

SLIDE Hello, all. My name is AJ Kluth and I'm pleased to present here some ongoing research that's part of a larger project considering connections between contemporary spaces of musical experimentalism in Los Angeles. This one in particular concerns a concert series that has been interrupted by the recent pandemic. It's looking like programming will continue this summer, but for the time being, this work considers events up until Spring of 2020.

My interest in JAZZ IS DEAD began some time in 2017 when I started seeing the posters pasted up on fences, electrical boxes, and alley walls all over Los Angeles. **SLIDE** Other than the words "JAZZ IS DEAD," there was no further information. Was it for a concert series? A product? A band? After some Googling I learned it was something like a large umbrella project put together by Adrian Younge and Ali Shaheed Muhammad that features related endeavors including **SLIDE** Younge and Muhammad's band The Midnight Hour, the event agency ArtDontSleep, the all-analog recording studio Linear Labs, and the eponymous concert series and soon-to-be record imprint.

I've been interested in the problematization of the term "jazz" since I started reading some of the "new jazz studies" **SLIDE** years back, and, of course, Nicholas Payton's **SLIDE** sometimes controversial refusal of "jazz" in favor of **SLIDE** "Black American Music," or, #BAM in 2011. However, I still haven't been able to secure an interview with Younge and therefore can't be sure of his impulse for the name. In interviews he's often slippery when asked about it, alluding simply to its provocative nature. **SLIDE** His partner Ali Shaheed Muhammad – a member of A Tribe Called Quest, a mover in the Soulquarian scene, and even endorsed with a signature Fender Precision bass – is less often in the limelight. A DJ, composer, producer, multi-instrumentalist, event organizer, and cultural instigator, Younge is more voluble in interviews. His predilection for three-piece suits, hats, and fingerless gloves seems to hearken to late 70s European cinema as much as Blaxploitation film aesthetics. This can also be heard in the soundtrack music **SLIDE** he's produced for an imaginary Italian film called *Venice Dawn* (2000) as well as the soundtracks for more "tangible" projects like *Black Dynamite* (2009) and Marvel's television series *Luke Cage* (2016).

Early concerts organized by JAZZ IS DEAD partners ArtDontSleep **SLIDE** demonstrate an understanding of jazz—in name and in concept—as a big tent; a constellation of mutually inflecting musics related a-historically in a mutually-constituting loop. This broad definition of jazz **SLIDE** has helped occasion a community of listenership in Los Angeles that is oriented around Black American Music, but not monolithic in its constitution. Rather, folks from many positions across fields of power as defined by their class, race, education, access, and exposures to music have been part of this community – coming together in a room on Los Angeles' near-East side to enact a living, dancing archive of musical memory. My talk today considers the significance of JAZZ IS DEAD in three chunks: **SLIDE** first, in terms of the production of a musical culture bigger than genre; second, considering this socio-musical history as an intermusical archive that is a condition of possibility for the new; and finally, in terms of spatiality and the historical cultural geography of Los Angeles. But before I go on, I'd like to share a bit of promotional footage from JAZZ IS DEAD to give you a feeling of how they're presenting themselves. **VIDEO**

SLIDE First, I'd like to discuss JAZZ IS DEAD in terms of its attitude to genre and history, beginning with some genealogical information about the series. Events organized under the

name ArtDontSleep began in the mid 2010s and, for the better part of the last ten years, has been booking concerts and events that mix up acoustic jazz sets with DJs and hip-hop crews, creating a feedback loop of influence celebrating music from the 1960s to the present. The programming of influential musical elders with younger artists who sample or otherwise remix those elders' work demonstrates Pan-African and Afrofuturist aesthetic strategies. This is further reflected in the mixing of hip-hop's sample culture with live instrumentation in modes of what's sometimes called alt-jazz, low-fi hip-hop, or just, "beat music." This feedback loop demonstrates what Kristen Lillvis calls the liminality of Pan-African and Afrofuturist aesthetic strategies.¹ Rather than a blunted hauntological space of out-of-joint nostalgia as Mark Fisher has dubbed hypnagogic pop's dead futurism, this space of cultural expression engages productively with memory and utopic ideation, remixing the familiar as the ontologically-contingent space of possibility for the new.² JAZZ IS DEAD continued this logic with programming starting in 2017 that has resulted, for example, **SLIDE** in the 2019 Roy Ayers shows with a live band. Perhaps most famous for his 1976 song "Everybody Loves the Sunshine," these sold-out concerts featured live DJ set openers and resulted in a record released on the JAZZ IS DEAD imprint. **SLIDE**

Though this music most certainly centers on Black American culture manifest through Music, I suggest this focus is not exclusionary. Rather than positing a universality of monolithic Blackness, this cultural space of inclusively invites plurality and a radical propensity for eclectic creolization.³ I take as a starting point here Paul Gilroy's assertion that strategies in the constellation of cultural practices of the African Diaspora are transcultural, transnational, and eschew racial and ethnic absolutism. Suspicious of ethnic particularism and nationalism, these favor a "global, coalitional politics in which anti-imperialism and anti-racism might be seen to interact if not to fuse."⁴ Ingrid Monson offers a helpful formulation of such cultural spaces whose practices engender open community with boundaries not restricted by phenotype. This approach understands: **SLIDE**

(1) culture as emerging from social practices in a process of contestation and engagement (which occurs over time, that is, history), (2) culture as inevitably mixed and partially overlapping with other cultures around it and (3) cultures as not bound neatly to space or geography but rather mediated by recording, print, and broadcast media. Culture, then, is not simply about race or ethnicity, but also about the definition and redefinition of collectivities (including races, identities, classes, ethnic groups, genders) through various kinds of social practice, such as playing music, arguing about race, living in the same neighborhood, attending religious services, watching television, marriage, and political activism.⁵ **SLIDE**

As such, the Black culture celebrated by JAZZ IS DEAD is historical in its scope, racially inclusive, and utopic in its vision. One can see this inclusivity in the crowds that line up for JAZZ IS DEAD shows that evince a mixture of races, ages, and social-classes – by outward appearance, at least. This is further demonstrated by the JAZZ IS DEAD record series – now working in

¹ Lillvis 2017: 59

² Fisher 2013

³ Lewis 2017: 445

⁴ Gilroy 1993: 4

⁵ Monson 2007: 11

conjunction with Impulse Records. The series engages in all-analog recording techniques, making new records that pair older and sometimes under-celebrated artists with younger musicians. In addition to new records with oft-sampled American artists like Roy Ayers, Doug Carn, and Gary Bartz, these also include new records with Brazilian masters Arthur Verocai, João Donato, and Azymuth.

SLIDE Despite its title, it is obvious that this concert series is invested in musics that have been called “jazz.” So, what kind of work does this moniker do in refusing “jazz” as a genre while being simultaneously generative of a rich constellation of cultural production? **SLIDE** My title addresses this jazz-is-dead-is-not-dead mess by way of the Dadaist exclamation celebrating its own paralogical being-non-being. We’re in that contemporary strange loop of “is/is not” jazz that demands we consider how we know what jazz is, who the gatekeepers are, to what authority such decisions appeal, and what’s at stake. Elsewhere I have considered meaning making in jazz music as bigger than genre, bigger than a “great man” theory of jazz history populated by virtuosic genius innovators; characterizing Black American Music rather as a virtuosic engagement with sonic archives.⁶ Meaningful acts of improvisation and the production of new music is, then, a kind of the negotiation with novelty and established practices. As a concert series and record label JAZZ IS DEAD manifests this logic by creating a liminal space; an arc of recursion with its live programming and records.

Some historical resistance to the word “jazz” as expressed by artists such as Duke Ellington, Max Roach, Charles Mingus, and Miles Davis has been related to the pigeon-holing work a label can do. Such a label draws a conceptual boundary around the music’s possible manifestations, limiting its engagement with other influences and audiences. All this while constructing a monolithic cultural imaginary of what “jazz” is supposed to be. This is reflected in some of the recent criticism levied by Nicholas Payton in his refusal of the term, asserting jazz died in 1959, and favoring the more open term, “Black American Music.” A primary goal for JAZZ IS DEAD seems to be making explicit connections with musics that, while not “jazz” in terms of strict genre, are clearly part of the music’s big family tree. Primarily this means hip-hop and developing strands of beat music, but also psychedelic Brazilian pop and Afrobeat. All of these musics, Younge argues, are related and mutually-inflecting. Addressing this in a 2020 interview with Downbeat magazine for the JAZZ IS DEAD release that featured Roy Ayers, he said:

SLIDE Hip-hop serves as a conduit to the past...If it wasn’t for hip-hop, there would be a lot of music that I wouldn’t know. If it wasn’t for hip-hop, I wonder if I would have even known who Roy Ayers is. A lot of times in black culture, when we are done with something, we don’t go back. Hip-hop kinda changed that. Hip-hop is vinyl culture taken to the next level.⁷

As such, the JAZZ IS DEAD phenomenon occasions the construction of an intermusical space that is bigger than any single genre designation might allow. The generational engagement and broad programming situate its musical community in a discourse of cultural meaning-making, productively complicating taxonomical efforts while reproducing emancipatory strategies, values of inclusion, self-determination, and mutual respect.

⁶ Kluth 2019

⁷ Murph 2020

SLIDE We've reached part three of my talk—the most “in progress” part—where I'm interested in considering the significance of spatiality to the JAZZ IS DEAD phenomenon. The physical location of JAZZ IS DEAD is a club called the Lodge Room in the Highland Park neighborhood of Los Angeles' near East side. Taking a cue from urban theorist Ed Soja that there is no unspatialized social reality, I want to add “spatiality” to the historicality and sociality implied by my earlier discussion of intermusicality.⁸

As a hip, eclectic music venue that programs established and up-and-coming artists, **SLIDE** the Lodge Room inhabits a 100-year-old building that was originally a Masonic Temple. Its renovation and repurposing has made it part of the gentrification on the strip of North Figueroa Street, contributing to rising rents that are changing the overall character of the neighborhood.

SLIDE Composed largely of single-family dwellings for primarily working-class Hispanic and Latino families, Highland Park's main tributaries of North Figueroa Street and York Boulevard are more and more lined with shops, bars, restaurants, and clubs that draw a “hipster” crowd. While still mixed, the gentrifying population is noticeably whiter, occupies a higher socio-economic class, and is engaged in rehabbing and flipping properties. **SLIDE** Clubs and gallery spaces in Highland Park have been accused by some of complicity through “art washing,” or, the collusion of cultural expression with symbolic and economic capital that paves the way for the displacement of a space's original inhabitants, ultimately, cultural erasure.

SLIDE JAZZ IS DEAD at the Lodge Room is not the only eclectic music series or venue in Los Angeles potentially implicated in gentrification through this process of art washing. There are several spots that program broadly, often with a focus on Black American Music and an openness to experimentation. These include Zebulon in Frogtown, the Echoplex in Silverlake, and the influential beat music series Low End Theory that ran from 2006 to 2018. However, JAZZ IS DEAD is exemplary among these for explicitly drawing lines of connection between generational legacies of mutual influence and intentional intercultural engagement. It is to be hoped that this engagement with an historical social imagination is implicated not only in negative elements of gentrification. This is because the Lodge Room is more than its material facticity and its implication in the historical urban power struggles – it is also a place where a community of individuals can activate their historically and spatially situated personal and communal imaginations.

SLIDE Soja argues that the spatially situated interactions of relevant historicality and sociality may productively activate a community's fictive capacities, activating real and imagined negotiations therein and instantiating a rebalancing act that might disrupt limitations of previous local epistemological and ontological assumptions.⁹ As what Soja would call a “thirdspace,” JAZZ IS DEAD might act as node for heuristic, iterative cultural expression significant for its ability to augment social realities.

SLIDE In conclusion, then, I suggest that by programming small group jazz, funk, samba, hip-hop, experimental beat music, and more, JAZZ IS DEAD is by accident or design engaged in the sonic and spatialized curation of a community that models those musical interspaces—mixing

⁸ Soja 1996: 46

⁹ Soja 1996: 81

audiences of varied histories of taste, race, and socioeconomic background sometimes separated by those very differences. Its vivifying, symbolically rich space transcends genre and is a testimony to music's relationship to memory, representation, and resistance. Thank you, and I look forward to our conversation.

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