

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?

6.2.1 Boredom and Creative Energy During the Pandemic

The meteoric rise of the TikTok platform in the first quarter of 2020 coincided with the first lockdowns in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. It can be reasonably inferred that this remarkable success was at least partially attributable to the sudden and widespread isolation experienced by the global population at the time. TikTok may have served as a source of diversion during this anomalous period, as well as a fortuitous opportunity for creative endeavors within the domestic sphere (Abidin 2020, 77).

Numerous individuals interviewed for this study did in fact assert that they began using TikTok during the lockdowns, primarily as a means of occupying their time. Caity Gyorgy is one such individual: “I think probably around last year was when I started getting into it. I can’t even remember when I joined. I think it was definitely during the lockdowns and stuff, because I didn’t really have much else to do.” During this period, the social situation for a significant proportion of the younger population underwent a considerable transformation. The financial constraints associated with pursuing their studies led to a shift in students’ ability to afford to remain in their place of education. In some cases, their sole viable option was to return to their parents’ home, where employment prospects were limited. Stella Cole provides a detailed account of her circumstances during the pandemic:

I started posting TikTok videos when I was in college, still at Northwestern University outside of Chicago, and the pandemic happened around my junior year of college. [...] So all of that sort of stopped. I took a quarter off college and I ended my lease in my apartment in Chicago, and I moved home for a year to live with my parents. And they live, like, kind of in the middle of the woods and there’s nothing going on. (Stella Cole, interview)

Although the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic may have contributed to the success of TikTok, the musicians interviewed had already gained experience on various social media platforms in previous years. Rachel Chiu, for example, states that she “had a lot of time to sit at home, and that’s when I was forced to find something to do.” But at the same time, she states: “Since I had social media, maybe when I was 16, I would post singing videos of me, on my Instagram story, but it was just for my friends. And then when COVID started, I started posting on TikTok.” In this respect, the pandemic seems to

have prompted some creators to test the possibilities of a new platform and to transfer content that has been tried and tested on other platforms to TikTok.

6.2.2 Initial Negative Attitude Towards TikTok

However, not all interviewees recognized the potential of the platform from the outset. The majority of interviewees initially expressed skepticism about TikTok, emphasizing that they had to be persuaded by various individuals to become actively engaged on the platform. At its inception, TikTok was perceived as frivolous and juvenile, with little to no long-term viability. Interestingly, this assessment also applies to the musician who has since achieved her greatest success on the platform. Stacey Ryan reflects on her early experiences with TikTok: “I mean, at the beginning, I was one of those people who were, like: I don’t want to get TikTok. I think it’s stupid. It’s just a trend. But then one of my friends convinced me to get it, and that was in November of 2019.” Additionally, Kellin Hanas asserts that she initially had no personal connection to the content disseminated on TikTok and its predecessor platform, Musical.ly. Moreover, she expressed skepticism regarding the platform’s potential for success:

TikTok used to be this app called Musical.ly when I was in, I don’t know, early high school or middle school. And everybody was posting silly stuff, it was a lot of dancing and a lot of lip synching and I was just not into that. And I remember being, like, TikTok is so stupid. I’m never going to download it, it’s never going to take off. (Kellin Hanas, interview)

The content shared on the platform was designed to be lighthearted and youthful, which initially prompted some interviewees to question whether they should present themselves in this media context at all. Caity Gyorgy, for instance, recalls her initial skepticism about TikTok: “I was very reluctant to get on the app because my little brother was using it and I was, like, maybe I’m too old for this or people just gonna think I’m cringy for doing this.” Brooklyn Stafford emphasizes her initial indifference to the platform, saying that at first, she only posted “silly stuff” on TikTok and did not get deeply involved, “because TikTok wasn’t my medium.”

6.2.3 Other Content Creators as a Source of Inspiration

Despite initial skepticism, at least some musicians appear to have developed a concrete plan for their own activities on TikTok relatively quickly. Stella Cole, for example, recalls her excitement when she discovered other content creators on the platform who were succeeding with jazz: “I saw other people on there, having success and I was, like, this is so cool. I saw Stacey Ryan, she was actually one of the first creators that I ever followed, and she had maybe, like, 150,000 followers at the time when I was just starting. And I was, like, this is so cool. She’s singing all these songs I love and people like it.” Consequently, as Stella herself states, she became increasingly driven to emulate the actions of creators like Stacey Ryan. In this case, it seems reasonable to posit that a specific plan was devised and implemented over a relatively short period of time, which subsequently informed her own actions on the platform.

6.2.4 The Role of Record Labels

In some instances, the impetus for launching a TikTok career originated from the musician’s record label. It is probable that a considerable number of individuals engaged in professional music-related activities have identified the potential benefits that TikTok can offer for distributing content, marketing musicians, and, ultimately, achieving commercial success in the future. Caity Gyorgy states that it was her record label that encouraged her to pursue a career on TikTok: “My record label was actually the one, they said: Caity, you need to get on TikTok, you need to start posting TikToks. [...] And because my record label told me to, I did.” However, this is an exception, as the majority of the interviewees were not signed to a label at the outset of their TikTok activity. Rather, they only became involved in such professional networks as a consequence of their initial successes on the platform.

6.2.5 Continuous Work on TikTok

Despite their initial skepticism, the interviewees, and in some cases their labels, appear to have rapidly recognized the potential benefits of maintaining a presence on the platform. Consequently, some of the musicians interviewed dedicated a significant amount of time and effort to developing their TikTok presence, continuously creating content to achieve and sustain a desired level of reach. Stella Cole points out that for a while she “worked hard and posted

every day and made so much content and spent a lot of time on it,” and that her joy at her first successes was all the greater. Sam Ambers asserts that he invested a considerable amount of effort into the platform, particularly during its nascent stages. Concurrently, he acknowledges his initial lack of familiarity with the intricacies of TikTok, which contributed to his initial sense of uncertainty:

I remember at that time it was such a crossroads because it was such a leap of faith because TikTok was so unproven. But it was so strange even from the first video that I posted, ever since that video for a good three or four months, I was posting every single day, and I mean every day. And I remember I was on holiday with my girlfriend at the time and I had, like, no followers and there was no reason for me to do these videos. But I was, like, I just need to do this. It's hard to explain, but I need to do these videos. (Sam Ambers, interview)

The fact that he felt compelled to produce videos for reasons that are difficult to explain or rationalize is related to certain statements made by other interviewees. It would appear that when content creators achieve a degree of success, they feel an urgent need to repeat that success and continue to produce content accordingly. In this context, Brooklyn Stafford describes the strong urge to remain successful with her videos, or to become successful again when her popularity waned:

You can't stop. You can't stop because the biggest thing is consistency. If you want to be successful in life, it's always about consistency, right? Putting it out there, putting your best out there, because the more you put out, the more you're going to receive. And you can't get discouraged if your numbers are low. You try something different the next time, a different approach on the TikTok medium, and then you see what comes back at you. (Brooklyn Stafford, interview)

6.3 Success on TikTok

As evidenced by the preceding paragraphs, the construction of a prosperous TikTok channel necessitates a considerable investment of time and effort. It appears that in order to achieve success on this platform, it is essential to develop tailored strategies for self-presentation and self-positioning, while con-