

# 1. Introduction

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“Jazz on TikTok? How’s that supposed to work?”

“TikTok, isn’t that that silly platform for teenagers? They’re going to play jazz on it?”

“What? There’s jazz on TikTok?”

“That doesn’t go together at all!”

Astonishment, skepticism, disbelief, or simply bemused giggles. These are the kinds of reactions that I have been encountering in conversations with colleagues, students, and in my personal circles since beginning my in-depth research on the topic of jazz on TikTok in early 2022. Many people apparently do not expect this type of music to play a role on this platform at all. But why is that?

TikTok is a short-form video platform that has existed in its current form since 2018. It is operated by the Chinese technology company ByteDance and emerged from the platform Musical.ly, which was launched in 2014. The term *short-form video* initially referred to the policy of allowing videos of up to fifteen seconds in length to be uploaded to TikTok. While it is now both possible and common practice to upload longer videos, the platform is centered around videos of fifteen to sixty seconds in length. TikTok experienced a rapid ascent to popularity following its initial release, with a notable acceleration during the global pandemic. During the months of the first global lockdowns in 2020, the platform witnessed a surge in both downloads and user numbers, exceeding previous records.

At the outset, lip-syncing videos and dance challenges constituted the predominant content on TikTok. However, the platform soon began to accommodate a more diverse array of content. At present, a variety of content is available on the platform, including videos focused on climate activism and science communication. Even politicians and political parties are utilizing TikTok as a

communication tool. The platform's content is diverse, yet it is still perceived by some as a platform for young people with a focus on silly content.

Reusing sounds is a significant aspect of the TikTok platform. This refers to the use of segments taken from musical compositions, such as part of a melody, a vocal line, or a chorus, in the creation of TikTok videos. Such excerpts may then be utilized by other users as a foundation for new videos, thereby facilitating their dissemination. TikTok is often the subject of criticism precisely because of this mimetic logic, which might conceivably, as the widely accepted conclusion suggests, lead to songs being produced *for* TikTok, so to speak. This implies a compositional or production-aesthetic tailoring along certain functional logics of the platform, with the aim of ensuring that certain song snippets *work better* on TikTok. In other words, they are more likely to enter circulation, thereby increasing the overall recognition of the songs.

The supposed emphasis on frivolous content, lip-syncing, dance challenges, and brief musical excerpts may initially appear to be incompatible with the conventions of jazz. How can improvisations lasting several minutes and intensifying in expression, complex harmonic structures or spontaneous ensemble interactions that emerge in the course of live performances be presented in a short-form video format? These elements undoubtedly play a crucial role within the realm of jazz. But what is actually presented as jazz on TikTok? Are there facets of jazz that can be transferred into a short-form video context with comparative ease? Are there certain jazz styles that might work particularly well in this media context? Isn't it obvious that jazz musicians respond to the technological innovations of their time, and – wishing to benefit from new communication media and the corresponding marketing potential – therefore also become active on new platforms like TikTok? And shouldn't it be the task of jazz research to take a closer look at such developments?

My research project on jazz on TikTok was inspired by my interest in exploring the ways in which jazz can be positioned within broader discourses surrounding technology. Having been academically socialized in popular music and jazz research, I had, among other things, worked for several years on a research project on playback devices in popular music cultures, with a focus on cultural and technical history. In the field of popular music research, the investigation of technologies, technical artifacts of various kinds, and human interactions with such objects is a key focus. This encompasses a range of topics, including playback devices, recording and storage media, musical instruments, effect devices, and the socio-technical constellations at play in recording studios and when working with digital audio workstations (DAWs). In the

field of jazz research, these topics are given considerably less attention, despite the fact that the aforementioned technologies and the manner in which individuals interact with them play a significant role in the context of jazz as well.

At approximately the same time, research on digital platforms pertaining to music piqued my interest. The literature in this field repeatedly addresses the ways in which musicians, producers, and label employees navigate the demands placed upon them by digital platforms, as well as the extent to which the algorithms of these platforms influence the processes involved in the distribution, reception, and production of music. I subsequently began to observe the representation of jazz on various digital platforms, initially mainly on YouTube and Spotify. In doing so, I gained the impression that jazz can be presented on different platforms with very different focuses. On the one hand, this means that very specific facets of jazz achieve particular visibility on certain platforms. On the other hand, jazz can be integrated into media contexts on platforms that did not play a significant role in this musical culture before the major breakthrough of digital platforms from the late 2000s onwards. Such observations can be exemplified by the dissemination of so-called *coffee table jazz* or *chill jazz* via highly popular Spotify playlists (Burkhart 2022). The advent of platforms has also facilitated the dissemination of music videos by jazz musicians on YouTube. Prior to this, such videos were uncommon in the jazz genre. However, they are now regularly produced by jazz musicians and are also used, among other things, to articulate socially critical messages (Burkhart 2025).

Based on these observations, I decided to examine the representation of jazz on at least one more platform at the beginning of 2022. At that time, TikTok was already a highly popular platform, yet I was largely unfamiliar with it. However, given its sizeable user base and the clear differences to platforms like Spotify and YouTube, which are immediately apparent due to TikTok's focus on short-form video content, I believed it would be worthwhile to explore this platform further. After familiarizing myself with TikTok and looking for jazz musicians who are active and popular on the platform, I quickly formed some initial and already quite specific impressions. I came across names like Laufey, Ricky Rosen, Rachel Chiu and Stacey Ryan – the latter describes herself on her TikTok profile as the “queen of jazztok.” I hadn't heard of any of these names before, but the young musicians (all in their twenties) already had a six-figure, sometimes even seven-figure following. In their videos, they performed classic jazz standards such as “It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got that Swing)” and “Fly Me to the Moon.” They often garnered considerable attention, with nu-

merous videos amassing millions of views. My impression after initial observations was that specific facets of jazz also seemed to attract particular attention on TikTok, or perhaps even to be afforded by certain platform logics.

The central inquiry of this research project is to examine how jazz is represented on TikTok and to identify the representation of this musical culture that emerges on this platform. Does the idea of jazz that emerges on TikTok differ from those constructed in other media contexts, such as journalism, the book market, documentaries, or in jazz research? What role does the musicians' engagement with the functional logics of the platform play, especially with its algorithmic system? What happens to the representation of a music culture when it is transferred into a new media economic context in which, at least according to the often astonished reactions that my research project provoked, one would not expect it?

In order to reconstruct the specific circumstances underlying the representation of jazz on TikTok, this study centers the voices of musicians who are particularly successful on TikTok with jazz-related content. These individuals have experience in working with TikTok and offer first-hand accounts of popularization processes on the platform. Empirically retracing the steps involved in their platform-related actions promises valuable insights into the question of which jazz-related content is featured the most prominently on the platform and for what reasons. In particular, the focus is on processes of cultural hierarchization in the context of TikTok. We can assume that in the competition for visibility in digital spaces – especially in the context of a platform like TikTok, where audio-visual content is shared – social categories of difference such as *race* and gender, as well as specific body norms and the cultural power relations associated with them, also play a crucial role.

The following questions are at the center of the study: Which jazz styles are prioritized by popular musicians on TikTok and consequently become particularly visible on the platform, and why? Do specific facets of jazz appear to be more suitable for this platform and its short-form video format than others? What role do the algorithmic moderation logics of the platform play in the considerations of the musicians regarding the popularization of certain content? To what extent can musicians see through these logics and to what extent do they allow themselves to be guided by them? What, then, is the logic of the socio-technical interactions between the platform and the musicians? Do these interaction processes have a homogenizing function, in that certain content is prioritized, both algorithmically and by the musicians, or through the socio-technical interplay of human and non-human actors? And are familiar cultural

hegemonies perpetuated in the process, or do shifts in emphasis with regard to cultural hierarchies occur in the context of the platform?

The study commences with an examination of prior research on the nexus of jazz and online media (chapter 2), with the objective of highlighting the extent to which this domain has been explored in the context of jazz research in recent years and the principal subjects that have been addressed. What is the role of research on digital platforms in this regard? And does this research illuminate any tangible approaches that the present study can build upon?

In order to evaluate the potential impact of digital platforms on culture, it is essential to comprehend their underlying operating principles. Chapter 3 presents an overview of the core modes of operation that are intrinsic to platforms, as well as an examination of core methodologies employed in platform studies. How is the data with which platforms operate collected, processed, and monetized? How do platforms control and curate their content? What is the basis for the action-structuring potential of platforms? And what research approaches can help to better understand the potential influence of platforms on processes of cultural production?

Subsequently, the specifics of the TikTok platform are outlined, particularly with regard to the platform-specific potential to influence processes of cultural production and the representation of cultures in digital spaces (chapter 4). The chapter provides an overview of the platform's central functionalities and of previous findings on the question of which TikTok-specific conventions have already emerged in recent years, i.e., which content has been more likely to be popularized on TikTok so far.

In chapter 5, my research approach is delineated. The chapter outlines the requisite methodological steps for empirically investigating the background of a particular representation of music cultures on TikTok. The progression from a systematizing corpus analysis to a detailed interview study is fundamental. In the context of a corpus-analytical approach, the first step is to identify which content is presented as jazz and achieves the greatest reach on TikTok. Subsequently, the most popular videos in this area are described (e.g., which musical repertoires and musicians exert the greatest influence within this segment?). The interview study focuses on the jazz musicians with the widest reach on TikTok in order to gain insights into their platform-specific production logics. The interviews are combined with the *conversational analysis* approach. In essence, this means that selected TikTok videos of the interviewees were viewed and analyzed together in order to understand which specific video elements are part of the musicians' platform-related strategies.

In chapter 6, the results of the interview study are presented in detail. Among other things, the following topics were discussed in dialog with the musicians: Who are the musicians who are particularly successful with jazz-related content on TikTok? What is their relationship to jazz? What constitutes a successful career on the TikTok platform? What is being done to achieve success and professionalize TikTok-related content creation? How do musicians interact with the platform's algorithms, and to what extent do they develop specific strategies for action regarding TikTok's algorithmic system? From their perspective, does TikTok's platform logic make it more likely that certain jazz-specific repertoires are played rather than others, and that certain musical expressions are more likely to become popular on the platform? Do certain groups of people find it easier to become popular on TikTok than others? Do musicians benefit from their success on TikTok beyond the platform? And to what extent could the TikTok-specific representation of jazz influence developments in the field of jazz beyond the platform?

Chapter 7 then presents an analysis of the extent to which processes of cultural hierarchization are reproduced on TikTok in the field of jazz. Which elements of the previously analyzed processes on TikTok are genuinely novel, and which are not? Does TikTok reflect cultural hierarchies that have been previously documented in comparable forms (not only) in music cultures over an extended period of time? Is it possible that shifts in emphasis may occur in digital spaces and as a result of the influence of non-human actors with regard to the hierarchization of cultural objects and groups of people?

The study concludes with a discussion of the challenges inherent in examining a contemporary and dynamic subject such as TikTok as part of a multi-year research project (chapter 8).