When Did Jazz Go Straight? A Queer Question for Jazz Studies

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Straighten up and fly right
Straighten up and stay right

I know, I know, weird title. People keep stopping me in the halls, asking, “When DID jazz go straight?” “Are you really going to answer that question?”

Straighten up and fly right

Jazz went straight in 1956. Jazz went straight in 1917. Jazz went straight in 1984. “Are you really going to pin it down? Make visible the queer jazz past, trot out the players of the queer jazz canon, and delineate the turning point when jazz comes out as the official soundtrack of heterosexual love and romance?”

Cool down, papa, don’t you blow your top

Um, no, I am not. See, those would be straight answers; linear when/then, who/them Q&A. I am going for queer here, Q with a Q. As a queer question, “When did jazz go straight?” flies at a bit of an angle, scanning the horizon for queer instances in which jazz appears to “go straight,” when people “go straight” to jazz, or when jazz gets called upon to represent “straightness.” This article, then, is a series of postcards meant to solicit more questions and to question others. It is meant as an alternative to hushed lines of inquiry that occasionally pop up in panels and articles and hallway talk: “Why are there no queers in jazz?” or “Who are the queers in jazz?” or “Why do queers like opera, Broadway show tunes, indie white girls with guitars, techno, but not jazz?” To those kinds of questions, I say, “When did jazz go straight?” It’s a saucy queer answer for questions like that.

As a queer question, “when did jazz go straight?” emphasizes straightness as a particular direction rather than a natural given. And it queerly invites more questions, such as “Who says jazz is straight?”, “For whom is it straight?”, “Which jazz is straight?”, and “How can anyone suggest a single orientation exists for those famously diverse conglomerations of sounds, styles, practices, spaces, listeners, players, and identities found under the jazz umbrella?” To which I answer, “Yes! Let us take these questions and run sideways with them into all kinds of specific local and historical contexts; for all those moments when jazz seems to represent straightness for groups and individuals, or to conceal the queerness of groups and individuals, let us ask how and why and what’s at stake?”

What’s going on in 2006, for example, when a popular cable TV lesbian soap opera series animates hip young white lesbians rescuing the Planet (night club) from a jazz quartet (by convincing the African American heterosexual woman who owns the establishment to “give the girlies what they want”) (“Loneliest”)? Or in 1984 when a jazz historian publishes his claim that “the incidence of homosexuality in jazz” is “not only below that in other kinds of music and all the other arts,” but “far below population norms cited in studies such as the Kinsey Report” (Sales 233-34)? Or in 1965, when an eclectic music magazine solicits responses of ten jazz musicians to the validity of the claim that “HOMOSEXUALITY IS ALMOST NON-EXISTENT AMONG JAZZ MUSICIANS AS COMPARED TO OTHER LIMBS IN THE TREE OF SHOW BUSINESS” (French 53)? How does a term like “effeminacy” come to operate as the critical language deployed by jazz writers, audiences, and musicians of the 1950s to denigrate some emergent jazz styles while advocating for others that are heard explicitly as black-hetero-masculine (Kelley)? I take the “when” in “when did jazz go straight?” not as a straight/definitive “when,” as in “when did the word ‘jazz’ first appear in print?” or “when was Louis Armstrong born?” I take it as a queer/slippery “when,” rife with particularity and difference. What is the role of straightness in these diverse and many jazz “whens?” One might be tempted to stop me right here and ask, “If jazz ‘went straight’ in all these moments, why not search for the first instance,” and then roll back from there to ask: what comprised its previous orientation? Is there a queer jazz past lurking betwixt and between the stations of the canon? And, if that is the case, why not talk about that? Why not ask, “When and where are the queer moments, subjects, sounds and spaces of jazz history?” That’s the really queer question, right?

To which I have to say, well, not necessarily. Why would it be queerer to “out” what is or may be “queer” in jazz discourse, histories, or cultures, while leaving historical constructions of “straight” to pass as normal, timeless, and something we already “know”? While I understand the importance of making visible the variety of sexual orientation and performances of sexual fluidity and of exposing homophobia in all fields, including jazz, I worry that to limit queer
theory to queer bodies is to settle for the “Where’s Waldo” school of GLBT historiography, in which “spotting the queers” becomes the object, and research becomes an exercise of historically informed “guydar” that fails to interrogate the historicity of straightness, not to mention the historical and cultural specificity of the closet.

Jonathan Ned Katz has cautioned against routes of queer historiography that “fail to name the ‘norm,’ the ‘normal,’ and the social process of ‘normalization’” and urges us to consider these as “perplexing, fit subjects for probing questions” (16). If a dominant fantasy of the “jazzman” (I am using “man” intentionally) in one discursive moment or another is constructed, even romanticized, as hyper-hetero-masculine, we might aim to disrupt this routine by proving that some actual jazz musicians and fans “deviate” from that norm. But to do so without “naming the norm” and “considering it perplexing,” is to risk mapping another set of desires on bodies already saturated with sexualized and romanticized projections.

I take seriously Katz’s questioning of why, in queer historiography, of all places, should scholars fly in such close alignment with sexology and criminology and other traditions that overlook the construction of “normal,” finding “greater charm” in “[a]nalyses of the ‘abnormal,’ the ‘deviant,’ the ‘different’ and ‘other,’ ‘minority’ cultures” (16). Scott Herring has recently likened such forms of queer historiography to “slumming literature,” along with sexology and sex tourism, and instead advocates a practice of “unknowing queer history,” defined as a refusal to produce knowledge about, classify, make visible, or recognizable “understandings of non-normative sexual bodies of any color, class, and gender” (23). Making visible marginalized subjects in the past is not simply a matter of liberating lost histories. Queer desire for knowable queer subjects can also objectify. Self-orientation through knowledge production operates not only through “Othering,” but through “saming” of historical subjects. I know about you and I am different from you. In that difference I become myself. Or I know about you and we are the same. You are my past, and through knowing about you, I become myself. Both of these moves involve fixing a subject as an object in order for the observer to become a subject. In addition, for Herring, a historiography in which the “queer” is rescued from ambiguity and rendered knowable replicates the unforgiving “in”/”out” of the closet, in which one kind of classificatory system of visibility is answered by another, as analyzed by Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick (Herring 13, 16). Not all historical and cultural contexts define sexuality in the same ways, and not all identification depends on or can afford public self-disclosure. Even people who are “openly gay” may have areas in their lives where they are “not out.” We could even think of that line that separates the “in” from the “out” as yet another effect of straightness; one more regulatory regime that disproportionately affects non-straight people.

I am looking for an approach that doesn’t pathologize, utopianize, or otherwise objectify sexuality in jazz cultures and history, that doesn’t claim space by fixing jazz subjects as sex objects (either positively or negatively); that doesn’t place the burden of our rethinking of the category of sexuality in jazz studies on the bodies of queer people of all colors and sexes and genders, people of color of all sexes and genders, women of all sexes, genders and colors, poor people, non-prescription drug users, alcoholics, incarcerated people, people with (or perceived to have) mental illnesses, or people whose labor and workplaces are routinely pathologized, criminalized, and/or romanticized through sexualization.

Despite the “when” in its title, this paper will not provide a periodization of the sexual orientations of jazz—but will, instead, reflect on analytical orientations from recent queer theory that I find useful as directions for a range of jazz studies scholarship—and not only for jazz studies scholarship on out or “outed” queer artists. This paper will not out individuals. This paper will not provide a lavender list of queer jazz musicians, audience members, musical styles, or time periods. This paper will look at straightness as a theoretical tool for continuing to re-think the historical tangles of sexuality, race and gender in jazz studies.

**What Do I Mean by Straight?**

So what do I mean by “straight” and “straightening”? I am not defining straight and queer primarily in terms of “object choice” (my sexuality is defined in relation to whom I love/desire) or “identity” (my sexuality is what kind of person I am, defined in relation to those with whom I am like). Instead, I am drawing from Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology* for an approach to theorizing straightness and queerness that foregrounds orientation, alignment, and directedness. Ahmed draws from queer geographers and phenomenologists not to ask “what is queer identity?” or “who are the queers?”, but to pose questions such as “what does it mean to be oriented?” and “what difference does it make what we are oriented toward?” (1). Whereas Judith Butler, following Louis Althusser, has been interested in the constitution of the subject through repeatedly hearing a self named and understanding that name as the self, or “recognition,” Ahmed reflects on the “physicality of the turn,” how turning one way rather than another brings different worlds into view (15). Straight lines, for Ahmed, are “path(s) well trodden” that “pull,” and our orientations along those paths and relationships to the pull are what constitute subjects and worlds (16). She points out that “straight” and “queer” share spatial etymologies, straight stemming from “direct” (16) and queer from “twist”
(67). When heteronormativity functions as a well-worn path, “straight” isn’t simply one way to love, or one kind of identity, but an orientation that aligns “directly,” making heterosexuality feel normal and natural. It isn’t “object choice” or identity that extends the reach of some bodies and blocks others, but the ways that some routes like heteronormativity and whiteness come to function as “straightening devices.” A queer orientation would also feel the “pull,” but would turn differently, and it would not be the different “object choice” that makes the difference Ahmed is interested in, but the difference it makes in terms of subject-formation and world-making to turn one way and not another.

I decidedly want to resist the impulse (even while feeling its pull) to exhume a knowable queer jazz past. My argument is more humble than that. What I want to do instead, is offer some suggestions for how we might attend to straightening, as well as queering, in scholarship that attempts to tackle the important task of theorizing sexuality in jazz studies in new ways. I am not arguing that “straightness” eclipse “queerness” as a sex-object-of-study in jazz-studies—but that we refuse to divide jazz into queer moments and straight moments, queer bodies and straight bodies, queer sound and straight sound—and to seek analytic approaches that help us to look at queering and straightening as relational, directional (drawing from Ahmed), historically entwined, and intersected with race, gender, class, modernity, nation, and other discourses, social categories, and fields of power. Jazz studies needs to know more about how jazz becomes a sign for heterosexuality in the moments in which that has happened, and it needs to queer straightness, to see it as “perplexing,” in order to see it at all. I see this as a simultaneous and related project to research that aims to produce knowledge about sexual variety and fluidity in jazz sites. To do the latter without attention to the former risks romanticizing moments that beckon as queer jazz pasts in situations where sexual curiosity and spectacle may have operated at least partially in the service of constructing straight lines.

By advocating an analysis of “straightness” in jazz studies, I am not suggesting that all jazz musicians are straight, or that all straight people like jazz, or that straight people invented jazz. This is not an essentialist argument about genre = identity. I am searching for other directions for thinking about moments when jazz “goes straight.” Some possibilities include 1) Jazz is often used as a sign of straightness, maybe even as a “straightening device”; 2) Jazz is, among other things, a narrative, often constructed as a straight line from inevitable style to inevitable style, genius to genius; and 3) Jazz emerged in the same historical moment as modern heterosexuality.

Jazz discourse has operated as a sign of straightness in many historical moments and for many different people, and for different reasons. Scholarship that incorporates queer theory tends to focus on performers who are themselves queer, gay, lesbian identified (or thought to be). This is important work, and certainly helps to reframe jazz history, and to learn more about contours of inclusion and exclusion of sexually diverse jazz subjects. There is some exciting work already and more emerging that is historically meticulous in this regard—David Hajdu’s Lush Life on Billy Strayhorn is an excellent example of a jazz biography that opens doors to understanding how one out gay black man negotiated his professional, social, and personal life in a specific time and place. Lisa Barg’s brilliant analysis of Strayhorn’s arranging—in particular, the issues that arose on the grounds of gender and sexuality and sound regarding his writing for Johnny Hodges—is a great example of historically specific analysis of queering and straightening in sound (Barg). I am not arguing that scholars cease writing about queer jazz subjects—only that identifying what’s queer in jazz is not enough.

Even among out queer jazz subjects in the present, there is no consensus about what it means to be a queer jazz subject, or who should name the jazz subject as queer. John Gill writes critically about jazz representations that have censored his and his partner’s sexuality even though they are openly gay and openly a couple. For example, when a documentary aired about him and his partner, British jazz composer, musician, and writer, Graham Collier, the parts of the program about their relationship were critiqued by columnist of a British jazz magazine. But what seems to have bothered Gill even more was that another out jazz writer and photographer, Val Wilmer, wrote about the incident as an example of homophobia in the jazz press—but then didn’t give the names of the couple. Her point was not to “out” the queers in jazz, but to out homophobia. But, for Gill, Wilmer’s treatment felt like censorship—or being “inned”—“reverse outed, that is, being pushed back into the closet” (69-72). Similarly, when jazz vibraphonist Gary Burton appeared on a panel organized by jazz critic Frances Davis at the Village Vanguard in April 2002, he critiqued jazz writers for never asking him about the effects being gay has on his music. On the other hand, Kevin McNeil points out that for jazz pianist, Fred Hersch, journalists have latched onto his sexuality to such an extent that “gay” and “HIV positive” have come to function as a descriptive prefix to virtually all articles about him, overshadowing his music (McNeil). Likewise, in an interview with the San Diego Gay and Lesbian Times, jazz pianist, song writer, and vocalist, Patricia Barber (discussing herself in third person) announced,

This openly lesbian jazz singer is obviously getting fatigued by all the talk of sexuality. Barber does admire and respect lesbians and gay people everywhere. […] In fact she is fairly political and outspoken. She is just tired of the interviews about music getting narrowed into interviews about
sexuality. She is starting to wonder if by simply being gay, she could maintain a level of notoriety that would secure her financial future. If so, Ms. Barber could stop practicing her scales and relax. (Barber)

What does it mean to ask queer musicians about sexual orientation and not to ask heterosexual musicians a similar question? Queer recognition cannot directly counteract homophobia and exclusion if it obeys a framework that constructs homosexuality (positively or negatively) as particular and different, and heterosexuality as simply presumed. As one break in the pattern, I suggest that we ask when and why and how does jazz get called up to provide particular brands of heterosexuality to the salad bar of cultural identity (while musical theatre, heavy metal, blues, and opera provide others)? I pose “When did jazz go straight?” as a queer question that I hope will function as one critical tilt among others in a larger project that seeks to shake up a problematic legacy that we might call, “How to talk about sexuality and jazz.”

**Historical Problems of Sexuality in Jazz Studies**

It would be an understatement to claim that scholars in Jazz Studies grapple with a legacy of problematic ways that sexuality and jazz have been linked in the field. On the one hand, jazz has been subject to racist stereotypes from the dominant culture about African Americans as extra-sexual, primitive, exotic, etc. On the other hand, jazz has been subject to “uplift” ideology that understandably claims it as a sign of dignity, genius, high art: a move that appears to remove sexuality from the discussion, but often cements particular and very narrow images of black hetero-masculinity into ideas about what jazz means. Hazel Carby, Angela Davis, Biman Basu, and Farah Jasmine Griffin have all written about the conundrum of respectability politics in denying black women’s sexual subjectivity. Many scholars have produced excellent critical analyses of such struggles over meaning of blackness, of white desires for particular performances of black masculinity, and many have produced excellent work on artists who did not fit or who refused or resisted narrow projections of the jazzman. Scholars who work at researching and writing about jazz musicians who were not heterosexual must carefully negotiate these paths and their pitfalls, while also taking great care not to “out” people who do not wish to be “outed,” or to impose an identity on someone who may not identify with the same terms of sexuality presumed by the scholar. Eileen Hayes has written about the problem of privileging of public self-disclosure that has resulted in marginalizing African Americans in gay and lesbian studies. Not all identification hinges on or can afford public self-disclosure.

Drawing from Ahmed’s focus on orientation, we might look at lines and alignments active in various historical moments—with straight lines becoming invisible to those who receive them, and restricting those who are off the “institutional,” “social” or “familial” lineage. She is not talking about inheritance of sexual orientation as though sexual identity is inherent in a person, but rather that we inherit the discourses of sexuality of our times and cultures—and since the 1920s, in the U.S., this has meant an inheritance of a discourse through which heterosexuality is normative, a line to be reckoned with. We may turn to it, or twist from it, we may be blocked by it or transported along it. It is important to note that multiple lines operate at once, and that many forms of heterosexuality are not included in the “straight” line. As Cathy Cohen has pointed out, there are many forms of heterosexual love and sex that have been restricted, banned, punished—it is important to challenge assumptions “of a uniform heteronormativity from which all heterosexuals benefit” (37-38). In fact, historically, the policing of race as unequal in the United States has been largely enacted on the grounds of who can have sex with whom, who can marry whom, who can refuse sex, and whose consent matters; and this has been true in both same-sex love and sex, and different sex love and sex (37-42). Patricia Hill Collins reminds us that the hyper-sexualization of African American men and women by the dominant culture is more accurately termed hyper-hetero-sexualization, and has played a key role in racialization: the construction of black heterosexuality as primitive, hedonistic, natural—against which white modern heterosexuality could be normalized (105-106).

**When Did Heterosexuality Go Straight?**

Let us leave the question “When did jazz go straight?” for a moment to review the history of heterosexuality, which, after all, has not always been “straight.” As queer theorists and historians of sexuality have pointed out, the categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality are of fairly recent origin, and their meanings have changed over time. Jonathan Katz writes in *The Invention of Heterosexuality* that when scientists began tossing around the word “heterosexual” in medical journals, they did not mean “normal” sex, or what Ahmed calls the “well trodden” path of the straight line. They meant sexual desire outside of procreation, a worrisome trend that they classified as one kind of perversion. Dr. James Kiernan, for example, saw “heterosexual” as more deviant than “homosexual,” because the former was potentially reproductive, and the latter purely erotic. Perversity, in other words, did not hinge on object
choice so much as it depended on maintaining a sharp distinction between eros and reproduction; to blur these was a hybrid activity, thus, very perverse (Katz 19-20).

In 1893, Krafft-Ebing used the word “heterosexual” to introduce the idea that erotic pleasure might be normal, that it could, in fact, be nature’s nice little incentive package to induce people to propagate the species. He saw heterosexuality as the erotic norm because it was procreative, and homosexual as pathological because its pleasures did not seduce participants into reproduction (Katz 21-23). But this did not automatically overturn the previous ruling on the perversity of heterosexuality, and the debate raged throughout the 1890s: was it normal or pathological to erotically desire someone of a different sex? Freud hit the ball out of that court when he reworked the concept “heterosexual” to mean three things at once: a kind of desire, a kind of act, and a kind of person. For Freud, “heterosexual” was not simply one kind of desire, one set of acts, one kind of person (among others), but desires and acts and personhoods that were “normal” (Katz 66). Yet, as normal as they were thought to be, they also needed to be protected through law, language, home training, and social life. In Katz’s words, this history of debates follows “the heterosexual idea” from “abnormal to normal, then from normal to normative” (82).6

These rapid shifts in sexual meaning and the construction of “normal” sexuality and personhood occurred not only concurrently, but co-constructively with rapid changes in “conflicts over racial definition and the presumed boundary of ‘black’ and ‘white’” (Somervale 3). Siobhan Somerville argues that the “crisis of homo/heterosexual definition” that emerged in the United States in the late 19th century “travelled a discourse saturated with assumptions about racialization of bodies” (2-4). Somerville examines the connections between “laws that bifurcated identity into black/white” and “homo/hetero” that were enacted in the 1890s (8). Both sets of laws intervened on the grounds of representation and language, specifically on the right of the state to classify persons as normal/abnormal (8). Sexology and racial science were both interested in sex and race, she points out, and both worked to construct the non-white body and non-heterosexual body as pathological (8). Of course, one of the most catastrophic laws of bifurcation, Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), originated in a New Orleans civil rights challenge to the state’s right to define people as black and white. The result, of course, was the ruling that said that a legally mandated division between races defined by the state did not promote inequality. The effects of Jim Crow on jazz history has been well explored in terms of race, but the interconnectedness between racial and sexual classification and zoning as also shaping jazz history could benefit from additional research.

**Straight Lines and Jazz in 1890s New Orleans**

We could attempt to “queer” histories of the emergence of early jazz through seeking examples of sexual fluidity in performance, “out” gay people such as Jelly Roll Morton’s mentor, Tony Jackson, or examining sex variety in Storyville, the legendary “birth place” of jazz. I am not saying that we shouldn’t, but to do so without interrogating the concurrently co-constructed straight lines defining race and sex would risk complicity in a historiography that already privileges New Orleans as the romantic, colorful, exotic, hyper-sexual birthplace of jazz. When sexuality appears as an explicit topic in relation to jazz history, it is commonly front-loaded into the origin stories of jazz as born in the brothels of New Orleans. Historians of New Orleans jazz offer potential twists to the canon when they inform us that jazz performers, unlike early sex workers in the late 1890s-early 1900s, were not restricted to Storyville; that jazz was played at dances sponsored by Catholic churches, social clubs, lawn parties, fish frys, and other settings. But the sex-origin-story continues to pull, those “other” venues tend to be treated as local trivia, and it is difficult to find a general jazz narrative that does not root jazz in the “born in a brothel” starting gate that leads onto a steady march from city to city, style to style, and finally to the institutional respectability of Lincoln Center, university programs, and academic journals.

To ask, “When did jazz go straight” in the 1890s, would help us to insist on the interconnectedness and historicity of categories and enactments of straight lines that result in the creation of Storyville. Though not a jazz history, Alecia P. Long’s masterful *Great Southern Babylon* demonstrates that the state’s assumption that blackness was already hypersexual is at the crux of the legal justification for the 1897 rezoning of the sex district smack dab in the middle of a black working class neighborhood, where “more than two thousand other people lived, shopped, and attended school or church” (128). The Union Chapel, an African American Methodist Episcopal church, was one of the major players in a class action suit against the city, and the argument was firmly centered in economics. New Orleans had long been a site of “exotic” sex tourism. The re-zoning of the working class black neighborhood as a brothel district meant that rents did not drop, but skyrocketed, displacing many of the black working class residents who lived there prior to the sex-zoning (102-104). Sex workers in Storyville were race integrated, but not allowed to leave the sex zones.

So while it is true that non-normative sex and early jazz share spatial history in Storyville, it doesn’t seem sufficiently queer to me to retrieve the “queer” people, lyrics, and scenes from Storyville history without examining the co-
constructions of straight lines of sex, race, gender, class, and nation (Jim Crow in New Orleans, after all, was racial re-classification as an enactment of Americanization). Katy Coyle and Nadiene Van Dyke make a similar point about the effects of sex-, race-, and class-zoning on queer historiography when they demonstrate that historical contemporaries as well as later historians could only understand the “smashes” or crashes of middleclass white women at New Orleans’s Newcomb College within the bounds of Victorian women’s “romantic friendship” (not sexual), while across town, close relationships among “working class prostitutes of Storyville, primarily ethnic and racial minorities,” were excluded from possibilities of friendship and could only be viewed in “sexual terms” (57). These sets of straight lines that zone friendship to Newcomb and lesbianism to Storyville correspond to the map that situates Storyville as the privileged site for early New Orleans Jazz, rather than Betsy Cole’s lawn parties on Josephine and Willow, the same working class neighborhood where many jazz musicians lived, including Buddy Bolden, Kid Ory, and King Oliver. The construction of early jazz as primarily sexual anchors the origin point of the jazz canon so it may march upwards to “high” culture/modernity/interracial harmony/America’s classical music and other such narrative destinations, many of which do not intend to support enduring constructions of blackness as hypersexual. Without studying the proliferation of these bifurcating lines and the power produced through them, historical work that focused on identifying a “queer jazz past” in Storyville could potentially do so without queering jazz historiography.

Making Heteronormativity Sexy: Jazz in the 1920s

According to Katz’s timeline of heterosexual history, the period known as the “Jazz Age” marks the shift when erotic heterosexual desire loses the stigma of perversion and takes center stage as the new straight norm. In her reading of marriage manuals, Julian Carter argues that “erotically charged marriage” was constructed as “inseparable from American citizenship” in the 1920s and 1930s (14). Because heterosexuality as a straight line was constructed as white, and that this was in large part achieved in contrast to the construction of the supposed hyper-heterosexuality associated with non-white bodies, the construction of “normal” erotic marriage legitimized exclusions of certain people from citizenship and civilization without having to articulate the criterion. Normal love means never having to know who’s excluded. Queering the stodgy old line that produced their forebears, while maintaining many of its most insidious planks, “white moderns” were able to have their “sexual revolution” without “renouncing their inheritance”:

> Because they believed themselves to be the legitimate heirs to western civilization in America, they felt entitled to modify their legacy as they saw fit. Their sense of racially based ownership of the civilization they inherited from the Victorians authorized their interventions in the construction of new standards of sexual sensitivity and restraint, health and happiness—that is, of sexual norms. When moderns indicted the Victorians for their sexual pathologies, they were making an argument as much as an observation: they wanted to claim ‘normality’ for themselves and their own generation’s orthodoxies. (Carter 23)

Jazz in the “Jazz Age” was one marital aid among others enlisted in the service of this reorientation. An analysis of the role of jazz in this double-move involves an approach to queering and straightening as relational and complex. Jazz was played by and listened to and danced to and enjoyed by many people in the 1920s, and my continued focus on “straightness” is not meant to comprise a reductive reading of what jazz meant and whose pleasures matter. But neither do I want to overlook historical relationships between new forms of jazz, new jazz spaces and subjects, new technologies, and powerful new regimes of straightness developing in the 1920s. Race-zoned by the white supremacist state as “hyper-sexual,” black culture, or fantasies of black culture, became tourist getaways for white modernists rejecting the old straight lines while benefiting from their lineage. Jazz in the “Jazz Age” aided in making heteronormativity sexy.

I have no intention of disparaging the excellent historical work on 1920s jazz cultures centered on African American migration and modernity, or the sub-cultural studies of queer jazz spaces in Jazz Age Harlem; certainly the best of this work attends to straight lines facilitating the appeal of black culture to white moderns, white queer “slumming,” and identity- and community-formation of people blocked by the dominant lines, including African American queer identity- and community-formation; but I do believe that it is also important to name the straightness of a sexual revolution in which a particular configuration of heterosexuality is being constructed as erotic and normative.

Straightness Ahead: An Incomplete Survey

I have neither the time nor the talent to map the coordinates of a century of straightness and jazz in this article (I am hoping that other scholars will take some of these balls and run with them). But I would like to gesture quickly in a string of directions in which jazz could be said to “GO STRAIGHT,” at least as part of what it does.
Gender and Sex Fluidity as Straightening Device

As the work of Eric Garber, Marybeth Hamilton, Jeffrey Callen, George Chauncey, Amber Clifford, Michelle Parkerson, and other scholars demonstrate, male and female impersonation has abounded in jazz performance spaces historically. While some scholars approach these spaces as sites for queering jazz studies through identifying queer performers and audiences, others grapple with the elusiveness of what is “knowable.” Jeffrey Callen notes that although women musicians are finally, if “grudgingly given some space” in jazz history, the field continues to suffer from “the complete excising of gender and sex fluidity” in the marginalization of male and female impersonators (186). Several scholars have produced exciting research on the sex spectacles that accompanied, even headlined, many of the venues and shows where jazz bands performed in the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, and beyond. Floor shows included chorus lines, exotic dancers, strippers, comedians, and male and female impersonators. At some moments gender/sex impersonation seems to indicate sub-cultural transgression, in others, mainstream fun, and others are, well, difficult to read. This is an exciting field with many projects and sites yet untapped. I hope that as scholars continue to study sex/gender fluidity in jazz scenes and spaces, that they will analyze the ways that such performances may have extended, as well as queered, the straight lines of their times.

In a 1940s film of a performance of Red Calhoun’s Royal Swing Band in a Dallas club called the Rose Room, an announcer steps to the microphone and prepares the audience for the next act to perform with the band. In this all African-American variety show, we have already seen a blues singer, exotic dancers, and a blackface comedy act:

If you’re a person that likes the unusual, you’re bound to like this next act, because the performer’s an unusual person, and he’s going to do a number an unusual way, but you’re going to like it, Jack, because now, comes Jean LeRue, our female impersonator, and we’re going to knock you out! It’s yours, Jeannie! (“Woman’s a Fool!”)

The tall African American female impersonator takes center stage in his long white gown, as the band plays a riff-based dance number. LaRue’s routine combines Charleston steps with Suzie-Q and other popular moves of the day. Midway through his number he lifts his skirt and shows some leg, slides to the floor in the splits and provocatively bounces up and down to the beat, rises once again and smiles and dances through the end of the tune.

We could read this performance as queer: it certainly queers a straight line that would depend on the hyper-hetero-masculinity of jazz performance and black masculinity, and a division of labor by which men play in the band and women perform their bodies as sexual objects. But the men in the band do not respond to LaRue; indeed they seem quite disconnected from the dancer before them, though not any more disinterested than they seemed when playing the charts of the other dance routines. While surely some audience members found pleasure in the female impersonator’s queering of gender norms, the announcer addresses an audience that “likes the unusual,” rather than an audience of “unusual persons.” Once again, I am drawn to approaches that co-analyze queering and straightening in performances by Jean LaRue, who sang and danced with jazz bands in Texas and California in the 1940s; Gladys Bentley, who performed in male drag at Harry Hansberry’s Clam House during the Harlem Renaissance; Mr. Half and Half, a fascinating performer of the both sides of extreme gender binarism in Kansas City in the 1930s studied by Amber Clifford in her dissertation, Queering the Inferno; and any number of gender impersonators in jazz history. Clifford grapples with the existence and erasure of drag clubs from jazz historiography, but she also considers the conundrum of not actually knowing how a performer like Mr. Half and Half, one of the stars of Dante’s Inferno in the 1940s, identified, or was received, or how subjects were hailed by his performances; if queer subject formation did take place, what does it mean that it took place in a club that had an all-white policy in the midst of the “interzone” jazz district in Kansas City. Clifford writes,

The gender identity of the performers themselves will remain as they must: in the historical archives of anonymity. This is not, however, a reason not to write about identity. As a historian, and a queer scholar, I equate subjectivity and disruption. For me, being ‘out and proud’ is itself a disruptive act, and a worldmaking one. As with [Daphne] Brooks, I will attempt to read the experiences of my subjects as an audience member, whose desires are played out on the bodies of the performer.

(19)

Clifford finds a way to “queer the Inferno” without having to prove that the identities of Inferno performers or patrons were queer. Callen wonders whether female impersonator Jean LaRue was gay, but decides against asking living sources, for whom such performances seemed unremarkable. Callen notes that, in fact, performances of “gender fluidity” seem to have been so commonplace for his informants from the Oakland jazz and blues scene, that LaRue’s
name came up many times before being identified as a female impersonator (185). Callen struggles with his decision not to ask informants about LaRue's sexual orientation, but because he “had promised informants to be respectful of their community,” and because his “intuition told [him] that this was not an avenue of investigation they would appreciate,” he decided against asking directly (195).

From my understanding of Ahmed’s concept of queer phenomenology, to determine the sexual orientation of individual performers such as Mr. Half and Half and Jean LaRue, or even Gladys Bentley (who was openly gay through the 1940s) is not necessary. Rather, we might want to look at how their performances operated in relation to the straight lines of their times and places; what kinds of orientations could have been facilitated by their performances? And, are they only important to queer jazz studies if they exhum e a queer jazz past? What if they serve to “reorient” subjects to straightness?

In taking the concept of “reorientation” from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, Sara Ahmed contributes a framework for looking at disorientation as an occasion for “straightening.” Merleau-Ponty was interested in what happens to subjects who enter a space that has been “contrived” so that those who enter it are temporarily caught off-balance. Perhaps the pictures are hung at angles. The subject does not, for a moment, “see straight.” Then, “after a few minutes, a sudden change occurs,” and the subject re-orientates her relation to space, “straighten[ing] any queer effects” (Ahmed 65). In other words, the disorientation leads to reorientation as straightening: “The body ‘straightens’ its view in order to extend into space” (66).

According to this “tendency of bodies to straighten queer effects” through perceptual reorientation, a performance by Jean LaRue, or Mr. Half and Half, or Gladys Bentley, may be, in fact, the disorientation that provides the occasion for “straightening up.” “Oh my god, is that a man or a woman, the same body could be either one,” may very well be the set-up to, “Oh, it’s a man performing as a woman!,” in an utterance that performs straight reorientation—I am not “like” the “unusual person,” but the “person who likes the unusual.” For other audience members, disorientation to the straight line is not what one would “aim to overcome.” Even so, in Ahmed’s analysis, a queer orientation is not free of the pull of the line, but aims, repeatedly, to reorientate to the slant. Side by side in the Dallas Rose Room may be one patron grooving to the pleasure of re-orientating to the straight line and another whose enjoyment stems from repeatedly resisting the pull. I see this approach to studying “queering” and “straightening,” or straightening via queering, not as replacement for, but as complementary with queer historical studies such as Garber’s meticulous research on the multi-layered social lives possible for gay and lesbian people in Jazz Age Harlem (Garber). I seek approaches that are able to look at the queering that occurs in performances presumed to be “straight,” and the “straightening” that occurs in performances that are presumed to be “queer.”

**Straightening the White Hipster**

To continue this twisty tour of sites and sounds that could benefit from approaches that analyze queering and straightening as relational, historically contingent, and intersected with and co-constitutive of other categories such as race, let’s revisit the classic white hipster debate between Norman Mailer and James Baldwin. While scholars have attended to the unconscious racism of the white hipster’s use of blackness and some have identified the homoerotic move involved in this hipster’s white male gaze when it is fixed upon black men,” Ahmed’s queer phenomenology opens up new ways for me to think about this debate along the lines of queering and straightening as relational.

In 1957, Norman Mailer released his essay, “The White Negro,” in which he identified a new, more expressive, more alive kind of white masculinity that could be achieved through engagement with black models of masculinity and culture, particularly jazz. In veering away from the straight line of a dominant version of postwar American white manhood, Mailer’s “White Negro” orientates himself toward his understanding of black masculinity, and becomes another kind of white man, one who can feel more, live more, and express more freely than the dreaded *man in a gray flannel suit*. In this sense, we can say that he reorients himself at a slant to the straight line, that he twists from it, or adopts a “querr” relationship to it. Part of this reorientation is achieved through listening to jazz, which Mailer equates with “orgasm”—a connection he explains through the music’s origins in “the Negro” who, because he could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization [. . .] kept for his survival the art of the primitive [. . .] liv[ing] in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body, and in his music he gave voice to the character and quality of his existence, to his range and the infinite variations of joy, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream and despair of his orgasm. (340-41)
So what is so “straight” about Mailer’s eroticism of black masculinity? Even Mailer’s essay states that “many hipsters are bisexual” (351). Ahmed reminds us that the root of “orientation” is “Orient,” the object constructed by the west to define itself as the center that faces the other. By facing the other, the self doesn’t just define the center, but extends its reach: “The otherness of things is what allows me to do things with them. What is other than me is also what allows me to extend the reach of my body” (Ahmed 113-14). Through a particular orientation achieved partially through jazz-love, then, the white hipster extends his reach by “looking at” the black man, and the black man who is “looked at” is fixed as an object and blocked as a subject in relation to this line. As Gerald Early puts it, “Mailer expresses a very simple and very old idea here, namely, that the black male is metaphorically the white male’s unconsciousness personified” (138).

James Baldwin’s open letter to Norman Mailer, first published in Esquire Magazine in 1961, calls attention to the effects of the white hipster’s gaze on actual black men. In “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” Baldwin re-claims a subject position by doing the “looking.” He critiques Mailer’s presumption of black men’s consent to functioning as the intentional “object” that facilitates the construction of the white hipster:

I think I know something about American masculinity which most men of my generation do not know because they have not been menaced by it in the way that I have been. It is still true, alas, that to be an American Negro male is also to be a kind of walking phallic symbol: which means that one pays, in one’s own personality, for the sexual insecurity of others. (172)

Like the 1920s white modernist, the “White Negro” veers off the beaten path without losing his way. Queering and straightening are operating at once, and not because one man identifies himself as heterosexual and the other as gay, but because the “White Negro” travels the well-worn path of primitivism—a straight line of whiteness, and, indeed, a sexual orientation that constructs a pleasurable self through fantasy projected on the bodies of an Other. Appearing in the same 1959 collection as “The White Negro” reprint is Mailer’s scathing essay on writers, in which he evaluates Baldwin as “too charming a writer to be major,” adding that “even the best of his paragraphs are sprayed with perfume” (Mailer, “Evaluations” 471), language that suggests his critique extends beyond a “straight” literary analysis. He disqualifies Baldwin not only from his idea of “major” writers, but from his definition of authentic “black masculinity.”

In the white hipster debates, then, straightness and queerness are operative: homoeroticism, homophobia, orientation, reorientation, and disorientation occur at once, and on fields of intersecting lines that facilitate different extensions and blockages for different bodies. The hipster’s improvisation on race, sexuality, gender, class, and nation transforms some structures in liberating ways, but does so by repeating patterns so pleasurable and commonplace as to pass unnoticed by the players who inherit them and by objectifying their beloved models of resistance.

**Straight Talk in the Eighties and Nineties**

The first college course I ever took that dealt with jazz history—and I was a jazz fan, very much identified through my love for jazz as a model for resistance—was taught by Grover Sales, author of Jazz: America’s Classical Music. Usually that large survey course consisted of lectures about the historical progression of styles and periods, punctuated by “drop the needle” tests in which we identified important recordings and occasional piano demonstrations of musical form such as blues scales. But one day Sales delivered a pronouncement about sexuality and jazz that struck me as off-topic. Unlike rock, he told us, jazz has no homosexuals. When jazzmen hug, it is about the love for music. “But what about Bessie Smith?” I wondered. Chris Albertson’s book, Bessie, after all, not only made the point that Bessie Smith was bisexual, but that gay sex was considered rather unremarkable in many jazz cultural spaces. Anticipating this challenge, Sales reminded us: Bessie Smith is blues. In his lecture, he had already established that blues is gay. Rock is gay. But not jazz. So what about Cecil Taylor? I thought I had him there, but my professor was unflappable. Cecil Taylor is not a real jazz musician. Musical classification, it turns out, doubled as sexual classification, and vice versa.

Later when I had occasion to read Sales’ writing, I learned that for him, the heterosexuality of jazz was not just an incidental, or a personal observation, but crucial to his understanding of “America’s classical music.” The canon—for Sales, and for many other adherents to the dominant jazz discourse—is a straight line. In one chapter, entitled, “The Nature of Jazz,” Sales claimed that

Jazzmen have long been preoccupied with sexual conquest of women, many of whom find the jazz musician irresistible. In any cosmopolitan city you could always find the most exotic and uninhibited
women where jazzmen performed. [. . .] Given such a macho environment, it should be no surprise that of all the arts, performing or otherwise, jazz is unique for its remarkable absence of male homosexuality. (42)

In *Jazz Letter* the same year, Sales contributed a treatise on “Why is Jazz not Gay Music?” Based on informal polling of jazz musicians during his years as a theatrical publicist (science, in other words), he was convinced that, “Plenty of chick singers are bi, but gay men usually go for Broadway show tunes, not jazz” (qtd. in Lees 233-34).

Although Sales is unusual in his candid remarks about sexual orientation and jazz, I have come to see his belief in this classification system not only as wonky, but pervasive; indeed, the fact that it is incorrect is not nearly as interesting as the extent to which it withstands correction. It is propelled and extended by “common sense.”

In her study of jazz in Norway in the 1990s, Trine Annfelt, a researcher at the Centre for Feminist and Gender Studies and professor of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies in Norway, provides a fascinating analysis of the construction of jazz as a hegemonic, and therefore straight, masculine discourse. As a rare place where men can express homosocial intimacy and emotion, without breaking the “prohibition against homosexuality,” jazz is protected by romantic myths of the “jazz musician” as the outsider with a life in debauch and an insatiable appetite for women (Monson 1995). At the same time homosexual men have been represented as lacking the ability to understand, let alone play, jazz. (Gill 1995). And this might be where the punishment lies, namely the threat of ‘losing’ one’s talent, that is to say, ‘become’ like homosexual men if one breaks the cultural taboo and desires men. To put it differently, the myths produce narratives about homosexuality which in turn can contribute to maintaining the hegemony of heterosexual men in the arenas of jazz. (Annfelt)

For Annfelt, jazz improvisation is a space for straight male homosocial intimacy that must be produced as straight. By protecting a space for men’s intimacy among men, a space that resists the strict coding of straight masculinity, jazz discourse must be fiercely protected by its myths as a hyper-hetero-masculine space, discouraging female and gay male players.

**Fighting Homophobia, 2001: Straight Odyssey**

At several historical moments, people have spoken out about jazz as a homophobic workplace—and, of course, I agree that it is important to expose and fight homophobia wherever it exists. 2001-2002 were landmark years for proclamations of jazz not only as one homophobic sphere among others in a homophobic culture, but as especially homophobic. See, for instance, the April 2001 panel “Destination Out” moderated by Frances Davis (Davis, “Destination”), followed by his *New York Times* article based on the panel (Davis, “Music”). In December 2001, *JazzTimes* published James Gavin’s article on homophobia in jazz in its “Family Life & Sex” issue. These are all fascinating sites for further analysis, but I would like to quickly discuss the *JazzTimes* issue for my next example of what we miss if we divide evidence into straight jazz and queer jazz.

If I am a researcher who is primarily interested in studying homophobia in jazz, or in identifying the gay and lesbian musicians in jazz, I might reach for the Gavin’s article in *JazzTimes*, overlooking its position within the layout of the “Family Life & Sex” issue. But if I am interested in orientation, queering, and straightening, I may find it worthwhile to study the ways in which the issue represents “family” as straight and how uncomfortably the presentation of jazz musicians as people with families sits in jazz discourse. I might also notice the comparative ease with which jazz discourse within this issue accommodates the lone gay jazz individual, bravely improvising against the odds in an especially heteromasculine enterprise.

In the “Family Life and Sex” issue, “family life” means straight families. “Sex” means homosexuality (represented almost entirely by men), sexy women on the covers of jazz records, and the way Lavay Smith sells a song. The articles themselves are more nuanced than the layout. Gavin’s article, plugged as “Gay & Unhappy” on the cover, is entitled within the magazine as “The Most Democratic Music? Homophobia in Jazz,” and is largely drawn from interviews with gay musicians who have “come out” in the business and who do not represent themselves as entirely “unhappy.” In fact, National Public Radio is represented in this article, and in others, as a “safe space” for gay jazz musicians to “come out.” But the placement and presentation of the article within the issue relies on the old object function of the lone, misunderstood jazz outlaw. “Gay & Unhappy” is illustrated with an artists’ lurid purple and black rendering of an African American man wearing a suit and hat and carrying a saxophone peering furtively out of a closet door (Gavin 67). The following article on the economic struggles of straight musicians, “Family Jazz” by Bill...
Milowski, is illustrated with warm indoor family portraits and bright outdoor photos of happy heterosexual jazz musicians with their spouses and children. The juxtaposition implies that gay jazz musicians are not hampered by the banality of bills or loved ones, but serve as symbols of the rights of the individual as a liberal subject—something very NPR-ish about that could benefit from scholarly attention. The sense of loss of the authentic jazz subject is actually more palpable, in my reading, in the domestication of the figure of the "jazz man" as "homeward bound" (as the teaser title on the cover indicates). The illustration of "Gay and Unhappy" restores the fictive jazzman to his "outlaw" status (there are no illustrations of jazz lesbians), while "Family Jazz" presents the jazz musician as middle-class, with mortgage concerns and a lawn. One photograph actually displays the body of drummer Billy Drummond as "bound" by a child's nylon crawl-through tunnel standing on end, as though a captive of domesticity (Milowski 72-73). Within this picture, a woman jazz musician does appear—pianist Renee Rosnes crouches beside her husband (Drummond) with a toy lawn mower, while their son Dylan motors out of the page on a toy tractor. I see the "Family Jazz" representation as more disruptive of the historical representation of the "jazz man" than "Gay and Unhappy." While hyper-hetero-masculinity has been privileged in jazz discourse, it has not been heteronormativity that has been celebrated by the mainstream, but its "outsider" status: racialized, sexualized, romanticized. The "real" iconic jazzman is far too hyper-hetero-masculine to peer out the top of a nylon tunnel, in the midst of a toy-strewn lawn, in broad daylight, beside his equally accomplished jazz instrumentalist wife and toddler son, right?

**Jazz Goes Straight, 2008**

One of the most insidious performances of straightness in jazz continues to circulate in the normative division of labor by which men play instruments and women sing—the roles paired in such a way as to suggest complementary romantic or sexual union. Oh, come on, you might say, surely this isn’t still with us. Well, actually, I do have a pretty recent example: On March 26, 2008, vocalist Keely Smith, most famous for her work in the 1950s with trumpeter/band leader Louis Prima (to whom she was married), appeared at a posh hotel gig in San Francisco—but not before firing Bay Area trumpet player Ellen Seeling from the band that had been assembled for her visit.

Seeling was not fired for her playing. Her abilities were not questioned, nor were her credentials; a jazz degree from Indiana and a resume that includes Machito, Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Big Band, Diva, Slide Hampton, Maiden Voyage, (the list goes on). The grounds for her dismissal, as explained by Smith’s manager, were straight forward: Smith’s act “plays off that sexual energy of men” (Garchik). Seeling replied that this was fine, but couldn’t Smith just ignore her on the bandstand? But this wasn’t an option. Smith would not go onstage with a woman in the trumpet section.

Sexism does not fully explain this scenario, although women instrumentalists continue to experience a great deal of gender-bias in jazz employment, particularly those who play instruments associated with men. And sexual orientation of individuals is not the root of the heterosexism that caused Smith’s manager to scour the Bay Area for another qualified (male) trumpet player while Seeling unknowingly spent the day in rehearsal for a gig she would lose. How would Smith or her manager know whether all of the men in the band were heterosexual, or if they had her “consent” to use their "sexual energy"? They, like Seeling, were hired to play a gig, not to sexually inspire the headliner, right? Yet, Smith did not invent the heterosexual norm of male instrumentalists and female vocalists, or the sexual orientation of bands in which the vocalist is not presumed to be just another player, but a sexual object. In claiming her sexual subjectivity, Smith queers the line that objectified her as a 1950s “girl” singer. This is her gig and she calls the shots. But the straight line that she travels to get there requires the sexual complicity of an all-male band. To share the stage with a woman horn player would queer the performance in a different direction.

On this straight line, men play instruments, women sing. Women instrumentalists are often thought to be lesbians, men singers are often thought to be gay—and we could argue, well, sometimes they are. And sometimes men instrumentalists and women vocalists are queer. But when women instrumentalists come out as queer they are seen as proving the norm and when men instrumentalists don’t come out they are presumed straight. These assumptions follow a straight line—and extend the reach of some bodies and block others whether anybody comes out or not. Rather than focusing on the individual sexual identities of Smith, or Seeling, or other band members, I am interested in the construction of a tradition of the band and band singer as a heterosexual couple, the lasting normativity of this arrangement and the lasting anxieties that linger when the integrity of this tradition is compromised.

But of course, this line doesn’t originate with Keely Smith; in fact, she is produced by it. Her career is shaped and made possible by the construction of the female band singer, not as a musical collaborator, but as a lover/sex object to the band. Jazz singers have a long history of being constructed as sexual, and white women singers as exciting transgressors, modern and sexy through associations with racialized hyper-hetero, non-normative, female sexuality at that. Perhaps the most blatant of the many examples I could list is Will Friedwald’s positive assessment of Connee Boswell’s voice as a “sensual, more genuinely vaginal instrument. Something else she picked up from New Orleans” (80). And in case we missed the point, he concludes, “That ain’t fur on her voice, honeychile, that’s pubic hair” (80).
Queering the lines, locating breaks in the discourse through historical and cross-cultural evidence of gender and sex fluidity in bands, different organizations of gender and sexuality and race, and other ways in which musical performance stimulated and channeled desire are all important to critical work that might help to transform these routines. But so is naming the normativity, as did Seeling when she relayed the story to the San Francisco Chronicle. Perhaps audiences who read the column noticed normativity as queer; perhaps more people viewed the performance of heteronormativity from a critical slant.

Conclusion

Is there such a thing as unoccupied musical territory, with no previous pathways cut through it to pull at us? Drawing from Sara Ahmed, I would have to say, probably not. But there are different alignments we can take, individually, and collectively, to the lines we inherit, in how we turn when we feel the pull of the lines, and what we hear and play and write when we do.

If queer means taking nothing to be natural or normal, then to queer jazz history would not only be to identify the queer individuals, moments, and performances, but to analyze and historicize the straight lines in specific jazz contexts. There are, then, many answers to the question, “When did jazz go straight,” because straightening and queering happen over and over. As jazz scholars, we may be more attracted to paths that direct us to the “outside,” the “outlaw,” the “out.” At the same time, we need to question the inside, the unnamed, the unremarkable, and figure out how it got that way; we must remember to notice when jazz goes straight.

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Notes

1 “Straighten Up and Fly Right,” by Nat King Cole and Irving C. Mills, is just one of many jazz standards using the word “straight.” In jazz discourse, “straight” can mean everything from without vibrato, without swing, law abiding, sober, not watered down, authentic, and corny.

2 See, for example, “Homosexuality in Jazz” (French), “Music: In the Macho World of Jazz, Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (Davis), “Destination Out” (Davis), and the “Family Life and Sex Special Issue” of JazzTimes.

3 Thanks to Ben Piekut for sharing French’s column with me.

4 This is not the first time I have refused to “out” people in a jazz studies paper about sexuality, and I have to say that this is a difficult topic for me. I don’t want to “in” people, either. See Tucker.

5 “Public and Private Discourses and the Black Female Subject: Gayl Jones’ ‘Eva’s Man’” (Basu), “Textual Healing: Claiming Black Women’s Bodies, the Erotic and Resistance in Contemporary Novels of Slavery” (Griffin).

6 Illustrating this claim with a telling progression of dictionary definitions, Katz cites the Webster’s Dictionary of 1909 as defining “homosexuality” as “morbid sexual passion for one of the same sex” and there was no entry for heterosexuality. But in 1923, “heterosexuality” enters Webster’s as “morbid passion for one of the opposite sex.” By
1934, we get the modern definition of heterosexuality, as "a manifestation of sexual passion for one of the opposite sex; normal sexuality" (Katz 82).

7 See the articles in Hirsch and Logsdon.

8 See, for example, "Gender Crossings: A Neglected History in African American Music" (Callen); “Sliding Scales: Notes on Storme Delarverie and the Jewel Box Revue, the Cross-Dressed Woman on the Contemporary Stage and the Invert" (Drorbaugh); “A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem” (Garber); “Harlem’s Queer Dandy: African-American Modernism and the Artifice of Blackness” (Glick); Claude Mckay, Code Name Sasha: Queer Black Marxism and the Harlem Renaissance (Holcomb); Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940 (Chauncey).

9 See Melnick and Lott.

10 For more on this debate, see Early, and also, Squaring Off: Mailer Vs Baldwin (Weatherby); Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin (Campbell); "I Only Like It Better When Pain Comes’: More Notes toward a Cultural Definition of Prizefighting” (Early); “White Fantasies of Desire: Baldwin and the Racial Identities of Sexuality” (Ross). Gennari reminds us that Mailer’s White Negro was critiqued in its day by Nat Hentoff, who charged the essay with ‘betraying an ignorance of jazz music, for propagating a fallacious image of the jazz musician, and for trafficking in racial stereotype” (Gennari 179-80).

11 Again, I am not advocating that we replace looking at queerness in jazz studies with looking at straightness, only that we do both. For a fascinating and beautifully written analysis of James Baldwin as a listener of jazz and blues, and of his listening as “a way of confronting, voicing, and grappling with his sexual and racial identities: namely the identificatory crossings of his queerness and his blackness,” see Kun.

Works Cited


