

2011

Storyville: Discourses in Southern Musicians' Autobiographies

Matthew Daniel Sutton

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<https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-wnm2-z287>

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Storyville: Discourses in Southern Musicians' Autobiographies

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A Dissertation presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

American Studies Program

The College of William and Mary
May, 2011

APPROVAL PAGE

This Dissertation is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy



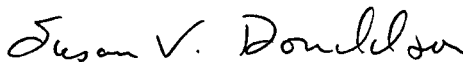
Matthew Daniel Sutton

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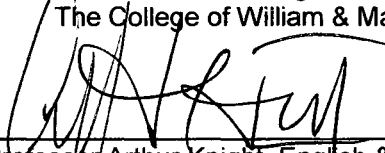


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ABSTRACT PAGE

This study utilizes many of the tools of the literary critic to identify and analyze the discursive conventions in autobiographies by American vernacular musicians who came of age in the American South during the era of enforced racial segregation. Through this textual analysis, we can appreciate this seemingly amorphous collection of books as a continuing conversation, where descriptions of the South and its music by turns confirm, contradict, and complicate each other. Ultimately, the dozens of southern musician autobiographies published in the last fifty years engage in a valuable and revealing dialogue, creating a virtual "Storyville"; ostensibly disparate works share themes, ideas, and literary approaches, while each narrative is distinguished by unique motifs, idiosyncrasies, and digressions.

From this crosstalk emerges a rich history informed by local knowledge as well as a larger, multifaceted portrait of now-vanished musical communities, such as Storyville-era New Orleans and the Mississippi Delta juke-joint circuit. In collaboration with co-authors, southern musicians typically employ a hybrid discursive style that attempts to balance personal subjectivity with historical authority. This narrative approach encompasses literary devices—such as free indirect discourse and *paralepsis*—and the "thick description" common in the social sciences. Through this reportage, musicians establish themselves as uniquely positioned organic intellectuals and citizen-historians of their respective places and times. Read collectively, musicians' published reminiscences provide important and overlooked first-person reflections on life in the Jim Crow South.

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DEDICATION

To Chris L. Sutton,
Musicianer

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“My heart is not weary/ It’s light and it’s free

I’ve got nothing but affection for all those who’ve sailed with me”

-Bob Dylan, “Mississippi”

My sincerest thanks to my dissertation committee for their time and efforts on my behalf: Dr. Charles McGovern, Dr. Susan V. Donaldson, Dr. Arthur Knight, and Dr. Adam Gussow. I also wish to acknowledge my debt to Dr. John Cawelti, professor emeritus at the University of Kentucky, who, many years ago, helped out a law-school dropout with an interest in literature; his kindness and example will never be forgotten.

For a freelance writer, time is money. Therefore, I am doubly gratified at the time and care Kurt Loder, David Ritz, George Vecsey, and Ellen Wright spent in answering my (occasionally impertinent) questions about their writing and collaborative methods. Colonial Williamsburg Productions provided me with valuable on-the-job training. The students I taught in William and Mary’s American Studies and Literary and Cultural Studies programs were exceptionally good sounding boards for many of the ideas advanced in this study. The American Studies Program’s awarding of a summer research grant and two conference-travel grants opened up some important doors, and for that I am grateful.

Above all, I appreciate the unflagging support of my parents, Chris and Pat Sutton, and the encouragement of family and friends everywhere. This project was

bookended by the joyous arrivals of my nieces, Madison Nicole Smith and Embry Kate Sutton. My heart was lifted by, among many other things, their pure love of music. I await the day I can pass on to them the music and writings discussed in the pages that follow, and look forward to what they can teach me in return. I am grateful for all the support I received during the long period of researching and writing this dissertation. To circle back to Dylan's "Mississippi": "Things should start to get interesting about now."

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INTRODUCTION

“In the swift whirl of time, music is a constant, reminding us of what we were and of that which we aspire. Art thou troubled? Music will not only calm, it will ennoble thee.” – Ralph Ellison, “Living with Music”

A few weeks after research for this study commenced in 2002, *Commentary*’s Terry Teachout augmented a positive review of jazz great Oscar Peterson’s autobiography with a blindside assault on the authorship of jazz autobiography. The critic found fault with some books’ emphases on the darker aspects of musicians’ private lives, while other works were disparaged for “shed[ding] little light on the inner lives of their nominal authors, and still less on the music made by those remarkable men” (“Music” 67). On the whole, Teachout accused musicians who author books of being inarticulate, lacking introspection and historical consciousness, and leaving their life stories to the literary mercy of hack ghostwriters. By misrepresenting over half a century of largely well-received jazz autobiographies as either sensationalized confessions of addiction or contrived Horatio Alger stories, Teachout overlooked the reality that these autobiographies have served as informed, eyewitness accounts of the world(s) of jazz to a knowledgeable reading public. First-person works as disparate as Louis Armstrong’s *Satchmo* (1954), Charles Mingus’s *Beneath the Underdog* (1971), Art Pepper’s *The Straight Life* (1979), and Wynton Marsalis and Carl Vigeland’s *Jazz in the Bittersweet Blues of Life* (2001) demonstrate

the range of jazz musicians' subjective experiences, and the ability of autobiography to articulate both the music and its milieu with insight and sophistication.

Elsewhere, the respected *Journal of Country Music* qualified an overall complimentary review of recent country-music autobiographies by asking in a headline, "What Hath Tom Carter Wrought?"—a reference to the journalist who has co-authored the best-selling life stories of George Jones, Reba McEntire, and broadcaster Ralph Emery, among others. The mock-horror of the headline is significant, signaling an anxiety that such autobiographies were undermining authority in country-music historiography by unleashing something new and out of control into the field. Both Teachout and the *Journal's* argumentative premises illustrate some of the misconceptions and misreadings of the content and context of American musicians' autobiographies.

Yet given this assumed lack of reliability, as well as the subliterate status of celebrity autobiography, it is remarkable how extensively and unquestioningly they are cited in some quarters, with great leeway given to their provenance and intention. Autobiographies now regularly shape the narrative structure and content of popular studies and histories of vernacular music, like Craig Werner's *A Change Is Gonna Come* (2006), Gerald Early's *One Nation Under a Groove* (1994), and Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr.'s *Race Music* (2003). Likewise, while Miles Davis's 1989 autobiography (co-written with Quincy Troupe) has been extensively scrutinized and rightly criticized for its faults, including many factual errors and the unattributed use of other authors' words and research, *Miles* is quoted verbatim in histories like John

Szwed's biography of Davis, *So What*, and Geoffrey Ward's companion volume to Ken Burns's documentary *Jazz*. In such cases, the desire to have Davis contribute to histories "in his own words," even if those words are fabricated or plagiarized from secondary sources, overrides the dispute over the actual authorship of the text.

Likewise, Burns's film (which assumed its place, from its title on down, as a definitive history) uncritically adopted a key scene from W.C. Handy's *Father of the Blues* (1941) as jazz's prevailing origin myth, rather than qualifying it as a heavily stylized scene from a book of memoirs. In much the same way, the narration in the 2003 PBS *American Masters* documentary on James Brown subordinated contemporary interviews with its (then very much alive) subject in favor of an actor reading passages from Brown's 1986 co-authored autobiography as narration. The co-written musician autobiography now commonly functions as the primary source material for Hollywood "biopics," whose screenplays regularly take further liberties with the contours of a subject's life story. Following up on the commercial success of *What's Love Got to Do With It* (1993), the film adaptation of Tina Turner and Kurt Loder's *I, Tina* (1986), Taylor Hackford's film *Ray* (2004; based on Ray Charles and David Ritz's *Brother Ray*, 1977) and *Walk the Line* (2005; based on Johnny Cash and Patrick Carr's *Cash*, 1997) have enjoyed exceptional popular and critical success and have established themselves, at least in the public imagination, as reputable, if not definitive, histories of their respective subjects.

For years, the life stories of musicians have meshed into the fabric of canonical American autobiography. Billie Holiday's importance in the field is not

simply limited to her authorized book *Lady Sings the Blues* (1956), but, as Farah Jasmine Griffin has noted, also encompasses the firsthand impressions of Lady Day recorded in the autobiographies of Malcolm X, Maya Angelou, Miles Davis, and Elizabeth Hardwick (*If You* 32). Similarly, Zora Neale Hurston's profile of Ethel Waters in *Dust Tracks on a Road* supplements Waters's own self-portraits in *His Eye Is on the Sparrow* and *To Me It's Wonderful* (177–180).

The subgenre of musicians' autobiographies is gradually establishing itself into academic discourse as well. Lawrence W. Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1977) employs examples from the published memoirs of musicians, including Louis Armstrong, Big Bill Broonzy, W.C. Handy, Mahalia Jackson, among many others, to uncover the folk practices and beliefs of African Americans in the South by presenting this historical source material in harmony with more traditional objects of analysis, such as folk tales, slave narratives, and WPA interviews. In his extensive study *The Creation of Jazz* (1992), Burton W. Peretti cites memoirs of early jazz musicians as reputable evidence alongside archival interviews and established historical studies. Likewise, literary critics like Gerald Early and David Yaffe integrate jazz autobiographies such as Count Basie and Albert Murray's *Good Morning Blues* (1985), *Lady Sings the Blues*, and *Miles* as key primary sources in their ongoing examinations of jazz and American literature and contend with the conflicts and untruths of those autobiographies, rather than dismissing them outright. Several studies by George Lipsitz have incorporated autobiographies by lesser-known musicians, such as Johnny Otis, Preston Love, and Horace Tapscott, to illustrate a

“hidden” history of popular music distinguished by bold crossings of race and class lines by vernacular musicians who function as organic intellectuals. An academic study of the blues like Adam Gussow’s *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (2002) draws on the memoirs of bluesman David “Honeyboy” Edwards to substantiate its thesis on violence toward African Americans in the South. In colleges and universities, musicians’ autobiographies now appear on the syllabi of literature, African American studies, and jazz-studies courses. Some university presses now regularly publish popular musicians’ autobiographies, such as those by Jerry Butler and Fred Wesley, whose narratives focus less on the authors’ renown and more on the social history revealed in their stories.

Another noteworthy change from past practices is signaled by the increasing number of non-Anglophone musicians whose life stories are published in the United States, attesting to the ability of these works to transcend cultural barriers. Since 2003, major publishing houses have translated and published in the United States autobiographies by Brazilian *tropicália* artist Caetano Veloso, South African trumpeter Hugh Masekela, and Cuban-American music icon Celia Cruz. Too long under the radar of academic and critical attention, musician autobiographies have now gained wider critical dissemination and “earned” the right to be used as primary sources.

While there is a body of commonly referenced musician autobiographies, and a foundational set of texts that has remained in print for years, there is not as of yet a canon within the subgenre. Part of this is due to the disjunction between musical

notoriety and authorship. Many major American music figures have produced insubstantial, unreflective, or unrevealing autobiographies, while a number of lesser-known musicians have authored or co-authored valuable and insightful works. It would be misleading to suggest that these texts coalesce into one coherent history. Musician autobiographies exist like stars in the night sky: some appear in clusters, others in loose constellations, but each star has its own eccentricity, weight, and pull. Additionally, the legacy of such wholly ghostwritten works as 1956's *Lady Sings the Blues* (William Dufty writing as Billie Holiday) and *Swing That Music* (1936; an unknown scrivener in the role of Louis Armstrong) has cast suspicion on the subgenre. The primacy of the co-writer or ghostwriter underscores the fact that autobiographies are literary productions that involve extensive collaboration in their conception, creation, and marketing stages. This study seeks to challenge the presumption that co-written or "as-told-to" books are inherently dishonest or worthless as historical studies, as such a presumption overlooks the major functions of popular musicians' autobiographies, namely to reaffirm a public persona (often extending into mythos, admittedly) and initiate or continue a dialogue with readers.

Consider, for example, the aforementioned episode related in W.C. Handy's *Father of the Blues*, where Handy hears the blues sung by a lone guitar player at a remote Mississippi train station and "follows" that sound to fame, fortune, and worldwide acclaim. Music historians and fans now commonly accept this account as an "official" origin myth, rather than a carefully plotted and narrated scene that supports Handy's self-coronation as "Father of the Blues," promotes the Father

alongside his progeny, and makes a bid for posterity, or at least wider public approbation. While this reliance on autobiography-as-primary-source is perfectly natural and expected, no current studies are questioning the complex cultural work that undergirds the conception, writing, editing, promotion, and consumption of these life stories.

This dissertation bucks the current trend of musical compartmentalization/ racial profiling to embrace jazz, blues, gospel, country, and rock equally and fervently; the shared experiences of southern musicians in the early and mid-twentieth century greatly outnumber the differences imposed upon them by a segregated society. For example, though Louis Armstrong in his autobiography *Satchmo* recounts the steps of apprenticeship necessary for a career in jazz, makes great use of the milieu's remarkably inventive lexicon, and uses improvisation as leitmotif, his story can and does apply to other types of music-making. His testimonial owes more to the twin traditions of the *Bildungsroman* and the American "self-made-man" story than any master narrative applicable solely to jazz musicians. Likewise, though the trials and tribulations of Johnny Cash and George Jones's lives would indeed, to borrow a phrase from Jerry Lee Lewis, "make a damn good country song," the hardscrabble sharecropping childhood they portray shares a commonality with the life stories of many fellow southern musicians in the jazz, blues, and pop fields. Ultimately, the dozens of musician autobiographies published in the last seventy years engage in a valuable and revealing crosstalk (a disruption of authoritative, single-voiced discourse); seemingly disparate works share themes,

ideas, and literary approaches, while each narrative is distinguished by unique preoccupations, idiosyncrasies, and digressions. Rather than merely taxonomize works or tediously catalog the inconsistencies between subjects' recollections and the historical record, this study utilizes many of the tools of the literary critic to analyze the discursive conventions among a wide cross-section of roughly contemporaneous musicians with vastly different life stories. Grounded in Mikhail Bakhtin's notion that even the most subliterate writings are part of a dialogue—both with the reader and with its historical antecedents—we can appreciate this seemingly amorphous collection of books as a continuing conversation, where descriptions of the American South and its music by turns confirm, contradict, and complicate each other.

While hundreds of primary sources exist in the field, only a handful of secondary sources have attempted to assess and critique musicians' autobiographies as a subgenre. Many of these secondary works have established important groundwork. Christopher Harlos's essay "Jazz Autobiography: Theory, Practice, Politics" (1995), identifies and addresses some major issues in the past half-century of jazz autobiography: the need for African American musician/authors to redefine their music in light of dominant, "whitewashed" histories of jazz; the mediating influence of co-authors; and the ultimate authenticity of these meticulously crafted texts. While interrogating these issues, Harlos makes effective use of literary-critical techniques in order to investigate the dynamics of authorial collaboration. Harlos's essay challenges the traditional view that self-penned works are more authentic and

authoritative than collaborative works. For Harlos, the carefully attuned interviewing and editing skills of Albert Murray are fundamental to establishing necessary context in Count Basie's autobiography, while a team of co-authors, editors, and interviewees brings added perspective to the life story of New Orleans musician Pops Foster. Furthermore, in their selective editing and polemical insertions in the text (through forewords, musical analyses, etc.), co-authors act as mediating agents and *ad hoc* authorities, connecting authors to their readers. By contrast, Harlos cites Charles Mingus's *Beneath the Underdog*, an impressionistic and often brilliant work of literary experimentation, as an example of a single-author text whose subjectivity defies the efforts of establishment figures (in Mingus's case, staid white jazz critics) to intrude upon or co-opt the act of storytelling.

Mingus's unique book is also analyzed in Elizabeth Schultz's essay "To Be Black and Blue: The Blues Genre in Black American Autobiography" (1975). Following up on Ralph Ellison's conception of the blues as a method of confronting and purging pain, Schultz traces a tradition of texts that narrate acts of African American resistance, resilience, and transcendence, from American slave narratives to the autobiographical works of Maya Angelou. As expressed by Ellison in "Richard Wright's Blues," the impulse to expose and endure hardships and injustice, either in text or song, is an inherently subjective autobiographical act (*Collected* 129). The "blues" type of writing—which does not necessarily have to invoke music—reads as a type of quest narrative, where the protagonist seeks the meanings behind injustice

and, pursuing the question “What Did I Do (To Feel So Black and Blue)?” achieves self-discovery.

Holly Farrington’s article “Narrating the Jazz Life” (2006) takes the initial steps of taxonomizing the various strains of jazz musicians’ life writing. Following David Danow’s *Models of Narrative*, Farrington situates works into three essential categories: the epic narrative, in which the subject narrates his or her life story in linear fashion, with a clear motive and purpose in mind; the mythic narrative, where events are often fabulized or represented in an impressionistic manner; and the labyrinth, a quest narrative where the objective is unclear to the subject-author and, consequently, to the reader (376). All three categories rely on conventional narrative strategies, as well as a coordinated dual performance by the autobiographical subject and the co-author, in order to convey a chosen persona to the reader.

Two divergent essays covering country musician’s autobiographies also take up the relationship between subject, collaborator, and audience, Jac L. Tharpe’s “Homemade Soap” (1984) and Bob Allen’s “What Hath Tom Carter Wrought?” (1995). Tharpe argues that the content found in the first wave of country autobiographies (following Loretta Lynn and George Vecsey’s *Coal Miner’s Daughter*, published in 1976) borrows liberally from Hollywood melodramas and the pious confessional autobiographies of born-again Christians, though the texts are ultimately guided by the profit motive. He senses in both strains “condescension” to the reading audience, both in the stars’ recounting of past poverty, misfortune, and/or addiction, and their representation of present-day material success (146). Country

entertainers concoct this “homemade soap” (as in “soap operas”) to dazzle yet ultimately take advantage of an amorphous and uncritical readership.

Bob Allen’s review essay of the second, even more successful, wave of autobiographies in the country-music field finds similar motivations in these volumes’ writing and marketing but presents a more considered response to their popularity. Using Tom Carter, the most prominent collaborator of 1990s country-music memoirs, as his example, Allen finds a distinction between the roles of author and writer (not very dissimilar from Michel Foucault’s conception of the terms in “What Is an Author?”), where a “writer” like Carter serves as an amanuensis or, in Carter’s own self-deprecating job description “a glorified stenographer” (308). Using extensive taped interviews and outside research as source material, the writer arranges and presents the subject’s experiences in a simulation of his or her idiomatic voice. In lieu of what Foucault terms “the author function,” Carter insists that his own additions to the text as a writer are intended to be conducive to the illusion of a one-on-one conversation between the subject and reader: “I want the reader to think that he or she is privy to these celebrities’ innermost thoughts, as if the celebrity is actually confiding in them” (309).

In contrast to the cynical view of the country-music-memoirs marketplace portrayed by Jac Tharpe, Carter insists that the profit motive is secondary to the lasting bond between veteran country-music stars and their fans. Autobiographies, then, become the medium through which subjects discuss the contours of their careers, at times deny scandalous rumors, and take ownership of their legacies.

“Many see it as a cleansing experience,” Carter claims. “Many see it as an obligation to a public that has been so good to them” (309). Allen observes, however, that this cozy, mediated relationship can be undercut by the subject’s own personal quirks and prejudices; a number of volumes have met with popular resistance when the subject spends an inordinate number of pages rehashing old grudges, or indulging in relentless self-justification or self-pity. Where Tharpe detects a cynical calculation in the construction of “common man”/ “common woman” personae in country-music autobiography, Allen is more sympathetic to the writing process, finding in Carter’s labors a deep understanding of the musician-fan relationship and detecting, even as the subgenre enters a “mass production” phase, an undercurrent of humility and forthrightness that elicits, rather than contrives, a reader’s connection with the autobiographical subject.

Addressing the issue of gender in the field, Pamela Fox’s “Recycled ‘Trash’: Gender and Authenticity in Country Music Autobiography” (1998) assesses the subgenre of co-authored autobiographies by female country-music stars, noting their complicated relationship with the reading audience. Primed by a performer’s constructed “down-to-earth” persona, readers of country-music texts expect to encounter a corresponding familiar and friendly narrative voice in published life stories. The balance between the “star” persona and the Everywoman must be struck for the subject to relate inside information on a life of fame yet still maintain a tone of humility that fosters reader empathy. The result, Fox argues, is a tightly scripted

performative act, stage-managed in large part by co-authors and visually represented by a series of humanizing photographs tracing the subject's life journey.

Fox expands her arguments in her book-length study *Natural Acts: Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music* (2009). Identifying the celebrity autobiography as a "lowbrow genre," Fox places the female country star's performance on the page within a historical continuum that invokes "class abjection, gender norms, constructions of whiteness, and markers of modernity" (10). In an approach that began with Loretta Lynn and George Vecsey's massively popular *Coal Miner's Daughter*, female country stars and their co-authors have adapted to the page aspects of country-music performative style, first essayed in barn-dance radio and honky-tonk performances and then parlayed through an unaffected, "down-home" persona disseminated in fan magazines. Such an extramusical performance straddles the line between extreme modesty and outright abjection, as female performers go to great lengths to be seen as ordinary, sublimating their extraordinary talent in the process. All this contrivance is done, ironically, to present performers and their music as authentic and safely within gender and class norms.

In-depth studies of individual autobiographies are rare, but two studies deserve mention. William Howard Kenney's "'Going to Meet the Man': Louis Armstrong's Autobiographies" (1988) traces Armstrong's successive "autobiographical statements," extending from a ghostwritten text in the 1930s, to the self-penned *Satchmo* (1954), to hybrids of interview and self-revelation in the 1960s. Along the way, each project served as an adjunct to his evolving public persona,

though Kenney argues that none of the texts, individually or collectively, represented the “true” Armstrong found in his private letters, due largely to a capitulation to the popular audience, and a tendency toward didacticism. Themes of self-representation and civic engagement also inform Adam Gussow’s essay on W.C. Handy’s *Father of the Blues*, “Make My Getaway” (2001). According to Gussow, as part of his meticulous self-fashioning, Handy used rhetorical understatement and the perspective of the boundary-crossing “race man” to counter lingering minstrel stereotypes, yet at the same time depicted the realities of African American life in the South, including the ever-present threat of lynching. In his third-person reportage on lynching and its repercussions, Handy articulated his disfranchisement from the South without directly indicting the region’s power structure.

Because there is not yet a standard critical vocabulary used to discuss these works and because esoteric, hair-splitting issues of authorship and presentation abound in this study, some clarifications on terminology seem in order. In instances where a performer and an author are jointly credited on a book, with an “and,” “with,” or “as told to” separating their names, I will refer to the second author as a co-author, co-writer, or collaborator. “Amanuensis” is used in its traditional sense, referring to one who directly interviews a subject and records or transcribes his or her words, with little editorial input. Editors who have taken a more active role in shaping the text, as in the case of Arna Bontemps with W.C. Handy’s memoirs or Janis Martinson and Michael Robert Frank’s work with Honeyboy Edwards, will be

discussed as editors and collaborators. Though some writers in the field like David Ritz have come to embrace the term “ghostwriter” with a degree of irony, its connotations of anonymity, unreliability, and deceit make it too loaded to use here interchangeably with “co-author.” When the term is used in the following chapters, it will only describe those writers who are actually anonymous, such as the spectral author ventriloquizing Louis Armstrong in *Swing That Music* or an author-for-hire who pastes together existing material with limited one-on-one contact with the subject, as exemplified by William Dufty’s active manipulation of character, narrative voice, and fact in *Lady Sings the Blues*.

Similarly, the sheer abundance and taxonomic difficulties presented by centuries’ worth of autobiography necessitate precision when discussing genre and subgenre. In *Reading Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson delineate fifty-two unique varieties of first-person writing, from unvarnished traditional forms like the diary and letter to recent, highly conceptualized modes such as “biomythography” and “*testimonio*” (183–207). The study at hand will use “autobiography,” “life story,” “life writing,” “account,” and “narrative” synonymously, recognizing that the act of telling one’s story can be wholly personal or heavily mediated, an act of total and unsparing candor or a fictionalized composite, delivered in a few short sentences in an album’s liner notes or refashioned through a multivolume series of texts.

Certain autobiographical acts are unique, however. Simply put, while all memoirs are autobiographical, not all autobiographies are memoirs. Especially in the

United States, “memoirs” connotes a discrete subcategory of autobiography composed or dictated toward the end of one’s life, narrated chronologically, foregrounding historical events, public accomplishments, and famous people encountered, with the intention, spoken or unspoken, of writing one’s self into history. Classic American examples of the subgenre would include works by ex-presidents, generals, and industrialists. In the literary vein, Gore Vidal’s *Palimpsests* and *Point to Point Navigation* offer recent models of the late-period, large-scale reminiscence. Classical-music scholarship is enriched (and often complicated) by centuries of weighty memoirs by composers, conductors, and virtuosos, each making a case for posterity. (More recently, a number of “as-told-to” autobiographies by opera luminaries have titillated fans with gossipy accounts of backstage affairs and animosities [Peters 21–22].) Nearly all of the works examined here have clear traces of the memoirs impulse—especially the desire to cash in temporal fame for immortality—but I will reserve the term for works written as self-retrospectives, such as W.C. Handy’s *Father of the Blues* or Sidney Bechet’s *Treat It Gentle*, which primarily review long-term career accomplishments and the subject’s importance in a historical context. To add to the semantic confusion, “memoir” (note the singular form) has been adapted into a term of convenience in recent years to classify and market a more impressionistic type of life writing, often by “unknowns,” documenting trauma, disease, or personal hardship (see Yagoda 1–3). However, it is the traditional usage of “memoirs,” with its emphasis on the “long view” of history and the public life, which I will employ here. I utilize the term “chronicle” less

strictly, to describe works such as Basie and Murray's *Good Morning Blues* that largely sidestep the subject's personal life in favor of documenting the places and dates of professional events like concert appearances and recording sessions.

The first chapter of this dissertation, "When It's Story Time Down South" (its title, like all that follow, adapted from the repertoire of Louis Armstrong) traces the development of autobiographies by southern musicians, chronologically and thematically, with special attention paid to their critical reception and their collective move toward a hybrid discursive style that attempts to combine personal subjectivity with historical authority. The emphasis will be on the evolving dialogue between musician autobiographies, especially by those working in the same musical genre. The role of the co-author will be critiqued, with the conclusion that co-authors fulfill a role midway between the historian and the music producer, functioning, in Benjamin Filene's phrase, as "memory workers," constructing in the majority of cases texts that present the musical life coherently and approachably to a non-specialist audience. Finally, the significant function of paratextual elements (such as discographies, photographs, and blurbs) in recent autobiographies will be discussed within the context of Gérard Genette's recent scholarship. In many recent autobiographies, the paratext provides an important and often overlooked historical ballast to life stories by foregrounding professional achievement and cultural significance.

Chapter Two, “I Ain’t Gonna Play No Second Fiddle,” and Chapter Three, “In Pursuit of Happiness,” examine self-narrated accounts of the development of musicianship by W.C. Handy and Louis Armstrong, respectively, and how their musical development and popularity fostered their conceptions of authorship and citizenship. These heavily stylized, civic-minded autobiographies establish key musician-citizen tropes: both use canny rhetorical understatement and the narrative structure of American progress to position themselves as cross-racial ambassadors. Handy and Armstrong are credited in this study as promoters of a specialized citizenship partly open to African American musicians in the segregated United States. Once accustomed to the alternation of accommodation with advancement, they “play the changes” as civic virtuosos: learning the rules, written and unwritten, of the Jim Crow system as they go along, ultimately creating something harmonious from a flawed score.

Following their examples, nearly every autobiography by a southern musician, from Pearl Bailey to James Brown, assumes the voice of the idealized American citizen: humble and grateful in the spotlight of success, trusting in the opportunities and mobility promised by a democracy, and hopeful in the republic’s ability to implement further positive changes. In Bakhtinian terms, this authorial stance is “centripetal” (literally meaning “rotation toward the center”), affirming unity and common core values to the reader. However, the more “centrifugal” life stories of Sidney Bechet and Nina Simone, both expatriates with deeply conflicted feelings about their home region and their nation, are also considered and given due

consideration in this dissertation. Both Bechet and Simone conflate their status as second-class citizens with the slights they perceive against their art and modify their American identities accordingly.

“Crescent City Blues” and “Blues from the South,” the fourth and fifth chapters, examine how musicians’ autobiographies have documented and enlivened two unique sites of southern music—the city of New Orleans and the sharecropping farms of the Lower Mississippi Valley between the years 1890 and 1960—through both first-person literary and more detached historical prose. Both the New Orleans and the Delta these musicians knew are “vanished” sites today (though revived in tourist-friendly simulacra), so their representation, through retelling, of local music-making and social relations is especially significant for our historical understanding.

The subjectivity of memory is the focus of the New Orleans section, as legends like Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet and lesser-known musicians (but brilliant raconteurs) like Danny Barker and Pops Foster engage in a spirited (and often amusingly mean-spirited) exchange on jazz in the “lost” Storyville-era New Orleans, with nearly every detail and opinion offered in one book disputed in another. From this crosstalk emerges a rich oral history and a multifaceted portrait of a remarkably inventive and resourceful musical community. Pete Fountain’s book *A Closer Walk* (1972) provides a bizarre interlude to this chapter, with its attempt to rewrite jazz history (in the dubious tradition of Paul Whiteman’s 1927 book *Jazz*) through the exclusion of African Americans and by paving over the ruins of Storyville in favor of a well-lit, well-policed (and well-segregated) modern Bourbon

Street. Conversely, the autobiographies of the Neville Brothers and Dr. John demonstrate how cultural practices live on in New Orleans, not the least through written commemoration and the revival of local, syncretic traditions.

In the section covering the Mississippi Delta, generations of musicians speak with eloquence and detail on the hardships and privations that faced the sharecropping or tenant family. In a bitter irony, scores of musicians come to realize that the economics of the southern cotton field and the northern music industry are often one and the same. Delta bluesman David “Honeyboy” Edwards’s extraordinary life story, *The World Don’t Owe Me Nothing* (1997) is the main work examined in this section, recognized for both its clarity of detail and its canny and imaginative narrative techniques (some of which are more common to modernist fiction than the popular musician’s autobiography). Willie Dixon’s *I Am the Blues* (1989), a companion of sorts to Edwards’s book, continues the collective story of the blues through the Great Migration.

The sixth and final chapter, “Just One of Those Things,” analyzes one of the familiar yet understudied tropes of musical initiation and mastery in this body of autobiographies, the “accidental career” claimed by musicians, especially female, entering fields dominated by white men.¹ In the case of the “accidental career,” musicians and songwriters, ranging from Loretta Lynn to Charley Pride, attempt to

¹ Other common narratives portraying the attainment of musicality include the white musician’s fantasy of cross-racial musical exchange and deep brotherhood with supernaturally talented African American mentors and a more generic quest narrative where the young hero seeks the source of an unfamiliar type of music so as to exert mastery over it.

ingratiate themselves to the reader by masking years of hard work and ambition. In their narration, they represent their overarching story, particularly the rise to prominence and the breaking of gender or racial barriers, as a series of “happy accidents” that enforced professionalism and success upon them, a trope akin to the “impostor phenomenon” identified in popular psychology. The irrepressible Ruth Brown delivers an important corrective to the accidental-career cliché in her autobiography *Miss Rhythm* (1996). Robbed of her royalties by what she pointedly refers to as “plantation accounting,” Brown takes on the corporatized world of popular music and assumes a role analogous to the “blues detective” envisioned in Albert Murray’s *The Hero and the Blues*. *Miss Rhythm* is a refreshingly cant-free retracing of her career, where she ascribes her successes to talent and drive, rather than sheer luck or an accident, and uses her wits to confront the malfeasance of the music industry.

The choice of the American South as the locus for this study is not an arbitrary one, nor does it reflect a conscious regional chauvinism on my part. But the blues born in the South is as prevalent and flexible a starting point for life writing as it is for music; blues-based musicians frequently improvise and embellish their life stories over the course of their career to reinforce a persona, manipulate the impressions of their audience, and establish their place within a historical continuum. They employ standard storytelling structures, expressions, and tropes in the manner that a blues performer employs common chord progressions, sets of “floating verses,”

or instrumental “licks.” In exceptional cases, however, musicians and co-authors introduce narrative techniques common to literature, such as point-of-view shifts and manipulations of “story time,” alongside semi-detached observations on the South’s race relations, culture, and economy that offer the reader informed context, similar to the “thick description” employed by anthropologists and other trained observers of societies. What musician-subjects choose to establish in print is often a final summation of a life’s journey, with significant concessions to both narrative conventions and the popular audience.

One of the major conclusions of this study is that musicians’ autobiographies on the whole honor the history and preserve the integrity of the music itself, even if it means sometimes lapsing into exaggeration and/or mawkish sentimentality or leaning on time-tested narrative structures. More significantly, this dissertation insists that the majority of books discussed here serve as important and overlooked first-person documents of life in the Jim Crow South. Far more than monologic celebrity autobiographies or clichéd “rags-to-riches” tales, musicians and co-authors utilize the medium of autobiography to testify (in every sense of that word) about how music fostered unlikely relationships across racial and class lines and allowed a select few to “get over.”

Ultimately, all the disparate works discussed in these pages cross-speak and amplify each other, creating in the process a virtual reconstruction of a timebound, region-wide “Storyville.” Like Greil Marcus’s imaginative community of Smithville, where the collective voices of Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music* leap

off the turntable, engage in a spirited intertextual dialogue, and embody a liminal world of their own, the Storyville established by these autobiographies brings a lost world back to life and expands what we think we know about the twentieth-century South and its remarkable range of music. Each of the following chapters can be read as a stop on a guided tour of a revived Storyville that sprawls beyond the boundaries of neighborhood, city, and region. Points of interest will include places of learning (not limited to schools), forbidden spaces on both sides of “the tracks” that bisect the Jim Crow South, concert-hall recitals, Saturday night dances, Sunday morning church services, and parades winding through Main Streets and back alleys. These texts revivify a time and place where blues-based music confronted barriers and crossed borders. Through them, we learn how the act of making music gave an identity and voice to many who were once powerless and how the music they made ultimately attracted—and moved—a mass worldwide audience.

Collectively, these guiding narrative voices bear witness to this spirit of artistic and social rule-breaking and offer their own subjective history of musical and social hybridization. Moreover, the personalities encountered in these works—from Louis Armstrong to Ray Charles, from Nina Simone to Johnny Cash—are as captivating as any found in southern letters. While there are notable gaps in the archive and many individual works need to be approached and analyzed with great care, the subgenre has grown enough in stature and sophistication that it can serve as a source for advanced historical and literary study. This dissertation is not intended to be an across-the-board defense of popular musicians’ autobiographies, but rather a

guide to the history and reception of a still emerging subgenre of life writing and a critical analysis of the themes present both in these works and the ongoing conversation in the American studies field: race, gender, citizenship, identity, and the politics of popular culture.

CHAPTER I

WHEN IT'S STORY TIME DOWN SOUTH

Passing through Nashville in the mid-1980s, collecting material for his travelogue *A Turn in the South*, author V.S. Naipaul was intrigued by an article found in the local newspaper that profiled country-music singer Jan Howard and her just-published autobiography. The feature story ran down the sad particulars of Howard's private life, including poverty, abuse suffered as a child and as a young wife, a second marriage that ended when her husband was revealed to be a bigamist, and the deaths of four of her children. A cynical observer might have characterized Howard's life story, or at least the publicized version of that life story, as the analogue to the hard times dramatized in the more maudlin strains of country music, and dismissed the book as a rags-to-riches tale capitalizing on a sensationalistic story. Yet the narrative drew Naipaul in.

What Howard intends to deliver in her book, Naipaul intuitively, consists of more than cheap self-exploitation or shameless self-exposure; he reads Howard's description of "writing through" painful experiences with palpable sympathy. Naipaul relates to his own readers, without condescension, Howard's recollections of weeping during the writing process and Howard's redemption through her performances for a loyal audience that empathizes with her through her music and by "willing her on, wishing her well" (Naipaul 233). Naipaul connects the revelations of Howard's troubled life, and its exposure to an emotionally sympathetic audience, with a prior description of country music by one of his southern interviewees as

“down-home music, crying music” (233). This communication, though highly mediated, rings true for Naipaul; as a detached observer, he goes so far as to compare country stars’ public exposure of personal pain to a passion play. “Music and community, and tears and faith,” Naipaul writes. “I felt that I had been taken, through country music, to an understanding of a whole distinctive culture, something I had never imagined existing in the United States” (233).

What could possibly unite Naipaul, a Trinidad-born, postcolonial writer who would eventually be awarded a Nobel Prize for Literature, with Jan Howard, a one-time author, and her humble, decidedly non-literary work? In part, the sympathy arises from his recognition of Howard’s unique writing situation. Being a woman and a practitioner of confessional life writing presents challenges in the composition and dissemination of her work. Even Howard’s stature as an established country-music star has some disadvantages, as book critics and a large segment of the public presume that celebrity autobiographies are ghostwritten texts, consisting of little more than extended, self-serving press releases crafted in a simulation of the subject’s first-person voice. But Naipaul also recognizes the dialogic function in telling her life story. The newspaper article he reads about Jan Howard is accompanied by photographs of the singer onstage at Nashville’s Grand Ole Opry. In those pictures, the audience, who presumably know Howard’s heartaches as well as her triumphs, reverently line up in the aisles to take snapshots. The audience’s act of “willing her on, wishing her well” is answered by Howard’s resilience, expressed by performing, by the act of writing, and by the content of the book itself.

ETHEL WATERS – *HIS EYE IS ON THE SPARROW*

Although it has important antecedents, such as W.C. Handy's *Father of the Blues* (1941) and Mezz Mezzrow and Bernard Wolfe's *Really the Blues* (1946), Ethel Waters and Charles Samuels's *His Eye Is on the Sparrow* (1951) stands as the prototype for the contemporary American popular-music autobiography and the type of artist-fan dialogue perpetuated in works like Jan Howard's. The narrative arc of Waters's life—from childhood privations to naïve entry into performance, from success to conflict to redemption—has superficial resemblances to the formulaic American rags-to-riches story. But Waters and her co-author rejected the didacticism and moralizing of the self-made-man tale. The book's well-known opening passage marked the distance between Waters and Samuels's narrative approach and those of her predecessors:

I never was a child.

I never was coddled, or liked or understood by my family.

I never felt I belonged.

I always felt like an outsider.

I was born out of wedlock, but that had nothing to do with all this. To people like mine a thing like that just didn't mean much.

Nobody brought me up. (Waters and Samuels 1)

The book's opening rhetorical gambit, half confession and half accusation, immediately announced that *His Eye Is on the Sparrow* was intended to be read as a heroic struggle against adverse forces, including Waters's own family. The passage's

calculated shock value became a major selling point of the book, especially when it was reprinted on the front cover of the subsequent paperback edition (Figure 1). In

FIGURE 1

ETHEL WATERS – *HIS EYE IS ON THE SPARROW*



Figure 1: Ethel Waters and Charles Samuels, *His Eye Is on the Sparrow*, New York: Bantam Books, 1952.

her stark self-appraisal, Waters and her collaborator drew the reader into the story through the narrative method of free direct discourse: “free” in reference to the tendency of the author, who serves as both narrator and character, to narrate personal details (interior monologue, personal impressions and feelings, etc.) alongside external events; “direct” referring to the first-person point of view and relative stability of the narrative “I” that addresses the reader; and “discourse” in reference to how events (constituting the “story”) are narrated, ordered, and presented in the text (Martin 140). Ethel Waters’s bracing introduction to her life story addresses a sympathetic implied reader with the unadorned language and direct emotionalism of the interior monologue; from the very first page, the co-authors initiate a literary dialogue, where the reader is called upon to become both a narratee and a confidante.

His Eye Is on the Sparrow ends with a resolution of the blues dilemma posed in its opening. The mother who has rejected Waters throughout her life offers kind words to her daughter on her deathbed, and thereby provides a type of validation even her most loyal fans cannot provide. The neat, full-circle ending of the tale reinforces critic Carolyn Heilbrun’s contention that popular autobiographies have conventionally offered palliative, “easy reading” to a mass public by virtue of their formulaic structure, thematic familiarity (centering on the lives of accomplished people), and an unambiguously happy ending (38). *Sparrow*, like the works that followed in its wake such as Billie Holiday and William Dufty’s *Lady Sings the Blues*, collapses genre conventions as well. The effectiveness of Waters and Samuels’s narrative approach relies on a hybrid discursive style that incorporates—

and at times subverts—the linear narrative of history, the multi-voiced discourse of the novel, and the intimacy of the confession. Because its plain-spoken discourse trampled over established notions of autobiographical propriety, reviewers of the time had few works to compare or put into context with *Sparrow*. Jazz historian Frederick Ramsey, Jr. only half-facetiously invoked *Paradise Lost* in his positive review for *The Nation*, presumably to contextualize the book's hellish depictions of poverty and abuse (303).

But *Sparrow* was resolutely a book written for the popular audience, with clear commercial goals. Throughout her career, Waters had adopted a series of personae, largely formed by popular tastes. Her first stage appearances, in 1917, came under the alias of “Sweet Mama Stringbean” (Cherry, “Long” 264). Her first recordings, made under her own name, were in the “vaudeville blues” style fashionable at that time. By the late 1920s, she adopted more mainstream Tin Pan Alley fare while also becoming a visible presence in the social world that accompanied the Harlem Renaissance. Yet for all of her popularity, the color line imposed strict boundaries on Waters's performance style. As Randall Cherry notes in his survey of Waters's career, she maintained parallel repertoires throughout the Twenties, by performing blues-influenced popular tunes for white audiences, and grittier “low-down” blues for African American fans (“Voice” 112). Waters then turned to gospel music in the 1940s while also pursuing acting roles on stage and in films. Writing her memoirs after a long period of professional stagnation, with fewer roles available to her as an actress and her old circuit of nightclubs and black-owned

theatres rapidly dwindling, Waters sought to consolidate her fan support by inscribing her place in African American popular culture. (Simultaneously, Waters had a more basic impetus to publish her memories, as she owed a significant amount of back taxes to the Internal Revenue Service.) In effect, Waters was able to bypass most “gatekeepers” in the entertainment industry and present her story more directly to fans through the medium of print. Banking on years of memorable stage and film appearances and recordings, Waters addressed an audience curious about her background and inner life. At all stages of her career, one observer noted, “[A]udiences felt drawn to her, caught up by her, held by the personality which came through words and dance” (qtd. in Cherry, “Voice” 100). By evoking her many performative incarnations, yet speaking from a more mature perspective, Waters effectively harmonized her many professional selves with a dominant authorial “personality” who superseded all past personae.²

It stands to reason that memoirs written by musicians to simulate one-on-one conversation would replicate the staged intimacy of modern recordings. Though perhaps only a coincidence of chronology, it is nonetheless worth noting that the first wave of popular-music autobiographies represented singers who had come to prominence with the advent of the electric microphone: Waters, Louis Armstrong, Bing Crosby, and eventually Billie Holiday. Simon Frith notes the change in the

² It is also well worth noting how elegantly Waters, as the subject and co-author of her own story, is portrayed on the book cover, in a gown and fancy jewelry, a stark contrast to the plain costumes she wore in her film roles, where she frequently portrayed domestic workers and poor rural women.

singer-listener relationship that the microphone fostered, “The microphone allowed us to hear people in ways that normally implied intimacy—the whisper, the caress, the murmur” (187). Whether transmitting the good cheer of Armstrong’s vocals, the relaxed croon of Crosby, or the anguished cry of Holiday, electricity, ironically enough, brought a more comforting and human dynamic to the recording of popular singing after years when megaphone-assisted shouting was the norm.

While the renown of an autobiographical subject may incline a reader to lend credence to the veracity of a narrative, it by no means guarantees that the reader will ultimately regard it as truth. In the case of Waters’s book, and those that followed, the subject who writes in good faith initiates an unspoken agreement between author and reader that Philippe LeJeune has termed the “autobiographical pact.” In this pact, the autobiographer affirms that he or she is the actual protagonist, narrator, and author of the life story depicted in the text. In essence, the author reassures skeptical readers that his or her life and book are one and the same. LeJeune summarizes:

In many cases, the presence of the author in the text is reduced to the single name. But the place assigned to this name is essential: it is linked, by a social convention, to the pledge of responsibility of a *real person*. I understand by these words, which figure in my definition of autobiography, a person whose existence is certified by vital statistics and is verifiable. Certainly, the reader is not going to verify this, and he may very well not know who this person is. But his existence is beyond question: exceptions and breaches of trust serve only to

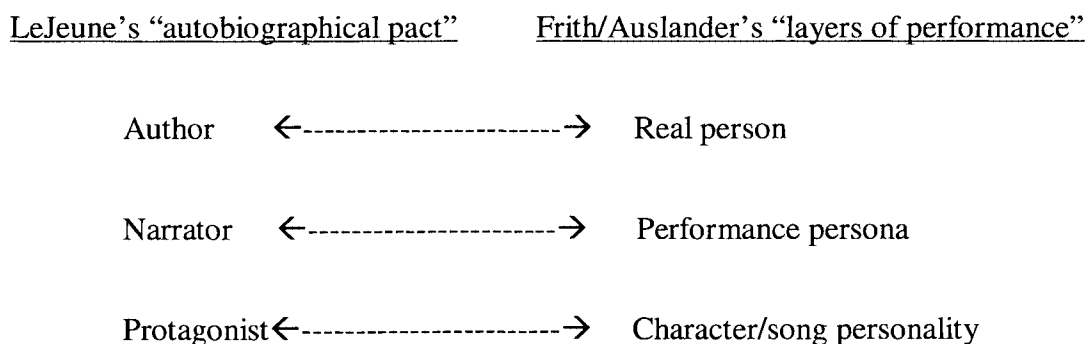
emphasize the general credence accorded this type of social contract.

(LeJeune 11, *italics in original*)

In virtually all cases of musician autobiographies, the reader is well aware of the “name” synonymous with the autobiography, whether that name has been established in the medium of music or circulated in a more general “celebrity” manner. Even lesser-known musical autobiographers like New Orleans jazz musicians Baby Dodds and Pops Foster possess “names” and personalities with currency among aficionados and record collectors. In some cases, a writer-performer must write in place of another “name,” such as a more lauded performer or a member of a peer group who has died. For example, as the more mainstream-accepted, commercially successful singer, Ethel Waters wrote in the stead of the late Bessie Smith, the most revered member of her cohort of 1920s female blues singers, in addition to others who did not achieve the same success or career longevity, including in her memoirs general descriptions of their shared touring circuit. Writing decades after the fact, jazz musicians Eddie Condon, Charlie Barnet, and even Louis Armstrong devoted a great deal of their respective memoirs to reminiscences of Bix Beiderbecke, whose legendary status (signified by fans’ familiar reference to him simply as “Bix”) was enhanced by his mysterious early death and subsequent silence in the archival record. More recently, rockabilly legend and “Blue Suede Shoes” songwriter Carl Perkins frequently veered from the details of his own life story to offer his insights into the life of Elvis Presley, his labelmate at Sun Records and the best-known performer of that song.

The musician-fan dynamic that animates performers' autobiographies has intriguing parallels to the autobiographical pact. Following Simon Frith, Philip Auslander identifies three "layers of performance" the popular musician embodies in the public mind: first, the actual person who makes the music; second, the "performance persona," or the image a musician has in the public imagination as a star; third, the character or personality a singer or musician inhabits in his or her songs (6). Therefore, performers and authors alike must acknowledge and balance the more performative aspects of their public image (Figure 2). Just as the author is assumed to be "outside" of his or her own autobiographical text, an actual person is commonly thought to be detached from the realm of performance, even when he or she is masterminding the musical and visual presentation. A performer's persona frames a piece of music, expressed by a "character," just as an autobiographical narrator would present a life story through the means of an in-the-moment, text-bound protagonist.

FIGURE 2: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL/MUSICAL PERSONA



While such exacting divisions of identity may seem applicable only to self-identified performance artists or chameleonic pop performers like David Bowie or Madonna, Frith's tripartite structure applies to vernacular musicians as well, perhaps the most obvious example being Johnny Cash. Cash fashioned a series of performance personae during his career, from a rockabilly performer in the 1950s, to the vaguely messianic "Man in Black" in the late 1960s and 1970s, to a stoic patriarch figure during the last decade of his career. Within all these overlapping personae, Cash inhabited characters within his repertoire of songs that, though, congruent with his chosen performance persona and larger generic norms, were not identical with the overarching image. Consequently, Cash could take on the personality of the cold-blooded killer narrating "Folsom Prison Blues," the romantic sentiments of "Ring of Fire," and the penitent voice of numerous gospel songs in the space of one concert or record album.

Author-performers like Cash, who have taken on so many musical and extramusical signifiers, must then change course and separate the person from their performance-based personae in their autobiographies and, if not exactly deny the authenticity of one's musical personae, at least address their constructed nature from the perspective of the real person/autobiographer. In Cash's 1997 autobiography, the subject-author even points to the indeterminacy of his own name and the multiple facets of his personality before addressing his performing image: "I'm Johnny Cash in public and on record sleeves [...] I'm Johnny to many people in the business [...] To [wife] June, I'm John [...] Finally, I'm J.R. [to family]" (Cash with Carr 9). As a

sequel to an earlier autobiography, *Man in Black* (1976) (written from the viewpoint of an earlier persona, newly committed to born-again Christianity), the older, “sage” Cash writes a more secular, history-minded book of memoirs in line with his latter-day performance persona, aimed in large part toward the younger listening audience that has adopted him.

For these fans, unfamiliar with much of his backstory, Cash reveals that the lyrics of songs like “Folsom Prison Blues” were purely fictional, and not based on first-hand experience. As if to assuage disappointed readers and prove his ultimate authenticity, though, he reassures them that the song’s visions of mayhem “did come to mind quite easily, though” (75). From Cash’s example, we can surmise that the “layers of performance” structure may be less rigid than the (admittedly already fluid) autobiographical pact; while a strict unity between protagonist, narrator, and author is desirable on the page, a musician indivisible from a performance persona and the stance expressed in his or her lyrics—a virtual diarist in song—seems artless and one-dimensional. To compensate and bring a simulation of the real person to the fore, musician-authors and their collaborators often highlight information in the text drawn from one’s personal, rather than strictly professional, life (even if they amount to “confessions” as superfluous like Johnny Cash’s admission of non-murder). Such a tactic both drops the masks of musical-based personae and forges an attenuated type of personal connection with readers/listeners/fans within the realm of the text.

This joining of the autobiographical pact with the desire to please a wide audience replicates the complex, mediated relationships forged in several strains of

American popular music, most notably country. With its associations of tradition and populism, country music thrives on a star system that prizes extraordinary talent and approachability in nearly equal measure.³ In *A Turn in the South*, one of V.S.

Naipaul's southern informants expresses no sense of contradiction in describing Loretta Lynn (by reputation rather than firsthand knowledge) as "one of the real earthy writers and a legend" (232). The informal atmosphere surrounding the Grand Ole Opry as well as earlier "barn dance" radio broadcasts helped country singers ingratiate themselves to a diffuse body of fans, in the process becoming, if not part of the family, certainly welcome guests on a Saturday night (see Malone 62–63).

Traditional Nashville offers fans opportunities to meet the stars, both at post-concert "meet-and-greets" and in festival settings like Fan Fair (Peterson 227).⁴ Such events thrive as sites of personal exchange. Pictures are taken, autographs are given and, when time allows, fans relate to the performer their own personal stories: how far they have traveled to see the show, what a performer's music has meant to them in their own lives, and the extent of their loyalty.

³ In country music, other types of books aside from autobiographies attempt to reinforce familiarity. Loretta Lynn and Johnny and June Carter Cash are just two examples of country stars who have co-authored cookbooks, and there are several "Cooking with the Stars" books on the market, demonstrating another affirmation of the idealized, near-familial relationships the most devoted country fans have built with their favorite performers.

⁴ After country's popularity peaked in the 1990s, the CMT music-video channel took over the operations of Fan Fair, transforming it into a far less intimate spectacle, almost indistinguishable from "arena rock." For a view of Fan Fair and the country star-follower rapport at its peak, see George Vecsey, "Country Music Fans Have Fans, Too," *New York Times* 14 Jun 1974: 20.

Even the “outlaw” and “alternative” country subgenres born out of opposition to Nashville hegemony thrive on devoted fanbases and tours of intimate venues. In their autobiographies, “anti-Nashville” country-music stars interpellate their fans as directly as their more commercial counterparts. Johnny Cash and Patrick Carr’s 1997 book *Cash* opens with a lament on the state of country music in the age of mass media, rhetorically asking his readership, “Is there anything behind the symbols of modern ‘country,’ or are the symbols themselves the whole story?” (17). From his unique perspective of being both a patriarch and outsider to modern country music, Cash and his co-writer distance themselves from the current scene, and place “country” in quotation marks to represent it as a construction, with its foundation in mass consumerism and publicity rather than musical tradition and musicians’ rapport with their fans. By voicing this estrangement, Cash and Carr persuade the reader to side with them in this generational battle and to assume all that they assume about the current state of country music.

As Cash’s appeal to his most devoted fans demonstrates, an overwhelming number of musician autobiographies are self-narrated retrospectives, delivered in conversational prose, from the perspective of a performer playing in a style deemed anachronistic by the larger listening public, but prized by a fervent cult of followers. The autobiographies of country-music stars of the 1950s and 1960s began appearing around 1980, as the genre experienced a period of gentrification, and country-radio playlists turned away from traditional country in favor of a more pop-oriented sound parlayed by younger performers. In another example, traditional New Orleans jazz

musicians began publishing memoirs in the 1950s, when the mass market regarded traditional jazz as nostalgia or merely the crude antecedent to the more polished Dixieland idiom. Seeking their place in posterity, these musicians made common cause with a dedicated group of record collectors and amateur historian-critics who passionately discussed and venerated early jazz and its cultural milieu.

As a result, musicians' autobiographies regularly betray a palpable quarrel with the present, describing past events in detail not only to "set the record straight," but also as a barely disguised critique of the supposed artificiality or inauthenticity present in contemporary music. This rhetorical move can allow a performer to build up the relationship with the reader, based upon their mutual alienation. A well-crafted volume of memoirs allows a performer past his or her prime to cash in on the capital of a public persona, built through years of personal appearances, publicity photos, and television and radio performances. Veteran musicians—especially in genres like country and rhythm and blues that have undergone fundamental changes and have left entire generations of stars behind—write themselves back into the present as they decry the perceived homogenization of contemporary music, its reliance on formula, and the machinery of stardom.

Among many jazz autobiographers, it was the evolving sophistication of the music and its audience that was considered suspect. In his *Born with the Blues* (1965), ragtime-era songwriter and impresario Perry Bradford lashed out at latter-day jazz historians (who, not coincidentally, marginalized Bradford's importance in their formation of a canon) as "lie dispensers" (46). He expressed equal bitterness toward

the seismic changes that transformed the music, specifically attacking the “Goatee Chaps” of bebop for their “tuneless, rhythmless kick” and “complicated arrangements” (15). Born a generation after Bradford, Dixieland-jazz revivalist Mezz Mezzrow also used his autobiography as a platform to disparage 1950s bebop. While few if any critics esteemed Mezzrow’s musicianship as anything more than an enthusiastic but semi-professional pastiche of traditional New Orleans jazz idioms, many credited him for his preservationist efforts, especially for his championing of Sidney Bechet, whose career was then in eclipse in the United States. In Mezzrow’s estimation, modern jazz barbarously supplanted the type of music he embraced through his playing and patronage. Beyond personal aesthetics, modern jazz earned Mezzrow’s scorn for its redrawn racial boundaries, as post-World War II African American jazz musicians, many of whom were expanding jazz’s boundaries through bebop, post-bop, and “free” styles, typically viewed musicians like Mezzrow (a man of Russian-Jewish descent, who chose to live in Harlem as a “voluntary” black man under prevailing racial custom) as a relic at best and a musical thief and cultural opportunist at worst. In titling his memoirs *Really the Blues*, after one of his own compositions, Mezzrow subtly indicted contemporary styles of jazz that he believed overstepped their cultural bounds by moving away from their origin in the blues. Not coincidentally, the title also reaffirmed his chosen role as a cultural arbiter.

However bitter this quarrel with the present may appear, criticism of contemporary music typically complements wistful remembrances of the past. Harlem stride-piano virtuoso Willie “The Lion” Smith, writing his memoirs the same

year as Perry Bradford, lamented the general state of popular music: “The kids today never had the chance to go through those rough spots that we did. After they make that one hit record, they are through because they don’t know how to act on a stage or in front of a television camera” (118). From his vantage point, Smith had to protect his reputation and distinguish the Thirties-era jazz he still championed three decades on from what he termed the “ultramodern mathematical cats” of modern jazz and “the juvenile rock ‘n’ rollers” (241). Many of these “kids” in turn voiced similar complaints in the 1970s and 1980s. Firsthand personal accounts by rhythm-and-blues stars of the fifties and sixties, including the once-indomitable James Brown, regularly launched into what critic Gerri Hirshey terms the “disco diatribe,” which laments the shifts in musical tastes during the seventies and their own resulting dip in commercial fortunes (xv). The recurrence of such complaints, across the spectrum of popular music, suggests that a common impulse for undertaking an autobiographical project is to revive not only a musical career in commercial decline but also the style of music associated with the subject-author.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL COLLABORATIONS

The most vexing issue in the authorship of celebrity autobiographies, and one that complicates the autobiographical pact is, of course, the mediating presence of the co-author. Recent critical surveys on contemporary life writing, like Linda R. Anderson’s *Autobiography*, quickly dismiss the efforts of musicians on the whole as examples of inauthentic, untruthful, and marginal life writing, largely for its

dependence on ghostwriters and professional authors-for-hire (8). Public and critical dissatisfaction with the nature of collaborative autobiographies has a long history, with familiar points of contention. A 1960 *New York Times* piece, titled “The Confessions of Practically Everybody,” criticized the celebrity confessional for a story arc that became predictable after the success of *His Eye Is on the Sparrow* and *Lady Sings the Blues*: the subject’s “childhood may be wretched, the days of his adulthood marked by stabs of a narcotics needle, his nights passed literally in the gutter sleeping off an alcoholic binge. But, however lost he is, he must be groping toward the light; in the end he must be spiritually regenerated or transfigured by love” (Walters 64). Engineering all these bogus confessions, of course, was the shadowy co-author. The *Times* article quoted Gerold Frank, a frequent ghostwriter of 1950s celebrity autobiographies: “Human lives do not have plots. I must impose form on chaos. I must make the reader keep on reading” (Walters 64). In his own defense, Frank admitted to exerting control over the finished product but distinguished between “imposing form” upon the subject’s experience and fabricating the book’s content. The *Times* presented a similar survey of the autobiographical field almost thirty years later, arriving at many of the same conclusions. What changed most dramatically in the intervening years was the audience, which had become not only well acquainted with the “redemption” narrative in life writing and the shaping influence of the co-writer/ghostwriter but also inured to mere mentions of scandal (Kakutani 21).

During that same time span, the American reading public developed a skepticism, perhaps a healthy one, toward the assumed core authenticity of autobiography, especially following exposures of acts of autobiographical bad faith, such as the purported Howard Hughes diary fabricated by Clifford Irving in the early 1970s. In light of recent memoir hoaxes, the autobiographical pact is both underscored and extended, as readers now expect proof of factual accuracy, even in the most impressionistic of works (Eakin 20–21). Phillippe LeJeune himself has modified his concept of the autobiographical pact to a degree; the pact now encompasses “the engagement that an author takes to narrate his life directly (her life, or a part of it, an aspect of it) in a spirit of truth” (N. Miller 538). This amendment to the pact, however, makes almost limitless allowances for subjectivity and a “spirit of truth.” Such “spirit” may be best described as the equivalent to what Donald Spence identifies in psychoanalysis as “narrative truth,” where the analysand in Freudian psychology shapes one’s own memories to his or her satisfaction. In this process of creation, “as the vague outlines take on form and substance, they also acquire a coherence and representational appeal, which give them a certain kind of reality. Narrative truth [...] depends on continuity and closure and the extent to which the fit of the pieces takes on an aesthetic finality” (Spence 31). Therefore, with the “vague outlines” of a musician’s life already established through prior public exposure, the reader of a subsequent autobiography judges the veracity of the book by how well the author and his or her collaborator represent and perpetuate those existing impressions. In the corpus of popular musicians’ autobiographies, there are no books whose

factuality has been completely discredited, in the manner of James Frey's novel-disguised-as-memoir *A Million Little Pieces*, though ghostwritten works like *Lady Sings the Blues* stretch the limits of authenticity and break the strict terms of the autobiographical pact. Unlike an unknown author writing to the vast mass audience, established stars bank on their connection with fans and assume fans' familiarity with his or her career and probably a good deal of personal information, making fabrication concerning most areas of their lives nearly impossible. For most subjects, only childhood and intimate relations are not already in the public domain.

This heightened awareness on the part of the reader complicates the act of self-representation in the autobiographical situation. From the nineteenth century on, American readers have approached autobiographies with the expectations that the authors, as represented through their works, should be modest, honest, and engaging. At the same time, subject-authors must perform a deft balancing act; to keep an audience enthralled, they must be humble, rather than appear unctuous or vain. Autobiographers must be approachable and relatable while at the same time write spectacularly about the extraordinary events in their lives. This tension shapes the discourse of books like Loretta Lynn and George Vecsey's *Coal Miner's Daughter*, which endeavors to depict Lynn's hardscrabble childhood, celebrate her success as a singer and songwriter, and affirm her incredible rise to stardom and numerous public accomplishments in one cohesive text. In the book's preface, titled "About Me and This Book," Lynn offers the reader a guarantee of authenticity in her statement of authorial control: "You can bet your last scrip penny I checked out every word before

they sent it to the book company. And if I didn't think it was true, out it went. The first thing I insisted was that it sound like me" (xiv). In critic Pamela Fox's estimation, Lynn "conflates image, voice, and identity here while simultaneously admitting that voice is a fabrication carefully crafted by Vecsey" ("Recycled" 240). In essence, Lynn, as author and arbiter, carefully negotiates the nuances of the autobiographical pact by claiming authorship of her "image, voice, and identity," even if her writing collaborator ultimately fashions the shape of all three.

Additionally, Lynn employs the foreword as a means to inform the reader of the instrumental but subordinate role she has negotiated for her co-author and establish boundaries concerning the outside mediation of her personal history. As with many popular musicians' life stories, Lynn and Vecsey construct their finished narrative around a hypothetical dialogue with fans seeking the answer to basic questions about the person behind the persona and the means she employed to overcome obstacles. Ironically, in many instances a co-writer employing relative objectivity can answer those "personal" questions more satisfactorily than the subject. In her book *Life Stories*, linguist Charlotte Linde draws a sharp delineation in personal narrative—written and oral—between narrator and protagonist. In most cases of life writing, the narrator is granted the freedom (and charged with the duty) to reflect on the action, comment retrospectively on events, and interpret their significance, tasks that the in-the-moment protagonist cannot realistically perform in the narrative (see Josselson 112). Given the need for such a division of labor, it stands to reason that a second person, skilled in wordsmithing, would assist in the

narrator's tasks and translate subjective experience into accessible, commercially viable prose.

FIGURE 3

TYPES OF COLLABORATIVE WRITING BY MUSICIANS

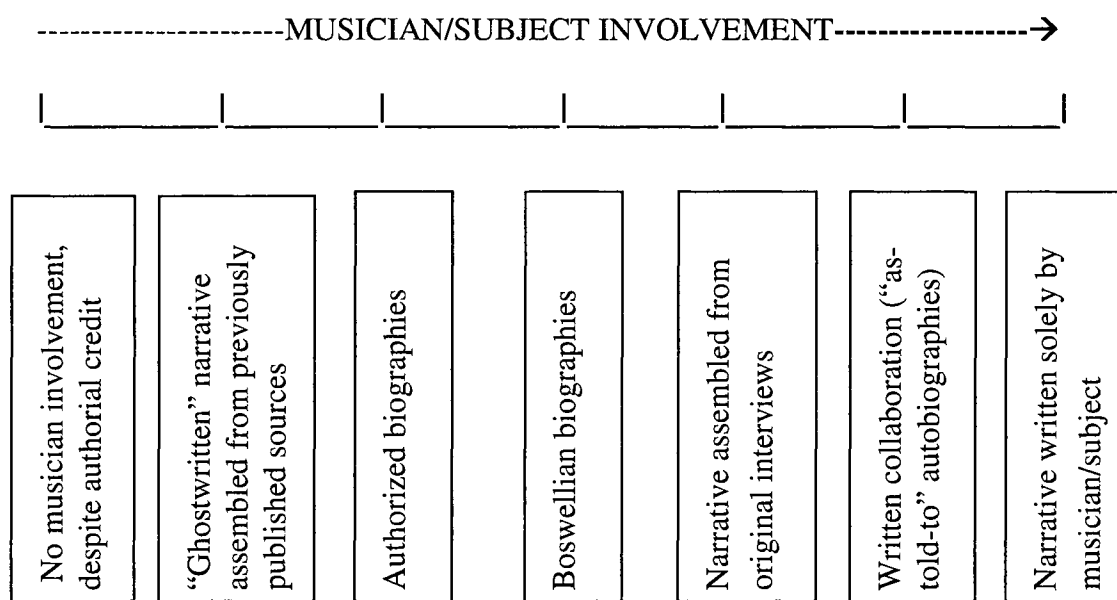


Figure 3 is a basic visual representation of the continuum of musician involvement in their published life writings, ranging from the ghostwritten autobiography to works written wholly by the subject. As of yet, no autobiography in this study has been revealed to be solely the work of a ghostwriter. (Such a work or works could very well exist, however, due largely to the strict confidentiality agreements ghostwriters commonly sign.) Ghostwriters normally work from existing sources related to the subject. In *Swing That Music*, Louis Armstrong's writer-for-

hire—who has never been definitively identified—was responsible for imitating the subject’s vivid use of the jazz vernacular, basing the book’s diction and tone upon previously published interviews. Remarkably for 1936, the unknown writer rejected the use of broad dialect and excessive use of stereotyped jazz argot in approximating Armstrong’s voice, often going to the other extreme and linking Armstrong’s actual words with heavy-handed musical analyses that valorized commercialized white-dominated “swing” over Armstrong’s own New Orleans jazz tradition. In doing so, the author represented Armstrong less as a musician and more as a pedantic observer. “Armstrong” writes:

And it is very true that the swing music we have today is far more refined and subtle and more highly developed as an art because the swing men who learned to read and understand classical music have brought classical influences to it. I think that may be said to be the real difference between the original New Orleans “jazz” and the swing music of today....[Swing] will surely take its place, in time, alongside of the great and permanent music of other countries....(74–75)

As incongruous and uncharacteristic as such passages appear to us now, when Armstrong’s actual writings are readily accessible, it must be remembered that this act of literary ventriloquism was accepted by most of Armstrong’s fanbase as an authentic document for nearly twenty years and enhanced his reputation as a spokesman and premier practitioner of jazz. As *Swing That Music*’s objective was to publicize Armstrong to his existing following and present him to a larger audience

alongside more mainstream “swing” musicians, the book must be considered a success, at least on those narrow, commercially attuned terms.

The most notorious case of authorized ghostwriting remains William Dufty’s work for Billie Holiday in *Lady Sings the Blues*. Having hit a personal and professional low point with a drug bust in February 1956, Holiday, who had already authorized Dufty to write her life story, seemed especially dependent on capitalizing on a connection with her remaining fans. Dufty’s knack for sensationalism, honed by years as a crime-beat reporter, influences nearly every page of *Lady*, from the tough posturing and dime-novel brevity of its oft-quoted opening (“Mom and Pop were just a couple of kids when they got married. He was eighteen, she was sixteen. I was three”) to its extended scenes of police harassment and prison life. From a business standpoint, at least, the hiring of a professional journalist like Dufty made sense. According to Holiday’s biographer Julia Blackburn, Dufty, who knew the singer initially as an acquaintance of his wife rather than as a performer, was so adept at stitching together old interviews in approximation of conversations with Holiday that he completed a draft of the first three chapters in twenty-four hours (262). In doing so, he met his publisher’s demand for a book that could be rushed to the market to capitalize on Holiday’s infamy following her narcotics arrests. Like *Swing That Music*, *Lady Sings the Blues* remains in print and is still largely received by fans as a work true in spirit, if not wholesale fact, to its subject. Such is the credulity of the audience for musician autobiographies.

Authorized biographies, credited solely to an outside co-writer and constructed largely of exclusive, present-day (rather than archival) interviews with the subject, have largely fallen out of favor with the reading public. Much of this disapproval can be traced to the current market's acceptance of, and demand for, first-person celebrity autobiographies; by contrast, the authorized biography seems a relic of traditional public-relations writing, acceptable for publicizing relative newcomers, but unsatisfying as a summation of a more established performer's legacy. (The most noted authorized popular-music biography, Hunter Davies's *The Beatles* (1968), was criticized for the pre-publication censorship of the text imposed by the band and its manager.) The most prominent authorized biography of a southern musician, Charles Sawyer's *The Arrival of B.B. King* (1980) does an admirable job of contextualizing King's life story within the cultural and economic history of his native Mississippi Delta region and presenting King as an exemplar of hard-won American success. Such a narrative was reflective of King's public persona at the time, as his touring circuit transitioned from blues clubs to larger theatres and casinos, and King began to receive honorary degrees and civic honors for his life's work. As his stature grew even further and his story evolved, King embarked throughout the 1990s and 2000s on a wider autobiographical project, with each new endeavor distinguished by the performer's direct involvement. This legacy-building project encompassed an "as-told-to" autobiography, an interactive CD-ROM, a lavishly illustrated "memento" book with facsimiles of historic artifacts (such as family photographs and concert

posters), liner notes for a retrospective box set, and finally a museum built in his honor in Indianola, Mississippi.

The remaining four categories in Figure 3 represent the range of collaborative life writing. Though relatively few in number, a few recent popular-musician biographies have been written after a long period of semi-detached observation and analysis in the co-author's voice, reporting on a life with the subject's consent and cooperation, in the tradition of James Boswell's 1791 biography of Samuel Johnson. The Boswellian biography is typically a compromise between an author and a subject when the subject expresses a reticence or anxiety about telling his or her life story in the first person. David Ritz's biography of jazz singer Jimmy Scott, *Faith in Time* (2002), illustrates the possibilities for an author writing about a celebrity in a Boswellian capacity. After making a dramatic musical comeback in the early 1990s, Scott was approached by Ritz to collaborate on an autobiography. Scott demurred, but allowed Ritz to commence his own book, shaped in large part by the author's own subjective observations. In doing so, Ritz-as-Boswell was authorized not only to write a wide-ranging biography with the cooperation of his subject and his inner circle but also to discuss without prior interference issues Scott was loath to address in interviews, such as his consumption of alcohol and his four failed marriages. In the foreword explaining his method of working with Scott, Ritz maintains that his aim in writing the Boswellian biography is identical to the numerous "as-told-to" works he has co-written in his subjects' voices: "[M]y methodology of biographical storytelling has been simple: become a trusted confidante and, in doing so, elicit the

candid truth....Watching him [sing], I felt fated to learn this man's story. I had to know him. I had to give his story the poignancy he gave his songs. I had to write as beautifully as he sang..." (*Faith* xi, xiii). The chance to be Scott's mouthpiece, advocate, and an autonomous authorial voice gives Ritz a chance to foreground his unabashed fandom. More importantly, it allows for a multivocal discourse within the text, as the perspectives of Scott, Ritz's other interviewees, and Ritz himself engage in a conversation, producing, if not a guarantee of absolute truth, at least a portrait of the artist that resists the general tendency in autobiography for subject-authors to engage in relentless self-justification to protect their public image.

At times, the lines blur between Boswellian biographies and collaborative autobiographies. In both situations, co-authors routinely observe, interpret, and write intimately about their subject during the process of composition. A recent book like Wynton Marsalis and Carl Vigeland's *Jazz in the Bittersweet Blues of Life* (2001) veers between the two forms, as Vigeland's "fly-on-the-wall" reportage of the musician on tour is interspersed with Marsalis's more impressionistic ruminations on music and race, resulting in something akin to a literary "call and response." What distinguishes the work from the Boswellian category is its presentation as a book-length narrative (as opposed to a collection of interviews) specifically marketed as a text by Wynton Marsalis, with first-person writing from the subject and the musician's name listed as an author above the title.

Apart from the ghostwriter, the most fluid role in the collaborative autobiography field is that of the author who assembles the text from interviews

conducted expressly for the book. Many of the amanuensis's tasks resemble the work done in the mid-1800s to present American slave narratives to a wider audience: collecting and organizing information (with an eye for emotionally involving details), editing the narrative for style and content, and adding supplementary information for context, usually in prefatory texts (Andrews 35). In the field of interview-based musician autobiographies, some works have been credited solely to the compiler. In Alan Lomax's *Mister Jelly Roll* (1950), the historian and folklorist takes sole authorial credit by right of his interstitial chapters, despite Jelly Roll Morton's full cooperation and dominance of the final text as both subject and unfettered raconteur. In an opposite case, the three editors, including poet John Ciardi, who conducted and assembled the interviews that were arranged to make up the main narrative of Sidney Bechet's *Treat It Gentle* (1960) took no direct credit as either co-authors or editors, and instead presented the book (posthumously) as the sole creation of its subject.

Even taking such a "behind the scenes" role can put a collaborating author in an unenviable position, with his or her efforts contested. Engaged as W.C. Handy's interviewer and uncredited amanuensis in 1939, Arna Bontemps lamented in a letter to Langston Hughes, "The Handy book is a headache. He jumps on my neck when I jazz it up; [literary agent John J.] Trounstone screams when I fail to. I'm afraid it will come to no good end. I'm going to take a long rest from it..." (42). Bontemps chose his words well when he noted the conservative Handy's aversion to "jazz up" his story, but more importantly, Bontemps illustrated the occasional cross-purposes of subject and publisher, and the uneven distribution of power that can exist between

subjects and authors.⁵ As life-writing theorist G. Thomas Couser succinctly concludes, “subjects typically outrank writers in wealth and clout” (40). With the clout that comes from name recognition, amassed career achievements, and artistic ability, musicians typically approach and collaborate on their life stories from a pronounced position of power and are able to choose from a variety of willing co-authors, set the parameters for the narrative, and have final say (often in combination with a team of personal managers, publicists, and others) on the final work. In this schema, co-authors situate their creative and narrative skills to fit the expectations of the subject.

However, occasional slips in the narrative voice remind us that, despite the disparity of wealth and power between subject and scribe, the co-author often holds ultimate control over the wording of the text in its final form. In his published narrative, Ike Turner’s supposed recollection of working in Memphis as a “lift attendant” (a British idiom, synonymous with the American term “elevator operator”) was doubtlessly provided by his British collaborator, Nigel Cawthorne (36). Likewise, first-person descriptions of “engaged” (as opposed to “busy”) telephones in Virginia-born Ruth Brown’s book betray the injection of her British co-author’s colloquial speech. At times the embellished language of the critic seeps into prose

⁵ Bontemps’s biographer Kirkland C. Jones reveals that the rift between Handy and his co-author grew so large that the litigious Handy threatened to file suit against Bontemps in order to dissolve the partnership. Bontemps’s “headaches” continued, as *Father of the Blues*’s publication was delayed until July 1941 (“Handy Book Ready”). Five years later, Handy publicized an additional grievance against Bontemps when he alleged that Bontemps took a line from a Handy song for use in his musical *St. Louis Woman* without permission (“W.C. Handy Singing Blues Again”).

represented as the subject's own words. Consider a passage from Hank Williams, Jr. and Michael Bane's *Living Proof* (1979) on the legacy of Hank Williams, Sr.: "what surrounded the life (and ultimately, the death) of my father goes beyond the whole concept of 'fans' and 'entertainers.' He gave voice to people who had traditionally been ignored—even despised—the lower-class southern white; the poor farmer, the wage earner, the workingman, the God-fearing family man, the bellhop, the black field worker" (12). The historical content conveyed in the passage is sound, even insightful, yet the detached and scholarly tone seems completely out of character for the reckless, obstreperous Hank Jr., and is almost assuredly the mark of Michael Bane, the former editor of the journal *Country Music*.

In some cases, the close personal relationship forged between the amanuensis and his or her subject often results in the writer exercising heightened discretion and "protecting" the subject from the effects of too much self-revelation. In an interview, Albert Murray recalled how the expansive conversations between himself and his friend Count Basie diverged from the agreed-upon approach of their collaborative book: "I had a little clip-on mike, and he would forge about the mike until he got into something that would be embarrassing to somebody else, and then he would turn the mike off and say, 'Now let me tell you about it.'...That's why the book [*Good Morning Blues*] is so true to him. It's so true to his personality. He never let it all hang out, because that was not the true Count Basie" (Trussell 46). A book of surprise revelations (or scandalous gossip) about Basie or fellow jazz luminaries might result in notoriety, yet, even if those revelations were factual or historically

significant, such a book would not be a “true” account of Basie’s life and times, as Murray understands them. Interestingly, in the passage quoted above, Murray collapses the distinctions between “him” (referring to William Basie), his personality (the self he presented in public, not limited to the famed bandleader “Count Basie”), and “the true Count Basie” (a combination of public and private person). In doing so, Murray underscores the terms of LeJeune’s autobiographical pact, in which the authentic autobiography presents the subject, narrator, and (co-) writer as a harmonious whole whose integrity invites the reader’s trust. Under the conditions of this pact, the text offers a subjective view emanating from a reliable source and thus represented—and often received—as “the truth,” as opposed to objective, empirical fact. In passing on this truth, the roles of author, narrator, and autobiographical subject are basically indistinguishable, separated only by the passage of time and any related changes in experience and perspective.

The written collaboration, or the “as-told-to” autobiography, remains the standard method of celebrity life writing. In addition to eliciting useful material from their informants, collaborative authors are responsible for the artfully smooth narrative transitions, polished prose, and unnatural narrative coherence in the representation of complex lives, the process that Georges Gusdorf calls “the original sin of autobiography” (41). In discussing his work as amanuensis, Albert Murray compared his task as Count Basie’s co-author to that of the musical accompanist: “as literary craftsman, the co-writer of an as-told-to autobiography is also present on every page....his role is very much the same as that of the piano accompanist who

comes on stage with the solo vocalist or instrumentalist. Once the performance gets under way, it is as if the very best accompanists are neither seen nor heard” (*Blue Devils* 31). Of course, musical accompanists are heard, just as co-authors are read, yet according to Murray their methods are intended to be as unobtrusive as possible. In their collaboration, Murray and Basie engaged in a lengthy dialogue as a tape recorder ran. Murray transcribed and edited the taped conversation into readable prose, with his own questions and cues omitted or folded into the text, and gave Basie the final approval over the finished product (*Blue Devils* 33).

As Murray’s summation of his methodology suggests, Basie’s process of writing his memoirs paralleled his working pattern with his chosen musical arrangers. Jazz musician and author Dickie Wells described one such collaboration between Basie and sideman Eddie Durham: “Basie really began to get a book [of musical arrangements] together when Ed Durham was in the band. Basie and Ed would lock up in a room with a little jug, and Basie would play the ideas and Ed would voice them....After Durham left Basie began to buy different arrangements from the outside. Even so Basie always played a big part, because he would cut out what he didn’t like...” (qtd. in Murray, *Stomping* 174). Significantly, Albert Murray quoted Wells’s account in his 1976 book *Stomping the Blues* and perhaps we see the prototype for his own literary collaboration with Basie in the 1980s. In the manner of a musician and arranger collaborating on a “book” of commonly played arrangements that spotlight an ever-changing big band at its best, Murray “voiced” Basie’s ideas within an orderly prose arrangement, and gives the bandleader the power to “cut out”

and rearrange any dissonant notes, the “dissonance” in this case being any details Basie deemed too personal or that violated, in Murray’s estimation, the subject’s “unimpeachable sense of propriety” (*Blue Devils* 33). Though Basie may receive star billing, the resulting text bears the stamp of an expertly produced, collaborative effort. Just as a big-band arranger would flesh out a single melody into an orchestrated, polyphonic “chart,” Murray was responsible for filling in the historical details surrounding Basie’s fifty years of reminiscences through research and further interviews. According to Murray, Basie simply told him, “I’ll tell you what happened, you come up with the dates” (Staples 6). The collaboration with Murray was congruent with Basie’s musicianship as well. Basie was given the freedom to free-associate and recall past memories, just as Basie’s band typically employed “head” arrangements, or songs that went untranscribed, that were passed on to new band members through close listening and imitation (Early, “*On Good*” 278). This type of attuned collaboration seems to have established itself as a viable model for autobiographical writing. In 2010, jazz musician and composer Randy Weston published his as-told-to memoirs *African Rhythms* under the type of billing traditionally used for musical composition: “Composed by Randy Weston, Arranged by Willard Jenkins.” Weston and Jenkins’s co-billing delineates their complementary roles, with the latter duly credited with absorbing the subject’s life story, refining it into a linear narrative/arrangement, and presenting the “composition” of a life to its best advantage.

Elsewhere, critics like Christopher Harlos and Richard Sudhalter analogize the co-writer's role to that of the record producer. Writers are hired to be both "supportive and critical," channel a signature sound (in the case of a celebrity-driven work, a familiar "voice" in the narrative), and present it to its best effect (Harlos 149). Even a book like Art Pepper's *Straight Life* (1980), a jazz memoir widely praised for its unsparing, confessional tone and intimations of brutal candor concerning the subject's narcotic addiction, bears the mark of meticulous "production." In a process detailed in the book's postscript, Laurie Pepper edited her husband's memoirs like a studio recording, capturing different "takes" of a story, clearing out redundancies, foregrounding choice bits, and asking Art to "punch in" missing information, just as a musician would overdub a few choice notes in the studio to correct a mistake rather than record another full take (480).

In some instances, a co-writer, like a music producer, will impose a characteristic touch on the final text, while other collaborators work more in the spirit of facilitation. David Ritz, perhaps the most prominent collaborator of "as-told-to" books, lays out his approach in the most straightforward of terms by concluding, "My attitude is, it's their book, not mine" (e-mail). This transparent method is analogous to the work of the music producer, both engaged in the process of "listening" to the voice and building a sympathetic production around it. Currently, no autobiography

of a musician features an adversarial or contrarian relationship between subject and author.⁶

The circumstances surrounding the writing of an autobiography typically mirror the circumstances of the performer's musical career. Books written during the ascent or at the top of a career are written as well as micromanaged by a team of co-writers and image consultants. Musicians typically write (or co-write) from within the public sphere and remain mindful of persona and public perception.

Collaborators, in turn, often finesse this perception, in a role comparable to “spin doctors.” This is a natural outgrowth of the music industry, in which artists rely on a well-coordinated team of musicians, producers, recording engineers, and (often in the case of jazz or country music) arrangers for their music, and a complementary team of publicists, copywriters, photographers, and graphic designers to mold their impression management (see Goffman 79). Likewise, co-writers fulfill their role through their knowledge of the publishing industry—understanding the market, facilitating dealings with publishers, and meeting deadlines. William Dufty's knack for ventriloquizing Billie Holiday on the page quickly, cheaply, and efficiently may have been an exaggeration of the co-writer's peculiar art, but it demonstrates the instrumental, multitasking role a co-author has in commodifying a musician's life story.

⁶ The possibilities of a less harmonious, give-and-take dialogue between subjects and amanuenses are suggested by Peter Bogdanovich's book of interviews and sketches of Orson Welles, *This Is Orson Welles*, in which the younger director probes Welles's memory, often pushing for more details when the subject is less than forthcoming and debunking the basis of many familiar anecdotes.

The atomization of authorship in collaborative autobiographies—authorship diffused among a subject (whose “hands-on” involvement is by no means a certainty), a co-author, and an unknown number of interested parties in the personal-management and publishing industries —shares a superficial similarity to the crisis of identity Roland Barthes analyzed in his essay “The Death of the Author.” Yet even Barthes affirms that the subject’s identity cannot be wholly subsumed or nullified in life writing, by noting “The *author* still reigns...in the consciousness of men of letters anxious to unite their person and their work through diaries and memoirs” (143, italics in original). While the “author” of musician autobiographies is typically a pluralized entity, and not the powerful singular “Author-God” Barthes seeks to slay, the ultimate aim of the collaboration is to fulfill the roles of the autonomous authoritative creator: constructing a reliable, single-voiced discourse; simulating complete self-assurance; establishing thematic unity; and promoting fixed meanings in regard to the public perceptions of a life and its legacy.

Given the difficulties of co-authorship, and the demands of the popular audience for “unfiltered” access to prominent figures, it is well worth considering why more musician autobiographies are not wholly self-composed, with only supplemental editorial input. Writing a first book single-handedly requires a long period of introspection, research, and a significant time commitment for the actual writing. Such a task can be daunting even to prolific, experienced writers; Mark Twain’s forty-plus years’ struggle to complete a cohesive autobiography and the staunch refusal on the part of authors such as T.S. Eliot, William Faulkner, and Toni

Morrison even to consider their memoirs demonstrates that contemplating the self-exposure of life writing, never mind mastering the form, can intimidate even the most accomplished literary creators. It seems almost too much to ask to expect a musician to produce a coherent life story as his or her first published work, especially when the subject is not only a slippery, subjective self but also identified as an artist, persona, and, in many cases, a celebrity all at once. Ironically, co-authorship typically increases a narrator's subjectivity; an amanuensis can edit a subject's "own words," while subject-authors must start from a foundational point, assuming the unfamiliar stance of the author and a voice that, even if sincere, can be perceived as contrived and inauthentic. To cite one example, the verbosity and arch tone of Chuck Berry's wholly self-penned autobiography (in sharp contrast to the economical wit found in many of his lyrics) cannot conceal the subject-author's unwillingness to address many of the key events of his public life, especially his periods of incarceration. A well-attuned and sympathetic co-author might have coaxed this vital information out of Berry and produced a more substantive and enlightening document.

A passage from the self-penned memoirs of 1940s country-music star Alton Delmore ably demonstrates the difficulty a musician can have in both relating his or her own past experiences and representing them in prose: "[S]ome of them [in the music business] make big names for themselves by climbing, like a monkey, over the shoulders of someone already known, damaging reputations until they are in the driver's seat. Then, they are content to drift along, like a beneficent angel, in the comfortable breeze of big money" (82). An attuned co-writer would surely untangle

the knot of mixed metaphors Delmore leaves behind and urge a more straightforward rhetorical approach. Throughout his book, Delmore constantly interrupts his own narration with dozens of unpredictable leaps forward (“More on this later...,” “I will tell that story in the next chapter or two...”), leaps backward (“Like I have written before...,” “To come back to the scene of...”), clumsy authorial self-direction (“Now I will get into the next chapter...”), and digressions (“There’s something I want to say here...”). Such devices strongly suggest the writer’s lack of control over the telling of his historically important story. It also illustrates, by negative example, the background role a skilled co-writer and editor can play in sorting out memories temporally into a linear narrative, which would ultimately lead the reader to appreciate the meaning and significance of the subject’s life story.

In considering the relative dearth of non-collaborative autobiographies, one must also consider the nature of the working musician’s life. Backstage and on the road, musicians of all genres share a vibrant, if not wholly trustworthy, oral history that thrives on hyperbole and one-upmanship. In *The Jazz Life*, Nat Hentoff points out the long tradition of musicians who, when pressed by overeager fans or self-appointed scholars, either claim faulty memory on historical details or wildly fictionalize autobiographical details, especially lurid tales of sex and drugs, to appease their audience (18–20). Blues historian Barry Lee Pearson notes the commonality of self-promoting musicians in the field who run roughshod over chronology and factuality in their constant attempts for wider attention (*Sounds* 31).

Such tendencies suggest that co-authors, with their outsider perspectives and the dual ability to check facts and temper a musician's ego, can serve an essential function.

Overall, single-author autobiographies have enjoyed great popular and critical acclaim, from Louis Armstrong's *Satchmo* to Duke Ellington's *Music Is My Mistress* to Bob Dylan's recent *Chronicles*. Significantly, though, these works offered oblique perspectives on their by-then legendary careers, leaving many temporal gaps and silences on themes that a co-author would likely pursue in interviews and research. In *Satchmo*, Armstrong sidestepped nearly all analysis of his fame and worldwide travels, and focused solely on his apprenticeship in New Orleans and early professional jobs playing on a steamboat traveling up the Mississippi River. Ellington, on the other hand, composed a lengthy suite of prose sketches that celebrated his worldwide travels and public accomplishments in a voice that echoed his genial persona on the bandstand. Writing behind what Mark Tucker accurately terms "an effusive verbal smokescreen," Ellington presented himself on the page as he did onstage—affable but somewhat impersonal, well in control of his demeanor and his cast of characters (114). In a 1944 *New Yorker* profile, Ellington admitted that decades of travel and shifting band personnel blurred many important details sought by fans and historians, and concluded "I should have kept a diary" (Tucker 236). Attempting to reconstruct this history decades later, with writer and longtime friend Stanley Dance serving as amanuensis and editor, Ellington as author eschewed the intimate details of a diary, and replaced them with a lengthy yet still fragmented rundown of his public life through what fellow jazz musician and writer Willie Ruff

affectionately but accurately termed his “sugary platitudes” and strained “hepcat” narrative voice (3). Singled out as a prominent African American public personage, an innovative artist, and lionized as a star, Ellington was rarely out of the spotlight’s glare. However, this foregrounding of his public persona comes at a cost to modern-day readers seeking inside information on the dynamics of the Ellington orchestras or his working methods with his musical colleagues, especially arranger Billy Strayhorn. While *The Duke* recalls in augmented prose every foreign dignitary who had the honor to be entertained by the band, he diminishes the contribution of his collaborators and longtime musicians by affording them only brief sketches covering their role in the creation of his music, that rarely exceeded two pages. The assistance and perspective of a more active co-author would very likely have led Ellington to compose an autobiography with more germane information about Ellington as a musician and bandleader.

The obvious quandary in examining the last seventy-plus years of musician autobiographies is why it has encouraged a static “color line” in professional co-authorship, and why, overwhelmingly, African American musicians employ white co-authors. In a 1971 letter to Albert Murray reprinted in the volume *Living with Music*, Ralph Ellison praises urbane cabaret performer Bobby Short’s autobiography for eschewing both collaboration and the vainglorious pronouncements on African American communities by an elite expert class, many of whom are self-appointed whites. “[A]s for those sociologists and half-assed politicians who’ve been filling the bookstores with vapid, dehumanized nonsense about what they term ‘*The black*

experience,” Ellison writes, “Short’s account of an individual Negro American of Mid-Western origins gives a richer sense of the general Negro experience than all their pronouncements. It restores some of the sense of complexity, wonder and diversity which I recognize as part of my own life” (251, italics in original). What Ellison responds to so passionately here is Short’s aspirations, assumption of agency, and method of using music as a means to cross racial and class borderlines, rather than dwelling on the effects of inequality that a co-author, especially one without a strong musical background, would likely use as a starting point.

The politics and personal dynamics of the black subject/white co-author dyad are rarely discussed in the secondary criticism or in the works themselves. One notable exception occurs in the opening chapter of Nebraska-based big-band musician Preston Love’s 1997 *A Thousand Honey Creeks Later*, in which Love preemptively defends his choice to write his memoirs unassisted. Love laments that the stories and impressions of African American musicians invariably become distorted when refracted through the lens of white co-authors. For Love, the co-author (which he collapses into the term “ghostwriter”) is by nature a “pedant,” insensitive to the nuances of the black musician’s vernacular or, worse, insistent on turning a fully lived life into cheap melodrama (1–2). Love cites *The Benny Goodman Story* and *Lady Sings the Blues* as examples of this misrepresentation, the former a whitewashed Hollywood biopic that glosses over the politics of white-black musical interchange to glorify a popular white musician, the latter a sensationalistic tale of abuse and addiction written by a white journalist that subordinates Billie Holiday’s singular

talent in the process. By taking on the authorship of his own life story, Love seeks to avoid similar distortions, as well as the risk of having the nuances of his experiences (which mostly took place in the “separate-but-equal” spaces of black theatres and dance halls during Jim Crow) lost in cross-cultural translation.

Elsewhere, Joanne M. Braxton notes that collaboration with white amanuenses and editors has been a necessary and at times fruitful element throughout the history of African American women’s life writing. Though this cross-racial collaboration has not been perfect, and resulted in significant thematic “silences,” these compromises were often necessary to shepherd life stories through the publishing process and to the wider marketplace (204). Many of these silences are palpable in accounts by female African American musical figures; at times these omissions are caused by the subject’s rather than the co-author’s uneasiness. For example, Marian Anderson’s experience writing her memoirs with her co-author, white music critic Howard Taubman, was marked by reticence to open up about her childhood or the experiences with racism (such as being turned away from Washington, D.C.’s Constitution Hall) that readers expected (Keiler 280). The result, as with Duke Ellington’s memoirs, was a relatively impersonal book that foregrounded public achievement over introspection or subjective reflection.

As suggested by Alan Lomax’s involvement in Jelly Roll Morton’s published recollections, the methods and aims of folklorists have left an influence on the interactions of co-authors and subjects. In *Romancing the Folk*, Benjamin Filene

identifies the power and authority assumed by interviewers and field researchers seeking the “roots” of popular music:

This was the domain of memory workers, people like John and Alan Lomax and Sam Charters [...] folklorists, collectors, writers, promoters, and producers who advanced visions of America’s musical past. The diversity of this group—and the many ties—its members had to the commercial music industry—illustrate that memory creation does not occur only in specific cultural locations. What these brokers shared, rather, was a drive for rootedness and a penchant for reinterpreting and renewing cultures. (131)

The “memory workers” Benjamin Filene identifies were almost exclusively white males with pronounced educational and/or class privileges. Filene casts his net wide, including other musicians, but prolific writers and commentators like John and Alan Lomax were among the most prominent cultural gatekeepers, handing down notions and constructions of which cultural products were authentically “folk” and which were touched (if not tainted) by the popular. Whether their approach was grounded in sociology (such as Charles Keil’s 1966 study *Urban Blues*), folklore (the work of the Lomaxes and others), or literary criticism (by writers like Paul Oliver), like-minded white chroniclers of African American music brought the language, methodology, and status of their respective academic criticism to the fore. While co-writers of country and rock autobiographies generally come from a journalism background, collaborators in the jazz, blues, and folk field have built upon the

foundations of academic folklore studies. Especially when the memory workers' labors were endorsed, funded, and/or presented by cultural institutions and large record companies and publishers, their work coalesced into a hegemonic expression that preserved established methods and mores.

In this way, the labors of many autobiographical co-authors resemble that of memory workers, as they focus on the social-history aspect of musicians' stories and capture the unwritten lore that surrounds the creation of vernacular music. Certainly there have been important African American memory workers, as ideologically diverse as Albert Murray and Amiri Baraka, who have documented, interpreted, and valorized blues-based music, but they have been relatively few in number. While anthologies like Kandia Crazy Horse's *Rip It Up* demonstrate that a small but active group of younger African American and multiethnic writers now expertly critique rock and pop as well as jazz, rhythm and blues, and hip-hop, no collaboration between a white musician and black co-author has yet emerged.

In considering the causes of this imbalance, James Lincoln Collier suggests that black musicians may consciously employ white amanuenses to "gentrify" their life story, signal upward mobility, and make overtures toward a larger "crossover" audience (38). This tendency has not gone unnoticed. Arna Bontemps, who had guided W.C. Handy's autobiography to publication over a decade before, expressed his dissatisfaction in a letter to Langston Hughes, triggered by the 1956 publication of *Lady Sings the Blues*:

Billy [sic] Holiday's book made me mad....mainly because of the inclination of certain lady celebrities to confine themselves to just one certain type of ghost writers as well as accompanists. Prejudice in reverse...I won't feel good again until I hear of [African-American author] Bill Demby, for example, doing an "as told to" story of [actress Gina] Lollobrigida. Or Marilyn Monroe....Poor Billie didn't even get a best seller out of her naked exposure. (Bontemps and Hughes 348)

Bontemps was perhaps too hasty in his assessment of the book's sales, which had amounted to a respectable 12,000 copies in its first year, and its lasting impact (Griffin, *If You* 46). Nonetheless, his observations on autobiographical representation ("prejudice in reverse") and the pitfalls of "naked exposure" still have relevance. Following Bontemps's advice and employing someone like William Demby as an amanuensis would have made *Lady Sings the Blues* an entirely different work, with a central narrative persona almost certain to be far different than the stock character/fantasy creation William Dufty constructed. However, having an African American and/or female contemporary of Holiday's as a co-writer would not have automatically fostered a more productive rapport with the subject or resulted in a more authentic or truthful autobiography. Ultimately, Holiday's publisher Doubleday purchased and marketed the book as a fallen celebrity's confession rather than a treatise on civil rights, giving any potential co-author limited space to expound upon social issues, regardless of their importance.

At times, the perception of inauthenticity through the act of collaboration determines the reception of a musician's autobiography more than any inherent flaw in the writing itself. In a 1957 letter to Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray praised musician Bill Broonzy and amanuensis Yannick Bruynoghe's collaboration *Big Bill Blues* for capturing "[a] hell of a lot of the old down home stuff...pretty much in the raw. None of that phony hype they ruined Louis's [second autobiography] *Satchmo* with" (Murray and Callahan 156). Murray neglected to note whether the "phony hype" was within the text of *Satchmo* or attributable to the book's promotion campaign. Nor is it clear to whom "they" referred. Armstrong wrote *Satchmo* without a co-writer and with minimal emendations. Those that were made, at manager Joe Glaser's insistence, excised references to New Orleans street violence and marijuana, subjects that could be construed as "phony hype." By contrast, the "down home stuff" in *Big Bill Blues* that Murray praised included the co-author's questionable decision to render Broonzy's voice in dialect and to guide the subject through leading questions, authorial choices made by Bruynoghe to reinforce the stereotype of the blues as a primitive, instinctual music.⁷ Broonzy was partly complicit in this misrepresentation. When it was advantageous, he manipulated his

⁷ Of course, Murray was making this critical judgment in the context of a private letter to a friend and fellow jazz fan. Like anyone else, he had the right to be contradictory and, in fact, often was. In 1958, twenty-five years before conducting the research and writing for what would become Count Basie's autobiography, Murray wrote Ralph Ellison to complain, on the basis of some less-than-stellar new recordings, "I'm just about sick of that Count ass Basie" (Murray and Callahan 199).

image to appear bumpkinesque, trading in his preferred wardrobe of sharp suits for work clothes when performing as a “folk” performer for white audiences under the aegis of well-connected music insiders like John Hammond of Columbia Records (Barker and Taylor 86). Hammond insisted on referring to the worldly, well-traveled Broonzy as a farmer and “primitive blues singer” from Arkansas, a romantic misrepresentation that ignored the hundreds of sides Broonzy had already cut by the mid-1930s (E. Wald 227).

This disjunction between perception and reality carries over into the reception of autobiographies by public figures. From Roy Pascal’s *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (1960) on, critics dealing with autobiography have excused excursions from the literal when it expresses an “authentic” experience, one in the spirit of the subject’s life story and narrative aims, as the readership understands them (Adams, *Telling* 52). The popular audience for musicians’ autobiographies shares in this malleable fashioning of truth. In a foreword to a fiftieth-anniversary edition of Holiday and Dufty’s *Lady Sings the Blues*, author David Ritz writes a virtual manifesto for fans prizing catharsis and emotional truth over factual accuracy or complete first-person authorship. Recalling his initial exposure to collaborative autobiography as a devoted listener and captivated observer of Holiday’s, Ritz admires how professionals like Dufty, or Alex Haley in his capacity as Malcolm X’s amanuensis, are able “to skillfully and even mystically sculpt voices of undeniable authenticity” (x). Of course, critics and historians, often citing LeJeune’s autobiographical pact, have generally denied the absolute authenticity of both works

and the process of evoking a disembodied voice through co-authorship. However, Ritz bases his veneration of *Lady Sings the Blues* not as a professional writer or critic but as a fan, “fan” in this instance signifying not merely an active consumer but rather a communicant of sorts, who receives a sense of the miraculous through a perceived insight into Holiday’s music, image, and persona by means of the text. The upholding of this idealized persona determines the authenticity of the text for the fan. The “mystically sculpted” voice—the free direct discourse that has been the *lingua franca* of musician autobiographies since Ethel Waters’s time—is a projection of the fanbase’s desires. In fashioning and telling a story of Billie Holiday, Ritz writes, “...the literal fact of authorship like the literal accuracy of the material itself, is not the point” (xiii). Likewise, whether Holiday assented to the “channeling” of her voice through a medium, much less approved of the finished product, appears irrelevant to the devotee. Just as a “narrative truth” can be pieced together from fragments of a story so long as they harmonize together within a larger framework, a simulation of an individual’s voice channeled through a mediator can be received as authentic so long as that voice conforms to an audience’s prior knowledge of the subject’s rhetorical approach or just the general contours of his or her public persona.

PARATEXT

In popular musicians’ autobiographies, the paratext supplements the author/reader dialogue by offering readers a second discourse parallel to the text proper. In “Introduction to the Paratext,” Gérard Genette identifies the function of a

text's supportive apparatus, which can include the title, preface, illustrations, blurbs, even the writer's own name: "they surround [the text] and prolong it, precisely in the order to *present* it, in the usual sense of the verb, but also in its strongest meaning: to *make it present*, to assure its presence in the world, its 'reception' and its consumption in the form, nowadays at least, of a book" (261; italics in original).

Introductions or forewords by third parties often interpellate readers directly, by coaching them on how to read the text that follows. Illustrations underscore key points in the narrative and are often accompanied by captions written in a self-consciously informal tone to continue the text's "conversation." Discographies, musical transcriptions, and lists of awards attest to the subject's ultimate success in a more self-consciously objective manner than the standard first-person narrative.

An autobiography's title can be as much of a semiotic construction as an entry point to the work. Critic Hayden White identifies the literary gamesmanship and layers of meaning implicit in the title *The Education of Henry Adams* (197). In five seemingly simple words, Adams obscured his own authorship (through the third-person perspective used in the title and throughout the book), narrowed the scope of his self-examination (representing his journey as an "education," rather than a "life"), and rejected the traditional nomenclature of life writing. (By comparison, Adams's brother, Charles Francis Adams, Jr., had his own memoirs published simply as *The Autobiography of...*) Not surprisingly, the titles of southern musicians' autobiographies rely on the public's familiarity with the subject, and use it as a promotional lure. Titles typically reference a nickname or affectionate

characterization attached to performers by fans, such as *Brother Ray* (Ray Charles), *Lady Sings the Blues* (Billie Holiday), and *Whisperin' Bill* (Bill Anderson, 1989). Lesser-known luminaries often invoke the type of music they perform within their titles to help fix their place in history; Pops Foster is helpfully referred to in his book's subtitle as "New Orleans Jazzman," and Ruth Brown makes no apologies for her self-coronation as "Rhythm and Blues Legend." Willie Dixon boldly stakes his own claim to an entire genre in the title *I Am the Blues* (1989). Alternately, the link between self-reflection in song and prose is reinforced when a title references a well-known original composition, whether it is a strict autobiography-in-song, as represented by Loretta Lynn's *Coal Miner's Daughter* or Johnny Cash's *Man in Black* (1976), or the more semi-autobiographical examples of Al Green's conversion narrative *Take Me to the River* (2000) and Hazel Dickens's chronicle of her political and social activism *Working Girl Blues* (2008). While the subtitle "An Autobiography"—as opposed to "The Autobiography"—once contained intriguing suggestions of breaking tradition and injecting subjectivity into the formula of life narrative, it has since become commonplace and offers no real indication of literary adventurousness, as evidenced by the rather formulaic works published by Lionel Hampton (*Hamp: An Autobiography*, 1993) and Hank Williams, Jr. (*Living Proof: An Autobiography*).

Promotional blurbs on the covers and among the front pages of volumes also serve as lures to the potential reader. Reprints of positive reviews typically focus on an established set of attributes. Many books are explicitly marketed as virtual

conversations with musical legends; an excerpted review from *Billboard* promises would-be readers of B.B. King's *Blues All Around Me* (1996) something resembling "a warm and lengthy conversation with a close friend" while the back cover of Johnny Cash and Patrick Carr's *Cash* claims the book's contents "gives a feel for what it might be like to spend some time with him." To attract and assure readers, blurbs sell honesty and the promise of revealed "secrets" as commodities. The inner flap of Dolly Parton's autobiography guarantees fans that "the real woman behind the star," with her "tell-it-like-it-is style," "no-nonsense attitude," and "down-home philosophy" has contained the whole of her personality exclusively between the book's two covers.

As another means of "conversing" with the reader, prefaces written in the subject's voice adhere to two common approaches. The first expresses the subject's modesty, consenting to the task of writing a self-appraising autobiography only for the sake of loyal fans. Count Basie's statement of reluctance in *Good Morning Blues*, "For years people have been trying to get me to do a book" (xii), is typical of this stance. This tactic of visualizing a rapt public seeking enlightenment through autobiography and, after a statement of personal modesty, satisfying their supposed wants is a convention of general American autobiography, especially the accounts of "self-made men" from Benjamin Franklin to P.T. Barnum to Lee Iacocca. Utilizing a drastically different approach, New Orleans musician Danny Barker's introduction to his self-penned *A Life in Jazz* (1986) combines an anti-elitist attitude with the "quarrel with the present" trope. In writing his book, Barker claims, he seeks to set

the record straight about the origins of New Orleans jazz, dispel the fanciful myths perpetuated by younger critics, and offer an experienced musician's firsthand account to offset the "crap" in other books (v). In doing so, Barker certifies his own authority and expertise and valorizes it over disassociated memory workers and self-appointed experts.

In far more conciliatory terms, the prefatory material for country-music autobiographies commonly consists of introductions written in the subject's voice, with occasional, incidental mentions of the co-author. In direct, second-person address, the subject takes on an informal, ingratiating tone, usually to describe the book's genesis and appeal directly to the fans who constitute the book's readership. Loretta Lynn and George Vecsey's *Coal Miner's Daughter* provides just one example. Without pretense, Lynn immediately addresses the more lurid elements of her life that have been discussed in the press and have likely attracted curious readers: childhood poverty, early motherhood (Lynn was a mother of four by the age of eighteen), a turbulent marriage, death threats from deranged fans, and rumors of drug abuse. By confronting an unflattering media-made image of herself, Lynn (through Vecsey's co-authorship) preempts criticism and, through a sense of vulnerability, reaffirms her ties to her fans by offering a counternarrative that, presumably, brings new information to light.

Dolly Parton's 1994 autobiography, which largely follows in the tradition of *Coal Miner's Daughter*, begins with a foreword that reads like a personal letter. Like Jan Howard before her, Parton attests to the cathartic, exhausting process of self-

examination that accompanies life writing. According to Parton, she submits to this process only to reward her fans, and cement a longstanding shared bond. Parton writes, “I just hope you get as much out of it as what I tried to put in it” (xi). She concludes the introduction with direct instructions on how to read the book: “I know you’ll go straight to the gossip parts first (I would, too). But after you’ve read those parts a few dozen times, please start at the front and read the whole story. It would mean a lot to me, and hopefully it will mean a lot to you as well. Love, Dolly” (xi). Parton and her unnamed amanuensis shrewdly promise a fair amount of absorbing “gossip parts” in addition to the facts, by establishing an agreement between the writer and the audience to deliver both an entertaining and truthful life story before closing with the affectionate send-off of a personal letter.

Roni Stoneman, a traditional country musician and comedian best known for her long stint on the television show *Hee Haw*, offers her audience similar assurance in the preface to her memoir *Pressing On* (2007). Ventriloquizing her audience through self-posed rhetorical questions, Stoneman preemptively addresses their expectations, by promising extensive coverage on a full spectrum of topics: her well-known musical family, her relationships with fellow musicians and television co-stars, and revelations of her escape from domestic abuse. According to Stoneman, the book’s chief objective, rather than self-aggrandizement, is to openly address questions posed by her long-time fans. Stoneman’s co-author Ellen Wright describes the delicate balance between accurately representing the subject’s life story and accommodating the inquiring reader:

I left out some great stories, great thematically and great theatrically. But I wanted the book to read quickly, and for that you can have too many incidents. Even if they are short, they will bog the reader down, and the narrative will lose force. The hardest thing was for me to keep the force of the narrative. So I cut ruthlessly. Obviously to avoid repetition, clear repetition, but also repetition of a theme that I felt had already been covered. I also cut to avoid giving the reader the wrong impression of Roni. Some stories which were great orally, would have, I knew, not be read with the correct interpretation. They needed Roni's inflections or her mugging to make their points accurately.

(Wright, e-mail)

The attention to “interpretation” in Wright and Stoneman’s case holds great significance as it does in all autobiographical works. Subjects and their co-authors must not only create but also manage the conditions for an intended reader response, one that results in both a more personal impression of a public figure and a richer understanding of his or her talents and legacy.

By examining as a cross-section the paratexts of the most widely read southern musicians’ autobiographies from 1936 to 2008, general trends emerge over time. The first wave of jazz autobiographies, from Louis Armstrong’s ghostwritten *Swing That Music* (1936) to Sidney Bechet’s *Treat It Gentle* (1960), relied on time-tested approaches in their prefatory material. In the classic American pattern of having a prominent, white public figure vouch for the character and literacy of an

African American memoirist—as exemplified by William Lloyd Garrison writing on behalf of Frederick Douglass in the latter’s *Narrative*, or Lydia Maria Child’s preface to Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*—*Swing That Music* included an introduction from white pop crooner Rudy Vallee, while W.C. Handy’s *Father of the Blues* began with a testimonial by white critic (and Handy’s longtime friend and legal advisor) Abbe Niles (see Kenney, “Going” 28–29). In both cases, the authors of the forewords paid their respective subjects personal compliments but largely concentrated on voicing strained explanations of African American vernacular music to an implied white, middle-class audience. Vallee strayed from the task at hand to indulge in self-promotion, informing readers “I believe I was among the first to recognize [Armstrong’s] genius,” a claim no historian or critic of note has ever seconded (Armstrong, *Swing* xv).⁸

Bookending Rudy Vallee’s curious foreword and following Armstrong’s fictionalized narration, *Swing That Music* concluded with a “Glossary of Swing Terms” to aid less attuned readers and a dry musical analysis of early jazz by one Horace Gerlach, that boasted chapter headings like “Rhythmic Counterpoint,” “Swing Interpolation,” and “Melodic Obbligato.” The textual apparatus in the second half of

⁸ Publisher E.P. Dutton’s advertisement for Vallee’s first autobiography, 1930’s *Vagabond Dreams Come True*, was a marvel of concision; in two short paragraphs, potential readers were promised a fantastic rags-to-riches story, including details of the singer’s “love, romance, and adventures,” and guaranteed in an “Important Notice,” “This book is not ‘ghostwritten.’ Rudy Vallee wrote it all himself.” Vallee was twenty-eight at the time, and had been a recording artist for less than two years.

Swing That Music explicitly and didactically marked the accepted boundaries of jazz in the Thirties, boundaries that were explicitly race conscious. Following the musical analysis, the final section of the book featured a full-band arrangement of the song “Swing That Music,” accompanied by individual promotional photos of a swing-era “dream band”: Armstrong, clarinetist Benny Goodman, trombonist Tommy Dorsey, and so on. True to swing’s reputation as the whitewashed, commercial alternative to jazz, only two of the ten pictured musicians were African-American—Armstrong and pianist Claude Hopkins—a race-based presumption rivaling that of Paul Whiteman’s infamous 1927 book *Jazz*, in which the white bandleader not only marginalized African Americans’ dominant influence on the music through exclusion but also anointed himself “The King of Jazz.”

Abbe Niles’s analysis accompanying Handy’s *Father of the Blues* read more palatably, though it too betrayed a heavy-handed attitude in arguing for jazz’s legitimacy. Niles described Handy as an “artist,” “a lyric poet,” and “the most famous and most affectionately regarded American Negro” (v–vi). In outlining his own history as a listener of Handy’s works, Niles delineated the process he deemed necessary to appreciate the music by implying that *Father of the Blues* was a composition of similar quality and complexity. In more recent times, jazz autobiographies have been much more likely to include forewords by outside authors than contemporary country, folk, or rock-musician books. In most cases, prefatory essays by jazz-music historians, like Rudi Blesh and Dan Morgenstern, contextualize

the subject's larger importance within the musical field and free the subject from the burden of single-handed self-promotion.

Significantly, the few autobiographies of pre-1970s African American female performers did not rely on the persuasive power of third-person forewords or textual apparatuses. The life stories of Ethel Waters and Billie Holiday, both marketed (and consumed) as emotionally charged confessionals, lacked introductions, giving their shocking tales little in the way of context, and, in some ways, marginalizing their identities as musicians. Even the flawed musical appraisals that prefaced Armstrong and Handy's life stories reinforced their subjects' place as significant musical innovators and attested to both their talent and fame.

Though typically the domain of music historians or critics, occasionally fellow musicians have written forewords to memoirs, including personal tributes (with more sensitivity than Rudy Vallee afforded Louis Armstrong). In the autobiography of New Orleans jazz pioneer Pops Foster, modern-jazz bassist Ron Carter offered an appreciation of his more traditional predecessor, while activist-musician Toshi Reagon attested to the shaping musical and political influence of her mother Bernice Johnson Reagon's group Sweet Honey in the Rock in the group's collectively written 1993 book.

The elaborate set of paratextual elements surrounding bluesman David "Honeyboy" Edwards's narrative in *The World Don't Owe Me Nothing* (1997) represents the mutually dependent relationship between text and paratext. Such contextual material is especially useful in the case of a lesser-known musician like

Edwards, whose slender catalog of original songs and spotty recorded history have historically excluded him from the canon of first-rank blues musicians, and whose notoriety is largely based on his first-hand acquaintance with Delta blues hero-cipher Robert Johnson. The paperback reissue contains a full thirty-three blurbs, gleaned from newspaper reviews, notices from blues-oriented magazines, and praise from notable people, ranging from blues musician Taj Mahal to author-broadcaster Studs Terkel. In his foreword, Albert Murray says nothing about the quality of Edwards's music, and instead uses the space as a platform to critique the larger issue of subject-author power relationships in cross-racial "as-told-to" autobiographies. Murray commends Edwards's collaborators for avoiding the "Huck and Jim" mythmaking he detects when naïve white fans and co-authors engage with African American musicians, and render them in print as both "exotic" and slightly "pathetic" figures (ix).

From there, amanuenses Janice Martinson and Michael Robert Frank step in with a list of acknowledgements, thanking people who have "looked out for [Edwards's] welfare" (xi).⁹ Martinson and Frank roughly outline their methodology, relying on informal conversations, choosing and transcribing the "best versions of the best stories and [tying] them together" (xiv). After Murray's cynical take on cross-racial collaboration, they refer to the racial politics of white authors writing for black subjects only obliquely, admitting to fashioning a linear narrative from piecemeal sources while attempting to represent accurately Edwards's speech patterns and

⁹ In addition to being Edwards's co-author, Frank served as Edwards's longtime business manager.

rhythms (and judiciously refraining from employing dialect). Elsewhere, the collaborators are absent from the text, neither contributing an afterword nor taking credit on the book's cover or spine. Three appendices underscore the historical weight of Edwards's life story. A "Miscellany" offers a glossary of terms, encompassing both archaic African American slang and idioms unique to the blues. Additionally, more generally circulated terms from the early to mid-twentieth century like "Depression," "greenhorn," "revivals," and "hoboing" are defined. Separate appendices outline the biographical details of contemporaneous blues musicians and the songs in their repertoires. The range and focus of these addenda suggest that these supplementary texts are created for the benefit of an imagined audience of general, young (and arguably white) readers, who are encountering the book as a history of a long vanished time and place.

Appearing in almost every musician autobiography currently in print, photographs are another vital part of the discourse between author and reader, conveying the importance of one's roots alongside validations of public accomplishment. Continuing a tradition begun in slave narratives such as Solomon Northrup's, W.C. Handy placed a contemporary formal portrait of himself as the frontispiece for *Father of the Blues*, above a facsimile signature. As Robert Stepto argues, the visual representation of the emergent subject after his or her trials combined with the subject's signature provide a powerful form of textual and personal authentication (11). The Carl Van Vechten photograph of Handy in *Father of the Blues*, then, serves as an essential element of the text; foreshadowing a

narrative of dignity and progress achieved through musical composition and publication, the impeccably dressed Handy poses proudly with a bound collection of his most famous songs. The stylized signature beneath the portrait affirms Handy's approval of the text and, implicitly, seals the autobiographical pact between subject and reader.

Other subject-authors employ photographs to commemorate social history alongside personal achievements. In his letter to Albert Murray recommending Bobby Short's autobiography, Ralph Ellison identified the volume's inclusion of personal photographs as a revelation of a hidden aspect of African American history, and an assertion of Short's place within that larger narrative: "I consider the photographs of his family and friends precious documents. They capture the pathos, the aspiration, the sense of style, age and youth of a given moment of our under-valued history" (*Living* 252). In Perry Bradford's *Born with the Blues*, the dozens of photographs of fellow performers coalesce into a type of family album representing the range of African American stage-musical entertainment in the 1920s and 1930s, even as many of the performers pictured go unmentioned in the written narrative. Missing elements in photo sections also carry significance. Childhood and family pictures are conspicuously absent from many rhythm-and-blues autobiographies, such as Ray Charles and David Ritz's *Brother Ray* and Al Green and Davin Seay's *Take Me to the River*. This omission could be due perhaps to the subjects' impoverished upbringings or alternately a desire to put their professional life at the foreground of the text and leave the past behind.

A text's dialogue with the reader is often made literal through captions to photographs, which break down into two types. In the type exemplified by Lynn and Vecsey's *Coal Miner's Daughter*, captions pose rhetorical questions and colloquial (sometime self-deprecating) asides, and thereby create the illusion that the reader is informally leafing through a family album alongside the subject. Especially in works by female country performers, a tension exists between humble beginnings and the trappings of stardom, between circumscribed feminine domestic roles and the expanded horizons of the public life. In the essay "Recycled Trash," Pamela Fox describes the subject's eventual capitulation to hegemony: "[Captions] almost always function to give the illusion of authorial control and static identity—through the years, essentially the same 'girl' lies underneath the teen dungarees, cowgirl fringe, and sequined gown. The captions thereby attempt to construct a seamless line connecting private histories and contemporary public lives" (240). By contrast, a less discursive, "official" type of photo section appears in works by male country musicians, with captions that resemble the wall copy found in museums that typically highlight awards and career milestones, and assume an elevated language and tone common to the expert, historian, or journalist. The divergence between male and female performers' captions arguably reflect a larger gender gap in the field, where male singers, though often marketed as simple "working men" or everyday people, can assume an aggrandized persona more readily than a female performer.

Thomas Swiss notes that photographs serve a similar, if more limited, function in mainstream popular musicians' autobiographies. As "an exertion of

control over self-image,” photographs simply reinforce the text, and its guiding narrative voice (290). Pictures authenticate the accompanying text by illustrating the subject’s career advancement. Musicians who emphasize their humble roots in the text typically include multiple (often weathered and grainy) photographs of parents, grandparents, and rural homeplaces. Simple family snapshots give way to visual representations of apprenticeship and hard work (often an early publicity photo both amusing in its anachronism and charming in its naïveté), followed by illustrations underscoring one’s fame. Photographs depicting sold-out concerts and film and television appearances signal commercial success. Subjects are commonly shown with other famous people, heads of state, childhood idols, and other musicians. Snapshots of the subject-author with older performers symbolize a link to musical tradition while poses with younger musicians fix the subject as an honored carrier of a musical legacy. The set of illustrations usually culminates in a recent, high-quality publicity photograph that signifies the performer’s stature and the distance he or she has traveled from humble beginnings.

This trajectory can be represented in other visual forms as well. Both W.C. Handy and Perry Bradford include facsimiles of vintage sheet-music covers of their most famous compositions, attesting to their decades-long efforts to publish and promote African American popular music to a mass audience. The maps of the Mississippi Delta found in Willie Dixon and David “Honeyboy” Edwards’s memoirs emphasize their personal and professional grounding in the region. Discographies signify perhaps the ultimate statement of career accomplishments, and the boundaries

of devotees' involvement with the collection and dissemination of a recorded legacy. In the pop and country fields, discographies appended to autobiographies tend to be basic lists of albums and singles, often with notation of sales-chart positions that quantify the subject's claim to commercial success. By contrast, the meticulously ordered and detailed inventories of titles, session musicians, and record matrix-numbers that accompany many jazz musicians' stories attest equally to the subject's prominence in the field and the exacting and studious inclinations of jazz aficionados.

Generally speaking, women's autobiographies contain less quantitative data in the paratext and lean more toward introductions, blurbs, and brief essays that engage in dialogue with the text proper. Befitting their history as activists as well as musicians, the collectively written history of the African American *a capella* group Sweet Honey in the Rock is interwoven with group members' first-hand reminiscences of the civil rights, feminist, and anti-apartheid movements. Alice Walker, Angela Davis, and Sonia Sanchez contribute written appreciations of the group's activism and advocacy for women of color, while Coretta Scott King writes the back-cover blurb. Group members, past and present, pen individual chapters, complete with personal snapshots, summarizing their unique musical and political roles, each distinguishing their "voice" on the page as they would on the stage. Members of Sweet Honey's support system, including their live-sound engineer and concert booker, also write chapters, underscoring the cooperative, egalitarian nature of the group.

Another work that suggests an alternative to the single-voiced, chronological book of memoirs, Hazel Dickens's *Working Girl Blues*, represents an evolving subgenre, an autobiographical work that eschews the primacy of narrative, being virtually dominated by paratext: a thirty-page biographical sketch of Dickens's life and career by co-author Bill Malone, the lyrics to forty of Dickens's original compositions, an extensively annotated discography, two photo sections (encompassing forty-one photographs), and an index. The sum of the autobiographical text is Dickens's introductions to the reprints of her song lyrics, which run one to three paragraphs each. Though they offer abundant insight as to the content of the songs, they provide, at best, an impressionistic overview of Dickens's life compared to the standard "as-told-to" personal narrative. The insight, real or fabricated, that narrative fosters has been instrumental in the widespread dissemination and positive reception most musicians' autobiographies have enjoyed.

RECEPTION

Much like the reading public, critics have been largely accepting of the "conditional authenticity" of musicians' autobiographies, and base their readings on pre-existing trust in the subject and his or her "name" value. While the musician-autobiography subgenre itself is often saddled with the reputation of being an undifferentiated mass of celebrity autobiographies and collaborative or ghostwritten works, and thus criticized *en masse* for being inauthentic, self-censored, and/or self-serving, reviews of individual works over the last fifty years have been

overwhelmingly positive. Quite simply, no autobiography by a performer of stature has received less than lukewarm reviews.¹⁰ A performer's legacy and body of musical work directly influence the reception of his or her narrative for the better. Reviewers for major newspapers and journals, music critics in many cases, commonly read an autobiography as a written adjunct to the subject's musical canon, and treat it with a proper, if not outright fawning, respect. As a result, a work like Basie and Murray's *Good Morning Blues*, with an approach so modest as to be almost impersonal, was as praised as Nina Simone and Stephen Cleary's vituperative *I Put a Spell on You* (1993), with both upheld as accurate portrayals of their respective subjects. This reception reflects not simply a lack of discrimination or aesthetic understanding on the part of reviewers but an understandable impulse to read musicians' autobiographies through the scrim of nostalgia and pay respect to musicians' career-long endeavors.

In exceptional cases, an autobiography receives mixed or scattered negative reviews for not being appropriately forthcoming. Aretha Franklin and David Ritz's *From These Roots* (1999) disappointed both critics and fans for its stated refusal to discuss intimate details of its subject's personal life or address longstanding rumors persistent in fan circles. Amounting to a relatively scant 251 pages, the book seemed too insubstantial to document the storied, five-decade-long career of the "Queen of Soul." Fans' dismissal of the book as "light" and "little more than a tightly

¹⁰ By invoking "stature" I exclude plainly ghostwritten "quickie" books written on behalf of young pop stars and various American Idols, which make no pretensions to being well-rounded life stories, critical self-examinations, or works of literary merit.

controlled interview” demonstrates not only their expectations for a more confessional work (and, tacitly, a belief that, as fans, they are entitled to a spectacular display of outward emotion), but also their “ear” for narrative tone (Awkward 34). The book could not satisfy fans wanting an appropriately regal book of memoirs, while Franklin’s reticence to open up more to her co-author and address the persistent body of rumors surrounding her private life disappointed many readers desirous of a more intimate portrait.

The legacy that fans protect is multifaceted, reified in commercial products like CD box sets as well as more intangible honors, such as Hall of Fame inductions, or public and civic honors. The perception of an autobiography as a self-selected retrospective is compounded when a work is promoted in tandem with a greatest-hits disc or box set. Louis Armstrong followed up his written reminiscences of New Orleans *Satchmo* with *A Musical Autobiography*, a multi-record set that spanned his career, featuring spoken-word song introductions and re-recordings of old favorites. Decca released a five-disc retrospective of Bing Crosby music in 1954 under the title *Autobiography*, with the singer introducing re-recordings of old standards with witty stories and quips, offering the listener a simulation of a private audience with the star (Kaye 421). Long-playing albums in the 1960s by Frank Sinatra (*A Man and His Music*) and Bobby Darin (*The Bobby Darin Story*) followed the same formula of juxtaposing classic hits with informal (though obviously scripted) introductions by the performers.

More recently, autobiographies have been specifically marketed as an adjunct to an artist's musical endeavors. The published life story of Dr. John (Mac Rebennack)—a *tour de force* of racial boundary crossing, drug addiction and recovery, and musical adventurousness—concludes with an undisguised sales pitch for a contemporaneous album. In the late 1990s, Rosemary Clooney and Al Green each published autobiographies in tandem with career-spanning box sets. In both cases, the artwork for the book matched that of the box set, and created a unified brand identity, a “synergy” in marketing terms, between text and music. The stark black-and-white cover of Johnny Cash and Patrick Carr's extraordinarily popular 1997 volume of memoirs *Cash* matches the somber monochrome on the covers of Cash's contemporaneous back-to-basics *American Recordings* CD series.¹¹ The Cash albums, with their stark production values, “just-roll-tape” approach, and emphasis on a “rootsier” sound, work in tandem with *Cash's* reminiscences and plainspoken prose, just as the book offers background and ballast to listeners approaching or reconnecting with his history through his recent music.

In other cases, the co-authorship and publication of a life story can be a continuation of an artist's efforts to take or regain control of his or her business and, by extension, legacy. In Ray Charles and David Ritz's *Brother Ray*, the latter part of the book details Charles's endeavors to own the master tapes of his past work, not

¹¹ Needless to say, Cash was fond of black, but the high-contrast black-and-white photo, emphasizing the performer's weathered visage, is more artfully constructed and image-driven than the rather plain onstage snapshot on the cover of his first autobiography *Man in Black* and less gaudy than the illustrations found in his authorized 1976 comic book, *Hello, I'm Johnny Cash*.

simply to legally possess the fruits of his labor but to retain control of when, where, and how to disseminate his music. The same issues of mastery and self-determination permeate the book. To tell his story in his own words and take ownership of that story gives Charles the same power as owning his own masters. By extension, Charles gains freedom when he purchases ownership of his work.

Likewise, the memoirs medium gives rhythm-and-blues star Ruth Brown a platform to review her colorful career but more importantly recount her lengthy and expensive struggle with her former record company over long-overdue royalty payments. Even if latter parts of the book resemble legal briefs and interrupt the narrative flow, her story still is in keeping with her persona as an indomitable blues heroine. In the study *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, Joanne M. Braxton identifies “sass,” or proudly talking back, as an essential element in African American women’s autobiographies, from Harriet Jacobs to the present day (31). Ruth Brown exemplifies this “sass,” both in her history and in the way she narrates her assertive actions, as she describes the process of dismantling the “mastery” imposed upon her by the industry. Thus gaining control of her “masters” assumes an obvious double meaning.

Of course, in both Ray Charles and Ruth Brown’s situations, ownership of their labors involves more than legal title and record-company ledger entries; it is the quantifiable measure of their freedom in an industry run by and for affluent whites. Houston A. Baker, Jr. traces a source of this “mastery” trope back to the turning point in the 1789 narrative of Gustavus Vassa/Olaudah Equiano, where the African man

purchases his freedom and, in his retelling of events, shifts to a more active narrative tone and voice to underscore his newly won agency. Such a shift, for Baker, “implicitly acknowledges that such economics *must be mastered* before liberation can be achieved” (*Blues* 37, italics in original). Even if Ruth Brown’s descriptions of combing through financial records sometimes make the narrative lag, they are essential elements to her story and emphasize her journey to gain rightful control and recompense (perhaps even reparation) for all she has created. The reader must accompany Brown as she retraces the economic side of her history by tallying up the credits and debits that determine the ownership of her name, her legacy, and her overall independence. The triumph Charles and Brown convey in regaining control of their work is unmistakably enriched by its overarching symbolism, as their music—their artistic expression—rightfully becomes their own legal property, which they may leverage for their own purposes and benefits.

CONCLUSION

In an approximately seventy-year span, popular musicians’ autobiographies have emerged as a distinct entity by reaching countless readers and providing historical details and perspectives previously unaddressed in standard chronicles. In representing the subjective impressions of both private and public lives, musicians’ autobiographies have developed a syncretic form of narrative that embraces elements of biography, cultural history, novelistic storytelling, and music criticism. At the same time, autobiographers are charged by their readership to prove personal

authenticity and integrity. To simultaneously write one's self into history and maintain a rapport with fans, the majority of musicians work with amanuenses or co-authors who guide the production of a work in ways analogous to that of music producers or folklorists. In a successful collaboration, the musician and the co-author present a multi-perspective narrative with a range comparable to that of an omniscient narrator, able to fulfill common reader expectations: reliability, firsthand expertise, incisive interpretation, and intimate detail. While this process stretches the limits of the autobiographical pact, the aim—the representation of an idealized yet credible self—remains the same. What ideally results is a form of “high fidelity,” as subjects and collaborators operate from within the perceived boundaries of a public persona to build upon the existing relationship a musician-author has with his or her fans.

Paratextual elements complementary to the text supply ballast and further proof of authenticity. The scholarly apparatus of authoritative forewords and discographies, most common to jazz narratives, underscores the documentary impulse in autobiography (and often counterbalances the irascible attitudes many veteran musician-authors have toward contemporary music). The use of photographs and photo captions in works across the musical spectrum extends the narrative's dialogical relationship with readers. With this rapport established, autobiographical subjects can represent themselves as subjective entities, major figures within their musical genre, exemplars of material success and, as will be discussed in the next chapter, observant citizens.

CHAPTER II

I AIN'T GONNA PLAY NO SECOND FIDDLE

Historically, autobiographies have served as the literary signposts on the road to American citizenship. Every movement toward equality and self-determination in the United States from the colonial period on has been vitalized by a body of first-person testimonies that have both individualized and universalized the right to exercise agency within the larger society. Though the pursuit of fame and notoriety may be the most common theme in southern musicians' autobiographies, the struggle for equal citizenship has played a key role in the development of the subgenre, with common approaches explored by disparate subject-authors. Typically, these narratives conflate personal success with social advancement. They trace the developmental steps common to vernacular musicians—in most cases, the journey from privation and anonymity to privilege and fame—and narrate as well the unique events that have shaped their lives and music. The culmination of this journey can result in wealth, to be sure, but in many cases the musician-author reveals how the ultimate result of one's strivings is the recognition of civil rights, new opportunities, and the innate sense of "belonging" crucial to citizenship. Significantly, the majority of autobiographies by southern musicians assume the voice of the idealized American citizen: humble and grateful in the spotlight of success, trusting in the opportunities and mobility promised by a democracy, and hopeful in the nation's ability to implement positive change.

The complex and sophisticated narrative strategies of African American musicians seeking subjectivity through dissemination of their stories can be decoded by understanding the discursive conventions of three subgenres of American autobiography: the Franklinian narrative of success, the artisan autobiography, and the slave narrative. In his autobiography, Benjamin Franklin built a persona that exhorted readers to follow a program of civic virtue, utilizing both amusing, fable-type stories of his younger self and unvarnished moralizing. In *Apostles of the Self-Made Man*, John Cawelti credits Franklin with scripting a type of uniquely American citizenship: “Franklin’s *Memoirs* presented a broad ideal of individual self-improvement based on the industrious pursuit of a profession, the cultivation of the moral and intellectual virtues, and the assumption of a responsible role in the general progress of society” (23). Among the many professions Franklin “industriously pursued,” his dual role as author and publisher distinguished itself as a combination of Enlightenment ideals and traditional work ethic. According to Michael Warner, “Franklin was the first American to fashion a career entirely of letters” (76). In crafting his own story (as deliberately as an artisan would craft a masterpiece), Franklin became authorized to place agency—achieved through hard work and a program of autodidacticism—at the forefront. In the *Autobiography*, both Franklin and the American colonies rise to independence in perfect harmony, as they amass technical knowledge, self-consciousness, and intellectual sophistication to make their autonomy and prosperity a virtual certainty.

Rarely do we consider all aspects of Franklin's writing situation. It must be remembered that Franklin wrote his autobiography as a celebrity of his times, from the perspective of a "name" author, addressing a reading audience who were familiar with the general facts of his biography. Consequently, in the prefatory material to Part Two of the *Autobiography*, representative members of that audience literally take over the narrative, praising the celebrity-author for his depiction of his hard-working and virtuous younger self in Part One, and beseeching him to continue his tale of industriousness and good fortune up the present day. R. Jackson Wilson summarizes how Franklin employed a self-reflexive approach in presenting his history to the public: "It was a writing stratagem that enabled him to generate a figure of himself that was simultaneously that of an earnest young tradesman and a wily old celebrity. He was writing a book that could be read in two distinct ways, by two different kinds of readers" (26). That is, the *Autobiography* could be read, mainly on its surface, as a success manual or, with more attention paid to the book's rich subtext, a literary performance that revealed humor, calculation, and at times contradiction.

Among its other distinctions, Franklin's autobiography represents a late-period example of the artisan autobiography, a diffuse body of life stories, usually brief and narratively "workmanlike," published by craftsmen and guild members, beginning in the Renaissance and continuing through the eighteenth century. In his expansive study of the genre, James Amelang explains how the artisan autobiography "was in large measure a discourse by, for, and among outsiders, first as members of subaltern groups, and then as members of the literate—and literary—minorities

within these groups” (48). Writing independently of one another, European craftsmen-authors positioned themselves as “modern” simply by the act of writing, as their ancestors were typically preliterate and had not developed a skilled trade and/or risen through the apprentice system. This younger generation’s act of writing autobiographically, even within the span of a few artless pages, signified a measure of education and progress in the world, as well as the leisure time necessary to engage in self-reflection, historical consciousness, and concern with one’s social status. “Many of these outsiders,” Amelang argues, “were desperately trying to convince themselves that they would become insiders, and sought to use writing in general, and autobiography in particular, as a means to this end. Writing was often (though not always) a transformative strategy, enabling authors to cross social as well as cultural boundaries” (48). According to Amelang, life writing by artisans signaled the beginning of popular autobiography, as these works focused on self-development and economic advancement, in contrast to the more metaphysical themes of spiritual autobiographies.

Aspects of the early modern artisanal autobiography persisted into the twentieth century, especially in the retrospective works of African American musicians and music entrepreneurs. As the first generation of African Americans to even consider profiting off popular music, composers like W.C. Handy and Perry Bradford used the autobiography medium to document their earliest exposure to vernacular music, their gift for adapting it to popular tastes, and the trials and travails of disseminating the finished product through public performance, sheet music and

sound recordings. Discussions of the finer points of composition or aesthetics were largely left aside, with the emphasis instead on how the subject-author surmounted institutional obstacles on the way to success. Importantly, this strain of writing implicitly equated success with “crossover,” or acceptance by white, middle-class audiences. Gary Giddins incisively identifies the essential elements of the mainstream American celebrity-citizen mythos in the first half of the twentieth century, “combining the American dream with melting pot diversity, cheerful tolerance, and a ready willingness to brave new frontiers” (“Mirror” 485). Significantly, Giddins finds these virtues exemplified in the public stories of prominent men born outside of privileged Anglo-Saxon hegemony; his pantheon includes Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Al Jolson, Louis Armstrong, Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, W.C. Handy, Jim Thorpe, and Elvis Presley (485). Giddins’s list is selective, and includes no women; Ethel Waters and Sophie Tucker are just two female performers of the period who fit the profile. Nevertheless, this grouping represents an unofficial “guild” of multicultural entertainers who entered the public sphere as outsiders, worked to ingratiate themselves with the white Protestant middle class, and whose stories reinforced the positive image of an open and accepting American popular culture that cheerfully rewarded ambition and talent.

The narratives of early twentieth-century African American musicians like W.C. Handy and Sidney Bechet carried the influence of oral histories dating back to slavery; these musicians, only one or two generations removed from slavery, undoubtedly heard accounts from family and acquaintances on life before

Emancipation. Present-day readers can only trace these autobiographies' discursive similarities to the well wrought, collaborative narratives describing enslavement, escape, and freedom. As outlined by Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., slave narratives employed several conventional rhetorical strategies to ensnare and involve the reader. First, the slave narratives affirmed common ideals, both religious (such as faith and piety) and secular (hard work, perseverance, patriotism). In Bakhtinian terms, they qualify as "centripetal" narratives for their reinforcement of core values. Works as disparate as Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* and Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* transmitted messages of uplift and inspiration, beginning with their title pages. Second, they adopted the legal language of testimony and outside corroboration. In the prefaces and forewords penned by prominent abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison and Lydia Maria Child, a second voice lent his or her name and good character to the evidence presented in the text, attesting to the truth of the narrative. Finally, collaborators of slave narratives wrote with the popular, rather than the elite, audience in mind. For example, the romance-novel emplotment and melodramatic language of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* universalized, rather than trivialized, the perversion of intimacy at the heart of the master-and-slave relationship. Without such trappings, *Incidents* would never have reached the parlors and libraries of the white reading public, as its themes of personal and sexual exploitation could never be conveyed to a "polite" audience in plain language.

In the well constructed life narrative, authors could exercise all the rhetorical tools of the Enlightenment, such as reason, wit, and self-consciousness. Within these narratives, literacy emerged as the key event. From literacy and language mastery, one attained authority, identity and, finally, agency. By decoding and utilizing the written word, once-enslaved people began to “write themselves into being,” confronting the dominant society on its own playing field, the marketplace of ideas (Davis and Gates xxiii). Their stories’ emplotment, characterizations, and use of rhetorical strategies contradicted the claims of those who doubted Africans’ intellectual ability, as Kant had questioned their intelligence, Hegel their grasp of historical consciousness, Hume (and later Theodor Adorno) their ability to create art, and Thomas Jefferson their ability to employ the complexity of thought required for narration. Of course, these attitudes did not evaporate after Emancipation. As late as 1941, the year W.C. Handy published his lengthy career retrospective *Father of the Blues*, a member of the southern planter elite like William Alexander Percy could write at length about African-Americans’ “obliterating genius for living in the present,” a trait that allegedly disposed them to historical ignorance and a propensity for mindless violence, and still be considered a moderate voice on race relations in the South (23). The societal and economic disparities between blacks and whites became further complicated when African American music emerged as a viable commodity in the American marketplace, as mainstream audiences sought out music simultaneously marked as “authentic” and “primitive” (Schroeder 100).

Historian Clyde Woods argues convincingly that the blues grew directly out of the post-Reconstruction experience, as the long-denied rights and citizenship of newly freed men—and in some cases, women—were in quick succession affirmed by three Constitutional amendments. With the ratification of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments came the abolition of slavery, federal protection of citizens' rights (such as the right to own property, due process, and equal protection under the law), and male suffrage, respectively. The Reconstruction amendments and the brief period of southern African American representation in Congress conferred a sense of civic inclusion that was ultimately stolen, replaced by the subaltern status imposed in the South by the Black Codes and Jim Crow segregation (Woods, *Development* 36–37). In Mississippi, the state's constitution was redrafted in 1890 specifically to contravene federal Reconstruction-era Constitutional amendments (McMillen 42–43). In extreme cases, white southern demagogues sought to reverse the advances of Reconstruction and strip away African Americans' citizenship entirely. In the most egregious example, Governor James K. Vardaman of Mississippi proposed a repeal of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments as a campaign plank (Daniel, *Standing* 30). Ultimately, the governor was successful in passing an “anti-vagrancy” law applied disproportionately toward African-American men, severely limiting their mobility and earning potential (Gussow, *Seems* 100). Vagrancy laws were arbitrarily enforced, most often invoked around cotton-harvest time, when cheap labor was at a premium (McMillen 142). The passage and enforcement of such legislation demonstrated the extent of the obstacles faced by

southern African American intellectuals trying to overcome the imposition of second-class citizenship.

W.C. HANDY – *FATHER OF THE BLUES*

Despite his longstanding mainstream popularity and moderate stance on race relations, even a person of note like W.C. Handy had to mount a case for full citizenship in his autobiography. To do so, he and his collaborators employed Franklidian discursive approaches, including the intercession of other voices in the paratext and a self-reflexivity that allowed him to alternate between two personae: the young man “on the make” and the wise sage. In his foreword to *Father of the Blues*, Abbe Niles, a white anthologist of African American music as well as Handy’s attorney, detailed his own history with Handy’s music, from first hearing “The Memphis Blues” in 1913 to assisting in the lawsuit to return that song’s copyright to the composer twenty-seven years later. Niles made his case for Handy’s artistic stature, dubbing him a rough “lyric poet,” but was more invested in introducing Handy as an example of American success. Like a defense lawyer, Niles entered into the record tangible proof of Handy’s good character and civic involvement. His introduction reproduced several of Handy’s letters to Niles written over the preceding decade, where he wrote of weathering present-day segregation and performing benefit concerts, including one for the defendants in the “Scottsboro Boys” case. In an anecdote that encapsulates both the absurdity and anachronism of segregation, Handy writes Niles concerning his first airplane trip in 1938, bound for Columbia, South

Carolina to see a play written in his honor. Barred from boarding a connecting flight out of Charleston alongside white passengers, the unshakable Handy drives the final 120 miles to his destination, arrives on time, and is warmly received at the performance (viii). In such episodes, Handy demonstrates his participation in a modernizing society slipping out of the reach of Jim Crow. Additionally, Handy in his correspondence denounced Communism, perhaps to preemptively offset criticism for his small role in the Scottsboro defense, and its association with left-wing groups (Handy, *Father* viii–xi). In this, the book’s opening statement, Niles commended Handy to the reader not simply as an entertainer but as the “most famous and the most affectionately regarded American Negro” (v). With this honorific, Niles tacitly congratulated Handy for his mainstream ideological stance, one that modestly advocated for racial justice and national unity as the United States prepared its entry into World War II.

Yet the book’s additional paratext suggested other, less conciliatory influences on Handy as he presented his story. In the “Author’s Acknowledgements,” Handy explained the genesis of the book, as African-American newspaper publisher Wendell Dabney and curator Arthur Schomburg pled with Handy to write his memoirs back in 1933. By aligning his autobiography with African American intellectuals and hinting at the lengthy period of the book’s composition, Handy endeavored to represent his life story as a major work with historical ballast and a significance that reached beyond popular music. Handy’s mention of the book’s original title, *Fight It Out*, implied that major changes in the content and tone of the manuscript had occurred

over time (xiii). According to Handy, the working title was intended as a tribute to his enslaved ancestors, some of whom bought their way out of slavery, some of whom made courageous attempts to escape the antebellum South. However, Handy concluded, “Since the title ‘Fight It Out’ did not express a musical career, I have changed it to ‘Father of the Blues’” (xiii). In what at first glance appears to be a negligible description of the text that follows, Handy subtly lifts the veil and gives the reader an insight into his autobiographical persona. Handy constructs his life story to please several constituencies, from the African American intellectuals eager to incorporate Handy’s narrative into the archive to the popular audience who know him through his music and genial public image. As an author and subject, Handy labors to be both guileless and intelligent, faithful and worldly, an adherent of Washingtonian grit (one of his most didactic chapters is unambiguously titled “Work Is the Measure of Wealth”) and a Du Boisian intellectual, capable of both deep introspection and effective action in the face of Jim Crow.

While Handy has been taken to task for the stuffiness of his narrative tone, his historical context must be remembered, as many early profiles of blues and jazz musicians retained antiquated notions of African Americans’ intellectual abilities. In his 1928 book *Rainbow Round My Shoulder*, white folklorist Howard W. Odum devised from his field observations a composite laborer-bluesman to narrate and vivify the segregated South, drawing from a body of collected African American folk songs and interviews (Hamilton 48–50). Odum ventriloquized his blues hero, “Black Ulysses,” with an array of discourses: blues lyrics, humor (including “playing the

dozens”), and lengthy stretches of reported dialogue. Yet Odum neglected to imbue his protagonist with historical consciousness; Black Ulysses’s travels were recalled in discrete narrative sections with a minimum of narrative transition or self-reflection (“Then I went back to Memphis...”, “I got job [sic] in tobacco factory ...”, “Then I went out to Peoria...”, “Well, I come back to Chicago...”) (*Rainbow* 246–247). In the interstitial sections that began each chapter, Odum acted as Black Ulysses’s Homer, providing virtually all the context for his hero’s journey. Meanwhile, Black Ulysses’s narrative style remained in a state of arrested development, creating a disjunction between the rich irony and symbolism that distinguished his folk songs and his rather dull, unadorned manner of speech. This dubious tradition continued even after *Father of the Blues*’s publication, when another white folklorist, John Lomax, appended his 1947 autobiography *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter* with a chapter of allegedly overheard anecdotes by African American informants that read suspiciously like warmed-over blackface routines (Barker and Taylor 18). Handy’s insistence on narrating his story with sobriety and dignity makes more sense in this light.

As part of the first generation of African Americans born after Emancipation, Handy’s road to citizenship was not fully mapped out, and existed largely within language, through stories of ancestors and prophetic promises of change yet to come. The example of his parents and the stories of his enslaved grandparents demonstrated the possibility of civic participation and racial uplift propounded by African American public intellectuals and newspapers of the time. In the first chapter of

Father of the Blues, Handy related his grandfather William Wise Handy's life story. Shot while escaping an Alabama plantation that was a stop on the Underground Railroad, William Wise Handy recovered, learned to read and write, and established several churches after Reconstruction (3). The elder Handy came to be regarded as "an honored and respected citizen" across the color line. Handy recalled: "When I was a small boy, Mr. George W. Karsner, one of the oldest white citizens of Florence [Alabama], stopped me, and after inquiring my name said, 'Sonny, if you become like your grandfather, you will be a great man'" (3). Clearly, Handy recognized his grandfather's labors and prestige as an example to follow and a call to participation in public life.

The life's work of W.C. Handy's father Charles exemplified civic engagement in the Booker T. Washington mold. The elder Handy farmed on his own property, was a respected preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, wrote for a local African American newspaper, and vocally supported the Republican Party, which in the years of Reconstruction still held a legitimate claim as the "Party of Lincoln" (Robertson 28). The younger Handy aptly referred to his ancestors' devotion to progress and involvement in the public sphere as his inheritance, marking both his filial loyalty and well-developed historical consciousness. At the same time, of course, Handy represented his pursuit of music as a quest, with inevitable conflict with his father's religious values and sense of propriety. In one of the best-known scenes in *Father of the Blues*, the young Handy works odd jobs in order to amass enough money to buy a guitar. Enraged at the prospect of his son giving up his social

and moral inheritance to associate with idle and immoral musicians, Reverend Handy rails at his son, “A box. A guitar! One of the devil’s playthings. Take it away. Take it away, I tell you. Get it out of your hands. Whatever possessed you to bring a sinful thing like that into our Christian home? Take it back where it came from” (10).¹² At his father’s insistence, Handy trades in his prized new guitar/”devil box” for a dictionary. In what could have been another example of the American musician rebelling against parental authority, Handy acquiesces to his father and refuses to demonize him in his recollection. This sympathetic characterization suggests the author’s adherence to his father’s principles.

From this point on, Handy’s pursuit of music becomes a negotiation, with constant balancing and bargaining. To buy his “devil box,” Handy must accept the traditional work ethic of his elders and engage in strenuous labor: for only a few cents a day, he picks cotton, fruit and nuts, makes lye soap, and works as a water boy and janitor. Becoming more ambitious, he completes a number of apprenticeships and, like young Ben Franklin, even runs a printing press (8). Perfectly encapsulating his goal of advancement and self-improvement in the Franklinian mold, Handy trades a gallon of milk for a copy of *Poor Richard’s Almanac* (7).

¹² Handy’s contemporary, Delta bluesman Charley Patton, was also forbidden by his preacher father from playing guitar because of the instrument’s supposedly sinister character (Litwack, *Trouble* 50). See note 14, below. The stereotype of the lazy blues musician persisted throughout Handy’s life; the *New York Times* review of *Father of the Blues* complimented Handy for elevating the music above the efforts of “idlers and no-accounts” through his entrepreneurial drive and classically derived musicianship (Stevens BR4).

The key scene in many Franklidian-derived autobiographies is the break with the family and their provincialism and the subsequent move to the big city; Handy's work proves to be no exception. Having forged all the tools of the young man seeking success—piety, strong work ethic, marketable skills—Handy makes his plan to move north and find his fortune through music in 1892, at the age of seventeen. With a mere twenty cents to his name, Handy rashly decides he and the vocal quartet he has formed should travel from Alabama to the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in hopes of performing to massive crowds. To reach their destination, they alternately hop boxcars and charm their way onto passenger cars through their singing. To finance the journey, the group serenades white excursion-boat patrons who picnic along the Mississippi River, picking up spare change. The group arrives in Chicago only to find out the fair has been postponed until the following year.

On the surface, Handy's account of "missing" the Columbian Exposition reads as an account of youthful folly and harmless naïveté on his part. In all likelihood, however, the older and wiser Handy narrated the event in his autobiography in order to "signify" on the inhospitality of the exhibition and the Gilded Age's popular culture in general. The fair's White City, with its architectural excesses and exclusion of African Americans (not to mention the name White City itself), made it a perfect synecdoche for a post-Reconstruction society that accepted racial segregation alongside the era's notion of material progress (Burg 321). Unreconstructed southerners, emboldened by the success of white supremacist "redeemer" state governments and the flimsy platform of states' rights, used the fair

as a pulpit for their revisionist versions of recent history. A once-enslaved woman named Nancy Green attracted crowds by portraying Aunt Jemima, a commodified version of the sentimentalized “Mammy” stereotype (Hale 151). Still sensitive to the portrayal of the South forty years earlier in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a group of white southerners planned to erect an ersatz antebellum tableau on the exhibition grounds, with black re-enactors leisurely sitting around a roughhewn log house, making homely crafts and plucking banjos, seemingly unperturbed by racial inequality (Litwack, *Trouble* 197). Organizers of the exhibit made no secret of the fact that such spectacles were intended to counter the presence of “educated Negroes” in public life, such as Booker T. Washington and the criticism of activists like Ida B. Wells, who wrote an incendiary pamphlet protesting the virtual exclusion of African-Americans from the Columbian Exposition. No less a figure than Frederick Douglass faced hecklers when he addressed an assembly at the fair on “The Race Problem in America” (Malcomson 363). In such a setting, a sympathetic hearing for young Handy and his group would have been unlikely, especially if the group refused to put on the more humiliating trappings of minstrelsy.

If exclusion from the fair was a blessing in disguise for Handy the performer, it still represented a missed opportunity for Handy the composer. The Chicago Exposition marked an important turning point in the business of popular music. As David Suisman points out, John Philip Sousa cemented his place as America’s “March King” with his crowd-pleasing appearances at the exposition. One of the numbers in his band’s repertoire, “After the Ball,” ignited the mass sale of sheet-

music, leading to the establishment of New York City's Tin Pan Alley and, eventually, the popular-music industry that consolidated the writing, performing, and publishing of songs, all businesses in which Handy eventually became an exemplar after years of tireless labor and self-promotion (30–32).

Amid this struggle, Handy banked exclusively on his own musical talent, gradually relying on music publishing as his source of income and means of advancement. Typically, performers and impresarios of African American music ran sideline businesses by necessity; for example, Frederick J. Loudin supplemented the income derived from presenting the Fisk Jubilee Singers in the 1890s with a shoe-manufacturing concern (Abbott and Seroff, *Out* 84). Handy's determination to follow his muse also signaled a break from Washingtonian thinking, as he removed himself permanently from the realm of manual labor, leaving him no trade on which to "fall back."

Handy's early career ambitions defied the compromised, nearly non-existent state of citizenship formalized in southern states by the Black Codes. Such laws were designed, as one sympathetic newspaper in Mississippi characterized them, to "keep the ex-slave in a position of inferiority [and] make him feel his inferiority" (Woods, *Development* 64). Under the Codes, young black men could be tied to the land through forced-labor "apprenticeships" that replicated the paternalism and inequality of slavery. Refusal to submit to this system could result in trumped-up charges of vagrancy (Woods, *Development* 64). Until the Great Migration broke the cycle of dependence for many, the predominating sharecropping system dashed

Reconstruction-era promises of financial independence, self-determination, and mobility. Handy's life as a traveling musician virtually dared a rebuke from the system, as the life of a musician or minstrel was unbound by territory, largely unproductive to the economic welfare of the region, and had no ties to the perpetual debt slavery and loss of liberty associated with sharecropping.

Joining the Chicago-based Mahara's Minstrels troupe in 1896, Handy learned the unwritten, ever-changing rules of racial etiquette on the road. Even on the minstrel-show circuit, Handy avoided any appearance of "concession to lowbrow taste" in his repertoire (35). Such a stance matched that of middlebrow musical impresarios such as John Philip Sousa, who emphasized the "elevating" aspects of their programs, and in a more general sense Franklin, whose rise to citizenship was marked by his disdain for common entertainment and his immersion in classics and philosophy. By Handy's account, his minstrel-show orchestras played a preshow program of classical music and military-band-style marches, with a minimum of "hokum" mixed in, thus refashioning the mode of black minstrel performance.

For Handy, discipline functioned both as a musical method and a survival skill, as he credited his band's professionalism and sober demeanor with overcoming the threat of white mob violence. At one particularly rowdy pre-show parade in Texas, Handy turned his head mid-solo to find a white man aiming a gun at him. Conditioned to ignore the threat, Handy continued to lead the band, only to have white men in the crowd lasso band members with ropes and pelt them with rocks. "I was furious," Handy wrote, "and stoutly refused to play a note during the parade. We

marched faster than usual but we kept our ranks” (44). One questions whether Handy and his group were able to effect such a clean getaway in the face of rifles and ropes, with seemingly no one else to intercede on their behalf. Yet, as a fable, the story has immense power while the orderly parade symbolizes Handy’s larger philosophy. The moral of the story for African Americans, as Handy imparts it, is to keep marching in the face of insult, “keep the ranks,” and not sacrifice personal or racial dignity.

Yet this stoic conservatism cannot fully insulate Handy from mob violence or the threat of murder. In a brief aside, Handy recalled the fate of a former bandmate named Louis Wright; “an unusually talented musician, this slim, sensitive boy resented insult with every fiber of his being” (43). Only in the company of cooler heads like Handy’s could such a proud, impetuous young man escape surveillance and punishment for infractions. According to Handy, after Wright left his company to join the Georgia Minstrels, the young man cursed a group of white men in Missouri for pelting the musicians with snowballs. A mob duly formed and waited for Wright behind the stage. After the show, the entire minstrel company was rounded up and held in police custody until Wright was identified. The subsequent lynching, attended by local law enforcement, was as swift as it was brutish. Members of the lynch mob severed Wright’s tongue, presumably to exact revenge for his “impudence,” and shipped his body to his mother in Chicago (43). After describing the horrific crime in his memoirs, Handy offered no subsequent commentary. Though imparting secondhand knowledge, Handy understood the power of such a starkly narrated story,

its astoundingly violent imagery carrying more force than sophistry or an appeal to pure reason ever could.

As observant as Handy was on his own travels, he barely escaped with his life on a few occasions. One of the more notable episodes occurred while his band made a tour stop in Texas. A member of his band complained of a skin irritation, and visited a doctor, while the band went on with its scheduled concert on the town square. In Handy's recollection, a local white doctor stopped the performance to announce, "Ladies and gentlemen, these niggers have got the smallpox. If they don't get out of town—and that right quick—we'll lynch them all" (47). Subsequently, local authorities moved the company to the town's outskirts and "inform[ed] us that the appearance of one or more case of smallpox among us would be the signal for them to burn the car and carry out the doctor's lynching threat with regard to the rest of us, men and women" (48). At that point, a gruesome death watch transpired. Given a pretext for murder (by a doctor, no less), would-be vigilantes kept the troupe in a confined space. Historian Robert Toll relates the scene in all its appalling detail:

When one of the black minstrels in W.C. Handy's troupe contracted smallpox in the 1890s, the entire company was literally corralled outside of the nearest Texas town. They not only were threatened with lynching if they left the compound but were also denied treatment even when the disease spread throughout the company. [...] Denied food, water, and sanitation facilities, they survived only because their train carried water and food reserves in case of just such

“emergencies.” Finally, under cover of a diversionary show, the troupe smuggled the fourteen sick men out in women’s clothing so they could escape from Texas to some place “where the benefit of a hospital might be enjoyed.” (221)

With this constant surveillance, the inattention paid to the group’s poor health, dwindling rations, and the undisguised threat of mass lynchings, Handy did not exaggerate when he called this site a “concentration camp” (48). Such imprisonment was an attenuated form of the “smallpox ordinances” that white authorities imposed on the surface to control public health but were actually intended to restrict the movement of African Americans (Hazzard-Gordon 66). As in those ordinances, the musicians’ freedom of movement was suspended as whites attempted to control space and, in a larger sense, suspend the new freedoms guaranteed by Reconstruction. Such an episode made the conflicts between the African American performer in the post-Reconstruction South and the prevailing rule of law all too clear. The modern African American minstrel threatened the latter-day slavery the law sought to impose by being professional, transient, and resourceful and, unlike the sharecropper, not beholden to the white landowner.

By the turn of the century, Handy left the road to pursue a career as a composer of light-classical music. While teaching music at Huntsville A&M University, Handy was pressured to advance a notion of racial pride, partly by rejecting ragtime. During one concert, as a musical joke on the black bourgeoisie, Handy led the university band on a number called “My Ragtime Baby,” under the

fake title “Greetings to Toussaint L’Ouverture,” receiving the praises of the school’s unwitting president (60–61). Such anecdotes illustrate how Handy’s progress was complicated by Du Boisian double consciousness, as he weighed the consequences of pursuing vernacular ragtime music or a more “respectable” European-derived style and struggled to reconcile his desire for mainstream respectability with his knack for writing the blues.

Ultimately, Handy chose popular music and returned to Mahara’s Minstrels. His reversion to the southern minstrel circuit seems baffling on the surface, given Handy’s obsessions with status, propriety, and his past brushes with violence and racism on the road. Yet Handy retained fond memories of the minstrel circuit, retrospectively describing it in the 1940s as a “distinctly American form of entertainment” (*Father* 63). He noted how minstrelsy was the premier talent pool for African American performers at the time, and how military bands often recruited from the ranks of minstrel bands. Karen Sotiropoulos writes of Handy’s generational cohort: “Even while they continued to use stage conventions reminiscent of minstrelsy, African American artists regarded the myriad of new cultural venues as opportunities to transform [...] nineteenth-century stereotypes” (36). Befitting the discipline required by the music, Handy subverted stereotypes by outfitting his thirty-piece band in grand style with epaulette-festooned uniforms and silk-covered hats. Handy posed regally in this uniform for a February 1904 notice in the African American newspaper *The Indianapolis Freeman*, as an anonymous author (possibly

Handy himself) wrote glowingly of the bandmaster's mien during his tours in the South:

When Mahara's Minstrels toured the South in 1903 the music was under the direction of one of our most thorough musicians. The Southern press spoke of his work in terms so unusually complimentary; clergymen, teachers and business men tendered such hearty receptions, and critics of both races spoke so little but words of praise that the people were impressed with the belief that he was the most efficient bandmaster and artistic cornetist ever seen South. This was W.C. Handy. ("W.C. Handy")

The description encapsulates Handy's professional ambition in the years before he committed the blues form to print. As he made his rise from the shadowy world of the traveling musician to the more respectable realm of composition and publishing, Handy sought approbation from the traditional pillars of American virtue—the clergy, educators, and businessmen—alongside the striving classes of African Americans, and has his modern “efficiency” praised in the same breath as his musicianship.

Handy and his band found semi-regular work performing at public events and political rallies around Clarksdale, Mississippi. Handy's group became such a fixture around town that they were invited to entertain at rallies for unreconstructed white politicians. At one such engagement, the band looked on, seemingly invisible, while a candidate for state office unleashed a barrage of white-supremacist rhetoric.

Invoking the Confederacy's supposed reliance on faithful, unquestioning servitude by

enslaved African Americans, the demagogue railed against social equality, making a pledge to return to an antebellum society and eliminate “nigger education” if he was elected governor (*Father* 80–81). Thunderstruck, Handy and his band had little choice but to sit silently during the tirade, then play the inevitable chorus of “Dixie” upon its conclusion.

Though Handy declined to identify the politician by name, the speaker’s rant against education for African Americans almost certainly came from James K. Vardaman, who zealously pursued such a ban for decades and won the Mississippi governorship in 1904 through such shameless campaign promises. During the harangue, Handy, in an epiphanic moment, came to realize the severity of oppression for African Americans in the South, especially those seeking their long-promised role in public life. “Every time we played for him,” Handy recalls:

I was reminded of the first time I had listened to oratory of this sort.

As a schoolboy in Florence I had gone home, buried my head in a pillow and wept after listening to sentiments like these uttered from the courthouse steps by a politician of the same stripe. Later I had wandered off alone in the woods across the road from the cabin in which I was born. There, point by point, I had undertaken to answer the man of ill will. Slowly, deliberately, I had torn his argument to bits. At the top of my voice I had hurled the lie into his teeth. The woodland took up my shouts. The words of my defiance echoed and

reechoed. That pleased me. I went home and slept well, a great burden removed. (81)

In this, one of the book's most extraordinary passages, Handy re-imagined the boundaries of his surroundings. Where Handy in his writings typically employed an almost evasive rhetorical understatement regarding race relations, the violence he uses in this passage to describe his private discourse—tearing the racist oratory to bits, striking back with loud defiance—is exceptional, anticipating the charged conclusion of Richard Wright's *Black Boy* [*American Hunger*], where the alienated protagonist resolves to “hurl words in this darkness and wait for an echo” and “to tell, to march, to fight” against prejudice he is certain to face (453). Because of the logic and force of his argument, the young Handy must escape to the woods to speak his piece, lest his response be overheard and interpreted by whites as impudence. Handy knows, almost instinctually, that civic knowledge and defiant discourse, like literacy for his enslaved forebears, could be dangerous things if discovered.

In this primal scene of racial difference and oppression, Handy resorts to the type of transhistorical space Houston A. Baker terms the ancestral matrix, in this instance the cabin that signifies humble beginnings in the American heroic mythos and the woods that served as the site of religious gathering (and possible escape route) for enslaved African Americans. The incident serves as a lesson that the boundaries of the Jim Crow South are constructed physically—most prevalently through the color line—and discursively, through demagoguery, requiring him to master his words and actions equally in order to succeed. Reminiscent of the

climactic chapters of Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom*, where the freedman insists on denouncing slavery rather than merely recounting his experiences for others to consider, Handy finds catharsis in the pointed though still reasoned oratory he delivers in the moment and again in its retelling. The cabin episode is a rare flashback in a narrative that otherwise races forward in its representation of Handy's successive accomplishments. By recalling the past and summoning "the words of my defiance," Handy revives emotions he suppressed for years during his public ascent.

As Adam Gussow suggests in *Seems Like Murder Here*, the untenable position of being among the premier "legitimate" African-American musicians in the Lower Mississippi Valley, and playing an unwittingly supportive role in white supremacy, must have opened up Handy to the possibility of other ways to promote himself and the advancement of African American music in the first decade of the twentieth century (94). His deliverance comes from an unlikely source, namely, the vernacular music he once rejected. Dozing off while waiting for a late train in Tutwiler, Mississippi, Handy was jolted by a peculiar sound:

A lean, loose jointed Negro had commenced plunking a guitar beside me while I slept. His clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages. As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of the guitar in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who used steel bars. The effect was unforgettable. His song, too, struck me instantly.

Goin' where the Southern 'cross the Dog.¹³

The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on the guitar in the weirdest music I had ever heard. The tune stayed in my mind. (74)

Even in his latter-day persona of “Father of the Blues,” Handy still evinced some conflict about his turn toward popular music. “I hasten to confess that I took up with low folk forms hesitantly,” Handy averred. “I approached them with a certain fear and trembling” (76). In Handy’s view, the bluesman’s ragged clothes, bare-bones instrumentation, and unrefined performance style represented an almost ghostly relic of an earlier time. Noting the “sadness of the ages” on the face of the blues singer, he subtly identified the music as a remnant of slavery. Under the existing Jim Crow laws, the songster was, strictly speaking, a vagrant (Wagner, *Disturbing* 37). Socially, he was an outcast of the polite society to which Handy aspired and the antithesis of the military-style bands and uplift philosophy Handy had presented for black and white audiences in the Delta.¹⁴ Symbolically, the bluesman resembled the

¹³ “The Southern” referred to the Southern Railway, whose tracks intersected with those of the Yazoo-Delta railroad line. The Yazoo-Delta cars, marked with a “Y-D,” were nicknamed “Yellow Dog,” or simply “The Dog” (see Rubin 30–32).

¹⁴ Blues historians Jeff Titon and David Evans have offered up the suggestion that the mysterious figure at the train station was none other than Charley Patton, based on the fact that Patton lived close to Tutwiler on the Dockery plantation in 1903, played slide guitar with a knife, and utilized, as many blues musicians did, the “Southern ‘cross the dog” lyric years later in his “Green River Blues.” While this is nowhere near enough information to make a positive identification, the suggestion that these two very different musical masters met briefly at the crossroads (and that the obstreperous Patton exerted such a life-changing influence on the mild-mannered Handy) is a fascinating one.

West African trickster-hero Legba, a disruptive, devilish spirit known as the “guardian of the crossroads” who symbolizes chance and unpredictability (Floyd, “Ring” 269). The “weird” (in the sense of being uncanny) music shook Handy’s confidence in his own musical mastery and discipline.¹⁵ In this vignette, Handy never asks the blues singer his name or origin, only the meaning of the song’s words; the singer explicates the lyric of his song and promptly vanishes. Handy is left to rationalize what he has just seen and heard. Roughly familiar with the blues’s origins in work songs—“earth-born music that was familiar throughout the Southland half a century ago”—Handy can identify and isolate the elements of the bluesman’s lament, and begin to reconstruct his musical approach (75).

¹⁵ The then-unfamiliar tonalities and emotionalism that connected spirituals with the blues struck other intellectuals of Handy’s generation as otherworldly as well. The first in-depth description of the blues, written by Harvard archeologist Charles Peabody, published in 1903, portrayed the singing around Stovall, Mississippi, as “monotonous but weird” (Gioia 22). That same year, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois characterized the “sorrow songs” from the South as “weird old songs” that carried “a haunting echo” of slave times (185). However, during the “classic blues” era of the 1920s, “weird” became a favored descriptor used to sell the blues in the wider marketplace, even as the genre diversified and moved away from the orchestrated sounds Handy popularized. In 1926, Paramount Records promoted the first successful “country blues” records, by Blind Lemon Jefferson, as “weird sad melodies” (Tilton 113, 214). An ad touting the latest blues records from the same label in the June 2, 1928 *Chicago Defender* singled out the “weirdness” of Rube Lacy’s “Mississippi Jail House Groan”: “Rube puts a lot of weird moaning and groaning into this number and some fancy guitar playing, too. It’s a hot record that you’ll like – typical Paramount quality” (D. Evans, *Big Road* 57). The Paramount ad typified the schizophrenic quality of the music industry and the public taste circa 1928, as it trumpeted simultaneously the haunting, otherworldly sensations of Lacy’s “moaning and groaning,” the “hot” (read: African American-influenced) intensity of the performance and the label’s Main Street assurance of product quality.

His transformation became complete with his second encounter with the blues. Playing a dance for white patrons in Cleveland, Mississippi, Handy and his orchestra—“musicians who bowed strictly to the authority of printed notes” and rejected all appearance of minstrelsy—ceded the stage to a three-piece band, called upon by the crowd to play “native music” (76). As he did in the encounter at the train station, Handy initially looked askance at the players, their crude instruments (“a battered guitar, a mandolin and a worn-out-bass”), and a form of music that Handy internalized as a throwback to slave times and hard labor (“a kind of stuff that has long been associated with cane rows and levee camps”) (77). As before, Handy begrudgingly admitted the music, though “monotonous” and unpolished, possessed a certain charm, even a “haunting” quality. His esteem rose greatly when the crowd spontaneously threw money at the trio: “Dollars, quarters, halves—the shower grew heavier...Then I saw the beauty of primitive music” (77).

In this story, Handy makes the leap from the sublime (hearing the weird music) to the concrete, and immediately repositions himself as a more commercially attuned artist. He simultaneously makes an affirmative step toward citizenship. Describing his musical epiphany decades after the fact, he declares, “That night a composer was born, an *American* composer” (77, italics in original). For the first time in his autobiography, W.C. Handy identifies himself as an American. From this point on, he visualizes his audience as heterogeneous, willing participants in the American “melting pot” mythology, and directs his musical endeavors toward them. The unlikely success of the blues convinces the composer who once venerated

European composers and their elite audiences that “the American people wanted movement and rhythm for their money” (77). Seeing his road to success suddenly mapped out, Handy describes himself and his as yet unheard music in deracialized terms, assuming that crossover and material success are synonymous. Handy’s self-characterization as a fully American musician, without conditions or qualifiers, is no small indication of his desire to be embraced as a mainstream figure in the culture.¹⁶ By melding his musical expertise with a commercially attuned sound that wins him approval and notoriety, Handy seeks to transfigure composition into citizenship.

Handy’s story is just one example in the lineage of “overhearing” strange music in the Americas and incorporating into an existing style palatable to mainstream listeners. In this rhetorical trope, musician-auditors recollect their chance encounters with unusual, “primitive” music to emphasize the distance between themselves and the “folk” and to maintain their air of gentility. Stage performer Thomas D. Rice, credited as the source for blackface minstrelsy, frequently related (and embellished) his story of encountering an African American man perform the

¹⁶ Handy’s insistence on referring to himself as wholly American was an anomaly in mid-twentieth-century African-American musician autobiographies. For purposes of comparison, Louis Armstrong uses “colored”—the most widely accepted term in the early twentieth century among African Americans—as a self descriptor in his 1954 autobiography, while Sidney Bechet refers to himself in *Treat It Gentle* (1960) as “colored” and “Negro,” but neither refers to themselves as “American” anywhere in their respective autobiographies. Despite his work as a United States consul and his decades-long presence in the public sphere, James Weldon Johnson referred to himself only as an “American Negro” or “Aframerican” in his 1933 memoir *Along This Way*, reflecting his internalization of double consciousness.

song “Jump Jim Crow” in the 1830s (Levine, *Black* 192). Rice refined this creation myth to authenticate his music and dance moves and distinguish himself from those who followed him onto the minstrel stage. Though Rice never quite settled on whether he first apprehended “Jump Jim Crow” in Cincinnati or Louisville, he was consistent in congratulating himself both on his perceptive grasp of the performer’s talent and his own fidelity to the original performance.

In 1862, New Orleans-born Creole pianist Louis Moreau Gottschalk recorded in his journal his simultaneous annoyance and fascination when a lengthy train journey was soundtracked by a fellow passenger loudly practicing Scottish and Irish music on a fife. Playing in the key of F major, the fife player substituted the B-flat note with a B-natural, an interruption of the standard European major-scale modality anticipating the flatted fifth (or “blue note”) popularized in 1940s bebop jazz. (In Western music-theory terms, the fifer is playing in the Lydian mode.) Unusually sensitive to musical inflection and expression, Gottschalk responded to the “foreign” music in proper Romantic style, slipping into a reverie and imagining “mountains,” “fantastic legends” and other facets of the “Scottish character” (Gottschalk 92). In publicizing his 1893 “Symphony from the New World,” which incorporated his interpretations of melodies gleaned from African American spirituals, Czech composer Antonín Dvořák presented his source material as “pathetic, tender, passionate, melancholy, solemn, religious, bold, merry, gay...” (Ross 131). In short, the “New World” music Dvořák overheard and adapted represented an emotionalism

far removed from the polished and intellectualized European classical music of the day.¹⁷

Handy's initial response to the blues is in line with such expressions by the dominant culture that marvel at the inventiveness and peculiarity of vernacular music. In the first musicological study of the Mississippi Delta blues, published in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1903, Charles Peabody anticipated Handy's vignettes when he described the social situations that give rise to blues singing, especially field labor, noted the world-weariness of its practitioners, and commented on the idiom's harmonic nonconformity, by acknowledging its "weird" melodies and "strange" rhythms alongside its "peculiarly beautiful" emotional effect (Harris 186). Likewise, in the two scenes reenacting his transformative encounters with the blues, Handy employed a well-crafted and concise discursive style with scholarly overtones, adaptable to retelling or embellishment by credulous white historians and folklorists (see Lomax, *Land* 165–166). The strange meeting with the lone bluesman, especially, became a perfectly structured origin myth, crucial to the process of corroborating Handy's claims of siring the blues. Like a conversion narrative,

¹⁷ Contemporaneous with these tales of "overhearing" foreign music was the complaint by traditionalists that popular music was "noise pollution," torturing rather than enchanting the involuntary listener. In *Selling Sounds*, David Suisman relates one such example by classical-music critic Henry T. Finck in 1900: "One afternoon, while I was watering flowers in the back yard, a boy in the street whistled a tune that I had not heard before. The infliction of that tune on my unwilling ears [infuriated me], not only because of its offensive vulgarity, but because there was something in the nature of that mephitic air that made me feel certain I should hear it a thousand times during the summer" (56).

Handy's descriptions moved from the external, emphasizing his experience as a "respectable" musician, to the internal, as he delineated the numerous changes in his sensibility and purpose that the blues triggered.

Critics of the time were quick to pick up on Handy's vivid origin myths, but far less likely to acknowledge their deeper subtexts. More recently, Adam Gussow glosses Handy's description of his transformative encounter with the blues as a return of the repressed (*Seems* 101). For the composer, hearing the "Southern 'cross the Dog" melody called to mind memories of William Malone, a fellow musician on the minstrel circuit who cried and moaned piteously as he slept, echoing "the woe of the whole world" (Handy, *Father* 67). Handy soon learned the source of Malone's turmoil: Malone's father's participation in Reconstruction-era Mississippi politics had triggered death threats from the Ku Klux Klan. The elder Malone was reduced to hiding beneath his cabin at night, as his wife, pregnant with William, lay vulnerable to vigilante attack. Though the Malones escaped and raised William in Washington, D.C., the inborn fear of assault by white men never left the young man and was voiced subconsciously decades later as he fitfully slept (67–68).

Handy's evocation of the Malones represented a turn in how Handy publicized his authorship of the blues, and his role in making it a signature American music. Just a year before publishing *Father of the Blues*, Handy was describing the birth of the blues in much more collectivist, prosaic terms in the magazine *Etude*. There, he insisted "the real blues must come from the heart and the pen of the Negro race itself" and congratulated himself for "being the first to collect [the blues's]

elements in orderly documentation, and to give this form of the music of my race a typical expression” (“Heart” 207). Handy’s bifurcation of the blues from “typical expression” reflects his uneasiness with jazz’s co-optation by the white mainstream, through such musical compromises to mass tastes as Paul Whiteman’s “symphonic jazz.” In turn, the introduction of African American music, even in its most pallid form, into the parlor and the concert hall generated a small panic in some quarters. Critics of unassimilated jazz claimed its “primitive” sound led to bad citizenship, and a degradation of European-American traditions (see Ogren 153–161). In his self-coronation as “King of Jazz,” Paul Whiteman emphasized his effort to legitimize jazz to a white, middle-class audience (Ogren 158). In Whiteman’s program notes for the 1924 premiere of *Rhapsody in Blue*, a piece he commissioned from George Gershwin in part to incorporate blues elements into orchestral music, the conductor erased the African American origins of jazz for his own purposes, by praising the “tremendous strides which have been made in popular music from the day of the discordant Jazz, which sprang into existence about ten years ago from nowhere in particular, to the really melodious music of today” (Ross 158). In doing so, Whiteman subsumed the then-unwritten history of African American popular music, specifically jazz. By claiming jazz arose from “nowhere in particular,” Whiteman wiped Africa, the Caribbean, and the American South off the cultural map.

Popular songs of the era that co-opted jazz and blues elements betrayed a similar cultural forgetfulness. The popular standard “Birth of the Blues,” written in 1926, fabricated a storybook Dixie where “some Darkies” who “only had the rhythm”

search for “a different tune.” The elusive melody is synthesized from the wind, a “wail” from a jail and, anticipating Handy’s description of the blues’s source, the “weird melodies” of windblown trees (Dennison 433). Similar “origin myth” songs from “That’s How Rhythm Was Born,” first popularized in 1932, to “Blues Are Brewin’” (performed by Billie Holiday and Louis Armstrong in the 1947 B-movie *New Orleans*) to Cole Porter’s “Now You Has Jazz” (1956) proliferated over the decades. As in “Birth of the Blues,” all these songs discounted the role of composition, or most human agency for that matter, in the creation of blues and jazz. As these songs gained popularity, they became fixed in the public imagination as authentic southern music, rather than mythopoetic projections by professional songwriters, few of whom had ever ventured south (see K. Miller 140).

By countering Whiteman’s falsehoods and the Old South “romance” of popular songs with his first-person testimony on the blues’s origins, Handy endeavors to show where “nowhere in particular” actually is. Take for example Handy’s description of the origin of “St. Louis Blues.” Musically, the song comes naturally to the composer, “that whole song seemed to spring so easily out of nowhere, the work of a single evening at the piano” (*Father* 28–29). Conceptually, however, the song draws from the past, recalling his struggles as a naïve, penniless singer on the banks of the Mississippi. The narrative Handy unfolds in his autobiography valorizes experience. Recalling his earliest days as a musician, Handy notes that his singing group had to disband after they failed to find work in St. Louis after the Chicago Exposition debacle. With no money and no job prospects, Handy slept on the banks

of the Mississippi River and in a vacant-lot encampment with hundreds of fellow out-of-work men. It takes little imagination to suppose that his memories of poverty and despair would eventually express themselves in the famous opening lines of “St. Louis Blues”: “I hate to see that evening sun go down” (Handy, *Treasury* 71), or his 1926 composition “East St. Louis”: “Walked all the way from East St. Louis/And I didn’t have but one poor lousy dime...” (Handy, *Treasury* 44). In an improbable stroke of luck, Handy, according to his autobiographical account, picks up a guitar in a white saloon and makes enough money through his musicianship in one night to leave town and start anew (or, in the words of “St. Louis Blues,” “pack my trunk and make my getaway”). The “birth” of Handy’s blues, he asserts, was not due to happenstance or a sound carried by a blowing wind, but rather his inherited ability to “fight it out,” demonstrating tenacity during hard times and a devotion to social and economic advancement.

In order to capitalize on his inventiveness, Handy was obligated to make the “supernatural” sound of the blues concrete through transcription and publication. Once Handy firmly established himself with the phenomenal commercial success of such songs as “The Memphis Blues” (1912) and “St. Louis Blues” (1914), the publishing industry “discovered” African American music anew, and raced to copyright existing music, co-opting it through imitation or codifying it as public domain (read: without a composer and free to use) (Barlow 122–125). The recording industry followed suit in 1920, after the unexpected success of Mamie Smith’s recording of Perry Bradford’s “Crazy Blues.” As a composer, Handy conjured

melodies so infectious and unaffected that they were assumed to be traditional and in the public domain, making them susceptible to theft by composers and publishers with better industry connections. Handy received official and exclusive recognition for his own creativity only when he notated and copyrighted such tunes. In short, Handy embraced publication as a moral right, to ensure that his labors cannot be taken away without recognition and recompense.

Commercial publication also discouraged outside appropriation of his music, especially by whites. Handy learned a bitter lesson in the importance of this exchange when, desperate for money, he sells the rights to “The Memphis Blues” for fifty dollars, only to see it become a perennial best-seller for its publisher. Subsequently, publishing played a key role in Handy’s larger objective of “uplift.” In 1913, Handy and business partner Harry Pace formed their own publishing company, disseminating both military-style marches and arrangements of African American spirituals (Robertson 152). Pace and Handy Publishers and its successor Handy Brothers Music Company enjoyed a measure of success up through the 1930s, despite rapidly changing public tastes. By detailing his highly visible involvement in the performing-rights group ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers), Handy set himself apart from gifted composers of color, like Scott Joplin and Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, who died virtually penniless. Without legally recognized and enforceable copyright law, Handy warned, “a great artist will pour out his heart and hard-hearted people will take it, unless that artist is protected” (261). Handy’s membership in ASCAP provided him not only with the “belonging” inherent

in joining a guild but also with a clear business advantage for the publishing company he co-owned.¹⁸ As Jacques Attali explains, copyright law emerged in the nineteenth century only to protect a publisher's interest in exclusivity, not the creative rights of the composer or musician (52).

Therefore, in an unmistakable irony, Handy's rise to prominence as the leading figure of African American music came at the expense of countless performers and innovators lost to history, personified by the mysterious man at the Tutwiler train station and the string band whose songs Handy appropriated. As Angela Y. Davis has noted, in claiming sole authorship of the music, Handy effectively cut out generations of anonymous creators from the process, subsuming them as a benighted, undifferentiated "folk" class, whose unpolished melodies he refined for middle-class consumption (136). By virtue of copyright law, Handy could parlay this finished work into legally protected, financially profitable authorship. Once Handy mastered the business of publishing, he found an official channel for the blues, one that reached a musically literate and culturally aware public, and afforded him access to the private sphere of the middle class through commodity production. Handy's blues, though, evinced a sense of racial and class conflict, as his impulse to elevate African American music to the parlor and concert hall without compromise

¹⁸ Handy may also have been boosting ASCAP in light of the establishment of Broadcast Music Inc. in 1939, a rival performing-rights organization formed by radio broadcasters to break the virtual monopoly ASCAP held in licensing popular songs. BMI was also notable for its inclusion of blues, country, and jazz in its song catalogs, genres ASCAP had largely shunned, its representation of Handy notwithstanding.

clashed with his desire to create and market music palatable to audiences on the other side of the color line, many of whom had little concern with the dignified portrayal of African Americans in popular song.

As the commercial sheet music makes evident, Handy tenaciously held on to every vestige of musical authorship. In a “revised version” of “St. Louis Blues” published the year after *Father of the Blues* (revised, it would seem, to profit from a new arrangement and capitalize on the ukulele craze of the day with specialized chord markings), the cover’s bottom left-hand corner announced the publication of “The Most Widely Known Ragtime Composition by W.C. Handy, Composer of ‘Memphis Blues’ in Which He Wrote the First Jazz Break Ushering in Modern Jazz.” Clearly still smarting from the taking of “The Memphis Blues,” Handy also hedged his bets on the music’s nomenclature, taking credit for both “ragtime” (the preferred generic term among whites and a separate, small cadre of New Orleans traditionalists) and “jazz,” as well as connecting his work to modern jazz, without claiming to be a participant.

Handy’s self-anointment on sheet-music covers may appear hyperbolic today. Read historically, though, such self-praise was both a preemptive strike against co-optation by the larger music-publishing industry and a necessary corrective to the defamatory images of African Americans commonly found on sheet-music covers. As Sam Dennison and others have pointed out, sheet-music illustration was a common medium for racist stereotypes from the 1820s onward. Handy’s self-identification as a highly successful and innovative composer went a long way toward

FIGURE 4: W.C. HANDY – “ST. LOUIS BLUES”

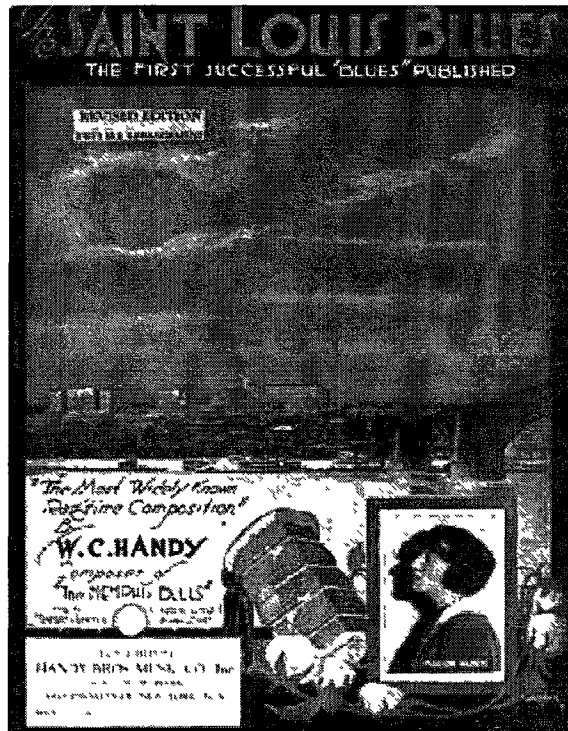


Figure 4: Revised edition of “St. Louis Blues” (1942); Handy Bros. Music, New York City. Original version published in 1914.

combating both vindictive caricatures of African American musicians and the erasure of African American musical authorship. In Handy’s time, publishers’ placement of stylized portraits of white performers on sheet-music copies of vaudeville-blues songs regularly obfuscated African American authorship. Publishers initially marketed “The Memphis Blues” on sheet music with an illustration of a white fiddler (Robertson 146). Among the white personalities given pride of place on the many reissues of “St. Louis Blues” during Handy’s lifetime were Paul Whiteman, Rudy Vallee, Ted Lewis, Harry James, Jo Stafford, Guy Lombardo, and Rube Bloom, an

arranger whose contribution to the song was apparently valued more than the composer's. Even Hollywood actors Jimmy Stewart and June Allyson graced the cover of one reissue, as a tie-in to the song's use in the 1953 motion picture *The Glenn Miller Story*.

Among Handy's African American contemporaries, the use of Handy's image and music signified refinement and musical discipline. As far back as 1915, a band accompanying the 101 Ranch Show (a travelling tent show simulating the Wild West) excited the crowds with its rendition of "The Memphis Blues." Headed by a bandleader named L.D. Baker, the group advertised itself as a purveyor of "Handy's repertoire of blues" and an aggregation in the Handy mold. "'Fess Baker always wears a smile," declared the black-owned *Indianapolis Freeman* newspaper, "because he has surrounded himself with a band of gentlemanly musicians, clean and refined, and no booze fighters or agitators" (Abbott and Seroff, *Ragged* 188). A year later, Baker's band participated in a Decoration Day parade through Washington, D.C., where, according to their publicity materials, they performed Handy's "Hail to the Spirit of Freedom" to the applause of President Woodrow Wilson (Abbott and Seroff, *Ragged* 188). Though Handy was certainly not the only exemplar of sophistication or patriotism among his generation of African American entertainers, it bears noting how quickly Handy's music was adopted by African American performers, both famous and obscure, and how "Handy" and "refined" became almost synonymous terms.

Similarly, in the latter part of his narrative, Handy reaps the rewards of his hard work through the lasting popularity of his published works. Civic recognition affirmed his stature and his carefully cultivated persona. In 1931, Memphis named a park in his honor, adjacent to Beale Street, to recognize his contribution to “the welfare of the city” (252). The dedication ceremony was preceded by a two-mile-long parade, complete with marching bands playing “The Memphis Blues” and “Beale Street Blues,” processions of African American military veterans and fraternal organizations, and floats manned by schoolchildren. Riding in a parade car, Handy ventriloquized the public’s affection for the composer: “That’s him... Yes, here he comes...that’s our Handy!” (253). At the dedication ceremony, public officials and religious leaders, black and white, delivered testimonials to Handy’s good citizenship. In recalling the program, Handy offered lengthy summaries of each speech, at times referring to himself in the third person as “Professor Handy.” The Professor looks on as speakers use the occasion to preach the gospel of uplift, with a local judge making “a direct appeal to the hearts of my people, extolling their rare gifts and virtues, and depicting the glory and grandeur of the future that awaits them” (257). Handy’s unabashed relation of such praise recalls the “Last Words” chapter of *Up from Slavery*, where Washington sums up his accomplishments at Tuskegee by quoting verbatim tributes to Washington by prominent newspapers and public figures.

Memphis reprised their celebration of the composer five years later, when Handy was feted as an honored guest at the city’s Cotton Carnival, and it is there that we detect a slight change in Handy’s attitude toward citizenship. Having

permanently established himself into the mainstream of American popular culture, Handy's objections to second-class citizenship become more pronounced, though often delivered with a veneer of gentility. At a concert at the city's Municipal Auditorium, he declined an offer to conduct Paul Whiteman's band in their arrangement of "St. Louis Blues," claiming bad eyesight, despite pleas from the all-white crowd (258–259). (Handy did suffer from deteriorating vision, losing sight for a period in the 1930s, and permanently going blind in 1943.) All but the most credulous reader will interpret Handy's demurral as a reaction against Whiteman's ersatz jazz and his years of pompous posturing about the "proper" way to play popular music like Handy's. In any case, Handy makes no further mention of Whiteman's invitation, nor does he reveal how his vision miraculously improved when he led his own band in an extended engagement at Harlem's Cotton Club during the same period. To paraphrase a song from the era written by his contemporary Perry Bradford and sung by his friend Bessie Smith, Handy politely but pointedly refuses to play second fiddle for anyone, especially Whiteman, and reenact the days of second-class citizenship simply to evoke nostalgia.

Handy also asserted his rights while on his many travels. At a restaurant outside Columbus, Ohio, a waiter serves Handy his dinner in a paper bag, and water in a paper cup, while white (and light-skinned black) members of Handy's touring party are provided with standard dishes and glasses. Handy confronts the waiter who has treated him brusquely:

I asked him if he had ever heard the *St. Louis Blues* and he began to tell me how he liked it. I told him that I happen to be the writer of that song and that I am an American. I reminded him of the great pains he took to humiliate me probably because he didn't like the color of my face. He looked sheepish and muttered something about the boss. I told him to tell the boss that America is appealing for unity now while one-half the world is warring against the other half or making preparations to fight because of racial antagonism. (281)

Again, we apprehend how Handy conflates authorship and citizenship. Handy's identification as the writer of a song with crossover popularity becomes equivalent to a passport, an irrefutable document of citizenship. Handy also wields his song catalog as capital, which he can then leverage in the ongoing negotiation of race. Handy invokes the success of his publications as much as his civil rights to shame the waiter for his prejudices. As his fame as the "Father of the Blues" widens, Handy becomes authorized to interpret his music's popularity as a unifying force and use the music's cultural capital to effect a small measure of social change.

Handy's exalted status was finally affirmed in 1939, when he was honored among six hundred "Great Americans" at the World's Fair in New York, a belated acknowledgement of his character, his contribution to American music and, symbolically, an opportunity for the nation's cultural establishment to rectify the "snub" of Handy at the 1893 Chicago exposition. On several occasions in 1939, including at the World's Fair site, Handy organized concerts of spirituals and swing,

featuring some of the most notable African American musicians of the day: Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, Noble Sissle, and a specially assembled “Negro Symphony” (275–277). In *Father of the Blues*, Handy diplomatically noted that the program was “set apart” (read: segregated) in order to “show the creative and interpretive gifts of the Negro” (275), while white groups led by Paul Whiteman, Glenn Miller, and Fred Waring played a separate concert. Despite the enforced racial separation, the concert represented a sense of completion for Handy, as much of the audience recognizes Handy and members of his cohort among the advance guard of American music.

The year 1940 was a logical endpoint for Handy to conclude his life story. At this stage, he was solvent enough to buy back the rights to “The Memphis Blues,” thereby obtaining a tangible measure of freedom and justice in both his life and work (138). Cognizant of the United States’ imminent involvement in the Second World War as he assembled his memoirs, Handy lamented the efforts of nations “trying to move Heaven and Earth with [...] airplanes, submarines, armored cars and battleships,” yet maintained a tone of optimism. Admittedly, the public recognition of Handy’s many musical and social accomplishments gave him a somewhat exaggerated sense of impending social equality for African Americans. Like the typical authors of American success stories, he conflated the completion of his own goals with the population’s general social advancement. *Father of the Blues* ends with Handy invoking Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America” in what amounts to a “closing benediction,” in Adam Gussow’s estimation (*Seems* 67). His closing words

affirm his centripetal stance, as he aligns himself professionally with fellow striver/songwriter Berlin, socially with an emerging black middle class hopeful for the fulfillment of democracy's promises and ideologically with a nation seeking unity as it organizes a massive war effort. Significantly, the former minstrel man can conclude his story with significant cultural capital to contribute to that effort.¹⁹

ECHOES OF HANDY

In *A Call to Assembly* (1991), subtitled *An American Success Story*, musician and teacher Willie Ruff writes himself in as W.C. Handy's heir. Born in 1931 in Sheffield, Alabama, less than ten miles from Handy's birthplace of Florence, Ruff became entranced by Handy when the composer-musician performed for an assembly at Ruff's elementary school. Subsequently, Ruff internalized his elder's respect for both sacred and secular music. Immediately, the aspiring musician despaired that he could not play "St. Louis Blues" on a valve-less regulation Army bugle he found around the house, consequently taking up the drum. Since his segregated school could not afford to outfit a band, Ruff gained tutelage from an older white friend, Mutt McCord, who passed on institutionalized musical knowledge across the color line. In exchange, McCord accompanied Ruff to African American tent shows and Sanctified church revivals to see musicians in action (43). While continuing to pick up elements of formal musicianship piecemeal, Ruff became a collector of raw,

¹⁹ *Father of the Blues* itself played a small part in the effort to keep up morale during the war, when the book was reissued in a special "Armed Forces Edition" for distribution to overseas troops (Szwed 125).

unpublished musical material just as Handy did in his minstrel days, picking up on the rhythmic tall tales (or “toasts”) he overheard at rent parties. Away from white people’s surveillance, Ruff sold northern African American newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* in Alabama, an act of interregional community-building that Handy also engaged in. As he grew aware of African Americans’ more visible role in popular music, Ruff became conversant with the wider musical universe, as he followed his favorite “musicianers” through the newspaper (68).

Though only fourteen, Ruff lied about his age to enlist in the Army, in part to accelerate his musical knowledge. Ruff began his stint in the last days of segregated ranks. Despite segregation and second-class accommodations, Ruff and his fellow infantrymen were given an informal education in black pride and history, as officers passed on the then largely unwritten lore of African American military heroism. Just as Handy’s band introduced a martial discipline to a popular musical form through military-style uniforms, written scores, and a serious demeanor, Ruff’s band introduced a jazz inflection to military music. Given access to a French horn, Ruff spent long, solitary hours in a boiler room, refining his musical technique, and honing it into both a skill and a type of language. An older bandmate counseled him: “Always remember that music don’t mean a thing unless it tells a story. It’s got to say something. Now, you got a story to tell, and don’t you ever let nothing or nobody make you ashamed to tell it in music” (132). Ruff’s hard work and openness to a variety of music puts him in good stead as he transitions into the life of a professional musician, working with musicians as diverse as classical composer Paul Hindemith,

Paul Robeson, and Charles Mingus, before accepting a teaching position at Yale University. Ruff and his musical partner, pianist Dwiki Mitchell, tour the world giving lectures that promote jazz as America's major contribution to world culture, carrying on Handy's mission to enshrine African American music as an exemplar of democratic culture.

At the conclusion of *A Call to Assembly*, Ruff brings his story full circle by reuniting with his white friend Mutt McCord and establishing a W.C. Handy festival in Alabama. As such, Ruff creates a fable of reconciliation similar to Handy's, where he can return to the South, bring his friendship with a white contemporary out into the open, and have his talent and ambition belatedly recognized in the more tolerant environs of the New South. Ruff's multi-step musical education—whether it is self-guided, peer-to-peer, or delivered through an institution—gives him entry into an elite realm of citizenship.

The Handy/Ruff pattern of social progress through assimilation is challenged by another composer and entrepreneur, Willie Dixon. Born in Vicksburg, Mississippi in 1915, Dixon became a major player in the Chicago blues scene beginning in the 1950s; his work as a songwriter, musician, and record producer remains influential on electric blues and rock. Following a trope established in musicians' autobiographies by Handy and Sidney Bechet, Dixon begins his story on an expansive note, harkening back to the experiences of his enslaved paternal grandfather. In Dixon's case, however, he evokes the cultural memory of his grandfather to establish his ambivalence toward the striving for mainstream citizenship. Dixon portrays his

ancestor as a rebel in the slave system, who made numerous escapes and withstood the inevitable punishments that came with capture (9).

Dixon's evocation of his grandfather seems appropriate, as many of his own experiences in the 1920s and 1930s reflect a social reality not far removed from the previous century's. Dixon learned firsthand at age thirteen about the South's suspect vagrancy laws and their role in supplying cheap labor when a policeman picked him up as a "hobo." Without a trial, he and a group of other black men were remanded to "the farm," a penitentiary where the men dug ditches by day and slept in shackles at night. One particularly sadistic overseer—"guard," called "Captain Crush," temporarily deafened Dixon by beating him with a strap. Dixon's remembrance of seeing Crush kill a fellow inmate before his eyes evokes the same fear and pity as similar descriptions in the slave narratives. Fancying himself a latter-day slave breaker, Crush replicates the cruelty of nineteenth-century overseers familiar to us through the slave narratives, but cuts a more sinister profile, if that can be possible, because of his anachronism. Supported by *ad hoc* local and state laws that curtailed the reforms of Reconstruction, Mississippi's quasi-legal penitentiary system, and the sanction of a white populace that largely accepted the chain gang as a sign of social order, Crush and his kind arguably held as much power in the 1920s as they did during the age of slaveocracy. Therefore, Dixon's remembrance of his grandfather's trials represents no idle fantasy but rather a deep identification. Though two generations apart and subject to two very different sets of codified law, both men

must negotiate the *de facto* rules of a largely unchanged South or craft a means of escape.

Willie Dixon's escape from "the farm," however, reads less as a tale of heroic daring and more of a parody of escape narratives. Sent by Crush to leave the prison grounds and fetch water for the chain gang, Dixon boards a mule and makes a very deliberate escape across the Yazoo River, then catches a train north, stopping in Memphis, then Chicago (28–29). Ironically, of course, the young man who was sent to prison on trumped-up charges of being a hobo made his getaway by becoming a hobo and stealing necessities from clotheslines and gardens along his route. Hitting the big city just in time for the outbreak of the Great Depression, Dixon catches a glimpse of the possibilities of music as an escape when he sees the success of Louis Armstrong and Cab Calloway in Chicago. He wanders the country, even going as far west as Hawaii. Like Handy before him, Dixon begins to write songs influenced by his travels, selling one song to a white country-music band and becoming a jack-of-all-trades (33). Dixon makes his way to New Orleans, works on the docks, and then takes a job shoveling coal on an excursion boat. Working for pennies, he makes his affirmative break from the hard labor and limited opportunities black men can expect in the South: "I was tired of just laying around there down South doing nothing because whatever you did, you weren't gonna get pay worth a damn and there was no way to advance" (40). Returning to Chicago, Dixon aligns his fortunes with the central city in the Great Migration, where fellow migrants are synthesizing the

musical form and content of the Delta blues with the kinetic energy and electricity of the city.

Dixon finds the audience for his music amid fellow migrants. In contradistinction to Handy, Willie Dixon made his entrance in the industry by selling “song sheets,” broadside-type publications with the words to popular songs, rather than fully notated sheet music. Additionally, the content of many of these song sheets would never be mistaken for Handy’s genteel parlor blues; Dixon’s most popular song sheet, a version of the X-rated African American tall tale “The Signifyin’ Monkey,” sells about 40,000 copies in Dixon’s estimation (52). Dixon advertised his wares on the street by reciting the rhythmic folk tale while accompanying himself on the bass. His real break in the music industry comes when he is hired by Chess Records as a musician, songwriter, talent scout, and intermediary between the musicians and the label owners. As with many small independent labels of the time, Chess did business under legally suspect contracts, often exploiting the power differential between the company and African American musicians eager to succeed in the industry. Recognizing this exploitation for what it was, and determined to protect the valuable commodities that his successful songs had become, Dixon took control of his own publishing in the late 1950s. Drawing on his traumatic experiences growing up in the South, Dixon connects ownership with his guaranteed civil rights, writing, “There wasn’t any law the black man had that the white man had to respect because nobody paid attention to the 14th and 15th amendments.... [Label owner] Leonard [Chess] was a businessman and what they called business in

America, especially before the 1960s, was if anything wasn't against the law, it was good business" (202). Invoking both the civil rights movement's fundamental demand for equality and the common-law edict that one should rightfully profit from the fruits of his or her labor, Dixon insists upon social equality and uses his music and its worldwide popularity as leverage to that end. In a significant step forward from Handy's parallel efforts, though, Dixon challenges the machinations of the music industry and directs his efforts toward African American audiences, rather than struggling for crossover success.

One of the most concerted efforts to establish citizenship as a theme in musicians' autobiographies is found in the quartet of books co-authored by singer-entertainer Pearl Bailey. Like many other African American artists who split their time between the stage, screen, and studio and made the transition from a segregated touring circuit to upscale venues patronized by whites—a cohort that included Ethel Waters, Sammy Davis, Jr., and Eartha Kitt—Bailey documented her professional and social progress in a series of books written to approximate a continuing dialogue with her fans, with each work adopting a slightly different authorial voice. Bailey's first book, 1968's *The Raw Pearl*, faithfully adopted the intimate tone and narrative arc of Waters and Samuels's *His Eye Is on the Sparrow*. In *The Raw Pearl*, Bailey represented herself as one equally adherent to patriotic ideals and Christian faith. Her story reads as a celebration of advancement, achieved through hard work and a belief in an American meritocracy, both among the general population and within show business.

The Raw Pearl's political moderation earned her both commercial success and recognition from the White House, as President Richard Nixon named Bailey "Ambassador of Love to the entire world" (needless to say, a purely honorary title) (Bailey, *Talking* 1). Following up on *The Raw Pearl*'s success and a lengthy engagement in a Broadway musical, Bailey published *Talking to Myself* (1971), the vividly titled *Hurry Up, America, and Spit!* (1976), and *Between You and Me* (1989), autobiographies that are less sequels than signposts of her mainstream popularity. On the whole, Bailey writes from the viewpoint of the celebrity, inserting at every opportunity a mention of her successful run in stage productions of *Hello, Dolly*. Yet it is also evident that Bailey's observations in her subsequent books come from a more privileged status; with her tough upbringing already addressed in her first book, she can write about more general topics and assume a more ingratiating tone toward her readership. Addressing her audience as her "children" (59), *Talking to Myself* surveys in broad terms the social problems of the day—war, racism, drug abuse, the "Generation Gap"—as Bailey offers familiar bromides by urging self-restraint and national and global unity.

Bailey published *Talking to Myself* at a time when autobiographies by African American women entertainers began to openly address controversial political topics, race relations in particular. In Lena Horne's 1965 autobiography, she detailed her involvement in the civil rights movement, including a meeting/photo opportunity with Attorney General Robert Kennedy that became a contentious discussion on equal opportunities for African Americans. The charged subject matter and tone of Eartha

Kitt's second autobiography served as an extension of her heated debate with Lady Bird Johnson at a 1968 White House luncheon. Ignoring all surrounding social niceties, Kitt bluntly asked the First Lady to justify the Vietnam War including the disproportional burden shouldered by African American soldiers and their families (see Dreher 109–118). Both Horne and Kitt rejected the superficial trappings of stardom and their *ingénue* pasts and utilized the medium of popular autobiography to assume a more substantive identity, one eager to enter the dialogue on race in America.

For her part, Bailey delivers her more conciliatory politics with a weirdly impersonal discursive tone. Reminiscent of Handy in the train-car scene, Bailey on her travels politely but forcefully upbraids a series of rude strangers for racist and/or sexist assumptions and reminds them of their common humanity and shared citizenship. In every case, the strangers come away humbled, and usually apologetic. Yet by not “naming names,” and presenting these charged encounters as glib anecdotes—the kind related on a talk-show panel or between songs at a cabaret appearance—Bailey weakens the force of her arguments. Even her 1976 book, which reflects traces of a post-Watergate cynicism, asks her readers to purge themselves of the past and recast themselves in the image of children, re-visioning the nation based on its original principles. *Hurry Up, America, and Spit!* begins with Bailey returning to her hometown of Washington, D.C. This trope of pilgrimage to the nation's capital, theorized by Lauren Berlant, symbolizes civic idealism, where the public—represented by one citizen or an army of marchers—calls upon the conscience of the

power elite, demands acknowledgement, accountability, and action, and usually achieves their goals. Yet, on her visit, Bailey sticks to her program of self-containment; one of the last of the discrete diary-type entries in *Hurry Up, America* is a reprint of a telegram from new president Gerald Ford, thanking her for an evening's entertainment at the White House and renewing her appointment as the "Ambassador of Love" (88). After lamenting America's social ills in print, Bailey, while in the company of the president, chooses to present him with nothing more than a song and dance. Her story's palliative ending disappoints the reader looking for catharsis or a significant change in Bailey's civic thinking. Ultimately, Bailey's autobiographical tetralogy reads not so much as a jeremiad against the shortcomings of the nation than as a stern but loving scolding.

NINA SIMONE – *I PUT A SPELL ON YOU*

By contrast, very little about Nina Simone's autobiography *I Put a Spell on You* could be considered conciliatory. Written during a long period of expatriation from the United States, her 1993 autobiography represents a rare example of an African American musician questioning the very foundations of citizenship and penning a book that refuses to assume a centripetal stance that affirms nationhood. In the first chapter of her autobiography, Simone (born Eunice Waymon) details the history of her hometown of Tryon, North Carolina, beginning with the lynching of an Indian chief in the 1850s. Her evocation of an event outside of her historical moment

and lineage signals her intentions to write beyond the parameters of the celebrity autobiography and to reject a narrative of advancement and reconciliation.

A former resort town, the Tryon of the 1930s and 1940s barely obscured segregation with a unique geographic and cultural layout of black and white communities. Tryon was not bisected by one single color line, Simone recalls, but rather marked by “a series of circles around the center with blacks and whites living in these circles. And a few blacks, a few, lived almost in the center, almost in the white areas. It was a checkerboard type of living, with areas that were totally white and a few pockets of blacks” (4). Amid this geographic fluidity, Simone’s parents enjoyed a degree of prominence. The small businesses her father owned, including a dry cleaner and barbershop, put him into contact with his white neighbors during business hours, while her mother led revival meetings as a Methodist minister. Beginning her study of piano almost from infancy, Simone developed part of her signature style by accompanying her mother’s services; she complemented the congregation’s impassioned singing with heavy bass chords, a trait she would carry on through her professional career. A prominent white woman in town heard her play at a church service at the age of six and promptly paid for her first year of formal piano lessons. Her piano teacher, an Englishwoman named Muriel Massinovitch, dubbed “Miz Mazzy” by Simone, fostered her development. Decades after the fact, Simone describes Miz Mazzy’s house in sharp, affectionate detail as a site of artistic sanctuary. The well-tuned grand piano in Miz Mazzy’s home represents a quantum

leap forward from the rickety uprights Simone played in revival tents and symbolizes the rewards that lay ahead if she channels her ambitions.

Miz Mazzy encouraged the young Simone's stated ambition to be the first female African-American concert pianist.²⁰ Through this tutelage, Simone acquired musicianship: a sense of empowering literacy encompassing the ability to read and artistically interpret music as well as an appreciation of culture in the wider world. Her classical training encompassed the technical elements of musicianship and its accompanying behavior, including posture, bowing, and other remnants of court musicianship. When the benefactor's money ran out at the end of the year, Miz Mazzy established a charitable fund in Tryon. Publicized by the local newspaper,

²⁰ The issue of who qualifies as the first African-American concert pianist is a vexing one. Obviously, racial barriers excluded qualified musicians from their proper performance situations, and, as Lawrence Levine points out in his *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, concert performances freely mixed the classical with the popular, following the eclectic tastes of the American concertgoing public, so the definition of a "concert pianist" has changed greatly over time. Thomas Wiggins, an autistic African American musician widely known in the United States from the 1860s to 1880s as "Blind Tom," appears to have had amazing skills as a mimic and possessed a knack for composing impressionistic piano pieces, but the Barnumesque hype that sold his talents to the public precluded any objective judgment of his musicianship. In the first book-length compendium of African American musical accomplishments, *Music and Some Highly Musical People*, published in 1881, James M. Trotter profiled several pioneers, including Samuel W. Jamieson, a graduate of the Boston Conservatory who toured to great acclaim, and Rachel Washington, a New England Conservatory graduate who pursued music education rather than a career as a soloist. By the time Simone moved north for intensive classical-music training, Hazel Harrison, Natalie Hinderas, and Philippa Schuyler had already moved through the conservatory system and begun performing professionally (Cohodas, *Princess* 41). Though she became prominent as a popular musician, Dorothy Donegan should also be credited as a precursor to Simone, as she regularly blended gospel and classical, beginning in the 1940s.

black and white citizens alike contributed to the Eunice Waymon Fund. When Simone writes in her memoirs of the “community expectations on my shoulders” as a musical prodigy, she speaks of “community” in the singular, with no mention of race. But the beneficence of the Fund also triggers a sense of fractured identity: she is both the town’s adopted gifted child and its charitable case, both Eunice Waymon the musician and, in her words, “Mrs. Massinovitch’s little girl” (24).

In her research, Simone biographer Nadine Cohodas finds evidence that the “Eunice Waymon Fund” was largely an embellishment created by Simone as she dictated her autobiography. Rather than Tryon uniting to pay for Eunice Waymon’s transformative piano lessons, the “Fund” was likely limited to donations by two prominent white women in the town (Cohodas, *Princess* 36). If true, Simone’s “misremembered” anecdote represents an interesting trade-off, as her self-aggrandizement also lifts the reader’s estimation of her racially separate and unequal community. In both the autobiographical and the biographical accounts, Simone’s prodigious musicianship insulates her from the typical expressions of Jim Crow. Unlike past generations of black intellectuals, Simone never has to resort to “stealing” knowledge or engaging in trickery to attain access to culture. Simone represents her earliest musical education as unique; in a geographically isolated town without strict segregation or openly oppressive white domination, Simone has the added advantage of a sympathetic teacher who offers her charge the same attention and tutelage as any comparably talented student.

However, her insulation from Jim Crow cannot be absolute. Her primal moment of race occurs at the age of eight at her classical debut in Tryon's town hall. In Simone's recollection, her parents are ushered out of the front row moments before the performance to make room for white patrons. Simone refuses to play until her parents are returned to their proper seats. Her audacity causes many in the auditorium to laugh at the little girl, but her parents are eventually reseated in their rightful place at the front of the hall. While her talent has taken her beyond the color line as it is mapped out, Simone learns all at once—in a very public arena—about the invasiveness of *de jure* segregation and class consciousness on her development. If the private practice space provided by Muriel Massinovitch resists constructed notions of “black” and “white,” and the church space overseen by Simone's mother exists as a “safely” segregated one free of outside surveillance, the more public cultural space replicates the existing power structure. This unanticipated regression to a stark artist-patron dyad virtually erases the assistance and goodwill previously offered to the young artist. In contrast to the prevailing myth surrounding the “crossing the tracks” trope, Simone pays dearly for her boundary crossing, coming away from her tutelage all too aware of her region's hegemonic reach.

In many ways, the recital dramatizes a break with the family, who can neither prevent nor adequately address the injustice she has just witnessed. The Waymons' acceptance of the crude, ill-timed gesture represents a larger working-class internalization of hegemony, relatable to their children only in broad, unsatisfying terms. “Most parents were reticent,” Jennifer Ritterhouse writes, “and very few were

‘easy’ or ‘natural’ when it came to talking about race; the ‘usual response’ to children’s inevitable questions was ‘I don’t know, that’s just the way it is’” (101). Aside from the mysteries of “separate but equal” societies, Simone’s earliest musical endeavors are already complicated by issues of power and the demands of professionalism: wide (if sometimes patronizing) approval from whites, alienation from her working-class parents, and the dilemma of musical authenticity that comes with crossover.

Incidents like this underscore and remind us how contested performance space was in the changing South. Highly publicized confrontations—like the Daughters of the American Revolution’s refusal to have Marian Anderson sing at Washington D.C.’s Constitution Hall in 1939 or the 1956 onstage attack on Nat “King” Cole by five members of an Alabama White Citizens’ Council (with the racially moderate governor in attendance)—demonstrated that African American performers were subject to arbitrary and sometimes violent expressions of Jim Crow, despite—or perhaps because of—a performer’s classical training or crossover popularity. The rise of African Americans to the “legitimate” concert stage and their presentation by white promoters as world-class concert performers often stupefied the enforcers of Jim Crow. In her autobiography, Marian Anderson recounted how many southern cities insistent on strict segregation in the realm of popular entertainment had no comparable restrictions in place for classical performances, and thus allowed her to integrate numerous concert halls and civic auditoriums. This artistic “loophole” may

well have emboldened Simone as she strived for a spot in a conservatory and a place on the concert stage.

Regardless of musical genre, African Americans who performed either for integrated or segregated, “whites only” audiences had to negotiate the boundaries of their performances and be constantly vigilant of their audiences. Simultaneously, white audiences had to negotiate and harmonize their reception of a performance with the past practices of Jim Crow. Undoubtedly, many of the white concertgoers who tacitly accepted the removal of Simone’s parents from the front row were also potential contributors to the Eunice Waymon Fund, and saw little contradiction between, on one hand, the relaxing of Jim Crow that encouraged Simone to publicly perform classical music and, on the other, the segregationist obsession with who sits where.

After the town hall recital, Miz Mazzy and Simone’s mother agreed to keep Nina/Eunice’s concert-pianist ambitions alive by sending her to a private academy fifteen miles out of town not subject to public-school segregation laws. This environment, if not completely insulated from racism, at least granted Simone enough space to undertake her most intense study yet. In her memoirs, Simone recalls awakening at four A.M. daily to practice piano, playing a total of five hours a day. Simone’s dedication was rewarded by valedictorian honors and a scholarship to a summer program at Julliard, funded by residents of Tryon. Simone’s one-year scholarship serves as a well meaning but ultimately tragic gesture, a stark reminder that a southern community in the 1940s could buck segregation as both law and

custom, but only in exceptional circumstances and only within the city limits. Any further gesture must conform to the hegemony of Jim Crow. And as the humiliating incident at her recital proves, even prodigies could not evade the watchful eye of racism.

The recital scene in *I Put a Spell on You* shares striking similarities to one in James Weldon Johnson's novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*. The protagonist, a light-skinned black man whose father is a white southern aristocrat, is kept cloistered from the outside world and race consciousness by virtue of his classical-music talent. Upon his mother's death, the town creates a college fund for him and arranges a public recital. The benefit concert at which he performs generates enough money for either one year at Harvard or four years at Atlanta University. For all its inherent generosity, the town's gift comes with the unspoken understanding that they can offer an African American, even one with his exceptional talent and ambition, no more. The protagonist, like the prototypical modernist hero, like Simone in her later career, begins his exile from that moment.

After the recital, Nina must see herself through a Du Boisian veil, through the eyes of whites, and anticipate hostility at every turn. Her self-image is further divided by her status as a woman, as the child of the working class, and as a modernist. Onstage, Simone becomes the embodiment of Langston Hughes's doomed "genius child" and the deeply disillusioned protagonist at the conclusion of Wright's *Black Boy*. Alice Walker's postmortem of Wright's decisive break with American culture and subsequent expatriation applies equally well to Simone: "The strain of creation

and constant exposure to petty insults and legally encouraged humiliations proved too great” (482). Simone’s emerging artistic sensibility and social maturity forces her to fight tradition on two fronts, hybridizing a self-created, boundary-crossing musical style while being denied opportunities an artist of her caliber deserves. Music functions in *I Put a Spell on You*, as it does in Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, as a means of social promotion, and a means of self-improvement unimaginable in a public-education system grounded in the inequality of Jim Crow (Angelou 230; Alabi 88).

But such ambition comes with a cost. As was the case with Wright and Angelou, Simone’s talent virtually expelled her from the South. Even a figure as successful and industrious as W.C. Handy warned African Americans at midcentury against reaching too high or expecting too much in the public arena. In a 1952 *Time* article, Handy suggested the blues and social equality were at odds, lamenting that organizations like the NAACP “are taking the blues away from us...They are leading the American Negro away from his real heritage into a bog of pretense and insincerity...Too many Negroes today are busy singing and talking five or six languages and turning up their noses at the blues” (“People” 39). After reading about Handy’s tenacious pursuit of citizenship in *Father of the Blues*, one is amazed to find him, as an elder statesman, essentially call for an end to African Americans’ artistic aspirations and claim that the “heritage” afforded African Americans places unwritten yet strict limitations on their creative pursuits.

Through the 1950s, Simone pressed on with her ambitions to become the first African American concert pianist. The burgeoning civil rights movement provided her with encouragement by breaking with history and the “go-slow” philosophy of social advancement; Marian Anderson, Rosa Parks, and Lorraine Hansberry, among many others exemplified unassailably dignified approaches to combating segregation and second-class citizenship. Simone herself completed one year at Juilliard, but a lack of money ended her classical-music tutelage. Not wishing her parents or teachers to discover her night job playing in clubs around Philadelphia and Atlantic City, she adopted the stage name Nina Simone. With a new professional identity, Simone “found her sound,” a blending of gospel (displayed by her percussive use of the left hand in her bass lines) and classical (a dexterous use of the right hand). Simone achieved success across genre lines, and appeals to jazz, pop, and folk fans alike.

According to Simone, motherhood and friendships with African American intellectuals like Lorraine Hansberry, James Baldwin, and Stokely Carmichael compelled her to reconsider her apathy toward politics and become involved in the civil rights movement. Her turn toward activism represented a decisive break from her family’s tradition and faith in quiet upward mobility. Simone writes, “The Waymon way was to turn away from prejudice and to live your life as best you could, as if acknowledging the existence of racism was some kind of defeat” (86). The philosophy by which the Waymon family lived—a Washingtonian program to move forward incrementally through hard labor and avoidance of confrontational politics—

cannot serve Simone. Ultimately, her talent does more than offer commercial advantages; it moves her philosophically beyond the outmoded stance of Washingtonian accommodation.

However, Simone admitted that her paramount concern in the early 1960s was furthering her career. “Through the early sixties,” Simone writes, “I went from being a New York name to a national star and then on to international fame” (82). Yet Simone and her co-author are not completely forthcoming in their book about her involvement in civil-rights benefits. Brian Ward reveals that while Simone and her husband and manager Andy Stroud did accept a two-thirds reduced rate for an appearance at New York’s Westbury Music Fair in support of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1964, her appearance fee of \$1000 (plus expenses) was nearly twice what the organization ultimately grossed from the event (308). Writing retrospectively in the early 1990s, after the civil rights movement had been celebrated, romanticized, and enshrined by official culture, Simone engaged in extensive revisionism regarding her direct political involvement. Simone relates how her grief at the murder of Medgar Evers led her to pen the uncompromising song of protest “Mississippi Goddam,” which in turn energized front-line activists working in Evers’s wake. Likewise, her composition “To Be Young, Gifted and Black” built upon the work of Lorraine Hansberry to give the burgeoning black-pride movement a rallying cry. Her music did serve as an important aural document of the times, but in her recollections Simone arguably overstates her role in effecting social change. Simone writes, “My friends in SNCC told me that when they got started and had their

meetings to discuss strategy...there would always be Nina Simone records in whoever's house the meeting was held in" (95). Through this anecdote, Simone declares herself an activist by proxy. Read in context with autobiographies by Anne Moody, John Lewis, and dozens of others whose tangible roles in the movement meant personal sacrifice and the threat of grave injury or death, Simone's claims of centrality in the civil rights struggle appears self-aggrandizing and historically inaccurate. Though the blurb on the back cover of the paperback edition of *I Put a Spell on You* attests that Simone's social consciousness "thrust her beyond international stardom into the center of activism," it is important to distinguish between the incidental uses of Simone's music in the movement and the type of social conscience and direct activism tens of thousands of Americans felt compelled to participate in during the era.

Simone's hybrid musical style employed the form of the art song and the concert setting, both the province of "Refinement," in a subversive way. (As Simone's fame grew, especially in Europe, her fiery renditions of songs like "To Be Young, Gifted and Black" in the world's finest concert halls before a well-dressed, affluent audience became almost commonplace.) *I Put a Spell on You* continues a similar disjunction: whereas we expect an autobiography to be an orderly, brisk examination of a life, Simone's narration is brimming with significant omissions, contradictions, and passages that sear with raw hurt. Simone's narrative resembles what Sacvan Bercovitch terms the "anti-jeremiad": "the denunciation of all ideals, sacred and secular, on the grounds that America is a lie" (191). Following Paul

Gilroy, Josh Kun runs down the typical attributes of the Black Atlantic musician: an African American intellectual, who has spent considerable time in Europe and Africa, “engaged in a discourse of race that skirted ethnic absolutism and racial particularity [in order to] seek out alternate experiences of race and nation, discover ‘cultural mutation’ and restless (dis)continuity...” (146). This definition applies particularly well to Simone’s centrifugal form of discourse; by her own admission, her experiences have alienated her from her region and her nation. Simultaneously, the civil rights movement that energized her music has largely faded from public view, and her popularity in the United States has diminished, leaving her at loose ends.

Like African American intellectuals ranging from Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois and James Baldwin to performers like Josephine Baker, Sidney Bechet, and Dexter Gordon, Simone left the United States and approached Europe as, in Ann Douglas’s apt phrase, “a court of higher appeal” (330). But, as her autobiography indicates, Simone’s multiple political and social disappointments during her expatriation weighed her down. Though she emigrated from Barbados to Liberia, then Switzerland, France, and the Netherlands, Simone could find no second home, no place of respite or artistic revitalization. Although Simone had accomplished in her music what James Weldon Johnson’s *Ex-Coloured Man* could not—forging a personally distinctive synthesis of African American and European music—such hybridization did not open up to her a stable or cohesive identity (such as “citizen of the world”). Rather than consider Simone within the binaries of citizen and exile or, worse, judge her to be a “failed” citizen of one country, perhaps Simone’s journey

should be considered in light of Gilroy's more recent scholarship on diaspora.

Reading Simone as a diasporic subject, we can accept that the indeterminacy of her narrative represents the conflicting and at times contradictory expectations she faced in the United States (both the rural South and the northern city), Africa, and Europe and the resulting difficulty in negotiating a stable identity that transcends our preoccupation with nationhood and belonging (see L. Anderson 116).

Musician and critic Ben Sidran points out the inherent affirmation at the heart of African American music: even the most doleful-sounding blues melodies can be accompanied by lyrics expressing optimism; favorite "floating" lyrics that recur from song to song include "it's going to be all right," "the sun's gonna shine in my back door someday," and "I'm sitting on top of the world" (35). But at the end of her own blues journey, Nina Simone rejected the consolations of this blues philosophy. Simone expressed her dissatisfaction with the United States synchronically; past events, ranging from her rejection by the classical-music establishment to estrangement from her father still linger in the present without resolution, exerting something akin to trauma and informing her protest against the status quo. As expressed in her centrifugal, stateless memoirs, optimistic faith in any amorphous social change, especially under the umbrella of "progress," seems impossible.

JAMES BROWN – *THE GODFATHER OF SOUL*

The core values of the civil rights movement propounded by Nina Simone and her contemporaries were not markedly different from those of mainstream American

society, yet they were not interchangeable (see Keil 164–190). Alongside African American political, social, and religious leaders, soul and jazz musicians began to be looked upon as carriers of an emerging cultural force. “They were a priestly caste,” Paul Gilroy writes, “guarding the spirit in the dark which represented a political community’s sense of its history. These singers did not simply provide a sound-track for the political actions of their soul sisters and brothers. They were mandated to speak on behalf of the community in elaborate, celebratory, ritual performances” (*Ain’t* 177). The music and expression of the movement were marked by an articulated ideology of uplift, most evident in gospel and, later, soul. The exhortation “you can make it if you try,” voiced literally by Sly and the Family Stone, predated by the artistry and example of Sam Cooke and Aretha Franklin, reiterated in the work of James Brown and Curtis Mayfield, and demonstrated by the Motown and Stax song factories, undergirded the outlook of the civil-rights generation. This “soul” aesthetic refined the blues’ outlook on life, its musical sophistication reinforcing lyrics that could transcend the often trite sentiments of the popular song to make unambiguous demands for respect and equality. Soul citizenship shared a symbiotic relationship with the civil rights movement: musically it updated the movement’s soundtrack of gospel and spirituals while philosophically bringing the message of Martin Luther King Jr.’s sermons to the AM radio airwaves (see Guralnick, *Dream* 512). In the upwardly mobile, finessed world of 1960s urban soul, citizenship for African Americans—suggested by the marketing tag Motown printed on millions of 45-rpm singles, “The Sound of Young America”—was neither a vague hope for

eventual assimilation nor a request to a higher power, but an achievable dream, and the fulfillment of a divine covenant.

As the era's most dynamic soul performer and self-proclaimed "Soul Brother #1", James Brown relates in his life story the burdens of personifying this struggle. Curiously, though, Brown chose to follow more generic discursive conventions, some of which seem unsuitable for a person of his stature. The first paragraph in James Brown and Bruce Tucker's *Godfather of Soul* (1986) is reminiscent of the calculated-to-shock introductions in *His Eye Is on the Sparrow* and *Lady Sings the Blues*: "I wasn't supposed to be James. I wasn't supposed to be Brown. And I wasn't supposed to be alive" (1). Believed to be stillborn, Brown was resuscitated from the brink of death by an aunt. When he was four, his mother abandoned him, while his father often left young James to fend for himself when he worked for days at a time at a turpentine camp. At the age of five, James was sent to live with a great-aunt, who ran a boardinghouse/brothel/moonshine still in Augusta, Georgia. There, he learned the ins and outs of an underground economy and the ways of the "hustler," the low-level entrepreneur who parlayed multiple professions, legal and otherwise, for personal gain. To earn his keep in his aunt's chaotic household, young James Brown delivered groceries, picked cotton and peanuts in season, and led soldiers on leave from a nearby army base to the brothel. He and a cousin ran errands (including bootlegging) and danced for servicemen for tips. By Brown's own account, he learned showmanship while working as a shoeshine boy in front of a local radio

station, entertaining and flattering his white customers in hopes of garnering a few extra cents.

This self-conception became the fixed image for Brown once he attained stardom: a poor boy risking exhaustion, ridicule, and retribution to please the paying customer and make his way in the world. Brown clung to this image as a crucial part of his origin myth, as indicated by a 2002 *New Yorker* profile. In the interview, Brown perpetuated a self- image as a boy benefactor, paying off his guardian aunt's rent for the month with the money he made buck-dancing for servicemen. Brown represented his younger, poorer self as preternaturally self-disciplined, determined enough to pull himself out of privation and a life of petty crime (Gourevitch 248).

With formal musical training well out of his reach, the aspiring musician picked up influences from a variety of sources. A local preacher named Daddy Grace led ring shouts and demonstrated how to energize a crowd. (Brown recalled that Daddy Grace wore a cape in his services, offering a hint as to where Brown picked up one of his iconic stage maneuvers.) From found instruments (a harmonica and an abandoned pump organ), Brown learned to play music by ear. In exchange for cleaning their vestibule, a church allowed Brown use of their piano, while he refined his singing through gospel harmonizing. Brown asserted he learned guitar from a bluesman named Tampa Red (a difficult claim to prove, as Brown's guitar playing went unrecorded).²¹ In his rare moments of leisure, Brown picked up on the

²¹ This "Tampa Red" was almost certainly not the best-known musician who recorded under that name, the blues guitar player born Hudson Woodridge in 1904, who moved to Chicago to pursue a recording career in the 1920s, long before James Brown's birth in 1933. The "Tampa Red" recalled by

relentless rhythms of “jump swing,” both on records and in film appearances by popular artists like Louis Jordan. Lacking any obvious opportunities for uplift, Brown latched onto music as a survival mechanism, a means to make money and alleviate hard times.

At the same time, Brown resorted to less artistic means of “getting over,” due to his family’s extreme poverty. Ashamed of being sent home from school for his ragged clothes, Brown stole clothes and broke into cars, justifying his thefts by “redistributing the wealth” to other poor black boys (29). Perhaps inevitably, Brown was arrested at the age of fifteen and served over three years in prison. While incarcerated, Brown continued his hustling ways, earning early release from the parole board with his gospel singing and inventive use of self-made instruments.

Brown’s knack of ingratiating himself with southern whites (reminiscent on the surface of young W.C. Handy’s first sojourn to Chicago), also leads him into conflicts that resemble nothing less than scenes from Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. According to Brown, three white men draining a ditch forced young Brown to stand in a pool of water and touch an electric air compressor. As a result, Brown immediately lost consciousness and barely escaped death by electrocution (24). In other cases, Brown voluntarily engaged in racial spectacle. Considering boxing as a

Brown was almost certainly a different musician who appropriated the nickname. As the example of two successive bluesmen who found fame under the name “Sonny Boy Williamson” and the prevalence of stage names brazenly appropriated from elder musicians (from “Little Howlin’ Wolf” to Janis Martin, “The Female Elvis”) shows, local musicians in the South were quick to adopt other musicians’ performing personae once their “models” had left the scene.

career/escape plan, Brown entered into numerous battle royals in Georgia. Well established “entertainments” in the South, battle royals were public spectacles, staged in municipally owned venues like Augusta’s Bell Auditorium and Atlanta’s Auditorium (in one instance, on the undercard of a 1918 Jack Dempsey fight), and in private showings, often connected to all-male “smokers” sponsored by Augusta’s golf elite. Journalist Curt Sampson describes one such exhibition from the 1930s in a scene as chilling as anything Ellison imagined in *Invisible Man*:

The battle begins. Six blindfolded black boys who have been recruited from “the Terry”—Augusta’s Negro territory—are shoved into the ring, their hands encased in boxing gloves. Sometimes one hand is tied behind each warrior’s back, to prevent any defensive jabbing. Someone hits a brass bell with a ball peen hammer and the combatants start throwing haymakers. They hit air, ring ropes, ring posts, and each other. Last one standing wins. [...] The white men laugh and gamble and watch the black boys beat the shit out of each other. (43–44)

Staged acts of sadism in the Jim Crow South, from the battle royal to the public lynching, were accompanied by a crowd of white citizens who participated by “looking on,” their notions of racial superiority artificially reinforced by the animalistic scene (see Hale 201). In his recollections, Brown and his co-author mount a weak defense of the participation in battle royals, by claiming, “It sounds brutal, but a battle royal is really comedy. I’d be out there stumbling around,

swinging wild, and hearing the people laughing. I didn't know I was being exploited; all I knew was that I was getting paid a dollar and having fun" (Brown with Tucker 27). Brown's rationalization may be an effort to deflect pity or to distinguish himself from the other brawlers (the character type Ellison refers to as "yokels" in his depiction). From works of overt social comment, like *Black Boy* and *Invisible Man*, we have both firsthand testimony and literary dramatizations of southern white men's fascination with black-on-black violence. We are less likely to expect to encounter such descriptions in an autobiography by a successful celebrity, especially one who invoked "the American Dream" as incessantly as James Brown. The insistence on the part of Brown and his co-author to paint the scene as just another formative learning experience defies belief.

By comparison, years of grueling one-nighters across the South presented fewer threats. Brown and his backing group worked their way up through constant touring, even if it meant occasional capitulation to segregation; they played white fraternity parties, segregated movie theatres, and whites-only restaurants to gain a local following (64–66). Gambling on crossover success, Brown paid \$5,700 of his own money to record *Live at the Apollo* in 1962, an audio document of his explosive live show, recorded at the premier venue for African American entertainment (133). Despite little mainstream-radio play, the *Apollo* album reached young white southerners seeking an alternative to the diluted versions of rhythm and blues then dominating the pop charts. Attempting to meet his new audience halfway, Brown adapted his onstage repertoire to include ballads and mainstream pop numbers, only

to realize that his new audience expected to hear gritty soul music and experience the full intensity of Brown's rhythm-and-blues revue. Among African Americans who had migrated north, Brown personified both the material success that urbanism promised and what Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., following Craig Werner, terms "the Afro-Modernism of the moment" (148). "James Brown ruled the private and public cultural spaces of black Chicago," Ramsey recalls. "You heard him constantly on the radio, at the block party, in roller rinks, homes, clubs, and stores. Everywhere" (149). By the time the *Chicago Defender* profiled Brown in June 1964, all the elements of his backstory were in place: to his interviewer, Brown framed the story of singing and dancing for change as his origin myth, referring to his father as a failed musician (in part to emphasize his own unlikely success), recalling his hard work as a young man, and representing himself as a superior athlete but reluctant singer, as if to separate himself from the seedier aspects of show business (Dolin 10).

Brown's social advancement mirrored the aspirations and accomplishments of the larger civil rights movement. Even before the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Bill outlawing segregation in public spaces, Brown insisted on desegregated shows when performing in Augusta and Atlanta, a reversal of the humiliations he suffered at similar venues during the battles royal. His draw as a performer, along with his popularity with young southerners both black and white, forced promoters to comply. He integrated a white neighborhood in Augusta despite neighbors' objections (Brown with Tucker 208). To acknowledge his success, Augusta declared a special "James Brown Day" in 1969 (204). At one point, Brown owned three of the five black-

owned radio stations in the United States, a significant accomplishment, especially during the years when soul prevailed as the dominant commercial force in American music (178–179). In a heavily symbolic gesture, Brown purchased the same Augusta radio station where he once shined shoes on the sidewalk. However, Brown's narrative still reflects ambivalence toward more direct activism. At a lunch counter in the Deep South, "Soul Brother #1" and his band turned and ran when Freedom Riders arrived to integrate the establishment, for fear they would be involved in a confrontation between the protestors and the police (126). Candidly, Brown admits in his account he never marched for civil rights, or even voted (171).

At the height of his fame, poised to make a major crossover into the white-dominated mainstream, Brown's entrepreneurial spirit took strange turns. Establishing James Brown Productions, Brown's idiosyncrasies shaped the working environment of his musicians and staff. Brown's road manager Alan Leeds ruefully recalls, "Working there proved to be just short of joining a cult. Nonperformers were expected to dress in conservative business suits and ties. Brown insisted that we all refer to each other by surname... We were liable to be fined for the smallest of infractions" (J. Fox 170). Brown also micromanaged his band on stage, displaying an obsession with band members' care of their uniforms and fining his players for missed musical cues and/or dance steps. Musician Fred Wesley fills out an extensive autobiography of his own with a litany of complaints against Brown's mercurial nature and obsession with detail. As a businessman, Brown seems to have adopted all

the eccentricities of moguls like Henry Ford and Howard Hughes but relatively little of their business acumen.

Rather than follow the example of W.C. Handy and invest in his own music—through publishing or ownership of record labels and recording studios—Brown followed the way of the street hustler. Dissatisfied by the weak promotional efforts on his behalf by the small independent King record label, Brown broke his exclusive recording contract and sold his service to a rival label, Smash, with more clout in the Top Forty marketplace (C. Rose 35). Pitting one company against another ultimately worked out in Brown's favor, as King released him from his contract and Smash provided him with a wider audience and more creative control. Depending on your point of view, such a maneuver reads as either a morally questionable, cutthroat business practice or a rare case of an African American artist taking on the system and winning on his own terms. Unlike Handy and other forebears, Brown did not have to wait decades for artistic recognition and was able to merge his music with African Americans seeking empowerment in other mediums. Cynthia Rose writes:

No sooner had the singer broken through on American TV and radio, than he was perceived as part of an emerging cadre of strong black men...men somehow sent to heal faults in the basic American conscience. During December of '64 Dr. Martin Luther King had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. And soon many other names—Adam Clayton Powell, H. Rap Brown, Andrew Young, Julian Bond, Black Panthers Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, a prisoner named

George Jackson and a dynamic young reverend who shared his last name [Jesse Jackson]—would start to make first an impact, and then demands, on white America. (74)

Of course, a wide diversity of political philosophies and practices distinguished members of this cohort. This diversity of thought may explain Brown's own political idiosyncrasies. In the late 1960s, Brown accepted honors from the NAACP and played benefits for both Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Stokely Carmichael's more militant Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (C. Rose 55). Brown never aligned himself with any one subgroup within the civil rights movement and at times seemed utterly removed from its discourse. In the 1960s, Brown contended, entrepreneurship "was real black power" (Brown with Tucker 178). Such indeterminacy, coupled with Brown's oft-stated philosophy of hard work could be interpreted as endorsements of either the gospel of capitalism or a statement of African American self-sufficiency.

To return to *Invisible Man*, it appears that Brown, when approached by those with political capital, was incapable of the sly subversion urged by the grandfather of the novel's protagonist, and the ability to "overcome with yeses." As his autobiography reveals, Brown's opportunism invariably won out over his social conscience. Brown's individualistic (or self-centered) approach to civil rights made him an approachable figure for politicians seeking inroads to the consciences of young African Americans. In early 1968, Vice President Hubert Humphrey summoned Brown for a photo opportunity on the occasion of Brown's release of a

single that urged youths to stay in school. Soon, Humphrey and his moderate Democratic agenda won Brown's endorsement in the presidential elections. While Brown's endorsement was criticized by many as a safe choice that capitulated to status-quo politics, Humphrey's long-standing promotion of civil rights likely struck a sympathetic chord with the singer (Sullivan 109).

That April, in the wake of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, the mayors of Boston and Washington, D.C. called upon Brown to perform live televised concerts to quell rioting in their cities. Following the concerts, which resulted in a remarkable decrease in inner-city violence, Brown was invited to the White House by President Lyndon Johnson as a guest for a state dinner. Even in his prideful remembrance, the singer admitted he and the president exchanged few words: "I didn't talk to Mr. Johnson very much," Brown recalled. "He was eating a lot of food. That man was *hungry*" (Brown with Tucker 190, italics in original). Brown's formidable reputation as a leader and peacemaker even compelled Georgia's pro-segregation governor Lester Maddox to call for Brown's assistance in breaking up a riot in Augusta in 1970 (209–216). To commemorate his new standing, Brown released a single entitled "America Is My Home" in 1968. The song failed to cross over to the pop charts, while its centrist message and relatively staid arrangement had little relation to the revolutionary form and content Brown and his band were introducing to soul music.

While Brown's celebrity cachet afforded him limited access to political power, Brown and the co-authors of his two autobiographies exaggerated the extent

of his political capital. Their lengthy descriptions of meeting American politicians, coupled with photographs publicizing encounters with three U.S. presidents, clearly demonstrate that Brown perceived these meetings as his acceptance into powerful circles and acknowledgement of his hard work and dogged determination, rather than co-optation of his immense popularity among African Americans. Read in conjunction with *Invisible Man*, the reader of James Brown's authorized life stories cannot overlook the inherent opportunism of every successive presidential administration from Lyndon Johnson to George W. Bush informally aligning themselves with a popular African American celebrity of no fixed ideology. Their carefully crafted words of praise offered to Brown are as facile and patronizing as the words spoken to the Invisible Man after the battle royal. In his hubris, Brown accepts these honors as executive decrees.

The photographs of Brown with a succession of U.S. presidents take on a curious resonance in the context of the singer's heavily mediated autobiographies. On the surface, the photographs resemble the famous 1970 snapshot of Richard Nixon meeting Elvis Presley in the Oval Office of the White House. The uneasiness in the picture—due in equal parts Nixon's visible incomprehension and Presley's incongruent, flamboyant style of dress—and the irony of the meeting (Presley invited himself to the White House, asking to be deputized as a federal narcotics agent, despite his abuse of prescription drugs) make it a readymade object of camp

sensibility.²² But Brown's momentary meetings with the presidents carry a deeper significance, and much less levity. Roland Barthes's semiotic reading of the soldier of African descent saluting the French flag on the cover of *Paris Match* opens a richer vein of analysis. The magazine image in Barthes's analysis relays a surface meaning, intended by authority figures and understandable to the average viewer, namely, that France as a nation and a colonizing world power commands the respect of all under her flag, regardless of ethnicity (*Mythologies* 116). Similarly, situating James Brown next to the president of the United States attempts to convey, with little subtlety, the message that politicians are in touch with young African Americans' concerns through their contact with a successful African American in the public eye. Less superficially, this series of staged photographs in Barthes's terms "appropriate" Brown's backstory: by working hard and buying into traditional American narratives of advancement as Brown did, the tableau seems to say, one can rise out of poverty and achieve material success, notoriety, and be lauded as an exemplary citizen.

The substance of these meetings is similarly unsatisfying. While Lena Horne and Eartha Kitt transformed contrived "meet-and-greets" into opportunities to "speak truth to power" and question the federal government's commitment to social reform, Brown seems oddly removed in his encounters. Neither a subversive voice nor a truly recognized citizen, Brown seemed content to step forward when those in power need a symbol of their party's social liberality. In the series of testimonial

²² This incongruity was compounded when, in the same year as the Humphrey meeting, a leading rock critic identified Brown, with some hyperbole, as "[m]ore ... than Muhammad Ali...the Stagger Lee of his time" (Cohn 110).

appearances after the King assassination, white politicians congratulated Brown for quelling riots, not helping to improve inner-city living. Meeting those in power, Brown never referenced, as he would sporadically in his lyrics, the conditions that were an underlying factor in 1960s urban unrest: lack of jobs, poor housing, substandard education. Simply put, Brown never broke protocol.

Brown's rhetorical and symbolic silence in such situations is especially disappointing when considered in light of his music of the time. As David Brackett notes in his musicological analysis of Brown's 1970 classic "Superbad," Brown was adept in his music at a type of double-voiced discourse that played upon the racial divide. Though the lyrics of the song appear on the page to be little more than a string of non-sequiturs when read in Standard English, Brackett argues, the sound of Brown enunciating those words, coupled with the subversion of the words themselves ("Superbad" = "superior"), demonstrate how Black English can upend and re-code discourse (121–123). However, Brown in his "official" capacities as public figure and author too often resorts to worn homilies and monologic discourse. The aesthetic rule-breaking and subversive troping exemplified by "Superbad" rarely comes to the fore in Brown's collaborative life writing.

Ultimately, as James Brown and his co-authors unwittingly relate it, his story is one of thwarted citizenship, where his faithful adoption of the culture's core values produces relatively few rewards. Especially as someone in the public arena for decades, Brown seemed curiously unable to build up a defensive "shell" in the face of acclaim or a means through which he could channel his dissatisfaction with an

unequal society. Brown's unswerving civic faith, his willingness to engage in spectacle (whether it was a battle royal or a photo opportunity), and fixation on his narrative of hard work and advancement proved to be part of his downfall. Brown published the first of his two memoirs in the mid-1980s, a period where his music and cultural influence was in decline, his business interests had collapsed, and where his public image suffered irreversible damage due to drug and spousal-abuse arrests. James Brown's insistence that his "American Dream has been fulfilled" reads as a sad case of false consciousness (265). Commercially marginalized and spurned by the public figures who once sought his sanction, Brown suffered much the same alienation as Nina Simone, but seemed far less reflective of that fact or its consequences. Though intended as a well-produced "soul" variation of the self-made-man theme, *Godfather of the Soul* reads more compellingly—and convincingly—as a first-person American tragedy.

CONCLUSION

In the mid-1960s, amid the full flowering of the civil rights movement and a multiplicity of African American musical styles, Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka) summarized the journey that musicians had taken in almost four centuries: "American Negro music from its inception moved logically and powerfully out of a fusion between African musical tradition and the American experience... It is indeed, a chronicler of the Negro's movement, from African slave to American slave, from Freedman to Citizen" (*Home* 107). W.C. Handy's *Father of the Blues*, taken by

itself, goes a long way toward affirming Jones/Baraka's premise. Handy's book begins the ongoing exploration of a national character related by southern African American musicians through the autobiographical medium. Utilizing Benjamin Franklin's success narrative, the artisanal autobiography, and the slave narrative as templates, southern African American musicians consciously write their life stories as a journey toward equal citizenship, rejecting subaltern status. Like Franklin before him, Handy establishes his claim to citizenship through reading, writing and publishing. In stories that read as Franklinesque parables, artisanal description, and narratives of freedoms won, Handy relates explicitly how, through the printed word, he became a citizen recognized by the dominant society, and implicitly how he assimilated into insider status through both art and commerce.

Through these works, we detect the fascinating progression from "The Memphis Blues" to "Mississippi Goddam," where music explicitly served as a means of uplift and affirmation for African Americans during a period of uncertainty, when the encoded rights of citizens and their lived social reality held little in common. Pursuing their rightful place in public life through entrepreneurship (Handy, Willie Dixon, James Brown), education (Willie Ruff, Nina Simone), or unapologetic overtures to popular musical tastes (Handy, Pearl Bailey), African American musicians of the early to mid-twentieth century found novel ways to transcend cultural barriers and become authorized to present their life stories as emblematic American stories. Through their descriptions, we come to appreciate their journeys

toward prominence, but more importantly come away with the notion that citizenship can be —and should be—a creative act.

CHAPTER III

IN PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

In 2002, Colonial Williamsburg, the United States' largest living-history museum, overhauled its main visitors' center, both aesthetically and thematically. To acclimate guests to its historical mission and to create a tangible timeline between late-eighteenth-century Anglo America and the multicultural present, the museum connected its Visitors Center to the site's Historic Area with a "Bridge to the Past," a footbridge marked by a series of Walk of Fame-type inlays sequentially commemorating key events and influential Americans from colonial times to the present day. Honored as a "Nation Maker" with a plaque situated between Henry Ford and Rosa Parks (Figure 5), Louis Armstrong's embedded tribute read:

1928

Louis Armstrong

Orphan • Trumpet Player

Set America's

Free Spirit to Music

Nineteen twenty-eight is an interesting year to single out in Armstrong's long career, as it highlights the recording of "West End Blues" and "Muggles," two early instrumental masterpieces. Yet neither song enjoyed widespread mainstream popularity, and the latter song, named after one of Armstrong's many pet names for marijuana, suggests a different kind of "free spirit" than Colonial Williamsburg ever intended. More significantly, of course, the well-intentioned tribute perpetuates the

FIGURE 5

LOUIS ARMSTRONG “NATION MAKERS” PLAQUE



Figure 5: Louis Armstrong “Nation Makers” plaque, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, Virginia, circa 2002.

myth that Armstrong struggled throughout his early life as an orphan and a ward of charity. Moreover, it characterizes Armstrong as an orphan in part to augment his accomplishments and civic virtue and enshrine him as a mainstream American “bootstrapper.”²³

²³ The myth that Armstrong was an orphan and a ward of the state continued well into the 1950s, informing Edward R. Murrow’s ponderous narration in the film tribute *Satchmo the Great* (1956) and Nat Hentoff’s liner notes to its soundtrack album. In voiceovers, Murrow sentimentalized Armstrong’s youth, asserting that he learned the trumpet in an orphanage and mentioning Mayann

But as evidenced by his self-penned memoirs *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans* (released in the U.S. in 1954, two years after its initial publication in France), Armstrong's claim to estimable American citizenship needs no such melodramatic trappings. In his autobiographical writings, the musician emerges as a formidable virtuoso of public engagement and civic thinking. Just as masterfully as he adapted traditional modes of music, Armstrong exemplifies a class of people who can creatively "play the changes" and deftly navigate through the written and unwritten rules of society, and, in the case of Jim Crow, create something palatable out of a flawed "score." Musical talent plays no small part in this status. Jacques Attali notes the fluid arrangement musicians have had with regards to their respective societies, as music reaches both the top and bottom of the social hierarchy: "[The musician] is simultaneously *musicus* and *cantor*, reproducer and prophet. If an outcast, he sees society in a political light. If accepted, he is its historian, the reflection of its deepest values" (12, italics in original).²⁴ The vast majority of popular musicians' autobiographies, written from the perspective of experience and personal accomplishment, attempt to fulfill the latter, more historical role, almost always casting past events, even the most traumatic ones, in an ultimately positive light as well as predicting a brighter future.

Armstrong only in memoriam, thus hinting that Armstrong was orphaned at a young age (Armstrong, *Satchmo the Great*).

²⁴ The categories of *musicus* and *cantor* come from Boethius's ruminations on music. Boethius prizes the work of the *musicus*, one who analyzes music philosophically, over the labors of musicians (especially traveling minstrels) and singers, or cantors (Page 74–79).

LOUIS ARMSTRONG – *SWING THAT MUSIC*

What makes *Satchmo* the first true jazz autobiography is its leitmotif of improvisation, exercised not only as a musical skill but also as a life strategy. Earlier memoirs like Handy's *Father of the Blues* narrated the musician's life in classic bootstrapping fashion, often stopping to make didactic points on its way down the straight-and-narrow path. And the first autobiography to bear Louis Armstrong's name, 1936's *Swing That Music*, continued that pattern. But the identity of *Swing That Music*'s ghostwriter remains unknown and the circumstances of its writing are rather murky. At the time of *Swing That Music*'s publication, fewer than a dozen books had been written in English on jazz; none of these were written by African Americans. Like Paul Whiteman in his skewed 1927 volume *Jazz*, no author had yet rebutted the presumption held by many white listeners that African American jazz was the product of instinct and imitation rather than conscious creation and refinement. In Gilbert Seldes's essay on "hot music" in *The Seven Lively Arts* (1924), the widely read cultural critic decreed "no negro band has yet come up to the level of the best white ones," the "best" band in question being Paul Whiteman's (Berrett, *Whiteman* 65).

The year of *Swing that Music*'s publication represented a highwater mark in jazz's crossover to the mainstream white marketplace. In 1936, Bob Crosby's formation of an all-white group playing self-conscious recreations of pre-1920s New Orleans jazz inaugurated the beginning of the Dixieland revival, a nostalgia-based music played by and for whites, founded on the music Creoles and African American

had synthesized two generations before (Blesh 343). That year's formation of the Hot Record Exchange in New York City connected members of the cult of white listeners that had formed around the first jazz records (Hamilton 159). (Wider acknowledgement of Armstrong's innovative early work would not occur until 1940, after Columbia Records' re-release of his early Hot Fives and Hot Sevens sides.) *Swing That Music* was published just as Armstrong began to fully ingratiate himself into mainstream show business. The book's release followed a period of personal and professional advancement, as he left his former manager Johnny Collins and reemerged under the effective, if heavy-handed, representation of Joe Glaser (Bergreen 387). Also in 1936, Armstrong made his feature-length motion-picture debut alongside Bing Crosby in *Pennies from Heaven* and guest-hosted for Rudy Vallee on his network radio show the following year. Armstrong's contrived life story was clearly intended to capitalize on this commercial momentum while also jumping on the swing bandwagon. A brief notice in the *Chicago Defender* announcing *Swing That Music*'s imminent publication boasted that the book culminated "a full year of hard work" by Armstrong on concert tours and in Hollywood, in which he had miraculously "found time to write a book on the much discussed subject of 'Swing Music'" (McMillan 24).

From a commercial standpoint, the publishers and ghostwriter(s) of *Swing That Music* had three constituencies to address: fans of Armstrong seeking to hear his story "in his own words," the subset of music fans interested in nostalgia for a mythic old New Orleans, and a younger set of listeners enraptured by the now commercially

dominant swing movement. From its title on down, *Swing That Music* attempted to cash in on swing as a music and dance craze and situate the thirty-five-year-old Armstrong within its youthful (not to mention segregated) borders. Much like its competing early-jazz histories, *Swing That Music* read as a white man's fantasy of the jazz world. The ghostwritten Armstrong gently guides the reader as an articulate explicator of jazz's secret language and milieu, who occasionally breaks out in "jazzy" interjections like "Yes, suh!" (26).

Surviving records suggest Armstrong's longtime manager Joe Glaser commissioned the outside writing of *Swing That Music*; no extant manuscripts or correspondence confirm Armstrong's direct involvement in the book's creation, although portions of the narrative resemble the prose style found in his contemporaneous letters (see Teachout, *Pops* 219). Advertised as a primer on swing jazz for the general public, *Swing that Music* is full of ventriloquized tributes to white musicians, from the Original Dixieland Jazz Band to Paul Whiteman to Benny Goodman, who did not share the stage with Armstrong under Jim Crow (Gerard 20). Likewise, the main text of *Swing That Music* incorrectly establishes in print Armstrong's true story, while the various textual addenda (which rival the text proper in length) blithely ignore jazz's origins in New Orleans and Armstrong's place in its historical continuum.

The task of introducing this skewed history of jazz fell to Rudy Vallee, whose megaphone-delivered love songs carried only the faintest hint of jazz. Vallee may have been chosen less for his critical faculties and negligible place in jazz history and

more for his proven record as an autobiographical commodity. The first of his three autobiographies, *Vagabond Dreams Come True*, was published in 1930 and had gone through nine printings in its first month of release (Kaye 52). Their differences in approach aside, Vallee seemed an odd choice as an appraiser of Armstrong's musical skill, as his own band eschewed brass instruments altogether in lieu of syrupy saxophones and strings (Kaye 52). While Vallee correctly credits Armstrong in his foreword for being a major influence on popular singers of the 1930s, such as Bing Crosby, Russ Colombo, and Mildred Bailey, he conspicuously omits himself from the list of performers under Satchmo's spell (Murray, *Blue Devils* 62). Professionally, a mainstream white star of the time like Vallee may have balked at promoting Armstrong at his own expense by naming him as an influence, and, consequently, an equal or superior talent.

Similarly, Vallee's rhetoric reflects a similar unease with identifying Armstrong as a social equal (assuming that Vallee wrote this brief foreword and not a ghostwriter). Beyond Vallee's odd, historically unfounded claim that he brought Armstrong to mainstream attention, the foreword seems to vacillate in the characterization of its subject.²⁵ As Christopher Harlos observes, Vallee describes Armstrong as a "good friend" before alternately delivering and withdrawing praise. Referencing his first encounter with Armstrong's trumpet playing as a Yale student

²⁵ In a claim even more outrageous than Vallee's, country-music song publisher Ralph Peer claimed that he "discovered" Armstrong by arranging to have him play on a 1930 Jimmie Rodgers recording session, five years after Armstrong began recording under his own name (Peterson 245, n. 22).

attending a “colored show,” Vallee cogently assesses his subject’s instrumental skills. In describing Armstrong’s “mastery,” Vallee identifies the elements of his virtuosity: “the unerring purity of his notes, his lip and fingering technique, and so on...” (xvi). Vallee’s use of the words “mastery” and “technique” significantly places Armstrong in the realm of traditional European musicianship, where musical sensibility is tempered by physical control and an attuned ear. In describing the singing of his “good friend” (and rival), however, Vallee relies on the tired characterization of jazz musicians as good-natured primitives. Vallee characterizes Armstrong’s singing (a term he insists on encasing in scare quotes) as “utterly mad, hoarse, inchoate, mumble-jumble.” But, Vallee assures the reader, “when you study it, you will come to see that it is beautifully timed and executed, and perceive that a subtle musical understanding and keen mind are being manifested through this seemingly incoherent expression....He is a master of his peculiar art” (xvi). In other words, patient listening and sober study by a sophisticated, detached audience can strip away the mark of the primitive from Louis Armstrong’s music and redeem the artistry hidden beneath the rough “mumble-jumble.” Vallee then goes back on his assessment by describing Armstrong and his playing as symptomatic of a culturally anarchic urban modernism. Armstrong’s “peculiar art,” Vallee decrees, results from “a chaotic, disorganized mind struggling to express itself” through “modern music” (xvi).

For all his stellar instrumental technique, Armstrong, in Vallee’s opinion, must struggle to situate his singing within acceptable boundaries. “You may say [Armstrong’s vocal style] is not singing,” Vallee writes, “that it is not beauty, that a

beautiful romantic song has been treated as a madman would treat it, and I must, perforce, agree with you" (xvi–xvii). Vallee makes no suggestion that Armstrong is synthesizing a hybrid of high- and low-culture influences or advancing jazz as a syncretic form that evolves over space and time, implying instead that Armstrong exhibits contradictory traits of the primitive and modern. Unwilling to situate Armstrong firmly in either camp, Vallee assigns him some of the least desirable attributes of both, introducing Armstrong to the reading audience as an "accidental" creator without self-consciousness as well as a modern-day neurotic, whose art flirts with nervous energy and "madness" (see Harlos 157). In a book that putatively belongs to Armstrong, Vallee's patronizing tone and amateur psychology disassociate the elements of the musician's persona, alienating, rather than drawing in, Armstrong's readership.

As if Armstrong needed to be further removed from the text that bears his name, a paratext-driven "Part Two" follows Armstrong's fictionalized narration, consisting of a "Glossary of Swing Terms" and a dry, musical analysis of early jazz by Horace Gerlach, a British musician who had written musical arrangements for Armstrong's short-lived big band. Gerlach's glossary of jazz terminology awkwardly juxtaposes idioms that have since entered the common vernacular—"jam session," "sitting in," "woodshed"—with inexplicable terms like "coffee-and-cake" (a low-paying session) and "screwball" (wild, swinging music) that either quickly fell out of favor with musicians or were wholly made up for the occasion.

While more attentive to the nuances of Armstrong's art than Vallee's patronizing introduction, Gerlach's addenda betrays a deep-seated cultural anxiety among the dominant culture vis-à-vis jazz. Reading today like a missing chapter from Ishmael Reed's 1972 satire of Jazz Age cross-racial cultural interchange *Mumbo Jumbo*, the second half of *Swing That Music* insists upon marking (and perhaps pathologizing) the social and racial boundaries of jazz before it fully spreads into the public consciousness. Gerlach discriminates between the music's African American origins—characterized as “primitive”—and its ostensibly refined mainstream counterpart. According to Gerlach, classically trained musicians have elevated jazz out of its “barbaric phase” and reliance on “gruff, shrill, awkward and unpolished melody” into a more commercially palatable realm (125). To accent this judgment, the final section of the book presents portraits of ten musicians who make up an imaginary swing “dream band,” accompanied by individual arrangements of the song “Swing That Music,” supposedly echoing each player's signature style. The text proper makes no mention of how the “dream band” was chosen (most had never played with Armstrong up to that point), nor does it reveal how pianist Claude Hopkins, the only African American depicted aside from Armstrong, was able to cross the unofficial color barrier imposed by the book's creators. The artfully lit individual promotional photos of the eighty-percent-white swing “dream band” in their finest stage outfits underscore the aggressive commercialization and cultural whitewashing at the core of swing.

By arranging “Swing That Music” for ten instruments, Gerlach granted himself equal songwriting credit with Armstrong. As it was transcribed, however, the trumpet arrangement did anything but “swing,” its stiff, eighth-note-based rhythm carrying none of jazz’s essential syncopation, while its melody was too staid and limited in range to accurately represent Armstrong’s abilities. To be sure, Gerlach’s revision of the song was anything but “gruff, shrill, awkward and unpolished”; nor was it revolutionary or, for that matter, very creative. In the rhythm section, the string bass and drum arrangements hewed to an unimaginative 4/4 beat, while transcribed parts for the violin and xylophone showed just how far “refined” jazz had strayed from its brass-band origins.

Likewise, the main text of *Swing That Music* blithely ignored the African American influence and domination over jazz. *Swing That Music* made relatively few mentions of Armstrong’s African American musical mentors and the musicians with whom he collaborated, aside from Joe “King” Oliver, who sponsored his career both in New Orleans and Chicago. The presumably white ghostwriter—who may have been Gerlach—expressed little feel for the rapid development and diversification of African American music in the early twentieth century (Kenney, “Going” 29). Speaking in Armstrong’s stead, the writer characterized black vernacular music as “crude in form,” dependent on validation from white experts and audiences (76). Such writing was firmly in the Whiteman mode, stressing the increasing “sophistication” of swing, and tacitly congratulating white musicians for moving away from past southern African American models. In *Swing that Music*, the

ghostwritten Armstrong capitulated to the melting-pot myth in his critique of America's adoption of jazz.

Armstrong's biographers have been loath to address the irreconcilable differences in voice and intent found in the trumpeter's two autobiographies, either dismissing *Swing That Music* as a harmless bit of publicity carried out in Armstrong's name or labeling it a legitimate work that stands alongside Armstrong's self-composed *Satchmo*. But the wholesale appropriation of Armstrong's persona, history, and voice signifies something more insidious. Ultimately, *Swing that Music* exemplifies the ghostwritten autobiography's fundamental method of "identity theft." Using Armstrong's reputation as its start-up capital, the ghostwriter "cashes in" on the public's goodwill toward the autobiographical subject and the reading audience's desire to simulate one-on-one intimacy through the written medium. Under this co-opted identity, the author representing Armstrong can introduce into the narrative any number of uncharacteristic and misleading utterances and judgments; in a case like Armstrong's, the imbalance between the author and the subjugated musician amounts to little more than an abuse of power. The ghostwriter's deceptive co-optation squanders Armstrong's hard-earned cultural capital. Consequently, portions of *Swing That Music*'s narrative and paratext seem intended to boost white musicians' reputations at the expense of Armstrong's. Throughout the book, Armstrong's artistry is egregiously subordinated to white culture and the lesser accomplishments of derivative white musicians.

Issues of integrity aside, Armstrong seems to have suffered no backlash or commercial setback from the ghostwritten *Swing That Music*. In fact, the illegitimate autobiography triggered scholarly interest and research in the true origins of New Orleans jazz (M. Williams 230). Evidently, even with a book not truly his own, Armstrong seemed to enjoy the prestige of authorship. In a letter dated January 12, 1937, Armstrong asked his correspondent, “Have you seen the book that I’ve written on ‘Swing That Music’? It’s pretty good and is selling like Hot Cakes over on this side...” (Jones and Chilton 142). In light of strong sales and increased mainstream visibility, Armstrong assumed authorial credit, even if he apparently mustered little enthusiasm over its content. It seems, however, that he dropped the charade by decade’s end, as *Swing*’s pedantic tone no longer fulfilled a role in his ongoing persona building.

By the mid-1940s, it appears Armstrong desired a second chance to present his life story to the public, this time through the mediation of an outside writer. Armstrong gave his friend Belgian jazz critic Robert Goffin hundreds of typescript pages recounting his life, stretching from his humble beginnings in New Orleans to his triumphant European tours. Yet his attempt at an autobiography/authorized biography hybrid, titled *Horn of Plenty* (1947), fell short, in large part because of Goffin’s difficulty in relating Armstrong’s idiomatic speech convincingly and the problems the publisher had translating Goffin’s prose from French to English (Bergreen 426–427).

Armstrong's first attempt at sole authorship of an autobiography also came in 1947, when he honed his writing voice in the mass-market men's magazine *True* (A. Rose, *Storyville* 88). In this first iteration of *Satchmo*, Armstrong satisfied public curiosity about the red-light Storyville district, offering *True*'s predominantly male readership titillating details on the prostitution trade, sublimating his own story in the process. The *True* article offered little insight into Armstrong's musicianship and capitulated to the excesses of "Old New Orleans" mythology, but it cleared the decks for Armstrong's entry into self-reflective autobiography.

LOUIS ARMSTRONG – *SATCHMO*

Amid a hectic schedule and the demands that came with international stardom, Louis Armstrong wrote his first true autobiography while on tour in Europe in 1952 (see Armstrong, *In His* 150).²⁶ Surprisingly, for a book written in hotel rooms and unfamiliar backstage areas, Armstrong's first extended foray as an author is engaging, concise, and, at least by the standards of the picaresque, cohesive; its narrative assurance alone lifts *Satchmo*'s reliability over *Swing That Music*'s ghostwritten

²⁶ Competition may also have had a role in getting Armstrong to commit his memories of New Orleans to paper. In 1950, Armstrong was asked to review Alan Lomax's authorized biography of Jelly Roll Morton for the *New York Times Book Review* ("Stomping"). In his idiosyncratic, conversational prose style, Armstrong gave Morton's book positive notices, but mainly digressed from the task at hand to write of his own formative experiences in the city, which, when later presented in *Satchmo*, ran counter to Morton's vivid historical imagination.

bricolage.²⁷ *Satchmo*'s mission, obviously, is one of personal and artistic reclamation, but still perpetuates elements of his personal mythology. As in *Swing That Music*, Armstrong in *Satchmo* claimed July 4, 1900 as his birth date, a date so rich in poetic possibility that one instinctively understands why generations of jazz fans suspended their disbelief. It seems only fitting that the premier American musician of his generation was born on the Fourth of July, inextricable from the nation, seemingly destined to usher in a century of innovation and artistic rediscovery. The date also connects Armstrong, from birth, with ritual and celebration. Historically, July 4th has been a topsy-turvy day where patriotic pageantry (and pomposity) often clears the way for public celebration and visions of excess (see S. Davis, *Parades* 102–103).

Parades and the music that enlivens them loom large in *Satchmo*; Armstrong depicts himself in the book as a central figure in these festivities, so it stands to reason that he would adopt July 4th—a great day for a parade—as his own day. In one of the book's earliest passages, Armstrong reports the outlying circumstances of his birth, according to his mother, Mayann: "Mayann told me that the night I was born there was a great big shooting scrape in the Alley and the two guys killed each other. It was the Fourth of July, a holiday in New Orleans, when almost anything can happen" (8). Armstrong's connection with the holiday, anarchic as it seems in his own description, imbues him with the same reckless spirit. While his actual date of

²⁷ Half a century earlier, Booker T. Washington wrote *Up from Slavery* while on tour, in circumstances much like *Satchmo*, when Washington was engaged in speaking and fund-raising tours on behalf of the Tuskegee Institute (Howarth 12).

birth, confirmed by his baptismal records, has been revealed to be the far less symbolic August 4, 1901, the mythology of the July 4th birth date was so in keeping with his image that he was nearly compelled to perpetuate the untruth in a book otherwise earmarked for self-revelation.

The site of the home Armstrong shared with his mother and sister at the corner of Liberty and Perdido Streets in the “Back of Town” section of New Orleans holds poetic symbolism as well. Just as his assumed birth date encompassed both patriotic parades and street shootings, Armstrong portrayed himself in his memoirs as one accustomed to living between freedom (Liberty) and oblivion (Perdido, Spanish for “lost”). The street names represent the high-stakes game of growing up in the roughest part of New Orleans, and the minute difference between opportunity and anonymity Armstrong faced. Exposure to the city’s criminal underworld, however, seemed inescapable. The “Alley” Armstrong identified in the street-shooting vignette, James (officially known as Jane) Alley, was literally in the shadow of the city jail (Charters, *Country* 95). The intersection of Liberty and Perdido lies less than four blocks from the boundaries of the Storyville district, as determined by the city’s 1897 vice ordinance. Yet as historian Alecia P. Long points out, vice in New Orleans was definitely not confined to Storyville’s Canal Street boundary, and the Uptown District that included Liberty and Perdido saw its share of licentiousness (196). In his fanciful descriptions of turn-of-the-century New Orleans, popular historian Robert Tallant portrays the “lost” street of Perdido as a corridor of vice, populated by

prostitutes, criminals, and voodoo priestesses, abandoned during the workday, raucous at night (182–183).

Like many in his cohort who were pushed by historians to recall their earliest days in detail, Armstrong extrapolated the borders of Storyville well beyond its legally mandated boundaries. Informed in the 1960s by New Orleans jazz historian Al Rose that Liberty and Perdido were outside the city-mandated vice district, a shocked Armstrong replied, “I depend on guys like you to know all that stuff. Jeez. I wonder how many people I told dat [*sic*] I was a kid in Storyville?...[W]hat I been tellin’ reporters an’ magazine people for forty years —well, that ain’t Storyville at all” (A. Rose, *I Remember* 128). Of course, given the dispersal of vice through the lower wards of New Orleans after 1917, Armstrong did not need to be inside the District to be exposed to the colorful life associated with Storyville. Gary Giddins makes the argument that Back of Town—locally known as “The Battlefield”—may well have been a more lawless area than Storyville, since the proprietors of “sporting houses” in the official red-light district had a vested interest in maintaining a semblance of order and not attracting police attention (*Satchmo* 52–53). Nevertheless, the abrupt demolition of Storyville in 1917 led to an almost instantaneous mythology; raconteurs like Jelly Roll Morton gained the attention of credulous fans and historians through fanciful tales of “Old Storyville” and typically placed themselves at the center. The national breakthrough of the first recorded jazz group, the all-white Original Dixieland Jazz Band, that same year began the

contentious debate about the authenticity of and ownership of jazz and a subsequent effort by dedicated fans to uncover jazz's roots.

A sympathetic rootlessness and search for origins underscore Armstrong's self-characterization in *Satchmo*. By the time Armstrong was christened at three weeks old, William Armstrong had already left his wife and newborn son (Berrett, *Companion* 255). Not surprisingly then, the absence of the father, or more accurately, the father's rejection of Louis, looms large in the book's subtext. The brief accounts Louis gives of William Armstrong evince deep ambivalence. Spying his father in a procession during one of New Orleans's many parades, the son takes pride in his father's noble mien. "He made the chicks swoon when he marched by as the grand marshal in the Odd Fellows parade," Armstrong remembers. "I was very proud to see him in his uniform and his high hat with the beautiful streamer hanging down by his side. Yes, he was a fine figure of a man, my dad" (*Satchmo* 29). As a father, though, William Armstrong "did not have time to teach me anything; he was too busy chasing chippies" (29).

Armstrong compensates with a close relationship with his mother Mayann. Early in the book, Armstrong makes a striking admission. Soon after Louis's birth, "My mother went to [live at] a place on Liberty and Perdido Streets in a neighborhood filled with cheap prostitutes who did not make as much money for their time as the whores in Storyville, the famous red-light-district. Whether my mother did any hustling, I cannot say. If she did, she certainly kept it out of my sight" (8). This confession, which goes without further comment, demonstrates Armstrong's

commitment to represent Storyville-era New Orleans accurately and frankly in his memoirs, with a minimum of added shock value. A purely centripetal text would likely omit this detail, while a centrifugal text might exploit it. (As the centrifugal memoirs of Charles Mingus and Miles Davis make clear, jazz and prostitution are intertwined tropically, with male musicians/libertines figuratively and often literally identifying themselves as pimps.) When Mayann and Louis are reunited when he is five, the two demonstrate an interdependence that belies Armstrong's youth. As soon as Armstrong is able to work, he brings his pennies home to his mother; when he grows up and begins to gamble, he shares his winnings. Mayann, in turn, provides him with a stable home against all odds. Her resourcefulness figuratively and literally nourishes her children, as she is able to transform leftover food from whites' tables into lunches that Armstrong describes in vivid, mouth-watering detail decades later.

This relative domestic tranquility is offset by scenes where Armstrong, in plain, unpolemical language, describes the ethics of living under Jim Crow. His first brush with segregation comes on his first streetcar ride at the age of five, accompanied by a friend of his mother. In his youthful exuberance, he takes the first available seat, oblivious to the posted signs that read "For Colored Passengers Only." Armstrong ignores his chaperone's instruction to move to the back: "Come here, boy...Sit where you belong" (14). "Quick as a flash," the chaperone yanks Armstrong back with her into the rear section. When Armstrong asks what the signs mean, the chaperone brusquely tells him, "Don't ask so many questions! Shut your mouth, you little fool!" (15). Appropriately, Armstrong depicts this episode as his

primal moment of race, a sudden jolt into reality that mars his idyllic and innocent state and leaves him grasping for a direct explanation of racism that never comes. He achieves some peace of mind a few years later, as black passengers, heading home after their Sunday-afternoon excursions, fill the street car completely, rendering segregation unenforceable. “Automatically,” Armstrong writes, “we took the whole car over, sitting as far up front as we wanted to. It felt good to sit there once in a while. We felt a little more important than usual” (15).

The law in question here is the Louisiana Separate Car Act, which went into effect in 1890, and was challenged by Homer Plessy in the 1896 Supreme Court case that legalized “separate but equal” public accommodations.²⁸ The Louisiana state legislature officially segregated all streetcars in 1902 in a wave of legislation designed to roll back the advances of Reconstruction (Woodward 97). In response, citizens staged several streetcar boycotts to protest segregation between 1891 and 1906, though the law ultimately stood (Daniel, *Standing* 40). Following the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, segregation was the law of the land, and Louis’s place on the streetcar and in the wider public arena became circumscribed and policed by authorities and closely monitored by fellow African Americans trying to keep the peace.

In his evocation of the streetcar incident, Armstrong reminds his readers of the cycles of history and acts of resistance made in the past, obscured by official history.

²⁸ The first Jim Crow law was passed nine years earlier, in Tennessee, also legislating the segregation of streetcars (Ritterhouse 125).

The “takeover” of the entire car that Armstrong invokes may have been an involuntary act of civil disobedience and may not have garnered headlines, but it exposed the untenable premises of segregation and unleashed the spirit of liberation that energized the burgeoning civil rights movement in midcentury. Here we have the first of many “close calls,” incidents where Armstrong tests the limits of a segregated society and effects a clean getaway.

A more open defiance of segregation laws began to occur as African Americans asserted their rights on the homefront during the Second World War. By 1942, in Birmingham, Alabama alone, the local transit authority reported eighty-eight incidents of African American citizens riding outside of their designated spaces on buses and streetcars (Norrell 127). Of course, as Armstrong related his earliest experiences with segregation in the mid-1950s, African Americans’ access to public accommodations was among the United States’ central social issues. Published in the United States the same year as the *Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision was handed down, *Satchmo* preceded the Montgomery bus boycott by one year and the integration of Little Rock, Arkansas public schools by three. Louisiana’s public schools were not integrated until 1960, and then only over the exertions of Governor Jimmie Davis (Woodward 172). Perhaps feeling unauthorized or abashed on speaking directly on contemporary race issues, Armstrong offered an episode from his past that demonstrated both the moral and practical weaknesses of segregation, holding out the promise of a similar breakthrough nationwide. With a minimum of sermonizing, Armstrong’s streetcar story reads as an ironic comment on *Plessy’s*

underlying legal fiction: no matter how separate whites kept him from official sources of power, they would never prevent him for partaking in an equal measure of joy and belonging in his hometown.

Both Armstrong and Richard Wright in *Black Boy* depict their primal moment of race on public transportation. In their recollections, experiencing the shame of second-class citizenship in public compounds the injury of being denied equal accommodations. Young Wright, accompanied by his mother and grandmother in a train station en route to Arkansas, cannot fathom why two separate lines form for train tickets or why white and black passengers sit apart from one another. Wright is scolded by his mother when he asks to get up from his seat and “peep at the white folks” (54). The force of his mother’s anger silences his questions but not his curiosity. Such episodes, when focalized through the sensibilities of an innocent child, involve and implicate the reader, especially those who at the time occupied the front seats of buses and trains.

Perhaps to compensate for the brazen “identity theft” of the first book bearing his name, Armstrong wrote *Satchmo* as a vehicle for two complementary personae that symbolized the steps of his musical literacy and accomplishment. First and foremost, *Satchmo* introduces the reader to “Little Louis,” a scrappy, optimistic child who, amid a hand-to-mouth existence, and a mostly absent father, was raised by his mother, a succession of adoring relatives, and Storyville itself. The boisterous Little Louis associated with people of all strata as they passed by Liberty and Perdido, rarely passing judgment on them, and living near New Orleans’s red-light district

without evident hostility or guilt. As Armstrong describes, "...I observed everything and everybody. I loved all those people and they loved me. The good ones and the bad ones all thought that Little Louis (as they called me) was O.K. I stayed in my place, I respected everybody and I was never rude or sassy..." (28). Amid such self-descriptions, Leslie Fiedler's description of the Good Bad Boy archetype in classic American literature resonates: "The Good Bad Boy is, of course, America's vision of itself, crude and unruly in his beginnings, but endowed...with an instinctive sense of what is right" (270). Like the Good Bad Boy, Armstrong good-naturedly challenged his community's norms, while instinctively knowing its boundaries and whom not to cross. The tenderloin district of New Orleans, long since demolished at the time of his writing, was for Armstrong his first (and maybe his best) audience and his sounding board, as well as an imaginative playground where larger-than-life figures paused in their illegal dealings to admire young Louis's goodness and impeccable dress. "Everyone liked me," is the simple, yet insistent refrain repeated throughout the book.

Armstrong's flattering self-portrayal as Back of Town's resident Victorian adult-child is interrupted only temporarily by his recounting of his arrest at the age of eleven for shooting off a pistol during a New Years' street celebration. As Barry Lee Pearson reveals in his analysis of bluesmen's life stories, musicians' creation myth consistently revolve around some mild transgression, usually involving adolescent males' defiance of adult authority. Such events add color and conflict to the overarching narrative and suggest the tendencies and temptations Good Bad Boys

have to overcome in their communities. The incident with the pistol never upsets the comic mode of the narrative, though, in part because the event has no overtones of violence or deep conflict (the pistol, belonging to Mayann's boyfriend, was loaded with blanks), in part because the Good Bad Boy receives what is depicted in the text as tough but fair justice. Brought in before a judge, Little Louis was sentenced to an indefinite stay in the Colored Waifs' Home for Boys. Characteristically, Armstrong the author put the accent on the positive aspects of the Home; situated in the country, the institution gave him his first taste of life outside of the Storyville area. The Home imposed strict, military-style discipline; bugle calls signaled the boys' daily routine and the teachers inflicted severe corporal punishment for infractions. Fortuitously, the school's vocational-training program provided him with his first formal music education, offering Armstrong an avenue through which he could distinguish himself.

Before his interests were channeled in the Waifs' Home, music had been a powerful but elusive force for Armstrong. Armstrong heard the music of Buddy Bolden, Bunk Johnson, and Joe "King" Oliver from a distance and, from an early age, apprehended the privileges and attention musicians enjoyed in New Orleans. Enlisted to play for celebrations, funeral processions, and social-club functions, musicians held an unmatched public visibility in "uptown" New Orleans. With other children, Little Louis participated in the "second line" of local parades, following the band, even carrying their instruments between numbers.²⁹ The division of the parade made

²⁹ As romantic a notion as "the second line" is, it has also historically been a contested site. During carnival, not only must parading musicians look out for their aspiring young counterparts eager for approval, but also tolerate non-musicians determined to harass the band. New Orleans parade

up of rambunctious kids clamoring to participate in a procession with indulgent older musicians served as a perfect metaphor for the multi-generational musical community of New Orleans and the personal exchanges that rejuvenated local traditions and observances. For every musician like Bolden or Freddie Keppard who kept his techniques secret, there were numerous others, namely Joe Oliver, who welcomed the attention of aspiring musicians. By insinuating himself into the parades, Armstrong did more than imitate his elders. Amid the celebration, he listened intently to the spontaneous music, noting how each musician created an individual style through phrasing, tone, and melodic invention. Of course, he also intuited that music could provide ready money. Once he internalized that connection, he formed a vocal quartet to sing for spare change on street corners. Approaching music through these self-led “apprenticeships” prepared him for the formal lessons that followed.

As the adult Armstrong describes his progress, Little Louis sets out to insinuate himself within the hierarchy of the Waifs’ Home, and win more friends through his burgeoning musical talent, only to find that the institution’s band director, Peter Davis, eyes him suspiciously because of his Back of Town origins. Revisiting their impasse forty years after the fact, Armstrong the author resorts to a curious discursive mode almost reminiscent of courtly romance. In his most flowery prose, Armstrong details the eventual success he has both in impressing his teacher and working his way up the hierarchy:

drummer Sonny Henry told an interviewer in 1950 that such interlopers “wants [*sic*] to rule the band – tell them what to do, tell them what to play,” even going so far as parading in front of the band, impeding their forward progress (Mitchell 154).

As the days rolled by, Mr. Davis commenced to lighten up his hatred of me. Occasionally I would catch his eye meeting with mine. I would turn away, but he would catch them again and give me a slight smile of approval which would make me feel good inside. From then on whenever Mr. Davis spoke to me or smiled I was happy. Gee, what a feeling—that coming from him! I was beginning to adapt myself to the place, and since I had to stay there for a long time I thought I might as well adjust myself. I did. (40)

So goes the weird courtship dance between Little Louis and Mr. Davis. Armstrong scripts Davis as a gruff, surly authority figure who harbors a “hatred” toward the ever-lovable Louis because of his rough background and resents the boy’s potentially disruptive presence amid the quasi-domestic space of the Waifs’ Home. Like Rochester or Heathcliff, Mr. Davis regularly spies Louis through the corner of his eye and always seems to be lurking around corners in proximity to his young charge. Armstrong bides his time, hoping to win over Mr. Davis, convince him of his essential goodness, and earn a spot in the band’s cornet section. After six months of waiting, Davis formally invites him to join his band, only to ritualistically humiliate him in front of his peers by giving the eager, aspiring cornetist a tambourine.

In one of the most common tropes of slave narratives, exemplary enslaved people like Frederick Douglass are forced by an unjust system to “steal” knowledge (Gates, *Signifying* 127). By contrast, Armstrong is willing to exercise patience, flatter those in power, and earn rewards through the capital of his personal magnetism. As

Little Louis's musicianship evolves, his rank in the band rises accordingly. After excelling on tambourine, he moves up to snare drum. Davis then promotes Louis to the brass section; Louis first plays an alto horn (an instrument that typically serves a secondary, harmonic function in marching-band music), before being given a bugle (which has a limited dynamic and tonal range relative to other brass instruments), then finally the cornet he desires.

Jacques Attali's conception of the musician as a free traveler along the hierarchy applies well to both Armstrong and his chosen instrument. As Krin Gabbard relates, medieval trumpeters in Europe could be employed as court musicians and municipal heralds or, alternately, itinerant entertainers, outside respectable society (*Hotter* 55–56). The cornet and trumpet offered a similar type of fluidity in Armstrong's time, with a place for it in military bands, officially sanctioned street parades, social gatherings (especially the New Orleans custom of all-day picnics along the banks of Lake Pontchartrain), and the grittier venues that welcomed early jazz. Though now considered secondary to the trumpet, the cornet held iconic status in early twentieth-century New Orleans, associated with its leading practitioners, such as Bolden, Oliver and Bunk Johnson. Bolden, especially, enjoyed a notoriety and mystique that went well beyond music. In taking up the cornet, Armstrong becomes part of a lineage of talented, charismatic black men who hold a distinct prestige within their community.

This prestige was most evident in parades, a major part of social life in New Orleans's lower wards. Marching bands have a tradition as a spectacle of power in

New Orleans. Soon after the Spanish takeover of the city in 1769, the city's new leadership outfitted a military band that paraded in full view of the now-marginalized French and Creole populations (Sublette 95). Marching bands were one of the few types of ensembles blacks and whites had in common in New Orleans (Hersch 16). Before the Civil War, Creole bands marched in downtown parades organized by whites, emphasizing the aspirations of the Creole caste (L. Jones, *Blues* 76). In the years that followed, the grand spectacle of black marching bands represented a limited yet distinct sense of liberation and boundary-crossing. The African American marching bands affiliated with local fraternal orders and Benevolent Associations galvanized members of the community; their highly ritualized performances at funerals were a type of communal regulation. Historically, the city tolerated some cross-racial interaction within the context of parades and allowed racial burlesque when it functioned as a safety valve and offset potential conflicts (Ostransky 26). In local celebrations such as Mardi Gras, sanctioned revelry was allowed, since the street parade symbolized the imminent beginning of Lent, and ultimately reinforced at least a public recognition of piety and order. According to Ben Sidran, the New Orleans elite and middle class considered African American marching bands a move toward musical respectability, as they represented a dissociation from the *vodun* tradition and the African-derived music associated with Congo Square in the early and mid-nineteenth century (49).

Yet for all the pride marching bands engendered in New Orleans, especially in the hearts of devoted second-liners like young Louis Armstrong, the larger society

looked askance at such bands as a pretentious spectacle unworthy of second-class citizens. The image of an all-black marching band was ridiculed in a series of immensely popular “coon songs,” including “The Coon’s Salvation Army,” written by the African American songwriter and minstrel performer Sam Lucas in 1884. In that song’s lyrics, the band is castigated, in broad dialect, for presuming to appropriate the sound, dress, and pomp of a white brass band: “De Coons am marching down de street/And don’t dey look just grand/ D’yer all in uniform today/ Dey hab a big brass band” (Dennison 288, spellings unchanged from original). Associating black musicians with the Zip Coon stereotype, the song lampooned black men’s discipline and mastery of music in a not-so-subtle attempt at emasculation. Other post-Reconstruction attempts to defame black marching bands in sheet-music form included “The Darkies’ Dress Parade,” “The Colored Ragamuffins” and “The Coons Are on Parade” (Dennison 379–380). By the 1910s such derogatory images were countered by African American composers, as evidenced by Rosamond Johnson’s 1903 setting of Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s poem “When the Colored Band Comes Marching Down the Street” to music, as well as Tin Pan Alley compositions, such as Irving Berlin’s “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” (1911), that featured ragtime syncopation (and a measure of dialect humor) while sidestepping the more degrading stereotypes endemic to the “coon song” (Johnson, *Along This Way* 161; Dunbar 178–179; Suisman 53–55).

Satchmo’s depiction of New Orleans parades subverts many of these lingering stereotypes. In the key scene of the book, the Waifs’ Home band is asked to

substitute for an adult social-club band in a parade through Storyville. Though Armstrong remembers the group's uniforms affectionately, one might gather that the waifs' uniforms would have been modest at best, and perhaps the object of ridicule among those conditioned by popular songs about "darky" bands. Having been appointed band leader by Mr. Davis, young Louis leads the band of waifs through Storyville and, drawing upon his past experiences as a street-corner "serenader," spontaneously "passes the hat" among the prostitutes, gangsters, and beggars who gather to watch, a gesture resulting in enough money for new, much-needed instruments and uniforms. In his words,

All the whores, pimps, gamblers, thieves and beggars were waiting for the band because they knew ... Mayann's son, would be in it. But they had never dreamed that I would be playing the cornet, blowing it as good as I did. They ran to wake up Mama, who was sleeping after a night job, so she could see me go by. Then they asked Mr. Davis if they could give me some money. He nodded his head with approval, not thinking that the money would amount to very much. But he did not know that sporting crowd. Those sports gave me so much that I had to borrow the hats of several other boys to hold it all. I took in enough to buy new uniforms and new instruments for everybody who had played in the band. (47-48)

The story, as written, is vivid and entertaining but fairly implausible—outfitting a marching band with new instruments and uniforms would probably require more than

just a one-time collection, and the legend of this sudden windfall seems too miraculous even for Little Louis.³⁰ But its exaggeration conforms to *Satchmo*'s expansive mode of discourse.³¹ Discursively, Armstrong relies heavily on embellishment and employs it as a complement to the music. In the same way that New Orleans jazz augmented the elements of staid European songs and classical music with a freewheeling spin, Armstrong populates his story with the stock characters of Victorian melodrama—waifs and orphans; drunks and prostitutes; stern, unfeeling teachers and redemptive children—and recasts them into a joyous celebration of music.

The parade scene flirts with elements of the carnivalesque. For Bakhtin, carnival's ultimate significance lies in its spontaneous creation by the disempowered, demarcating the limits of political and religious authority and suggesting the shape of life outside those boundaries. Leading the band through Storyville, Armstrong

³⁰ In recasting his own childhood into narrative, Harry Houdini told a story of childhood beneficence that rivaled Armstrong in its championing of neighbors' goodwill and youthful pluckiness. While working as a messenger boy, Houdini hears his father despairing over overdue rent and calling for divine intervention. The dutiful son collects so much money the following day (presumably by asking for money as well as working) that he returns home to shower his family with coins, saying "Shake me! I'm magic!" (Brandon 22). The "magic" reference takes the story over the top into self-referential myth, but its symbolic power is undeniable; we expect in retrospective stories for the young hero to perform extraordinary, precocious deeds and lay the groundwork for his subsequent career. Not surprisingly, the young Houdini plans his escape from his family's poverty and want by fixating on a hero/substitute father. Just as Louis Armstrong chooses Joe Oliver as mentor/surrogate father, Erich Weiss starts on the path to being Harry Houdini by fixating on French magician Robert-Houdin.

³¹ The parade scene had previously been portrayed in Goffin's *Horn of Plenty* in a version that stopped short of the claim that a passing of the hat resulted in new uniforms and instruments (67).

improvises and creates his own occasion and celebration, making the parade the essence of carnival, even as it stays within the bounds of authority (see Ehrenreich 95). Unlike ritual processions analyzed by Bakhtin and Natalie Zemon Davis, the street parade Louis leads has no apparent anti-authoritarian overtones. By pitching in on behalf of the waifs and orphans, the sporting crowd of Storyville willingly performs the positive social work New Orleans's upper crust overlooks. The ragtag band's proud march through Storyville may imitate and make light of the sober demeanor of a military marching band, as well as the discipline represented by Mr. Davis. Yet the passing of the hat reinforces, rather than threatens, the social hierarchy, as it takes place under the stern, watchful eye of Mr. Davis, whose assent allows for the transubstantiation of "tainted" money into shiny new instruments and uniforms. As much as the band's parade imitates official culture, the scene more effectively demonstrates the unlikely sense of community the Little Louis character engenders in Storyville, both as a geographic location and as an imaginative landscape within the book.

On the surface, the impromptu parade and collection-taking resembles the ritual of charivari as practiced by impromptu "bands" found in New York and Boston in the early nineteenth century. As described by Dale Cockrell, white working-class youths, usually amid New Years' celebrations, would assume outlandish clothing and pick up noisemakers to serenade their "betters," pick fights with African Americans, and, anticipating modern-day trick-or-treating, threaten mild property damage if food and alcohol were not offered. Cockrell identifies three essential components of this

carnavalesque street rite: communal regulation, the rite of passage, and role inversion (33). Such spectacles were not foreign to the Crescent City around the turn of the century. Among New Orleans' segregated Irish, Creole, and Cajun societies, impromptu charivari bands regularly interrupted wedding festivities and demanded a place at the banquet table (Saxon et al. 68). Regularly, bands of young amateur musicians—so-called “spasm bands”—would play on the sidewalks outside Storyville landmarks like Mahogany Hall, in hopes of embarrassing customers out of some pocket change and getting tips from pimps, madams, and prostitutes (Rose, *Storyville* 123). This ritual was grounded in a larger, civic culture of shaming in New Orleans, led by local newspapers like the *Sunday Sun* that made it their duty to “call out” and identify by name both the proprietors of prostitution houses and their clientele.³²

But the component of communal regulation—the “shaming” aspect of charivari—is conspicuously absent in this scene from *Satchmo*. Leading the parade, Louis has no intention of shaming the denizens of Storyville or rooting out vice. Nor does he engage in the disrespectful mockery and broad burlesque central to carnival. On the contrary, he leads the Waifs' Home band and, most significantly, the stern Mr. Davis, on a tour of his old haunts, while allowing the sporting crowd a chance to demonstrate its kindness and generosity in support of a respected social institution. While charivari spectacularly erupts in spaces lacking order, young Armstrong engenders a fleeting sense of social rectitude in the red-light district, where it is least

³² See Al Rose, *Storyville* 208 for a colorful example.

expected. In this way, he engages in a permissible type of role inversion, essentially assuming the role of the bandmaster and drum major without completely undermining Mr. Davis's authority. The band under Louis's direction plays music that is both proficient and approved by authority, a refined complement to the "rough music" typically banged out by spasm bands and Callithumpian bands on tin horns, kazoos, and pots and pans. The Waifs' Home band's newfound skill imitating the music and manner of their professional counterparts demonstrates the "correctness" and effectiveness of their education, without the undertone of protest that fuels a shaming procession.

Certainly Louis's parade embodies the rite-of-passage element of charivari, as Armstrong deftly narrates his progression into maturity and public attention. The Waifs' Home is the liminal space between Storyville and respectability; all subsequent retellings of his early life hinge on his reforming stay in the Home (H. Baker, *Blues* 183). The waif band's parade marks the critical point when Louis steps out of the second line, advances beyond imitating his musical elders, and symbolically leads his own procession (see Ogren 27; Levine 233). As portrayed in *Satchmo*, the parade represents the unveiling of his adult magnetism, as Little Louis wins over members of New Orleans's lower wards' two separate societies: the hierarchized institutionalized world, represented by Mr. Davis, and the city's largely unregulated underground milieu. Armstrong's street parade scene reconciles the two; he can display the exceptional talent the Waifs' Home has fostered yet still share it

with the “sporting crowd” of Storyville and accept their money. Once he collects the proceeds, he shares the wealth and helps others through his endeavor.³³

Additionally, Louis depicts his premiere performance as his initiation into the advance guard of New Orleans jazz, and suggests with his talent and leadership, the music can effect a social transformation. In this heavily stylized scene, Armstrong the author rewrites the legend of Armstrong the musician, by creating an overarching metaphor for how he saw his subsequent career. When the older Louis finally takes the sound of young African-Americans out of the district to the rest of the country, he returns to the roles he naturally assumed in the parade—leader, popularizer, benefactor, and legitimator—bringing to the wider public a new form of music that transforms inspiration into money, approval, and respect.

In the parade scene, Armstrong portrays a second role inversion; music allows a self-transformation from a “waif” to a “chosen” figure, the heir apparent to a treasured local tradition. Zutty Singleton, a longtime Armstrong sideman, offers his own appraisal of Louis’s budding musicianship in his formative years:

The first time I saw Louis was when he was about twelve, thirteen years old. He was singing with three other kids in an amateur show at Bill and Mary Mack’s tent show in New Orleans....This happened just

³³ Armstrong reinforced his role as benefactor when he made his triumphant return home to New Orleans in 1931 after nearly a decade’s absence. Just as he once by his own account outfitted the Waifs’ Home band with new uniforms, Armstrong provided new caps, uniforms (with “Armstrong” emblazoned across the chest), and equipment to a local baseball team, subsequently known as “Armstrong’s Secret Nine.” Such an extravagant gift encapsulated Armstrong’s largesse and hometown spirit, as well as spread his fame (Jones and Chilton 124; Cogswell 140).

before Louis got sent to the Waifs' Home, and so I didn't see him again for a while. But I heard about him at the Home. Some of the fellows that were sent there would come back and say how fine this Louis Armstrong was playing. Then I saw Louis playing in a band at a picnic. He was marching along with the band, so we got up real close to him to see if he was actually playing those notes. We didn't believe he could learn to play in that short time. I can still remember he was playing *Maryland, My Maryland*. And he sure was swingin' out that melody. (Shapiro and Hentoff 48)

Remembering Louis's triumphant hero's return back to New Orleans approximately forty years after the fact, Singleton concisely sums up the transformation that took place in the Waifs' Home. The rumors of Armstrong's newfound musical prowess and maturity only hint at what he has actually accomplished. Doubters like Singleton scrutinize his skill and come away believers. In this account, Armstrong metamorphoses from a spirited singing amateur to a musical pacesetter whose skill transcends the simple reading of notes. By "swingin' out that melody," Armstrong broadcasts his individual musical voice.³⁴ Armstrong discovers that "to swing"

³⁴ That said, "Maryland, My Maryland" is an interesting choice of song to "swing out," its rather trite tune adapted from "O Tannenbaum." Its lyrics, written in 1861 in New Orleans by James Ryder Randall after hearing of a riot in his hometown of Baltimore, are a mélange of white southern memorializing and rabble-rousing. The first verse, which a century later gave Edmund Wilson a title for his study of Civil War literature, urges native Marylanders to "Avenge the patriotic gore/That flecked the streets of Baltimore," while the ninth and final verse exults in the state's imaginary victory over Union forces: "Huzza! She spurns the Northern scum." It may be doubtful that Armstrong knew all nine verses of the song or the regional chauvinism that inspired it, but Singleton's sophisticated

means more than syncopating or creating melodic and rhythmic variations; swinging involves streamlining and modernizing source material and signifying on the anachronism of the original tune, in much the same way that bebop would later adapt the tricky chord changes of Tin Pan Alley and Broadway tunes while lampooning or simply dispensing with their original melodic, lyrical, and thematic content.

In his extended essay *The Hero and the Blues*, Albert Murray identifies the ability to improvise as the “Heroic Essence,” the common thread found in modernist literature and in African American music. Like a master musician improvising over complicated chord changes, Murray’s Blues Hero can not only adapt to adverse conditions but “swing” those changes to create something personal and life affirming. That energy and resilient spirit often reverberates. Eric Hobsbawm identifies Armstrong as an example of a type of charismatic citizen that energizes the working classes with his or her unlikely success:

The artist sprung from the unskilled poor, and playing for the poor is in a peculiar social position....The star musician, dancer, singer, comedian, boxer or bullfighter is not merely a success among the sporting or artistic public, but the potential first citizen of his community or his people. A Caruso among the poor of Naples, a Marie Lloyd in the East End, a Gracie Fields in Rochdale, a Jack Johnson, Joe Louis or Sugar Ray in Harlem, a Louis Armstrong

retelling recognizes his colleague’s power to transform the most staid and stodgy music, a type of artistic “signifyin(g)” that became a foundation of classic jazz. In 1944, Baby Dodds and Bunk Johnson adapted “Maryland, My Maryland”’s tune in a New Orleans jazz arrangement (Hersch 160).

occupy a position far more eminent among 'their' people than a Picasso or Fonteyn in orthodox society...For the star was what every slum child and drudge might become... (197–198, 200)

The parade represents Armstrong's re-emergence into New Orleans's public life, as well as a de-institutionalization. Armstrong has come out of the Colored Waifs' Home reformed but unbowed. Once sent away to the home for his boisterous participation in folk ritual, namely "shooting in" the New Year, the slightly older, but much more worldly Armstrong demonstrates his rehabilitation by affirming the social order: making music (as opposed to the Callithumpian noise of spasm bands), inspiring the "sporting crowd" to make an act of charity, and parading proudly under the auspices of Mr. Davis, rather than contributing to the anarchy of the street. After the parade, Louis's New Years' transgression with the pistol is forgiven and forgotten, his period of "reformation" now complete.

A curious scene that follows the parade vignette illustrates Armstrong's ability to employ music as a life strategy and as a means of self-preservation. In Armstrong's recollection, he and some fellow bandmembers are given an afternoon pass to leave the Home's grounds and entertain a white audience at a picnic on the city's West End. The group decides to take a quick swim in the lake during an intermission. Frivolity ensues until one of the boys' swimming trunks fall off. Before the young man can recover his trunks, a white man sneaks up to him, aims his gun, and declares, "You black sonofabitch, cover up that black ass of yours or I'll shoot" (49). The distress this anomalous scene induces in the reader is compounded

when one realizes its similarity to Richard Wright's short story "Big Boy Leaves Home," first published in 1936, included in the collection *Uncle Tom's Children* four years later. In "Big Boy," a white woman spies a group of African American boys swimming naked. The boys' pleas of innocence go unheeded, and soon a white army officer emerges with a shotgun, bellowing, "You black sonofabitch" (31). After two of the four boys are shot and killed, one of the youths, Big Boy, overtakes the officer and kills him with his own gun. Though stunned by the sudden turn of events, Big Boy is able to make his escape, while the fourth young man, Bobo, is captured by a lynch mob. From his hiding place, Big Boy sees the horrors of the lynching intensified when the white mob, its bloodlust still boiling, mangles and dismembers Bobo's corpse. With no way to prove his innocence, Big Boy, the sole survivor among his group of friends, has no recourse but to catch a ride on a truck and escape to the North.

Whether Armstrong knew "Big Boy Leaves Home" is a matter of conjecture; standard sources on Armstrong make no reference to his familiarity with Wright or his works. Though the wide popularity of books like *Native Son* and Wright's notoriety in both the mainstream and African American press make it very plausible that the author would have been known to Armstrong at least by reputation, the musician's reading habits were simply too idiosyncratic to draw a conclusion. In any case, Armstrong and Wright's stories completely diverge at the point where a naked black body is pathologized and confronted by a potential white murderer. At the sight of the man and his shotgun, Armstrong recalls, "We were scared stiff, but the

man and his party broke out laughing and it all turned out to be a huge joke. We were not much good the rest of that day, but we weren't so scared that we could not eat all the spaghetti and beer they gave us when they were through eating. It was good"

(49). Armstrong makes no further elaboration. In his vignette, the potential for a shooting or lynching under the thinnest of pretexts gives way to a kind of celebration, where the band of black youths goes back to entertaining the would-be mob and, for their trouble, are allowed to eat their hosts' table scraps. Though impossible to accept at face value, especially in juxtaposition with "Big Boy Leaves Home," Armstrong's affable tone and episodic storytelling convey how Armstrong views self-preservation in the Jim Crow South. As musicians, the ability to perform (under a spotlight or under a gun) has the potential to shield young black men in the musician class from violence. Among the white picnickers, Armstrong and his peers engender the type of pseudo-benevolent condescension James Baldwin termed "protective sentimentality" ("Many" 65). As portrayed in *Satchmo*, race's burden is not a grinding, day-to-day struggle against an oppressive system, but rather a series of occasional "close calls" that can be reliably "performed" around through musical talent and improvisation.

Such adaptability serves Armstrong well in his family life as well. After eighteen months in the Waifs' Home, Armstrong attempts a domestic reunion with his father. Unable to incorporate Louis into his new family, his father turns him away, claiming he is little more than another mouth to feed. Fortunately, musician Joe Oliver steps in as a primary influence in Armstrong's life. Armstrong first sees Oliver in New Orleans while the older musician is marching in a parade, proud and

heroic, much like his brief glimpses of William Armstrong in earlier parades. From that moment on, Joe Oliver and William Armstrong are twinned in Louis's mind. When a father figure is needed in *Satchmo*'s narrative, Joe Oliver duly appears to provide guidance and assistance to the younger musician, paying the medical bills for one of Louis's girlfriends and, in an unmistakably symbolic gesture, passing on one of his cornets to Armstrong.

Though Mayann welcomes Louis back into her home, the streets of New Orleans become the site where the teenaged Armstrong forges an identity separate to that of Little Louis. In *Satchmo*, Armstrong dramatizes the persona of "Dipper," the street-smart young man known throughout the area of the lower wards dubbed "The Battlefield" whose street credibility never overshadows the goodness of his "Little Louis" alter ego.³⁵ As assured of his moral compass as Little Louis, Dipper, emboldened by the attention he receives through music, adopts a true "jazz life," adopting the slang of the jazz musician and using improvisation and appropriation in all aspects of his life. Blues scholar Barry Lee Pearson has identified the common thread of African American musicians' origin stories, noting how performers "place [value] on improvisational agility," especially when confronted with hostility (*Jook* xiii). This adaptability is multifaceted and can encompass a range of maneuvers,

³⁵ One of the more curious aspects of Armstrong's persona-building is that, despite the book's title, the nickname "Satchmo" never appears in the text. William Howard Kenney notes that Armstrong was dubbed "Satchmo" only after he left New Orleans, as a contraction of one his older nicknames, "Satchelmouth." Thus, any reference to "Satchmo" in the text would have been anachronistic.

whether musical (adjusting one's style or repertoire to please or pacify a potentially antagonistic audience) or occupational (taking on odd jobs in between gigs) or, as a last resort, making a getaway from potential racial violence (see Gussow, *Seems* 72–75). Throughout the book, improvisation gives way to mastery, and becomes the leitmotif on his heroic journey. As Armstrong employs it, improvisation involves far more than merely “making it up as you go along,” but instead encompasses the ability to forge through obstacles with wit, guile, and a supreme confidence in one's own abilities. In this way, the improvisational hero follows the path of the trickster hero in African American folklore or the chosen one in the European tradition (see Levine 380). Improvisation “underscores the musician's tolerance for ambiguity and courage in the face of risk... [where] each performance is an adventure” (Berliner 218). In jazz, successful improvisations vary the source material melodically and rhythmically, controlling the tempo and pacing. These technical demands ensure that even for its most gifted technicians, jazz becomes a life's journey, with attendant artistic, interpersonal, and financial difficulties to overcome.

Having channeled his youthful energies, his innate desire to please, and his love of performance into music, Louis/Dipper takes virtually any job that offers ready money, while harboring a wish that Joe Oliver will eventually take him in as a musical apprentice. The list of jobs the young Armstrong undertakes in his youth include: coal-cart driver, rubbish man, newspaper vendor, a return to the coal cart, stevedore on a banana boat, a third stint on the coal cart, ragman, unofficial neighborhood doctor during a flu epidemic, delivery boy on a milk truck, a stint as a

gambler, dishwasher, member of a wrecking crew, whitewasher, bellboy, and one final stand aboard the coal cart. Additionally, Armstrong in succession earns his keep with work done at the Waifs' Home, protects his mother from a series of abusive men, and serves as self-proclaimed "stepfather" to his developmentally disabled cousin Clarence while finding time to undertake his musical apprenticeship. Why does labor figure so prominently in Armstrong's self-presentation? First and foremost, Armstrong, like W.C. Handy before him, emphasizes work to rebut the notion that jazz musicians were shiftless and idle, especially in the "good-time" world of Storyville-era New Orleans. Contrast the young Armstrong's extra-musical résumé to the list of seedier vocations pursued by his elder, Jelly Roll Morton. Biographer Phil Pastras traces Morton's peripatetic trail through his underworld schemes: "pimp, pool hustler, card shark, piano player, vaudevillian, minstrel" (76). In a more general sense, "hustler" connotes a method of advancement far different than the one Armstrong adopts. The hustler subverts racist stereotypes partly by doing exactly what he is accused of—being lazy, immoral, and greedy. As Robin D.G. Kelley observes in his analysis of Malcolm X's descriptions of his hustling past, desperate young men often turned to the hustler's life of crime when alienated from capitalism. Ironically, of course, hustlers made their way in the world by exploiting women as commodities and selling illegal goods by replicating tried-and-true capitalist principles (173-175). In the upside-down world of the criminal underground, the pimp won admiration from his peers according to how little he worked compared to how outlandishly he dressed and spent money, as it signaled his

control over women (Keire 47). By contrast, Dipper's resourcefulness and work ethic keep him from prevailing on others. While Armstrong does admit to a brief attempt at being a pimp, its farcical outcome (his one prostitute stabs him with a pocket knife, leaving him to run home to Mayann for solace) confirms that music was Armstrong's true course.

While Jelly Roll Morton relished telling self-aggrandizing tales of his days of hustling his way through Storyville to interviewer Alan Lomax in *Mister Jelly Roll*, Armstrong describes his many jobs, legal and otherwise, in detail in his autobiography in part to situate his story into the larger cultural history and redeem impressions surrounding the District and the city in general. Armstrong endeavors to show that the citizens around Storyville typically engaged not only in legitimate work, but also physically taxing labor that paid very little. In contrast to the boastful, wholly self-interested hustler persona that Morton adopted, Armstrong underlines his obeisance to his employers (most of whom are white), his reliability, and his service to others. In short, Armstrong assures skeptical readers that he has "paid his dues," and earned the right to parlay music as a profession. *Satchmo*'s detailed descriptions of Armstrong's rise out of the Storyville milieu prove that the musician's life can have structure and intent.

Secondly, Armstrong emphasizes his myriad of jobs to illustrate his expansive attitudes and ability to adapt. A work like *Satchmo* qualifies as an example of what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., calls a "counter-genre" to the American self-made-man autobiography. From an early age, Armstrong values spontaneity over calculation

and tall tales over unadorned reportage. Armstrong's retelling of his life story suggests success and fame can come through play rather than work, "indulgent" living as opposed to thrift and self-denial, and through association with people of all social strata. Armstrong's familiar tone and preference for the rollicking, picaresque narrative conveys to the reader the belief that good fortune can be as elevating as the traditional American values of hyper-competitive capitalism and muscular Christianity. For Armstrong, there is no strict division between work and play. From the day he joins the Waifs' Home band, he identifies music with authority and agency, imagining the esteem of his peers: "I thought of what the gang would say when they saw me pass through the neighborhood blowing a cornet" (41). When working on the coal cart around Storyville, Dipper blows a tin horn, alerting potential customers and developing his embouchure and lung power in the process. Armstrong would cling to this image later in life, making it a theme upon which he would introduce variations in future interviews and autobiographical writings.

Finally, Armstrong must venerate common labor to distinguish himself from the most pernicious stereotypes attached to young African American men. Though Armstrong makes no mention of it in *Satchmo*, holding jobs in the street posed serious risks for a black male, especially one so young and, seemingly, so trusting. Herbert Cappie, a New Orleans native sixteen years Armstrong's junior, recalled that in the city "if a white girl was raped, all black boys had to stay off the streets until the police had picked up one as a suspect. And they's [*sic*] usually find one whether he was a suspect or not..." (Ritterhouse 191). Black street musicians also had to be

observant of their audiences. Armstrong's contemporary Danny Barker relates in his own autobiography the necessity to anticipate the capriciousness of the frequently intoxicated white patrons of the city's red-light district and to endure without comment taunts and racial slurs alongside backhanded compliments on one's musicianship (*Life* 37–38). In *Satchmo*, Dipper quits the coal cart on Armistice Day, November 11, 1918, adopting it as his own day of freedom and liberation. As if to underscore the world-historical importance of his endeavor, he begins his fulltime pursuit of music on that day, believing (rightly as it turns out) that his moment has come and that the new post-war audience will now be receptive to his music.

Armstrong's two fleeting allusions to the Armistice constitute the sum of references to the nation in *Satchmo*. This is not to suggest that Armstrong's volume of memoirs stands separate from centripetal American autobiographical conventions. As Franklin did in the guises of Silence Dogood and Poor Richard, Louis adopts a series of nicknames to chart the course of his fame and mark his association with every stratum of society. Armstrong's crew of street kids are depicted as an ironic take on Franklin's Junto club, striving associates who are not quite equal to their leader. Like Franklin on his road to wealth and success, Armstrong never voices any doubt in his eventual triumph over adversity and never considers the possibilities of defeat (see Leibowitz 30). The unlikely pair makes an intriguing dyad: if Franklin, by his own account, is the letter of young male American virtue, Armstrong represents its less inhibited spirit. Franklin scripts his life's journey as a pilgrim's progress, while Armstrong travels a more antic, picaresque path, with frequent stops

for music, food, and sex. Armstrong personifies generosity where Franklin appears thrifty, if not downright stingy. Franklin disdains the worldly habits and pursuits of his fellow working-class typesetters, while Armstrong relishes his time with New Orleans musicians and the denizens of the vice district. Armstrong is eager to learn from elders but destined to follow his own path, whereas Franklin educates himself to mix in with elite society to gain authority and fame. “In such a narrative [as Franklin’s],” Jill Ker Conway asserts, “there is no place for the emotions of family, for sexual passion or the other human appetites” (*When* 22). By contrast, Armstrong embraces the joys of indulging in New Orleans’s spicy Creole cuisine, welcomes the romantic attentions musicians can attract, even celebrates the “physic” (laxatives) his mother insists he take on a weekly basis (*Satchmo* 16). All of Armstrong’s preoccupations arise from what Bakhtin termed the “lower body stratum,” and his life writing reflects an earthiness bowdlerized in the typical self-made-man autobiography (and *Swing That Music*, for that matter). In every aspect of his autobiographical persona—author, narrator and subject—Armstrong embraces pleasure, well-being, and the pursuit of happiness.

Charles Hersch notes the numerous occasions in which Armstrong’s reminiscences lampoon the self-denial of the Franklinian hero, though Armstrong engages in a parallel quest for respectability and self-improvement (188–189). Franklin retraced the shaping experiences of his periods of want as part of his character building, embracing frugality and asceticism; of course, he related his memories toward the end of a long life, while enjoying the advantages of material

abundance. Armstrong on the other hand rejected the notion that any special virtue arises from poverty. As illustration, Armstrong offers the example of David Jones, a bandmate on a Mississippi River excursion boat who taught Armstrong to read music. In the Franklinian tradition, Jones spends the summer-long boat tour in a state of virtual starvation and conspicuous poverty. His meager musician's wages are sent back south to his family to maintain a small cotton farm. "Every day he would eat an apple instead of a good hot meal," Armstrong writes. "What was the result? The boll weevils ate all of his cotton before the season was over" (208).

In Armstrong's subversion of the Aesopian fable of the ant and the grasshopper, the man with the best-laid plans goes hungry as the wily, adaptable boll weevil thrives, along with those, like Armstrong, who eat well and indulge in play. Jones's single-minded pursuit of wealth only leaves him open to disappointment, just as improvisational living allows Armstrong to counter unforeseen circumstances and overcome the vagaries of experience. The only lesson imparted by poverty, Armstrong insists, is "never to deprive my stomach...I probably never will be rich, but I will be a fat man" (209). Just as the autobiography of Armstrong's contemporary Richard Wright is shaped by memories of hunger and want, Armstrong's autobiographical persona revolves around the state of being well-fed and satisfied, typically through a combination of his neighbors' beneficence and the goodwill his music engenders. In Armstrong's own retelling, the Waifs' Home serves an essential function as much for the regular meals they provide as the musical and personal discipline Mr. Davis imposes. Following a day on the second line of

parades, social-club members treat Armstrong and his fellow revelers to copious food and drink (225–226). On at least half a dozen occasions in his narrative, Armstrong recalls a musical performance, not so much to trumpet his own artistry, but to describe the after-show meals offered to him, often by total strangers, on both sides of the color line.

Armstrong's exaltation of gourmandizing reads as a riposte to white bourgeois notions of propriety and ostentatious self-denial. Overindulgence in rich food had been a stereotypical trait of the black man held by whites in the South going back to slavery days, and commercialized by white songwriters in the broadest of strokes with blackface-minstrel tunes such as "I Always Take De Cake" and "Good Sweet Ham" (Dennison 276). In his narrative, Armstrong portrays his unrestrained, working-class appetites as a virtue, and a facet of his popularity, subverting any lingering Old South stereotypes.

Having mastered basic technique and improvisation, Armstrong reaches musical maturity when he breaks from tradition and learns to read music in scenes that echo the efforts toward literacy in the slave narratives. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., summarizes the nexus between literacy and self-mastery: "Learning to read, the slave narratives repeat again and again, was a decisive political act; learning to write, as measured against an eighteenth-century scale of culture and society, was an irreversible step away from the cotton field toward a freedom larger even than physical manumission" (*Figures* 4). Likewise, learning to read music was a political act for African Americans, especially as they appropriated European notation for a

culturally open and pluralistic end. Jazz playing, as its essence, interpreted musical notation creatively; syncopation “bent” a note’s time value at the player’s whim, while brass and woodwind players expanded the range and timbre of their instruments beyond the classical tradition. Applying to musicality the critic Robert Stepto’s concept of “ascent,” the forward-looking pursuit of knowledge and self-determination that drives black expressive culture, Craig Werner concludes that musical literacy involves more than reading and interpreting music. Crucially, musicality “means learning to play the game by the real rules” (*Playing* 16).

Especially in life writing by African American musicians, musical skill and a wider apprehension of the outside world are inextricable. In *Satchmo*, Armstrong represents his introduction to racial codes north of New Orleans as a corollary to his musicianship. Armstrong’s first fully professional band, led by Fate Marable, regularly performed for segregated audiences on pleasure boats, essaying a diluted form of jazz more in line with Paul Whiteman’s “symphonic” style than the local variety.³⁶ While the boat line’s owners represented black musicians in their promotional literature with crude caricatures derived from minstrel stereotypes, in performance, Fate Marable and his band were anything but minstrel throwbacks or embodiments of a buffoonish caricature. Jazz historian William Howland Kenney describes the band as “impeccably dressed in tuxedos, seated on a stage behind a

³⁶ Based more upon the need to fill a fleet of expensive excursion boats to capacity than anything else, the Streckfus company engaged in a degree of audience engineering around 1919, reserving Monday night excursions for African Americans when the *St. Paul* was docked outside St. Louis (Dodds as told to Gara 22).

thick railing, courteous, discreet and ultimately mysterious...” (*Jazz* 30). On the surface, the straitlaced Marable (from Paducah, Kentucky) seemed to have little common ground musically with the streetwise New Orleans jazz musicians he hired. Marable prided himself on being a stern taskmaster, like Peter Davis, and insisted his band read their musical scores strictly and keep improvisation in check, chiefly to present his band as “legitimate” to his white audiences, in contradistinction to the looser aggregations his musicians had previously performed with in New Orleans (Kenney, *Jazz* 57). However, Armstrong responded well to the enforced musical discipline, as he did in the Waifs’ Home, and later credited his experiences aboard the excursion boats—his first performances outside New Orleans—for his accelerating musical development. With the help of bandmate David Jones, Armstrong learned to read music fluently as a member of Marable’s band, adding sight-reading to his musical arsenal without leaving his improvisational genius behind. Thus, he achieved complete musicianship—as both a traditionally trained musician and a jazz pioneer—through complex negotiation with both the strictures of Jim Crow and the white audience’s appetite for “hot” music. Reading music had an added, unintentional benefit for African American musicians in the South: by concentrating on the sheet music, musicians like Armstrong kept their heads down, eluding the accusation of “looking at” white women and the consequential threat of white male aggression (Brothers 251).

Owing perhaps to such internalizations of racial etiquette, many of the allegiances Armstrong expressed in his writings are toward the paying customer,

regardless of race. His eagerness to please extends to the readers of his life story. However, a notable exception occurs in a scene where Armstrong and the rest of Marable's band are contracted to play aboard a steamboat dubbed the *Sydney*, on an evening's excursion from St. Louis. The group's drummer, Baby Dodds, gets drunk before one evening's show and turns belligerent, first toward his bandmates, then toward members of the all-white audience, including women and children. John Streckfus, Jr., a captain and son of the *Sydney*'s owner, confronts Dodds during an intermission and, after a verbal confrontation, chokes the drummer into submission. "It was a gruesome sight," Armstrong remembers. "Everybody stood around in a cold sweat, but nobody said, 'Don't choke him any more' or ask for mercy...Baby sank to his knees and Captain Johnny released him as he passed out" (207–208). Armstrong makes no further authorial comment on the issue, letting the lesson on race relations between white employers and black musicians sink in.³⁷

In this chilling depiction of a near-lynching, Armstrong offers a stark reminder of the racially charged environment and mutual mistrust that surrounded early jazz as it became widely heard popular music. In the public sphere, no measure of fame or novelty could afford a black musician freedom from the surveillance or unchecked power of whites. Armstrong learns from Streckfus's actions the extremes of racial hostility. The band's silence during the incident is undoubtedly a learned reaction, as Armstrong notes that bands also averted their eyes when fights broke out

³⁷ We have only Armstrong's take on this incident, as Baby Dodds and his co-author Larry Gara make no reference to it in Dodds's autobiography, published in 1959.

among white patrons, lest any hint of involvement be misread as incitement. In the uncharacteristic brutality of this scene, Armstrong lays out the perils of spontaneous, direct resistance, and seems resigned to a more gradualist approach.³⁸ The Baby Dodds incident illustrates the unacceptable risks of race rebellion, and suggests that Armstrong and most of his contemporaries channeled into music the frustrations that arose from being deemed second-class citizens.

Because *Satchmo* conveys Armstrong's winning personae so effectively, one can easily overlook the shaping experiences of race, and his willingness to portray them in his narrative. Neither a self-identified "race man" nor a firebrand in private, Armstrong avoided sweeping statements in his book about racism or the state of race relations in the past or present. A comparison with the contemporaneous autobiographical writings of Richard Wright reveals that both authors depicted the challenges and indignities of citizenship under Jim Crow, but where Wright's first-person narratives at times betrayed a self-doubt that gave way to overwrought self-pity, Armstrong relied on free-flowing, though sometimes evasive, discourse and a characteristic theme of pursuing happiness. But at times the discourses of *Black Boy* and *Satchmo* share a resemblance. Following Bakhtin, Houston A. Baker, Jr., analyzes sections of *Black Boy* that engage in a carnivalesque discourse to mock

³⁸ A period photograph of Fate Marable's group reproduced in Gary Giddins's biography of Armstrong reveals a white crew member, likely one of the Streckfuses, lurking behind the band with the self-satisfied grin of ownership, lording over his group of impassive, if not seething, musicians (Giddins, *Satchmo* 70). The Streckfus boat remained a floating vestige of the Jim Crow era, staying segregated until 1969 (Bergreen 152).

pretension and sanctimony (*Blues* 150). Bored in a church pew, Wright subverts the lyrics of a hymn in his mind to mock the congregation's piety ("Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound/ A bulldog ran my grandma down") (*Black Boy* 96). Wright's spontaneous inversion of the hymn spoofs its intended message; upon hearing Bible stories and hymns, Wright claims, "we always twisted them, secularized them to the level of our street life" (96). As skilled improvisers, Armstrong and Wright even made the basic details of their life fluid; like Armstrong, Richard Wright also laid claim to an incorrect birth date and, in shorter pieces that preceded *Black Boy*, foregrounded the poverty and violence he was exposed to as a child, apparently to the point of exaggeration (T. Adams, *Telling* 70). Wright's discourse often takes on an "echoic" quality, as his narrative voice reverberates through the experiences of others. Befitting its title, *Black Boy* assumes a role as a collective autobiography of southern African American young manhood. In one instance, Wright describes his experience in the South as channeled through a thousand lynchings, though he admits to never having been abused by whites at that point in his life (87). His solitary pursuit of knowledge through reading results in a sense of isolation completely absent in Armstrong's *Bildungsroman*, where the inherent joy of music and interaction with like-minded peers give him a sense of belonging within his community and faith in his individual accomplishment. Both Armstrong and Wright migrated from the Deep South to Chicago, Armstrong in 1922, Wright five years later. Whereas Armstrong portrayed his move north as another episode in his pursuit of happiness, Wright

characterized his shaping experiences in the South as “the terror from which I fled” (303).

In contrast to Wright’s account and the migration narratives analyzed by Farah Jasmine Griffin, where trauma and/or the threat of murder forces young black men north, Armstrong depicts his relocation to Chicago as the fulfillment of a long-promised destiny, free of coercion. Characteristically, Armstrong applies broad comedy to his tale. Unwittingly dressed as a bumpkin, Armstrong boards the northbound train alone, immediately devours the fish sandwich prepared for him by Mayann, and then charms fellow passengers into sharing their meals with him during the long ride. Beneath the surface of his humorous storytelling, however, lies Armstrong’s recollection of his participation in the Great Migration. Like countless other northbound strivers, Armstrong was sent on his way out of the Jim Crow South with a few necessities and a ration of home cooking, under the implicit promise that he will send for his family once established in the big city.

Upon arrival in Chicago, Joe Oliver is nowhere to be seen, leaving Armstrong temporarily abandoned. A kindly policeman approaches him, offering assistance. Armstrong offers up his new identity to the policeman:

“I came in from New Orleans, Louisiana,” I said. “I am a cornet player, and I came up here to join Joe Oliver’s Jazz Band.”

He gave me a very pleasant smile.

“Oh,” he said. “You are the young man who’s to join King Oliver’s band at the Lincoln Gardens.” (231)

The apparently psychic policeman hails a cab and sends him to Lincoln Gardens. In Armstrong's retelling, much of black Chicago recognizes him as a young man "from home," intuiting his extraordinary talent, and sets him up for his inevitable triumph. Despite its contrived dialogue, Armstrong's description of his arrival in Chicago reads like promotional literature for the Great Migration. "Every street was much nicer than the streets of New Orleans," Armstrong boasts (235). The city abounds with friendly faces, good food, and accommodations and possibilities for a livelihood made through music.

When Armstrong eventually reconnects with Oliver, the underlying story nears completion. As in the typical conclusion of the *Bildungsroman*, Armstrong overcomes obstacles, reaches maturity, and contemplates the promise of future success. Apprised of Armstrong's growing fame with the Fate Marable band and the Tuxedo Brass Band, Oliver incorporates Armstrong into his musical family:

"Gee, son, I'm really proud of you," Joe said. "You've been in some really fast company since I last saw you."

The expression on his face proved that he was still in a little wonderment as to whether I was good enough to play with him and his boys. But he did not say so. All he said was: "Have a seat, son, we're going to do our show. You might as well stick around and see what's happening because you start work tomorrow night."

"Yes sir," I said. (233)

Oliver brings his protégé home after the performance, sealing the paternal connection over a home-cooked dinner with his wife and stepdaughter and earning Armstrong's filial-type loyalty. "They were a happy family," Armstrong writes, "and I became one of them" (234). For all its simplicity, this closing scene's significance cannot be overstated: while Armstrong's birth father abandons him twice and disdains him for being another mouth to feed, "Papa" Oliver graciously brings Louis (a/k/a "Dippermouth," a/k/a "Satchelmouth") to the table and makes him a member of the family unconditionally. Professionally, Armstrong reaches his long-promised goal. "I had hit the big time," Armstrong concludes. "I was up North with the greats. I was playing with my idol, the King, Joe Oliver. My boyhood dream had come true at last" (240).

In an interview excerpted in Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff's oral history of early jazz, *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya*, Armstrong provides an epilogue to *Satchmo*, linking his acceptance into Oliver's band with a larger domestic reunion:

Speaking of [Chicago's] Lincoln Gardens, I had been playing there about two or three months, when one night, just about as we were getting ready to hit the show, we all noticed a real stout lady, with bundles in her hands, cutting across the dance floor. To my surprise, it was my mother May Ann. The funny thing about it is that King Oliver had been kidding me that he was my stepfather, for years and years. When he saw May Ann (tee hee) he didn't know her. We kind of stalled the show so I could greet my dear mother, with a great big kiss

of course. Then I said to her, “Mamma, what on earth are you doing up here in Chicago?” May Ann said, “Lawd, chile, somebody came to New Orleans and told me that you were up here in the North awfully low sick and starving to death.” I told mother, “Aw, Mamma, how could I starve when I’m eating at King Oliver’s house every day...”

(105, spellings unchanged from the original)

Growing up in New Orleans, Armstrong develops from living spontaneously, without a father’s influence, to maturity, as he picks up bits of fatherly wisdom and guidance from Peter Davis and the older generation of jazz musicians, all the while receiving protection and unconditional love from Mayann. But only when he finds his place in King Oliver’s band and introduces his beloved mother to his adoring “stepfather” does he achieve closure. (Armstrong himself underscored the scene’s importance when he read this scene aloud at the conclusion of the 1956 documentary *Satchmo the Great* and its accompanying soundtrack.) With this tidy, sentimental description of domestic reunion and success, Armstrong closes the book on the mastery of his world through New Orleans idioms. In a 1966 self-penned feature for *Life* magazine he retells the scene to similar effect. A distressed Mayann makes the long, costly trip from New Orleans after “some cat told her I was stranded in Chicago” (“Growing” 37). Armstrong relishes the chance to put her fears to rest and show Mayann the spoils of his wealth and notoriety. “I used to take Mama cabareting, and we’d get soused together. Used to have a very nice time” (“Growing” 38). Mayann soon

collects her belongings in New Orleans and moves to Chicago to share an apartment with Armstrong and his new wife, pianist Lil Hardin.

The former Little Louis completes the domestic circle here, in a reconstructed, blended family where, for the first time, patriarchal and matriarchal influences are in balance, with matrimony exerting its own centripetal force. Armstrong's discovery of a home in the urban north with a fellow jazz musician is significant for the manner in which it rebuts stereotypes of the jazz life. "Regarded as an epidemic of moral anarchy," Madhu Dubey writes, "jazz became the prime signifier of a new urban culture that was perceived as threatening to social stability and order" (300). In portraying domestic tranquility with his adoptive "Papa," Armstrong counters this presumption of familial disorder, as well as his ability to assimilate into the modern city by parlaying cutting-edge music to a culturally aware audience.

Allegedly, manager Joe Glaser insisted that Armstrong end *Satchmo's* narrative with his 1922 debut in Chicago, so a sequel could be written that would finesse the contours of his early professional career, including his encounters with organized-crime figures (Giddins, *Satchmo* 16). If true, the rough-around-the-edges Glaser made an uncharacteristically brilliant and sensitive aesthetic choice. By the end of *Satchmo*, the young Armstrong has achieved redemption by "fixing" his broken home, affirming the love of his mother while being incorporated into his surrogate father's family. Armstrong has mastered the improvisational art of living by one's wits and conquered every aesthetic and social challenge New Orleans has put in his way. Therefore, he is authorized at twenty-one, the age of majority, to

leave home and seek his fortune in the big city on his own terms. By cutting his narrative short and not recounting his subsequent successes, Armstrong cannily avoids any display of immodesty.

While a book-length sequel to *Satchmo* was never completed, Armstrong wrote prolifically until his death in 1971, and often returned to the subject of the first twenty-one years of his life to make small emendations to his previous narrative. The details of how Louis attained musicianship would shift slightly with each retelling. In a later version titled “Satchmo Says,” Armstrong begins his musical journey with church singing at the age of ten, followed by quartet singing. Omitting any mention of the tin horns or the coal cart, he enters the Colored Waifs’ Home with no instrumental background. Instead of tambourine, Mr. Davis starts Louis on the marching drum before transitioning to alto horn, trombone, then cornet. “I learnt just that fast,” Armstrong declares. Inconsistencies aside, Armstrong’s ultimate endpoint and message remain the same; in the parade through the Third Ward, Armstrong charms the sporting crowd and collects enough money for new instruments for the band, though not uniforms (Jones and Chilton 208). In retelling his story for *Life* magazine in 1966, Armstrong only inches the narrative along; unlike *Satchmo*, he does acknowledge his marriage to Lil Hardin in this account and briefly covers his experiences in Chicago. In every iteration of his life story written after *Satchmo*, Armstrong focused his attentions on his childhood, portraying his years of informal education as a picaresque adventure. The “happy ending” that concludes every successive retelling occurs when he joins Joe Oliver’s band, achieves regional

notoriety, and makes a splash in the then semi-underground world of jazz, rather than when he earns worldwide fame and fortune.

AUTHORSHIP AND CITIZENSHIP

In contrast to W.C. Handy, Armstrong did not use his autobiography as a platform to claim his allegiance to the nation and the core ideals of nationalism. However, his depiction of African Americans' northern migration and the opportunities that supposedly awaited at the end of that journey implied that he placed his trust in advancement and justice. Through both its artistry and its infectious energy, jazz challenged exclusivist notions of what qualified as entertainment and culture. During the Cold War, Armstrong was valorized in mainstream culture as a model of citizenship. A 1955 *New York Times* article identified jazz as "America's secret sonic weapon" and the globe-trotting Armstrong the nation's "most effective ambassador" (Belair 240). The *Times* made no mention of race, subsuming Armstrong in the great melting pot while co-opting his music as proof of American exceptionalism. Recasting Armstrong's creolized New Orleans music as the product of an undifferentiated national culture, the *Times* critic concluded, "nobody plays jazz like an American" (241). As Penny M. Von Eschen delineates in *Satchmo Blows Up the World*, tours by top jazz musicians arranged by the U.S. State Department were designed to counter depictions of American racism abroad and forge political and cultural relationships with African, Middle Eastern, and Asian nations. This ambitious cultural-exchange program was launched in spite

of jazz's innate protest against the social order (3–4). Armstrong's deft balancing of cultural adventurism and civic virtue made him a natural fit for the program; fans dubbed him "Ambassador Satch" long before he was tapped for official duty.

As the United States' jazz emissary to the world, Armstrong was called upon to reenact elements of his boyhood persona in introducing American music to other cultures. For example, parades seemed to follow Armstrong everywhere he went. Commencing his first tour of Africa in 1955, an impromptu procession broke out as he and his band disembarked at a British Gold Coast airport, resulting in what journalists called, with an understandable measure of hyperbole, "the greatest paean of welcome [the city of] Accra had ever known" (Von Eschen 59; Giddins, *Satchmo* 161). Here, Armstrong "bent" social strictures without breaking them, just as he did in Storyville half a lifetime earlier, using music to reinforce the social order.

Back home, amid the resistance to Jim Crow and the resultant pushback by segregationists, Armstrong refused to make pronouncements about the South's entrenched racial codes. When questioned about issues such as segregation, Armstrong delivered a stock answer, "I don't dive into politics," coupled with an enigmatic (critics might say buffoonish) smile (Jones and Chilton 218). In early 1957, a concert by Armstrong and his All-Stars in Knoxville, Tennessee, nearly ended in tragedy when a bomb was thrown at the theater, allegedly from a member of the local White Citizens Council, with the intention of disrupting the show and injuring members of the integrated audience (Giddins, *Satchmo* 160). To the press, Armstrong dismissed the incident as insignificant.

However, his publicly apolitical stance shifted dramatically in the wake of the standoff between state and federal authorities during the integration of public schools in Little Rock, Arkansas, in September 1957. Segregationist governor Orval Faubus defied the Supreme Court's decision in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case to end "separate but equal" education by keeping schools segregated and mobilizing the Arkansas National Guard to prevent nine African American students from entering Little Rock Central High School. Armstrong took Faubus's defiance as a personal affront, and responded with an unprecedentedly blunt and open political statement. A reporter backstage with Armstrong in North Dakota overheard Armstrong inveigh against institutionalized racism: "The way they're treating my people in the South, the government can go to hell" (Bergreen 471). Armstrong was doubly outraged by President Eisenhower's slow reaction against the segregationists, and charged that Governor Faubus and his ilk were overstepping their bounds and "trying to run the federal government ("Nation's" 1). In his uncharacteristically public expression of anger, Armstrong concluded, "It's getting almost so bad, a colored man hasn't got any country" (Giddins, *Satchmo* 163). The publication of his remarks, coupled with Armstrong's sudden cancellation of a State Department-sponsored goodwill tour to Russia, brought him the most negative publicity of his career. Reactionary editorial columnists suggested a boycott of Armstrong's concerts, though it never materialized. However, Armstrong's stature among African American public figures was reflected in both the number of celebrities who came to Armstrong's defense and the forcefulness of their support. Lena Horne, Eartha Kitt, and Jackie Robinson publicly

concurred with Armstrong's condemnation of the action, even as they expressed respect for Eisenhower. Robinson noted that Armstrong's frustration with "states' rights" politics was "a feeling that is becoming rampant among Negroes....Now the Negroes are beginning to stand up and be counted" ("Nation's" 2). Ultimately, the successful integration of Central High defused the controversy.

While Armstrong's emphatic denunciation of Jim Crow has passed into legend, few historians have noted how Armstrong used life writing to move beyond the incident and "rehabilitate" his public image. Simply put, Armstrong wrote his way out of controversy, employing his ever-present typewriter as an improvisational tool. First, he made amends with President Eisenhower in a widely quoted telegram: "If you decide to walk into the schools with the little colored kids, take me along, Daddy. God Bless You" (Bergreen 472). Here Armstrong rhetorically turned on his heels and improvised a viewpoint markedly different from the one he expressed days earlier, claiming that the president was "two faced" and had "no guts," seemingly content to watch African American schoolchildren get assaulted and robbed of their civil rights (Bergreen 471). Rather obsequiously, Armstrong's "jazzy" argot in the telegram addressed Eisenhower as a friend, leader, even emancipator. As "Daddy" to the "little colored kids," Eisenhower was flattered with one of Armstrong's favored honorifics but characterized, rather naively, as a man of action, rather than protector of the status quo.

In a co-written article published in the May 1961 issue of *Ebony*, titled "Daddy, The Country Sure Has Changed!" Armstrong put a positive spin on the post-

Brown program of “deliberate speed” integration. From the point of view of the seasoned traveling musician of no fixed ideology, Armstrong’s article offered a progress report of sorts on race relations in the United States. Of course, Armstrong at this late stage in his career enjoyed a unique, and not entirely representative, positionality. While he did tour with a racially integrated band, their music was grounded in nostalgia and cultural consensus, and offered listeners an escape from the emerging trend in jazz toward social awareness and an uncompromising stance informed by the civil rights movement.³⁹ As one historian notes, even the most avowed segregationists seemed torn between their political stance and their sentimental enjoyment of Armstrong’s familiar music (Daniel, *Lost* 166–167).

The essay’s unctuous title aside, Armstrong and co-author David Dachs noted the hypocrisies of the half-integrated towns on the American landscape, and the difficulties raised by desegregated concert halls. Armstrong lamented the prevailing ban on interracial groups in New Orleans, which effectively kept Armstrong and his All-Stars away from the city through most of the 1950s and 1960s. (Armstrong’s last segregated performance in New Orleans was in 1952; he only returned to play in 1965, after the local ban was rescinded by force of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.) Now sixty years old, Armstrong represented himself as both a seasoned traveler and just “a kid in Storyville, working on a coal cart by day, playing cornet at night” (“Daddy”

³⁹ For context, Armstrong declared “Daddy, The Country Sure Has Changed!” to *Ebony*’s readership the year after Max Roach’s group recorded *We Insist!: Freedom Now Suite* and the year Ornette Coleman’s *Free Jazz* and John Coltrane’s *The Avant-Garde* were released.

81). Such a characterization conveniently allowed him to slip the bonds of political commitment. On tour, he could be “just” a musician, playing for the delight of the general public; here, the avuncular Satchmo who refused to “dive into politics” made his return.

Rhetorically, Armstrong presents the progress of civil rights in diachronic fashion; as a touring musician, he sees the same towns and cities once a year, and detects slow and steady progress with each visit. He laments the “old devil prejudice” and detects more of it in the South than in other regions, but blames acts of overt racism on individual attitudes rather than institutionalized structures. Events like the Little Rock showdown, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the Greensboro sit-in go unmentioned. Instead, Armstrong boasts that his band can now perform at southern universities’ dances and proms (including those held at the University of Arkansas, which Armstrong parenthetically calls “Faubus country”). In keeping with his lifelong fascination with food and drink, Armstrong declares that the white sons of the South who dance to Armstrong’s music now regularly invite him and his band to eat with them at fraternity houses and imbibe with them at keg parties (86). “These same society people,” Armstrong writes, “may go around the corner and lynch a Negro. But while they’re listening to our music, they don’t think about trouble” (86). Armstrong’s proud assertion that his music can soothe the savage lyncher’s breast, read under the surface, points to the low expectations the older Armstrong had for interracial social equality. Arguably, it also betrays a certain cynicism: as a musician who has ingratiated himself with most white audiences during decades of brutal

white-on-black violence, Armstrong, or, more accurately, Satchmo can tour the South with relative ease, entertain all paying customers, and skip town before the seemingly inevitable white-supremacist violence begins. Armstrong's essay places hope in gradual advancement, the type he witnessed on tour from the perspective of a celebrity. His conversational discursive style represents a swift, and perhaps too abrupt, switch from the righteous anger he displayed after the Little Rock incident. The readership of *Ebony* could be excused from feeling that the progress Armstrong celebrated in the article had severe limitations in its depth and reach.

Despite Armstrong's immense popularity, there were many in the mainstream who simply missed the point of his improvisational citizenship and skillful navigation through a segregated culture. *Time* magazine's 1971 obituary of Armstrong overflowed with the same type of patronizing, plainly wrong assessments that Rudy Vallee interjected into *Swing That Music* decades earlier. The anonymous *Time* scribe characterized jazz as "a disreputable mix of African, Spanish, French and Protestant revivalist musical influences that would mature into a uniquely American idiom" and likened Armstrong's voice to "a wheelbarrow crunching its way up a gravel driveway" ("Last" 34). In keeping with the anachronistic mischaracterization of jazz as primitive music, the writer made no mention of Armstrong's musical innovations or work as cultural ambassador for the United States, yet included asides on the musician's "glossy face and keyboard-size grin" and "minstrel-show appearance and jolly-fat personality" (34–35). The obituary ticked off the more lurid elements of *Satchmo*, such as his mother's possible foray into prostitution and Louis's

incident with the pistol on New Year's, but made no suggestion that Armstrong heroically lifted himself out of New Orleans's Battlefield through his music or a remarkable, innate sense of resourcefulness.

A more fitting epitaph for Louis Armstrong may be found in the first verse of the traditional spiritual "How I Got Over": "My soul looks back and wonders/ How I got over." "How I got over" connotes three similar but distinct meanings: to take advantage, as a hustler would; to succeed, especially in the commercial realm; and to transcend. In Gerald Early's analysis, "the power and reach of the phrase 'How I got over,' a phrase used by both black preachers and black hustlers, [represents] the autobiographical summing up of both the sacred life and the profane life. 'How I got over' is the sign of the underground victory, the rebel victory that is not simply enduring one's adversities but outslipping them" ("Hero" 382). Few of the actions in *Satchmo* really qualify as "outslipping"; Armstrong rarely takes advantage of others in need, and he reaches his endpoint—his "boyhood dream" of playing music with Joe Oliver's band in Chicago—not by some amorphous talent but through tireless work and self-sufficiency. Likewise, the art of "getting over" means much more than the accumulation of money and acclaim. Rather, it denotes the cultivation of a personal and artistic mastery within the boundaries of the wider culture, whose habits and regulations appear puzzling, if not inexplicable, to the outsider. Overcoming the obstacles of Jim Crow through the unlikely medium of music underscores just why the pursuit of musical mastery has been a recurrent theme through countless literary and autobiographical narratives. Music has the ability to trespass over boundaries

and seep through societal structures, paying no heed to hierarchies, racial and class barriers, or national borders. Those that follow the music most diligently and master its powers leave temporality behind and find transcendence.

CONCLUSION

Cleveland Amory's *New York Times* review of *Satchmo* declared that "Louis and his Storyville are something not only for the jazz but for the social historians" (7). Such an assessment signaled that by mid-century Storyville, or at least the idea of it, had been rehabilitated in the public imagination, due in large part to its association with Louis Armstrong. What was once dismissed as an unsavory underworld, barely within the bounds of the nation, was now deemed worthy of study and commemoration, even with many of its rougher edges left unrefined. Containing multitudes, Armstrong's music and personality ably bridged the gap between the licentiousness of the former red-light district and the propriety of Cold War culture. Armstrong himself described the sweep of his life story in the simplest of terms: "My whole life has been happiness. Through all the misfortunes....I did not plan anything. Life was there for me, and I accepted it" (Berrett, *Companion*, xiv).

In Armstrong's pursuit of happiness, improvisation serves as the leitmotif in all of his endeavors, musical and otherwise: as an adaptable young laborer, a provider for his family, a positive influence in the Waifs' Home, and as a budding musician who fuses tradition with modernity. As author, Armstrong accomplishes what critic Gary Giddins identifies in his musicianship: "Using mild embellishment and bold

improvisation, he rephrases, restates, amplifies, and finally re-creates the melody” (*Satchmo* 37–38). In this case, the pre-existing “melodies” Armstrong shapes to his own ends are the master narratives of the self-made-man autobiography and the *Bildungsroman*. In an ironic turn of events, the picaresque *Satchmo*, with its satire on the pretensions of the rags-to-riches story, says more about Armstrong’s development of sensibility and principles than the hollow, sanitized version of the American Dream constructed for him in *Swing That Music*.

At a place in his career where he could have profited from having another formulaic American success story written for him, Louis Armstrong assumed the privileges of authorship denied him twenty years earlier and created a multi-layered life story that subverted the pieties of the self-made-man tale. Most interestingly, Armstrong rejected the temptation to celebrate his extraordinarily successful public life, focusing on his roots in the area around the long-since-demolished Storyville, a space defined by African American aesthetics and expressed in modes ranging from music to foodways. Without pandering for street credibility, Armstrong recounts the sometimes violent way of life in the red-light district with a disarming fondness and clarity. While detailing his early, “improvisational” years and celebrating his love of earthly delights, Armstrong’s autobiography ultimately reinforces normative values—family, friendship, hard work, and achievement—in an unlikely setting, a strategy that not only rang true for the author, but set the standard for many future jazz autobiographies.

Most impressively, *Satchmo* reads today as a forecast of the civil rights movement, a text that can be read in juxtaposition with midcentury African American “protest” literature like Wright’s *Black Boy* and “Big Boy Leaves Home.”

Armstrong, like W.C. Handy, reveals how the popularity of African American music allowed its practitioners to maneuver around many of the exclusionary barriers to citizenship. In retelling their stories, they sought to demonstrate the extent of their strivings for civil rights and recognition as citizens at a time when equal status was not guaranteed by law or through judicial or police enforcement. Their musical expressions extended this desire for equality and justice beyond temporal borders.

CHAPTER IV

CRESCENT CITY BLUES

In the historiography of twentieth-century American popular music, New Orleans and the Mississippi have been set apart as key origin points, sites where the music developed in semi-isolation among a dedicated (and competitive) cohort of musicians who arrived North during the years of the Great Migration fully formed as artists. Musicians and their writing collaborators, from W.C. Handy in the early 1940s to bluesman David “Honeyboy” Edwards in the late 1990s, have furthered this narrative in their own self-retrospectives. In the intervening years, musicians from New Orleans and the Mississippi Delta region have based their social observations and first-person histories on the local, emphasizing their respective homebases’ cultural differences. Their written works demonstrate that their achievements did not just happen anywhere, or in a homogenous, purely geographically defined region understood as “The South,” but rather amidst rich local cultures with unique cultural environments, subpopulations and obstacles.

Both New Orleans and the Delta boasted a nearly unimaginable concentration of skilled and innovative musicians, as well as a discriminating local audience who granted both fledging and seasoned players varied opportunities to perform but always demanded excellence. Musicians from New Orleans and the Delta have in common an awareness of history and lineage and a conscious sense of cultural preservation toward their vernacular music. In the vast majority of cases, musicians identify their music-making as a craft, steeped in a local tradition, and trace their

music back to a tradition or a singular influence or mentor with whom they served an apprenticeship.

Through this informal commemoration, New Orleans's musically rich red-light district Storyville lives on in legend, transcribed into oral history and finessed in written narrative and musical tribute. Autobiographical accounts by six New Orleans musicians who came of age in the "Storyville era" (1897–1917) provide a fascinating example of crosstalk through life writing. Intriguingly, each account complements the others like individual parts in a written musical arrangement, even when a "dissonance" arises between individual testimonies. Louis Armstrong, writing from the dual perspectives of acclaimed musician and international superstar, "takes the lead" and describes the jazz milieu from the inside out, with only incidental references to other musicians besides himself and his mentor Joe Oliver. Pianist Jelly Roll Morton and reedman Sidney Bechet devote much more space in their accounts to the attainment of musicianship and the unique interactions between local players. Three lesser-known New Orleans musicians, drummer Baby Dodds, bassist Pops Foster, and guitarist Danny Barker, dialogically function as a "rhythm section," providing essential background while adding in characteristic touches. Less invested in promoting a narratively cohesive image of New Orleans and its music, their accounts often contradict both their better-known colleagues' autobiographies and the received wisdom perpetuated by younger historians to offer a subjective, local perspective.

Historically, New Orleans's musical culture was shaped by unique demographics that set it apart from the prevailing southern hegemony; the city by law and custom promoted precise racial categorizations and castes (Barlow 26). While the majority of the South relied on the "one-drop rule" to define race and affirm the privileges of whiteness, New Orleans was culturally enlivened by both light- and dark-skinned Creoles who inhabited separate castes and parallel cultures, informed by their French and Spanish ancestry. Creoles of color in New Orleans were avowedly a distinct entity; as Thomas Brothers underscores, they identified themselves neither as African nor American. Grasping to their French heritage, an identity rarely considered in the all-or-nothing legal construction of race during Jim Crow, Creoles set themselves apart from much of the jazz community in their language, vocations, dress, and preference for genteel parlor music (Brothers 173). The vestiges of French and Spanish culture gave many Creoles distinct class privileges, with many enjoying educational and professional advantages that the vast majority of people of color in the United States were denied (see Litwack, *Been* 535). By the 1850s, new arrivals, especially from Ireland, challenged Creoles' prominence in the city, with many of them either indifferent or hostile to Creoles' language, culture, or social standing (see Mitchell 39–40). By 1910, legal decisions regarding segregation in Louisiana led to the grouping of Creoles and African Americans under the designation of "color" rather than ethnicity, collapsing the tripartite structure of race that undergirded social relations in the city by bringing New Orleans in line with the type of whites-over-blacks segregation affirmed in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (Hersch 100).

Equally influential in the city's cultural history, though, was the occasional relaxation of racial hegemony, and the fascination the upper echelons of society had with African-derived music. Dating back to 1817, a full century before the closing of the Storyville district, Congo Square represented New Orleans authorities' attempt to impose spatial and temporal limits on African American music, dance, and social life. Dancing was restricted to the boundaries of the Square, during daylight hours every Sunday (Hazzard-Gordon 38). According to historian Bryan Wagner, these restrictions were enforced by the gun, as the beginning and end of each Sunday's festivities were marked by shots fired by an overseeing city police officer (*Disturbing* 269). Despite this armed surveillance, Congo Square was a remarkable anomaly in the South; in other jurisdictions, such as Charleston, South Carolina, enslaved peoples' Sunday meetings were banned by ordinance in the early 1700s (Radano, *Lying* 69).

The legendary dimensions of Congo Square can largely be traced to one description, written in February 1819 by the British-born architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe upon observing the Sunday afternoon activities. In the account, Latrobe gravitates to the Square, curious as to the nature of the "noise" that breaks through the calm of the Sabbath; facetiously, he assumes from afar that the clamor arises from "horses trampling on a wooden floor" (49). Though unmoved by the music and dance he perceives once he reaches Congo Square, degrading it at once as "brutally savage" and "dull and stupid," Latrobe notes the centrality of music in the assembly (Sublette 276). Three musician-elders captivate and energize an audience of five or

six hundred, by Latrobe's estimation. The elders lead a call-and-response song as groups of men and women surround the musicians, dancing in circular patterns. The use of large cylindrical drums alongside a string instrument fashioned from a gourd attests to the transplantation and blending of once-separate West African musical traditions in the Americas (Sublette 275). Though Latrobe does not understand the melding of cultures he sees, preferring to collapse it all into a monolithic culture imported from Africa, or appreciate the music being made (using "noise" as an epithet), he does recognize the perpetuation of expressive traditions in Congo Square, unintentionally yet effectively conveying the communal, spiritual life that music engenders.

Anticipating the relaxation of prevailing laws and customs in the city's officially policed carnivalesque events such as Mardi Gras, the city's slave-owning establishment seemed to have tolerated music and dance at Congo Square, despite numerous slave uprisings in the U.S. South and the Caribbean in the first half of the 19th century, and despite a clause in Louisiana's *Code noir* that penalized owners who "allow[ed] his or her said slaves the liberty to dance during the night" (Roach 252). Though never officially disestablished, Congo Square died out as a meeting place by the early 1850s, as New Orleans grew as a slave market for the South and withheld privileges for enslaved people accordingly. But vestiges remained, and by the 1880s Sunday dances returned to the outskirts of the city, with former slaves at the center continuing local folkways (Asbury 252).

The impressions of these latter-day celebrations published by novelist George Washington Cable in 1886 mainly continued in the Latrobe vein, but reflected changing musical influences in New Orleans. According to Cable, while drums still predominated the proceedings, the gourd/string instrument had evolved into a banjo, a device like the West African kalimba (or “thumb piano”) was present, and basic European instruments like the jaw harp and triangle were incorporated into the free-form music. A single song leader, whom Cable characterized as “Black Hercules,” led the performance (Floyd, *Power* 36). Most significantly, participants sang and chanted in a French-Creole patois (Stearns 52–54). Cable’s description inadvertently attested to the creolization of music on the margins of New Orleans, and its ready absorption not only of West African idioms but also Spanish and French influences. Subsequent retellings of the Congo Square legend from the 1930s on folded in fanciful elements of the primitive, including “frenzied” music, “immodest” dancing between men and women, and the open practice of voodoo (see Asbury 242–244; Huber 207). Such projections attempted to characterize Congo Square as the forerunner of the licentious culture fully expressed in Storyville.

SIDNEY BECHET – *TREAT IT GENTLE*

Sidney Bechet commenced his autobiography *Treat It Gentle* (published posthumously in 1960) by rebutting such presumptions and bearing witness to jazz’s true heritage. He begins his narrative *in medias res*, as if already engaged in a dialogue with the reader: “You know there’s people, they got the wrong idea of Jazz.

They think it's all that red-light business. But that's not so" (1). As a veteran musician, Bechet was commonly asked to speak on behalf of his New Orleans cohort and to augment the more lurid depictions of Storyville and its environs. However, Bechet resists any impulse to exploit any connection to Storyville, real or imagined. Instead, Bechet harkens back to Congo Square, where he claims his grandfather Omar was the central figure, carrying on sacred African traditions of music and dance.

Writing in commemoration of both Congo Square and 1910s New Orleans in the late 1950s, Bechet laments the intervening changes in the perception toward musicians that accompanies mass popularity: "A man now, he's not just a musicianer any more. He's got himself a name and he's got to perform up to that name....His own reputation demands that he become a performer as well as a musicianer. He's got to be a personality" (176). Given that Bechet had made well over a hundred recordings at this stage and enjoyed veneration from European audiences, his ambivalence to fame is curious. One might detect some jealousy directed toward his peer Louis Armstrong, whose formidable instrumental skills had been subsumed by his more "pop" vocals and constant presence on radio, film, and television.⁴⁰ Bechet may also have been making a sly dig at Dixieland music, an attenuated form of New

⁴⁰ Bechet's "secondary" status to Armstrong was long running and can be seen, for example, in the 1938 city guide to New Orleans assembled by the Federal Writers' Project. Though the authors treated jazz rather cursorily in the "Music" chapter, Armstrong was afforded a full paragraph, with his instrumental and vocal techniques singled out for praise. Bechet, on the other hand, was mentioned only among a list of "Other New Orleans Negro composers and exponents of jazz," some of whom, like Joe Oliver and Jelly Roll Morton, were significantly older and had fallen out of favor with younger listeners (137).

Orleans jazz marked by groups' standardized costume dress and contrived showmanship.

Bechet's irascibility may also have been directed at younger musicians, whom he perceived to have a diminished respect for tradition. Bechet's somewhat testy tone likely grew out of the exacting standards he held fellow musicians to, even on one-off "pickup" gigs. As one latter-day observer wrote of Bechet's bandstand manner, "[M]usic to him was a skill to be taught, to be learned. There was a right way to play, a right way to breathe, a right set of chords, a right tempo for each tune. The job was simply to learn the right way and then, secure in one's craft, one could go before the public" (Chilton, *Sidney* 207). This exactitude and allegiance to "the right way to play" cut both ways for Bechet. Many perceived his unbending standards of musicianship as an expression of bitterness toward younger jazz musicians who dispensed with the previous generation's "rules." At the same time, Bechet's traditionalism earned him the respect of a second generation of listeners, especially in Europe, too young to have experienced 1920s and 1930s jazz firsthand. Though he began his fifth decade as a musician close to bankruptcy, by the time he began dictating the stories that would become *Treat It Gentle* to his amanuenses, he was enjoying a commercial upswing that would continue up until his death in 1960. Amid his fervent cult following, Bechet was declared the "King of New Orleans" and acknowledged as a repository of New Orleans's musical styles, traditions, and history (Chilton, *Sidney* 281).

In antedating his story to antebellum New Orleans, Bechet's narrative constructs what Houston A. Baker calls the "ancestral matrix," a set of music-making and survival skills collected from slavery to the present day (*Blues 2*). Bechet writes, "My story goes a long way back...It goes back further than I had anything to do with. My music is like that...I got it from something inherited just like the stories my father gave down to me. [...] And all my life I've been trying to explain about something, something I understand—the part of me that was there before I was" (4).⁴¹ The main story passed down to Bechet is that of "Omar," a charismatic, musically gifted African prince captured and brought to New Orleans, who Bechet claims as both his grandfather and spiritual ancestor. Through Omar, Bechet fuses the myths of Congo Square and the rebellious slave of Louisiana lore, Bras-Coupé. Bras-Coupé's legend can be traced back to the 1830s, when a fugitive slave named Squire (or Squier) noted for his musical and marksman skills lost an arm resisting arrest (see Asbury 245). Subsequently renamed Bras-Coupé, the fugitive hid out in the swamps surrounding New Orleans with a band of fellow outlaws. Depending on the retelling of the legend, Bras-Coupé surreptitiously returned to the city either to see his wife or to rob and pillage plantations. These retellings were predictably determined by race; African Americans' versions of the story depicted him as a charismatic hero resistant to slavery's all-encompassing rule, while the local white conservative *Times-Picayune* newspaper described the original Bras-Coupé as "a semi-devil and a fiend

⁴¹ Bechet's attention to the origins and continuation of jazz is reflected in the provisional title he chose when working on his autobiography in the 1950s, *Where Did It Come From?* (Chilton, *Sidney* 291).

in human shape” (Asbury 245). Nearly all iterations of the tale placed Bras-Coupé at Congo Square at some point, partly to situate the story temporally, partly to illustrate his strength and charisma through the Square’s defining idioms of music and dance.

By linking his own music to the Congo Square of Bras-Coupé and by extension to Africa, Bechet becomes New Orleans music’s historical consciousness. For this reason, critics such as Samuel Charters have likened Bechet to a West African *griot* for artistically representing and perpetuating the story of Omar’s rebellion (*Roots* 29). More than just a “wise man,” the *griot* assumes multiple discursive positions within his community: historian, critic, soothsayer, storyteller. When Bechet narrates the story of Omar, he assumes similar artistic license, telling a multi-layered story set in the past to illuminate issues in the present and set the stage for the future.

Because of its intricate plot and centrality to Bechet’s self-presentation, the revision of the Bras-Coupé legend through the story of Omar deserves an extensive summary. Bechet represents his grandfather Omar as a renowned singer, dancer, and drummer at the Sunday gatherings at Congo Square. With his natural grasp of music, Omar becomes the object of a personality cult; “Everyone liked him,” Bechet asserts, even his master. Though enslaved, Omar is described by Bechet as “a free slave,” with few restrictions on his movement or actions. Within Congo Square, Omar exercises full authority, leading the assembled slaves in improvisational music that anticipates jazz. Interestingly, Bechet turns the discourse of critics like Latrobe inside out when describing the music created at Congo Square. The percussion-driven

music “was primitive and it was crude, but down at the bottom of it [...] it had the same thing there is at the bottom of ragtime” (8). Whereas Latrobe finds “primitive” music to be evidence of African Americans’ failure to assimilate to European culture, Bechet identifies the drumming, call-and-response singing, and free-form dancing as the foundation for a new, hybridized style of expression in its earliest stages of development. More importantly, music helps rebuild Africans’ identity in the New World. It was, Bechet states simply, “the only thing that couldn’t be taken from them” (30). The labor and energy musicians exert is their own, the value of their music both intangible and inalienable. Omar’s music-making and dancing affirm his subjectivity and dignity in the face of slavery.

Once established as the major figure in Congo Square, Omar tries to win over a shy slave girl named Marie, first with his music and dancing, then through voodoo. They finally meet in secret while her master throws a party in the Big House of his plantation. Upon discovering the pair in the bayou, Marie’s master shoots Omar in the arm. Omar escapes into the swamps, coming upon a group of maroons in hiding. The fugitives attempt to heal Omar’s wounds, but he eventually must have his arm amputated, the fulfillment of one of his prophetic dreams.

Bechet interrupts his narration with free indirect discourse from Marie’s master’s point of view, expressing his simultaneous feelings of affection, lust, and ownership of Marie. Confused by his own actions and jealous of Omar, the master lies to the lynch mob that inevitably forms. When the master tells them that a “buck” has raped one of his “girls,” the posse jumps to the conclusion that the master’s

daughter Eveline has been raped and sets off to lynch Omar in defense of southern white womanhood. (Under Louisiana's *Code noir*, the penalty for rape of a white woman was death [Roach 253]). Though the master admits his lie of omission to his wife, he makes no such confession to his male peers, perpetuating the charade by offering a reward for Omar's capture. Under the complex dynamics and "deep play" of slave ownership, the master goes beyond all bounds of reason to punish Omar for a crime he did not commit, hoping that vigilante "justice" will obscure his wrongdoing and somehow avenge the purity of Marie. The master "didn't care for the truth and he didn't care even for the girl anymore," Bechet writes. "He had to have my grandfather; he had to see him dead if he was to ruin himself doing it" (28). As white men and hunting dogs scour the bayou looking for Omar, field slaves and fugitives alike raise their voices, singing of worry, dread, and trouble. Though gravely injured, Omar rushes to find Marie, in hopes of escaping to New Orleans with her. Omar arrives at a friend's cabin on a nearby plantation and explains his plight, only to have the (unnamed) friend plot a way to find Marie's master, so he may direct him to Omar and receive a reward.

At this point, Bechet delays the representation of the simultaneous pursuits of Omar. In another example of free indirect discourse, he focalizes from the point of view of the mistress of the Big House. As she nurses an ill and distraught Marie, the slave master's wife laments the inevitable tragedy yet to come and wishes circumstances could be different. To cover up his lie, the master plans to marry his daughter Eveline off to a Florida family, leaving his wife further bereft.

Meanwhile, Omar creeps around the Big House and rescues Marie while Omar's friend seeks out the master in hopes of a bounty. When he reveals Omar's nearby location, the posse closes in. Omar races away from the Big House, dodging gunfire, and returns to his supposed friend's cabin, quickly collapsing from exhaustion. Unnerved by the distant sound of guns and an overwhelming sense of dread, the informant shoots and kills Omar as he sleeps. The informant drags Omar's corpse to the Big House, demanding his reward from the master as the mob looks on. Shocked at the sight, Marie's master does nothing; only when his wife threatens to expose his dishonesty does the master own up to his tragic mistakes. Though upset by the duplicity, the mob can do nothing in this situation against one of their own, and eventually scatter. The informant receives no reward for Omar's murder. To make amends, the master buries Omar himself, as mourning slaves sing in Omar's memory, enshrining him as a martyr. Bechet concludes the Omar episode with an image of cultural preservation; slaves mourn Omar's passing by singing and chanting, thereby carrying on his tradition of spontaneous music-making. While Bechet honors the precedent set by his ancestor, he notes that jazz is intertwined with sorrow, with Omar's story giving the music its grounding in tragedy.

Because of the liberties Bechet's narrative takes in presenting multiple characters' points of view and simultaneous actions, the reader can probably gather that the tale of Omar is heavily stylized fiction. As Jürgen Grandt reveals, Sidney Bechet's paternal grandfather Jean Bechet was a free Creole with no possible connection to Congo Square in its prime and no apparent musical skills (7). Bechet's

father, named Omar, was born in 1855, just as Congo Square was being disestablished. This Omar, with the true, tangible tie to Sidney Bechet, was a shoemaker well known in New Orleans's Creole bourgeois circles, who played music for relaxation rather than rebellion (Chilton, *Sidney* 1–3). Similar to Louis Armstrong backdating his date of birth to the first Independence Day of a new century, Sidney Bechet manipulated his genealogy to connect his music-making to its local source and to harness the seductive power of myth.

Clearly, the fictional Omar stands as Bechet's variation on the Bras-Coupé theme and has many similarities to a version of the Bras-Coupé legend collected by Works Project Administration fieldworkers and published in the 1945 volume of Louisiana folktales *Gumbo Ya-Ya*. In this orally transmitted version, a "gigantic mulatto" named Squire sings and performs voodoo rituals in Congo Square. Like Omar, Squire is granted a measure of freedom and mobility by his master. Squire is shot and maimed in an escape attempt, upon which fellow slaves give him the Bras-Coupé moniker. In his new identity, he retreats to the swamps, organizing resistance efforts and regularly eluding capture. With his amazing strength and virility, Bras-Coupé becomes an object of terror and fascination among whites; vigilantes claim their bullets pass through his body, while rumors spread that he consorts with white women. Bras-Coupé miraculously eludes capture until he is cornered by a fisherman in a swamp, who brains the fugitive slave with a heavy blunt object and drags his corpse into the city's public square (Saxon et al. 253–254). As Bryan Wagner notes, Bras-Coupé loomed large as an object of fear and loathing for New Orleans

authorities; through retellings of the legend he became a shape-shifting, composite outlaw who threatened the sense of law and order that existed under the *Code noir* (68–69).

The version George Washington Cable interpolated into his 1880 novel of New Orleans manners *The Grandissimes* introduced elements to the legend that Bechet amplified in “Omar.” In *The Grandissimes*, Bras-Coupé is an African prince, captured and brought to New Orleans in the 1790s. The prince names himself Bras-Coupé out of pure symbolism, referring to the loss his tribe has suffered by his capture, not to any lack or physical wound of his own. Cable’s narrator presents Bras-Coupé as the embodiment of an idea, “the truth that all Slavery is maiming” (171). Bras-Coupé accepts slavery in Louisiana only because he is promised the hand of a beautiful Creole woman, Palmyre, in marriage. After their wedding, Bras-Coupé tastes wine for the first time and immediately strikes back against his enslaved status, beating his overseer, placing a voodoo curse on his master’s plantation, and escaping into the swamps. Bras-Coupé’s curse appears to be effective, as weeds suddenly grow wild on the plantation and choke the crops. Pursued through the swamps in vain by whites and Creoles alike, Bras-Coupé unexpectedly reemerges in Congo Square. Amid what Cable terms the “old barbaric pastimes,” “hideous discords,” and “wildest contortions” of African Americans, Bras-Coupé, emboldened by drink again, executes a phenomenal series of acrobatic dances while playing a tambourine (190). Word spreads about the fugitive’s reappearance, and soon Spanish police apprehend Bras-Coupé in mid-dance with a lasso. Under the prevailing *Code noir*, Bras-Coupé

is punished for his acts of rebellion by being lashed and having both his ear and hamstrings severed. Bras-Coupé is informed on his deathbed that his just-deceased master has forgiven him, yet the maimed, impassive prince refuses to lift his curse on the plantation until just before his own death.

In Cable's melodrama, Bras-Coupé and his curse on the land act as an all-encompassing narrative device whereupon much of the novel's conflict can be placed. Cable's evocation of Bras-Coupé's African nobility gives him a measure of dignity and authority previous versions of the legends lacked. It also conveniently sidesteps the tangled multiracial genealogy underlining the story of the "giant mulatto" Squire. Additionally, Cable folds in elements of romance, artistry, and mastery not found in the Squire version of the legend. Bras-Coupé's passionate pursuit of the Creole Palmyre clearly leads the way to Bechet's Omar/Marie plot and opens up the possibility for the African hero to produce an heir in the Americas, a crucial aspect of the story missing in the folktale.

Cable's Bras-Coupé possesses all the superhuman strength of Squire, but much of it is channeled into music and dance. By making Congo Square the site of Bras-Coupé's reemergence, Cable introduces the theme of cultural recombination. The music heard in Congo Square reflected hybridity, where African styles were in the process of incorporating Spanish, French, Caribbean, and Anglo elements; in Bechet's extrapolated story, Omar serves as a composite character, embodying this syncretism. The African prince's spontaneous dance and music-making illustrates the reemergence of African culture on a new continent, revived as symbolic resistance

against enslavement. By the time Herbert Asbury's highly embellished, popular history *The French Quarter* appeared in 1936, Bras-Coupé's dancing was as much of a heroic attribute as his rebelliousness. Though Cable (a former Confederate army officer) may not have specifically intended the Bras-Coupé tale as a medium for subsequent retellings that made a fugitive slave a hero, he did give the character numerous heroic attributes future authors, like Bechet, could revise and expand.

Summarizing Bechet's "Omar" chapter in his otherwise well researched and even-handed survey *Jazz Masters of New Orleans* (1967), jazz historian Martin Williams follows up a misreading of *Treat It Gentle* with an unusual extrapolation: "Omar was killed by a slaveowner, who, in repentance, freed Bechet's grandmother, kept her as a member of his household and almost as a member of the family, asked her to take his name, Bechet, and gave her an inheritance when he died. With that inheritance, Bechet's father went to an integrated private school, and helped establish his household" (140). Of course, as Bechet tells the story, a fellow slave kills Omar. The slavemaster's remorse is triggered by his cowardice rather than a show of force, but in any case he never manumits his slaves or makes allowances for their futures. In *Treat It Gentle*, it remains unclear what happens to Marie after Omar's murder or exactly how Bechet learned Omar's history. As an after-the-fact narrator, Williams takes it upon himself to tie up some of Bechet's narrative loose ends. But Williams's conclusions do not come from *Treat It Gentle*, further demonstrating how the legend virtually compels each narrator to make value-laden additions to the story, and erase other elements.

Both Bechet's narration and Williams's extra-literary projections illustrate the desire in the early 1960s to bring elements of the Bras-Coupé story into the present. As with countless contemporaneous works of African-American fiction, Omar's story pivots on the trope of the black man framed for the white man's sins. (The popularity of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, also published in 1960, attests to the timeliness of Bechet's concerns.) Yet Omar's death, though sacrificial, does not inscribe him as a victim. Significantly, the white lynch mob cannot capture and kill Omar in Bechet's version, nor do they dismember or dishonor the corpse before the master confesses his untruths. Consequently, Omar stands outside the twinned portrayals of lynching victims found in melodrama: either the "brute" stereotype of racist literature who is punished by the white mob, typically as retaliation for an alleged rape (as in Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman*), or the somewhat shallow, pathos-driven scapegoat figure found in midcentury protest literature. As in some earlier versions of the Bras-Coupé legend, a friend betrays Omar's trust, attempting (and failing) to assume Bras-Coupé's stature and fame (Wagner 70). Omar's death at a fellow slave's hand complicates the simplistic black-white dyad and subtly implicates opportunistic slaves for perpetuating the system by "selling out" members of their community.

Though Bras-Coupé was consistently portrayed as a Janus-faced character, a hero to most African Americans and a "terror" to all others, Omar's power and charisma are channeled into music and dancing that can even enrapture slaveowners (see Wagner 69). Though all the retellings have differences of degree, Bras-Coupé and Omar are distinguished by their capacities as outlaw, culture hero, and patriarch.

Read skeptically, Bechet co-opts the Bras-Coupé legend to reestablish his New Orleans roots during his lengthy period of expatriation and to claim a “purer” lineage than his rivals and contemporaries. As Lawrence Levine argues, Bechet likely internalized the received information of Bras-Coupé and made embellishments in part to elevate his own stature in the New Orleans cultural hierarchy (388–391). Like Preservation Hall, opened in the French Quarter a year after *Treat It Gentle*’s publication, the tale of Omar serves as a readymade construct, a simulacrum of New Orleans’s mythical past, invoking rusticity and romance to compensate for a relatively incomplete history.

Read more graciously, following Houston A. Baker, Jr.’s interpretation of African American cultures in *I Don’t Hate the South*, Bechet’s storytelling parallels the interpolation of fiction in W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, specifically the story “The Coming of John.” By creating and animating emblematic composite characters, both Bechet and Du Bois become authorized to assume the privileges of the storyteller, not least of which is the potential to invoke the heightened senses of fear and pity at the heart of tragedy. Through Bechet’s Omar and Du Bois’s heavily symbolic character Black John, the two authors create sympathetic Icarus figures whose aspirations mirror those of their creators: Omar as a revered musician and cultural hero, Black John as an educated, conscientious bellwether of the post-Reconstruction African American man. Each character’s tragic fate arises from the refusal to “know their place” in a racist society, choosing instead to pursue dignity above and beyond “accommodation.” (Connecting the two authors further, it can be

argued that Bechet held the same conflicting feelings of admiration, jealousy, and righteous scorn toward his more conciliatory rival Louis Armstrong that Du Bois had against Booker T. Washington.)

Sharing the multi-faceted perspective of the organic intellectual and the expatriate, Bechet and Du Bois extend their critique of Jim Crow beyond first-person reportage, representing the suffering of the slave and the sacrificial victim of lynching through fictional techniques, especially inner focalization. Their evocative prose styles lift the discourse. Like the “sorrow songs” exalted by Du Bois in another chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, the narratives seek solace amidst tragedy. In imagining how his great-great-grandmother withstood the constant terror of slavery, Du Bois “reaches back” two hundred years, far beyond what he can know as an evidence-based historian, to invoke the spirituals brought over on the Middle Passage, which are then carried through the generations in order to give him strength (*Souls* 187–188). Likewise, Bechet connects the sacrifice of Omar to his own music-making and identifies his ancestor’s tragedy as a source of his own “sorrow song”: “All the beauty that there’s ever been, it’s moving inside that music. [...] The blues, and the spirituals, and the remembering, and the waiting, and the suffering, and the looking at the sky watching the dark come down—that’s all inside the music” (218).

This solemn commemoration transmogrifies Omar into a fluid spirit, helping animate events in the present. According to Paul Gilroy, “Racism rests on the ability to contain blacks in the present, to repress and to deny the past” (*Ain’t* 12). Bechet’s evocation of Omar counters this repression through reflective descriptions of the past,

which are informed by local oral history and hidden from the mass gaze. By writing an idiosyncratic capsule history of jazz that reaches back to Africa, Bechet situates jazz's roots in a specific time and place, as opposed to those who attempt to co-opt the music by erasing its complex origins. At the same time, "Omar" boldly reappropriates the Bras-Coupé legend in order to compensate for gaps in the archive and a lack of a "paper trail" for his own ancestors, Squire/Bras-Coupé, and by extension all enslaved African Americans. Furthermore, the use of fictional characters and narration interrogates other, even more fantastic accounts of New Orleans's jazz origins. Omar embodies Bechet's desire to revive a usable past through the use of myth and commemorative writing. Bechet's writing, then, functions as an expression of double consciousness and is complicated further by his experiences as an expatriate. As Rudi Blesh notes in the foreword of *Treat It Gentle*'s reissue, Bechet writes the story of Omar in the same spirit that Alex Haley would adopt nearly two decades later in *Roots*, both employing historically based storytelling, "round" characters and novelistic discourse to dramatize their stories and compensate for a history alternately erased and co-opted.

Bechet interprets himself and his artistic progress through the eyes of a fictional ancestor in large part to counter, in Du Bois's words, "a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity," specifically those Bechet addresses in his opening chapter, who disparage jazz's status as art (Du Bois, *Souls* 38; Bechet 1). One of the major tensions undergirding *Treat It Gentle* arises from Bechet's dual status as a traditionalist and a modernist. On the surface, it might appear Bechet simply wants it

both ways, invoking Omar to claim his connection to African musical traditions while also drawing attention to his prominence on the contemporary musical scene, especially among sophisticated European listeners. However, when viewed through Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic, Bechet's stance more aptly embodies "a non-traditional tradition, an irreducibly modern, ex-centric, unstable, and asymmetrical cultural ensemble that cannot be apprehended through the Manichean logic of binary coding" (Gilroy, *Black* 198). Due to the many gaps in his ancestry, Bechet's sense of tradition is permanently and irretrievably fragmented, another example of the "flawed score" that a musician must improve upon and improvise around to create something whole and satisfying.

Of course, many of Bechet's musical and narrative techniques—the recasting of the "primitive" into new idioms, the destabilization of artistic form and content, and the deterritorialized viewpoint of the exile or expatriate—are all elements of High Modernism, yet compatible with his claims to tradition. Instead of approaching tradition and advancement as a binary opposition, which requires him to align with one or the other, Bechet accepts a diasporic sensibility, where space and time are fluid and history informs, rather than impedes, his progress. In his concluding chapter, "It's the Music and the People," Bechet celebrates jazz as a transnational medium, enlivened by those who advance the art form by respecting its origins:

I met many a musicianer in many a place after I struck out from New Orleans, but it was always the same: if they was any good, it was Omar's song they were singing. [...] A musicianer could be playing it

in New Orleans, or Chicago, or New York; he could be playing it in London, in Tunis, in Paris, in Germany. [...] But no matter where it's played, you gotta hear it starting way behind you. There's the drum beating from Congo Square and there's the song starting in a field just over the trees. The good musicianer, he's playing *with* it and he's playing *after* it. (202, italics in original)

Present-day jazz “musicianers,” then, are charged with the solemn task of matching and carrying on “Omar’s song.” Yet with no tangible evidence of the skill exhibited by the musicians of Congo Square, one can only approach the level of past performative excellence that Bechet takes on faith. Consequently, a musician can never be completely assured he or she has mastered the idiom, leaving many to strive endlessly. Without the consolation of history, musicians have to approach so-called traditional music both synchronically (“The good musicianer, he’s playing *with* it...”) and diachronically (“...and he’s playing *after* it”).

Upon those striving musicians, Omar exerts an animate force stretching beyond his own putative place and time. Following Kathleen Brogan, Adam Gussow identifies the “Omar” chapter as an example of a “haunted text” (*Seems* 187). In such texts, “‘floating’ otherworldly beings are themselves the vehicles by which the ‘dead and maimed’ are remembered, and confrontations with ghosts are a way for peoples to ground themselves anew” (Brogan 16). Certainly the “dead and maimed” Omar exerts a force in the text, one so pervasive that Bechet brings him to the fore of his narrative. Bechet channels the spirit of his symbolic antecedent by frequently

referring to unadulterated African American music as echoes of “Omar’s song.” Yet in “haunted texts” such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, the dead take on physical as well as psychic shape, and act upon the living. In *Treat It Gentle*, Omar’s death causes no trauma for Bechet, nor is he charged, explicitly or implicitly, with avenging his ancestor’s betrayal and murder. While Bechet notes that the sacrifice of Omar was “an awful early beginning” for New Orleans music (a description that forecasts *Beloved*’s injunction that the haunting tale was “not a story to pass on”), the presence of the dead and maimed ancestor animates, rather than besets, the musician’s endeavors, working as a spirit capable of benevolence and encouragement rather than an uncontrollable demonic force. For a “traditional modernist” like Bechet, history, even one marked by enslavement and cultural erasure, is less a nightmare from which he is trying to awake than a fable that changes shape with every retelling without losing its essential moral.

REVIVING STORYVILLE

Though betraying deep ambivalence about the city’s complex, deeply ingrained social structure, Bechet advances a version of New Orleans that inhabits a symbolic place and time of its own. The Congo Square Bechet carries in his heart is deterritorialized; it is not quite Africa, nor quite the United States. When Omar is expressing himself in the Square, he helps transform it into a liminal site of free play, parallel to what Homi Bhabha calls the “third space,” where binaries are broken down (such as, in this case, the dichotomy of slave vs. free). By using this “vanished” place

and time as his foundation, Bechet reintroduces tradition into the ongoing process of modernity, esteeming the local while recognizing its connections to the national and universal. From the first chapter of *Treat It Gentle*, Bechet employs a seemingly idiosyncratic, anachronistic terminology when referring to the music. In his view, “jazz” is merely “a name the white people have given to the music” (3). Bechet rejects the term both for how it signifies the music’s cultural co-optation and its unsavory extra-musical associations. “Jazz,” Bechet remonstrates, “Jazz could mean any damn’ thing: high times, screwing, ballroom. It used to be spelled *jass*, which *was* screwing. But when you say ragtime, you’re saying the music” (3, italics in original). Bechet’s insistence on anachronistically describing traditional New Orleans music as “ragtime,” in lieu of “jazz,” illustrates his entrenched preference for the local over the mass, for the past over the present. In rebranding his music as ragtime, he harkens back to a world that predates commodification and the imposition by outsiders of a “star” system among New Orleans musicians.

In place of celebrities, Bechet venerated the distinct class he termed “musicianers.” For Bechet, “musicianers” denoted those who could sight-read music and adapt to an unfamiliar score, as opposed to “jazzmen,” who played by ear and largely stuck to a repertoire (Ogren 31). Though the *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the term back to 16th century Scotland, the title held currency throughout the South among the full spectrum of vernacular players, “musicianer” and otherwise, across the color line. Its widespread usage may have had less to do with a Scots-Irish lineage and more to do with the reflexive application of the common “-er” suffix to

“music” and “musician.” The term may also be a conflation between “musician” and “professor,” the honorific term used to denote a player who could sight-read music well (Crow 50). The “musicianer” appellation took on a different connotation as it spread through the South by referring to those who could make a living solely through music. The term can be found in oral histories of former slaves gathered by the Works Progress Administration and remembrances by black Civil War veterans. Folklorist Howard M. Odum discovered the term in use in the Delta around 1905 (D. Evans, *Big Road* 35). In the early Thirties, country-music fiddler Walter Smith placed an ad in a Danville, Virginia newspaper, offering his group’s professional services: “Musicianers and singers want job broadcasting or stage” (Russell, *Country* 89). Mississippi-born piano player Pinetop Perkins termed himself a “musicianer” once he acquired a cheap guitar to play at local parties (presumably for money), rather than when he made a name for himself as a pianist (Pearson, *Jook* 69). Likewise, in interviews, Rube Lacy recalled Delta blues pioneer Tommy Johnson as a “musicianer” to denote Johnson’s musical adaptability at dances (Gioia 117). Honeyboy Edwards employed it in his 1997 memoirs to denote both regionally popular blues musicians like Charley Patton and touring minstrel-show players. Neither Perkins nor Lacy nor Edwards’s use of the term relates to reading musical transcription, suggesting the term took on a very different connotation in the Delta. Yet historian Paul Oliver discovered some intraregional variation, as the term could be generically applied to non-singing musicians in the Deep South, as opposed to “songsters” who sang and played (*Broadcasting* 26–27). Likewise, country-music

patriarch and song collector A.P. Carter (born in southwest Virginia in 1891) used the term to distinguish instrumentalists from singers (Zwonitzer 121). In *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison's poor sharecropper character Trueblood uses the term, largely to mark his provincialism (55).

Bechet's unwavering use of obsolete nomenclature represents an act of cultural reclamation as well as a refinement of terms he believes are simply too loose. He reserves "musicianer" for those who have followed in Omar's footsteps, approaching their music as a craft and lifelong pursuit, rather than a path to notoriety or personal gain. Among African American jazz musicians of Bechet's generation, "routine" musicians are the opposite of musicianers; they play chiefly for people's amusement, remaining musically illiterate and reliant on playing by ear (Brothers 28). In their estimation, very little distinguishes "routine" musicians from "spasm bands," the roving youths who torture sounds out of homemade instruments outside New Orleans's brothels and saloons for tips. Creoles used the "routiners" term as well, but with a slight twist; "routiners" was the unflattering nickname musically literate Creoles applied to jazz musicians who could neither read sheet music nor play commercial arrangements, a reflection of the disdain many in that community had toward popular music (Hersch 104).

The roots of such long-standing prejudices, of course, lie in the city's complex racial compartmentalization. Louisiana's *Code noir* (1724) allowed for the manumission of mixed-race enslaved people (commonly assumed to be the offspring of European masters and women of African descent) and created the legal status of

“free person of color” (see Buerkle and Barker 7–8). Alongside the city’s caste system, geography was a barrier; lighter-skinned Creoles of mixed French and Spanish ethnicity resided near the downtown area, while darker-skinned African Americans lived uptown (Berrett, *Whiteman* 20). Though New Orleans hosted a full range of venues for classical and vernacular music by 1850, music rarely transcended the prevailing racial codes. Prosperous Anglos and Creoles alike patronized opera companies, philharmonics, and concert appearances by European virtuosos, but did so in separate venues. Despite the large Creole population, which included many socially prominent families, the New Orleans Opera House was strictly segregated, off limits to non-whites (Woodward 14). Competing Creole and white symphony orchestras played in concert halls with whites, blacks, and Creoles in the audience separated by tiers (Ward and Burns 9). Needless to say, the city’s indigenous African American music never passed through these doors or troubled the existing hierarchy. The attitude of the city’s cultural elite can be surmised from a 1918 article in New Orleans’s *Times-Picayune*. In grandiose terms, the anonymous author rhapsodized, “there are many mansions in the house of the muses.” While melody inhabited the “great assembly hall” in the imaginary house of music, jazz was relegated to its basement, with “the thumpety-tumpety of the negro banjo” disturbing the proper music upstairs. Acknowledging New Orleans as a source for “this particular form of musical vice,” the paper went on to sniff, “We do not recognize the honor of parenthood.” After updating Benjamin Latrobe’s musical assessments of African-derived music as “noise,” the *Times-Picayune* went further, characterizing jazz as an

“atrocities” from the slums, and concluding, “Its musical value is nil, and its possibilities for harm are great” (qtd. in Walser 8).

The editorial writer’s reference to “musical vice” no doubt alluded to jazz’s connection with the city’s just-completed experiment with legalized prostitution within a mandated district. Growing out of the established tenderloin district around Basin Street, the city adopted in 1897 a proposal by Alderman Sidney Story to limit houses of prostitution to an area in uptown below Canal Street. (A proposal to have a second red-light district in the “American section” of town was defeated.) That area soon became known as “Storyville,” much to the lawmaker’s chagrin, though jazz musicians and other denizens referred to it as the “District” (A. Rose, *Storyville* 36–39). Prostitution was never formally legalized in the District, but rather decriminalized and permitted within predetermined spatial boundaries under an unwritten code of “community standards” after nearly a century of ineffective ordinances (A. Rose, *Storyville* 1–2). In 1900, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the ordinance, allowing the city to exercise its power by restricting houses of vice to a defined area (Keire 9). Thus an uneasy compromise was struck; prostitution was allowed within a thirty-eight-block area, catering to white customers, while saloons and brothels that admitted African Americans and dark-skinned Creoles were confined to the “Back of Town” section.

The official sanctioning of the red-light district emboldened entrepreneurs like Tom Anderson, a saloon keeper and former state legislator. Anderson’s Annex club, with its rococo décor and bar the length of a city block, was one of the few

establishments in the District to employ a full band (Ward and Burns 27). Houses of prostitution almost exclusively employed piano players as musical entertainment to keep overhead low and to maintain a modicum of discretion.⁴² Likewise, local dance halls employed three- or four-piece groups, rather than full bands (Charters, *Country* 97). Concurrently, local officials wielded vaguely worded “vagrancy” laws against African American men in the District, placing a chilling effect on their movement in the area (Keire 55). With most African American musicians virtually banned from the District, the city’s most innovative music-making developed mainly in the black and Creole parts of town, across Canal Street, in the area sometimes called “Black Storyville” (A. Rose, *Storyville* 39). Louis Armstrong’s *Satchmo* is one of the few complete first-person records of this area during this period of time. While Armstrong did not shy away from descriptions of violence, prostitution, and gambling in his neighborhood, he also distinguished that time and place as a site of African American creativity and resourcefulness. This area around Storyville seems to exemplify what Langston Hughes called “the Quarter of the Negro,” sites, that in Houston A. Baker’s interpretation, promote “black cuisine, religion, music and literacy” (*I Don’t* 24). In this microcosmic world, food scraps are creatively assembled, spiced up and transformed into nourishing meals, swaths of fabric are sewn into presentable clothes, and a tin horn on a junk cart becomes a future musical legend’s first instrument. While Back of Town had more than its share of

⁴² Some proprietors went even further, dispensing with musicians altogether through the use of coin-operated player pianos (A. Rose, *Storyville* 103).

licentiousness, its permissiveness did not preclude the flowering of a culture that grew from the bottom up.

Just as Storyville sat uneasily amid the city's official culture, its proximity and lure to sailors based around the port of New Orleans was a constant issue. In August 1917, the Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels issued an order banning open prostitution within a five-mile radius of a navy base. According to Storyville historian Al Rose, New Orleans's mayor appealed to the Secretary to rescind the order, only to be told by Daniels, "You close the red-light district or we will" (*Storyville* 167). City authorities, under pressure from the U.S. Navy, officially closed "white" Storyville on November 12, 1917. Ultimately, the action only dispersed, rather than eradicated, vice in the city's lower wards. According to jazzman and author Danny Barker, the closing of the vice district forced musicians to be more resourceful and seek out new audiences. Eventually a touring circuit opened, bringing New Orleans musicians to the Deep South states. In turn, bandleaders began recruiting young and eager Louisiana musicians into their ranks (Buerkle and Barker 24). Barker wryly noted that New Orleans was not the only city in the 1910s with a jazz-soundtracked underworld; as African Americans began migrating north just before World War I, the licentiousness of Storyville was transplanted to the "buffet flats" of Chicago and the rent parties and after-hours joints of New York City (*Buddy* 124). Not coincidentally, Chicago and New York became the havens for jazz musicians seeking to escape southern racial customs and soon replaced New Orleans as the nation's epicenters of jazz.

Only a few months after Storyville's disestablishment, the first recorded jazz band, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, arrived in New York City on the success of their mannered versions of "Tiger Rag" and "Darktown Strutters' Ball," which spurred national demand for New Orleans music on record (see M. Williams 98). (For all its superficial "southern" trappings, Dixieland jazz was, like minstrelsy before it, popularized in the North.) As jazz took root in American popular culture, a spurious nostalgia for Storyville grew only a few years after its demolition. In 1923, Ida Cox and her Blues Serenaders recorded a number entitled "I've Got the Blues for Rampart Street." Paramount Records' accompanying promotional advertisement promised listeners that the tune "takes you right back to Tom Anderson's—the Black Cat—the Cadillac" (Titon 238). Most likely, the potential consumer had never patronized or even come near such establishments, but, in the age of Prohibition, was nonetheless intrigued by their enduring (and no doubt embellished) reputations. Likewise, "Jazz Age" music from New Orleans often slyly harkened back to the music's more lawless origins, commemorating the District while functioning as an in-joke to those in the know. Spencer Williams's 1929 instrumental "Mahogany Hall Stomp" crossed over to the wider popular-music audience as a danceable, toe-tapping number. Some in the mainstream audience might have been scandalized to learn of the song's celebration and symbolic revival of Mahogany Hall, one of the last Storyville dancehalls/brothels shut down in 1917 (A. Rose, *Storyville* 42). As New Orleans grew in stature and became recognized as one of the nation's musical birthplaces, the circumstances of jazz's conception were bowdlerized almost as often

as they were wildly exaggerated. For example, a 1944 *New Yorker* profile of Duke Ellington quaintly referred to Mahogany Hall as a “resort” (Tucker 216). Less scandalously, Louis Armstrong’s “West End Blues” revived without words an actual resort on Lake Pontchartrain that featured jazz (Blesh 286).

Even during its twenty years of existence, Storyville exhibited imaginative contours, and its legend only grew after its disestablishment. “Storyville,” as subsequent generations have come to know it, is an imaginative construction based on romantic exaggeration. Historian Leroy Ostransky credits the “enthusiasm and romantic effusiveness” of jazz chroniclers for painting New Orleans with a broad brush, conflating the red-light district with the city as a whole when creating a portrait of a city moved by music, vice, and intrigue (33). During the 1930s and 1940s, several Storyville-era musicians readily supplied credulous historians and musicologists with creatively remembered stories. For example, Danny Barker admitted to creating elaborate fictions about the “lost city” of Storyville when on tour. Being from New Orleans, Barker commented, “meant I was accepted like a long-lost relative. I’d make it my business, when there was a quorum around the table, to relate some fantastic tale: a tragedy, something that involved murder, jail, romance, voodoo, gambling, graveyards, music, whores and pimps and end with the killing of a rotten stool pigeon by a mean policeman” (*Buddy* 125). Pianist Jelly Roll Morton, speaking to folklorist Alan Lomax in 1938, was eager to give his interlocutor a vivid account of the long-defunct Storyville. Given his “bragadocious” reputation and declining commercial fortunes in the 1930s, it comes as little surprise that he placed

himself at the center of the District in his lengthy monologues, which Lomax recorded for posterity under the auspices of the Library of Congress. Returning to New Orleans after a brief sojourn north in 1902, the seventeen-year-old Morton quickly ingratiated himself into a hidden subculture unknown to most denizens of Storyville. In the backrooms of the brothels, Morton and his peers formed an informal brotherhood of piano players who socialized and traded musical tricks. In summoning up this association, Morton offered Lomax a lengthy and detailed roll call of local piano “professors,” most of whom, like the famed Tony Jackson, did not leave behind recorded examples of their work. According to Morton, he supplanted Jackson at the top of the Storyville hierarchy by beating him in a contest; whether this was an official competition, an informal “cutting contest” between musicians, or simply a figment of Morton’s active imagination is unknown (Lomax, *Mister* 45).

Louis Armstrong’s entry into the milieu of New Orleans musicians took a very different tack. By many observers’ accounts, Armstrong was just as adept at aesthetic transformation in his earliest playing days as he was as a professional. Recall Zutty Singleton’s admiration, expressed almost half a century after the fact, of Armstrong’s ability to extract a sense of “swing” from a hokey tune like “Maryland, My Maryland,” yet still use the song as a framework for individual expression (Chapter III, above; Shapiro and Hentoff 48). According to Armstrong himself, his musical skill and general popularity allowed him to go anywhere in town, from the wards inhabited by African Americans and Creoles to the predominantly Irish section of town, as opposed to backroom culture of the enclosed Storyville district.

Armstrong invokes this mobility, and the splendor of New Orleans's parade culture, throughout *Satchmo*. Only the geographic and symbolic boundary crossing engendered by the parade allows a young man from The Battlefield to witness and internalize the spectacle of African American social-club members in dress uniforms, proudly astride horses, amid fanfares from local brass bands (*Satchmo* 225). As discussed in Chapter III, the upside of his stay in the Colored Waifs' Home is the chance to join the marching band and make good on his musical promise. Parading with the band, the young apprentice discovers the ability to, in Albert Murray's estimation, "conjure up or otherwise generate an atmosphere of revelry, jubilation, and earthly well-being, and so also of affirmation and celebration" (*Blue Devils* 106). Such joy, arising from the breaking of boundaries and staid social graces, becomes a leitmotif in Armstrong's public persona. He reimagines this parade of waifs in *Satchmo*:

We were so glad to get a chance to walk in the street that we did not care how long we paraded or how far. [...] The first day we paraded through my old neighborhood everybody was gathered on the sidewalks to see us pass. All the whores, pimps, gamblers, thieves and beggars were waiting for the band because they knew ... Mayann's son, would be in it. But they had never dreamed that I would be playing the cornet, blowing it as good as I did. They ran to wake up Mama, who was sleeping after a night job, so she could see me go by.

(47–48)

So confident is Armstrong in the retelling of this seminal moment that he feels authorized to give voice to the thoughts of his spectators (“...they had never dreamed that I would be playing the cornet...”) and verbalize their approval as well as narrate incidents, like the waking of Mayann, that he did not witness himself if he was marching in the parade. As an author, Armstrong reports actions and dialogue that he himself could not have witnessed. This sudden change in narrative perspective—when a first-person, limited narrator offers information he or she is not authorized to give—is labeled “paralepsis” by Gérard Genette in his study *Narrative Discourse*. Genette explains how modernist novelists such as Marcel Proust employed paralepsis to report the simultaneous actions of people inhabiting different social strata, giving the narrative a multivocal discourse and temporarily ceding the narrator’s role as the story’s center of consciousness. In autobiography, paralepsis has the effect of expanding point of view, usually in the service of the author’s self-image, reliability, and narrative control. In this case, Armstrong “throws his voice” from one scene of action to another simultaneously occurring one to illustrate the central role of jazz in New Orleans and animate the community that encouraged him.

Additionally, paralepsis introduces a narrative suspension of time and sense of deterritorialization, as the diegetic action appears to stop as the narrator or focalized subject shifts his or her attention to report on the distant action or dialogue. Time “stretches” to cover all the salient details in the contemporaneous scenes. This sense of mastery and omniscience over the story tests a narrator’s reliability. In *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Genette notes that paralepsis can be, in his terms, a “breach of

trust” because it shifts, often without notification or warning, the narrative focalization and describes an event, utterance, or viewpoint out of the autobiographer’s purview (78). This issue of “trust” between author and reader, of course, has relevance to Philippe LeJeune’s autobiographical pact. With the author and narrator providing more information (and, within the text, holding more power) than the concomitant subject, the crucial intertwining between the three can unravel. Hence, the reader’s attention may be drawn to the fissure between author and subject, causing the reader to doubt the veracity of the text. It is therefore significant, and vital to our understanding of musicians’ use of the paraleptic voice, to note that these shifts in focalization are delivered in written versions of idiomatic speech, the familiarity and informality of the tone easing the transition in narrative voice.

In this episode, Armstrong’s authorial approach resembles one of his best-known musical milestones. In 1928’s “West End Blues,” Armstrong begins the piece unconventionally, delaying his ensemble’s entrance and playing a solo as the introduction. Specifically, the solo is a cadenza, defined by the *Harvard Dictionary of Music* as “a passage or section of varying length in a style of brilliant improvisation, usually inserted near the end of a composition, where it serves as a retarding element, giving the performer a chance to exhibit his technical mastery” (Apel 120). Armstrong defies convention by beginning “West End Blues” with the cadenza and putting his solo voice in the forefront, but otherwise accomplishes everything classical virtuosos have done for centuries: suspending the tempo and playing freely, “stepping out” of the notated music on the page, and proceeding, at

liberty, with his or her own improvisation. Likewise, in *Satchmo*'s crucial parade scene, the brief narrative "cutaway" from the street to Mayann's bedroom plays with time and space to expand the narrative scene and exhibit the narrator's way with a story, augmenting what he remembers from that day with events and dialogue that he can only surmise.

For centuries, *paralepsis* has served as a narrative strategy when a writer-subject wants to insert self-praise in an oblique manner. In the life story of Renaissance artist Benvenuto Cellini, Cellini reports on a private conversation between Pope Clement VII and a distinguished gentleman, smitten with Cellini's art:

"Most blessed Father [...] I beg your Holiness to tell me who the man is; for if he is a person worthy to be helped, I can teach him a secret which may cure him of that infirmity." The Pope replied: "He is the greatest artist who was ever born in his own craft; one day, when we are together, I will show you some of his marvelous works, and the man himself to boot, and I shall be pleased if we can see our way toward doing something to assist him." (114)

The "infirmity" Cellini mentions is a temporary blindness, which serves as at least one reason why he did not directly perceive this extravagant appraisal of his artistic gifts. Cellini makes no mention in his narration how he came to learn about this conversation or the provenance of this information; this second-hand dialogue is recorded just as if the author were present.

One of Armstrong's contemporaries also employs *paralepsis* to represent his earliest public musical endeavor and the reaction it generated. In Sidney Bechet's *Treat It Gentle*, the author remembers being six years old, transfixed with music, and his brother's clarinet in particular. At his brother's surprise birthday party, Sidney listens in his family's front room as the Freddie Keppard band begins to play in the kitchen, despite the absence of their clarinet player George Baquet. Almost involuntarily, the six-year-old becomes so taken with the music that he retreats to a hidden corner, takes up his brother's clarinet, and plays along. "At first no one heard me," Bechet remembers. "But then, the way I was told it, people began to take notice. [...] Well, they figured maybe [Baquet] *had* shown up, or maybe some other musicianer was taking George Baquet's place. And then the men in Keppard's band, *they* noticed it and began to look at each other. Who the hell was playin'? Maybe they thought it was a joke of Baquet's..." (71, italics in original). Like Armstrong in *Satchmo*'s parade scene, Bechet reports the inner thoughts of listeners and bystanders who appraise his early skill in order to illustrate his early mastery. Though with Bechet we get a better sense of how he became conscious of these inner thoughts ("...the way I was told it..."), his intention, like Armstrong's, is to represent how his musicianship was discovered through an unlikely chain of events yet instantly recognized as prodigious.

Through the use of such novelistic techniques as the subject-narrator's use of *paralepsis*, free indirect discourse, and dialogue, genres like autobiography, according to Bakhtin, "become more free and flexible, their language renews itself by

incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the ‘novelistic’ layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally [...] a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving, contemporary reality (the openended present)” (*Dialogic* 7). Such “chroniclers,” to use Gérard Genette’s term, are considered “mixed” or “ambiguous” narrators, as they “stretch” the diegesis out of its established time and place into the narrator’s own contemporary surroundings, thereby testing the narrator’s authority and reliability (*Revisited* 104). Henry Louis Gates, Jr., identifies a similar approach in slave narratives, where subjects’ characteristic idioms coexist with the narration’s sense of expanded consciousness as they attain literacy and, consequently, a greater understanding of the world around them (*Signifying* 210).

Some of that understanding, however, stays between the lines of the text. As jazz historian William Howland Kenney observes, Louis Armstrong remains circumspect about discussing race in his evocations of New Orleans, not even addressing it as elliptically as Bechet does in the Omar fable. The accounts of racial violence around the New Orleans jazz world that do exist commonly understate its effects. In Jelly Roll Morton’s expansive conversations with Alan Lomax (which led the folklorist to dub him “a Creole Benvenuto Cellini”), the pianist mentions a lynching threat he faced while performing in Biloxi, Mississippi, but only in passing (Lomax, *Mister* xix). In fact, Morton mentions the threat more to boast about his proximity to white women in the local “sporting-houses” than to decry vigilante racism (Lomax, *Mister* 42). Morton claims to have witnessed two later lynchings but

is disturbingly cavalier about their circumstances. In the first instance, a mob in Greenwood, Mississippi lynches a young African American man who shot a white man. According to Morton, local African Americans consider the two killings “an even break” and accept the status quo (143). Similarly, Morton describes in a blasé manner a lynching in Biloxi: “This fellow, Henry Lyder, was lynched for attacking a white girl. Now you know yourself that a lot of these rapes is lies [*sic*]. But plenty of them is truth. In this case the people I talked to in Biloxi felt it was the facts. It seems that most of the people of Biloxi, white and black, were satisfied: they seemed to think Lyder had really attacked the girl” (143). From this point, Lomax’s narrative moves on, without a transition, to more stories of life on tour. If Lomax is representing Morton’s reminiscences faithfully, it appalls the reader to realize how Morton has internalized and represented white southerners’ sense of lynching as quick and sanctioned “justice.” Part of this blindness to lynching’s horror can be traced to Morton’s relentlessly self-serving nature; it is essential to the persona he is creating in collaboration with Lomax that he be seen as a force of nature impervious to Jim Crow, “traveling on” through the South with nothing standing in his way.

Yet another of Morton’s references to lynching carries more resonance and is more reflective of New Orleans musicians’ apprehension of racial violence. Recalling his turn-of-the-century repertoire, Morton teases Lomax with brief snippets of a song performed locally about Robert Charles, an African American born in Mississippi who migrated to New Orleans. Rebelling against what he saw as police harassment, Charles shot twenty-seven members of a white mob, killing seven (four

of them police officers), in July 1900. After several days of eluding capture, Charles was shot and killed by a member of a vigilante mob. White citizens subsequently riddled the corpse with bullets. Still unsatisfied after Charles's killing, the mob prowled New Orleans' black neighborhoods, looking for further confrontation. In the ensuing four days, at least twelve were killed, scores were injured, and property in the lower wards was destroyed with impunity (Litwack, *Trouble* 407). Local white newspapers capitalized on the incident to opine on African Americans' supposed penchant for violence and vice (Dray 136). (Charles was suspected of abusing cocaine.) In areas such as Storyville, however, Charles became a folk hero, almost immortalized in the type of song Morton only partially recalled in his interview with Lomax. "I once knew the Robert Charles song but I found out it was best for me to forget it," the usually forthcoming pianist averred. "And that I did in order to go along with the world on the peaceful side" (Lomax, *Mister* 57). Morton's refusal to record the song for posterity suggests the role of lynching in local musicians' imaginations. Though Morton and subsequent generations of Creoles and African Americans saw racially motivated killings in the Deep South decrease in number and witnessed the rise of anti-lynching campaigns, the specter of these murders remained, leaving silence in the wake of its trauma. As Morton demonstrates, selective "forgetting" of past traumas is as prevalent as remembering when imparting a life story.⁴³

⁴³ Lomax found similar resistance among his Mississippi informants in his studies of the Delta blues. At Lomax's request, bluesman Sid Hemphill performed a locally familiar song about a lynching in Strayhorn, Mississippi, which, astoundingly, identified members of the lynch mob by name. When

NEW ORLEANS CROSSTALK

In their rhetorical revival of the Storyville era, lesser-known musicians have taken a leading role, often uncovering minute details with insight and disarming humor. Largely because they are “minor figures,” New Orleans musicians like Danny Barker, Pops Foster and Baby Dodds are authorized to introduce dissenting opinions into the archive, without compromising their reputations. Moreover, they can freely and without repercussion challenge accepted wisdom about customs and individual musicians of the Storyville era. Within musicians’ shared oral history, accounts of the artistic idiosyncrasies of New Orleans jazz musicians are legion; trumpeter Freddie Keppard refused to make records, fearful that his signature style would be absorbed and duplicated by lesser musicians, while Sidney Bechet occasionally hid his fingers with a napkin as he played (Gottlieb 54). Several New Orleans musicians resisted recording for Alan Lomax when the folklorist traveled through the city in the late 1930s, believing that it diminished the value and uniqueness of live performance (Szwed 46). Partisan fans, in turn, transformed such quirks into the elements of legend. In this multivoiced oral history, no musician in New Orleans jazz attracted more conjecture than Buddy Bolden. Countless histories

queried by Lomax on the victim’s identity, Hemphill demurred, “Lemme see, now...Lemme see... You know I just fergit who it was!” (Lomax, *Land* 323). Dogged research by blues historian David Evans shows the victim of the lynching was in fact a white man accused of murder. A review of Lomax’s field tapes reveals that Hemphill’s response to Lomax’s question was less colorful; as Hemphill’s response is mostly silence it is barely an answer at all (Freeland and Smith 142). Hemphill likely conflated Lomax’s attitude and line of questioning with that of white authorities and reacted defensively with silence.

acknowledged Bolden as the premier New Orleans trumpeter of his day and the progenitor of Joe Oliver, Freddie Keppard, and Louis Armstrong. This memorialization was done without the aid of extant recordings or virtually any firsthand record of his artistry. Bolden was committed to a mental hospital, most likely for schizophrenia, in 1907, ten years before the first sound recording of New Orleans jazz was made. He was twenty-nine years old. Some fanciful stories have Bolden suffering his final, permanent breakdown while performing in a street parade in 1907 (M. Williams 14).⁴⁴ Bolden died, unrecorded and unknown by the public at large, in 1931. Only one authenticated photograph of Bolden survives. Taken about a year before he was institutionalized, the photograph eerily depicts Bolden as a half-faded image, a near-apparition both youthful and already slipping away into myth, his cornet held in front of him as if passing it on to the next generation and the world.

Speaking on the record with Alan Lomax, Jelly Roll Morton passed on local legends that present Bolden as a folk hero of uncommon strength and charisma. Morton portrayed Bolden as the premier musician of his day, unperturbed when fatal fights break out during his band's performances, equally fond of whiskey and women (58–60). Repeating an oft-told tale, Morton told Lomax of Bolden's supposed ability

⁴⁴ Elements of the Bolden legend may have had their source hundreds of miles away in Memphis, as the local lore surrounding the cornetist Sam Thomas anticipated events ascribed to Bolden. Leading the Young Man's Brass Band beginning in the late 1860s, Thomas was credited with establishing African American brass bands on Beale Street (G. Lee 120). More colorfully, Thomas was fancifully recalled by white historians as a groundbreaking musician who inexplicably ended up "broken and disheartened, in the Shelby County Insane Asylum" while his musical innovations were carried on (G. Lee 121).

to play at an unimaginable volume and intensity. When performing at Lincoln Park, about ten miles from the city's center, Bolden was allegedly able to project his music across the wide expanse. Morton enthused, "Any time it was a quiet night at Lincoln Park because maybe the affair hadn't been so well publicized, Buddy Bolden would publicize it! He'd turn his big trumpet around toward the city and blow his blues, calling his children home, as he used to say" (60). In the legend Morton perpetuates, Bolden becomes the first of many sacrificial figures in jazz, with his superhuman strength on the trumpet a major source of his downfall.

Professionally, Bolden had little contact with Storyville, and none with the French Quarter, both "downtown" districts closed off to African Americans segregated in the uptown areas. Yet the rough contemporaneity between Bolden and Storyville excited jazz historians and fans who saw in both the romance of New Orleans's past and an exhilarating, if second-hand, encounter with self-destructive artistry. In books and interviews, many New Orleans musicians, perhaps weary of speaking on behalf of a long-inactive musician, discounted his influence on their playing. According to Louis Armstrong, Bolden lacked musical finesse (*Satchmo* 24). In *Satchmo*, Armstrong makes a cryptic comment connecting Bolden's flawed technique and subsequent breakdown: "All in all Buddy Bolden was a great musician, but I think he blew too hard. I will even go so far as to say that he did not blow correctly. In any case he finally went crazy. You can figure that out for yourself" (23). Through understatement, Armstrong distances himself from the Bolden legend by criticizing Bolden on technical merits for not having as pleasant a tone on the

trumpet as Armstrong's seminal influences, Bunk Johnson and Joe Oliver (see Bergreen 60–63).

In the same vein, Pops Foster, born in 1892, claims to have only heard Buddy Bolden's band once and expresses only moderate enthusiasm toward their style. "Buddy played very good for the style of stuff he was doing," Foster admits. "He played nothing but blues and all that stink music, and he played it very loud" (15). For Foster, who became a musical standby in New Orleans through his versatility, playing well in one style amounts to relatively little, and his characterization of that style as "stink music" (presumably a "funky" style), reads as a backhanded compliment at best. Elsewhere, Sidney Bechet's evocation of Bolden borders on the disdainful. "He lived it fast, Buddy did," Bechet writes. "And that's another reason he was so popular, why you hear his name so much: it was the way that he lived his life" (84). Bechet goes on to express his doubts that Bolden was truly an innovator, and credits his posthumous popularity to memories of his flamboyant showmanship and flair for self-aggrandizing storytelling. Baby Dodds, only nine years old when Bolden withdraws from performing, also disarmingly expresses irreverence toward the man and his legend: "The sporting class of people would go to hear Bolden. [...] We used to call it a honky tonk where Bolden played and his men were the bums. I heard Bolden play but I can't remember anything about him or the music" (Dodds as told to Gara 12). Dodds's attitude may be indicative of larger schisms in New Orleans's music community, as individuals often set themselves apart by generation, ethnicity (especially African American versus Creole), musical style, and ability

(often notation-reading “musicianers” pitted against improvisatory “routiners” who followed Bolden’s example). According to Danny Barker, established members of the New Orleans jazz community were stingy with praise for younger musicians. An aspiring player’s support typically came from other young players and bandmates, many of whom were related to each other (*Life* 43–44). As such, Dodds, whose career extended into the recording era, may be “signifyin(g)” on past jazz masters like Bolden when he comments that he “can’t remember anything about him or the music” without the aid of records. Without this type of documentation, Dodds relegates Bolden and his generation to the anachronistic age of the saloon and honky tonk, rather than elevating them to posterity.

Other New Orleans musicians affirm Bolden’s legendary status in more positive terms but for selfish ends. In a 1950s interview, Storyville-era trombonist Kid Ory embellished his own coming-of-age story by ventriloquizing Bolden:

I talked to Bolden once when I was in New Orleans visiting at my sister’s house. I had just come from the music store where I bought a trombone and was trying it out. He was on the sidewalk and heard me playing and knocked on the door. I answered the door and he said, “Hello, young fellow, was that you blowing the horn?” I said, “I just bought it.” He said, “It’s good. I’m looking for a trombone. How would you like to come and play with me?” I said I’d have to ask my sister, so he asked her and she said I was too young....I was about fourteen then.... (Shapiro and Hentoff 28–29)

The flat, non-mimetic dialogue hints that Ory did not intend for Bolden to be at the center of the tale. Instead, Ory “reports” through a semi-fictional Bolden about his own proficiency with his new instrument and the near-professional skill he displayed at such a young age. Additionally, Ory, who performed with Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, and Joe Oliver over the course of his career, is able to “pad his résumé” by claiming near-membership in Bolden’s band.

Just as Bolden was canonized as New Orleans jazz’s cynosure by rights of reputation alone, Storyville took on exaggerated dimensions in the popular imagination as the center of jazz long after its demolition. Veteran New Orleans musicians like Pops Foster, Danny Barker, and Baby Dodds endeavor in their respective autobiographies to contextualize or debunk many of these myths. Like Sidney Bechet before him, Pops Foster begins his 1971 autobiography attacking the misconception that Storyville was the primary center of jazz in New Orleans. For most working musicians, Storyville was off-limits; young jazz musicians more frequently learned their trade within a circuit of local picnics and parades. Foster began his tutelage playing with his brother and sister at genteel lawn parties. At fourteen, Foster joined the Rezelle Band, playing parties, “stable dances,” and fish fries. Much like urban rent parties, many of these occasions were for-profit functions, where hosts would not only charge “guests” admission but also procure city permits, purchase police protection and abundant food and beer, even advertise.

Other “picnics,” however, took the Storyville spirit to more public spaces. Foster notes that his band would often be booked to play on consecutive days for

picnics along Lake Pontchartrain. On Sundays, bands played for families and social clubs in Lincoln Park, a site designated by the city for African Americans. In Foster's idyllic reminiscence, the picnics are enlivened by abundant entertainment, including variety shows and hot-air balloon rides, for the nominal fee of fifteen cents (12). These local excursions allow aspiring musicians like Foster to see older, more professional bands up close and in the open air, as a direct contrast to the small bands playing in the backrooms of Black Storyville. On Monday, the same bands play in the parks for pimps and their prostitutes, recovering from the weekend (14–15). Though perhaps a minor footnote, such a firsthand description of New Orleans's unique music culture holds great value. In this case, Foster's memory of the Lake Pontchartrain picnics rescues his experience from the pervasive but flawed assumptions about where New Orleans musicians plied their trade and what audiences they played for.

Though the Rezelle Band shared a time, place and, apparently, a clientele with the "professors" of Storyville, they performed under different circumstances and inhabited a separate sphere, influenced in no small part by race. Like the *jongleurs* of the Middle Ages, New Orleans musicians could on occasion cross social and class lines and transgress racial boundaries by playing picnics for blacks and whites. Though perceived as members of a servant class, they enjoyed privileges as skilled, in-demand professionals (see Attali 14). This relaxation of segregation, however, at times posed risks for African American musicians. In one of Danny Barker's recollections of his early career, he and his band obtain a booking to play at a rally for

a white-supremacist politician. Like W.C. Handy a generation earlier, the band makes it through their performance by repeatedly playing “Dixie” on cue, ignoring the racist demagoguery and keeping their heads down (*Life* 105). The absurdity of their position is compounded when the unnamed rabble-rouser compliments the band after the rally and tips each musician five dollars.

Such fabulous anecdotes should be read dialogically, each one an attempt to “top” the last. This crosstalk between the accounts of contemporaneous musicians at times resembles a rhetorical cutting contest, where each author tries to spontaneously invent and “swing” the authoritative version of the story of New Orleans music (see Brackett 117). Just as Foster revives the history of jazz picnics and Barker remembers the co-optation of jazz by segregationists, in evoking the culture of the parade, drummer Baby Dodds uncovers local “secrets” held by his cohort. Dodds reveals to the reader that the now-standard essaying of “Didn’t He Ramble” in New Orleans funeral parades began when a band played it to “signify” on the philandering ways of the deceased (17). Dodds’s recollections of the picnic and lawn-party circuit around the city complement those of his contemporaries. Like Pops Foster, Dodds seems to relish his role as a sideman, namechecking local musicians and jazz luminaries in equal measures, in part to underscore his distance from the larger music industry and elevate local traditions and history.

Guitarist Danny Barker, on the other hand, consciously assumes the role of historian in his voluminous writings, which encompass the years before his own prominence. As part of this younger generation of New Orleans musicians (one that,

significantly, had access to recordings and jazz magazines), Barker could attest to the relative fame of older New Orleans musicians and adjudicate the city's best musicians. When Barker chooses to boost the more locally renowned Bechet over Armstrong, as well as argue for the reputations of musicians like Walter Blue, who made little impact outside the local jazz community, he takes back a measure of authority from self-styled, romantically motivated historians and consciously restores a measure of stature to people and events obscured in the wider public record.

Similarly, in his book of reminiscences *Oh, Didn't He Ramble* (1974), New Orleans trumpeter Lee Collins dispenses with narration for a chapter to offer a "roll call" of New Orleans musicians, both acclaimed and obscure (52–64). Just as Jelly Roll Morton did in *Mister Jelly Roll*, Collins includes this semi-objective heroic catalog in part to situate himself as a major musician in the local scene, with first-person connections to dozens, if not hundreds, of fellow players. Like Barker, Collins assumes the mantle of historian, commemorating personages obscured by self-appointed experts, tantalizing these experts with descriptions of bands that went unrecorded and undocumented, leaving the archives forever incomplete.

While this band of New Orleans writers and musicians cannot agree on many aspects of the city's "golden age," they generally agree on Storyville's marginal importance to the African American musician. In *Satchmo*, Louis Armstrong's presence in "white" Storyville is almost incidental; years away from assuming the mantle of virtuoso, Little Louis cuts a pathetic figure in the white part of the District, pushing a coal cart or rag wagon, "eyeballing" far older women in vain, and straining

to hear King Oliver from the street. “White” Storyville is just as marginal to Sidney Bechet’s early music-making. By 1917, the twenty-year-old Bechet had been an in-demand professional musician for three years, playing cabarets and theaters rather than brothels. The fifteen dollars Bechet typically earned in a week exceeded the average wages of local laborers (Chilton, *Sidney* 16). Those who did play “the District” mainly recall the money they earned in the saloons and their ability to entertain segregated audiences eager to dance. Joining Willie Hightower’s American Stars band at sixteen, Baby Dodds recollects that he made good money in the tenderloin. On the bandstand, the American Stars kept dancers satisfied with a repertoire that strayed far afield from jazz to include ethnic European songs for visiting foreign soldiers and waltzes for their Creole clientele.

Pops Foster remembers his time playing in the district with the Magnolia Band just as vividly. The bassist made nine dollars a week playing in the District, plus tips from intoxicated, free-spending European sailors. The closing of Storyville did little to alter his musical pursuits. Like many of his peers, Foster worked a day job and played sporadically with bands in the District, mainly on a “pick-up” basis, relying on parades and picnics for more steady musical work (47). Though the 1947 B-movie melodrama *New Orleans* and Abbe Niles’s introduction to W.C. Handy’s edited collection of period blues songs (also published in 1947) depicted the closing of Storyville as the death knell for jazz in the city, the reality is much more prosaic

(see Handy, *Treasury* 25).⁴⁵ At most, fifty musicians, mostly Creole pianists, were put out of work by the city's 1917 anti-vice ordinance (Ogren 58). The city's brass-band tradition remained vibrant. Younger African American musicians, shut out of Storyville's musical community of Creole piano "professors," viewed the change as an opportunity. "A new generation was about to take over," Louis Armstrong remembers. "My little crowd had begun to look forward to other kicks, like our jazz band, our [singing] quartet and other musical activities" (*Satchmo* 97).

Contemporaneous with the revisionist history of African American jazz outside of Storyville, the commercial success of Dixieland, with its nostalgic connotations, led some partisans to "whitewash" the city's jazz history, underrepresenting the contributions of African Americans. In his 1960 book on the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, H.O. Brunn omits New Orleans African American musicians from the narrative. In his 1972 autobiography *A Closer Walk*, Dixieland star Pete Fountain implicitly approves of an imagined local culture, already politically and socially gerrymandered, that retains "separate but equal" spheres for musicians. Fountain represents his tutelage, like most of his generation, as an ongoing, multi-mediated process. Rebelling against traditional instruction, he learns the clarinet through close study of the records of Benny Goodman and the example of two local musicians, George Lewis (black) and Raymond Burke (white). As a teenager, Fountain boldly joins Lewis at a jam session; in Fountain's memory, his playing is

⁴⁵ In one widely circulated, wildly exaggerated imagining of Storyville's closure, the District's prostitutes left the brothels *en masse* as "all the Negro jazzmen of the Red Light dance halls" serenaded them with a rendition of "Nearer My God to Thee" (Shapiro and Hentoff 63–64).

naturally the veteran's equal, so he never has to withstand the gantlet of the cutting contest. Continuing a feature of New Orleans jazz memoirs established by Danny Barker and Lee Collins, Fountain provides a catalog of his New Orleans musical peers; this catalog, though, has no resemblance to any others. Of the eighty, mostly local, musicians Fountain name-checks in *A Closer Walk*, only five are African American. (Bizarrely, Louis Armstrong makes one brief appearance in Fountain's New Orleans-centered book, and then only to congratulate Fountain for his commercial success.) As a weirdly upbeat musical answer to Ralph Ellison's rhetorical framework "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks," Fountain and his co-writer blithely posit that multiethnic music can be mastered in New Orleans outside of interracial and/or intergenerational networks. Going against the grain of white jazz musicians' autobiographies from Mezz Mezzrow to Dr. John, Fountain passes over issues like cultural hybridization or boundary crossing.

In a remarkable coincidence, *A Closer Walk* was published in 1972, the same year as Ishmael Reed's withering satire of white cultural co-optation *Mumbo Jumbo*. Two more divergent texts on musical interchange can scarcely be imagined. In Reed's novel, the surviving fragments of African culture are embodied in a shape-shifting contagion, called Jes Grew, which spreads from New Orleans to the rest of the United States in the 1920s, "infecting" those with whom it comes into contact. The expressions of Jes Grew—jazz, informal dancing, "soul" food, etc.—threaten white authorities (waggishly termed "The Wallflower Order") and those termed the "Robber Barons," white musicians and personalities who adopt and profit from

elements of African American culture. In James Snead's analysis of the novel, the Robber Barons justify their cultural plundering by proclaiming it as an expression of "universality," an attenuated interracial brotherhood where whites assume superiority as a matter of course. Under such a scheme, vernacular culture can be co-opted and repackaged at will in a "mammoth power play" that bolsters hegemonic authority and suppresses dissent (244). Pete Fountain, of course, is a Dixieland musician, not an empire builder, yet his book's subtext suggests that he bears traces of the "Robber Baron" impulse: selectively spotlighting the range of jazz in New Orleans, assuming without reflection that the music is "universal" and no longer tied to its cultural traditions, and accepting Jim Crow as an acceptable habitus for his artistic expression.

Fountain's odd memoirs would be a mere footnote in jazz annals if it did not present a narrative that, like Paul Whiteman's, tries to normalize absurdly biased concepts of tradition and progress. *A Closer Walk's* preface by Bob Harrington, "The Chaplain of Bourbon Street," praises Fountain for "lifting the musical culture" of New Orleans.⁴⁶ When acknowledged in the text, African American musicians like Bunk Johnson, George Lewis, and even Louis Armstrong are patronizingly depicted

⁴⁶ Contemporaneous general histories of New Orleans jazz also attempted to expunge vice from the city's musical history and portray white Dixieland musicians as mainstream civic boosters. In *New Orleans Jazz: A Family Album* (1969), editors Al Rose and Edmond Souchon presented portraits and descriptions of Storyville-era African American, Creole, and white bands side by side, with little substantive commentary on the city's prevailing program of segregating audiences and venues. Countering an imaginary stereotype, Rose and Souchon exaggerated the propriety of the working musician: "Your Crescent City jazzman is usually a family man...Usually he has a full-time occupation outside the music business. Alcoholics, narcotic addicts, homosexuals are rare in this fraternity. Few have ever been in serious trouble with the law" (271).

as relics, rather than pioneers. Though a lifelong New Orleans citizen, Fountain declines to address the city's complex racial codes and their effects on both everyday life and then-segregated events like Mardi Gras (subjects covered with understated brilliance and wit by Armstrong in *Satchmo*). Since black people are mostly absent, racial segregation never figures (explicitly) in the text, though it lurks in the subtext. As author, Fountain purposely severs "jazz" from "Dixieland," the latter a code word for whites' commercialized appropriation of creolized music since Storyville's closure and the Original Dixieland Jazz Band's inaugural recording in 1917. Dixieland assumes a privileged stature for being a "traditional" (read: hegemonic) form, as opposed to "progressive" jazz or authentic New Orleans music, "disruptive" styles that reference the city's discordant, multiethnic history.

Such a stance is troubling, not only for its ahistoricism but also for its grounding in what Pierre Bourdieu terms "class racism," a bourgeois revulsion toward others' supposed lack of taste and refinement (174–175). Fountain's self-serving descriptions of being constantly at work—in local clubs, on tour, on Lawrence Welk's television program—seem especially egregious in this context, implying that Fountain took it upon himself to be New Orleans's primary musical ambassador, charged with reclaiming the good name of the city and its music after decades of unsavory associations. As Brian Ward notes, in pursuing the "wages of whiteness," "white male workers proudly—if by no means always accurately—presented themselves as reliable, hard-working, thrifty, family-oriented breadwinners [against] powerful countervailing visions of blacks as indolent, over-sexed, profligate

and unreliable” (234). This is exactly how Fountain sells out his African American and Creole musician forebears and peers, by representing himself as a hard-working, frugal, and virtuous family man whose music has a purpose and attraction socially superior to “common” jazz.

The book title Fountain chooses holds unwitting irony. As Albert Murray explains, in its traditional New Orleans context, “A Closer Walk With Thee” accompanies ecstatic celebration in church services (*Stomping* 27). No event Fountain describes, musical or otherwise, comes close to ecstasy, nor does he seem to want to have a “close walk” with his fellow jazz musicians if it violates traditional southern racial codes. Like a good bourgeoisie, Fountain avoids all mention of politics and religion. Fountain’s description of Mardi Gras parades reads like a Chamber of Commerce press release, with no mention of carnival’s strict segregation (which was not lifted until Fountain was in his thirties, having by that time achieved fame as one of the city’s best-known musicians). At no point does he address the incoherence and hypocrisy of a whites-only parade built in large part on African American and Creole carnival traditions. Instead, Fountain depicts Mardi Gras as a place for (implicitly white) locals and tourists alike to “swing” and enjoy a parade and civic party neatly unencumbered by race, without ties to religious or cultural traditions (40).

In keeping with his centripetal stance, Fountain makes no mention of New Orleans’s notoriously hot and humid climate or the flooding that occurs in the city’s lower wards. (New Orleans’s sea-level elevation necessitated the building of levees

to reduce the number of floods, or at least divert the water away from the homes of the landed gentry.) Geographically as well as culturally, Fountain represents himself as standing on higher ground. Fountain centers his evocations of the city in the French Quarter, particularly the commercialized Dixieland tourist trap of Bourbon Street. Because of segregation laws and local custom, Bourbon Street played only an incidental role in jazz's most fertile period in the city. Its saloons and dives emerged only after Storyville's closure. Chroniclers of the city's "good old days" react to the Bourbon Street's simulacrum of Old New Orleans with either disgust or indifference. In his history of Storyville, Al Rose, not one to typically make judgments about the city's reputation for licentiousness, denigrates the modern-day entertainment district as "tawdry and sordid," pandering to "well-to-do young hoodlums, the scum of the South's colleges and universities" (172, 174). In autobiographies that describe the geography and culture of downtown New Orleans with clarity and precision, like Armstrong's *Satchmo*, Bechet's *Treat It Gentle*, and *The Baby Dodds Story*, Bourbon Street is wholly omitted from the discussion, implying its irrelevance in the making of early-twentieth-century jazz. Even Jelly Roll Morton, who as a light-skinned Creole man could have patronized Bourbon Street with little repercussion, has nothing to say about the boulevard in his book. Of the era's "survivors," only Pops Foster deigns to address the presence of Bourbon Street in his memoirs, and only then with contempt. "People go to the French Quarter now and they think the hot spots we played were along Bourbon Street," Foster spits. "Back then Bourbon Street was just a bunch of furniture and jewelry stores" (46).

By contrast, Fountain vigorously participates in this culturally forgetful, entrepreneurial rebranding of the French Quarter. Around 1960, Fountain, a fixture in local tourist spots, seeks to open his own establishment. The only vacancies on Bourbon Street are on points east, past the 600 block, which Fountain describes as a “dark and mystical land” of local watering holes and gay bars (169–170). Fountain presses on, and builds a club of his own design. His establishment of the French Quarter Inn in 1960 reifies both his ambitions and his ahistoricism. To attract the burgeoning tourist trade, Fountain guts a 200-year-old building on Bourbon Street to open an “authentic” bar and performance space for himself and his all-white band. In a priceless bit of unconscious hubris, Fountain labels his club a local “landmark” (171). His razing of an authentic landmark in his rebuilding process reflects an imperialist approach to space, history, and culture.

Fountain’s desire to create a Disneyfied simulacrum of Storyville by demolishing an actual historical site demonstrates Ellen Douglas’s allegation in her book of essays *Witnessing* that the New South, all too eager to prove itself in the national arena, short-sightedly tears down its manmade landscape as well as its natural environment (19). To “erase” the Ninth Ward and its history (or, more aptly, its survival) from the books—in favor of pandering to tourists by promoting the French Quarter as a restaurant-bar complex with a Dixieland flair—demonstrates just what it means to miss (the point of) New Orleans and its varied cultures.

Like Fountain’s Inn, New Orleans’ present-day reconstruction elevates visitor-friendly simulacra over unprofitable notions such as historical preservation

and economic justice. Such pursuits whitewash the past and pawn the illegitimate results off as tradition. Fountain's act is a harbinger of what Clyde Woods terms "Bourbonism," class and race domination barely masked by *noblesse oblige* and a libertarian, "free-market" stance ("Katrina's" 429). Before Hurricane Katrina in 2005, New Orleans adopted Bourbonism in its attempts to be recognized around the globe as a modern, cosmopolitan U.S. city, which came at the expense of its own residents. Near the site of the former Congo Square, the city established the Municipal Auditorium, which remained a segregated facility until the mid-1960s (Tallant 19). The grandiose Superdome athletic and concert venue opened in 1975, about a block away from what was once Storyville, displacing African American residents of the Third Ward in the process (Roach 232; Brothers 99).

Fountain's assumption of proprietorship and pandering to the white tourist trade anticipated the conditions set by government agencies and private corporations for rebuilding New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. President George W. Bush's famously ill-considered words in his first address to the nation after the devastating hurricane speaks volumes on the misplaced priorities of the Bourbon mindset: "I believe that the town where I used to come from Houston, Texas to enjoy myself—occasionally too much—will be that very same town, that it will be a better place to come to" (qtd. in Lipsitz, *Possessive* 237). What President Bush left out of that promise, of course, was a resolve to restore—or, better yet, improve—the lives of New Orleans's residents, especially the tens of thousands who were forced to leave the city and were left homeless after the storm. The Bourbon-approved "recovery"

effort is premised on New Orleans functioning primarily as a tourist destination rather than a community, leaving its diverse native populations an afterthought. *A Closer Walk* represents this stance in its prototypical form.

At the conclusion of *A Closer Walk*, Fountain enjoys the advantages of being one of New Orleans's privileged Bourbons. The city fathers officially declare a Pete Fountain Day, with the mayor explicitly congratulating him for restoring, in his words, "respectability" to New Orleans jazz (165). Fountain then ostentatiously leads a parade to the segregated Municipal Auditorium; as he plays, he falls into self-congratulatory reverie. "I walked with my friends and neighbors," Fountain recalls, "and I was proud to have had anything to do with elevating jazz to its proper status" (166). At the book's close, enriched by the profits from the French Quarter Inn, Fountain plans to construct a plantation-style house in nearby Slidell (200). Bafflingly, given the provenance of his own Bourbon Street club, he proclaims "nothing has changed much at all since the days when I was a kid...Business goes on as usual on Bourbon Street" (200). Fountain is half right. There have been changes on Bourbon Street, some of which Fountain is responsible for: the tearing down of Spanish and French architecture erases foundational elements of the city's unique, creolized past, while the amenable but bland sounds of Dixieland homogenize jazz. Yet the Bourbon impulse remains constant. *A Closer Walk* documents Fountain's contributions to the ongoing effort to commercialize and Anglicize New Orleans, and recast the venerable Vieux Carre into the superficially joyous, tourist-dependent French Quarter. Fountain does not simply rebuild a piece of Bourbon Street; he

effectively colonizes it by erasing its past and proclaiming past, present, and future ownership and dominion.

A richer and more nuanced account of how New Orleans music and life was founded upon cultural syncretism can be found in autobiographies that discuss, often with scholarly detail, the invented celebrations of residents historically excluded from the city's Mardi Gras festivities. In both the Zulu parade that Louis Armstrong leads in 1949 and the anarchic processions of the Mardi Gras Indians evoked by the Neville Brothers and Dr. John (Mac Rebennack), the pretensions of the upper class are mocked, creating a space for unfettered carnivalesque expression. In one of the few instances that the narration in *Satchmo* reaches beyond his early adulthood, Armstrong expresses his pleasure in being chosen as "King of the Zulus" in the 1949 parade. In their parade and costuming, African American members of the Zulu Aid Pleasure and Social Club parody the officially sanctioned, whites-only ceremony. Over time, the Zulu parade has developed into a finely drawn caricature, a comprehensive mockery of European pretensions to authority. Traditionally, the Zulu King wears a lard bucket for a crown, wields a banana stalk for a royal scepter, parades through the street in ragged clothes, and is insulated from the raucous crowd by a coterie of street hustlers acting as a royal guard (Brothers 81). Members of the Zulu King's attendant court include such lampooning characters as "The Big Shot of Africa" and "The Witch Doctor." Donning grass skirts and black greasepaint over a layer of white clown makeup, they pose for pictures in their outrageous garb, their mock-solemn demeanor subverting the photos of white society krewes' grandiose

costumes and pompous air (see Roach 23). The parade itself precedes the officially sanctioned, whites-only Rex parade on St. Charles Avenue and draws a comparable crowd. In lieu of cheap manufactured trinkets, the Zulus toss large coconuts to the masses (Roach 19).

The Zulu King's accoutrements are equally subversive. "[King] Zulu did everything Rex did," historian Reid Mitchell concludes:

If Rex traveled by water, coming up the Mississippi with an escort from the U.S. Navy, Zulu came down the New Basin Canal on a tugboat. If Rex held a scepter, Zulu held a ham bone. If Rex had the city police marching before him, Zulu had the Zulu police—wearing police uniforms until the municipal authorities objected. All that Zulu did caricatured Rex, a black lord of misrule upsetting the reign of the white lord, a mocker of a mocker. (151)

When Armstrong was offered the chance to be "a black lord of misrule" in 1949, he gratefully accepted the honor. In *Satchmo*, he unabashedly calls his role in the parade a "lifelong dream" (127). However, in his private letters during the writing of his book, Armstrong expressed lingering misgivings about the black-on-white makeup and the buffoonish elements of his costume (Armstrong, *In His* 250; Kenney, "Going" 39–40). His experience in the parade illustrated the reality of his hectic schedule and his estrangement from New Orleans by the 1940s. Because of Armstrong's immense popularity by 1949, New Orleans was almost just another stop on a grueling tour, even during Mardi Gras. On the day of the Zulu parade, the

trumpeter and his band arrived in the city at six A.M.; Armstrong's disorientation was compounded when he awoke in his hotel room to find a representative of the Zulus in the process of applying his "ceremonial" makeup (*In His* 250). Seeing the Zulu makeup for the first time, Armstrong's northern-born piano player, Earl Hines, blurted out, "What tha [*sic*] hell is that—" (*In His* 250). As Armstrong described the parade in his private correspondence, the ceremony ended up being half homecoming, half professional obligation.

It is significant, then, to examine how Armstrong discursively represents such an uneasy homecoming in *Satchmo*. Just as the parade sits anachronistically amid a personal history that otherwise ends in 1922, the type of narrative detail and tone Armstrong employs in representing the parade is unlike anything else found in *Satchmo*. He writes:

Every member of the [Zulu] Club masquerades in a costume burlesquing some famous person. The King of the Zulus, also in masquerade costume, rides with six other Zulus on a float giving away coconuts as souvenirs. The members march to the good jumping music of the brass bands while the King on his throne scrapes and bows to the cheering crowds. Every year Mr. Jamke, the gravel and sand dealer, invites the King and his cortege and all the Zulus to come to his offices for champagne. (127)

This description is coupled with (or undercut by) a photograph in the book's illustration section of Armstrong in his Zulu King regalia, with white makeup on top

of what appears to be old-fashioned burnt cork. Armstrong's synopsis clearly acknowledges the burlesque and "signifyin(g)" at the heart of the parade. Yet the reader detects conflict in Armstrong's discourse. Armstrong's characteristic humorous asides and private jokes momentarily fall away. Unlike the description of the Waifs' Parade that defined his rise to musicianship, Armstrong does not speak from a subjective point of view or focalize from the perspective of others. Aside from his recognition of the "good jumping brass bands," a detached tone replaces his affable, first-person voice. In this case, Armstrong engages in something akin to "thick description," an interpretation of culture borne out of close, first-person observation, analyzed in "microscopic" detail and expressed in terms readily accessible to outsiders (see Geertz 15–21). Armstrong steps back from his first-person knowledge of the parade to speak in third-person voice on the parade's essential "burlesquing."⁴⁷ Such detached detail may have been an expression of defensiveness, lest his acceptance of the parade ritual be interpreted as succumbing to blackface stereotypes. In *Stomping the Blues*, Albert Murray defends Armstrong's role in the parade, insisting that the trumpeter's intention was to take part in a local ritual of race and class subversion (190). Armstrong's careful delineation of the king's role, gleaned from his immersion in New Orleans's parade culture, demonstrates that he saw—and more importantly, understood—the layers of meaning within the ritual. Quite plausibly, Armstrong's manner during the parade may have

⁴⁷ Incidentally, to illustrate what "thick description" entails in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz uses an ethnographer's analysis of communicative winking, which the ethnographer also describes as a "burlesque" (6–7).

had all these subtle touches of parody and subversion, and given him the chance to engage in semi-sanctioned racial masquerade. It seems fair to say that, regardless of his genial public persona, Armstrong had seen, heard, and experienced too much by the mid-1950s to be the butt of the joke.

More recent accounts of carnival by New Orleans musicians have also endeavored to represent the singularity of the city's African American carnival culture through thick description of the unofficial parades that take place beyond the French Quarter, led by groups known as the Mardi Gras Indians. Dating back to the mid-1880s, after the advances brought by Reconstruction had largely vanished, groups of African Americans took to the streets, in a parallel to the Zulu parade, in elaborate simulation of Indian dress. In defiance of official Mardi Gras culture, they asserted their rights to indulge in the spectacle and rule-breaking spirit of carnival (Mitchell 116). During the carnival season, young African American men organize in "krewes," decked out in elaborate headwear that draw freely from Plains Indians' ceremonial clothing and established white Mardi Gras krewes. Led by assertive "big chiefs," the krewes compete informally for recognition in singing, dancing, and overall presentation. The processions, as George Lipsitz and others detect, blends surface elements of American Indian dress with a performance style that can be traced to West African traditions. Yet many of the more notable facets of their parading and music-making are adaptations of more recent New Orleans carnival traditions. Like their white counterparts, Mardi Gras Indians spend most of the year stitching together their costumes, with their garb signifying their respective roles in

the krewe's hierarchy. As Reid Mitchell points out, the earliest groups' connection with Native Americans was tenuous at best; while some participants plausibly claimed Native American (usually Choctaw) heritage, the parade itself was more likely an "invented tradition," with its signifiers of native identity—like headdresses and tomahawks—initially gleaned from popular-culture portrayals of Plains Indians (114–115).

Over time, the groups' music, ceremonial dress, and style of parading developed unique contours. For all its year-to-year continuity, the Mardi Gras Indians' tradition includes space for change and innovation. Sartorial custom dictates that each year's costumes must be significantly different from the past year's. While each krewe shares in a fairly static repertoire of about twenty songs, each krewe freely adapts each song's lyrics, inserting lines of self-praise (Lipsitz, *Time* 240–242). Throughout the parade route, groups seek each other out for face-to-face musical and dancing challenges as well as occasional fisticuffs. Whereas elite white krewes parade through the main thoroughfares of New Orleans in a single-file procession, dispensing trinkets to the assembled crowd, Mardi Gras Indians follow improvised, convoluted routes through backstreets and alleys, occasionally stopping for drinks and other treats offered by bystanders (Lipsitz, *Time* 235). A krewe's "second line" functions much as it did in Louis Armstrong's time; spectators readily become participants, accompanying the krewe's chants with improvised percussion instruments. This open participation, as much as the costuming, music, and dancing, has become an inextricable part of the spectacle.

This spectacle is evoked in all of its energy and complexity in two recent autobiographies by New Orleans musicians, one by Dr. John, the other by the Neville Brothers (Art, Aaron, Charles, and Cyril); both have appropriated elements of the Mardi Gras Indians into their stage acts. More intriguingly, the narration in both books is temporarily suspended by thick description of the Mardi Gras Indian parade. In the case of Dr. John, the turn toward an in-depth, scholarly discourse underscores his immersion in the multiethnic cultures of the city. For the Nevilles, it establishes both their connection to the city's musical traditions and their family ties to the Mardi Gras Indians.

In the Nevilles' collective autobiography, co-written with David Ritz, Cyril Neville offers a capsule history of the Mardi Gras Indians. Like Sidney Bechet's conjuring of Omar, Neville harkens back to the era of Congo Square and the rebellious spirit of runaway slaves that influenced New Orleans music, drawing a connection between Maroons and Indian krewes. Cyril writes of the Mardi Gras Indians' origins in the discursive style of a historian. "The mythology of the tribes is based on territorial integrity," Neville claims. "The emphasis was on pageantry—extravagant costumes and haunting music. The emphasis was on self assertion" (Nevilles and Ritz 245). Brother Art Neville picks up the discussion with a disquisition on the Indians' musical syncretism, followed by Aaron's rundown of local "tribes" and their individual musical approaches. Cyril concludes the section with a Du Boisian observation on the krewes' constructed identity, observing that their music and pageantry "came from New Orleans, and it also came from a deeper

place. It's a place of alienation, or if you think about it, double alienation—alienation for being black and alienation for being Indian" (246).

Growing up, the Neville brothers shared in much of this disengagement with the city's public culture, since Mardi Gras was officially segregated until the 1960s, and still *de facto* segregated afterward. Because local police carefully watched the movements of African Americans in white wards during carnival, the Nevilles never saw the "white" parade and its attendant festivities. Instead, they observed local street parades, or a "secret Mardi Gras" (53). In these parades, their uncle Jolly led a group of Indians; according to the Nevilles, Jolly assumed leadership in the processions both to honor his part-Native American heritage and to protest his second-class citizenship as a black man in New Orleans (243–244). "When Jolly became [his tribe's] big chief," Cyril recalls, "he became a symbol of strength. It took us all a while to find that strength within ourselves, but Jolly showed us that it was there" (245). Following his example, the Nevilles assume their own "territorial integrity" by incorporating elements of Jolly's costuming and parade chanting in their stage act as a means of articulating their own alienation from their past and their marginalized place in the present.

Whereas the Neville Brothers call upon the ancestral matrix to interpret the levels of meaning in the Indian procession, the white musician Mac Rebennack, known worldwide by his stage name Dr. John, apprehends the spectacle through his knack for understanding the city's method of cultural bricolage. Rebennack appropriated his stage moniker in the mid-1960s from the original Dr. John, a

nineteenth-century trickster figure, self-styled voodoo priest, and intimate of Marie Laveau, notorious for hoodwinking gullible white people seeking out voodoo rituals around Congo Square (Tallant 39). Conceived in collaboration with black record executive Harold Battiste, Rebennack's rebirth as Dr. John conveyed his studied appropriation of New Orleans popular myth (Ward 258). The first Dr. John boasted, improbably, that he was a Senegalese prince, much like Bechet's "grandfather" Omar. In their adoptions of such "royalty," Bechet and (under very different circumstances) Rebennack claimed not only lineage to African music, but also nobility. Rebennack's reinvention suggests that in New Orleans the pursuit of local vernacular music is a near-occult practice whose mastery garners public value and esteem. Like his namesake, Rebennack attained his first flush of fame by appealing to outsiders looking for bayou exoticism. His debut album *Gris-Gris* (recorded in 1968 in Los Angeles, where Rebennack was employed as a pop session musician) was marketed to the mass audience outside of New Orleans more as an in-vogue psychedelic record, rather than one influenced by local blues and jazz. In retrospect, Dr. John describes his 1960s persona as a "character," a self-creation who syncretizes midcentury New Orleans jive, beatnik cool, and late-Sixties flamboyance, represented by a stage show that liberally borrows from old minstrel shows (145).

This syncretism comes as no surprise, given Dr. John's background and the ability of New Orleans music, with its myriad of influences and approaches, to adapt and insinuate itself into emerging styles such as rock and roll. As record mogul and rhythm-and-blues aficionado Ahmet Ertegun noted, New Orleans audiences were an

anomaly in the late Fifties, their preference for music informed by local traditions out of step with the increasingly homogenized popular music that boasted a national following (Hirshey 72). Yet, by law, blacks and white performers could not share the same stage in New Orleans in the 1950s, a time when integrated rock-and-roll package shows began barnstorming the South and drawing an enthusiastic young white audience (Guralnick, *Dream* 228). Hence, capitulation to Jim Crow became not only morally questionable, but presented a barrier to well-paying jobs for many musicians on both sides of the color line.

In *Under a Hoodoo Moon*, Dr. John and co-author Jack Rummel interrupt the musical saga of young Mac Rebennack to both sketch out and interpret the influence of the Mardi Gras Indians' parades, a ritual formulated long before the subject's birth. Dr. John and his co-author describe the makeup and hierarchy of individual groups, their patois, and their music and dancing as expressions of creolized culture. To demonstrate difference among the tribes, an intergroup confrontation is dramatized in the text. The authors take care to explain the deep play of such a confrontation, authoritatively claiming that the violence is well contained and largely symbolic, essentially a ritual that asserts manhood and status within the community (17). Returning to subjective, first-person voice, Dr. John reasserts his place in New Orleans life by boasting of his seemingly innate understanding of the city's complex culture: "[T]his kind of thing seemed normal to me as a kid. Didn't every town have tribes? I thought so" (18). Seeking out an appropriate mode of dress for his "Night Tripper" performance persona decades later, Dr. John outfits himself in the castoffs of

old Indian costumes and the elaborate headdresses worn by the “big chiefs” (146). In the style of free adaptation and borrowing that goes back to the cultural recombinations at Congo Square, Dr. John “cloaks” himself musically as well in bits and pieces claimed from the city’s traditions. To his credit, though, Dr. John acknowledges the provenance of such borrowings and includes himself as part of that ongoing tradition.

Dr. John and the Neville Brothers put their interpretations of carnival into print at a time when its rituals were being redefined, on the streets and in the courts and statehouse. The carnival season’s increased commercialization (and growing reputation as a public bacchanal) separated the parades even further from their foundation in the observance of Lent. A 1991 court order ended the era when traditional carnival krewes kept segregated ranks. As a result, upper-class white krewes like Comus, Momus, and Proteus withdrew from the festivities, after a century and a half of active participation (Roach 242). Klansman David Duke’s political viability in Louisiana—winning a seat in the state legislature in 1989, carrying almost forty percent of the vote in a bid for the governorship—exposed long-simmering racial divisions. The thick description of the Mardi Gras Indian parades offered by the Neville Brothers and Dr. John only partially counter such forces of cultural homogenization and political extremism. Yet they do endeavor to commemorate and celebrate a locally cultivated subculture that arose from the bottom up and withstood decades of change. In these discursive turns toward the more objective and scholarly, musicians write as organic intellectuals with historical

continuity in mind, and in hopes that their descriptions will contribute to the perpetuation of local ritual.

CONCLUSION

Surveying the latter-day reminiscences of musicians from the Storyville era, Leroy Ostransky simply states, “New Orleans jazz men as they grew older were prone to exaggerate” (38). This exaggeration sprang from several sources: creative remembrance, forgetfulness amid the passage of time, personal affiliations and jealousies, a desire to write themselves into history or revise existing accounts, and simple belligerence. On a wider scale, J. Bill Berry surmises that the South fosters an expansive mode of storytelling where personal and regional histories are fluid, embellishment is common, and oral tales are met with attuned listening and responses. This dialogic trait, represented as simple storytelling, serves as “the prototype of southern autobiographical writing” (Berry, “Southern” 7). This impulse to “break the rules” of first-person reportage allows subject-authors to demonstrate how New Orleans has historically functioned as a contact zone between European and African traditions, and a site of exchange between descendants from Africa, Europe, and the Caribbean. In this body of work, a “life’s story” often begins before one’s birth, and takes on the viewpoints of ancestors.

A major facet of narrating experience in New Orleans—and, as we shall see in the next chapter, the Mississippi Delta—is to evoke places that are gone, people never met, and events that are temporally out of the subject’s range, all privileges of

authorship typically reserved for writers of fiction. High modernist writing, especially, portrays past events (most often family histories) that, temporally, the present-day narrator could never have seen with a sureness and clarity of thought he or she cannot be privy to. In a case like Sidney Bechet's, a reworked version of a passed-down tale serves as a countermyth, a riposte to recurring misreadings of African American music-making. Lawrence Levine makes note of Bechet's deft understanding of local ritual, especially the syncretic elements of African-American religion and artistic expression, and his ability to "blend and interweave myth with fact" (388–389). Bechet approaches the Bras-Coupé legend, in both its oral and written forms, as a palimpsest, "rubbing out" anachronistic or unwanted elements, and replacing them with his own first-hand observations on musicianship and social relations. Through the story of the African prince Omar and his Creole bride Marie, Bechet employs transnational imagery to underscore New Orleans's inextricable ties to global culture. Bechet's authorship of the legend, coupled with his own parallel life story, demonstrates how a musician's autobiography can extend the boundaries of first-person description into an expansive form, embracing biography, cultural history, music criticism, and novelistic discourse.

In their autobiographies, successive generations of New Orleans musicians have described, differentiated, and distinguished local culture and music-making. There is an element of repartee and conversation central to the life writing of New Orleans musicians. The majority of New Orleans musician-authors dismiss the notions that jazz has a single origin point or that the legend of Buddy Bolden exerts

any great influence from beyond the grave. Instead, Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet, and Pops Foster rebut the presumption that jazz was born in brothels and brought up exclusively in the demimonde. Through their narratives, each musician-author reanimates the more genteel, centripetal culture of picnics, lawn parties, and brass-band parades. To contextualize local rituals, especially the multi-layered acts of subversion on display during carnival, subject-authors from Armstrong on have employed a more scholarly discourse, similar to an anthropologist's use of "thick description," to replace the impressionistic, skewed observations that have mischaracterized New Orleans culture since the days of Benjamin Latrobe. The next generation of New Orleans musicians, including Dr. John and the Neville Brothers, speak eloquently about how their music was enriched through cultural bricolage and the need, in a city cordoned off by race and class, to improvise and invent new forms that blend existing elements of the local with popular musical forms.

By contrast, Pete Fountain's skewed notion of jazz's local history not only distorts present-day understanding of the music and its environment but also impedes the understanding of its past by creating a false sense of consensus. Fountain blithely ignores New Orleans' historically grounded racial and class conflicts in order to refashion jazz as "Dixieland," a more "harmonious" music that privileges staid European notions of musicianship and presentation over the improvisation and adventurousness found at jazz's essence. In doing so, Fountain engages in a quixotic type of urban renewal in the old city, leveling the city's musical tradition to its blandest elements as indifferently as he razes Bourbon Street edifices to build a

nightclub set aside for the white tourist trade. Sidney Bechet conceives of a more sustainable, inclusive model for cultural commemoration in *Treat It Gentle*, where music flourishes out of subjective memory and feeling. Likewise, autobiographical accounts by Bechet's contemporaries and rivals draw on remembrance and, ideally, strike a balance between historical accuracy and generosity. The collective story of New Orleans jazz scattered among these autobiographical texts contain many "solos," in the form of greatly embellished, first-person fictions, but are most satisfying when the soloist occasionally steps out of the spotlight to bring attention to the wider stage.

CHAPTER V

BLUES FROM THE SOUTH

The two hundred-mile-long delta between the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers encapsulated many of the South's extremes. Describing its reputation for threatened and actual violence in 1932, the *Chicago Defender* damned Mississippi as "the most brutal community in history" (qtd. in McMillen 230). Oral histories and official records alike represented the area as anachronistic, atavistic, and the epicenter of the South's problems with racism, poverty, and lack of education. Throughout the 20th century, the Delta remained the poorest subsection of the South, with correspondingly substandard levels of education, infrastructure, and health-care access (Hyland and Timberlake 80). Its hot, humid climate made agricultural labor especially strenuous, while planters of all strata had to negotiate and struggle with what James Cobb calls the "physical challenges" of the region (*Most* 28). Settling the Delta required generations to engage in hard labor, initially completed by enslaved African Americans, then by their descendents. By demand of the Delta's wealthy planter class, laborers cleared thousands of acres of wilderness and drained standing water to uncover the deep, rich soil beneath. The mournful lyrics and tonality of the blues underscored the extremity of this labor, the interpersonal sorrow expressed in the music extrapolated to virtually every aspect of life in the area.

Historians have used sweeping terms to characterize the Delta and its underlying economy, from James Cobb's "the most southern place on earth"—a description that overlooks the plantation economies of the southern hemisphere—to

Nan Elizabeth Woodruff's "American Congo," which discounts the hundreds of thousands of acts of resistance against the prevailing system, most visibly outmigration. Unlike New Orleans society, where Creoles represented a strata reserved for free people of color, class and racial categorization in the Delta had no such ambiguity or middle ground. The Delta counties of Mississippi boasted a four-to-one ratio of blacks to whites, making the legal fiction of "separate but equal" segregation difficult to enforce. The newly deforested and cleared Delta land attracted new African American residents from Mississippi's hill country seeking more arable land (E. Wald 85). To counter this supermajority, the area's planter class, in line with Mississippi's "Redeemer" government, seized economic and political power by the dawn of the 20th century, holding a near-complete hegemony. This power was bolstered both by vigilante violence tacitly approved by local and state governments and laws which circumscribed the actions of freedmen and freedwomen after Reconstruction (Oshinsky 21). The state's 1890 constitution instituted black disfranchisement through such measures as one-year residency requirements, literacy tests, and a poll tax (Harris 106). First under Mississippi's Black Codes, then under state law after the Codes' repeal, an African American without written proof of employment could be convicted of "vagrancy" and struck with an arbitrarily large fine; in lieu of payment, the convicted "vagrant" was forced to work off his sentence with unpaid heavy labor (Oshinsky 20–21).

One especially odious example of the use of African American men as a labor force by the white planter minority was the "convict lease" system. Prisons in the

Deep South, exploiting the disproportionate number of African American men in their prisons, would lease convicts to contractors, who put them to work in back-breaking jobs like planting cotton and laying railroad track, or exceptionally dangerous lines of work like coal mining or dynamiting hills for railroad tunnels (Oshinsky 44). Convict labor was considered key to the completion of these massive efforts; in many cases, to pad the ranks of laborers, African American men were conscripted into labor gangs, held in custody under trumped-up charges of vagrancy. Leased convicts were forced to work to pay off fines, which were typically set at a high arbitrary rate; with daily “wages” around fifty cents, even misdemeanors took months to work off. Meanwhile, the contractors acted as middle men, collecting money from the state for laborers’ room and board, but spending significantly less than was allotted. Though outlawed by an act of Congress in 1887, the practice continued until the 1920s, reflecting both the *laissez-faire* attitude toward southern race relations in the national mainstream and the obsession the southern power structure had with its own perpetuation, even when it contravened federal law (Oliver, *Blues* 190–191).

After the breakdown of Reconstruction reforms, African Americans had little recourse against legal and economic oppression. In 1890, about four-fifths of the African American population lived in the Black Belt, geographically and culturally isolated from southern cities and the rapidly modernizing North and West (Lincoln and Mamiya 90). In lieu of the robust manufacturing sector that would eventually draw tens of thousands of African Americans north annually, production in the South relied on hard labor and coercion. Turpentine camps along the Black Belt relied on

peonage for a captive workforce. Owners of camps colluded with police to capture workers who left the camps (using violence when the authorities deemed it necessary) and charged the would-be escapees excessive interest on existing debts (Daniel, *Shadow* 140–141).

As David M. Oshinsky convincingly demonstrates in his chronicle of prison-plantation labor “*Worse Than Slavery*,” authorities in Mississippi handily replaced the convict-lease system just after 1900 with the establishment of the Parchman state penitentiary. Under the gun, the overwhelmingly African American prison population was made to reenact the antebellum plantation experience, laboring from sunup to sundown in the cotton fields. Each member of a labor gang was expected to pick two hundred pounds of cotton each day of the harvest, with the proceeds going into the state’s coffers and little of that earmarked for the penitentiary.

Such regression into closed, plantation-style dominance over African Americans defined the isolated spaces of the Mississippi Delta, and a system that extended second-class-citizen status to most of its residents. Historian J. William Harris summarizes the prevailing social system in the early 1900s in the starkest of terms: “‘Progress’ in the form of schools, parks, and hospitals was usually reserved for whites only” (169). Though the planter elite acted as local boosters, publicizing the millions of dollars spent on improvements in education and infrastructure (paved streets, electric streetlights, drainage, etc.), such improvements were implemented exclusively on the white side of the tracks (Woodruff 18). Not coincidentally, African Americans began migrating out of the Delta in historic numbers during the

1910s; almost 150,000 left Mississippi that decade (McMillen 262). Floods, disease, crop infestation, and wartime inflation made sharecropping an even less attractive proposition, while the prevailing system of disfranchisement and white rule made social change a virtual impossibility. Yet, as Neil McMillen argues, the migration out of Mississippi can only partly be explained by general economic or social trends. The need to move and seek opportunities was an intensely personal one, requiring both spiritual resolve and material sacrifice in the face of uncertainty (263–264).

For those who stayed, the effects of the Mississippi River flood of 1927 dramatically illustrated the plight of poor southerners, white and black, in a time of supposed modernization. As many as 750,000 homes in the region were damaged when the river overran its banks (Oliver, *Broadcasting* 114). As fourteen million acres in the region lay underwater, hundreds of thousands of southerners lived in makeshift tent cities, their losses in the disaster intensified by their lack of resources and inability to rebuild (Daniel, *Deep'n* 84). By one estimate, the flood left behind 300,000 displaced people, who sought relief in 150 camps (Lawson 141). As Pete Daniel notes, the year 1927 signified material progress and technical advancement for the nation as a whole, highlighted by Charles Lindbergh's initial transatlantic flight, the first public demonstration of television, and the first "talking" motion picture (*Deep'n* 8). In addition, 1927 marked the year Duke Ellington recorded "Black and Tan Fantasy," a musical evocation of the flourishing Harlem Renaissance. Yet such watersheds meant little in the South, as the region contended with a natural disaster countless observers could only describe in Biblical terms. Even in this moment of

common devastation and loss, the region's entrenched labor structure and unwritten rules against social equality held firm. Though an estimated ninety percent of Delta residents displaced by the flood were African American, the assistance offered to flood refugees was not offered in proportion (D. Evans, "High" 5). According to blues historian Paul Oliver, African Americans left homeless by the flood were forced to pay for food, clothing, and shelter provided free for whites.⁴⁸ If unable to pay for such relief, their "debts" accrued from public assistance were transferred to white landowners, who demanded repayment through sharecropping (*Blues* 222). African Americans were also conscripted as laborers in the camps and put in the service of whites (*Blues* 222).

Undoubtedly, such inequity and disproportionate amount of suffering and loss found a measure of expression in the Delta blues. From its beginnings, the Delta blues broke with the lyrical themes and musical approach of the previous generation's "respectable" blues, written by the likes of W.C. Handy for the sheet-music-buying public. Samuel Charters relates an illustrative, though perhaps apocryphal, story about this divergence. After bluesman Gus Cannon left behind cotton farming in his native Belzoni, Mississippi, he arrived in Memphis in 1913, seeking instruction in banjo and sophisticated, urban music-making from none other than Handy himself. "After a few hours," Charters writes, "they both gave up. Handy couldn't understand

⁴⁸ The resulting alienation from such "charity" was articulated in Walter Roland's "Red Cross Blues" (1933), later adapted into powerful performances by Leadbelly ("Red Cross Store Blues," 1941) and Mississippi Fred McDowell ("Red Cross Store," 1970).

any of the country [blues] music Cannon was playing and Gus couldn't understand any of the formal music that Handy was trying to show him" (*Country* 118).

Though other regional, idiomatic variations on the blues developed concurrently in the Piedmont and Texas, the general critical consensus is that the blues emanating from the Delta has a characteristic sense of extremity, rawer in its musical approach, and more direct in its lyrics than other strains of blues (see Pearson, *Virginia* 200). In time, the music historians and critics once classified as "country blues" became "Delta blues," so as to link the music with the political and social oppression associated with Mississippi (Hamilton 232–233). Many critics responded to the "timelessness" in the words and vocalizations of Delta blues musicians, believing them to be vestiges of antebellum music-making. In lieu of overt protest lyrics, William Barlow identifies two general categories of Delta blues lyrics: "cautionary folktales—lessons on how to survive in a hostile social environment—and prideful songs of self-assertion" (325). While bluesmen from the 1910s through the 1940s were often well traveled and well attired, and seemed to have limitless freedom of expression, notions of advancement and autonomy in their lyrics were expressed in individualized terms and tempered by everyday realities. Musicians like Big Bill Broonzy affirmed the music's connection to latter-day plantation life even amid charges of anachronism. "Some Negroes tell me that the old style of blues is carrying Negroes back to the horse-and-buggy days and back to slavery," Broonzy declared in the 1950s. Nevertheless, Broonzy half-jokingly promised to play his untutored brand of the blues "as long as the South grows cotton

and mules and men eat cornbread” (Broonzy as told to Bruynoghe 30). Tacitly, Broonzy’s witticism conveyed the notion that too little had changed in the Delta since Emancipation to set a new, “freer” type of music into motion and suggests furthermore that the sophisticated, self-consciously modern sounds of jazz and rhythm and blues and the positivism at the core of the New South credo did not fully reflect the realities of his regional and generational cohort. Such understated critiques, as expressions of both alienation and self-assertion, distinguish the small but significant body of autobiographies by Delta musicians, encompassing Broonzy, B.B. King, Honeyboy Edwards, and Willie Dixon. These texts trace the journey taken by those who rose in stature from agricultural laborer to relatively autonomous blues musician as well as document the migration from the Delta to the urban North where, ironically, they found familiar type of economics at play in the music industry.

COTTON FIELDS AND JUKE JOINTS

Like its musical correspondent New Orleans, the Mississippi Delta was out of step with the rest of the country in a period of rapid industrialization. Neither New Orleans nor the Delta and its adjacent areas in the Lower Mississippi Valley (northern Mississippi, southwestern Tennessee, eastern Arkansas) contained a dominant manufacturing sector in the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. The global demand for cheap, abundant cotton meant the Deep South’s economy relied on the vestiges of their respective antebellum trades, cotton-growing in the Delta, shipping and trade in the Gulf region. Such work relied on hard, often exploitative labor that

deferred the dream of progress for poor whites and African Americans alike. Because cotton was the Delta crop that sold most readily in the marketplace, landowners furnished tenant farmers with cotton seed only, leaving them little chance to diversify their crops (Grossman 55). If planters did diversify, it was to grow corn as feed for the mules furnished by the landowner, essentially paying for the animals' upkeep out of their own pockets (Woodward 29). The reliance on a single cash crop, of course, left tenants economically vulnerable and fearful of the ravages of flood, drought, and infestation; the damage done to a year's cotton haul by boll-weevil infestations was well documented in dozens of contemporaneous blues songs.

The cotton trade formalized the disparity between land owners and tenants that permeated all aspects of culture in the Delta. African Americans held a supermajority in the Delta, making up more than eighty percent of the population in most of the region's counties (E. Wald 85). Politically, the difference between these numbers and the reality of white rule spoke to the power of the sharecropping-racist nexus. While Reconstruction-era reformers declared the ownership and resourceful use of "forty acres and a mule" as the path to self-sufficiency, the reality for African Americans was a cycle of debt and dependence. By 1916, only 5.5 percent of African Americans in the Delta owned their own land; the vast majority was entrapped into various types of tenancy: sharecropping, share renting, and cash renting (Titon 8).

Aside from its untenable economic foundation, tenancy and sharecropping tested the premises of American civic virtue. As Leon Litwack notes, freedmen and freedwomen were conditioned to believe that "success came ultimately to the hard-

working, the sober, the honest, and the educated, to those individuals who engaged in ‘faithful industry,’ practiced ‘judicious economy,’ cultivated habits of thrift and temperance, made their homes ‘models of neatness,’ and led moral, virtuous, Christian lives” (*Been* 522). Sharecropping’s domination seemed premised on taking full advantage of such humble and meek claims to citizenship. “Judicious economy” was almost impossible to sustain when landowners controlled most aspects of crop production and all aspects of “Settlement Day,” the day when the landowner reviewed his own ledgers to determine the annual obligations of his tenants. While most landowners, doubly enriched by the returns from the field and commissary, looked the other way when families moved in between planting seasons, others demanded payment in full for the past year’s “debts.” Apart from such outrageous economic abuses, keeping croppers on the farm in peonage compromised the Thirteenth Amendment’s outlawing of involuntary servitude (see Daniel, *Shadow* 14–15). Yet under the hegemony held by the plantation owners, croppers had little recourse. The subsistence living that sharecropping and tenant families endured made a life of toil and economizing a bleak reality rather than a choice. The seemingly never-ending labor and demand for young field hands made formal education a distant hope.

The near-impossibility of saving money under such a system made out-migration difficult for most African Americans. Statistics show that, percentage-wise, fewer African Americans from the Delta migrated north compared to their southern Mississippi counterparts (Marks 65). Workers from southern Mississippi

who worked in sawmills and the turpentine industry as well as dock workers along the Gulf of Mexico possessed more marketable skills than farm laborers. Such jobs also paid relatively higher wages, allowing families to begin the often multi-stage task of relocating in the urban North. In some cases, the planter class created additional obstacles. As Isabel Wilkerson summarizes, white authority figures in the Deep South went to great extralegal measures to impede northern migration, positioning their efforts at train stations. Northbound African Americans had their trains waylaid, their tickets torn up, and in some instances were arrested and imprisoned (163). Jazz bassist Milt Hinton, born well south of the Delta in Vicksburg, Mississippi, related one such example to music writer Gene Lees. By 1910, Vicksburg's African Americans, excited by economic opportunities up North and exhorted from the pulpit to leave behind the seemingly endless cycle of segregation and racial violence, were forbidden by whites from buying a train ticket out of town. Pathetically trying to hold back the tide of migration, "the white people decided they couldn't let this cheap black labor get away. So they blocked the railway stations in Mississippi.... A black man could not buy a ticket from Mississippi in 1910... You couldn't *leave*. And the ones who had left already, who had escaped, are writing back telling you how wonderful it was in Chicago..." (Lees 164, italics in original). Within the Delta, African Americans faced a similar program of harassment at train stations in towns like Greenwood and Greenville by both planters and police. In the latter town, at the lowest geographic point of the Delta, white city officials in 1916 resorted to physical violence against African Americans

who boarded trains in hopes of making a permanent break with the South (Woodruff 42).

Intra-regional migration presented the more realistic means of progress for many African Americans, making the borders between New Orleans and the Delta relatively permeable. Before the Civil War, the two areas forged a commercial connection, as Delta planters traditionally made annual sojourns to the port city to purchase both bulk items and luxury goods (Ownby, *American* 8). Railroad lines built during Reconstruction increased contact between the two semi-isolated areas (Cobb, *Most* 141). Anticipating the larger migration northward, thousands of African Americans migrated from the Mississippi Delta to New Orleans around the turn of the century, largely to escape the perpetual debt imposed by sharecropping (Brothers 136). The new arrivals gave the city both an infusion of musical talent and an audience open to new music, who accepted jazz as the sound of the big city.⁴⁹

To understand the deep emotionalism at the heart of the Mississippi Delta blues, one must understand the dependency sharecroppers had on an inequitable system and the coexistent sense of hope and advancement that positive change was always imminent. Each spring, croppers received equipment, housing, and the use of land from the owner. The sharecropper split the cost of seed, fertilizer, and the processes necessary to get the product to market (ginning and baling cotton, for instance). Landowners took a standard cut of fifty percent of the crop proceeds off

⁴⁹ Migration from New Orleans to rural Mississippi was far less frequent, though in *Father of the Blues* W.C. Handy noted the arrival of “lush octoroons and quadroons from Louisiana” in the “New World,” Cleveland, Mississippi’s red-light district (78–79).

the top. From the remaining half, owners subtracted the cost of housing, necessities (food and clothing, often bought on credit at a premium at a company store), and in many cases interest on those necessities, paying the sharecropper the remainder, if any. Owners kept their records secret and forbade croppers to take their harvests to market, leaving them ignorant about the true value of their labors (Kirby 145).

Additionally, landlords controlled the material consumption of sharecropping families by what they stocked, and did not stock, in their commissaries. Often left without the means to pay off a year's debt, many sharecropping families were reduced to borrowing money from their landlords to survive the winter and pledging to work another year's crop, in the distant hope of eventually breaking even. Recalling his family's situation as sharecroppers, country singer Charley Pride writes, "I remember a year when Mother and Daddy fought the heat and the cold and the wet all season to bring in a crop and didn't have enough money left over to buy shoes for all the kids. [...] It was a continuous cycle and nearly an impossible one to break" (43). As Pride's descriptions make all too clear, sharecropping ably kept ambition and dissent in check by maintaining a seemingly permanent laboring underclass.

Only by comparison to sharecroppers did tenant farmers (or "renters") lay claim to a better deal. Tenants owned their own equipment and assumed more of the cost of producing a crop in exchange for a higher percentage of the market value. "Share" renters provided their own tools, seed, and draft animals; in exchange for farmland, shelter, and firewood, share renters usually surrendered one-third of their family's crops to the landowner (Titon 8). "Cash tenants" paid a flat rate for rent

upfront, assuming the costs, risks, and benefits of the harvest (Sawyer 45–46). Such arrangements were rare in the Delta, however, as, unlike sharecroppers, tenants had legal ownership of their crops (Sawyer 46). Furthermore, cash tenancy appeared too much like social mobility to the landed aristocracy, who banked on the continuation of debt servitude.

At one point, this system appeared to be permanently entrenched. By 1916, statistics showed that 50.7 percent of African American farm families in the Delta worked on shares, as the remaining 49.3 percent labored as tenants. The study found no African American families owning and working their own land (Titon 8). While African Americans did own and cultivate land in other areas of the South, they were effectively shut out of the Delta and its highly profitable cotton economy.

The chance for tenants to break the cycle completely through buying their land was distant; most evidence of its occurrence in the Delta is anecdotal. By one account, a New Deal-era program sponsored by the Farm Security Association assisted 128 African American tenants—about .2% of the population—in the purchase of farms, albeit in flood-prone areas of the Delta (Harris 322). Musicians' autobiographies abound with examples of perpetual sharecropping and tenancy but only a few accounts exist of social mobility for sharecroppers and tenants under the system. In his autobiography *The World Don't Owe Me Nothing*, a rich repository of Delta lore, bluesman Honeyboy Edwards relates only one example as an exception to the rule. Describing the labors of a man named Lawrence Johnson, who worked his way up from a cropper to a renter, Edwards recalls, "that man would eat dry bread. If

he cleared two hundred dollars out of his crop he had that next year when he'd make another two or three hundred dollars. He kept on like that and that man bought himself two mules, and then he started to renting. [...] Had a car, wagon, mule, everything. But that was by starving himself to death, near about" (8). Though Johnson exhibits an admirable work ethic and drive, Edwards's intention in relating the story is to emphasize how even the most ambitious and frugal croppers in the Delta labored in vain under the system, sacrificing the enjoyment of life in the process.

Edwards's anecdote, coupled with the fact that the Delta produced a remarkable concentration of skilled, versatile African American musicians, leads one to infer that music played a vital role in overcoming, or even withstanding, the social and economic disadvantages suffered in the fields and labor camps. After World War I, planters increasingly paid tenants in cash, rather than scrip, leading to a minor consumer revolution among African Americans (Woodruff 149). This increase in cashflow naturally lessened croppers' dependence on plantation commissaries and the forced consumption of inferior goods at a high markup. The move to a cash economy also led to an increase in discretionary spending and the pursuit of leisure goods. Along with inexpensive automobiles, mass-produced musical instruments, phonographs, and radios were chief among the rare luxury purchases of Delta tenant farmers. Many middle-class whites, conflating thrift with virtue, expressed disdain toward African American families paying for phonographs, pianos, and organs in installments to furniture companies and dry-goods stores. As a correspondent in a

1917 St. Louis newspaper article described the “lavishness” of rural African Americans, “the natural love of the black man for music manifests itself in his desire for a piano or talking machine. Gladly he will kick in \$200 or \$250 for a standard piano. Organs are his second choice and phonographs third” (Woodruff 45). The reporter’s condescension aside, this account, and others like it, proved that African Americans prioritized music-making and, despite meager incomes, would pay to bring music into their private sphere. Especially in the form of phonograph records, music transmitted not simply lyrics and melody but what Lawrence Levine identifies as “a sense of excitement,” an intangible yet powerful feeling of recognition and belonging (226).

Significantly, the market for records virtually bottomed out during the Great Depression, reflecting the larger economic catastrophe. (By one calculation, \$100 million worth of records were sold nationwide in 1927, a mere \$6 million in 1933 [Barlow 133]). The financial insecurity faced by sharecroppers and tenants compounded during the 1930s. Atlanta newspaper editor Ralph McGill observed, “By 1933 the idle hookworm-and-pellagra-sick cotton sharecroppers and the bankrupt ‘Big Houses’ all testified eloquently that the one-crop economy was finished” (82). Sharecroppers were now caught in a trap, suffering the brunt of the Depression, dwindling sharecropping revenues, and the modernization of farms (S. Turner, *Man* 17). In the interest of regional economic recovery, New Deal legislation such as the Agricultural Adjustment Act paid subsidies to planters who reduced their annual yield. As a result, hundreds of thousands of croppers were evicted, their fields left

fallow (to the enrichment of landowners), and their longtime (albeit troubled) bonds with planters dissolved (M. Miller 129). Some croppers reported having Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) subsidy payments stolen by planters, others ended up as day laborers for their former bosses, no longer receiving even the token gesture of “furnished” farm equipment or consumer goods (Woodruff 158).

Through the 1930s, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration distributed a disproportionate amount of relief to the Delta’s largest and most profitable landowners. For example, in 1932, the Delta and Pine Land Company received \$83,000 in AAA payments (constituting about one-fifth of the company’s annual profit); by comparison, some counties in the Piedmont region received one-fifth of that direct assistance for distribution among all landowners (Harris 303). The attempt in the late 1930s and early 1940s by the Arkansas-based Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union (STFU) to organize male and female tenants across the racial divide and assert their rights ultimately made belated and limited inroads in the planter-dominated Mississippi Delta.

Though Delta farmers lagged behind their Midwestern counterparts in the introduction of such modern implements as tractors, cotton farming became increasingly mechanized through the 1930s (see McMillen 151). Following the significant drop in land available for sharecropping after the introduction of AAA policies in 1933 and 1934, farm mechanization further reduced the number of hands needed and, consequently, decreased a sharecropping family’s revenue (Woodruff 159). By the 1940s, a full cotton crop could be cultivated by machine, at a savings

advertised as eighty-five percent less than picking by hand (Gioia 207). Landowners aided by labor-saving implements and/or New Deal subsidies now regularly hired former croppers as day laborers (see Cobb, “Somebody” 915).

To compensate, croppers and tenants needed to be jacks-of-all-trades and make themselves useful year round (taking jobs in mills during the winter, for example) or, better yet, leave the fields behind for good. Southern historian James Cobb provides a poignant encapsulation of sharecroppers’ common dilemma: “Should they uproot themselves and their families (perhaps for the second time in a relatively short period), leave friends and familiar surroundings, and depart for the golden streets of northern cities? Or should they hang on in the Delta, hoping for the big crop year that might free them from debt and give them the opportunity to become independent, landowning farmers?” (*Redefining* 100). Some families could make it year to year on shares, provided they were fortunate enough to secure fertile land, deal with a relatively honest landlord, and find remunerative odd jobs that generated income in the winter. But overcoming the constant debt economy of sharecropping required all of the above plus a measure of mutual fair dealing and respect across class and racial lines, something the southern system neither encouraged nor rewarded.

Consequently, sharecroppers faced a paradox: farming on shares was hard, honest work in service of an unfair system; their labor could be, and often was, counterproductive to their advancement. The fate of African American sharecroppers represented the same type of dilemma that underscored the blues: how to find

consolation amid a seemingly hopeless situation. For all of its economic injustice, and class and race resentment, Delta sharecropping did take place on fertile soil, albeit often in over-tilled condition, thus providing a glimpse of better times ahead. Both period accounts and autobiographical reminiscences attest that poor families toiled from sunup to sundown for months at a time in the cultivation of their crops. Each spring brought hopes of a harvest bountiful enough to turn a family's fortune around and cash in on the promise voiced by countless blues songs that "the sun's gonna shine on my back door someday." Of course, basic laws of agriculture and economics conclude that any harvest bountiful enough to pull a family out of sharecropping's trap would be distributed more or less evenly across the area, resulting in an abundant supply and a buyer's market. Furthermore, crops grown on land rented out on shares were bested in the market by hardier crops grown in richer soil with better tools, whose sale was not subject to the arbitrary whims of the landowner. As Richard Wright summarized the sharecropper's blues lament, "The land upon which we live holds a promise, but the promise fades with the passing seasons" ("Inheriting" 19). The tragedy—or, more aptly, the blues—at the heart of sharecropping extended beyond economic exploitation: the system wedded old-fashioned debt servitude or in some cases even peonage with late capitalism, as owner and tenant raced time, the environment, and each other to squeeze the last piece of use-value out of the land.

By the 1930s and 1940s, as a synecdoche for the South, Mississippi loomed in American life as the nation's "problem" area: slow to prosper economically,

politically intransigent, and socially mired in Jim Crow segregation (Cobb, *Redefining* 48). David Oshinsky describes the state's plight starkly; for generations, "Mississippians earned less, killed more, and died younger than other Americans" (127). Simultaneously, American popular culture abounded with idealized southern imagery, from the "moonlight and magnolias" grandeur of plantation romances to the popularity of New Orleans-derived music (ranging from ragtime to jazz to Dixieland) and emerging strains of rhythm and blues, which freely borrowed from Delta blues. Abel Meeropol's searing lyrics to "Strange Fruit," first recorded by Billie Holiday in 1939, encapsulated this duality. In the "pastoral scene of the gallant South," the "scent of magnolia" in the "southern breeze" juxtaposes against the horrible sight of the lynched body, the "strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees." In Meeropol's lyrics, middle-class white southern culture, renowned for its hospitality and gentility, became equally notorious for the animal brutality of its spectacle lynchings and for its tacit sanctioning of both vigilante and official racial violence. Though contemporary studies found a significant decrease in lynchings—from fifty-nine in 1921 (Dray 254) to sixteen in 1927 (Dray 336), for example—such quantitative evidence did little to erase historical memory. The failure of Congress to pass proposed anti-lynching bills in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s tragically illustrated the tenuous hold African Americans had on their status as protected citizens, and the influence many grandstanding white southern politicians had in keeping Jim Crow the law of the land. Likewise, the 1935 murder of an STFU organizer attempting to unionize Mississippi sharecroppers indicated that, while the number of tenants was decreasing across the

Black Belt, their obeisance to the dominant order was still demanded (Woods, *Development* 151).

B.B. King relates in his autobiography one of the most outlandish attempts by the white southern hegemony to keep social inequality the status quo during World War II. After completing army basic training, King and other African Americans were sent back to the fields to pick soybeans and cotton for the war effort. King returned to northern Mississippi in a segregated train car, while German prisoners of war rode in whites-only cars. Subsequently, when the Germans were put to work in the fields in one of the ten POW camps built in the Delta, camp operators granted them special privileges. King remembers: “We blacks picked till nightfall—seven or eight in the evening. But the Germans were allowed to take off at three in the afternoon. Plantation owners worried about overworking them. That made us feel less than human. We were seen as beasts of burden [...] To watch your enemy get better treatment than yourself was a helluva thing to endure” (91). Prisoners of war also assisted in the building of levees along the Mississippi River, but were still kept separate from African Americans, and treated to better conditions. Under the Geneva Convention, the prisoners held rights in the Delta that the area’s African American citizens could not necessarily claim: their work could not be coerced, nor could they be deprived of food, clothing, and medical care. In addition, the camps offered intramural sports (Skates, “German”). Historian James L. Dickerson is blunt in his assessment: “In the Delta, German POWs received a high degree of acceptance among white Mississippians” (119). It appears that many Mississippians preferred at

least a skin-deep common cause with German defenders of fascism to the acknowledgement of African Americans laboring for the domestic war effort, lest that honorable labor pave the way toward social equality. King's evocation of "beasts of burden" weighs heavily, suggesting that laborers in the Delta were commonly regarded as less than field hands, and more as interchangeable subalterns expected to endure all manner of insult and disfranchisement.

Yet amid such indignities, certain spaces for African Americans were allowed to flourish, in large part as a planter-sanctioned safety valve. The largest Delta plantations, like the Stovall plantation outside of Clarksdale, were so immense and self-contained that they boasted their own "juke joints" for the after-hours pleasure of their tenants.⁵⁰ These sites grew to be an important social nexus on the sharecropping plantation, a fluid space for commerce and recreation. "Musicians had always used their talent to evade both farmwork and hourly jobs," Pete Daniel writes. "In the juke joints and honky-tonks that stretched across the South, blues and hillbilly music soothed workers bored by routine, beset by hard times, or troubled by hard love"

⁵⁰ In his 1941–1942 field notes, Fisk University folklorist Lewis W. Jones documented the dances that took place every Saturday night on the Stovall plantation (Work et al. 32). The Dockery sawmill and cotton plantation, about sixty miles south, was the other locus for Delta blues musicians. Amusingly, in an interview with Ted Gioia for his 2008 book *Delta Blues*, the descendants of Will Dockery categorically denied that their plantation housed anything as disreputable as a juke joint and dismissed the notion their ancestor would have allowed such licentiousness on his property (45–47). In reality, Charley Patton honed his musical skills while living on the Dockery plantation, and it is there where Robert Johnson, Howlin' Wolf, and John Lee Hooker heard Patton play.

(*Lost* 94). The juke joint served an essential function for rural African American communities, as Katrina Hazzard-Gordon relates:

[The juke joint] served as a mixing ground for the remaining strains of African culture and those additional elements that developed during the slave experience. It provided a forum for blending regional and Euro-American cultural elements. It later provided a forum for visitors or travelers to demonstrate new dances or variations, as well as an arena in which whites could observe and assimilate some aspects of black culture and dance. And it allowed African-Americans to express aspects of their newly developing national character. (82)

Comingling with elements of this expanding consciousness, not least of which was an articulation of a “national character,” was a more local, one-on-one sense of camaraderie, in both domestic and public spaces, situated along what Hazzard-Gordon terms the “juke continuum.” In *Mules and Men* (1935), Zora Neale Hurston captured the range of complex discourses, spoken and sung, undergirding the raucous atmosphere of the house party. There, blues lyrics, much like folk tales, jokes, and the outrageous, boastful stories colloquially known as “lies,” marked the vast distance between life as imagined and life as experienced. Energized by music that reflected both the desires and frustrations of its audience, the house party and juke joint became vital social spaces that, in Robin D.G. Kelley’s summation, “constituted a partial refuge from the humiliations and indignities of racism, class pretensions and wage work” (36).

There were less lofty reasons to gather at juke joints, roadhouses, and house parties as well; such establishments were synonymous with liquor, gambling, and clandestine meetings. The juke joint represents a compelling chronotope for the Delta at the moment it slouched toward progress and contact with the economy and culture of the urban north. In the juke chronotope, African Americans in the Mississippi Delta are freer with their words, their actions, and their money; in turn, musicians adapt existing forms of music into new shapes to please an increasingly cosmopolitan audience. Perhaps for the first time in their lives, African Americans formed new social bonds outside the strictures of the plantation and church, away from the surveillance and judgment of whites.

The lure of the juke joint provided African American musicians with a large audience eager to be entertained. Numerous Delta musicians, such as Muddy Waters, Sunnyland Slim, and B.B. King, situated their music-making within the temporal demands placed upon the sharecropper. Such bluesmen worked in the field by day and played functions on Friday and Saturday night (Pearson, *Sounds* 90). In the case of Honeyboy Edwards, his nighttime music-making led to skipping occasional days of plantation work, then abandoning sharecropping altogether. Relying on a series of accommodating girlfriends, Edwards was able to relax and sleep during the day and either perform at a juke joint or “promenade” through downtown Greenwood, Mississippi by night, spending money at attractions such as movie houses (50). Representing what R.A. Lawson terms “the countercultural South,” Edwards’s embrace of both “laziness” and free spending can and should be read as a form of

resistance against plantation hegemony (17). Additionally, Edwards's control of his money and leisure time was a provocative declaration of the bluesman's relative economic independence.

Similarly, B.B. King describes the attention his mother's cousin, bluesman Bukka White, attracted on his periodic visits home. Timing his visits to avoid the detection of white overseers, White, in King's recollection, would "show up looking like a million bucks. Razor-sharp. Big hat, clean short, pressed pants, shiny shoes. He smelled of the big city and glamorous times; he looked confident and talked about things outside our little life in the hills" (25). No doubt, the sight of White's finery, probably surpassing the worth of a sharecropper's monthly earnings, impressed King. Yet more significant in this recollection is White's evident confidence and expanded worldview, two attributes that would have been stifled under sharecropping. Bukka White and Honeyboy Edwards, like Charley Patton and Robert Johnson before them, used the notoriety earned through musical mastery to slip the yoke of tenant farming and other strenuous low-paying jobs and travel both within and beyond the region, looking for the most profitable places to play. Like West African *griots*, such Deep South bluesmen engendered resentment for their refusal to do farm work, with their indifference to sunup-to-sundown toil interpreted by landowners and most field hands as insolence (Charters, *Roots* 61). The obverse of upwardly mobile musical strivers like W.C. Handy, itinerant bluesmen were "the personification of alienation" from an unfair sharecrop system, refusing to be tied down to debt servitude or the empty promises of advancement through year-in, year-out cotton farming (Cobb, *Redefining*

107). As related in autobiographies like Edwards and King's, bluesmen were as admired for being economic "free agents" as they were for their music.

By the same token, the charisma exuded by expert bluesmen put white men on the defensive. The biographers of Delta bluesman Howlin' Wolf (Chester Burnett) uncover an incident in the late 1930s when a white woman on a sharecropping plantation requested that Wolf and a partner play the blues for her. When the performance was interpreted by onlookers as "serenading" and a brazen attempt at seduction, the musicians barely escaped lynching, and were subsequently put under surveillance by suspicious whites (Segrest and Hoffman 48–49). Texas musician Mance Lipscomb employs a unique type of discourse when recalling a racially motivated hanging and shooting he once witnessed. Lipscomb conveys the same impressions an eyewitness would in legal testimony when describing the sight of the victim's bullet-ridden corpse: "Man didn't have a face! Body near about like mush" (Lipscomb as told to Alyn 144, spellings unchanged from the original). As if suddenly aware he has told his auditor too much, and implicated the system that sanctioned the lynching and murder of black men too harshly, he shifts the focus to himself. His declaration of survival—"I'm still here, playin on this old gittah"—resonates on multiple frequencies. Fundamentally, Lipscomb informs the reader that through keen observation of race relations he has avoided the deadly traps set for black men in Jim Crow society. In the same way that Louis Armstrong's recollection of Baby Dodds's near-lynching on the excursion boat contains a subtext that justifies his own disavowal of confrontation, Lipscomb revives the repression-worthy memory

of the mutilated man to mark the distance between individuals who try to fight single-handedly against white supremacy and those who employ skills such as music-making as both a conciliatory gesture and a survival strategy. The declarative statement “I’m still here” takes on several levels of signification. Again, it differentiates Lipscomb from the shooting victim but also situates him in the South in the age of northern migration. Millions of African Americans expressed their fear and disgust for lynching, and its toleration in the South, by resolving to seek a better life and migrating north or west. Such a decisive move echoes a climactic scene in James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, as the rootless protagonist witnesses a black man burned at the stake by a white mob. In the horrible spectacle, he sees the South’s past, present, and future coalesce. The inevitability of more lynchings and riots under the prevailing law forces the protagonist to leave the South permanently.

In a similar cautionary tale, Honeyboy Edwards relates in his autobiography the story of “Quack,” “a boy out in the country who was on the same plantation as my uncle” (29). According to the story, Quack is forbidden by a plantation agent to leave the premises and obtain medicine for his expectant wife. In the midst of a heated argument, the agent shoots Quack. Quack then takes the gun and shoots the agent three times before killing him with an ax. A white lynch mob quickly forms, beats the pregnant woman, shoots Quack, and finally kills him by dragging him behind a truck. Edwards limits his commentary to a homily: “That was some bad times back when I was a boy” (30). As with most stories of this type, the details offered are

difficult to verify, especially since Edwards's reportage is, at best, secondhand. Narratively, though, like Armstrong and Lipscomb's seemingly dispassionate relations of traumatic stories of white vigilantism, Edwards cannily interpolates a story of a contemporary's run-in with white authority amid "local color" narrative, suggesting that the narrator has chosen his nonconfrontational stance wisely. The narrator's surface-level dispassion and lack of overt commentary only slightly conceals the moral of the story. In the totalitarian world of the plantation, even the strongest, proudest men have little reasonable recourse in defending themselves and their families.

DELTA CROSSTALK

While the documentary work on Delta blues music is extensive and, for all its lapses into romanticism, largely accurate, significant gaps in its history remain, due to the lack of first-person sources and the relatively late advent of Mississippi blues recording. As a result, blues musicians from the Delta region, following up on years of inquiries from historians and aficionados, typically comment on their lesser-known, undocumented forerunners. Just as the imposing specter of Buddy Bolden hovers over New Orleans music, numerous musicians inhabit the history of Mississippi blues as literal legends, since their music went unrecorded; examples include Henry Sloan (a purported teacher of Charley Patton on the Dockery plantation) and Ike Zinneman (said to be an influence on Robert Johnson during the younger musician's mysterious "woodshedding" phase") (Sante 482; Palmer *Deep*

51, 114). Much like the way surviving New Orleans musicians of the Storyville era were expected to provide to inquiring parties historically sound descriptions or impressions of the elusive Buddy Bolden decades after the fact, Delta blues musicians were virtually compelled to address the body of legends surrounding Robert Johnson, perhaps the most influential yet least understood figure in traditional blues music. Many facts related to Johnson's career remain sketchy, but scholars agree that he displayed an extraordinary personal magnetism and enjoyed such benefits of the bluesman's life as attention from women, flashy clothes, the ability to travel, and, most importantly, enough income from juke-joint appearances and dances to avoid the toil and humiliation of sharecropping (see Guralnick, *Searching* 20–21). Though his recorded output is limited in quantity—the results of two recording sessions in San Antonio, Texas in November 1936 and June 1937—the songs themselves form one of the most respected *oeuvres* in American music, marked by his instrumental prowess and a remarkably poetic sensibility in his lyrics. Johnson included a number of crowd-pleasing “hokum” songs in these two sessions, but gave his best performances on apocalyptic compositions such as “Hellhound on My Trail” and “If I Had Possession Over Judgment Day.” His death by poisoning in 1938 sealed his fate as the blues' most inscrutable figure; his burial in an unmarked grave (in any one of three possible cemeteries) ensured his mythical status. That status was furthered, yet complicated, by oral legends that claimed, with no shortage of lurid detail, how Johnson attained his musical skills by selling his soul to the devil at a mythical crossroads, and how the devil conspired in Johnson's death by poisoned whiskey (see

Spencer xiii). Yet neither Johnson nor his local auditors established the crossroads myth; a version largely in tune with Johnson's invented backstory appeared earlier in N.N. Puckett's 1926 *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (Floyd, *Power* 73–74). Additionally, Elijah Wald suggests that the mystical overtones of the Johnson legend may have resulted from a convergence of folklorists' dual interests in African American music and African-derived spiritualism (270). Instead, the tale, which only fully coalesced in the 1960s, became an amalgam of several disparate elements: his fans' need to explain his amazing musical talent, Johnson's allusions to the supernatural in such compositions as "Me and the Devil Blues," romantic fantasies of a mystic Delta held by a blues fanbase that had become overwhelmingly white and urban, and a conflation of Robert Johnson's story with that of Tommy Johnson, an earlier Delta bluesman who actually made the claim of a deal with the devil (Schroeder 29–30).

Most of Johnson's surviving contemporaries held fast to the reality that Johnson accrued his musical talents through intense practice, the natural development afforded by frequent performances, and the desire to escape endless farm labor, despite the prodding of interviewers to make statements to the contrary. At best, Delta musicians acknowledged that the rumors surrounding Johnson gave him an aura both menacing and alluring. According to Honeyboy Edwards, "[Robert] maybe did talk about the crossroads just to frighten people—he said he went down to the crossroads and went down on his knees and met a man...Robert was a big bullshitter"

(qtd. in Schroeder 31).⁵¹ Edwards's conclusion expresses a healthy skepticism toward the larger myth of Robert Johnson as well as measuring the distance between those who knew Johnson firsthand and those venerated his legend decades after the fact.

Amid this alternate mythmaking and debunking, dedicated historians discovered, by a combination of solid research and pure luck, two photographs, a handful of alternate takes (expanding his body of work to forty-one recorded performances), and his death certificate, the only official documentation of his existence. Even when these missing pieces of his life uncannily resurfaced, Johnson remained a cipher, never quite fixed within the milieu of the Mississippi Delta.

Interviews with Johnson's family, musical contemporaries, and acquaintances alternately complicated and deepened the constructed mythology. A successful Delta blues musician like Muddy Waters, whose relationship with Johnson was virtually nonexistent, was browbeaten into claiming a deeper connection with his deceased contemporary by eager interviewers wishing for a proxy connection to such a legend. As an amateur musician, recording for visiting folklorist Alan Lomax on Stovall Plantation in 1941, Waters referenced Johnson as a recording artist, rather than an acquaintance (Gordon 41). According to Waters's biographer Robert Gordon, the younger musician only saw Johnson perform once, at a street performance (31). Three decades later, Waters, now a world-famous recording star living in Chicago,

⁵¹ Edwards's reportage is slightly suspect, as it mainly rehashes the lyrics to Johnson's well-known "Cross Road Blues": "Well, I went to the cross road / Fell down on my knees..."

commonly told inquiring reporters and fans he witnessed numerous Johnson performances (Gioia 155). Ostensibly, such manufactured history served a dual purpose: to exalt further Waters's standing as a surviving exponent of authentic Delta blues and to satisfy a demand for historical romance. "Evidently," writes Patricia R. Schroeder, "the Johnson industry has become so intense that artists from his era have no choice but to speak about him—even if they have nothing firsthand to say" (32). In such cases, such coaxed testimony taints the body of knowledge on Delta music, without revealing much about Robert Johnson.

Though much of the romantic lore surrounding Johnson depicts him as a lone soul communing with demons out by the crossroads or perfecting his craft alone, Johnson was actually a visible presence in the Delta, a fixture on the local roadhouse/party circuit, with many contacts among local musicians. Like a trickster daring fate, Johnson would regularly perform for lumber and levee workers, making his relatively leisurely profession—which probably amounted to vagrancy in the eyes of the law—much more conspicuous (Woods, *Development* 144). At times, Johnson's amenability and musical adaptability made him a virtual human jukebox; Honeyboy Edwards relates how Johnson would satisfy his audience's request for his well-known "Terraplane Blues" for the (now astounding) price of fifteen cents (Palmer, *Deep* 129). Bluesman Johnny Shines, who met Johnson as a youth while the older musician was traveling through Arkansas, attested that Johnson's repertoire was informed by popular tastes and geared toward a sporting crowd: "Ragtime, pop tunes, waltz numbers, polkas, shoot—a polka hound, man. Robert just picked songs out of

the air. [...] Hillbilly, blues, and all the rest” (Guralnick, *Searching* 22). Yet Johnson’s reserved and inscrutable nature affected how he was remembered. In the late 1980s, Peter Guralnick noted how Shines and another bluesman with extensive ties to Johnson, Robert Lockwood (who was unofficially adopted by Johnson when he moved in with Lockwood’s mother), self-consciously carried on Johnson’s music and legend as musicians and interview subjects, yet “though each was well aware of the other, neither shares a single experience or memory of their time with Johnson.”⁵² In a certain sense, in fact, each is suspicious of the other’s memories and the memories of others, because in their experience *it simply didn’t happen that way*” (*Searching* 26; italics in original). The combination of historians’ ardor in uncovering the true Robert Johnson and musicians desire to link themselves with the iconic musician resulted in further confusion, with elements of Johnson’s biography becoming wildly exaggerated in the process.

Delta musicians’ autobiographies provide a greater consensus regarding Johnson and his influence. B.B. King, who became the South’s best-known living bluesman during Johnson’s posthumous 1960s–1980s commercial revival, tempers his admiration of the “King of the Delta Blues” in his autobiography: “Because his music was made so close to my home—and exactly during the age of my growing up—you’d think that I’d be under his spell. But I wasn’t. He didn’t speak to me with the power of Lonnie Johnson or Blind Lemon [Jefferson]. I listened to Robert

⁵² To highlight the fact that Robert Johnson lived on and off with his mother in the 1930s, Lockwood adopted the stage name “Robert ‘Junior’ Lockwood” when he pursued a career in blues music, despite the lack of blood relation.

Johnson and liked him, but that was all” (78). In interviews, other musicians who knew Johnson agree with King. In his 1999 autobiography *A Blues Life*, Mississippi-born musician Henry Townsend described an encounter with Johnson in Townsend’s adopted hometown of St. Louis: “To me Robert Johnson was an average kind of guy. He was quiet—he’d talk to you if you talk, he wasn’t gonna increase the conversation [...] But there was plenty of other people before and after Robert Johnson” (68–69). Such an understated description ably demystifies Johnson’s character, portraying him as talented but not supernaturally charismatic.

Similarly, Muddy Waters, an acquaintance of Johnson’s around the Stovall Plantation, who worked several of Johnson’s compositions into his early repertoire, told James Rooney in the late 1960s, “I really admired music so much—but if they was singing good blues, I just loved ‘em. But my copy was Son House” (Rooney 105). Without dismissing Johnson’s influence or talent, Waters informs his auditor about the abundance of skilled musicians in the Delta in the 1930s: “[T]hat Delta sound is what I brought to Chicago. There was a lot of that groove in Mississippi but they didn’t get the chance to bring it out. I knowed a lot of ‘em could play as good as Robert but didn’t get the chance to bring it up North so they could expose it out to the public” (Rooney 114). King and Waters’s lack of romanticism in their assessments demonstrate that Johnson’s musical influence in the Delta, while highly significant, was not monolithic, nor did it discourage aspiring blues musicians from making their own way. The accounts underscore that musicians freely interacted socially and artistically but rebut the notion advanced in the popular mythos that Johnson created

his body of work wholly in a separate sphere, in isolation from the musicians and audience who vitalized the Delta juke joint.

Honeyboy Edwards provides the most complete first-person account of Johnson in his autobiography; not incidentally, in years before Edwards committed his memories to the page, his detailed portraits of Johnson made him a favorite interview subject for blues scholars. Having established his own backstory and reputation through such conversations, Edwards does not claim Johnson as a key influence but rather as a peer, equally amenable to drinking and socializing with Edwards as performing for a paying audience. Recalling his first encounter with Johnson (one that jibes with Muddy Waters's more reliable testimony), Edwards describes in detail Johnson's impeccable dress and ability to draw a crowd by playing the blues in an alley (99–100). Johnson's suit and fedora, and his ability to earn a quick payday from his impromptu audience, impress Edwards more than any supernatural charisma.

In what is likely a reflection of his interaction with learned scholars over the intervening years, Edwards and his co-authors employ, rather uncharacteristically, music-theory terms to denote Johnson's musical individuality: "Robert Johnson come out with a classic blues style, with mostly a lot of minor chords. He had a lot of seventh chords in the blues and it sounded better than just playing straight" (102). Undoubtedly, Edwards knows the musical significance of minor and seventh chords in the major-chord-based harmonic palette of the blues. But his passing mention of "classic blues" is interesting, reflecting an external critical vocabulary and perhaps his

own internationalization of scholars' rather rigid canon of blues greats. Likewise, Edwards's dramatization of Johnson's fatal poisoning—an event he claims to have seen firsthand—through dialogue and multiple points of view strongly suggests that as a writer he is working from a “script,” developed in large part in collaboration with previous interviewers. His canny refusal to speculate on the legend that Johnson sold his soul to the devil demonstrates that Johnson's influence on him is partly musical, partly mythical.

DAVID “HONEYBOY” EDWARDS – *THE WORLD DON'T OWE ME NOTHING*

Like Robert Johnson, Edwards followed a tradition of itinerant African American musicians that dates back to Reconstruction (Edwards 39–41). Our knowledge of the insular world of the plantation is greatly enriched by Edwards's detailed first-person oral history *The World Don't Owe Me Nothing* and his depictions of music amidst the everyday life of the tenant farmer. According to Edwards, his family worked in the 1920s as sharecroppers, as opposed to renters, living in a “double” (two-room) house on a plantation with an oil lamp and potbellied stove. As was standard with sharecropping families, every able-bodied person contributed to their meager income: David started working in the field at the age of nine. To economize, his mother raised chickens for sale and limited purchases at the commissary to basic staples. In 1926, the family's labors resulted in a rare profit, as their crops cleared \$250 (13). That good fortune ended the following year, when historic floods struck the Delta. In what Edwards recalls as the “Year of the High

Water,” heavy rains during the winter cause the nearest levee to break. The plantation boss man puts the Edwards family on a truck and takes them to high ground, only to have the truck stall. Edwards’s mother gets a cold and is sent to a hotel, while the family has to resort to living in a boxcar, where they stay for several months, under the care of the American Red Cross. Soon after, his mother dies, followed by a sister.

The year 1929 brings a similar cycle of hope and despair. Relocated to a new plantation, with its own “riders” (overseers), Edwards’s remaining family soldiers on, nearly resigned to continuing the cycle of drudgery and debt. Almost miraculously, the area of land issued to the Edwards family has excellent Delta soil, and results in a high yield. The family earns \$300 for their cotton, enough for Mr. Edwards to buy David a new suit and a guitar, the essential tools of the bluesman’s trade. Above and beyond its professional use, the suit symbolizes upward mobility and foreshadows his break with Delta agriculture. As historian Ted Ownby observes, for African Americans living in the Delta between the wars, “clothing reflected an individual’s success or failure under new economic conditions and helped attract men or women. For young adults, stylish and store-bought clothing no longer signified debt or dependence” (*American* 117). Edwards’s bold choices as a consumer, defying his elders’ concerns with “debt and dependence,” reflect the reach of his musical and personal ambitions. Lamentably, the family’s windfall precedes the 1929 stock market crash by only days. After the Depression hits, demand for cotton plummets. Though Depression-era cotton cultivation requires the same outlay of supplies and

hard labor, the following year's crop brings in only one-tenth of what it did before the crash.

On the plantation, Edwards is imbued with the drive to make music and begins his apprenticeship long before he acquires an instrument, to say nothing of an audience. Because both his parents play music, Edwards never faces a barrier to music-making on the domestic front. According to Edwards, his mother (from Kentucky) plays slide guitar with a knife, while his father (hailing from New Orleans) occasionally entertains at juke joints (4–5). By his own account, Edwards attains musicianship with a second-hand, mail-order guitar, observing the guitar-playing both of amateurs and then-local legends like Tommy Johnson. But what is most compelling is Edwards's narration of his own origin story, encapsulated in a single evening at a juke joint:

One night a crowd of people staying across the field from the house gave a party. Back then they would give country dances at a different place every Saturday night. They'd fry fish, drink white whiskey, dance. And this night they was dancing to one of them windup gramophones and they fooled around and broke the spring on it. And they said, "Man, we ain't got no music. Know what we'll do; we'll get little Honey over here. He can play pretty good!" And they come over to my papa's house and got me. I guess I played one piece and sang a hundred songs all night long, fast and slow, fast and slow! (26)

In his debut, Edwards controls his surroundings, manipulating the performance's energy level, alternately heightening and lowering the audience's enthusiasm by improvising increasingly idiomatic verses (often reflecting the performer's basic surroundings and directly addressing audience members) to a basic tune, a tactic historian William Ferris has observed among the most experienced Delta blues players (*Blues* 58). Taken literally, Edwards's use of *paralepsis* allows him to be in two places at the same time in his narration, as he reports on the actions and dialogue of the partygoers across the field before he physically arrives on the scene. Again, we have a narrative where the autobiographer feels authorized to extrapolate events he could not have seen and to ventriloquize the reaction of his first public audience decades after the fact, thereby "stretching" the temporal and spatial boundaries of his narration.

Like "Little Louis" Armstrong's parade for Storyville's "sporting crowd," this origin story is significant not just for its symbolic (and self-promoting) characteristics but also for the central role the community plays. In his recollection, Edwards claims to have played one hundred songs that first night to entertain the partygoers; even if we make some adjustment for plausibility's sake, we see that Edwards gratefully acknowledges the shaping influence of his first audience. (Interestingly, Edwards neglects to mention whether this first performance was a paid one.) The house-party audience's approbation reaffirms their ownership of the music and legitimates Edwards as a carrier of their tradition, elevating him overnight from a sharecropper's son to a privileged quasi-public figure. As Albert Murray writes in *The Hero and the*

Blues, “the outlying regions... cooperate with the hero by virtue of the very fact of and nature of their existence. They help beget real-life and storybook heroes alike, not only by generating the necessity for heroism in the first place but also by contesting its development at every stage and by furnishing the occasion for the fulfillment” (39). In this brief but symbolically rich scene, the party crowd issues a challenge: to meet and in some ways surpass the musical standard set down by the records, and, if Edwards dares, attempt competence and mastery of the idiom in one fell swoop. Through this rite-of-passage scene, Edwards encapsulates the ability of the Delta blues performer to achieve autonomy and free agency through proficiency in the music popular among his community.

Other blues musicians, well acquainted with their roles as caretakers of a musical tradition and latter-day *griots* of African American life through their participation in expansive, historically minded interviews, have commonly employed paralepsis when relating their own origin stories. In scholar Barry Lee Pearson’s recent book of interviews with African American blues musicians, *Jook Right On*, the rhetorical strategy occurs with surprising frequency. In one instance, blues mandolin player Yank Rachell recalls that after his first successful engagement at a house party, he suddenly built up a following:

Next Friday night, such and such a one having a supper, well, they come get us. I had a band, me and Sleepy John Estes, and say another bunch have their band. Those guys get this band.

“They playing such and such a place.”

“Such and such a one playing over there.”

“Yank Rachell and them playing over there. I’m going where they at.

They make the best music.” (Pearson, *Jook* 41–42)

Rachell’s loose reporting of the spoken words (“such and such”) affirms that his objective in relating this memory through dialogue is intended less as a strictly mimetic account, and more as self-appraisal, articulated through the voices of others. Another one of Pearson’s interview subjects, Virginia Piedmont blues musician Archie Edwards, offers his own multi-perspective take on his first public performances:

My older brother, Willie, he had met a few old professional blues artists. So I got around to play a few chords. I kind of ran them together and made a little something that sounded pretty good. So my brother would go to these house parties, get him a shot of corn liquor and tell all the other old guys, “You guys can’t play no guitar, I got a little brother at home in the bed sleeping beat you playing.”

So they all said, “Go get him.”

So he’d come and get me, see, every Saturday night around two or three o’clock in the morning. I’d hear the old Model-A Ford coming out in the front yard idling, “Tick, tick, tick, tick, ticking.”

When I hear that I say: “Uh-oh, gotta go help my brother out.” I’d jump up, put my little coat and trousers on, get that little old guitar, go play the guitar for them. So I called that song “The Saturday Night

Hop,” because I had to hop out of the bed just about every Saturday night to go save my brother, you know, get him straightened out.”

(Pearson, *Jook* 87)

In his narrative, Archie Edwards makes a dexterous turn from the specific to the iterative (“every Saturday”). While the ventriloquized older brother heaps praise on Archie Edwards’s musical skill (“I got a little brother at home in the bed sleeping beat you playing”), Archie in his own words insists he entered the public arena solely to save his brother’s good name. In his story, *paralepsis* allows him to make the narrative “leap” necessary to give voice to people outside of his acquaintance. Not coincidentally, these composite characters end up singing the praises of the then-fledgling musician.

Significantly, the journeyman stage that Honeyboy Edwards embarks upon after his near-miraculous first performance is an endeavor done almost solely in public. As in his premiere, performance comes easy for him. Nowhere in his autobiography do we get descriptions of Edwards struggling to perfect his craft in private or intimations that he engaged in “woodshedding,” the semi-monastic period of intense practice and musical and spiritual development central to the legends of such key musicians as Robert Johnson and Charlie Parker. These scenes in Edwards’s autobiography emphasize the fact, too often obscured in fanciful popular and academic lore, that the blues was a social music, adapted to fit public spaces, occasions, and tastes. The typical environment for the blues was a raucous house party or dance hall on a Saturday night, not a mythical crossroads.

The musician's livelihood was grounded in temporal boundaries; the punishing sunrise-to-sundown schedule of cotton growing made leisure time a rare commodity for most of the Delta blues audience. In a town like Cleveland, Mississippi, adjacent to Will Dockery's massive plantation, Robert Palmer writes, "several thousand blacks would swarm into town from the nearby plantation to shop, gossip, see and be seen. Saturday was their day, as surely as Sunday was the Lord's" (*Deep* 86). As he continued his education in blues performance with his mentor Big Joe Williams, Edwards learned to take advantage of his community's ways of spending and to apply common tricks of the trade for street musicians, a code that boiled down to the truism "follow the money." Such practices were well in place before the peak of the Delta blues era. From the 1910s to the 1950s, traveling minstrel troupes made their only area appearance in the Delta during the October cotton-harvesting season (Abbott and Seroff, *Ragged* 214, 288).⁵³ To make money year-round, Edwards learned to play around sawmills on payday and county seats on Saturdays (when farmers brought their goods to market), to "serenade" affluent white

⁵³ Consistently through mid-century, traveling minstrel groups feverishly attempted to separate Delta farm workers from their newly obtained money every October around harvest time. Given the fierce competition for that money, the cashflow around Delta towns must have been substantial. In their chronicle of black traveling shows, *Ragged but Right*, Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff uncover a notice in the *Indianapolis Freeman* that three troupes converged on Greenwood, Mississippi on one October night in 1917, knowingly competing with each other as well as the Barnum and Bailey circus. Afterwards, all of the groups reported a profit, with one performer declaring on his way out of town, "Mississippi is some minstrel show state" (216). That same year, across the Mississippi River, the governor of Arkansas, Charles H. Brough, weighed the option of banning circuses from his state, so as to remove the temptation for young African Americans to leave the sharecropping field and join a traveling show (Woodruff 62).

people in hotel lobbies, and to always play in “wet” counties, where legal alcohol sales loosened lips, hips, and purse strings. He brought his guitar and “passed the hat” among levee workers and sawmill laborers, but only on their paydays (78).⁵⁴ On the plantation, Edwards brought his guitar to bootleggers’ shacks. Despite its associations with vice, blues was so widely popular in the Delta that it was often integrated into local commerce. In an interview, Edwards related to Robert Palmer a typical early job: “sometimes the man who owned a country store would give us something like a couple of dollars on a Saturday afternoon. We’d sit in the back of the store on some oat sacks or corn sacks and play while they sold groceries and whiskey and beer up front, and the people would come in and listen to us and pitch in” (*Deep* 119). The sight of change (and maybe the occasional dollar bill) in a passed-around hat must have been doubly gratifying to an ambitious bluesman like Edwards. The legal tender represented not only a reward for his labors but also, in a region where plantation scrip was often coin of the realm, a glimpse of how the outside world did business.

In such performances, Edwards directed his craft toward public spaces and tastes and established his repertoire accordingly. From the earliest point in his career, Edwards claims to have intuited his audience’s expectations. Studying the dissemination of the blues in Coahoma County in 1941 and 1942, Fisk University

⁵⁴ Such “hustling” continued through the Great Migration. In his autobiography, Henry Townsend described how street-corner bluesmen in late-1940s Chicago would stage musical “battles” on adjacent street corners to attract attention and money, a tactic that resulted in mutual profit to the “rival” performers.

folklorist John W. Work III made special note of Edwards's "devoted following," which placed him in the esteemed company of Muddy Waters and Son House (Work et al. 86). It is remarkable just how far Edwards's list of songs ranged outside of the country-blues idiom and how technology assisted in his musical education.

Roadhouse jukeboxes and home gramophones influenced and extended the stylistic diversity of Edwards and other Delta bluesmen. Judging from Work's field notes concerning jukeboxes in the area, the Delta audience was receptive to blues on records, but seemed to prefer more escapist, "Hit Parade" fare in social situations (E. Wald 277–280). Essaying popular hits from the 1920s to the early 1940s, from "Isle of Capri" and "Shine On Harvest Moon" to Duke Ellington's "Sophisticated Lady," Edwards readily stepped into the role of human jukebox when he undertook the work of the street musician (117). As he did in his debut, Edwards replaced and overthrew the mechanical reproduction of music through his versatility. The eclecticism of Edwards's repertoire reflected the range of music appreciated by rural and small-town southern audiences. Additionally, it underscores Karl Hagstrom Miller's contention that black musicians in the first half of the twentieth century did not conform to the categorical expectations of many folklorists by exclusively performing music traceable to a singular African American vernacular tradition. By 1942, Edwards provided the only live music in Coahoma County, Mississippi on Saturday nights, competing with the jukeboxes that had taken over the roadhouse circuit, commonly

playing four- and five-hour shows in exhausting competition with the machine (Lomax, *Land* 397, 400).⁵⁵

In his own account, Edwards never expresses dissatisfaction or alienation when he performs popular music, intimating that, as a performer, Edwards was as adept at inserting himself into the worlds evoked by “Isle of Capri” or “Sophisticated Lady” as he was with any song in the shared Delta blues repertoire. Likewise, in live performance, the generation of blues performers who preceded Honeyboy Edwards was conversant in mainstream popular idioms. Famed blues singers like Ma Rainey kept the customers satisfied with a repertoire that collapsed popular and folk, freely interspersing songs from the burlesque stage with the southern blues (Levine 195). A street performer like Clyde Maxwell would regularly learn new songs off records to grab the attention of passersby and keep his repertoire current and his skills sharp (Pearson, *Sounds* 78). Even amateur musicians at parties were expected to have broad repertoires (see Levine 195; Ayers 393). Consequently, provincial, self-identified blues performers like Edwards were still expected to adapt their style to play music suggestive of “urban sophistication, high culture, or distant exotic lands”

⁵⁵ However, those same tastes and preferences among the young in the Delta were moving away from the blues. In the Fisk University study of the blues led by John W. Work III, a survey of jukeboxes around Clarksdale revealed that by 1941 the music had lost favor with the younger generation, who were conversant with more urban musical idioms, such as big-band jazz (encompassing both African American groups such as the Duke Ellington and Count Basie orchestras and more mannered “swing” bands such as Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, and Artie Shaw), “jump blues” groups like Louis Jordan’s, and vocalists ranging from the Ink Spots to Bing Crosby. Fisk folklorist Lewis W. Jones found fewer than thirty blues selections among the offered fare in five roadhouse jukeboxes in summer 1941 (Work et al. 311).

(K. Miller 18). As Edwards's testimony shows, bluesmen in the Delta from the 1920s through the 1940s were worldly and modern, the romantic projections of subsequent fans and critics notwithstanding. While much of their recorded music evoked images of sharecropper's shacks, stubborn mules, and floods of Biblical proportions, purveyors of the blues also eagerly embraced consumerism, worked hard to please an audience conversant with commercial popular music and pursued music as an alternative to the hard labor and unforgiving economics of sharecropping.

GOING NORTH

Across the Mississippi River, aspiring musicians in Arkansas felt the same alienation from manual labor and the cycle of dependence as their counterparts in the Delta. Johnny Cash's memoirs, detailed not only his own personal history with farm labor—beginning as a water boy at age five, he picked cotton with his parents and siblings by age eight—but also the year-round effort families like his made to scratch out a subsistence living from a patch of overworked soil. After the Cashes sowed seeds in the spring, they spent the long hot months of summer pulling weeds from the field, cutting hay, and growing vegetables, anticipating the fall's harvest. They performed this labor doggedly, in spite of the constant threats of floods and crop infestation.

The Depression hit families like the Cashes especially hard; by one estimate, one-fifth of Arkansas families received emergency relief under New Deal programs (Kirby 56). After years of moving from share to share, the Cashes had their fortunes

changed in 1934, when they resettled in Dyess, Arkansas, one of the colonies newly established by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), for, in historian Jack Temple Kirby's words, "the rehabilitation of 'worthy' tenants in homestead communities and the granting of low-interest, long-term loans and free supervision in agronomy to particularly promising non-landholders" (57). Much like the Mississippi Delta two decades earlier, recently clear-cut land became available on the Arkansas side of the river to small farmers (Woodruff 32). There, on twenty acres they purchased on interest-free installments, the Cashes grew cotton on newly plowed, recently deforested land. Remarkably, FERA gathered their crops, combined them those of other families living on the cooperative farm, sold them on the market and distributed the proceeds among the farmers (Cash with Carr 19). In addition to having their cotton sold under more favorable conditions than tenant farmers, the Cashes reaped the benefits of communal living; in lieu of plantation commissaries, general stores were cooperatively run and profits were shared, while canneries and cotton gins operated for the residents' benefit (Cash with Carr 19). The government housing constructed for the farming families of Dyess was plain, even drab, but efficient; by comparison with the sharecropper shacks he once knew, Cash recalls them as signposts of "the Promised Land" (20).

In exchange for this assistance, the Cashes worked steadily from April to October in the cotton fields. Though the Cashes faced the same challenges as other planters—floods, infestation, heat—they soon were able to enjoy the benefits of good land and hard work, with none of the chicanery associated with "Settlement Day."

Significantly, the type of collectivist farming that lifted the Cashes out of servitude resembled the Socialist programs advocated, but never widely implemented, by the STFU (Manthorne 28). In stark contrast to the disfranchisement of African American tenant farmers during the Depression, the Cashes enjoyed public assistance that reestablished their claim to the land and to personal dignity.

Levon Helm recalled a more hardscrabble post-Depression recovery working on his family's farm in the 1940s in Turkey Scratch, Arkansas. One-crop farm families like the Helms struggled to subsist in the wake of successive shakeups in agriculture: mechanization, New Deal policies, and the rise of agribusiness (see Malone 39). Though the family owned their own land, the necessity to cultivate as much cotton as possible meant they worked shoulder-to-shoulder with black and white sharecroppers and migrant workers from Mexico. Starting out as a water boy, Levon began farming at the age of nine, the same year he received his first guitar. The following year, the family home burned down, making the Helms even more reliant on the vagaries of small-scale cotton farming. In their recollections, Cash and Helm effectively convey the vulnerability children experienced in subsistence-farming families. Before either one reached adolescence, they became "hands" on their families' small expanses of land, with their labor both expected and relied upon, while setbacks in the fields—due to weather, infestation, or underperforming crops—were felt deeply and immediately. For aspiring musicians like Cash and Helm, music becomes not so much a vocation as salvation. Both come to embody the world-weary attitude to farming's drudgery articulated by Nick Tosches: "The simple and

irrefutable truth is that no human being would rather break his back in the cotton fields than take in good folding money by making records” (21).

Soul singer Al Green found not merely the “good folding money” Tosches speaks of but also a dignity through music that he never enjoyed as a poor sharecropper’s son (28). As a fifth-generation sharecropper in the tiny town of Jacknash, Arkansas, Green’s father embodied the tragedy of the system, and the difficulties in breaking the cycle of economic dependence (43). In recalling his childhood, Green tempers his admiration of his father with the stark realization that, in the eyes of most, he was simply a “hardscrabble cropper on a played-out piece of land” (22). Seeing his proud, hard-working father reduced to asking for food at the plantation commissary before his crop comes in looms large in his memories. In 1955, soon after his father was declared in debt to the landowner for another year, the Greene family assembled their belongings and moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan, where their success in the industrial North was anything but guaranteed.⁵⁶ Though the Greene family’s move came rather late in the Great Migration, in a decade where mechanization and fewer plantations caused the number of sharecropping families in the Delta to plummet by seventy percent, it nonetheless dramatized the act of “pullin’ up stakes” (Cobb, “Somebody” 917). Their action represented not a stealth act of leaving town or quitting hard labor, but rather a belated act of self-preservation. Simultaneously, the move preempted the fate of the sharecropper when the system came to a relatively quick end. By the late 1960s, with sharecropping largely extinct,

⁵⁶ Al Green dropped the final “e” from his surname when he entered the music business.

the town of Jacknash had disappeared. “Jacknash had just dried up and blown away like an old corn husk,” Green writes (235). A similar type of vanishing occurred across the region; in midcentury the number of sharecroppers dramatically declined as residential farmers elected to move to the cities, squeezed out by larger corporate farms (see Daniel, *Lost* 9). By 1969, eighty-eight percent of southern farms were run by single owners or corporations (Sokol 284).

Mechanization and migration killed sharecropping while Civil Rights eroded the bonds of paternalism. For many African American families, the break with agriculture signified the end of farm work and an alienation from labor that went back generations to slavery days. In the autobiographies of Delta musicians, the promise of musical success intertwines with the momentous break with tenant farming and sharecropping and a move to the North. Therefore, as Angela Y. Davis writes, “the very process of traveling must have generated a feeling of exhilaration and freedom in individuals whose ancestors had been chained for centuries to geographical sites dictated by slave masters” (19). Establishing himself locally as a musician, Honeyboy Edwards left farming behind for the simple reason that it was less remunerative than playing juke joints. Returning to the plantation after “hoboing” and playing street corners with seasoned bluesman Joe Williams, Edwards could no longer summon the hope or humility to work for a landowner or overseer. “I was plowing out in the field and wore the sole out of my boot,” Edwards remembers. Anytime you wear the sole out of a boot, it’s time to leave there” (45). Edwards uses proxy narration to illustrate his sudden departure: “That Saturday the boss asked my

daddy, 'Henry, where's Honey at?' My daddy told him, 'Well, Honey's a young man. Honey's gone now and I don't know where he is.' I left; I cut out" (45). In his use of *paralepsis*, Edwards underscores that he is truly gone, leaving others to speak in his absence. What his repudiation of sharecropping may lack in dramatics it gains in finality. Though Edwards's path to success as a musician turned out to be far more difficult and circuitous than he ever anticipated, he never returned to the fields or the employ of a field boss. Edwards left the Delta behind with determination, as if to say, in the words of a standard blues line, "If you don't believe I'm leaving/ You can count the days I'm gone." For a musician like Edwards, this resoluteness would undoubtedly have been accompanied by the knowledge (firsthand, in his case) that he, like any other African American man, could be compelled by white landowners to perform hard labor under skewed vagrancy or trespassing laws. The escape north, then, had to be performed quickly, intelligently, and decisively.

Acts of resolve such as Edwards's subverted existing cultural stereotypes. After the commercial success of Howard Odum's *Rainbow Round My Shoulder* (1928), the travelling laborer-musician became a paradigm; performers who resembled Odum's "Black Ulysses" stereotype were exalted for their musical excellence while subtly condemned for their shortcomings as steady workers and dependable family men. Odum and others viewed such "wandering" as instinctive in African American men (W. Jones 44). Many bluesmen of the Delta, by contrast, demonstrated ambition and resourcefulness outside the demands of manual labor, using travel as a means to an end. Interviewed by William Ferris, bluesman James

“Son Ford” Thomas concisely describes music’s place in breaking the cycles of economic disadvantage and second-class citizenship: “The first guitar I owned was in 1942. I picked enough cotton to pay for that. I ordered me a guitar out of Sears and Roebuck, a Gene Autry guitar. It cost eight dollars and fifty cents. After I got my guitar, I wouldn’t pick no more cotton. That was it. That’s how I learned to play the guitar” (*Give* 112–113).

By contrast, B.B. King’s break with sharecropping was more gradual and deliberate, with no overt protest against the plantation bloc. In his recollection, he finds a sense of self-worth in his field labors, a “poetry” in cotton growing (57). “Cotton didn’t make me or my people rich,” King admits, “But cotton got us through” (58). By King’s estimation, he plowed 60,000 miles of Delta farmland before pursuing music full-time (Gioia 20). For all his ambitions as a musician, King continued working on plantations as a matter of pragmatism until his musical career became firmly established. “[E]ven though my dreams were lofty, I was down-to-earth. The earth of Mr. Johnson Barrett’s plantation was my means of sustenance. And along with my dreaming nature, I tried to stay practical” (71). That same practicality led King to begin his blues career as a street musician; a Saturday’s worth of busking in town (where earthy blues attracted more attention and money than the heavenly spirituals he loved) earned him ten dollars, more than his weekly wages on Barrett’s farm. Despite the clear advantage music held in this cost-benefit analysis, King did not leave Mississippi until years later, when he accidentally wrecked his boss’s valuable tractor and, in a panic, headed for the big city of Memphis, guitar in

hand. Representing himself in his account as an extraordinarily patient and conscientious young man in the Franklinian mold, King eventually worked off the debt owed for the damaged tractor; even when he earned a coveted slot as a disk jockey on Memphis's WDIA, he picked cotton on a West Memphis, Arkansas farm between shifts to earn money (121–122). Reflecting his hard-working, pragmatist persona, King represents cotton farming as hard but rewarding labor that trained him for the strenuous life of the constantly touring musician. Rather than dwell on the inherent exploitation of the cropping/renting system, King credits his work on the plantation for forging his centripetal set of values: hard work, loyalty, and the value of a dollar. It speaks volumes on King's outlook that when he achieved his first great plateau of success in the North—headlining theatres like Harlem's Apollo and Chicago's Regal for \$1000 a week—he instinctively compared his wealth and stature to the \$22.50 he earned for a week's labor atop a tractor in the sweltering Delta, and found both means of labor and remuneration satisfying.

Most musicians were less sanguine in their comparisons; migration to the North became the preferred option for southern-born musicians seeking advancement, but was never a guarantee that he or she could escape plantation economics. In *Lady Sings the Blues*, Billie Holiday and William Dufty characterized the 1940s jazz-club scene in New York as an antebellum plantation, with club owners the slave masters, lording over the actions of African American performers on and off the stage. Jazz writer Gene Lees related the exasperation of Lester Young who, though a featured attraction on Norman Granz's "Jazz at the Philharmonic" world tours in the late

1940s and early 1950s, described the enterprise, with its strenuous schedule and low pay, as “a flying plantation” (223). Record labels specializing in jazz and blues became notorious for their underhanded dealings with African Americans. By the 1950s, the system had become so entrenched that critic Nat Hentoff was able to summarize its inequities in a few strokes:

If [a musician] acquires enough of a reputation to draw the interest of a record company, he may well be cozened into signing a contract by which the firm has so much the upper accounting hand that at the end of the contract the musician will owe the label money. Options usually are entirely at the firm’s discretion and generally run for two additional one-year options after the contract’s first year. Costs of a session, album covers and liners and “promotion” are usually charged against the leader of a date, and some strange bills have been included under ‘promotion.’ (*Jazz Life* 51)

The tool of record-company dominance, as with the plantation owner, was the contract. Like sharecroppers, southern-born musicians frequently were illiterate; those with several years of schooling simply lacked the comprehension needed to understand sophisticated (and often underhanded) contracts, many of which surrendered years of work with a stroke of the signee’s pen. Just as sharecroppers were typically left in the dark about the true value of the fall harvest and the actual tally of their families’ expenses over the course of a year, record labels large and small kept their accounts private, often underreporting sales or, as Hentoff alleged,

charging label expenses to an individual artist's account and not paying him or her until all debts were deemed settled. Even gifts and favors granted to artists would eventually show up in their debt column.

In one of the most notorious examples of contractual murkiness, Chicago-blues record mogul Leonard Chess would allegedly buy Cadillacs for his most successful artists, including southern-born musicians like Muddy Waters, in lieu of royalties, in large part to distract them from the accounting books. In her history of Chess Records, *Spinning Blues Into Gold*, Nadine Cohodas concludes that such elaborate gifts were emblematic of a complex yet overall positive working relationship, "an amalgam of culture, commerce, and custom that tried at once to be both family and business" (93). Indeed, Leonard and Phil Chess, Jewish immigrants from Poland, forged lasting arrangements with some notoriously obstreperous musicians; conceivably, the European-born brothers and their largely southern-bred stable of acts found common ground through their ongoing adaptation to the urban North.⁵⁷ The intertwining of business and personal interests between the Chess brothers and the musicians on their label illustrated what George Lipsitz terms "the

⁵⁷ It bears noting that many Chess artists, even as they gave the label owners their due in interviews decades after the fact, engaged in a casual anti-Semitism, typically crediting the Chess brothers' success and business acumen to their Jewish heritage. Recalling how the Chess brothers ran their company, musician Bo Diddley told an interviewer, "[M]ostly all the Jewish people own everything. They got all the money. Give him a thousand dollars, he'll turn it into ten million" (Cohodas, *Spinning* 110). Such pernicious stereotypes undoubtedly intruded on the business dealings between Leonard and Phil Chess and their labels' artists, who were, in the label's most prolific period, exclusively African American.

new urban realities of the 1940s [that] allowed for new cultural exchanges that would have been impossible in prewar America” (*Time* 116–117). Additionally, such interchanges differed greatly from what blues musicians had experienced in the South, where blues music was still synonymous with the semi-underground world of the juke joint.

Nonetheless, these “new cultural exchanges” in Chicago were underscored—or undermined—by a familiar old economy. As the Chess brothers adopted the unwritten rules of independent record-making, they kept their eyes on the bottom line, and, when necessary, used the bonds of paternalism to encourage the company’s success. Cohodas contends that under such an arrangement, “Chicago was not the plantation and musicians were not held hostage to the company” (94). Chuck Berry, arguably the label’s biggest attraction, left the label suspicious of the Chesses’ motives, then returned after an unsuccessful stint with a larger, more impersonal (and more fiscally traditional) company. Chess musicians could—and frequently did—approach Leonard or Phil Chess with desperate demands for cash, under nearly every conceivable pretext. In certain cases, the Chess brothers spent money less out of largesse than a near-familial sense of responsibility. In an episode far less scrutinized than the Cadillac presentations, Leonard Chess quietly and uncomplainingly paid for drug treatment for his star singer Etta James (Cohodas, *Spinning* 189). The majority of former Chess artists recall the label owners with affection, and surviving outtakes

of Leonard Chess helming recording sessions demonstrate his familiarity with his artists.⁵⁸

Yet the written evidence of such affable partnerships is scarce. Artists' contracts and financial records, as well as the Chess brothers' running tallies of artists' expenses are missing, leaving the issue still open to debate. (In fairness, the label's paperwork was likely to disappear, given how frequently the licenses to Chess recordings were sold to increasingly larger media empires, beginning in the 1970s.) Many of the label's most lucrative contracts were signed without the artist retaining counsel, or possessing enough literacy to read even the most boilerplate contract. Muddy Waters, for example, could only write his name, learning to do so as a young man in Mississippi in order to sign off on his sharecropping agreements at Stovall Plantation. Even Chess's staunchest defenders cannot offer much objective evidence of ethical business dealing, resorting to reiterations of the Chesses' gift-giving largesse and accusations that their artists would not or could not exert personal responsibility. To be sure, musicians have traditionally labored in a cash economy, and many who migrated from the sharecropping South were dazzled by the instant

⁵⁸ A famous exchange is preserved on outtakes of the 1957 Sonny Boy Williamson (Rice Miller) recording "Little Village," which Leonard Chess produced. Chess and Williamson's volley of argumentative profanity and familiar joking earned the recording a parental-advisory sticker upon its 1980s re-release. In *Lipstick Traces*, Greil Marcus claims the back-and-forth "explains a great deal about the evolution of the master-slave relationship" (58). However, the recording reveals Chess to be anything but the Simon Legree of Southside Chicago; his mellifluous use of X-rated street vernacular and ability to absorb and laugh off similar insult show him to be well attuned and adapted to the oral culture of Chicago (by way of the Delta) blues musicians.

gratification of ready payment. Eager to make quick money, they were often amenable to working outside a formal contract-based system. As musician Ike Turner described the booming business in rhythm and blues in the early 1950s, “[C]ontracts didn’t mean nothin’. We would play for anybody who gave us twenty-five dollars” (Cohodas, *Spinning* 65). This “wildcat” mentality emboldened music-industry insiders to dispense with the long-term ramifications of contracts. When a relatively small amount of cash could be paid in lieu of royalties (which required extensive documentation and the possibility of legal scrutiny), record executives could employ musicians as virtual field hands. At the same time, the “gifts” they granted artists were subtracted from future royalties in the same way that attractive goods purchased from a plantation commissary were factored against a sharecropper’s annual production. In the case of Chess Records, gifts and favors were doled out seemingly with no strings attached. Yet ultimately, from the majority of musicians’ perspectives, it seems any “favors” granted above and beyond token cash payments came with a hidden price, as it fostered an ever-deepening dependence on label owners.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ The short but fascinating life of the Jackson, Mississippi-based Trumpet Records (1951–1956) illustrates how white label owners and black musicians could work together harmoniously. Owned and operated by native Mississippian Lillian McMurry, Trumpet released records for the expanding (and increasingly Jim Crow-defying) rhythm-and-blues market by the likes of Sonny Boy Williamson (a/k/a Rice Miller) and Elmore James. The anecdotal evidence on McMurry, collected in the Trumpet Records history *Diamonds on Farish Street*, concurs that she worked in cooperation with her artists, was financially generous to a fault (advancing cash to the label’s artists as an act of good faith, rather than as a means of business leverage), and rejected much of the prevailing segregationist “etiquette” between white women and African American men (see Ryan 115). At the same time,

Vicksburg, Mississippi-born musician Willie Dixon saw this dynamic firsthand, working for Chess in their 1950s heyday. In his autobiography, Dixon feels little compunction against comparing the music business, with its exploitative, one-sided contracts, to slavery:

[My mother] used to talk about Africa, what they did in slavery, what they did to her full parents. My mother always said, “The smaller the writing, the more important it is.” That’s like the recording business, you know with the contracts and everything. Most of the time, I read the subject and next thing I look for [is] the smallest writing on there. In those days, the people felt the reason they wrote the smaller things on the contract was because most black people couldn’t read and when they would start, the first thing was to read the biggest thing they could see. (10–11)

Amid this environment, Dixon became a major player in the success of Chess Records, as a songwriter, musician, producer, and talent scout. Nevertheless, Dixon had to disguise his expertise and power by functioning as a trickster within the system. As one Chess employee observed, “[Y]ou have to realize that Will Dixon, who is a more than ordinarily bright man, tricked Leonard Chess, who died thinking Will was stupid. Will had the best stupid act going that I may have ever seen in my life. I didn’t find out that Will was an intelligent man until I had been working with

McMurry exhibited guilelessness, perhaps even naïveté, in an increasingly cutthroat business, which led Trumpet to be a herald of things to come in the late 1950s and early 1960s, rather than a full participant.

him for two years and that was because he let me” (Dixon 195). In a ruse that harkened back to master-and-slave relationships, Dixon lured Chess into false security and informality through his “stupid act,” all the while observing the label owner’s manner of exploitation (see Kelley 22–23). While his labelmates “read the biggest thing they could see” (namely the dollar signs on the contract), Dixon utilized his hidden literacy and good sense to maneuver around Chess’s contractual traps. His ability to read and understand contracts and labor relations gave him the freedom that others unwittingly signed away. In his ultimate act of literacy, his own well-crafted autobiography, Dixon revealed what his trickster persona once concealed and brought the “small writing” of exploitative contracts to light.

Relationships between individual musicians and the larger industry still revolve around these issues of power. Country-music song publishers, able to take advantage of the glut of aspiring, ambitious songwriters, commonly work on a “share” system that leaves all but the most successful practitioners in debt to the publishing company. The recording industry’s practice of advancing money against future royalties and unnamed “expenses,” still in practice today, is based on convincing the laborer of abundant profits, no matter how remote the possibility (Peterson 46).⁶⁰ In reviewing the disparity between country-music stardom and the dependence on a labor-for-hire system, even million-selling artists like Waylon Jennings and Al Green can, with some justification, compare their working situations

⁶⁰ For a caustic but clear-eyed look at the industry’s continual streamlining of this system, see the 1993 essay “The Trouble with Music” by musician and sound engineer Steve Albini.

to their sharecropping ancestors (Jennings with Kaye 157–158; Green with Seay 44). Under such a system, a musician and songwriter like Carl Perkins could record two national hits for Sam Phillips’s Sun Records, yet face so much debt when non-itemized “recording costs” were deducted that the rising star was forced to go back to picking cotton to raise cash (Perkins and McGee 139). According to Perkins’s version of events, even when his account is in the black, subsequent payments from Sun come erratically and grudgingly, further alienating him from his musical labor. Little wonder, then, that musicians’ narratives often rail against the industry from the seemingly advantageous perspective of stardom. However, such notoriety gives the autobiographical subject a platform to air grievances and allege specific shady business dealings, the type of privilege the sharecropping system sought to stifle.

Another privilege granted to the migrant musician is the ability to reinvent oneself. Big Bill Broonzy migrated north after returning from a two-year stint in the army during World War II. Unwilling to acquiesce to Jim Crow in his native Arkansas after his military service, Broonzy moved to Chicago, finding employment as a Pullman porter (Charters, *Country* 170). Interestingly, Broonzy brought relatively little of his local music tradition north, developing his musical style in Chicago by listening to records of southern bluesmen. Made when he was in his mid-thirties, his first records, Samuel Charters claims, “were probably the most unpromising first records ever made by any blues singer. He was terrible” (*Country* 171). Broonzy eventually attained competence, but attracted a white, urban audience in the 1940s and 1950s largely through his (heavily exaggerated) backstory as a poor

cotton farmer and his endearing stage manner and wit. It mattered little to this new audience, ostensibly seeking authentic “folk music,” that Broonzy derived his source material in front of a Victrola, rather than behind a mule. Therefore, as Adam Gussow identifies, Broonzy related to his auditors through a multilayered discourse, “notable for the double-voiced way in which a sophisticated and successful Chicago-honed performer reconstructs himself as a blue-jeaned country hick” (*Journeyman’s* 116). Broonzy’s active self-creation resulted in a “split” narrative voice in his book *Big Bill Blues*, where he vacillated between folksy storytelling and the cynical tone of the city dweller; at times he even referred to himself in the third person (151–152). Broonzy’s new, urban persona, as documented in his autobiography, relied on his evocations of working as a plow hand both to authenticate his music to newcomers and to form a bond with his fellow migrants from the Deep South. Similarly, Willie Dixon settled in Chicago after years of “hoboing,” in large part because the city gave him both the freedoms of opportunity and movement and an audience eager to hear Mississippi-derived blues. When Dixon and his fellow musicians were able to play the blues freely on the streets in Chicago’s enclaves and make more money than they did as stockyard workers, they illustrated the cultural continuity that coexisted with the promise of economic and social progress.

Musicians like Broonzy and Dixon represented the third generation of African Americans participating in the Great Migration, who took advantage of their forebears’ incremental but significant advancements toward equality in labor, education, and housing. That said, historian Carole Marks points out in her history of

African American northern migration the serious challenges faced by the first generations of new arrivals—poverty, substandard housing and health care, crime, and unjust treatment from law enforcement—adding up to what Marks terms a “social war” (145). Still, Chicago experienced a 148 percent growth in its African American population between 1910 and 1920; in the same ten-year span, Detroit’s African American population expanded six times over (611.3%) (Marks 121–122). Statistics place the total number of out-migrating southern African Americans between 1910 and 1940 around 1.8 million. Among Broonzy and Dixon’s cohort, about 1.5 million African Americans left the South in the 1940s, another 1.5 million in the 1950s (D. Davis 11). In her history of the Great Migration, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, Isabel Wilkerson extends the timeline of the movement, and concludes that approximately six million African Americans left the region between 1915 and 1975; as a result, forty-seven percent of African Americans lived outside of the South by the 1970s, compared to ten percent around the time of World War I (9–10).

As impressive as such numbers are, they still cannot completely convey the fervent desire individuals harbored to break out of debt, peonage, and general exploitation. Around the time the “country blues” was finding its form in the Delta, a Greenville, Mississippi, laborer wrote to the *Chicago Defender* in May 1917, making no secret of sharecroppers’ growing frustration: “Dear Sir, I want to get my famely [sic] out of this cursed southland. Down here a negro man is not as good as a white man’s dog” (qtd. in Spencer 104). Much like the metropolitan Chicago recalled by Louis Armstrong in *Satchmo*, the city represented advancement for generations of

Delta musicians and the possibility for a new beginning.⁶¹ “I wish you could have seen me,” Muddy Waters told an interviewer in the 1970s about his arrival in Chicago. “I got off the train and it looked like this was the fastest place in the world: cabs dropping fares, horns blowing, the peoples walking so fast” (Palmer, “Muddy” 42). This fast pace, coupled with the musicians’ own ambitions and desire to innovate, would transform the blues and bring it to its widest audience yet. Using the “Black Metropolis” of Chicago as a base of operations, transplanted southern musicians would adapt to the city as a new soundscape, and transform their music through its exposure to a more heterogonous audience, eventually broadcasting it to the world.

CONCLUSION

In the early to mid-twentieth century, both New Orleans and the Delta area were demographic nonconformities, resulting in a greater sustainability of the folkways—religion, culture, food—that are typically subsumed by a dominant culture. Culturally and socially insular, the Delta produced a characteristic type of music that reflected influences from both sides of the color line, touching gospel, popular song, balladry, and oral folklore. The result, in Samuel Charters’s phrase, was a “rich confusion of music” (*Country* 15). The exploitative economics of

⁶¹ As Jon Michael Spencer notes, Chicago may have had special musical resonance with potential migrant musicians, as it was home to the Sears and Roebuck Company and Montgomery Ward, purveyors of affordable mail-order guitars (105).

sharecropping and tenant farming exerted both a shaping and deleterious effect on this music. The seemingly endless toil of farming cotton on shares had its deepest expressions in the blues, where pain was articulated, broadcast, and ameliorated partly through interpersonal commiseration and partly through the lyrics' common theme of ultimately overcoming life's troubles. Juke joints adjacent to cotton plantations and the streets of county-seat marketplaces gave aspiring musicians spaces to develop their craft, not just musically but also professionally, as they learned which types of music and which performance styles influenced patrons to part with what little money they had. Blues musicians like Robert Johnson passed into legend not only through their music and performance styles, but also their ability to travel and spend money freely. Blues musicians could (and often did) purchase jewelry, fancy dress clothes, and intoxicants, all commodities purchased with cash, not plantation scrip. As the plantation system gave way to mechanization and a system more suited to agribusiness, migration to the North became the only possible avenue for further musical and economic advancement. The autobiographies of Delta blues musicians reflect a culture living in hope through these changes, clutching to dreams of imminent good fortune. Throughout the region, members of the underclass are bound by their belief in luck: Delta prisoners hoping for a pardon, sharecroppers hoping for good crops and honest dealing with landowners, gamblers at juke joints hoping for a good hand of cards, and the itinerant musician hoping for a better life in the North.

As with the vast majority of southern musician autobiographies, subject-authors from the Delta used autobiography as a means to “come home” and restate their local identity in the Deep South, while maintaining the broad outlines of their more cosmopolitan public personae. Their reminiscences veer between sentimental remembrance and clear-eyed critiques of the segregated South. For a lesser-known musician like Honeyboy Edwards, his foundation in the Delta authorizes him to speak—with some degree of embellishment—to issues of interest to contemporary historians, from the dynamics of sharecropping to the performance style of his contemporary Robert Johnson. In his use of such literary devices as *paralepsis*, Edwards is able to convey his sense of narrative truth rather seamlessly, harmonizing between his lived experience and outsiders’ perceptions of Delta blues. In the broad view suggested by Albert Murray’s *The Hero and the Blues*, Edwards embodies the “blues hero,” always adapting and improvising when imparting something new and instructive to his audience, then moving on to the next performance (106–107).

For all their narrative invention, bluesmen like Edwards do not need to resort to melodrama to give their life stories a sense of danger and intrigue. As blues historian Robert Palmer argues, the joyful act of playing the blues came with inherent risks:

[B]lues singers didn’t have to respect social conventions or the church’s shopworn homilies; they were free to live the way they wanted and to tell the truth as they saw it. They could find a paying audience in the tiniest hamlet, in a rural sawmill or café, or on any

downtown street corner; they didn't have to devote their lives to backbreaking farm work or stay in one place too long. They were the life of the party, the toast of the back of town; they got as much to drink and as many women as they could handle, and sometimes more. They knew the worst of times, but during the best of times they sported eye-catching clothes, jewelry, a wad of greenbacks, even a fancy automobile. (27)

Yet even the most popular blues heroes were not immune to the laws and economic realities of their time and place. Blues singers working the streets of the Deep South had to obey existing racial mores and anticipate the hair-trigger tempers of whites on the lookout for black men who did not "know their place." Vagrancy charges were leveled at black men not conspicuously doing work in the sight of a white man. A charge of "impudence" could be leveled at any black man in public for any perceived transgression of the unwritten laws of racial etiquette or, most fatally, for the "reckless eyeballing" of white women. More prosaically, the system of cotton sharecropping closed off the possibilities for advancement and reward.

Consequently, the social and material advantages offered to the bluesman, especially in the urban North, had an undeniable lure. These advantages are enumerated in texts by B.B. King and Honeyboy Edwards but equally applicable to New Orleans jazz musicians of the Storyville era or any artist seeking autonomy. To "live the way the wanted and to tell the truth as they saw it" was no small feat in that place and time, and ultimately carried more value than the money they accrued through their music.

When the labors of sharecroppers were taken for granted and the word of a black man was culturally and legally worth less than that of the most disreputable white man, to advance in life through the medium of blues music was worth almost any struggle.

CHAPTER VI

JUST ONE OF THOSE THINGS

In the recounting of artistic pursuits, only a fine line—or a small shift in perspective or time—separates accident from inspiration. While luck, especially when represented as fortune, implies an invisible hand, accidents arise from sheer circumstance, completely outside an actor's control. Generally speaking, American biographical discourse has favored luck over accident when explaining phenomena, and gone one step further by conflating luck with serendipity, the seamless collaboration between fortune and alert, opportunistic individuals (see Alcock 14). The Horatio Alger hero, for example, in Jackson Lears's interpretation, was able to "make his own luck," "earn[ing]...good fortune through relentless energy [...] always up and doing, on the lookout for opportunity" (156).⁶² Consequently, this sense of attunement with the outside world provides the kind of "breaks" described as "lucky." Lucky breaks abound in southern musicians' autobiographies. As with most books by entertainers, subjects represent themselves synchronically, claiming who they are at the time of their writing is essentially the same person they were before, with stardom an external phenomenon (see Eakin 12–13). Nevertheless, the irrefutable changes in one's stature and notoriety over time must be ascribed to an external cause, and in many instances that cause is represented as sheer accident. Most

⁶² As John Cawelti observed, Alger's stories also hinged on an "unbelievable tissue of coincidences ... [that] put some strain on the tolerance of his youthful readers" (115). Mysterious strangers/ benefactors, suddenly lucrative stock holdings and the like typically rewarded the young hero, but in ways largely unrelated to his ambition or inner goodness.

intriguingly, though, African American musicians crossing the unwritten color line and the majority of women musician-autobiographers represent their early pursuits as an essentially accidental career in order to finesse any perceived violation of the prevailing social order.

Historically, American vernacular music and games of chance have flourished in the same surroundings: juke joints, the backrooms of saloons, and after-hours clubs. However, as a precipitating factor in novel musical approaches, accident recurs with surprising frequency in the lore of American popular music. The first blackface minstrel troupe, the Virginia Minstrels, formed following an impromptu chorus of “Old Dan Tucker” intended as charivari (Lott 136). According to one popular yet factually disproven story, Louis Armstrong “invented” scat singing in the recording studio when the sheet music for “Heebie Jeebies” fell to the floor, forcing him to improvise nonsense words in order to salvage the take (Ogren 97). In another apocryphal tale, Mamie Smith made the first blues record in 1920 when she substituted at the last minute for a tardy Sophie Tucker (L. Jones, *Blues* 99).⁶³ Even distinct musical styles are linked to accidental beginnings. In some accounts, the first example of dub reggae spontaneously occurred when Jamaican engineer Byron Smith inadvertently omitted the vocals from a mix during a recording session, leaving only the bass-heavy rhythm (Chang 30).

⁶³ For the debunking of this myth, see Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, 225.

Of course, when unplanned events like these strike a chord or crystallize experience, they cease to be accidents at all, instead becoming fabulized and incorporated into an orderly narrative. “Luck,” in its generic form, has always been an element in first-person narration; no credible narrator can account for the origin of every event in his or her life story, nor take sole credit for every successful endeavor. Obviously, male musicians elevate luck when retrospectively recounting their career (the most obvious example would be the chipper tone of Bing Crosby’s ghostwritten *Call Me Lucky*, where the singer and his amanuensis credited good fortune and the right connections with the elevation of an erstwhile Good Bad Boy to star status), but they assume the mask for different ends than women. Men who prize luck do so largely to present themselves as an approachable Everyman, a “natural” man unaffected by the trappings and demands of fame. For men, luck plays a role primarily when retrospectively recounting the genesis of a career and a crucial moment of performance: in a common trope, aspiring performers from Elvis Presley to Little Richard and George Jones to Ray Charles salvage faltering early recording sessions (and their careers) at the last minute by breaking out into more individualistic, less mannered performances that unexpectedly win popular approval. These “accidental” airings of their individualistic voices come to define their mature styles.

In some autobiographical accounts, even “bad luck” can be fortuitous. If the train W.C. Handy waited for in Tutwiler, Mississippi were not nine hours behind schedule, he would not have been stranded after hours in the station and not have had

his fortunate encounter with the blues. In Handy's account, serendipity encompasses not only being in the proverbial right place at the right time, but also the preexisting musical training and agility needed to take advantage of his discovery and the sagacity to understand the value of such novel music.

As seen in the example of W.C. Handy, "luck" signifies perceptions of chance and fortune but can also take into account an individual's intention and talent. "Luck" and "accident" often intersect and are generally employed as synonymous terms, but in autobiography, where agency and self-determination are common underlying themes, accidents assume a slightly different connotation, referring to events that are wholly unanticipated and, therefore, unwanted and unimagined. While one may wish for luck in the form of a desired consequence, one cannot truly wish for an accident, as its form and effects remain completely unknown until they materialize. For example, Louis Armstrong frequently invokes luck in *Satchmo* in reference to street gambling; in such games of chance, a desired result is both foreseeable and mathematically expressible. By contrast, in the creation myth that has Armstrong inventing scat singing, the accidental falling of the sheet music is never outside the realm of possibility but lies far afield of the expected chain of events in the song's performance and recording. The ultimate effect of Armstrong's spontaneous reaction—to improvise nonsense syllables in lieu of lyrics to comical effect—combines the unpredictability of accident with the chance occurrence that Armstrong can be quick thinking and musically agile enough to improvise his way out of the situation, utilizing his seemingly boundless sense of humor. What we

conveniently call “accident” in music, then, is often a synchronism of events, a combination of, in Peter Guralnick’s words, “accident, necessity, invention, and the illumination of genius” (*Dream* 94).

W.E.B. Du Bois identifies a similar concatenation of factors in his elegiac 1920 essay on the African-British composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, “The Immortal Child,” as Du Bois describes his subject’s musical beginnings in London as “a series of chances” (*Darkwater* 115). One “friendly workingman,” seeing a spark of talent in the young Coleridge-Taylor, gives him a violin. Soon, a musician passing by sees the boy carrying his violin while playing marbles and offers to give him lessons. Finally, a sympathetic schoolmaster recommends Coleridge-Taylor to a choirmaster at a more prestigious school. “[B]y happy accident,” Du Bois narrates, “his way was clear. [...] He was one of those fortunate beings who are not called to *Wander-Jahre*, but are born with sails set and seas charted” (*Darkwater* 115).

More pointedly, Du Bois remarks that the most fortunate accident for Coleridge-Taylor was being born in Great Britain rather than under Jim Crow in the United States, where his talent and drive would have been stifled (*Darkwater* 117). Though Du Bois is writing retrospectively about a deceased artist in a sentimental mode of discourse that does not require perfectly cogent proofs of cause and effect, he still invokes a radical notion of chance, akin to what Melville Herskovits would later term “the deification of Accident.” Alienated from white Christian conceptions of Divine Providence (to say nothing of earthly justice), African Americans have historically turned from the promise of a knowable, logical endpoint and toward the

idea of Fate as a determining factor, accepting chance or trickery as some of its unpredictable manifestations (see Sidran 21). Under such a system that rejects predetermined outcomes, no situation is inescapable; as distant a prospect as it may be, instant good fortune is always held out as a possibility. Michael Eric Dyson maintains that beginning with African Americans' first contact with the New World, accidents were "subsequently viewed as an extension of the culture's ideas and survival" (77). This survival instinct undergirds the resourcefulness of the runaway slave, the quick thinking of the trickster figure, and the artistic daring of the musical improviser. Called to confront unimaginable odds, their imagination and instincts collaborate with the open-ended semi-narrative of Fate to create something spontaneous and unanticipated.⁶⁴

Backstories similar to Coleridge-Taylor's, where the subject becomes almost secondary to his or her own success and embarks on something akin to an "accidental career," have been a constant throughout the history of musical performers in the United States, especially in cases when a performer breaks through barriers of race,

⁶⁴ The accidental-career trope has persisted in other areas of public life in the South as well and been demonstrated by poor whites seeking advancement out of desperate circumstances. For example, to preserve his "Man of the People" image, Louisiana governor (and occasional songwriter) Huey Long perpetuated stories about his humble political beginnings in stump speeches and his autobiography. Though the story's details shifted along with the audience, Long consistently portrayed his entrance onto the political stage as a snap decision, spurred on by friends (T. Williams, *Huey* 119). Long also recalled his first major speech as a triumphant rite-of-passage performance. In his self-dramatization, Huey overcame (or, perhaps more aptly, capitalized on) his "rustic and awkward" appearance to outwit a group of experienced politicians and win the crowd's approval (T. Williams, *Huey* 128).

class, and/or gender. In some instances, complete (and sometimes hostile) strangers personify fortune. For example, in the stock narrative he would share with interviewers, Nat “King” Cole claimed only to have switched from being an instrumentalist to a singer when he was pressured by an overzealous and intoxicated white man to vocalize during a performance (Friedwald 476). As his mainstream popularity grew, Cole subtracted the element of conflict from this origin myth. Re-established from a jazz piano player to one of mainstream America’s most popular vocalists, Cole amended the tale to re-characterize it as a simple matter of show business: “To break the monotony, I would sing a few songs here and there between the playing. I noticed thereafter people started requesting more singing and it was just one of those things” (Lees 226). Significantly, Cole deletes the obnoxious white patron (if he ever existed) from his amended story; from Cole’s vantage point as a mainstream star, the patron’s challenge (and, perhaps, implicit threat) becomes “just one of those things,” out of his control, along the way to fame. Cole’s own on-the-fly decision-making, affirmed by his growing fanbase, determines when and where he lifts his voice. In this anecdote, Cole employs accident in a manner contrary to Du Bois’s interpretation of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor’s career, as a way to address his unlikely mainstream success yet retrospectively finesse a perceived transgression of race and class lines and disavow any bitterness against the system.

In the case of Johnny Otis, the Greek-American rhythm and blues musician, impresario, and activist who openly identified himself as “black by persuasion,” the chance hearing of music paved the way for his more voluntary conception of identity

(Lipsitz, *Time* 143). Born John Veliotis in Vallejo, California in 1921, Otis resisted the urging of his Greek immigrant parents, friends, and teachers to assimilate into mainstream white American culture. Though obsessed with jazz and rhythm and blues, Johnny Otis did not cross over into African American culture simply to follow the music more closely or to pass across the color line. Like Mezz Mezzrow before him, Otis moved well beyond his initial exotic fantasies of African American life, choosing both a professional and domestic life among African Americans, and accepting the unpredictable, unscripted cultural consequences. Unlike Mezzrow, who brazenly declared himself a “voluntary Negro” of no fixed origin, the vital essence Otis responded to was a local one, experienced firsthand among the rhythm and blues scene of postwar Los Angeles, vastly different than the homogenous national culture his assimilationist parents venerated. Otis’s career took its strangest turns on tours through the South, where his fluid identity was subject to the strictures of Jim Crow and its obsession with skin color as status marker. In one instance, the light-skinned Otis had to sit under a sunlamp before undertaking a southern tour, at agent Joe Glaser’s insistence, so as not to confuse southern authorities in their enforcement of apartheid (Otis 87). When Otis did pass as a black man, he did so accidentally, when club owners and law enforcement, otherwise opposed to integration on the bandstand, allowed his group to play without incident, simply under the assumption that any leader of an African American band must be African American himself (Lipsitz, *Midnight* 27–28). Such accidents reflect less on Otis’s adopted ethnicity than on a

binary, segregationist code portrayed as being as ludicrous almost as much as it is degrading.

Conversely, non-white country-music performers have invoked the accidental-career trope when relating how they “crossed over” and began singing in a style coded as “white.” Singer Johnny Rodriguez rose to fame in the 1970s in part upon a fictitious backstory in which he was overheard singing and playing guitar in his jail cell by a sympathetic Texas Ranger, who alerted a talent scout (Malone 140). In Rodriguez’s origin story, the element of “accident” (the policeman’s unintentional listening) is the pivot of the story, setting into motion a series of fortuitous events. Not coincidentally, the “accident” also pulls Rodriguez in centripetally; under the aegis of the law, Rodriguez’s character and claim to citizenship (Rodriguez was born in Texas, of Mexican heritage) is affirmed.

Historically, African American country musicians have employed similar, carefully wrought narratives of strange fortune to explain their unlikely place in a white-dominated field. As a founding member of the Grand Ole Opry, harmonica player Deford Bailey appeared on the Opry’s radio show for sixteen years, beginning in 1925, and toured extensively through the South supporting the likes of Bill Monroe, Roy Acuff, and the Delmore Brothers. As his biographers David C. Morton and Charles K. Wolfe outline, Bailey tempered his own favorable publicity by offering various stories about his “big break,” all of which put good fortune and the intercession of others at the foreground. Depending on the version he chose to tell, Bailey accidentally broke into country music by either being overheard playing

harmonica by the secretary to one of the Grand Ole Opry's sponsors (Morton and Wolfe 39), being forced against his will to compete against white entertainers in a talent contest and winning second prize (Morton and Wolfe 42), or being taken along involuntarily by a white band needing a harmonica player for an imminent radio session (Morton and Wolfe 46). In every version, Bailey expressed modesty in his own musical skills to the point of abjection and an initial unwillingness to disturb the status quo. Only at the insistence of white people with a certain influence, Bailey insisted, did he move forward in his musical career.

Following Bailey, Charley Pride, historically the most successful performer of color in the country-music field, has narrated his life story by contrasting detailed descriptions of his "lucky breaks" with a curious diffidence toward careerism and musical ambition. At times, his autobiography *Pride* (1994) seems predicated on a vaguely absurdist premise that would fit well into a television situation comedy or fish-out-of-water movie: what if a black man could not shake off his knack for singing white-coded country music and ingratiating himself with white fans? What if the music industry coerced him to shape that knack into a lucrative act and fans demanded that he become one of the top stars of his era? *Pride* lays out such a curious career trajectory, where Charley reluctantly falls back on his singing as a replacement for his dreams of pro-baseball stardom. Pride's autobiography depicts the performance of country music across an invisible color line as a near-involuntary act that wins over potentially hostile crowds without much effort.

In Pride's recollection of his initial exposure to country music, listening to the *Grand Ole Opry* radio program as a child, he credits his natural ability to mimic the voices of white country stars like Hank Williams and Roy Acuff as his impetus to sing in that style. Both as a child and as an adult, Pride declares wonderment at the aural segregation of music, not understanding why country is deemed "white folks' music." "I sang what I liked," Pride writes, "in the only voice I had" (56).⁶⁵ (By contrast, Ray Charles, as a self-proclaimed "country boy," credited his successful early 1960s foray into country-and-western to a love of the music and careful planning [Charles and Ritz 222]). By representing his musical taste and voice as organic outgrowths of his rural southern background, Pride both underscores the simplicity of his intentions and disavows any hint of racial transgression.

Despite his historical distinction of being the first African American to enjoy a sustained career in country music, Pride represents his rise with astounding diffidence; before he commits to a professional career as a singer, music holds relatively minor importance in his self-conception. As a young man, Pride sings as a hobby—to entertain fellow soldiers during his stint in the army, and in honky-tonks and cowboy bars in his adopted home state of Montana—but pursues baseball as a career. Pride's athleticism allows him to play professionally in the last days of the Negro Leagues. Pride limits his singing to occasional guest slots at honky-tonks and renditions of the National Anthem at his own baseball games, for fun rather than pay.

⁶⁵ In addition to Pride, Ray Charles, BB King, and Tina Turner express in their respective autobiographies their early love of country music, as heard on such far-reaching radio stations as Nashville's WSM.

Though encouraged by professional country singers passing through Montana to leave the saloons behind and pursue a full-time career singing in Nashville, Pride makes a pilgrimage to Tennessee not to try his luck in Music City but to attend a regional tryout in Memphis for the fledgling New York Mets baseball team. When Pride is rebuffed by Mets manager Casey Stengel, Pride impulsively takes the next bus to Nashville, where he walks into the offices of a Music Row publisher, who coincidentally has been looking for a black country singer to test the viability of the concept in the marketplace. Pride passes the audition with no difficulty but evidently remains casual about a career in music. Recalling his entry into the country-music field, Pride writes, “Having a record or two on the streets, I imagined, could add a nice supplement to my smelter salary” (136). Hedging his bets, Pride travels back and forth between his home in Montana and Nashville, not quitting his day job until he finally hears his own songs on the radio while on the factory floor (145-146).

From its unlikely beginnings, Pride’s career takes a turn into serendipity, as Pride’s sound and image meet the existing needs of the country-music industry. Following the advent of rock and roll in the mid-1950s, the integration of musical genres intensified. During a brief moment when existing genre labels broke down, a popular song could reach a top spot on the pop, country, and rhythm-and-blues charts. Though radio formatting and popular tastes soon made such categories more rigid, country-music executives actively sought to produce a prominent African American star by the mid-1960s, a long overdue acknowledgement of the cross-racial interchange at the heart of the music. By Pride’s own admission, his manager Jack

Johnson, producer Jack Clement, and musician/label executive Chet Atkins spent two years laying the groundwork for Pride's introduction to country-music fans, with Pride having no real input on the insiders' machinations. Atkins's involvement is especially noteworthy, as he was among the main shapers of Nashville's drift toward pop-inflected country music, more palatable to an increasingly urban, cosmopolitan audience (see Pecknold 134).

Pride's version of his Nashville breakthrough—where he plays an incidental role in the planning and marketing of his music—is intended to be read as “natural,” socially and aesthetically. In an act of class solidarity with the mainstream of country-music fans, Pride constructs an image of himself as a self-identified, largely independent working man who contracts his inborn skills out to others. Unimpressed by the lure of stardom, Pride sings in what he characterizes as a singular, unaffected style, without input from his “bosses.” In a manner far removed from the constantly striving, “pluck-and-luck” Horatio Alger hero, Pride lets good fortune come to him. Pride pursues country music full-time only when it can pay better than his blue-collar job. Once he fully arrives in Nashville, Pride maintains a journeyman's work ethic. By his own account, he approaches Nashville without an agenda beyond his own personal success.

As if sheltered by this innocent worldview, Pride does not depict country music as racially contested ground in his memoirs, apart from a few minor confrontations in provincial towns and a betrayal by one secretly bigoted business associate. Much like Nat “King” Cole's self-reported anecdote of his pop-singing

origins, Pride's rare descriptions of racism amount to "just one of those things" in a performer's experience. As Pride describes the 1960s country-music scene he helped integrate, radio airwaves, sales charts, and the hearts and minds of country fans are open to all in a market-driven meritocracy. According to the singer, younger country personalities like Waylon Jennings, Loretta Lynn, and George Jones immediately welcome him into their fold, and older stars with more entrenched racial attitudes, such as Faron Young, come to respect Pride for his work ethic and adaptability to Nashville's then-prevailing "countrypolitan" sound.⁶⁶

Though his career may have started accidentally, Pride becomes a quick study of prevailing regional mores: Pride agrees to have his earliest records and publicity materials distributed by his record label without an accompanying photograph and initially avoids singing love songs so as not to inflame racist sentiment. (Not long afterward, white male country musicians like Merle Haggard would broach the subject of white-male/black-female relationships in their lyrics [Tosches 214-15]; Pride's music has avoided the theme of interracial romance entirely.) Summarizing his philosophy of limited accommodation, Pride invokes rugged individualism rather than identification with other African Americans who came of age during the civil rights movement. "Protect yourself and what's yours," Pride writes, "but don't fight

⁶⁶ In the past thirty-plus years of country-music autobiography, white subject-authors' elaborate praise of Charley Pride and self-acknowledgment as Pride's primary champion to skeptical country fans has become something of a cliché. In their respective autobiographies, Waylon Jennings, Loretta Lynn, George Jones, Johnny Cash, and Roni Stoneman each take credit for Pride's acceptance in the country-music field, though their stories diverge wildly.

the battle if there is nothing to be won” (49). Through such pronouncements, Pride rejects any notion of double consciousness. In Pride’s manner of self-presentation, to portray his success as a constant struggle, complicated by an identity crisis, would be to give backhanded credit to the hegemonic power of racial codes in Nashville and the South in shaping his career. By contrast, a narrative where good fortune takes an active role underscores the sense that events, even ones perceived as accidental, have followed a preordained, “natural” order.

Until a younger crop of slicker, crossover-ready performers subsumes his generation of country stars, Pride expresses little dissatisfaction with his place in the country-music pantheon. Pride dismisses the idea that he pursued music with the intent of breaking the unwritten color barrier in country music, declaring “I never wanted to be a role model or a spokesman for anybody” (224). Explicitly, Pride limits his agency by telling readers he has no interest in changing his initial, imitative style or further integrating the ranks of country musicians.⁶⁷ If Pride ever attempted to “open the doors” for other performers of color, he does not mention it in his autobiography, nor does he present to the reader any scene where he tries to wrest control of his music, change his original untutored approach to singing, or even stand

⁶⁷ While dozens of Nashville singers, musicians, producers, and executives are name-checked in *Pride*, African-American contemporaries such as Linda Martell, Stoney Edwards, O.B. McClinton, and Cleve Francis are left conspicuous by their absence. In the prologue to his narrative, Pride characterizes Deford Bailey as “a fleeting novelty act” (12). Pride’s description is as historically inaccurately as it is dismissive.

out more in the country-music star system. Instead, he follows his original musical “knack,” which invariably leads to a convergence with good fortune.

While country performers have often been divided into two camps in academic studies—“hard core” and “soft shell,” largely depending on their appeal to the wider pop marketplace—Pride stands as an exception to that dialectic, for reasons only tangentially connected to race (Peterson 150–155). Like his “hard core” brethren, Pride can claim a childhood marked by longing and depravation, a connection to the land (originating from his early life on a sharecropping plantation in Mississippi), and an informal stage manner amenable to an unpretentious, working-class audience. Yet his constructed Everyman image invites comparisons to more pop-oriented performers in the country field, through his conversational, melodious voice, easygoing onstage demeanor, and casual dress. Able to straddle both sides of the dialectic, Pride’s authenticity is traceable to his stated involuntary knack for singing country music in a commercially successful style with few inflections of jazz, blues, or any other style outside of mainstream country’s realm. By representing his crossing of the unwritten country-music color line as a series of natural events set into motion by a fluke event, Pride implicitly disavows any dissatisfaction with the homogenizing, star-making machine of Nashville and the music’s history of marginalizing performers of color.

THE FEMINIZATION OF ACCIDENT

The intentional deflection of agency has been most prominent as a steady undercurrent in women's life writing. While male-dominated autobiographical subgenres like the "self-made-man" tale or political and military memoirs commonly exaggerate the subject-author's power and agency, Jill Ker Conway identifies the tendency of women, even world-historical figures like Jane Addams, to "underwrite" their memories. While Addams put on paper her extensive, long-range plans to spearhead reforms in private letters and diaries, her memoirs depicted her life's work in establishing Hull House as a modest endeavor, initiated with little advance planning or prior calculation. As such, Conway laments, Addams "never assumes responsibility" of her public life and its wide-ranging effects in her autobiographical writing situation ("Points" 47). This public front, of course, does not preclude the recovery of experience and responsibility when writing in the private sphere. Feminist critics like Carolyn Heilbrun have observed a stark contrast between the public and private in women's life writing when the subject-author addresses her own agency. Though their aspirations may be beneath the surface in texts published under their name, Heilbrun writes, "Their letters and diaries are quite different, reflecting ambitions and struggles in the public sphere and strong personal feelings; in their published autobiographies they portray themselves as intuitive, nurturing, passive, never managerial" (19). The intentional masking of women's knowledge, authority, and drive compels us to read narratives, even supposedly "subliterary," heavily

mediated ones such as popular musicians' autobiographies, carefully in order to find points where this self-censorship breaks down and the subject represents her agency.

Stances of professional “modesty” have been a constant throughout the history of female musical performers in the United States. Arguably the first female music “superstar” in the United States, the Swedish-born opera singer Jenny Lind was promoted to the American public by P.T. Barnum not as the trained vocal musician that she was but rather as a “natural” talent, unaffected by ambition or careerism. Journalists following Lind blithely ignored her years of opera performance and professional triumph in European opera houses to perpetuate their image of Lind as an artless songbird, a simple, humble peasant girl unfamiliar with the demands of the professional male sphere (see B. Adams 47–48). Her appointed biographers concocted a pre-fame persona for Lind, constructing primal moments that celebrated the “purity” of the pre-stardom Lind, to the delight of her audience (B. Adams 51). Subsequently, publicity materials promoting opera divas to the mass audience regularly spotlighted performers’ “inherently female” embrace of the family circle, while marginalizing their professional and artistic ambitions, as well as their personal political and social viewpoints; one typical headline in this vein read: “Mme. Pasquali, Opera Singer, Says She’s No Sympathizer with Suffragists” (G. Campbell 22).

Women’s avowal of an accidental career extends to female performers in the popular realm as well. In the 1940s, gospel sensation Sister Rosetta Tharpe endorsed (or created wholecloth) a string of stories detailing her serendipitous professional

beginnings. What began as the standard “beginner’s luck” trope of winning an amateur contest exploded into an individualized, well-plotted story of being “discovered” by a generous benefactor. Depending on the retelling, the benefactor would be a wealthy white patron, a booking agent, or another musician. As Tharpe’s biographer Gayle F. Wald explains, part of this embellishment was due to the sensationalistic journalism at the time. Such tale-spinning was also necessary to establish a usable narrative to explain and publicize her daring musical crossover from churches to secular venues or, as Wald writes, “a way of presenting her as an authentic Pentecostal while explaining how she turned up at the Cotton Club” (35). In contrast to a narrative technique like *paralepsis*, which promotes the narrative stretching or suspension of time, accounts of the accidental career typically speed up diegetic time, to represent the “whirlwind” of instant, unexpected success. Employing the trope of the contest (derived from the masculinist discourse of the “hero’s journey” tale) allowed subjects like Tharpe to narratively encapsulate their career preparations within a single event, grounded in one particular time and place, and avoid the appearance of immodesty by crediting others, even to the point of exaggeration.

The shadowy benefactor is but one of the recurring personifications of luck in female musician’s origin stories. In other instances, domineering men acting as managers/Svengalis take over a fledgling female performer’s career, demanding control over her style and appearance; typically, these dominant personalities are also performers’ husbands, as in the case of Ike Turner (Tina Turner), Doolittle Lynn

(Loretta Lynn), Andy Stroud (Nina Simone), or a succession of villainous, greedy men, as portrayed in Billie Holiday's *Lady Sings the Blues*. The "luck" that such Svengali figures represent, manifested in their surface skill in such traditionally masculine occupations as business and record production, allow them to bear the burdens of the public sphere, while allowing the female performer to keep her place in the private sphere and deflect any accusations of calculation in her career.

Complementary to the controlling-husband type is the "meddling relative" figure, who coerces a young woman's entry into show business, usually through benign trickery. In her 2005 autobiography, Cuban-music superstar Celia Cruz credits the beginning of her long career to a series of involuntary events, beginning when a cousin enters her into a talent show without her prior knowledge (32). In this variation on the "Cinderella story," the subject's recognition of her own talent is virtually irrelevant. An outside force—in Cruz's case, the interceding cousin, but more broadly perceived as luck itself—has to enter the scene and lead the way to validation. By winning the contest, Cruz (and other female subjects who have utilized this trope) convey the impression that success was instantaneous, unaffected by a female's own drive or ambition.

Country singer Maxine Brown relates an even more circuitous story of accidental fortune. Eager to coax her shy younger brother, Jim Ed, onto the stage, young Maxine enters him into an amateur singing contest without his knowledge. After his first performance, Jim Ed quickly becomes a local favorite. At an appearance, Jim Ed turns the tables and spontaneously calls Maxine to the stage,

where they harmonize in public for the first time. The crowd's warm reception to the unplanned duet leaves her reeling from the excitement. "Being on a stage and singing in front of a crowd was something I had only dreamed about since the hard old days of south Arkansas," Brown remembers (39). As the Browns pursue singing professionally, Maxine sublimates her own ambitions by channeling them through her brother. Though she writes the Browns' first hit, "Looking Back to See," Maxine takes little overt credit for the effort, by claiming, "I did want J.E. to have a song all his own" (42). For Brown to enter into the male-dominated world of country songwriting—or even to revive the memory a half-century later—she must disavow her (quite evident) personal ambition and employ an evasive type of discourse marked by understatement and deference to the patriarchy in the form of her implicitly more worthy brother.

This delicate balancing act between gendered expectations of humility and internalized pride suggests why the ambivalence toward fame and mass success is a constant undercurrent in female country performers' autobiographies. According to Pamela Fox, female country performers are locked into a "double bind" in their role as authors, having to represent themselves as natural, rural, and authentic (three qualities which, Fox maintains, are constructions built up by the male-dominated country-music industry), while also maintaining their privileged stature as stars and/or artists (*Natural* 15). To maintain this complex, constructed image, country-music fan magazines from the 1950s to the 1970s regularly featured articles presenting female stars in an unpretentious, domestic setting. Performers'

professional achievements were largely set aside to emphasize their traditional private-sphere roles, such as wife, mother, and homemaker. At the height of her early-1960s reign as “Queen of Country Music,” for example, Kitty Wells was idealized by fan magazines as “a mother first, singer second,” and “a lovely picture of fine American womanhood,” who, despite her regal status in her chosen profession, “prefers a living-room sofa to a ‘throne’” (quoted in Fox, *Natural* 96–97). The fan magazines’ rhetoric seemed designed to reassure the public that female country-music stars would not abandon their domestic roles for stardom, by extension reinforcing the conservative values at the heart of the music.

LORETTA LYNN – *COAL MINER’S DAUGHTER*

Perhaps no performer has demonstrated this linkage with fans more than Loretta Lynn. Her autobiography, *Coal Miner’s Daughter*, co-written with journalist George Vecsey, remains a touchstone for country-music memoirs, and was an unexpected yet massive commercial success that became one of the top-ten nonfiction bestsellers of 1976 and the basis of an award-winning 1980 film. Often portrayed as a country-music adaptation of the standard show-business autobiography or a conventional rags-to-riches tale, *Coal Miner’s Daughter* deserves a close re-reading for the way in which it affirms the authenticity of its subject and engages in a spirited dialogue with its readers by utilizing elements of the accidental-career trope without fully succumbing to its clichés.

It is telling, and not a little disconcerting, that much of *Coal Miner's Daughter's* prefatory material concentrates on its subject's lack of formal education and inexperience as a prose writer. By her own admission, she simultaneously feels the adoration of millions of fans who identify with the lyrics she has drawn from her own life and abasement about the inherent exposure in putting those experiences between the covers of a book and opening them up to scrutiny. Despite being a celebrity in a mass-media age, Lynn feels the same exposure and doubt Peggy Prenshaw identifies in earlier female life writers, where "[t]he act of expressing herself in public in writing, of intruding the female self upon the male-dominated turf, meant risking her standing in her family and acceptance by her neighbors, her church, by the whole wide world, as far as she can tell" (444).

Significantly, Lynn was virtually compelled to write her memoirs in part to counter, rather than publicize or celebrate, her first flush of mainstream notoriety. In 1973, to mark their first in-depth study of modern-day country music and its mass popularity, *Newsweek* put Lynn on its cover. The accompanying article surveyed the stars in the field—like Johnny Cash, Charley Pride and Dolly Parton—but culminated with the story of Lynn's rise to fame. This publicity, which mainstream performers would have been grateful to receive, sparked something of a backlash in the country-music community, and alienated some of her most loyal fans, who feared she would forsake them for the more lucrative (and fickle) pop marketplace. Additionally, the 1976 Robert Altman film *Nashville* stirred controversy in country-music circles, in part for its portrayal of a troubled country singer who closely resembled Lynn. To

reassure older fans and to acclimate new ones, *Coal Miner's Daughter* painstakingly retraces the steps of her career, authenticating her allegiance to country music, emphasizing her distance from the pop-music field, and narrating such common tropes of a musician's life story as the first instrument and the first public performance. At the same time, Lynn represents her advancement as, at best, a collaboration, but also, at several points in her recounting, a series of involuntary acts far afield of her modest abilities and expectations.

Though never explicitly addressed in the book or its film adaptation, Lynn gained her first degree of confidence through her music, as well as her first hint that she could have an identity beyond her circumscribed roles as wife and mother. Married at fourteen, mother of four by the age of eighteen, Lynn sublimated her own wishes as a young woman, following her hard-drinking husband Doolittle Lynn from her family home in Butcher Holler, Kentucky, to Tacoma, Washington. Though a faithful listener to the *Grand Ole Opry* radio program, Lynn made no connection between her own love of singing and music as a profession; "It was another world to me," she claimed (Lynn with Vecsey 14). In the chapter of *Coal Miner's Daughter* titled "Beginner's Luck," Doolittle buys Loretta a Sears and Roebuck guitar for her eighteenth birthday. Lynn teaches herself to play and makes up songs each night after putting her children to bed. Writing her story years later, she admits that she played music to fend off feelings of loneliness and homesickness. Lynn's self-taught after-hours music-making presents an interesting spin on the time-honored trope of woodshedding, where a young (usually male) musician attains artistic mastery after a

prolonged period of practice, exile, and cunning. While male musicians regularly represent their months or years of practice as a prelude to a spectacular public career, Lynn takes advantage of the chance occurrence of receiving a guitar as a gift by teaching herself music in private, outside of public space or time, with no expectation of reward other than private solace.

In subsequent chapters, Lynn and her co-writer follow the unspoken convention of country-music autobiographies and sublimate the full story of her self-guided musical training. Now writing from the vantage point of a star, Lynn chooses to represent herself to fans as humble and approachable by omitting most of the details of her musicality and determination to succeed, portraying her musical talent instead as a natural “gift.” While musicians’ memoirs typically paint a first performance as an act of will and/or guile that serves as both a rite of passage and a prelude to a career, Lynn recalls her first encounter with an audience as an involuntary one, traced to the intercession of her husband. One night, Doolittle brags to his drinking buddies about Loretta’s singing skills. To silence his doubters, he brings her to a local bar the following night, even going so far as to verbally abuse her when she tries to back down. At this crucial moment, Loretta must simultaneously master the act of performing in public and defend her husband’s ego and pride. Though clumsy and unschooled in stage mannerisms, Loretta’s “natural” style and voice wins everyone over. But her performance, as represented in her memoirs, is more about a husband putting his wife up on display than Loretta Lynn “finding her voice” and singing. Significantly, she and her co-writer narrate this crucial first step

in her career as a series of happy accidents. Her success is portrayed as the unlikely product of her husband's alternate spells of kindness (buying Loretta the mail-order guitar) and belligerence (his drinking and outspokenness), depicting Loretta's move onto the public stage as an extension of her role as Doolittle Lynn's wife, rather than as a progression beyond the domestic sphere.

Lynn's recitation of her early career, in which she appears as an incidental party to her own success, runs parallel to aspects of a state of mind pop psychologists have termed the "impostor phenomenon." Under this thought pattern, individuals, often highly motivated and accomplished, doubt their worthiness in the face of success or acclaim, and fear public exposure as a fraud (Harvey with Katz 2). To discount their own agency or explain away their own success, many "impostors" cite luck as a primary, rather than contributing, cause of events (Harvey with Katz 16). Many common triggers for this phenomenon mirror the anxiety-laden events expressed by female musicians in their autobiographies: upward social mobility, an unanticipated level of success, the stress of maintaining a respectable public image, a long separation from one's family, and the perception of being seen as a "token" (Harvey with Katz 87–93, 192). It is significant, then, how pervasive Lynn's husband Doolittle appears in the book, for it is his rather pushy insistence on her talent that authenticates her worthiness and compensates for her lack of outward ambition. Her success, then, seems predicated on the maintaining of separate spheres, as the husband engages in the type of public involvement that Loretta instinctively shies away from, at least initially.

Likewise, in the film adaptation of *Coal Miner's Daughter*, we see Sissy Spacek as Lynn demonstrate her burgeoning talent tentatively in the private sphere, trying out her early songs on her children. A rendition of her first record “Honky Tonk Girl” subtly reminds the viewer that, despite her family obligations, Lynn at this stage is barely an adult. The script collapses Lynn’s series of good fortune into a montage, blithely representing her career as a series of uncalculated “breaks,” rather than the result of Lynn’s unique talent: in short order, she wins a local amateur contest, makes a local TV appearance in Tacoma, then renders a professional recording of “Honky Tonk Girl” good enough to (fortuitously) catch the ear of influential record men. Doolittle and Loretta are savvy enough to promote her first record in person to radio stations in the region but allegedly ignorant of national sales charts. By the time they finally “learn the ropes,” Lynn’s career has already been established.

While this encapsulation of events makes good narrative sense, it glosses over a few important facets of Lynn’s early career she emphasizes in her book. For reasons probably related to her “outsider” status, her transition from a provincial amateur to a polished Nashville performer was guided by the Wilburn Brothers, an established country act who took her on tour and brought her to the attention of Decca Records. Beyond this professional assistance, the brothers attempted a Pygmalion-like transformation of Lynn, sometimes in cooperation with Doolittle, sometimes over his objections. In addition to training their young charge in professional stage performance, the Wilburns insisted that Lynn wear makeup, store-bought clothes, and

high-heeled shoes for the first time. The irony speaks for itself, as it takes a patriarchal system (made up of both her husband and industry insiders) to teach her how to “be a woman” in country music.

This imposition of readymade country signifiers imitates the larger Nashville system of star-making, succinctly characterized by country-music historian Richard Peterson as “fabricating authenticity,” where aspiring stars are groomed in the accepted practices of the industry, and publicized in a way that exaggerates their originality (within the limits of the genre), lack of pretension, and credibility (206–211). The Wilburns’ attempt to dress Lynn in the “uniform” of a female country-music star is a textbook attempt at credibility, as it conforms to a mass audience’s notions of presentation; only in retrospect does the transformation seem contrived or foolish. As Lynn incrementally takes control over her own career—a process reified by the publication of her book—she shifts her presentation toward the type of authenticity that emphasizes the non-imitative aspects of her music and persona and targets a smaller, more personally invested audience. Peterson defines this type of authenticity as being perceived as “true, consistent, sincere or real as opposed to the imitative, artifactual, contrived, or phony” (209). Through active reading and listening, Lynn’s core audience interprets the more idiosyncratic, unpolished elements of her performance style as evidence of truth, consistency, and sincerity, while Lynn in turn honors her fans for their devotion. “That’s why I appreciate my fans,” she writes. “They accept me for being myself” (158). Thus, Lynn’s status of “First Lady of Country Music” reads as both an honorary title and an affirmation that she has

remained true to herself and has no peers in an increasingly homogenized industry. The reciprocal relationship Lynn and her most devoted fans share illustrates that for all the work Nashville does in manipulating raw talent into a fixed idea of the genuine item, perceptive, attuned fans remain the ultimate judges of authenticity.

Of course, such an expectation of truth and sincerity is universal, and applies equally well to listeners of country music and readers of autobiography, but it bolsters T.S. Eliot's observation in his eulogy of English music-hall singer Marie Lloyd that the "embodiment of virtues" often binds together a performer and audience as much as the performance itself. Eliot praises Lloyd as much for her social function as her individual talent. Pinpointing what he calls Lloyd's "vitality" and "moral superiority," Eliot notes "it was her understanding of the people and her sympathy with them, and the people's recognition of the fact that she embodied the virtues which they genuinely most respected in private life, that raised her to the position she occupied at her death" (173). In characteristically apocalyptic terms, Eliot worriedly predicts that the working-class audiences who idolized the music-hall singer will lose their chance to connect emotionally with popular culture following "the decay of the music-hall," as its dynamic of artist-fan "collaboration" will soon be subsumed by moving pictures and recorded music (174).

What Eliot did not tell the reader was the full extent of the audience's connection to Lloyd. At the height of Lloyd's popularity, there was wide public knowledge of Lloyd's private, domestic life, including the upbringing of her daughters and her relationship with a disruptive, significantly older husband, a

situation similar to Lynn's (Archer and Simmons 11). Ultimately, this type of "gossip" became Lloyd's best publicity and bonded her to an audience sympathetic to her personal struggles. Lloyd's success also relied on a class identification and connection with an audience that eschewed "high art" and its pretensions. The music and image of Marie Lloyd, like Lynn's, was too provincial in mainstream estimation to really cross over beyond her loyal working-class audience (157). Loretta Lynn reproduced this type of interpersonal sympathy within the spaces of contemporary popular culture: recordings, radio, the press, television, and ultimately film. Through songs like "Coal Miner's Daughter" or "You're Looking at Country," Lynn positioned herself as a spokesperson for her audience. Like Lloyd, her commercial success comprised only a small part of her ultimate significance; both the music-hall doyenne and the country-music star earned their fame by portraying the concerns, language, and humor of the working classes faithfully and sensitively.

The difficulty in balancing fame with empathy can be seen in the last scene of the film adaptation of *Coal Miner's Daughter*, in which Sissy Spacek as Lynn sings the title song in concert, at the height of her fame and newly energized after Doolittle has assumed full responsibilities as a husband and father. The music in "Coal Miner's Daughter" is secondary to the plain, unambiguous lyrics that celebrate her parents' goodness and sacrifice and the world she has left behind. But the song does not accurately portray the life story Loretta Lynn has previously revealed. The song both encapsulates and idealizes her life in Butcher Holler, Kentucky, without mention of her artistic awakenings, her turbulent marriage to Doolittle Lynn, or her connection

with her fans. The last line of the penultimate verse (and the last line we hear before the credits roll), “I never thought of leaving Butcher Holler,” is at once a gracious acknowledgement of her roots and a somewhat disingenuous rhetorical gambit that reintroduces the theme of her accidental-career beginnings. Such a stance may have been more a reflection of the boundaries the Nashville establishment had drawn for their stars than Lynn’s own outlook. Co-author George Vecsey recalls that Lynn was, in private, outspoken and candid about the issues of her day, especially feminism: “She didn’t have much enthusiasm for movements...but she was a raging feminist in her actions. She loved to hear about women getting better jobs and asserting themselves” (E-mail interview, 4 March 2007). The last verse of “Coal Miner’s Daughter” notwithstanding, Lynn clearly thought of the world beyond her small town and indeed did leave Butcher Holler for a life that, while far from easy, offered her many more choices and rewards and provided her with a previously unavailable sense of having options and free choice.

Lynn’s ultimate success led to some serious misreadings of her story as an exaggerated rags-to-riches tale. A 1991 review in *The Nation* patronizingly concluded that “Lynn, as the ‘Coal Miner’s Daughter,’ personifies one of country [music]’s favorite fantasies, in which sturdy families overcome grinding poverty through strength of spirit” (Santoro 457). In truth, the poverty suffered by Loretta Lynn as a child and a young woman was anything but an illusion or fantasy. While her recital of her professional accomplishments certainly has the markings of a fairy tale, only the most cynical could misread the book’s early chapters and interpret her

descriptions of poverty as an invention or narrative device. In his book *Hillbillyland*, J.W. Williamson remarks, with a touch of condescension, that such a portrayal of a Kentucky coal-mining town as an Edenic paradise flatters her working-class audience, while insuring that she “remains one of the good rural poor of Butcher Hollow” [*sic*] (248). The question is why does Lynn underrepresent her success on the one hand and co-write a lengthy autobiography that capitalizes on her fame on the other? Both her on-stage performances and her writing explicitly address her most devoted fans, who see Lynn as both a relatable person and a star, with little contradiction between the two. Her attempt at reclaiming her identity and control of her career by invoking Butcher Holler seems to be a way to gain equilibrium after two decades of fame, invoking the type of interpersonal “sympathy” and “vitality” T.S. Eliot recognized between Marie Lloyd and her fans. Yet both book and film prevaricate on the issue of how success has changed Loretta Lynn. Like her protestations that her songwriting is a mere “knack,” her self-portrayal as a simple coal miner’s daughter, reified through a co-written book and a Hollywood film, ultimately underestimates both her talent and the longevity of her career in the interest of maintaining an image co-created and closely guarded by her mainly working-class audience.

The ending of her book is even more ambiguous. Having enjoyed unprecedented success and acclaim as a female country performer, Lynn promises in her final chapter that there will be “more to come” (194). At once a valediction and a vow to continue her labors, such a statement harmonizes with the ambiguous endings

critic Christy Rishoi finds among a cross-section of first-person writing by women. “[W]omen’s coming-of-age narratives often refuse closure,” Rishoi asserts, “preferring instead an ambiguous textual ending that affirms the provisional nature of identity” (63). Referring less to the trappings of fame and more toward a sense of empowerment, the promise of “more to come” would seem to be the point where she breaks out of the circumscribed roles of stardom, where she emerges from the image of the “Coal Miner’s Daughter” or the “Honky Tonk Girl” (personae that, in keeping with Rishoi’s claim, are subject to revision and evolution) and claims a personal, self-determined identity. Though forty-four years of age at the time of the book’s publication, Lynn’s (admittedly co-written) statement of empowerment marks the creation of a more subjective self that has come of age by recognizing past personae as constrictive and shedding them accordingly. As the main author of her story, Lynn can take pride in a loyal fanbase, and an audience who identify with her through her songs. But most importantly she has agency, a choice in the way she sees and represents herself, offering readers a logical and satisfying conclusion to the story of her development. By detailing the struggles faced early in her career, Lynn gives the lie to *Nashville* director Robert Altman’s glib summation of country-music stardom: “You get off the bus carrying a guitar, and, with luck, in two years you have a guitar-shaped swimming pool” (Pecknold 228). Indeed, one of the pitfalls of the accidental-career trope is its openness to misreading; a celebrity’s story of “instant” fame and abundant luck may be intended as a statement of humility but can easily be

interpreted as hubris, an insinuation that the subject has not paid his or her dues professionally.

Loretta Lynn does credit luck with a role in her relatively quick rise to fame, and she is not shy about discussing her material rewards—her luxurious homes, her well-appointed tour bus, her elaborate stage costumes—throughout her autobiography. But most importantly, Lynn and her co-author represent how careers in country music are sustained not through successive episodes of “dumb luck” but rather a mediated yet attuned relationship with fans who respond to a successfully constructed image of authenticity with a demonstrable sense of loyalty. Such a connection reflects a shared habitus where Lynn and many of her fans share customs of rules, rituals, and invented traditions that embody what is proper in social production. Therefore, as a symbol of centripetal values in a musical genre that respects aesthetic and social conservatism, Lynn’s recounting of her own social production must implicitly stay within the boundaries of her audience’s expectations.

TAKING CONTROL

As important as the accidental-career narrative is in understanding female musician autobiographies, it is also crucial to recognize those who have rejected the trope by delineating their agency in attaining musicianship. For example, Dolly Parton represents her first performance in her memoirs as anything but an accident. Having made up songs and picked up the guitar as a child on her own volition, Parton is bold enough to ask for a job singing on a local radio show. Though Parton fights

feelings of nervousness, her intentions are bold and clear. “My insecurity,” she writes, “came face to face with my ambition” (100). Parton does not need to be tricked or coerced into a debut performance, nor is she shy in her account about invoking the word “ambition.” The confidence she gains from the crowd emboldens her; in turn, Parton writes “at that very moment I fell in love with the public” (101). Her inner confidence and knack for connecting with an audience point the way to her future career. In her recounting of subsequent career plateaus, such as her first Grand Ole Opry performance, she invokes the same type of self-determination, clearly delineating between the expanded opportunities the country-music industry offers her and free-floating, nonspecific luck.

Likewise, in the autobiography of the Mexican-American singer, songwriter, and musician Lydia Mendoza, the pursuit of a musical career is portrayed as a lengthy, unquestionably intentional process. Born in Houston, Texas in 1916, Mendoza traces her family’s musical tradition through the matriarchal line, with both her mother and maternal grandmother playing guitar. At the age of four, Mendoza begins to “feel the impulse of the music” when hearing her mother play (11). Her attraction to the guitar only increases when her mother places the guitar on the wall, out of Lydia’s reach. Of course, from that point the instrument assumes iconic status, and the details of Mendoza’s subsequent pursuit of music takes familiar shape. She fashions a guitar from wood, nails, and rubber bands, before receiving a real guitar at age seven. Her early musical training incorporates the local with the transnational, the traditional with the commercial: her grandmother gives her informal lessons,

while her father, who has no apparent musical inclinations himself, offers encouragement. Lydia absorbs a range of styles from local bands and records (Italian tenor Enrico Caruso being a strong if unlikely early influence) and eagerly collects gum wrappers imprinted with the lyrics of popular songs (22–23).

After years of nomadic life, the Mendozas move permanently to Texas in 1927, when Lydia is 11. Soon after, her father falls ill, and the family's fortunes decline. To make money, Lydia and her siblings form a band, playing restaurants, barber shops, and street corners, as well as private homes. Nearly overnight, music transforms from Mendoza's hobby to a matter of survival. In a borrowed car with flat tires, they troupe to San Antonio to audition for Okeh Records when the label advertises for Hispanic musicians. Okeh pays the family \$400 for twenty sides, but their professional momentum is stalled when Mendoza's father abruptly moves the family to Michigan to seek work as migrants in the beet fields. Up north, the Mendozas live in an abandoned boxcar, performing only occasionally and then usually after a long day's work in the beet fields. They return to Texas in 1930 after their father is laid off after a brief stint at a Ford plant; to pay for the journey home, the Mendoza children must stage impromptu concerts along the route.

Lydia starts playing as a solo performer at the age of fifteen, sometimes earning as little as twenty-five cents for a performance. Significantly, many of the spaces where she performs, such as downtown plazas, were previously closed to female musicians (59). Relocating with her family in San Antonio, Mendoza starts to move from under her father's control, teaching herself guitar in secret. In 1932, her

“break” comes when she gains the attention of disk jockey Manuel Cortez. Lydia sings on radio for \$3.50 a week, enough to pay her family’s rent. As her fanbase grows, she transitions from tent shows to theaters, making five dollars a day, supplementing her earnings with talent-contest winnings and money earned from playing for wealthy people’s parties in San Antonio (83). After a series of successful solo recordings in the 1930s, Mendoza is advertised as the voice of the common people, in much the same way Marie Lloyd was publicized to music-hall audiences or Loretta Lynn would be marketed in the 1960s and 1970s (135). Her early records and professional persona as “La Cancionera de los Pobres” (“The Songstress of the Poor”) bring her out of semi-retirement twice, in the 1940s and the 1970s.

In surveying her career in the 1980s, Mendoza credits luck and personal sacrifice in equal measure. Arguably, she need not be so modest. Read expansively, the “big break” ascribed to Manuel Cortez was really no break at all. Mendoza made her professional name through years of performing in less than ideal conditions and by satisfying the demands of an audience that, by necessity, had to be discriminating about how much money they spent on entertainment. Thus, the connection, musical and beyond, that Mendoza forged with that audience was no accident. Appropriately, Mendoza represents her career in a more “masculinist” discursive mode, explaining how she prepared herself for the inevitable obstacles through intensive practice, an improvisational outlook, and an unwavering work ethic. Such a self-reliant stance, harmonized with her ballads of struggle and perseverance, resonates with an audience that spans generations and national borders.

The autobiography of Ruth Brown, 1996's *Miss Rhythm*, also depicts a well-deserved comeback, recounted in a manner that breaks completely with the accidental-career trope. Brown and her co-author Andrew Yule represent her pre-professional days as an alternating current of good and bad luck: singing in church with her father from the age of six, Ruth becomes entranced with a range of sacred and secular music, but especially a collection of Billie Holiday 78s smuggled into the house by an uncle. Working as a server in a Portsmouth, Virginia USO, she wins over the black servicemen with her voice; by chance, a group of airmen buy Ruth a ticket to New York to compete—and win—a contest at the Apollo Theatre's amateur night.

Unable to subsist in the city and defend her title on her \$15 prize money, she returns home to her disapproving father. On her second bid for recognition, she is hired and fired by bandleader Lucky Millinder on the same night, and stranded penniless in Washington, D.C. Fortunately, Brown runs into a friend who refers her to her future manager Blanche Calloway (the sister of Cab Calloway), who finds her a boarding house and arranges a showcase for her singing at the Crystal Caverns club. Within days, Brown's talent attracts the likes of Duke Ellington and disk jockey Willis Conover, who puts in a call to Ahmet Ertegun at Atlantic Records, who signs her at first hearing (55).

Such a fortunate sequence of events may seem trite when read out of context, but they also match the “deification of accident” concept; Brown instinctually recognizes the importance of convergence and contact and employs creative

improvisation as a response to life challenges (see Dyson 77). The “bad luck” the young woman faces in the city catalyzes into a voice of experience, confidence, and humor. Like Lynn, Parton, and Mendoza, the young Ruth Brown endears herself to her fanbase by ignoring the labyrinthine workings of the music industry and “just singing”: by forging her own style of rhythm-and-blues vocalizing, performing as brilliantly at a small navy officers’ club as she does for Duke Ellington, and letting the demands and responsibilities of her career fall where they may. By her own admission, her success in the studio comes just as effortlessly. She must be coaxed into recording what becomes her signature song, 1953’s “Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean,” and only embraces the tune after it sells a million copies (148). Such offhanded success (similar to the nonchalance Charley Pride claimed to have harbored at the start of his own unlikely career) conveniently defers any suggestion that she harbored any “crossover” pop ambition. Brown frequently makes mention of the unpredictable taste of the pop marketplace, unsure how to identify it, much less pander to it. Her string of hits at the fledgling Atlantic label leads those in the industry to term Atlantic “The House that Ruth Built.”

Given this success and the patriarchal attitude of the recording industry, it may be understandable why she overlooked the finer points of her contract. While it did not escape her attention that white pop singers like Patti Page scored hits with pale imitations of her songs (while Brown made a maximum of \$350 per side), Brown accepted the injustice as a matter of course, believing in the beneficence of her label until they unceremoniously dropped her in 1960. After recording sporadically

in the 1960s and 1970s, taking a myriad of jobs outside of music and suffering domestic abuse, Brown initiated not only a musical comeback in the early 1980s, but also a remarkable reclamation of her legacy. Aided by an attorney named Howell Begle, Brown began to probe into Atlantic's bookkeeping, seeking to find why the company went years without paying her royalties based on the continuing sale of her records. Upon suing the label for racketeering, the two discovered that Atlantic systematically underreported sales when calculating Brown's payments yet inflated sales numbers in self-promotional trade advertisements. In a process Brown pointedly but justifiably termed "plantation accounting," expenses connected to Brown (such as remastering her songs for compact-disc reissue) were charged against her account, while the continued sales of her old records went unreported, leaving her perpetually in debt and, like the Deep South sharecropper, unable to inspect the company's ledgers. Publicly calling out Atlantic (by now a corporate-rock label and multi-million-dollar subsidiary of the Time-Warner media empire) and shaming them for their fiduciary failures toward their original roster of African-American artists, Brown earned both a personal financial settlement and a promise to establish a Rhythm and Blues Foundation to aid artists in similar straits. "The idea of money was important," Brown writes, "but this had long since gone beyond that. The struggle now was for nothing less than getting my dignity back" (218).

While Brown's autobiography shares with *Coal Miner's Daughter* and *Lydia Mendoza: A Family Autobiography* the theme of maintaining dignity, it stands out in the way that it ultimately rejects the accidental-career narrative. In her determined

efforts to get the money and respect owed to her and to write herself back into rhythm-and-blues history, Brown embodies the “blues detective” archetype as outlined by Albert Murray and Houston A. Baker. Describing the blues detective’s function in *The Hero and the Blues*, Murray explains: “[T]he detective-story hero is in quest not of the Holy Grail and salvation, but of evidence concerning the source or sources of ‘evil.’ Indeed, for all the fisticuffs and shoot-em-ups so frequently involved, the detective-story hero’s quest may perhaps be more appropriately described as a research mission” (100). Uncovering the backroom dealings and machinations that occurred when her career appeared to be a series of unintentional successes deepens Brown’s understanding of music’s corporate structure; by equating the economics of pop music with sharecropping, she detects a connection to past injustices as well. While Brown’s story may be lacking in “fisticuffs and shoot-em-ups,” her investigation into misapplied royalties is still a troubling one. Furthermore, Brown interrogates the entertainment industry’s way of doing business during Jim Crow. In the 1950s, Brown recalls, “what hurt me was the fact that I had originated the song, and I never got the opportunities to be in the top television shows and the talk shows. I didn’t get the exposure. And other people were copying the style, the whole idea” (Ward 48). The “crime” of white performers copying Brown’s repertoire and performance style without giving proper credit is evident; from that point on, as a “blues detective” she must root out the causes of such indignities which are embedded in the system, ultimately taking on a powerful media conglomerate.

To fulfill this “research mission,” Brown must draw on a type of double consciousness, narrating her tale as both a celebrated rhythm and blues “diva” and, as an African American woman, one who has been systematically exploited by and excluded from the business side of the industry. Like Murray’s blues detective, Brown must take comfort in her small moral victory and leave the rest for others, as Murray explains:

When the contemporary detective achieves his [or her] stated objective, he has done only that, as it were. It is not assumed that his [or her] successful action has rid the environment of any such all-powerful dragons or curses ...[The blues detective] has exposed one or maybe several sources of social misfortune. But there is always another and another no less urgent assignment awaiting his return to the office” (*Hero* 101).

Brown’s latter-day commercial comeback is well deserved, but the real satisfaction comes when she earns the chance to retrace the steps of her storied career: rectifying her dispute with Atlantic, performing her songs exactly as she wants to perform them, enjoying the full fruits of her labor, and getting back her good name. The connotation of “masters” (original, master recordings) for an African American musician is a powerful one; after centuries of musical appropriation, usually portrayed as harmless “borrowing,” the ownership of master tapes gives the musician agency and the final say on who makes use of his or her own music. Likewise, to tell the story of their career in their own words and “own” that story gives musicians the power that comes

with agency. Simply stated, Brown earns a measure of freedom when the law affirms her partial ownership of her work. Through her memoirs, the reader accompanies Brown as she retraces the economic side of her history, tallying up the credits and debits that determine the ownership of her name, her legacy, and her overall independence.

CONCLUSION

While the typical account of early musicianship reads as a mock-heroic tale of endless practice leading to a series of triumphant performances, a significant number of works, predominately written or co-written by women, expresses the rise to prominence as a series of fortunate accidents. In both cases, musicians carefully craft the emplotment of their earliest exposure to music and the transition into mastery. In the trope of the accidental career, musicians, many of whom have achieved remarkable success in the public arena, utilize the cultural capital inherent in an autobiography to deny intentionally chasing fame or having any overt designs on success. By detailing the musical “accidents” that ignited a career, rather than simply taking due credit for forging an individual style, performers writing for a wide audience often choose to retrospectively finesse their supposed “transgression” of race, class, and gender norms in the South and disavow any bitterness against systematic injustice both in and out of the recording industry.

Adherence to this stance can result in unusual narrative contours. African American country singer Charley Pride omits any in-depth discussion of his early

musical training and ambition in his career retrospective. By representing his crossing of the country-music color line as a fluke, he implicitly disavows any dissatisfaction with the homogenizing, star-making machine of Nashville and the genre's history of subsuming performers of color. Explicitly, Pride limits his agency by telling readers he has no interest in changing his "natural" style or further integrating the ranks of country musicians. In Loretta Lynn's autobiography *Coal Miner's Daughter*, the subject-author "underwrites" much of her phenomenal commercial success. In the chapters detailing her unlikely move toward musical professionalism, she intentionally masks her talent, knowledge, and agency, in order to credit her domineering (though naïve) husband with her early successes. As compensation, an affective link to her fans emboldens her to take more control of her self-presentation. Lydia Mendoza and Dolly Parton also credit their respective fanbases for their rise from poverty. More significantly, they reject the accidental-career narrative, rightfully crediting their own ambitions and cultivated musical talents for their popularity.

Ruth Brown narrates her career as a period of seemingly effortless notoriety followed by a protracted battle with the recording industry. Realizing that a career in the blues is not as easy as it once seemed, Brown develops a new persona midway through her career by crusading for other underpaid African American musicians. The sense of pride and accomplishment once-marginalized musicians like Ruth Brown convey in regaining control of their work is unmistakably enriched by its symbolism, as their music —the expression of their bodies, their souls, and their

voices —rightfully becomes their own legal property, available for their own purposes and benefits. Such an endeavor underscores that a true career in music entails more than a trail of good fortune or some contrived *American Idol*-like “discovery.” Rather, a life’s work in music requires an extraordinary marshalling of resources: the courage to sing from experience, the talent to connect with an audience, and the audacity to author your own story.

EPILOGUE

FENCE-BREAKING BLUES

“Jim Crow is dead! Long live B.B. King!”

– Back-jacket copy to Charles Sawyer’s *The Arrival of B.B. King* (1980)

In his 1958 essay “The Charlie Christian Story,” Ralph Ellison criticized jazz writers who professed willful ignorance of musicians’ roots and pre-professional development:

The jazz artist who becomes nationally known is written about as though he came into existence only upon his arrival in New York. His career in the big cities, where jazz is more of a commercial entertainment than part of a total way of life, is stressed at the expense of his life in the South, the Southwest, and the Midwest, where most Negro musicians found their early development. Thus we are left with an impression of mysterious rootlessness, and the true and often annoying complexity of American cultural experience is oversimplified. (*Collected* 270)

Ellison’s observations contain two premises applicable to southern musicians who came of age in the Jim Crow era: first, that music is a totalizing, lifelong pursuit, offering a privileged few an avenue out of regional provincialism and cultural stasis; second, that the particulars of musicians’ “roots” and beginnings often go unexamined, with inter- and intraregional distinctions glossed over by historians and

critics. In the time of Ellison's writing, this misleading sense of "rootlessness" is due to the mass public's embrace of the melting-pot myth and a centripetal narrative of slow-but-steady progress toward equality, with Jim Crow represented as a regional anomaly at best. Countering such cultural amnesia, southern musicians' autobiographies have historically "claimed" a richer sense of place and time through narrative. While music-industry publicists, record companies, and fans may celebrate the public life, descriptions of musicians' shaping influences bespeak an ownership of the earlier, more private life. This effort toward memorialization and revival reinforces Ellen Douglas's observations in *Witnessing* on the author's duty to counteract the "forgetting" of history, willful or otherwise (21–22).

The volume and immense reach of musicians' autobiographies compound this responsibility. Writing in *PMLA* in 2007, critic Nancy K. Miller predicts, quite plausibly, that "despite the beating the genre regularly takes from journalists and critics who seem to keep hoping that the age of memoir is over, autobiography may emerge as a master form in the twenty-first century" (545). By 2000, autobiographies by entertainers had become well established as the most widely published subcategory of life writing, overtaking works written by clergy (Bjorklund 176–179). Analyzing the increase in both prominence and quantity of celebrity autobiographies, Ben Yagoda concludes in his 2009 book *Memoir: A History*, "[t]hey were ...roughly through the mid-1960s, cut from the same cloth: meant to burnish what would later be called the 'brand,' these narratives were sanitized and inspirational, emphasizing the obstacles surmounted on the way to eminence, with amusing anecdotes liberally

sprinkled in. The uncomfortable and the unseemly were strenuously avoided” (182). This characterization holds little resemblance to the majority of autobiographies by southern musicians from the 1940s to the 1980s that portrayed segregated life in the region. W.C. Handy’s description of his minstrel troupe’s narrow escape from lynching, Louis Armstrong’s sly descriptions of slipping the yoke of Jim Crow in New Orleans, and Loretta Lynn’s intriguing recounting of her accidentally feminist career are all contained in works marketed as “celebrity autobiographies,” yet they serve as valuable primary-source accounts of a time and place undergoing fundamental social, political, and cultural transformations.

The extent of that transformation can be seen in two common scenes in southern musicians’ autobiographies, the trope of “the road” during the Jim Crow era and the bestowal of civic honors on a musician, recognizing his or her contributions to the nation’s cultural life. Constraints in the travels and accommodations of African American performers, unsurprisingly, go back to Reconstruction-era minstrel shows, as resourceful troupes relied on segregated lodgings when available or, in its stead, private homes in African American neighborhoods and, as a last resort, tents on the outskirts of town (Phinney 59). The larger the touring group, the more complications travel presented. In 1906, to enforce discipline within their company, and pre-empt any run-ins with quarrelsome whites, vaudevillians Bert Williams and George Walker warned members of their traveling cast to “conduct yourself [so] that your manner and mode of life will disarm all criticism and place you above reproach” (Forbes 137). Williams and Walker went so far as to levy fines on those who broke a set of

written rules about personal behavior and appearance, as Cab Calloway and James Brown would do within their respective bands decades later.

The measure of success for many touring minstrel companies was the ability to compartmentalize relations with the white audience. As one chronicle of the minstrel circuit summarizes, “Large, successful black minstrel troupes insulated themselves from the Jim Crow pitfalls of public conveyance and lodging by traveling in and living out of privately owned railroad cars which they arranged to have shuttled from town to town. The performers kept out of danger by avoiding unnecessary personal contact with whites” (Abbott and Seroff, *Out* 105). To keep southern tours profitable and safe, black minstrels began in the 1870s to hire personal train cars and keep private stocks of food; such a mode of travel built in its own defense mechanisms, mitigating against any white resistance they might encounter. According to historian Robert Toll, special compartments were constructed inside some cars to hide performers, in case a performance, or merely the presence of a troupe of mobile freedmen, would anger local whites (220). Personal traveling accommodations also served as insurance against the lack of adequate facilities; in the border states of the Upper South and Midwest, where travels by African Americans were not as strictly overseen as in the Deep South, the lodging accommodations that some performers found—like train depots and underpasses—were not really accommodations at all (Harrison 25).

It would be misleading, though, to assume generations of traveling African American musicians were hapless victims of Jim Crow, denied adequate food and

lodging day in and day out. Though the Theatre Owners Booking Association (TOBA), established in 1921, was notorious for booking African American performers on strenuous tours, they were successful in creating a network of private homes, boarding houses, and “friendly” restaurants willing to serve traveling performers until its closure in 1930 (B. Jackson 36). On occasion, African American performers found white southerners to be amenable co-conspirators against the system. On southern tours in the 1950s, gospel star Sister Rosetta Tharpe regularly employed white bus drivers in order to deflect police attention and obtain food for the traveling company (Wald, *Shout* 104).

A subversive sense of humor also bonded traveling groups of black musicians. Recalling a rare band tour down south, New York-based jazz pianist Willie “The Lion” Smith depicted the trip with a joke that did not mask the message:

We got down to the mountain town in the southwestern corner of Virginia late in the afternoon and took a bus to the hotel we had been told to go to by the agent. The way the cracker bus driver was acting made me suspicious of what might happen. That place was a hundred years behind the times. Hell, the name of the town—Lynchburg—was enough to scare the wits out of us. (199)

Histories of African American musicians in the South highlight the indignities of segregation, usually in sharp detail, but just as often recall the ingenious maneuvers taken to subvert the system. Bessie Smith pioneered the art of traveling in luxury in spite of Jim Crow, customizing a train car for her 1925 tour through the South. In

typically grand style, the car boasted seven staterooms, a kitchen, hot and cold running water, and enough space to accommodate her entire traveling company and the accoutrements of a large-scale tent show (Albertson 94). In this way, Smith began the trend of flamboyantly spurning segregated public transportation, fearlessly living better than the law or custom allowed.

Subsequently, African American big bands often upgraded to better forms of transportation even before they had a national profile. As far back as the 1920s, regional dance bands (also known as “territory” bands) from the South, such as Alphonso Trent’s Orchestra from Fort Smith, Arkansas, traveled from town to town in a row of long and immaculate touring cars, winning the admiration of patrons and fellow musicians on appearance alone (Wilkinson 33). Noble Sissle conducted his orchestra as “ambassadors of good will theory,” equating professionalism with stoicism in the face of Jim Crow (Chilton, *Sidney* 101). On his first tour through the South, New York-born Cab Calloway insisted on professionalism from his band, on stage and off, and ordered them to ignore racial slights, explicitly telling his musicians that a necessary part of their job as a touring band was to “elevate the black customer” (Dinerstein 248). To ensure a minimum of confrontations with Jim Crow, Calloway hired a private Pullman car for himself and his band (Calloway 140). Similarly, booking agent Irving Mills chartered two private Pullman cars for the Duke Ellington Orchestra for a 1934 tour through Texas and the Southeast, in addition to a seventy-foot-long baggage car to transport their equipment (Ellington 77, 85). Describing the caravan to journalist Nat Hentoff, Ellington recalls, “We parked them

in each station, and lived in them. We had our own water, food, electricity, and sanitary facilities. The natives would come by and say, 'What's that?' 'Well,' we'd say, 'that's the way the President travels.' We made our point" (Hentoff, *Jazz Is* 31). Such a regal mode of travel "automatically gained us respect from the natives and removed the threat and anticipation of trouble" (Ellington 86).

Other African American performers along the musical spectrum responded to the obstacles posed by Jim Crow with a similar ethic of self-reliance, adaptation, even triumphalism. Much of the subtext of Marian Anderson's subtle and brilliant memoirs, *My Lord, What a Mornin'* (1956), involves the slow but determined progress made by traveling African American performers, in parallel with the burgeoning civil rights movement. At the outset of her career as a concert soloist, Anderson relied on the same unofficial network of private accommodation in the South used for popular African American performers represented by the Theater Owners Booking Association (xiv). Anderson's public persona in the 1920s and 1930s contained traces of Washingtonian accommodation; in the face of Jim Crow, she paid special attention to her onstage wardrobe and demeanor when playing in the South, in keeping with her unofficial role as cultural ambassador (111). Illustrating her adaptation to Jim Crow living, Anderson's biographer Allan Keiler documents the array of personal equipment Anderson carried on tour in the 1930s and 1940s. Her customary twenty pieces of luggage contained not only her stage outfits, but also an ironing board, sewing machine, a hot plate, dishes, and a sleeping bag. Past experiences touring the South made Anderson resolutely self-sufficient, and she

prepared accordingly, packing both professional and personal necessities with almost military precision and care (232). While lodging in hotels that also served whites, Anderson avoided even the appearance of confrontation, eating meals in her room (by her own choice, so she claimed) so as to steer clear of white patrons.⁶⁸

This offstage reticence paid dividends in her public life. By the 1950s, Anderson sang for mainly white audiences, her drawing power allowing her to insist on performing in upscale, desegregated concert halls (249). In *My Lord, What a Mornin'*, Anderson and her co-author depict the South as a distinct entity, slouching toward progress. The customs of racial separation touched every aspect of an Anderson performance, from the logistics of travel to the seating of the audience, as the performer herself never escaped the watchful eye of Jim Crow. (As a compromise to her segregated audiences, Anderson occasionally encored with “Carry Me Back to Ole Virginny.”) Ultimately, the power of music to relax social strictures and Anderson’s own selfless “ambassador” work led increasing numbers of white southerners to accede to Anderson’s insistence on equal accommodations and pay to see her perform in concert halls once designated as whites only.

Such a victory, however, was far from absolute. The trope of touring through the Jim Crow-dominated South illustrates a cruel irony of fame. African American

⁶⁸ The habit of African American performers cooking their own food on the road as a means of defensive self-sufficiency died hard. In the 1973 documentary *Let the Good Times Roll*, Bo Diddley is seen discussing his experiences with Jim Crow while making dinner in his backstage dressing room, just before headlining a large coliseum show. A decade later, journalist Gerri Hirshey recorded the tableau of Smokey Robinson—rhythm and blues idol, songwriting legend, and millionaire—frying eggs in an electric skillet in his luxury hotel suite in Manhattan (130).

musicians and singers who earned success in the post-migration North were compelled by managers and booking agents to extend their tours to the South. There, a star was typically treated like a second-class citizen, often subjected to the same set of customs their ancestors sought to leave behind. Black musicians were united in what Peter Guralnick has termed a “brotherhood of disaccommodation,” where travelers, touring musicians, and professional athletes often crossed paths on the circuit, but their responses to Jim Crow were hardly monolithic (*Dream* 80).

Personal ideology plays a large part in what memories of segregation are related in post-civil-rights autobiographies. At times, even members of the same traveling party have vastly different impressions of the conflicts they encountered in the segregated South. According to Lionel Hampton’s memoirs, the bandleader leveraged his national popularity to make small inroads in the region. On advice from NAACP President Walter White, Hampton took his integrated band, complete with a white female vocalist, on a southern tour in 1951, a period when Hampton claimed other African-American-led bands were avoiding the region altogether. With an itinerary full of whites-only colleges and universities, Hampton and his band performed a series of dances and concerts without incident. Emboldened by this popularity and by White’s encouragement, Hampton claimed to have cut the ropes set up to divide blacks and whites in segregated dance halls, with no repercussions (98). However, in his own book, Afrocentric pianist and composer Horace Tapscott recalls a less conciliatory incident from his early-1960s stint in Hampton’s band, where he and other young bandmates stormed an Alabama lunch counter, demanding (and

receiving) proper service (76). The mental strain of playing segregated southern shows led Tapscott to leave the band in 1961. Hampton, widely known as a social conservative and Republican Party supporter, made no reference to any such impromptu protests by his bandmembers against segregated facilities in his own book.

Performers of color not subject to Jim Crow still met obstacles on the road, yet improvised and adapted accordingly. In her tours along the Texas-Mexico border, Lydia Mendoza and her family waged a low-level war against racial prejudice similar to African American musicians' avowed private resistance to Jim Crow. Despite their popularity on radio and records, the Mendozas faced countless obstacles during personal appearances in the late 1930s. Barred from theatres and other venues owned by Anglos, the Mendozas were forced to blaze their own tour circuit, mainly playing in church halls, often sleeping and eating at the same church halls or along roadsides to avoid discrimination (Mendoza 132). On the Mendoza's travels, anti-Hispanic racism became almost a self-fulfilling prophecy; denigrated by whites as "gypsies," the Mendozas, though a highly successful and gifted family of performers, were forced to become drifters seeking shelter and sustenance when hotels and restaurants refused their money.

Returning to the road in 1947 after a decade-long hiatus, the Mendozas continued to adapt to the Southwest's hostile environment. The family worked a circuit of tent "theatres" around cotton towns in Texas, allowing them to both bypass the established network of Anglo theatres and follow the migrant population who

venerated Lydia Mendoza, “The Songstress of the Poor,” as their public voice. Still facing discrimination on the road, the family kept to themselves during the day, cooking their own food, and staying in out-of-the-way motor courts (271). In exchange for this social invisibility, the Mendozas took greater control over their finances, insisting on being paid (in cash) based on gate receipts, rather than a fixed fee. As recorded in her autobiography, Mendoza emphasized the long-term rewards of such sacrifices. By withstanding the same racism as her core audience and emerging as a successful, unique popular artist, Mendoza came to share an empathy with her listeners that went beyond music. That connection became formalized through a series of civic honors Mendoza received later in life, symbolizing her belated acceptance by the dominant culture, culminating in the awarding of the National Medal of the Arts (Broyles-González xi–xiii).

Southern cities and states’ bestowal of civic awards and honors on popular musicians who withstood decades of segregation encapsulates the region’s progress from Jim Crow, serving also as a continuation of the late-career tributes offered to once-marginalized performers like W.C. Handy and Louis Armstrong. Popular blues-based musicians gradually became officially recognized emblems of civic excellence, beginning with the 1931 dedication of W.C. Handy Square in Memphis. A statue of Louis Armstrong looks down on what was once Congo Square, a short distance away from New Orleans’s long-segregated Municipal Auditorium. Such statues and memorials mark their subjects’ passage into collective memory. Paradoxically, such static memorialization may also induce a forgetfulness of their subjects’ lives and

times, glossing over the era of segregation and second-class citizenship by leveling their subjects' experiences with other historical figures.

In a related trope, select musicians record in their memoirs their receipt of elaborate testimonials from local, state, and national governments in recognition both of their musical contributions and their civic virtue. Toward the end of his autobiography, Dizzy Gillespie returns home to South Carolina after years of worldwide touring (including concerts under the sponsorship of the U.S. State Department) to address legislators in the State House. Recognizing the effects of the civil rights movement, Gillespie praises the state, and the South as a whole, for their steps toward progress. In return, South Carolina embraces him as a native son. In the film version of *Brother Ray*, Ray Charles receives a proclamation from the state of Georgia and an official apology for his banishment from the state stemming from an incident when Charles refused to play before a segregated audience. Georgia state senator Julian Bond officiates a ceremony in the state chambers, urging fellow legislators to “welcome him back home” with a standing ovation. In this scene, Charles earns his full measure of citizenship and a degree of reparation for past wrongs.

Mainstream and official recognition can also be profitable, as demonstrated by B.B. King in *Blues All Around Me*. As a lifelong striver, in the tradition of W.C. Handy, King determinedly directed his music to new audiences and new markets, beginning with his appearances on Memphis radio in the 1940s. In his relentless touring, King moved from juke joints to the African American theater circuit to a

series of venues previously closed to blues musicians: rock halls in the 1960s and venues as diverse as Las Vegas lounges and concerts behind the Iron Curtain in the 1970s. By the 1980s, an ambitious manager licensed King's name and image to restaurants and numerous commercial items, while urging King to endorse everything from fast food to airlines in television commercials. King accepted such lucrative work in tandem with awards, like the Kennedy Center Honor and the Presidential Medal for Arts, that acknowledged his civic stature alongside his artistic accomplishments. In light of such recognition, King states simply, "I finally got what I wanted: worldwide acceptance" (286). King readily accepts his unofficial role as global ambassador of the blues and by extension vernacular American culture, though he expresses regret that his predecessors were not afforded the same honors. Therefore, his autobiography serves two important functions: first, it acts as an adjunct to the awards and testimonials he receives, filling in the gaps of his earlier, private life. Second, it commemorates those unrecognized predecessors and fixes King within their lineage.

These themes of travel, testimony, and commemoration underscore one of the more intriguing recent examples of southern musician autobiography, Wynton Marsalis and Carl Vigeland's *Jazz in the Bittersweet Blues of Life* (2001). In lieu of writing a traditional, linear book of memoirs, Marsalis and his collaborator depict a tour of Marsalis's group through the United States as a snapshot of the national culture and an opportunity for Marsalis to voice his conceptions of music, race, and citizenship. In alternating sections of the text, Marsalis comments on the "social

work” of jazz, while Vigeland records his own impressions of the musician-composer at work. Marsalis and Vigeland’s book exhibits a more open collaboration between musician and co-author than the traditional arrangement, with their occasional divergences of opinion represented on the surface, rather than the subtext, with their alternating chapters functioning as literary call and response. As such, the book suggests the possibility of new formulaic approaches for musicians’ life writing.

At points, *Jazz in the Bittersweet Blues of Life* resembles Albert Murray’s *South to a Very Old Place* (1971), an earlier travelogue and meditation on the evolving South. In that text, Murray employed the universities of the New South, once bastions of class and ethnic exclusion, as synecdoches for the region as it slowly progressed. Likewise, Marsalis and his band make tour stops through a modernized, post-civil-rights, Sun Belt South, playing a circuit of colleges and venerable downtown theatres. Significantly, they also perform in once-segregated train stations in Montgomery, Alabama, and Lexington, Virginia, which have been converted into performance spaces that reflect local prosperity and cultural sophistication (144, 163). The retrofitting of the train station, once a strictly segregated, forbidding space for African Americans, holds special symbolism. More than just a waystation, the train depot calls to mind W.C. Handy’s phantasmal first encounter with the blues, Louis Armstrong’s long-awaited journey north to join “Papa” Joe Oliver, Milt Hinton’s recollection of frustrated white Mississippians blocking the way of migrating African Americans, and countless white musicians who sought musical tutelage and personal transformation by “crossing the tracks” to areas populated by African Americans.

Conceptually, it brings to mind Ralph Ellison's bedeviling "Little Man at Chehaw Station," who challenges overconfident musicians to know the extent of their traditions and perform at their best in every situation, no matter how dire it appears on the surface. For Marsalis, the train station serves as a point of arrival, a site for citizens across the New South to gather to honor the legacy of jazz and acknowledge its role in fostering social change in the region.

Marsalis employs the intimacy of first-person life writing to individuate his own story from common assumptions on the life of a musician. More than a simple string of personal appearances, Marsalis interprets touring as a heroic journey: "On the road, something incredible can take place at any moment, something that can reaffirm or realign your conception of who you are and want to be in the world" (20). Passing by countless train stations and crossroads, Marsalis and his band travel not as past musicians had traveled—as "a multifarious assembly in transit," in Houston A. Baker's phrase—but as respected musicians, unofficial historians, and representatives of the social progress jazz signifies (7). Light years away from the era in which African American bands made defensive, military-style preparations for southern tours, Marsalis transverses through the region in a well-appointed tour bus as an honored citizen. He and his fellow musicians perform jazz as an officially sanctioned, exceptionally American form of music, warmly welcomed in institutions once off-limits to African Americans as they travel through former sites of lynchings and "sundown towns" (232–233). Music once banished to out-of-the-way roadhouses now finds a home in the luxurious space of the auditorium. However,

Marsalis's music rarely sentimentalizes the past; through epic-length compositions like *Blood on the Fields*, Marsalis consciously evokes slavery and post-Reconstruction abuses of African Americans, often in spaces superficially scrubbed free of any such reminders. As he tours the South in the year a new millennium begins, Marsalis presents jazz as a shared American source of wisdom, joy, and healing. Even when Marsalis confronts the lingering symbols of the old order, such as when he makes an appearance before the Georgia state legislature under the Confederate flag, white, right-wing lawmakers crowd around to shake his hand and have their picture taken with him. These may be gestures informed by a superficial "friendship orthodoxy," but nevertheless are indicative of a relaxation of social codes unimaginable a generation earlier, when the prevailing hegemony openly called for the permanence of segregation and "separate but equal" spheres, and viewed jazz as a disreputable form of entertainment.

However much the white South has turned away from Jim Crow, its evolution only partially explains why Marsalis and Vigeland's documentation of the region's positive changes holds such power. Marsalis is the latest iteration of the organic intellectual producing a counternarrative to received wisdom on American music creation and revising autobiographical discourse through narrative invention, following Ethel Waters, W.C. Handy, Sidney Bechet, and Louis Armstrong, among many others. Such autobiographical subject-authors serve a function akin to Gramscian organic intellectuals, emphasizing the process of music-making in the U.S. South, and detailing a shared sense of struggle among their cohort alongside

their own personal accomplishments. Much of this struggle was exerted against the system of legally mandated and societally enforced segregation. Even among seemingly apolitical musicians, having their music heard despite societal barriers represented progress. Largely independent of one another, musician-authors and their collaborators have conceived, organized, and published a counterhistory of southern music and its surrounding culture from the bottom up.

Of course, Marsalis's book does not represent an absolute endpoint for the southern musician's autobiography, yet it serves as a significant milemarker. The journey Marsalis records follows those taken by his ancestors, from W.C. Handy's quest for respectability to Louis Armstrong's pursuit of happiness. Marsalis is but one beneficiary of the decades-long efforts to report on and critique race relations and social inequality in the U.S. South within the autobiographical medium. Despite its superficial resemblance to a musician's tour diary, *Jazz in the Bittersweet Blues of Life* takes its place in a lineage of texts that confronts the complex social and cultural underpinnings of multiracial popular music in the United States and, in the process, creates a space for further dialogue. Nearly half a century after Louis Armstrong informed black America, with some embellishment, "Daddy, The Country Sure Has Changed," Marsalis assumes the authority of authorship to address the attitudes of the past, write his way into the existing record, and report his own subjective impressions of the incremental changes in the U.S. South.

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