

RACISM AND PREJUDICE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: A TALE OF JAZZ

MUSIC AND ITS MUSICIANS

By

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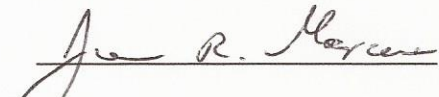
A Thesis Submitted to The Honors College
In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelors degree
With Honors in

History

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

M A Y 2 0 1 5

Approved by:



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Abstract

This thesis explores the prejudice and tense racial relations minority jazz musicians experienced in the early to mid-twentieth century. By analyzing the lives and careers of Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, and Artie Shaw the thesis attempts to answer the following questions: What were the experiences of early jazz musicians? How did White and Black jazz artists interact and cooperate with one another? What obstacles did each race face in the efforts to integrate? And finally, what lasting influences did discrimination have upon the musicians? These particular individuals were chosen because of their immense talent, fame, and relatively wide spread influence across multiple decades of jazz music; together, they provide a widespread view of the era. Through various integration efforts, these black and ethnic white jazz artists worked together in order to overcome both the negative image that American society had of jazz music and the negative image that American society held in regards to minorities.

Part I: Introduction

The era of jazz music is characterized by extraordinary experiences. As the author Vladimir Simosko notes, “Jazz history itself cannot be divorced from the history of the times...some grasp of the mood of the times is necessary, as is a brief survey of the broad contours that heavily influenced the details [of jazz]” That is, in order to understand jazz, one has to understand the people and events that surrounded it. The music had a long and tumultuous progression from a hated art form to a well-loved and uniquely American art form, which its musicians experienced on a professional and personal level. In a time when racism ran rampant across the country, black and ethnic white jazz artists not only had to struggle with negative judgments towards the music they played, but also incredible hatred directed towards their race and/or ethnicity.

Bessie Smith was no stranger to such experiences. While touring the south, Bessie was the object of immense admiration. With so many adoring fans, “Bessie must have known that many of the Southern followers who flocked to her tent, laughed at her jokes and applauded her

singing were Klansmen who had left their sheets at home”.¹ It would seem that the general population had to grapple with the status quo of Jim Crowism as well as the growing popularity of jazz music; one side had to be stifled in order to participate in the other. On one particular night in the summer of 1927, Bessie was performing under a tent to a packed audience. One musician ventured out of the tent only to find a group of hooded Klansmen attempting to collapse it by pulling out stakes.² In this instance, racism trumped the love of music, thus Bessie had to live and perform in a bewildering world where she was both loved and hated.

Interestingly enough, this treatment did not stop Bessie from speaking her mind. As soon as she learned of the multiple Klansmen attempting to collapse her tent,

she ran toward the intruders, stopped within ten feet of them, placed one hand on her hip, and shook a clenched fist at the Klansmen. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” she shouted above the sound of the band. ‘I’ll get the whole damn tent out here if I have to. You just pick up them sheets and run!’[as she made her way into the tent, she said to her prop boys] “and as for you, you ain’t nothing but a bunch of sissies.”³

Bessie may have lived in a world where she was both loved and hated, but she most certainly moved past this contradiction and did not let others intimidate her. Bessie’s tenacity and bravery of dealing with the situation are very telling of the way in which jazz musicians stood up for themselves.

Since racial relations and opinions about jazz music were so intertwined, essays depicting the way critics viewed the art form can provide insight into how its musicians were viewed as well. A number of essays in the book, *The New Negro* by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarret do just this. Early writings of the 20th Century describe jazz in terms of extremely

¹ Bill Crow, *Jazz Anecdotes: Second Time Around* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 150.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

derogatory and racialized language. One such essayist describes jazz “as the self-expression of a primitive race” equating the black artists of the genre to savage children.⁴ Others wrote that the music had “grotesque and burlesque effects” and that it was essentially nothing more than a “bad influence on music.”⁵ This type of music, therefore, was forever coupled with groups considered “others.” These comments are essentially calling black musicians savage and belittling their art form as something primitive and devoid of any real merit. They are entirely insulting and filled with ill will. This manifests itself into moments of blatant racism as was the case with Bessie Smith’s southern performance and run-in with members of the Ku Klux Klan.

However, a large majority of these prejudiced feelings and attitudes towards the music and musicians began to fade as jazz became a defining feature of American culture and life. Later writings are altogether more positive and provide a more inclusive and far less negative approach to the music. For example, one writer states, “the most prejudiced enemy of our race could not sit through an evening with Europe [James Reese Europe, an early bandleader], without coming away with a changed viewpoint for he is compelled in spite of himself to see us in a new light.”⁶ Yet another comment states, that artists such as Europe “[have the] white man’s ear because he is giving the white man something new...” and such influence is indeed “jazzing away the barriers of prejudice.”⁷ The comments are in obvious contrast to the almost biting words of the early writings. They acknowledge the talent and ability to enthral audiences that jazz musicians possessed. The hopeful tone of entertaining, instead of disgusting, the white man and thereby breaking barriers of racial prejudices illustrate the amicable relationship black and white jazz artists would have throughout the entirety of the 20th Century because of their shared

⁴ Henry L. Gates, Jr. and Gene A. Jarrett, *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 484.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 485-486.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 482.

⁷ *Ibid.*

experience through music. These writings also allude to the massive integration efforts that jazz musicians would eventually take on.

The author Dan Morgenstern writes, “more than a decade before Jackie Robinson made his debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers, jazz began to level its playing fields.”⁸ This statement illustrates the important place jazz music held in early integration efforts and how its musicians were clearly ahead of the curve in terms of uniting diverse people in a common activity. As the writer Mark R. Schneider states, “for the first time in American history, a black created art form commanded the attention and admiration of millions of whites.”⁹ This creates a number of interesting social issues since the country was clearly still deeply separated along racial and ethnic lines.

How was such an art form able to survive and expand in America given the racial climate? The answer lies with its musicians. Jazz was making an active effort to combat prejudice and this was first made obvious by the effort of Benny Goodman and Teddy Wilson’s 1936 integrated and public performance and was continued by the numerous ongoing efforts made by jazz artists throughout the entirety of the early to mid-20th century. Despite the continued barrier of segregation and instances of blatant mistreatment, multiple artists agreed that their efforts, “‘had opened up a door already, a giant crack.’ And that door gradually opened of its own accord... But [their efforts were] the first cracking of the door.”¹⁰ The show of solidarity between white and black artists of the jazz era enabled integration to grow. The artist Thelonious Monk even went so far as to say, “jazz and freedom go hand in hand...” furthering the sentiment that jazz music provided opportunities for minority artists to flourish and express

⁸ Dan Morgenstern, *Living with Jazz* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), 664.

⁹ Mark R. Schneider, *African Americans in the Jazz Age: A Decade of Struggle and Promise* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 86.

¹⁰ Morgenstern, *Living with Jazz*, 665.

themselves.¹¹ Surely, this journey was not without its challenges and triumphs. What were the experiences of early jazz musicians? How did White and Black jazz artists interact and cooperate with one another? What obstacles did each race face in the efforts to integrate? And finally, what lasting influences did discrimination have upon the musicians? Such questions can be answered by carefully analyzing the lives and careers of major jazz figures.

The early to mid-twentieth century brought about numerous innovations in art, but few were as popular or influential as jazz music. Viewed primarily as a unique American art form, largely influenced by African and African American culture, its popularity gradually increased during a time when racism and prejudice still so deeply divided America. Jazz's struggle from hated art form to the beloved music of an era is parallel to the struggles its black and white ethnic minority musicians endured; attitudes towards jazz music largely reflected attitudes towards race.

To better understand the complexities of race within the jazz era, especially race issues that targeted the musicians, this paper will take on a socio-cultural lens and focus primarily on the lives of four famous jazz artists: Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Artie Shaw, and Frank Sinatra. These particular individuals were chosen because of their immense talent, fame, and relatively wide spread influence across multiple decades of jazz music; together, they provide a widespread view of the era. While their stories of racism and prejudice are not unique, the experiences of these specific artists illustrate jazz as a counterculture, the extent to which race dictated societal norms, and the great lengths in which musicians tried to combat prejudice.

¹¹ Ibid., 667.

Part II: Louis Armstrong: Jazz Firsts and Combatting Uncle Tom

Twentieth century America was a difficult time for jazz music and its artists. This difficulty lies in the fact that jazz music was initially met with harsh backlash and hatred and its musicians were the subjects of prejudiced thinking. The Jazz Age itself was characterized as a time of freedom and deviancy and the music that resulted from the era was often looked at with disdain for being a representation of this rebellion. This coupled with the fact that jazz was seen as an African American genre of music, explains the overall apprehension to value and accept jazz. For example, jazz writers at the time “resorted to such stereotypes as ‘primitive’ and ‘simple’ to characterize black creativity. Similarly, certain writers on jazz...consistently restricted the music to the idea that black demonstrations of rhythm result from a ‘savage; or ‘exotic’ racial inheritance.”¹² Thus the music was always reduced to the skin color of its artists.

While artists faced the difficult task of being involved with an unaccepted form of music, they also had to grapple with the fact that they were not accepted as individuals. Ray Stannard Baker makes an interesting observation writing,

The Negro is an American in language and customs; he knows no other traditions and he has no other conscious history; a large proportion, indeed, possess varying degrees of white American blood... and yet the Negro is not accepted as an American... the Negro is set apart as a peculiar people.¹³

This characterization as a separate, peculiar group of individuals ultimately lead to discrimination and an overall racist way of thinking found in a large part of white America during the twentieth century. Black jazz artists were disliked both professionally for their music and personally for their race and heritage.

¹² Henry L. Gates, Jr. and Gene A. Jarrett, *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 16.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 70.

Such treatment made it difficult for musicians such as Louis Armstrong to advance their art. He had to face both the difficulties of trying to popularize an art form that was hated and facing the common practices of discrimination as a black man making his eventual widespread fame so extraordinary. He was an extremely talented trumpet player deeply tied to the social and racial aspects of jazz music. From his childhood and beginnings of his career, Louis' life story consisted of tragedy, obstacles, success, and hope.

Born on August 4, 1901 (although he often told people his birthday was on Independence Day 1900) to Mayann Albert and William Armstrong, Louis was the grandson of slaves; he was born into one of the poorest sections of New Orleans and was raised by a single mother who worked as a prostitute.¹⁴ Despite the conditions that he lived in and the negative influences he was exposed to, Louis persevered. This perseverance developed in part because of the generosity of a Jewish immigrant family he was close to and worked for. The Karnofsky family was extremely influential, teaching Louis Russian lullabies and doing the one thing that essentially started his career; buying him his first cornet.¹⁵

While the Karnofsky family may have provided the tool that would inspire an extremely talented musician, it was Louis' own misfortune and run in with the law that jumpstarted his career. On New Year's Eve 1913, twelve year old Louis decided to fire a gun into the air which led to his subsequent arrest and placement into the Colored Waif's Home, a reform school where Louis received formal musical training under the tutelage of Peter Davis.¹⁶ While Louis had already expressed an affinity for music through his early experimentation with the trumpet, this formal instruction enabled the young Louis to receive a proper education in the art form for

¹⁴ Marc H. Miller et al., *Louis Armstrong: A Cultural Legacy*. (Hong Kong: University of Washington Press, 1994), 18-19.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

which he would become so well known. This instruction, the purchase of his first instrument, and the sheer fact that he grew up in New Orleans, largely credited with being the birth place of jazz music, were all beneficial to his future. From these beginnings, his career only skyrocketed. After leaving the Colored Waif's reform school at the age of thirteen, he went on to be mentored by the famous Joseph "King" Oliver, one of the original Dixieland greats. He also continued to be surrounded and influenced by the music of early innovators of jazz and Dixieland music; Jelly Roll Morton, Sidney Bechet, and John Robichaux, just to name a few.¹⁷

In later life, Louis mused, "Jazz and I grew up side by side."¹⁸ Given the breadth and success of his career no other statement could be truer. Born at the turn of the century and having received musical instruction in a place and time when Dixieland Jazz was just beginning, Louis was exposed to the struggles and successes of famous, early musicians as most jazz artists were trying to overcome the popular distaste of the "savage" music they played and other jazz artists were rising in ranks and becoming increasingly more popular and accepted. However, even though he was not one of the early founders of jazz, he did have a profound impact in shaping its successful continuation due to his lengthy career. Because of such an influence, Marc H. Miller writes, "if historians were to select an individual to personify twentieth century American Culture, one leading candidate would certainly be the jazz musician Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong."¹⁹ Besides being so entrenched in the history of jazz musically speaking, Louis also had a lucrative movie and radio career that took on the span of the 20th century.

Throughout his life and career, Louis was keenly aware of the social and racial issues plaguing America. Louis' experience as a black man in the public eye brought with it its own

¹⁷ Ibid., 22.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.,17.

unique challenges and experiences and can provide a full picture of twentieth century America. By analyzing the color barriers he crossed in terms of music and movies as well as the criticism he received from the public for his stance on racial issues, Louis' life can accurately shed light on the racial issues black jazz musicians often faced as well as what they overcame.

It is no secret that Satchmo was a hugely successful jazz superstar beloved by many. His work and talent spoke for themselves. Louis lived in an early twentieth century world where jazz music was still relatively new and minstrel shows were a form of popular entertainment, perpetuating harmful black stereotypes. However, despite these challenges, "Armstrong worked within these harsh realities to forge a broadly popular image in the United States. Armstrong was proud of his success against the odds..."²⁰ Louis did indeed manage to become a popular artist; in the realm of music, he set enormously high standards for himself. But how did he manage to navigate through a world so divided because of race issues? According to various historians, it took place in subtle ways. People often underestimate how influential Louis was because he took on a "less public role in breaking the color barrier, especially during the 1930's, when he was the first of his race to perform in dozens of venues all over the land."²¹ Furthermore, "he was also the first black performer, in 1936, to have his own sponsored radio program when he and his band substituted for several months for singer Rudy Vallee... (Vallee was one of many Armstrong fans in show business; Louis's artistry had long since transcended categories.)"²² Louis' talent had made Vallee a fan and thus Vallee wanted Louis to substitute for him. On the airways, and in live performance, Louis set precedents for all future black artists and performers by simply setting foot in areas previous off limits to those of his race. His virtuoso on the

²⁰ Ibid., 58.

²¹ Dan Morgenstern, *Living with Jazz* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), 91.

²² Ibid., 39.

trumpet and the talent of the bands he led, coupled with the good fortune of having the opportunity to perform in these venues, forever changed black and white relations because he was opening doors and breaking racial barriers. White patrons would pay to see these talented black musicians perform, they were in awe of them, and for at least a time, respected them for this talent. While relations certainly were not changed nor were they changed solely because of music, black artists were gaining access to venues previously denied to them. Doors were opening, and Louis, as the first black performer to take these actions, was an influential part of this.

In addition to music, Louis took an active role in movies of the age. He was so influential that all throughout the 1930's,

Armstrong succeeded in desegregating many motion picture theatres in the downtowns of many major American cities outside the South. In those days, theaters featured stage shows along with first-run movies, and big bands were favorites in these shows.

Armstrong was the first black band leader to perform in many of these venues, as can be gleaned not from the histories of jazz but from a perusal of black newspapers, such as the *Chicago Defender* or the *Pittsburgh Courier*.²³

An important point to note here is that historically black newspapers were reporting on Louis as being the first black band leader to perform in these venues. As stated before, his and his band's talent put him in high demand for performances, but these actions can also be viewed as as little efforts to advance black Americans in modern society.

In a time when African American roles in films typically consisted of nothing but lazy, deadbeat, black men disappointing their wives, there was very limited mobility for black actors.²⁴ Because of this stereotypical portrayal, Louis' roles in movies were not always viewed in a

²³ Ibid., 38-39.

²⁴ Miller et al., *Louis Armstrong*, 154.

positive light. While he was setting precedents for future black performers, he was not necessarily combatting negative black stereotypes. He often acted in an over the top comedic way and was not opposed to “ethnic humor and old-style ethnic images. Once his fame grew to the point where he was a favorite of integrated and white audiences, Armstrong remained true to the type of entertainment he had grown up with” that is, the minstrel-esque, racist portrayal of black Americans.²⁵ This presents an interesting contradiction to Louis’ otherwise progressive actions on race matters. While Louis had a large black fan base one still must question why he did not actively speak out against such stereotyped portrayals of his race. Perhaps it simply was “all he knew” as the common saying goes. Or, perhaps, it was the only way Louis felt like he could have the opportunities to work in movies; play along with what was popular just to get to a point where he had power and influence over audiences including white audiences.

His typical portrayal of black men in movies also provided a framework for Louis to sarcastically comment on social issues. Oftentimes, black actor’s intonation and over the top acting were specifically targeted towards black audiences as a type of social commentary, parody, and satire.²⁶ Black movie stars such as Moms Mabley and Dusty Fletcher acted in a “rowdy style characterized by eye pops, thick dialects, [and] broad gestures... [which were] far different in spirit from the... vicious mockery of the white minstrels... [the audience recognized] that these shenanigans were but *one* comment on but *one* aspect of the African-American experience.”²⁷ If this was the approach that Louis took, then surely some of his work would be misconstrued by white audiences or black audiences that did not like or understand the satirical nature of the acts. Donald Bogle offers the sentiment that Louis “represented an ever-

²⁵ Ibid., 159.

²⁶ Ibid., 157.

²⁷ Ibid.

enthusiastic, nonthreatening, friendly figure who did not challenge their assumptions on race or racial superiority- except when he played his instrument.”²⁸ So while Louis was characterized as an enthusiastic friendly person, his portrayal of himself in movies can be seen as an effort to be accepted by white audiences all while making subtle social commentary for his black fan base and allies in the white community. This may have been especially important to him, since as Miller notes, his talent on the trumpet put him far above other artists including white artists. At first glance, Louis’ acting career can be seen as nothing more than perpetuating already negative beliefs due to his portrayal of the racist stereotypes of black citizens in movies; however, upon further analysis, Louis’ acting can be seen as an avenue to advance black actors as well as gain standing with white audiences. He does this by subtly satirizing the portrayal of blacks in films all while playing along with the common perceptions white citizens held of black citizens.

During the war, Louis continued to play an active role in race relations. With the recording ban of 1942 that did not allow any member of the musician’s union to record music or play on the radio because of royalty disagreements, “he did a number of engagements at military installations.”²⁹ Despite arrangement and travel issues, Louis and his manager remained patriotic and Louis in particular was adamant about “entertaining black men and women in uniform.”³⁰ Louis’ war efforts are important for two reasons. First and foremost this is an example of a black jazz artist not only travelling the world, but being enthusiastically received by white servicemen and women. Secondly, Louis’ insistence on entertaining black servicemen and women sent out an important message; a well-loved musician was paying respect to a group of people either ignored or forgotten about in the war. These actions, whether or not they were pushed forward by

²⁸ Ibid., 159.

²⁹ Morgenstern, *Living with Jazz*, 39.

³⁰ Ibid.

the recording ban, show a deep commitment to country and a continuing commitment to civil rights.

Louis can also be viewed as an American ambassador to Europe. His musical and motion picture fame reached across the Atlantic and he was asked to perform overseas after the war. When the suppression of jazz music ended with the war (Hitler had banned the “degenerate music” from much of Europe), it reemerged as a symbolic representation of freedom and liberation because Hitler was defeated and the music was once again allowed to be played.³¹ A *New York Times* article praised Louis writing, “America’s secret weapon is a blue note in a minor key. Right now its most effective ambassador is Louis (Satchmo) Armstrong.”³² Due to special State Department sponsored music tours, people who lived behind the Iron Curtain were able to listen to Louis’ music.³³ Here is a black American, whose success in his career had enabled him to not only cross colors barriers and improve race relations, but had also given him a position of national standing. Louis’ music had got past the war and the Iron Curtain during a time when anything American was not readily received by foreign governments.

But despite all that Louis Armstrong did in his career, despite all the adoring fans from all nationalities and backgrounds, he was still subjected to moments of blatant racism especially while on tour in the South. Joe Glaser, Louis’ manager Jewish manager, “saw to it that Armstrong was shielded as well as possible from the pervasive problems of racism by accompanying him and his band on road trips.”³⁴ In the 1940’s Glaser had expanded his clientele from just Armstrong to dozens of other black musicians which meant that he could no longer go

³¹ Miller et al., *Louis Armstrong*, 59.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Morgenstern, *Living with Jazz*, 39.

on every trip Louis and his band had booked.³⁵ Interestingly, here is a second example of a Jewish American having a major positive impact on Louis' life and career, the first being the members of the Karnofsky family that helped Louis acquire his first cornet. Furthermore, Louis and his band did not have the luxury of having their own private car to use like the Ellington band. They therefore relied on public transportation which brought with it the possibility of facing discrimination.³⁶ Touring in the South and having direct contact with the public meant that despite the efforts of his manager, Louis and his band undoubtedly had negative racial experiences. No matter the talent or the fame racist attitudes still persisted and black musicians had to struggle everyday with this horrible treatment. This treatment would persist as Louis continued to break barriers and advance his career.

Louis, however, was not only tied to instances of civil rights when it pertained to him or his career alone. "America's racial climate changed swiftly after World War II, and as one of the nation's most successful blacks, Armstrong was inevitably drawn into the civil rights struggle."³⁷ Louis had lived and experienced the hardships that people like him unfortunately went through. And yet, he did not view his role as a famous musician as an appropriate way to address political or social matters. He was simply an individual that did not want to necessarily get involved. However, when it came to the civil rights struggle in Little Rock, he was adamant about his opinions and because he was so apolitical in his career when he spoke, his words carried a great deal of weight.³⁸ Louis had a "strong public [stance] on school desegregation in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957, when among other things, he said that President Eisenhower had 'no guts'

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Miller et al., *Louis Armstrong*, 55.

³⁸ Ibid., 58-59.

and called Arkansas governor Orville Faubus an ‘uneducated plowboy.’”³⁹ One could argue that given what he experienced in his own life living in the South, such an act of blatant and violent racism outraged him. His passionately harsh words coupled with his fame and well known good demeanor, insured that people would listen to what he had to say on the topic. While Louis may not have been the most outspoken individual when it came to injustice, his actions concerning the Little Rock desegregation issue as well as his role as a sort of jazz ambassador to foreign nations undoubtedly placed him in a position of great political influence whether or not he welcomed the attention. He was making waves simply through his successful career as a black man and when the occasion arose, he made sure that those feelings would be heard across the country no matter the cost.

Despite all the amazing and interesting parts of Louis Armstrong’s life, one of the most perplexing aspects remains the backlash he received from people in the white and black community regarding racial issues. Louis took great pride in his African Heritage, took great pride in his success as a black male in a racially divided country, and took pride in his ability to make people laugh and not worry about their opinion of him; that is, until he was referred to as an Uncle Tom by numerous people in the black community. Dan Morgenstern writes, “not even when some whites (who had no right to) and some blacks (who had no right to) called him Uncle Tom, aggressively or apologetically, maliciously or misguidedly, did he let it frustrate him, though it hurt him deeply.”⁴⁰ In response to such actions Louis replied,

Some folks, even some of my own people, have felt that I’ve been “soft” on the race issue. Some have even accused me of being an Uncle Tom of not being “aggressive.” How can they say that? I’ve pioneered in breaking the color line in many Southern

³⁹ Morgenstern, *Living with Jazz*, 91.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

states... I've taken a lot of abuse, put up with a lot of Jazz, even been in some pretty dangerous spots through no fault of my own for almost forty years.⁴¹

In a rare glimpse of utter seriousness, the happy-go-lucky Satchmo expressed his shock. In his mind, he had crossed numerous musical and motion picture barriers opening doors for future black artists to succeed and have a chance of reaching a wider audience. He had even spoken out on racial issues such as Little Rock, so this accusation of him being an Uncle Tom, is rightfully a surprise. What could have led to such an allegation? The answer may lie in Louis' apprehension to get involved in political matters. He was an entertainer through and through and enjoyed performing for other people, but to some this was unacceptable. Given his fame and influence in society, many may have expected a more active or stronger role from him in the civil rights movement. Perhaps his stereotypical depictions of black Americans in films angered some individuals leading them to believe he was not doing any good for black Americans. No matter the reason for such name calling and criticism, it remains clear that Louis did what he thought best for him, his band, and the members of American society he represented.

According to Dan Morgenstern writes, "Armstrong's life and art was, in and of itself, a triumph over racism or, more accurately, its obversion."⁴² With his underprivileged beginnings as the son of a single mother engaged in prostitution, the grandson of slaves, and born in one of the poorest sections of New Orleans with few chances of upwards mobility, Louis' undoubtedly struggled. The cultural atmosphere of New Orleans Dixieland along with the good will of a number of benefactors allowed Louis to develop his art form and let his career take flight. His success in breaking color barriers by being the first black man to perform in various venues and radio shows, his diverse fan base, his role as an advocate for black military men and women, and

⁴¹ Miller et al., *Louis Armstrong*, 58.

⁴² Morgenstern, *Living with Jazz*, 92.

his few moments of outrage regarding racial issues of the age, Louis had a profound influence on the social and racial issues of the nation. For many it was obvious that “Louis Armstrong broadened the history of jazz beyond denigrating myths of African Culture.”⁴³ His talent and fame showed that black musicians in the country were more than the color of their skin, they were simply well loved and talented people deserving of the respect they had earned. In his own way, Louis Armstrong remained a steadfast proponent of civil rights in America.

Regardless of any controversy that existed throughout his career, one thing was for certain; it was all about the music for Louis. Later in his life, he said,

‘a note or a good tune will always be appreciated if you play it right’ he said in his sixties. ‘I appreciate all kinds of music and play all kinds. I don’t think musicians should type themselves... if you perform you’re going to have your ups and downs but what is said about you, good or bad, is forgotten tomorrow. That’s how fast our America is.’⁴⁴

His open minded approach to music mirrored his open minded approach to all kinds of people.

The ever joyous Armstrong simply loved to perform, was passionate about the things that mattered most to him, and made sure that he was inclusive to all. Louis Armstrong will always be remembered for his incredible talent on the trumpet, his happiness, and his enthusiasm. But more than this, he should be appreciated as a man that took risks resulting in “the first cracking of the door” of racial barriers.⁴⁵

⁴³ Henry L. Gates, Jr. and Gene A. Jarrett, *The New Negro*, 16.

⁴⁴ Morgenstern, *Living with Jazz*, 75.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 665.

Part III: Ella Fitzgerald: First Lady of Song and “Sounding White”

Louis Armstrong will forever be remembered as one of the most talented musicians of the 20th century. He will also be remembered for the profound influence he had on future jazz artists. Armstrong’s influence is particularly evident in the life and career of the famed singer Ella Fitzgerald. Her early life was so influenced by Louis’ musicianship that,

“as soon as Ella heard Louis Armstrong, she was attracted to his singing style. Even years after she became an established artist she included an imitation of his vocal style in her act. Armstrong was a crucial early influence...In emulating Armstrong, Ella’s musical subconscious was being shaped by the most important vernacular vocalist of the twentieth century... by listening and imitating, Ella was instinctively following the method by which all young musicians become proficient in jazz.”⁴⁶

Louis Armstrong’s musical influence on Ella coupled with her own unique vocal talent allowed her to have a lucrative career of her own. Both musicians shared similar experiences because of the expanse and fame of their careers as well as the racial barriers they faced and overcame. Overall Ella Fitzgerald’s life provides a glimpse of the experiences that a black female artist had in the jazz world.

Born on April 25, 1917 to William Fitzgerald and Tempie Williams Fitzgerald, Ella grew up in a poor part of New York City -one that a childhood friend of hers described as “a little rough... we were poorer than the poor today. But we got on, that’s the difference.”⁴⁷ The neighborhood, a mix of racial and ethnic minorities, was one that “had a significant minority of blacks amid a majority of Italians, with just a sprinkling of eastern Europeans, Irish, and Greeks.”⁴⁸ She was an ambitious child in both her school work and the performing arts. In grade school she actively danced, played the piano, and sang. However, it was the church that she

⁴⁶ Stuart Nicholson, *Ella Fitzgerald: The Complete Biography* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 9-10.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

attended that gave Ella her “first active participation in formal music- making.”⁴⁹ Listening to the phonograph and radio continued to expose her to new music. Ella had a multiple setbacks in trying to jumpstart her career. For years, she tried making a living as a street performer. When a local club held talent show nights, Ella decided to try her luck. She made her dancing debut on Wednesday, November 21 1934 at the Apollo.⁵⁰ After seeing a sister dance duo perform during the talent night, Ella became discouraged because she did not have the figure or costume to compete against the girls; instead, when Ella went up on stage she started to sing.⁵¹ This spur of the moment decision would forever change Ella’s life. To her “delight and surprise, she brought the house down. When she was called onstage at the end, the roar of the crowd made it clear she was the winner.”⁵² Her performance at the Apollo brought attention to Ella’s singing talent. This initial performance allowed her to connect with other musicians and audition for different bands. At these auditions, she was met with opposition and was often rejected. It was not until she auditioned for Chick Webb’s (a famous black swing drummer and band leader) band that her luck changed. Initially, Chick Webb had his doubts about hiring Ella. Like the other band leaders she auditioned for Chick said, “she was a big girl...and she knew nothing whatsoever about how to dress or talk to strangers.” It was not until he got the opinion of famed drummer Kaiser Marshall that he decided to finally hire Ella; Kaiser told him, “you damn fool, you better take her! She [is] smart.”⁵³ As time went on and after a few lessons in stage performance, “Ella threw her all into her new role as band singer.”⁵⁴ She memorized lyrics and melodies with relative ease she even impressed the musicians of the band with her sight reading skills. “After his initial

⁴⁹ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 17.

⁵¹ Ibid., 18.

⁵² Ibid., 19.

⁵³ Ibid., 36.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 38.

misgivings, Webb soon realized he had a valuable asset in Ella. Within weeks of her joining the band, she was on the road...⁵⁵ Her talent and potential to be a great band singer far outweighed her appearance.

After a number of successful performances, it soon became clear that Ella was a real asset to the Chick Webb band. With her signature song “‘A –Tisket, A-Tasket’ Ella was the most popular female vocalist in America. In three short years she rose from obscurity to stardom, and although she was only twenty-one, she had the world at her feet.”⁵⁶ Her success propelled Chick Webb and his musician’s careers. Because of this, her needs and fame came first. This is extremely apparent when reading the account of musician Garvin Bushell, who wrote: “what really made the band... was Ella... Chick was smart enough to see that. But Ella’s one problem was that she didn’t have a tremendous stage presence... Louis [Louis Jordan the alto saxophone player in Webb’s band] was overshadowing Ella, so Chick decided to fire him”⁵⁷

Ella had a temper and often snapped at her boss, Chick Webb.⁵⁸ Ella’s influence on the Webb band is significant. Despite a lack of stage presence as well as what would appear to be a lack of respect towards her boos and others, Ella’s career and needs came first. Wither her fame, she was the one that essentially made the band; there was no way Chick would fire her especially when black jazz artists like himself were trying to make a name among the public. Ella did not have the stage presence of Louis Armstrong. Yet she too became an influential artist in the jazz world. The way Chick catered to Ella’s career speaks to her immense talent.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 55.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 54.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 56.

Ella's singing talent and ability to change and shape her style of performance made her invaluable to band leaders. At this point in the late 1930's, jazz music was slowly becoming more accepted among the widespread American public; an increasing amount of white artists were starting to play within the genre making the previously "savage" music more acceptable. While this made jazz more inviting to white audiences, it also raised other, interesting racial issues. The concept of "white sounding" jazz vs. "black sounding" jazz arose. Chick Webb, despite being a black jazz artist who his career in Harlem with a traditional "black sounding" style of playing, was adamant about playing in a "white sounding" style. This "white" styling of playing consisted of a sweet, melodious type of jazz characterized by orchestral sounding arrangements. Some of Webb's musicians later wrote, "for some reason Chick wanted his band to sound like a first-class white band... so he used arrangers like Al Feldman... but they didn't write for colored bands, they didn't write the things we played... what really made the band though, was Ella."⁵⁹ Given Chick's desire for a "white sounding" band, the adaptable Ella seemed like the perfect singer. Stuart Nicholson muses,

perhaps this is the key to the Webb-Fitzgerald relationship. Webb's bias towards a "white" sound could well have been the key factor that endeared him to the raw, inexperienced Ella when he took her under his wing in 1935. John Chilton pointed out that Ella's voice sounded as if it could just as easily be from a white singer. In commercializing his band for the broadest possible appeal, Webb was focusing on white America, the constituency that could provide the biggest paychecks.⁶⁰

This example provides insight to the changes going on within jazz music. While the art form may have been gradually becoming more accepted, some of its black artists felt the need to further ingratiate themselves with white audiences by appealing to their tastes. Based on the statement that Ella's voice "sounded white" and Chick's preference of "white sounding"

⁵⁹ Ibid., 49.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 50.

arrangements, one can presume that in a radio or movie setting, the average person in the public would not necessarily know that this band was composed of black artists. Perhaps this was what Chick wanted-to appear white in order to be more successful.

In an intriguing twist, there were white jazz artists and band leaders who wanted their music to sound “black.” This “black sounding” jazz was characterized as hot jazz or lively and extremely syncopated music. Artists such as the Jewish, white Artie Shaw sought out this style of playing for his own bands.⁶¹ When Artie ‘wanted his own band to sound ‘black,’ he approached Teddy McRae, Webb’s tenor saxophonist, who duly obliged him with two million-selling hits, ‘Back Bay Shuffle and ‘Traffic Jam.’”⁶² While this certainly was not true for many black and white jazz artists (Benny Goodman, for example, did not characterize his sound as either “black” or “white” despite being a white bandleader and Ella was a guest singer for his band for a time), there are major examples of white artists wanting to “sound black” and black artists wanting to “sound white.”⁶³

Both Chick and Artie were extremely successful and had multiple hits throughout their careers so which style worked better? It can be argued that because Chick sounded “white” and Artie was white that they shared a large amount of success, but this does not account for the widespread success of other black and “black sounding” artists such as Duke Ellington or Louis Armstrong. Thus “sounding white” may have been an advantage to some artists; however, jazz music as a whole was becoming more accepted. Therefore some of its black artists were becoming more musically accepted. In terms of Ella’s career, her ability to learn certain styles of singing very quickly allowed her to both “sound white” and “sound black” depending on what

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 44-45.

was needed from her. This made her a versatile artist, able to perform with any band leader regardless of the style they preferred.

Like Louis Armstrong, Ella's talent and success opened many doors for her, which subsequently opened doors for the black artists who came after her. Early in her career with the Chick Webb band, Ella "set an attendance record at New York's huge Paramount Theatre, breaking a five-year all-white record for the house. At the time, Webb's band was only the third black band ever to play the Paramount, following Louis Armstrong and Cab Calloway."⁶⁴ Their success here, like the success of the black performers before proved that they were as good as any white performer. Additionally, this made Ella the first black, female performer to play at the Paramount.

June of 1957 would prove to be one of the most important bookings of Ella's career. This was a

challenging engagement at New York's famed Copacabana... As the first black artist to headline at the club, she was walking into unknown territory. It was a fact emphasized by the Copa's caution in billing her second to a seasoned comedian... At the end of Ella's run, the club's owner promised her top billing on her next appearance. Widely reported in the press, her success would play an important role in... [persuading] the huge Las Vegas clubs to open their doors to her.⁶⁵

Whereas Ella was one of the first black female performers at the Paramount, the Copacabana marked the first appearance of a black artist ever. She was not only completely wowed the audience of the Copa, she also set a precedent of her own. A report in *Melody Maker* praised Ella saying that getting booked and absolutely excelling in her performance was significant because

⁶⁴ Ibid., 55.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 169.

the Copa was usually reserved for Broadway types such as Joe Lewis or Frank Sinatra.⁶⁶ The success of her performance and the fame of the Copacabana further propelled her career.

Ella also contributed to jazz music by taking performances to more accessible venues. In 1954 along with a trio of musicians including: John Lewis on piano, Jimmy Woode on bass, and Shadow Wilson on drums, the quartet performed at the first Newport Jazz Festival. The concept of the jazz festival became “institutionalized around the world and was another significant step in taking jazz out of the nightclubs and presenting it as a concert attraction.”⁶⁷ This showed that jazz music was slowly becoming more accepted in the main stream. Instead of being found in night clubs, many of which were associated with trouble, it could be found in the daytime at a music festival open to a much wider audience.

Regardless of Ella’s success and popularity, she could not change the fact that she was indeed a black woman living in a time and place where both of these characteristics were not widely respected or accepted by others. Because of this, she endured numerous instances of blatant racism throughout her career. One such instance took place during World War II. War time meant travel restrictions and crowded public transport.

When the tour headed south, Ella couldn’t find a seat in the blacks-only carriage and after hours of standing finally found a seat in the whites-only section as the train passed through Washington, D.C. When a railroad conductor tried to move her out, it was only the intervention of a group of white sailors who insisted she sit with them that enabled her to retain her seat.⁶⁸

Despite how much Ella was loved by the public, despite how much more accepted jazz music was, despite her fame and the fact that she was on her way to perform at a military base, she was

⁶⁶ “Ella's a wow at the Copa,” 1957, *Melody Maker (Archive: 1926-2000)*, Jun 22, 1957, <http://ezproxy.library.arizona.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1614838427?accountid=8360>.

⁶⁷ Stuart Nicholson, *Ella Fitzgerald*, 147.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

still subjected to the humiliating experience of having to give up her seat just because of the color of her skin. If it was not for the good will of the (either progressive thinking or star struck) sailors, Ella would have assuredly lost her seat. Even though Ella was still mistreated, the intervention by white sailors illustrates some progress found in the American public.

Later in the same trip, when Ella finally arrived at the military base in New Orleans, she was greeted by John Hammond (a famous music critic who was instrumental in the careers of many black jazz artists) who was serving in the military at the time. Commenting on his meeting with Ella, he writes, “I had lunch with Ella in a miserable black hotel while she told me her troubles...”⁶⁹ This is significant for a number of reasons. First and foremost, Hammond had to meet Ella in a hotel for blacks only, which by his description lends one to infer that it was run down or subpar at the least. Even though she was an invited performer at the base, she still had to find lodging deemed appropriate for her. Furthermore, Ella was still mistreated even while she was staying and performing in the birth place of jazz music. Even though some social norms were changing, black artists still endured racism even if their music was more widely welcomed. Perhaps most important, however, is the exhibited relationship between Ella, a black woman, and John Hammond, a white man. As a confidant, it was clear that Hammond was an ally to Ella while she endured these acts of racism. Indeed he “was a champion of racial equality, and his love for jazz and blues helped to elevate black music from segregated clubs and small, poorly distributed "race" record labels and carry it to a wide audience.”⁷⁰ Ella’s relationship with Hammond as well as her time performing in integrated bands such as Benny Goodman’s, shows

⁶⁹ Ibid., 81-82.

⁷⁰ "John Hammond, 76, Critic and Discoverer Of Pop Talent, Dies," *The New York Times*, 1987, accessed February 26, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/07/11/obituaries/john-hammond-76-critic-and-discoverer-of-pop-talent-dies.html>.

a friendship and comradery between white and black jazz artists. This would help advance the cause of jazz music and civil rights alike.⁷¹

Ella also faced discrimination while flying on airplanes. After the success of the Newport Jazz Festival, Ella was booked to perform in Australia and

booked a first class flight to Australia with her maid, Georgiana Henry, and accompanist John Lewis, Ella and her small party flew from San Francisco...when they reached the scheduled stopover for refueling in Honolulu, Ella and her party were bumped from their seats to make room for some white patrons. Since they were forced to stay in Honolulu for three days before making another connection, their concerts in Sydney had to be cancelled. Norman Granz [a Jewish Jazz music producer] was immediately outraged. This was precisely the situation he had been campaigning long and hard to stamp out. It was blatant, institutionalized racism. He immediately put legal proceedings into motion... A spokesman for the airline said it was an "honest mistake." The suit was eventually settled out of court for an undisclosed sum.⁷²

Ella and those she travelled with were yet again subjected to absolutely humiliating and degrading treatment. The difference here though is that this instance directly interfered with one of Ella's major performances. It was much more than having to stand on a bus; she was literally kicked out a plane and was unable to collect her belongings. It was this particular example that enraged Norman Granz and led legal action. In most other instances of racism, jazz artists either stood up for themselves verbally or an ally would stand up for them. Norman Granz, on the other hand, decided to sue a company. Like Louis Armstrong, Ella was helped by a Jewish American in her effort to combat prejudiced treatment. The eventual payment in damages to Ella and her guests makes a bold statement; such instances of extreme mistreatment were not going to be tolerated.

⁷¹ Ibid., 44-45.

⁷² Ibid., 148.

Norman Granz's progressive way of thinking and protecting black Artists such as Ella were sometimes frowned upon. At an October 1955 concert in Houston,

five members of Houston's vice squad...tricked their way into the backstage area by showing their shields and claiming to lifelong jazz fans. Their intention was to show Granz just what Houston thought of his "liberal" ideas... law enforcement officers arrived... brandishing their firearms... it was transparent that the raid was intended as a "drug bust," and Granz could see that the officer was seeking an opportunity to make a plant away from the general melee... finally Ella, Georgiana, Dizzy, Illinois, and Granz were forced to go to the police station where they were charged with being party to an illegal dice game.⁷³

What was supposed to a sensationalized drug bust story turned out to be a biting report of what the Houston Police had attempted to do; eventually, thanks to Granz lawyers, the charges were dropped.⁷⁴ Yet again, Ella and her companions were subjected to racism. Even though Ella's music was gaining popularity, some, particularly in the south, had to remind black artists that they were still second class citizens. Thankfully, not all of Ella's tours were completely marred by instances of racism. She was widely accepted throughout Europe and enjoyed performing at a number of venues. Interestingly enough, however, any instances of racism she encountered while in Europe were at the hands of American Citizens. While at a hotel in Amsterdam,

Ella and her maid... entered the small bar and remained seated at the bar talking and sipping their drinks. Two American soldiers walked in and headed for the bar; the moment they saw Ella... they turned away and headed for a table. It was so blatant that everyone went and joined Ella at the bar. Even the singer who was working in the bar turned his back to the soldiers who, shamed, bought drinks all around.⁷⁵

This was a show of solidarity with Ella. In America, whenever incidents like this happened, there was either no one there to step in or only a few; in Europe, an entire bar decided to stand up against such behavior.

⁷³ Ibid., 150.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 138.

Travelling was not the only way that Ella faced discrimination. She also had to combat racist treatment within the world of radio. Stuart Nicholson describes the situation:

Ella was seldom heard on the radio [in 1947]. “Ella kills everybody- musicians, other singers, fans, hard-boiled recording men- but somehow or other she has been unable to get on the radio with a program of her own or a regular spot on a big show,” wrote Bob Bach in *Metronome*. Pointing out that the airwaves at the time were full of singers, all of whom were white...”Need we draw any neon arrows to lead you to the large and disgraceful spectre of Jim Crowism behind American radio? ... I will simply cite the answer I was given by one advertising big-wig when I suggested Ella for an opening on a big network show: ‘She wouldn’t look so good for pictures.’”⁷⁶

When one looks at the famous, female radio stars at the time they were primarily petite, white women. Regardless of whether Ella “sounded white” or whether she was equally if not more talented than these women, the simple fact that she was a larger framed, black singer meant that there was no room for her in the popular radio market.

Thus Ella’s life provides a unique perspective on jazz music. She struggled to advance an art form that was only slowly starting to gain acceptance, struggled with her size and appearance so that she would be accepted by band leaders and producers, and she constantly battled the prejudicial and discriminatory treatment many black artists experienced.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 105.

Part IV: Frank Sinatra: Ol' Blue Eyes and Activism

Francis Albert Sinatra was born December 12, 1915 to Italian immigrant parents Natalina Garaventa and Antonio Sinatra in Hoboken, New Jersey. As the son of Italian immigrants, Frank was keenly aware of the prejudice that existed in the U.S. Later in life, Frank would note, “Of course it meant something to me to be the son of immigrants. How could it not? How the hell could it not? I grew up for a few years thinking I was just another American kid. Then I discovered at-what? five? six?- I discovered that some people thought I was a dago. A wop. A guinea... you know, like I didn’t have a fucking *name*.”⁷⁷ Such sentiments would not hinder Frank’s desire to sing. In 1935 Frank auditioned for a musical appearance on *Major Bowes and His Original Amateur Hour* which led to Frank being paired up with a trio group to form the Hoboken Four.⁷⁸ After touring the country with this group, Frank returned home to his family and worked a number of musical odd jobs including a 15 minute daily radio show on NBC and a job as a singing waiter at the Rustic Cabin.⁷⁹ It was in July of 1939 that Frank finally received his big break when he recorded his first album with band leader and trumpet player Harry James.⁸⁰ Despite this success, Frank continued to be met with ethnic prejudice. Harry James wanted Frank Sinatra to change his name to something easier to pronounce and less Italian sounding to which Frank replied, “when Harry [James] wanted me to change my name, I said no way, baby. The name is Sinatra. Frank fucking Sinatra.”⁸¹ Historian Leonard Mustazza writes, “perhaps his name would not be so well known if he had acquiesced in the pressure to submerge his ethnic identity in the insipid melting-pot stew- a pressure to which popular performers would continue to

⁷⁷ Douglas Brinkley et. al., *Frank Sinatra: History, Identity, and Italian American Culture*, edited by Stanislaw G. Pugliese, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 33.

⁷⁸ Nancy Sinatra, "Timeline," *Sinatra.com*, Accessed March 6, 2015. <http://www.sinatra.com/timeline>.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Douglas Brinkley et. al., *Frank Sinatra*, 34.

succumb through the decades following and to this very day.”⁸² Indeed, Frank’s Italian pride was integral in forming his charming personality and quick wit. From these early days as the young Italian singer in various bands, Frank would go on to create an individual identity, recording solo songs and eventually become one of the most widely influential figures of big band music.

His talent was insurmountable and he

was perhaps one of the first vocalists of the twentieth century to develop the ability to communicate American popular songs to listeners in their most complete form- the music and lyrics presented simultaneously- without ever sacrificing the importance of one for the other. He integrated and balanced swing, tone, color, phrasing, diction, and intonation in a way that created unequalled performances...Sinatra seemed to have cultivated and refined the skills that created the sound and style that defined him.⁸³

Douglas Brinkley writes, “Frank Sinatra never knew a generation gap...Sinatra turned pop art into high art, his voice showing the human dimensions behind modernity...”⁸⁴ Loved by the country (and loved even in today) his talent would make him a household name, but it was so many other aspects of Frank’s personality and beliefs that would contribute to his lengthy and successful career. “Talent alone is not enough to account for his professional longevity...” known as the country’s ‘No. 1 ‘swooner’” Frank was an extremely active individual for civil rights.⁸⁵ Frank Sinatra was a longtime activist for integration and equal treatment. One could argue that his own past experiences with anti- ethnic sentiments would make him such an outspoken proponent of civil rights. Frank was a fierce

[defender] of the social “underdog,”...[and] was not limited to ethnic whites. Early on he also took up the banner of racial equality, a decidedly unfashionable stance that came not without cost to him personally and professionally but one that he steadfastly maintained

⁸² Ibid., 33.

⁸³ David Finck, *Frank Sinatra: The Man, The Music, The Legend*, edited by Jeanne Fuchs and Ruth Progozy, (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2007), 10.

⁸⁴ Douglas Brinkley et. al., *Frank Sinatra*, 19.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 34, 38.

for his entire career. His efforts did not go unnoticed. For years now, the black community has applauded his pioneering efforts on their behalf.⁸⁶

Indeed, “from his perch atop the entertainment world, he used his considerable drawing and earning power to open doors for black performers...”⁸⁷ In addition to the famed musician, Frank was an activist through and through. His actions while touring with racially mixed groups, the movies he starred in, the writings on race that he published in magazines, and the national civil rights tours he went on all illustrate his profound commitment to civil rights.

Even early in his career, Frank was committed to standing up against racial injustice. An example of such an instance took place when Frank was singing in Tommy Dorsey’s band. While on tour, Frank offered to share a room with Sy Oliver, the black music arranger of the Dorsey band. When the band checked in at the hotel, the clerk did not allow Sy Oliver to stay with Frank as the hotel was for whites only. Filled with rage, Frank grabbed the clerk from behind the counter and threatened to vandalize the hotel if Sy was not offered a place to stay.⁸⁸ This behavior was typical of Frank’s character. Multiple media sources would report on Frank’s commitment to civil rights writing,

“an early victim of anti-Italian bigotry, there has never been in him the slightest trace of anti-black bigotry.” It’s true, and there were many such stories of his courageous action at the time. As was once noted, “At a time when segregation was virtually a way of life in the U.S. and Black entertainers couldn’t stay in hotels where they performed, Sinatra put his career on the line to try to make things better for many Black performers of the ‘40’s and 50’s.”⁸⁹

The anti-Italian prejudice he experienced may have been a contributing factor to his actions later on in life; he knew what it felt to be discriminated against and did not tolerate such

⁸⁶ Ibid., 34.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 40.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

discrimination against others. Frank stuck with his convictions even when it could have potentially harmed his career. While he certainly “earned...the respect of those who themselves felt ethnically and racially oppressed” he also angered many conservative sources such as the Hearst press which consistently reported on “Sinatra’s unsavory associations with shady characters” and his support of the Roosevelt administration.⁹⁰ It is clear that this had no lasting negative effect on Frank’s career, however. He continued to be a huge proponent of civil rights and enjoyed an enormous amount of success.

Even Frank’s famed Rat Pack was a testament to overcoming social inequality. When Frank became the leader of the pack in 1957,

it included Joey Bishop, Sammy Davis Jr., Dean Martin, and Peter Lawford as the core group, or two Jews, two Italians, one African American, and one WASP. ‘The Rat Pack Show’... ‘featured- even flaunted- race and ethnicity’...The Pack, unlike the silent generations that preceded, paraded their ethnicity... No longer victims of prejudice, they used humor to lash out at prejudice.⁹¹

Thus, Sinatra combatted racism and prejudice in a number of ways. On one hand he took the confrontational route like Louis and Ella by speaking out against mistreatment and even engaging in arguments. On the other, he used humor, similar to Louis’ acting in films, to make a sort of social commentary on the racial climate of the time. It was the fame of the Rat Pack that enabled such comedy to be well received.

The Rat Pack however was no stranger to racism. Despite his fame, “Sammy Davis Jr. for instance, was allowed to dine at New York’s Copacabana as Sinatra’s guest only after Sinatra threatened not to sing for the hundreds who’d lined up to see him perform.”⁹² Additionally, Frank

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 29.

⁹² Ibid., 40.

“threatened not to perform at the Sands in Las Vegas because Nat King Cole and other black performers were not allowed to stay at the hotel or eat in the dining room.”⁹³ Extremely angered by what took place at the Sands event, Frank is reported to have said “I’ll burn it down before they do that to him again...If he does not eat in the dining room, I don’t work here anymore.”⁹⁴ Such examples, makes one thing clear: regardless of fame, his fans, or his music, Frank was never going to sacrifice his values and beliefs just to perform. In fact, he was going to use his fame as a way to stand up against injustice and accomplish what he wanted.

Frank was also active in civil rights in his movies. In the film *The House I Live In* Frank played himself and taught the lesson of tolerance to a group of boys saying, “Look, fellas... religion makes no difference except to a Nazi or somebody as stupid... Don’t let them make suckers out of you.”⁹⁵ In 1946, the film went on to win the Honorary Award at the Academy Awards.⁹⁶ Another film entitled, *Kings Go Forth* discussed the issues that surrounded interracial marriages and relationships.⁹⁷ These films show that Frank not only used his fame to gain influence in the civil rights struggle, he made sure that it pervaded his entire career and work. It was not enough to simply use his influence; he also had to make sure his subject matter embodied his passion for civil rights. The fact that the *The House I Live In* won an academy award also illustrates that the films that dealt with racial issues were being well received and applauded. Additionally, Frank was ahead of the times in terms of hiring practices. As one

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 26.

⁹⁶ Nancy Sinatra, "Timeline,"

⁹⁷ Douglas Brinkley et. al., *Frank Sinatra*, 41.

Baltimore Sun writer said Frank was ““a veritable one-man Hollywood civil-rights squad, hiring blacks for his films long before it became considered the fair and moral thing to do.””⁹⁸

Frank Sinatra as the singer and movie star was extremely well known. Less known is Frank Sinatra as the published writer. Frank was very outspoken with his beliefs on civil rights and he often wrote editorials and essays regarding the topic. One of his articles entitled “Let’s Not Forget We’re *All* Foreigners” was published in the July 1945 edition of *Magazine Digest*. It consists of three pages, best summed up by one quote in which Frank wrote, ““Wops, dagoes, kikes, and niggers are America.””⁹⁹ True to his nature, Frank was insistent on spreading the message that all human beings, regardless of the race, religion, or background are uniquely American and should be treated with dignity and deep respect. Not much later after his *Magazine Digest* publication, “on September 17, 1945 [Frank] published virtually the same article in *Scholastic*, a magazine aimed at young people... he asserts that kids at the time were a lot smarter than those of his own generation and were accordingly fit for the kinds of future changes he wanted to see effected.”¹⁰⁰ Frank was smart in this sense; by encouraging people of all ages, especially young people to stop prejudiced thinking and actions he was targeting all segments of society and therefore had a better chance of enacting real change. Later in his career, Sinatra published a longer article in *Ebony* magazine where he wrote,

My many friends are scattered around this land and in some foreign countries, too... They are many colors and religious faiths, rich and poor, intellectual and illiterate. A friend to me has no race, no class and belongs to no minority. My friendships were formed out of affection, mutual respect and a feeling of having something strong in common. These are eternal values that cannot be racially classified... The fact is that I don’t “like” Negroes any more than I “like” Jews or Moslems or Italians or any other

⁹⁸ Ibid., 35.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 38.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 39.

group...My personal relationships are not determined by the boundaries of a country or what society thinks of certain kinds of human beings.¹⁰¹

This article takes on a more personal tone than Sinatra's other works. He speaks about all that he has encountered in his personal and professional life. Included are his experience with prejudice growing up as an Italian boy, the racial intolerance he witnessed with friends Nat King Cole and Louis Armstrong, as well as how influential black artists such as Duke Ellington, Sammy Davis Jr., Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, and Miles Davis were on his own career.¹⁰² In speaking on Ella Fitzgerald's talent, Frank wrote, "the art of Ella Fitzgerald has grown beautifully with the years and it has carried me right along with it. She in my opinion is the greatest of all contemporary jazz singers."¹⁰³ Speaking more generally about the various influential jazz artists, Frank wrote,

professionally and musically, I can't begin to fully evaluate the tremendous importance of Negro singers and musicians to my development as a singer...the debt I owe them is too immense ever to be repaid. It has been much more than a long association. I have been on the receiving end of inspiration from a succession of great Negro singers and jazz artists stretching all the way back to the early Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington.¹⁰⁴

Instead of preaching to others why racial intolerance is wrong, he is illustrating just how harmful it can be. Frank is also showing how influential black artists were in his own life therefore giving them an elevated status in the life of a very famous performer. *Jet* magazine, writing about this particular article in *Ebony* noted, "his public position on race in the *Ebony* article was the most significant stand taken by a famous White person since Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt" when she wrote

¹⁰¹ "Relationships of Sinatra with Blacks that Book about Him Does Not Highlight," *Jet*, October 13, 1986, Accessed March 6, 2015, 57 and Douglas Brinkley et. al., *Frank Sinatra*, 41.

¹⁰² Douglas Brinkley et. al., *Frank Sinatra*, 41-42.

¹⁰³ *Jet*, October 13, 1986, 62.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

in *Ebony* over 10 years before him.¹⁰⁵ In this, Frank was truly enacting social change the likes of which can easily be compared to other great humanitarians of the age.

Later in his life, Frank wrote an editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* on July 4, 1991 entitled “The Haters and Bigots Will Be Judged: Some Words from a ‘Saloon Singer’ to Those Who Still Haven’t Figured out the Whole Point of America.” In the piece, Frank discusses the true meaning of Independence Day- that all men are created equal and even comments on the practices of the KKK and those who make insensitive comments:

I’m a saloon singer...But I do claim enough street smarts to know that hatred is a disease- a disease in the body of freedom... America is an immigrant country...Take a minute. Consider what we are doing to each other as we rob friends and strangers of dignity as well as equality...I’m no angel. I’ve had my moments. I’ve done a few things in my life of which I’m not too proud, but I have never unloved a human being because of race, creed, or color. And if you think this is a case of he who doth protest too much, you’re wrong. I couldn’t live any other way: the Man Upstairs has been much too good to me.¹⁰⁶

Throughout his entire life, from his humble beginnings to his worldwide fame, Frank Sinatra remained a true champion of civil rights. His persistence and fearless attitude makes him unique; unlike the mild efforts to speak out that Louis Armstrong engaged in, Frank was ready to unabashedly proclaim his opinions to the world, and did so in numerous publications. His skill as a writer is little known but perhaps one of the most telling aspects of his character.

Frank also fundraised for, was recognized by, and was involved with a number of charities promoting equal rights for all. After singing and starring in the movie *The House I Live In*, “Frank Sinatra garnered laurels for his work against prejudice from the National Conference

¹⁰⁵ *Jet*, October 13, 1986, 59.

¹⁰⁶ Frank Sinatra, “The Haters and Bigots Will Be Judged,” *Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*, (Jul 4, 1991), <http://ezproxy.library.arizona.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1642071784?accountid=8360>.

of Christians and Jews.”¹⁰⁷ His work, not only recognized by religious organizations, also included the political arena. From an FDR supporter to a Regan supporter only one thing remained consistent- he was eager to help those that were being racially or ethnically discriminated against.¹⁰⁸

The dedication that Frank showed earned him a number of awards. In the 1960’s “he was awarded an honorary Doctor of Humanities degree by Wilberforce University for... ‘practice of true democracy.’”¹⁰⁹ On April 15, 1971 Frank was awarded the Jean Hersholt Humanitarian Award by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for his commitment to humanitarian efforts.¹¹⁰ Frank was also awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by Ronald Regan in 1985 for his contribution to American society.¹¹¹ And nearly two decades after his first award, on May 14, 1987 he was given a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Los Angeles chapter of the NAACP.¹¹² These four honors show how well recognized he was for his work in civil rights. Frank also did fundraising for a number of organizations including:

performances to benefit national organizations like the NAACP, Martin Luther King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Latino organization Nosotros. He also did work on behalf of causes and issues that moved him personally. In March 1981, for instance, he joined Sammy Davis Jr. in a benefit performance at Atlanta’s Civic Center to help finance the investigation into the serial murders of children in that city.¹¹³

Whether in actions or in words, Frank always put his money where his mouth was. By linking his singing career to his political and social causes, he was holistically engaging himself in the cause for equality. This is particularly rare for the time that Frank’s career spanned. As Leonard

¹⁰⁷ Douglas Brinkley et. al., *Frank Sinatra*, 25.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

¹¹⁰ Nancy Sinatra, "Timeline,"

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Douglas Brinkley et. al., *Frank Sinatra*, 42-43.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 42.

Mustazza notes, in today's society celebrities are often automatically linked to some sort of social or political cause but back in 1945, Frank's outspoken commitment to racial tolerance issues was truly unique; "when performers wanted to be known merely as pleasant entertainers and steer clear of controversy, it took a good deal of conviction on Sinatra's part to come down squarely on one side of a controversial issue."¹¹⁴ While Frank's actions on tours and his writings were obviously significant, his multiple, very public honors and multiple, very public performances for civil rights really put him in the spotlight during a time when any artist would not necessarily want that kind of attention. His commitment to causes he genuinely cared about placed him head and shoulders above other artists

As if actions, performances, movies, writings, fundraisers, and awards were not enough to make him unique and prove his dedication to the civil rights cause, Frank also conducted national tours in which he spread his messages of love and acceptance of others through the civil rights movement. As Leonard Mustazza writes,

In 1945 he toured the country giving lectures to high school students about tolerance, acceptance of individual differences, and celebration of diversity that makes America great. The most famous of these lectures occurred during a racially charged incident at Froebel High School in Gary, Indiana.... The white students at the school staged a strike to protest the new principal's "pro-Negro policies" of allowing the school's 270 African American students to participate in the student government association, to use the school pool, and to play in Froebel's orchestra...by all indications... [the strike] was primarily arranged and promoted by the white students' parents.¹¹⁵

The high school tours are significant for two reasons. On one hand, this shows Frank's efforts to yet again try and influence young people as the leaders of tomorrow. His touring the country, not to perform but rather to spread his profound belief in tolerance makes Franks involvement all the

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 38.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 37.

more noteworthy. On the other hand, the strike that broke out when Frank was giving his lectures shows the deep ethnic divisions of the time as well as the fact that Frank was not easily deterred by any kind of action against his messages. Despite the opposition, Frank went to the high school in order to make sure he was heard.

Frank was a hero for many. The son of Italian immigrants and an outspoken proponent of equal rights,

Italian Americans, American Jews, Irish Americans, Polish Americans, and other clearly identifiable ethnic groups have regarded him as *their* star, someone who, unashamed, retained his ethnic identity, who, despite his great fame, spoke *like* them and *for* them, who held out the hope that they, too, could aspire to better positions in our often parochial society... “the life and career of Frank Sinatra are inseparable from the most powerful of all modern American myths: the saga of immigration. Because he was the son of immigrants, his success thrilled millions who were products of the same rough history.”¹¹⁶

For Frank, it was not enough to simply just keep his name or just stand up for his friends on tour; he threw himself into his work and attacked racism and prejudice from all angles- through writing and activism and through song and film. Through his activism, “Frank Sinatra advanced multiculturalism long before it became the right thing to do.”¹¹⁷ Frank’s talent made him extremely famous but his unabashed dedication to stay true to himself and support those that needed it most made him an icon.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 34.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 35.

Part V: Artie Shaw: Clarinet Icon and Author

Artie Shaw, like Frank Sinatra, experienced ethnic hatred, was an extremely famous and talented musician, and was an avid writer. His long life and career were filled with terrible instances of prejudice; however, they were also filled with a number of exciting integrated performances and musical triumphs. On May 23, 1910 in New York City Arthur Arshawsky was born to Jewish immigrants Sarah Strauss from Austria and Harry Arshawsky from Russia. His parents owned a dress making business and his father also owned a photography studio for a short time. Sometime during WWI the family fell into bankruptcy causing them to lose the dress making and photography businesses. The family decided to leave New York City for a new start in New Haven, Connecticut. Artie was just seven years old when they moved.

While Artie was hailed as one of the most talented clarinet players the world had ever seen, his musical education did not start with the clarinet. Artie originally started playing piano and ukulele. After watching a number of jazz bands perform, Artie decided to learn the C melody saxophone at the age of thirteen. Within a few months, Artie began playing at amateur nights with his band the Peter Pan Novelty Orchestra, composed of himself and a few high school friends. These performances slowly gained attention from professional musicians so he dropped out of high school at fourteen years old, changed his last name to Shaw, and became a full time musician in Johnny Cavallaro's dance band. It was in these early days that Artie picked up the clarinet and found that he was very good at playing it. After playing in numerous bands, travelling to such musically influential places as Harlem, New York, and watching other jazz musicians perform, Artie began to expand and hone his talent as a musician and clarinet player. A performance at the New York Imperial Theatre in April 1936 eventually brought Artie widespread fame and led to such musical hits as "Stardust" and "Begin the Beguine." For the rest

of his life, Artie quit and rejoined the music business with his breaks providing him with an opportunity to expand his writing career.¹¹⁸

Artie's musical career with his efforts at integrating bands, his musings on racism, and his time learning how to play jazz music from black artists provides an interesting glimpse into relations between black and white musicians. Similarly, Artie's experiences with anti-Semitism as well as his reflections on the Jewish experiences in his writings provides further insight into the lives of white ethnic artists.

Compared to the other artists discussed in this work, Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, and Frank Sinatra, Artie Shaw was certainly the most eccentric artist of the group. Unlike the others, music was never the end all be all of his life. Artie often showed disdain for the Hollywood and music business lifestyle and on numerous occasions quit music to pursue other things such as his short story writing.¹¹⁹ However, Artie always came back to his music despite what he said about the industry; his music was a formative part of himself and it remained important to him. His career in jazz is best explained by the interactions with and admiration he had for black jazz musicians. Like Sinatra, he was quick to explain that a lot of his musical learning and inspiration came from the guidance and performances of black musicians.

For example, very early on in his career while touring and performing with Johnny Cavallaro's band Artie spent some time living in Cleveland. It was here that

Shaw discovered a stack of Louis Armstrong records at a record jobber's warehouse. He took them home and "it was like instant *satori*. I couldn't believe what I heard. It was

¹¹⁸ The biographical information written thus far has already been discussed in the author's previous paper on Shaw: Amanda R. Ehredt, *Artie Shaw: Identity and Activism in Jazz Music, 1910-2004*, 2014, 3-5.

¹¹⁹ Sheilah, Graham, "Artie Shaw Will Abandon His Clarinet," *The Atlanta Constitution*, (February 5, 1941): 16, <http://ezproxy.library.arizona.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy1.library.arizona.edu/docview/503777795?accountid=8360>.

‘dirty’ music, meaning he’d slur notes, do things that a trained musician was taught not to do. And yet it all worked.” Shaw took a week off from his band job and drove to Chicago, where Armstrong was appearing at the Savoy. “The first thing I heard him play was that cadenza at the beginning of *West End Blues*. I could play it for you right now, note for note on the piano. It’s in my head, indelible.”¹²⁰

First hearing Louis play at such a young age and so early in his career, inspired Artie to experiment and break barriers in his own career. In an interview towards the end of his life, Artie reflected on this initial exposure to Louis’ playing.

I was a white kid, my first idols were Bix [Beiderbecke] and [Frankie] Trumbauer. Those were the guys I listened to. And they were remarkable, but they did the same thing. Louis was the first guy that I heard that gave me a whole new approach to what this thing called jazz is. [He] made such an impression on me that I thought, “This is God.” This wasn’t a man. Louis became God for me. I followed him around and listened to what he did, and that’s all. I didn’t try to play like him. First of all, I was playing a clarinet; he played trumpet. But I tried to do the interpretations of what he did in a manner that he did. So he was number one.¹²¹

Here, Artie is quick to note that white kids like him that grew up listening to jazz were usually exposed to white jazz artists, but it was the legendary black artists like Louis that really taught him how diverse and edgy jazz music could be. Artie’s reverence for Louis, likening him to God, illustrates how influential Louis was on his career. Even years after his career was over and he had earned a great deal of fame, Artie never felt like he was an equal to Louis. He was a God and Artie was simply lucky enough to have heard him play.

In addition to Louis, Artie held a deep respect for Ella Fitzgerald’s music and performances. Artie had the chance to perform with Ella along with Buddy Rich and Jerry

¹²⁰ John White, *Artie Shaw: His Life and Music* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 49.

¹²¹ Lee Mergner, "Artie Shaw: Shaw on Shaw," *Jazz Times*, May 2002 <http://jazztimes.com/articles/19896-artie-shaw-shaw-on-shaw>.

Colonna on a tour of Australia in the summer of 1954.¹²² Artie had known Ella since her time with the Chick Webb Orchestra and had seen her perform many times. Commenting on her talent, Artie states,

She's beyond compare... She's a minor miracle. Major miracle... Her singing is incredible; she can do anything: any range, high or low... from bop to scat to popular songs. She was remarkable... Billie [Holiday] had a unique approach to a song; she made it hers. Ella does that in a different way, entirely different. Of the two, though, I'd say Ella is the more universal musician... But very down-to-earth. I had a lot of respect for her, I liked her a lot. Nice woman. There aren't too many people in the business that you can say that about: totally unaware of how great they are; they just *do* it.¹²³

Just like with Louis, Artie shows a deep respect for Ella's musical ability. Having had the chance to perform with her on multiple occasions, Artie was intimately aware of her talent as well as her personality and it appears that the duo got along well.

While both Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald had a significant impact on Artie Shaw's career, it was Artie's time in Harlem under the tutelage of Willie "The Lion" Smith that significantly impacted his early career. According to Mark Schneider, "Harlem did not dominate the music world the way it did the literary world, but it boasted a swinging nightlife. Pianists made Harlem famous in the jazz world."¹²⁴ Willie Smith was one such pianist. While with the Aaronson band, Artie moved to New York and frequently visited Harlem in order to hear its musicians perform in clubs. Upon hearing Willie play at Pod's and Jerry's club Artie commented, "I had never heard any piano playing like that before in my life...[he played] some the damndest music I ever heard coming out of any instrument... he would keep up a running accompaniment of short growls, almost like little barks... creating a sort of syncopated,

¹²² Tom Nolan, *Artie Shaw, King of the Clarinet: His Life and Times*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), 295.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 295.

¹²⁴ Mark R. Schneider, *African Americans in the Jazz Age: A Decade of Struggle and Promise* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 86.

drumlike, contrapuntal undercurrent to what he was doing with his fingers and hands.”¹²⁵ Clearly amazed by Willie’s ability to play the piano, Artie continued coming back to Harlem in order to listen and learn from some of Harlem’s greats. Years later in his autobiography, *The Trouble with Cinderella*, Artie reflects on his time in Harlem with Willie:

Through some accident I can’t remember, I found my way to Harlem; and there I found temporary haven, a place to light for a while. Also, I found a friend. This was a Negro piano player named Willie Smith, who was known all over Harlem as “The Lion.” After my first visit [at Pod’s and Jerry’s] I felt that this tiny little joint, with its dim lighting, its small bar over at one end of the room, its sprinkling of red-and-white checkered tables, was what I had been looking for. It reminded me of the South Side Chicago hangouts I used to frequent. The clientele was more or less the same, but more important than the clientele was the whole atmosphere of the place. I felt at home here, for the first time since I had arrived in New York. Mainly, it was the music that attracted me. And that was Willie Smith’s department- for it was he, The Lion, who dominated this little joint with his piano playing.¹²⁶

Artie found a home in Harlem where he could expand his skills and practice his musical expression under the tutelage of some of the most influential and talented black artists there were. The influence of their “hot” jazz playing surfaced as Artie began to arrange music for his own swing bands. Staying true to the “hot” or “black sounding” jazz style, Artie approached the arranger and tenor saxophone player Teddy Mc Rae to make his own band “sound black.”¹²⁷ This partnership proved to be lucrative for Artie; Mc Rae helped him create “Back Bay Shuffle” and “Traffic Jam,” two hits that sold millions.¹²⁸

Artie’s experiences in Harlem acquainted him with the young blues singer Billie Holiday. Years after their initial introduction, Artie heard that Billie was leaving the Count Basie band so

¹²⁵ White, *Artie Shaw*, 51.

¹²⁶ Artie Shaw, *The Trouble with Cinderella* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Young, 1952), 223-224.

¹²⁷ Stuart Nicholson, *Ella Fitzgerald: The Complete Biography* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 50.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

he drove straight to her home in New York to ask her to be the singer of his band. Describing Billie's time in his band, Artie comments

That kid could sing. She could sing the blues marvelously... She's as good as anybody I've ever heard. She couldn't stay with the band because it was too tough for black people in those days. We went down across the Mason-Dixon Line one time, playing in the south. And as we started to go into the Deep South, Billie turned to me and said, "Do you think I should do this?" I said, "Yeah, I think you should do it." "I think it's important that you break that line..." the second night, she finished singing a song... an old spiritual song. When she finished, some redneck in front of the band hollered, "Have the nigger wench sing another song..." Billie was a short-tempered lady; she had a short fuse... She was mouthing at him, "You..."—you know what she was saying. And then pretty soon some angry noses came up. People gathered in knots on the floor. They didn't want her to do that. So I had it all set: I had the cops out in the wings, and they grabbed her and put her in the bus and drove her away. That was the end of that night.¹²⁹

This incident illustrates that Artie was keenly aware of the obstacles black performers faced while touring with bands. Artie was adamant about having integrated bands but also realized that this made his band a target while on tour, especially in the South. He was ready to break color barriers and knew that by hiring Billie, it would make her the first black female to sing with a white band.¹³⁰ The lengths that Artie took to ensure Billie's safety, having the cops ready to whisk her away in case the crowd got out of hand, shows how Artie deeply cared for his musicians and, like Frank Sinatra, would find his own way of standing up against the injustices they faced.

While Artie shared similarities with Frank Sinatra in the way he gave credit to black musicians for inspiring his music and in the ways he stood up for them, Artie is unique in the fact that he repeatedly expressed that he wished he was black. In his comments about his time in Harlem Artie said:

¹²⁹ Mergner, "Artie Shaw: Shaw on Shaw,"

¹³⁰ Shaw, *The Trouble with Cinderella*, 230.

For the most part I was actually living the life of a Negro musician, adopting Negro values and attitudes, and accepting the Negro out-group point of view not only about music but life in general. In fact, on the few occasions when I was forced to realize I was a white man, I used to wish I could actually *be* a Negro... I could find no way to break into the white world, I was willing to forget it and go on about the business of trying to make a place for myself in this colored world into which I had accidentally stumbled and in which I now felt I belonged in a way I had never felt in any other milieu I had ever been a part of. For with these people I felt a warmth and enthusiasm and friendliness, and a sense of life that had been completely lacking in most of the relationships I had ever had with members of my own race.¹³¹

For Artie, black performers were much more than professionals he could learn from, they were welcoming and accepting of him, almost like a family. These musicians were his friends and mentors inspiring him to continue on with his music all while fueling his passion for civil rights. In commenting on racial discrimination in his autobiography Artie wrote, “I am not deluding myself with any notion of making any Great Contribution in this matter of minority persecution... in the fight against this disease...I feel we all have an obligation to try to do something about the way things are with us... There are all sorts of functions; and pointing out evil is one more function...”¹³² While he may not have been an activist like Frank Sinatra, Artie certainly was not afraid to state his opinions. Through his writings, music, and actions Artie proved time and again to be an ally to black jazz musicians in their struggle for acceptance within society and jazz music.

Artie’s perspective on discrimination is unique because he himself was an ethnic minority. As a Jewish American he was subjected to prejudice. The incidents that occurred during his early life were especially influential to his character and the actions he took throughout his career.

¹³¹ Ibid., 228-229.

¹³² Ibid., 35-36.

Artie's first experiences with anti-Semitism began when his family moved to New Haven, Connecticut. This is what he wrote about the move in his autobiography:

At the age of seven, I was enrolled in Dwight Street School in New Haven. From that point on I began to learn a great deal- very little of it, however, having much to do with formal education. In fact, there were... experiences I underwent during the time I attended Dwight Street School, which had as much to do with shaping the course of my life as anything I can think of at the moment. Until then, I had never given much thought to such matters as being "different" from other kids I knew... Now I suddenly [realized]... that there was this one thing about myself, this "difference" that set me apart. I learned what it means to be a Jew...¹³³

Before leaving to New Haven, Artie lived in a rather diverse section of New York City. This move to New Haven singled him out from the otherwise homogenous population. Confronted by his new classmates, Artie was constantly made fun of for having a "different" sounding name. "Arshawsky" was a much longer and more foreign sounding last name compared to the last names of many of the children that attended Dwight Street School.¹³⁴ Artie's last name, quiet demeanor, and Jewish identity made him an easy target for bullying. At one point "bullies cornered [Artie] after school and warned him not to recite the Lord's Prayer with the rest of them in class: 'Go on home and say your lousy kike prayers, and keep your dirty sheeny nose out of other people's prayers, you hear what I'm telling you?'"¹³⁵ The bullies then chased Artie home. These confrontations definitely served to show Artie that he was "different." Constantly berated, isolated, and mocked by his classmates, Artie quickly learned what it meant to be an ethnic minority, a Jew, in a society that was intolerant and abusive.

The most obvious way this move and subsequent bullying changed Artie was in the shortening of his last name. "Arthur Arshawsky" quickly turned into "Artie Shaw" when he

¹³³ Ibid., 23-24.

¹³⁴ Tom Nolan, *Three Chords for Beauty's Sake: The Life of Artie Shaw* (New York: Norton & Company, Inc., 2010), 3-4.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 4.

began his musical career. Commenting on the bullying he endured and his decision to change his last name Artie wrote:

At the age of seven, I was troubled by the painful situation of being relegated to the out-group. I ... felt ... that I could do nothing about it even after I grew up. At the age of fifteen, I was still unable to accept this situation and I was completely and utterly unwilling to live with a kind of pain which was, after all, not of my choosing. So I decided to skirt it. Not however, without a good deal of guilt. In fact, I carried this guilt around inside of myself for a great many years, until it eventually began to permeate everything that happened to me, in such a way as to make it impossible for me to enjoy whatever success I was later to achieve... All I could do was to act on what I rationalized for myself as the necessities for getting ahead in the profession I had chosen. The first thing that I told myself had to be corrected was my name. It was too long. It was unwieldy. Nobody could pronounce it... The one thing I never even allowed myself to think about at all was, of course, the really basic reason I wanted to change it. That's right- I was ashamed of my name. Not only that, I was ashamed of being a Jew.¹³⁶

Artie is acknowledging that the bullying he endured made him ashamed to be Jewish and thus ashamed of his last name. Though he initially masked this as a matter of convenience, of a way to make his name more recognizable and thus more famous, he admitted to himself later in life that it was truly out of embarrassment. Unlike Sinatra, Artie was not proud of his ethnicity as he began his career. The change to Shaw allowed him to mask his Jewish identity so as to avoid any further discrimination or mistreatment. Artie even hid his ethnicity from his mentors such as Willie Smith. In an interview, Artie mentions ““Willie didn’t know I was Jewish. I didn’t tell him that.””¹³⁷ It would seem that before Artie began to feel welcomed by the black jazz community, he even felt the need to hide his identity from them as well. Historians have even suggested that Artie “sought fame and fortune in the music business as an ‘alternative to this parents’ Jewish

¹³⁶ Shaw, *The Trouble with Cinderella*, 90-91.

¹³⁷ Nat Hentoff, "Jews in the Family of Jazz," *Jazz Times*, May 2010, <http://jazztimes.com/articles/25939-jews-in-the-family-of-jazz>.

identity.”¹³⁸ By changing his name and finding widespread fame and wealth, Artie could overcome all his immigrant parents did not.

Artie’s beliefs about his ethnic identity put him in an interesting position when speaking about the Jewish experience in his autobiography *The Trouble with Cinderella*. He, like Frank Sinatra, had a lot to say about discrimination and his experiences with it. He was not as much an activist as Sinatra (he did not write explicitly on race and certainly did not give civil rights talking tours) and was not always proud of his family heritage. Artie was not, however, afraid to state his opinion on discrimination nor was he afraid to explain his early fears about being identified as Jewish.

In speaking about what occurred at Dwight Street School, Artie generalized his experiences and applied them to the larger Jewish population:

I now realize that it is practically impossible for any Jewish kid to grow up in the average American town- meaning a more or less predominantly Anglo-Saxon, Protestant community such as New Haven is now was then- without becoming aware of the fact that he is some curious kind of undesirable alien. Obviously, this whole so-called Jewish Question is far too complex to go into length here. But one thing is certain. No Jewish child, no matter how carefully protected, can avoid at least a few head-on collisions with this thing called anti-Semitism; and as to how any individual child will react, or how hard it throws him and how weird a character- malformation he may develop as a result of his first contact with this particular type of stupidity- well your guess is as good as any.¹³⁹

Here, Artie identifies the enemy that has hurt so many Jewish kids like himself; anti-Semitism.

By relating his own encounters with discrimination, he legitimizes the shared experience of being discriminated against. Artie states that it is inevitable all while explaining that there are many different ways in which to cope with such discrimination. He described these different coping mechanisms when he wrote:

¹³⁸ White, *Artie Shaw*, 29.

¹³⁹ Shaw, *The Trouble with Cinderella*, 24.

I'm aware that the word "scar" has melodramatic overtones. But I can't think of a better word for what I am talking about. I know any number of Jewish people who have this same scar but who try to ignore it by some variation on the I'm-a-Jew-and-proud-of-it theme; but that won't work for me. There is no more sense in that than there is in being proud of being blonde or brunette, tall or short, blue eyed or brown eyed. All anyone can do about this whole ridiculous primitive manner of categorizing people in in-groups and out-groups is to try to be as adult as possible about it... All I could figure out was that there must be something about me that was different, alien, strange, and (worst of all) undesirable- that is from other kid's point of view... from the moment I realized that my being Jewish was something to be jeered at for, called names for, or hated and excluded for... I was no longer the same kid I had been before... At that point I had to resign myself to what even at that age I knew to be the plain truth; that for no reason I could understand, and certainly through no choice of my own... there I was, a Jew, whatever that meant, and, whether I liked it or not, a Jew I would remain for the rest of my life until the day I died.¹⁴⁰

Artie responded to the discrimination he faced by turning inward; he was hurt by the feeling that he was undesirable and tried to ignore this feeling. This explains the changing of his name as well as the acceptance he felt among the black jazz community. Among the average white and Protestant population of America, he was discriminated against and it was in the black jazz world where he felt most at home because his fellow jazz artists had felt the pain of similar discriminatory treatment. After reflecting on the overall shared experience of Jewish Americans, Artie once again talked about his initial feelings of being ashamed of being a Jew:

It's only because I am no longer ashamed, no longer ashamed of being Jewish, *and no longer even ashamed of having been ashamed*, that I can speak about it now, after having buried it away for so many years. I believe I can now be objective. But it took me a long time to arrive at the point where I could face this problem and deal with it realistically. And before I arrived at that point, I can only tell you that by then I had gone so far off the track that it's a wonder I was ever able to grope my way back again, and learn to deal with the pain of that one guilt so that it no longer exists as real pain but only as a sort of sense-memory of pain. In other words, as I said earlier, there is still a scar and even an occasional twinge- but at least I have learned how to live with these souvenirs and try to

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 24-26.

make as valid a life for myself, in spite of them, as the disease which originally caused them will allow.¹⁴¹

Overcoming both the impact of anti-Semitism (although some kind of scar still exists) and the feelings of being ashamed, Artie is able to carefully articulate the complexities of growing up as a Jewish American. His reference to discrimination as a disease shows his disdain and inability to truly understand why human beings categorize themselves and others. It is these strong opinions that made Artie Shaw such an advocate of equal treatment.

Extremely talented and wealthy, Artie Shaw certainly made a name for himself in the jazz world. While his music will forever be remembered, Artie's Jewish identity and the inspiration and influence he gained from black jazz musicians make him an important figure in understanding the roles that black and ethnic minority musicians had within jazz music.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 91-92.

Part VI: Conclusion

“America’s unique contribution to music was jazz, which in the course of the period [of the twentieth century] spread not only all over the United States but also over a good deal of the rest of the world.” Starting in New Orleans, spreading to Chicago and New York, and then spreading globally, jazz music was paired with America. As a defining feature of American culture, jazz music has a history that is as tumultuous and varied as the history of America itself. Initially deplored as an art form that some believed would eventually destroy all that was musically and socially acceptable, jazz became one of the most beloved art forms of America.

Both its black and ethnic minority musicians were part of this journey. They endured decades of ridicule and discrimination based solely on the music they chose to perform and their race or ethnicity. But these musicians also experienced great moments of musical and social success and triumph. Because of this, their life stories are an integral part of understanding both the music and culture of twentieth century America.

Speaking on the importance of these stories, Bill Crow wrote:

Jazz musicians are bound together by a rich and colorful history that lives in the music itself, remembered, created, and re-created. In addition we have stories about ourselves, stretching back to the beginnings of the music that are told and retold; legends and laughter that remind us of who we are and where we are from... If you want to play jazz for a living you either learn to laugh or you cry a lot. We don’t laugh all the time; we have our low moments just like the rest of the world. But the pleasure of getting together to play the music we love seems to bring out our good humor... The anecdotes we tell about each other seem to be the ones we like the best. They remind us of our individuality and our human nature. There is a wonderful variety of subjects: bandstand stories, road stories, jam-session stories, bandleader stories, tales about innocence and venality, serendipity and catastrophe...¹⁴²

¹⁴² Bill Crow, *Jazz Anecdotes*, ix-x.

By analyzing the careers and lives of Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, and Artie Shaw, this paper has sought to do just that: explore the unique bond they had as jazz musicians and provide a glimpse into each of their experiences.

When analyzing these four artists together, it is clear that their lives did indeed consist of low moments, as Crow has written. The ethnic discrimination and name calling that Frank faced as an Italian American and Artie faced as a Jewish American shaped the ways in which they lived. Through the actions they took to protect and defend their black friends and their writings later on in life condemning any form of prejudice or discrimination, it is apparent that the two were deeply committed proponents of civil rights. Similarly, the discrimination that Louis and Ella faced as early black jazz musicians also shaped them as artists. The name calling and criticism for not being an outspoken enough critic of civil rights injustices that Louis faced as well as the moments of discrimination that Ella faced profoundly affected their careers.

However, Louis, Ella, Frank, and Artie knew how to laugh. Despite all the mistreatment that they endured, each artist rose above it in order to set precedents in both music and performance. The prestige that Louis and Ella had for being some of the first black artists to ever perform at various venues, the number one hits that each produced, and the wildly successful movie careers of Louis and Frank are just some examples of the tremendous success each of them had. Through cooperation and integration efforts, black and ethnic white jazz artists of the twentieth century worked together in order to overcome both the negative image that American society had of jazz music and the negative image that American society held in regards to minorities.

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