

Jazz and the Civil Rights Movement:

A lecture given by Alex Graham to the Jazz History course on Thursday, March 24th 2005 at the University of Toledo in Toledo, Ohio.

INTRODUCTION

One subject in jazz that has always been very interesting to me is the relationship between the greats of jazz and the civil rights movement. And today, I would like to relate some of the more compelling stories of how some of these musicians were able to voice their opinions on integration and racial equality in the United States, not only through their music, but also through their lives away from the bandstand. The participants in these stories include both black and white musicians, all of whom challenged the status quo of segregation in the name of progress. I will also be playing some recordings from these musicians so you can hear for yourself the eloquence and social commentary of the music they made in the name of the civil rights movement.

LOUIS ARMSTRONG

As I'm sure you all know by now, Louis Armstrong is debatably the single most influential person in the history of jazz. And while that label certainly applies to his music, it also applies to his personality, his stage presence and his attitudes towards racial equality and the injustices of segregation. His nickname, which was "Satchmo", and his ebullient personality, combined with his love of entertaining and connecting with an audience unfortunately resulted in a public persona that came to seem like something of a racist caricature to some people. His constant smile and white handkerchief that he used to wipe the sweat from his brow reminded some people of characters from minstrel shows, and when the be-bop movement of the 1940s started, Armstrong was frequently criticized by several black musicians and intellectuals for being an "Uncle Tom". This even included Miles Davis and Dizzy Gillespie who once referred to Armstrong as someone who promoted a "plantation image". He came from an era before it was common for prominent black entertainers, or white entertainers for that matter, to speak out against racism because it was considered bad for business. And in the 1920s when he first made a name for himself, this meant maintaining the status quo and not rocking the boat when it came to mixing politics and music. As it turns out, however, a lot of this criticism was unfair and Armstrong was a passionate advocate for change. One song that I am going to play for you in a couple of minutes was recorded in 1929 and is from one of the influential *Hot Fives* and *Hot Sevens* sessions that catapulted Armstrong to fame. The song, "(What Did I Do To Be So) Black and Blue," was written by Fats Waller and lyricist Andy Razaf. The original lyrics to this song were directed at interracial bias between lighter and darker skinned blacks, but Armstrong's version was definitely geared towards making a statement about White racism towards African-Americans. It was one of the best-known pieces written by Fats Waller in his career, and it's also a very poignant look at the social stigmas that were omnipresent for Black Americans in the

1920s and 1930s. It was included in the show *Connie's Hot Chocolates* that was largely financed by the noted gangster Dutch Schultz who actually suggested some of the lyrical content of the song to Andy Razaf. Schultz had thought it would be humorous to have a scene in which a black girl woke up in a white bed inside a totally white room having had her man stolen by a light-skinned girl. Razaf took this idea a step further and created a beautiful social commentary. Both musically and lyrically, it conveys a multitude of messages. The feeling of forlorn that comes from being alone can be interpreted in the context of a failed romance, marriage, or being outcast because of skin color. And the title has at least two meanings: black skin and blue demeanor, or emotionally black and blue from the hardship of discrimination. In spite of the obvious risk that Razaf took, the song was such a hit that the show made money. The original lyrics go something like this:

Verse:

Out in the street, shufflin' feet,
Couples passin' two by two,
While here am I, left high and dry,
Black, and 'cause I'm black I'm blue.
Browns and yellors, all have fellers,
Gentlemen prefer them light,
Wish I could fade, can't make the grade,
Nothing but dark days in sight:

Chorus:

Cold, empty bed, Springs hard as lead,
Pains in my head, Feel like old Ned.
What did I do, to be so Black And Blue?
No joys for me, No company,
Even the mouse ran from my house,
All my life through, I've been so Black And Blue.

I'm white inside, It don't help my case
'Cause I can't hide, what is on my face, oh!
I'm so forlorn, Life's just a thorn,
My heart is torn, Why was I born?
What did I do, to be so Black And Blue?

'Cause you're black, Folks think you lack
They laugh at you, And scorn you too,
What did I do, to be so Black And Blue?
When you are near, they laugh and sneer,
Set you aside and you're denied,
What did I do, to be so Black And Blue?

How sad I am, each day I feel worse,
My mark of Ham seems to be a curse!
How will it end? Ain't got a friend,
My only sin is my skin.
What did I do, to be so Black And Blue?

And the Armstrong recording: (Play recording)

Old empty bed
Springs hard as lead
Feel like old Ned
Wish I was dead
All my life through
I've been so black and blue

Even the mouse
Ran from my house
They laugh at you
And scorn you too
What did I do?
To be so black and blue?

I'm white inside
But that don't help my case
Cause I can't hide
What is in my face

How will it end?
Ain't got a friend
My only sin
Is in my skin
What did I do
To be so black and blue?

By singing the song out of its original context in the show, it becomes a pure social commentary. For an artist like Armstrong to record songs with lyrics that challenged society's attitudes towards racial justice was a huge risk and something that simply didn't happen very much during that time.

Later in his career, Armstrong had become an unofficial ambassador for the United States and frequently traveled the world performing concerts on behalf of the State Department and other government entities. And during the 1950s, when the civil rights movement was beginning to reach its apex, Armstrong made the most of his popularity to promote the movement. In fact, Armstrong was a major financial supporter of Dr. Martin Luther

King Jr. and other civil rights activists, but mostly preferred to work quietly behind the scenes, not wanting to mix his politics with his work as an entertainer. However, the few exceptions to this rule made it even more effective when he did speak out. When Armstrong called President Eisenhower “two-faced” and “gutless” for his inaction during the conflict over school desegregation in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957, it made national news. As a protest, Armstrong cancelled a planned tour of the Soviet Union on behalf of the State Department saying "The way they're treating my people in the South, the government can go to hell" and that he could not represent his government abroad when it was in conflict with its own people.

By 1970, just one year from Armstrong's death, Dizzy Gillespie and many others in the African-American community had come to see Louis Armstrong in a different light. Gillespie was saying: "If it hadn't been for him, there wouldn't have been none of us. I want to thank Louis Armstrong for my livelihood" and made a reference to the fact that Armstrong had "an absolute refusal to let anything, even anger about racism, steal the joy from his life."

BENNY GOODMAN

Benny Goodman is widely regarded as one of the most influential clarinetists in jazz. Nicknamed “The King of Swing”, Goodman was one of the first widely known and recognized white instrumentalists in jazz, and his music helped usher in the swing era of the 1930s and early 1940s. He is also responsible for many of the first instances of racial integration in jazz.

As his popularity increased in the early 1930s, Goodman found himself in need of more and more arrangements for a weekly radio show on NBC called “Let's Dance”. His friend John Hammond suggested that he purchase some arrangements from Fletcher Henderson, who had New York's most popular African-American band in the 1920s and early 1930s. Most white band leaders of the time had preferred to play a watered down kind of jazz and dance music that they thought would be easier for white audiences to digest, so it was a risk for Goodman. Of course the music was a success, and it's been said that by using Fletcher Henderson's arrangements, Benny Goodman did for jazz what Elvis Presley did for rock and roll by appealing to a broader white audience. Goodman publicly acknowledged his debt to Henderson and in doing so introduced many young white swing fans to Henderson's band. Later in his career, Goodman also used other black arrangers including Jimmy Mundy and Edgar Sampson.

The most significant integration Goodman was able to achieve is when he hired pianist Teddy Wilson to play in his trio in 1936. Integrated bands at that time were virtually unheard of in the north and actually illegal in the south, but Goodman's popularity allowed him the freedom to restrict his touring to the northern and western states without having to challenge the “Jim Crow” laws in the south. In 1936, he added Lionel Hampton on vibes to form the Benny Goodman Quartet and in 1940 he added jazz

guitarist Charlie Christian to his band and small ensembles, who played with him until his untimely death from tuberculosis less than two years later. All of this happened 10 years before Jackie Robinson integrated Major League Baseball.

Yet another break-through moment in racial integration in jazz came in 1938 when Goodman headlined a blockbuster concert at the venerable Carnegie Hall. It was the first time in history that Carnegie Hall presented racially integrated lineups of musicians and it featured his integrated band plus members of the Count Basie and Duke Ellington bands, which played with Goodman's band in a "jam session" atmosphere. On Fats Waller's "Honeysuckle Rose," members of the Count Basie Orchestra (including Basie at the piano, Lester Young on tenor saxophone, Buck Clayton on trumpet, guitarist Freddie Green, and bassist Walter Page) are invited to sit in with Johnny Hodges and Harry Carney from the Ellington ensemble, along with Goodman and his drummer Gene Krupa. The music from this recording is incredible, but more importantly, it elevated jazz above its dance hall image and recognized black musicians like Basie and Ellington and all of their band members as important artists. Here is a recording of the jam session on "Honeysuckle Rose".

BILLIE HOLIDAY

Billie Holiday was one of the great jazz vocalists of all time, and was only 24 years old when she released her famous recording of the song "Strange Fruit". The song had originally been a poem written by a white, Jewish schoolteacher and union activist from New York City named Abel Meeropol who was outraged after seeing a photograph of a lynching in a civil-rights magazine. Meeropol wrote the song under the pseudonym "Lewis Allan" which were the intended first names of his two stillborn sons. The original title was "Bitter Fruit," and the poem was published in the January 1937 issue of a union publication called *The New York Teacher*. After putting music to it, the song was performed regularly at various socialist and union gatherings by Meeropol's wife and friends from the local teachers' union. Holiday was first introduced to the song by Robert Gordon who had heard it sung by a quartet of black vocalists at an anti-fascist fundraiser. Gordon worked at a Greenwich Village nightclub called *Café Society* at the time where Holiday was the featured attraction, and he thought that the song would go over well with the integrated crowd that frequented the club. He was right, and Holiday was soon compelled to record the song on Commodore Records because her main label, Columbia Records, refused to release it. The recording provoked a strong reaction not only in the United States, but also around the world. It was difficult for Holiday to find good opportunities to perform the piece due to its serious nature and it was even banned in South Africa during apartheid.

The song was quickly adopted as the anthem for the anti-lynching movement. The lyrics and melody made it difficult for white Americans and politicians who heard it to ignore any more the Southern campaign of violence against blacks. According to statistics, Between 1882 and 1968, mobs lynched 4,743 people in the United States, over 70

percent of them African-Americans, and incredible statistic that is probably on the low-side when you consider how many lynchings went unreported or documented.

“Strange Fruit” was a song of incredible power and listeners reacted in a variety of ways. It was often shunned because many listeners resented being forced to think about serious topics like racism and lynching in an entertainment context. Even within the black community reaction varied. Paul Robeson felt that “Strange Fruit” portrayed blacks as victims. Other blacks feared “Strange Fruit” would incite even greater acts of racial hatred. The lyric to “Strange Fruit”:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,
And the sudden smell of burning flesh!

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

And here is the recording.

Later on in Holiday’s career, “Strange Fruit” became her theme song and she liked to close her sets with it.

Meeropol made headlines in later years when he adopted the sons of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg who were orphaned after their parents were executed for treason in 1953. He also wrote the lyrics to the song "The House I Live In," which was recorded by Frank Sinatra, as well as "Beloved Comrade," which was often sung in tributes to Franklin Roosevelt, and "Apples, Peaches, and Cherries," which was recorded by Peggy Lee.

In 1971, Meeropol said, "I wrote ‘Strange Fruit’ because I hate lynching, I hate injustice, and I hate the people who perpetuate it." Victims of lynching were people who were marginalized from society, and most were black men. They were lynched for a variety of reasons, often because they did something to upset a prominent member of the community, who would then organize a mob to track down and kill the victim. Many times, the victims broke no laws but were lynched out of jealousy, hatred or religious difference. Lynching was more common in the South, but could happen anywhere. In fact, the photograph that is thought to have inspired Meeropol to write “Strange Fruit” was from a lynching in Indiana in 1930.

CHARLES MINGUS

Unlike Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday and other musicians who had been careful in the way they expressed their feelings about integration and racial justice, the great bassist Charles Mingus was not one to shy away from mixing his music with his politics. The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 overturned the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1892, (which had declared that segregation did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment as long as facilities were provided for African-Americans that were “separate but equal”,) but that was just the beginning of the struggle to desegregate the public schools. On September 3rd 1957, as part of President Eisenhower’s initiative to implement the desegregation of public schools, nine African-American teenagers were to be admitted to Little Rock Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. The day before this was to take place, Governor Faubus ordered the state militia into the capital. The following day, the day that was supposed to see the admittance of the African-American students, Faubus had the National Guard block their entry. A mob of protestors against desegregation formed around the school in support of Faubus’s stand and the African-American students only narrowly escaped being injured or even killed by the mob. This was the beginning of the showdown between President Eisenhower and Governor Faubus to desegregate the schools. Eisenhower federalized the National Guard and ordered them to return to their barracks and then sent in the 101st Airborne Division to protect the African-American students. The mobs became so enraged that Faubus had to turn to the president for assistance. In one of the supreme moments of irony in American history, Eisenhower sent in the federalized National Guard, the very same troops that had earlier prevented the African-American students from entering Little Rock Central High, to quell the insurgence of the conservative citizens.

Like Louis Armstrong, Mingus was outraged by what he saw as a backwards and narrow-minded use of power to delay the integration of the school when the highest court of the land and the executive government were clearly ready to take the first steps toward greater equality. As he makes clear in the lyrics to “Fables of Faubus”, he felt that anyone who opposed such progress was an idiot.

Lyrics:

Oh, Lord, don't let 'em shoot us!
Oh, Lord, don't let 'em stab us!
Oh, Lord, don't let 'em tar and feather us!
Oh, Lord, no more swastikas!
Oh, Lord, no more Ku Klux Klan!
Name me someone who's ridiculous, Danny.
Governor Faubus!
Why is he so sick and ridiculous?
He won't permit integrated schools.
Then he's a fool! Oh Boo!
Boo! Nazi Fascist supremacists!

Boo! Ku Klux Klan (with your Jim Crow plan)
Name me a handful that's ridiculous, Danny.
Faubus, Nelson Rockefeller, Eisenhower
Why are they so sick and ridiculous?
Two, four, six, eight:
They brainwash and teach you hate.
H-E-L-L-O, Hello.

As you can see, these lyrics are in stark contrast to the lyrics of “Black and Blue” and “Strange Fruit” which both alluded to the problems of racism through symbolism. “Fables of Faubus” is extremely direct, even in its title. It insults Governor Faubus and even mentions Nelson Rockefeller and President Eisenhower in the same breath. Columbia Records would not allow Mingus to record the scathing lyrics on his seminal release, *Mingus Ah-Um*, and so he would have to wait until he recorded for the independent company Candid Records before his original conception of this piece would be heard before a larger audience. What I will play for you now is the version from *Mingus Ah-Um*. Personnel: Charles Mingus (piano, bass); John Handy (alto & tenor saxophones, clarinet); Shafi Hadi (alto & tenor saxophones); Booker Ervin (tenor saxophone); Jimmy Knepper, Willie Dennis (trombone); Horace Parlan (piano); Dannie Richmond (drums).

JOHN COLTRANE

Tenor saxophonist John Coltrane’s personality with regards to music and civil rights was quite different from Mingus. He was a deeply religious figure who expressed his love of God through his music, and his views on God put him in step with Dr. Martin Luther King’s non-violent approach to resisting segregation and the injustices of racism. In 1963 Dr. King decided to launch a non-violent assault on Birmingham, Alabama that at the time was the bastion of segregation in the south. Within days 2,500 protesters had swamped the Birmingham jails. After ten days of civil disobedience, the authorities caved in. Birmingham was a huge victory for the civil rights movement and the protests had a massive impact - there were 758 demonstrations against racism and 14,753 arrests in 186 US cities in the ten weeks that followed Birmingham, culminating in the historic march on Washington. In 1964 Coltrane played eight benefit concerts in support of King and it was the following events in Birmingham that would also move him to write the song “Alabama”.

On the Sunday morning of September 15th, 1963 a dozen sticks of dynamite were planted by white racists in the basement of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. At 10.45am the bomb went off, killing four young black girls aged between 11 and 14. Coltrane wrote the song “Alabama” in response to the bombing and he deliberately patterned the composition and his saxophone playing on Martin Luther King’s funeral speech. Midway through the song, mirroring the point where King transforms his mourning into a statement of renewed determination for the struggle against racism,

Elvin Jones's drumming rises from a whisper to a pounding rage. The crescendo was symbolic of the rise of the civil rights movement. What I will play for you now is a recording of Dr. King's eulogy and Coltrane's recording of "Alabama".

Martin Luther King's Eulogy for the Young Victims of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church Bombing, delivered at Sixth Avenue Baptist Church

18 September 1963
Birmingham, Ala.

[Delivered at funeral service for three of the children—Addie Mae Collins, Carol Denise McNair, and Cynthia Diane Wesley—killed in the bombing. A separate service was held for the fourth victim, Carole Robertson.]

This afternoon we gather in the quiet of this sanctuary to pay our last tribute of respect to these beautiful children of God. They entered the stage of history just a few years ago, and in the brief years that they were privileged to act on this mortal stage, they played their parts exceedingly well. Now the curtain falls; they move through the exit; the drama of their earthly life comes to a close. They are now committed back to that eternity from which they came.

These children—unoffending, innocent, and beautiful—were the victims of one of the most vicious and tragic crimes ever perpetrated against humanity.

And yet they died nobly. They are the martyred heroines of a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity. And so this afternoon in a real sense they have something to say to each of us in their death. They have something to say to every minister of the gospel who has remained silent behind the safe security of stained-glass windows. They have something to say to every politician [Audience:] (Yeah) who has fed his constituents with the stale bread of hatred and the spoiled meat of racism. They have something to say to a federal government that has compromised with the undemocratic practices of southern Dixiecrats (Yeah) and the blatant hypocrisy of right-wing northern Republicans. (Speak) They have something to say to every Negro (Yeah) who has passively accepted the evil system of segregation and who has stood on the sidelines in a mighty struggle for justice. They say to each of us, black and white alike, that we must substitute courage for caution. They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers. Their death says to us that we must work passionately and unrelentingly for the realization of the American dream.

And so my friends, they did not die in vain. (Yeah) God still has a way of wringing good out of evil. (Oh yes) And history has proven over and over again that unmerited suffering is redemptive. The innocent blood of these little girls may well serve as a redemptive force (Yeah) that will bring new light to this dark city. (Yeah) The Holy Scripture says, "A little child shall lead them." (Oh yeah) The death of these little children may lead our whole Southland (Yeah) from the low road of man's inhumanity to man to the high road

of peace and brotherhood. (Yeah, Yes) These tragic deaths may lead our nation to substitute an aristocracy of character for an aristocracy of color. The spilled blood of these innocent girls may cause the whole citizenry of Birmingham (Yeah) to transform the negative extremes of a dark past into the positive extremes of a bright future. Indeed this tragic event may cause the white South to come to terms with its conscience. (Yeah)

And so I stand here to say this afternoon to all assembled here, that in spite of the darkness of this hour (Yeah Well), we must not despair. (Yeah, Well) We must not become bitter (Yeah, That's right), nor must we harbor the desire to retaliate with violence. No, we must not lose faith in our white brothers. (Yeah, Yes) Somehow we must believe that the most misguided among them can learn to respect the dignity and the worth of all human personality.

May I now say a word to you, the members of the bereaved families? It is almost impossible to say anything that can console you at this difficult hour and remove the deep clouds of disappointment which are floating in your mental skies. But I hope you can find a little consolation from the universality of this experience. Death comes to every individual. There is an amazing democracy about death. It is not aristocracy for some of the people, but a democracy for all of the people. Kings die and beggars die; rich men and poor men die; old people die and young people die. Death comes to the innocent and it comes to the guilty. Death is the irreducible common denominator of all men.

I hope you can find some consolation from Christianity's affirmation that death is not the end. Death is not a period that ends the great sentence of life, but a comma that punctuates it to more lofty significance. Death is not a blind alley that leads the human race into a state of nothingness, but an open door which leads man into life eternal. Let this daring faith, this great invincible surmise, be your sustaining power during these trying days.

Now I say to you in conclusion, life is hard, at times as hard as crucible steel. It has its bleak and difficult moments. Like the ever-flowing waters of the river, life has its moments of drought and its moments of flood. (Yeah, Yes) Like the ever-changing cycle of the seasons, life has the soothing warmth of its summers and the piercing chill of its winters. (Yeah) And if one will hold on, he will discover that God walks with him (Yeah, Well), and that God is able (Yeah, Yes) to lift you from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope, and transform dark and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of inner peace.

And so today, you do not walk alone. You gave to this world wonderful children. [moans] They didn't live long lives, but they lived meaningful lives. (Well) Their lives were distressingly small in quantity, but glowingly large in quality. (Yeah) And no greater tribute can be paid to you as parents, and no greater epitaph can come to them as children, than where they died and what they were doing when they died. (Yeah) They did not die in the dives and dens of Birmingham (Yeah, Well), nor did they die discussing and listening to filthy jokes. (Yeah) They died between the sacred walls of the church of God (Yeah, Yes), and they were discussing the eternal meaning (Yes) of love. This

stands out as a beautiful, beautiful thing for all generations. (Yes) Shakespeare had Horatio to say some beautiful words as he stood over the dead body of Hamlet. And today, as I stand over the remains of these beautiful, darling girls, I paraphrase the words of Shakespeare: (Yeah, Well): Good night, sweet princesses. Good night, those who symbolize a new day. (Yeah, Yes) And may the flight of angels (That's right) take thee to thy eternal rest. God bless you.

RESOURCES

Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Cafe Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights

By David Margolick

The Creation of Jazz: Music, Race, and Culture in Urban America (Music in American Life)

By Burton W. Peretti

Jazz in Black and White: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Jazz Community

By Charley Gerard

What Is This Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists (Music of the African Diaspora)

By Eric Porter