

Ensemble and Otherness: The Jazz Musician in Robert Altman's *Kansas City* (1996)

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ABSTRACT. This article examines the representation of the jazz musician in Robert Altman's 1996 crime drama *Kansas City*. The film features contemporary musicians playing the roles of notable jazz musicians of the 1930s – including Coleman Hawkins, Mary Lou Williams and Ben Webster – and it places the Kansas City jazz scene at the center of the film's narrative.

In form similar to the cutting contest that lies at the heart of the film's story, this article offers two differing perspectives on the role of the jazz musician in *Kansas City*. One perspective suggests that, in the film, jazz makes it possible for people to work collectively, while the other suggests that jazz serves as a marker of otherness and difference. These themes are examined in relation to the political power of jazz, and the article examines how these are articulated through the music that plays throughout film. The film's uncompromising engagement with issues of race and representation weaves through the narrative's fugue-like structure with diegetic and non-diegetic jazz music. At the film's core is the representation of the figure of the jazz musician and the world they inhabit at the epicenter of the jazz world, Kansas City in the 1930s.

KEYWORDS: Spaces of Optimism, Race, Representation, Identity, Jazz Performance



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Ensemble et altérité : le musicien de jazz dans *Kansas City* de Robert Altman (1996)

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RÉSUMÉ. Cet article se penche sur la représentation du musicien de jazz dans le drame de Robert Altman *Kansas City* (1996). Le film présente des musiciens contemporains jouant le rôle de musiciens de jazz majeurs des années 1930 – dont Coleman Hawkins, Mary Lou Williams et Ben Webster – et il met la scène du jazz de Kansas City au cœur du récit.

En prenant pour modèle le combat musical qui occupe une place centrale dans la narration, cet article propose deux interprétations différentes du rôle du musicien de jazz dans *Kansas City*. La première interprétation suggère que, dans le film, le jazz permet de travailler de manière collective ; la seconde suggère que le jazz est un marqueur de l'altérité et de la différence. Ces thèmes sont examinés en relation avec le pouvoir politique du jazz, et l'article analyse la façon dont ces aspects s'articulent autour de la musique jouée tout au long du film. *Kansas City* aborde sans compromis les questions de race et de représentation ; ces questions sont intimement liées à la structure du récit qui rappelle une fugue musicale avec son jazz diégétique et non diégétique. La représentation de la figure du musicien de jazz et du monde qui est le sien – Kansas City dans les années 1930, épice du monde du jazz – occupe une place essentielle dans le film.

MOTS-CLÉS : espaces d'optimisme, race, représentation, identité, concert de jazz

This article examines the representation of the jazz musician in Robert Altman's 1996 crime drama *Kansas City*. Set in 1934, the film's multi-strand narrative depicts not only the political corruption and organized crime that shaped the life of the city during the interwar years, but also its vibrant jazz scene. Using prominent jazz musicians of the 1990s to play some of the luminaries from the history of jazz, the film includes performances by Craig Handy as Coleman Hawkins, Joshua Redman as Lester Young, Cyrus Chestnut as Count Basie, Geri Allen as Mary Lou Williams, James Carter as Ben Webster, as well as a number of other artists, including elder statesman of the bass Ron Carter. In a film that, as Adrian Danks observes, « is more focused on issues of race than almost any other work in Altman's career » (2015: 332) jazz music, its performance, and the spaces it defines and inhabits, convey an explicit racial dynamic, firmly positioning the music in relation to African American identity. Thus, what the jazz musician represents within the film, and equally, how musicians are represented, might usefully be discussed through reference to the ways in which identity is constructed around notions of similarity and difference – explored in what follows through the themes of ensemble and otherness. Drawing on close textual analysis of the film alongside analysis of the critical literature published on it, the authors aim to consider how these themes offer different –but also complementary– perspectives on the figure of the jazz musician in *Kansas City*.

At the heart of the film's representation of the jazz musician is a recreation of the legendary all-night cutting contest that took place between Coleman

Hawkins and Lester Young in the Cherry Blossom Club in Kansas City in December 1933 –transposed by Altman to the Hey Hey Club on election day the following year. The article is co-authored in alternating sections in a way that aims to echo the play between the two distinctive voices that was heard in the historic battle royale between Hawkins and Young. In what follows, Fox considers notions of ensemble, while Birtwistle explores the theme of otherness, with one author suggesting that, in Altman's film, jazz performance makes it possible for people to work collectively and to share a common identity, while the other proposes that jazz serves as a radical marker of otherness that works to define racial identity. The themes of ensemble and otherness represented in the film's performances of jazz are examined in relation to its uncompromising engagement with issues of race and representation. These themes are articulated through jazz and the jazz musician as the fugue-like structure of the film unfolds.

Ensemble 1: Spaces of Optimism

I have never really been in love with jazz the way I am in love with other forms of cultural expression. However, I have always loved jazz as an idea, a sonic statement that coincides with film noir's seductive iconography of rain-drenched city streets and smoke filled bars of dangerous intimacy. Perhaps that is why I am more interested in the representation of jazz than the music itself, and particularly how it is represented on film. Whatever type of music we like it is clear, as suggested by neurologist Oliver Sacks' book *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*, that we all have, to varying degrees, music in our heads. The jazz I have in my head is a product of filmic representation more than listening to jazz for its own sake. From Tavernier's *Round Midnight* (1986) via *Bird* (Eastwood, 1988) and *Let's Get Lost* (Weber, 1988), the figure of the doomed jazz musician hits all the right bass notes. However, within *Kansas City*, the jazz musicians provide an oasis of collective and carnivalesque togetherness as the film's other narrative threads unravel.

My ambivalence towards jazz finds its counterpoint in the certainty of my positive response to Robert Altman as a filmmaker. Kolker, Gabbard, Self and Thompson identify the links between a jazz aesthetic in Altman's films such as *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *California Split* (1974), *Nashville* (1975) and *Short Cuts* (1993). Not only does Altman use jazz on the soundtrack but also the ways in which his characters tend to interact, overlap and digress in their dialogue, produces a form of improvisation that is highly suggestive of the jazz tradition of solo pieces that come together to form the whole. *Kansas City* represents Altman's most overt expression of his love of jazz in a narrative film and he uses the music in a complex and challenging manner. The jazz performances work diegetically and non-diegetically to create spaces of "optimism". These spaces can be described as residing along a continuum between the Panglossian notion of optimism, to the "cruel optimism" elaborated by Berlant as « the condition

of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object in advance of its loss » (2011: 93). The jazz musicians on stage at the Hey Hey Club inhabit a liminal space of optimism that offers protection, at least while they are performing, from the sordid political and prejudiced realities of Kansas City in 1934. These spaces of optimism are created on three levels: within the film through the jazz performances; meta-textually in relation to Altman's disregard for easy to follow Hollywood narratives; and extra-textually by the ways in which jazz can be seen as contributing to the history of the Civil Rights movement and the development of the African American artist/performer as a key player in the history of twentieth century American culture. As Titlesdat (2000: 15) notes: « it makes it possible for us to conceive of jazz bodies (through the relation of the symbolic to the semiotic) as points at which, in communication with others, musical and cultural tradition and history are actualized ».

Before examining the representation of the jazz musician, it is first important to establish the context within which this representation takes place, focusing on Altman's love of jazz and how this figures in his authorial signature. *Kansas City*, in its use of music, does a great deal more than activate the jazz cultural archive. As Altman explains in an interview with David Thompson:

I look at *Kansas City* as a musical piece, a fugue, with each character represented by an instrument. Harry Belafonte (Seldom Seen) was the trumpet, Dermot Mulroney (Johnny O'Hara) was the trombone, Jennifer Jason Leigh (Blondie) and Miranda Richardson (Carolyn Stilton) were tenor saxophones doing a duet, and in a way their dialogue was like variations on a theme that didn't have too much to do with advancing the plot (Thompson, 2006: 178).

A fugue usually opens with a main theme which then sounds in each voice as it enters, with the final entry often followed by closing material or coda. Altman's claim about the fugue-like nature of *Kansas City* can be corroborated by a consideration of the film's overlapping opening sequence and the closing coda.

The film opens without any diegetic or non-diegetic music as Blondie (Jennifer Jason Leigh) arrives at the house of Senator Henry Stilton (Michael Murphy) to provide a manicure for his wife, Carolyn (Miranda Richardson), but also to deliver the laudanum to which Mrs. Stilton has become addicted. This dialogue-free opening sequence secures the time and the place: 1930s, Kansas City. Blondie is not Mrs. Stilton's usual manicurist; she is substituting for her sister Babe (Brooke Smith), in order to gain access to the Senator's house. Her plan is to kidnap the Senator's wife and use her as collateral in seeking the return of her husband who has been taken by Seldom Seen (Harry Belafonte), a black gangster who runs the Hey Hey Club. Her husband, Johnny O'Hara (Dermot Mulroney), with the help of one of Seldom Seen's cab drivers, "Blue" Green (Martin Martin) has robbed a rich black gambler, Sheepshank Red (A.C. Smith) coming to play the tables at the Hey Hey Club.

The next scene begins with the main credit sequence and we are back in time, earlier that day before Johnny's robbery and before the need to hatch Blondie's plan. We are introduced in this credit sequence to the other voices who supply variations on Blondie's theme; Seldom Seen, the space of the Hey Hey Club, the space of the railway station where Blondie and her sister work, the departure of Senator Stilton, a political rally, the arrival of Babe's husband, Johnny Flynn (Steve Buscemi), an enforcer for Boss Pendergast (Jerry Fonnelli), the meeting with Johnny O'Hara and the cab-driver, the arrival of the rich black gambler and in a wonderful peripheral story that is an Altman trademark we see a teenage Charlie Parker (Albert J. Burnes) befriend a young black girl at the station and take her to the Hey Hey Club. Throughout this title sequence music is used as a counterpoint to the narrative. A brass band is playing at the political rally in the railway station and we are introduced to the space of the Hey Hey Club by the sign at the front proclaiming the Battle of the Tenors: Coleman Hawkins vs. Lester Young.

As soon as we enter the Hey Hey Club the music performs a diegetic function and then as we leave to follow the other story strands it becomes non-diegetic to act as a continuity soundtrack for our diversions into Blondie, Johnny and Senator Stilton's worlds. Jazz also highlights the Hey Hey Club as the dramatic and narrative center of the film as even though we move from the space of the club we take the space of the music with us. The title sequence ends with a return to our original location and time frame where Blondie continues with her plan.

In *Kansas City* the film is more about how jazz shapes the storytelling than the imperatives of Hollywood's three act structure. Advancing the plot is less important than exploring the spaces of optimism created by the jazz performances in the Hey Hey Club as Altman subverts the narrative and leads the audience into digressions that question the very notion of the codes and conventions to which Hollywood films adhere. The upbeat artistry and sense of collegiality evident in the jazz performances is completely at odds with the downbeat narrative strands that focus on corruption, vote-rigging, theft, revenge, addiction and betrayal. Fugue-like jazz performances offer a contrapuntal narrative, a space where optimism can flourish through the jazz ensemble, as well as a deconstructive device questioning the conformity of Hollywood genre storytelling. While these shifts in the affective atmosphere within the film do not change the world for the black musicians or those enjoying the music in the Hey Hey Club, rather they help set up and undercut the easy notion of nostalgia associated with period piece films. Altman has always been keen to remove the sepia tones from our historical photo album in films like *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971) and *Thieves Like Us* (1974). Even if we see, as Thompson (2006: 19) suggests, the second half of the film as Altman's « dream memory » of Kansas City, the escape into nostalgia is undercut by the overpowering presence of Boss Pendergast's political machine, to which even Seldom Seen as the brutal but jazz sensitive club owner, is subservient. And beyond that is the continuity of jazz, outlasting the politicians and eventually helping to supply the verna-

cular architecture of the black cultural flow that informs American culture not a political movement as such, but a deep current that is an integral part of the mainstream.

Otherness 1: Unembedding Jazz

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Breaking with established cinematic practice, rather than having musicians or actors mime to pre-recorded music, Altman made the decision to recreate the Kansas City jazz scene of the 1930s by filming “live” performances given by contemporary jazz luminaries dressed in period costume. Given the screen time that Altman devotes to these performances, it is perhaps unsurprising that the film’s representation of jazz has been the subject of some discussion, securing praise from some writers and criticism from others. In the latter camp Peter Watrous, writing as jazz critic for *The New York Times*, commented upon the film’s release in 1996:

Kansas City is good-hearted in that it uses actual young musicians playing actual music. But irrespective of the film makers’ intentions, the film treats the musicians as mutes, without a story to tell [...] they remain nameless, faces without a history or even much of a presence. The film, in its own way, worships the musicians, lingering on their faces and spending plenty of time soaking up the playing. But oddly, unlike older Hollywood movies that it is clearly derived from, *Kansas City* doesn’t even let the musicians have a speaking role (Watrous, 1996: 26).

Here Watrous perceives something of a paradox, whereby the jazz musician is foregrounded within a text that simultaneously appears to render them insignificant within a narrative context. In addition to a critical concern with what might be characterized as the « unembeddedness » of the jazz musician and jazz music within the film’s multi-strand narrative structure, Watrous’s review also proposes musical anachronism as another of *Kansas City*’s failures of representation: « The music [...] isn’t particularly idiomatic of the time or place [...] it imagines a Kansas City style, overloaded with riffs and shouting and honking, as if rock-and-roll predated it, not the other way around » (Watrous, 1996: 26). What Watrous’s critique reveals is a perceived tension between two distinct modes of representation which might each make a claim to authenticity. On the one hand, the music played by Handy, Redman, Chestnut, Allen, Carter, and the other professional jazz musicians who perform in the film, is wholly authentic – in the sense that it is being played by some of the most accomplished American jazz musicians of their generation. On the other hand, this very authenticity may result in an audible departure from the musical idioms of 1930s jazz – which is to say, situated within the context of Altman’s period reconstruction of the Kansas City of his youth, the music being played might be considered histo-

rically inauthentic, and hence anachronistic. Echoing Watrous's critique, Gayle Sherwood Magee writes:

even as the actors play the roles of earlier canonic performers, their improvisations, musical language, and overall sound are uniquely mid-1990s. While the image conveys one meaning [...] including knowledge of, attention to, and respect for jazz history, the sound is undeniably contemporary (Magee, 2014: 186).

Thus, while occasionally employing exaggerated, expressionist effects to suggest the music of the past (viewed by Watrous as more akin to rock-and-roll than 1930s jazz), the music performed by Handy and Redman is fundamentally informed by the post-bop tradition, within which they emerged as performers in the early 1990s.

The tension between contemporary and past styles of jazz performance that is signaled in by Watrous and Magee might be seen to represent another form of unembeddedness –in this case historical– that in some ways parallels the narrative detachment of the film's musical performances. However, as I will argue, rather than seeing these formal and stylistic traits in terms of failure (Watrous titles his review "The Movies Miss Another Chance") we might consider how these forms of unembeddedness work more positively to signify the jazz musician's radical otherness. That is to say, the way in which jazz musicians are represented in *Kansas City* marks them out as fundamentally different from the other characters in the film, creating a palpable sense of otherness that contributes to the film's uncompromising engagement with issues of race and identity.

A sense of otherness is constructed, in part, through the narrative spaces within which musical performance is staged. Although jazz is used as non-diegetic music throughout *Kansas City*, we only see jazz musicians performing within the confines of Seldom Seen's Hey Hey Club, in which African American musicians play for an exclusively African American audience. That this space is delineated along racial lines is made explicit when the white characters Johnny O'Hara and Blondie enter the club. O'Hara's presence in the club is constructed as problematic by Seldom Seen, who comments « You come swinging in here like Tarzan, right in the middle of a sea of niggers, like you're in a picture show », while Blondie is forcibly ejected following her attempts to secure O'Hara's release. Commenting on the unceremonious removal of Blondie from the club, Krin Gabbard argues that the scene shows:

that Altman is more interested in the complexities of race relations than in an uncritical celebration of Kansas City music and musicians. The black players laugh and make fun of Blondie with their instruments as she passes the bandstand kicking and screaming. The wide-open politics of Kansas City gave blacks some degree of autonomy in their own domain (Gabbard, 2000: 150).

Thus, the space of jazz performance is not only racially coded, but as Gabbard indicates, is also constructed as other in terms of its autonomy from the world outside its doors. The film represents the club as an isolated, enclosed environment, out of synch with the time frames established by the workaday world of Kansas City, and out of step with the rhythms of daily routine. Beyond the walls of the club, the various events that structure the film's narrative –centering on Blondie's kidnapping of Carolyn Stilton, and the efforts of political fixer Johnny Flynn to influence the outcome of the city election– take place over the course of two days and a night. However, within the space of the club the musicians play on, regardless of time of day, and immune to the events taking place outside. A number of writers on the film have noted the way in which the musicians playing in the Hey Hey Club are insulated and separated from the key narrative and temporal structures of the rest of the film. Thus, Self proposes that, « Jazz and the club [...] seem to provide a kind of permanence [...] as from dusk to dawn for two days, before the beginning and after the end of the story, coterminous with the discourse, the jazz goes on » (Self, 2002: 15), while Danks refers to the film's portrayal of the « hermetic world of jazz » (Danks, 2015: 338). Similarly, Robert Niemi proposes that « Crosscuts back to the musicians playing their sumptuous jazz suggests that, as artists, they are immune from the political corruption going on all around them –either superior to it or merely oblivious » (Niemi, 2016: 169). The “permanence” that Self observes in terms of jazz and the club can be seen as a force of assertion, viewed optimistically as the creation of a space defined by free and authentic expression, or less positively as a refuge from the outside world. However, what both readings of this space share in common is the sense of disconnection and separateness. In this way, the representation of the jazz musician developed within the film works to further amplify and drive home the sense of otherness and difference that, within the context of the film's racial dynamic, clearly define African American identity. Of course, in part, Altman's film reflects the historical social context within which jazz articulates a sense of otherness, and in this respect it is worth remembering that even when black artists like Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald became part and parcel of the American cultural fabric, their representation was often racially coded –particularly in cinema. However, the construction of jazz's otherness in *Kansas City* also results from the particular way in which the jazz musician is represented in the film, which conveys a sense of unembeddedness not only through narrative construction, but also through the decision to use contemporary jazz musicians rather than actors to represent historical figures. In this way, in the film's construction of jazz as black music the intensification of difference through othering serves to radicalize the expression of racial identity articulated through musical performance. If, as Ken argues, jazz performance creates spaces of optimism within the film, then this is achieved not only through the depiction of what Niemi has described as « a harmonious community dedicated to the life-affirming power of art » (2016: 172), but also through the otherness that is central to all radical expressions of identity.

Ensemble 2: Contest and Communal

Andy's close analysis of the unembeddedness of jazz as it is used by Altman in the film could be aligned with the vision of the film as a fugue where the counterpoint and modulatory nature of the new episodes are not seeking to suppress the music but offer variations on the central theme. The film is consciously celebrating its own inability to normalize or subordinate jazz to classical Hollywood's storytelling conventions. In fact, it is working to subordinate classical Hollywood narrative to the schemas of jazz performance.

The cutting contest between Coleman Hawkins (Craig Handy) and Lester Young (Joshua Redman) is at the center of the film. Cutting contests were a feature of the Kansas City jazz scene in the 1930s but also part of a tradition that existed in the jazz clubs of New Orleans and New York. While cutting contests were often a duel between the acknowledged masters of their instruments and up and coming talent, in *Kansas City*, there is much more a sense of shared excitement from the players and crowd. Starting at 57:41 as we see Senator Stilton asleep on the train that will take him back to Kansas City. The diegetic noise of the train is beautifully interwoven with the sound of the jazz ensemble as we cut back to their performance in the Hey Hey Club. The focus is not just on the band but on the enjoyment of the audience, those sitting and dancing as they respond to the band's playing. These cuts between performers and audience establishes a community of performance that spreads from the stage to the dance floor to the gallery, where the young Charlie Parker is soaking up this masterclass. At 58:15, the camera moves in on Coleman Hawkins (Craig Handy) as he starts the cutting contest with Lester Young (Joshua Redman). The camera cuts away to the club's downstairs gambling hall where Sheepshank Red is playing dice and as Seldom Seen predicted, losing all his money. Hawkins' tenor sax solo is still audible as we cut back to the stage where at 59:01 Lester Young responds with his sax solo. Another cut to the club's exterior where Blue is being led to a car, his fate inevitable, but as the car pull away the camera stays on the front of house posters. « Battle of the Jazz. Lester Young vs Coleman Hawkins, Who is King of the Righteous Riff? »

Back on stage where Hawkins responds to the duel by removing his jacket, undoing a button on his waistcoat, and blows his response. Altman's directorial style is evident in the way the camera pans smoothly from one player to the other, but this movement becomes more abrupt as the duel intensifies. After approximately six minutes of the cutting contest with a few cutaways to other scenes where no dialogue is used, the music provides the continuity but also the counterpoint to what we see happening in the background. The cutting contest ends in a handshake between the two duelists as a culmination of ensemble playing and virtuoso performance. One gets the sense that Altman wanted to spend even more time on the jazz and in some senses he does. Not in *Kansas City* itself but in the companion film, *Jazz '34: Remembrances of Kansas City Swing* (1997) he made as a public service TV funded documentary using all the players in the ensemble and extending the musical sequence

in *Kansas City* to take up the 75 minutes of what critic Jonathan Rosenbaum (2020) named as « the best jazz film I have ever seen ». Using the same players, setting and costume design and employing the voice of Harry Belafonte as narrator, it is as if the music and the performers, unable to be contained by the narrative constraints of *Kansas City*, become its own righteous riff. According to Rosenbaum (2020): « *Kansas City* represents the repressed, “buried” text in *Jazz ’34* —much as *Jazz ’34* represents the “buried” text in *Kansas City* ».

Driggs and Haddix suggest that jazz and its performers contributed to the evolution of the Civil Rights Movement and as the soundtrack to the development of African American cultural identity. I also want to argue that the spaces of jazz in the broader systems of cultural power can be described as optimistic and the performance of the cutting contest provides a fine example of the close connections between jazz and the vernacular of the artist that was to influence heavily post World War 2 American poetry, literature, fashion, music and popular culture. The “cool” in *Kansas City* is how the performers maintain the spaces of optimism while being surrounded by the spaces of crime and corruption. As the cutting contest is progressing the murder of Blue is taking place in a back alley for his collaboration with Johnny O’Hara in the attempted robbery of his own people. The musicians are, of course, not immune to these negative forces but within the structure of the film somewhere above the fray.

I would argue that in Altman’s case the inscription of difference is emancipatory in several ways. First, within the film the spaces of optimism created through the jazz performances provide continuity but also a counterpoint to the other narrative threads. In doing this they undercut the linear structure of Hollywood storytelling and undermine the generic expectations of the gangster genre by digression, intermission and musical *jouissance*. Second, the jazz performances point to broader spaces for optimism/change articulated, for example, by Dr. Martin Luther King’s opening address at the 1964 Berlin Jazz Festival where he identified « the role played by music in articulating the suffering, hopes, and joys of black experience long before the task was undertaken by poets and writers » (Dyer, 1991: 194). The struggle to have jazz recognized as an art form mirrors the struggle for societal freedoms. As Johnny Griffin asserts: « Jazz is music made by and for people who have chosen to feel good in spite of conditions » (quoted in Abdul-Jabbar, 2007: 193).

Following its fugue-like structure the film ends with a coda where Seldom Seen is counting the takings after a long day and night of activity at the Hey Hey Club. As he counts his cash the camera moves to re-focus again on the jazz performers. In an almost empty club with most of the audience and the players having departed the stage two bass players play the film to its fade out. Although the bass players are playing Duke Ellington’s *Solitude*, the figure on his own in the shot is Seldom Seen; Ron Carter still has collaborators for the performance of the tune. The film highlights the vibrancy of the jazz scene in Kansas City in the 1930s, brought to an end by the zealotry and racism of Lloyd Stark, elected Governor of Missouri in 1936, who, with the help of J. Edgar Hoover, sought to clean up the city by insisting its jazz clubs closed at midnight. While the cor-

rupt politicians faded, the continuity of jazz outlasted their efforts to control the spaces for jazz performance, and contemporary Kansas City, when Altman made the film, had a vibrant jazz club scene.

Otherness 2: Jazz Performance and Authenticity

Self has argued that within *Kansas City* jazz constitutes a form of resistance (Self, 2002: 19), and indeed, as Niemi points out, the music contained within the film « functions as an implicit rebuke to the alienation, corruption and violence that mark the racist American Gesellschaft in which it is embedded » (Niemi, 2016: 172). However, there is perhaps another sense in which the notion of resistance might provide a useful perspective on the representation of the jazz musician within the film. As described earlier, a number of writers have commented that the film's jazz performances are not historically accurate, in that they do not duplicate the modes of musical expression that characterized jazz in the 1930s. Altman himself summarized this perceived failing in the following terms: « the jazz world has a little trouble taking it because all those great players were performing the kind of music from that period of the early 1930s, before bebop, yet they were playing their own music, not an imitation of it » (Thompson, 2006: 179). Here I would reframe the discussion around historical authenticity to consider the effect generated by a form of representation in which –to paraphrase Altman– musicians play their own music, and how this in turn might create another form of othering within the cinematic text.

A number of the professional jazz musicians who appear in *Kansas City* are called upon to perform the roles of key figures associated with the history of Kansas City jazz, including Count Basie, Mary Lou Williams and Lester Young. In part this is achieved through the use of period costume: thus Gabbard describes how Craig Handy, playing the role of Coleman Hawkins, conceals his dreadlocks in a large hat (2000: 144), while Joshua Redman sports a porkpie hat as part of his portrayal of Lester Young. Although Altman was particularly complementary of Handy's acting performance in the cutting contest between Lester Young and Coleman Hawkins, commenting « Handy could be a movie star » (quoted in Gabbard, 2000: 147), there is also a clear sense in which, when the musicians actually play, they do so in their own style and thus appear primarily *as themselves*. This, I would argue, creates a sense of presence that is fundamentally different from that of the actors in the film, whose own performance skills are organized around the camera rather than a musical instrument.

This sense of difference is perhaps most clearly communicated by the appearance of bass player Ron Carter as a member of the Hey Hey Club house band. Carter, who came to prominence in the American jazz scene in the 1960s through his work with Miles Davis, is arguably the best known of all the professional musicians populating the fictional space of the Hey Hey Club, and paradoxically the least convincing in fictional terms. Although his costume may be as approximately appropriate as any other, he nevertheless somehow appears

more conspicuous than his fellow musicians, less deeply inscribed into the diegesis than the other players. During the cutting contest, Carter's deep concentration on his own performance –communicated through body language, perspiration, and the way in which his gaze is turned away from the dueling tenor players– serves to show that he is playing music, but not playing a role. Unlike the saxophonists Joshua Redman and Craig Handy, who are called upon not only to play their instruments, but also to participate in the drama by adopting the roles of Lester Young and Coleman Hawkins, Carter is there *only* as himself. This detachment from the fictional dimension of the scene in which he himself participates is further communicated by the way in which he interacts with his fellow musicians at the end of the scene, turning to converse with the other member of the rhythm section, the drummer Victor Lewis, rather than reacting to the dramatic duel which has just concluded, and which within the world of the film's fiction commands narrative focus. Carter's unembeddedness within the fictive world of the Hey Hey Club also results from his idiosyncratic beard, which speaks to his elder statesman status, and connects him with other barbate jazz musicians of the post-war era, such as Sonny Rollins and Pharoah Sanders, rather than the Kansas City jazz scene of the 1930s.

This form of participation without belonging is not unique to Carter's performance, and to an extent applies to all the musicians who appear in the film. The sense of otherness that results, and which marks out the professional jazz musicians from the rest of the film's cast, is further underwritten by the fact that none are given speaking roles. As Watrous correctly observes, « the film treats the musicians as mutes, without a story to tell » (1996: 26). However, where I would fundamentally disagree with Watrous's analysis of the film is in his claim that « It has turned the music and the musicians into servants of the film's plot and ambiance ». Rather, I would argue, the potentially radical dynamic of the film's representation of the jazz musician rests on the fact that these performers *do not* serve the film in this manner, but rather carve out space and time for themselves, maintaining their own identity as musicians rather than simply being absorbed as characters into the film's narrative world. Returning to Self's claim that jazz constitutes a form of resistance, we might thus argue that the jazz musicians featured in *Kansas City* resist absorption into the film's diegetic world. How then, might this take on political meaning within the film's engagement with issues of race and identity?

That there is more at stake in Altman's recreation of the Kansas City Jazz scene of the 1930s than matters of historical or musical accuracy, or even narrative significance, is indicated by the film's awareness of the relationship between race and representation. After being taken prisoner by the black crime boss Seldom Seen, the white petty crook Johnny O'Hara is asked whether he likes radio, to which he replies, « Yeah, I like it sometimes ». His captor then snaps back, « Goddam right you do! All that Amos and Andy. In the movies and radio white people just sit around all day long thinking up that shit. And then they believe it! ». This reference to the problematic history of white representations of African Americans clearly demonstrates the film's awareness of its own

status as a white project: that at some level Altman *is* just another white man sitting around all day thinking up shit. However, although the representation of jazz performance within the film has been seen by some as a failure –historically inauthentic and irrelevant in narrative terms– its very resistance to narrative and stylistic incorporation challenges any notion of white privilege that Altman's leadership of the project might otherwise suggest. The fact that neither jazz music nor the jazz musician are successfully narrativized in *Kansas City* should not be seen as failure. Rather, in a film in which jazz stands as a marker of racial identity, the sense of otherness that emerges from Altman's representation of the jazz musician speaks to absolute, irreducible difference, and the final inaccessibility of blackness to white territorialization. Although Watrous might complain that « The music, finally, isn't even part of the plot » (1996: 26), there is a sense in which it does not need to be, since the power of the film's representation of music and musicians derives from their place within the complex fabric of American society.

Conclusion

Both writers' solos argue that the jazz performances in *Kansas City* within the Hey Hey Club can be read as spaces of optimism but also spaces of difference where ensemble and otherness co-exist. The cutting contest takes up six minutes of the film's narrative but its centrality as a spectacle of performance amidst the fugue like nature of Altman's storytelling overshadows the film's final resolution of Johnny's capture, Caroline's kidnapping, and Seldom Seen's tussle with Boss Pendergast where white control of the structures of power in Kansas City is reaffirmed.

Altman admitted what he termed the « dichotomy in the film »: « I think [...] there was too much music for the people who wanted action/melodrama, and too much melodrama for the music fans » (Thompson, 2006: 178). Altman does not offer this statement by way of apology but as an expression of his understanding of the mixed response to the film while being convinced that his construction matched his ideas about the supremacy of jazz as the film's key structure of feeling. The texture of the film is created through the diegetic and non-diegetic use of jazz music. Apart from the opening sequence, the film's narrative travels along the spaces of jazz.

In appearing to revive the music of the past, *Kansas City* might be seen (and heard) as an exercise in nostalgia, driven by a desire to recreate the Kansas City jazz scene of the director's youth –and thus a far cry from the more iconoclastic approach usually associated with Altman. However, Altman's particular brand of jazz revivalism, relying as it does on the distinctive voices of leading contemporary jazz musicians of the 1990s, problematizes the notion that the film simply aims to recreate the music of the past. Altman's iconoclasm is still evident in the complexity of the film's storytelling. At the same time, the film's focus on issues of race and representation undercuts any notion that in drawing

on the talents of a group of younger jazz musicians, the film aims to appeal to its audience simply by featuring musicians who were spearheading a revival in the popularity of jazz at the time the film was made. Rather, *Kansas City* speaks not only to the director's love of jazz, but through its representation of jazz and the jazz musician, takes an uncompromising and critical stance on issues of race and identity. Altman's devotion to the jazz aesthetic in his storytelling combined with the unembeddedness of the performances help to produce conditions of ensemble and otherness, in what could be called an act of « dialogic communalism » (Titlestad, 2003: 113). In the film's coda the evolving nature of jazz is re-affirmed and celebrated by Ron Carter's elder-statesman presence where the film, very fittingly, brings the curtain down with jazz.

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