

# Two Turntables and a Saxophone

How jazz plays off hip-hop.

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Robert Gasper

When I e-mailed a knowledgeable friend that I'd be writing on jazz and hip-hop, she replied, "Man, can people stop talking about this already?" She's right, in a way. The jazz/hip-hop nexus is simply a cultural and genealogical fact. Turntablists, MCs, and jazz musicians are collaborating every day. And yet the impact of hip-hop on some of the best new acoustic jazz still isn't widely understood.

To borrow a term from DJ Shadow, jazz and hip-hop are *omni-genres*, held together more by musical and cultural philosophies than by any limiting parameters of "style." While hip-hop has devolved time and again into disposable pop, it has never lost its vitality as an underground, alternative art form. This is the aspect of hip-hop that jazz musicians are responding to; they're encountering hip-hop on creative rather than commercial terms. And they're refuting the popular view that today's jazzers are stuck in the '50s and '60s.

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The cross-pollination of jazz and hip-hop is often explicit, with hip-hop elements in plain view: turntables, samplers or laptops, and maybe even an MC on the mic. Some of the most forward-thinking instrumentalists, such as the trumpeters Wallace Roney, Dave Douglas, Russell Gunn, and Graham Haynes, or the pianists Andy Milne, Omar Sosa, Matthew Shipp, and Jason Lindner, have done substantial work along these lines. But just as hip-hop is more than rhymes and turntable scratching, jazz is more than a ching-a-ling ride cymbal. Hip-hop aesthetics—not aural pastiche per se, but approaches to rhythm, mood, and form—have filtered into acoustic jazz in subtle ways. Young virtuosos like Kurt Rosenwinkel, Robert Gasper, and Vijay Iyer note the influence of hip-hop on their work, but that influence is almost always implicit and uncalculated.

In an interview, Rosenwinkel, a guitarist, had high praise for Jay Dee (James Yancey, aka J Dilla), the iconic hip-hop producer from Detroit. But in nearly the same breath he cited Charles Ives' "Central Park in the Dark" (1907) and Arnold Schoenberg's "Five Pieces for Orchestra" (1909) as similar "beacons of harmonic quality." In these [Ives](#) and [Schoenberg](#) fragments, conventional harmony is replaced by a flow of spooky timbres and tone colors—what Schoenberg termed *Klangfarbenmelodie* (sound-color-melody). This [instrumental mix](#) of Jay Dee's "Come Get It" is oddly similar in its textural and tonal ambiguity. Lurking among the melodic lines is a burble of ambient noise that almost functions as a chord.

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Cueing up Rosenwinkel's "[Brooklyn Sometimes](#)" from his 2005 Verve release *Deep Song*, we hear him play (and sing) an eerie melody over sustaining chords. The beat, with its steady repetitions and modern bounce, could almost be programmed, yet we hear the strings of the bass and the wooden shells of the drums. The harmony is not as "outside" as Ives' or Schoenberg's, but there is a kindred tonal eccentricity. In the spectral timbre of Rosenwinkel's guitar and voice is a hint of Jay Dee's blurry, ineffable sonance. The link may seem distant, but such is the allure of creative music. (I recently heard Elvis Costello explain that "Alison" was partially inspired by the Spinners' "Ghetto Child.")

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Robert Gasper, a 26-year-old pianist, has just debuted on Blue Note Records with *Canvas*. He is also in Mos Def's touring band, and appears (with Rosenwinkel, as it happens) on *Live at the Renaissance*, a forthcoming album by Q-Tip. Gasper, too, is a huge fan of Jay Dee. "I'm not like a cat who says, 'Oh, hip-hop is popular so let me put some of that in my music,'" Gasper told me. Referring to his peers, he added, "We are children of the hip-hop generation who play jazz. Just like back in the day, cats were the children of the Motown generation, and they played soul music." In the [opening](#) to "Canvas," Gasper sets up a slow, hypnotic groove. The structure—a pithy chord progression cycling in an off-kilter rhythm—alludes to contemporary hip-hop and "neo-soul."

Vijay Iyer, also a pianist, leads a quartet and frequently collaborates with the hip-hop performance poet Mike Ladd. In addition to hip-hop, Iyer is influenced by avant-garde jazz and the music of his Carnatic (South Indian) heritage. Discussions with Iyer get deep fast—he holds a Ph.D. from Berkeley in music and cognitive science. In an e-mail he wrote: "To me, hip-hop [i.e., programming, sampling, etc.] performs a tension between the human and the post-human. ... The question with acoustic music, which is always made by physical bodies, is how to invoke that same tension."

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"Infogee's Cakewalk," from Iyer's latest Savoy disc, *Reimagining*, [opens](#) with austere harmony over a rhythmic template that may sound intuitive, but, in fact, is too complex to describe here. In our exchange, Iyer described the appeal of "creating specific repeating rhythms for the drummer to play, much like one might in a pop song or a drum machine loop." He added that "these illusions of the post-human can only persist for a few moments, before they are shattered by some unquestionably mortal sound."

These musicians listen closely to one another; would that more of us listened to them. But from a market standpoint, it matters little whether they play hip-hop or polkas. Gene Santoro was admirably blunt about this reality in his recent book *Highway 61 Revisited*: "The fact is, most Americans don't like instrumental music." It's a crystalline insight, rendering the arguments of jazz detractors, such as Rosa Hyde, [writing](#) in the London-based online magazine *Fly*, quite beside the point:

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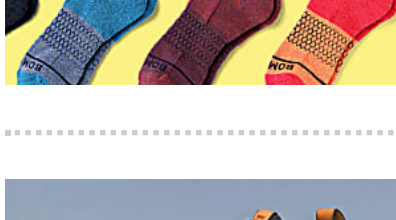
[J]azz has priced itself out of the pockets of today's youth and placed itself amongst the dusty company of Beethoven and Bach. ... I think [Coltrane] too would be saddened to see how stagnant the music has become. ... Faced with extinction, jazz must open its eyes, clean out its ears and learn from hip hop. ... What would be the impact of a living legend like Wynton Marsalis to play while Jay-Z flowed on the beat? I'd pay to see it, wouldn't you?

I'd pay not to see it. There's a huge difference between the organic musical evolution I've tried to outline and Hyde's hypothetical publicity stunt. (Not so hypothetical, in fact: Think Jay-Z and Linkin Park, Nelly and Tim McGraw, and the pairing that started it all, Aerosmith and Run-DMC.) Of course, Hyde is partly right: Jazz is often too expensive, too insular, too classicized. But spend a week in fairly cheap New York haunts like the 55 Bar, the Jazz Gallery, Cornelia Street Café, and Fat Cat, and see how fast the "stagnation" thesis collapses. Jazz is not "fading extinction"—this is laughable—and it has already learned from hip-hop. So, rather than hold our breath for Wynton to play music he openly and emphatically hates, why not get hip to what's already out there?

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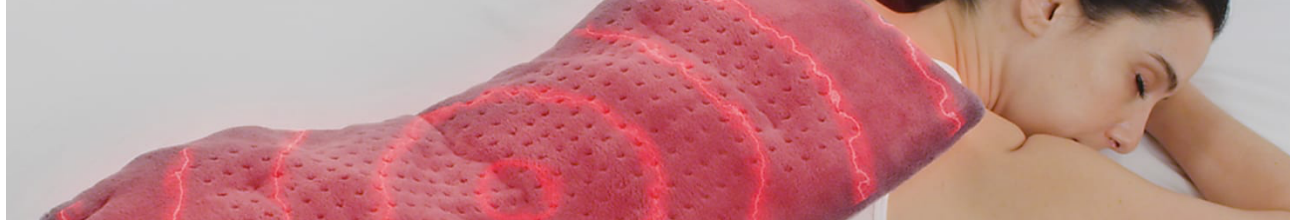
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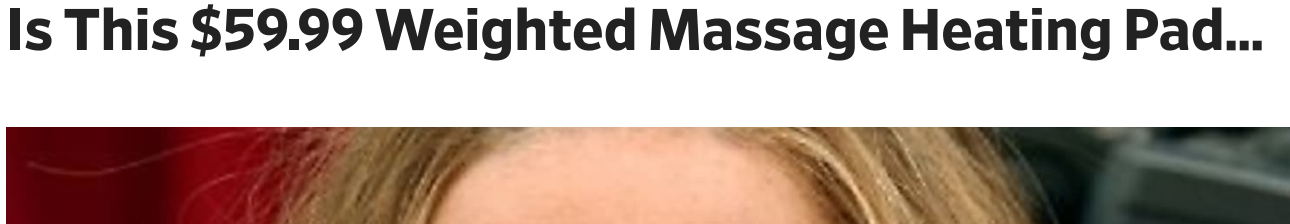
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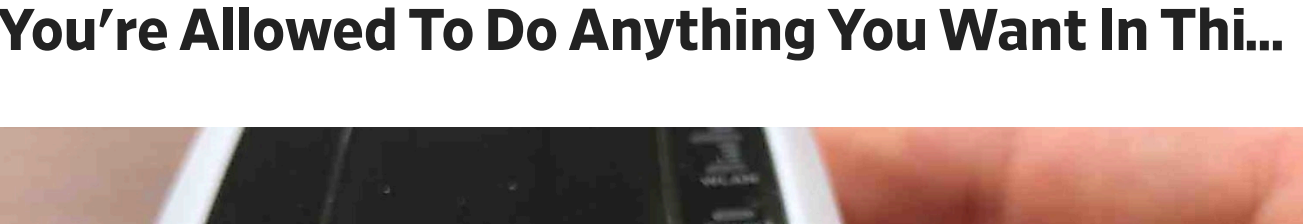
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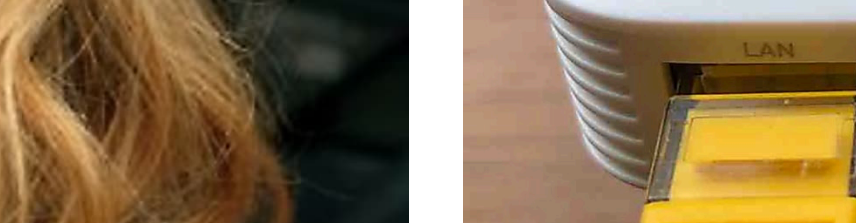
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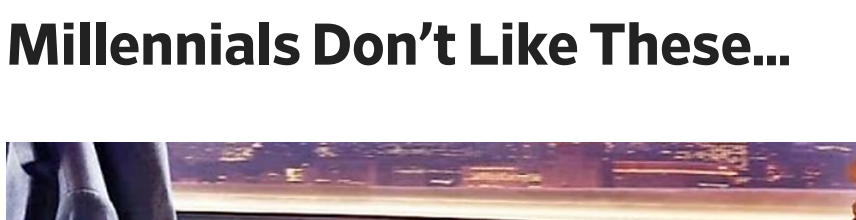
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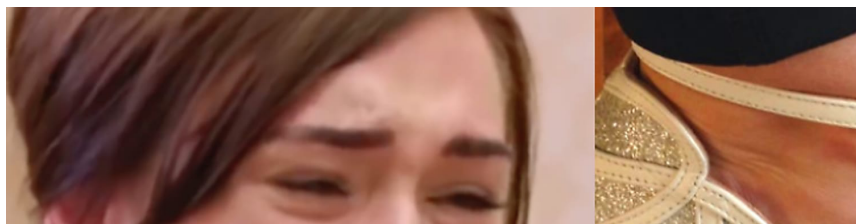
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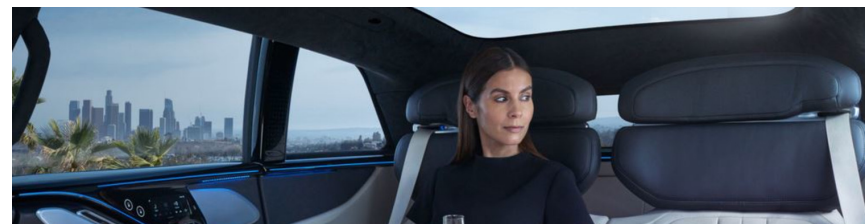
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