Jazz is a music pioneered by black musicians in a segregated nation. Race therefore has always been a central concern of its historians and critics. During the 1920s, black intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance claimed jazz as what Langston Hughes termed “one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America—the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul” (1926). His contemporary Alain Locke agreed that jazz was “basically Negro . . . though fortunately also human enough to be universal in appeal and expressiveness” (1936, 72). A predominantly white group of critics at mid-century tended to stress this presumed universality over racial divisions. Leonard Feather’s famous “blindfold tests,” for example, “challenged the idea that race was a determining factor in jazz performance,” even as Feather remained devoted to pointing out “the grim details of racism” in his work (Gennari 2006, 56). During the 1960s, the Black Arts movement responded by asserting the music’s essential blackness. Amiri Baraka proclaimed that “the spirit, the World Explanation, available in Black Lives, Culture, Art, speaks of a world more beautiful than the white man knows” (1967, 175). By the 1990s, a backlash against this so-called reverse racism in jazz informed a controversial polemic by Gene Lees, who asserted that “any statement that jazz is ‘black music’ and only black music is racist on the face of it” (1994, 198). Only the most formalist jazz scholarship has avoided overt discussion of racial issues altogether, and even this absence often implies positions on race, such as the assumption that European notions of musical coherence and quality can be treated as universal.

In addressing race, then, the “New Jazz Studies,” which I define here as that body of work that since the 1990s has drawn on the insights of cultural studies and critical theory in examining jazz, is less a radical departure than the continuation of a long tradition. What make these studies “new” are their methods and conclusions rather than the subject of race per se. In this chapter, I survey a necessarily incomplete selection of recent scholarship to identify some common themes and approaches in a diverse discipline.

The scholars whose work I address typically operate from the premise that race is always simultaneously a social construction, developed historically and culturally rather than determined biologically, and a social reality, a powerful idea that has had unavoidable, material, and often painful effects on musicians and their audiences. Just as ideas about race have created the conditions under which jazz is performed and perceived, jazz also helps to construct race by promoting shifting, competing notions of racial identity. As Andrew Berish puts it, “music and racial identity become mutually constitutive and part of a circular social argument: music is proof of racial difference, and racial difference ‘naturally’ produces different music” (2012, 14). The New Jazz Studies thus
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examines both the social and political structures underpinning racial discrimination and the more abstract question of how musicians perform, and audiences hear, whiteness or blackness.

A simple, binary division between black and white, however, fails to account for the intricacy of the interactions and slippages between these categories as well as those racial identities that fall outside the binary altogether. How, asks the New Jazz Studies, can we acknowledge this complexity without losing sight of the distinct contributions of African American musicians or drifting into a utopian vision of the melting pot that fails to take racial inequalities and power struggles into account? As Ingrid Monson explains, “situations of . . . cultural hybridity . . . present daunting challenges to cultural analysts committed to neither denying difference and its structural persistence nor reifying culture into a biologically based essentialist paradigm of race” (2007, 10). Nicholas M. Evans points out that this is not a new dilemma: from its beginnings “music like jazz was seen to be fundamentally African American yet simultaneously a cultural hybrid, and in both respects it was considered definitively American” (2000, 2). Although the widely promoted view of jazz as a “color-blind” music that transcends race often reflects well-meaning liberal opposition to racism, it also masks racial inequality and injustice; “the color-blindness discourse . . . builds the supremacy of whiteness upon a stigmatized but contained category of blackness” (Panish 1997, 8). While the New Jazz Studies often continues to view race through a black-white binary informed by racial ideologies in the United States, it frequently shifts perspective to reveal the mutual dependence of these categories and the uncertainty surrounding their division. My survey begins with such works before turning to other studies that point past the binary by addressing Asian American and Latinx musicians in United States (US) jazz or considering the varied racial meanings jazz carries in a global context.

Blackness: Essence or Practice?

One of the most significant debates of the last twenty years has centered on how to balance an understanding of jazz rooted in black identity and history against an antiessentialist stance that deconstructs racial generalizations while still acknowledging the social effects of race. The former position was argued influentially by Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., whose model of African American music history, explained most fully in The Power of Black Music (1995), updates and refines Amiri Baraka’s notion of a “changing same” that maintains an essential core even as its external forms diverge (1967, 180–211). For Floyd, jazz is founded on the “cultural memory” of the ring shout, which he views as “central to the cultural convergence of African traditions in Afro-America,” and also on a broader, more all-encompassing quality that he terms “the master musical trope of Call-Response” and which includes a group of essential melodic, rhythmic, and timbral practices (1995, 8, 1991, 266–268, 276). Jelly Roll Morton’s 1926 Black Bottom Stomp, for example, “is governed by the Call-Response principle, relying upon the Signifyin(g) elisions, responses to calls, improvisations (in fact or in style), continuous rhythmic drive, and timbral and pitch distortions that I have identified as retentions from the ring” (Floyd 1991, 279). Floyd refers here to literary critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s notion of Signifyin(g), a rhetorical practice of revision and intertextuality that Gates sees as fundamental to African American culture (1988). Robert Walser similarly employs Gates’s ideas in assessing Miles Davis’s 1964 performance of My Funny Valentine as a link in a “chain of signifyin[g]” that incorporates “the melodic possibilities, formal conventions . . . harmonic potentials, and previously performed versions of the original song” (1993, 351). More recently, Douglas Malcolm has drawn on Gates’s theories to identify irony in the music of Duke Ellington, who satirized “white fantasies of African-American authenticity and instinctual emotiveness,” and Dizzy Gillespie, who “problematic[d] through parody the teleological trajectory of popular music and its social implications of a white-based normativity” (2015, 213, 218).
Signifyin(g) has provided critics with an influential, albeit generalized, means of situating jazz within the broad stream of African American culture.

Other critics hope to move away from a monolithic conception of blackness while preserving attention to jazz’s African American innovators. In his widely discussed book *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (2003), Ronald Radano “locates black music’s power not in a segregated racial preserve but in the relational position of a black sound confessing the mulatto truth of a white supremacist nation” as he also “defends the magical, miraculous quality of black performance” (12–13). Matthew Butterfield argues that swing itself, often seen as fundamental to authentic black jazz, actually helps to construct the very idea of racial authenticity:

> the success or failure of social interaction in the maintenance of the swing groove produces a quality of feeling in conjunction with specific musical processes that can be described through language invoking race, such that racial meanings are imposed upon this feeling. The rhythmic quality is thus understood in terms of race, and in this way it does work in producing race as a form of difference. (2010, 332)

Blackness in this formulation is not so much generative of jazz as generated from jazz, in a process that encompasses language and affect as well as sound and performance.

In *Race Music* (2003), Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr. seeks to mediate between blackness as essence and blackness as construction, explaining that

> while I recognize and share, to a large degree, the recent critical stance against a monolithic conception of black culture, I do want to rescue from the critical guillotine the idea of a collective black critique, a collective sensibility, however contested it may be. (11)

While continuing to uphold jazz as a “race music,” Ramsey argues that jazz reflects specific historical and social contexts rather than a single model of black identity; for example, “jazz in the 1940s represented the quintessential Afro-modernist expression of black urbanity” (2003, 187). Charles Hersch, in his study of early New Orleans jazz, similarly proposes that black identity in jazz was both flexible and central, writing that although “the existence of Creoles challenged the binary racial system, and indeed the concept of race itself, in a number of ways,” such challenges never fully undermined Jim Crow segregation or the “one-drop rule” (2007, 9–10, 21). Charles Hiroshi Garrett, considering Jelly Roll Morton’s infusion of the blues with a “Spanish tinge,” makes the related argument that

> subscribing to a binary model of race threatens to flatten the more multifaceted reality of Morton’s life as a Creole: his cultural background profoundly shaped his musical career even as it forced him to negotiate life as a nonwhite subject in a segregated society. (2008, 51, 62)

Racial identity thus remains essential to jazz as both a shifting, unstable set of ideas and practices and a sense of rootedness and coherence.

Many studies treat blackness as not only a matter of cultural inheritance but also a set of signifiers that musicians have employed consciously and strategically. Such an approach enables scholars to address specific aspects of musical style not as essential racial traits but rather as strategies of *performing* race that sometimes reinforce old conventions and sometimes suggest new possibilities. Taken together, important works in the New Jazz Studies trace racial ideology through the
history of jazz. Of New Orleans jazz, Hersch suggests, “if one rejects a polarized choice between uphold ing and transgressing racial lines and instead focuses on the ways they are continually nego tiated, challenged, and upheld, the actions of these musicians become comprehensible” (2007, 87). During the swing era, black musicians in the US found ways to counter racist beliefs within the context of mass-marketed entertainment, often by demonstrating mastery of both European “classical” techniques and those associated with African American traditions; as Scott DeVeaux puts it, “the most satisfying way to undermine” racial stereotypes “was to incorporate elements of what the white world respected as musical knowledge and literacy into the cultural practices that fueled the stereotype” (1997, 62–63). Jeffrey Magee describes the diversity of Fletcher Henderson’s early repertoire as a counter to the critical cliché that “black jazz is improvisatory, authentic, and non-commercial and therefore ‘true,’ and white jazz is written down, diluted, and commercial, and therefore ‘false’” (2005, 27–28). Lisa Barg and Walter van de Leur assess the racial implications of Duke Ellington’s compositional strategies in his 1943 work *Black, Brown, and Beige*:

through its successive themes, its restless progression of transitions and modulations, and its sudden changes in tempi and meter, Ellington sought to ‘parallel’ the monumental movements, migrations, and ruptures in racial time and space that have characterized African American historical consciousness.

(2013, 450)

Such studies provide a corrective to older narratives of jazz history in which an assertive politics of black identity entered jazz only with the bebop innovators of the 1940s.

During the bop and post-bop eras, African American musicians continued to negotiate the definition of authentic black music in the face of racial stereotypes. In his book on the music and career of pianist and composer John Lewis, Christopher Coady demonstrates “the persistent tendency of the trade press to decipher and write about African and African American music as inherently rhythmic, effusive, mystical, and naïve,” a tendency that has led Lewis’s interest in European concert music to be interpreted as “an abdication of African American identity” (2016, 6). Coady posits instead that “Lewis’s music appears to evince a weaving together of versions of African American identity at play during the 1950s rather than an assimilationist move toward a European cultural aesthetic” (2016, 104). Scott Saul, examining 1960s “soul jazz,” hears an intentionally “blacker” alternative to the “integrationist vision” of mainstream pop music, one that stressed musical effects identified with African America: emphatic use of open fourths and fifths, rhythmic vamps that shuffled back and forth for extended periods, gospel cries of enthusiasm from the bandstand, melodies that traded the snaky chromatics of bebop for simpler repeated blues statements.

(2003, 195)

Several scholars have explored the movement in post-bop and avant-garde jazz toward Afro-modernism, which Ingrid Monson defines as a “blackening of modernist aesthetics” that did not preclude European and non-Western influences but also rejected a color-blind universalism (2007, 71). Radano points to Anthony Braxton’s “articulation of a vital, dynamic art that referred to the modernist legacy but in a distinctly African-American creative voice [and] signaled the appearance of a dramatically new kind of musician: the black experimentalist” (1993, 5).

One group of works focuses on institutions founded by such experimentalists in the US during the 1960s and 1970s in response to what Eric Porter terms “a Black Arts imperative—what Larry Neal described as a duty to ‘speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of black people’” (2002, 192). Saul suggests, “the results might surprise those who slight the Black Power movement,
and its cultural affiliate the Black Arts movement, for making reductive appeals to the essence of blackness” (2003, 304–305). Chicago’s Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), for example, “inventively rediscovered the roots of a black aesthetic even as its focus on ‘creative’ music suggested that music was beyond category, the ongoing discovery of an open form” (Saul 2003, 318). Daniel Widener describes Horace Tapscott’s Pan Afrikan People’s Orchestra, based in Los Angeles, as “less a musical group linked conceptually to the local black freedom struggle than a part of the organizational fabric of the movement itself” (2010, 146). Often, however, Tapscott embraced a relatively conservative style that resisted the tendency to link “radical politics and unconventional aesthetics” (Widener 2010, 149). Organizations designed primarily to support Afro-modernist musicians sometimes faced difficult questions. What was more important, engagement with black communities or the individual prerogatives of the artist? To what extent could white musicians participate? For St. Louis’s Black Artists Group, for example, “the imperative to formulate and address a black nation collided with an aim toward universality in the group’s artistic vision” (Looker 2004, 67). In his study of the New York “loft jazz” scene of the 1970s, Michael C. Heller describes collectives for which “the centrality of blackness” was not “a contested argument that required constant affirmation” but rather “an underlying premise that guided the group’s activities,” even when these groups did not exclude non-black participants (2017, 119). Debates within New York’s Jazz Composers Guild pitted “black nationalist imperatives to close down interaction with European history and culture” against a “will to self-actualization” that would allow black musicians to work with whites and to draw on whatever influences they wished (Piekut 2009, xx). The early AACM chose to limit their membership by voting out white vibraphonist Emanuel Cranshaw:

> in the context of the burgeoning influence of a newer kind of African American cultural and political nationalism, one could well imagine the AACM coming under considerable pressure regarding its bona fides as a truly “black” organization as long as Cranshaw remained a member.

(Lewis 2008, 197)

Such work on jazz collectives has shed light on the social and aesthetic means by which the blackness of jazz has been maintained and redefined.

Although these collectives often showcased the work of men, Widener insists on “the need to see black women as providing aesthetic direction as much as a material underpinning” for such groups (2010, 131). This claim is one example of a broader movement in New Jazz Studies toward examining the intersections of gender politics and black identity. Eric Porter argues that “investigations of race and racial history in that thing we call jazz require attention to gender as a mode through which race is lived and as a broader field of power that is itself raced” (2008, 231). A significant number of works have focused on black masculinity. Jennifer Griffith examines the ways in which Charles Mingus “struggled to rearticulate black masculine identities both as a performer and as an artist” in response to the tenacious stereotypes of vaudeville and minstrelsy (2010, 337). Monique Guillory argues that such rearticulations have had negative consequences: “in the attempt to reclaim the masculinity that American history denied them for so long, black jazzmen fashioned a cloak of masculinity that reified the patriarchy, misogyny, and sexism of the white mainstream” (1998, 192). An assumed link between blackness and masculinity has been the subject of critique by black women musicians. Linda F. Williams argues that while “African American women born before 1945 emphasize the prioritization of racial empowerment over sexual liberation,” younger musicians often “put forward the notion that racism and sexism coexist and should be critiqued and analyzed on equal terms” (2007, 120–121). In an ethnographic study of female saxophonists in New York, Yoko Suzuki describes a scene in which authentic black jazz
is seen as masculine while white women saxophonists receive attention as innovators, leaving black women “invisible at the intersection of feminist and anti-racist interests” (2013, 221). Farah Jasmine Griffin, discussing vocalists, argues that “one mythical source of black modernity is the haunting voice of a black woman . . . but because it develops alongside and not fully within the nation, it maintains a space for critique and protest” (2004, 113, 119).

**Whiteness: Appropriation and Reflexivity**

While studies such as those cited above sometimes consider white musicians in relation to a jazz tradition led by black performers, other writers have devoted more detailed attention to the question of white identities in jazz. Some critics simply assert that white musicians are important too, in defensive reaction to a supposedly “politically correct” version of jazz history that dares to mention structural racism, what Richard M. Sudhalter calls “the ‘white men can’t jump’ approach embodied in the jazz history canon” (1999, xvii) or Randall Sandke “the pervasive white-equals-racist paradigm” (2010, 5, 8). This work represents less a rethinking of racial categories than the perpetuation of old ideas about white entitlement.

Scholars more invested in considering racial inequalities and the social construction of race in the US have explored white fascination with and appropriation of black music, what Eric Lott terms “love and theft” in his frequently cited book on blackface minstrelsy (1993). What did it mean for white performers to “sound black” (Stras 2007, 208) or “play black” (Burke 2008, 24)? Some of this work addresses the period before the Second World War, when European immigrants and their children sought to assimilate into a white American identity. Michael Rogin suggests that temporarily mimicking a black identity served as an ironic means for ethnic minorities to lay full claim to whiteness; for the Jewish protagonist of the 1927 film *The Jazz Singer*, “blackface propels him above both his father and African Americans into the American melting pot” (1996, 100). More recently, however, Charles Hersch has argued

> in contrast to Michael Rogin’s analysis of Jewish blackface minstrels such as Al Jolson, many Jews did not identify with blacks in order to become white. Rather, they engaged with black culture in order to avoid “melting” into an American mainstream they considered bland and intolerant and to “re-minoritize” Jewishness.

*(2017, 92)*

Frederick J. Schenker’s work on American jazz musicians drawn to Balkan music during the 1980s reveals an updated, indirect form of appropriation practiced by white performers self-conscious about both their own racial inauthenticity and the politics of imitating black musicians. For white Americans, Balkan music provides the possibility of drawing on a “racially distinct” music without risking criticism as appropriators of black music; “even though Balkan music might seem to be a music of Europe, it was explicitly marketed to primarily white audiences as a racial supplement ready to be consumed” (Schenker 2015, 231).

Other work on whiteness focuses on its intersections with gender and sexuality, often through examining white men’s efforts to mimic a stereotyped vision of black masculinity. Ingrid Monson argues that for white would-be hipsters such as Norman Mailer,

> the bald equation of the primitive with sex, and sex with the music and body of the black male jazz musician is so voyeuristic and sexually objectifying that it is no wonder James Baldwin criticized white obsession with the image of the African American male as “walking phallic symbol.”

*(1995, 404)*
In her close reading of Mezz Mezzrow’s 1946 autobiography *Really the Blues*, Gayle Wald demonstrates that

“voluntary Negro” passing is a theoretically and ideologically impure enterprise, in which notions of the permeability of the color line compete with the projection of inexorable and essential difference onto racially defined subjects, and in which masculine authority is maintained or even expanded through the eroticization of black men and masculinity.

(2000, 57)

Other writers have moved away from a male-dominated model of minstrels and hipsters to address female performers and whiteness. Laurie Stras, in a study of the Boswell Sisters, argues that anxiety surrounding their indeterminate racial identity “was mitigated by their sustained performance of another social and cultural stereotype, the southern lady or belle, a social role that is transparently performative” (2007, 210).

A related trend among white jazz scholars and critics has been toward self-reflection. How does a writer’s own racial identity affect his or her views on race and jazz? John Gennari points out that “in a field of black creative leadership, most jazz critics are white, and they’ve often brought to their work a heightened sense of social purpose in a culture in which crossing the color line historically has been fraught with complications” (2006, 8). While this sense of purpose often leads white critics to adopt antiracist positions, these positions may coexist with what Ted Gioia calls “the Primitivist Myth” of jazz: “a stereotype which views jazz as a music charged with emotion, but largely devoid of intellectual content, and which sees the jazz musician as the inarticulate and unsophisticated practitioner of an art which he himself scarcely understands” (1989, 137–138). Ramsey, in a 1999 essay reviewing what he terms “the new and improved white jazz-literati,” argues that “inasmuch as the idea of cultural criticism and interpretation is fraught with identity politics, the lack of white scholars theorizing how their own subjectivities shape their interpretations of black music is regrettable” (1999, 214).

In the absence of such self-reflection, what Ramsey calls “the taken-for-granted, naturalized ‘Critical White I’” seems to speak from a position of objective authority (1999, 214). Ingrid Monson responds to this issue with a thoughtful essay on her own complex identity as “a woman, a trumpet player, a Midwesterner, a Norwegian American, a daughter of the white middle class, and perhaps the most damning, a lesbian. . . an apparently impossible portfolio of inauthenticity and unhipness for the would-be scholar of jazz and African American music,” a formulation that highlights the relationship between race and issues of gender, sexuality, and class (2008, 267). Hilary Moore optimistically proposes, “in black music scholarship, white scholars have the potential to assert and erode difference through their acknowledged transgression of musical and racial borders” (2007, 15). For white scholars, then, the challenge is to decenter whiteness, recognizing and theorizing its privileges and effects in order to produce new understandings of race in jazz.

**Beyond the Binary**

Black, white, and their variants are, of course, hardly the only racial categories relevant to jazz, but musicians and communities outside this binary have been marginalized in conventional studies of jazz in the US. Deborah Wong demonstrates that

the long history of Other colors in jazz—that is, Asians and Latinos—is consistently refigured as absence. If the very idea of an Asian American jazz is new or strange, this
Christopher Washburne similarly describes a discourse in which “Latin American- and Caribbean-inflected jazz is segregated from the mainstream, black-versus-white, US-centric ‘real jazz’ world” (2012, 90). The exclusion of Asian Americans, Kevin Fellez argues, derives in part from gendered stereotypes of Asian American men as a feminized “model minority” who lack the masculine creative force supposedly essential to authentic jazz (2007, 72–73). Scholars seeking to reinscribe Asian American musicians into jazz discourse often point to their relationship to black performers. Loren Kajikawa argues that, beginning in the 1960s, by “emulating the political stances and performance styles of African American players, Asian American musicians used the cultural space opened up by revolutionary black nationalism and the jazz avant-garde to begin investigating their own identities” (2012, 198). One such musician, composer and critic Fred Ho, explained that “I have sought through the use of music to promote the solidarity of Asian Americans and African Americans, by forging what I have termed ‘an Afro Asian New American Multicultural Music’” (2008, 21). Reconsideration of Latinx or Caribbean contributions to jazz tends instead to stress African–diasporic connections and negotiations between performers and genres. David García reveals, for example, that the Afro-Cuban jazz collaborations of Dizzy Gillespie and Chano Pozo represented “an expression of a broader and fervent movement to (1) define jazz as a modern African American art form with African and Caribbean roots and (2) transform the knowledge of Africa and its cultural inheritance in the New World” (2011, 197).

US-centered assumptions about blackness and whiteness have been further extended and challenged by recent studies that emphasize the diverse range of racial meanings that jazz takes on in transnational contexts. In some cases, these significations involve cosmopolitan variants on the “Primitivist Myth.” In 1930s Shanghai, as Andrew F. Jones demonstrates, the supposedly primitive blackness of jazz demonstrated by contrast “China’s implicit inclusion in a modern circuit of civilized commodity consumption” (2003, 235). Micol Seigel explains that Brazilians of the 1920s saw jazz as paradoxically both primitive and central to European modernity: “Clearly the music was black, but there it was, adored and uplifted in the centers of ‘civilization’—places Brazilians had understood as the antitheses of blackness” (2009, 121). Jeremy F. Lane reveals how black colonial intellectuals such as Léopold Senghor and white primitivist critics such as Hugues Panassié negotiated the meaning of jazz in relation to the Francophone “black Atlantic” (2013, 90–125). In other instances, jazz signaled a modern, American identity as much as a racial one. Christopher Ballantine explains that South African jazz during the swing era was “based on the confident assertion of a racial and cultural identity between black people in South Africa and those in the United States,” but also on a “looser” notion of American popular culture that encompassed white performers such as Woody Herman and the Andrews Sisters (2012, 20–23). These studies examine jazz scenes in which, while the music retains a perceived link to African American identity, ideas about blackness vary in relation to local circumstances and global political movements.

As George E. Lewis argues, however, “a recent outgrowth of the rise of world jazz” is “that musicians who identify with the genre of jazz do not necessarily consider fealty to African American aesthetics, histories, and canons as critical to membership in jazz communities” (2016, xx). One example is the Brotherhood of Breath, a London big band of the 1970s comprising both South African and British musicians; Jason Toynbee argues that “by calling on African sources directly” they “bypassed African America as the font of jazz” (2013, 14). In such contexts, examining hybridity may be more productive than tracing jazz back to its African American origin. Carol Ann Muller, in her study of South African women in jazz, proposes a model of “entanglement”
that “avoid[s] the pressure to highlight ideals of purity, authenticity, harmony, sameness or difference (as race studies have done) by privileging instead the processes of hybridity, creolization, and blurred boundaries” (2011, 52). Some critics view the globalization of jazz as holding the potential to break down racial and political boundaries, in what Paul Austerlitz (citing Paul Gilroy) calls “planetary humanism” (2005, xv, 188). Rashida K. Braggs argues for a notion of universalism that “does not merely connote global but black-cum-global-cum-cosmopolitan-cum a host of contradictory and complementary significations” (2016, 167).

The transnational turn challenges us to think beyond the US-centered, black-white binary that has dominated jazz scholarship, and its calls for a nuanced, politically astute global humanism are as necessary as ever in a world marked by a resurgent white nationalism and struggles over immigration and diversity. By continuing its inquiry into the complexities of race, the New Jazz Studies still has much to teach us about the music and its significance.

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Race in the New Jazz Studies


