

6. Results of the Interviews

6.1 The Musicians' Careers

Which individuals are particularly adept at utilizing the TikTok platform to disseminate and engage with jazz-related content? Are they primarily jazz musicians with a classical education who pursued a conventional career trajectory from music school to conservatory? Or can musicians who have taken alternative paths also achieve success with jazz on TikTok? Given that the most successful jazz-related content on TikTok is a highly specific jazz repertoire closely aligned with popular music culture, the following section will also examine the role that genre concepts and the restriction to certain musical genres currently play for the interviewees and have played in their personal and professional development.

6.1.1 Early Musical Phase

All of the interviewees reported having been regularly surrounded by music from an early age. In some cases, they had already taken instrumental lessons at pre-school age, which is why their careers at first glance seem very typical of professional musicians. Some of these musicians were influenced by their parents and focused on classical music training, which entailed instrumental training based on the Western art music canon. Sam Ambers, for example, provides a detailed account of this: "I've played piano since I was five. [...] I've got all the Mozart, all the classical stuff on unlock and that's kind of my background. And I also played the drums since I was a kid as well." Rachel Chiu recalls a musical education that was markedly competitive, encompassing participation in various competitions with a particular emphasis on classical music:

I started when I was five, my parents put me in piano lessons and I had a teacher that was pretty serious about piano. So I was very competitive. I would compete at music festivals. And I did the Royal Conservatory of Music. And I did classical piano the whole time until high school, until I graduated high school. (Rachel Chiu, interview by the author, 18 May 2022)

As Brooklyn Stafford observes, some of her classical training is evident in selected TikTok videos, particularly with regard to the technically demanding playing techniques:

My classical training really helps me just get that dexterity down. I feel as a classical musician, you'll see a lot of classical influences probably in my videos because I started off very classical. I did, like, Suzuki, I've done Rachmaninoff and, like, those big jumps that I do, like, that's a more classical thing [...]. So yeah, my classical influences really helped me get the dexterity to [...] just jump around the piano. (Brooklyn Stafford, interview by the author, 28 June 2022)

For some interviewees, a strong connection to music was the result of the influence of relatives who were professionally engaged in the field. Kellin Hanas, for example, discusses her grandmother, “a choir director and music teacher,” who introduced her to the trumpet. Caity Gyorgy recounts her academically accomplished and multifaceted secondary education, which encompassed a diverse range of artistic disciplines, including music. Despite an initial lack of discernible emphasis on jazz, her musical training ultimately constituted the majority of her academic pursuits:

I went to the Calgary arts academy and so I was constantly doing artsy things in school there. And once I finished that school, I went to high school for grades 10 to 12 and I went to a performing and visual arts program at a public school in Calgary, where I was a part of three choirs. A concert choir, a chamber choir, and a jazz choir. I also took music theory and I did a lot of music there, like, ten and a half hours of rehearsal every week just for choir. Not to mention there was a quite a few hours of theory work as well to do. And lots of concerts to prepare for and so I was really, really involved in music there but it wasn't jazz. (Caity Gyorgy, interview by the author, 19 May 2022)

Nevertheless, a background in formal education is not a necessary condition for success in the context of jazz on TikTok. Erny Nunez notes that he did not

undergo any formal training and instead developed his skills by teaching himself: “Musically, I’ve never been trained. I’ve never had any special type of training. I wish I did. But musically, I guess I sort of adapt to what I hear. I’ve been told I have a great ear. And so I guess the more I listen to things, the more I pick up my stuff.”

6.1.2 Educational Background

The educational pathways of the interviewees following their departure from formal education are diverse. However, it should be noted that a number of the interviewees had already commenced or completed a professional jazz education at a conservatory at the time the interviews were held. Caity Gyorgy recalls her very straightforward and institutionally bound professionalization path, which included studying at a conservatory after a school education that already had a strong musical focus: “I have been in music school, I just finished my master’s degree, I went straight from high school to my bachelor’s degree, straight from my bachelor’s degree to my master’s degree. I’ve been surrounded by musicians for the last decade, essentially.” Stacey Ryan also talks about her time at the “jazz school,” as does Kellin Hanas, who also regularly plays in select orchestras such as the National Youth Orchestra, which gives young musicians the opportunity to perform at Carnegie Hall, among other venues.

Despite receiving intensive musical training during their childhood and adolescence, not all of the interviewees pursued further studies in music. Rather, they regarded music as a hobby that they pursued alongside their academic studies, albeit sometimes with great dedication. Rachel Chiu is a case in point:

I’ve been to school for the past five years at the University of British Columbia and I didn’t study music. I didn’t study jazz. I didn’t study anything like that. I studied French literature as well as family studies. Because I want to become an elementary school teacher. And music has always been something I liked, so it’s always been on the side. (Rachel Chiu, interview)

Stella Cole talks about her time at “Northwestern University outside of Chicago,” where she “was studying theater, double majoring in theater and international relations, minored in German. And I got a certificate in musical theater. That’s everything what I was studying in college.” Sam Ambers dis-

cusses his educational trajectory, which involved a period of exploration that vacillated between musical and academic pursuits. His initial aspiration to pursue a career in music following graduation was initially impeded by the advent of the global pandemic. However, the subsequent virality of one of his TikTok videos proved to be a turning point in his career trajectory:

In the UK from the ages of 16 to 18, you can do a thing called A-levels which prepare you for university. I did those and whilst I was doing those I kind of decided in myself that I wanted to pursue music. So when I was 16 and 17, I used to do loads of kind of jazz singing. I would sing at restaurants and kind of old peoples' homes and wherever, singing, you know, Frank Sinatra, Michael Bublé, all of that. And once I finished A-levels at 18, I was, like: You know what? I want to give music a shot. So I tried for a good six, seven, eight months, but then COVID came around and that kind of disrupted every plan that I had and really put, you know, put things to a halt. So at that point, I was, like, okay, it's probably a bit more safe if I go down an academic route and have that as something that I can fall back on. So I moved to Bristol [...] and my plan was to do economics at Bristol University and I was going to go there. But then the video that I posted on TikTok took off about two months beforehand, and I very, very quickly kind of managed to gain a bit of a following and I was, like, okay, let me give myself one more year on TikTok and we'll go from there. (Sam Ambers, interview by the author, 22 September 2022)

The preceding paragraphs illustrate that all interviewees inherently possess a robust and biographically influenced attitude towards music, if not exclusively towards jazz. However, this does not necessarily imply a desire to pursue music as a profession through formal education. In contrast with the conventional academic perception of jazz, the traditional classical route via a conservatory education is evidently not a prerequisite for remarkable success in digital spaces with jazz-related content.

6.1.3 How Did the Musicians Get into Jazz?

The question of how the interviewees were first drawn to jazz is a significant one. It is common for musicians to discuss the individuals who had a profound impact on their musical development. These individuals may be family members or teachers who provided inspiring music lessons. Erny Nunez, for instance, recounts the profound influence of his father, who introduced him to jazz:

An inspirational person who got me into it was my father. He sadly passed away last year in August. But, you know, as I was growing up that's all he listened to. He taught me just that this type of music was sort of, like, what he called the best music. He always used to say that this is the best music, right? You got to bring it back. (Erny Nunez, interview by the author, 5 August 2022)

Sam Ambers recalls lengthy automobile journeys with his mother en route to their vacation destination in the northern reaches of Scotland. During these expeditions, he was first introduced to the music of Michael Bublé: “My mum loved Michael Bublé and he had just brought out his *Call Me Irresponsible* album. And I remember basically that being on repeat, you know, the entire way up and I'd say that's quite a soft introduction to jazz.” In the case of Sam Ambers, a family member provided a “soft introduction,” whereas for Caity Gory, a romantic love affair was the decisive impetus for a jazz career: “I sort of got into jazz because I started dating a jazz drummer, which is really silly. But I actually really ended up liking the music.” Other interviewees, particularly Rachel Chiu and Kellin Hanas, highlight the impact of their music instructors on their enthusiasm for jazz. Notably, Stella Cole offers an intriguing perspective, suggesting that her transition to jazz singing was largely influenced by her presence on TikTok:

I wouldn't have called myself a jazz singer before the pandemic, actually. I've been singing this music for a really long time, but my focus was more on musical theater until I realized through doing TikToks and singing it more that this was something I really loved to do, just as much as acting and musical theater. So I started doing it. (Stella Cole, interview by the author, 1 August 2022)

This demonstrates that the experiences gained on the platform can significantly impact the future career trajectories of young musicians, including their stylistic preferences.

6.1.4 Musical Idols

In addition to significant figures in their personal and academic lives, the interviewees also identified numerous musical influences that played a pivotal role in their professional development. These include well-established singers

who launched their careers several decades ago, such as Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, and Judy Garland. Notably, Michael Bublé, who did not achieve prominence until the 2000s, is also frequently referenced. As the majority of interviewees were singers, it is unsurprising that singers are almost exclusively cited as idols. Looking at the results of the corpus analysis, however, it is striking that these are mainly musicians who can be assigned to mainstream pop music. In contrast, there is no mention of musicians who are more likely to be considered canonical in jazz-specific, specialized, or niche discourses. With regard to Judy Garland, Stella Cole even suggests that the singer may not be accurately described as a jazz musician:

Judy Garland, she's not really a jazz singer, maybe some people consider her a jazz singer. I don't know. I never have, though. But I've been watching older musicals since I was two or three years old. Like, *Mary Poppins in Sound of Music* and *Meet Me in St. Louis*, *Wizard of Oz*. And then at Christmas time *White Christmas*. That was a lot of my exposure to the standards first, through watching old musicals and, you know, Judy Garland, I just grew up listening to her voice. (Stelle Cole, interview)

It is evident that an introduction to jazz in childhood and adolescence does not necessarily have to be achieved through exposure to jazz musicians who are presumed to be style-defining and pioneering in jazz circles – again, the “jazz icons” (Whyton 2010) mentioned in chapter 5.4 come to mind. The interviewees identified musicians who offer a “soft introduction to jazz,” as Sam Ambers puts it, as being of particular importance. As evidenced by numerous interview passages, the interviewees perceive these artists as being primarily singers of a certain generation who achieved success around the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Caity Gyorgy recalls her initial exposure to such vocalists through a compact disc released by Starbucks: “Starbucks used to make these CDs with compilations, and this one was great. And I sort of got introduced to a lot of different singers on that one, like, Blossom Dearie and Abby Lincoln was on that one and, of course, Ella [Fitzgerald] and Sarah [Vaughan], and Billie Holiday. It was really great. Actually, it was kind of a good opener.” In this context, Sam Ambers identifies Michael Bublé as a particularly relevant example. His examination of Bublé’s music also prompted him to examine the recordings on which Bublé’s adaptations are based in greater detail: “Once you start listening to Michael Bublé, you start listening to the original versions of the songs that he

covers and the alternate versions. And you get to your Frank Sinatras and then your Nat King Coles and your Chet Bakers. And it kind of goes from there.”

6.1.5 Attitude to Musical Genres Other than Jazz

The interviewees demonstrate a broad and inclusive approach to musical taste and practice, engaging with a diverse array of genres beyond conventional forms of jazz. Some of the musicians interviewed underscored the centrality of jazz in their own musical endeavors, while simultaneously affirming the value of other musical forms. Caity Gyorgy offers a perspective on this phenomenon: “I think jazz is really where I found my calling. [...] I listen to lots of different kinds of music but jazz is what I sing.” The majority of the interviewees also post songs from other genres on the platform, although the focus is on jazz. This is exemplified by Erny Nunez, who also performs country songs on TikTok: “I do like country. I like lots of different genres. But I want jazz to be my main type of genre.” Brooklyn Stafford underscores her determination not to confine herself to a single musical genre. She also asserts that she does not necessarily identify as a jazz musician: “I wouldn’t consider myself, like, the jazz musician to go to, but I consider myself just a musician as a whole. I play pop, I play jazz, I play different genres. I play Latin music, right? I consider myself a musician and not just limited to one genre.”

This stylistic openness appears to be automatically reflected in the interviewees’ TikTok profiles. It can be assumed that the diverse range of musical styles to which these musicians have been exposed throughout their lives has influenced their work on the platform. Sam Ambers offers insight into this phenomenon:

It wasn’t just jazz when I was growing up. I mean, it was a lot of Michael Jackson and Stevie Wonder, I guess more recently Bruno Mars. And yeah, I mean, it’s been a whole variety of music. And that’s kind of reflected in the TikTok stuff. You know, it’s quite varied and it’s not just jazz stuff. (Sam Ambers, interview)

Kellin Hanas posits that stylistic openness has become a necessity for jazz musicians, particularly in light of economic considerations. The live music market, which is of paramount importance for professional musicians, is increasingly demanding a diverse stylistic range from musicians:

I've played funk gigs, more pop style stuff. I really am interested in musical theater and Broadway style, and I like to write songs in that style with, you know, lyrics and stuff. [...] Especially nowadays, it's important to be able to play everything. I want to be the most versatile player that I can be because then, you know, you get hired for everything. (Kellin Hanas, interview by the author, 23 June 2022)

Furthermore, Kellin maintains that it is imperative for the advancement and long-term sustainability of jazz to embrace influences beyond the conventional boundaries of the classical jazz canon: "I used to be such a jazz purist because I was, like, if you don't listen to old big band swing from the 40s, you're not real. [...] That stuff's great for what it was for the time and it's classic and we still listen to it. But the music has to move forward."

The interviewees all indicate a willingness to engage with musical forms beyond the domain of jazz. A majority of them express a desire to transcend the boundaries of jazz as a singular musical practice. These individuals represent a generation that did not necessarily grow up with a predisposition towards a single musical genre. Instead, they evince a proclivity towards incorporating diverse influences into their own musical endeavors. This reflects tendencies towards stylistic pluralization, which have been repeatedly described in studies of contemporary jazz discourses for several years (Burkhart 2019; Knauer 2018; Solis 2019) and which have always been a key factor in the development of jazz (DeVeaux 1991). Jazz on TikTok appears to be relatively open in terms of style, and success on the platform is not contingent on the classical training of the musician.

6.2 Starting a Career on TikTok

The progression of each TikToker's career was discussed in detail during the interviews. The following questions were posed: How does a social media career start and develop? What was the impetus to becoming seriously active on the platform? When did the user's success begin and what events was it triggered by? And to what extent can success on TikTok be planned?