

La La Land Is a Hit, but Is It Good for Jazz?

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Abstract: The debates around *La La Land* (2016) tell us a great deal about the state of jazz today and perhaps even in the near future. Many critics have charged that the film has very little real jazz, while others have emphasized the racial problematics of making the white hero a devout jazz purist while characterizing the music of the one prominent African American performer (John Legend) as all glitz and tacky dance moves. And finally, there is the speech in which Seb (Ryan Gosling) blithely announces that “jazz is dead.” But the place of jazz in *La La Land* makes more sense if we view the film as a response to and celebration of several film musicals, including *New York, New York* (1977), the *Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers* films, and especially Jacques Demy’s *The Young Girls of Rochefort* (1967). Both *La La Land* and Demy’s film connect utopian moments with jazz, and push the boundaries of the classical Hollywood musical in order to celebrate the music.

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Damien Chazelle, a serious jazz aficionado since childhood, has made the music central to both the plot and the score of his film *La La Land* (2016). If nothing else, the omnipresence of jazz in a film so widely honored suggests that jazz still has some resonance with audiences. But like almost every other American film that would represent jazz, *La La Land* runs smack up against racial issues. The film’s appropriation of jazz in the face of the music’s complicated racial histories has driven a backlash against the film.¹ Critics objected to the prominence of two white stars in a film about that uniquely African American cultural practice, jazz. To make matters worse, Keith (John Legend), the one important black character in the film, creates commodified pop music and even features tacky dance routines in his stage shows.

Although I found much of the film exhilarating and moving, I am more than a little uncomfortable with *La La Land*’s racial politics. Nevertheless, I argue that the film navigates some treacherous waters with intelligence and charm and that it

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doi:10.1162/DAED_a_01745

ultimately makes a strong case that jazz does indeed still matter.

Any understanding of *La La Land* as a “jazz film” must begin by situating it within larger traditions. A work of profound cinephilia, *La La Land* references multiple films, most of them in the musical comedy genre. But Chazelle does more than just quote from classical musicals, and he makes no attempt to recreate their aesthetics. As he has said in interviews, Chazelle was as devoted to seriously representing the emotional lives of his characters as he was to paying homage to American musical cinema. He wanted “to smash into that old-fashioned musical logic” by finding magic in the “grit and texture” of everyday life.²

A catalog of the many films and cinematic traditions that Chazelle has addressed in *La La Land* should start with his joking reference to Frank Tashlin’s *The Girl Can’t Help It* (1956). At the very beginning of *La La Land*, the outer edges of a square space containing the word “Cinemascope” suddenly expand to the traditional wide-screen ratio, recalling the opening scene of Tashlin’s film in which actor Tom Ewell appears to physically push the walls of the image to the outer edges of the screen. Chazelle has claimed another minor bit of inspiration, admitting that “Another Day of Sun,” the production number that follows the Cinemascope gag, was based on the scene in Rouben Mamoulian’s *Love Me Tonight* (1932) that begins with Maurice Chevalier singing “Isn’t It Romantic” in a simple tailor’s shop. Different groups of people hear the song and sing it themselves so that anyone passing by can also pick it up. Thanks primarily to a singing troupe of soldiers marching across the country, the song is finally passed to Jeanette MacDonald, who gives it her own operatic interpretation from high up in her chateau.

Chazelle had this scene in mind when arranging *La La Land*’s opening song “Another Day of Sun” to be passed from one motorist to another as they step out of their cars to sing in the middle of a gigantic traffic jam.

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A more crucial influence on *La La Land* is the work of the French director Jacques Demy. In interviews, Chazelle regularly singles out Demy’s *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (1964) as his favorite film. The use of bold colors for costumes, interiors, and even cityscapes in *La La Land* recalls the look of Demy’s film, as does an emotionally charged conclusion in which the lovers are *not* reunited. Demy’s *The Young Girls of Rochefort* (1967) also comes up in Chazelle’s interviews. As in *Umbrellas*, actors sing in a quickly articulated style with a conversational tone, much like the vocals of French performers Charles Aznavour and Jacques Brel. “Another Day of Sun” features several actors singing in English but imitating the conversational style of the songs in Demy’s films. And like the agile motorists at the beginning of Chazelle’s film, actors seem to spontaneously break into singing and dancing throughout *Young Girls*. In *Umbrellas*, of course, no one ever stops bursting into song.

The soundtrack of *La La Land* has much in common with the scores that French composer Michel Legrand wrote for Demy’s films. Justin Hurwitz, who played in a band with Chazelle when they were teenagers and has composed the music for all four of Chazelle’s films, has talked about his borrowings from Legrand’s cinematic compositions. The best example may be Legrand’s practice of recording a jazz trio of piano, bass, and drums in front of a symphony orchestra. The music behind “Another Day of Sun” is an excellent example of how Hurwitz has made use of this practice. As a devoted jazz enthusiast, Legrand regularly borrowed from great American traditions.

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Chazelle and Hurwitz have paid off that debt with their own tributes to Legrand.

Chazelle has also mined the rich veins of American musical comedy, especially the well-established trope of soon-to-be lovers transcending early stages of hostility through dance and song. We see this in the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers film *Top Hat* (1935), for which Chazelle has expressed admiration. Chazelle has also spoken of his affection for *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), another film in which an attractive couple are joined in song and dance before finding romance on the other side of their initial antagonism. In terms of *mise-en-scène*, *La La Land* prominently looks back to Hollywood musicals in “Epilogue,” the long production number that closes the film and recalls the stylized, color-drenched scene designs for the extended ballet sequences that conclude *An American in Paris* (1951) and *The Band Wagon* (1953).

To their credit, Chazelle and actors Emma Stone and Ryan Gosling labored to create the seamless dance numbers that distinguish many of Hollywood’s classic musicals. Compare the extended dance takes of Mia (Stone) and Seb (Gosling) with the screen performances of Fred Astaire, who insisted on long, unedited takes when his dances were filmed. Then compare these sequences to the numbers in a film such as Rob Marshall’s *Chicago* (2002), which are cobbled together from numerous shots, few of which last more than a second or two.

La La Land is also distinguished by several scenes in which characters actually sing as they are being filmed, unlike the vast majority of performers in musical films who mouth words as they listen to playback. Often these words are supplied by someone other than the actor on screen. Chazelle has said that he likes “roughness,” and he is more than willing

to sacrifice some of the surface sheen of the conventional Hollywood film. So, when Mia joins Seb at the piano for a short performance of “City of Stars,” when Mia briefly sings “Someone in the Crowd” in a lady’s room, and when Mia sings her climactic aria, “The Fools Who Dream,” they are singing in real time and, as in the dance sequences, without edits. Although directors can do as many retakes as they wish in these situations, the performers take great risks when they present themselves live and unedited. In some ways, Gosling and Stone are like jazz musicians flying above the music without a net.

There are not many examples in cinema of actors singing in real time, but a few that do exist are worth mentioning. For *Pierrot le fou* (1965), Jean-Luc Godard recorded Jean-Paul Belmondo and Anna Karina singing outdoors, making sure that their vocals reflected their body movements, including the moment when Belmondo continues singing as he jumps down from a tree. This is as good an example as any of Godard’s project of exposing and problematizing the conventions of dominant cinema. In a completely different appropriation of this tradition, Anne Hathaway laboriously tugs at our heart strings when she exudes “I Dreamed a Dream” live and in tight close-up in *Les Misérables* (2012).

Robert Altman’s *Short Cuts* (1993) also deserves mention for one of the most elegant performances ever by a singer-actor. In *Short Cuts*, Annie Ross plays Tess, an older jazz singer with an elaborate romantic history.³ The same description can be applied to Annie Ross herself, but in creating Tess, Ross sings in a lower register and with a sharper attack than when she performs in clubs. She developed a voice and a singing style that is entirely compatible with the character of Tess. Ross’s portrayal is even more compelling because

she sings in real time with her backup band, avoiding the moment in most musical films when the actor's speaking voice is unmistakably replaced by a dubbed-in singing voice. In *Short Cuts*, Ross separates herself from nearly all other singing actors who essentially sing as themselves when they perform on screen.

Among those critical of *La La Land*, the most vocal have denounced Emma Stone and Ryan Gosling for not being polished singers or dancers. But these criticisms ignore the extent to which Chazelle was trying to show real people going from ordinary speech and movement to song and dance without ceasing to be the same complex individuals they were before. Chazelle sought this effect in "A Lovely Night," the first number in which Mia and Seb dance and sing together. Gradually working his way into the number, Seb first begins singing in a voice very much like his speaking voice. When Mia is about to join in, we hear her clearing her throat. When Seb picks up Mia's purse and begins to look inside, she snatches it back in a gesture that is both choreographic and natural. Gradually, it all becomes choreography. And again, without edits.

The "A Lovely Night" number in *La La Land* illustrates Chazelle's conviction that the most challenging musical moments in a film happen when characters unexpectedly but organically begin to sing.⁴ The filmmaker must convince the audience that people are suddenly singing and/or dancing because there is no other way to express what they are feeling. Think of the opening of *Oklahoma* (1955), in which Curly can only admire the beauty of his land with song. Or when in *On the Town* (1949) sailors freshly turned loose in the wonderland of New York City cannot help but harmonize to "New York, New York."

In his definitive study of the Hollywood musical, Rick Altman has referred to

musicals like *Oklahoma* and *On the Town* as "folk musicals," distinguishing them from "fairy tale musicals" and "show musicals."⁵ In the show musical, most of the important numbers happen on stage or in some venue appropriate to performance, complete with visible musical accompanists. Examples would include *Cabaret* (1972) and the Busby Berkeley musicals of the 1930s. In the fairy tale musical, a couple is united by music as they cross social and class borders. The Astaire-Rogers films and Ernst Lubitsch's operettas (and Mamoulian's *Love Me Tonight*) are the best examples.

Rick Altman describes the folk musical primarily as a vehicle for building a community, but for my purposes, the films in this subgenre are distinguished by spontaneous song and dance in unlikely locations, almost always with nondiegetic music. People also sing in unexpected places in fairy tale musicals, but Altman puts these films into a separate category, having built his subgenres primarily around plot mechanics.

Chazelle has taken the folk musical to a different level by combining or, as he says, "smashing" the musical into the kind of emotional realism we associate with completely different film genres. And his goal in these collisions has been to make it all seem natural. This is precisely what Chazelle achieved in his first film, *Guy and Madeline on a Park Bench* (2009). Perhaps because he was working on an extremely limited budget (the film was his senior thesis as an undergraduate at Harvard), the film was shot in black and white, featured nonactors, relied heavily on improvised dialogue, and regularly used a hand-held camera to shakily zero in on the faces of actors.

For most of *Guy and Madeline on a Park Bench*, we could be watching an early Casavetes film or even a documentary, so loose is the editing and the progress of

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the narrative. Music enters first when we see Guy (Jason Palmer) playing his trumpet along with a singer. Later, at a party scene, a character breaks into song and then joins one of the guests in a tap-dance competition. Audiences might tend to bracket off these early scenes with their diegetic soundtracks from the realism of the film's mostly nonmusical moments. But the film is almost over when Madeline (Desirée Garcia) sings to herself with nondiegetic sound while wandering through the park. Even more strikingly, when she later learns that Guy is still interested in her even though they had broken up earlier in the film, she exuberantly sings "Boy in the Park" about her first kiss with Guy. Not only is she singing and dancing in the restaurant where she works, but music suddenly emerges from nowhere and her coworkers join in the dance. The scene culminates when two women join Madeline in a tightly choreographed tap-dance routine.

Everything we have learned about Madeline, including her mostly affectless and musicless reactions to other people, has led up to the moment when a musical number reveals what has been inside all along. In the final moments of *Guy and Madeline*, when the title characters are reunited in Madeline's apartment, they return to the same low-key, matter-of-fact demeanor they exhibited before Madeline began singing "Boy in the Park." After making perfunctory small talk, Guy plays a long, unaccompanied trumpet solo while Madeline listens. Significantly, Guy does not need to sing or dance. He has jazz. And Guy is played by Jason Palmer, a professional jazz trumpeter who plays the filmed solos live.

When his solo ends, Guy looks up sheepishly, searching for a reaction. Chazelle ends his film just as we see Madeline breaking into a smile. But because of her performance of "Boy in the Park," we

have a good idea of how she feels. Madeline and Guy are a couple again. In a film that can only barely be called a musical, Chazelle has created an organic relationship between music and the inner lives of his characters.

Chazelle has expressed admiration for Dudley Murphy's two pioneering short films, *St. Louis Blues* and *Black and Tan*, both released in 1929. *St. Louis Blues* was a vehicle for blues empress Bessie Smith and her only performance on film. *Black and Tan* featured the young, regal Duke Ellington just as his music was beginning to make him a star. Chazelle has also mentioned Bertrand Tavernier's *Round Midnight*, a French film from 1986 that cast the eminent jazz saxophonist Dexter Gordon in a major acting role. The fact that all of these films are built around real-life jazz artists may explain why Chazelle took a chance on Jason Palmer as a protagonist in *Guy and Madeline* even though he had never acted before.

Clearly, Chazelle knows how difficult it would be to separate a jazz artist – and his inner life – from jazz. His casting of jazz artist Jason Palmer in *Guy and Madeline* is consistent with his request that Ryan Gosling develop his skills as a pianist prior to his appearance in *La La Land*. Whenever the audience sees Seb's hands on the piano keys, they are hearing a performance by Gosling, who frequently exhibits real talent and agility as a jazz pianist. (When we do not see Gosling's hands, the pianist is Randy Kerber, who has played with Nancy Wilson, Diane Schuur, Tom Scott, Al Jarreau, and Quincy Jones, among others.)

A jazz film that ought to be singled out for comparison with *La La Land* is Martin Ritt's *Paris Blues* (1961). Although they do not actually play their instruments, Sidney Poitier and Paul Newman do impressive bits of miming when they play,

respectively, tenor saxophone and trombone. And thanks to Billy Strayhorn and Duke Ellington, who wrote extraordinary music for the film, the jazz lives of the protagonists strongly resonate through the music.⁶ *Paris Blues* ends with the expatriate jazz artist Ram Bowen (Newman) deciding to stay in Paris and not return to his American home. His decision comes just as the film's other main characters are heading back to the States, including the American schoolteacher Lillian (Joanne Woodward), with whom he was having an affair. Determined to become a serious composer, Bowen is convinced that he can only achieve his goal if he remains in Paris and, as he tells Lillian, only if he works alone: "I got to follow through with the music. I got to find out how far I can go. And I guess that means alone."⁷

In *La La Land*, Mia goes off to Paris to practice her craft and becomes a huge success. Seb decides not to accompany her, even though that would have been a real possibility, as the fantasy ballet at the end of the film makes clear. But when it looks as if Mia will get a major role in a film that will shoot in Paris, Seb's advice recalls what Paul Newman said to Joanne Woodward: "When you get this, you got to give it everything you got." Although the woman in *La La Land* abandons the man, while it is the man in *Paris Blues* who walks away from the woman, both films embrace the myth that great art can only be created by a scrupulously isolated artist – and maybe only if it's in Paris.

Whether intentionally or not, *La La Land* has much in common with a jazz film that fits Rick Altman's definition of the show musical: Martin Scorsese's *New York, New York* (1977). In Chazelle's film as well as in Scorsese's film, the leading man is much more devoted to jazz than is the leading lady. In both, the man ends up performing in his own jazz club while the woman ascends to movie stardom. In

both films, the lovers break up and then reencounter each other in the last moments of the film. And in neither film do the lovers reconnect; the films do not shy away from the darker side of romance.

I would argue that *La La Land* is in some ways a response to *New York, New York*, whose glum ending probably prevented it from striking box office gold. The last big production number in Scorsese's film is the boffo performance of the title song by Francine (Liza Minnelli), who has the screen all to herself. In the scene at Jimmy's (Robert de Niro) club the Major Chord that immediately precedes Minnelli's big number, the music is portrayed in a much less sensational fashion. In fact, we see a modernist jazz group performing only for a few moments and certainly not in a spotlight. The camera quickly cuts away and follows Jimmy to the bar, where he flirts with some young women, and then into his office. Late in the film but hardly at the end, jazz has disappeared from *New York, New York*.

Scorsese's film concludes with Francine and Jimmy agreeing to meet later in the evening. But both independently decide not to meet, heading off in different directions as the film ends. At the end of *La La Land*, Seb and Mia also pass up a moment to reunite after several years of separation. And in addition to placing the name of one of America's two largest cities in their titles, *La La Land* and *New York, New York* share the practice of placing the characters' nonreunion immediately after a major production number. But there the similarities end. Instead of giving the production number to only one of his lead characters, Chazelle features them both. And instead of leaving the two leads entirely separate from each other, Chazelle brings them together in an extended sequence that could be one character's dream, the shared dream of both characters, or perhaps even the

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audience's fantasy. The first part of *La La Land*'s concluding number revises the romantic history of Mia and Seb to eliminate all conflict and obstacles to their love affair. It then takes them into a fantasy world where they even end up with the same married life we have already seen Mia living with her husband (Tom Everett Scott).

The conclusion of *La La Land* allows us to have it both ways, first revealing how painful it is for Mia and Seb to recall the intense feelings they once had for each other. Chazelle abandons the feel-good conventions of the classical musical when the former lovers agonizingly lock gazes for the first time in five years. But this moment is immediately followed by a joyous fantasy of what their life together might have been and, for a moment, what it actually was. Comparing *La La Land* and *New York, New York* as "jazz films," Liza Minnelli's performance of "New York, New York" stands out: it is all Broadway and Las Vegas and prominently set off from the truncated jazz moment at the Major Chord that precedes it. Chazelle's film is much more a celebration of the music, infusing the final moments with jazz artists on-screen as well as Justin Hurwitz's jazz-inflected Legrand-esque score. The audience even gets a glimpse of Caveau de la Huchette, a jazz club in Paris that was a home for lindy hoppers after World War II and is still in operation today.

The mostly black musicians we see playing at the Caveau de la Huchette are miming to playback. The artists on the soundtrack are Los Angeles studio musicians, all of them white. Even today, and even when black musicians are on the screen, white musicians still have an advantage. But the studio artists are also skilled jazz musicians, including trumpeter Wayne Bergeron, who hits an A above high C as the scene at La Caveau

winds down. At least the black musicians are on-screen and not off-screen supplying invisible music for white lovers, as is so often the case with Hollywood films.

In an interview with Terry Gross, Chazelle talked about his love of jazz and his attempts to become a jazz drummer.⁸ He recalled that his father had a jazz record collection with LPs by Count Basie and Charlie Parker, among others. He was especially fascinated by the stories his father would tell him about Parker. But his favorite recording in his father's collection was *Clifford Brown and Max Roach*, released on Emarcy in 1954. Chazelle was especially taken with the track "Delilah." For what it's worth, this was the very first of many recorded collaborations between the distinguished trumpeter Brown and drummer Roach, who practically invented the art of bebop drumming. "Delilah" appears to be the first tune they recorded in the studio when they arrived there in 1954. Chazelle may have been reacting to the freshness of Brown and Roach's first moments together in the studio.

Chazelle says that he became enchanted with "Delilah" when he was thirteen, the age at which many jazz enthusiasts first fall in love with the music.⁹ Chazelle says he listened to the music repeatedly and that "it summed up my life." He spent a great deal of time on his drum kit trying to reproduce Roach's solo toward the end of the recording. I would add that "Delilah" is a stirring performance by all members of the Brown-Roach band, including tenor saxophonist Harold Land, pianist Richie Powell, and bassist George Morrow. Without insisting on any strong connection, I would simply observe that "Delilah" is in a minor key and has a certain brooding feeling that vaguely recalls Arabic musics. With its bright solos over a dark background, "Delilah" looks forward to *La La Land*, with its bright colors

and upbeat performances on top of a complex, emotionally fraught story line.

When asked to list his favorite drummers, Chazelle has named Roach, Jo Jones, and Buddy Rich, adding that he liked the “theatricality” of solos performed by Rich and Gene Krupa. This preference is surely compatible with Chazelle’s larger ambitions. He told Terry Gross that he always wanted to be a filmmaker, even when he was working hardest at becoming a jazz musician. At least according to Justin Hurwitz, Chazelle won awards as a jazz drummer at competitions when he was in high school. Nevertheless, Chazelle told Gross that his playing never “measured up” to that of his idols. He aspired to be an excellent drummer, in part because of an aggressive high school band director who was fond of saying “not my tempo” to the musicians in his ensemble.

Chazelle freely admits that his second film, *Whiplash* (2013), is autobiographical. If nothing else, the film documents the pain and exertion that are the inevitable side effects of pursuing perfection, at least for anyone who wants to be a great jazz drummer. And like the Paul Newman character in *Paris Blues*, Andrew (Miles Teller), the drummer hero of *Whiplash*, sends his girlfriend away, believing that he cannot succeed with romantic distractions.

When talking with Terry Gross about *Whiplash*, Chazelle was careful to add that his own teacher, on whom the character of Fletcher (J. K. Simmons) is based, was not at all as sadistic and violent as the character in *Whiplash*. Obviously, it makes a better story when Fletcher turns out to be so devoted to bringing out the potential he sees in Andrew that he is prepared to go to almost any extreme, even losing his job at the conservatory. What’s missing from *Whiplash* is a compelling reason why someone would want to suffer through brutal initiation rituals to

play lightning-fast, bombastic compositions with the kind of military precision that Fletcher demands. Late in the film, when Andrew goes to hear Fletcher in a jazz club, I was amazed to hear him playing jazz piano in the soft, lyrical mode associated with someone like Bill Evans, who never recorded anything like the harsh compositions in *Whiplash*.

Significantly, there are no important black characters in *Whiplash*, while Andrew aspires to play like the white show-off Buddy Rich.¹⁰ The driving, intense arrangements programed by Fletcher recall the music that big bands led by white musicians such as Rich and Maynard Ferguson performed in the 1970s and 1980s. In *La La Land*, however, Seb wants to play a much less macho music than Andrew and is devoted to great African American jazz artists such as Thelonious Monk, whose solo on his 1967 recording of “Japanese Folk Song” Seb is resolutely trying to master in the opening moments of the film. There is nothing in *Whiplash* like this scene early in *La La Land* in which the white hero honors the black jazz artists who have inspired him.

Desirée Garcia, who became an important film scholar after acting in *Guy and Madeline on a Park Bench*, has defended Chazelle against the charge that a jazz film should not be built around two white actors. Pointing out that *Guy and Madeline* starred a black jazz musician and a Latina graduate student, she wrote that the casting of *La La Land* “says more about what it takes to get a movie made in Hollywood than the intentions of the director.”¹¹ Damien Chazelle wanted to make a big, splashy revisionist musical, and he could not get the funding without stars of the caliber of Emma Stone and Ryan Gosling.

Still, *La La Land* has its racial problematics: for one, Seb essentially declares himself to be the savior of jazz. But

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I would add that Chazelle wanted Seb to be less sympathetic in earlier drafts of his script, even “something of a jerk.” He was to be more like the Seb of an early scene who scolds his sister for sitting on the fetishized stool he claims once belonged to Hoagy Carmichael. Even in the final version of *La La Land*, Seb is the kind of jazz purist everyone in the jazz community knows all too well: someone who not only loves the Real Thing, but also feels obliged to despise anything that does not measure up to his own notion of what jazz ought to be. Seb’s distaste for playing in a 1980s cover band at a pool party is not meant to be an endearing characteristic. In his conversation with Gross, Chazelle states that he has renounced his own purism and does not share the musical fanaticism he gave to Gosling’s character. Chazelle even claims now to like “I Ran,” the hit recorded by white rockers A Flock of Seagulls in 1982. In *La La Land*, Mia requests that the cover band play the tune, supposing – correctly – that it is exactly the kind of thing that Seb would despise.

Perhaps because of Ryan Gosling’s charisma, Seb is a much more sympathetic character in the release print of the film. And his jazz purism is compelling, especially when he earnestly delivers a jazz lesson to Mia after they have taken a walk on the Warner Bros. backlot. Chazelle made a point of shooting the scene in a real jazz club with a historic location. He chose the Lighthouse Café near the Hermosa Pier, where canonical jazz artists such as Miles Davis, Lee Morgan, Joe Henderson, the Modern Jazz Quartet, Chet Baker, Cannonball Adderley, and Art Pepper performed regularly in the 1950s and 1960s. When John Levine, the original owner, passed away in 1970, the club began featuring jazz less regularly.¹²

African American artists are performing at the Lighthouse when Seb passionately tells Mia how he feels about the music:

Every one of these guys is composing, they’re rearranging, they’re writing. Then they’re playing the melody. And now, look. The trumpet player, he’s got his own ideas. And so, it’s conflict and it’s compromise, and it’s just, and it’s new every time. It’s brand new every night. It’s very, very exciting. And it’s dying. It’s dying, Mia. It’s dying on the vine. And the world says, “Let it die. It had its time.” Well, not on my watch.

At worst, Seb is aspiring to be the savior of helpless jazz musicians, including the black artists on the stage – over whose music he is talking! And he is, of course, “mansplaining” to Mia, who may or not be impressed with his verbiage. One might also object to Seb’s military metaphor of “not on my watch.” Nevertheless, Seb delivers a compelling account of how jazz artists perform, and he most assuredly makes the case for the lasting importance of the music. For people like me, who are highly ambivalent about *La La Land*, this sequence at the Lighthouse Café is emblematic.

Later in the film, after Seb has become a member of Keith’s flashy pop band, Mia is undoubtedly sincere when she tells him that she now loves jazz. And she is enthusiastic about his ambition to open his own jazz club. To my mind, one of the most thrilling moments in the film is a set of quick shots followed by whip pans that show Mia ad-libbing her own eccentric – some would say “goofy” – moves while Seb dashes off piano riffs at the Lighthouse. Meanwhile, musicians on the bandstand are tearing through Hurwitz’s hard-bop composition “Herman’s Habit.” The scene has what film critic Richard Dyer has called the “utopian” qualities of classical musicals, even if we may wince at the sight of Mia surrounded almost entirely by appreciative black people.¹³ The fantasy here is that the music brings out the impulse in all of us to

move freely with grace and humor and that everyone, regardless of race, gender, and class, gets it. Pity that this fantasy is so typical of American jazz films in which black artists applaud and even congratulate white artists who have stolen their music. Chazelle has succeeded in capturing the utopian magic of the old musicals, but at least in *La La Land*, he seems to have overlooked the racial hierarchies that were implicit and frequently explicit in those films, beginning with Al Jolson's blackface appearances in the pioneering musicals of the 1920s and 1930s.

Shortly after the scene at the Lighthouse when Mia and Seb joyfully improvise their own call-and-response, the film lets us know that Seb has made a painful compromise by joining Keith's band. When we first see Keith and his large ensemble on stage with Mia in the audience, Seb has a moment alone in the spotlight playing what is clearly his own music on a grand piano. Little by little, however, as Keith takes over and begins to sing "Start a Fire," the music loses its magic. Although he smiles throughout the process, Seb moves from the grand piano to a stylized keyboard that looks more like a child's toy than a real musical instrument. Although the crowd reacts enthusiastically to the music, Emma Stone's capacious eyes reflect increasingly higher levels of disappointment as the camera cuts back and forth between the band and her reaction shots. Regardless of whether *La La Land*'s real-life audience is fond of John Legend, the film definitively characterizes the music as suspect when the stage becomes overpopulated with backup singers and gyrating dancers. Seb should not be surprised when he looks up to see that Mia has left the building.

I should also point out that all four of the people in Keith's group doing tacky dance moves, not to mention the featured piano player, are white. Are we to assume

that Keith has a racial agenda? A better way of thinking about the white people in Keith's band is to associate them with *La La Land*'s scrupulously multicultural casting. Think of the multiethnic dancers in "Another Day of Sun," as well as the Afro-Cuban band that suddenly appears in the back of a truck. Consider also the African American fiancé of Seb's sister, the numerous black jazz artists who regularly appear throughout the film, and the black dancers surrounding Mia when she dances at the Lighthouse. This is not to deny the centrality of white characters among so many people of color, but any race-based critique of *La La Land* must acknowledge the film's consistently multiethnic milieu.

At any rate, John Legend's character is by no means the villain of *La La Land*. A crucial scene in the film takes place when Seb has just begun rehearsing with Keith's band. Knowing that Seb is still an incorrigible jazz purist, Keith tries to talk him out of it. Chazelle has said that he wrote several drafts of dialogue for Legend. But after several takes, Legend insisted on ad-libbing his own dialogue.

But you say you wanna save jazz. How you gonna save jazz if no one's listening? Jazz is dying because of people like you. You're playin' to 90-year-olds at the Lighthouse. Where are the kids? Where are the young people? You're so obsessed with Kenny Clarke and Thelonious Monk. These guys were revolutionaries. How you gonna be a revolutionary if you're such a traditionalist? You're holding on to the past, but jazz is about the future.

Part of this speech may have been written by Chazelle, but I would guess that the final line was ad-libbed by Legend: "You're a pain in the ass, man."

John Legend, who is listed as one of the film's executive producers, clearly understands the tension in the film's script. But

La La Land
Is a Hit,
but Is It
Good for
Jazz?

Keith is not being entirely fair when he says that Seb wants to be a revolutionary. On the contrary, Seb is content to play the older, venerated music, and he never expresses a desire to reach out to young people.

Chazelle has said that building so much of the film around Seb's jazz purism and Keith's insistence that he must move on is "kind of meta." In other words, the film is commenting on itself by equating jazz with Hollywood musicals. Although *La La Land* is highly influenced by older movies, Chazelle hoped that his film could "push things forward, modernize, and update." And at least according to Keith, Seb must move on from his desire to play older, purer jazz, just as Chazelle must move on from blandly revisiting the conventions of the classical musical. It is significant that early in the film, Seb is trying to recreate a riff that Thelonious Monk recorded almost fifty years earlier. Keith acknowledges his admiration for Monk: a black artist sings the praises of another black artist. But for several decades now, it has primarily been white purists who have preserved the revered music of Monk and the other African American "revolutionaries." Wynton Marsalis, Wyliffe Gordon, Stanley Crouch, and many other eminent black artists and writers are profoundly invested in jazz purism, but the current jazz canon was mostly defined by white jazz writers like Martin Williams and Gunther Schuller, and many more still working today. Of course, there is also a long history of exploitation of black artists by white record producers and club owners. African Americans have surely wanted to preserve the great black music of the past, but their disempowerment has often prevented it.¹⁴

Chazelle says he sympathizes with both Keith's and Seb's positions, implying that he also understands someone's

preference for the older utopian Hollywood musicals as well as for the time-honored recordings of the first generations of black jazz artists. As the film ends, we see that Seb has opened his own jazz club where, as with most of the urban venues where people go to hear the music today, the setting is elegant, the audience sedate and mostly white. And what we hear in the club most definitely looks back to canonized jazz traditions. One of the first things the camera reveals inside "Seb's" is Francis Wolff's classic photo of a pensive John Coltrane in 1958. This is exactly the kind of place where I love to hear jazz in New York. Yet the positive images of Seb's club undermine Chazelle's assertion that there is a correlation between the film's revisionist approach to musicals and the need for jazz musicians to move past the music of the 1950s and 1960s. Chazelle has in fact pushed the musical into new territory, but Seb is still playing the older music. We know that Keith's performance of "Start a Fire" is not where jazz ought to go, if only because Chazelle has asked us to regard the music with the disappointment we see in Mia's face.

There may be no way around *La La Land's* racial problematics, even if, like Desirée Garcia, we acknowledge the realities that Damien Chazelle confronted when he chose to make a big-budget Hollywood film. Several jazz enthusiasts and film scholars for whom I have great respect simply cannot forgive him for building *La La Land* around two white stars. Nevertheless, I have real admiration for a film that maintains its utopian charms even as it pushes at the boundaries of the classical Hollywood musical in order to celebrate that grand old music, jazz. The film also celebrates great black jazz artists such as Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, and Kenny Clarke who, as Chazelle tells us, still matter.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ For an especially powerful screed against the film, see Ira Madison III, “*La La Land*’s White Jazz Narrative,” MTV News, December 19, 2016, <http://www.mtv.com/news/2965622/la-la-lands-white-jazz-narrative/>.
- ² Damien Chazelle, commentary track on DVD release of *La La Land* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Summit Entertainment, 2016). Unless otherwise indicated, all statements attributed to Chazelle are from this source.
- ³ See Krin Gabbard, “The Hypertexts of *Short Cuts*: The Jazz in Altman’s Carver Soup,” in *Robert Altman: Critical Essays*, ed. Rick Armstrong (New York: McFarland, 2011), 20–37.
- ⁴ Desirée Garcia, conversation with the author, July 27, 2017. Garcia has written about ethnic musicals in which people sing spontaneously, a research project with strong connections to what Damien Chazelle has tried to achieve with American musicals. In my conversations with Garcia, however, she denies that she had much influence on Chazelle’s work and vice versa. See Desirée Garcia, *The Migration of Musical Film: From Ethnic Margins to American Mainstream* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2014).
- ⁵ Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
- ⁶ As was often the case when Strayhorn’s contributions were unacknowledged, the opening credits for *Paris Blues* simply read “Music by Duke Ellington.” Critics who have examined the scores for the film’s music argue that the majority of what we hear in *Paris Blues* was composed and arranged by Billy Strayhorn. See David Hajdu, *Lush Life: A Biography of Billy Strayhorn* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 208–211.
- ⁷ For an extended reading of the film, see Krin Gabbard, “*Paris Blues*: Ellington, Armstrong, and Saying It with Music,” in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 297–311.
- ⁸ Terry Gross, interview with Damien Chazelle, *Fresh Air*, January 5, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2017/01/05/508338063/la-la-land-director-aimed-to-make-a-film-even-musical-skeptics-would-love>.
- ⁹ Of the many jazz enthusiasts with whom I have spoken over the years, most have told me that their passion for the music began when they were thirteen or fourteen. See David Hajdu, “Forever Young? In Some Ways, Yes,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/24/opinion/24hajdu.html>.
- ¹⁰ See Richard Brody, “Getting Jazz Right in the Movies,” *The New Yorker*, October 13, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/whiplash-getting-jazz-right-movies>.
- ¹¹ Meredith Goldstein, “The Predecessor to ‘La La Land’ Was Set in Boston—And a Lot More Diverse,” *The Boston Globe*, February 24, 2017, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/names/2017/02/24/the-predecessor-land-was-set-boston-and-lot-more-diverse/r4J3X7cjoeacLQbJHoVB4J/story.html>. See also Desirée Garcia, “La La Land’s ‘Burst-Into-Song’ Style Echoes the Intimacy of Early Black, Mexican, and Jewish Productions of Yore,” *Zócalo: An ASU Knowledge Enterprise Magazine of Ideas*, February 14, 2017, <http://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/2017/02/14/la-la-lands-debt-ethnic-musicals-yore/ideas/nexus/>.
- ¹² “Nightclubs and Other Venues,” *Grove Music Online* (January 22, 2002).
- ¹³ Richard Dyer, “Entertainment and Utopia,” *Movie* 24 (Spring 1977): 2–13.
- ¹⁴ An especially striking act of preservation by an African American artist that deserves mention here is Jason Moran’s project of reconstructing spaces where swing and bop artists performed in the 1930s and 1940s. See “Watch Jason Moran Explore the Story of New York City’s Most Iconic Jazz Clubs,” *The Vinyl Factory*, May 7, 2016, <https://thevinylfactory.com/films/jason-moran-staged-new-york-city-jazz-clubs/>.