

Jazz as Discourse:
Music, Identity, and Space

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"When my grandmother found out that I was playing jazz in one of the sporting houses in the District, she told me that I had disgraced the family and forbade me to live at the house... She told me that devil music would surely bring about my downfall, but I just couldn't put it behind me."¹

—Jelly Roll Morton (Ferdinand Lamothe)

Jazz has long occupied a place in the American popular imagination. Historians and musicians like Ken Burns and Wynton Marsalis, respectively, have characterized it as “America’s music.” And for many, its “hot rhythms”—or upbeat tempos—and exotic melodies have represented the freedom, independence, and modernity of life in the American city. Though anecdotal in nature, my many trips to New York City serve as a way to frame this study of jazz in New York City. These trips engrained in me the notion that jazz was a central part of urban life. To me, there was a definite reason why jazz was the soundtrack to the city. Its diversities of style, tempo, melodies, musicians, and audiences reflected nearly perfectly the varieties of people, cultures, languages, and lifestyles that could be found in the city. It didn’t matter, I learned early on, whether or not the people playing and listening to the music were white or black. It didn’t matter, for example, that my grandfather grew up in a nicer, predominantly Jewish neighborhood in Manhattan; he was free to lug his drum kit on the subway for a chance to play on “Swing Street” just like anyone else who felt they had something to say, especially if that person felt that words fell short.

American cities, particularly New York City, in the first part of the twentieth century were home to a myriad of peoples, cultures, languages, religions, and socio-economic classes. And urbanites interacted on a daily basis in a shared space. Within this shared space, city residents also expressed their experiences through a variety of mediums, artistic and otherwise. Urban historian Gunther Barth writes that in the city of the nineteenth century, the “apartment

¹ Qtd. Jelly Roll Morton. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/beyond/jazz.html>.

house, metropolitan press, department store, ball park, and vaudeville house” allowed urban citizens to “cope with the problems created by a rapidly expanding urban setting.”² The development of these things, according to Barth, “mirrored faithfully the struggle of city people with change and chance,” as well as, I contend, notions of identity and interaction with each other.³ “City people,” Barth asserts, “forged the new [modern, urban] culture from the elements that characterized their world.”⁴

Like the vaudeville house and ball park, jazz, too, had its roots in the “elements that characterized” the urban condition. And in this way, jazz is an “urban event” not unlike anything else that has happened, or continues to happen in American cities. Barth, in other words, could just as well have included “jazz,” “jazz clubs,” or “dance halls” in his list alongside the “apartment house...press...and vaudeville house.” The common theme among all of these urban institutions were that urban citizens constructed them as tools to express themselves and their relation to others and to cope with life in increasingly urban and modern surroundings.

Additionally, the jazz world—and, indeed, the entertainment industry in general—exemplifies what Gunther Barth describes as the display of “splendor and misery” that was “intensified [by] rapid industrialization.”⁵ Barth’s characterization of the city is undoubtedly referring to the speed and activity of urban life that was capable of producing the highest of highs, and the lowest of lows. Intimately related to this characterization, too, is the relationship that industrialization had with the concepts of modernity and notions of “progress.” To study jazz and the context in which it was created, played, and consumed reveals many of the societal and cultural tensions that such “rapid industrialization” brought on. Furthermore, a focus on jazz musicians and audiences

² Barth, 4.

³ Barth, 5.

⁴ Barth, 4.

⁵ Barth, 3.

prompts a discussion on the type of discourse in which many marginalized Americans took part. This reveals the multitude of ways in which people defined what it was to be an American in the first part of the twentieth century, precisely at the time during which the United States was emerging as a major world power.

In order to understand jazz in this way, we must first define the “modern American city” as a place of difference and of people. To do so, I will use a series of three relationships: music and space, identity and space, and identity and music. Each of these themes—identity, space, and music—is intimately related. In particular, they are all dynamic constructs that emerge from the ways in which people view themselves and interact with others.

For our purposes, “music” will be any type of musical enterprise that musicians undertook. We will consider “music” anything that musicians played on radio airwaves, in recording studios, in clubs and bars, or in apartment “cutting parties.” We will also consider “music” anything that was written down, though we will pay particular attention as to whether or not the music was played and whether or not it was ever intended for an audience. “Space,” on the other hand, will refer exclusively to urban space. “Space,” in this work, would include physical markers that denote boundaries, such as those that exist on a political map. Streets typically serve this border function. Space, to expand its definition, can also be defined as “the physical setting of social activity as situated geographically.”⁶ The areas we will be most concerned with are neighborhoods, rarely surmounting much more than several square blocks, in particular because they were the scenes of much “social activity.” The purpose of examining neighborhoods in this way is to gain an understanding of the ways in which people passed through that space and to help determine the ways in which they interacted—or in some cases,

⁶ Stokes, 3.

did not interact—with others in the city. Though, as I will show, streets were not the only part of cities that defined borders. The third theme of importance for this paper is identity. There is a plethora of definitions and interpretations of what an “identity” is. For our purposes here, we will define identity as the process that allows people to see themselves and others. Society, language, history, and ethnicity all play an important role in this process, and each will reveal itself of particular assistance in denoting different identities. Especially in terms of city life, race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status are of significant interest.

These constructs, in city life, came face to face with each other on a daily basis. Such frequent interaction continually blurred, or at the very least caused a redefinition of, the boundaries to these racial, ethnic, and social constructs and identities. As with most new experiences, there were mixed reactions. Some people embraced the change and “subversion” to mainstream values and esthetics, as Charles Hersch has called it. Yet others were afraid, chiding the change of a mixed, impure society, as a “mongrel” society, as Ann Davis has described. Similarly, Geraldine Pratt, an urban historian, has asserted with regards to identity construction in shared urban space that “we have multiple and sometimes contradictory” identities and that we “are sometimes torn between identifications, often moving between identifications in different situations and places.”⁷ Though in other cases, resistance to these multiethnic and multiracial interactions served to harden social, ethnic, and racial boundaries. Those deemed “unfit” for mainstream America, for example, were often confined, de facto, to certain districts of the city. These districts, as I will elaborate later, will be the focus of my study. It is within this framework, nevertheless, that jazz emerges as a musical expression of the urban condition, as a commercially, artistically tangible manifestation of the tensions in modern, “mongrel,” society.

⁷ Cities of Difference, 26.

The first set of themes I would like to treat is the relationship between space and identity. The way urban space was organized, particularly with regards to specific neighborhoods, had a direct impact on the ways in which people interacted. And, subsequently, spatial orientation influenced how they viewed themselves and others. There is thus a definite connection between urban space and how people constructed their identities. David Sibley's article "Outsiders in society and space" adds further depth to this perspective. He is concerned mostly with the "social construction of the outsider" and the ways in which "stereotyped images" have become a part of "popular consciousness and...confirmed marginal or residual status in advanced capitalist societies."⁸ This perspective is easily relevant to jazz musicians, most of whom were—and continue to be—black, gay, or Jewish. These groups of people were not readily accepted into mainstream American society. But through jazz—and other forms of musical entertainment found on Broadway—they were able to begin to take an active role in mainstream America. This was a discourse very much rooted in the implications, contradictions, and tensions inherent in consumption. Most of these musicians, in other words, played jazz professionally, as a means of earning a living. And many patrons of jazz—be they in jazz clubs or record shops—listened to jazz because it was "youthful" and rebellious. Many others, however, also listened to the music because it afforded them the opportunity to "culturally slum," that is, to "see how the other half

⁸ Anderson, Kay and Fay Gale, eds. *Inventing Places: Studies in Cultural Geography*. "Outsiders in Society and Space," by David Sibley, 107. Sibley, in discussing Gypsies in England, identifies several important themes that, for our purposes in this study, demand our attention as well. Sibley writes, "In popular perceptions of the Gypsy presence in modern English cities, the appropriate context for understanding Gypsy culture, that is, the world views Gypsies articulate themselves, remain largely hidden" (109-110). In many ways, this same principle is readily applicable to blacks and Jews in modern American cities. The appropriate context for understanding the jazz musician, in other words, wasn't necessarily in the limelight of the entertainment business. It wasn't when the musicians were playing for others the dance hall, but instead in the "after-hours" clubs during "jam sessions" or "cutting parties," when the musicians played for themselves.

lives” without any interaction beyond the show they received. Sibley continues, “marginal...places with [which] groups like Gypsies are often associated, confirm the outsider status of the minority...[these places] appear threatening,” and a “fear of the ‘other’ becomes a fear of place.”⁹ “The labeling,” Sibley attests, of “places as threatening,” such as the “inner city”—which “itself becomes a coded term for the imagined deviance of black minorities”—“confirms the otherness of the minorities with whom the places are associated, and relegation to marginal spaces serves to amplify deviance.”¹⁰ Pratt describes this as the “territorial[ization]” of identity and continues that “borders in space and place are tied up with social boundaries.”¹¹ Characterizations of space thus emerge as important societal markers, serving to reinforce notions about persons of specific races or ethnicities who happen to reside within those delineated areas.

The next set of themes I would like to define is the relationship between music and identity. This relationship takes two forms. The first falls under the field of ethnomusicology. It posits that expressed music is a form of expressed identity. Within this framework, for example, jazz was an expression of black, or mixed-race, urban identity. Martin Stokes’ collection of articles in *Ethnicity, Music, and Identity: The Musical Construction of Place* helps us further define jazz as a musical expression of a social and cultural identity, which, in this case, has already been situated as a product of the urban condition.¹² With regards to viewing music, much of what Stokes argues is in support of ethnomusicology as a discipline. He urges his readers to consider, as Seeger did before him, that “music is not just a thing which happens ‘in’ society,”

⁹ Sibley, 112.

¹⁰ Sibley, 112.

¹¹ Cities of Difference, 27.

¹² His work will also help us begin the discussion on our third set of themes, the relationship between music and space.

but instead that “society...might also be...conceived as something which happens ‘in music.’”¹³

As a consequence, especially as jazz in New Orleans is concerned, many jazz musicians had varying goals. According to Charles Hersch, they wanted to “make a living, express themselves,” but because of the nature of music’s relationship to cultural, social, economic, racial, and ethnic identity, “the music’s meaning and impact went beyond what they intended...”¹⁴ This irony was exacerbated with jazz’s popularization because the music, as a product of a particular notion of identity—black and urban—became relevant to those who were neither black nor urban. This wrinkle brings us to the second way in which music related to identity.

Perhaps the larger narrative within these themes is of the nature and implications of acceptance, consumption, and popularization. One of the more pertinent developments with regards to this theme is the meaning people attached to jazz upon hearing it. Or, as Stokes explains, “music ‘is’ what any social group consider it to be.”¹⁵ Of profound significance is the way people related to it in terms of their own identity. Race, ethnicity, and class all played a role in this process. Examining the ways in which jazz related to the mainstream is thus important in establishing the relationship between jazz and identity and culture. These processes indicate the degree to which jazz music and musicians were considered “American” and does a great deal towards identifying the ways in which Americans defined what was “American.” Another important development with regards to jazz’s consumption is the way in which the music changed upon reaching a more mainstream audience. This helps explain, for example, the emergence of de facto institutions like jam sessions and after hours, musicians only clubs. In regard to mainstream American “Culture,” with a capital “C,” jazz historian Lawrence Levine

¹³ Stokes, 2.

¹⁴ Hersch, 12.

¹⁵ Stokes, 5.

explains that “Jazz...at least seemed to be the product of a new age; Culture...at least seemed to be tradition...Jazz was raucous, discordant; Culture was harmonious, embodying order and reason. Jazz was accessible, spontaneous; Culture was exclusive, complex, available only through hard study and training.”¹⁶ Levine’s list continues. But the point he is making is all too clear. He correctly asserts that jazz, as a musical form, was viewed as milieu unto itself. It represented depravity, the collapse of American “moral fiber.” Musicologist Jonathan Kamin echoes this sentiment. There was resistance to jazz because there were many who thought that “its acceptance would accelerate the erosion of traditional values,” and because there were “those who had commitments to traditional academic music...”¹⁷ This is what Levine identifies as a close relationship to the European notion of culture.

In America, this meant that the argument that jazz was “sensual rather than spiritual,” for example, was more often than not an “open or thinly-veiled racist” argument “based on assumptions that other races were inferior to the white race and that maintenance of white civilization required racial purity.”¹⁸ Jazz, bluntly, was not accepted because those who played jazz were not white, Anglo-Saxon, or protestant. Because it was played by racially “impure” people, the music itself “was a corrupting influence in civilization.”¹⁹ In spite of these objections, though, and maybe in part *because* of these objections, jazz was nevertheless popularized. Though here Kamin makes an interesting point. The “direct consequence of all the moral and social pressure,” Kamin asserts, “was a change in the character of the music that reached the audience.” This is a way in which Hersch’s “racial rules” directly influenced the way that jazz evolved in the mainstream. While the nature of the music itself was changing because of social

¹⁶ Levine, 7.

¹⁷ Kamin, 280.

¹⁸ Kamin, 280.

¹⁹ Kamin, 280.

and moral pressures deemed necessary for “safe” consumption, the music was also changing because “many young whites began to perform the music...in a style more acceptable to white audiences.”²⁰ This interesting twist allows for jazz critics and aficionados to evaluate the so-called “authenticity” of the music.²¹ Jazz, in other words, “was a black music for black audiences. As elements of the white audience became interested in it, it was modified to suit their tastes,” which effectively made it more “acceptable to the more adventurous in a less avant-garde group.”²² And though “each stage reaches a larger audience through the same process,” ironically, each “larger audience has less awareness of, or commitment to, the original innovation than the previous one, and so will accept the more diluted form.”²³ This somewhat elitist perspective, while not wholly untrue, also indicates the way in which the popularization of music—in this case, jazz—can alter and “dilute” its original form. What Kamin leaves out, however, is what this “diluted” form indicates about the society that accepts it. This form of jazz may very well be viewed as a fusion. The significance of this fusion will emerge as we compare the evolution of “popular” jazz and determine whether or not it approaches a more “authentic” form of jazz.

The final set of themes the demands definition here is the relationship between music and space, which is also a central theme in Stokes’ work. Equally as important, Stokes contends, was that “the social and cultural worlds that have been shaped by modernity...would be hard to

²⁰ Kamin, 284.

²¹ This is part of the dilemma that Jews and gays introduce in New York. This is one of the ways in which the terms of discourse shifted subtly, though significantly, from New Orleans to New York.

²² Kamin, 285.

²³ Kamin, 285.

imagine without music,” in large part *because* music “informs our sense of place.”²⁴ In this way, the music becomes intimately related to our notion of space, as well. Stokes elaborates,

The musical event, from collective dances to the act of putting a cassette or CD into a machine, evokes and organises collective memories and present experiences of place with an intensity, power and simplicity unmatched by any other social activity. The ‘places’ constructed through music involve notions of difference and social boundary. They also organise hierarchies of a moral and political order (3)²⁵

Stokes, in this passage, unites almost simultaneously the themes that I have expressed just a few pages prior. In referencing “difference” and “social boundary,” Stokes effectively defines music as defining a border in its own right. In Stokes’ model, music can have the same effect as a street in terms of delineating space. The music, as a reflection and expression of a particular identity, can thus establish a cultural border akin to the border that a street might define. In so unifying these themes at once, Stokes is free to characterize music as being “socially meaningful...because it provides the means by which people recognize identities and places, and the boundaries that separate them.”²⁶ Likewise, with regards to experiencing jazz in person, Given asserts that “Jazz performance, as Travis Jackson has detailed, encompasses many frames of social activity beyond the sonic and instrumental—a live show’s time, place, broader cultural backdrop, and other considerations likewise beyond our scope here, can all be considered “musical” in a general, expansive sense.”²⁷ As with Stokes, Given maintains that music cannot only define the parameters of a space, but can indeed also inform the identity of a space.

Alan Turley examines this theme in great depth in specific regards to New Orleans, stating, “Black and Creole musicians were directly influenced by their urban and community

²⁴ Stokes, 2. Emphasis added.

²⁵ Stokes, 3.

²⁶ Stokes, 5.

²⁷ Given, 433.

environments.”²⁸ He identifies New Orleans’ altitude and status as a port city that allowed for the development of jazz. Historically, New Orleans residents had had access to brass instruments “since French colonial times, due to Napoleon Bonaparte’s encouragement of brass bands in the colonies.”²⁹ As a result, blacks in particular were “more adept musically than their Southern urban counterparts.”³⁰ Because of the city’s altitude, these brass bands were hired for funeral processions, and “because of African/Caribbean influences they played a dirge to the cemetery and sprightly ‘ragged’ melodies from the cemetery” as a means of celebrating the “soul’s entrance into heaven.”³¹ Since New Orleans is in fact located below sea level, its cemeteries are actually “composed of mausoleums and located *in* the city” as opposed to outside the city.³² This influenced the music because the procession from the cemetery, during which the band would play “ragged” melodies, would often turn into a parade, mixing “ragged” and improvised melodies, both of which were important parts of the brass band tradition. The significance of the port, according to Turley, is that “all of the social, ecological and musical elements” came together there, especially since it was the last stop on the Mississippi River. And, in addition to its domestic significance, New Orleans was “also a thriving *international* sea port.”³³ This is significant in so far as an urban area in “contact with foreign cultures and clients” must be “more tolerant of new and foreign ideas.”³⁴ It is likely that this tolerance extended to racial boundaries as well, which would have created a physical environment wherein racial, ethnic, and socio-economic class interaction were common. Turley is concerned, then, with the expression of

²⁸ Turley, 107.

²⁹ Turley, 110.

³⁰ Turley, 110.

³¹ Turley, 110.

³² Turley, 110. Emphasis in original.

³³ Turley, 110. Emphasis in original.

³⁴ Turley, 110.

ethnicity and identity through music according to terms defined by the environment in which the musicians and audience live.

As a “test case” of the themes I have just explained, I offer a brief analysis of New Orleans. Jazz, as renowned pianist Jelly Roll Morton alludes, was many things. Some people perceived jazz as a dirty music, devoid of any sophistication, structure, or elegance. Others, such as Jelly Roll himself, found exoticism, a creative outlet and means of expression, and an unrelenting attraction. We might say that jazz diverges from its European and African roots, representing a “uniquely American” mix of the two types of music. But this perspective, in large part, marginalizes the majority of complexities of race relations and class dynamics.³⁵ It leaves out, in other words, the role that urban space played in impacting how people viewed themselves and others. It is no surprise, then, jazz’s story is often uncertain and at times difficult to grasp all at once. Even the origin of the word “jazz” itself is shrouded in a narrative approaching mystery.³⁶

Musicians like Jelly Roll, who played in areas notorious for seedy activity, such as the District, endowed jazz with a particular reputation. For some, such as Ida Tarbell quoted in a *Times-Picayune* editorial, it was simply “a very irritating thing” that “assaults the nerves and dulls the brain.” For Tarbell, she saw jazz as having a “demoralizing effect,” due in no small part to the fact that “Drink is its natural accompaniment.”³⁷ The ways in which Tarbell associates jazz with other social milieu reveals a great deal more than we might expect. Later in the editorial, a “nerve specialist quoted by a New York newspaper” contends that jazz is “very bad for the world

³⁵ Hersch, Charles. *Subversive Sounds: Race and the Birth of Jazz in New Orleans*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago (2007).

³⁶ Some sources contend that the word “jazz” is derived from sex.

³⁷ Baskin, Frederic J. “New York Wages Bitter War on Merits of Jazz: New Play Which Treats of Syncopation Starts Controversy.” *Times-Picayune*: New Orleans, 29 March, 1922, p. 25.

in general” and a “well known priest declares” that jazz is “‘rotten,’ leading to ‘all sorts of lascivious dancing and destroying whatever taste for good music there might be.’”³⁸ For Tarbell and others critical of jazz, the music was not a positive fusion of European and African musical elements. It was, instead, an affront to their sensibilities and, most importantly, a threat to the ways in which they had constructed their identities. As New Orleans and jazz historian Charles Hersch points out, a man of mixed race both “jazzing” popular songs and playing “jazz” tunes represented “musical miscegenation” of music with European and African origins.³⁹ Hersch even points out that many saw that the music’s rhythms “subverted sexual purity” too.⁴⁰ This was undoubtedly due to the hip gyrations that jazz music encouraged.

But Tarbell’s perceived threats to her identity are justified. Particularly because she was not from Storyville, she viewed that space, as well as those who lived in it, with relative hostility. Again, Hersch provides the impetus for this claim. He contends that “jazz did in fact subvert racial segregation, musically enacting and abetting Plessy’s [spatial] assault on white purity...jazz arose out of and encouraged racial boundary crossings by crating racially mixed spaces and racially impure music, both of which altered the racial identities of musicians and listeners.”⁴¹ What this further implies is that, according to modern theorists, race is a socially constructed product dependent in large part on context.⁴² And, not unlike the music itself, these constructed identities were forged and dependent on life in and around the District.

In this way, though, the music emerges as one of many musical forms that New Orleans citizens played at the turn of the century. Charles Hersch astutely points out, for example, that

³⁸ Baskin, Frederic J.

³⁹ Hersch, 5.

⁴⁰ Hersch, 5.

⁴¹ Hersch, 5.

⁴² Hersch, 7.

even those “classic jazzmen” did not always play solely what we might consider “jazz.” “If one simply looks at the variety of songs King Oliver recorded,” Hersch reasons, “it is difficult to make the case that they are all the same kind of music: blues (‘Dippermouth Blues’); multipart rags (‘Weather Bird Rag’); popular songs (‘Sweet Lovin’ Man’); indefinable performances like ‘Sobbin’ Blues,’ which is not a blues but a sentimental tune featuring a ‘sobbing’ slide whistle; and evocations of Chopin’s funeral march (‘Dead Man Blues’).” Hersch also reminds his readers that jazz great King Oliver “recorded...a small fraction of what he played.” Music fans are also subsequently left without “recordings of the waltzes, mazurkas, schottisches, and national anthems that the band played in countless gigs.”⁴³ From this characterization of music in the District, there emerges a significant question with regards to defining jazz. If “jazz” was just one of many different types of popular, entertaining music, then how did it distinguish itself as a “sui generis,” and something that many acknowledged as “new and different”?⁴⁴ What made this particular brand of music, in other words, so important and powerfully communicative? Furthermore, how did this impact the way in which jazz aficionados would look at jazz history? In large part, I contend, the music’s significance comes from its very characteristics, and the values that music critics ascribed to it. It was, and continues to be, a mix of styles, interpretations, grooves, and, perhaps above all, so-called “hot” rhythms.

* * *

Each of the neighborhoods I will examine—Harlem, Broadway, and Greenwich Village in New York City—all exhibit to one degree or another these and other characterizations of urban space. Each of these urban spaces, more importantly, continues the racial, ethnic, and economic conversation that started in New Orleans though on subtle, albeit significantly

⁴³ Hersch, 208.

⁴⁴ Osgood, 513.

different, terms. These differences helped bring jazz to the forefront of American popular culture and served as a gateway through which musicians could begin to think about their place in American society. To think about it another way, consider that the music, like each of the things in Barth's list, is a product of the ways in which people occupy urban space. To view jazz in New York City, a burgeoning capital of culture and diversity, allows us to see how different urban spaces had an impact on the ways in which jazz was created, promoted, consumed, and accepted in the twentieth century. In New York City, we see the ways in which gays, Jews, and other immigrants added to the discourse that already existed between blacks, whites, and creoles in New Orleans.

One of the larger goals of this paper is that each of the four chapters will demonstrate the relationship between urban space, urban people, and music, positioning jazz not as an inevitable creation, but instead understanding it as a musical form on its own terms, as a product of the specific time and space in which it originated and was popularized. New Orleans historian Charles Hersch characterizes this understanding succinctly, writing, "society's racial rules, customs, expectations, and prohibitions influenced the creation and development of jazz."⁴⁵ In New Orleans, as I will show, these racial rules stemmed in part from a national consciousness of race that was very much related to the decision handed down in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and the way that New Orleans jazz musicians subverted the pre-existing binary notion of race.⁴⁶ Furthermore, racial identity in New Orleans had a great deal to do with its European history and the emergence of a creole middle class. "Miscegenation," or as Ann Davis calls it, "mongrelization," of American society becomes the backbone in the discourse of constructing American identity. In New York City, the conversation becomes more complex. The influx of

⁴⁵ Hersch, 8.

⁴⁶ Charles Hersch's introduction is immensely helpful in establishing this framework.

diverse ethnic and immigrant identities, including Jews from Eastern and Western Europe and blacks from Caribbean islands, add depth and new and different contradictions to the racial discourse that began in New Orleans. For many Jews, in particular, race continued to be an issue, especially in terms of “whiteness.” Racial “purity” continued to be an issue, and both Jews and gays were viewed as corrupting influences to that construct, a mainstream identity of its own.

The significance of the neighborhoods I selected for my study is that with each phase, jazz becomes more acceptable to mainstream American society. This implies a certain acceptance for those who were marginalized from American society as well. Yet, as jazz becomes more acceptable in one sense, it simultaneously becomes more rebellious in another. Though race never ceases to be an important part of the music, jazz’s anti-mainstream appeal broadens over time to those who feel slighted for reasons other than race. Furthermore, this investigation raises questions regarding the validity of notions of a so-called “pure” race or “pure” culture. The responses to jazz as a threat to racial and cultural “purity” also indicate the nature of identity construction in general in twentieth century American society.

Chapter 1: The Fetish of “Black Harlem” and “Negro Jazz”

In terms of the relationships between racial and cultural identity, place, and music, perhaps no place is better suited to begin our discussion of jazz in New York City than Harlem. This section of New York City, encompassing “less than two square miles of northern Manhattan,” was nevertheless a center of cultural activity, offering “a kaleidoscope of literary, political, and hedonistic activity unmatched anywhere in the United States.”⁴⁷ Art, music—including jazz—poetry, and literature were all widely produced, circulated, and consumed. Yet the nightlife in particular, including the jazz scene, was most identifiable in its racial association. The vast majority of residents in Harlem were blacks that had taken part in what is now known as the Great Migration. It was this movement, along with the Harlem Renaissance, that allowed for the continuation of the racial conversation that began in New Orleans, to which this work alludes in the introduction.

It is my goal in this chapter to hash out the ways in which this discourse took shape in Harlem. In particular, I hope to use the perception of a “Negro Harlem” and the construction of the “New Negro” racial identity to delineate and discuss how jazz evolved in Harlem.⁴⁸ The first section of this chapter thus treats the themes of space and identity. The Harlem Renaissance and the themes that propelled that artistic movement define this relationship. Furthermore, the Harlem Renaissance, of which jazz was a large and important part, will help make the connection between space and music. Specifically, too, this discussion demands that we give close attention to the nightlife in Harlem. This section will deal with the relationship between music and space. In particular, the Cotton Club will help define the nightlife itself as well as the contradictions, tensions, ironies, and frustrations that grew out of consumption of that nightlife.

⁴⁷ Watson, 3.

⁴⁸ Balshaw, 307. Balshaw uses the term “Negro Harlem” to characterize Harlem’s racial makeup.

Perhaps the most interesting piece of this discussion will be the dichotomy that existed between commercialized jazz and non-commercialized jazz, centering around the question of jazz “authenticity.” This dichotomy, which we can find well illustrated in the workings of the Cotton Club, will demonstrate the extent to which popularization and consumption of jazz changed the meaning of the music and allowed for predominantly white audiences to continue to pigeonhole and stereotype jazz musicians. In this way, this final section will deal with the relationship between music and identity. The chapter will close with the effects of the Great Depression on the Harlem Renaissance and the role of the repeal of Prohibition and the 1935 race riot in causing yet another “migration” to midtown Manhattan.⁴⁹

Throughout this discourse, it is imperative to keep in mind several things. Perhaps most important is the understanding that just as New Orleans’ unique mixture of race, ethnicity, and class created a culture in which musicians played “jazz,” as well as other styles such as ragtime and the blues, so, too, did New York City’s emergence as the “capital of [American] culture” in the 1920s and 1930s play an equally significant role in jazz’s maturation and propagation.⁵⁰ To

⁴⁹ Though race is undoubtedly a fundamental part of this conversation, I will not necessarily rely on in the way I do in this chapter again until chapter 3. Race seemingly decreases in importance because of the influence of Jews and gays on Broadway and in other midtown areas. This represents, in large part, a major repercussion of consumption in that white audiences in Harlem chose to consume merely *part* of the scene. In isolating the music from the people, the culture, and the place of “Harlem,” they continued to marginalize the black community from mainstream America. This comes to a head, arguably, during Benny Goodman’s—a Jewish musician—concert in Carnegie Hall in 1938. The irony here is that jazz, on the one hand, was being celebrated as “modern,” “American” music, the music of a new cultural empire in New York; while on the other hand, the audiences of this music were, perhaps unwittingly, continuing to marginalize and exclude the very creative elements of the music. This sets the stage for chapter 3, wherein race, lo and behold, once again emerges as a major issue. The importance of the Civil Rights Movement and the ideologies of the Beat Generation cannot be overlooked in describing how jazz made yet *another* migration to Greenwich Village, seeking out perhaps the most tolerant, open, and accepting space on the island of Manhattan. Equally as important, this “migration” is not necessarily of a people, but instead of an aesthetic, interpretations of jazz.

⁵⁰ Douglass, Ann. *Mongrel Manhattan*.

tell the story of jazz in New York, in other words, is also to tell the story of America's emergence as a "modern," twentieth century empire. Jazz in New York served the same purposes as jazz in New Orleans twenty years earlier. It provided, particularly to those marginalized groups, a somewhat provocative means of questioning and challenging the nature of American identity. This discussion is most clearly evident in the ways in which jazz interacted with, and to some extent came to define, American popular consumerism culture and music. It is important to also keep in mind the implications of this consumption. In New York, unlike in New Orleans, "jazz became a national product...sparking debate about authentic and inauthentic that never *could* have happened in New Orleans, since there it was just 'music' for whatever an occasion demanded."⁵¹ The reality was that each "brand of jazz"—whether ragtime, Dixieland, or big band—was genuine in its own right.⁵² What the case of jazz in Harlem will demonstrate is the degree to which even the popularized, or "whitened," jazz influenced the nature of the popular perception of what it meant to be "American" in the 1910s and 20s.

In order to fully and faithfully examine the relationships between these themes, a bit of background on the Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance, respectively, are necessary. Additionally, and equally as important, will be characterizations of New York City as an emerging metropolis in a global sense, and in particular a leading center of musical publishing and innovation. The discourse on race and defining what it means to be "American" thus takes on added significance here in that it played out not only on the national stage, but also on the world stage. Duke Ellington, perhaps the most preeminent figure in jazz, also posits that "new

⁵¹ Hersch, Charles. *Subversive Sounds*, 210. Emphasis added.

⁵² Burke, Patrick. *Come In and Hear the Truth*, 2. It is important to recall the nature of acceptance as described by Kamin, and that each "round" of acceptance "dilutes" the nature and originality of the music. In making the music more consumable, that is, some of the initial significance of the music is altered, according to the demands of predominantly white audiences, musicians, and concert promoters looking to add to their bottom line.

music” was being played first in the West Indies, New Orleans, and Chicago. But it was not until they all “converged in New York and blended together” that what we know as “jazz emerge[d] as a widespread and recognized popular art form.”⁵³ It would not be a stretch to characterize the discourse of competing notions of what it meant to be “American” in the same way. Yes, it is true these discussions were going on elsewhere in America, just as “new music” was being played elsewhere. But it took New York City, and Harlem in particular, to discuss these themes on a national level.

The relationship between Harlem and blacks was cemented in the first decade of the twentieth century. Prior to the World War I, as much as “90 percent of America’s Negro population still lived in the South, 78 percent in the countryside.”⁵⁴ With the rapid mass industrialization of the United States, particularly in Northern cities, many of these “Negroes” found the potential for greater economic and social freedom than they had previously experienced. This mass movement of blacks from rural areas in the South to more urban and industrialized cities in the North between the years 1900 and 1930 is known as the Great Migration. As with international migrations, historians discuss the Great Migration in terms of “push” and “pull” factors. That is, reasons why groups of people decide to leave an area—or are “pushed” away—and reasons why they decide to arrive in another area—or are “pulled” toward. Specifically, Stewart Tolnay and E.M. Beck identify economic and social reasons. “The consensus,” they write, “seems to be that the precipitating causes [of the boll weevil infestation and flooding] combined with festering economic dissatisfaction to trigger the black exodus.”⁵⁵ Economically speaking, for example, the “push factors operating on blacks were formidable,”

⁵³ Qtd. Ann Douglass. *Mongrel*, 15.

⁵⁴ Douglass, Ann. *Mongrel*, 73.

⁵⁵ Tolnay and Beck, 348.

particularly in the years following Emancipation.⁵⁶ Furthermore, there was “little hope of moving up the ‘agricultural ladder,’” meaning that black farmers perpetually occupied the lowest economic level.⁵⁷ By the same token, these “push” factors “translated into migration...when there was a promise of better conditions elsewhere.”⁵⁸ Historian Joe William Trotter, Jr., affirms this characterization of the causes of migration. Citing an article in the *African Methodist American Church Review*, Trotter concludes that there were indeed many “forcers that propelled blacks out of the South.”⁵⁹ Likewise, many “African Americans were...attracted by the pull of opportunities in the North.”⁶⁰ Quantitatively speaking, and in New York’s case in particular, “one in seventy people in Manhattan” was black in 1890; yet, just 40 years later, “one in every nine” was black.⁶¹ Stewart E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck estimate this percentage to constitute roughly “170,000 blacks” between 1900 and 1910, 450,000 in the following decade, and 750,000 in the 1920s.⁶² To this extent, the racial character of Manhattan, as exemplified in Harlem, changed dramatically in this roughly 30-year period.

Perhaps the most important consequence of this rapid influx of blacks to New York City is that the vast majority of them chose to settle in Harlem. Using Sibley’s and Pratt’s conceptualizations of space and identity, it is evident how Harlem became known in some circles as “Negro Harlem,” as Maria Balshaw describes, and as “a seething cauldron of Nubian mirth and hilarity.”⁶³ This “seething cauldron,” most historians agree, began with a World War I victory parade. Veterans of the “Fifteenth Regiment of New York’s National Guard marched

⁵⁶ Tolnay and Beck, 352.

⁵⁷ Tolnay and Beck, 352.

⁵⁸ Tolnay and Beck, 353.

⁵⁹ Trotter, 31.

⁶⁰ Trotter, 31.

⁶¹ Douglass, Ann. *Mongrel*, 73.

⁶² Tolnay and Beck, 348.

⁶³ Watson, 4. Quoting a *Variety Magazine* description of Harlem.

home to Harlem” on February 17, 1919.⁶⁴ The all-black regiment’s experience in the Great War instilled in them a national and racial pride that, upon returning home to New York, and Harlem, injected their communities with a new sense of themselves. Leading intellectuals, such as W.E.B. DuBois and Alan LeRoy Locke, helped coin the term “New Negro.” The new image of the “Harlem hero,” for example, was no longer the “soldier on the battlefield, but the cultural nationalist in the parlor.”⁶⁵ This would be the cornerstone idea for the intellectual movement towards defining and promulgating a “black aesthetic” known as the Harlem Renaissance. Harlem Renaissance historian Steven Watson describes the implications and importance of the “New Negro.” The “avant-garde buzzword, ‘new,’” he writes, had vast implications. To speak of “the New Woman” or “the New Art,” for example, “blurred the boundaries between aesthetics, politics, and life style...” and likewise, “‘the New Negro’ movement embraced...race-building...jazz poetics, progressive or socialist politics, racial integration, the musical and sexual freedom of Harlem nightlife, and the pursuit of hedonism.”⁶⁶ Harlem’s cultural, intellectual, and entertainment activity inspired Langston Hughes to coin the term “Jazzonia.” This was what he and many others considered to be a “new world of escape and release...a place where the bold eyes of white girls called to black men, and ‘dark brown girls’ were found ‘in blond men’s arms’...it [had] a certain strident and hectic quality, and there [were] overtones of weariness and despair” could be found there.⁶⁷ Harlem, to the popular imagination, at least, was the epicenter of exoticism. It was the bastion of a type of “Negro bohemianism,” and the Jazz Age incarnate. Watson explains, “The fascination with Harlem was accompanied by the new objectification of the Negro as an exotic icon. As one observer put it, ‘To Americans, the Negro is not a human

⁶⁴ Watson, Lewis, Tolnay, and Beck.

⁶⁵ Watson, 15.

⁶⁶ Watson, 9.

⁶⁷ Davis, 277.

being but a concept.”⁶⁸ Likewise, as a result of the American “attention...upon the Negro artist and scholar...Harlem became a gathering place for downtown intellectuals and Bohemians.”⁶⁹

The dichotomy of the implications of consumption is set as many of these “downtown intellectuals and Bohemians” truly sought knowledge and understanding of “Negro art and culture,” while others were “merely looking for exotic thrills in the black community.”⁷⁰ Harlem was, simply, “the Mecca” of black intellectualism, art, and life. In his characterization of Harlem and its significance as a representation of the relationship between space and identity, it is inextricably bound with the implications of consumption.

The tensions and implications of whites consuming black music and entertainment were clearly illustrated in the Cotton Club, and played on the nature of the relationship between music and identity. The daily entertainment at the Cotton Club, a white-owned cabaret that catered exclusively to white audiences, was most representative of Harlem nightlife and its contradictions. Located in the heart of what was then known as “Jungle Alley,” the Cotton Club was perhaps the biggest, most well known, most lavish, and most strictly enforced segregation establishment in Harlem. Harlem historian Jim Haskins describes the scene as “A whites-only nightclub in the heart of Harlem...the Cotton Club was a bastion of glamorous contradiction and the perfect symbol of its era.”⁷¹ In large part, Haskins’ characterization of the Cotton Club as a “glamorous contradiction” comes from its strictly enforced policy of segregation. It was this policy “which made it the most comfortable stop for a first-timer to Harlem” because “one could

⁶⁸ Watson, 105.

⁶⁹ Davis, 276.

⁷⁰ Davis, 276.

⁷¹ Haskins, introduction.

view the black-white maelstrom without actually descending into it.”⁷² Harlem historian Steven Watson continues, describing the

Prefabricated exoticism neatly choreographed on a proscenium stage a few yards away was anything but frightening. The Cotton Club was not the only Harlem club that catered to white audiences, but it was the largest, featured the most extravagant shows, charged the highest prices, and most strictly enforced the color line. (125)

The fact that this type of club was not only successful, but arguably the *most* successful and well known in history indicates a great deal about how people at the time associated black identity with jazz music. It is doubtful, in other words, that many of the white patrons in the Cotton Club did not view jazz as the source of moral depravity and decadence. As we saw in the introductory case study of New Orleans, opposition to jazz, even in New York, was widespread. In March of 1922, for example, a play entitled *The National Anthem* elicited a strong objection to jazz. As a bill to “regulate modern dancing and dance music” was making its way around the New York Legislature, “New Yorkers of prominence, including many in the theater and in the pulpit, are eloquently voicing their views on the subject.”⁷³ These views, the article continues, were divided between those who thought jazz was “acceptable” and those who thought jazz was “corrupting.” The playwright’s wife, for example, objects to jazz because “When you become accustomed to the pronounced rhythm [and dance] you are unable to get that beautiful relaxation which comes from the appreciation of fine music.”⁷⁴

Yet, the white crowds continued to flock to the Cotton Club and Harlem not in spite of, but *because* of the way they commoditized the “New Negro.” This “new” construct of racial and

⁷² Watson, 125. The audience had only to delve as far into “the jungle” as the exotic “jungle décor” demanded of them, which was very little. Every table, in other words, was full of whites.

⁷³ Baskin, Frederic J. “New York Wages Bitter War on Merits of Jazz.” *Times-Picayune*, March 29, 1922, p. 25.

⁷⁴ Baskin, Frederic J. “New York Wages Bitter War on Merits of Jazz.” *Times-Picayune*, March 29, 1922, p. 25.

cultural identity represented a very real attempt by black artists, musicians, and intellectuals to gain racial equality. To the majority of whites, though, the “New Negro” was merely a fad. The “New Negro,” in other words, “perfectly satisfied progressive America’s psychological and intellectual needs of the moment,” represented white America’s aspirations spiritually, religiously, sensually, and morally.⁷⁵ Accordingly, as a “symbol of the Jazz Age, the Negro was enlisted by high bohemia in its war against the Babbitts, the bluenoses, and the Republicans who ruled the nation.”⁷⁶ The profound irony is that the majority of mainstream America were consuming jazz and black entertainment because of scenes like that at the Cotton Club, shows that “promoted a strictly regulated version of beauty that would be acceptable to white audiences—the homogenous sepia chorus line was composed uniformly of ‘high yaller’ female dancers who were under twenty-one years of age and over five foot six in height.”⁷⁷ And even in Duke Ellington’s band, a reviewer for *Variety* magazine “described the chorus as ‘almost Caucasian high yaller girls,’” meaning that the dancers and backup talent looked almost white in complexion.⁷⁸ And in some cases, “unorthodox scoring was enthusiastically accepted by the management [of the club] when it became clear that customers interpreted the sound of the band...as ‘jungle music.’”⁷⁹ “Being promoted to icon status,” in other words, “did little to raise

⁷⁵ Watson, 105. This is an important segue in identifying one of the ways in which race seemingly became less important. Because of its socially exalted status, “being black” was reduced in large part to an accepted part of the terms and conditions of the entertainment industry. In this way, it became wholly acceptable, and indeed expected of major productions, to include white performers in black face. This is where the study of Al Jolson’s *The Jazz Singer* can serve as an example of the ways in which differing ethnicities and religions began to take a part in the discourse of American national identity in the 1920s and through the 1930s.

⁷⁶ Watson, 105.

⁷⁷ Watson, 126.

⁷⁸ Lawrence, 112.

⁷⁹ Lawrence, 115.

the financial fortunes of black Americans, nor did it break widespread Jim Crow laws.”⁸⁰ Harlem nightlife instead perpetuated much of what Reconstruction-era minstrel shows made popular at the end of the nineteenth century. Perhaps the most pertinent description of the Cotton Club comes from Marshall Stearns. Recalling a show, he describes:

where a light-skinned and magnificently muscled Negro burst through a papier-mâché jungle onto the dance floor clad in an aviator’s helmet, goggles, and shorts. He had been forced down in darkest Africa, and in the center of the floor he came upon a ‘white’ goddess clad in long, blonde tresses and being worshiped by a circle of cringing ‘blacks.’ Producing a bullwhip from heaven knows where, he rescued the blonde and they did an erotic dance. In the background, Bubber Miley, Tricky Sam Nanton and members of the Ellington band growled, wheezed and snorted obscenely. (quoted in Lawrence 116)

It is accurate to posit that Harlem represented, to “a broad swath of hedonists—from international chic society to Greenwich Village bohemians,” little more than “the perfect place to cap off a night at the theater or to diffuse the tensions of a hectic business day.”⁸¹ This only deepened the association that Americans, and New Yorkers in particular, had with music and identity, jazz and “blackness” in Harlem.

Black artists and musicians were viewed as a novelty and as a source of entertainment. And as more and more whites descended upon Harlem to absorb “Negro culture,” Nathan Huggins wrote, “Into [Harlem’s] vortex white ladies and gentleman were pulled, to dance the jungle dance...bodies thrust, clenched eyes and teeth, staccato breath, sweat-bodies writhing and rolling with a drum and a beat...” And Jimmy Durante proclaimed, “You go sort of primitive up there.”⁸² Lena Horne, “who danced in the Cotton Club’s chorus line in the early 1930s, recalled, ‘The shows had a primitive, naked quality that was supposed to make a civilized audience lose

⁸⁰ Watson, 105.

⁸¹ Watson, 109.

⁸² Lawrence, 116.

its inhibitions'...The Cotton Club was the place where curious whites could travel uptown and, for the price of dinner and a few drinks, could have a vicarious sexual experience. For those repressed souls who were unwilling or unable to experience it at home, black dancers, singers, and musicians would act out their own sexuality accompanied by music..."⁸³ A.H. Lawrence, in these passages, does two things. He first affirms the notion that certain spots in Harlem were destinations because of the way they played on the relationship between jazz and a particular "Negro" identity characterized by moral looseness, over-sensuality, and deep spirituality. Yet, what he also does is to indicate a more "repressed" appeal. That is, he identifies that part of this attraction to black entertainment was not racist in nature, but instead stemmed from a desire to act the way the performers did on stage. While on the one hand these stage performances reinforced stereotypes and racism, on the other hand they provided a "vicarious" experience for others who felt marginalized by mainstream American expectations and rules.

The disconnect between Harlem as "black space" and the strictly enforced policies of segregation at first seems disconcerting. Jonathan Kamin's and Scott Levine's characterizations of music and identity, however, help us understand that racism was one of, if not the primary, driving forces that created "moral and social pressures" that in turn changed "the character of the music that reached the audience."⁸⁴ The music at the Cotton Club was not of the same ilk of the music at rent parties or at after hours, musicians only jam sessions, which included "cutting contests" that demanded innovation and creativity, musical dexterity and a level of expression that was more often than not lacking in an environment like the Cotton Club.

On the other hand, Harlem historian Steven Watson describes that "the decibel level went up after 3:00 A.M., when New York's curfew law shuttered the city's legitimate cabarets" and that

⁸³ Lawrence, 116.

⁸⁴ Kamin, 284.

at this point in the night, when most of the white audiences, save for the very adventurous, had returned downtown, that “moonlighting performers dropped into the clubs that had paid off the police for ‘special charters’...The activity at institutions like the Sugar Cane continued in high key until piercing seven o’clock whistled warned that a new work day was about to begin.”⁸⁵ It is not unlikely that the Sugar Cane, during regular business hours, was a club much less like the Cotton Club in that it was not as segregated or “diluted.”⁸⁶ At places where musicians played in this way, in the side streets near “Jungle Alley,” one could also find “cocaine and marijuana” as well as the “less-elegant boîtes that attracted a more racially mixed crowd.”⁸⁷ It was this scene that popular culture more or less ignored in Harlem. But, paradoxically and ironically, it was also this scene that inspired the Cotton Club; perversions and misinterpretations, that is, of “Negro culture.” This consumer-driven attitude created both tensions and ironies and cheapened, at the same time, the relationship between the identity and the music by making the identity a spectacle of entertainment. Crowds at places like the Sugar Cane, on 135th at Fifth Avenue, for example, “included only a sprinkling of white customers” because “this...was the fringe of adventure.”⁸⁸ Writer Wallace Thurman, himself a resident of Harlem, remembers the Sugar Cane, “on Fifth Avenue near 135th Street,” as having been “located on the border of the most ‘low-down’ section of Harlem. This place is visited by few whites or few “dicty” Negroes. Its customers are the rough-and-ready, happy-go-lucky more primitive type--street walkers, petty gamblers and pimps, with an occasional adventurer from other strata of society.”⁸⁹ For Thurman, the “other strata” is not the black in Harlem, but rather the white from downtown. And, as one might

⁸⁵ Watson, 129.

⁸⁶ To borrow Jonathan Kamin’s term.

⁸⁷ Watson, 128.

⁸⁸ Watson, 129.

⁸⁹ Quoted from <http://faculty.pittstate.edu/~knichols/vogue.html>

expect, “Harlem's famed night clubs [such as the Cotton Club] have become merely side shows staged for sensation-seeking whites.” And in Thurman’s opinion, they “approximate the infectious rhythm and joy always found in a Negro cabaret.”⁹⁰

Because most of the residential buildings in Harlem were not black-owned, rent tended to be “\$12 to \$30 a month higher than in other areas of Manhattan,” despite the fact that “salaries paid to African Americans were lower than those of their white counterparts.”⁹¹ In response, many residents decided to entertain through “rent parties.” These parties also clearly demonstrated the connection of Harlem’s identity to the Great Migration. “Cheap proletarian food, redolent of the South, filled the kitchen. These events, which were Harlemized versions of the jook-joint parties in the deep South, reminded many immigrants of their roots.”⁹² These rent parties, particularly through this characterization, also clearly delineate the ways in which space and identity were related. The migrants from southern cities and towns adapted the cultural institution of “jook-joint parties” to the more “modern” and “industrialized” urban setting. The significance of the urban setting on Harlem residents’ black and Southern identity is that the city engendered more relationships and exposure to the mainstream and popular American cultures. The very spectacles of the performance shows at the Cotton Club, for example, were mimicking, in a “white-friendly” fashion, the events at these rent parties.

It is in the Cotton Club that we would have seen the greatest and most profound dilution not only of jazz and its original meaning, but also “New Negro” sensibilities, which had become, in the “jungle décor” setting of the Cotton Club, complete with its “sepia” chorus line, a near-parody of the Harlem Renaissance altogether. It was a sham of modernism. Furthermore, jazz in

⁹⁰ Quoted from <http://faculty.pittstate.edu/~knichols/vogue.html>

⁹¹ Watson, 130.

⁹² Watson, 131.

a place like the Cotton Club represented not the constructs of identity and music according to the marginalized, but instead the refraction of jazz through racist and patriarchal notions of culture and society, resulting in the creation of sterile environments in which affluent, downtown whites viewed the exotic, attractive “New Negro” from a safe distance. Constructs of the mainstream, in other words, trumped the constructs of the marginalized themselves, despite the fact that the marginalized created and played the music. This is wholly indicative of the way in which controlling space implied a control of society, particularly when one considers the fact that although a great number of blacks lived in Harlem, very few actually owned any property.⁹³ That is, “The saloons were run by the Irish, the restaurants by the Greeks, the ice and fruit stands by the Italians, the grocery and haberdashery stores by the Jews,” according to Claude McKay. “The only Negro business,” he continues, “were the churches and the cabarets.”⁹⁴ Langston Hughes chided the irony, likening the scene to “amusing animals in a zoo.”⁹⁵

As one might expect, this frustration could only hold out as frustration for so long before some people decided to take action. This action came in the form of rioting and looting, starting on March 19, 1925.⁹⁶ Following the riot, a series of articles appeared in the *New York Times* attempting to analyze and draw conclusions as to the causes of the riot and how to resolve the circumstances. Even years later, in 1943, an article reflecting on the more recent riot of 1942 likened both racially-charged outbursts as “an explosion induced by pent-up feelings of resentment.”⁹⁷ Among the principle causes of the riot, according to a “Topics of the Times” piece published just three days after the riots, were “economic maladjustment” and

⁹³ Sibley, 112.

⁹⁴ Claude McKay, qtd. in Watson, 13.

⁹⁵ Quoted from <http://faculty.pittstate.edu/~knichols/vogue.html>

⁹⁶ Lewis, 306.

⁹⁷ “Riots in Harlem Analyzed,” *The New York Times*. 6 August, 1943; page 14.

“discrimination against the colored people in the matter of employment.”⁹⁸ A significant part of the problem also had to do with the irony that not many blacks actually owned property in Harlem. “Harlem has got to feel,” the op-ed affirms, “that more colored clerks and salespeople should be employed in retail businesses that cater so largely to Negroes.”⁹⁹ This piece takes a somewhat surprised tone, even going so far as to condone the sentiments behind the riots, but condemn the riots themselves. The more insightful and progressive pieces are a letter to the editor, the 1943 article, and an op-ed piece titled “Harlem Riots Laid to Neglect by City.” In the “Neglect” piece, the author asserts, “The recent Harlem riots ‘have surprised no one who has been in touch with the condition under which we have permitted our Negro fellow-citizens to live.’”¹⁰⁰ Among the root causes of frustration leading to the riot, this article asserts, was the condition of children who needed extra care, but who did not necessarily qualify as “neglected children.”¹⁰¹ Perhaps the most important piece in *The New York Times* was a letter to the editor that appeared in the March 23, 1935, publication. Progressive in tone, the letter expresses outrage that “These people [in Harlem], loyal as they have been to America’s causes, are still looked upon as aliens without any given rights of privileges.”¹⁰² Because the people of Harlem “sense antagonism when they apply for help” and because they “paid the same taxes for their homes; paid the same price for an inferior grade of food,” they are right to be upset.¹⁰³ Likewise, “Intellectual Harlem” is justified in being “resentful of its lack of representation.”¹⁰⁴ The condition of blacks in Harlem, characterized by joblessness, poor wages, inflated rents, and an

⁹⁸ “Topics of the Times,” *The New York Times*. 22 March, 1935: page 22.

⁹⁹ “Topics of the Times.”

¹⁰⁰ “Harlem Riots Laid to Neglect by City,” *The New York Times*. 13 April, 1935; page 3.

¹⁰¹ “Harlem Riots Laid to Neglect by City,” *The New York Times*. 13 April, 1935; page 3.

¹⁰² Jacksen, Malcom Aage. “Letter to the Editor,” *The New York Times*. 23 March, 1935; page 14.

¹⁰³ Jacksen.

¹⁰⁴ Jacksen.

exhibitionist quality of life for downtown whites, came to a head in March 1935. Imagine the frustration, for example, of a musician like Benny Carter, Fletcher Henderson, or Duke Ellington upon seeing that there was only one black musician in an advertisement for *Downbeat Magazine's* "All Star Band."

"Harlem nightlife continued to flourish until the 1933 repeal of the Volstead Act ending Prohibition finished off Uptown nightclubs. The sophisticated sounds of swing overtook the blues, and the jazz center moved down to Fifty-second Street. Save for a few institutions like...the Cotton Club...there was less emphasis on troupes of sepia chorines and extravaganza. The action moved instead to the divier speakeasies where the gin was stiffer and rockier. Because fewer blacks could afford the clubs, interracial mixing declined."¹⁰⁵ This represented, in part, an attempt to recapture a more "authentic" urban jazz sound. The move away from Harlem took its cue from two things that ended the Romantic, exotic, and consumable perception of the "New Negro Renaissance." These events were the repeal of Prohibition, as Watson alludes above, and the 1935 Harlem race riots. The appeal of Prohibition took with it the attraction of the "Uptown club" scene because of the way white audiences consumed it. The "New Negro" no longer served the functions it had for progressive America. And the riot illustrated, in no uncertain terms, the profundity of the tension that partial, sterilized consumption of diluted jazz at racially segregated places like the Cotton Club had produced.

¹⁰⁵ Watson, 158.

Chapter 2: Claiming Ownership in the Media and Cultural Capital of the World

As New Yorkers became disillusioned with the allure of Harlem nightlife, due in large part to the end of Prohibition and the riots of 1935, jazz migrated and found a new home in Midtown. A string of clubs and what would have passed as “low-end” cabarets in Harlem began to spring up on West 52nd Street, between Fifth and Seventh Avenues. This stretch of West 52nd Street quickly acquired a “reputation as a center for jazz...during Prohibition with tiny, illicit speakeasies where white professional musicians gathered to socialize and play in casual jam sessions,” and was known colloquially as “Swing Street,” or even just the “Street.”¹⁰⁶

It is my goal in this chapter to discuss the ways in which the relationships between identity and music, music and space, and identity and space changed and were redefined as a result of being in Midtown Manhattan. In the first section of this chapter, I will discuss the history of 52nd Street and its emergence as perhaps the most important site to hear jazz. I will also explain how a series of circumstances and a group of musicians gave the street a “musicians-only” reputation. In so doing, I will discuss the ways in which these musicians were

¹⁰⁶ Burke, 3.

connected to the same kinds of dialogues about race and social status that were taking place in Harlem. As a means of testing the constructs of identity and space—that is, how the “musicians-only” reputation differed between white and black musicians—I will briefly compare the Onyx on 52nd Street to Minton’s in Harlem. But the more important point upon which I plan to elaborate is the emergence of the jam session. It was this informal, de facto institution that gave these “illegitimate” clubs authority and “authenticity” in the musical world and helped lead to the emergence of a new musical aesthetic embodied in bebop. To many, bebop was the beginning of the end of jazz. But to others, it was a truer, more “authentic” interpretation. Thus, the second section of this chapter will treat the jam session through the relationship between identity and music. Perhaps most importantly, however, is the emergence of a dialogue approaching debate between the origins of jazz. Owning the history of jazz at a time when jazz was emerging as a “uniquely American” music, and thus a “uniquely American” voice, was of an importance that cannot be understated. A key component of this characterization will be a description of the so-called “bop” aesthetic and its association with young black musicians. As concert promoters and other industry professionals became aware of the jam session and its appeal, there emerged a curious tension between commercial success and the authority bebop. Commercializing the “illegitimate” scene seemingly undermined the very reason for having created the jam session and bebop in the first place. As many of the clubs on 52nd Street struggled to adjust to the demands of the popular market, they began hosting burlesque shows and became venues for forms of entertainment other than jazz. It was this dissociation between music and space that prompted yet another migration of jazz.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ This final migration, which will be the subject of my final chapter, was to Greenwich Village, and took place around the late 1940s and early 1950s, just as the bebop aesthetic was coming into its own as a modern and avant-garde art form. And ironically, the fact that it was publicly

Before understanding 52nd Street itself, we must understand the complexities of the neighborhood out of which it emerged: Midtown Manhattan. In Harlem, there was a great deal of mixing of races, socioeconomic status, and ethnicities. But as the Cotton Club scene demonstrated, it was largely fabricated and staged, a diluted experience. In Midtown, on the other hand, there was much more mixing, though to a more “authentic,” and violent, extent. In Robin D.G. Kelley’s biography of Thelonious Monk, he describes the racial tensions that existed in an increasingly diverse section of New York. Monk grew up in a neighborhood known as San Juan Hill, named for Teddy Roosevelt’s exploits during the Spanish-American War. One resident recalled that “Our main fights...were with the Irish and the Italians on the avenue...[The whites] would not let you go by on the sidewalk.”¹⁰⁸ The neighborhood, though diverse and more tolerant than others in the city, was by no means an easy place to live. It illustrates well some of the principles of space and identity that were the focus of the introduction. Each ethnic group—including blacks from the Caribbean, American South, Italians, Irish, or others—was seeking to define itself through the space that they occupied. Though diverse in one sense, in another it was not. There existed pockets of ethnic clumping throughout the neighborhood. It was not uncommon, in other words, to find several buildings located close together in which mostly

and popularly accepted as such severely undermined its avant-garde nature. The 1950s jazz scene in places like the Five Spot Café and the Open Door, as I will show through figures like Ornette Coleman who played on a plastic horn, was an age of even more openness and experimentation. From the bop aesthetic emerged “cool jazz,” “jazz fusion,” “modal jazz,” “hard bop,” “free jazz,” and other incarnations of so-called “modern jazz.” The relationship between identity and music found a home in Greenwich Village, the center of American bohemianism, because it was a conflicted and complicated relationship. On the one hand, the musicians sought social acceptance, social openness and tolerance. But on the other hand, their very success as jazz musicians, driven in part by a reclamation of the jazz aesthetic and a redefinition of their role in society as artists, relied on the fact that they were actually marginalized by American mainstream culture and society.

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Kelley, 18.

Caribbean blacks lived. Likewise, it was not uncommon to find several similar buildings with Italian residents. This description of San Juan Hill is useful first because it is located mere blocks from the stretch of 52nd Street that calls our attention. Second, it demonstrates the tensions and complexities of city life when multiple ethnicities are involved. To this end, it will be important in understanding how 52nd Street emerged as a mostly white “musicians-only” space.

The other important aspect of this section of Midtown was that it was home to a new industry: mass media and communications. It was aptly suited to cater to the new professionals in the emerging communications industry. According to historian Patrick Burke, “Midtown became ‘the new center of life in Manhattan...’” and was defined as the center of a “‘new kind of culture’ based on mass media and marketing.”¹⁰⁹ Similarly, historian Ann Douglas asserts that because radio was “increasingly dominated by New York’s NBC network” and was able to provide “air play and promotion.”¹¹⁰ Many musicians, in order to make a living, played professionally in studios, creating tunes that were circulated in popular and mainstream culture. As the 1930s progressed, New York City itself became a type of destination for musicians, a sort of “mecca for jazz musicians: Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet, Jelly Roll Morton, and many others left Chicago for short or long periods of time to gig with New York bands and artists.”¹¹¹ If there was work as a professional musician, New York was where they could have found it. Likewise, if there was a place to be a professional musician looking for work, New York was it. Douglas writes, “Just as nineteenth century authors had been irresistibly drawn to Harper’s new mass-marketing techniques, musicians of the postwar [WWI] decade followed the new sound

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Burke, 16.

¹¹⁰ Douglas, 14.

¹¹¹ Douglass, 451.

media to Manhattan.”¹¹² As a professional in the city, a musician was privy to any number of work opportunities, most of which were in studios either backing up singers at broadcasting companies like NBC or in “offices” in Tin Pan Alley, the center of the creation of American popular music.¹¹³

Though there was a lot of work for professional musicians, it was an “elite group of musicians” who dominated and “monopolized” studio work, historian Samuel Charters asserts.¹¹⁴ And at the time, social rules dictated the hiring of white musicians for the more lucrative studio gigs. Because “the Onyx,” was “located in the same neighborhood ‘as CBS (52nd and Madison), NBC (711 Fifth), Radio City...and Broadway theaters,’” it was thus only “a short walk for studio and theater employees in search of a drink and the company of their peers. Soon after its opening, the club adopted a password for entrance that reflected its patrons’ professional affiliations: ‘I’m from 802.’”¹¹⁵ It was the Onyx Club’s reputation as a musicians-only club that was perhaps its most interesting, and distinguishing, characteristic. Again, Burke offers insight:

At the Onyx Club, the first jazz venue on 52nd Street, young, white, male musicians strove to reject the perceived banality and pretense of mainstream pop music in favor of what they saw as the more open, vital expression to be found in African American jazz. The improvisatory creativity of jazz allowed these musicians to enact an ideal of masculine independence and self-determination that contrasted with the restrictions and limitations imposed by the music business in which they worked. (Burke, 14)

In this description of the club, Burke defines the music these musicians created in terms of its relationship to the mass culture from which, to a certain degree, the Onyx offered respite and refuge. In catering to white musicians, an interesting dynamic emerged between the audience and the performers. At the Onyx, as opposed to a place like the Cotton Club, they were one in the

¹¹² Douglas, 14.

¹¹³ It is this scene which I will discuss in more detail later in the chapter.

¹¹⁴ Quoted Burke, 18

¹¹⁵ Quoted Burke, 18.

same. The musicians thus played for themselves and their peers, to satisfy their own enjoyment. Burke writes, “In contrast to the flashy edifices [the studios and other institutions of New York’s emerging mass media culture] that surrounded it, the Onyx Club was an unpretentious, relaxed spot...”¹¹⁶ The owner of the club, Joe Helbock, even acted as a type of secretary. He provided not only “liquor, a piano, and a phonograph for his customers,” who were professional musicians, but also “stored instruments, took and forwarded telephone messages from family members and employers, and received musicians’ mail.”¹¹⁷ The result was a place where musicians could come together, informally, and ultimately reinforce their collective identity as white musicians. These musicians thus reinforced their identity and its association with 52nd Street through playing music. In much the way that Stokes elaborates on the association of space with identity, and if we remember that Harlem was associated with “blackness,” then 52nd Street was associated with the ultimate “insiders” of the music industry, the musicians.

More importantly in regards to Swing Street’s development as a musicians-only spot in the mid-late 1930s was that many critics, consumers, producers and writers saw what amounted to a dispute in terms of the “authenticity” of jazz. Was jazz more “authentic,” they wondered, if blacks played it? Or was it more “authentic” when jazz musicians—regardless of race—played it in the absence of a consuming audience? Some debates focused on style, too. Was the New Orleans style more “authentic” than the more “modern” or “progressive” bebop? It was these questions that many jazz writers, critics, and musicians wrote and spoke about. The main themes of this debate, from the questions posed above, are of racial, commercial, and historic origin. The significance of these debates points to a much larger issue in American society, in no small part due to the recognition of jazz as a “uniquely American” music, and thus a “uniquely American”

¹¹⁶ Burke, 16.

¹¹⁷ Burke, 19.

voice. If jazz's origins, in other words, were indeed "Negroid,"¹¹⁸ and if bebop and jam sessions were a particular representation of black identity, then to many critics and writers at the time, America's distinct voice, the whole construction of identity, was *African* and thus *black* in nature. Likewise, if so-called modern "swing" music was merely a perversion of "Dixieland" jazz, that "natural" and sometimes cacophonous expression of music, then America had lost its voice over time. What was at stake for those writing about jazz in these terms, in other words, was nothing short of the American identity itself. For this reason, composers like Irving Berlin and writers for magazines like *Downbeat* will outright deny the influence of blacks in the creation of jazz. Gus Matzorkis, writing in 1966 for *Downbeat*, asserted that "It is one thing to acknowledge the central role Negro musicians have played in jazz but quite another to conclude that jazz is 'Negro music.' That conclusion is both erroneous and mischievous."¹¹⁹ And that the notion that "'The really great jazz comes from the black man'" is nothing short of one of many "grotesque exaggerations" that "lie at the heart of the latest crisis in jazz' long history of conflicts and self-destructive tendencies."¹²⁰ In denying the uniqueness of jazz to the black identity, Matzorkis is essentially reclaiming jazz as the "profound expression of truths about the *human* (not just the Negro, the white, the urban, the country, the American, the modern) condition. The greatest jazz transcends whatever 'Negro-ness,' or 'white-ness,' it might manifest, and if we have the capacity and the will to open ourselves to it, it reveals glimpses and apprehensions of *man* to us, whoever we are...it...is true that there is no 'Negro-ness,' no 'white-ness.'"¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Miller, Paul Edward. "Roots of Hot White Jazz Are Negroid," *Downbeat Magazine*. April 1937: 5.

¹¹⁹ Matzorkis, 22.

¹²⁰ Matzorkis, Gus. "Down Where We All Live," *Downbeat Magazine*. 4 August 1966: 21.

¹²¹ Matzorkis, 21. Emphasis added.

Much of this debate came to a head in January 1938, amid the attention Benny Goodman received for playing Carnegie Hall in New York City. And undoubtedly, the views surrounding this concert informed Matzorkis' own views. Gama Gilbert, previewing Goodman's show for *The New York Times* explained, "Swing, conceived in shanties and honky-tonks of New Orleans, will tonight invade the sanctum of the Philharmonic-Symphony Society at Carnegie Hall. Where have stood Toscanini, Walter, Beecham, there will stand Maestro Benny Goodman, king of swing, and concert debutant."¹²² Immediately in this characterization, Gilbert distinguishes jazz not as European classical music, but instead as something unto itself. Gilbert readily admits that jazz, which she calls "swing," was "conceived in shanties and honkey-tonks." Though, in "invading the sanctum" of Carnegie Hall, Gilbert asserts that:

Jazz was congratulating itself, and receiving the congratulations of polite society, that it had shed every vestige of its uncouth and disreputable origins and had taken on the odor of respectability. It had disowned and erased from its memory its forebears and ancestral homes—the darky workers on the levees of the lower Mississippi, the hell-holes of New Orleans, the riverboat bands with 'Bix' Beiderbecke, King Oliver and 'Satchelmouth' Armstrong, Memphis and its blues, the sawdust and smoke-beery air of the Chicago joints. (Gilbert, 7)

Much like Matzorkis, Gilbert's views can be seen as racist. And to a certain extent, they are. But in so describing jazz's entrance into the realm of "respectability," she reclaims jazz as a "white," or mainstream popular art form by implying that only through Benny Goodman could jazz have "arrived," socially and culturally speaking. Furthermore, in characterizing jazz as having come "instinctively...from the hot lips and agitated fingers of a handful of darkies who had started life as stevedores, cotton pickers or river rats" who "one day they had put a horn to their lips, or grappled with an accordion, and [sweet and easy] music sounded," Gilbert is simultaneously able

¹²² Gilbert, Gama. "Swing It! And Even In a Temple of Music," *The New York Times*. 16 January 1938: 7.

to describe jazz as belonging, in some capacity at least, to blacks, while still promoting and claiming jazz as a “white” art.¹²³ It took a figure like Goodman, in other words, to make jazz “respectable” for mainstream society in a way that only tacitly recognized its “miscegenated” and “mongrel” origins. In Goodman, too, jazz critics were able to find an example of a *white* musician who emulated and played jazz just as well—and even better, according to some—than his black counterparts. But this is not due solely to an unexplainable racism. Rather, it has to do much more with the idea that the degree to which jazz was “black” also indicated the degree to which America’s voice and identity were “black.” And for many people in the 1920s and 30s, they were simply not ready or willing to accept such a “mongrel” view of American history. To write, as Miller did in *Metronome*, that “The main stem in the evolution of jazz is the negroid, beginning with Joplin and Bolden” was incredibly rare, and verged on the same kind of culturally “subversive” notions that Charles Hersch identifies.¹²⁴

If jazz did indeed have “Negroid” roots, then the only logical way to play “authentic” jazz was to emulate black musicians. In American popular entertainment, blacks had often been the subjects of emulation since traveling minstrel shows were popular in the 1870s and 1880s. Especially, too, at a place like the Cotton Club in Harlem, black entertainers were often fit into specific roles that would have been familiar to their white audiences. An important precursor to the emulation on 52nd Street was Al Jolson’s blackface in *The Jazz Singer*. Historian Michael Rogin, in his 1992 article, contends that the film was, like much of the jazz of the day, a “white depiction of blacks.”¹²⁵ In a romanticized way, the “white male hero...frees himself from

¹²³ Gilbert, 7.

¹²⁴ Miller, 5.

¹²⁵ Rogin, Michael. “Blackface, White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Voice,” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 18, no. 3 (Spring 1992): 419.

paternal, old-world constraints...he rises from black/white conflict in the film.”¹²⁶ Furthermore, and more to the point of this study, “ventriloquizing the black,” allowed the jazz singer to “escape his immigrant identity through blackface” because blackface allows the performer to “speak from his own, authentically felt inferior.”¹²⁷ And, in donning blackface, *The Jazz Singer* “celebrates not the Jew as pariah...but the Jews as parvenu,” while simultaneously “points to another American pariah group, African Americans.”¹²⁸ What Rogin means to pinpoint in his analysis of the film are the processes of identity construction, specifically for an immigrant Jew in New York City during the jazz age. Equally as important as what people saw themselves as, for example, was what they saw themselves as not. It is reasonable to posit that many Jews constructed themselves more as “not black” than as “Jewish” as a way of assimilating more easily into American culture. Al Jolson’s character even changes his name in the film from “Jakie Rabinowitz” to “Jack Robin,” a much more “Wasp” sounding name, as Ann Douglass would say.

Elaborating on these themes, Ann Douglass identifies other white musicians who, in the eyes of critics, successfully emulated and improved upon the “black” notion of jazz. In looking at Fred Astaire and Irving Berlin, for example, Douglass arrives at a question of an implication of “authority,” that of “exploitation.” Defending Astaire and Berlin as individual musicians, Douglass asserts, “It was part of the ethos of the day that white performers absorbed African-American art and performance styles...you started black or ethnic and got whiter and more Wasp as, and if, success came your way. It was a class pattern as much as a racial or ethnic one: black

¹²⁶ Rogin, 419.

¹²⁷ Rogin, 420.

¹²⁸ Rogin, 427.

to white, ethnic to Wasp, lower class to upper. This was Astaire's trajectory, as it was Berlin's."¹²⁹ Writing at length, Douglass explains:

It makes sense that most of the pioneers who reclaimed the American vernacular for musical and theatrical culture in the 1910s and 1920s were Jews and blacks. The claims of both groups to speak standard Anglo-American were half discounted from the start. If their need for linguistic upward mobility and the pressures on them to achieve it were stronger than anything their Wasp peers experienced, their hope of achieving it was less; they had a greater stake in defending and celebrating what they discovered they already possessed, Yiddish-American and African-American vernacular speech... Whether the artist was a Wasp or a Jew or a Negro, a distinctively modern art meant undoing dispossession, making inventive use of one's buried or censored cultural and linguistic origins, and to hell with the consequences. (Douglass 376)

It is fair to say, as Douglass does, that "'Nigger' music was somehow already his [Berlin's] own."¹³⁰ Ironically, "Over the years, Berlin grew increasingly quick to deny the black sources of his music. Sounding much like Whiteman, he explained that 'our popular songwriters...are not negroes' but 'of pure white blood...many of Russian...ancestry': he had avoided the word 'Jew' and expunged the Negro."¹³¹ "Avoiding the word 'Jew'" and "expunging the Negro" allowed Berlin to actively proclaim that jazz, as "America's voice" was also, indeed, his own voice. Berlin, as a Russian-Jewish immigrant, thus constructed himself as an American first, not in spite of the jazz that he composed and played, but because of it. Like the character in *The Jazz Singer*, Berlin also changed his name from "Israel Isidore Bailin" to "Irving Berlin."¹³² Ironically, "while its black origins might be denied at home, they were recognized and celebrated in many places abroad...In Europe, American blacks could be seen as exotic rather than threatening, as part of

¹²⁹ Douglass, 360.

¹³⁰ Douglass, 358.

¹³¹ Douglass, 359.

¹³² It should be noted, too, that George Gershwin's given name was Jacob Gershowitz.

an avant-garde of primitive art.”¹³³ In much the same way, “As the blues rooted in the Northern cities, their rural and folk nature was altered, reined, whitened. The songs were written down; the lyrics were cleaned up and elaborated, and the music was subjected to various kinds of treatment, sometimes jazzed and ragged, more often Europeanized into conventional harmonies and turned into Tin Pan Alley pop.”¹³⁴ In this way, the commercialization of the emulation of jazz drastically changed the nature of the music. “Tin Pan Alley pop” was decidedly lighter and less serious than many of the music that emerged from jam sessions across town. In this way, many Jewish entertainers and musicians—the Gershwin brothers, Berlin, Leonard Bernstein, Aaron Copland—used jazz in their performances to cater to a more mainstream audience. In ways not unlike the utilization of jazz in jam sessions or “cutting contests,” these mainstream jazz creations were the “authentic” sound after which many Jewish immigrants sought as a means of entering mainstream American society as fully accepted members.¹³⁵

At the Onyx, on 52nd Street, there emerged a very telling example of this imitation. *The Onyx Club Revue*, an “album” made from a recording of a jam session of white musicians on January 24, 1933, demonstrates how the image of “blackness,” as expression through white imitation, created “willfully irreverent” music.¹³⁶ The recording from that day “features intentionally out-of-tune playing and nasal singing, flippant references to drinking, passages in which the musicians’ barely suppressed laughter renders them almost unable to perform...and

¹³³ Douglass, 352.

¹³⁴ Douglass, 395.

¹³⁵ A “cutting contest” was something that took place during after-hours “jam sessions” during which one musician would challenge another to see who could “cut” the other with their improvisational skills. Sometimes, these contests would last all through the night, and when the most virtuosic instrumentalists went at it, there was often no clear-cut winner. Just as the jam session in general, these cutting contests were significant in encouraging musicians to explore the limits of their instrument and of the music itself.

¹³⁶ Burke, 13.

even a series of belches into the microphone.”¹³⁷ “At the Onyx,” writes Burke, “musicians aspired to a state of masculine independence in which they resisted the conventions of the music business and upheld the value of musical and personal self-expression.”¹³⁸ And “although not all of the patrons of the Onyx were musicians, the club’s illicit nature [as a speakeasy] contributed to its reputation as an exclusive spot where an intimate circle of musicians could play and interact freely without the limitations imposed by a commercial audience.”¹³⁹ In part, the Onyx, like many of the other clubs on the street, emerged as the “central gathering point” for “white jazz and dance-band musicians” because of racist employment practices.¹⁴⁰ As a result, the “workingman’s” saloon atmosphere of the Onyx club reflected this; the majority of patrons, who were for the most part musicians, were also white. Here there emerges another interesting point, and a good point of departure for understanding how the 52nd Street scene developed against the backdrop of many of its musicians’ ambiguous, complex, and complicated views toward “the other;” that is, the black professional musician. To many critics at the time, this was an important characteristic of the jazz that occupied the space of 52nd Street.

Equally as important as what 52nd Street was, was what 52nd Street wasn’t. The fact that 52nd Street became home to this type of “irreverent” imitation of “authentic” and “anti-commercial” jazz indicates the degree to which the Street was a space of a deliberately constructed identity. To many of the younger professionals in particular, the Street was readily made a foil to the more rigid professional manufacture of Culture. A piece in *The New Yorker* by Morris Markey explains the goings-on in Tin Pan Alley offices and publishing houses. He describes what amounts to a “factory” of music. But the machines creating and producing are not

¹³⁷ Burke, 13.

¹³⁸ Burke, 20.

¹³⁹ Burke, 21.

¹⁴⁰ Burke, 17. Emphasis added.

made of iron and steel, but instead are professional musicians. Markey writes about a “ruddy-faced man” who was “doin’ a turn with a partner...” and wanted “a special with a couple of my own catch-lines in it. I don’t do no plugging of these tunes, you know, like most of these babies. I have to have it individual-like. Something my own...”¹⁴¹ In the midst of this “ruddy-faced man” explaining his desire for a more serious, personal outlet of musical expression, he was interrupted by someone in the office, perhaps a manager, indicative of the industrial and regimented nature of professional song-writing, who “thrust his head through a door leading through the wall and cried sharply: ‘Step on it, Ike. Waitin’ on that stuff!’”¹⁴² Describing this dynamic in more depth, Markey elaborates on the scene:

The manager very kindly explained to me the workings of the plant. “Always a crowd here,” he said proudly. “All the professional people hang out here, and get their music here. All those little rooms you saw are studios. We keep pianists working all the time, learning these folks their songs. That’s the way they learn ‘em you know, mostly. Sort of by ear, you see, instead of reading the notes. Our boys just play ‘em over and over until the artist gets it...Most of those people you saw working back there on scores and specials and things are just the regulars. But it’s Mr. Berlin that does the real stuff. His songs are original, you know what I mean? He works over them. Sometimes he’ll spend three or four days over his rhymes—just the rhymes, see?” (Markey 45)

Many of the musicians and patrons began to play and act a certain way, respectively, with regards to music, and notions of “entertainment” shifted as “authenticity” became a theme of importance. But these notions were shaped by deliberate constructions of space, music, and identity that were grounded in popular entertainment conceptions of “blackness.” That is, these

¹⁴¹ Quoted in Markey, 43. A “special,” the Markey explains, was “a new chorus to replace the original chorus, for the repeat.” What this means, in layman’s terms, is that the author of the piece of music was applying his creativity to come up with a new variation on the tune’s original chorus. This demonstrates, perhaps, the roots of frustration and discontent that many professional musicians felt and the beginning of the perception of the need for places like the Onyx club.

¹⁴² Markey, 44.

expressions of “authentic” jazz were no more a creation and construct than the “inauthentic” publishing houses in Tin Pan Alley.

Aside from many of the clubs themselves, which many thought to have embodied the values of jazz—including freedom of expression and openness and tolerance—perhaps the most significant development was the emergence of what was known as a “jam session.” This impromptu assemblage of jazz musicians—typically after a night of “legitimate” work—demonstrates a great deal about the nature of popular music and further develops a theme from the first chapter of the dichotomy between “commercial” and “authentic” jazz. The Street was able to offer an alternative to the more rigid professional scene and provided an environment in which young musicians could be adventurous and creative. At clubs all across the city, but especially on Swing Street,

Jam sessions therefore encouraged techniques, procedures, attitudes—in short, the essential components of a musical language and aesthetic—quite distinct from what was possible or acceptable in more public venues....But where the restless energy and imagination of ambitious young progressives were given free rein, a startling new music took shape the fast tempos and deliberately convoluted harmonic progressions, obstacles thrown up to disorient the ‘no-talent guys’; the pursuit of virtuosity for its own sake; the shift of focus away from the mass audience to the personal struggle of musicians to master the art of improvisation: all fed directly into the emergent bebop style. (DeVeaux 217)

Professional musicians further distinguished themselves from the “mainstream” through these jam sessions, and allowed themselves to construct their identities more freely. Being amongst themselves, and not being the object of consumption, in other words, allowed the musicians to begin to see a more serious side to the music.

The space—52nd Street and its clubs—thus emerges as the place where certain constructions and expressions of identity played out. White musicians reinforced their identities, but they did so in a way that mimicked, to a certain extent, the minstrel and blackface imitations

of *The Jazz Singer*, though in a less obvious way. The white professional musicians who conducted themselves in the ways they thought blacks behaved did not do so in blackface, nor for an audience, for example. Yet, in so donning the “invisible blackface,” they sought to reclaim ownership of a more “authentic” type of jazz, in much the same way that Jackie Rabinowitz morphed into “Jack Rabin.” To the white musicians at the Onyx and other white critics, expressing their conception of “blackness” signified that they could play as well as, if not better than, black musicians themselves. In not only replicating, rather surpassing blacks in their acting out of “blackness” this group of Onyx musicians reasoned that jazz was as “white” as it was “black.” They had effectively, according to them, reclaimed jazz as the “white” music that it was, albeit perhaps heavily influenced by blacks.

But here is where things get tricky, particularly as the relationship between identity and music is concerned. There was, undoubtedly, an equally as deliberate attempt on the part of black musicians like Thelonious Monk, Kenny Clarke, Dizzy Gillespie, and Charlie “Bird” Parker to rewrite the jazz canon, to challenge the existing jazz, or “swing,” aesthetic. Historians Peter Rutkoff and William Scott contend that in “Ko-Ko,” Parker’s first recorded bop tune, “Parker used the pasted scrap of [the popular song] ‘Tea for Two’ to taunt the white dominated music business.”¹⁴³ Similarly, Eric Lott contends, “Bebop was about making disciplined imagination alive and answerable to the social change of its time.”¹⁴⁴ These musicians took their musicianship incredibly seriously, and used the jam session as a way to further explore and express themselves. They constructed their identities—particularly in the wake of not only the 1935 riots, but also the 1942 Harlem riots, with black soldiers’ involvement as the poignant and

¹⁴³ Rutkoff, Peter and William Scott. “Bebop: Modern New York Jazz,” *The Kenyon Review*. Vol. 18, no. 2 (Spring, 1996): 93.

¹⁴⁴ Lott, Eric. “Double V, Double Time: Bebop’s Politics of Style,” *Callaloo*. No. 36 (Summer, 1988): 597.

ironic backdrop—as “self-styled ghetto intellectuals.”¹⁴⁵ Bebop became a social tool through which a select group of black musicians playing at places like Minton’s Playhouse in Harlem during after hours jam sessions sought to legitimize their own notions of “authentic” jazz and, more importantly, “authentic” identity. Accordingly, perhaps, bebop was rooted much more heavily in the blues and gospel, traditionally identified as “black” musical forms. Furthermore, the musicians, partly because of what Scott DeVaux calls “friendly competition,” partly because of professional necessity, and partly because of a deliberate attempt to do so, began to view themselves as artists first and entertainers second. Rutkoff and Scott point out Ralph Ellison’s take on it: “They were concerned...with art, not entertainment.”¹⁴⁶ And despite flirtations with institutions like the American Communist party, “the musicians knew that jazz itself best expressed their political values.”¹⁴⁷ Playing alone, in and of itself, musician Milt Hinton contended, “was the kind of militancy that we exercised.”¹⁴⁸ Even the name of Charlie Parker’s famous “Now’s the Time” “revealed Parker’s political concerns” because the title was “a call for action by and for African-Americans.”¹⁴⁹ As such, the tune was “greeted...as an activist statement.”¹⁵⁰ It is clear that during the early-mid 1940s, bebop was absolutely, almost unequivocally, an expression of black identity born of frustration with the racist economics of professional musicianship and racist American society in general. Perhaps the most revolutionary part of the “bebop revolution,” in other words, was that “these modern jazz revolutionaries insisted on receiving cultural as well as financial credit for their music.”¹⁵¹ They insisted, this

¹⁴⁵ Lott, 598.

¹⁴⁶ Quoted in Rutkoff and Scott, 111.

¹⁴⁷ Rutkoff and Scott, 114.

¹⁴⁸ Quoted in Rutkoff and Scott, 114.

¹⁴⁹ Rutkoff and Scott, 115.

¹⁵⁰ Rutkoff and Scott, 115.

¹⁵¹ Rutkoff and Scott, 116.

narrative contends, on having agency over their own artistic, musical, and cultural creations and achievements.

As the notion of so-called “modern music” developed and eventually found its way to Swing Street in the mid-1940s—after the recording ban—bebop became the object of commercialization. This, as one might expect, severely changed the meaning of the music, especially to musicians like Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, and Dizzy Gillespie. DeVaux contends, money was “there to be made, and the jam session...quickly became an integral part of the swing craze.”¹⁵² Accordingly, “Such large scale events [like Goodman’s concert at Carnegie Hall] featured stylized versions of the jam session,” often resulting, on 52nd Street, no less, in “an irreverent mix of heady improvisation and slapstick humor.”¹⁵³ Many involved in the effort to make jazz a serious art found themselves struggling to “maintain their sense of higher artistic principles.”¹⁵⁴ This was made particularly difficult because the “general public tended to treat jazz as entertainment,” and as a result, jazz concerts—including especially Goodman’s at Carnegie Hall—began to adopt a “painfully self-conscious aping of established concert etiquette.”¹⁵⁵ Even as early as 1926, a piece in *The New Yorker* embraced jazz as having “been on the upgrade culturally,” while simultaneously lamented that “so far, in one respect, [the Gershwin orchestra] have not measured up to their classical competitors” because “they don’t have annotated programs.”¹⁵⁶ Weare Holbrook, the author of the piece, asserts that he would be “waiting impatiently for the time when the ushers at the Metropolitan Opera House” would hand out programs for jazz concerts. If Holbrook were present at Goodman’s Carnegie Hall affair, his

¹⁵² DeVaux, 279.

¹⁵³ DeVaux, 279.

¹⁵⁴ DeVaux, 279.

¹⁵⁵ DeVaux, 279.

¹⁵⁶ Holbrook, Weare. “Blue Notes on the Program,” *The New Yorker*. Feb. 2 1926: 28.

appetite for formal jazz presentation would have undoubtedly been satisfied, particularly when one considers that jazz had, finally, at long last, “received the congratulations of polite society.”¹⁵⁷ DeVeaux writes,

The swing craze affected musicians, too, and in a different way disturbed the fragile equilibrium that had protected the jam session. For by celebrating a handful of brilliant soloists, swing underscored the importance of jazz improvisation within the musicians’ community and sent musicians eager to hone their skills to nightclubs and after-hours spots, where they crowded the bandstands... These subterranean musical developments have found their way into the historical record only because they were officially deplored—by the American Federation of Musicians. (DeVeaux, 280)

In mainstream acceptance, the democratization of the jam session for all to listen and take part in, the message behind a Parker tune like “Now’s the Time,” was seemingly sidestepped altogether. In commercialization, in other words, no longer were only a “handful of brilliant soloists” celebrated. And in taking the jam session out of the “nightclubs and after hours spots,” it lost much of its “rebellious” character.

Given this commercialization and vast mainstream acceptance, many jazzmen found themselves at odds with the jazz that they heard. In many cases, “jazz” devolved as a category entirely. Countless times, musicians like Duke Ellington, Charles Mingus, and Thelonious Monk explained that they were not seeking to play “authentic” jazz, but instead to just play “music.” Perhaps this was an attempt of these musicians to divorce themselves from the canon of popular music entirely. If “jazz” was “white America’s” voice, it is conceivable to suggest that many black musicians wanted no part of it, or at least of the popular jazz scene. In this way—and through their desire to have financial and cultural agency, as Rutkoff and Scott contend—black jazz musicians also sought a more “authentic” jazz sound, though in their own way. In other

¹⁵⁷ Gilbert, 12.

words, those who played jazz sought to be taken seriously as artists and musicians. But because of the widespread commercialization and consumption, by the end of the 1940s, many of the clubs had either closed or began to “feature burlesque instead of jazz.”¹⁵⁸

It is fair to say that bebop—that is, so-called “modern jazz”—existed somewhere between competing interpretations. On the one hand, “It is not reasonable to expect that these [white] musicians would have risked lucrative careers for an insider idea of authentic jazz that at first seemed to have little commercial viability outside the confines of the Onyx Club.”¹⁵⁹ Likewise, it is reasonable to expect that the recording ban between 1942 and 1944 seriously impacted jazz performance. Informal and unpaid jam sessions were held, in other words, because that was the only way many musicians could play.¹⁶⁰ And on the other hand, there existed a real attempt to push jazz musicianship forward in a serious art. Between these two notions of jazz, born of economic necessity and conscious rebellion, perhaps, lies the reality that jazz was interpreted in varying and sometimes contradictory ways. To the Jews, for example, its more pop and commercial-oriented style was an appealing and viable way of assimilating into American mainstream culture. Likewise, young, frustrated black musicians irreverently developed bebop out of their own jam sessions in places like Minton’s Playhouse in Harlem. It is important to point out here that just as jazz was many things to many people, there also emerged divergent expressions of what jazz meant to them. Thus, there were different incarnations of the “jam session.” It is not simply enough to say that *the* jam session was “originated” by black musicians

¹⁵⁸ Burke, 3.

¹⁵⁹ Burke, 205 (?)

¹⁶⁰ Though I did not have time to explain in detail in this paper, this is an incredibly important development. Furthermore, when one considers that there was an ambience of “friendly competition” amongst musicians, these jam sessions took on a meaning that perhaps no one could have ever anticipated. For more on this, see chapters 4, 5, and 6 in Scott DeVeaux’s *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History* (1997).

and “imitated” by white musicians; simply, there was no *singular* “jam session,” but multiple ones. Rather, the fact that these perceptions existed and perpetuated is evidence of the degree to which the debates about jazz’s “authenticity” touched nearly every aspect, institution, and expression of the music. Various types of jazz musicians thus constructed their identities in very different ways. And the question “ownership,” which came from the debate of “authenticity,” was the same that allowed Jews to assimilate; blacks to buck the system; and whites—“Wasps”—to reclaim for themselves what they considered a “white” art form with “Negroid” roots while at the same time fulfilling a need to express themselves outside the professional recording world of rigid, and often shallow, pop tunes. Thus, as Burke wrote, there existed a very “particular conception of authentic jazz” on the street.¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ Burke, 6.

Chapter 3: Commercialized Cool, Greenwich Village and The State Department

As competition for jazz in an increasingly commercialized landscape forced many clubs on 52nd Street to feature burlesque and variety comedy shows, the street's clubs lost much of their identities as a "musicians-only" hangouts. Jazz, as an "art music" taken more seriously, found itself at odds with the changing dynamic of the clubs on the street. In this chapter, I plan to explore the ways in which jazz again relocated, this time to Greenwich Village.

As with the other chapters, the framework for understanding jazz in this environment is predicated largely on the relationship between space and identity. In the Village, there existed a thriving population of artists, bohemians, and intellectuals. Historically speaking, Greenwich Village was home to a myriad of "counter cultural" and "culturally subversive" movements. Its residents were known, and in some cases infamous, for their emphasis on personal freedom and individual creativity. Equally important is the way that jazz, as a modern, serious, avant-garde musical art form, found a logical home in this part of Manhattan. As the music became a part of the "bohemian" conversation in the Village, many began to associate jazz itself with Greenwich Village. In this way, the space and the music were indelibly linked. The Café Society was in many ways a precursor to clubs like the Village Vanguard and the Five Spot, in which the very notions and limits—if there were any—to modernism and avant-gardism were tested. In these clubs there played out similar racial tensions, particularly as the "authenticity" of jazz took on more significant and profound implications. As these racial and socio-economic debates continued, jazz genres seemingly exploded, overnight. Bebop had given way to hard bop, cool jazz, modal jazz, free jazz. Jazz's definition was again up for grabs. In this free-for-all of identity attribution, the most unlikely character ascribed to jazz perhaps the most obvious and overlooked identity. The U.S. State Department, in the 1950s, began a series of "Goodwill Tours" through

which the U.S. government, in its fight against anti-democratic communists across the world, would export American culture. To this end, both explicitly and implicitly, jazz was known domestically and internationally as the music of freedom, liberty, and, most importantly, democracy. In many ways, this identity and relationship with the music can be traced back to the clubs and musicians in Greenwich Village.

Most significantly, the “democratic” identity that jazz took on was in many ways full of contradictions. There were many ironies to the State Dept.’s use of black jazz musicians as a means of demonstrating the values of democracy and “equality for all” because they did so against the backdrop of domestic Jim Crow legislation and a racially inhibitive professional music industry. This paradox and apparent conflict of interest is heightened because the State Dept.’s use of jazz appealed to international elites as a respectable art music. In many ways, this prolonged and deepened the debate about jazz’s “authenticity.” The State Department chose their “ambassadors” based on race—that is, they were white—commercial success, and size. The small combos—quartets, quintets, etc...a— were indicative of the ways in which the jam session had been institutionalized through its commercialization on 52nd Street. Furthermore, jazz in the 1950s catered to the notion that, as America’s “indigenous” music, it was a given that it should be respectable. As such, the State Department tours sought to achieve international respectability. And in so doing thus pursue a colonial-minded strategy of spreading American democracy. All of these ideas, though, were still fundamentally rooted in stereotyped notions of “blackness,” though with a different name, “Americanness.” This, too, is evidence of the “reclamation” of jazz by whites and the American mainstream. Curiously, and in a way not lost on foreign audiences, the U.S. government did all this at a time when segregation was still the norm; when America was still largely a Jim Crow society. In this sense, it is terribly ironic that

the values of freedom and liberty that jazz's escape to the Village represented were the same that the U.S. Department of State used as a justification for the "export" of jazz as a means through which to spread American democracy. This all demonstrates, to one degree or another, that jazz's "miscegenated" and "mongrel" beginnings were not at all ever truly resolved. Rather, the fact that jazz's meanings, ownership, and origins are still points of contention indicate the extent to which jazz, unequivocally American, is many different things to many different people.

The Village began almost as a small town within the larger New York metropolis, hence the name "Greenwich Village." Historians have begun to discuss the Village's evolution in terms of "archaeological eras." And the first "four villages"—that is, the first eras—include "the Indian settlement of Sappocanican, the Dutch farming district of Bossen Bouwerie, the English colonial village of Green Wich, and the American suburb of Greenwich."¹⁶² Geographically and historically speaking, the Village was in fact separate from the rest of New York City.¹⁶³ And its identity has for the most part reflected this separation. It was not until the decades between 1830 and 1850 that the Village began to take on a distinctly urban form, though it continued to remain largely residential.¹⁶⁴ According to this "archaeological perspective," historian Floyd Dell's "sixth" and "seventh Villages," between roughly 1900 and 1960, coincide with the emergence of an "American bohemia." The Village, by the 20th century, was no longer "an isolated hamlet" and "the oldest surviving section of the city," but was "encircled by New York City."¹⁶⁵ In addition to its historical geographic isolation, the Village, with its "narrow, oblique streets did not conform to the prevailing gridiron pattern" of the rest of the city, thus setting it apart even

¹⁶² McFarland, Gerald W. *Inside Greenwich Village: A New York City Neighborhood, 1898-1918*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001): 1.

¹⁶³ McFarland, 1.

¹⁶⁴ McFarland, 2.

¹⁶⁵ Humphrey, 1.

further from the rest of Manhattan.¹⁶⁶ The people who lived in the Village accordingly developed an identity that was distinguishable from the rest of the city. As New York City emerged as a cultural capital, with an especially meaningful mainstream, the identities that Villagers constructed diverged in significant ways. The Village had long been home, for example, to bohemians, outcasts, rebels, and non-conformists, including artists and intellectuals. Robert E. Humphrey, a Greenwich Village scholar and author, writes that the people who came to the Village “Between 1910 and 1920...shared an aversion for ordinary pursuits and bureaucratic organizations” and found themselves, by choice or circumstance, “on the edge of society.”¹⁶⁷ Humphrey goes on to point out that these people, those in the literary and artistic communities, “created bohemia and erected their own social barriers.”¹⁶⁸ In so doing, the space of Greenwich Village almost inevitably became the destination for bohemians in the United States and other parts of the world. Humphrey likewise argues, “Village rebels...popularized iconoclastic ideas about art, politics, feminism, sex, and psychology while furthering personal freedom for men and women.”¹⁶⁹ Interestingly, this bohemian identity is rooted in large part in nostalgia. By the beginning of the twentieth century, in other words, “A novelist only needed to write ‘then she moved to the Village’ to evoke an entire set of assumptions—she’s a bit rebellious, artistically inclined, sexually emancipated, and eager to be on her own.”¹⁷⁰

It is clear how Greenwich Village, due to its geographic and historical origins, became one of the more important bohemian and “free-wheeling” places in the country, let alone the world. The reason for the Village becoming “the Village,” however, also has a great deal to do

¹⁶⁶ Humphrey, 1.

¹⁶⁷ Humphrey, 12.

¹⁶⁸ Humphrey, 10.

¹⁶⁹ Humphrey, 10.

¹⁷⁰ Wetzsteon, Ross. *The Republic of Dreams, Greenwich Village: The American Bohemia, 1910-1960* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002): 2.

with the “rapid urbanization of America and the equally rapid growth of a mass society,” both of which “helped create the conditions for a vital enclave of creativity and dissent” that came to characterize the Village. Greenwich Village’s “unassociation” with the mainstream, in other words, was the expression of its bohemian residents in constructing themselves as what they weren’t. And though this spatial identity dates back as far as the nineteenth century, like Harlem, Greenwich Village’s association with bohemianism didn’t truly “take off” until the 1910s and especially following World War I in the 1920s. Greenwich Village’s ascension as a type of American bohemian capital is also curiously defined by a strong sense of nostalgia. History is treated almost as if it were a type of mythology. And even in as the Greenwich Village became in the 1950s a type of capital for much of the “Beat” and other modern literary and intellectual movements, contemporary historians were still discussing the so-called “golden era of Greenwich Village.”¹⁷¹ In 1959, at nearly the same moment in time that Ornette Coleman’s modern jazz was challenging the ironic construction of a so-called jazz “canon,” historian Allen Churchill wrote that the Village’s “golden era” was between 1912 and 1930. Furthermore, he contends that the very reason that inspired him to write the history was because he “will never see again...the fine, free spirit of Greenwich Village in...its Bohemian heyday.”¹⁷² In a phrase, American bohemianism in Greenwich Village was rooted in the notion that, “Whatever else bohemia may be...it is almost always yesterday.”¹⁷³ This, interestingly enough, resembles much of the discourse surrounding the “authenticity” of jazz. And the realization of the “rapidity with

¹⁷¹ Churchill, 20.

¹⁷² Churchill, 21.

¹⁷³ Wetzsteon, 15.

which revolt turns into fashion”¹⁷⁴ helps explain how jazz, once taboo, “mongrel,” and subversive was becoming “America,” “white,” and internationally “respectable.”

Jazz’s presence in this type of environment in many ways complicated its very definition. The debate regarding jazz’s “authenticity of style” took on added significance in the Village, particularly as the State Department began promoting and touring distinct types of jazz and jazz artists, which were readily identifiable as “mainstream” jazz. No longer was the stylistic “authenticity” between the “moldy fig” proponents of Dixieland jazz and the young “boppers,” or even explicitly between “commercial” and “anti-commercial” music. Rather, the new debate dealt much more with the avant-garde and modernistic inclinations of jazz, though commercialism was a large component of these debates. Perhaps nowhere else did this debate come to a head better than it did with Ornette Coleman’s engagement at the Five Spot in Greenwich Village. The success of the Five Spot as, arguably, *the* jazz destination in Greenwich Village can be attributed to a variety of factors. The first significant fact is that the club was located in a part of Greenwich Village that, in the 1950s, was blossoming into the “East Village.” Historian and jazz musician David Lee writes, “The transformation had started in the early 1950s. As rents rose in Greenwich Village and other parts of Manhattan, writers such as Allen Ginsberg, Kerouac and Mailer moved into the neighborhood.”¹⁷⁵ Lee, describing the club’s history, continues:

...and in 1956 the brothers Joe and Iggy Termini, who had inherited the Five Spot from their father, initiated a jazz policy. They presented such modern artists as Thelonious Monk, Randy Weston and David Amram, as well as the radical young avant-garde pianist Cecil Taylor. Taylor’s six-week engagement “immediately attracted a new crowd of artists, writers, and members of what at the time was commonly

¹⁷⁴ Wetzsteon, 20.

¹⁷⁵ Lee, David. *The Battle of the Five Spot: Ornette Coleman and the New York Jazz Field*. The Mercury Press (Toronto): 2006, 12.

referred to as the Uptown Bohemia. The skids went out, the sawdust came off the floor, the prices went up,” and by the end of the year the Five Spot had become an outpost, pioneering the transformation of its neighbourhood into the East Village—an extension of the long-established Greenwich Village community. (Lee, 11)

Similarly, The Village Vanguard, which had long a club of variety shows, stand up comedy acts, poetry readings, folk music, and a social club, began in 1957 to operate under an all-jazz format. Max Gordon, the owner of the club, said in an interview that he did so because “the whole operation had become weary, stale, flat and unprofitable” and, most importantly, because he “had to give the young people what they want. They want jazz.”¹⁷⁶ As a home to modern and challenging writers like Ginsberg and Kerouac, the “East Village” thus “extended” from Greenwich Village’s relatively rebellious and offbeat identity. Furthermore, and a bit ironically, the East Village’s “sheer volume of intellectual traffic put the Terminus [the owners] in a rare position: one in which the presentation of ‘art for art’s sake’ in a non-subsidized commercial venue could turn out to be a sound business decision.”¹⁷⁷ This place was so much of a crossroads of “intellectual traffic,” that Greenwich Village historian Terry Miller contends that “a new underground formed here, and painters, writers and jazz musicians joined forces to stage an assault on the very definitions of art, music, theater, and literature.”¹⁷⁸ Jazz’s presence in the East Village thus can be understood as an extension bebop in the sense that the music, to a certain extent, was an explicit artistic attempt to “stage an assault” on what many at the time were referring to as the so-called “jazz canon.”

As a contextual interlude, jazz by the late 1940s and through the 1950s and 1960s had begun to acquire such prominence as “America’s music” that there began to develop a type of

¹⁷⁶ Millstein, Gilbert. “O Tempora O Vanguard.” *New York Times*, 16 June, 1957.

¹⁷⁷ Lee, 11-12.

¹⁷⁸ Quoted in Lee, 13.

“canon,” or an institutional-like framework around which a working definition of jazz could be formulated. In this way, the formation of a jazz canon represented the depth of the “authenticity” debates that had started nearly 20 and 30 years earlier. In a December 25, 1954, *New Yorker* piece, “The New Yorkers” describe an interesting expression of the institutional-like framework that informed the debate of “authenticity.” At Columbia University, professor and “jazz mandarin” Sidney Gross started teaching a course called “Adventures in Jazz.”¹⁷⁹ The London-born professor “became a student of jazz at twelve, on hearing a Jimmy Dorsey recording.”¹⁸⁰ Despite the fact that Gross’ jazz class, “the first of its kind at Columbia,” and “lasts only ten weeks and provides no credits towards a degree,” Gross “feels sure that every college in the country will eventually have to come to terms with jazz, and take it as seriously as history of French.”¹⁸¹ Gross’ assertion without question points to the level of significance to which many thought jazz had ascended. By 1954, mainstream conceptions of “hot rhythms” and jazz melodies were no longer taboo in the ways that they had been less than a generation earlier. A key part of Gross’ class were the appearances of guest lecturers and, sometimes, musicians themselves. The New Yorkers describe a conversation between jazz critic and *Downbeat* contributor Nat Hentoff and several of the students in the class. Hentoff’s assertion that “Jazz is heading in several different directions at once” is particularly interesting, and one that he qualified by stating, “One of these directions is, I believe, a search for more form.”¹⁸² A student’s inquiry into the significance of the “West Coast modern movement” as compared to “the Chicago school” invoked a seemingly contradictory and perplexing answer. Hentoff was quick to point out, “The so-called West Coast movement doesn’t exist,” and that it was “no different from

¹⁷⁹ The New Yorkers, “Talk of the Town: Magnetic Force.” *The New Yorker*, Dec. 12 1954: 16.

¹⁸⁰ The New Yorkers, 16.

¹⁸¹ The New Yorkers, 16.

¹⁸² The New Yorkers, 16.

jazz anywhere else.”¹⁸³ Hentoff’s defense of a singular vision of jazz rested undoubtedly in his conception of “authentic” jazz. All the “moderns,” Hentoff replied to the student, were “copying the recordings of people like Jelly Roll Morton,” contending further that “what happens with revivalists is that they tend to get homesick for people they’ve never been.”¹⁸⁴ Hentoff’s “expert” opinions are both cause and effect of jazz’s acceptance.

What’s more, in one guest lecture, he marginalized any relationship of jazz to a modern or avant-garde identity. His assertion that the modernists were “copying” jazz artists like Jelly Roll Morton overlooks entirely the notion that jazz was at any point in its history subversive or challenging. His acceptance of jazz as “American” and “respectable” instantly confine jazz to a mainstream audience, and promote a notion of “authenticity” that is rooted in New Orleans style and “whiteness,” even though Jelly Roll Morton was Creole. By the same token, however, Gross included perhaps the most modern and avant-garde jazz artist as a guest: Thelonious Monk. In his guest “lecture,” Monk explained the difference between “old-style chords” and “a new-style chord...the chords we’re using nowadays...”¹⁸⁵ It is interesting to have both Monk and Hentoff in the same class because they provide profoundly differing notions of jazz, and music in general. Hentoff’s mere presence endows jazz, and thus Gross’ class, with an air of respectability and legitimacy, a type of professional authority that indicates the same type of acceptance of a “jazz canon” that emerged from the debate regarding “authenticity.” It was Hentoff’s crowd, for example, that referred to Monk as “‘childlike,’ ‘brooding,’ ‘naïve,’ ‘primitive.’”¹⁸⁶ As such, Hentoff’s perspectives on jazz demonstrate a more rigid, fixed opinion. It is fair to say that he was not necessarily concerned with the current state of jazz insofar as he was able to connect it to

¹⁸³ The New Yorkers, 16.

¹⁸⁴ The New Yorkers, 17.

¹⁸⁵ The New Yorkers, 17.

¹⁸⁶ Kelley, xiv.

a particular reading of its history, a reading through which he could identify jazz as “American;” “artistic” for legitimacy’s sake, rather than “artistic for art’s sake;” and perhaps most importantly according to critics like Hentoff, “white.” It should be noted, however, that Hentoff was generally more open and accepting of new types of jazz than most. His appearance is only to serve as a representation of how the jazz “canon” built itself up in the 1940s and 1950s. Hentoff is neither the “rule” nor the “exception” to jazz critics and writers. Rather, he is a small piece of a much larger puzzle.

Hentoff’s views also indicate the degree to which, despite an institutional-like framework surrounding the emergence of a “jazz canon” and a so-called “jazz constitution,” the debate for the origins and thus ownership of jazz were still very much in question. Furthermore, this characterization of Hentoff is not meant in anyway to contend that Hentoff and other jazz critics were racist or closed-minded about jazz. On the contrary, they were often among the more open-minded segment of the American population. The key piece of information is that these critics and writers—as well as their publications like *Downbeat*—were as much a construction of mainstream musical identity as anything that had emerged from Tin Pan Alley or anything that was equated with Benny Goodman’s Carnegie performance. The reality is, as Max Gordon alluded, that a business has to stay in business. In order to do that, it must cater to the desires of its clientele, and in this case, that included many people who wanted to construct themselves as “hipsters,” as outsiders looking in because it was the fashionable thing to be. This helps explain Charles Mingus’ outburst in a 1959 taping at the Five Spot, as mentioned in Ingrid Monson’s “The Problem with White Hipness.” Monson explains, “In a tape made in 1959 at the Five Spot, a New York nightclub, Charles Mingus gave the downtown white hip bohemian clientele a

lecture from the bandstand.”¹⁸⁷ This lecture consisted of Mingus explaining to the audience that:

You haven't been told before that you're phonies. You're here because jazz has publicity, jazz is popular...and you like to associate yourself with this sort of thing. But it doesn't make you a connoisseur of the art because you follow it around.... A blind man can go to an exhibition of Picasso and Kline and not even see their works. And comment behind dark glasses, Wow! They're the swingiest painters ever, crazy! Well so can you. You've got your dark glasses and clogged-up ears. You sit there in front of me and talk about your crude love affairs You sit there in front of me and push your junkie-style glasses up on your noses. (Quoted in Monson, 416).

Monson goes on to explain,

For Mingus, adoption of the visual and verbal style of musicians could never compensate for an inability to comprehend the implications—musical, social, and political—of the modernist musical argument. He chafed at being reduced to a stereotype, even if it was one that audiences thought admirable. The most damaging legacy of the mythical view of the rebellious, virile jazz musician may be perhaps that when African American musicians emphasize responsibility, dignity, gentleness, or courtship, some hip white Americans presume that the artist in question may not be a "real" African American. (Monson, 416)

Here, clearly, Mingus is wrestling with his own conceptions of “authenticity” in the face of mainstream notions. Of massive importance is that the topic of debate is now the “authenticity” of art, the evaluation of which is nearly purely subjective. As such, it is even easier to ascribe to jazz, as an “art,” any number of meanings. Accordingly, there emerged a “clash of agendas between what musicians saw as important, and what was valued by jazz critics and influential jazz listeners of the time—and to understand the passions that flared when these expectations were projected onto this new music.”¹⁸⁸ Writers like Norman Mailer began describing jazz in terms that implied not only that jazz was “art” music, but instead that jazz was “high art,” that “jazz would offer more than just passing enjoyment; in fact, that it had the potential to be even

¹⁸⁷ Monson, Ingrid. “The Problem with White Hipness,” *American Musicological Society*. Vol. 48, no. 3. Autumn, 1995: (416).

¹⁸⁸ Lee, 50.

more profound an art form than classical music.”¹⁸⁹ Discovering with certainty the “ownership” and “origins” of jazz thus became even more significant.

Perhaps this is why Ornette Coleman, who at times played a plastic horn for artistic purposes, caused such a disruption when he played at the Five Spot. In other parts of the city, people joked that you always knew what club Coleman was playing in because it would be empty.¹⁹⁰ But it was precisely the Five Spot’s location in Greenwich Village’s bohemian and intellectual environment that allowed Coleman to even take part in the conversation. It was because, as Lee describes:

The jazz club of 1959, then, was a place where racial tensions between black and white were ignored, sublimated, or enacted in more subtle forms (as exemplified by Mingus’ adoring coterie of white women, the jazz club milieu enabled whites to pay homage to black artists, to enact a liberating, if temporary, reversal of the roles allocated to them in American society). This could be said to be true of the jazz field as a whole: it had an independent identity as a field in itself, but it also provided numerous intersections where the (predominantly white) members of different fields...could congregate and in doing so, publicly display their liberal humanism in regard to black American culture. From its opening until well into the 1960s, the Five Spot Café was one of the busier of these intersections. (Lee, 47)

The clientele at the Five Spot was thus “more urbane, more informed, and more tolerant—indeed, encouraging—of new developments.”¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁹ Lee, 50.

¹⁹⁰ Lee.

¹⁹¹ Lee, 54.

Conclusion: The Contradictions of Meaning and the Nature of Identity

Comparing these two attitudes—that of the institutionalized mainstream, represented by writers like Nat Hentoff and the more open, experimental, avant-garde, envelope-pushing—demonstrates the degree to which jazz was nearly universally accepted as an American art music. Perhaps the greatest single series of events, which demonstrate these tensions and differing views, were the tours put on by the State Department as a tenant of Cold War cultural diplomacy. These tours represent, too, perhaps the best attempt to define jazz in an “official” way. The State Department did, in fact, define jazz—very narrowly—so that it could send it all across the world as a way of representing the values of American democracy. Yet many of the contradictions and tensions from home emerged abroad, particularly as musicians like Dave Brubeck and Louis Armstrong played to crowds in the Middle East and South America against the backdrop of Jim Crow legislation in the United States. Though Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald were among the musicians who toured on behalf of “democracy,” Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was adamant about presenting an “all-white” version of jazz to the world.¹⁹²

The emerging sentiment regarding the State Department tours was contradictory. On the one hand, the Dulles and the State Department drew upon the more serious and artistic identity of the music that musicians like Thelonious Monk and Charles Mingus helped create. In so doing, Dulles felt he would be able to promote it as a type of classical music; a uniquely American classical music. The emergence of a jazz canon and the institutionalization of clubs, record stores, and radio shows, indicates that jazz, for many, represented the contribution of America to world music. As such, the State Department sought to push jazz as being representative of typically American values. And in terms of the Cold War, this unequivocally

¹⁹² Crist, Stephen A. “Jazz as Democracy? Dave Brubeck and Cold War Politics,” *The Journal of Musicology*, vol. 26, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 149.

meant that jazz represented freedom, individual liberty, and democracy for all. But the irony with this rhetorical statement was that many of jazz's principal creators were black, and as such were not privy to the rights and freedoms to which other American citizens were. These narratives carried significant weight abroad as well. Brubeck refused to play in South Africa, because of apartheid,¹⁹³ and Louis Armstrong took a bold step in criticizing Eisenhower for failing to support the Supreme Court's integration ruling in Little Rock in 1957.¹⁹⁴ To this end, the nature of jazz emerges not as a singular entity, but instead as a music with a meaning as diverse as those who listen to and play it. The more people tried to define jazz as a particular genre, the more it seemingly resisted categorization.

And it was in this vein, perhaps, that Mingus chastised his audience at the Five Spot. In part, too, Mingus' critique was more far-reaching than to just implicate a certain strati of society who "followed jazz around." In large part it came directly in the face of an explicit attempt on the part of the State Department to make jazz—and thus American values of individual freedom and democracy—respectable the world over. This development elevated the stakes of ownership because the discourse in defining "the" American identity was now being projected throughout the world. On the one hand, jazz developed as a modern musical art form, avant-garde. On the other hand, jazz was simultaneously being constructed as a type of fixed genre, indicative, ultimately, of American values like individual freedom and democracy. These debates of authenticity have not truly been resolved. But that is fitting, because to identify "once and for all"—dogmatically, almost—the characteristics of jazz as a genre would be to imply that there is but one singular American identity.

¹⁹³ Crist, 150.

¹⁹⁴ "Classroom: Ken Burns' 'Jazz'." <http://www.pbs.org/jazz/classroom/jazzschool.htm>

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