Music meanings in movies: The case of the crime-plus-jazz genre

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This paper explores the role of film music in creating meanings of concern to those with an interest in consumption, markets, and culture. Specifically, the paper examines ways in which the significance of ambi-diegetic cinemusical moments — that is, music performed on-screen (diegetic) in a manner that advances the dramatic development of plot, character, and other themes (non-diegetic) — enrich our interpretation of three key exemplars from the crime-plus-jazz motion-picture genre: *Pete Kelly's Blues* (1955), *The Cotton Club* (1984), and *Kansas City* (1996). Key homologous parallels and contrasts among these three films touch on various consumption-, markets-, and culture-related themes in general and on the contrast or tension between commerce (crime) and art (jazz) in particular.

**Keywords:** film; cultural products; jazz; crime; commerce

**Introduction**

This paper proposes that the role of music in general or jazz in particular as a key aspect of meaning in an artistic offering such as a motion picture calls for an interpretive analysis of the music itself — not merely the lyrics to songs; not just the non-musical screen personas of the performers; and not only the extra-musical aspects of costumes, props, or scenery; but rather the details of the actual musical compositions and performances. This logic pursues the viewpoint offered in previous analyses of symbolic consumption in motion pictures, television programs, novels, and plays (Holbrook and Grayson 1986; Holbrook and Hirschman 1993) insofar as the interpretation of (say) clothing, automobiles, or décor goes beyond the recognition of their roles as costumes, props, or scenery to embrace their special significance and deeper meaning as manifestations of symbolic consumer behaviors that work toward the dramatic development of plot, character, and other themes. In this – like other aspects of props (a Rolex wristwatch or Ferrari automobile), costumes (Prada shoes or a Vuitton handbag), décor (a Victorian living room or a colonial dining area), scenery (a well-manicured lawn or the view of a dingy back alley from a tenement window), and so forth – the music that film characters choose for consumption in the form of playing, singing, listening, and/or dancing sheds light on their personalities, moves the plot forward, and conveys other important dramatic messages. Thus – following earlier cinemusical interpretations (Holbrook 1985, 2003, 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2006, 2007) – the analysis here focuses not on the role of **non-diegetic film scores** (background music or underscoring produced off-screen in ways that advance a film’s dramatic development), and not on the more mundane aspects of **diegetic source music** (performances that appear on-screen to support the realism of the narrative action by enhancing the verisimilitude of the mise-en-scène), but rather on the importance...
of ambi-diegetic film music that appears on-screen (like diegetic music) but that works in significant ways to advance key dramatic meanings (like non-diegetic music) (Holbrook 2003; cf. Biancorosso 2001; Marks 2000; Rosar 2002).

Describing this interpretive strategy in the abstract makes little progress toward demonstrating its potential applicability. For this reason, the interpretation of ambi-diegetic music in motion pictures will be illustrated by an analysis of cinemusically meaningful on-screen jazz performances in three key films from the crime-plus-jazz genre in general and by an appreciation of how these cinemusical moments illuminate the parallel theme of commerce-versus-art in particular (cf. Holbrook 2005c, 2006; Bradshaw, McDonagh, and Marshall 2006). Specifically, the following interpretive analyses will examine the meanings of cinemusical performances as these illuminate the contrast or conflict between commerce (crime) and art (jazz) in Pete Kelly’s Blues (1955), The Cotton Club (1984), and Kansas City (1996).

The role of film music in the crime-plus-jazz genre
For better or worse, jazz musicians – almost always in need of a night’s work and a good day’s sleep – often perform at expensive nightclubs, fancy grills, posh watering holes, brassy brasseries, comfortable taverns, dangerous roadside restaurants, boisterous beer halls, dank dives, sleazy bars, and any number of other establishments ranging from the most upscale and elite that money can buy to the most downscale and bedraggled that one might imagine, where folks can go to have a drink, eat some peanuts, chew a steak, and listen to some good music. Most of the people who hang out in such venues are doubtless perfectly decent nine-to-five workers who just want to have a little fun, toss back a couple of shots, and snap their fingers to some hip sounds. But low-life gangsters, hoodlums, and felons also need a place to congregate. And it appears, especially in crime films, that jazz clubs often provide their typical meeting places of choice. For this reason – with a lot of help from the film-noir genre, from the movie or television scores of composers like Henry Mancini (the TV series Peter Gunn during the late-1950s), and from partially valid stereotypes that just won’t die – jazz has become a sure-fire signifier for the premonition of robbery, blackmail, kidnapping, or murder. If the cocktail pianist flats a fifth in his solo on “Honeysuckle Rose,” can a fusillade of machine-gun fire be far behind?

Some day, an ambitious musical historian with far more patience and way better funding than the present author will trace this trend from (say) After the Thin Man (1936) to The Pink Panther (1964) to Manhattan Murder Mystery (1993) to The Score (2001) to Inside Man (2006). But, in the meantime, let us confine our attention to three particularly conspicuous and representative examples of the crime-plus-jazz genre – namely, Pete Kelly’s Blues (1955), The Cotton Club (1984), and Kansas City (1996). Taken together, these three films span the last half of the past century and give us some clear insights into the ways in which the crime-plus-jazz motion-picture genre has deployed ambi-diegetic cinemusical meanings involving performances presented on-screen for the purpose of dramatic development.

Preview: three illustrations of ambi-diegetic cinemusical meanings in the crime-plus-jazz motion-picture genre
In short, the present essay explores how on-screen film music can function ambi-diegetically to advance the dramatic development of a motion picture. We shall consider detailed illustrations based on our cinemusical interpretations of the aforementioned three representative examples from the crime-plus-jazz genre. As a brief overview, consider the following set of
parallel homologous comparisons among the three films of interest – to be developed more systematically in the three major sections that follow.

As indicated here, the three films of interest show key similarities and contrasts. More importantly, in their various ways, they reflect the manners in which the ambi-diegetic meanings of on-screen music contribute to a film’s dramatic development in the crime-plus-jazz genre. All converge on a key homologous parallel between crime-versus-jazz and commerce-versus-art – namely, crime : jazz :: commerce : art. These points provide the major focus for detailed illustrations in the next three sections.

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Pete Kelly’s Blues (1955)

Pete Kelly’s Blues (1955) – starring its director Jack Webb in the role of Pete Kelly, a cornet-playing bandleader whose gig in a 1927 Kansas City speakeasy puts him in conflict with Fran McCarg (Edmond O’Brien), a gangster trying to extort money from the band – comes across as a cinematic disaster until you stop paying attention to its improbable plot, ignore its awkward acting, and regard it instead as a fine vehicle for the presentation of some excellent jazz. At the time he made this film, Webb was riding high on the success of his television show Dragnet, on which he played a tough, curt, macho, world-weary cop. So what does he play in Pete Kelly’s Blues? Of course: a tough, curt, macho, world-weary cornet player.

The only problem is that – in enacting a love story between Kelly and the beautiful Ivy Conrad (Janet Leigh) – Pete’s tendency to talk to Ivy in roughly the same manner in which Sergeant Joe Friday addresses the common criminals on Dragnet renders the scenes deliciously comic, but with an uneasy feeling that Webb did not intentionally play them for laughs. Further, the crime-related aspects of the story-line go way over the top. When McCarg clumsily imposes his extortion racket on the musicians, the band’s drummer Joey Firestone (enacted by the same Martin Milner who later starred as the guitar-playing hero in Sweet Smell of Success [1957]) goes bonkers and – very, very foolishly – insults McCarg so flagrantly that the crime boss has no choice but to gun him down like a mallard on the first day of duck-hunting season. This tends to make Kelly angry and disoriented to the point where the bandleader – also very, very foolishly – spends the rest of the movie ducking the romantic advances of Conrad until the preposterous scene at the end in which she traps him in a dance to a schmaltzy hurdy-gurdy in the very same ballroom where, at that very moment, Kelly is in the process of stealing McCarg’s personal papers for the purpose of incriminating him and thereby ending his reign of terror. When McCarg and his henchmen burst upon the scene – presumably attracted by the horrendous racket of the noisy calliope – an improbable fusillade of gunfire results in the loathsome hoodlum’s demise via a veritable coup de schmaltz.

So – as an interpretive strategy – let us forget the story-line and, instead, go for the music. In this connection, the film opens with a soulful rendition of “Just a Closer Walk with Thee,” played by a mournful cornet with gospel-choir accompaniment around the grave at a burial service in New Orleans circa 1915. This dirge segues, in the manner of the old New Orleans funerals, into a happy version of “Oh, Didn’t He Ramble” as joyful marching music for the traditional spirited procession back to town. On the way, the cornet of the deceased falls off the hearse wagon, to be kicked around in the mud, pawned, and passed down from hand to hand for a few years until Pete Kelly wins it in a craps game and ultimately learns to play it well enough to become a band leader. All this establishes the link of jazz with its African-American ancestry and sets the stage for the authenticity of Pete Kelly’s commitment to his horn – quite consistent with that evinced by (say) Rick Martin (Kirk Douglas) and Bleek Gilliam (Denzel Washington) in such previous and subsequent productions as Young Man with a Horn (1950) and Mo’ Better Blues (1990), respectively (Holbrook 2005c).

As we pick up the story of Pete Kelly, we find the cornetist playing a rousing version of “Smiles” in a small Kansas City speakeasy in 1927. The music in this scene bursts with light-hearted abandon provided by a group of real-life musicians put together by Matty Matlock (clarinet) and featuring Dick Cathcart (trumpet), Eddie Miller (tenor sax), Moe Schneider (trombone), Ray Sherman (piano), George Van Eps (guitar), Jud DeNaut (bass), and Nick Fatool (drums) – essentially the same LA band that recorded together many times during...
In the mid-1950s under the name of The South Rampart Street Paraders. The full contents of five such albums have recently reappeared in a reissue set entitled *Classic Columbia Condon Mob Sessions* (Matty Matlock et al. 2001) and might serve as the gold standard for happy-go-lucky Chicago-styled Dixieland-jazz revivalism at mid-century. Matlock – an under-appreciated jazz giant who spent much time behind the scenes in such aggregations as the Bob Crosby Band – was a master of the New-Orleans-Chicago-Dixie-styled clarinet-obbligato flourishes and knew how to bend himself to perfection around the crisp lead horns of the trumpeters with whom he worked (including, besides Cathcart, the formidable Red Nichols, the impressive Clyde Hurley, and the marvelous Wild Bill Davison).

Interestingly enough, the music from *Pete Kelly’s Blues* found its way onto long-playing records in at least three different versions. First, the renditions of tunes from the movie recently reissued on Mosaic (2001) appeared under the name of Matty Matlock and his Jazz Band (1955) on Columbia. The same group – calling itself Pete Kelly’s Big Seven, with a narrative by Jack Webb – recorded essentially the same repertoire for RCA Victor (1955). And songs performed in the film by Peggy Lee and Ella Fitzgerald, accompanied by the Matlock band, also showed up on a record album entitled *Songs from Pete Kelly’s Blues* released by Decca (1955).

In “Smiles” and in other ensemble pieces featured throughout the film, Jack Webb benefits from this hospitable musical setting with aplomb. Apparently, the actor was a major jazz fan – owner of over 6,000 recordings and an amateur cornet player who diligently practiced the horn. According to Richard Sudhalter’s liner notes for Mosaic (Matlock et al. 2001), Webb had worked before with Dick Cathcart in a short-lived radio version of *Pete Kelly’s Blues* in mid-1951, and Meeker (1981) reports that Cathcart continued to perform for the 1959 television series based on the film. Undoubtedly, Webb’s fondness for the music inspired his directorial and thespian efforts in the movie version of *Pete Kelly’s Blues*. Certainly, his aptitude on the horn facilitated the near perfection Webb achieved in synchronizing his cornet miming with the trumpet sounds ghosted by Cathcart. The effect helps to preserve the aura of great jazz – its spontaneity amidst precision – and moves the story forward by revealing the Kelly character as a serious musician with a high level of bandstand charisma.

These personality characteristics qualify Kelly for the amorous advances of Conrad, who invites him to a drunken party where, as the couple dances, an on-screen orchestra plays “I Never Knew” – the tune that turns out to be Ivy’s leitmotif – a lovely ballad that captures something of her gentle nature. When Ivy later visits Pete to apologize for her tipsy behavior at the rowdy party, the non-diegetic soundtrack again plays “I Never Knew” as they work their way toward a first passionate kiss. Usually, “I Never Knew” appears in the non-diegetic score – whenever images or thoughts of Ivy come into play – for example, on the aforementioned awful-sounding out-of-tune calliope in a scene at the Everglade Ballroom and, later, via a full orchestral treatment when Ivy proposes marriage in a rather charming way. Again, we hear this non-diegetic leitmotif when Conrad waits for Kelly in her car outside the speakeasy, they argue, she tells him that he wouldn’t get married unless he found a girl who looks like a cornet and adds that she is “three valves short,” they break off their engagement, and she drives away with the classic line, “Gosh, I’m sorry to see me go.” Yet again, the theme appears in the background when Ivy tries to make up with Pete and to renew their relationship at the very moment when he is rushing off in search of McCarg’s incriminating documents, too busy to talk with her, and in the mood to dismiss her brusquely. But, as the film approaches its end, we encounter two occasions when the Conrad leitmotif shows up in dramatically important ambi-diegetic form.

First, in the suspenseful scene at McCarg’s office, the calliope machine plays “I Never Knew” as a basis for Ivy to ask Pete to dance, under circumstances fraught with imminent
danger. The ludicrous sound of the hurdy-gurdy playing the old jazz/pop standard by Ted FioRito (music) and Gus Kahn (words) perfectly complements the wildly improbable nature of this dance episode — in which Conrad just wants to hold Kelly and twirl around in a romantic way while he wrestles with a life-threatening crisis that she knows nothing about. In a sense, the song “I Never Knew” deserves more respect than that. Recall that FioRito wrote the tunes to other such classics as “Toot Toot Tootsie” and “Laugh! Clown! Laugh!” As a lyricist, Kahn created an even longer list of masterpieces like “Dream a Little Dream of Me,” “I’ll See You in My Dreams,” “It Had to Be You,” “Liza,” “Love Me or Leave Me,” “Makin’ Whooppee,” “My Baby Just Cares For Me,” “My Buddy,” “The One I Love Belongs to Somebody Else,” “Yes, Sir, That’s My Baby,” and “You Stepped Out of a Dream” — plus “Toot Toot Tootsie” (with FioRito). As one of the best and most widely circulated hits for both songwriters, FioRito and Kahn’s “I Never Knew” (1925) has been performed and recorded by an endless succession of musical heroes including Louis Armstrong, Charlie Christian, Nat “King” Cole, John Coltrane, Tommy Dorsey, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, Coleman Hawkins, Zoot Sims, Frank Sinatra, Teddy Wilson, and Lester Young — plus Peggy Lee and George Van Eps (both of whom appear in Pete Kelly’s Blues). In other words, the song has an impressive musical pedigree, is associated with the finest jazz artists, and carries amorous associations from an era evocative of the budding jazz-age romance between Kelly and Conrad.

Hence, in the song’s second crucial on-screen appearance, we experience a feeling of triumph when the ambi-diegetic music in the film’s last scene turns out to be none other than “I Never Knew” — this time performed by Kelly himself, playing in the old speakeasy to an appreciative audience that includes Conrad. This concluding performance sounds jubilant, recalling the atmosphere surrounding “Smiles” when the movie began, and again at the Everglade Ballroom when things were temporarily going well for the band and for the Kelly-Conrad romance. In that earlier Ballroom scene, a Dragnet-type voiceover by Webb tells us that, on its own merits, the Everglade is a pretty drab scene, but that the good thing about the place is Ivy. And — BAM! — we see and hear the start of a crackling version of … “Smiles.” At the end — with an authentic Chicago-style version of “I Never Knew,” performed full-tilt by the Matlock band with Jack Webb and the guys doing their convincing miming on-stage — things have returned to normal. McCarg, the wicked crime boss, is dead. Kelly and Conrad have found true love. And all is well — both musically and socially.

But there is more ambi-diegetic jazz of (1) musical note and (2) dramatic substance in Pete Kelly’s Blues. In the first connection (musical note), Webb the director gives us two wonderful performances by Ella Fitzgerald playing the part of Maggie Johnson, the singer at Fat Annie’s, a wayside roadhouse where the musicians meet for their secret rendezvous. In this capacity, Fitzgerald does little to advance the movie’s plot line but rather serves to provide a transcendent touch of musical excellence. Indeed, Ella’s singing presents us with a remarkable gift that we, as viewers, must take time to appreciate. When we first encounter her at Fat Annie’s, Maggie is singing “Hard Hearted Hanah” in a joyfully Fitzgeraldesque rendition backed by a piano-bass-and-drums trio (Don Abney, Joe Mondragon, and Larry Bunker, respectively, on the soundtrack but played by black actors on-screen). Visually, as Maggie, Ella seems stiff. But musically, as herself, she hits those pitch-perfect notes for which she is so justly famous — with all her trademark glissandos and coloratura effects thrown in for good measure — working her way three times to the high note on the concluding phrase, a repeated D-natural on the words “vamp of Savannah, G … A.” The first two times, she reliably nails the D-naturals with her enviably precise vocal instrument. On the third, she leads us to the same moment in the song — at which point we fully expect to hear those two D-naturals one more time — but then lifts her voice up a half-step to produce two
shining E-flats (in effect, a downward appoggiatura, from the fourth to the third of the tonic chord). In context, the effect of this little musical surprise – a phrase often found in gospel music and associated with a soul-jazz feeling – is **electrifying**.

Later, Kelly again visits the roadhouse and finds Maggie in the midst of singing “Pete Kelly’s Blues” (with words by Sammy Cahn and music by Ray Heindorf written especially for the film). Until now, this tune has served as the film’s principal non-diegetic music – supplying background effects whenever something particularly seedy needs to happen, such as Pete mixing a drink for an already-inebriated guest or arguing heatedly but fruitlessly with a gangster. In Maggie’s ambi-diegetic version, we hear the piece for what it was apparently intended to be – a bluesy torch song sung as only Ella could sing it. Thus, Maggie’s performance, however irrelevant to the main story-line, carries an important part of the movie’s meaning – anchored in the commerce-versus-art theme (paralleling the crime-plus-jazz genre) – namely, that there is great music out there, as performed by someone of Ella Fitzgerald’s caliber (art in the form of jazz), to be treasured far beyond the sort of monetary gain that crooks and hoodlums covet as the sordid lucre from their larcenous capers and squalid shake-down schemes (commerce in the form of crime).

In the second connection referred to earlier (dramatic substance), the ambi-diegetic music provided by Peggy Lee – playing the part of Fran McCarg’s girlfriend Rose Hopkins (for which she received an Academy Award nomination as best supporting actress) – contrasts vividly in style and function with that provided by Ella Fitzgerald. Specifically, unlike Ella’s songs, Peggy’s musical performances are crucial to the dramatic development of the film. Something has to get Kelly angry enough to resist McCarg’s strong-arm tactics. That “something” turns out to be the way McCarg treats Kelly’s friend Rose, whom the film portrays as a talented but frail songbird – deeply miserable in her abusive relationship with the gangster, profoundly wishing that she had settled down with a family when she had the chance, touchingly apologetic when McCarg tries to foist her torch-song talents upon Kelly’s band of Dixielanders, and pitiable as she tries to drown her resulting sorrows in whiskey. In short, Rose contrasts with Maggie in almost every way imaginable: Rose : Maggie :: Peggy : Ella :: Swing : Blues :: Light : Dark :: Soft : Loud :: Insecure : Solid :: Fragile : Strong :: Cool : Hot :: Inebriated : Sober :: Disturbed : Sane :: Caucasian : African American.

When she performs her “try out” number with Pete’s band, Rose sings “He Needs Me” – a song specially composed for the film by Arthur Hamilton and subsequently often recorded by such worthy female singers as Rebecca Kilgore, Cleo Laine, Gloria Lynne, Polly Podewell, Nina Simone, Frances Wayne, and Peggy Lee herself – in a compelling performance that resembles nothing so much as a white distillation of Billie Holiday. In this scene, Rose stands at the edge of the stage – statuesque and virtually immobile, with her left hand resting on the piano and her right arm hanging loosely at her side – delivering the torchy lyrics in a husky but dead-accurate voice, soft and sultry, but with perfect intonation and pellucid enunciation. She is terrific. And she follows this stunning performance by moving to center stage to sing “Sugar” – accompanied by fine obbligatos from Kelly – still standing stoically immobile but doing incredibly expressive things with her eyes and lips and looking as precariously alluring as a beautiful rose (her name) that is about to be hit by a terrible storm (her boyfriend). In subsequent stages of the film, “He Needs Me” serves as non-diegetic music to underscore scenes that portray the degradation of this flowerlike singer.

Clearly, Kelly is impressed by the formidable talents of this tragic songbird, but – more important to the ambi-diegetic role of this music – her musical style and demeanor bring out a protectiveness in him that he has not shown in his other relationships (including that with Ivy). These protective instincts stand their test in a parallel follow-up scene in which Rose – having drowned her sorrows in way too much booze – tries but fails to perform “Somebody
Loves Me” with the band. Predictably, McCarg reacts with characteristic violence and beats her up. Semi-conscious, she falls down the stairs and suffers a head injury that reduces her to the mental capacity of a five-year-old and confines her to a state hospital for the insane.

Following the music rather than the verbal text, we should observe that – when playing drunk during a humiliating performance in front of a loud and hostile crowd – Peggy Lee acts her role as a debilitated lush by slurring and forgetting the words but still sings perfectly in tune! In this connection, notice that the only time Liza Minnelli sings with good intonation during New York, New York (1977) is when she does a soft-pedaled imitation of Peggy Lee. Even in the mental hospital, as a brain-damaged patient, Rose still sings in tune – this time, a forlornly childish song called “Sing a Rainbow,” also written by Arthur Hamilton for this film but not followed up by other singers (with the unfortunate exception of Astrud Gilberto). Here, Rose spends her time playing with a limp rag doll and crooning this sad song about red-yellow-pink-and-green to herself in a demented state of perpetual regression to infancy. This scene, colored so strongly by Peggy Lee’s distraught ambi-diegetic singing, furthers the dramatic development by revealing Kelly’s decent side and highlighting his protectiveness toward Rose. Indeed, hearing her pathetically sing that forlorn children’s song arouses his righteous indignation to the point of taking action against McCarg.

So – to put it mildly – ambi-diegetic cinemusical meanings play a key role in Pete Kelly’s Blues. In innumerable cases, on-screen performances of jazz pieces and songs sung by singers ranging from competent (Janet Leigh) to accomplished (Peggy Lee) to shimmering (Ella Fitzgerald) perform one or another function in advancing the development of plot, character, or thematic material – Ivy as a bit dipsy but lovable, Rose as a tragic motivation for retribution, and Maggie as a vivid contrast to Rose. Further, much of the jazz in Pete Kelly’s Blues enjoys the sort of in-between status celebrated by Kassabian (2001) – in the sense that it often begins as diegetic/non-diegetic music and then reappears as non-diegetic/diegetic music – for example, in the mixed (non)diegetic scoring of such tunes as “I Never Knew,” “He Needs Me,” and “Pete Kelly’s Blues.” However, one especially deft use of this transitional device appears to deserve special comment.

Specifically, early in the film, the Kelly band makes a record of the old Donaldson-and-Lyman chestnut “(What Can I Say) After I Say I’m Sorry?” – featuring a nice clarinet solo, taking the tune at an unusually slow tempo, and playing it for all its potential poignancy. This diegetic performance presages the imminent departure of the group’s clarinetist Al Gannaway (Lee Marvin), who has been scared off by the intrusion of gangsters into their formerly carefree existence. As Gannaway says goodbye to Kelly outside the studio, we hear the replay of “What Can I Say?” from the recording session inside. The two exchange some references to the Jean Goldkette Orchestra – where Al hopes to find a job and where (we know) the trumpet chair is currently occupied by Bix Beiderbecke, the then-reigning white enfant terrible of the cornet. And then, as the band’s newly waxed recording of “What Can I Say?” continues in the background, it’s “Goodbye, Al.”

Later, Gannaway returns, full of rage at how Kelly has caved in to McCarg’s shake-down scam. He asks Pete to return the mouthpiece that he once gave the cornetist, as a symbol of friendship, after taking it from a deceased bugler in World War I. The two exchange angry words, Pete knocks Al down and throws the mouthpiece into the dirt beside him, and again, Gannaway leaves, this time on a bitter note. But Kelly redeems himself by following Al in his car and asking his old friend to climb inside for a ride. Repentant, Al returns the symbolic mouthpiece. Everybody smiles. In the background, while this reconciliation unfolds, we hear a performance of the formerly diegetic but now non-diegetic “(What Can I Say) After I Say I’m Sorry?”
The Cotton Club (1984)

Directed by Francis Ford Coppola and starring Richard Gere as the cornetist Dixie Dwyer, The Cotton Club (1984) might be characterized as a variation on Pete Kelly’s Blues (1955) with the addition of numerous songs by Duke Ellington, a great deal of dancing, and an extra half-hour of tedium. In a nutshell, Dixie Dwyer (Richard Gere) recapitulates the role of Pete Kelly (Jack Webb) as a jazz-loving cornet player who gets embroiled in the evil machinations of the Prohibition-Era Mafioso types. Specifically, an especially nasty gangster named Dutch Schultz (James Remar) takes a “liking” to Dwyer because Dwyer saved Dutch’s life in a barroom bomb attack. Dutch honors this social debt by employing Dwyer’s brother Vincent (Nicholas Cage) and by hiring Dwyer to escort his mistress Vera Cicero (Diane Lane), with whom Dwyer has already had a brief romantic fling and toward whom he feels a strong sexual attraction. Much of the film’s action hinges on the hoodlum-related activities of brother Vincent and the temptations presented to Dwyer in trying to keep his nose clean while accompanying the alluring Vera to her rendezvous with Dutch. Ultimately, both Vincent and Dutch meet violent ends, while Dwyer and Vera find a way to (re)unite.

Meanwhile, a subsidiary plot develops (accounting for much of the extra half-hour) in which Sandman Williams (Gregory Hines) working on-and-off with his (real life) brother Clay Williams (Maurice Hines) wins (1) a dancing job at the Cotton Club and (2) the attentions of a silver-tonsiled Cotton Club performer named Lila Rose Oliver (Lonette McKee), who is light-skinned and can pass for white or, more importantly, for a jazz singer somewhat in the mold of Lena Horne, thereby affording some of the film’s few distinguished musical moments. In an apparently sincere effort to recreate the ambience and musical style of the Cotton Club circa 1930 – a famous locale in Harlem where Duke Ellington performed with his so-called “jungle” orchestra from 1927 to 1932 and where black performers provided the scintillating shows but were not permitted to participate as members of the audience – Coppola populates his film with appearances by Diane Venora as Gloria Swanson, Gregory Rozakis as Charlie Chaplin, Vincent Jerosa as James Cagney, Rosalind Harris as Fanny Brice, and Zane Mark as Duke Ellington. Further, he indulges the tormented efforts by Larry Marshall to recreate the preenings of Cab Calloway on “Minnie the Moocher” – that dreary song with the annoying refrain about “Hi-Di-Hi-Di-Hi-Di-Hi … Ho-Di-Ho-Di-Ho-Di-Ho” – which, surely, might serve as a standard of comparison for the depths of bottomfeeding to which the most obnoxiously commercial, obsequiously pandering, offensively lowbrow music is capable of sinking.

But, beyond these celebrity touches that conspire to add so much needless weight to this production-heavy musical extravaganza, the film offers a great deal of diegetic music that – while enhancing the realism of the mise-en-scène – must prove somewhat controversial in the present context. With impressive accuracy as far as the real-life Cotton Club in the late-1920s and early-1930s is concerned, the film features a very large amount of material provided by a bunch of crackerjack studio musicians reproducing the sounds of the early Duke Ellington Orchestra. For example, the film’s soundtrack album The Cotton Club (Various 1984) – produced by the movie’s musical supervisor John Barry and displaying not (say) a saxophone but (rather) a machine gun on its cover – includes many tunes strongly associated with the Duke, masterfully transcribed and arranged for the film by Bob Wilber (with a little help from people like Sy Johnson, David Berger, Randy Sandke, and Al Woodbury): “The Mooche,” “Cotton Club Stomp #1 and #2,” “Drop Me Off in Harlem,” “Creole Love Call,” “Ring Dem Bells,” “East St. Louis Toodle-O,” “Mood Indigo,” “Wall Street Wail,” “Slippery Horn,” and “High Life.” In these recreations, Wilber benefits from the technically proficient contributions of such ace musicians as, among others,
Joe Temperly and Frank Wess (saxophones), Marky Markowitz and Lew Soloff (trumpets), Dan Barrett and Britt Woodman (trombones), Mark Shane (piano), and Chuck Riggs and Dave Samuels (percussion). Together, these studio virtuosi do a masterful job of recreating the famous Ellington sound. But, there’s the rub.

Specifically, *The Cotton Club* borrows extensively from the period-relevant Ellington oeuvre to give us a film score saturated with a heavy dose of Duke’s “jungle” music from the late-1920s. Then, as later, Duke was a colorist given to exercising his penchant for interesting musical textures or even outlandish sound effects. Thus, from the “jungle music” days in the 1920s until the end in the 1970s, the Ellington Orchestra specialized in a number of always colorful but sometimes grating sonic aberrations produced by trombones with plunger mutes (e.g., “Tricky” Sam Nanton); trumpets with wa-wa effects (“Bubber” Miley or “Cootie” Williams); squealing high-stratosphere brass pyrotechnics (“Cat” Anderson); syrupy, gushing, almost rancid-sounding alto saxophones (Johnny Hodges); and screeching violins (Ray Nance). Leonard Feather manages to put a positive spin on these extraneous intrusions:

> Early Ellington orchestral characteristics included the use of what he originally called “jungle style” effects, through the use of plunger mutes. … Much of the success of the band … was attributed to Ellington’s unique selection of tonal colors, through orchestral voicings that could never be duplicated because the individual timbre of each man in the orchestra was itself essential to the overall effect. (1960, 191)

In other words, Ellington managed to incorporate a variety of strange sounds into his orchestral fabric. Some call it a “unique selection of tonal colors.” Others would call it “noise” – no more pleasing to the ears than (say) a baby’s incessant wailing or an unattended car alarm. Thus, even Feather must admit that “Cat” Anderson “spoiled many of his performances with high note effects and poor musical taste” (101) and that Ray Nance “has been known primarily as a comedy personality” with “an excessive accent on grotesque visual mannerisms” (347).

*The Cotton Club* also features Duke Ellington’s famed aura of exaggerated flamboyance and bravura sophistication. Duke, the handsome stud, the natty dresser, the savvy bon vivant who regaled his audiences with affected speech mannerisms and with constant reassurances – repeated to the point of irritation – that he, each soloist, and indeed every member of his large aggregation “Love You Madly.” True, all this put Duke in an orbit known – to paraphrase his own words – as “beyond category.” But it also invited an emphasis on crowd-pleasing showmanship at the expense of art that comes through loud and clear in *The Cotton Club*. The minute we see the figure of Duke Ellington (Zane Mark) dressed in white tie and tails, looking like he is about to explode with self-satisfaction, we know that we will soon be entertained to within an inch of our lives. Indeed, in a spectacular display of the tension between commerce and art, this portentous prophesy provides the major premise for much of *The Cotton Club*.

In this motion picture – often in ways that do not appear to contribute significant meaning to the film’s dramatic development – hoofers hoof, tappers tap, and singers, sometimes with screeching incompetence, mercilessly sing. In the latter connection, consider especially the agonized faux-operatic excrescences of Pricilla Baskerville on “Creole Love Call,” the noisome delivery by Dave Brown of “Ring Dem Bells,” and the trying effusiveness of Gregory Hines on “Copper Colored Gal.” However, it is the dancing in *The Cotton Club* that really gets bogged down. The chorus-line numbers – choreographed by someone named Joyce Brown, who is buried in the credits – consist mostly of thick-legged beauties strutting their stuff, lovely to look at individually but painful to watch collectively as they
shuffle around the stage in quasi-disarray. Even worse are the tap routines featuring the Williams Brothers (Gregory and Maurice Hines). Indeed, the tap dancing in *The Cotton Club* falls far below the standard expected from a film purporting to capture the great tradition of tapsters harking back to the likes of Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, the Berry Brothers, Sammy Davis and Family, or the nonpareil Nicholas Brothers (on whom the Hines characters appear to be loosely based). In an essentially African-American mode of artistic expression, even such whiter-than-white tapsters as Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire managed to master the one basic requisite of this art form – namely, that the tapping sounds the dancers make with their feet must correspond to the rhythmic cadence of the music to which they are dancing. This basic requisite might seem pretty obvious. But Maurice and Gregory (who passed away in 2003) just don’t get it. Thus, the Hines style of tapping involves flicking your feet in a manner that makes clicks totally unrelated to the rhythm of the music to which you are dancing, no beat-reinforcing taps, no flurries of syncopated clicking sounds, just random noises made by feet flailing with arms waving in oblivious excess. Losing contestants on Ted Mack’s *Amateur Hour* – back in the days when people took tap dancing seriously – did a better job of synchronizing their tapping with the musical pulse (right before they lost to a seven-year-old ventriloquist or a three-foot-tall baton twirler).

As partial recompense for the painful experience of watching the Cotton Club chorus line dance out of step and the Williams team tap out of rhythm, the film does offer one nice moment of musical fallout from the romantic relationship that develops between Sandman Williams and the light-skinned Lila Oliver when we find Lila singing in an all-white nightclub owned by the evil Dutch Schultz. In this strained setting – “passing” for white in an atmosphere clouded by corruption and potentially riddled with bullets – Lila rares back and lets us have the magnificent “Ill Wind,” written for a Cotton Club *Parade* show in 1934 by Ted Koehler (words) and Harold Arlen (music), who had composed “Stormy Weather” for the same venue in the previous year. The latter song – quite similar in feeling and very close in harmonic structure to the former – is indelibly associated with Lena Horne, who memorably performed the piece in the film *Stormy Weather* (1943) and who also recorded “Ill Wind” at about the same time. Just in case we miss this association, the source music for *The Cotton Club* includes a snatch from “Stormy Weather” in the ambi-diegetic performance – a direct quote, near the end, by trumpeter Lew Soloff in the back-up band – by which time, we cannot help but notice that Lila bears a striking resemblance to the young Lena. Hence, “Ill Wind” serves as a perfect vehicle for her ambi-diegetic torch-song delivery – all the more because, in its explicit angst-ridden lyrics and its plentiful implicit musical associations with at least one other world-weary song, it sums up the emotional destructiveness and physical danger of the gangster-dominated scene in which Sandman and Lila seek to nurture a budding romance – thereby developing both Lila’s character and relevant aspects of the dramatic setting.

But the aspect of *The Cotton Club* that emerges as its only plausible commendation lies *not* in the spectacular diegetic musical extravaganzas described earlier but *rather* in the quietly confident and little-celebrated way in which Richard Gere *plays his own cornet solos*. Historically, matinee idols have sometimes met with mixed success when trying to bring their musical talents to fruition on the silver screen. Recall, for example, Jimmy Stewart’s wobbly-voiced rendition of Cole Porter’s “Easy To Love” in *Born To Dance* (1936). Or the misplaced method acting of Marlon Brando in *Guys and Dolls* (1955) – proving beyond doubt that “the method” cannot help a person carry a tune. Or even the otherwise magnificent Fred Astaire – just about any time he opened his mouth to sing in a relentlessly off-key croak. But Richard Gere is something else!
Apparently, recalling Jack Webb, Gere played the trumpet in a band during his high-
school years and retains enough technique to enable him to learn some simplified horn solos
written out note-for-note in a Bix-like style by the acclaimed mainstream jazz artist Warren
Vaché (the back of whose head, playing cornet as a stand-in for Gere, appears in one brief
musical scene). Ultimately, Gere’s cornet playing is the only taste of humanized reality in
the whole film and is therefore much to be savored. Specifically, this ambi-diegetic jazz
reveals the character of Dwyer as at least serious about something (his music) and as a
person of enough integrity (artistic commitment) to make us care what happens to him (a
passable career as both musician and screen actor in gangster movies) and to help us believe
that he deserves the love of an appealing woman such as Vera. If Dwyer did not play the
cornet so attractively, we would be hard-pressed to find any persuasive reason to like him
at all. Hence, as an instantiation of the art-versus-commerce theme, his ambi-diegetic
cinematic performances contribute meaningfully to the dramatic development of the film.

Unfortunately, however, these performances are few and far between. Inexplicably, they
make no appearance whatsoever on the aforementioned soundtrack album. However, a care-
ful viewing of The Cotton Club suggests at least one occasion on which the cornet work by
Gere as Dwyer deserves careful notice and more than a little admiration. Specifically, in a
scene where Dutch meets with his fellow mobsters while Dwyer and Vera wait impatiently
in utter boredom, the gangster suddenly asks Dwyer to play that piece by Bix Beiderbecke.
Dwyer responds by tossing off Beiderbecke’s cornet solo from “Singin’ the Blues” – the
legendary performance that Bix (cornet) recorded with, among others, Frank Trumbauer (C-
melody sax), Miff Mole (trombone), Jimmy Dorsey (clarinet), and Eddie Lang (guitar) on
4 February 1927. The importance of this improvisation emerges in the liner notes provided
by producer George Avakian for The Bix Beiderbecke Story (n.d.):

Singin’ the Blues … is usually considered one of the three most celebrated solos in jazz history
(the other two being King Oliver’s cornet choruses on Dippermouth Blues, and Johnny Dodds’
rendition of the original Alphonse Picou clarinet solo in High Society). It is a solo of intense,
brooding beauty, carefully built up to a typical tumbling break in the middle, with a surprise
explosion after it. There was hardly a contemporary white musician of jazz pretensions who
didn’t learn it by heart. Fletcher Henderson paid the ultimate tribute by recording it twice in a
version for his whole brass section, and in the thirties Will Osborne and Adrian Rollini both
waxed similar arrangements for full orchestra.

The present author knows the Beiderbecke solo by heart because – when he was a boy
– his father used to play it verbatim on the piano. Years later, when searching for an apart-
ment on New York’s Upper West Side to be occupied by a visiting colleague, the author
answered an anonymous ad in the New York Times for a sublet up on Riverside Drive and,
when he got there, discovered that the whole place was filled with the most exquisite Ori-
tental rugs. The owner had died, and his son gave a tour of the beautiful apartment with great
courtesy and patience. At the end of this encounter, the son of the deceased mentioned that
he used to be in the music industry but had taken a leave of absence to manage his Armenian
father’s rug-import business. He said he had been a record producer. When asked what sort
of music he had recorded, he began, “Well, have you ever heard of Erroll Garner?” The
author realized at once that he had struck pay dirt. The son’s name, it turned out, was none
other than … George Avakian. Such a nice man, so dedicated to this music. Besides his
expertise on the subject of Beiderbecke and contributions to the priceless Bix reissues,
Avakian was a tireless producer for such artists as Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Benny
Goodman, Dave Brubeck, Paul Desmond, Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins, J. J. Johnson, Erroll
Garner, Art Blakey, Keith Jarrett, Charles Lloyd, and Bill Evans. We might wonder what
George Avakian – now in his late-eighties – thinks of Richard Gere’s musical performances in *The Cotton Club*. Most likely, he approves.

**Kansas City (1996)**

In approaching Robert Altman’s *Kansas City* (1996), let us interpret this film from an angle consistent with our focus on the meaning of ambi-diegetic jazz – namely, as a continuation of the crime-plus-jazz genre in general, with implications for the commerce-versus-art theme in particular. This interpretation places *Kansas City* (1996) in the direct line of descent from *Pete Kelly’s Blues* (1955) through *The Cotton Club* (1984) to the more recent cinematic scene. As suggested by the three-fold homologies developed as a table of parallel comparisons in the introduction, the problem is that *Kansas City* pursues the familiar themes without the help of any real music-performing hero. Indeed, instead of a horn-playing protagonist such as Pete Kelly (Jack Webb) or Dixie Dwyer (Richard Gere) to occupy the film’s central core, the always-quirky Altman gives us a gun-toting anti-heroine.

This anti-heroine appears in the form of Blondie O’Hara (Jennifer Jason Leigh), whose major pre-occupation is to rescue her ne’er-do-well husband Johnny O’Hara (Dermot Mulroney) from the evil clutches of the gangster boss Seldom Seen (Harry Belafonte), who hangs out with all the other local Bad Boys at the Hey-Hey Club, where an exceedingly impressive roster of major jazz talent plays full-time ‘round-the-clock jazz on a 24/7/365 basis in a kind of perpetual musical nirvana, more or less oblivious to the vile corruption that surrounds them on all sides. That corruption includes the violent detainment of Johnny, who has infuriated Seldom by mugging one of Seldom’s out-of-town gambling customers. Betraying a grotesque degree of *customer orientation* and spouting caricatured rhetoric that sounds like a reading from the textbook for *Marketing 101*, Seldom and his henchmen evoke the link between commerce and crime while giving Johnny a very hard time – asking difficult questions, with typical Altmanesque irony, such as whether he likes the movies. Not really, it appears.

By contrast, Blondie loves motion pictures, idolizes movie stars, and has learned most of what she knows about both styling her peroxide-tortured hair and being a gun moll from watching old Jean Harlow films such as *Hold Your Man* (1933), which she brags she has seen six times. Desperate to free Johnny, she launches an elaborately convoluted scheme based on kidnapping one of her sister’s manicure clients – Carolyn Stilton (Miranda Richardson), the wealthy but pharmacologically challenged wife of an unloving presidential advisor to FDR named Henry Stilton (Michael Murphy) – in order to force Henry to help get Johnny released. Predictably, the upshot of all this – after two hours of agonizing – is that Carolyn and Blondie have become sympathetic friends, but in a misbegotten recapitulation of Clark Gable’s and Jean Harlow’s misadventures in *Hold Your Man*, Johnny and Blondie are both … deceased.

This febrile, disjointed, gangster-laden story hovers like a lead balloon over the surface of the ambi-diegetic jazz that limns the atmosphere of the seedy Hey-Hey Club, where much of the action takes place. Miscreants obsessed with filthy lucre and other ill-gotten monetary gain come here to lie, to cheat, to steal, and to kill each other, while the musicians – Altman seems to say – just behave like the true artists they are (the ones with whom Altman identifies and hopes that we also identify). The guys in the band more or less ignore all the crime-related violence and mayhem, playing their music with total dedication and an air of detachment bordering on indifference to the degradation and vice that surround them. It makes sense to view this scenario as supporting the Altmanesque subtext that a jazz musician (read the true artist with creative integrity or the film director with a flair for
spontaneity) must ignore the greed and corruption that run rampant through the interrelated worlds of business and crime (read the commercial pressures of the music industry or the profit motive of Hollywood). Better to remain detached, to do your own thing, and to create inspired improvisations than to become embroiled in the evils of commodification.

In this connection, the illustrious house band at the Hey-Hey Club includes, among others, Don Byron (clarinet); Nicholas Payton (trumpet); Joshua Redman, Craig Handy, James Carter, David Murray, and David “Fathead” Newman (saxophones); Geri Allen and Cyrus Chestnut (piano); Russell Malone and Mark Whitfield (guitar); Ron Carter and Christian McBride (bass); and Victor Lewis (drums). These musicians – all highly respected jazz masters, plus others too numerous to list here – play with total aplomb. The mood characterizing this scene is captured to telling effect by Oliver Stapleton’s somber cinematography – all in hues of black, brown, gray, and other brooding colors. The club patrons wear the right clothing, adopt the right postures, and signify their approval with loud vocal encouragement.

The legitimacy of this scene benefits from the fact that the cinemusical performances are filmed in real time – that is, we see the jazz musicians captured on film while they are actually playing, a stupendously worthwhile innovation in jazz filmology that harks back to the work of Bertrand Tavernier in Round Midnight (1986). Indeed, so good is the real-time ambi-diegetic music in Kansas City (1996) that Altman issued a 75-minute companion release entitled Robert Altman’s Jazz ’34: Remembrances of Kansas City Swing (1997), comprising full-length versions of tunes represented only by excerpts in the film. Jazz ’34 makes no pretense to dramatic content but ranks as one of the finest cinemusical presentations of jazz ever offered.

At many junctures in Kansas City, the on-screen presence of a musical group – jamming away on familiar tunes like “Indiana,” “I Surrender Dear,” and “Lullaby of the Leaves”; swinging “Blues in the Dark,” “St. Louis Blues,” and “Harvard Blues”; or playing simple head arrangements of well-known Kansas City standards such as “Moten Swing,” “Tickle Toe,” and “Froggy Bottom” – adds an aura of authenticity to a mise-en-scène that depends heavily on Altman’s use of diegetic jazz with the KC flavor. A problem arises, however, in that most of these musicians – generally in their twenties or thirties in 1996 and born thirty or forty years after the heyday of the music they are called upon to play – do not sound very much like their KC role models. Rather, they mostly sound like exactly what they are – namely, young modernists trying to emulate a relaxed, bluesy sort of style from days of yore. The Kansas City feeling is there, found in such details as Mark Whitfield’s Freddie-Green-styled comping on guitar and the smoothly chugging rhythm section with Geri Allen (piano), Christian McBride (bass), and Victor Lewis (drums) that this chording supports – approximating, as it does, the famous Green-Basie-Page-Jones sound associated with the “Count” Basie Band. But the harmonic language that characterized the historical guys from Basieland is totally transformed. The note selections of a Joshua Redman (as Lester Young), a Craig Handy (as Coleman Hawkins), or a James Carter (as Ben Webster) deviate sharply from anything that would ever have entered the head of the real Pres, Bean, or Ben. Young’s ardent lyricism, Hawkins’ busy arpeggios, and Webster’s breathy throatiness – all quite old-fashioned by today’s standards – are nowhere to be found. Instead, we hear three well-trained guys who sound as if they went to school on the Wayne Shorter transcriptions and the Jamey Aebersold play-along recordings – which, mostly, they did.

The real question that we should ask ourselves is whether the manifest musical incongruities just described really matter. On this issue, we might anticipate a continuum of opinions ranging between two divergent extremes, each of which deserves exploration. Let us call these polar perspectives the anti-Altman and the pro-Altman positions, respectively.
The *anti-Altman position* places a high positive value on the role of *diegetic* music in the *realistic depiction* of the mise-en-scène. This *realism-oriented perspective* would argue along the following lines.

1. In order to achieve realistic depiction, a film must depict realistically.
2. To depict realistically, the film must use props, costumes, décor, scenery, settings, and other aspects of consumption symbolism appropriate to the time and place in which the action occurs.
3. Conversely, the appearance of consumption symbolism that is inappropriate to the time and place of the action tends to detract from the film’s realistic depiction. For example, in the 1934 world of *Kansas City*, it would be inappropriately unrealistic to have Blondie drive a Chrysler PT Cruiser, to have Johnny wear a Tommy Hilfiger sweatshirt, to have Carolyn addicted to Prozac, or to have Henry plan his trip to Washington on a Treo Smartphone.
4. By the same logic, realistic depiction requires that a film’s diegetic music match the time and place in which the action occurs. Musicians playing at the Hey-Hey Club in Kansas City circa 1934 should look, sound, and behave as much like Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins, Ben Webster, “Hot Lips” Page, Jo Jones, Walter Page, “Count” Basie, Jay McShann, Mary Lou Williams, and the rest as humanly possible. Lester should hold his horn at a 90-degree angle, should play with spare melodic lyricism, should wear a porkpie hat and a thin moustache, and should utter phrases like “I feel a draft” or “I’ve got eyes” or “Lady Ben” or one of his other patented expressions.
5. *Kansas City* gets the porkpie-hat part more or less right; but, in general, Lester Young (Joshua Redman), Coleman Hawkins (Craig Handy), Ben Webster (James Carter), Herschel Evans (David Murray), and the others come across as contemporary jazz players dressing up for a movie. In one scene, a saxophonist (James Carter as Ben Webster) plays a squealing passage that Ornette Coleman might have been proud of and then gives the others a look that comes more out of a Hip-Hop than a Hey-Hey sensibility. In another, Cyrus Chestnut delivers a mock version of stride piano with a harmonic structure so far past Bill Basie that it sounds more like something from Bela Bartok. Similarly, Geri Allen captures the piano style of Mary Lou Williams about as much as Jackson Pollack resembles Rembrandt. Meanwhile, Victor Lewis on drums recalls Jo Jones far less than “Philly” Joe Jones. Elsewhere, Ron Carter plays a pizzicato bass solo on “Solitude” (Altman’s favorite song since his housekeeper introduced him to Duke Ellington back in the 1930s) in a manner not heard prior to the 1950s and with a tone not found in jazz until his own post-Scott-Lafaro playing with Miles Davis in the 1960s and beyond. Both he and Christian McBride on bass produce sustained low notes as different from the thumpy sound of (say) Walter Page as it is possible to imagine. And if Kevin Mahogany bears any resemblance to Jimmy Rushing on “I Left My Baby” – other than a tendency to be somewhat rotund – then this similarity remains a well-kept secret that *Kansas City* will do nothing to betray (especially given that Mahogany sings from behind the bar in the manner of Joe Turner).
6. So every time we hear these musicians play – that is, often and for long periods throughout the entire film – we cannot help but think … *anachronism*.
7. In this sense, we may conclude that Altman’s choice of diegetic jazz clashes with the film’s objectives of realistic depiction.
But, in response to this anti-Altman argument, the pro-Altman position places a high positive value on the role of ambi-diegetic jazz in the dramatic development of plot, character, and other themes. This contrasting drama-oriented perspective would argue as follows.

(1) In order to achieve dramatic development, a film must develop dramatically.
(2) To develop dramatically, the film must use props, costumes, décor, scenery, settings, and other aspects of consumption symbolism that resonate with the emotions, identifications, and associations of leading characters, plot lines, and emerging themes.
(3) Conversely, the appearance of consumption symbolism that is inappropriate to the characters’ emotions, plot-related identifications, or thematic associations tends to detract from the film’s dramatic development. For example, in the sin-infested, crime-ridden, danger-filled world of Kansas City, it would be dramatically inappropriate to have Blondie drive a convertible sports coupe, to have Johnny wear tennis clothes, to have Carolyn drink beer, or to have Henry travel to Washington in a pickup truck.
(4) By the same logic, dramatic development requires that ambi-diegetic cinemusical meanings match the emotional tone, plot-related identifications, and thematic associations of the characters and events around which the action occurs. Musicians playing at the Hey-Hey Club in Kansas City should look, sound, and behave like guys at the periphery of a world embroiled in crime that they seek to escape by means of immersion in jazz.

In this connection, consider the following description of KC during the 1930s taken from a Website called “Club Kaycee,” sponsored by The University of Missouri – Kansas City (www.umkc.edu/orgs/kcjazz/jazzspot/0venue.htm):

During the 1920s and ’30s, Kansas City was known as the “Paris of the Plains.” Old Kaycee was the commercial and entertainment center for points North, West and South. … Political Boss Tom Pendergast made good-times and apparent prosperity possible. … Under the control of the Pendergast Machine, Kansas City was a wide open town and prohibition had little effect on “business as usual.” Major industries included bootlegging, gambling, and prostitution. … Edward Morrow advised his readers in the Omaha World Herald, “If you want to see some sin, forget about Paris and go to Kansas City. … Kansas City probably has the greatest sin industry in the world.” … Many of the city’s clubs never closed. According to Milton Morris, owner of the Hey Hay Club [note the different spelling, disguised a bit in the film], it was customary to christen new clubs by giving a cab driver five bucks and the key to the front door of the club with instructions to drive as far as he could and throw away the key. Five dollars would send a cab a long way in those days. Club owners never closed their doors.

The evocation of this scene found in Altman’s mise-en-scène for the Hey-Hey Club – which seems to be something of a composite of the real-life Hey-Hay, Cherry Blossom, and Reno Clubs – appears dramatically true to the emotions, identifications, and associations of importance. Specifically, the musicians drift in and out – talking, drinking, and even sleeping, but obviously coming to play. They take turns and trade choruses on the bandstand. For the most part, they maintain a laid-back KC-based rhythmic feeling in their performances. In the words of Gabbard, “the musicians … play in their own, more extroverted styles while trying to suggest the ‘flavor’ of their predecessors’ playing” (2000, 145). And, most importantly, the jazz artists provide the counterpart to the “sin industry” so rampant elsewhere in the film – the point of contrast that spells out the alternative lifestyle to which those of an Altmanesque persuasion are called – namely, immersion in your own creative integrity though the world around you may be going to hell in a hand basket. Here, the parallels with
Altman-in-Hollywood suggest a strong and important art-versus-commerce subtext. Elsewhere, as revealed especially in the droll cynicism of *The Player* (1992), Altman finds the crass commercialism of the movie industry positively lethal. In reviewing *The Player*, Roger Ebert noted the “cold sardonic glee” with which Altman made this satiric “movie about today’s Hollywood”:

This is material Altman knows from the inside and the outside. ... Hollywood cast him into the outer darkness in the 1980s, when his eclectic vision didn’t fit with movies made from marketing studies. ... here is a movie that uses Hollywood as a metaphor for the avarice of the 1980s. (1992)

(5) *Kansas City* in general and its ambi-diegetic cinemusical meanings in particular get not only the porkpie-hat part pretty much right, but also a lot of the other emotions, identifications, and associations that surround the jazz community on the edge of a politically and ethically corrupt turmoil. In this film, the jazz musicians have no lines to recite. They do not interact with the criminals, do not dirty their hands with political involvements, and do not get involved with the gambling, drug dealing, prostitution, kidnapping, larceny, or murders that flank them on all sides. They just sit there and play their instruments – a feat requiring an almost superhuman dedication to their art and a prodigious ability to focus on the creative process despite the most harrowing distractions from all directions at once. To repeat, this situation significantly parallels the artistic struggles of Robert Altman in Hollywood.

Some sense of the fidelity with which Altman has captured these aspects of the KC jazz scene comes to light in the following description offered by Russell:

Kansas City saxophonists in particular were a formidable lot. One night in 1934 at a club called the Cherry Blossom the leading saxophonist in jazz, Coleman Hawkins, had been challenged by a trio of Kansas City men – Lester Young, Herschel Evans, and Ben Webster, all unknown at the time – in a session that wore on until late the next day and left Hawkins battered and defeated. ... Places with names like the Reno and Sunset, the Cherry Blossom, Subway, Hi-Hat, ... and the Hey-Hay Club ... had live music. The music began early in the evening and ... continued around the clock. (1973, 30) ... A remarkable feature of music in Kansas City was that nobody told the musicians what to play or how to play it. Jazzmen were free to create as the spirit moved them. ... The gangsters who ran the clubs did not interfere. As the result of favoring conditions – steady work, isolation, a concentration of talent, and almost total lack of commercial pressures – Kansas City had developed a jazz style of its own. (32, italics added).

Once we abstract our way past the differences in musical style between the 1930s KC musicians and the young guys deployed in the ambi-diegetic jazz of *Kansas City*, it becomes clear that Altman has done a superb job of conveying the key thematic elements portrayed in the preceding quotation from Russell (1973) – namely, a fiercely competitive level of musicianship, an active club scene where the music never stops, a surrounding atmosphere of crime and corruption, and the freedom of the musicians to pursue maximum creativity unhindered by interference from the gangsters or by commercial pressures that might impede their artistic integrity.

(6) So every time we hear these musicians play – that is, often and for long periods throughout the entire film – we must focus on the relevance of this ambi-diegetic jazz to the evocation of the film’s major characters, plot lines, and thematic ideas. In this connection (cf. Gabbard 2000), a particularly effective use of ambi-diegetic jazz
appears in the scene featuring musicians at the Hey-Hey Club in which we witness a titanic tenor-saxophone battle between Coleman Hawkins (Craig Handy) and Lester Young (Joshua Redman). This frenetic musical cutting contest contrasts with the juxtaposed scene in which some of Seldom’s henchmen drive a traitor named “Blue” Green (Martin Martin) to a distant and deserted location where, as the tenor battle concludes at 4:10 a.m. and as the two competing musicians shake hands triumphantly, the gangsters viciously knife “Blue” to death and leave him to the dogs. This disturbing demonstration of violently homicidal cutting contrasts with the parallel musical confrontation to telling effect. Here, we see a vivid opposition between the forces of rapacious criminality (evil commercialism) and the voices of pure jazz (artistic integrity). And lest we miss the point, the unfolding drama of the relevant homology is driven home by the cinematic cutting via which Altman presents both sides of the juxtaposition simultaneously. In short, we observe cutting from three vantage points that, in effect, compose a revelatory sort of dialectic consisting of a thesis (“cutting” via a sublime saxophone battle); an antithesis (“cutting” via a murder by stabbing); and a synthesis (“cutting” via a cinematic montage). Thus, in Altman’s foreboding use of ambi-diegetic jazz to presage the counterposed forces of evil about to unfold, the on-screen music does its job of providing contrasting emotions, identifications, and associations to perfection. The fact that Joshua Redman and Craig Handy sound more like each other than like either Lester Young or Coleman Hawkins becomes irrelevant. The important set of homologies has far more to do with the vivid contrast between Joshua-and-Craig trading choruses as opposed to murderers stabbing “Blue” Green. The relevant dialectical tension and resolution provide a deep sense of … synthesis (cf. Gabbard 2000).

(7) In this sense, we may conclude that Altman’s choice of ambi-diegetic jazz fulfills the film’s objectives of dramatic development. Along similar lines, another astute use of on-screen jazz pursues the “in between” aspect of what Gabbard refers to as “shifts between diegetic and extradiegetic registers” (2000, 146). Specifically, in the scene where Blondie and Carolyn first begin to form a sympathetic bond, we hear piano music that soon turns out to emanate from Geri Allen playing the role of Mary Lou Williams at the Hey-Hey Club.

According to Gabbard:

Surprising the audience by showing them that Geri Allen/Mary Lou Williams has been playing behind the first moment of bonding between the two female leads is typical of how Altman … rethought the conventional practice of cinema sound in … Kansas City. (147)

In another passage from Russell, we find the following highly relevant account of the peripheral role played by Charlie Parker – the immortal “Bird” – on the Kansas City jazz scene circa 1934:

Charlie Parker was very much a product of this vigorous grassroots musical culture. … His father was … a singer and dancer. Charlie’s mother, Addie Boyley, was a local girl whom the entertainer had married in her seventeenth year. (1973, 32) … Between 1928 and 1939 … Charlie Parker underwent a metamorphosis from an unexceptional schoolboy studying at Crispus Attucks grammar school to one of the geniuses of American music. (33)

This aspect of Bird’s background, it turns out, becomes a central metaphor in Altman’s film – one that we notice only gradually and only if we pay very careful attention (cf. Gabbard 1996).
An early scene in *Kansas City* shows a young girl – 14-year-old Pearl Cummings (Ajia Mignon Johnson) – arriving at the train station where she expects to be met by some well-intentioned but incompetent white society ladies who have charitably brought her there for purposes of giving birth to her illegitimate baby but who have managed to be late for meeting the train. Returning from a trip with his high-school marching band – alto saxophone in hand – a youthful Charlie Parker (Albert J. Burnes) finds Pearl sitting in the white section of the waiting-room seats, warns her that this is forbidden, and then – with common sense and protectiveness far beyond his years – takes her with him to the mezzanine of the Hey-Hey Club where, still holding his horn in case we have missed the point, Charlie proceeds to act as a sort of Greek Chorus by explaining to Pearl, as well as to us viewers, the significance and identities of the musicians performing on the stage below in general and of Lester Young in particular.

Meanwhile, when Blondie kidnaps Carolyn, she takes the wealthy politician’s wife to the Western Union office for purposes of sending a telegram calling him back from his trip to Washington, DC. There, we encounter the cleaning lady doing her evening chores. However improbably, this cleaning lady turns out to be Addie Parker (Jeff Feringa) – Charlie’s mother (who actually did have a job with Western Union in real life). But this is typical Altman – a director for whom all roads, no matter how disparate, tend always to lead toward convergence in the end. In this connection, recall (say) *Nashville* (1975) or *Short Cuts* (1993). In a similar spirit of convergence, the telegraph-office scene gives Blondie a chance to ask Addie how her son Charlie is doing with his music. It turns out that Charlie Parker is doing just fine, thank you. Meanwhile, via his protectiveness toward Pearl, Charlie is busy revealing himself to be one of the two estimable characters (not counting the ambidiegetic musicians) to be found in the film – the other, in her own warped way, being Blondie (in one of Jennifer Jason Leigh’s most surpassingly quirky roles).

Ultimately, it is really Parker through whose eyes we see much of the film unfolding. He sits up there in the balcony while the musicians play their ambidiegetic jazz and, also, while the gangsters carry Blondie screaming from the Hey-Hey Club. There he sits while all the musical beauty and criminal ugliness transpire. He of all people in the film appreciates the deep opposition between crime (commercial greed gone amuck) and jazz (artistic integrity held aloft). And, of course, he also seems to represent the sensibilities of the director Robert Altman (cf. Gabbard 2000, 151).

In this connection, notice that – like Charlie Parker – Robert Altman came from Kansas City. Like Parker in the film, Altman himself was 14-years-old when Parker, as leader of Jay McShann’s saxophone section, left town. It takes little imagination to envision Robert Altman, at age fourteen, sitting in the balcony and watching the heroic Charlie Parker perform in the same manner that Charlie Parker in Robert Altman’s film sits and watches his own avowed hero Lester Young.

So, in the last analysis, maybe this film does have a real music-performing hero after all. Maybe its true cinemusical hero is Lester Young – through the eyes of Charlie Parker – via the sensibilities of Robert Altman. Charlie Parker was born in Kansas City on 29 August 1920. Robert Altman was born in Kansas City on 20 February 1925. But Bird has been dead for fifty years. Fortunately, Altman survived until 2006 to tell the tale.

**Conclusion**

The foregoing interpretations begin with a table of homologous parallels among three major crime-plus-jazz films. The specific analyses of each film suggest that all three lend themselves to an understanding based on the contrast or conflict between commerce (as
represented by the selfish, greedy, and/or tainted aspects of crime) and art (as represented by the creative, honest, pure aspects of jazz). Though this subtext remains mostly implicit – below the surface level – in all three motion pictures, it appears clearly to those willing to unfold the meanings implicit in the juxtaposition of crime and jazz that colors all three films and that speaks volumes about the underlying tension between commerce and art. Commerce – as mirrored by the persistently self-interested and resolutely evil activities of common criminals – comes across as inherently evil or at least highly suspicious. Art – by contrast, as mirrored by the bravely self-sacrificing and stubbornly courageous jazz performances of the true music-for-music’s-sake heroes – emerges as a source that shines forth as a source of sweetness and light. Apparently, in the face of crime, film noir has a potential bright side. And its name is jazz.

References


**Discography**


