

know which one will do well." According to Stacey Ryan, it is possible to "to speculate. [...] But at the end of the day, you don't truly know." Stacey has previously attempted to leverage the TikTok algorithm to her benefit, employing a variety of strategies. However, she has yet to identify a consistently effective approach. This experience has led her to a disconcerting realization:

I've tried over these past couple of years to try to post at a specific time or look at when my engagement is up compared to when it's not. And I've tried different hashtags. I've tried no hashtags. I feel like I tried everything. [...] Writing stuff like putting a title in it, not putting a title in it. I've tried writing the lyrics to my original songs on the screen when it's playing. I've tried not doing that, and I feel like I cannot get this clear idea of what works and what doesn't. [...] We take so much time trying to understand this platform and we never will. (Stacey Ryan, interview)

Notwithstanding these almost resigned-sounding statements, the explanations provided thus far indicate that all the musicians interviewed have developed their own repertoire of platform-specific optimization strategies. These strategies have enabled them to achieve success on TikTok, at least in numerous instances. The fundamental challenge is the inability to predict the platform's reaction to specific activities at any given point in time, while still developing and pursuing targeted strategies. As Sam Ambers aptly observed:

I feel like TikTok is this new, exciting food that nobody really knows. Nobody really knows the ingredients. It's like KFCs herbs and spices. Nobody knows the exact combination of the eleven spices. No one knows how important it is to have viewer attention. How important a like or a comment or a favorite is or a hashtag is. But I think cumulatively having an awareness of the components that could make you successful is very important. But kind of the ratio of how important they all are, I'm not too sure. (Sam Ambers, interview)

## 6.6 "The Secret Sauce": Jazz Repertoire on TikTok

The preceding sections have demonstrated that popular content creators interact with the functional logic of the TikTok platform in a multitude of ways. They formulate specific assumptions regarding which types of behavior, under what circumstances can help attract the attention of both the platform's algorithms and its users. It has been demonstrated that, while there is no single, univer-

sally effective strategy for achieving success on TikTok, musicians can develop comparable approaches. It is evident that a relatively homogeneous picture of jazz on the platform emerges when the most successful musicians are considered. They interpret the TikTok platform in a basically similar way. It can thus be concluded that the platform's affordances elicit particular behaviors, that content creators respond to this to some extent, and that a substantial amount of comparable content is produced as a result.

It thus appears evident that the emphasis on a relatively homogeneous jazz repertoire on TikTok, as evidenced by the findings of the corpus analysis, can be attributed to the particular socio-technical dynamics between the platform and the content creators. These relationships were discussed at length with the musicians who were interviewed for this study. The popularity of relatively old jazz standards from the Great American Songbook on TikTok is a phenomenon that warrants further investigation. It is also important to understand why original compositions and virtuoso improvisations play a relatively minor role in the most popular jazz-related content posted on the platform. The experiences of musicians on TikTok suggest that certain repertoires are better suited to a short-form video context than others. This raises the question of whether certain repertoires are prioritized based on the platform's algorithmic moderation. Finally, it is essential to examine the role that the aforementioned ideas about TikTok's algorithms and users' practices play in the selection of repertoire and songs on the platform.

### 6.6.1 Trends on TikTok

A number of interviewees emphasized the importance of aligning the production of their videos with existing trends on TikTok. This entails adapting their content to align with songs or stylistic features that have already gained popularity on the platform. The precise manner in which such trends emerge remains uncertain. However, the interviewees maintain a close observation of TikTok with the objective of identifying trends at an early stage and adjusting their content production in a timely manner. "Generally, with TikTok, you have to be very, very, very responsive to trends," says Sam Ambers. Nevertheless, it is not sufficient to merely release videos of covers of popular or viral songs. As the interviewees indicated, musicians must be able to identify trends and infuse their own distinctive style into songs and videos to differentiate themselves from their peers. Otherwise, they run the risk of getting lost in the sheer volume of content. Brooklyn Stafford explains: "You go find a trend and then

you add to it. [...] You have to catch the trend wave. If something is really popular, here's the secret sauce. If something is really popular and you think you can add something that makes it better: boom! You're set. That's all it is. Follow the trends and see what happens." Rachel Chiu also stresses the significance of discerning and interpreting trending songs in a manner that is distinct from the prevailing trends. She has shared a number of videos on TikTok, showcasing her proficiency in playing the guzheng, a traditional Chinese zither. In addition to the mouth trumpet, Rachel has also become known for playing the guzheng while singing lyrics in Chinese on TikTok. She occasionally performs well-known melodies and offers a reinterpretation of them through the use of the guzheng. To illustrate, she elaborates on her adaptation of the TikTok trend song "I Hate All Men but When He Loves Me" (Chiu 2021c): "This is actually a trend that was going on on TikTok. [...] So I kind of incorporated that but instead of doing that song I did a Chinese song that was very well-known and a lot of people resonated with it and I got 1.4 million plays on it." The selection of repertoire is frequently influenced by prevailing trends or the general popularity of specific songs, even in contexts beyond jazz. Sam Ambers: "Most of the videos that I post are related to either a trending song or a particularly famous song," and Rachel Chiu explains: "And a lot of the songs that I find that I want to do is based on what's trending." Once more, this methodology is predicated on the supposition that adaptations of songs that have already been incorporated into TikTok trends are more likely to be showcased on as many For You pages as possible. Consequently, users may be prompted to engage with the content or dissuaded from swiping due to its popularity. Sam Ambers notes: "If something is already popular, then when somebody sees you do a video that they've already seen was good, then they're more likely to stick around. Hence it will do well. So it all feeds into itself." This further illustrates the interconnection between musicians' perceptions of algorithmic processes and their understanding of user behavior.

It can be posited that specific musical criteria must be met for songs to become trends and circulate on platforms. For instance, Jost, Schmidt, and Neumann-Braun propose that songs that proliferate on YouTube as cover versions must be musically accessible to the widest possible audience. It is evident that this is particularly the case with regard to mainstream songs, which permit a considerable degree of expression without necessitating a high level of virtuosity or theatricality from the outset (Jost, Schmidt, and Neumann-Braun 2014, 347–48). This appears to hold true for TikTok, as the platform logic strongly encourages imitation, particularly in relation to the features duet, use this sound,

and stitch. In this regard, musical compositions that exhibit specific iterative and low-threshold musical characteristics are more prone to dissemination within digital spaces.

Similarly, Stacey Ryan makes assumptions about one of her viral videos, in which she performs the jazz standard “Fly Me to the Moon” (Ryan 2021a). This is a duet video in which Stacey reacts to an existing video. In the original, an individual is observed seated in the driver’s seat of a vehicle while another individual outside strikes the driver’s window with a hammer, seemingly to assess the window’s stability. Due to the regularity of the hammer blows, the video was widely referenced by musicians, who utilized the hammer sounds as the rhythmic foundation for their performances. Stacey recalls: “That video was going viral because everyone was playing songs over it because it had a good bpm. So people could pick any song, not every song, but many songs would work. So I was, like, that’s cool, I feel, like, I could do something fun with that. And then I saw another guy who did ‘Fly Me to the Moon.’” This shows that the actual choice of songs is sometimes based on trends as well as on specific musical features.

It is also evident that people operating within the music industry can influence the process of selecting songs. A number of the individuals interviewed stated that they work with managers, which is a relatively common practice among TikTok content creators who have amassed a considerable following and viewership. Those employed in the music industry are confronted with the growing necessity of examining the data yielded by digital media platforms and adjusting their strategic decisions in accordance with this analysis (Baym et al. 2021; Maasø and Hagen 2020). It is therefore unsurprising that content creators on TikTok frequently receive recommendations with regard to prevailing trends and particular song selections. As Sam Ambers observes:

I know, personally, you know, from a lot of friends, that they’ve really struggled with the fact that they’re being told to post a TikTok every day, and they’re being told to do trends and things that they would never normally do. But because it’s TikTok and because it works on TikTok, they’re being told by their record label or by their management that they have to do it as opposed to doing a video about the new song that they’ve written because people just don’t have the attention span. (Sam Ambers, interview)

The specific assumptions about platform logics and algorithmic imaginaries thus have implications not only for the musicians themselves, but also for music industry actors who are confronted with the challenge of monetizing their

observations and experiences on a given platform. However, none of the interviewees could confirm any such influences on their own TikTok activities.

### 6.6.2 TikTok Affords Certain Musical Repertoires

The assumption among the musicians interviewed for this study is that success cannot be achieved equally with all jazz repertoires. The interviewees indicated that they have to adapt to the rules of the platform to a certain extent and, on occasion, make compromises in their choice of songs. One of the consequences of this is that most of the musicians interviewed do not focus exclusively on jazz on TikTok, but rather demonstrate a stylistic range that encompasses a variety of musical genres. Sam Ambers commented more extensively on this topic during the interviews than any of the other musicians. According to him, an orientation towards so-called mainstream repertoires is a decisive factor for success on TikTok:

Jazz obviously has a place on TikTok, but in order to give myself the best opportunity to develop a bit of an audience on TikTok, I've always thought the key word has been mainstream, and the key word has also been versatility. It's so important to be versatile, to try and to appeal to as many different audiences as possible, to try and kind of expose yourself to as many people as possible. And that is why you'll see that I do videos across entire genres, you know, an entire range of genres because I want to kind of reach as many people as possible. (Sam Ambers, interview)

As Sam also notes, there are numerous niches on TikTok where creators with highly specific content can achieve notable success and attain considerable reach. This is evident when one considers the vast number of users and uploaded videos on the platform. Additionally, jazz performances on TikTok can be regarded as a niche phenomenon, particularly in comparison to the most popular TikTok creators, who have followers in the tens of millions (Kaye, Zeng and Wikström 2022, 95–96). As Sam Ambers observes, creators on TikTok must decide whether to focus on a narrower niche or to pursue a more extensive reach through the selection of a particular repertoire:

In order for something to do well, it has to have some kind of mainstream relevance or popularity. It's as simple as that, you know. Of course, TikTok actually does a really good job of finding niches. So if you're in a particular niche and you're a fan of that particular niche, then, you know, there's a

happy marriage of a creator posting videos about that. And you as a viewer finding those videos. TikTok is really good at being able to recognize what people want. But generally, if you want the bigger views, you have to do more mainstream things. (Sam Ambers, interview)

Adherence to the so-called mainstream may necessitate a degree of compromise in artistic expression. Sam Ambers emphasizes that his TikTok profile is “not necessarily representative of [him] as a musician.” He further asserts that it is crucial to occasionally set one’s personal musical inclinations aside and turn one’s attention toward those repertoires that, based on one’s observations, appear to be the most promising on the platform:

I think TikTok has its ways of streamlining what works, and sometimes you have to follow what works as opposed to what you actually do and kind of what is authentic to you. So there definitely is a bit of compromise. [...] I think in terms of musicality and artistry, [TikTok] really streamlines what people do. (Sam Ambers, interview)

The emphasis on trends and *TikTok-ready* repertoires has, at times, led to the perception that deviating from these norms may entail a certain degree of risk. As Sam notes, there is a possibility of experiencing a substantial decline in reach on the platform as a consequence of such deviation:

The moment you kind of step outside of what is the stream and what is mainstream in terms of content, the moment you do something that’s different, it’s a big risk because, you know, you don’t have the security of a trend, you know. It’s just your own video. So yeah, I think it has limited artistry to an extent. And I think artists in general try to cater for TikTok. (Sam Ambers, interview)

Sam Ambers posits that it is imperative for musicians on TikTok to concentrate on specific mainstream repertoires. The question thus arises as to which repertoire this refers to in the context of jazz. The results of the corpus analysis indicate that the most popular mainstream repertoire in this context is made up of the Great American Songbook and swing era compositions. These include songs such as “Fly Me to the Moon” and “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got that Swing),” which are associated with renowned figures such as Frank Sinatra and Duke Ellington. The popularity of established jazz standards on TikTok can be attributed to the musicians’ perceptions of which types of repertoires will

resonate with users and the reasons behind this resonance. In her argument, Brooklyn Stafford asserts that it is of the utmost importance to provide TikTok users with a sense of familiarity, while simultaneously imbuing the songs with a distinctive personal touch:

The key to getting something successful on TikTok is to get something that a lot of people know and adding a different element to it. And I would say it has less to do with how good you are technically, right. You need to tap into people's emotions. You need to tap into people's familiarity. People look for familiarity, right, in music and pieces and whatever medium that you decide to play. It's all about tapping into that familiarity. And that's the secret sauce. It never failed once. [...] I'd say for jazz musicians trying to get more attention, more notoriety, it really has to come down to – can you put a spin on something that people already know? That's my biggest suggestion. [...] Being a jazz musician on TikTok requires you to keep pushing. And keep doing a different approach to things that people already like. (Brooklyn Stafford, interview)

As with the musicians' remarks on TikTok trends (see above), there is an emphasis on the need for differentiation and to create videos with recognition value. One particularly effective strategy – or, in Brooklyn's words, “the secret sauce” – seems to be to reinterpret relatively old jazz standards that are perceived as having a high degree of recognition among TikTok users in a highly creative manner. As Brooklyn Stafford goes on to explain, this is tantamount to a recipe for success. She exemplifies this with the song “Fly Me to the Moon,” of which she – like nearly every popular jazz musician on TikTok – has uploaded her own highly popular version on TikTok (Stafford 2021a):

“Fly Me to the Moon,” right? That's more of my jazz kind of more centered songs, the “Fly Me to the Moon” piece that I did. And then again, that's also a very familiar piece. Everybody knows “Fly Me to the Moon,” right? And once you add a different element to it, people love that. And I could do the same approach to a different piece. (Brooklyn Stafford, interview)

The other interviewees corroborate Brooklyn's assertion that TikTok users respond favorably to videos on the basis of their familiarity with specific songs. Stella Cole also emphasizes that the selection of her repertoire is significantly shaped by past audience responses. This is precisely why her musical output on TikTok occasionally deviates from what she produces outside of the plat-

form: "In real life, I like singing standards that people don't know as well. But on TikTok a lot of people are interested in hearing songs that they already know." Caity Gyorgy also assumes that user familiarity with specific musical compositions is a pivotal determinant of success on TikTok: "People really like what's familiar, I think. At least that's what I've noticed over time. [...] People like the videos of the songs that they already know."

Stella Cole also hypothesizes that not all jazz repertoire is equally suited for dissemination on TikTok. The mainstream appeal of songs like "Fly Me to the Moon" is a significant factor, and many users associate nostalgic sentiments with such songs, as evidenced by the comments on her videos. It is evident that nostalgia plays a role on a relatively new platform like TikTok, which has been demonstrated to be used primarily by comparatively young individuals (Zeng and Kaye 2022, 80):

Like I said earlier, people really like to hear what they know. Especially, I mean, a lot of people comment on my videos and tell me when I'm on my live streams and stuff that the music I sing brings them a lot of comfort and makes them feel a lot of nostalgia. And so I think that's part of the draw of the old jazz. Like, everybody knows the song "Fly Me to the Moon," whereas there maybe aren't as many people who would know a modern free jazz tune or really understand as much what that's about on TikTok, you know. [...] The jazz right now is not pop music, obviously, but you know, in the thirties and forties, fifties and even in the sixties, I mean, these standards were pop music. (Stella Cole, interview)

Nevertheless, there appear to be various manifestations of nostalgia. As indicated by the interviewees, nostalgic sentiments are not exclusively associated with older songs. They also encompass songs that, for the predominantly younger TikTok users, are linked to memories of their childhood and adolescence. One illustrative example is the animated series *The Fairly OddParents*, which first aired in the United States in the early 2000s. The show's theme song is performed by Brooklyn Stafford in one of her most popular TikTok videos. The video is a mash-up with the song "Friend Like Me," which was released on the soundtrack of the Disney movie *Aladdin* (1992). The caption to the video on TikTok reads, "The mashup you didn't ask for but needed 😊♪♪" (Stafford 2021b). Brooklyn offers an explanation for the video's success, stating:

People really gravitate towards stuff that has a nostalgia factor for them. What I found to be the most popular things that really catch people's attention – sometimes it's not even jazz. But say, for instance, I did, like, a *Fairly OddParents*, that was my most popular video. It was my *Fairly OddParents* plus my – the Latin song remix, "Friend Like Me." And I think one of the reasons why it got so popular is because everybody really knows that childhood *Fairly OddParents* song. Everybody has that nostalgia of that, and once you take something that was so important to them and you do a totally different twist on it, it blows people's minds away, right? (Brooklyn Stafford, interview)

Once again, Brooklyn reiterates the necessity of infusing popular songs with a unique twist. This assertion is further substantiated by her reiteration of the core assumption held by content creators regarding the characteristics of successful videos. As Sam Ambers notes, the act of *ticking boxes* is a fundamental aspect of the interviewees' interpretations of TikTok. According to Brooklyn, there are three key elements at play: the *wow factor*, the degree of familiarity with the songs, and the potential of certain songs to evoke nostalgic feelings in users. "So there's three things, right? You have to have a wow factor. You have to have something that's already known, right? Like, something that somebody can attach to. If they know the piece, if it brings in nostalgia for them, if it has an emotional factor, that's very important."

However, the nostalgic sentiments musicians evoke in their audiences are not solely a reflection of their personal experiences with music. They can also be attributed to specific individuals, many of whom are considerably older than most TikTok users. As illustrated by Stella Cole, a considerable number of her admirers associate the Great American Songbook compositions with their grandparents:

Even if it's the younger people on TikTok who see me and are, like, oh my gosh, my grandparents listen to this music, or my parents always listened to this growing up, or this was their wedding song. You know, they're American standards for a reason. They're standard songs that everybody knows, a lot of people know. And they're just the classics. (Stella Cole, interview)

This type of nostalgia, which primarily relates to individuals with whom the user has a close relationship and not necessarily to the user's own musical or media socialization, is likely to contribute to the popularity of jazz repertoires on TikTok that, at first glance, do not seem to have a strong connection to the lives of most TikTok users. Using "Fly Me to the Moon" as an example, Caity Gy-

orgy speculates that the piece is likely to evoke nostalgic sentiments in many individuals due to its association with memories of loved ones, particularly within the familial context. Caity herself is no exception to this phenomenon:

"Fly Me to the Moon" [...] that one's just so popular. Everybody knows that song. Especially lots of older people here. Anybody who's, like, you know, above the age of, like, 60 knows that song and probably showed it to their kids, because that's the music they grew up with, that kind of stuff. [...] So I think there's sort of a comfort in that, I think at least for me, you know, like, I would listen to certain songs with my grandparents growing up and [...] this music makes me think of my grandpa a lot. Especially Frank Sinatra, my grandpa loved Frank Sinatra and the Rat Pack. I think maybe other people can relate to that as well. (Caity Gyorgy, interview)

Moreover, a number of jazz standards have achieved a certain degree of familiarity among younger audiences as a result of their inclusion in the curricula of educational institutions or private music lessons. Rachel Chiu, for instance, notes that a piece such as "Autumn Leaves," which she performs in one of her popular TikTok videos (Chiu 2022), has become a recognizable part of the musical landscape for many young people "because a lot of kids in high school had to learn, you know, jazz standards. So it's, like, almost me trying to bring that nostalgia back for them. Something that they haven't heard in a long time."

However, Stacey Ryan is quick to point out that the demographic of users who listen to jazz on TikTok is not limited to people under the age of twenty-five. In one of her most popular videos, Stacey Ryan performs "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy," originally popularized by the vocal group The Andrews Sisters in 1941 (Ryan 2020). According to Stacey, individuals outside of the typical teenage and young adult demographic have commented positively on the video. She attributes this primarily to the fact that the video was posted on the For You pages of older users:

I remember noticing that it was a lot of older people were seeing it. And it makes sense because that's a song from an older generation. [...] I remember just getting all these comments and you could just tell it was older people writing them. [...] I found it interesting that that video sought out that demographic because it's a really appropriate demographic, because it was showing it to people who actually heard that song when they were, like, my age or ten years older or 20 years older. So I feel like TikTok really, really did well with that one. (Stacey Ryan, interview)

Additionally, some musicians have expressed reservations about the nostalgic emphasis on traditional jazz standards. This is primarily attributable to the perception among some of the interviewees that there is an unreflective glorification of the past, which they believe may be a factor in the popularity of songs from the Great American Songbook on TikTok. Kellin Hanas argues that these songs do not play a role in the lives of many TikTok users. However, their popularity is concomitant with what she perceives as a problematic romanticization of life in the first half of the twentieth century:

All of a sudden, because it's popular, people are romanticizing the 1940s, the 1930s, the 1950s. It's the same thing of, you know, you'll see these videos on TikTok of these girls being, like, here's my 1940s style, get ready with me and they'll dress up and do their makeup and then all the comments will be these young girls being, like, oh, I wish that I could live in the 40s. No, you don't. You're a woman. You would get beat by your husband and not be able to go to school. That's the reality of it. [...] There's this whole mentality of, oh, I want to live in the past. I want to live in the past. The past was so beautiful and romantic and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. [...] [They are] romanticizing things that just aren't real. And so they get attached to these songs that represent those times, I guess. (Kellin Hanas, interview)

The popularity of a specific jazz repertoire on TikTok is cited by the interviewees as a significant contributing factor to its success. This popularity can be observed as manifesting in certain geographical regions and social milieus. The song "Fly Me to the Moon," which, according to the corpus analysis, is one of the most popular jazz standards on TikTok, was referenced on multiple occasions in the interviews. It is "probably the most popular jazz song that a lot of people know," says Rachel Chiu, and songs from the Great American Songbook are familiar to many people who have no specialized knowledge or academic background in jazz. Rachel is referring to jazz standards like "Autumn Leaves" and "Misty," which she herself associates with singer Ella Fitzgerald and which she believes are very popular among different groups of listeners:

I like the older songs, like, Ella Fitzgerald, like, "Misty" or "Autumn Leaves," like, typical ones. And those are usually the ones that other people have also maybe heard. If they've heard jazz, those are the songs they heard. So if you're not a jazz student, if you heard any jazz, those would be the songs. My goal is to get some people to be, like, oh, I actually know this song, although not many people know it, right? (Rachel Chiu, interview)

In addition to Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra was frequently referenced in the interviews, in part due to the fact that he recorded what is arguably the most well-known interpretation of “Fly Me to the Moon” in 1964. As asserted by Rachel Chiu, it is arguably one of the most celebrated compositions in the history of jazz. When asked whether she believes this phenomenon is exclusive to TikTok, Rachel responds with a qualified affirmative, noting that this particular song and analogous repertoires and musicians, such as Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald, are likely to be perceived as occupying a relatively elevated status, particularly within the North American cultural milieu:

I think it's beyond TikTok, but maybe I could rephrase by saying it's one of the most popular songs in North America. Because, you know, a lot of people I know know this song. If they do know a jazz song, it would be “Fly Me to the Moon.” Name a jazz song, they would say: Frank Sinatra, “Fly Me to the Moon.” Or they know who Frank Sinatra is. One of the biggest jazz artists that is common and that people know. Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald, those are two big ones. But also it's big because during Christmas, Frank Sinatra sings a lot of the songs that we listen to. And so that's why I think people know this song. It's because Christmas is also one big reason why people listen to jazz, which is sadly the truth. And so I think because Frank Sinatra sings a lot of those Christmas songs, you hear his voice a lot. And so people are most likely to listen to him if they really are to listen to jazz. (Rachel Chiu, interview)

The proposition that jazz is synonymous with Christmas music is antithetical to the classification of jazz as art music, a designation that is prevalent within academic discourse. This illustrates the fact that the perceptions of content creators who are successful with jazz on TikTok – and presumably users who watch jazz videos on the platform – can differ significantly from the conventional and enduring value systems of numerous jazz fans, journalists, musicians, and academics. It would appear that the particular notions pertaining to the logic of the TikTok platform are also shaped by a multitude of music-related biographical experiences that the musicians have accumulated beyond the platform. It is noteworthy that Sam Ambers, the sole non-North American among the interviewees, reports that he did not anticipate a significant response when he posted a video of himself singing “Fly Me to the Moon” on TikTok (Ambers 2021b):

“Fly Me to the Moon” is probably – I’m trying to think, it probably is the most popular jazz standard of all time. Potentially, potentially. I’m not sure, that’s

a big claim. But I mean it's one of the top standards, isn't it? But again, you know, whilst I like to listen to Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald, I didn't think that "Fly Me to the Moon" would resonate with the TikTok audience. Therefore, I had to try and add a bit of spice to things. Again, "Feeling Good." Whilst "Feeling Good" is probably a bit more mainstream than "Fly Me to the Moon." Again, it's not completely – it's not a pop song. So it was about adding a different element just to make it a bit more entertaining. (Sam Ambers, interview)

For the British musician Sam Ambers, the success of Michael Bublé's version of "Feeling Good" on TikTok is more evident than that of "Fly Me to the Moon." As he states, he had to make the Sinatra song "more entertaining." However, his interpretation of the Bublé song, as evidenced by his first viral TikTok video, is also shaped by the distinctive comedic stylings of the song itself. This is why, at first glance, there appears to be no notable contrast in his approach to the two aforementioned songs. Given Michael Bublé's considerable commercial success in the British music market, particularly during the 2000s and 2010s, it is plausible that Sam's assertion that Bublé's music is more aligned with pop than that of Sinatra is influenced by his personal experience and background. This illustrates that the success potential of specific musical repertoires among musicians on TikTok is also influenced by factors that are not directly related to the platform's intrinsic characteristics.

The musicians who participated in this study are acutely aware of the fact that the TikTok-specific repertoire predominantly reflects a distinctly North American perspective on jazz. Caity Gyorgy, for instance, makes this observation: "I think these songs are popular in general. 'Fly Me to the Moon,' everybody knows that song, especially – at least in Canada and the U.S., most people know that tune." Similarly, Frank Sinatra is widely recognized in North America and can be, according to Caity, described as an "iconic" figure. Nevertheless, the immense popularity of "Fly Me to the Moon" has also resulted in the song being perceived as "extremely over," as Erny Nunez argues: "I think it's overrated in North America." Caity Gyorgy maintains that the emphasis on musicians like Frank Sinatra and their most celebrated compositions ultimately reflects a certain North American centricity:

I know I'm being very, like, North America centric right now, and I think about all of this stuff because that's all I've known. But a lot of people over North America know those songs very well from either pop culture references or

just, you know, from – it's funny, it's a part of the culture, like, Frank Sinatra is part of the culture here. (Caity Gyorgy, interview)

### 6.6.3 The Influence of Popular (Mass) Media on TikTok

Caity's reference to "pop culture references" indicates the potential influence of other factors on the jazz repertoire on TikTok, as identified by multiple interviewees. These factors include popular (mass) media formats such as movies and TV shows, as well as computer games. It would be misguided to assume that digital platforms are entirely free from the influence of classical mass media. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that the content and formats of such media are sometimes transferred to the platform context and transformed according to certain platform conventions (Jost 2022). In the case of *The Fairly OddParents*, Brooklyn Stafford has argued that the presentation of theme songs from such formats on TikTok constitutes a strategy with a proven track record of success. This is due to the fact that these songs, as Brooklyn argues, evoke feelings of nostalgia in a significant proportion of users (see above). The question of whether TikTok users engage in nostalgia when listening to such songs, or whether their individual associations are more diverse, is irrelevant in light of the undeniable fact that content disseminated by mass media plays a significant role in the popularization of certain songs on the platform. The song "It's Been a Long, Long Time" is a compelling illustration of this phenomenon. The corpus analysis indicates that it is one of the most prevalent jazz compositions on the platform, with nearly all of the jazz musicians in the top one hundred having uploaded one or more renditions. The song achieved a notable degree of popularity among younger demographics following its inclusion in the closing sequence of the 2019 film *Avengers: Endgame*. This cinematic work is based on the superhero comics *The Avengers*, published by the U.S. company Marvel Comics. It is evident from the responses of the interviewees that the popularity of this musical piece on TikTok can be attributed to the popularity of the films, particularly given that they are sometimes able to recall the corresponding film scene. In this context, Caity Gyorgy highlights the popularity of Marvel movies in North America:

[Regarding] "It's Been a Long, Long Time" [...] I have speculations. This one is popular but I think it really got a resurgence because it was at the end of one of the *Avengers* movies, recently. [...] Where [Captain America] goes back in time and he lives out his life with agent Peggy Carter and they grow old

together. [...] The *Avengers* movies are huge. The Marvel movies are crazy big over here. [...] The last scene is him dancing. It's, like, the 1940s or something. At least it looks like that from the outfits that, I think, are just from the time period based on when Captain America is from. This last scene is him and agent Peggy Carter, who's his partner, dancing. And that's the song that plays into the credits. And so that one is, like, a huge earworm I think for people as well, especially if people are a fan of the Marvel *Avengers* movies. So those are very popular songs. (Caity Gyorgy, interview)

This appears to corroborate Kellin Hanas' characterization and critique of the way in which younger individuals display a penchant for referencing and romanticizing the era spanning the 1920s to the 1950s. Not only does the prevalent jazz repertoire on TikTok originate from this period, but on occasion, the mass media formats that inform the repertoire on the platform unmistakably evoke this historical epoch. According to Erny Nunez, this music now has a "very, very young fan base." He was astonished to discover that the song "It's Been a Long, Long Time" had unexpectedly gained immense popularity among the younger demographic as a result of the *Avengers* film: "After that I started seeing a lot of young kids around my school sing it when the movie came out and I was, like, I'm seeing other teenagers at my age singing this type of song. But I do think having big types of people, like, listen to this music and play is very impactful on this young generation."

As Erny Nunez observes, video games can also serve as a source of inspiration and influence for the jazz repertoire on TikTok. In one of his most popular videos, Erny performs the 1941 version of the song "I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire" by the vocal group The Ink Spots (Nunez 2021). The song is featured on the soundtrack of multiple versions of the video game series *Fallout*, which served as a source of inspiration for Erny. "I played the video games, actually. I played the video games ten years ago. I was, like, this game has a lot of really old music that I should probably try. And so I think that was the first song that came into my mind that I should sing on TikTok." Kellin Hanas also emphasizes the impact of such media on the jazz repertoire on the platform and presents an analysis of another video game with a comparable soundtrack: "That's a really big thing. There's this video game called *BioShock*, and the whole soundtrack of that game is really, really old tunes. A lot of big band stuff and a lot of old vocal stuff."

Furthermore, it appears that a considerable number of young individuals are first exposed to specific jazz compositions via their use in Netflix series

soundtracks, as Stella Cole has postulated. After uploading her rendition of “Fly Me to the Moon” (no longer available on TikTok), she was taken aback by the multitude of comments that referenced the South Korean Netflix series *Squid Game*, which features the aforementioned song on its soundtrack:

When I posted that video of “Fly Me to the Moon” and it got, you know, maybe 300,000 views or something, so many people were commenting, like, oh, this is that song from *Squid Game*. And I was, like, what? I had never seen *Squid Game*. And I was, like, what are people talking about? This is not from a show that was made two years ago. This is one of the most famous songs in America. (Stella Cole, interview)

#### 6.6.4 Jazz and Humor on TikTok

TikTok is occasionally dismissed as a platform for juvenile content that may be challenging for older users to understand. While such critiques often have an undertone that smacks of a blanket criticism of contemporary culture, it is undeniable that humor is a pivotal aspect of the platform. The short-form video format seems to lend itself well to presenting short skits, and musical content in particular is often used to support punchlines or the narrative of a video as a whole (Abidin and Kaye 2021, 58). It is therefore unsurprising that jazz is sometimes associated with humorous content on the platform. As the corpus analysis demonstrates, such content is a common, if not dominant, facet of jazz on TikTok. Furthermore, several of the interviewees have also produced videos with humorous connotations or even a focus on humor, most notably Kellin Hanas, Caity Gyorgy, and Sam Ambers.

The integration of humor and jazz was met with a favorable response in the interviews, with particular commendations directed towards Kellin Hanas's videos. As Caity Gyorgy argues, Kellin succeeds in combining jazz with humor in a way that does not denigrate the music. Rather, it offers an opportunity to introduce the technically proficient aspects of jazz to those who might otherwise be unable to access this genre: “Kellin does an incredible job of blending comedy with music. [...] I think that there has to be a way to make the virtuosity accessible. And I think, like, with Kellin combining comedy with the virtuosity is a really great way for people to be, like, oh, that's hilarious.” Kellin Hanas's own sentiments align with this viewpoint. At the inception of her TikTok career, she did not upload any content related to music, instead focusing on comedy. However, over time, she conceived of a novel approach that inte-

grated both genres. According to Kellin, it is important to note, however, that not all content related to jazz would be recognized on the platform, as most of the audience does not have a strong connection to this genre of music. That is to say, the content would have to be tailored accordingly, according to Kellin:

The general public doesn't really understand this music. And so I was, like, okay, what if I took my trumpet and did something just stupid? Just something so random that wouldn't make any sense? [...] Some people will think that I have a book I write my ideas down in and – no. Literally every time I make a TikTok, I go: I want to make a TikTok, what would be stupid? And then I get the idea within 0.5 seconds and I'm, like, okay, I'm going to do this because this seems stupid and dumb. (Kellin Hanas, interview)

While Kellin discusses the perceived frivolity of the punchlines in her videos, most TikTok users appear to be drawn to the distinctive blend of comedic content and Kellin's trumpet performances. This is also evident in the commentary accompanying Kellin's videos. "People were commenting on the playing part. And I was, like, oh, I can do something with the playing now and also not compromise me wanting to be, like, goofy. I can do both at the same time." In her discourse, Kellin describes how she discovered a strategy or a distinctive selling point that can be repeatedly implemented. She stresses the necessity of maintaining the prominence of the musical component despite the incorporation of humor. The integration of jazz and humor on TikTok represents a challenging balancing act for musicians. Kellin asserts that she is careful not to convey the impression that she is disparaging jazz on her TikTok profile. At the same time, the nature of TikTok is inherently conducive to the presentation of humorous content, particularly for members of Generation Z (those born between 1997 and 2012), who have become accustomed to such forms of expression. Kellin elaborates:

It's a difficult thing to balance because [...] I mean, this music is serious. [...] None of my videos are saying: Oh, this music is dumb and silly. [...] I'm not compromising the music when I do it. I'm making sure that the music is at a high level to be enjoyed at. To give respect to the music part. Obviously, if I put on a jazz song and made it stupid, that would be disrespectful. [...] But, you know, that's something that I've been worried about. [...] I care about it, obviously, but [...] there's a ton of creators on that app that do everything based off of humor. [...] I'm part of Gen Z. I think that we are just the silliest. Our humor is so weird and we are – our generation really relies on humor, and

so combining, you know, something that I'm good at and that I enjoy doing is kind of a little unique. You know, there's a lot of jazz musicians, but most people in the world aren't a jazz musician, let alone a female jazz musician. Combining kind of the shock factor of that plus something that relates to the younger audience that's on this app – because they're just looking to laugh, like, we're all looking to laugh at something just ridiculous together because that's what our generation thrives off of. So, it's just – it's like a hard balance. [...] I think I just got really lucky that people liked it because it could have easily gone the opposite way of, like, this is annoying. But I think that I did it in a way so that it's paying respect to the music and combining something that the younger generation likes. (Kellin Hanas, interview)

Sam Ambers asserts that jazz videos with a humorous connotation can also be appreciated by jazz musicians. He cites one of his most popular videos, a nine-second clip captioned “an everyday occurrence” (Ambers 2022a), in which he is seen with another singer in front of a doorway, as an example. The video incorporates a text layer that provides a description of the depicted action: “POV: You walk past 2 jazz musicians having an argument.” The action is confined to the two vocalists engaged in a verbal altercation, employing scat singing as a means of insulting or competing with one another. The camerawork employed is intended to create the impression that the situation has been captured spontaneously and unobtrusively, within the context of everyday life. Sam Ambers states that the video was created spontaneously, in just a few minutes to spare during a meeting with two other TikTok content creators. The video rapidly gained considerable online attention, even beyond the TikTok platform, according to Sam:

The thing is, that video got reposted by a lot of jazz memes pages on Instagram. And the funniest thing is, when I was at the Jazz Conservatoire last week, people didn't know me from the Samsung videos. They knew me from that video, which is a funny thing. They were, like, oh my God, he's the guy from the jazz video. And that was quite funny. (Sam Ambers, interview)

As exemplified by the jazz meme websites referenced by Sam, the conjunction of jazz and humor in digital spaces is not an anomalous phenomenon and it does at times attain a considerable degree of popularity. The observation that the majority of Sam's videos, as he himself attests, are not widely known among jazz students indicates that his content reaches an audience of listeners with an affinity for this music who are not professionals in the field of jazz. It can

be reasonably inferred that TikTok is reaching a distinct subset of the jazz audience that is not necessarily engaged with more traditional media channels.

### 6.6.5 Virtuosity

In the case of Kellin Hanas's videos, as previously stated, multiple interviewees highlighted the distinctive combination of comedic elements with her relatively advanced technical proficiency on the trumpet. Her trumpet playing has on occasion been described as virtuoso, which is undoubtedly a contributing factor to her success. However, the results of the corpus analysis indicate that musical virtuosity is not a significant factor in the field of popularity peaks of jazz on TikTok. Nevertheless, virtuosity is indubitably a pivotal element of the aesthetic value system of numerous jazz musicians and aficionados, particularly with respect to the improvised solos that are of paramount importance in jazz. The interviews addressed the concept of virtuosity and the notable absence of virtuosic elements in the videos posted by the most popular jazz musicians on TikTok. There is a general consensus that it is difficult to convey virtuosity in a short-form video. This is exemplified by Kellin Hanas, who has demonstrated the necessity of presenting virtuosity in a manner that is accessible to a broad audience. Caity Gyorgy has postulated that the logic of the platform itself encourages musicians to refrain from displaying virtuosic abilities:

I think [...] virtuosity is typically demonstrated in a longer setting. [...] I think it's very easy for somebody to sing an incredibly high note, you know, once and record it and post it. But to be able to do it non-stop for an extended duration of time and just prove that you have worked on this and prove that you've developed your instrument, you've developed your skills and your understanding of theory and harmony enough to, you know, automatically, you know, do a whole thing. [...] There are some people that are just fantastic musicians and, like, you know, like, they're virtuosic, and maybe they just don't show their virtuosity. (Caity Gyorgy, interview)

Furthermore, musical virtuosity or complexity can act as a deterrent for a significant proportion of users. It is therefore essential to provide content that is relatable for the largest possible number of users. As Sam Ambers argues, this implies that even videos that are perceived as not being produced to a high standard can be extremely successful: "Ironically, the lower production or the

lower quality videos tend to do better because I think on TikTok people want re-latability, you know. I don't think they necessarily want virtuosic playing that, you know, doesn't seem attainable or realistic."

Conversely, Caity Gyorgy's videos, which prioritize showcasing her technical abilities, have also garnered admiration from numerous TikTok users. This is particularly evident in several videos in which she scats at high speed, primarily singing instrumental jazz solos that she has transcribed beforehand. In reference to the previously discussed video captioned "Can you tell which song I'm soloing on? Bonus points if you can count how many times I breathed!" (Gyorgy 2021a), Caity recalls users' reactions and her own amazement at the video's popularity:

I was, like, well, I don't have a TikTok for today. So I guess I'll post this one. And it blew up. [...] There were so many people being, like, I have no idea what you're doing, but I know it's impressive. And so I reach this audience that was, like, not jazz audience at all, but they were very impressed by it. Which is kind of interesting to me and – yeah, I'm not really sure what to think about this one because I was just sort of, like, blown away that people actually liked it, because it was just – I thought it was extremely niche content, but apparently not. (Caity Gyorgy, interview)

### 6.6.6 Original Compositions

The corpus analysis revealed that original compositions do not occupy a prominent position within the context of jazz on TikTok. The interpretation of jazz standards is a common practice among jazz musicians, which may explain why original compositions play a less crucial role in this field than in many other popular music cultures. Nevertheless, creativity, particularly in the context of improvisation, represents a pivotal aesthetic criterion in the domain of jazz. Additionally, the act of composing original pieces represents a pervasive area of engagement for numerous jazz musicians. Of the musicians interviewed, only two – Stacey Ryan and Caity Gyorgy – regularly perform their own compositions in their videos on TikTok. Caity Gyorgy acknowledges that she did not initially anticipate that her own compositions would achieve success on the platform. However, she experienced a profound sense of elation upon observing this outcome: "I started posting my original songs and then those were the ones that have done the best. And that was just sort of, like, very incredibly

encouraging for me because I thought, you know, like, people want to hear my original music."

The musicians' reluctance to upload original compositions on TikTok is occasionally motivated by strategic considerations. Brooklyn Stafford, for instance, notes that she has been composing her own music for an extended period but has not yet shared it on TikTok due to her desire to expand her audience and to reach "enough people." Kellin Hanas does not believe that TikTok is an optimal venue for showcasing her original compositions:

It's just not the place, you know? I do compose. I have compositions that I've played and I just don't think TikTok is the place to put that because it just wouldn't reach an audience because the audience is just not there. On my Instagram, maybe, you know, on my professional Instagram specifically for my music that people are following to see that stuff. But [on] TikTok, half of the people are there [...] just because of the other stuff that I do, other than trumpet. So I don't think anybody would be interested in seeing a three minute, four minute long video of an original that I wrote because that's just not what they're there for, you know, they're there to see some crazy, weird trumpet thing and then something else unexpected happens, you know? (Kellin Hanas, interview)

### 6.6.7 Jazz on TikTok vs. Jazz Beyond the Platform

The sections of the interviews that address questions of virtuosity and original compositions indicate that the affordances of TikTok's platform logic not only encourage musicians to prioritize a specific repertoire, as evidenced by the popularity of Great American Songbook songs on the platform, but that – based on their experience on the platform – musicians also refrain from presenting certain facets of their musical work on TikTok. In this manner, the affordances of the platform and the musicians' algorithmic imaginaries not only impact the selection of which musical repertoires are performed, but also promote the exclusion of certain styles, thereby preventing them from being visible on the platform.

Some interviewees note that the jazz music observed on TikTok may differ from traditional representations of the genre in other contexts. They attribute this discrepancy to the distinctive logic of the TikTok platform, which necessitates that musicians capture users' attention immediately. Brooklyn Stafford argues: "Jazz music in general on TikTok and social media is so much different

than what's popular, I would say, in the real-world setting, and what catches people's attentions." Stella Cole suggests that the conjunction of TikTok and jazz is a tenuous one, particularly in a live setting. She argues that jazz is predicated on the immediacy of interaction between musicians, encompassing a mode of situational and spontaneous musical creation within a collective and that the situation on TikTok is, in fact, the opposite, which constitutes a significant challenge for her as a musician:

It sometimes is difficult because music and especially jazz music is supposed to be this very, like, in the moment thing. [...] Everybody's playing exactly what they're feeling and, like, improvising accordingly. And it's supposed to be a very, like, of the moment inspiration. And it's interesting when you try to put an art form like that onto a social media app [...] that assumes that people have very short attention spans and that prioritizes things that are going to be, like, a quick and sort of instant source of pleasure. So that's definitely an interesting thing to navigate. (Stella Cole, interview)

She sometimes considers the music she creates on TikTok to be a distinct form of musical expression that is largely unrelated to her live performances:

A jazz tune, you know, it's going to be at least, like, four minutes long once the band has all taken a solo. That's such an important part of it. And having that when I'm performing in real life and then trying to go back to TikTok and film something where I'm just sort of, like, smiling and singing 30 seconds of a song – it's definitely different, it feels like a different art form. (Stella Cole, interview)

Stella states that the platform logic of TikTok exerts a pivotal influence on which facets of jazz gain popularity on the platform and on her own self-perception as a musician: "In the end of the day, a computer is what's deciding who's successful on TikTok and who isn't. And that changes the art, and it changes how it feels to be an artist."

It should be noted, however, that the computer itself does not determine success or failure on TikTok. Rather, socially prevalent stereotypes play an important role in the socio-technical negotiation of visibility on TikTok, especially in relation to the construction of beauty and regarding certain body norms.

## 6.7 Gender Stereotypes, Body Standards and Beauty Norms

The findings of the corpus analysis indicate that the platform logics of TikTok and the socio-technical interactions between the platform and its users and content creators exert a significant influence on the visibility of jazz repertoires on the platform. Moreover, they also shape the potential for success of certain (groups of) musicians on TikTok. As has already been demonstrated, this phenomenon is particularly prevalent among relatively young, female, *white* individuals between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five who conform to specific conventional beauty standards. These ideals pertain, on the one hand, to the physical appearance of the musicians and, on the other hand, to how they present themselves on TikTok. Upon first observation, it would seem that female jazz musicians in particular attach significant value to their appearance, encompassing elements such as makeup, hairstyles, and attire. While such processes are not exclusive to TikTok but are a ubiquitous feature throughout the entertainment industry (and beyond), the interviews demonstrate that a distinct *beauty action* (Degele 2006) is particularly evident on TikTok. The algorithmic imaginaries of the musicians are of significant consequence in this regard, at times exerting a decisive influence on their actions with regard to how they portray themselves on TikTok.

In the course of the interviews, all the musicians emphasized that, from their perspective, certain normative ideals of beauty play an important role on TikTok. In particular, they noted that conforming to a certain physical ideal is sometimes described as one of the basic requirements for success on the platform. These assumptions are typically derived from prolonged observations of the platform's logic. In certain instances, musicians have specific ideas about the best way to present themselves on TikTok. These ideas then become guiding principles, influencing the image of jazz that emerges on the platform to a similar degree as ideas about promising musical repertoires and musical features. Caity Gyorgy provides a summary of the relevance of certain beauty ideals based on her own experience:

If I don't wear makeup, my videos don't do well. If my hair is, like, up in a bun, it doesn't do as well. [...] In a lot of my videos, you know, I've got, like, the full makeup on. Like, sometimes, if I'm making a TikTok, I will go and I put my fake eyelashes on. I glue them on, and just so that I can do the TikTok and that it will do well. [...] They do better when you look better. [...] The ones that aren't doing as well are the ones where I'm not really wearing makeup.