

BEFORE THE BLACKLIST: HOW THE NEW YORK JAZZ COMMUNITY PROMOTED RADICAL  
POLITICS AS AN AGENT OF SOCIAL CHANGE LEADING UP TO THE MCCARTHY ERA

by

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## Abstract

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*Before the Blacklist: How the New York Jazz Community Promoted Radical Politics as an Agent of Social Change Leading Up to the McCarthy Era*

Dissertation directed by Associate Professor John Gunther

As a musical form that is inextricably linked with the story of race in America, jazz has had a long-standing connection to American politics. While the most obvious period of these connections according to the common narrative of jazz history is the Civil Rights era, there are other periods in which jazz and politics have told an equally compelling story. Overlooked by many jazz historians, the important role of radical politics in the jazz of the 1930s and 1940s creates an impressive precursor to the jazz of the 1950s and 1960s in terms of activism, and should be considered a pre-Civil Rights era in jazz and African American political culture.

By examining case studies of Duke Ellington, Hazel Scott, Billie Holiday and Barney Josephson's Café Society, a clearly established community where jazz and radical politics were in constant contact and shared a common ideology centered about civil rights, this document seeks to define a new interpretation of jazz as an agent of social change in concert with the radical politics of Harlem in the 1930s and 1940s.

More than just a socio-political survey, this paper addresses how the aesthetic approaches of these artists may have encouraged their understanding of and alignment with socially progressive thinking and political activity.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Jazz music and American politics have had a long and often unsettled relationship since the origin of jazz in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. There are many possible avenues with which to approach an understanding of how jazz and politics may be linked, as well as different eras in which these links occur. If jazz can be considered as an ever-changing composite of popular music, folk music and art music, it is clear that the relationship between jazz and politics changes depending on which aspect of the music is being considered.<sup>1</sup> As popular music, jazz can function as a commentary on popular culture with a remarkable ability to combine cultural and political observations regarding the nature and role of popular culture in America. Considering jazz as folk music, different perspectives of American culture can be seen in the music, changing as the conditions and experiences of the American people change through political and societal turmoil. As art music, jazz provides the unique opportunity of expressing aspects of the American experience through its American-made rules, forms and conventions, allowing the jazz artist to address and interpret American political activity.

The relationship between jazz and politics is most often seen in the literature as indirect, with artistic endeavor reacting to political circumstances. There is also a more direct relationship where jazz artists strive to use their art and activities to influence American politics. This phenomenon is most often recognized as having occurred during

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<sup>1</sup> This way of interpreting jazz as an American form of music is an apt method by which to consider the breadth and diversity of jazz, and functions well as an introduction to the origins of jazz in DeVeaux, Scott and Gary Giddins. *Jazz*, (New York. W.W. Norton. 2015).

<sup>2</sup> There is a clear combination of reverence and concern with jazz expression in one of the fundamental descriptions of jazz of the jazz age from the African American political perspective in J.A. Rogers' "Jazz at

the Civil Rights era, and to a lesser extent during the Harlem Renaissance. The relationship between jazz activity during the 1930s and 1940s and the distinctly progressive American political climate of that era has very little exposure in the common narrative of jazz.

When considering jazz and American politics, an underlying thread of how race plays into this equation is implicit, and is often perceived in the most overt interpretations. The connections between jazz and political activity during the Harlem Renaissance was largely informed by the New Negro and Black Nationalist movements, where the new African American popular music, colloquially referred to as jazz, was considered by the leaders of those movements simultaneously with contempt as the music of the unsophisticated and with pride as a completely African American form.<sup>2</sup> Much later, during the Cold War and into the Civil-Rights era of the 1950s and 1960s, jazz as political expression had become more direct and expressive of specific political issues, particularly centering on race.

The importance of race in American politics and its relationship to jazz has been readily discussed in relation to the Civil Rights era, defined largely by judicial and legislative milestones, such as *Brown v. Board of Education* of 1954 the Civil Rights Act of 1964. There has also been significant discussion afforded to jazz and politics during the Harlem Renaissance, which is frequently considered as being contemporary with the Jazz Age of the 1920s, and not coincidentally with the earliest decades of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP.) By contrast, the time between these periods has been most often treated in sociological and economic terms

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<sup>2</sup> There is a clear combination of reverence and concern with jazz expression in one of the fundamental descriptions of jazz of the jazz age from the African American political perspective in J.A. Rogers' "Jazz at Home" published in Locke, Alain. Ed. *The New Negro*. New York. Albert and Charles Boni, Inc. 1925. Also see Floyd, Samuel A. Ed. *Black Music in the Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Greenwood Press. 1990.

rather than political ones, focusing on themes such as jazz and the New Deal or jazz and World War II. What has been largely overlooked in the literature is the relationship between jazz, its artists and associates and the political climate of the times. It is no coincidence that the 1930s and 1940s was an era of unprecedented progressive political activity at the national level, which was considered by many as leftist, socialist and in the ultimate manifestation, communist. By assessing and understanding the progressive and often radical political perspectives of some of the most prominent individuals in the field of jazz in this era, we can gain new insight into how jazz has influenced – and been influenced by – liberal politics in the decades leading up to the Civil Rights era. The period between the Harlem Renaissance and the Cold War can be seen as a direct predecessor to the Civil Rights era. This is an historical perspective in direct contrast to a commonly presented theory of the Civil Rights era coming out of an upheaval in American racial politics stemming from influences coming into play only after World War II.

During the Harlem Renaissance, the role of jazz music as a social and political message was mostly integrationist in keeping with the New Negro movement, espoused by African American writers, including the first civil rights activists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, W.E.B. DuBois and James Weldon Johnson, and the more literary focused JA Rogers, Alain Locke and Langston Hughes. These figures, especially Johnson and DuBois, figure prominently in the NAACP, founded in 1909, and through this organization are some of the earliest examples of significant political activism in the area of civil rights for all Americans, regardless of race. Parallel to this movement was the Pan-African approach of Marcus Garvey and his United Negro Improvement Association, which was another significant

movement with political ideas that influenced a large cross section of African American society, particularly those in Harlem.

While there was significant political activity among African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance, the music of the African American community, and particularly jazz, was largely apolitical in terms of musical content. The architects of the Harlem Renaissance were highly selective regarding their acceptance of jazz music as a viable form of expression and even entertainment among African Americans. Many of the leaders of political action in the Harlem Renaissance were vocal in their assessment of jazz as subversive to their endeavors to improve the social conditions for Americans of African descent. In general terms, the concept of the New Negro espoused in these circles focused on racial pride and integration, and many thought of jazz as a vulgar form of music, with little of value that could possibly contribute toward their overarching goals of cultural acceptance in wider American society.

During and after the McCarthy era, we see a clear record of jazz music and musicians with strong political connections calling for social and political change in issues of civil rights. Starting as early as 1948, when President Truman issued Executive Orders 9980 and 9981 mandating desegregation in the military and in the Federal work force, American politics began to be more deeply and directly involved in issues surrounding race. Connections with jazz music during this era were overt, with artists including Max Roach and Charles Mingus producing music in the 1950s that made clear reference to political action in fostering racial equity.<sup>3</sup> Direct political expressions in this music ranged from calls

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<sup>3</sup> Literature on jazz and politics in this era abounds, with standout titles including Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: civil right call out to jazz and Africa*. (New York: Oxford University Press. 2007). and Frank Kofsky, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*. (New York: Pathfinder Press. 1970).



for civil liberties without racial discrimination to explicit indictments of political actions perpetuating the oppressive conditions.

This period from 1948 to 1968 was certainly a peak in the overt relationship between radical politics and jazz expression, but it was not solely a reaction to executive orders, Supreme Court decisions, or even the increase in political activism among African Americans. There is a historical precedent from the previous generations that have extrinsic connections between jazz expression and radical politics, but that can nevertheless be seen as precursors to the jazz music of Civil Rights era. Every part of American culture was influenced by leftist political concerns in the 1930s and 1940s, and the African American population and jazz music is no exception. From New Deal programs to struggles for workers' rights and strong union activity, America was shifting left during this time. Thus, musical expression in the jazz idiom is reflective of this socio-economic position, and was influenced by the positions of left-leaning politics, which were particularly relevant to the African American community, whose members regularly faced discrimination in the workplace.

Although connections between jazz artists and politics in 1930s and 1940s America may not be as apparent to later generations as they were during the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights era, there were significant ties between radical politics and the jazz community of the era. Jazz artists were informed and influenced by radical politics in their musical expression as well as in the arenas in which they presented their music. By focusing on four case studies of artists or scenes in the New York jazz community of this era, these connections become clear and the role of significant jazz artists of the Depression

and World War II eras in radical politics, and as predecessors of those of the Civil Rights era, is amply demonstrated.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

While much has been written about American culture and society as a distinct era from the beginning of the Depression to the end of World War II, there is a paucity of specific research involving jazz music and politics during this era. Most general jazz histories (Ulanov 1952, Schuller 1989, Kirchner 2000, Martin/Waters 2002 and Giddins/DeVeaux 2015) make only vague reference to politics in jazz outside of the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights era. These mainstream texts rarely make reference to McCarthyism and its impact on jazz artists. Even the more progressive jazz histories (Shipton 2007, Gioia 2011) do not adequately address the important relationship between liberal or leftist politics in the African American community and the jazz world between 1930 and 1950.

Books and articles that specialize in jazz concerns of the Depression and War eras only rarely address politics and, even less so, radical politics and communism. Some of the major biographies of icons of these eras, such as Coleman Hawkins, Glenn Miller, Duke Ellington and Charlie Parker (John Chilton 1990, Simon 1974, Tucker 1991, Woideck 1996) mention political activity among jazz artists in passing, but fail to adequately represent the cultural importance of such connections. A handful of authors have taken first steps into building the connections between Depression-era politics as motivating factors in musical creation but were restricted in their research by the lack of openness and candor owing to

the repressive influence of McCarthyism (K. Chilton 2008, Gourse 1997, Shaw 1971, Charters and Kundstadt 1962.)

Two areas outside of music and jazz in American culture have received in-depth focus on the influence of leftist politics on creative expression: literature and the film industry. Because many writers from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) era through the Cold War were involved in communist and socialist causes and were often quite vocal, the literary criticism of the era has an abundance of examples to draw from (Washington 2014, Kelley 1994, Anderson 2001 and Smethurst 1999.) Other cultural figures have played significant roles in the connections between politics and jazz within the period addressed, such as John Hammond, Barney Josephson and Helen Lawrenson, who have provided first hand accounts of these issues (Josephson 2009, Lawrenson 1978, Hammond 1977.)

Just as literary criticism has amply addressed elements of leftist and progressive thought among writers of the 1930s and 1940s, there is a vast collection of historical writing regarding communism in Hollywood leading up to the blacklists that destroyed the careers of many writers, actors and directors in the film industry of the time. Entire books have been dedicated to this connection, much like those found in literary criticism, and many employ a Marxist lens through which to interpret the functions of leftist tendencies in a Hollywood under the control of capitalist big business (Ceplair and Englund 1980, Buhle and Wagner 2002 and 2003.)

An abundance of literature in political history describing radical politics in America during the period under review exists outside the arts and many primary sources from the era highlight the importance of radical politics, particularly in the African American

community. Many texts focusing on specific cultural identities, such as “Black Americans” or residents of Harlem, offer specific examples of the relationship between the Communist Party and social and political issues directly affecting the African American populations of America (Foner and Shapiro, 1991 and Naison 1983.). Primary sources from this period include African American newspapers, such as the *New Amsterdam News*, *Pittsburgh Courier* and *Chicago Defender*. The weekly editions of these publications offer great insight into the regularity with which Communist Party tenets – from issues involving anti-fascism to workers’ rights – are considered, and paint a picture of an oppressed population that is focused on actively striving for equality in a society they helped to build. More dogmatic publications, such as the *Daily Worker* and *New Masses* are sources that demonstrate the commitment the Communist Party USA made to include the African American population in its agenda of elevating the working class and correcting oppressive policies active throughout the US.

There are, in fact, very few documented references to the intersection of jazz and radical politics between 1930 and 1950. Many of these documents figure prominently in the evidence offered below but only constitute chapters or fractions of published books, articles and essays. There are a few sections of biographies that acknowledge Communist Party affiliation among jazz artists, but only in passing and with little contextualization or interpretation of the influence these activities had on the music or the politics (Josephson 2009, Griffin 2001 and 2013, Kernodle 2004.) Two significant chapters from older books address these topics (Stowe 1994, Erenberg 1998), but there is nothing specific to jazz in this period that has been written in the past eighteen years.

The personal letters and autobiographies of artists including Hazel Scott, Duke Ellington, Mary Lou Williams, John Hammond and Barney Josephson confirm that jazz and leftist politics were thoroughly and deeply connected in the 1930s and 1940s.

Interpretation and analysis of the sources listed above demonstrate that the connections between radical politics and jazz in the 1930s and 1940s exerted mutual influence between jazz, writing and political activity. The music of artists such as Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday and Mary Lou Williams expressed ideological parallels to leftist thought while simultaneously informing the leftist writing of authors ranging from Langston Hughes and Richard Wright to Upton Sinclair and Dorothy Parker – all writers published in *New Masses*. Many significant musicians of this era supported leftist causes through appearances at fundraisers and advertisements for progressive programs. The synergy between these two distinct artistic communities was strong, and in spite of statements that contradict this, the jazz musicians of the era were at least tacitly connected to the communist movement in America during this time and more so to leftist politics in general.

Although the jazz music of the Civil Rights era in the 1950s is commonly seen as the defining example of political activity in jazz, the influence and support of the previous era of jazz is rarely regarded as the precursor to jazz in civil rights that it actually was. The 1950s and 1960s being described as the Civil Rights era focused on the social and political issues of the time as the primary factor in defining that era. Contrasting this, the 1930s and 1940s include periods referred to as the Depression, New Deal and World War II eras, designations that focus on economic impact and world relations, reducing societal and political activity to inferences rather than defining aspects of the period. Another factor that has suppressed the understanding and acceptance of the importance of progressive

politics in the 1930s and 1940s – both in jazz and American culture at large - is the effect of the “Red Scare” of the 1950s, elicited by the draconian tactics of the anti-communist movement and represented by the McCarthy-led House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Many artists and activists relinquished and denied any ties to organized progressive, leftist and especially communist sentiment for fear of being included on the blacklists that were prevalent during the McCarthy era.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the Communist Party of the USA consciously included in their policy dialogues how to address “the Negro issue” in the United States. As a folk, art and entertainment medium prominent in the African American community of the era, jazz as an expression of the African American experience is at the center of this issue. Through the case studies of four distinct artists or groups involved in Harlem jazz production of this era, specific and heretofore insufficiently investigated connections between those artists and groups present a jazz community that was intricately connected to communist and socialist political activities. The specific cases of Billie Holiday, Duke Ellington and Hazel Scott and their work during the period under investigation offer a diverse range of connections to radical politics, and their varied positions in jazz history help to balance a view of the complete picture. Before those specific artists are highlighted, however, an analysis of how the artists and other figures in the music industry convened at the Café Society creates a microcosm of how radical politics and cultural endeavors in New York City of the late 1930s were intertwined in creative expression through jazz and political activism.

## CHAPTER 2

### JOHN HAMMOND (1910-1987), CAFÉ SOCIETY AND AMERICAN COMMUNISM

At the beginning of the 1930s, while jazz was practiced by artists of diverse racial and ethnic identities, racial integration on the bandstand was not only uncommon, but in major public performances, unprecedented. Mixed-race recordings had been occurring since the New Orleans Rhythm Kings and Jelly Roll Morton recorded with racially integrated bands as early as 1923, but this was still uncommon by the early 1930s. The merchandizing of recorded jazz music was unofficially racially segregated in many areas, where “race records” were produced for and sold to African Americans in stores and neighborhoods separate from their European American counterparts. The 1930s, however, was the decade in which racial segregation in jazz began to slowly evaporate, and the major figures eliciting this change were predominantly white business owners who had the control, resources and inclination to promote racial integration in jazz. Many of these men were affiliated, either directly or indirectly, with progressive liberal politics and in many cases had relationships of some kind with the American Communist Party.

John Hammond was a white man of privilege, heir to the Vanderbilt fortune and lifelong entrepreneur in the music business. Since his early teens, Hammond had struggled to balance his appreciation for the European classical music his family promoted and the popular music he enjoyed listening to on the radio and in the New York theaters of the 1920s. While attending Hotchkiss prep school in his early teens, Hammond would travel into New York every two weeks for violin lessons and spend the rest of the evening hearing the best live jazz New York had to offer, including artists Bessie Smith, Fletcher Henderson,

Elmer Snowden and Luis Russell.<sup>4</sup> Raised in a politically progressive household, Hammond fought assiduously throughout his life in support of social justice and against oppression and political and economic inequality. In his experience with African American jazz artists in New York, he witnessed undeniable instances of oppression and inequality. In his own words, Hammond characterized the situation: “Usually my involvement in political and social activism resulted from my love for jazz and the people I met who shared that enthusiasm.”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps because of his perspective and first-hand knowledge of the African American community in New York in the 1920s, the single issue that Hammond focused on most intently, especially during the 1930s and 1940s, was equal rights for Americans regardless of color, creed or class. It is not a coincidence that throughout much of the 1930s and 1940s Hammond felt that socialist and communist agendas worked, at least in part, toward similar goals.

After leaving Yale University in his late teens to recuperate from jaundice, Hammond realized the connections he made during his years as a fan of jazz had brought him within close proximity of the music business, and particularly the jazz music of Harlem.<sup>6</sup> Rather than return to school, he decided to establish himself first as a writer for the British music magazine, *Metronome*, which was looking for an American writer who could write about the music of Harlem, to replace their regular correspondent, Herbie Weil, the drummer for Adrian Rollini’s all-white band with no connections in the black jazz community. Hammond’s obvious passion, motivation and close relationship to jazz in

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<sup>4</sup> John Hammond and Townsend, Irving, *John Hammond On Record*, (New York: Penguin Books. 1981). See also Dunstan Prial, *The Producer: John Hammond and the Soul of American Music*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux. 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Hammond, 91.

<sup>6</sup> Hammond, 60. Prial, 28.



Harlem quickly led to his meteoric rise in the music business as a critic, promoter, record producer and impresario. While his first recording session as a producer, featuring pianist Garland Wilson, was generally without impact – and one that Hammond discounts by omitting in his autobiography – his second session as a producer yielded one of the most important recordings of the early 1930s, Fletcher Henderson Orchestra’s “New King Porter Stomp.” This recording was the model for Benny Goodman’s 1935 recording of the same title that legendarily started the swing era. Once ensconced and trusted in the business, Hammond’s first priority was to regularly record mixed-race groups, matching the right players together based on their musical style, rather than non-musical divisions based solely on ethnic identity.

Through Hammond’s close relationships with African American musicians beginning in the early 1930s, he became aware of the social and political activities of African American activists during this time, and saw many parallels to his own political positions. Hammond made a habit of keeping up with African American news items on local and national levels and was a regular reader of African American press such as the *Baltimore Afro-American*, the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*.<sup>7</sup> During this time Hammond was asked to join the board of directors of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a board which, counter-intuitively, included few African American members. Hammond declined the position on the NAACP board, as he was just twenty-one at the time, and knew there were likely more effective ways for him to contribute to the advancement of colored people than to be another white male on a board where few people of African descent found a seat.

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<sup>7</sup> Hammond. 59.

The NAACP was largely run by white progressives who wanted to create social change for African Americans and who managed a membership of African Americans that voted in few as board members until later in the 1930s. As Hammond describes the NAACP in 1932:

Its leadership was predominantly white and liberal. Oswald Garrison Villard, who had just relinquished the editorship of *The Nation* to Ernest Greuning, the Rev. John Haynes Holmes, pastor of the Community Church, and Charles Edward Russell, a founder of the American Socialist Party, now a lively cantankerous elder, were typical of the distinguished white members of the board. There were few Negro directors and working-class blacks had no voice or place anywhere in the organization. The membership were mostly professional: black doctors, lawyers and academics... who were inclined to preserve what status they had by playing Uncle Tom in the presence of whites.<sup>8</sup>

Hammond goes on to qualify that this wasn't to say that the NAACP was an "Uncle Tom" organization, but that they were more cautious about taking aggressive stands for justice than most other activist organizations were. He then compares the NAACP reaction to the Scottsboro, AL case of wrongfully accused and convicted African American young men - a reaction which was decidedly cautious and ineffective - with the reaction of the American Communist Party. While the NAACP deliberated on the most prudent response, the Communist Party, through the International Labor Defense, sent legal counsel for defendants and worked voraciously to have their conviction overturned. This was just one of many examples when communist and socialist organizations took action on their philosophical support of black self-determination in America that was a mandated

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<sup>8</sup> Hammond. 81-82.

component of the America Communist Party platform since 1930.<sup>9</sup> This subsequently led African Americans in all quarters of Negro America to develop sympathies for the communist cause, both for appreciation of assistance with situations like the landmark Scottsboro case and recognizing the Communist Party's support of black nationalism as a solution to racial oppression in America. In effect, these platforms of the Communist Party provided an outside confirmation of some of the proposals of Marcus Garvey and his popular United Negro Improvement Association, which had been discounted by earlier members of the NAACP, among whom can be counted W.E.B. DuBois and James Weldon Johnson.

It was with this kind of understanding and appreciation of the role of leftist politics in affecting social change that Hammond established a career as an influential columnist, critic, producer and promoter of jazz. While never a member of the Socialist or Communist parties, Hammond was a progressive admittedly engaged in leftist political activity. His commitment to social change, particularly around issues involving the African American community, informed his highly influential activities in the promotion of jazz in the 1930s. Three of the most important and far-reaching of these activities included his work with Benny Goodman promoting integrated bands in studio and live performance, the 1938 *Spirituals to Swing* concert Hammond promoted and his subsequent close involvement with the policies – musical and otherwise – at Barney Josephson's Café Society Downtown nightclub, which opened in December 1938.

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<sup>9</sup> Philip Sheldon Foner and Herbert Shapiro, eds. *American Communism and Black Americans: A Documentary History, 1930-1934*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991.

When John Hammond returned to the U.S. from a 1932 tour of Europe with a series of recording contracts with the Columbia Gramophone Company of England, one of the first sessions he produced was a jazz date featuring Benny Goodman. Hammond wanted Goodman to record with Coleman Hawkins, but at that time Goodman was still financially reliant on the patently discriminatory radio and musical theater side of the industry, and rightfully worried about backlash if he recorded with African American musicians. Consequently Goodman's 1932 session included only white players, including Charlie and Jack Teagarden, Artie Bernstein, Gene Krupa and Joe Sullivan. The recordings sold well and prompted American Columbia Records to request another session under Goodman's leadership. This time, however, Hammond was able to convince Goodman to include two African American musicians, a young, relatively unknown singer named Billie Holiday and Don Redman's trumpet player, Shirley Clay. While this recording set no precedent for racially integrated recordings, it was a breakthrough for Benny Goodman in demonstrating to him that he could successfully record with African American musicians without jeopardizing his career opportunities. Hammond's passionate political beliefs regarding social change in favor of greater equity among races yielded direct, discernable actions in the music industry related to increasing civil rights for all Americans, long before there was a defined civil rights movement.

Shortly after the 1933 integrated Benny Goodman sessions, Hammond wrote in the British popular music magazine *Melody Maker* that there were plans for a Summer 1934 European tour by a super band made up of the best white and black American musicians ever assembled. This tour, reportedly to be led by Goodman and including Jack Teagarden, Benny Carter, Chu Berry, Teddy Wilson and Gene Krupa never took place. There had never

been any other evidence that this tour had been planned, and commonly accepted conjecture is that Hammond had made up the tour and then tried to make it happen through force of will.<sup>10</sup> The only other mention in the press of this tour was an October 1934 *Down Beat* article noting that the alleged tour had been cancelled. Hammond's unrelenting drive to foster the first integrated performing ensemble with Benny Goodman as leader finally became reality, although ironically, not directly under Hammond's auspices. Certainly, Hammond had been encouraging Benny Goodman to engage an integrated band for years, but the first public performance of such a band came sooner than even Hammond could have imagined. Booking Goodman for an Easter 1936 concert in for the Chicago Rhythm Club, Helen Oakley asked Goodman if he could bring the trio he had recently recorded with, including Teddy Wilson and Gene Krupa.<sup>11</sup> At first Goodman hesitated, concerned that presenting an integrated band on a highly visible stage might be the undoing of his recently found popularity that had come as a result of his *Let's Dance* radio show tour the previous summer – the same tour that is said to have been the beginning of the swing era. Goodman ended up accepting the invitation and the prodding by Hammond for Goodman to put together an integrated band was justified by the positive audience response and lack of backlash for this breakthrough in racial barriers of the time in jazz. This single performance set the precedent for a future quartet with Lionel Hampton added that is generally listed as the first fully integrated regularly performing jazz ensemble.

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<sup>10</sup> Prial. Also Ross Firestone, *Swing, Swing, Swing: The Life & Times of Benny Goodman*, 1st ed., (New York: Norton, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Prial and Firestone.

John Hammond's promotion of the 1938 *Spirituals to Swing* concert at Carnegie Hall is a common part of the jazz history narrative as it conveniently places swing era jazz within the African American musical tradition going back to times before jazz was codified. With this single event (and the second follow up concert a year later) a textbook of limited scope can address how spirituals influenced jazz and was reintroduced to the American public and how the boogie-woogie craze of the 1940s was ignited by the introduction of Pete Johnson, Albert Ammons and Meade Lux Lewis at the concert. This event also underscores the importance of a rare concert featuring African American performers at establishment-focused Carnegie Hall represented a changing social climate that related to jazz and American Popular music. What most of these textbooks that cover the basic jazz narrative neglect is that Hammond secured sponsorship for this program from *New Masses*, a popular monthly literary magazine with a decidedly Marxist perspective.

While Hammond may not have been a card-carrying communist nor did he identify as a communist sympathizer, he understood that the communist platform was in active support of social change that focused, in part, on solutions to the oppression and discrimination against people of color in America. In fact, the Comintern (Communist International) through policy established by its governing arm, the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI), was in favor of a separate, self-determined black nation, based on areas of the south where, if voting blocs were redrawn, African Americans would have a clear majority.<sup>12</sup> The Comintern believed in a theoretical separate nation of black Americans that could create systems of government and justice that would be in their own interests, instead of the current situation where the ruling southern agrarian capitalist

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<sup>12</sup> Philip Sheldon Foner and Herbert Shapiro, eds., *American Communism and Black Americans: A Documentary History, 1930-1934*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 36-37.

system was engaged in governing in such a way as to keep the oppressed classes out of a position of self-determination. John Hammond was not a supporter of the segregationist approach to improving conditions for African Americans, but he was certainly sensitive to the systematic oppression of underrepresented minorities the communist perspective was committed to replacing.

*New Masses* was resplendent with articles and stories aimed at anyone interested in promoting social change that favored equality and social justice for African Americans. These articles included surveys of Negro folk songs, work songs, short stories and plays by known activists for increased Negro rights, including communist party members Erskine Cleaver, William Patterson and Langston Hughes, as well as articles written by Hammond himself, under the pseudonym Henry Johnson.<sup>13</sup> Clearly, the Marxists/Communists in America were looking to recruit African Americans to their cause, and justifiably felt they had a shared investment in the overthrow of the capitalist system in America.<sup>14</sup> That the role of the *New Masses* and consequently the American Communist Party in one of the premiere jazz events of the 1930s is not merely underplayed, but virtually ignored in most of the written histories of jazz is indicative of a post-McCarthy anti-communist sentiment that has been pervasive in the US since the late 1940s.

John Hammond was undeniably influential in the New York jazz world of the 1930s and 1940s and his political perspectives were largely informed by his work with African American jazz musicians. These have been elements of the John Hammond story that are generally part of the common narrative of jazz. The important role of radical politics, in the

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<sup>13</sup> Prial. 110.

<sup>14</sup> *New Masses* magazine issues are available in digital form from various sources. The first eight volumes are available with color covers here: <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/new-masses/#j32> (accessed 1 Jan 2016)

form of Comintern policies, Marxist magazines and the intersection of shared ideals between communists, socialists and African American jazz musicians have been left out of the message in a nearly wholesale fashion. The depiction of John Hammond within the history of jazz in a selective context that excludes the very important and informative connection to radical politics is an attribute shared with one of the most important New York jazz venues of the late 1930s into the 1940s, Barney Josephson's Café Society.

### **BARNEY JOSEPHSON (1902-1988) AND CAFÉ SOCIETY**

Around the time John Hammond was planning the first *Spirituals to Swing* concert in 1938, a former colleague of his from a stretch as a journalist for the *Brooklyn Eagle*, Sam Shaw approached Hammond with a request to help Shaw's friend, Barney Josephson. Josephson was starting a new club in Greenwich Village with a purpose and policy Shaw knew Hammond would appreciate. Shaw suggested to Hammond that he meet with Josephson to offer himself as something of a musical advisor for the new club. While Josephson was a fan of jazz and had heard it develop in New York over the past decade and a half, he had neither the contacts nor the understanding of public opinion that Hammond had been developing throughout the 1930s. Josephson also had a political and social perspective that was in keeping with Hammond's own belief system, and the two immediately became strong business partners and supporters of one another.

A former business owner in the shoe industry New Jersey, Barney Josephson had been forced out of business during the depression and was working as a clerk in a former employee's store. During the height of his business success, Josephson was a regular at many of the New York nightclubs that featured jazz during the late 1920s and early 1930s.



Josephson had gotten into jazz at a young adult through an interest in the concept of Negro liberation, a Marxist ideal prominent in the early 1920s, and through that interest came a desire to explore and develop a passion for jazz.<sup>15</sup> Raised in an immigrant Jewish family, Josephson had little tolerance for racial and ethnic oppression and discrimination and was deeply affected at nearly every turn by the outrages he witnessed in Harlem. Aside from his displeasure at the role organized crime had in running many of the significant New York jazz clubs of the 1930s, Josephson recalled his utter disgust with the environment and policies of the Cotton Club in Harlem:

The name *Cotton Club* alluded to the slaves toiling in cotton fields down South; its jungle décor with artificial palm trees, a travesty. All their entertainers were Negro, but no Negro customers were allowed in the place. Duke Ellington couldn't have his mother come in to hear him play... The bandstand remained segregated. Black and white musicians were not allowed to perform together. Well, all of this outraged me.<sup>16</sup>

In 1938, while Josephson was working at his former employee's shoe store, his brother Leon secured \$6000 in loans and suggested that he fulfill his dream of correcting many of the social ills he had seen in New York nightlife by opening his own club. With no experience in the restaurant or nightclub business, Barney found a building in Greenwich Village, where the rents were cheap, and set out to create a venue for entertainment where his own social values of community, respect for diversity and equal opportunity for all could be the driving force in the institutional policies. By the time he opened the club, he was already \$18,000 in debt, but he was running the kind of business he'd always wanted,

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<sup>15</sup> Josephson, Barney, and Terry Trilling-Josephson, *Cafe Society: The Wrong Place for the Right People*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 7.

<sup>16</sup> Josephson. 8.

where the bands and audiences were completely integrated, which also attracted a very liberal – and often activist and radical – audience. In promoting the new club, Josephson liked to refer to it as “the wrong place for the Right people,” playing on the political and social attitudes of the glamorous café society set, well-heeled and conservative society figures who actively sought out urban adventures in nightclubs of Harlem and uptown New York – *not* the kind of audience he was seeking. In fact, Josephson settled on the name Café Society, suggested by *Vanity Fair* columnist and self-identified communist sympathizer Helen (Norden) Lawrenson.<sup>17</sup> The Café Society was to be a new kind of club, where the entertainers were paid a fair wage and all audiences were welcome regardless of race or ethnicity.

Josephson took the theme of anti-bourgeois rhetoric seriously, which was humorously and scathingly reflected in the murals he commissioned for his new club. Again with the help of Sam Shaw, the same man who introduced Josephson to John Hammond, he identified some of the best muralists and illustrators of the era with leftist tendencies. All of these men had been working as Roosevelt-sponsored Works Progress Administration (WPA) artists, creating public works on commission from the federal government. Artists including lithographer Adolf Dehn, magazine illustrators Sam Berman, Syd Hoff and John Groth and painters Gregor Duncan, Anton Refregier and William Gropper created huge murals for the venue featuring unflattering depictions of the café society set that emphasized their absurdity and symbolically the inherent ugliness of capitalism and greed.<sup>18</sup> Like much of the WPA art of the era, these works were done in a style

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<sup>17</sup> Josephson, 27, and Helen Lawrenson, *Whistling Girl: Candid Confessions of a Chameleon*, (Garden City: Doubleday and Co. 1978), 86.

<sup>18</sup> Josephson. 25-26.

commensurate with what is commonly referred to as Marxist art of the 1930s, most famously represented in many of the works of Diego Rivera. Bright colors emphasized a cartoon-like whimsy that pointed out societal flaws, as culminated in the US in the Depression of the 1930s. Josephson contracted each of these artists to produce large murals that mocked the bourgeoisie of New York's café society with juxtaposition of animal heads on human bodies in evening wear. While Josephson made it clear that content was at the discretion of each artist, it was clear to all what the general tenor of the venue was going to be, and Josephson certainly didn't veto any of the incendiary representations of the New York upper class.

### **CAFÉ SOCIETY AND COMMUNISM**

Helen Lawrenson, at the time a columnist for both *Vanity Fair* and *Esquire*, later claimed that Café Society was established from the very beginning to raise money for the Communist Party and that her involvement as publicist for the club was prompted by Earl Browder, the then head of the American Communist Party.<sup>19</sup> While Barney Josephson's own autobiography excludes any mention of Browder or specific communist ties, there is no question that the general political sensibilities of the patrons, performers and management of the club, including Josephson, were decidedly left wing, and strongly focused on social consciousness and justice issues. Josephson intended from the beginning to have a cabaret with a social and political message, and jazz was the music he felt would best express that message. As he reportedly told John Hammond when they first discussed the programming at Café Society, " Well, first, it's going to be a nightclub that has something

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<sup>19</sup> Lawrenson. 85.

to say, and we're going to have Negro and white talent working together. The talent and the musicians will be integrated. I want fresh, unknown talent. In addition to that, I will invite the Negro public in as patrons."<sup>20</sup> Café Society was the first New York venue that promoted jazz and political activism, combining the music of the city with comedic intermission acts performing political and social satire of the highest order, including performances by MC Jack Gifford and the first professional engagement of satirist Zero Mostel, who was an avowed communist and later became one of the more famous targets of the Red Scare and the actions of the House UnAmerican Activities Committee.

There is no disagreement among primary sources such as Josephson, Lawrenson and Hammond, or the biographers of jazz pianists Hazel Scott and Mary Lou Williams and singer Paul Robeson, that the political climate at the Café Society was at the very least left-leaning, most likely in support of the communist-affiliated Harlem Popular Front and in many cases supportive of causes in direct relationship to the American Communist Party. Frequently listed patrons of the nightclub include noted communist sympathizers, or "fellow travelers" Paul Robeson, Langston Hughes, Abel Meeropol, Lillian Hellman and many more. Café Society had the distinction of being the first club in New York City that regularly hosted both truly integrated audiences as well as outspoken members of the political left. Whether Josephson was active in the Communist Party is moot, as he clearly held political beliefs and convictions around the issues of racial equality and social justice that were in tandem at the time with the political left. Contemporary analysis of political activity of the 1930s and 1940s often neglects to recognize that the platforms and politics of FDR-style socialism were not very distant from the American Communist Party. In fact,

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<sup>20</sup> Josephson. 13-14.

in November of 1944, after Josephson had opened a second Café Society (Uptown), one of his artists, Mary Lou Williams, was involved in the FDR Bandwagon reelection tour that was sponsored by the Communist Political Association led by record executive Moe Asch.<sup>21</sup>

Another target of the anti-communist investigations into Café Society was the political affiliation of Barney Josephson's brother Leon, who had always been interested in radical theories regarding the dangers of unbridled capitalism and considered himself a Marxist, but had never expressed fidelity to the Communist Party. He was most emphatically an anti-fascist, and in a remarkable account related by Barney, Leon was reportedly involved in a failed assassination attempt of Adolph Hitler in Denmark in 1935 and arrested for related actions. This took place before many European countries had come to terms with the depths of Hitler's depravities that would become apparent over the next few years. Leon never sought affiliation with any political party after his incarceration in Denmark and the Comintern completely disassociated with him, but he was forever a marked man, which reflected on Barney. Once anti-communist activities in the US dominated national interest to a level of paranoia the influence and power wielded by Congressmen on the House Un-American Activities Committee, such as McCarthy, Nixon and HUAC Chair, J. Parnell Thomas made any old ties to radical politics dangerous. By the time the Red Scare had become an accepted component of the Cold War in America bordering on national hysteria, anybody involved in political activities on the left was patently suspect, and Barney Josephson was no different.

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<sup>21</sup> Tammy L. Kernodle, *Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams*. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 102.

## **BILLIE HOLIDAY (1915-1959) AND “STRANGE FRUIT”**

The relationship between John Hammond and Barney Josephson yielded many important musical events, but perhaps no single event was more important, musically or politically, than the introduction of Billie Holiday to a wider audience via Café Society through one of her most iconic and politically meaningful songs, “Strange Fruit.” As Josephson relates the story of “Strange Fruit” in his autobiography, he first showed Holiday the song having acted as liaison between the composer, Abel Meeropol (writing under the pen name Lewis Allen), and the singer.<sup>22</sup> Meeropol was a poet and songwriter, and was also an outspoken proponent of communist solutions to the negative effects of capitalism and systematic oppression of ethnic minorities in America.<sup>23</sup> Meeropol had apparently heard that Café Society was a venue with a political perspective he shared and that there might be a performer there interested in singing his song with a strong anti-lynching message, which he had recently written and had performed in leftist circles. Meeropol approached Barney Josephson with the song shortly after Café Society opened, and recognizing the potential power of the song solely from the lyrical content, Josephson suggested it to Billie Holiday. The song quickly became Holiday’s closing number, and Josephson helped Holiday present the song and the message to maximum effect.

Josephson insisted that Holiday save the song as her last encore, and that she perform it with a single spotlight on her face only. While Holiday came to Café Society from a recommendation by John Hammond, Josephson had taken charge of how to present her at

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<sup>22</sup> Josephson, 46.

<sup>23</sup> Nancy Kovaleff Baker, “Abel Meeropol (a.k.a. Lewis Allan): Political Commentator and Social Conscience,” *American Music* 20/1 (2002), pp. 25–79.

the Cafe Society. He chose Teddy Wilson as her accompanist and decided on how many songs she would perform in each set. Josephson mandated that she only sing three or four songs, leaving at least three for encores, and ultimately saving “Strange Fruit” as her last song. The emotional and political ramifications of the song combined with Holiday’s deeply personal and poignant reading of both the lyrics and the melody with her inimitable method of back-timed phrasing made Holiday’s subsequent recordings of “Strange Fruit” one of the most important songs in the jazz repertory. “Strange Fruit” is perhaps *the* most important jazz song of the repertory in terms of conveying a focused political and social message. It appeared during a time when lynching was still a sadly common reality among African Americans living in the South. One’s stance on anti-lynching legislation at the state and federal level served as something of a litmus test for politicians at the time., “Strange Fruit” represented of a point of entry into the world of radical politics that suffused Café Society. Barney Josephson created an event out of the performance of “Strange Fruit” that was as much visual as oral, and considered each performance a work of “agitprop”, a political theater to oppose lynching.<sup>24</sup>

As Café Society gained ever-increasing notoriety as both a venue for fine, authentic jazz performance and a destination for fellow travelers in the leftist movement, it became a ready target for anti-communist attacks. In the late 1940s as the Cold War intensified, anti-communist sentiment increased dramatically. Ideas once seen as politically viable extensions of the New Deal attitude and policies met growing disdain and distrust. Both John Hammond and Barney Josephson were under surveillance by J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI, but they were ultimately affected by the blacklisting of the early 1950s in very different

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<sup>24</sup> David Margolick, *Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Café Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights*. (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2000), 49.

ways. John Hammond, while assumed to be a fellow traveler and communist sympathizer – an attribution he never denied – was also vocal in his criticism of many aspects of the Communist Party. He admired its idealism and commitment, but he took issue with some of its core principles.<sup>25</sup> Because of his public disagreement with many communist talking points and despite his sympathy with the party on the race issue, any investigation on the part of the FBI or the HUAC was minimal. Hammond's unwillingness to "name names" to the HUAC was tempered by his status as a rich white man with all the privileges of upper class society in urban America and he never had any significant consequences from the FBI or the HUAC. While he reports in his autobiography that he testified to the FBI in the 1950s that he never was, never considered and never would become a member of the Communist Party, and offered specific examples of his rationale, he was involved in many benefit concerts that supported causes directly linked to communism, such as the Russian War Relief Inc., American Council on Soviet Relations and the National Committee for People's Rights.<sup>26</sup> These concerts also including many of the biggest names in jazz of the day such as Duke Ellington, Coleman Hawkins, Count Basie and Benny Goodman as well as many performers from Café Society including Hazel Scott, Albert Ammons, Pete Johnson, Teddy Wilson and Frank Newton. Despite Hammond's position as a liaison between these musicians and the communist sponsors of these events, the combination of his pedigree and his outright disavowal of the Communist Party protected him from significant harm comparable to the blacklisting that affected many figures in both Hollywood and New York during the 1950s. Barney Josephson was not so lucky.

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<sup>25</sup> Prial. 153.

<sup>26</sup> Hammond. 311.



As the proprietor of Cafe Society, Barney Josephson was put under great scrutiny by the FBI, the HUAC and most importantly by the New York public who were his prospective patrons. Josephson's concept of the nightclub as the "wrong place for the Right people" was symbolically a slap in the face of the politically conservative players on the home front during the Cold War, including J. Edgar Hoover and his FBI agents, Senator Joe McCarthy and the entire House Un-American Activities Committee. Barney Josephson openly criticized the capitalist system, the bourgeoisie and the growing conservatism in America by promoting satire and racial integration as prominent features of how he managed Café Society. The ultimate demise of both of his Cafe Society clubs, however, came about as a result of his brother Leon's conviction of contempt of Congress charges from the mid-1940s. During his trial, Leon had invoked the Fifth Amendment when asked about his work with anti-fascist causes and his communist ties, which prompted the contempt charge. In the court of public opinion, largely informed by the conservative press, Leon's actions combined with Barney's pattern of promoting ideologies associated with radical politics to frame Barney as a radical himself. Barney wouldn't publicly counter Leon's positions of actions, nor would he disavow communism as a viable political perspective.

Once Barney Josephson made it clear through his actions - and inactions - that he was still a supporter of radical political action and was not going to cower under the pressure of growing Cold War anti-communist aggression, the end of his career as a nightclub proprietor was near. While he was still trying to book the best jazz acts available in New York at both of his locations during the mid-1940s, he was an early victim of the blacklisting that would later become more widespread. Henceforth, any artists performing at Josephson's clubs were tagged as being on the wrong side of the political street. Local

and national journalists working for conservative publishers such as Conde Nast and Hearst conglomerates were instructed by their publishers to only write negative reviews or reports on activities associated with Josephson and his clubs. One writer for *Life* magazine who was a frequent patron of Cafe Society and friend of Josephson's was told by his editor to investigate a tip that there was a back room at the uptown location where Russian spies passed information to each other.<sup>27</sup> Through the mid-1940s Josephson was relentlessly attacked in the press for completely fabricated ties to Soviet Russia and insinuations that colored the truth in the most libelous ways. In 1947 due to lack of business, Josephson closed Cafe Society Uptown and less than two years later closed the downtown location.

By 1950 the blacklisting of Barney Josephson was complete, and the press in New York continued to taunt Barney Josephson for his political convictions and association with radical politics and the fight to end segregation. In her nationally syndicated column *Voice of Broadway*, Dorothy Kilgallen reviewed the new club that replaced the Cafe Society Uptown location by eviscerating Josephson's politics: "Last night the beautiful La Directoire opened on the site of the former Cafe Society, Communist-line night club. No longer will you have to enter these beautiful portals to the strains of the Red Army marching song played by Teddy Wilson."<sup>28</sup> Just as entertainers disavowed their relationships with Paul Robeson based on his political convictions, artists began disassociating with Barney Josephson primarily in an attempt to protect themselves from the ravages of the blacklist.

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<sup>27</sup> Josephson. 239.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Josephson. 253.

### CHAPTER 3

#### DUKE ELLINGTON (1899-1974)

Long seen as a relatively mainstream and apolitical figure, Duke Ellington may appear to be an unlikely case study as a jazz artist involved in political activism before 1950. In fact, many aspects of Ellington's professional and artistic life border on the political, particularly during the years of World War II. While not overtly secretive in most cases, Ellington did little to publicize his deep interest in aspects of African American history related to revolt and how to change the rigid white power structure in America, just as he deemphasized his devout faith as a core component of his identity. His contributions as a performer to numerous benefit events for causes that were closely related to and in many cases supported by the Communist Party are but one aspect of Ellington's involvement in leftist political activity. When his programmatic works addressing the situation of African Americans throughout time – from “Black and Tan Fantasy”, “Symphony in Black”, “My People” and “Ebony Rhapsody” to the recognized pinnacle of his work in this genre, “Black, Brown and Beige” – are reviewed and analyzed under a Marxist lens, the recurrent themes of the oppressed worker and an existing capitalist power structure in a highly segregated and discriminatory society take on new meaning.

Race is usually and understandably the dominant issue in analysis of the content of Duke Ellington's programmatic works in this way. The question of racial oppression is at least one focal point in many of these works, an issue owing largely to the institutionalized power differential American capitalism has benefitted from over centuries in the form of slavery, where the Americans of African descent were an oppressed underclass at the

hands of a super-bourgeoisie, the agrarian plantation owners of the American Antebellum South. Ellington himself was a student of slave revolt, although this was an interest of his he rarely publicly acknowledged. According to journalist Richard Boyer of the *New York Times*, Ellington was fascinated by the stories of Nat Turner and Denmark Vessey and their early examples of activism, through systematic and violent uprising.<sup>29</sup> In turn, the narratives Ellington employed throughout much of his programmatic work took up issues of class oppression as much as racial ones, but their militant tone is veiled just enough to avoid overt condemnation of the established music industry players, whether promoter, producer, critic or the institutions as a whole.

*Black and Tan Fantasy* was focused on the fallacy of integrated entertainment in New York during the 1920s. Although the Cotton Club was the Ellington Orchestra's home base for the years between 1927 and 1933 and ultimate source of national celebrity through syndicated radio broadcasts hosted by the establishment, the venue still applied the 'brown paper bag rule' in hiring dancers, and prohibited staff of African descent from mingling with the white patrons.<sup>30</sup> In the "soundie" version of *Black and Tan Fantasy*, the female protagonist, played by Freddie Washington, is forced by the theater boss to dance herself to death for the benefit of the paying audience. The symbolism here can be interpreted in two distinct ways. In one, the boss is the overseer, forcing his 'slave' to toil to her own detriment for his own benefit. Through a socialist lens, this is a scenario that institutional socialism and communism would work to eradicate by taking power away

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<sup>29</sup> Richard Boyer, "The Hot Bach" in *The Duke Ellington Reader*. Mark Tucker, ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>30</sup> The "brown paper bag rule" was demeaning policy that was known throughout the African American community, the brown paper bag rule determined eligibility to perform in a stage show based upon a dancer's complexion being visibly lighter than a brown paper bag when held up to their face.

from the higher classes and promoting social ownership with democratic control of all decisions. In another interpretation, the focus would be on the band who witnesses the oppression of the dancer, knowing she is in trouble but unable to take action for fear of losing their own livelihood if they stand up to the boss. Symbolically, Ellington has presented a scenario that does not call for social change directly, but emphatically points out some of the significant evils of the prevailing system of capitalism and governmental acquiescence to that system. While the characters of the musicians are passive, the message is clearly intended to evoke the ire of an African American community who has seen this scenario unfold in a wide range of industries and in this way is leaning toward a militancy that Ellington had read about in the slave revolts of the previous century.

### **BLACK, BROWN AND BEIGE**

Throughout the 1930s, Duke Ellington had made repeated reference to a planned large scale composition that was designed to reflect "...the experiences of the colored races in America in the syncopated [musical] idiom."<sup>31</sup> Rather than making a series of overt statements to accompany this composition, Ellington followed his stated dictum that "I think a statement of social protest in the theatre should be made without saying it," hence relying on allegory and innuendo.<sup>32</sup> When Ellington finally premiered the work at a 1943 Carnegie Hall concert - his first concert in that illustrious venue with a very short history of featuring African American performers - the programmatic piece was listed in the program as *Black, Brown and Beige: A Tone Parallel to the History of the American Negro*. It is no

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<sup>31</sup> Brent Hayes Edwards, "The Literary Ellington" in O'Meally, Robert G., et. al., eds. *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 338.

<sup>32</sup> Edwards. 343.

accident that this particular performance was staged as a benefit for Russian War Relief, a cause that was readily accepted during the war against fascism of the early 1940s, but was later considered an Un-American endeavor during the Cold War. Performed without detailed program notes, the three-movement suite was through-composed with sections detailing the three specific periods of the Africans once transported to North America: slavery, fighting for American values in the revolutionary, civil and world wars, and the current period, with a focus on “the people of Harlem, and all the little Harlems around the USA.”<sup>33</sup>

During the first performances, at Carnegie Hall and in subsequent concerts in other Northern cities, Ellington provided narrated introductions to each movement, describing the periods about to be represented, and in many instances offered thinly veiled references to the oppression that was a part of the African American experience regardless of era, and was continuing even at the time of the concert. Ellington recounts these descriptive narrations in his autobiography, *Music is My Mistress*, published in 1973. He describes the first, “Black” section as being set in times of slavery, creating a link between the work song and the spiritual. Ellington was a vocally pious and devoutly religious man throughout his career, and in 1943 social conditions compelled him to make a connection between sacred music and the music in the fields, or the music of the proletariat. His narration is full of imagery and double meanings that can clearly be interpreted through a socialist perspective as it details the myriad of ways in which the disenfranchised laborers during and immediately following slavery were kept in their place as the workers without any kind of control or authority in the system they supported through their labor. The situation

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<sup>33</sup> Duke Ellington, *Music Is My Mistress*. (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1973), 182.

Ellington reflects in each section of *Black, Brown and Beige* has a keen focus on the oppression and resilience of African Americans as a people with a distinct heritage and history.

The “Brown” section of the suite is focused on the various wars in which African Americans fought and gave their lives for without the benefit of equal representation once the fighting was over. This section had significant contemporary implications regarding World War II, where the “Double V” campaign was promoted among African American communities, sought victory for soldiers of color abroad against a foreign enemy and victory at home against the discrimination and segregation those same soldiers were subject to. In the “West Indian Dances” section Ellington represented a celebration of colored soldiers, including many escaped slaves from Haiti, who aided in the defense of Savannah from Spanish invaders. Here again Ellington used musical allegory to point out the inconsistencies of asking people of color to fight only to be denied their rights at home after the war had ended. There are no literal depictions of military scenes here, but in Ellington’s narration and in later writings about the meaning behind *Black, Brown and Beige* there are certainly scenarios that question the status quo and criticize a society that would stand for such inequities.

The “Beige” movement of the suite featured a narration from Ellington at the premiere that is the most directly critical of the race situation in America. Described by Ellington, the separate section of the “Beige” movement expresses a new dignity for the African American, a search for inclusion in sophisticated American society, tempered by, as Barry Ulanov interpreted Ellington’s narrative, “... the shouts of the underfed and poorly

clothed and miserably housed.”<sup>34</sup> Describing this section in retrospect, Ellington pointed out that the African Americans in New York at the time were “rich in experience and education,” but short on opportunity; he stated that at the time, forty two African Americans working as Red Caps at Grand Central Station held PhD’s, but were not able to put their advanced training to use and fulfill their potential.<sup>35</sup> Thus, each of the sections of *Black, Brown and Beige* employs the jazz musical idiom in an idiosyncratic Ellington style to represent the plight of working African Americans without any kind of agency in an American society they were instrumental in building. One of the fundamental tenets of socialism, “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs,” is reflected in Ellington’s promotion of the working class to a position of control, authority and partnership in the endeavors for which they toil.

Adding further weight to the importance of the worker in these stories of the African American experience from the mind of Duke Ellington is the unpublished scenario for an unfinished opera, *Boola*, which was the basis for much of the story and representation found in *Black, Brown and Beige*.<sup>36</sup> The main character of the “Work Song” scenario, Boola is a laborer forced to toil for a white master and is represented in a way that parallels the Marxist vision of the suffering and disenfranchised proletariat. The musical imagery of the scenario while Boola sang his work songs combined the backbreaking labor of slave life with a desire to ease his master’s conscience and hide his true desire for revolt and ultimately freedom. The lines from the scenario “The silent slave is a brooding slave / a brooding slave is a dangerous slave... so SING, you black bastards,

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<sup>34</sup> Brian Priestley and Cohen, Harvey G. “Black, Brown and Beige” in Tucker, Mark, and Duke Ellington, eds. *The Duke Ellington Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. 199.

<sup>35</sup> Ellington. 182.

<sup>36</sup> Cohen. 1012.



SING!” show how even music is under control of the master in the slavery system.<sup>37</sup> The theme of a smoldering militant discourse pervades just under the surface of many selections of *Black, Brown and Beige* and is emphasized by a reading of the scenario, which only came to light posthumously.<sup>38</sup>

### **JUMP FOR JOY, DEEP SOUTH SUITE AND BEGGAR’S HOLIDAY**

There are many other major works of Duke Ellington that demonstrate what he referred to as “social significance-thrust” and can be seen as promoting, what at the time, were radical political ideals of complete racial integration and the end of racial stereotypes. From the 1941 musical *Jump for Joy* to the 1947 multi-movement *Beggar’s Holiday*, Ellington imbued many of his major, long form works with strong pro-worker messages as well as promoting a class equality that was anathema to the capitalist big business system. Equally striking, Ellington’s *Deep South Suite* provided veiled commentary on anti-miscegeny laws and the pervasive prevalence of lynchings still happening in the south. These are just three examples of a myriad of works Ellington produced in the 1930s and 1940s that lend credence to a relatively uncommon view of Ellington as a political activist long before the Civil Rights era.

The “Sun-Tanned Revu-sical” *Jump for Joy* was the first legitimate Broadway-style show created and produced entirely on the West Coast, and was the brainchild of a group of writers who were intent on correcting “...the race situation in America, through a form of

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<sup>37</sup> Cohen. 1014.

<sup>38</sup> Duke Ellington, *Black, Brown and Beige*, undated typescript 8. Duke Ellington Collection, series 4: Scripts, box 3, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

theatrical propaganda.”<sup>39</sup> A series of sketches, with Ellington as primary composer and on-stage bandleader, *Jump for Joy* presented stories that depicted the end of a Jim Crow America and promoted racial harmony and an end to discrimination and hatred. The first act closed with a number called “Uncle Tom’s Cabin is a Drive-In Now,” but the opening of the second act, “I’ve got a Passport From Georgia (and I’m Going to the U.S.A.)” was too controversial even for this show and had to be cut. While Ellington wrote only the music for this production, he was involved in this show, with its strong and potentially incendiary social and political implications because it was known he believed in the underlying meaning of the show as a whole. Though *Jump for Joy* was ahead of its time and never became a commercial success, it was another instance of Ellington leveraging his national fame to promote political and social change through his art rather than oratory. It is telling that in a 1960 interview, when asked why Ellington hadn’t made a statement on civil rights in America like many other jazz artists in the late 1950s, Ellington replied, “I made my statement in 1941 in *Jump for Joy* and I stand by it.”<sup>40</sup> *Jump for Joy* was also deeply important for Ellington because it served as the impetus for his tour agent, William Morris, Jr., to implore Ellington to write his own major long-form work for a Carnegie Hall performance, thus prompting what became *Black, Brown and Beige* as well as the first of a series of Ellington’s Carnegie Hall concerts throughout the 1940s.<sup>41</sup>

Where *Jump for Joy* was much more overt in its expression of a radical perspective toward racial strata in America, two subsequent long form works from 1946 and 1947 are

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<sup>39</sup> Ellington. 175.

<sup>40</sup> Charles Melville, interview with Duke Ellington on BBC Network 3, quoted in Graham Lock, *Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton*. (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999) 95.

<sup>41</sup> Ellington. 181.

generally considered to be more in keeping with Ellington's implicit "approach to protest", *Deep South Suite* and the musical production of *Beggar's Holiday*.<sup>42</sup> *Deep South Suite* was a four movement long form work written for the 1946 Carnegie Hall concert, which Ellington included because, "By now, a major work was expected of us at every Carnegie Hall concert, and on November 23, 1946, we came up with *The Deep South Suite*."<sup>43</sup> With movement titles "Magnolias Just Dripping with Molasses" and "There Was Nobody Looking" to describe purely instrumental music, this long form piece from 1946 qualifies as providing a message "without saying it." While the music was instrumental, it is clear from later explication by both Ellington and by his son Mercer that the message was strong and specific.<sup>44</sup> The title "Magnolias Just Dripping with Molasses" was taken from a line in *Jump for Joy* that criticized white representations of black life in the south.<sup>45</sup> Mercer Ellington went so far as to characterize all four movements of *Deep South Suite* as "satirical and bitter,"<sup>46</sup> and the entirety of *Deep South Suite* conjures thinly disguised images of a Jim Crow south, where Ellington consistently had trouble finding suitable accommodations and hospitality for his touring bands.

*Beggar's Holiday* was produced within a year of the Carnegie Hall concert that premiered *Deep South Suite*, and Ellington's deep personal beliefs about integration throughout American society are evidenced in his involvement in the production.<sup>47</sup> In scoring the music for this production, Ellington could thoroughly present his position on integration without having to stand at a podium and verbally express his beliefs, which

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<sup>42</sup> Lock. 101.

<sup>43</sup> Ellington. 184.

<sup>44</sup> Mercer Ellington, and Stanley Dance. *Duke Ellington in Person: An Intimate Memoir*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1978) 96.

<sup>45</sup> Lock, 97.

<sup>46</sup> M Ellington, 96.

<sup>47</sup> Lock. . 101.

were still radical at the time, particularly surrounding the issue of miscegenation. *Beggar's Holiday* boasted a truly integrated cast and crew, with lead actors including Avon Long, Alfred Drake, Thomas Gomez and Zero Mostel, the latter of whom was an actor later infamous for his involvement and subsequent blacklisting during the McCarthy era. Both *Beggar's Holiday* and *The Deep South Suite* positioned Ellington among many high-profile African American entertainers, writers and business people who were working toward better conditions unilaterally for Americans of any racial and ethnic identity.

Throughout his career, Duke Ellington had considered himself a “race man,” W.E.B DuBois’s designation of a person who is committed to the social uplift of their own race, which is generally referring to the African American community. Despite his indirection or subtlety, Ellington’s personal beliefs informed his every action, artistically, socially and politically. While he was often criticized for not being active in the fight for civil rights, his artistic output and professional decisions to engage in projects like *Deep South Suite*, *Beggar's Holiday* and *Jump for Joy* were his forms of social protest and political activity. Ellington continually worked to effect social change in terms of racial equality, and these endeavors were often in concert with the progressive and leftist political activities that were going on around him. Although he never actively endorsed political movements or parties, he was among a host of African American jazz artists and entertainers who used their positions in the public eye to support causes that were aligned with socialist and even communist endeavors. Ranging from gentle innuendo to nearly militant expressions of outrage regarding instances of oppression and inequality, Ellington was a leading voice in the milieu of left-leaning jazz artists, and as such was simultaneously one of the most

important and least visible jazz artists to combine artistic expression with political action from a progressive perspective.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **HAZEL SCOTT (1920-1981) AND PEOPLE'S RIGHTS**

The period between the Harlem Renaissance and the Cold War was a pivotal time in jazz history. The advent of the swing era across the nation, the prominence of 52<sup>nd</sup> Street as “Swing Street” in New York and the incubation of bebop all took place in this window of less than fifteen years. Political and judicial activity as they pertain to African American society also produced significant events during this time, from urban race riots, including those in Harlem, the national “Double V” campaign during WWII and the landmark case of the Scottsboro Boys in Alabama to the specific targeting of African American entertainers, among other outspoken political groups, by the House Un-American Activities Committee in the late 1940s. While many jazz artists used their notoriety and celebrity to bring attention to many of these issues – including luminaries such as Duke Ellington, Fats Waller and Billie Holiday – perhaps no artist was as vocal, involved or influential across the entirety of African American culture and politics as Hazel Scott. This simultaneously enviable and dubious distinction ended up destroying Scott’s career in the United States through her admittedly indirect but documented involvement in radical politics that became synonymous with the enemy during the Cold War.

Possessing a “triple-threat” of great intelligence and eloquence, breathtaking musical talent and disarming charisma, not to mention physical beauty, Hazel Scott was destined to become a musical and cultural star of the highest order. Her prowess as a pianist in both classical and jazz idioms in no way overshadowed her outspoken positions

on civil rights in America before the term was in common use. In addition to becoming a major star of screen and broadcast radio and, briefly, television, Scott was known to support political endeavors aimed at promoting human rights and social equality in America. Additionally, Scott engaged in what James C. Scott refers to as “infrapolitical” endeavors, where in specific instances, she stood up for her rights as a person of color in American society and affected social change on a limited, personal scale.<sup>48</sup> Her actions in these roles ranged from insisting all her audiences be completely racially integrated to appearing at fundraising events and rallies that supported liberal candidates and progressive, race-based issues. Quite often these candidates and issues were aligned or directly connected to socialist, communist or other ‘leftist’ political identities. Her political and ethical convictions that allied her with the American political left ultimately cost Scott not only a syndicated television show bearing her name, but also her career and status as a headlining performer throughout the United States, thanks in no small part to her erroneous listing in the *Red Channels* publication, known for outing avowed communists. Because of this effective blacklisting at the hands of overzealous anti-communists, a young woman of color who was clearly on the rise to the top of the entertainment world was forced to seek opportunities overseas.

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<sup>48</sup> Kevin Boyle, "Radio, Race and the Rewriting of Civil Rights." *Reviews in American History* 33, no. 2 (06, 2005): 249-253 Boyle defines civil rights work on individual bases without overt activism as infrapolitical, borrowing from James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. (New Haven: Yale University Press) 1990.

## EARLY LIFE

Hazel Scott's story starts in the West Indies, where she was born to well-educated and politically active parents. At the age of 4, Hazel and her mother, all but abandoned by her father, relocated to New York in search of greater opportunity and established familial and cultural ties in the Harlem of the 1920s. Coming from a relatively egalitarian society in Trinidad, where her Venezuelan mother Alma was trained as a concert pianist and her West African father Thomas was an academic, Hazel's introduction to the segregation and discrimination of New York in the 1920s was difficult for her to comprehend, especially as a young child, however precocious she clearly was. Her father, who moved to New York separately, dealt with the change no better. Coming from a family of means and education, his life as an adult in the West Indies had not prepared Thomas for the restricted opportunities the Scott family faced in Harlem. All of these circumstances led to the development of young Hazel's understanding of race in America: that justice is not necessarily universal and that she was commonly identified by others – children and adults alike - as belonging to a lower class by no other criterion than the color of her skin.

Hazel's earliest awareness of political activism came at a young age as well. Five year-old Hazel attended a meeting of the United Negro Improvement Association with her father where the featured speaker was the association's founder, Marcus Garvey.<sup>49</sup> Hazel recalled asking her father why it was so important for Garvey to continually repeat his statement "I am a man", only to be told by her father that some people in New York and in

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<sup>49</sup> Karen Chilton, *Hazel Scott: The Pioneering Journey of a Jazz Pianist from Café Society to Hollywood to HUAC*. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press) 2008 (14)



America cannot see that he is a man.<sup>50</sup> While Hazel was later to demonstrate her alignment with integrationist racial policies, this early exposure to black nationalist perspectives must have been a significant influence on her developing social consciousness.

Recognized as a child prodigy, young Hazel was known to perform impromptu concerts at home for neighbors, playing serious classical repertoire she had learned by ear from hearing her mother's playing as well as improvising in popular styles she had heard in the neighborhood. At the age of eight years old, Hazel auditioned for a scholarship at Juilliard and though her previous training had been clearly outside the academy, her musicality, developed ear and ability to compensate for her deficiencies in creative ways inspired Juilliard's concert piano instructor Oscar Wagner to take her on as a private student.<sup>51</sup> Fortunately, Wagner, oblivious to her racial identity, was concerned solely with her talent and academic potential. For Hazel, this was among many instances when her singular talent and "genius" (to repeat Wagner's descriptor) afforded her an opportunity that otherwise would have been unavailable to her because of her racial identity. By this time in her life, Hazel Scott had developed the expectation that opportunity should be available to all people regardless of race, which became a fundamental element of her world view and informed many of her later perspectives on social justice and her commitment to political as well as infrapolitical activity.

While Alma Scott's own ambitions in Trinidad had always been focused as a pianist with a career on the concert stage, in America it became clear that this was not an option due to the racially restrictive nature of European classical music performance in America at the time. After years of trying to maintain a household in which to raise Hazel through

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid. (15)

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. (22)

domestic work, Alma set about teaching herself saxophone in a style of popular music her daughter was naturally absorbing. As Hazel entered her teenage years, and was combining studies at her neighborhood primary school with studies at Juilliard her mother spent time in bands led by Valaida Snow and Lil Hardin, and eventually led her own all-girl jazz band, the American Creoleans. Although Alma was committed to developing her daughter's classical concert music skills, Hazel's inexorable interest in popular music led Alma to include her in the Creolians.

## **ENTERING ADULTHOOD**

Hazel's entry into the world of popular music in the African American community also presented a first-hand introduction to the social and political climate of the African American community, particularly in Harlem. As a teenager Hazel saw both the civic and cultural pride of the African American creative class as well as instances of direct oppression and subjugation to the power differential between the races. She also found out how it could be a dangerous community for people of color of any ethnic background. In 1935 a series of riots broke out in Harlem in response to reports of a racially motivated crime against a Puerto Rican youth. Looting, arson and police brutality followed, until it was became evident that the original crime was in fact falsely reported. Coming of age in the adult world of the streets of Harlem also contributed to Hazel Scott's impression of the social and political situation of people of color in America. For a young woman who read newspapers in several languages and expressed interest in topical political and social issues since the age of five, these events were certainly on her mind and important in developing her understanding of the world around her.

Another clearly formative experience for Hazel was her position in the 1938 Broadway musical *Sing Out the News* presented at the Music Box Theater. Alma had been actively guiding Hazel's career since she had joined the American Creolians, starting with a spotlight booking as a relief act for the Count Basie Orchestra at the Roseland Ballroom when Hazel was fifteen. This was followed by Hazel's victory in a piano competition that yielded a radio show on New York's WOR radio and finally the chorus role in *Sing Out the News*. What was most significant about this role in 1938 was Hazel's being featured on a song called "Franklin D. Roosevelt Jones", in which Hazel sang about an African American child raised in "New Deal" America and the unprecedented pride, possibility and bright future this young person of color believed he had, which was metaphorically represented in tribute to the progressive liberal political leader whose name he carried. The conviction with which Hazel related this story to her audiences – with a passion and righteousness that was emblematic of her attitude throughout her career – yielded positive reviews singling out her work and garnering her a handsome increase in weekly salary, an unusual honor for a member of the chorus. These experiences in her teenage years working in show business informed her concept of how artistic expression and social concern could and should go hand-in-hand. For Hazel Scott, these were the earliest politically motivated expressions in a career for which social and political values were considered and acted upon.

### **CAFÉ SOCIETY AND LEFTIST INFLUENCE**

Before she had completed high school, Hazel Scott was a professional musician in New York, performing both as a solo artist, notably in 1938 at the Yacht Club, as well as

briefly fronting The Hazel Scott Band, alternately called in the press “Fourteen Men and a Girl.” While Hazel was by this time fairly well known throughout Harlem, it was a recommendation from family friend Billie Holiday that led to what proved to be the most significant booking of Hazel’s early career. When Barney Josephson asked Billie Holiday to leave her regular position at Cafe Society Downtown to inaugurate the new Uptown location as its featured singer, one of Holiday’s conditions was that her spot downtown be given to a young pianist/singer named Hazel Scott. Billie knew that not only would this be an important career move for Hazel, but that given her temperament and social consciousness, the politics of the establishment and its clientele would be a good match for her as well. Josephson’s well known policy of a completely integrated audience with zero tolerance for expressions of bigotry or hatred among audiences or performers fell right in line with Hazel’s own maturely developed sense of social justice, particularly when it came to issues of race.

At Café Society Hazel thrived personally and artistically, as had Billie Holiday. Hazel became the new darling of the New York intellectual community, and many of those patrons who admired not only her musical talent and skill, but also her forthright wit and eloquence both from the stage and among the audience were also members of the leftist political community. It was through working at the Café Society that Hazel Scott became familiar with activists and artists such as Paul Robeson, Duke Ellington and Eleanor Roosevelt. While in later testimony Hazel Scott attests that she was unaware of many of the political activities functioning within and around the Café Society community, her personal writings indicate that she was fond of all aspects of the environment – artistic, political and activist. This makes sense considering her early interest in political issues involving race

and her adamant positions in favor of complete racial integration in American society. Many writers, including her biographer Karen Chilton, present her House Un-American Activities Committee testimony as the last word from Hazel Scott regarding her attitudes toward liberal and leftist politics, but her associations and personal writings offer evidence that her testimony before HUAC may have been, like that of many people called to testify under penalty of treason, coerced through thinly veiled threats of imprisonment and financial retribution. Rather than suffer from such dire consequences, many quickly disassociated themselves as best they could from any organized leftist groups.

### **LIFE AFTER CAFÉ SOCIETY: HOLLYWOOD**

Two other important professional and personal developments in Hazel Scott's life centering on the left-leaning Café Society had a tremendous impact on the trajectory of her career and her political activity. First, but not necessarily foremost, was the assumption by Barney Josephson as Hazel's business manager. Josephson abhorred situations involving African American entertainers being exploited by the privileged white men who controlled the music business (e.g., Irving Mills, Moe Gale and Joe Glaser.) Consequently, he insisted on paying his artists a relatively high wage, regardless of race. At the time Hazel started at Café Society, she was making the unheard of sum of \$1000 a week, and when she left three years later it had risen to \$2000. Although he acted as her business agent and manager, Josephson declined to take a percentage of Hazel's bookings outside Café Society to which he was entitled, whether for live performances or those in the Hollywood movie industry. In the negotiations with Hollywood studios, Josephson demanded \$5000 a week for Hazel with a minimum of five weeks' work. Far from being anti-capitalist, Josephson and Scott

both were positioned to take advantage of the system that routinely created unfair conditions for African Americans through strong negotiation tactics and understanding Hazel's true value to the studios as a very popular and talented artist.

When Hazel did leave the Café Society to pursue a career in Hollywood and as a concert performer, Barney Josephson remained influential both as a business manager, negotiating competitive contracts on Hazel's behalf, and as a model of how to effect positive social change and enhance racial integration. From the time Hazel worked at the Café Society, she insisted all her contacts include a clause stating that all of her audiences much be completely integrated racially, with no exception, just like the policy at Café Society. Witnessing the power of the courageous activism in the policies enforced at the Café Society, she was emboldened to continue to fight for her rights as an African American woman long after she left Josephson's sphere of influence.

When she embarked on a career in Hollywood, with Josephson's blessing and initially with him as her agent, Hazel maintained her active desire to affect social change. In a move similar to her contracts demanding racially integrated concerts, Hazel Scott, with Barney Josephson's assistance in framing the language, added specific restrictions to her movie contracts regarding her representation specifically and the representation of her race in general in all the pictures she was to be involved in.<sup>52</sup> These restrictions specified that she was never to be portrayed as anything but a respectable African American in a professional setting of some kind – usually as a high-class nightclub entertainer – and never in any of the stereotypical roles of maid, mammy, prostitute or other decidedly lower-class,

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<sup>52</sup> Barney Josephson and Terry Trilling-Josephson, *Cafe Society: The Wrong Place for the Right People*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press) 2009. 137.

racially insensitive roles. She also mandated in her contracts that no African Americans involved in her films were to be so represented. Through the infrapolitical model, Scott was able to refer to her contract and halt production of one of her movies when she complained that women of color were costumed in dirty rags pursuant to their factory jobs when they were seeing their beaus off to war. Hazel rationalized that no self-respecting woman of any race would allow herself to be seen in dirty clothes in such a situation and so refused to participate in the shooting of the critical scene until the costumes were re-crafted to reflect a more honest depiction of the situation. While not politically active through civic protest in a manner more common during the civil rights era, Hazel Scott was certainly an activist in her time and profession, standing up for what she knew was right, and striving to create a positive representation of African Americans in film and on stage. Her tactics seem largely to be a page taken from the activities of many leftist political movements in whose circle she was constantly navigating as a featured performer at Barney Josephson's Café Society.

### **LIFE AFTER CAFÉ SOCIETY: ADAM CLAYTON POWELL, JR. (1908-1972)**

The second development in Hazel Scott's life that centered, at least initially, on her work at Café Society was of a highly personal rather than professional nature, but not without decidedly political implications. It was as a performer at the Café Society that Hazel Scott met and began an affair with her future husband, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. The son of Reverend Adam Clayton Powell Sr., of Harlem's Abyssinian Church, Adam Jr. took over as its Pastor in 1937, leading the ten-thousand-member congregation into a new era. This was an era for the Abyssinian Church when their pastor preached in church as well as on the streets and in the nightclubs and cabarets he knew well through regular patronage as a

younger man. Hazel Scott and Adam Powell were aware of each other long before they began a courtship that led to their marriage in 1945 at Café Society. Scott and Powell were of one accord on many subjects, not the least of which was in the domain of political and social change. Both were progressive politically, far to the left of the mainstream Democratic Party, though never directly affiliated with the Communist Party. Both were deeply committed to engaging in activities that promoted civil rights for all regardless of race, with a special focus on improving conditions for African Americans through lobbying, legislation and public relations.

Before he returned to the fold of his father's Abyssinian Church in Harlem in 1933, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. spent several years rejecting the faith he was brought up around, in response to the premature death of his sister Blanche. During that painful time, Powell struggled in school, got kicked out of City College of New York, frequented Harlem nightclubs and learned much about life on the streets. After finally resolving his feelings over the loss of his sister during his last two years at Colgate University, Adam returned to the faith, and leveraged his experiences on the streets to inform his message, becoming a relatable figure to a wider segment of the African American population in Harlem. Throughout the 1930s, Adam Jr. was a respected and approachable figure in Harlem as peer and preacher.

By 1930 he was speaking to larger and larger crowds, with a message that was less spiritually based and more politically focused. Recalling his participation in a Harlem hospital strike protesting racist hiring practices in 1930, Powell states, "For the first time I



heeded the call of the masses and became part of the struggles of the people of Harlem.”<sup>53</sup>

In a 1938 commencement address at Shaw University, he spoke to the crowd of new graduates, “We’ve got to streamline our race and come to realize that *mass action* is the most powerful force on earth.”<sup>54</sup> [Emphasis added] When Powell announced his candidacy for US Congress representing Harlem in the newly minted twenty-third congressional district of New York, he told the crowd in Madison Square Garden, “It doesn’t matter what ticket or what party – my people demand a forthright, militant, anti-Uncle Tom congressman! My cry today and until I die is let my people go – NOW!”<sup>55</sup>

Fighting big business, government corruption and demanding rights for the historically oppressed in Harlem, Powell was clearly an extremely liberal candidate. He appeared in political rallies alongside Eleanor Roosevelt, Earl Browder, head of the American Communist Party and Paul Robeson, who was at the height of his popularity and a known communist sympathizer. These same rallies promoting leftist and radical causes were supported by musical acts including Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Billie Holiday and, of course, Hazel Scott. By the late 1940s, however, with the war a recent memory, fascism defeated in Europe and the Soviets no longer allied to U. S. interests, Powell, Scott and many other progressives began to distance themselves from previous connections to Communist Party members and sympathizers. In the early 1940s Powell’s increasingly militant and populist messages were echoed in the Harlem publication the *People’s Voice*, which Powell co-founded and on which he served as editor-in-chief, but by the time he was

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<sup>53</sup> Adam Clayton Powell Jr. *Adam by Adam: The Autobiography of Adam Clayton Powell Jr.* (New York: Dial Press) 1971. 57.

<sup>54</sup> Wil Haygood. *King of the Cats: The Life and Times of Adam Clayton Powell Jr.* (New York: Houghton Mifflin) 1993. 73.

<sup>55</sup> Powell. 93.

elected to his second term in Congress in 1946, he had sold his shares in the paper; it was developing a reputation as a “mouthpiece of the Communist Party,” and Powell, like many African Americans, no longer wanted any part of it.<sup>56</sup> Paul Robeson’s forty-sixth birthday celebration on April 16, 1944 was a noted fete in the entertainment and political worlds, as it coincided with the anniversary of the Congress on African Affairs, the leading voice of the time in anti-colonialism and Pan-Africanist thought. While many of the elite of radical politics and entertainment were among the twelve thousand attendees, including Duke Ellington, Jimmy Durante, Lillian Hellman, Earl Browder and Babe Ruth, the Army Intelligence agents sent to report back to the FBI noted that Adam Clayton Powell, among other leaders of the Negro community, were not located among the attendees. The report to the FBI includes the analysis that this was due to a rift developing between established black leaders and communist sympathizers.<sup>57</sup>

### **CAREER CHANGES LEADING UP TO HUAC INVOLVEMENT**

Hazel Scott’s connection to Adam Clayton Powell became much more than an affair or a friendship based on shared political and social ideals when they were married in a private ceremony at Café Society Downtown. In 1945, once Hazel became Mrs. Powell, wife of the influential Congressman from Harlem and pastor of the Abyssinian Church, social expectations changed, and Adam asked her to refrain from performing in nightclubs in favor of a more sedate concert career. While this meant time touring away from home, and consequently time away from their young son, Adam Clayton Powell III, it also meant

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<sup>56</sup> Karen Chilton. (130)

<sup>57</sup> Martin Duberman. *Paul Robeson*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf) 1988. 285.

exposure to a broader national audience, portending significant consequences that almost simultaneously built up and tore down Hazel's career as a performing musician in America.

Hazel had already chosen to leave behind a lucrative career in Hollywood because of the rampant racism she saw around her, even though she contractually forbade any forms of discrimination or perpetuation of negative stereotypes in her own films. Now as a touring concert performer, especially in the deep south, Hazel encountered violations of her consistent demands that no audiences be segregated, and on several occasions she chose to cancel performances rather than perform in venues that refused to abide by her stipulations. When she was touring the West Coast and refused service in a Spokane, WA restaurant – the proprietors pointed to a sign that no coloreds were served in the dining room – Hazel sued the owners of the restaurant and won a \$5000 damages settlement.

As a result of touring across the nation, Hazel had developed a national following, and had become one of the most popular performers in the late 1940s. She was recognized for her prodigious talent, her charm, wit and eloquence and began to be featured on television in variety shows such as Ed Sullivan's *The Toast of the Town*.<sup>58</sup> On July 3, 1950, Hazel Scott premiered in her own television show, initially broadcast in New York City on the fledgling DuMont television network. Hazel started every show with "Tea for Two", which had become her theme song, based on the version Art Tatum had taught her in her teens, and she played piano and sang songs from the standard jazz repertoire, such as "I'll Remember April" and "S'Wonderful" as well as performing pieces from the classical

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<sup>58</sup> Karen Chilton. 140.

repertoire she had learned in her studies with Oscar Wagner.<sup>59</sup> Critical and popular response was enough to bring aboard more sponsors and prompt DuMont to syndicate the show nationally not one but three nights a week over their network.<sup>60</sup> This was a major coup for Hazel and for racial and gender equality, as Hazel was the first African American woman to host her own show as a musical performer. This seemed to be Hazel Scott's next big move in the entertainment world, breaking her out as a star at the pinnacle of popular music. But her notoriety created a situation that was all too common for African Americans in the public eye with a history of political activism. Just one month into her position as a television host, her name appeared in the publication *Red Channels*, a monthly magazine that featured listings of public figures whose political views the publishers, a group of former FBI agents who called themselves Counterattack, believed linked them to communist organizations and beliefs.

In *Red Channels*, Counterattack made the claim – without evidence – that Hazel was involved in some way with a long list of organizations alleged to be communist fronts or directly related to the American Communist Party. Even organizations with a singular goal of providing relief to victims of the war against fascism, such as the Joint Fascist Refugee Committee and the Artist's Front to Win the War were included on this list, intended to paint Hazel as a pro-communist agitator.<sup>61</sup> Even though Hazel clearly held beliefs that were in keeping with humanitarian relief and the fight against fascism, her position in the entertainment industry had changed drastically since the time she was merely a featured

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<sup>59</sup> Dwayne Mack. 2006. "Hazel Scott: A Career Curtailed". *The Journal of African American History* 91 (2). (Association for the Study of African American Life and History, Inc.) 153–70. <http://0-www.jstor.org/libraries.colorado.edu/stable/20064068>.

<sup>60</sup> Karen Chilton, 140.

<sup>61</sup> Mack. 164.

performer at Café Society, and she had much more to lose by standing up for her positions. In a pro-active move, Hazel requested an audience with the House Un-American Activities Committee, the primary investigative arm of the McCarthy era. Testifying was an uncommon thing for a public figure who had not been legally accused by Congress of treasonous behavior, but the HUAC allowed Hazel to testify in deference to her husband, a colleague of the members of the committee.

Just as Josephine Baker and Paul Robeson had suffered in previous years, Hazel Scott was subject to threats and accusations by HUAC members because of her association with radical political movements in the interest of effecting social change for an oppressed African American population. The disproportionate instances of these kinds of accusations of communist activities against African American entertainers and those who fought for civil rights of all regardless of race has caused historians and analysts to surmise that many of these communist accusations were more about quelling the radical voice of civil rights activists than they were about genuine concern for communist activity.<sup>62</sup> Certainly many of these artists, including Hazel, had worked on campaigns that promoted communist causes, but the basis of their involvement was in how the CP actively and aggressively addressed issues of civil rights, not in any desire to change the US government from a democracy to a communist regime.

Thus, in the oral testimony Hazel Scott provided in her voluntary appearance before the HUAC in Washington during 1950, she was able to unequivocally state that she was “...not now, never have been and never entertained the idea and never will become a

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<sup>62</sup> Philip Sheldon Foner, and Herbert Shapiro, eds. *American Communism and Black Americans: A Documentary History, 1930-1934*. (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1991), Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Harlem Nocturne: Women Artists & Progressive Politics during World War II*. (New York: Basic Civitas, 2013), and Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, And The Black Working Class*, (New York: Free Press, 1996) are significant examples.

member.”<sup>63</sup> Even though she had clearly been sympathetic to activists associated with the Communist Party throughout the 1930s and 1940s, including her deep friendships with Paul Robeson and Barney Josephson, when the time came for her to save herself and her career in the face of a hostile and powerful congressional committee comprised of men influenced by an overzealous anti-communist agenda, Hazel proceeded to disavow her connection to those former friends and champions due to their activism. In doing so, she also disassociated herself from those who had fought by her side for improvements in the social and political conditions for African Americans. This distancing was a personal blow to both Robeson and Josephson, who had already lost almost everything to the effects of the blacklisting, and who were both striving to maintain some sense of dignity and belonging in an American society that had abandoned them long before Hazel had.

Although Scott’s statement about her membership in the Communist Party was completely true, to interpret her declaration as being opposed to radical politics would be a significant oversight. Her prepared written testimony to the HUAC highlighted Reverend Ethelred Brown’s support of Benjamin Davis in the latter’s campaign for City Council on the Communist Party ticket and identified Brown as a current and former Socialist and that “Socialists have hated Communism longer, possibly, than any other group.”<sup>64</sup> Scott’s distinction here between what are now both considered radical politics is the core of her inclusion in these case studies; while never directly supporting Communism as an ideology, she certainly was in favor of overarching issues of promoting the equality, justice and

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<sup>63</sup> *Testimony of Hazel Scott Powell: Hearing before the Committee on Un-American Activities, House of Representatives, Eighty-First Congress, Second Session, September 22, 1950.* Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off, 1951. 3619.

<sup>64</sup> *Testimony of Hazel Scott Powell.* 3619.

freedom from discrimination and oppression which were values associated with liberal politics of the time.

In another example of infrapolitical activity, Hazel made suggestions to the HUAC outlining ways the erroneous accusations and resulting slander created by false listing on the part of groups like Counterattack may be corrected in the future. Hazel proposed the implementation of a method based on the judicial system that allowed for the accused to offer evidence in their own defense before publication of lists by groups like Counterattack. The irony of HUAC's previous criticism of the judicial system as a viable model for combatting the "red tide" was not lost on Hazel. Even while she was distancing herself from radical politics by denouncing Communism as an ideology, she was promoting systems that would protect those engaged in activism that might be construed as radical. This is another instance where Hazel Scott's most impactful and radical political activity is strongly asserted.

Even with Hazel's rejection of communist activities and relationships, and although the committee chose not to pursue any action against her, the judgment of the sponsors of her television show and her public had already been rendered. Within weeks of appearing before the HUAC, Hazel Scott's show was cancelled due to lost sponsors and a headline appeared in the tabloid *The Compass*, "Redlist Costs Hazel Scott Job."<sup>65</sup> Once on top of the entertainment world as an influential black female performer and television personality, it was only a matter of months before Hazel Scott had lost the status she had worked for a decade to gain. While she was still able to tour in the US on a reduced scale, the impact of her alleged association with communist activities severely affected her career in America

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<sup>65</sup> Mack. 165

and forced her to look overseas to regain some of the status and income she had once had in the US.

With a concert tour in 1950 and 1951 in major cities throughout Europe, Hazel once again was the dominant force in the concert hall she had been in the US in the late 1940s. With audiences that were less concerned about her patriotism and more concerned with her ability to play American music combined with European concert music, Hazel was able to focus once again on her concert career. Being branded as an ideological enemy of democracy in her alleged associations with the communist party in the eyes of her own government and people, however, was a distinction that was hard to completely transcend. Even in Paris, when the Powells were staying in US government-supported housing, Adam and Hazel discovered that they were being followed closely, even going so far as finding elaborate microphone systems in an adjacent room aimed at their bedroom, presumably designed to capture them crafting anti-American communist plots while in Europe. Eventually, and even after resuming a concert career in the US, the pressures resulting from the accusations against her and Adam became too much for Hazel, and she experienced what doctors diagnosed as a nervous breakdown. From this point on, her career was never to achieve the promise that had only two years earlier seemed to be just a matter of time. For Hazel Scott, her radical political activities that came about from her passionate feelings about racial equality and civil rights had not only become ineffective, but had stopped her career in mid-stream. For Scott, the Red Scare created by zealous political operatives on the right extreme of American politics and society had been the single most impactful aspect of her career as a jazz performer.



For the rest of her life, which was cut short in 1981 due to cancer at the age of sixty-one, Hazel stayed away from political activities for the most part, with just one notable exception. As an expatriate in Paris through the late 1950s and early 1960s, Hazel stayed actively informed of the growing civil rights movement in the US, paying particular attention to the non-violent work of Dr. King, Rosa Parks, and the passionate protest folk music of artists such as Odetta. When approached by James Baldwin in 1963 to help organize a protest march on the US Embassy in France in support of Dr. King's March on Washington for Freedom and Jobs, Hazel immediately agreed, and was one of several American's who presented US Ambassador to France Cecil Lyon with a petition in support of Dr. King's efforts promoting civil rights for all in the U.S. After the sacrifices Hazel had made in her early adulthood in fighting for social change through her music, infrapolitical actions and her outspokenness about of the social ills of America in oppressing the African American, Hazel was a generation too early to take full advantage of the civil rights era in full flower during the 1960s. But in her own time she was instrumental in establishing a standard of resilience and firmness in demanding equal rights for all, regardless of race.

From her earliest years as the child of parents who were part of an intellectual and creative class of African descent, Hazel Scott was intimately aware of the issues within American society and politics throughout her life. While she was never overtly engaged in political demonstrations or partisan activity, her infrapolitical efforts in her experiences at the Juilliard School, at Cafe Society, in Hollywood and in her concert career worked to effect change in the way musicians and entertainment business people treated racial integration and fostered equal opportunity for all. Because the focus of Scott's belief system was on correcting instances of oppression and subjugation of working class African Americans, her

work was in many ways parallel to the work of leftist groups and specifically the American Communist Party. Despite her testimony to the House Un-American Activities Committee, her position on social justice and racial equality was several steps to the left of mainstream liberal American policies. Hazel Scott was arguably a significant contributor to the promotion of the progressive ideals of racial equity and equal rights for all in a time when the fight for civil rights had not yet been fully discerned as it would be in the 1950s and 1960s.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSIONS**

There is no question that jazz music is the unique product of American culture, with a variety of influences and sources that could only have come about in the post-slavery America of the early 20th century. It is also readily accepted that because of the diversity of ethnic and racial influences on jazz during this time the music itself is in many ways a reflection of the story of race in America, with a particular focus on racial as well as cultural identities from the African diaspora. Because issues of race have been an inextricable part of American politics since long before the advent of jazz, it is also true that jazz music in all of its facets - as an art music, as a folk music and as a popular music - is similarly connected to political activity in America, with a specific impact on those same issues of race. In many ways race, politics and jazz in America have a shared history, where connections abound in all directions and none of these areas are completely free of influence from the others.

The common narrative of jazz history allows for direct connections between race and politics most significantly during the Civil Rights era, as well as a somewhat murkier secondary period of demonstrable impact during the Harlem Renaissance and the early years of the NAACP. The period between these two eras is generally regarded without a clear understanding or description of the relationship between jazz music and politics, which is an omission that neglects a very important chapter in both jazz history and American political history. This omission can be attributed to the effects of the McCarthy-era “red scare”, in which those involved on the wrong side of a battle against “un-American”

politics, as defined by a small group of zealous and ambitious politicians, were compelled to denounce their involvement in radical politics as an agent of social change. As a result of an approach to political history in America informed by the biases of Cold War propaganda, our understanding of the history of jazz and its relationship to progressive politics has also been compromised in favor of a perspective that renders socialist and communist ideals and the jazz community that supported them during the 1930s and 1940s as politically deviant and immoral.<sup>66</sup>

A close study of just a few jazz artists, as well as promoters of the music, working during the 1930s and 1940s reveals a hidden truth that jazz music and radical political activity related to the goals of socialism, communism and progressive political thinking were not only linked, but formed a significant aspect of American life, particularly in New York. By looking at the work of Duke Ellington, Hazel Scott, Billie Holiday, as well as the influence of John Hammond and Barney Josephson in the jazz community, it is clear that progressive politics was a common thread that many jazz artists, composers and fans shared. With a focus on battling class strife, racial inequality and oppression, leftist politics were well aligned with many members of the New York jazz community of the 1930s and 1940s. During this time, socialism and other progressive political perspectives did not yet have the negative connotation it has been burdened with since the McCarthy era. In fact, progressive political activity was the law of the land, with New Deal socialism having played a key role in bringing America out of the Depression.

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<sup>66</sup> Hazel Scott's prepared HUAC testimony includes among a list of dissident identities bigots, fascists and communists, placing communism alongside two perspectives Scott was a frequent opponent of in her own ambiguous activism. While socialism is excluded from her list, conservative politicians in the 1950s who opposed New Deal types of legislation would have no problem adding it to the other three.

By accepting and exploring the connection between the New York jazz community and radical political action as an agent of social change in the 1930s and 1940s, a greater understanding can be gained of the complex conditions at play during this era. Most tellingly, these connections present the reality that the Civil Rights era had significant precedents in the 1930s and 1940s, and the relationship between jazz and civil rights commonly regarded as starting in the 1950s had similar precedents in previous decades. Jazz and politics in the 1930s and 1940s enjoyed a significant relationship of mutual benefit, and this relationship has been neglected in the common narrative of jazz and political history in America. A complete and thorough understanding of jazz history and American politics must recognize that the era between the Harlem Renaissance and the Cold War was truly a necessary and significant precursor to the era of the 1950s and 1960s that is commonly referred to as the Civil Rights era.

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