

Please Duet This: Collaborative Music Making in Lockdown on *TikTok*

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic forced millions of musicians worldwide to put their careers on hold, avoid in-person collaborations, and find new ways to make music during global lockdowns. *TikTok*, the popular short video platform, has become digital space for musical artists to create new content and collaborate directly other creators using unique platform features. One particularly notable feature is Duet, which allows creators record new videos that place them alongside other creators' existing videos. Duets can be paired or chained together by numerous creators, each building on or adding to the previous video. Musical artists on *TikTok* used this feature to pass time, participate in jams, and create new music while in lockdown. This article explores instances collaborative music making on *TikTok* through a case study of @JazzTokOfficial, a collectively managed *TikTok* account formed in late-2020. Findings draw on eighteen (n = 18) qualitative interviews with members of the JazzTok community who have used the platform's Duet feature to create new musical collaborations while socially distanced. This article argues that musical artists engaged in distributed creativity facilitated by a short video platform to overcome the strains of making music during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19; TikTok; music; lockdown; creator studies

Introduction

In 2020, COVID-19 lockdowns forced millions of people around to world to shelter in place and practice social distancing. Despite efforts to contain the virus throughout mid to late-2020, full or partial lockdowns remained in effect for much of the year in many countries around the world, spiking at various points when new waves of the virus surged. The global lockdowns had a pronounced impact on revenues and careers in the international music industries. Live music industries lost an estimated \$30 billion (USD) globally as concerts and performance series were postponed indefinitely and finally cancelled (Aswad 2020). Well-established artists that had access to professional recording facilities like Charlie XCX and Taylor Swift proved it was possible to produce music while in quarantine with the proper resources (Cragg 2020). However, for millions of hobbyist, amateur and aspiring musicians around the world, the 2020 lockdowns posed major challenges on the ability to make and play music collectively with others. In moments of isolation, millions of musical artists sought out creative new ways to make content on their own or with others while remaining socially distanced (Banks 2020). Digital media proved to be a simple and effective means to continue doing music for income or fun – some began live streaming, several started YouTube channels, and others finally caved and downloaded the popular short video platform *TikTok* to see what all the fuss was about.

For musicians, an immediately appealing feature of *TikTok* was Duet, which allows TikTokers to create a new video side-by-side an existing video.

This article describes processes of making socially distanced musical content using the Duet feature on *TikTok*. Findings are informed by qualitative interviews conducted with eighteen ($n = 18$) musical artists on *TikTok* in early 2021 (see Appendix). The majority of participants were based in the US ($n = 15$). Interviewees were initially identified purposively as members of a *TikTok* community known as ‘JazzTok’ (detailed further below). After the initial interviews, several other members of the JazzTok community were contacted via snowball sampling. Interviews lasted between sixty and ninety minutes and were all conducted via Zoom. Interviews were recorded, transcribed using an automated transcription service, and analysed for qualitative themes using a grounded approach to thematic coding (Charmaz 2006; Corbin & Strauss 2008).

Throughout this article, I refer to informants as ‘TikTokers’, meaning those who use *TikTok* as both viewers and creators, just as those who view and create on YouTube are colloquially known as YouTubers (Postigo 2016). I argue that TikTokers participate in collaborative music making, or distributed creativity (Sawyer & DeZutter 2009), facilitated by the *duet* feature. Additionally, I argue that TikTokers are continually contesting and appropriating the function of Duet on *TikTok* to build connections and create content during an unprecedented moment of limited mobility. The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, I describe the features of *TikTok* that distinguish it from other types of digital platforms and historicize the Duet feature guided by the platform biography method (Burgess & Baym 2020). Next, I discuss the ways individuals make collaborative music on *TikTok*, focusing on ‘Duet Jams’, a concept I frame using Sawyer and DeZutter’s (2009) theoretical conception of distributed creativity, collaborative situations in which groups collectively generate a shared creative product. I then present a case study of @JazzTokOfficial, a collectively managed *TikTok* account formed by TikTokers who met through repeated Duet Jam interactions. I conclude arguing that the artists of JazzTok engaged in distributed creativity facilitated by a short video platform to overcome the strains of making music during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, the benefits of which will extend into the future.

Platform Features

TikTok is a short video platform, meaning it hosts audio-visual content that is no longer than 60 seconds, and its primary mode of content consumption and dissemination is via mobile device (Kaye et al. 2020a). On the one hand, TikTok encourages the same type of participatory cultures (Jenkins et al. 2015) evident on other digital media platforms such as YouTube through vernacular creativity, mundane participation as a means of collective cultural participation (Burgess 2006) and produsage, collaborative and continuous building and extending existing content (Bruns 2008). On the other hand, TikTok includes an arsenal of additional platform features that promote interactions and modes of production unique to the short video format. I follow Galloway (2004), who conceptualises platform features as protocological objects that structure and exercise control over the specific social situations on which they are brought to

bear. Users may creatively work around the apparent intended use of features, which can reveal the politics, relationships, and cultures of use (Bucher 2013).

Several features of *TikTok* intentionally facilitate engagement and interaction with others. Some of these features are latent, such as the primary mode of viewing videos on *TikTok*, the For You Page (FYP) that recommends new content for users to scroll through endlessly, matched to viewers' unique preferences via a sophisticated algorithmic recommender system. By scrolling through the FYP, TikTokers are constantly engaging with new content that refreshes frequently and is recalibrated based on a wide variety of user data (TikTok 2020b). Some of the factors that influence which videos get recommended by one's FYP are, in part, based on one's engagement with other videos and users. In June 2020, *TikTok* released a statement explaining how the FYP recommendations are made, in the interest of improved transparency (TikTok 2020b). The statement explained that in addition to recording data from one's own inputs such as liking, commenting, or following, the algorithm also adjusts recommendations based on the inputs of friends, followers and other TikTokers one is following.

Other features are more active facilitators of interaction, such as Use This Sound, Video Reply to Comments, Stitch and Duet, each of which are used to create new videos. Use This Sound allows TikTokers to create a new video that directly imports the audio from the video they were just watching with one tap (Kaye et al. 2020b). Video Reply to Comments allows TikTokers to spotlight a comment left on a previous video by creating a new video to respond to the comment or commenter (Abidin et al. 2020). Stitch was added in October 2020, and allows TikTokers to clip a short segment from a previous video and place it at the start of a new video (TikTok 2020c). Duet, the focal feature of this article, works by scrolling through *TikTok* videos, finding a video to Duet, and tapping a dedicated Duet button on the TikTok sharing interface. The *TikTok* platform automatically downloads the video and opens the video recording interface to shoot or import a video that appears side-by-side the original being used for Duet (Weir 2020).

The appeal of Duet makes perfect sense in the context of the COVID-19 lockdowns. The Duet feature creates an opportunity for parasocial interaction (PSI), one-sided relationships between individuals and figures in media (Jarzyna 2020). Duets can be used to facilitate PSI by everyday TikTokers engaging in Duet dances or lip-synching with celebrities (Musical.ly, 2017). Duets can also provide social interaction responding to questions posed by other TikTokers with personal stories, reacting to content in a new video, or playing music together with another person, which was instrumental for millions of people feeling shut-in and isolated following the first wave of lockdowns. *TikTok* has changed the function of Duet, including some transformations that took place in late-2020 when the pandemic was in full swing, which is significant considering Duet was not originally included as a feature when *TikTok* first launched internationally.

A Brief History of the Duet Feature

To historicise the development of the Duet feature on *TikTok* I draw on the platform biography method (Burgess & Baym, 2020). Platform biography chronicles how digital media platforms

change over time by considering social, political, and cultural forces. In developing the platform biography method, Burgess and Baym focus specifically on platform features to understand the politics of relationships between users, technologies, and cultures of use (2020, 35). In their book, *Twitter: A Biography*, Burgess and Baym trace pathways of feature evolution at four stages: appropriation, integration, contestation, and iteration. This evolutionary perspective illuminates how certain features change and develop through social and technical interactions, tension, and exploration. Providing sufficient evidence to support of each of these four stages of evolution is beyond the scope of this article, but the platform biography can still provide a useful framework to review the history of *TikTok*'s Duet.

To begin, Duet was not hardcoded into the original international version of *TikTok* but likely would have been familiar to many early *TikTok*ers. *TikTok* launched in 2018 after parent company ByteDance acquired and rebranded popular lip-synching short video platform, *Musical.ly*. Duet was a popular, not to mention trademarked, feature on *Musical.ly* (The Nation 2018). *Musical.ly*'s Duet feature was, itself, reminiscent of another Duet feature on the social singing platform *Smule*, which allowed users to create harmonies with themselves or other users (Smule, 2015). The key difference was that *Musical.ly*'s Duet did not allow additional audio to be recorded using Duets as it was introduced as a way to dance or lip-sync alongside others (Musical.ly 2017).

The first mention of Duet being integrated into the *TikTok* platform came via corporate press release in March 2019 (TikTok 2019). Duet debuted alongside another feature, 'Reactions', both of which enabled *TikTok*ers to create new content with one another as a "launchpad of creative activities as people re-interpret other peoples' content and create unique experiences," (TikTok 2019, 1). According to the release, Duet was meant to carry forward practices of lip-synching and dancing from *Musical.ly* whereas React allowed *TikTok*ers to share feedback or commentary on videos. Using React, *TikTok*ers could participate with others to create comedy skits, response videos, trolling videos, or collaborative musical content. Duets were initially silent, but Reactions allowed *TikTok*ers to add their own audio to respond to other videos. In 2020, *ByteDance* merged Reactions and Duet followed by the introduction of a new feature, Stitch, in September 2020. Stitch allowed *TikTok*ers to clip a short segment of another video and then record their reaction, stitched together with the clip from the original (TikTok 2020c). In essence, Stitch replaced Reactions. In October 2020 Duet was given the option to record audio as well as the addition of new layouts (TikTok 2020d). Duet layouts enabled *TikTok*ers to shift the position of a Duet on their screen and, more importantly, made it easier for *TikTok*ers to string together Duets, forming expansive chains, each containing the original video and audio of the previous Duets (Chen 2020).

This brief historical overview illustrates how the Duet feature came to be what it was in early 2021. At the time, numerous means of making music remotely existed, including on *TikTok*. As the next section explains, making collaborative music on *TikTok* was possible before the October 2020 Duet update, such as by using Reactions third party recording and editing platforms. The Duet update came months into COVID-19 lockdowns, giving musical *TikTok*ers an improved digital tool to create collaborative music.

Making Music on *TikTok*

TikTok, a short video platform designed to encourage and facilitate user-generated content, was a natural online space for singers, songwriters, producers, and instrumentalists to record and share their musical creations. Global COVID-19 lockdowns created many obstacles for musical artists: rehearsals needed to be conducted remotely, access to recording studios was limited, and live performances were shifted to virtual gigs or cancelled. The pandemic also created opportunities for artists who had the capability to record and release music independently (Cooper 2020). Several innovations of the past decade such as high-quality home recording equipment, the proliferation of advanced digital audio workstations (DAWs) and increased avenues to self-publish music online have dramatically lowered entry barriers for music production and dissemination (Prior 2010; Wikström 2020).

Some *TikTok*ers interviewed for this study stated they do not do music professionally, such as Jake (@jakedoesmusicsometimes) who remarked: “I don't like do music in college or anything, I just needed a creative outlet.” For Jake and a handful of other informants who enjoyed making music for fun and not as their primary creative career, *TikTok* offered a means to share musical projects easily and in an engaging manner. Informants described how they could record and upload videos directly from their device's camera and edit using the *TikTok* platform. Alternatively, they could use external recording hardware and third-party production software to create better quality video and audio that they would then upload and share via *TikTok*. The opportunity to record and share music on *TikTok* was an unexpected boon to informants who were newer to the platform:

I think my preconception of thinking that *TikTok* was just these teenagers dancing to random songs was completely wrong. I didn't realize there were so many subtopics genres on the app and I was actually shocked that there were so many musicians on there just doing their thing, putting out like their own instrumentals, or just jamming to another song. I was beyond shocked and I loved it.

Bri (@souponstarbri)

Bri, who joined *TikTok* in mid-2020, was among millions of new users who understood *TikTok* to be an extension of *Musical.ly*, a singing and dancing platform aimed at teenagers. When *TikTok* saw its largest initial growth spurt in 2019 its primary userbase and target market was preteens (Albury & Savic 2019). After spending more time on the platform, Bri and others began to find communities and subcultures recommended to them through their own activity while scrolling through the FYP. Several informants stated that they had never used *TikTok* prior to COVID lockdowns but decided to give it a try either out of boredom, because of recommendation, or after seeing a *TikTok* video that piqued their curiosity. The platform managed to hold their attention by introducing them to other musical *TikTok*ers with shared similar interests.

I started posting a lot of synthesizer content, so then I would start seeing more synthesizer content. And then I realized that [people were using] these hashtags, like #SynthTok, #MusicTok and #JazzTok, which have now kind of become their own little communities.

Kyle (@felonious_skunk)

As on other platforms, using hashtags is an optional way to organise content according to user-generated categories. The three hashtags Kyle mentioned were also noted by other informants who included them to connect to musical communities or attract musical TikTokers to their page.

Other informants, whose careers were tied to music, highlighted *TikTok*'s unique content creation features as a way to encourage playing and practising while they were temporarily unable to play their regular gigs. Kris, a church musician and music teacher, initially joined the platform before the lockdowns to connect with his younger students:

I wanted to experience it and figure out how it worked... and it would surprise the kids when I'd throw out little jokes about something that happened on *TikTok* and they'd be like, "Oh!" and then I'd joke and say, "I don't know what you're talking about." So that was the point of getting on in the first place. And then of course in March of last year, we hit this global shutdown and my school decided we were going to be out. The church I was playing at decided they would no longer be meeting for a while... so here I am at home and everything that I'm used to had shut down. I just wanted to take that opportunity to be more creative and try to find a creative outlet... it wasn't really planned out so much as it was just something I enjoyed doing.

Kris (@musixicn_kris_)

Jay, a professional trumpeter with over thirty years of experience as a touring musician, found a lifeline on *TikTok* in late 2020, when suddenly:

My entire career that I spent my entire life building was gone, I was subbing on Broadway. Broadway is gone. Touring is gone. I was scheduled to play with the national symphony for Memorial Day, Fourth of July, all gone. Everything was gone.

Jay (@jaywebbtrumpet)

Jay revealed that posting videos on *TikTok* initially helped to ease some of the anxiety of having to put his musical career on hold. Within a few months, he saw a new potential for professionalisation on *TikTok* leading to further investment in the platform and his own music setup. Jay was one of several informants who either built or improved on existing home recording studios to create musical content specifically for *TikTok*.

The actual process of recording and uploading music on *TikTok* varied among informants. For example, some used their smartphone to record to record audio and video quickly and easily, while others already had the musical hardware and software needed to make high-quality recordings at home before they joined *TikTok*. Among those that did not have their own home recording setup, many felt justified to purchase the gear after finding musical success on *TikTok*. After converting his closet into a bespoke studio, Jay said that he was writing and recording more music than ever before in his professional career. His first song that credited him as the songwriter as opposed to an instrumentalist or performer, was released on digital music streaming platforms in late 2021. The song, 'Bust Your Windows'¹, was written,

¹ Bust Your Windows – Stacey Ryan and Jay Webb. Available at: <https://open.spotify.com/album/243ttCsxpFZ4OoYgHTRzHw>

recorded, and released in collaboration with another informant, Stacey (@staceyryanmusic), who explained that the song began as a “Duet Jam.”

Duet Jams

According to informants, the main ingress for musical collaborations on *TikTok* was via Duet Jams, which are exactly that: musical jams facilitated by *TikTok*'s Duet function. Duet Jams can take many forms. For example, a guitarist may post a lead and a bassist and drummer Duet to add the rhythm section; a beatmaker may share a produced track for a vocalist to add their own lyrical invention; a songwriter may release a new song and members of the Duet *TikTok* community begin to remix it in real time. Whereas affordable recording gear and digital audio workstations (DAWs) helped convert bedrooms into studios, *TikTok*'s Duet feature further transformed bedrooms into collaborative jam spaces. Creating social spaces to allow for jamming to take place is an important part of the musical enterprise (Cornfield 2015). Jamming is spontaneous; jamming is collaborative; jamming is fun. Just as live music scenes were heavily curtailed during COVID-19, so too were jam spaces and rehearsal rooms, unless they were sufficiently large to allow for social distancing. According to informants, Duet did a good job emulating the experience of jamming:

[The Duet] feature really does tailor the best to musicians and maybe actors as well. The fact that you can layer onto anything... As somebody who loves playing in bands and loves collaborating, it's one of my favourite features.

Gabbi (@fettuccinefettuqueen)

When Duet was introduced on *TikTok*, the audio clip was typically imported from the original video being ‘Duetted.’ At the time, adding additional audio was reserved for Reactions, so Duet encouraged users to participate in popular dance challenges, lip-sync to popular songs, or otherwise jump on popular trends. Some informants explained that Duets were still frequently used to follow *TikTok* trends, but others explicitly distanced themselves from that type of TikTokking:

I don't follow the trends. I'm on the side where I like to add new content rather, which is much harder. It's just like content creation. You're making something new, putting yourself in there, and it feels more complete with you in it. I think Music *TikTok* does that really well. Those kinds of [Duets] take effort. You're always creating new content through these features.

Shout (@vocaloutburst)

Damoyee (@damoyee) highlighted two ways to start Duet Jam. Firstly, while browsing their FYP TikTokkers may stumble upon an interesting short video that they decide to Duet. Several informants commented that the simultaneous randomness and specificity of the *TikTok* algorithmic recommender system fuelled their spontaneity. Some days they might encounter a video that seemed tailor-made for them to Duet while others they might find something surprising that lent itself well for a Duet Jam. Secondly, TikTokkers could find a Duet Jam in-progress and explore other versions by tapping on the audio icon at the bottom right to engage with *TikTok*'s Use This Sound feature. Use This Sound allows TikTokkers to create a new video based on the one they were just watching (Kaye et al. 2021) and lists all the videos that have

‘used’ a specific sound. Rather than proceeding to use the sound, prospective Duet Jammers could find new inspiration for their own Duets by exploring others’ jams.

Duet Jams create novel content through ‘distributed creativity’, defined as groups of individuals who join together to produce a new creative output that ranges from the “relatively predictable and constraints to relatively unpredictable and constrained” (Sawyer & DeZutter 2009, 82). The Duet feature necessarily constrains some options for creative expression, but allows for unpredictable contestation of the feature’s intended use. As an example of a relatively predictable and constrained Duet Jam, Emerson (@emersonbrophy) explained that he would sometimes set up videos to become Duet Jams by creating templates – “I sing one line and have the lyrics on screen for the next line that someone else sings” – but even still he could never be sure how other TikTokers might add to his song on via Duet. As an example of a relatively unpredictable and unconstrained jam, Adam, a music student, described putting his knowledge of music theory to work when creating Duets:

When I see a video of someone singing an acapella tune without a track, I'll do an edit and add the piano part, which is sort of backwards, I think, from how people think of it, you know, you lay down the piano part and *then* you sing along to it. But doing it this way allows me to get away with cool re-harmonization. I'll take the chords and I'll change them to be more interesting.

Adam, @adamdorfmannmusic).

In this way, Duet Jams allow TikTokers to participate in online remixing and sampling culture by contributing their own complex musical additions.

Informants explained that Duet Jams were a useful way to grow their followings on *TikTok*. For example, Anthony explained that it was a Duet Jam that propelled his *TikTok* profile to new heights after he posted a Duet drumming behind a creatively remixed version of the jazz standard *Fly Me to the Moon* shared by another TikToker, “and overnight it got like 10,000 views when I had just about 50 followers. I was pretty shocked to see that kind of growth happen,” (Anthony, @ewokbeats). As a rhythm section player, Anthony reflected, “my page was basically built off of Duets people because I've noticed that people don't just want to watch the drums or drum covers.” Before long he had built connections with a handful of other musical TikTokers through repeated Duets adding drums.

Another appeal of Duet Jams for many informants was the ease with which they could engage in jamming; however, some informants highlighted technical issues they needed to overcome in order to participate in a seamless jam.

There's this unpredictable delay on Duets. Especially if you're doing something rhythmic, you record it and you listen back to it and it's like off by maybe a quarter of a beat, which every now and again, it's negligible, especially if it's not strictly rhythmic. If it is [strictly rhythmic] the Duet doesn't quite work.

Kris, @musicixnkris

In addition to technical limits, some informants also noted economic constraints associated with Duet Jams. As mentioned above, the majority of informants stated they had no interest in professionalising their content to make money from *TikTok*. The simple reason was that

profiting on *TikTok* was daunting and frustrating in early 2021, as *TikTok* only had limited avenues for direct monetization (Kaye et al. 2021), compared to platforms like *YouTube* with more mature revenue schemes (Google 2021). In July 2020, *TikTok* introduced the ‘TikTok Creator Fund’, a \$200M (USD) fund to pay eligible creators for their content based on views that was subject to numerous terms and conditions (TikTok 2020b). Only the US-based informants were eligible to join the Creator Fund at the time of interviews. Many had experimented with joining the fund but ultimately left, mentioning that it paid a pittance for views and that they felt their overall video view count had decreased after joining. Most relevant to this discussion, several informants stated that the Creator Fund did not allow their Duets to be monetized. This was repeated by all informants who were still members of the Creator Fund at the time of our interview. This was not much of a factor however, as none of the informants reported making much money from the Fund anyway. In the future, if the Fund became a more profitable source of income, the policy could potentially economically disincentivise TikTokers from Duetting others.

TikTokers can also still Duet with themselves, as was one of the original intended uses of *Musical.ly*’s Duet. Ebony (@ebonylorenmusic) said she often would Duet her own videos when recording acapella songs and chain together multiple versions of herself to create rich harmonies. Other informants mentioned creating Duet Chains to jam along with multiple other TikTokers to simulate a virtual jazz orchestra. Duet Chains build on the standard, two-video Duet to allow multiple new entrants to add to Duet content by chaining them together ad infinitum. The October 2020 Duet update afforded TikTokers the ability to rearrange the placement of videos in Duet Chains and create vast Duet Mosaics. Duet Chains allow for more complex jams that informants suggested would be difficult to replicate remotely. Ralph, a trombonist who worked professionally as a music teacher and composer, recalled participating in a Duet Chain that:

...was a New Orleans jazz version of ‘When the Saints Go Marching In’. And usually, with that sort of style of New Orleans jazz, it's extremely chaotic. Everyone has their own role to play, but at the same time is doing something completely different and out of their world, you know, showing off their own thing, everyone's sort of battling for, like, dominancy. And that's the thing that can't really be done unless it's in person except for *TikTok* where you're able to Duet like that.

Ralph (@theboneguy)

Jamming on Duet Chains was cited as a key avenue for distributed creativity to manifest on *TikTok*. The concept of distributed creativity builds on what Sawyer terms collaborative emergence (2003). According to this view, creative group processes are likely to arise under circumstances where actions have unpredictable outcomes and subsequent actions are determined by previous actions. In the above example, Ralph stumbled upon a jam in progress and added his trombone part to harmonise with the previous instrumentalists. Any TikToker that found the video after Ralph’s contribution could then harmonise with him or branch off in a new direction. Through collaborative emergence, distributed creative actions are often recontextualized by others and each participant is considered to be contributing equally; as is the case in live improvisational performances (Sawyer & DeZutter 2009). Alex (@alexengelberg), who previously did part-time work as a musical accompanist for an improv

comedy theatre prior to the COVID-19 lockdowns, explained that Duet Jams were a digital embodiment of the “Yes and...” philosophy of live theatrical improvisation, where each new addition contributes to the ongoing performance in unexpected ways. Informants also noted further technical limitations when adding more personnel to Duet Jams. For example, the slight delays noted above became more of a problem in longer Chains. Each subsequent TikTok who joined a jam in progress would need to carefully manage their own delay or risk throwing off the tempo of the whole chain. In addition, one informant described an issue with mixing audio when adding to Duet Chain:

Being able to adjust the volume on the different Duets would be my ultimate change... Even on a big Duet Chain, the original sound is still there. I had one request of TikTok, it would be to change the volumes [of other in the Duet Chain] such that you don't end up with feedback and like crunchy vocals because the volume [of other Duetters] was too loud.

Rachel (@rvmillz)

Communities formed through Duet Jams added a musical component to online social interaction for informants who were confined to their homes. RJ (@rjthecomposer) described TikTok as “the ultimate fusion of social media and content platform,” that allowed him to make new friends and join communities while also sharing his creative musical ideas. Anthony mentioned that he would often jump into a Duet Jam in progress when he saw one or more of his friends who were already participating. Duet Jams helped communities grow each time new faces appeared in the chain. Like Anthony, many informants listed other TikTokers with whom they would frequently Duet, thereby creating remote a musical ensemble with rotating members that would go on to transcend the *TikTok* platform.

JazzTok

The @JazzTokOfficial account is exemplary of musical distributed creativity produced through Duet. It is a collectively managed musical *TikTok* account that was created at the end of 2020. Many informants explained that they had used hashtags like #jazztok, #musictok or #synthtok to connect with like-minded TikTokers or shape the contours of content they encountered while scrolling through the FYP, long before the formation of @JazzTokOfficial. As Kyle explained in response to tagging his own videos:

I probably use more hashtags than I need to but they have been helpful... I don't know how many people found me that way, but I definitely noticed that the hashtags I used influenced the stuff I would see on my own feed.

Kyle (@feloniousskunk)

#JazzTok was a regularly featured hashtag among a group of musical TikTokers who had formed a community through Duet Jams and Chains in the latter half of 2020. Before long, several members had begun to mutually follow each other allowing for more interaction and collaboration on the platform. Like other social media platforms, *TikTok* features an internal messaging feature, Inbox, to send and receive messages between users on the platform. In July 2021, the only way to send messages to other TikTokers was by being ‘mutual’, the platform vernacular for ‘friends’ or two accounts that follow one another. Many members of the

@JazzTokOfficial community had already been mutuals for months and had jammed together in many Duet Chains. According to co-founding member Ben, the official account represented a “sentient jazz hivemind” on *TikTok* that was born in December 2020:

It all started with a live stream. [Lisa] was streaming, and I had never seen her do a live stream before. I don't think I had ever even heard her voice before. And it was her, I think [Gabbi] and [Kyle] and I were in the chat. I remember saying JazzTok is the best Tok. And [Lisa] was like “JazzTok *is* the best Tok... hey I've had this idea. Do you want to start a discord server?” and I was like “YES. That sounds awesome, that's a brilliant idea!” The next morning, I wake up to a notification inviting me to the server. I was the third person; Lisa, Gabbi, and I were the first people. And we just started inviting friends, and they started inviting people and now we've got over one hundred members.

Ben (@bensrightbrain)

The group set up a server on Discord², a separate social messaging platform, and created a new *TikTok* account, @JazzTokOfficial, managed by Ben and soon comprised of dozens of musical TikTokers. The JazzTok founders were not the first to create a collectively managed *TikTok* account. Other prominent examples are ‘*TikTok* house’ accounts co-managed by groups of influencers living together and creating content (Lorenz, 2020). Whereas *TikTok* houses might be formed by marketing or talent management firms, JazzTok emerged independent of outside influence; a group of musicians who got to know each other through repeated Duets. After a few weeks of coordinating and communicating, @JazzTokOfficial posted its first video, a fully orchestrated arrangement of Mariah Carey’s All I Want for Christmas is You³. The video was released on 24 December 2020 and featured several familiar faces among those who used #jazztok in previous Duets (Figure 1).

² <https://discord.com>

³ <https://www.tiktok.com/@jazztokofficial/video/6909535106017316102>



Figure 1. JazzTok's debut performance of All I Want for Christmas is You'⁴

The process of forming JazzTok exposed several technical limitations of *TikTok*. For example, JazzTok ensemble videos are edited together on a third-party platform, not using the Duet function. Ben (@bensrightbrain) outlined the process of making JazzTok videos, which involved skilled use of multiple online platforms to record, merge, and edit video and audio files submitted by a geographically dispersed community of musicians. Everything was sourced within the community but required extra effort outside of the *TikTok* platform, as a co-founding member explained:

TikTok is not good for communities unfortunately, which is what we found out with JazzTok. That's actually, the reason I made JazzTok. *TikTok* is really good for finding people we needed a place where we could talk together in a group and also share stuff. The *TikTok* messaging app is lousy... So, to have a community on *TikTok*, you kind of have to come off of it and go somewhere else.

Lisa (@utzig)

Despite these limitations, the ability to create communities and feel connected via relationships forged on *TikTok* was repeatedly referenced as a silver lining to the COVID-19 pandemic for informants in the JazzTok community. As the third co-founding member, Gabbi, explained,

⁴ Personnel: top: @theboneguy (left), @damoyee (center), @theonlytylerl (right); middle: @bensrightbrain (left), @utzig (center), @joethewolfe (right); bottom: @abedin_saxstuff (left), @ewokbeats (center), @mneufeldmusic (right); not pictured: @caden.ake (saxophone) & @nathaniel_0211 (trumpet). Arranged by @mneufeldmusic. Video by @bensrightbrain.

she was truly surprised by the depth of the relationships she formed with other musicians via JazzTok:

TikTok has brought me a network of people that I would never have met. I've never even been overseas. Knowing that I have a worldwide network of people... It's just nuts and it's even more crazy that it's happened in a time where we literally can't travel. Like it's so unprecedented. I don't mean to make light of COVID, because it's obviously this horrible thing that's been negatively affecting everybody worldwide, but you know, in my head I was like, well, if I'm not gigging, I may as well just do this. It's just brought me so many friendships that I never would've seen coming at all.

Gabbi (@fettuccinefettuqueen)

The JazzTok community grew noticeably during the four-week span of interviews, as evidenced by the Discord server. In early January 2021, the server had around one hundred members, which doubled to over two-hundred-fifty when I concluded interviews in early February. In addition to posting new ensemble pieces arranged and orchestrated by members, @JazzTokOfficial began posting other types of content in the later months of 2021, such as jazz challenge videos⁵ and interviews with core artists⁶. Nodding to its Duet roots, many video call on viewers to “please duet this video” and add their own musical contribution to the JazzTok cloud-based Big Band.

Please Duet This?

In this article, I have described ways in which *TikTok*'s Duet feature has been used by musical TikTokers to create, collaborate, and communicate during COVID-19 lockdowns. Through a case study @JazzTokOfficial, I argue that Duet is an integral feature for distributed creativity on *TikTok*. Informants in this study highlighted several critiques of Duet, which may point to future evolution of Duet, which remains ongoing in July 2021. Regardless of limitations, all eighteen informants fondly recounted spending their time in lockdown learning, sharing, and duetting each other on *TikTok*.

TikTok and Duet had a real, tangible impact on the personal lives and professional careers of informants. All eighteen members of JazzTok spoke about how grateful they were to have made so many new friends to cut through the isolating moments of the pandemic and lockdowns. Informants shared stories of unexpected career developments that emerged through *TikTok*, Duets, and JazzTok. Stacey, a Gen-Z college student in Canada, experienced the process of recording and releasing for the first time guided by Jay, a Gen-X professional musician in the US. Damoyee (@damoyee) and Ebony (@ebonylorenmusic), two independent musicians in early stages of their professional careers, had amassed sizeable followings on *TikTok* and shared strategies to translate their *TikTok* fame into fandoms as they released more music. Adam, a music student, spent the lockdown Duet Jamming with friends for fun but also pointed to many new skills he had picked up in the process that were sure to prove useful in his future career:

⁵ <https://www.tiktok.com/@jazztokofficial/video/6981112930813086982>

⁶ <https://www.tiktok.com/@jazztokofficial/video/6984059245578800390>

I'm excited to really do stuff with the skills that I've been using *TikTok* to practice. I really think that's what it is... practising production, video editing... all of these skills that are going to become really useful... I have *TikTok* to thank for that.

Adam (@adamdorfmannmusic)

The case study of JazzTok has limited generalisability but points to several productive directions for future research. Future work should investigate how the Duet continues to evolve on *TikTok* and on competing short video platforms, such as Instagram Reels, that have integrated their own versions of the feature (e.g. Carman, 2021). Additionally, future work should explore how other *TikTok* features, such as Use This Sound, create unique opportunities for distributed creativity that are distinct from digital platforms like YouTube. Finally, future studies should seek out other musical communities on *TikTok* and elsewhere that formed out of necessity during the COVID-19 pandemic and investigate what happens to those communities in the wake of the pandemic.

The spectre of COVID-19 will likely continue hover over the international music industries for years to come. As the major players scramble to adapt business models, independent artists are proactively finding ways to do what they love and discovering new professional opportunities to make music with others from afar. Given that the interviews were primarily conducted in January, I ended each by asking informants what they were looking forward to in the New Year. They told me they were eager to return to rehearsal spaces, to perform in front of crowds and, above all, to meet up with their JazzTok family in real life:

I'm really excited to deepen some of these friendships I've made. I have been so blessed to be put in a room with so many fantastic people who I know are going to succeed and do great things.

RJ (@rjthecomposer)

Appendix – Interviews

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted in January and February 2021 remotely via Zoom. All informants cited in this study provided informed consent to be named and to include their TikTok account names in publications.

Name	Date	Account	Country
Ebony	12Jan21	@ebonylorenmusic	US
Emerson	14Jan21	@emersonbrophy	Australia
Ben	15Jan21	@bensrightbrain	US
Shout	16Jan21	@vocaloutburst	US
Anthony	18Jan21	@ewokbeats	US
Damoyee	19Jan21	@damoyee	US
Kris	20Jan21	@musixicn_kris_	US
Bri	20Jan21	@souponstarbri	US
Lisa	20Jan21	@utzig	US
Rachel	21Jan21	@rvmillz	US
Adam	21Jan21	@adamdorfmannmusic	US
Jake	21Jan21	@jakedoesmusicsometimes	US
Jay	22Jan21	@jaywebbtrumpt	US
Alex	26Jan21	@alexengelberg	US
Ralph	27Jan21	@theboneguy	US
Stacey	28Jan21	@staceyryanmusic	Canada
RJ	30Jan21	@rjthecomposer	US
Gabbi	4Feb21	@fettuccinefettuqueen	Australia

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