Sound, Mediation, and Meaning

in Miles Davis’s *A Tribute To Jack Johnson*

by

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Department of Music
Duke University

Date: November 21, 2008

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Mark Anthony Neal

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Miles Davis, never one for self-effacing humility, took his boasting to new heights when he proclaimed in a *Rolling Stone* interview from December 1969, “I could put together the greatest rock and roll band you ever heard.” Most critics agree that *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, recorded between February and April of 1970, was his attempt to do just that. The album featured an ensemble that was closer to a rock power trio than a jazz quintet, musicians who were as schooled in rock and R&B as in jazz, and a prominent use of emerging instrument and studio technologies previously unheard in Davis’s music. In highlighting these stylistic markers, *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* made definitive the musical transition that Davis’s immediately preceding works had set in motion.

Though few fans of the era would have been surprised by Davis’s invocation of the value-laden vocabulary of “greatness” in describing his music, many were taken aback by his desire to associate with what he termed “rock and roll.” For a musician trained in the jazz tradition and revered as a master of the genre, the intentional incorporation of influences from contemporary popular music was viewed by many jazz listeners as nothing short of heretical. What did it mean, then, for Davis to make such a claim – and such an album – at the particular time that he did?
To address these two questions, I investigate in my dissertation the production, circulation, and reception of both the stand-alone album *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* and the documentary film for which parts of the album were initially the soundtrack.

Combining my training in music with scholarly perspectives on identity politics, technology studies, film studies, and African American social and political history, I demonstrate how this recording comprises both a signal incursion into accepted jazz practice, and a unique window onto vital debates around jazz, popular culture, and identity constructions in the U.S. in the early 1970s. This dissertation thereby offers one approach for continuing the critical re-evaluation of fusion jazz that has prominently been in progress since the late 1990s.
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Acknowledgements

Today is perhaps the second-happiest day of my life, because it is the day that I write the final words of a dissertation project that has dominated my thinking throughout my time in graduate school, and – in the many intellectually overwhelming moments – has seemed like it may well never end. This day is overshadowed only by a day just over five years ago, when the most wonderful woman I’ve ever known agreed to spend the rest of her life with me. She’s been my constant companion since then, offering support, encouragement, and motivation at all the right times. More importantly, she has been a reminder to me that life is about so much more than music and music scholarship, especially at those times (all too often!) when my successes and failures at the two nearly robbed me of all reasonable perspective. So I begin by saying thank you to the woman who has probably sacrificed even more than I have to see this project come to its conclusion. Alisa, I would not have completed this dissertation were it not for your support and encouragement. It will sound familiar if I tell you again that two of your many gifts to me are that you make life fun, and you keep me sane. So thank you for the gift that you are to me, and thank you for the hope you give me for the future.

I offer my sincere thanks to all those who have read and commented on various portions of this dissertation along the way. I thank my dissertation advisor, Paul
Berliner, and the members of my committee – Tom Brothers, Mark Katz, and Mark Anthony Neal – for their support and their constant willingness to give of their time for the sake of this project. I thank Anthony Kelley, who was a helpful presence throughout the dissertation process; from early conversations that helped to refine my thinking on jazz to final words of encouragement as the project neared its completion. I thank Steve Pond, who not only provided a methodological model for this work with his own dissertation and book, but also read chapters, heard conference presentations, responded to emails and phone calls, and in general did more to assist me in this project than it was probably reasonable to ask him to.

I thank my colleagues who have helped to sharpen my thinking about this dissertation. A year-long grant in 2006-2007 through the Mellon Foundation allowed me to benefit from the interdisciplinary perspectives of the members of the Franklin Center’s Dissertation Working Group. Their contributions were notably helpful for early drafts of Chapter Three. The longsuffering members of the music department’s dissertation support group – Joyce Kurpiers, Quyen Tran, Jessica Wood, and Jenny Woodruff – were faithful readers for the nearly two years of the group’s existence. In particular, I want to thank Matthew Somoroff, who I’m sure has read more of this dissertation than he wanted. Matthew has been a model for me of collegial support, from his generosity with his time, to his willingness to share his expansive knowledge of jazz, to his valuable critical insight that has informed not only this dissertation but also
how I think about music scholarship more broadly. I also thank those who have contributed to this project through sharing their thoughts at the conferences where I have been privileged to present portions of this work: the 2005 South Central Graduate Music Consortium, the 2006 Society for Ethnomusicology, and the 2007 Society for American Music. Finally, I am grateful to all those who contributed reference assistance and general expertise along the way, most notably Bob Belden, Alan Bodian, Peter Losin, Paul Tingen, Ryan Maloney at the Institute of Jazz Studies, and Matt Snyder at the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center.

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Rick and Judy Smith, who have always faithfully supported me, even when it was never quite clear why it took so long to write a dissertation. And, Mom, although I know you’re willing, you really don’t have to read anything beyond this page.
Introduction

“Like it or not, the developing new jazz of the Seventies may very well prove to be as controversial and divisive as bop was in the Forties.”¹ – Don Heckman

* * * * *

“The winds of change are blowing o’er the land.”² So begins critic Charles Suber’s insightful editorial in *Down Beat* magazine on the status of jazz in the U.S. in 1969. According to Suber, existing music technologies were changing, models of music education were changing, U.S. population demographics were changing, and – as a consequence – the definition of jazz was changing. Suber dismisses the prominent argument from the time that “jazz is dead,” characterizing it as a nostalgia-induced “mournful wail of self pity.” Instead, he attempts to avoid conceptualizing jazz as an historically or stylistically particular genre, asserting that “jazz is alive and well and living wherever you wish it to be.” Suber argues that “jazz” should not be used as a descriptor for an exclusive musical style but instead as an “umbrella term” that can embrace everything from contemporary popular music, including “most of soul, rhythm-and-blues, and bits and pieces of ever evolving rock,” to electronic music that incorporates the diversity of contemporary technological developments. Although

Suber does not have the space in this limited editorial to expand on what is gained from his proposed redefinition, his writing does offer provocative insight into the cultural politics of jazz in the late 1960s.

In part, this editorial continues the longstanding debate among jazz listeners over the nature and scope of jazz and over who has the right to define and police its borders. As numerous scholars have demonstrated, such questions were by no means new to jazz listeners in the 1960s, with arguments over the changing definitions of jazz being a constitutive element of the very project of constructing a “jazz tradition.” As I will describe further below, whereas previous disagreements had ultimately been resolved in the promotion of a particular dominant narrative for jazz, this late-1960s moment marks a point of rupture in jazz historiography that, in many ways, continues to the present. While some have lauded this as a moment when jazz sought to revitalize itself by continuing in the established practice of embracing a diversity of musical styles or by reaching out to its populist roots, others have dismissed it as a commercial

corruption of the music’s artistic purity that advocates had been striving to achieve for jazz since the 1940s.4

The lasting impact of this rupture raises the issue of what musical, discursive, and structural components enabled such a unique and enduring break within jazz historiography. As Suber’s editorial implies, in the late 1960s this debate was significantly inflected by the emergence of new popular music styles as well as new technologies impacting the processes of musical creation. The relevance of these two developments had first prominently surfaced among jazz listeners in 1967 as Down Beat and Jazz magazines both made important editorial shifts in the scope of their music coverage, opting to begin including contemporary popular music in their publications.5 Matthew Brennan has argued that economic factors motivated these editorial shifts, pointing out the pressures placed on the magazines by the various instrument manufacturers who comprised the magazines’ primary sources for advertising revenue.


5 In June 1967, Down Beat announced its new policy of including “rock” music in its coverage. The following month, Jazz magazine initiated a similar policy, reflecting this decision with its titular change to Jazz & Pop. See editorials addressing these shifts in Jazz & Pop (August and November, 1967) and Down Beat (June and July 1967).
Those manufacturers, upon determining that the majority of the magazines’ readership comprised student musicians who were as eager to learn about contemporary popular music as they were jazz, insisted that the magazines make themselves more topically appealing to those readers. However, as Iain Anderson has argued, by the late 1960s, jazz and popular music had long since been constructed as oppositional genres, with popular music ultimately facilitating jazz’s emergence as an art music by adopting the “vulgarity, permissiveness, and rebellion once associated with ‘America’s art form.’”

Hence, at the same time that the leading jazz magazines were sensing the economic necessity of expanding their coverage to include popular music, the solidifying constructions of difference between jazz and popular music were making such a decision ideologically problematic. The discourses of value and cultural hierarchy which, in the late 1960s, circumscribed jazz and popular music as irreconcilable, contributed to this debate. Furthermore, these discourses, along with issues of technology, audience demographics, and economics were articulated with

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7 Iain Anderson, This Is Our Music: Free Jazz, the Sixties, and American Culture (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), p. 35.

8 Indeed, as Brennan argues, though these magazines made at least nominal efforts towards including rock and popular music, those efforts failed due in part to the lack of rock expertise among their editorial staffs as well as the rise of other, rock-centered publications such as Rolling Stone magazine. See Brennan, “Down Beats,” (2007), pp. 115-138.
constructions of social and cultural identity as well as style-based notions of musical integrity to enable this unique moment of controversy in jazz.

Miles Davis did little in the late 1960s to shy away from this controversy. In fact, as Stuart Nicholson has argued, Davis became “its most charismatic figure” while supplying symbolic validation for the musical integrity of the emerging, though already contentious style now broadly referred to as fusion jazz. ⁹ Not only did Davis adopt many of the musical and sartorial characteristics that were prominent in much popular culture of the late 1960s, but he also regularly made sweeping assertions to the press about jazz’s relative lack of value in relation to the changing contemporary world. In addition to chiding interviewers at the time for referring to his music as “jazz,” Davis once went so far as to boast, in an intentionally confrontational flourish, “I could put together the greatest rock and roll band you ever heard.” ¹⁰

⁹ Stuart Nicholson, Jazz-Rock: A History (New York: Schirmer Books, 1998), p. 130. As the genre-based nomination for this music varies, I adopt Steven Pond’s term “fusion jazz” as the most appropriate and most thoughtful designation thus far proposed. See his discussion in Head Hunters, pp. 10-18.

Davis ultimately proved less than eager to embrace the full scope of this claim.\(^{11}\) However, its coincidence with Davis’s organization of a new band, his related adoption of new instrument technologies and new approaches to composition, as well as his new methods for recording in the studio collectively demonstrate that his comment was more than an empty rhetorical provocation. In 1969, in fact, Davis was in the midst of recording a series of albums that critics would describe precisely as examples of rock-influenced music.\(^{12}\) Although evaluations varied widely, critics who rejected this new approach and those who embraced it all agreed on one point: this was a music that was not to be ignored.\(^{13}\)

**Fusion Jazz Scholarship and Criticism**

Since the early 1970s, however, most jazz writers and scholars have neglected not only Davis’s music from the time but also the vast majority of the music known as fusion jazz. With a few notable exceptions, writers have paid little attention to this

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11 In an interview conducted in June 1970, Davis flatly denied ever making the claim, noting, “I think I can put together a better rock ‘n’ roll band than Jimi Hendrix? What’s a rock ‘n’ roll band? The only rock I know is the rock of cocaine. Well, imagine me saying I think I can do something.” Zygote, “Miles Davis,” p. 33.


music, either to chronicle its history or to offer a critical assessment of its impact. Recently, a variety of writers have begun to redress these very issues by considering the musical characteristics and cultural politics of fusion jazz, as well as its potential contributions to contemporary critical theory. Stuart Nicholson laid an important foundation for much of this work with his 1998 book *Jazz-Rock: A History*, through which he provides an encyclopedic survey of fusion jazz from the mid-1960s through the mid-1990s. Ethnomusicologist Steven Pond was the first to build upon Nicholson’s work with his groundbreaking dissertation from 2000, revised and published in 2005 as *Head Hunters: The Making of Jazz’s First Platinum Album*. Pond offers an exhaustive study of Herbie Hancock’s 1973 *Head Hunters* album, the highest selling jazz album of the decade. Drawing upon the work of sociologist Georg Simmel, Pond situates this album musically, biographically, technologically, and commercially, in what he terms the productive “web of affiliations” through which the album’s significance becomes apparent. Musically, he discusses the individual contributions of both the performers and the producers, and he rightly draws attention to the ways in which technological

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14 Two of the more notable exceptions are: Julie Coryell and Laura Friedman, *Jazz-Rock Fusion: The People, the Music* (New York: Delta, 1978) which provides a valuable collection of brief interviews with many of the top fusion jazz musicians of the 1970s; and Greg Tate, “The Electric Miles, Parts One and Two [1983]” reprinted in *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), pp. 68-85 which attempts to inaugurate a revisionist exploration of Davis’s music between 1969 and 1983.

15 Nicholson, *Jazz-Rock*. 
developments enabled and impacted the musical results. Moreover, his insightful study of the relationships among the album, genre, and marketing bring into stark relief the value of such considerations while importantly maintaining the perspective that commercial concerns convey “only part of the story” of fusion jazz. Through the variety of analytic perspectives he employs, Pond accomplishes two related goals: (1) he provides a comprehensive and definitive study of one of jazz’s landmark recordings, and (2) he demonstrates the value for fusion jazz studies of a multifaceted methodology that successfully accounts for the diversity of interlinked dimensions significant for understanding the music. Of particular value to the current study were Pond’s inclusion of post-production decisions in the broader realm of musical interaction, and his careful recognition of marketing considerations as influential on, but not exclusively definitive of, the making of Head Hunters.16

Music scholar Kevin Fellezs has recently added to the critical studies of fusion jazz with his 2004 dissertation “Between Rock and a Jazz Place: Intercultural Interchange in Fusion Musicking.” His primary interest is in exploring the various social transformations realized through what he terms, drawing upon Christopher Small, “fusion musicking.” Focusing on four different case studies, Fellezs demonstrates some

16 Pond, Head Hunters, pp. 28, 26, 25; and 117-154 for production as artistic interaction, 155-186 for the discussion of marketing.
of the ways that fusion musicians performed and embraced alterity through sound. Through emphasizing the racial and gendered “border crossings” of groups led by Miles Davis and Joni Mitchell, for example, Fellezs argues for fusion jazz as a space wherein “hegemonic social relations” are productively challenged. Through tracing the artistry of John McLaughlin and Herbie Hancock, Fellezs demonstrates how the spiritual, commercial, and artistic discourses on fusion jazz upset existing “normative . . . aesthetic and critical hierarchies.” These analyses contribute to his larger project of theorizing “fusion-ing” as a performative process “that produces hybrid cultural objects and systems,” thereby contributing to post-colonial discourse and critical theory more broadly.17

Finally, in 2007 Lawrence Wayte completed a dissertation titled “Bitches Brood: The Progeny of Miles Davis’s Bitches Brew and the Sound of Jazz-Rock” in which he devotes individual chapters to the constitutive musical roles that electric guitars, keyboards, drums, and electric basses played in the sound of early fusion jazz. Wayte examines the materiality of the instruments, the physicality of performance, and the particular sonic – and especially timbral – results in order to map an “aural landscape”

17 Kevin Fellezs, “Between Rock and a Jazz Place: Intercultural Interchange in Fusion Musicking” (PhD Diss: University of California at Santa Cruz, 2004), pp. 2 and 38. This dissertation is soon to be published in a revised form by Duke University Press. For an additional critical study by Fellezs of the contemporary discourses with which Tony Williams’s early fusion jazz was articulated, see “Emergency! Race and Genre in Tony Williams’s Lifetime” Jazz Perspectives 2/1 (May 2008), pp. 1-27.
of early fusion jazz. As a part of this larger taxonomy of instruments prominently associated with fusion jazz, Wayte offers a detailed explanation of the impact that electric guitar construction has on timbre and of how timbre, in turn, impacts performance style and genre-based coding. Wayte ultimately moves beyond a discussion of genre to demonstrate the broader formations of “cultural meanings and codes” associated with these particular instruments in the early 1970s.18

These three studies, along with Stuart Nicholson’s foundational survey, represent an important intervention in the historiography of fusion jazz and in the broader field of jazz studies. Additionally, in the cases of Fellezs and Wayte, they bring greater scholarly attention to a period of Miles Davis’s career that has historically been neglected. As Davis scholar Paul Tingen has noted, although Davis is one of the most-studied figures in all of jazz, his music from the late 1960s until his death in 1991 has not been given the same degree of critical attention afforded his earlier music.19 What

18 Lawrence A. Wayte, “Bitches Brood: The Progeny of Miles Davis’s Bitches Brew and the Sound of Jazz-Rock” (PhD Diss: University of California at Los Angeles, 2007), pp. 90-142, 34.

attention it does garner from biographers and critics is often notably ungenerous and unilaterally dismissive.\textsuperscript{20}

Since the 1990s, two scholars in particular have contributed article-length studies of Davis’s early fusion period that have begun to provide critical nuance and scholarly rigor to the music.\textsuperscript{21} Gary Tomlinson’s 1991 article, “Cultural Dialogics and Jazz: A White Historian Signifies,” represents an important step in demonstrating the unique value of Davis’s early fusion jazz, while also drawing attention to the interpretive value of literary and critical theory when applied to the music. Drawing upon theories espoused by literary scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and philosopher Valentin Mudimbe, among others, Tomlinson argues for a revaluation of Davis’s early fusion jazz. He questions the methodological assumptions of much previous jazz writing; assumptions

\textsuperscript{20} Perhaps the best known criticism of this period comes from Stanley Crouch’s “Play the Right Thing” \textit{The New Republic} (February 12, 1990), pp. 30-37, where he accuses Davis of selling out, genuflecting before the commercial, and pimping himself in order to make money.

\textsuperscript{21} Four other scholarly works on Davis’s fusion music are less directly valuable for the current study. Victor Svorinich offers a brief musicological analysis of the recording sessions and the musical content of two of Davis’s fusion albums. See Svorinich, “Electric Miles: A Look at the \textit{In a Silent Way} and \textit{On the Corner Sessions}” \textit{Annual Review of Jazz Studies} 11 (2000-2001), pp. 91-107. Michael E. Veal issues a call for a reconsideration of Davis’s fusion music in his “Miles Davis’s Unfinished Electric Revolution” \textit{Raritan} 22/1 (Summer 2002), pp. 153-163. Chris Smith draws upon many of Davis’s concert performances from the 1980s in the context of his study of Davis’s use of physical and verbal gestures in the creation of what he terms a “ritual space” of performance. See Smith, “A Sense of the Possible: Miles Davis and the Semiotics of Improvised Performance” in \textit{In the Course of Performance} edited by Bruno Nettl (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 261-289. Finally, David Sanford analyzes examples of musical borrowing in \textit{Agharta} to demonstrate how jazz has utilized “numerous outside sources to evolve or modernize itself” (iii). See Sanford, “‘Prelude (Part 1)’ from \textit{Agharta}: Modernism and Primitivism in the Fusion Works of Miles Davis” (PhD Diss: Princeton University, 1998).
that have resulted in a de facto jazz canon that ascribes “timeless aesthetic value” to tunes instead of analyzing them as historically particular creations. Tomlinson proposes an aesthetic of dialogics which, when applied to Davis’s early fusion, emphasizes the collaborative impulse behind his music, including its stylistic convergence, racial inclusivity, and instrumental and timbral expansiveness. Tomlinson thereby demonstrates a productive approach to the study of Davis’s early fusion jazz that moves beyond the canonic concerns of transcendence and formal value and instead allows Davis’s music to be seen not as an abandonment of existing musical conventions but rather as “one of the richest stylistic amalgams in jazz history.”

Eric Porter, in his 2001 article “‘It’s About That Time’: The Response to Miles Davis’s Electric Turn,” takes up Tomlinson’s argument as a way of situating the historical production and critical reception of Davis’s early fusion jazz in the context of prominent discourses of cultural nationalism in the 1960s and beyond. Tomlinson emphasizes musical style and aesthetics in arguing for the importance of recognizing the dialogic and hybrid nature of jazz when analyzing Davis’s early fusion. Porter, however, understands such stylistic evaluations as functions of each critic’s broader views of the historical legacy of 1960s era cultural nationalism. For example, Porter

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demonstrates how Stanley Crouch has been critical of 1960s cultural nationalism, viewing it as “a breakdown of social vision and a failure of black male cultural authority.” Crouch’s evaluation of Davis’s early fusion jazz results from this broader understanding, with Crouch criticizing the music as a failure due to its “commercial” rather than “aesthetic” construction of black authenticity. For Crouch, such a move symbolizes Davis’s abandonment in the late 1960s of the “black cultural value, integrity, and autonomy” that jazz could and should represent for African Americans. Through this and other examples, Porter draws attention to the broader cultural and political contexts in which fusion jazz critics were writing in order to demonstrate one of the reasons behind the music’s accrual of specific political significance.

In addition to Tomlinson and Porter, several authors writing for general readers have recently penned accessible works that aim to draw attention to and validate Davis’s music since the late 1960s. Paul Tingen’s 2001 book Miles Beyond: The Electric Explorations of Miles Davis, 1967-1991 offers an impressive survey of Davis’s music since the 1960s, with particular attention to the music up to 1975. Tingen draws upon

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23 Eric Porter, “‘It’s About That Time’: The Response to Miles Davis’s Electric Turn” in Miles Davis and American Culture ed. Gerald Early (Saint Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 2001), pp. 130-147 at 144-145 and 134, respectively.

24 Tingen, Miles Beyond. Though Greg Tate’s two 1983 articles were among the earliest critical evaluations of Davis’s fusion jazz, no prominent critical discussions followed, until the emergence in the 2000s of Tingen’s book, along with books by George Cole and Philip Freeman. See Tate, Flyboy, pp. 68-84.
interviews he conducted with nearly fifty of Davis’s musical associates from the period, emphasizing their perspectives as a way to counteract much of the existing writing that Tingen sees as unfairly denigrating Davis’s post-1960s work. George Cole’s 2005 book *The Last Miles: The Music of Miles Davis, 1980-1991* takes up chronologically where Tingen leaves off, providing exhaustive discographical detail about Davis’s recordings from the 1980s. Similar to Tingen, Cole includes extensive quotations from interviews he conducted with thirty-one of the thirty-six musicians who played in Davis’s bands during the 1980s. Cole and Tingen thereby collectively value the perspectives of those musicians who were involved in creating the music under study. Philip Freeman, in his 2005 book *Running the Voodoo Down: The Electric Music of Miles Davis*, takes a different approach, altogether avoiding interviews with relevant musicians in favor of a style modeled in part on Greg Tate’s earlier writing on Davis. Freeman takes a more topical rather than strictly chronological approach, including individual chapters on, for example, production techniques used on Davis’s albums throughout the 1970s, the importance of bassist Michael Henderson in the development of Davis’s music in the early 1970s, and the rise in prominence of guitarists in Davis’s bands throughout the

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1970s. Freeman’s work is thereby more of a selective interpretive reading of Davis’s fusion jazz than a comprehensive, discographical, interview-based study of the era.

These works collectively bring productive nuance to the study of Miles Davis’s early fusion period while pointing out the ongoing need for more focused studies of the specific production and reception of Davis’s individual albums from that time. The Tomlinson and Porter articles, in particular, join with the three book-length works by Pond, Fellezs, and Wayte, to make a scholarly case for the critical value of fusion jazz within the academy. In their repertorial emphasis, these works draw attention to a body of previously marginalized music, and in the diversity of their methodological approaches, they contribute to the recent expansion of the nature and scope of jazz studies in the academy, to which I now turn.

**New Jazz Studies**

In 1991, with the publication of his watershed article “Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography,” Scott DeVeaux uncovered and problematized the ideologies behind the creation in the twentieth century of what he terms “something like an official history of jazz.” As DeVeaux describes it, this official history has gone through several transitions, including a move from (1) a “static, anti-developmental,  

anti-modernist view” that characterized jazz historiography up to the 1940s, (2) through an essence/evolution model that allows jazz to embrace both “an honorable past and a hopeful future,” and (3) to a construction of the “mainstream” by the 1960s that embraces “any body of music neither so conservative as to deny the possibility or desirability of further development, nor so radical as to send that development in uncontrollable directions.” These three transitions all share in common an “assumption that the progress of jazz as art necessitates increased distance from the popular.”

DeVeaux acknowledges his concern over this trend, which he sees as being amplified by the “deadening uniformity of cultural meaning” resulting in part from jazz’s move into the academy. In calling for future jazz scholarship unbound by the dominant narrative’s limitations, DeVeaux advocates for a methodology “that is less invested in the ideology of jazz as aesthetic object and more responsive to issues of historical particularity.” He concludes, “Only in this way can the study of jazz break free from its self-imposed isolation, and participate with other disciplines in the exploration of meaning in American culture.”

Since DeVeaux’s article, the academic study of jazz has “broken free” in significant ways from the disciplinary strictures of its past. A case in point is the jazz

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27 DeVeaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition,” pp. 525, 535, 537, 550, and 553, respectively. For a work that traces many of the trends in jazz scholarship since DeVeaux’s article, see Sherrie Tucker, “Deconstructing the Jazz Tradition: The ‘Subjectless Subject’ of New Jazz Studies” The Source: Challenging Jazz Criticism vol. 2 (2005), pp. 31-46.
panel at the 1988 meeting of the Modern Language Association, which was a catalyst in the development of the multidisciplinary field now commonly referred to as New Jazz Studies. Through a combination of jazz studies groups, along with publications ranging from individual articles to collective anthologies to book projects, scholars from a variety of disciplines have contributed to what Ingrid Monson has characterized as “a trend toward social and cultural histories of jazz that has been under way since the early 1990s.” Broadly speaking, these works focus on those “historical particularities” that DeVeaux referenced rather than on contributing to any overarching notion of the jazz tradition. In embracing these new approaches, the works published in the 1990s and beyond have raised a series of productive questions: What does it mean to study jazz? What are the limits of jazz scholarship, either repertorial or methodological? Who has the right to write authoritatively about jazz?


It is in this dual context of a renewed scholarly interest in fusion jazz, along with a reinvigorated multidisciplinary field of jazz studies, that my current dissertation is situated. My intent with this study is to raise further awareness about a period of musical creation that has only recently begun to garner significant critical attention, while also bridging some of the various ways of knowing and studying jazz. More specifically, I combine my training in music with scholarly perspectives on identity politics, technology studies, film studies, and African American social and political history. I apply this scholarship to a particular album, Miles Davis’s *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* (1971), in order to build upon the recent critical reevaluation of the cultural politics of early fusion jazz.

*Recordings in Jazz Scholarship*

This dissertation centers on a particular studio recording, thereby drawing upon the strengths of the longstanding practice, established with the earliest historical and critical writing on jazz, of utilizing recordings as foundational source materials. As Gunther Schuller noted in his important musicological work from 1968, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development*, “The jazz historian . . . is forced to evaluate the only thing
that is available to him: the recording.”

To cite earlier examples, Hugues Panassié pointed out his dependence on recordings for his 1936 study of jazz, while André Hodeir was careful to note in his 1956 collection of writings, “The judgments of jazz in this book are based on recordings.”

While earlier scholars consistently acknowledged recordings as the exclusive sonic source material for constructing their histories of jazz, it was less common for them to cast a critical eye on the impact that the medium of the recording might have on the music about which they were writing. Similarly, they showed little interest in how recording’s commodification of music impacted either its circulation within an increasingly consumer-based society or of how the economic concerns implicit in music’s commodification influenced discourses of musical integrity within the jazz genre. For these writers, recordings were valuable primarily for their role as repositories for an otherwise ephemeral musical product. To the extent to which Schuller and others


31 See Hugues Panassié, Hot Jazz: The Guide to Swing Music trans. Lyle and Eleanor Dowling (New York: M. Witmark and Sons, 1936 [1934]), pp. 20-21, who outlines a twofold argument for the value of recordings in jazz: (1) that a record is “the ideal medium” for preserving jazz’s otherwise ephemeral improvisations and (2) that his location in France precludes him from hearing in person most of the prominent jazz musicians, who perform almost exclusively in the U.S. For the André Hodeir quotation, see Jazz: Its Evolution and Essence trans. David Noakes (New York: Grove, 1956), p. 2.

32 For one of the more thoughtful early analyses of the respective roles of transcriptions and recordings in jazz scholarship, see Winthrop Sargeant, Jazz: Hot and Hybrid (New York: Arrow, 1938), pp. 1-26.
did address the impact that recordings could have on the creation of jazz histories, their comments typically fell into one of two categories. For one, they revealed a suspicion that recordings offered an inaccurate representation of how the music “really” sounded in a given period. This was the case, for example, when the absence of drums on jazz recordings from the 1920s was understood to result from their potential distortion of the musical balance due to existing limitations of recording technologies rather than on their lack of use in jazz ensembles from the time. Another example is when the temporal limitations of a 78-rpm disc were seen to obscure the representative improvisatory longevity prized in early jam sessions. A second category of evaluation centers more on improvements in audio fidelity and is generally conveyed as a defensive optimism on the part of writers that a recording was truly capable of conveying all information of musical importance for understanding a performance or a particular musical aesthetic. André Hodeir, for example, asserted in 1956 that recordings “have reached a stage of technical perfection” that justifies their use as reliable sonic repositories.

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33 For the categorization that follows, I have drawn upon Gabriel Solis, “‘A Unique Chunk of Jazz Reality’: Authorship, Musical Work Concepts, and Thelonious Monk’s Live Recordings from the Five Spot, 1958” *Ethnomusicology* 48/3 (fall 2004), pp. 315-347 at 337.

34 For a more thorough articulation of this approach, see Schuller, *Early Jazz*, p. x. For an explication of these and other “phonograph effects” that avoids the tone of suspicion, see Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 72-84.

For these analysts, such considerations were essential for studies of musical style that sought to detail a musician’s improvisatory vocabulary, to clarify the prominence of particular instruments in particular periods, or to transcribe individual musical contributions in order to analyze musical interaction in a specific group setting. These considerations are less helpful, however, for a variety of other scholarly concerns. For example, they offer little insight into theorizing the role of recordings in genre-based constructions of musical authenticity or in considering the impact of a recording’s transformation of music into a material commodity. Moreover, they do little to facilitate an understanding of how recordings circulate among various communities who in turn create meaning out of the content and form of those recordings, nor of the ways in which recordings both circumscribe and occlude that which exists as jazz history.

Indeed, jazz scholars since the 1990s have begun to acknowledge the limitations of these earlier studies’ “primarily phonocentric” approaches, such as their emphases on musical style and stylistic evolution. One response to such approaches is exemplified by the two volumes of essays Krin Gabbard edited in 1995, titled Representing Jazz and Jazz Among the Discourses. In what might be termed a “post-phonocentric” approach, the contributors to these volumes rely less directly on recordings than did earlier writers,

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thereby complementing or – in some cases – correcting these earlier studies. Instead of continuing the earlier trend of jazz scholarship that was “chiefly devoted to legitimation” of jazz as music, contributors to these volumes emphasize jazz’s connections to a variety of extra-musical media – most notably the literary and the visual, including film, dance, dress style, and photography – in order to draw attention to some of the variety of meanings jazz has accrued throughout its history.37 These authors collectively demonstrate the interpretive vistas that become available when studies of jazz move beyond an emphasis on recordings and into the diversity of experiences, embedded in particular cultural moments, that comprise the locations where jazz’s meanings are formed and expressed.

A second response to these earlier approaches has been to acknowledge the value of recordings while considering the ramifications of a musical history that has relied so heavily on recordings. Jed Rasula, in his contribution to Jazz Among the Discourses, titled “The Media of Memory: The Seductive Menace of Records in Jazz History,” draws attention to the role of recordings in constructing a jazz history, criticizing their use in creating an evolutionary model of stylistic progress. Rasula is critical of previous jazz scholarship that has utilized recordings as “numbers between which the historian fills in the dotted lines” in developing a particular historical

narrative. Instead, Rasula asserts that recordings “ruin chronology” in part because they do not necessarily circulate in the chronological order in which they were created, and they are not necessarily listened to by consumers in their original order. For Rasula, recordings should not be used for creating a particular history of jazz but instead should be recognized as a specific version of jazz history that has already been created. Since recordings are occasional and fragmentary consequences of sound’s mediation, their limitations must be recognized prior to their use in constructing a narrative history. Otherwise, they may do more to occlude jazz’s history than to clarify it. Rasula argues instead for the discursive primacy and historical autonomy of recordings in their own right, thereby offering a provocative and valuable theoretical incursion into the role of recordings in jazz scholarship. 38

Gabriel Solis, in an article from 2004 titled “‘A Unique Chunk of Jazz Reality’: Authorship, Musical Work Concepts, and Thelonious Monk’s Live Recordings from the Five Spot, 1958,” has extended this consideration of the use of recordings in jazz scholarship. Solis emphasizes that recordings do not exist “independently of people” but instead only take on meaning “because of a variety of ways people engage them in human contexts” – either through listening to the recording or “imagining the people

behind the recording.” Solis argues for the centrality of listeners in creating a recording’s meaning, writing, “There are, indeed people producing and consuming recordings, and the meanings of these recordings emerge from that engagement.”

While Rasula draws attention to the value of recordings as material texts through which a particular history of jazz has already been written, Solis emphasizes the centrality of reception-based interpretation in determining the particular meaning of a recording and, hence, that recording’s significance for jazz’s history.

Both writers represent a constructive scholarly intervention into the question of the use of recordings in jazz scholarship and, more specifically, in constructing a history of jazz. Recognizing recordings as mediations of both sound as well as of jazz history, these two scholars bring greater nuance to the question of what exactly it is we are studying when we claim to study jazz. Additionally, they draw attention to recordings not as value-free repositories of sound that provide unadulterated windows onto prior musical eras but rather as thoroughly mediated representations of particular moments in jazz history that are unavoidably value-laden.

Rasula and Solis both contribute productive insight into the value recordings can hold for jazz scholarship beyond their previously acknowledged roles as sonic repositories. They thereby demonstrate some of the interpretive possibilities and

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responsibilities of utilizing recordings in the creation of jazz scholarship. With this dissertation, I seek to expand upon their insights by asking how *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, as a material commodity, both mediates the sounds created by the musicians and also influences the ways in which specific listeners at a particular historical moment created meanings through its existence. As such, this dissertation acknowledges the unique value of the recording and attempts to account for the various questions such an acknowledgement raises. My approach essentially begins with the materiality of the recording and seeks to understand how it was created, circulated, and put to various uses in specific interpretive communities.

*Album Selection*

For those familiar with Davis’s early fusion jazz period, *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* may not seem the most obvious choice for an album study. *Bitches Brew* (1970) is undoubtedly the most iconic and most often cited Davis recording from the era, in part because of its unique commercial success in selling over 500,000 copies at the time of its release.40 However, several reasons recommended *Jack Johnson* as a uniquely productive case study for articulating the most salient aspects of the cultural politics of Davis’s early

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40 For example, in the widely used jazz survey textbook by Henry Martin and Keith Waters, *Bitches Brew* receives prominent attention in the chapter on fusion jazz, while *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* is not mentioned. See *Jazz: The First 100 Years* 2nd ed (Belmont: Thomson Schirmer, 2006), pp. 330-334.
fusion jazz. Though I hope to avoid contributing to a hagiography of Davis or to a revisionist history in which I argue for the aesthetic value of this album in relation to Davis’s recorded output, I would be remiss not to point out the superlative language that has been applied to the musical content of this album in the past. Both Miles Davis and his producer Teo Macero have agreed that this was among the most aesthetically successful recordings of Davis’s career. Cultural critic Greg Tate similarly celebrated the recording as “a masterpiece, a landmark, a signpost, and a synopsis. . . . It stands as the culmination of everything Miles had been reaching for since Filles de Kilimanjaro.”

Despite the acknowledged aesthetic success of this album, Jack Johnson’s less-than-spectacular sales record invites investigation into the prominent discourse of commercialism that has circumscribed the majority of popular criticism directed toward Davis’s early fusion jazz. Those jazz fans who contribute to this discourse often cite Bitches Brew’s impressive sales figures as evidence that Davis “sold out” his artistic integrity by showing greater concern for financial success than musical quality. A

As Macero put it, “I think that his Jack Johnson album was his finest and Miles agrees. Something happened in this album that far exceeded Bitches Brew. It was contemporary, new – it just had a newness that some of the albums did not have and I think that he made a great contribution as far as rock and jazz groups to follow and music in general.” Teo Macero, Response to Questionnaire for the Miles Davis Seminar in Tokyo [ca. 1977] (The Teo Macero Collection, JPB 00-8, Music Division, The New York Public Library: Box 16, Folder 18).

Tate, Flyboy, p. 77.

As I pointed out above in footnote 20, perhaps the best known criticism of this period comes from Crouch, “Play the Right Thing,” pp. 30-37. The discourse of commercialism as a corrupting influence,
Tribute to Jack Johnson’s sales of roughly 50,000 units allows me to engage with the idea of commercialism not as a statistical construct but rather as a discursive formation.\textsuperscript{44} Relatedly, focusing on this album enables me to avoid a potential outgrowth of the commercialism discourse that would privilege those albums that sold the most units as the most significant objects of critical investigation.

Interpreting Jack Johnson’s limited sales success, then, invites an expansion beyond the critical discourses which have dominated much popular writing on fusion jazz. The album’s titular invocation of the African American heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson, along with its function as a soundtrack for a 1970 documentary on Johnson, enables one such expansion.\textsuperscript{45} It not only foregrounds issues of race and

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however, has a long history in jazz writing. As Rudi Blesh put it in 1946, “Commercialism [is] a cheapening and deteriorative force, a species of murder perpetrated on a wonderful music . . . Commercialism is a thing not only hostile, but fatal to [jazz].” Quoted in DeVeaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition,” p. 529. For a more recent critical evaluation of the discourse of commercialism within jazz, see Simon Frith, “Is Jazz Popular Music?” Jazz Research Journal 1/1 (2007), pp. 7-23.

\textsuperscript{44} Notably, no Davis album since has rivaled Bitches Brew’s sales success. Nevertheless, Davis continued in the stylistic pursuits which are sometimes cited as evidence of his preoccupation with commercial concerns. Either Davis was too dense to realize that his music was not achieving commercial success, or – more likely – he was not creating this music solely or even primarily for the purpose of commercial gain. Though I give little direct attention to the issue in the remainder of this dissertation, the entirety of this project is a demonstration of a methodology that enables the study of fusion jazz apart from the distressingly persistent discourse of commercialism, born out of an outdated model of the isolated artistic genius separated from economic structures. Instead, this study accepts as a given the very real desire for economic advancement that music represented, particularly for those African Americans who came of age in the context of the discriminatory structures of the U.S. in the twentieth century. Moreover, it assumes economic concerns as structural realities in which all musicians must exist and not as automatically corrupting influences on an anterior aesthetic purity.

\textsuperscript{45} Jim Jacobs, producer, Jack Johnson, directed by William Cayton (The Big Fights, 1970).
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masculinity, but it also facilitates an articulation of the album with the cultural and identity politics of the U.S. in the early 1970s. The recording’s creation during a period when Davis was experimenting with radically new approaches to studio recording techniques and post-production sound manipulation enables another productive methodological expansion. Although Davis had begun adopting similar studio recording techniques in his work on *In a Silent Way* (1969) and *Bitches Brew* (1970), *Jack Johnson* represents a significant shift in approach. Admittedly, all three recordings emphasize tape splicing as a primary method for constructing individual tunes through post-production. Additionally, all three albums utilized recording environments which allowed for improvisatory jam sessions that emphasized open-ended interaction more than performances of discrete tunes.

However, the sessions for both *In a Silent Way* and *Bitches Brew* were held for the specific purpose of creating an album and occurred over a constrained and brief time period (one day for the former; three days for the latter). After the *Bitches Brew* sessions from August 19-21, 1969, however, Davis held sixteen different recording sessions between November 1969 and June 1970 with no apparent plans for immediate creation of an album.46 With each of these sessions, he utilized the studio as a space for

46 Those sessions took place on: November 19 and 28, 1969; January 27, 28; February 6, 18, 27; March 3, 17, 20; April 7; May 19, 21, 27; and June 3, 4.
experimenting with different personnel combinations and with a variety of musical styles. Though Davis may have envisioned some of the sessions eventually contributing to an album, his broader purpose was utilizing the studio for sonic exploration. Moreover, after the last of these sixteen sessions took place on June 4, 1970, Davis ceased recording in the studio for nearly two years. When he did return, it was again for the specific purpose of recording an album, in this case *On the Corner* (1972). His decision to cease recording in the studio further marks the sessions from the first half of 1970 as creatively distinct from those which both preceded as well as followed them.

In addition to these issues, two events had a significant practical impact on my decision to emphasize *Jack Johnson* in this dissertation. First, an archive of material that Teo Macero donated to the New York Public Library was processed and made fully available for scholarly research in the fall of 2004. As I spent time working through the archive, I discovered a wealth of previously unavailable information related either directly or indirectly to this album that made it particularly fertile ground for scholarly research. Additionally, I had the good fortune of hearing the entirety of the unedited session tapes from fourteen of the sixteen studio sessions Miles Davis led between November 1969 and June 1970. This provided me with an invaluable opportunity to

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47 After the June 4, 1970 session, Davis did not return to the studio until March 9, 1972 to record “Red China Blues.” His next significant studio venture was the *On the Corner* sessions on June 1, 2, 6, 12, and September 6 of 1972.
clarify several longstanding misconceptions about the album’s creation. These two events in particular reinforced the unique value of a study focused on *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*.

**Methodology**

In the work that follows, I investigate the creation, production, marketing, and reception of the stand-alone album *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* as well as the documentary film for which it was initially the soundtrack. Without downplaying the economic motivations in the creation and dissemination of this album, I hope to avoid conflating observations regarding marketing and commerce with ideas of a corruption of an anterior musical purity. Instead I strive to bring insight to the ways in which this album circulated within a consumer society by emphasizing the diverse and nuanced ways in which various listeners at the time situated and made meaning through the album. I will thus highlight the ways in which the music’s existence as a commodity mediates the meanings created by its listeners. Moreover, I will clarify the ways in which music-as-commodity influences discourses of musical authenticity, from broader concerns over marketing and genre to more particular conceptions of individual identity formation. I strive to understand this recording, drawing upon Timothy Taylor, as both

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48 Here my thoughts resonate with those of Steven Pond, who notes, “The influence of the market is not to be denied, but it tells only part of the story.” See Pond, *Head Hunters*, p. 25.
a text and a “culturally and historically specific utterance;” as both an object of study in its own right and a lens through which a particular historical moment can be viewed.  

I have also been influenced by Ronald Radano’s argument that, in order for music scholarship to do justice to the ways in which meanings accrue to sound, such scholarship must “account for the way discourse itself plays a generative role” in the creation of those meanings.  

A significant focus of this dissertation is thus on how meanings accrue to music once it exists as a material medium. As such, I have intentionally privileged the discourses and the specific vocabularies of those listeners, critics, and musicians who engaged with the album at the time of its release. At those points where a particular argument would be enhanced by discussing a specific portion of the album, I have found that it is most productive to reference the relevant portion of that recording for the purpose of providing the reader with further sonic clarification. This has been particularly important due to the nature of the sonic-based arguments in

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51 My work can thereby be understood as a complement to several previous studies that have emphasized the meaning(s) created by musicians in the context of group performance such as Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); and Robert Hodson, *Interaction, Improvisation, and Interplay in Jazz* (New York: Routledge, 2007). In a sense my approach is closer to that of Lewis Erenberg in its desire to privilege listener agency in creating meaning through music. See Erenberg, *Swingin’ the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. xiii-xiv.
this dissertation which, more often than not, deal with issues of timbre that are not adequately captured in available graphic representations. My expectation is that readers will consult the recording whenever necessary during their reading.

Chapter Overviews

As Charles Suber’s comments imply, and as Miles Davis’s invocation of the term “rock and roll” gestures toward, the musicians and producers for A Tribute to Jack Johnson utilized studio and instrumental technologies in ways that were decidedly unorthodox for those trained in jazz practices. Davis’s choice of musicians, his incorporation of electric instruments, and his invocation of the sonic conventions of contemporary popular music all contributed to an album that problematized many of the existing genre-based categories that were growing in prominence at the time. Moreover, Teo Macero’s innovative uses of post-production studio techniques helped to create the space of genre-based uncertainty this album occupied. In Chapters One and Two, then, I highlight the value of this intentional incorporation of emerging sonic technologies for early-1970s debates about the politics of genre, constructions of musical integrity, and broader notions of jazz historiography.

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In addition to the enabling role of technology in the making of *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, the album’s creation by an interracial group of musicians at the height of black cultural nationalism has much to contribute to an understanding of early-1970s American conceptions of race. Davis, his fans, and his critics were all eager to refer to this music as “black music” and the performance of it as “playing black.”\(^5\) In Chapter Three I discuss what it meant to “play black” and why it was important at the time to make such a claim about the content of the album. Additionally, I discuss the insight this album offers into constructions of masculinity at the time through its use as the soundtrack to a documentary film featuring a particularly hypermasculine and confrontational representation of Jack Johnson, the first African American heavyweight boxing champion. I demonstrate how the music was articulated with prominent ideologies of Black Power as well as the music’s contribution to the renewed interest in the figure of Jack Johnson, as most notably advanced in the late 1960s through the public discourse of Muhammad Ali.

In the fourth chapter, I highlight the ways in which the marketing of this album informs broader questions regarding the politics of popular culture in early 1970s America. Columbia Records, in an attempt to position this album before as broad an

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audience as possible, adopted a strategy that combined targeted print advertisements with concert venue selection in order to introduce this album to jazz fans, rock fans, countercultural youth, and African Americans. The primary advertisement for the album visually and linguistically draws attention to Miles Davis’s physical body, situating the body of the performer as the mediator between technology and musical authenticity, which are presented in the ad in oppositional terms. In this chapter, I situate the ad in the context of Columbia’s broader marketing strategy for Miles Davis at the time while further developing the issues of genre, race, masculinity, and technology that I raised in earlier chapters.

Finally, as mentioned above, though the music is best known today as a stand-alone album, it initially functioned as the soundtrack to a 1970 documentary film on Jack Johnson. In the fifth chapter, I utilize theories of sound in film in order to analyze the unique relationship between the music and the documentary. I also highlight the musical differences between the soundtrack and the stand-alone album while clarifying existing confusion over the relative artistic influence of Miles Davis and his producer Teo Macero in constructing the soundtrack. Additionally, I expand upon a portion of my argument from Chapter Three by situating the emergence of this documentary in the dual context of Jack Johnson historiography and black masculinity in the era of Black Power.
To return to the words Scott DeVeaux wrote now nearly two decades ago, “The time has come for an approach that is less invested in the ideology of jazz as aesthetic object and more responsive to issues of historical particularity.” In embracing this approach, I base my own readings of the album and of the materials articulated with the album on the perspectives of those listeners who heard the album at the time of its original release. To paraphrase Christopher Small, the question I am attempting to address with this dissertation is not “What does this album mean?” but rather, “What does it mean that this album was created at this time, in this place, with these musicians, and what does it mean that this album circulated among, and was put to various uses by, the variety of listeners for whom it held significance?” Ronald Radano reiterated DeVeaux’s criticism when he argued that the process and history of recording jazz has

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54 DeVeaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition,” p. 553.

55 For this reason, my use of Davis’s autobiography is intentionally limited. Questions regarding the identity of the narrative voice in the autobiography have been prominent since its publication. Moreover, even if one were to accept the narrator as Davis, use of the work would necessitate additional critical layers regarding issues of memory, history, and identity politics in crafting an autobiography, thereby distancing my analysis from the rich ground of interpretive voices in the early 1970s. For more on autobiographies in jazz history and on Davis’s autobiography in particular, see, e.g., Kathy Ogren, “‘Jazz Isn’t Just Me’: Jazz Autobiographies as Performance Personas” in Jazz in Mind, ed. Buckner and Weiland, pp. 112-127; Christopher Harlos, “Jazz Autobiography: Theory, Practice, Politics” in Representing Jazz, ed. Gabbard, pp. 131-166; and David Yaffe, Fascinating Rhythm: Reading Jazz in American Writing (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 150-197.

56 Small writes: “It is not enough to ask, What is the nature or the meaning of this work of music? . . . [Instead] we can ask the wider and more interesting question: What does it mean when this performance (of this work) takes place at this time, in this place, with these participants?” Christopher Small, Musicking: The Meaning of Performing and Listening (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1998), p. 10.
resulted in the recorded material being received “increasingly as an ahistorical and
depoliticized abstraction, a collection of timeless masterpieces.”57 It is my hope that,
through this dissertation, at least one such album can now be understood as a work that
is significantly enriched by realizing its articulation with those particular historical and
political discourses prominent in the U.S. at the time of the album’s release.

A Note on Titles

Because portions of the material created during the 1970 recording sessions have
been used to contribute to several commercial releases, a note of clarification is
necessary regarding the specific designations used in this dissertation. As I will describe
in Chapters One and Two, some of the material from the fourteen studio sessions held in
1970 was originally released in two forms: either as a part of the soundtrack to the 1970
documentary on Jack Johnson or as a part of the stand-alone album, released in 1971. In
2003, as a part of their ongoing reissue project, Columbia Records released The Complete
Jack Johnson sessions, which includes much more, though not all, of the studio material
recorded in 1970. In 2006 I was able to listen to the entirety of the unedited session reels
from all fourteen of the 1970 sessions. Hence, in what follows, I am careful to
distinguish among the music contained on: (1) the stand-alone album, (2) the

57 Radano, New Musical Figurations, p. 16.
soundtrack, (3) the 2003 complete reissue, and (4) the unedited session tapes that are not commercially available at present.

Additionally, regarding the stand-alone album, for the first printing of the album in 1971, the title on the cover read *Jack Johnson*. For the second printing released later that year, the title was listed as *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*. In this dissertation, I use the two titles interchangeably.
Interlude

Call him a genius, a provocateur, or a sell-out, but no one has ever accused Miles Davis of being musically stagnant. Never content to rest on the stylistic success of the past, Davis made a career out of embracing change. From bebop to cool jazz to hard bop to “time, no changes,” Davis had been involved in nearly every major stylistic development in jazz since the 1940s. And as the 1960s moved into the 70s, it was clear that Davis was at it again. Bitches Brew created a new musical world for a new listening audience. Miles Davis at Fillmore showed Davis overwhelming a venue for countercultural youth with innovative and confrontational sounds. As Davis began 1971 with the release of another new album, listeners were charged with anticipation about what he would do next.

With two half-hour tunes, it’s clear that Davis isn’t going for the pop singles market. But the distorted guitars, hypnotic bass riffs, and driving drum patterns aren’t exactly the musical stuff of a jazz recording either. What’s Davis up to now? And what is this sound that leaps off of A Tribute to Jack Johnson? From the driving rhythms of “Right Off” to the James Brown-inspired “Yesternow;” with a soul bassist, a rock drummer, and a jazz saxophonist, this seemingly schizophrenic album explodes musical categories and frustrates listener expectations. As Miles Davis entered the 1970s, he was making it more and more clear that his music was about change. With A Tribute to Jack Johnson, Davis was happily facing head-on the challenge of uniting disparate musicians and contrasting musical styles under his own aesthetic of inclusion.
and embrace. This was something new, but it was yet to be seen how far Davis could push the boundaries without alienating his audience, his critics, or his fellow musicians. And it was yet to be seen whether even a musician of Davis’s abilities could pull off such a radical stylistic transformation. When Jack Johnson landed with a thud on retail shelves in February 1971, it was a sound that gratified some and shocked others. But it was sound whose impact could not be denied.
Chapter One: In Search of a New Sound

“You take Miles Davis for instance. His surroundings – and I say his ‘surroundings’ because I mean the musicians he surrounds himself with – his environment, musically, has changed. It keeps changing all the time.”¹ – Lee Morgan

“I never think of music in . . . terms [of genre]. I operate on an entirely different basis. I mean, when a guy who calls himself a jazz fan comes up to me and says I’m not playing jazz anymore, it puzzles me. I never set out to play any one type of music because I’ve never thought of music being divided into different categories. What is a jazz fan anyway? Is he someone who wants to hear the same old clichés over and over again? Does he want to wear the same clothes all the time?”² – Miles Davis

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In the first half of 1970, Miles Davis was in search of a new sound. After performing and recording with the same four musicians for nearly half of the 1960s, Davis’s “second great quintet” had gradually disbanded, leaving him with both a musical void and a distinct opportunity.³ By 1970, Davis was completing the process of replacing four of the most original and respected improvisers then active in jazz, while at the same time addressing his desire to incorporate into his sound some of the


² Jane Ennis, “Miles Smiles” Melody Maker (January 9, 1971), pp. 16-17 at 17.

³ Ron Carter was the first to leave the quintet in July of 1968. Herbie Hancock ended his association with the live band one month later, though he continued to appear on Davis’s studio recordings through 1972. Tony Williams left the live band in late 1968 and made his last studio recording with Davis in February of 1969. Wayne Shorter was the last to leave the live band, in December of 1969, though he still performed with Davis at the Fillmore East in March of 1970. For more information on this transitional period in the broader chronological and stylistic context of Davis’s career, see: Carr, Miles Davis, pp. 209-292; Chambers, Milestones, book II, pp. 135-232; and Szwed, So What, pp. 252-303.
emerging popular music styles of the day. Throughout the 1960s, Davis had consistently emphasized the improvisatory nature of his music while maintaining a strong stylistic affinity with the jazz tradition. His identification with this tradition was implicit in his band’s instrumentation as well as the repertorial content of his live concerts. In terms of instrumentation, Davis’ band comprised the typical jazz makeup of upright bass, piano, and drums along with trumpet and saxophone. In terms of live repertory, his concerts featured performances of such jazz standards as “Stella By Starlight” and “‘Round Midnight.” Consequently, during his time with this quintet, Davis had maintained his stature as among the most respected musicians in all of jazz.4

But by the late 1960s, Davis was ready for something new. Times were changing, styles were evolving, and Davis was eager for his music to represent the uniqueness of the present instead of repeating the prominent styles of the past. As he told an interviewer in 1970, “The past is unimportant. . . . I have completely forgotten any music that was done more than a year ago.”5 Davis had similarly noted in an interview from the previous year, “I have to change. It’s like a curse. Old clichés die out and new ones


5 Zygote, “Miles Davis,” p. 28.
come in. I never look back.” Having never been one to allow a sense of tradition to hinder his own desire for sonic exploration, Davis, by 1970, was in the midst of one of the most radical explorations of his career. Taking often drastic steps in his search for a new sound, Davis emerged in the 1970s with a new band, a new style, and a largely new fan base. Three components, in particular, were integral to Davis’s new musical direction: performance venue, personnel, and instrumentation. As I argue below, through his extensive experimentation in the recording studio during the first half of 1970, Davis identified the studio as the most appropriate site for developing this new sound. Additionally, his recruitment of a Motown bass player along with a drummer and guitarist who both had performance experience in contemporary popular music brought new sonic dimensions to the overall sound of his band. Moreover, his corresponding incorporation of emerging instrument technologies including electric keyboards, electric basses, and guitar effects were also key components of the unique and uniquely new sound for which Davis was searching.

**Venue: Live Concerts vs. Studio Recordings**

Between January and June of 1970, Miles Davis led some fourteen different studio recording sessions. For Davis, this was a notably fertile period of studio work.

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7 Those dates were: January 27, 28; February 6, 18, 27; March 3, 17, 20; April 7; May 19, 21, 27; and June 3, 4. See Peter Losin, “Miles Davis Sessions: 1945-1991,”
Particularly in comparison with the previous year, when he had entered the studio a total of only seven times, the first half of 1970 marked an intense period of studio-based musical exploration.8 As of June 1970, however, Davis ceased recording in the studio for nearly two years.9 This flurry of studio activity, framed chronologically by a relative lack of studio sessions, was unique in Davis’s recent history as the 1970 sessions were not directly related to a specific forthcoming album. As I discussed in the Introduction, Davis held recording sessions in February and August of 1969 to create the music for In a Silent Way and Bitches Brew, respectively. In each case, Davis oversaw a relatively concentrated group of studio recording dates in order to create the music for one specific album. However, the two sessions in November of 1969 along with the fourteen sessions held between January and June of 1970 lacked this chronological concision and unifying musical conception. Instead of calling the sessions for the purpose of creating a specific album, Davis utilized them as opportunities for musical experimentation by employing different combinations of musicians in improvisatory musical settings that featured open-ended group jams instead of focused recordings of discrete tunes. Though the resulting material would go on to appear on portions of five albums


8 Davis’s 1969 studio sessions took place on: February 18, 20; August 19, 20, 21; November 19, 28.

9 After the June 4, 1970 session, Davis did not return to the studio until March 9, 1972 to record “Red China Blues.” His next significant studio venture was the On the Corner sessions on June 1, 2, 6, 12, and September 6 of 1972.
released over the course of the next decade, none of the sessions was held for the specific purpose of contributing to those albums.\textsuperscript{10} Instead, the 1970 sessions comprised a unique series of studio-based sonic explorations that were held not directly for the purpose of album creation but rather for the value of facilitating musical experimentation in the context of a studio setting.

Although the particular motivation for this flurry of studio activity was unique in Davis’s recent history, his alternation between extensive studio sessions and extended absences from the studio was far from uncommon in the context of his broader career. Between May 1963 and December 1964, for example, he did not take part in any studio recording sessions. This was again the case from February 1965 through September 1966.\textsuperscript{11} These periods of absence from the studio alternated with periods of extensive use of the studio, such as the nine studio sessions Davis organized in May and June of 1967.\textsuperscript{12} During his periods of studio inactivity, Davis was careful to maintain a recording schedule by utilizing his many live concerts as recording opportunities. This was the case in December 1965 when Davis’s quintet was recorded during a concert engagement at the Plugged Nickel in Chicago and again in June and December 1970.

\textsuperscript{10} Material recorded in these sessions would appear on the following albums: \textit{A Tribute to Jack Johnson} (1971), \textit{Live/Evil} (1971), \textit{Big Fun} (1974), \textit{Get Up With It} (1974), and \textit{Directions} (1981).

\textsuperscript{11} This period of inactivity was significantly influenced by Davis’s hip degeneration, which necessitated two operations in April and August of 1965. See Carr, \textit{Miles Davis}, pp. 202-203.

\textsuperscript{12} Those 1967 sessions took place on: May 9, 16, 17, 24; June 7, 13, 22, 23; and one unspecified session in June, resulting in the albums \textit{Sorcerer} (1967), \textit{Nefertiti} (1968), \textit{Water Babies} (1976), and \textit{Directions} (1981).
when Davis and his band were recorded in concerts at the Fillmore East in New York and at the Cellar Door in Washington, D.C., respectively. Throughout Davis’s recording career, the sites for his recording sessions regularly shifted between the studio and concert venues. At no time was this more apparent than in the period surrounding the fourteen recording sessions from the first half of 1970.

Listeners and critics have proposed various reasons as to why Davis would regularly alternate between recording venues. Gary Bartz, Davis’s saxophonist from August 1970 to March 1972, offers one explanation. He recalls that Davis felt that the band Bartz was a part of “shouldn’t go into the studio . . . because [the band] was so organic.” Bartz continues, “Instead of going into the studio, he would have almost every concert recorded.”13 Though Bartz’s use of “organic” can be interpreted in any number of ways, he seems to be implying that the band achieved a level of musical interaction in the live concerts for which the studio environment would not have been conducive.

There were, after all, significant differences between the musical expectations in place for live concerts in contrast to studio sessions. Whereas, for example, a studio session allowed for numerous starts and stops along with opportunities to work out the various musical parameters of a tune over time, the live concert environment was far

more constrained temporally. If a band did not begin or end a tune in an ideal fashion, or if a soloist got lost in a musical form, it would have been inappropriate for the band to stop the performance and then begin it again. In the studio, however, regular starts and stops of the musical performances were accepted and even expected as a part of the performance process. Additionally, the more intangible influences of an audience’s expectations and interactions were an integral part of the concert setting, thereby influencing that environment in ways that would not have been present in the studio.

Moreover, the musical immediacy of group interaction and the finality of a soloist’s improvisation were more pronounced in live concerts than in the studio. The studio allowed for several takes of a given solo that could then be edited either to shorten a solo that had gone on for too long or to combine together the best portions of two or more takes of a solo. In a live concert, however, there was no opportunity to go back and try a solo again or shorten a solo that had extended beyond an engaging length. The musical results of a studio recording, however, carried with them an expectation of permanence that was not a part of the more ephemeral live concert setting. Whereas a solo performed in a live concert was less likely to be remembered note-for-note in the years that followed, a solo recorded in a studio and released on an
album would have been listened to repeatedly and would have garnered the level of critical and analytical attention that repeated listenings invite.14

Finally, there would have been significant physical difference between concerts and studio sessions that impacted the group’s musical interaction. In a studio, the availability of sound monitors and the creation of a controlled aural space helped to guarantee that each musician would be able to hear all the other musicians. However, the use of sound partitions and the regular separation of musicians into individual rooms for the purpose of instrument differentiation in the recording mix could have impeded the visual cues and body language that are integral components of group interaction. In concert settings, however, these two issues would have been regularly reversed. One’s ability to hear all the other group members was contingent on the often-varied quality and availability of stage monitors, regularly resulting in a musician’s inability to hear another band member.15 Conversely, the band’s ability to arrange their physical layout on the concert stage would have helped to ensure open sightlines, thereby facilitating the visual aspects that contribute to a successful musical experience.

14 For a contemporary account of the various analytic differences between listening to a concert and listening to a recording, see Matthew W. Butterfield, “Music Analysis and the Social Life of Jazz Recordings” Current Musicology 71-73 (Spring 2001/2002), pp. 324-352.

15 As Chick Corea recalled regarding the period when he and Keith Jarrett were simultaneously playing amplified keyboard instruments in Davis’s band, “When Keith and I played live, there was really no communication. . . . I could never hear what Keith was playing and I doubt Keith ever heard a note I was playing. So it was hard to really play something together.” Quoted in Tingen, Miles Beyond, p. 117.
Hence, the physical, musical, and temporal aspects of a live concert would have contributed to a decidedly different musical environment than that which was available in a recording studio. According to Bartz, then, live concerts were particularly conducive at the time to facilitating a certain type of musical immediacy and group interaction. Bartz recalls that Davis was drawn to the musical potential of such interaction during Bartz’s time in the band, so he chose to exploit those opportunities by focusing on live concert recordings from late 1970 through early 1972.

Davis’s producer Teo Macero has similarly pointed out the ways in which the two different environments facilitate different forms of creative expression. As he recalls, after the studio sessions of 1970, Davis felt that he had taken his electric music as far as the studio would allow and that it was time to shift his focus to concert performances in order to pursue in that setting the musical ideas that had been previously developed in the studio. Critic Bob Blumenthal voiced a comparable idea in 1973, when he recognized the differing creative potentials afforded by a studio and a concert engagement. Overtly valuing the latter over the former, he argued that a studio recording loses an important aspect of the overall musical “environment.” As he explained:

By environment, I mean the effects of playing this music live versus recording in a studio. With so much added emphasis on electronics, there is obviously much more room to utilize the technology in a recording situation; the results, usually,
are too canned, however, and . . . [many] bands have been known to be vastly more impressive in clubs or concerts.\textsuperscript{17}

While Davis was less eager than Blumenthal to value one performance venue over the other, he did agree that the two facilitate significantly different modes of creativity which must be evaluated on their own distinct terms.\textsuperscript{18} As he put it in 1975:

I wish Columbia Records would get on the case and record me at [concert venues]. Whenever I play somewhere for three or four days, some historic music is being made. That stuff won’t come off the same way in a studio at 8 A.M. the next morning. All the spontaneity is gone.\textsuperscript{19}

From Davis’s perspective, the constraints of live concerts were more conducive to certain aspects of musical creation, which he articulated as “spontaneity” or “organicism.” Blumenthal and others agreed, adding that studios were advantageous for the use of certain technologies while concert venues contributed to an “environment” distinct from that which was available in the studio.

Particularly by the early 1970s, innovative studio technologies including multi-track recording, overdubbing, and post-production sound editing expanded further the creative and aesthetic differences between notions of musical interaction in a live concert


\textsuperscript{18} That Davis valued the aesthetic products from both concerts and studio sessions is implicitly supported by his approval in the early 1970s of albums that included only studio material (\textit{A Tribute to Jack Johnson}, 1971), only concert material (\textit{Miles Davis at Fillmore: Live at the Fillmore East}, 1970), and a combination of concert and studio material (\textit{Live/Evil}, 1971).

and those in a recording studio. These and other studio-based technologies facilitated
the creation and organization of sounds that could not be reproduced in concert settings.
Likewise, the conventions and constraints specific to live concerts were conducive to a
different experience of musical creation and interaction than that afforded by the
recording studio. In 1970, then, the decision to focus on recording in the studio for an
extended period of time was informed by the particular creative potentials engendered
by the technologies and conventions specific to the studio environment.

Davis recognized these distinct creative possibilities when he noted in 1970, “We
can’t duplicate [in a live concert] that [studio track] anyway, ’cause a live performance is
entirely different than what you just heard.”²⁰ Davis understood the studio to be a
different creative environment from a live concert, and he maintained distinct ideas
about what was musically appropriate in each setting. For Davis, live concerts
facilitated a sense of both immediacy and finality through the particular modes of group
interaction and improvisation that they made possible. In the studio, Davis equally
valued interaction and improvisation, but in the service of creating blocks of sound that
could then later be overdubbed, spliced, or otherwise edited in their use as source
material for future tunes or albums. I will clarify further in Chapter Two the specific
ways in which studio recording technologies were utilized in the service of constructing
A Tribute to Jack Johnson. For now, though, it is clear that when Davis made fourteen

²⁰ Zygote, “Miles Davis,” p. 30.
trips into the studio in the first half of 1970, he was in search of a sound for which the studio environment was particularly conducive. When, in June 1970, he shifted his recording focus to live concerts, it was to document a sound that could best be achieved in that specific setting.\textsuperscript{21}

\textit{Davis’s Group Bifurcation}

In early 1970, then, Davis had established the studio as the most appropriate site for pursuing his current musical goals. He was less certain, however, about the specific combination of musicians that would contribute to that new sound. For those fourteen studio sessions, Davis did not consistently work with one specific group of musicians. Instead, he experimented with different personnel combinations and different instrument combinations in his ongoing studio explorations. Davis recruited a group of seventeen musicians, whom he would later refer to as “Miles’s Stock Company Players,” and arranged them into thirteen different group combinations over the course of those fourteen sessions.\textsuperscript{22} As Figure 1 below illustrates, while Davis had a “stock” group of

\begin{flushleft}
\footnotesize
21 Gabriel Solis has acknowledged that he is “unconvinced” that concert performances and studio recordings “ultimately lead to a different sort of music.” He writes, “One should be aware of the limitations of approaching jazz recordings as though they were conceptually independent of live performance for either musicians or audiences.” However, though the basic values of musical interaction and group improvisation remain the same for Davis in both contexts, the vastly different expectations he held for how that interaction would be organized in these two venues demonstrate that, for Davis, there were key differences between musical creation in the studio and in a concert setting. See Solis, “A Unique Chunk,” pp. 336 and 342.

22 Miles Davis and Quincy Troupe, \textit{Miles: The Autobiography} (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), p. 312. The only complete personnel duplication occurred between the February 27 and March 3 sessions. For a note on the various interpretive issues pertinent to utilizing the Davis autobiography as a historical source, see footnote 55 in the Introduction.
\end{flushleft}
performers, he was consistently making personnel adjustments from one session to the next; either adding an additional performer or substituting one as a way to form the particular group that would create the sound he was after.

Notably, during that same six-month period, the makeup of Davis’s concert band remained consistent. Once Wayne Shorter left the concert band in early March 1970, the personnel consisted of: Steve Grossman (ss), Chick Corea (el p), Dave Holland (b, el b), Jack DeJohnette (d), and Airto Moreira (perc). The only alteration was the addition of Keith Jarrett in late May 1970 as a second keyboardist. So while Davis was constantly forming and reforming different groups with which to record in the studio, he was careful to maintain a consistent group for his live concerts.

The combination of personnel experimentation in the studio along with personnel consistency in the concert band represents a unique shift for Davis. As I imply above, since finalizing the personnel in his “second great quintet” in September 1964, Davis had consistently performed in both concert and studio settings with the same four musicians. Each album released between 1965 and 1968 featured Davis along
<table>
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**Figure 1: Personnel for Davis’s 1970 Studio Dates**
with Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter, and Tony Williams. Additionally, aside from some substitutions on bass to accommodate Ron Carter’s active performance schedule, Davis played in all live concerts during that time with those same four musicians.

Although this concert/studio group bifurcation was a noted departure from the stability of his previous quintet, Davis had begun gesturing towards this configuration as far back as 1967, when he added a guitarist to the band for studio recording purposes but maintained the quintet for live concerts. The differences in size and personnel between concert and studio groups grew even more dramatic in subsequent sessions, until Davis famously assembled thirteen musicians – including three keyboard players, two bassists, and four drummers and percussionists – for the August 1969 sessions that would result in the album Bitches Brew. At the same time, Davis’s preferred concert group remained a quintet that featured Wayne Shorter, Chick Corea, Dave Holland, and Jack DeJohnette. This pattern of group bifurcation continued so that, by early 1970, the

23 Those albums are: E.S.P. (1965), Miles Smiles (1967), Sorcerer (1967) [with the exception of the track “Nothing Like You” which was recorded August 21, 1962], Nefertiti (1968), and Miles in the Sky (1968) [with the exception of “Paraphernalia” which featured the addition of George Benson on guitar].

24 Due to scheduling conflicts, Ron Carter was replaced by bassists Richard Davis, Albert Stinson, and Buster Williams for certain tour dates during 1966 and 1967. For more information, see Losin, “Miles Davis Sessions: 1945-1991.”

25 Joe Beck joined the quintet on guitar for studio sessions on December 4 and 28, 1967.

26 Those musicians were: Miles Davis (tpt), Wayne Shorter (ss), Bennie Maupin (b cl), Joe Zawinul (el p), Larry Young (el p), Chick Corea (el p), John McLaughlin (gtr), Dave Holland (b), Harvey Brooks (el b), Lenny White (dr), Jack DeJohnette (dr), Don Alias (perc), and Jumma Santos (perc).
existence of two discrete performing ensembles for Davis had become an established practice.

**Individual Musical Contributions**

Of the thirteen different personnel combinations Davis utilized in the studio in 1970, two specific groups created the music that would go on to comprise roughly ninety percent of the album *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*. Those two groups were the February 18 band, consisting of Bennie Maupin (b cl), Chick Corea (el p), Sonny Sharrock (gtr), John McLaughlin (gtr), Dave Holland (el b), and Jack DeJohnette (dr); and the April 7 band, consisting of Steve Grossman (ss), John McLaughlin (gtr), Herbie Hancock (org), Michael Henderson (el b), and Billy Cobham (dr). 27 Davis took great care in recruiting these musicians, as he expected them not simply to play the musical ideas placed before them but rather to contribute particular skills and unique voices to the ensemble.

Though he assumed the responsibility of directing each session’s overall development, Davis’ approach was to assemble specific musicians who would each bring a unique musical personality and an original contribution to the session. As Chick

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27 “Right Off” is 26.50 long, and of that 25.34 is from the April 7 session. The remaining 1.16 was recorded on November 19 or 28, 1969. “Yesternow” is 25.36 long, and of that 12.23 was recorded on April 7, 9.50 was recorded on February 18, 1970, and the remaining 3.23 comes from two different sessions in 1969. As a percentage, then, the April 7 session produced 72% of the material that would appear on the *Jack Johnson* album, while 19% came from February 18, 1970, and the remaining five minutes (9%) of the fifty-three minute album was culled from other sessions. More details on the post-production construction of this album will be given in Chapter Two.
Corea put it, “Miles wanted his musicians to be unique individuals, like he is.”

This was an essential aspect of creativity for Davis; one which was instilled in him from his earliest musical experiences in jazz settings. Within the conventions of jazz, a musician’s goal was to develop a unique and individual sound that could then be productively utilized in the context of musical group interplay. Artists in this tradition highly valued the development of a distinct sound as they understood that development to signify a milestone of artistic maturity. Playing with a particular musician afforded one the opportunity to experience that musician’s individual musical style and to allow that style to inspire one’s own creativity. Davis acknowledged as much in 1970 when responding to an interviewer’s question about his musical process:

> The guys I have in my group make me hear what the pieces sound like. I pick them for that reason. . . . I play off of musicians that are in my group. I mean, I react to them. So actually I’m not playing the horn, they are. I just have the physical thing to control, the mouthpiece and stuff. But they’ve given me the stuff to play.

For Davis, the importance of each musician’s creative contribution in his band could not be overstated. As Davis “played off of” the musical contributions of the

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29 For two foundational studies of the centrality in the jazz tradition of a musician developing an individual musical voice and realizing that voice in the context of group interaction, see Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, especially section two on developing an individual voice (pp. 63-285), and section three on group interaction (pp. 289-446); and Monson, *Saying Something*.

30 Zygote, “Miles Davis,” p. 28.

31 For more on personnel selection as what Gabriel Solis has articulately described as “a part of expressing an authorial voice in jazz,” see Solis, “‘A Unique Chunk,’” p. 337.
other musicians, his own creativity was ostensibly equally inspiring for them. This resulted in a creative give-and-take in the studio that Davis summarized in 1970 as follows: “Usually we fuck around and I tell everybody this and that. And somebody else says why don't we do this. Well I’ll hear somebody do something and I’ll say do that.” While Davis would suggest certain musical ideas, the other musicians would contribute additional ideas, creating an interactive musical environment in which each voice played an integral role in the overall sound.

Though Davis credited his band with inspiring him towards the musical “stuff” of their performances, the band members all pointed toward the various ways in which Davis’s playing and direction were pivotal for each session. Chick Corea noted, “His genius as a bandleader was in his group way of thinking, and in choosing the musicians and leading them forward by what he played, and by the way he used the ideas he or someone else brought to the band.” Keith Jarrett likewise acknowledged the centrality of Davis’s instructions in inspiring him to create the music he contributed in the first place. As he put it, “He said things to me I never heard anyone mention, just a very few words now and then about the music, but they were so meaningful.” Sonny Sharrock describes the February 18 session as one such meaningful encounter:

32 Zygote, “Miles Davis,” p. 28.  
33 Quoted in Tingen, Miles Beyond, p. 58.  
It was the only time I ever played with [Davis], but it was really amazing. There’s something about master players, man. You learn by osmosis. . . . He never said shit about teaching me anything about music. But I learned more that day than any other day in my life. . . . My approach to the instrument changed.35

As the unedited session tapes demonstrate, the February 18 session resulted in just under thirty-five minutes of recorded material. Roughly ten minutes into that session, Davis and the band begin working on an arrangement for a riff-based tune in common time, a portion of which would appear as a part of “Yesternow” on the Jack Johnson album. DeJohnette limits his drumming to quarter notes on the snare and hi-hats punctuated by a bass drum hit on each downbeat, along with an anticipatory bass drum hit on the last sixteenth note of each measure. Holland and McLaughlin both play distinct one-measure riffs over which Davis and Bennie Maupin play a unison melody. Sharrock’s contribution is a series of harmonies that contribute to the accompaniment. Sharrock consistently divides his contribution between a sus4 chord resolving to the major third and various unrelated densities of sound that are outside any sense of functional harmony. Davis stops the group some eighteen times and makes a variety of rhythmic and harmonic suggestions to the players before they finally complete what Davis describes as a “nice” take. During one such stop, Davis provides rhythmic instructions to Sharrock in an attempt to compel him to align his contributions to the tune’s established pulse and meter. In the previous take, Sharrock had utilized an echo

effect in which the echoed material did not line up with the tune’s established pulse and in which Sharrock did not consistently begin his contribution on a specific beat of the measure. In essence, Sharrock’s contribution had in no way aligned with either the rhythmic or harmonic aspects of the rest of the band. After stopping the band, Davis says to Sharrock:

MD: Sonny – come on now! [laughter]
SS: You want it higher?
MD: No, I just want it on time, you know?

Davis here offers some clarification that he is not concerned with the pitch content or the relative register in which Sharrock plays. Instead, he instructs Sharrock to perform in a way that lines up rhythmically with what the rest of the band is doing, though he does not offer any specific instructions on how precisely Sharrock is to play “on time.” In light of these ambiguous instructions, Sharrock adjusts his playing on the following take so that he enters on defined beats and so that his echo device is repeating material in either eighth notes or quarter-note triplets in relation to the established pulse.
While in this case Davis did offer a specific intervention into the performance, he also regularly utilized subtle, non-directive instructions to guide the musicians. As Chick Corea recalled:

With Miles, there was never any sitting down and discussing the music: “Hey, I’d like you to play a little more of this or that.” No instruction, no analytical conversation. There were grunts, glances, smiles, and no smiles. Miles communicated, but not on a logical or analytical level.36

Chris Smith has highlighted the subtle sonic and visual ways through which Davis, in various concert settings, would utilize these “grunts, glances, smiles, and no smiles” to direct the musical process. He argues that part of Davis’s approach was to employ a “deliberate incompleteness” of direction that resulted in an “intentional ambiguity” of musical expectations within the band.37 This created a heightened sensitivity to the

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sonic environment and to each musician’s subtle musical contributions, thereby facilitating an increased awareness of musical interaction among the band members. Although Smith focuses on case studies from Davis’s bands in the mid 1960s and the 1980s, these principles are apparent in the 1970 studio sessions as well, such as when Davis gives Sharrock the ambiguous but provocative instructions to play his part “on time” without clarifying exactly what would constitute such playing.

Through this “intentional ambiguity,” Davis sought to spur his musicians on toward greater levels of creative experimentation. One of Davis’s goals as a band leader, in fact, was to force musicians into creative mindsets or musical situations that would spur them towards new approaches to music-making. Davis regularly spoke of encouraging his musicians to “play what you know and play above what you know” or to “extend themselves beyond what they think they can do.”38 For Davis, such improvisational creativity was the essence of musical interaction. His goal as a leader, then, was not to impose on his musicians a stifling set of parameters that dictated specific musical content so much as it was to oversee a creative environment in which each musician was inspired to contribute to a unique final product.39


39 As Dave Holland noted, “Miles was giving us a context for the music, and then we found what we could do within that context.” Quoted in Tingen, Miles Beyond, p. 76.
In addition to his own verbal and musical direction in the studio, another way Davis facilitated this “intentional ambiguity” was by consistently placing his musicians in changing musical situations.\textsuperscript{40} As I pointed out above, with the 1970 sessions Davis regularly altered a group from one session to the next by adding a new player or substituting a different player. This included incorporating new instruments, such as his use of Khalil Balakrishna on sitar for the January 27 session, or adding additional musicians on the same instruments, such as his use of both McLaughlin and Sharrock on guitar for the February 18 session. These personnel changes immediately altered the ensemble, thereby impacting the creative dynamic among the various musicians. Through this shifting of personnel from one session to the next, and through his own often ambiguous instructions, Davis sought to unsettle the musicians’ expectations and compel them towards creative experimentation with new sounds and new musical ideas.

\textit{The February 18 and April 7 Sessions}

Davis’s strategic introduction of new musicians and instrument combinations is apparent in both the February 18 and April 7 sessions. On these dates, Davis formed two distinct bands comprising new combinations of musicians with varying levels of

\textsuperscript{40} Again, in reflecting back on his career in his autobiography, Davis wrote, “See, if you put a musician in a place where he has to do something different from what he does all the time, then he can do that – but he’s got to think differently in order to do it. He has to use his imagination, be more creative, more innovative; he’s got to take more risks. He’s got to play above what he knows. . . . Then anything can happen, and that’s where great art and music happens.” Davis and Troupe, \textit{Miles}, p. 220.
performance history with Davis. On February 18, Davis included several performers with whom he had previously worked in the studio. Bennie Maupin had first recorded with Davis during the *Bitches Brew* sessions from August 1969, and he had been a fixture at Davis’s recording dates since then, missing only the February 6, 1970 session. Dave Holland and Chick Corea had consistently recorded with Davis since the *Filles de Kilimanjaro* sessions of September 1968 and had also been a part of Davis’s concert band since August 1968. Jack DeJohnette joined the concert band in early 1969 and had recorded in the studio with Davis prior to that, while John McLaughlin had been Davis’s guitarist of choice in the studio since his arrival in the U.S. in February 1969.

Sonny Sharrock was the only performer at this session who had not previously recorded or performed with Davis. Sharrock, now revered as the “father of free jazz guitar,” was a somewhat surprising choice for Davis as his avant-garde style differed significantly from Davis’s increasing gestures toward contemporary popular music.41 Sharrock first made his name in New York in the mid-1960s playing with free jazz musicians including saxophonist Pharaoh Sanders and trumpeter Don Cherry.42 He also performed as a part of Herbie Mann’s group between 1967 and 1974, while appearing

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additionally as a sideman with Wayne Shorter. It was during a tour with Mann that Davis heard Sharrock play and invited him to be a part of the February 18 session.

Critics have pointed out that stylistically, “Sharrock sounds like no other guitarist ever born.” He took pride in his lack of skill in comping on guitar, noting, “I don’t like to comp – I hate it. I don’t know any chord sequences or any tunes either. You name a tune, and I don’t know it!” He further argued that not only comping, but harmony in general, “gets in my way – it clutters things up.” Instead of thinking about combinations of notes, Sharrock based his playing on “feelings,” explaining, “I don’t hear notes in my head. I hear feelings and I want to do the feeling.” In representing these “feelings” in sound, Sharrock used a variety of unique equipment including a slide, distortion effects, an echoplex, and various other electronic devices in order to achieve a sound that was characterized by critic Francis Davis as a “buzz-saw trill.” His self-described musical goal was not merely “[to] show off technique” but rather “to shout from the beginning” by using “energy” instead of “chords.”

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48 Quoted in Francis Davis, “This Is Not Jazz: The Guitar Buzz and Howl of Sonny Sharrock” The Village Voice (September 3, 1991), pp. 67-68 at 68.
The vocabulary above begins to gesture toward the difficulty of depicting in words the unique characteristics of Sharrock’s approach to the guitar. As his contributions to the February 18 session demonstrate, Sharrock largely eschewed any melodic or harmonic implications for his performance. His comping was not based on chords but rather on sonic experimentation unrelated to any tune’s implied harmonic center. Likewise, when Sharrock contributed guitar solos, he did not use any combinations of sounds that would imply a traditional sense of melody. Instead, he utilized various effects pedals to create a sound that emphasized timbral difference and registral extremes. Paradigmatic examples of his musical style can be found on the February 18 portions of The Complete Jack Johnson sessions, for example, with his performances on “Willie Nelson (insert 1),” particularly with his five solo breaks beginning at 4.20, and also throughout the entirety of “Willie Nelson (insert 2).”

Although these contributions were in stark contrast to the other band members’ styles, Sharrock recalls that he did not feel out of place at the session. As he put it, “I

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50 See The Complete Jack Johnson Sessions (Sony, 2003), disc one, tracks three and four. This material was first given the title “Willie Nelson” in preparation for its release on the 1981 album Directions. This titular homage was apparently influenced by Davis’s manager at the time, Mark Rothbaum, who also functioned as Willie Nelson’s manager. See Tingen, Miles Beyond, p. 102.

51 Davis was notably dismissive of much of the avant-garde free jazz of the late 1960s, as demonstrated by his criticisms of Archie Shepp’s recording “The Funeral” during a Down Beat “Blindfold Test” in 1968. See Feather, “Blindfold Test,” reprinted in Miles Davis Reader, ed. Kirchner, p. 135. However, as his band members – most notably Tony Williams, Dave Holland, and Chick Corea – began embracing free jazz in the late 1960s, Davis did not prohibit their playing free during his live concerts. Listen, e.g., to the free ensemble playing, sans Davis, on much of the concert recording Double Image from October 1969. See also Chick Corea’s comments on Davis allowing – and even on occasion joining in with – the free
think Miles, if he heard what you were doing, then he was very easy on you. Whether he liked it or not wasn’t necessary. If he understood what you were trying to do, then he’d be cool.” Davis was apparently “cool” with what Sharrock contributed, as his only surviving instructions to Sharrock from the February 18 session are the few comments above related to rhythm and tempo. In inviting Sharrock to record that day, Davis reinforced his desire to incorporate new and unique musicians into his band. If this addition signaled a significant step in Davis’s search for a particular sound, that search would result in even more surprising personnel choices for the April 7 session.

For that session, Davis chose to recruit a rhythm section that comprised entirely different musicians from his current concert band. Instead of Jack DeJohnette on drums, Davis used Billy Cobham. Instead of Dave Holland on bass, Davis used Michael Henderson. Finally, instead of Chick Corea on keyboard, Davis eliminated the centrality of keyboard and recruited instead John McLaughlin to handle the primary accompanimental role. Only saxophonist Steve Grossman remained from his concert playing in the rhythm section in 1969 and 1970, but always “bring[ing] back a focal point of melody in the group.” Quoted in Tingen, Miles Beyond, pp. 95-96.


53 Sharrock’s appeal to Davis was significant enough for Davis to offer him a position in his concert band following the February 18 session; an offer that Sharrock declined. See Milkowski, “Vernon Reid and Sonny Sharrock,” p. 27.

54 Though Herbie Hancock joined the band on organ midway through the session, his contribution was significantly more peripheral than that of the guitar. Hancock doubled bass lines, played occasional solos, and added some background chords to the overall texture. However, by the time he joined the
band. Grossman, who first performed with Davis at the age of eighteen as a replacement for Wayne Shorter for a November 19, 1969 studio recording session, joined the concert band in March 1970. His self-described background in “straight-ahead jazz” made adjusting to Davis’s current musical style difficult. As he puts it, “For the first time in my life I felt at a loss for what to play sometimes. It was a strange feeling.”

This difficulty for Grossman was amplified by Davis’s insistence that he forego playing his primary instrument, the tenor saxophone, in favor of performing on the soprano saxophone. This was the case for the April 7 session, the entirety of which Grossman played on soprano sax.

For that session, Grossman and Davis joined with a rhythm section anchored by the drumming of Billy Cobham. Cobham had regularly recorded with Davis since November 1969, and he brought a diverse stylistic potential that included a background in jazz and studio music as well as experience in several groups categorized by critics at the time as rock or jazz-rock. For the April 7 session, it was Cobham’s rock-influenced sensibility that appealed to Davis. Davis, in fact, was so attracted to the characteristics of this style that he had initially attempted to recruit Buddy Miles, the drummer in Jimi McLaughlin had already worked out the idiomatic guitar grooves that formed the basis for the musical interaction that day.

55 Quoted in Tingen, Miles Beyond, p. 78.


57 See the Atlantic Records biography from 1976 titled “Cobham, Billy – biography” in the Billy Cobham Clippings, The Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University.
Hendrix’ band, for the session. Davis knew of Miles’ work, and the two had apparently been spending time together around the recording date. Miles remembers visiting Davis at his home and being offered an opportunity to contribute to the April 7 session. Unaware at the time of the significance of Davis’ offer, Miles turned down the opportunity. As he recalls, “I knew what he was asking me, but it was like I was in the twilight zone in a way. I was still a kid basically, I’d just left the chitlin circuit and all of that, and I still was a little green behind the ears, you know?”

Miles’ rock-based drum style would become the rhythmic ideal for Davis for several years, as Davis would regularly cite Miles as an example for his current drummers to emulate. Jack DeJohnette, for example, recalls Davis’ not-so-subtle encouragement to begin playing more like Miles, noting:

We were playing in California and [Davis] said, “Listen to this Jimi Hendrix track.” The drummer was Buddy Miles and I said, “Yeah, yeah, it’s a nice groove” . . . [Davis] was trying to tell me something that he wanted, but he didn’t know how. He sang the beat to me, “dum-dum-daahh, dum-dum-daahh, dum-dum-daahh, dum-dum-daahh.” I said, “I get the picture – you want Buddy Miles’ groove with my technique.” He said, “Right.”

58 Quoted in Bill Murphy, “Raging Bullhorn: Miles Davis and A Tribute to Jack Johnson” The Wire 236 (October 2003), pp. 30-37 at 32, 34.

59 Quoted in Carr, Miles Davis, p. 298. For a similar story, see Bill Milkowski, “John Scofield and Jack DeJohnette: Creativity, Advice, Politics, and the Miles Factor” Down Beat (April 1992), pp. 16-19, 22 at 18.
Dominique Gaumont, a guitarist for Davis throughout much of 1974, similarly remembers Davis instructing the drummer Al Foster to “copy the simplicity of Buddy Miles.”

Such “simplicity” was a distinguishing aspect of much of the drumming characterized as rock at the time. As critic Carl Belz argued in his 1969 book devoted to chronicling and defining rock, the rhythms created by a drummer played a definitive role in the genre-based coding of an album or a song as rock. Belz noted, “The most persistent feature of rock has been its beat.”

Musician and critic Ian Carr agreed, noting in 1972, “The word ‘rock’ . . . refers to the specific rhythms of a music which came into its own during the last decade.” Critic Richard Williams further clarified that this defining rock rhythm was the characteristic straight eighth-note feel that he designated “eight-to-the-bar” as opposed to the “triplet feel” that characterized more traditional jazz styles. Rhythms that emphasized straight eighth notes in the context of a bass–snare quarter note alternation were defined as “rock rhythms” and comprised a “rock foundation” over which songs were constructed.

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60 Quoted in Chambers, Milestones, book II, p. 240.
then Billy Cobham as a substitute, Davis was showing a decided interest in this prominent rock-based approach to drumming.

While his recruitment of Cobham represented an important step for Davis in achieving a particular sound, the addition of Michael Henderson on electric bass was perhaps the most radical step he had yet taken in incorporating into his sound the musical characteristics of contemporary popular music. Henderson was the first bass player to join Davis’s band without any prior experience in jazz performance. Davis’s earlier bass players, including Ron Carter and Dave Holland, had all been trained primarily in the jazz tradition. Though they were capable of performing on electric bass in the riff-based style that was prominent in much popular music of the day, they were more at home on the upright acoustic bass, executing the complex harmonic style that was the traditional basis for jazz improvisation. Henderson, though, had no training on the upright bass, nor did he have a background in jazz harmony or in improvising bass lines over intricate chord changes. His earliest musical experiences were with various Motown and soul musicians, and he was essentially a self-taught electric bassist who performed exclusively in popular styles. When Davis first recruited Henderson, his primary professional experience had consisted of tours with Aretha Franklin and Stevie Wonder in the late 1960s.65

65 Leonard Feather and Ira Gitler, The Encyclopedia of Jazz in the Seventies (New York: Horizon, 1976), p. 174. It was while on tour with Wonder, in fact, that Davis first heard Henderson play and successfully
Whereas Holland could move between a soul-influenced bass vamp and the various free and traditional styles of jazz, Henderson did not provide such stylistic flexibility. He was a bassist trained in popular styles, and his contribution to the band would not be in demonstrating the harmonic dexterity necessary for navigating the chord changes of traditional jazz tunes but rather in contributing a riff-based approach to performance that was strongly rooted in soul and other contemporary popular music. From all available evidence, it is clear that this was the reason Davis ultimately hired Henderson. Henderson recalls Davis instructing him early on that his role was “to hold the band down” and “to be a rock.” As he recalls:

[Davis] hired me to play just what I was playing [i.e., soul- and rock-based riffs]. He hired me to bring something new to his music. I thought that maybe he wanted me to learn some of his older [jazz] stuff, but he said, “If you learn any of that old shit, you’re fired!” And he told me, “Anytime the guys try to play any of that shit, don’t follow them.” The other guys wanted to take him where he’d been before, but he didn’t want me to go there. . . . The others in the band didn’t know why I was in the band, but Miles knew exactly what he wanted from me.

What Davis wanted was a bass player who would establish a consistent riff-based foundation over which the different soloists could improvise. He was interested in a bassist who, instead of reacting to the harmonic implications of the soloists, would

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66 Gary Bartz recalls Davis’s initial hesitance at hiring Henderson for that specific reason, noting, “Miles was hesitant [to hire Henderson] because he had never had a bassist that didn’t play acoustic also. I thought it might take the music in a different direction. Miles agreed and we were a band.” Bartz, “The Hardest Working Band,” p. 8.

67 Quoted in Tingen, Miles Beyond, pp. 104 and 119.
maintain the harmonic and rhythmic stability of a constant riff-based groove. As Davis put it in 1973, “Michael has a funky sound, you know, and I been teachin’ him for awhile. Like if he’s in E flat and I play an A chord or maybe a C or a D he doesn’t get ruffled anymore like he used to. He sticks where he is. He’s used to all my stuff by now.” 68 Although Davis implies here that Henderson experimented with more harmonically responsive accompaniment early in his performance career with Davis, there is no such experimentation present in Henderson’s earliest recording sessions with Davis on April 7, May 19, and May 27 of 1970. For each of those sessions, Henderson consistently maintains the harmonic center for each specific riff that forms the basis for each performance.

Davis’s decision to recruit a bass player who would embrace the prospect of playing exclusively in a riff-based style was a drastic step away from the traditional approach to jazz bass performance. Along with Billy Cobham’s drumming style, this riff-based approach signaled a definitive step away from traditional jazz practice and toward those techniques and styles associated with the popular music of the day. One final step in that shift was Davis’s decision to replace the keyboard for this session with the electric guitar work of John McLaughlin. McLaughlin, who had spent much of the 1960s playing in various jazz and rock bands in Great Britain – including stints with

Ginger Baker and Jack Bruce – had first recorded with Davis on February 18, 1969. Davis consistently utilized him in the studio after that, recruiting McLaughlin for each of the fourteen sessions in 1970. Davis valued McLaughlin's musicianship and repeatedly attempted to recruit him into his live band.69 Though McLaughlin always chose to pursue other opportunities, including his stint in Tony Williams’s Lifetime group and his later work with the Mahavishnu Orchestra, Davis consistently voiced public praise for McLaughlin’s musical skills. As he once put it, “I heard some of the records [Eric Clapton] is on, and he ain’t doing nothing. There’s nothing there. John McLaughlin, he’s the one, that’s the killer.”70 McLaughlin brought a musical sensibility, as well as an instrumental specificity, that was integral to the particular sound Davis wanted at the time.

For most of the 1970 sessions, McLaughlin typically worked in tandem with one or more keyboardists. On January 28, for example, he joined electric pianists Chick Corea and Joe Zawinul in creating the riff-based ballad “Feio” and the tune “Double Image,” both of which feature roughly equal contributions from guitar and keyboards. Beginning February 27, Davis eliminated from his recording sessions all keyboard instruments in order that McLaughlin could occupy the position as the sole harmonic and accompanimental instrument. This was still principally the case for the April 7

70 Zygote, “Miles Davis,” p. 33.
session, though Herbie Hancock joined the session midway through to make more peripheral contributions.71

Davis’s choice to emphasize the role of the guitar while downplaying the contribution of any keyboard instrument was yet another overt gesture toward the sounds of contemporary popular music and away from his traditional association with jazz. Throughout Davis’s career, the piano had held a primary place in both his concert and studio bands. From his hard bop recordings of the 1950s, to his modal bands in the late 1950s and early 1960s, to his second great quintet of the mid 1960s, the chordal responsibilities had rested entirely on the piano. Even in the late 1960s, when Davis first began adding a guitarist to his existing quintet, the guitarist played a secondary role, initially contributing a background tremolo or doubling a bass line.72 However, by early 1970, piano and guitar held roughly equal importance in Davis’s recording sessions, and the balance of power shifted decidedly to the guitar beginning with the February 27 session. This development in Davis’s recording groups – from piano alone, to piano with guitar, to guitar alone – was among the defining transitions in Davis’s search for a new sound.

71 See footnote 32 above.

**Guitar and Piano: Timbre, Genre, and History**

Guitar and piano have distinct timbral possibilities along with distinct idiomatic musical potentials that include issues of chord voicing, voice leading, and rhythmic propensities. Additionally, they have widely divergent histories in relation to style and genre, and by 1970, those histories had been solidly mapped onto two distinct and discursively oppositional musical genres. As numerous critics asserted at the time, the piano was strongly associated with jazz performance, while the electric guitar was a symbol for the popular music genre of rock. Drawing on an historical argument, Joachim Berendt could write at the time, “Since the history of jazz begins with ragtime, and ragtime was a pianistic music, jazz begins with the piano.” In his history of rock from 1971, Richard Robinson similarly noted, “If the guitar had never been thought up by some inventive lute player in a far‐gone century, rock . . . would have had to invent one, [because] . . . without it, rock . . . as we know it today would not, and very likely could not, exist.” With these two origin myths, both writers draw upon the centrality of the piano and the guitar, respectively, in the formation of jazz and rock.

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Critic Nick Cohn voiced a common perspective at the time, when he argued that the essence of rock music was the electric guitar. He noted that though electric guitars “had been around for years,” they had never before held the constitutive and definitive role that they did in rock music, where they functioned “as bedrock, as the basis of a whole music.” Critic Jon Landau supported this idea in his summary of rock from 1970:

[Rock since 1964] was mainly played on guitars instead of pianos and horns, mainly by whites instead of blacks, mainly in groups of three, four, or five musicians, instead of in nine and ten piece bands, . . . and mainly in concert halls and specialized clubs, instead of in bars and state fairs.

Landau’s comments offer insight into the importance of race, technology, and venue in the genre-based coding of a sound. He also gestures toward the ways in which jazz and rock were progressively being read in terms of class at the time, with piano-based jazz increasingly associated with middle-class cultural aspirations and guitar-based rock – through its associations with the blues tradition – inhabiting the lower cultural and economic status with which that tradition was historically articulated. Moreover, Landau confirms what numerous other critics at the time observed – that electric guitars, and particularly the distorted timbres such guitars were able to produce, were visual and sonic symbols for rock music, while pianos held the same function for jazz.

77 For more on how jazz and rock were categorized in light of existing cultural hierarchies, see Brennan, “Down Beats,” (2007); and Anderson, This Is Our Music, pp. 10-48.
For most critics, in fact, these genre-based associations were so obvious as not to warrant comment. When the issue did come up, it was in relation to the possibility of a different instrument unseating the guitar or piano from their pre-eminent positions in relation to rock and jazz. In his history of guitar from 1970, for example, Irwin Stambler includes a chapter titled “Challenge to the Guitar” in which he prognosticates about which instruments may eventually rival the guitar’s primary position in rock.78 Similar discussions were equally prevalent among jazz critics at the time. An interviewer in the late 1960s, for example, raised the issue with jazz pianist Dave Brubeck. He asked Brubeck about the role of the piano in jazz and the possibility of another instrument gaining the status within jazz that the piano currently held. Brubeck responded, “[The piano] is still the No. 1 instrument with me, and I think it always will be.”79

These comments demonstrate that by 1970 the electric guitar was an accepted symbol for rock music while the piano held the same significance for jazz. In Davis’s search for a new sound, the decision to utilize an electric guitar in place of piano had unavoidable genre-based implications. This, in combination with his decision to use Henderson’s riff-based electric bass style and Cobham’s rock-influenced drumming, was a definitive stylistic choice for Davis.

The opening shuffle groove on “Right Off” demonstrates one of the many moments on the *Jack Johnson* album where idiomatic guitar playing, riff-based electric bass lines, and drumming influenced by popular music combine to create Davis’s new sound. As Figure 3 below demonstrates, Henderson provides a consistent harmonic and rhythmic foundation for the tune with his steady repetition of the two measure riff outlining an E7 chord. The use of a dominant chord as the harmonic basis for the tune, along with Henderson’s incorporation of the flatted-third blues note towards the end of the riff, provide a blues inflection to “Right Off” that is further reinforced by McLaughlin’s guitar playing, which I will discuss below.

![Figure 3: Henderson and Cobham’s Playing on “Right Off”](image)

Cobham accompanies Henderson’s riff with what emerges as an ambiguous rhythmic pattern in terms of its genre-based specificity. The pattern’s bass/snare quarter note alternations join with Cobham’s cymbal crashes on every beat to create a strong backbeat in the context of an aggressive, driving rhythm. Though these characteristics lean more towards the rhythmic practices of contemporary popular music and
specifically of rock, the underlying shuffle-based feel is historically associated with a variety of musical genres, including jazz, soul, and the blues. Hence, while the backbeat and the aggressive cymbal playing reinforce a rock feel for the tune, the shuffle rhythm creates a sense of genre-based ambiguity. As I will argue in Chapter Two, the overall coding of this tune as rock is as much a result of the studio mix as it is the rhythmic characteristics of the drums, as the elevation of the drums in the mix to a level of aural prominance helps to define the tune’s rock feel. The mix thereby eliminates much of the genre-based ambiguity that arises from Cobham’s use of a shuffle rhythm.

The coding of this tune as blues-inflected rock is further reinforced through McLaughlin’s idiomatic guitar playing that characterizes much of “Right Off.” The shuffle’s key of E is a particularly common harmonic center for much guitar-driven rock as it allows for the consistent use of several open strings, facilitating ease of execution while utilizing the unique resonance that comes from sustained open strings on guitar. McLaughlin incorporates three open strings – the low E along with the B and the high E – into this shuffle, allowing them to ring out throughout the riff. Additionally, he begins with an open E-major chord and utilizes an idiomatic shift whereby he maintains the

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80 For a history of the alternations between a shuffle feel and a straight eighth-note feel as the rhythmic basis for American popular music, see Alexander Stewart, “‘Funky Drummer’: New Orleans, James Brown and the Rhythmic Transformation of American Popular Music” Popular Music 19/3 (October 2000), pp. 293-318. For more on the importance of the backbeat in popular music and the genre-based ambiguity of the shuffle rhythm, see Monson, Saying Something, pp. 195-199.

81 The highest- and lowest-pitched strings of a guitar in standard tuning are both an E, while the fifth-string A and second-string B are used in the IV and V chords of the key of E.
same position with his left hand and moves up the guitar fretboard to produce a quartally-inflected sound. This shift, a defining characteristic of the shuffle, is made possible by a combination of the standard guitar tuning along with the idiomatic fretboard technique that McLaughlin employs for its realization.

From the hand position detailed in Figure 4 below, McLaughlin then bends the fifth-string C-sharp note up a half step, reinforcing the rock- and blues-based implications of the mixolydian mode while utilizing a technique that has been associated with guitar-based blues since its earliest days. Finally, McLaughlin incorporates various idiomatic guitar fills at the end of the second measure of each occurrence of the riff. For the fill transcribed below in Figure 5, McLaughlin maintains the fret position of the preceding quartal chord and utilizes two fingers, two frets, and two open strings to create a fill which is particularly idiomatic to the guitar. The bends, slides, pull-offs, and unique open-string resonance comprise the idiomatic aspects of this passage that distinguish it from the musical possibilities that a keyboard instrument would have most easily realized at the time. While a keyboard could have performed the same pitches as McLaughlin’s guitar, the technique with which McLaughlin executes the sounds is ultimately unique to the guitar. Similar playing by McLaughlin characterizes the remainder of this tune and demonstrates the way in which the guitar was central to creating the characteristic sound of the overall album.
While the transcription above illustrates some of the idiomatic characteristics of McLaughlin’s guitar style, it does not portray an equally significant aspect of his playing: namely the extremely distorted guitar sound that dominates *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*. Dave Marsh, in his review of the album, referred to McLaughlin’s sound as “roaring, super-charged, and mean” in what was an unmistakable allusion to McLaughlin’s surprisingly distorted sound.\(^82\) This use of distortion is present in McLaughlin’s playing on “Yesternow,” but it reaches its climax on the tune “Right Off.” Here McLaughlin uses a moderate level of distortion throughout the tune, and towards the end, at about the 25.30 mark, he increases the level of distortion even further while

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contributing a guitar solo that serves as the conclusion of the tune.\textsuperscript{83} McLaughlin’s playing throughout the album, and at this moment in particular, featured a greater level of distortion than he or any other guitarist up to that time had used with Davis.

According to Bill Murphy, this heavily distorted sound was exactly what Davis wanted for the 1970 sessions. As he points out, it was “at Miles’s insistence” that McLaughlin adopted such an extreme level of distortion in the first place.\textsuperscript{84} Davis, in fact, can be heard on the unedited session tapes early in the April 7 session instructing McLaughlin, “Turn that motherfucker up.” When McLaughlin responds by increasing the gain and the level of distortion his amplifier is producing, Davis responds approvingly, “Yeah. Shit. Turn that shit up.”

Many critics at the time heard the distinct influence of Jimi Hendrix in McLaughlin’s use of distortion on the album.\textsuperscript{85} McLaughlin himself hinted at this influence when he acknowledged in 1975 that Hendrix “has had an effect on most contemporary guitar players.”\textsuperscript{86} Since his notorious performance at the Monterey Pop Music Festival in 1967, Hendrix had been esteemed as arguably the most innovative

\textsuperscript{83} See Wayte, “Bitches Brood,” pp. 90-91 for more on this moment.

\textsuperscript{84} Bill Murphy, “Raging Bullhorn,” p. 34.

\textsuperscript{85} Ron Brown, for example, described McLaughlin’s playing on the album as sounding “like a subdued Jimi Hendrix in quite a few places.” See Ron Brown, “Review of Jack Johnson” Jazz Journal (August 1971), pp. 30-31 at 31.

electric guitarist of his generation. His playing was characterized by a sexually suggestive performance style as well as a pioneering use of new instrument technologies and electronic effects. Hendrix worked closely with Roger Mayer, who was the leading developer of guitar effects pedals in the late 1960s, to create the electronic effects including distortion pedals, wah-wah pedals, and phasers, all of which Hendrix used to create startlingly new sounds with his guitar.

Blues guitarist Michael Bloomfield describes hearing Hendrix at a New York club in 1966 and being overwhelmed by the diversity of sounds Hendrix was creating with his guitar. As he remembers: “H bombs were going off, guided missiles were flying – I can’t tell you the sounds he was getting out of his instrument. He was getting every sound I was ever to hear him get right there in that room with a Stratocaster, a Twin (amplifier), [and] a Maestro fuzz tone.” Steve Waksman evokes the innovation and influence of Hendrix’s guitar style when he writes, “His array of bent, distorted notes teetering over the edge of tonality and feedback shrieks struggling to avoid the inevitability of sonic decay introduced sounds that had really never been heard before in

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Hendrix’s distinctive musical style, facilitated by his innovative use of emerging instrument technologies, meant that any guitarist after him who used distortion or a wah-wah pedal would be ripe for a potential comparison.

Hendrix’s influence did not stop with guitarists, however, as his use of the wah-wah pedal along with a Marshall amplifier influenced Miles Davis’s decision to begin using the same equipment in his performances. Davis was first introduced to Hendrix in the late 1960s through his then-wife Betty (Mabry) Davis. The two were mutually impressed by each other’s innovative musicianship, and Hendrix and Davis unsuccessfully sought out opportunities to perform together. Hendrix moreover became the specific musical model after which Davis encouraged his guitarists to pattern themselves, as was the case with Davis’s instructions to McLaughlin to increase the volume and resulting level of distortion during the April 7 session. Mike Stern, Davis’s guitarist from 1981-1983, similarly recalls Davis’s consistent instructions to imitate the various sonic and technical aspects of Hendrix’s guitar style. Stern notes, “He’s always saying things to me like, ‘Play some Hendrix! Turn it up or turn it off!’

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91 Bill Murphy, “Raging Bullhorn,” p. 32. The Marshall amplifier emerged in the 1960s as the standard for rock guitarists due to its creation of tone that emphasized gain, output, and broad harmonic frequencies. See Waksman, *Instruments of Desire*, p. 183 for more on this. Hendrix influenced Davis’s adoption of the wah-wah pedal, and Davis also sought to purchase a Marshall amplifier for his trumpet after hearing Hendrix use the amp at his New Year’s Eve concert at the Fillmore East in 1969. For a broader introduction to Hendrix’s influence on jazz musicians beginning in the late 1960s, see Murray, *Crosstown Traffic*, pp. 182-206.

Miles loves Hendrix.” Hence, just as Davis encouraged his drummers to perform in the style of Hendrix’s drummer Buddy Miles, so too did he desire for his guitarists to emulate the sound and musicality of Hendrix himself.

Though critic Ron Brown described McLaughlin’s playing on the album as comparable to a “subdued” Hendrix, even this would have been an anomaly on a jazz recording from the time, as the implied prominence of distortion in such a sound would be both a departure from the traditional jazz guitar sound and a reinforcement of Davis’s gesture toward rock. McLaughlin’s sound on the album was a striking departure from the timbral norms established by previous guitarists in the jazz tradition. From Freddy Green to Charlie Christian to Wes Montgomery, jazz guitarists had historically utilized a sound characterized by a lack of distortion and a timbral quality described as “clean,” “warm,” and “round.” This sonic association was at least partially the result of the history of the electric guitar’s invention. Lawrence Wayte, drawing in part on the earlier work of Steve Waksman, has demonstrated how the earliest uses of guitars in jazz groups predated the invention of the electric guitar. The

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95 See, e.g., Tom Scanlan, “Caught In the Act: Wes Montgomery” Down Beat (January 30, 1964), p. 32; Bill Quinn, “The Thumb’s Up, or What the View is Like from the Top” Down Beat (June 27, 1968), pp. 17-18, 44-45.

standard early guitar was a hollow-body, acoustic instrument that, due to its limitations in volume production, was incorporated into the rhythm section of jazz big bands and not typically featured as a solo instrument. When electronic amplification was first introduced in the 1930s, jazz guitarists such as Charlie Christian and Eddie Durham essentially utilized an electronic pickup to amplify the sound created by their hollow-body instruments. The design of these instruments, with their thin wood backs and tops that create hollow resonant chambers, resulted in the “warm” and “round” tone that came to be constitutive of a standard jazz guitar sound. Up through the late 1960s, in fact, all jazz guitarists utilized amplified hollow-body instruments. Joe Beck, George Benson, and Bucky Pizzarelli, who played guitar with Davis on his earliest guitar sessions in December 1967 and January 1968, all performed on amplified hollow-bodies and were all sonically located in the standard jazz guitar tradition.97

Additionally, though, this hollow-body guitar design resulted in the tendency for the guitar to feed back when it was amplified at high levels of volume. The body was sympathetic to particular frequencies that would then be accentuated in the sound

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97 Notably, although McLaughlin played on a solid-body guitar from the start with Davis, his earliest contributions do not feature the same degree of distortion found on Jack Johnson. McLaughlin’s first recording with Davis in February 1969 for the album In a Silent Way featured a clean sound. It was not until the subsequent Bitches Brew album that he began utilizing a more distorted sound, though even then his guitar timbre did not reach the intensity of distortion that it would on the Jack Johnson sessions. As critic Robert Quine would later summarize, McLaughlin’s sound from In a Silent Way through Bitches Brew to Jack Johnson progressed from a “polite jazz sound” to a “more aggressive” guitar timbre to one that was “vicious” and “slashing” on Jack Johnson. Quoted in Bill Milkowski, “Miles’ Rock Manifesto” in accompanying booklet, The Complete Jack Johnson Sessions (Sony, 2003), pp. 44-59 at 55.
picked up by the electronic microphone. This frequency would then be magnified in the sound produced by the amplifier, which would then augment the possibility for that same frequency to be picked up again by the guitar’s microphone. This would eventually result in a feedback loop, whereby the continual amplification of that particular resonant frequency would create a loud squeal or howl that would overwhelm all other sounds being produced on the guitar. McLaughlin recalls this very issue as being notably problematic in his earliest experiments with amplifying hollow-body guitars. He recalls:

I love the sound of distortion, . . . [so] I wanted a big amp. . . . I’ll never forget the day I got this amp. We were on the gig and plugged it in. I found out that I could get feedback, but it was uncontrolled because I was playing a . . . hollowbody with pickups on it. But I noticed there were some notes I could get to really feed back on me. If I really pushed the amp, I could get it to distort which was, for me, quite a revelation. It was kind of scary at first . . . I didn’t know how to handle distortion at the time.  

In part as a way to mitigate this unintended feedback, guitar manufacturers began developing solid-body guitars that were first mass-produced in the early 1950s. Solid-body guitars could be amplified to extreme levels, thereby creating a distorted sound without producing unintended feedback. Distortion, as Robert Walser has pointed out and as McLaughlin implies above, originally resulted from the application of excessive power to a particular instrument. In the case of electric guitar, an

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98 Quoted in Stump, Go Ahead John, pp. 27-28.
99 See Waksman, Instruments of Desire, p. 45
amplifier’s speaker, when pushed to produce a level of volume that exceeded the capabilities of the speaker, would generate a distorted sound due to its inability to accommodate the demand for amplitude. Historically, distortion was an undesirable effect, as it signaled an amplifier’s inability to produce an adequate level of volume.100

During the 1960s, rock musicians began to value solid-body guitars and their ability to create distorted timbres, along with the sonic power, excess, and rebellion that they implied, as desirable effects. These musicians utilized amplifiers not only to generate a louder sound but also to alter the timbre of the sound produced. The intentional creation of distortion thereby came to be incorporated into the sound of rock. As guitarist Bill DeArango put it in 1971:

One of the things that did intrigue me about the rock players was the way they used the amplifier. The jazz guitarist used amplification as he would a PA system, to put him on the same level with the other instruments. But [Jimi] Hendrix and some of the other rock players used it as an electronic extension of their playing.101

Critic Edmund Ward similarly noted the correlation between distortion and rock when he argued in 1968, “The controlled distortion given off by any amplifier forms the basis of the hard, metallic sound of much rock.”102 Ward is correct in asserting that the creation of distortion could be “controlled” by 1968, due both to the prominence of


solid-body guitar construction as well as the recent development of specific effects pedals that created the sonic results of excessive gain without the danger of unintended feedback. These systems, commonly referred to by guitarists as “stompboxes,” were inserted into the line between the guitar and the amplifier. Each stompbox would in some way alter the signal that the guitar delivered to the amplifier. Some of the most common stompboxes were the fuzzbox, which created a heavily distorted signal, the tremolo, which created groups of echoes in close temporal proximity, and the wah-wah pedal, which offered variable frequency modulation based on the relative position of a foot pedal.

These and other pedals all provided new opportunities for controlled sound modification. Rock musicians quickly adopted the use of such effects pedals, further solidifying the resulting sounds as constitutive elements of rock music. In a 1971 article on jazz guitarists who had begun playing in styles associated with rock, one such guitarist acknowledged the connection between stompboxes and rock, saying, “I had never used a pedal and sound effects when I was playing jazz, but I must say I like the varied tones you can get using one.”

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When McLaughlin utilized a solid-body guitar along with distortion and wah-wah pedals for his contribution to *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, he was adopting technologies and sounds that were not typical for jazz performance. His sound on the recording, described by critic Robert Quine as “vicious” and “slashing,” represented McLaughlin’s acceptance of those instrument technologies associated with rock music at the time. Critics and other listeners who maintained allegiance to the jazz tradition were generally less accepting of those same technologies. The criticisms voiced by such jazz fans regarding the use of instrument technologies fell into two broad categories: (1) criticisms of the perceived lack of musical skill by those utilizing such technologies and (2) criticisms of the timbres created by those technologies.

A reader of *Down Beat* magazine from 1969, for example, drew upon the former when he referred to Jimi Hendrix as “a trick guitarist” because he relied on “electrical tricks for effects.” This reader concluded that Hendrix’s music was nothing more than “psychedelic hogwash” that should be valued far below even “elemental jazz.”

Similar arguments are present in the comments of the numerous jazz critics who consistently evaluated the use of instrument technologies as attempts by unskilled musicians to cover up a lack of musical ability. Ira Gitler, upon hearing a tenor saxophonist use an effects pedal to alter his sound, concluded that the performance

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“was ugly” because the musician “shred[ded] every last vestige of beauty from that [tune] by playing effects rather than musical ideas.” Richard Palmer, in an article highly critical of popular music, concluded that all such instrument technologies “are really gimmicks.”

Critics seeking to bolster this technology vs. musicianship argument often cited jazz musicians from the past as examples of unmediated technical virtuosity and musical skill. Leonard Feather noted in 1971, “If, for instance, [Art] Tatum were alive today, he would not be messing with an octave-short, fuzzy-buzzy electronic keyboard; or . . . if he were, his phenomenal talent could never be fully appreciated.” The implication is that musicians such as Tatum, who were trained in the jazz tradition, had no need for instrument technologies because their talent alone was sufficient for a successful performance. If anything, such a technology would inhibit full appreciation of a musician’s ability. Rudy Braff put it plainly when he pointed out that “Louis Armstrong didn’t need a microphone” to create a successful performance.


thereby asserted that a microphone and, by extension, any instrument technology, was a crutch for a musician and that true masters such as Armstrong did not need to rely on such crutches when performing.112

Critics applied similar arguments to Miles Davis in the early 1970s as a way to highlight his jazz credentials at a time when he was intentionally incorporating emerging instrument technologies into his band. Bob Palmer, for example, noted in a 1972 review of *Live-Evil*, “For all you technology buffs, Miles has the wah wah pedal mastered, but he steps up to the open mike every once in a while to remind you that he doesn’t need it, he just digs it.”113 Similarly, in Dave Marsh’s otherwise positive 1971 review of *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, he admits that Davis’s use of electronic effects “pisses me off, in a way – he doesn’t need all those gadgets, you know, he’s Miles. That’s the worst part of the record, when he fucks around with technology.”114 These critics viewed instrumental technologies as gimmicks that either covered up a lack of musical ability or inhibited the full appreciation of a musician’s talent.

Other jazz critics were equally dismissive of instrument technologies not because of their perceived “gimmickry” but rather because of their associated timbres. For such

112 The irony, of course, is that Armstrong began using a microphone for recording purposes shortly after its introduction in 1925, as did every other recording artist. Braff’s comments demonstrate an ideology prominent at the time that technology was a corrupting influence instead of a way music was mediated in an electronic age.


critics, jazz had historically been defined by the timbres created by acoustic instruments. Those same timbres, if the integrity of jazz were to be maintained, should remain the sonic basis for the music. Bass players, for example, should have no need of the sounds created by an electric Fender bass, just as pianists should reject the use of electric keyboards. Jazz guitarists should avoid using a distorted sound, and saxophonists should utterly reject the echoplex or other technological effects. As Dan Morgenstern noted regarding an acoustic jazz performance at a 1969 music festival, “In delightful contrast to the amplified electronic crimes against human hearing that were to assault the mind during the next few days, [Phil Woods’s] pure, human sound rang out into the night in celebration of life.”115 “Pure” and “human,” of course, are Morgenstern’s evaluative circumlocutions for “acoustic.” His statement belies the ideology espoused by traditional jazz fans from the time that acoustic correlates to purity and musical skill while electronics are nothing more than a corruption of that ideal.

Such critics applied this ideology most prominently to the value of the upright, acoustic bass in contrast to the growing popularity of the electric bass. One reviewer criticized a particular electric bass solo, describing it as “an object lesson in how bad a jazz solo can sound on a Fender bass.” He went on to note, “It’s stiff, . . . and the sound

has none of the wood-and-string snap of a standup bass." These writers agreed that, by the early 1970s, unaffected acoustic instruments symbolized the purity of the jazz sound while electric instruments that highlighted timbral alteration symbolized the corrupting influences of rock and other contemporary popular music. Individual musical talent, defined as a lack of technological engagement, was a primary authenticating gesture for jazz musicians. They demonstrated this musical talent by rejecting emerging instrument technologies and continuing their use of those acoustic instruments historically associated with traditional jazz practices. Use of acoustic instruments and avoidance of technological effects would ensure both the continued musical skills of the performers as well as the purity of the timbres those performers created.

Other critics voiced concern not at the use of such technologies but rather at their perceived overuse, particularly when a technology was first introduced to the public. Gary Giddins expressed just such a concern when, in 1972, he observed “what seems to be a gee-whiz attitude to the possibilities of electricity” as opposed to the use of such technologies in the service of facilitating musical creativity. Similarly, when Mark Plummer first heard the Moog Synthesizer at the 1970 Isle of Wight Festival he described


it as “little more than a toy.” Robert Moog, the inventor of that synthesizer, agreed that many musicians made use of it early on as more of a novelty than a musical extension. As he put it in 1970, “I like anybody who takes [the Moog] seriously and gets into it beyond the obvious effects that you hear on some records. There have been some attempts to use it as a novelty, but that’s over and I don’t think it’ll happen again.”

As Moog implicitly argued, the introduction of any new technology inaugurates a period during which musicians learn how to utilize that technology in creative ways. Just as he recognized in 1970 the coming of age of the Moog in relation to its creative and musical uses, so too did Harvey Mandel see 1970 as a pivotal year for electric guitar effects, noting that their use “is certainly getting more musical. People are becoming aware of those who can really play and those who are pretending.” Mark Plummer pointed out a similar tendency related to the development of guitar amplifiers, observing the “tendency for people to become the slave of machines.” As he put it, “It takes a while to get used to using 250 watts of power instead of a ten watt Fender. You’ve got to be careful that the 250 watts doesn’t take you over.” These critics noted

121 Plummer, “When a Jazzman,” p. 27.
the tendency on the part of musicians, upon the introduction of a new technology, initially to exploit that technology for its own sake and only later to incorporate the technology into their own musical creativity.

For many jazz fans, though, instrument technologies would never reach the point where they could contribute to musical creativity. Though critics such as Mandel and inventors such as Moog argued for a period in which musicians began utilizing a technology with demonstrable musical skill and creativity, traditional jazz critics generally continued to view such instrument technologies with suspicion. That the majority of the comments from critics above are taken from the early 1970s highlights their continued rejection of such technologies at that time.

Particularly by early 1970, when Davis held the recording sessions that would result in *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, the genre-based lines in relation to electric instruments and musical effects were firmly in place. In general, the more a musician incorporated instrument technologies into his or her performance practice, the more easily that musician came to be identified with the rock and contemporary popular music. Nowhere was the distinction between jazz and popular music more prominent than in the genre-based coding of distorted guitars and electric basses as rock instruments in contrast to acoustic basses and pianos as jazz instruments.
When Miles Davis utilized both a distorted guitar and an electric bass as foundational components for the 1970 sessions, he was creating a sound decidedly outside the sonic boundaries of traditional jazz. The timbres of these instruments, along with the sound and style of Billy Cobham’s drumming, contributed to the genre crossing music created on April 7. Likewise, on February 18 Davis brought together musicians with diverse stylistic backgrounds as well as instruments associated with different musical genres in order to facilitate much of the remainder of the music for *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*. In bringing together these stylistically varied musicians who were utilizing instrument technologies in innovative and creative ways, Davis created the musical environments which resulted in what he considered to be among the best recordings of his career. This resulting sound was enabled by the combination of new personnel and emerging instrument technologies in the specific context of the recording studio.

An equally significant aspect of the overall sound was the innovative way in which emerging studio technologies contributed to the final album. Instead of

122 Though Davis’s use of these instruments had unavoidable genre implications, he first claimed that his band’s decision to go electric was not based on genre but rather on the more pragmatic need of increased volume in live settings. See, e.g., Dan Morgenstern, “Miles in Motion” *Down Beat* (September 3, 1970), pp. 16-17 at 17; and Larry Kart, “The Chick Corea File” *Down Beat* (April 3, 1969), pp. 21-22 at 21. While volume may indeed have been an influential consideration, it would have been of little significance for the studio sessions on which Davis utilized such instruments. The audio environment in a studio could have been carefully monitored, with louder instruments being placed behind partitions or even in separate rooms. In the studio, increased volume has no direct correlation to ease of hearing. The studio use of distorted guitars and electric basses, then, was less an issue of volume than one of timbre.

performing complete tunes in the studio, Davis utilized the February 18 and April 7 sessions to oversee improvisation-based jam sessions that were opportunities for informal group interplay. Only later did Teo Macero assemble portions of those two sessions, along with material from two additional sessions, to craft the final album. Utilizing emerging studio technologies in ways that further challenged established genre-based conventions, Macero crafted this diverse series of open-ended studio jam sessions into the discrete tracks titled “Right Off” and “Yesternow” that mutually comprise the album *A Tribute to Jack Johnson.*
Interlude

McLaughlin, Henderson, and Cobham are “going for it,” as McLaughlin would later say, joyfully lost in the energy and the driving rhythms of this infectious rock jam. The tempo is up, the groove is happening, and the volume is definitely loud. Cobham crashes on every beat over a constant bass/snare quarter-note alternation that is the rhythmic standard for rock drumming. Henderson is locked into a bluesy bass riff over which McLaughlin aggressively hammers out a distorted, rock shuffle. If there were ever a moment on record that captures the raw energy of intense group interplay, this is it. For over two minutes, the trio jams away, lost in a groove that seems like it cannot – and should not – stop.

But then something happens. McLaughlin changes his chords, and the groove begins to lose its sense of inexorability, sounding instead like the flawed result of an under-rehearsed jam session. McLaughlin’s new chords clash with Henderson’s bass riff, and the excitement of the groove gradually begins to slip away. With each passing second, successful interaction grows ever more elusive as the musicians gradually lose their grip on a groove that had only moments before seemed so impossibly secure. Though they had earlier been contributing to an engaging musical conversation, McLaughlin and Henderson now don’t even seem to be speaking the same language.

The problem is that McLaughlin has modulated to a new key – B-flat – a distant tritone from Henderson’s E bass riff. At this moment of overt harmonic conflict and unavoidable dissonance, Miles Davis chooses to begin his solo. But what can he do? There’s no way to blend
these two distant keys into a single, recognizable harmony. Davis is going to have to make a
choice and hope that the other musicians adjust. Blasting away on a relentless B-flat, it’s clear
that Davis has chosen to follow McLaughlin, leaving Henderson as the odd man out in this
harmonic tug-of-war. But even twenty seconds after Davis’s entrance, Henderson is still in E,
McLaughlin is still in B-flat, and the tune seems headed for disaster.

What’s going on here? Who’s calling the shots, and how could a session led by one of the
most respected musicians around end up in such apparent disarray? These are the questions that
the opening minutes of “Right Off” suggest. And, almost from the start, there was no lack of
explanation about how such an anomalous musical moment came to be.
Chapter Two: Studio Surgery

“Some people have said I took a clipper to the tapes... You know, a piece here, a piece there, then we ended up with this album and that album. Well, the thing is we had to do that, because none of the albums were ever really finished. With me, if I remembered something that happened six years ago on one of Miles’s tracks, I’d dig the thing out and say hey, we could use that, and put that in somewhere. And today people are saying I created a whole new dimension of editing [laughs]. We were just doing what we needed to finish the record.”¹ – Teo Macero

“While jazz musicians largely have been reluctant to take advantage of the vast range of techniques and effects that modern recording technology facilitates, rock musicians, and especially rock producers, have had no such qualms or misgivings. Quite the contrary, in fact. They have rushed into recording studios to embrace and explore just about every technique that modern recording procedures have put at their disposal.”² – Peter Welding

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The title – “Right Off” – is actually right on. Or at least that’s what the stories now told about it imply. As the popular myths about the April 7 recording session point out, the tune was birthed in a moment of musical spontaneity and sustained and enriched by the equally spontaneous appearance of an unexpected musician midway through the session. For those who have listened to and read about the recording, the following two stories will sound familiar. In the first story, John McLaughlin is describing the beginning of the April 7 session, during which the material for “Right Off” was recorded. As he remembers it:

¹ Bill Murphy, “Raging Bullhorn,” p. 36.
We were all in the studio, just waiting for Miles. He was talking to Teo Macero in another room and that went on for 10-15 minutes, and I got bored. I started to play a boogie in E, just to have some fun, that’s all. I was playing these funny kind of chords . . . kind of angular chords, but all really related to the blues. . . . I was really hitting the strings hard, just going for it. Billy picked it up, Michael picked it up, and in a couple of minutes we were gone. So finally the door opened and Miles ran in with his trumpet. The [recording] light was on and he just played for about 20 minutes, which I had never seen him do before. It was a situation where he just walked in and everything was happening already. And he played so fine. It was so spontaneous, such a great moment.3

In the second story, Billy Cobham remembers a similarly serendipitous studio occurrence later that same day. As he recalls:

Herbie [Hancock] walked in with a bag of groceries. He wasn’t scheduled to be on the session or anything, he just dropped by the studio to hand Miles a copy of his latest release on Warner Brother’s called Fat Albert Rotunda. And Miles looked at him and pointed to this Farfisa organ in the corner and said, “Play!” . . . So Herbie looked at this Farfisa organ – it was the first time he had ever seen the thing – and couldn’t figure out what to do with it. So he’s trying to get some kind of sound out of it. He and Stanley Tonkel, the engineer, are trying to figure out how to get the thing to work until finally you hear this one long chord cluster of notes: “Waaaah!!” That’s Herbie trying to figure out how the blasted thing turns on. And then he starts to play a solo. I mean, it was that kind of thing. He walked in cold. He’d just come from the store with a container of milk and some

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other groceries. He played the solo, he gave Miles the record and he split. And that’s how that record came together. It was just that loose.\textsuperscript{4}

Two different stories from two different musicians about the same recording session. In the first and more often repeated story, McLaughlin turns to music as a way to alleviate a technologically-induced studio boredom. The engineers are taking their time in setting up microphones and checking the various input levels and equalizations, so McLaughlin decides to entertain himself by playing a musical passage that is on his mind. The musical content that he chooses comes from “the blues,” and the manner of his playing is one of joyful abandon (“I was . . . just going for it”). The other musicians quickly join in this unplanned moment of musical creation and achieve a level of groove that they recognize as something special (“in a couple of minutes we were gone”). Not even Davis and the engineers can resist the groove, so Davis gives in to his musical urges and runs in to join the rhythm section for nearly twenty minutes of spontaneous musical interaction. Though the microphone levels had not yet been properly balanced, the musicians did not have the patience to subject themselves to the apparent necessities of technology.\textsuperscript{5} Spontaneous group interplay trumped technological necessity. The end result, according to McLaughlin, was “a great moment” that was created not by studio


\textsuperscript{5}In another version of this story, Billy Cobham recalls, “John and Michael Henderson started to play, more in a kind of warm up mode than anything else while Stan Tonkel got a balance on the instruments.” See Milkowski, “Unleashing the Avatar,” p. 67.
technology but rather by the in-the-moment musical interaction of jazz performers. In this implicit battle of technology versus musical interplay, musical interplay won a decisive victory.

The second story similarly focuses on musical spontaneity as the key to creating a successful musical moment. Hancock “just dropped by” the studio where there just happened to be a Farfisa organ that, though playable, was certainly not a prime instrument. The engineer, apparently risking electrocution in the presence of this unpredictable technology, plugs the organ in.\(^6\) Even then, the organ does not respond until Hancock uses not just his hand, but rather the force of his entire forearm to physically coerce the organ into producing sound.\(^7\) Once the organ begins cooperating, Hancock plays his solo and then abruptly leaves the studio, presumably in order to continue with those mundane activities – including grocery shopping – that his day had been devoted to prior to his unexpected recruitment into the recording session. Neither the lack of Hancock’s rehearsal time nor the unpredictability of the organ itself can stop the successful musical moment that results from this spontaneous opportunity.

According to both stories, spontaneity overcomes a technological obstacle as the groove resulting from group interplay creates a successful musical experience.

\(^6\) In the version of the story found in Tingen’s \textit{Miles Beyond}, Cobham adds, “I don’t know how he did it [referring to plugging in the Farfisa] without getting . . . shocked” (p. 105).

\(^7\) In Tingen’s \textit{Miles Beyond} version, Cobham again adds, “[Hancock] couldn’t get a sound, so he put his forearm across the keys, and suddenly the thing goes . . . Wwraammm!” (p. 105).
The only problem is that neither story is fully accurate. As Michael Henderson has pointed out, Hancock had been present at the previous night’s rehearsal at Davis’s apartment, so he at least knew of the recording session and possibly had been invited to attend.\(^8\) Also, the unedited session tapes from that date reveal Hancock joining the band roughly three minutes into one of the takes of the “Right Off” jam, which would potentially line up with Cobham’s recollection. However, he does not enter with a loud forearm cluster but rather with a brief, barely-audible melody. Roughly a minute later, during which time Hancock has been experimenting with various settings on the Farfisa, the groove breaks down. When the tapes begin rolling again, Hancock still briefly toys with a few settings before beginning a solo. It is a portion roughly two minutes into that solo that is ultimately included in the album version of “Right Off.” However, after this solo, Hancock does not abruptly leave the recording session, as Cobham recalls, but instead stays around and performs on nearly the next hour of studio material. So while Hancock may or may not have “just happened to walk past” the studio, the way in which he came to perform with the band and the chronology of the music that ended up on the album is significantly less spontaneous than Cobham’s recollection would suggest.

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\(^8\) Henderson is quoted as follows in Tingen, *Miles Beyond*, p. 104: “Two weeks later [on April 6] we met at his brownstone in New York. Billy Cobham came over, and John McLaughlin, and Herbie and Keith Jarrett. Clive Davis was also there. And the next day we were in the studio at CBS, recording *Jack Johnson*.”
The McLaughlin story represents an even more dramatic recasting of the studio events of April 7. McLaughlin recalls improvising a spontaneous jam that results in “about 20 minutes” of unplanned group interplay. Again, the unedited studio tapes from that date reveal that McLaughlin’s recollection is at variance with the historical details of the session. Paul Tingen, drawing upon the expanded studio material made available on the 2003 release The Complete Jack Johnson sessions, has already raised doubts about the details of the story.9 He argues that, since the take utilized for the original studio release was titled “Right Off [Take 10]” on the complete reissue, there may well have been nine previous takes of some form of the same material. Additionally, Davis can be heard at the beginning of “Right Off [Take 10]” giving what seem to be harmonic instructions to McLaughlin, implying that this ostensibly spontaneous jam was worked out over the previous nine takes.10 While Tingen’s argument is plausible, the unedited session tapes from that date give a clearer picture of the specific chronology of the studio events and of how the “Right Off” groove developed into its final album form.

9 See Tingen, “The Jack Johnson Sessions.”

10 Davis says, “Go ahead, John, play. Play it up. Play it up, and then drop down.” See “Right Off [Take 10]” at 0:00 on The Complete Jack Johnson sessions (Sony, 2003). Tingen interprets this instruction to be related either to volume, in which case McLaughlin would decrease the volume of his playing at the agreed upon moment, or to harmony, in which case McLaughlin would play the boogie “up” in the key of E and then “drop down” to the key of B-flat in order to prepare for Davis’s entrance.
The April 7 session begins with the rhythm section of Billy Cobham, Michael Henderson, and John McLaughlin working on four different passages: an E-flat riff, a four-chord sequence, a chromatic transition line, and what McLaughlin describes above as a “boogie in E.”

The musicians, under Davis’s supervision, are experimenting with different approaches to providing metric continuity among these four passages. The first take, for example,
begins with the trio playing the E-flat riff for about twenty seconds at a tempo of roughly 108. McLaughlin then leads the trio into playing the chromatic transition line for about five seconds, for which he speeds the tempo up to roughly 126. When McLaughlin then moves into a single iteration of the E boogie, Cobham stops playing in order to ask Davis a question about the tempo. He wants to clarify Davis’s desires about how to integrate the E-flat riff, which was played with a straight eighth note feel at a tempo of 108, with the chromatic transition line, which was played with a triplet feel at a faster tempo of 126. Cobham asks, “It’s the same tempo?” to which Davis responds, “The same tempo. Just cut it in half. Make it a half shuffle.”

Over the next eleven minutes of studio time, Davis continues to provide instructions to the musicians as they struggle with how to integrate rhythmically and metrically these four disparate passages. This includes ten different starts and stops where various members of the trio ask Davis about the passages. After stopping for the seventh time, for example, Cobham asks, “Miles . . . after that shuffle, man, do I go back into it?” to which Davis responds, “Look here. When he says, ‘da-dat’ [demonstrating McLaughlin’s rhythm for the last two sixteenth-note chords of the E-flat riff] you can say, ‘bap-bap-bap-bap-bap-bap-bap-bap’ [demonstrating a straight eighth note feel over the tempo established during the E-flat riff].”

After ten such starts and stops, the group initiates the first extended jam on the E boogie, over which Steve Grossman solos on soprano saxophone for nearly two minutes.
The band then modulates the E boogie up to A-flat, as they had done in one previous take. This modulation apparently takes Grossman by surprise, as he stops playing just after the tune moves to the new key. When Grossman stops playing, Cobham also pauses for a moment, at which point the groove has been sufficiently disrupted so that the entire band stops playing. Over the next fourteen minutes, the group works through ten more starts and stops, including two Grossman solos over the E boogie that are roughly two minutes and one and a half minutes long, respectively. Once they have worked out a sense of key relationships, metric continuity, and formal structure, they perform the material now known as “Right Off [Take 10].”

For this take, now nearly thirty minutes into the recording session for the day, McLaughlin and Henderson begin by playing the E boogie for just over two minutes. At that point, McLaughlin modulates to the key of B-flat to prepare for Davis’s entrance. Henderson, however, continues playing his bass riff in the key of E, creating a harmonic

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11 The unedited session tapes further reveal that, at the end of the April 7 session, the band launches into a seven-minute funk jam in A-flat that, as of this writing, has not yet been made commercially available. The quintet of Cobham, Henderson, McLaughlin, Hancock, and Grossman plays for nearly thirty seconds while Davis and Macero, from the control booth, repeatedly request that the musicians stop playing. Macero can be heard pleading with the musicians to “try it again” and to “hold it, hold it, hold it!” while the band continues to play. Davis similarly says, “Hey hold it a minute” and “Shut up!” while the band again continues playing. After thirty seconds, the band finally stops, and Davis instructs the musicians to begin again, presumably so that Macero can record the beginning of the jam. The band starts again, with Grossman soloing on soprano sax, followed by a McLaughlin guitar solo, and the jam ends with Henderson alone playing the bass riff that had provided the foundation for the jam. Though Davis does not solo over this groove, the manner in which the musicians ignore Davis’s and Macero’s requests to stop playing resonates with the way the beginning of the “Right Off” myth has been told. When discussing *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, then, McLaughlin was likely conflating this A-flat funk jam with the beginning of the “Right Off” boogie in E.
tension that Paul Tingen has exuberantly referred to as “one of the most exhilarating moments in the history of music.”\(^{12}\) Davis chooses that moment to enter, emphasizing a B-flat in his solo until, after nearly twenty seconds of this harmonic clash, Henderson joins the other two musicians in B-flat. It may seem strange that after nearly thirty minutes of studio time working out the musical details of the tune, Henderson could miss this harmonic modulation. Again, though, a hearing of the unedited session tapes creates at least some level of sympathy for Henderson’s confusion over the details of the modulation.

The band, at Davis’s instruction, had previously played different portions of the four passages in four different keys, none of which was B-flat. Additionally, when Davis instructs the musicians in key relationships during the takes leading up to “Right Off [Take 10],” there is usually a general level of confusion about which portions of the passages are in which keys and about how all four passages are to work together structurally. The following interchange between Davis and McLaughlin, for example, occurring roughly twelve minutes into the session and after twelve starts and stops, demonstrates this uncertainty.

MD: Make that little figure, and I’ll play.
JM: Which figure?
MD: After you get to the [indiscernible] make that little figure and I’ll play.
JM: What this? [JM plays the E boogie and then modulates it to A-flat]

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\(^{12}\) Tingen, “The Jack Johnson Sessions.”
MD: Yeah, yeah. After he gets through playing, and then I’ll play.
JM: You want to play in E-flat?
MD: Yeah, yeah. In B-flat.
JM: In B-flat?
MD: E-flat is alright. And you’re playing in B-flat?
JM: No, I’m playing in A-flat.
MD: From the top.

It is roughly fourteen minutes and ten takes later when McLaughlin modulates from E to B-flat while Henderson stays in the key of E. Nevertheless, the unedited session tapes both confirm and clarify Paul Tingen’s hunch that the beginning of the original “Right Off” release was not, in fact, the result of a spontaneous and disruptive studio jam. Instead, it was a culmination of no fewer than twenty-two starts and stops occurring over nearly thirty minutes of studio time, including extensive rhythmic and harmonic instructions from Davis.

It is clear that two of the most circulated stories about this recording session did not happen the way they were said to. As the session shifted from present event to past recollection, the allure of the myth of spontaneity exceeded the actual historical events, resulting in the widespread circulation of these two prominent stories. The question to ask, then, is why – if these two stories are not true – did they gain such currency in the popular mythology circulating about the album? Why are these stories so easy to
believe, and why have they gained such a prominent place in current discussions of the album?13

With the remainder of this chapter, I offer an answer to these questions by first outlining the politics of genre and authenticity in the late 1960s and early 1970s as realized through contemporary popular discourses on studio technology. I then detail the studio production techniques used for this album and read them in the context of the above discourses. I argue that the overt and innovative uses of such audible studio technologies as tape splicing, overdubbing, and post-production mixing on this album place the recording in an ambiguous position in relation to genre designation, with such practices being associated at the time more with rock and contemporary music than with jazz. I then situate the two stories detailed above as responses by traditional jazz listeners to what was viewed as the continued threat of jazz’s demise, in this case signaled by the perceived defection of Miles Davis from the genre of jazz to that of rock. I argue that A Tribute to Jack Johnson, in a more overt way than Davis’s prior recordings, underscores this perceived defection through its overt attempt to highlight the audibility of studio post-production techniques, in particular the techniques of tape splicing, overdubbing, and mixing. Additionally, I offer clarification regarding the influence that producer Teo Macero held over the construction of the final album.

Technology, Genre, and Authenticity

From the time of its inception in 1917, recorded jazz had largely been defined by the goal of capturing in a complete take a live moment of musical interaction.14 Though there were notable exceptions during the 1940s and 1950s, single takes that recorded complete performances were the aesthetic standard for recorded jazz.15 As Albin Zak has noted in his study of recording technologies:

In jazz, the integrity of the musical moment is a central tenet of the music, and musicians’ creative energy . . . is aimed at making the most of that moment as it is happening. Altering it after the fact challenges the traditional ideology of authenticity in jazz.16 Zak refers to this approach as “transparent documentary representation,” whereby the mediating studio technologies lack aural prominence so that the sonic results on record will be heard as unmediated.17 Regardless of their degree of use on an album, the presence of technologies such as tape splicing, overdubbing, equalization, or other sound mediations are downplayed or even ignored within traditional jazz discourse in

14 The accepted historical narrative cites the Original Dixieland Jazz Band’s 1917 recording of “Livery Stable Blues” and “Dixieland Jass Band One Step” as the first instance of recorded jazz. See, e.g., Martin and Waters, Jazz, pp. 55-59.

15 Sidney Bechet, for example, overdubbed all of the instrumental parts for his 1941 recordings “The Sheik of Araby” and “Blues of Bechet,” and Lennie Tristano adopted a similar approach on his 1955 eponymous album. See Albin J. Zak, III, The Poetics of Rock: Cutting Tracks, Making Records (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 7 for more details.

16 Zak, The Poetics of Rock, p. 7.

17 Gabriel Solis has similarly argued, “The aesthetic of jazz is such that recordings are engineered to create a simulation of live sound, to present the impression of ‘being there.’” See Solis, “A Unique Chunk,” p. 341.
favor of the idealized musical event that forms the conceptual basis for transparent documentary representation. The resulting album is understood within that discourse to be a direct window onto the moment of musical interaction in which the responsibility of recording technology is simply to capture that which the musicians are already playing. Similarly, a producer’s job is to oversee the documentation of this live musical performance. From this perspective, the unaltered, unmediated instantiation of group interaction via a single, complete performance of a tune was the primary authenticating gesture for a jazz recording.

Zak further argues that this approach was dominant in jazz up until the emergence of fusion jazz in the late 1960s, when the transparent documentary representation aesthetic was prominently challenged for the first time. The emergence of fusion jazz is best articulated in terms of the rise in popularity of rock music (along with the demise of jazz as a popular music), the availability of emerging recording technologies that opened up new sonic possibilities for studio production, and the prominence of value judgments among traditional jazz critics in relation both to the


artistic merit of rock music and to the commercial motives of its practitioners. *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, when articulated with these issues, provides an opportunity to gain a detailed understanding of what was at stake (and for whom) during this disruptive and transitional time.

In the late 1960s, many traditional jazz fans prominently began voicing a concern that jazz was dying. In light of unimpressive record sales and dwindling audiences, such fans saw the continued economic viability of the genre as anything but guaranteed. Saxophonist Lou Donaldson’s comments from 1969 express this widespread anxiety. In response to a question regarding the imminent death of jazz, Donaldson responded, “Dying? I’m afraid jazz is dead. . . . Pretty soon, jazz will end up just like classical music: they’ll play it about two months out of the year out in the park, in the summertime, and that’s it.”20 This issue reached such a fever pitch that *Down Beat*’s editor Charles Suber was compelled to write, “It should come as no surprise to *Down Beat* readers that jazz is alive and well and living wherever you wish it to be.”21 In defending the vitality of jazz, in part by offering a radical redefinition of “jazz-as-

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anything,” Suber draws attention to the anxiety that accompanied discussions of jazz’s commercial and economic prospects in the late 1960s.22

But while jazz may have been dying, rock was alive and well. Rolling Stone magazine could cite the soaring record sales of albums such as the Beatles’ eponymous recording and Bob Dylan’s John Wesley Harding. This was in addition to the remarkably well-attended concerts at large rock venues such as the Fillmore East and West and, perhaps most symbolically, the popular outdoor festivals such as the Monterey Pop Festival (1967) and Woodstock (1969).23 An important measure of the rise in popularity of rock was the unprecedented volume of record sales which was implicitly contingent on the technologies that impacted recording and production.24 Rock bands and producers in the late 1960s were generally eager to make use of newly emerging studio technologies as a way to expand the potential creativity of record production.

22 The topic of jazz’s continued economic viability was also addressed in Jazz magazine. In July 1967, the magazine acknowledged the decline in popularity of jazz, and the corresponding decline in readership and advertising revenue. As a way to achieve greater economic security, the magazine expanded the scope of its coverage to include rock and other more popular musics; an expansion reflected by the magazine’s titular change to Jazz & Pop at that time. One month prior, Down Beat had made a similar decision to broaden the scope of its music coverage to include rock. See editorials addressing these shifts in Jazz & Pop (August and November, 1967) and Down Beat (June and July 1967).

23 See, e.g., Rolling Stone, “Beatles’ Record Busting LP May be All-Time Biggest” (December 21, 1968), pp. 1, 4; Rolling Stone, “Dylan LP to be a Million Seller” (February 24, 1968), p. 8; and, for a contemporary account of the Woodstock festival, Rolling Stone, “It Was Like Balling for the First Time” (September 20, 1969), pp. 1, 20, 23-26.

24 Carl Belz acknowledged the centrality of recordings in rock in 1969, noting, “Rock has existed primarily on records. In this, the music is rather different from jazz . . . . Although jazz and other types of folk music exist on records, they did not originate in that medium. For the most part, they originated and developed through live performance. Rock, it seems to me, has generally done the opposite.” See Belz, The Story of Rock, p. viii. Theodore Gracyk makes a similar argument in his book Rhythm and Noise.
Particularly from the mid-1960s on, albums such as the Beach Boys’ *Pet Sounds* (1966) and the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) became symbols for how rock and contemporary music could make a productive and even definitive use of studio technology in creating the hit records that defined the genre. For both of these albums, the goal of production was not the creation of a musical work that could then be recreated in a concert setting but rather was the construction of what Lee Brown, borrowing from the earlier work of Evan Eisenberg, has termed a work of “phonography;” a work that “cannot be performed” and is “only phono-accessible” through the medium of the recording.  

Particularly with the *Sgt. Pepper’s* album, the Beatles had no intention of performing the album material in concert settings. They instead recognized the differing aesthetic standards between studio work and concert work, and they saw little value in conflating the two into a single conception of musical creativity. Audible instances of studio technology and post-production were integral to the aesthetic conception of these recordings. This foregrounding of studio technology was thereby integrated into the rock recording aesthetic as these two albums signaled recording’s rise in importance as the sonic and material foundation in defining rock music of the late 1960s.

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Though rock musicians and producers were often eager to utilize the newest recording technologies, many traditional jazz listeners at the time expressed hesitation and even suspicion towards those same technologies. This was due in large part to their prevalent acceptance of transparent documentary representation as the aesthetic standard for jazz recordings. In general, these listeners saw a direct correlation between the lack of audible uses of studio technology and the perception of authenticity in jazz. The more audible the technology, the less authentic the music. Such jazz listeners began to value jazz recordings based on their lack of engagement with studio technologies just as other rock listeners began to value rock recordings for their intentional and consistent exploitation of those same technologies. While this lack of engagement with technology was always as much an ideal as it was a reality, such an ideal held significant ideological currency for traditional jazz fans in the late 1960s.27 Jazz critic Peter Welding, for example, summarized as follows the ways in which studio technologies were becoming increasingly significant in the genre-based coding of an album:

It’s an interesting paradox: while jazz musicians largely have been reluctant to take advantage of the vast range of techniques and effects that modern recording technology facilitates, rock musicians, and especially rock producers, have had no such qualms or misgivings. Quite the contrary, in fact. They have rushed into recording studios to embrace and explore just about every technique that modern recording procedures have put at their disposal; not only that, they have

27 As Mark Katz has noted, jazz musicians were forced to engage with and accommodate certain recording technologies from the time of recorded music’s inception. For example, one of the more prominent “phonograph effects,” or overt influences of recording technology on jazz, was the time restraints imposed on song length and improvisation in the era of 78 rpm records. See Katz, Capturing Sound, ch. 3.
created a number of techniques that have since been incorporated into standard recording practice. It is this openness, this willingness to put advanced technology to work that largely accounts for the vitality and excitement that have infused much current rock and which has led to statements about the relative moribundity of jazz. Jazzmen and jazz record producers could profit from a study of the recording and production techniques of rock.²⁸

Though Welding argued for the potential creative value of emerging studio technologies, most traditional jazz critics voiced decidedly negative value judgments about the use of such technologies in the creation of jazz albums. Just as traditional jazz listeners disparaged the uses of new instrumental technologies as corruptions of the jazz aesthetic,²⁹ so too did they regularly dismiss the use of studio technology as “merely the gimmicks of a pop recording business which thrives on constant novelty.”³⁰ Those writing in *Down Beat* viewed such “gimmicks” as a consistent threat to the artistry of jazz. In some cases, as in Jim Szantor’s review of Miles Davis’s *Bitches Brew* (1970), artistry was still able to triumph over the technological threat. As he wrote, “Though electronic effects are prominent, art, not gimmickry, prevails and the music protrudes mightily.”³¹

However, the vast majority of studio-related comments criticized studio technologies as dehumanizing gimmicks that detracted from the quality of the music.

²⁹ This issue is addressed in greater detail in Chapter One.
As Gary Giddins put it in a 1972 review of a technologically advanced album by the group Weather Report, “Something visceral is missing. The music is too cold and metallic, as though much of the substance were tinsel. There is a certain amount of the flow and freedom characteristic of jazz but the total effect is more like . . . electronic machination.”32 A part of this dehumanization was the audible distancing of the recorded sound from a live concert sound, the latter of which traditional jazz fans still viewed as the sonic and aesthetic standard toward which recordings should strive. Bob Dawbarn, for example, noted about Miles Davis’s Filles de Kilimanjaro, “I don’t recall another recording that has come so near to capturing the beauty of his in-person tone.”33 This idea was echoed by Alan Walsh, who described Davis’s playing as “a tone that is never captured on records.”34 Both critics understood the implicit goal of recording technology to be the capturing of the same sounds that musicians created during live concerts. They gave no credence to the idea that studio recordings and live concerts are different instantiations of the music and may necessitate different aesthetic bases for their critical evaluation. Dawbarn and Walsh’s mode of thought demonstrates a common perspective among traditional jazz fans at the time, who understood studio

technologies to be nothing more than dehumanizing and mechanistic gimmicks. Their use and overuse could only detract from the final sonic quality of the recording.

Surprisingly, some of these same criticisms initially appeared in rock journalism from the time. Such criticisms demonstrate the process by which the introduction of a new studio technology would inaugurate a period in which the musical uses and critical evaluations of that technology would actively be determined. Some rock critics, for example, maintained the priority of live performance as the aesthetic standard, implying that the goal of a recording should be to recreate a band’s live concert sound. Chris Strachwitz, for example, noted, “Jazz records, like rock records, capture only a part of the thing, you must hear [a group] in person in order to really enjoy them.”35 Applying similar aesthetic values in a review of the eponymous album by the group Spirit, Barret Hanson noted, “This record never gets far from the live group sound. This is mainly because the music on it was all worked out in live performance: the recording just captured what was already there.”36 Both writers point to an implicit understanding of live performance as the musical standard, arguing that the value of a recording is contingent upon its faithful representation of a group’s concert sound.

Similarly, critic Jann Wenner praised the group Cream for not “muddying” a particular song “with a lot of meaningless studio garbage” that would result in the

35 Chris Strachwitz, “Correspondence” Rolling Stone (April 6, 1968), p. 3.
album lacking a sense of human engagement.37 This same idea of studio technology as dehumanizing was present among some musicians, such as when Eric Clapton, for example, noted in 1969, “I don’t dig the idea of studios. It’s a very like sterile scene . . . [and] very impersonal really.”38 Likewise, critic Jon Landau panned the Rolling Stones’ album *Their Satanic Majesties Request* as “embarrassing” due to the overuse of “countless studio gimmicks” and “production effects,” including “an unbearably vulgar use of echo.”39 Studio technology, in fact, had come under such fire from these and similar listeners that one writer even thought it necessary to defend the technology’s potential artistry, writing, “Studio effects, added tastefully, are not necessarily ‘garbage,’ and they can add a great deal to a song.”40

Some of the above criticisms on the part of rock listeners, after all, were simply the result of a lack of information about the procedures by which albums were recorded and produced. One reader, for example, pleaded with *Rolling Stone* magazine for a series on just such topics, asking:

> What happens to a piece of sound from the time it is conceived in the artist’s mind until it comes out of the speakers of my record player? I could really dig

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seeing a series of long articles covering these topics. What is a producer? What is an engineer? What do they do? How are the master tapes made?41

It did not take long for rock fans to gain answers to these questions. Some readers, in fact, became so informed that they began to grow suspicious not of the use of studio technologies but rather of what was viewed as the inappropriate level of influence producers held over the final album. An ad from 1970 draws upon this suspicion in pointing out, “John Klemmer is young, rebellious, and wonderfully gifted. When he goes into a recording session, we don’t tell him what to do or how to do it. We just listen in awe. When he says the record is ready we know that it is.”42 The implication is that there is no producer or engineer determining the sonic outcome of Klemmer’s album. Instead, Klemmer himself maintains complete artistic autonomy in the studio. Similarly, Ralph Gleason argued in 1970:

Most rock groups believe that they must have three things (in addition to their music and their talent): a manager, a press agent and a producer. . . . The truth is that aside from that handful of genuine, creative contributors (like [Phil] Spector and like [George] Martin who really did do something), the best producers are the bands themselves. . . . The most dangerous myth is the producer myth.43

Such writing highlights a prominent suspicion about the influence of producers and engineers on the outcome of recorded music. Through, for example, buying into the

41 David Nicholas Hillis, “Correspondence, Love Letters & Advice” Rolling Stone (December 7, 1968), p. 3.
43 Ralph Gleason, “Perspectives: So You Wanna be a Rock Star” Rolling Stone (December 24, 1970), p. 27.
“myth” that producers have the unique skills and creativity necessary for creating high quality recordings, many musicians, in the opinions of these critics, were failing in their responsibility to contribute actively to the creation of the albums that would bear their names.

While some rock reviewers and musicians viewed the use of studio technology with suspicion as sterile, dehumanizing, or unable to recreate the sounds of a live performance, it was more common for those involved in rock music to revel in the creative possibilities of these new technologies. As Larry Coryell, a guitarist significantly influenced by rock practices, noted about a 1969 album:

The final tape . . . is the result of playing each instrument myself, then over-recording, mixing, editing, balancing – it’s something that I could not possibly recreate in live performance. Most recordings, these days, cannot be played in person by the bands who made them.44

Critic John Burks drew upon this idea in an article on Jimi Hendrix, where he wrote, “This is another area where Hendrix led all other improvising rock and roll and jazz-men: he was the first, and remains the most effective, at manipulating tape to give his recorded solos added levels of expression.”45 Such writers grant audible uses of studio technology a level of autonomy in which they are no longer subservient to a reproducible concert sound but rather define their own aesthetic standards. For most rock musicians, audible and often extensive use of emerging recording technologies

became part and parcel of the sound of rock at the same time that a rejection of those technologies was coming to define the traditional standard for recorded jazz. As critic John Burks summarized in *Rolling Stone* magazine:

> A sad thing has happened to jazz music. . . . Jazz used to be miles ahead of any other branch of American popular music in terms of interesting compositions, arrangements, the techniques and technology of playing. . . . However, jazz as an innovative force, as an influence on other musics, would seem to be a thing of the past. . . . Name one jazz player who uses the new technology of the recording studio as well as the average rock and roll band – let alone the Beatles, the Mothers, the Byrds, and Jimi Hendrix. . . . By and large they are following – not leading – trends initiated by rock musicians.46

These writers collectively demonstrate the ways in which audible uses of studio technology began to be coded in terms of genre in the late 1960s. While traditional jazz listeners continued to value the idea of transparent documentary representation, those associated with rock and contemporary popular music had broadly accepted studio technology as a viable mode of musical production based on a different aesthetic standard from live musical performance. For such rock listeners, a recording technology could be utilized on its own aesthetic terms, without consideration of the possibility for its sonic reproduction in a live concert setting. Though Miles Davis had been groomed in the jazz tradition, his search for a new sound in the late 1960s led him away from what he began to see as jazz’s restrictive musical standards and towards a desire for greater genre-based blending. Part of this search included an awareness of the new

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possibilities of studio technologies, possibilities that were utilized on *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* in ways that his previous recordings had only begun gesturing toward.

**Studio Technology and A Tribute to Jack Johnson**

By the time of Davis’s 1970 recording sessions, he and Teo Macero had established a tradition of experimenting with studio technologies. Macero began utilizing tape splicing and overdubbing as far back as his 1953 production work on Charles Mingus’s album *Explorations*. Among his work with Davis, Macero’s unorthodox mixing techniques used on *Sketches of Spain* (1960) were groundbreaking for the time.\(^47\) This experimentation continued, for example, with two tunes from *Bitches Brew* (1970) which made significant use of tape splicing, looping, and other studio effects.\(^48\) More famously, *In a Silent Way* (1969) utilized tape splicing in order to include the exact repetition of roughly nine minutes of music, thereby creating a thirty-eight minute album out of twenty-nine minutes of material.\(^49\) As early as 1967, in fact, Davis had begun abandoning the practice of performing complete takes in the studio, utilizing


\(^{49}\) See Bob Belden, “Creating ‘In a Silent Way’” in accompanying booklet, *The Complete In a Silent Way Sessions* (Sony, 2001), pp. 72-77. This decision inspired Martin Williams to write, “The editing, annotating, and packaging are horrendous. Through faulty tape splicing, a portion of the music even gets inadvertently repeated at one point!” See Martin Williams, “Jazz: Some Old Favorites are Back” *New York Times* (January 18, 1970), p. 112.
the studio instead to create the sonic materials that would only later be combined into complete tunes. As I argue in Chapter One, Davis at this time rarely entered the studio with a complete concept of a piece in mind. More commonly, he would suggest a bass riff, a brief melody, or a particular rhythmic feel and allow that to inspire the musicians he had selected for the session. Instead of performing a complete instantiation of a discrete tune, he and the band would experiment in the studio, with the tapes rolling the entire time. Macero explained this process in an interview from 1971:

There are no takes one, two, or three, because there’s something new that pops into the music every time, whether it’s deliberate or just by accident, no one seems to know quite for sure. The group is constantly building toward a final goal, and we don’t stop the tape machines like we used to do in the old days – they run until the group stops playing.50

The following year he similarly noted, “When we record we never stop the machine. We record everything from top to bottom.”51

This had been Macero’s approach with Davis since at least the “Circle in the Round” sessions from December 4, 1967, where the band played thirty-five different takes of individual portions of the tune that were only later edited and compiled into a finished track.52 Instead of working toward the goal of recording a complete take, these

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51 Teo Macero (as told to Gordon Wright), “The Miles Davis I Know” [1972 manuscript], (Macero Collection, NYPL: Box 17, Folder 12).

52 See Bob Belden, “Annotations” in accompanying booklet, Miles Davis Quintet, 1965-1968 (Sony, 1998), pp. 63-103 at 88-89 for a discussion of how these individual segments were combined into a complete track.
sessions were used as opportunities to experiment with various musical ideas in order to compile the raw materials that would only later be used to construct finished tracks. As Macero again explained, “The tape machines . . . run until the group stops playing. Then we go back, listen, and decide between us what should be tacked to what – it becomes a search-and-find routine, and finally it’s all there, it’s just a matter of putting it all together.”

Over time, the challenges for Macero in constructing an album increased as the amount of previously recorded material likewise increased. Whereas Davis utilized this method on only a few sessions in the late 1960s, by the mid 1970s he had amassed an archive of literally dozens of reels of session tape containing hours of unused material from prior studio recordings. As Macero put it in 1974, “There’s an archive of Miles Davis that won’t quit and it’s all in perfect, mint condition. I take and I make masters of everything. [When it is time to create an album] I may have fifteen reels of Miles [to work with].” The challenges posed by this ever-expanding archive were apparent to a reporter who observed one such editing session shortly after Davis’s flurry of recording sessions in the spring of 1970. The reporter noted, “Miles has been so productive that Teo has one gigantic headache. He has six months worth of editing and enough material to produce albums for the next three years. No one quite knows what to do with all the

53 Albertson, “The Unmasking,” p. 87.
material at hand.” Such a “headache” was common for Macero at the time and was the expected result from adopting a procedure that utilized the studio as the site for exploring different musical ideas and the editing room as the place where complete tracks came into existence.

In describing and clarifying the details of what comprised post-production studio editing, Macero often drew upon various artistic metaphors in order to highlight the creative value of his own studio work. In contrast to the common denigration of studio work as nothing more than “gimmickry,” Macero once described such work as “painting in the editing room,” thereby ascribing to the process a level of artistry that few traditional jazz fans acknowledged at the time. In this visual arts analogy, the material recorded in the studio comprises the palette of colors and available shapes from which the producers then craft the final product. In addition, Macero once used a literary analogy in clarifying the role and value of studio production. He noted that, with tape editing, “You’re acting like a writer for a book, like an editor. I mean you can’t pan the book if the material is great. I’m just there to make sure that everything is in order.” His comments were partially a defense of his editorial methods in the face of accusations regarding the perceived lack of authenticity for tracks that had been created

55 Zygote, “Miles Davis,” p. 33.


using tape splicing. He argues that, just as an editor will help an author to organize his or her writing in the most artistically effective way, so too is it his job as producer to take the various materials from Davis’s session tapes and organize them in the way deemed most appropriate. Through this analogy, Macero again implies the artistry of studio production and the importance of his role in crafting the recorded material into the final product.

Using still another analogy, Macero referred to his studio production work as a form of musical composition, thereby taking care to situate the creative aspects of studio production specifically within a context of musical skill. As he put it:

I learned from the standpoint of editing, shifting the compositions around so that the front becomes the back, the back becomes the middle, the middle something else. It’s a creative process being a producer with Miles. In fact, it’s more of a creative process than it is with any other artist. You have to know something about music. You really need to be a composer, because for a lot of it [Davis] relies on you and your judgment.  

Here Macero highlights the creativity of the studio production process, implying parallels between music composition and production. To explore Macero’s comparison further, in composing, the artist creates a musical product under various constraints: instrumental, formal, harmonic, or other. With his own work as producer for Davis, Macero would compose a final track under the constraint of having only the

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existing studio tapes as his available source material. Once, in fact, when discussing this constraint, Macero recalled asking Davis to return to the studio in order to re-record a portion of a tape that was promising but that was not adequately developed. As Macero recalls the exchange, “He’d just finish a piece and I was let loose. I’d ask Miles ‘Can you do it again?’ and he’d say no. So I’d make loops and bridges and when he heard it, he’d say ‘I knew you were going to do that.’”60 With this narrative, Macero highlights the degree to which he was forced to utilize his own compositional creativity in new and productive ways.

At various times, then, Macero compared his work as a producer to different creative arts in an attempt to highlight and perhaps even defend the artistry of his studio production techniques. At a time when traditional jazz listeners viewed studio production as a novelty at best and as a dehumanizing and mechanistic gimmick at worst, Macero sought to elevate the artistic status of the producer within jazz. He explained the processes that went into album production as artistic processes, thereby situating his studio work in a decidedly creative realm.

Macero’s comparison of studio production to music composition was among the most logical connections he could make, as it grew directly out of his professional background. He had spent much of his mid- to late-20s studying at the Juilliard School, where, though majoring in saxophone performance, he maintained secondary interests

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60 Quoted in Cole, The Last Miles, p. 22.
in composition and sound editing. After graduating from Juilliard, Macero developed a friendship with the composer Edgard Varèse, once referring to him as a “second father.” This friendship developed during the mid-1950s when Varèse was creating such influential electronic works as his “Déserts” (1954) and “Poème électronique” (1957-1958). Both of these works were revolutionary at the time in their use of emerging sound technologies. They both also utilized two related but distinct compositional processes, categorized in the 1950s as elektronische Musik and musique concrète. These processes were attempts to utilize the possibilities of tape recording along with sound production and manipulation in order to create a new musical aesthetic within the realm of Euro-American art music. Specifically, elektronische Musik, in focusing exclusively on the synthetic production of sound, strove for total control over the timbral results by systematically ruling from consideration any and all pre-existing sounds. Musique concrète, on the other hand, utilized as its starting point those sounds that already existed in the world, whether human speech, instrumental sound,

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62 Iara Lee, “Interview with Teo Macero.”

or anything else heard in everyday life. Varèse’s work at the time tended to combine aspects of both elektronische Musik and musique concrète as well as, in the case of “Déserts,” the combination of prerecorded electronic music and live acoustic instruments.

Varèse’s adoption of such techniques had a significant impact on Macero. As he described the work of Varèse and his contemporaries:

They were doing a lot of electronic effects and I was fascinated with what they were doing. And I used to listen to all of that stuff and talk to them about it. . . . They encouraged me to do a lot of different things. So, when I have the opportunity [to utilize new technologies in innovative ways] I just do it.

Innovative uses of new technologies were an integral part of the compositional process for many of the composers whom Macero most admired in the 1950s. When he was given the opportunity to utilize emerging technologies in order to craft musical works, it was only logical for Macero to understand such an approach as a form of musical composition.

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65 After Varèse’s death on November 6, 1965, Macero wrote to a Columbia Records executive on December 27, 1965 with the following personal request: “Since Edgar Varese has passed away, it would be nice if we could supply Mrs. Varese with 100 of his albums. . . . As you know, Mr. Varese was one of the most outstanding contemporary composers in the field of serious music. It would be very nice if we could give these records to Mrs. Varese, for distribution to libraries and universities here in the United States in his name. I would appreciate anything you could do to implement the above as I am sure Mrs. Varese would be very grateful and, as a colleague of the great Maestro, I would be deeply indebted to you.” (Macero Collection, NYPL: Box 44, Folder 2.)

66 Iara Lee, “Interview with Teo Macero.”
Of the two prominent approaches to electronic composition in the 1950s, *musique concrète* would have the most direct conceptual link with Macero’s 1970s production work with Davis. As Peter Manning characterizes the process of *musique concrète*, “Composers . . . start with a selection of potential sound sources, offering a range of characteristics with which they may experiment, building up from the results of such investigations the elements for a complete composition.” 67 This notion finds immediate resonance with Macero’s own descriptions of his tape editing processes in the early 1970s. As he put it in 1972:

> We record everything from top to bottom. . . . We still keep the machines running because, who knows, maybe some tiny little phrase somewhere might be just the thing we need to tie everything together. Sometimes, you know, things don’t take shape in the studio; only later on, when we have all the parts to work with, do they take the shape we want them to be.

68 Macero therefore utilized prerecorded material from the studio as his “potential sound sources” to which were later added various electronic effects and were then cut, spliced, and reorganized into the final tune. This approach, then, is a rearticulation of the *musique concrète* principles Macero first encountered while under Varèse’s tutelage in the 1950s.

While the precise techniques utilized in constructing “Right Off” and “Yesternow” will be described in detail below, one example will suffice for now to

68 Teo Macero (as told to Gordon Wright), “The Miles Davis I Know” [1972 manuscript], (Macero Collection, NYPL: Box 17, Folder 12).
demonstrate what Macero termed his compositional approach to tape editing. On “Yesternow,” one of Macero’s tape splices occupies 18.49 through 18.53 of the album track. This four-second edit comprises a single sustained guitar chord by Sonny Sharrock that occurs in between the material titled “Willie Nelson Insert 1” and “Willie Nelson Insert 2” on the 2003 complete reissue. It is included so as to fill roughly two measures of the previously established meter and also to link together the two distinct riffs which characterize the two musical ideas. Sharrock’s guitar chord has nothing in common harmonically, melodically, or rhythmically with either the previous or the subsequent material on the track. Instead, it provides a distinct opportunity to set apart the music of “Insert 1” from that of “Insert 2.” Using the chord in such a way was a decidedly compositional decision, as the chord did not function as such when it was initially played in the recording studio. Instead, during the session, Sharrock played the chord at the end of a jam over the “Insert 1” riff that included numerous rhythmic breaks during which the band would remain silent while Sharrock would fill the space with various guitar effects and unusual sounds. Macero heard the musical potential in one such break and recontextualized the resulting guitar chord as the sonic bridge described above. He went on to utilize similar approaches throughout the editing of A

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69 This material was first given the title “Willie Nelson” in preparation for its release on the 1981 album Directions. This titular homage was apparently influenced by Davis’s manager at the time, Mark Rothbaum, who also functioned as Willie Nelson’s manager. See Tingen, Miles Beyond, p. 102.
Tribute to Jack Johnson, using the recorded music as compositional source material from which to create the final tracks as they appear on the album.

Macero and Davis: Agency in Studio Production

Thus far I have simply asserted Macero’s agency in the production of A Tribute to Jack Johnson. This has led to a discussion of Macero’s compositional training that has situated his production aesthetic at least partially within the trajectory of avant-garde Euro-American concert music. For some African American critics in the early 1970s, particularly those who aligned themselves with cultural nationalism and the Black Arts Movement, such an association had unavoidable racial implications.70 In 1971 Ron Welburn, for example, argued for a specific connection via technology between Euro-American avant-garde composers and contemporary rock music, both of which he characterized in racial terms as “white.” In his analysis of the relationship among race, technology, and music, Welburn asserted, “Rock musicians are in a technological lineage extending through John Cage, Stockhausen, Edgard Varèse, all the way back to Marconi and the wireless. White rock is a technology, not a real music.” He characterized such technologies as nothing more than “props” that served only to sustain this “white rock” music that had been stolen from African Americans but that lacked the emotional and

70 I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Three the relationship between Miles Davis and the Black Arts and Black Aesthetics movements. For an excellent study on the 1960s articulation of music and Black Arts thought, see Anderson, This Is Our Music.
spiritual immediacy of the music from which it was taken. Welburn contrasted the prominent role of technology in white rock with its limited role in African American music, writing, “Blow out Con Edison during simultaneous rock and soul music concerts, and see who suffers the most.” He acknowledged his suspicion over the corrupting influence of technological mediation on African American music and concluded his argument as follows:

Electronic music can make the black man blind from the sight of money and the white man rich on his deathbed, laughing absurdly at having fooled the niggers this last go-round. Black musicians should re-evaluate the technological intrusions now threatening our music; times may come when that technology will be useless. Our music is the key to our survival.71

For Welburn, technology was a constitutive element of white music, from the avant-garde compositions of Edgard Varèse to the contemporary rock popular in the early 1970s. Technology could only serve to corrupt the purity and power of African American music and should be avoided as an “intrusion” and a “threat” by African American musicians active at the time. Amiri Baraka, in 1970, offered a different evaluation of the relationship among technology, race, and contemporary music. He argued that technologies “have the morality of their inventors” while asserting that the prominent technologies of the late 1960s had been invented by white men. As such, those technologies were not capable of conveying the emotional and spiritual qualities

that African American expressive culture demanded. Instead, Baraka argued for the creation of a “new technology” that would enable the “post Western” expression particular to those African Americans who had been “freed” both socially and intellectually. While acknowledging, then, the inadequacies for African Americans of any technology created by white men, Baraka implied the distinct ways in which African Americans might develop and make use of new technologies for their own unique purposes.

Rayvon Fouché has proposed a similar idea, arguing for “the concept of black vernacular technological creativity.” Fouché offers this concept as a way to acknowledge African American agency in the context of a discursive history that has circumscribed African American technological experiences as nothing more than “technology as material oppression.” Arguing for a categorical reconceptualization of African American technological engagement that is based on ideas of racial and cultural difference, Fouché writes, “One cannot expect African Americans, who have traditionally been relegated to peripheral sites within American society and culture, to interact with technological products analogously to the members of the dominant

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American culture.” Fouché argues in part, then, that African American engagement with technology has been, and will continue to be, fundamentally different from the ways in which whites have engaged with those same technologies.

These arguments raise the issue of the ways in which the development and use of technological products have been articulated in the U.S. with constructions of racial difference. Welburn draws attention to one way technology was coded in terms of race in the early 1970s as distinctly white. Baraka and Fouché, however, draw attention to issues of agency and difference in relation to African American technological engagement. Miles Davis’s eager adoption of emerging instrument and studio technologies beginning in the late 1960s offers a contrast to Welburn’s argument of technology as a “threat” to African American creativity. At the same time, Davis’s music from this period provides a productive entry into the issues raised by Baraka and Fouché regarding technology and agency.

It is in this context, then, that I now raise the issue of agency in relation to studio production for A Tribute to Jack Johnson. Specifically, I am interested in the degree of collaboration between Davis and Macero in the work of album production. Was Macero fully autonomous in making the artistic decisions necessary for producing this album; was he collaborating with Davis; or was he working under Davis’s direct supervision?

For while Macero is officially listed as this album’s producer, there has been since the album’s release considerable confusion over the precise role that Macero played in crafting the final product. Questions of agency in relation to Davis’s album production, then, are salient not only for the purposes of attribution but also for the particular ways such questions are implicated in the historical articulation of race, technology, and music as outlined above.

Confusion over agency in relation to Davis’s album production may never be definitively eliminated.\footnote{As Dave Holland, who played bass in Davis’s band from 1968 through 1970, noted about the music from that time, “If you listen to the music, you can see there was quite a bit of editing. There was definitely some compositional editing but how much of that was Teo and how much was Miles . . . I have no idea what the balance of the decision was.” Quoted in Cole, \textit{The Last Miles}, p. 23.} Regarding \textit{A Tribute to Jack Johnson}, the nearly four decades that have now passed since the album’s creation have seen the loss of many of the figures who had the most intimate knowledge of the album’s production. Furthermore, existing accounts are often filled with the inconsistencies that come from different individuals with differing memories recalling these events decades after the fact. However, in the case of \textit{A Tribute to Jack Johnson}, there is sufficient material and anecdotal evidence to begin to reconstruct the creative interplay and relative artistic agency in the studio between Macero and Davis.
Discussions of artistic input and, ultimately, artistic control have consistently been contentious in relation to Davis’s music. Disputes over authorship of musical material occurred throughout his career, from the debate over compositional credits for “Donna Lee” in the 1940s to similar disputes over the composer designation for original tunes throughout the 1960s and beyond.\textsuperscript{75} Similar issues of artistic control extend beyond questions of composition into the realm of production for Davis. In 1969 with the release of \textit{Filles de Kilimanjaro}, for example, Davis began including the line “Directions in music by Miles Davis” on his album covers, apparently in response to just such a production dispute. As he explained the line at the time:

It means I tell everybody what to do. . . . If I don’t tell ‘em, I ask ‘em. It’s my date, y’understand? And I’ve got to say yes and no. Been doing it for years, and I got tired of seeing ‘Produced by this person or that person.’ When I’m on a date, I’m usually supervising everything.\textsuperscript{76}

This inscription was at least partially the result of Davis’s dissatisfaction over the release of the album \textit{Quiet Nights} in 1962, an album which Macero had produced and released

\textsuperscript{75} For an introduction to the initial confusion over whether Charlie Parker or Davis composed “Donna Lee,” see, e.g., Carr, \textit{Miles Davis}, p. 37; and Szwed, \textit{So What}, pp. 58-59. Davis had similar disputes in the late 1960s and early 1970s with Wayne Shorter over the authorship of “Sanctuary” and with Joseph Zawinul over the authorship of “Pharaoh’s Dance” and “In a Silent Way.” Letters from Shorter to Columbia Records dated January 14, 1971 and from Zawinul to Davis dated August 20, 1969 provide some of the details of these disputes. See Miles Davis Clippings, The Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University; and Macero Collection, NYPL: Box 13, Folder 6.

\textsuperscript{76} Gleason and DeMicheal, “I Could Put Together,” p. 25. As Virgil Moorefield argues, it was in the late 1960s and early 1970s that the function and artistic value (and resulting monetary entitlement) of a producer were first broadly recognized in the music industry. Davis’s response could be understood as a reaction to this broad shift in perception at the time. See Moorefield, \textit{The Producer as Composer}, p. 45.

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without Davis’s consent and which caused a rift in their relationship for several years.\textsuperscript{77} Nevertheless, this statement expresses Davis’s desire to claim full artistic control over – and credit for – all the various aspects of the creation of his albums.\textsuperscript{78} As I will demonstrate below, Davis was sometimes actively involved in the details of post-production while, at other times, his role was more the self-described offering of a final “yes or no” to the decisions made by others. Regarding \textit{A Tribute to Jack Johnson} in particular, Davis did gesture toward the importance of Macero’s role in the album’s creation, cryptically writing in the liner notes, “The guitar and the bass . . . are ‘Far-in’ – and so is the producer Teo Macero. He did it again!”\textsuperscript{79} While this statement is frustratingly vague for the purposes of understanding Macero’s specific involvement in the album, it does acknowledge the importance of his creative contributions to the production of the work.

Neither Davis nor Macero explicitly discussed the post-production processes for \textit{A Tribute to Jack Johnson} around the time of its release in 1971. Nevertheless, it is possible from the available evidence to formulate a general understanding of the standards of interaction between the two at the time. In 1969, for example, Macero acknowledged


\textsuperscript{78} Steven Pond has similarly demonstrated how numerous jazz musicians, including Davis, became more involved in album post-production beginning in the late 1960s as a way to maintain their influence over the final content and form of their studio recordings. See Pond, \textit{Head Hunters}, pp. 117-154.

\textsuperscript{79} Miles Davis, “Jack Johnson” in accompanying booklet, \textit{A Tribute to Jack Johnson} (Columbia, 1971); reprinted in \textit{The Complete Jack Johnson Sessions} (Sony, 2003), pp. 4-5.
Davis’s creative direction for tape splicing and editing when he noted, “We piece [the various incomplete takes] together and Miles creates here, too. He’ll play [the tapes] a dozen times to find something new. . . . He’ll take the tapes home and listen to them. He is thoroughly involved in creating the final product.”\textsuperscript{80} These comments were made around the time of the release of \textit{In a Silent Way} and \textit{Bitches Brew} and likely were references to the editing processes on those two albums.\textsuperscript{81}

Two years later Macero implied that such collaboration was still characteristic of his production work with Davis when he noted, “We don’t stop the tape machines like we used to do in the old days – they run until the group stops playing. Then we go back, listen, and decide between us what should be tacked to what.”\textsuperscript{82} Between Macero’s comments in 1969 and 1971, three albums had been released: \textit{Miles Davis at Fillmore: Live at the Fillmore East} (late 1970), \textit{A Tribute to Jack Johnson} (February 24, 1971), and \textit{Live-Evil} (November 17, 1971). These three albums, along with the two mentioned above, comprise the initial period in which Davis and Macero were utilizing their new approach to post-production album construction. Macero’s comments from the time imply a consistent collaborative effort throughout the period whereby Davis and Macero work together in determining the details of tape splicing and other post-production

\textsuperscript{80} Gleason, “On the Town,” p. 41.

\textsuperscript{81} \textit{In a Silent Way} was recorded on February 18, 1969 and released on July 30, 1969. \textit{Bitches Brew} was recorded August 19-21, 1969 and released on March 30, 1970.

\textsuperscript{82} Albertson, “The Unmasking,” p. 87.
effects. In such accounts, Macero is careful to acknowledge the creative involvement and oversight that Davis exercised in relation to crafting the final albums.

However, in later years, when Macero was reflecting back over a longer period of his career, his comments imply that his and Davis’s collaboration shifted significantly after this initial collaborative period from roughly 1969 to 1971. In a 1974 interview, Macero noted that with Davis, “You really need to be a composer, because for a lot of it he relies on you and your judgment.” Macero followed this up with a clarification that, regarding the various edits and tape splices, “Miles has to be aware of it and he is aware of it. . . . I don’t take liberties on my own, unless I check with him. I might do it prior to his listening to it but then the final decision is up to the artist, because he has to live with the record.” In this same interview, Macero downplayed Davis’s involvement in creating the final recording, noting:

I spend as much time listening to [a session tape during the production process] as he spent creating it. He may have gone over a composition in his mind, mentally, for weeks, and that’s exactly what I do when I listen to the tape. . . . I keep listening to it over and over with the engineer [as the various edits are being made] and finally Miles comes in and listens to it and he sort of smiles and he walks out. That’s all there is to it.83

83 Gregg Hall, “Teo,” p. 15. On the same page, Macero notes: “One [technique] which I was responsible for Miles using on his new album was a recording loop. I record whatever program I want and play it back in a given composition. If you listen to ‘Go Ahead John,’ it’s obvious; it’s obvious to me because you hear the two parts and it’s only two parts, but the two parts become four and they become eight parts. This was done over in the editing room and it just adds something to the music. I wasn’t about to put it down until Miles heard it. I wouldn’t presume to know that much about his music to do it without his approval. I called him in and I said, ‘Come in, I think I’ve got something you’ll like. We’ll try it on and if you like it, you’ve got it.’ He came in and flipped out. He said it was one of the greatest things he ever heard. Sort of smiles and walked out.”
While Macero is careful to point out that he “checks” with Davis regarding the acceptability of the various edits, he minimizes Davis’s role in the process, implying that Macero does the substantive editorial work and that Davis is only peripherally involved in approving the final product. By the time of this 1974 interview, Macero had produced three additional Davis albums: *On the Corner* (released November 15, 1972), *Miles Davis in Concert: Live at Philharmonic Hall* (released February 1, 1973), and *Big Fun* (released April 19, 1974), and he was likely working on the construction of *Get Up with It*, which would be released November 22, 1974. Macero’s comments imply that, by 1974, Davis was less involved in the minutia of post-production details and instead left much of the work up to Macero.

Other comments by Macero in 1977 imply that Davis’s active involvement in such decisions was waning even further. As he put it, “I recently asked Miles what he thought about his producer and he said that he couldn’t do without him – meaning me – because I was his extra ‘alter ego’ and his second set of ears.” Macero argued that, when dealing with the different recording sessions, particularly those taking place on different dates:

The tempo changes get a little faster, rhythmic ideas get turned around and, eventually, I put all this together in one album in one piece on one side. My role is to guide Miles musically through these various episodes. I sometimes put the piece end to end. If for a better word, I help to rearrange the material. Sometimes the front or the opening is put at the end of the piece and the ending
may be put at the front. In other words, I shift the material to suit both Miles and myself. I help to recompose his music and Miles allows me this latitude.\(^84\)

Here Macero no longer comments on Davis’s direct involvement in the editorial process or on his active oversight of the final product. Instead Macero now asserts his own responsibility for “recomposing” the material and for “guiding” Davis through the editorial process. Macero now claims his own centrality in organizing the various materials into their final form.

1977 falls in the middle of what are often designated as Davis’s “silent years.” This was a period from roughly late-1975 through mid-1980 where Davis ceased touring, largely ceased recording, and embarked on a period characterized by solitude and extensive drug use.\(^85\) Stories from the period tend to include details of Davis hallucinating in his darkened apartment, living in squalor, and manipulating friends in order to gain access to drugs and prostitutes.\(^86\) This was also a period of extreme physical pain for Davis, whose numerous health problems had finally become unbearable.\(^87\) As a way to fulfill Davis’s contractual obligations to Columbia Records

\(^{84}\) Teo Macero, Response to Questionnaire for the Miles Davis Seminar in Tokyo [ca. 1977], (Macero Collection, NYPL: Box 16, Folder 18).

\(^{85}\) See, e.g., Carr, Miles Davis, pp. 329-346.


\(^{87}\) Davis’s ongoing battle with sickle-cell anemia resulted in a third hip replacement surgery in December of 1975. This was in addition to continued hospitalizations for pneumonia, gallstone removal, a
during this time of creative inactivity, Macero contributed to the production and release of several albums culled from unused recording sessions dating as far back as the 1950s. In light of his overwhelming health issues at the time and his own self-proclaimed “boredom” with the prospect of musical endeavors, it is reasonable to assume that Davis had very little involvement in the construction of those albums and presumably very little interest in approving or criticizing the final products.

Comments that Macero made in the 1990s and beyond imply just that. In reflecting back on the period of the 1970s some twenty years after the fact, Macero noted, “I was a co-composer rather than a producer. He’d just finish a piece and I was let loose.” In 1994 Macero again asserted his centrality in the process, arguing, “I had carte blanche to work with the material. I could move anything around . . . and then add in all the effects – electronics, delays and overlays.” In commenting on Davis’s involvement in such procedures, Macero dismissed the notion, asserting:

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larynx operation, and bleeding stomach ulcers. His health struggles in the 1970s are detailed in, e.g., Carr, Miles Davis, pp. 323-328.

88 After the release of Get Up With It in November of 1974, Macero contributed to the following American releases for Davis: Water Babies (November 1976), Circle in the Round (November 1979), and Directions (February 1981). These included tracks recorded between October 1955 (in the case of “Two Bass Hit” from Circle in the Round) and May 1970 (in the case of “Konda” from Directions). Davis returned to the studio in May 1980 for the sessions that would result in The Man with the Horn.

89 See Cheryl McCall, “Miles Davis” Musician, Player, and Listener 41 (March 1982), pp. 38-48 at 40 where Davis discusses his boredom with the state of music during this period.

90 Quoted in Cole, The Last Miles, p. 22.

91 Quoted in Nicholson, Jazz Rock, pp. 112-113.
Miles always wanted to take credit for everything. You know, he’d walk into the session, play, then walk out. In the 26 or 28 years we worked together he maybe came to the editing room five or six times. He never saw the work that had to be done on those tapes. I’d have to work on those tapes for four to five weeks to make them sound right.92

These comments accurately depict the methods by which the late 1970s albums would have been constructed. In neglecting to situate his comments in a specific historical period, Macero may be conflating the entire decade of the 1970s into a single creative era. He appears to be reading the entirety of that decade as a consistent collaborative process that, while characteristic of the album production during the second half of the 1970s, has less relevance for those albums from the first half of the 1970s.

Interestingly, Macero is careful to point out there were “five or six times” when Davis came into the editing room and was actively involved in the production processes. While this figure is more of an estimated summary than a chronicle of specific collaborative practices, it coincides with the “five or six” albums that Davis released between 1969 and the first few years of the 1970s.93 It was during this early period that Davis and Macero had yet to establish their aesthetic standards for album production. It would seem reasonable to conclude that Davis was actively involved in establishing

92 Quoted in Nicholson, Jazz Rock, p. 100.

93 In another interview from 1997, Macero similarly summarized, “I mean Miles never came to the editing room. In 25 or 30 years he was there maybe four or five times.” Iara Lee, “Interview with Teo Macero.”
those aesthetic and collaborative standards by his direct participation in the various editing sessions during which the albums were constructed. Comments from others involved in those recordings confirm this idea.

Macero himself specifically recalled Davis’s editorial involvement in the *In a Silent Way* sessions, acknowledging:

That was one of the rare times that Miles came to the studio. I called Miles up and I said, “Look, I mixed two stacks of tapes, about 15 or 20 reels each, I can make the cuts, I can do the edit . . .” [As Miles] “I’ll come down. I’ll be there.” So he came down and we cut each side down to 8 1/2 minutes and I think the other side was 9 1/2 and he said he was leaving in four-letter words, he’s going to get out of there, and that would be his album. I said, “Look you really can’t do that. I mean CBS will fire you, suspend you, fire me. But give me a couple of days, I’ll think about it.” And then a couple of days later I sent him up a tape and that was it. 94

While Macero’s comments imply that Davis’s presence in the editing sessions was not ultimately a source of much assistance, they also acknowledge that Davis was actively present during those sessions and making important decisions about the final editing of the album. Similarly, a letter from Davis to Macero regarding the follow-up *Bitches Brew* album clearly documents Davis’s ongoing involvement in post-production decisions. The following letter, which refers to material recorded on August 19, 1969, shows Davis not simply approving editorial decisions made by others but rather actively making those decisions himself:

94 Iara Lee, “Interview with Teo Macero.”
Dear Teo;  

Take the last two takes, which are the same thing, and stick the first take on the beginning (the slow part in C minor with the C pedal.) The second take – put on the end with the C pedal in the C minor and all the drum noise which ends the side. Now we have the beginning and an ending. The first part of the tape is tuning up and the rest is where it starts. It begins with the conversation between you and me where you say, ‘Just stomp the shit off.’ That’s where I want this whole side to start. Don’t forget to overlap the C with the bass clarinet introduction – in other words, run it together. After you put on the introduction then you put the ending on and the rest runs straight through as is. It should be about 27 to 30 minutes. The part before which you’re going to use for the introduction and ending, there’s a little section that really swings. It starts off with the bass clarinet and it’s really tight swing. Use this more than once when there’s a lull in the feeling, but don’t use it after the introduction. If you want to lead into the introduction with it that’s okay. Don’t break any of the sections. Have them run together whether they are high in volume or low in volume. This is one side that I want you to work on. If you are not sure you have the right take, phone me in California. Extend the bass clarinet introduction and let it play twice before the trumpet comes in – just repeat it over. Sincerely, Miles Davis

This letter indicates Davis’s detailed involvement in the precise editing and construction of “Bitches Brew” from the Bitches Brew album; the editing of which would have occurred sometime between the conclusion of the studio work on August 21, 1969 and the album’s release on March 30, 1970.

Finally, an interviewer who observed an editing session on June 8, 1970 noted Davis’s active involvement in the album editing process. The session included both

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95 The Teo Macero Collection, The Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University.

96 Davis references California as his location in the letter. His only known trip there between August 1969 and March 1970 occurred September 9-21, 1969, when his band had an extended engagement at Shelly’s Manne-Hole. The Bitches Brew editing, then, can be safely assumed to have begun at that time. It should be noted, however, that the final album track of “Bitches Brew” includes several edits and loops that are not detailed in Davis’s letter, implying collaboration and negotiation between Davis and Macero beyond the letter. See Bob Belden, “Session by Session Analysis” in accompanying booklet, The Complete Bitches Brew Sessions (Sony, 1998), pp. 108-140 at 130-131. See Losin, “Miles Davis Sessions: 1945-1991.”
Davis and Macero and was directed toward editing the tapes of Davis’s two previous Fillmore concerts: the March 6-7 performances at the Fillmore East and the April 9-12 performances at the Fillmore West. The writer noted, “Miles alone knew the directions to be taken and how to get there. Miles listened to the tapes for about three hours, discussing the merits of one tape, the lack of clarity on another, where a cut should be made, what changes should take place.” He summarized Macero’s role in the process as follows:

Teo had worked with [Davis] probably longer than anyone else, and had survived it without any noticeable scars. Yet Teo too, was incapable of understanding what was passing through the man’s head. Long ago he ceased attempting to understand that creative genius, merely accepting it, and reshaping the musical child of creation to fit the desired specifications. Teo was good, as good at his art as anyone in the business, or Miles wouldn’t use him, but Teo was like a worker on an assembly line: he performed his task perfectly, but he could not understand the finished product because he only assembled a part. 97

While this writer comes across as less-than-critical of Davis throughout the article, his comments do show Davis’s active involvement in the editorial process as late as June 1970, after the final recording session for A Tribute to Jack Johnson on April 7. 98 Macero’s comments, along with Davis’s letter and the above writer’s observations, collectively

97 Zygote, “Miles Davis,” p. 33.

98 This author was presumably star-struck by Davis’s willingness to spend extensive time with him over the course of several days, particularly since Davis had not given an interview “in almost a year” when this series of meetings took place. Zygote, “Miles Davis,” p. 27.
document Davis’s active involvement in the post-production work for those albums released between 1969 and at least 1971.

However, while the anecdotes above imply the likelihood of Davis’s involvement in producing *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, others who were central in creating that album have raised doubts about the level of Davis’s specific involvement in the project. Alan Bodian, for one, was familiar with the album due to his role as the screenwriter and principal researcher for the film documentary for which portions of the album initially served as the soundtrack. As I will argue in greater detail in Chapter Five, Bodian recalls that Davis was not involved in the tape editing or in any other production responsibilities for the album. Instead, while Davis was central in directing the group interaction for the various 1970 studio sessions, Bodian and Macero were responsible for the work of selecting and organizing the resulting material. Though Macero and Bodian’s production work was initially for exclusive use as the soundtrack, Bodian recalls that Macero also later directed the conversion of the soundtrack into the stand-alone album now under consideration. 99 Macero’s recollections of his involvement with the album are likewise in agreement with Bodian’s.100

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99 Alan Bodian, interview with author, December 8, 2007. The documentary saw its theatrical release on June 4, 1970, while the stand-alone album was released on February 24, 1971.

100 For Macero’s recollection, see Bill Murphy, “Raging Bullhorn,” p. 36; and Teo Macero, “Editing and Mixing,” April 2004, http://www.artistshousemusic.org/videos/editing+and+mixing (February 2, 2008).
Purely from a musical perspective, the content of *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* raises some additional doubts about the level of Davis’s direct involvement in its production. Throughout his career, Davis had been adamant about his lack of interest in repeating the musical styles of the past. As I argued in Chapter One, Davis asserted that he not only refused to perform the music from his past, but he also refused to listen to recordings of that music.\(^\text{101}\) However, *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, as I discuss below, includes music that was created not only in the immediately preceding studio sessions from 1970 but also music from sessions as far back as February of 1969. The decision to incorporate material from past recording sessions simply does not coalesce with Davis’s stated aesthetic principles. Particularly in light of the abundance of unused material still available from the fourteen recording sessions from 1970, it would seem out of character for Davis to actively pursue the reuse of older material for a new album.

Additionally, though Davis was directly involved in producing the albums that came immediately before and after this album, *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* was unique from those albums in at least two important ways. First, as I stated above, the album was initially developed not as a stand-alone album but rather as the soundtrack for a documentary film. As I will discuss in Chapter Five, Davis was on tour in California when the work of crafting the soundtrack was carried out in New York, and he was not able to be involved in the decisions about which music should accompany which scenes.

\(^{101}\) See, e.g., *Zygote*, “Miles Davis,” p. 28; and *West*, “Black Tune,” p. L9.
Hence, he was unable to contribute to those initial decisions that would later influence the conversion of the soundtrack into a stand-alone album. Second, *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* is unique from its surrounding albums due to the expansive amount of studio material that was available for constructing this album. With *In a Silent Way*, Davis helped work with material that had been recorded in a single day. With *Bitches Brew*, the material for crafting the album was similarly recorded in three consecutive days, and the production work was likely begun immediately thereafter. Similarly, with the Fillmore album, Davis and Macero were working with a discrete number of musical sets recorded over a temporally constrained period.

For *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, however, there were sixteen studio sessions available that encompassed a time period of nearly seven months. Working through this material would have necessitated the devotion of significant time to listening to and editing these sessions at a moment when, as I argued in Chapter One, Davis had decided to eschew studio work in favor of nearly two years devoted exclusively to live concert performances. While he was willing to contribute to the production of a circumscribed group of sessions, such as that recorded at his Fillmore concerts, Davis may have found the creative prospect of working through seven months of recording sessions significantly less appealing.

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102 After the June 4, 1970 session, Davis did not return to the studio until March 9, 1972 to record “Red China Blues.” His next significant studio venture was the *On the Corner* sessions on June 1, 2, 6, 12, and September 6 of 1972.
The available evidence suggests, then, that *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* is an anomaly in relation to Davis’s involvement in its studio production in the early 1970s. Though Davis was pragmatically divorced from the editorial decisions that went into his album construction later in that decade, he generally played a pivotal role in the album production of the early 1970s. A series of circumstances, however, precluded Davis’s involvement in this particular album, resulting in Teo Macero likely being responsible for the vast majority of the artistic decisions that went into its construction.

The available evidence makes clear the evolving nature of Davis’s and Macero’s studio relationship during the course of their career. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, as Davis was exposed to the technical aspects of album production for the first time, Macero was responsible for much of the work involved in producing the albums. It was not until the late 1960s that Davis took on a more active role in tape editing and production decisions. This could have been the result of his interest in developing a personal aesthetic of tape editing during a revolutionary period of technological development. It could also have been the result of his mistrust of Macero after the *Quiet Nights* mishap in 1962. As Davis, throughout the early 1970s, developed greater trust in

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103 Stanley Tonkel, an engineer on these early-1970s sessions, supports the idea of Davis’s generally active involvement in production at the time, while contrasting it with his lack of involvement in producing earlier albums from the 1950s. He recalls, “When Miles joined Columbia [in the 1950s] he . . . didn’t know about technology and recording. He left a lot of work for Teo. . . . Teo was very instrumental in those early albums of Miles. He was as much a part of the manufacturing and recording as Miles was. . . . Later on, around the period of *Bitches Brew,* Miles got more involved in the editing process.” Quoted in Cole, *The Last Miles,* p. 22.
Macero’s aesthetic sympathy with his own musical tastes, he likely gave Macero more creative latitude and responsibility with production decisions. This was apparently even more the case in the late 1970s, when Davis was almost entirely divorced from the music scene for nearly five years. During those “silent years,” when Davis rarely left his home and made few official appearances in the studio, it is highly unlikely that he was in any way involved in the editorial decisions that went into the production of *Water Babies* (1976), *Circle in the Round* (1979), and *Directions* (1981).

In the 1990s and beyond, when Macero reflects back on the entirety of his career with Davis, he appears to conflate the different editorial practices and protocols of the 1970s into one consistent practice. He then reads that practice in terms of Davis’s late-1970s lack of editorial involvement and his own unrivaled importance in constructing the albums from that time. From that perspective, Macero would have been correct in asserting Davis’s direct editorial involvement in only “five or six” sessions throughout his career. Those sessions, based on the available evidence, included at least the production of *In a Silent Way*, *Bitches Brew*, and *Miles Davis at Fillmore: Live at the Fillmore East*. They did not, however, include the sessions responsible for *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*.

**Studio Production for *A Tribute to Jack Johnson***

In the case of *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, extensive tape splicing and post-production work were central to the form of the final album. Neither “Right Off” nor
“Yesternow” existed as discrete tunes prior to their construction via post-production tape splicing, overdubbing, and the application of various effects and sound manipulations. Davis’s flurry of studio activity in the first half of 1970 resulted in at least ten hours of music that would have been available in constructing *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*. The sessions on February 18 and April 7 resulted in two hours and fifteen minutes of material, in addition to the four hours of available music recorded at the sessions on February 27 and March 3, 17, and 20. There were also three hours of music on unused session tapes from the two months prior to that. From these available reels, Macero created the two tracks that now exist as “Right Off” and “Yesternow.”

While the available material spanned at least the nine sessions from January to April, the final album is dominated by the two guitar-heavy sessions of February 18 and April 7.

As Figure 10 below illustrates, the nearly twenty-seven minutes of “Right Off” were culled almost exclusively from four different takes recorded on April 7. The first ten minutes and forty-six seconds of the album track correspond to material from “Take 10,” which occurred roughly one-third of the way through the session that day. At

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104 These figures are based on the track timings found on the unedited session tapes from the 1970 sessions as well as *The Complete Jack Johnson Sessions* (Sony, 2003).

105 Those nine sessions, as described in Chapter One, took place on: January 27, 28; February 6, 18, 27; March 3, 17, 20; and April 7. These were followed by additional recording sessions on May 19, 21, 27; and June 3, 4.

106 The following analyses of “Right Off” and “Yesternow” draw extensively upon the session details included in “Track Listing and Discography” in accompanying booklet, *The Complete Jack Johnson Sessions* (Sony, 2003), pp. 21, 29-31.
10.46, though, “Take 10” fades out and is replaced by a one minute and fifteen second excerpt from a muted, rubato, solo trumpet recording Davis made on either November 19 or 28, 1969. This melody has been altered by the addition of a delay, resulting in each trumpet note sounding some three or four additional times at various time intervals of less than a second. Additionally, a rubato accompaniment Macero created using a tone generator is overdubbed onto the trumpet part, comprising an overtone-rich E bass note that is marked by its occasional alternation with a D a whole step below. The recording date and performers for the synthesized accompaniment are undetermined, though it is likely that Macero recorded the part himself during the post-production construction of the album.

After this minute and fifteen seconds of Davis’s echo-inflected trumpet with synthesized accompaniment, the track then, at 12.02, fades back into another take from the April 7 session; this time three minutes of the track titled “Take 10A.” At 15.02, the track is spliced directly into a portion of “Take 11” that omits roughly the first two minutes of the studio material. This direct tape splice is repeated at 18.30 when “Take 12” is inserted into the tune. The first forty-five seconds of this take is then looped in order to extend the passage to roughly one minute and thirty seconds. At the looped point (approximately 19.30 of the album cut), a half beat is added to the riff, thereby

107 Bill Murphy, “Tapes ‘n’ Tapes.”
extending one measure from the established 4/4 meter to 9/8. After roughly six more minutes, “Track 12” then fades out to end the album cut at 26.50.

Figure 10: Studio Production for “Right Off”

“Right Off” comprises four different portions of the April 7 recording session along with a solo trumpet recording from the previous year as well as a synthesized accompaniment presumably recorded during the post-production sessions for the album. This material was combined with various post-production effects, including tape splicing, looping, overdubbing, and various echo and reverb effects, in order to craft the twenty-seven minute tune known as “Right Off.” The use of tape splicing to combine material recorded at different times and on different dates is noticeable at several points of the track. The fades into and out of the muted trumpet section at 10.46 and 12.02, for example, and the addition of one half of a beat at the 19.30 mark due to the looping of “Take 12,” are three such moments where the post-production assembling of the album track is made audible. These moments demonstrate that the final track was not the result of uninterrupted group interplay that was captured in its entirety by recording equipment but rather was the culmination of hours of studio experimentation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Edit</th>
<th>Recording Date</th>
<th>Performers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>Right Off</td>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td>Miles Davis (tpt), Steve Grossman (ss), Herbie Hancock (organ), John McLaughlin (gtr), Michael Henderson (eb), Billy Cobham (dr)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.46</td>
<td>Trumpet Solo</td>
<td>November 19 or 28, 1969</td>
<td>Miles Davis (tpt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.02</td>
<td>Take 10A</td>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td>same personnel as Take 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.02</td>
<td>Take 11</td>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td>same personnel as Take 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.30</td>
<td>Take 12 w/ looped intro</td>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td>same personnel as Take 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.50</td>
<td>[END]</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
followed by even more hours of post-production editing. While the centrality of this post-production process is audible on “Right Off,” it is made even more obvious on “Yesternow,” the album’s second and final track.

“Yesternow” begins with a portion of the track “Take 4,” that was recorded roughly one hour and twenty minutes into the April 7 session. At 7.31 of the album track, approximately the next three minutes of the session take are deleted, resulting in a splice that moves the album track from 7.31 to 10.20 of “Take 4.” At this cut, similar to the 19.30 cut of “Right Off,” an additional beat is added to the measure, resulting in one measure of 5/4 instead of the established meter of 4/4. Then at 12.23 of the album track, the same solo trumpet from November of 1969 that had first appeared at 10.46 of “Right Off” is present again, this time without the delay effect that had characterized its initial appearance. Accompanying this presentation of the material is an excerpt from the opening of the tune “Shhh/Peaceful,” recorded on February 18, 1969 and originally released as a part of the album In a Silent Way. This combined portion of “Yesternow” is effected by the application of a reverberation that sets it apart aurally from the previous portions of the album track. During this section, beginning at 13.04, Davis can be heard effectively performing a trumpet duet with himself, as his performance on “Shhh/Peaceful” temporarily overlaps with the overdubbed trumpet recording from November 1969.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Edit</th>
<th>Recording Date</th>
<th>Performers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>“Yesternow” Take 4 at 0.00</td>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td>Miles Davis (tpt), Steve Grossman (ss), Herbie Hancock (organ), John McLaughlin (gtr), Michael Henderson (eb), Billy Cobham (dr)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.31</td>
<td>“Yesternow” Take 4 at 7.31</td>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td>same personnel as Take 4 above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.23</td>
<td>Right channel: Trumpet Solo Left channel: “Shhh/Peaceful”</td>
<td>Right: Nov 19 or 28, 1969 Left: Feb 18, 1969</td>
<td>Miles Davis (tpt) [with unidentified overdubbed neo bass] Miles Davis (tpt), Wayne Shorter (ss), Chick Corea (ep), Herbie Hancock (ep), Joe Zawinul (organ), John McLaughlin (gtr), Dave Holland (b), Tony Williams (dr) [from In a Silent Way, released 1969]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.00</td>
<td>Willie Nelson Take 3</td>
<td>Feb 18, 1970</td>
<td>Miles Davis (tpt), Bennie Maupin (b cl), Chick Corea (el p), Sonny Sharrock (gtr), John McLaughlin (gtr), Dave Holland (eb), Jack DeJohnette (dr)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.34</td>
<td>Willie Nelson Insert 1 at 18.34</td>
<td>Feb 18, 1970</td>
<td>same personnel as Take 3 above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.49</td>
<td>Willie Nelson Insert 1 at 18.49</td>
<td>Feb 18, 1970</td>
<td>same personnel as Take 3 above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.53</td>
<td>Willie Nelson Insert 2</td>
<td>Feb 18, 1970</td>
<td>same personnel as Take 3 above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.50</td>
<td>Trumpet Solo</td>
<td>Nov 19 or 28, 1969</td>
<td>Miles Davis (tpt) [with overdubbed orchestra arranged by Teo Macero and narration by Brock Peters]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.36</td>
<td>[END]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

**Figure 11: Studio Production for “Yesternow”**

Then at the 14.00 mark, the track fades into “Willie Nelson Take 3,” which begins a roughly ten minute period comprising portions of three different takes from the February 18, 1970 recording session. Over the next ten minutes, the following three edits are spliced together: at 18.34 the album track includes fifteen seconds of “Willie Nelson Insert 1” beginning at 5.48, at 18.49 it cuts to a four-second excerpt from 6.22 of the same take, and at 18.53 it cuts to the beginning of “Willie Nelson Insert 2,” which comprises roughly the next five minutes of the album track. One final edit then occurs at 23.50, where, for the third time, the same trumpet solo appears that had been recorded in November 1969. Also for the third time, the excerpt is set to a different accompaniment, joined now by an overdubbed rubato wind ensemble passage of
unknown provenance, though likely composed and conducted by Macero.\textsuperscript{108} Additionally overdubbed onto the trumpet and wind passage is a narration by Brock Peters, the actor who did the documentary voice-overs as Jack Johnson.\textsuperscript{109} The end of this section marks the end both of “Yesternow” as well as of the full album.

“Yesternow” comprises seven different takes, recorded in at least four different sessions, over the course of at least fourteen months.\textsuperscript{110} While “Right Off” combines the use of some audibly prominent tape splices with some that are significantly less noticeable, each of the seven edits on “Yesternow” is clearly a tape edit.\textsuperscript{111} Even those edits that could have been obscured, such as the edit within “Take 4” at 7.31, are made audible due to the addition of an extra beat at the edit point. Moments such as the fade in and fade out at 12.23 and 14.00 are even more overt instances of creating an album track that could not possibly have been performed in one complete take in the studio. Also, even if a listener were not to recognize the music at 12.23 as being “Shhh/Peaceful” from an already released recording, it would be impossible to miss Davis playing a duet

\textsuperscript{108} John Szwed quotes Macero as identifying the wind passage as a portion of a soundtrack for the television program “The Man Nobody Saw.” See Szwed, So What, p. 310. Portions of the orchestral manuscripts of “The Man Nobody Saw” are available as a part of the Macero Collection at the New York Public Library, but my own research has failed to establish any correspondence between the music on the album and the notation on the available manuscript scores. (Macero Collection, NYPL: Box 57, Folder 11.)

\textsuperscript{109} That narration is, “I’m Jack Johnson, ‘Heavyweight Champion of the World.’ I’m black. They never let me forget it. I’m black, alright. I’ll never let them forget it.”

\textsuperscript{110} I say “at least” because the recording date for the wind ensemble passage is unknown.

\textsuperscript{111} While, for example, the tape loop at 19.30 of “Right Off” is prominent, resulting in the addition of one half of a beat to the measure, the edit at 15.02 that creates the beginning of the organ solo is significantly less noticeable.
with himself at that point. Such moments imply that there was little desire to hide the fact that the material on this recording was constructed using post-production editorial decisions. This is amplified that much more by the repetition of the same solo trumpet passage three times throughout the recording, as well as the use on “Yesternow” of three distinct performing ensembles, in addition to the unidentified members of the concluding wind ensemble.112

_A Tribute to Jack Johnson_ thereby emerges as a definitive statement highlighting the audible use of studio technologies for the purpose of album production. This album draws attention to such editorial practices as including previously released material, repeating one trumpet solo three different times in three different contexts, as well as creating extra beats at key edit points. Moreover, when it came to mixing the final album, the intensity of the drums was brought to the front of the mix as a way to emphasize further the aggressive nature of the music and the resulting ways in which that perceived aggression signaled rock music of the time.113

The overt uses of such technologies referenced musical practices and sonic styles associated more in the early 1970s with rock and contemporary music than with jazz. Through such practices, _A Tribute to Jack Johnson_ reveals itself as a work of phonography

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112 One band created the material for “Take 4,” a different band played the “Shhh/Peaceful” material, and a third band recorded the “Willie Nelson” portions.

113 See Chapter One for more on how sounds perceived as aggressive at the time were interpreted as sonic codes for rock music.
that eschews the idea of transparent documentary representation and implicitly challenges the genre-based codes through which certain studio technologies were currently being read. This album was not readily accommodated by the genre-based conventions of either rock or jazz. For while it was instrumental music that emphasized improvisation, many of the instruments and rhythmic approaches – as I pointed out in Chapter One – were closer to rock than to jazz. Additionally, the nature of recording and production practices utilized on this album was more closely aligned to rock conventions than to jazz.

It is in such an environment of genre-based uncertainty that the two myths which opened this chapter find their home. In one, the serendipitous appearance of Herbie Hancock in the studio overcame the technological obstacle of a faulty Farfisa organ in order to create a successful musical moment. In the other, John McLaughlin’s technologically induced studio boredom compelled him to initiate an improvisatory rock jam that resulted in a powerful instance of group interaction. The question raised by these myths, and the question that has driven this chapter, is why did the two stories of musical spontaneity trumping technological necessity gain such currency in the popular mythology circulating about A Tribute to Jack Johnson? Through this chapter, I have offered the following response.

Traditional jazz fans, who comprised the vast majority of Davis’s historical fan base, were facing the imminent demise of the economic foundation of the genre. Jazz
record sales were diminishing at an alarming rate, and many jazz musicians began exploring such musical realms as the ideologically elite avant-garde or the economically appealing world of popular music. At the same time, the rise of new studio technologies placed under siege what was for many fans the very core of jazz itself – the prominence of largely improvised musical interplay whereby a group cooperatively realized a complete instantiation of a musical work. Miles Davis had already begun drifting away from traditional jazz practices with his recordings *In a Silent Way* and *Bitches Brew*. These albums, along with Davis’s performances at rock venues such as the Fillmore East and West and the Isle of Wight festival, helped to attract a new audience that was more familiar with rock than with jazz. Additionally, these albums began gesturing towards Davis’s acceptance of the instruments, timbres, and rhythms that were more characteristic of contemporary popular music than of jazz. Finally, and most notably with the release of *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, Davis also definitively rejected the idea of transparent documentary representation and embraced instead the creative potentials of studio technologies and the phonography-centered aesthetic of the rock genre.

In this setting, the circulation of two narratives that highlight spontaneous group interplay while devaluing the necessity of studio technology emerge as a reinforcement of the musical and ideological values that many jazz listeners saw as being under siege...
in the early 1970s. These stories were immanently believable for a group in search of aesthetic and ideological validation. Particularly in light of the audible post-production work on *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, these stories also reassured traditional jazz fans that Miles Davis still valued what they valued and that, while the surface of the album might be characterized by technological gimmickry, the substance was still an emphasis on spontaneous group interplay. These stories achieved a significant level of currency due to their resonance with the values held by traditional jazz listeners at a time when those listeners perceived jazz to be in a moment of considerable crisis.

This chapter has focused on the ways in which uses of studio technology on *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* problematized prominent genre-based constructions of rock and jazz in the early 1970s. When it came to characterizing his own music, however, Miles Davis was notably contemptuous of both of these categories, regularly referring to jazz and rock as “white words” that “white folks dropped on us.”  

As I argue in the following chapter, when Davis, as well as many listeners at the time, discussed the nature and sonic characteristics of his music, they relied not on invocations of established genre categories but rather on the use of highly-politicized notions of blackness and masculinity.

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115 See, e.g., *Zygot*, “Miles Davis,” p. 35; and Frederick D. Murphy, “Miles Davis,” p. 36.
Interlude

The tune begins with a sense of hesitation. Michael Henderson and Herbie Hancock enter together on a unison six-note bass riff, but the riff is somehow unstable; tentative. The musicians seem to have entered somewhere in the middle of the measure, yet they give no sonic clues as to where the downbeat or even the basic pulse might be. Without establishing any sense of meter or of beat, the two then lay out, creating a sonic void that John McLaughlin partially fills with one sustained and wah-inflected guitar chord. As the chord resonates in a seemingly pulseless moment, Henderson and Hancock enter again, adding one additional note to the beginning of the riff that finally provides a more defined sense of the tune’s metric and harmonic center. After playing the riff, now seven notes long, the two again lay out, and McLaughlin once more fills the subsequent void with two additional rhythmic chords, further solidifying the pulse. Henderson and Hancock follow with a repetition of the bass riff, establishing it as a foundational element of the tune.

The bassist and organist will continue this two-measure pattern, comprising a seven-note riff followed by a measure of silence, for the next twelve and a half minutes, laying the harmonic and rhythmic foundation for trumpet and saxophone solos as well as chord-based ambient guitar jams. What began as an apparently tentative and unstable gesture emerges as the harmonic and rhythmic basis for nearly half of “Yesternow,” the second and final tune on A Tribute to Jack Johnson. A seven-note, multivalent sonic gesture. A tentative intrusion into an open void that is then recontextualized as the musical basis for much of the track. So begins “Yesternow,” a tune
whose surprising initial gesture resonates both through and beyond the musical group interplay, providing a sonic entry into the contested worlds of jazz culture and racial and gender politics in early 1970s America.
Chapter Three: Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m a Man

“Miles [Davis], beyond all things, is black and he is proud of it. He doesn’t want to be anything else.” 1 – Zygote Newspaper

“An animal instinct . . . compels [Davis] to work out in a gym in front of others to demonstrate his masculinity, and it is one of the driving forces that makes him write and play music.” 2 – Zygote Newspaper

* * * *

Miles Davis spent a significant amount of time selecting and revising the seven notes that would form the basis for much of the group’s musical interplay for the April 7 recording session. During the previous night’s rehearsal, Davis had taken Henderson and McLaughlin aside and introduced them to a version of the riff. 3 As the unedited session tapes reveal, the next day Davis nevertheless devoted nearly forty additional minutes of studio time to further modifying the riff. This included no fewer than six complete stops and restarts along with numerous verbal cues and musical instructions through which the details of the riff and the instrumentation responsible for playing the riff were gradually revised.

The riff originally began with four sixteenth notes functioning as a pickup beat, followed by a series of sustained dotted-quarter notes (Figure 12). Over the next twelve

1 Zygote, “Miles Davis,” p. 34.
2 Zygote, “Miles Davis,” p. 31.
3 See Tingen, “The Jack Johnson Sessions.”
minutes of studio time, Henderson gradually began articulating the individual notes in a more staccato manner (Figure 13). After that, the placement of the riff within the measure was shifted while several notes were eliminated, resulting in a measure of rest (Figure 14). Up to this point, the riff had been performed by Henderson alone, without the assistance of Hancock on organ. After the metric placement and articulation of the riff was finalized, Hancock then joined in, first doubling the riff in a higher octave (Figure 15) and then joining Henderson in the same octave. It is only at that point that the material now known as “Yesternow” was finally performed and recorded. As is audibly apparent in the final product, though, and as Henderson remembers discovering the night of the rehearsal, the riff is modeled after the main bass riff from James Brown’s 1968 anthem “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud.” The “Say It Loud” bass line and Davis’s final revision are included below as Figures 16 and 17.

![Figure 12: “Yesternow” riff, initial iteration](image)

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4 See Tingen, “The Jack Johnson Sessions.”
Figure 13: “Yesternow” riff, second iteration

Figure 14: “Yesternow” riff, third iteration

Figure 15: “Yesternow” riff, fourth iteration

Figure 16: “Yesternow” riff, final iteration
Though the musical borrowing itself is clear, the motives behind and meaning of that borrowing are less immediately so. Was Davis continuing his assault on the perceived restrictions of genre categories by intentionally recruiting jazz, rock, and soul musicians to play over a funk riff? By invoking Brown’s tune “Say It Loud,” was Davis attempting to draw upon an emerging shift in the ideology of racial politics at the time? Or was this simply an aesthetic choice for Davis, where he discovered a riff that he liked and adapted it for his own purposes? The central question these all gesture toward is, what did it mean for Miles Davis to utilize this riff at this time for this particular recording?

In what follows, I offer a response to this question by first discussing the meaning that Davis and others at the time attached to “Say It Loud” as well as the impact that meaning had on Davis’s use of this riff on “Yesternow.” I highlight the ways in which Brown’s tune was articulated at the time with the “Negro-to-Black conversion experience” that accompanied a widespread ideological shift in the late-
1960s African American freedom struggle. I further underscore Davis’s awareness of the political meanings of the designation “black” and his own conception of an aggressive masculinity as an essential component in the construction of blackness. Davis actively sought to situate his music in a particular context of race and gender through emphasizing the relationships between boxing and music, uniquely foregrounded in this album. I argue that, by reading the use of this riff through prominent discourses on blackness and masculinity from the late-1960s and early-1970s, *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* emerges as a politically-influenced expression of one way that music was utilized at the time in race- and gender-based constructions of being.

**Say It Loud: I’m Black**

James Brown’s tune prominently introduced the phrase “black and proud” into the popular lexicon in 1968. The phrase soon became a prominent avenue for the circulation of a newly emerging racial consciousness, consolidated under the notion of “blackness.” In the late 1960s many African Americans readily self-identified as “black and proud” as a way to signify solidarity with recent ideological shifts in the African American freedom struggle. Lyrically, Brown’s construction of “black and proud” is based on notions of assertiveness (“we demand a chance to do things for ourselves”) and militant resolve (“we’d rather die on our feet than keep living on our knees”). “Say It Loud” and its resulting catch-phrase came to comprise the soundtrack for what was among the most significant public shifts in ideology and vocabulary in the history of the
African American freedom struggle. Up through the mid-1960s, most African Americans tended to view the racial designation “black” not as a source of pride but rather as an insulting derogation. As Martin Luther King, Jr., president of the influential Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and others pointed out, “Even semantics have conspired to make that which is black seem ugly and degrading. In Roget’s Thesaurus there are some 120 synonyms for ‘blackness’ and at least 60 of them are offensive. . . . There are some 134 synonyms for ‘whiteness,’ and all are favorable.”

Since the designation “black” carried such negative connotations, most African Americans through the early 1960s accepted and even advocated for the continued use of “Negro.”

In the mid-1960s, though, African Americans prominently began debating the most appropriate racial designation by which to self-identify. Broadly speaking, the debate centered on the continued acceptance of the designation “Negro” versus its replacement with terms such as “Afro-American,” “Afram,” or, more popularly,

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“black.” On the former side, leaders such as King argued against the adoption of the designation “black” and for the continued use of “Negro.” Throughout the 1960s, in fact, up through his final speech in Memphis on April 3, 1968, King consistently used the term “Negro” as the designation of choice when referring to African Americans and publicly spoke against the use of “black.”

However, while King saw little value in replacing the term “Negro” by recuperating “black,” leaders such as Stokely Carmichael, who was the national director of the Southern Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), held the opposite view. As he put it:

> When we were in Africa we were called Africans or blacks; when we were in Africa we were free. When we were captured and stolen and brought to the United States, we became Negroes. So Negro is synonymous with slavery. . . . If you say you’re a Negro, what you’re saying is that your beginning is in slavery. If your beginning is in slavery, the best you can hope to be is a good slave.

H. Rap Brown, who replaced Carmichael as SNCC’s national director in 1967 and later went on to join the Black Panther Party, succinctly confirmed this opinion when he

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noted in 1968, “Negro is a slave word.” The “Negro” versus “black” debate quickly took on political significance as opponents of the use of “Negro” described it as a slave word while opponents of “black” described it as confusing and unnecessarily negative.

This debate was articulated with the ongoing African American freedom struggle as racial designation became linked to political ideology. In the early 1960s, at the same time that African Americans were self-identifying as “Negro,” the assimilationist and non-violent ideologies of the Civil Rights Movement were at their peaks in public discourse. Martin Luther King, Jr. maintained his profile as among the most influential African American leaders, and non-violent attempts to bring about legislative equality, including the national Civil Rights legislation of 1964, 1965, and 1968, comprised some of the more prominent results of the freedom struggle.

However, as Civil Rights legislation remained unenforced by many state and local governments, and as African American bodies continued to appear beaten and attacked on the daily evening news, many African Americans began to question the value and success of a legislation-based, non-violent approach to the freedom struggle. Such African Americans began to lose confidence in the Civil Rights Movement as it was currently being pursued and began to ask if there were not a more effective method by

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10 Quoted in Leo, “Militants Object,” p. 31.

which to continue. King’s assassination on April 4, 1968 was in many ways the final straw for those who were drifting away from the ideology of the Civil Rights Movement. Witnessing the murder of a man who had been the national symbol for non-violence signaled the end of a belief in the value of such an approach for many activists.

It was a group of disillusioned African Americans who came to embrace the designation “black” and to develop the more militant style of activism symbolized by the Black Power Movement. Though King’s murder was an irrevocable turning point for the freedom struggle, dissatisfaction with the perceived passivity of the Civil Rights Movement had been fermenting among many African Americans for some time. Most prominently symbolized through the Watts riots in 1965 and the long hot summers that followed, the roots of this dissatisfaction, as Peniel E. Joseph and others have argued, extend as far back as the 1950s. However, while the sentiment may have been present for some time, it was not until the late 1960s that ideology, action, and racial designation became united as a new direction for the freedom struggle. “Negro” became associated both chronologically and ideologically with the assimilationist mindset and non-violent approach that had characterized the freedom struggle up through that time. To be “black,” though, was to be assertive, militant, nationalistic, and ready to demand fair opportunities and equal rights. In recording “Say It Loud,” Brown created one of the

primary means by which this new approach would achieve significant public support. At the same time that self-identifying as “black” was gaining increased political significance, James Brown’s infectious “black and proud” groove was growing into an overt political chant, galvanizing this newly emerging racial sentiment.

The song’s release in 1968 thereby gave even greater momentum to the recuperation of “black” that had initially gained prominence with Stokely Carmichael’s famous use of the phrase “Black Power” some two years prior in 1966. Carmichael had joined Martin Luther King, Jr. in leading demonstrators in a continuation of James Meredith’s “March Against Fear” in Mississippi. This had been Meredith’s solo walk across the state that was intended as a symbolic victory over the pervasive sense of fear that he felt to be present in many of the state’s African Americans. The solo march was halted after only a few days when a group of attackers critically injured Meredith, but the Carmichael and King group reconvened the march shortly thereafter. During the march’s continuation, the demonstrators faced consistent harassment by both the public and the police. On June 16, Carmichael forcefully decried such harassment when he intoned, “This is the twenty-seventh time that I’ve been arrested. I ain’t going to jail no more. The only way we gonna stop them white men from whuppin’ us is to take over. What we gonna start saying now is Black Power!”\(^\text{13}\) In so doing, he publicly threw

\(^{13}\text{Quoted in Joseph, “Introduction” in The Black Power Movement, ed. Joseph, p. 2. Though the phrase “Black Power” had previously been used by other African American leaders – such as its titular invocation in Richard Wright’s Black Power: A Record of Reaction in a Land of Pathos (New York: Harper and}
down the gauntlet regarding both the ideology and the designation that would accompany those contributing to the African American freedom struggle. From this time forward, the designation “black” gained a new political currency and potency while becoming the banner under which the African American freedom struggle would rally.

There was often significant difference of opinion over the precise meaning of “Black Power.” King argued that the phrase was “confusing” and that it gave “the wrong connotation.” Comparing the use of “Black Power” to the failed delivery of a joke, he argued:

If you tell a joke and nobody laughs at the joke and you have to spend the rest of the time trying to explain to people why they should laugh, it isn’t a good joke. And that is what I have always said about the slogan Black Power. You have to spend too much time explaining what you are talking about.

Generally, though, “Black Power” was understood to promote militancy, nationalism, and assertiveness; all characteristics seen as lacking in the Civil Rights Movement. According to Carmichael, “Black Power” was the desire to unite through the power of self-determination. As he put it, “The goal of black self-determination and


black self-identity – Black Power – is full participation in the decision-making processes affecting the lives of black people, and recognition of the virtues in themselves as black people.”  

Through self-determination, African Americans would realize an increased sense of intrinsic value that Carmichael and others viewed as essential to effecting societal change. The Black Power Movement thereby came to symbolize all that the Civil Rights Movement did not; namely a militant and assertive call to self-determination that embraced nationalism over and against assimilation.  

The Black Power Movement aided in the recuperation and politicization of the designation “black” and contributed to its emergence as the racial designation of choice among African Americans in the late 1960s. The change in designation – from “Negro” to “black” – became so prominent and so loaded at the time that some African American intellectuals developed the concept of the “Negro-to-Black conversion experience” to

16 Carmichael and Hamilton, Black Power, p. 47.

17 Recent scholarship has problematized many of the prominent stereotypes of the Black Power Movement by focusing on the unique contributions of specific individuals as well as the many variations found in regional expressions of the Movement. See, e.g., Komozi Woodard, A Nation Within a Nation: Amiri Baraka and Black Power Politics (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Melba Joyce Boyd, Wrestling with the Muse: Dudley Randall and Broadsie Press (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); and James Edward Smethurst, The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005) for three of the most recent exemplars of this new scholarly emphasis. As Smethurst points out, though there were “different strains” throughout its existence, “the movement gained some sense of national coherence institutionally, aesthetically, and ideologically, even if it never became exactly homogeneous” (p. 7). It is that “national coherence” as articulated through the popular writings of the movement’s most prominent leaders which comprises the working definition of “Black Power” for the purposes of this study.
describe the phenomenon.18 This conversion was the process by which individual
African Americans learned to formulate a positive racial identity based on pride in the
perceived unique attributes of their race. As William Hall put it, this was the means by
which African Americans shifted from viewing themselves as “inadequate, inferior,
icapable of self-determination, and unable to cope with the intricacies of life in a
complex society” to viewing themselves instead as “adequate, self-reliant, assertive, and
self-determinative.”19

The Negro-to-Black conversion extended into all realms of life for African
Americans at the time. Dress styles, hair styles, physical features, speech, as well as
literature, poetry, visual art, and music were all employed to represent the unique
properties of being “black.” Those who self-identified as “black” utilized such
properties as a way to embrace their physical distinction and to celebrate their racial and
cultural difference. In the late 1960s, for the first time in American history, to be “black”
was to be beautiful. As the author and cultural critic Hoyt Fuller put it at the time:

After centuries of being told, in a million different ways, that they were not
beautiful, and that whiteness of skin, straightness of hair, and aquilineness of
features constituted the only measures of beauty, black people have revolted.
The trend has not yet reached the point of avalanche, but the future can be

Freedle, “Stages in the Development of Black Awareness: An Exploratory Investigation” in Black Psychology

clearly seen in the growing number of black people who are snapping off the shackles of imitation and are wearing their skin, their hair, and their features “natural” and with pride.\textsuperscript{20}

Fuller’s assertion of “blackness” as a source of “pride” for African Americans finds an unsurprising resonance with, if not its origins in, James Brown’s 1968 anthem.

Cultural representations of racial difference, while resonant with the Black Power Movement, found their more explicit theorization in the related Black Arts and Black Aesthetics Movements. These movements sought to articulate the distinct characteristics of the cultural products that would bolster a growing impulse toward community pride and self-definition. Just as African Americans had adopted the term “black” as a way to break away from the perceived white control exerted by the use of the term “Negro,” so too did they desire to define for themselves the nature and value of Black Art apart from the aesthetic values assumed by many white artists and critics. At the same time that Stokely Carmichael was leading the call for “Black Power,” Black Arts theorist Larry Neal and others were pointing out that, “The Black Arts Movement . . . is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept” in that they both were based on a “desire for self-determination and nationhood.”\textsuperscript{21} Most notably, the Black

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} Hoyt W. Fuller, “Introduction: Towards a Black Aesthetic,” in \textit{The Black Aesthetic} ed. Addison Gayle Jr. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), pp. 3-12 at 8.
\end{itemize}
Arts Movement shared with the Black Power Movement a dissatisfaction with the results of efforts toward assimilation and embraced instead a decidedly nationalistic approach that was rooted in a dichotomous construction of race in America. Based on the idea that an African American artist’s primary responsibility was “to speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of black people,” these two movements collectively defined aesthetic value from a distinctly “black” perspective.22

While, as novelist and playwright Julian Mayfield implies, there were as many definitions of Black Aesthetics as there were “black” aestheticians, the movement did coalesce around several general themes.23 The Black Aesthetic involved, in the words of Larry Neal, “more than the process of making art.” It also included “the destruction of white ideas” and of “white ways of looking at the world.”24 Black aestheticians felt that for too long “black” art had been judged according to an aesthetic value system derived from European thought and privileging European art styles. Critics such as Jimmy Stewart argued that there were two dichotomous artistic traditions – one white, and one black – with two distinct systems of aesthetic value. As he put it, “There have always


been two musical traditions: the musical tradition or aesthetic of white people in the West, and the musical tradition of Black people in this country.” The responsibility of the African American artist, then, was to create works of art that highlighted the unique aesthetic values and creative potentials of African Americans while intentionally excluding any practices or values associated with whiteness.

For Etheridge Knight, a poet and Black Arts theorist, this meant the creation of new, intentionally “black,” forms. As he put it, “The black artist must create new forms and new values, sing new songs (or purify old ones); and along with other Black authorities, he must create a new history, new symbols, myths and legends (and purify old ones by fire).” Since these “new forms” and “new symbols” were based on a distinctly African American perspective, then the works of art that incorporated them were to be created specifically for African Americans. As Black Arts literary critic Addison Gayle points out, “[The black artist] has given up the futile practice of speaking to whites, and has begun to speak to his brothers.” African American critics were also to be attentive to the specificities of African American art and were to judge the works accordingly. Again, Gayle argues, “The question for the black critic today is not how

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27 For more on the attempt on the part of Black Arts critics to control the authorship of black music criticism, particularly of jazz criticism, see Lorenzo Thomas, “Ascension: Music and the Black Arts Movement” in Jazz Among the Discourses, ed. Gabbard, pp. 256-274.
beautiful is a melody, a play, a poem, or a novel, but how much more beautiful has the poem, melody, play, or novel made the life of a single black man?”

28 These “new forms” and “new symbols” were directed toward and inspired by “the special character and imperatives of black experience” within African American communities; communities circumscribed by both region and class as entailing the “distinctive styles and rhythms and colors of the ghetto.”

29 Black Art, then, was a way for increasingly nationalistic artists to defensively construct an aesthetic system that was predicated on its rejection of anything and everything termed “white,” whether aesthetic values, audiences, or critical evaluations. Art deriving from “black” people, created for “black” people, and evaluated by “black” people became the definitive authenticating gestures for those attempting to propagate the nationalistic ideology of the Black Arts Movement.

Julian Mayfield added an historical orientation to the Black Aesthetic when he argued that such an aesthetic “is in our racial memory, and the unshakable knowledge of who we are, where we have been, and, springing from this, where we are going.”

30 The Black Aesthetic, then, encompassed an historical awareness of the African American past, a revolutionary vision of freedom for the present, and a clear conception of hope for the future. As Ron Karenga, leader of the cultural nationalist organization US,


summarizes, all Black Art must share three primary characteristics: (1) it must be “functional” in that it rejects the notion of “art for art’s sake” and instead works toward increased freedom for African Americans (2) it must be “collective” in that it comes “from the people and must be returned to the people in a form more beautiful and colorful than it was in real life” and (3) it must be “committing” in that it is devoted to the cause of the freedom struggle. 31 Focusing on “blackness” in art provided an opportunity to construct and praise difference and to highlight the value of and the right to self-determination and self-definition. The Black Arts and Black Aesthetics Movements were overt efforts to establish the right to define cultural value for African Americans by African Americans.

This right to define was central because, as Amiri Baraka argues, “The ability to define, of course, is the ability to control. . . . The person who defines is the person who has the power.” 32 Carmichael elaborates:

We must first redefine ourselves. Our basic need is to reclaim our history and our identity from what must be called cultural terrorism, from the depredation of self-justifying white guilt. We shall have to struggle for the right to create our own terms through which to define ourselves and our relationship to the society, and to have these terms recognized. This is the first necessity of a free people. 33

33 Carmichael and Hamilton, Black Power, pp. 34-35.
In defining racial designation and aesthetic and artistic quality, African Americans in the late 1960s were claiming the power to control their own cultural representations.

These three related movements – Black Arts, Black Aesthetics, and Black Power – collectively politicized the designation “black.” To self-identify in the late 1960s as “black and proud” was to invoke a militant, nationalistic discourse that prized racial difference as beauty and self-definition as a right. As James Brown’s song grew into a popular symbol for the politicization of the term “black,” invoking this song became a political act. This was only amplified as Brown himself emerged as a prominent symbol for “blackness” at the time.

As critic Mel Watkins could write in 1971, “James Brown is the personification of blackness, the embodiment of the black life style. His significance lies in his fidelity to

that life style and his deft evocation of its nuances and subtleties.” 35 Amiri Baraka had similarly argued, “The world James Brown’s images power is the lowest placement (the most alien) in the white American social order. Therefore, it is the Blackest and potentially the strongest.” 36 For these writers, “blackness” is the critical standard for defining and evaluating James Brown. And, at least for Watkins, Brown’s “life style” is presented as the critical standard for defining blackness. In such cases, James Brown and “black” were effectively synonymous, with Brown serving as a metonym for what “blackness” should be.

Other African American critics and leaders, though, showed less enthusiasm for presenting Brown as the standard bearer for this newly politicized notion of “blackness.” Emory Douglas, the Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party, accused Brown of “system-straddling;” of supporting both black nationalism as well as the capitalist system that many revolutionary African Americans saw as oppressive. As he put it in 1969, “You hear James Brown talking about Black and Proud, then you hear him on the radio saying, ‘Why don’t you buy this beer?’” 37 Brown’s own actions in the late 1960s made him all the more susceptible to such oppositional critical evaluations.


During that time, Brown made public appearances with the radical activists Harry Belafonte and Julian Bond as well as a variety of conventional politicians including Hubert Humphrey and Richard Nixon. He created decidedly conservative and patriotic songs such as “Don’t be a Drop Out” and “America Is My Home,” the latter of which Amiri Baraka referred to as “PimpArt” because it “did not have the consciousness of Black” and instead comprised “lies about America.” Only two months after releasing “America,” Brown recorded the seemingly revolutionary political anthem “Say It Loud.” Significantly, then, Brown’s public and critical reception often varied depending on his latest public appearance or his latest hit single. From the release of “Say It Loud,” and particularly once Brown succumbed to African American public pressure by cutting his processed hair style and going “natural” with an afro, he was generally described, as one fan approvingly put it, “as down as a chitlin’.”

James Brown thereby became a public symbol for “blackness” at a time when “black” had achieved a specific political resonance. Invoking the phrase “black and proud” was a way to identify with that particular political significance. And it is here that a response begins to emerge to the primary question that opened this chapter: what


did it mean for Miles Davis to utilize the “Say It Loud” riff for his 1971 album A Tribute to Jack Johnson? As the discussion above implies, when Miles Davis borrowed the “Say It Loud” riff, he was invoking the political and social significance of the term “black.” Davis showed an awareness, after all, of both the significance of Brown’s tune and of the designation “black” around the time of this recording. In August 1970, for example, during a discussion of the ways in which genre affects marketing strategies, Davis noted, “Jazz is an Uncle Tom word and pretty soon, just like nobody wants to be called Negro or colored, nobody wants to be called a jazz musician.”41 Here Davis recognizes the derogatory nature of the racial designations “colored” and “Negro” and gestures toward his recognition of those terms’ lack of popularity among African Americans at the time. In 1975, Davis made this rejection of “Negro” and acceptance of “black” even more overt by noting, “I don’t play rock. Rock is a white word. And I don’t like the word jazz because jazz is a nigger word that white folks dropped on us. We just play Black. We play what the day recommends.”42 In rejecting the designation “Negro,” and in describing his music in terms of “blackness,” Davis showed an acute awareness of the political and social significance of this prominent renaming. His borrowing of the “Say It Loud” riff and use of that riff for this recording was yet another instance of Davis ensuring that he was, in fact, playing “black.”

41 Zygote, “Miles Davis,” p. 35.
42 Frederick D. Murphy, “Miles Davis,” p. 36.
John McLaughlin offers a different perspective on Davis’s use of Brown’s riff. According to McLaughlin, Davis’s choice was influenced as much by aesthetic issues as it was by political implications. As he remembers it:

Miles was searching for [funk] riffs. He would play me a chord on the piano and ask me what would I do with it in terms of a riff. Having been listening to James Brown for quite a few years already, I had a collection of riffs that I would play for him. One particular riff that I had, he took and made me work on it until he liked it.⁴³

McLaughlin is referring here to the “Say It Loud” riff, and his recollection implies that Davis’s use of the riff did not emerge from an intentional desire to make an overt statement about the racial politics of the day. Instead, McLaughlin situates Davis’s use of the riff in strictly aesthetic terms, implying that Davis may not have known about either the specific source of the riff or about its potential political associations.

McLaughlin’s recollection, recorded more than thirty years after the session in question, is decidedly different from that of Michael Henderson, who instead remembers Davis as the one who introduced and taught the “Say It Loud” riff to McLaughlin at a rehearsal the night before the recording session.⁴⁴ This recollection is more in line with the details from the unedited session tapes that were discussed at the beginning of this chapter,

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⁴³ Quoted in Milkowski, “Unleashing the Avatar,” p. 71. McLaughlin is careful to qualify that his statement is not an attempt to claim compositional credit for the riff. As he put it, “We all had ideas. Everybody would come in with things – a riff or a motif. But they were all really in the function of Miles and his music. . . . So it’s a kind of useless question: Who wrote what? Because the concept and the way the music grew and was recorded was truly, absolutely Miles.” (p. 72)

⁴⁴ See Tingen, “The Jack Johnson Sessions.”
where Davis and Henderson worked out the final version of the riff together, apart from any audible assistance by McLaughlin.

McLaughlin’s claim notwithstanding, the aesthetic influences on Davis’s choice of the “Say It Loud” riff are not to be dismissed. For, as I discussed in Chapter One, Davis was vocal in the late 1960s and early 1970s about his appreciation for much of the popular music of the day. At a time when he took pride in pointing out that he listened neither to his own prior recordings nor to any contemporary jazz, Davis was eager to acknowledge, “I listen to James Brown and those little bands on the South Side [of Chicago]. They swing their asses off." Whether spending time with Jimi Hendrix or Sly and the Family Stone, recruiting musicians from Hendrix and from Stevie Wonder, incorporating distorted guitars, Marshall amplifiers, and wah-wah pedals, or exchanging his Italian suits for psychedelic dress, Davis overtly and consistently borrowed from the sound and style of many popular musicians of the day.

Davis’s use of this riff, then, should not be interpreted in a limited and oppositional framework of either aesthetic choice or political statement. Instead, both perspectives jointly add to the meaning and significance behind the music.

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Undoubtedly, Davis’s aesthetic preference for the sound of the riff was a necessary condition for his choice to use that riff in his own music. Additionally, as Davis consistently demonstrates through discussions of his music from the time, he never sought to distance the aesthetic components of his sound from the larger social and political issues which he understood that sound to represent. In other words, in addition to being an aesthetic decision, Davis’s use of the “Say It Loud” riff was implicated in the larger political and social meanings of “black” at the time.

This association was further strengthened by the comments of both African American and white listeners from the era who consistently describe Davis’s music in terms of race; specifically in terms of “blackness.” White critic Dave Marsh, in his 1971 review of A Tribute to Jack Johnson, noted about the record, “It’s about real stuff: life, and blackness.”47 Another white critic in 1970 described Davis’s playing as a “perfect black ribbon of sound which unfolded from Miles’ trumpet.”48 A more critical review from an African American writer in Jet magazine noted, “The second fiddle trumpeter Miles Davis is playing to Johnny-come-lately white rock groups in recent concerts where he has fronted a combo that is far from Black.”49 As this critic went on to point out, Davis’s combo was “far from Black” in both its integrated personnel as well as in the related

music that personnel was creating. While these critics offer different final evaluations, the significant point is their consistent invocation of “blackness” as the standard for critical judgment as well as their implicit assumption that “blackness” is a quality that can be present in, or at least represented by, sound.

Davis, his fans, and his critics, then, were eager to situate this music in terms of “blackness” and the performance of it as “playing black.” In so doing, they were drawing upon the political meanings of “blackness” that accompanied the prominent “Negro-to-Black” renaming at the time. Davis’s familiarity with the political implications of the designation “black” adds another level of meaning to his musical borrowing of the “Say It Loud” riff. Just as Davis at the time was actively constructing a verbal discourse of “blackness” for his music, his intentional use of this riff was an overt gesture toward reinforcing sonically the “blackness” of this sound. If Davis’s intent was to “say it loud,” that he was “black and proud,” then borrowing Brown’s riff and using language of “blackness” to describe the resulting music were notably effective in achieving that result.

In addition to his verbal discourse and to this one overt musical borrowing, though, Davis and numerous other writers at the time voiced other opinions as to how race, specifically “blackness,” was audible through sound. Prominent thought on “black” music from the time falls into three categories: (1) black music as defined by a musician’s phenotype, (2) black music as a sonic construct, that can be performed with
conviction only by African Americans, and (3) black music as a sonic construct, available to any musician – regardless of phenotype – who devotes the time to developing a stylistic competency in the elements of that music.

First, one of the ways that Davis and others understood music to be racially coded was a result of the race of its creators. In 1969 and 1970 Davis often commented on the race of performers, regularly linking phenotype with essentialized notions of music. In 1969, for example, the following interchange took place between Davis and an interviewer: “Davis: The race has a lot to do with it, man, because black people can swing. There’s no getting around that. Gleason: White people can’t swing? Davis: Uh-uh.”50 Again, in an interview from 1970, Davis noted, “Everybody knows, that with the blacks, you get a good rhythm section.”51 In such cases, Davis argued that the race of the performer is directly relevant to the musical sensibility of that performer. In 1969, Davis made the relationship between phenotype and musical style even more overt, arguing, “I can tell a white trumpet player, just listening to a record. There’ll be something he’ll do that’ll let me know he’s white.” The interviewer then asked, “It’s like listening to somebody’s accent, is it?” to which Davis replied, “Right.”52 Davis thereby claimed to be able to recognize in the style and musical characteristics of a particular

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51 Zygote, “Miles Davis,” p. 30.
52 Les Tomkins, “Miles Davis Talking to Les Tomkins in 1969” http://www.jazzprofessional.com/interviews/Miles%20Davis.htm (October 14, 2006).
performer that performer’s racial identity. Through these and similar comments, Davis argued for differences in intrinsic musical style and aptitude that are related to the phenotype of the performing musicians. In such cases, playing “black” for Davis was a direct result of “black” people playing.

Again in 1969, and in language starkly resonant with much of the Black Aesthetic thought at the time, Davis argued for two distinct and dichotomous musical styles, defined by a prominent construction of racial difference. As he put it, “There’s two kinds – white and black, and those bourgeois spades are trying to sing white and the whites are trying to sound colored. It’s embarrassing. It’s like me wearing a dress.”

Here Davis continued to argue for the audible presence of “blackness” in sound while maintaining that phenotype impacts a musician’s ability to perform a sound with conviction or authenticity. This sentiment represents a subtle shift from Davis’s comments above, as he now recognizes “blackness” as a sonic construct that can be learned and appropriated by any musician, regardless of phenotype. Such an idea was not uncommon at the time, though few writers went so far as to delineate the actual sonic markers of a “black” or a “white” musical style. Leonard Feather, for example, once described the lead singer for Blood, Sweat & Tears as “the blackest white Canadian on the scene,” arguing that he sang with “vigor, sincerity, earthiness, blackness . . . and a

relentless emotional communication.” Feather, as with most other critics at the time, provided none of the formal musical aspects of the sound that would elucidate his terms and categories of evaluation. One exception to this pattern, though, was the critic John Lombardi, who noted in 1970:

The superficial aspects of soul can be picked up easily – the vocal inflections, rhythmic, harmonic and lyrical techniques, the choreography, the jive – but an understanding of the basic sadness and bleakness that most black music covers and seeks to transcend is simply beyond the scope of white groups.55

Here Lombardi lays out at least some of the general musical characteristics of a “black” style but then relegates those characteristics to the realm of the superficial, arguing that the definitive content of “black” music resides in an emotional essence that is “beyond the scope” of white musicians.

The issue of “black” music as a style and of whites’ ability to perform in that style gained particular prominence in the late 1960s with the rise of white blues musicians such as Janis Joplin, Joe Cocker, Johnny Winter, and Mike Bloomfield. Advertisements at the time were common that referred, for example, to Winter as “a white flame ignited by black blues” or to Joplin as “a white chick belting black Blues.”56

In a notably trenchant article on the topic, Ralph Gleason, a white critic who advocated

throughout his career for the music of African Americans, argued that white musicians who perform in styles associated with African Americans “keep insisting that the name of their game is chitlins and collard greens and it’s actually chicken soup, baby, chicken soup.” Gleason argued that “Mike Bloomfield will never be a spade” and that the idea that white musicians can never sound fully “black” was “a simple historical fact and there is nothing that can be done about it.” He concluded that “[blackness] won’t rub off. You can’t become what you are not and it’s not for sale. Play your own soul, man, and stop this shuck.” 57

Gleason’s argument and the line of thought it represented set off a critical backlash that highlights a third discourse on “blackness” as sound that was prominent at the time. 58 Nick Gravenites noted in response to Gleason:

Mike is from Chicago and Chicago has over one million Black Americans living there and it is virtually impossible to live in the city and not become a little Black in your heart and soul. . . . You are going to ask that Mike cut out ten years of his life like they never happened? That he never did hang out with black musicians, that he’s one hundred percent “Chicken Soup?” Forget it, Ralph. 59


59 Gravenites, “Gravenites: Stop This Shuck,” p. 17.
Dizzy Gillespie made a similar point when asked about the nature of “black” music. He noted:

It’s your environment and what you are brought up with. I believe that if you take a white baby and put him in the sanctified church at the beginning, before he hears any music at all . . . I don’t care what age, two, three, four, or something like that . . . put him in there, give him a tambourine and tell him to play, he will develop exactly like the Black kids. Because it is a matter of you are what your experiences are. 60

Gravenites and Gillespie demonstrate this third prominent way that “black” music was understood at the time; namely as a set of musical practices and characteristics that musicians of any phenotype can master with sufficient practice and enculturation. As they imply, certain musical styles, for historical, social, and cultural reasons, originate in segregated musical communities. Those styles then become articulated in terms of the identities of those segregated communities, which – in the United States – has tended to mean in terms of race. As Archie Shepp once argued, “Jazz is Black Music . . . [because] the creative source of the music . . . has come from black culture.” 61 In such cases, notions of origins are given priority in the racial coding of a musical style. The sound, though having no necessary connection to race, comes to be viewed as a sonic marker of race. Cases such as the Winter and Joplin ads referenced above, where whites can “play black” or blacks can “talk white,” introduce a certain tension to the discussion. Observing this phenomenon in 1968, drummer Lonnie Castille

60 Quoted in Tam Fiofori, “Getting Dizzy” Melody Maker (September 25, 1971), pp. 12, 42.
noted with amazement, “Sometimes, you can’t tell [based on the sound] whether [the performer is] white or Negro until you look.” Castille was struck by the fact that a musical style, while articulated in terms of its cultural origins, can be – and often is – learned by anyone willing to devote the time and energy to developing a stylistic competency. A performance of sound, while articulated as a performance of race, explodes beyond any exclusive notions of a musical style’s contingency on phenotype. Instead, playing “black” is a matter of utilizing particular sonic markers through which a specific musical style is articulated in terms of race. Davis showed a sensitivity to this argument when, in describing John McLaughlin, he noted, “He’s not only white, he’s English, and you can’t get any whiter than that. And yet he has the funk. He plays like he’s black and he’s so white.” Davis here acknowledges “blackness” as a musical

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63 This idea finds resonance with the recent writing of cultural theorists Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy. Hall’s approach is based on the idea that, “Black’ is essentially a politically and culturally constructed category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed trans-cultural or transcendent racial categories and which therefore has no guarantees in nature.” He goes on to argue for cultural products as the sites “where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented . . . to ourselves for the first time.” Gilroy summarizes this approach by arguing, “Racialised subjectivity [is] the product of the social practices that supposedly derive from it.” Such ideas add greater nuance to the ways in which sound is complicit in performances of identity, specifically of race, and of how musical performances become articulated with racialized subject formation. See Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities” in Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 441-449 at 443; Stuart Hall, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture” in Black Popular Culture: A Project by Michelle Wallace ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), pp. 21-33 at 29 and 32; and Paul Gilroy, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 102.

64 Quoted in Chris Murphy, Miles To Go, p. 11.
style that can be learned by musicians of any phenotype and that has no necessary or exclusive connection to any particular race, though he again does not offer any specifics regarding the particular musical characteristics of this “black” style.

Though most writers in the 1960s did little to delineate the precise musical practices constitutive of “black” music, scholars since then have attempted to do just that. Similar to the more literary-focused theorists of the Black Arts Movement, these writers have sought to theorize a distinctly “black” music. Their theorizations include descriptions of formal musical characteristics and practices as well as invocations of a particular understanding of the African diaspora as foundational to the historical roots of such practices. Two scholars in particular exemplify this approach.

In 1974, composer Olly Wilson began arguing for a certain identifiable “essence” of black music that, at its core, was a “conceptual approach” to music-making that entailed a “way of doing something, not simply something that is done.” 65 He later clarified that this “way of doing something” included the use of metric contrast, the presence of a fixed and variable rhythmic group, a percussive approach to instrument performance, the use of call-and-response, the creation of a “high density of musical

events,” and the use of the body as part of the music-making process. Wilson discussed several of these practices in the context of what he termed “the heterogeneous sound ideal,” whereby “a kaleidoscopic range of dramatically contrasting qualities of sound (timbre)” are incorporated into the practice of musical creation. This approach defines black music at the level of inherent musical content and practice, and it also places the music in a distinctly African diasporic context.

Samuel Floyd, in his important book from 1995, similarly consolidated much of his thinking on African American musical history by defining “black” music in two ways. First, in language again resonant with Black Arts writing of the 1960s, he links black music’s origins to Africa by basing the music on a subjective and experiential “African cultural memory” that serves as “a repository of meanings that comprise the subjective knowledge of a people.” Additionally, though, “black” music is defined by musical retentions that were present in the African American ring shout and that can be traced back to African expressive practices, which Floyd lists as follows:

Calls, cries, and hollers; call-and-response devices; additive rhythms and polyrhythms; heterophony, pendular thirds, blue notes, bent notes, and elisions; hums, moans, grunts, vocables, and other rhythmic-oral declamations, interjections, and punctuations; off-beat melodic phrasings and parallel intervals and chords; constant repetition of rhythmic and melodic figures and phrases (from which riffs and vamps would be derived); timbral distortions of various

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kinds; musical individuality within collectivity; game rivalry; hand clapping, foot patting, and approximations thereof; apart-playing; and the metronomic pulse that underlies all African-American music.68

While those discussing black music in the 1960s showed a hesitance in laying out that music’s specific characteristics, Wilson and Floyd show no such reticence. More recent scholars, while acknowledging the value of Wilson and Floyd’s approach, have, in the words of Gabriel Solis, sought to understand “the construction of musical ‘blackness’ as a mutable and geographically and historically contingent process” instead of primarily as a definable set of musical characteristics.69 Here concepts of a “blues aesthetic” and the theorization of “Afro-modernism” emerge as categories that enable productive discussion of blackness and music.70 To this can be added Paul Gilroy’s sophisticated analysis of sound and identity politics through his theorization of a perspective of “anti-anti-essentialism” which acknowledges the importance of social and musical practices in identity formation without collapsing the complexity of sound’s


articulation with race into the polarities of what he terms the “ethnic exceptionalist” and “anti-essentialist” perspectives.  

Ronald Radano has argued further for the mutability and historical contingency of black music by outlining the emergence of this category as a discursive formation, arguing for “black music’s very constitution as part and parcel of the broader emergence of race in American public history and culture.” Radano productively questions the value of defining “black music” as a bounded set of musical practices, problematizing what he terms “the view, still common to our time and culture, of an immutable black musical essence that survives apart from the contingencies of social and cultural change.” Instead, Radano emphasizes those contingencies and the ways in which the discourses constructed around those contingencies play “a generative role in [black] music’s making.”

This recognition of the mutability and historical contingency of “black” music as a discursive formation represents a notably different perspective from that which was prominent in the late-1960s moment of cultural nationalism and Black Power. At that time, “black” music broadly functioned as a politically motivated avenue for the circulation of a newly emerging racial consciousness expressed in part through such

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72 Radano, Lying Up a Nation, pp. 4, 3, and 42. As Radano additionally argues on p. 5, “To assume that musical practices of the present document consistent patterns of performance and reception over the course of two hundred to three hundred years . . . is to assume a kind of cultural stasis that ignores the flux of musical and sociodiscursive processes as it contradicts the broader historical record.”
ideas as the “Negro-to-Black conversion.” Whether defined at the time in terms of “attitude” or “energy,” or in terms of formal musical practices such as “vocal inflections” or “lyrical techniques,” the discursive function of “black” music was to create a cultural space wherein emerging understandings of racial identity could be valued and expressed on their own terms.73

Though Miles Davis seemed unconcerned with the prospect of verbal consistency in his discussions of “black music” in the late 1960s, his comments from the time demonstrate a trust in the existence of “black music” as a particular style that could be both aurally identified and learned with varying degrees of success by musicians of any phenotype. Though Black Arts writers attempted to define the essence of a “black” style as outside the realm of whites, others at the time acknowledged the possibility of whites developing a particular stylistic competency to perform in a way that could be heard as “black.”

For A Tribute to Jack Johnson, “playing black” constituted a musical, political, and discursive formation, comprising intentional musical borrowing along with the use of verbal discourses that reinscribed the role of sound in the creation of “blackness.” Through this formation, the musical content of the album was interpreted in the context of “playing black,” of creating “perfect black ribbons of sound,” and of embodying what

73 Anderson, This Is Our Music, pp. 114-115.
Ron Welburn described in 1971 as “the expression of true black sensibility.”\textsuperscript{74} Davis, though, added yet another level of discursive complexity to the album’s musical racialization. For, in addition to style, musical borrowing, and verbal discourse, playing “black” on this album was also inseparably linked to a particular notion Davis held of what it meant to be a man.

\textit{Say It Loud: I’m a Man}

As Paul Gilroy has noted, “Gender is the modality in which race is lived,”\textsuperscript{75} thereby implying the necessity of understanding the ways in which the two are mutually articulated in individual and social constructions of being. Algernon Austin applies a more particular conceptualization of this idea to the late 1960s when he argues, “Within the ideology of Black Power, not only was the most authentic blackness male, but the most authentic maleness was ‘Black.’”\textsuperscript{76} Austin thereby draws attention to the essentially patriarchal and often misogynistic politics of the late-1960s freedom


\textsuperscript{75} Gilroy, \textit{The Black Atlantic}, p. 85.

\textsuperscript{76} Algernon Austin, \textit{Achieving Blackness: Race, Black Nationalism, and Afrocentrism in the Twentieth Century} (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006), p. 58. James Smethurst has problematized this traditional narrative in his \textit{The Black Arts Movement}, pp. 84-89 where he argues that, while “a paternalistic, often homophobic, masculinism was a powerful strain within the Black Arts and Black Power movements,” those movements were “among the very few organizational and ideological spaces of that era in the United States . . . where one could effectively raise the issue of male supremacy and gender oppression.”
struggle. When remembering back to A Tribute to Jack Johnson, Miles Davis embraced just such a sentiment as he attempted to delineate his music in terms of a “blackness” inflected by a particular form of aggressive masculinity. As he put it:

When I wrote these tunes [on A Tribute to Jack Johnson] I was going up to Gleason’s Gym to train [as a boxer], . . . I had that boxer’s movement in mind, that shuffling movement boxers use. They’re almost like dance steps. . . . The question in my mind after I got to this was, well, is the music black enough, does it have a black rhythm, . . . would Jack Johnson dance to that?  

Davis here combines boxing, “blackness,” and rhythm into a single description of the music on A Tribute to Jack Johnson. Not only does he refer to this music as “black,” but he also intentionally situates it in terms of a particularly physical and aggressive activity – one that has traditionally been coded as masculine. Davis thereby implicitly agreed with James Brown, who, in anticipating Austin’s argument by roughly twenty-five years, was summarized by an interviewer in 1970 as crudely arguing that true manhood comprises “blackness with balls.”  

For Miles Davis, this aggressive and virile notion of masculinity was heavily dependent on boxing and on the culture associated with it. As an interviewer from 1970 put it, “An animal instinct . . . compels him to work out in a gym in front of others to

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78 Davis and Troupe, Miles, pp. 314-315.

demonstrate his masculinity, and it is one of the driving forces that makes him write and play music.”80 In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Davis consistently voiced his attraction to boxing and to the manner in which boxing influenced his own conceptualization of the music he was creating. No fewer than six interviews between 1969 and 1970 took place in the context of training sessions at a local gym, where Davis was apparently boxing on a near-daily basis.81

A common theme throughout these interviews is the rationale for Davis’s boxing training and the ways in which that training impacted his conception of musical performance; particularly his rhythmic sensibility, including his phrasing, on trumpet. Davis explains this connection in the following interview excerpt from July 1969:

I asked him how the boxing affected his playing. “Makes me stronger . . . . Cause I play right here – I stand like this when I play, man.” Bending back in his characteristic question-mark stance. . . . “I play like this, and the rhythms come like this.” Holding his trumpet straight ahead and feinting his body in crisp moves from side to side. Like a boxing movement? “Yeah. But the thing is to breathe right. Cause if you breathe like this” – whoosh, whoosh, short shallow breaths – “you just play the same old shit. Somebody could just follow along with what you play. So you have to . . . keep the breathing free” – long deep breaths from his guts, then blowing the air out smoothly cleanly – “and you can play any kind of beat, in the middle of the beat, all kinds of phrases, five-note phrases, six-note phrases.”82

80 Zygote, “Miles Davis,” p. 31.
82 Heckman, “Sparring with Miles,” p. 29.
Again in an interview from December of 1969, Davis makes several explicit connections between the rhythms of boxing and the rhythms of music, in this case expanding the notion beyond individual musical phrasing and articulating instead the ways in which boxing relates to group improvisation and interplay. As he puts it:

When you box, you gotta watch a guy. You understand? You gotta watch him, anticipate him . . . you gotta say if he jabs, I’m gonna stop it with my left hand. All this stuff has to be like this [snaps fingers]. DeMichael: Then you’re saying the same thing’s true in music. . . . Davis: Yeah.⁸³

Such comments on the connections between boxing and music were common for Davis during this period. He once, in fact, noted a specific rhythmic correlation between boxing and the music on A Tribute to Jack Johnson, claiming that portions of his solos were emulations of Jack Johnson’s rhythm when throwing jabs. As Chris Murphy, Davis’s assistant for much of the 1970s, remembers it, “I mentioned that I also liked his use of mini-chords on the album [A Tribute to Jack Johnson], the little two- or three-note chordlets that he used as a kind of percussive punctuation, symbolizing the left jab of the great champion. ‘You caught that?’ he asked.”⁸⁴ While Murphy’s is nothing if not a leading observation, and while neither Murphy nor Davis goes on to clarify the precise moments on the album on which Davis was purportedly jabbing, the two could be

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⁸³ DeMicheal, “And in this Corner,” p. 32.
⁸⁴ Chris Murphy, Miles To Go, p. 11.
referencing portions of Davis’s solo from “Right Off” such as those transcribed below in Figure 18.

(David Davis’ “Right Off” solo)

Davis described both his performance style on this album, as well as his general conceptualization of music and musical interaction at the time, in terms of the rhythms and the physicality of boxing. He highlighted the rhythmic implications of punching combinations, his boxing-inspired stance while playing, and the continuities between approaches to breathing for boxers and trumpet players. Moreover, he situated his particular understanding of musical interaction in the context of boxing. In so doing, he created a synchronic articulation in the late 1960s and early 1970s between this particular
album and the physicality and aggression of boxing. In addition to these rhythmic and corporeal associations, Gerald Early has further linked Davis’s fascination with boxing to his conception of masculinity, arguing that as far back as the 1950s Davis’s association with boxing allowed him to portray himself as dangerous and as rebellious. Since much of society viewed Davis’s boxing role models as dangerous and rebellious, Davis was similarly evaluated based on those associations. Additionally, for a trumpet player whose livelihood was contingent upon the consistent care for his lips, boxing itself was a dangerous act. If Davis injured his lip, he would be unable to perform for weeks if not months, so even amateur training as a boxer was a risky venture.85

Just as Early locates the origins of Davis’s notion of masculinity in a post-WWII historical moment, Davis himself also cited prominent African American fighters from then and earlier periods as formative influences on his personal development.86 In a 1974 interview, for example, Davis said:

I would like for black people to look at me like Joe Louis.” . . . Miles, your idols have always been fighters. “Yeah, ‘cause they don’t miss – like Joes Louis didn’t

85 Gerald Early, “The Art of Muscle: Miles Davis as American Knight and American Knave” in Miles Davis and American Culture, ed. Early, pp. 3-23 at 8-9. For other writing on Davis and masculinity, particularly as it relates to his well-documented misogyny, see, e.g., Pearl Cleage, “Mad at Miles” in Deals with the Devil and Other Reasons to Riot (New York: Ballantine, 1993), pp. 40-41; reprinted in The Miles Davis Companion: Four Decades of Commentary ed. Gary Carner (New York: Schirmer, 1996), pp. 210-216; Hazel Carby, Race Men (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 135-165; and Robin D.G. Kelley, “A Jazz Genius in the Guise of a Hustler” The New York Times (May 13, 2001), section 2, p. 1. This misogyny may have resulted from Davis’s insecurity over his own alleged bisexuality, an orientation asserted in Carr, Miles Davis, pp. 481-482; and contested in Chris Murphy, Miles To Go, pp. 212-214; and Quincy Troupe, Miles and Me (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 77-78.

miss, and Jack Johnson was 20 years ahead of his time. Ray Robinson, too. . . .
Fighters just turn me on and make me wanna do something.\(^{87}\)

William Cayton, the director of the Jack Johnson documentary, has pointed out that in
the 1960s and 1970s, “[Davis would] come to our offices and ask for a bunch of [old
fight] films. He’d put the spool on the projector himself, threading the projector, then sit
there and watch for hours.”\(^{88}\)

Nearly every Davis scholar and biographer, in fact, has pointed out the influence
of professional boxers on Davis’s personal and musical development.\(^{89}\) In the 1950s,
Davis was influenced by Sugar Ray Robinson, more than any other boxer, even citing
Robinson as his inspiration for quitting heroin use at the time.\(^{90}\) By the late 1960s and
early 1970s, Davis’s focus had moved more toward Jack Johnson as his primary role
model. Chris Murphy has pointed out, “Miles always kept an autographed photo of

\(^{87}\) Gregg Hall, “Miles,” p. 19.

\(^{88}\) Quoted in Chang, “Miles’ Blow by Blow,” p. 4.

\(^{89}\) Gerald Early, more than any other, has clarified the ways in which boxers served as role models
for the aggressive heteromasculinity that Davis adopted throughout his career. See his “The Art of Muscle,”
pp. 3-23; “Miles Davis, Vince Lombardi,” pp. 154-159; and “Some Preposterous Propositions from the
Heroic Life of Muhammad Ali: A Reading of The Greatest: My Own Story” in Muhammad Ali: The People’s
Champ ed. Elliott J. Gorn (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), pp. 70-87 at 72-75. The
prominence of Miles Davis in recent writing on jazz masculinities had led Sherrie Tucker to term the field
“Miles Davis Studies” and to admit that the trend “worries” her due to “its privileging of iconic figures that
‘fit’ the most celebrated, even stereotypical versions of black masculinity in jazz.” See her “Big Ears:
Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies” Current Musicology (Spring 2001/2002), pp. 375-408 at 389. Tucker’s
point is well taken, and many authors have recently begun to address the relationship between jazz and
alternative masculinities. See, e.g., David Ake, “Regendering Jazz: Ornette Coleman and the New York
Scene in the Late 1950s” in his Jazz Cultures (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 62-82; and
Patrick Burke, “Oasis of Swing: The Onyx Club, Jazz, and White Masculinity in the Early 1930s” American
Music (Fall 2006), pp. 320-346.

\(^{90}\) See Gregg Hall, “Miles,” p. 19.
Jack Johnson next to his bed. To Miles, Johnson was a hero.”⁹¹ Drummer Buddy Miles also noted Davis’s inclination toward watching and studying old fight films featuring Jack Johnson. He remembers, “One day I was there [at Davis’s house], and he showed me some pictures, some very rare footage at that time, of Jack Johnson.”⁹² William Cayton confirmed Davis’s attraction to Johnson at the time, noting, “Miles was so enthusiastic about doing [A Tribute to Jack Johnson]. Jack Johnson was his type of guy, a proud black man with his own set of principles.”⁹³

Davis saw in Johnson many of the personal and professional characteristics that he wanted to highlight in his own career. As Chris Murphy again points out, “Miles saw himself as being similar to Jack Johnson. They were both stylish, and loved fast living and beautiful women. They were also the best in the world at what they did, achieving success on their own terms, without owing anything to anyone.”⁹⁴ Davis, then, saw a particular resonance at the time between his own personality and that of Jack Johnson, and he admired and even sought to emulate both Johnson’s corporeal style in the boxing ring as well as his personality outside of the ring.

For Davis, agreeing to record this album was an opportunity to further his association with Johnson at a time when he looked to Johnson as a model for what

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⁹¹ Chris Murphy, Miles To Go, pp. 29-30.
⁹² Quoted in Bill Murphy, “Raging Bullhorn,” pp. 32 and 34.
⁹³ Quoted in Chang, “Miles’ Blow by Blow,” p. 4.
⁹⁴ Chris Murphy, Miles To Go, pp. 30-31.
“black” masculinity should be. For this album, in fact, and for the only time in his career, Davis wrote the liner notes. They read, in part:

Johnson portrayed Freedom – it rang just as loud as the bell proclaiming him Champion. He was a fast-living man; he liked women – lots of them and most of them white. He had flashy cars because that was his thing. That’s right, the big ones and the fast ones. He smoked cigars, drank only the best champagne and prized a 7 ft. bass fiddle on which he’d proudly thump jazz. His flamboyance was more than obvious. And no doubt mighty Whitey felt “No Black man should have all this.” But he did and he’d flaunt it.\(^{95}\)

This narrative of an extravagant, assertive, and implicitly dangerous life is as much a description of Davis as it is of Johnson, and no doubt Davis liked the association.\(^{96}\) While this selective narrative does not always line up with the available historical record on Johnson, it does give particular insight into how the figure of Johnson was being recuperated and reinterpreted in the late 1960s.\(^{97}\) It was at this time that Jack Johnson as an image found a new resonance among many African Americans.

A part of the “Negro-to-Black conversion” was a male reclamation of assertiveness,

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\(^{95}\) Miles Davis, “Jack Johnson” in accompanying booklet, A Tribute to Jack Johnson (Columbia, 1971); reprinted in The Complete Jack Johnson Sessions (Sony, 2003), pp. 4-5.

\(^{96}\) As Richard Williams pointed out, “Obviously, there are a lot of parallels between Johnson, the boxer/womanizer/aesthete, and Davis, the trumpeter/boxer/aesthete. . . . One feels more than ever that Miles wants to be Heavyweight Champion of the World himself, in his own league.” See Richard Williams, “Review of Jack Johnson” Melody Maker (May 19, 1971), p. 26.

\(^{97}\) It has been documented, for example, that Johnson enjoyed neither listening to nor performing jazz. See, e.g., Jack Johnson, Jack Johnson – In the Ring and Out (Chicago: National Sports Publishing Company, 1927), pp. 221-222, where Johnson reviles jazz, which he describes as “not of lasting substance,” because it has caused the public to have “lost in a great measure our appreciation of the better kind of music.” As Johnson puts it, “I find my delight, as far as music is concerned, in the splendid compositions of the old masters, who not only wrote music in its highest forms, but who made it live with the reality of life, transferring into it such depth of feeling and such height of expression that it arouses the best qualities of human nature.” See also Geoffrey C. Ward, Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), pp. 187 and 262.
realized as a patriarchal emphasis on masculinity as power. For many who were now “black,” as Algernon Austin notes, “[Racial] oppression was understood as the emasculation of black men. . . . Black liberation, therefore, would require the hypermasculinization of black men. To this end, black machismo [became] the normative ideal.”98 Charles Thomas similarly argued in 1970 that embracing “blackness” allowed a man to find “his competent self” and to engage actively in “a society in which he is no longer a passive onlooker.” Part of that active engagement resulted in an African American man who was “aggressive, independent, and at times hostile” in relating to societal structures and groups that in the past had maintained a restrictive definition of a “black” man as “a passive, dependent, self-defeating person.” Thomas concludes, “Now it is his moral responsibility as the man to change the social order so that that which a man has to do will be done for women, children, and old people.”99

This language identifies the reinstitution of a youthful masculinity (“old people” apparently are not “men”) as an integral component of the “Negro-to-Black conversion.”100 Patriarchal leadership was at least partially contingent on establishing

98 Austin, Achieving Blackness, p. 51.


100 Some writers at the time understood the rise of “black” hypermasculinity as a reaction to newly prominent female assertiveness in the late 1960s. See, e.g., George Jackson, Soledad Brother (New York: Coward McCann, 1971), pp. 62-64, 118, 220; and William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, Black Rage (New York: Basic, 1968), pp. 62-64, 73-74. Others, such as Ben Sidran, utilized a technology-centered discourse to
and learning from prior exemplars of such a “black” masculine ideal. And at a time when many newly converted “blacks” were looking for particularly assertive and militant role models, Jack Johnson fit the mold. He was seen as being strong, aggressive, brash, and arrogant; a man who not only beat up “whitey” in the boxing ring but also fearlessly pursued romantic relationships with white women outside of the ring.

Aspects of his personality including his flamboyance both in and out of the boxing ring as well as his generally extravagant lifestyle were particularly conducive to the late-1960s search for outspoken and abrasive “black” male leaders. Johnson, then, along with the particular form of masculinity that he came to represent, was achieving new levels of popularity in the late 1960s.

This public resurgence of interest in Johnson was only amplified when then-exiled Heavyweight Champion Muhammad Ali began discussing the correlations between Johnson’s life and his own. As Ali once put it, “I grew to love the Jack Johnson image. I wanted to be rough, tough, arrogant, the nigger white folks didn’t like.” In addition to this shared defiant refusal to capitulate to white expectations, Ali also saw more specific commonalities between the two. Their forced exiles from boxing – Ali’s

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for refusing to fight in Vietnam and Johnson’s for being accused of taking a white woman across a state line for immoral purposes – were one such similarity that Ali referred to as “history all over again.” 102 James Earl Jones, who starred in both a play and a film on Jack Johnson in the late 1960s, recalls Ali’s enthusiasm regarding the similarities between the two fighters. Jones remembers Ali visiting him backstage after a performance of the Johnson play, noting:

[Ali] told me, “I want to go on stage and say those lines.” He was referring to the scene where the Jack Johnson character is in exile in Europe. He’s been reduced to performances of Uncle Tom’s Cabin to earn a living, and the powers that be keep pursuing him, hoping to get him to agree to a little fight with a prearranged loss. Finally, they talk him into coming back to fight, with the idea of turning the crown over to Jess Willard in Cuba. And the character says, “Come get me; here I is.” We waited until the audience had left. Then Ali went out onto the stage and spoke to an empty theater. “Here I is! Here I is!” He felt those lines expressed his life, and he spoke them with feeling. 103


103 Quoted in Thomas Hauser, Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), pp. 197-198. The parallels between Ali and Johnson continued when, for his return to the ring on October 26, 1970, Ali fought Jerry Quarry, a white contender who had been dubbed the next “great white hope” by the media. The original “great white hope” was Johnson’s rival Jim Jeffries, who had come out of retirement from boxing in 1910 in an unsuccessful and racially motivated attempt to win back the heavyweight crown for the white race. During the Quarry fight, Ali’s cornerman emphasized this similarity, repeating, “Ghost in the house” in reference to this perceived culmination of the connections between Ali and Johnson. See Randy Roberts, Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes (New York: Free, 1983), pp. 227-228. Notably, on the day of the Quarry fight, Jim Jacobs brought Ali a copy of the recently completed documentary on Jack Johnson – the same documentary for which Davis created the soundtrack – and Ali spent the afternoon watching the film and garnering ideas from it on how to intimidate Quarry in the ring. See George Plimpton, Shadow Box (New York: GP Putnam’s Sons, 1977), pp. 152-154.
The Ali/Johnson link was not lost on sports journalists in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As one writer put it:

[Ali] made you think of Jack Johnson, the first black Heavyweight Champion and the most flamboyant Southern nigger white America had ever seen. . . . Like Jack Johnson, he’d violated the bloodsport morality, he’d double-crossed the pug game, and he’d undergone the first change of heart alienating him from his national role.\(^\text{104}\)

Other writers implicitly highlighted the regularity of this comparison by noting how the Ali/Johnson link came up in seemingly unrelated and everyday experiences for Ali.\(^\text{105}\)

These perceived similarities were so strong that Ali once claimed to have been asked to play Johnson in a feature film in the late 1960s; a film that was only a small part of the renewed interest in Jack Johnson at the time.\(^\text{106}\)

The publication of a biography in 1964 signaled the start of a flurry of public and scholarly interest in Johnson.\(^\text{107}\) This was followed in 1968 by Howard Sackler’s award-winning play, mentioned above, based on parallels between Ali and Johnson; a play which two years later was used as the basis for a feature film directed by Martin Ritt.\(^\text{108}\)

1969 saw the release of a reprinting of Johnson’s autobiography as well as the

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\(^{105}\) See, e.g., Kram, “He Moves Like Silk,” pp. 16-19.

\(^{106}\) Ali claimed that he refused the offer to be in the film due to his unwillingness to entertain white women as romantic interests on the screen. See Hietala, “Muhammad Ali,” in *Muhammad Ali*, ed. Gorn, p. 134.


publication of yet another biography of Johnson. The Jim Jacobs/William Cayton documentary then appeared the following year.\textsuperscript{109} These films and publications highlighted the more flamboyant and potentially offensive aspects of Johnson’s personality and lifestyle. Significant emphasis, for example, was placed on Johnson’s relationships with white women and his unwillingness to defer to white expectations in the Jim Crow era.\textsuperscript{110} The tone of Robert deCoy’s biographical introduction was not uncommon among the late-1960s literature in its imaginative summary of Johnson’s life. It reads:

He was the King of the Commoner, who slept with white queens, showing only the black of his ass to white kings. He was the raging fire of black vengeance, a burning bush speeding across the highly combustible plains and prairies of social customs. He singed them in bloody-hot defiance.\textsuperscript{111}

In placing such an emphasis on Johnson’s bold refusal to subjugate himself to the wishes and expectations of white society, these books and films realized a particular interpretation of Johnson’s image in a distinctly Black Power moment. In the late 1960s, when “newly converted blacks” were searching for assertive figures of “black” masculinity to correspond to the new political implications of the related racial designation, Jack Johnson’s image was revived in the service of this new ideology.


\textsuperscript{110} See, e.g., Sackler, \textit{The Great White Hope}; and Ritt, director, \textit{The Great White Hope}; which go to great lengths to highlight Johnson’s miscegenist proclivities.

\textsuperscript{111} deCoy, \textit{The Big Black Fire}, p. 9.
Muhammad Ali’s desire to associate himself with Johnson only amplified Johnson’s popularity along with the particular form of “black” masculinity that he came to represent.  

For Miles Davis, recording this album was his own way of associating himself with Johnson at a time when Johnson was an ideal model for what “blackness” and assertive masculinity should be. As Gerald Early again argues, “In a most profound sense, Davis saw himself as operating within a black male heroic tradition, and black male heroes were men like Jack Johnson.” Early’s assertion finds a particular resonance with the racial and gender politics of the late 1960s, in which African American heroes were assertive and militant men and were most certainly “black,” with all the political currency the term held at the time. It was in this particular Black Power moment that Jack Johnson became an ideal symbol for “black” masculinity. At the same time, James Brown’s tune “Say It Loud,” achieved a particular galvanizing force as an avenue for the circulation of a newly emerging racial discourse defined by the newly politicized meaning of “blackness.”

112 This performance of “black” masculinity was at its peak with the contested blaxploitation films of the early 1970s. Characters such as Priest, John Shaft, and Sweetback took the notion of physical and sexual prowess as masculine ideal to its extreme. See, e.g., Ed Guerrero, Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); Isaac Julien, dir., BaadAssss Cinema: A Bold Look at 70s Blaxploitation Films (New York: Docurama, 2002); and William R. Grant, Post-Soul Black Cinema: Discontinuities, Innovations, and Breakpoints, 1970-1995 (New York: Routledge, 2004) for more on the hypermasculine image highlighted in this genre. 

To self-identify as “black and proud” in the late 1960s and early 1970s was to invoke just such a discourse that combined patriarchal militancy with racial politics. For the album *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, the sound and the discourses constructed on the sound resulted in a unique opportunity for Davis and his listeners to articulate the racial and gender politics of this historical moment. Through drawing upon the political meanings of “blackness” and the aggressive and defiant masculinity that Jack Johnson symbolized, Miles Davis was thereby able to shout through this album as loudly and clearly as he could, “I’m black, and I’m a man.”
Interlude

Now some nineteen minutes into “Yesternow,” a new riff begins. For this, the tempo, the feel, and even the modal center have shifted. The organ is gone, and now a strikingly distorted McLaughlin and a different bass player, Dave Holland, double up on a tripartite riff: a decidedly pentatonic fifteen-note grouping of five plus four plus six. With the accompaniment of a driving drum pattern and heavily effected, space-like guitar sounds, this riff inaugurates a three-minute rock jam over which Davis’s trumpet and Benny Maupin’s bass clarinet offer brief solos. As the jam fades out, a rubato wind ensemble, present for the first time in the recording, occupies the available sonic space. Playing a series chords characterized by extended harmonies and long durations, the ensemble serves as accompaniment for a muted and rubato solo by Davis. Davis’s distinctive sound in conjunction with the lush, wind-ensemble chords offers a striking contrast to the aggressive and rock-inflected sound of much of the prior material on the album. It seems a decidedly gentle and unassuming way to end the recording.

As the album is concluding, though, a new voice emerges. Or perhaps it’s just a new sounding of the same voice that has characterized this album so far. Brock Peters, the actor who performed the documentary voice-overs as Jack Johnson, enters over the sonic foundation laid by Davis and the wind ensemble. Peters’s booming bass voice, full of confidence and resolve, reads as a sonic metonym for the assertive “black” masculinity which Davis sought to sound out through this album. During this final monologue, Peters intones, “I’m Jack Johnson, ‘Heavyweight Champion of the World.’ I’m black. They never let me forget it. I’m black,
alright. I’ll never let them forget it.” Drawing together invocations of “blackness” and boxing in
a vocal style emphasizing the bass voice as a traditional sonic code for masculinity, this
monologue summarizes Johnson’s reception in the late 1960s while reinforcing the very codes
that reception draws upon. It also resonates with the discourse constructed around Miles Davis’s
music at the time. Such resonance was not lost on contemporary critics when discussing A
Tribute to Jack Johnson. Dave Marsh, in fact, concluded his review of the album in a way that
proves particularly fitting. In reference to the above monologue, Marsh noted, “[That just] might
be Miles speaking.”¹

Chapter Four: Marketing Miles

“Once again, I feel we should place a few ads in the underground press for Miles Davis’s LP product. . . What Miles is doing on records and in his live appearances now will certainly be listened to with interest by serious Rock buyers. Can we plan some small space ads that aim Miles at the Rock audience?” – Bruce Lundvall

“All I tell ‘em to do is to sell the music black, not to put no white girls on the cover with no pants on and stuff like that. Sell it black.” – Miles Davis

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On February 24, 1971, Columbia Records released A Tribute to Jack Johnson. Drawing upon sonic codes from both jazz and contemporary popular music, the album had the potential to reach the broad mass audience that the previous year’s Bitches Brew album had successfully tapped into. Though a well-received album marketed exclusively to a jazz audience might sell upwards of 50,000 copies, an album that crossed over to the larger popular music audience could easily eclipse 500,000 in sales. By 1971, Bitches Brew was well on its way to doing just that, assisted at least in part by Columbia’s significant financial investment in the album’s promotion. An important aspect of this

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1 Bruce Lundvall, April 1, 1969 memo to Morris Baumstein, (Macero Collection, NYPL: Box 13, Folder 15).
2 Stephen Davis, “Miles Davis,” p. 13
4 Bitches Brew, released on March 30, 1970, sold 393,844 units by the end of December 1971. See untitled sales chart from 1972 (Macero Collection, NYPL: Box 13, Folder 9). It was certified gold by the Recording Industry Association of American in 1976, signaling the official sale of 500,000 units, and would
promotion was Columbia’s attempt to market the album to the broadest audience possible. Their success in so doing led critics to acknowledge Davis’s “new audience” and to debate the impact that audience would have on his role within the realm of jazz.\(^5\) Such critical responses ranged from statements of optimism over jazz’s potential for increased commercial viability to statements of concern over the prospect of artistic compromise for the purpose of financial gain.\(^6\) Sales of Bitches Brew pointed toward an expanded audience for Davis, and as Columbia prepared to release A Tribute to Jack Johnson, they were faced with the task of maintaining the connection between Davis and those listeners who had turned Bitches Brew into such a noted commercial success.

This issue of sustaining the popularity of Davis’s recordings was part of a larger discussion at Columbia Records at the time regarding the best strategy for continued financial success for the company. There was considerable internal disagreement over which musical styles could be counted on to generate significant album sales both in the present and beyond. In the early 1960s, Columbia had achieved remarkable success by focusing on Broadway cast albums such as Camelot and My Fair Lady, as well as Mitch Miller Sing Along albums and middle-of-the-road recordings by vocalists including

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\(^5\) See, e.g., an advertisement for Bitches Brew on p. 23 of Rolling Stone magazine (June 25, 1970), which begins with the headline, “Rock critics agree Miles Davis has found a new audience.”

Robert Goulet and Barbra Streisand.\textsuperscript{7} These releases regularly topped the album sales charts, often selling upwards of 500,000 or even one million units.\textsuperscript{8} As the decade progressed, sales of albums from emerging pop, rock, and soul artists began to eclipse such previously reliable recordings. While, for example, recordings by Johnny Mathis, Lawrence Welk, and Judy Garland joined with Broadway cast albums to dominate the album sales charts in 1960 and 1961, between 1968 and 1970 forty-two of the forty-nine best-selling albums came from pop, rock, and soul musicians.\textsuperscript{9} Bob Dylan’s album sales surpassed those of Andy Williams, while Janis Joplin achieved a level of popular success in the late 1960s that Broadway cast albums could only then dream of.

While the impressive sales figures for many popular musicians in the late 1960s were a noted fact, Columbia executives disagreed over whether such sales were a momentary fad or a lasting trend. Mitch Miller, who was the head of Columbia’s Artist and Repertory department for popular music during their middle-of-the-road heyday of the 1950s and early 1960s, was particularly unconvinced of the long-term financial viability of rock and other contemporary music. Miller helped to establish a culture of


\textsuperscript{8} Between 1958 and 1961, for example, Mitch Miller released eleven albums in his Sing Along series, with total sales of over 4.5 million units. See Gary Marmorstein, \textit{The Label: The Story of Columbia Records} (New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 2007), p. 252.

\textsuperscript{9} See Hoffman and Albert, \textit{The Cash Box Album Charts}, pp. 496-504.
dependence on the tried and true genres that had generated significant profits for Columbia during the 1950s, and he was hesitant to embrace what he viewed as the momentary popularity of rock and soul music. For Miller, and for the risk-averse Columbia executives he represented, the question was whether Columbia would capitulate to current trends in popular music for the purpose of short-term financial success or continue to emphasize their traditional stable of musicians in the midst of what they interpreted as a momentary sales slump.

Clive Davis, president of Columbia Records from 1967 until his dismissal in 1973, saw the emerging popularity of contemporary musical styles as anything but a passing fad. Clive interpreted the demise of Broadway cast album sales and concurrent rise in popularity of contemporary music as established trends in the music industry. He began looking to contemporary pop, rock, and soul acts to lift Columbia off of what he described as “the frightening plateau of marginal sales profits” that had been plaguing the company since the mid 1960s. For Clive, his attendance at the 1967 Monterey Pop Music Festival brought into sharp focus the future of the music industry and the steps that would be necessary to ensure Columbia’s part in that future.

10 See Davis and Willwerth, Clive, pp. 2-6, 34-36. See also Marmorstein, The Label, pp. 229, 251.

11 In this chapter, I will continue to refer to Miles Davis as “Davis,” as I have throughout this dissertation. To distinguish Miles Davis from Clive Davis, I will refer to the latter as “Clive.”

12 Davis and Willwerth, Clive, p. 5.
At Monterey, Clive saw what he described as “a glimpse of a new world.” The festival featured over thirty emerging bands and solo artists including Jimi Hendrix, Jefferson Airplane, and Janis Joplin’s Big Brother and the Holding Company and drew a crowd of over 40,000 attendees for each of festival’s three days. The vast majority of that crowd was young and countercultural, comprising individuals who were looking for a new music to articulate their newly-adopted values and lifestyles. For Clive, Monterey made it clear that changes in album sales and musical tastes were not a matter of passing stylistic trends. Instead, popularity was now dependent on attracting the emerging youth audience represented at Monterey; an audience that looked to music to differentiate their generation from past generations, to represent the social and political values that were of utmost importance to them at the time, and to play a constitutive role in individual and generational identity. As I demonstrate below, this audience represented for Clive a clearly-defined consumer group circumscribed by demographics, class, and race. Under his leadership, Columbia began to focus on reaching this distinct audience as a way to achieve long-term financial success.

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13 Davis and Willwerth, Clive, p. 75.
Historians and cultural critics have questioned the uncritical use of designations such as “youth audience,” “1960s youth culture,” and “the movement” as if they were clearly-defined, self-evident categories.\(^{15}\) Peter Braunstein has criticized this tendency for its creation of “decontextualized [and] dehistoricized . . . assumptive categories” that are less representations of the complexities of the decade’s ideologies than they are one-dimensional inventions invoked in the service of often-superficial arguments.\(^ {16}\) Though Braunstein may be justified in defining this youth culture as “an inherently unstable collection of attitudes, tendencies, postures, gestures, ‘lifestyles,’ ideals, visions, hedonistic pleasures, moralisms, negations, and affirmations,” Columbia’s understanding of this target audience was far more circumscribed at the time.\(^ {17}\) Specifically, in the late 1960s Columbia utilized their marketing strategies to focus primarily on college-aged, middle-class whites in order to capitalize on the vast sales potential they represented.

This demographic resulted from the intertwined increase in economic prosperity and dramatic rise in birth rates in the years immediately following World War II. Specifically, the U.S. saw a fifty-three percent increase in the number of births from 1940

\(^ {15}\) See Aniko Bodroghkozy, *Groove Tube: Sixties Television and the Youth Rebellion* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 5-10 for one such criticism that has been particularly influential on my discussion of the 1960s youth culture below.


\(^ {17}\) See Braunstein and Doyle, “Historicizing” in *Imagine Nation*, ed. Braunstein and Doyle, p. 10.
to 1950, equating in raw numbers to the presence of 5.5 million more children under the age of five in 1950 than there had been a decade earlier. As the members of this so-called “baby boom” reached college age, the prospect of enrolling in college was a realistic possibility for broad segments of the population for the first time in American history. The general post-war economic prosperity that characterized much of the 1940s and 50s facilitated the continued rise of the middle class and the resulting economic ability to fund a college education. While in 1945 there were 730,000 high school graduates currently enrolled in college, that number had quadrupled to nearly three million by 1960 and doubled again to roughly six million by 1970. Accompanying this notable increase in the number of college-aged students was a similar increase in relative financial wealth. The same economic growth which enabled students to afford a college education also led to an increased level of discretionary income for those students; income that facilitated the purchase, in part, of popular music recordings.

By the mid 1960s, the number of middle-class youth who were enrolled in colleges in the U.S. had drastically increased. The vast majority of those youth was

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defined not only in terms of class but also in terms of race. For although the post-war baby boom saw a shared increase in birthrates among African Americans and whites, African Americans enjoyed significantly fewer opportunities for educational advancement in the 1960s. Moreover, as I demonstrated in Chapter Three, the increasingly radical racial politics of the time along with the entrenched segregationist structures in the U.S. broadly served to separate African American youth from the more dominant white, middle-class youth culture. This race-based division combined with economic and demographic trends to result in the emergence of a white, middle-class youth audience as the primary market for popular music in the late 1960s.

Columbia found reason to believe in this particular youth market as a coherent body largely due to the musical tastes its constituents held in common. These youth, as Columbia understood them, had come of age in the Cold War era where the broadly accepted goals of life included the pursuit of the American dream in the context of an American political exceptionalism which stressed the value of democracy over the threat of communism. Subsequently disillusioned in part by the escalation of the Vietnam

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22 Malcolm X voiced a rising belief when he noted in a 1964 speech, “Whites can help us but they can’t join us. There can be no black-white unity until there is first some black unity. There can be no worker’s solidarity until there is first some racial solidarity.” Quoted in Monson, Freedom Sounds, p. 169. Monson goes on to note on p. 170 that SNCC and CORE both began excluding whites from their previously integrated organizations in 1966 and 1967, respectively.
War, the perceived widespread social conservatism in the U.S., and the growing homogenization of American culture, these youth grew more skeptical of the American dream and of the institutions that supported it. Many youth felt that cultural institutions, in particular, either ignored or misrepresented their increasingly countercultural political and social views. Those youth began looking to younger artists and musicians both to represent and to galvanize such views. On the musical side, this resulted in the rapid rise in popularity of artists including Bob Dylan, The Beatles, and The Rolling Stones, whose albums regularly sold in the millions.

By the late 1960s, it was clear to Clive Davis and many others within Columbia Records that the only way to ensure the company’s continued financial success was to reach this audience. Particularly in the aftermath of the overwhelming success of the 1967 Monterey Pop Festival, targeting the youth audience was among the more guaranteed ways for Columbia to optimize its record sales. Under Clive’s leadership, Columbia adopted a three-part strategy for reaching this audience that comprised: (1) increasing the presence of what Clive termed “rock” or “contemporary” acts on Columbia’s roster, (2) initiating an aggressive expansion of their record retail business

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24 See, e.g., Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo, Rock ‘n’ Roll is Here To Pay: The History and Politics of the Music Industry (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1977), pp. 44, 73, and 80; and Davis and Willwerth, Clive, pp. 74-77.
into geographic areas that targeted younger listeners, and (3) utilizing advertisements that would strategically appeal to the youth sensibilities of the late 1960s.25

**Columbia’s Roster and Retail Expansion**

In the post-Monterey moment of the late 1960s, Clive pushed Columbia to sign musicians including Janis Joplin, The Electric Flag, Blood, Sweat & Tears, and Santana.26 While these acts initially served further to diversify Columbia’s stylistic offerings, by the early 1970s Columbia had established a decided pattern toward emphasizing rock and contemporary performers, with such acts accounting for over fifty percent of the company’s album sales by 1972.27 Columbia also underwent an unprecedented expansion of their retail business in order to ensure that these new artists were reaching the target youth audience.

In 1969 Columbia made the unconventional decision to purchase a chain of retail record stores to facilitate introducing their artists to the youth audience. As was the case with all major record companies, Columbia had historically been responsible for

25 As I will discuss below, Columbia understood African Americans to comprise a distinct consumer group in the 1960s. They began developing specific strategies for reaching that group in the early 1970s, thereby further solidifying their distinction between African American youth and white, middle-class youth as two discrete markets.

26 See Davis and Willwerth, *Clive*, pp. 6, 74-76.

27 Columbia’s roster in the late 1960s included country stars such as Tammy Wynette and Johnny Cash, classical musicians such as Vladimir Horowitz and Leonard Bernstein, jazz performers including Thelonious Monk and Miles Davis, as well as the middle-of-the-road musicians discussed above. See Davis and Willwerth, *Clive*, pp. 4-6, 105; and Chapple and Garofalo, *Rock ‘n’ Roll*, p. 193.
recording, manufacturing, and distributing their albums but had not been directly involved in the retail aspects of the music business. Their experience in retail had previously been limited to the Columbia Record Club, a direct-mail business begun in 1955 which offered access to selections from Columbia’s active catalog on a subscription basis.  

Though this service provided convenient access to Columbia’s catalog for those who would otherwise be hindered geographically from such access, the subscription basis of the service limited its effectiveness in reaching the broadest possible audience. As a way to gain a more strategic understanding of the musical tastes of the youth market while also ensuring that more of their catalog was consistently available to that market, Columbia purchased Discount Records. In 1969 Discount comprised eighteen record stores that specialized in geographic areas near college campuses. In their eagerness to capitalize on the strategic importance of Discount Records, Columbia expanded the chain to include over sixty stores by 1973.

Discount Records was appealing because of its detailed inventory system which allowed the tracking of album sales for specific demographics. As I will discuss below, record sales were highly regionalized and decentralized at this time, which impeded the accumulation of timely and reliable information on consumer demographic trends. Columbia acknowledged that their decision to purchase Discount was motivated by a

\[ \text{\textsuperscript{28}} \text{See Chapple and Garofalo, } \textit{Rock 'n' Roll,} \text{ p. 52; and Marmorstein, } \textit{The Label,} \text{ pp. 221-222.} \]

\[ \text{\textsuperscript{29}} \text{Davis and Willwerth, } \textit{Clive,} \text{ p. 124.} \]
desire “to test new merchandising methods and to collect accurate consumer buying data, especially from the young people presently enrolled at the university level.”  

In this way, Columbia not only could gain a better understanding of which records were and were not selling to their target youth audience, but they could also ensure that more of their catalog was consistently available to that audience.

Getting their product before an interested audience was a key concern for record companies during this era, as local and regional sales strategies had not yet been eclipsed by a more homogenous, national approach to distribution. Instead, album distribution was notably decentralized, with retail trends targeted toward local and regional markets. Chain record stores and national retail outlets such as Sam Goody had only begun to displace the local “mom and pop” record stores that served as musical bedrocks for cities and neighborhoods. Consequently there was rarely any standardized national distribution strategy for ensuring that a particular recording would be available in all of the target markets at the optimal times. Even if a company were to develop a national strategy for an album’s distribution, the strategy would be contingent upon the willingness of thousands of independent, local record stores to order and stock that album. Indeed, while most record companies employed a national promotion staff that broadly oversaw distribution and sales, the staff’s job was more a matter of coordinating

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30 Quoted in *Rolling Stone*, “Columbia Records in Record Stores” (February 1, 1969), p. 10.

and analyzing the various sales figures specific to each local area. This decentralized structure relied on local sales people who would promote in a particular region a specific album or single that a record company desired to emphasize. It would only be with the cooperation and centralized structures of national chain retail stores that sales and distribution could be negotiated by a single national office. Instead, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, local and regional sales people were essential in providing record companies with the local knowledge and personal relationships that were integral to facilitating a financially successful album.

At this time Columbia Records had a three-tiered structure for promotion and distribution. Eighteen local sales people were each responsible for an individual market, generally centered on larger cities including New York, Atlanta, and Los Angeles. Additionally, Columbia employed four regional promoters who were responsible for the more expansive geographic areas not covered by the local promoters. A national staff based in New York oversaw the local and regional promoters and broadly coordinated the entire process. The national staff would prioritize the various albums and singles that were to be released in any given quarter and would then send out sales strategies to their regional and local promoters. Those local promoters were responsible for guiding an album into prominence in their respective markets.

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32 Davis and Willwerth, Clive, p. 194.
The goal of achieving a high volume of record sales for each album necessitated a dual strategy on the part of each promoter. On the one hand, promoters would push Columbia releases to local and regional radio deejays with the goal of a single or an album gaining airplay on a particular radio station or a group of stations in a given region. This documented radio popularity could then be used either to push the same single in another region or to provide evidence to the local retail stores that a single held significant sales potential for that area. If, for example, listeners to a local radio station were constantly calling to request more airplay of a particular single or album, the local promoter could cite that demand as reason for local record stores to stock that album.

At the same time, the promoters would push releases at the mom and pop retail stores as a way to generate significant orders of a particular album. Those orders could then be cited as evidence in convincing local radio deejays that an album was gaining popularity in an area. Thus, the method of generating buzz about an album was largely a circular process. It mattered little whether an album first gained the attention of a retail store or a radio deejay, as either could function as the important first step in breaking an album or single into a region. Once a recording had achieved significant local or regional success, that success could then be cited by promoters in other regions to help demonstrate the potential popularity of the recording in broader segments of the U.S. The ultimate goal for any recording was its appearance in a national sales chart, such as *Billboard* or *Cash Box*, preferably as a part of the Top 40 for a given week. This
national attention would practically guarantee album sales in the hundreds of thousands, if not millions.

Charting nationally would open up such possibilities due to the unique role that rack-jobbers played in the music retail business at the time. As Steven Pond has detailed the process, only once a recording appeared on a national chart would it gain the attention of the rack-jobbers, who were responsible for stocking record stands in various department stores and grocery stores.\(^{33}\) The rack-jobbers would purchase specific recordings from a distributor and stock those items in retail stores and supermarkets in space that they leased from that store. They were responsible for maintaining the racks, and their income depended on moving the highest volume of recordings possible. Since a rack-jobber had access to a limited amount of space in any given store, that person was likely to stock only those recordings that had already demonstrated a broad popular appeal by charting on a national scale. For a recording to attract the attention of a rack-jobber, then, was a sign that it was poised to reach the pinnacle of its commercial success.

This success was generally available at most to the forty albums that contained the top singles from each week’s sales charts. In many cases, in fact, it was only the top thirty or even top fifteen recordings that would generate such sales. This was due in large part to a shift in the 1960s in broadcast radio practices, whereby commercial


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breaks, deejay monologues, and radio playlists were collectively limited in order to provide more airplay for the week’s most popular singles. This strategy was, in the words of Steve Chapple and Reebee Garofalo, “fabulously successful” at attracting and retaining listeners, and it quickly became standard practice for singles-oriented radio stations across the U.S.\textsuperscript{34}

With as few as fifteen singles on a station’s active playlist for a given week, a promoter’s task of obtaining radio play for a new recording grew increasingly difficult. On average, a station’s music director might receive one hundred or more records each week, from which two or three at most would be selected to rotate onto the week’s playlist. The competition among record companies to get an album or single to break on a national chart augmented the value of radio music directors and deejays and led to many of the payola scandals prominent in popular music throughout the 1960s and beyond.\textsuperscript{35} In this cycle of decreasing product diversity, the restricted radio playlists would constrain the number and variety of recordings stocked by local record stores, which would in turn constrain even further the diversity of product orders made by

\textsuperscript{34} Chapple and Garofalo, \textit{Rock ’n’ Roll}, pp. 98-99, and 101-102. As Chapple and Garofalo point out, this formula, initially developed by Bill Drake at KYNO in California in 1961, rapidly spread to other stations.

\textsuperscript{35} See Chapple and Garofalo, \textit{Rock ’n’ Roll}, pp. 60-64, and 226-227 for more on payola.
rack-jobbers. Gaining initial attention for a new release was the single most difficult obstacle for a company to overcome in achieving sales success for its various recordings.

Columbia’s interest in purchasing Discount Records, then, was driven in part by their search for an effective way to circumvent the legal and logistical difficulties in getting a product onto the radio and into the various retail outlets. If Columbia owned the retail outlets, they would be free to stock whatever product they chose. Since only a few records made it to the rack-job level and achieved the resulting national sales success, and since Columbia was otherwise dependent on the whims and tastes of local store owners or on the self-restrictive club membership of its Record Club, Discount Records provided a unique opportunity for Columbia to strategically ensure that their product reached a significant portion of their target audience.

While from Columbia’s perspective this was a logical business decision, it was not met with universal enthusiasm from the public, particularly from the youth audience Columbia was targeting with the purchase. At a time when many youth understood the U.S. to be growing in its impersonal, mechanized efficiency, a hallmark of the youth culture was promoting the opposite values of individuality and freedom. These youth viewed large institutions – whether the government, the university, or a major corporation such as CBS/Columbia – as prominent symbols of the values they were actively rejecting. As Clive Davis acknowledged, “Columbia Records in the

36 See Anderson, *This Is Our Music*, p. 82.
public’s mind was a large company, the large music company, . . . and must have seemed to some like General Motors [in its size and corporate structure].” 37 Columbia’s ability to purchase at will an entire chain of record stores reinforced the company’s public perception as a large corporate entity fundamentally in opposition to the countercultural values adopted by many youth at the time. An article in Rolling Stone voiced this institutional mistrust by emphasizing that, with Columbia’s purchase of Discount Records, “no other record company has a business communications network to compare.” 38 The article stressed the exceptional nature of a major record company owning its own chain of retail stores and used the vocabulary of “businesses” and “networks” to highlight the antithetical nature of Columbia’s decision to the values and lifestyles adopted by many youth. In spite of this conflicted response, Columbia’s decision to purchase Discount Records represented a savvy and effective approach at reaching their target market. This purchase worked in conjunction with a renewed advertising emphasis that further enabled Columbia to reach and connect with the youth audience.

Advertising in the Underground Press

The purchase of Discount Records attuned Columbia to both the positive and negative aspects of being a division within the larger CBS corporation. While CBS’s

37 Davis and Willwerth, Clive, p. 106.
38 Quoted in Rolling Stone, “Columbia Records in Record Stores” (February 1, 1969), p. 10.
financial and organizational resources were tremendous assets in improving album availability, the visible use of those resources could serve to alienate the very people Columbia was hoping to reach. Nowhere was this problem more apparent than in Columbia’s advertising strategies in the late 1960s. Columbia was faced with the task of utilizing their significant financial resources to purchase advertisements in various youth-oriented publications without disaffecting that audience by appearing overly commercial or corporate. One way Columbia sought to gain credibility with the youth audience was by appealing to their countercultural sensibilities through both the content of Columbia advertisements as well as the political persuasion of the publications in which those advertisements appeared.

With the rise of a distinct youth audience in the 1960s came an increase in the number of newspapers and periodicals that were intended to cater to the interests of that audience. Collectively known as the “underground press,” this diverse group of magazines and newspapers held in common what Donna Ellis termed in 1971 “their shared opposition to the American ‘system’ politically, culturally, and economically.”

Ellis elaborated:

First of all, they are essentially local papers, catering to local communities, with neither the ability nor apparently the inclination to provide national or international coverage beyond that supplied by the Liberation News Service, their “wire service.” Secondly, they are loosely tied to an underground

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community sharing cultural forms and leisure activities outside the Establishment, notably rock music. . . . And finally, all the papers are concerned in some way with the “Revolution” or the “Movement.” The exact nature of the Movement is unclear although it is opposed to the American “system.”

The local and transitory nature of these publications make an exact quantification of their number impossible, but the best sources estimate the existence in the late 1960s of roughly 500 underground newspapers with a collective circulation of up to five million each week. These publications ranged in size from the LA Free Press, which was among the largest underground newspapers in the U.S. with a weekly circulation in 1969 of nearly 100,000, to numerous smaller publications such as North Carolina’s Anvil with a circulation at the time of roughly 5,000. These papers existed largely to remedy a dissatisfaction with the news coverage in the major newspapers and magazines. Undergrounds tended to emphasize the anti-war movement, radical politics, sexual images that challenged the limits of pornography laws, and both festivals and recordings related to rock music. Their readership was primarily the youth audience that Columbia was so eager to target. As Morris Baumstein, from Columbia’s advertising department, put it, “The underground press is probably the least

41 Abe Peck, Uncovering the Sixties: The Life and Times of the Underground Press (New York: Pantheon, 1985), p. 183 cites the existence of over 500 underground publications in the late 1960s with a potential circulation of up to 4.5 million. Robert Glessing, The Underground Press in America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), pp. 6, 10 similarly lists over 450 underground papers with a circulation of nearly five million. As Glessing points out, “Most underground newspapers have a lifespan of approximately twelve to eighteen months if they attempt weekly publication” (p. 96).
42 See Peck, Uncovering the Sixties, p. 183; and Glessing, The Underground Press, p. 92.
professional effort in publishing. But they are a highly logical medium for us. The people who read the papers are the ones who include music as essential to their way of life. It’s simply part of their bag.”

In the late 1960s, Columbia began intentionally reaching out to the youth counterculture by placing advertisements in the underground press. Many of these ads drew upon the individualism and anti-establishment tendencies characteristic of youth at the time. Constructions of honesty as a hallmark of individualism were present in a Columbia ad in Chicago’s The Seed newspaper from 1969. Promoting new records by Tim Hardin and Mark Spoelstra as music so “honest” that “even your best friend may not understand it,” Columbia dedicated these albums to those listeners who purchased records “strictly for your own head” instead of “to fill a gap in your collection” or to “impress your friends and neighbors.” An ad for a new Bill Puka album in the LA Free Press from 1971 similarly argued that the songs on the album were so “personal” and so “real” that Puka was often “too embarrassed” to sing them in front of an audience. With this album, Puka has taken his honesty and individualism to an almost debilitating

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extreme. Through such ads, Columbia attempted to highlight those characteristics that would appeal to the perceived sensibilities of the youth culture at the time.\footnote{Gesturing toward the aesthetic qualities of such albums, critic Jon Landau presciently argued in 1970 that more ads in the near future would “jabber about honesty, restraint, quiet, countriness, and reflectiveness” as a response to “the danger of over-production” that recent technological developments made possible. See Landau, “Rock 1970,” p. 41.}

Other Columbia ads drew upon the vocabulary and ideology of the pacifist flower children segment of the youth counterculture, such as a 1969 ad in Creem for The Chambers Brothers’ Love, Peace and Happiness. Promising that this album will “make your neighbors more neighborly,” the ad instructed listeners to play the album at a high volume during evening parties. Anticipating complaints from nearby neighbors, the ad advised, “When the drags in your building come rapping on your door, hurling vicious threats of murder and cops, invite them in. Turn them on to love, peace and happiness.”\footnote{Creem 2/8 (1969), p. 14.}

Additionally, as Bill Graham’s Fillmore venues in San Francisco and New York became symbols for the music of the youth culture in the late 1960s, Columbia strategically drew upon the name’s emerging brand status by starting their own “Fillmore Records” label. Ads for new albums on the label boasted that “Fillmore used to be just East and West” but that, with the establishment of the new label, “now it’s everywhere in between.”\footnote{See, e.g., advertisements for new albums by Aum and the Elvin Bishop Group in Creem 2/7 (1969), pp. 8, 26.} Columbia further drew upon the iconography of the
counterculture when, for example, an ad referenced Woodstock as the recording site for the Tim Hardin album discussed above.49

As advertisements by Columbia Records and other record companies became a more consistent presence in underground publications, those publications came to rely on the revenue generated through such ads to ensure the financial viability of the papers. The vast majority of underground newspapers existed on the brink of financial disaster, with 72% of the respondents to a 1968 underground paper survey claiming to be either barely breaking even or losing money.50 As Robert Glessing argued, financial instability was often perceived as a sign of editorial effectiveness for a newspaper. As he put it, “The dissident editors believe a publication begins to sell out to the establishment when it starts making money.”51 But the undergrounds still needed the ad money that major record companies were providing. This was equally beneficial for the record companies since undergrounds were a relatively inexpensive way to advertise an album in a local area. Ad executive Barry Morrison estimated that a record company could run forty ads eight different times in underground publications for what a single page would cost in a prominent, nationally-distributed magazine.52 As a result of this mutually beneficial relationship, record companies became the primary sources of

50 Glessing, The Underground Press, pp. 91, 96.
51 Glessing, The Underground Press, p. 84.
52 See Glessing, The Underground Press, p. 91.
financial solvency for most underground papers. These papers were shocked when, late in the spring of 1969, Columbia made the decision to stop purchasing ads in the underground newspapers they had previously supported.

Rolling Stone magazine drew attention to this change, noting that “the underground press is rife with speculation concerning Columbia’s political motives” for the decision.\(^{53}\) John Wilcock, editor of one such underground newspaper, attributed the decision to CBS’s discomfort over being linked to the perceived political and moral extremes espoused by such papers. As he put it, “CBS doesn’t want to be associated with pornography, dope, and revolution. That’s the real reason [for the change].”\(^{54}\)

Historian and former underground press employee Abe Peck has endorsed the idea that the FBI and CIA pressured Columbia and other record companies to cease advertising in underground papers. Peck cites memos from January 1969 in which the FBI and CIA referred to underground papers as “almost treasonous” and as “enemies of the United States.” These memos argued that “eight out of ten [underground papers] would fail if a few phonograph record companies stopped advertising in them” and that the CIA should pressure such companies to cease their financial support of these papers.\(^{55}\)

Whether due to concerns over public relations, governmental pressure, or other


\(^{55}\) Peck, Uncovering the Sixties, p. 176.
influences, Columbia’s abrupt withdrawal from underground papers left many with dire financial prospects.

Since undergrounds relied on record advertisements for their financial security, Columbia’s decision was seen to have compromised the ongoing existence of many of the newspapers that functioned as conduits for the revolutionary attitudes that characterized their readers. Clive Davis dismissed the idea that it was Columbia’s responsibility to finance the revolution, referring to such an idea as “charity” and arguing:

If you’re talking about charity, we have a full charitable program all over this country to every kind of impoverished group. But if you’re talking about advertising, we’re not supposed to support the revolution, we’re supposed to sell records, and to expose our artists and their music to the widest possible audience.\(^{56}\)

He later clarified that this was not a change in policy, as Columbia had simply “tested advertisements in underground papers” and found that advertisements showed a significant result only in those publications that placed an emphasis on music.\(^{57}\) Columbia, then, opted to focus their advertising on music-centered periodicals and to eliminate their presence in those undergrounds that were not demonstrating a significant influence on album sales.\(^{58}\)


\(^{58}\) While, for example, no Columbia ads appear in the *Berkeley Barb* after late-April 1969, Columbia ads are present in the music-centered *Creem* newspaper throughout 1969 and beyond. Likewise, although
Advertising in the Mainstream Press

In addition to their experiments with advertising in the underground press, Columbia drew upon the vocabulary of the counterculture in ads appearing in magazines that were not strictly a part of the underground. Their expansive advertising in *Rolling Stone* represented one such attempt to create a significant presence in what was the definitive newspaper for covering youth-oriented music of the late 1960s.\(^59\) In a two-page, multi-album ad in *Rolling Stone* from 1968, Columbia featured a semi-circle of five hippies, an African American, and a Native American in full headdress passing around what appears to be a marijuana cigarette. The ad encouraged the listeners to “know who your friends are,” to “be together,” and then to “listen.”\(^60\) A few months later, Columbia ran another multi-album ad that boasted, “The Man can’t bust our music.” Again featuring a diverse group of youth, this time holding various protest posters, the ad argued that although “the Establishment’s against adventure,” “the Man

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\(^{59}\) *Rolling Stone*, though associated with the counterculture, was never fully a part of the underground press. As its editor Jann Wenner explained, “*Rolling Stone* . . . had nothing to do with the underground press. I wanted to do something professional-looking, with professional standards, something primarily about rock ‘n’ roll.” Quoted in Peck, *Uncovering the Sixties*, p. 107. Though it would occasionally include an article that supported “the movement,” *Rolling Stone* never consistently espoused the radical politics that were a constitutive part of the underground ideology. See, e.g., the cover story “The American Revolution: 1969” in *Rolling Stone* (April 5, 1969).

\(^{60}\) *Rolling Stone* (September 21, 1968), pp. 16-17.
can’t stop you from listening” to the radical albums that Columbia was currently producing.61

These ads served to distance Columbia from the “Establishment” and to validate purchasing Columbia’s albums as a way to join in the anti-establishment youth culture of the day. Columbia made this idea explicit when they asked in another 1968 *Rolling Stone* ad, “If you won’t listen to your parents, the Man or the Establishment . . . Why should you listen to us?” Listing the underground credentials of ten of their artists, Columbia utilized those artists to demonstrate their solidarity with the youth culture and to establish their credibility with that market.62 This attempt was again present in a 1971 ad for a Fraser & Debolt album in *Rolling Stone* in which two-thirds of the ad’s text comprised a quotation from a review of the album that had appeared earlier in the *LA Free Press*.63 Drawing upon the implicit authority of critics from the underground press, Columbia further demonstrated their attempt to gain credibility with the youth audience, an attempt that was further reinforced through a series of advertisements in 1969 that positioned Columbia’s artists as “revolutionaries.” A *Rolling Stone* editorial offered an implicit criticism of such campaigns due to their self-evident manipulative nature.64 For *Rolling Stone*, such strategies were evidence of Columbia’s business-first

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mentality that many youth would view as antithetical to a genuine association with the counterculture.

Critical responses to these advertisements by those sympathetic to the counterculture, along with Columbia’s decision to pull their advertising from the underground press, contributed to a complex relationship between Columbia and the youth counterculture. Despite their eagerness to criticize Columbia as the epitome of the institutionalization they were intentionally rejecting, large numbers of youth continued to purchase Columbia-related albums. Columbia’s marketing strategy, combined with their recruitment of youth-oriented musicians and their purchasing and expansion of Discount Records, helped elevate sales profits from roughly five million dollars per year in the mid 1960s to nearly fifty million per year by the early 1970s.65

Targeting the African American Audience

While Columbia’s strategy of targeting white, middle-class youth resulted in impressive profits in the late 1960s, some within the company began to look to African American listeners as a way to increase even further the company’s sales potential. Though conservative figures estimate that African Americans were responsible for just over seven percent of total album sales in the late 1960s, Columbia was doing little to

65 Figures taken from Davis and Willwerth, Clive, p. 6.
intentionally target the market they represented.\textsuperscript{66} In the early 1970s, motivated by the continued success of Motown, Stax, and Atlantic Records, Columbia began investigating the most effective ways to capture a significant portion of the African American audience. Columbia galvanized this attempt when they hired students from the Harvard Business School to examine the possibility of reaching the African American market. Their research resulted in the “Harvard Report” of 1972, which comprised a nearly fifty-page analysis of the soul music market along with evaluations of several methods by which Columbia could successfully gain a significant share of that market.

The report’s primary recommendations were for Columbia to create a separate soul music group with its own budget, director, and staff, including a distinct promotion team. Additionally, after pointing out that many in the soul music industry viewed Columbia as “an ultra-rich, ultra-white giant which has for the most part chosen to snub Blacks in the business,” the report recommended several community-based outreach actions to help improve Columbia’s image. These included reaching out to specific radio stations, helping African American artists perform concerts in predominantly African American areas, and establishing relationships and perhaps even store franchise opportunities with owners of local record stores that emphasized soul music.

\textsuperscript{66} This statistic, and the quotations that follow, are drawn directly from a personal copy of: “The Harvard Report: A Study of the Soul Music Environment Prepared for Columbia Records Group,” (Boston: Harvard University, Graduate School of Business Administration, 1972), photocopied. Seven percent equated to $120 million of the nearly $1.7 billion music industry in 1970.
Columbia, under Clive Davis’s leadership, implemented several of the report’s recommendations, including an augmentation of their local and regional promotion staff with several African Americans who were to target soul radio stations.\(^{67}\) As Clive put it, “If we were going to get into black music, it was obvious that we had to have black promotion men.”\(^ {68}\) In 1971, while the Harvard Report was still being researched, Columbia had already launched the Philadelphia International Records label to record albums and singles with the successful production team of Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff. Additionally, in 1972 Columbia worked out a decade-long distribution deal with Stax Records whereby Columbia gained distribution rights for Stax’s three major labels – Stax, Volt, and Enterprise – giving Columbia even more clout in relation to the African American market.\(^ {69}\)

**Miles Davis and Marketing**

At several key points, the conclusions of the Harvard Report resonated with the public complaints that Miles Davis had been voicing against Columbia for several years.

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\(^{67}\) As the Harvard Report points out, none of the other major record companies at the time – including RCA, Capitol, and MCA – was actively pursuing the African American audience. While the Report argued that the majors were currently “uninitiated and uninformed” about the African American market, Columbia might quickly find itself in competition with them for “available Black artists” as well as for “the limited available Black professional and management personnel who are experienced in this area.”

\(^{68}\) Davis and Willwerth, *Clive*, p. 145.

In the late 1960s Davis was critical both of the paucity of African American artists on Columbia’s labels as well as the lack of promotional support Columbia provided for the few African American artists they did hold under contract. As he put it in 1969, “[Columbia] don’t sell no black folks. . . . They sell nothing but white skin, blond hair and blue eyes. They sell that rock by Janis Joplin, Blood, Sweat and Tears, and all that.” He went on to argue for the correlation between the low number of African American artists at Columbia and the insignificant sales figures Columbia was generating among African American listeners. Regarding the white artists above, Davis bluntly noted, “Black people don’t want to hear that, and they’re buying a third of the records being sold today.” \(^{70}\) Two years later, Davis was still complaining that Columbia “refuses to push Black music.” Instead, Davis argued, they continued to “push white rock and sad-ass hillbilly tunes” including their misguided attempts “to make Black bands sound like Blood, Sweat and Tears” in order to increase sales. For Davis, this demonstrated that “Columbia has no idea where cats like James Brown and Isaac Hayes are at.” He continued, “With all the revolutionary things happening, it would seem this would be an ample excuse for the company to push gutty, Black sounds like James Brown’s band and Curtis Mayfield. But they don’t.” Voicing his frustration over the perceived lack of

diversity among Columbia’s artists, Davis concluded, “Everybody can’t be like The Beatles.”

For Davis, this was more than an idle complaint, as he went on to suggest specific steps Columbia could take to remedy the situation. According to Hollie West, Davis planned to meet with Columbia’s executives in early 1969 to encourage them to begin working with select African American promotion and talent agencies. The goal of this collaboration would be to improve Columbia’s presence among African American listeners through relevant concerts and record promotions. Davis likewise argued for the value in hosting talent shows at African American colleges in order to locate and support new talent. Not content to wait for Columbia’s leadership on the matter, Davis also took several steps on his own that further demonstrated his personal investment in instituting change within the company. First, he began working with an African American owned marketing firm in the late 1960s to generate ideas for how best to market his music to African American listeners. He also offered to play concerts at any predominantly African American colleges for free. His attempts to reach African Americans with his music went beyond the college campus, as Davis once took half of

74 See, e.g., Gregg Hall, “Miles,” p. 19.
his performance fee for a Philharmonic concert on November 26, 1971, and purchased tickets that were to be distributed for free to African American youth in the area.\textsuperscript{75} As he noted shortly thereafter, “You know, I make $500,000 in a year, but I would do it for five dollars if my music would get to the black people.”\textsuperscript{76}

Davis, however, felt that his music was not reaching African American listeners due to Columbia’s apathy in their attempts to reach those listeners. As he put it, “They don’t even try to go into the black neighborhoods and sell records.”\textsuperscript{77} When they did make an effort, Davis felt that their marketing campaigns were ineffective because of Columbia’s fundamental lack of understanding for how to connect with African Americans. Put simply, Davis maintained that Columbia did not “know how to sell a black man’s personality.” As he expanded, “First thing, the white man thinks all Negroes want to laugh. . . . I would sell sex (in advertisements and commercials) to the black woman from the black man. I would make him say what any black man says to a black woman.”\textsuperscript{78} For Davis, Columbia’s inability to connect with African American listeners was a direct result of the prevalence of white employees developing the advertising campaigns for the company. As he put it, “I told Clive . . . [to hire] a black

\begin{footnotes}
\item[75] Albertson, “The Unmasking,” p. 67.
\item[77] Stephen Davis, “Miles Davis,” p. 13.
\end{footnotes}
man who thinks black to sell the music to black people.” Davis also stressed his desire, as Hollie West summarized it, to see Columbia “begin using the black image” in advertisements and on album covers. For Davis, utilizing “the black image” on promotional material would help to ensure that his records were reaching African Americans, particularly those youth who were currently more prone to purchase music by James Brown and Sly and the Family Stone than they were to purchase Davis’s albums.

As I argued in Chapter Three, Davis described his music in the late 1960s and early 1970s as “black” music, and he was eager for the marketing of his music to represent that. As Columbia’s emphasis on targeting specific markets increased throughout the 1960s, they became more and more focused on identifying the specific genre into which a particular album or artist would fit. Davis, in contrast, was deeply suspicious of any genre-based designation, rejecting each one as nothing more than a “white category” imposed on music by “white people.” Instead of defining his music as rock, jazz, or soul, Davis insisted that he was creating “black” music that went beyond any particular attempt at market segmentation or genre-based designation. As

79 Watts, “Miles Davis” in Today’s Sound, p. 127.
he put it, “I ain’t thinkin’ . . . about no fuckin’ market . . . Columbia tries to get me into that shit but I won’t let ‘em do it.”  

For Davis, then, “black music” was an overarching category that transcended any specific genre. When it came to marketing his music, Davis wanted its “blackness” to be the emphasis of the ads, as genre-based designations would misrepresent his music and only serve to limit its appeal. According to Davis, the primary way by which music could be marketed as black was by emphasizing images of African American bodies on album covers and in related advertisements. As he put it, “All I tell ‘em to do is to sell the music black, not to put no white girls on the cover with no pants on and stuff like that. Sell it black.” Again Davis noted, “I told ‘em how to merchandise nigger music man. . . . Put niggers on the covers, put brothers and sisters on ‘em, whatever they gonna call us next, that’s what you put on the covers to sell us.”

These comments articulated Davis’s concern that, even when Columbia drew attention to his albums, it was merely to attract the white youth audience that Columbia recognized as an important market at the time. In a 1973 interview, Davis complained, “They tell me, ‘We want to introduce you to a new audience,’ but that audience is

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82 Stephen Davis, “Miles Davis,” p. 12.
83 Davis once noted, “I kept telling Clive that he should sell my music, not jazz.” Quoted in Zygote, “Miles Davis,” p. 35.
85 Stephen Davis, “Miles Davis,” p. 12.
always white. . . It makes me mad when Columbia says ‘We want these people to hear you.’ I don’t audition for no white man.”

Davis’s complaints did not sit well with the executives at Columbia Records. Having recently signed Davis to a three-year $300,000 contract, Columbia was eager for his albums to achieve the commercial success that would justify such a financial investment. His complaints not only undermined Columbia’s promotional strategies but also resulted in significant tension between him and the company. As Clive Davis responded, “You would think that he’s not grateful, but I just know he is.” He continued:

I’m prepared for all of Miles’s statements; none surprise me. . . . [But Davis’s criticism] bothers me because I think we have really done a tremendous amount to be creative along with him, and we work very closely with him so that we make sure that he sells not only to jazz audiences and to contemporary rock audiences, but to R&B audiences as well.

Davis, however, refused to back down from his criticisms or to acknowledge in public any benefits from Columbia’s marketing strategy. When Clive directly confronted him about his public statements, Davis replied, “Was I telling a lie, Clive? If you can say I’m a liar, I’ll retract that statement.” Clive was apparently unable to convince Davis of Columbia’s support for African American artists, as Davis continued to criticize

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87 For information on this contract, see Jet, “Miles Davis Rips Record Firm,” p. 59; and Melody Maker, “Jazz News” (March 21, 1970), p. 4.


89 Albertson, “The Unmasking,” p. 68.
Columbia in the press.90 In a 1974 interview, for example, Davis summarized his feelings, describing Columbia as “the saddest record company in the world.” He concluded, “They don’t do nothin’ for niggers – NOTHING!”91

Columbia, then, faced the prospect of having to satisfy Davis’s ongoing requests that they specifically target African American listeners with his music while at the same time attempting to reach the expansive audience of white youth who were purchasing music in substantial levels at the time. An ongoing discussion within Columbia throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s reveals that Columbia pursued a dual approach to satisfying both desires: they utilized album covers and print advertisements to market Davis’s music as black while encouraging him to pursue performances at new concert venues in order to successfully reach the broader youth audience.

**Venue Selection as a Marketing Strategy**

Columbia, as a record company, was less involved in the concert tours its artists undertook than in the records those artists created in the studio. If Columbia did engage in facilitating certain performance opportunities, it was only when those performances

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90 Private correspondence, though, offers a more nuanced view of Davis’s opinion of Columbia’s promotional attempts. He concluded a memo to Clive Davis from January 1970 with the comment, “Incidentally, Bob Altschuler has been doing a fine job publicity wise, because the Blacks are starting to buy more records too.” See Miles Davis, letter to Clive Davis, January 8, 1970 (Macero Collection, NYPL: Box 14, Folder 2). This was in response to several letters Bruce Lundvall had written to Davis late in 1969 informing him of Columbia’s various advertising campaigns on his behalf. See, e.g., Bruce Lundvall, letters to Miles Davis, October 15, 1969; and November 21, 1969 (Macero Collection, NYPL: Box 17, Folder 9).

91 Gregg Hall, “Miles,” p. 18.
were seen to have potential benefit to album sales. Such was the case in late 1969 when Clive sought to introduce Davis to the young, white, and largely countercultural audience associated with Bill Graham’s Fillmore venues in San Francisco and New York City. Graham had first promoted a concert at the Fillmore auditorium in San Francisco on December 10, 1965. After continued success there, he opened the Fillmore East in New York on March 8, 1968.\footnote{See Bill Graham and Robert Greenfield, \textit{Bill Graham Presents: My Life Inside Rock and Out} (Cambridge: Da Capo, 2004), pp. 232, 241.} Both venues became synonymous with the musical tastes of the counterculture, featuring such artists as Janis Joplin, The Grateful Dead, Santana, Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix, and Sly and the Family Stone.\footnote{See the special edition of \textit{Planet Magazine} “A Tribute to the Fillmore” (December 1971) for a more extensive list of the musicians who appeared at the two Fillmore venues.} Performing at these two venues was a proven way for an artist to reach the youth audience and to generate the volume of album sales that audience was understood to represent.

In November 1969, sensing that Davis’s recent musical explorations might be appealing to the Fillmore crowd, Clive wrote to Graham, suggesting Davis as a good option for a concert. Clive argued, “The fantastic reviews in \textit{Rolling Stone} . . . [demonstrate that] Miles is well on his way to really breaking out of his jazz bag.” He described the potential of a concert featuring Davis and Taj Mahal and The Flock as “a real sleeper” for the Fillmore and reiterated, “The ‘underground’ is ready for Miles.”\footnote{Clive Davis, letter to Bill Graham, November 17, 1969 (Macero Collection, NYPL: Box 13, Folder 18).}
This suggestion was also likely influenced by the reduced audiences Davis was then attracting through his appearances at the small clubs that had traditionally served as the primary venues for jazz performances. Although Davis was among the most respected jazz musicians of the time, his audience draw had steadily declined throughout the late 1960s. Dave Holland, who joined Davis’s band in 1968, recalled his “shock” at the meager audience Davis was drawing at the time, including a concert in California with “maybe thirty to forty people” in attendance. Holland noted, “My expectation of Miles was that, him being a great artist, everyplace he played would be absolutely packed. That was not the case.”  

This dwindling concert attendance did little to reassure Clive that Davis was fully reaching his potential audience. In an attempt to boost Davis’s record sales by diversifying his audience, Clive pursued the Fillmore opportunity described above.

Graham accepted Clive’s request, and Davis first appeared at the Fillmore East March 6-7, 1970, opening for both Neil Young and the Steve Miller Band. In a follow-up letter after the concert, Clive voiced his “delight” that the crowd’s reaction to Davis was “ecstatic,” leaving open the possibility of other similar concerts in the future.

Davis, in fact, appeared at the Fillmore East and West three additional times that year,

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95 Quoted in Tingen, Miles Beyond, p. 82.
playing on bills with groups including the Grateful Dead and Laura Nyro. These concerts opened up a new horizon for Davis regarding the possibilities for live performance, as he went on to play alongside rock groups at large halls and outdoor festivals including the Isle of Wight festival in Great Britain in 1970 and the Hollywood Bowl in California in 1971.

Davis also began performing at college campuses as a regular part of his touring schedule, appearing in the early 1970s at the University of Michigan, UCLA, Stanford University, and the University of Miami, among others. These college appearances worked in tandem with a new advertising emphasis by Columbia that sought to target those same campuses with Davis’s music. In October 1969, for example, Columbia Vice President Bruce Lundvall wrote to Davis regarding Columbia’s efforts at introducing his then-current release In a Silent Way to various colleges. Lundvall described how the album was selected as one of five “concentration albums” for the month of October, resulting in significant exposure for the album on thirty major college campuses. This entailed “on-campus display, publicity coverage, advertising and concentrated airplay

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98 Davis’s band played at the Fillmore East twice (March 6-7, June 17-20) and the Fillmore West twice (April 9-12, October 15-18). See Losin, “Miles Davis Sessions: 1945-1991.”


100 See Losin, “Miles Davis Sessions: 1945-1991.”
on campus radio stations.”\textsuperscript{101} Through this combination of focused advertising, live concert appearances, and their purchasing of Discount Records in 1969, Columbia was able to position Davis to reach the potentially lucrative youth audience. One particularly successful example occurred at the University of Miami in late 1970, where Columbia combined album advertising with a live concert. The concert attracted a large audience, and Davis so enjoyed the experience that he contacted a Columbia representative to request similar events in the future.\textsuperscript{102}

Through this shift in venue away from smaller jazz-oriented clubs and towards college auditoriums, rock halls, and outdoor festivals, Davis ultimately showed a willingness to embrace Columbia’s strategy for introducing his music to a broader youth audience. Although Davis had been eager for his music to achieve greater commercial success, he initially voiced decided opposition to the prospect of performing for what he termed the “long-haired white kids” who populated venues like the Fillmore.\textsuperscript{103} Clive recalls one meeting in particular where Davis was notably upset about the sales success of groups such as Blood, Sweat & Tears who Davis viewed as musically derivative of his

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\textsuperscript{101} Bruce Lundvall, letter to Miles Davis, October 15, 1969 (Macero Collection, NYPL: Box 17, Folder 9). Lundvall was careful to point out that these college-focused efforts were “in addition to our national efforts on behalf of the album.”

\textsuperscript{102} See Kate Buckley, memo to Columbia’s College Promotion Managers, November 20, 1970 (Macero Collection, NYPL: Box 17, Folder 9): “Davis has expressed interest in doing additional college concerts. He is available for concerts now and is interested in being placed in contact with any college groups who are looking for campus entertainment.”

\textsuperscript{103} Davis and Willwerth, \textit{Clive}, p. 261.
\end{flushright}
own sound. Clive proposed to Davis the idea of performing in new venues as a way for him to reach a more expansive audience while maintaining his own sense of musical integrity. As Clive recalled his response to Davis:

"Creatively, no one can tell you where to go, but there are two things that I think you should do. You’ve got to . . . [stay] true to your artistry, because you are the pioneer and you are the leading influence. Then, in exposing what you do to the young people of today, who might never have experienced the magic and the mystery of what you do, I know it’s gonna have an impact."  

Davis initially rejected this idea, even threatening to break his contract with Columbia. Although he eventually agreed to Clive’s suggestion, he continued voicing his lingering resentment over the agreement even during the time he was actively performing at these venues. He complained in 1970, “Now it’s twice that I’m playing the Fillmore, and it’s twice I’m making no money . . . Clive Davis, President of Columbia, told me to do it, and that’s the only reason I’m doing it. . . . I go along with what Clive says because at Columbia they go along with whatever I do musically.”

While Davis valued the artistic autonomy Columbia gave him in the studio, he also took offense at the perceived lack of direct financial remuneration his concert appearances were generating.

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104 Bill Murphy, “Raging Bullhorn,” p. 34.
105 See Davis and Willwerth, Clive, p. 261.
106 Zygote, “Miles Davis,” p. 35. See also Saal, “Miles of Music,” p. 99.
He was additionally concerned that appearances at such venues contributed to Columbia’s “white” marketing strategies that Davis opposed. He described his appearances at the Fillmore as “good public relations for Columbia” since they were able to advertise Davis “like they would a white artist.” Davis clarified, “But I don’t want them to sell me like they do a white artist.” Instead, Davis reiterated his primary concern that Columbia market his music as “black” in order to effectively reach African American listeners. While he may have found performing before a larger audience to be more satisfying than playing to half-empty clubs, Davis would not be fully satisfied until his music reached a significant portion of African American youth. Though Davis’s venue selection did little to reach African Americans, Columbia did adopt some of his suggestions as to how his music could be marketed as “black.” Specifically, in response to Davis’s criticisms of Columbia’s outreach to African American listeners, Columbia began emphasizing images of African Americans on Davis’s album covers and in print advertisements for those albums.

*Album Covers and Advertisements as Marketing Strategies*

At the time Columbia released *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, album cover design and print advertising were both directed by Columbia’s Creative Services Division (CSD).

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107 Zygote, “Miles Davis,” p. 35.

108 See Marmorstein, The Label, pp. 333-360 for an introduction to this division’s organization throughout the 1960s.
The CSD worked in collaboration with Clive Davis and with the respective recording artist in order to design visual elements that were appropriate for each specific album. For *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*, the CSD overtly drew upon the value and appeal of blackness in crafting the visual elements of the album. As I argued in Chapter Three, though blackness had not always been understood as a beneficial characteristic in the past, in the late 1960s it had come to serve as a source of pride for many African Americans. At that time, prominent notions of cultural nationalism emphasized the value of the perceived distinctions of African American culture and physical appearance. Black was beautiful, and the physical and cultural particularities of African Americans were transformed from causes of shame into sources of pride. This moment created the discursive environment in which Columbia could begin emphasizing blackness as a selling point for Miles Davis as well as for other African American musicians on their roster.

Musical contestations over constructions of blackness in sound grew in prominence in the late 1960s as sonic markers became politicized in the service of emerging racial ideology. Particularly in relation to discussions of the blues influence on contemporary musical styles, black phenotype became a visual marker of musical integrity.109 Columbia intentionally drew upon this idea, for example, with a 1969

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109 As I argued more extensively in Chapter Three, this was the environment which enabled Ralph Gleason’s criticism of Mike Bloomfield for “trying to sound black” by playing the blues. See Gleason, “Perspectives: Stop this Shuck,” p. 10.
Rolling Stone advertisement for Taj Mahal. Featuring an image of Taj Mahal’s face that occupied roughly half of the space, this ad twice used the word “authentic” to describe his blues playing on the album.\textsuperscript{110} A similar ad from 1970 for an album by The Last Poets featured a photograph of the band members under a heading that read, “The New Black Blues (white singers can’t imitate).”\textsuperscript{111} Ads such as these utilized visual images of African American skin to symbolize musical authenticity in a way that established black phenotype as an asset and white phenotype as a deficit.\textsuperscript{112}

This trend resonated with Davis’s opinions from the time, discussed above, that the presence of African Americans on album covers and in advertisements would directly appeal to African American consumers. Davis had consistently voiced this belief since as far back as his 1962 interview with Alex Haley, where he explained his insistence that Columbia put an image of Frances Davis, his current wife, on the cover of the album Some Day My Prince Will Come (1961). He argued, “I just got to thinking that as many albums as Negroes buy, I hadn’t ever seen a Negro girl on a major album cover unless she was the artist. . . . It was my album, and I’m Frances’s prince, so I suggested they use her for a model, and they did it.”\textsuperscript{113} From that point on it was common for

\textsuperscript{110} Rolling Stone, November 15, 1969, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{111} Rolling Stone, April 30, 1970, back cover.
\textsuperscript{112} A response to this idea is expressed in a 1969 ad for white blues musician Jo-Ann Kelly that asserts, “Blues is the way you feel. Not the way you look.” See Rolling Stone, November 15, 1969, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{113} Quoted in Chambers, Milestones, book II, p. 33.
Davis, his current African American female interest, or both to appear on his album covers.\textsuperscript{114}

While this is partially the case for \textit{A Tribute to Jack Johnson}, that album is unique among Davis’s albums in that it featured two different covers; one for the album’s initial release in February 1971 and a different cover for its reprinting later in the year. The initial cover featured an illustration by Paul Davis of Jack Johnson in a yellow 1920s-era luxury convertible (see Figure 19 below). Joining him in the car are five women – two Caucasians and three African Americans. In bold type in the upper-left corner are the words “Miles Davis” with “Jack Johnson” appearing in the same font just below. The fine print on the cover includes information on the contributors to the documentary, including the script writer, cameraman, and musical director.

As a marketing device, this cover was decidedly ineffective in catching the eyes of the same number of fans who had purchased \textit{Bitches Brew} a year earlier. It also did little to signal either the band members or the style of music on the album. As a fan

\textsuperscript{114} For example, Cicely Tyson appeared on the cover of \textit{Sorcerer} (1967), Davis appeared on numerous covers including \textit{In a Silent Way} (1969), and Davis appeared with his then-wife Francis Davis on the cover of \textit{E.S.P.} (1965). In addition to utilizing photographs of African Americans, Davis also commissioned illustrations emphasizing aspects of African or African American culture for his album covers. With \textit{Bitches Brew} (1970) and \textit{Live/Evil} (1971), for example, Davis hired Abdul Mati Klarwein to create covers emphasizing African motifs, while he would later commission Corky McCoy to create the ghetto-inspired scenes of African American community life on the cover of \textit{On the Corner} (1972). For more on these and other album covers, see Carissa Kowalski Dougherty, “The Coloring of Jazz: Race and Record Cover Design in American Jazz, 1950-1970” \textit{Design Issues} 23/1 (winter 2007), pp. 47-60; and Robert G. O’Meally, “Jazz Albums as Art: Some Reflections” \textit{International Review of African-American Art} 14/3 (1997), pp. 38-47.
from the time later reminisced about his and his brother’s mutual discovery of this album:

It was kind of hard to figure out from the cover what was going on with this record. And since we had limited funding, we had to make our choices carefully. [My brother] finally bought the record, and I think we were both really surprised at first at how rockish it was.\textsuperscript{115}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure19.jpg}
\caption{First Cover for \textit{A Tribute to Jack Johnson}}
\end{figure}

As I will discuss in Chapter Five, the documentary for which portions of this album served as a soundtrack was nominated for an Academy Award in 1971. The album’s initial release on February 24 of that year occurred only days after Oscar

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\textsuperscript{115} Quoted in Milkowski, “Miles’ Rock Manifesto,” p. 58.
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nominations were officially announced on February 22. It is likely that Columbia sought to capitalize on the publicity of the Oscar nomination by releasing the album just after the nomination was to be announced and also by including as the cover a prominent drawing of Jack Johnson. When the documentary failed to win an Academy Award and when the album was released to slow initial sales, Columbia apparently reevaluated their marketing approach and decided that a greater visual emphasis on Miles Davis might do more to attract fans of his music.

In an attempt to identify this more clearly as a Miles Davis album, Columbia replaced the cover for the second printing with a black-and-white photograph of Davis (see Figure 20 below). The photo, taken by David Garr, was a modified version of the same photo that had appeared on the back cover of the first printing. For the new cover, the other musicians in the photo as well as the drums and the microphone into which Davis was playing, have all been blackened out. What remains is a full-body image of Davis in his characteristic question-mark stance, playing presumably by himself, with no audience indicated and no other musicians in view. The visual emphasis is entirely on Davis, with the album information in the upper left corner and Davis’s liner notes in a column on the right side. Additionally, as a way to draw greater attention to the style of

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music on the album, some of the contributing musicians’ names appear on the back cover; a detail that had been omitted from the first printing.  

Teo Macero later recalled being opposed to the change in album cover, noting, “I really fought against that, because . . . I felt it was the wrong thing to do and that it would hurt Miles. Unfortunately I lost that battle.” Macero does not clarify exactly how the cover change would hurt Davis, though the change apparently did little to increase album sales. As Macero recalls, Columbia was already doing more at the time to promote *Miles Davis at Fillmore: Live at the Fillmore East*, which had been released in

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117 The musicians from the April 7 session are listed, but those from the February 18 session are omitted.

118 Bill Murphy, “Raging Bullhorn,” p. 32.
late 1970. Presumably, Columbia sought to draw attention to the name recognition that would come from the use of “Fillmore” in the album title, as they had done with the creation of the Fillmore label discussed earlier, thereby attracting the youth audience that was central to Columbia’s marketing strategy at the time. Critic Robert Quine supports this idea, recalling:

I remember listening to the so-called hip FM stations at the time going on and on with this jive hippie rhetoric about, “Put on your black light, toke up and listen to Miles at the Fillmore, man.” They kept repeating Fillmore, Fillmore, Fillmore overtly as a selling point. Whereas, Jack Johnson – a far superior album that would’ve connected much better with this audience they were actually going after, was completely ignored.

In 1971 critic Dave Marsh similarly observed the lack of attention being directed to the Jack Johnson album, noting, “Strange to tell, Jack Johnson’s issue has not received an nth of furor attendant upon the release of Bitches Brew and the Live [Miles Davis at Fillmore] album.”

In an additional attempt to generate such “furor,” Columbia designed a print advertisement for A Tribute to Jack Johnson and arranged for its appearance in a diversity of newspapers and magazines. This was not the first time Columbia had incorporated

119 Bill Murphy, “Raging Bullhorn,” p. 32.
120 Quoted in Milkowski, “Miles’ Rock Manifesto,” p. 57.
122 Columbia similarly attempted to promote musicians associated with other genres to the rock-focused youth crowd. In an apparent attempt to rebrand jazz pianist Thelonious Monk for the youth market, Columbia advertised his album titled Underground in Rolling Stone. The ad reproduced the album’s politically-inflected cover art, and described it as “out-of-sight,” asking the reader, “[Can you] dig it?” See
print advertisements into their attempt to reach a diverse audience with Davis’s music.

As early as 1967, in fact, Columbia had begun strategizing ways to utilize print
advertisements to market Davis beyond the jazz audience. In an internal memo from
that year, Clive Davis wrote:

To get more product out of Miles Davis – which is certainly worthwhile – I
promised that we would not restrict his promotion in jazz journals, where he is
reviewed any way, but also try to broaden him. . . . What plans do we have for
promotion, ads and publicity? 123

Robert Altshuler responded to the memo several weeks later, describing the success of
Davis’s most recent album The Sorcerer and adding:

I have gotten an okay from Miles to bring Martin Williams, a free lance writer for
Hi Fi Stereo Review and Al Aronowitz of the New York Times to attend Miles’s next
recording sessions for future articles. I am working on some other publicity
ideas, and will give you further information as they develop. 124

As both Aronowitz and Williams were known for writing for magazines that had
readerships beyond the traditional jazz audience, this was a productive first step in
promoting Davis to a broader listenership.

Rolling Stone (July 6, 1968), p. 23. Columbia took similar steps to market its classical music library to the
youth audience, launching a five-month promotion campaign that included an ad for a Hector Berlioz
recording that stated, “Hector Berlioz Took Dope, and His Trips Exploded into Out-of-Sight Sounds.”
(September 6, 1968), p. 37.

123 Clive Davis, untitled memo, November 22, 1967 (Macero Collection, NYPL: Box 16, Folder 16).
124 Robert Altshuler, untitled memo, December 4, 1967 (Macero Collection, NYPL: Box 16, Folder 16).
Columbia’s approach continued later in the 1960s as they began discussing the potential commercial benefit of placing advertisements for Davis’s albums in various underground publications. Bruce Lundvall, in a memo to Morris Baumstein dated April 1, 1969, wrote:

Once again, I feel we should place a few ads in the underground press for Davis’s Lp product. Bob Altshuler sent me the attached rave review, from Rolling Stone, on the new Miles album Filles De Kilimanjaro. What Miles is doing on records and in his live appearances now will certainly be listened to with interest by serious Rock buyers. Can we plan some small space ads that aim Miles at the Rock audience?125

Though Columbia’s relationship with the underground press was notably strained at the time, they went on to place ads for Davis’s albums both in underground papers as well as in the more widely distributed Rolling Stone.

One such ad for Filles de Kilimanjaro (1969) that would ostensibly “aim Miles at the Rock audience” began with the headline, “You May Like Jazz, and Not Even Know It.”126 The ad then attempted to convince the reader that Filles shared much in common with the “psychedelic music” that the reader had been “buying and digging” the past few years. It pointed out some of the musicians who were categorized in the Schwann catalog as jazz players, including B.B. King and Otis Redding, as a way to complicate the reader’s expectations of what “jazz” might be. Finally, the ad quoted extensively from

125 Bruce Lundvall, memo to Morris Baumstein, April 1, 1969 (Macero Collection, NYPL: Box 13, Folder 15).

the positive review *Filles* received in *Rolling Stone* as a way to provide further credibility for the album.

Another ad in *Rolling Stone* in 1970 similarly attempted to highlight the ways in which Davis’s recent music resonated with the more popular music of the time. Featuring extensive quotations from positive reviews by rock critics of the *Bitches Brew* album (1970), the ad asked, “Rock critics agree Miles Davis has found a new audience, or is it that Rock has just found Miles Davis?”

In other Davis ads, Columbia incorporated more subtle allusions to the vocabulary and imagery of contemporary music. Drawing upon the popularity of album-oriented rock and the notion of concept albums in which each song is a part of an intentionally integrated whole, an ad for *Bitches Brew* described the album as a “novel without words” that featured “an incredible journey of pain, joy, sorrow, hate, passion, and love.”

Another *Rolling Stone* ad for *At Fillmore* (1970) presented the album as taking the listener beyond the “comfortable music and predictable sounds” that characterized much popular music of the day and into “a place where the clichés of today’s music don’t exist.”

Columbia recognized that attracting a new audience could result in the alienation of Davis’s more traditional jazz fan base. For a *Bitches Brew* ad in *Down Beat,*

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then, the text noted that although Davis’s “audience has grown . . . there’s always been a solid core.” It went on to argue that though this new audience “[would] like to say they’ve been into Miles for years, most of them can’t.” Highlighting the value of Davis’s traditional fans who would be reading the ad, the text concluded, “You probably can [say you’ve been into Miles for years]. And [you] will.”

Through these ads, Columbia demonstrated their strategy of making connections with new, rock-oriented listeners, while taking care to maintain the existing connection between Davis and his more traditional jazz audience.

Print Advertisements for A Tribute to Jack Johnson

In line with this pattern, Columbia chose to place advertisements for A Tribute to Jack Johnson in publications geared toward a variety of listeners. With each of these publications, Columbia sought to target a distinct audience – from the underground press (LA Free Press and Creem) to African American publications (Essence) to rock and jazz publications (Rolling Stone and Down Beat, respectively). Though these publications were notably diverse, the album’s print advertising centered on one specific ad that was designed to hold currency for as many audiences as possible. This ad, as a part of Columbia’s continued deference to Davis’s insistence that African American bodies be emphasized in ads and album covers, drew attention to Miles Davis’s body in a

strikingly overt way (see Figure 21 below). Columbia ran this advertisement in no fewer than six national and regional publications between April and June of 1971.\textsuperscript{131} The ad is characterized by the visual and linguistic prominence of the body; visually through the full-body profile of Miles Davis that dominates the ad, and linguistically through the use of the word “body” nine times in the text of the ad.

The text begins by stating the rationale for including Davis’s photograph, arguing that the prominence of Davis’s body in the advertisement is in direct proportion to the prominence of his body in the sounds heard on the album. The ad then quotes Davis as stating his visceral reliance on his body for determining the musical integrity of what he plays (“my body rejects things I don’t like”). After establishing Davis’s body as the focus of the ad, the text connects Davis’s use of his body in musical activities with Jack Johnson’s use of his body in pugilistic activities (“Miles’ new album is named after a guy who also knew how to use his body: Jack Johnson”).

In this ad, then, the body is appropriated for at least three related purposes. First, it serves as a prominent visual cue clarifying the recording as being created by Davis. Particularly in light of the ambiguity of the initial album cover, which draws little visual attention to Davis’s role in the album, this ad draws immediate attention to

Figure 21: Advertisement for *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*
the physical body of Miles Davis and thereby highlights Davis as the central focus of the recording. Second, the body serves as the material connection between Davis’s performance career and Johnson’s boxing career. The ad contributes to Davis’s ongoing attempts to highlight the connections between his own life and Johnson’s, as well as the ways in which his conceptualization of musical performance was influenced by boxing at the time. Finally, the body provides a vocabulary for describing the timbral qualities of Davis’s playing on the recording, while also clarifying Davis’s definition of musical value and integrity.

The issues of timbre and musical integrity were notably politicized in the early 1970s due to their articulation with prominent discourses constructing technology as a corrupting influence on music. As I discussed in Chapters One and Two, emerging instrument and recording technologies at the time were revolutionizing music in two ways. First, the rise of electric instruments, amplifiers, and instrumental effects were creating a radically new palette of sounds while also redefining notions of instrumental virtuosity. Additionally, the prominent incorporation of studio technologies such as multitracking, tape splicing, and post-production effects were similarly redefining the process of studio recording and the notions of musical creativity that had previously defined such recording. The introduction and widespread adoption of these new

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132 See Chapter Three for more on Davis’s attempts to link discursively his boxing training to his musical performance.
technologies brought with them a debate over how such technologies would be incorporated into existing constructions of artistic excellence within a given genre. Those listeners in particular who were grounded in the jazz tradition tended to view the use of such technologies with suspicion, often criticizing them as “mechanistic” or somehow less than “human.”\textsuperscript{133} Instead of viewing these technologies as objects that mediate the creation of sound, such listeners understood them to be machines that separate musicians from the very sounds they are creating. The severity of criticisms directed toward instrument and studio technologies were directly proportional to the degree such technologies were seen as distancing a musician from the physical production of the resulting sounds. From this perspective, the post-production sound manipulation enabled by studio technologies was a particular threat to the creative primacy of improvisation and group interaction that had historically served as constitutive components of musical creation for jazz performers. For adherents to this view, instrument and studio technologies could only serve to damage both an individual’s musicianship as well as the final musical products created in the name of jazz performance.

In this context, the ad above explicitly uses Davis’s body to mitigate existing suspicion over technology’s corrupting influence on music and musicianship. The first

few sentences of the ad make an ironic use of technological vocabulary in order to construct a corporeal foundation for the music on the album. The ad identifies the full-profile photo of Davis as comprising “the numerous devices Miles Davis uses for creating his incredible music.” In order to clarify further the ad’s meaning, the text continues, “All you see is his body because all you hear is his body. The trumpet he plays is only plugged into one thing: Miles Davis.” This idea is reinforced in the ad’s concluding line, which refers to the album as an example of Davis “playing with numerous devices: heart, soul, imagination.” The prominence of Davis’s physical body in the ad, then, is utilized to mitigate any anxiety in the listeners that might result from the general prominence of technology in music at the time. More specifically, in light of the undeniable technological mediation on *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* that I pointed out in Chapters One and Two, Davis’s body provides a corporeal symbol of unmediated musical integrity.

Columbia, then, was likely emphasizing Davis’s body in the ad in an economically-driven desire to counteract the suspicion of technology that they understood to be negatively impacting his album sales. While the ad is conducive to any number to interpretive possibilities, it was undoubtedly a part of Columbia’s broader goal of drawing attention to *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* and thereby increasing
album sales by placing the music before as many potential listeners as possible. The final question, then, is did Columbia achieve their goal of generating significant sales success for *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*? If the ad was intended to generate album sales equal to or exceeding the commercial success experienced by *Bitches Brew*, what were the sales figures for this album?

Unfortunately, the available evidence is inconclusive. Though Columbia Records undoubtedly maintained records of sales figures and album printings for their releases, those figures have not been made publicly available. The anecdotal evidence about the album points to sales that were far below those being achieved by *Bitches Brew*. As critic Chris Albertson noted in 1971, neither *Miles Davis at Fillmore* nor *Jack Johnson* “shows signs of doing as well commercially” as *Bitches Brew*. The only independent markers of sales milestones occur when the Recording Industry Association of America

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134 I have emphasized Columbia’s likely perspective of using the ad to mitigate existing suspicion by traditional jazz fans of technology’s corrupting influences on the music. However, the diverse readers who encountered the ad in, for example, *Rolling Stone* (rock and contemporary fans), *Essence* (an African American audience), and the various underground publications (countercultural youth audience) could have interpreted the ad in a variety of ways. Two other readings, in particular, seem likely given the state of racial and cultural politics at the time, both of which emphasize the prominence of Davis’s body in the ad, but read that prominence in oppositional ways. For one, Davis’s poised stance, evocative of both a boxer’s gracefulness in the ring as well as of Davis’s question-mark posture when playing trumpet, could easily have been read as a visual symbol of racial pride during this period of “black is beautiful” cultural nationalism. Alternatively, the visual emphasis on Davis’s body could have been interpreted as contributing to the longstanding practice of visual objectification of African American bodies. The latter issue had garnered prominent theoretical attention in the U.S. only a few years prior to the ad, with the 1967 publication of the English translation of Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* and its influential notion of “epidermalization.” See Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* trans. Charles Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967 [1952]), p. 11.

135 Albertson, “The Unmasking,” p. 87.
(RIAA) officially recognizes sales of 500,000 or one million by designating an album as “gold” or “platinum,” respectively. Though the RIAA certified *Bitches Brew* as a gold album in 1976, *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* has yet to receive such certification.\(^{136}\) Not only in the immediate aftermath of its release, but in the more than three decades since, the album has yet to reach 500,000 units in official sales. The best estimate I have been able to locate comes from Bob Belden, the producer of Sony’s 2003 *Complete Jack Johnson Sessions*. He estimates sales of between 50,000 and 200,000 for the album, a figure which Davis scholar Paul Tingen affirms as being likely.\(^{137}\)

Though such sales would have been more than respectable for a musician exclusively reaching out to the jazz audience, anything less than sales equal to *Bitches Brew* would have been a disappointment for Columbia. Particularly in light of Columbia’s financial investment and multifaceted marketing strategy for the album, this flat initial reception must have been a puzzle. Columbia’s disappointment could only have been amplified by the album’s intentional association with the documentary on Jack Johnson. As I previously mentioned, the album’s release in February 1971 coincided with the announcement of the documentary’s nomination for an Academy Award. Moreover, Columbia organized the release of advertisements for the album to

\(^{136}\) *Bitches Brew* would be certified platinum in 2003, signaling 1,000,000 copies sold. See “Gold and Platinum Searchable Database,” http://www.riaa.com/goldandplatinum.php (November 6, 2007).

\(^{137}\) Bob Belden, personal correspondence, October 23, 2007; and Paul Tingen, personal correspondence, November 27, 2007.
begin in April 1971, just after the Oscar awards ceremony took place on April 15 of that year.\textsuperscript{138} In both cases, Columbia sought to capitalize on the assumed publicity the Academy Awards would generate for the documentary. In fact, though this study thus far has focused almost exclusively on the stand-alone album, that album may never have appeared were it not for the role of the documentary’s initial critical success in motivating Columbia to release a related album. For the final chapter, then, I turn to a study of the documentary that played a critical role in enabling the creation and release of \textit{A Tribute to Jack Johnson}. 

Chapter Five: From Soundtrack to Album

“In the [Jack Johnson] film, a stunning drum solo accompanies a Charlie Chaplin silent movie boxing routine thrown in as atmosphere, but that solo is missing from the album, as is other incidental music.”¹ – Doug Ramsey

“There were these master tapes at Columbia Records of Davis’s recording sessions. Teo Macero set up some sessions for me where I sat by the hour and listened to those tapes and picked out the music that I thought would fit certain scenes in the [Jack Johnson] film. I’d listen to those master tapes and think to myself, ‘Well this music will fit this scene.’ And I made copious notes, and I was careful to write down exactly where on this tape it came from or that tape. And that’s essentially how I did it.”² – Alan Bodian

* * * * *

In 1961 William Cayton and Jim Jacobs combined their respective personal fight film collections to found the company The Big Fights, Inc. This company held what were often the only existing copies of the most significant boxing matches in the history of the sport, and the company’s stated goal was to amass, restore, and preserve these and other historic fight films. Within the decade, Big Fights had built up a collection of over 16,000 such films, resulting in the largest library of fight films in the world.³ Cayton and Jacobs utilized their films to create a variety of television shows and feature-


² This and all subsequent quotations in this chapter from Alan Bodian are taken from a telephone interview I conducted with him on December 8, 2007.

length film documentaries throughout the 1960s, including the *Jack Johnson* documentary which is the focus of this chapter.

Cayton had first utilized films from his personal collection for this purpose in 1948 when his advertising agency, Cayton Inc., was hired by the Vaseline Company to develop a sports-based television program for which its new hair tonic would serve as the sponsor. Although Vaseline agreed that a sports-related show would be most appropriate for their intended audience, the company left it to Cayton’s discretion which specific sport he would feature in the program. Cayton opted for boxing in part because it was one of the few sports that were visually appropriate for the small, black-and-white television screens prominent during that era. It was much easier to see the detailed movements of two boxers in an enclosed ring than, for example, all the actions of twenty-two football players on a 100-yard field. Additionally, Cayton was a lifelong boxing fan, and he likely saw this as an opportunity to utilize his boxing knowledge and his developing fight film collection for the benefit of his advertising company.

The initial program’s success inspired Cayton to create a series of fifteen-minute fight films, titled “Greatest Fights of the Century,” which aired on television throughout the 1950s and 60s. These programs confirmed for Cayton the financial value that historic fight films held and gave him both the opportunity and the motivation to continue incorporating his personal collection into public media events. Although Cayton had both a professional and personal interest in fight films, he soon discovered
that the process of locating and purchasing the rights to many of these films was no easy
task. The Sims Act, passed by the U.S. Congress in 1912 and repealed in 1940, had
established a national ban on the interstate commerce of all fight films. This bill
effectively created a thirty-year period during which fight films were not actively
circulating in the U.S.4 Without a legal market, often only a few copies of any given
fight film from that period would be available in the U.S. Even after Congress repealed
the Sims Act and again legalized fight film commerce, there remained the difficulty of
tracking down the few remaining copies of those films made between 1912 and 1940.

Interestingly, the Sims Act had initially been passed in response to Jack Johnson’s
successful defense of his heavyweight title in 1910. Johnson had become the first African
American to hold the heavyweight crown when he defeated Tommy Burns in 1908.
Since then, each of Johnson’s subsequent white opponents faced increasing pressure
from the white public to win back the heavyweight title in order to symbolize the
continued superiority of the white race. Many considered Jim Jeffries, a then-retired
heavyweight champion who had held the title from 1899 to 1905, to have been the most
talented boxer in recent history. Popularly known as the “great white hope,” Jeffries
was deemed to be white America’s best and last prospect for defeating Johnson and
regaining the heavyweight title. When Johnson defeated Jeffries in 1910, news of the

defeat triggered widespread and often deadly race riots throughout the U.S. As was common at the time, the fight had been filmed, and recordings of the fight were scheduled to be delivered to local movie houses throughout the country. Fearing that the film’s arrival would incite further violence, many local and state legislators began responding with various ordinances banning fight film commerce in their respective states. On July 31, 1912 the U.S. Congress passed the Sims Act as a way to consolidate these various state and local ordinances at the national level by prohibiting “the importation and the interstate transportation of films or other pictorial representations of prize fights” throughout the entirety of the country.5

This act thereby created the structural conditions for the limited availability of fight films in the U.S. As a result, Cayton was regularly forced to look to Europe and Australia for the only remaining copies of fight films from that period, since such films had legally circulated in locations outside the U.S. throughout the twentieth century. Cayton’s personal passion for, and business interest in, these films made him among the first to recognize their economic and historic value. His early interest allowed him to gain exclusive rights to the films of the vast majority of significant boxing matches. His collection in the 1950s was rivaled only by Jim Jacobs’s personal library, which Jacobs had developed initially as a private hobby during the same period Cayton was

developing his more business-oriented collection. Jacobs was an avid fight film collector, although he was best known in the 1950s as an international champion in the sport of handball. His regular overseas travels for handball competitions provided him opportunities to acquire many of the same fight films for which Cayton was actively searching. He and Cayton eventually decided to pool their resources in order to work together to obtain as many such films as possible. What began as an informal hobby for Jacobs and an intriguing business venture for Cayton developed into a mutual interest in locating and purchasing the rights to these historically significant films.

The Big Fights’s Documentaries

After founding The Big Fights, Inc. in 1961, Cayton and Jacobs continued utilizing their now-mutual fight film collection to create additional fifteen minute made-for-television boxing specials in the “Greatest Fights of the Century” series. Additionally, they employed their library beginning in the mid 1960s to create several full-length documentaries devoted to various heavyweight champions. Prior to Jack Johnson, Cayton and Jacobs had already produced no fewer than three such full-length documentaries. Two, Knockout (1965) and Knockout #2 (1966), featured film excerpts of nineteen and twenty-five championship boxing bouts, respectively, and both films ran roughly fifty minutes in length. A third, The Legendary Champions (1968), was more expansive in scope, covering boxing’s heavyweight champions between 1882 and 1929.
and running just under 100 minutes. These documentaries were professional in research and production standards, with The Legendary Champions in particular receiving nominations for an Oscar for best documentary at the 41st Academy Awards and a Gold Medal at the 1969 Atlanta International Film Festival.

As The Legendary Champions was nearing completion, Jacobs had already begun planning for a new documentary about Jack Johnson. He approached Alan Bodian to assist him in researching and writing the documentary, which was initially envisioned as a thirty-minute television show on Johnson’s championship years from 1908 to 1915, to be aired on CBS. The period during which the film’s research was still in its early stages, however, coincided with the noted rise in racial tensions in the U.S. that I discussed in Chapter Three. As I pointed out, the year 1968 saw the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., while the previous year was marked by an explosive race-inspired uprising in Newark, New Jersey as well as Muhammad Ali’s prominent refusal to enter the military draft. As African American nationalism and militancy increased towards the end of the decade, CBS became less confident in the financial viability of a documentary highlighting the aggressive and non-conformist figure of Jack Johnson.

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7 This documentary would also lead to the creation of a derivative book of the same name in 1972. See Rex Lardner, The Legendary Champions (New York: American Heritage Press, 1972), which lists William Cayton and Jim Jacobs as consultants.
Ali’s refusal to enter the draft and the subsequent stripping of his heavyweight title was particularly influential on CBS’s decision. Since Ali regularly made public comments on the commonalities between himself and Johnson, CBS felt that the presence of a television documentary on Johnson would elevate racial tensions even further by drawing attention to Ali’s plight.

Although the CBS documentary was put on hold, Bodian continued his research into Johnson’s life. For more than two years, he tracked down additional films, photographs, and other information on Johnson that resulted in a dramatically expanded conceptualization of both the film’s length (nearly ninety minutes instead of thirty) and chronological scope (Johnson’s pre-championship career through his death in 1946 instead of solely his championship years of 1908-1915). As Bodian recalls:

Jim and I had already decided to proceed [with researching the film], and I got deeply involved. I spent over two years on the thing, constantly gathering materials. It really turned into an obsession for me. I gathered an enormous amount of material, mostly in the form of still photography. Even while the film was being made new material about Johnson that I’d been looking for began to show up from obscure places all throughout the world. And the film evolved from a short 30-minute documentary just on his fighting career from 1908 to 1915 into a full-blown documentary-biography.

Bodian is careful to point out that he and Jacobs carried out the vast majority of the work in researching and producing the documentary. Although William Cayton is officially listed as the director of the film, Bodian contests the prominence that such a title affords Cayton. According to Bodian, Cayton was essential in funding the film and in providing access to much of the footage of the boxing matches that appeared in the
documentary. He had little involvement, however, in the day-to-day decisions comprising the film’s making. As Bodian bluntly recalls, “[Cayton] didn’t do a god damn thing on the film. Nothing. . . . He put up the money and he had the company, no question about that. But in terms of the actual making of the film, [he contributed] zero.” Instead Bodian is eager to clarify that he and Jacobs did all the substantive work in conceptualizing, researching, and creating the film. Bodian was officially listed as the screenwriter and principle researcher for the documentary, while Jacobs was responsible for more of the production-related tasks.

This documentary contributed to the late-1960s resurgence of interest in the figure of Jack Johnson that I discussed in Chapter Three. While this period saw the publication of several biographical works on Johnson along with numerous related articles, the play and film adaptation of Howard Sackler’s award-winning 1968 *The Great White Hope: A Drama in Three Acts* was a particular motivating factor for Bodian in completing his documentary. Although Bodian and Jacobs were already actively researching the documentary when Sackler’s play was released, Bodian took particular issue with the way that Johnson was represented in the play. He recalls:

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8 I was unable to speak with either Cayton or Jacobs about the creation of this documentary, as they both passed away prior to the beginning of my research, Jacobs on March 23, 1988 and Cayton on October 4, 2003.

9 This project won a Tony Award, a Pulitzer Prize, and New York Drama Critics Circle prize, among others. See Roberts, *Papa Jack*, p. 228.
Howard Sackler’s play is pure invention, and it has nothing to do with fact. Absolutely nothing. . . . The character that Sackler put in his play was very primitive, but the real Jack Johnson wasn’t primitive by any means. Nor was he being manipulated. Instead, he did the manipulating. . . . The real Jack Johnson was not being controlled by anybody. In the Sackler play, he looks like he’s a pawn, you know, being used and manipulated. That was not his real character. His real character was quite different.

The idea that a documentary can ever present “the real” aspects of a historical event or figure has been brought into question by recent media studies scholarship.10 Bodian’s research, however, led him to the conclusion that the more abrasive and confrontational aspects of Johnson’s personality were under-represented in Sackler’s play. Bodian intended his documentary in part as a corrective, striving to highlight the very aspects of Johnson’s personality that he found to be lacking in Sackler’s depiction. In the play, for example, the narrative concludes with Johnson having just lost a fight in Havana after struggling to survive during his exile from the U.S. in the 1910s. The play ends with Johnson effectively defeated not only by his loss to Jess Willard in the boxing ring but also by the insurmountable structural racism that dominated the U.S. at the time.

In the film, on the other hand, Bodian emphasized Johnson’s defiance and personal agency in directly confronting the racist structures that characterized U.S.

society in the early twentieth century. One line in particular epitomizes this approach.

Bodian’s Johnson proclaims at both the introduction and the conclusion to the documentary, “I’m Jack Johnson, ‘Heavyweight Champion of the World.’ I’m black. They never let me forget it. I’m black, alright. I’ll never let them forget it.” This statement frames the documentary in defiance and resolve, demonstrating how Johnson’s character refused to capitulate to white expectations, choosing instead to transform his racial identity from a hindrance into a legacy. For Sackler’s Johnson, blackness was ultimately an impediment to his personal and professional success. With Bodian’s Johnson, blackness was recuperated as a motivating source of pride for confronting and overcoming the limiting societal expectations Johnson faced at the time.

Beyond the commercial aspects of this project, the documentary was an opportunity for Bodian and Jacobs to create a corrective portrait of Johnson at a time when his image functioned as a prominent and controversial symbol in popular culture.

In addition to its prior work on Knockout, Knockout #2, and The Legendary Champions, in the late 1960s The Big Fights was simultaneously developing the Jack Johnson film and a documentary on Muhammad Ali. Titled a.k.a. Cassius Clay, the latter film was released November 3, 1970, just under five months after Jack Johnson was

released on June 4, 1970.\textsuperscript{12} The film was a justification of Ali’s refusal to enter the military draft and an indictment of the system that had stripped him of his boxing title. Released just after Ali returned to the ring in October 1970, this film demonstrated The Big Fights at its most overtly political. \textit{A.k.a. Cassius Clay}, along with the other four documentaries created by The Big Fights in the 1960s, collectively illustrate that by 1970, Cayton and Jacobs were devoting significant time and financial resources to creating both television specials and full-length documentary films based on the unique resources available in their expansive fight film library.

Since both \textit{Jack Johnson} and \textit{a.k.a. Cassius Clay} were completed in 1970, Cayton and Jacobs contemplated entering the two into consideration for an Academy Award for the best feature documentary for that year. However, since one producer could officially submit only one documentary per year for Oscar consideration, Cayton and Jacobs decided to alternate their listing as producer and director for the two films. Bodian recalls that the decision about who would be listed as producer for which film was entirely arbitrary since both films had already been completed when the Academy Award submissions were made. As I mentioned above, Bodian asserted that Jacobs was responsible for the day-to-day decisions of producing both documentaries while Cayton’s more symbolic involvement would not historically warrant the title of either producer or director. In their excitement to promote both films, Cayton and Jacobs

\textsuperscript{12} See entries for \textit{a.k.a. Cassius Clay} and \textit{Jack Johnson} in \textit{American Film Institute Catalog}. 
disregarded the conventions of assigning production credits in order to ensure that both documentaries were considered for the prestigious Academy Award. Bodian noted, “You’d think these things would be very structured and laid out, but they weren’t. [Cayton and Jacobs] literally flipped a coin to see who would be listed as director and who would be producer.” The coin toss resulted in Cayton’s listing as producer for \textit{a.k.a.} and as director for \textit{Jack Johnson}, with Jacobs identified as director for the former and producer for the latter.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{Developing the Soundtrack}

Early in 1970, after more than two years of research and production, Big Fights was nearing the completion of the \textit{Jack Johnson} documentary. One of the final steps in that process was the identification of appropriate music for use as the documentary’s soundtrack, a task for which Alan Bodian was primarily responsible. After hearing a recording of Miles Davis at that time, Bodian decided that Davis had the precise “quality” and “dimension” in his playing to complement the documentary’s narrative and visual content. As he recalls, “A lightbulb went off and I said, ‘This is the kind of music I have to play for the film.’” Bodian met Davis at Davis’s home in Manhattan one Sunday afternoon to request the use of his music for the film. Although he and Davis

\textsuperscript{13} That these decisions were made after the completion of the films is further reinforced by Cayton’s listing as producer on the actual film credits for \textit{Jack Johnson} with Jacobs as director. The official Academy Award records have the two reversed.
had no prior relationship, Bodian was able to discuss the documentary with him and convince him to contribute the music. As Bodian recalls:

He didn’t know who I was. He had never met me. I had no name-dropping to do or anything like that. I told him outright what I was doing and I would like very much to use his music for the film. He said, “Why man? What you want to do that for?” . . . And I said to him, I didn’t know what the hell to say, so I finally said, “Well I think you might rediscover your roots.” . . . It was a banal thing to say, but it was the only thing I could think of.

Bodian’s sales pitch, then, combined with several other factors in influencing Davis’s decision to contribute the soundtrack. As I argued in Chapter Three, creating this soundtrack was additionally appealing to Davis because of his own interest in boxing at the time. He had a passion for training as a boxer, and he admired African American fighters such as Johnson. Additionally, in the late-1960s era of cultural nationalism and Black Power, Johnson’s recuperated image as an assertive and successful African American resonated with the image Davis was actively promoting of himself. Motivated in part by these similarities, Davis contributed music for the film, after which he enjoyed an ongoing friendship with the documentary’s creators.

According to Cayton, when Davis was at the height of his interest in boxing, he would spend considerable time at Cayton’s office watching and discussing fight films. Cayton remembers:

[Davis] would discuss boxing with an intensity that you couldn’t imagine. He’d come to our offices and ask for a bunch of films. He’d put the spool on the projector himself, threading the projector, then sit there and watch for hours.
Every once in a while he’d come running up to me and say, “Bill, why’d this happen? How come Joe Louis got hit with that shot?”

The opportunity to create this soundtrack resonated with Davis during a period when his interest in boxing was at an all-time high.

The Soundtrack’s Role in the Documentary

Bodian’s research, in conjunction with The Big Fights’ film library, resulted in a wealth of archival footage that comprises the vast majority of the visual content for the documentary. Bodian combined film excerpts of Johnson’s most significant fights with hundreds of photographs he had collected during his research to form the visual basis for the narrative. For those remaining portions of the narrative for which relevant visual material could not be located, Bodian either utilized generic footage of related events, or he commissioned original drawings and photographs for use as substitutes. For example, Bodian wanted to include a discussion of Johnson’s alleged experience in Madrid as a matador during his exile from the U.S. between 1913 and 1919. Since no films or photographs exist of this experience, Bodian included generic photographs of a bullfighting arena from the 1910s. He then interspersed this image with black-and-

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14 Quoted in Chang, “Miles’ Blow by Blow,” p. 4.

15 Such generic use of a visual archive is a common technique for films that rely on existing film footage for their visual content. See Bruzzi, New Documentary, p. 38.
white drawings of Johnson as a matador that he had commissioned specifically for the documentary.  

Bodian united these visual images through the use of two voice-overs that supply the overall narrative and also offer commentary on the narrative. Brock Peters contributes the voice-overs as Jack Johnson, and Kevin Kennedy functions in the role of the invisible and omniscient narrator. Peters’s remarks act as commentary on various events in the film, and they are most prominent in the scenes of boxing matches, where Peters often recreates the imagined taunts Johnson directed toward his opponents. For example, during the fight scene between Johnson and Jim Jeffries, Peters is heard imploring Jeffries, “Come on, man, do something!” and “Strong, Mr. Jeff, real strong. But fighting me was wrong!” Kennedy, on the other hand, presents the narrative itself, providing a definitive interpretation of the film’s visual images. Kennedy’s invisibility in the film along with his overt separation from the film’s historical events contribute to what film historian Stella Bruzzi has termed a “narration-led documentary.” She describes such a documentary as follows:

By blending omniscience and intimacy, [narration-led documentaries] address the spectator directly; they set out an argument (thus implying forethought, knowledge, the ability to assimilate); they possess a dominant and constant

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16 This portion of the film occurs at 70.12-72.05. For commentary on the scene, see Lehmann, “Jack Johnson,” p. 25.

17 This occurs from 25.50-28.58 of the film.
perspective on the events they represent to which all elements within the film conform; they offer a solution and thereby a closure to the stories they tell.\textsuperscript{18}

This general description holds true for the \textit{Jack Johnson} documentary. As I mentioned above, the film establishes Johnson as a defiant, cunning, and triumphant figure in part through the framing of the documentary with the statement, “I’m black alright. I’ll never let them forget it!” This presentation is reinforced through the narrative interpretation that Kennedy provides. One such example occurs during the scene that immediately follows Johnson’s jail sentencing for violating the Mann Act, which made it illegal to cross state lines with a woman for the purpose of procuring sex. Johnson consequently decides to flee to Europe, and Kennedy’s narration interprets the flight as Johnson outsmarting the white authorities. Johnson poses as a bat-boy for a traveling African American baseball team in order to escape the city where he was being watched as an initial step in obtaining safe passage overseas. In light of Johnson’s shrewdness, Kennedy marvels, “A plan. A scheme. The cloak-and-dagger aspects appeal to Johnson’s sense of the dramatic. A cap on his head. A load of bats in his arms. He jumps on the train just as it pulls out. Who would believe that the Giants’ ‘bat-boy’ is Jack Johnson!” Kennedy’s narration thereby interprets Johnson’s flight as a clever and victorious escape from the authorities’ attempts to thwart his professional potential.

Throughout this “narration-led documentary,” Kennedy’s voice-overs similarly offer interpretations of the film’s visual images. The documentary’s argument, that Johnson was a strong individual who consistently refused to allow the surrounding structural and discursive racism to impede his personal and professional goals, held significant currency in the late 1960s. The documentary’s relevance was further reinforced through the particular style of music used for the soundtrack; a style characterized by instruments and other musical markers that were aurally specific to the late 1960s and early 1970s.

As film scholar Jeffrey Rouff has pointed out, the combination of voice-overs with a soundtrack that is entirely non-diegetic is highly unconventional for documentary films.\(^\text{19}\) Rouff cites two reasons why such films more often avoid voice-over narration and use music that is exclusively diegetic. For one, avoiding the use of voice-overs reinforces the idea that the documentary’s constitutive images are unmediated and unaltered, contributing to the perception of an objective presentation of the narrative’s truth for which documentaries typically strive. Additionally, the use of diegetic music allows filmmakers to avoid potential instances of copyright infringement.

\(^{19}\) Diegetic sound is that which is audible to both the viewers of and the characters in a film. Non-diegetic sound is that which is audible to the viewers but inaudible to the characters in a film. In addition to the voice-overs and the soundtrack, the remaining sound sources for the Jack Johnson documentary comprise various non-diegetic sound effects, including cheering crowds and ringing bells, which are overdubbed at relevant portions of the narrative.
that using legally-protected music would create.\textsuperscript{20} In both cases, \textit{Jack Johnson} did not adhere to the typical conventions of documentary filmmaking, using voice-overs and non-diegetic music to craft a particular presentation of Johnson’s life. Bodian recognized the distinctiveness of this documentary, both in terms of content and presentation as well as in research and organization, when he noted:

I can honestly tell you that the way we went about making this documentary probably does not apply to any other documentary that’s ever been made. Without fear of contradiction, I can say that it wouldn’t hold for any other film because of circumstances at the time and because of the people involved in the making of it. . . . [The conventions regarding] the making of documentaries or the use of music in film don’t match what we did with \textit{Jack Johnson}. It’s unique.

Bodian cited the nature of the soundtrack, in particular, as setting this documentary apart from more traditional approaches. Not only was the music intentionally non-diegetic, but it explicitly avoided the sonic conventions of the historical period that the documentary’s subject occupies. Although the documentary is set chronologically between the first decade of the twentieth century and Johnson’s death in 1946, the soundtrack makes no attempt to recreate the musical styles or instrumental sounds from that period. Bodian acknowledged that he was intentionally avoiding period-specific music – what he described as “that goddamned banjo music they use for early films” – because, “In 1970 no one would have chosen Miles Davis [to recreate the musical styles of] . . . 1912 or 1915 or that period.” Instead, although Bodian

makes no claim to have attempted to influence the music that Davis created for the
documentary, he was well aware when he recruited Davis that he was creating a
decidedly modern, electric-based music. Bodian was intrigued by Davis’s music in part
because it could function as what he termed a type of “counterpoint” to the film’s
historical era, utilizing the sonic contrast to draw attention to Johnson’s relevance for the
current moment. Davis’s decidedly modern style of playing – including the use of
electric instruments, instrumental effects, rhythms influenced by popular music, and
repeated bass riffs – helped locate the film sonically in the context of the cultural and
racial politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

However, as Rouff points out in the argument above, the use of contemporary
non-diegetic music for the documentary necessitated consideration of the various
copyright laws that applied to Davis’s studio recordings, since Columbia Records legally
owned the rights to those recordings. This issue was first raised at Columbia early in the
summer of 1970, shortly after Bodian first approached Davis with the soundtrack offer.
In a memo written on May 15 of that year to Dennis Katz, Columbia’s Director of
Business Affairs, Teo Macero noted:

Miles has written and recorded enough music to put together for a feature film
produced by William Cayton and Jim Jacobs entitled Jack Johnson. These men
produced the film Legendary Champions which was nominated for an Academy
Award in 1969 and for which they won the Gold Medal at the Atlanta Film
Festival in 1969. On what basis can we proceed to grant them permission to use
Miles’s material and what are the chances of Columbia releasing the soundtrack? Please advise.\textsuperscript{21}

This conversation continued over the next few days as Katz, Macero, and Cayton began working out the details of this agreement. The next written documentation of the negotiation comes from May 21, when Katz wrote to Cayton:

Dear Bill: It was good speaking to you the other day. I look forward to hearing from you again with regard to a screening of \textit{Jack Johnson}. As discussed, if we forego a soundtrack album, we will license our recordings to you at a fee to be settled upon between us. Naturally, if we decide to release a soundtrack album the arrangement is totally different. I look forward to hearing from you. Cordially yours, Dennis Katz\textsuperscript{22}

With this letter, Katz acknowledges Columbia’s decision to allow Davis to contribute music for the soundtrack while maintaining the possibility for a related stand-alone album to be released in the future. With the agreement in place, \textit{Jack Johnson} saw its release in theaters some two weeks later, on June 4, 1970. Just over eight months after that, on February 24, 1971, Columbia released the related stand-alone album that both Macero and Katz mention in the above memos.\textsuperscript{23} According to Bodian, the delay between the two releases was the result of Columbia’s hesitance regarding the financial

\textsuperscript{21} Teo Macero, May 15, 1970 memo to Dennis Katz, (Macero Collection, NYPL: Box 13, Folder 18).
\textsuperscript{22} Dennis Katz, May 21, 1970 letter to William D. Cayton, (Macero Collection, NYPL: Box 13, Folder 18).
viability of an album associated with a documentary. He argues that only once the documentary began to garner critical and popular attention did Columbia decide to release a stand-alone album. The film’s nomination for an Oscar for best feature documentary at the 43rd Annual Academy Awards, along with other encouraging critical attention, convinced Columbia that the documentary’s reception was positive enough to facilitate the popular success of a related album.\(^\text{24}\) Columbia saw the Oscar nomination, in particular, as a valuable opportunity to draw attention to a related album, and they timed the release of the album to coincide with the official announcement of Oscar nominations in late February 1971.\(^\text{25}\) As I argued in Chapter Four, this attempt to link the album with the documentary took a number of forms. The album was released to coincide chronologically with the nomination announcement, and both its title and its initial cover were dominated by visual and linguistic references to Jack Johnson.

Columbia’s initial indecision regarding the commercial viability of a stand-alone album is not surprising in light of their ongoing discussions from the period regarding


\(^{25}\) Although the ceremony was held on April 15, 1971, nominations for those awards were officially announced two months prior, on February 22, 1971. See Warga, “Love Story,” p. A3.
how to market Davis most effectively to a broader audience. Would the music’s association with a boxing documentary contribute to increased album sales? What audience would this documentary reach that was not already being reached through the extensive marketing campaigns Columbia currently had in place? Would the documentary be released on a national level, allowing a large number of people to see the film and hear the accompanying music? Finally, how prominent a part in the film’s credits would Davis and his music be given?

These questions were all the more important at the time due to Davis’s relative inexperience in creating music for a film soundtrack. Prior to this documentary, Davis had worked on only one other soundtrack in his career, providing music for the French film *Ascenseur pour l’échafaud* (1957), directed by Louis Malle. Davis had agreed to create the Malle soundtrack as a way to fill his schedule after some performance dates were cancelled during a European tour the last two months of 1957. On December 4, Davis led a quintet comprising Barney Wilen (tenor sax), René Urtreger (piano), Pierre Michelot (bass), and Kenny Clarke (drums) in an improvisationally-based recording

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26 Shortly after the release of *Jack Johnson*, Davis was approached about contributing music to an upcoming documentary by William Greaves, but the legal details could not be worked out. This was likely the documentary *Ali, the Fighter*, which Greaves produced in 1971. This seems to be the event that Ian Carr mistakenly attributes to the *Jack Johnson* documentary in his biography of Davis (p. 294). See Charles Musser and Adam Knee, “William Greaves, Documentary Filmmaking, and the African-American Experience” in *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora: Diversity, Dependence, and Oppositionality*, ed. Michael T. Martin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), pp. 389-404; and Ralph J. Tangney, January 27, 1971 letter to Teo Macero (Macero Collection, NYPL: Box 17, Folder 10). For a discussion of the seventeen total films on which Davis’s music had appeared as of 2004, see Krin Gabbard, “Miles from Home: Miles Davis and the Movies” *The Source: Challenging Jazz Criticism* 1/4 (2004), pp. 27-41.
session for the purpose of creating music for the film. The quintet would watch a portion of the film in the studio, and Davis would then set the parameters for the group’s improvisation in relation to that particular scene. The band would then improvise while each specific segment of the film was replayed in real time. The band created the entire soundtrack in this way in a single recording session. The resulting film, nearly ninety-minutes in length, featured only eighteen minutes of music that was later released in the U.S. as one side of the 1958 compilation album Jazz Track.27

Unlike the Malle film, with Jack Johnson Davis was not actively referencing portions of the film during his recording sessions. According to Bodian, in fact, Davis’ first exposure to the film occurred only once the music had been added. He recalls, “Davis never saw the film until after they had done the mix. He had never seen a foot of the film. Nothing. So . . . no, he did not work from the film at all [in the recording studio]. The music was put in later.” The other musicians involved in the recording sessions have implicitly affirmed Bodian’s recollection, never mentioning the film or knowledge of the film when discussing those recording sessions.28 The relationship, or lack thereof, between the documentary’s musical and visual components has been the focus of several critical comments. In an early review, for example, Doug Ramsey noted,

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28 See the musicians’ discussions of the April 7 session in, e.g., Gregg Hall, “Miles,” pp. 16-20; Milkowski, “John McLaughlin” in Rockers, p. 166-181; and Tingen, Miles Beyond, pp. 103-108.
“As background for the film, the music is frequently appropriate. At other times it seems the record session must have been held independently of the film making; the music just doesn’t fit.”

Jack Chambers similarly argued, “There is no feeling that Davis tailored his improvisations to the finished film.” Bodian himself is careful to acknowledge that some aspects of the relationship between the music and the film were “serendipitous” because the two were created independently of each other. He maintains total support for the final outcome, arguing that the combination of music and image “worked out perfectly.”

Although Davis had been actively recording throughout the first few months of 1970, evidence suggests that he was not aware of the film prior to the April 7 session, and even then he had not yet seen the documentary and would not have been able to craft music to coincide with the visuals. He did not create specific music to accompany particular scenes in the documentary, but instead he organized an improvisationally-based jam session as I described in Chapter One. This session resulted in over one hundred minutes of music which, when combined with unused studio material from the


31 According to Paul Tingen, “It’s unknown at what point exactly Miles was asked by director William Cayton to supply the music for his motion picture about Jack Johnson, but according to Macero, the trumpeter did have this in his mind for the next session, on April 7.” See Tingen, “The Jack Johnson Sessions.”
previous twelve sessions, totaled over twelve hours of available material for use as the soundtrack.\textsuperscript{32} However, while only the music from April 7 could have been even indirectly influenced by the idea of the documentary, that music still was not created to coincide with any of the film’s specific content. Instead, at the conclusion of the April 7 session, Davis had created hours of material that would then need to be revisited in light of the documentary in order to determine which music would be most appropriate for use as the soundtrack.

After the session, however, Davis’s upcoming tour schedule prevented him from allocating the necessary time to accomplish that task. Davis was apparently facing a deadline to submit the soundtrack, as on April 7 he requested that Macero offer his services to expedite the project’s completion. As Macero recalls, at the conclusion of the April 7 session:

Miles came to me and he said, “Hey Teo, I gotta go to California tomorrow.” I said, “Well good, have a good time.” He said, “No, but I got a picture to do.” I said, “A picture?” He said, “Yeah, a picture. I got 3,000 bucks. I’ll give you 1,500.” I said, “You got a deal.” So I put together the Jack Johnson thing.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{32} As I discussed in Chapter One, Davis was in the studio in 1970 on the following dates: January 27, 28; February 6, 18, 27; March 3, 17, 20; and April 7. Additionally, Davis’s recordings from November 19 and 28, 1969 had not yet appeared on a recording. See Losin, “Miles Davis Sessions: 1945-1991.” The February 18 session resulted in roughly forty minutes of usable material, in addition to the four hours of available music recorded at the sessions on February 27 and March 3, 17, and 20. There was also a combined five hours of music on unused session tapes from the remaining dates in January and February 1970, and November 1969. These figures are based on the track timings found on the unedited session tapes from the 1970 sessions, \textit{The Complete Jack Johnson Sessions} (Sony, 2003), and \textit{The Complete Bitches Brew Sessions} (Sony, 1998).

\textsuperscript{33} Teo Macero, “Editing and Mixing.” See also Bill Murphy, “Raging Bullhorn,” p. 36.
As Macero’s recollection implies, Davis was scheduled for a four-night engagement at the Fillmore West in San Francisco from April 9-12, just two days after the April 7 recording session. He had then agreed to perform in California throughout the remainder of April, including concerts at the University of California Jazz Festival on April 24 and the Both/And Club on April 28. It was not until early May that Davis would return to New York to lead five additional studio recording dates between May 19 and June 4. 34 As Macero recalls, Davis’s upcoming touring schedule would impede his ability to be directly involved in constructing the soundtrack, since his concerts in California would prevent timely access to the New York studios where Columbia housed his recording archive. In order to meet the project’s deadlines, Davis enlisted Macero to begin the work of selecting music for the documentary.

Macero accepted Davis’s offer, and in early April he was put in contact with Alan Bodian to begin the process of pairing music to image. As the primary researcher for the documentary and as the person who initially recruited Davis for the project, Bodian was a key figure in determining how music was to function in the documentary. Macero and Bodian, in fact, worked together in carrying out the music selection and tape editing for the soundtrack. According to Bodian, Macero organized listening sessions for him at one of Columbia’s studios and provided him with the tapes from

which the soundtrack was to be constructed. Due to tight recording and production
schedules at Columbia’s studios, it was difficult to gain extensive access to a room
where listening sessions could be held. Macero was able to schedule a few two to three
hour blocks of time for Bodian to work through Davis’s material, but the available time
would not allow for detailed listening to the more than twelve hours of available session
reels. Macero thus narrowed down the session material prior to Bodian’s work with the
tapes, eliminating the material that he felt would not be conducive to the soundtrack,
including the studio chatter and false starts that were prominent throughout the
sessions. Bodian then worked with the previously-edited tapes, choosing specific music
to accompany specific scenes from the film. As he recalls the process:

There were these master tapes at Columbia Records of Davis’s recording
sessions. Teo Macero set up some sessions for me where I sat by the hour and
listened to those tapes and picked out the music that I thought would fit certain
scenes in the [Jack Johnson] film. I’d listen to those master tapes and think to
myself, “Well this music will fit this scene.” And I made copious notes, and I
was careful to write down exactly where on this tape it came from or that tape.

After Bodian selected the specific music to accompany each scene, Macero was
responsible for overseeing the actual processes of tape splicing, overdubbing, and other
production work that resulted in the final mix. Although Bodian recalls his own
centrality in initially selecting the music, the final product shows significant
involvement by Macero. The post-production tape manipulation as well as the
overdubbing involving tone generators and orchestrated wind ensembles are in line
with the production techniques Macero would employ in his work on the stand-alone

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album. On the soundtrack, for example, Macero utilizes two portions of a solo drum performance by Jack DeJohnette, recorded during the February 18 session. As the unedited session tapes reveal, DeJohnette had first experimented for just over three minutes with the cymbal-heavy rhythm, included below as Figure 22, at a tempo of roughly 146 beats per minute. He subsequently experimented for nearly another seven minutes with the pattern included below as Figure 23 at a tempo of approximately 110 beats per minute. In both cases, DeJohnette regularly returned to the foundational patterns transcribed below, although he also consistently used the second half of each relative pattern as an opportunity to experiment with different drum fills and rhythmic accents.

![Figure 22: DeJohnette’s February 18 Drumming (part one)](image1)

![Figure 23: DeJohnette’s February 18 Drumming (part two)](image2)

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35 See Chapter Two for a detailed analysis of Macero’s production work on the stand-alone album. See also Bill Murphy, “Tapes ‘n’ Tapes.”
In one appearance of the figure, DeJohnette’s solo drumming accompanies a scene unrelated to the documentary’s narrative in which Charlie Chaplin is featured in a comedy routine that is set as a boxing match between the undersized Chaplin and a decidedly muscular opponent. The first portion of the scene features a selection from the Figure 23 solo, sped up from the original 110 beats per minute to roughly 148 beats per minute. Both the tempo and pitch of the drums are increased in an apparent attempt to match the intensity of Chaplin’s boxing match. At the climax of the scene, when Chaplin knocks out his oversized opponent in part by inserting a horseshoe into his boxing glove, the drumming represented in Figure 22 is used, and the tempo is again increased from the original 146 to nearly 350 beats per minute. Both cases involve significant tape editing, including splicing and looping, and both draw upon tempo and pitch manipulation of recorded segments that suggest Macero’s involvement in the production process for the film’s soundtrack.

By the time Macero and Bodian completed their work on the soundtrack, Davis had returned from his concert tour in California. Macero invited Bodian and Davis to listen to the final mix in order to ensure that it met with their approval. According to

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36 This occurs from 43.58-45.34 of the documentary. The first portion of the scene is roughly 43.58-45.18, while the second portion comprises the remaining sixteen seconds.
Bodian, this was the occasion when Davis first heard the music arranged as a
soundtrack. As he describes the meeting:

I’ll never forget this as long as I live. Teo Macero had put the whole soundtrack
together in rough form, and then he was going for a final mix, and he invited me
over. Now you have to understand there’s no formal setting there. It’s inside an
engineer’s studio. All these dials and stuff like that around. And I was sitting in
this chair listening to the final mix. Davis had just come in for the first time to
hear it – he had never heard it; any of it. And he comes behind me and he puts
his hands under my chin, and he says, “That’s absolutely beautiful.”

Bodian recalls being struck by Davis’s emotional response to the organization of
the soundtrack. With this meeting, Davis, Macero, and Bodian all agreed that the
soundtrack was complete, and the music was ready to be added to the film. This
represented the final step in the more than two year process of researching and creating
the documentary. Shortly after this meeting, in early June 1970, Jack Johnson was
released to a significant level of critical acclaim. Once Columbia made the decision to
release a stand-alone album, Bodian recalls that Macero contacted him again to be
reminded of the specific segments and specific master tapes that Bodian had drawn
upon for the soundtrack. As he recalls:

When Columbia Records came to the conclusion after the film came out that they
wanted to do an album, then Macero got in touch with me. At that point, they
needed me because I knew where the music came from. I had copious notes and
I had written it all down, and I told him exactly where on this tape it came from
and that tape.

While locating the soundtrack material on the master tapes may have been an
important first step in creating the stand-alone album, the album’s release in February
## Miles Davis’s Music Used in the *Jack Johnson* Documentary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session Date</th>
<th>Album</th>
<th>Track</th>
<th>Track Time Code</th>
<th>Film Time Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td><em>Jack Johnson</em></td>
<td>“Right Off”</td>
<td>1.59-5.14</td>
<td>0.00-3.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td><em>JJ</em></td>
<td>“Right Off”</td>
<td>5.27-5.40</td>
<td>3.32-3.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>“Right Off” (take 11)</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>3.57-5.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>JJ</em></td>
<td>“Right Off”</td>
<td>16.40-16.46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb 18, 1969</td>
<td><em>In a Silent Way</em> (JJ insert)</td>
<td>“Shhh/Peaceful”</td>
<td>1.40-2.45 ($ISW$), 13.04-14.05 ($JJ$); w/ overdubbed strings</td>
<td>8.45-9.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>“Right Off” (take 11)</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>10.07-10.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug 20, 1969</td>
<td><em>Bitches Brew</em></td>
<td>“Miles Runs Voodoo Down”</td>
<td>0.30-1.44</td>
<td>10.54-12.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td><em>JJ</em></td>
<td>“Right Off”</td>
<td>0.36-1.50</td>
<td>16.11-17.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td><em>JJ</em></td>
<td>“Right Off”</td>
<td>15.00-16.46, 17.10-17.20, 12.05-13.30; w/ loops</td>
<td>17.53-21.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug 20, 1969</td>
<td><em>BB</em></td>
<td>“Miles Runs Voodoo Down”</td>
<td>1.50-2.50</td>
<td>21.50-22.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td><em>JJ</em></td>
<td>“Right Off”</td>
<td>14.00-14.55</td>
<td>23.13-24.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb 6, 1970</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>“Double Image”</td>
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<td>24.55-25.07</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aug 21, 1969</td>
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<td>“Pharoah’s Dance”</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>29.04-29.45</td>
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<td>Aug 20, 1969</td>
<td><em>BB</em></td>
<td>“Miles Runs Voodoo Down”</td>
<td>1.56-2.53</td>
<td>31.02-31.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td><em>JJ</em></td>
<td>“Right Off”</td>
<td>17.39-18.30; w/ 12-13 seconds not on album</td>
<td>32.06-33.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug 20, 1969</td>
<td><em>BB</em></td>
<td>“Miles Runs Voodoo Down”</td>
<td>0.00-3.35, edited</td>
<td>33.35-34.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td><em>JJ</em></td>
<td>“Right Off”</td>
<td>6.35-10.42; w/ 4-5 seconds at the end that are not on album</td>
<td>34.58-39.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb 18, 1970</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>none: DeJohnette solo</td>
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<td>39.28-40.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb 18, 1970</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>none: DeJohnette solo</td>
<td>none: tape sped up from original</td>
<td>43.58-45.34</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aug 19, 1969</td>
<td><em>BB</em></td>
<td>“Sanctuary”</td>
<td>0.02-0.39</td>
<td>45.34-46.11</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>“Yesternow”</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>46.11-47.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb 18, 1970</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>none: DeJohnette solo</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>47.35-47.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug 19, 1969</td>
<td><em>BB</em></td>
<td>“Sanctuary”</td>
<td>0.39-1.16</td>
<td>48.32-49.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb 18, 1969</td>
<td><em>ISW (JJ insert)</em></td>
<td>“Shhh/Peaceful”</td>
<td>0.08-0.53, 4.32-4.49, 0.53-3.36 ($ISW$); 12.24-14.05 ($JJ$) w/ edits</td>
<td>49.09-52.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb 18, 1970</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>“Willie Nelson”</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>54.23-56.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feb 18, 1970</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>“Willie Nelson”</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>56.22-56.40</td>
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<td>Feb 18, 1970</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>none: DeJohnette solo</td>
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<td>56.40-57.15</td>
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<td>Feb 18, 1970</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>“Willie Nelson”</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>57.48-58.01</td>
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<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td><em>JJ</em></td>
<td>“Yesternow”</td>
<td>1.08-2.17</td>
<td>58.01-59.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td><em>JJ</em></td>
<td>“Right Off”</td>
<td>12.10-13.55, with 10-12 seconds not on album</td>
<td>59.23-61.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 24: Davis’s Music Used in the Documentary*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session Date</th>
<th>Album</th>
<th>Track</th>
<th>Track Time Code</th>
<th>Film Time Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nov 19 or 28, 1969</td>
<td>JJ</td>
<td>none: Davis solo, wind ens.</td>
<td>album material, different overdub, w/ new 4-5 second tpt insert</td>
<td>68.52-70.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug 21, 1969</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>“Spanish Key”</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>70.30-72.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb 18, 1970</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>“Willie Nelson”</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>72.04-72.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 19/28, 1969</td>
<td>JJ</td>
<td>none: Davis solo, wind ens.</td>
<td>album material, w/o wind ensemble accomp</td>
<td>72.35-73.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb 18, 1969</td>
<td>ISW (JJ insert)</td>
<td>“Shhh/Peaceful”</td>
<td>1.40-4.30 (ISW), 12.24-14.05 (JJ); w/ loops</td>
<td>73.20-76.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>“Right Off” (take 10A)</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>77.38-78.49</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td>JJ</td>
<td>“Yesternow”</td>
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<td>79.22-79.48</td>
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<td>none</td>
<td>none: DeJohnette solo</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>82.25-82.50</td>
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<td>Aug 20, 1969</td>
<td>BB</td>
<td>“Miles Runs Voodoo Down”</td>
<td>1.26-1.34</td>
<td>82.51-82.59</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nov 19 or 28, 1969</td>
<td>JJ</td>
<td>none: Davis solo, wind ens.</td>
<td>album material, different overdub</td>
<td>83.07-83.43</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aug 21, 1969</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>“Spanish Key”</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>86.03-87.46</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

[87.46 END] [48 minutes, 52 seconds of total music]

Figure 24 Continued: Davis’s Music Used in the Documentary
1971 made it clear that the album was not simply a recreation of the material from the soundtrack. Instead, there were significant differences between the musical selections used on the soundtrack and those used on the stand-alone album. Doug Ramsey referenced one such difference in his 1971 album review where he noted, “In the *Jack Johnson* film, a stunning drum solo accompanies a Charlie Chaplin silent movie boxing routine thrown in as atmosphere, but that solo is missing from the album, as is other incidental music.”37 As Figure 24 demonstrates above, this drum solo was only one of the many differences between the musical content and organization of the two.

The stand-alone album material, as discussed in Chapter Two, was taken almost exclusively from the February 18 and April 7 sessions. When it came to constructing the soundtrack, however, Bodian and Macero drew upon a significantly expanded archive of source material. Of the nearly forty-nine minutes of total music on the film, just under twenty-six minutes – or roughly fifty-three percent – also appears on the stand-alone album. Thus, nearly half of the music on the soundtrack was not utilized in constructing the stand-alone album. This additional material was taken either from portions of the February 18 and April 7 sessions that would not be used for the album, or from altogether different recording sessions held on other dates. Figures 25 and 26 below clarify the similarities and differences between the music used on the stand-alone

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### Music on Both Soundtrack and Stand-Alone Album

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session Date</th>
<th>Track</th>
<th>Track Time Code</th>
<th>Film Time Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td>“Right Off”</td>
<td>1.59-5.14</td>
<td>0.00-3.19</td>
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<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td>“Right Off”</td>
<td>5.27-5.40</td>
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<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td>“Right Off”</td>
<td>16.40-16.46</td>
<td>4.57-5.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb 18, 1969</td>
<td>“Shhh/Peaceful”</td>
<td>13.04-14.05; w/ overdubbed strings</td>
<td>8.49-9.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td>“Right Off”</td>
<td>0.36-1.50</td>
<td>16.11-17.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td>“Right Off”</td>
<td>15.00-16.46, 17.10-17.20, 12.05-13.30; w/ loops</td>
<td>17.53-21.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td>“Right Off”</td>
<td>14.00-14.55</td>
<td>23.13-24.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td>“Right Off”</td>
<td>17.39-18.30; w/ 12-13 seconds not on album</td>
<td>32.06-33.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td>“Right Off”</td>
<td>6.35-10.42, w/ 4-5 seconds at the end that are not on album</td>
<td>34.58-39.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb 18, 1969</td>
<td>“Shhh/Peaceful”</td>
<td>12.24-14.05</td>
<td>51.14-52.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td>“Yesternow”</td>
<td>1.08-2.17</td>
<td>58.01-59.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td>“Right Off”</td>
<td>12.10-13.55, with 10-12 seconds not on album</td>
<td>59.23-61.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 19 or 28, 1969</td>
<td>none: Davis solo, wind ens.</td>
<td>album material, different overdub, w/ new 4-5 second tpt insert</td>
<td>68.52-70.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 19 or 28, 1969</td>
<td>none: Davis solo, no wind ens.</td>
<td>album material, w/o wind ensemble accomp</td>
<td>72.35-73.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb 18, 1969</td>
<td>“Shhh/Peaceful”</td>
<td>12.24-14.05 (L)</td>
<td>74.28-76.09</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 7, 1970</td>
<td>“Yesternow”</td>
<td>2.17-2.47, edited</td>
<td>79.22-79.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 19 or 28, 1969</td>
<td>none: Davis solo, wind ens.</td>
<td>album material, different overdub</td>
<td>83.07-83.43</td>
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[87.46 END] [25 minutes, 49 seconds total]
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<th>Track</th>
<th>Track Time Code</th>
<th>Film Time Code</th>
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<td>“Right Off” (take 11)</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>3.57-4.57</td>
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<td>Feb 18, 1969</td>
<td><em>In a Silent Way</em></td>
<td>“Shhh/Peaceful”</td>
<td>1.40-1.44, w/ overdubbed strings</td>
<td>8.45-8.49</td>
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<tr>
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<td>none</td>
<td>“Right Off” (take 11)</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>10.07-10.53</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aug 20, 1969</td>
<td><em>Bitches Brew</em></td>
<td>“Miles Runs Voodoo Down”</td>
<td>0.30-1.44</td>
<td>10.54-12.08</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aug 20, 1969</td>
<td><em>BB</em></td>
<td>“Miles Runs Voodoo Down”</td>
<td>1.50-2.50</td>
<td>21.50-22.56</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feb 6, 1970</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>“Double Image”</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>24.55-25.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug 21, 1969</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>“Pharaoh’s Dance”</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>29.04-29.45</td>
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<td>Aug 20, 1969</td>
<td><em>BB</em></td>
<td>“Miles Runs Voodoo Down”</td>
<td>1.56-2.53</td>
<td>31.02-31.59</td>
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<td><em>BB</em></td>
<td>“Miles Runs Voodoo Down”</td>
<td>0.00-3.35, edited</td>
<td>33.35-34.29</td>
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<td>49.09-51.14</td>
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<td>57.48-58.01</td>
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<td>“Spanish Key”</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>70.30-72.01</td>
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<td>72.04-72.30</td>
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<td><em>ISW</em></td>
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<td>73.20-74.28</td>
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<td>none</td>
<td>“Spanish Key”</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>86.03-87.46</td>
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Figure 26: Music on Soundtrack not Appearing on Stand-Alone Album
album and that on the soundtrack. Figure 25 highlights the music that the two held in common while Figure 26 highlights their musical differences.

Jack DeJohnette’s drum solo, transcribed above in Figures 22 and 23, illustrates the use of material recorded on February 18 or April 7 on the soundtrack that was not included on the stand-alone album. As the unedited session tapes demonstrate, DeJohnette performed this unaccompanied drum solo at the beginning of the February 18 session as a part of a ten-minute warm-up that doubled as an opportunity for the engineers to set up microphones for the drums and adjust the various input levels. DeJohnette played the two drum patterns as they appear on the soundtrack and also utilized the opportunity to practice several variations on those patterns. This initial practice session, and in particular the pattern represented in Figure 23, was the basis for the rhythms DeJohnette would incorporate into the ensemble playing that took place later in the February 18 session. Roughly twenty seconds of this ensemble performance would appear on the track “Yesternow” from the stand-alone album, a general sketch of which appears below as Figure 27.  

38 This occurs at 18.35-18.55 of the stand-alone album. While I have included a transcription of John McLaughlin’s guitar playing here, I have not included Sonny Sharrock’s contributions to the ensemble texture, as his sonic input defies expression within traditional music transcription.
For the soundtrack, however, Macero and Bodian chose not to use the ensemble performance from “Yesternow,” opting instead to draw upon DeJohnette’s solo practice session that began the February 18 session. As Figure 24 above demonstrates, segments of this drum solo appear five different times on the soundtrack, including the occurrence described above in which Macero spliced, looped, and increased the tempo and the pitch of the solo material.

In other cases, there is significant overlap between the portion of a recording session used for both the soundtrack and the stand-alone album. For example, both the soundtrack and the album draw upon material recorded roughly forty-five minutes into the April 7 session. Sixty-four seconds of this material is present in the documentary while only fifty-one seconds of that same material occurs as a part of the stand-alone
album on “Right Off.” A subsequent thirteen seconds of material from the April 7 session, then, appears on the soundtrack but not on the stand-alone album. In some cases when the same portion of the recording session is used for both the soundtrack and the stand-alone album, Macero has spliced the material so that it is presented in a different order on each. For example, as depicted in Figure 28 below, three excerpts of material recorded during the April 7 session are arranged differently on the soundtrack and on the stand-alone album. In the figure, the horizontally-striped section represents a soprano sax solo by Steve Grossman over a B-flat accompaniment by Henderson, McLaughlin, and Cobham, while the vertically-striped section represents a portion of Herbie Hancock’s organ solo over the same groove. The diagonally-striped section is again based on the B-flat groove, now with Hancock comping as a fourth member of the rhythm section, with Miles Davis contributing a climactic portion of his trumpet solo. The gray area represents a variety of ongoing music, not necessarily shared in common among the three iterations identified below.

In addition to this use of material from February 18 and April 7, Macero and Bodian also drew upon other recording sessions from 1969 and 1970 when constructing the soundtrack. Ten musical segments, for example, equating to roughly nine and a half

39 The material occurs in the documentary at 32.06-33.10 and in the stand-alone album at 17.39-18.30.
minutes of material, were culled from the August 19-21, 1969 sessions for the *Bitches Brew* album. In seven of these cases, the soundtrack material had already been released as a part of *Bitches Brew*. In three cases, however, Macero and Bodian drew upon alternate takes of music from “Pharaoh’s Dance” and “Spanish Key” for use on the soundtrack.\(^{40}\) In three additional cases, totaling three minutes and seventeen seconds of the soundtrack, Macero and Bodian utilized portions of music from the album *In a Silent Way*, recorded February 18, 1969, that were not used on the stand-alone album *A Tribute to Jack Johnson*.\(^{41}\) Finally, for an additional twelve second portion of the soundtrack, Macero and Bodian incorporated a selection from the recording of “Double Image” that

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\(^{40}\) Those three cases are: 29.04-29.45, 70.30-72.01, and 86.03-87.46.

\(^{41}\) Those appear on the soundtrack at: 8.45-8.49, 49.09-51.14, and 73.20-74.28.
had taken place on February 6, 1970 and that would not appear as a part of any commercial album release.\textsuperscript{42}

When Macero was making the initial decisions about which master tapes to supply to Bodian for his listening sessions, he included material recorded as far back as February 1969. Moreover, the fact that some such material had already appeared as a part of the albums \textit{In a Silent Way} and \textit{Bitches Brew} did not rule out its potential use on the \textit{Jack Johnson} soundtrack. As I pointed out in Chapter Two, Macero used a similar approach when constructing the stand-alone album, including music that had previously appeared as a part of \textit{In a Silent Way}. However, with the \textit{Jack Johnson} stand-alone album, Macero expanded his available sonic palette beyond the material drawn upon for the soundtrack, resulting in two related but distinct musical entities. Thus, the soundtrack and the stand-alone album emerge as individual musical statements in which nearly half of the musical material appearing on one does not appear on the other.

The \textit{Jack Johnson} documentary resulted from a series of collaborations, beginning with William Cayton and Jim Jacobs’ mutual devotion to boxing and mutual interest in collecting fight films. Alan Bodian utilized their film library, along with his own additional research, as the basis for selecting visual images and crafting a narrative for

\textsuperscript{42} This occupies 24.55-25.07 of the documentary.
the film. Bodian additionally played an integral role in constructing the soundtrack, first soliciting Miles Davis to contribute the music and then working with Teo Macero to see that music and image were appropriately paired. The care that went into this work helped enable the documentary’s critical success, which in turn motivated Columbia to release the related stand-alone album. Thus, Bodian’s collaborative work, first with Cayton and Jacobs and later with Davis and Macero, helped to ensure that Davis’s musical creations found use on two fronts: first as accompaniment to a visual documentary and second as an independent sonic entity that found relevance beyond any specific visual references.
Final Reflections

After its initial release, the Jack Johnson documentary appeared in theaters in the U.S. throughout 1970 and 1971. The documentary then gradually faded into obscurity, and it is no longer commercially available as of this writing. In a commercial reversal, while the stand-alone album was released in 1971 to relatively tepid initial sales, it has garnered increased popular and critical appraisal in the past few years, particularly since Sony’s 2003 release of The Complete Jack Johnson sessions.¹ In the aftermath of the 2003 release, Miles Davis was posthumously inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, at least in part as an acknowledgement of the cross-genre influence Davis’s playing since the late 1960s had exerted on rock-based musicians.² In the first decade of the 21st century, Miles Davis’s early fusion jazz, and the Jack Johnson album in particular, has experienced a new wave of popular and critical interest.

Notably, in the first decade of the 21st century as well, the image of Jack Johnson has been further publicized – if not politicized – through the release of the documentary and related book-length biography of Johnson by Ken Burns and Geoffrey Ward, titled

Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson. Burns is a controversial figure among jazz scholars and musicians as a result of his 2001 documentary Jazz. This ten-part, nineteen-hour long series has been praised for drawing attention to jazz but criticized in part for the historically and stylistically circumscribed definition it offers of the music. Burns’s inclusion of Wynton Marsalis and Stanley Crouch as commentators in the documentary has helped to establish it as a lightning rod for controversy. This is particularly true for those who value the post-1950s jazz styles, such as free jazz and fusion jazz, that were marginalized in Burns’s documentary. After the Jazz documentary, Marsalis and Burns continued their collaboration with Unforgivable Blackness in which Marsalis contributed not only as an on-screen commentator but also as the composer of the film’s soundtrack.

A comparison of the 1970 Cayton documentary and the 2004 Burns documentary clarifies the ways in which the two have come to symbolize two notably different perspectives on the trajectory of jazz since the 1960s. While both documentaries are similar in their portrayal of a heroic image of Johnson, they could not differ more in the symbolic and stylistic content of their soundtracks. The Cayton soundtrack contains the


popular music-influenced performances organized by Miles Davis that have served as exemplars of early fusion jazz and have formed the basis for the current dissertation. This soundtrack, in making extensive use of the instruments, rhythms, and riff-driven harmonies associated in 1970 with popular music, reached beyond the sonic boundaries of the film’s historical era. The Burns soundtrack, on the other hand, was created by one of the most prominent spokespersons for the neoclassicist movement in jazz, which in part rejects the place of fusion in the broader trajectory of jazz history. Marsalis based this soundtrack on the period-specific sounds that characterized the film’s chronological scope, reaching back in spirit if not always in practice to the 1910s and 1920s. These two soundtracks combine to offer a stark example of two fundamentally different approaches both to soundtrack composition and to the very idea of “jazz” and “the jazz tradition.”

Gabriel Solis has argued that recordings take on particular meanings in jazz’s history only when specific groups of listeners interact with those recordings.\(^5\) Heard in the twenty-first century, the Marsalis and Davis soundtracks offer jazz listeners an opportunity to rally behind two very different ideas of “what jazz is, and isn’t,” to draw upon the title of an earlier Marsalis article.\(^6\) For those who embrace what Marsalis’s

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\(^5\) As Solis puts it, “Recordings have a presence and meaning in the jazz community only because and to the extent that they are currently invoked and engaged by the community.” See Solis, “A Unique Chunk,” p. 340.

soundtrack symbolizes, jazz emphasizes tradition, swing, and the blues, and it is largely defined in terms of a particular musical aesthetic that reached its developmental apex in the 1950s. For those who embrace what Davis’s soundtrack symbolizes, jazz is understood as constantly evolving, both influencing and being influenced by the variety of musics contemporaneous with a given era.

The ongoing debate engendered by these two positions has often moved beyond notions of musical style to incorporate hypotheses regarding musicians’ motives as they relate to constructions of musical integrity. Specifically, this debate has regularly centered on the question of whether fusion jazz should be considered a part of the broader jazz tradition, or whether it should be dismissed as an anomalous moment during which musicians in a previous era were drawn away from the alleged artistic purity of the genre in search of commercial gain. The frame itself creates a problematic dichotomy, positing a stereotyped noble autonomous tradition against an ostensibly corrupting commercial arena. Nevertheless, it has remained a prominent distinction in historiographical debates among jazz listeners throughout the past several decades.

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8 See Tomlinson, “Cultural Dialogics and Jazz,” pp. 64-94 for a summary of, and a response to, such a position.
Fusion jazz’s reception and valuation in the early 1970s were far less circumscribed by financial and commercial concerns than critics have since argued. Instead, as I have demonstrated through this dissertation, listeners were more likely to discuss fusion jazz, and A Tribute to Jack Johnson in particular, in the contexts of instrument and studio technology, constructions of individual and group identity, and concerns over genre and appropriate marketing strategies. Developments in instrument technology had expanded musicians’ available timbral palettes while also impacting existing notions of instrumental virtuosity. At the same time, new recording technologies were challenging established norms of musical interaction and creativity in the studio. These technological developments were articulated with concerns over genre construction and artistic value, as many traditional jazz fans came to view new technologies not as mediations of sound’s creation but rather as threats to existing notions of artistic excellence and genre-based musical integrity.

In addition to discussions of technology’s impact on early fusion jazz, concerns in the early 1970s over identity politics resonated with Jack Johnson in at least two ways. First, this album drew upon the newly-emerging political meanings of “blackness” through both its musical content as well as the verbal discourse listeners attached to the music. Additionally, Miles Davis regularly sought to link this music to a particular construction of an aggressive masculinity by highlighting the ways in which boxing influenced his conceptualization of musical performance at the time. Finally, marketing
and commerce played a structural role in enabling and impacting this music’s circulation. While Davis maintained a primary interest in his music reaching an audience of African American youth, Columbia sought to maximize album sales by focusing instead on the broader white youth audience at the time. Moreover, it was Columbia’s belief in the album’s sales potential, motivated by the critical success of the related 1970 documentary, that initially convinced the company to release the stand-alone album.

In the early 1970s, commercialism was neither the only, nor even the most productive discourse through which listeners framed this album. When the issue of commerce was raised, in fact, it was most often done so by Columbia Records in the context of discussions concerned with maximizing album sales in order to ensure the company’s financial viability. Instead of uncovering a commerce-centric discourse, this study of the production, circulation, and reception of *A Tribute to Jack Johnson* in the early 1970s has demonstrated a greater diversity of perspectives from which listeners created significance through the album.

This dissertation thereby offers one approach for continuing the critical re-evaluation of fusion jazz that has prominently been in progress since the late 1990s. It is my hope that this study will provide interested listeners with new perspectives on the music’s significance, inspiring a productive re-engagement with this album and with
early fusion jazz more broadly. Moreover, I hope this study will invite interested scholars to interact with early fusion jazz, creating works that further defamiliarize some of the music’s ingrained narratives. Such scholarship would form a rewarding outcome for this dissertation, while also drawing further attention to those distinctive musical creations that have served to inspire and enable my own work.
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Biography

Jeremy Allen Smith was born in Simpsonville, South Carolina on October 24, 1976. He graduated with a Bachelor of Music Degree in Theory and Composition from the University of South Carolina’s Honors College (2000), a Master of Arts Degree in Theology from Regent University (2003), and a Master of Arts Degree in Musicology from Duke University (2005). His dissertation research has benefited from grants and fellowships awarded by Duke University, the Society for American Music, and the Mellon Foundation.