Exploring Genre and its Connection to Race and Gender Through the Music of Nina Simone, Alice Coltrane, Joni Mitchell, and Jeanne Lee

by

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Abstract

Much of today’s music is evolving past genre. This can be seen in long-winded descriptions of artists with multiple genre descriptions such as folk/pop/jazz/punk and with the multi-genre and genre-less music becoming more commonplace. Labels and music services place artists into genres in an effort to make music more marketable. Sometimes this categorization stems from musical characteristics, and sometimes it stems from other characteristics, like the artist’s gender or race. This paper delves into genre by exploring and musically analyzing the work of a number of female jazz artists. After analyzing four songs, and interviewing one artist who works outside of genre, I argue that genre is most useful for the marketing, and sometimes related to an artist’s race and/or gender.
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Introduction

The average listener today hears the word jazz, and thinks of the genre of music with a laid-back beat, a singer or trumpet player, and expressive chords. Images of 1920s dance parties might come to the aforementioned listener’s mind, or else visions of old time crooners like Sinatra and the rat pack.

To think of “jazz” as something more than a genre or style of music is uncommon amongst those consuming pop culture today. “Jazz” as race music, as African-American music, is not the first connection that an average Caucasian person would make who does not have much general musical knowledge. Yet, jazz is part of the American musical canon we know today because of black culture that came to America, mostly as a result of slavery. For the context of this paper, it is not necessary to go into an in-depth exploration of how “jazz” as a genre came to be. It is important, however, to understand that jazz evolved from many places and people, and was initially music that African slaves sang and played with each other, often in a call and response format. It developed and changed from its inception, going through five main genres or eras of “jazz” (swing/big band era, bop, cool, hard bop, free jazz/avant garde, fusion/jazz rock).1

Additionally, though this paper uses the term “jazz” in most of its analysis, the jazz I am referring to would best be described as “creative music.” “Creative music” is a newer term in the world of music and academia; many feel that it does a more accurate job of defining the evolving genre that is “jazz.” Lloyd Peterson described this reasoning well in his book on this topic writing:

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1 Sharp, Snyder, and Hischke. Jazz Style Periods. PDF. N/A: Kendall/Hunt.
To me, it refers to those engaged in the search for a personal language. Creative musicians search for an expression of their own realities on the planet and choose music as the medium. Jazz, as an American music, has given body to the idea that each musician can speak or his or her self, that freedom resides in the degree to which we allow each other to be free, that each musician must have the right, the responsibility, to pursue his or her own voice. Creative music as I understand it drinks from that same well, and perhaps is a more apt name for much of the music discussed here.\(^2\)

The importance of engaging with the historical background of creative music deals partially with the past and current impact that creative music has on our society. In particular, when it comes to advances in racial equality, creative music (jazz) has aided African Americans. For one thing, creative music was one of the first instances in American society where African Americans and whites were able to interact as equals. Though initially, creative music was music of the African Americans, it gained popularity with whites in the country too. By the 1930s, being a jazz musician was based on ability. Thus, black musicians were able to obtain gigs based on their musical skill. Granted, they still faced discrimination in the music scene, but musical skill played a large factor in deciding who got the gig, instead of skin color. Some even considered African American musicians to have a special ability to play creative music that whites could not access or have, as a result of not having “lived the blues.”\(^3\)


\(^{3}\) Gerard, Charles D. Jazz in Black Und White: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Jazz Community. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001, 84. This topic, of whether creative music of “jazz” is music of African Americans, and whites cannot play it as well, is something that has been debated by many academics and the like in various books and articles. This debate will not take the forefront in this thesis.
In the 1940s, a new style of creative music grew—bebop, which African Americans were specifically acknowledged as creating.\(^4\) With this came a new sense of pride for creative music in the African American community, and thus many changes regarding social conventions about creative music’s production and dissemination. African American musicians desired to be perceived as artists, not entertainers, and as such, general societal perception of them did begin to change.\(^5\) By demanding to have their work taken more seriously within the music world, African Americans were also asking to be taken more seriously, and on equal footing as white Americans. Creative music played a definitive role in the social changes that were occurring, and continue to do so to this day.

To further our understanding of the impact that creative music had on the political, social and racial climate, it is also important to examine the “jazz collectives” that began forming around this time. Many of these collectives that were started by black musicians, were often inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, and aimed to gain respect for themselves as artists and within the art world. One such group was the Jazz and People’s movement of the early 1970s, which was a protest group whose aim was to open up television to jazz musicians. The group had some success, as their leader Rahsaan Roland Kirk led them to create disruptions during television tapings, which interrupted programs people were watching.\(^6\) Jazz was much more than entertainment in America. It was not just something African Americans could listen and relate to, or that white people could listen to and perhaps sympathize with; it was a way to rebel, to gain respect and equality. Jazz also shaped American

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\(^4\) Ibid., 80.
\(^5\) Ibid., 80.
\(^6\) Ibid., 95.
culture in the new archetype it birthed. It was through the artistic underground in African-American culture in the 1940s and 1950s that the idea of the hipster “as a ‘white Negro,’ whose mode of behavior came from African Americans, came to be.”

Given that background, this paper will explicitly explore the creative music of female jazz artists. Gender equality in the world of music has never been realized. Despite all the leaps and bounds women have made in the workplace and through political movements like #MeToo, gender inequity remains great throughout the music industry. In a study conducted by Dr. Stacey L. Smith at the University of Southern California published in 2018, she analyzed the top 600 songs (as defined by Billboard’s year-end top 100 chart) from 2012 to 2017; and discovered that out of these 1,239 performing artists, only 22.4% were women. Furthermore, the percentage of women behind the scenes in the music industry was even bleaker, with only 12.3% women out of the 2,767 songwriters credited. The number of female producers most responsible for the sound of pop music was just barely at 2%. Although this study was centered on popular music, not creative music, we can presume the ideas carry over.

Additionally, this paper will mostly explore the work of female vocalists, in an attempt to understand the effect that sexism regarding female singers has had on

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7 Ibid., 98.
9 Ibid.
10 Alice Coltrane is the exception to the rule, yet this examination will look at her chanting work, which is vocal music, despite the fact that she did not identify as a vocalist nor was she known as one in the business.
creative music and how that has changed the social and political climate in the music scene and in America as a whole.

This idea of sexualizing the singer in a band is not a new one, and appears in much academic work. Professor of American Studies at the University of Kansas, Sherrie Tucker, wrote about this phenomenon within girl-bands in the 1940s saying:

“In the gender division of jazz and swing labor, the normal configuration is for men to skillfully operate instruments and for women to perform privatized popular versions of femininity with their voices and bodies.”11

The body is an instrument, and Tucker brings up the fact that often when that body is a woman’s, it is either hyper-sexualized or challenged because of its lack of femininity—something that unfortunately is still rampant in the music scene today, both within bands and by audience members. Tucker also expands on this idea, saying that:

“Girl musicians often inherited the girl singers’ stereotype—that they were unskilled sex objects. But the women instrumentalists were also seen as freaks in ways that girl singers were not, especially girl musicians who played instruments thought of as masculine: drums, trumpets, saxophones, etc.”12

The most striking part about this statement for the purposes of my explorations in this paper is the mentality that female singers are “unskilled sex objects.” Why is singing something that comes without “skill”? Why is it attached to the feminine? Although these questions are not directly addressed in my work, they provide an extra layer of reasoning as to why I chose to only analyze the work of female vocalists.

12 Ibid.
For the purposes of this paper, I will pull some definitions from composer and University of Pennsylvania Professor Guthrie Ramsey. It will be helpful to think of music not as an “artifact of ethnic identity but as an important part of the materiality of ethnicity.” Furthermore, we shall consider ethnicity as a complex construction that includes our “class status, our age, gender, sense of location and place, our daily activities, our rituals, rites of passage, and so on.”

What we create as artists is born from what we know and whom we have been shaped into. We are shaped into our individual selves based on the circumstances that craft the world in which we grow up in and our place within it. Ethnic identity (as defined earlier), political scenarios that shape how we are treated in society as a result of our ethnic identity, and the social norms that are upheld and that we find ourselves at the mercy of, all help create certain experiences which shape an artist’s experience. More simply put, art has many meanings outside of its standard archetypes.

Take music, for example. To say that music has meaning is not a revelation. Music has meaning outside of the composition of the piece or song. The artist, the social and political climate that the artist lived in when the piece was written and performed, where it was performed, who viewed it, what people thought of it then and what people think now, who listens to it the most—all of these things contribute to the complex implications of music.

This paper is an exploration of all of the aforementioned factors that breathe meaning into the music of female jazz musicians and vocalists through both a musicological and music theory-based lens. To start off, we will look at classic artists

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who thrived during the 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s—Nina Simone and Alice Coltrane. Both women and their music were involved in their own ways with the tumultuous racial politics and the civil rights movement. I will analyze Simone’s live performance of “Feelings” at the Montreux Jazz Festival in 1976, and I will analyze a song Coltrane composed and performed from one of her albums titled “Om Shanti.” The second chapter will focus on Joni Mitchell and Jeanne Lee, analyzing “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat” and “In These Last Days” respectively. It serves as a tangential exploration from the more classic era of women in jazz, looking at two artists who are not usually thought of as jazz. Through the analysis in the first two chapters, I will explore the genre of all four songs and artists. Each of these musicians is associated with a certain genre despite this, and my analysis of both the performance techniques they use and the compositional techniques they use in their music showcases how in creating music outside genre, they are able to simultaneously speak on a personal everyday level and on a broad socio-political level. The last chapter explores the idea of genre further, and features an interview I conducted with musician and composer Fay Victor. Together the two of us discuss her work as a genre-less composer and the possible connection between genre, race, and gender.

These findings will represent the power and change that female vocalists and musicians have wielded on American society, politics, and culture in the past, present, and future, and will shed light on the correlation between genre, gender, and race.
Chapter 1: Analyzing Classic Jazz Songs Through Nina Simone and Alice Coltrane

In order to best understand how Nina Simone was an artist making music outside of the constraints of genre, I will deconstruct and evaluate her performance of “Feelings,” live at the Montreux Jazz Festival in 1976. The deconstruction of the aural part of this performance will deal with rhythm, improvisation, tone and intonation, the written score or lack thereof, shared references, and differences in listening/understanding of structure. I will evaluate then this performance, looking at the context of the performance, the time period, and the artist’s motives and influences at this time. Together, these insights will come together to create an analysis of the artist and this performance that provide insight into a broader conversation about genre.

Rhythm

Though there is not a steady percussive beat clearly driving Simone’s performance, there are many rhythmic devices that occur in “Feelings.” Simone plays the piano and sings on this piece, but the rhythmic differences between the two roles sound as though two different people are playing and singing.

When listening to much of the pianist’s rhythm on this song, it appears to have a classical feel—the rhythmic figures are not sung and sound like they are in a duple meter. The piano alternates between simple blocked chords held for different durations (sometimes full measures or more, other times keeping the beat) and solo sections in which fast duple rhythms (eights, sixteenths, the like) are utilized.
Through all of this, the piano’s rhythm remains straight, which is associated with classical music but not jazz.

There is also a drummer lightly accompanying Simone during her performance. The drums maintain a steady pulse and groove with Nina’s piano. The subtle drum part emphasizes the already steady beat that the piano is keeping, and adds a slight color to its rhythmic atmosphere.

Simone’s vocals differ from this rhythmically. Particularly at the beginning of her rendition of “Feelings,” she takes a slight pause, waiting for each chord to play and listening to it before singing. This gives off the rhythmic sense that she is improving every line, and is reminiscent of the manner in which many jazz singers improvise over the chords of standards. This technique continues throughout the words that she sings. Simone also speaks over the music. The rhythm of her spoken words is interesting. Often, she places special emphasis on certain words, but there is a part towards the beginning of her performance during which she says, “as a robot gets herself together, and we do it, we get to the middle, where we have forgotten our feelings of love, you will help me, huh?” to the audience. She speaks each of these syllables in a rhythmically separated manner—it’s a robotic and mechanical rhythm, reminiscent of a metronome. There, the rhythmic cadence that she adds to her spoken word improvisation adds a layer of meaning and understanding to it, really placing Simone in the role of a robot putting “herself together.” This technique of using rhythm as a tool to aid spoken word resembles a technique used in rap today, and also has elements of beat poetry in it.

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Another interesting aspect of the rhythmic devices that Simone employs during her performance is the manner in which the rhythmic styling of her voice and piano playing interact. By having the rhythmic texture of two differing styles working together, Simone positions this piece and her work outside of Morris Albert’s original version of “Feelings,” and furthermore, places her own work outside of any specific genre.

*Improvisation*

There is so much to the improvisation that Simone is doing during this performance, that I believe that, despite Albert having written the original version, Simone’s improvisation and what she does with the piece during her performance suggest that she is to an extent composing her own version. Throughout her version of “Feelings,” Simone improvises on the vocal melody, over the vocal melody, with spoken word, and with piano solos.

Melodically, Simone improvises the phrasing of the vocal melody and over the original vocal melody harmonically, in a traditional jazz vocal manner. The changes that she makes feel natural and add to what she is saying to give the words a spoken feeling, rather than simply re-iterating the melody that Albert sings in his version. Below are both lyrics from Albert’s version beside Simone’s version, so as to see the contrast between the two.

**Albert:**
Feelings, nothing more than feelings,
Trying to forget my feelings of love.
Teardrops rolling down on my face,
Trying to forget my feelings of love.
Feelings, for all my life I'll feel it.
I wish I've never met you, girl;
you'll never come again.

**Simone:**
Feelings, nothing more than feelings
Feelings, nothing more than feelings
Feelings of love
You know what?
As a robot gets herself together and we do it,
and we get to the middle, where we have
Forgotten our feelings of love, you will help
Feelings, wo-o-o feelings,
Wo-o-o, feel you again in my arms.
Feelings, feelings like I’ve never lost you
And feelings like I’ve never have you
Again in my heart.
Feelings, for all my life I’ll feel it.
I wish I’ve never met you, girl;
you’ll never come again.
Feelings, feelings like I’ve never lost you
And feelings like I’ve never have you again in my life.
Feelings, wo-o-o feelings,
Wo-o-o, feelings again in my arms.
Feelings
Feelings, wo-o-o feelings,
Wo-o-o, feelings again in my arms.
Feelings...

me, huh?
Teardrops, falling down my face
Trying to forget all my feelings of love
Goddamn, you know, what a shame to have
To write a song like that
Feelings, I’m not making mad fun of the man, I do not believe the conditions that produced a situation that demanded a song like that.
Well come on, clap dammit.
For all my life I feel it, I wish I’d never seen it,
It can’t possibly come again
Feelings, woh woh woh feelings,
woh woh woh, feelings, again in my heart, okay.
Feelings, feelings that I never met you
Feelings that I never even saw you, again in my heart
(piano interlude improvisation on the chorus)
to forget my… feelings of love.
Feelings, I swear on all my life I’ve feelings, oh lord,
I wish I’d never lived this long, I hope this feeling
never comes again, feelings, feelings like I never lost you
And feelings like I never really had you, here in my arms
Come on, let’s hit the climax, feelings, you know this song come on, ooohhhh, feelings, oooh oh oh, feelings, again in my arms
Feelings oh lord feelings, I’m not gonna let you go so soon and so embarrassingly soft,
So let’s please do the chorus
Feelings, woah woah woah feelings, woah woah woah,
Feelings, again in my arms come on
Feelings (everyone joining) oh oh oh feelings, feed me feed me feed me
Again in
(Piano playing, improvisation on melody kind of like a cadenza)
Here in my heart, you’ll always stay here in my heart, no matter what the words may say you will stay here in my heart, no matter what the day, you will stay here in my heart, no matter what they say, no matter what they compose, or do, no matter what the drugs may do or songs may do or people may do our machines will do to you

Based on this comparison of lyrics, we see that Simone appears to transform time, to stretch it beyond a traditional linear time scheme; and that this stretching adds an extra feeling of tension. These feelings are hard work, and Simone wants you to hear the intense effort of this. The original “Feelings” that Albert sang and recorded was approximately three minutes and forty-two seconds,\textsuperscript{17} while Simone’s improvised version at the Montreux Jazz Festival is slightly over eleven minutes.\textsuperscript{18} But Simone doesn’t just stretch time for the sake of lengthening this song. She is lengthening harmonic phrases, adding new musical improvised portions, adding new lyrics (both spoken and sung).

In repeating phrases multiple times with different phrasing and sometimes slightly different melodies, Simone adds a heavy quality to the “feelings.” It’s not really “nothing more than feelings,” even though that is what she sings. Rather, her improvised vocals suggest that these feelings are more than a romance gone sour.

After singing a line or so of the original chorus, Simone often improvises a few sentences—she talks to the audience. She makes “feelings” a conversation. She says, “Goddamn, you know, what a shame to have to write a song like that.” With that phrase, Simone is referencing both the song Albert originally sang that she is covering, and the song about racism that she is singing to the audience. The song she is singing is describing the feelings that come from being a black person, especially a

\textsuperscript{16} Jumpropetow. Dailymotion.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
black woman, in the world. She is trying to communicate not only the complex aspects of this, but those of writing about it, to the audience.

Her improvised words, “As a robot gets herself together and we do it, and we get to the middle, where we have forgotten our feelings of love, you will help me, huh?” also insinuates that there are many layers to the song. Where is the “middle”? The middle as part of the building process? The middle as in the middle ground with racial politics? Is the robot referring to her and all black people? It seems to insinuate that. If we compare these improvised lyrics to Albert’s version of the song, it would appear that the robot reference and the idea of putting oneself back together deal with emotional heartbreak—the end of a relationship, and the act of trying to heal from that. Simone is speaking of a relationship in these lyrics, but the middle that she refers to is not just the middle of a recovery but the “middle” that is happening in America and in the world during the moment of civil rights that she is living through. Just because some legal rights are being granted to Black people does not mean that equity or emotional healing has been achieved. The lyric about forgetting feelings of love is particularly telling, as she seems to be asking her fellow people of color to remember how to love and show compassion for themselves throughout this process of getting oneself back together.

Another poignant portion of Simone’s improvised spoken words come through in the lyric, “I’m not making mad fun of the man, I do not believe the conditions that produced a situation that demanded a song like that. Well come on, clap dammit.”19 Again, Simone stretches out and complicates Albert’s ideas about being heartsick. She is in disbelief over heartbreak, sure, just like Albert was, but this

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19 Jumpropetow. Dailymotion.
is not a heartbreak just between two people but rather between a whole race of people and a country. Her improvisation of this song is due to the “conditions” in the country right now; the conditions that could produce such a heartbreak for so many generations of people.

At the very end of her performance, Simone sings, “here in my heart, you’ll always stay here in my heart, no matter what the words may say, you will stay here in my heart, no matter what the day, you will stay here in my heart, no matter what they say, no matter what they compose, or do, no matter what the drugs may do or songs may do or people may do our machines will do to you, I will always have my feelings, nothing can destroy that cause I know that that is all that is all, that that is the base, for you.”

It is a drawn-out way of emphasizing that black people’s feelings about the racism and injustice they are facing are never going to go away. This improvisation both emphasizes the permanent impact that racism has left and will continue to leave on people, and the fact that some laws being passed to create change cannot undo the feelings of the past. Simone’s lyrics that say “no matter what they say, not matter what they compose, or do, no matter what the drugs may do or songs may do or people may do,” suggest that she wants her audience to understand the pain, not just as a feeling that fills the heart, but as something that affects humanity and people’s present and future actions.

Some of Simone’s improvisations are subtler, as she changes the words only slightly from Albert’s. For example, one of the lines of lyrics from Albert’s song says, “you’ll never come again,” and Simone instead sings, “it can’t

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20 Ibid.
possibly come again.” The distinction between the “you” and “it” make it seem that Simone is speaking to something that could be a person, but also could be an object, a movement, a force. Then the use of “can’t possibly” instead of “never” suggests that the feelings Simone are talking about are, again, not referring to love lost from a single person, but instead to more overarching themes, such as racism, that have contributed to the feelings that she is singing about.

Simone makes a slight change to Albert’s lyrics again later in the song. Albert sings, “Feelings, for all my life I'll feel it, I wish I've never met you, girl,” while Simone sings, “for all my life I feel it, I wish I’d never seen it.” As before, Simone’s lyrical changes add an air of the impersonal. Changing “I wish I’ve never met you, girl,” to “I wish I’d never seen it,” makes the feelings that she is singing about clearly descriptive of a feeling that is not just between two individuals. Although she does not say that “it” is racism, by using “it” and discussing the act of seeing something she did not want to, it is implied that the “it” that Simone wishes she had not seen is racism. Given how Simone discusses her understanding of the civil rights movement and protests and how she became a part of it (see above), it makes sense for these lyrics to suggest that.

Another small but notable difference between Albert’s lyrics and Simone’s is when Albert sings, “Feelings, feelings like I've never lost you and feelings like I've never have you, again in my heart,” which Simone changes to, “feelings, feelings

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22 Jumpropetow. Dailymotion.
24 Jumpropetow. Dailymotion.
that I never met you, feelings that I never even saw you, again in my heart.”

Although this time, Simone does not take out the “you” and insinuate that her lyrics are not about an individual, in changing the sentiments of the words from losing and having someone, to never having met or seen someone, she positions these feelings as belonging to someone who has never had something, rather than someone who is missing something they once had. Thus, while Albert is singing of a love he lost, Simone is singing about respect, rights, and love that she and other people of color have never experienced.

*The Written Score, or Lack Thereof*

Most popular music and a fair amount of jazz have employed the use of lead sheets. On lead sheets, melody and chords are provided from which the performer/performers can read and improvise off of as they wish. The original “Feelings,” which Albert first wrote, does not have sheet music in the more classical sense but rather lead sheets. Simone likely improvised loosely off of this. Likely, her rendition of “Feelings” changed depending on where and when she performed it. No music or lyrics are available of what she sang at the Montreux Jazz Festival; only the video recording of the performance remains as a score.

The lack of a written copy of what Simone improvised adds an element of the oral tradition to it. Granted, now the only way to hear this piece is to experience it via the video recording. The lack of a score for Simone’s cover and the lead sheets that are available for Albert’s version help make Simone’s rendition even more of her own song, despite it being a cover. Additionally, the fact that there is not written

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26 Jumpropetow. Dailymotion.
transcription of Simone’s rendition of this song places this piece and performance outside of the canon of more classical music and even much jazz music; it is not replicable.

Shared References

There are many shared references in Simone’s performance of “Feelings.” First and foremost, it is a cover of Albert’s original song “Feelings.” Granted, as discussed in prior analysis, Simone’s version is quite different from Albert’s not only musically, but also lyrically. Those two aspects together create a song about something similar, but also divergent from the original topic.

Albert’s song, “Feelings,” would be considered a popular song. Simone’s cover of it, however, would not fall into the genre of pop, although it is difficult to place into another genre completely. The fact that Simone’s “Feelings” is a rendition of an improvised version of Albert’s original song is a reference to the jazz tradition, certainly not classical music, in which music is written out.

However, this is not to say that “Feelings” is without any references to classical music. There are several elements of classical music in Simone’s cover. Most notably, there are several piano solos that Simone improvises in the later verses and choruses that she sings that sound like classical codas. She plays the melody in one hand and chords in the other, and uses rhythmic devices such as trills, creating something that could sound like it could come from the Romantic era. It serves as a clear reference to Simone’s musical education; one in which she studied classical music quite intensely.
Differences in listening/understanding of structure

The compositional structure of “Feelings” is almost strophic, based on the model of Albert’s original version, which is purely strophic. Although “Feelings” does follow the general strophic formula of verse, chorus, verse, chorus, etc., Simone’s melodic and lyrical improvisations break from this structure. She adds a piano solo that feels almost classical after certain verses, extends other choruses melodically and lyrically past previous ones, effectively changing them, and uses spoken word over her piano playing in a manner that makes many verses different from the last.

Furthermore, in terms of the compositional structure, much of Simone’s vocalizations sound jazz-like, while much of the piano accompaniment and solos that she plays have a more classical structure. Vocally, Simone seems to follow every chord, improvising as she goes, like a jazz vocalist would. As for the piano, the solos in particular sound very classical, especially in the manner in which the chords and melody are played and layered over each other.

Context of this performance

The Montreux Jazz Festival has occurred for two weeks every summer in Switzerland, by Lake Geneva, since its conception in 1967 by Claude Nobs, René Langel, and Géo Voumard.\(^{27}\) Today, it is considered one of the most important events in Europe, and despite its large size prioritizes “intimacy” in order to foster

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improvisation. Its website boasts the many historical greats who have performed there, Simone among them.

When Simone performed “Feelings” at the festival in 1976, it was relatively newly formed. Her improvisational performance thus helped to establish the history and reputation that the festival has today. The manner in which she was so direct with the audience, speaking to them in as part of her performance and improvising off of them, is a style that reflected in the values and traditions that the festival still has today.

Simone often discussed the intensity of her live performances and what they did to her emotionally, saying, “I went out from the mid-sixties onwards determined to get every audience to enjoy my concerts the way I wanted them to, and if they resisted at first I had all the tricks to bewitch them with.”28 This certainly shows during her performance of “Feelings,” in which her command over the audience is almost like that of a preacher addressing her congregation.

Time period

The Montreux Festival was founded the year before the Fair Housing Act of 1968 came into existence. This act is often considered the last great legal achievement of the Civil Rights Era. The early 1970s, the time during which the festival was coming into being, marked the rise of the Black Power movement.29 However, in 1976, the year Simone performed “Feelings,” tension and anger were growing, as

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Black people remained disillusioned with the inequality that they still faced, particularly in America. Her rendition of the song seems to suggest that new legal victories cannot erase the communal grief that people of color in America experience. Her performance also seems to indicate that in 1976, despite some legal action being taken to end racism, America has by no means reached the end of the fight for equality.

*Artist’s motives and influences at time*

On a personal level, Simone’s artistry and personal life was going and had gone through much transition during the decade and a half prior to this live performance. In the sixties, Simone had not only come to terms with but also fully embraced the role of being a protest singer—she played at marches, benefits, and worked alongside many figures in the Civil Rights Movement. She described that period of her life saying, “in the movement I lived at twice the speed I ever had and music and politics took up my whole life. I didn’t have personal ambitions any more—I wanted what millions of other Americans wanted.”

That being said, Simone expresses that some of the energy she had for fighting for Civil Rights changed in the seventies. After playing a segregated concert in 1970, Simone felt so discouraged by the state of the political climate in the U.S. that she internally chose to withdraw from politics. To add to this change, soon after, Simone split up with her long-time husband, father to her child, and manager Andy Stroud. She also lost her father in the early seventies. Simone also moved to Liberia.

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31 Ibid., 103.
for a few years, and remained a citizen of Liberia during her performance at this festival.

There are many indications that this was an especially emotional set for Simone. She talked back and forth a lot a good deal with the audience, and at one point said:

“I haven’t seen you for many years since—1968. I have decided I will do no more jazz festivals. That decision has not changed. I will sing for you—or we will do and share with you a few things. After that I will graduate to a higher class I hope and hope you will come with me. We’ll start from the beginning.”

It is therefore clear that the rendition she performed of “Feelings,” was a special one; marking a personal turning point for Simone herself.

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Like Simone, Alice Coltrane was also an artist making music outside of the constraints of genre. She went through several different phases and periods of musical style and inspiration. I will analyze her song “Om Shanti,” through rhythm, instrumentation, purpose/intention, shared references, and differences in listening/understanding of structure. I will then historically place the song and its release by looking at the context of this song, the time period, and the artist’s motives and influences at this time. All of this, will further our understanding of why it is difficult to place Coltrane into a musical genre.

_Rhythm_

Rhythmically speaking, “Om Shanti” keeps a very steady beat. The song opens with Alice Coltrane’s voice stretching the chant “om jai rama,” just a hair before falling into the steady chant beat that the rest of the vocals provide throughout the nearly seven-minute song. Vocally, Coltrane uses lyrics that are repetitive mantras traditionally used in Indian chants and meditations. This—combined with the repetitive nature of the lyrics—which alternate between “Om Jai Rama, Jai Krishna Hari Om,” “Om Shanti Om, Shanti Om Shanti Om,” “Anantam Para Brahma Om,” “Mritya Hari Om,” and “Om Jai Krishna, Jai Rama Hari Om,”—create a steady lyrical rhythm, that, although sung, feel like a chant.

The percussion used contributes to this style with a steady beat that the vocal line creates. A percussion instrument that sounds like a tambourine steadily emphasizes the strong beats with a louder hit, in addition to the weaker beats with a softer hit. These beats are in no manner swung; they are very straight. Thus, in this manner, the percussion also helps create an atmospheric quality for the song.

The rhythmic combination of the steady chanting vocals that Coltrane sings, along with the echoes of those chants by back up singers, and the percussions’ straight beat, suggest that this is a religious piece, even a meditation—something to soothe the mind, body, and soul. Rhythmically, this song borrows elements from rhythms of Indian music. This makes sense given how influential her friendship was with Swami Satchidananda, founder of the Integral Yoga movement.35

34 Ibid.
Instrumentation

By analyzing the instrumentation in “Om Shanti,” we are exposing ourselves to the style of music that Coltrane began composing later in life—after her friendship with Swami Satchidananda—and that which she is best remembered for. “Om Shanti” uses organ, percussion, upright bass, Alice Coltrane’s own voice (which she rarely did), and back-up singers.

Alice Coltrane was also known for bringing the organ into much of the music she created. The organ is more traditionally associated with church music and classical music. Organs are not common in most musical spaces, but rather for the most part can be found in chapels and churches—places of religious worship. Coltrane herself was a prodigy who grew up playing piano and organ for her Baptist church.\(^\text{36}\) As such, it makes sense that she would be inspired to utilize the organ in her compositions.

Coltrane is using her own voice in “Om Shanti,” which was not common for her, as she was not thought of as a vocalist. Her voice alternates between a blues-like style of singing and more of a chanting style. Sometimes the words that she is saying seem to stretch themselves into something else, and at other times it comes across as though she is praying and meditating on the lines that she sings as she sings them.

In addition to her own voice, back-up singers accompany Coltrane. The back-up singers both echo her and sing with the chants with her, reminiscent of a call and response style, which has deep roots in African-American musical traditions—including blues, jazz, gospel, R&B, soul, and hip-hop. This style comes from Sub-

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 18.
Saharan African cultures, and was developed in America through slave work songs, field hollers, spirituals, and blues.\(^{37}\)

Alice’s use of bass and percussion add an interesting flavor to “Om Shanti’s” instrumentation. Without the addition of those two rhythm section instruments, the instrumentation would place the song much more into the type of music that Coltrane was likely playing in church. The bass and the percussion, moreover, are influences from her days playing the jazz scene.

The blending of these instruments also creates a blending of genres. It makes “Om Shanti” an aural experience that cannot be placed in a church, in a jazz club, or even within the traditional meditations in from Indian music that Swami Satchidananda exposed her to.

*Purpose/Intention*

In order to best understand Alice Coltrane’s intentions in the writing and composing of “Om Shanti,” we must first examine the meaning behind the lyrics. As mentioned earlier in this song analysis, the lyrics that Coltrane sings in “Om Shanti” are repetitive Indian meditation chants. It also important to note that the chants that Coltrane is using as lyrics in this song are used in practice to meditate—to remove unnecessary thoughts and focus on a single emotion or state of being.

The title of this song, “Om Shanti,” which is used throughout the piece, is used as a greeting and parting in meditation, yoga practice, and Hinduism. “Om” has no precise meaning, but rather is thought to be the sound of the universe. “Shanti”

means peace, calm, or bliss in Sanskrit. Coltrane uses a variety of other chants that call on similar ideas and Indian deities.

In using these chants as lyrics, even though Coltrane adds a melody underneath the chant, making it more musical than it might sound in a more traditional meditation, she endows “Om Shanti” with a healing message. This is especially interesting to consider in dialogue with Coltrane’s involvement with the racial politics playing out at that time. Coltrane uses South Asian musical elements to bring to mind the pain that Black people felt as a result of centuries of oppression. It seems instead that of using her music as a direct means of protest, she chose instead to focus on moving her people forward with less pain.

Shared References

“Om Shanti” is a unique blend of references to the more traditional African American jazz tradition of improvised music and the meditation and chants used in Hinduism and other Indian religions. Coltrane’s decision to utilize aspects of Indian music in her own music blends, and in a sense intertwines, these two cultures. Many academics and critics find the unusual way in which Coltrane achieved this particularly interesting. Cultural historian Melani McAlister, in particular, has written a great deal about the politics of African Americans and their interest in Non-Western religions. Berkman mentions McAlister’s interests in her writing on Alice Coltrane, saying, “McAlister sees such spiritual explorations among black Americans as a way of forming “an alternative sacred geography” that provides “alternatives to official

policy, framing transnational affiliations and claims to racial or religious authority that challenged the cultural logic of American power.”

She sees these spiritual pursuits as part of a larger project that encompasses “a re-visioning of history and geography in order to construct a moral and spiritual basis for contemporary affiliations and identities.”

Coltrane’s references to musical ideas of Indian music are more than a nod to her friendship with Swami Satchidananda. The nods to both music from Black culture that Coltrane grew up participating in (gospel and jazz) and Indian meditation music and chants that she was introduced to and immersed in by Swami are very purposeful. McAlister would see this as a way of forming “an alternative sacred geography.” Coltrane’s musical genre references certainly suggest that “Om Shanti” was part of the cannon of artistic spirituality within the Black Power movement.

**Differences in listening/understanding of structure**

Many traditional Western songs, whether it be classical Lieder song cycles, standard pop tunes, or even jazz standards, have lyrics that evoke a relatable feeling—such as being heartbroken or missing someone, or tell a story, like wanting someone that you can’t have or deciding to get over something or someone. Often such stories and feelings are combined. “Om Shanti,” along with much of Alice Coltrane’s other songs, disrupts that aural Western canon. The lyrics in “Om Shanti” do not tell a story, nor do they necessarily invoke a common human emotion. Instead, as discussed earlier in the section on purpose/intention, the lyrics are meditation

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40 Ibid.
chants, that are used to clear the mind of unnecessary thought and focus in on one thing. “Om Shanti” is a song about honing concentration and freeing the mind; it is not about telling a story or evoking a specific, universal human feeling.

However, the structure of chords under the melody of “Om Shanti,” are unusual in comparison to what one would expect for a meditation chant song. The chords are more varied than the stereotypical pop song, that has only four different chords, but not extensively so. The song uses the G minor chord, the C minor chord, the E flat major chord, the F minor chord, the B flat major chord, the F major chord, the C major seven chord, the F seven chord, the G minor seven chord, the C major chord, and ends on the C minor seven chord.\(^4\) It would be appropriate to compare the chord progressions utilized as similar to that of a jazz standard.

Furthermore, the vocal line is not totally monotone, or even mostly on one note, which chants are more often than not associated with. The opening vocal melody that Coltrane sings slides into a note, and then moves into an interval that is a third below, before coming back to its previous note. There even appears to be a melodic chorus occurring during the lyrics “om shanti om” that the song is named after. Here again, Coltrane combines and melds different structural expectations of Western song and Indian chant, creating a song that, though reminiscent of many different genres, does not truly fit into one.

\textit{Context of this song}

“Om Shanti” was just re-released in 2017 on a compilation album titled, “World Spirituality Classics 1: The Ecstatic Music of Alice Coltrane.” The collection is Luaka Bop’s and pulls songs from Coltrane’s recordings that were initially written only for her ashram between the years 1982 and 1995.42

However, “Om Shanti” was originally released on Coltrane’s record titled “Divine Songs” in 1987.43 When it was released in 1987, this record was not commercially released. It was meant as devotional music purely for the consumption and to be shared by the community at Sai Anantam Ashram.44 “Om Shanti” was composed and recorded during a period in Coltrane’s life during which she had turned away from the mainstream public as an audience for her music.

This context lends a more devotional aesthetic and purpose to both the song and Coltrane as an artist. This was not music that Coltrane intended to be played at a club, or heard on the radio. Although Coltrane’s music was deeply spiritual, and as discussed in earlier analysis, falls into the Black Power movement canon, one must assume that Coltrane did not intend for the masses of people in general, or of Black people even, to hear her music and experience its healing power in the face of racism and destruction. Her music in her later period of life, and the song “Om Shanti” were meant to be heard and felt only by followers of her ashram.

That being said, Coltrane’s music today, including “om shanti,” is being received by a wider and increasingly diverse audience. Particularly after the release of

43 Ibid.
“Om Shanti” on the Luaka Bop’s collection, Alice Coltrane, and that song, have been receiving newfound praise from critics. Pitchfork described “Om Shanti” and Coltrane’s music as evidence of how “spirituality can gently move mountains.” With this praise seems to come a societal re-examination of how spirituality fits into, and became a part of, the movement against racial inequality.

Time Period

In terms of racial politics in the U.S., 1987—when Coltrane released “Om Shanti”—is a year that falls in the wake of the Bakke verdict, Jesse Jackson’s attempts to mobilize African Americans politically, and Oprah Winfrey launching her show. In some ways, America was moving forward; yet in others it was moving backwards. With the Bakke verdict, the Supreme Court justified Bakke’s claim of anti-discrimination in the college process, but also held that Affirmative Action was something that institutions of higher learning could use to ensure enough diversity in their student bodies. It helped put Affirmative Action as a concept on the radar of the American people. With Jackson’s work there was a push to get more African Americans voting, and with Oprah’s show Americans bore witness to change and redefining of Black characters on American television. However, all of this positive energy combatting racism does not signify its end, as five years after Coltrane releases the album that this song is on, the Los Angeles Race Riots of 1992 broke out.

47 Ibid.
Both in the contextualization portion earlier and in the shared references portion, I touched upon how Coltrane would have perceived her influences regarding the writing and performing of “Om Shanti,” given the social and political happenings during the period. As mentioned earlier, neither this song nor was her music was directly inspired by these social and political happenings.

Despite this, Coltrane and her music are associated with fitting into the Black Power canon because of the kind of music that she was creating, when she was creating it, and particularly with whom. In particular, “Om Shanti” exemplifies this because Coltrane clearly blended African American influences with those of Asian spirituality. In Berkman’s book about Coltrane and her music she writes that, “Black Power…was also concerned with defining and asserting blackness as a cultural ideal. This, in turn, required a new spiritual foundation. Members of the Black Arts movement— the cultural arm of the Black Power movement— wrote ardently about the need for a black spiritual culture whose politics were consistent with the revolutionary agenda of Black Nationalism.”

Sometimes a historical era influences art, and sometimes art made in that era influences it. In Coltrane’s case, it falls more into the latter.

*Artist’s Motives and Influences at Time*

When Alice Coltrane wrote “Om Shanti,” she was in what many academics consider the third period of her musical and artistic career. She had already met her husband John Coltrane, the two had gotten married, and he had died. She had also

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already befriended Swami Satchidananda, and become greatly influenced by Indian culture musically and spiritually.

Although this was prior to the release of “Om Shanti,” it is important to note that, although Alice and her husband John Coltrane did not aim to create the spiritual music discussed in the previous sections, they did have a belief system driving how they created their art. John had three tenets that he believed in, which Alice shared—

“First, music making is based on personal spiritual expression, and the artist should be fully committed to expressing an authentic self as a musician. Second, music making should be universal, erasing aesthetic boundaries and proscriptions about style. And third, such musical universality requires branching out: it is inclusive, pluralistic, and multicultural.”

Knowing that Alice also believed in these tenets for creating music, and knowing that the music she was writing was during the time of the Black Power movement, we can make the claim that although this piece does not have clear sociopolitical intentions that the artist imbued it with upon creation, it still carries the weight of some of these ideas.

“Divine Songs,” the album that “Om Shanti” was released on in 1987, falls in the midst of a number of records that Coltrane chose not to release on a commercial label, including the likes of “Turiya Sings” and “Infinite Chants.” In only releasing this music to her Ashram, Coltrane’s intent behind “Om Shanti” and the music she was creating during that period becomes much more spiritual and intimate. It was not for the masses, nor was it meant to be consumed or listened to by just anyone. “Om

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50 Masters, Marc, and Marc Masters. “Listen to "Om Shanti" by Alice Coltrane.”
Shanti” is therefore divergent from mainstream musical marketing, as is Alice Coltrane herself as a musician.
Chapter 2: Analyzing Tangential Jazz Songs Through Joni Mitchell and Jeanne Lee

This chapter will focus on analyzing two female artists who are considered more of a tangent to the cannon of jazz vocalists than Simone and Coltrane. I will begin by analyzing the version of “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat” that Joni Mitchell recorded and wrote lyrics to. I will evaluate the song through its rhythm, the instrumentation/formation of the band, the purpose/intent, and the written score or lack thereof. Then I will further evaluate Mitchell’s artistic intentions with this song and how they were perceived through the public reception, the time period, and her motives and influences at the time. My analysis will prove that Mitchell was more than the label of a folk/pop singer she is often given.

The recording of “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat” on Joni Mitchell’s album “Mingus” features herself on vocals and guitar, Jaco Pastorius on bass, Wayne Shorter on the soprano saxophone, Herbie Hancock on the electric piano, and Peter Erskine on the drums.

Rhythm

Despite technically being a jazz composition, with music written by well-known jazz musician and composer, Joni Mitchell’s “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat” lacks a very steady rhythmic groove. Much of this is due to the manner in which the drums and bass play in the song. The song beings with a few seconds of solo drum, quickly followed by the bass entering. Although the drums are keeping beat to a certain extent, the bass drums are not used, which gives the song the feeling of being less
grounded. Although the bass often plays on the first beat of phrases, it is playing a much more melodic line. The bass also does not consistently play on the downbeat of the measure.

Both drums and the bass would, in a traditional jazz band setting, be keeping the rhythm and groove of the song in a more obvious manner. Additionally, in opening the song with a duet-like conversation between the lone drums and bass, it opens the space musically for both instruments to expand beyond their traditional roles, into more melodic-solo like lines.

To add to the interesting rhythmic elements already occurring with the drums and the bass, both the electric piano and Mitchell’s guitar do not add any steady rhythmic groove that they are helping to support. Overall, the entire rhythmic section’s lack of a solid groove helps stretch time in the piece. This, combined with Mitchell’s vocals’ switching between duple and triple rhythms, makes this piece difficult to play rhythmically. Though “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat” is written in 4/4, a pretty common time signature, the song’s rhythmic elements mean that it doesn’t necessarily feel as though it is played in this time signature.

*Instrumentation/Formation of band*

The instrumentation mentioned above (prior to the rhythmic analysis) is not an unusual choice of instrumentation for a jazz band. Instead, as discussed in the above analysis on rhythm, this instrumentation distinguishes itself from others in the sense that it repurposes the traditional roles of some of the instruments; like the rhythm section, which is much more soloistic.
It makes sense that this band would have an unusual way of utilizing its instrumentation, because Mitchell formed this band and began working with many of these musicians because of her unlikely collaboration with Charles Mingus. This collaboration was the result of Mingus finding out that he was going to die soon, and seeking someone to write worthy lyrics for his musical eulogy. Mingus became interested in Mitchell as the person to write lyrics after hearing her album titled *Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter*. Shortly after that, Mingus became interested in T.S. Eliot’s “Four Quartets”—Eliot’s last great poetic work, thought by many critics and academics to be both “devotional” and “apocalyptic.” Mingus wanted to Mitchell to help him set this poetry to some of his music as a final eulogy of sorts. Mitchell did not care for Eliot’s poem, but this was the beginning of a collaboration between the two, and a majority of the album, which “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat” is on, consists of music that Mingus composed and Mitchell wrote lyrics for. Furthermore, some of the band members who helped Mitchell record the song and the album are musicians whom she met and played with through writing with Mingus, with some of the band members being people whom Mitchell was already playing with, making “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat” a song born of cross-genre collaboration.

Purpose/Intent

When Mingus initially wrote “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat,” it was intended as an elegy for jazz saxophonist Lester Young. Young was admired by many as a musician, and was a crucial figure in the jazz scene. Mingus performed the song a number of

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times and it was recorded for his album *Mingus Ah Um*, and on his album *Mingus Mingus Mingus Mingus*.\(^{52}\) While Mingus and Mitchell were collaborating, he talked to her a lot about Young—about both the kind of person and the kind of musician that he was. From those conversations, Mitchell wrote her own lyrics to the sung. They are as follows, below:

When Charlie speaks of Lester
You know someone great has gone
The sweetest swinging music man
Had a Porkie Pig hat on
A bright star
In a dark age
When the bandstands had a thousand ways
Of refusing a black man admission
Black musician
In those days they put him in an
Underdog position
Cellars and chitlins'

When Lester took him a wife
Arm and arm went black and white
And some saw red
And drove them from their hotel bed
Love is never easy
It's short of the hope we have for happiness
Bright and sweet
Love is never easy street!
Now we are black and white
Embracing out in the lunatic New York night
It's very unlikely we'll be driven out of town
Or be hung in a tree
That's unlikely!

Tonight these crowds
Are happy and loud
Children are up dancing in the streets
In the sticky middle of the night
Summer serenade
Of taxi horns and fun arcades
Where right or wrong
Under neon
Every feeling goes on!
For you and me
The sidewalk is a history book
And a circus
Dangerous clowns

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Balancing dreadful and wonderful perceptions
They have been handed
Day by day
Generations on down

We came up from the subway
On the music midnight makes
To Charlie's bass and Lester's saxophone
In taxi horns and brakes
Now Charlie's down in Mexico
With the healers
So the sidewalk leads us with music
To two little dancers
Dancing outside a black bar
There's a sign up on the awning
It says "Pork Pie Hat Bar"
And there's black babies dancing
Tonight

As one can see, Mitchell did not try to write the lyrics to the song as though she were Mingus herself, or from a perspective of understanding and knowing Young and his impact from Mingus’ point of view. Instead, she positions herself as the narrator, opening the song singing the phrase, “When Charlie speaks of Lester.” Mitchell continues to narrate throughout the song, but the narration that she gives us is not just the story of Lester Young—although she does illustrate several pieces of that with more detail—but rather a story that’s about the way that life is/was for African Americans during that time.

The first verse introduces Mingus’ original intent for the song—as being an eulogy for Lester Young. But in describing Young, Mitchell’s lyrics touch on the difficulties that came with being a black musician, singing, “When the bandstands had a thousand ways / Of / refusing a black man admission / Black musician / In

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54 Ibid.
those days they put him in an / Underdog position.” She provides a concrete example of how Young and other black musicians are discriminated against by club owners and owners of other music venues because of their skin color.

Mitchell’s second verse discusses Young’s marriage to his wife, who was white. She elucidates the public disapproved of this union with lyrics such as, “Arm and arm went black and white / And some saw red / And drove them from their hotel bed.” But Mitchell takes this verse further, moving from Young’s life to the racial politics in the present (the present she is writing these lyrics from). That verse ends with Mitchell singing, “Now we are black and white / Embracing out in the lunatic New York night / It's very unlikely we'll be driven out of town / Or be hung in a tree.” This reflection on the New York that Mitchell knows shows how interracial marriage has become more acceptable, and places some of the onus for that on the likes of famous people like Young, who were early to take that risk, despite the consequences they might face.

In her third verse, Mitchell narrates and reflects on her present surroundings, using ideas about race relations she has brought up by eulogizing Young in the previous two verses. This becomes particularly apparent at the end of the verse as she sings, “The sidewalk is a history book / And a circus / Dangerous clowns / Balancing dreadful and wonderful perceptions / They have been handed / Day by day / Generations on down.” With those lines, Mitchell brings in ideas about how racism has continued to thrive in this country. She alludes to the idea that it still exists, and places the burden for its existence on the “generations” that have “handed” it down.

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55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
The fourth and last verse that Mitchell wrote brings listeners back to the song’s original intent—a eulogy for Young—and the reason that Mitchell was able to write lyrics to the music in the first place, which was Mingus. By bringing Mingus into the last verse, singing, “Now Charlie's down in Mexico / With the healers,”\(^{58}\) Mitchell is eulogizing Mingus too. The song ends with Mitchell singing, “So the sidewalk leads us with music / To two little dancers / Dancing outside a black bar / There's a sign up on the awning / It says "Pork Pie Hat Bar" / And there's black babies dancing / Tonight.” With these last words, Mitchell ties Mingus to Young, ties both of them to the symbol of the “Pork Pie Hat Bar,” and ties that symbol to the narrative struggles and triumphs of racism in America.

Although Mingus had not yet passed away when Mitchell was writing this song, by the time her album *Mingus* came out, he had died. In a sense, Mitchell’s entire album is a eulogy for Mingus. This song in particular is interesting to consider because it serves as a double eulogy, in addition to a reflection on how both artists fought against racism.

Mitchell’s intent to write “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat” as a eulogy gave her a platform to reflect on the state of racism and its effect that she had been witness to, from her own perspective as a white, female, Canadian musician. Mitchell’s identity provides a dissonance to the narrative and topic, which is interesting. In many ways, she is an outsider to struggles that musicians like Mingus and Lester faced—that Black people in America faced. Given that, one might wonder why Mingus wanted her to put lyrics to “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat,” and some of his other compositions. The answer lies in how these two musicians’ combined musical intentions come together

\(^{58}\) Ibid.
to eulogize more than one man or two, but rather eulogize an era of struggle and hardship that was and still is being faced.

*The Written Score or Lack Thereof*

Mitchell’s lyrics and Mingus’ composition are laid out on a standard jazz lead sheet. Although the song is not technically a common jazz standard, it certainly sets the precedent for other bands to perform the composition, improvising it and making it their own version.

Furthermore, the lead sheet of Mitchell’s lyrics and how she set them to Mingus’ chords provides analytical insight into the meaning of “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat.” For the purposes of this analysis, since the focus is on Mitchell’s version of the song, we will focus on how her lyrics add to the music Mingus had already written.

As noted earlier in this analysis, Mitchell set her lyrics to “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat” after Mingus had already composed it without. This was traditional in jazz standards, where the lyricist, whether or not that was the person who was also composing, wrote lyrics after the chords and instrumentals had already been written.59 Above, we discussed how Mitchell’s lyrics added to the meaning of Mingus’ song. Here, we will analyze how the melody that she wrote complimented the lyrics both rhythmically and melodically.

Rhythmically, there are several instances in which Mitchell plays with the lyrical rhythm to suit the words she wrote. One notable instance of this occurs is

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measure four (Figure 1), when Mitchell places the word “swinging” on last 2/3 of a triplet, giving the world itself a feeling of swing.

*Figure 1*

\[ \begin{array}{c}
\text{3} \\
\text{swing- in'}
\end{array} \]

In measures 15 and 16 (Figure 2), Mitchell rhythmically stresses the colors in the phrase, “arm in arm went black and white and some saw red.” She does so by increasing the rhythmic value every time a different color is sung. “Black” she sings for an eighth note; “white” she sings for a quarter note tied to an eighth note; “red” she holds the longest—for a sixteenth note tied to a dotted quarter note. In holding the notes that the colors are sung on out longer that other parts of the phrase, she is emphasizing the role they play in the outcome of events, particularly that of the “white” and the “red.

*Figure 2*
In measure 18 (Figure 3), Mitchell draws out the word “easy” in the phrase “love is never easy.” She places the “eas” of “easy” on a quick sixteenth note, with “y” really held out on a dotted eighth note tied to a quarter note. In doing so, Mitchell makes the word “easy” sound hard to sing, which fits since the message she is communicating in that phrase is that love, along with other things insinuated in her lyrics, is difficult.

Figure 3

In measure 20 (Figure 4), Mitchell again rhythmically draws out a word to place emphasis on it. This time, she places emphasis on “happiness” in the phrase “it’s short of the hope we have for happiness.” In total, the word “happiness” takes up two and a half beats of the four in the measure. The “happ” of “happiness” is a quarter note tied to a sixteenth; the “i” is just a sixteenth note; the “ness” is two eighth notes tied together. Of further note, besides the extra time Mitchell gives this word to emphasize its importance and the desire for it, is the uneven emphasis of the way in
which Mitchell sings the word. The word is sung on a downbeat, but the first syllable (“happ”) is not equal to the last longer syllable (“ness”), and the middle syllable (“i”) falls on a short and weak beat. This gives the “happiness” she sings of a disjoined quality.

Figure 4

At the end of measure 24 and the beginning of measure 25 (Figure 5), Mitchell makes another subtle rhythmic decision on the word “hung” in the phrase “or be hung in a tree.” She sings “hung” on the last eighth note and weak beat of measure 24 and lets it hang on a tie to the eighth note that is the downbeat of measure 25. She lets the word “hang” literally hang from a weak beat to a strong beat and over the measure, a rhythmic unit of division.

Figure 5

Mitchell is also intentional about the rhythmic placement of the word “wrong” in measure 32 (Figure 6), in the phrase “where right or wrong under neon.” She
places “wrong” on the weakest and last beat of a group of four sixteenth notes that already falls on beat two of the measure (a weak beat). “Wrong” is also held out via a tie to an eighth note, hanging over the second strong beat of the measure (beat three), and thus effectively removing the second strong beat listeners expect in 4/4 time—making it sound “wrong.”

*Figure 6*

![Musical notation](image)

In addition to all of the rhythmic devices Mitchell uses to add meaning to her lyrics, she also creates meaning in her placement of the lyrics on Mingus’ melody. She does this in measure 6 (Figure 7) with the phrase “a bright star in a dark age.” She places “bright star” on higher notes (a B-flat and a D-flat) that jumps up a fifth from the word “a” in measure 5. This jump places the “bright star” clearly higher in pitch, as though Mitchell is vocally reaching for those notes in the sky. Then, she places “in a dark age” lower in pitch, jumping back down to an E-flat, moving to the G-flat, then the A-flat, then back down to the G-flat on the word “age.” Harmonically, it places “dark age” in a lower register; Mitchell is word painting.

*Figure 7*
In measure 8 (Figure 8), Mitchell places the words “refusing” and “a black” from the phrase “when the bandstands had a thousand ways of refusing a black man admission.” She places the word “ing” of “refusing” on an A-natural, a note that is not in the key signature (E-flat minor), and thus stands out, thus emphasizing the dissonance of the refusal. She also places “a black” on an E-natural and a D-natural respectively. Since both of these notes are also not within the key signature, those words also pop out in a dissonant manner, especially the E-natural which is not only not in the key signature but also is a change to the root of the key signature.

*Figure 8*

In measure 11 (Figure 9), Mitchell uses places the word “under” from the phrase “in those days they put him in an underdog position,” outside of the key signature. Specifically, she places the “un” of “under” on an A-natural, which is not in the key signature, and thus draws extra attention to that word. Furthermore,
Mitchell has the word “underdog” descend harmonically—another time when she uses word painting to demonstrate and add to the meaning of a word in her lyrics.

*Figure 9*

![Musical notation]

In measures 19 and 20 (Figure 10), Mitchell again uses naturals outside of the key signature to draw extra, unnatural, attention to the phrase “it’s short of the hope we have for happiness.” Her placement of naturals in measure 19 does not seem to signify emphasis on particular words for a special reason, but rather the phrase as a whole. But the natural she places in measure 20, on the second syllable (“i”) of happiness, does sound more intentional, as though Mitchell is trying to upset the flow of the word, showing that “happiness” is not achievable or at the last not always what it promises to be.

*Figure 10*

![Musical notation]
In measure 23 (Figure 11), there is another notable section in which Mitchell uses the melody to add something to her lyrics. This occurs in the phrase “it’s very unlikely.” Mitchell places the words “very” and the first syllable of the word “unlikely”, “un,” on an E-natural, which as mentioned earlier in the analysis of the written score, is more jarring since it is changing the root of the key signature. However, by the second syllable of the word “unlikely,” Mitchell has moved back to an E-flat, and thus to a note in the key signature and the root of the key. This adds an extra air of uncertainty by steering things in a direction that is melodically out of the ordinary, and then returning to normal, hence aurally reminding us how “unlikely” such a move is.

*Figure 11*

At the end of measure 28 and the beginning of measure 29 (Figure 12), Mitchell utilizes two vocal slides on the words “and loud” when describing a crowd. These slides are only a short interval. However, the smaller pitch range creates less of
a falling of sound and instead a more concentrated sound, evocative of the way a loud crowd might vary in pitch.

Figure 1

There’s another small instance of this in measure 35 (Figure 13). Here, Mitchell once again uses pitches outside of the key signature to emphasize and draw attention to a word she sings. In this measure, that word is “dangerous” from the phrase “dangerous clowns balancing dreadful and wonderful perceptions they have been handed day by day.” Mitchell sings a C-flat on the first syllable (“dan”) of the word “dangerous,” coloring it with the unease and unnaturalness that a note outside of key sounds with.

Figure 13

The instances of rhythmic and melodic placement above are the prominent ones; the point being, Mitchell understood the weight of responsibility that came with putting words to Mingus’ song.
Public Reception

The reviews and reactions to Mitchell’s collaboration with Mingus and the songs on her album titled *Mingus* are mixed. They were mixed when the album was released, and they remain mixed to this day. A “Rolling Stones” review from 1979, the year Mitchell released the album, praised it as a good “memorial” to Mingus. The reviewer complimented Mitchell and the performers on the album for staying true to their own sound. The reviewer claimed that most of the album other than “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat,” which “retains the Mingus flavor” could have passed as purely Mitchell’s work.\(^{60}\)

That being said, other reviews have been less flattering. Many people wondered why the tempo on the album is so slow.\(^{61}\) Particularly those who were more involved in the jazz world, have critiqued and wondered why an album inspired by and for Mingus, that featured several of jazz’s best improvisers, did not let those performers improvise, and instead had them riffing behind Mitchell’s vocals.\(^{62}\)

This album and the song “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat” were definitely outside of the canon that the public had and still retains regarding Mitchell’s music. *Mingus* and to some extent *Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter* are Mitchell’s only forays into jazz. These albums are regarded as being outside of the Mitchell canon because the public and the market, even today, expect a certain sound out of her. If that sound does not fit into the pop/folk and singer/songwriter genre that Mitchell is so often grouped into, it is an anomaly.


\(^{62}\) Ibid.
Time Period

Mitchell wrote the lyrics to this song during the spring of 1978, during the period of time she spent collaborating with Mingus. The song was released on her album titled *Mingus* in 1979. As discussed in the previous time contextualization in the analysis of Alice Coltrane’s “Om Shanti,” in terms of important dates in African American history, 1978 marks the decision of the Bakke verdict and Affirmative Action discussions.63 One of the most relevant things to note in relation to that case is that there were a large number of Americans who were opposed to affirmative action because they felt that “the playing field” was already equal.64 Essentially, the decision on this Supreme Court case, and the discussion that it sparked, showed that despite the racism that was still plaguing America, many people believed that America had entered a post-racial era.

Placing the intention and lyrics that Mitchell wrote for “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat” into that historical context sheds clarity onto what that song stood for as a piece of art. For one thing, Mitchell points out in the lyrics both the impact that racism has had on Black people and how that continues to be carried down from generation to generation—one would assume on both the part of white and black people. It also places into context how the collaboration between a Mitchell, a white, female, folk/pop singer, and Mingus, a black jazz musician and composer, must have appeared to their peers and the public. Despite much progress being made to end

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64 Ibid.
racism, the manner that this song came into being and also the message behind it was not commonplace in mainstream art/media.

**Artist’s Motives and Influences at Time**

Before Mingus asked Mitchell to collaborate with him, Mitchell had been going through a three-month period of writers’ block with her songwriting. Prior to meeting Mingus and releasing her album titled *Mingus*, Mitchell had released *Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter*, an album that is known for expanding further on the experimental jazz-fusion style that Mitchell was exploring in her album *Hejira*. Several music critics say that Mitchell lost much of her fan base who liked her pop and folk tunes of the albums that she wrote prior to *Mingus* (*Hejira* and *Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter*).

Mitchell was not directly involved in any political or social movements during the period of time right before she met Mingus. However, a recent biographer of Mitchell’s, David Yaffe, points out that she did share a similar psychological sensation of double consciousness that Mingus and many black Americans felt. W.E.B. Du Bois wrote about this experience, describing it as the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” For Mingus and other black Americans this double-consciousness took the form of the conflicting identities of being an American and being a Black person. Yaffe believes that for Mitchell, this

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67 Ibid., 277.
came through in her desire to be independent as a songwriter, a bandleader, and a studio producer, how that conflicted with her desire for love, and how she felt that “love stimulated [her] illusions more than anything.”

Therefore, although Mitchell’s identity afforded her very different treatment from that received by many members of society, there was some understanding between Mitchell and Mingus about the struggle of trying to marry two conflicting identities to each other. This shared feeling must have lent some artistic influence to Mitchell when she was working on music with Mingus.

The second song I will analyze is one by the artist Jeanne Lee called “In These Last Days.” Like the previous three analyses, I will consider the rhythm, the instrumentation, the purpose/intention, and the differences in listening/understanding of structure for this song. Then, like in prior analyses, I will explain the context of this song, the time period, and Lee’s motives and influences at the time she wrote and recorded it. The analysis of Lee and “In These Last Days” proves particularly interesting in that she is the most consistently genre-less of the of the artists we have looked at thus far in this paper.

Jeanne Lee does the vocals and provides the poetry (lyrics) for “In these last days.” Andrew Cyrille is the drummer. Jimmy Lyons is on the saxophone.

_Rhythm_

One of the reasons that “In These Last Days” is so unlike songs produced by other jazz trios is in its complete lack of a rhythmic groove. Between the vocals, the

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68 Ibid., 277.
drums, and the saxophone, not one keeps a beat. In fact, the rhythms being sung or played are more like solo improvised lines, interacting with each other in a purposeful manner.

The drums, which as discussed in earlier song analysis, usually keep the beat or groove, seem to rhythmically be improvising off of the vocalist’s musical choices. The drums do not play the same thing throughout the seven-minute piece. And although the drums are not controlling or creating the rhythmic groove of the piece, they definitely contribute to the feel and mood. The drummer’s choice to slow down or speed up with the vocals creates an ebb and flow of tension. The drummer’s decision to play a more rhythmically complex line at times and a simpler line at other times also drives the song from more tense portions to less tense ones, adding to the simple poetry/lyrics that Jeanne Lee wrote and sings.

The saxophone functions in a similar manner to the drums. However, its rhythmic trajectory feels a little less out of the ordinary since in jazz settings the saxophone is usually an instrument used for playing the melody and improvising upon that in a soloistic fashion. Throughout “In These Last Days,” the saxophone rhythmically provides faster moving notes, which act as what could be conceived of as ornamentation for Lee’s vocals—especially since in Lee’s vocals, she extends words and phrases for longer periods of time.

This brings us to a rhythmic analysis of Jeanne Lee’s vocals on this piece. Her vocals are interesting rhythmically because they don’t have the traditional rhythm that one would expect from vocals on a jazz song. Lee holds onto notes for so long that words are stretched far from the traditional emphasis they would hold if spoken. It is
almost as if they are being chanted, or even sound like an instrumental part. With the rhythm of vocals that can change from long and held out to slow, Lee is in some ways singing the vocals in the manner that the drummer is playing his part. Hence, she is able to infuse emotion, particularly tension into her poetry, in the way that a more melodic and traditional vocal line that rhythmically tried to make the sung words sound as they are spoken would not have been able to do.

One of the main characteristics of more traditional jazz music is that it has a groove and a beat—something that you can nod your head to or tap your foot along to. “In these last days” lacks that, which is why many critics consider it and the album Nuba, which it was released on, as New Music. However, there is something that distinguishes “In these last days” and the music that Jeanne Lee was creating with this trio from the New Music scene—particularly the more elite parts of it associated with the likes of John Cage. (That is not to say that Lee was not involved with that scene, for she was, having graduated from Bard College). However, some New Music has its roots in more theoretical and philosophical ideas. The lack of a rhythmic beat and the manner in which it is carried out in this song, seem more so to inject emphasized emotional drama and feeling into Lee’s poem.

Instrumentation

With a vocalist, a saxophone and drums, this might initially appear to be an ordinary jazz trio. However, as discussed at length in the rhythmic analysis section, these instruments and the vocals are not played in the manner in which they would be in a jazz trio.
In addition to the lack of rhythm, the melodic lines that Lee, Lyons, and even Cyrille on the drums are playing stray from the norm of what each instrument would normally do. (The “norm” defined as a rhythmic groove for the drums, and improvising melodies together over the same chords for the saxophone and the vocals). Lee’s vocals sound feel like drones at some points, and the manner in which she sings sounds much more like the way an instrumentalist would play the line. She is not just narrating a story with the lyrics of the song, she is narrating the story with abnormally heavy breathing, screams, and nonverbal articulations in a way that interacts on equal footing with Lyons’ saxophone line and Cyrille’s drum line. No one is sitting back in the trio while one person solos, even though Lee is the one singing the words. All three of them are the soloists, and in conversation with each other.

_Purpose/Intention_

Jeanne Lee wrote “In These Last Days” as a poem in 1973, about six years prior to the improvised recording she made for the album _Nuba_. The lyrics are simple but incredibly powerful. They make direct references to the political and social turmoil in the seventies regarding racism in America. They are listed below:

_In these Last Days_  
_Of Total_  
_Dis-in-te-gra-tion_  
_Where every day_  
_Is a struggle_  
_Against becoming_  
_An object in_  
_Someone else’s_  
_Nightmare:_  
_There is great joy_  
_In being_  
_Naima’s Mother_  
_And unassailable strength_
The words to this poem are clear in their intent. The “last days” that Lee is referring to are both her own and that of other people of color, presented as the turmoil that those in minority communities experienced in the 1960s and 1970s in America. The first stanza of the poem—“In these Last Days / Of Total / Dis-in-te-gra-tion / Where every day / Is a / struggle / Against becoming / An object in / Someone else’s / Nightmare,” is also very personal. Lee is speaking to, in the simplest manner that she can, about her personal experience bearing the weight of having the identity of being both a woman and a black. Both of these minority identities have put her at a disadvantage because of the manner that the majority views both of these identities as lesser, often objectifying and dehumanizing members of these groups.

Vocally, Lee opens by repeatedly singing these lyrics with the additional aural sound that is mentioned in earlier analysis of this song. She improvises on that first stanza of the poem for a little over half of the recorded song. Her improvised vocals start off slowly. She holds the words on notes for extended periods of times, and this, combined with the tone of her vocals at this point, gives the first part of the improvisation a more somber and even elegiac feel. Every time that Lee sings the word “dis-in-te-gra-tion” she sings it in a disjointed manner separating each syllable so listeners can hear the disintegration.

Lee uses “dis-in-te-gra-tion” as a focal point to vocally disintegrate. As she keeps singing the opening stanza, her improvisation begins to incorporate more and more notes that evoke screams and howls in their timbre and pitch. Her repetition of

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certain phrases becomes the repetition of just one word for a few seconds here and there. There is a notable moment in the recording where she repeatedly sings the word “where.” Although technically that would be a stutter, the color and tone with which Lee sings it, as though she’s almost speaking it, has a powerful resonance that is not a weak stutter, but rather feels like an active decision to be vulnerable and to show the audience, her listeners, and the world the emotional affect that this statement is having on her.

From that point onward in the song, Lee literally disintegrates vocally, breaking into screams, howl-like sounds, and other non-articulate syllables that simultaneously sound outraged, pained, and strong. There is nothing weak sounding about the pain and terror Lee is evoking. This becomes particularly apparent as she sings the phrase “an object in someone else’s.” She separates each word, adding extra emphasis to each word, making them feel and sound pointed, indignant.

Then, slightly over halfway through the improvisation, Lee brings in the second stanza—“There is great joy / In being / Naima’s Mother / And unassailable strength / In being / On the Way”—and seems to make her voice quiver and quake with the “great joy” she is singing of. That being said, there is still a sense of control about how out of control she is, a sound that is unmistakably powerful. As Lee improvises on the phrase “unassailable strength in being” she slows down once more in a purposeful way. One of the times that she sings the word “strength,” she has it grow higher in pitch, as though she is growing stronger as she sings it. As Lee gets to the very end of her vocal improvisation of her poem, she grows quiet. The color of her voice sound similar to that of a whisper, although it is louder than that in volume.
It has a hushed quality, something she does purposefully so that her audience has to really listen carefully to the words she is singing, and in doing so, treat her less like the object that she is tired of feeling like.

*Differences in listening/understanding of structure*

The average listener thinks of improvised jazz as having a recognizable chord base—a structure that they expect to aurally hear and have referred back to, regardless of how far from the original piece the improvisation stretches. “In These Last Days” breaks these aural standards, and surprises listeners with its unconventional improvisation that seems to be influenced by the manner that Lee sings her poem, instead of using a lead sheet.

This unconventional improvisational structure also makes the listener question if “In These Last Days” is more of a song or more of a poem. How do we define or draw a line between what counts as music and what is a spoken-word performance? Why do we feel the urge to draw a line separating the two? Although it was likely not Lee’s main goal to get the listener to ponder these things, it could have been something she was considering, given that how society chose to perceive and categorize people was something she was well versed in and aware of.

That being said, the main reason the listening structure of improvised jazz is broken up here, and instead follows the poetry/lyrics is because that was where the significance came in meaning for Lee. Throughout her career as a vocalist, she was constantly trying to change the conventions around singing and being a vocalist. In
response to being asked about the influence of instrumentalists on her singing Lee said,

“I’m more interested in what the voice is in itself… I was moving away from the conventional idea of music. I could take music out of musicality, add space and silence.”

The above quote from Lee explains why she approached her musical improvisation from her poetry. It also illuminates why listening to “In These Last Days,” and her music in general is so full of aural surprises for the listener.

**Context of this song**

As mentioned in earlier analysis of this song, “In These Last Days” was a poem and composition that Lee wrote in 1973. It recorded with drummer Andrew Cyrille and saxophonist Jimmy Lyons in 1979 and released on the album *Nuba*. *Nuba* was not purely an album of Lee’s poetry or music, and the other six tracks on the album are different improvisations. The album as a whole and the trio was committed to a dynamic of improvisation and collaboration without a hierarchy.

**Time period**

“In These Last Days” was recorded and released in 1979, the same year that Mitchell released “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat.” So, as mentioned in previous analysis of that song, this was during and directly following the Bakke case, which resulted in Affirmative Action becoming a hotly debated topic in America again.

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Also mentioned previously in this analysis, Lee wrote the poem in 1973. In terms of major historic events in America’s black history, this falls a year after Shirley Chisholm ran for president. Though she did not win, she was the first major party Black candidate to run and the first female candidate to run for president. An event like that marked a political and sociological change in how black women saw themselves, and how they perceived how American society saw them. Though there are no direct references to it in the song, one can assume that a political event as major as that was definitely on Lee’s mind.

*Artist’s Motives and Influences at time*

Depending on whom you spoke with, Lee was involved with any number of social movements and ideas through her music, poetry, and other art forms she was interacting with, such as dance. Some critics and academics consider her work an example of investment in the politics of the everyday, others speak of her resistance to gender norms in improvisation, and then there’s the decision to uncover the voice for what it is that she speaks to a lot, among other things. One such review, written by Ntozake Shange about one of Lee’s performances at Soundscape in New York, in 1981, helps illuminate how Lee’s art was connected to social justice, below.

“She is not afraid of all this body that moves so sweet I dare you/ and isn’t this more than you ever imagined; her body is song. […] We got a woman among us who isn’t afraid of the sound of her own voice. She might lay up nights, wondering how are we staying alive ‘cause we didn’t hear what she just heard/or sing it.”

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74 View of Jeanne Lee's Voice | Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études Critiques En Improvisation.
It is almost as though Lee herself is the art and music she is striving to create, and all she does is show us parts of herself. There is nothing manufactured about her improvisation in “In These Last Days.” In fact, it often sounds as though Lee is just speaking to us about how she feels in a way that evokes this feeling aurally.

In addition to her own motives regarding her art, some scholars have theorized that “In These Last Days” is also specifically about the failures of ethnic mobilization in the 1960s and 70s and what it felt like to be a part of those communities. Given the historical background, Lee’s own identity, and her relationship to art and her own voice, this makes sense.

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75 Ibid.
Chapter 3: Considering the Relation of Race and Gender to Genre with Fay Victor

Analyzing these four different songs composed/improvised and performed/recorded by four different prominent female artists brought up questions of genre is perceived—both by listeners and the marketplace. How do we categorize songs as one genre or two? How do we categorize artists as a jazz singer or a folk singer? Why are some musicians referred to as “singers” while others are referred to “composers”? How do race and gender play into this? How do social norms and politics play into this? During the course of my thesis research and musical composition studies this year, I sat down and interviewed Fay Victor—a multi-genre composer, vocalist, and performer—in the hopes of getting some insight into all of these questions.

Background on Fay Victor’s Work

To provide some background on Victor, and why she is relevant to this research, I will discuss her life and work, thus far. Victor came to the music scene late, by her own admission, compared to others in her field. She did not begin to explore it until her early twenties, and did not decide to specifically become a jazz vocalist and explore that field until her late twenties. In my interview with her, she told me that as a result of this she, “felt like [she] was way behind, and [she] wanted to develop as quickly as possible.”

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77 Ibid.
For Victor, this meant moving to Amsterdam in the Netherlands for a number of years. At the time, she felt that Europe held more opportunities for musicians that America did, and she was not alone in that assumption. Nina Simone left America for a while, sick of many political and social implications she experienced as a result of being a female, Black artist. Simone even mentions in her autobiography that she felt that there was less racism in the music scene in Europe—she specifically cites Paris as an example. Alice Coltrane too, moved to Paris for a stint to study both classical music and jazz, and though she does not specifically say so, there was probably an element of wanting to leave the racist environment she had grown up in, in the states.

For Victor, the years she lived in Amsterdam were pivotal to shaping the direction her career and artistry moved in. In our interview, she mentioned how many new kinds of genre she was exposed to there, and immersed in. She specifically mentioned the importance of having the opportunity to sing more blues, something she felt she would not have had the opportunity to do had she stayed in the U.S. She told me that that exposure to many different genres got her thinking about why people were so particular about what specific genre they should sing or make music in.

The notion of being open to different genres was not something Victor had initially been concerned with. Since she felt that she had come to the jazz scene so late in life, her desire to catch up to everyone else sometimes closed her off to the idea of singing anything that was not jazz. It was actually the artist and jazz vocalist Cassandra Wilson who helped Victor realize that singing jazz did not necessarily constrict one to singing only jazz tunes. Wilson would sing and improvise music by

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78 Simone, Nina, and Stephen Cleary. *I Put a Spell on You.*
79 Berkman, Franya J. *Monument Eternal*
80 “Personal Interview with Fay Victor.” Interview by author.
the Monkees, and other such groups, in addition to using instrumentation the way a rock group would.

Victor told me that the other large factor that contributed to her moving past the label of being solely a jazz singer and improviser was a realization she had in her early thirties while she was singing jazz to an audience in the Netherlands.

“It was just such a moment that it hit me that pretty much everyone in the audience had gray hair. It’s okay, but it just felt like whom am I talking to and what am I saying? These are not my peers; these are not my problems; whatever I might want to talk about that’s serious to me, I’m not sure they can hear it. This is not a judgment in a bad way, just a ‘what am I doing’ kind of thing.”

That experience in particular made Victor’s first question when thinking about composition and improvisation, “what am I trying to say?” instead of “what genre should I write this in?”

Victor has come a long way from an artist who is just a jazz singer. Over the span of her career and still now, she has fully embraced being a multi-genre artist.

She is a singer, composer, improviser, and an educator (currently at The New School). At the moment she is currently working on a musical project that is a rolling diary of the Trump administration.

“These compositions are so small, and they develop through improvisation. And the idea that that project, well the impetus for it is with this administration there’s been so much rationalization and reframing of what the current president is saying, and I have a real problem with that… It’s been an amazing thing to really develop this project and to perform it has been kind of cathartic. It feels like really sort of connecting well social justice with music in a way that also interacts with the audience.”

Victor noted to me however, that as far as she was concerned social justice and activism were intertwined with art. She could not explain how she connected the two since she felt there was no way to separate the two.

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81 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
**Jeanne Lee’s influence on Victor**

As I talked to Victor about how I became interested in the connection between genre, race, and gender, I spoke to her about the different artists and the songs of theirs I was analyzing. When I brought up Jeanne Lee, Victor spoke about how she felt that at this point the two of them had a lot in common as artists. Victor hadn’t known about Lee until she heard her by chance perform with Mal Waldron at the Bimhaus in Amsterdam. Victor had never heard someone quite like Lee before. One of the things that struck her most about Lee was how she recreated “music as a conversation.” It was not an accompaniment or a way to make “you look nice and making things pretty around you but actually interacting in a musical way.” Victor described Lee’s vocal improvisations, saying:

> “Though we’re dealing with a lot of structure in that moment, we’re still not really sure what’s going to happen from one moment to the next, and we’re listening to each other to see where we’ll go.”

Other than that, Victor was amazing at how Lee performed a huge variety of musical genres—more than any other jazz vocalist she knew of.

Based on how Victor’s work has changed since she considered stopped considering herself a “jazz singer,” I ascertained that both her improvisational compositions and her multi-genre approach to her music were both greatly inspired by Jeanne Lee.

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83 Ibid.
84 Ibid.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
After having analyzing Jeanne Lee’s approach to vocals and how they interacted with instrumentals, and then hearing Victor talk about how this had inspired her work, I grew curious about the relationship between the two, asking Victor to elaborate. She brought up how quickly the education of jazz singers had changed in the last twenty years. Nowadays, many people can go to school for jazz, she told me, but only a few decades ago that was not a common practice. She chalked this up to the fact that most vocalists were not as musically educated as instrumentalists, because there was no demand for them to be. The role of a vocalist was to sing the melody, and perhaps improvise over that. She spoke of her own experiences as a jazz singer, saying:

“[Singers] were the little sweet cherry; the guys did the heavy lifting… I think it’s an old generation that felt that way, but I think a lot of generations they liked that. They liked that they didn’t have to make things too much about being a musician and giving that aspect over to the soloist. I’ve seen it over and over again, where singers are singing the chorus of a song, and not improvising at all, and then give the instrumentalists like ten choruses.”

Victor admitted that it was not easy for a vocalist to master all the scales and harmony the way that a saxophonist might. She also admitted that it was not a calling for everyone. There is and was nothing wrong with feeling satisfied singing the melody, she said. But, she had gotten bored with that and wanted to expand her voice beyond that. She had wanted to leave the closed box she saw as jazz singing.

How the Marketplace Categorizes Victor

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87 Ibid.
88 Ibid.
Given how much Victor spoke about her multi-genre approach to her music, I asked her more about her reactions to people placing her in a box of being a jazz singer. Depending where you looked up “Fay Victor,” whether that be Google, Spotify, or the likes, the categorization of what kind of musician she was changed. I asked her how she felt about still being labeled as a jazz singer despite having grown away from that, and despite doing much more than solely being a singer in the present.

“I go back and forth. There was a period where I didn’t want to be called a jazz singer at all. I had a group called the Fay Victor ensemble, and we put out two records, and [the press] kind of downplayed what I did—being a jazz vocalist. I felt like the music wasn’t really jazz. It had a jazz sensibility, but it wasn’t really jazz, and almost nothing swung, potentially.”

However, upon reflection of how she had felt about the records she released with the Fay Victor ensemble, she told me that she felt more relaxed about the labeling of what kind of musician she was now. That being said, she still did not care for not also being referred to as a composer saying, “you can call me a jazz singer,” but I am also a composer. She and I discussed how although there are more female composers now, composition is by and large still a very male-dominated profession.

**Genre’s Role in the Marketplace**

Throughout the interview with Victor, I kept asking her if she felt that she had personally experienced the connection that the marketplace created between gender, race, and genre. I pushed her to explain to me why she felt that genre continued to dominate the marketplace, despite the fact that it was not always purely based on the musical characteristics of songs.

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89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
Her response was that it was easier to sell music with the help of genre. Genre acts as a formula for categorizing music and helps people find what they like, and record labels and companies do not want to fix a marketing system that is already working. This makes sense from an economic standpoint. But from the view of someone who knows that most consumers of music do not like artists that fall strictly into one genre, the existence of genre in the marketplace can be prevent people from discovering new artists outside of the genres they are usually listen to.

Furthermore, although Victor herself feels that many of the genres that she has been placed into have been a result of her musical roots and her multi-genre approach, there are many instances where the media and labels have not know how to categorize someone’s music and made decisions based on race and gender. For example, how do we explain why the singer/songwriter genre has such a wide musical range of female artists? How do we explain why there is an incredibly large number of different music under the genre of jazz in the music marketplace? These associations are not always bad, but they are definitely limiting some artists and some listeners.

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91 Ibid.
92 Ibid.
Conclusion

By analyzing different songs in detail from four different female vocalists, musicians, and composers—Nina Simone, Alice Coltrane, Joni Mitchell, and Jeanne Lee—I have proven how difficult it is to categorize a song, an album, or even a performance into one category of genre. All four of the songs and performances I discuss in this paper would fall under the umbrella of jazz. Nina Simone performed “Feelings” at the Montreux Jazz Festival—the word “jazz” is literally in the name of the event she performed it at; Alice Coltrane’s “Om Shanti” falls into the category of more new age jazz; Joni Mitchell’s version of “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat” is jazz because the original composition Mingus wrote is considered jazz; Jeanne Lee’s “In These Last Days” is also considered jazz, albeit New Music jazz.

Yet, through the analyses I wrote of each of these four songs and artists in the first two chapters of this thesis, I proved that none of these songs or artists fit into one category. All of these songs are multi-genre or genre-less in their own way. Although the artists might have genres they normally create and perform music in, I have found that none of them truly fit into the genres the marketplace has put them in. This especially came through in the third chapter of my thesis where I conducted an interview with Fay Victor and pondered whether the previous analysis combined with today’s music industry proved that there was a correlation between genre, race, and gender.

There are some correlations between those three factors, and further research into these topics could be done with more songs, especially songs performed and/or composed by a minority race, gender, or both. Additionally, research projects
attempting to answer how record labels and music platforms such as Spotify, Apple Music, Pandora, and the likes, decide what artists/albums/songs will be placed into which genres would provide further insight as to how much of a correlation there is between genre, race, and gender.

Being aware of that correlation is something that could change the way we consume and search for new music to listen to. It could also potentially help shed light on, if not help eliminate, sexism and racism in the music industry.
Afterward

After taking a composition class with Professor Neely Bruce my sophomore year at Wesleyan, I knew that I wanted to study composition. I also got the idea in my head that I wanted to complete a Senior Composition Thesis for the Music Department. I did not yet know what kind of composition thesis I was interested in composing, but I knew I wanted it to be about a topic that was both personal to me and much greater than me in its relevance to others.

During my junior year, I took a Music Major Seminar on creative and improvised music with Professor Tyshawn Sorey. The course really inspired me, particularly the manner in which we discussed genre in relation to creative music (how we referred to jazz). It made me think about musical genre in a different way, and I brought that fresh perspective so my summer internship at a small record label in Brooklyn called Badabing! Records. There, I was exposed to how the music marketplace thought about genre. I found myself noticing that there seemed to be some misplacement of music into certain genres. I found myself wondering if this misplacement had anything to do with a correlation between genre, gender, and race. This idea was one I knew I wanted to explore my senior year. Additionally, I realized one of the reasons I was so intrigued by this question was because of my identity as a woman of color, and thus the inspiration for the topic of the suite of music I composed and performed was born.

It has been extremely rewarding to work on the compositional aspect of my thesis and the written component this entire year. As I conclude this yearlong project,
it is my hope that this is just the start of delving into musical composition/songwriting and research related to these topics.
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Appendix

Full Transcription of Interview with Fay Victor

Fay Victor (FV): That’s kind of a hard question to answer. I guess the best thing to say is that when I made the decision to become a musician and to decide to make this my life’s work, I was a budding jazz vocalist, but I came to jazz very late. So I didn’t look at it, I loved it, I was very passionate about it, but I also didn’t look at it as something that I had to be beholden to in any way. At first I was, but…

Camille De Beus (CD): Would you tell me a bit about how you got to where you are?

FV: Well, I was in my early twenties, when I even like decided that I wanted to explore just music and it was towards my late twenties when I decided just what I wanted to do. So, for me, it was, kind of freeing in a way to not feel like, well not at first. But after a certain period of time it was kind of liberating to not have this sort of chain of like, okay, like I have a family who’s really into jazz, people are not really give me a lot of trouble or whatever. And also by nature, I’m kind of try to do what I think is right and not what someone or other people or things such as society dictate. So when I started, the big issue when I started was being, because I started late, I felt like I was way behind and I wanted to develop as quickly as possible. And then, one of the ways that felt, for a lot of reasons, what felt the best was to go to Europe. So I lived in Amsterdam, the Netherlands for a long time, for about eight years, and that turned out to be a really good decision, because not only did I perform a lot, I really figured out a lot more of what I wanted to sing as a vocalist. I also was exposed to a lot of music that I wasn’t exposed to before. And I even had the opportunity to experiment and perform some of that music. Blues being one of them, I got to perform a lot of blues. I probably wouldn’t have if I didn’t, strangely enough, I wouldn’t have probably if I was still here. So all those things sort of informed this idea of why be so particular about what specific genre I should sing or whatever. And I started to write with my husband, we were using a lot of different references. My husband is an ethnomusicologist by education, and so we just listened to a lot of different kinds of music, and just had access, and he sort of had a deep knowledge of music from all around the world. And so it kind of just opened up the playing field to such a, and I felt like that was valid, because at the time, the great vocalist Cassandra Wilson, I don’t know if you know who that is?

CD: The name sounds familiar.

FV: She’s a person around. She’s probably in her mid-sixties at this point. She’s still performing. She, in the nineties, did something, somewhat revolutionary, in that she started, she was a jazz vocalist, her first album was standards, great American songbook, and then somewhere in the mid-nineties, she started releasing, she got signed to Blue Note, which is one of the more famous jazz record labels, and she started releasing these records where, first of all the instrumentation was very
different, she started using guitar and djembe and percussion, and not that guitar isn’t used in jazz, but she started using it more the way it’s used in a rock group, as opposed to how a jazz group would. And she started using material that really came out of her childhood, which was from the seventies, and you know, covering things like Joni Mitchell and “The Monkees,” and writing her own material, and all of a sudden she sort of opened up this door, because that was the sort of thing I was missing. Because I had come to jazz so late, I was sort of negating all of the other music I had loved my entire life, in terms of how I was performing, and so she opened up the door to kind of say, you don’t really have to do that. Because she was still a jazz singer, and improviser. She rearranged some of the material so that it was easier for improvising. So that was one thing. Then I guess the other really big thing, at one point, I was in the Netherlands, I was at that point, in my early 30s, and I was singing to an audience, you know a couple hundred people, and it was a Sunday afternoon, and it was just such a moment that it hit me that pretty much everyone in the audience had gray hair. Like everyone was, you know it’s okay, but it just felt like who am I talking to and what am I saying? These are not my peers, these are not my problems, whatever I might want to talk about that’s serious to me. I’m not sure they can hear it. This is not a judgment in a bad way, just a what am I doing kind of thing. So to all of that, just sort of opened up this idea of being really open-minded about the music I was approaching, would sing, and it became more of a thing of what do I want to say, whether it’s a song I write or something that I cover. What is the thing I’m truly trying to say? Let that be the focal point as opposed to what particular genre it came from.


FV: No it’s important.

CD: A lot of what I’ve been researching, it seems to be the place to go.

FV: I think it’s changed now. I don’t know if I would do it now, if I were that age. Also jazz has changed. There’s a much clearer academic route than at the time I’m talking about—the early 90s. Not the people who went to school for jazz, but really coming out of the black tradition, and not that black musicians didn’t have PhD’s in jazz, of course there were, but, coming out of the black tradition the idea was, the best way to really understand this music was on the band stand. And, I felt that also because I started so late, I didn’t have the luxury to go to school, and be sort of ensconced away, like not really active, a part of the world that the music is, because this is a social music, oral music, it’s not a music that, I mean we have some, obviously you can study and all that but for me, at that point, that wasn’t, I just wanted to get a handle of it and interact with it. For me, it made more sense to do the work, and perform it, and interact with musicians that wanted to play with me. You know, when you’re starting out, there’s usually not that many. In Europe it was much easier to find people that really wanted to play with me, and I just had a lot more work. It was night and day in terms of how much I could perform. Then you know, I
lived in Amsterdam but was easy to get to Brussels. I worked a lot in Germany, I
worked a lot in Spain, all over. So it was just easy to get to different countries, with
different markets and so I’m really glad I did that. And that’s why I went to Europe.

CD: Specifically for the written portion of my thesis, focusing on Alice Coltrane,
Jeanne Lee and Tyshawn was mentioning that Jeanne Lee and perhaps the others
specifically had influenced you? What impact or inspiration did they have on you as
an artist, how you came to be familiar with them? Specifically Jeanne Lee?

FV: She, for me, as a vocalist, is a very interesting bridge. We strangely have quite a
bit in common at this point. I actually never met her but I heard her live, it was totally
by accident, I was, when I lived in Amsterdam, the great Mal Waldron was still alive.
Do you know who that is? Mal Waldron was very amazing and well known and well-
respected jazz pianist. He was the last pianist of Billie Holliday. He lived in
Amsterdam. In Amsterdam there’s a venue called the Bimhaus; Tyshawn has
performed there. I have as well. When Mal Waldron was alive he would perform
there quite a bit. I knew who he was, not in person. For jazz he was a pretty big man.
One night he was performing at the Bimhaus and Jeanne Lee sat in with him, and I
didn’t know who she was. At that point I had been living there, and she lived in the
Netherlands too. She taught in the Hague.

CD: How did she influence you? Why was she so impactful?

FV: The time that I had her live, I didn’t get what she was doing. But then a few years
later, when I started to search out different ways of expression, I stumbled upon her
again. This time it was the duo she made with Ram Blake in the 60s called “The
Newest Sound Around.” At that point I was listening to a lot of hard bop and close
bop jazz and modal and so, I hadn’t heard a singer really interact that way. I was a
huge Betty Carter fan up until that point. But even Betty Carter always retained a
certain level of control over everything, and this sounded a lot more conversational.
At the same time I happened to be working, one of my mentors, a great pianist named
Curtis Clark, who, one of his influences on me, which I don’t talk about as much is,
one of his influences on me as a vocalist was interacting in that kind of way.
Recreating music as a conversation, not me accompanying you, and making you look
nice and making things pretty around you but actually interacting in a musical way
that we’re not really sure, even though we’re dealing with a lot of structure in that
moment, but we’re still not really sure what’s going to happen from one moment to
the next, and we’re listening to each other to see where we’ll go. That was certainly
the rapport Jeanne had with Ram Blake and the rapport she had with Mal Waldron,
when I heard her that night. So, she opened up that door. But the other thing, I found
amazing about her and to me no other jazz vocalist has really managed to do this, she
really sort of did all kinds of music. You know, that was just one thing. She did a lot
of free improvisation, she did a lot of, I listen, one of my favorite groups is a group
called “Nuba,” with Jimmy Lyons and Andrew Cyrille. They’re fantastic because it’s
free and open but there’s also a lot of structure that comes up, I think organically. So
she’s just a very deep inspiration for the ability to just do it all, and have it sound real. Another big influence of mine is Cathy Bernerian. Do you know who that is?

CD: There’s a lot of things that sound familiar, and I think I’ve listened to in class with Tyshawn, but I guess not familiar to feel like I know them.

FV: “She also an influence in the same way, sort of coming from the modern classical world. I’ve been thinking a lot about this lately, the last year or two, but I think Jeanne Lee was one of those vocalists that gave permission. Again, like Cassandra Wilson gave permission. It’s totally okay to use material that’s outside of the jazz cannon, rearrange, whatever. And Jeanne Lee gave permission to kind of just tap into whatever creatively feels right and makes it your own and explore that, and when that’s finished move on. And then I tried to study with her actually. By the time I really figured, got much clearer about what I wanted to do as a vocalist, I realized I needed some technical assistance. I reached out to the conservatory at The Hague, where she was teaching, and they took a message and they said, when she comes back, she was on vacation, but she was already sick and she died like a week later. So I never got to study with her. Too late.”

CD: Yeah.

FV: Does that answer your question?

CD: I’m wondering if you could explain a bit more, did you feel like there was only one way to interact with jazz? Or as a jazz vocalist?

FV: Yes definitely. As a vocalist definitely. It seemed very prescribed, what you could do. Even when I knew nothing, and I would try to take some risks, I would sometimes get a lot of pushback on that. And I didn’t understand it. At some point it just me, you know, one of the great things about living in the Netherlands, I had the opportunity to solicit a lot of music, go out to a lot of music, and hear music in all these different ways and one of the things I realized especially where jazz was concerned, is that vocal jazz conceptually was at least at that moment, really far behind what was going on with instrumental jazz. Instrumental jazz had all these different avenues that you could experiment with. And vocal jazz was no, it was just. And it was just really boring to me. This is boring and limiting. So one of the impetuses for me was okay, what other sounds can I make, what other. Well the good thing was I lived in Europe, so European improvisation, that was new, I wasn’t used to that.

CD: How was European improvisation different from that?

FV: Well, using much more sound based, versus like doing things. This is related to chords, because also the idea of free music was not in my understanding yet either. So, for me, I think, I just found the whole idea of jazz singing, super boring and
limited and in this very weird box that was also really myopic that didn’t want to look outward either.

CD: Why do you think jazz vocals were so behind the instrumentals?

FV: I don’t mind you asking, it’s just a heavy question.

CD: I wonder because my musical background is from classical music. I grew up studying classical piano… Nice to explore other genres in college. I’ve been taking jazz vocal lessons for a bit… I’m curious in Europe how it’s different?

FV: I think for a lot of, for most vocal jazz history, I mean, a lot of vocalists go to school and stuff and can sing any scale an instrumentalist can. But up to maybe twenty years ago, most vocalists weren’t as educated musically as instrumentalists. Mainly, because they didn’t have to be. I mean, if you’re just singing a melody, now of course some vocalists went deeper, some names you know, some peoples names you don’t know. Also, I think for a lot of vocalists, they really saw their role as just being an entertainer, I mean also there’s the jazz role. We were the little sweet cherry, for the guys to do the heavy lifting and so. And I think, I hate to, I think there’s a lot of jazz stuff, singers, and I think it’s less and less and less, and I think it’s an old generation, but I think a lot of generations they like that. They like that they don’t have to make things too much about being a musician and giving that aspect over to the soloist. I’ve seen it over and over again, where singers improvising, singers are singing the chorus of a song, and not improvise at all, and give the instrumentalists like ten choruses. It’s a whole. So I think there’s a that, and I think there’s that and I think it’s really hard to, especially by using your ear, to learn all those scales and to really improvise the way a saxophone player would. It’s really hard. You have to get with your piano and do the harmony, you know it’s just not, not everybody wants to do that. Especially if you’re a singer and you can still get good work without having to go through all of that. But then there are vocalists that decided no I wanna do something more like a Betty Carter or an Abby Lincoln, and they did really well. But that route is always harder. I’m doing okay, but my life would have been a lot easier if I had just wanted to be a normal jazz singer. Trust me. So I think, and it’s like a calling. You don’t decide I’m gonna be more interesting. My thing is I was so bored, and still really inspired by music in general, and inspired by what I was trying to figure out, what I wanted to say. And I was trying to write a lot, so I was inspired by that, but inspired by being a jazz vocalist, because I just found that as limiting. But I will say that I also see it as a portal, it’s a great portal to expand and check out other music and explore other music. So, I do think that about jazz. So I’m really happy. And I still think standards to this day. But now I sing it really in my own way. I interact with musicians, that we can really take a lot of freedoms. Does that your answer your question?

CD: It did, it did. On Spotify you aren’t listed under a genre, but on Google you’re listed as a jazz singer. What are your thoughts on that? Do you feel like you were lumped into that category? Do you feel like that’s a fair classification?
FV: I go back and forth. There was a period where I didn’t want to be called a jazz singer at all. I had a group called the Faye Victor ensemble, and we put out two records, and it kind of downplayed what I did—being a jazz vocalist. I felt like the music wasn’t really jazz. It had a jazz sensibility, but it wasn’t really jazz, and almost nothing swung, potentially. So, but now I feel a little differently. Now I’m a little more relaxed about it. I don’t care so much, because I just, I get more won’t call me a composer. You can call me a jazz singer.

CD: Going of off that, I’ve noticed relations to genre and gender and race… I noticed on Spotify and after Tyshawn’s seminar… There are so many people they lump into similar categories. It seems to be based on gender and race. Do you also feel that there is stereotyping in race and gender in genre? Interning at a record label… understanding genre from a marketing perspective… What is your take? Is classifying things in genre necessary? Is it only based on musical characteristics? Is musical classification necessary?

FV: I’ve been calling it sort of a multi-genre approach, where everything is everything. I’ve basically given up calling it anything, like I’m my own music, I don’t call it anything, anymore. I just call myself an improviser. And actually I have a line, that now I have on my bio, that which is me trying to get away with the idea of trying to define myself, it’s like a sentence. I’d rather show it cause it would sound pretty annoying to kind of say out loud. I mean, who talks about themselves like that? But I’ll show it to you. I’m not sure in my case that it’s necessarily related to race or gender. I have been a little confusing, honestly, I’ve been doing disparities for a really long time. People don’t know how to categorize me, which I like. And, I have an issue with the press because they still refer to me as a jazz singer. Just a jazz singer, they don’t say jazz singer and composer. I have a real issue with them, like not because like I have a project where I have composed all the music and written all the words, and whenever they’ve talked about it, which I’m glad they’ve talked about it, they just, they never say that I’ve composed the music. That kind of shit pisses me off.

CD: A quick interjection, I feel like I’ve realized that the title and idea of composing is such a male thing, and I also feel like, females aren’t so often pushed into the singer identity, which even if they play other instruments that’s gonna be the number one thing, regardless of all else, which is sometimes wonderful, but I think it’s interesting how gender plays into that.

FV: Yeah, that it has so much if you’re a singer, it’s really, it is really frustrating. I wanna say that happens a lot less now. I feel like it’s related to, you know, it’s complicated, I have to sort of take responsibility for the fact that I’m going at this in a way that I want to go about it, and that just means that it takes a while for people to get it. And that’s been, I’m a little impatient so that’s a really hard thing to deal with but it’s just the reality of it. I can’t, I mean I can say well, this gendered this is racist—sometimes it is—but I also think, I have to be fair, if I was just going the
straight and narrow, if I was a normal jazz vocalist, and I was getting excited about me that wasn’t in getting or keeping what I was doing or, then I would think it was definitely related to race or gender. I’m also doing, and the really interesting thing is that I released a record in 2018, my project, all original music, most of it improvised, but some of it, nothing was composed but some of it, but the text was prepared beforehand and for the very first time, and this was consistent, that’s why I’m mentioning it, the press not only acknowledged the singing style, and how different it was from everything else, but they also gave me complete credit for it. They also gave me complete credit for leading the band. They did not give the band, which was all men, any credit, which was the case. So for me that was like a shift, a change. I think that’s because I’ve been doing what I’ve been doing in kind of a strange way for a really long time. I think the moment has come where people really start to get it. Also now, at this point, there are other vocalists who are taking a lot of risk and treating work as multi-genre and multi-faceted. The labeling isn’t just about people maybe being, having blind spots or being out of touch. I think it’s a combination of something coming at people that they don’t know what the hell to call it, and that’s fair. In light of that, over the years, the press has still been pretty positive. But, it’s always a hard road when you make a decision to go against the grain and do a where we actually don’t know where it’s gonna go.

CD: Going off of that, it seems like you’re not very concerned with the marketplace for music. Would you say that’s a decision, something that just happened? Where do you stand on that?

FV: Well, I definitely like money, and I don’t have a lot of it. But, you don’t go into this kind of music to make money. Then you’re really setting yourself up for disaster or heartache. I teach, and I perform a lot.

CD: Where do you teach?

FV: “Right now, I joined the faculty of The New School, this semester. But I’ve had my own teaching practice for years, my own private teaching practice. I run workshops. Sometimes over the years I’ve taken jobs or… Actually I haven’t had to work a full-time job in 10 or 11 years now. Also, I’m married and that helps. He’s a musician too. So, it would be nice to make a lot of money and produce a record that, I don’t even know if that’s possible for anybody nowadays. Maybe even Taylor Swift, I mean I guess she’ll do okay, but…

CD: I mean she’s…

FV: You have to make a lot of money making a record.

CD: I mean you really have to have an ear for what the mass people like. If you’re passionate about that, that’s wonderful, but that’s also very difficult to do.
FV: I feel very successful being able to, because at this point, I pretty much make music with who I want to make music with and, that’s an amazing luxury. I have a couple of close friends that are string players, they go out on the road with people like ADELE, and they like it for a while because the money is really good. But, as a way of life, it’s hard, because you’re just invisible. So you’re making a lot of money but you’re invisible. And, you’re not really developing yourself as a musician. I feel like, for the most part whenever I perform, and even now, when people ask me to perform, as myself, not even if… unless it’s insanely well paid. I’m not taking a gig unless somebody calls for me. And maybe that sounds weird, but if you just want any kind of singer for the project, just could be any singer, then I think you should go find that singer. But for the most part what happens now is people reach out because they want what I do. That’s great, I mean, I lecture a lot, and I’m asked again to lecture about what I do and not, and for me that’s really great work because I’m getting to talk about the process. Also as a woman of color, that not only doing this kind of same term, but has also lived god into the world, that somebody let me see. Because when I’m out there, the women of color that are in the audience, and the men of color, really feel like wow okay I can do this too. And that way, I feel successful.

CD: That is successful. Going back to genre, why do you think there’s such a strong desire to categorize music into genre? Why is there this human desire?

FV: I’m not sure it’s human, because I read this book, it’s called “The Authenticity of Pop Music,” do you know this book? I can confirm the title. Basically it talks about all the marketing ploys that have sort of been devised to delineate, especially in this country, ways along a class, and how things were organized in this way so now we think, when we think of country music we think, white. When we hear blues we think black. But in the real world, the people in those communities were doing both. Musicians were performing, interacting, it was a very cross-cultural, cross-pollination of activity and that’s not the way, it’s a market-place thing. It’s actually a branding totally about that, and it goes all the way back to when radio markets were segregated as well, and we had race records, which is designed for the black market. So, you could take like “tutti frutti” from “Little Richard” and then, I don’t know if you know who Pat Boone is? Then have Pat Boone sing is because the markets were so divergent. So I think that’s where it comes from, and I think we’ve just been programmed to think about that way. But it’s, but I don’t think it’s human at all. Actually, I think the fact that now, we have things like, I don’t know how, like an iPod, with so many things being on shuffle, I think that’s actually exposed people to more music, and more connections. I think that’s really one of the things… People don’t really talk about it, but I think that’s one of the influences about going into multi-genre less, because people are just much more used to hearing all kinds of music. So I just think it’s clever marketing. Our brains are wired now a certain way.

CD: Going off of that, do you think that it’s also the market that wants to place? You’re a singer, you’re a composer, you do film scores?

FV: Yes, yes, yes. I think that’s marketable.
CD: Why do/what do you think is the impetus?

FV: Well because it’s easier to sell. It’s like if you feel you have a formula that works, then—if it ain’t broke then don’t fix it. Take a singer like Diana Krall, she looks a certain way, puts out a certain kind of a record, she sells two million copies. Or like with Norah Jones, all of a sudden every record label wants to do the same thing because that seems like a winning formula without realizing. Maybe they’re just really good and special at what they do, and you know, it can’t be repeated. But that’s not the way it’s thought of. It’s like oh my god, let’s crunch the numbers, and see how we can, and then you know. Then we have a lot of A&R now, especially record companies that aren’t even musicians. They’re just business people, and they’re just about a bottom line and they see, and there’s just a lot of discussion about how pop music is just four chords, and how progressions are the same, and it’s unfortunate but I think it’s just a market driven thing, and it makes it easier to say, this person always does this, and they always do that. And so, when you Google them, you’re not surprised, you don’t have to think about it. You can just pay and I think that has a lot to do with it.

CD: I also think that’s really interesting because sometimes genre can be a way to close your way off to more kinds of music? I wonder why segregating genre characteristics makes it easier to sell?

FV: I think if… I’m not a marketing person, but I think it’s just easier to sell people something they’ve already bought before. In the sense of a thing like music, you kind of have to market because it’s not a tangible, I mean maybe the product is tangible in terms of what it is packaged in, but the thing in and of itself is not. It’s the perennial question, how do you define music. We’ve come up with a formula to define something and people buy it, and you can keep replicating it and they make more money. Essentially I think unfortunately that’s what it is. Because there’s no reason why, because like again, I don’t think it’s human at all. I mean humans like patterns. I think we like patterns but at the same time our brain can create new patterns with real ease provided we’re familiar or something, or that we can craft. So, I don’t think it’s that.

CD: Given all of that, where do you think the future of genre-less music is going?

FV: I think it will probably move more and more towards a genre-less place because I think people are listening—whether it’s intentional or by accident. For example, Pandora, I hate Pandora. I don’t like the system because it’s deciding too much. It takes one song I’ve chosen and you say, well okay, that’s too much. I’d rather it be based on an artist or similar artist. But, yeah, I think that is always going to go, because anytime, like what about the music program, or just being on YouTube, on Facebook, and just sharing sounds. Just clicking on something that somebody shared or just having the sound on so whatever you’re is in your feed you’re running across. So you’re hearing all this other stuff. I think whether we want to admit or not we’re
less and less in a musical box than we ever were I think. Cause we just have all this stuff.

CD: So you would say that it is moving in a positive direction?

FV: Well, positive if one thinks not sort of categorizing in that kind of way is a good thing, yeah.

CD: I feel like, having mainstream culture and music recognizing a lack of genre would be a positive thing. So you think it is moving toward that?

FV: I think it’s inevitable. If I hear all the records that did really well last year, very little had a clear delineation of the genre that it was a part of. I think musicians are thinking more about what they want to say anyway, because we’re living politically in a very special time, which kind of forces that question. I think it’s a good thing about the time we’re living in now. People can’t just now, and that includes me. I mean, not that I ever, but you got to really ask yourself the question, is this really the right time to talk about, you know, a meadow, for example? And if so, why? I think that’s kind of how also, drive. I think, I haven’t talked about this enough in this interview but I think one of the other reasons that my approach has been to become so genre-less is because it’s never about, it’s never like, I want to write a bossa or I wanna write a sonata. Or, I wanna write, it’s never about that. It’s like I wanna write a piece about this. I want to write a piece about that. I want to write a piece about gun violence, I want to write a piece about whatever. How best can I say what I want to say? And that might involve a number of things, a whole combination of things. So I think the people start to look at things more, like not that they have to, but okay what do I really wanna say with this piece? What do I want to communicate? What do I want? Now I think it’s inevitable that you’re not gonna be stuck in one genre, because otherwise it’s gonna sound really limiting. It’s not gonna sound like you. I’ll give a little example. This is a pretty simple example. Years ago, there’s a jazz composer named Eddie Harris. He was a like hard bop, soul, jazz from the sixties. He was actually one, he was a jazz millionaire. He made a lot of money because he also was on Atlantic Records for a long while. I love him. Great tunes, more groove based compositions. Like, vamps, one chord, two-chord kinds of things. Anyways, he has this one tune called Shantan that I really liked years ago. But I didn’t like the bass line he wrote under there that he wrote for his solo, because I listened to a lot of different things, I found this amazing bass line, from a New Orleans funk band, called the meters, that had this ridiculous bass line that worked so well. To this day, I perform the two together. It’s funny, it came up in my class at the New School. We were talking about how to combine grooves and how to take anything, and I said to them, you know, if I had only listened to jazz I might not have known about the other tune. Because I wouldn’t have been listening, to that kind of music. So just listening to a lot of different things just expands what’s possible. When you hear something, like oh, I can put that with that. That’s what it was. And even though, musically, I mean not that far apart, but definitely not within the same genre, for sure. So, I think it’s also, you know, I think because people are listening to more, and this in the nineties when
it wasn’t as obvious. I think people are going to start making those kinds of connections. So I think that’s good.

CD: Then going off of that, I guess I’m also interested in, how social justice ties into your music?

FV: I think it’s a part of the same thing. For the very first time I’m actually creating a specific social justice project that’s going to be, it’s a rolling diary of the Trump administration. It’s already been launched and it’s a work in progress. We’re on our way to jazz festival, and January, and we were on our division festival last year. So the idea of those compositions is really like, so they’re small, and they develop through improvisation. And the idea that that project, well the impetus for it is with this administration there’s been so much rationalization and reframing of what the current president is saying, and I have a real problem with that because I feel like it’s making him sound.. Anyway, I don’t want to get into my opinion but this project is about the distillation of a lot of the things he is saying and what I think they mean. And so that’s what the text, sort of distillation. And, it’s been an amazing thing to really develop this project and to perform it has been kind of cathartic. It feels like really sort of connecting well social justice with music in a way that also interacts with the audience. So I’m very happy about that. To me, it’s always been political with my work. I’m always trying to make and really talk about things that I really want to say and feel important to say. But I think up until very recently I was pretty sly about it. It wasn’t sort of like a, you had to really listen to kind of get that I think. But this administration is especially made it easier and easier to be much more forthright. But I do see it just as an extension of who I already am. It’s not like a new coat or anything.