2011, p. 1; see also Musgrave, Gross and Klein, 2024). These responses indicate widespread feelings of what we might call ‘promotional fatigue’: resentment at how the compulsion to self-promote impinges on creative efforts, an exhaustion with being permanently on display via social media, and a sense of disorientation when attempting to maintain ones’ footing on the constantly shifting terrain of digital music promotion.

For most, then, promotional labour was a necessary evil ideally performed by a third party. This creates a context within which offloading promotional responsibilities onto professional ‘industry’ figures, be they record labels, strategists, or managers, represents a shared ambition for many, and a marker of career progression, rather than a problematic ceding of control or creative autonomy. P29 for example saw subcontracting promotional concerns, particularly platform metrics, as a marker of their professional success, meaning that non-creative work didn’t ‘take up too much of their headspace’. This allowed them to concentrate on artistic work:

people always want to know [about metrics], especially people like my record label, or my publisher, or my manager. But the great thing is, I have those people who worry about it, and I don't really think about it (P29).

As another participant wryly summarised, with digital promotion: ‘the goal is to get someone else to do it for you - because it's not fun!’ (P9).

This section has explored some of the forms of promotional labour undertaken by LJS participants. I have discussed the complexities and tensions surrounding the scene’s partial embrace of digital means of promotion, particularly social media. I have shown how the opportunities this labour might open up are accompanied by varied kinds of burden – financial, bureaucratic, musical, psychological. The collective ambivalence felt toward platform adoption within the scene map onto a set of music-making values, where excessive catering to the perceived logics of circulation and self-branding on social media is seen as a marker of inauthentic musicianship and even antithetical to jazz practice. In this final section, we have

seen how shared experiences of algorithmic and promotional fatigue underpin efforts to subcontract the messy and potentially corrupting work of promotion to professional intermediaries, the subject of the next section.

6.3: Promotional intermediaries

6.3.1: Reintermediation and curatorial power

GP - Worldwide

As musicians have sought to offload burdensome promotional labour, the stratum of cultural industry intermediaries, operating in the gap between producers and their potential audience, retain real significance. Following Wenceslas Lizé's typology of cultural intermediaries (2016), this section draws particularly on responses from participants who fulfil functions as 'artistic work intermediaries', 'situated between producers of artistic products and their clients or employers' including agents, managers and platform employees (Lizé, Greer and Umney, 2022, p. 794). I consider how the scene has orbited around the influence of what Lizé calls 'mediators', who 'guid[e] the audience through its relationship with the artwork', focusing on the figure of the 'curator' (Lizé, 2016, p. 36).

A central figure is DJ, radio presenter, and record label founder Gilles Peterson. His promotion of the scene through a network of radio shows, festivals and labels have made him a key interlocutor between the scene and the wider music industries. The process by which the LJS has moved from a localised and inward-facing music community to a global brand is inseparable from Peterson's promotional activities. Peterson's close connections to successive musical zeitgeists in British dance music since the 1980s – rare groove, acid jazz, and broken beat (Paz, 2015; Melville, 2019) – have seen him move from a pirate radio host to a borderline household name with a weekly national radio show on BBC 6Music. While his musical influences are rooted in dancefloor friendly music of Black origin, part of his reputation is for globetrotting eclecticism and musical 'discovery' (Fairley and Boudreault-Fournier, 2012, p. 247), emblematised in Peterson's 'Worldwide' brand, originally the title of his BBC show running between 1998 and 2012. His position at the centre of an ecosystem of festivals, radio shows, and record labels tied to the Peterson brand also means he has a financial stake in elements of the scene. Peterson is an example of what Emilia Barna calls 'taste entrepreneurs', who are 'top consumers, connoisseurs with a high level of (sub)cultural capital, and cultural

producers... [who] build careers, their own brands, through showcasing their taste through their repertoire' (Barna, 2018, p. 265).

Many participants saw Peterson's advocacy as integral to the scene's success, with some suggesting he was unique amongst industry figures in spotting the LJS's potential:

the rise of the contemporary... Black London jazz scene... except for very important support and patronage of Gilles Peterson – [happened] completely without any of the gatekeepers even noticing it was happening' (P23).

For writer/DJ P16, Peterson's arrival on the scene was a significant step. They framed Yussef Kamaal's absorption into the Peterson ecosystem, signing to his label Brownswood and playing Peterson's Worldwide Festival in 2016, as the first major move from the LJS toward broader music industry and media interest:

the first mainstream - well, not "mainstream" - bigger 'jump' was, I think, Yussef [Kamaal] in 2016 on Brownswood. I think that was Gilles's [Peterson's] entry point. And whenever Gilles gets involved, the whole world gets involved - the whole world of... Gilles-following folk who love music... I think he got Yussef Kamaal to play at Worldwide festival in 2016 (P16).²²¹

These comments underscore Peterson's role in providing momentum as a tastemaker with widespread music industry name recognition. This has a downstream effect on the wider London musical ecosystem. Promoter P28, for example, stressed the foundational role of aesthetic judgement and intuition in their professional life, and distanced themselves from overly quantified decision-making, evoking the 'craft' of promotion discussed by Frith et al above:

first and foremost what I care about is the music itself... You can usually just tell... There's no real science to it... I would never, think about working with an artist, first and foremost, on the back of seeing Spotify plays (P28).

They pointed instead to Peterson as a helpful indication that an act might be a 'safe bet' that could reliably draw a crowd:

even just one little bit of validation will go a long way – like getting played by Gilles Peterson (P28).

Music strategist P13 made an adjacent point. They segmented potential audiences, suggesting Bandcamp users represented active devotees who required little promotional effort. They

²²¹ Note the reticence regarding 'mainstream' associations, underscoring again an ongoing investment in the scene's alternative status.

pointed to Peterson as an essential target for accessing the next ‘tier’ of potential audience for London jazz, guiding the tastes of the ‘genre-curious’ who required:

...a little bit of editorial comfort... That could be a Gilles Peterson play... [and] Radio 6 support (P13).

DJ/broadcaster P33 claimed signing to Brownswood was an aim for many jazz musicians they knew. The label’s association with Peterson was significant here, providing a shortcut to Peterson’s network of industry contacts and a reliable audience on UK PSM via his weekly BBC radio show:

I know a lot of musicians who have... a top five of indie labels that are going to propel them - Brownswood is always at the top. You’ve got the backing of Gilles... you know for a fact that if you’ve got a record on [Brownswood], you’re gonna get support on the BBC... You will get support in a lot of places, all over the world, within your space (P33).

P3, a writer and musician, also saw Peterson’s substantial role as partly a function of his relative economic security, contrasting his position within PSM and the music industries with another important scene mediator, journalist and DJ Tina Edwards, who had been reporting on the LJS since the early days. P3 suggested that trying to work the beat of (at the time) underground music like Edwards was ‘deeply un-monetisable’ making it ‘tough to be a champion... unless you’re like Gilles Peterson, then you’ve already got a big platform.’ They also discussed witnessing curatorial power in action first-hand when selling their work on Bandcamp:

as soon as Gilles Peterson gave me a ‘square’²²²... I noticed a big rush of people coming to the page and ordering and buying stuff... those are moments when you realise certain people have, like, immense power (P3).

Perhaps the clearest indication how central Peterson’s personal brand has been in articulating the LJS to wider popular culture is his curation and provision of voiceover for virtual radio station Worldwide FM in the video game *Grand Theft Auto V*, ‘the most financially successful media title of all time’ as of 2018 (Cherney, 2018). Tracks by numerous LJS artists feature on the playlist for in-game listeners after a 2020 update, forcefully demonstrating Peterson’s status as the pre-eminent intermediary spreading (a very specific version of) British jazz to a huge and global listenership. All London jazz artists featured have connections to Peterson’s various projects: Kokoroko, Joe Armon-Jones and Zara McFarlane have all released music through Peterson’s label Brownswood Recordings, while Emma-Jean Thackray had a monthly residency

²²² Bandcamp’s interface shows square thumbnails of buyer profiles underneath items for sale, allowing users to track others’ purchases.

on Peterson's internet radio station Worldwide FM, a standalone venture born from its in-game predecessor.²²³ Association with or endorsement by Peterson, then, has tangible benefits for a jazz artist's career.

Peterson as aesthetic bottleneck

In the main, these accounts laud Peterson's passionate commitment to music and evident care for those that make it. Nonetheless, some were uneasy about the weight of influence exerted by a small network of businesses and industry intermediaries, clustered around this single tastemaker, on British jazz. P35 pointed out that 'lots of fantastic musicians out there... don't get the publicity that they deserve', suggesting that those making music that fell between the gaps of Peterson's public tastes had struggled:

People like Gilles Peterson has an incredible influence on people. [He] seems to only like, I suppose, one type of genre... If you've listened to his shows, I think the music is all very similar [so] yeah, people do get left out (P35).

Here, despite Peterson's reputation for open-minded eclecticism, the suggestion that his support has clear stylistic limits illustrates the role that the promotional work of influential 'mediators' has played in the coalescence of the scene as a media entity.

Peterson can therefore be understood as an *aesthetic bottleneck*, through which the heterogeneity of London jazz practice passes to become a tangible, marketable sound and brand. On this point, one interviewee attributed the predominance of spiritual jazz styles, discussed in Chapter Four, to Peterson's role:

There's a certain aesthetic, I guess, that is getting preferential treatment...led by Gilles Peterson's aesthetic, which is very focused on spiritual jazz... that is a massive influence, just because he's the only person... playing this stuff on the radio (P17).

These are concerns, then, about what Robert Prey calls 'curatorial power', 'the capacity to advance one's own interest, through the organizing and programming of content' (Prey, 2020, p. 3). Prey uses the term in reference to music streaming. But it became apparent that there was no easy dividing line between Peterson's direct influence curatorial interventions and the more intangible effects of associations with the emergent LJS brand to which he is integral. P35, for example, had seen their first record associated with 'very mainstream jazz' artists by

²²³ The station paused operations after losing sponsorship in October 2022, and now runs a very small programming schedule with Peterson the sole host (Ahmet, 2022; Bradshaw, 2022).

MSPs, despite understanding their music as much closer to fusion. However, where others had been 'left out' by Peterson, P35 had felt the benefits of his endorsement on- and off-platform:

when [second album] came out, Gilles Peterson picked up on it... my associated artists changed instantly to the type of musicians [he] likes... I don't understand the secrets of Spotify... [but] that really helped my reach... [to] people who like, I don't know, Sons of Kemet, or Nubya Garcia (P35).

While P35 had worked with some of these other LJS musicians, their own music was sonically distinct, and they placed distance between themselves and the prevailing sounds and narratives of the LJS:

The musicians who've been the main focus for 'what is the London jazz scene?'... I see myself on the outskirts of all of that... I don't feel connected, I suppose, to that scene in a musical way (P35).

This underscores the complexities of the contemporary promotional landscape. While participants understood (and sometimes expressed concerns regarding) the direct influence of Peterson and other influential curators, their *indirect* endorsement has tangible effects on algorithmic recommendation systems, due in all likelihood to the use of 'cultural data' by recommender systems, which 'crawl the web for discourse' that suggests connections between artists (Morris, 2015, p. 454; Bonini and Gandini, 2019, p. 6).²²⁴ P35 had been a beneficiary of Peterson's endorsement, drawing them into the slipstream of streaming recommendations surrounding a much-hyped musical moment. But they also positioned this as a fickle, unpredictable process, necessarily involving boundary drawing at the expense of others, and felt bracketed within a social and aesthetic designation that did not match their musical identity or lived experience in the British jazz world.

Evidently then, despite rapid changes in the music industries in the wake of digitalisation, the 'curatorial power' of specific influential figures continues to hold real sway. Where Peterson represents the most prominent and public-facing example here, 'behind-the-scenes' promotional work also continues to rely heavily on close personal contacts. P13, for example, pushed back against my suggestion that MSP playlisting was hard to parse and beyond external influence. Rather than beholden to the 'black box' of mercurial and unaccountable

²²⁴ Bonini and Gandini suggest that Spotify's recommendation systems have "'subsumed" the social influence of traditional and amateur gatekeepers into its code'. They call this 'stacked and entangled' process of human tastemakers and machine interaction an 'algo-torial logic' (Bonini and Gandini, 2019, p. 6).

recommendation systems, they foregrounded the enduring relevance of personal, human connections:

It's not totally opaque... like everything in the music industry, it's a bit of a mafia. So, like: I know the person who heads up editorial at Spotify, we've known each other for a long time. And I know the people at Apple [Music]. Y'know, it's not that complicated (P13).

As a former executive at a major record label, their professional networks are far more substantial and far-reaching than most, making this argument cold comfort to those without connections to the 'mafia'.²²⁵ DJ P33, for example, had recently started a small label, and had experienced this situation from the other side. They suggested that paying the correct distributor was essential:

Those guys are the ones pitching to playlists. There's a lot of that going on... [I know] a saxophonist, relatively unknown in his own right... he managed to get a guy who... has a good relationship with certain playlists at Spotify, at Apple Music. [saxophonist] obviously paid for these services... that had a huge impact on his streaming figures (P33).

Streaming services here formed one part of a wider promotional strategy, rather than an end in itself. Where MSP income on its own tended to be of limited significance, placement on flagship jazz playlists such as Spotify's Jazz UK or State of Jazz could have:

a knock-on effect on getting [gig] bookings... if you're... alongside like Yussef Dayes, and Nubya Garcia [on the playlist], you can go to Love Supreme Festival²²⁶ and go: 'Hey, can you give me a set in early in the day or something?' (P33)

The influence of paid promotion upon playlist placement is contentious, as it belies public statements from MSPs regarding their proprietary curation systems, purportedly insulated from (and, implicitly, fairer than) the grubby work of music industry promotion and the spectre of preferential treatment or 'payola' for favoured artists (Sun, 2019; Morgan, 2020, 2022). P13 suggested that media preoccupations with algorithms as autonomous technological forces provided a helpful smokescreen allowing MSPs to elude accountability. They singled out Spotify for 'hid[ing] behind the algorithm', leaning upon a veneer of technological objectivity to

²²⁵ P13's statements also cut against, for example, Robert Prey's interviews with veteran A&Rs, who lamented the waning influence that personal connections play in playlist placement and, as with other promotional figures discussed in this chapter, emphasised that their profession was a form of 'craft' (Prey, 2020, p. 3; see also Forde, 2022).

²²⁶ An annual jazz festival in Sussex.

obscure the profound influence of persistent promotional and PR labour upon playlist placement.²²⁷

your job as a label [or] a manager often is jumping on the fact that your track is getting attention, and then doing all the work off-platform: across all your social media channels, and through press and promo and marketing to get people to follow the artists, not the song (P13).

But the feedback loop between streaming and concert promotion again demonstrates the continued significance of ‘who you know’ in shaping the scene, dictating processes of inclusion and exclusion. P24 worked on the festival circuit, and while at pains to clarify that those with influence were ‘doing a really good job’ in platforming up-and-coming artists, suggested that Peterson was a figurehead within a very small network of influential mediators calling the shots for many high-profile music festivals:

People don't really understand how small the festival world is.... It's the same people everywhere ...I have just been so surprised to learn [who] programmes so much of Cross the Tracks, or We Out Here, or Outlook [festivals]... it's not as if it's [just] the 'old boys network's' mates playing [but] I suppose it is a bit like that... someone like Gilles and all the platforms that he has – I look at the ecosystem and [feel] like: 'how much [are they]... creating what is 'cool'?' (P24).

This discussion of curatorial power, and specifically Gilles Peterson as a central node in LJS promotion, shows the enduring significance of ‘who you know’ in the platformised, post-digital music industries. Where algorithmic recommendation is posited as the in-house solution to the ‘problem’ of musical abundance in the streaming era (Fleischer, 2015; Seaver, 2022; Krogh, 2023), in a scene like the LJS – where ambivalent attitudes toward the digital are entangled with affective investments in non-mainstream cultural identity – human curation retains enormous (and with Peterson, arguably outsized) influence (Jansson and Hracs, 2018).

Yet Peterson’s apparent role as ‘kingmaker’ in the LJS is itself patterned by platform influence. P35’s discussion of shifts in their associated artists on MSPs after his vocal support shows how complex cycles of human promotional action and algorithmic reaction can rapidly map a musical formation like the LJS in ways distinct from social, cultural and musical ties ‘on the ground’. But within a cultural sector that rewards existing success, this map can quickly become territory, *producing* rather than merely reflecting a scene. Amid this multidirectional flow of influence between promotion, curation and platform recommendation, offline and on, the

²²⁷ As Meredith Rose makes clear, hiding behind complexity to defer accountability also plays a crucial role in the economics of streaming: payments earmarked for smaller rights holders in particular regularly going unassigned due to metadata inconsistencies, ultimately to the benefit of MSPs and major labels (Rose, 2023).

scene that has crystallised in the public eye has rapidly foregrounded certain figures and occluded others – something which intensifies with further media attention, discussed below.

As with recommendation algorithms themselves then, promotion at large in the contemporary music industries is perhaps best understood as a heterogenous ‘sociotechnical system’, constituted by murky and rapid articulations of autonomous computational action and human intervention (Seaver, 2021b, p. 772). In the case of the LJS, we should understand the scene as a media entity as produced by what we could call this ‘promotional assemblage’, which ‘like previous musical assemblages... involves human and technical components’ and destabilises easy (and typically critical) oppositions between people and technology (Goldschmitt and Seaver, 2019, p. 74; see also Born, 2005). Caught, sometimes unknowingly, within this assemblage, some musician participants viewed these unexpected and occasionally uncanny (dis)articulations between their music, the work of others, and audiences with a mixture of resignation and exasperation:

It's all luck, really: the algorithm likes you, or Gilles Peterson likes the track or something. I'll take a human being over an algorithm. But if I can't get the human being, I'll take the fucking algorithm... [but] it's deeper than what I can just see, I'm afraid (P7).

But ‘ubiquitous music’ also assigns huge importance to the role of *narrative* in enabling music to cut through the crowded music marketplace (Quinones *et al.*, 2016). Music today has been untethered from ancillary contextual information (liner notes, album artwork etc), distributed unpredictably via editorial playlists and recommendation systems, themselves ambiguously articulated with antecedent forms of musical organisation such as genre (Rekret, 2024, pp. 50–75). These circumstances place a high premium upon catchy, engaging extra-musical narratives which can scaffold the music and gain the attention of listeners, including other cultural industry intermediaries (Powers, 2013a, pp. 320–321). This ‘storytelling’ work is thus another core strand of music promotion, to which I turn now.

6.3.2: Narrativisation and mythmaking

As music scenes begin to attract wider industry attention, the fuzzy boundaries and multivalent collection of stylistic signifiers, cultural meanings and social networks of which they are comprised begin to pose problems. As Keith Negus has argued, the ‘strategic calculations’ that guide music business decision-making are oriented toward ‘stability, predictability and containment’ in music production and promotion (Negus, 1999, p. 52). Negus sees *genre* as the

terrain on which music industry workers endeavour to corral the messy reality of scenic practice into established categories, promotional narratives, and ultimately into cultural commodities. Rather than a process of top-down imposition and appropriation, this is a dynamic and reciprocal process, with different ‘genre cultures’ being constituted from the ‘complex intersection and interplay between commercial organizational structures and promotional labels; the activities of fans, listeners and audiences; networks of musicians; and historical legacies that come to us within broader social formations’ (Negus, 1999, pp. 29=30).

‘Genre cultures’ are thus sites of contestation over meaning and value, and the vocabulary of genre is central to promotional ‘storytelling’. In the LJS context, we have already seen abundant evidence of press and promotional accounts that speak to and frequently bolster the ‘fusty reputation’ of British jazz, deploying trope-laden accounts that ‘lampoon [it] as elitist or silly’, typically drawing a stark contrast with the ‘new’ scene (Murphy, 2018). To provide some examples as reminders, we could look to the approving comparison of LJS participants with the archetypal ‘piano-doodling dad’ from journalist Will Hodgkinson in *The Times*; or Niloufar Haidari’s suggestion for *Vice* that ‘Nu Jazz’ is distinctive due to its escape from the supposed ‘rigid frameworks’ of ‘classical jazz’ through which ‘a new, exciting sound’ has emerged, ‘liberated from the strict musical orthodoxy of its forebears; what’s important here is freedom of expression and musical collaboration’ (Haidari, 2019), among countless others (Appouh, 2018; Hewett, 2018; Hutchinson, 2018b; Bell, 2023). The latter example is particularly egregious as it is a satirical account of jazz *audiences* that relies on a portrayal of ‘orthodox’ jazz *practice* as typically unconcerned with freedom or collective musicking. This fairly stunning misinterpretation demonstrates the persistent problems caused by inexpert coverage of the scene, with the neophilic impulse common in cultural journalism leading to an inaccurate dismissal of core practices – or indeed, key features of the genre culture – of its subject matter.

Again, we should note that these binary simplifications are out of step with the lived reality of everyday scenic practice. In particular, the ‘incubatory’ phase of the LJS of the mid-2010s saw substantial overlap and ebb and flow between the participants, spaces and sounds that purportedly comprise the ‘Nu Jazz’ and ‘Actual Jazz’ so sharply delineated in clumsy narrative accounts of this sort. This is not least due to the need for all but the most successful musicians to take any working opportunities available, regardless of repertoire or cultural cachet.

But while these misinterpretations are glaring, I would argue that they resonate with the degree of insecurity regarding the relationship of the LJS to the wider British jazz world; the status of jazz in Britain; and the position of British jazz vis-à-vis America which the thesis has traced as *internal* to the scene. Such insecurity casts doubt on the *authenticity* of LJS practice.

This assumes heightened significance in the contemporary promotional context, as the narrative work of cultural intermediaries is increasingly closely tied to the operations of what Serazio calls ‘authenticity industry professionals’, amid the crisis of authenticity induced by platformisation, discussed in 1.5.2 (Serazio, 2024). As such, narrative constructions of the scene that draw upon genre-specific tropes to legitimate it as novel, or populist, or sonically innovative perform vital legwork in producing authenticity and imbuing the scene with requisite authority.

Digital strategist and label founder P13 outlined the components of a successful promotional campaign:

a lot of it has to do with the... the context and the narrative you use to pitch... you tend to think about your campaigns in terms of what the story is... [for] press, online, that could be radio, that could be TV... to tell them an interesting story about the band (P13).

Artist manager P23 saw this context provision as essential to creating active engagement, turning disinterested audiences into fans. This assumed greater consequence with MSP dominance:

streaming doesn't enable us to tell any story about your artist, it's completely passive. It's just playlist, algorithmic driven. Without being able to tell that story, you're effectively selling elevator music, and the music could be made by anyone. It's completely faceless (P23).

These comments deploy common critiques of music streaming, suggesting that they encourage passive, ‘lean-back’ listening that, bereft of context, is functional and meaningless (Hesmondhalgh, 2021, pp. 9–12; Bonini and Magaudda, 2024, pp. 92–120). The suggestion, then, is that storytelling capacities of professional intermediaries offer a ‘human touch’, re-injecting meaning into consumer musical experience. Similarly, record label worker P11 used the language of care, seeing their company’s offer to musicians in their capacity to faithfully and creatively convey an artist’s identity:

what we do as a label, a lot of it is like storytelling... people don't need a record label to release music anymore... what is the benefit of signing [to] [P11's label]?... well, we're trying to give artists this really holistic, wraparound care, and support, [by] storytelling (P11).

As with the discussion of record production in Chapter Five, promotional intermediaries here advocate for their continued importance through a digital/human binary, emphasising the centrality of craft, care, and enthusiasm for their clients. However, P13 alighted on a key issue: ‘the problem is that everyone is doing that. Everyone's on the pitch all the time.’ With an

overabundance of public relations professionals perpetually ‘on the pitch’, for an endless supply of musicians, ‘cut through’ in a crowded music marketplace is paramount. Despite having emphasised their own role in honing this through storytelling, P11 said potential label signees needed to play up their personal narratives in advance:

I am very interested in what somebody's story is - what's their viewpoint, are they singular? Or are they one of five other artists that kind of sound similar? (P11).

This places further demands on budding musicians – beyond the qualities of their work, there is an incentive to accentuate or even fabricate extramusical distinctiveness to provide a contextual ‘hook’. These structural factors mean that what may begin as a well-intentioned effort to provide complex, inclusive narrative work can ultimately hollow out nuance or subtlety.

Race and reclamation

A central metanarrative thread in the promotion of the scene has been the real, meaningful – but complex – shifts away from hegemonic whiteness in British jazz augured by the LJS. This facet of the scene is evidently necessary to foreground in accounts of the scene. But emphases on the scene as a triumph of improving representation for people of colour within the scene at times lapsed into reductive *misrepresentation*. As with the discussion of ‘jazz populism’ in Chapter Three, some participants thought that overbearing, simplified narratives of the scene as indexing a wider change overlooked enduring inequalities. Music PR P26, themselves in the business of ‘storytelling’, felt the clamour surrounding the LJS had potentially overplayed shifts in representation, particularly for Black women, suggesting this narrative was ‘overegging it a bit... it's just one Black woman [Nubya Garcia] at the moment, on the UK side, that's got a little bit of a limelight.’

Artist manager P36 saw the rapid upswell of attention surrounding the scene, and the embrace of more prominent acts within the music industries, as inseparable from the wider context of contemporary race politics:

post-George Floyd, everyone's really keen to be like 'oh, we've got a Black woman on the team', or 'we're releasing this queer black trans artist's music', right? But they're bringing them into structures that are completely racist and sexist, and transphobic... the longevity of that is super fragile (P36).

This charge, of performative solidarity by the promotional assemblage that enfolded the scene by platforming acts visibly distinct from the white male norm, was a common one.²²⁸ Manager P18 speculated that a degree of cynicism underpinned the partial uptake of the LJS in jazz journalism, viewing *The Guardian's* jazz editor as symbolic here:

I think the arbiters of good taste - the John Fordhams of the world - would get, like, 'brownie points' from their editors... to write about young black artists... I felt there was a hunger from the existing 'old white men' of jazz, to be seen to be supporting this new 'brown' culture that was beneath their noses the whole time, but they'd never really supported before (P18).

P5 made a congruent point, implying that media and institutional attention toward the jazz scene was playing 'catch up' during a period of heightened attention (and revenues) circulating around the cultural output of people of colour in the UK. While still emphasising that these dynamics were patterned by race, particularly white overrepresentation among press commentators, they also saw the hurried embrace of the LJS as borne from earlier missed opportunities:

everyone got onto grime 10 years too late [laughs], none of the... predominantly white music press gave grime its proper time... they needed something [else]... Turns out it was jazz this time round... I think everyone was hyper aware of anything, coming from any place in the UK, that was coming from black and brown voices ... they just don't want to be seen to miss it (emphasis original) (P5).

The suggestion of cynical or post-hoc engagement with the LJS as a visibly 'Black and brown' culture has particular resonance in the context of the anti-racist uprisings discussed in Chapter Two. Amid the scrambled industry response, many have sought to provide demonstrative endorsements to cultural formations that are visibly Black or multi-racial, and/or associated with social justice commitments.²²⁹ These moves have frequently been rushed, inadequate, and insincere, sharing some of the shortcomings of prior institutional gestures toward 'diversification' and underlying liberal representational politics (Gray, 2016; Nwonka and Malik, 2018; Saha, 2018; Saha and van Lente, 2022). Steven Hadley et al (2022) highlight a gulf between 'rhetoric and action' regarding racial inequality and other forms of marginalisation in the British cultural sector, singling out the failure of public funding bodies like ACE to live up to avowed commitments as ultimately de-politicising the drive for anti-racism and diversity (Hadley, Heidelberg and Belfiore, 2022, p. 259).

²²⁸ Beyond P36, discussions of queer and trans identities and/or their lack of representation in the scene were rare.

²²⁹ While much of the literature exploring 'woke-washing' and attendant phenomena such as radical consumption and brand activism have focused upon the branding and marketing of consumer goods, much of the analysis holds true for the music industry promotional assemblage.

Beyond being merely insufficient, this sort of activity can exacerbate existing hierarchies in the cultural industries: ‘the *recognition* of inequality may be, in itself, part of the problem. At worst, it is a potential strategy for ensuring the continued dominance of already powerful social groups [emphasis original]’ (Brook, O’Brien and Taylor, 2020a). Erin Brook et al describe this as ‘inequality talk’, wherein senior white male incumbents in the cultural industries use very public discussion to prominently flag their awareness of inequality, in ways that protect their enduring status and foreclose structural change. And indeed, there was a striking degree of candour regarding discussions of race among senior cultural intermediaries with whom I spoke, that appeared to fit this description. For example, P23 discussed two all-white bands they managed, suggesting that they were struggling for media endorsement within the current climate:

Gilles Peterson is less supportive of artists like [Group 2] and [Group 1] than he used to be. Because he's got a new jazz scene to play with... suddenly, [their] music's of less use to him... there's been an absolute narrative flip... [where], for want of a better expression, skinny white boys playing electronica-influenced music has been replaced by cool Black kids playing grime and jazz-influenced music (P23).

P23 suggested these discrepancies in attention and the crystallisation of simplistic media narratives hindered *all* musicians due to the problematic elision of race and genre:

You've got white bands playing music they were never calling jazz in the first place, and then you have a Black scene which everyone calls jazz... maybe be a band making music that sounds like Portico Quartet,²³⁰ but they were Black, it would definitely be called jazz? (P23).

Here, the overdetermined conflation of musical style and racial identity that has haunted popular music since its inception rears its head again. P23 is suggesting that Black live musicianship is *necessarily* ascribed the category of jazz, while white musicians are easily excluded from prevailing LJS narratives, hindering the professional progression and artistic fulfilment of all parties.

This sort of audience and artistic segmentation and disciplining of cultural production (and promotion) along the lines of race is what Saha calls the ‘racialising/rationalising logic of capital in cultural production’ (Saha, 2016). Rationalisation refers to ‘standardised practices that cultural industries implement to deal with the inherent unpredictability of the market’ (Saha, 2016, p. 4).²³¹ But Saha argues that cultural production in the current conjuncture embeds the

²³⁰ An all-white instrumental group with jazz elements and instrumentation, nominated for the Mercury Prize in 2008.

²³¹ The production and packaging of music according to the established aesthetic and discursive norms of a given genre is one example of rationalisation at work (Negus, 1999).

production of commodified and absolutist forms of *difference* into these rationalisation processes, according to principles whereby racial identities come to represent niche markets, as discussed in Chapter Two. We can see how, in P23's case, this hindered the bands they managed from being understood by the musical terms they desired, as they failed to 'fit' what they deemed the prevailing narrative.

Other musicians also discussed their experiences of falling foul of reductive promotional narratives that conflated race and musical style. Saxophonist P17 suggested that, in one of their long-running bands, problematic stereotypes of racial authenticity had hindered their professional advancement:

I could say as a brown, Asian, non-Black non-white musician, I have been massively marginalised. If I was a black saxophonist, I think I would have found it a lot easier to get into certain record deals, management deals, agents, whatever - media attention. Because the stereotype is if you're a black saxophonist, that's, 'authentic' ... but [bandmate] is a big white guy, I'm a little Asian guy, and we play afrobeat and reggae. So, y'know, we've fucked it from the start, really [laughs] because that doesn't fit into any stereotype (P17).

P17's account of slipping between pre-conceived industry formulae as a 'non-Black, non-white' saxophonist demonstrates the rationalising/racialising promotional logics of the British music industries in microcosm. The reference to instrument is important, too, presenting another axis by which artist identity can be packaged (or misidentified) by promotional intermediaries. P19 took up this point, arguing that as a 'mixed race woman singer' she had faced immense struggles, first to be taken seriously as a musician, and then to have her music bracketed as jazz at all:

[it's] a total headfuck most of the time [laughs]... that's what I've observed as a brown woman, singing my own songs within the jazz context - because I consider what I do to be jazz... the rest of the music industry considers it to be jazz, but the jazz industry has decided that it's not jazz (P19).

P19's experience speaks to numerous complex and overlapping 'logics' at play in the cultural industries, along intersecting vectors of genre, gender, race and instrumentation. These examples suggest that the 'racializing/rationalizing' logic of LJS promotion has manifested, in London, in fairly subtle ways: articulating styles coded as uncomplicatedly 'Black' such as Afrobeat specifically to young Black musicians; or excluding women vocalists who do not match pre-existing 'formats' of jazz singer from belonging within the jazz world. These logics see musicians (particularly non-Black musicians of colour) who are less easily parsed by cultural intermediaries and press interlocutors deemed less marketable. While rarely made explicit,

they have nonetheless had significant professional and personal consequences – as P19, poignantly, attested:

The strange thing is that I didn't even think about race at all, until I became a jazz artist... until being a jazz artist, it didn't really play into my world at all. You were just allowed to be who you are, rather than think about who you are intersecting with the colour of your skin (P19).

However, there are other instances where promotional narratives assume the form of lurid and jaw-dropping racism. Saxophonist Camilla George, when discussing racist treatment on the UK circuit, described being mistaken by promoters and other intermediaries for other Black women musicians ‘all the time’ (Burke, 2021, p. 169),²³² before recalling an encounter in 2017 with a rural promoter proudly bearing a promotional poster trading on the purportedly novelty of George’s majority-black band, featuring a ‘topless Black lady with a skirt made out of bananas’ (Burke, 2021, pp. 169–170). This anecdote reveals a highly problematic negative inversion of standardised cultural industry marketing, representing the ‘rationalising/racialising’ logic of cultural promotion at its crudest. In this instance, George and her group are fetishised and assigned the status of exotic ‘Other’, a mode of music marketing with a deep history (Born and Hesmondhalgh, 2000), interwoven with the trajectory of jazz as a form (Toynbee, Tackley and Doffman, 2014a, pp. 5, 18). For all the well-documented strides made by the LJS regarding the cultural politics of race and gender, George’s account provides one shocking reminder of the resilience of racism in British jazz.

DIY and Novelty

As already discussed, another defining narrative trope in the presentation of the scene is the portrayal of the LJS as ‘something rising up unbidden, almost as an insurgency’ placed in counterpoint, if not opposition, to an (often ill-defined) political, cultural and jazz ‘establishment’ (Freeman, 2022, p. 96; see also Hutchinson, 2018; Whitehouse, 2018a; Hasted, 2019). Within the confines of press releases, liner notes or journalistic coverage, the already nebulous oppositional qualities of the scene have been distilled into a core motif: the LJS as a ‘DIY’ formation. At the high water mark of press and industry attention in 2018, discussions of a ‘can-do DIY spirit’ (May, 2018) driving the resurgence of jazz in London were widespread to the point of cliché, attributing the scene’s success to a *sui generis* combination of ‘DIY ingenuity’ (Adeleye, 2018) and hard graft that sutured together the nexus of musicians, audiences,

²³² Nubya Garcia has also described being confused for other Black women musicians as a regular occurrence (Adeleye and Garcia, 2018).

venues and distribution infrastructure which constitute the LJS.²³³ There is a kernel of truth in these accounts, as the stories of spaces like TRC and Steez demonstrate.

But exaggerated emphases on the scene's distinctiveness in its commitment to DIY overstates a coherent politics of production. DIY music is characterised by an explicitly anti-hegemonic, anti-industry ethos, and a desire for musicians and fans to gain control of the means of producing and distributing records and putting on their own gigs (Bennett and Guerra, 2018, pp. 1–4). Typically discussed in relation to the punk tradition, parallel histories exist in jazz, with a slew of independent record labels, cultural collectives, and co-operative venues long preceding 'punk rock's valorisation of the DIY attitude' (Wallace, 2020, p. 118). Many of these efforts reflected the specific modalities of race and racism in the United States, with much of what might retrospectively be understood as DIY jazz practices in the 20th Century a response to disparagement of Black music by white America and the dual processes of exclusion and exploitation by the mainstream music industries (e.g. Brackett, 2016, pp. 149–192; Hagstrom Miller, 2010; Wilmer, 2018, pp. 285–353).

In some instances, jazz musicians sought to construct parallel music business organisations to control the production and circulation of recordings, in evidence in the formation of independent publishing companies by Charles Mingus, Max Roach, Duke Ellington, and Horace Silver in the early 1950s (Saul, 2001). Others had a more collective character and explicitly political motivations: alongside the aforementioned AACM, the Jazz Composer's Guild, for example, formed in 1964 at the instigation of trumpeter Bill Dixon, who argued explicitly using 'DIY' vocabulary that 'it is quite obvious that those of us whose work is not acceptable to the Establishment are not going to be financially acknowledged... it is very clear that musicians, in order to survive... will have to 'do it themselves' in the future' (Isoardi, 2006, p. 13). Other groups still sought a complete separation from the circuits of commerce, as in the community arts movement, notably the scene that developed around Leimert Park in Los Angeles from the 1960s, led by jazz pianist, educator and activist Horace Tapscott and his Pan Afrikan People's Arkestra (Isoardi, 2006). These organisations were ideologically diffuse and regularly short-lived, but were, out of both practical necessity and political conviction, explicitly oppositional in orientation toward the mainstream music industries and to varying degrees, the demands of commercial music making, (see Currie, 2011; Gebhardt, 2015; Saul, 2001).

²³³ Federico Bolza, founder of New Soil, a 'hybrid business spanning strategy, management and label skills' that has worked with Church of Sound, Theon Cross, Ill Considered and others within the scene, provides a pithy example of this narrative: 'this generation have taken the DIY ethos that has infused insurgent genres from punk to grime, combined it with the digital savvy that is their birthright and added the social consciousness of grassroots community organisers' (Bolza 2020).

As we have seen throughout, LJS participants by contrast exhibit complicated, ambivalent, but ultimately pragmatic attitudes to commerce, the music industries, and public institutions. While there certainly *is* a tangible political edge to much LJS music and discourse, in particular regarding anti-racist and decolonial struggle, the avenue of expression is primarily through music and media, rather than efforts to short-circuit cultural industry exploitation through the organisation of parallel or oppositional infrastructure. This is important to note because of the frequent connections imputed between LJS ‘DIY’ practice today and the activity of their forebears. Often, this takes the form of a slippage between aesthetics and production practice. In particular, the substantial aesthetic influence of the spiritual and Afrofuturist jazz sounds of the 1970s upon the London scene, discussed in Chapter Four, are taken to imply a more wide-ranging set of cultural and institutional parallels.

Here, a common point of reference is the composer and bandleader Sun Ra. Ra has become a prominent touchstone in jazz, hip-hop, and wider cultural discourse in recent years (e.g. J. Lewis, 2016; see Solis, 2019b), and is a recurrent citation in press coverage of the LJS (e.g. Hutchinson, 2018b; Cornwell, 2019; Kalia, 2019c). Shabaka Hutchings and Cassie Kinoshi, in particular, have repeatedly discussed the significance of Ra’s political and artistic project as a whole – rather than just his music – as influential, drawing inspiration from his concept of ‘Astro-Black Mythology: of subaltern cultures taking control of their history by re-imagining it through science-fiction, and creating liberatory visions of tomorrow in the process’ (Smith, 2016b; Boyd and Kinoshi, 2021). This is therefore a widely acknowledged cultural debt to a significant, and until recently often overlooked, strand of African American jazz practice in LJS discourse. But the fierce independence and proto-DIY impulses of the Sun Ra Arkestra were also vital aspects of their musical practice and cultural politics. Ra was, in the estimation of jazz critic John Corbett, the ‘father of DIY jazz’, with the Arkestra’s activities extending to communal living among band members, setting up their own record label El Saturn, administering the group’s finances, and organising tours (Corbett, 2006). I would suggest that the very widespread narrative moves that place the LJS within the Afrofuturist lineage initiated by the Arkestra also provides a latent implication of equivalent cultural politics, rooted in this kind of self-organisation, in the London scene. In this way, the LJS is ascribed with a kind of jazz DIY aesthetic that has become somewhat unmoored from actual practice, in a way akin to adjacent processes in punk and indie rock (Jones, 2021, pp. 49-50).

Equally, framing the scene as *distinctively* DIY downplays the realities of contemporary cultural production. As discussed in 6.2, musical ‘independence’ is virtually compulsory for most, and something many seek to eschew by outsourcing promotional responsibilities. Rather than a

conscious, political choice, doing-it-yourself is a troublesome obligation that mostly infringes on LJS participants' creative practice. This is a situation Ellis Jones defines as 'DIY as the new default', 'a form of independence that does not hold the same political potential' as the self-consciously oppositional organisational practices of punk and indie musicians of the 1980s (Jones, 2021a, p. 7). Such nuance, and important internal differences in ethos or production practices *among* LJS participants, rarely makes the cut in press and promotional accounts of the scene. Instead, the 'DIY' narrative glosses London jazz into a homogenous, populist insurgency sat apart or against the broad sweep of British jazz. DIY functions here to plug the scene into a set of values and discourses that, while now residual, retain symbolic power in contemporary popular music, whereby independence and self-production are key signifiers of integrity, autonomy and 'alternative' status (Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 2015).

Comments made by Crispin Parry from the organisation British Underground make this clear: 'It's almost as though the sound has been reclaimed from the old guard... it's an independent movement. They're not worrying about whether they can get money from the Arts Council or if they can put a gig on at the Barbican. It has a lot of that grime DIY spirit' (quoted in Whitehouse, 2018).²³⁴ As Chapter Three makes clear, there *are* a number of foundational LJS institutions, e.g. Jazz Re:Freshed, Tomorrow's Warriors, and Kinetika Bloco, who (as NPO organisations) spend a great deal of time worrying about access to ACE funding. P15 worked at an independent jazz label and was sceptical on this point:

I've seen... [people] talking about how 'DIY' it is - but I don't necessarily think it's as DIY as some other genres of music... there's a lot more support and infrastructure than people give credit to [sic]... this kind of music does get a lot of funding from the Arts Council. And because of the jazz tradition, it's possibly more respected than (I don't know), post-punk or something (P15).

Equally significant is Parry's equation of 'reclamation from the old guard' with 'DIY spirit'. This resonates with event promoter P30's concerns, that 'DIY' implied an absence of a living pre-LJS jazz community – that 'doing it yourself' erases the work of those doing it already:

There have been people doing it [jazz in London] for ages. So... I think DIY almost has a bit of a 'deletion' aspect. You know, for [gig series] to say we're DIY... sound[s] a little bit too much like 'we built this castle', and it has a habit of erasing the hard work that's gone before... yeah, [DIY] can render some things problematic (P30).

²³⁴ British Underground is a charity- and public-funded organisation that runs events advocating for British musicians abroad. Despite the name, it is firmly industry-oriented, producing LJS showcases across multiple years at creative industries conference South by Southwest (SXSW) in Austin, Texas. Parry's intervention, and British Underground's support, actually undercuts the DIY narrative that he advances.

P20, a music charity worker, saw this as a central misrepresentation of the scene, suggesting that the ‘the media don't know what's going on until it's actually happen[ed]’:

[the LJS] was happening a long time before anyone picked up on it. It didn't just appear out of nowhere... it's been decades in the making to get to this point (P20).

This situation left many participants in a bind: acutely aware of the exclusionary underside to the ‘hype-cycle’ of ‘new London jazz’, but equally unwilling to miss out on fleeting career opportunities before industry and media attention moved elsewhere. Some felt compelled to position their music within the terms of ‘DIY innovation’ as a result. This was despite an acute awareness that the very *emphasis* on the music as ‘new’ might render it rapidly dated:

This stuff has happened before, and it will happen again... I also don't think that this ‘wave’, personally, is... [pauses] unless a lot of work is put in... I don't think it's gonna last. I think it will benefit a certain group of musicians. And then you'll see it die down again. (P33).

As already discussed, the cyclical, boom-and-bust dynamics of the cultural industries and the ‘jazz revival cycle’ are long-established. But the pace at which contemporary attention accrues and dissipates is unprecedented, representing a massive intensification of the ‘enduring ephemeral’ identified by media theorist Wendy H. K. Chun over a decade ago in her analysis of the temporality of what was then called ‘new media’. Chun argues that ‘to call something new is to ensure that one day it will become old’, arguing digital media and Internet-enabled consumption accelerated the rate at which cultural objects become passé (Chun, 2008, p. 148). The abundance and ease of access to musical archives, alongside the economic incentives surrounding intellectual property revenue maximisation discussed in Chapter Five, has seen versions of music critic Simon Reynolds’ ‘Retromania’ thesis applied to music and popular culture writ large. Reynolds argues that cultural forms since the 2000s, despite being presented as novel and cutting-edge, are increasingly constituted through the recycling, rehabilitation or pastiche of bygone sounds, reflecting ‘pop culture’s addiction to its own past’ (Reynolds, 2011; see also Williams, 2022).

Whether or not there are good grounds for these (somewhat unfalsifiable) diagnoses of stasis in contemporary music culture, it speaks to a discursive environment within which novelty is not only highly valued, but also where the conditions that *enable* musical novelty are seen as imperilled.²³⁵ Here, streaming platforms are both culprit – perpetually throwing up archival

²³⁵ Chun has argued elsewhere, for example, that algorithmic recommendations inherently ‘encourage the creation of “more of the same.” All these systems... restrict the future to the past’ (Chun, 2021, p. 169).

recordings for musicians to emulate at the expense of innovation – and main beneficiary – if fresh sounds are at a premium, where better to find and share them than via platform ‘discovery’ (Prey, 2018; Morgan, 2020; Morris, 2020)? With the stakes thus raised, we can see how the sugar-rush of media coverage and audience attention that both encourages, and flows from, assertions of novelty can ultimately be destructive.

The deployment of simple, catchy narratives – as a means of promotion, but also born out of a genuine excitement for the ‘rebirth’ of jazz in the UK – emerges here from a music industry context that fosters neophilia, favouring an emphasis on change and novelty over a consideration of continuity that is converging with and courting the logics of rapid digital media virality (Strachan, 2017, p. 37; Wikström, 2020; Arditi, 2021, pp. 41–61). This was something that singer and longtime jazz journalist P1 identified as a mutually reinforcing relationship between different layers of music industry intermediary:

a lot of it has to do with spending money on publicity [laughs]... large labels are always looking for new young musicians... and journalists always like to... make their mark as journalists [by] having associated themselves with some particular movement or musician - they like to feel they discovered them... everyone is looking for something, to make their mark (P1).

With the benefit of experience and critical distance, P1 saw this dynamic of cyclical promotional ‘surges’ in British jazz as belying a more mundane reality:

what's happening now doesn't seem that different from what's been happening all through the years I've been interested in jazz, just because every single decade or few years, there's been an upsurge in interest in some particular aspects of jazz... it doesn't seem like it's anything particularly unusual to me. (P1).

As myopic and simplistic narratives crystallise regarding the decline and renewal of British jazz, they have had unintended, but predictable, consequences. Significant cultural producers and sounds who present an awkward fit for prevailing accounts of the scene have been marginalised, while some of the complexities even of those that are being promoted become sidelined. Narratives of ‘birth, growth, and decay’ are ‘common strategies’ in industry marketing, independent of genre, providing ‘order out of the messy realities of the historical record’ (Anderton and James, 2022, p. 2). But their deployment typically foregrounds individual personalities and ‘mythologised events’ that ‘serve to downplay or ignore others that were involved in particular scenes, events or activities, or entire sectors of music production (Anderton and James, 2022, p. 3).

One musician participant had experience of the ebb and flow of media attention, and had previously been a beneficiary during their time in a formerly prominent British jazz group: ‘we

had our moment in the sun, in the media: 'this is the new thing'... I was one of those at that time'. They suggested that their own experiences underscored the 'fairly arbitrary' nature of music promotion and media narrativisation:

The 'South London jazz scene'... you would think like, me being from South London, working with the drummer from [prominent LJS band], playing in a lot of the same... you'd think that [the media narrative] might include someone like me (P19).

They stressed that while younger musicians enjoying press and music industry attention were 'really reverential of older pioneers' themselves:

That's not replicated in the opportunities. [The industry] is very ageist... not because of them [young musicians], it's because of the way it's written about, the way it's talked about. It's all to do with the sort of concept of freshness and newness, and [that] this is the 'new thing' (P19).

Trumpeter Mark Kavuma has made similar points in press interviews:

there has been all this media attention on the young London jazz scene, it has isolated the older jazz scene. It's created this rift... I don't think it's good in the long run... its popularity, and what the media is pushing (West and Kavuma, 2023).

These amnesiac tendencies, in turn, have bred resentment. One instructive case here was the

laudable effort by Australian artist Kimberley **Crofts** to visually represent the 'UK jazz family tree' beginning in 2017. This generated a lively response on social media, with some flattered by their inclusion, but others aggrieved about absences (see e.g. Dick, 2018). The map is currently on Version 6 (see Appendix One), where Crofts provides an accompanying note discussing the London-centricity of the 'map', and being 'overwhelmed with the expectations to make [it] definitive' (Crofts, 2018). Crofts explained how the demands to 'make it comprehensive' placed divisions within the British jazz landscape into sharp relief:

the requests to "make it comprehensive" were a wild ride. Most people were very kind, but... there are a lot of jazz heads out there who don't see [the LJS] as jazz, and wanted me to change it completely to suit their worldview. I had to very carefully explain more than a few times that

(1) I was from Sydney and doing this remotely so my knowledge of "the scene" is as an outsider, and

(2) that this was MY view of the bands I was into at the time.

(personal communication, 21st April 2024).

Crofts' map, circulating during the high point of press attention the LJS, evidently struck a nerve, igniting simmering resentment in the wider jazz community regarding attention being heaped on a fairly small handful of young musicians. The suggestion that many 'heads' reject the inclusion of the LJS within their definition of jazz proper helps draw out otherwise private sentiments and experiences of injustice, once again underscoring the role of genre contestation as an enduring and potent form of boundary work and exclusion in the jazz world. Here, the undercurrent of insecurity surrounding belonging and 'real' jazz status that flow throughout this thesis comes fully into view.

This section has analysed the role played by a number of different cultural intermediaries – curators, promoters, managers, publicists – in shaping the LJS. I have demonstrated the central role of Gilles Peterson, the pre-eminent 'taste entrepreneur' in British jazz, as a power-broker, who has patterned access to the scene and acted as an 'aesthetic bottleneck', serving to restrict which sounds have come to represent the LJS. The section has also showed how the tenor of press and promotional discourse around the scene has driven a form of cultural inflation, with a consistent emphasis on distinctiveness and cultural or political significance, often with little discussion of the music itself. The section has also provided us a view of Negus's genre cultures concept in action, by exploring the 'complex interplay' between different actors, institutions and cultural values surrounding the scene's promotion. The disjunction between the scene's internal practices and identity, and the reductive depictions of jazz past and present that scaffold LJS promotional narratives demonstrate the reciprocal articulation of culture and industry that Negus identifies as producing popular music genre (Negus, 1999, p. 30). The specifics of these processes, in turn, can partly be attributed to ongoing upheavals in the journalism and advertising sector and the downstream impact this has had on music criticism, which I turn to next.

6.4: Brands as power brokers

6.4.1: Music journalism, advertorial and the rising tide of branded content

Exacerbating this inflationary tendency is the hollowing out of music journalism. Without romanticising pre-digital articulations between artists, promoters and journalists,²³⁶ historically music critics have punctured some of the hype generated by other promotional intermediaries. The ‘cross-cultural utopianism’ and ‘intellectual pluralism’ of the UK alternative music press from the late 1960s-1990s, made for a frequently oppositional relationship between music writers and record labels, providing a bulwark between potential audiences and industry efforts to simulate musical innovation (Sinker, 2019).²³⁷ But years since have seen the ‘PR-isation’ of news media, ‘characterised by a swelling PR industry, blurring job roles and a growing colonisation of PR mindsets amongst journalists’ (Jackson and Moloney, 2016, p. 4). These are symptoms of wider structural changes, notably the collapse of the print news model and the permanent economic instability of its digital successor (Lotz, 2021, pp. 55–91). This has resulted in a proliferation of ‘churnalism – the use of unchecked PR material in news’ (Jackson and Moloney, 2016, p. 4).

These shifts have been felt acutely in (what remains of) the music press, which exhibits distinctive forms of precarity, caught as it has been ‘between the travails of the major-label music industry and those of gatekeeper print journalism’ (McLeese, 2010, p. 434). The instantaneous, cheap or free access to recordings today has disrupted the ‘long-cultivated symbiosis between the record business and the music critic over the post-war years’ (Warner, 2015, p. 440), serving to ‘fundamentally diminish the gatekeeping, juridical role of the writer’ (Lobato and Fletcher, 2013, p. 115).

The remit of music criticism has also transformed by what Devon Powers calls the ‘decentralised’ status of the contemporary popular music landscape, fragmented into myriad genre- or scene-based niches largely covered by unpaid fan-writers (Powers, 2013b, p. 128). Contemporary music journalism also exists within a ‘metaculture’ (a ‘structure of meaning that mobilise[s] culture in space and time’) of ‘firstness’ (Powers, 2015, p. 166). This rewards the

²³⁶ The sexism and chauvinism threaded through much lauded rock criticism from what Simon Warner calls the ‘golden age’ of popular music journalism (particularly the late 1960s and early 1970s) is well-documented (e.g. Coates, 2003; Powers, 2013, pp. 98–155; Warner, 2015, p. 443; Brennan, 2017, pp. 142–144). Jazz critics, for their part, have also been key in propagating primitivist readings of race and music in early jazz and the restrictive gatekeeping of jazz authenticity as discussed in Chapter Two.

²³⁷ Jazz received regular coverage beyond specialist publications until the 1980s, particularly in *Melody Maker*.

production of quick first ‘takes’ on new cultural objects in ways that ‘impact cultural circulation, working to accelerate it, make it more promotional, and stress its numerical aspects’ (Powers, 2015, p. 177). Underpaid and overworked music writers are thus incentivised to regurgitate or repackage press releases, and ‘the accolades for being first can and often do outstrip those for being credible, comprehensive, or right’ (Powers, 2015, p. 177). The result is music coverage that is frequently thinly-veiled PR copy.

Indeed, Ramon Lobato and Lawson Fletcher argue that ‘the full-time music journalist... barely exists as an industrial category of the creative workforce’ (Lobato and Fletcher, 2013, p. 112). The authors identify ‘two related strategies’ taken by music writers facing precarious conditions and waning authority, turning either to a more ‘curatorial’ model, or deepening a ‘commitment to the neo-romantic model of serious music writing’ (Lobato and Fletcher, 2013, pp. 115–116; see also Sinker, 2019). This bifurcation played out in my interviews. One music journalist framed their role as advocacy or curation, not dissimilar to that of Peterson:

The way that I do criticism... it's just more about shining a light on stuff that people wouldn't normally know or hear about (P3)

They believed negative criticism undermined this objective, seeing critique as a waste of column inches:

I basically end up giving everything four stars, there's a couple of five out of fives. I just wouldn't review anything that I thought was shit, because I just think it seems pointless (P3).

They also recognised their work often amounted to another link in promotional assemblage, with most subject matter:

com[ing] through a network of PRs... lots of like, obscure PRs, and labels and stuff, who have come to know me, and are sending stuff. So it's still not really, like, super 'under the radar'... yeah, that element of discovery is still manufacture (P3).

Another participant, by contrast, retained strong commitments to the ‘truth’ of music criticism. They acknowledged the argument that specialist music writing was becoming ‘redundant’ due to the digitally-enabled ‘direct interface between the artist and the audience’, which allowed ‘any audience member [to] have [their] say in the marketplace’. But they remained emphatic that expert arbitration remained necessary:

The role of the critic is to tell the truth. It's as simple as that. To say: 'this is good music, and this is bad music', to be very 'Ellingtonian' about it (P22).

Key here was critical integrity rooted in separation from the constraints and demands of music industry promotion:

the other school of thought is that people like myself, and hopefully other critics who have a certain amount of integrity... [are] still very relevant. Because people actually want to read something which is insightful, and which isn't marketing. Which isn't just y'know: 'this is this is the latest thing, this is amazing, blah, blah, blah' (P22).

6.4.2: Brand 'collaboration'

However, P22's approach is rare. What music publications endure today are more dependent on lucrative brand partnership than ever, producing what dance music journalist Shawn Reynaldo calls as 'a rising tide of branded content' overrunning popular music discourse (Reynaldo, 2023). While often occupying the same digital and print spaces as music journalism, and adopting similar stylistic norms, this material is 'advertorial' content, a form of 'brand journalism' whereby corporations attempt 'to absorb and redeploy journalistic labour and, simultaneously, to ensure that that labour does not come across as commercially obvious' (Serazio, 2020, p. 689). This can, at times, produce a risibly circular cultural landscape, as with a recent gig series headlined by Ezra Collective, sponsored by shoe brand Dr Martens and covered/promoted in an exclusive editorial on *Crack Magazine* - itself sponsored by Dr Martens (*Ezra Collective to headline Made Strong London with Dr. Martens in Peckham*, 2023).

What is certainly clear is that the LJS is now hot property for many consumer brands. There are manifold examples of LJS musicians and/or their music being recruited to advertise musical equipment and 'lifestyle' products (clothing, alcohol, and cars). These types of consumer good have a long history of advertising through music, with a specific legacy of marketing with jazz (Laver, 2015).

Some campaigns are framed as collaborations, a discursive technique which minimises the underpinning financial exchange. For example, drummer Yussef Dayes' sale of an unreleased track, 'Blackfriars', on vinyl for sale alongside a limited-run tracksuit from Dutch streetwear brand Patta, adopted the 'semiotics and the economics of "the drop" – the release of a limited-edition product, frequently a co-operation between two well-known brands, or even artists, which is heavily publicised and sure to be sold out soon' (Davey, 2020; Eismann, 2023, pp. 289–290). Here, the flow of credibility and cultural capital – and, indeed, payment between artist and brand – is unclear, and potentially multidirectional. This also feels like a collaboration 'authentic' to the artist, and the scene. The wearing of casual clothing and/or cutting-edge

fashion by musicians and audience is touted in press and promotional literature as a marker of distinction from the stereotypical, and manifestly passé uniform of mainstream jazz acts (besuited) and audience (turtleneck/tweed) frequently cited by journalists (e.g. Hutchinson, 2018; Haidari, 2019; Dwyer, 2023).

The polygeneric aspects of LJS practice seem key to the appeal for brand agencies. Ezra Collective's starring role in a 2022 campaign for Johnny Walker Black Label whisky, for example, was predicated on 'their genre-fusing progressive music', with 'each instrument add[ing] another layer... demonstrating the perfectly balanced blending of flavours' in the product (*New Johnnie Walker Campaign Majors on Black Label*, 2022). Likewise, Moses Boyd's campaign for Meantime Brewing Company also functions by analogising their brewing process with Boyd's 'pioneering' processes of blending, mixture, collaboration and musical discovery (*Meantime Brewing Company 'Pioneered in Greenwich' by Pitch Marketing Group*, 2021). These campaigns deploy the overt celebration of musical mixture as sonic metaphors for the product being sold, with the scene's reputation as a visible, valuably diverse formation rounding out the promotional messaging. Meier suggests this is commonplace in music branding where 'difference – in terms of either content or approach – has emerged as the new standard' (Meier, 2017, p. 100).

More distant, and perhaps surprising, incidences of brand 'collaborations' with the LJS also exist, including major financial service providers (e.g. *Klarna announces support for new UK festival - We Out Here*, 2019). In part, this stems from the malleable quality of jazz as a signifier. Its fluctuating, unstable cultural status seen the term enlisted to brand a dizzying array of products and services, most of which have little discernible connection to the music (Laver, 2015, p. 2). Being bracketed as jazz invites interpretations that are at once overdetermined and problematically indistinct, and those seeking to cut through in the popular music landscape can see their work pigeonholed as a byword for elite consumption. This is an association decades in the making by advertisers, music industry promoters, and film and television producers, who have 'explicitly utilise[d] [jazz's] presumed artistic integrity and cultural cachet' for these ends (Atkins and Parra, 2013, p. 136; see also Gabbard, 2016).

Despite the scene's efforts elsewhere to dispense with these associations, the proximity of jazz to elite consumption returns when we examine other brand campaigns, with luxury goods a common theme. Garcia, for example, has modelled for Italian high fashion brand Bottega Venetta, and promoted Fossil watches in collaboration with fashion magazine Vogue (Pometsey, 2021; Black Dog Films, 2023), while Shabaka Hutchings has played at a Louis Vuitton show during Paris Fashion Week (Yeung, 2020). Elsewhere, pianist Ashley Henry anchored an

advertorial piece for the Audi Q8, hosted on high-end fashion site Mr. Porter (*An Audience With Mr Ashley Henry*, 2018). We could look also to a 2023 advertorial featuring singer Poppy Ajudha discussing her passion for Dior jewellery as another indication of the multiple linkages between the LJS and ‘aspirational’ branding campaigns for exclusive consumer products (Hendren, 2023).²³⁸

Artist manager P37 helpfully summarised the complexities of working with brands. They suggested a certain straightforwardness in the transactional nature of the artist-brand relationship, that could afford *greater* autonomy to artists than a conventional recording contract:

There's a neutrality there...: 'well, you're just a brand, I know what you want out of it, you want to look cool. I need money to pay my band. So let's meet in the middle'... It does offer autonomy. And really, that's what artists are looking for. They want to be able to create, without limitation (P37).

They also argued that a reliance on brand endorsements was born from necessity:

If there was another option, I guarantee you that musicians would not be, like, running after Louis Vuitton... people need to look at the bigger picture before they judge people for that stuff (P37).

None of this is to crudely write off the artists involved, nor the content they promote, out of commitments to artistic purity unsullied by commerce. As Jonathan Hardy argues, the outcomes of branded content ‘cannot be read off either in terms of aesthetic value, creative independence, or brand control. There are no grounds to celebrate or condemn such work *in toto*’ (Hardy, 2021, p. 225).

However, issues *did* emerge in interviews regarding music culture’s dependence on the patronage of consumer brands. Festival worker P24 acknowledged that ‘brand sponsorship is one of the only ways [artists] can hope to support [themselves]’, but added:

I hate that! ...Music shouldn't be a beauty contest. And there's inevitably some artists that won't get to do things based on how they look... [depending on] how easily they are stylised, by a certain brand. It's not cool... it's not a solution for sustaining music (P24).

The notion of music as a ‘beauty contest’ revives the resentments expressed in 6.2.1 at participating in the normative visual economy of social media. LJS musicians have

²³⁸ Ajudha has moved away from jazz, but came up through the scene, featuring on a number of releases and in much of the press coverage (Aponysus, 2018).

acknowledged this elsewhere. Ajudha, for example, has expressed disappointment at her appearance being front-and-centre in a 2019 LJS feature in respected fashion magazine *iD* (Whitehouse, 2018b)t:

I was on the first page and it said, 'Jazz can be hot'... I remember that feeling of, 'Oh, she's just on the first page 'cos she looks good and she's not even a jazz musician.' (Marmot, 2024, p. 252).

These forms of brand objectification, while nothing new, underscore issues at stake with reliance on brand sponsorship and promotional income. The 'beauty contest' of brand collaboration entrenches wider tendencies in the contemporary economy of visibility. Financial security, when popular music is primarily a promotional strategy, flows along well-worn and tired lines toward those deemed conventionally attractive, according to gendered, raced, fatphobic, ageist, and ableist lines, *re-inscribing* these same normative standards and disadvantaging those who fail to meet them or who are unwilling to 'play the game' (Elias, Gill and Scharff, 2017; O'Connor, 2023).

The imperative to court brands also further exacerbates tendencies toward cultural inflation discussed in 6.3. Marketers seek cultural niches proximate to the 'underground' as sources of credibility, but a certain threshold of mainstream appeal is also necessary. This is partly what makes the LJS an attractive proposition for the advertising sector, as a 'crossover' formation on the cusp of the commercial mainstream. However, its audience – certainly at the beginnings of the scene's emergence into the wider world in the mid-2010s – remained, in reality, fairly small. Record label worker P11 described a process of simulating scale in this context:

I remember Gilles [Peterson] did this piece of content... it was like a partnership with Jaguar and The Atlantic. They were like 'Gilles, tell us about something like really cool that's happening in London'. He was like, 'well, yeah, like jazz is cool'... it felt almost slightly outlandish - maybe it was a stretch to be like 'this is the new big thing', because it was like the new small thing, do you know what I mean? (P11)

Peterson's status as the premier 'taste entrepreneur' is reaffirmed in this luxury car brand collaboration early in the scene's emergence, enabling him to set the terms of the LJS narrative as it entered the wider media industry ecology (*The British Impact | Gilles Peterson on Jazz*, 2016). Here, we can see how brand collaborations can serve to entrench wider promotional tendencies toward novelty, claims of originality, and place a myopic media focus upon individuals with existing profile, to the detriment of longer histories, wider scenes, and less well-known figures.

Evidently, musicians are faced with limited options to finance their artistic pursuits today. But, viewing these examples in the round, one wonders how easily the commitments to accessibility and anti-elitism that structure the scene, discussed in Chapter Three, sit alongside the patronage of high-end clothing brands or luxury car manufacturers. We can also reflect upon what the enthusiasm for LJS endorsements among creative agencies employed by these brands tells us about their imagined or intended audience. The incorporation of London jazz into promotional efforts for conspicuous consumer goods suggesting that, despite a relative absence of attention to class in LJS discourse, the *marketing* industry perceive the ‘London jazz brand’ as appealing to ‘diverse, engaged and well-heeled audiences’ (*Corporate Partnerships | EFG London Jazz Festival*, no date). Such corporate entanglements provide another point of clarification and complication regarding the narrative construction of the LJS as an oppositional, anti-establishment formation.

6.4.3: Brands and the fragility of scenic infrastructure

Ultimately, the key point of tension here surrounds music’s purpose, rather than its value as such. Brands evidently view LJS acts and their surrounding community of production and consumption as important, intangible assets. But the ‘colonisation’ of popular music cultures by branding and promotion removes all specificity from hitherto distinct musics, turning them from a cultural end in themselves into a promotional means, using increasingly sophisticated and occluded ways to signal authenticity and ‘obscure their promotional intent’ (Meier, 2017, p. 158). As this chapter demonstrates, musicians are acutely aware of the fickle nature of music industry interest and the dizzying pace of boom-and-bust cycles of attention and promotional enthusiasm. Many thus seek to make hay while the sun shines, grasping any and all opportunities for remuneration. Given the substantial burdens of promotion discussed in 6.2, and the enduring, limiting effects of curatorial power evident in 6.3, this is understandable.

However, the reliance of music workers upon advertising money, and the internalisation of promotional logics, matters. The current settlement cedes power to corporations operating far outside the music industries, whose relationship to the musical communities with which they work is at best transactional, but more often extractive, and whose pursuit of fleeting trends is manifestly *more* pronounced even than the music industries proper (Meier, 2017, p. 157).²³⁹ Beyond the sponsorship of individual musicians, this leaves vital scenic, promotional and

²³⁹ Although, of course, organisations *within* the music industries are often no less mercenary in their treatment of musicians and scenes.

production infrastructure troublingly beholden to corporate largesse. As a result, apparently stable nodes that have been key to the LJS's development have disappeared virtually overnight.

One pertinent example is the surprise shuttering of the Red Bull Music Academy (RBMA) in April 2019 (Hogan, 2019). RBMA was heralded as an exemplary form of collaborative branding (Seidler, 2019), with the energy drink manufacturer funding a radio station, a music journalism outlet, and a global programme of gigs, panels and conferences since the late 1990s. Although ultimately a 'sponsorship project, because its basic function [was] to promote the brand through cultural events', the light-touch approach taken to branding and a culturally sensitive approach to the scenes it hosted made it an 'institution within the music world... without the political and public constraints and obligations that public cultural institutions have' (Holt, 2015, p. 256). Its music journalism arm 'The Red Bulletin' was also a key piece of discursive infrastructure, with high budgets, production values, and seemingly extensive editorial freedom. This provided space for writers to document emerging music cultures, hosting much nuanced coverage of the LJS (e.g. Mao, 2015; Smith, 2016; Warren, 2018; Davies and Warren, 2019; Boyd and Kinoshi, 2021).

The funding provided by Red Bull enabled the kinds of considered music journalism in ever-shorter supply elsewhere, as cash-strapped music publications increasingly turn to advertorial content. Closer to the LJS, Worldwide FM provided another relatively blank canvas for Peterson, forming what journalist and DJ Paul Bradshaw called 'a diverse, global, forward thinking, progressive community' on air, framing the station as 'a legal pirate radio station' akin to Peterson's early illegal broadcasting days illegally (Bradshaw, 2022). But this comparison underscores a crucial point of difference: where older, pre-digital music scene infrastructure such as pirate radio was vulnerable to legal intervention (James, 2021, pp. 56–79), the current model of corporate sponsorship is fragile in different ways. Worldwide FM's reliance on the largesse of digital file transfer company WeTransfer saw the station close amid economic headwinds facing the digital economy in 2022, which have imperilled the independent radio sector more generally (Ahmet, 2022; Bradshaw, 2022; Heath, 2022a).

There is a shared awareness of the shaky foundations beneath contemporary 'independent' music. This was evident in the anxious and despairing responses to Bandcamp's acquisition, first by media giant Epic Games in March 2022 and then by music licensing company Songtradr in October 2023 (Pahwa, 2022; Voynovskaya, 2023). Bandcamp's accessibility to all users, its knowledgeable editorial team, and 'relatively low commission rate of 15 percent' has seen it become an essential piece of infrastructure for independent musicians, in particular, since its

creation in 2008, with its ‘ease of use and patina of goodwill’ setting it apart from major streaming platforms (Reynaldo, 2022; Ruiz, 2022).²⁴⁰

Similar anxieties abound in music journalism, made evident by the outcry following the highly influential music site Pitchfork being folded into men’s lifestyle magazine GQ by media conglomerate Condé Nast in 2024 (Powers, 2024).²⁴¹ Much like Bandcamp, it appears to have been financially sustainable, but is of little financial importance to an organisation at the scale of Condé Nast during media industry upheaval. In such a thoroughly ‘financialised media economy’, the current profitability of these media properties matters less promise of future returns to investors (James, 2024).

Promotionalism understands music and culture in the aggregate, and sees scenes and sounds as fungible, creating a music industrial landscape that is short-termist in the extreme. It is worth remembering that, while the music industries feel substantial for those who participate in them, in the context of even the wider cultural industries, the sums of money involved are relatively small, and are smaller still in the context of the advertising sector – or indeed, as with the above instances, the energy drink and digital storage markets. For companies operating at this scale, the billion dollar-plus lifetime payouts to artists from a platform like Bandcamp, or the operating budget of Worldwide FM, constitute fractions of a percentage point on their balance sheets, and are treated accordingly (Brown, 2024). The affective and symbolic investment that music makers and fans place in these organisations (alongside the meaningful, sustainable income source that Bandcamp provides for thousands of musicians) is ancillary to the business models of their corporate patrons, ultimately disposable in service to the bottom line.

These examples show how undergirding logics of contemporary investment, with short horizons and a demand for immediate, high yields, is inimical to small-scale durability for music culture, understood holistically: musicians, music writers, curators, performance spaces – music scenes. While temporary endorsements of brands might keep the wolves from the door of individual musicians, at scale this amounts to a resignation to brand colonisation that leaves music-making poorer as a whole (Meier, 2017, pp. 132–138). Similarly, the acceptance of corporate funding by music venues or broadcasters seems unavoidable amid stark economic turmoil in the cultural sector. This seems an acceptable compromise with the hands-off

²⁴⁰ LJS musicians have also enjoyed regular editorial endorsement on Bandcamp, reflecting the tastes of Chief Curator Andrew Jervis (e.g. Jervis and Moses, 2023).

²⁴¹ Albums by prominent LJS figures have been reviewed on Pitchfork, with Nubya Garcia’s 2020 release *Source* receiving the coveted ‘Best New Music’ label (Bloom, 2018; Beta, 2020; Ruiz, 2020; Cardew, 2021b, 2021a; Bromfield, 2023).

corporate sponsorship models offered by RBMA or Worldwide FM. But the issue is less the interventions of brands into cultural production – whether crassly commercial, or organic, integrated ‘collaborations’ - rather, the model of financial dependence is the problem. As we have seen, reliance even on benign brand munificence has left much of the infrastructure that nurtured and sustained the LJS (and myriad other music scenes) permanently teetering, Jenga-like, on the verge of collapse.

6.5: Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the complex sphere of promotion and branding surrounding the LJS, beginning by exploring the opportunities and many challenges presented by the subsumption of music promotion by social media. I have highlighted how, contrary to accounts of digital ‘democratisation’, the expanded bureaucratic demands and breached participatory limits that accompany digital self-branding for musicians has been predominantly experienced as burdensome and invasive, with scene members seeking to offload this labour onto specialist third-parties to make time and mental space for creative work. This discussion also pointed to an incipient divide between the growing attention paid to jazz-based ‘platform musicians’ and the internal values of the LJS, where a commitment to social, in-person musicking still holds sway and explicit efforts to grab audience attention on-platform are deemed inauthentic and, potentially, un-jazz.

With self-promotion proving so arduous for musicians, and under conditions of musical hyperabundance, dedicated intermediary figures hold enduring sway in the industry landscape. I focused particularly on the ‘curatorial power’ exerted by Gilles Peterson on the shape and trajectory of the LJS. While emphasising that his dedication to platforming a wide array of musics is regularly celebrated by participants and commentators, the section traced some core concerns regarding the outsized influence of Peterson as an industry gatekeeper, particularly as an ‘aesthetic bottleneck’. I contextualised Peterson’s efforts within a wider ‘promotional assemblage’, where his curatorial activities interacted, in complex and unclear ways, with other gatekeeping activities by MSPs, which together proved influential in shaping the sounds and musicians who have become most closely associated with the ‘London jazz explosion’. I then moved on to discuss other elements within this assemblage, namely record label workers, PRs and publicists, examining the role of promotional storytelling in crystallising dominant scene narratives. The section traced how a saturated music-discursive landscape has made for a tendency toward cultural inflation and the production of hype, which has propagated simplistic accounts of the scene’s novelty and self-made qualities, at the expense (and to the chagrin) of

those who have fallen by the promotional wayside. I also discussed how promotional narratives are subject to the 'rationalising/racialising logic of capital in cultural production', in ways that have again drastically simplified discussions of the cultural politics of race in the scene, and confined some musicians who fail to match extant promotional-racial formula to the margins.

Finally, I have argued that the problematic simplifications that have circulated in LJS discourse are in part a function of the rapid convergence of music journalism with branded copywriting. I have shown that the waning of critical, thoughtful and funded music writing allows PR to proliferate unchecked, clouding the promotional landscape in ways that hinder honest and informed assessments of contemporary popular music. Brand financing is also increasingly inescapable in the music industries proper, and I have traced some of the themes that emerge in LJS brand campaigns. While providing valuable income in straitened circumstances for music-making, I argue that, with brands holding all of the cards in these processes, artists remain vulnerable, and a dependence on the interest of predominantly luxury goods manufacturers tends to benefit those with existing profile, entrenching extant imbalances of attention within the jazz landscape. I have then 'zoomed out' to apply an equivalent critique to the current brittle infrastructure of (quasi-)independent music, suggesting that the withdrawal of sponsorship by Red Bull and WeTransfer, and the imperilled state of Pitchfork and Bandcamp, point to shallow foundations for incubating and amplifying the scenes of the future.

7: Conclusion

7.1: Introduction

This concluding chapter consists of two parts. In 7.2, I draw together findings from the previous four chapters to answer my first research question regarding the LJS's formation during a period of (re)politicisation of popular culture, while outlining some of the scholarly contributions produced in the process. The second section, 7.3, does the same for my second research question, pertaining to the role of platformisation.

7.2: London jazz and politics

This thesis has examined the growth in popularity and attention for jazz in London through the mid-2010s into the 2020s. It has contextualised this jazz 'explosion' within two key facets of the current conjuncture. First, (re-)politicisation: the LJS has been widely interpreted as an inherently political formation, coming of age amid intense, ongoing upheaval and punctuated with repeated explosive ruptures (Grenfell, Windrush, COVID). As such, this is a period when, 'the national frame' has been 'especially heavy, constraining and troubling' (Stephens, 2022, p. 12).

The LJS is emphatically a product of these instabilities. Social critique threads through discourse by and about the scene, with LJS participants taking aim at institutional racism within the scene and British politics, and particularly the intersecting inequities of race and gender in the British jazz landscape.

The project of the LJS is frequently positioned as one of *reclamation*. Such a framing employs a vision of jazz in its best or truest form as a Black dance music. This reading of the jazz tradition relies on a partial telling of the music's history, in the process advancing the performance practices and aesthetic principles of London jazz as a return to some sort of musical essence through the incorporation of popular Black Atlantic musical forms, wresting the genre from an ossified and exclusionary jazz 'establishment' in the process. The thesis thus traces how dominant readings of the LJS understand the scene as a vanguardist project, 'rescuing' a benighted genre and overturning perceptions of jazz as the preserve of old white men: hard to play, difficult to listen to, and expensive to learn. Such perceptions are neatly summarised by jazz journalist Chris May:

the new scene exists in a parallel universe to the established jazz world, but it is shaking the walls and bricks have started to fall. The new music has an energy and sense of community that could free British jazz from the sizeable wasteland of museum-piece

repertory music for audiences looking to relive the past. The new jazz mixes cerebralism with soul and is successfully bringing jazz back to the people. Like the first stirrings of jazz in New Orleans a century ago, this is rebel music which has not forgotten how to have a good time (May, 2019).

While I show throughout that there are some elements of truth in these accounts, part of the project has been adding overdue nuance to this picture. I have shown repeatedly that the narrative processes through which the LJS has been lauded and exceptionalist regularly employ a stereotypical vision of jazz that elides and excludes much of the fullness of jazz practice, its relationship to other forms of music, and indeed its complex articulations to racial, ethnic and national identity.

However, the primary purpose of this thesis has not been to simply complicate or push back against the ways that partial, problematic and at times caricatured accounts of jazz culture have been folded into the 'London jazz explosion'. Instead the thesis is animated by a version of the question posed by the musicologist Christopher Small, and taken up by Guthrie Ramsey: 'Why are these people making this music at this time and in this place?' (Small, quoted in Ramsey, 2022, p. 1) – and, crucially, *why does it matter that they call it jazz?* Rather than litigating the historical accuracy or otherwise of the uses and abuses of jazz history and culture in contemporary London jazz, the thesis tries to unpack what the use of the term jazz *does* when deployed in this context, and what this tells us about its attendant, ambivalent socio-political implications.

As Chapter Three traces, while the institutionalisation of jazz education has for many represented a problematic form of sacralisation, the conservatoire has still provided the basis for the majority of LJS players. This chapter thus advances our understanding of the complexities of learning jazz on the London scene: its problematic institutional biases, its entanglements with informal provision, and the enduring, perhaps surprising, role of canonical American repertoire both within and without the conservatoire. The chapter suggests the concept of 'jazz populism' as a way of conceptualising anti-jazz-establishment sentiment, as a rallying cry *and* marketing device. I underscore how acts of distancing from non-commercial institutions also reflect a corollary enthusiasm within the scene for 'market empowerment' that ascribes popularity and financial gain with a resistant valence as a means of circumventing the (commercially marginal) British jazz 'mainstream'.

In Chapter Four, I also demonstrate how, even as the scene has partially disavowed ties to the jazz tradition at home and in the US, its continued association with the genre and its attendant infrastructure has opened up performance opportunities at new venues emerging as part of urban regeneration schemes. The chapter highlights the profound ambivalence of the LJS's

enfolding into artwashing practices under the rubric of ‘neoliberal multiculturalism’, analysed alongside the prohibition of grime and drill performance and the criminalisation of its creators. The chapter complements and extends work by Dale Chapman and Eric Porter on jazz, neoliberalism, place-making and the city, bringing this literature to bear on the British context.

Also significant is the is tangible decolonial thread in the scene’s output, animating much of the most rewarding and aesthetically striking music to emerge from the LJS – work by figures like Sarathy Korwar, Shabaka Hutchings, Cassie Kinoshi, Binker and Moses, and Nérija. This music is very much of its time and place, rendering into sound the restless processes of stylistic and cultural collision that catalysed in the dance across London, not through bland or superficial musical mixture but via the generative friction of genuine hybridity.

More precisely, the best of the LJS is intensely of its *time(s)* and its *place(s)*: music which indexes and calls into being its complex ‘roots and routes’. The orientation toward many, concurrent musical and cultural temporalities – hidden pasts and potential futures – and toward the multiple, geographically dispersed origins and paths of travel that constitute the condition of diaspora, are two axes integral to making (and understanding) London jazz, providing the warp and the weft of scenic identity.²⁴² While ‘Black British jazz’ is avowedly local, in its diasporic ‘plural richness’ and its steadfast refusal to forget the role of past injustice in present oppression (Gilroy, 1993, p. 81), it both sutures and makes visible the scars of Trafford’s ‘post-colonial cut’, discussed in Chapter Two.

In both the explicit political declarations of some scene participants, and the politicised affect of the LJS live vibe, my contention is also that the scene’s ‘explosion’, and its unanticipated resonance among wider audiences, has been intertwined with broader dynamics in British political life, in particular the unexpected opening up of political culture in the late 2010s.

This period saw the opposition Labour party taking a sharp, surprising leftward turn under the leadership of former (and future) backbencher Jeremy Corbyn between 2015-2019. The Corbyn moment was precisely contemporaneous with the LJS’s move from an insular scene to an important node in British popular music and the global jazz world. Without overstating direct connections between scene constituents and Corbyn’s Labour, I *do* want to situate the ascent of the LJS within the wider climate of Corbynism, much of which was only tangentially related to parliamentary politics. This period witnessed a lengthening of the horizon of political

²⁴² Although perhaps over-used and under-theorised in popular discourse, the prominence of multiple overlapping temporalities, mythmaking, and utopian imagining in the LJS invites consideration as Afrofuturist practice (see Eshun, 2003) – or Indofuturist, the description that percussionist Sarathy Korwar uses for his work (Clarke and Korwar, 2022). While not an avenue pursued in the thesis, it could be a rich frame for further study of contemporary British jazz.

possibility in British political culture, even as material conditions and parliamentary politics worsened and drifted rightwards, respectively.

Certainly, there is a significant overlap between the politicised affects of London jazz performance discussed in detail in Chapter Four, and the mode of address adopted within more explicit left-wing formations in this period. Activists and organisers sought to harness the utopian potential of manifestations of collective joy both for electoral ends and as part of an attempted wider cultural transformation. Jeremy Gilbert, drawing upon the later work of Mark Fisher, has used the umbrella term 'Acid Corbynism' to describe this project, with 'acid' being used capaciously to index 'an attitude of improvisatory creativity and belief in the possibility of seeing the world differently in order to improve it' (Gilbert, 2017; see also Phull and Stronge, 2017; Fisher, Ambrose and Reynolds, 2018, pp. 759–779). Much political organising in this period drew 'strength and inspiration from cultural forms that promote feelings of collective joy' looking in particular to sub- or countercultural popular music – music festivals, grime, and indeed London jazz - as a means to overcome 'the alienating individualism of capitalist culture' (Gilbert, 2017). Building on Gilbert's concept (and dropping the suffix), it seems obvious that London jazz at its most effervescent and incisive (particularly experienced live) had a marked anti-elitist, 'jazz populist', critical-multicultural and utopic bent that can helpfully be understood as 'acid'. And here, surely the utopian, critical impulse of jazz and its long history as an articulation of emancipatory politics is key. As a music and a culture, jazz contains the uniquely transformative capacities of improvisation. It demonstrates a singular ability to move and shift through time, space and cultural position, while maintaining a central, essential connection - the 'changing same'. It models a future, better social world through the participatory practice of antiphony. Above all, jazz since its inception, and in the very fact of its existence, represents a defiant, joyous and uncompromising expression of the undeniable humanity of its creators, in the face of the systematic denial of their personhood. This is what has made it a potent vehicle for social critique in the London jazz context, even as mediations of the scene have often looked past these crucial aspects of jazz practice.

One future implication of the thesis could thus be to place the LJS, and my theorisation of its politicised joyful vibe, in conversation with these existing research threads. Drawing London jazz into these analyses would helpfully broaden our understanding of contemporary convivial left culture, and in particular bring the cultural production and practices of people of colour more into frame. Approaching the LJS in this way helps us both situate the scene properly within its conjuncture, but also underscores how London jazz is of real significance as an

expression of that conjuncture, one which has much to teach us about British political (multi)culture in the 2010s-2020s.

7.3: London jazz and platforms

My second main area of enquiry has pertained to the articulation of London jazz with platformisation: the subsumption of ever-greater parts of cultural and social life by digital platforms, and the attendant shifts in cultural production. This has also been drawn out through a strategic (although only partial) rejection of platform logics, particularly with regard to social media documentation and promotion. Here, the fragmentary glimpses afforded by social media played a core role in growing the reputation of the LJS. It is within this context that I put forward the concept of 'scenic allure' for explaining the LJS's popularity, an aura of subcultural vibrancy that assumes particular resonance in a city where grassroots music communities are imperilled and fleeting.

The thesis has shown how participants felt that the intense and intimate aesthetic sociality of the LJS in its 'incubation' phase, at venues like TRC or nights like Steam Down, was compromised by the arrival of newcomers drawn by social media footage, who diluted, and often whitened, these tight-knit spaces. This ambivalence regarding digital documenting has also extended to record production, with many perceiving an experience of *relative aesthetic shortfall* when LJS participants have sought to capture and circulate their music beyond a gig setting.

On this point, I have argued that the scene's highly-prized sonic hybridity has created a stumbling block for some musicians. By producing records that are assessed according to countervailing and competing aesthetic codes drawn from different genres, many of these recordings have fallen between two stools. Those musicians who have successfully negotiated these challenges have astutely leveraged competing discourses of musical authenticity, derived from jazz orthodoxy, on one hand, and club culture, on the other. But I argue that *both* of these approaches have flourish under conditions of platformisation. The emphasis on fetishised, analogue production techniques and in-the-moment recording imbue the direct-to-disc recording with a valued aura of rarity in the contemporary moment. Meanwhile, the wholesale embrace of cutting-edge electronic synthesis and stylistic hybridity by acts like Moses Boyd and Joe Armon-Jones foreground a kind of virtuosic technicity, and writes contemporary London jazz into a lineage of Black technological music production.

My analysis of self-branding practices and the labour of promotion shouldered by London jazz musicians has demonstrated that social media promotion has become a new terrain of contestation regarding jazz belonging and (il)legitimate methods of gaining an audience. This discussion pointed to a divide between internet-native ‘platform musicians’ in jazz (Zhang and Negus, 2021) – of growing prominence in popular discourse – and *post-digital* LJS musicians, who regard the stage as the key site for musicking. Here, this work complements and complicates recent work on social media jazz musicking (Kaye, 2022).

Central to the analysis of the entanglement of platformisation and the LJS is the concept of *post-digital malaise*, a negative disposition toward ubiquitous mediation that conjoins a ‘macro’ sense of crisis with the ‘micro’ experience of everyday platform frustration. I suggest that this permeates scenic discourse, values and practices, and explains much of the scene’s success, with the LJS offering potential audiences ‘real’ musicianship and ‘authentic’, intense aesthetic-social experience at a time of generalised anxiety regarding the degradation of culture due to platform encroachment. Attending to the LJS using this framing – one which foregrounds the *ambivalence* of the digital and the *partial* platformisation of jazz practice – is a key contribution of the thesis, providing a model for researching other contemporary jazz cultures in a way that moves past the tendency toward feast or famine in jazz studies: either focusing on wholly virtual jazz practice, or ignoring the digital entirely.

That the time is ripe for a post-digital turn in jazz scholarship was recently made clear in an interview with noted saxophonist Soweto Kinch. Kinch framed the launch of his recent BBC radio show – full of LJS releases – as responding both to an apotheosis of output and attention in British jazz, and to a deep need in the current moment, employing an argument at once old (and deeply jazz), and to-the-minute:

[Jazz] is anti-AI. It's the antidote to the algorithm... Music based on individual interpretation and personal stories, people playing music together in improvised contexts – [it] really feels like a panacea, which is why it's getting more popular... music which feels authentic, which feels uncontrived, and not built by formula (quoted on BBC Radio 4: Today, 04/04/2024, 2024).

This thesis has sought to provide a rich, nuanced, and critical account of London jazz over the past decade or so, in part by way of response to some of the more reductive narratives that have come to define contemporary jazz in London. My research interest flows from a belief in the signal importance of the scene and the traditions that it has syncretised – political, cultural musical – and its ongoing relevance as a formation that has much to teach us about

contemporary culture in Britain. While more excitable accounts of London's 'new jazz generation' have been overly hasty to ascribe a coherent politics to the scene, or turn a blind eye to complexity and contradiction, what has never been up for debate is the urgency and significance of the LJS in eroding the institutional whiteness of British jazz. The ongoing scandal surrounding comments made in March 2024 by saxophonist Martin Speake provides a dishearteningly recent example of how much more needs to be done. Speake, a senior tutor at Trinity Laban, inveighed against Black 'victimhood', and the Black Lives Matter movement, suggesting that there was a 'war on whiteness' in British jazz, and that he and his white compatriots were losing gig bookings due to excess opportunities provided to Black musicians (quoted in Holder, 2024; see also Williams, 2024). The support for Speake in subsequent discussion, including from notable jazz figures, suggests that these views remain prevalent in the British jazz landscape (Lebrecht, 2024; Leggett, 2024; Mwamba, 2024).

This thesis thus concludes with a demand for an uncompromising, inclusive, radically anti-racist jazz in Britain. In this respect, London jazz has led the way.

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Discography

- Binker and Moses 2015 *Dem Ones* London: Gearbox
- Charlie Stacey 2022 *The Light Beyond Time* Haarlem: Night Dreamer
- David Mrakpor 2022 *Lonely* London: Jazz Re:freshed
- Emma-Jean Thackrey 2020 *Um-Yang* Haarlem: Night Dreamer
- Ezra Collective *You Can't Steal My Joy* 2019 London: Enter the Jungle
- Ezra Collective, Swindle and JME 2020 *Quest For Coin II* London: Enter the Jungle
- Gary Bartz and Maisha 2020 *Night Dreamer Direct-to-Disc Sessions* Haarlem: Night Dreamer
- IDLES 2018 *Joy As an Act of Resistance* London: Partisan
- Joe Henderson 1966 *Mode for Joe* Los Angeles: Blue Note
- Kaidi Tatham 2011 *Kaidi's Five* London: Jazz Re:freshed
- Kamasi Washington 2015 *The Epic* Los Angeles: Brainfeeder
- Kendrick Lamar 2015 'Alright' Los Angeles: Top Dawg Entertainment
- Knucks 2022 *ALPHA PLACE* London: Nodaysoff CC
- Madlib 2003 *Shades of Blue* Los Angeles: Blue Note
- Makaya McCraven 2018 *Universal Beings* Chicago: International Anthem
- Maxwell Owin and Joe Armon-Jones 2017 *Idiom* London: Yam Records
- Moses Boy 2020 *Dark Matter* London: Exodus Records
- Moses Boyd 2016 'Rye Lane Shuffle' London: Exodus Records
- Néríja 2019 *Blume* London: Domino
- Nubya Garcia 2020 *Source* Beverley Hills, CA: Concord Jazz
- Nubya Garcia 2021 *Source # We Move* Beverley Hills, CA: Concord Jazz
- Pharoah Sanders and Floating Points 2022 *Promises* New York: Luaka Bop
- Sarathy Korwar and Upaj Collective 2020 *Night Dreamer Direct-to-Disc Sessions* Haarlem: Night Dreamer
- Soccer96 and Alabaster DePlume 2020 *I Was Gonna Fight Fascism* London: Moshi Moshi
- Sons of Kemet 2018 *Your Queen is a Reptile* New York: Impulse!
- Steam Down 2021 *Five Fruit* New York: Decca
- The Original Dixieland Jazz Band 1928 *Livery Stable Blues* Camden, NJ: Victor
- Tom Misch and Yussef Dayes 2020 *What Kinda Music* London: Beyond the Groove
- Us3 1992 'Cantaloop' Los Angeles: Blue Note
- Various Artists 1996 *The New Groove* Los Angeles: Blue Note

Various Artists 2004 *Blue Note Revisited* Los Angeles: Blue Note

Various Artists 2018 *We Out Here* London: Brownswood Recordings

Various Artists 2020 *Blue Note Re:Imagined* Los Angeles: Blue Note

Various Artists 2022 *Blue Note Re:Imagined II* Los Angeles Blue Note

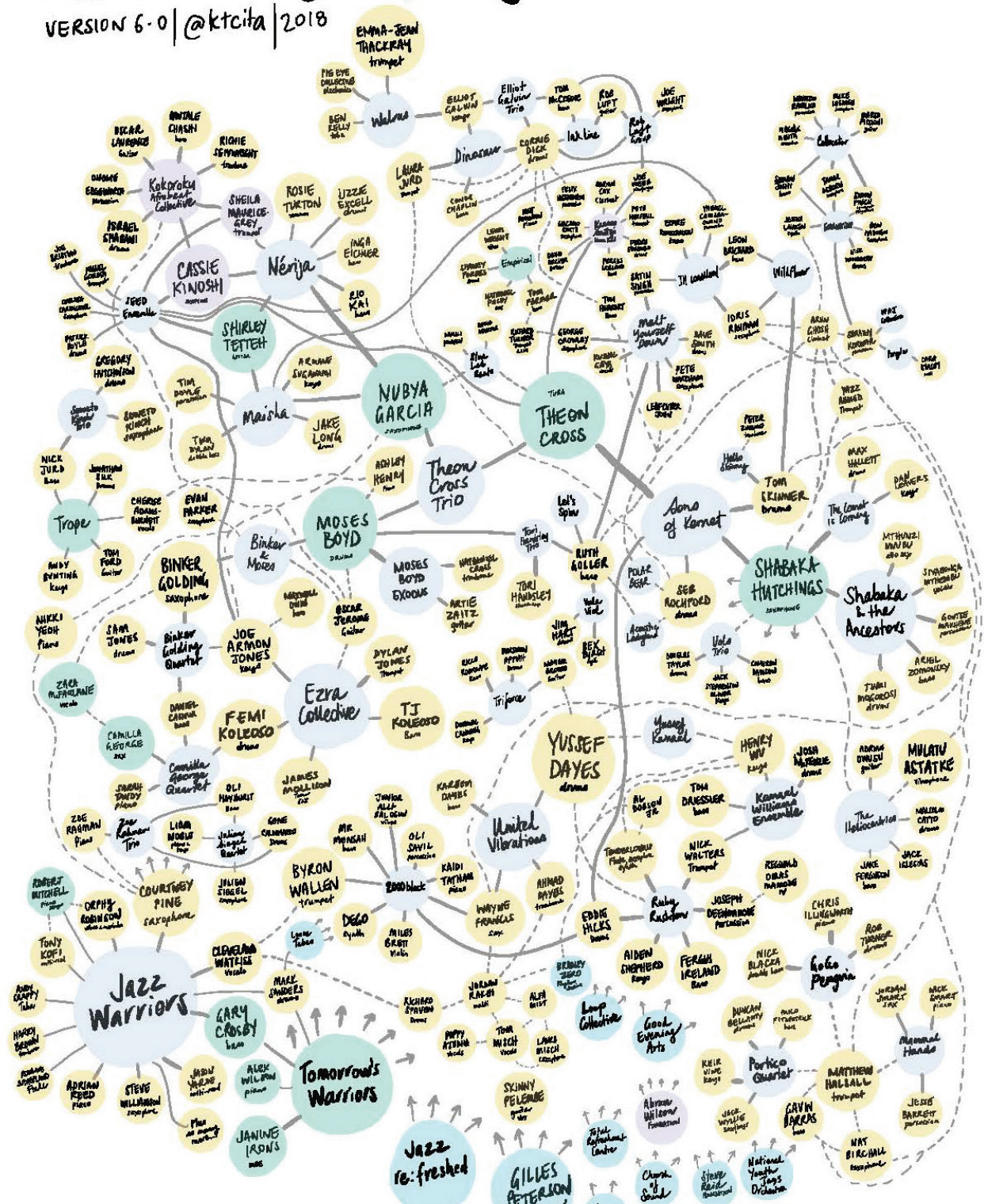
Various Artists 2023 *London Brew* Beverley Hills, CA: Concord Jazz

Yussef Kamaal 2016 *Black Focus* London: Brownswood Recordings

Appendix 1: London Jazz Map

The London* jazz family tree

VERSION 6.0 | @kctita | 2018



KEY

- MUSICIAN
- BAND
- TOMORROW'S WARRIORS
- SUPPORTER, LABEL, FOUNDATION
- Band member
- - - Former member or occasional collaborator
- * Plus a little Scotland, Manchester, South Africa, and Ethiopia

This is a personal project initiated in early 2018 from Sydney Australia.

It was created to help me make sense of the amazing London jazz scene.

Apologies for any omissions or mistakes. Done so remotely it's hard to be accurate.

Please edit, grow, and share this so that the scene gets the recognition it deserves.

A high resolution version can be downloaded from www.medium.com/@ktcita

Kimberley Crofts
DESIGNER. SYDNEY @ktcita

Appendix 2: Pseudonym Key

Codename	Roles
P1	Singer, journalist
P2	Pianist, Composer
P3	Journalist, poet
P4	Trumpeter, composer
P5	Agent, promoter, musician
P6	Drummer
P7	Saxophonist
P8	Creative Producer
P9	Singer, producer
P10	Bassist, composer
P11	Record label worker
P12	Writer, broadcaster Strategic consultant, record label worker
P13	worker
P14	Bassist, educator
P15	Record label worker
P16	DJ, writer, broadcaster
P17	Saxophonist
P18	Band manager, club owner
P19	Singer, composer
P20	Charity worker
P21	Drummer
P22	Writer, broadcaster
P23	Artist manager
P24	Festival organiser, creative producer
P25	Guitarist, academic
P26	Music consultant, PR, DJ
P27	Saxophonist, conductor, arranger
P28	Programmer, talent developer
P29	Percussionist
P30	Musician, promoter, programmer
P31	Bandleader, trumpeter
P32	Pianist
P33	DJ, label head, curator
P34	Saxophonist, DJ
P35	Trumpeter, composer
P36	Artist manager
P37	Photographer, event programmer