

How does Robert Glasper and Miles Davis’ Album *Everything’s Beautiful* (2016) Move the Legacy of Jazz Rap Forward?

ISOBEL SAVULESCU

By the late 1980s, hip-hop artists seeking an alternative to mainstream, commercial sounds began to incorporate jazz codes into their music. This led to the conception of the sub-genre known as “jazz rap.” The fusion of these genres brought an elitism to hip-hop records through its association with jazz’s long standing cultural and political capital. Since the twenty-first century, jazz rap as a distinct sub-genre receded into the background of hip-hop and neo-soul music, despite the fact that some artists continue to both lyrically and musically reference jazz.

This article begins with a comparative analysis of the evolution of jazz rap over the 1990s, before discussing specifically the jazz codes used in this sub-genre. I then explore how jazz codes emerged in a new and dynamic form in Robert Glasper’s album *Everything’s Beautiful* (2016), where Glasper re-worked recordings of Miles Davis. I argue that this album uses jazz codes in a different way than jazz rap records of the 1990s, and embodies jazz’s evolution and relevance to the ongoing conversation on what constitutes contemporary music today. Glasper’s samples are not simply static snapshots of jazz as it once was; rather, Glasper integrates recordings of Davis’s music in such a way that it both shapes and is shaped by each track. Davis and Glasper interact in a dynamic way as opposed to the traditionally static way of sampling jazz recordings in hip-hop records; the album represents the two artists as coexisting creative forces. As such, the album shows that the relationship between past, present, and future jazz is symbiotic, rather than one-directional. Finally, I discuss how this symbiosis in *Everything’s Beautiful* reconciles past, present, and future jazz, and thus signifies a different meaning than that of 1990s jazz rap records and their contemporary legacies.

Method

My comparative analysis of Glasper's album, *Everything's Beautiful*, can be summarised in the following two steps:

i) an overview and discussion of commentaries on this album by prominent jazz and hip-hop critics, describing how jazz came to signify high art by the 1980s, and how this led to the conception of the jazz rap subgenre.

ii) a discussion and analysis of the differences in musical characteristics between sub-genres of hip-hop; namely, to demonstrate how Glasper's album reworks jazz recordings in a different manner than the sample-oriented jazz rap artists of the 1990s.¹

Definition of Hip-Hop: Key Musical Characteristics

Jeff Chang points to the summer of 1973 on the streets of the Bronx, New York as being the birthplace of hip-hop. He identifies DJ Kool Herc as a principal founder of the genre.² The four elements which defined hip-hop included: breakdancing; DJing on turntables; graffiti; and rapping.³ Rap music, a style closely linked to hip-hop, has been defined by Tricia Rose as “a form of rhymed storytelling accompanied by highly rhythmic, electronically based music” which, historically, gave a voice to marginalised urban African Americans.⁴ Stylistically, hip-hop stems from a wide range of genres such as soul, funk, reggae and rock—early hip-hop pioneers like DJ Kool Herc mixed beats and samples from artists, such as James Brown and the Incredible Bongo Band, to produce a mix of “Black soul and white rock records with an uptempo, often Afro-Latinized backbeat.”⁵

¹ The main source that I drew from in order to make this analysis was a mini-documentary on *Everything's Beautiful* published at the time of the album's release in 2016: “Miles Davis & Robert Glasper—Everything's Beautiful (Mini Documentary),” March 10, 2016, YouTube video, accessed February 1, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_NFokhjyZk.

² Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop* (New York: Picador, 2005), 67.

³ Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 110. Likewise, Tricia Rose identifies these elements as fundamental to hip-hop. Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 79.

Hip-hop remained the music of the New York streets until “Rapper’s Delight” (1979) by The Sugar Hill Gang topped American and international charts. This breakthrough saw hip-hop music depart from “New York’s insular hip-hop scene” and become a global phenomenon.⁶ Hip-hop was then subsumed by the music industry over the five years after the release of “Rapper’s Delight.” This contributed to tensions between the emancipatory message that hip-hop tried to spread and its growing commerciality.⁷

Lyrics often differentiate between sub-genres of hip-hop. The Columbia University professor and cultural sociologist Jennifer C. Lena analysed the hip-hop records that entered the charts between 1979 and 1995 in terms of the flow, background, rhythmic style and semantic content of each sub-genre. Lena’s findings demonstrated that the semantic content of hip-hop sub-genres adhered to the following themes:

- i) East coast gangsta rap: violence, boasting, race
- ii) New Jack swing: romance, boasting, partying, money
- iii) G-funk: sex, parody, boasting, money
- iv) Jazz rap: romance, parody, race, gender roles, politics.⁸

An additional sub-genre of hip-hop that emerged in the early 1990s in the southern states of the US was called trap. Trap stepped into mainstream hip-hop music in 2009.⁹ Trap music is relevant to my analysis of Glasper’s *Everything’s Beautiful* because he uses aspects of this sub-genre to ground his music in a contemporary aesthetic.

Despite using trap elements in his music occasionally, Glasper’s music is not confined to a single genre. Performing as a jazz pianist, his album *Black Radio* (2012) won a Grammy for “Best R&B

⁶ Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 131.

⁷ Rose, *Black Noise*, 3–4.

⁸ Jenifer C. Lena, “Social Context and Musical Content of Rap Music, 1979–1995,” *Social Forces* 85, no. 1 (September 2006): 484.

⁹ Jernej Kaluža, “Reality of Trap: Trap Music and its Emancipatory Potential,” *Journal of Media, Communication and Film* 5, no. 1 (Summer 2018): 24.

Characterised by 808-style kick drums and rolling hi-hat lines, a prominent contemporary example of the sub-genre is Atlanta trio Migos’ *Culture II* (2018).

Album.”¹⁰ Born in 1978 in Texas, Gasper has been releasing music since 2003 through solo and collaborative projects, including *The Robert Gasper Experiment. Everything’s Beautiful* was not the first album where he fused hip-hop and jazz sensibilities, but it is the album which anchors his dialogue between jazz and hip-hop to a single jazz figure: Miles Davis. In the following section, I will provide a brief overview of the aspects of jazz’s history and sub-genres relevant to my analysis of *Everything’s Beautiful* to illuminate how Gasper’s re-workings of Davis’ jazz recordings shaped his work on this album in the manner of an artistic partner or collaborator and not as a static sample.

Definition of Jazz

Jazz emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century in New Orleans before spreading to the East Coast of the United States. Though jazz’s exact origins and history are highly complex, Reiland Rabaka, Professor of African American and Caribbean Studies at Colorado University provides an overview that is sufficient for the purposes of this article. His statement that jazz “symbolizes a shift in African America [that marks] the transition between rural and urban music,” as well as an acceptance by the upper class of the legitimacy of African American popular music, effectively summarises the depth, nuance, and origins from which jazz, as is known today, evolved and became something of its own.¹¹

Jazz, by the 1980s, had migrated from nightclubs to concert halls as a result of the diffusion of “jazz art ideology” across middle and upper classes.¹² Key contributing factors in modern jazz’s elevation to high art included new scholarly criticism—particularly surrounding bebop and its technical complexity—and, in a commercial and cultural context, the introduction of live performances in concert halls and the increased production of jazz

¹⁰ According to the popular streaming service Spotify, his music pertains to neo-soul and jazz-funk genres. Though the claims of such streaming services are highly hegemonic, they nonetheless provide a relevant indication of how an artist is marketed to the public.

¹¹ Reiland Rabaka, *Hip Hop’s Amnesia: From Blues and the Black Women’s Club Movement to Rap and the Hip Hop Movement* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), 112.

¹² Justin Williams, “The Construction of Jazz Rap as High Art in Hip-Hop Music,” *The Journal of Musicology* 27, no. 4 (2010): 437.

records by independent record labels.¹³ Jazz's new status as a cultural product of and for the socially elite filtered down into media representations of jazz artists and their music. A slew of television commercials, films and advertising campaigns throughout the 1980s strengthened the association of jazz with images of "affluence, sophistication and a high-brow aesthetic that resisted being considered a 'popular music.'"¹⁴ One such example of these high-brow media representations of jazz was saxophonist Courtney Pine promoting GAP turtleneck sweaters in *Rolling Stone* magazine as a visual reference to Wynton Marsalis' fine suit aesthetic.¹⁵ Media representations such as these cemented the public perception that jazz was the music of the intelligentsia.

Born in 1926 in Illinois, Miles Davis rose to fame as a trumpeter in Charlie Parker's Quintet in 1944, before continuing to forge a solo career which spanned jazz sub-genres from bebop to hard bop, modal jazz, and cool jazz. Today, Davis is arguably one of the most renowned figures in jazz history. His legacy therefore serves as a perfect conduit for Glasper to explore the division between past, present, and future jazz forms.

The following section describes how this perception of jazz as high art provided hip-hop artists with the opportunity to "elevate" their music above mainstream hip-hop by incorporating elements of jazz through the use of jazz codes.

The Rise and Fall of Jazz Aesthetics in Hip-Hop Music

Whilst jazz was experiencing an upward movement through social classes over the decades leading up to the 1980s, hip-hop was also experiencing a generic reconfiguration as the divide between sub-genres widened.¹⁶ According to Justin Williams, hip-hop groups turned to bebop's music and ideology to explore alternatives from hardcore and gangsta rap, but also to distance themselves from the commerciality of popular rappers.¹⁷ This desire to distinguish their

¹³ Paul Lopes, *The Rise of a Jazz Art World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 157–58.

¹⁴ Williams, "The Construction of Jazz Rap," 440.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 439. Wynton Marsalis was considered the front man for the Neo-classical jazz revival, which presented jazz as a sophisticated, high art form.

¹⁶ In particular the divide between the popular and gangsta rap sub-genres.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 453.

music from popular music was similar to early beboppers disassociating themselves from commercial swing bands.¹⁸ Hip-hop groups wanted to distinguish their music from commercial artists. They drew from jazz as an exclusive art form that had, by the 1980s, become associated with the intelligentsia and also a sense of nostalgia.¹⁹ The desire to substitute commercial currency with intellectual currency led to the conception of the hip-hop sub-genre of jazz rap, also called “college kids’s rap” and “thinking man’s rap.”²⁰

Williams notes the similarities between the jazz and hip-hop genres beyond their shared racial history. Both began as dance music; they have rhythmic similarities; and also the act of improvisation was generally seen as a signifier of authenticity and artistic quality.²¹ When groups that fused the two genres emerged in the late-1980s, this link “acted as a symbolic exchange... that increased the social capital of both [genres].”²² Jazz rappers of the late 1980s and 1990s signaled their social, intellectual, and musical exclusivity through the use of jazz codes; however, Glasper took the integration of these codes a step further into uncharted territory when he evoked both a holistic and unadulterated sense of Miles Davis’ presence in the process of crafting both the pieces and the album as a whole. These jazz codes included:

- i) a walking acoustic bass
- ii) saxophones or a trumpet with a Harmon mute
- iii) a more generalised “jazz feel” created by “swung eighth notes and expressive sub-syntactical micro-rhythmic variations.”²³

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 447.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 442.

²⁰ Rabaka, *Hip Hop’s Amnesia*, 147.

²¹ Williams, “The Construction of Jazz Rap,” 441.

²² *Ibid.*, 442. Here, Williams refers to Bourdieu’s concept of social capital as the socio-economic benefits resulting from being a member of a social group. Though it appeared that jazz belonged to the upper class, hip-hop artists were reclaiming jazz as their own cultural product, and in doing so forging their own kind of exclusive social group—a group that was distinct from the “parental” genres from which it strayed: mainstream hip-hop and modern jazz.

²³ *Ibid.*, 443–44

These above interpretations are generalised; the exact meanings of these jazz codes are less important than what the audience believes they represent.²⁴ In the jazz rap of the late 1980s, these codes were translated into mainstream jazz ideology; namely, an ideology that encompassed the values of sophistication and elitism.²⁵ In addition to instrumental musical codes, jazz rappers also included lyrical references to jazz styles, culture, artistry in general, and also utilised recordings from an eclectic range of jazz eras and sub-genres that ranged from bebop to rhythm to blues to soul. Though sampling was a widespread practice across hip-hop sub-genres, it was predominantly the jazz codes embedded in the music and flow of jazz rap records that created an ideological and aesthetic distinction between the commercially driven hip-hop artists and the hip-hop artists who drew from jazz's heritage. The former were perceived by jazz rappers as being inauthentic or sell-outs as they were aligned with popular culture, in terms of both artistic values and image-making.²⁶

The intertextual lyrical references to jazz, politics, and philosophy operated on both subtle and explicit levels. Williams draws strong connections between the intentions of jazz rap artists and the hipster culture of the Beats.²⁷ Rabaka, however, argues that jazz rap was an extension of bebop ideology and was firmly grounded in bebop's relationship with jazz poetry, as well as its cultural and political histories. He contends that although the combination of hip-hop and jazz styles was new in the late 1980s, jazz rap was not in itself a new mode of expressing hipness; that is, being either cool or trendy. Langston Hughes' album *The Weary Blues* (1958) is an example of jazz's roots in poetic traditions; Rabaka refers to this album as a "proto-jazz rap album."²⁸

²⁴ Ibid., 456–57.

²⁵ Ibid., 444.

²⁶ Ibid., 447–48.

²⁷ Ibid., 448. In Williams' analysis of the lyrics of seminal jazz rap groups A Tribe Called Quest and Digable Planets, he notes that both used "complex lyrics that may appear incomprehensible to the square outsider." See page 452.

²⁸ Rabaka, *Hip Hop's Amnesia*, 143. With respect to Williams' discourse, Rabaka warns against the dangers of attributing too much importance to the Beats' fusion of jazz and poetry, as this disregards seminal Harlem Renaissance poets such as Hughes and Amiri Baraka, who infused jazz poetry with the politics of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. The refrain at 1:24 on the track "Blues Montage" from Langston Hughes's *The Weary Blues* (1958) is one

Rabaka's discourse is a call to fight against "hip-hop's amnesia" and to acknowledge jazz rap's—and, more broadly, hip-hop's—poetic, cultural and political inheritance from bebop and other African American art forms.²⁹ In line with Rabaka's argument, Tom Perchard adds that in addition to lyrical content and jazz codes, sampling in early jazz rap records functioned as a conduit for an African American "cultural memory."³⁰ Perchard discusses Guru, one of the earliest proponents of jazz rap and a member of the band Gang Starr, as an example of the intersection between intellectualism and cultural memory in jazz sampling. On the Gang Starr track "Jazz Thing" (1990), Guru conveys a narrative of jazz history set to samples of Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong and Thelonious Monk. Perchard interprets Guru's narrative as both a "cultural reunification across history" and a representation of "the class differences that existed within African American culture."³¹ Guru envisioned a future for jazz and hip-hop founded in cultural history, but when jazz sampling expressed this history, it invoked an implicit class divide. As an early jazz rap figure, Guru's style of sampling directly from past jazz records contrasts vividly with Glasper's style, which integrates sounds from the past and present more seamlessly, organically, and democratically—as I later explain.

While Williams, Perchard and Rabaka all emphasise the link between jazz rap and past jazz forms, Gabriel Solis argues that the fusion of jazz with other genres—but particularly contemporary ones, as heard in *Everything's Beautiful*—can be an example of Afrofuturism, rather than solely a homage to a cultural memory. The aspect or definition of Afrofuturism that matters most to jazz, according to Solis, is Nettrice Gaskin's conception of Afrofuturism as "the artistic practice of navigating the past, present, and future simultaneously."³² Solis analyses the music of eminent experimental

example of this proto-jazz rap style: Hughes's languid but expressive speaking voice and the instruments engage in a loose call-and-response that encourages Hughes to continue his poetic flow.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁰ Tom Perchard, "Hip Hop Samples Jazz: Dynamics of Cultural Memory and Musical Tradition in the African American 1990s," *American Music* 29, no. 3 (2011): 280.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 292. Perchard goes on to note that Guru, a college graduate, offered visions in his music of a future that placed faith in "formal organization."

³² Gabriel Solis, "Soul, Afrofuturism & the Timeliness of Contemporary Jazz Fusions," *Daedalus* 148, no. 2 (2019): 31.

hip-hop artists such as Flying Lotus, Kamasi Washington, and Robert Glasper himself through the frameworks of polygenericism and Afrofuturism. Generic fusion between the broad era of 1960 to 2000 was a means of challenging authority and authenticity within genres, as well as contesting the overarching hegemony across genres; genre created a “hierarchy of value” and Baby Boomers and Generation Xers concerned themselves with “genre purity” to protect this hierarchy.³³ Amiri Baraka’s article “The Changing Same: R&B and the New Black Music” informs Solis’ discourse on polygenericism, Afrofuturism and jazz. In broad terms, Baraka sees an inherent connection between African American artists across space and time, and therefore no African American audiences should experience alienation from new combinations of jazz with other genres. This idea of uniting cultural history across time is relevant to my analysis of *Everything’s Beautiful* in the following section.

The three artists that Solis discusses are examples of the re-integration of jazz into generic spaces that have perhaps experienced Rabaka’s “amnesia” of their cultural and musical roots. Rather than only remembering the past, though, Solis claims that “the return to older material is not simply derivative... but rather part of an Afrofuturist ‘back to the future’ gesture.”³⁴ From this perspective, the fusion of jazz and hip-hop is valuable not because it reclaims jazz from an elitist space, but because it unifies two forms of African American cultural expression across time. Through the frameworks of polygenericism and Afrofuturism, jazz’s status as a genre of intellectual, high art—a status which heavily informed 1980s and 1990s jazz rap—becomes less important than jazz’s potential to connect artists and audiences across past, present and future. As such, Solis’ discourse provides a useful theoretical foundation which I will use to compare 1990s jazz rap records and *Everything’s Beautiful*.

Despite the fact that Solis mainly analyses four albums released post-2014, the first jazz rap album to embody the relationship Solis identifies between polygenericism, Afrofuturism and jazz was arguably Guru’s *Jazzmatazz* project. The first of four *Jazzmatazz* volumes, released in 1993 in the midst of jazz rap’s heyday, was the first album to involve well-known jazz musicians improvising over

³³ Ibid., 24.

³⁴ Ibid., 31.

hip-hop beats and vocals, rather than sampling jazz recordings. Guru reversed the direction of influence that was the common practice of jazz rappers at the time; feature artists created original “new” jazz music to comply with a hip-hop track. In a widely-quoted 1994 interview, Guru stated that the jazz rap movement was about “bringing jazz back to the streets” after it had been transformed into elite, high art.³⁵ This demonstrates that Guru’s intentions for *Jazzmatazz* aligned with Solis’ claim: that using jazz in novel ways can be an Afrofuturist attempt at reconciling past, present and future. Like Guru, Glasper’s approach to making music results in the creation of new art that unites listeners across time; but as we will see in the next section, Glasper’s music offers a more democratic relationship between both past and present sounds, and between highly renowned and less known musicians.

Another difference between Glasper’s music and Guru’s *Jazzmatazz* is that though the *Jazzmatazz* project was innovative in that it moved away from sampling and introduced “live” jazz improvisation, this expression of jazz ideology still conceptualised jazz as a phenomenon of the past. *Jazzmatazz* featured musicians who were already well-established in the jazz genre, such as Donald Byrd and Lonnie Liston Smith. As such, the albums link hip-hop with past jazz styles and sentiments, gaining power from bebop’s legacy as an exclusive genre. Hip-hop beats and vocals in combination with “live” jazz reinvigorated hip-hop with the tradition of jazz improvisation and produced a new sound, but the components of that sound were rooted in past jazz styles. As Rabaka argues, *Jazzmatazz: Streetsoul* (2000) “seems to simultaneously... look backward (to soul jazz and jazz poetry) and forward (to neo-soul and the evolution of conscious rap).”³⁶

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, jazz codes have largely dissipated into the background of hip-hop and neo-soul music. References to jazz heritage have become diluted and no longer signal an explicit bebop ideology or legacy, but rather, a generalised, nostalgic sense of a hipness or relevance that is no longer a living cultural phenomenon. One such example is XamVolo’s album *All The Sweetness On The Surface* (2019), which

³⁵ Quoted in Williams, “The Construction of Jazz Rap,” 435.

³⁶ Rabaka, *Hip Hop’s Amnesia*, 161. This future vision that Rabaka predicts was never fully realised because jazz rap diminished in popularity as a genre soon after *Streetsoul*. See discussion on page 158.

sounds informed by jazz styles and even samples a Thelonious Monk record on the track “Feels Good.” However, despite the Monk sample and other bebop-reminiscent jazz codes, the album presents jazz as a phenomenon of the past that can be combined with “new” sounds, but that will always be something “old” in itself. We will see that Glasper’s method of sampling and composition in *Everything’s Beautiful* differs to that of contemporary albums, like XamVolo’s, and 1990s jazz rap records, including Guru’s *Jazzmatazz* project.

Having surveyed the factors that led to the convergence of jazz and hip-hop genres, the musical characteristics of 1990s jazz rap records, and the relevant theoretical frameworks such as polygenericism and Afrofuturism, I now turn to an analysis of Glasper’s *Everything’s Beautiful*. I pay particular attention to how the album’s musical characteristics transcend the boundaries of time and genre in a way that does not portray jazz as music of the past, nor does it draw from jazz’s association with the socially elite.

Robert Glasper’s Revival and Reinvention of Jazz Sensibilities in Hip-Hop

Robert Glasper’s album *Everything’s Beautiful* (2016) represented a tangible shift in the use of jazz codes in neo-soul music today. Glasper—a hip-hop influenced jazz pianist—compiled a collection of Miles Davis’ recordings from the Columbia Records archives and digitally re-worked these into new tracks.³⁷ Both Davis and Glasper are co-credited as the album’s artists. Glasper stressed in an interview that he was not remixing Davis’ recordings, but rather wanted to demonstrate how Davis continues to inspire the creation of new art, stating that the idea of the project was to “take some of Miles’ ideas, shake them up, and try to show the influence of Miles in making new things.”³⁸ While the album is close in spirit to Guru’s fusion of past and present jazz/hip-hop styles on the *Jazzmatazz* volumes, I will argue that *Everything’s Beautiful* still differs

³⁷ Greg Tate, “Everything’s Beautiful,” *Rolling Stone*, June 2, 2016, accessed February 1, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/everythings-beautiful-199789/>.

³⁸ “Miles Davis & Robert Glasper,” 00:00:30. Only two of the eleven tracks—“Little Church” and “Milestones”—are titled as remixes of the original recordings; this demonstrates Glasper’s intention of creating new music rather than paying tribute to Davis’ music as artefacts of the past.

significantly from 1990s-style jazz rap records like *Jazzmatazz* in terms of its conjuring of Miles Davis as an artistic presence who works alongside and unites artists from multiple genres and eras.

Solis identifies two other Glasper-led albums, *Covered* (2015) and *ArtScience* (2016), as examples of the intersection between Afrofuturism, polygenericism, and jazz. However, I focus on exploring the impacts of Glasper's choice to use Davis as a specific jazz code, acting as a conduit between past, present, and future. *Everything's Beautiful* features an array of artists spanning genres from soul to contemporary R&B; for example, renowned artists like Stevie Wonder and Erykah Badu, high profile hip-hop producer 9th Wonder, as well as more peripheral artists, like Hiatus Kaiyote and Bianca Rodriguez. Glasper combines Davis' legacy with both renowned and up-and-coming feature artists to create music that transcends boundaries of time and genre, and in doing so highlights the ongoing importance of Davis's music.

In an interview about *Everything's Beautiful*, Glasper stated that the project was based on Davis' vision, trumpet, voice, composition, influence, and "swag."³⁹ The first track of the album, "Talking Shit," begins with a recording of Davis giving instructions to musicians. When Davis instructs "Play some kind of figure that you could keep playing through," the electric piano comes in with the main two bar motif that continues throughout the song. From the first track, Davis is established as the "conductor," so to speak, whose presence actively shapes the form and content of the track. By introducing the listener to Davis' voice before any of his or Glasper's music, Glasper immediately presents Davis as a fully formed persona who is directly influencing this track and all of its subsequent sounds. This representation of Davis imbues the album with a sense of his "swag" which Glasper, arguably, would not have captured had he only sampled Davis' music. Opening the album with a sample of Davis' trumpet would risk the abstraction of Davis' persona from his music, but Glasper unifies musician and music through the use of vocal samples. Davis' voice—especially in the opening of the album—not only invokes his legacy as a renowned jazz musician, but also conjures a vision of him as an enduring and complete artistic figure.

³⁹ "Miles Davis & Robert Glasper," 00:02:47.

Davis' voice becomes its own motif. Throughout the album, Glasper uses Davis' vocal samples in three ways that may be summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Description of Glasper's uses of Davis' Voice Across *Everything's Beautiful*

	Description/Effect	Example
Conversational vocals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Davis engages in (one-sided) dialogue with other musicians. - Davis is established as the musical leader/conductor. 	"Talking Shit" (throughout)
Extended spoken vocals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Whole sentences give the sense of a personal address from Davis to the listener. - Samples exist outside of the rhythm and tonality of the music. - Samples act as a medium between musical content and listener, creating intimacy. 	"Milestones—Remix": <i>"You got to cool it a little bit, I mean you got to let it carry you"</i> (3:35)
Vocal riff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Samples are rhythmically integrated into the music. - Davis' voice is woven into the texture and rhythm amidst other instruments. 	"I'm Leaving You": <i>"Wait a minute"</i> (chorus riff, e.g. 0:37)

By using samples of Davis' voice in these three manners, Glasper places Davis both inside and outside of the music. This ultimately allows Davis to alternate between his role as the album's overarching artistic presence—or the "conductor"—and his more democratic role as a member of the musicians. These musicians were all active in 2016 when the album was released; as such, when Glasper places Davis' voice alongside them, he projects Davis into the present time. In contrast, when Glasper uses Davis' voice to place him in the role of the "conductor," Glasper preserves Davis'

legacy as a renowned jazz musician of the past. Switching roles in this way is one example of how Glasper uses these vocal samples to reconcile past and present jazz in an Afrofuturist gesture.

Although the feature artists on the album vary in their degrees of fame, Glasper ensures that Davis' status as one of the most renowned musicians in jazz history does not overshadow their presence. Davis is clearly the focal point of the album; but although he stands at centre stage, the spotlight is not always on him. Whenever Glasper samples one of Davis' trumpet solos, the trumpet is always engaging in a dialogue with another instrument. The most obvious example of this is on the track "Maiysha (So Long)," which features vocals by the venerable Erykah Badu. In an interview, Badu states that she "reimagined Miles' melody and added [her] own in the bridge area."⁴⁰ The trumpet is introduced in the middle section of the song (3:20) and engages in a call-and-response dialogue with Badu's vocals. Davis' trumpet, however, is always responding to Badu's vocals. There is often a slight rhythmic disparity between the two lines; each call-and-response phrase happens over two bars, but Davis' response often begins on an off-beat while Badu's phrase begins on the beat. This rhythmic asymmetry makes the trumpet line seem more closely connected to the vocal line, and creates a sense that Badu's vocals are leading Davis' trumpet even though Badu has built the vocal melody from Davis' original trumpet melody. Glasper seemingly reverses the direction of influence—it sounds as if Davis' trumpet grows out of Badu's vocals, when in fact it is the opposite way around. The musical structure and form can therefore be seen to grow like a plant, organically, with space and time for both to shape and be shaped by each other's presence.

Indeed, the entire project is itself a response to Davis' work, but rather than "new" music answering "old" music, the "old" is reinvented and answers the "new." Glasper deliberately confuses, or, at least, complicates the origin and ownership of the melody, which then signifies that Badu and Davis should be treated as equally authentic artists contributing to the composition of the

⁴⁰ Erykah Badu, "Erykah Badu Talks Directing Robert Glasper's 'Maiysha' Video, Building a Multimedia Production Company & Collaborating with D.R.A.M.," interview by Niki McGloster, *Billboard*, June 24, 2016, accessed February 1, 2020, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/7416540/erykah-badu-robert-glasper-maiysha-so-long-video-interview>.

piece, despite their different genres, audiences, and times. In this sense, Glasper disregards Davis' status as a historical figure to a certain extent, and instead places him on equal footing with contemporary artists like Badu. In doing so, he allows listeners to appreciate and understand Davis for his artistry rather than for his glorified place in the jazz history books, making him heard primarily as an active contributor to the album who is no longer confined to a historical time and space.

The Dialogue of Past, Present, and Future in Robert Glasper's Reworkings of Miles Davis

On the track "Little Church–Remix," featuring vocals from Hiatus Kaiyote, Glasper again presents Davis as more than a historical figure and demonstrates that Davis' version of jazz is relevant to and interacts with contemporary jazz styles. Though the title of this track refers to it as a "remix," Glasper has done more than remix it. One such example is his rearrangement of the original melody from the trumpet to the voice, which requires both more effort and artistry than "remixes" as we know them today. In addition to this, there are layers of vocal harmonies which utilise various production techniques—ranging from simple techniques such as reverb and panning, to more heavy manipulations of the sounds that create disturbing audio effects (3:01). Similarly, in "Milestones–Remix" the main four note riff is rearranged onto digital synthesisers, a distorted electric guitar, and heavily processed vocals. Both of these examples use modern production techniques and digital instruments in place of the acoustic instruments on the original recordings; this process of rearranging musical ideas into a new ensemble requires a significantly higher level of co-ordination and nuance than the process of shortening, lengthening, and adding effects to an existing sample, which is precisely what many remixers do nowadays. In 1990s jazz rap, the samples were reproductions of jazz recordings in their original form, but in this case Glasper literally translates Davis' melodies into the voices and instruments of today, which requires a high degree of awareness and appreciation of both the old and the new.⁴¹ In these examples,

⁴¹ An example of a 1990s jazz rap record that uses sampling in this way is "Escapism (Gettin' Free)" by Digable Planets (1993) which samples the hook from "Watermelon Man" by Herbie Hancock (1962). The sample preserves the hook in its original form and is immediately recognisable. Gang Starr's *Step*

Glasper does more than reproduce past recordings; he demonstrates that Davis' music can evolve while still embodying Davis himself. This shows that jazz music must not be limited as a touchstone of the past; it should and can be transformed into new art forms without losing its sense of history and suffering from Rabaka's concept of "amnesia."⁴²

Glasper uses production techniques to a similar effect at many moments throughout the album. In his use of digital techniques, Glasper creates a symbiotic relationship between jazz styles of the past and the present; the "old" informs the "new" and vice versa. An example of this is on the track "Violets," which samples Davis' renowned "Blue in Green" (1959). "Violets" features a drum machine playing a syncopated rhythm—this rhythm subverts listeners' expectations that synthetic or programmed drums are restricted to straight time, as is the case in the majority of popular and hip-hop songs that one hears on radio and television. "Milestones–Remix" contains multiple layerings of Georgia Ann Muldrow's vocals with a phaser effect that creates the sense that the vocals are in a state of constant motion throughout the entire stereo field. Muldrow sings a form of a chant over four bars and the production—specifically, the mixing and reverb—blends her chant with the contemporary hip-hop setting. Glasper summarises the fusion of past jazz sensibilities with contemporary sounds and production techniques in an interview about the album. He stated that: "I'm living in the spirit of Miles... because I'm documenting my time period... I'm documenting where music is now."⁴³ By embodying this spirit, jazz sounds from a bygone era are no longer irrelevant because Glasper has shown a way of reconciling and integrating these sounds with the evolving musical styles, technologies, and production techniques of today.

Many of the tracks on *Everything's Beautiful* transition into an outro section that is often radically different to the main section of the song, in terms of genre style and signifiers. These outros

In The Arena (1991), particularly "Check The Technique," is another example of this type of direct sampling. Though Glasper does include some direct samples from Davis records—for example the sample in "Ghetto Walkin" is recognisably from Davis' "The Ghetto Walk–New Mix" (1969)—Glasper alternates between recognisable, direct sampling and more integrative re-working of Davis' music.

⁴² Rabaka, *Hip Hop's Amnesia*, 16.

⁴³ "Miles Davis & Robert Glasper," 00:00:09.

provide an example of how the album embodies polygenericism—a key component of Solis’ “‘back to the future’ gesture”—which liberates the songs from the confines of a single, discrete genre, instead proposing that jazz and hip-hop music can be fluid in its styles and sensibilities.⁴⁴ On “Maiysha (So Long),” towards the end of the song (5:20) it becomes dominated by digital synthesizers, hand-claps, and other percussion tracks, which makes the bossa nova beat feel more like a contemporary dance beat. The percussion tracks slowly fade out and the song ends with an almost psychedelic combination of haunting vocals and synthesizers. In contrast, the coda of “I’m Leaving You” fades into eight bars of blues played on a distant electric guitar and an acoustic drum kit, and ends with a sample of Davis’ voice mumbling the word “nevermind.” The blues-style outro is of a very different timbre, texture, and rhythm than the main section of the song, which features a funk rhythm that is driven by electric and bass guitars. Similarly, towards the end of “Milestones–Remix” the hip-hop beat stops, leaving only the piano and the heavily-layered vocals. After another insert of Davis’ voice (3:36), the hip-hop beat returns but with an energetic hi-hat line playing clean, compressed notes, making the beat sound distinctly more like a trap beat, as described earlier.

All three of these unexpected outros move the songs smoothly into a new direction, which allows Glasper to comment on the dynamic and fluid nature of genres across time. This outro style differs from that of 1990s jazz rap albums. For example, A Tribe Called Quest’s *The Low End Theory* (1991) contains mostly abrupt but smooth transitions between tracks, but each track usually remains in one style or otherwise features sounds of a homogenous timbre and texture, unlike many tracks on Glasper’s album.⁴⁵ In doing so, these tracks support Solis’ argument that polygenericism, Afrofuturism, and jazz combine to form a “‘back to the future’ gesture.”⁴⁶ Glasper, moreover, ensures that Davis’ spirit is always present in some form or other at the very moment that each song

⁴⁴ Solis, “Soul, Afrofuturism & the Timeliness of Contemporary Jazz Fusions,” 31.

⁴⁵ Likewise, most of the tracks on Gang Starr’s *Step In The Arena* (1991) feature fade-outs, but not Glasper’s style of outro.

⁴⁶ Solis, “Soul, Afrofuturism & the Timeliness of Contemporary Jazz Fusions,” 31.

bleeds into a new genre; he shows that Davis as a musician can adapt not only to new times but also to genres outside of pure jazz.

Just as the transitions into the final sections of these tracks comment on the fluid nature of genre, the transition between “Ghetto Walkin’” and “They Can’t Hold Me Down” —tracks two and three on the album—similarly signals an ongoing, smooth evolution across time and generic styles. “Ghetto Walkin’,” featuring vocals from neo-soul artist Bilal, uses the familiar imagery of the ghetto to cement the connection between the current hip-hop world and the jazz world of which Davis was a part. The song ends with Bilal repeating the phrase: “They can’t hold me down” before the texture thins to only a keyboard synthesiser. This synthesiser then carries the music seamlessly over into the next track which reworks Bilal’s vocals as a motif. While on “Ghetto Walkin’,” Bilal’s vocals had a clear and resonant quality, on “They Can’t Hold Me Down” the sample is distinctly lo-fi, which sounds as if it were lifted off a record from a much earlier time period. Through this form of intra-album sampling, Glasper compresses the usual time frame of sampling jazz recordings: traditionally, an artist would sample a record that had been released a significant time prior to the release of their own record, but here Glasper has effectively sampled his own music that the listener has heard only moments beforehand.⁴⁷ Glasper manipulates the act of sampling to smooth the transition between tracks and preserve a sense of continuity, despite changing vocalists, key signatures, and instrumentation. The “run on” transition between these tracks conveys the notion that the distinction between the sounds of the past—as heard through the samples—and the sounds of the present, are fluid; jazz must not be restricted as being a touchstone of the past.

⁴⁷ This method of sampling is explained in my earlier use of examples, such as “Jazz Thing” (1990) by Gang Starr, which samples “Light Blue” (1958) by Thelonius Monk; “U.M.M.G. (Upper Manhattan Medical Group)” (1959) by Duke Ellington; and a 1933 recording of “Mahogany Hall Stomp” by Louis Armstrong. Other early jazz rap records that did not feature samples from decades earlier nonetheless used samples from previously released and usually well-known records; for example most of the samples used on De La Soul’s *3 Feet High And Rising* (1989) were from albums released in the 1970s and early 1980s and included popular artists like Johnny Cash, Ben E. King and Sly & The Family Stone. *3 Feet High And Rising* and later De La Soul albums are analysed in more depth in Rabaka’s *Hip Hop’s Amnesia*.

Conclusion

The track “This Is Not Fear” from Glasper’s album *ArtScience* (2016), contains a voiceover which asks a timely question: “My people have given the world so many styles of music... so why should I confine myself just to one? We want to explore them all.”

By overlapping jazz and contemporary styles such as hip-hop, *Everything’s Beautiful* pioneers new modes of engaging in a musical dialogue between the past and the present. Glasper offers an Afrofuturist vision which both preserves the heritage of jazz as a phenomenon with cultural capital and explores uncharted territory through advances in music technology. Rather than using samples of Davis’ music as references to a past form of jazz, Glasper evokes a complete image of Davis as an artist through his innovative use of sampling; his use of outros; and his adoption of multiple generic sensibilities. This article has argued that the key difference between *Everything’s Beautiful* and jazz rap records of the 1990s, and their contemporary legacies, is that Glasper transforms jazz from an artefact of the past into new, evolving art, in which the spirit of existing recordings can shape a piece organically. By capturing the spirit of Davis’ presence, the “old” and the “new” become codependent and coexistent; we can both explore the past and envision the future.

ABSTRACT

This article proposes that Robert Glasper’s album *Everything’s Beautiful* (2016) represents a significant change in both the creative process and possibilities of the sub-genre of jazz rap that emerged in the late 1980s. I present an overview of the history of jazz and hip-hop, defining their key musical characteristics alongside sub-genres including popular, gangsta, and jazz rap. I then argue that Glasper re-works recordings of the jazz legend Miles Davis in an organic way so that they are not static snapshots nor samples nor remixes of his music; rather, they interact as a dialogue that allows Davis’ music to both shape and be shaped by the distinct voice and presence of Glasper. This allows Glasper’s album to speak not just of jazz as a phenomenon of the past, but of the ongoing relevance of Davis’ music today. Davis is therefore present both inside the music and outside of it as a leader, a unique position which allows

Everything's Beautiful to transcend the boundaries of both its time and genre.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Isobel Savulescu is an aspiring student of a range of musical studies, with a particular interest in the production and analysis of contemporary works. Of her varied compositional pieces, her most recent radiophonic work involved recording sounds from the Blue Mountains region to create a depiction of the space, with particular emphasis on the problematic role of humans in this space. Isobel has completed a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Sydney with majors in Music and English. Over the course of this degree she invested herself in broadening her compositional and critical skills, engaging in diverse classes such as Jazz Riots and Revolutions, from which this article originated. Isobel has recently commenced a Doctor of Medicine at the University of Sydney, during which she hopes to pursue her interest in the intersection between music, neuroscience, and mental health.