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### Our Music

I have very vivid memories of my father listening to jazz in his office; these memories flow from age 7 to now. When I think of jazz, I think of my father. I think of how he can sit in his office covered in John Coltrane and Miles Davis posters for hours and listen to this improved music that flows together to create something that makes him feel so engulfed in his Black culture. The only times I would join in on his listening is in the car. While he had this deep connection with jazz, I clung to a wide variety of music from Chance the Rapper to Faye Webster, and I don't think I have ever felt the music the way he has. Watching him bob his head and tap the steering wheel, watching him truly feel the music, I never opened my eyes to the fact that jazz music is *our music*.

On a cool Friday evening, my group and I boarded the bus and set off to what we thought was the bustling jazz club, Con Alma; *however*, where we ended up was in Shadyside, at their old location that has since closed down. As we stand outside the old location, we take in our surroundings. Not even 30 feet from the closed-down club is a beautiful home with an incredible amount of plants and an older man gently petting a quiet Boston terrier on the porch. In my head,

I wonder if he has ever been to *Con Alma* and what connection he has to the jazz scene in Pittsburgh. When we finally realized that the location we were meant to go to was located at the center of downtown Pittsburgh, we hustled to the next bus stop and embarked on a thirty-minute bus ride downtown.

I grew up in a suburb outside of Chicago. I mainly say Chicago when people at Pitt ask where I am from because if I say Gilberts, Illinois, I receive a confused face and many more questions on the other side. In my hometown, we don't have nor need a lot of public transportation like this; there are a few Pace stations and one Metra, but the Port Authority was something completely new to me and, in some aspects, quite daunting. However, when a boy no older than nine years old boarded the bus and got off at his stop with no problem, I realized that my fear of public transportation needed to dwindle out sooner rather than later.

As I look out the large window on the bus, I notice the combination of buildings we drive by. Next to an old barbershop, rundown but still in business, is a new modern condo complex being built, and across from that even more, I realize I am looking at gentrification. I am seeing communities come down and classes intermix. I think of the effect this will have on the people who call this place home and have called it home for decades. Where will they go? Did they see this coming?

Finally, we arrive on Penn Ave. and see the lit-up Con Alma sign poking out on a busy street. When we walk in, there is no doubt we are getting looks from the much older crowd. It was much busier than I expected for 6 p.m. on a Friday, but a



Figure 1. Con Alma street view  
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kind woman was able to get us a table for five in the back for one hour.



*Figure 2. Nina Simone sitting at a jazz club in Pittsburgh (1965)*

We are seated in a booth with a slightly obstructed view of the performers, "Ken Karsh Trio." Immediately after sitting, I can't help but bob my head to the song I have never heard before, and I see everyone doing the same, feeling the music is an experience we are all having in this building. Around the entire club are black-and-white pictures of notable jazz artists; above me is a beautiful picture of Nina Simone, the only picture I recognize. In the image, she is sitting in a chair with her legs crossed in a black dress. She looks gorgeous, and I can't help but smile. We later learn that those pictures were taken by a famous Black photographer from Pittsburgh named Teenie Harris, and they were all donated by a museum.

There is an older couple next to us. The man is very engaged in the music, and between his powerful claps and sips of his drink, he snuck in glances at our table. I get insecure, then realize what he is looking at a group of five students typing away on their phones at a jazz club where not one person has their phone out but instead is engaging in conversation, feeling the music, tapping their feet, and smiling at their tables. I took a minute to observe this. There is rarely any place where there is not someone at the table



*Figure 3. The people in Con Alma engaging in conversation Taken by classmate, Bella Proper*

with their phone out, whether it be for checking texts or another unnecessary scroll. Maybe it is because this is an older crowd, but there is no doubt that there was a genuine connection between everyone there.

We sat for a while and examined the upscale menu, featuring plates of Spanish, Asian, and Italian origin. We land on a shrimp empanada and focaccia bread. As we enjoyed our small, pricey, but delicious plates, a tall man in a bright floral shirt with "Con Alma Est. 2019" tattooed on his arm approached. Owner and chef Josh Ross takes a seat next to Kayla. He immediately opened up the conversation by addressing that jazz music is the true Black American music. Not even a minute into the conversation, Ross gives credit where it is due. As a woman of color, witnessing someone give credit to my people for what they have created is a rare experience and one that I was not expecting. This left me excited to hear more.

Ross elaborates on how enjoying jazz music was never only a Black or white thing; jazz clubs were "holes in the wall" everyone could come to and enjoy, and it wasn't until serious racial strife stemming from the Martin Luther King Jr. assassination and gentrification of the city did things become polarized. Jazz clubs being described as "holes in the wall" that everyone can enjoy made me ponder. They weren't always like that; like Ross asserted, the music is Black American music, and the clubs were where they could play jazz and feel pride. In her lecture, "Arts of the Contact Zone," acclaimed author and literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt describes the importance of "safe houses" within the creation of contact zones. She asserts, "Where there are legacies of subordination, groups need places for healing and mutual recognition, safe houses in which to construct shared understandings, knowledge, claims on the world that they can bring into the contact zone"(Pratt, 466). I see the original jazz clubs that Ross was speaking of as "safe houses" for African Americans during time of racial turmoil. Historically, these clubs were areas

to celebrate Black Culture and feel safe in doing so. As it evolved, it became widespread, and you see people from all different backgrounds in the club, still celebrating Black culture and recognizing the importance of its history. This wouldn't have been possible without the jazz clubs starting as “safe houses.”

Ross’s interest in jazz came from the samples a band called "A Tribe Called Quest" used, which got him into jazz music. He noted that he would go to the record stores and find the music they sampled. I thought it was really interesting that a hip-hop band was his segway into jazz music, and it held that much of an impact. I wonder if my dad knows about that band. What was his segue into jazz?

Ross notes that he sees cooking and jazz as the same action; the musicians are 'cooking' on the stage, improving and creating art they are proud of and want to share, while the chefs are cooking the meals in the kitchen, trying new recipes they want to share with others. Ross creates these different menu items by digging into other cultures, hence the plethora of options the menu features. He combined both music and food to bring people together and enjoy their time. I found it notable that he thought of two things people enjoy seeing, and he wanted to give that to them so badly that he created one of the most diverse spaces I've ever been in. I asked Ross about the images surrounding the entire club, and he was able to name everyone in those pictures and the stories behind each photo with ease. He recalls what was taking place at the time the photo was taken. I find myself being jealous and wishing I could do that. They are representations of Black culture, my culture, but I had no clue who the majority of the people in the images were. I think of how my dad could do exactly what he did without a stutter; maybe I would be able to as well if I joined him in the office and listened to jazz the way he did.

As the night closes out, Ross encourages us to listen to "A Tribe Called Quest" to get a break from our generation's "formulated" music. This ending note stuck out to me. While Ross's passion for music is notable and it is very clear he is knowledgeable, I can't help but ponder on his description of our generation's music. I see music as something that has to be formulated. The music of his favorite hip-hop band, "A Tribe Called Quest," was formulated and their samples being from jazz music make jazz a part of that formula. It took the music of the past to create music that fits into the styles of their current era, the music that young Josh Ross would listen to. In the 21st century, rappers still utilize the "formula" that Black pioneers of music created to release music that appeals to younger audiences who did not grow up with jazz being the most trending music of the time. Chance the Rapper's album, "Coloring Book," mixes rap and gospel, two integral parts of Black culture and music. In combining these two music types, he appreciates the roots of Black music while altering it to fit the times. While I am not directly listening to traditional Black gospel music, I am still feeling the power of it through its integration into the music of today. Is the way I feel listening to Chance the Rapper the same way my father feels listening to jazz?

While I am left feeling enlightened and with an itch to come back, I am also feeling a sense of empowerment, not only in jazz but in my music and how it connects to my culture. It uses the formula older Black music styles, like jazz, have given it. I text my father the rundown of my experience and ask him and my mother to join me next time for parents' weekend. This time I will listen, and I will understand my dad's fascination with the music, because I have felt it too, just in a different way. I will join because this isn't just music; it's music from our culture, being admired and recognized in a room full of people from different backgrounds, journeys, and ways of life, but one thing in common: the love for music.

However, why is this realization just taking place in this one building on a busy street? Ross noted that this is the only jazz club in Pittsburgh. This isn't just a decline in business; it's the loss of culture that Ross is working to keep alive. While I leave this visit empowered, I also leave with a question: How can we accurately depict the impact that pioneers of Black music culture have on our music of today?

### Work Cited

Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Way of Reading: An Anthology for Writers*, edited by David Bartholomae, Anthony Petrosky, and Stacey Waite, Bedford/St. Martins, 2019, pp. 466.

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