Over the past decade and a half, the jazz pianist and composer Jason Moran has moved in a direction rather unusual for a major American jazz musician. While continuing to work in common practice jazz situations as a soloist, bandleader, and sideman, Moran has ventured intrepidly into the worlds of performance and conceptual art, exploring uses of extra-musical visual and sonic media, literature, and other forms and artifacts not customarily associated with US jazz presentation norms. Sharing the stage with Joan Jonas, a pioneer of video and performance art since the late 1960s, Moran pummels the piano keys while Jonas, in a flurry of industrial clangor, pounds on a factory-grade metal pestle, drops an armful of poles, and spins a huge metal hoop top-like across the floor. Working with veteran conceptual artist and philosopher Adrian Piper, Moran mimes the rhythmic pattern of Piper’s voice as she chants exhortations to fellow artists, imploring them to demystify their work and push relentlessly for political and social change. Collaborating with his wife, the acclaimed mezzo-soprano Alicia Hall Moran, and with the renowned British historian Simon Schama, Moran plays an original piece for piano, voice, and spoken word narrative based on Schama’s book about revolutionary-era black slaves promised freedom by the British in return for fighting the Americans. In his role as an artistic director of the San Francisco Jazz Center, Moran curates an event in which his trio, Bandwagon, improvises to a crew of skateboarders careening around a ramp set up in front of the band (Adler 2006; Lothringer 2012; Scheinen 2013).

In the context of contemporary US jazz—an eclectic field still in search of a post-Marsalis paradigm—Moran’s multimedia performances exude something of an aura of left-of-center experimentalism, closer kin to the downtown New York avant-garde scene than to the Lincoln Center Jazz alliance between midtown corporate capital and uptown African American authenticity. Moran himself is a decidedly uptown character. Amiably hip with his stubbled face and a Thelonious Monk-inspired penchant for rakishly stylish hats, Moran cuts a figure emblematic not just of the jazz tradition but also of fresh, dynamic stirrings in hip hop-era African American cultural and intellectual life. Born in 1975 and raised in a middle-class
Houston, Texas family before moving to New York to attend the Manhattan School of Music, Moran now is a central figure in the efflorescence of art and culture that has been dubbed the New Harlem Renaissance (Ogunnaike 2006). A polymath intellect with special interest in the visual and plastic arts, Moran moves easily among musicians, artists, filmmakers, museum curators, designers, celebrity chefs, writers, and scholars. Often working in collaboration with his wife, Moran traverses longstanding racial boundaries in New York’s cultural geography and carries his border-crossing, polyglot vision to arts and cultural institutions across the United States and beyond (Wilkinson 2013).

Moran frequently performs his music in art galleries and museums; an extensive part of his creative practice over the last decade has involved residencies in institutions such as the Whitney Museum in New York and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (Moran 2006). For the 2012 Whitney Biennial, Jason and Alicia Hall Moran curated a set of collaborative performances called “Bleed,” a title that invokes the bleeding together of art worlds and political discourses, as well as the bonding of African American people through familial blood and shared memories of a soaked-in-blood history. The event featured a wide variety of sound, image, and dance-based fare interspersed with short talks by scholars, journalists, and artists. Alicia Hall Moran sang a version of Beyoncé’s “Run the World (Girls)” accompanied by Japanese Taiko drummers, a relatively conventional performance compared to the one in which she talked about her life as an artist while receiving acupuncture. The visual artist Kara Walker joined Bandwagon for a performance called “Improvisation With Mutually Assured Destruction.” As Bandwagon played along with a recording of the Rolling Stones’s “Brown Sugar,” Walker projected images of Mick Jagger alongside the song lyrics, coupled with words and phrases of her own that intensified the song’s demonic aura of slave rape and heroin (Ramsey 2012; Ratliff 2012).

“Bleed” received far more attention in New York art circles than in jazz ones. In the art museum, such work typifies a much-noted shift away from an exclusively object-based curatorial mindset toward inclusion of traditional performing arts like dance and music and newer time-based arts like experimental film, video art and installation, sound art, and performance art (La Rocca 2012). In jazz studies, where Scott DeVeaux and his apostles have turned core, boundary, and periphery into field-defining keywords, Moran’s multimedia projects are located on the far periphery of the periphery, figuring little or not at all in mappings of the music’s current boundary-lines (DeVeaux 1991; DeVeaux 2005; Porter 2012). This is partly attributable to the ephemeral nature of multimedia performance, its insistence on live, real time enactment, and the resulting practical and philosophical difficulties associated with its preservation. But it is also, as I aim to show, illustrative of jazz’s equivocal relationship to other arts, notwithstanding the strong interdisciplinary turn of the New Jazz Studies. I will argue that while jazz is inherently interdisciplinary and has always been a multimedia form, its deep historical connections with other multimedia forms (especially the American theater) generated a need for jazz to mark out its own distinctive, sovereign space, and in so doing to muffle certain of its interdisciplinary energies.

Jazz’s cross-arts interdisciplinarity, then, is both exalted and repressed. I have found this to be true of my own feelings about Jason Moran’s work: I am fascinated by his multimedia projects, and yet sometimes I wish all he would do is sit at the piano and play straight-ahead blues. My objective here is not so much to offer deep critical analysis of Moran’s multimedia performance as it is to use this work as an occasion to reflect on the history of jazz’s relationship to other arts; to explore the contact zones between jazz and allied expressive forms; to touch lightly on aesthetic issues prompted by that inquiry; and, finally, to consider how jazz studies is implicated in these issues.

We have met Jason Moran and will return to him in due course. Time now to think about the terms multimedia and performance in relation to jazz.
Multimedia has become a slippery and imprecise term, referring as often to mass-produced home electronics and geeky digital technologies as to avant-garde art works. In the 1960s, the term was applied to any form of artistic experiment that involved several media used at the same time. The stereotypical conception of multimedia was the kind of activity labeled a “multimedia happening” that one could see in art schools and museums. In motion picture caricatures, it is seen as a kind of post-beatnik séance with psychedelic hallucinogens: someone reads bad poetry while musicians play drums and saxophones over the rumbling of audiovisual equipment as dancers move around sculptured and random objects against a background of film projections or a light show. In more authentic guises, multimedia connoted a serious reckoning with aesthetic concepts and procedures through an effort to erode the boundaries separating artistic disciplines. This impulse, tied to a piercing of the boundary between art and everyday life, was an animating force in the Fluxus movement, a loose international clutch of composers, artists, writers, and performers inspired by the maverick ideas of John Cage and (through Cage) Marcel Duchamp.

In 1966, Fluxus artist and theorist Dick Higgins wrote an influential manifesto titled “Intermedia,” hailing that term as a better descriptor for Duchamp pieces that were “truly between media, between sculpture and something else,” and for the most exciting interdisciplinary creative activity subsequent to Duchamp’s assault on the conventions of high art (Higgins 1966; Higgins 2002). Among the most memorable Fluxus-affiliated performances were concerts of “new music” that deconstructed or mocked standard concert protocols. “Wearing classical concert dress,” writes Fluxus historian Joan Rothfuss, the artists performed iconoclastic ‘event scores’—short texts instructing them, for example, to dismantle a piano, polish a violin, urinate into a bucket, or simply count the audience out loud. . . . The concerts were like live anthologies of the unexpected: music might be the product of a telephone call, a flushing toilet, or a haircut; poetry was visual, paintings were danced. Audiences were both perplexed and delighted. (Rothfuss n.d.)

Cage and the Fluxus movement had a much smaller impact on jazz in the US than in Europe. True, the eclectic oeuvre of John Zorn—file-card compositions, game pieces, duck calls blown in buckets of water, collaborations with performance artists—connects this tradition to the downtown experimental jazz scene. But more revealing of the overall trend-line are the pointed efforts by AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians) composer and theorist George Lewis to critique what he calls Cage’s “narrative of dismissal” in regard to jazz, and to characterize Cagean indeterminacy not as an original cultural formation but rather as an outgrowth of postwar developments in improvisation and spontaneity that originated in bebop (Lewis 2004a). While Lewis has framed the indeterminacy/improvisation polemic as a split between a “Eurological” paradigm associated with Cage and an “Afrological” one associated with Charlie Parker, Rebecca Kim has argued for what she calls Cage’s “tensely separate togetherness” with jazz (Kim 2012). Cage’s negative aesthetics (his effort to vacuum art and performance clean of expressiveness, sentiment, narrative, and even, in his fatuous misappropriation of Buddhism, the ego and the self) hinged on a Hegelian relationship to jazz; the music’s interpersonal intimacy, emotional content, and discursiveness (its conversational, call-and-response dynamic) served as the antipode to Cage’s ideal of affect-free purity (McMullen 2010). Cage’s seeming disdain for jazz, however, did not inoculate him from contact with jazz musicians more open-minded, anti-didactic, and dialectically spirited than he. In 1965, the AACM’s Joseph Jarman, intrigued by the essays in Cage’s book Silence, arranged a collaborative performance for Cage and his quartet called Imperfections in a
Given Space. Jarman and his sidemen remember a convivial encounter; Cage, when he first talked about the collaboration fifteen years later, fretted over whether he had helped the jazz musicians overcome their unfortunate “old habits of conversing and answering” (Kim 2012, 80–81).

Jarman was soon to become a member of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, whose formative period in Paris in the late 1960s/early 1970s coincided with a flurry of ludic “happenings” and Fluxus events then taking place in that city and across Europe (Steinbeck 2011, 42). In his book *Northern Sun, Southern Moon: Europe's Reinvention of Jazz* (2005), Mike Heffley delineates how European jazz musicians like Peter Brotzmann, Derek Bailey, Evan Parker, and Willem Breuker both emulated and diverged from American jazz culture during the apogee of African American cultural nationalism, embracing the ethos of free improvisation associated with John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler and others, but also embarking on an effort to cultivate a separate jazz aesthetic informed by a non-American cultural ethos (Heffley 2005, 3–22, 63, 137–138). Walter van de Leur, in a recent conference paper, details Dutch jazz's association with the Fluxus movement, which brought jazz-centered “happenings” in iconic public spaces drawing on nationalist folklore and idioms of humor and irony thought to be distinctively Dutch (van de Leur 2013). Nearly a half-century after the European free jazz *Emanzipation*, jazz's Dutch masters have not abandoned their interest in Fluxus-inflected performance practices. Critics, alas, do not necessarily share their taste for the antic and the ludic. Reviewing a set of performances at the Guelph Jazz Festival in 2006, one critic lauded Misha Mengelberg’s piano work but lamented his deployment of “wacky post-Fluxus revolutionary mixed media shenanigans that the Netherlands was (still is) famous for”; another castigated drummer Han Bennink for indulging in “the kind of antics . . . that would get most ordinary mortals a one-way ticket to a secure institution” (*Paris Transatlantic Magazine* 2006).

Moran found his way to jazz through hip-hop, discovering Monk and Horace Silver in De La Soul break-beat samples (Ouellette 2011). His forays into multimedia performance resonate with the multiple technologies and forms of address characteristic of that interdisciplinary aesthetic (for example, DJ turntable-ing, rapping, spoken word performance, break-dancing, graffiti). Jazz, too, is an interdisciplinary aesthetic; the music, it is not too much to say, was born and nurtured and then re-born in multimedia performance environments. Think of New Orleans second line parading, with its rambunctious dancing and flamboyant costuming; Duke Ellington in the Cotton Club revue, with its lascivious dancing and elaborate staging; Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, Ethel Waters, Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, and other famous jazz musicians in any number of swing era Hollywood films; Armstrong, Fats Waller, and Cab Calloway mixing music and comedy in their vaudeville-style stage acts. Later, bebop and free jazz musicians collaborated with poets, playwrights, dancers, and painters under the banners of the Beat and Black Arts movements. As Aldon Lynn Nielsen points out, many jazz musicians of the post-Second World War years “saw themselves as interdisciplinary artists. Cecil Taylor was a poet and was engaged with modern dance. Archie Shepp was a poet and playwright. Joseph Jarman was a poet. Herbie Nichols was a poet” (Nielsen 2013, 36).

Thinking in general terms about jazz in relation to other art forms is one thing; thinking about jazz as one of multiple artistic languages employed in particular art works and performances takes the matter a step further. Paul Steinbeck has taken the lead with his work on the Art Ensemble of Chicago’s blending of jazz with theatrical sketches, poetry, spoken word, humor, elaborate visual displays, and extra-musical sound; his analysis of the AEC’s “A Jackson in Your House,” a piece that uses surrealist verse, sardonic laughter, a mock-minstrel show stump speech, sirens, and gunfire, is a groundbreaking model one hopes will spur further efforts to apply both intermusical and intermedia analysis to close readings of particular performances and texts. As Steinbeck notes, jazz studies has been slow to engage the “expanding body of literature on intermedia and musical multimedia, which is currently dominated by writings on flagship classical genres (opera, art songs) and popular forms (music videos, film soundtracks)” (Steinbeck 2011, 153).
An exception to this lacuna is the study of jazz and poetry. This is so not just because canonical African American poets like Langston Hughes and Amiri Baraka performed with canonical jazz musicians like Charles Mingus and Archie Shepp, but because modern African American literary theory and criticism have adopted the central tenants that black music is the black poet’s primary muse, and that black music itself is fundamentally a form of oral vernacular—a black language in the literal (not metaphorical) sense. Even so, the scholarly literature on jazz and poetry is conspicuously thin when it comes to analysis of actual performances of poets and musicians in collaboration. And while it is undeniable these two expressive forms share certain aesthetic properties and often overlap in theme and purpose, the critical tropes commonly used to describe this kinship—rhythmic vitality, soul, funkiness, etc.—may reveal very little about the singularity and idiosyncrasy of a given performer or performance. Indeed, the jettisoning of overworked critical tropes might itself be the point of a particular work. Meta DuEwa Jones, in her book *The Muse Is Music: Jazz Poetry From the Harlem Renaissance to Spoken Word* (2011), examines a performance by saxophonist Hamiet Bluiett and poets Yusef Komunyakaa and Nathaniel Mackey. While Bluiett and Komunyakaa bear out familiar jazz poetic notions about “the tactility and physicality of language,” Baraka’s “how you sound” injunction, and the interplay of vocal phrasing and bodily rhythm, Mackey strenuously resists expectations of the hyper-expressive musicality and charismatic physicality associated with African American poets, especially in this age of the poetry slam (Jones 2011, 224).

In fact, Mackey, who in addition to being a major poet is also perhaps the most sophisticated contemporary theorist of the jazz/literature nexus, rejects the assumption that live performance (the poet reading her/his own work) brings out a poem’s truest meaning (Mackey 1993). Mackey calls himself a “writerly” poet and insists on the visibility of words on a page, not the physical sounding of those words, as the foundational essence of the poem. He posits the “animacy of the word” itself in the frame of the pagescape as the authentic performance of the poem: poetry, for Mackey, is the art of “words being made to perform by the poet” (Jones 2011, 21; Mackey 2004, 228–236). Musicologists might recognize this formulation as a canny framing of the ever-vexing issue of text versus performance, the question of whether music resides in its written textual form or in its performed (physically sounded) instantiations (Cook 2001). Mackay proposes an unraveling of the text/performance binary: poetry resides in the performativity of the text itself.

We begin here to touch on the way multimedia art works, however much or little might seem compelling about their interdisciplinarity, can have the effect of quickening our interest in fundamental aesthetic issues, of sharpening our thinking about the ontologies of art forms themselves. When Nathaniel Mackey enriches and complicates our thinking about poetry, he also enriches and complicates our thinking about jazz, calling into question conventional notions of improvisation and overt expressivity as sine qua non of jazz authenticity. Mackey, in fact, urges and enables us to think harder about the very idea of performance. “Performance is a bothersome word for writerly poets,” he writes. “Performance poetry, poetry slams and the like have made the term synonymous with theatricality, a recourse to dramatic, declamatory, and other tactics aimed at propping up words or helping them out” (Mackey 2004, 228).

Jazz, too, has an ambivalent or even adversarial relationship with performance and theatricality, one that is embedded in the history of jazz’s long and complicated relationship with the institution of the theater itself. This takes us back to the so-called Jazz Age of the 1920s—and even further back than that. Bear with me as I briefly rehearse some of this history.

III

In *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class* (2009), theater and performance studies scholar David Savran argues that the American theater came to be viewed as an institution of “legitimate” high culture, the kind of theater associated with Eugene O’Neill...
and other literary playwrights, only after it “defeated” jazz. The American theater came into its own at the end of the 1920s, that is, only by defining itself as something different from jazz. This meant purifying itself of its deep institutional and aesthetic entanglements with jazz, as well as countering jazz’s power as a metonym for all that was new and daring in American culture. Jazz changed the way American bodies sounded, looked, and moved, in turn changing the shape of American imagination and desire. In the Jazz Age, jazz stood for flash, flesh, vitality, transgression, spectacle; jazz was, in a word, theatricality. Jazz’s revolutionary cultural power, of course, had much to do with race and the frisson of difference. Jazz was miscegenation—not just in its racial crossbreeding, however, but also in its formal hybridity. As an artistic practice, the key to jazz’s cultural hegemony was its versatility as a mode of performance that cut across and disturbed the integrity of different media. “Given its many manifestations, guises, contexts, and performance venues,” Savran writes, “jazz . . . represented the most significant form of cross-mediated performance in the 1920s.” Jazz was “a form that undermined the authority of dance and concert music, cabaret, social dancing, vaudeville, revue, and narrative theater. It was, in short, less a discrete style than a musical and social energy linking all these performative practices” (Savran 2009, 17).

Savran’s thesis proposes a cultural logic that can help us think about the history of jazz’s framing as an artistic and disciplinary field in relation to its kindred arts. If the theater needed to defeat jazz to win sanction as art, jazz, if it was to be considered art, needed to defeat theater. More precisely, like American drama it needed to vanquish that part of theater culture that had come to be synonymous with jazz—jazz not as high art but as lowbrow entertainment. To put it another way, what the art-and-little-theater movement and the jazz-as-art mission held in common was a disdain for theatricality. Anti-theatricality was crucial to each art’s claims to seriousness. Theatricality in this context could mean exhibitionism, staginess, or gaudiness in the sense in which one thinks of Jazz Age commercial amusements, Broadway musical theater, Las Vegas revues, and the like. But on a more basic level it means performativity itself, a suspicion about any kind of performance that calls attention to itself as a performance; an act, not the real thing.

The performance tradition lurking specter-like in the shadow of the cultural history I am sketching here is blackface minstrelsy. The minstrel stage engendered and bequeathed the performance codes, sonic and visual aesthetics, and (not least) racial dynamics of twentieth-century American entertainment on down to early television variety shows and the Rat Pack. A wealth of scholarship in recent years has explored the complex history of blackface: its production of degrading racial stereotypes, leading to countervailing missions of uplift and respectability by black public intellectuals and political leaders; its function as a space of white expressive freedom, eroticism, and fantasy; its central importance as a laboratory for the development of performance skills by black and white artists alike. My interest here is much narrower: I want simply to underscore that minstrelsy is synonymous with imposture, dissimulation, and illusion. As a multimedia spectacle involving song and dance, sketch comedy, oratory, fortune telling, impersonation, and ventriloquism, minstrelsy was first and foremost the putting on of an act. The very essence of minstrelsy was its inauthenticity. It was a charade. It was not true. It was a performance.

Jazz, we know, has a long history of attracting true believers, believers in the truth-telling properties of true jazz. The historiography of jazz is coterminous with never-ending arguments about jazz’s true essence and with ardent efforts to separate “real jazz” from “pseudo-jazz” or even “anti-jazz.” Jazz’s familiar series of style wars have been so intense because, at the time of their unfolding, sectarian combatants believed they were arguing not about mere stylistic differences but rather about the difference between what is true and what are travesty, denial, concealment, facsimile, and simulation. The point I want to emphasize is that if jazz authenticity hinges on believing that the music is defined by its truthfulness, its sincerity and integrity, jazz then is fundamentally at odds with the idea of performance, especially insofar as the idea of performance attaches itself to traditions of the theatrical, in particular blackface minstrelsy and its long legacy.
The earliest and most enduring discourse of jazz authenticity posits that the truth of the music resides in its connection to the blues. This is a conviction shared by a group of jazz theorists otherwise as sharply dissonant as Rudi Blesh, Amiri Baraka, and Stanley Crouch. For these three and for many others, the blues is jazz’s truth both in the sense that it is the indispensable and irreducible essence of its constitution, and in the sense that it ensures jazz’s honest engagement with the real, the nitty-gritty, the unvarnished fundamentals of life. In her important book, *Staging the Blues: From Tent Shows to Tourism* (2014), Paige McGinley, a scholar of American theater and performance, maps out the emergence of the blues within the theatrical context of black entertainment. Before she recorded for Paramount in 1923, Ma Rainey was known primarily as an actress, the theatrical star of the Rabbit’s Foot Minstrels. Rainey and Bessie Smith cultivated stage acts of “glamour and sophistication for a largely rural audience,” establishing conventions of black stardom through elaborate costuming and self-fashioning. Only when recordings isolated the sound of blues from its theatrical context did the blues become a musical object to be collected, archived, and critically analyzed and evaluated.

Blues criticism, McGinley argues, started out as an explicit effort to separate folk culture from theater; later it became a doctrine of folkloric purity defined by its suspicion of theatricality. When Paul Oliver skewers Howlin’ Wolf as “just about the biggest ham actor on stage” and takes exception to Sonny Boy Williamson’s dandyish derby hat, gloves, and umbrella, McGinley takes him to be representing “a more widespread anti-theatricality in blues criticism, which dismisses the theatrical trappings of blues performance as secondary, feminized, derivative, or affectively excessive” (McGinley 2014, 9). McGinley’s notion of blues criticism’s anti-theatricality strongly aligns with the arguments I make in *Blowin’ Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics* (Gennari 2006) about the anti-sentimental and anti-affective masculinism that suffused jazz criticism in its formative years. It also brings to mind Eric Porter’s identification of long-standing prejudices against vocal music in musicians’ and critics’ circles, because vocal music has often been linked with women and the female body, which in turn have been associated with emotions, irrationality, and sexuality, rather than with the masculine mind or heroic romanticism assumed to be the generative force for serious improvised art.

*(Porter 2013, 99)*

There are several ideas in play over the foregoing paragraphs that I would like to underscore, augment, and fold into a final set of still unfinished thoughts about Jason Moran’s multimedia work and its meaning for jazz and jazz studies.

First: *performance* is both a complicated and a clarifying term in jazz owing to its affiliation with histories of racialized and gendered practice and ideology. Jazz is shadowed not just by minstrelsy (and what McGinley calls minstrelsy’s “vicious hangover”), but more deeply by the history of the black body and its centrality to both the suffering and trauma undergirding American capitalism and the joy and pleasure generated by American entertainment. Saidiya Hartman argues that the compulsory performances demanded of enslaved persons—the coiffe, the coerced gaiety at the slave market, the spectacle of bodies on the auction block—constituted a form of public theater dramatizing the racial logic of the US social order (Hartman 1997; McGinley 2014, 9). United in that logic are minstrelsy’s trope of the singing and dancing slave and what Anthony Braxton calls “the reality of the sweating brow,” the exercise of white power through consumption of an enforced, performed happiness in which signs of the black performing subject’s willing labor must be manifest. This history permeates the work of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, whose
members—Paul Steinbeck shows us—were familiar with the codes of minstrelsy and used them in wickedly satirical commentaries on the absurdities, calumnies, and tragedies of race (Steinbeck 2011, 144, 148–149).

This history also saturates the creative imagination of artist Kara Walker. One of her recent works was an in situ installation featuring an enormous sculpture of a black woman working in a sugar cane field, crouched in a posture of acute sexual vulnerability, yet at the same time full of the self-possession and sovereign repose of a Buddhist icon or a monumental Egyptian sphinx. The sculpture, “A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby,” was made out of thirty tons of refined white sugar molded on to vast blocks of polystyrene foam. Heralded by the Times as “one of the most substantial works of art to hit New York in years,” it sat in the cavernous sugar shed of the old Domino factory in Brooklyn, drawing hundreds of thousands of visitors during the summer of 2014 (Gopnik 2014). The installation serves as a kind of diptych with the piece Walker performed with Jason Moran at the “Bleed” exhibition at the 2012 Whitney Biennial—that exhibition, like an Art Ensemble of Chicago concert, a kind of postmodern minstrel show in its mixture of song and dance, oratory, body art, and alternative medicine. On that occasion, Walker was a performance artist using the stage name Karaoke Walkrrr, singing in a willfully grating voice to Moran’s band’s gloss on the Stones’ “Brown Sugar,” while her laptop projected blow-ups of words like “crawl,” “beg,” “grovel,” “slit,” “blood,” and others connecting Mick Jagger’s libido to the history of sugar, plantation slavery, and the subjection of the black female body.

The paradox of performance art—or rather, its whole point—is the genre’s distaste for and distrust of performance in the conventional, theatrical sense. “Performance artists, in general, are not performers,” writes artist and curator Helene Lesterlin (Lesterlin n.d.). “They are engaging in a visual arts-based practice that hinges on the idea that their body, or the body of others, is their material.” Performance art and conceptual art emerged as almost exclusively white avant-garde movements in the 1960s and 1970s. The renaissance of those fields in recent years has been driven by black artists like Homer Jackson, Clifford Owens, and Xaviera Simmons, building on the work of pioneering forbears like Sherman Fleming and Adrian Piper (Weaver 2012). This is as it should be: since so much of American performance in the theatrical sense traces its origins to blackface minstrelsy, and so much American performance in the Erving Goffman “presentation of self in everyday life” sense has to do with the negotiation of racial codes, performance art’s ironic, trenchantly knowing stance toward performance per se—itself-reflexive commentary on the ways bodies perform in public—compel it to engage forthrightly with race. Performance art has always been on the cutting edge of gender discourse; more recently, it has become an extremely rich and provocative space for thinking about gender as always racialized, and race as always gendered. In Jason Moran’s multimedia works, as in his more conventional jazz presentations, the male jazz body is a vital, even integral presence. And yet, as in much performance art, female bodies (Joan Jonas, Adrian Piper, Kara Walker, Alicia Hall Moran) figure centrally in the formal, conceptual, and ideological grammar of Moran’s multimedia pieces in ways that create gender dynamics unusual for jazz. Especially noteworthy for jazz studies are the ways Walker, as Karaoke Walkrrr, and Alicia Hall Moran, as a performance artist interrogating her role as a conservatory-trained theatrical performer, implicitly embody antidotes to the trope of the feminized jazz singer.3

Second: Jazz’s relationship to multimedia, intermedia, and interdisciplinarity has been ambivalent, and in some cases vexed, in spite of (or maybe because of) the music’s singularity and preeminence in the modern arts. Some notion of what jazz was presumed to represent (primitivism, bohemianism, interracialism, improvisation, spontaneity, vitality, etc.) was the key ingredient that conferred modernity on theater, concert music, dance, film, the graphic and plastic arts, and writing. At the same time, the mission to legitimize and canonize jazz as an
The art of its own entailed detaching the music from its multi-art contexts; quarantining it in its
own exclusive, often cultish preserve; and codifying its history in an archive of recordings and
iconic memorabilia. Jazz studies, even in this period of desacralization and anti-essentialism,
continues to hold on to romantic, exceptionalist notions of jazz not just as an art but as an
ethic, a community, an intimacy.

Just as theater needed to defeat jazz and jazz needed to vanquish Jazz Age theatricality in order
to fashion an image of seriousness and substance, so latter-day evangelists of jazz seriousness have
found it necessary to repress the dominant multimedia art and social energy of our own time,
hip-hop. Much has been made of Stanley Crouch’s critique of rap music videos as contemporary
minstrelsy (“Birth of a Nation with a backbeat”) and of his disavowal of black cultural nationalism,
but his performance as a jazz moralist hinges equally on a forsaking of the multi-arts agenda he
himself pursued as a poet, playwright, and musician during his Black Arts period in Los Angeles
(Isoardi 2006, 75, 101, 137–139).

Third, and finally: Jason Moran’s multimedia work raises intriguing questions about what jazz
actually is, what constitutes a jazz performance, where the performances should take place, and
so on. The editors of the collection *Jazz/Not Jazz: The Music and Its Boundaries* (2012) suggest that
while many scholars claim that “jazz has no essential characteristics,” we still fall short of the state
of radical relativism that would make the category completely meaningless, the evidence being
that “the Sex Pistols has never been seen or heard as jazz,” and “neither has Lady Gaga, Snoop
Dogg . . . or Weird Al Yankovic . . .” (Ake et al. 2012, 5–6). The point is clever and well taken.

But it eludes the question of how we should think about collaborations between performers who
have already been coded as being inside and outside of jazz’s ostensible boundaries. When Jason
Moran, who we call a jazz musician, works with Joan Jonas, who we call a performance artist,
the resulting performance a jazz multimedia piece, a piece of multimedia performance art that
uses a jazz musician, or something else? What part of the performance is the jazz part? Doesn’t that
last question become more interesting when we notice that Joan Jonas is at least as improvisational
as Jason Moran, and maybe more so?

Philip Auslander proposes “what musicians perform first and foremost is not music, but their
own identities as musicians, their musical personae” (Auslander 2006, 107). What Jason Moran
performs, in this formulation, is not primarily jazz music, but rather his own jazz persona—a
persona that is positioned in a larger cultural matrix. When he performs that persona in a multi-
media piece in a museum with fellow performers and audience members not primarily engaged
in performances of jazz personae, rather than in a jazz club with fellow musicians and an audience
very much so engaged, he raises knotty, perhaps un-answerable questions about jazz, its processes
and objects, and its very ontology. He makes the meaning of the performance—and jazz’s range
and scope of possibility to create meaning—a matter not just of music and sound, but of location,
identity, culture, and history. He implicitly invites us to consider: how are the sounds of a jazz per-
formance situated in relation to extra-sonic (for example, visual, physical, literary, philosophical,
and political) elements that shape the cognitive maps of performing musicians and their listeners?
Where is the “jazz” in a given performance in relation to the flow of cultural discourses and cul-
tural information surrounding the performance?

Studying Jason Moran has re-energized my interest in jazz history, aesthetics, criticism, and schol-
arship, and it has deepened what had been a relatively casual interest in conceptual and per-
formance art. I have become more fascinated by jazz’s relationship with poetry, theater, dance,
painting, and other of the time arts and the visual and plastic arts, even as I have also become
more intensely aware how much I love simply listening to the music. The Jason Moran I most
enjoy is the one who plays solo piano, reworking the possibilities of jazz’s standard repertory. This is the Moran who brought the *New Yorker* political writer Hedrick Hertzberg back to jazz after a decades-long withdrawal. “It was stunning. I’d never heard anything like it before,” Hertzberg wrote after hearing Moran perform a twenty-minute interpretation of James P. Johnson’s “You’ve Got to Be Modernistic.”

I had no idea what ‘tune’ it was or even what genre it was. It wasn’t really a ‘tune’ at all. It was like a trip through an unfamiliar aural city—a city of obscure but careful order and full of ancient and modern architectural vistas, a new neighborhood and a new mood around every corner.

*(Hertzberg 2012)*

Whether as a blues and stride neotraditionalist who reminds us of jazz’s time-tested verities, or as an experimentalist who surprises us with his wacky post-Fluxus mixed media shenanigans, Jason Moran is a musician and conceptual artist who challenges our jazz presuppositions, stretches our jazz imaginations, and transports jazz beyond what we thought were its borders.

### Notes

1. See also Corbett (1994).
2. See also Harris (2004) and Jackson (2004).
3. The artistic collaboration between Jason Moran and Alicia Hall Moran is fruitful terrain for a critical reassessment of the figure of the jazz wife. For suggestions on how to think about this figure against the backdrop of traditional jazz ideology, see Tucker (2012, 272–274).

### References


“Wacky Post-Fluxus Revolutionary Mixed Media Shenanigans”


