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A city within the city: a jazz portrait of Yerevan underground, frontline and elite

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ABSTRACT

The formation and development of jazz in Yerevan were directly shaped by Soviet cultural policy and its ideological constraints, generating a set of adaptive mechanisms that governed the evolution of urban jazz culture. These mechanisms, continuously reconfigured under shifting political conditions, constituted a flexible cultural toolkit for negotiating restrictions and prohibitions. One of the central strategies for circumventing official control was the emergence of diverse jazz environments embedded within the urban fabric of the city, operating across a spectrum of institutional, semi-institutional, and informal spaces – state-supported concert venues, public entertainment sites such as parks and cinema foyers, and marginalized underground settings including private apartments, workshops, and university basements. The article conceptualizes Yerevan as a multilayered urban organism in which jazz functions simultaneously as a cultural practice, a symbolic system, and a spatial organizing principle. It argues that jazz environments contributed to the formation of a "three-storied" urban structure consisting of official (frontal), underground, and – following independence – elite dimensions, each corresponding to specific socio-political and cultural configurations. Within this framework, jazz is interpreted not merely as a musical genre but as a mechanism of spatial production and social differentiation. Drawing on theories of social mapping, urban semiotics, and the interaction between sound and space, the study examines how musical practices shaped, and were shaped by, the ideological and spatial organization of the city across the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Methodologically, the research combines historical analysis, cultural interpretation, and spatial theory, drawing on primary sources, including archival materials and firsthand testimonies from jazz musicians and participants, as well as secondary literature. The findings demonstrate that jazz in Yerevan functioned as a mediating force between ideology, space, and identity, producing alternative cultural geographies that extended well beyond the Soviet period and continued to influence post-independence urban transformations and cultural hierarchies within the city.

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Introduction

An urban area is a constantly developing, rhythmic, and absorbing organism that can expose both historical and current layers. These layers are shaped by the interaction of various social groups' interests, youth subcultures, and the urban environment.

Each city dweller possesses some fundamental resources borrowed from the city and from imaginary "other cities" formed from those resources, that is, cities within the city. This phenomenon is theoretically defined as social mapping. According to Lynch, a mental map is an association map of an individual or a social group (Lynch, 1960, p. 9–12). Mental maps are created through memories in the form of symbols of squares, parks, significant streets, and other cultural landmarks (Vermishyan et al., 2015, p. 63). As a consequence, an abstract, non-limited environment is shaped in which the above-mentioned individual or social group exists, facilitating their orientation and activity in the real city.

Sound, or music, and space are included in certain relationships, in addition to the interactions between an individual, a social group, and space. A sound is produced by the vibration of elastic objects distributed in space: the source of the sound is localized at a defined point and spreads into the surroundings. On the other hand, our space perception depends on our ears and our interpretation of sounds (Belgiojoso, 2021, p. 93). In other words, music can greatly impact the space and, in turn, be changed by its environment.

T. Adorno asserts that public opinion has a reverse influence on music and, if possible, alters it: the real role of music is mainly carried out by the dominant ideology (Adorno, 1976, p. 138). Undoubtedly, Adorno's approach is of Marxist nature, and it cannot be applied to all directions in music.

Let us consider the spatial abstraction of Yerevan shaped as a result of music, society, and mainstream ideology interactions — initially in the context of Soviet Armenia and then that of independent Armenia — examining how music became the coordinator of the urban space environment, influenced and was influenced by the process, and shaped the outlines of further development. It will be illustrated through the example of jazz as shaped by Yerevan's urban cultural milieu. It is notable how the jazz abstraction of the city, shaped by several social layers, began to shape the overall image of Yerevan, leading to the outline of a three-storied jazz Yerevan.

Early Soviet era, new economic policy, and the basics of Yerevan jazz culture (1921–1928)

The post-revolutionary and post-war period in Russia (1918–1921) posed serious economic challenges for the newly emerging giant state, and to overcome them, the political elite resorted to partial compromises. Thus, in 1921 Moscow launched the New Economic Policy (NEP) and offered concessions to foreign investors and capitalists (Fink, 2014, p. 12). Lenin's precedent for NEP tolerance facilitated the smooth integration of jazz into the Soviet system (Slobin, 1984, p. 54). Despite its very short life, the NEP also sparked a wave of criticism against jazz, making it a symbol of bourgeois, low moral values. Jazz was associated with the NEP, earning the notorious title "Music of the Nepmen," and was isolated from mainstream entertainment, confined to newly formed marginal salons and inns.

After the end of the NEP, when jazz had acquired the epithet "the music of the NEPmen," it needed to restore its reputation in order to serve Soviet ideology. For this reason,

the process of "whitening" jazz began in the USSR. As early as 1926, the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment (Narkompros) sent Russian musician Leopold Teplitsky on a mission to the United States to study jazz so that it could be adapted for the USSR (Fejertag, 2014, p. 23).

During those years, several major organizations were established in the Soviet Union to organize Soviet musical life. RAPM (Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians) and ASM (Association for Contemporary Music) emerged, with the former being jazz and modern Western music's number one enemy. However, finding arguments against jazz was one thing, but finding a musical direction equivalent to jazz as a replacement was an entirely different matter, as jazz had gained immense popularity among the urban population during the NEP years. The proponents of proletarian jazz found support for legalizing jazz in the Marxist articles by Michael Gold, a representative of the Communist Party of the USA and editor of the Daily Worker, and Edward Charles Smith. They argued that there could be "true" proletarian jazz that could promote class consciousness (Smith, 1933).

According to this logic, jazz in the Soviet system was divided into bourgeois jazz (the music of the NEPmen) and "true" proletarian jazz (the music of the common working class). This division created an ideological extremity between American and Soviet jazz, leading to a hostile conflict. Russian Soviet musicologist Alexei Batashev also emphasized the importance of the ideological and politicized concept of jazz through the music of Duke Ellington, which played a significant role in shaping proletarian jazz during the Stalinist era, noting that the ideological concept of jazz as the music of ordinary Black people was adopted by American communists of the 1920s, who in turn referred to Lenin.

In the 1930s, jazz interested the Soviet political elite purely from the perspective of party propaganda. Soviet musicologists and proletarian jazz brilliantly utilized this ideological concept — aligned with socialist ideology — and became an essential part of the Sovietisation of mass art, shaping Stalinist agitational "Red" jazz (Pereverzyev, 2020, pp. 146–147). Of course, this artificial division applied to jazz is now subject to serious criticism. However, it highlights the two main directions in jazz during the Soviet period: mainstream (official) and underground. Thus, in the 1930s, the slogan "The Song is the Komsomol's Assistant" emerged and gained state-level significance. The creation of proletarian, urban songs became a priority (Raku, 2009).

The outline of Yerevan in the Stalinist "Red" era: frontal and underground jazz

The second half of the 1930s is marked by the completion of Soviet cultural policy, whose ideological foundation was socialism, and whose governing mechanism was mass appeal and national ideology. Cultural institutions became distinctive mechanisms functioning for the state, and jazz became part of the agitational apparatus.

Yerevan also witnessed the second wave of repatriation in the 1930s, which led to the resettlement of a diverse population. As a result, "maylas" (neighborhoods) and "t'aghers" (districts) were formed, creating a social stratum with a unique value system and clearly defined territorial boundaries.

The immigrants of the 1930s, who had come from Greece, Bulgaria, France, and other countries, were called "the French" by the locals, just as the immigrants of the 1920s were given the general label "the Poles" (immigrants from Constantinople).

French Armenians were in particular demand: from a political standpoint, people arriving from a developed capitalist country enhanced the USSR's international reputation (Stepanyan, 2010, pp. 73–75).

This situation is vividly illustrated by a famous 1932 article in Khorhrdajin Arvest magazine, which included a caricature depicting locals eavesdropping at the door to hear the loud music the repatriates are listening to, and criticizing it (Khochik, 1932, p. 30). Repatriates, some of whom were bearers of Western culture and values, resettled in the city's suburbs. Later, in the late 1940s, they became the foundation for the stilyagi subculture, which is addressed below.

In Armenia, jazz skipped the NEP stage entirely and started directly from the Red Era. The division of Yerevan's urban jazz zones thus took place in a two-storied format — frontal and underground — determined by authoritarian political ideology and the barriers it imposed.

The forefront of urban jazz environment organization developed in two vectors: large concert stages and state representation on the one hand, and local mass entertainment on the other. The underground movement spread on a larger scale in the late 1940s, during the Cold War, in contrast to the massive struggle against formalism and "those who bow to the West" in 1948 (Artizov & Naumov, 1999, p. 175).

Unlike mainstream official jazz, Soviet underground jazz developed in marginalized spaces — in the apartments of repatriates, studios, basements of universities and factories, and other deviant locations. Soviet Armenian jazz musician Armen Tutunjyan recalls that he and his fellow jazz enthusiasts tried to gather information about repatriates and meet them to visit their homes or studios to listen to jazz or learn more about it. As Tutunjyan remembers, there were two ways to acquire American jazz records and magazines: through immigrants themselves and their connections with friends and relatives abroad, and through the so-called "black market" of hidden spaces that resold illegally imported goods. This phenomenon was widespread not only in Soviet Armenia but in nearly all republics of the USSR (A. Tutunjyan, personal communication, May 20, 2012). In Yerevan's "black market," located in the Silachi neighborhood, one could find everything unavailable in stores. Immigrants sold their clothing and items brought from abroad, including foreign vinyl records and musical instruments (Stepanyan, 2010, p. 185).

The mainstream jazz direction in Yerevan was primarily limited to two major entities: the state jazz orchestra and the estrada symphonic orchestras of radio and television that continued this trend from the 1950s, along with several smaller ensembles with state status. Radio and television also provided the musical backdrop for jazz in the city. While public radio organized public time, audiences were largely tuning in to prohibited channels, particularly Willis Conover's Jazz Hour on the Voice of America. During the Cold War, Conover was one of the most listened-to presenters on that channel; his program was specifically aimed at third-country audiences, including the USSR, and was partly part of American cultural policy. Conover believed that the power of music and radio could mitigate misunderstandings and improve international relations (Ripmaster, 2007, p. 22).

There also existed intermediated environments where Soviet entertainment was combined with Western trends — cultural spaces intended to organize public time that were gradually transformed into intermediated jazz environments.

Underground jazz Yerevan

Soviet avant-garde, jazz and circus

In terms of aesthetic tendencies, jazz entered the USSR within the Soviet avant-garde. Contemporaries saw jazz as a musical reflection of a new, dynamic life, revealing an associative affinity with the rhythm of the modern city (Kovalenko, 2014). It was not accidental that the innovative, experimental, and eclectic field of art characteristic of the twentieth century made room for inherently exotic jazz within the context of Soviet absurd theatre and circus eccentric performances, and the first jazz concerts in the USSR took place alongside circus programs and theatrical presentations.

Consequently, Soviet jazz, unlike other international branches, was born in a theatrical environment, and its initial steps were associated with visual entertainment. It had formed within the milieu of prominent Soviet theatrical figures such as Meyerhold, Eisenstein, Foregger, and others (Batashev, 1972, pp. 10–11). Following the same logic, the Soviet jazz pioneer was not a musician but a poet, choreographer, and representative of experimental art — V. Parnakh (Kravchenskiy, 2018, pp. 110–115).

It is precisely this eccentric, theatricalized line of jazz that became the foundation of the Armenian State Jazz Orchestra, which, in addition to its jazz repertoire, was enriched with musical numbers featuring theatricalized, noisy orchestras with pots and other metallic instruments.

Regarding the theatricalization of jazz formation in Armenia, Ayvazyan writes in his autobiography: “The higher organizations wanted to create a lively, cheerful, and national orchestra in Armenia — something like jazz. This task was entrusted to me. At first, I was very afraid. Having received a ‘respectable education,’ I had never done anything like this. However, I decided to try my hand at the ‘light genre.’ Although this ‘light genre’ apparently promised to become a very complex genre for me. I resolutely decided to create an original, bright, and colorful jazz orchestra based on national elements. It was more than complex, and I would say it was experimental work. This endeavor had no traditions; I had no examples to guide me in the right direction. Moreover, there was no estrada in the Caucasus at all. Additionally, I wanted this jazz to be cheerful, eccentric, and theatricalized” (Ayvazyan A., Memoir).

The theatricalized line of the State Jazz Orchestra continued the widespread trends in jazz perception in the USSR during the 1930s and 1940s. This aesthetic direction was resolved only starting in 1956, when the orchestra underwent significant reform and composer and jazz musician Konstantin Orbelyan became its artistic director.

The kinship between jazz and circus eccentricism is also evident in the famous Soviet Armenian film Road to the Circus[1], whose music was composed by Orbelyan himself, with his orchestra performing it (Hayastani Azgayin Kinokentron, 2020).

Parks as jazz venues

The garden was the second environment for underground jazz. Chief architect A. Tamanyan specifically used Howard’s garden city model as the basis of Yerevan’s plan, cultivating the city parks on the principle that parks and major public and cultural buildings should be placed in the city center. In the USSR, the ideological basis of this model was entertainment socialization.

[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GzBiP29zDlU&t=144s

Despite the state-regulated paradigm that opened public areas and the entertainment in those areas was meant to urge and complement the development of a "Soviet person", in practice it led to quite a different destination. It was in the garden environment that popular "garden music" was formed in several Soviet cities, including Yerevan. In the 1920s, this music consisted of Western dances played by self-initiated brass bands — one-step, two-step, foxtrot, boogie-woogie, and other Western dances — with bands receiving the epithets of "noisy" or "orchestras of things" in society. "Noisy orchestras" were involved in various campaign events in the 1920s and 1930s, including "living newspapers" (Batashev, 1972, p. 14).

The garden environment, intended for state-regulated propaganda, thus took on a different meaning through music and consequently changed the space's function. During those years, a jazz atmosphere was created in Flora Garden, 26 Commissars' Garden, Builders' Garden, and the Philharmonic Garden (Tutunjyan, 2014, p. 52) — platforms where Western cultural forms and their Soviet versions were intertwined.

Following critical articles in Soviet magazines, it can be concluded that a large number of young people were obsessed with Western views (At the park of the 26 Commissars, 1938, p. 3). The youth consisted of both native Yerevan residents and those who had arrived during the first wave of repatriation, with French Armenians standing out in particular.

The importance of the garden environment in the context of jazz formation in Armenia is also mentioned by the founder of jazz in Armenia, Artemi Ayvazyan, in his unpublished autobiography:

> "Continuing the search for musicians for the jazz orchestra, one summer, I visited the 26 Commissars' Garden. Evening was approaching, but the summer heat had not yet subsided. Scattered here and there on the trees were pieces of paper nailed up with nails, handwritten with ink that read: Western dances today... This is how I found the dancing Ordoyan brothers..." (Ayvazyan A., Memoir).

It was in the garden environment that the first concert of the State Jazz Orchestra of Armenia, formed by Artemi Ayvazyan, took place — recorded in history as having occurred on April 9, 1938, at Flora Garden. However, the garden concerts of the state jazz orchestra differed from the concert hall performances of the same orchestra, both in repertoire and in the freedom of musicians and the audience's attitude (Ayvazyan A., Memoir).

As contemporaries recall, the young people were pleased, while the adults criticized and condemned the youth, sometimes even throwing tomatoes at the orchestra musicians (M. Vardazaryan, personal communication, April 6, 2022). Later, during the Cold War years, when jazz was officially banned, the jazz pieces performed in concert halls were preceded by small satirical sketches mocking bourgeois jazz — only after which did the performances take place, thus presenting jazz as a negative phenomenon (Ayvazyan A., Memoir).

Cinema as a jazz club platform: passage areas between the Soviet and the Western

As Lenin famously declared, "The most important of all kinds of art for us is the cinema." The cinema of 1930–1936 was one of the main ideological mechanisms for organizing Soviet society's leisure time, carrying significant social and political significance (Korjova, 2006, pp. 34–35). The screen image, as a semiotic structure, is a visual message that encodes and transmits information about both the city and the citizen

(Avanesov, 2022, p. 45). Long before World War Two, music was in almost all Soviet movie theatres, accompanying silent films.

The connection between cinema and jazz was not a new concept, with traditions tracing back to the birthplace of jazz — the USA. It is no coincidence that the first Hollywood sound film, The Jazz Singer, touches upon the themes of jazz and the jazz musician. However, in the Soviet environment, cinema and jazz were linked more by ideological connections. Both in cinema and in Soviet jazz, also known as Song Jazz, there was an emphasis on text as the best means of interpreting socialist ideology.

In the field of sound cinema, the role of the musician changed in the 1930s: the musician who previously provided the movie soundtrack altered his function. Now bands provided entertainment during movie breaks, and each Soviet cinema had its own orchestra that gave concerts in the foyers. The chairman of Goskino, B. Shumyants, wrote in 1939: "We need our Soviet jazz, Soviet jazz operetta, our Soviet jazz film" (Pereverzyev, 2020, p. 256).

Like elsewhere, cinemas opened one after another in Yerevan. In 1936, with the construction of the Moscow Cinema, a jazz band composed mostly of repatriates was formed; two years later, this band served as the basis for the establishment of the State Jazz Orchestra of Armenia (Ayvazyan & Adoyan, 1997, p. 99).

> "The jazz at the 'Moscow' cinema was among the best, as the artistic director of the orchestra was the renowned trumpeter Tsolak Vardazaryan, who had received his education at the Moscow Conservatory and had listened to various jazz groups that had visited the USSR during his student years. The orchestra's success was also linked to the returnees; for instance, jazz musician Martin Vardazaryan recalls that most of the orchestra's members knew what 'real' jazz was, referring to American jazz. In the foyers of the cinemas, besides the musical numbers from the day's film, the music from well-known films of that time, such as Sun Valley Serenade and Let George Do It!, could also be heard" (K. Petrosyan, personal communication, September 11, 2023).

Almost every cinema operating in Yerevan had its own jazz orchestra. For several decades, cinemas such as Moscow, Nairi, Sasuntsi David, Hayrenik, and others, as well as some theatres, were associated with jazz music. Jazz musicians M. Vardazaryan, E. Yerzinkyan, K. Petrosyan, L. Malkhasyan, and others spoke about their jazz orchestras that performed in various cinemas over the years.

Significant differences emerged between orchestras with state status and those performing during intermissions in cinemas. Formally censored concert programs were closely monitored, both through detailed examination of the programs and through the presence of high-ranking officials at the concerts. In contrast, the concert programs during film screenings often took alternative routes. Composer, pianist, and jazz musician K. Petrosyan mentions that they would present one program but actually perform a completely different one, or they would translate the name of a jazz standard and attribute it to a fictional author, thus resolving the issue — though this, of course, only held in the press (K. Petrosyan, personal communication, September 11, 2023). Such entertaining events were not spared from critical articles in Sovetskoe Iskusstvo, Pravda, and other publications (Sardaryan, 1959, p. 66). A popular perception of the area was summarised in the phrase: "Let us go to the cinema to listen to jazz."

"Imaginary West" and its localization in Yerevan streets and cultural places

As a consequence of Stalin's bans and repressions, in the 1950s the subculture of stilyagi (style hunters) developed and spread widely across the republics of the USSR. The term comes from the English word "style" and carries a mocking connotation. The representatives of this subculture were followers of Western values who wore foreign clothes, listened to jazz, and, under conditions of the Iron Curtain, developed their own model of some "imaginary West" (Yurchak, 2014, pp. 334–335). The idea of existential freedom, typical of jazz culture, became a musical reflection of various youth, subcultural, and social movements.

Stilyagi identified streets and symbolic landmarks of Soviet cities with those of New York or other famous American cities. Gorky Street in Moscow, Nevsky Prospekt in Leningrad, and Stalynyan Avenue (Prospekt) in Yerevan were nicknamed Broadway (Baykov, 2015). The vicinity of Prospekt, Abovyan Street, and the Moscow Cinema served as meeting places for stilyagi, with the nearby Small Philharmonic Concert Hall (A. Adamyan, personal communication, May 6, 2020). Georgy Litvinov's documentary novel Stilyagi: How It Was and the 2008 film Hipsters, based on the book, provide vivid descriptions of the subculture.

Apartments, studios, and university campuses as underground jazz environments

The years of the Khrushchev Thaw (1953–1964) and the relative freedom it brought also transformed Yerevan's jazz scene. Alongside state-run and popular jazz occupying the front line, smaller jazz platforms were being formed: apartments, studios, and the basements of universities and other organizationsorganizations. This is how self-initiated jazz began.

As the artist Grigor Khachatryan recalled: "We studied banned literature from censorship articles. Without understanding, the highest authorities helped us and then wondered how these young people knew so much about the West, jazz, and alike. There were progressive painters' studios next to the Barekamutyun subway station, where the Hayastan Department Store stood in the 1970s. Artists, deviating from the Soviet system and time, gathered and talked about jazz, rock, modern literature, and decided how to break the Iron Curtain of the Soviet Union to learn more about the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, and others" (Stepanyan, 2014).

The jazz gathering places in Yerevan included the apartments of drummer Armen "Chiko" Tutunjyan and French-Armenian repatriate Varuzhan Kyuregyan, where young Soviet Armenian students gathered. The connection with renowned jazz producer George Avakian, who lived in France and the United States, provided great opportunities: jazz magazines, records, sheet music, and even musical instruments were sent to Armenia, stimulating the jazz scene in Yerevan. There was also a significant boost in self-made jazz recordings on used medical tapes, which contributed to the spread of American jazz.

With the next wave of repatriation in Armenia (the 1950–1960s), American jazz began to develop significantly. The influence of French-Armenian immigrants on local culture was especially notable — the novelties they brought and the European spirit were different and unusual to the local population, particularly in clothing, free, independent behavior, and music (Stepanyan, 2010, p. 76).

The repatriates became a fertile source of cultural capital. Those were mainly Armenians aged 30–50 who had immigrated from France, the USA, and Greece, and they had

a significant impact on the development of jazz. A vivid example of the blend of Yerevan, Western culture, and jazz is Jacques Duvalyan's songs "Yerevan is Speaking," "In the Streets of Yerevan," and "In Baghramyan Street," which demonstrated the process of foreign culture localization while not being welcomed by the authorities. Almost every workshop or organization had its own self-initiated pop or jazz band.

Varuzhan Kyuregyan, an architect at ArmStateProject Institute, was a pioneer who made significant contributions to jazz coverage and teaching. As a French-Armenian, he had the opportunity to build a large jazz vinyl collection and to subscribe to the French Jazz Magazine (Tutunjyan, 2014, p. 112).

A passage from Gurgen Khanjyan's novel Give Me Your Hand, Kiddie presents the universal mood of Yerevan, jazz, and freedom:

> "To the left of the Sanasar-Baghdasar café, not far from the Getar River, at the corner of Charents Street, there is a building of the Armproject Institute, with a jazz concert in its hall. Listening to jazz in the Soviet country is like a political plot; still, many people are willing to take part in the conspiracy. There are no free seats in the hall, only places to stand; well, there are aisles where they can sit on the dusty carpet, having a tight squeeze... Here are the initiators of the conspiracy: Arthur, Chico, Alik, Malkhas, taking the stage. Alik wets the saxophone's mouthpiece in his mouth, taps the pearly pads with his fingers; Arthur 'stands up' the red double bass, touches the thick rope-like strings, does not like it, twists the nickel-plated pegs, tries again, ready; Malkhas slides his finger over the keys of the piano, hits a few chords, it's OK; having tried the big drum, Chico is already beating the sticks, one, two, one-two-three-four, here they go... The close, metallic sound of the saxophone comes out freely, spreads through the hall, takes out to the city" (Khanjyan, 2017, p. 219).

Along with workshops, university campuses were very important. Student jazz orchestras of Yerevan State University, the Polytechnic and Brusov Institutes stood out, producing L. Malkhasyan, A. Tutunjyan, E. Yerznkyan, A. Bakunts, V. Asatryan, and others, who became jazz symbols of Soviet Yerevan. In 1968, the Brusov Institute campus hosted the first Rhythm-68 Yerevan Jazz Festival (Shamtsyan, 2019, p. 18).

Alternative Yerevan: formation of café culture and hotels

The 1960–1970s were the period when a café culture was being shaped in Yerevan — the Poplavok, the Koziryok, the Skvoznyachok, the Derasanakan, the Kopeyka, the Araks, the Krunk cafés — public places where, outside Soviet ideology, an "alternative discourse" was formed. Jazz and newly sprouted rock served as the musical background for that discourse.

Along with professional musicians, people from various professions also began playing jazz. Jazz retained its hobby status and remained popular mainly among young people. Many government officials, engineers, architects, and others devoted to jazz, a diverse source of support, played a major role in its development, allowing it to find new mechanisms of survival.

The president of the Composers' Union, E. Mirzoyan, and the secretary, K. Koltukhchyan, provided substantial support for the advancement of jazz in Armenia, resulting in several jazz festivals being organized, such as Jazz Panorama Yerevan-85 and Jazz Panorama Yerevan-86, and auditions of jazz ensembles were held (Koltukhchyan, 2004,

pp. 24–25). Koltukhchyan recounts: “And we began the fight for the festival... After a year and a half of navigating through all possible and impossible instances, with the active support of USSR People’s Artists and composers Eduard Mirzoyan and Konstantin Orbelyan, and a rather difficult meeting with Armenia’s Minister of Culture Yuri Melik-Ohanyan, finally... finally, on June 25, 1985, the first All-Union Jazz Festival ‘Jazz Panorama Yerevan-85’ opened in the grand hall of the Aram Khachaturian Concert Hall.” Eleven ensembles participated, including Orbelyan’s and Nazaretov’s jazz bands, Lukyanov’s and I. Bril’s ensembles, Goloshchyokin’s group, and others (Koltukhchyan, 2004, pp. 26–27).

Another alternative platform for jazz was provided by the city’s hotels: the Ani, the Armenia, the Intourist, and the Dvin. In 1969, an unexpected jam session took place at the bar section of the Ani Hotel, featuring the legendary B.B. King and Armenian jazz musicians. This impromptu performance left the Soviet audience in awe. It is no coincidence that Armenian jazz veterans state that jazz was not banned in Armenia (L. Malkhasyan, personal communication, February 8, 2019) — proof that there were always mechanisms and interested individuals in the Soviet era who enabled jazz to survive and advance.

Jazz in Yerevan during the period of independence

Following the independence settlement, a transition process from Soviet socialism to liberal democratic capitalism began in Armenia. A demand appeared for the “independence” of jazz from the Soviet jazz tradition and the formation of a new model for its development. In independent Armenia, jazz culture had the opportunity to evolve in all directions, reflecting both modernity and the influence of different social strata, which, in turn, formed various, often contradictory jazz subcultures.

A new cultural ferment emerged in Yerevan’s urban environment, developing along several vectors. Elite jazz, mainstream jazz, underground marginal jazz, café background jazz, and restaurant “rabiz-jazz” emerged in urban cultural settings. In the latest decade, open-air jazz festivals have been established, organizing various jazz venues both indoors and outdoors in public spaces within the context of urban culture.

Elitism as a new environment of jazz in Yerevan

In the late 1990s, jazz began its transformation from a predominantly mass culture into an elite culture in Armenia. As a result, jazz also changed the organization of urban space. In contrast to the strategy of popularising jazz in the Soviet era, during the years of independence jazz became concentrated in Yerevan’s center, gaining new status and limiting its audience to the select. To listen to jazz became fashionable and a marker of taste (A. Hyusnuts, personal communication, February 10, 2018).

The years of President R. Kocharyan’s rule completed the process of jazz elitisation. Jazz clubs and cafés emerged; the Aragast café became the main hub of Yerevan’s jazz scene among the city’s political elite. Karine Ter-Sahakyan accurately describes this process in her memoirs: “The Tekeyan Center was established in the place of the Krunk café, but jazz, our jazz, remained. The Krunk café model of 1966 was indeed transferred to the Aragast café of the 1990s; however, the Poplavok café of our time has survived, despite undergoing many changes. Now it glitters with its high prices. Anyway, it is a trifle, as Malkhas is here and he plays jazz...” (Ter-Sahakyan, 2005, p. 15).

The Aragast café, among the major centers of café culture formation in Yerevan in the 1960–1980s, suddenly became a jazz elite "laboratory"[2]. The process of making the jazz elite was driven by the pro-Western image of the second president of Armenia, which emphasized jazz and basketball. The actual phase of jazz elitism lasted until the second half of the 2000s, when the Malkhas Club and the Mezzo clubs opened, and Aragast began to lose ground.

The process of elitisation was also influenced by the "Sharm" company, which, during those years, was one of the main organizers of jazz events in Yerevan. Its director, Ruben Jaghinyan, known as Jazz Rubo, organized the major jazz festivals of the 2000s (D. Babayan, personal communication, August 29, 2023).

The city's jazz identity was actively supported by Radio Jazz, which launched in 2008. Its morning jingle, voiced by actor Armen Elbakyan, announced: "The city is listening to jazz." A telling vignette is provided by the press: "Each morning, 36-year-old economist Gevorg drives to work, and when he hears Elbakyan's words on the radio, he turns up the volume so that everyone knows he is listening to jazz. He admits that he does not know the name of a single jazz artist but is fully aware that in Yerevan, jazz is a marker of taste and status"[3].

The slogan "Yerevan is listening to jazz" and posters with the same title adorned the streets of Yerevan for several years, emphasizing at a subconscious level Yerevan's identity as a jazz city and positioning jazz as an elite art form (A. Manukyan, personal communication, May 6, 2020). In 2015, the Yerevan Municipality organized the "Yerevan Summer 2015" event series, featuring jazz concerts titled "The City is Listening to Jazz"[4]. In 2018, the slogan became central to the city's 2800th anniversary celebration[5]. Even in 2024, Yerevan's city day celebration was marked by a jazz concert at the Cascade under the same slogan[6]. Although jazz is not the leading genre in Yerevan's overall musical tastes, the city's image as a jazz city remains unchanged. As Russian rocker Yuri Shevchuk once remarked: "Yerevan is a jazz city"[7].

Creation of innovative, experimental club environment

In contrast to the open concert formats of the Soviet period, in the 1990s jazz clubs sprang up one after another in Yerevan's basements. Jazz platforms that had operated in studios and university basements during the Soviet period — developing marginal jazz — thus became legitimate during the years of independence. The Avant-garde Folk, the Stop, the Subway clubs, and later The Club became platforms for a group of jazz musicians to experiment with various postmodern music.

Jazz performances have been taking place in Yerevan since the 2000s, featuring such performers as A. Tunjboyajyan, the Armenian Navy Band, and V. Hayrapetyan. Underground jazz found its established form in different clubs at different times (the Avangard Folk, the Stop, the Down-town, the Lady Jazz, the Ulikhanyan clubs), forming an established audience and a model typical of Yerevan's new jazz culture.

[2] https://mediamax.am/am/news/yerevan-XX-century/7778/
[3] https://blansh.wordpress.com/2009/01/29/jazz/#more-344
[4] https://www.azatutyun.am/a/27199291.html
[5] https://armenpress.am/hy/article/934528
[6] https://www.yerevan.am/hy/news/erewane-jaz-e-lsowm/
[7] https://hy.armradio.am/archives/31001

Jazz as the organiser of the restaurant "Rabiz" environment

Business was developing so-called "rabiz jazz." Interesting parallels can be drawn with the period of Soviet jazz's formation, when, in the 1920s and 1930s, all forms of garden and salon music were called "jazukha." In this case, "jazz" became a trend, and to commercialize, many bands added the term "jazz" to their name in order to become more competitive in the music market.

One of the most noticeable recent manifestations of this trend has been the jazz interpretation of the musical composition "Khorovats is a Very Good Thing," which typically accompanies the serving of khorovats (Armenian BBQ) in restaurant complexes. This fusion highlights the interaction between traditional Armenian culture and contemporary jazz, showcasing how jazz is increasingly used to appeal to modern tastes while preserving local cultural elements.

In the past decade, Armenian jazz culture — previously concentrated in Yerevan — has adopted a decentralization strategy. Efforts are being made to cultivate a diverse musical and cultural scene in other cities across Armenia, stimulating tourism development and representing an attempt to transfer Yerevan's jazz character to other regions of the country.

Conclusion

Jazz is a universal platform in the field of intercultural communication, a unique structural model that works across different socio-cultural systems, absorbing the ideological, political, and other influences of the cultural traditions in which it operates while greatly shaping the organization of its environment.

The changes distributed between music culture and urban space are never completely separate from the crossroads of postmodernist discourse, power, and subject. Time has shown that postmodernist theories have become indispensable for understanding the role of music in identity formation (Krims, 2012, p. 162).

Through partially associative maps, a distinct abstraction of jazz culture is shaped. In the context of Yerevan, this abstraction takes the form of a three-tiered demarcation of the city, each floor performing certain ideological and social functions. In the Soviet period, it evolved in two dimensions: the frontal, state-regulated, overt dimension; and the underground, basement-level, marginal dimension — both of which in turn influenced the organization of the urban environment, shaping unique jazz surroundings.

As a consequence of elitisation in the period of independence, a third dimension was added: jazz in the "attics" of inaccessible or elite spaces. The jazz trends in Yerevan's musical image stemmed from the predominance of jazz resources at the heart of the pop music that emerged in the Soviet era, which had already shaped public opinion during the years of independence, associating the musical image of Yerevan with jazz.

During the period of independence, this vision persisted, though undergoing ideological transformation. While in the Soviet period Yerevan's jazz associations were connected with large-scale pop and underground apolitical subcultures, in the period of independence they became connected with elite and trendy tendencies. What remained constant across both periods was jazz's role as a spatial organizer, a mechanism of cultural differentiation, and a symbolic resource through which successive generations of Yerevan's urban population negotiated identity, ideology, and belonging.

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