

ACADEMIC JAZZ IN THE POSTMODERN ERA: *NU-JAZZ* IN CONTEMPORARY COMPOSITIONAL PRACTICE

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SUMMARY. The impact of technology on jazz has been profound, provocative, and far-reaching since the genre's inception. Combining the musical qualities of jazz with those of electronic music requires a high degree of imaginative subtlety, as musicians approach this synthesis from a foundation of deep experience in jazz practice. In the late 1990s, a new subgenre emerged, *nu-jazz*, combining jazz with dance-music elements, particularly funk and electronica, alongside free improvisation. Its sonic approaches range from extensive use of electronic devices to purely live instrumentation, with numerous hybrid configurations of acoustic instruments and electronic processing in between. What remains constant is jazz-specific phrasing and harmonic conception.

This study examines the author's composition *Summit* as a case study of compositional strategies derived from the *Third-Stream* movement within a heterogeneous contemporary stylistic context. This approach represents one possible means of maintaining the relevance of jazz composition for younger, contemporary audiences.

Keywords: nu-jazz, hybridity, electronic sound, third stream

1. Introduction

The relationship between jazz and technological innovation has become a defining concern of contemporary musicological discourse, as scholars increasingly recognize that the development of jazz is inseparable from the sonic, social, and technological environments in which it emerges. Early research on recording technologies demonstrates that the advent of disc

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recording and, later, multitrack production fundamentally reshaped jazz performance and improvisation by introducing concepts of repeatability, layered construction, and the analytical scrutiny of multiple recorded takes. More recent scholarship extends this trajectory into the digital sphere, showing how electronic processing, virtual instrumentation, and hybrid performance practices have transformed jazz aesthetics at the turn of the twenty-first century and facilitated the rise of subgenres rooted in electronically mediated sound.

Within this broader historical continuum, *nu-jazz* stands out as one of the most significant stylistic developments of the past three decades. Building on earlier experiments by artists such as Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock, and Brian Eno, *nu-jazz* merges electronic timbres, digital effects, ambient textures, and dance-derived rhythmic structures with the improvisational ethos of jazz. Its evolution has been shaped equally by European electronic music cultures, by hip-hop and downtempo aesthetics, and by studio-based compositional techniques that blur the boundary between live performance and constructed sound. The resulting repertoire is defined by a dynamic interplay between jazz-derived harmonic language and phrasing on one hand, and electronically generated textures, looping procedures, and minimalist repetition on the other.

Although this hybrid sound world has been examined from historical, sociological, and technological perspectives, its implications for contemporary compositional practice remain comparatively underexplored, particularly within academically grounded creative work. This article addresses that gap by examining how *nu-jazz* principles can be integrated into original composition. Through analyses of two of the author's works, the study investigates how stylistic synthesis and sound design interact with traditional formal structures. By situating these compositional strategies within the broader lineage of jazz / technology interaction, the article aims to illuminate both the continuity and the innovative potential inherent in contemporary hybrid jazz composition.

2. The context

Researchers concerned with the fluidity of stylistic boundaries – an inherent consequence of hybridity – have identified early intersections between genres as far back as the Renaissance, through the blending of sacred music with secular texts and *vice versa*. Later, during the Baroque era, this tendency became evident first in the works of Johann Sebastian Bach and subsequently in those of Georg Philipp Telemann. Even when stylistic unity characterized a given historical period, it nonetheless inspired composers to experiment with cross-genre mixtures. The twentieth century, defined by an

unprecedented diversity of creative expression, provided fertile ground for some of the most heterogeneous and unexpected combinations of styles and genres, ranging from highly valuable artistic syntheses to others of more modest compositional impact.

The evolution of jazz across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has continually stimulated the creativity of performers and composers alike, generating new genres and styles that, at each stage, introduced innovative modes of expression. In recent decades, these developments have accelerated dramatically, branching into an array of subgenres so numerous that any systematic classification has become nearly impossible. The multitude of combinations, mixtures, and fusions among diverse musical elements has imparted a distinct sonic imprint to each emerging subgenre.

3. Jazz and digital sonorities

The impact of technology on jazz has been profound, provocative, and multifaceted since the very beginning of the genre. Early audio recordings on disc represented one of the first technological tools adopted by jazz musicians, decisively contributing to the popularization and wider accessibility of the music during the 1920s and 1930s. As musicians adapted to recording techniques and began transferring live performances onto discs, jazz gradually became a medium suited for remote listening. The introduction of recording technology fundamentally changed the conception of performance in jazz by providing the genre with a sense of repeatability previously unknown, while also allowing the close study of multiple recorded versions of the same piece.

Beginning in the late 1950s and early 1960s, many of the genre's leading artists experimented with *multi-tracking* in their album productions – like Miles Davis (*Miles Ahead*, 1957); Lambert, Hendricks & Ross (*Sing a Song of Basie*, 1958); and Bill Evans (*Conversations with Myself*, 1963).

Initially, the absence of improvisation in early electronic music, particularly that produced using magnetic tape, justified the reluctance of many jazz musicians to embrace it, given that improvisation was central to jazz and its stylistic developments of the time (such as *bebop*). Despite these impediments, a significant number of jazz artists began working with tape-recorded materials and eventually with electronic instruments, seeking ways to combine electronic music with jazz.

The paths followed by jazz musicians in their explorations of the electronic realm during the 1960s included:

- Incorporating pre-recorded electronic music on tape into *live* or studio performances (1960–1970);
- Using electronic devices (other than synthesizers) to modify or accompany acoustic instruments in *live* contexts, through amplification, distortion, echo effects, or *octave splitting* (1965–1970);
- Employing synthesizers (1965–1970).²

From 1963 onward, experimental projects involving the fusion of jazz – especially *free jazz*, with its heightened expressive freedom – and pre-recorded electronic music resulted in a series of innovative works. These opened new pathways not only for processing electronic sonorities but also for generating them through novel means.

The revolution in instrumentation made possible by the computer left a significant imprint on improvisation from the early decades of the century. The adoption of new sonic resources developed along two parallel trajectories: on one hand, by musicians active within the *free jazz* tradition, and on the other, by proponents of digital improvisation associated with the avant-garde.

4. *Nu-jazz* - a new type of fusion

Dave Douglas³, one of today's leading contemporary jazz artists, emphasizes the importance of aligning jazz with the plurality of today's sonic environment, in which electronic media and rhythm play a central role in the genre's ongoing process of emancipation. As he states: "In this period, what happens inside and outside us is reflected in the thousands of ways in which music transforms and evolves. These technologies, more than anything else, are an essential part of what human development represents."⁴

In the late 1990s, a new subcategory of musical style emerged, known as *nu-jazz*, combining jazz with elements of dance music, particularly funk

² Holmes, Thom. "The Roots of Electronic Jazz, 1950–1970", in *Jazz Perspectives*, volume 10, 2-3, 2018, pp. 207-242.

³ An American trumpeter, composer, educator, and entrepreneur, he is the founder of numerous projects and instrumental ensembles. His body of work encompasses a vast stylistic diversity and a notable contribution to the field of improvisation, recognized and honored with prestigious awards such as the Doris Duke Artist Award, the Guggenheim Fellowship, the Aaron Copland Award, and two Grammy Award nominations.

⁴ Nichols, Stuart. *Jazztronica: A Brief History of the Future of Jazz*, <https://www.jazztimes.com/features/jazztronica-a-brief-history-of-the-future-of-jazz/?v=3605c251087b> (date of access 18.02.2026)

and Electronica⁵, alongside free improvisation. The result of this seemingly heterogeneous mixture was a fresh and innovative form that continues to expand the boundaries established by its predecessors.

As suggested by its alternative labels, *nu-jazz* is distinguished above all by its strong electronic imprint, which penetrates much more deeply into this territory than acid jazz, a style that remains more closely aligned with soul and rhythm and blues. In terms of instrumental choices, especially percussion and rhythm-section sonorities, such as the use of acoustic bass, *nu-jazz* draws inspiration from cool jazz, swing, bebop, and bossa nova.

Paradoxically, although its roots lie in the United States, *nu-jazz* was initially popularized primarily in Europe, particularly in Norway and the Netherlands, and has since achieved global circulation. Because of the stylistic diversity and the highly individualized artistic approaches within *nu-jazz*, it is difficult to define the genre in terms of fixed forms, structures, harmonic language, theoretical frameworks, or instrumentation.

Traditional jazz has always been characterized by the fusion of diverse stylistic elements, and *nu-jazz* continues this tradition through the integration of digital technology. Approaches range from the exclusive use of electronic devices to purely live performance, with many hybrid combinations of acoustic instruments and electronic effects in between. What remains constant is jazz-specific phrasing and harmonic conception. Tempi can vary from slow, ballad-like grooves to fast, house-influenced beats. From purely instrumental tracks to politically engaged vocal works, *nu-jazz* has broadened jazz's audience while preserving key stylistic traits of the genre.

Among the stylistic predecessors of *nu-jazz* are Terry Riley, whose ambient-inflected textures influenced albums such as *Soft Machine*; Brian Eno, particularly through his late-1970s experiments with funk and fusion, including his work with Brand X; and Miles Davis's track *He Loved Him Madly* from the album *Get Up with It*.

The emergence of *nu-jazz* can be traced back to the 1970s, when musicians such as Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock, and Ornette Coleman began integrating electronic instruments into jazz. In the early 1980s, Bill Laswell and Herbie Hancock announced a distinctive hybrid direction with the album *Future Shock*, incorporating hip-hop rhythms and electronic elements. From the late 1980s onward, hip-hop musicians such as Gang

⁵ The term holds a dual significance. The first refers to a broad category of styles based on electronic music intended for listening, while simultaneously maintaining a dance-oriented direction. The second significance designates a particular typology of stage music that emerged in the early 1990s in the United Kingdom.

Starr, The Roots, A Tribe Called Quest, and Nas explored jazz-rap, while house producers drew inspiration from post-bop and jazz-funk.

Over time, *nu-jazz* absorbed additional influences: post-rock electric guitar textures; minimalist repetition in phrasing, as heard in Portico Quartet, inspired by Steve Reich and Philip Glass; and the lush orchestration of arrangers such as Henry Mancini and Les Baxter, rediscovered by groups like Jaga Jazzist and Snarky Puppy. Ambient music also plays a significant role, especially in the early work of Nils Petter Molvær. Nik Bärtsch is known for combining minimalist repetition with dub-influenced ambience. Throughout its evolution, *nu-jazz* has retained a relaxed, accessible aesthetic, marked by electronic textures that often carry retro or ironic kitsch associations.

In the mid-1990s and early 2000s, the diversification of electronic music further accelerated *nu-jazz*'s development. Downtempo⁶ artists such as Jazztronik, St Germain, Trüby Trio, DJ Takemura, Perry Hemus, and Jazzanova cultivated the hybrid style. Dance-music producers working with artists such as Squarepusher and Spring Heel Jack, and later London Elektricity and Landslide, were drawn to jazz-influenced complexity. Techno artists such as Carl Craig and his project *Innerzone Orchestra* demonstrated sustained interest in *nu-jazz*, while *hardcore* and *breakcore*⁷ figures such as Alec Empire, Nic Endo, and Venetian Snares explored more aggressive variants. A decade later, dubstep producers such as Boxcutter engaged with electronic jazz. Meanwhile, Bugge Wesseltoft and Nils Petter Molvær became known for *nu-jazz* improvisation within traditional jazz forms. *The Cinematic Orchestra*⁸ is recognized for integrating a traditional jazz ensemble with electronic production.

Since 2009, the *Electro Jazz Festival de Megève* (Haute-Savoie, France) has been entirely dedicated to *nu-jazz* (electro-jazz). Held annually in August, the festival gathers both leading established groups and emerging artists working within this musical direction.

5. Nu-jazz within the Author's Compositional Output

RO RO (2019, original composition) takes as its point of departure the concept of stylistic hybridity operating on multiple levels. Rooted in the

⁶ A combination of hip-hop and electronic styles, which can incorporate a wide diversity of genres, including funk, dub, psychedelia, R&B, and house, as well as other forms of electronic music.

⁷ Subgenres of electronic dance music.

⁸ The *Cinematic Orchestra* is a British Nu jazz and electronic music group, founded in 1999 by Jason Swinscoe. The sound employed in both live performances and studio recordings utilizes an instrumental ensemble with an improvisational role, alongside electronic music equipment operated by a DJ.

Third-Stream tradition, which combines academically grounded compositional language with the jazz idiom, the work's three movements integrate classical formal archetypes – sonata, rondo, and strophic form – within a sound world dominated by jazz sonorities. These layers intersect through harmony, rhythm, timbre, and notation. The final movement, *RO Rondo*, brings these two stylistic coordinates into dialogue with *nu-jazz* aesthetics: although its electronic components and expanded rhythmic and timbral palette may initially appear incompatible with academic formal structures, they ultimately function as a means of positioning contemporary jazz composition within a current cultural context.

The formal design of *RO Rondo* is based on alternation, articulated through a refrain and three contrasting couplets, within which two solos are embedded: drums and electric guitar. The refrain maintains traditional phrase symmetry and motivic coherence, yet each return situates it in a new instrumental and structural context. The influence of *nu-jazz* is evident in the prominence of digitally generated sounds produced through computer-based software. These are complemented by acoustic instruments, including drum set (doubled by electronic drums), electric guitar, and analogue electric piano. The sonic material was developed through sound-design processes in which original tones for both lead and accompaniment were processed, layered, and transformed.

The opening presentation of the refrain is stated twice by a synthesized voice, accompanied by digital timbres (oscillators and synthesizer) and acoustic elements – drums and bass guitar. The lower staff of the score is devoted to special effects, notated through a graphic system adapted from academic composition in order to represent the processing and manipulation of sound and oscillators with maximum precision.

7 **Bbm7** **F7b9(#5)** **Bbm7(9)**

7 GTR. Fill 7fr.

E.Gtr.

Lead

SYN 2

D. S.

Bass

SFX

9 **E7sus** **G7(9) sus** **G7m7(b5)**

9 10fr.

E.Gtr.

Lead

SYN 2

D. S.

Bass

SFX

RO Rondo (author's composition), first phrase, mm. 7-10

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The second couplet (mm. 72–111) constitutes a section devoted entirely to *nu-jazz*. Here, the electric guitar solo occupies the core of the melodic discourse, while the accompaniment is constructed from electronically generated material using arpeggiators and sound modulators.

E.g. 2

105

E. Gtr.

Lead

Pno. 1

SYN 2

Vox.

D. S.

Bass

W. Bl.

SFX

Bbm11

Bbm11

***RO Rondo* (author's composition), mm. 105-106**

In the final return of the refrain, rhythmic variation is introduced through triplet-based writing, and the diffused timbre of the lead voice anticipates the psychedelic ending, which, together with the visual component, creates a contemplative, meditative atmosphere.

E.g. 3

**RO Rondo (author's composition), mm. 144-146, the last variation of the refrain**

The second work examined in this study, *Summit* (2020), was composed in the context of the global crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, a period marked not only by severe restrictions on personal and artistic freedom but also by profound psychological strain within the artistic community. *Summit* is a single-movement chamber work structured according to a principle of multiple strophic variation, into which free sections of differing function are inserted, combining stylistic elements characteristic of *Third-Stream* aesthetics. Its formal organization is closely linked to methods of sonic construction, particularly orchestration, timbral treatment, thematic development, and expressive shaping. The electronic section functions as an autonomous, improvisatory episode, acting both as a moment of colour within the sequence of academically notated passages and as a precursor to later developments in instrumentation and sound design.

Figure 1

INTRODUCTION A transition ELECTRONIC SECTION B transition C transition A1

Beyond providing a synthetic accompaniment layer, the electronic section features a synthesized timbre created through digital software, with its color shaped by controlled oscillator modulation. The texture includes both tones derived from a single waveform and digitally processed audio effects. The principal solo is performed on a digital instrument referred to in the score as “digital piano”, although in practice it consists of a fully customized synthesizer. This section also incorporates vocal samples that are transformed through software-based manipulation and reinterpretation.

Additional digital processing techniques include reverse sound, applied to instruments such as the analogue electric piano using delay, panning, and reverb. One of the most distinctive sound-design elements is the vinyl-crack timbre, which introduces the electronic section's sequence of effects. This is followed by processed electronic drum patterns and a digitally generated brass-like sound labelled swell brass in the score.

Digital timbres also appear within the predominantly academic passages, where they enrich the resonance of traditional instruments. In the final solo, for example, the acoustic piano remains in the foreground but is doubled by a synthesized layer created through sound-design techniques.

Formally, the electronic solo adheres to classical principles through a fixed number of measures and a recurring harmonic progression. Its musical language is dominated by modal ambiguity, articulated both vertically and horizontally through polymodal procedures. The upper line – the improvisatory solo – only intermittently aligns with the harmonic framework of the bass, unfolding instead as a horizontally polymodal melody that gravitates toward shifting modal centers. Harmonically, multiple pedal points in the accompaniment suggest a D-based mode with an elided third, creating sustained tension. This pedal is articulated through stacked fifths, reinforcing the modal sonority of the passage.

In the second segment, the harmonic discourse shifts toward a new modal center on F#, again treated with an elided third, an idea anticipated earlier without yet resolving the ambiguity of the underlying D-mode. The third harmonic plane combines modal structures, such as quartal sonorities (m. 84), with harmonic parallelism. One example is a descending progression superimposed both over a D pedal and over a broader field of parallel fifths (mm. 78–85).

E.g. 4

The musical score for 'Summit' (author's composition), mm. 78-82, consists of six staves. The top staff is for Piano, marked 'Pian', and features a 'D pedal point' indicated by a circled 'E' and a circled chord. The second staff is for Small Brass. The third staff is for Pn. digital w/ (Piano digital with). The fourth staff is for Synth Brass, marked 'parallel 5ths'. The fifth staff is for Trumpet. The bottom staff is for Marimba. The score shows a descending progression superimposed over a D pedal and a broader field of parallel fifths.

Summit (author's composition), mm. 78-82

6. Conclusions

The present study demonstrates that the contemporary sonic landscape is no longer a neutral backdrop but an active participant in the creative process. The digital ecosystem in which we reside fundamentally alters the reception, recording, and transmission of acoustic music. In this context, the influence of electronic music performers and producers on the jazz idiom and the art of improvisation is not merely anecdotal; it is transformative. However, as this research has argued, the preservation of an original, personal artistic signature must remain the central axis of the creative act in contemporary jazz.

Regarding the contemporary compositional phenomenon, the study analyses yield several conclusions formulated from the standpoint of the creator, beyond that of the analytical observer. Hybrid works benefit from treating orchestration and sound design as structural parameters rather than as post-production adornment. From another perspective, graphic strategies adapted from academic composition can productively capture the specificity of electronic processing and signal flow, enabling score-level reproducibility of timbral procedures. Furthermore, regarding the aesthetic dimension, *nu-jazz's* relaxed but intricately textured surfaces may function as an entry point for broader audiences, provided that electronic resources amplify the idiomatic phrasing and harmonic imagination that mark jazz as such.

Despite the pervasive presence of electronic media, jazz remains fundamentally an art of individual and collective expression. The increasingly sophisticated palette of digital sounds can only acquire artistic meaning through musicians who are able to use these resources creatively, critically, and with stylistic awareness. Modern jazz styles, including *nu-jazz*, thus play a crucial role in the contemporary revitalization of the genre.

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