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CAFÉ SOCIETY: AN “UN”-AMERICAN ESTABLISHMENT

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ABSTRACT

This thesis provides an analytical overview of the first completely racially integrated nightclub in the United States known as the Café Society. The establishment opened in New York City in December of 1938 under the proprietorship of a young Jewish-American entrepreneur by the name of Barney Josephson, who had been inspired by the stinging political commentary in the cabarets he had visited on a trip to Europe in the interwar period. Having found success by tapping into the popularity of the Left-wing of those sympathetic to the liberal New Deal of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Café Society was essentially a microcosm of the nation's attitude toward the leftist policies that were a response to the Great Depression. The Café Society offered African-American artists a place to genuinely express themselves and an opportunity for the broader African-American population to participate in the nightlife that before that had then been a luxury exclusive to white people. The names of seminal American artists who got their start, or performed, at the Café Society include Billie Holiday, Josh White, Miles Davis, and John Coltrane. That enthusiasm eventually waned, however, as the Red Scare set in following the Second World War. In 1948, Josephson was labeled as a communist in the press after his brother Leon-- who loaned Barney the money he needed to initially open the Café Society-- refused to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee. As a result, business began to decline and Josephson was forced to sell his beloved nightclub.

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INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1937, a shoe salesman from Trenton, New Jersey with a love for jazz music and no experience in the entertainment industry whatsoever moved to New York City with a vision and a humble loan courtesy of his brother. By the end of the following year, that same man would open what would become one of the most successful nightclubs in New York City for the next decade to come. That man's name was Barney Josephson, and the name of his club was the Café Society. What made the Café Society special was not its success, nor its popularity - at least on their own. What distinguishes the Café Society from its non-integrated competitors in the history books is that it managed to become so successful and popular, while simultaneously being a haven of left-wing and relatively radical progressive politics in the setting of the early twentieth century.

While the Café Society was certainly unique for its time, and largely sprouted out of an increase in the popularity of progressive politics spurred by the New Deal, there was an underlying force of progressivism and integration that had previously existed in the labor movement-- in particular the Congress of Industrial Organizations. In 1935 the CIO dramatically split from the American Federation of Labor due to their concern over the treatment of African-Americans in the South.¹ The CIO had a much more inclusive ideal of the organization of labor at the time, and recognized the detrimental effects that the labor conditions of the South were having on national politics. Josh White, who performed prominently at the Café Society, was very supportive of the CIO and even wrote a song called "Citizen CIO," in which he praised unions for their support of African-American workers as well as their anti-fascist tendencies.

¹ "A Brief History of Labor, Race, and Solidarity." *AFL-CIO* Online. Accessed 30 March 2019, <https://racial-justice.aflcio.org/blog/est-aliquid-se-ipsam-flagitiosum-etiamsi-nulla>

Even though the Café Society did not appear out of thin air, it was certainly a breath of fresh air for those-- like Barney Josephson and Josh White-- who were critical of the standard labor practices and wanted to make a difference.

When Josephson came to New York City after leaving his job as a shoe salesman he had a vision for a nightclub that would provide a foil to the elitist establishments on the East Side of Manhattan. He chose the name “Café Society” itself to satirize the term as it was coined by a contemporary gossip columnist, who went by the pseudonym “Cholly Knickerbocker,” to refer to the upper crust of society that he was quite fond of.² Josephson had become interested in the style of satire that was featured in the political cabarets of Europe, which he had discovered during his travels there at the time of the decline of the Weimar Republic in Germany and rise of the fascist principles of Adolf Hitler throughout much of the continent.³ The target of his club’s satire, indicative of the name he chose, was the popular haunts of the moneyed elite, such as the famous Stork Club, owned by Sherman “The Sherm” Billingsley-- where Frank Sinatra is known to have frequented.

The reason that Josephson chose these clubs as his target was because of their business practices, which he found to be less-than-ideal.⁴ First, although it was not the law in the North, nightclubs were segregated in New York City. The most integrated establishment was Harlem’s Cotton Club, which allowed African-Americans to perform but banned them as patrons-- aside from a few occasions where high profile performers were relegated to a distant corner of the room so as to ensure as little contact with the white patrons as possible. In Josephson’s own

² Barney Josephson and Terry Trilling-Josephson, *Café Society: The Wrong Place for the Right People*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, (2009); 27.

³ Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 20.

⁴ David W. Stowe, "The Politics of Café Society." *The Journal of American History* 84, no. 4 (1998); 1386-87.

words, “Duke Ellington couldn’t have his mother come in to hear him play...”⁵ This state of affairs was perpetuated by the influence of the ethnocentric Italian mob, which had connections throughout the entertainment industry at that time and enforced the segregationist policies of nightclubs that one would expect to find throughout the American South, rather than the North.⁶ Second, the nightclubs of New York City in the 1930s catered to the uber-wealthy and a culture of celebrity that Josephson loathed, and prices at establishments like the Stork Club were exorbitant and wildly inflated.⁷ Lastly, the treatment of employees and performers in the mob-operated clubs of the East Side were far below the standards that a union man like Josephson saw as acceptable.⁸

Café Society challenged the business practices of mainstream nightclubs, and David W. Stowe offers this explanation as to how it did so:

Café Society's formula, which competed successfully with many others during the war years, combined a business ethos of honest value with an aesthetic that held authenticity as its primary value while it experimented with genre blending and cultural hybridism.⁹

With such a formula, Josephson offered an alternative to the completely profit-motivated business model characteristic of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was Josephson’s commitment to the advancement of African-Americans through integration, pro-labor business practices, and genuine devotion to the art and the artists who either performed at or contributed to the Café Society that kept his business afloat. Unfortunately, in 1948, it would be those principles that got him into trouble with Senator Joseph McCarthy, the House Un-

⁵ Josephson and Trillings-Josephson, 8.

⁶ Gerald Horne, “Class Struggle in Hollywood, 1930-1950: Moguls, Mobsters, Stars, Reds, and Trade Unionists.” Austin: University of Texas Press, (2001); 104-107.

⁷ Stowe, 1388-89.

⁸ Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 54-61.

⁹ Stowe, 1386-87.

American Activities Committee, and the FBI and led to the untimely end of his ownership of the business. In this thesis, I will examine Josephson's unconventional business strategy and demonstrate how they not only precipitated his success, but also led to the downfall of the Café Society as the support for the popular left-wing policies and social programs of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal gave way to the staunch anti-Communism of the United States following the Second World War and the Soviet Union's occupation of Eastern Europe. I will format my thesis in three chapters, each highlighting different components of Josephson's approach to managing his nightclub.

In the first chapter, I discuss in more detail the state of race relations in the United States during the Great Depression with a focus on the American music scene as it existed in New York City nightlife, and the practices therein. I provide information on the policies of established, mob-operated nightclubs in New York City where Josephson had witnessed the very practices he sought to offer an alternative to by introducing Sherman Billingsley's Stork Club as a foil to the Café Society. In addition, I note specific examples of how left-wing ideas were dealt with by the wealthy upper-class in and around the time of the Café Society's inception, such as the infamous mural that Diego Rivera had painted at the request of the Rockefeller's just a few years prior to Josephson's club opening.

The purpose of the second chapter will be to demonstrate Josephson's devotion to and respect for the African-American artists that he employed as well as his passion for the art that they created. The content of the chapter includes Josephson's dealings with and treatment of the performers that he and legendary talent scout John Hammond booked to perform at Café Society. I do this by including information regarding the lives of a few of the most prolific artists and performers to have been associated with Josephson's club in a series of vignettes-- each about a

different performer. Each vignette discusses-- with as much detail as could be found-- the artist's life and dealings with Barney Josephson, with an emphasis on any struggles or encounters with segregation each may have had in their respective careers or lives, and what impact Café Society had on them. In order to provide a wider range of perspectives over the entire decade during which the establishment operated, I have chosen three musicians whose respective tenures at the Café Society did not have much overlap with one another; Billie Holiday, Hazel Scott, and Josh White.

The third chapter discusses the scrutiny placed on those concerned with the management of the Café Society by House Un-American Activities Committee as well as the Federal Bureau of Investigation. This was fueled by the rise of Joseph McCarthy's anti-communism following World War II and ultimately caused a decline in the business' popularity. To do so, this chapter analyzes primary sources from popular newspapers and periodicals during the late-1930s on into the early-50s. In addition, I explore lesser known publications of the contemporary black press, in order to provide some insight into how the Café Society was perceived by the public.

Chapter 1

A PLACE LIKE NO OTHER

Nightlife Before the Café Society

Look what they're doing to these people. The only unique thing that we possess culturally in this country is the music the Negro people have given to us, our only indigenous art form. Gospel, blues, jazz, rock and roll, all originated from the spirituals and slave songs down South. Everything else was brought over from Europe... I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted a club where blacks and whites worked together under the footlights and sat together out front, a club whose stated advertised policy would be just that. There wasn't, so far as I know, a place like it in New York, or in the whole country for that matter.¹⁰

-- Barney Josephson on American Culture and the Treatment of African-Americans in the Nightclub Business

¹⁰ Barney Josephson and Terry Trilling-Josephson, *Café Society: The Wrong Place for the Right People*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press (2009); 9.

To get a sense of what it was that Barney Josephson loathed about the practices of New York City nightclubs in the 1920s and 30s, take Sherman Billingsley as the prime example of what exactly Josephson had hoped to avoid as the proprietor of the Café Society. The only similarities between these two individuals are perhaps that they were both white, they both owned nightclubs in New York City, and that's about it. Not even the passage of time could soften Josephson's opinion of Billingsley. In retrospect, Josephson said of his rival: "Sherman Billingsley, proprietor of that society hangout, the Stork Club on East 53rd Street, was a terrible snob, an anti-Semite and anti-Negro. He had started out a bootlegger and could never have made it without his gangster affiliations."¹¹

To Josephson, Billingsley represented everything that was corrupt and wrong about the nightclub industry. The main impetus that inspired Barney Josephson, and drew him into the world of club ownership, was his love and respect of the jazz and blues music of African-Americans.¹² While he wished to showcase the talent and culture that he had such an appreciation for, the prevailing notion at the time when it came to jazz was that it was a vehicle for what Burton W. Peretti described as "white escapism."¹³ "White escapism" encapsulates how the entertainment industry of the early 20th-century was intended to satisfy a white audience, and thusly explains the caricatures and stereotypes of television programs and films that many of us have now come to know and understand today. For many nightclub owners and patrons, the music of African-Americans seemed to have been little more than an interesting footnote in the history of American culture, as Stephen Graham described a Cotton Club show: "A group of

¹¹ Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 9.

¹² Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 9.

¹³ Burton W. Peretti, *Nightclub City*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press (2007); 20.

Negroes are singing a Dixie song, and the Negroes are like slaves and they are like children. They are fondly unified in a sentimental group, and they croon and beguile with notes of long-drawn sweetness and sadness.”¹⁴ Graham’s quote implied that African-American art was not fit to be considered “art” in the traditional sense, and thusly trivialized the African-American experience and their authority to create something of significant cultural value. This also explained the decision of clubs to satirize the presentation of the plantation scene as being the natural place of origin for the stereotypical African-American.

The longing for escape in white society was not indicative of a population that was looking to accept other cultures and peoples as part of their own way of life, but rather reflective of a wish to consume them in a satirized and exaggerated way for its own leisure. Just as it does today, taking part in New York City nightlife at this time implied that one was likely to encounter people of other ethnicities in some capacity—a prospect that was somewhat anxiety-producing for a rather straight-laced citizenry used to a traditional understanding of race relations in the United States. As diversity had increased—particularly in urban areas—since the end of the Civil War and ratification of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, insecurities regarding what would happen to the dominance of white Americans followed suit. Those insecurities, as well as the desire to escape in the world of entertainment, manifested themselves in the atmospheres of popular night spots like the Cotton Club, with its plantation theme.¹⁵ Cab Calloway’s success there reflected the mainstream white audience’s preference for big band swing jazz over the more unfiltered blues-based stylings of those of the likes of Louis Armstrong, which would have

¹⁴ Stephen Graham, *New York Nights*. New York: George H. Doran (1927); 24. Found in Peretti, 20.

¹⁵ Peretti, 17.

been more accurate in regards to the style of music played on plantations.¹⁶ The popular big band swing music did not really have much connection with the rural plantations of the South, or the people who lived there—other than its roots in blues, and that it was played by African-Americans. When it came to consuming entertainment, particularly when the performers were African-American, it didn't have to be accurate, it just had to be entertaining.

Logically then, central to the nightclub atmosphere was the “jungle” and plantation caricature of black people. Just as Stephen Graham was fascinated by the African-Americans in the Cotton Club singing Dixie songs in the roles of amiable plantation workers, white audiences generally felt that Harlem jazz was the result of the mixing of stereotypes in which black people found their origins in the jungle and on the plantation. In their minds, the music was simply an expression of that simplified version of what was perceived as reality. As the black cabarets of Harlem began to attract white patrons, blacks were subsequently banned from attendance, and such “jungle revues” that became famous in the Cotton Club moved in. Once such a presentation of jazz music was sanitized for the mainstream white audience, it was a simple task to transport this type of show into midtown venues, where whites would be spared the trip to Harlem.¹⁷

Such a superficial approach to black culture lends itself to another aspect of nightclubs in the Roaring Twenties and the following Depression Era, and that was the artificial nature of the “culture of celebrity” promoted by the Stork Club and the big names of “Café society.”¹⁸ Nightclubs invested huge amounts in highly skilled wait staffs in an effort to imitate the “environment of the idle rich.” This caused favoritism to be shown to the biggest spenders, who

¹⁶ Peretti, 183-84.

¹⁷ Peretti, 20-21.

¹⁸ David W. Stowe, "The Politics of Café Society." *The Journal of American History* 84, no. 4 (1998); 1386.

would tip better, and a sense of disdain towards those patrons of humbler means. The nightclub staple of cigarette concessions also carried extra fees to be added to the bills of customers which were largely already very inflated due to expensive food and drink prices. Cover charges also began to be introduced at this time, and as more clubs started using them, others— like the Villa Venice which advertised no excessive prices or cover charges— were forced to institute them in order to keep up.¹⁹

The popularity of the exclusive “class clubs” was on the rise, and-- more and more-- nightlife in general was becoming an activity of the wealthy in New York City, as poor people were affected disproportionately to the wealthy during the Great Depression. While many of the uber-wealthy were not terribly affected by the stock market crash in 1929, the residual effects of the Depression eventually caught up to the nightclub industry in 1933. The early-mid 1930s saw a low-point for New York City nightlife, as struggling nightclubs were forced to focus on unpretentiousness and low costs during that time. Fortunately for them, the repeal of Prohibition resulted in a revival of Broadway— which was also spurred by the New Deal’s Federal Theatre Project— and eventually led to a resurgence of the lavish consumerism characteristic of 1920s nightclubs. While President Roosevelt’s New Deal promoted equality and liberal social policies, the objectification of women and blatant racism continued to be ever present. A possible explanation for this is that, as some social barriers are broken, others are erected. For example, as African-Americans were freed from slavery and granted citizenship in the South following the Civil War, Jim Crow and segregation were instituted so that the powerful white elite could hold on to their power. As the New Deal helped alleviate the struggles of impoverished Americans,

¹⁹ Peretti, 14.

there was a return to elitism, as the wealthy felt that there was more of a necessity to flaunt their status once more in order to differentiate themselves from those less fortunate.²⁰

The Stork Club became known for high drink prices, giving gratuitous amounts of attention to celebrities, and carefully monitoring who exactly was allowed into the establishment as other “class clubs” had done in the 20s. In addition, there was an unwritten ban on African-Americans from entering the Stork Club. Other nightclubs with similar policies to that of the Stork Club, such as El Morocco and 21, created a social atmosphere characterized by social hierarchy that became known as “Café society.”²¹ At the helm of the Stork was, of course, Sherman Billingsley-- also known as “The Sherm.”

Billingsley came from a family of Prohibition bootleggers in Oklahoma and started working at the age of seven when his brothers gave him a toy wagon that they allowed him to play with so long as every day he went to the nearby Native American reservation and sold them “soda” which, in reality, was alcohol.²² After a stint in federal prison on account of being caught bootlegging, Billingsley became a real estate developer in New York City. On the side, he operated his speakeasy, which he called the Stork Club, and kept the authorities at bay by cozying up to Edward Flynn, who ran the powerful political machine known as Tammany Hall in the Bronx. After the repeal of Prohibition, Billingsley kept some friends in high places on his side, as Flynn had connections to the Roosevelt’s, and he himself had managed to form a notable friendship with FBI director J. Edgar Hoover— which Hoover used to gather information

²⁰ Peretti, 171-73.

²¹ Peretti, 177-78.

²² Robert Sylvester, *No Cover Charge*. London: P. Davies (1956); 68.

regarding suspected radicals in the nightclub industry.²³ Billingsley was a far cry from the shoe-salesman from Trenton, New Jersey that would become one of his fiercest competitors.

Unsurprisingly, the methods that the Sherm used to run his exclusive nightclub were radically different than those off Barney Josephson and Café Society. Billingsley would constantly suck up to his well-to-do and celebrity customers by bestowing various expensive gifts upon them, from perfume to champagne.²⁴ Such a strategy was not so much one that any businessman of humbler means could readily adopt. He also gave celebrities gifts of copious amounts of alcoholic beverages to manipulate them into making a massively expensive “guest appearance” by more or less forcing them to stay and drink what was given to them, or face the newspapers and tabloids who would jump on any sort of drama that might arise from them turning down a gift from Sherman Billingsley and the Stork Club.²⁵ Having friends in the media, such as Walter Winchell-- a man who enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship with Billingsley as one of the premier proponents of celebrity gossip in print and on the radio-- was another advantage that the Stork Club had over other establishments.²⁶

The policies regarding race in the Café Society and the Stork Club were diametrically opposed, and reflected the attitudes of their respective proprietors. Where Josephson had an expressed and advertised commitment to a broad notion of tolerance within the walls of his club, Billingsley had an unwritten rule of barring anyone who was not white from his establishment. One night, an old customer of Billingsley called and said he wanted a table for himself and a party. In the party was an extremely wealthy Indian prince known as the Maharajah of Jaipur.

²³ Peretti, 179-80.

²⁴ Sylvester, 82.

²⁵ Sylvester, 82.

²⁶ Sylvester, 88.

Billingsley told the customer, “I don’t want none of those colored men in here.” When the customer told Billingsley that he was talking about one of the wealthiest men in the world, the club owner replied, “He’s still colored,” and that was his final word on the matter.²⁷ When it came down to the brass tacks, race meant more than money for those of the mindset of Sherman Billingsley. No matter how wealthy someone was, if they were not white, they were considered to be less-than in the eyes of some. They were the outsiders; the “wrong” people. At the same time, if race is taken out of the equation, the Stork Club and other such clubs that sought to be a part of “café society,” implicitly had to implement a policy based on *exclusivity*, rather than *inclusion*—as was the case with the Café Society.

Further anathema to Barney Josephson’s policy of inclusion and his constant support of the artistic talent of the musicians he employed were the debutante cabaret singers presented in the Stork Club and related establishments that perpetuated the culture of celebrity they fed off of. Such singers were generally hired on account of their social standing and who their parents were, rather than because of any outstanding level of talent.²⁸ Billingsley failed to see that musicians, artists, and performers were genuine people who have experienced America in many different ways, from a variety of walks of life, and-- as such-- had the potential to contribute greatly to American culture, as well as his nightclub. On one occasion, the Sherm, noticing that one particular night was a rather slow one for business, demanded that the music be kept lively, and conveyed this to the orchestra. “Tell the orchestra leader not to play sad music on a sad night,” he said.²⁹

²⁷ Sylvester, 89.

²⁸ Peretti, 179-80.

²⁹ Sylvester, 86.

The atmosphere of the Stork Club was the result of the micromanagement of Sherman Billingsley. Nobody was safe from his ever-watchful and critical eye. He was known to write notes to anyone and everyone under his employ, from the head chef to the hatcheck girl. According to biographer Robert Sylvester, the greetings of these letters were almost always along the lines of, "God damn it! Son of a bitch!... Obscenity. More Obscenity. How many times have I told you that when a customer, etc."³⁰ One night, his attention was drawn to the hatcheck girl who, standing by the door in the wintertime, was shivering due to the cold. Billingsley had one of his other staff members go over and reprimand her, and told them, "Tell that girl to stop dancing. This place is not a dance hall."³¹

What made the Café Society and the Stork Club so different was that each was a reflection of its owner. What made the Café Society "the Café Society," was the myriad of people who contributed to every aspect of it. From the artists who painted the murals, to the ones who performed on stage every night and the diverse set of patrons that they had performed for. The Stork Club, on the other hand, was entirely the brainchild of Sherman Billingsley. It was created to profit off of the culture of celebrity that it helped to create and, rather than celebrate the diversity of American society, it perpetuated the mindset of exclusivity and elitism-- that there is some kind of ideal that is to be strived for in the public eye.

³⁰ Sylvester, 83.

³¹ Sylvester, 86.

The “Communist” Visual Art of Café Society

The basement room had spaces with columns coming down the walls. I told the artists, “You’re free to paint what you like, absolute freedom. I do not want you to submit any sketches. Choose your spaces. This is your panel, your space. Paint.”³²

-- Instructions that Barney Josephson gave to the artists that were hired to paint in the Café Society.

³² Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 26.

Unlike the European cabarets that enraptured Barney Josephson, American nightclubs were generally bereft of any political radicalism, of which the Stork Club was no exception.³³ Another club-- which opened in 1934 on the 65th floor of Rockefeller Center, was the Rainbow Room. Nelson Rockefeller took a large role in the designing of the Rainbow Room and, as a member of one of the wealthiest families in the world at the time, spared no expense when it came to furnishing arguably the most over-the-top expensive night spot in New York City. The endless wealth of the Rockefeller family afforded the establishment the ability to lose vast amounts of money per year and still stay afloat. The building that housed the Rainbow Room, the RCA Building, was the newest addition to the New York skyline and the first since the Great Depression had taken effect.³⁴

The main lobby of the impressive building was to house a mural by Diego Rivera. In 1933, the Rockefeller's hired the great Mexican painter, with the agreement that he would be paid a total of \$21,000 over the course of three installments of \$7,000 for each of the three pieces of this enormous Fresco painting.³⁵ The name of the piece was called *Man at the Crossroads*, and it depicted a contemporary nightclub scene, with all of the ills inflicted upon the world by capitalism on one side, contrasted with the hopeful image of Vladimir Lenin leading the world towards peace, represented by the Soviet leader joining the hands of a worker, a soldier, and a black person featured quite prominently in the mural.³⁶

³³ Peretti, 9.

³⁴ Peretti, 180-181.

³⁵ "Rockefeller's Ban Lenin In RCA Mural And Dismiss Rivera." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, May 10, 1933. <http://ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/docview/100702524?accountid=13158>.

³⁶ Peretti, 182. *New York Times*, May 10, 1933.



Figure 1. "Man at the Crossroads," Diego Rivera, 1934

Figure 1. Rivera's *Man at the Crossroads* was never completed, and only black and white photographs remain of the original work before it was destroyed by the Rockefeller's. The full image (above) was recreated by Rivera in Mexico after the affair with the Rockefeller's in New York. The controversial image of Lenin joining the hands of the soldier, the worker, and the black person that sparked the whole debacle can be seen to the right. *Courtesy of DiegoRivera.org.*³⁷



Figure 2. Likeness of Vladimir Lenin in greater detail.

The inclusion of Lenin was seen as potentially offensive by the Rockefeller's, and Nelson had sent a letter to the Mexican painter to request that he "substitute the face of some unknown

³⁷ [https://www.diegorivera.org/man-at-the-crossroads.jsp#prettyPhoto\[image1\]/0/](https://www.diegorivera.org/man-at-the-crossroads.jsp#prettyPhoto[image1]/0/)

man where the face of Lenin appear[ed].”³⁸ In the letter Rockefeller also complimented the work of the artist-- his mother was a well-known admirer of Rivera’s work and treasurer of the Museum of Modern Art-- and sympathized that the inclusion of Lenin would be acceptable to him if the mural were to be displayed in a private residence.³⁹ In a thoughtful manner, Rivera attempted to convince Rockefeller of the importance of including the likeness of Lenin in his piece, and offered a compromise by erasing the depiction of the nightclub as representative of the ills of society resulting from capitalism, and replacing it with an image of Lincoln-- among others-- in their efforts to better humankind by abolishing slavery in the United States. He explained his willingness to compromise in such a manner thusly:

I am sure that the solution I propose will entirely clarify the historical meaning of the figure of leader as represented by Lenin and Lincoln, and no one will be able to object to them without objecting to the most fundamental feelings of human love and solidarity and the constructive social force represented by such men. Also it will clarify the general meaning of the painting.⁴⁰

Rivera also stated in his response that he would rather see the mural destroyed than compromise on the inclusion of the likeness of Lenin.⁴¹ He felt so strongly about *Man at the Crossroads* because he considered it to be his masterpiece, as its message was to be about the progress of mankind that had been brought about via technology.

Unfortunately, his unwillingness to compromise on the Lenin issue led to his dismissal by the Rockefeller’s, and he was paid in full although the work was incomplete, as the letter he received that terminated his contract contained a check for the remaining \$14,000 that he was still owed. The excuse used by his employers was that his mural would not fit the “decorative

³⁸ *New York Times*, May 10, 1933.

³⁹ *New York Times*, May 10, 1933.

⁴⁰ *New York Times*, May 10, 1933.

⁴¹ *New York Times*, May 10, 1933.

theme of the great hall” of Rockefeller Center.⁴² Still, Rivera had hoped to finish his masterpiece, and his artistic vision garnered him some support in the art community. Following his dismissal, a group of demonstrators surrounded the RCA Building in support of Rivera before they were disbanded by the police.⁴³ In the end, Nelson Rockefeller had the mural destroyed.⁴⁴

The Rockefeller’s reaction to Rivera’s mural was based in the general idea that support for any ideas that could be considered communist in nature would be bad for business. While it can certainly be argued that Rivera was quite deliberately antagonizing some of the most successful capitalists to have ever lived by painting an image of Vladimir Lenin on an enormous mural—and having them pay for it—their uneasiness when it came to the image was still rooted in fear for their reputation over the prospect of being associated with communism. Such anxieties were prevalent in the United States on a more general level, as many on the far Left were seen as subversive, and “communism” became a dirty word. It made sense for businesses, even if they were sympathetic to Left-wing ideas, to shy away from any inflammatory images that might alienate a good deal of their potential customer base. That being the case, it was quite remarkable for Barney Josephson to allow his place of business to essentially be a blank canvas for the artists he asked to paint for him there.

Unlike Rockefeller-- and Sherman Billingsley to a lesser extent, Josephson gave the artists that he employed complete and total creative license to paint, sketch, draw, say, sing, and perform whatever they saw fit. As stated in the introductory quote that began this section, he

⁴² *New York Times*, May 10, 1933.

⁴³ *New York Times*, May 10, 1933.

⁴⁴ Peretti, 182.

gave them “absolute freedom” and trusted completely in their discretion when it came to their contributions to the Café Society.⁴⁵ While the Greenwich Village basement space of Number 2 Sheridan Square was no great hall of the RCA Building at 30 Rockefeller Plaza, the inclusion of some controversial artwork in an establishment that was open to the public was still a profound political statement on the part of the proprietor of the Café Society.

Even though Barney and his brother Leon were known for their communist sympathies, and were constantly under the scrutinous eyes of J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI, as well as Joseph McCarthy’s House of Un-American Activities Committee, the murals and art in Café Society generally stopped short of explicitly including any overtly communistic symbolism. The club’s obvious left-lean was apparent upon entrance, however, as there was a bust of a monkey inside of the doorway with the likeness of Adolf Hitler, whose fascism and intolerance was certainly not welcome within the walls of Josephson’s establishment.⁴⁶ Rather than espouse any support of renowned figures in left-wing politics, the artwork in the Café Society usually poked fun at the nightclub’s namesake-- those who subscribe to the artificial culture of celebrity.

⁴⁵ Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 26.

⁴⁶ Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 31.



Figure 3. Two murals featured prominently in the Café Society.

*Courtesy of AxisCompany.org.*⁴⁷

The first of the above images was painted behind the bar in the Café Society by Sam Berman. His intention was to capture the inclusiveness of Josephson's club, and the various animals and people all laughing and having a good time together is meant to represent all of the different kinds of folks that were welcome in this revolutionary establishment. Normally behind the bar in such an establishment there would have been a large mirror, but Josephson was of the

⁴⁷ <https://www.axiscompany.org/history.php>

opinion that people did not tend to look so great when they were drinking, so he thought they may not want to look at themselves. With this in mind, Berman painted the mural with the idea in mind that it would be a mirror, and people would see themselves “reflected” in the forms of a variety of animals drinking at the bar and carrying on with their conversation.⁴⁸

The second image was created by Alice Stander. It depicts a nightclub patron completely at the mercy of the onslaught of gimmicky services offered by mainstream, contemporary nightclubs which Josephson was not a fan of. Featured in Stander’s piece are a cigarette girl, a hatcheck girl, a fortune-teller, a waiter, and a number of other distractions found in most nightclubs that would constantly come around looking for large tips.⁴⁹ On the subject of such distractions, Josephson remarked, “We were going to be unlike all other nightclubs. Cigarette girls would not sell little stuffed doggies and gardenias for the ladies. No one would be taking photographs at the tables.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 31.

⁴⁹ Ralph Blumenthal. "Look Who Dropped in at the Stork." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, July 1, 1996. <http://ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/docview/109570663?accountid=13158>. In one case, one of Sherman Billingsley’s head waiters at the Stork Club named Victor Crotter received a \$20,000 tip.

⁵⁰ Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 23.

Chapter 2

WORKING FOR BARNEY JOSEPHSON: THE “WHITE-MAN BOSS”

Billie Holiday

She did what she liked. If a man she liked came up, she'd go with him; if a woman, the same thing. If she was handed a drink, she'd drink it. If you had a stick of pot, she'd take a cab ride on her break and smoke it. If you had something stronger, she'd use that. That was her way. She didn't apologize for it and she didn't feel ashamed. All she wanted was to have fun in whatever way it struck her. She was sensitive, she was proud. She could tell a good joke; she knew all the words to use if you rubbed her the wrong way. When she told you off, you were damn well told--white, black, rich, poor. She had a real zest for life. As a performer, she could make you fall in love, she could break your heart. A lot of what she did ended up breaking her heart. That was her life. There was no other person on the face of the earth who was like her. Billie Holiday was a single edition.

-- Barney Josephson reflecting on Billie Holiday in a 1979 interview⁵¹

⁵¹Stuart Nicholson, *Billie Holiday*. Boston: Northeastern University Press (1995); 117-8.

Billie Holiday was one of the first performers hired by Barney Josephson for the Café Society's opening show in late December of 1938. It would not be an understatement to say that without the Café Society, it is more than likely that there would have been no Billie Holiday, and without Billie Holiday there would not have been a Café Society. While Josephson's grand opening night was not without its roster of jazz greats such as Albert Ammons, Meade Lux Lewis, and Pete Johnson, it was Billie Holiday who became the star of the Café Society in its earliest years. Her rendition of the early African-American protest song—which was interestingly written by a white man—"Strange Fruit" cemented her in the spotlight for years to come, and it was Josephson and the Café Society with its radically progressive policies that allowed her to sing such a song so publicly at a time when racial discrimination was the overwhelming norm, rather than the exception. In many respects, Josephson and Holiday each owe their success to the other.

Their relationship began when Billie Holiday was introduced to Barney Josephson in 1938 by John Hammond, who took on the responsibility of booking the talent for the Café Society.⁵² Hammond was Holiday's agent and, up until that point, had only marginal success in introducing her to mainstream, white audiences. Their relationship with one another had been growing increasingly tense in the years leading up to the meeting with Josephson, due to their lack of progress together.⁵³ As it turns out, the last time that Hammond would go to find a booking for Billie Holiday would be the one that would finally be her big break.

A biographer of Holiday, Stuart Nicholson, claims that "Billie's residency at the Café Society gave her an opportunity to define her style... to an extent that had been impossible

⁵²Barney Josephson and Terry Trilling-Josephson, *Café Society: The Wrong Place for the Right People*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press (2009); 14.

⁵³Meg Greene, "STRANGE FRUIT". In *Billie Holiday: A Biography*. Westport, CT: Greenwood (2006); 55.

before.⁵⁴ Without a doubt, Holiday's sudden rise to stardom and popularity among white audiences was catalyzed by her performance of the song "Strange Fruit." The song itself was one of the very first African-American protest songs, and it was about the horrors of lynchings that were constantly occurring throughout the Southern United States. It features very graphic imagery in its lyrics, which depict a horrible scene of African-American corpses as the "strange fruits" hanging from the trees in the South:

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

Pastoral scene of the gallant south
 The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
 Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh
 Then the sudden smell of rotten flesh

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck
 For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
 For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop
 Here is a strange and bitter crop.⁵⁵

"Strange Fruit" was penned by a second generation Jewish-American man from the Bronx by the name of Abel Meeropol under the pseudonym Lewis Allen. Robert Gordon, a promoter who was helping Josephson put together his opening show, had heard Meeropol's poem-- originally entitled "Bitter Fruit"-- set to music by an African-American singer named Laura Duncan. Gordon brought the piece to Josephson's attention, and the pair decided to invite Meeropol to the Café Society in order to hear it for themselves. Meeropol performed the song for

⁵⁴Nicholson, 111.

⁵⁵Billie Holiday, vocalist, "Strange Fruit," by Lewis Allen, recorded April 1939, A-side Single, Commodore, Vinyl 78rpm.

Josephson, who was floored by the intense imagery of the song.⁵⁶ He then asked if Holiday would be willing to perform it. Billie was hesitant about performing the song at first, and she told Meeropol and Josephson that she would have to think it over. When she made up her mind, she said to Frankie Newton-- whose band backed her at the Café Society: “Some guys brought me a hell of a damn song that I’m going to do.”⁵⁷

Only in such a place as the Café Society would Holiday be able to make the song “Strange Fruit” a staple of her career. The song, as performed by Holiday, is a slow-tempo ballad in the key of B-flat minor-- which is commonly regarded as one of the most somber keys in classical music.⁵⁸ The song, with its provocative lyrics forced her audience to think about the horrors of racial violence in a setting where they had come, primarily, to enjoy themselves and simply be entertained for an evening. Josephson was very particular when it came to how the song was to be performed in order to maximize the effect of Holiday’s deliverance. Holiday would only perform it at the very end of her set, and take no encores after she had finished her performance. The lights would all be dimmed, with the exception of a single beam of light on Billie, and the wait staff was to stop whatever they were doing to minimize distractions for the audience.⁵⁹ As the final, haunting line faded away, Holiday’s performance was initially met with complete silence. Then, a single soul began to clap tentatively before the rest of the crowd joined in with raucous applause. Josephson claimed that this moment was absolutely crucial for both the Café Society and Billie Holiday alike.⁶⁰

⁵⁶Greene, 59-60.

⁵⁷John Chilton, *Billie's Blues: A Survey of Billie Holiday's Career, 1933-1959*. London: Quartet Books (1975); 69.

⁵⁸Nicholson, 113.

⁵⁹ Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 47-48.

⁶⁰Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 48.

When Meeropol initially came to Josephson with “Strange Fruit,” he knew that he wanted Billie Holiday to sing it, but he absolutely refused to impose the song upon her. Josephson recognized that it was something that she would have to voluntarily choose to do, especially because of the content of the lyrics, and the possible consequences an African-American woman would have potentially faced for singing a protest song of its nature. Contrary to common practice among nightclub managers at the time, Barney Josephson made it a point to treat those in his employ with the utmost respect, no matter their race, sexuality, political preferences, etc. He also respected Holiday as an accomplished artist. So, in his view it, Josephson felt that it was not within his prerogative to tell a professional how to do their job. Therefore, he warned Meeropol: “[If] Billie listens to this song and says no. That’s it. You may not try to persuade her. I won’t allow that. If there’s any persuasion to be done, I’ll do it-- or none.”⁶¹ Fortunately, for everyone involved, it turned out to be a massive success.

Billie Holiday’s Café Society gig was undoubtedly one of the best things to happen to her, and not just from a professional standpoint. Billie did not receive a great education, nor did she go to school beyond fifth grade. She seemed to grasp the limitations that she had to deal with due to her lack of education, as she would constantly get frustrated when she didn’t understand what some of the other musicians were talking about when it came to the intellectual, political discussions that were a staple of the Café Society. Barney Josephson provided her with encouragement and advice during her time with him, and “did wonders for her confidence on-stage, enabling her to project a more sophisticated act.”⁶² According to Lena Horne, “It was Barney who encouraged us, as artists, to express our individuality in our performances.”⁶³ In

⁶¹Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 46.

⁶²John Chilton, 68.

⁶³John Chilton, 68.

large part, the main way that Josephson was able to accomplish this was by offering performers a place to perform where discrimination would not be tolerated.

This was undoubtedly a welcome change for Holiday as, just prior to her residency at the Café Society, she had been a singer in Artie Shaw's band. Shaw had his own residency at the Lincoln Hotel, and had another female singer in addition to Holiday; a white woman by the name of Helen Forest. The singers were to be seated until it came time for them to sing their respective choruses. Forest was allowed to sit onstage with the band, while Holiday was relegated to a small room off in the wings of the stage. In addition, Holiday was forced to use the hotel's freight elevators in order to get to the stage because guests in the hotel were upset by an African-American person using the guest elevators. Billie eventually quit after some time of dealing with such treatment, but the straw that broke the camel's back was when Shaw would not allow her to sing when the band was given the opportunity to have their performance broadcasted on the radio, and subsequently got featured on the cover of *Metronome* magazine with only one singer: Helen Forest.⁶⁴ Josephson said of Billie Holiday and segregation practices of other clubs:

I often wondered how Billie Holiday... who always kept one eye on the door when she sang, must feel when singing in a place where her own people were not permitted in. But if they were welcomed and seated at ringside tables, wouldn't that make a difference in Billie's performances and others also?"⁶⁵

Josephson was constantly concerned with the well-being and the maintenance of the Café Society's environment of acceptance when it came to artists being able to express themselves as they saw fit. He wanted to make sure that they were all able to have steady employment on his watch, and he went to great lengths to ensure that such a state of affairs was maintained. It allowed performers like Holiday to really develop their acts, and provide them with a sense of

⁶⁴Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 38.

⁶⁵Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 110.

security that their jobs were not constantly at risk.⁶⁶ That being said, Josephson did still have a business to run and, as permissive as he was as a boss and manager, he had to have certain rules in place. One of his least liked rules, given the well-known habits of jazz musicians at the time, was his policy of not allowing the musicians to smoke marijuana while backstage or on the job.⁶⁷

While Josephson and Holiday had a pretty good relationship, it was not without the occasional confrontation. According to jazz critic Whitney Balliet, Josephson was of the impression that Billie Holiday always saw him as a “white man boss,” but did not blame her for never completely trusting him given her past experience with club owners in her music career.⁶⁸ One of their most intense bouts came after a lukewarm reception of one of Holiday’s performances by the audience. Josephson was well-aware that Billie would take a cab around town between sets in order to avoid his no-marijuana stipulation, but one night she returned from her break and Josephson was able to visibly tell what she had been up to. He let it go, as he usually did, but after the audience did not give her the applause that she had been expecting after she performed her opening number, Holiday turned around and lifted up her gown to reveal her bare buttocks to the audience in order to show her displeasure.⁶⁹ Josephson knew that this was her way of saying, “Kiss my black a--!” a sentiment of protest that he was not in complete disagreement with, but he felt he did have to reprimand her for being completely unprofessional.⁷⁰ According to Josephson, she never did anything like that again after he threatened to find new acts if he was to catch anyone smoking marijuana saying,

I won’t ask who was smoking, and I don’t want anyone to snitch on whoever is because the most abhorrent thing to me is a stool-pigeon. If I smell this stuff around here

⁶⁶Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 111.

⁶⁷John Chilton, 66-7.

⁶⁸John Chilton, 62.

⁶⁹John Chilton, 66-7.

⁷⁰Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 56.

and I know it's coming from you guys [the musicians in general], I'll put you all on notice. I'll put in an all new show and new musicians.⁷¹

In his description of Holiday's performances, one gets the impression that Josephson really appreciated that she was truly feeling the words that she was singing, and that there was really nothing that was not genuine about her singing.⁷² In addition, the quote at the beginning of this section-- spoken by Josephson years after the death of Billie Holiday-- implies that despite the disputes that the pair may have had, Josephson thought very highly of Holiday. It's also a testament to his accepting nature of people that would be considered quite "different" by mainstream standards in the early twentieth century in particular; Josephson did not make any judgment regarding Holiday's personal character based on her race, sexuality, or history of drug use, and that non-discriminatory nature of his when it came to management was an immeasurably important in making the Café Society what it was.

⁷¹ Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 57

⁷² Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 48.

Hazel Scott

She has to have plenty of nerve to sit at that piano after such greats as Meade Lux Lewis, Albert Ammons, and Pete Johnson-- the Boogie-Woogie Boys-- get thru wearin' the ivories... But Hazel holds her own, and demonstrates a style all her own...

-- From *New Amsterdam News* article "**Hazel Scott Succeeds Billie Holiday at Café Society**"⁷³

⁷³"Hazel Scott Succeeds Billie Holiday at Café Society." *New York Amsterdam News (1938-1941)*, Nov 18, 1939, City edition.

At the request of Billie Holiday, upon her leaving Barney Josephson and the Café Society, Hazel Scott—Holiday’s protégée—was going to get her shot to capture the hearts of the Café Society patrons. If Holiday was the star of the Café Society in Greenwich Village, Scott would become the star of Josephson’s second nightclub: the Café Society Uptown. Due to the success of his original club, downtown in Greenwich Village, Josephson decided to open a second Café Society in September of 1940. This new branch was much closer to the other East Side, upper-class establishments he intended to satirize—at least geographically.

Hazel Scott was an incredibly talented pianist and vocalist, who had strong senses of both social consciousness and self-awareness. She became known for taking arrangements of traditional European classical music and infusing them with popular jazz stylings to much acclaim as well as criticism. Despite criticism she remained true to herself and found much success with the Café Society and Barney Josephson. Scott also dabbled in Hollywood as an actress where, as a native of Trinidad and Tobago, she refused to do anything that would reflect poorly upon anyone with darker skin.

At just nineteen years of age, Hazel Scott was to be the top-billed performer at the new Café Society Uptown branch, and her pay was raised from just a few hundred dollars per week to fifteen-hundred dollars per week. Josephson also had a dressing room constructed there for Scott’s personal use, which she said was “as big as an apartment.”⁷⁴ In many respects, Hazel Scott owed a great deal of success to the guidance and advice of Barney Josephson.⁷⁵ The rest, she likely owed to a man by the name of Leonard Feather-- a respected jazz critic who saw

⁷⁴Karen Chilton, *Hazel Scott: The Pioneering Journey of a Jazz Pianist from Café Society to Hollywood to HUAC*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press (2008); 60.

⁷⁵Karen Chilton, 115.

potential in Hazel Scott, just as Josephson did. Feather worked as Hazel Scott's publicist and producer, and worked very hard to get her featured in the press. Even though she was incredibly talented, editors did not want to have a black woman featured in their publications. Most of his success in this venture was found in the contemporary black press (*Amsterdam News, Chicago Defender, Pittsburgh Courier*).⁷⁶

After leaving their home in the Latin American country of Trinidad, Scott, her mother Alma, and Grandmother Margaret moved to a small apartment in Harlem. The increase in pay that Scott received from Josephson after the opening of Café Society Uptown afforded her the ability to move her family into a relatively nicer apartment "with large rooms and a nice view." Scott was aware that balancing a checkbook was not particularly one of her talents, so she always turned over the money she had earned from her employment under Josephson to her mother.⁷⁷

Her album *Swinging the Classics* was a huge commercial success, and featured swing versions of classical tunes.⁷⁸ Some people had their reservations, like one man who walked out in disgust as she played during a show that Josephson put on at Carnegie hall to benefit the local musicians union. When told about the incident Scott replied,

I'm inclined to agree with him. I know lots of people who have good reasons why it's all right to swing the classics, but-- well, I wish I didn't do it. I just can't help it. My stuff is hybrid... I'm not grim enough for the classics. As for swing-- well, I'm not sufficiently aboriginal.⁷⁹

⁷⁶Karen Chilton, 57.

⁷⁷Karen Chilton, 61.

⁷⁸Karen Chilton, 62.

⁷⁹Karen Chilton, 64.

Such a criticism was likely borne out of the popular sentiment of the time that jazz-- largely seen as the music of African-Americans-- did not mix well with the classical music scene.⁸⁰ The same racism that kept Billie Holiday relegated to a backseat position to Helen Forest in Artie Shaw's band can be found in the criticisms of the way in which Hazel Scott performed classical music selections in the swing style. But again, as was the case for Billie Holiday, Barney Josephson and the Café Society were there to provide Scott with a place where her art would be accepted without discrimination, and Scott's popularity and reputation continued to flourish despite her critics' opinions. Scott was offered a position by the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel at a salary that doubled what Josephson was paying her.⁸¹ She turned them down out of a sense of loyalty to Josephson and the Café Society.

At the height of her popularity, Scott was often compared to Mary Lou Williams, who was generally regarded as more of a traditional jazz and blues pianist because she did not swing the classics as Scott did. Where Scott became well known for using her personality to entertain audiences in her strapless dresses-- which she wore for the functional purpose of being able to move her arms more freely as she played the piano-- Williams let the music do the talking. Even though Williams was a much more established musician at the time, Josephson would constantly try to get her to be a performer more in the vein of Scott. While she refused to do so, and even took the suggestion as an insult, she respected Scott's performance style and did not judge her for such differences. In turn, Hazel Scott had idolized Mary Lou Williams, and saw her as the premier female jazz pianist. The two were lifelong friends.⁸² Such a relationship, of mutual

⁸⁰Karen Chilton, 51. When John Hammond put together a show entitled "An Evening of Negro Music: From Spirituals to Swing." It was criticized because black music was seen as fit for only nightclubs and ballrooms, and did not belong in a formal concert hall.

⁸¹Karen Chilton, 65.

⁸²Karen Chilton, 67-8.

respect and admiration, would likely never have been able to blossom had the inclusive Café Society never existed to bring together these two premier African-American talents.

As Scott gained popularity she was more able to set conditions for her to be hired to perform, and it was Josephson who handled her contracts and made sure that all such conditions were met. Most notable among these was that she refused to perform before segregated audiences. If she arrived at a venue and the audience was separated by race, she was to be paid for the performance but would not have to put on the show. This wound up being detrimental when it came to her overall income because it drastically limited the number of venues she could perform at, but with the aid of Josephson, she was able to hold fast to her refusal to perform before segregated audiences.⁸³ The two had grown quite close during Scott's time at Café Society, and Josephson even considered Scott to be his own daughter, since her biological father did not come to the United States when the Scott's moved there in Hazel's youth, and was quite elderly at that time to begin with.⁸⁴

Since he felt that it was within her own interests in 1942, Josephson started pushing for Scott to go to Los Angeles. As before, Josephson handled all of her film contracts, and made sure that she was paid well.⁸⁵ Where other African-American women were struggling in the film industry-- including Lena Horne, who was one of Scott's Café Society peers-- Josephson managed to negotiate a weekly salary of \$4000 for Scott. To provide some reference, Hattie McDaniel made \$700 per week for her role as Mamie in *Gone with the Wind*.⁸⁶ Josephson was

⁸³Karen Chilton, 64.

⁸⁴Barney Josephson and Terry Trilling-Josephson, *Café Society: The Wrong Place for the Right People*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, (2009); 189-91.

⁸⁵Karen Chilton, 73.

⁸⁶Karen Chilton, 76-7.

somewhat of a guardian angel for Hazel Scott while she was in Hollywood. When she left he had told her,

If, in any film, they show you in any way that's derogatory, you stop working. Call me in New York... Just say Mr. Josephson told me what's in my contract. You can straighten it out with him.⁸⁷

As her agent and manager, Josephson made sure the stipulations of Scott's contract were met, as he did with other nightclub appearances by Scott around New York City. The stipulations of Scott's film contract were that her skin color could not be altered for a film, she would play piano and sing but never as a housemaid, she was not to wear an apron or a bandana, and she could not be presented in a way that would make her out to be a stereotypical reflection upon her native people or African-Americans.⁸⁸ When director Gregory Ratoff wanted to bring Scott out to Hollywood, Josephson would not allow him to hire her unless these assurances were made in the form of a written contract. Josephson also negotiated her a total of \$20,000 for her first movie.⁸⁹

After an incident where Scott purchased a shoddy piece of jewelry in California with the money she had earned in her first movie, Josephson told her that she had made a mistake. Scott went home and told her mother about it, and the pair came back the next day. It was then that Alma told Josephson that she thought he was correct in his assessment of Scott's decision to buy this necklace-- worth \$22,000; significantly more than she had made on the movie after taxes were considered-- and asked if he would become Hazel's trustee from then on.⁹⁰ He never took any fee for this service.⁹¹

⁸⁷Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 139.

⁸⁸Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 137.

⁸⁹Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 137-8.

⁹⁰Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 140.

⁹¹Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 190.

At one point, after Josephson was officially made her trustee, Scott had purchased two pairs of shoes for \$35 each. Josephson sent them back because nobody could see her feet when she had performed anyway, so he saw no need to spend so much on shoes. He assured Scott that he would buy her new shoes, as it was his former profession. He bought her two pairs of evening slippers for less than \$4 each.⁹² Josephson, during that time, also helped Scott find a nice house just outside of the city, in White Plains, NY, for her and her mother to live in. He felt that he should do this after he went to visit Scott at her apartment in Harlem when she was sick. He also got her a good life insurance policy, which was hard to come by if you were an African-American at the time.⁹³

In 1945, Hazel Scott married Representative Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.—an influential African-American Democratic congressman who represented Harlem and was a strong voice in support of racial equality. Josephson hosted the spectacle of a wedding reception at the Café Society.⁹⁴ At her wedding to Congressman Powell, Scott's father was assumed to have been long dead, so it was Barney Josephson who gave her away in the ceremony, as he had come to think of her as a daughter. Josephson had a strong feeling that Congressman Powell was marrying Scott for her money, as Powell was recounting to him-- from memory-- the totals of all of her assets on the way to the church, and would not stop talking about how impressed he was with the amount of money she was able to accrue during her career. Josephson was not happy with this revelation, and in that moment he thought, "Barney Josephson, Adam Powell is marrying your

⁹²Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 141.

⁹³Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 141.

⁹⁴Karen Chilton, 107.

daughter for her money.” Josephson also paid for the entirety of their wedding reception, and received a bill from Powell for what was left over.⁹⁵

Barney Josephson took great care of the artists who he hired to perform at the Café Society, and he often went to great lengths to ensure that they were well respected by other club-owners and patrons in his own club alike. He had no qualms about enforcing his policy regarding the integration of the club in order to preserve an atmosphere of acceptance and inclusiveness. Josephson’s tactics in the enforcement of this rule ranged from politely reminding patrons of the policy, to giving them their checks and insisting that they leave. One particular story from Josephson’s memoir, regarding Hazel Scott and a particularly nasty racist woman, says quite a bit about how much Josephson respected and looked out for those under his employ, and those of darker complexion more generally, as well as how such respect and care did not go unnoticed by those concerned.

According to Josephson, there was an occasion where he was sitting at the bar in Café Society Uptown waiting for Scott to arrive and her show to begin. When she got there, he greeted her warmly, complimented her, and gave her a kiss on the cheek as she walked to her dressing room. A woman, who appeared to be of the upper echelon of society, walked down from the other end of the bar and told Josephson that he was a “n-----r lover [because] only a Jew could kiss a n-----r.” Josephson ignored the woman; had the bartender give her the check, make her leave, and not say anything to Hazel Scott because he was concerned as to how she might take it right before she was to perform. At the end of the night, when it was time for her to be on

⁹⁵Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 189-91.

her way, Scott made a point to kiss Josephson on the cheek and said to him-- and everyone else who was still there, "Only a n---r would kiss a Jew."⁹⁶

⁹⁶Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 142.

Josh White

Barney, after introducing me, walked off stage and I walked on. The noise in the place was terrible. I put my foot up on a chair. I smiled. They continued to talk. I started to tune the guitar, but they didn't listen. I started 'Evil-Hearted Man' without raising my voice one bit. I did about three verses and then it happened. They started to listen. They listened for years. It was the greatest goddamn nightclub in the world.

-- Josh White on his first performance at Café Society

Josh White was a guitarist and singer in the folk-blues tradition who began his residency in the Café Society in August of 1943, billed under Mary Lou Williams as the headliner. Josh was different from the other African-American performers at Café Society in that he was a folk singer. He thrived on explicitly political material in his songs, unlike other white folk singers such as Burl Ives, Richard Dyer-Bennet, and Susan Reed, who-- although they were quite progressive, and dedicated in their cause-- who did not rely so much on politically charged art. He was known for his direct challenges to Jim Crow laws in the press at the time, and for going against the grain with his music and song selection-- a perfect fit for the Café Society.⁹⁷ He would often espouse his dislike for the pop-music of the time coming from Tin Pan Alley, even though he was becoming something of a pop-star himself, and his appeal was somewhat limited to the Café Society.⁹⁸

It was Barney Josephson who convinced Josh White to perform at the Café Society, when he doubted in his own ability to hold the attention of a cabaret audience-- which were known for talking through whole performances. Josephson said to him, "If you can't quiet them, you shouldn't be working here."⁹⁹ According to White, during his first performance, he was able to completely capture the attention of his audience, and "they did not stop listening for years."¹⁰⁰ His assessment certainly had some truth to it, as in a little over a year later, Josh would overtake

⁹⁷Elijah Wald. *Josh White: Society Blues*. New York;Abingdon, Oxfordshire,;: Routledge; (2013), 104.

⁹⁸ Rose. "New Acts: JOSH WHITE." *Variety (Archive: 1905-2000)*, Sep 01, 1943, 43, <http://ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/docview/1401247005?accountid=13158>.

⁹⁹ Wald, 113.

¹⁰⁰ Wald, 113.

Mary Lou Williams as the headliner-- as was the case in the eyes of the press, where his name was taking precedence over Mary Lou's.¹⁰¹

As a folk singer, the subject matter of White's songs usually dealt with issues at the core of the progressive movements of the time; the war for democracy against Hitler and fascism abroad, as well as the fight for equal rights among African-Americans at home were usually on White's mind. His most well-known protest songs often tie these to themes together and recognize the need for unity in the war abroad, but also point out the hypocrisy of African-Americans fighting for democracy that they are not afforded at home, thanks to Jim Crow. While it may be arguable that Josh's outspoken criticism earned him special attention and admiration from the Roosevelt's after a performance of his song "Uncle Sam Says" at the White House, there is little to suggest that the rumors of any coffee and bourbon drinking session in the President's private quarters actually ensued following that show—as some anonymous sources may claim.¹⁰² However, within the span of the next few years following this performance-- which took place in February of 1941 and included other Café Society regulars the Gates and Burl Ives-- the Roosevelt's would become important in Josh's life, as he would be adopted as a symbol of the New Left that was created as a result of FDR's New Deal.¹⁰³

His support for the war manifested itself most vividly in his rendition of a poem that had been written by the great Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes called "I'm Marching Down Freedom's Road." The lyrics, as written by Hughes, were,

Ought to be plain as the nose on your face,

¹⁰¹ Smith, Bill. "Night Clubs-Vaudeville: NIGHT CLUB REVIEWS - Café Society Downtown, New York." *The Billboard (Archive: 1894-1960)*, Nov 25, 1944, 26, <http://ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/docview/1039896497?accountid=13158>.

¹⁰² "Uncle Sam Says," AntiWarSongs.org, last modified March 19, 2010, <https://www.antiwarsongs.org/canzone.php?id=27743&lang=en>

¹⁰³ Wald, 71.

There's room in this plan for every race,
Some folk think that freedom just ain't right,
Those are the very people I want to fight.

Now, Hitler may rant, Hirohito may rave,
I'm going after freedom if it leads me to my grave.
That's why I'm marching, yes, I'm marching,
I'm marching down freedom's road.

United we stand, divided we fall,
Let's make this land safe for one and all.
I've got a message, and you know it's right,
Black and white together unite and fight.

That's why I'm marching, yes, I'm marching,
Marching down freedom's road.
Ain't no fascists gonna stop me, no Nazis gonna keep me,
From marching down freedom's road.¹⁰⁴

The song itself was a group effort undertaken by Hughes who wrote the lyrics, Josh White who performed it, and Emerson Harper who wrote the music. While “Freedom’s Road” was about the need for Americans, one and all, to support the war effort for our noble constitutional ideals of freedom, equality, and justice for all, it did not so much address the state of affairs facing African-Americans at home. This song is a good example of the convergence between the contemporary civil rights movement and those on the Left—especially those involved in folk music, and Josh White represented a bridge between the two outlooks in the “Double-V for Victory” campaign during WWII. However, “Freedom’s Road” was a less provocative wartime anthem than Josh White’s other works, like “Uncle Sam Says” and “Defense Factory Blues.”

The song “Uncle Sam Says” was written in response to Roosevelt’s decision to implement the Selective Service Act, and laments the treatment that African-American soldiers

¹⁰⁴ Performed by Joshua White, “I’m Marching Down Freedom’s Road,” words by Langston Hughes, music by Emerson Harper, recorded 1942. From *That’s Why We’re Marching: WWII and the American Folk Song Movement*, Smithsonian/Folkways, 1996.

were subjected to under the segregationist leadership and policies of the United States military.

The lyrics are:

Airplanes flying 'cross the land and sea,
Everybody flying but a Negro like me.
Uncle Sam says, "Your place is on the ground,
When I fly my airplanes, don't want no Negro 'round."

The same thing for the Navy, when ships go to sea,
All they got is a mess boy's job for me.
Uncle Sam says, "Keep on your apron, son,
You know I ain't gonna let you shoot my big Navy gun."

Got my long government letter, my time to go,
When I got to the Army found the same old Jim Crow.
Uncle Sam says, "Two camps for black and white,"
But when trouble starts, we'll all be in that same big fight.

If you ask me, I think democracy is fine,
I mean democracy without the color line.
Uncle Sam says, "We'll live the American way,"
Let's get together and kill Jim Crow today.¹⁰⁵

After Josh's brother Bill was drafted, he went to visit him at his camp where he witnessed ads posted for potential Ku Klux Klan members and subpar living accommodations for the African-American soldiers. That night, he reportedly could not sleep and came up with this song. White was somewhat critical of his own work, but felt good about what he had to say in its lyrics, making the comment, "It wasn't a good song, a good tune, a good lyric, but it said what I had to say, what I wanted to say about Uncle Sam."¹⁰⁶

"Defense Factory Blues" is another protest song that sought to capture the feelings of African-Americans contributing to the war effort at home, while being oppressed by racism and Jim Crow at the same time. The song is about an African-American who would like to work in a

¹⁰⁵ "Uncle Sam Says," by Joshua White and Waring Cuney, recorded 1941, Keynote.

¹⁰⁶ Wald, 85.

munitions plant to support the military, and the lyrics outline his plight and request for some “democracy to defend”:

I'll tell you brother
Well, it sure don't make no sense
When a Negro can't work
In the national defense.

I'll tell you one thing
That boss man ain't my friend.
If he was he'd give me
Some democracy to defend.¹⁰⁷

There was a clear discrepancy between the reasons that the United States used for going to war in Europe and the treatment of African-Americans and other minorities within the U.S. itself. While songs like “Uncle Sam Says” and “Defense Factory Blues” embodied how Josh really felt about such hypocrisy in the United States’ espoused goals for fighting Hitler and fascism, they were not the songs that he really enjoyed singing. After singing “Defense Factory,” Josh would sometimes comment saying, “Yes, folks, that’s a song I wish I never knew about... If there was no discrimination against the colored man, I’d give up singing it in a minute.”¹⁰⁸ “Uncle Sam Says” and “Defense Factory” were about the way the world was for African-Americans in the early twentieth century, while “Freedom’s Road” was full of hope and optimism about the way the world could and ought to be.

With songs like “Freedom’s Road,” “Defense Factory Blues,” and “Uncle Sam Says” it is easy to understand why and how Josh White was able to feel so at home when performing in Barney Josephson’s Café Society. His provocative lyrics that point out racial injustice and hypocrisy in the segregation of the military fit the bill regarding what Josephson was looking for

¹⁰⁷ “Defense Factory Blues,” by Joshua White and Waring Cuney, recorded 1941, Keynote.

¹⁰⁸ Wald, 109.

in his political cabaret show, and-- like Billie Holiday's relationship with the establishment-- Josh White and the Café Society were able to provide for one another. Josh lent his name and talents to attract more progressive thinkers to the establishment, and Josephson and the Café Society provided Josh with a place where his songs and message would be accepted and encouraged. While he did not think too highly of himself as a public speaker, Josh knew that his guitar playing and voice could engage the minds of his listeners in a way that was just as effective as the best orators of the time. Josh once said of his abilities, "I'm no speech maker. All I can do is play a guitar and sing. [But] it's a pretty good way of making people listen to what I have to say... You can so easily find your way into people's minds with music and make them start thinking."¹⁰⁹

Another group effort, undertaken by those closely connected with the Café Society-- specifically Josh White and "Strange Fruit" writer Abel Meeropol-- was a song by the name of "The House I Live In." The lyrics of the song were a celebration of all of the things that Meeropol felt made America great, and they largely touch upon the ideals, institutions, and rights that are the core principles of our democracy. The version of the song that is most well-known is Frank Sinatra's performance in a short film of the same title released at the end of World War II in 1945. The lyrics are a set of responses to the question, "What is America to me?"

What is America to me?
 A name, a map, or a flag I see?
 A certain word, "democracy?"
 What is America to me?

The house I live in, a plot of earth, a street
 The grocer and the butcher, and the people that I meet
 The children in the playground, the faces that I see
 All races and religions, that's America to me

¹⁰⁹ Wald, 111.

The place I work in, the worker by my side
 The little town or city where my people lived and died
 The "howdy" and the handshake, the air of feeling free
 And the right to speak my mind out, that's America to me

The things I see about me, the big things and the small
 The little corner newsstand and the house a mile tall
 The wedding in the churchyard, the laughter and the tears
 The dream that's been a-growin' for a hundred and fifty years

The town I live in, the street, the house, the room
 The pavement of the city, or a garden all in bloom
 The church, the school, the clubhouse, the millions lights I see
 But especially the people
 That's America to me.¹¹⁰

While Sinatra's intent in singing this song in the film was to fight racial prejudice against African-Americans and Jewish people in the postwar, his rendition took some liberties with the lyrics of Meeropol and was not quite as powerful as the original piece that Paul Robeson sang and Josh White used to close his set at Café Society.¹¹¹ The song begins in the same way so the first verse below has been excluded. It then quickly and sharply diverges in the second verse and the only similarity after that is the very last verse—again excluded here in an effort to keep things as brief as possible. When directly comparing them, the original lyrics were much more to Meeropol's point.

The house I live in, the friends that I have found,
 The folks beyond the railroad and the people all around,
 The worker and the farmer, the sailor on the sea,
 The men who built this country, that's America to me.

The house I live in, my neighbors white and black,
 The people who just came here, or from generations back,
 The Town Hall and the soap box, the torch of Liberty,

¹¹⁰ Sinatra, Frank, Rko Radio Pictures, Alex Stordahl, and Albert Maltz. *The House I Live In*. 1945. Video. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mbrs00009167/>.

¹¹¹ Wald, 109.

A place to speak my mind out, that's America to me.

The words of old Abe Lincoln, of Jefferson and Paine,
Of Washington and Douglas, and the task that still remains,
The little bridge at Concord, where Freedom's fight began,
Our Gettysburg and Midway, and the story of Bataan.

The house I live in, the goodness everywhere,
A land of wealth and beauty with enough for all to share,
A house that we call Freedom, the home of Liberty,
and the promise for tomorrow, that's America to me.¹¹²

Like "Freedom's Road," "The House I Live In" was a song that Josh loved to sing, because it was about how he felt the world should be, and it's hopeful vision for America's future was something he shared with the patrons, management, and employees of the Café Society-- a place where he saw that vision beginning to come true.¹¹³

Sinatra, particularly towards the end of his life, was known for being sympathetic to Right-wing ideology, his rendition does call to mind some more traditionalist ideals than that of Josh White. One of the most prominent contrasts between the two are in the verses in each rendition that end with the line about speaking one's mind. Where Sinatra crooned about the grocer, the butcher, the people, and the children in the playground, White sang of his "neighbors white and black," as well as a town hall—the place where democracy is put into practice. Another interesting addition in the White version is the line about America being a "land of wealth and beauty with enough for all to share." At the core of this line is the same message as in "This Land is Your Land" by Woody Guthrie, who was blacklisted as a communist for singing such songs that have to do with public ownership of land. White also added a verse that provided

¹¹² Performed by Paul Robeson, "The House I Live In," words by Lewis Allen, music by Earl Robinson, recorded 1947. From *The Odyssey of Paul Robeson*, Omega Classics, 1992.

¹¹³ Wald, 109.

a link between the ideals expressed in his song to the Founding Fathers of the United States among other influential American statesmen and thinkers. Relatively, Sinatra's version was a bit more sanitized for a mainstream audience than White's.

By singing such songs, Josh garnered a reputation as being more outwardly expressive in his demands for racial equality than any other performer at Café Society, and by extension perhaps even at any nightclub in the city. Unfortunately, that made him one of the biggest targets for forces of prejudice and discrimination.¹¹⁴ There were occasions throughout White's Café Society residency when Southern servicemen would come into the nightclub for his performance in order to distract the audience by yelling racial slurs.¹¹⁵ A contemporary news article from the *Amsterdam News* publication documented White's troubles:

...Josh White has been finding the goings hard down in [Greenwich] Village. He's the star attraction at Café Society-- a place where Negroes and whites have found his blues singing to be worthy of a trip from all parts of the country. After having enjoyed a rather long and amicable sojourn at the spot, in the last few weeks, he has been distressed over a sudden influx of Southern servicemen who resentfully shout his numbers down during his floor show appearance.¹¹⁶

According to the article, Josh would constantly be verbally assailed by these members of the military from the South and he would become targeted by such offensive behavior and shouts of, "They don't want to hear that N----r sing," during his performance.¹¹⁷ The piece goes on to praise White's professionalism in his response. Josh would simply stop playing and let the

¹¹⁴ Wald, 109.

¹¹⁵ "Trouble Stalks Heyward and White." *New York Amsterdam News (1943-1961)*, Sep 30, 1944, City edition. <http://ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/docview/226018627?accountid=13158>.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

culprits thoroughly embarrass themselves before being told off by regular Café Society patrons and tossed out by Josephson's staff.¹¹⁸

Josh also dared to perform a rendition of "Strange Fruit," and it often got him into trouble with whites, but with Billie Holiday as well, as he dared to cover what she deemed to be her song on the very stage where she had performed it to incredible effect over the years just prior to Josh's arrival on the Café Society scene. According to Josh, once she found out he had added Meeropol's song to his repertoire-- which she felt had become her own-- she came down to the club and threatened him.

For a time she wanted to cut my throat for using that song which was written for her. One night she called by the Café to bawl me out. We talked and finally came downstairs peaceably together, and to everyone's surprise had a nice little dancing session. I loved her interpretation of the song, but I wanted to do "Strange Fruit" my way. After that, she often came in the Café, more often than not for the late show around 2:30 in the morning. Sometimes she was real late and wouldn't even come in. She'd drive down to 2 Sheridan Square and sit outside listening to the car radio with her big boxer dog, Mister.¹¹⁹

The two settled their differences though, as Josh had the chance to explain to her how much he admired her and believed that the "song should be sung by everyone until it never had to be sung again."¹²⁰

Josh often got into fights with white patrons who did not appreciate his material—or his habit of fraternizing with white women, but more on that shortly—inside and outside of the Café Society. As Mary Lou Williams remembers,

...on several occasions when Josh agreed to escort me back to Harlem after the show, sometimes four or five white men, who had been viewing Josh's drinking with white women at their tables, would be waiting for him outside the club and he would have to fight them all off by himself before we could leave. Some nights, he would be cut and

¹¹⁸ Wald, 109.

¹¹⁹ Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 53.

¹²⁰ Wald, 110-11.

bruised pretty bad, but the other men would really be hurting, laying on the ground. He just accepted this... like it was part of his job.¹²¹

It stands to reason that Josh White was completely aware of the consequences that such actions had in the racial climate wherein he lived. That being said, he used the Café Society as a platform to challenge such realities-- as was Barney Josephson's intention for the establishment when he opened it. Josh would test the Café Society patrons to see if they truly held any prejudices whenever he would be invited to sit at a table when he wasn't on stage performing. He would do so by taking a sip from a white patron's glass when they would put it down, or take a drag from one of their cigarettes if they left it sitting in an ashtray on the table. If they would not touch the cigarette or glass again after he had, then he had his answer.¹²²

Such behavior as sipping from a white person's wine glass was not all that got Josh into trouble. Josh was the first mainstream African-American performer who used sex appeal in order to catch the eyes of white female audience members. At a time before only Elvis' torso was allowed to be broadcast on television, onstage at Café Society Josh White was flexing his neck muscles as he tuned his guitar and slowly unbuttoning his shirt as he tore through his set-- all at the request and encouragement of Barney Josephson. As White's son Josh, Jr. says, "...he was lucky he didn't get killed for it."¹²³ While this did not do him any favors with the racist men who would wait outside to fight him-- it certainly helped vault his career and popularity to unprecedented levels at that time, and Josephson knew it was a good sell for the Café Society if Josh continued to commit to this aspect of his act. The fact that it was controversial also meant that it would undoubtedly appeal to the Café Society's regulars.

¹²¹ Wald, 110.

¹²² Robert Shelton. *The Josh White Song Book*. Chicago; Quadrangle; (1963), 27.

¹²³ Wald, 112.

Josh was able to become quite the ladies' man, despite having a wife and children of his own. As Josephson recalls,

He was married with three children, but that didn't dissuade the girls who would literally line up outside waiting for him. Nor did it dissuade Josh. One of the girls, a white teenager, caught his eye, caused him some trouble. Her brother, a big guy, was the doorman at the Liederkrantz Club. When he found out about the affair, Josh got roughed up.¹²⁴

He even managed to attract the attention of other Café Society musicians and performers such as Lena Horne, who remembered Josh as being “a wonderfully sexy man,” and explained that one “used to have to beat [their] way through swarms of women just to say hello to him.”¹²⁵

Josephson's influence in staging Josh White's act so that it would have the most impact upon the audience as possible is apparent, as it was somewhat similar to his staging of Billie Holiday's encore performances of “Strange Fruit.”¹²⁶ At the beginning of his act, White would come on stage to tune his guitar, sit on a stool with one foot up, guitar on his knee, and a lit cigarette behind his ear.¹²⁷ Josh's performance required the utmost silence and attention of his audience, and he was one to demand that attention. According to his daughter, Bunny White, Josh had demanded the respect of his audience. If he would come out and people were chatting when the spotlight came up onto him while he was on the stage, we would wait there with the spotlight on him and smoke his cigarette quietly until everyone in the room was quiet.¹²⁸ Josh's methods for silencing the audience began to become well-known among other nightclub performers who were astonished by his ability to completely command the attention of the whole room. He would shoot a venomous glance at an unsuspecting conversationalist, or sometimes

¹²⁴ Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 172.

¹²⁵ Lena Horne and Richard Schnickel, *Lena*. Garden City, NY; Doubleday; (1965), 116.

¹²⁶ Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 172.

¹²⁷ Wald, 114.

¹²⁸ Wald, 113-14.

completely stop playing in the middle of a song. According to Sammy Benskin, the oft-bandleader of the Café Society's house band, there was one occasion where Josh got up from his stool mid-song and walked over to a table where a group of men were sitting and began talking. "The whole room tensed up," recalled Benskin, and Josh-- who still had the spotlight following him-- whispered something into the ear of one of the men that made the whole table fall completely silent. When Benskin later asked Josh what he had said to the man, White told him he said, "I told him he was wearing a very pretty tie."¹²⁹

In a regular performance setting, then as now, the lengths to which Josh White went to achieve a silent, attentive audience would likely be considered rather unprofessional or offensive. However, Josephson understood why Josh needed silence during his perform. He remembered of Josh's performance style,

The tender, tear-in-the-throat quality of his voice made quiet necessary to put over the effect he wanted... He was not a shouter. He sang blues. He sang songs of social conscience, some of which he wrote. He sang of Jim Crowism, of slums, of lynchings, of chain gangs, of hunger. He wanted attention paid to the words.

As with the other artists, Josephson tried to really grasp what the performers and those he hired were trying to say with their art. In many cases, what they were trying to communicate to the world many of the same concerns that Josephson had. Many of the artists were African-Americans who had just witnessed the Harlem Renaissance not terribly long before Josephson opened his club. In many regards the plights of African-Americans such as Josh White and Billie Holiday were linked to those of Jewish-Americans like Josephson and Abel Meeropol.

Barney Josephson's brother Leon, who had a hand in providing the initial capital that Barney used to open the Café Society, shared some responsibility in the management of the

¹²⁹ Dorothy Siegel. *Glory Road: The Story of Josh White*. San Diego: Harcourt; (1982), 77-78.

business. He was not as outwardly involved as Barney was in managing the Café Society, and he had barely anything to do with booking the talent, but he was known the voice his opinion from time to time. The two would have their disagreements about what should be done in many different cases, but more often than not Barney would go ahead and do whatever it was he was planning on doing anyway. One of the instances that offended Leon the worst had to do with the lyrics of one of Josh White's songs, which had to do with a comparison between African-Americans and whites. Leon had voiced his disapproval of some of the lyrics, and asked Barney to tell Josh not to sing them. When Barney refused to do such a thing, Leon refused to talk to his brother for a significant period of time, despite their co-ownership of the Café Society.¹³⁰

Similar to the case in which Josephson felt that it was not within his prerogative to tell Billie Holiday what to perform because he respected her as an artist, he again refused to alter Josh White's song because of the content of its lyrics. The lengths to which Josephson would go to uphold the integrity of the artists he employed, as well as provide for them a place for them to speak their true minds, was remarkable. He even risked estranging his own brother so that Josh White could perform his works as he had written them, no matter what the reaction of the crowd might be. What is additionally admirable about Josephson's management style when it came to his nightclub was that he always seemed to stick to his original convictions and principles when he first had his vision of opening a place like Café Society. Barney Josephson pulled no punches when it came art and politics in the basement of 2 Sheridan Square. Just like the mere existence of a place such as the Café Society pushed the limits on what was acceptable in the nightclub business, Josh White-- more than any other Café Society performer-- pushed the limits of what was acceptable in the time and environment that he lived and performed.

¹³⁰ Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 227-28.

Chapter 3

THE PRESS, HUAC, AND THE UNTIMELY END OF THE CAFÉ SOCIETY

There was no let for me. His brother is a communist and Barney won't disavow him, so he is one too. Didn't Barney Josephson open the first interracial nightclub? He brought the n----s— they were still using that language— into his clubs and gave them good seats. They danced on the same floor as white people. Here's a guy who gave Billie Holiday a song like "Strange Fruit" to sing— to bring such a song into entertainment and popularize it. He put Negro and white talent together on the same stage. He gave his place to the antifascists so they could hold fundraising events. It's rumored that he gives money to the Left causes, which I did. I never denied that.

-- Barney Josephson on his treatment by the press. ¹³¹

¹³¹ Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 240.

This chapter analyzes the relationship of Barney Josephson and the Café Society had with the press. To describe their relationship in short, one might certainly say, “It’s complicated.” In Café Society’s formative years as well as during its heyday, the relationship was a symbiotic one. During that time, many of the major African-American publications seemed to be hopeful and excited at the prospect of a space where black artists and performers would be presented on the same equal footing as their white counterparts, while there was a silence that could potentially speak volumes in the mainstream press surrounding the revolutionary establishment. As the Red Scare following World War II began to set in, and Barney’s brother Leon found himself in some hot water with the House Un-American Activities Committee, the Left-wing Café Society’s business quickly disappeared as the mainstream press suddenly broke their silence on Barney Josephson and linked him to his avowed-communist brother. To make matters worse, the Right-wing press began to run stories unfavorable to the Café Society, as many Right-wing columnists-- such as Walter Winchell-- were close with those of the likes of Sherman Billingsley at the Stork Club. Just as it did with the support that the New Deal garnered for government-funded social programs on a broader scale, the Red Scare tore at the seams of what made a place like the Café Society possible, and eventually led to its demise in 1948.

Barney Josephson pointed out that, “When one presents talent, one must have press.”¹³² Since his entire business model was predicated upon presenting new, never-before-seen talent, the draw for the press to Café Society would have been undeniable. It stood to reason that, as many of the other clubs could handily afford to present the most well-known acts for long periods of time, there was only so much columnists could write about Frank Sinatra before they started to repeat themselves. Thus the plethora of reviews in the publications *Billboard* and

¹³² Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 240.

Variety are a dime a dozen. However, at the time, they provided the club with much-needed publicity to get patrons in the door, and so the mutual benefits of this relationship are apparent. Apart from a single review from *Variety* which hypothesized, "...one of the secrets of [Café Society's] affluence may well be that rare something which makes it a happy meeting ground for the social set and the leftist wing," the publications do not purvey any particularly valuable information regarding how they perceived the Café Society's policies regarding integration nor its political leanings.

The African-American press, on the other hand, showed no qualms in exhibiting its enthusiasm for the revolutionary policies of the Café Society. Articles appeared in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, *The Chicago Defender*, *The New York Amsterdam News*, and *The New Journal and Guide* (then called *The Lodge Norfolk and Guide*). While in some cases, their enthusiasm towards Barney Josephson and the Café Society eventually soured due to his being linked to communist sympathizers in the late 1940s, many of these publications offer incredible examples of how the African-American community would have been exposed to the existence of the establishment and its proprietor.

The New Journal and Guide recognized how the artists of the Café Society depended upon Barney Josephson and vice versa. In an article from March 1946, entitled "The Saga of Barney Josephson," Don DeLeighbur wrote that it was likely that Josh White would go down in the history books as the "king of the blues"-- even though there were many blues pickers and singers of far greater skill.¹³³ In context, the implication here is that, because of the exposure that

¹³³Don DeLeighbur. 1946. "Two Stars Rank as Favorites among White Nitory Patrons." *New Journal and Guide* (1916-2003), Mar 16.

the Café Society had afforded White to the white, mainstream audiences, his reputation would be benefitted at the expense of those more talented than he.

Furthermore, two quotes from the DeLeighbur article support the notion of mutual dependency when it came to the artists and management of the Café Society. The first is that the author believes, “Without Josh White at either Uptown or Downtown Café Society, Barney Josephson would feel it immediately, whether in receipts or in comment of his guests.” Conversely, “Josh White outside of Café Society might not be so hot... He has to have an audience that is sympathetic and willing to listen as he musically weaves the blue story of the Negro’s soul.” The combination of these two quotes suggest that Café Society and African-American artists have created yet another symbiotic relationship. The author recognized what the Café Society had provided for African-American artists such as Josh White: a place to perform and be a part of the New York City nightlife as well as an attentive audience to perform for. The ever-important aspect of “social consciousness” in White’s music had never before been afforded a serious place in entertainment outside of the theater. According to this article, White’s rise to stardom was predicated upon his ability to “impress ideas of political thinking” through his music. At the same time, the Café Society would not be able to stay in business were it not for the myriad of talented African-American artists-- like Josh White-- that Josephson employed.

Another piece from *New Journal* in November of 1946 lauds Josephson and presents the proprietor in the most positive of lights. The author discussed Josephson’s childhood; how his mother instilled upon him and his three brothers the importance of equality, how he was unafraid to choose an African-American as his debate partner in high school-- even though it meant he was to be beaten up by his fellow white students, and how he has a policy of never allowing any sort of entertainment in his club that is degrading to African-Americans. “A white night club

owner has proved that night clubs can be centers of entertainment for all Americans without adopting Jim Crow racial patterns.”¹³⁴ One can almost hear the optimism in the author’s words. The quotes that the author chooses highlight Josephson’s commitment to equality: “When I opened Café Society Downtown in 1938, my friends thought I was balmy. But if that was being balmy I wanted to be that.”¹³⁵ The article also made note of the fact that Josephson truly loves the art in which he is in the business of providing for his audiences, and that he respects those artists in a way that was not the norm when it came to contemporary night club owners.

In just two years, Café Society Downtown quickly caught the eye of *The Chicago Defender* as an establishment with the unique ability of discovering and popularizing African-American talent.¹³⁶ It also touted the Café Society in a piece from November 1946 entitled “Night Club is Weapon to Fight Discrimination.” Similar to the “Saga of Barney Josephson” piece, this one mentioned Josephson’s past of protesting racial discrimination. Both made note of how in his youth, Josephson picketed a movie theater that would not allow his African-American friends inside to watch a movie with him. Additionally, both articles point out that, when Café Society first opened, Josephson was willing to go \$12,000 into debt without compromising on his convictions when it came to accepting white and black performers and patrons alike before his club began to gain popularity. This article clearly held Josephson in high regard. It claimed that his “specialty” was presenting white and black artists “on the same floor, in acts of equal dignity.” The article quotes him as saying, “All I want is performers, Negro and white, on exactly the same artistic footing.” The author believed that, not only had Josephson achieved

¹³⁴ "CAFÉ SOCIETY." 1941. *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*, Jan 11.

¹³⁵ "Saga of Barney Josephson...." 1946. *New Journal and Guide (1916-2003)*, Nov 30.

¹³⁶ "CAFÉ SOCIETY." *Chicago Defender*. Jan. 11, 1941.

this, but has also set an example for success and tolerance that even the most scrupulously, purely business-minded individuals might do well to follow.¹³⁷

As Katherine Ann Cornell was added to the Café Society roster, *The Pittsburgh Courier* had high hopes for her future as a star of New York City nightlife on account of Josephson. *The Courier* recognized Josephson's eye for talent, and praised his contributions when it came to getting other performers recognized such as Hazel Scott and Lena Horne.¹³⁸ Those who ran the paper appreciated the Café Society's recognition of the tremendous talent of African-Americans.¹³⁹ *The Courier* was also pleased with Josephson's policy of rarely making changes to his line-up, if he could avoid it in an effort to provide the artists he employed with steady work and pay.¹⁴⁰ It was also noted in another 1940 piece, written by columnist Bill Chase for *The New York Amsterdam News*, that Josephson always made sure that he paid the African-American artists who worked for him above the minimum wage that was required.¹⁴¹

One possible explanation for the mainstream press' general silence when it came to the Café Society was offered by Barney Josephson himself. Frank Farrell reviewed Café Society positively in *The World Telegram*. According to Josephson, he was told by his editor, "Don't you know better than to review Café Society? You don't review them unless you can pan them. Otherwise you do not mention their name, only if you can find something dirty." Bob Dana, another critic who enjoyed Café Society and wrote for *The New York Herald-Tribune* was forbidden by his employer from going to Café Society to write reviews.¹⁴² While it would seem

¹³⁷ "Night Club is Weapon to Fight Discrimination." 1946.*The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*, Nov 16.

¹³⁸ "Ann Cornell Latest Rave of Café Society." 1943.*The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*, Aug 28.

¹³⁹ "CAFÉ SOCIETY HOLDS ON TO NEGRO TRADITION." 1940.*The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*, Sep 14.

¹⁴⁰ "Café Society Chief Scores as Ivory Hunter for Clubs." 1944.*The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*, Jun 24.

¹⁴¹ Bill Chase. 1940. "ALL EARS." *New York Amsterdam News (1938-1941)*, Oct 19.

¹⁴² Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 239.

ill-advised to simply take Josephson at his posthumous word, his claims are at least somewhat supported by the shocking level of media silence surrounding the Café Societies in the mainstream press.

Although the mainstream press seemed to have a terrible aversion to bringing any unnecessary attention to either Café Society Uptown or Downtown, Barney's reputation as a successful club-owner had still managed to catch the eyes of two men from the Federal Housing Administration.¹⁴³ As a result, they reached out to his brother Leon as the man to supply the financial capital for a project. The three men struck a deal, wherein the FHA men would supply expertise if Josephson supplied the money, to build the first community of interracial housing in the United States. As other communities like Levittown were being constructed exclusively for whites, this community was to be called Paul Robeson Park.¹⁴⁴ While the association between the two brothers would seem to have been mutually beneficial one in early 1947, the year would end up being disastrous for the Josephson name, and it would soon spell disaster following Leon's refusal to testify at the HUAC hearing.

Leon Josephson was the first person to officially challenge the constitutionality of the House Un-American Activities Committee.¹⁴⁵ His refusal to testify after receiving a subpoena from HUAC would shortly be followed by a contempt of Congress charge that resulted in a year in federal prison. The name "Leon Josephson" began to make national headlines by the end of March 1947. Unfortunately for Barney-- who, of the two brothers, was the one who enjoyed his life in the limelight-- his well-known name was tied with Leon's in the press to more effectively identify who he was. Obviously, at a time when the Soviet Union was taking control of Eastern

¹⁴³ Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 229.

¹⁴⁴ Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 229.

¹⁴⁵ Josephson and Trilling Josephson, 236.

Europe following World War II and the Red Scare was burgeoning in the American political scene, having a brother who publicly identifies himself as a communist make national headlines, would not end up being very good for business. What began as a way to simply identify Leon, which had the side effect of placing Barney's name next to that of an avowed communist, turned into a way for the right-wing press to attack the reputation of Barney Josephson.

In many, if not all, of the articles covering the Leon Josephson story, Barney is clearly identified as his brother and owner of the Café Society, and although it may have been done only to identify Leon, that was about all it took to have an effect on the Café Society. Two of the most scathing criticisms of Barney's connection communist sympathizers came from curious sources. The first came from a Left-wing, but anti-communist, paper known as *The New Leader*. While *The New Leader* article is about Leon Josephson rather than his brother, it concluded with a clear attempt to besmirch the reputation of the Café Society:

The last I heard of Josephson was when he borrowed \$600 from a friend of mine; the 'loan' was never repaid. Perhaps it went with other such loans, into financing the highly profitable Café Society, managed by Leon Josephson's brother Barney.¹⁴⁶

Perhaps this was true, but the author, one Liston M. Oak, offers no additional information as to who this "friend" of his may have been. To imply that the Josephson brothers would steal money from people, while they would have been well within their means to pay them back, to finance their nightclub, without providing any additional proof is simply yellow journalism.

The second article came from none other than *The Pittsburgh Courier*, which had been so supportive of Josephson and the Café Society in the past. The piece was written by George S. Schuyler and, while it was preceded by a disclaimer from the editors which read, "This column represents the personal opinion of Mr. Schuyler and in no way reflects the editorial position of

¹⁴⁶ Liston M. Oak. 1947. "ALERT!: Dedicated to an Expose of all Totalitarian Enemies of Democracy Links in the Communist Chain." *New Leader*, Mar 15.

The Pittsburgh Courier," it was certainly a significant departure from the coverage of Barney Josephson and the Café Society that had previously appeared in the publication. Schuyler incriminated the Josephson brothers among others, including Congressman Adam C. Powell, Jr., and accused them of being sympathetic to what he referred to as the "international Communist conspiracy against civilization."¹⁴⁷ Schuyler's reaction to the Josephson affair was exemplary of the limitations that the Red Scare forced upon African-Americans when it came to their support for the Leftist organizations that had always expressed strong support for civil rights.

The Right-wing press' were not forced into such a position, as it had generally always had it out for Josephson and Café Society from the beginning. Walter Winchell, a well-known gossip columnist who was friendly with Sherman Billingsley at the Stork Club, would often criticize Café Society. An article published in the *Atlanta Daily World* claimed that Winchell had "an 'attitude' toward Negroes. According to the piece, in an effort undertaken for the sole purpose slander Café Society and the artists who performed there, Winchell had fabricated and published a story about Hazel Scott and Lena Horne having a fight."¹⁴⁸ The Right-wing press was never very fond of Josephson nor his progressive establishment.

An easy way for Barney to avoid the bad press, and possibly save his business, would have been to disown his brother following his contempt of Congress charges. However, Barney refused to do so, telling reporters that he stood firmly by his brother's side. "I would like you to know that my brother's position is a principled one. He is a lawyer. He knows the law. He knows our Constitution. I can only support a man who takes such a principled position."¹⁴⁹ Just as

¹⁴⁷ George S. Schuyler. 1947. "VIEWS and Reviews." *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*, May 10.

¹⁴⁸ Don Seymour. "LENA HORNE, HAZEL SCOTT FIGHT STORY DENIED." *Atlanta Daily World (1932-2003)*, Oct 31, 1943.

¹⁴⁹ Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 239.

Josephson put the needs of his employees before his own profit margin over the years as a business owner, the support he showed for his brother speaks well of his character, even if it was not in the best interest of the Café Society.

The Josephson brothers were quite clear in their position on HUAC. Both felt that it was an attempt by the right-wing to counteract President Roosevelt's New Deal, and that their focus on the entertainment industry-- particularly Hollywood-- was on account of an attempt to mitigate the influence of the Left on the public by controlling what was shown to them via the blacklisting of certain film producers and actors.¹⁵⁰

The bad press that Josephson received kept new talent away as well as patrons. There was a notion that those who associate and perform with Café Society are sympathetic to its politics.¹⁵¹ In addition, as Barney Josephson described, relationships were torn apart on account of the Red Scare, and his were no exception. Among those with whom the former club-owner was most disappointed were Josh White and Hazel Scott. In regards to the former, Josephson remarked, "He, who sung songs of Jim Crowism, slums, chain gangs, lynchings, hunger, sang to the House Un-American Activities Committee."¹⁵² White claimed to have been "exploited by Communists" and testified before HUAC, even without a subpoena, and requested that there be "an effective exposure of Communistic activities in the theatrical and musical fields."¹⁵³ He also went on to denounce Paul Robeson.

Based on Hazel Scott's relationship with Café Society and Barney Josephson-- as was discussed in depth in the previous chapter-- it makes sense that her testimony against Josephson

¹⁵⁰ Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 246.

¹⁵¹ Josephson and Trilling Josephson, 240-41.

¹⁵² Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 258.

¹⁵³ Louis Lautier. 1950. "Hazel Scott Latest Star to Deny "Red" Connection." *New Journal and Guide (1916-2003)*, Sep 23.

would sting the owner more than any other. In her statement, Scott admitted to performing at a rally for local New York politician, and avowed communist, Benjamin J. Davis in 1943, but only at the directive of Barney Josephson who was her employer at the time. She says that the depiction of her as being sympathetic to communists is “a totally inaccurate picture.”¹⁵⁴

Hazel Scott specifically mentions Barney Josephson’s name in her HUAC testimony, saying that he signed her up to play various benefit concerts, but her performing for a cause under the directive of her employer does not necessarily make her sympathetic to that cause. She claimed that, “In show business, managers send their talent to appear at various benefits and we go because our managers tell us it builds our audiences. So you don’t question, you just do it.”¹⁵⁵ Josephson contended that he had always asked Scott whether or not she wished to perform anywhere, and made sure that it was always up to her to decide.¹⁵⁶

While neither party is around to confirm either side of the story, Josephson’s record with those under his employ is certainly in his favor on this matter. His treatment of Billie Holiday when it came to the question of her performing “Strange Fruit” is a prime example of how Josephson approached such matters. In late 1946 into early 1947, there ran a pair of stories in the African-American paper *The Chicago Defender* that had to do with Josephson’s handling of an affair where a band showed up late for a performance. According to the first piece, J.C. Heard’s Orchestra was fired by an angered Josephson because they had been playing at a benefit show prior to their nightly Café Society spot, and as a result arrived twenty minutes late. Heard then filed a complaint with the Local 802 of the American Federation of Musicians saying that they

¹⁵⁴ Lautier. 1950.

¹⁵⁵ Testimony of Hazel Scott Powell, House Un-American Activities Committee Hearing-- Eighty-first Congress, Sept. 22, 1950.

¹⁵⁶ Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 260.

had notified Josephson of their prior engagement. A few weeks later, *The Defender* ran a follow-up piece which explained that Heard had received permission from the management of Café Society to perform for a benefit show at the Apollo Theater for the Harlem Needy. Upon returning to Café Society, there had been a holdup backstage that prevented the band from loading into the club on time, even though they had received a police escort from the Apollo. Following a union hearing that lasted a little under an hour, Heard and Josephson settled their dispute amicably. Josephson withdrew his dismissal of Heard's band, and Heard withdrew his complaint. On a related note, Josephson was also quite friendly with the union, as the first benefit show he did at Carnegie Hall in 1941 was in support of the Local 802. It featured nearly all of the acts and performers from the Café Society on a single bill.¹⁵⁷

Josephson's reaction to Hazel Scott's testimony might have been a little harsh, considering that he had proudly thought of himself as a surrogate father to the young star early in her career, and then wanted absolutely nothing to do with her following her testimony.¹⁵⁸ In light of the blacklisting that HUAC was implementing, it is logical to assume that Scott sought to testify before the committee because her entire livelihood was at stake. The personal toll that these hearing exacted upon the American public was an inevitable effect of the HUAC hearings. Still, Scott did not do Barney Josephson's career any favors by calling into question his possible communist connections just two short years after he was forced to close the Café Societies due to the fiasco with Leon refusing to testify before HUAC.¹⁵⁹ It was not uncommon for public figures to have to make choices such as the one that Barney Josephson himself faced; on one hand he

¹⁵⁷ "Night Club Stars to Swing at Broadway's Carnegie Hall." 1941. *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)* (1921-1967), Apr 12.

¹⁵⁸ Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 261.

¹⁵⁹ "No Red Stain on Me: Hazel Scott." 1950. *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)* (1921-1967), Sep 23.

had his principles—particularly his devotion to his own brother, and on the other hand was his livelihood in the Café Society that he was so passionate about and had used to do a lot of good.

All this to say that the Red Scare's impact on the Café Society and those involved was essentially a microcosm in regards to what was happening on the national level. With the Red Scare, those who supported and administered the House Un-American Activities Committee were able to sow dissent by manipulating the media through blacklisting and charges of contempt of Congress, which the press would pick up on to the detriment of business owners, artists, and others who supported Left-wing politics. Barney Josephson described the Red Scare thusly:

There was terror in the land. People were afraid to keep certain books on their shelves. In the middle of the night people were walking out of their homes. If they didn't have an incinerator they would drop their books in the garbage on the streets. Already people were renouncing their friends. Wives and husbands were fighting or splitting up because one of them belonged to some group labeled a communist-front. The Red hysteria affected... every aspect of American life into the 1960s.¹⁶⁰

That “hysteria” is the reason that the Café Society ended up going out of business.

¹⁶⁰ Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, 248.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Café Society largely rose to popularity in the New York City nightclub scene because of a growing amount of support and tolerance for liberal politics on account of the effectiveness of the New Deal in alleviating the pressures of the Great Depression. In addition, there was a strong connection between the oppression of African-Americans—even in the Northern states over seven decades after the end of the Civil War—and the treatment of the minority Jewish-American population. In many ways, that connection was afforded the opportunity to manifest itself in the Café Society, where Jewish-American proprietor Barney Josephson and a great many African-American and other left-leaning artists confronted the prejudice, discrimination, and unethical business practices of the contemporary status-quo.

In the heyday of the superficial “culture of celebrity,”—essentially a meaningless status manufactured by popular tabloids that became the focus of contemporary nightclubs in the 1930s and 40s—the Café Society was able to find success by branding itself as “the right place for the wrong people.” Barney Josephson’s club offered a distinct alternative to establishments such as the Stork Club and El Morocco on the East Side of Manhattan by committing itself to the principles of inclusion rather than exclusion. His management style and personable nature when it came to the relationships he had with those he employed created an atmosphere that was welcoming towards all. The integrated club allowed for African-American artists to present themselves in a meaningful way before a mainstream audience with whom they could converse and fraternize—whereas before they had been relegated to the backstage area or to the worst seats in the house.

Despite early support from the Black press, the Café Society elicited a conflicted response from many top African-American publications following Leon Josephson’s refusal to

testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee. While the Left had long been a proponent of civil rights, the post-war Red Scare forced many prominent African-Americans to make a choice between distancing themselves from those who were being blacklisted and accused of sympathizing with communism, or face the devastating consequences associated with supporting those who had supported them. The choice was a difficult one, and in many ways the Red Scare was able to effectively, although temporarily, knock the wind out of the progressive movement that had found life following the election of Roosevelt and the implementation of the New Deal and, by extension, the Civil Rights Movement as well. Such a turn of events was enough to pull the rug out from under the Café Society, whose main clientele were those who supported such progressive, Left-wing politics and civil rights.

Although the Café Society Uptown and Downtown branches were only in operation for approximately a decade, its influence on American music—particularly that which was created by the many talented African-American artists to have graced its stage—is undeniable, and has largely been forgotten as an essential part of the development of American music. In more than a few ways the Café Society was ahead of its time, and it deserves more recognition in the discussion of American culture and history.

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