

Soul, Afrofuturism & the Timeliness of Contemporary Jazz Fusions

Gabriel Solis

Abstract: The rise of jazz-R&B-hip hop fusions in contemporary Los Angeles offers an opportunity to reflect on the ways jazz matters to black audiences today. Drawing on recent Afrofuturist art and theory as well as on Amiri Baraka's analysis of the "changing same" in black music, this essay traces out the significance of work by artists as diverse as Kamasi Washington, Flying Lotus, Thundercat, and Robert Glasper, positing that their music tells us that jazz matters not only in itself, but also in its continuing capacity to engage in cross-genre dialogues for musicians and audiences who hear it as part of a rich continuum of African American musical expression.

We are, it seems, in an age of Afrofuturism. The release of the *Black Panther* feature film in February 2018 was greeted with a spate of think pieces across a range of media, explaining the term *Afrofuturism* for an unfamiliar audience. "T'Challa, also known as the Black Panther, the title character of the blockbuster movie, wasn't the first person to land a spaceship (or something like it) in downtown Oakland, Calif.," starts one such article.¹ Such pieces point back to bandleaders Sun Ra and George Clinton (and sometimes to Jamaican dub artist Lee "Scratch" Perry) to provide background for the film's mix of the old and the new, technology and the spirit, space-age Africa, and, eventually, a sense of diasporic culture that travels in both directions across the Black Atlantic – in ships in the sky rather than the sea – suturing the fissures rent by the middle passage, by war, and by colonial modernity's many terrors.

At the same time, we are in an age of *poly-* or even *omnigenericism* in music. That is, in many cases, musicians and their audiences are liable to connect multiple genres, creating new fusions, and

GABRIEL SOLIS is Professor of Musicology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He is the author of *Thelonious Monk Quartet with John Coltrane at Carnegie Hall* (2013) and *Monk's Music: Thelonious Monk and Jazz History in the Making* (2007).

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even to view all genres of music as potentially available to them. This is notable, if only because of how strongly it represents a break from the immediate past. Over the course of a period from perhaps 1960 to 2000 (to speak in very rough terms), genre became not only the key way to interpret popular music, but one of its most powerful modes of creating a hierarchy of value. From the authenticity – and authority – of rock to the “Disco Sucks” campaign of the 1970s, and from the much-touted “realness” of country music to Wynton Marsalis’s increasingly strange, transphobic comments from the early 1990s on fusion as a kind of musical “cross-dressing,”² Baby Boomers and Generation Xers invested heavily in a discourse of genre purity as a way of attaching value to their chosen object of attention. That discourse seems less and less relevant every year.

Jazz – beyond the singular instance of Sun Ra – seldom enters into discussions of either Afrofuturism or the contemporary omnigenic black music so strongly connected with it. And yet, following the theme of this issue of *Dædalus*, I wish to look at the remarkable presence of jazz (understood broadly) at the heart of precisely these two phenomena. Indeed, despite the prominence of Marsalis’s voice as an arbiter of jazz in the 1990s and 2000s, it is my contention that the turn to stylistic plurality is reasonably seen as a return, a move that echoes and recaptures a crucial element of the ethos that underlaid jazz in the 1970s. My intention in locating jazz in relation to the speculative, Afrofuturist current of our contemporary moment is twofold in relation to claims about why jazz still matters: first, to ask about the music’s contemporary visibility and, second, to ask what we might still learn from it today. Ultimately, in answer to both of these questions, I argue that the relevance of jazz can be seen

in its value to a broad audience and to musicians who may not identify with the genre term “jazz” but who, nonetheless, make music in dialogue with it in one way or another.

If the contemporary meaning of jazz does not necessarily point to either a futurist position or an imbrication in the midst of a broader space of black popular music, its history certainly provides considerable precedent. To a remarkable extent, in fact, seeing the continuing relevance of the music requires an accounting that understands it as having always been more than a narrow style category, always more than simply a musical form. To see it today as the cultural metaphor, artistic movement, and range of sonic signifiers that it most certainly is, it is critical to recognize its broad background.³ Regarding this background, jazz occupied an odd place in the twentieth-century imagination: situated between worlds, it was “both/and” in many contexts. Racially, for instance, historian and journalist J. A. Rogers’s famous article in *The New Negro* saw it as a “marvel of paradox”: the music was both particularly African American, American, and, at the same time, universal.⁴ Also, aesthetically, as Ingrid Monson notes, pointing to mid-century jazz’s “Afro-modernism”: “at once more populist than its European [modernist] counterpart, yet committed to articulating its elite position relative to the more commercial genres of R&B and rock and roll.”⁵ And, indeed, generically, the music has been open to incorporation from the most disparate of sources – Western classical and Afro Caribbean, Nordic, African, and Indian musics have all informed it – and yet has also policed its boundaries; and of course, many of the musicians past and present who have played this music reject jazz as a genre label altogether. Here I explore an aspect of this in-betweenness, focusing on

the movement across genres as producing a kind of transcendence, and on the role of technology as a symbol of this genre-crossing gesture and as a generator of the music's sound and social meaning.

To get at this body of ideas and to clarify why they matter, I'll start with a discussion of a few pieces that clearly occupy a relation to both jazz and other forms of black popular music, in order to get at the musical aesthetics at play. I am being intentionally vague with regard to genre in this formulation. My point is to see both sonic signifiers of jazz and a jazz "impulse" in an explicitly polygeneric music scene, rather than one that coheres around style or other features of a coherent genre.⁶ Some of the music I discuss here clearly comes out of a primary orientation to jazz, but much of it draws on jazz from another space. This discussion leads me to a reading of Afrofuturism as a discourse in contemporary African American and African Diasporic arts. The central notion animating the study of this music is, to paraphrase Nigerian American science fiction author Nnedi Okorafor, that black speculative arts routinely trouble ontological boundaries, whether through a kind of liminality as "in-between-ness" or as "both/and-ness."⁷ Like the music discussed here, such work disrupts distinctions, such as that between science fiction and fantasy, between demotic and avant-garde, or more broadly between human and non-human, sitting at the intersection of the biological, the technological, and the cosmological.

My thinking on the intersection of polygenericism, Afrofuturism, and jazz was first prompted by a desire to reinvestigate cultural critic Amiri Baraka's ideas in the seminal article "The Changing Same: R&B and the New Black Music."⁸ In short, looking at the landscape

of African American music in the mid-1960s, Baraka, then writing as LeRoi Jones, saw an emerging gulf between the jazz avant-garde (the "New Thing" or "New Black Music," as he called it) and the working-class black audiences that had sustained jazz in earlier decades. Addressing the same question that animates this issue today – why jazz matters – he argued that there should be no alienation of black audiences from avant-garde jazz. Rather, as he saw it, there was much for black communities to find in the New Thing, that in fact the two kinds of music (R&B and New Black Music) explored the same territory, gave voice to the same longings, and did the same work, just in different registers. His argument goes into quite abstract, metaphysical directions: "To go back in any historical (or emotional) line of ascent in Black music leads us inevitably to religion, i.e., spirit worship. This phenomenon is always at root in Black art."⁹ And further, "The blues (impulse) lyric (song) is even descriptive of a plane of evolution, a direction . . . coming and going . . . through whatever worlds. Environment, as the social workers say . . . but Total Environment (including at all levels, the spiritual)."¹⁰ From James Brown to Albert Ayler, Sun Ra, and John Coltrane, "The song is the same and the people is the same."¹¹

Following Baraka, but offering a more mundane line of argument, I am interested in the fact that there was considerable mutual interest in making music across that genre divide within a few years of the publication of Baraka's article. This includes (but is hardly limited to) popular artists who embraced elements of the New Thing – such as the soul band Earth, Wind & Fire whose 1971 debut album, *The Need of Love*, opens with a nearly ten-minute free jazz piece, "Energy," or Nina Simone, whose work on songs such as "Why? (The King of Love Is Dead)"

brought inspirations from gospel-tinged R&B together with modal jazz to mourn the murdered African American leaders of the late-1960s – as well as avant-garde figures who incorporated signifiers of funk and R&B, such as Pharoah Sanders, whose long, timbrally noisy explorations dug into Afrocentric cosmologies with the underpinning of a funky, danceable groove, or Archie Shepp, whose album *Attica Blues* threaded together funk and “energy music” to protest the racialized, carceral state made increasingly visible by the policing initiatives now known as the Rockefeller Drug Laws. This has once again become relevant in the work of a group of young musicians originally from Los Angeles who have collaborated on a range of projects and who all traverse the boundaries between jazz, R&B, and hip hop, including producer and DJ Flying Lotus, saxophonist Kamasi Washington, bassist Thundercat, pianist Robert Glasper, and of course, rapper Kendrick Lamar.

I focus here on this group of Los Angeles musicians, looking particularly, if fleetingly, at recent recordings including Flying Lotus’s *You’re Dead!*, Kamasi Washington’s aptly titled, massive album *The Epic*, and Robert Glasper’s work with his trio and a larger group called “The Experiment.” These make for a useful set, since they represent a breadth of genres and stylistic approaches that define the scene (from work that is straightforwardly within the jazz frame to work that is in significant ways outside that frame), and because they involve three distinct approaches to making work that might reasonably be called Afrofuturist. Significantly, each of these artists, in one way or another, makes reference back to mid-1970s jazz-R&B fusions, and each works in ways that interestingly disrupt not only genre boundaries, but also the expectations about the relationship to

technology that have constituted those boundaries in the recent past. Moreover, the return and reinterpretation of these sounds should remind and reiterate for us the historical significance of genre-spanning jazz fusions to African American audiences in the 1970s.

Flying Lotus’s *You’re Dead!* is the least obviously “jazz” project of those I discuss here.¹² The album’s scant thirty-eight minutes is composed of nineteen short tracks, the longest coming in at just under four minutes, and most running less than two. As a result, the album dispenses with the kind of extended, improvisational forms common to modern jazz; moreover, it does not use the kinds of song forms that remain the common language of jazz, even in the more heteroglot post-1970s era. Rather, its episodic structure makes up a single, longer form. What is most interesting about the piece is the way that Stephen Ellison (Flying Lotus’s given name) and his co-composers, including Stephen Bruner (Thundercat), Kamasi Washington, and Herbie Hancock, use brief snippets of a wide range of genres to represent the album’s concept: a meditation on the moment of death and its aftermath, seen from the perspective of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.¹³ That is, though the title suggests a sense of morbidity, it should be thought of as a piece aiming at an understanding of the process of death, a liminal state, and rebirth, a mystical perspective journalists have credited in part to Ellison’s upbringing as the nephew of Alice Coltrane. This narrative of rebirth can be heard on multiple levels – personal, social, cultural, and so forth – an interpretation Ellison indicates (without quite articulating) in interviews around the project, including, for instance: “The concept is so much more than ‘You’re dead as a person,’ to me. Even calling it *You’re Dead!* goes so deep into how I felt maybe a year ago,

where I was watching the music scene shift and change.”¹⁴

To get a sense of this, and a feel for the ways the piece deploys a language that ties together hip hop’s more experimental wing and mid-1970s electric jazz (El-lison specifically points to George Duke in interviews, but Stanley Clarke, Chick Corea, Joe Zawinul, Miles Davis, and others are apparent as well), it is useful to consider tracks three, four, and five: [“Tesla,”](#) [“Cold Dead,”](#) and [“Fkn Dead.”](#) In just under four minutes combined, they include a compendium of stylistic signifiers: double-time shuffle groove; additive, even-eighth patterns; a distorted electric guitar and electric piano pairing; a synth choir; and what I think of as a kind of cosmic slow jam. The thing that marks this as something other than the 1970s jazz fusion it most clearly resembles in its stylistic mix is the sonic quality Mark Fischer describes as “crackle.”¹⁵ That earlier jazz fusion consistently used the peak of high-fidelity recording techniques to produce music that sounded profoundly clear. Performers as diverse as Weather Report, Return to Forever, and George Duke all worked within the jazz aesthetic of their time, producing albums that attempted to capture a sound as close to an unmediated purity as possible. Flying Lotus, on the other hand, uses high levels of compression, distorting the sounds of his source material to sound intentionally lo-fi. Listeners may hear this as producing a temporal distance or a haunted, ghostly quality – as Fischer suggests recordings by fellow EDM artist Tricky have – or they may interpret the recording’s crackle as indicating a kinship with music from the era of analog recording; or they may see the sound connecting this album with the circulation of hip hop mixtapes.

None of this is improvisatory in the way jazz is commonly understood. Rather, El-lison describes the process of creating the

music as an inherently technologized, collaborative composition using the studio as a medium: playing licks, loops, and even just timbres with Hancock and others, and slowly cobbling things together into tracks:

When we did the “Tesla” song, I had some drums that I had already recorded – I kinda found a cool loop, and a little idea. Herbie had come by and I played some ideas, some things I was feeling. He got on my Fender Rhodes and I started humming ideas out to him, and those became progressions. Then we did another take, and then he got even more free with it. Eventually you get these really fast recordings, and you just kind of jump to moments.

It’s kind of the same as writing, with loops and stuff. It’s hard to explain, but it makes so much sense in my mind. Like, I try to put it together just like I would make a beat, even if I’m using [other] people – if I had records or chopping up samples from the Internet, I still do that with collaborations and working with people.¹⁶

This kind of creative practice – so much a part of the digital age, and yet still so fundamentally connected with long-standing models of musical interaction – explodes the distinction between improvisation and composition in interesting ways. It aims, ultimately, at a fixed musical object, and in that sense is clearly compositional; and yet, it happens in the moment, through interaction between musicians, in the studio, and in that sense is improvisational. Its reliance on the plasticity of digitally recorded sound makes it distinctively contemporary, and its combination of the human and the technological is a hallmark of Afrofuturism.

Kamasi Washington’s *The Epic* is something like the opposite of *You’re Dead!*¹⁷ Its seventeen tracks run nearly three hours, regularly extending more than ten

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minutes each, and most have some version of head-solo-head form. There is no obvious program to the project, in the way there is in *You're Dead!*, but its title and cover art imply a certain interest in cosmic hugeness and a sense of possibility. In line with this, on the whole, the album has a fairly unified sound. Critical commentators have pointed to John Coltrane as the key intertext, noting the ways Washington moves between a modal language, "Giant Steps"-derived harmonic complexity, and outside playing; the ways the massiveness of the arrangements resembles Coltrane's larger ensemble works; and so on.¹⁸ And Washington generally name-checks Coltrane in interviews. But there's really not very much on the album that sounds like Coltrane; rather, the project sounds as though it has picked up in the middle of the mid-1970s, "post-Coltrane" work. In this regard, Will Layman, writing in *Pop Matters*, compares it with McCoy Tyner, Pharoah Sanders, Gary Bartz's Nu Troop, The Crusaders, Miles Davis, Wayne Shorter, Joe Zawinul, and Archie Shepp.¹⁹

The album's commitment to a sound that is at once accessible and cutting edge can be most clearly heard in the final track, "The Message." The song's 7/4 funk groove supports a head and series of solos (Thundercat on electric bass, Washington on tenor, and Ronald Bruner Jr. – Thundercat's brother – on drums) that mine the timbres and shapes of 1970s polygeneric jazz (fusion and avant). The most interesting intersection between the human and the technological is best seen not on the album, however, so much as in Washington's live performances of this work in the year following the album's release. As captured in a live broadcast NPR made from Los Angeles's Regent Theater for the show *Jazz Night in America*, "[The Message](#)" achieves a size and scope reminiscent of the 1970s shows of

pioneering Afrofuturist funk-rock band Parliament-Funkadelic.²⁰ A voice-over introduces the song as sci-fi-inspired lights flash like a mothership landing. "This is a journey into music and sound," the voice intones. "Watch out and get ready to move your feet. Wherever you are, you will be a part of it." There follows an extended introduction that features the hip hop producer Battlecat, crafting an improvisation out of sampled clips of Washington's own saxophone solo from the studio recording of the song. Once again, the effect of the spectral is introduced, as Battlecat's sample is marked off from Washington's live sound precisely by crackle. The intersection here of a jazz-derived form (a precomposed head used to bookend and as the source for a series of improvised solos), a massed stage presence, and explicitly technologized sound – indeed a sound that might be called "cyborgian" for the ways it extends the human through first an analog instrument (the saxophone) and then a digital one (the sampler) – offers many ways to think of this piece and its performance as polygeneric.

Finally, I would point to two of Robert Glasper's recent recordings: the trio album *Covered* and the Experiment album *Artscience*.²¹ In comparison with Washington's *The Epic* and Flying Lotus's *You're Dead!*, *Covered* fits most clearly within the mainstream of contemporary acoustic jazz. Glasper uses the trio format to play densely interactive music that is rhythmically complex and harmonically varied, and that mostly uses songs as the basis of extended improvisation. He has actually played music that is much less obviously within the jazz frame – his album *Black Radio* won the 2013 Grammy award for best R&B album – but he has generally separated the two genres in his output, releasing jazz recordings under the Robert Glasper Trio and avant R&B under the

Robert Glasper Experiment. For what it's worth, the *Black Radio* albums draw on jazz (and hip hop and blues) within the larger R&B and neo-soul frame in a fairly programmatic way, pushing the idea of black radio as a polygeneric space, a space where listeners have heard compatibility in music well beyond the boundaries of genre. What makes *Covered* such an interesting album is that Glasper uses it to enact a further turn of the transgeneric screw, to bridge the two aspects of his own creativity, performing material mostly from the *Black Radio* projects but doing so in his trio format.

The opening cut from Glasper's most recent Experiment album, *Artscience* (a term clearly reminiscent of Sun Ra's "Myth Science"), continues this both/and hip hop–jazz fusion approach, and indeed explains it about as directly as it possibly could. This piece, "[This Is Not Fear](#)," opens with a minute-long collective improvisation by a quartet including Glasper on piano, Derrick Hodge on bass, Mark Colenberg on drums, and Casey Benjamin on saxophone. With its quick tempo and highly interactive sound, this sits clearly in a contemporary jazz world. As the track goes on, however, Glasper settles into a slower pace, laying lush, R&B-derived chords underneath the more frenetic work of the other three. These two sound streams continue as Benjamin's saxophone takes up a melody derived from Glasper's chord changes. Glasper intones over this sonic bed a manifesto for contemporary polygenericism: "The reality is," he says, "my people have given the world so many styles of music, you know so many different styles; so why should I just confine myself to one? We wanted to explore them all." At this, Hodge and Colenberg settle into a hip hop–derived groove with a strong emphasis on the downbeat, and turntablist Jahi Sundance enters with a

set of electronic sounds reminiscent of video game soundtracks.

I'm not the first to suggest a trans- or intergeneric frame for understanding black music, but it remains true that both scholarship and criticism (as well as aspects of the newly algorithmic systems of music marketing) remain aligned to a strong vision of genre as the key frame for the music. That said, I would point to a few instances of work in this vein that I take inspiration from. Musicologist Guthrie Ramsey's now classic book *Race Music* draws on the resources of oral history and a community-based view of African American music-making to uncover the ways similar frames of reference informed the music across a wide spectrum of genres and styles, from jazz to blues and from doo wop to hip hop in the period between the 1930s and the 2000s.²² His use of the term "race music" as a title is particularly telling, inasmuch as it points backward historically to a moment, in the 1920s and 1930s, when music by African American artists was marketed – and consumed, or so it would appear – not on the basis of genre (like blues, jazz, or R&B), but rather on the basis of a racialized community. Musicologist David Ake and colleagues likewise explore the gatekeeping function of the genre label "jazz" in their edited volume *Jazz/Not Jazz: The Music and Its Boundaries*.²³ Through a range of case studies, from the 1920s to the present, they showcase the extent to which jazz musicians have reached out past those boundaries – into pop, light classical music, avant-gardism, and more – as well as the ways jazz communities have policed the borders of the music.

The music I've discussed in this essay is similar in some ways to the repertoires looked at by Ramsey or by Ake and

others, inasmuch as they involve both a matter of working through current social and aesthetic issues across some genre divides, and a desire to reach across and around those divides to develop hip new sounds. And yet, given their particular place in time – at the end of a history that already includes the stories those authors are telling – they need more interpretive resources. Ramsey’s “blues muse” and the dynamic of “up South” that derives from the mid-century Great Migration may tell us something about this work, but not much at all about its technological bent or speculative leanings. And though the jazz/not jazz dyad may describe how some listeners respond to much of this music, I see something more complicated going on. If nothing else, most of the musicians here (with the exception of Glasper) could as easily be described as outsiders reaching across a boundary *into* jazz as insiders reaching out.

I draw on Afrofuturism as a way of framing this material because of that tradition’s clarity in identifying the critical engagement with speculative culture as a repository of black thought and resource for black liberation. In brief, Afrofuturism describes Afrocentric work in the arts and philosophy that investigates African diasporic engagements with a vanguardist orientation, technoculture, and/or the fantastical. The term Afrofuturism was first coined by Mark Dery, a cultural critic who identified a trending interest in both science and technology *and* science fiction among African American artists and intellectuals in the 1990s.²⁴ Writer and critic Ytasha Womack identifies a double process whereby the growth of the concept in the 1990s and 2000s took two forms: first, the production of an Afrofuturist ethos in new work, largely in literature, film, and the visual arts; and second, the reinterpretation of older black arts to find experimental, technoculturally

oriented, often mystical precursors.²⁵ Building on Womack’s groundbreaking exploration of the concept, black speculative arts scholars Reynaldo Anderson and Charles Jones have described it as “the emergence of a black identity framework within emerging global technocultural assemblages, migration, human reproduction, algorithms, digital networks, software platforms, [and] bio-technical augmentation.”²⁶

Musically speaking, this technotopian vision is commonly seen in spatial terms, in the outer space/Egypt (or perhaps better, Nubia) pairing, as for instance, in Sun Ra’s work, or on the cover art of Earth, Wind & Fire’s *All ’n All*. Aside from Ra, Afrofuturists have tended to focus on the soul/funk/hip hop continuum, in such figures as Jimi Hendrix, George Clinton, or Janelle Monáe, or on Jamaican Dub, as Michael Veal points out in his book on the genre.²⁷ The relative absence of Afrofuturist writing on jazz can be explained in large measure as the result of a historical accident. The dominant voices in jazz during the theory’s emergence in the 1990s were the so-called Young Lions, a group of musicians who were explicitly past-oriented and came off as luddites. Coalescing around Columbia Records’ marketing of Wynton Marsalis, this community of musicians *was* race conscious, even if they may not have been interested in more pan-Africanist politics of the generation before them; but, at least as Columbia and the PBS *Jazz* documentary would have it, they rejected both the fusion and avant-garde styles of jazz that defined the 1970s and early 1980s in favor of playing within a postbop style that was canonized in the 1950s and 1960s; and their decision to play acoustic music was couched in an explicit opposition to electric (and electronic) instruments.²⁸ Perhaps most important, they cultivated a specific antipathy toward hip hop,

the black music most clearly technological in both material and ideology as well as most relevant to the 1990s American zeitgeist.

However, looking beyond this particular constellation of references, there is much in Afrofuturism that comes to seem highly relevant to much jazz, and certainly to the work I am discussing here. Not only the orientation to technology as a resource for liberatory, improvisational music, or the extensions of the human into new realms through technology, or the intersections between science and mysticism, but also perhaps most significantly Nettrice Gaskin's vision of Afrofuturity as "the artistic practice of navigating the past, present, and future simultaneously."²⁹ Although theorists of Afrofuturism do not routinely identify polygenericism as a core component of the movement, I believe it is reasonably seen to be one. The multiplicity that marks both its spatiality and its temporality is similarly found in the genre orientation of its major figures. Sun Ra's work spanned approaches from as disparate of sources as swing jazz and electronic noise music; George Clinton's P-Funk project was explicitly an attempt to mediate between funk and psychedelic rock; more contemporaneously, Janelle Monáe has made a career of "tipping on the tightrope" strung between hip hop, R&B, bubble gum pop, and more. What's more, the figures of the cyborg, the android, and the monster – all of which have been fixtures in Afrofuturist work since at least the 1970s – are themselves hybrid.

The response to the music I'm looking at here among jazz critics has been mixed, but I find the following telling: among the interminable end-of-year listicles in 2015, NPR's jazz critics poll rated *The Epic* at #4, after work by such established figures as Rudresh Manthappa, Maria Schneider, and Jack DeJohnette. Yet when they went

to publish the list, they gave Francis Davis the opportunity to pan the album:

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This sprawling 3-CD debut by a Los-Angeles-based tenor saxophonist who's recorded with Kendrick Lamar as well as Gerald Wilson is being talked about by its more fervent admirers as if it were jazz like we've never heard it before. It's not, though. Strings, voices, cosmic graphics, Washington's dashiki and all, it's merely jazz like we haven't heard it in a while – an intentional throwback to those "spiritual," early '70s Impulse, Black Jazz and Strata-East LPs whose greatest appeal might be to listeners too young to remember the dead end for jazz this sort of thing led to back then. Washington's obvious sincerity, while admirable, isn't enough to save *The Epic* for those like me, who do remember all too well. Then, I don't hear what others say they do in Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly* or Broadway's *Hamilton*, either.³⁰

The final throwaway line aside, Davis's complaint is that this work isn't original. I suggest the return to older material is not simply derivative, as Davis would have it, but rather part of an Afrofuturist "back to the future" gesture (and indeed, a return to the specifically Afrocentric, Afrofuturist past embodied in the technologically experimental, at times spiritually inclined, funky music of George Duke, Herbie Hancock, and Earth, Wind & Fire, among others) in order to take advantage of its potentiality for a futurity of the present.

To think further about the stakes of the polygenericism that ties these musicians' work together, and the investment in the technological as a resource for music that is profoundly human, it will be useful to turn for a moment to the notion of polygenericism as critique and as a mode of making the culture at large better. In musical cultural studies, the most extensive

recent meditation on this capacity of music is music critic Josh Kun's *Audiotopia*, which locates this possibility not only in the work of artists, but in the work of listeners. At base, Kun narrates the experience whereby cross-generic listening created for him "an alternate set of cultural spaces" through which he could envision a world larger and different than the one in which he lived while growing up.³¹ Drawing on sociologist Ruth Levitas's reading of Foucault's notion of "heterotopias," he describes recordings not as "maps of the future," but as "adequate maps of the present," believing we can find, in music's cultural polyphony, maps that "point us to the possible."³²

The same, I suggest, is true for musicians, as well as for audiences. For instance, Ellison (Flying Lotus) identifies jazz as a source of possibility for him, I think, precisely because he is inside it as a listener, but not fully inside it as a music-maker. The recordings I've looked at here express a range of critique, but together perhaps their most crucial intervention is in the critique of genre. It's not that they reject jazz so much as that they reject a genre-based conception of it. Indeed, each of them is happy to claim jazz as a description of their work; but in doing so for such varied work (and for work that moves past both the *sounds* of post-1980s acoustic jazz and its ideological attachment to genre purity and distinction from other forms of pop music) they push it to integrate into a holistic, poly- or even omnigenic black music. Nonetheless, while it is clear that the artists I have looked at here want to speak to an audience that is interested in hip hop, R&B, and jazz, it's less obvious that the industry either can or cares to help make that happen, or that listeners share their interest. While the first of these issues can be grasped using older methods, the latter two – listener's activity especially – are

much more difficult. One way to get at it is to look at the ways this music is embedded in a recommendation matrix by the streaming services through which many audiences now consume music. A glance at the "related artists" pages for Flying Lotus, Washington, and Glasper is instructive. In a sense, they tell a story about how an artist may or may not be understood beyond conventional notions of genre. Of the three, only Washington's really describes an omnigenic frame. Notably, while his page points to both Glasper and Flying Lotus, neither of their pages points to him or to each other. Glasper's is composed primarily of well-known artists solidly within the jazz world – Kurt Rosenwinkel, Kenny Garrett, Brad Mehldau, Roy Hargrove, Nicholas Payton – and Flying Lotus's includes almost solely other experimental, electronic, sample-oriented artists – Samiyam, Tokimonsta, Daedelus, Knxwledge, Shigeto. Washington's page points in both of these directions. Interestingly, his is also the only one of the three to point directly to other new or canonical artists associated with Afrofuturism, including Sons of Kemet, Alice Coltrane, Pharoah Sanders, and Sun Ra.

This is a good moment to stop and take some historical stock of the aesthetic critique embedded in polygenericism. This is not just the oddball feeling of a few musicians at the edge of things, but rather an emergent structure of feeling (much as I think Marsalis's rejection of fusion was in its moment), and one that can be multiplied over and over within the popular music world. It accounts for the rise of extended instrumental music with or without room for improvisation (whether in math rock or in electronic dance music) and the rise of explicitly hybrid styles (in work as diverse as that of Rhiannon Giddens, D'Angelo's *Black Messiah*, or

Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*). It also accounts for the move away from monogeneric listening – at least as a form of middle-class/elite distinction. While this is no doubt significantly related to the massive shift to online subscription listening, it is a site where jazz clearly matters, specifically the jazz of the 1970s. The critique of the 1970s fusion and avant-garde movements by the succeeding generation was that the music had lost its way: the experiments had led to a dead end and the way forward in jazz was to look at the moment before, to the early 1960s, and explore a new path from there.

The artists I describe here have found a relevance of a different type in 1970s jazz fusions. That music offers not a vision of

jazz as a specific musical style, but as an orientation to music-making that has the capacity to diffuse into many genres, indeed, into any genre. There is more to this, however, than simply a kind of flexibility or breadth to the jazz fusions of the 1970s as a way of understanding why jazz – this jazz – still matters: it is to be found in the shared Afrofuturist leanings that connect the music these artists are making today with that of the past. Beyond the specific elements that might mark art as Afrofuturist – the connection of Egypt and outer space, the interest in cyborgs and other posthumans, the investigations of fugitive myth-science – these works share an affect that we surely need at this moment.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Glenn Kenny, "Exploring Afrofuturism in Film, Where Sci-Fi and Mythology Blur," *The New York Times*, March 13, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/13/movies/touki-bouki-streaming-afrofuturism.html>.
- ² Rafi Zabor and Vic Garbarini, "Wynton vs. Herbie: The Purist and the Crossbreeder Duke It Out," *Musician* 77 (March 1985).
- ³ I do not wish to engage in the exercise of defining jazz here, but I note that such a definitional discourse is common and has colored both scholarly and critical writing, as well as occasional statements by jazz musicians such as the (in)famous rant by Pat Metheny on whether or not Kenny G should be interpreted as a jazz musician. Pat Metheny, "Pat Metheny on Kenny G," *Jazz Oasis*, 2000, <http://www.jazzoasis.com/methenyonkenny.htm> (accessed June 22, 2018).
- ⁴ J. A. Rodgers, "Who is the New Negro, and Why?" in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892–1938*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).
- ⁵ Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 71.
- ⁶ A note is in order here about what I mean by "genre." The term is commonly used as shorthand to describe a musical style or tradition defined by a set of shared sonic features, forms, and, where applicable, textual themes. In addition, music scholars who have written about genre formation have pointed to two other defining features: first, industry practices (from studio norms, to venues, to PR and more); and second, audience behaviors. See David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and 20th Century Popular Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016); Fabian Holt, *Genre in Popular Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); and Keith Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1999). While I will primarily discuss aspects of style in this essay, in fact my contention is that the polygenericism of the music I am interested in here extends to both of these other aspects of genre production as well.

- ⁷ Quiana Witted, “‘To Be African is to Merge Technology and Magic’: An Interview with Nnedi Okorafor,” in *Afrofuturism 2.0*, ed. Reynaldo Anderson and Charles Jones (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2016), 207–208.
- ⁸ Gabriel Solis, “Timbral Virtuosity: Pharoah Sanders, Sonic Heterogeneity, and the Jazz Avant-Garde in the 1960s and 70s,” *Jazz Perspectives* 9 (1) (2015): 48.
- ⁹ LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka], “The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music),” in *Black Music* (New York: Akashic Books, 2010 [1966]), 181–182.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 184.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 187.
- ¹² Flying Lotus [Stephen Ellison], *You’re Dead!*, Warp Records, 2014.
- ¹³ Arun Rath, “Music from Death’s Doorstep: A Conversation with Flying Lotus,” NPR: All Things Considered, October 12, 2014, <https://www.npr.org/2014/10/12/354599863/music-from-deaths-doorstep-a-conversation-with-flying-lotus> (accessed June 22, 2018).
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ Mark Fischer, “The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology,” *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 5 (2) (2013): 42–55.
- ¹⁶ Rath, “Music from Death’s Doorstep.”
- ¹⁷ Kamasi Washington, *The Epic*, Brainfeeder, 2015.
- ¹⁸ Adam Shatz, “Kamasi Washington’s Giant Step,” *The New York Times Magazine*, January 21, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/24/magazine/kamasi-washingtons-giant-step.html>.
- ¹⁹ Will Layman, “The Kamasi Washington Phenomenon,” *Pop Matters*, January 14, 2016, <https://www.popmatters.com/the-kamasi-washington-phenomenon-2495458272.html> (accessed June 22, 2018).
- ²⁰ The full video of the concert can be found at Jazz Night in America, “Kamasi Washington’s ‘The Epic’ in Concert,” YouTube, uploaded August 7, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYbPSIXQ4q4>. “The Message” begins at 1:44.
- ²¹ Robert Glasper, *Covered: Recorded Live at Capitol Studios*, Blue Note Records, 2015; and Robert Glasper, *Artscience*, Blue Note Records, 2016. It is challenging to write about Glasper in this context at this point, inasmuch as he is most visible in the jazz press now for a set of misogynist comments exchanged in an interview between himself and pianist and blogger Ethan Iverson. Ethan Iverson, “Interview with Robert Glasper,” Do the Math, March 2017. (See Michelle Mercer, “Sexism from Two Leading Jazz Artists Draws Anger—And Presents an Opportunity,” *The Record: Music News from NPR*, March 9, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2017/03/09/519482385/sexism-from-two-leading-jazz-artists-draws-anger-and-presents-an-opportunity>, for quotes from and commentary on the Do the Math post, which is no longer available.) I abhor those comments, but still find the music compelling in relation to the topic of contemporary soulful jazz fusions.
- ²² Guthrie Ramsey, *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).
- ²³ David Ake, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and Daniel Goldmark, *Jazz/Not Jazz: The Music and Its Boundaries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).
- ²⁴ Mark Dery, “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose,” in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994).
- ²⁵ Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013).
- ²⁶ Reynaldo Anderson and Charles Jones, “Introduction: The Rise of Astro-Blackness,” in *Afrofuturism 2.0*, vii–viii.

- ²⁷ Michael Veal, *Dub: Soundscapes and Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2007). *Gabriel Solis*
- ²⁸ *Jazz*, dir. Ken Burns, PBS miniseries, 2001.
- ²⁹ Nettrice Gaskins, "Afrofuturism on Web 3.0: Vernacular Cartography and Augmented Space," in *Afrofuturism 2.0*, 27.
- ³⁰ Francis Davis, "The 2015 NPR Music Jazz Critics Poll," NPR Jazz: A Blog Supreme, December 21, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/ablogsupreme/2015/12/21/460527087/the-2015-npr-music-jazz-critics-poll> (accessed June 22, 2018).
- ³¹ Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 2.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 23.