INTRODUCTION

Jazz, Place, and Heritage

Famous stages from historical jazz venues appeared in MacArthur Fellow Jason Moran’s multimedia exhibit for the 2015 Venice Biennale as works of art in themselves. STAGED, a project that involves both new music by the pianist and sculptures recreating stages from now-closed New York jazz spaces, has since turned up in several art exhibitions and museums in both Europe and the United States, placing audiences in situations that encourage them to engage aurally not only with the music they hear but also with the ideas evoked by the physical space from which the music is played. One sculpture represents an eighteen-foot-wide slice of Harlem’s Savoy Ballroom as it might have looked behind the likes of Chick Webb and Ella Fitzgerald while throngs of Lindy Hoppers moved on the dance floor. Part recreation drawn from old photographs and part Moran’s imagination, the stage wraps performers from behind and above with brilliantly reflective golden scallops and rich, intricately patterned fabric, giving an air of opulence to this depression-era escape into music and dancing once accessed via Lenox Avenue for as little as thirty cents. Yet undercutting that feeling of ease and relief are the recordings, piped through speakers built into the sculpture, of the sounds of a chain gang working outside a Louisiana prison—Moran seems to insist that we see the stage as belonging to a more complex story in a broader world. Another sculpture surrounds musicians with two walls and a ceiling representing the close quarters of the Three Deuces, a bebop-era venue on Manhattan’s 52nd-Street scene. The small stage pressed in a corner between padded walls mimics
the one that used to host Charlie Parker, Max Roach, and other bebop pioneers. Music pours forth from the exhibit’s Steinway Spirio, sometimes because Moran and his band are actively playing in the space, and sometimes in its player piano mode that sounds Moran’s music without his body. Music, memory, space, and presence are all served up as rich territory for contemplation, threads that overlap to weave contemporary jazz from a mix of history and innovation grounded in the physical spaces of its creation. Stages are more than empty containers to put autonomous musicians in; they are integral to the fabric of jazz. Considering the role venues play in the culture of jazz provides a means of understanding this music that can’t be accessed through sound alone. Moreover, these considerations now take place in the high art world of museums and galleries, rather than the sometimes-seedy clubs and juke joints of the 1920s jazz world or even the popular ballrooms or clubs like the Savoy or Three Deuces themselves. What follows is a close look at how the places in which jazz is heard contribute to both the sound of the music and the cultures that surround it through stories told in both historical sources and the voices of contemporary musicians. As Moran’s sculptures suggest, jazz venues not only host but also contribute to the creation and interpretation of jazz history.

“Man, if you have to ask, you’ll never know.” When I first encountered this popular (if unsubstantiated) bit of jazz wisdom, I was full of youthful enthusiasm for challenging, exciting sounds that enchanted me far before I could come close to playing or naming them, and I assumed Louis Armstrong was telling me that I should innately get jazz, in my soul, as some kind of fundamental moral relationship or ticket to hipness that I either held or didn’t. The more time I’ve spent with this music and the discourses that surround it, the more I’ve come to take these words from a different angle, as acceptance of the unknowable. The closer I have looked, the more jazz’s definition has come to appear as the heart of some kind of wobbly Venn diagram cobbled together from beach balls on a breezy day, constantly rearranged by a combination of inherent traits and external forces while also appearing completely different depending on the spot the viewer chooses to stand. A ball of swing might appear to overlap perfectly in the very center with others holding particular harmonies, improvisation, and one telling of jazz history, but only from one vantage point, and only for a moment. A few steps to the left or right or a little gust of wind lays some defining jazz features aside as others are pushed into alignment. The jazz of Louis Armstrong and the jazz of Pat Metheny can both look like the middle,
as can Ornette Coleman’s jazz and Nina Simone’s and Benny Goodman’s. These musics do not have to have any concrete defining features in common to all hold a place in jazz discourses, and the constant shuffling of sounds and ideas that brings each artist’s work into and out of the center has come, for me, to look like jazz’s only consistency, the constant changes and shifting niche cultures that both define it and make definition elusive.

This changeability and the constant redrawing of jazz’s boundaries are nowhere more apparent than in live performances, events that bring the relationship between the physical spaces and historical narratives into focus. While this book will not define jazz once and for all, it will provide five different recent snapshots of the music’s ever-shifting structures, taken from different vantage points and in different weather. By looking at a range of contemporary venues in which jazz is played and heard, the borders of the music and its defining traits remain flexible, but an interesting recent shift comes into focus, one that may prove to be as game-changing as jazz’s mid-twentieth-century lean away from popular culture and toward the high art world kicked off by the bebop generation. Sociologist Paul Lopes refers to the 1950s and ’60s as a “modern jazz renaissance” in which jazz was “firmly secured…as a major American art tradition.” By examining the language used to describe jazz from the music’s origins through the late twentieth century in trade magazines and eventually broader forms of media, Lopes identifies the late 1950s as the historical moment in which the idea of “a progressive jazz tradition from folk art, to popular art, to modernist high art” came to dominate the discourse.¹ Certainly related to its now well-established art credentials, jazz of the twenty-first century is found in noncommercial spaces with increasing frequency. As live jazz performance has become more closely tied to nonprofit institutions than the commercial speakeasies, ballrooms, and clubs that at various times in the past defined the music’s landscape, its relationship to its own heritage has become increasingly important in its public presentation. If presenting jazz in a commercial context can be said to provide a product, the nonprofit world frames jazz as a service, one that offers some sort of social good that goes beyond its monetary value. Though different jazz spaces explain jazz and its heritage in various and sometimes conflicting terms, ties to the past consistently play an important role in defining the present value of the music in all the places this book explores, as imbuing jazz with a noteworthy heritage helps to define and support the social good that makes possible the jazz-as-service framework. With the
themes of heritage, preservation, institutionalization, and education in mind, recent performances at the Village Vanguard, Jazz at Lincoln Center, SFJazz Center, university jazz programs, The Stone, and Preservation Hall offer the opportunity to observe the role played by space and place in shaping what we understand to be jazz and its role in contemporary life. A chief aim of this book is to make more transparent the ways in which our presentation of jazz dictates how we understand both its history and its future, and, in particular, to consider how live performances of heritage redefine the past for the purposes of the present. Jazz places and jazz heritage have always been in conversation, but their relationship has become increasingly central to jazz performances as those performances shift to a service-oriented framework.

While it is impossible to name any one musical element that unites jazz as a genre, it is almost equally difficult to avoid hearing the words “heritage” or “tradition” in all varieties of discourse on jazz. They show up in scholarly and popular books, magazines, documentaries, liner and program notes, blogs, and even the 1987 House Concurrent Resolution 57, a document in which the US Congress declares this music, whatever it may be, a “rare and valuable national treasure” that “is important for the youth of America to recognize and understand...as a significant part of their cultural and intellectual heritage.” Martin Williams, a major figure in jazz-as-art-music canonization who won a Grammy for his Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz, titled his best-known book, a 1970 history of jazz, The Jazz Tradition, and its 1985 companion Jazz Heritage. The major festival celebrating the music’s birthplace is the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, and In the Tradition is the title of albums by a number of diverse artists, such as avant-garde saxophonists Anthony Braxton and Arthur Blythe in the 1970s and the Canadian Fraser MacPherson quartet in the 1990s. Trumpeter Doc Cheatham, whose experience with jazz dates back to the 1920s, also recorded an In the Tradition album in 1987, and then Cheatham’s grandson and fellow trumpet player Theo Croker released one in 2009, a few years after Cheatham’s one hundredth birthday. Such references to the past are a regular fixture in how jazz is verbally described and contextualized, and this common practice has a major impact on both the way jazz is framed for contemporary live audiences and the means by which those performances are supported.

As discussions of jazz tradition have crescendoed, the nature of the music’s economic support has been in transition. As Scott DeVeaux wrote in his landmark article, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition,” “If at
one time jazz could be supported by the marketplace, or attributed a nebulous (and idealized) vision of folk creativity, that time has long passed. Only by acquiring the prestige, the ‘cultural capital’ (in Pierre Bourdieu’s phrase) of an artistic tradition can the music hope to be heard, and its practitioners receive the support commensurate with their training and accomplishments.”4 Tradition and heritage are not ideas associated only with jazz in the past; they are pillars that support the music’s present cultural and economic value. Yet leaning on these pillars does more than procure spaces and funding to allow live jazz to be heard, it also changes the music that is made and the modes of listening that audiences bring to it. Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett’s theorization of the concept of heritage production, originally formulated in the context of museums and tourism, offers a useful way of understanding how choices made in presenting the “traditional” affect the cultural work that performances do. As she points out, “Much is made of the traditions themselves, as if the instruments for presenting them were invisible or inconsequential.”5 She emphasizes that while heritage production bases itself in the past, “the heritage industry is a new mode of cultural production and it produces something new. There is no turning back.”6 By redefining the past, presenting music as heritage carves out a new space for musical practices that no longer inhabit their traditional spaces, and this means that the musical practices themselves are also new in important ways. Kirschenblatt-Gimblett describes this process as the “second life” of those things we claim as heritage, “Heritage organizations ensure that places and practices in danger of disappearing because they are no longer occupied or functioning or valued will survive. It does this by adding the value of pastness, exhibition, difference, and, where possible, indigeneity.”7 Performing heritage makes visible again that which is fading from view and links histories with physical spaces in the process. But as Peggy Phelan cautions in her work on the politics of performance, increased visibility cannot simply be equated to increased power.8 Highlighting values such as pastness, difference, and indigeneity, which Kirschenblatt-Gimblett argues are central to the notion of heritage, may increase the visibility of jazz, but this process works through an “aesthetics of marginalization” that cordons off the very things it shows from meaningful interaction with mainstream culture.9 How certain presenters choose to frame the relationship of jazz to the past has a direct impact on the amount of relevance audiences perceive in the music’s relationship to the present.

Another central concern that arises when considering live
performances, especially those that explicitly engage with history, is what it means to be “live” at all. A recurring theme that arose in the venues I studied was the place or influence of past recordings in present performances. Philip Auslander’s work on liveness and Jason Stanyek’s and Benjamin Piekut’s exploration of the idea of “deadness” in recording—the resurrection of voices from the past in current music—provide useful insights into how the dead continue to share agency with the living when they are evoked or replayed and how the very notion of the live can only exist with regard to the recorded. Recent work by jazz studies scholars has increasingly drawn attention to the importance of listening contexts in understanding sounds and cultures in jazz history. For example, as Moran draws attention to the physical space of the Savoy Ballroom through his sculpture in STAGED, Christi Jay Wells looks back to the physical bodies that moved to the music there in their reading of Chick Webb’s work in relation to dancers. Wells considers technical musical features such as tempo and form not as grist for internal analysis of autonomous musical works but as elements of a live performance tradition worked out in real time through dialog between dancers and musicians. An example of the flip side of this heightened awareness of the difference between live and recorded listening can be seen in the writings of Darren Mueller, whose discussions of the long-playing record format and its impact on jazz draw attention to the ways in which recording and listening technologies help shape our understandings of and experiences with this music. Although this book is chiefly concerned with live performance, contemporary live jazz venues are deeply interconnected with jazz’s history as a recorded music. Performance spaces and performers interact with jazz’s recorded past through the creation of live albums, through live performances of music from famous records, and simply through the unavoidable reality of presenting in person a musical genre whose whole history has unfolded alongside music recording technology, a situation that makes the sounds of the music’s “great masters” available on such different terms than the sounds of Bach or Mozart.

Finally, the physical spaces of these venues and their geographical locations play an essential role in framing and defining the music heard within them; when linked with human ideas and values, both individual and shared, the venues become jazz places. In introducing the concept of place, geographer Tim Cresswell writes, “Place is how we make the world meaningful and the way we experience the world. Place, at a basic level, is space invested with meaning in the context of power.”
There is a reciprocal relationship between jazz places and jazz practices, and the concepts of heritage and tradition are important linchpins in that relationship. As Cresswell describes, “Place provides a template for practice—an unstable stage for performance. Thinking of place as performed and practiced can help us think of place in radically open and non-essentialized ways, where place is constantly struggled over and reimagined in practical ways. Place is the raw material for the creative production of identity rather than an a priori label of identity. Place provides the conditions of possibility for creative social practice.” Just as jazz is performed in venues, venues as places are performed through jazz practices, and these twin processes both draw on and contribute to contemporary understandings of jazz heritage. Following Edward S. Casey’s writings on place and space, the analyses in this book come from a perspective of understanding heritage and place as deeply interconnected. Each of the venues discussed here plays a role in defining a jazz tradition by gathering together the physical, cultural, and sonic elements that make such a tradition perceptible. As Casey writes, “Place is the generatrix for the collection, as well as the recollection, of all that occurs in the lives of sentient beings, and even for the trajectories of inanimate things. Its power consists in gathering these lives and things, each with its own space and time, into one arena of common engagement.” Casey points out that, in addition to simply gathering together physical things in a location, “Places also gather experiences and histories, even languages and thoughts.”

The articulation of ideas about heritage and tradition through live performance in a given jazz place also reflects the power dynamics of that place and the people who invest it with meaning. In these studies of jazz venues in the United States, a music of African American origin in a nation historically defined by racially segregated spaces can show some of the ways in which place is contested or used to develop or alter ideas about race. In "How Racism Takes Place," George Lipsitz writes that, even in the twenty-first century, “Because of practices that racialize space and spatialize race, whiteness is learned and legitimated, perceived as natural, necessary, and inevitable. Racialized space gives whites privileged access to opportunities for social inclusion and upward mobility. At the same time, it imposes unfair and unjust forms of exploitation and exclusion on aggrieved communities of color. Racialized space shapes nearly every aspect of urban life.” Yet, in looking for productive solutions to the injustices of American racialized space, Lipsitz points to African American music, art, and literature, “African
American expressive culture has functioned as both a symptom and a critique of the nexus that links race and space. Its compelling qualities testify to the shameful duration, depth, and dimension of the racialization of space and the spatialization of race.”18 Live performances of jazz both exist within and comment on the systemic forces Lipsitz explains and critiques.

Similarly, the historically fraught gender politics of jazz both shape and are shaped by the places in which jazz is performed and heard. Geographer Doreen Massey describes what she terms the “power geometry” of space and place to get at how gender figures into understandings of these concepts. Massey highlights how place is both changeable—a process rather than a static fixture—and viewed differently by different users and inhabitants depending on their position within the power geometry of a given place at a given point in time. As she explains,

One of the problems here has been a persistent identification of place with “community.” Yet this is a misidentification. On the one hand, communities can exist without being in the same place—from networks of friends with like interests, to major religious, ethnic or political communities. On the other hand, the instances of places housing single “communities” in the sense of coherent social groups are probably—and, I would argue, have for long been—quite rare. Moreover, even where they do exist this in no way implies a single sense of place. For people occupy different positions within any community.19

Collectively, jazz places show contested ideas about and varying experiences with what might be considered a large-scale, shared jazz community; individually, each venue holds different benefits, challenges, pathways, and barriers for every performer and listener who accesses music there—and those who can’t or don’t.

While choices about which artists to feature, what repertoire to perform, and how to approach that repertoire all contribute important elements to how each venue defines jazz, the location of those venues and the nature of the spaces themselves also shape who hears each version of jazz and how it is interpreted. In order to better understand how ideas of heritage and tradition are presented in the venues studied here, I therefore take into account the general nature of the contemporary urban environments in which these venues exist and the specific cities, neighborhood, and buildings in which each is found. These considerations are framed largely by Adams Kriks’s *Music and Urban Geography*, which unpacks the important relationship of late twentieth-century global capitalism to contemporary urban landscapes and the
musical experiences available within twenty-first-century cities, a connection between music, cities, and economies that he sees as reciprocal, with each factor both shaping and shaped by the others. Krims writes of “design intensity” in the post-Fordist city, a term that “refers to the tendency in advanced societies for products and services to owe much of their value to aspects of design and informational content, and for design and informational aspects of products and services to develop rapidly.”20 Within “design-intensive” cities economically rooted in information, service, and tourist industries, music becomes an important aspect of what Krims describes as “integrated aestheticized space,” attracting residents and tourists to a given location and also relying on that location to provide an environment that will contain and support the type of listeners to which that music appeals.21 Were it possible to physically swap the locations of New York’s Village Vanguard and New Orleans’s Preservation Hall, transporting the music and musicians of each, it would not be possible to ensure their economic and aesthetic viability went with them to their new environments: the appeal and success of each is tied not just to musical sound but also to how that sound fits into shared ideas of place and heritage that extend beyond their walls to the broader neighborhoods and cities they inhabit and the niche markets served by each.

Place commonly plays a significant role in narratives of jazz history. As Andrew Berish writes, “Although not always theorized, jazz scholarship and criticism have from their beginnings been attentive to the places of the music: where it was developed, practiced, recorded, and performed.”22 Contemporary examples continue to describe the music in terms of space and place as well. For example, Scott DeVeaux and Gary Giddins’s popular textbook Jazz contains the chapter titles “New Orleans” and “New York in the 1920s.” In his book Jazz Matters: Sound, Place, and Time since Bebop, jazz studies scholar David Ake writes, “Musicians create and listeners are drawn to certain sounds, forms, and grooves because of the identities they celebrate or the ideas or emotions they convey or evoke at a particular place and time. A performance that speaks to us in youth (or in winter, or in Berlin, or in the morning, or in a barroom) may not speak to us in old age (or in summer, or in Memphis, or at night, or in a concert hall).”23 While jazz has long been created and heard around the world, as recent publications like Philip Bohlman and Goffredo Plastino’s Jazz Worlds / World Jazz and Alex Rodriguez’s “Making the Hang in Chile at Thelonious” attest, in the United States, links between music and place have had a particularly
strong presence in jazz discourse. As Berish writes in his study of place in mid-twentieth-century swing culture, “Tied as it was to the birth of modern American mass-mediated culture, since its beginning jazz has been about the tension between the voice of the local and the expression of the nation.” By examining the intersections of place and heritage in contemporary venues, the following chapters reexamine questions of jazz, place, and history in a twenty-first-century American context.

Each chapter ventures into a different type of place, exploring some of the many environments in which jazz is now heard. “Liveness” is a word often paired with the first venue in this study, the Village Vanguard. A multitude of well-known albums have been recorded in front of the audiences in this small club, and many of them boast of their creation “live at the Village Vanguard” in titles or otherwise prominently on their covers. Chapter One explores the persistence of this venue through eight decades of change in the surrounding scene leading to its current status as a site that both exists in the present and evokes a jazz world now mostly erased, a world of clubs functioning as independent businesses rather than their charitable projects—Dizzy’s Club Coca Cola inside Jazz at Lincoln Center standing as a clear twenty-first-century contrast case. Conversations with pianists Fred Hersch and Ethan Iverson, both regulars at the Vanguard, bring to light the ways in which the long history of the venue now helps to shape the music that is performed there.

In contrast to Hersch and Iverson, the star musicians featured in the concerts discussed in the second chapter’s reading of Jazz at Lincoln Center were not alive to perform or witness their music’s live presentation in that space, but the weight of their reputations helped to solidify the presence of jazz at large-scale, nationally visible performing arts centers. The Hall of Fame concert series resurrected a handful of historical artists each season, including Fats Waller, Mary Lou Williams, and Bill Evans in 2010, through productions that featured both music and narration to make the work of these musicians part of the venue’s bigger story of jazz history. This chapter explores the shared agency of deceased composer-performer-improvisers and contemporary presenters of their music including in the incorporation of artists of diverse races, genders, and musical styles into a unified blues- and swing-based canon. While that canon and its well defined artistic credentials helped to bolster the presence and growth of Jazz at Lincoln Center, similar venues that have taken shape in the wake of its successes have asserted their own identities in part by reacting to rather than replicating artistic