



# “Fly Me to the Moon”: Jazz on TikTok

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**Abstract:** Jazz is very popular on TikTok. A search for the hashtag #jazz currently leads to a list of videos with a total of 2.7 billion views on the platform, and there are many young jazz musicians taking advantage of the opportunities the platform TikTok offers them to reach large audiences. With this article, I want to show how jazz is presented on the platform. The main questions are the following: Which jazz styles are particularly popular on TikTok and for what reasons? Which groups of musicians are especially visible on the platform? And what might the mechanisms of the TikTok platform, that is, the app’s functions and the algorithmic system, have to do with the popularization of certain jazz styles and (groups of) musicians? My research is based on a corpus analysis of one hundred highly popular jazz videos uploaded onto the platform.

**Keywords:** jazz; TikTok; Great American Songbook; platform affordances; musical canonization

## Introduction

Jazz on TikTok—the topic of this article might appear surprising at first. On the one hand, we have the short-form video platform TikTok: videos with a typical duration of fifteen to sixty seconds, well known for dance challenges and lip-synching, and often ridiculed due to its alleged focus on silly content by adolescents. On the other hand, we have jazz: celebrated as “art music,” where musical complexity is an important aesthetic value, and typically associated with instrumental virtuosity, long and improvised solos, ever increasing expressivity, and sophisticated compositions with complex harmonic progressions. How could these two cultural spheres ever fit together?

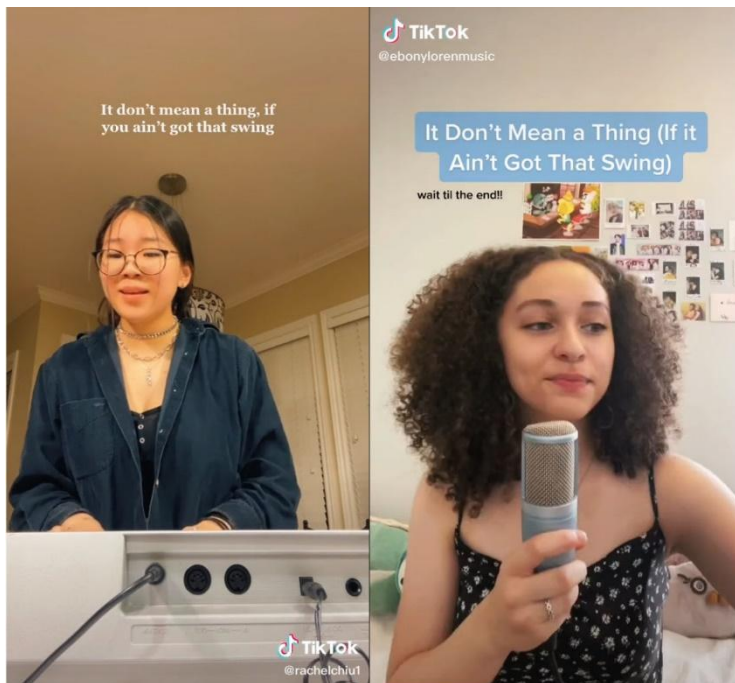
Despite these ostensible contradictions, jazz is very popular on TikTok. A

search for the hashtag #jazz currently leads to a list of videos with a total of 2.7 billion views on the platform.<sup>1</sup> Some jazz musicians on TikTok might even be described as “short-video celebrities,”<sup>2</sup> for example the self-declared “queen of jazztok” Stacey Ryan (@staceyryanmusic), who currently has 1.3 million followers and whose videos have been liked 21.1 million times. As a consequence of her success on TikTok, she was signed to Island Records and started touring internationally in 2022. She is by no means an isolated case: the musician Laufey (@laufey), for example, has over half a million followers on TikTok. She has become well known for her jazzy original compositions and versions of jazz standards from the first half of the twentieth century, which she has been uploading to the platform since 2020, and she headlined her first tour of the United States in autumn 2022.

There are numerous other examples of jazz musicians who are popular on TikTok. Interestingly enough, even a cursory glance at the most successful videos with the hashtag #jazz shows that a very specific facet of jazz culture is particularly popular on this platform. One of the most popular jazz videos was uploaded by Rachel Chiu (@rachelchiu1): the description of the video is “My phone was at 1% 😞” (see fig. 1), and it got 7.2 million views and 2.2 million likes. In this video, Rachel Chiu performs the song “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got that Swing),” composed by Duke Ellington, with lyrics by Irving Mills, and first released in 1932.<sup>3</sup> It seems to be rather the rule than the exception that jazz musicians are very successful on TikTok with jazz standards from that period. For example, Ebony Loren (@ebonylorenmusic) uploaded a version of the same Ellington composition (see fig. 1), which is also among the most popular jazz videos on the platform (1.4 million views, almost 400,000 likes).<sup>4</sup>

This article examines the most popular jazz videos on the TikTok platform, which are defined as jazz videos due to their use of the hashtag #jazz. These videos, such as Rachel Chiu’s and Ebony Loren’s versions of “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got that Swing),” exemplify a facet of jazz culture popularized in the first half of the twentieth century in which aspects such as virtuosity and improvisation, which nowadays are widely considered important aesthetic criteria in jazz, are not necessarily in the foreground. Consequently, the musical styles presented on TikTok as jazz do not necessarily align with the conventional definitions of jazz in other contexts. The categorization of these videos as jazz is contingent upon the varying perceptions of what is understood as jazz in different historical and geographical contexts. According to jazz researcher Scott DeVeaux,<sup>5</sup> jazz has always and necessarily

been in a state of permanent change, and musical genres in general are highly flexible systems that are continuously changed by the actors involved.<sup>6</sup> Nowadays, jazz appears to function more than ever as an umbrella term for a wide variety of musical styles.



*Figure 1 Rachel Chiu and Ebony Loren performing "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got that Swing)."*

The examples mentioned above clearly illustrate that there are many young jazz musicians taking advantage of the opportunities the platform TikTok offers them to reach large audiences. In an article on jazz in the digital age published in 2014, Haftor Medbøe and José Dias argued that jazz "has been slow to embrace the power of social media and seems to consistently arrive late at the table be it in the examples of MySpace, Facebook and Twitter."<sup>7</sup> Almost a decade later, the situation has changed significantly, as current research shows. As Chris J. Cottell demonstrates, jazz musicians have recently developed video-based collaborative aesthetic practices on YouTube and Facebook.<sup>8</sup> And as Bondy Kaye and Jean Burgess<sup>9</sup> and Bondy Kaye, Jing Zeng, and Patrik Wikström<sup>10</sup> show, there is a vibrant jazz community on TikTok, especially due to the account @JazzTokOfficial. It is thus apparent that digital media platforms are becoming increasingly important for jazz musicians. However, little is known about the representation of jazz in digital spaces, about jazz musicians' staging practices on digital media platforms, and about how the musicians engage with these new media environments.

With this article, my aim is to open up the field for research on highly popular jazz performances on TikTok and to show how jazz is presented on the platform. The main questions are the following: Which jazz styles are particularly popular on TikTok and for what reasons? Which groups of musicians are especially visible on the platform? And what might TikTok's platform mechanisms, that is, the app's functions and the algorithmic system, have to do with the popularization of certain jazz styles and (groups of) musicians?

That is to say, my focus is not solely on the jazz performances themselves but also on the platform's technical infrastructure and on community practices that might potentially have a crucial influence on the representation of musical cultures on TikTok (see Merlin, and Zanotti in this Issue). In this context, I discuss TikTok's potential role as an agent of musical canonization in the era of digital media platforms. Empirically, my research is based on a corpus analysis of one hundred highly popular jazz videos uploaded to the platform.

## **Platform Affordances and Musical Canonization in the Era of Digital Platforms**

Is the popularization of particular jazz styles more likely on TikTok? In order to answer this question, we must examine TikTok's platform infrastructure and certain community practices that might influence what kind of content will be disseminated on the platform. There are various platform features that appear relevant in this context.<sup>11</sup> TikTok's media format is the short-form video—short meaning that the typical duration is between fifteen and sixty seconds, even though the production of videos with a duration of up to ten minutes is possible. One central feature of TikTok is the “For You” page, a landing page the user is automatically directed to when opening the app on a smartphone. It offers a scroll of videos, curated algorithmically and individualized for every single user. For content creators who strive for visibility on TikTok, it is important to get their videos on the For You page of as many users as possible, as the app's focus on the landing page makes it rather unlikely that users will search for videos independently of the For You algorithm.<sup>12</sup> Creators should thus ideally attract the platform's algorithm in some way with their content if their aim is to reach large audiences.

Furthermore, there are platform features that provoke social interaction, in particular “duet,” “stitch,” and “use this sound.” The duet feature allows for duetting videos by other creators, which means that a new video appears side by side with the original. With the stitch feature, TikTokers can reuse short segments of existing videos, for example video or audio excerpts. This sound feature allows TikTok users to incorporate the original sound of any existing video into their own video creations. While all these features trigger a wealth of interactions on TikTok, there are even more possibilities for interacting with others, such as commenting, liking, replying to comments, calling for participation, and participating in video challenges.

We can assume that the short-video format, the interaction-centered platform features, and the community practices might potentially lead to the production of specific musical content tailored to TikTok’s overall platform logics. For example, it could be important for musicians to choose songs, or rather excerpts of songs, that can easily be performed in just a few seconds and that appear appropriate for encouraging user engagement, for example by being particularly catchy or songful, making reproduction by other users more likely. Briefly speaking, we can assume that the platform’s design and algorithmic system mean that TikTok makes certain actions by users more likely than others.

We can also say that this is due to the platform’s *affordances*. The term affordance was coined by psychologist James J. Gibson<sup>13</sup> and means action possibilities available in the environment, relative to actors’ action capabilities and not changing if the actors’ goals or needs change.<sup>14</sup> In the decades following the publication of Donald A. Norman’s book *The Design of Everyday Things* (1988),<sup>15</sup> the concept of affordance was developed further, particularly in studies on material culture, with the aim of examining which actions humans are more likely to take when engaging with artifacts due to certain features of their design and material conditions. Today affordance is a key concept in disciplines as diverse as, for example, media sociology<sup>16</sup> and archeology.<sup>17</sup> In music-related research, the term has been discussed with regard to the action possibilities communicated by musical sound<sup>18</sup> and the question of how the practices of using technical music devices like record players and iPods,<sup>19</sup> as well as digital audio workstations,<sup>20</sup> are influenced by the characteristics of design and technical functionality.

In research on digital media platforms, the concept of affordance is applied to

the analysis of social media interfaces on the one hand and the investigation of the structural relations between platform-specific technological features and the practices by platform users on the other.<sup>21</sup> Thus, in platform-related research, the term affordance describes the “‘multifaceted relational structure’ ... between an object/technology and the user that enables or constrains potential behavioral outcomes in a particular context.”<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, the concept of affordance used in this context is a rather broad one, referring, for example, to the technical features, functions, and interface design of digital media platforms and the related user practices. Instead of solely analyzing the affordances of a particular button—such as the “use this sound” button on TikTok—the focus is on the specific communicative practices and actions enabled or constrained by the interface, design, and technical features of digital media platforms.<sup>23</sup> That is to say, platform features and practices such as liking and sharing should also be considered when researching platform affordances. Furthermore, the specificities of the platforms’ media formats are highly relevant, as they can—to a certain degree—guide the users’ communicative actions. For example, only short-form videos can be uploaded on TikTok, and Twitter (now X) only allows the posting of written texts with a maximum of 280 characters. These restrictions will automatically influence the media products that are created by the users. Instagram, to take another example, affords a focus on photography, which has led to the development of visual aesthetics that are characteristic of the platform.<sup>24</sup>

As a result, certain behavioral norms of users will emerge on individual digital media platforms over time: so-called platform vernaculars or “shared (but not static) conventions and grammars of communication, which emerge from the ongoing interactions between platforms and users.”<sup>25</sup> Users can acquire specific knowledge of these conventions by observing them and subsequently tailor their content to individual platforms.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, by constantly engaging with platforms and the respective algorithmic systems, users and creators may develop certain assumptions on how to train algorithms in favor of their individual needs.<sup>27</sup> This is related to what Taina Bucher has described as “algorithmic imaginaries,” by which she means “ways of thinking about what algorithms are, what they should be, how they function, and what these imaginations, in turn, make possible.”<sup>28</sup> The goal of creators who have developed certain “platform practices”<sup>29</sup> on this basis is to increase their visibility in virtual spaces and to train the recommender systems in their favor,

for example in order to make it to the For You page of as many TikTok users as possible.

Technical features and algorithms thus have a significant impact on the usage of platforms. Still, how *exactly* platforms are used is dependent on specific social norms and practices of the users.<sup>30</sup> While digital media platforms can make certain communicative actions more likely, it is up to the users to creatively engage with the platforms' affordances, potentially bringing new aesthetic practices into play.<sup>31</sup> The interplay between platforms and users may even give rise to very specific forms of cultural expression. The task for researchers is to better understand *how* digital media platforms enable or constrain certain practices and actions.

What does all this mean for the specific case of jazz on TikTok? It can be assumed that popular jazz creators (and popular creators in general) aim to understand the platform's logic in order to learn what kind of video content, which songs, or which jazz styles will perform well on TikTok. This, in turn, might have a decisive influence on the popularization of specific repertoires on the platform. In addition, it can be assumed that musicians will learn how to present themselves on TikTok in a way that helps them achieve long-lasting success. Potentially, this could lead to a quite homogeneous representation of music cultures on the platform. On the basis of this sociotechnical interplay of human and non-human actors, I argue, there are new modes of cultural canonization emerging.

Canonization has been a key topic in jazz and popular music studies for several years now. As jazz scholar Tony Whyton argues, canons "enable people to celebrate what is perceived as the best a culture has to offer".<sup>32</sup> In jazz, there are several recordings by musicians such as Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, and John Coltrane that have been regarded as "the best" for decades by journalists, academics, publicists, and fans. At the same time, canons can be very homogenizing, as they "typically foreground the work and values of a particular social group or elite at the expense of others."<sup>33</sup> That is to say that canons, as documented in jazz history books, in music journalism, or in documentaries, usually represent the preferences of those who have the power to speak in the respective media. Since authorities like music journalism and academia have for a long time been (and to a large extent still are) dominated by *white* males from Western Europe and North America, canons in the field of jazz and popular music typically exclude women, non-

binary people, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), and musicians from geographical regions outside the United States and Western Europe.<sup>34</sup> Thus, which (groups of) musicians are considered the best and which musical repertoire is regarded as the most valuable is dependent on historical power relations and repeated over and over in specialized discourses. Typically, this causes a homogeneous representation and perception of musical cultures focused on only a few (mainly male) “heroes” and “seminal” recordings, while “the rest” are treated marginally.

With the dawn of the era of digital media platforms, alternative domains of musical canonization have emerged. Digital media platforms are used by billions of people every day, and musicians have to have a presence on these platforms in order to be competitive. Typically, musicians strive for popularity and visibility, trying to get clicks, likes, comments, and subscriptions, which is—to a certain degree—always dependent on the platform’s algorithms and the respective recommender systems. In this sense, non-human actors intervene in the competition for popularity and visibility.<sup>35</sup> As recent research has shown, TikTok’s visibility regime also perpetuates homogenizing tendencies that are typical of cultural canonization in general, in particular with regard to social categories like gender and *race*. The majority of the most popular TikTok creators are young *white* Americans.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, extremely popular creators such as Charli D’Amelio, who currently has almost 150 million followers on TikTok, can be described as normatively attractive young women who, as Melanie Kennedy argues, represent the “continuation and intensification of girl culture and the ideals of young female celebrities.”<sup>37</sup> Obviously, certain beauty ideals also play a very important role in terms of visibility on TikTok. This could lead to the homogenization of the most popular content on the platform, where young women who conform to certain beauty norms are given the greatest visibility—at the expense of other social groups.

This means that the algorithmic recommender systems of digital media platforms, which play a crucial role for content moderation, are not only important for the visibility of certain musical repertoires. They also perpetuate social stereotypes, and they push creators to tailor their content according to the platform’s affordances, which could lead to a very homogeneous representation of musical cultures on the platform. This process can thus be understood as a new mode of *sociotechnical canonization* based on the interplay of human and non-human actors. With regard to the specific case of jazz on TikTok, we can therefore ask: How does the platform’s



logic influence the popularity of particular jazz styles? And are certain groups of jazz musicians more likely to be successful on TikTok?

## Corpus Analysis

The first step to approaching these questions is an empirical investigation of how jazz is represented on TikTok. One appropriate method for doing so is a corpus analysis of popular jazz videos on the platform. The purpose of such a corpus analysis is to provide an overview of a specific cultural field on TikTok by systematizing the content of a defined number of relevant videos on the basis of a set of descriptive categories. In doing so, we can ask questions like: Which musical repertoire is typical of jazz on TikTok? In which settings do the musicians perform? And are there specific communicative actions afforded by the platform and approached by the musicians? In doing so, it is possible to infer regularities within a delimited repertoire of TikTok videos, which in turn can provide the basis for detailed case studies on individual videos and musicians. Corpus analyses have already been applied in several studies on TikTok, for example in research on expressions of grief,<sup>38</sup> science communication,<sup>39</sup> climate activism,<sup>40</sup> and communicative practices on a general level.<sup>41</sup>

In order to define as representative a corpus of jazz videos as possible, I used a web scraper to search for videos tagged with the hashtag #jazz. At the time this article was written, this was the most popular hashtag directly related to jazz on TikTok. TikTok creators usually use popular hashtags in order to assign their videos to specific topics and to make their content more visible. Using a web scraper is an easy and reliable method for collecting numerical data independently of the researcher's individual engagement on the platform. This is very important, as the individual usage of TikTok very quickly triggers the personalized algorithmic content filter. Referring only to the content recommended by the For You page algorithm would thus lead to a very distorted representation of jazz on TikTok. Searching for the hashtag #jazz, I only collected videos that were labeled as jazz music on the platform, independently of my own assumptions on what might be classified as popular jazz on TikTok. Furthermore, web scraping allows for collecting metadata such as play counts, number of likes, and number of comments. The results can easily be sorted on the basis of this information, and we can see which

videos labeled with the hashtag #jazz are the most popular in terms of likes and views. The disadvantage of this method is that we can only collect videos uploaded by users who actually use the respective hashtag. Nevertheless, the sheer volume of videos on TikTok means that it is necessary to make a targeted selection in any case.

The corpus for this study encompasses one hundred videos tagged with the hashtag #jazz, ranked by the number of views. There were individual videos on the list that displayed no reference to jazz, neither sonically nor visually. These videos were not considered for the analysis, and I collected more appropriate videos to replace them until I had reached one hundred again. In the next step, I watched every video several times in order to systematize its audiovisual content. In doing so, I inductively developed a set of descriptive categories in the course of the analytical process. I worked with the software MAXQDA, which is designed for qualitative research. The software is often used for systematically analyzing text data, but it can also be applied for coding (audio)visual data. All in all, I developed a system of descriptive categories with 1,601 codings in total. The main categories, divided into several sub- and sub-sub-categories defined in the course of the analytical process, were the following: musical repertoire, gender relations, *race/ethnicity*, setting, video form, musical performance, and verbal elements.

## Results

### Musical Repertoire

There is a clear tendency toward versions of jazz standards played by the content creators: this phenomenon was observed in forty-six out of one hundred videos. Most of these songs belong to the repertoire of the Great American Songbook, a loose canon of popular songs composed and first recorded from the 1930s to the 1950s. A significant number of these compositions have been performed by jazz musicians over the years, and they represent a specific aspect of the jazz canon—these songs are considered jazz standards.<sup>42</sup> In twenty-one videos, we hear original compositions by the content creators, although not necessarily fully fleshed-out songs, but rather short loops or harmonic progressions. Snippets of original songs are only performed by the above-mentioned musicians Stacey Ryan and Laufey. In fifteen videos, the original sound of existing jazz recordings was

adopted. While the adoption of pre-existing sounds may be typical of many TikTok videos, especially in the case of dance challenges and lip-synching, it is obviously not of great importance for jazz musicians on the platform. Improvisation plays a minor role, as we mainly hear musicians improvising in only eleven videos. Most of the time, these improvisations are only very short segments without instrumental accompaniment, whereas only one musician, the trumpeter Kellin Hanas, improvises to jazzy stock instrumentals in a “classical” sense.

Most of the time, we hear versions played by the content creators or original recordings of songs first recorded from the 1930s to the 1950s: ten songs are from the 1950s, and nine songs each are from the 1940s and 1930s. The oldest song in the corpus is from 1928 (“Makin’ Whoopee,” performed by Laufey). Table 1 provides an overview of the songs that appear in the corpus at least twice.

Tab. 1: Most popular songs in the top 100 of videos tagged with the hashtag #jazz on TikTok.

Title	Songwriters	Year	Occurrences
“Fly Me to The Moon”	Bart Howard	1954	5
“It’s Been a Long, Long Time”	Jule Styne/Sammy Cahn	1945	4
“In the Mood”	Wingy Manone/Andy Razaf/Joe Garland	1939	3
“L-O-V-E”	Bert Kaempfert/Milt Gabler	1964	2
“La Vie En Rose”	Édith Piaf/Louis Guglielmi	1947	2
“Sing, Sing, Sing (With a Swing)”	Louis Prima	1936	2
“Sway”	Luis Demetrio/Norman Gimbel	1954	2
“It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got that Swing)”	Duke Ellington/Irving Mills	1932	2

However, it is not clear whether the musicians are really referring to the first recorded versions of the songs or rather to the most popular recordings. For example, the song “Fly Me to the Moon” was first recorded in 1954 but was popularized by Frank Sinatra’s version from 1964—nowadays, it is considered a Sinatra song.

## Gender Relations

The gender ratio is relatively balanced, with a slight tendency toward male musicians. Videos were coded as “male” or “female” if the musician who uploaded them can be assigned to this gender category. This is also true of duet videos, where two or more videos from different accounts are displayed simultaneously. In forty-seven videos, there are male musicians performing, and women perform in thirty-seven videos. In ten videos, we see mixed

groups, and in six videos, gender is not discernible, as the musicians are not visible. Categorizations based on social categories such as gender—and also *race*/ethnicity—are of course not entirely reliable and can only be made in a relatively superficial manner in such an analytical procedure. For instance, the classification of musicians as either male or female was based on my own subjective perception, which is influenced by the pervasive social logic of binary gender categorization.<sup>43</sup> It cannot be ruled out that the actual gender identity of the individuals in the videos may differ from these categorizations.

The gender ratio could lead one to assume that the most popular jazz musicians on TikTok are males. If we take a closer look at the musicians who appear in the corpus multiple times and whose musical repertoire is typical with respect to the aforementioned focus on Great American Songbook songs from the first half of the twentieth century, the picture changes a little. The musician featured most frequently in the corpus is Ricky Rosen (@rickyroser), who appears in seven videos. He performs versions of songs such as “Sway” (originally from 1954) and “It’s Been a Long, Long Time” (originally from 1945). Another male musician who performs a comparable repertoire is Erny Nunez (@young\_crooner), with two videos in the corpus. Ben Freeman (@ben\_makes\_names\_to\_music) has five videos in the top 100: he provides humorous content by, for example, playing songs backward and asking the audience to identify the song they hear—this kind of jazz performance is rather unusual with regard to the analysis of the musical repertoire. The most successful female musicians on the list, on the other hand, clearly represent the focus on Great American Songbook songs. Stacey Ryan, Laufey, Ebony Loren, and Rachel Chiu appear at least twice with versions of songs such as “Fly Me to the Moon” (1954) and “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got that Swing)” (1932). This means that the jazz repertoire that is the most popular on TikTok tends to be represented by female musicians who are highly popular on the platform, each with at least 500,000 followers. Although the musicians’ age is not displayed on TikTok, all the musicians mentioned here are clearly in their early twenties or even younger.

## **Race/Ethnicity**

The coding regarding the *race*/ethnicity category followed the recommendation of Lucibello et al. and assigned the videos to the categories “Asian,” “Black,” “Indigenous,” “Latinx,” “Middle Eastern,” “White,” and

“Other.”<sup>44</sup> Additionally, the categories “mixed groups” and “not discernible” were defined. The category “mixed groups” was selected when the videos featured multiple musicians who could be assigned to different categories. For instance, if only musicians belonging to the “Black” category were shown, no distinction was made between individuals and groups. “Not discernible” was chosen when the musicians were not recognizable, for example due to costumes. These categorizations, like those of gender, are necessarily superficial. However, in the context of a preliminary analysis, such an approach is unavoidable if one is to first reveal inequalities on a general level and thus lay the foundation for more in-depth analytical steps.

The defined top one hundred is clearly dominated by *white* musicians; this category was applied to a total of sixty-eight videos. The categories “Black” (5), “Latinx” (4), “Asian” (3), and “not discernible” (3) play a clearly subordinate role, while the categories “Indigenous,” “Middle Eastern,” and “Other” were not assigned at all. In eleven videos, we see mixed groups; six videos do not show any people. This overview demonstrates that the musicians who can be clearly categorized as *white* are in the majority. It is evident that the field of the most popular jazz videos on TikTok is predominantly a “white space.”<sup>45</sup>

## Setting

No great variability can be ascertained with regard to the video settings. In the majority of the videos (73), we see the musicians perform in domestic spaces. Only occasionally are they filmed playing on a stage or in a rehearsal room. This is typical of TikTok, as many creators film themselves at home—an aesthetic that is certainly influenced by the coronavirus pandemic, when a large part of the global population was in domestic isolation, continuing what had already been described as “bedroom culture”<sup>46</sup> in social media research before the advent of TikTok.

## Video Form

Most of the videos (74) were obviously filmed by the musicians themselves placing their smartphone in front of them. Most musicians (85) are filmed in selfie mode, that is, from a rather close distance, while fifteen musicians are seen from a greater distance, for example performing on a stage. Even though the duet is one of TikTok’s key features, only seven videos in the corpus

make use of this feature. The majority of the videos (73) were recorded in one pass, which means that storytelling modes with more than one storyline or perspective do not play a key role for most musicians.

## **Musical Performance**

In eighty-seven videos, we see musicians performing the music themselves, whereas in thirteen videos the music is taken from other sources. There is a clear tendency toward solo performances (62); ensembles are featured in twenty-five videos. This seems logical, as the majority of the videos were produced by musicians at home, not in a concert or rehearsal setting. In thirty-seven videos, we see musicians singing, whether to an instrumental track (16), to their own instrumental accompaniment (12), to a cappella (8), or to the accompaniment of multiple instrumentalists (1). While there is no clear tendency regarding the musical accompaniment, singing to pre-recorded instrumentals might be a feature that is typical of jazz performances on TikTok, but it is rather unusual in jazz beyond the platform. Instrumental music without vocals occurs in thirty-two videos.

## **Verbal Elements**

The majority of the videos make use of the English language, be it in the song lyrics, the text layers, or spoken language. Spanish (4) and French (2) language elements occur occasionally, whereas ten videos contain no verbal elements at all.

On TikTok, creators can add written text to their videos by using the app's features for text layers, for example to explain the topic of the video or display song lyrics. Due to the platform's short-video aesthetic, one reason for doing so might be that there is not enough time for spoken explanations or introductions. Furthermore, adding song lyrics can make it easier for other users to duet, as they can sing along to the original sound. And perhaps the text layers will attract more user attention.

In several videos (22), the text layer serves to explain what the video will be about. Song lyrics are displayed in fifteen videos, and in fourteen videos the creators use the text layer for telling stories that are not related to the topic of the video or the song's lyrics. Song titles are displayed in twelve videos, and some (11) creators reply to users' comments, which are displayed in a

text box on the left of the screen. This feature cannot be regarded as a text layer in the sense of the aforementioned examples, but it does add verbal elements to the videos. These textboxes typically display comments by users and requests for the creators to sing particular songs.

In twenty videos, we can hear spoken announcements by the musicians. For example, they announce the song they are about to sing. In the videos with more humorous connotations, the announcements sometimes serve to prepare the punchline of a joke (12).

## Summary of the Corpus Analysis

Of course, there is no specific formula for performing jazz on TikTok. Still, there are some recurring patterns that allow us to define a number of typical features. Versions of jazz standards of the Great American Songbook repertoire first recorded between the 1930s and the 1950s are very popular, most of them sung by relatively young *white* women in their early twenties—although there are more male musicians in the top one hundred. The musicians typically perform in mundane settings and in selfie mode, and singing is more popular than instrumental music. Almost all musicians featured on this list sing songs in English, which is obviously their mother tongue. Text layers are used frequently, while spoken announcements are less typical as long as the musical performance, rather than humorous elements, is in the foreground.

## Prototypical Creators and Content

According to the results of the corpus analysis, the following musicians can be regarded as prototypical of jazz on TikTok: Ricky Rosen (@rickyrosen), Stacey Ryan (@staceyryanmusic), Laufey (@laufey), Rachel Chiu (@rachelchiu1), Ebony Loren (@ebonylorenmusic), Sam Ambers (@sam\_ambers), Stella Cole (@stellacole), and Erny Nunez (@young\_crooner). If we take a closer look at their profile pages, it becomes evident that the focus on singing jazz standards of the Great American Songbook repertoire from the early twentieth century to the 1950s is a defining factor for the style of their performances on TikTok. For example, almost all of them have uploaded their own version (sometimes even several versions) of the two songs that, according to the corpus analysis, are the most popular: “Fly Me to the Moon” (1954; see fig. 2) and “It’s Been A

Long, Long Time” (1945). That is to say, the jazz musicians who are the most popular on TikTok also perform the jazz standards that enjoy the greatest popularity on the platform. This is true not only of these two songs but of several others as well, for example “La Vie en Rose” (1947) and “L-O-V-E” (1964). Clearly, popularity with jazz on TikTok is, at least to a certain degree, dependent on choosing a very specific repertoire.

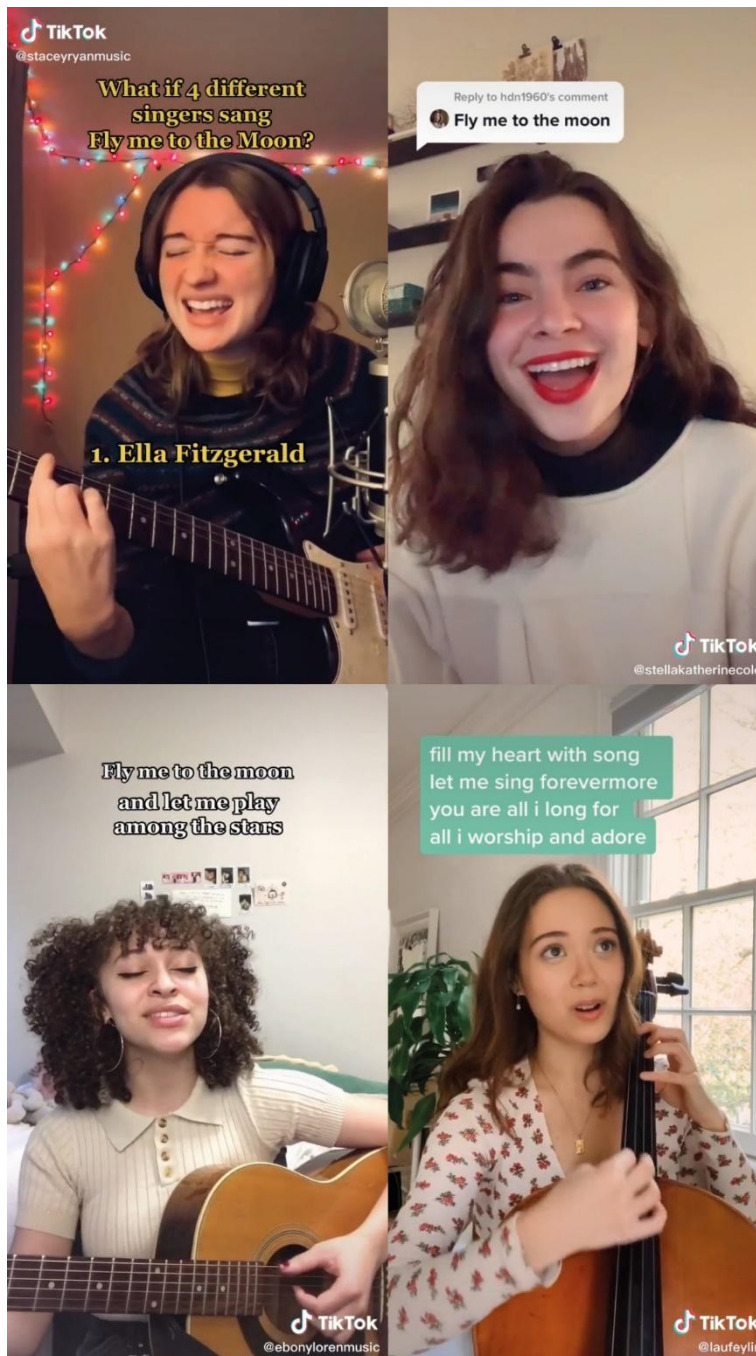


Figure 2 Stacey Ryan, Stella Katherine Cole, Ebony Loren, and Laufey performing “Fly Me to the Moon.”



Why exactly this kind of jazz? With regard to “Fly Me to the Moon,” it seems that every jazz musician who wants to be successful on TikTok has to upload their own version of this song if they want to reach a large audience.<sup>47</sup> The song is highly popular on the platform in general. A search for the hashtag #flymetothemoon currently leads to a list of videos with more than 290 million views on TikTok. For my ongoing research on jazz on TikTok, I conducted interviews with musicians from the United States, Canada, and the UK whose jazz videos are highly popular on TikTok.<sup>48</sup> Some of them have argued that “Fly Me to the Moon” is one of the most, maybe even *the* most popular jazz recording of all time, at least in North America. This may be a very North America-centered perspective on jazz, as many listeners in other geographical regions might be surprised by this assessment. As recent research demonstrates, TikTok in general is, to a certain extent, North America centered. As Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström show, the majority of the most popular TikTok creators are from the United States—a fact that they attribute to the assumption that TikTok aims at establishing itself in the American market in particular.<sup>49</sup> If this is true, the business model of ByteDance—the company behind TikTok—would therefore have a direct impact on the musical repertoire that is particularly popular on the platform.

Another potential explanation for the popularity of certain jazz standards on TikTok is their prevalence in popular media. Whereas “Fly Me to the Moon” was featured in the South Korean series *Squid Game* and has subsequently gained popularity on TikTok, “It’s Been A Long, Long Time” probably owes its success on TikTok to the fact that it appears in a well-known movie: it was used at the end of *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). These examples demonstrate that contemporary popular media culture can have a strong impact on the jazz repertoire that is played on TikTok. In addition, users want the musicians to sing songs that they probably know from popular media or from other TikTok creators, as we can, for example, see in Laufey’s version of “It’s Been a Long, Long Time.” At the beginning of the video, she comments: “A lot of you have asked me to sing this song, so here you go.”<sup>50</sup>

These two songs, as well as the aforementioned “La Vie en Rose” and “L-O-V-E,” clearly demonstrate that the kind of jazz that enjoys the greatest popularity on TikTok does not necessarily coincide with the repertoire typically associated with the jazz canon perpetuated by journalists, researchers, music documentaries, and others. For example, music by so-called jazz icons<sup>51</sup> such as Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, and John Coltrane is not featured. Instead,

TikTok showcases songs from the Great American Songbook. Songs like “La Vie en Rose”, a signature tune of Édith Piaf, and “L-O-V-E,” composed by Bert Kaempfert and Milt Gabler, would probably not be considered jazz recordings at all by many jazz enthusiasts. But on a short-form video platform that is very much based on generating interaction, it appears self-evident that songs like these, which are catchy and relatively easy to sing along to, will receive more attention than virtuoso improvisations, complex compositions, or recordings that are typically several minutes long and lack catchy hooks. Jazz creators, in turn, have to work with the platform’s affordances. Obviously, in terms of their repertoire choices, musicians have to respond, to some extent, to what the platform demands, what the users want to hear, and what is likely to generate interaction and visibility on the basis of TikTok’s platform logic. In this respect, the platform’s affordances can have a decisive influence on the musical repertoire that achieves popularity on TikTok.

As we can see in fig. 2, some of the prototypical jazz musicians on TikTok are relatively young women in their early twenties who conform to a certain prescriptive beauty norm. While they often accompany themselves on guitar or piano while singing, we can assume that they are primarily perceived as singers. Whereas jazz instrumentalists tend to be in the background on TikTok in general, the focus on young female singers clearly perpetuates gender-related stereotypes that have been typical in jazz culture for decades. In an article on women in jazz, Sherrie Tucker describes the “gender-coding of musical instruments” in jazz from a historical perspective.<sup>52</sup> Tucker argues that several instruments that are relevant for jazz—such as brass, bass, and drums—have traditionally been associated with men, while women were mainly—if at all—accepted as singers.<sup>53</sup> We can see the results of this gender-coding and the related exclusion of women in jazz historiography even today, for example when skimming through jazz history books, where typically only a few female singers but quite a lot of male instrumentalists are featured.<sup>54</sup> It is not very surprising that certain gender stereotypes and beauty norms are also perpetuated on TikTok, as the platform is accused of using user attractiveness as a key criterion for its ranking systems.<sup>55</sup> In this respect, it is obvious that, in addition to a certain repertoire, the musicians’ appearance also determines their success on the platform, due to the logic of algorithmic filtering.

## Conclusion

According to the corpus analysis and the analysis of individual profiles of highly popular jazz musicians, TikTok paints a very homogeneous picture of jazz. The most popular musicians who can be described as prototypical of jazz on TikTok are for the most part conventionally attractive, *white* North American women in their early twenties singing jazz standards of the Great American Songbook repertoire mainly written by *white* male songwriters from the United States from the 1930s to the 1950s. Original compositions, improvisation, and ensemble interaction are relegated to the background, despite these being important aspects of jazz. Obviously, it is not equally easy for everyone to be successful with jazz on TikTok. Popular creators tend to need a certain musical repertoire and a certain physiognomy, and they should sing songs in English. TikTok is sometimes considered an inclusive space where everyone can find their individual niche, and this might be true to a certain degree. But if we focus on the creators who enjoy the most popularity, quite the opposite seems to pertain. This applies not only to jazz but to the platform in general.<sup>56</sup>

I argue that this is to a large extent due to the platform's affordances and the logic of algorithmic filtering. Creators who strive for visibility have to observe which content performs well on the platform and tailor their musical repertoire and appearance accordingly. Due to the short-video format and the platform's sociability features, like duet, stitch, and use this sound, certain jazz styles or specific songs are more likely to perform well, as it is more likely that they will attract and hold the attention of quite a lot of users. These mechanisms should by no means be understood in a media-deterministic sense but rather as a specific form of sociotechnical interplay between the platform and its users—between human and non-human actors. As the specific case of jazz on TikTok demonstrates, this sociotechnical interplay can potentially lead to a very homogeneous representation of musical cultures in digital spaces, reaching millions of people.

TikTok obviously pushes normatively attractive young people and perpetuates social stereotypes, especially with regard to gender and *race*. In this sense, certain mechanisms of cultural canonization that are typical (not only) of jazz are perpetuated on the platform. But at the same time, there are clear differences from the jazz canon as documented in jazz history books, in music journalism, and in documentaries. Compared to these traditional

gatekeepers, what the platform presents as “the best”—or at least as the most popular—of jazz tends to be influenced by contemporary popular media, such as well-known movies and series, and the focus is on jazz standards of the Great American Songbook repertoire—not on bebop or other jazz styles widely considered “art music.” Normally, Black male instrumentalists are regarded as the canonical figures of jazz. But on TikTok, young *white* female singers are the most visible jazz musicians. That is to say, certain aspects typical of jazz-related canonization seem to be reversed to some extent on the TikTok platform. On the other hand, certain tendencies of jazz-related canonization have not changed. For example, it is still the singing women, rather than the instrumentalists, who receive the most attention. There are also clear inequities in terms of *race* and ethnicity, as the majority of highly popular jazz musicians analyzed in this study are *white*. It is evident that racist biases are pervasive in digital spaces, particularly in the context of algorithmic filtering.<sup>57</sup> Intersectionality, understood as the interconnectedness and, at times, reinforcement of social categories such as gender, *race*, ethnicity, and class, which has been commonplace in jazz for decades,<sup>58</sup> plays a pivotal role on TikTok as well.

In this sense, the platform’s affordances and the striving for visibility in digital spaces may spawn alternative domains of jazz-related canonization, challenging the traditional gatekeepers’ narratives of cultural hierarchization.<sup>59</sup> Still, TikTok cannot be understood as a hermetic space but is instead influenced by certain cultural stereotypes that have long been crucial for the formation of cultural canons. This means that digital media platforms such as TikTok can be regarded as new cultural gatekeepers that bring new modes of cultural canonization into play. But these modes of canonization are still highly influenced by various cultural contexts that go far beyond digital media platforms. It is an important task for researchers to understand the platform mechanisms and the new modes of cultural canonization arising in digital spaces.

As researchers only have limited access to the APIs (application programming interfaces) of digital media platforms, it is very difficult to gain insights into the platforms’ logic. Some platform companies, for example Spotify, have even tried to have research on their platforms banned by the courts—eventually, Spotify’s plan failed, the research was conducted, and the results were published.<sup>60</sup> However, platform companies are very restrictive, and getting in touch with their employees is extremely difficult or probably impossible

in most cases.<sup>61</sup> One possible way to better understand platforms is to get in touch with people who don't work for platform companies but who have specific knowledge of certain functional logic systems due to their professional engagement with platforms—for example professional musicians with high numbers of followers and several viral videos. These people can tell us a lot about platform logic, and they know better than outsiders what kind of content will probably perform well on individual platforms. Another avenue that appears promising is to get in touch with music industry professionals, such as music producers and label managers or employees of social media agencies. These professionals have to develop certain strategies for showcasing musicians on platforms, or perhaps even for tailoring musical content to certain platforms. That is to say, what we need is in-depth case studies on the various production cultures that shape the image of music cultures as communicated on digital media platforms, reaching myriads of people every day.<sup>62</sup> This approach can complement the kind of corpus study presented in this article by investigating the production logic of individual creators and the respective platform practices.

## Notes

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